

Why Books Matter

“Books Are Weapons in the War of Ideas”

Kenneth C. Davis

During World War II, the book publishing industry did something extraordinary. Beset by paper rationing and other wartime constraints, a group of publishers set aside rivalries and consented to allow some of their titles to be mass-produced in a series of staple-bound paperback reprints. Millions of these books, called Armed Services Editions, were shipped overseas and distributed free of charge to American soldiers and sailors.

This ambitious undertaking was the brainchild of the Council on Books in Wartime, a nonprofit industry group formed after the Pearl Harbor attack. Its goal was to sustain morale by providing troops with “relaxation and inspiration.”¹ But the Council had a loftier mission, expressed in its motto: “Books Are Weapons in the War of Ideas.”

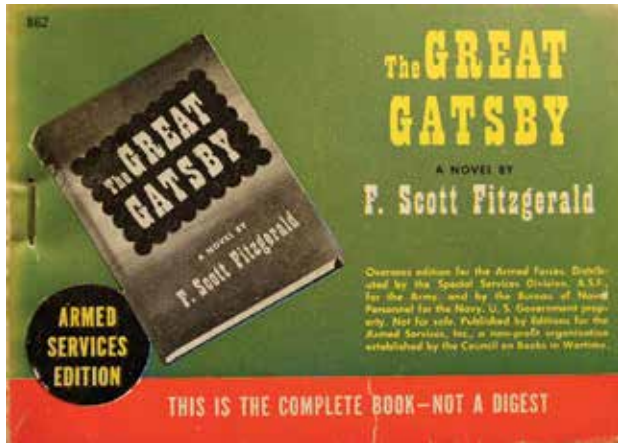
A wartime poster, depicting a Nazi book burning, featured a quote from President Franklin D. Roosevelt: “**Books cannot be killed by fire.** People die, but books never die. No man and no force can put thought in a concentration camp forever. No man and no force can take from the world the books that embody man’s eternal fight against tyranny. In this war, we know, books are weapons.”

Produced on catalog presses idled during wartime, the Armed Services Editions went to war against Fascism and Nazis—they were a non-lethal part of America’s “Arsenal of Democracy.” Eventually, more than 120 million digest-sized Armed Services Editions, comprising some 1,300 titles, were placed in the hands of countless American sailors, soldiers, airmen, medics, and nurses. Shared by uniformed readers until they fell apart, the books were often torn page-by-page and passed around on battleships and bombers.



World War II poster from 1942, quoting President Roosevelt, www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/cph.3g04267

By all accounts, the project wildly exceeded its morale-boosting goal. And it had an unintended consequence. Launched shortly after the 1939 debut of Pocket Books—America’s first “mass market” paperbacks—the Armed Services Editions created a ravenous appetite for inexpensive paperbound books. The craving exploded in America’s postwar “Paperback Revolution,”



The Armed Services Edition of *The Great Gatsby* is credited with reviving the reputation of the 1925 novel and its author, who had died in December 1940. (Library of Congress 20150617SM059. Selected Armed Services Editions. Rare Book and Special Collections Division)

helping “democratize” reading in America, as I recounted in my first book *Two-Bit Culture: The Paperbacking of America* (1984).

This 80-year-old history comes to mind as we are once again in a “War of Ideas.” But the enemy is no longer far-away Fascism. In America today, book bans and the suppression of reading have been weaponized in the country’s volatile partisan conflicts.

Nobel Prize-winner Toni Morrison’s novels *Sula*, *The Bluest Eye*, and *Beloved*—winner of the 1988 Pulitzer Prize—are often among the “usual suspects” in what the *New York Times Magazine* recently described as “a political environment where book-banning efforts are being used to drive voter sentiment.”² Alongside the assault on teaching anything other than a sanitized American history that will not cause some students to feel “shame,” these bans are part of a war of ideas, largely fueled by anti-intellectual and anti-science sentiment, being waged across the country.

But why ban or burn a book? Why go to war against written words? The answer is simple—fear.

Usually, it is the fear of ideas that threaten established power and authority. Once an idea is labeled “heresy,” “sinful,” or “decadent,” it is more easily suppressed or crushed. A strongman like Mussolini or Stalin understands the importance of controlling words and thoughts as a means of controlling people. They exile and imprison



Nazi book burning; May 10, 1933 Berlin (Image via U.S. Holocaust Museum <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/book-burning>)

writers like Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn who had mocked Stalin’s mustache.

And they don’t just ban books, they burn them, as the Nazis did in 1933 with the works of Thomas Mann, Ernest Hemingway, Helen Keller, and many others considered “degenerate.” Or, as the words of the Nazi “Fire Oath” put it: “Against the falsification of our history and disparagement of its great figures.”³

Of course, this has also happened in the United States. In the 1830s, abolitionist writings were banned from the U.S. mail on the orders of President Andrew Jackson. In South Carolina, abolitionist pamphlets were publicly burned in a bonfire a century before the notorious Berlin blaze.

After the Civil War, Anthony Comstock, a Civil War veteran who began a personal crusade against “vice,” was appointed by Congress in 1873 as the nation’s Puritanical overseer of books. Comstock could single-handedly decide which books to prohibit from the U.S. mail—a position he held until 1907. Besides any fiction that Comstock deemed objectionable, his targets included “marriage manuals”—contraception and birth control advice—and some anatomy textbooks.

Long after Comstock left the post, his strict rules governed American literature around the country. The first serious judicial blow against such censorship came in 1933, when New York Judge John M.

Woolsey ruled that James Joyce's acclaimed 1922 novel *Ulysses* was *not* obscene.

I am quite aware "Ulysses" is a rather strong draught to ask some sensitive, though normal, persons to take. But whilst in many places the effect of "Ulysses" on the reader undoubtedly is somewhat emetic, nowhere does it tend to be an aphrodisiac. "Ulysses" may, therefore, be admitted into the United States.⁴

Judge Woolsey's landmark decision did not end book censorship in America. The lingering effect of Comstock's rules held sway in many cities, Boston chief among them. And many publishers delighted in publishing books that proclaimed "Banned in Boston" on their jackets. The phrase almost always boosted sales.

In the 1950s, political views replaced sex as the chief subject of censors. Back then, an Indiana textbook commissioner wanted to rid schools of any books about Robin Hood. Why? He stole from the rich and gave to the poor.⁵ That reeked of Socialism. Perhaps amusing, but it was part of a wave of book purges led by Senator Joseph McCarthy.

First targeting U.S. State Department overseas libraries to remove so-called "subversive" literature, McCarthy and his allies also pummeled American schools and libraries 70 years ago. McCarthy's crusade led the American Library Association to issue its initial "Freedom to Read" statement in 1953. Daringly defiant in the face of the powerful Wisconsin senator, the revised version today still reads, "We believe rather that what people read is deeply important; that ideas can be dangerous; but that *the suppression of ideas is fatal to a democratic society.*"⁶ (Emphasis added)

Over the years in the United States, there have been many local skirmishes over books, often in school settings. The chief targets were once Huck Finn and Holden Caulfield. Later, it was Harry Potter and Heather, the little girl raised by lesbian mothers in the picture book *Heather Has Two Mommies*. First marked in 1982, the American Library Association's perennial Banned Books Week continues to highlight those books being

banned or challenged, mostly in schools across the country. And in 2022, the surge of book bans became a tidal wave. As PEN America, a writers' organization, put it plainly in a recent report,

More books banned.

More districts.

More states.

More students losing access to literature.⁷

But something is different this time around. The works increasingly under attack often deal frankly with issues of sexuality, race, and gender, with many written by women, people of color, and openly gay writers. They now include such books as *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas, *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson, Juno Dawson's *This Book is Gay*, and *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You* by Ibram X. Kendi and Jason Reynolds.⁸

But one side in America's current "War of Ideas" is now far better organized and more heavily weaponized through social media than ever before. And there is a clear ideology at work. The vitriolic assaults are often grounded in white Christian nationalist beliefs. The present-day onslaught is also sharply partisan—much like that highly politicized, national crusade against any books that hinted of Socialism during the McCarthy era of the early 1950s.

In tracing the rise of paperback publishing and its impact on reading and the spread of ideas in *Two-Bit Culture*, I wrote, "I begin with this simple assertion. Books can change people and societies."

Having written it nearly 40 years ago, that idea struck me as a self-evident truth. Perhaps complacently, I thought we had moved past the need to explain why books matter. Yet, the intrinsic value of books was again powerfully driven home for me in the early months of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, when I found relief from the cascade of bad news in the act of reading short fiction.

Inspired in part by *The Decameron*, Boccaccio's collection of brief tales told during a plague, I began reading novellas. I was not looking to escape reality, but searching for an antidote to the

anxiety, stress, and sleeplessness the pandemic brought to so many people. I rediscovered the physical and psychological value of the act of reading—benefits well-supported by research. The Council on Books in Wartime had it right in 1942. Reading books uniquely provides “relaxation and inspiration.” But I crucially found much more. Because in 1942, the Council was right about books as “weapons in the war of ideas.”

Books make us think. When you think, you ask questions. When you ask questions, you often find that “glimpse of truth,” as Joseph Conrad memorably wrote, “for which you have forgotten to ask.”

And that is the key to why books matter and why they pose such a threat to those who would crush truth. Those who would ban or burn books are not worried about “dirty words”—or even the bared cartoon breast in *Maus*, another recent target of censors. They fear facts and reality. They fear losing control. They recognize the threat to their power that comes when people—including their children—learn to think for themselves.

That is why the current wave of book banning is so dangerous. We are in a war for the soul of democracy. The liberating freedom to read is one front, one line, one wall that must be held. The forces attempting to bury truth in the pursuit of power cannot be permitted to win this war of ideas that FDR clearly framed as a battle in “man’s eternal fight against tyranny.” ■

Notes

1. Kenneth C. Davis, *Two-Bit Culture: The Paperbacking of America* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1984), 69–70.
2. Erika Hayasaki, “How Book Bans Turned a Texas Town Upside Down,” (Sept. 8, 2022), www.nytimes.com/2022/09/08/magazine/book-bans-texas.html.
3. “Fire Oaths,” the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/fire-oaths>
4. David Margolick, “Judge’s ‘Ulysses’ Ruling still a Landmark 50 Years Later,” (Dec. 6, 1983), www.nytimes.com/1983/12/06/arts/judge-s-ulysses-ruling-still-a-landmark-50-years-later.html
5. Kenneth C. Davis, “When Robin Hood Was Blacklisted,” (Oct. 9, 2022), <https://dontknowmuch.com/2022/09/when-robin-hood-was-blacklisted>.
6. “The Freedom to Read Statement,” the American Library Association, www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/freedomreadstatement. Adopted June 25, 1953, by the ALA Council and the AAP Freedom to Read Committee;

amended January 28, 1972; January 16, 1991; July 12, 2000; June 30, 2004.

7. “Banned in the USA: The Growing Movement to Censor Books in Schools” (Sept. 19, 2022), <https://pen.org/report/banned-usa-growing-movement-to-censor-books-in-schools>.
8. “Top 10 Most Challenged Books Lists,” www.ala.org/advocacy/bbooks/frequentlychallengedbooks/top10.

Photo credit Nina Subin



Kenneth C. Davis is the author of *Don’t Know Much About History*, *In the Shadow of Liberty*, and *Strongman*, among many other titles. His most recent book is *Great Short Books: A Year of Reading—Briefly*. A celebration of books, reading, and writers, *Great Short Books* is a guide to 58 novels, all about 200 pages in length or shorter, that Davis read during the pandemic lockdown. Spanning from the eighteenth century to the present, *Great Short Books* includes diverse works from Voltaire to Colson Whitehead, from hardboiled mysteries to magical realism. Ken Davis brings a historian’s eye to placing these books and their authors in the context of their times. He has contributed to *Social Education* in the past and a list of his published books and articles can be found on his website dontknowmuch.com

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