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INTRODUCTION WHAT IS A LITERARY LYNCHING?

The word censorship usually means the silencing of writers by ruling powers, religious or secular: Galileo's life and Salman Rushdie's life threatened by religious authorities; Gustave Flaubert, James Joyce, D.H. Lawrence, Allen Ginsberg, etc. dragged into court for "indecentcy"; a whole generation of writers terrorized or killed by Stalin or Hitler or Mao or dozens of lesser dictators. Even in a democracy with guarantees of free speech written into the Constitution, we must constantly challenge government officials who, especially in times of perceived national peril, would silence truthful writers for "irresponsibility" or "disloyalty." These are the most obvious threats to the freedom to write.

But they are not the only threats. A book that contains unpopular ideas can be suppressed without government action—threats of punishment arising spontaneously out of the fears or prejudices of ordinary people.

William Styron said, "There have been very few writers of any stature who have not been subjected to a great deal of abuse." Any serious writer endures mean-spirited reviews, angry family and friends, irrational misreaders, and assorted cranks with personal agendas. These are all normal hazards of the job. "If you can't take the heat..." as the politicians say. Nobody forces us writers to publish our thoughts. But when the abuse goes beyond the expected heat, it can become an unofficial attempt at censorship resembling the spontaneous, irrational gathering of a lynch mob.

Literary lynching usually begins with a furiously irresponsible attack by a reviewer. So far, situation normal—if the attack doesn't just sputter out, it should become a controversy—that is, a heated exchange of differing opinions. But it doesn't. Instead, the reaction against the author spreads, sparking attacks that distort or reinvent the contents of the book and throw whatever nasty labels are current ("traitor," "racist," "pornographer") at the author. These labels are then repeated and spread by people who have never read the book (and may even make statements vowing not to). Unofficial blacklisting by bookstores and libraries may follow. The author receives hate mail and even threats.

All these attacks may be abetted by uneasy, perhaps fearful silence or even by half-hearted agreement from respected, knowledgeable people who know the accusations are lies. Still worse is the silent withdrawal of friends, acquaintances, and even family—more shocking to the author (and more lonely) than official government suppression or any curses from prejudiced strangers. "Not what our enemies did," as Hannah Arendt put it, "but what our friends did." Worst of all—especially for us readers—may be the effect on the injured author's work. She or he may be unable to write for some time or may be emotionally and spiritually knocked off course, and, if she continues writing at all, may end up writing something that detours from the real strength of her talent.

Why would a book trigger, not an argument, but a widespread, spontaneous effort to obliterate it, even a continuing vendetta against the author? Sometimes the author has written a truth that many people know but are unwilling to see revealed. Sometimes the book does not reveal any suppressed truth. It simply happens to come out at a moment in

history when widespread fear and anger are seeking release, and the book becomes a target—a scapegoat in the most primitive sense of the word.

Usually these reasons—denial of facts, loose anger, fear—coexist, as they did in 1982, when my seventh novel provoked an attack on me. At the time I realized that my experience was not unique, was, in fact, mild compared to some I had heard of. Why hadn't I read more about such attacks? Probably for several reasons. Since the attack isn't government censorship, no First Amendment watchdogs step forward to defend the writer. Since it is not a court prosecution, there is no weighing of testimony for or against the author, no evidence presented, no verdict handed down. Since the attack takes on some aspects of a witch-hunt, those in agreement with the writer are often frightened into silence, lest they be accused of the same thought-crimes and suffer the same isolation. With lack of debate and lack of any authoritative judgment for or against the author, lies about the book and the author may simply float in the air, like a vaguely unpleasant odor, throughout the author's life and even beyond. Like an actual lynching, once it's over, people want to forget how and why it ever happened, and especially to forget how they—either by joining the attack or by maintaining silence—let it happen.

To better understand what had happened to me, I decided to read and write about some of my literary betters who suffered similar attacks. I chose six renowned authors who suffered attacks severe enough and sustained enough (two of them still ongoing) to be well documented in English: Ivan Turgenev, Thomas Hardy, Kate Chopin, George Orwell, Hannah Arendt, and William Styron. Since an attack on any one book cannot be considered in isolation, I tried to sketch in an overview of each writer's life and work, against the background or context for the attack—historical, social, political, and psychological. I give a summary of the content of each book, for readers who might not know one or another book, or might have forgotten its main ideas. Finally I touch on the effects of the attack on the author, on literature, on us. Discussion of each book in terms of all these elements makes it clear, I think, that the practice of literary lynching is not confined to one political, religious, national, or ethnic group. Level of education is not necessarily a factor. In fact, intellectuals, as Orwell pointed out, may be more prone to accept abstract slogans over facts, and to use their verbal talents to more widely and effectively effect a literary lynching.

After discussing these six authors, I give an account of my own experience. My story can be said to represent the experiences of the vast majority of unofficially attacked writers. These are the lesser known, the obscure writers whose ordeals remain unrecorded in literary history because the offending book was effectively suppressed (or didn't even get into print) and the author was forgotten.

Why bother? In a world where most writers can't print a word without some tyrant's approval—an increasingly Orwellian world where endless war brings new government assaults on the constitutional guarantees of free societies—does it really matter if one book is stupidly squelched by popular prejudice?

Yes, it really does matter.

In the *New York Times* of June 10, 1999, Margot Jefferson described a PEN-sponsored panel discussion by prominent writers: "Blasphemy: What You Can't Say Today in America." Jefferson wrote, "Trouble comes when you offend someone with the legal, financial, or cultural power to censor and ostracize you." However, according to

Jefferson, the panelists did not talk about being ostracized for something they had written. They talked about the FEAR of being ostracized—about "*what happens when one is left alone with the constraints the psyche imposes, and with anxieties about how one's audience will respond.*" (my emphasis) In other words, they talked about what they were NOT writing, out of fear of their readers—a fear possibly shared by publishers, for whom controversy may be profitable, but an effective boycott might be fatal to sales.

This panel of self-censoring writers was convened before we entered this new century of new terrors. It was convened at the end of a century of unprecedented growth of literacy—which is supposed to correct ignorant superstition and prejudice. Yet we of the new "information age" and in a country with comparative freedom from government censorship, were producing writers who were afraid to write what they really thought.

When censorship is imposed by a powerful tyrant, most writers fall silent or prostitute their talent to the tyrant. But there are always acts of resistance: unpublishable words are memorized and passed on orally; samizdat are written, copied, passed around, and smuggled out to free territory; a few writers even print openly and face imprisonment or death for the sake of truth.

But if the censor—created by public ostracism—lives within the anxious writer, who needs a tyrant? Then we are all tyrants, actively or passively crushing our own minds.