

Bannings and Burnings in History

Some of the most controversial books in history are now regarded as classics. The Bible and works by Shakespeare are among those that have been banned over the past two thousand years. Here is a selective timeline of book bannings, burnings, and other censorship activities.

2019: In the United States, people demanded the removal of J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter series from public libraries. Complainants objected to depictions of magic, witchcraft, and “actual curses and spells” in the text. They also disliked the characters’ use of “nefarious means” to achieve their goals, reported the American Library Association (ALA). The fantasy novels—there are seven in all—chronicle the lives of students at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. The ALA also reported that Harry Potter books were the most frequently challenged in U.S. public libraries from 2000 to 2009.

2019: In the United States, people demanded the removal of Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* from public library shelves. Complainants objected to profanity and “vulgarity and sexual overtones” in the text, reported the American Library Association (ALA). The novel, which was published in 1985, depicts a future Christian theocracy in the southern half of North America. The ALA also reported that Atwood’s novel was the 88th most frequently challenged book from 2000 to 2009 and the 37th most frequently challenged book from 1990 to 1999 in U.S. public libraries.

2016: In northern Russia, the Vorkuta Mining and Economics College burned 53 books, including textbooks about logic, French surrealism, and criminology. A spokesperson said they were full of ideas “alien to Russian ideology.” A Western foundation created by George Soros, the billionaire financier and philanthropist, had provided the money to publish the books. The college also seized another 427 books for shredding.

2013: In Pakistan, spokesmen for organizations that represent the nation’s private schools announced bans on *I Am Malala: The Girl Who Stood Up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban*. In November, Adeb Javedani, president of the All Pakistan Private Schools Management Association, said that a ban was in force in the libraries of 40,000 affiliated schools. Kashif Mirza, chairman of the All Pakistan Private Schools Federation, said a ban was in force in its affiliated schools. Senior education officials said the book—which was co-authored by Malala Yousafzai and Christina Lamb—showed insufficient respect for Islam.

2013: Islamist insurgents in the African nation of Mali set fire to a library in Timbuktu and incinerated 4,000 ancient manuscripts. The damage would have been worse, but a quick-thinking librarian had organized the removal of hundreds of thousands of manuscripts to safety.

2012: In the United States, people demanded the removal of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* from public library shelves. Complainants claimed the novel was sexually explicit, and they objected to depictions of violence and the novel’s religious viewpoint, reported the American Library Association (ALA). The novel, which was published in 1987, explores the destructive legacy of

slavery in 19th-century America. The ALA also reported that Morrison's novel was the 26th most frequently challenged book from 2000 to 2009 and the 45th most frequently challenged book from 1990 to 1999 in U.S. public libraries.

2012: In May, Irshad Manji—a reform-minded Muslim—toured Malaysia to promote her book *Allah, Liberty and Love*. In Kuala Lumpur, government officials raided bookstores to confiscate copies of the book. Then, after receiving a critical report from the Department of Islamic Development, Malaysia's Ministry of Home Affairs banned the book. Manji protested the ban, and her Malaysian publisher challenged the ban in court.

2011: In June, Canadian author Lawrence Hill received an email from a man in the Netherlands who said that he and others planned to burn Hill's novel *The Book of Negroes* because they objected to the N-word in the title. On June 22, they burned copies of the book's cover in Amsterdam. Two years later, Hill published another work: *Dear Sir, I Intend to Burn Your Book: An Anatomy of a Book Burning*.

2010: The U.S. Department of Defense bought and destroyed the entire first printing—9,500 copies—of Lt. Col. Anthony Shaffer's *Operation Dark Heart*. The book focused on the war in Afghanistan. Even though Shaffer had worked closely with military officials when he was writing the manuscript, some feared that the book would reveal military secrets. Shaffer's publisher, St. Martin's Press, did release a second printing, but it featured cuts and changes that the U.S. Department of Defense had ordered.

2010: In India, nationalist students burned copies of *Such a Long Journey*, Rohinton Mistry's acclaimed novel, at the gates of the University of Mumbai. The students also pressed the university to stop teaching the book. Aditya Thackeray, the students' leader, said he objected to the "obscene and vulgar language" in the novel and to negative references to India's nationalist politicians, including his grandfather. The university quickly dropped the novel from the syllabus.

2001: The U.S.A. PATRIOT Act, passed by the American Congress in response to terrorist attacks on New York and Washington on September 11, gave the FBI power to collect information about the library borrowings of any U.S. citizen. The act also empowered the federal agency to gain access to library patrons' log-ons to Internet Web sites—and protected the FBI from disclosing the identities of individuals being investigated.

1998: American publishers expressed outrage over news that a Washington bookstore was ordered to turn over records of Monica Lewinsky's book purchases to independent counsel Kenneth Starr. Lewinsky is the former White House intern with whom President Clinton had what he later termed an "inappropriate relationship." The Association of American Publishers declared: "I don't think the American people could find anything more alien to our way of life or repugnant to the Bill of Rights than government intrusion into what we think and what we read. I would suggest Mr. Starr give some thought to his own reading list. Maybe it's time for him to re-read the First Amendment."

1998: In Kenya, the government banned 30 books and publications for “sedition and immorality,” including *The Quotations of Chairman Mao* and Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*.

1997: In Ireland, a government censorship board banned at least 24 books and 90 periodicals.

1992: In August, during the Bosnian war, Serbian troops shelled the National Library in Sarajevo. They destroyed between 1.5 million and 3 million volumes. It was one of the worst book burnings in modern history. Soldiers shot at anyone who tried to save the books.

1988: Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*, which some critics said blasphemed Islam, was burned repeatedly by Muslims in the United Kingdom. In October, India—a majority Hindu nation which has a minority Muslim population—became the first of several countries in the world to ban the novel. (In 2012, Indian writers called for the ban’s repeal.) The Republic of South Africa also banned the novel in 1988, although the government lifted this ban in 2002.

1987: After retiring from 20 years’ service with Britain’s MI5 counterintelligence agency, Peter Wright moved to Australia and wrote his autobiography, entitled *Spycatcher*, in which he accused British security services of trying to topple Harold Wilson’s 1974–76 Labour government. The book, a best-seller, was banned in Britain, and the British government waged a lengthy and expensive legal battle to prevent its publication in Australia. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher said that if Wright ever returned to Britain, he would be prosecuted for breaching the country’s Official Secrets Act. But when Wright died in 1995, he got the last laugh, since his ashes were scattered over the waters of the Blackwater Sailing Club in southern England.

1987: *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou was removed from the required reading list for Wake County, North Carolina, high school students because of a scene in which the author, at the age of seven and a half, is raped.

1983: Members of the Alabama State Textbook Committee called for the rejection of *The Diary of Anne Frank* because it was “a real downer.” It was also challenged for offensive references to sexuality.

1980s: During its examination of school learning materials, the London County Council in England banned the use of Beatrix Potter’s children’s classics *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* and *Benjamin Bunny* from all London schools. The reason: the stories portrayed only “middle-class rabbits.”

1977: Maurice Sendak’s picture book *In the Night Kitchen* was removed from the Norridge, Illinois, school library because of “nudity to no purpose.” The book was expurgated elsewhere when shorts were drawn on the nude boy.

1977: *Decent Interval*, a memoir written by a former CIA employee, criticized the CIA, Henry Kissinger, and U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. Author Frank Snepp succeeded in getting his book published before the CIA knew about it, but the government filed a lawsuit against him,

even though no classified information appeared in the book. In 1980, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled against Snepp; the government seized all profits from the book and imposed a lifelong gag order on the author. Snepp was required to submit everything he might write—fiction, screenplays, non-fiction, poetry—to the CIA for review. The CIA won the right to cut any classified or classifiable information within 30 days of receipt of Snepp’s work.

1974: *The CIA and the Cult of Intelligence* revealed some of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency’s dirty tricks and failures overseas and in the United States. The authors (Victor Marchetti, a former senior analyst for the CIA, and John D. Marks, a former U.S. State Department official) were told by a U.S. court to submit their manuscript to the CIA before the book was published. The CIA demanded the removal of 339 passages from the text, but eventually the publisher won the right to retain 171 of those in the first edition of the book. By 1980, the publisher had won the legal right to publish 25 more passages, but the most recent edition (1989) still indicated numerous censored passages.

1973: The school board in Drake, North Dakota, ordered the burning of 32 copies of Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five* and 60 copies of James Dickey’s *Deliverance* for, respectively, the use of profanity and references to homosexuality.

1970: *White Niggers of America*, a political tract about Quebec politics and society, was written by Pierre Vallières while he was in jail. The book was confiscated when the writer was accused of sedition, and an edition published in France was not allowed into Canada. A U.S. edition was published in English in 1971.

1960: D.H. Lawrence’s novel *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* was the subject of a trial in England, in which Penguin Books was prosecuted for publishing an obscene book. During the proceedings, the prosecutor asked: “Is it a book you would wish your wife or servant to read?” Penguin won the case, and the book was allowed to be sold in England. A year earlier, the U.S. Post Office had declared the novel obscene and non-mailable. But a federal judge overturned the Post Office’s decision and questioned the right of the postmaster general to decide what was or was not obscene.

1959: After protests by the White Citizens’ Council, *The Rabbits’ Wedding*, a picture book for children, was put on the reserved shelf in Alabama public libraries because it was thought to promote racial integration.

1954: Mickey Mouse comics were banned in East Berlin because Mickey was said to be an “anti-Red rebel.”

1953: The Irish government banned Anatole France’s *A Mummer’s Tale* (for “immorality”), Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* and *Across the River and Into the Trees* (for “immorality”), all the works of John Steinbeck (for “subversion” and “immorality”), all the works of Emile Zola (for “immorality”), and most works by William Faulkner (for “immorality”).

1937: The Quebec government passed An Act Respecting Communistic Propaganda, popularly known as the Padlock Act. The statute empowered the attorney general to close, for up to one

year, any building that was used to disseminate “communism or bolshevism.” (These two terms were undefined.) In addition, the act empowered the attorney general to confiscate and destroy any publication propagating communism or bolshevism. Anyone caught publishing, printing, or distributing such literature faced imprisonment for up to one year without appeal. In 1957, the Supreme Court of Canada struck down the Padlock Act in a case called *Switzman vs. Elbling*. The court said that the act made the propagation of communism a crime; however, the court’s reason for striking down the law had less to do with the evils of censorship than with the division of powers between federal and provincial governments. The court declared that the power to pass criminal law belonged exclusively to Ottawa, so Quebec’s Padlock Act was *ultra vires* and unconstitutional. Only two justices raised the issue of censorship in this case.

1933: A series of massive bonfires in Nazi Germany burned thousands of books written by Jews, communists, and others. Included were the works of John Dos Passos, Albert Einstein, Sigmund Freud, Ernest Hemingway, Helen Keller, Lenin, Jack London, Thomas Mann, Karl Marx, Erich Maria Remarque, Upton Sinclair, Stalin, and Leon Trotsky.

1932: In a letter to an American publisher, James Joyce said that “some very kind person” bought the entire first edition of *Dubliners* and had it burnt.

1931: *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll was banned by the governor of Hunan province in China because, he said, animals should not use human language and it was disastrous to put animals and humans on the same level.

1929–62: Novels by Ernest Hemingway were banned in various parts of the world such as Italy, Ireland, and Germany (where they were burned by the Nazis). In California in 1960, *The Sun Also Rises* was banned from schools in San Jose and all of Hemingway’s works were removed from Riverside school libraries. In 1962, a group called Texans for America opposed textbooks that referred students to books by the Nobel Prize-winning author.

1929: *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was banned in the Soviet Union because of “occultism.”

1929: Jack London’s popular novel *Call of the Wild* was banned in Italy and Yugoslavia. In 1932, copies of this and other books by London were burned by the Nazis in Germany.

1927: A translation of *The Arabian Nights* by the French scholar Mardrus was held up by U.S. Customs. Four years later another translation, by Sir Richard Burton, was allowed into the country, but the ban on the Mardrus version was maintained.

1885: A year after the publication of Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*, the library of Concord, Massachusetts, decided to exclude the book from its collection. The committee making the decision said the book was “rough, coarse and inelegant, dealing with a series of experiences not elevating, the whole book being more suited to the slums than to intelligent, respectable people.” By 1907, it was said that Twain’s novel had been thrown out of some library somewhere every year, mostly because its hero was said to present a bad example for impressionable young readers.

1881: Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (published in 1833) was threatened with banning by Boston's district attorney unless the book was expurgated. The public uproar brought such sales of his books that Whitman was able to buy a house with the proceeds.

1864–1959: Victor Hugo's novel *Les Misérables* was placed on the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*.

1859: George Eliot's novel *Adam Bede* was attacked as the “vile outpourings of a lewd woman's mind,” and the book was withdrawn from circulation libraries in Britain.

1859: Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* was published, outlining the theory of evolution. The book was banned from the library of Trinity College, Cambridge, where Darwin had been a student. In 1925, Tennessee banned the teaching of the theory of evolution in schools; the law remained in force until 1967. The *Origin of Species* was banned in Yugoslavia in 1935 and in Greece in 1937.

1843: The English Parliament updated an act that required all plays to be performed in England to be submitted for approval to the Lord Chamberlain. Despite objections by illustrious figures such as George Bernard Shaw (in 1909), this power remained with the Lord Chamberlain until 1968.

1807: Dr. Thomas Bowdler quietly brought out the first of his revised editions of Shakespeare's plays. The preface claimed that he had removed from Shakespeare “everything that can raise a blush on the cheek of modesty”—which amounted to about 10 per cent of the playwright's text. One hundred and fifty years later, it was discovered that the real excision had been done by Dr. Bowdler's sister, Henrietta Maria. The word “bowdlerize” became part of the English language.

1807: In Paris, French police entered the room in the asylum where the Marquis de Sade was imprisoned and seized several of his manuscripts, including the manuscript of his latest novel, *The Days at Florbelle*. The police claimed that the notorious libertine's novel was blasphemous and obscene, and Sade never saw it again. After Sade died in 1814, his younger son, anxious to restore the Sade family's name, asked the Ministry of Justice to burn *The Days at Florbelle* and any other manuscript like it. The authorities obliged. But one police officer saved one notebook: it outlined the story and briefly described a few characters and incidents.

1788: Shakespeare's *King Lear* was banned from the stage until 1820—in deference to the insanity of the reigning monarch, King George III.

1744: *Sorrows of Young Werther* by the famed German author Goethe was published in this year and soon became popular throughout Europe. The book was a short novel, in diary form, in which a young man writes of his sufferings from a failed love affair. The final chapter of the book drops the diary form and graphically depicts Werther's suicide. Because a number of copycat suicides followed the publication of the book, the Lutheran church condemned the novel as immoral; then governments in Italy, Denmark, and Germany banned the book. Two hundred

years later an American sociologist, David Phillips, wrote about the effect of reporting suicides in *The Werther Effect*.

1720: *Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe was placed on the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* by the Spanish Catholic Church.

1616–42: Galileo’s theories about the solar system and his support of the discoveries of Copernicus were condemned by the Catholic Church. Under threat of torture, and sentenced to jail at the age of 70, the great scientist was forced to renounce what he knew to be true. On his death, his widow agreed to destroy some of his manuscripts.

1624: Martin Luther’s German translation of the Bible was burnt in Germany by order of the Pope.

1614: Sir Walter Raleigh’s book *The History of the World* was banned by King James I of England for “being too saucy in censuring princes.”

1597: The original version of Shakespeare’s *Richard II* contained a scene in which the king was deposed from his throne. Queen Elizabeth I was so angry that she ordered the scene removed from all copies of the play.

1559: For hundreds of years, the Roman Catholic Church listed books that were prohibited to its members; but in this year, Pope Paul IV established the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*. For more than 400 years this was the definitive list of books that Roman Catholics were told not to read. It was one of the most powerful censorship tools in the world.

1524–26: Thousands of copies of William Tyndale’s English translation of the New Testament were printed in Germany and smuggled into England, where they were publicly burned in 1526 on the orders of London’s Roman Catholic bishop. Church authorities in England insisted that the Bible would be available only in Latin and that only they would be able to read and interpret it. In 1536, as a result of a plot masterminded by the English, Tyndale was arrested in Belgium, tried for heresy, and strangled and burned at the stake near Brussels. A few of his translations were burned with him. Today, only three original copies of Tyndale’s New Testament survive.

1497–98: Savonarola, a Florentine religious fanatic with a large following, was one of the most notorious and powerful of all censors. In these years, he instigated great “bonfires of the vanities” which destroyed books and paintings by some of the greatest artists of Florence. He persuaded the artists themselves to bring their works—including drawings of nudes—to the bonfires. Some poets decided they should no longer write in verse because they were persuaded that their lines were wicked and impure. Popular songs were denounced, and some were turned into hymns with new pious lyrics. Ironically, in May of 1498 another great bonfire was lit—this time under Savonarola who hung from a cross. With him were burned all his writings, sermons, essays, and pamphlets.

640: According to legend, the caliph Omar burned all 200,000 volumes in the library at Alexandria in Egypt. In doing so, he said: “If these writings of the Greeks agree with the Book of

God they are useless and need not be preserved; if they disagree, they are pernicious and ought to be destroyed.” In burning the books, the caliph provided six months’ fuel to warm the city’s baths.

35: The Roman emperor Caligula opposed the reading of *The Odyssey* by Homer, written more than 300 years before. He thought the epic poem was dangerous because it expressed Greek ideas of freedom.

A.D. 8: The Roman poet Ovid was banished from Rome for writing *Ars Amatoria* (*The Art of Love*). He died in exile in Greece eight years later. All Ovid’s works were burned by Savonarola in Florence in 1497, and an English translation of *Ars Amatoria* was banned by U.S. Customs in 1928.

259–210 B.C.: The Chinese emperor Shih Huang Ti is said to have buried alive 460 Confucian scholars to control the writing of history in his time. In 212 B.C., he burned all the books in his kingdom, retaining only a single copy of each for the Royal Library—and those were destroyed before his death. With all previous historical records destroyed, he thought history could be said to begin with him.