



NEVER JUDGE A

[CHILDREN'S] BOOK

BY ITS COVER

September is not only known as the month when school starts back up, but in the world of literature it is seen as the time to defend one's first amendment right-- to read a banned book. Children's and Young Adult books are often the first to get targeted for their content, language, or references to certain experiences. At the [American Library Association \(ALA\)](#), the [Office for Intellectual Freedom \(OIF\)](#) works to promote awareness of challenged and banned books, supports librarians and authors, and advocates for the freedom to write and read. Also at ALA, the [Association for Library Service to Children \(ALSC\)](#), announces its award winners at the start of every year. How do OIF and ALSC intersect?

Once in a while, books that have received an ALSC award or honor also appear on a list called "[Frequently Challenged Children's Books](#)". This is a list compiled by OIF. Typically, challenged books appear more frequently for older readers (middle through high school). Kristin Pekoll, Assistant Director of OIF, cites exposure as a key ingredient to challenged/banned books, especially those included in school curriculums. There is a strong possible correlation between older readers engaging in the same texts across schools in certain grade levels and why books are often challenged for that age group.

OIF has been collecting data on banned books since the early 1990's*.

Here is a small selection of titles on OIF's list that also have received an ALSC award or honor:

By Eric Carle.
Wilder, 2003

. By J.K. Rowling. Odyssey Honor, 2008

. By Mildred D. Taylor. Newbery Medal, 1977

Children's literature is in a unique position as children are often not selecting the titles they are exposed to. Parents and caregivers must be aware of why books are challenged and banned in the first place and not shy away from exploring that text themselves. Looking at the titles listed above, it is difficult to quickly discern either why someone felt it should be challenged, or why the ALSC committees decided to award the title a medal or honor. To determine both, the books must be taken and read in their entirety. By looking at the book overall, the text is given the chance to speak for itself. It's important to take the time to read the book and develop your own opinion. Librarians serve as a great resource in helping sift through a book's context, content, and overall message.



There are also authors whose work appears on the Frequently Challenged Children's Book List who have received an ALSC award or honor for a different title.

A sample of these authors and their books is listed below:

- George Ancona. *Belpre Honor, 2011*; on OIF's list, _____ is the challenged text.
- Ken Mochizuki. *Notable Children's Recording, 2001*; on OIF's list, _____ is the challenged text.
- Patricia Polacco. *Notable Children's Recordings, 2000 & Notable Children's Books, 1995*; on OIF's list, _____ is the challenged text.

READ A BANNED BOOK

This list is important to mention as readers should also analyze the author with respect to their individual texts. Although they may be award-winning authors, not all their texts, regardless of their past work, will be seen as "award worthy" by those challenging the content. If one book is banned yet another book by the same author is not, each text deserves its own read before jumping to conclusions.

In an expanding, global community, multicultural and diverse literature can often present a challenge when it comes to integrating it within the shelves of a public library. It is important to be aware of the supports that are available to librarians faced with the challenging of a book. Librarians can engage in dialogue with fellow librarians in their communities of the best way to respond to a book challenge. Furthermore, libraries can strive toward a collective and unified stance among the librarians and the directors. OIF provides [support and trainings](#) for librarians and teachers, whether going through the process of a challenged book or wanting to bring awareness. Pekoll says, "It's important to bring an awareness to what 'banned children's literature' means through library programming" to better

promote challenged and banned children's books among the adults within a child's life. Pekoll suggests turning programs into platforms for exchanging ideas and discussing challenged and banned books.

Referring to the earlier point of the greatest exposure coming from classroom curriculum, teachers also should be aware of supports available. School librarians and teachers can also find [resources](#) from the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) if they are in a challenged book situation. Teachers can reach out to school librarians and local public librarians, and know there are steps to support teachers beyond reporting a challenged text.

There are many interpretations one

can take away from a text, and as far as award winners go, parents and caregivers should take the time to read the books that are being challenged in their entirety and make the best choice for their family from there. At the end of the day, parents and caregivers know their children best—not every book, or award winner, may be the best fit. That's where your local librarian comes into play as someone to turn to when determining your own opinions on challenged and banned texts.

Rather than shying away, banned books present an opportunity for an exchange of ideas, values, and perspectives through dialogue.