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OPINION | COMMENTARY

'Banned Books Week' Isn't Actually Interested in Banned Books

If it were, conservative writers like Abigail Shrier and Ryan T. Anderson would be on the list.

By Thomas Spence

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The annual ritual known as Banned Books Week rarely involves books that have been banned in any meaningful sense. Begun in 1982 and endorsed by such mainstream organizations as the American Library Association and PEN America, this gimmicky promotion caters primarily to those who believe that schoolchildren should have access to anything bound between two covers without the interference of those busybodies we call parents.

But this year, for the first time in the 40-year history of Banned Books Week, writers and publishers face the threat of real book-banning. Strangely enough, the sponsors of Banned Books Week have nothing to say about it.

My own publishing house, Regnery, and our authors have been in the crosshairs of powerful forces. Last year we published “Irreversible Damage: The Transgender Craze Seducing Our Daughters” by Abigail Shrier, a lawyer who writes frequently for these

pages. Focusing on the recent explosion of gender dysphoria among adolescent girls, she questions the rush to subject minors to life-altering surgical and chemical treatments.

A few months later, Amazon announced that it would no longer sell another title on a similar topic, “When Harry Became Sally: Responding to the Transgender Moment,” a 2019 book by Ryan T. Anderson.

We wondered if “Irreversible Damage” was next, and dozens of Amazon employees tried to make sure it was, petitioning to expunge it from the online store. Amazon, fortunately, decided not to ban Ms. Shrier’s book.

Amazon’s broad reach in the marketplace allows writers and publishers to bypass the quiet censorship of brick-and-mortar bookstores, whose commercial judgment is sometimes tinged with ideological prejudice. At the same time, the singular power of “Earth’s Biggest Bookstore” makes possible a new and more efficient form of censorship. If Amazon doesn’t carry a book, it is practically invisible.

Woke Amazon employees know this, and so do politicians. Sen. Elizabeth Warren, for example, finds intolerable the journalist Alex Berenson’s relentless dissent from the pandemic party line. His four self-published eBooks appear on a list that the senator recently presented to Amazon’s CEO, Andy Jassy. The unsubtle suggestion: If he knows what’s good for him, he’ll throw them onto a digital bonfire. In November, Regnery will publish Mr. Berenson’s deeply researched book, “Pandemia.” Will it be available on Amazon? That seems to depend on whether Mr. Jassy has the stomach for a fight with Sen. Warren.

The worst casualties of Amazon’s banning will be unseen: the books not published because they might be excluded from the only bookstore that really matters. What publisher will invest in a book if Amazon is unlikely to carry it?

You might think that this genuine book-banning would give a new complexion to this year’s Banned Books Week. Yet one of the principal sponsors, the American Booksellers Association, is no more interested in giving dissenters a place on the shelf than Sen. Warren is. This summer, Regnery participated in the ABA’s “white box” program, a monthly mailing of review copies to 750 independent bookstores. It is difficult to get these stores to consider our generally conservative titles, but we thought “Irreversible Damage,” praised by a number of feminists, might pique the interest of the more open-minded members.

We were wrong. When a bookstore employee in Brooklyn pulled a copy of “Irreversible Damage” from the box, the shock of encountering a book that contradicted her passionately held opinions drove her to [Twitter](#) to rebuke the ABA for hurting her feelings. “I’m seething,” she [wrote](#). Within hours, the ABA had apologized to its member stores for a “serious, violent incident” and declared that sharing this title with booksellers was “inexcusable.”

Sharing this title with booksellers was “inexcusable.” In a lengthier message three weeks later, the ABA added the outrageous defamation that the book constitutes “hate speech.”

So welcome to Banned Books Week 2021. The theme this year is “Books Unite Us. Censorship Divides Us.” The list of featured titles, almost entirely limited to progressive works, does present a united front. But what about the second part of that theme? When will Banned Books Week pay attention to banned books?

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