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# Our Right To Read

## Libraries and book bans in the United States today



Kirsten Menger-Anderson · [Follow](#)

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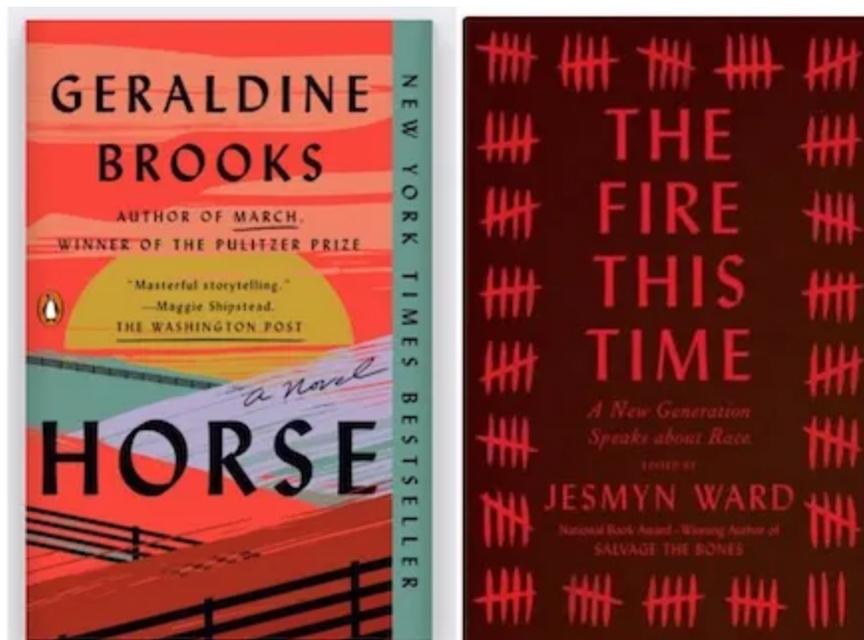
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This week is National Library Week, and I've been thinking about censorship. It's a theme that often came up while I was researching my novel, much of which is set in interwar Vienna. From the blanked pages of the *Arbeiter-Zeitung*, a daily paper placed under preemptive censorship, to the closing of libraries to "cleans" them of "Marxist" literature, censorship was prevalent under Austria's authoritarian leaders.

Unfortunately "cleansing" libraries is not just a policy of last century's infamous fascists. A few months ago, the Department of Defense temporarily suspended library services for tens of thousands of children at Pentagon schools, so that officials could conduct a compliance review to ensure that titles aligned with Trump's executive orders. Just last week, the United States Naval Academy conducted a similar review, removing 381 volumes from the library shelves, including titles by Jesmyn Ward and Geraldine Brooks.



Two of the 381 books removed from the U.S. Naval Academy's library

In Huntington Beach, where the City Council recently voted unanimously to install a commemorative MAGA plaque in front of the central library, there is also a push to censor library collections. The Council has called for a parent guardian review board to screen books in the library's children and teen collections, and for any title found to contain vaguely defined "sexual content" to be placed in a restricted area. Currently the subject of a lawsuit as well as a special election, the policy is doggedly supported by council members, who repeatedly deny that moving books to a restricted area constitutes a ban.

Similar machinations and denials are also playing out at the state-level in places like Iowa and Florida, where, together, over 8000 of the approximately 10,000 book bans in public school identified by PEN for the 2023–24 school year occurred. As in Huntington Beach, the Florida department of education denies that any books have been banned, instead lashing out at "far left activists" who "fight to expose children to sexually explicit materials."

According to the list of materials "removed or discontinued" from Florida schools in the 2023–2024 school year, titles include *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood, *A Good Man is Hard to Find* by Flannery O'Connor, *Beloved* by Toni Morrison, *Normal People* by Sally Rooney, *Slaughterhouse-Five* by Kurt Vonnegut, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou.

Looking more closely at titles banned in schools for the 2023–2024 school year, PEN found that for all the inflammatory rhetoric about "explicit books"

only 13% had “on the page” descriptions of sexual experiences. More commonly, the removed books featured LGBTQ+ representation, people or characters of color, or discussions of race or racism.

The American Library Association (ALA) is currently tracking over 120 state-level bills that aim to erode the authority of local library boards and staff, broaden the definition of “obscene content,” and directly censor diverse content. Since 2020, library challenges have come increasingly from a “well-organized, conservative political movement, the goals of which include removing books about race, history, gender identity, sexuality, and reproductive health from America’s public and school libraries that do not meet their approval.” These pressure groups focus on both school and public libraries.

In the 2025 State of America’s Libraries Report, released today, the ALA’s Office for Intellectual Freedom finds that the bulk of library challenges now come from pressure groups:

“Pressure groups and government entities that include elected officials, board members and administrators initiated 72% of demands to censor books in school and public libraries.”

It’s chilling to see local, state and federal governments move to align library shelves with their ideology, and to enable a single individual or mother’s group to more easily impose their opinions on library collections. As Allison Lee, PEN America LA director, has said “Government officials weighing in on the minutiae of library collection management is nothing short of ensorship.”

This week is National Library Week, “an annual celebration highlighting the valuable role libraries, librarians, and library workers play in transforming lives and strengthening our communities” and today, April 7th, is the Right to Read day. Let’s celebrate libraries, not censor them.

- Libraries
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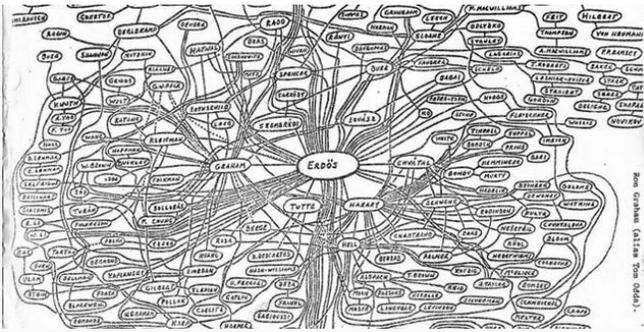
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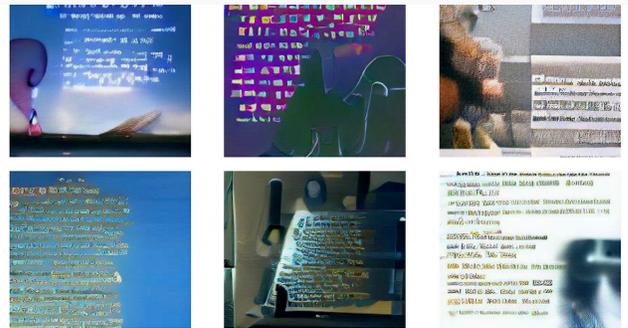


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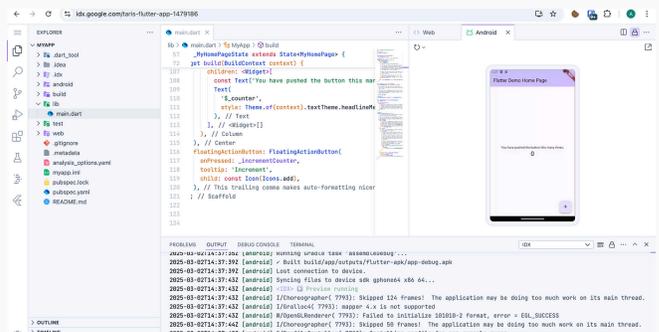


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