

# Tagging of Banned and Challenged Books

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**Abstract:** We collected the tags associated with the American Library Association's Top 100 Banned/Challenged Books: 2000-2009 on LibraryThing, GoodReads and BiblioCommons and examined the tags for terms that matched the reasons given for challenging the books, the general age ranges assigned to the books, and the subject matter of the books. User tags demonstrated an awareness of censorship issues related to banned or challenged books as well as an awareness of subject areas that were potentially controversial.

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## 1.0 Introduction

The American Library Association (ALA) has maintained lists of frequently challenged and banned books for many years, collecting information from libraries of all types across the United States. In Canada, censorship is monitored by the Book and Periodical Council, which consists of "associations involved in the writing and editing, publishing and manufacturing, distribution, and selling and

lending of books and periodicals in Canada" (Book and Periodical Council 2013a). The Canadian Library Association is a member of the Book and Periodical Council. An annual Freedom to Read Week in Canada and a Banned Books Week in the USA provide a regular reminder of the potential harms of censorship (ALA 2013, Book and Periodical Council 2013b). These activities are intended to combat censorship attempts, but also to educate the public about the issues involved with censoring books.

To examine public perceptions of banned or challenged books, we collected social tagging data associated with frequently challenged books on the ALA Top 100 Banned/Challenged Books: 2000-2009 list (ALA. n.d. Top 100 Banned/Challenged Books) to see how users of social bookmarking or social reading sites (LibraryThing, GoodReads, BiblioCommons) perceived these books in comparison to the perceptions of patrons who challenged these books, as this may provide additional data to assist librarians in determining why the books are challenged and how to respond to challenges using available data about the books and the library's policies.

## 2.0 Background

Censorship begins with a presumption of thought control (Schrader 1992, 14) based on the idea that removing a book from a library will remove interest in the subject or at least the ability to access the information. Censorship requests in the United States have most often been from schools, school libraries, and public libraries initiated by a parent, and common reasons for the challenge include that the material is sexually explicit, the language offensive or that the content is unsuited to the age group it targets (ALA n.d. Number of Challenges). In Canada, censorship requests are also most often seen in school and public libraries. The most recent censorship results available on the Book and Periodical Council's Freedom to Read website from 2011 show that the majority of challenges in that year were to books at public libraries (Canadian Library Association 2013). Since one of the purposes of the library is to "facilitate community access to cultural records" (Schrader 1992, 13) it is important that librarians be aware of reasons for challenges to books by library patrons.

Previous tagging studies show that user tags are often similar or related to controlled vocabulary headings, but tags also show evidence of emerging vocabularies (Kipp 2005). Studies of LibraryThing tags also show similarities between tags and subject headings and evidence of changing genre categories (Smith 2007; Bartley 2009). Thus, tags should display relevant information about the book that will describe the features referred to in challenges such as subject matter, language use, and age appropriateness. Schrader (1992) studied challenges to books in Canadian Public Libraries and found that libraries with clear collection policies were more likely to be able to articulate a strong reason for retaining a book so the library could maintain an unbiased, balanced, representative collection (Schrader 1992, 13).

Isajlovic-Terry and McKechnie (2012) conducted a focus group interview with children, and discovered that children have different perspectives about challenged

books. As Isajlovic-Terry and McKechnie suggest, a study examining tagging of banned or challenged books should provide a better understanding of users' diverse opinions and perspectives about the collection. Schrader (1992) studied challenges to books in Canadian Public Libraries and found that libraries with clear collection policies were more likely to be able to articulate a strong reason for retaining a book so the library could maintain an unbiased, balanced, representative collection (Schrader 1992, 13). Tagging could provide additional data from a user perspective of the public's perception of banned and challenged books.

## 3.0 Methodology

We examined tags from social reading sites LibraryThing, GoodReads, and BiblioCommons (a social OPAC) applied to the ALA Top 100 Banned/Challenged Books: 2000-2009 (ALA. n.d. Top 100 Banned/Challenged Books). This list was selected because one of the researchers had noted people tagging books with terms similar to "ALA 100 Most Frequently Challenged Books" in LibraryThing. We collected ISBNs for each book using LibraryThing's work disambiguation pages and then manually collected tags from each book's LibraryThing, GoodReads, and BiblioCommons pages. For series entered as a series, we selected the first book for our analysis. In addition to the tags, we also collected information about the reasons given for challenges to the books from the ALA Frequently challenged books of the 21st century page (ALA. n.d. Frequently challenged books of the 21st century), and recommended age or grade information from NoveList and Amazon.com. Since age suggestions made by users were also available in BiblioCommons, we collected this data for each item on our list. Our research questions were:

1. How do social reading site users describe banned or challenged books from the ALA Top 100 Banned/Challenged Books: 2000-2009?
2. How do the judgments of social reading site users, as seen in the tags, compare to suggested age ranges for the books from official sources, especially for items challenged as being inappropriate for the age group?

## 4.0 Results

Each of the three systems from which we collected data have different user groups and different limits or requirements for tagging or participating. LibraryThing and GoodReads are both social bookmarking sites for readers, but do not necessarily share the same users. LibraryThing was created first and has few restrictions on tag

creation. Tags can contain multiple words, special characters, and are entirely user generated. GoodReads, which now belongs to Amazon, has pre-built shelves provided for users but also allows users to add tags of their own. Multi-word tags are combined into a single word-phrase using hyphens in the system. BiblioCommons is a relatively new social OPAC developed in Toronto used by a number of different library systems around the world, with the majority of systems being in Canada and the USA. The system has few limits on tagging, but does not have the large number of tags present in more established systems such as LibraryThing and GoodReads. Because of the differences between the three systems, the data will be presented separately for each.

#### 4.1 Tagging Data from Librarything

LibraryThing users applied 506,365 tags (46,418 unique tags) to our chosen book titles. The shortest tag length was 1 letter and the longest 255 letters (e.g. “1001 1001 books 1960s 20th century American American fiction American literature asylum beat classic classics fiction insanity literature made into movie madness mental health mental hospital mental illness mental institution movie novel Oregon own paperb”), with a mean of 15 letters. The tag with the most words contained 54 words: “this book is convusing but it is a good book because u have to think about what it is talking about because it skips back and forth to some parts but at then end you will be happy that it does that or the book wouldnt sound right this is a really good boo.” The longest tags on LibraryThing were created by users who did not follow directions for entering tags into the system, thus creating one long tag when they probably intended to create multiple separate tags, or were unsure if they were describing or reviewing an item.

The most popular tag in our data set on LibraryThing was “fiction,” followed closely by the tag “read,” which is likely either a short form of “toread” or a reference that the user has already read the item. The next two tags are genre related, followed by an age suitability guideline. Tags “classic” and “classics” are likely intended to be the same term, but have been entered separately by users and used almost as many times. The use of different forms of words is very common in social tagging and illustrates the problem users have with controlled vocabulary systems which expect to see only one form of a word. Most of these top tags for the entire data set are not subject related, but instead describe genre, age suitability, or personal associations with the book. There was a great deal of variation in the number of tags provided for each of the banned books (see Table 1). While the *Alice* (series) is listed as a frequently challenged book along with the

*Harry Potter* (series), it has far fewer tags on LibraryThing (and also on GoodReads and BiblioCommons).

Table 2 shows top tags for the top three books on the ALA list. In the individual lists for each book, subject related terms are present in the top tags, though general form information, genre, and age suitability terms are also present.

#### 4.2 Tagging Data from GoodReads

GoodReads users supplied 4,418,298 tags (7,085 unique tags) to our chosen book titles, with a frequency of 5 or more. The shortest tag length was 1, the longest tag length 35 and the mean tag length was 12. The tag with the most words contained 9 words: “amazon-s-100-books-to-read-in-a-lif,” one of which is truncated. GoodReads imposes more limits on tagging than LibraryThing and allows users less freedom in selecting tags for an item. This tool also provides pre-built “shelves” for taggers to use, reducing variability even further. Longer tags also appear to be truncated at around 35 characters. Popular tags on GoodReads for this data set included “to-read,” “currently-reading,” “own” and “books-I-own,” as well as more generally useful terms such as “fiction,” “young-adult” and “fantasy” (see Table 1). The prevalence of personal tags may be due to GoodReads’ status as a social bookmarking tool for readers, a similar tag “read” was found on LibraryThing (see Table 1), but other top tags were descriptive rather than personal. Again, the *Alice* (series) had many fewer tags than the other top 3 books (see Table 2), but then the *Harry Potter* (series) had considerably more tags than the other books. Individual tag clouds contained more descriptive terms, but personal terms such as “to-read” and “currently-reading” were still prevalent (see Table 1). GoodReads had many more tags than the other two systems and subject related tags were frequently further down the list.

#### 4.3 Tagging Data and Age Suggestions from BiblioCommons

BiblioCommons had the least amount of tagging data of the three systems chosen. Many items had no tags at all and even relatively popular items sometimes had few tags. Users of BiblioCommons provided 1636 total tags (752 unique tags). The shortest tag length was 0, longest tag length 60 characters, and the mean tag length 11 characters. The tag with the most words contained 11 words: ““teenage girls’ first romance (but not a cheesy as it sounds)” and was not simply an example of failure to follow tag entry instructions for the system.

The top ten tags on BiblioCommons are very different from the ones present in LibraryThing or GoodReads (see Table 1). No personal tags were present in the top

LibraryThing (LT)		GoodReads (GR)		BiblioCommons (BC)	
Tag	Frequency	Tag	Frequency	Tag	Frequency
fiction	19062	to-read	2592737	fantasy	31
read	16871	fiction	137364	science fiction	29
Movie	13969	favorites	127943	magic	23
novel	10009	classics	111058	moody	21
young adult	8340	currently-reading	108246	drama	20
literature	7015	young-adult	63236	dystopian	20
classic	6939	fantasy	51170	classic	19
classics	6219	own	39848	racism	17
American literature	5235	books-i-own	30219	fantasy	31
children's	4391	ya	25146	science fiction	29

Table 1. Top ten tags for all books

Title	Tag 1 Freq	Tag 2 Freq	Tag 3 Freq	Tag 4 Freq	Tag 5 Freq
<i>Harry Potter</i> (series)	children's literature 2008	children 2007	adventure 763	witches 431	novel 421
<i>Alice</i> (series)	fiction 11	friendship 8	realistic fiction 7	children's 6	Alice 5
<i>The Chocolate War</i>	young adult 393	fiction 330	bullying 111	read 81	high school 77

Table 2. Top five tags on LibraryThing for top 3 books

Title	Tag 1 Freq	Tag 2 Freq	Tag 3 Freq	Tag 4 Freq	Tag 5 Freq
<i>Harry Potter</i> (series)	fantasy 25	magic 23	fiction 10	dark 9	magical 6
<i>Alice</i> (series)	drama 1	school life 1	moody 1		
<i>The Chocolate War</i>	awesome starts here 1				

Table 3. Top five tags on BiblioCommons for top 3 books

tags and many are subject or topical tags. Genre tags were also present in the top ten. The top 3 books on the ALA list did not receive as much attention in BiblioCommons, save for the *Harry Potter* book (see Table 2). The *Alice* series had only 3 tags and *The Chocolate War* only one. This suggests strongly that social OPACs do not yet have enough tag data for useful analysis.

Top tags for the top books (Table 3) tended to be subject related or topical, but the only tag present for *The Chocolate War* was “awesome starts here.” This tag was present on other books as well and is similar to the “toread” tag in that it expresses a personal connection with a book.

In addition to tagging, BiblioCommons users can also provide an age suggestion for items in the catalogue. We collected the first page of the age data for each item on the list where available. In the vast majority of cases, there were only a few age suggestions. Age suggestions included ranges—e.g., 5 to 99, 6 to 10—and suggestions of the form X years and over.

#### 4.4. Award Books vs. Banned Books

Though not generally present in the top 10 tags on any of the three systems, tags were present in each to indicate that books were award winners, challenged/banned or

	Author(s)	Title	Year(s) Challenged	Reasons
1	Rowling, J.K.	<i>Harry Potter</i> (series)	2001, 2002, 2003	occult/satanism, violence, anti-family, religious viewpoint
2	Naylor, Phyllis Reynolds	<i>Alice</i> (series)	2001, 2002, 2003, 2006, 2011	nudity, offensive language, religious viewpoint, sexually explicit, sexual content, unsuited to age group, homosexuality
3	Cormier, Robert	<i>The Chocolate War</i>	2001, 2002, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2009	nudity, offensive language, sexually explicit, sexism, unsuited to age group, violence, sexual content, religious viewpoint
4	Richardson, Justin, and Parnell, Peter	<i>And Tango Makes Three</i>	2006, 2007, 2008, 2010, 2012	Homosexuality, unsuited to age group, religious viewpoint, anti-ethnic, anti-family, sexism
5	Steinbeck, John	<i>Of Mice and Men</i>	2001, 2003, 2004	offensive language, racism, violence, unsuited to age group

Table 4. Top 5 Books from ALA Banned/Challenged List 2000-2009

had been selected for book groups and city wide, provincial/statewide reading challenges. Tags were analysed for mention of specific awards such as the Pulitzer Prize, Booker Prize, Newbery (and Newberry misspelled) award, etc. Well-known and respected lists were also included such as the New York Times Bestseller List, NEA Educator's Top 100 list, and ALA Best Books for YA list, as they are compiled by professionals in publishing, librarianship and/or education and occurred 1000 or more times as tags. Other lists such as "top 1000" or "books to read before you die" were not included because they could not be verified as either specific unified lists or lists from trusted sources. The names of specific prizes were verified in the same way.

#### 4.5 Comparison of Tags with Reasons for Challenges

The first five books on the ALA Top 100 Banned/Challenged Books 2000-2009 list are listed in table 4 along with the years challenged and reasons for the challenge provided by ALA. Reasons for challenges were only available from ALA for part of the data set. The top 20 books from the list had reasons provided.

We have included an examination of the tags associated with the first five books in detail in this paper to demonstrate where tags overlap or disagree with the reasons given for challenging the books on the ALA Banned/Challenged List 2000-2009.

For the *Harry Potter* series, a series about a young boy who discovers he is a wizard and goes off to boarding school to learn how to control his magic, tags that could be considered related to the occult were found in the tag lists on all three sites (e.g. magic, wizardry, witches) and were quite common, though in most cases not in the top 10. Tags related to satanism were not present in the lists.

Tags related to violence (e.g. murder, dark, adventure) were found, but not in the top 10. Despite the fact that numerous murders do occur in the series, the tag "murder" was only found with frequency greater than 5 on LibraryThing (frequency was 9). This means that users would never see this tag in the tag cloud unless they were deliberately looking for it. Tags related to family/anti-family were even less frequent and tags related to a religious viewpoint were non-existent. The closest tag to a religious viewpoint was "good vs. evil" which was used 102 times and was not a top 10 tag for the *Harry Potter* series (see Table 1).

The *Alice* series, which documents the life of a motherless young girl, had many more reasons given for challenges, but few of these reasons appeared in the tags. No tags were found relating directly to: nudity, offensive language, sexually explicit, sexism, violence, sexual content, or religious viewpoint. Many tags concerning the precise age group for which the series was intended were present though (e.g. juvenile, grade 4, young adult, teen) which does suggest some disagreement as to which age group readers consider to be suitable for the series. As it is an "age progression series" (a tag present in LibraryThing), readers might provide very different answers depending on their age when reading each novel. A series of tags concerning drug abuse were present in LibraryThing and GoodReads but not referenced by a reason for challenging the series. This is interesting considering the lack of overlap between reasons and tags for this series.

The *Chocolate War*, a story about a high school secret society which encourages a mob mentality against a single student, had more tags than the *Alice* series, but fewer than *Harry Potter*. Tags were present debating the appropriate age group for the book, with a majority of taggers agreeing that it was a teen or young adult book, but some

taggers suggesting it was appropriate for middle school or for adults. This disagreement does fit with the “un-suited for age group” reason for challenging the book as it shows users do not agree on the appropriate age group. The most common tags matching a reason from the ALA list were for violence and bullying. These were quite common, though not top ten reasons. Other reasons were not present in the tags.

*And Tango Makes Three* is the true story of two male penguins at the Central Park Zoo in New York who were given an abandoned egg to raise. This book is a picture book aimed at young children. Unlike the top three books on the ALA list, *And Tango Makes Three* has many tags that match with the reasons for challenges given. On LibraryThing and GoodReads, tags such as “homosexuality,” “LGBT,” “two dads,” and “alternative families” make it clear that readers agree that the book does indeed discuss homosexuality and alternative family arrangements. Tags are mainly factual though with no negative emphasis. One tag used only once was “Reason: Homosexuality” which may refer to the ALA banned/challenged books list. Tags on BiblioCommons were a different matter. No tag was used more than twice and most were used only once, but many tags featured a clear negative bias towards the book, though a few had positive messages. Tags such as “brain-washing,” “civilization destroyed,” “godless penguins,” and “lies” showed clearly that at least one user of BiblioCommons was very opposed to this book. The most interesting tag was “satanic spheniscidae (penguins).” Again, each of these tags was used only once so these tags may be the work of only one user. This obviously does not represent a universal opinion as at least one other user used positive tags such as “nurturing instincts,” and “parenting possibilities.”

*Of Mice and Men* details the friendship between two migrant farm workers. Unlike *And Tango Makes Three*, this book does not have many tags that match the reasons for challenges given by ALA. The majority of tags related to the reasons were age range suitability suggestions, which in this case ranged from grade 7 to adult.

#### 4.6. Comparison of Reading Levels

We compared reading levels for each book using reading levels listed in NoveList (NL) and tags from LibraryThing and GoodReads. We also examined age suggestions provided by BiblioCommons users. NL lists reading levels by age and grade level. NL represents professional recommendations, where tags and age suggestions reflect users’ opinions. Therefore, a comparison between NL and tags in relation to reading level may suggest differing views of challenged books. Amazon.com suggested age ranges have been used to complement NL, since not all

of the 100 books used in this study are registered in the NL database.

We analysed the top tags representing grade level or age and the BiblioCommons age suggestions. There is disagreement in the tags assigned concerning the appropriate age level for these books. It is clear from even a cursory glance at the age related tags and BiblioCommons age suggestions that users have differing views as to what constitutes age appropriate reading material. This is especially clear in the age suggestions on BiblioCommons for the young children’s picture book *And Tango Makes Three*. This book was written for young children (NoveList suggests Pre K to 3 or 0 to 8 years), but several users of BiblioCommons suggested it should only be allowed for ages 18 and up. A number of negative tags were assigned to this book and it is likely that this age suggestion came from these same taggers. Other taggers on BiblioCommons, however, agreed more or less with the NoveList age suggestions providing ranges such as 2 and up, ages 3-8, ages 5-10 and similar, so it is clear that hiding this book in the adult section would not please all users. Tags assigned to this book on LibraryThing and GoodReads also agreed that this was a book for children and not a book for teens or adults.

The age ranges given for *The Chocolate War* and *Of Mice and Men* showed similar, though less glaring issues in which users were divided over the recommended age ranges. Some taggers suggested *The Chocolate War* was for middle school and up while others agreed with NoveList that it was more appropriate for high school and up. Similarly, taggers felt *Of Mice and Men* would be suitable for late middle school and up (ages 12 and up or grade 7 and up) while NoveList felt the book was for adults. A similar pattern was seen with the *Harry Potter* and *Alice* series, suggesting that readers on LibraryThing and GoodReads may have read these books at a younger age than NoveList recommends.

#### 6.0 Discussion and Conclusions

The most popular tags on LibraryThing and GoodReads were actually reading related rather than item related. Many users used tags such as “toread,” “currently-reading” and similar to indicate that they have or want to read the item in question. Many other tags were genre related such as “fantasy” or “science fiction” or even form related: “novel” and “audiobook.” Popular tags on BiblioCommons tended to be more subject related, showing a distinct difference between the two types of sites. Unfortunately the small number of tags present in BiblioCommons renders the data from that site less useful. Long tags on LibraryThing tended to be accidents where users entered what appeared to be a series of tags incor-

rectly, while long tags on GoodReads and BiblioCommons tended to be phrases entered as a tag. All three systems had both long and short tags and included a wide variety of personal and subject related terms (even though BiblioCommons had many fewer tags).

It is clear from the analysis of the data that users are aware of the ALA banned and challenged books lists and of anti-censorship activities like Freedom to Read Week. Although subject related tags outnumber censorship related tags, users have frequently tagged these books from the ALA top 100 list as banned/censored or challenged suggesting that this information is a valuable addition to the description of the item. Social reading site users are also aware of common prizes and lists of bestsellers or popular books. Many users of all three sites we examined have also included book lists, book clubs, and readings challenges in their tags. Tags such as “1001 books to read before I die” and its many variants were quite common in the data set on LibraryThing and GoodReads.

In general, the tag lists for the selected books on LibraryThing, GoodReads and BiblioCommons did not provide a substantial match with the reasons given for challenges. When tags did match, they were often not popular tags or particularly commonly used. Tags that did match reasons were most likely to be age suitability suggestions (or perhaps the age at which the tagger read the book). Because of the high number of tags on LibraryThing and GoodReads, and especially the high number of tags on these two services that equated to “toread” or “have read,” tags that matched the reasons were less common. The low number of tags present in BiblioCommons, however, made such tags popular tags by default where only 10-15 tags were present. This makes a tool like BiblioCommons very susceptible to trolling by pressure groups or even individual users with an agenda, thus making these tags less useful to others. These tags also represent a clear departure from the tradition of library cataloguing where items are to be described in a neutral manner. This use of tags in library catalogues is obviously something librarians must consider carefully.

Users also frequently provided a suggested age or grade range for the books, some of which differed substantially from those listed on NoveList. These differing opinions on the proper age range for these books are congruent with the main reasons for challenging books: unsuited to age group, sexually explicit and contains offensive language.

Censorship of books for children is a particular concern as children rely on others to provide them with access to books. It is thus extremely important for public and school librarians to be aware of censorship issues and social media tools like LibraryThing, GoodReads, or social OPACs like BiblioCommons that can help to track

public perceptions of a book. Our analysis of tags associated with the ALA Banned/Challenged List 2000-2009 suggests that books which show substantial differences between user perceptions of appropriate age range and NoveList age range or have negative tags associated with them are likely to be prime candidates for challenges.

*It's not just the books under fire now that worry me. It is the books that will never be written. The books that will never be read. And all due to the fear of censorship. As always, young readers will be the real losers.* (Blume n.d.)

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