

Portland State University

**PDXScholar**

---

Library Faculty Publications and Presentations

University Library

---

2020

# Review of the Book: Silenced in the Library: Banned Books in America, by Zeke Jarvis

Rhiannon M. Cates

*Portland State University*, rhicates@pdx.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/ulib\\_fac](https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/ulib_fac)



Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

**Let us know how access to this document benefits you.**

---

## Citation Details

Cates, R.M. (2020). Book review [Review of the book Silenced in the Library: Banned Books in America, by Zeke Jarvis]. *Libraries: Culture, History, and Society*, 4(1), 107-109. doi:10.5325/libraries.4.1.0107

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access. It has been accepted for inclusion in Library Faculty Publications and Presentations by an authorized administrator of PDXScholar. Please contact us if we can make this document more accessible: [pdxscholar@pdx.edu](mailto:pdxscholar@pdx.edu).

Even more broadly, when added to ALA's inability to defend a principled professional's stance, Knowles's initial firing by the Norwood Public Library due to her exercising those principles, continues to add to a welcomed and growing antilibrary exceptionalism thesis in library historiography. This story parlays what we have recently learned about ALA's reluctance to support racial desegregation of public libraries in the post-World War II era. The more we come to understand how, when matters turn consequential, the library as an institution, and librarianship as a profession, does not vary significantly from other institutions and other professions—institutional aspiration statements like the Library Bill of Rights notwithstanding. The more readily we reconcile these facts of the profession's past, the more effective we shall be in addressing the challenges of the future.

Methodology aside, a few quibbles remain. First, while the assertion is plausible that librarians self-censored themselves in response to anticommunist attacks such as those endured by Knowles, such a larger story would have benefited from evidence, especially because we also know from previous research that some libraries capitulated to similar attacks. Indeed, this dilemma may well be the story a micro-history approach conceals. Second, the book's cover does not flatter the study's subject.

Hepler's contribution features a detailed view of the politization of suburban middle-class women's community and a trenchant analysis illustrating the experience of an "ordinary" librarian. But it's also possible that Knowles's legacy of tribulation, resistance, and ultimate vindication among the Quaker community's defense of her, stands out precisely because these were not ordinary circumstances.

**Jarvis, Zeke. *Silenced in the Library: Banned Books in America*. Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, an Imprint of ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2017. ISBN: 978-1440843945. Hardcover: \$94.00.**

*Reviewed by Rhiannon M. Cates, Portland State University Library*

doi: 10.5325/libraries.4.1.0107

Each September, educators and librarians organize programs and displays around the American Library Association's Banned Books Week to engage readers in conversations about intellectual freedom. *Silenced in the Library: Banned Books in America* serves as a straightforward guide in examining the

history of challenged books as well as attitudes that have over time informed the efforts of parents, religious and political groups, and other challengers to limit the presence and accessibility of certain subjects and titles. Tracing this engaging history, author Zeke Jarvis effectively underscores the lasting and evocative social impact of popular literature in American culture.

A professor of English, biographer, and editor, Jarvis has compiled an accessible and well-researched guide to challenged and banned books in the United States. The nearly 150 adult and juvenile titles reviewed in this text represent a range of work by Western authors that spans the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. From infamous children's classics to evocative adult contemporaries, Jarvis includes a number of newer and perhaps lesser-known, through no less inflammatory, selections in this collection.

The titles explored in *Silenced in the Library* are organized into six sections designated by the thematic content most popularly cited in challenges: representations of race, religion, and sexual orientation, sexual content, drug and alcohol use, and depictions of violent and otherwise objectionable behavior. Graphic novels, increasingly the targets of challenges, are in their own distinct category, given their unique visual nature. This organization allows the reader to easily browse by topic and lends itself well to the social evolution of contested subject matter that Jarvis examines.

Following an overview of content standards as they have been applied over time by publishers, government organizations, and the public, Jarvis begins each themed section with a short introduction, guiding readers through timelines of relevant cultural and literary events. Each introduction is followed by alphabetically organized encyclopedic entries that situate each included title within the context of its initial creation as well as its reception and contestation over time, and, if so, why it may continue to receive challenges. In addition to author biographies, brief plot and character summaries are provided before the challenges themselves are detailed. Jarvis notes defensive efforts as well as responsive decisions made by educators and librarians, when applicable. The impact of campaigns to limit access to texts is assessed in terms of readership, future works, and popular culture, with Jarvis making relevant connections to television, film, video games, and other media throughout the book. Finally, each entry includes three recommendations, given in the form of citations for continued secondary reading about each title and the particular challenges brought forth.

The organization and objective, contextually driven design of *Silenced in the Library* invites readers to consider and come to their own conclusions about the nature and outcomes of book challenges and bans, as well as the larger literary and cultural significance of books in general as related to notions of intellectual freedom, literary quality, and propriety.

Compared to other texts on the subject, *Silenced in the Library* serves foremost as a reference tool, focusing on the contexts of the challenges themselves, rather than replicating any ideological or theoretical analyses of censorship or literary merit. In contrast to resources like Dawn Sova's extensive Literature Suppressed series, *Silenced in the Library* is a more concisely composed and researched retrospective, designed suitably for on-the-spot reference, readers advisory, and trivia, rather than in-depth scholarship and analysis. Jarvis brings new titles and authors into the conversation, with his range of included genres and publishing dates extending beyond the ALA-centric lists of usual suspects found in their Hit List series and popular guides such as Herbert Foerstel's *Banned in the U.S.A.*, while still holding space for those more notorious major players in this well-rounded collection.

In all, this is an accessible and navigable guide to texts central to the history and future of intellectual freedom, as well as a narrative recollection of evolving popular attitudes toward divisive topics, proving useful for librarians, educators, and anyone engaged in reader's advisory and book-adjacent education, as well as activists and readers of all kinds. *Silenced in the Library* would certainly be an asset in planning informed and engaging programming related to censorship and intellectual freedom for any literacy and library advocate.

**Bautz, Annika, and James Gregory, eds. *Libraries, Books, and Collectors of Texts, 1600–1900*. New York: Routledge, 2018. ISBN: 978-1138593190. Hardcover: \$149.95.**

*Reviewed by Anders Tobiasson, Portland State University*

doi: 10.5325/libraries.4.1.0109

Walter Benjamin writes that “there is in the life of a collector a dialectical tension between the poles of disorder and order.”<sup>1</sup> The essays in *Libraries, Books, and Collectors of Texts, 1600–1900* (Routledge, 2018) often give concrete examples of that dialectical tension, as well as illustrate the interesting and surprising ways in which order can be imposed on a collection. In this journey