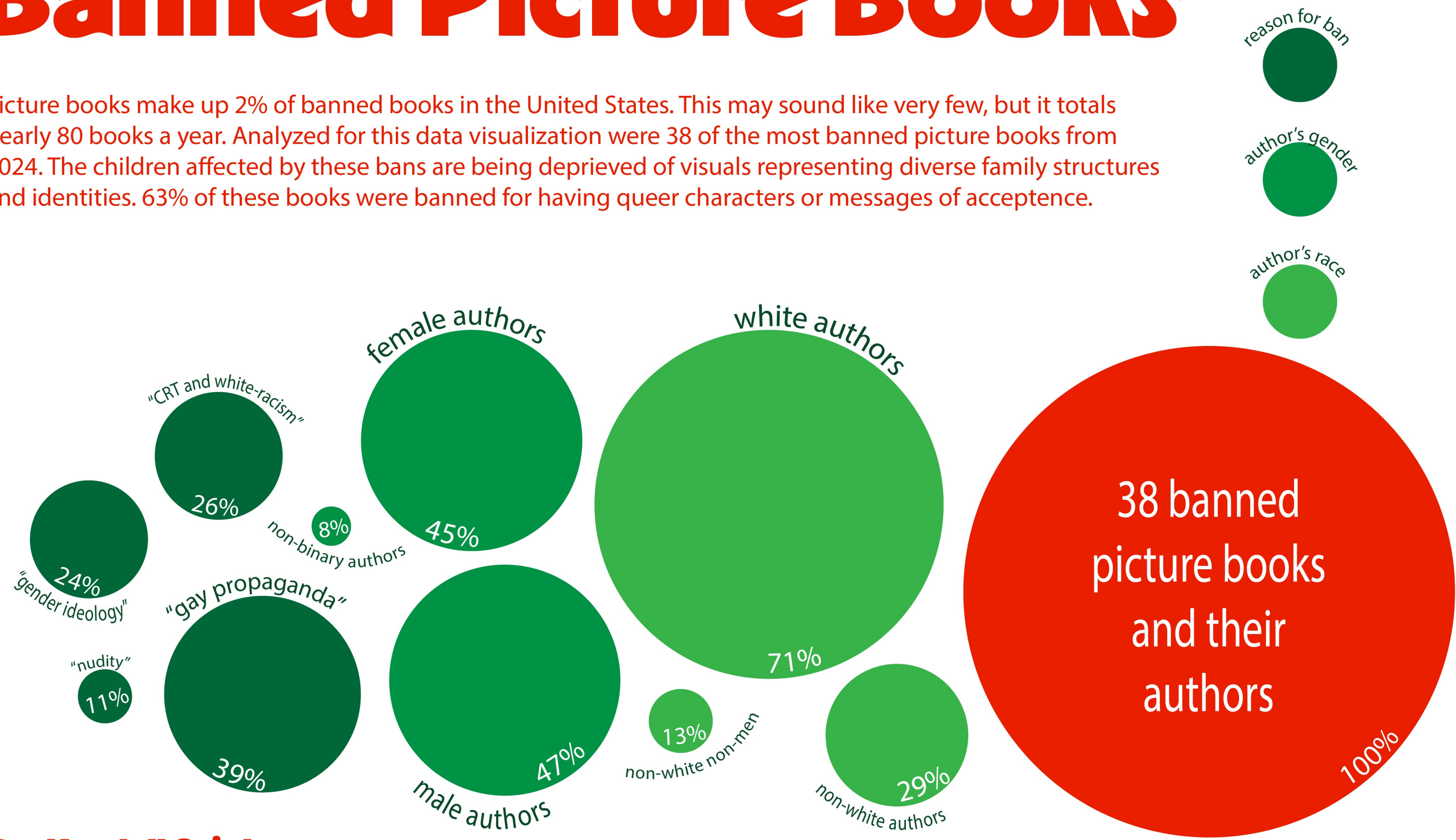


Banned Picture Books

Picture books make up 2% of banned books in the United States. This may sound like very few, but it totals nearly 80 books a year. Analyzed for this data visualization were 38 of the most banned picture books from 2024. The children affected by these bans are being deprived of visuals representing diverse family structures and identities. 63% of these books were banned for having queer characters or messages of acceptance.



Framing Diversity as Danger: The Rise of Picture Book Censorship

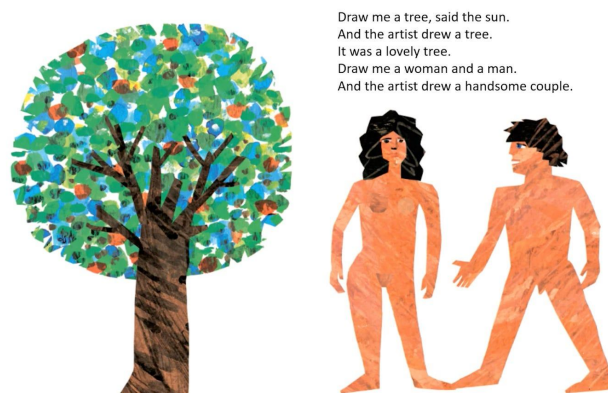
A Creative Multicultural Communication Final

For my final project, I focused on Module 4: Dimensions of Human Diversity – Gender, Race, Ethnicity, with a particular emphasis on children’s books. Throughout this module, we explored themes of bias, discrimination, and microaggressions. For the past year I have been working at a kids art studio and find myself often reading picture books. Since this class, I have been taking second glances at these books to determine if they are considered anti-bias or not. Learning to identify these dynamics in the media we consume, even from a young age, can empower us to make more informed and empathetic decisions as adults.

From the outset of this project, I knew I wanted to focus on children’s picture books, as it was one of the topics I found most engaging during class. While diversity in picture books has been increasing in terms of illustrations, storylines, and authorship, there has also been a rising effort to ban or challenge these same books. The fact that picture books are being targeted and criticized for allegedly teaching "critical race theory" is both concerning and revealing of today’s cultural tensions. I set out to explore the ways in which picture books are being affected by recent conservative efforts to censor material they deem to be “not age appropriate.” As part of this exploration, I created a data visualization that presents information about the most banned picture books over the past year, including author demographics and the stated reasons for the

bans. Titles such as *And Tango Makes Three* and *Pink Is for Boys* were among those frequently challenged. These books, which seem harmless at first glance, are surprising entries on a list of censored material.

During my research, I was shocked to learn that Eric Carle, author of *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, has had another one of his books, *Draw Me a Star*, banned from school libraries. I chose *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* as a visual reference point for my project because its iconic style is instantly recognizable and helps audiences connect quickly with the subject matter. *Draw Me a Star* was banned for containing an illustration of nudity. On the surface, protecting children from inappropriate content seems reasonable and would be encouraged. However, the image in *Draw Me a Star* does not depict anything explicit or graphic. The book follows a young artist who is guided to draw various elements of the world including stars, houses, people, animals, and trees. While some interpret the story as a loose reflection of biblical creation, the primary theme is one of imaginative exploration through art (Zarin, 1992).

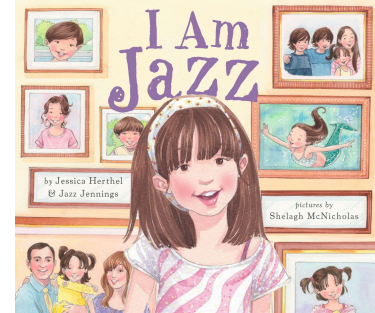
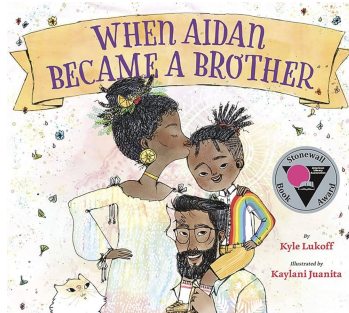
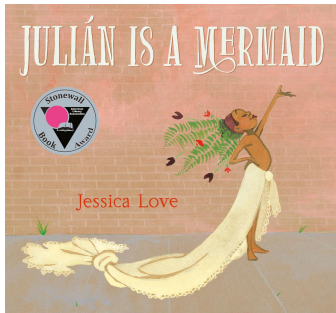


The page cited in the banning of *Draw Me a Star*

The book was first challenged in 1996, a parent claimed it included “soft pornography” and worried it might “encourage children to draw naked bodies themselves.” In response, Carle stated: “A friend, an art critic, compared my pictures favorably to primitive cave paintings. I am pleased with that analogy, for I attempt to simplify nature for children, and through fact and fantasy, to give joy and to help first readers fall in love with books.” Carle emphasizes an essential point: illustrations of bodies in children’s books are simplified representations of nature. It is adults, not children, who project sexualized interpretations onto them. These books are meant to help children understand themselves and the world around them, and bodies are a natural part of that world.

One of the most cited reasons for banning picture books today is the inclusion of queer expression. My data analysis found that 39% of banned picture books depicted LGBTQ+ characters, and 24% addressed topics related to gender. Books that feature same-gender parents or explore non-traditional gender identities are often labeled “inappropriate” or “confusing” for young readers. However, representation of diverse families, such as those with two moms or two dads, should never be considered harmful. Books like *Julián Is a Mermaid*, *When Aidan Became a Brother*, and *I Am Jazz!* introduce children to concepts of identity and acceptance. Although discussions about gender can be complex, it is well established that children typically form a stable sense of their gender identity by the age of four (Rafferty, 2024). These books serve as gentle, age-appropriate introductions to the diversity children may encounter in real life. Conservative groups often challenge these books by claiming they are too complicated

for young children to understand. In reality, it is not the children who are confused, it is often the adults who are uncomfortable with the ideas presented.



Another major category under which picture books are banned is “racial themes” or “racism.” At first glance, banning racist books may seem appropriate, and again, encouraged. However, this depends entirely on how racism is being defined. On one hand, it refers to discrimination against marginalized groups, a definition most agree is harmful. On the other hand, some conservatives define “racism” as any book that acknowledges unequal treatment based on race, even when such treatment is historically or factually accurate. For example, *Antiracist Baby* was banned for supposedly “teaching children to be racist,” largely because it includes an illustration of a white child climbing an intact ladder while a Black child climbs a broken one (Natanson, 2010). The intent of the image is clearly to highlight systemic inequality, in a way children can understand, not to encourage racism. By acknowledging that the world is not always fair, books like this aim to empower children to create positive change.

Parents who object to such messages often fear that their white children will feel guilt or discomfort. Books such as *Separate Is Never Equal* and *Baseball Saved Us* have been challenged for similar reasons. Children’s book author, Zetta Elliott,

describes this paradox of parents not wanting to educate their children through picture books best by saying, “Adults’ fixation on certain kinds of picture books reflects a discomfort with darker moments in American history, especially episodes of racism and police brutality.” Many adults have yet to confront their own roles in perpetuating systemic inequality. As a result, they are unable or unwilling to educate their children on these difficult, but crucial, topics.

The next piece of data I looked at was their author’s gender and race. By gender, the authors of these banned books were nearly equally split between male and female authors, with 8% of the authors being non-binary. Knowing that there are very few non-binary picture book authors out in the US, it is surprising to see such a percentage of them represented in the banned books. It suggests that books written by non-binary authors are disproportionately targeted, likely because their works explore themes of identity and acceptance. Race also played a role. Of the 38 most banned picture books, 29% were written by authors of color. This is significant, especially considering that in 2021, only 27% of all children’s books were written by authors of color (The Associated Press). While this number is not specific to picture books, I think it gives context to the children’s book publishing environment. Additionally, I examined the intersection of race and gender, finding that 13% of banned picture book authors were non-white and non-male, meaning they are either women or non-binary authors of color. This is a higher percentage than I expected and makes me wonder if creators from marginalized communities are being disproportionately censored.

Throughout this research process I was most surprised by the lengths and arguments people will go through to ban a book. Some parents believe that their

children are truly in danger of learning harmful views through picture books. No matter what your political or moral leanings are, everyone just wants the best for their kids.

Now is the time that we need to prove to adults, and children, that representation and inclusion of all ideas and identities will only make us stronger. The best way to do that is still to be discovered, maybe we should try a picture book.

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