

## Great Books Will Always Be Their Own Best Defense

Margaret Renkl, The New York Times, Oct. 2nd, 2023 (adapted)

During my grade school years in the early 1970s, I read everything. Books, of course — books about dogs and teen detectives and gruesomely martyred saints — but also the morning newspaper and the evening newspaper, a long-dead relative's ancient encyclopedias, my father's Reader's Digest, my mother's Southern Living. In the time-honored tradition of nerds everywhere, I read the backs of cereal boxes with the same rapt attention that I devoted to "Old Yeller" and Nancy Drew. If there were words before me, I read them.

By sixth grade, I had exhausted the school library's appealing options and moved on to the county bookmobile. When children's books proved too short to hold me through the long, unoccupied days of summer, I started choosing books from the adult sections, too — just to have enough to read until the bookmobile came back. The driver, unsure how to manage this wondrously ecumenical but often wildly inappropriate range of titles, asked my mother to sign a form that gave me permission to check out anything I cared to read.

My mother didn't hesitate to sign it and then paid no attention to the books I chose. If she had, she would have discovered that tucked among books like "Dracula" and "All Creatures Great and Small" and "The Complete Poems of Edgar Allan Poe" were titles like "The Stepford Wives" and "Valley of the Dolls" and "Jaws." I doubt Mom would have been thrilled to discover that in learning about great white sharks, I was also picking up some unexpected information about what adults in the midst of an extramarital affair could do with their hands in the front seat of a moving car, but the subject never came up.

As Banned Books Week gets underway, I've been thinking again about that bookmobile. My parents were Goldwater Republicans who sent their children to Catholic school. And yet for them, the very idea of policing my reading was laughable. What parent, left or right, doesn't want to raise a reader? My parents trusted that I understood the difference between fiction and my own life, and I did.

Among today's conservatives, this attitude is almost impossible to imagine. During the 2022-23 school year, PEN America, an advocacy organization that defends free expression, recorded 3,362 instances of book

banning, an increase of 33 percent in just one year. "Overwhelmingly, book bans target books on race or racism or featuring characters of color, as well as books with L.G.B.T.Q.+ characters," notes the organization's report.

Although some liberals want books banned, too — for them, it's often classic titles like "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" and "To Kill a Mockingbird," which treat race in a way that is problematic — most bans are instigated by conservatives who increasingly target not just school libraries but classroom book collections and public libraries as well.

These efforts are taking place within the context of a much larger Republican tyranny of the minority.

Book bans belong to the same categorical crime against democracy as denying red-state citizens the full range of medical care available to the citizens of blue states. The same crime against democracy as denying L.G.B.T.Q. people their full civil rights. And the same crime as rewriting textbooks to avoid the reality of white violence against Black people. Republicans are doing everything possible to prevent an entire culture from moving toward inclusiveness, diversity and freedom. And their terror campaigns can be very effective.

Libraries have always been welcoming places for Americans, particularly American children. A library is a safe space for exploring the full range of human experience and human thought, all under the supervision of knowledgeable and loving adults. Librarians are the heroes who love books and the human beings who read them and who know how to help the readers find the books they need.