

## Behind 'Banned Books Week'

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Books are dangerous.

Papal bulls preceded the first Index to Prohibited Books in 1538, demanding prepublication approval by the Church and the burning of those books deemed heretical. In 1933, Hitler banned books that were deemed un-German and didn't support his agenda, and book burnings ensued, much like the one in *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*--though Hitler probably wasn't giving autographs. In 2005, Superintendent Bob Conder of Norwood High School in Colorado confiscated copies of *Bless Me, Ultima* from the school's English classes and gave them to parents for burning. In 2009, a list of 26 titles were banned in certain areas of Texas, removed from library shelves or class reading lists. Twenty-two books have also been restricted based on age, reading level, and requiring parental permission; no burning has yet been reported.

Some books are dangerous because they contain ideas that illuminate the dark areas of the human condition, such as teen suicide or war. Other books challenge the status quo, offering nontraditional family life such as gay or divorced parents. Then there are those books that use objectionable language, four-letter words or racial slurs. Books can also contain ideas that go against one's religious creed or political viewpoints.

Banned Books Week, begun by the American Library Association and observed since 1982, is an annual celebration of books that have been challenged or banned. *Banning* refers to a book being completely restricted, as by removal from a school, library, or store. *Challenging*, on the other hand, means that an individual or group has asked for a book to be banned, but not all challenges are accepted and carried that far.

Banned Books Week is the celebration of intellectual freedom, of the First Amendment, which provides for freedom of speech and of the press. This freedom allows you to read whatever you want without me, your professor, your neighbor, a school administrator, or a homeless guy stopping you. You can check out *120 Days of Sodom*, *The Satanic Verses*, or *Captain Underpants* if you want. You can buy *Woman Hollering Creek*, *Freak Show*, or a copy of the Quran at Amazon.com without our government hauling you from your chair and torturing you.

But there are people who want to stop you from reading Harry Potter or Naruto. Why? Perhaps because they feel threatened by ideas outside of their own, because they don't think you're mature enough or smart enough to handle new or different ideas, because they're afraid you'll think for yourself and challenge the status quo, or perhaps simply because they don't understand the context of the book or haven't read it.

Most bans and challenges occur in school libraries. The most challenges in Texas this past year occurred in Stephenville, Houston, and Irving ISD. 27% of all challenged books ended up banned in the 2008-2009 school year. School libraries face greater challenges specifically because of the age groups they cater to, and most school districts offer alternate books for assignments should a given work prove offensive to the child or parent. This is a better practice than forcing a librarian to remove a book completely from the shelves, because at that point you have infringed upon the rights of every other child to access that book. Banned Books Week reminds us that the power to determine what an individual can or cannot read lies with that individual—or her parents, in the case of minors—not with an educator, neighbor, or law-maker.

Academic libraries, such as your Newton Gresham Library, only make up 0.5% of institutions facing challenges. That's not to say the Library hasn't faced a challenge or two over the years. But that doesn't keep NGL from supporting the

American Library Association, Banned Books Week, intellectual freedom, and the First Amendment--not just for a week at the end of September, but every day.