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Banning Books Threatens Freedom of Speech

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Banning Books Threatens Freedom of Speech

UM librarian shares concerns about protecting diversity of opinion and perspective

SEPTEMBER 30, 2022 BY CLARA TURNAGE



The number of books banned from libraries and schools across the nation is on the rise, according to a new report by **PEN America**. That is why a **University of Mississippi** librarian says the conversation around censorship is as relevant as ever.

Over the last year, the number of books banned or under investigation exceeded 1,500, according to the nonprofit, which works to defend free speech. The report **found 22 instances of book bans in Mississippi**.

Among the authors targeted are Margaret Atwood, Toni Morrison, Judy Blume and John Green, who spoke at the university's 2022 Fall Convocation.



Melissa Dennis

"It's alarming to librarians because it's a threat to freedom of speech," said Melissa Dennis, head of research and instruction services at the **University Libraries**. "If you want to shield your own eyes – fine. If you want to shield the eyes of your children – fine."

"But wanting to remove something from the public because it doesn't align with your personal views? That infringes on the rights of others."

Dennis led a workshop on Sept. 21 during national Banned Books Week on how banning books harms a society that prides itself on free speech.

The books most banned are those concerning LGBTQ and racial themes, she said. PEN America's report notes that one in three books under scrutiny deals with LGBTQ+ topics. Additionally, 41% of those works feature protagonists of color.

"These are demands for things to be hidden," Dennis said. "And there is a real strong theme here: race and LGBTQ issues. It's so discouraging."

While most book bans originate from parents and community members, PEN America reports a rise in politically motivated bans.

Diversity of opinion, thought and perspective is what makes an informed society, Dennis said. If we continue to ban the things we disagree with, we'll lose that diversity.

"We can't grow as a society if we are diluting that learning," she said. "When you see something you don't like, stay away from it. You don't try to take it away from everyone else."

The University Libraries' fall lineup of events is available [here](#).

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