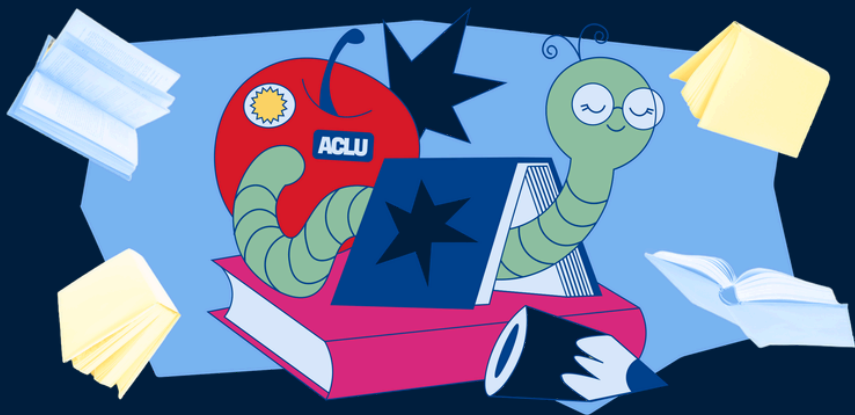


HOW TO START A BANNED BOOK CLUB

A guide by the ACLU of North Carolina



ACLU North Carolina

WHY YOU SHOULD START A banned book club

Ideas are powerful. That's why the right to free expression includes the freedom to read whatever we choose. But it's also why state governments and local school districts have attempted to restrict access to books in school libraries and classrooms.

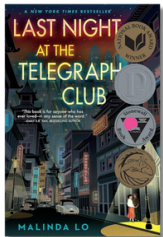
The state legislature has enacted several new laws in the past few years that increase school censorship and limit access to school library books, including a law allowing parents to restrict the school library books their children can check out and new requirements for how school districts respond to challenges to school library books.

Libraries exist to help people encounter and explore different ideas, topics, and viewpoints. Limiting the books available in libraries shrinks the world for students and limits their ability to explore perspectives that are different from their own. It also makes it harder for LGBTQ+ students and students of color to see themselves represented in books that might provide them with connection, hope, and inspiration.

If you want to help ensure that these books reach audiences that want to read them, you can start your own Banned Book Club in your community, and we're here to help.

HOW TO USE THIS TOOLKIT

We've collected some of the titles that have been challenged, removed, or restricted in North Carolina in recent years. Each one includes a description and some background on the book. Choose one or more books that interest your group, create a welcoming space for discussion, and invite people to read, listen, and learn from one another. The digital version of the toolkit on our website includes discussion questions to help start the conversation. You can find it at the QR code on the back of this booklet.



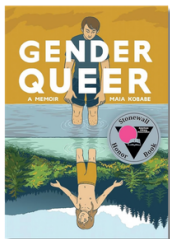
Last Night at the Telegraph Club | Malinda Lo

A gripping, tender coming-of-age novel exploring identity, queerness, and historical upheaval set in San Francisco's Chinatown during the 1950s. Recommended for grades 9-12.

#5 most banned in the country 2025, pulled from shelves pending review by Pender Co. Schools in 2023.

Discussion questions:

- What perspectives did Kath and Lily bring to each other? How did Lily's self-perception change? Who are the people in your own life that get you to look closely at yourself and the world around you?
- Thinking of her mother's statement "There are no homosexuals in this family," Lily shares with Lana, "I don't want to lie about it, but I can't help thinking it would be easier if I did." What do you think of Lana's advice to Lily? What advice would you give to Lily?
- What did you know about the 1950s before reading this book? What assumptions did you have about people, places, and events? What did you take away from this book that you might not have found by reading a history book?



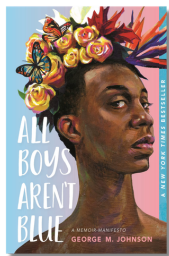
Gender Queer | Maia Kobabe

Started as a way for the author (who uses e/em/eir pronouns) to explain to eir family what it means to be nonbinary and asexual, *Gender Queer* is a memoir about identity, gender, sexuality, and self-discovery. Recommended for grades 9-12.

#3 most challenged in the country 2025, banned by Alamance Co. in 2022.

Discussion questions:

- *Gender Queer* is written as a memoir, relating real experiences from the author's life. How do you think the work benefits from existing within this genre, as opposed to telling the same story through fiction?
- A big part of *Gender Queer* is about Maia's struggle to find a way to perform eir gender. How do you understand your gender? What makes you feel like it fits your specific self?
- When was the first time you saw a character that you could see yourself in in media? How did it make you feel?



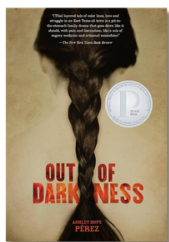
All Boys Aren't Blue: A Memoir-Manifesto | George M. Johnson

In a series of personal essays, George M. Johnson explores their childhood, adolescence, and college years in New Jersey and Virginia. Recommended for grades 7-12.

One of the 20 books Moms for Liberty challenged in Wake County in 2026.

Discussion questions:

- For Johnson's whole life, he's been able to depend on his family, even if they don't understand or necessarily agree with his choices. Talk about a time you've relied on your family or friends and they've fully supported you. Are there things you're going through now that you could use support with?
- When he was in college, Johnson was initially torn about joining a fraternity. What's a club, activity, or hobby you've been interested in engaging with but have been afraid you won't be accepted? What are pros and cons to trying it out?
- If you could write a memoir-manifesto, what would your purpose be? Who would you be writing it for? What hope would you be giving them?



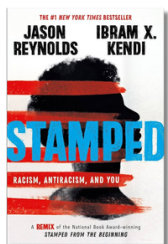
Out of Darkness | Ashley Hope Pérez

Ashley Hope Pérez takes the facts of the 1937 New London school explosion as a backdrop for a riveting novel about segregation, love, family, and the forces that destroy people. Recommended for grades 9-12.

Banned by Catawba, Cumberland, and Pender Counties in 2023.

Discussion questions:

- The book progresses chronologically, with the exception of a section at the beginning. Why do you think the author begins this way and doesn't include this section later? How does this introduction set the tone for the rest of the novel?
- Why does Mr. Turner refuse to sell to Naomi during normal store hours? What racist remarks and actions does Naomi encounter throughout the novel, and how is this similar to and different from the racism Wash encounters?
- The book's narrator is revealed at the end of the novel. What is the narrator's motivation for telling Wash and Naomi's story?



Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You | Jason Reynolds and Ibram X. Kendi

This book shines a light on the many insidious forms of racist ideas, and on ways readers can identify and stamp out racist thoughts in their daily lives. Recommended for grades 5-12.

Removed from AP English curriculums in New Hanover Co. in 2023.

Discussion questions:

- What is history? How is history much more than simply a recording of dates and facts that are significant only to the past? What are the consequences of continued omissions about the history of racism and antiracism in the US?
- In what ways is racism woven into the fabric of American institutions? Where do you see evidence of this today?
- At the beginning of *Stamped* and in chapter 13, Reynolds asserts, “Life rarely fits neatly into a box. People are complicated and selfish and contradictory.” Who are some of the complicated political figures, past and present, and what makes them complex?



I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter | Erika Sanchez

A stunning young adult novel about a teenager coming to terms with losing her sister and finding herself amid the pressures, expectations, and stereotypes of growing up in a Mexican American home. Recommended for grades 7-12.

Banned by Pender and Burke Counties in 2023.

Discussion questions:

- Despite experiencing intense grief, Julia continues to be in conflict with her family. Do you think she's struggling for acceptance and independence or against culture and tradition?
- Julia wants to apply to college but fears *la migra* will discover her parents are undocumented and deport them. How does her family's tenuous immigration status impact her goals and her relationship with education?
- We know that Julia struggles to find joy in life, except when it comes to books. How does her relationship with books affect her relationships with people?



The Poet X | Elizabeth Acevedo

An astonishing novel-in-verse by an award-winning slam poet about an Afro-Latina heroine who tells her story with blazing words and powerful truth. Recommended for grades 7-12.

Banned by Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools in 2023, subject of a 2020 lawsuit against Lake Norman Charter School

Discussion questions:

- What did you think of Acevedo's decision to write the novel in verse? What effect did this have on the telling of the story?
- How did Acevedo's setting and language paint a picture of Xiomara's home and culture? What was most effective about her descriptions?
- How do Xiomara and her twin support one another as they face pressure to fulfill certain expectations of gender and identity from their family?



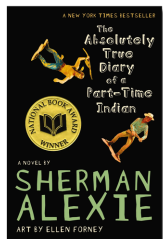
Felix Ever After | Kacen Callender

A revelatory young adult novel about a transgender teen grappling with identity and self-discovery while falling in love for the first time. Recommended for grades 7-12.

Banned by Burke Co. Schools in 2023.

Discussion questions:

- When the Instagram troll starts sending Felix transphobic messages, Felix responds by saying “you [don’t] get to say who I am and who I’m not. You don’t have that power. Only I [do].” What parts of ourselves do only we have the power to define? How does this power relate to other areas of Felix’s identity and sense of self?
- How do you see Felix’s parents or his relationship with them impacting his choices and the way he sees himself? What about other characters and their parents? How do parents or parental figures influence you and how you make decisions?
- When the group is discussing their sexual identities, Ezra says he doesn’t care much about labels but acknowledges that they might be important to others. What do labels offer people in the face of discrimination and violence? Why might they matter? How do you use labels in your own life?



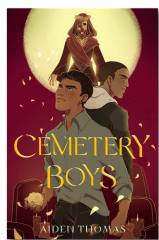
The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian | Sherman Alexie

This book tells the story of Junior, a budding cartoonist growing up on the Spokane Indian Reservation who leaves his troubled school on the rez to attend an all-white high school.

Banned by Pender Co. Schools in 2023 and Moore Co. Schools in 2024

Discussion questions:

- Junior is hyper aware of what it means to belong or not belong and he explores this constantly in the novel. What do you make of the theme of belonging/unbelonging as Junior navigates the spaces in his life? Where does the title of the book figure into this conversation?
- Junior's artwork is prominent throughout the book. What is the significance of Junior's art? How can/does his art take on different meanings in different moments for varying audiences?
- Arnold misses his best friend, Rowdy, after he starts his new school. But Rowdy doesn't seem to want to join him there. How do Arnold's and Rowdy's views of the reservation—and their own lives—differ? What do you think the author is trying to show you through those differences?



Cemetery Boys | Aiden Thomas

A trans boy determined to prove his gender to his traditional Latinx family summons a ghost who refuses to leave in this paranormal young adult novel. Recommended for grades 9-12.

Banned pending review by Pender Co. Schools in 2023, later returned to shelves.

Discussion questions:

- Cemetery Boys is steeped in Latinx culture and traditions, especially those surrounding Día de Muertos. Which details and traditions were your favorites?
- At one point, Yadriel thinks: "Navigating pronouns was a minefield when language was based on gender." Why do you think the author chose to make the magic system in Cemetery Boys based on gender as well?
- Yadriel thinks that summoning a spirit and releasing it to the afterlife would allow him to prove himself as a brujo and a boy. But Julian questions why Yadriel needs to prove himself to begin with. Why do you think it was so important for Yadriel?