

HOW WE TALK ABOUT BOOKS WE DON'T LIKE

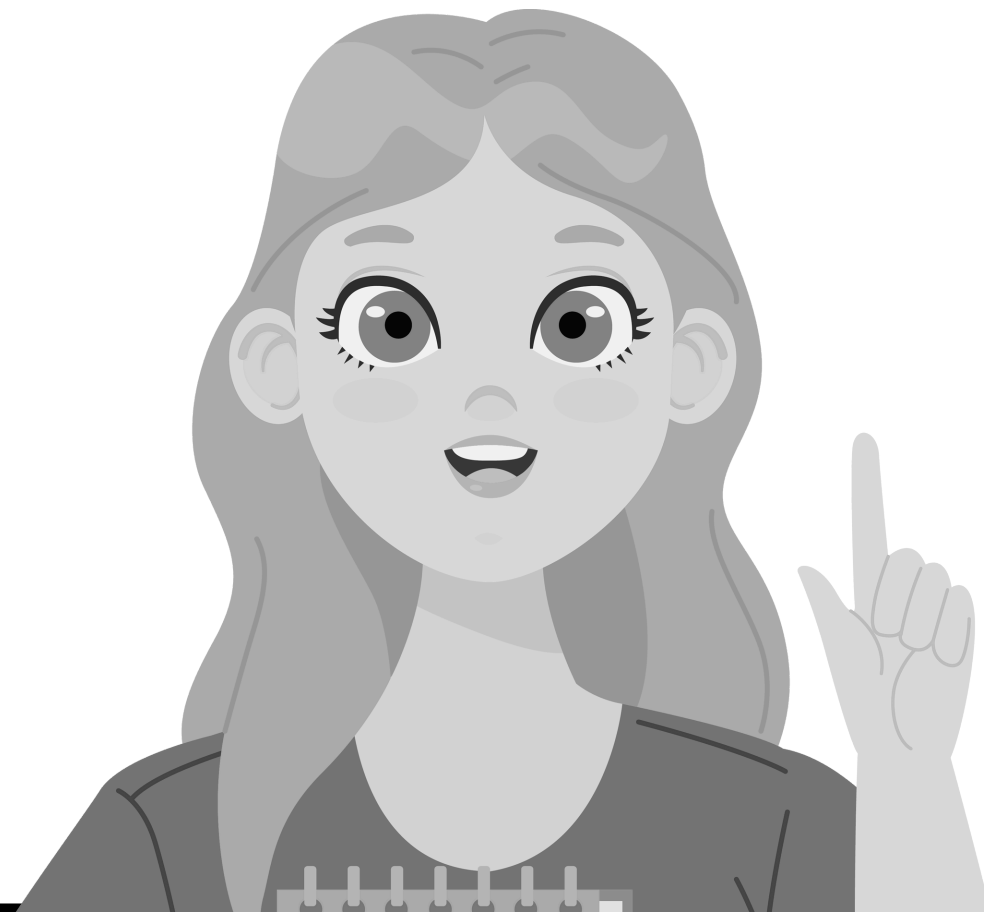
The Language & Rhetoric of Book
Challenges/Bans 2013-2023

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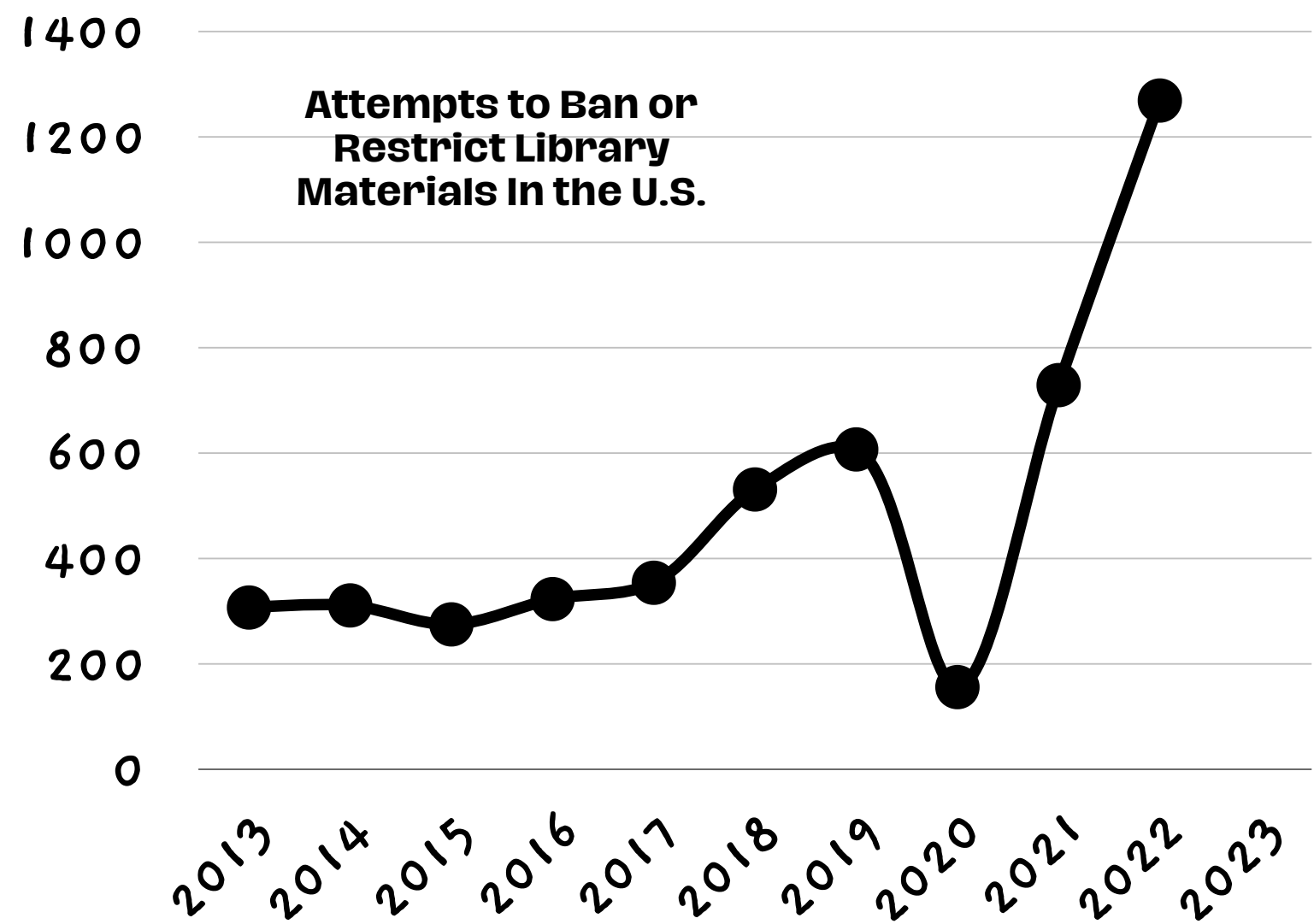


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THE NUMBER OF BOOK CHALLENGES IN PUBLIC LIBRARIES HAS BEEN INCREASING OVER THE PAST DECADE.

A challenge is an attempt to remove or restrict access to materials based on the objections of a person or group.

RESEARCH TEAM

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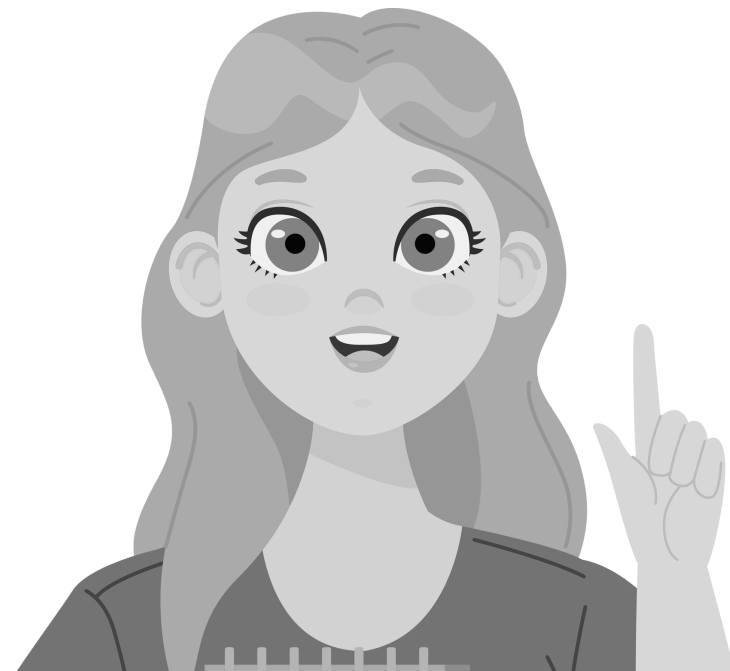
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**WE WONDERED
WHETHER THE WORDS PEOPLE USE
WHEN THEY CHALLENGE
BOOKS MIGHT HAVE CHANGED
OVER THE LAST 10 YEARS**

So we collected some data...

WE LOOKED AT 218 WRITTEN CHALLENGES THAT WERE SUBMITTED TO PUBLIC LIBRARIES

The documents collected included:

- ALL submitted book challenges received by the Oregon Intellectual Freedom Clearinghouse at the State Library of Oregon between 2013-2023
- ALL submitted book challenges collected in Pierce County, Washington between 2013-2023
- ALL submitted book challenges collected in Burbank, California between 2018-2022
- ALL submitted book challenges collected from Sacramento Public Library (CA) between 2013-2023

So we collected some data...

WE INTERVIEWED 12 EXPERIENCED LIBRARIANS

We conducted 12 standardized open-ended interviews with librarians from around the United States. We specifically sought out librarians who had experience working with patron complaints and/or reviewing written material challenges.

In our interviews, many expressed that there has been a clear shift in the language used by patrons within the last decade, and particularly within the last 5 years.

So we collected some data...

WE COLLECTED 49 QUESTIONNAIRE RESPONSES FROM LIBRARY WORKERS

Our survey included twelve questions regarding library worker experiences with formal and informal book challenges, and compiled data regarding the changes over the last 10 years. The questionnaire was sent to dozens of library contacts across the country. States represented in our final research include California, Florida, Maine, Ohio, Oregon, Texas, Vermont, and Washington.

Table 1. Top 5 Categories Coded in Document Analysis

<u>Code #</u>	<u>Category</u>	<u>Times Coded</u>
8	Children's & YA	84
5	Sexual Content	79
4	Race & Ethnicity	39
9	Language	28
3	LGBTQ+	24

Table 2. Top 5 Sub-Categories Coded in Document Analysis

<u>Code #</u>	<u>Category</u>	<u>Times Coded</u>
8.1	Inappropriate for Children	55
5.1	Pornographic/ Sexually Explicit	42
4.2	Racism	22
8.2	Excessive Violence	13
5.2	Obscene	12

WE THEN ANALYZED THE DATA FOR KEY WORDS, TOPICS, AND COMMON PHRASES

Our analysis looked at the rhetoric of patrons and grouped it into 12 different themes. We then looked to see how often these themes showed up in a given year. This allowed us to see trends in the language patrons use and how this may have changed over the last decade as challenges have been on the rise.

We found this phrase
80 times in our
research!

“INAPPROPRIATE
FOR
CHILDREN”

“PORNOGRAPHIC/
SEXUALLY
EXPLICIT”



We found these
phrases 51 times in
our research!

WORDS CAN CAUSE REAL HARM

A Library Director -

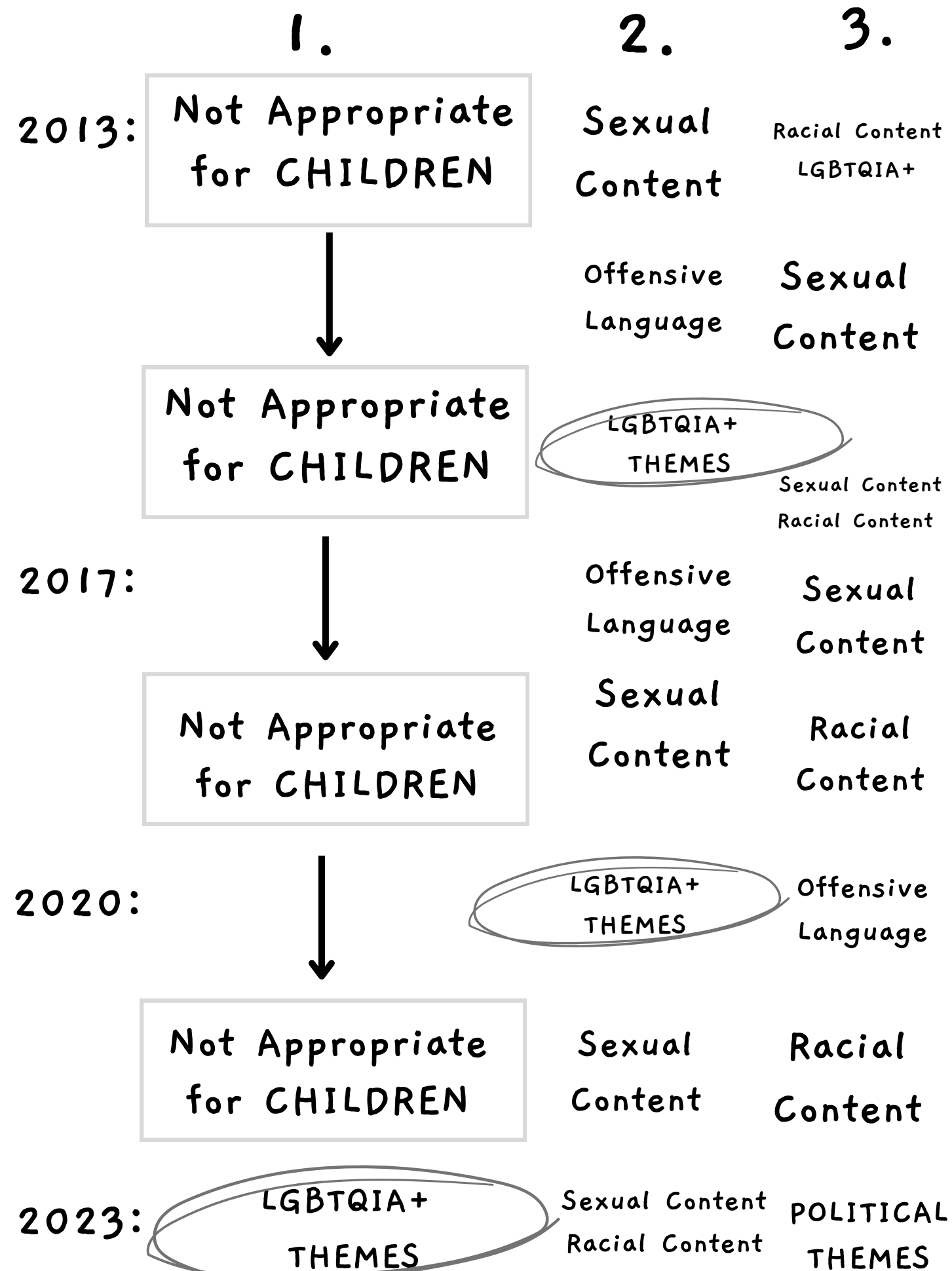
“He called me and the teen librarian ‘pedophiles and groomers.’ Wow. That’s definitely language that until the last couple of years, we really had never encountered in any kind of pushback about library materials...And of course, we are not pedophiles or groomers, like those are really triggering words for everybody, right?”

WE READ THESE KINDS OF WORDS IN WRITTEN COMPLAINTS FROM PATRONS:

"violence against animals"
"talks about vagina, penis, and sex" "Pornographic"
"Unsuited to Age" "traumatizing, extreme violence, appalling" "Violence celebrated"
"too grown up for children" "written to have undue influence on the reader" "extremely graphic"
"[I don't want] my 12 year old to know how girls have sex" "Racist memorabilia"
"Graphic nudity and eroticism" "the description referred to them as a family, but there are two dads" "spreads misinformation" "Swear words"
"completely inappropriate for children's picture book.. Pornography" "encourages sexual experimentation" "offensive language"
"The publication unfairly celebrates the black man and promotes a left wing agenda" "an affront to Native people"
"Promotes false religion, specifically will cause the reader to put faith in man and not god" "tells kids that adults are wrong about gender"
"This man's proclivity to pedophilia is something I don't want to come into innocent hands." "stereotypical images of African American children"
"Not fit for most readers" "...show two dads as a family... should not be among the kid books but in the section of the library on homosexuality"
"The content and language seems too mature for elementary students. Not only might they misunderstand it, they may take it literally." "Burn it."
"child pornography" "I feel this book is teaching people to be negative, insulting, disrespectful, dishonest, rude, inconsiderate, and ill-mannered."
"Homosexuality" "objected to a reference to Cinderella as a "slut" and deemed the poem violent and abusive to women and girls"
"Drugs" "teaching people to be negative, insulting, disrespectful, dishonest, rude, ill-mannered" "encourages teens to experiment"
"deliberate nonconsensual affection" "Book normalizes and desensitizes viewers from extreme violence, rape, and hatred."
"The book was a gross and disgusting chronicle of unusual sexual practices." "inappropriately provocative" "borderline pornographic"
"book was a gross and disgusting chronicle of unusual sex practices" "inclining [readers] to commit socially destructive action" "racist"
"completely unnecessary" "Vulgar, nudity, male sexual orgy, weird, sick and disgusting." "Rip up this book and burn it" "anti-family"
"surprising me that my tax dollars are paying for it..." "anti-religious statements" "racism"
"mentions slavery without condemning it" "not suitable for sensitive audiences"
"racist depiction of Africans" "inappropriate"

LIBRARIANS TOLD US THEY HEARD THESE KINDS OF WORDS FROM PATRONS:

Inappropriate
Deviant Discriminatory Indoctrination Violence
"Shocking to me" "too much diversity" Perverts LGBTQIA+ Grooming Fallatio
"Christian nationalist" "Racist to white people" "Political agendas" Pedophiles Misinformation
Normalizing Profanity "Not appropriately balanced" "Homosexuals and lesbians" Outraged "Critical race theory" Indecent
Cursing Flippant "Outdated depictions of racial minorities" "It has 'Gay' in the title" "Offensive images of black people"
Obscene "Sickening, the bible forbids it" "These laws are fraudulent, They are not legally married." Appropriate
"Talked about the founding fathers being slaveholders, but not enough about their Christianity" Groomers
Offensive "Shouldn't have in the library" "This is of the devil. God does not sanction this perversion of marriage"
"Depicts nudity of child victims of sex crimes" "Harmful to our to transgender youth in our community"
"Sexual content" "LGBTQ people are going to burn in hell" "Defying authority" "Character talks back"
Graphic Pornographic "Historically inaccurate" "Adult themes" "Awfully 'booby'" Vulgarity
Frightening "I don't believe in it" "Not age appropriate" Gender Pedophilia Satanism
Misogyny "Sexual language" Ideology
Pseudoscience Unsavory



Complaint Themes and Changes

Top Themes (by year) found in written book challenges in Public Libraries

“Maybe that's underlying what was there all along...It was suddenly okay to say things that were hateful...it was coming from the very top...There was a shift that happened, and then it was normalized in a way I just hadn't seen before.”



-An Oregon Library Director

"The other factor that's definitely playing into how this conversation plays out over the [last] 10 years...what is available now in terms of the complexity of the literature has really changed and shifted... We are seeing more and more diverse voices represented... we're publishing more people of color, authors of color...And maybe there's a consciousness of how race plays into those stories, but there's so much more than a black character, so much more than a Latino character. They're a complex, complete person who is Latino... And for certain readers, that's more frightening to encounter. That's more unnerving, right? Because it's less reductive...some people really would like to keep [them] stuck in that reductive phase where all they are is black, or all they are is Latino, and that they're not full, complex, interesting human beings... So I think sometimes we're seeing readers react to that, to their discomfort and their own inability to see communities of color or queer folk as complex, interesting, layered people. "

- Oregon Youth Services Librarian



WE LEARNED THAT THE WORDS PEOPLE ARE USING HAVE CHANGED.

There has been an increase in rhetoric that complains about books featuring LGBTQIA+ themes, racial issues and political themes. Some of this language has become more violent and we saw words like “burn it” written on challenges.

WE LEARNED THAT CONCERN OVER WHAT CHILDREN ARE READING HAS ALWAYS BEEN THE TOP REASON FOR CHALLENGES

This theme was the #1 reason for challenges until 2023, when LGBTQIA+ themes shared the #1 spot

WE LEARNED THAT IN A MEDIA-SATURATED WORLD, RHETORIC IS EASILY MIMICKED

“Folks on the either end of the political spectrum...would be using the language that is popular in those circles. You pick up the shared vocabulary of your community.”

-A Cambridge, MA librarian

NAVIGATING CONTROVERSY AND CENSORSHIP

In cases where book challenges are politically motivated, come from outside the community, and/or use some of the inflammatory rhetoric we heard in our research, preparing for challenges with well-crafted objectionable content policies and de-escalation strategies can help stop attempted censorship before it takes hold.

LIBRARY ADVOCACY WORK

**REQUIRING CHALLENGES BE
BROUGHT BY A COMMUNITY
MEMBER**

DE-ESCALATING ONE-ON- ONE INTERACTIONS WITH PATRONS

YOUR IDEAS?

CONVERSATIONS WITH PATRONS

- Challenges reflect the social concerns patrons experience and are often contextualized within greater political or social movements. Understanding the underlying concerns and values a patron has can help guide more productive conversations.
- Our research supports the belief that challenges are symbolic; as one of our interviewees postulates those who are challenging books believe they are helping “vulnerable population[s].” This is a motivation many of us can empathize with and to communicate where our values are aligned with patrons. We want to reinstate nuance and human-ness into the conversations.
- “The job of a librarian is not to eliminate controversial or offensive material from the library but to contextualize those things for patrons. We want to foster community conversations around controversial issues.” - August

"I think that when you select materials for the public, you have a responsibility to address each concern seriously. But I also feel...you can't bow even to a majority rule when you have members of the community for whom this book is perfect... Our community is made up of a very diverse group of people."

Retired Children's Librarian -



"It is very hard as a librarian...to feel like you're constantly fighting against this and it can be really wearing. And so I think it's really important for us as librarians to figure out how we take care of ourselves and how we get the support that we need. Or I think we're going to stop doing the hard work, and instead we're going to choose not to order the titles that we know will be controversial."

-An Oregon Library Director



OUR PRINTABLE ZINE

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—A Cambridge, MA librarian

WORDS CAN CAUSE REAL HARM

"I called me and the teen librarian 'pedophile' and 'groomer.' Wow. That's definitely language that encountered in any kind of pedophile about library materials...And of course, we are not pedophile or groomers, like those are really triggering words for everybody, right?"

A Library Director

Complaint Themes By Year

The Themes by year found in written book challenges in public libraries

Year	Sexual	Language	Content	Sexual	Language	Content	Sexual	Language	Content	Sexual	Language	Content	Sexual	Language	Content	Sexual	Language	Content
2013	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
2017	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
2020	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
2023	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1

Patron Children's Librarian

"I think that when you select materials for the public, you have a responsibility to address each concern... But I also feel...you can't have been to a majority vote when you have members of the community for whom this book is perfect... Our community is made up of a very diverse group of people."

-An Oregon Library Director

"It is very hard as a librarian...to feel like you're constantly fighting against this and it can be really wearing. And as I think it's really important for us as librarians to figure out how we take care of ourselves and how we get the support that we need. Or I think we're going to stop doing the hard work and instead we're going to choose not to order the books that we know will be controversial."

TO READ THE FORMAL RESEARCH PAPER:

Send an email to: awgust@uw.edu

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University of Washington
Information School

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A challenge is an attempt to remove or restrict access to materials based on the objections of a person or group.

WE WONDERED HOW THE WORDS PEOPLE USE WHEN THEY COMPLAIN ABOUT BOOKS MIGHT HAVE CHANGED DURING THIS TIME.

So we interviewed 12 librarians, conducted 49 questionnaires with library staff, and collected 218 written book challenges from around the United States.

LIBRARIANS TOLD US THEY HEARD THESE KINDS OF WORDS FROM PATRONS:

Inappropriate
Discriminatory
Deviant
"Shocking to me"
"too much diversity"
"Christian nationalist"
"Racist to white people"
"Normalizing Profanity"
"Cursing"
"Not appropriately balanced"
"Homosexuals and le Filippant"
"Outdated depictions of racial minorities"
"It has 'Obscene'"
"Sickening, the bible forbids it"
"These laws are frai"
"Talked about the founding fathers being slaveholders"
Offensive
"Shouldn't have in the library"
"This is of the devil"
"Depicts nudity of child victims of sex crimes"
"Harmfu"
"Sexual content"
"LGBTQ people are going to burn in hell"
Graphic Pornographic
"Historically inaccurate"

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CONCLUSION

- Further Research Needs
- Questions?



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FULL RESEARCH PAPER

