

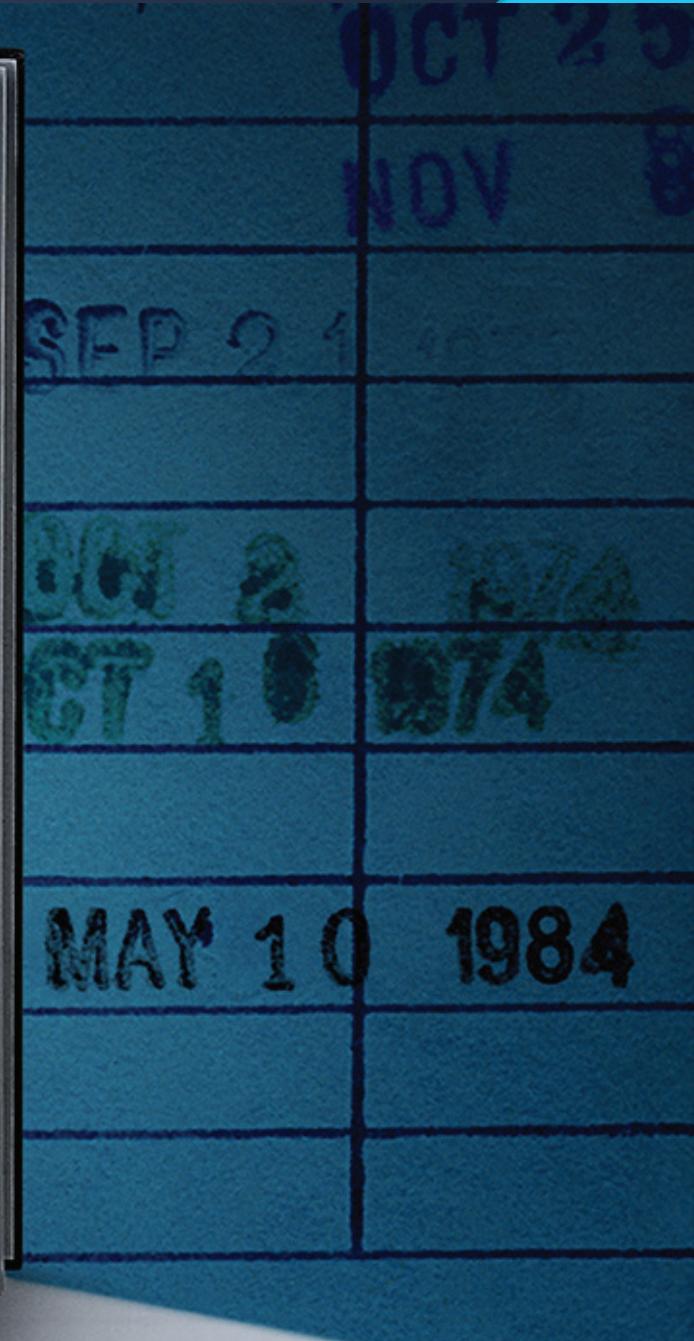


America's
war on
books
is more
than a
war on
words.



THE LIBRARIANS

ENGAGEMENT GUIDE



Corporation
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Broadcasting



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Letter from the Filmmaker

When I set out to make *The Librarians*, I didn't expect to be documenting a battle for the soul of American democracy. I thought I was chronicling a wave of book bans in Texas and Florida, but what I uncovered was a wide and deeply coordinated national effort to censor, intimidate, and ultimately dismantle public institutions—especially libraries and the women who run them.

Like so many people I know, when I was a kid, my books and my library saved me. Librarians inspired me. I remember constructing the Dewey Decimal System on the spines of all my coveted books that lined the shelves of my bedroom in rural Pennsylvania.

We structured the opening of the film using nostalgic archival imagery to evoke a shared, almost sacred image of librarians—much like firemen, they've long held a place of trust in the American imagination. That made the attacks feel all the more surreal. These aren't controversial figures; they're career professionals dedicated to freedom of information. And yet, here they are—being criminalized, harassed, even fired.

Over the three years of production, the film evolved into something more investigative than I originally imagined. We began in Granbury, Texas—before it became the first town under federal investigation for book banning and discrimination. While embedded with librarians across the state, it became clear the story was much larger than a single list targeting books because of race, sexual orientation, or gender identity. I wanted to document how organizations like Moms for Liberty—born out of COVID-era anxieties—developed coordinated campaigns, influencing school board politics and playing on people's fears.

The challenge was enormous. This isn't just about libraries; it's about the erosion of public education, the rise of Christian nationalism, and the crumbling of civic dialogue. And yes, there's misogyny at its core—most of the librarians under attack are women.

But despite that weight, I found hope. Students stood up at board meetings, defending their right to read. Everyday patriots like Rev. Jeffrey Dove and Courtney Gore—a conservative school board member turned whistleblower—risked reputations to speak out.

Stylistically, I pushed myself. I drew inspiration from graphic novels and dystopian cinema. I wanted *The Librarians* to feel both grounded in truth and heightened in urgency. I was so fortunate to collaborate with Nico Muhly—whose score elevated the emotional depth of the film—and with a team of brilliant producers, cinematographers, animators, and editors.

The librarians we profiled include a devout Catholic, an Army veteran, a Baptist minister's daughter, and a lauded Librarian of the Year. They are quiet heroes; each deeply committed to protecting young people and preserving the freedoms we too often take for granted.

What I hope viewers take from *The Librarians* is this: these aren't isolated incidents. They're part of a larger struggle over truth, access, and who gets to shape the future. And while the attacks are fierce, so too is the response.

— **Kim A. Snyder**, Director/Producer, *The Librarians*



About the Film

FILM SYNOPSIS

When Texas lawmakers seek to review a list of books, librarians find themselves on the frontlines of a national battle. Across the U.S., librarians face the impact of uniting against library collection standards that include restrictions on race-related and LGBTQIA+ content. Drawing on historical context, *The Librarians* explores the broader implications for education and public life.

SCREENING OBJECTIVES

- Educate audiences about the impact of book bans and censorship on a democratic society
- Promote public understanding about the importance of intellectual freedom, including the constitutional right to free access to information
- Highlight the expertise of public and school librarians, including their role in supporting the freedom to read
- Uplift the existing movement-building work of librarians, building solidarity across communities
- Encourage local, thoughtful, and informed civic engagement and dialogue about an important current issue
- Inspire discussion about how books can build connection and understanding



How to Screen the Film

CHOOSING A VENUE

As an event facilitator, you might choose to partner with local libraries in your area to host a film screening. You might also consider hosting an event at another general (and more neutral) venue, such as a community center, educational institution, or theater, while still inviting local librarians to be involved and to share their experiences and perspectives with the audience.

Virtual screenings are also an option for hosting a public event for *The Librarians*. A virtual screening can expand your event's geographic reach to audiences who aren't able to attend in person.

FRAMING THE CONVERSATION

- **Consider your event format.** After showing the film, you may choose to have a moderated discussion and/or include other activities to engage your viewers. Several topics and themes are included in this guide to spark ideas about what to cover. Depending on your audience and goals, you might incorporate breakout groups and smaller, conversation-based activities into your event, as well as large group discussion.

- **Remember to create a respectful space for dialogue.** This film contains material on book banning, censorship, and various social and political issues that have sparked much debate and disagreement in American life over the past several years. Since your public screening may draw community members with very different views on these topics, fostering mindful civic dialogue will be key to hosting a successful event.
- **The words we say matter.** Language plays a critical role in shaping how we understand the fight over books in schools and public libraries. Many of the terms used in these debates carry emotional weight, political meaning, or even deliberate misinformation. Familiarize yourself with key terms that are used (and sometimes misused) in discussions about censorship and access to information.

Further ideas about how to facilitate thoughtful conversations, while attending to the safety and security of all participants, appear in the sections below.

FACILITATOR TIPS

As you plan your screening event, consider how to encourage respectful discussion among participants. Safe environments can foster deeper and more honest conversations about charged political topics.

Prepare yourself:

- **Sit with your own reactions beforehand.** View the film before hosting your event and give yourself time to reflect on its issues, so you aren't processing your initial responses while trying to facilitate a discussion.
- **Be knowledgeable.** You needn't be an expert on free speech or the freedom to read to lead an event for *The Librarians*. However, knowing the basics can help you keep a discussion on track and gently correct misstatements of fact. The background information and resource sections throughout this guide may help you, and the potential partnerships sections may spark ideas about local organizations and individuals who can provide additional expertise.
- **Be clear about your role as a facilitator.** A facilitator's job is to remain neutral and help move the discussion along without imposing their views on the dialogue.
- **Know who might be present.** It isn't always possible to know exactly who will attend a screening, but if you know what kinds of groups are present in your community, you may be able to predict who might be represented. Also keep in mind that issues can play out very differently for different groups of people. Factors like geography, age, race, religion, and socioeconomic class can all have an impact on how audience members may understand the topics covered in this film. Take care not to assume that all members of a particular group share the same point of view.

Prepare the group:

- **Agree to ground rules about language.** Prior to starting a discussion or Q&A, remind the audience of basic ground rules to ensure respect and aid clarity. Typically such rules include no yelling or use of slurs and asking people to speak in the first person ("I think...") rather than generalizing for others ("Everyone knows that..."). If a speaker breaks a ground rule, gently interrupt, remind them of the rule, and ask them to rephrase.
- **Ensure that everyone has an opportunity to be heard.** Be clear about how people will take turns or indicate that they want to speak. Plan a strategy for preventing one or two people from dominating the discussion.
- **Recognize the difference between dialogue and debate.** In a debate, participants try to convince others that they are right. In a dialogue, participants try to understand each other and expand their thinking by sharing viewpoints and listening to each other actively. Remind people that they are engaged in a dialogue.
- **Encourage active listening.** Ask the group to think of the event as being about listening, as well as discussing. Encourage participants to listen for things that challenge as well as reinforce their own ideas. You may also consider asking people to practice formal "active listening," where participants listen without interrupting the speaker, then rephrase to see if they have heard correctly.

- **Remind participants that we all see through the lens of our own lived experience.** Who we are influences how we interpret what we see. Everyone in the audience may have a different view about the content of the film they have just seen. Inviting speakers to identify the evidence on which they base their opinion can help people to understand one another's perspectives.
- **Take care of yourself and group members.** If the intensity level rises, pause to let everyone take a deep breath. Also, think carefully about what you ask people to share publicly, so that you are not pressing anyone to reveal things they may not be ready to get into.

The conversation tips in the previous section have been adapted from the ITVS facilitator's guide for Miss Navajo.

SAFETY TIPS

- **Create a safe space for collective dialogue:** Screening events are an opportunity for you to promote a secure community space that includes different voices and perspectives, including those from historically marginalized groups. Before hosting your event, ask your partners and speakers what they need to feel safe during your conversation.
- **Disclaimers:** Remember that the content in this film may prompt difficult emotions for some viewers, particularly those who may have worked in library-related settings. Note this at the beginning of your event so viewers can prepare themselves. Check out this [librarian safety tip sheet](#) from PEN America for more guidance.



Topics and Themes

The Librarians explores several topics and themes, all of which can prompt further discussion. The topics listed below are potential ways to frame your events and post-film conversations:

- The Role of Librarians
- The Role of School Boards, Elected Officials, and Community Members
- Book Banning and the Freedom to Read
- The Power of Reading

You may focus on one topic or several and organize them into thoughtful discussions and activities. Each topic includes the following:

- **Overview and background information** that include framing language and helpful insights about the topic
- **Discussion questions** that provide guided prompts to help get the conversation started
- **Resources** that offer information and education to help you prepare for your event
- **Potential partners** such as community groups and partners, that can contribute additional knowledge during moderated conversations
- **Engagement activities** that promote active participation in the film's topics
- **Additional discussion questions** that support in-depth conversations and personal reflection



THE ROLE OF LIBRARIANS

“We’re stewards of the space, stewards of the resources. We’re the stewards for the people. Now, I think we’ve moved into a vanguard.”

— Anonymous Librarian, *The Librarians*

Background Information

Librarians have always had a unique position on the frontline of American debates about free access to information. But in recent years, they've been thrust into increasingly visible public roles as book-banning efforts rise in various states. As more published titles come under attack nationwide, librarians have found themselves at the center of controversy.

The Librarians delves into these charged contemporary topics, giving voice to various librarians and allowing them to share their firsthand experiences, including their understanding of the responsibilities of their profession. The film also gives audiences insights into the background and training that many librarians have, including how they decide to make different materials and ideas available to their local communities.

Professional librarians are stewards of information. This is a role librarians take seriously: before getting their jobs, many of them have pursued advanced degrees in library science, where they

gain expertise in managing a library's resources and planning its programming to best serve their community's needs. Librarians follow a professional code of ethics, which includes stipulations on upholding intellectual freedom and providing patrons with equitable access to information. Many librarians attend library-related conferences and continuing education meetings each year. They belong to professional librarian associations, and they also follow long-established professional best practices to determine which books to add to their collections.

See the [American Library Association Code of Ethics](#) for more information. Also check out [EveryLibrary's collected requirements for becoming a librarian](#), listed by state.

Discussion Questions

- Tell a story about going to a library, either in your hometown or somewhere else. What was it like? How did it make you feel? Who did you interact with there?
- Recall a time when a librarian helped you or someone you know. What was their response? What was yours? What did you learn from the materials you encountered?
- What surprised you most from seeing the stories of the librarians in this film? Which specific stories do you think will stay with you now that you've watched the film?
- Why do you think librarians have wound up on the frontlines of these heated political discussions about reading and intellectual freedom? How do you feel about these topics, now that you've watched the film?
- Ask librarians what topics they'd most like to convey to the public during a panel. Questions for librarians might include:
 - How has working as a librarian helped you engage with your local community?
 - What criteria do you consider when adding books to your collection?
 - What do you wish more people understood about a librarian's role?

Potential Partnerships

Reach out to the local school and public libraries in your area while planning your event. Ask if they have any resources they'd like to share or if any of their staff librarians would like to be involved, either on a panel or to provide information at a table afterwards. (You might also ask these librarians to explain some of the differences between public and school librarian roles.)

Other potential partners include:

- Local nonprofits in your state or city that support libraries and library personnel, or that engage in library-related advocacy. (There are many! Look up your Local Friends of the Library organization or state library association.)
- Local nonprofit chapters that support the groups often targeted by book-banning policies and legislation. Potential ideas include the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG), the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and UnidosUS. Local church groups, mosques, and synagogues could also be worth engaging in your public conversation, as well as centers that support mental health and substance use challenges.
- Local chapters of organizations that work on free-speech advocacy, such as the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) or PEN America.

Engagement Activity Ideas

- **Spotlight local librarians and their stories:** Host a short discussion panel after the film, in which 2-3 local school or public librarians share their experiences and perspectives (especially on topics from the film, about freedom to read, and why access to information is important). This can be a moderated conversation, and it can also include Q&A from the audience. Encourage audience follow-up and open dialogue!
- **Invite attendees to decide which factors matter most when selecting books for a library collection:** They can write it down for themselves, jot it on a sticky note, share with their neighbor, etc. Then compare this with insights from actual professional librarians. You might use the [American Library Association selection criteria](#) as a resource for this activity.
- **Provide a handout that features how school librarians support students and school communities:** Use or adapt [these infographics](#), or ask school librarians to discuss the book-selection process during a Q&A.
- **Create an opportunity for attendees to write encouraging notes to the librarians in their community:** Set up stations such as a white board, a drop box, postcards, or a sticky-note wall for participants to share their messages.

Resources

- [The American Library Association](#)
- [The American Association of School Librarians](#)
- [The Public Library Association](#)
- [The Association for Rural & Small Libraries](#)
- [The Association of College & Research Libraries](#)



THE ROLE OF SCHOOL BOARDS, ELECTED OFFICIALS, AND COMMUNITY MEMBERS

“If you can control the library, you control the community. Because if you can control the flow of information, if you can control the ideas. You’ve got it. You’ve got everything.”

— Anonymous Librarian, *The Librarians*

Background Information

In many local communities, public school board meetings have become arenas for debates about the reading materials made available in school libraries. The film gives a glimpse into the influence that school board members, as well as various elected legislators, have in modern-day book banning debates.

School board members play vital roles in public schools and local communities. Many school board members are elected by their local constituents, though some are directly appointed by other government officials. These board members make important decisions about school districts' budgets and curriculum, including about school library policy. Elected state legislators can also play a role in these debates—as we see in *The Librarians*, which recounts how a Texas state representative submitted a list of 850 so-called “questionable” books to state school officials in 2021, launching further investigations into the materials held in school libraries.

Local public libraries are also governed by their own board of trustees. Individual members of these library boards are appointed by the local city or county, or they are elected by the general population, depending on the specific location. Typically, library boards meet every month, and they work with the library administration on planning and goal setting for local library services and offerings. Many libraries have nongoverning “Friends” groups that provide additional support to their local library.

Check out this [American Library Association page about the role of library trustees](#) for more information. As you plan your event, you might look up the school boards and library boards in your area to learn more about how they operate.

Discussion Questions

- In the film, we see different community members show up at local school board meetings to share their perspectives about book banning and the contents of library collections. What role(s) do you play in your own community? (Are you a parent, community member, student, librarian, teacher, administrator?) Based on your personal experiences, how do you tend to engage with the libraries in your area? Or with the public education system? What might you do now that you've seen the film?
- After watching this film, what are some ways you could get involved in your local public school system, your local library, or your local legislative process? What do you still need to learn about how these institutions work? Who could you learn it from?
- When you watched this film, especially the scenes featuring school boards and legislative sessions, what perspectives from people of other backgrounds caught your attention? What would you like to learn more about?
- To what extent should school boards and legislators be able to influence which books are available in public and school libraries? Why?
- Follow-up questions to deepen the discussion:
 - To what extent should parents, community members, students, educators, and other stakeholders be able to influence which books are available in public and school libraries?
 - Who do you think is most affected by these decisions?
 - Who has the most expertise? Why?

Potential Partnerships

Invite civic engagement advocacy groups to come out to your event, to provide materials or further information about the process of getting more involved with local institutions (or school boards). For ideas, check out the [American Political Science Association's page on civic education organizations](#).

Engagement Activity Ideas

- **Letter-writing station:** Provide contact information for local legislators and school board members at a table, as well as resources for attendees to write their own letters and/or emails. One writing prompt: "Dear Decision Maker, I have just seen the documentary *The Librarians*, and I want you to know..."
- **Information on running for office:** Set up a table where event attendees can learn about the process of running for the school board or another local elected position. You might do this in collaboration with a local civic engagement organization.
- **Resource sharing:** Invite local organizations to set up a table at your event and provide "more information" flyers about their work. Consider including any potential partners listed in this guide, or others of your choice.
- **Inspired actions:** Create a white board or Post-it note wall where attendees can write what they'd like to do after watching this film. Take a photo to capture your local community's insights.

Resources

- [EveryLibrary Bill Tracking Page](#)
- [Unite Against Book Bans Guide to Attending Library Board Meetings](#)
- [Unite Against Book Bans Guide to Contacting Decision Makers](#)



BOOK BANNING AND THE FREEDOM TO READ

“We need our books. We want our books. They wrote emails to the principal saying, ‘Please don’t take away our books.’”

— Marie Masferrer, *The Librarians*

Background Information

In 1953, amidst growing concerns about censorship during the Cold War era, the American Library Association adopted its first “Freedom to Read” Statement, affirming the public’s right to access diverse ideas and information.

In recent times, the freedom to read has increasingly come under attack in many parts of America, as organized groups and public authorities have developed more concerted efforts to remove or limit access to reading materials in school and public libraries, and even in classrooms and universities. Instead of trusting individual Americans (or individual parents and families) to pick which content is right for them, book bans curtail one of our country’s most fundamental freedoms: to read and write as one wishes, including ideas that others might find offensive.

Discussion Questions

- Why is reading so integral to freedom of thought? And why is access to information so important for democracy? Try to explain this in your own words.

- How do you choose what you want to read? Or what you don’t want to read? If you are a parent, how do you approach these decisions for your children? What support or tools might you need to ensure that your child is accessing age-appropriate material?
- After seeing this film, what do you think the real consequences are of book bans and challenges? Who do they impact, and how?
- Throughout history, many governments and movements have restricted or destroyed books. How do you feel about this practice, and why?
- Who do you think should get to decide what the public can and cannot read? What sorts of impacts do you think censorship can have on our society?
- When’s the last time you read a book that challenged the way you think about the world? What do you think you gained from wrestling with something that might have felt difficult for you?
- How do you think communities can balance different values and beliefs while still supporting access to information?

Potential Partnerships

Invite a local literacy group, library advocacy group, or freedom to read group to participate in your event. These groups could participate in moderated conversation or make resources available after your event.

Think of who else cares about reading in your community as good potential partners. This includes institutions of higher education (community college, college, or university).

Engagement Activity Ideas

- **The lives of library books:** In collaboration with a local library, set up an activity in which attendees proceed through the different steps involved in library book selection and/or library book banning. You can set these up as literal physical stations around the room, then invite people to guess which steps come first, second, third... This may spark understanding of how much is involved in curating a library collection (or in book banning procedures).
- **Banned books display:** Also in collaboration with a local library, set up a table at the event where attendees can browse an assortment of frequently banned titles. Consider having a few local librarians on hand to discuss these books and answer questions. You may also have flyers or bookmarks available to spark discussion among attendees.
- **Banned book trivia:** Round up a few banned books from your local library and include their first lines in a display at your event. Invite attendees to try to match the title of each book with its opening sentence. The person to match the most titles and opening lines wins a prize! (Alternative format: invite attendees to match banned book titles with the reasons the book was banned in the past.)

- **Learn more about countering censorship:**

Create a QR code or list of local organizations that audiences might like to learn more about. Make this list/website available at your screening event to invite exploration and highlight the work of your partner organizations.

- **Freedom walk:** Arrange a [“freedom walk”](#) (a term coined by librarian Lucy Podmore) with stations where viewers can learn more about the first amendment, libraries, and how to be an engaged voter.

- **Social media engagement:** Let your creative juices flow, both for this theme and the others listed in this guide! Consider creating social media resources, including vertical videos to reach younger audiences online and promote your event. The goal is to engage film attendees and advance their thinking about the freedom to read.

Resources

- [PEN America Book Ban Resources](#)
- [PEN America Freedom to Read Statement](#)
- [American Library Association page on “Banned & Challenged Books”](#)
- [American Library Association Freedom to Read Statement](#)
- [United for Libraries' Terms and Definitions Related to Intellectual Freedom and Censorship](#)
- [Freedom to Read Project, “Debunking the Myths” on Book Bans](#)
- [Let America Read](#)
- [Unite Against Book Bans](#)



THE POWER OF READING

*“Had I not picked this book up,
I don’t think I would be sitting here now.”*

— Lou Whiting, *The Librarians*

Background Information

Books can expand our view of the world, because reading is one powerful way that we can learn more about ourselves as well as the complex human societies we belong to.

Ponder the following quote from the scholar [Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop](#), who compellingly compared our experiences of reading to encounters with windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors:

“Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created or recreated by the author.

When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of a larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books.”

The Librarians highlights the importance of reading, both for personal growth and for wider civic dialogue. As you facilitate discussion at your event, encourage attendees to consider the impact of reading in their own lives.

Discussion Questions

- Can you share a story about how reading a book changed your mind about something? What happened? What did you learn, or how did your perspective change?
- Have you ever understood yourself more deeply after reading a book? Or felt empowered in some way? Share this story, too.
- How has reading made you feel more connected to your community, or to other people beyond yourself? Share your insights and ask your neighbor about theirs.
- What do you do when you disagree with what an author has written in a book—or what another person thinks about a book you’ve read? Have you ever had a productive conversation as a result of this disagreement? What happened?

Potential Partnerships

Invite local authors from your community to participate in a public discussion about how they've seen their books expand other people's awareness of a particular issue, or how they've come to understand the power of reading for themselves.

Consider placing these local authors in conversation with local librarians ([see "The Role of Librarians" section above](#)). Encourage discussion about how the ideas in books can impact different kinds of readers.

Local book clubs and writers' clubs are also great partners for a screening event, as well as art councils, commissions, and local art leagues.

Engagement Activity Ideas

- **Book club sign-up:** Set up a table where attendees can sign up to join a local book club, or get information about starting one of their own. You might consider including some recommended titles, or information on virtual or in-person book clubs already out there.
- **Little Free Libraries:** Host a table at your event featuring [Little Free Libraries](#) in your area, plus information on where to find them (or start a new one)!
- **Library resources:** Provide handouts for attendees to take home about library events, resources, and advocacy.

- **Zine-making activity:** Prepare a zine with fill-in-the-blanks prompts for attendees to share their own lived experiences. Pages could include phrases like: "My favorite children's book is...," "A book that made me reconsider my understanding of reality is...," "A book that completely changed my perspective is...," and so forth. Barnard College provides resources on [how to make a zine](#).

- **Book giveaways and swaps:** Offer free books for attendees to encourage reading, or invite participants to engage in a book swap at your event. (If a physical book swap isn't feasible, invite participants to share their insights about a favorite book with a partner or small group.)
- **Parent tip sheet:** Have a tip sheet available for parents who want their children to be engaged readers. Ask a local literacy organization if they have resources to share.

Resources

- [Start a Little Free Library](#)
- [Books Save Lives](#)
- [Start a Banned Book Club](#)
- [How You Can Fight Book Bans](#)

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INDIE LENS POP-UP

For more than 20 years, the award-winning Indie Lens Pop-Up program has partnered with local organizations across the country to bring people together for film screenings and community-driven conversations. Inspired by the documentaries featured on PBS's *Independent Lens*, Indie Lens Pop-Up is a space for sharing ideas and making connections that shape our understanding of ourselves and the world around us. Since its inception in 2005, nearly half a million participants have come together at Indie Lens Pop-Up events to discuss issues that impact local communities. Learn more at pbs.org/indielenspopup.

INDEPENDENT LENS

Independent Lens is an award-winning documentary series that fosters understanding, seeks to build empathy, and encourages a more united society. Produced by ITVS, *Independent Lens* documentaries have premiered on PBS for 25 years and streamed on YouTube, helping Americans foster deeper connections between communities and themselves. From the Oscar-nominated *I Am Not Your Negro* to the Peabody-acclaimed docuseries *Philly D.A.* and the Emmy® award-winning *The Invisible War*, *Independent Lens* provides viewers with in-depth, nuanced storytelling reflecting the experiences of people from a variety of voices and communities. *Independent Lens* is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting: a private corporation funded by the American People, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the Ford Foundation, Acton Family Giving, Park Foundation, and Wyncote Foundation.

Stream anytime on the PBS app or YouTube. Learn more at pbs.org/independentlens.

ITVS

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