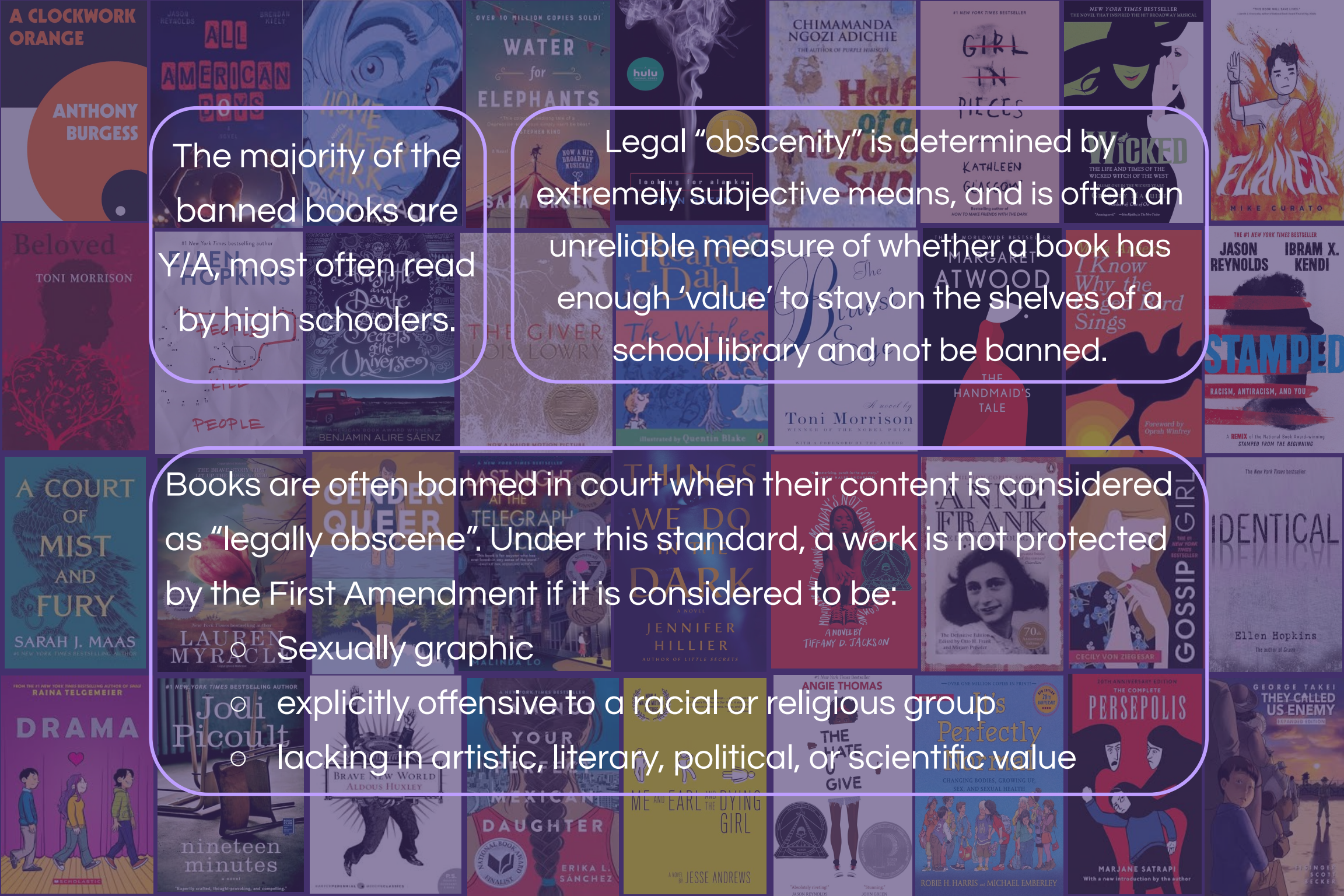
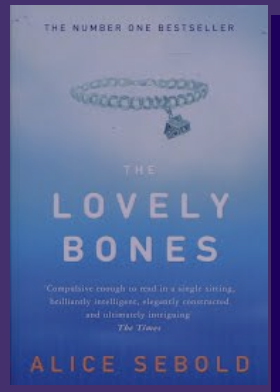
By: Purvaja Srinivasan

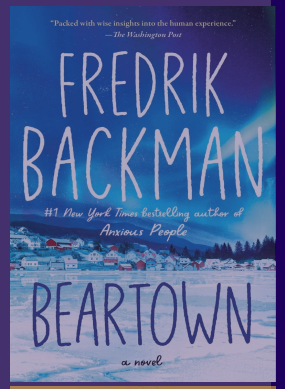
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UNIQUE TITLES HAVE BEEN BANNED FROM SCHOOL LIBRARIES IN THE LAST FOUR YEARS ALONE.

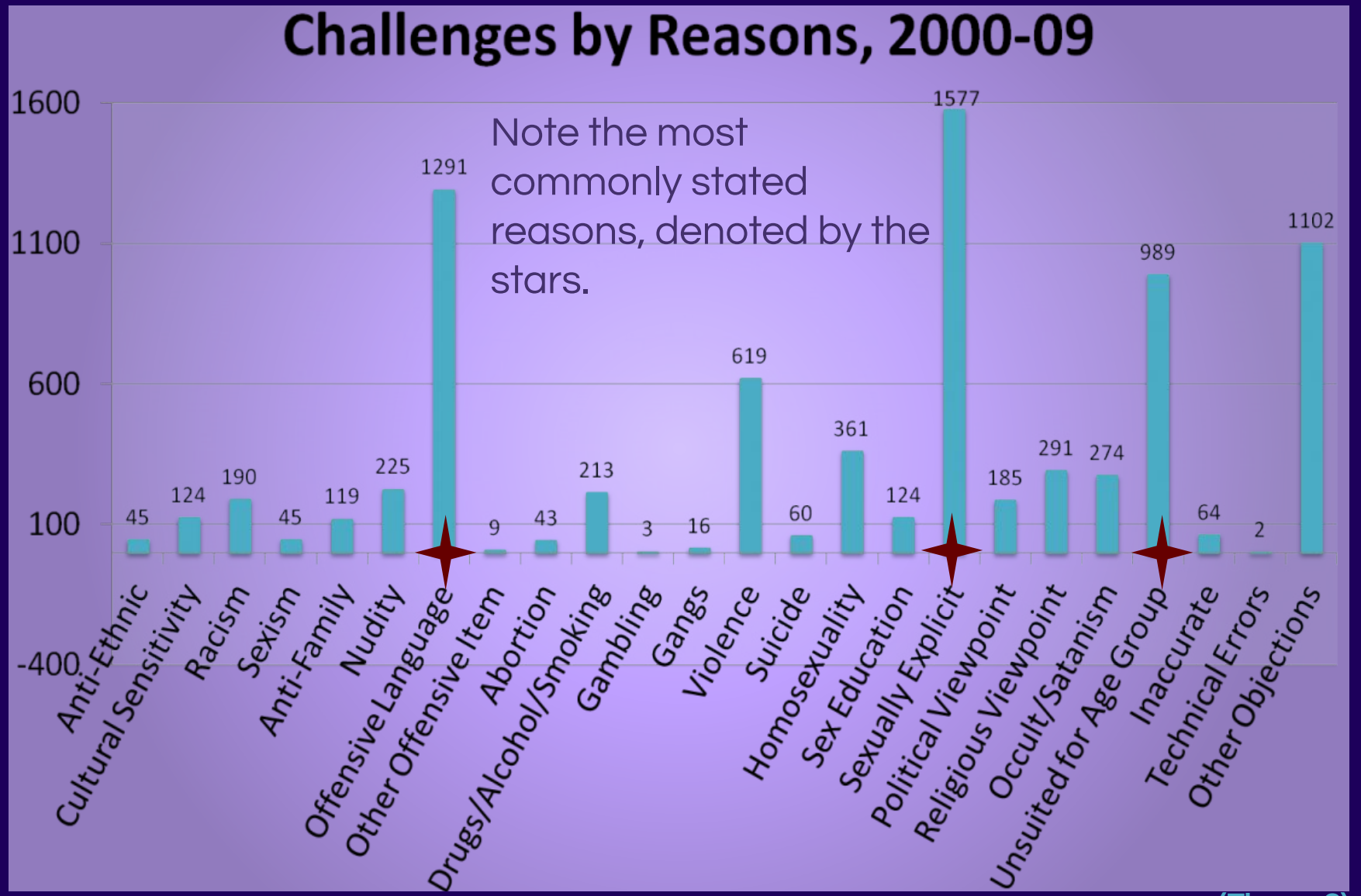

The majority of the banned books are Y/A, most often read by high schoolers.
Legal “obscenity” is determined by extremely subjective means, and is often an unreliable measure of whether a book has enough ‘value’ to stay on the shelves of a school library and not be banned.
Books are often banned in court when their content is considered as “legally obscene”. Under this standard, a work is not protected by the First Amendment if it is considered to be:
Sexually graphic
explicitly offensive to a racial or religious group
lacking in artistic, literary, political, or scientific value



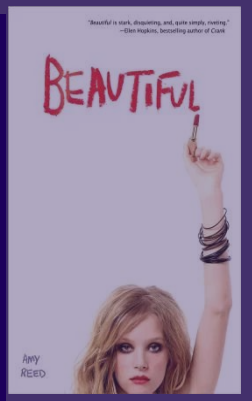


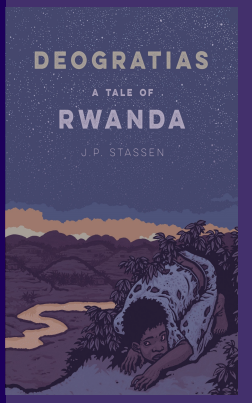




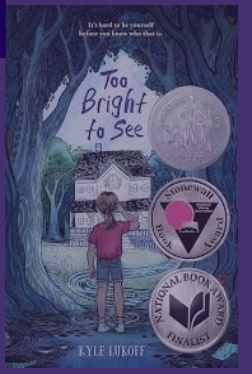


(Figure 2)









As this graph of commonly cited reasons for book bans is quite antiquated, would any of these reasons still be applied to the state of book bans today?

The Court of Personal Opinion

- The process to decide the fate of challenged books is unreliable to begin, yet the most recent instances of book banning happen even without this process.
    - For the 2024-25 school year, swaths of books are being removed from school libraries out of a “fear of legislation” rather than actual existing legislation that mandates it.
- This leads to book bans being carried out for increasingly vague, subjective, politically-motivated, insufficient, misinformed, or outright bigoted reasons.



What does it mean if a work is "sexually explicit" anyways?

This phrase, along with complaints about "profane language", are still constantly used to argue that a book isn't "appropriate" for school-aged children and therefore, should not be present in a school library.

They're too young to know LGTBQ+ families exist!

In children's book "And Tango Makes Three", it showed kids a nontraditional, LGBTQ+ family dynamic of two male penguins and a chick.

Even though some of the kids are gay, or have nontraditional families themselves, or have friends that do.

They're too young to know that puberty exists!

In "The Diary of Anne Frank", a diary written by a tween girl, it showed Anne being curious about her own changing body, and therefore shows "graphic sexual content" to her audience.

Even though they are likely going through it themselves themselves and also have questions about their body.

They're too young to know sex exists! (and people their age might want it).

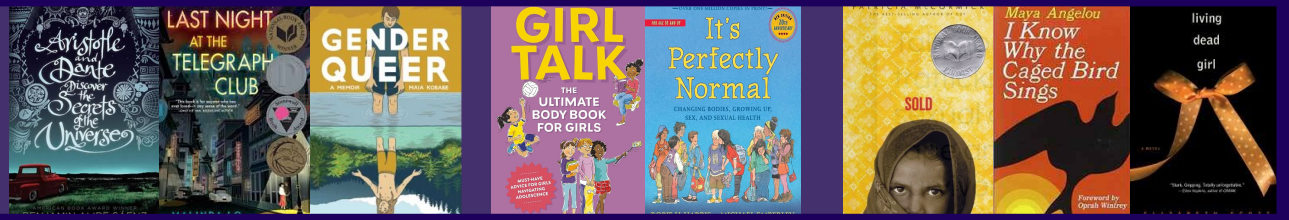
In Sarah J. Mass's YA dark fantasy series A Court of Thorns and Roses (which already comes with some controversy), many of her characters pursue romantic and sexual relationships with each other.

Even though they are exploring their own sexual identities, and have likely already seen sexual content from other media.

The "sexually explicit" label is also applied to books that contains depictions of sexual violence, domestic abuse, and rape, even though they are as real as any of the previously stated examples. Even literal sexual education content isn't safe.

"I'll know it when I see it"? OR Missing the point?

(Note that profanity is a reason used across all categories).

"Pornographic and obscene material" in a book that is intended to...	
"Graphic violence" or "depictions of racism" in a book that is intended to...	
"Promotes" or "glorifies" harmful behaviors in a book that is intended to... (Note that there is significant overlap between the presented sections as they are often put together in book challenges.)	

(Click on the book covers from left to right, by rows in presentation mode)

By judging books on a few "obscene" parts, book banners ignore the themes and lessons that authors want to communicate and sometimes even purposefully use those scenes to discredit the stories that are told. For example, Jodi Picoult's harrowing tale of a school shooting, "Nineteen Minutes" was banned from school libraries; not for violence, but for *sexual content*! This example shows how buzzwords/inflammatory labels can be used to mask other motives for book banning by fixating on a cuss word or sex scene and drumming up enough shock so that the author's purpose or message is cast aside.

Censoring Reality

Banning books that talk about harsh realities is an attempt to pretend these realities don't exist.

This also affects school curriculums that include teachings of systemic racism, slavery, climate change, etc.

Books provide a safe space to explore your own identity, learn about difficult topics, and empathize with those different than you.

Without this safe space students are ignorant and susceptible to misinformation from inaccurate/ biased sources.



(Figure 3)

The Legislature

Florida's law was one of the first to call for this kind of widespread censorship in schools, and many other states have been inspired by it, as seen in the examples here.

Florida's HB 1557 "Parental Rights in Education" (also colloquially called the "Don't Say Gay" bill) restricts discussion of sexual orientation and gender identity in schools.

South Carolina's Regulation 43-170: puts groundwork in place to enable removal of a book across all the state's school districts.

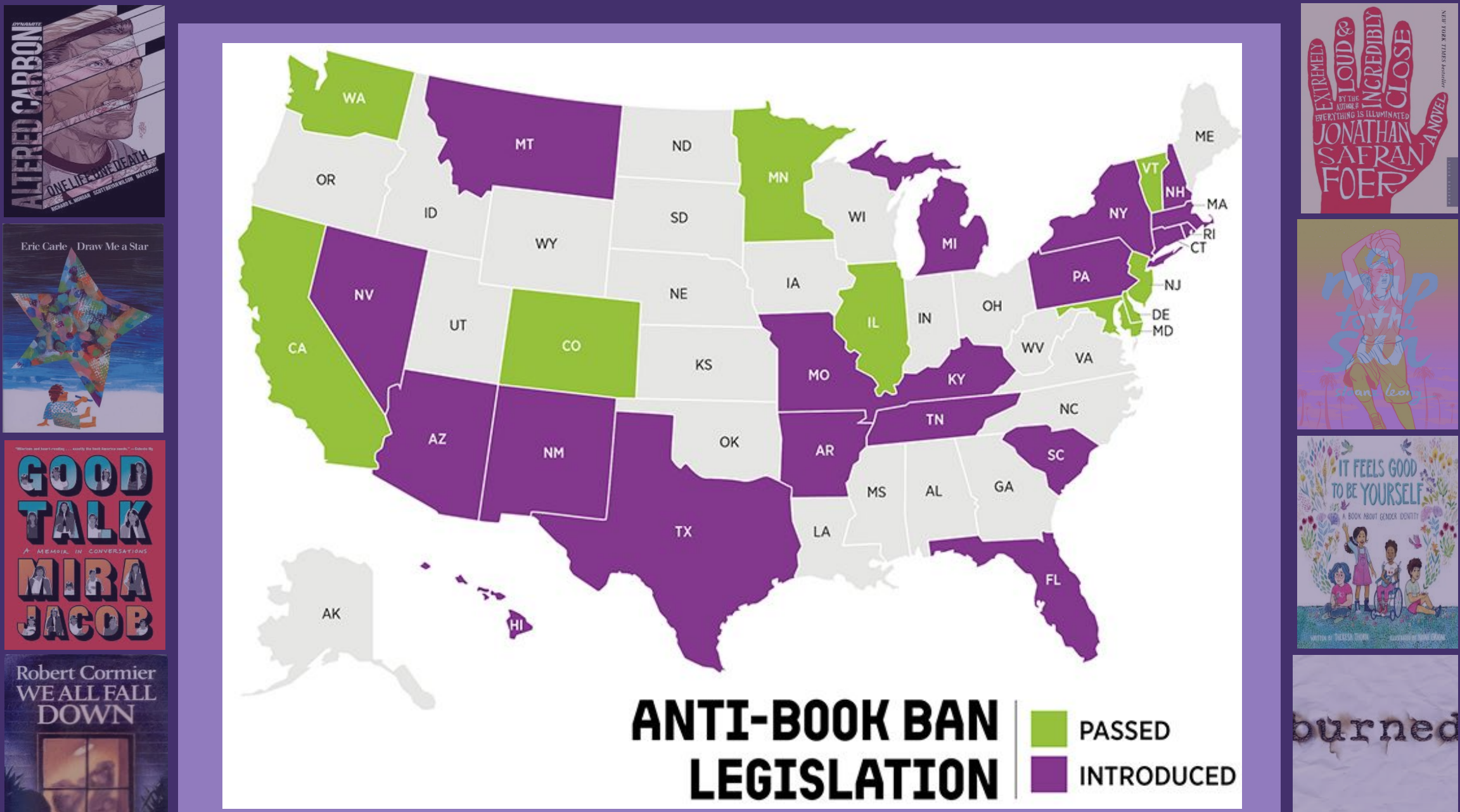
Utah's HB 29: bans a book in schools statewide as soon as three districts (or two districts + five charter schools) have declared it as "objective sensitive material".

"No-read" lists circulate on the web. Any objecting party can simply look them up, copy and paste, then demand hundreds of titles be removed. Preemptive "no-buy" lists have also been created and shared.

So What Can be done?

I. At the individual level: Of course, the best way to combat book bans is to read banned books and share them.
   A. Staying informed is a must, as new rules and precedents are constantly being set for US censorship.

II. Legally:
   A. Many authors, parents, free speech advocacy organizations (PEN America, American Library Association, etc.) have filed lawsuits against unlawful censorship in schools.
   B. Multiple states like Illinois, California and New Jersey have passed bills to outlaw the banning of books for “partisan or doctrinal” reasons, create a “Bill of Rights” that libraries must adopt or forgo state funding, and protect librarians.


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ANTI-BOOK BAN LEGISLATION
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(Figure 4)

(Figure 5)



John Green Sums It All Up

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