

Utah book banning spree part of a broader, preemptive campaign of censorship and oppression

David Walsh
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Earlier this week, the state of Utah added a 36th book to the list of books that every public school in the state now has to remove from its shelves. The latest target of the Utah censors is Stephen King's *Different Seasons*, a collection of novellas, three of which were adapted into films (*The Shawshank Redemption*, *Stand By Me* and *Apt Pupil*).

The statewide campaign of book-banning in Utah was given legal legitimacy by the legislature's passage of a bill in 2024 allowing parents to challenge books they deemed "sensitive material" and requiring a book be removed from all public schools if at least three school districts determined it amounted to "objective sensitive material." This has opened up the floodgates and allowed a relative handful of censorship fanatics to wield considerable control over every school in the state.

Organizations such as Utah Parents United, associated with the Republican Party and the Christian right, openly advocate censorship and directly bringing in the authorities in response to books they don't approve of. The organization put out a 78-minute video in which the outfit's "curriculum director" Brooke Stephens, according to KUTV, "tells parents ... that if they find a book that they believe is offensive, they should call police. 'We're going after the ones where we can get the police on it. That's a big part, we're going to call police, we're going to make police reports,' says Stephens." Police on the brain?

The subject matter in many of these books center on LGBTQ communities, books about racial justice, and books the groups says are obscene. Among the books found to be objectionable is the novel 'Beloved,' by Toni Morrison, considered

by many to be an American classic. In addition to calling police, UPU suggests filing lawsuits against schools and applying pressure on principals and librarians to pull books off of school shelves. (KUTV)

Ban books now—why not burn them in the future?

The list of "Banned in Utah" books include several by Sarah J. Maas, an American fantasy author who has sold more than 75 million copies of her books in 40 languages. Three novels by Elana K. Arnold, an American children's and young adult author, are on the list—others among them, *What Girls Are Made Of*, a finalist for the 2017 National Book Award for Young People's Literature, and *Damsel*, a Michael L. Printz Award honor title in 2019.

Other popular works now banned in all Utah schools include the graphic novel adaptation of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, Judy Blume's 1975 novel *Forever...*, listed by BBC News in 2019 as one of the 100 most influential novels ever written, and Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (also made into a prominent film). Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Jodi Picoult's *Nineteen Minutes* are on the list as well.

Kelly Jensen at Bookriot makes two salient points about the removal of the books.

First, the average publication date of the books banned in Utah is now 2008. (The King book came out in 1982, Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* in 1970!) "Many of the books removed are titles likely sitting on shelves when the people who are banning them were themselves students. That they weren't a problem then only speaks to the manufactured panic around 'inappropriate' books."

Second, only nine school districts in Utah (out of 42) have accounted for the book bans. Davis and Washington

Counties have been involved in 35 and 31 of the bans, respectively. “In other words, *two* school districts in the whole state account for the vast majority of bans.”

This notion of a “manufactured panic” and the relative handful of book banning advocates driving the process are quite significant. They point to the important political and social facts surrounding this filthy business in Utah, which has nothing to do with saving the children of the state from “pornographers.”

It is, above all, another sign of the extremely tense and explosive conditions in the US, and the great social and moral polarization.

In April, the American Library Association came out with its annual report on the State of America’s Libraries and it revealed “how far and how deeply the attacks on democratic rights and freedom of thought and expression have gone and how determined the right-wing, fascistic elements are to suppress truth on various fronts.”

As we noted,

This is not the result of some sudden upsurge in public morality or even prudishness. This is a concerted, organized campaign driven by ultra-right elements dedicated to forcing their anti-democratic and unpopular views on a largely unsuspecting public. It is part of the preemptive assault on popular consciousness, driven by fear of the growing radicalization materialized in the “No Kings” demonstrations of millions and other indications of public hostility to the entire political establishment.

In response to the book-banning crusade, a coalition of LGBTQ organizations and independent bookstores have joined forces to hand out free copies of the books that have been targeted. According to the *Salt Lake Tribune*, the giveaways “will continue, they say, until the state ends its practice of removing titles from school shelves statewide. Organizers of the ‘Read Between the Bans’ campaign include The King’s English Bookshop, Under The Umbrella bookstore, The Legendarium bookstore and Weller Book Works, along with Utah’s LGBTQ+ Chamber of Commerce and Safe Zone Utah.”

The Democratic Party and the Utah AFL-CIO, along with the teachers’ unions, are officially on record opposing the book banning, but they have done little more than issue indignant statements and organize a few protest

stunts.

This reactionary crusade does not come out of some right-wing surge in public opinion. On the contrary, polls indicate far more tolerant views of homosexuality, interracial marriage and other once “controversial” orientations or statuses. The fascistic elements naturally do what they can to encourage every ounce of backwardness in the population. In reality, however, the big movement of the masses in the US at present is to the left.

The book bannings, which are widespread in America, occur on the same “historical plane” as the efforts to block youth from social media, the anti-immigrant chauvinism, the promotion of religious bigotry and superstition and the Trump administration’s anti-communist hysteria.

As far as the powers that be are concerned, everything must be done to block young people, above all, from being able to look honestly and objectively at their society and—as they inevitably will—draw radical, far-reaching conclusions.

The feverish anti-democratic actions in Utah are also a concrete response to the growth of political opposition and radicalism in that state. The No Kings rally in Salt Lake City March 28, which attracted 15,000 to 20,000 people and ended at the State Capitol, was widely estimated to have been the largest protest in the state’s history.

The *Salt Lake Tribune* observed: “From St. George to Logan, thousands of Utahns gathered in the streets Saturday to protest President Donald Trump as part of the third national ‘No Kings’ day of protests.”

March 28 protests were held in sizeable Utah cities, including Salt Lake City, Provo, St. George, Ogden, Park City, Cedar City and Logan. Beyond that, however, anti-Trump demonstrations also took place in Heber City (population 16,900), Vernal (population 10,400), Price (population 8,200), Ephraim (population 5,600), Moab (population 5,400), Kanab (population 4,700), Fillmore (population 2,600) and Boulder (population 240).



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