

Book banning is unfair to teens, says "Thirteen Reasons Why" author

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Author Jay Asher (left) and Executive Producer Selena Gomez attend Netflix's "13 Reasons Why" premiere at Paramount Studios on March 30, 2017, in Los Angeles, California. Photo by: Eric Charbonneau/Invision for Netflix/AP Images

"Thirteen Reasons Why" is a book written for teens, but it deals with some of life's most serious issues.

It tells the story of Hannah Baker, a teenage girl who, after living through a painful attack, decides to kill herself. Hannah is going through so much pain that she feels that she cannot go on living. Before she dies, though, she records 13 tapes explaining her decision.

Since it was published in 2007, "Thirteen Reasons Why" has been a target of censorship. It was banned in some towns, and at some schools in the United States and Canada, it was pulled from libraries.

After seeing his work banned, author Jay Asher now believes more strongly than ever that censorship is dangerous. The "PBS NewsHour" recently spoke with him during Banned Books Week, held September 24 to 30 in celebration of the freedom to read, to discuss censorship and the reactions to his work. This interview has been lightly edited.

QUESTION: What kinds of stories are censored?

JAY ASHER: Pretty much any story that makes people uncomfortable. Stories about issues that people find scandalous such as sex, drugs, or, in the case of my book, sexual assault, suicide and teen drinking, are often censored because people just do not want to talk about those things.

QUESTION: Do you think censorship tends to target young adult fiction?

JAY ASHER: Yes. One of the main reasons is because young adult literature is fairly new. So, many people still think of books for teens as children's books. When you write a book that includes "adult" topics but people think of it as a "children's book," it seems even worse. These are actually topics that teens know about and deal with, though, so not writing about them makes them something we don't, or cannot talk about.

QUESTION: Has young adult literature gotten too dark?

JAY ASHER: You know, I felt I had a very innocent childhood, but many people don't. Many teens go through a lot of darkness in their lives before they are adults, and having literature that explores these parts of their lives can help them with the stress they may be feeling.

QUESTION: In your experience, how have the themes in young adult literature helped teens explore their sense of self?

JAY ASHER: I never understood how powerful it could be until I started hearing from some of my teenage readers. I just got an email from a reader who said that "Thirteen Reasons Why" was the first time they had felt understood. A book should not be anybody's first time feeling understood, and that's why censorship bothers me. These books need to be out there.

Censorship Of His Book Is "Frustrating"

QUESTION: Is there ever a cause for censorship?

JAY ASHER: No, because every reader is different. There's no book that's inappropriate for every person, but there are people who cannot handle everything.

QUESTION: The American Library Association listed "Thirteen Reasons Why" as the third-most censored book of 2012. What is your reaction to that?

JAY ASHER: It's frustrating and upsetting.

I hear from teens that my work encouraged them to ask for help. Some people seem to think that issues like teen suicide, drinking, sex or sexual assault are inappropriate, but if that's the case, teens who may identify with those themes feel there isn't a safe space for them.

QUESTION: What was your original intention or inspiration when starting the book?

JAY ASHER: "Thirteen Reasons Why" was partly inspired by a family member who attempted suicide in high school, and some of the scenes were things I had experienced or people had told me about over the years.

Some Library Reactions Were Expected

QUESTION: Before you wrote "Thirteen Reasons Why," did you think it would be censored?

JAY ASHER: Yes, I knew it was going to be pulled from libraries.

QUESTION: What has been the response to “Thirteen Reasons Why” since it premiered as a Netflix series?

JAY ASHER: Everything is just heightened. You have more readers and viewers, but you also have more criticism.

I’ve had a lot of teens reach out to comfort me about the criticism, and I appreciate it. At the same time, I feel bad they have to listen to adults argue about all this.

Quiz

- 1 Which sentence from the article supports the idea that Jay Asher's book has had a direct impact on some readers?
- (A) Before she dies, though, she records 13 tapes explaining her decision.
 - (B) When you write a book that includes "adult" topics but people think of it as a "children's book," it seems even worse.
 - (C) I hear from teens that my work encouraged them to ask for help.
 - (D) A book should not be anybody's first time feeling understood, and that's why censorship bothers me.

- 2 Which sentence from the article shows Jay Asher's MAIN problem with censorship?
- (A) Stories about issues that people find scandalous such as sex, drugs, or, in the case of my book, sexual assault, suicide and teen drinking, are often censored because people just do not want to talk about those things.
 - (B) These are actually topics that teens know about and deal with, though, so not writing about them makes them something we don't, or cannot talk about.
 - (C) I never understood how powerful it could be until I started hearing from some of my teenage readers.
 - (D) There's no book that's inappropriate for every person, but there are people who cannot handle everything.

- 3 Read the sentence from the section "Censorship Of His Book Is Frustrating."

What was your original intention or inspiration when starting the book?

Which word is the BEST definition of "intention" as used in the sentence above?

- (A) root
- (B) angle
- (C) goal
- (D) twist

- 4 Read the selection from the section "Some Library Reactions Were Expected."

Everything is just heightened. You have more readers and viewers, but you also have more criticism.

Which of the following words, if it replaced the word "heightened" in the selection above, would CHANGE its meaning?

- (A) intensified
- (B) magnified
- (C) elevated
- (D) diminished