

Land of the Free, Home of the Brave?: American Children's Literature in an Era of Heightened Censorship

In a country advocating, loudly, the rights of the individual, what about child readers? Are they granted an expansive vision of their world? What rights do children have where books are concerned?

Diversity in American Children's literature is both thriving and under assault. Despite opposition, and concerns about access, writers and publishers are seemingly persevering. A survey of the websites for top publishers for children in America reveals a concentrated effort to resist censorship and promote diversity in the form of statements of support, resources for resisting challenges and bans, and curated lists of banned books. Children's literature is clearly contested territory in contemporary America.

While diverse books are increasing in number, they remain a small portion of children's literature overall and are disproportionately targeted by censors. In 2023, the ALA documented a "65% increase in challenges compared to 2022, reaching the highest levels ever documented ... in 20 years of tracking: 4,240 unique book titles were targeted for removal from schools and libraries. This tops the previous high from 2022, when 2,571 unique titles were targeted for censorship" (www.ala.org/bbooks/censorship-numbers). The ALA report warns, "recent censorship data are evidence of a growing, well-organized, conservative political movement" which is strengthened by legislation restricting materials available in schools and public libraries.

This edited collection explores current trends in American Children's literature (including YA texts) in light of increasing, and more organized, challenges and bans. Individuals and groups, backed by politicians and given "teeth" by new legislation, are making a determined effort to circumscribe the material available to children. Essays will look at American Children's literature from the 21st century, specifically the content that triggers bans/challenges, in order to determine what all the "fuss" is about.

The focus will be on books that have been challenged/banned since 2020. Texts may be published in the last four years or works revisited in this contentious climate and subsequently challenged/banned. An increasing concern is what to do with texts that seem dated or have not "aged well"? Books may contain racist, sexist, or otherwise offensive material which jars with contemporary social and

political norms. Do you contextualize or remove offending elements or suppress the book?

Pressures are exerted from both ends of the political spectrum. Liberals and conservatives alike engage in a battle to shape/control American Children's literature in the name of protection—of innocence, against corruption, in favour of their own value systems. Efforts to censor material inevitably reveal both a distinct concept of childhood and a belief in the power of the book/reading.

A particular vision of childhood excludes the diverse identities and experiences suggested by the targets of challenges and bans, one which seeks to impose a narrow, and self-serving concept of American childhood. The identity politics involved support what Isabel Millán defines as childnormativity: “an idealized Western, white, middle-class, able-bodied, heteronormative, and cisnormative sense of what it means to be a child or to experience childhood” (“Introduction: Reading in Drag, Coloring in Autofantasia.” *Coloring into Existence: Queer of Color Worldmaking in Children's Literature*, 12). This collection highlights efforts to expand “what it means to be a child or to experience childhood” through stories in America.

The kinds of groups/material most frequently challenged in the last four years have been BIPOC authors and/or protagonists and LGBTQ+ characters/content. For organizational purposes, essays will be grouped into the following sections, based on the targets of challenges/bans. The complexity of identity will no doubt result in overlaps/ intersections.

Topics may include, but are not limited to the following suggestions:

Section one: Black/African American experience/race/racism

- The push for diverse/inclusive representation/recognition
- Resisting (embracing?) accusations of engaging in “critical race theory” and/or promoting “woke ideology”
- Challenging efforts to sanitize history to “protect” child readers
- Countering historical omissions/inaccuracies, misleading or insensitive depictions

Section two: People of “Color”/“Hyphenated” Americans

In a 1915 speech Theodore Roosevelt vehemently asserted that “there is no room in this country for hyphenated Americanism. When I refer to hyphenated Americans, I do not refer to naturalized Americans. Some of the very best Americans I have ever known were naturalized Americans. Americans born abroad. But a hyphenated American is not an American at all.” “Hyphen” is read as a sign of torn allegiance in this xenophobic context.

- Labels often erase identities. Can they reinstate them? Does embracing the “hyphen” afford a more compelling and healing quality to American Children’s literature?
- Transnational identities in a “melting pot”
- What place does ethnic diversity have in the national literature? Is the emphasis on difference or commonalities? A celebration or undercutting of diversity?
- Does it escape the trap of being “othered” or “exoticized”?
- Immigrant, migrant, refugee—relocation or forced displacement?
- Representation as a way of combating prejudice and countering bias—a means of expanding the territory of American Children’s literature.

Section three: Native Writers—displaced but not silenced

Roosevelt’s hyphen also functions as a minus sign—it signals the missing Americans whose ancestors predate the “naturalized American”—Native Americans

- Book bans as a new exercise in erasure: Dr. Debbie Reese’s essay, “Killing the Indians in 2023: Book Banning Seeks to Erase Native Americans,” and her blog documenting challenged/banned books, warn of the increasing “disappearance” of books by Native writers
- Countering the lingering effects of the “noble savage” stereotype
- Authenticity is crucial but complicated by the fact that the label Native American conflates hundreds of nations under one term; there are at least five hundred sovereign Native Nations—a political status that distinguishes their tribal members from minority groups in America—does that play out in the literature?
- Are certain Nations more active in Children’s Literature?
- Navigating the relationship between the past and present

- How visible and accessible is Native American Literature for Children? HarperCollins launch of Heartdrum, a Native-focused imprint in 2019 is a positive development but how successful has it been? Have other publishers followed this example?
- What does inclusion in American Children's literature look like from a Native American perspective?

Section four: LGBTQ+

- What kinds of identity and bodies are permitted in American texts? The Puritan origins of the country frequently peak through especially around discussions of childhood innocence. The default depiction has been the heterosexual but not sexual child.
- Can American Children's literature accommodate more fluid identities?
- characters and themes recognizing the lived experience of LGBTQ+ individuals/communities
- What constitutes effective representation? How do authors avoid stereotypes?
- Defying obscenity law and hyperbolic rhetoric about "porn in schools"

Please submit proposals (maximum 500 words) and a brief bio to Danielle Russell drussell@glendon.yorku.ca by December 31, 2024.