

Banning Books out of Fear of Inspiration: A Ritual Theory Perspective

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ABSTRACT: Banning books from public and school libraries has sharply increased in the U.S.A. in recent years. This paper analyses the phenomenon of book banning from the theoretical perspective of how books get ritualized in different textual dimensions. Book bans have a long cultural history in shaping literary and religious canons. Comparison with book burning shows some similar and some distinctive strategies behind book banning. Like book burning, book banning aims to draw public attention and to offend political opponents. In contrast to ritualized destruction of iconic books, however, book banning attacks the expressive dimension of reading texts by trying to prevent access to them. Whereas book burnings aim to offend opponents' sensibilities, book bans aim to prevent inspiration to imagine certain kinds of social forms and personal identities. That goal is apparent from the disproportionate focus on banning books with multi-cultural and LGBTQIA+ themes. The ban acts as a warning against embracing certain opinions and identities. However, analyzing book banning as ritual also draws attention to well-developed, ongoing traditions of counter-ritualizing by many libraries. They publicize banned book lists and encourage reading them during "Banned Books Week" and similar events. Through this ritual analysis of iconic and expressive texts, book banning emerges as a traditional site of cultural conflict over the means and goals of textual inspiration.

Tags: Book bans, ritual theory, libraries, inspiration, identity

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