

‘Criminal liability for librarians’: the fight against US rightwing book bans

Skye Perryman of Democracy Forward, which helped block a controversial Arkansas law, says attacks will continue



Martin Pengelly in Washington

[@MartinPengelly](#)

Sat 5 Aug 2023 11.00 BST

In the classic comedy Blackadder, Prime Minister William Pitt the Younger demanded “tougher sentences for geography teachers”. So much for satire. In the real world, US Republican politicians are now seeking “criminal liability for librarians”.

To Skye Perryman, president and chief executive of the nonprofit Democracy Forward, as absurd as rightwing book bans can seem (a Florida claim that the Arthur books can “damage the souls” of children a particularly florid example), this is no laughing matter at all.

She says: “In Arkansas, Governor Sarah Huckabee Sanders signed a bill into law that would have done a number of things, including creating the potential of criminal liability for librarians.”

The law, Act 372, would make it a misdemeanor offense, punishable by up to a year in jail and a fine of up to \$2,500, for librarians and booksellers to furnish minors with materials deemed “harmful” by authorities. The law also provides for challenges to materials in public libraries.

Last Saturday, two days before the bill was to become law, a federal judge blocked it, as a violation of free speech rights under the first amendment to the US constitution.

The judge, Timothy L Brooks, quoted Fahrenheit 451, Ray Bradbury’s dystopian novel: “There is more than one way to burn a book. And the world is full of people running about with lit matches.” Feelings are running high.

Arkansas is set to appeal. It will face organised opposition. Democracy Forward is part of a broad coalition including the Arkansas Library Association, the Central Arkansas Library System, community bookstores, the American Booksellers Association, the Association of American Publishers, the Authors Guild, the state branch of the American Civil Liberties Union and individual library users.

For Perryman, such work is only beginning.

“What we know is that laws like the one in Arkansas are part of a national effort from anti-democratic forces, movements and people that do not represent the vast majority of the American people, or even the vast majority of people in states like Arkansas, that are seeking to sow culture wars in order to undermine democracy.

“In Arkansas, we blocked that law with a broad coalition of booksellers, librarians and community members, and I think that’s really important in terms of understanding what’s happening in these communities. We are seeing people who do not typically go to court, who do not typically resort to the legal process, really mobilising.”

Attempted book bans in libraries and public schools have proliferated in Republican states, complaints made on grounds of history, race, gender, LGBTQ+ rights and more. Attempts to ban titles by high-profile authors ([Maya Angelou](#), [Amanda Gorman](#), [Art Spiegelman](#)) have attracted national headlines. The phenomenon has perhaps been most visible in Florida, under a governor, Ron DeSantis, running for the Republican presidential nomination, and with “grass roots” groups such as Moms for Liberty sprouting and shouting loud.

Perryman points to sources of fertiliser for such rapid growth.

“We have seen a real effort on the part of anti-democratic and far-right actors like Sarah Huckabee Sanders, like Ron DeSantis in Florida, like [Governor] Greg Abbott in Texas, like legislatures that have developed this [policy]. We have seen a real effort from those sort of lawmakers to develop strategies that are responsive to a very vocal but small minority of people.

“The far right has been strategic about trying to organize groups [such as Moms for Liberty](#), formed to provide an appearance that there is an organic movement sprouting across the country, that people are really concerned about children being able to access books, about freedom of expression and what’s being taught in schools.

“And what we see time and again is that those voices do not represent a majority of people, and that they are part of a network that is coordinated to try to create issues, in order to be able to roll back progress and roll back our basic freedoms, including the freedom to read and the ability of communities to thrive.

“In order to combat that, we have to understand what we’re up against. And so what we have done [at Democracy Forward](#) is not only work with on-the-ground communities seeking resources to fight back, who need legal representation … but also to really look and monitor [what is happening](#) at the local and state levels throughout the country. And who is behind those efforts.”

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2023/aug/05/criminal-liability-librarians-us-rightwing-book-bans-arkansas-democracy-forward>