

## Editorial: A Call to Share Challenged & Banned Books

*Allison Segarra Hansen*

This issue of First Opinions, Second Reactions was first set to be published during Banned Books Week, which was September 18-24 this year. It is telling that the atmosphere of increased censorship in 2022 contributed to this issue's delay. Finding and securing book reviewers was uniquely difficult and took extra effort compared with prior issues.

Banned Books Week is “an annual event celebrating the freedom to read” (American Library Association). *The American Library Association's* (ALA) Office for Intellectual Freedom tracks challenges and bans of books across the United States. In 2021, most challenged books were “about Black or LGBTQIA+ persons” (ALA). The issues with this type of censorship are many. Of particular concern is the message this sends to teachers and to students.

School districts across the country are pulling books off the shelves because of the current censorship movement (Zurcher). One list of 850 books called to question was examined and “97 of the first 100 books on the list were written by ethnic minorities, women or LGBTQ authors” (A Rising Tide of Complaints). Many of the books describe and depict life from the perspective of those who have been historically minoritized and marginalized in this country. As Burmester & Howard state, restricting these types of books makes it very difficult for educators to “include culturally relevant literature in their classrooms” and continues to limit the diversity of our literary canon (p. 7). In her review of *The Poet X*, Carlota Holder writes, “As our students' worlds become more diverse, so should the texts they engage in. Gone are the days where students should be required to read “classics” to compete with their white, affluent peers. Now is the time to read “banned” books and amplify the voices of our students.”

When instructional materials are censored based on race, sex, gender identity, and sexual orientation the way it has been over the last two years, we are restricting our children from developing their own ways of knowing, being, and seeing the world. We are limiting them to a singular lens and enable “the danger of a single story” (Adichie 1). This sends a very clear message about whose knowledge is privileged and valued within our society. Additionally, the jobs of educators are made harder as they must be increasingly careful about what they say and the materials they use. I believe this is directly related to the difficulties we experienced securing and retaining classroom teachers as reviewers for this issue, thus causing the significant delay in publication. However, we found a pre-service teacher, college professors, moms (and a daughter), and school instructional leaders willing to share why the challenged and/or banned books they selected to review should not be restricted. Each of these books were or currently are challenged and/or banned.

We begin our issue with Audrey Taylor’s review of what some classify as a classic: *The Diary of Anne Frank*. Taylor says, “To censor her (Anne’s) words is to lessen her impact and deny her humanity all over again.” A mother-daughter duo follow with a *Second Reaction* of Anne’s diary. Mom, Elizabeth Dougherty, writes that the book is a reminder that “you are NOT alone in your feelings,” while the daughter, Maddie Dougherty writes, “I realized that she (Anne Frank) processed and experienced things exactly as I did.”

We follow Anne’s unfathomable coming of age story with a modern day coming of age story of Xiomara, *The Poet X*. In Carlota Holder’s review of the award winning book written entirely in verse, she alludes to the responsibility we have to the teenagers we know and love. She writes, “Instead of limiting their exposure, we must embrace their growth to young

adulthood. We must accept their curiosity, their social lives, their complex identities, their language, their beliefs, and guide them, not limit them.”

In keeping with the theme of young girls coming of age, the next set of reviewers describe the importance of the intertwining stories of the young, Black, female characters Claudia, Freida, and Pecola in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*. Breanya Hogue calls it a “rich and necessary text.” Megan Paulk describes it as “a salient piece of literature that can be used to convey lived experiences...”

We end our issue with two LGBTQIA+ coming of age stories, *Melissa* and *Gender Queer*: both unique and powerful in their own right. Reviewer and editor of FOSR Nicholas Husbye writes, “*Melissa* was published in 2015, the book - originally titled *George* - was one of the first middle grade novels to wrestle with transgender children’s experiences...” Writer Marie Lewis describes *Gender Queer* as “both a fiercely contested, yet desperately needed perspective for young people and parents still struggling with their understanding of gender identity.”

If our theme for this issue was not “banned books,” it could easily be “identity exploration” as we see each main character grappling with who they are, who society wants them to be, and who they are becoming. This is a common thread for all pre-adolescent and adolescent youth. Some of us, even as adults, are still trying to figure out who we really are. It may sound too simplistic, but from my perspective as one of these adults, I believe it would have helped me greatly to read about characters like me (Multiracial in a majority white environment). Nevertheless, if teachers are not feeling empowered to select the books that will speak to the hearts of their kids, then it is up to the rest of us to make sure to do so. Similar to those who answered the call for this review, I now call on school leaders, moms, dads, uncles, aunts,

grandparents, caregivers, mentors, and college/university faculty and staff to help get these books in the hands of youth whom you know may need them.

### Works Cited

Adichie, Chimamanda. "The Danger of a Single Story." Ted Talk.

[https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_ngozi\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story](https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story).

Accessed 23 November 2022.

American Library Association. *National Library Week Kicks Off with State of America's Libraries Report, Annual 'Top 10 Most Challenged Books' List and a New Campaign to Fight Book Bans*. ALA News.

<https://www.ala.org/news/press-releases/2022/04/national-library-week-kicks-state-america-s-libraries-report-annual-top-10>. Accessed 23 November 2022.

Burmester, Samuel, and Lionel C. Howard. "Confronting book banning and assumed curricular neutrality: A critical inquiry framework." *Theory Into Practice* 61.4 (2022): 373-383.

Zurcher, Anthony. *Why are certain books being banned in US?* BBC News.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-60261660>. Accessed 23 November 2022.