

When Books Are Banned

Thirteen authors whose works for kids have been censored share their stories.

By **SUZANNE NOSSEL**

FOR AS LONG AS there have been books, there have been censors who have tried to keep them away from other people. Today these efforts run the gamut from outright bans to limiting a book's availability by get-

YOU CAN'T SAY THAT!

Writers for Young People Talk About Censorship, Free Expression, and the Stories They Have to Tell

Compiled and edited by Leonard S. Marcus

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(Ages 10 and up)

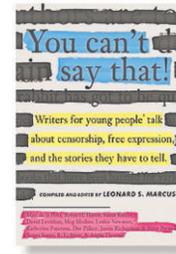
ting it removed from library shelves or cut from classroom syllabuses. The American Library Association publishes lists of the most frequently banned and challenged books, which, revealingly, contain mostly children's and young adult titles.

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"You Can't Say That," a collection of interviews conducted by the children's literature expert Leonard S. Marcus, offers an antidote to the censors, elevating the voices of 13 authors whose books for kids have been challenged. Marcus probes not just what made these works controversial, but also the life paths that led the writers to pursue their subjects, and how they reacted to campaigns to muzzle their work — all of which are sure to interest their young fans, as well as students of free speech.

Marcus talks with Dav Pilkey, whose Captain Underpants series routinely tops banned books lists, for reasons ranging from fart jokes to the depiction of a family with two fathers, and with Matt de la Peña, whose novel "Mexican Whiteboy" was caught in the cross hairs of a political tussle over a Mexican American studies program in Tucson's public school system. To read these writers sharing their reasons for broaching delicate topics is to realize that the fights over their books are fundamental struggles over how we are raising and educating new generations.

While few of the authors Marcus interviews expected to be censored, nearly all



were consciously pushing boundaries by sharing perspectives that had been outside the reach of most children. Robie H. Harris, best known for "It's Perfectly Normal," a nonfiction work about puberty and sex, was warned that by offering explicit factual information to kids she would ruin her career. She forged ahead, determined to provide children with answers to important questions that most adults in their lives would rather not discuss. While Harris recounts feeling "terrible" for the librarians and booksellers who received physical threats after making her books available, she takes heart in the story of a

young girl who reported being abused by her father after learning from Harris that *that* behavior is not normal at all.

Angie Thomas, the author of "The Hate U Give," found her hit book on the A.L.A.'s Top 10 list two years in a row. Often the reason given was the book's expletives, but Thomas believes its subject matter — the killing of an unarmed Black teenager by a white police officer — was what led the school district to call it "filth." The experience of hearing from children and parents deprived of a book they wanted to read prompted Thomas to take up the subject of censorship in her second novel, "On the Come Up," which portrays rap music as both a way to express subversive ideas and a target for those seeking to clamp down on unpopular points of view.

Marcus's interviews spotlight what is at stake when books are challenged. Authors can be thwarted in conveying their most pressing insights. Vulnerable readers can be denied information that may help them make sense of their lives, feel less alone or ask for help. Attempts to ban works of literature offer a potent reminder in a digital age of just how much books still matter. □