TEEN VOICES

Freedom to Read Edition

New York Public Library

A Magazine By and For Teens

Issue #3

WHAT DOES THE FREEDOM TO READ MEAN TO YOU?

Welcome to the Freedom to Read Edition of *Teen Voices*

At The New York Public Library, we believe in the freedom to read. Unfortunately, in recent years, we've seen an alarming increase in book bans and challenges across the country. The majority have targeted books for young people that feature LGBTQ+ voices and people of color. Through NYPL's Books for All campaign, including our nationwide **Teen Banned Book Club**, we have helped readers across the country to exercise their freedom to read and access some of these challenged titles.

But we also wanted to find out from teens, who are most affected by these censorship attempts, how they feel about the threat to their freedom to read. During Banned Books Week in 2023, NYPL asked teens across the country to answer one simple question: **"What does the freedom to read mean to you?"**

We received almost 500 submissions from 36 states. From those, a panel of readers at NYPL have selected 21 powerful essays as our winners, including a grand prize winner that was published in *Teen Vogue* in April 2024. In this magazine, you can read all 21 winning essays.

Learn more about how you can get involved and protect the freedom to read at the back of the magazine or by visiting us online: **nypl.org/booksforall**

Thank You

The New York Public Library's Teen Reading Ambassadors program offers internships to teens to develop job readiness and leadership skills, act as leaders and role models to younger kids, and be ambassadors for the Library's mission to inspire a lifelong love of reading and learning. Several of our Teen Reading Ambassadors joined the selection panel to pick the winners of our National Teen Writing Contest, alongside Young Adult librarians and other NYPL staff. Thanks to: Christopher Adams, Rosa Caballero-Li, Vanessa Carrasco, Karen Chen*, Ella Chernauskas*, Kira Cohen, Melanie Correa, Olisha James, Ivy Kuhrman, Maura Muller, Kate Obedzinski, Liz O'Malley, Emily Munoz*, Siva Ramakrishnan, Rachel Roseberry, Arielle Saber, Avigail Sharon, Alexa Solano*, Hannah Spratt, Dasiya Theet*, Campbell Tillotson, Bryan Zhao*, and Alidel Zayzay*. (* = Teen Reading Ambassador.)

Thanks also to our partners at the American Library Association, 826 National, *Teen Vogue,* and Unite Against Book Bans.

These programs and initiatives are part of the Library's Tisch Youth Education Programs, led by the Merryl and James Tisch Director of Branch Libraries and Education. Major support for educational programming is provided by Merryl H. and James S. Tisch.

Major support for children's and young adult programming is provided by the Andreas C. Dracopoulos Family Endowment for Young Audiences.

Lead support for Teens 360° is provided by the City of New York. Additional support is provided by Arthur W. Koenig, the Stavros Niarchos Foundation, the Best Buy Foundation and the Joly Family Foundation, Mr. and Mrs. Evan R. Chesler, Google.org, and Michael ByungJu Kim and the MBK Educational Foundation.

Front cover artwork by NYPL Teen Reading Ambassador **Nana Adwoa Agyemang**, age 17.

READ THE WINNING ESSAYS

A Note from Anthony W. Marx | President of The New York Public Library

Congratulations to all of our 21 teen winners of the Freedom to Read writing contest. I am moved and inspired by your essays, which describe so well the role that books play in your lives and your passion for intellectual freedom. At a time when book bans are at an all-time high, it's heartening to see so many teens from across the country actively making their voices heard on the crucial topic of the freedom to read.

The Luminosity of Reading

GRAND PRIZE WINNER!

Tara Isabel Lago
Age 18, New York

As the grand prize–winning essay in The New York Public Library's National Teen Writing Contest, "The Luminosity of Reading" was first published in Teen Vogue *in April 2024.*

Carrying my lantern up high, I entered Columbia University's College Walk, the 33 paper mache lanterns illuminating the night sky. In the shape of open books, these lanterns were taking flight: a murmuration of stories, flying across Morningside Heights to spread the joy of reading. Despite the chill of a rainy fall evening, warmth and energy spread through the community and my palms, holding the lantern above me.

"*Metamorphosis* by Kafka!" At last, it was my turn. I stepped onto College Walk and twirled my lantern as I moved across the path, the beetle at the top of the book dancing along with me. I smiled and laughed, gasping at how amazing it was to participate in this great tradition.

Morningside Lights is an annual lantern parade in New York City's Morningside Heights neighborhood, where Columbia is located. Every year, volunteers collaborate to build paper lanterns around a specific theme. From assembling the lantern wireframes to applying the white paper base and colored tissue paper, each workshop builds on where others left off, a true cycle of learning, love, and incompletion.

Since this was my first semester at Columbia, I was excited to participate in these workshops and contribute to the parade's theme of The Open Book, an ode to reading and to the libraries that share these books with all.

As a mini-reunion, I invited two of my closest high school friends to join me, and we immersed ourselves in the task of starting the paper lantern construction process. Hand-in-hand with our cream cheese and yogurt cartons of glue, my two friends and I applied tissue paper to Kafka's *Metamorphosis*.

"Would you love me if I was a bug?" asked my high school friend, as we brushed glue and allowed the tissue paper to blanket the lantern's surface.

"Of course." I smiled, remembering how much I missed her company.

I didn't know that my answer showed that I had not read the book.

But today, tomorrow, or in my wide, open future, I could read *Metamorphosis* because of the freedom to read. My freedom to read allows me to choose the ideas I want to learn, the knowledge I want to pursue, and the pages I want to peruse. The workshop space embodied not only my reading freedom but our collective one: I was surrounded by 32 other lanterns that were open books, literally and figuratively.

These books could be transformed into Silverstein's *The Giving Tree*, Butler's *Parable of the Sower,* Harari's *Sapiens*, or Brooks' *World War Z*. From classic to contemporary, fiction to nonfiction, and children to adult, these diverse books had one universal commonality: they were chosen because of their indelible impact on us, the readers. The community of lantern makers, bibliophiles, and illustrators curated the Morningside Lights' library themselves. Although the lanterns only showcased a select number of books, The Open Book theme was a celebration of every story and the freedom to read.

At the end of my workshop session, my *Metamorphosis* lantern was ready for the next set of hands. In the spirit of blind collaboration, strangers after me would glue the orange, red, green, and brown colored paper and design it in the form of eyes, apples, wine bottles, keyholes, and, of course, the emblematic beetle. Step by step, different hands by different hands, all 33 lanterns would be completed.

On the day of the parade, I witnessed the culmination of our efforts. The lanterns were vibrant even without their lights, and once we connected their cords to our battery outlets, the colors and character burst forth, illustrating that knowledge glows when it is accessible to everyone. I proudly carried *Metamorphosis* through Morningside Park and Columbia University, one lantern, one perspective among a parade of many. Morningside Lights was alive, full of chatter and song; thematic music wafted through the air as people talked and listened to book excerpts from our lantern library.

A mother and daughter pair, the strangers who worked on *Metamorphosis* after my workshop, walked alongside me. The mom told me she was so eager to participate that she had stayed up until midnight to register for the workshops, ensuring she'd get a spot. I agreed, saying I was looking forward to this event since I learned about it during my student orientation week at Columbia. We bonded over *Metamorphosis*—I started the process of making the lantern and they were the ones who finished it. Now, we would end this journey together: me, carrying *Metamorphosis*, and them, guiding and cheering me on.

Whenever the ground became too bumpy or the foliage too thick, my two new friends would help me navigate the lantern so that it would not get stuck between the branches. Whenever I got tired and the weight of the wires, paper, and lights chafed my hands, I would look beside me, at the mom and daughter, their wide eyes aglow. I would look ahead of me, at my fellow-lantern carriers and the undulating flock of color and light. I would look around me, at the Columbia students, Morningside Heights residents, and beyond, who joined the parade, drawn in not just by the pretty lights but by the covers of books they recognized, loved, and cherished. Reinvigorated, I would tighten my grip on the stick supporting *Metamorphosis* and walk with renewed determination in my steps.

Defending the freedom to read may be difficult. It may be heavier than a lantern and darker than a cloudy city night. It may have foes scarier than entrapping branches and trickier than uneven ground. Yet as a community, our efforts and the light of our lanterns and our stories shine brighter than these problems combined. My lantern's glow did not waver and neither did we. From *Metamorphosis* to *The Collected Poems of Robert Frost* to *Frog and*

Toad and more, we reaffirmed our dedication not only to these stories but to each other and our freedom to read.

From the bottom of Morningside Park, we steadily made our way up to the procession's final stop: Columbia's College Walk, where we were welcomed by people who carried their homemade lanterns in camaraderie. As we waited for each of our open books to be called, I felt it fitting that I was carrying my light of knowledge into Columbia, the campus I was beginning to call home.

"*Metamorphosis* by Kafka!" At last, it was my turn, but I was never alone. From gluing white tissue paper on *Metamorphosis* with my high school friends to enjoying the company of the mother and daughter pair, Morningside Lights has allowed me to sustain old friendships and create new ones. As I stepped onto College Walk, the mother and daughter danced along with me, the beetle, a glittering invertebrate star right above us. We smiled, we laughed, and we gasped at how amazing it was that we got to participate in this great tradition. This was our first Morningside Lights, with the promise of more to come.

Because of this experience, I was inspired to read *Metamorphosis*. "Would you love me if I was a bug?" had an entirely different meaning as I progressed through the story. I finally understood the design elements of the lantern, but more importantly, the reason why *Metamorphosis* was chosen as one of the open books in the first place. I was moved by the way Kafka transformed a mundane event, like waking up in the morning, into an absurd and heartbreaking allegory of life, family, and responsibility. Without Morningside Lights, I may not have ever read *Metamorphosis*. Without the accessibility and the promotion of these stories, I would not be able to explore the full potential of my freedom to read and the endless limits of my curiosity.

Before returning the *Metamorphosis* lantern to its storage unit, I looked around for the final time, at the students, teachers, friends, and strangers that surrounded me. In our individual capacities, we were readers, artists, writers, lantern-makers, and potential freedom-to-read fighters. There was warmth and energy in the air, channeled by the magic of these lanterns, whose light, cultivated by our collective learning and love, would never leave us even after we unplugged the cord. Beyond these paper lanterns, the open books carried lights of knowledge themselves—a glow that deserves to be protected, elevated, and shared with all. In this moment, ensconced by the beauty of the lanterns, the wonder of the community, and the preciousness of these stories, I realized that it does indeed take a village to create, celebrate art, and champion our right to read. ◆

“Not giving access to our stories will not make them cease to exist, it will only make us more adamant about sharing them with the world.”

Alice Wolf
California

My Home

Avah Montgomery
Age 16, Arizona

One of my earliest memories of reading comes from the Mesquite Public Library. This mecca of knowledge sits nestled in between what was once the Paradise Valley Mall and a Costco. Carefully hidden, it was my respite as a young child, a place where I could go where I experienced complete freedom. I remember my mom parking in the lot besides the library. I would fiddle with my seat belt on my booster seat, desperately attempting to free myself from the confines of the metallic lock. I was filled with unbridled excitement; I knew that I was about to enter my own magical world.

Once free, I gripped my mom's hand in excitement, and we began the short walk to the library's entrance. Through the sliding glass doors was a place of adventure, romance, tragedy, but, most of all, learning. A flurry of air would meet us upon our entrance, carrying the smell of old and new books alike. It smelled like an old attic—a combination of black and white photos, old records and tapes. Teddy bears long forgotten by their beloved owners. Boxes of holiday lights and decorations. Like memories that are carefully stored in the filing cabinets of a mind, simply waiting to be retrieved and remembered once again. The library smelled like home.

I remember carefully choosing picture books off the metallic gray shelves, cognizant that I could only take a certain amount. I would practice my counting skills. Five. Six. Seven. Once I reached my book limit, I would attempt to make a list in my mind of all of the books that I had reshelved. I would tell them that I would never forget them, that I would be back to flip through their pages and learn all that they had to tell me.

At home, I would take the books into my room and examine each one. Did I make the right choice? Did I choose "good" books? Would they satisfy my voracious appetite for understanding the world around me?

Each night, my parents told me that they would read me five picture books. As I got older, the books got longer, so they began trimming down the number, reading three each night. Then, I moved into the world of chapter books, where they would read me as many chapters as they could before bedtime. My love for books and for our evening traditions was incredibly strong. Reading became a vital part of my upbringing, and it continues to be a substantial part of who I am. However, when it came time for me to learn how to read on my own, I initially struggled.

If I couldn't do something on the first try, was it even worth doing at all? This perfectionist mindset continues to follow me through life. I even told myself that I would never be able to read. I am so grateful that I was proven wrong. I would go on to become an unquenchable reader.

It all started with Geronimo Stilton. These books described the misadventures of the rodent journalist by the same name, and the action-packed stories gripped me. I loved the different fonts that were used and the many cheese-puns. The puns were extremely 'gouda' in the mind of a seven year old. From there, I made a jump to *Harry Potter*, reading over two million words in the second grade alone. I had found my place of comfort: in the pages of books.

As a child, my extreme social anxiety made it very difficult for me to find friends. Often, I found myself alone on the swingset during recess, but I was never truly alone. I was at Hogwarts, Camp Half-Blood, Fablehaven, the Land of Stories, and Alagaësia. I traveled with each of the characters as if they were my family. When they encountered troubles, I too suffered. Their greatest triumphs, I shared. I escaped loneliness, anxiety, and depression with these characters by my side. They taught me how to be myself. How to learn, accept defeat, and pursue new things, no matter how impossible they may seem. I became me because of the many different worlds that I lived in.

Now, I no longer spend as much time in the world of fantasy. Instead, I prefer to better understand the world that we currently inhabit. Everything changed when I first picked up *Just Mercy*, an incredibly powerful book written by Bryan Stevenson. In his first book, Stevenson recounts his time as a young lawyer, fighting for the rights of wrongly incarcerated men and women. Reading this book allowed me to better understand the criminal justice system. I developed my own beliefs on the death penalty based on the knowledge that Stevenson provided. I thought about the legal system from a completely different lens. As a cisgender white woman, Stevenson's teachings allowed me to gain much-needed knowledge about the world that we live in. I would go on to read *Solitary* by Albert Woodfox and *The Sun Does Shine: How I Found Life and Freedom on Death Row* by Anthony Ray Hinton and Lara Love Hardin. These stories shocked me with their brutality and the reality that they portrayed. Yet, I knew that they were true, and I knew that I needed to understand inequality, in order to better call out the egregious choices made by politicians and leaders around me.

No human being deserves to be incarcerated for a crime that they did not commit. No person needs to be terrorized for the color of their skin, sexual orientation, religion, gender, or ability. In my mind, the key is that we are all human beings. Humans. When did we forget that? In the midst of terror and brutality, I am left wondering when we stopped looking at each other as a community, as individuals, as people who deserve kindness.

I believe that the book bans that plague our nation are largely created in response to fear. If we teach our children about people who have a different lived experience than us, will our children become like the people that we fear? Will their beliefs change in a way that no longer supports our own? All of these questions are valid. However, I think that we need to change the narrative and instead begin asking: How can my child benefit from reading books written by people who have a different perspective? What if I can allow my child to become a kinder, more respectful, understanding person by giving them literature to read that allows them to see the many ways that people exist in our world? How can I teach my child empathy through reading? What if my child reads a book that allows them to better understand themselves? All of these questions may better allow leaders and parents alike to understand that books are not to be feared. Books are a place where comfort is found, and, yet, in our society, they have become demonized, and authors continue to be censored for calling out injustice that they have lived through.

Instead of "othering" people, why not strive to understand and come from a place of human kindness. However, all of these notions are wildly idealistic. As a liberal, queer, Jewish writer and activist, I know that the future that I hope for is not necessarily plausible. Yet, the books that I read (especially those that have been banned) allow me some sense of hope. If I can read these books and speak, think, write about them, then perhaps someone, somewhere will realize that they are not alone. In a world of books, none of us are alone. ◆

The Night I Stood, and the Night They Listened

Ivan Torres
Age 18, New Mexico

Palms sweaty, heart going pitter-patter, I loudly announce my name into the microphone: I-V-A-N T-O-R-R-E-S. As I began, I didn't need a script. What I was saying was coming directly from the soul.

Now and then, there are moments that can change your life. Mine was April 13, 2023. What started as a slow day at my desk studying for finals took a turn when I got a text from a colleague at the ACLU of New Mexico. It was urgent. A group was going to attend tonight's city council meeting and call for the removal of LGBTQIA+ books from the public library.

I was shocked, something that seemed so distant and so foreign was now taking place in my backyard. It was time to mobilize. I frantically began searching through my digital Rolodex texting everyone I knew asking them to attend the meeting and speak against book banning.

As I walked from my seat to the podium, I was daydreaming about mock trial: walking into the courtroom, opening the Law and Order-type swinging doors to the well, and standing at the council table, announcing "Ivan Torres for the people, your honor." In many ways, I was ready to represent "the people" again, but in a much more tangible way.

After all, "the people" are more diverse than ever. My family is just one example in a sea of similar stories. A family coming from Mexican immigrants, of two mothers, and of the working class.

To me, taking that podium was about far more than just repeating a speech given countless times in countless other communities. It was about making the city councilors feel what it means to have your identity attacked, your right to be who you are in public questioned, and our dignity examined.

It is not just about books, it is about people and the stories they represent. I thought of the words of Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop, "Books are mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors." I was going to defend those books as if my life depended on it. Because for some students, their life does.

Sadly, most challenges target works by or about a person of color or a member of the LGBTQIA+ community. These challenges have a chilling effect on LGBTQIA+ youth. In fact, 41% of LGBTQ youth considered attempting suicide according to The Trevor Project in 2023.

But most of all, I see the faces of my friends in those statistics. When those mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors disappear, so will the people they portray.

Yet, as people flowed to and from the podium, the city councilors seemed uninterested until the youngest people took the podium. The councilors, as if resurrected from their slumbers, awakened—eyes wide and attentive. When we spoke, they listened. At the end of the meeting, the city council reiterated their support of the public library and its director.

A couple of weeks passed, and I was attending my debate club's end-of-year banquet at a local restaurant. As President, I was giving my end-of-year speech and swearing in the new officers. The most surprising thing happened next—a Republican member of the city council approached my table and commended others and myself for speaking at the meeting.

Students have this "I could never have done that" mentality, but the reality is this: yes, it is scary, nerve-racking, and a little frustrating. But, when we reclaim and recognize our power as students we can break down the walls of censorship.

Intellectual freedom is where this fight begins, but it is far from where it ends. Censorship is but a prelude to these groups' ultimate ends of undermining the separation of church and state and building an exclusionary society where they not only ban books, but the people and the ideas they represent. These challenges to intellectual freedom speak to an evolving culture of censorship and hate. But, when students, teachers, and the community unite, we can chart a path forward to actualize the goal of vibrant inclusivity. ◆

My First Favorite Book

Heba Elkouraichi
Age 16, New York

A core and life-shaping memory of mine is attending my first Scholastic Book Fair. I vividly recall my kindergarten teacher announcing the next day's events and feeling uncontrollably giddy, as she spoke about the fair as though each picture book was its own portal into a different fantasy world of princesses, dragons, and fairies. As soon as I arrived home that afternoon, I begged my parents for $10 to spend on the prettiest and most magical-looking picture book I could find, but my father, the sole breadwinner of our home at the time, did not have any money to spare. I turned to my mother, knowing that if I looked cute and sad enough, she would quickly cave and give me anything I wanted.

She reached for a heavy bag at the bottom of her closet and opened it to reveal hundreds of coins that she had been saving over the course of what I could only assume to be several years. "If you show me that you can count the full ten dollars in pennies, nickels, dimes, and quarters, you can take them to school for your book fair." My mother made everything a learning experience, and the opportunity to teach me to count money, while simultaneously getting me excited to read, was irresistible to her. Five-year-old me spent what I remember to be hours on counting the money over and over again ensuring my calculations were accurate.

The next day, however, I noticed that my peers were all holding crisp $20 bills, and what began as unbridled excitement and accomplishment immediately became a feeling of embarrassment, inferiority, and an intense desire to clutch my bag of change and hide it away in my hands. My mother, who noticed me move my tiny hands away from hers to cover the money, quickly picked up a book to distract me from my own discomfiture. "Wow, look at this," said my mother in Arabic, "It's about Islam!" I was not able to read the title at the time, but the illustrations themselves, of a beautiful and grand mosque and a girl who looked shockingly just like me, were enough to make me completely forget about any self-conscious thoughts I had before.

I flipped through the pages of *Golden Domes and Silver Lanterns: A Muslim Book of Colors* by Hena Khan and illustrated by Mehrdokht Amini as if they would disappear before my eyes if I were to look away. It was thoroughly astounding to me that there could be a book about people like me and my family, as it was the first time I'd seen my religion portrayed as beautiful and full of love in any sort of media. I saw my own adoration of vibrant colors in the little girl sitting on the cover of the children's book. I saw my father praying on a gorgeous traditional red prayer mat, much like the one we had at home. I saw my mother wearing a rich blue hijab; one that I was sure I could find

if I dug through her exceptionally well-kept and extensive shawl, hijab, and scarf collection. I was barely in school and very young, but, even then, the disdainful or even to an extent, frightened looks that my parents sometimes received were not lost on me. Although I didn't quite understand why they were alienated, I recognized the differences between my family and the other people around me; that our Muslim and Arab characteristics somehow separated us from the rest. Being exposed to this book, however, allowed me to celebrate the unique parts of me for the first time, setting aside others' perception of Islam in favor of my own appreciation for the vibrancy of my religion and culture as a whole.

Even now, I recognize *Golden Domes and Silver Lanterns: A Muslim Book of Colors* as the book that sparked my love for reading, but also as the first piece of literature that made me truly feel confident to be a Muslim in America—that the richness of my religion and ethnicity, and the individuality that comes with that, is, if anything, a source of pride. For this reason, whenever I come across a book that highlights the intricacies of cultures, I am reminded of the positive influence that *Golden Domes and Silver Lanterns* had on me, and I feel hopeful that a little boy or girl who feels underrepresented or ashamed due to the things that make them who they are will pick up a similar book and realize that they are part of something magnificent just like I once did.

The freedom to read is of paramount importance because of its unique ability to give people the opportunity to feel heard, understood, and appreciated in predominantly intolerant environments. It allows a person to find a safe haven within the pages of a book when that is not necessarily their reality. If the freedom to read about diverse lives and experiences becomes abridged, it sends an unspoken message to everyone who identifies with a part of any given banned book: your differences are not celebrated or even acknowledged, and therefore every positive portrayal of them is taboo and should be concealed. In a modern and inclusive world that values personal freedoms, it is a complete and utter disservice to ban the very books that can mean the distinction between a confident child who is proud of their heritage and one who will grow and experience life with the idea that their characteristics and features are somehow inferior. ◆

Who Am I Without Books?

Camille Fallen
Age 15, Virginia

A young girl with a deep caramel complexion and rows of black braids that were pulled together in a neat bun atop her head (a nod to her ballet training at a local ballet studio) excitedly skipped through the lobby of her elementary school and nearly bounced up the stairs to her second-grade classroom. For weeks she had been waiting for this day. Not only was it her seventh birthday, but she was finally able to enjoy the day with her classmates. Unlike the standard tradition of bringing cupcakes, candy treats, or donuts to share with her class, her teacher had started a new tradition—to celebrate a birthday by sharing your favorite book with your classmates. After all twenty-plus students, an almost 50/50 mix of boys and girls, sat down in a circle, the teacher looked at the birthday girl and asked, "Camille, what book will you share with us today in honor of your birthday?"

Eight years later, I vividly remember that day. The book that I chose to share, *When I Grow Up: Sonia Sotomayor*, is a book that inspired me to dream without limitation.

Looking back, I took for granted that I could read a true account of a Latina woman who valued education and hard work, leading her to Princeton and Yale Law School, and eventually, to becoming the third female U.S. Supreme Court justice. I shared a promising future with Justice Sotomayor. What I didn't realize then, but what I know now, as a result of exposure to historical accounts, civil rights documentaries, and my travels to southern states, is that it is a mistake to take the rightto read freely for granted.

My second-grade read-aloud experience was only five decades removed from the experience Ruby Bridges had when she integrated an all-white elementary school in Louisiana in 1960, four years after the seminal Brown vs. Board of Education U.S. Supreme Court decision that concluded separate but equal school systems were unconstitutional. Ruby's presence caused unrest, threats, and detrimental harm to her family. A first-grader at the time, Ruby learned to read, but she didn't have access to books that celebrated the melanin in her skin. Instead her school provided books that presented a dominant, Caucasian-centered worldview. If she saw those who looked like her in books, it fit a stereotypical narrative of Black inferiority.

Lack of diversity in books remained unchanged for a long time. My mother, a child of the 1980s who grew up as a voracious reader, admired the sleuthing skills found in Nancy Drew books and enjoyed the fun aspects of the Sweet Valley High books, but she was hyper-aware that no one in those books mirrored her cultural experiences.

Progress on this front has been slow, but in recent years the demand for books that accurately reflect the heterogeneity of our nation became too great to ignore. More books about racial identity, same-sex marriages, and other LGBTQ+ identities were published in large part due to the efforts of We Need Diverse Books (founded in 2010) and similar organizations. I have benefited greatly from that movement. As a kid, I read books that were a conglomeration of chocolate complexions and Afro puffs that reflected my life as a Black girl in America.

The beautiful tapestry of diverse voices for which I have become accustomed is being jeopardized by a countermovement that seeks to silence historically marginalized voices and erase minority representation. More than 30 states have prohibited select books about gender and race from school systems, and 40% of these bans feature people of color as prominent characters. Ironically, some of the most lauded children's books that have garnered prestigious awards, such as *New Kid* and *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You*, both exploring the experiences of race in America, are a mainstay on banned book lists. There is a reason why diverse books are being targeted so relentlessly: reading about the experiences of others leads to understanding of one another, and this undermines systemic white supremacy. Keen awareness and understanding of others evokes empathy, fosters community, and most of all, demands action.

In an effort to give back to my community, I have taken action to assist other children in gaining access to books that mirror their experiences. In early 2023, I founded NOVA Diverse Books. In that role, I have provided books to a Title I school and beauty shops. I want kids to experience what I have known to be true for me: books provide an understanding of your history and grant you the ability to envisage your future.

In essence, books solidify a sense of self that all children deserve to have instilled within them. The book that I read in the second grade, *When I Grow Up: Sonia Sotomayor*, made me realize that I, too, could be a lawyer, and even a changemaker. It was the catalyst for my love of the law and all things politics that still live inside me to this day. Sometimes I ask myself "Who am I without books?" because the impact they've had on me is so indelible that it's hard to imagine who I would be without them. But if the current attacks on books nationwide continue to be executed, future generations will find themselves asking the same question—then answering it. ◆

“These challenges to intellectual freedom speak to an evolving culture of censorship and hate. But, when students, teachers, and the community unite, we can chart a path forward to actualize the goal of vibrant inclusivity.”

Ivan Torres
New Mexico

The Crime of Indifference

Amanda Gao
Age 16, New York

"We're always thinking of eternity as an idea that cannot be understood, something immense. But why must it be? What if, instead of all this, you suddenly find just a little room there, something like a village bath-house, grimy, and spiders in every corner, and that's all eternity is. Sometimes, you know, I can't help feeling that that's what it is."
— Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*

I was 15 years old when I first picked up a book by Dostoevsky. By the time I put it down, the house was silent, and one hour had slipped into the next. It was strange, the way in which a young, guiltily murderous, Russian man captivated me. Even more peculiar was the extent to which I empathized with his detachment and his existential crisis in a seemingly indifferent world. Is the world relativistic or are our morals objective? Do they define us? Can murder ever be justified? Society told me that 15 was too young to have such thoughts, that my speculations blinded me, and I didn't really understand, that I needed to lift my head from the yellowed, inky pages and focus on the real world.

But reality is subjective. As far as I am concerned, books are as real as the laughs and tears they evoke. After all, this is the same society that requires 15-year-olds to map out the framework of their entire lives, that expects us to act as adults when they treat us as nothing more than improvident, reckless nuisances. Through those endless printed letters and leather spines, there is a window to something that encompasses much more than SAT scores and physics tests. Books contain stories that touch a deep fragment of our spirits that material things never quite can.

"We were the people who were not in the papers. We lived in the blank white spaces at the edges of print. It gave us more freedom. We lived in the gaps between stories."
— Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*

There have been 874 unique books banned by state law in the United States in the past year. Famous titles include Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, and Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*. For a country that prides itself so greatly on liberty for all, this is quite the contradiction. After all, no matter how vivid the writing, printed words will never jump off the paper and strangle the person reading them. If not bodily, then where could the harm possibly lie? In the ideas presented, supposedly. Books confront the brutality of humanity in its unfiltered state, they tell the stories of those in the margins who would otherwise go ignored, and they refuse to obscure the crimes of modern society—among others, racism, sexuality, gender, and misogyny.

Perhaps it is out of fear then that the book banners act. Fear that acknowledgement, through stories, will solidify the existence of these problems or that we will be able to see past them to a better future. As if closing our eyes and refusing to see the acid on the social fabric of America in front of us makes it any less corrosive. And therein lies the intrinsic value of reading and the necessity to have the freedom to do so. Reading plants the seed, it gives us the sustenance we need to create ideas of our own that bloom and flourish into gardens of thought. Every protest, civil rights movement, and revolution began with an idea. A simple sentence in one person's mind. Reading allows us to overcome stagnation and develop true progress, whether that be emotional, social, or political. It forces issues out of the shadows and into the light. Barring individuals from accessing these ideas and prohibiting them from reading amounts to erasure. Erasure of the labor of the authors, of their identities, of the very freedom and diversity that is meant to characterize our culture. The liberty to read is fundamentally tied to the principles of a functioning society and acts as a bedrock for education, making it critical to our collective interests. To deny this right is to deny the importance of learning and growth altogether.

"There must be something in books, something we can't imagine, to make a woman stay in a burning house; there must be something there. You don't stay for nothing."
— Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*

If people are given a voice, but others are prevented from hearing that voice, does the voice exist at all? Knives are meant to cut, pencils are meant to write, and books are meant to be read. The core issue expands far beyond books and the attempt at censorship. It is the implications that are truly dangerous. Reading is the sine qua non of knowledge accumulation— it is the primary pathway by which we are taught and by which we can foster our imaginations. No garden can grow without a seed to act as the starting point from which the roots may sprout.

Books might only be the beginning. Who is to know what they might come for next? What they might deem as bestial or inappropriate all under the guise of "preserving the minds" of children and "ensuring a healthy environment." We never understand the innate value of an object until after it is taken from us, and we do not quite realize the insight that literature is able to provide us until after we are deprived of it. Information is what drives us. It is what allows us to sincerely appreciate the myriad of human experiences that surround us. Everything that defines the current world is garnered from information about the past, and the past is what guides our present.

But these are just the thoughts of a now 16-year-old teenager. I may not have all the wisdom of those who have lived for three times as long as I have, but I can say that I've seen this world and the flaws that run through it, and that reading was integral to carving me into the person I am now. The present might only be determined by the past, but the future is dependent on the choices we make. Even if eternity is just a tiny old room, we must recognize the fatality of restricting people's right to read. If not for ourselves, then at the very least for the generations of the future. For what is humanity if not a tapestry of dreams and rectification? ◆

And He Lived Happily Ever After

Connor Chan
Age 17, New York

Once upon a time, in a land not so far away, there was a princess. This princess was said to be so beautiful that the king and queen built a formidable wall around their kingdom, fearing the safety of their family. She was raised to be sheltered, unaware of the world outside. It wasn't that ignorance was bliss. It was because a life inside the castle, inside the fortress, was the only life that she knew. There really wasn't much to know, without many friends or people to talk to. What she did know was that the inside was the safest to be, because that was what her parents insisted. But neither warnings nor walls could protect her. Rumors of the princess' beauty spread so far and wide that a ferocious dragon took notice, and plotted to abduct her. Under the cover of night, the dragon struck, taking the princess away. She was never to be seen again. The dragon, however, lived happily ever after, content to spend the rest of his days guarding a tower of his treasures. THE END

I was like that princess once. I was definitely sheltered, tucked away in a comfortable world where there were no worries or responsibilities except one: be the perfect girl. From my parents' perspective, this was an easy task. All I had to do was wear dresses, like the color pink, look pretty, and play nice. It was simple enough if you wanted to be their dress-up doll, their princess. And for the longest time, I was. I did like the dresses and the color pink. But under the surface, I felt that something was wrong. There isn't anything wrong with dresses, pink, being pretty, or playing nice. But it was their insistence that only girls could do that which felt wrong. Why shouldn't the boys play nice? Why shouldn't the boys want to look pretty? And why shouldn't boys even think of associating with pink? I never really did anything with that confusion, because I knew I would get the same answer again and again. It was because they were boys, and I was a girl. Simple as that—even if I cringed each time and felt like I had just been doomed to cursed slumber on every occasion I was called "princess."

Eventually though, I would wake up. Not because of true love's kiss, but because of the library. Like Belle in *Beauty and the Beast*, I was amazed by libraries. The first time I stepped into my local branch, I knew that I could spend eternity there. And I wouldn't even need to be cursed in order to stay! The library was magical to me because it seemed to hold all the answers. Beyond the many books that I buried myself under, the librarians were friendly and patiently helped me with questions. It was on one ordinary, yet life-changing day that I decided I wanted to know why I felt so uncomfortable being labeled a princess. I was drawn to a display of books set out for Pride Month. From my research at home, I thought that I might have been called transgender because I felt uncomfortable associating with my gender assigned at birth and felt more comfortable identifying as a boy. Still, I was uncertain.

Experience told me that this was impossible, something that my parents said came right out of a fairy tale. I pushed on, picking up a book about queer identity. I read, finding more books with protagonists who were just like me. But they were respected. They were never called "princess" when they didn't want that. And they were believed. To me, that was the most important part. These books helped me come to terms with myself, so I could finally accept that I didn't have to live the rest of my life as someone I wasn't. From the library, I gained the security and advice I needed to be me. The library was there when I wanted to figure out what to do when I didn't like my name. The library was there when I needed a push to come out in high school. And the library continues to be there when I am hurt from hearing "she/her" or "I miss when you wore your hair longer and wore actually pretty clothing" and want to escape to a place where I can read about teens like me who can navigate through their issues. Though mostly fictional, these narratives remain true for LGBTQ+ teens across the nation. We all long for a world where we can act and be heard. Sometimes, we just need to see that we aren't alone in order to take that first step. Had I never encountered books discussing this topic, I might have never been encouraged to think beyond what I was told.

In today's climate, that is a dangerous and sobering thought. It seems dystopian or even wicked to see that we can't read about the very things that are the most important to us. Book bans always hurt, because they are ultimately a curse to force ignorance. They might try to insist that there is only one story and aim to erase history that does not fit their ideal. They might claim that the existence of queer people is unnatural and move to censor evidence that they are, in fact, part of reality. They might say that we would never be able to live happily ever after if we saw graphic depictions of the very violence that is committed against us every day. To insist that book bans are necessary to protect us is to say that the wall was effective in protecting the princess from the outside. Let's revisit that story again, but with a twist.

Once upon a time, in a land not so far away, there was a boy, even if nobody else wanted to recognize that fact. The idea of his beauty was treasured beyond anything else, even his own happiness. To guard this idea, a wall of ignorance was constructed so that the boy could never escape from his own doom. But the wall did not hold. The boy escaped, transforming into a great dragon in the process. The dragon could not be held to the same standards as before. His parents looked on in horror as they saw their precious princess morph into an unlovable monster. The dragon fled, having to hide himself so that he would not be hunted down in the name of someone who did not exist to be saved. The dragon found his refuge in the most majestic tower of books called the library. In time, the dragon grew fond of the library, which he learned to call home.

I am that dragon. The library really has become a form of home, because of the amount of time I have spent being myself within it and because of the way that I have contributed to my own school's library. The amount of joy that I have experienced from both the books I have read and the connections I have felt to others because of those books is unmatched. And so, because of the library, I can say that I will live happily ever after.

THE END ◆

An Open Book

Caelynn P
Age 15, Minnesota

To open a book is to escape
To a new reality away from your own
To live and love through someone else's eyes
To feel how you never have before
To dream of things you have never dreamt
And yet, They want you to close that book
To put it away so you can become one of Them
They want your book to burn
To tear
To ban
To cut it apart
Into tiny pieces
So no one may ever read
That masterpiece again

That is Their agenda
To hurt and to harm
To scream to the entire world that
We are the root of Their problems
Those that They sculpted out of lies
They say that we have the agenda
And that we try to use against Them
When all we want is to be able to freely
Love
Live
And read
To try to believe
That we can be ourselves without other people's judgment
To show our true colors to the world
And to be free to write our own stories
And receive unconditional love back

We desire a mirror
A book that will show
Who you truly are inside
On its pages
To see yourself in those stories
And to know you are not alone in a world
That tries to convince you otherwise
To see that you are no
Freak
Weirdo
Or some strange anomaly
No one has ever heard of

To have some stranger
An author from some other reality
Show you that there are more
People like you out in the world
Reading these books
Those same books you are
That is the strongest thing we can do for our youth

And yet, what They want is
To conform you
To make you who They want you to be
To infest your life
With lies that make Them look
The victim
That's what They want
To try to reach into your brain
And tear apart what this love for knowledge has given you
To take away all of those hours of investment
Into people and things you didn't know on page one
But then by the end of the book
You know them
Like you know yourself
As if they were always apart of you

When will They realize that
To make you one of Them
They would have to get rid of all of that
Who you are and what these words have made you
To take out every fictional world
To get rid of every story, childish or not
To get rid of every memory of
The good cries
The happy smiles
The connections
That each and every book gives you
Every printed-out world
Real or fake

They can't though
And They know that
This is what they are afraid of
Your strength in the knowledge that
You are as a part of that story
As each and every one of of those words
Pressed into pages
In perfectly symmetrical lines

Pages that smell like home
When will They stop trying
Trying to make you think like Them
Because to do that
You would have to obliterate who you are
To stop believing in the good in others
To stop believing in true love
To stop believing that there will be a happy ending
Even for Them

◆

What Does The Freedom To Read Mean To Me?

Amina Walker
Age 16, New York

Imagination and inspiration are both blessings. It's a bigger blessing to be able to share them, in any form. Without the freedom my favorite authors, songwriters, or creatives had, what would I enjoy? And how would I have found my voice? What I like to write and the way I write has been influenced by the authors I've had the privilege of being able to read.

I use words like "blessing" and "privilege," not because I believe literacy is a skill for a select few, but because, at certain points in American history, other people did. In this country's past, being African American and being a girl meant my passion for literacy would have been crushed. As an African American, my people were forbidden from learning to read and write by law during the centuries of chattel slavery. I am fortunate enough to have traced some of my lineage back, and I know for a fact I had family who were enslaved on the Poplar Grove Plantation in North Carolina. The select few on the plantation who were allowed to read would have been restricted to solely what was approved by their plantation overseers. The Bible was the only written work that slaves were allowed to consume, and it is no secret that the Bible was a tool used to keep the enslaved subjugated.

Those enslaved people who served as preachers would read and teach Biblical passages to other slaves that served to justify their oppression. The only way to reach heaven was to remain an obedient slave. Literacy was allowed only to keep them in chains.

Fast forward a few centuries to present day, and I have a cousin living in South Carolina. She is not allowed to read certain things in her high school, specifically regarding race and American history. Administrators told her and her family that the school system looks at history from a "South Carolinian point of view." A "South Carolinian point of view" eliminates slavery when talking about the Civil War—changing the story of this country's darkest days to make it more favorable to the present day South.

In the time that followed Emancipation, it was common for Black schools to be targets of attacks by angry white Americans. Their schools were also severely under-resourced. This country did not value literacy in Black children, content to live with the stereotypes of an uneducated people that would have to manage with little education and within the confines of poverty.

As a young lady, many of these historical barricades wouldn't have budged. Women and girls were only wanted in the home. There was

no need for them to learn to read and write because they only needed to maintain their homes and take care of the children, right? Literacy for women and girls was under-valued and unsupported. As an African American girl, intersectionality would have made it so that I felt the repercussions of society's bigotry with twice as much force. Had I been born during any other era, it would have been possible that I lived my entire life illiterate.

Of course, this was not the reality for every single African American or every single woman. While there were many that challenged societal standards, this would have been the norm for a majority and for a very long time.

Being able to read isn't only important for history, though. The freedom to read makes it possible to access stories that shine a bright light on African American culture. With the continued rise of the Afrofuturism genre and the increase of Black main characters in young adult novels, being able to read means that the youth across the African diaspora will be able to see themselves in more than just "struggle stories."

Tracy Deonn, author of one of my favorite series of all time, *The Legendborn Cycle*, is a female African American author. Her books are about Bree Matthews, a sixteen-year-old Black girl who discovers her lineage and power in a magical, yet predominantly white society—the descendants of King Arthur and the Round Table. With the magical structures in her story further influenced by the African American spiritual practices and traditions called Hoodoo, Deonn connects the magic of her novel to Black American cultures in a way I had never read before. If she did not have the freedom to write, I don't know if I would have ever seen Hoodoo in mainstream media.

The Legendborn Cycle was not the first young adult series centering a Black main character, nor will it be the last. In that same way, I hope it is not the last series that incorporates Hoodoo or other elements of African American culture that I don't see represented enough in traditional fiction and fantasy.

I have always been an avid reader. It was a punishment to me if I went to bed without having read a story beforehand. I hope as I continue to grow, my love for reading doesn't falter. Having the freedom to read has shaped a large part of who I am today—someone with a passion for stories, someone who is an advocate for her culture, someone who is not afraid to speak up for what is right. It means I can continue to grow and find inspiration wherever I am. ◆

Hunger

Anonymous

Age 16, California

In my family, we eat what we cannot preserve.

My mother splits open the mouth of a fish and spills her secrets into its mute, amphibious underbelly. My father hacks off the spoiling thumbs of a sweet potato and grieves.

We pour our ingredients into a pot and feed the stew to our mouths.

We are all born with a leak, our histories simmering in our stomachs. Some seeped through our cracks and lingered on everything we touched. Some waited for rupture.

I find myself asking again and again, why do I write?

To me, words are a way of celebrating the world and each other. We are a web of contradictions, and writing captures our complexities in beautiful and unique ways. Writing is how we articulate our experiences and say to the world that "we are here." It's how we prevent stories from being silenced and forgotten. It means to embrace voices from diverse communities and to say that your story matters.

Words are not pretty. They awaken us.

They are monoliths rooted with passion. They are enigmas; they are souls; they are paradoxes. They build unexpected homes. They reverberate to challenge the status quo. They teach suffering and love.

In sharing this literature we are participating in this world. We gain a new clarity and understanding of the people around us. We are proud participants of truth, and we bear witness to each individual on this planet. We gain consciousness and feeling.

I've lived through the erasure of my history. If you open a book and search for China, 1960s, you might read about the Great Famine and the mass starvation. Search for China, 1970s – the starvation subsides. Fast forward fifty years and search for China, 2020s. Many COVID-19 articles, and the starvation is gone.

But the people living in China were always starving.

This is not the starvation you learn in books.

This is the gut-wrenching grinding against your stomach. This is the knowing you can never get out. Knowing you are born to slaughter.

This is hunger.

Hunger: A Montage of Mouths

A boy suddenly passed out during school and got cremated. *What?* His heart was still beating. He just lost consciousness. *Cremated?* His parents expected him to be passed out but found their little boy dead. *How can they cremate a person without proof of death or consent?* Don't think he was actually cremated. Someone found his organs useful. The passing out was no accident.

A girl just barely larger than the door mat died curled up in front of the hospital door. *From COVID?* No, a fever. She didn't have tylenol, and the doctors refused to let her in. *Why?* Because she wasn't rich enough or born to a family of government officials to have the right to life.

A kid found a dead rat head in their school lunch. *Aren't the families going to sue?* Can't sue if the school called it a duck's neck. *How can the school feed them that?* Healthy things wouldn't be worth feeding to them anyway.

Another man committed suicide in his apartment. *Why?* He was hungry. There's barbed wires over their apartment gates. The zero-COVID policy locked him in. *Where's the food?* Right outside his apartment gate. Fresh cabbage, tomatoes, rice. Trucks upon trucks, rotting. The smell covers up the decaying flesh.

A couple held hands and jumped off the balcony of their apartment. *Hunger?* Hunger.

They're mandating blood tests before all college entrance exams now. *Blood tests?* Seeing if your organs are worth keeping alive.

The roof collapsed on a school gym. The kids are crawling out like a cockroach infestation. *What is a child?* A body splayed out, a graveyard. A liver worth as much as their existence, as much as a cabbage in a palm. An afterthought. A lung heaving, finding air under the debris.

You ask me to cite my sources; I play you the soundtrack of rubber tires against gravel from midday drives to the supermarket, of moons caught in a cup of water by the window, and of chopsticks and plates clinking behind the dishwasher's hum. I have no sources. These lives were never written down. They were salvaged by mouths.

I hold on to these stories for longer than they have lived. Here, I write them down to eternity.

In China, you can't search for "89" or "egg fried rice." You can't read George Orwell, you can't eat dumplings without soy sauce (Remember the man who was jailed for that just because the police officer was drunk, and the next morning, the officer forgot why he arrested him, so he stayed in jail for months? Because he was not rich enough to buy himself out of jail? Because he was guilty for being human? I'm sorry—you don't remember. You never knew he existed in the first place).

In China, the textbooks are cleansed and rewritten to purify and justify the government's rule. The internet is disconnected and shut down from the outside world. Tragedies are erased; there are no starving people here, the children read as they shove their bare hearts and stomachs deeper into the table.

People's Daily

A boy suddenly passed out during school and was found dead. *they cremate a person with proof*

Another man was hungry. he ate Fresh cabbage, tomatoes, rice.

A couple held hands

the hospital the doctor was right

They're mandating blood tests before all college entrance exams now. you are worth keeping alive.

A kid found a dead rat head in their school lunch. *the families* called it a duck's neck. *the school feed them* Healthy things

The kids like xi as much as air

No words that have been written should ever be erased. Because who has the power to decide to erase those words? And what other words do they have the power to erase?

Any group with enough power to decide what survives and what dies has the power to use it to justify their rule. When the government gains enough power to ban literature, they also gain the power to assert fear and conformity in the people, to erase anything that challenges their authority. The people are deprived of individuality, autonomy, and liberty.

The people living in China don't know they're hungry.

In a few more generations, their stories, too, will be gone. The Tiananmen Square massacre and the Uyghur genocide are slipping into a distant memory, yet these are only the stories we know that are dying. Each day, an uncountable, unknowable number of human beings disappear.

I resist this erasure.

I ask myself, why do I write?

And I repeat, to preserve, to preserve.

To preserve the silent histories that leak from my family when we are not watching. To preserve my father's mother who died because the hospital in China refused to give her medicine. Because she was not rich enough to be considered a *somebody*. To preserve the fragments of human beings that manage to slip in between the textbook pages, to be salvaged across a firewall of silence.

Soon, there will be no one left to remember. The people inside are forgetting, and the people outside will never know. There will be no proof that we lived at all.

So I must bear this proof.

We are vessels of history, ebbing and decaying in the waters that carry us. I am here. I am always speaking. Feel these human lives through my words. Remember their souls. If you set these words aflame, I will collect their ashes and plant a garden. As a reader, a writer, a human being: I am preserving. ◆

A Lone Student's Merit

Angelina Meng
Age 17, New York

In my junior year, a book was at risk of being banned. Titled *The Good Women of China*, the book was unforgiving in its explicit depictions of homophobia and sexual abuse. Some parents believed this wrongly depicted the Chinese as misogynists while others believed it would convert their children in its portrayal of the "beauty of lesbian sex." As someone who had read the book, I found both arguments shallow: this book was meant to raise awareness for silenced women. Ironically, these parents wanted to re-silence them. Disguised by a pseudonym, I argued with these parents on Facebook to preserve the current curriculum.

However, my anonymous opinions were not enough, and the book was still at risk of being permanently removed. With no other choice, I went directly to the board meeting to speak to the administration. As I sat in the audience waiting for the meeting to start, I chatted with a few nearby parents, who eagerly explained how wonderful it was that a student cared enough about the debate to come speak at the meeting. Standing before the Board of Education, I braved my way through my defense of the book. The parents, who had been so eager to introduce themselves minutes earlier, were silent—they wrongly believed that I wanted the book removed. Among the five people that spoke that day, I was the lone student representative who actually read the book and could defend its merits through first-hand experience. The parents opposing the book's preservation in the curriculum later cornered me as I tried to leave. I argued my point but to no avail. The parents refused to accept that I supported the book, and it was over an hour before I left the school that evening. Thankfully, the board decided that the book would stay, and I thought that would be the end of it.

The following year, my actions to defend *The Good Women of China* were recognized and I received an honorable mention for the National Intellectual Freedom Award. I flew out to Columbus, Ohio, to attend the annual convention and accept my award. Waiting for my name to be called, I heard the acceptance speeches of the other awardees. They had published books, had their own writing banned, and fought relentlessly for the freedom of literature. I was stunned by the magnitude of their accomplishments, and, with each passing speech, I grew more and more nervous to stand in front of such an accomplished crowd. Delivering my speech is

a blur— all I remember is the overwhelming feeling of support as I shook everyone's hands and went back to my seat.

At the convention, I had the opportunity to attend a variety of panel discussions and other events. I listened to five authors, all of whose books had been banned. I took away two major points from their conversations. First, I realized that the more they spoke about why schools and districts banned their books, the more I wanted to read the book. Banning their books did the opposite of its intended purpose. I currently own a copy of one of the most frequently banned books in the past two years: *Out of Darkness* by Ashley Hope Pérez. Second, I realized that one of the most impactful ways to fight book banning is to speak out. Speaking at a board meeting was not something I originally perceived as the best way to fight book banning, but was something I did out of a lack of other solutions. However, after the panel discussion, I realized that my perspective as a student was valuable. The board had cited my words in their rationale—I had an influence on others, especially those without the same experiences.

My decision to go to a board meeting was more than just the preservation of an impactful book in a small high school. A school with the power of banning books is far from education, but a suppression of knowledge. The events of this last year have filled me with a sense of gratitude for my school's endorsement of the right to knowledge. However, I have also been filled with the overwhelming feeling of injustice for the books that continue to be banned across the world. While my fight may be over, the long-standing war against book banning is far from resolved. A student holds more power in their voice than they think, and, with the collaborative effort of students around the world, we may one day be able to celebrate a world in which we have the freedom to read anywhere, about anything, written by anyone. ◆

Using Your Words

Eliot Fowler
Age 13, Maine

"Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances."

Countless court cases have protected these rights to speech, to belief, to debate. We've all been told time and time again, "You're in America. You have a right to free speech, to free expression." And yet, here we are, watching books be snatched out of our hands, while the snatchers scream "INDOCTRINATION!" and "THE BOOK IS HURTING YOU!"

The book, in fact, is not hurting me. The book is expanding my mind, opening my views up to the wider world. The book is giving me knowledge about people who are different from me—making me a more well-rounded, empathetic human being with a deeper understanding of the world beyond my cozy bedroom reading nook. All studies taken on the subject show: reading makes kids more empathetic, emotionally intelligent people. These are skills that are essential in this world. Taking that away from kids is taking away an essential freedom—the freedom to read, the freedom to express yourself, the freedom to learn of other cultures and ways of life, the freedom to see yourself represented in the characters the people you read about, and the freedom to understand that you are not as alone in this world as you thought.

Books with diverse characters make kids more empathetic. Kids understand more about people different from them, whether they are different in race, religion, traditions, gender, beliefs, sexuality, income, body type, home situation, or something else. Without these books, kids may give in to the pattern that seems increasingly common in our society—seeing people different from them and fearing them, hurting them, discriminating against them. Our society really needs books to show kids just how diverse the world is and how diversity is something to be honored and celebrated rather than attacked, feared and exterminated. Kids need empathy to grow up and be kind, helpful and compassionate members of society, and anything that builds this sort of empathy, I believe, is truly important and essential.

Not only that, but kids need to be able to see themselves in the characters they read about. Countless books with diverse main characters have made kids feel less alone in who they are, and have helped them understand that they are not horrid oddballs who must conform to society's standards. These books show kids that, no matter what other people may say, they still deserve love, acceptance and compassion. This, too, is essential to kids'

coming of age. Especially in the tween and teen years when many people feel like outcasts, it's really important for all kids to have books that show them that they belong.

Book bans and attacks give a hateful and unwelcoming message to people of color, LGBTQ+ people, and other diverse identities represented in the books that are so often banned. This is not the message we should be sending. In my opinion, we are all humans and we all deserve the same acceptance, love, joy, and welcomeness in communities around the country and the world.

I have been reading since age four and have always had an interest in books and words. Even before I could actually read, I would pretend to read, babbling and looking at the pictures of books by authors like Robert McCloskey, Dr. Seuss, and Maurice Sendak. I still read today. The library is basically my second home, and I walk there every day after school. Books have opened my mind to the wider world. In the books I've read, I've been to all seven continents. I've gone on adventures in Japan with a boy from San Francisco. I've been to a neighborhood in the southern United States and watched as an uprising for justice came about in the wake of police brutality. I've even traveled to Germany and read in horror as the characters were persecuted during the Holocaust. Many of these adventures, I've come to realize, would not be possible if the message of these "book banners" was spread to the extent they want it to be. This lifelong passion for books and reading is part of why, when I hear about attempts to ban books, I become angry. It frustrates me that hateful people with a limited view of others different from them are able to so easily demand a book be removed and have it removed. The freedom to read is one of the most important freedoms held by Americans, in my view, because, not only is it the freedom to do the act of reading itself, but it is also the freedom to express yourself, the freedom to learn, the freedom to be understood and the freedom to understand others. Attacks on this are not only hateful and small-minded—they undermine one of the most basic and important American freedoms.

To combat this attack on our freedom of expression, it's important that people show how important reading is to them and how these challenges and bans hurt that. Reading has been an essential part of my life and has been a very important part of many other people's lives. To infringe on this right to read is taking away a point of joy for many, many people, and that should be condemned. The books that I read, I think, should have nothing to do with politics. Adults I don't even know shouldn't have the right to regulate what I read. I should be able to choose what I read and choose with confidence.That right should not be up for grabs.

We, the young people of the world, the people who will be inheriting this Earth, must continue to practice our rights and freedoms. We must show the people trying to infringe on our rights—it's not up to you. You have no say in what we read or don't. No matter what you say, we will keep reading. We'll keep learning, keep exploring, and keep opening our minds. We'll look for representation and seek out books about people different from us to learn about where they're coming from. We must tell future generations this chapter of history so it doesn't repeat itself. And most importantly, we must keep reading. ◆

Intertwined

Dana Balin
Age 16, New York

Children don't realize they are different until others start pointing it out. It seems silly, but kids simply lack that type of self-awareness. Despite being the only Filipino at my Jewish preschool, I saw no difference between myself and my classmates for the better half of a year. But one day, a classmate asked about my darker skin. It wasn't malicious, simply curious, and it made me curious as well. Before that moment, I had never truly thought about my appearance. So, I went home and asked my mother, beginning the long road to understanding my unique lineage as a Wasian Jew.

As other children grew more perceptive, I became accustomed to explaining my differing skin tone and features. But, despite my best attempts at explaining, the concept was difficult for them to grasp. They needed reasoning to understand my existence, but I had none. This was simply the way I was born. While I hoped for understanding, I knew better than to expect change. After all, their world consisted solely of Caucasian features. I was merely a temporary disturbance in the trend. I wondered if I would ever be considered standard, rather than an anomaly.

Joining my sister at the local elementary school allowed me to become exactly that. Right away, the diversity and nonchalance astounded me. Asian, Hispanic, and African American children roamed the halls, with nobody commenting on their skin tones or facial features. No longer did my race make me abnormal.

What I hadn't known was that I was the only Jew in my grade, and one of three in the entire school. When the other children found out that I didn't celebrate Christmas, I was once again subjected to a myriad of questions. Was it sad not to celebrate Christmas? How could I not believe in Santa? If I didn't believe in Jesus, how did I know right from wrong? Again, I was a disturbance in the trend. But would my interference resonate with them, or would they continue to see Judaism as an oddity?

It seemed, no matter where I went, I was either Jewish in a room of Christians or Asian in a room of white people. But, as everyone must at some point or another, I adapted. I was lucky enough to be raised in an environment where I was never harmed for my differences, merely questioned. I learned to pass off confrontations about my race or religion with jokes. Meanwhile, I picked up hobbies to talk about when other attempts at connection failed. I much preferred to make friends based on strength of character and shared interests rather than specific races or religions.

Of course, Comic Con, known to be a place for people of all backgrounds to bond over their passions, drew me in immediately. Going with my friends had become a yearly pilgrimage, filled with surprise and excitement. This year,

however, as I walked through the hundreds of stands selling merchandise, I struck gold: a stand for comic books made solely about underrepresented minorities. Having always been curious about other cultures, I quickly went to check it out. On the table, there was one series that caught my eye. "Like that one, huh?" the man at the stand asked. I nodded, picking up the first issue to read the back. "That's the first ever comic with a Jewish, Asian lead," he explained, "Nobody thought it would happen, but we did it!"

Now, I'm no stone wall when it comes to emotions. I'll admit that I'm the first to tear up at a sad movie scene and the last to stop crying when the credits roll. Still, I never understood being overwhelmed with the joy of representation. It seemed dramatic. I never cared whether a character was white, Christian, or male. If they thought like me or acted like me, in my mind they were close enough. But at that moment, when I looked at the cover and saw myself staring back, the tears just came. My friends, who had been looking at Dungeons and Dragons dice sets nearby, came to my side to ask what happened. I showed them the comic right away, still excited about my discovery. "Do you feel seen?" one asked, half-jokingly. I nodded, laughing as I wiped my tears. Naturally, I bought the comic book. I later went to have it signed by its creator in Artist Alley. Still excited days later, I raved about the comic to my friends at school.

But, the comic did not change me in any noticeable way. My skin did not become darker as ink smeared on my skin. My religious beliefs did not solidify in a miraculous revelation. I was still who I was before the endeavor. But to be seen, to be represented, to look at a story with someone like me front and center, felt unimaginably empowering. It was as though my existence was finally regarded as more than an anomaly. That very feeling of belonging is exactly what book bans are meant to target.

Let's not pretend that a novel has the power to hypnotize a person. The human brain is far too complex to be taken advantage of so easily. Books simply give a wider range of perspectives. Sometimes, these perspectives impart a revelation to someone who had never thought outside of what they had been taught. Perhaps, if the children in my preschool had read about Asian cultures, they wouldn't have needed reasoning behind my differing features. Maybe if the children from my elementary school had learned about alternative views of the universe, my religion would not have seemed so inconceivable. However, as my experiences can attest, these revelations do not come to those who do not want them in the first place. As much as I wish they could, books will not force acceptance from someone set in their ways.

The true beauty of literature lies, not in its ability to alter cognition, but in its ability to give a sense of belonging to someone who has already broken from the norms of their station. To take away that outlet is to isolate people from their community. Book bans are put in place with the hope that, by labeling certain opinions or people as unordinary, they can be ignored to the point of nonexistence. They are meant, not to keep one's identity from warping, but to deny pride in an already established identity. Do not bar children from experiencing the joy of seeing themselves in a novel, whether that be through their faith, race, gender, or sexuality. Do not allow them to go on believing they are alone. Just as everyone deserves to feel special, everyone deserves to feel normal too. ◆

"Banning books for the sole purpose of 'shielding' children from reality will only teach them to suppress their emotions. Wouldn't you rather they learn to accept themselves than to hide themselves away from those they love?"

Draimely G.
New York

A Ode to Banned Books

Elora P-M.
Age 19, Maryland

When I was ten years old, my friends and I consumed young adult novels with a hunger. They were our gospel, a shared language we all spoke. As a child, I read a little too much and took school a little too seriously. I quickly exhausted the juvenile books, reading and rereading my favorite books until I finally decided to make the climb up to the young adult section of the library. It felt different to me, a holy place, liberated from the noisy toys and crying children of the first floor. The stories felt more real. Once I reached this sanctuary, I never went back. My friends and I adored John Green, a man who's target audience was certainly not bookish fifth graders, but who captured our hearts anyways. Between us, we owned every novel he'd written. We would exchange them, passing the books around in class like contraband, reading them aloud in hushed whispers during recess. We loved the fantastical and the dystopian, but there was something about the shared experience of reading these novels that struck us much more deeply. While we had no business reading them at our age, something about the gritty reality infused in these novels had us infatuated.

My personal favorite was *Looking for Alaska*, which also happened to be one of the fifth most contested books in 2022. I've been trying to wrap my head around what could be so bad about this specific book. I questioned whether there was some underlying sinister message I had missed, some horribly twisted scene that I had repressed. All I remembered was a story about dealing with loss at a young age and finding hope in the midst of grief. What I now realize is contested is the same thing that drew me in—the genuineness of this novel. There's drug use and sexual content, but it isn't glamorized or gratuitous. These details add to the reality of the story. The perceived threat seems to revolve around fears that teenagers will read this book and be influenced, convinced to make the same mistakes as the characters. These fears operate under a presumptuous assumption that children and adolescents are blank slates with weak minds, who can be tainted by any mention of deviance, whose brains just can't comprehend any theme deemed too mature. People never give teens enough credit—our lives are more multifaceted, our lived experiences more complex, our ability to distinguish right and wrong more developed than anyone seems to realize.

What people also fail to consider about these novels is that they reflect a reality that differs from their own—but a reality nonetheless. Adolescents going through the loss of a loved one will see their struggles reflected in *Looking for Alaska*, those questioning their sexuality will find support in *All Boys Aren't Blue*. Fiction is a powerful form of communication that can serve as a safe space for more people than one could imagine. If we limit the ability to discuss these unique identities and situations, we limit resources available to those identities, making them feel more alone. We also handicap an entire generation, stunting their capacity for empathy and open-mindedness by erasing different identities from their visions. I was first truly introduced to the concept of homosexuality when I read *Will Grayson*, *Will Grayson*, another John Green classic (co-written

with David Levithan). When I read that one of the characters was gay I paused. I had heard of homosexuality, heard adults mouth the word gay like it was profanity, somehow a dirty word. I was ambivalent towards the subject, any wariness fueled by ignorance, but my love for John won and I devoured the story, leaving with a broader perspective. When gay marriage was legalized that same year, my friends and I celebrated. When one of my friends eventually came out as bisexual, I recalled reading the word in that book and looking up the meaning, making a connection that would serve me years later.

What really sticks out to me when I think back on my relationship with books was how deeply they impacted my worldview. I haven't read a single book I've regretted. I've read some questionable novels, with differing viewpoints, or some grossly explicit scenes. Nonetheless, every story I've consumed has positively impacted me, whether by adding to or reinforcing my perspective, or just by entertaining me. I've yet to encounter a book capable of indoctrinating me, but I've experienced a lot of deeply moving stories that have done nothing but expand my capacity for empathy and understanding. *The Hate U Give*, an extremely impactful novel on police brutality and racism has stuck with me since the first time I read it at fourteen. It conveys an experience I can't live, but can understand. The darker parts of the novel, which are cited as reasons for bans and challenges, highlight an unfortunate reality. As long as teenagers are being killed by the people entrusted to protect them, as long as race itself is a subject of contention and a cause of persecution, there will be no shielding children from these topics. Those who are in a position to ignore these harsh truths are just the people who need exposure to different stories, and the realities they are based on.

In the seemingly endless fight to protect children and please everyone, enraged parents and officials are starting to slap a label on anything they personally deem offensive. The crimes are becoming more and more specific with books like *Junie B Jones* and *Captain Underpants* being challenged for encouraging misbehaving and nudity. In a desperate attempt to shield children through a gross abuse of power, people are watering down children's literary options. While many wouldn't consider *Captain Underpants* a great loss, its censorship is a testament to just how overzealous the censorship of books is becoming. We are reaching a point where one must question just how far people will go to repress any story that has the potential to upset or offend. The freedom to read extends beyond the books themselves. Enveloped in it is the freedom to learn, the freedom to think independently, the freedom to express oneself honestly. The epidemic of censorship is a blight on our country, especially our youth. Any harm that possibly could have been afflicted from reading a book is mild compared to the harm that banning any atypical story and being force-fed a handpicked narrative will bring. Readers of any age need the freedom to explore different ideas, even if it means finding challenges to their own perspectives.

If I could talk to my ten-year-old self I would tell her to cling to her John Green books as tightly as she could. I would encourage her to read whatever she wanted and to escape in the pages of her novels as often as she pleased, because she could never have as much hunger for knowledge as she did in elementary school. The books I read in elementary school have been the foundation for my decision to major in English and my lasting love of reading, but even now I can't compete with the passion I see in the younger generation. I can only hope that they will be able to read freely, and find as much fulfillment in their books as I did. ◆

The Timeline From My Grandma's Ink

Luna Lee
Age 15, Connecticut

I know my grandmother as the sweet woman who wraps me in a warm embrace as I walk out of the airport doors, her contagious smile creasing the wrinkles that litter her face. I know her as the woman who whispers Japanese curse words under her breath when the Sudoku puzzle gets hard or when a tragedy strikes in the corny romance she's currently invested in. But mostly, I know her because of the rise and fall of her voice as she reads me the books she's written that never got published because she was too much of a feminist, a fear to the general public.

When she was younger and had no wrinkles or strands of frosted hair, she was nothing if not daring. From her witty remarks to her fiery ambition, she thirsted for challenges and was too proud to lose a fight to the many people who told her to quiet down and to be a woman. She refused. Society labeled her as unruly and stubborn, so much so that they had their young sons and daughters purposely avoid her in classes and during recess.

"They were scared of me, of how my mind worked," my grandmother said in Japanese once, her eyelashes fluttering with excitement. We were sitting on her bedroom balcony, her creased hands running through my dark hair. I was eight years old and crying because the neighborhood boys didn't want to hang out with a girl.

"Are they scared of me, too?" I asked, my voice dripping with misery. I felt her soft laugh against my back as she shook her head.

She looked into my eyes and gave me a smile with a flicker of mischief. "They're scared of what you could be." She looked briefly away at the bright blue sky looming before us. "We contain multitudes; we all do," she stated. "It's how we show them that scares people off."

I did not fully comprehend anything she said until a few years later when she sat me down in the kitchen, the smell of banana bread baking in the oven. Her arms were wrapped around a cardboard box, almost protectively. Peeling the duct tape off, she opened the box, and inside were notebooks. From leather to composition to small pocketbooks, they were all hidden and stored in the box. Her name was written on each of them, and a sense of pride washed over her face as her hands grazed each cover.

"These hold the words that I wish people would listen to one day," my grandmother said with a sad smile. "I've tried for years, but they turn me down just because they're afraid they can't ever finish anything I start. Years and years will pass, and maybe they won't even fit in my lifetime," she laughs, her eyes meeting mine. "But they will be yours, because your lifetime is not mine to live through."

"What do you mean?" I asked her, my voice tainted with questions and fear.

"You're a new time, and I hope that in your time, you'll find people who will listen," she says as she slides a notebook over the counter. "You'll find people who respect every word and thought you put down."

With that, I flipped to the first page of the notebook, holding not only pages yellowed with age but thoughts that a younger version of my grandmother had, opinions she still held. Smack dab, in the middle of the page she wrote, "*The true heart of a woman beats to protect another.*"

It's written so hard that it left indents on the other pages, but what shocked me the most was a red mark crossed through the sentence. A small note was written in the same red ink, but I knew without reading it that it wasn't by my grandmother, but by an editor who feared her as much as everyone else did.

Noticing my shock, my grandmother laughed. "They said my thoughts were a danger; what they didn't know was that I was the danger." She winked, walking off to tend to the oven that dinged with the finish of the banana bread. Her face had glinted off the reflection of the oven door, and for the first time in my life, I saw and understood her. From the way the left side of her mouth turned up to the wrinkle of her nose bridge, I saw a woman built and shaped by determination.

My grandmother consists of so many beautiful things. Her skin is made of endless pages of poems, all creasing and wrinkling as years passed in the blink of an eye. Her eyes work as mirrors, reflective and glittery, never dull.

People always point out that we resemble each other, that we have the same nose, the same tilt in our heads every time something makes us laugh. They had also noticed that we shared the same eyes. What they didn't know was that having the same eyes as her made me see the world the same way she did.

Every whisper of discouragement or flicker of pessimism was fuel that set fire to bursts of hope. We both see the same future, bustling with possibility. Through different perspectives and even different languages, we both live and breathe in a world we're insistent on improving.

Now, her notebooks are something I hold close to my heart. I trace the ink that she once set down in a time when she'd be shunned for ever thinking that way, and I hope that she'll be there when the time comes that those ideas are no longer a danger. I think about how, even now, the pieces of literature that she produced would be questioned, evaluated, and treated as a crime.

The work that would produce great shame from past generations would now be the treasures of the ones in the future. Even when I am given the freedom to read the pages that hold so many of my grandmother's thoughts and ideologies, there is a haunting thought that people worldwide are not given the same opportunities to read such work.

Through the timeline of literature and the freedom to access such pieces, the hopes of creating one that we can all share gives me a genuine glance at what freedom looks like. ◆

Book Bans, Political Censorship Have No Place in Our Nation's Classrooms

Joshua Weissenberger
Age 18, South Dakota

Imagine learning about Christopher Columbus but not being able to talk about the experiences of the Indigenous people already living on the land. Or being a high school history teacher and not being allowed to use terms like "systemic racism" to teach about slavery and its longstanding impacts on Black people to this day.

In some states across the country, this isn't just a hypothetical situation.

Over the last few years, there has been an increase of state-based efforts to restrict the teaching of so-called "divisive concepts." This nationwide push is part of a coordinated effort to limit teacher and student rights and free speech and to take away our ability to discuss racial justice issues in classrooms.

Those who want to ban "inherently divisive concepts" claim that teachers are teaching about these topics in ways that sow division among students and are a threat to the unity of the nation. They say that limits on honest discussions about race prevent the political indoctrination of students. What these limits really do, however, is rob young people of an opportunity to learn an inclusive and complete history.

That's because many will interpret limits or restrictions on "inherently divisive concepts" to mean a ban on discussing or raising issues of race or gender in the classroom at all. Preventing discussions like this or restricting access to books like this is an attack on free speech, a value that should be held in the highest regard. As a matter of fact, it's our right. The First Amendment protects the right to share ideas, including the right of listeners to receive information and knowledge. Anything less is classroom censorship, pure and simple.

As a future history teacher, this saddens me. No, this angers me!

Education is a tool of empowerment put to its highest use when teachers and students are given the full scope of their constitutional rights to engage in comprehensive, meaningful, and sometimes difficult conversations. Teaching students about American history without examining its contradictions and failures leaves

students ignorant of their country's full story. It deprives them of opportunities to develop their critical thinking skills and prepare themselves for real conversations about systemic racism in their life. Having the opportunity to learn and talk about the history and cultures of Indigenous communities, people of color, LGBTQ+ and Two Spirit people, and other marginalized communities benefits all students.

On top of that, the government cannot impose their personal moral values on others. The First Amendment's guarantee of the freedom of speech and the right to access information has created an incredible marketplace of ideas in our country. Each of us gets to choose what books we read and what information we access—but we don't get to choose for other people. That's censorship, pure and simple. And censorship is un-American and unconstitutional.

A free society is based on the principle that everyone has the right to decide what art or entertainment they want to view or create or the books they want—or do not want—to read. Just because one person doesn't want their child to read or discuss a book about a certain topic or "divisive topics" doesn't give them the right to restrict that book for everyone else. Schools should be a thriving ground for freedom of speech and freedom of thought.

To be sure, no one is going to agree on the merits of every book. Some books will make you uncomfortable. Some books will make you angry. There might be books you think children shouldn't read. There might be books you hope no one will read.

For students of color, the ability to talk and learn about the experiences and viewpoints of people of color and America's legacy of racism is critical to feeling connected in their school and that equality is valued in their community. Banning books or conversations about race—and gender and sexuality—in schools risks maintaining or creating education environments that are unwelcoming and even discriminatory toward Black, Indigenous, and other students of color, women and girls, and LGBTQ+ and Two Spirit students that can get in the way of their education.

When you attempt to ban books and censor the truth, you open the door to dangerous false narratives about the past and can create educational environments that are unwelcoming and inequitable, particularly for students of color. The ability to discuss and debate ideas, even those that some find uncomfortable, is a crucial part of our democracy and the fight to create a just and equitable world for everyone.

It's why I want to be a teacher. I just hope I can give my future students a complete look at history—with any book they want to read. ◆

Late Bloomer

Aliyah Sarmiento
Age 17, Florida

I was a late bloomer.

And, no, I don't mean it in *that* way.

By the age of six, it became apparent to me that I was a pariah in a sea of obnoxious book-loving classmates. Why? Because I *hated* reading.

Believe me, I was not some type of chronic iPad kid (mostly because I could not afford it), and my loving mother and father were by no means a "Here's a bowl and a stick! Have at it!" type of parents. My aversion towards reading really all stemmed from one thing—

I barely knew how to.

Unlike most of my peers, I did not attend pre-school. In fact, I was about a year late in joining kindergarten, only having practiced my writing skills a few months prior to that. Barely knowing how to write numbers and letters, the concept of reading flew way beyond my head, and when I observed other kids my age grasping it so easily, I was discouraged from even trying. Growing up in Singapore, where academic success was highly prized, I saw no point in running a seemingly lost race.

This distaste for reading continued up until I started elementary school. I resented our designated self-reading times, avoided raising my hand during reading-aloud practices, and was utterly dreadful at spelling and comprehension tests.

So, imagine my absolute joy when I found my lifeline in the form of *Mrs. Foo*.

Standing at 5'5" with thick-framed glasses, Mrs. Foo was an angel in an English teacher's human body. With gentle hands and a loving nature, she had recognized the face of contorted frustration and fear of literature and decided to pull me aside. Expecting a lecture of some sort, I looked down at my shuffling feet in shame as I stood in front of her.

"Do you want to read with me?"

My head shot up in surprise. I admitted to her that I had been struggling for a while and that I was probably not the best reading buddy. However, she simply pulled a seat beside her and whipped out *The Lorax* by Dr. Seuss. Page by page, she helped me pronounce every single word and used its colorful illustrations to help with context. After every few pages, she would ask me to give her a summary of

what I understood as she helped to fill in the gaps that I missed, something I was very appreciative of.

This soon became a ritual. Every designated reading time, she would come by my desk and ask me to give her summaries. As I improved my reading and comprehension skills, what once was aversion to reading became indifference. Soon, indifference grew into love.

It was this love, in fact, that pushed me to win my first short story contest in middle school and take up a college-level creative writing class as a high schooler. The same love that inspired me to start writing and producing my own original songs. And the same love that constantly reminds me of my dreams to write my own book one day.

To me, the freedom to read is synonymous with being able to read. And to be able to read means to be able to live a million lives and reread them over and over again. When we cut those lives short, we not only restrict our ability, but our creativity, as well. Today, *The Lorax* continues to be a controversial and banned book due to its "different" viewpoints on society. However, it is this diversity that pushes kids like myself to think outside of the box and keeps us open-minded, which today, in a world riddled with war and plagued with ignorance, is what we need the most. Reading is and will always be a gift, and we should be able to use it as we wish. ◆

Paper Cut

Oluwatoyin Kupoluyi
Age 19, New York

"i'm not sure when I decided words will be my best friend
maybe when I realized pens come with a heart
that bleeds along lined paper
leaving a trail of meaning
cutting through a paper and leaving its mark"

What makes a handful of letters into words, what makes said words into meaningful sayings that form paragraphs?

Before words became my best friend, silence was there. I used to love silence, it brought me pleasure to think and watch but never speak. I used to hide my face in the darkness my silence brought. Silence was a two-faced tool that pretended to be my friend but quietly robbed me of my power and, like a vampire, slowly sucked my voice. As I befriended words my bond with silence slowly drifted. Words were the key that unlocked the chain that silence had around me. As a young child I was constantly unsure of my place in the world. Speaking terrified me because I didn't want to make a mistake. I didn't want to be too loud or bold in my statements. So I stayed quiet. As I outgrew silence books became my sanctuary. They were more than just stories on pages; they were keys to different worlds where I could feel understood, heard, and valued.

Towards the end of my 8th grade year I read *Monday's Not Coming* by Tiffany D. Jackson. *Monday's Not Coming* was more than a book to me; it was a revelation, a journey that mirrored my own quest for identity and voice. Reading this story wasn't just an escape; it was a mirror reflecting the struggles, fears, and determination I lived with. As I read the pages of this powerful narrative, I found echoes of my own experiences woven into the protagonist's journey. The book explored themes of identity, silence, and the haunting absence of someone deemed insignificant by many—a narrative that resonated deeply with me. The character's quest to find her missing friend mirrored my own mission to discover my voice in a world where silence often reigned. Through this journey, I realized the power of speaking out, of refusing to be silenced by societal norms or expectations.

Monday's Not Coming wasn't just about storytelling; it was a catalyst that fueled my courage to stand up for others. It showed me the importance of raising my voice, not just for myself but for those whose stories often go unheard. The book became a beacon, guiding me to advocate for justice, empathy, and understanding. Through *Monday's Not Coming* I found my voice. It wasn't just about being talkative or social; it was about using words as a tool for empowerment, for shedding light on overlooked narratives, and for advocating for a world where every voice is heard and valued. This book became the cornerstone

of my advocacy, reminding me that through storytelling, we can ignite conversations that drive meaningful change.

Book bans aren't just about restricting certain stories; they are attempts to cage my imagination, limit my understanding, and stifle my growth. Book bans represent a dangerous suppression of voices, narratives, and perspectives, something I've experienced firsthand through my journey with books like *Monday's Not Coming*. These bans don't just restrict access to certain stories; they diminish the opportunity for individuals, especially marginalized communities, to find their voices and be heard. For someone like me, whose growth and self-discovery were profoundly shaped by the words on those pages, book bans feel like an assault on personal freedom. It feels like the chain I fought to remove is slowly being forcefully rewrapped around me. They deny the chance for individuals to connect with stories that resonate with their experiences, struggles, and aspirations. By banning books, we're not just removing words from paper; we're erasing avenues for empathy, understanding, and growth.

These bans strip away the chance for individuals to explore diverse perspectives, to foster empathy for others' experiences, and to learn from stories that challenge their own beliefs. The dangers of book bans lie in their ability to silence marginalized voices. They perpetuate ignorance, reinforce stereotypes, and hinder progress towards a more inclusive society. When we deny access to narratives that shed light on important issues—such as social justice, identity, mental health, and diversity—we prevent the dialogue necessary for societal evolution and empathy. Books like *Monday's Not Coming* hold a mirror to reality, encouraging discussions about sensitive and crucial topics. They empower individuals to find their voices and advocate for change. When these narratives are censored or removed, we lose the opportunity to engage in these crucial conversations, hindering our collective growth and understanding.

At its core, the danger of book bans lies in their impact on people like me, who foundsolace, empowerment, and a sense of identity within the pages of these stories. It's about ensuring that every voice, every story, regardless of its narrative or origin, has the chance to be heard and valued. Book bans challenge my freedom of speech, feeding me the silence that I spent my teen years fighting against. ◆

Finding Pride Within the Pages

Alice Wolf
Age 16, California

There's a special kind of magic in the way books can allow one to navigate the depths of another's mind and view the world through their eyes. It's a magic I've been lucky enough to have been exposed to since I was young, and I firmly believe I wouldn't be who I am today without it. I have vivid memories of devouring fantasy series when I was younger and how they were the first to truly fuel my love for reading. After my mother passed her copies of *Harry Potter* into my small, eager hands, eight-year-old me would brandish a toy wand in front of a mirror and dream of places with much more magic and wonder. The escapism in books such as these was at once a source of entertainment and an outlet for my childish imagination. When I trace my passion for reading back to my childhood, it always begins with these magical tales that I fell in love with. From there it only swelled.

When I grew older and matured, the books I decided to spend time with did as well. As I struggled with my identity and figuring out who I was, stories of people who were facing similar struggles were where I found solace. It was in middle school that I first found books representing queer identities. It was as if I was handed the key to a door in my mind that had once been obscured by the fog of my uncertainty; assigning words to feelings I had never been able to articulate. Having access to the likes of *Lily and Dunkin*, which follows a young transgender girl, and *The 57 Bus*, which told the real story of a non-binary teen, led me to discover how fluid gender can be and that not everyone can be narrowed down into the labels society assigns to us. Not only did this open my mind to others, but it helped me reflect on myself and where I might fit in this broad spectrum of identity. I felt inspired to experiment with my own gender expression and, in doing so, began to develop a more solid sense of self. I explored questions I had never even thought to ask myself before, and on the journey to seek the answers, I found pieces of my identity scattered along the path like discarded pieces of clothing for me to try on. Not everything fit perfectly of course, but it never felt like this was a path I walked alone. These books I read gave me a sense of solidarity to take along with me, like a trail of breadcrumbs leading me out of the dark.

Fast forward to high school when I eagerly began to seek out opportunities to promote the importance of reading and these stories that I was certain needed to be known. I dedicated numerous hours throughout the year to volunteering in my school's

library and, along with a small team of other passionate, like-minded readers, assembled displays to highlight the selection in the library. The one that stood out the most to me was the display we put together for Banned Book Week last year. I had already known that certain places in the U.S would challenge books they deemed inappropriate—usually for unfair reasons—but until then I had never truly grasped the extent of these bans and the deep homophobia, racism, and bigotry they are rooted in. Looking at the statistics and the books, it was clear that the voices of people of color and members of the LGBTQ+ community were being targeted and censored in an attempt to shame and silence them. The same voices that had taught me, uplifted me, and guided me all throughout my adolescence. Voices that had been a shining light to me as a young, confused queer kid, echoing my feelings back at me in a way that validated them when I needed that most.

I was so proud to be able to deliberately shine a light on these books in a school where they are not only not banned or restricted in any way, but promoted, celebrated, and taught. As I stood before the display we had constructed, I was able to fully take in how important this was. To allow these voices to be raised instead of attempting to dismiss them. To give the opportunity for teens like me to see their faces and their stories reflected back at them in the authors and characters they read about. To not be erased or isolated, but instead to be recognized and valued.

That feeling I had in middle school when I was first greeted by queer characters never diminished. Even now, finding them in the stories I read, whether they play a part big or small, feels like a comforting hand on my shoulder or a knowing smile thrown in my direction. A tender reassurance that I am seen and that my story deserves to be told. For this is a fact that will remain true no matter how many places try to censor our identities: not giving access to our stories will not make them cease to exist, it will only make us more adamant about sharing them with the world. This is because the freedom to read comes not only hand-in-hand, but intertwined with the freedom to learn about community, empathy, and ultimately, yourself. ◆

Allow Us Understanding

Draimely G.
Age 16, New York

Children are raised in the image of their adult care takers. Almost everything they learn is from them. Children will only start to develop their own beliefs and values when they start school, meet new people, and read.

When I started school, I was in a new environment. Surrounded by unfamiliar voices, their words crisp and raspy. I struggled to decipher the information they spread. I was below, at the bottom of the staircase, enjoying the comfort of an imaginary world. I struggled to connect with the other bodies that surrounded me, I struggled to understand their dialect. Since everyone else could communicate so easily, I felt I was the black sheep.

My young mind was not aware that what I was experiencing was common. I was left in a dark street searching for light. Searching for understanding in cracked glass bulbs. I wanted to connect, I wanted to communicate with these foreign beings. I wanted to become one of them. Being so young and so quiet, it can force you further into an inevitable silent future. I felt comfort in dreaming of it, my own insufferable future. One where I would always end up sitting in the back of a party, letting the tips of my fingers circle the rim of my glass.

By the end of elementary school, I was prepared to be alone. It sounds depressing, but at the time it was what I believed. Sinking into despair felt better than a talk with my parents or a hug from a random kid in my class who felt only pity. I convinced myself that I was not a child of beauty, intelligence, or charisma. I was just a child.

But then, in middle school, I started to read and to feel something different, something new. At first, it wasn't comfortable. It was entertainment. I would read stories of children like me. Children who also wanted understanding. I would read these stories, thinking they were just stories. I would never fully relate to the creatures drawn on these white pages. It was just a fake reality.

It was not. It was real. It was my own perception of life drawn onto 200-something pages of paper. My life was so easily captured. As if my exact emotions had been felt by all who had come before me. I read stories of young girls who struggled to create friendships, to use their voices, and to understand themselves. These kids questioned everything. Their identities, their personalities, their bodies, their sexualities. Someone had robbed me of my struggles and printed it onto paper.

Reading these stories did not cure me of my failed attempts at becoming like those around me. Instead, It taught me something different. I did not have to change. I didn't need to shape myself into the unknown silhouettes of those around me. In fact, I would soon realize I was not the only one who felt the need to change.

These uncensored lives on paper are the reason I now know I don't need to change. It is because of these fictional characters that have real struggles, struggles I have gone through, that I allow myself to accept myself, even if I do not understand it.

Children will inevitably experience everything you can think of and more. Banning books for the sole purpose of "shielding" children from reality will only teach them to suppress their emotions. Wouldn't you rather they learn to accept themselves than to hide themselves away from those they love? We are made the way we are, allow us to understand it. ◆

The Lives Between the Lines

Maya H.
Age 16, New York

It is a universally acknowledged truth that two are better than one. It's in the Bible, it's in textbooks, we witness it in our cities and in any other place where humans congregate and coexist. Our whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Humans are unique amongst nature in this aspect; we are far stronger in groups not solely due to physical prowess but rather thanks to our minds. When we connect with each other, we create the opportunity to work together and construct things far beyond our individual capabilities. The most glaring obstacle preventing this idyll of unity is our lack of empathy for our surroundings, especially those who are different from us. So how do we overcome this barrier?

In her TED Talk, "The Danger of a Single Story," Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie references the power of stories to influence identity, reinforce and create stereotypes, and nurture empathy. In telling us about her experiences with closed-mindedness, both those in which she was viewed through a narrow lens as well as ones that caused her to grasp the limitations of her scope, Adichie allows us to understand the truth about humans—our subjective vantage point is inherently insufficient.

Every single one of us has a prism, of sorts, through which we view reality. Much like a prism bends light to generate a vast array of divergent colors, our respective scopes are intrinsically distinctive and unique. It's no stretch of the imagination to understand that the way I see the world is very different from the way a girl from Suriname would see it. To a certain extent, every moment of our lives shapes us and develops our worldview, though some have more effect than others. My parents and I share similar opinions on a multitude of issues, and the vast majority of my friends' views also overlap with mine. Similar circumstances create similar "prisms" and, in most places, multiple parallels exist within the conditions of the people inhabiting them. These parallels create the foundation for communities (whether towns and cities, the casts of productions, or families)—principally the sense of unity and empathy for other members of the group—but they also inhibit the expansion of our scopes. When we surround ourselves with people whose prisms closely resemble our own, we often forget that other types of prisms exist that can also create marvelous rainbows.

My peers back home in Israel were all pretty similar to me: a secular majority, mainly middle-class and all with a deep desire to

learn. Our discourse was limited, not because we shied away from complex topics but rather because, once you stripped away personal preferences and minor disagreements, our general opinions and personal truths were nearly identical. We would delve into the intricacies of political shifts and movements, real-world events, or even conflicts and gossip between our peers—often only to realize that we wanted the exact same things, even if our methods of achieving them were different.

Looking around us, we can see that this is often the case. We all grow up in a society, a culture, an environment—and perhaps the one thing that all social circles share is their reliance on stories to develop their cultural narratives. When thinking of childhood stories, some of us may flash back to grandparents' tall tales, while others recall urban legends from their schooldays, and others think of fairy-tales and fables. Storytelling is a fundamental facet of what it means to be human. Stories unite people. They invoke emotions beyond our awareness, provoke our thoughts, and make us reevaluate our opinions. Stories allow us to connect on the most fundamental levels, to see the person in front of us, not just look at them.

In most societies, the stories are limited by the society's scope. A group of Colombians cannot possibly fathom how it feels to be Indian—and one must wonder, how can we bridge this gap?

The answer is deceptively simple. Words. Words allow us to take part in other peoples' experiences. Whether an op-ed, a full-length classical novel, or anything in between, words enable the formation of connections from afar. Curled up with a book in NYC, I can suddenly gain an intimate understanding of a Middle-Eastern girl or a non-binary Quebecois. When we transcribe our stories, we create a safe space, a brave space, that fosters the growth of our minds and the nurturing of our souls.

While talking to a teacher on the subway home, the topic drifted towards literary analysis of weighted subjects, such as religious texts or real-world events. She recalled, "I hadn't realized I was allowed to have thoughts on politics and the world around me. I was given a new lens through which I could view my surroundings."

I felt similarly when I first saw a Jewish girl in contemporary American literature. As far as I was concerned, the terms "Jewish" and "American" were mutually exclusive literature-wise, especially in books targeting younger audiences. I remember regarding Rowan Roth, a character in Rachel Lynn Solomon's *Today Tonight Tomorrow*, as a paragon of teenage existence. I even stalked the author relentlessly online, trying to decipher this strange, wonderful being who had breathed life into a concept that had seemed implausible only moments before. I imagine I am not alone in feeling this sentiment. Seeing my experiences materialize corporeally, on a real piece of paper in an actual book, gave me hope. It made me feel seen.

When organizations ban a book, they silence a narrative. They stifle a voice. They muzzle the boy pondering his identity, the girl questioning religion, the kid shocked to discover someone like them peering from between the lines—and they deprive the rest of the world of opportunities to hear and learn. Consider a child on their first day of school surprised that some kids are grabbing at his hair. Imagine a girl in a bathroom, terrified by the changes in her body. Now imagine them lifting a book, a bit afraid, but waiting with bated breath to know. Imagine them discovering that they're normal, and that they can be accepted. Think about how much lovelier our world could be if this process were the norm.

Banning books restricts our opportunities to learn. Libraries, first and foremost, are knowledge hubs. They provide equitable access to information. Humans are meant to learn, to grow. When we empathize, we grow, and when we learn, we gain the ability to empathize. Empathy cannot exist without knowledge. Turning a blind eye to the events in our world doesn't solve those issues—it simply exacerbates them by legitimizing their existence. Knowledge is power. It is power in itself, but it also grants us the power to create together. Adichie says that "when we reject the single story, when we realize that there is never a single story about any place, we regain a kind of paradise."

I cannot claim that our world is perfect. But it is clear to me that so long as we dismiss certain stories, effectively barring interpersonal connection, collaboration, and knowledge, our collective paradise will remain relegated to the realm of fantasy. ◆

STAND WITH LIBRARIES TO PROTECT THE FREEDOM TO READ

Take Action!

1. **Get the facts on book bans.** Through the American Library Association's Unite Against Book Bans initiative, you can stay up to date on attempts to ban books in the United States. Find talking points, a guide to getting in touch with decision-makers, and more: **uniteagainstbookbans.org**
2. **Check out the ALA's Freedom to Read Statement.** This landmark declaration of principles from the ALA was originally written in the 1950s in response to a rise in censorship efforts during the McCarthy era. Read now and sign on: **uniteagainstbookbans.org/freedomtoread**
3. **Make your voice heard** on social media using the hashtag **#UniteAgainstBookBans**
4. **See for yourself** the current state of book bans using this database provided by the National Coalition Against Censorship: **ncac.org/youth-censorship-database**
5. **Explore more resources** to help you take action from the National Coalition Against Censorship: **ncac.org/project/youth-free-expression-program**
6. **Report censorship to the ALA**, which tracks attempts to ban or restrict library materials: **ala.org/challengereporting**
7. **Stay up to date** on book bans and censorship using PEN America's resource center: **pen.org/issue/book-bans**
8. **Talk about the freedom to read** with friends, family, and teachers—and consider starting a banned book club of your own! Book clubs are a great way to talk about why it's important that everyone has the right to read freely.
   - Research what books are being banned on the ALA website: **ala.org/top10**
   - Check out books, e-books, and audiobooks from your local library.
   - After reading, ask yourselves: What are the main themes explored in the book? What do you think the author is saying about those themes? What did you get out of the book and what do you think others may get out of it?

Learn more: **nypl.org/booksforall**

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New York Public **Library**

PROTECT THE FREEDOM TO READ AT NYPL

Book bans and censorship are on the rise, threatening the right to read freely. Join us for our special Teen Banned Book Club events with bestselling authors and learn how you can help raise awareness and take action to protect this essential right!

Books are considered banned when they're removed from a library's collection after being challenged by a person or group. Book bans and challenges have reached an all-time high in the U.S., overwhelmingly targeting books for young adults written by or featuring LGBTQ+ people or people of color. Bans and challenges can also lead to "quiet censorship," which occurs when books are not made available out of fear that they will be challenged.

Book bans matter because they silence perspectives, erase identities, and eliminate choice. Being able to read about different perspectives and experiences is essential to the free flow of ideas that's at the heart of our democracy. In uniting against book bans and censorship in all forms, we champion intellectual freedom and the right of all voices to be heard.

Take action now: **nypl.org/booksforall**