

Carleton University
Fall 2025 Preliminary Course Outline
Department of English

ENGL 4607B / 5900G / WGST 4812 / 5901

Topic: Ban this Book: Censorship, Sexuality, Diversity, and Questions of “Harm”

Prerequisites: ENGL4607B/WGST4812: 4th-yr standing in appropriate ENGL/WGST program

ENGL5900G/WGST5901: enrolled in ENGL or WGST graduate program

Or permission of the department

Format: In-person, not suitable for online students. The course format emphasizes peer learning and requires committed in-person presence

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Carleton University is located on the traditional, unceded and un-surrendered Territory of the Anishinaabe Algonquin Nation, the customary keepers and defenders of the Kichi Sibi (Ottawa River) watershed. Carleton occupies this land as a settler institution, a result of an economy of property and allocation of public space facilitated by the nation-state of Canada. As a settler whose ancestors came as uninvited visitors, my responsibility is to work to develop right relationship to this land, including the earth, water, and non-human plants and animals, and to the Indigenous peoples who are the original and ongoing stewards of this land

***** This is a preliminary syllabus only—texts and assignments are subject to change. A complete version will be available closer to the start of the term. *****

Course Description

This description is tentative! It is also too ambitious and will be scaled back

This course will explore laws, policies, trials, and practices that have targeted books—and bookstores and libraries—for representations of 1) marginalized sexual and gender identities & desires and, more recently, 2) racialized identities and information about racist and imperial histories. The latter may include, on one end, the suppression of historical information and analyses of slavery and imperialism, and on the other, suppression or removal of “classic” literature that includes racist language.

We will research and discuss books that have been suppressed as well as the context of their legal (or not so legal) suppression, seizure, burning, or other forms of censorship. Learning about literary censorship is painful for any student of literature; we will aim to alleviate—and counter—the weight of this learning through the pleasures and value of reading and discussing powerful, impactful literature that has faced suppression. We will also learn about those who have sought freedom and social transformation through literature while actively resisting censorship.

The goals of the course are

- 1) to read and appreciate literature that has been deemed “obscene,” banned, and/or removed from libraries
- 2) to learn about the histories and cultural contexts of censorship, including the recent resurgence of censorship and attacks on public and school libraries.
- 3) to learn how individuals and organizations have resisted censorship and promoted the freedom to read, write, publish, and share work that supports equity
- 4) to learn how reading and writing have functioned as forms of resistance in oppressive contexts

With our focus on how censorship has targeted representations of sexual, gender, and racialized minorities and histories, we will consider how concepts of “vice” and “harm” have been mobilized in censorship activity.

Course Materials: Historical & Theoretical Focus Points

Our course will focus on British, US, and Canadian texts and contexts, organized around three key historical moments:

1880s to 1920s

Theoretical framing: the history of sexuality as a “history of discourses” (Foucault)

Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and its role in Wilde’s trials which eventually led to his imprisonment for “acts of gross indecency between men”

Radclyffe Hall, *The Well of Loneliness*, in the context of early-twentieth century censorship and discourses of homosexual or “perverse” sexuality

Landmark obscenity trials of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* and D. H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*

The “Comstock Laws” in the United States

The Great War (WWI), sexuality, censorship, and issues of national security

1970s-2000

Historical framing: The role of reading, writing, publishing, and literary communities in movements for liberation including queer/trans, feminist, anti-racist, anti-war, and anti-capitalist contexts

HIV/AIDS epidemic, the demonization and death of gay men, the rise of queer theory & politics

The Canadian Border Services’ seizures of “obscene” material in the 1980s-90s, targeting Gay & Lesbian Bookstore

US National Endowment for the Arts’ withdrawal of funding for (queer) art deemed “obscene”

mid-2010s to present

Recent and ongoing book bans and attacks on school and public libraries in the US and Canada: we will consider these acts in relation to 1) claims of “parental rights” that are anti-LGBTQIA+, “anti-gender,” and anti-“critical race theory”, 2) attacks on “DEI” in the public and private sectors, and, to a much lesser extent 2) equity and trauma-informed claims to protect children from “harm.” Judith Butler’s *Whose Afraid of Gender?* will frame our understanding of current “anti-gender” attacks on reading.

Alongside learning about current repressive anti-book, anti-reading, and anti-library movements, we will also read some of the most-targeted books, such as Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Maia Kobabe’s *Gender Queer: A Memoir* (2019), and texts that address US history. Our reading may also include selections from the recent wave of YA and children’s books that protest and satirize book banning, such as Alan Gratz’s *Ban This Book* (2017), which was also banned in Florida in 2024, and activist literary projects to combat censorship, such as *Forbidden Passages: Writings Banned in Canada* (1995), and *Banned Together: Our Fight for Readers Rights* (YA focus, 2025)

Students will have the opportunity to research historical, recent, and ongoing issues of the interplay of systemic oppression of political minorities, forms of political power, liberation movements, publishing histories, censorship, and threats to libraries, as well as how censorship has been challenged in these contexts. Students will be invited to research practices of censorship (and anti-censorship) from the 1880s to now that extend beyond the primary focus of our course. If we’re lucky, the course will include special guests such as current public and school librarians, and/or representatives from organizations such as the Ottawa Trans library and PEN Canada.

Course Objectives (“Learning Outcomes”)

Through reading, written work, interactive exchange, independent research, and preparing for presentations and class discussion, our course invites you to:

- 1) **pay attention to**
 - the literary texts and historical contexts
 - your writing and communication
 - one another

- your own presence
- 2) ***practice and develop key skills in***
- communication: written and oral, formal and informal
 - teaching and group facilitation: presenting material and leading discussion
 - group engagement/collegial peer exchange
 - conducting and curating independent research
 - time management/project management
 - self-assessment and self-reflection; giving and receiving feedback
- 3) ***gain familiarity and facility with***
- a range of life writing (particularly auto/biographical) genres and forms
 - past, recent, and current issues and ideas related to censorship in English literature (1890s to now)
 - select terms and concepts in contemporary feminist, queer, and intersectional analysis and critique relevant to the texts and histories addressed
- 4) ***appreciate, enjoy, and care about***
- what you read and research
 - what and how you write
 - the members of our class

Activities, Assignments, and Assessments

****preliminary info; details may change****

1. Participation: Includes in-class engagement (most important!), online Discussions, workshop participation, and peer feedback
2. Three or four Reading Reflections/close readings 750-1000 words
3. In-class writing and/or final course reflection
4. One Research Presentation and write-up: 10-15 minute presentation plus facilitation of class discussion; includes annotated bibliography
5. Final Project: includes proposal, annotated bibliography, and sharing work in progress