

Teaching Between the Bans: Exploring Book Banning, Censorship, and Book Access in the Middle Grades

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we invite middle-level educators to discover how literature can be a gateway to understanding and addressing book bans, censorship, and access to books. We delve into the recent rise in book challenges, particularly against diverse narratives, and trace the historical roots of censorship. Highlighting ten selected texts, we show how they can be practical tools in teaching the critical importance of intellectual freedom. Accompanied by discussion questions and engaging teaching ideas, these books aim to spark critical thought, embrace varied viewpoints, and motivate students to actively discuss censorship issues. This piece is a resource for educators to enrich their approach to complex topics and underscore the vital role of reading in shaping aware, inquisitive, and active citizens in today's increasingly complex world.

KEYWORDS

banned books; educational censorship; book access; book challenges; middle school literacy; diverse narratives

Books themselves are freedom. Freedom to think, to believe, to dream.

Lucas; *Words on Fire* (Nielsen, 2019, p. 109)

In the first eight months of 2023 alone, the American Library Association's Office for Intellectual Freedom recorded an unprecedented spike in attempts to censor library materials, with challenges to 1,915 unique titles (SLJ, 2023). This marks a worrying twenty percent increase from 2022, which sets a record for the most challenges in over two decades. Most targeted were books reflecting the lives and rights of people of color and the LGBTQIA+ community, echoing a historical pattern of marginalizing already underrepresented voices.

As troubling as these statistics are, they are not without precedent. History is rife with censorship, from the destruction of millions of books in the National Library in Sarajevo during the Bosnian War in 1992 (Burgess, 2020) to the banning of classics by Shakespeare (Baldassarro, 2011). We have witnessed the burning of books by profound thinkers in Nazi Germany (Stern, 2022) and the suppression of scientific truth by the Catholic Church (Artigas, 2006). More

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recently, a Georgia teacher, Katie Rinderle, was terminated for reading a picturebook she purchased at the school's Scholastic Book Fair, *My Shadow is Purple* (Stuart, 2022), to her fifth-grade gifted class (Sonnenberg, 2023). These acts of censorship were not simply about removing books from shelves; they were about stifling ideas, silencing dissent, and erasing cultural and intellectual diversity.

The pattern is clear: society's progress stalls when books are banned. Amid a resurgence in banning books across the United States, the role of educators in fostering a culture of open inquiry and protecting intellectual freedom has never been more important. Recent headlines underscore this urgency, with books on topics from diverse historical narratives to those reflecting a range of identities being removed from classroom libraries, school media centers, and public library shelves. This alarming trend erases numerous perspectives of human experience and weakens the foundation of public education within the United States, which thrives on the exchange of ideas and the freedom to explore them. Historically, censorship and book banning have been instruments of oppression, stifling the voices of marginalized communities and reinforcing the barriers to access. As advocates of literacy and students' rights, we firmly believe that every student has the inherent right to read, explore, and think critically about diverse perspectives.

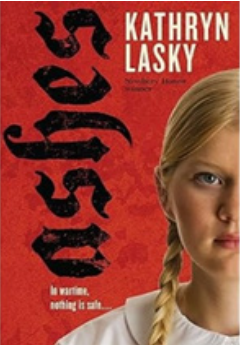
Books About Banned Books . . . and Censorship and Book Access

In an educational environment that is constantly evolving and facing new challenges, teachers find themselves at a crucial intersection, balancing the responsibility to address complex issues while managing varied external pressures. The question arises: What path should we take? We propose the answer lies in turning to literature itself to provide a solid foundation. By integrating stories that reflect on book banning, censorship, and book access, educators equip students with the tools to understand and question these issues. This approach allows students to connect with the core values of freedom and access, showcasing the real-life and historical impact of these principles.

In this article, we present ten books, including five picturebooks and five novels, which serve as both mirrors and windows (Bishop, 1990) into the complex world of censorship, book banning, and access to books. We specifically included picturebooks within our list of recommended texts, acknowledging their growing recognition in middle-grade classrooms for engaging adolescent students. These books are visually appealing and rich in mature themes, complex content, and multi-layered meanings. With their intricate illustrations and challenging texts, picturebooks cover controversial topics and support reading comprehension skills. This combination makes picturebooks valuable educational tools for middle school students, facilitating a more profound understanding and engagement with the material (Bintz & Ciercierski-Madara, 2022; Costello & Kolodziej, 2006).

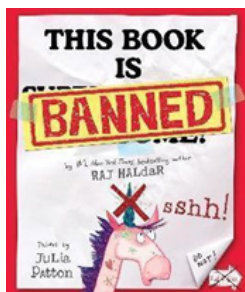
Along with the carefully selected texts, we have included suggested discussion questions, teaching ideas, and activities with the goal of informing and inspiring students to become thoughtful, questioning, and engaged citizens. Our proposed texts range from historical contexts that gave rise to censorship to examining its present-day actualities. We explore how books about banned books, censorship, and book access can be powerful tools in the classroom. In addition, we provide a collection of resources (Figure 1) to aid educators in exploring perspectives of censorship, book banning, and access to books and education. By equipping our students with the ability to analyze the world around them, we are defending their right to read and empowering them to shape the future of their own intellectual freedoms.

Figure 1: Summaries, Discussion Questions, Teaching Ideas, and Activities with Texts Featuring Censorship, Book Banning, and Access to Books and Education

Ashes (2010) by Kathryn Lasky Historical fiction, novel, 320 pp., ISBN 9780142411124	
<i>I'll say whatever I want. I'm not a book. You can't burn me!</i> (p. 304)	
	Thirteen-year-old Gaby (Gabriella) lives the typical life of any thirteen-year-old girl in Berlin in 1932. She goes to the theater with her best friend and enjoys her favorite pastime of reading...even during the occasional class. She comes from a loving, educated family and great friends, including Albert Einstein. But slowly, that all starts to change as the political climate begins to change. Author Kathryn Lasky writes a gripping novel about a young girl living in the days when Hitler began to come into power. This historical fiction novel highlights how quickly censorship can take over and what is really at stake when that happens. Gaby watches how censorship affects her classmates, family, and close friends. Then she watches, in horror, how censorship affects her beloved books that she has come to cherish. In <i>Ashes</i>, the reader takes a historical journey while learning about the dangers of censorship.
Discussion	
- Considering Gaby's experience, how do changes in political power, like the rise of Hitler, impact the freedom to access and enjoy literature? What can this tell us about the role of government and politics in shaping what we read? - Gaby finds solace in books during turmoil. How do you think banning or censoring books would have affected her understanding of the world and her identity? What might be the consequences for young people when their access to diverse stories and perspectives is restricted?	
Teaching Ideas & Activities	
Personal Responses to Censorship: Invite students to create a visual or written response expressing their feelings about censorship, inspired by Gaby's story. They could design posters, write poems, or create short stories that reflect what losing access to books might mean for them. This activity will allow students to connect personally with the impact of book bans and censorship, encouraging them to express their viewpoints creatively and consider the value of free access to literature in their own lives. Compare/Contrast: Using the graphic organizer, have students compare and contrast the effects of censorship. For example, compare Gaby's classmates' behavior and attitudes at the beginning of the novel to their behavior and attitude at the end of the novel. How did censorship play a part in this? Alternatively, compare Gaby's life at the beginning of the novel to her life at the end of the novel. Again, ask how censorship plays a part in this. Other choices could be Gaby's father, Albert Einstein, and the overall social life of Berlin's citizens.	

The Book is BANNED (2023) by Raj Haldar
 Fantasy, picturebook, 40 pp., ISBN 9781728276564

Because we banned everything and there's no ending left to read. (p. 35)



Giraffes! Hippos! And unicorns!?! These are some of the things that get BANNED in this silly and engaging book about book banning. Author Raj Haldar uses ordinary examples to demonstrate to his young readers how banning the simplest things can lead to eliminating everything. It all starts when the Hippos want to ban the giraffes because they are tall and get all the leaves off the trees. No more giraffes! But wait! What happens when someone thinks the hippos complain too much?? They get banned, too! No more giraffes and no more hippos! Thus begins this tale of banning things because of differences and dislikes...until there is nothing left to read and no ending to the story..

Discussion

- In this story, various items are censored, leading to a series of bans. How does this reflect the potential consequences of censorship in real-world scenarios? What might be the broader impact on society if diverse ideas and topics are routinely banned?
- Considering the book's humorous approach to banning subjects like dinosaurs and avocados, what message does it convey about the reasons behind censorship? How can this perspective help us understand the importance of having access to a variety of books and ideas?

Teaching Ideas & Activities

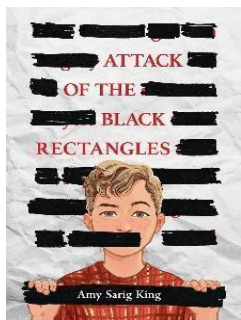
- **Create a Banned Book:** Challenge students to write and illustrate their own short story, picture book, or comic strip on a seemingly innocuous topic, then go through a mock 'banning' process. Discuss the reasons why certain books might be banned and the impact of these decisions, encouraging students to reflect on the importance of diverse perspectives in literature.
- **Banned Book Fair:** Have students create displays or presentations on books that have been historically banned or challenged (in the U.S. and globally). Students can research the reasons behind the ban and its cultural or historical context, then present their findings to the class.

Attack of the Black Rectangles (2022) by Amy Sarig King
Realistic fiction, novel, 272 pp., ISBN 9781338680522

The first step is finding out who did it, I Say.

Then why they did it, Denis says.

Then we fight it, Marci says. (p. 72)



His dad believes he is an alien, his mother is a hospice nurse, and his grandfather is a truth-teller, so what does that make Mac? Being encouraged to have integrity, sixth grader Mac Delaney, in a town that's 97% white from Pennsylvania, stumbles onto a book from the library. Not long into his reading, Mac finds out that someone is marking out words and phrases in the book he is reading. Who is the culprit? Did someone make a mistake in the book? When Mac goes to his teacher, Ms. Sett, for answers, he learns that she agrees with the censorship. With the support of friends Denis and Marci, Mac challenges the status quo and finds out they have gotten more than they bargained for. This book aligns with the politics happening in modern times. It opens the door to having those hard discussions of acceptance, friendship, growing pains, and the importance of letting people decide for themselves what is true. However, you have to know all the facts, right?

Discussion

- Considering Mac's reaction to the blacked-out sections in *The Devil's Arithmetic* (Yolen, 1988), how does censorship in literature impact a reader's understanding of history, susceptible topics like the Holocaust?
- Mac's decision to challenge the censorship at his school raises important questions about student activism. What role should students play in addressing censorship issues in their schools or communities?

Teaching Ideas & Activities

- **Create a Speech Suppression Poster:** Working in small groups or independently, have students design posters that illustrate the causes and effects of speech suppression. This project allows them to visually express how restricting speech can impact individuals and society while critically considering the consequences of limiting free expression.
- **Create a Public Service Announcement (PSA):** Have students use Adobe Spark (or similar software) to create a PSA on the importance of reading and the impact of book censorship. This activity encourages students to express their views on why reading is fundamental and to explore the arguments for and against censoring books. Here is a three-minute tutorial: youtube.com/watch?v=iWrx0SxTaBw

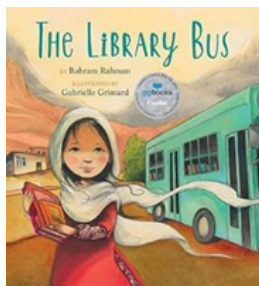
The Library Bus (2020) by Bahram Rahman

Realistic fiction (based on true events), picturebook, 32 pp., ISBN 9781772781014

There are no schools for girls in the village or the camp.

They only have the library bus once a week.

But I will help them the same way your grandpa helped me. (p. 30)



Not being aware of the privileges of learning in a classroom, Pari's mother brings the learning experience to remote mountainous areas and teaches her daughter Pari the value of an education with a mobile classroom. With the library bus, children can escape what they consider the norm of war and rubble and trade it for a short while for an adventure a book will take them. Based on actual events, the author gives homage to Afghani women in his own family and their relentless pursuit of the freedom that literacy can give but is forbidden for the female gender. This book will provoke the thinking of middle school students learning about geography or cultures beyond their own.

Discussion

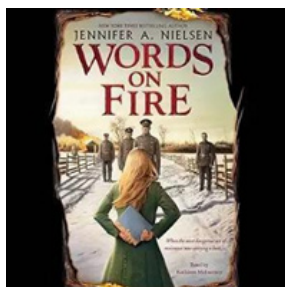
- Reflect on the role of the library bus in providing access to books in Pari's story. How does this mobile library challenge the traditional barriers to education, especially for girls in war-torn areas?
- Considering the restrictions on girls' education in Pari's community, discuss how access to books can empower individuals and change societal norms. What impact could this kind of access have in communities where certain groups are denied educational opportunities?

Teaching Ideas & Activities

- **Comparative Analysis:** Have students create Venn diagrams to compare learning experiences in a library bus versus a traditional classroom setting and the educational opportunities for boys versus girls in Afghanistan. This activity encourages students to analyze the different educational environments and gender disparities in access to education, enhancing their understanding of global educational challenges.
- **Illustrated Storyboard Project:** Encourage students to create illustrated storyboards that depict key scenes from *The Library Bus*. Focus on how the library bus impacts the community and the differences in educational opportunities for boys and girls in Afghanistan.

Words on Fire (2019) by Jennifer A. Nielsen

Historical fiction, novel, 336 pp., ISBN 9781338275780

*How do you destroy a people? You take away their culture.**And how is that done?**You must take their language, their history, their very identity.**How would you do that?**I pressed my lips together, then looked up at her.**You ban their books. (p. 78)*

Words on Fire is a powerful historical fiction novel that resonates profoundly with themes of censorship, the importance of cultural identity, and the courage to defy oppressive regimes. Set in late 1800s Lithuania under Russian rule, the story centers around 12-year-old Audra Zikaris, whose life changes dramatically when she joins the underground network of book smugglers. These brave individuals risked everything to distribute Lithuanian books, which the Russian Empire banned to suppress the Lithuanian language and culture. Audra's journey is one of resilience, bravery, and the transformative power of literature. The book not only highlights the historical impact of book banning but also celebrates the spirit of resistance and the vital role of access to literature in preserving cultural identity. This narrative offers middle school teachers a compelling resource to discuss the consequences of censorship and the enduring value of intellectual freedom with their students.

Discussion

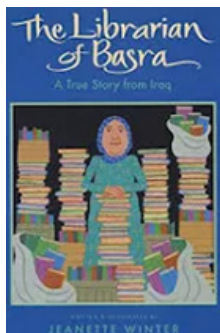
- How did the actions of the book smugglers in *Words on Fire* challenge the idea of censorship? What risks did they face, and why do you think they believed those risks were worth taking?
- In what ways does banning books affect a community or culture, as shown in *Words on Fire*? Discuss how the absence of particular books can shape or limit our understanding of the world.
- If you were in Audra's situation in *Words on Fire*, what would you do and why? Would you risk breaking the law to preserve and share your culture's literature? Discuss the moral and ethical considerations in such a situation.

Teaching Ideas & Activities

- **Create a Book Smuggler's Diary:** Have students create a diary or journal entry from the perspective of a book smuggler in *Words on Fire*. Encourage them to express the challenges, fears, and motivations of a smuggler. This activity will help students empathize with those who fought against censorship and understand the importance of preserving cultural literature.
- **Debate on Book Banning:** Organize a classroom debate on book banning. Assign roles to students – some as censorship authority members and others as literary freedom defenders. This exercise will allow students to explore and articulate both sides of the issue, fostering critical thinking and understanding of the complexities surrounding censorship.
- **Interactive Map Exploration:** Use online resources to create an interactive map (such as Google Maps) showing locations where book banning has occurred historically and in modern times, including the setting of *Words on Fire*. This can be a collaborative project where students research and add information to the map, learning about the global impact of censorship and the fight for intellectual freedom.

***The Librarian of Basra: A True Story from Iraq* (2005) by Jeanette Winter**

Narrative nonfiction, picturebook, 32 pp., ISBN 9780152054458



*All through the night, Alia, Anis, his brothers,
and shopkeepers and neighbors take the books
from the library shelves, pass them over the seven-foot wall,
and hide them in Anis's restaurant. (p. 14)*

This story is an accurate account of a librarian in Basra risking everything to save the books in Basra's Central Library. The librarian, Alia Muhammad Baker, fears for the safety of the books in her library because there are rumors of war among her people. As those rumors become true, Alia must act fast. She is not alone. Her fellow citizens answer her cries for help. But will they act in time to save all 30,000 books in the city's library?

Discussion

- Alia and the villagers took significant risks to save their books during the war. Why do you think they considered these books so valuable, and what does this tell us about the importance of preserving literature in times of conflict or censorship?
- Considering Alia's effort to save the library, how does access to books and literature contribute to a community's resilience and identity, especially in challenging times like war?

Teaching Ideas & Activities

- **Book Rescue Simulation:** In this classroom activity, students act as a community deciding which books to save in a crisis. Split into groups, they choose books based on criteria like historical and cultural importance, mirroring the challenging decisions in literature preservation. For added engagement, students can bring their favorite books, imagining them as the last existing copies, to deepen their understanding of the value and impact of saving books during adversity.
- **Writing Prompt:** What would a book think? Pose this question to students and have them respond from the perspective of a book in Alia's library. Students can focus on the book's journey, its significance to the citizens of Basra, and its feelings about being saved. This will help students empathize with the emotional value books can hold and explore the impact of losing access to literature.

***Banned Book* (2023) by Jonah Winter**

Realistic fiction, picturebook, 32 pp., ISBN 9781568463940



■ have the right to ■ ■ ■

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**[This content has been removed.] (p. 18)*

This short but powerful 32-page picture book addresses the issues of book banning and censorship in schools head-on. It features pages with text literally blacked out, symbolizing the suppression of words deemed “not allowed” by a group called “We Are Right,” or WAR. This group, acting as self-appointed censors, influences school board meetings and advocates for removing certain books from libraries. This narrative serves as a crucial resource for middle school teachers to explore the consequences of censorship and emphasize the importance of access to literature in educational settings.

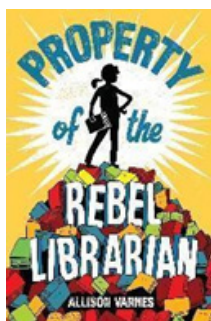
Discussion

- How does the literal blacking out of text in *Banned Book* represent censorship? What impact does this visual representation have on your understanding of the effects of censorship?
- Why do you think the group “We Are Right” wants to ban certain books? Discuss how their actions might affect students’ access to diverse perspectives and information.
- Imagine if your favorite book was banned. How would that make you feel and why? Discuss the importance of having the freedom to choose what you read.

Teaching Ideas & Activities

- **Create a Visual Censorship Exhibit:** Have students create visual representations of censorship inspired by the blacked-out text in *Banned Book*. They can use excerpts from various books and creatively censor words to reflect the impact of censorship. This can be followed by a class discussion on how censorship changes the meaning and impact of literature.
- **Small Group Role-Play Debate:** Divide the class into small groups, each representing different stakeholders in a book-banning scenario (such as members of WAR, librarians, students, authors, etc.). Have the different stakeholder groups present their arguments (either for or against book banning) to the class. Then, students can ask questions and challenge their views. This activity can foster empathy and understanding of different viewpoints.

Property of the Rebel Librarian (2018) by Allison Varnes
Realistic fiction, novel, 288 pp., ISBN 9781524771478



Don't count yourself out just yet, June,

she [Ms. Bradshaw] says, gathering a stack of books into her arms.

You read that one book, and one book can change everything. (p. 14)

June Harper has never caused trouble a day in her life. She loves to read, and she loves Ms. Bradshaw, the librarian at her school, Dogwood Middle School. Ms. Bradshaw is super friendly and recommends great books, like the one June just finished reading, *The Making of a Witch*. But when June's dad discovers the book, he is not pleased at all! "Missing kids. Witches. It's too scary for you." This discovery leads to many books being banned from the school library and a recourse of action by Ms. Bradshaw that devastates June. It is just too much for someone in middle school! However, when June discovers a Little Free Library one day, an idea is sparked, and she takes matters into her own hands. She becomes the Rebel Librarian, secretly providing books for the students at Dogwood Middle to read. But if her secret identity is revealed, will it just make the matter worse? Will she ever make her parents and principal understand the fundamental importance of reading?

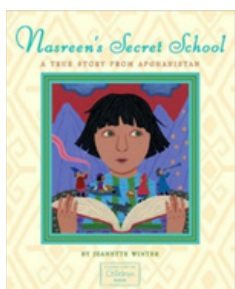
Discussion

- *In Property of the Rebel Librarian*, June's actions challenge the book ban at her school. Discuss the importance of individual actions in opposing censorship. What impact can a single person's efforts have in situations like these?
- Considering the consequences faced by the librarian and the impact on the school community, what does this story teach us about the broader effects of censorship on education and intellectual freedom?

Teaching Ideas & Activities

- **Reflective Letter Writing:** As an individual or class project, students can write letters to Allison Varnes, the author of *Property of the Rebel Librarian*. In their letters, students should discuss their interpretation of why she wrote the book and the key messages they believe she conveyed about censorship and freedom of reading. Additionally, they should include their personal takeaways and how the story resonated with them.
- **School-Wide Reading Campaign:** Organize a school-wide reading campaign featuring books that have been challenged or censored. Students can collaborate to create promotional materials and host events to discuss the themes of these books, involving teachers, parents, and other students. This can culminate in a school assembly or community event where the importance of intellectual freedom and diverse literature is highlighted, creating a broader conversation about censorship and its impact on the learning environment.

Nasreen's Secret School: A True Story from Afghanistan (2009) by Jeanette Winter
 Narrative nonfiction, picturebook, 40 pp., ISBN 9781416994374



*The Taliban soldiers don't want girls to learn about the world,
 the way Nasreen's mama and I learned
 when we were girls. (p. 5)*

For five years, the Taliban took over Afghanistan, leaving a lasting imprint where the way of life for women and girls had forever been changed. This is the story of one little girl, Nasreen, and her grandmother, who were resilient to the changes in her world. This book is dedicated to the courageous women and girls of Afghanistan.

Discussion

- In the story, education becomes a secret and risky endeavor. How do you think the act of banning books and restricting education can impact a community, especially its younger members?
- Considering Nasreen's experience and the secret school, discuss why you think access to education and books is essential for personal growth. What might be the consequences in a society where such access is denied?

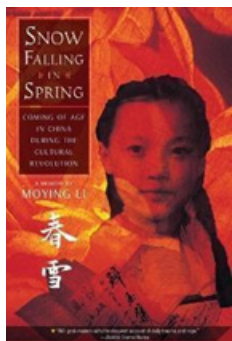
Teaching Ideas & Activities

- **Secret Classroom Activity:** Transform the classroom into a 'secret school' similar to the one in the book. Have students experience a day of learning as if they were doing it in secret, discussing what it feels like to have restricted access to education. This activity can help students appreciate their right to learn and understand the challenges faced in environments where education is banned.
- **Comparative Freewrite*:** Ask students to freewrite for 15 minutes, comparing their own educational experience with Nasreen's. Encourage them to explore themes like freedom of education, access to books, and the impact of censorship on learning. This exercise can deepen their understanding of the value and privilege of education in different cultural and political contexts.

*A freewrite is the practice of continuously writing down thoughts as they come, without pausing to edit for spelling, grammar, or structure.

***Snow Falling in Spring: Coming of Age in China During the Cultural Revolution* (2010) by Moying Li**

Memoir, novel, 192 pp., ISBN 9780312608675



There was nothing Baba treasured more than his books (p. 79)

...From Baba I learned to value books. But I never truly appreciated them until one day in 1968 (p. 82) ...the soldiers dumped all our books into large hemp sacks that they pulled from the back of the truck.

The paper factory will turn this trash [books] into pulp in no time, they announced. Dragging the sacks through our gate, they flung them, one after another, onto the open truck. Then hurling Baba on top of the bulging bags, the soldiers drove away in a cloud of dust. (p. 84)

This memoir offers readers a vivid look into the Cultural Revolution in China, a period marked by intense censorship and suppression of literature. Li's story began in Beijing and went on from 1966 to 1976. Through her eyes, readers experience the harrowing effects of censorship and the loss of intellectual freedom as Mao's Red Guards purge books, culture, and free thought. The author's recollections provide a personal account of a critical historical moment and underscore the importance of preserving access to literature and cultural heritage. These themes resonate deeply with contemporary discussions on book banning and censorship.

Discussion

- How did the Cultural Revolution's censorship and book ban impact Moying Li's life and education? Discuss the importance of having access to a variety of books and ideas during one's formative years.
- Compare the experiences described in *Snow Falling in Spring* with current situations where books are banned or censored. What similarities and differences do you observe?
- Moying Li's story shows the power of literature in difficult times. Why do you think access to books and diverse ideas is important, especially in challenging circumstances?

Teaching Ideas & Activities

- **Personal Memoir Project:** Encourage students to write their own short memoirs or diary entries, reflecting on a time when they felt their voice or choices were limited. This exercise will help students connect with Moying Li's experiences and understand the impact of censorship on a personal level.
- **Cultural Revolution Research and Presentation:** Assign students to research different aspects of the Cultural Revolution, such as its impact on education, literature, and personal freedoms. Students can then create presentations or posters to share their findings, helping them to understand the historical context of Moying Li's memoir and the broader implications of censorship.

The ten selected books outlined above provide a foundation for deeper exploration into censorship and literary freedom. Moving to Table 1, we present a range of resources for further exploration. We hope this collection, which incorporates various viewpoints on censorship, book banning, and access to literature, equips middle-level educators with essential tools for enriching classroom dialogues on these vital topics.

Table 1: Resources to Explore Perspectives of Censorship, Book Banning, and Access to Literature and Education

Title & Link	Description	Possible Use for Teachers
<i>The History of Book Bans—and Their Changing Targets—in the US.</i> bit.ly/3TjBIZM *Please note that you will need to create a free account with National Geographic to have free unlimited access to content.	This article examines the rise in book banning in the U.S., highlighting its historical context. It covers various eras, from early religious censorship in colonial times to modern challenges against books discussing LGBTQIA+ issues, race, and sexuality. The piece also discusses the evolution of censorship targets over time, including classic authors like Twain and Stowe, and how schools and libraries have become contemporary battlegrounds for book bans. The article emphasizes the impact of these bans on intellectual freedom and education.	Teachers can use this article as a resource to educate students about the historical and contemporary context of book banning in the U.S. It provides examples across different eras, illustrating how the targets of censorship have evolved. This can foster discussions on the reasons behind book bans and their impact on society. The article can be used to explore themes of intellectual freedom and how censorship challenges democratic values, encouraging critical thinking and debate in the classroom.
<i>Banned Books – Top 3 Pros and Cons</i> bit.ly/3NkXanI *This article is from a nonpartisan issue-information source (ProCon.org)	This article highlights the increasing trends in book challenges in the U.S. It outlines arguments for banning books, including parental rights to shield children from certain content, and arguments against emphasizing the importance of diverse literature for educational and emotional development. The article also discusses the role of parents, schools, and libraries in these challenges and highlights the changing reasons for book bans over the years.	Teachers can use this article to provide a balanced view of the debate surrounding banned books, illustrating both sides of the argument. It can be a resource for discussion, encouraging students to critically evaluate the reasons for and against book banning. The article contains a "Take Action" section where students are provided with five action items ranging from learning more about book banning and censorship to encouraging students to write letters to their US representatives to voice their opinions.
American Library Association (ALA) ala.org	This comprehensive website offers extensive materials on advocacy, current censorship issues, and statistical data on book challenges. These resources can help create informative, engaging lessons exploring the dynamics of intellectual freedom and censorship in contemporary society.	Links to resources for more information regarding Advocacy & Public Policy, Banned & Challenged Books, Censorship by the Numbers, How to Report censorship (report challenges or bans of materials, resources, programs, and services), and Books for All (with the New York Public Library).
<i>Sample Script About Book Bans for School Board Meetings</i> bit.ly/46UewyT *To learn more about PEN AMERICA: The Freedom to Write, please visit pen.org/about-us/	The article provides a sample script for addressing school board meetings about book bans, advocating against challenges to books that often target themes of race, gender, and sexuality. It emphasizes the importance of the freedom to read and argues against the imposition of one group's preferences over others.	Teachers can use this article to provide students with a practical example of civic engagement in the context of book bans and censorship. The sample script can be modified to express both sides of the argument. It demonstrates how individuals can effectively communicate their concerns to school boards, promoting an understanding of advocacy and the democratic process.

Final Thoughts

In this article, we delved into books that tackle themes of book banning, censorship, and limited access to literature and education. By bringing these stories into middle-level classrooms, educators can help students understand and question these complex issues. As the character Lucas stated in *Words on Fire* (2019), “Books themselves are freedom. Freedom to think, to believe, to dream” (Nielsen, 2019, p. 109). This quote underscores the importance of our collection of

suggested texts and the provided teaching ideas, which open up opportunities for critical discussion, giving students insights into the consequences of limiting access to diverse voices.

Looking ahead, our role as educators in promoting free and open access to literature is essential. Exploring these books is more than just an academic exercise; it is a commitment to freedom and access. It is our responsibility to guide students in appreciating a variety of perspectives, fostering a generation of U.S. citizens who value the freedom to read and learn. We must keep advocating for the open exploration of literature, setting the stage for a future where every book is available, and every viewpoint is accessible.

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