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What does Wyoming have in common with Tennessee? Both states were highlighted in a New York Times article as harboring politicians bent on censoring reading material. In their article, "Book Ban Efforts Spread Across the U.S.," published January 30, 2022, Elizabeth Harris and Alexandra Alter write that in Wyoming, "a county prosecutor's office considered charges against library employees for stocking books like 'Sex Is a Funny Word' and 'This Book Is Gay'."

In Tennessee, state the writers, the McMinn County Board of Education voted to remove the Pulitzer Prize-winning graphic novel "Maus" from an eighth-grade module on the Holocaust. The Board objected to nudity depicted (that's nude cartoon mice!) and the cussing.

When I retired, I settled in Wyoming, but ten years of my teaching life happened in Nashville, Tenn., where I frequented the city's library. Hence, I was delighted to find a May 5, 2022, NPR report indicating that the very library is bucking the would-be censors by issuing "banned-book library cards" with the legend: "I read banned books with my library card."

According to the NYTimes writers, the American Library Association announced, last fall it received an unprecedented 330 reports of book challenges, each of which can include multiple books.

Frequent targets of banning efforts are books about race, gender, and sexuality, like George M. Johnson's "All Boys Aren't Blue" and Toni Morrison's "The Bluest Eye" and her Pulitzer-Prize winning "Beloved." The latter takes an event from the life of an escaped slave who killed her baby girl to prevent her growing up enslaved. Yes, "Beloved" is disconcerting to read. It casts an unsparing light on the violence of slavery, including the sexual violations white Southern men deemed their birthright. Should high school readers be spared such detail? By the time they reach high-school reading, these teens will have witnessed their share of social turmoil.

The editor deleted the following two paragraphs (my bold script) to shorten the submission.

One title that caught my eye: Kurt Vonnegut's "Slaughterhouse Five." The author wrote the book as sci-fi fantasy, but parts of it are autobiographical. Serving in the U.S. army during WWII, Vonnegut found himself a prisoner of war in the German city of Dresden, when, in mid-February 1945, the combined RAF and USAAF strategic bomber forces targeted the city. 772 British bombers and 527 American ones dropped more than 3,900 tons of high-explosive bombs and incendiary devices on the inhabitants. Dresden was a Red-Cross-designated "free city," where Eastern refugees, fleeing the advancing Soviets, sheltered by the thousands. The bombing and the resulting firestorm turned the city to rubble and killed about 25,000 people. Three more USAAF air raids followed. Vonnegut recalled the "utter destruction" and "carnage unfathomable" as the Germans put him and

other POWs to work gathering bodies for mass burial. The firestorm had shrunk adult skeletons to the size of small children; still, “there were too many corpses to bury . . . the Nazis sent in troops with flamethrowers.” In a special 1976 edition, the author wrote of “the Dresden atrocity” as “tremendously expensive and meticulously planned” and, in the end, meaningless.

It seems to me, in light of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, “Slaughterhouse Five” is relevant. As one representative of Genocide Watch put it, “The Nazi Holocaust was among the most evil genocides in history. But the Allies’ firebombing of Dresden and nuclear destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were also war crimes and . . . acts of genocide. We are all capable of evil.” It’s something to keep in mind when tempted to hold forth on other people’s misdeeds. In the almost three months since Putin began his offensive, millions have been forced to flee Ukraine, and entire cities have been reduced to rubble. “I never thought Europe would see another war,” said my cousin in Germany when we talked on the phone.

Banned-Book clubs are springing up elsewhere. The Daily Kos Banned Book Club alerts us that, “Once a month, we will highlight a new book that is currently being targeted. Once announced, we’ll send you a link to the story. Book Club members will then engage in conversation in the comments. You are also invited to write your own story about the reading if you want to focus on a particular aspect.”

Their first selection is George M. Johnson’ “All Boys Aren’t Blue,” which tells what it was like to grow up being Black and queer. I’ve been reading the book via the library’s online “Libby,” and find it informative, intelligent, and well written. Yet, as of this writing, “All Boys Aren’t Blue” has been banned from public schools and libraries in at least 15 states.

The club recommends we buy the books to be discussed from amazon or other booksellers, but participation does not hinge on purchase. And so, I’m making “I read banned books” part of my Zoom book discussion group. Who knows, a Wyoming library may decide to follow the Tennessee model and issue its own “I read banned books with my library card.”