

# Banned in hand

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## Introduction

In a modern world that promotes freedom in both speech and availability, there continues to be restraint of these beliefs in literature and an increase in discussion about the political side of reading. This blog wants to explore these aspects of limitation that both readers and authors meet in the “world of freedom”. Yet, hundreds of books are banned each year. Perhaps if you go to your bookshelves, you might find some of your books are actually banned in your hand!

## We are behind Banned in Hand

We are three university students studying Language, Literature and media at Linköping University who have a passion for reading a vast range of different genres, some of which are found to be controversial. We strive for no restraints when it comes to the availability of reading and believe that everyone should be able to consume any kind of book. Each year, hundreds of books become banned for readers, in which we, as readers, lose the right to consume this hidden and perhaps wise knowledge in our hands; this is taken from us by politics, but what are the reasons behind this? Why do we ban some books and how does this affect our society and minds in consumptions? These are some of the questions that appeal to and drive this blog, which we desire to spread and discuss how and if politics affect our reading.



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Detta är en återpublicering av bloggen [Banned in Hand](#)

Ett projektarbete i kursen *Att publicera i den medierade offentligheten* vt 2025 som publicerats av

Linköping University Electronic Press i serien: [Linköping Electronic Press Workshop and Conference Collection](#), Nummer 36

ISSN: 2003-6523

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## Meet the Writers

Here, you'll find info about the creators of this blog!

We are three university students who started this blog to spread information about banned books. We have asked ourselves a few questions to help readers of this blog get a better understanding of who we are.

Hello!

My name is Ella, and I've always liked to read, for as long as I can remember. I absolutely love to immerse myself in a story and to travel into the world of a book. My favorite genres include classics and literary fiction. Some of my favorite banned books are probably *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath and *Ulysses* by James Joyce. Each has impacted me a lot in its own way, and it's very strange to think that at some point in history, both books were actually being actively suppressed and kept from readers. I also love the works of Virginia Woolf and the Brontë sisters. Any book of theirs, banned or not, is almost guaranteed to receive a sky-high Goodreads rating from me. (Basically just make it a beautifully written, feminist historical drama, and I'm probably sold.) From time to time I do like to dip my toes into something more modern, though, and when I do I usually turn to two authors who I know will always have my back when it comes to a good story (that will probably also break me a little); Donna Tartt and Kazuo Ishiguro.

Hello!

My name is Alice and, nowadays, I love to read. It is a terrific experience that allows people to explore new worlds and get submerged in something other than their own reality. However, when I was younger, reading was something I associated with school and homework. I detested it. It wasn't until around 2015 that I really started to enjoy reading. My favorite banned book is *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins. I love dystopian novels. That's where my love for reading came from. The first book series that I read was *The Maze Runner* by James Dashner. Newt 💔 RIP. I still mourn to this day. Moving on, one of my favorite books of all time is *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* by Taylor Jenkins Reid. It is a beautiful story about the aging and reclusive Hollywood movie icon Evelyn Hugo, who is finally ready to tell the truth about her glamorous and scandalous life. The story progresses as Evelyn tells a reporter about her life as an upcoming Hollywood actress and how she grew her fame. The main thing in the book is Evelyn's relationship with Celia St. James, exploring their sexualities and coming to terms with who they are. I love this book because the idea of love as something dangerous, as something that you have to fight for, is so prominent. It's truly beautiful and real. I struggled with realizing that Evelyn Hugo wasn't an actual person, I found myself wanting to look her up but coming up short. Oh well.

Hello!

My name is Sofie, and I am one of the three students who started this project to spread information about banned books. I have had a passion for literature since I was a child; however, growing up in a country that does not actively ban books, this discourse did not come to my attention until later when I began exploring more genres and becoming a part of the book community online, which raised this question. Throughout the years, my reading has been a way for me to find new ways to think and perceive the world; it has opened many new mindsets and perspectives that I have learned from. However, as I began working on this project, I realised that most of my favourite novels are actually banned or challenged in some countries, for instance, *The Virgin Suicides* by Jeffrey Eugenides, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde, *The Book Thief* by Markus Suzak, and *Dead Poets Society* by N.H. Kleinbaum. Sometimes, this makes me distressed, knowing that books I loved and learned from are pulled from people's hands; they won't have the chance to read them, or at least not without censorship and losing the wisdom within the novels. Still, I cannot place myself fully behind not banning

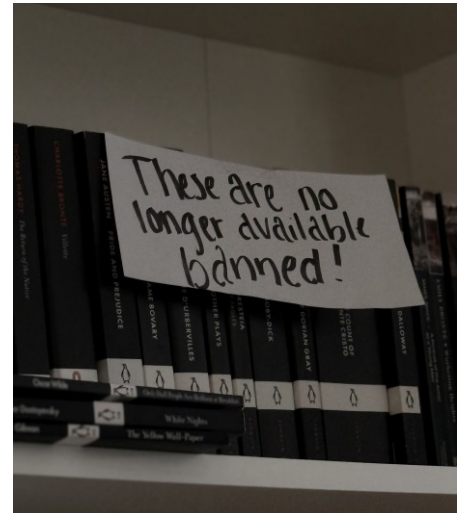
books, thinking there must be good reasons behind this. Perhaps I believe too much in the good of people, or perhaps there are some benefits, but that is something I wish to dig deeper into and hopefully find somewhat of an answer. However, some other favourites of mine that are not banned or censored are: *A Very Easy Death* by Simone de Beauvoir, *Film for Her* by Orion Carloto and *Strange the Dreamer* by Laini Taylor.

## Banned Books: A Tale As Old As Time

This text is an overview of the history of book banning.

**The act of banning books is hardly a new phenomenon. Throughout history, books have been suppressed, banned, and even burned for reasons political, religious, or simply in the name of protecting kids from content that was deemed “obscene” or “inappropriate”. But where did it all begin? And what can we learn by looking at the long history of book banning?**

Books have been around for a really long time, and book bans – well, probably for almost as long. ILAB (International League of Antiquarian Booksellers) writes that as far back as in ancient Rome, poet Ovid was banished from the city and his text, *Ars Amatoria* (eng. *The Art of Love*) was banned for its raunchy content and promotion of adultery. While there were likely other factors influencing the poet’s forced exile as well (such as possibly not being on the best of terms with emperor Augustus), there is no doubt that the book was controversial – so much, in fact, that it was famously burned by Savonarola in Italy 1400 years later. By 1930, the book was *still* causing controversy as an English translation was banned by U.S Customs, making Ovid’s love manual a strong contender for the award of history’s most long-lasting book ban.



According to Gutman Library, a part of Harvard University, the first American book ban (in the modern sense of the word- read more about different types of book bans [here](#)) is believed to have taken place in Massachusetts in 1637. Thomas Morton’s *New English Canaan*, which criticized Puritan leadership to the point of comparing leaders to crustaceans (such as nicknaming one of his foes “Captaine Shrimp”), caused an outrage and was consequently banned, while the author was effectively exiled from Massachusetts for the rest of his life. National Geographic, meanwhile, mentions William Pynchon’s 1650 pamphlet *The Meritorious Price of Our Redemption* as the first known instance of what we would consider a modern, formal book ban – again, for challenging Puritan beliefs. Regardless of which was **actually** the first proper book ban, we see a pattern emerge; in the 17th century, book bans were all about religion.

Fast forward to the 19th century ... and while religion was still a widespread reason for book banning, another issue now appears to come into focus: slavery. Harriet Beecher Stowe’s 1851 novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was famously both banned and burned, and during the Civil War in the 1860’s, both sides banned literature that promoted the views of the other. The 1800’s were also very particular about morality, especially concerning sexuality and religious piety, which led to banning books with “immoral” content. In fact, as National Geographic points out, the Comstock Act of 1873 meant that owning or sending such books was now a criminal offense.

The 20th century, then, saw a wide range of shifting attitudes towards book banning. While the rigorous moral codes of the 1800’s eased up, the World Wars brought propaganda and political persecution and consequently a variety of other reasons for banning books. The interwar period and World War II in particular meant that any books opposing Nazi Germany or its views lived a very dangerous existence. According to Nsdoku München, the Munich Documentation Center for the History of National Socialism, there were about 100 public burnings of “un-German” literature recorded between March and October of 1933; the particular date alone of May 10, 1933 saw as many as 25,000 books being destroyed in university towns all over the country, according to Holocaust Encyclopedia. The phenomenon of books being targeted during war has persisted long since. For instance, in 1992, the Bosnian war caused between 1,5 and 3 million books in the Sarajevo National

Library to be destroyed by Serbian troops, making it one of modern history's most extensive book burnings, according to the website "Freedom to Read".

And what about our time? Looking up from history to peek instead at our present day, we'll notice that book banning is far from a thing of the past. PEN America's "Index of School Book Bans 2023-2024", comprising more than 10,000 instances where access to certain books in American school libraries has been limited or removed, reminds us that books are still being deemed as objects to be controlled and/or withheld. Book burnings, too, still happen around the world today, for different political purposes. In Scandinavia, we need to look no further than Rasmus Paludan's Quran burnings, which began in 2019, caused a global outrage and highlighted the symbolic status of books as carriers of ideology, religion, and values. The burning of a book, in Paludan's case as well as in Germany in 1933, was less about the book itself and more about the political message signaled by the action. The book, then, becomes a stand-in for something larger than itself, and that's why book bans and burnings need to be seriously addressed. After 2,000 years of exiles, bans and burnings, we can conclude that the written word holds a very special kind of power – one that frightens and provokes, but one that also gives a voice to the oppressed, provides a space for ideas to grow, and bears witness of the way the world once was.

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## Can Book Banning Be Justified?

This text serves to discuss

Book banning has a long history (you can read further about this here: [link](#)) and has mostly had the purpose of sorting reading materials into categories or into so-called labels that describe the “problematic” content, such as discussing religion or politics offensively. However, the Oxford English Dictionary defines offensive content as ‘anything that may cause



offence to a reader, particularly in relation to religion, race, gender, politics, sexuality, disability, or with regard to language that is considered obscene, vulgar, or taboo’, but this also creates further problems in the discussion of book banning with Benjamin Franklin describing this phenomenon:

*'If all printers were determined not to print anything till they were sure it would offend nobody, there would be very little printed'.*

Perhaps this is where we meet a grey zone, ‘[...] anything that may cause offence [...]’, every human has their own thoughts and ideas of anything such as what is defined as offensive; reading a novel raising awareness of a sensitive subject loses its audience as it primarily desires to contain sensitive stories or situations to draw people and to make people understand the problem which is faced. Yet, this also increases the likelihood of getting banned. Does this save a certain group of people from offensive content or limit the possibility of exploring certain topics?

As with most discourses, it is difficult to answer yes or no merely. Although, especially in the Western world, a majority would agree that there is no justified ban, it is not that simple. Perhaps the banning of *The Anarchist Cookbook* (1971) by William Powell in Australia could be justifiable as it does contain instructions on how to manufacture, for instance, explosives, and I do believe that most people are fine with this ban as it could lead to chaos in some hands. It would be hard to imagine what would happen if anyone could have this book at home, creating explosives that could easily kill people.

Then, this could be shifted the other way around: how many people would consider creating explosives? not to mention the materials required to create these, some are illegal and difficult to come by, the question, then, becomes what are the chances?

Further, you may look at a larger perspective, in which the book is banned only in one country, yet the number of explosives has not increased in those countries where it is accessible. Although there must be said that the chances of police raiding a suspect’s home for explosives probably do not search for this book but more likely look at their search history on their phones or computers; therefore, there is no data that show a correlation between these, which comes into another problem in trying to control people’s reading materials: the Internet.

In the modern world, it is almost impossible to fully control what people consume because of the Internet, causing book banning to have a decreased dominance over people. It is easier than ever

before to consume information, and what kind of data people are exposed to is more tricky due to the ease of searching on the internet and gaining access to data, for instance, children downloading

+18 restricted books or the amount of young people reading romance novels written for adults.

Although a book becomes banned in a school, state or country, people could use the internet to gain access to it, not to mention that, in countries which have blocked users in that particular country from getting the specific novel, users can use, for example, a VPN. Even totalitarian countries, where Big Brother (a reference to the novel 1984 by George Orwell meaning that the political party in power is always watching one and people have no privacy) is watching, have problems with controlling their people as the Internet gives indefinite opportunities to gain information and data anyway.

Book banning was more efficient in history as books would have needed to be smuggled into a country meanwhile, today, it might take some minutes to download it on the computer.

Unfortunately, this makes it nearly impossible to control anyone and to so-called “save” a certain group from harmful or inappropriate content. Furthermore, book bans in school districts are even further in a lost fight to “save” children as they will be able to access and read the novels during their leisure time, for example *A Court of Mist and Fury* by Sarah J. Maas is banned in some school district yet there is a high number of younger people still accessing and reading this book. This begs a question for you, the reader of this text, but also society, how can we save certain people from inappropriate and harmful content, if it is even possible; to fully monitor a person’s activity on the Internet and reading materials would be exhausting not to mention, could we still say that we have freedom and privacy?

However, the biggest question about book banning is simply, are we allowed to control and limit people’s reading materials? Again, as Benjamin Franklin said (as quoted earlier in the text), it is almost impossible to write a book that would not offend anyone, and most of the classic texts would be banned, which has once changed or profoundly impacted society, we lose a major part of our history and understanding. A major part of history is the ability to gain knowledge from the past to create a better future, especially not to make the same mistakes. However, banning books does that we erase a part of history and wisdom written on the pages, perhaps book banning, then, becomes a symbol of the burning of the library in Alexandria, in which people lose the access to the books and a part of history disappears in some aspects. Although, the banning of Hitler’s novel *Mein Kampf* might have been a justifiable ban as it served to limit Hitler’s influence during World War II and to this day may influence particularly children reading it, perhaps we are saving younger people from harmful content or are we hindering children but also every person from gaining a part of history and information from the content. This creates the question, is there any exception when it comes to book banning or is book banning inherently wrong?

This is not to answer if book banning is okay or not but rather to open a conversation and widen a comprehension of the complex practice that is living alongside books, both in reading and in the process of writing. Authors have to ask themselves how to formulate words and sentences in their texts to still express the same message without risking being banned. There have been attempts throughout history in which the imagination of writers has saved them from banning and still expressing their message, for instance, by using allegory. However, at some point, one may ask if this is freedom, which one may counter with, what is freedom?

In the end, the root of the endless discussions of book banning is the people in society; every person thinks differently and many believe that they have the right opinion in this matter. However, as this text has discussed, it becomes difficult. What may cause offence in a text is mostly personal; in the same way, Svenska Pen (‘Swedish Pen’) writes, ‘A banned book can be a book that someone else does not think anyone should read’ (this is translated from Swedish to English). Throughout this, there is only one

conclusion that we can draw which is that this is subjective; there will always be people who disagree or agree with book banning, and there will be valid reasons on both sides.

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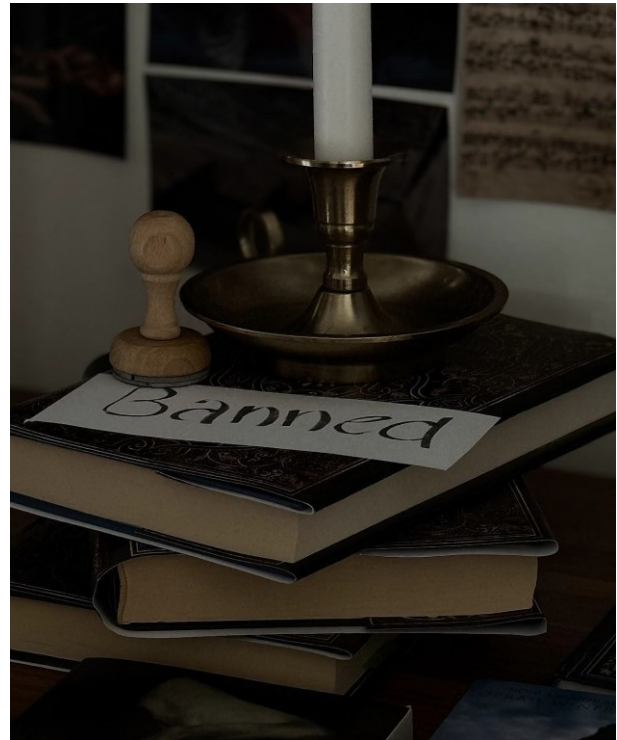


## All Reading Is Political

Debate: This is the writer's opinion

Imagine telling your own child that they cannot go out and explore the world. Seems weird, right? Now imagine a world where someone who has a higher power over society is calling the shots on what and what not the people in that society are allowed to explore. Seems almost dystopian. Am I right again? This is something that seems so obscure and terrifying to realize that it is, in fact, happening right now. All right, maybe not in the sense of exploring this world. Perhaps you know the saying, "The world is a book, and those who do not travel read only one page." (Saint Augustine) By then banning books, they are limiting people's access to the world and to be able to explore by removing their access to "controversial" books.

While yes, I can argue that some books should definitely be banned, like *Mein Kampf* by Adolf Hitler; It should have been banned to limit his influence. However, arguably, books like *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath shouldn't be banned. Yes, it does include some themes that can be harmful in the wrong hands, but it also teaches an important lesson that I think should be available for everyone. Not to mention all the books that have been banned just because they contain LGBTQ+ content. It sends the message that being in the LGBTQ+ community is wrong. In a country like the US, where the First Amendment protects free speech, including literature, the president wants to ban even more books, going against this human right. By banning books, people are given limited access to diverse ideas, and it restricts people's personal choices. If we look at the history of book banning ([link to text](#)), one can see that



totalitarian regimes like Nazi Germany have a history of banning books to control people's thoughts. Sounds a lot like *1984* by George Orwell (1949)— which is also banned, by the way— and it's definitely scary to think about and wonder if it will happen in the US. Although the banning of books in the US isn't something that has started with President Trump, the US has a history of banning books that usually challenge topics that should be allowed to be talked about freely, like gender norms or even racial norms.

All reading is political, but why? It's because every single book reflects cultural, social, or political ideas. Even so-called neutral books uphold certain kinds of values or worldviews. I believe that what can be damaging or inappropriate varies between people. It doesn't have to mean the same thing to everyone. There is some kind of subjectivity when it comes to what is considered damaging or not suitable for everyone in books. In some books, what made them become banned is the discussion of societal issues, like *Beloved* by Toni Morrison (1987), which is actually based on a true story. The real event followed Margaret Garner who, like the main character in Morrison's *Beloved*, killed her own daughter to prevent going back to enslavement. It was her life that inspired Morrison's novel. I think that banning books like these, that talk about the real events of someone who has been through something so horrible—like *The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank (1947)—is repressing, in some kind of way.

When discussing banning books, censorship is important to mention. Censorship is the suppression of content or ideas, and the act of banning books is a type of censorship that can take many forms ([link to text](#)). There are bans happening in a lot of schools and libraries. Then, some bans forbid the book in the entirety of the country. I argue that deciding what people can't read, through censorship itself, is actually a political act. Books should not be banned. They should be read, discussed, criticized, and thought about.

So that being said, do you think that all reading is political?

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## Banned Books and Silenced Writing: A Matter of Life and Death

This text serves to inform and discuss

It's easy enough to think of a book ban as a mere formality; an annoying inconvenience to you, the reader, and to the author who will, of course, miss out on money as well as have to see their reputation be attacked. But book bans, being part of a greater political landscape, can mean more than just a book quietly disappearing from a list or from a shelf in your local library. For authors, having their books banned can result in harassment and threats – sometimes, even, to their lives.

Here is a list of a few authors who have experienced the darker effects of book banning firsthand:

- Ovid was exiled from Rome and had to live in Romania
- Dante was exiled from Florence
- Salman Rushdie, having lived under death threats from Iran's Supreme Leader since 1988, was attacked and nearly killed at an American literary festival in 2022
- Jeanine Cummins faced death threats after the publication of her novel *American Dirt*

in 2020

- Ellen Hopkins was accused of "grooming children" and "pedophilia" for her YA novels (quoted from Publishers Weekly)
- Abbad Yahya faced lynching threats and was forced into exile after the Palestinian government banned his book *Crime in Ramallah* in 2016
- Dinko Gruhonjić, a Serbian journalist and writer, has faced death threats and smears since 2024, being one of several Serbian journalists targeted for "their independent and critical reporting" (quoted from PEN International)

As we can notice, several of these instances are no more than a few years old, raising questions about just how "free" the world of today truly is. Of course, people will always have opinions, and any work of art needs to be able to interact with a certain dose of criticism – but when criticism turns into death threats and forcing writers into exile, when the urge to silence and vilify becomes greater than the urge to listen and discuss, that's when we must reexamine the role of book banning in our modern societies. Instances like these, continuing to take place all over the world, remind us yet again of the very possible real-life implications of book bans and how authors, in the face of these implications, continue to write – sometimes, even, with their lives on the line.

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## What is Book Banning and What Kinds of Banning Exist?

In the discussion of book banning, it is essential to understand the meaning and significant effects caused by this practice. The act of banning or challenging books, which is discussed historically in our post, *Banned Books: A Tale As Old As Time* ([link to text](#)), has emerged as a longstanding practice in our society that labels reading materials as offensive, primarily on religious, moral, or political grounds. In the list of banned books, you will find these labels commonly employed; however, there has also been a rise in the banning of reading materials that contain sexual content. Aliprandini and Sprague note that reading materials viewed as a threat to public welfare are removed, which raises the question of whether we genuinely utilise this practice in a beneficial manner. While totalitarian societies ban books that they assert to promote political instability or immorality, today's society advocates freedom of both speech and writing, yet books continue to be labelled as offensive for various reasons.

Whether writing about some subjects, such as sex, is offensive and should result in a ban is a question we then need to answer, also the consequences of people missing out on books that contain specific subjects and views, or perhaps not. Rarely does a book get entirely banned in a country; most likely, the book will be banned in some school district or library, and you will be able to get your hands on the banned book in the bookshop downtown. There are different kinds of bans, and before you take a look at the list of banned books or perhaps you have seen a video of someone claiming that a book is banned in your country yet you have it on your bookshelf, we are going to explain and clarify these kinds of bans.

- **Challenged books:** These are books that have been through a process of removing or restricting materials. This is usually done by censorship and changing words in a book to make it less offensive, such as *Fahrenheit 451* Bal-Hi edition, which censored swear words and changed 'drunk man' to 'sick man' to make it suitable for high school students. The American Library Association writes, 'Books usually are challenged with the best intentions - to protect others, frequently children, from difficult ideas and information'.
- **Shadow/silent book ban:** Reading materials that disappear from shelves without an official reason put against them. However, it could also be in the form of putting them on higher shelves, libraries stopping the purchase of certain books to, for instance, avoid backlash, or partially limiting access to some books by imposing age restrictions.
- **School book ban:** Access to these books is diminished/restricted; meanwhile, the freedom to read them becomes limited within the school district, in which books are not allowed to be read or used for educational purposes. However, school book bans are often a result of parents or community members raising concerns about the content of a book, or it is an administrative decision made by those in charge.
- **Library book bans:** Similar to school book bans, library book bans diminish access to these books by not having them in the library. These books are not allowed to be loaned or read there.

- **A 'real' book ban:** A book ban has many definitions. Pen America describes a book ban as 'The removal or restriction of those materials'; However, the last definition of book ban that has not yet been mentioned is a 'real' book ban, in which you are prohibited to own the book and have no access to it in your country, for example *No Enemies, No Hatred* is entirely banned in China, therefore, has a 'real' book ban.

A list of banned books is available on the blog post [Banned Books](#)

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Detta är en återpublicering av bloggen [Banned in hand](#)

Ett projektarbete i kursen *Att publicera i den medierade offentligheten* vt 2025 som publicerats av

Linköping University Electronic Press i serien: [Linköping Electronic Press Workshop and Conference Collection](#), Nummer 36

ISSN: 2003-6523

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## Quiz

Click here to take our quiz about banned books: <https://take.quiz-maker.com/QBXZD7PP8>