

# Book Lovers at Front Lines in Fight for Democracy

By Don Mathis

## AUTHOR'S

**NOTE:** *This essay was inspired by the May 5th screening and plática of *The Librarians* held at the Esperanza Peace & Justice Center. Banned Books Week is October 4–10, 2026, plenty of time to plan more events and pláticas around censorship.*

Librarians across the county are mobilizing to oppose book banning. The 2025 film *The Librarians* shows public servants fighting a national battle against right-wing groups looking to ban books and curb free expression. =

A children's book by Veronica Arreola has become one of the most banned books in America. *J Is For Justice!: An Activism Alphabet* is among the most banned in school districts nationwide. This board book encourages children to discover their power, to speak up for their beliefs, and to realize their power to change the world.

Book banning efforts in the U.S. are primarily driven by organized conservative advocacy groups and lawmakers. Pressure groups like *Moms for Liberty* and *No Left Turn in Education*, along with some government officials, initiate the vast majority of challenges. Teachers, librarians, students, and parents oppose these book bans with a fight for their First Amendment rights.

Many of the books targeted for bans in the U.S. cover LGBTQ+, racial and sexual themes. When people see themselves reflected meaningfully in literature, it strengthens identity, belonging, and confidence. The modern normalization of book bans is unprecedented in scale,



The Librarians documentary screened at Esperanza on May 5th was followed by a plática with Graciela Sánchez, Anel I. Flores, Suzette Baker and Lucy Ibarra Podmore. Photo Credit: Sherry Campos

but the underlying motivations — controlling which identities and ideas people can access — are not new.

The phrase “Banned in Boston” originated in the late 1800s. It was popularized by moral crusader Anthony Comstock to describe works suppressed by Boston officials, particularly through the *New England Watch and Ward Society*.

Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* was banned and heavily censored in the 19th century primarily due to its frank depictions of sexuality, the human body, and homoerotic themes. It was deemed “shocking” and “too sensual” for the era, leading to its 1881 ban in Boston. Whitman lost his clerical job.

Most libraries refused to shelve it. Whitman, however, refused to alter his work and was forced to find a new publisher. When he did, the first printing of the new edition sold out in a single day.

Let's look at an excerpt from “*I Sing the Body Electric*” (Stanza 2) as we celebrate banned books:

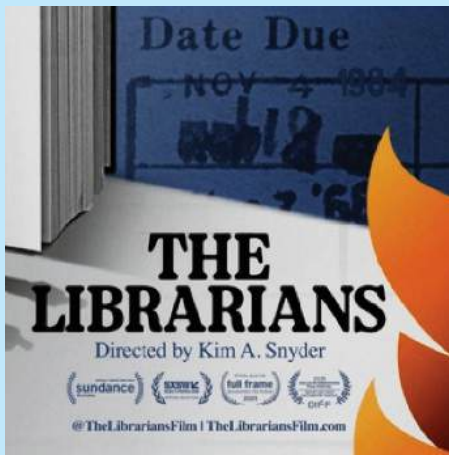
The love of the body of man or woman balks account (resists explanation), the body itself balks account,

That of the male is perfect, and that of the female is perfect.

The expression of the face balks account,

But the expression of a well-made man appears not only in his face,

It is in his limbs and joints also, it is curiously in the joints of his hips and wrists,



It is in his walk, the carriage of his neck, the flex of his waist and knees, dress does not hide him,

The strong sweet quality he has strikes through the cotton and broadcloth,

To see him pass conveys as much as the best poem, perhaps more,

You linger to see his back, and the back of his neck and shoulder-side.

The sprawl and fulness of babes, the bosoms and heads of women, the folds of their dress, their style as we pass in the street, the contour of their shape downwards,

The swimmer naked in the swimming-bath, seen as he swims through the transparent green-shine, or lies with his face up and rolls silently to and fro in the heave of the water,

The bending forward and backward of rowers in row-boats, the horseman in his saddle,

Girls, mothers, house-keepers, in all their performances,

The group of laborers seated at noon-time with their open dinner-kettles, and their wives waiting,

The female soothing a child, the farmer's daughter in the garden or cow-yard,

The young fellow hoeing corn, the sleigh-driver driving his six horses through the crowd,

The wrestle of wrestlers, two apprentice-boys, quite grown, lusty, good-natured, native-born, out on the vacant lot at sun-down after work,

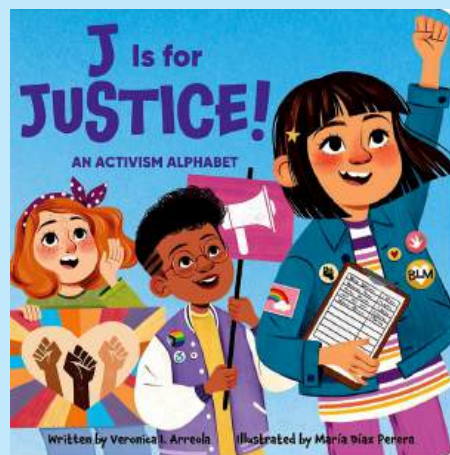
The coats and caps thrown down, the embrace of love and resistance,

The upper-hold and under-hold, the hair rumped over and blinding the eyes;

The march of firemen in their own costumes, the play of masculine muscle through clean-setting trousers and waist-straps,

The slow return from the fire, the pause when the bell strikes suddenly again, and the listening on the alert,

The natural, perfect, varied attitudes, the bent head, the curv'd neck and the counting;



Such-like I love—I loosen myself, pass freely, am at the mother's breast with the little child,

Swim with the swimmers, wrestle with wrestlers, march in line with the firemen, and pause, listen, count.

—Walt Whitman,  
*Leaves of Grass*  
excerpt

BIO: *Don Mathis' life revolves around the many poetry circles in San Antonio. His poems have been published in a hundred anthologies and periodicals and broadcast on local TV and national radio.*

