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Banned Books Week 2020: Censorship is a Dead End

Zachary Lewis

University of Dayton, zlewis1@udayton.edu

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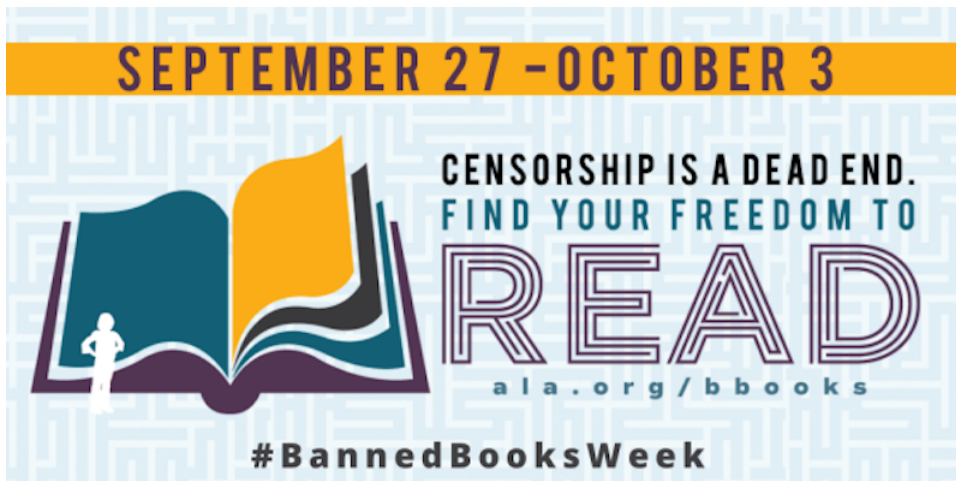
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MONDAY SEPTEMBER 28, 2020

Banned Books Week 2020: Censorship is a Dead End

By Zachary Lewis

The theme of this year's Banned Books Week — "Censorship is a dead end. Find your freedom to read" — presents us with a reminder of the power of literature.

This idea of "finding freedom" through reading is not new; many people (myself included) use reading as a form of escapism. There's something magical about reading a harrowing thriller on a cozy winter day or a cheesy romance at the beach. But there is a more powerful form of freedom to be obtained from reading — one that helps us discover ourselves and learn about those around us. The written word is a tool for the liberator, acting as a beacon of hope for those yearning for freedom and understanding. Censorship is a tool of the oppressor, working to keep those voices unheard.

'EXPLICIT' ... 'OFFENSIVE' ... 'VULGAR'

Censorship is often conducted under the pretense of good intentions. Looking at lists of the most challenged books, many children's books have been banned for use of "explicit language," "offensive viewpoints" and sexual content. Other books are banned for the much more vague offense of "containing controversial issues." Some books are deemed too violent or unfit to be read by younger readers because they discuss racism.

"Explicit language" is found in *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison, arguably one of the greatest writers of our time. Morrison's description of society's racist beauty standards rang true to readers across the world, offering reassurance that they are not alone. Jessica Herthel's and Jazz Jennings' "offensive viewpoints" in *I Am Jazz* have been used as educational tools for children to learn about gender identity and to affirm the identities of trans children. The "vulgarity and sexual overtones" of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* are used to portray a society that does not respect or value cisgender women outside of their reproductive abilities.

PREVIOUS POST

Plan Your Project

Librarians of the University Libraries instruction team introduce a planning flowchart for students' research and writing projects this semester; services of Book a Librarian and the Write Place can assist with any project, at any time.

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NEXT POST

History Major's Surprise Discovery: Anti-Suffrage

History major and Roesch

CENSORSHIP: REINFORCING STIGMAS

It's no coincidence that the most challenged books are often the ones that tell stories about marginalized identities. Eight of the 10 most challenged books of 2019 were banned because of their depictions of LGBTQIA+ characters. Angie Thomas's *The Hate U Give* tells the story of a Black teen coping with a horrific act of police brutality — a prescient topic that was deemed “vulgar” and “anti-police.” Books about femininity and female sexuality — topics often viewed as more explicit and more inappropriate than masculinity and male sexuality — often end up on these lists.

Censorship is designed to attach stigma to these topics, to make them appear shameful and wrong. In the censorship of stories about women, people of color and those with LGBTQIA+ identities, these people remain “othered”; their stories remain unheard.

EXERCISE YOUR FREEDOM; UNDERSTAND OTHERS

By reading about others' experiences, by looking through the eyes of a character who is different from us, by taking time to understand and appreciate those from different walks of life, we break free of the oppressive bonds of censorship.

By finding our freedom to read, we free ourselves and those around us.

THE 10 MOST CHALLENGED BOOKS OF 2019

Each year, the American Library Association publishes a list of the 10 books that received the most challenges.

[Check out the 2019 list.](#)

— *Zachary Lewis is an assistant professor and student success librarian in the University Libraries.*

Library regular Marie Poinatte shares her thoughts on a surprise discovery she made in the spring term: There were women in Dayton who were against women's suffrage.

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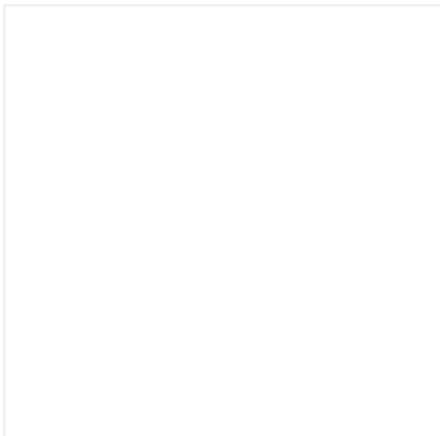
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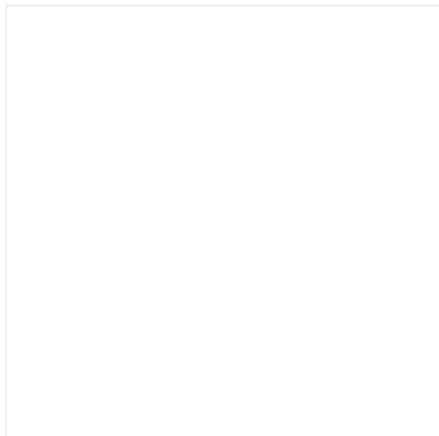
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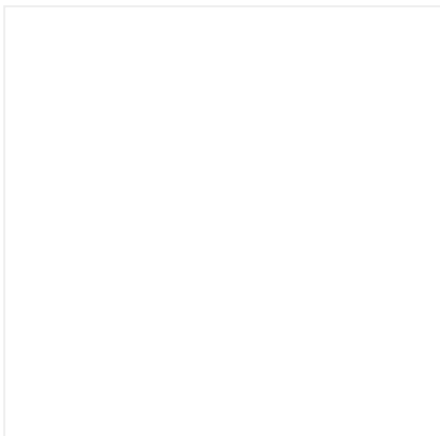
What's Trending



Students courtside



A little porch sittin'



Abroad in Geneva Series: Part 1 Praying for Peace during Lent

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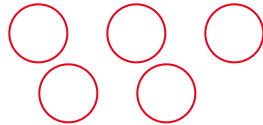
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