

Banned Books Week is an annual event celebrating the freedom to read, the importance of the First Amendment and the danger that exists when restraints are imposed on the availability of information in a free society.

In honor of the 30th Banned Books Week observance, these nationally known authors agreed to talk about the impact of censorship on their lives.

The featured authors include Beth Hammett, Jane Yolen, Lesléa Newman, David Harrison, Sandy Asher, Jan Cheripko and Patricia Hermes.



Beth Hammett

She teaches developmental writing at College of the Mainland, Texas City, Texas, does national presentations on educational topics and is a professional author for several education companies. Her recent book is “Natalie, Diary of a Senior Year.”

www.bethhammett.com

What banned book have you read and how did it affect you?

“Go Ask Alice,” which portrayed the pressures peers place on one another. It made me realize that there were “frenemies.” In addition, it portrayed real life and real problems teens encountered. I read as many banned books as possible, but, living in a rural area of Oklahoma, the majority of banned books were not available for me to check out at the library. Therefore, I purchased them with my babysitting money at a city bookstore fifty miles away. Banned books saved my life! They are like today’s reality shows where characters wrestle with everyday problems and solutions. Banned books answered many of life’s questions for me, and they helped me work through my own problems.”

Have any of your books been challenged or banned?

“Some teachers and parents opposed teaching and reading my YAL novel, “Natalie: Diary of a Senior Year,” because of the subject matter. However, an “estimated five million students have been sexually assaulted by teachers” (<http://www.wnd.com/?pageId=39748#ixzz1SoljnepX>). This proves there is a need for education about the topic. I’m very aware that the book is not for younger students, and I wrote it with that thought in mind. However, I wanted the novel to “push boundaries” while addressing the problems of adult/teen relationships. I knew there would be opposition, yet I wanted to capture the emotions of the students who I interviewed. As a writer, I felt an obligation to tell the truth about such relationships, and I hope that is what readers took away from the book.”

Has the concern of censorship/banning ever discouraged you from writing about a particular topic?

“When I first started the novel, I was informed not to make the antagonist a teacher, as I wanted to do, because of backlash from my peers and the education community. I changed the character to a doctor, but I wish I had addressed the topic head on and kept the antagonist as a teacher. I succumbed to peer pressure! Would I have the same reaction today? No, I would fight to keep the antagonist a teacher because of the statistics and number of students affected by the problem. Tougher guidelines in school districts and stricter laws against such relationships need to be put into place.”

What is your greatest concern about efforts to remove books from classrooms and libraries?

“Banned books ban freedom of speech. I understand parents’ points of views in protecting children from inappropriate materials, and I respect their decisions. Age appropriateness is key to introducing banned books ... Real life is not pretty, so discussing issues that banned books address helps students to make informed decisions when confronted with similar incidents.”





Jane Yolen

She has written more than 300 books, won numerous awards and received six honorary doctorates in literature. Her books include “My Father Knows the Name of Things,” “The Scarecrow’s Dance,” and “How Do Dinosaurs Say I Love You?” Her newest books include “Snow in Summer” and “The Last Dragon.” www.janeyolen.com

“I have had some of my books banned or challenged by schools – “Dragons Blood,” “Devil’s Arithmetic,” “Armageddon Summer,” “Dove Isabeau,” “No Bath Tonight” among others, with reasons varying from the “satanic” (the devil implied was Hitler!!!), magic, witches, and reading tea leaves. And my Holocaust novel “Briar Rose” was taken from the Kansas City Library and burned on the steps of the Board of Education by the Fred Phelps group (along with Magic Johnson’s memoir and a book about important gay men and women in history) because one character was gay and the book’s center has a section on the Pink Triangle Camps which the smart Phelps folks seemed to think meant they were summer camps instead of death camps.

“It all makes me tired, tired and irritated by irrationality badly disguised as caring, and stupidity trying to dress in rational clothing and failing miserably. But it will never stop me reading those books that rise to the numinous and challenge my comfortable existence. And it will never make me stop writing either.



Lesléa Newman

She is the author of 60 books including “A Letter to Harvey Milk,” “Nobody’s Mother,” “The Boy Who Cried Fabulous,” and “Heather Has Two Mommies.” She has received many literary awards including poetry fellowships, children’s fiction awards and many others. www.lesleakids.com

What banned book had an impact on you?

“I’m sure that “The Diary of Anne Frank” has been banned somewhere for the passages about Anne’s sexuality, and probably because of the subject matter in general (the Holocaust). This book had a profound effect on me as a young girl. It made me think about what it meant to be a Jew, and it also made me think about being a writer and the power of the written word.”

Have any of your books been challenged or banned?

“My book, “Heather Has Two Mommies” has faced many challenges, in many communities, including New York City and Wichita Falls, Texas. In New York, the book was part of a multicultural curriculum (but it was taken off the curriculum). In Texas, the book was put in a special “adults only” section for a while, but that was found “unconstitutional”. While these events are frustrating (and a bit shocking) they don’t affect my writing. If anything, they make me more determined to tell the truth.”

What is your greatest concern about efforts to remove books from classrooms and libraries?

“My concern is about who makes these decisions. Who has the right to tell someone else what they can or cannot read? Freedom of expression is an absolute necessity.”



David Harrison

The Springfield, Mo., writer has had more than 80 books published, and has received awards for poetry, fiction and nonfiction. His titles include books about teaching poetry and writing stories. His titles include “Bugs, Poems About Creeping Things,” “Pirates,” and “When Cows Come Home.” He has also been a featured speaker or presenter at 80 state, regional and national conferences in 27 states. www.davidlharrison.com

What banned book had an impact on you?

“I just looked at a list of the most commonly banned books in the United States. It reads like a bibliography

of dozens of my favorite books: “Nineteen Eighty-four,” “Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,” “The Adventures of Tom Sawyer,” “Beloved,” “The Bluest Eye,” “The Call of the Wild,” “The Catcher in the Rye,” “Catch-22,” “Slaughterhouse-Five,” “The Color Purple” ... The list goes on and it includes one stellar author or poet after another. No one book has changed my life ... but collectively the literature that various individuals and groups around the country would forbid me to read would surely leave my life poorer, my emotional landscape narrower, my world view more ignorant and more like that of those who set themselves up as ultimate judges of what is good and not good to read.”

What is your greatest concern about efforts to remove books from classrooms and libraries?

“I may be wrong but I think that most people and organizations that fight to have a book banned do so because they believe that their religion would not approve of the targeted book or writer. I realize that some parents become involved on their own when they object to the subject and/or language in a given book and don’t want their child to read it. I think there are some pretty stupid books out there, and there are many of which I personally disapprove, but I don’t have the right to have such books pulled from public view. When I was a parent of young children, I didn’t hold them on my lap and read “Lolita” or “Tropic of Cancer.” If other parents chose to read them to their children, I would not have approved but I could hardly tell them they hadn’t the right to. It would never occur to me to head for a public or school library to demand the removal of literature that I found too raw or distasteful to read myself. To the extent that book banning projects are driven by religion, I am opposed to having anyone press their own brand of religion on me. Book banning and burning is an old custom in many societies but I see no place for it in a democracy.”



Sandra Asher

She has written more than 25 books for young readers, including picture books such as “Too Many Frogs,” and “Here Comes Gosling.” She has also edited five anthologies, and as Sandra Fenichel Asher has written more than 36 plays for young audiences including “A Woman Called Truth” and “Somebody Catch My Homework.” <http://usawrites4kids.drury.edu/authors/asher>

What banned book had an impact on you?

“I can’t imagine my adolescence without “Catcher in the Rye” and anything else by J.D. Salinger I could get my hands on. My generation could scarcely get through a conversation about anything of importance to us without referencing Holden Caulfield. We “war babies” were taught to obey, believe, and conform, but Holden inspired us to question everything, especially authority. I suppose in a way he was our Harry Potter, on a more recognizable battleground – and, of course, Harry’s faced censorship as well.”

Have any of your books been challenged or banned?

“Ironically, I wasn’t lucky enough to have a rabble-rousing challenge or banning that would have brought attention to my books. Instead, they suffered from a quiet – and probably far more pervasive – sort of censorship. I was told by a prominent children’s literature educator that he couldn’t nominate “Summer Begins” for the Mark Twain Award because it contained words like menopause, abortion, and vagina. Just the words, mind you. Nothing graphic going on. More than once I arrived at school visits where my books were being sold and found “Things Are Seldom What They Seem” left in cartons under the table. Central to the plot is a teacher who molests his students. Again, nothing graphic, but the importance of telling someone about such behavior is stressed. Should I threaten to walk out if the books remained hidden? No, I felt I couldn’t disappoint the young people who were waiting for my visit. But perhaps I should have raised a fuss. The book went out of print while it was still on the nomination lists for two state awards. I also recall visiting a school where the librarian confided before my first presentation that she’d taken some of my books off the shelves. ‘Has there been a problem with them?’ I asked. ‘No,’ she said, ‘but a parent might object.’

“It’s important to draw attention to the big censorship cases, but know far more books – and the important ideas they may contain – suffer this kind of censorship without making the news.”

What is your greatest concern about efforts to remove books from classrooms and libraries?

“Some years ago, a professional theater in Missouri toured my play “A Woman Called Truth,” about the abolitionist/women’s right advocate Sojourner Truth. The next year, they offered a play about Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr., called “The Meeting.” One school district turned them down with the explanation that ‘ ... the play you brought last year gave our black students ideas.’

“Ideas. Ways of looking at ourselves and the world. Ways of thinking about ourselves and the world. Shouldn’t we have available to us as many different ways as possible? Shouldn’t we be free to pick and choose? As corporations bought up independent publishing houses and put independent bookstores out of business, someone (I wish I could remember who) pointed out that our access to ideas was being systematically limited – and would we be as uncomplaining if our access to styles of jeans were similarly reduced?”



Jan Cheripko

He is a publicity and promotions specialist for Boyds Mills Press, and an author. His most recent novel, “Imitate the Tiger,” breaks the usual stereotypes of sports plots and characterization. He also teaches English at the Family School, a private school for at-risk teenagers near Hancock, N. Y. He speaks to students, educators, and parents throughout the country about writing, literature, heroes, and at-risk students. www.boydsmillspress.com/contributors/author/cheripko-jan

He expressed his views in this essay.

“Who Are the Censors?”

“We live in the world of this or that. We make subjective choices all the time. And so it is with art of any kind – music, movies, literature.

“Most of us have some breaking point of discomfort when it comes to any form of communication. Child pornography? Glorification of violent rape? Denial of the Holocaust? Should books be written about these subjects? Should they be in public libraries? In schools? Who makes the determination?

“It’s easy to identify those who are vocal and obvious in their objections. Whether we align more with religious zealots and the conservative right objecting to graphic sexual scenes on this spectrum of choosing, or we side with the adamant atheists and liberal left objecting to an overtly Christian doctrine, if we’re honest, we have to conclude that some material we find so objectionable as to wish it had never been published. Once published, however, in a democratic nation, at least, we have a right to protest its worth and merit.

“But what books never see the light of day because of publishers, or never get put on a library shelf because of librarians, or die an untimely death because of a review?

“Let’s face it, publishers are interested in the bottom line, not all librarians have an unlimited budget, and reviewers – talk about a subtle form of censorship.

“Each of us censors, that is we individually “remove or suppress that which we feel is morally objectionable.” Those who attempt to do it publicly are far less threatening to me than those who do it surreptitiously while pretending they are not.

“Self Selecting

“Recently, I was at a book festival and a grandmother and grandson stopped to buy one of my YA novels. I don’t sell that many at book festivals, so I was thrilled. But the boy seemed young to be buying one of my novels which deal with more mature ideas. I explained to the grandmother that the books are usually for seventh graders and up (not a criteria that I put on them, but that reviewers have set). She said that the boy was in fifth grade and was an advanced reader. The novel they picked dealt with a love story involving a young woman who was a recovering cocaine addict, involved violence, used the F word on more than one occasion, and was, in my mind, for an older reader. Despite my warnings, she bought it for the boy anyway. I have a new approach – I’m going to tell people they can’t buy my books.

“An author near me said that children “self-select.” What an idea! It’s not the first time I’ve heard the term. So when parents go into a supermarket to shop, their three-year-olds should self-select? Extreme analogy? Perhaps. But the reality is that regardless of the intellect of a fifth grader he or she doesn’t have the experience or the physiological brain development or the emotional or psychic maturity to access and assess some subjects. Shouldn’t someone censor? Clearly his grandmother thought not.

“I teach at a school for at-risk teens. Been doing it for many years, and it is clear to me that most of the students have had exposure to experiences of reality for which they are not prepared. On the one hand, they appear to be well acquainted with sex, violence, drugs, alcohol, cutting, purging, lying, and other destructive behavior. Yet, on the other hand, they know little about boundaries, honesty, trust, moral judgment, and love. They already know the former. I’m interested in giving them art that will support the latter. Censorship? Yes.

“They would self-select those images, stories, characters, and emotional thrills that would support that with which they are comfortable. They need other experiences which will move them out of their comfort zone and into something that could activate in them a higher aspect of themselves and move them from self-centeredness into concern for others in their world. They will not self-select that which challenges their beliefs. As a responsible adult in their world, I offer guidance in the selection process. Some would call that censorship.”



Patricia Hermes

She has written almost 50 books for readers from early middle grades through young adult, as well as two nonfiction books for adults. Her books have won many awards and recognitions: American Library Association Best Book, Smithsonian Notable Book, C.S. Lewis Honor Book, Ira Children’s Choice, as well as many state awards, four of them for the novel “You Shouldn’t Have to Say Goodbye.” www.patriciahermes.com

Have you ever had a book challenged or banned?

“Yes, I have had books banned, and have had speaking engagements withdrawn because of what was PERCEIVED as bad language and bad behavior. Example, in my book “Kevin Corbett Eats Flies,” the protagonist, Kevin, is looking for a way to keep his dad from pulling up roots and moving yet again. Kevin hatches a plot with his friend, Bailey. Kevin’s dad is widowed. The teacher, Miss Holt, is single, and Kevin thinks if Dad met teacher and fell in love with her, he wouldn’t want to move away.

“Bailey reacts with horror. ‘But then Miss Holt would be your mother!’

“Nah,’ Kevin replies. ‘They don’t have to marry. Just fall in love.’

“Well, that is Pat Hermes speaking from her life experience. If one loves someone else, one wants to be near the loved one.

“I was taken to task for promoting living together without marriage. That thought was nowhere in that brief passage. Someone else’s (dirty) mind put it there.

“What concerns me is that people don’t care about the important issues in a book — just trivial things as occasional bad language. In the Kevin book, the kids lie, they forge Dad’s signature, they climb up on rooftops from which they could fall and kill themselves. No one bothers with any of that. Just an occasional bad word or implied thought is enough to ban a book.

“My book, “A Solitary Secret,” is a story about incest. I will be the first to admit that it’s a difficult story to read. However, there are no graphic scenes and the story is told in diary form. It was cited as one of the American Library Association Best Books of the Year, but I challenge you to find it in any school library. Yet, as we are becoming aware — at last! — this happens, not only to young girls, but boys, also. These kids need to know that they are not alone, that they can get help. They need to know that others have gone through this and survived. (Think about the Irish orphanages and the church scandals involving priests and young boys.)

“Well, the whole idea of banning books is just so repugnant. Can we learn nothing from history? The burning of books in Nazi Germany before the war — that was one of the first attempts to stamp out “thinking,” to refuse to consider contrary views. Look where it led. And if we allow the banning of thoughts in books, then whose views are imposed on us? The views of those few intolerant minds who would stamp out free speech.”