

CONCLUSION

An agent who read *Literary Lynching* in manuscript asked, rather impatiently, “Well, what’s the point?” then, “You don’t say what to do about these unfair attacks on authors!” It was clear from her tone that she was not really asking a question and making a suggestion, but stating her lack of interest in pitching a book like this. There was no point in my arguing that “what to do about it” is implicit in the examples cited as a warning to readers to avoid joining an illogical, destructive reaction against a book.

Easier said than done, as history teaches us. We can easily identify and repudiate the psychological, social, and political reasons for attacking a book, but usually not until long after the period when the beliefs and events were controversial. (Chopin’s honesty regarding female sexuality seems obvious a century later; Orwell’s analysis of political infighting during the Spanish Civil war are unquestioned half a century later.) But the purpose of my book is to help analyze, understand, and avoid participating in any ongoing or future popular attempt to censor a book.

So perhaps “You don’t say what to do about it!” is a valid request for rules to follow when the almost universal urge to censor gets started. Yes, I include myself among readers always in danger of being swept up in a wave of popular wrath against a writer. In that spirit, I’ve set down a few rules for myself as a reader:

I will never adopt and repeat any judgment on a book I haven’t read—no matter how much I love and respect the person who makes it, and no matter how much I detest the previous work of author.

If a book infuriates me, I will stop, take a deep breath, and ask myself what pushed my buttons: a lie written in the book? a truth I’d rather ignore? a mistake that doesn’t necessarily invalidate the whole book? something in me— a fear or prejudice that has little or nothing to do with the book?

I will never place any subject off limits for any writer.

If I am convinced that a book is intentionally harmful and dishonest, I will say so, citing excerpts, correctly quoted, and signing my statement. But I will not try to stop other people from reading the book and making their own judgment.

If I believe a book has been misunderstood and misrepresented, I will have the courage to step forward and defend the writer—speak out, write a letter, do something to transform a potential lynching into a civil, heated, healthy controversy.

And what about rules for writers, myself included? Can I suggest ways to avoid such attacks? If you are a writer of recreational genre fiction and diet books (which I read too, no disparagement intended) you’re probably safe. But if you are writing serious, probing fiction and non-fiction, even for an established readership whose political and social attitudes match your own, you could—in fact, sooner or later, you probably will, if you keep your eyes on the truth in front of our noses—stumble into a hornet’s nest of truth declared off limits. You may even offend simply by being yourself, a member of the gender or race or class deemed unqualified to write on a particular subject.

In my introduction, I quoted from a *New York Times* article about an authors' panel that discussed "what happens when one is left alone with the constraints the psyche imposes, and with the anxieties about how one's audience will respond." The only way to avoid this anxiety is through self-censorship, adopting a "party line" or avoiding a subject altogether. Poet George Oppen actually stopped writing during the years when his Communist Party comrades tried to dictate what would be proper and politically correct. He didn't follow their dictation. He just stopped writing. For decades he let his political loyalties suffocate his gift. Oppen is an extreme case of voluntary self-censorship. But every act of self-censorship, even minor omissions of risky words, is an act of thought murder, the destruction of the best a writer has to offer to the world.

Victor Serge (1890-1947) was a socialist revolutionary who repeatedly offended and got kicked out of one group after another, did prison time, saw his health damaged and his life often threatened. In his *Memoirs of a Revolutionary* (1945) he wrote as follows: "I give myself credit for having seen clearly in a number of important situations. In itself, this is not so difficult to achieve, and yet it is rather unusual. To my mind, it is less a question of an exalted or shrewd intelligence, than of good sense, goodwill, and a certain sort of courage to enable one to rise above both the pressures of one's environment and the natural inclination to close one's eyes to facts, a temptation that arises from our immediate interests and from the fear which problems inspire in us. A French essayist has said: *What is terrible when you seek the truth, is that you find it.* You find it, and then you are no longer free to follow the biases of your personal circle, or to accept fashionable clichés."

In one of her final essays before she died Susan Sontag wrote that the French essayist's sentence should be pinned above every writer's desk. She didn't mean to warn writers into self-censorship, only to help us prepare ourselves to face what may happen when we are doing our job.