

Submitter: W McCormick  
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I have lived in Oregon for my entire life. I've been a student here since kindergarten, and I am still a student in Oregon now that I am attending college. Being a student is and was not easy, especially when I was a minor. This was because of how ostracized I felt because of how others reacted to my identity, even in the family I was raised by. Since I was a quiet kid, of course the first thing I turned to for comfort was reading.

In particular, reading freely as a teenager gave me chances that I never would have had if my reading material was restricted. I got to read about diverse perspectives on life and the world, which led me to develop a greater sense of empathy and understanding for others' perspectives, including perspectives that I don't agree with. It gave me opportunities to practice critical thinking, a skill I use every day to make informed decisions as an adult, especially in voting. It allowed me the ability to do my own personal research on things that interested me, including philosophy, film study, and sex education. The latter was one that especially has helped me in my adult life, as I would argue it's the main reason for why I have never developed an STI, put myself in dangerous situations, or experienced an unwanted pregnancy.

Though most importantly to me, reading freely saved my life. As mentioned before, I was ostracized by my community for who I am as a person. This was especially hard to deal with when I was a teenager, because everything was so emotionally heightened, and it felt like it was never going to get better. I was in a state of constant misery because I genuinely believed that I was not deserving of human dignity, kindness, or love. It got to the point where I actively became suicidal. I started developing plans for how I was going to kill myself and end my suffering. Reading was one of the only things that kept me going. It reminded me that things can get better, that people like me aren't destined for nothing but misery. It gave me hope to stay alive long enough to become an adult who could give back to the community and improve it, rather than let the harm continue. If I didn't have these reminders as to why I should stay alive, I don't know if I would have. I honestly don't think I would be here today if it wasn't for the support I gave myself through reading. Because if I didn't find my own system of support, who was going to help me?

I keep thinking of all the kids out there who are like how I was. I know they're out there, and I know they are especially scared now more than ever. They are in a time marked by political instability, and they think that their entire existence is being threatened with nothing they can do to solve it. They feel like their world is out of their control because the world sees them as nothing but kids who can't make their own

choices freely. I used to feel this way. From personal experience, I know for a fact that the last thing they need is for more control to be taken away from them, especially when it comes down to the simple act of reading.

I know some may be concerned about the younger kids, ones that are below teenage years. After all, if they're able to read freely, what sorts of harmful material would they come across? For that, I say the answer is simple; read with your kids. Don't expect the world to raise your kid for you when the world is not a welcoming place. Don't get me wrong, I understand why people want to protect children, it's a very noble thing to want. Limiting the rights of what people can read in school or at the library doesn't solve the problem, though. I believe it would do more harm than good, especially for the isolated, suicidal kids who need an outlet that tells them there is a reason to stay alive. I was one of those kids. If it weren't for the comfort of the books I read, many of which I believe would be at risk of getting banned, I might have stayed nothing but that kid in the memories of those who grieved my death.