# Authors unite against rising censorship of children’s books in the US



Recent developments in the United States have seen a notable increase in book challenges and bans, particularly affecting children's literature that explores themes of race, gender identity, and LGBTQ+ issues. Colleen AF Venable, known for her middle-grade series "Katie the Catsitter," experienced this firsthand when the second book in her series was challenged in Florida. Venable recalled a scene in the book where a character’s mother consoles her about growing apart from her best friend and mentions the possibility of finding a boyfriend, girlfriend, or "nonbinary friend" in the future. This seemingly innocuous dialogue was enough to draw ire.

Venable's experiences are illustrative of a broader trend. Her graphic novel "Kiss Number 8," co-created with Ellen T. Crenshaw, features a storyline about a teenage girl from a conservative Catholic background who realizes she is bisexual. Although the novel aims to depict the support of the church, it has been labelled as anti-Christian by critics, resulting in its inclusion in several banned and challenged book lists.

The rise in book challenges has mobilized authors and advocates. Venable is among the roughly 2,000 members of Authors Against Book Bans (AABB), an advocacy group formed this January by prominent figures in the literary world, such as Gayle Forman, David Levithan, Andrea Davis Pinkney, and Maggie Tokuda-Hall.

Statistics from the American Library Association underscore the urgency of their mission, showing a 65% increase in the number of books targeted last year compared to 2022, marking the highest levels ever recorded. Texas and Florida lead in book bans, but the phenomenon is not confined to these states. Massachusetts alone has seen around 70 books challenged in its schools over the past five years.

PEN America, a nonprofit organization committed to protecting free expression, notes that recent efforts to ban books predominantly target stories with LGBTQ+ themes and narratives by and about people of colour.

Self-described parental rights advocates argue that their aim is to shield children from what they perceive as inappropriate or indoctrinating content. Mary Ellen Siegler from the Massachusetts Family Institute contends that activist groups exaggerate concerns about book bans. She cites titles like "Let’s Talk About It: The Teen’s Guide to Sex, Relationships, and Being a Human," arguing that such books, when available in schools and libraries, infringe upon parental rights.

Opponents of censorship, however, maintain that young readers benefit from access to information, especially regarding their own identities. They argue that books addressing race and gender are often caught in a backlash against progressive social movements. In December, Representative Ayanna Pressley introduced the Books Save Lives Act to Congress, underscoring the belief that representation in literature can be crucial for young readers.