

Banned Books – Our perspective.

Gedakina has worked with Indigenous women and their families throughout New England since 2002. We have always tried to present the public with gifts of culturally appropriate and historically accurate literature. We believe this will help others to learn another history, another perspective, and that there could be many sides to a story. Gifting is the Native way, and it allows us to teach our children to be proud of their history and lifeways.

We have an amazing program called the One-Shelf Book Project. We start reviewing books to share with schools and libraries in December, researching and reviewing new books well into the following summer. Three staff members review books using the following criteria: 1. Books must be about Indigenous peoples 2. Books must be historically accurate 3. Books must be culturally appropriate 4. Books must help our children see themselves in a positive light and 5. Books will primarily be from the Northeast.

In October we send a gift set of one shelf of books to approximately 30 educational Institutions throughout New England. These books are well received, and we are proud of the fact that, together, as a small community, we have helped to choose the books for the schools our children attend. We want all children to learn from these books. Far too often certain states or special interest groups think they know best, and they become the gatekeeper of our stories, at worst banning our books and at best failing to highlight or lift up our books. Their criteria are different from ours. They are entitled to their stories and opinions and likewise we are entitled to ours. We do not want one gatekeeper for our stories.

Recently some of the books that Gedakina deems appropriate have been challenged, banned, or otherwise censored. We are not talking about deep philosophical books, we are talking about beautiful, simple children's literature with wonderful lessons, stories and a distinct way of allowing our children to see themselves in a positive light. What is happening to our world? Are we no longer accepting a differing opinion? Are we no longer tolerant or embracing diversity in this country? Do we want to bow down to one gatekeeper, maybe it's the one that cries the loudest? Many times, it feels this way to us.

According to the American Library Association (ALA) there were 1,269 attempts to ban or restrict books in 2022. The number of titles that have been targeted for censorship from January 1, 2023, to August 31, 2023 is 3,923. A challenge is an attempt to remove or restrict access to materials or services based on the objections of a person or group of people. A book is banned when it is entirely removed from a collection in response to a formal or informal challenge. As Indigenous women we cannot afford to lose these teachable moments. Educators and parents alike treasure these teachable moments, it gives us an opportunity to critically think through a situation. Nobody should have the right to take this moment away from us.

There is mounting pressure to ban books in this country at all levels of education. I can't help but wonder if it is simply fear behind this movement. Fear of the privileged people losing the power to control. It's happened many times before in our history that this fear has reared its ugly head. It's happening once again all around us. Please pay attention, if you are reading this, you are living during a time when negative history is repeating itself. For this reason, we are including a few books published in years past along with our newly published titles. These books are as important and relevant now as they were when they were first published, and we believe the themes within should be addressed with children.

If we continue to lose the right to freely express ourselves, we will be missing diversity, the right to learn about differences in religion, beliefs, culture, history, historical patterns and so much more. Our personal fear is that the remaining books will be written by the privileged “people of authority” in our world, and that these people will be telling our history and our story once again. That didn’t work before, remember it has dictated generations of learning and we ended up with racism and misunderstandings. We can’t allow that to continue to happen. There should not be simply one gatekeeper we should be allowed to think critically for Ourselves.

We must fight hard to keep our privilege to read and write what we want. We need to fight for the privilege to tell our history and our story. We need to work together to stop a story controlled by just one gatekeeper and share many different opinions.

Judy Dow, Executive Director