





# Banned books

We turn rebellious this month as we re-read the novels that the powers-that-be tried to ban from circulation

*Last Exit to Brooklyn* by Hubert Selby Junior  
words *clare gogerty*

It's hard to imagine a book causing such a fuss today. Such was the perceived power of literature in 1967, that politicians and judges sought to protect the public from *Last Exit to Brooklyn's* so-called depravity and potential to corrupt. A Conservative MP initiated a private prosecution, and the jury passed a guilty verdict. The judge thought that women would be embarrassed to read its six tales of prostitution, transvestism, gang rape, homosexuality and domestic violence. The book was banned and all copies in Soho were seized (just three, actually – and these were at the publishers). Fortunately, the ruling was overturned a year later, helped a defence from writers Anthony Burgess and John Mortimer, and the book become a cult classic.

It can still land a sucker punch to the unwary. I first read it as an impressionable student up from the country to study in a northern city. Selby's tales of inner-city destitution and the desperate and damned who lived and died there, chimed with my new-found discovery of dirty back streets and their gritty romance. Although these were stories of lost, and often detestable, souls who existed without a glimmer of hope or redemption, it is testament to the writing that they still engendered feelings of compassion and tenderness. Despite my upbringing in an English spa town where the worst thing that happened was a speeding motorist, my

sympathies lay in Brooklyn, with Tralala the prostitute as she pulled on a clean jumper and trawled the bars for trade, Georgette the transvestite hopelessly in love with jailbird Vinnie, and even union man Harry Black, the wife beater, struggling with his homosexuality.

And it read like nothing else. Selby left school at 15 and wrote with scant attention to grammar or punctuation. He wrote fearlessly and in a rush. The prose is spontaneous, and apostrophes are absent – he explained that an apostrophe meant typing an upper case 8 on his manual typewriter and slowed him down. The words spill on to the page, as though spoken by one character to another, high and sore, in a dive, at three in the morning. Paragraph breaks are often abandoned and there are lengthy outbreaks of upper case. Nothing is censored but nothing is unnecessary.

I found re-reading the book today, though, to be tough. Its unflinching look at a violent world is harder to take as the years go by and the impulse to shield myself from life's savagery has taken over. But I will always appreciate *Last Exit to Brooklyn* for its honesty and originality, and one thing I will never be is embarrassed by its 'depravity'.

*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll  
words *katie antoniou*

One of the best bits about being a new parent is rediscovering your favourite childhood

classics. I was so keen to do this when my daughter was born that I began reading to her long before she could really understand anything. *Alice* was top of my list, so I've been reading it aloud, really savouring Carroll's unique use of language, which I probably didn't even notice as a child. As an adult, I've become a very vivid dreamer, so the crazy, nonsensical dream world really resonates with me, particularly the size-changing antics and the feeling of being both yourself and not yourself. Although originally published in 1865, it's these 'trippy' elements of the story that led it to be banned in the 1960s in the US for its alleged promotion of drug use, but the book was also banned in China back in the 1930s for its depiction of animals using human language. The governor of the Hunan Province said that it was "disastrous to put animals and humans on the same level".

Of course, the book was always just a fantasy, but it's thought provoking to read the tale with that sentiment in mind today, when we're becoming increasingly aware of how intelligent animals actually are. It may have taken nearly a hundred years, but with the backlash against places like Seaworld and US courts granting chimpanzees human rights, we're moving further away from the idea that animals and humans are so very different.

As both an adult and a writer, I feel that I can now appreciate this book on a whole different level. For me, Carroll is a great example of a truly gifted writer, one whose style is unique – instantly recognisable. If you revisit it now, you'll probably realise that →





## what we're reading

*Alice* has never really left your consciousness. A quick scroll through Pinterest or Instagram or your Facebook feed and you'll doubtless come across a Carroll quote, whether it's reassuring you that all the best people are mad, or that it's possible to believe as many as six impossible things before breakfast. The timeless genius of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is that both adults and children still relate to these ideas as much today as when the book was first written.

### The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood words *terri-jane*

*The Handmaid's Tale* has never been officially banned, though schools and libraries have frequently challenged it since its publication in 1985 for its explicit depictions of sexuality, and for its religious fundamentalism. It's been consistently included in the American Library Association's Top 100 Most-Challenged Books for the last 30 years, but has now found itself back on bestseller lists after Donald Trump's presidential inauguration. I'm re-reading it in anticipation of the television show starting, after being reminded how terrifying it is by the trailer.

Set slightly in the future, the president has been assassinated and a new theocracy has been established. It tells the story of Offred, who has found herself kept by a high-ranking Commander and his wife as their Handmaid. Sterility is common, and so forced surrogacy is a fundamental part of the new society. She's fortunate; as a woman married to a

divorcee at the time the Republic of Gilead was founded, she's classed as an adulteress, and it's only her fertility that has saved her from a worse fate. Handmaids, at least, are a valued commodity.

Stripped of all the rights she held before, Offred has not kept anything of her former life. She's not allowed money, or possessions, and even her name – literally, of Fred – is part of her new identity as a Handmaid. She is dressed from head to toe in red to mark her out (women with different roles wear different colours). Public executions are common in Gilead, and bodies are hung on display as a warning. Offred is aware that if she doesn't perform her duty as a Handmaid, she'll be sent to the Colonies – a sort of work camp for disgraced women, though she's not certain it really exists.

Atwood's prescience is chilling, especially in the current political context of women's autonomy over their own bodies. As I'm reading, the most frightening part of the book seems to be not the things people will do, but the justifications they will make to themselves in order to do them. I'm more struck by how explicit this is, over any sex scenes, and by how the women in the novel – even the Wives – have been reduced to functional objects.

### Peyton Place by Grace Metalious words *frambles ambler*

This tale of small town America life has something of a reputation. At the time of its release in the 1950s, it became a by-word for titillation, resulting in it being banned in

more conservative US States, forbidden in Canada entirely and being heavily censored elsewhere. The result: sales in the millions.

Although its racy reputation lingers on, this is no Jilly Cooper bonkbuster. Sure, there's one swarthy hero who causes womenfolk to swoon in his wake, but in the main, *Peyton Place* is less a romp and more plain sad.

The fixation with sex surprised me ("It is unfortunate that Mrs Metalious is so flustered with sex", sniffed one censorship board member, "for she often writes well.") because its depiction is so bleak. There's syphilis, rape, illegal abortions and virtual incest, linked to storylines of murder and suicide. Reading it today, the primary message seems to be that the 1930s (when the book is set) was not a happy time to be a woman – and the 1950s reaction to its publication implied things weren't much better 20 years on. In fact, Metalious makes it clear that it was not a happy time to be anything other than a powerful white man.

*Peyton Place* is a page-turner that kept me up at night, while making me feel for her characters. Well, the select few of them she seems to actually like. Metalious was an inhabitant of the kind of place she tears apart. A housewife, married to the local schoolteacher, some of the events and characters were obviously inspired by those in her own town. Her life story turned out to be as cruel as one of her plot lines. I prefer to imagine her as she appears in her author shot – sat at her typewriter in her sneakers, prepared to commit to print what others only dared gossip about behind closed doors.♦

