

Silenced Stories

Senior Copy Editor Emily Ireland

St. Andrew's prides itself on the freedom and opportunity to learn, even about controversial and hard topics. However, that is not the case for all Mississippi and Nationwide high schools; the banned book epidemic is taking away children's curiosity and right to learn. In communities all over the world, certain books are banned in public schools and libraries because the content is considered insensitive or inappropriate. In Madison County specifically, *The Hate You Give* by Angie Thomas has been banned due to its content on racial issues and police brutality. While *The Hate You Give* is fiction, many readers share the same experiences and hardships Thomas wrote about. Banning books that talk about violence, although very real in our current society, is controversial. "If you live it," Senior Anabelle Abraham said, "you should be able to read about it."

Similarly, Margaret Atwoods's *The Handmaid's Tale* is a controversial book that has been banned in many places due to its content on religion, women's rights, violence, sex, and explicit language. However, in a classroom setting where the novel is analyzed, it can be seen as much more than a book unfit for consumption, rather it teaches many lessons on a multitude of themes, such as the importance of identity and freedom. Earlier in the year, Seniors taking Dr. Paul Smith's English Literature and Composition 12 class read this very book. "There were all the reasons to teach [*The Handmaid's Tale*] and none of the reasons not to," Smith said. "It's a compelling piece of literature, not without flaws. It's a great read, more relevant now than ever because we see so many threats to freedom of expression, bodily autonomy, and the rights of women. I think it's timely, engaging, a great read, and a wonderful text to deal with." Allowing students to dive into a book that deals with so many relevant issues in our world today like *The*

Handmaid's Tale is so important. Letting students make their own informed opinions on topics and using critical thinking skills are key parts of education at St. Andrew's. "If we don't present different viewpoints, and we only present one particular viewpoint, we're not asking students to do any thinking, we're just asking them to accept a general truth or the truth as we believe it, or as the publishers of one particular book believe it to be," St. Andrew's Librarian, Tonja Johnson said. "So if we really want to make those educated decisions, and we really want students to be able to think thoughtfully about controversial topics or debatable topics, they have to have all of the information. They have to see it from different viewpoints."

Another harmful aspect of book bans is taking away a child's sense of belonging. According to Mississippi Public Broadcasting, "the majority of bans target books featuring LGBTQ+ themes or characters, books centered on racial inequality or include themes of race and racism, and books with themes of violence and sexual experiences." St. Andrew's is a school that welcomes diversity, so there are a number of LGBTQ+ students, students who speak different languages, and students who are of different races and from different cultures in our community. In the SA community, it is important to provide students who may feel different or excluded with books that make them feel accepted. "Certain groups are being targeted [through book bans], and it's sending a message to those students in particular, that they don't belong and that their story doesn't matter, and it's a way of making people feel less than and nobody should be made to feel that way," Johnson, said. "Everybody's story matters, and it's important that we see that we're not all the same." Realizing and accepting our differences in the SA community brings us together, and reading books about people's differences is one way to do that.

Some books are not fit for all audiences, but that does not mean they should be banned for everyone, especially in schools. Introducing high school students to difficult concepts is how

they learn, and ultimately shapes them into who they become. “If [book bans are] effective, some students will never get to experience that life-changing book,” Smith said. “I’ve been doing this for 34 years now. I’ve seen over and over again how well a single book can transform a student: wipe away some prejudices and totally reframe the possibilities of the future, the kid’s life, and how they see the world.” Book bans take away stories that authors wrote for particular audiences. Authors can be inspired to write about something they have struggled with in the past, giving younger generations knowledge they wish they had. “As a librarian,” Johnson said, “I’ve heard too many people tell me that having access to particular information or a particular story, not only made a difference in their life, but it saved their life.” There are so many different genres of books discussing many different topics in libraries today for consumers to pick and choose what they want to read. “Nobody’s forcing you to read a book,” Abraham said, “but I think it should be out there for people to be able to read and gain information because if there are no resources for that, then what are we doing?”