



**“Dissent is Patriotic”: *Ban This Book* as a Literary Voice
Against Censorship of Books**

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Abstract

Censorship of books has served as a means of maintaining power, enforcing conformity, protecting perceived moral, social, or national order, and as an effective tool to silence dissent. Although modern states provide freedom of speech and expression as a Constitutional Right, the age-old practice of censorship of books persists and remains a controversial issue, particularly due to resistance to such acts in various ways. Advocates of individual freedom and plurality of thought, vehemently voice against banning books. This paper attempts to delineate how literature too voices against the censorship of books focusing on Alan Gratz’s Ban This Book. Gratz, weaves a story of standing up for the freedom of reading by children. By writing the story of resistance he is also voicing in favour of writers’ freedom of expression. Through this narrative, Gratz not only encourages young readers to question imposed restrictions but also reaffirms the role of writers in defending intellectual freedom. The paper foregrounds the author’s stance that dissent is necessary for the survival of democratic principles, and that writers have the duty to promote awareness about censorship and the need to resist it.

Keywords: Censorship, Reading, Freedom, Resistance, Dissent

Censorship—banning and burning—of books is as old as human life. The acts of controlling access to knowledge is prevalent in almost all parts of the world. Books are contested and censored by individuals, governments, religious, cultural, and political groups when they are deemed to be inappropriate and should not reach people lest they corrupt people’s minds. Globally, innumerable books have been censored primarily on religious, political, sexual, moral

and cultural grounds. Books such as *The Satanic Verses* by Salman Rushdie, *Harry Potter series* by J.K. Rowling, *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown, *The Last Temptation of Christ* by Nikos Kazantzakis etc are banned for religious reasons. George Orwell's *The Animal Farm* and *1984*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The Communist Manifesto* by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Doctor Zhivago* by Boris Pasternak etc are some of the books banned for political reasons. Books like *The Well of Loneliness* by Radclyffe Hall, *Lady Chatterley's Lover* by D H Lawrence, *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov, *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison, *Gender Queer* by Maia Kobabe etc are some of the works banned for sexual/obscenity based charges. Thoroughly researched contributions in the form of books like *Banned Books, 387 B C to 1978 A D* (1978) by Anne Lyon Haight documents more than three hundred books suppressed through the years. Similarly, *120 banned books : Censorship Histories of World Literature* (Third Edition,2022) by Dawn B. Sova, Margaret Bald, and Nicholas Karolides provides a comprehensive list of literary works suppressed in many countries along with the significant details of each book. As this paper does not aim to study global censorship patterns and trends, the inclusion of a plenitude of books that have been and are still being removed from circulation across different temporal and geographical spaces does not serve the purpose. The few examples mentioned provide a hint about the global, justification-driven censorship of books.

From the innumerable historical and ongoing instances of book censorship, we understand that, the phenomena of book censorship has served as a means of maintaining power, enforcing conformity, protecting perceived moral, social, or national order, and as an effective tool to silence dissent. Nevertheless, throughout history, bibliophiles and supporters of freedom have resisted this phenomena in various ways including reading and circulation of banned books secretly, saving books stealthily, reproducing the contents of a destroyed book, advocating intellectual freedom, scholarly interventions, campaigns, fighting legal battles, through associations/organizations working against censorship etc.. thus, the story of censorship of books encompasses the stories of resistance as well.

Book banning has a long history in America, a country that promises freedom and opportunities to not only its people but to any one from any part of the world. From Shakespeare to Allen Gratz many books have been contested and banned. Not only the contemporary ones but books cherished earlier and books considered classics (in many parts of the world) were charged with

accusations and are banned. A notable trend in the history of censorship of books is the escalation of book bans in school libraries. PEN America, an institution that strives for free expression defines a school book ban as

“ any action taken against a book based on its content and as a result of parent or community challenges, administrative decisions, or in response to direct or threatened action by lawmakers or other governmental officials, that leads to a previously accessible book being either completely removed from availability to students, or where access to a book is restricted or diminished”

(PEN America Index of School Book Bans).

In schools, book bans are justified by posing reasons like age inappropriateness, obscenity, language, misrepresentation, violence, sexual content and other moral considerations. In its Index PEN America provides a list of state mandated and district level book bans along with a list of books banned at school districts every year. Further, a report by PEN America, titled *The Normalization of Book Banning- banned in the USA 2024-25*ⁱ provides a comprehensive report and analysis of book banning trends in the year 2024. Similarly, The American Library Association provides a lengthy list of books challenged and removed from libraries and schools. As per the American Library Association official website top ten frequently challenged books in 2024 are- *All Boys Aren't Blue* by George M. Johnson, *Gender Queer: A Memoir* by Maia Kobabe, *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky, *Tricks* by Ellen Hopkins, *Looking for Alaska* by John Green, *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl* by Jesse Andrews, *Crank* by Ellen Hopkins, *Sold* by Patricia McCormick, *Flamer* by Mike Curato. Also, as per the ALA's records there have been attempts to remove 2,452 unique titles in 2024. Any report on book bans in American schools provides an alarming picture of rising bans.

With book banning being rampant, we hear voices in favour of intellectual freedom and the necessity of pluralistic approach to reading and education in the scholarly interventions such as in “Books, censorship, and anti-intellectualism in schools” (2020), Emily J M Knox explains the role of books in intellectual life. Criticizing book banning she states, “books that do not fulfil their role as a vessel for acceptable ideas are dubbed trash or filth” (30). She opines that people try to remove books as they are scared of their power. She argues that the challengers of books focus on one interpretation of the book. She insists that students must be encouraged to read

books and interpret them in different ways. She suggests that teachers and school authorities should include books without worrying about the challengers and should be ready to defend them in case of challenges.

Similarly, Elizabeth Noll in her article, “The Ripple Effect of Censorship: Silencing in the Classroom” (1994), calls for a proactive stance and collective voice against censorship. She suggests that open dialogues about freedom of expression and intellectual freedom is a necessity. She holds that role and responsibilities of teachers and schools in this regard can empower both students and teachers against censorship.

Literature too provides a platform to resist censorship. Through the fictionalization of censorship of books, writers have tried to create awareness about the phenomenon and have provided ideas and courage to fight against it. Reviewed by the *Publisher’s weekly* as “a book lover’s book that speaks volumes about kids’ power to effect the change at grassroots level,” Allan Gratz's middle-grade novel *Ban This Book*, published in 2017, depicts the story of a fourth-grade girl’s crusade against censorship of books. The novel not only exemplifies the ongoing censorship in schools but also as Gratz himself mentions, provides awareness to children about censorship issues and provides ways to deal with them. The paper with a close reading of text in the context of rising book bans in America in general and banning of the novel in particular and the democratic ideals upheld by the American forefathers and the present Constitution, attempts to depict the novel as a systematic resistance to censorship of books. Deriving from Alan Gratz’s utterance that dissent is patriotic, the paper also aims to understand and justify dissent in the context of censorship and informs the work as a dissent which is not harmful rather a necessity and an obligation.

In the novel, Amy Anne Ollinger, the nine-year old protagonist, an avid reader, finds refuge and solace in books. When one of her favourite books, *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler* by E.L. Konigsburg (which she has read many times) is missing from the shelf, she learns about the concept of banning books. The book was removed due to a concern from a classmate’s parent about the appropriateness of the book. The librarian shares her intent of speaking against the arbitrary ban in front of the school board and invites Anne to speak in defence of the book. Anne agrees reluctantly as she has never contested elders. Anne became nervous and hence could not speak at the meeting. However, she rejects Mrs. Spencer’s accusations against the book (which has been removed) and expresses “No book I’d read in the

library had taught me to lie, to steal or to cheat! Every kid who had any kind of brains knew how to do all the stuff already” (35). Anne is depicted as a normal quiet girl who has thoughts and views but doesn't express them. She lives with obedience to parents and the school system. The depiction of Anne as a normal girl appeals to every child as every child can see himself/herself in Anne. However, as the story moves further we notice a change in her behaviour as she curls up courage, confidence and stands up for what she wants in an organized way.

In the novel, Mrs. Jones, the passionate librarian of the school not only instigates Anne to put forth her views in the school board meeting, but also articulates against banning books. In the school board meeting, the librarian, rejecting the outright removal of books from the library, asserts that ignoring the procedure of filling out the Request for Reconsideration forms is inappropriate. Mrs. Jones' words reflect the importance of procedural actions in democracy. It insists on the need to discuss and deliberate before making decisions against the totalitarian behaviour of direct action by authority. She speaks in favour of intellectual freedom:

It's our job as educators to expose our children to as many different kinds of books and as many different points of views as possible. That means letting them read books that are not easy for them, or too hard for them. That means letting them read books that challenge them, or do nothing but entertain them. And yes, it means letting students read books with things in them we might disagree with and letting them make up their own minds about things, which is downright scary sometimes. But that's what good education is all about. (33)

Mrs Jones seems to be Gratz's mouthpiece when she utters, “every parent has the right to decide what their child can and can't read. What they cannot do is make the decision for everyone else (34). This is akin to a major question in Anne's mind which becomes a major premise of her fight against banning; how can one person decide the choice of everyone? While Amy fights for reading choices, Mrs. Jones words highlight her broader perspectives on the role of books in the intellectual development of students. Her words are akin to many scholarly articulations that we have on book banning in schools. Gratz also critiques the narrow mindedness of censors through Mrs Spencer, who gets books removed without even reading them. Her choice for removal is based on lists provided by parents and online reviews. Censors are criticized by the liberals for this kind of biased temperament and narrow mindset.

After the board meeting, Anne's father provides a temporary solution by getting the copy of her favourite book. Anne gets agitated when books are removed continuously at the insistence of many parents. Restless Amy Anne, decides to read every book banned from the library. Her first action against the ban was to read the banned books secretly. Reading itself is an effective tool to resist bans. Soon after, she is joined by her friends, they start collecting and sharing banned books. Books are safely placed in Anne's closet. More students join them in reading and they keep the books alive through reading and sharing. Gratz successfully depicts covert ways of resistance that children at their capacity employ.

Along with her friends Rebecca, Danny and others she starts Banned Books Locker Library (B.B.L.L.), a revolutionary step to dissent the school authority's domination. As in any library here books are collected, circulated, maintained through proper method of documentation. Her library becomes popular as books that are banned are the ones that children love to read. As demand increases more books are procured through exchanges. Anne and Rebecca also earn money through bake sales for buying banned books to expand their library. The expansion of the locker library indicates that a large number of books are getting banned. It is commendable to note that as a response to banning, children come out of their comfort zones and limitations. After the incident of getting caught by the principal with a banned book, Anne is suspended for three days. She and her friends decide to be more careful and make fake covers to the banned books. By now Anne and her fellow readers have become champions who are not scared of anything and always find a way to get the things to work for them. They have transformed from quiet readers into strategy makers.

An interesting dramatic moment in the story is the cameo of Dav Pilkey, a well-known American comic book writer, whose *Captain Underpants Series* has been one of the most challenged books in the U S schools. In the story, Mrs Jones deliberately invites Dav Pilkey to address children as his books are in a challenge list prepared by Mrs. Spenser. By getting real writers into the fictional world, Gratz brings context into text making it more relevant. It reminds us that the happenings in the novel is a part of a wider ongoing issue.

His visit has three notable moments of far reaching impacts; firstly, Ann courageously asks, what he thinks about his books being banned? This demonstrates Anne's transformation from a quiet reader to an outspoken rebel. Secondly, Dav's words in reply resonate with the views of any

(banned) writer. He says, “I think it's important that libraries be a place where you can find all kinds of books. good ones, bad ones, funny ones, serious ones. Every person should be free to read whatever they want, whenever they want, and not have to explain to anyone else why we like it, or why we think it's valuable. I hope you all get a chance to read my books someday” (131). Thirdly, Dav Pilkey not only provides autographs on a copy of his work *Captain Underpants* but also presents Anne with twelve more copies. This act is a kind of reassurance to Anne, whose further steps change the scene entirely. Dav Pilkey's words and actions not only condemn (though in a milder tone) banning but also help in Anne's resistance against it.

When Anne and her friends scrutinize the justifications for banned books they find them silly. During the school board meeting Anne and other children mock the elders by presenting reconsideration forms, requesting to ban almost every book from the library by stating various silly reasons which make them inappropriate for children. In the end, the children win their arguments and the board decides not to remove books arbitrarily.

The novel is a systematic resistance to banning books from school libraries. In an interview given to Abena Hutchful of NCAC (National Coalition Against Censorship) ¹ Alan Gratz, has clearly stated that the sole purpose of writing this novel is to introduce the concept of censorship to children. He wanted children to understand that banning books is not a historical instance but a current issue happening around them to which they have to respond. Through this novel, he wanted to create a model to show how to respond in such situations. He believes in the strength of united effort against freedom and says that “If I can give kids the tools now for how to protest or how to speak up, then hopefully that will be something that they have all their lives as a resource for affecting change” (Banned Books Week: YA Author Alan Gratz on Giving Kids the Tools to Resist Censorship)

Undoubtedly, the novel is a brilliant telling of ways to defend reading choices. By depicting children's love for books and the stance they take for books, the novel acts as a guiding material -as intended by the author- for young readers. It also depicts that not only adults but youngsters can also stand up for their rights and bring changes. Through the zeal and efforts of children, it also, at times mocks passive adult readers. The novel is definitely an embodiment of Alan Gratz's anti-censorship stance. Ironically, the novel which is a vehement voice against censorship had to face the same.

In 2024, when book banning in schools spiked everywhere in the USA, in February a member of Moms for Liberty contested Gratz's book claiming that the book depicts or describes sexual conduct and submitted a challenge to the book objection committee of the school district of Florida's Indian River County. It was also challenged for promoting banned books to children. Allan Gratz has written a letter against the ban. During the board meeting, his letter was read along with the letters of writers like Jodi Picoult, Lauren Groff, Amanda Jones and Linda Henry. These writers along with Margaret Murray and Marjie Flanigan, co-chairs of Education Champions, a local group that read the letters at the meeting, insisted the board not to ban the book. Despite all efforts and its own district book-review committee's decision to keep it, the novel was banned in May 2024.

When CNN (which has covered the entire story) asked what his message was to the book censors, Gratz uttered "dissent is patriotic."ⁱⁱⁱ The formulation "dissent is the highest form of patriotism," popularized by a well-known historian Howard Zinn, is a widely used slogan in the context of deliberations on democratic ideals and philosophy in the USA. Zinn says being loyal to the government is not patriotic rather dissenting an unjust government is patriotic. In an interview discussing the formulation he said,

"One of the great mistakes made in discussing patriotism — a very common mistake — is to think that patriotism means support for your government. And that view of patriotism ignores the founding principles of the country expressed in the Declaration of Independence. That is: the Declaration of Independence makes it clear that governments are artificial creations set up to achieve certain ends — equality, life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness — and when governments become destructive of those ends it is the right of the people in the words of the Declaration, to alter or abolish the government. (Dissent In Pursuit Of Equality, Life, Liberty And Happiness)

Zinn's views on dissent in reaction to the government are applied to schools in the novel as the same thought is applicable to any system. Gratz brings in political ideas in his creative response against censorship. For him banning books with absurd justifications is an act of politics and domination especially in cases of arbitrary bans. both Zinn and Gratz's utterances reflect that anything that attempts to work against the founding principles of America- liberty, equality, justice- should be resisted for the betterment and survival of the people and the country.

Besides, The First Amendment to the Constitutionⁱⁱⁱ of the United States provides freedom of speech and the press along with others clearly indicating that the citizens have intellectual freedom. Against this background this paper has taken its title and has analysed the novel, indicating that resistance/dissent necessary in democratic societies when actions are against the ideals of democracy and dissent becomes patriotic as it strives for people's rights which is a major element of every democratic country. Also, dissent is patriotic when human beings fight for intellectual freedom, which is necessary for the advancement of mankind. Allan Gratz's novel, *Ban This Book* functions as a patriotic act of dissent in the context of book bans in schools as the phenomenon of book banning is being questioned and freedom given by the Constitution is asserted in support of the necessity of plurality of thought and freedom of choice and expression.

This paper has explored how dissent in a school was for the protection of American democratic ideals. Gratz's work, while aimed at children, delivers a deeply patriotic message: in a Democracy, courage to question authority and injustice, voicing for rights, working for the fulfilment of democratic ideals are civic responsibilities to be nurtured from the childhood. Not only the characters but writers too dissent through the creation of such characters and works aiming to impact readers. The paper understands the novel as both a representation and intervention in the history of book censorship. This paper, by studying the novel as a creative response to censorship, upholds the role of literature in dealing with real issues.

Notes

ⁱFor more on National Coalition Against censorship visit <https://ncac.org/>

ⁱⁱFor the coverage on the ban of the novel *Ban This Book* refer to <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/07/23/us/florida-book-ban-alan-gratz-response>

ⁱⁱⁱFor the First Amendment refer to <https://constitutioncenter.org/the-constitution/full-text>

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