High School English Electives Round 1
Controversial Book Descriptions

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings
Summary: The book begins when three-year-old Maya and her older brother are sent to Stamps, Arkansas, to live with their grandmother and ends when Maya becomes a mother at the age of 16. In the course of Caged Bird, Maya transforms from a victim of racism with an inferiority complex into a self-possessed, dignified young woman capable of responding to prejudice.
Challenged: Sexually explicit material, such as the sexual abuse the author suffered as a child, and its "anti-white" messaging. Angelou's book, which is part autobiography, part literary fiction, details many real-life events the author experienced from her early life through adulthood. Many of these recollections have led to the book being challenged or banned.  

The Great Gatsby
Summary: The Great Gatsby is considered the Great American Novel. The Great Gatsby uses many literary devices and it is useful to classroom discussions for this purpose. This book is easily approachable by teenagers and helps them to recognize and understand the relationship between theme and symbolism.
Challenged: Language and sexual references.

Invisible Man
Summary: The invisibility of Ellison's protagonist is about the invisibility of identity—above all, what it means to be a black man—and its various masks, confronting both personal experience and the force of social illusions. The novel's special quality is its deft combination of existential inquiry into identity as such—what it means to be socially or racially invisible—with a more sociopolitical allegory of the history of the African-American experience in America. The first-person narrator remains nameless, retrospectively recounting his shifts through the surreal reality of surroundings and people from the racist South to the no less inhospitable world of New York City.  
Challenged: Language, rape and incest.

Catch-22
Summary: Joseph Heller’s satirical WWII war novel describes the events following a group of deployed airmen from different points of view of the characters. The sequence is non sequential so that the timeline develops throughout the development of the plot. The novel’s literary merits are its exemplary point-of-view, use of rhetoric, and the challenges and irony of fear and authority (specifically the main character becomes more afraid of his own captain than of the German Army).
Challenged: There are a handful of racial slurs, the characters speak with typical “military men” misogyny and racist attitudes of the time. There are scenes of violence both hand to hand and with guns, and violence against women.

The Things They Carried
Summary: The Things They Carried is a collection of short stories about the Vietnam War and the lasting effects of war on the men and women who fought in war. This book is part memoir, part historical fiction and was never meant to be a book about war, but more about the memories, the spiritual, emotional, and psychological burdens that we all carry with us. Each story, though deeply entrenched in the Vietnam War, shares themes of friendship, loyalty, loss, and courage.  
Challenged: Profanity and sexual references