In *Fahrenheit 451*, the author, Ray Bradbury, illustrates a world in which books are endangered. To prevent the public from reading unorthodox ideas the government outlaws books and sends fire fighters to “burn ‘em to ashes, and then burn the ashes” (8). Bradbury’s horrific vision of future remains fictional today; however, a fireless revolution against intellectual freedom has occurred for centuries in the form of book banning. When individuals feel threatened by heretical beliefs in a book, they may try to issue a ban. While some argue that book banning is a form of protection, it inhibits intellectual freedom and creates a society wherein innovative ideas perish.

Though book banning occurs today, the tradition has a history extending from sixteenth-century Europe. In 1559, the Roman Catholic Church published *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*, a list of banned books. The Church intended to prevent the proliferation of Reformist propaganda, but it also wanted to stop the circulation of heretical or blasphemous beliefs (Jenkins). The Church banned classics, like works by Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero, because these works contained Pagan themes. However, the Church became increasingly blinded in its judgment; once, it almost banned a book on dining etiquette, because it promoted rational thought without including references to Christian morality. Ironically, works by Marx, Freud, Darwin, and Hitler were not on the updated list, because the Church did not consider them dangerous (Heneghan). When the ideas in books present opinions contrary to shared cultural values, the offended party will act against the infringement by trying to ban books. For this reason, the practice of book banning continued into other settings even after the failed attempt of the Roman Catholic Church to limit intellectual expression.
At present, book banning is most associated with public schools. Often, parents will challenge books for containing sexual themes, profanity, blasphemy, and political agendas (Long). Jennifer Rossock argues that most parents who encourage book banning in schools do not understand the full context of the material. For instance, censors want to ban *To Kill a Mockingbird* because of racial slurs, but they neglect the book’s historical and cultural importance and the significance of such language in the story. J.D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* receives particular attention in book banning groups because of profanity, homosexuality, and prostitution; however, these claims ignore the book’s aesthetic as an accurate portrait of adolescence (Jenkins).

Admittedly, not all claims against books are unfounded. Some books contain messages that are debatable in the context of a public elementary school. Books like *And Tango Makes Three*, a story about two homosexual penguins who hatch and raise a baby penguin, and *The Lorax*, a children’s book containing environmentalist values, present controversial issues to a young audience that may be unready for adult problems (Petrilli). Some parents try to ban or restrict access—requiring a child to have the signature of a parent before borrowing a restricted title—to protect their children from accessing these books. Ironically, this approach actually generates more hype for banned books (Kidd 199). Parents should retain the right to oversee what their children read, but banning a book affects all children who use that library. A protest group PABBIS, Parents Against Bad Books In Schools, believes that one parent’s actions to remove a “bad book” from the shelves can save hundreds of young minds, but this reasoning assumes that everyone holds the same values (“Controversial and challenged”). A socially conservative parent may not want his or her child to read *And Tango Makes Three*, but a parent who is trying to teach his or her child about the importance of acceptance and the presence of homosexuality in society will find the book an excellent resource. One person should not limit the availability of a book for the masses.

PABBIS advocates restricted access to information and instead pushes an agenda against books containing controversial content. The protestors of PABBIS argue that their tax dollars should not be used to promote scandalous material in schools. In spite of
disgruntled parents, teachers should expose students to controversial material. While students do not need to accept the viewpoints presented in the classroom, they should have awareness of current dichotomies. The news writer on PABBIS’s website writes that library science and English students are taught to “promote, select, acquire, use and defend smutty books by their college professors, who are even more leftist and social marxist[sic] than average college professors” (“Controversial and challenged”). Unsavory words are both the weapon and the target of PABBIS, but their defense that books indoctrinate children into supporting certain ideologies is flawed.

While books may evoke certain feelings about a topic or introduce conflict to a belief, Christine Jenkins cites research by Joyce Lancaster to show that reading does not change but reinforces the opinions of children. In her study, Lancaster showed five classrooms of white, middle-class fifth grade students various pictures of children playing. The photographs showed the same activity but had a varying number of black and white students playing together. Lancaster asked her subjects to choose which group they would want to join—the group of all whites, all blacks, or a mixture. Using their answers, she determined whether the students had low or high prejudice levels. During the next six weeks, Lancaster encouraged students to read a variety of books that had a positive display of black students before redoing the picture test. After reading, the students who originally lacked prejudice had even less prejudice, and the students who were originally prejudiced were more prejudice. Lancaster concluded that reading boosted previously held opinions and that family and peers affected beliefs more than reading. Parents who fear that reading books with questionable material will alter their child’s behavior ought to worry more about the example that they set rather than the opinions expressed in literature.

Moreover, proponents for book bans focus more on themselves rather than on the author who wanted to spread his or her ideas. The First Amendment of the United States Constitution safeguards the freedom of speech and press, and book banning abridges this right to intellectual expression (Long). In a presentation against a ban on Aldous Huxley’s _Brave New World_, a presenter had the audience write their greatest fear on a
piece of paper. When the audience finished, the presenter collected the papers and read each one before tearing the papers to pieces and calling their fears trash in order to allow the audience to empathize with the author of a banned book (Rossuck). To Huxley, *Brave New World* illustrates his fears, and to have a panel judge his work as inappropriate disregards his entitlement to an opinion.

To combat book banning, libraries have started a tradition known as Banned Books Week. During the last week of September each year, librarians promote challenged books and the importance of intellectual freedom (Petrilli). Judith F. Krug, the director of the Office of Intellectual Freedom, says that about eighty-five percent of challenged titles do not receive attention (Long). Banned Books Week also functions as an exposé, revealing titles that have been secretly challenged—and sometimes removed—from libraries throughout the year. Book bans are a silent killer in libraries, massacring ideas and beliefs. The American Library Association works to keep books on the shelves and available to the public. As outlined in the Library Bill of Rights, libraries “must support access to information on all subjects that serve the needs or interests of each user, regardless of the user's age or the content of the material” (Chapin). Restricting access to information will prevent the conversation of ideas. “Protecting” the public by banning books exacerbates the problem; information—for better or for worse—must remain available to all.

While this country adheres to the importance of the First Amendment and its declaration of intellectual freedom, books are challenged each year. Libraries and by extension their patrons must support all opinions—regardless of popularity, controversy, or creed—to foster the proliferation and propagation of ideas. Ray Bradbury’s character Montag said that everyone “need[s] to be really bothered once in a while” (40). The prospect of having books silently removed from shelves and the ideas that they contain hidden should create alarm. Books and their ideas need to be treasured, and the right to intellectual freedom preserved. Increased awareness and proactive movements against book banning need to combine to extinguish this fireless revolution. Voices must sound to protect the voices contained within books.
Works Cited


