

Testimony before the U.S. Senate Committee on the Judiciary
Hearing on
“Book Bans: Examining How Censorship Limits Liberty and Literature”
September 12, 2023
Emily J.M. Knox
Associate Professor
School of Information Sciences
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
Chair of the Board of the National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC)

(Spoken) Thank you, Chairman Durbin, Ranking Member Graham, and members of the Committee for giving me the opportunity to testify at this hearing.

I am an associate professor in the School of Information Sciences (the iSchool) at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. I am also board chair of the National Coalition Against Censorship.

I previously served as president of the Freedom to Read Foundation, the legal arm of the American Library Association.

My testimony does not reflect the views of the University of Illinois, NCAC, FTRF or the ALA.

My research focuses on information access, intellectual freedom and censorship, information ethics and policy, and print culture studies.

I was born in Nashville, Tennessee and grew up in Columbia, Maryland. I studied Religion at both Smith College and the University of Chicago and, after working as project assistant at the law firm of Kirkland & Ellis, I received my MSLIS from the iSchool at Illinois.

After working as a theological librarian for 5 years, I attended the doctoral program at the School of Communication & Information at Rutgers University.

Books and Libraries have always been part of my life. My mother was a high school librarian at Magruder High School in Montgomery County, Maryland, for 32 years and I often spent my summers with her shelving, conducting inventory, and checking in magazines.

We always observed Banned Books Week. Ma would bring home the list of books that had been challenged. My favorite author, Judy Blume, was almost always on the list. The characters in her books seemed like real people to me—like me and my friends.

I could not understand why people would not want me to read books about my own life.

My father was a professor at Morgan State University in Baltimore and when I followed in his footsteps by getting a PhD, I knew exactly what I wanted to study: why do people attempt to ban books?

It is not surprising that the reasons are clear—Reading is powerful and the freedom to read can be frightening.

According to the ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom, over 2500 unique titles were targeted for censorship in 2022. Almost all of the books can be categorized as "diverse" or books by and about "LGBTQIA, Native, people of color, gender diversity, people with disabilities and ethnic, cultural, and religious minorities."

At the same time, researchers have found that 71% of Americans oppose book bans in public libraries and 67% oppose banning books in school libraries.¹

Books are one of the most powerful technologies in the world. They bring ideas across both time and space in a small, portable package.

During this current crisis, there is a lot of discussion about whether or not books are "harmful" or "dangerous" or "hurtful."

This actually depends on who is reading them.

As Jesse Shera noted, we do not know what happens when an individual reads a book. Each person brings their own experiences to the book and those experiences will determine their response.

These interpretations are never static.

Rudine Sims Bishop argued, books are mirrors, windows, and sliding-glass doors. A book can help "us understand each other better by helping to change our attitudes towards difference."

What we see right now is that people are fixated on the idea that books are only mirrors or sliding-glass doors. They only reflect something true about the reader themselves or the reader's world or they invite the reader to mimic an identity or action they read about in the book.

It's important to remember that books are also windows—they give us access to other people's lives.

¹ American Library Association, "Voters Oppose Book Bans in Libraries," Text, Advocacy, Legislation & Issues, March 21, 2022, <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/voters-oppose-book-bans-libraries>.

Kerry H. Robinson notes that adults often censor “difficult knowledge” or “knowledge that many adults find challenging to address in their own lives but especially with children.”

What could be more difficult than knowledge that can define your identity?

But in order to describe your truth you must have the words to do so.

These campaigns to censor books are unconstitutional and against every person’s right to intellectual freedom. That is, the right of every individual to hold and express opinions, and seek, access, receive, and impart information and ideas without restriction.

The First Amendment states that “Congress shall make no law abridging the freedom of speech.” Our right to speak, write, publish, and read are all protected by the Constitution.

This right is not based on whether or not people agree with the ideas being expressed.

We must remember that as citizens of the United States, we are a free people, it is our right to read freely.