

More book banning in Utah and Iowa

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16 August 2024

Two recent developments highlight the far-right's determination to ensure that artistic works that supposedly discuss sexual topics—but in reality may describe any socially critical sentiment whatever—stay out of the hands of students in the American K-12 public school system.

On August 2 a federal appeals court lifted a temporary injunction against an Iowa law that will ban over 3,000 books from K-12 curricula and school libraries because they depict sexual matters, with the exception of religious texts.

Senate File 496 was originally signed into law in December by Republican Governor Kim Reynolds and thousands of books were immediately removed from schools and school libraries. After the law was challenged on First Amendment grounds by civil rights and gay advocacy organizations, as well as a number of authors, Judge Stephen Locher of the District Court for the Southern District of Iowa issued the injunction, noting that the law was too vague and would cast a “puritanical ‘pall of orthodoxy’ over school libraries.”

With the new ruling, however, Iowa will now resume removing titles which include *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker, *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood, the graphic novel about the Holocaust, *Maus*, by Art Spiegelman, George Orwell's *1984*, *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee, *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison, and the DVD of Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List*. It would be hard to argue that any of these books are being banned for their prurience.

The same day in Utah, the State Board of Education released a list of 13 books that are banned statewide from K-12 schools under the provisions of the H.B. 29 law signed into law by Republican Governor Spencer Cox in March, which stipulates that it is “protecting children from the harmful effects of illicit pornography over other considerations.” According to the law, if three school districts or two school districts and five

charter schools ban a book, it must be banned statewide.

Books banned in Utah include *Oryx and Crake* and *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood, Sarah J. Maas's *A Court of Thorns and Roses* and its sequels, *Forever* by Judy Blum and the Rupi Kaur poem, “Milk.” Books removed from school libraries in Utah cannot be sold or distributed, they must be destroyed.

These bans resemble nothing so much as the religious ruling (fatwah) issue by the Iranian clerical regime in 1989 against Salman Rushdie's novel, *The Satanic Verses*, a ruling for which the author was partly blinded last year.

The right-wing group Moms for Liberty, which is closely associated with the most fascist elements in the Republican Party, and their supporters in the Iowa state legislature have been instrumental not only in garnering support for the censorship law, but in implementing it as well. The state government itself did not issue a list of books to be removed, but fascist politicians took it upon themselves to send Moms for Liberty material to local school districts, including the group's notorious screed, the “Book of Books” document. The group is also playing a key role in the Utah book banning.

In fact, while the works banned as a group may have—usually very tame—depictions of sex or advocate implicitly or explicitly the rights of gay youth or suggest the flexibility of gender identity or transgress other Christian fundamentalist shibboleths, descriptions of discrimination, oppression or revolt that the far-right is seeking to keep out of young minds are prominent in the censored works.

Sarah J. Maas's popular fantasy novels, also banned in Iowa, have some relatively innocuous sex scenes in them but it would be difficult to believe that the presence of magic and polytheism—and a certain spirit of rebellion against poverty—in the books are not also, or even the main, targets of the religious fundamentalist

activists.

Rupi Kaur's *Milk and Honey* (2014) a collection of fiction and poetry, which has sold over 3 million copies is banned in both Iowa and Utah (and frequently around the United States), has depictions of sexual abuse whose purpose is to document the destructiveness of this kind of behavior and to prevent it. As she noted on her Instagram account, "I remember sitting in my school library in high school, turning to books about sexual assault because I didn't have anyone else to turn to. This is the reality for many students."

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), banned in Iowa, is hardly known for its sexual scenes but rather for its portrait of the internal scars of racial oppression and the fight against it. It contains passages that are critical—from the left—of groups such as the Stalinist Communist Party. Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), reviled by the Christian right, depicts a world in which women are not allowed to read, and critiques the kind of dystopia that many far-right evangelicals would like to see—where half of the population has no rights at all.

The last few months have seen an uptick in the passage of censorship laws in other Republican-dominated states including Idaho, Tennessee, and South Carolina, most of them following the game plan laid down by fascist Florida Governor Ron DeSantis.

The opposition to the Iowa and Utah bans has been loud and sincere from librarians, teachers and parent's advocacy groups, but they have presented a certain political conundrum because they lean largely on the Democratic Party or Democrat-connected advocacy organizations, among them PEN America, which has played a highly visible role in providing information on the bans and in supporting legal action against them.

It is impossible to call the Democratic Party or its affiliates champions of free speech, particularly given their conduct since the mass movement of young people against Israel's genocide in Gaza began in October. Liberal institutions such as Columbia University for example, tied by a million threads to the Democrats, had its students arrested and manhandled in April by the New York Police Department (NYPD)—with the active collusion of Democratic Mayor Eric Adams—simply for peacefully protesting the university's ties to Israel, a scene repeated all over Democrat-controlled New York City and state, as well

as in Chicago, Los Angeles and dozens of other liberal-controlled cities with college campuses.

Earlier this month, the NYPD arrested, after a manhunt, journalist Samuel Seligson for simply videotaping an anti-genocide protest. Making clear that the Democrats are no allies in the fight to defend free speech.

Pro-Palestinian sentiment remains the most censored set of ideas by the Democratic Party itself and at campuses in the United States where it has influence. Barnard College, affiliated with Columbia University, removed on August 12 from all of its social media, a post of an Arab student discussing her summer internship and holding up an image of Palestine.

As to PEN America, the organization has been morally demolished by hundreds of pro-Palestinian writers, once associated with the organization, who have refused over the last several months to participate in its awards ceremonies and literary festivals because of the organization's refusal to condemn the genocide against the Palestinian people in Gaza. One group, Writers Against the War in Gaza, is now organizing a boycott against the organization.

The refusal to offer even a modicum of criticism against the murderous role of American imperialism in Gaza was, in fact, part of the policy of PEN America before the genocide began on October 7. In December 2022, PEN America published a lengthy report on the situation of culture in Ukraine—a piece of imperialist war propaganda—which extolled Ukrainian nationalist chauvinism and did not mention the actions of the Ukrainian government in banning books in Russian and removing them from Ukrainian libraries, much less the removal of statues of famous Russian writers—actions motivated by the far right in Ukraine.

PEN America has never commented on the arrest and imprisonment of socialist journalist Bogdan Syrotiuk or the banning of the *World Socialist Web Site* in Ukraine.



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