



DEMAERRE

Politics

# **Banned Books: Conservatives Target Publishers As Part of Their School, Library Censorship Push**

*Miseducation is a column that chronicles what it's like to be a student in the modern United States.*

BY MARY RETTA

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The United States experienced a **stunning uptick in book bans** in 2022. According to data from the American Library Association (ALA), more than 1,200 challenges to various books were filed last year. This is nearly double the number of challenges in 2021, and by far the greatest number since the ALA began keeping track of bans 20 years ago, the Associated Press reported.

Many of the over 2,500 individual titles that were objected to in 2022 dealt with issues of race, gender, and sexuality. Conservatives have targeted **teachers, librarians**, and even **students** in an effort to control what is learned and discussed in schools. More recently, conservative censorship has found a new potential target: publishing houses.

In April, the Tennessee legislature passed SB 1059, a **bill** that specifically calls out book publishers that distribute materials to K-12 public schools, saying those publishers can be charged with a felony and fined at least \$10,000 or up to \$100,000 if the materials are found to be legally obscene. Previous bills have already made it illegal to distribute “obscene” materials to minors, but this new law adds specificity, targeting book publishers and the books they provide to schools. Unlike existing laws, it also makes a first offense for publishers a felony instead of a misdemeanor.

The bill condemns obscenity in schools, but largely leaves the concept up

to interpretation. “The tricky part here continues to be how obscenity is defined from a legal perspective,” Erika Long, a librarian in Tennessee, tells *Teen Vogue*. In an ideal world, she argues, librarians would be the ones to discern what is appropriate for children of a certain age to read, rather than the government. “In a recent [ALA] survey, 74% of parents showed a great deal of confidence in [school libraries] to make good decisions about the books they add to collections,” she points out. “If the majority of legislators who voted for this bill truly understood the varied steps in the collection-development process, they would trust librarians to do their jobs.”

Deborah Caldwell-Stone, the director of the ALA’s office for intellectual freedom, also expresses fear of the potential consequences of SB 1059. “The Tennessee legislation is just one example of proposed laws advanced by conservative political advocacy groups that want to expand the definition of what is considered obscene for minors, so that it is easier for them to ban or restrict books that address sex, sexuality, sex education, reproductive health, gender identity, and sexual orientation,” she tells *Teen Vogue* via email. “Some involved in these campaigns are open about their desire to remove all books reflecting the lives, experiences, and concerns of LGBTQIA+ persons, on the grounds that no gay, queer, or transgender person’s stories should be on library

**teen**VOGUE

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“Activists are working to chill not just how school libraries acquire books, but how those books are published and sold in the first place.”

Many advocates are worried that the bill is a tipping point in Republicans' fight to limit the kind of books publishing houses are legally allowed to produce. In February, a bill was introduced in Congress that would “prohibit a publishing house from knowingly furnishing sexually explicit material to a school or an educational agency.” Per the legislation, if the publishing house knowingly provides a school with “materials containing a sexually explicit visual depiction of any kind,” that publisher could face a fine up to \$500,000.

“I think there are pretty high chances that similar legislation spreads to other states,” says Dana Blanchard, the programming coordinator of Haymarket Books, a “radical, independent, nonprofit” book publisher based in Chicago. “This is all part of the right-wing agenda. They call it ‘culture wars’; I call it trying to smash radical ideas and people’s ability to organize. It’s not surprising to me that this censorship comes after the uprising around Black lives, increased youth climate activism, and the amazing activism queer folks have been part of in the last few years. The right’s response to that is to try to make people afraid to talk about our history, to organize, to read radical books.”

Though Haymarket is not based in Tennessee, Blanchard feels that it and other publishing houses nationwide could still feel effects from SB 1059. “Our distributor is based in Tennessee,” she says. “We’ve recently tried to get our distributor and other independent publishers to push back on this legislation.”

An unfortunate consequence of legislation like SB 1059, Blanchard adds, is that it forces publishers to make decisions about what books to print based on factors like fear. “The whole purpose of this legislation is to make people afraid,” she says. “I think there are some publishers who are

going to be more careful with what they distribute to libraries. We're not one of them, but we're also not one of the **big five publishers** — the main purveyors of books."

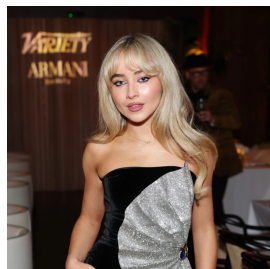
Blanchard continues, "Conservatives have gone after teachers, they've gone after librarians, and now they're going after publishers because, at the end of the day, there are certain publishers who care more about their bottom line than the people to read."

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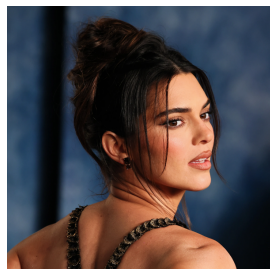


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