

## Controversies and Challenges

Books and other materials are often challenged, censored, or banned on the grounds that they are inappropriate for children and teens, and the most commonly-cited reasons include sexual content, objectionable language, and violence. But throughout history, books have also been challenged on political grounds. In the realm of Young Adult literature, the censoring of political topics is sometimes less overt.

Between 2000 and 2005, the ALA Office of Intellectual Freedom recorded 144 challenges to books due to “political viewpoint.” In addition, books were challenged for offensive language (811 instances), violence (405), being “anti-family” (57), and “unsuited to age group” (504). Other books have been challenged for promoting inappropriate behaviour. Indeed, any book that defies the accepted norms of suitability for young adults can be considered anti-establishment.

Dystopian fiction and radical literature in general has faced its fair share of challenges across time. *The Giver* by Lois Lowry, *The Handmaid’s Tale* by Margaret Atwood, and *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley all appear on the ALA’s list of the 100 Most Frequently Challenged Books of 1990–2000.

If a book is “dangerous” enough to challenge or ban, it is important to consider why. Perhaps its “danger” is an indication of the importance of the work. How can libraries make determinations on what is too dangerous?

Certainly, there are books that really are not suitable for young people (however that may be defined). Moreover, a given library cannot, and should not, have every book on every subject for every person. The role of librarians, then, is to develop collection and provide reference and advisory services that will allow patrons access to materials that meet their information needs.

Censorship through selection can never be completely eliminated in collection development. The avoidance of radical viewpoints is often a practical way to ensure that a collection does not offend particular groups. Moreover, librarians, like anyone, tend to have a higher tolerance for radical materials that are in keeping with their own views. However, collection development policies for young adult materials can be designed to encourage the inclusion of as wide a range of materials as possible. Since an important part of growing up is encountering ideas that are unfamiliar and

sometimes even frightening, young adult readers should have the opportunity to pursue their intellectual development through unconventional materials.

Common wisdom dictates that the handling of challenges requires a clear and comprehensive collection development policy for the library. The policy guides the selection of materials in relation to the existing collection and the community served, and moreover, it can be used to justify the selection of items that are challenged. Libraries should also have procedures in place for when a material is challenged and ensure that due process is afforded to any requests.

School librarians and teachers have different considerations when it comes to handling challenges to books. In some cases, their collection policies are determined by outside entities, so the librarian may have limited control over selection. They can also be held more directly accountable to governmental officials than public libraries. Books are sometimes “pre-approved” by educational authorities before they can be included in curricula and libraries. School libraries serve a “clientele” of a specific age group who are expected to use the library primarily for academic purposes. Since they often stock books from the school curriculum, school libraries can become embroiled in broader challenges to books in the classroom.

Authors like Norma Fox Mazer (1997) have spoken out against the fear of including books that are “potentially censorable.” Librarians and teachers instead must always consider the rights of their students first when it comes to education, allowing them access to the “dangerous” works that may touch their lives and promote the development of critical thinking.

Dealing with challenges requires strong personal ethics. In addition, support from colleagues and professional organizations can assist librarians in making tough decisions and take appropriate actions. The International Federation of Library Associations’ (IFLA) “Statement on Libraries and Intellectual Freedom” (1999) states that, “Librarians and other professional libraries staff shall fulfil their responsibilities both to their employer and to their users. In cases of conflict between those responsibilities, the duty towards the user shall take precedence.” Librarians should not lose sight of their duty to uphold young people’s right to read and access information.

## Challenges to Dystopian Works

Young people's access to the following dystopian works of fiction has been challenged in school and public libraries in North America between 1976 and 2001 (along with one instance in 1928 and another in 1963). Most of the titles are very well known and extremely widely read, but their radical ideas still cause controversy amongst those who question the suitability of the books for young people.

Title	Reasons for challenges
<i>Animal Farm</i> by George Orwell	Political theories; "Orwell was a communist;" includes the phrase "masses will revolt"
<i>Brave New World</i> by Aldous Huxley	Generally anti-establishment: sexual material; immoral content; "centred around negative activity;" contempt shown for marriage and the family; anti-Christian and anti-religion; includes depictions of drug use, orgies, and suicide; obscenity; profane language
<i>Candide</i> by Voltaire	Considered obscene
<i>A Clockwork Orange</i> by Anthony Burgess	Profane language
<i>Fahrenheit 451</i> by Ray Bradbury	Censored for profanity
<i>The Giver</i> by Lois Lowry	Thematically unsuitable for age group; violence; depicts suicide, infanticide, and euthanasia; objectionable treatment of sexuality
<i>The Handmaid's Tale</i> by Margaret Atwood	Profanity; sexual material; offensive references to "minorities, God, women and the disabled"; thematically unsuitable for age group
<i>1984</i> by George Orwell	Pro-communist; sexual content

### References:

American Library Association. *The 100 Most Frequently Challenged Books of 1990–2000*. Retrieved April 7, 2007 from <http://www.ala.org/ala/oif/bannedbookweek/bbwlinks/100mostfrequently.htm>

American Library Association. *Free Access to Libraries for Minors: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights*. 2004. Retrieved April 7, 2007 from <http://www.ala.org/ala/oif/statementspols/statementsif/interpretations/freeaccesslibraries.htm>

American Library Association. Office of Intellectual Freedom. *Challenges by Type, 2000-2005*. 2005. Retrieved April 7, 2007 from <http://www.ala.org/ala/oif/bannedbookweek/bbwlinks/challengesbytype20002005.pdf>

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Mazer, Norma Fox. *Shhhh! The ALAN Review*, 24.2 (1999), 46-48. Retrieved April 7, 2007 from <http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/ALAN/winter97/w97-10-Censorship.html>

## Political Challenges to Children's and Young Adults Access to Books

The following works have been challenged in North American schools and libraries between 1977 and 2003 on the basis of their political content or anti-establishment themes.

Title	Reasons for challenges
<i>The Autobiography of Malcolm X</i> by Malcolm X and Alex Haley	Racist; called a "how-to manual for crime"
<i>Little Piece of Ground</i> by Elizabeth Laird	"A racist, inflammatory, and a totally one-sided piece of propaganda" dealing with the Palestinian-Israeli conflict
<i>Maxine's Tree</i> by Diane Leger	"Indoctrinated children into an anti-logging or extremist viewpoint"
<i>A Light in the Attic</i> by Shel Silverstein	Encourages disobedience; "suggestive illustrations"
<i>Black Boy</i> by Richard Wright	Author called a communist
<i>Of Mice and Men</i> by John Steinbeck	Author's patriotism and "anti-business" attitude was questioned
<i>New American and Canadian Poetry</i> by John Gill (editor)	"Anti-establishment view;" sexual content; promotion of objectionable language
<i>The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock and Roll</i> by Jim Miller (editor)	"Will cause our children to become immoral and indecent"
<i>Sylvester and the Magic Pebble</i> by William Steig	Depicts the police as pigs
<i>Where the Sidewalk Ends</i> by Shel Silverstein	Promotes rebellion against parents and authority figures; violence; depicts suicide, death and drug use; promotion of the occult; "disrespect for the truth"

The reasons these works were challenged were cited from the following sources:

Lancto, Craig. *Banned books: How Schools Restrict the Reading of Young People*. 2003. Retrieved April 7, 2006 from <http://www.worldandi.com/newhome/public/2003/september/mt2pub.asp>

American Library Association. *Banned and/or Challenged Books from the Radcliffe Publishing Course Top 100 Novels of the 20th Century*. Retrieved April 7, 2007 from <http://www.ala.org/ala/oif/bannedbooksweek/bbwlinks/reasons banned.htm>

*Banned books: The Who, What, When, Where & Why*. 2006. Retrieved April 7, 2007 from [http://www.deletecensorship.org/downloads/booklist\\_hpb.pdf](http://www.deletecensorship.org/downloads/booklist_hpb.pdf)

*Challenged Books and Magazines List*. Retrieved April 7, 2007 from [http://freedomtoread.ca/docs/challenged\\_books.pdf](http://freedomtoread.ca/docs/challenged_books.pdf)