

Book Banning, the Graphic Novel, and the New American Censorship

Rakhi Ramachandran

Assistant Professor, St. Josephs college (Autonomous), Irinjalakuda, Kerala, India.

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Abstract

*PEN America has recorded close to twenty three thousand book bans in American public schools since 2021, including 6,870 during the 2024 to 2025 school year across twenty three states. The American Library Association documented 4,235 unique titles challenged during 2025, the second highest annual figure it has ever recorded. Graphic novels and illustrated books are removed at rates well above their share of library collections, and roughly three quarters of the illustrated titles removed involve LGBTQ representation, characters of colour, or discussion of race. This article asks why the picture makes the difference. It argues that the visual form is targeted not because its content is more explicit but because images resist the defences that protect prose, since a panel can be photographed, projected at a school board meeting, and circulated without its context in a way a paragraph cannot. The argument is developed through the removals of *Maus* and *Persepolis*, the sustained campaign against *Gender Queer*, and the legal shift from the plurality reasoning in *Pico* to the Fifth Circuit's 2025 holding that library curation is government speech. The article closes on what the decade has cost the form.*

Keywords: - Censorship, Book Bans, Graphic Novels, Comics Studies, School Libraries, Intellectual Freedom.

I. INTRODUCTION

In January 2022 the school board of McMinn County, Tennessee, voted to remove Art Spiegelman's *Maus* from its eighth grade curriculum. The objections were eight profanities and a small drawing of a nude mouse. That mouse is the author's mother, in a bathtub, after her suicide (Spiegelman, 1991). The book is a Pulitzer winner. What makes the board minutes worth reading is that board members say repeatedly, and apparently in good faith, that they do not object to teaching the Holocaust but only to this particular way of showing it.

The vote drew international attention and *Maus* returned to bestseller lists within a week, which is the usual pattern and the reason bans are sometimes dismissed as counterproductive theatre. The dismissal is complacent. Attention protects famous books. It does nothing for the several thousand titles removed quietly each year by districts that never make the news, and it does not restore the classroom in McMinn County.

The scale is now documented well enough to argue from. PEN America has counted close to twenty three thousand school book bans since 2021, with 6,870 in the 2024 to 2025 school year alone, spread across twenty three states and eighty seven districts (PEN America, 2025). Florida recorded the largest number, followed by Texas and Tennessee. The American Library Association logged 713 attempts to censor library materials during 2025, covering 4,235 unique titles, second only to its 2023 figure (American Library Association, 2026).

Within those totals graphic novels are conspicuously overrepresented. This article takes that overrepresentation as its problem. The explanation usually offered, that comics are read by younger children and therefore held to stricter standards, does not survive contact with the evidence, since the removed titles are overwhelmingly young adult and adult works. A better explanation has to do with what images do in a public argument.

II. A FORM WITH A PRIOR CONVICTION

American comics have been here before, and the earlier episode shaped the form's legal and cultural position permanently. Wertham (1954) argued that crime and horror comics caused juvenile delinquency, testified to a Senate subcommittee, and precipitated an industry self-censorship regime. Nyberg (1998) documents what followed: the Comics Code Authority, adopted in 1954, effectively removed crime, horror and any sympathetic treatment of authority figures being questioned, and narrowed American comics to children's material for a generation.

Beaty (2005) has argued that Wertham has been caricatured, and that he was a progressive psychiatrist concerned about racist imagery as well as violence, which is true and does not alter the outcome. The Code was not law. It was a distribution agreement, enforced by wholesalers who would not carry uncoded titles, and it demonstrated that private censorship can be more thorough than public censorship because it faces no constitutional test.

The form's recovery took four decades and was achieved partly by adopting the vocabulary of literature. Hatfield (2005) traces the emergence of alternative comics and the strategies by which they claimed adult seriousness. Chute (2010) established that women cartoonists had produced a body of life writing of considerable sophistication, and Chute (2016) extended the argument to documentary witness, reading *Maus* and *Barefoot Gen* as forms of testimony that prose could not have delivered.

The recovery had a side effect. Graphic novels entered school libraries in the nineteen nineties and after on the strength of literacy arguments, as a bridge for reluctant readers, and that framing has proved a liability. A book admitted as a reading aid has a weaker claim to curricular necessity than one admitted as literature, and the removal campaigns have exploited exactly this.

III. WHY THE PANEL IS VULNERABLE

Consider the mechanics of a school board challenge. A complainant needs to convey to an audience, in under three minutes, that a book is unsuitable. With a prose novel this requires reading a passage aloud, which is slow, sounds like literature, and invites the reply that the passage has a context. With a graphic novel it requires holding up a page.

McCloud (1993) described comics as a form in which meaning is produced in the gutter between panels, through closure performed by the reader across a sequence. Groensteen (2007) developed the same insight more formally, arguing that the page operates as a network in which every panel is read in relation to the others rather than in isolation. Both accounts imply that a single panel extracted from a graphic novel is not a smaller piece of the work. It is a different object.

This is the vulnerability. Gender Queer, Maia Kobabe's memoir of coming to a nonbinary and asexual identity, has been the most challenged book in the United States for most of the current period, and the campaign against it has consisted almost entirely of circulating two panels (Kobabe, 2019). The panels are explicit. They are also four pages of a two hundred and forty page book about adolescence, confusion, and the difficulty of explaining oneself to one's parents. A prose memoir describing the same material would be far harder to reduce to a projected image on a screen behind a podium.

Chicago Public Schools removed *Persepolis* from classrooms in 2013 on the basis of scenes depicting torture under the Iranian regime, which is precisely the historical content the book exists to convey (Satrapi, 2003). The pattern repeats. The image that makes the testimony possible is the image that makes the removal easy, and the form's documentary power and its legal exposure are the same property viewed from opposite sides.

IV. THE LEGAL GROUND SHIFTS

For four decades the governing authority was a fractured Supreme Court plurality. In *Board of Education v. Pico* (1982) a plurality held that a school board may not remove books from a library simply because it dislikes the ideas contained in them, while allowing removal on grounds of educational suitability or vulgarity. No opinion commanded a majority, which left the doctrine unstable, and the distinction between disliking ideas and finding them educationally unsuitable was never workable in practice.

That instability has now been resolved in a direction the intellectual freedom sector did not want. On 23 May 2025 the Fifth Circuit, sitting en banc, held by ten votes to seven that a public library's decisions about which books to acquire and retain constitute government speech, and are therefore not subject to challenge under the Free Speech Clause at all (*Little v. Llano County*, 2025). The case concerned seventeen books removed from a county library in Texas after complaints. The Supreme Court declined to hear an appeal in December 2025.

The reasoning has a certain logic. A library cannot buy everything, so selection is unavoidable, and if selection is speech then the library must be free to speak. The difficulty is that the holding does not distinguish selection from removal, and treats a decision not to acquire a title on budget grounds as the same act as pulling a title from the shelf after a political complaint. Within the states covered by the ruling, that reasoning removes the principal legal instrument readers had.

Knox (2015) studied challengers directly rather than writing about them, and found that most were not organised activists but parents acting on a genuine belief that a specific book had harmed or would harm a specific child. That finding has held up less well since 2021. PEN America's indexes record a shift towards coordinated activity, with model complaint lists circulated between districts and a substantial share of bans traceable to a small number of organisations and to state legislation rather than to individual parents.

V. WHAT GETS REMOVED AND WHAT THAT MEANS

The distribution is not random. The pattern holds across both counting bodies. Roughly three quarters of the graphic and illustrated books removed involve LGBTQ characters, characters of colour, or the discussion of race and racism, and the ALA puts the figure for all challenged material at around forty per cent (American Library Association, 2026). Read the two numbers together. The illustrated book is not being removed for being illustrated, it is being removed because of who tends to appear in it, and the drawing makes that visible faster than a paragraph would.

The most challenged list for 2025 rewards attention because it is stranger than the controversy suggests. It is headed by Patricia McCormick's *Sold*, a verse novel about a Nepali girl trafficked into a brothel, which is taught precisely because it is unbearable. The *Perks of Being a Wallflower* is second, a book published in 1999 that has been challenged for twenty five years. *Gender Queer* is third, and two Sarah J. Maas fantasy novels appear, which shows the mechanism now catching commercially successful genre fiction alongside the identity titles the campaigns nominally target.

The effect on the graphic novel as a form is harder to measure than the ban counts and is probably larger. Librarians report pre-emptive non-acquisition, which appears in no index because no challenge is filed. Publishers have grown cautious about school and library editions. Cartoonists working on memoir have described adjusting what they draw. A form that spent forty years escaping the Comics Code is being disciplined again by a mechanism that, as in the nineteen fifties, operates through distribution rather than through law.

There is a further loss specific to the medium. The graphic memoirs under attack are, overwhelmingly, books in which a young person works out who they are. Chute's account of graphic life writing identifies the form's particular capacity to hold contradiction, showing a remembered self and a narrating self on the same page. That is a resource for exactly the readers the removals are said to protect.

VI. THE COUNTER-MOVEMENT

Opposition organised faster than the sector expected, and it came mainly from libraries rather than from publishers. Brooklyn Public Library began issuing free digital cards in April 2022 to anyone in the United States between thirteen and twenty one, giving access to its full electronic collection regardless of what a local district had removed. Card holders had borrowed more than three hundred thousand items by the initiative's third anniversary, and the model has been taken up by library systems in Boston, Seattle, San Diego and Los Angeles County (Brooklyn Public Library, 2025).

The design is worth noting because it sidesteps the legal fight entirely. A ban operates on a collection within a jurisdiction. A digital card issued from another state does not contest the removal, it routes around it. Whether courts will tolerate this indefinitely is an open question, and legislation targeting out of state digital lending has been proposed in several places.

Student organising has been the other surprise. Banned book clubs run by high school students appeared across the affected states, in several cases with the participation of school librarians acting in a personal capacity. The tactical strength of these groups is that removals are usually justified by reference to protecting young people, and it is awkward to sustain that justification against the young people themselves.

None of this restores a curriculum. A student reading *Gender Queer* on a phone through a Brooklyn card is not in a classroom discussing it with a teacher, and the difference is the whole of what education adds to reading. The counter-movement preserves access to texts while conceding the more important ground, which is the shared and guided encounter that a school was supposed to provide.

VII. CONCLUSION

Two things about the current wave distinguish it from earlier American censorship episodes. It is coordinated, with legislation, model lists and litigation strategy operating together rather than district by district. And it now has favourable law in a substantial part of the country, which the Comics Code era did not, since that regime was private precisely because public censorship would have failed constitutional review.

The overrepresentation of graphic novels is not incidental to this and not a matter of content. Sequential art can be excerpted in a way that destroys meaning and preserves impact, and a public argument conducted in three minute increments at a podium rewards whatever can be held up. The form's expressive strength is its procedural weakness.

Defences that rest on literary merit have limited purchase here. Merit was never the issue for a board that removed a Pulitzer winner over eight words. The protections that hold are procedural and dull: reconsideration policies requiring the whole work to be read before a vote, standing limited to district residents, written findings, published appeal routes. None of that is stirring. It worked reasonably well for decades and was dismantled within about three years in several states, largely because nobody thought it needed defending.

Spiegelman remarked after the McMinn County vote that the board had reduced his mother's suicide to a naked mouse. The sentence identifies the mechanism exactly. A panel was separated from its page, a page from its book, and a book from the forty years of work that produced it. Whatever the courts decide about government speech, the substantive question raised by the decade is whether a public capable of that separation can be trusted with the reading of anything.

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