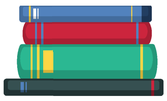
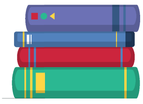


41 Challenged Publications

Canadians and others have long tried to remove books and magazines that they deem offensive, or inappropriate for certain audiences, from public libraries and schools. Sometimes they have succeeded and sometimes they have failed. Here are 41 examples from recent decades.



A Jest of God
Margaret Laurence
McClelland and Stewart, 1966

In **1978**, a school trustee in Etobicoke, Ont., tried but failed to remove this novel from high school English classes. *A Jest of God* – which won the Governor General's Literary Award for fiction in 1966 – depicts the unhappy life of an elementary schoolteacher in small-town Manitoba. The trustee objected to the portrayal of teachers "who had sexual intercourse time and time again, out of wedlock." He said the novel would diminish the authority of teachers in students' eyes.

The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz
Mordecai Richler
McClelland and Stewart, 1969

In **1990**, parents demanded the removal of this novel from high school reading lists in Essex County, Ont. They objected to "vulgarity, sexual expressions and sexual innuendoes" in the text. The novel, which is set chiefly in Montréal in the 1940s, tells the story of a young Jewish man who strives for material success. Noted Canadian authors – including June Callwood and Al Purdy – defended the book. But the Essex County Board of Education advised teachers and principals to avoid using novels in class that "might provoke undue controversy."

Asha's Mums
Rosamund Elwin;
Michele Paulse
Women's Press, 1990

In **1997**, school trustees in Surrey, B.C., banned the use in the elementary grades of children's storybooks that depict same-sex parents. One of the banned titles was *Asha's Mums*. A teacher, James Chamberlain, challenged the ban in court. In **2002**, the Supreme Court of Canada declared that B.C.'s School Act required secular and non-discriminatory education. A ban on books about same-sex parents could not be legally justified.

Barometer Rising
Hugh MacLennan
Collins, 1941

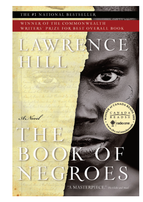
At a convention in **1960**, members of the Manitoba School Trustees Association voted unanimously to ask Manitoba's department of education to remove this novel from the high school curriculum. *Barometer Rising* is a story of family conflict and romance set in Halifax during the First World War. "What the trustees objected to is the vulgarity and the language used in it," said Frank Kennedy, a trustee from Norwood, Man. Most trustees had not read the novel.

The bellybuttons
Maryse Dubuc,
Marc Delafontaine, Illustrator
Cinebook

In **2009**, a school for troubled teens in Laval, Que., pulled this comic book series off its library shelves. School authorities feared that the young, thin female characters in the books might encourage anorexia among female students. The books returned to the library shelves after the vulnerable girls had graduated.

Betty: The Helen Betty Osborne Story
David Roberston,
Scott B Henderson, Illustrator
HighWater Press, 2015

In **2018**, Robertson learned that Alberta Education had put *Betty* on a list of books that were "not recommended" for use in classrooms. The graphic novel, which is intended for students in Grades 9–12, tells the true story of a Cree woman who was kidnapped and murdered in The Pas, Man., in **1971**. A ministry spokesperson said that "graphic representation of sensitive content" must be taught in "age-appropriate ways." But Robertson said putting books on a list that discourages teachers from using them is censorship.



The Book of Negroes
Lawrence Hill
Harper Collins, 2007

In **2011**, Canadian author Hill received an email from a Roy Groenberg in the Netherlands who said that he and others planned to publicly burn Hill's novel because they objected to the N-word in the title. The novel, which won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize in 2008, tells a story about slavery in the 18th century. On June 22, 2011, Groenberg and his colleagues burned photocopies of the Dutch edition's cover in Amsterdam.

Canadian Poetry: The Modern Era
John Newlove, Editor
McClelland and Stewart, 1977

In **1987**, Parents for a Quality Curriculum objected to the use of this anthology – and five other works of contemporary Canadian fiction – in high schools in Victoria County, Ont. The parents objected to "anti-establishment attitudes" in the poems, but the school board voted to keep *Canadian Poetry* on its reading list.

The Diviners
Margaret Laurence
Knopf, 1974

In **1976**, Rev. Sam Buick and school board trustee Jim Telford of Peterborough, Ont., led an effort to remove *The Diviners* from local school curricula, complaining that the novel "reeked of sordidness." Though unsuccessful in Peterborough, the movement to ban the book coalesced into the group Renaissance Canada, which successfully lobbied the Huron County School Board to remove Laurence's novel from school curricula two years later. In reaction to the censorship efforts, the Canadian Library Association, the Books and Periodicals Council, and several other organizations joined forces to form the Freedom of Expression Committee – a group committed to defending the right to read. Their activities included organizing the first Freedom to Read Week in **1984**.

The first time
Charles Montpetit, Editor
Orca Book Publishers, 1995

Between **1992** and **2002**, secondary schools in Quebec invited Montpetit to talk to students about this award-winning non-fiction anthology for teenagers. The government body that funds such visits also sent each school copies of the books to distribute to students. But on five occasions, school authorities belatedly realized that the authors in *The first time* had written about sex or sexual experiences. The schools refused to distribute the books and asked Montpetit to discuss other works.

Gender Queer
Maia Kobabe,
Pheobe Kobabe, Colourist
Oni Press, 2020

This book has been challenged numerous times by both individuals and groups. In **2023**, the Prairie Rose School District in Alberta received complaints at two successive meetings claiming that the work, along with several others, constituted pornography under the Criminal Code of Canada, citing sections 151, 152, 153, 163, and 171. *Gender Queer* is also featured on the Action4Canada website as part of a campaign to rid schools of works dealing with sexuality by labelling them pornography.

Go Ask Alice
Anonymous
Prentice-Hall, 1971

In **1978**, school boards in Richmond and Langley, B.C., removed this book from their high schools. *Go Ask Alice*, which reads like a diary, describes a teenage girl's experiences with narcotics and sex. In Richmond, students sent a petition to the school board to protest the ban, and the Richmond Teacher-Librarians' Association supported them. In Langley, a committee of school trustees, librarians and parents recommended keeping copies in school counsellors' offices. But these efforts failed; both bans stayed in effect.

The Golden Compass
Philip Pullman
Knopf, 1996

In **2007**, Ontario's Halton Catholic District School Board voted to ban Philip Pullman's trilogy of fantasy novels – *The Golden Compass*, *The Subtle Knife*, and *The Amber Spyglass* – from its schools. The board objected to "atheist" themes in the British author's books.

The Handmaid's Tale
Margaret Atwood
McClelland and Stewart, 1985

In **2008**, a parent in Toronto complained about the use of this dystopian novel in his son's Grade 12 English class. *The Handmaid's Tale* tells the story of Offred, a woman who lives in a future patriarchal theocracy. The parent disliked the novel's "profane language," anti-Christian overtones and themes of "violence" and "sexual degradation." In **2009**, a review panel of the Toronto District School Board recommended that the novel be kept in the curricula for Grades 11 and 12. *The Handmaid's Tale* remained on Grade 12 reading lists.

The Harry Potter Series
J.K. Rowling
Raincoast Books, 1997

In **2000**, a Christian parent in Corner Brook, Nfld., complained about the presence of these popular fantasy novels in an elementary school. The parent objected to the depiction of wizardry and magic, and the school principal ordered the books' removal. Neither the parent nor the principal had read the novels.

Hold Fast
Kevin Major
Clarke, Irwin & Co, 1978

In **1988–89**, an individual tried to get this young-adult novel removed from a high school library in Estevan, Sask. *Hold Fast* tells the tale of a troubled lad from small-town Newfoundland who challenges adult authority at almost every turn. School authorities in Estevan considered the complaint but kept the book in the library.

The Impressions Series
Jack Booth, Editor;
David Booth, Editor
Holt, Rinehart &
Winston of Canada

In **1991**, 30 angry parents entered Rosary Catholic School in Manning, Alta., detained the principal and demanded the removal of *Impressions*. The parents claimed the fairy tales and poems in this language arts series for youngsters conveyed morbid, Satanic themes. Later, the school board ordered the removal of the books.

Irreversible Damage: The Transgender Craze Seducing Our Daughters
Abigail Shrier
Regnery Publishing, 2020

The work has been challenged on several grounds. Critics have labeled it transphobic, arguing that it poses a danger to the transgender community. The book has also been criticized for alleged inaccuracies, with detractors questioning both the existence of the so-called "craze" it describes and the validity of the evidence – whether anecdotal or theoretical – used to support its claims. It is the most challenged title in the 18 years of Canadian data gathering.

The Last of the Golden Girls
Susan Swan
Fawcett, 1989

In **1989**, two women in Alberta heard the author read a passage from this novel, which describes the sexual escapades of three female friends in Ontario's cottage country, on CBC Radio. Thinking the passage obscene, the two listeners complained to the police in Edmonton. A few months later, after having listened to the tape, a detective dismissed the complaint.

Lives of Girls and Women
Alice Munro
McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1971

In **1976**, a high school principal in Peterborough, Ont., removed this novel from the Grade 13 reading list. The novel depicts the life of a girl growing up in small-town Ontario in the 1940s. The principal "'questioned its suitability' because of the explicit language and descriptions of sex scenes," reported Jeff Sallot in *The Globe and Mail*.

Ma soeur veut un zizi
Fabrice Boulanger
Les éditions de la bagnole, 2012

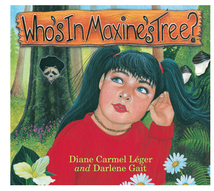
In **2013**, Québec news agency TVA Nouvelles published an article showcasing parental outrage at the content of Québecois author and illustrator Fabrice Boulanger's children's picture book on anatomy. The article contained statements from parents decrying the "explicit" illustrations and its "lack of respect for parents who try to instill good values on their children." The article prompted the book's publisher, Les Éditions de la Bagnole, to release a response defending their decision to publish the book, citing children's natural curiosity regarding anatomical differences. Libraries from Québec to Alberta have commonly reported challenges to this title since its 2012 publication.

Maclean's
1911 -

On Oct. 23, **2006**, *Maclean's* magazine excerpted Mark Steyn's bestselling book *America Alone*. The book considers the impact of Muslim immigration to Western democracies. In **2007**, the Canadian Islamic Congress (CIC) filed complaints with three Canadian human rights bodies. The CIC said Steyn's "flagrantly Islamophobic" writing exposed Muslims to hatred and contempt. The Canadian and Ontario human rights commissions dismissed the complaint without hearing it, but the B.C. Human Rights Tribunal held a hearing in **2008**. The tribunal cleared *Maclean's* of any wrongdoing.

Marie Tempête: Le secret d'Emilie
Patrick Cothias; **Pierre Wachs**
Glenat, 1997

In **2000**, feminists in Hull, Que., began campaigning to remove adult comic books and graphic novels that depict violence against women from the city's libraries. In **2001**, they persuaded the city council to ban "all visual documents … that trivialize and/or condone acts of sexual aggression or sexual violence" from public libraries. Librarians reluctantly restricted access to 180 books. Among them was *Marie Tempête: Le secret d'Emilie*, a graphic novel set in eighteenth-century France. In **2002**, a public outcry in Quebec prompted politicians to repeal the ban, and the books returned to the open library shelves.



Maxine's Tree
Diane Léger
Orca Book Publishers, 1990

In **1992**, an official of the woodworkers' trade union in B.C. asked for the removal of this children's book from elementary school libraries in Sechelt, B.C. The official said the book, which tells the story of a girl who tries to protect a tree in B.C.'s rainforest, promoted an anti-logging viewpoint. The school board rejected his request.

My Body is Growing
Dagmar Geisler;
Andrea Jones Berasaluce,
Translator
Sky Pony Press, 2020

In **2023**, this picture book on body awareness by German author and illustrator Dagmar Geisler tied for the most challenged title in Canadian libraries with five libraries reporting challenges. Though it is intended to be an "introduction to body awareness and sexual education for preschool and early elementary school students," complainants decried the book as "soft porn for kids," and one described the book as a "pedophile symbol." One affected library removed the book from the collection.

The notebook
Agota Kristof;
Alan Sheridan, Translator
N.Y. Grove Press, 1977

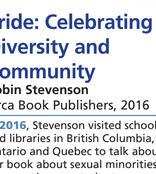
In the spring of **2003**, the father of a 16-year-old girl in St-Jérôme, Que., complained to school authorities and the news media about this novel. *Le grand cahier*, which won literary awards in Europe, describes the effects of war on two boys who live in an unnamed country. The parent described the novel as "very violent and grossly pornographic." The school quietly dropped the book from its reading list at the beginning of the 2003–04 school year.

Of Mice and Men
John Steinbeck
covici-Friede, 1937

In **1994**, in Alberta's legislature, Victor Doerksen called for the removal of profane, irreligious books from Alberta's schools. He cited Steinbeck's novel, which describes the hardships of migrant workers in California during the Great Depression, as an example. Doerksen had a petition that bore the signatures of 811 Albertans who wanted schools to withdraw books that "demean or profane the name of God and Jesus Christ."

Pink, Blue, and You!
Elise Gravel; **Mykaell Blais**
Anne Schwartz Books, 2022

In **2023**, a group of 90 parents attended a local public library board meeting in Dayton, WA, USA, demanding the removal of several children's books from the library shelves. Among them was Blais and Gravel's **2022** picture book on gender identity and stereotypes, which was specifically called out by activists for promoting "lies and false genders." In response, the National Assembly of Québec passed a motion in support of Gravel, declaring that such censorship "has no place either in art or in democracy."



Pride: Celebrating Diversity and Community
Robin Stevenson
Orca Book Publishers, 2016

In **2016**, Stevenson visited schools and libraries in British Columbia, Ontario and Quebec to talk about her book about sexual minorities. On one occasion, no students appeared at an event in a public library because a school principal had, on short notice, withdrawn permission for the teacher to take her classes there. The principal was worried about parental objections. In **2019**, while promoting a newer book – *Kid Activists: True Tales of Childhood from Champions of Change* – in the United States, Stevenson learned that an elementary school in suburban Illinois had cancelled her visit because a parent had complained about the mention of a gay person, Harvey Milk, in the book.

Roger Sudden
Thomas H. Raddall
McClelland & Stewart, 1944

In **2017**, two people challenged this historical novel, first published in 1944, in a post-secondary school library in Nova Scotia. They also challenged Raddall's other novels and the inclusion of the author's papers in an archive. The challengers said the portrayals of Indigenous people were racist and wanted to remove these works from all school libraries in Nova Scotia. While talking with the complainants, library staff acknowledged the "unfortunate portrayals" of Indigenous people but noted the historical value of Raddall's work and the value of intellectual freedom. The library retained all the novels and the author's related papers in the archive.

Sex Is a Funny Word
Cory Silverberg;
Fiona Smyth, Illustrator
Seven Stories Press, 2015

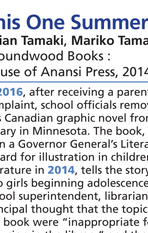
In **2023**, five libraries reported challenges to Canadian author Cory Silverberg's juvenile nonfiction book on sex and gender, tying for the year's most challenged title in Canadian libraries. Complainants describe the book as "pornography" that "promotes gender identity" and "sexualizes children and adolescents." *Sex is a Funny Word* has been a frequent target of censorship attempts since its publication in 2015, appearing on the American Library Association's Top 10 Most Challenged Books list in both **2017** and **2019**.

Stories for late night drinkers
Michel Tremblay;
Michael Bullock, Translator
Intermedia, 1977

In **2010**, a Christian parent in Laval, Que., tried to persuade a high school to ban this collection of macabre short stories. She said that she did not want her son exposed to "Satanism and pedophilia." The school rejected her demand. Tremblay is one of Quebec's best-known authors, and *Contes pour buveurs attardés* has appeared on Grade 10 reading lists in Québec for years. In the book's preface, the author says that his stories tackle homosexuality, incest and encounters with the devil, although these references are so allusive that they are almost undetectable.

Such Is My Beloved
Morley Callaghan
McClelland and Stewart, 1957

In **1972**, two Christian ministers tried to get this novel removed from a high school in Huntsville, Ont. The novel, which is set in the 1930s, tells the story of a young Roman Catholic priest who tries to persuade two women to abandon their lives as prostitutes. The ministers objected to the novel's depiction of prostitution and the use of "strong language."



This One Summer
Jillian Tamaki, **Mariko Tamaki**
Groundwood Books :
House of Anansi Press, 2014

In **2016**, after receiving a parent's complaint, school officials removed this Canadian graphic novel from a library in Minnesota. The book, which won a Governor General's Literary Award for illustration in children's literature in **2014**, tells the story of two girls beginning adolescence. The school superintendent, librarian and principal thought that the topics in the book were "inappropriate for inclusion in the library" and that the language was "inappropriate."

Three Wishes: Palestinian and Israeli Children Speak
Deborah Ellis
Douglas & McIntyre, 2004

In **2006**, the Ontario branch of the Canadian Jewish Congress (CJC) objected to the inclusion of this non-fiction book in a voluntary reading program in Grades 4–6 of Ontario's schools. In *Three Wishes*, children speak frankly about the strife around them in Palestine and Israel. Concerned about the "toxic effects" of the book on students' minds, the CJC urged school boards to withdraw *Three Wishes* from the reading program. At least five school boards restricted or denied access to the book.

Underground to Canada
Barbara Smucker
Clarke, Irwin, 1977

In **2002**, African-Canadians lobbied the Tri-County District School Board in Nova Scotia to remove Underground to Canada, John Ball's *In the Heat of the Night* and Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* from classrooms. The complainants objected to the depictions of Black people and the use of the N-word in these anti-racist novels. The school board rejected their request.

Vue Weekly
Ron Garth

In **2007**, the Edmonton Public Library received a complaint about this local news and entertainment magazine. A patron described *Vue Weekly* as "a very negative, even dark publication" and objected to the sex ads. The library retained copies in its collection.

Wallpaper

In **2001**, a patron of the Toronto Public Library complained about the June 2001 issue of this glossy style magazine. The cover features a photograph by Joachim Baldauf of three topless models – two male and one female – standing in the sea. The patron said that the female model was being used as a sex object to sell the magazine, but the library retained its copies.

The Wars
Timothy Findley
Clarke, Irwin, 1977

In **2011**, parents complained to Ontario's Bluewater District School Board about the use of this novel in Grade 12 English classes. The novel tells the story of a Canadian soldier in Europe during the First World War. One woman objected to depictions of sexual violence and prostitution. Students and others defended the novel's literary value. The school board's textbook review committee recommended that *The Wars* be kept in the secondary school curriculum, and the novel remained in classrooms.

Western Standard
JMCK Western Pub. Corp., 2004 -

In **2006**, the *Western Standard* – a magazine published in Alberta – reprinted eight of 12 Danish cartoons about Islam to illustrate a news article. In Calgary, an imam – and later the Edmonton Council of Muslim Communities – complained to Alberta's human rights commission. They said the cartoons exposed Muslims to hatred or contempt. In **2008**, the commission rejected the complaint. The magazine's publisher, Ezra Levant, estimated that he had spent $100,000 defending himself. During the dispute, the *Western Standard* ceased publication.

The Young in One Another's Arms
Jane Rule
Doubleday, 1977

In **1990**, Canadian customs officers seized this novel en route from the United States to Glad Day Bookshop in Toronto. The officers were searching for sexually obscene literature, but later released the novel to the importer. The novel, which depicts gay characters positively, is legally published and sold in Canada.

freedom to read

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ola :: ontario library association
Book and Periodical Council

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