Book-burning comes to America

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In a major act of censorship, with chilling implications for democratic rights, publisher W.W. Norton has announced its decision to "permanently" remove Blake Bailey's biography of American novelist Philip Roth (1933–2018) from print. Several individuals have accused Bailey of sexual wrongdoing, including rape, dating back to 2003. None of them have come forward with any evidence to back up the claims.

Bailey's 880-page book, well-received critically and considered one of the important works of the year in its field, will be pulped. Norton also reported its dropping of Bailey's 2014 memoir.

In a statement dripping with hypocrisy, Norton's president, Julia A. Reidhead, asserted that "Mr Bailey will be free to seek publication elsewhere if he chooses." In fact, overnight Bailey has become a "non-person," he has ceased to exist.

Grotesquely, the book company also said it would match the amount of Bailey's book advance to donate to "organisations that fight against sexual assault or harassment and work to protect survivors."

Already, a search on Norton's website for *Philip Roth: The Biography* lands one at a message that reads: "Our apologies! We can't find the page you're looking for."

The publishing firm's mission statement asserts that "Independent since 1923, employee-owned, and proud to publish 'books that live,' Norton is here for you." The book company promises "that we will stick to the business of publishing the best books we can lay our hands on and then keep our hands on them for as long as may be." Or, until some clique of gender-fixated zealots applies a bit of pressure.

The purging of Bailey's book sets a sinister example, intended to intimidate artists, biographers and scholars alike. The message being sent is clear: any influential figure who rubs establishment public opinion the wrong way can be denounced and dispatched in like manner.

The filthy snout of the *New York Times* has been busily at work in this affair. On April 21, the *Times* published an article setting out the "sexual assault allegations" against Bailey.

There is no reason to give the slightest a priori credence to the claims made in the *Times* article, which conforms to a pattern of trial-by-media that has been "perfected" since the launching of the #MeToo witch-hunt in October 2017. Bailey has never been charged with or convicted of a crime. None of the alleged incidents were ever reported to the authorities.

Astonishingly, on the basis of these unsubstantiated assertions, Norton, in the *Times*' gleeful phrase on April 21, "took swift and unusual action." The publishing firm first revealed that it had stopped a 10,000-copy second printing scheduled for early May. Now, Norton has gone one infamous step farther.

Bailey has labeled the allegations "categorically false and libelous." In response to Norton's latest announcement, his lawyer condemned the publisher's "drastic, unilateral decision … based on the false and unsubstantiated allegations against him, without undertaking any investigation or offering Mr Bailey the opportunity to refute the allegations."

There is an unreal element to the campaign against Bailey's book. No one argues the biography contains falsehoods or that the author plagiarized another's work. On the contrary, even hostile reviews acknowledge the book's thoroughness. No, the biographer has fallen foul of a dubious "morals charge."

The National Coalition Against Censorship simply repeated an elementary truth, although an imperiled one, when it pointed out, in opposing Norton's decision, that books "must be judged on their content. Many of literature's celebrated authors led troubled—and troubling—lives. While a writer's own biography can certainly impact our interpretation and analysis of their work, the reading public must be allowed to make their own decisions about what to read."

French author Jean Genet's "criminality" was embedded in the very title of one of his most important works, *The Thief's Journal* (1949), which remains widely and deservedly read. No one has yet suggested that the remarkable novel by another French writer, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, *Journey to the End of the Night* (1932), should be destroyed because the author later became a pro-Nazi anti-Semite.

Individuals convicted of heinous acts have their books published all the time, including death-row prisoners and more. For that matter, of course, a grouping of truly serious criminals, former US government officials and generals, responsible for the deaths of millions in the Middle East, North Africa, Central Asia and generally everywhere around the world, has its (ghost-written) memoirs and banal musings published like clockwork.

But with one Salem witch-trial-like outburst of hysteria, a respected biographer, author of a volume that was to become the standard work on the subject, vanishes into thin air.

The attack on Bailey is unprecedented since the dark days of

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McCarthyism, when the US government removed thousands of books by left-wing authors and sympathizers from its overseas libraries. It continues and escalates a recent process that has already involved the ruination (or attempted ruination) of individuals such as the late James Levine, Woody Allen, Kevin Spacey, Placido Domingo, Aziz Ansari, Louis C.K., Charles Dutoit, Garrison Keillor and Geoffrey Rush, and the institutionalization of censorship.

Bailey, who spent nearly a decade on the Roth volume, is an undeserving victim of this scurrilous campaign. The presence of Roth himself looms largely over the present affair.

The April 21 *Times'* article let the filthy cat out of the bag in this regard. It observed that the controversy "that has engulfed Mr. Bailey erupted in part because of the publicity he has received for his Roth biography, which led some of the women accusing him of misconduct to come forward." Some of the latter "have noted that they were bothered not only by the praise lavished on Mr. Bailey, but by the way, in his Roth biography, that he seemed to excuse the writer's misogyny. Several literary critics seized on the fact that in the biography, Mr. Bailey brushed off Mr. Roth's mistreatment of women."

One does not even have to read between the lines here. Bailey is being punished by the accusers, the *Times* and, now having fallen into line, Norton for his failure to condemn Roth sufficiently for what they claim is the latter's "mistreatment of women."

Roth's writing has run afoul of the race-and-gender Mafia operating in and around the Democratic Party, including prominently the pseudo-left and feminist set. The late writer made no secret of his distaste for identity politics, a subject he treated scathingly in *The Human Stain* (2000). In 2018, in regard to the then recently launched #MeToo campaign, Roth commented that he saw no "tribunal" before which the sexual misconduct allegations might be adjudicated, but instead "publicized accusation instantly followed by peremptory punishment. I see the accused denied the right of habeas corpus, the right to face and examine his accuser, and the right to defend himself in anything resembling a genuine judicial setting, where careful distinctions might be able to be drawn as to the severity of the reported crime."

Roth has fallen out of favor and faces the prospect of becoming a "non-person." His work will likely be increasingly dropped from college courses and demands will be made that his "immoral," "libidinous" novels be removed from libraries.

The accusation that Roth in his novels is a "misogynist" deserving of banishment is almost beneath replying to. Roth was an artist, that is to say, someone who attempted to represent reality honestly and without idealization. As a result, he stubbornly refused to see anyone, male or female, as "blameless." His efforts run counter to the absurd, philistine and thoroughly stupid view now prevalent in establishment circles, something out of a Victorian melodrama, that women are eternally saintly victims who never tell a fib or carry out a betrayal. What passes for the American intelligentsia has fallen to this ridiculous, ignoble level.

In 2014, Roth responded in an interview to the charge of misogyny, noting that the accusation, although absurd, was "not necessarily a harmless amusement." He continued, "In some quarters, 'misogynist' is now a word used almost as laxly as was 'Communist' by the McCarthyite right in the 1950s—and for very like the same purpose."

Indeed, the assault on Roth's reputation has this definite *right-wing* character. His critics despise him in the end because of his most admirable and enduring qualities, embodied in his angry and informed artistic treatment of such subjects as petty bourgeois conformism and repression, anti-Semitism, American fascism, Communism, identity politics and more. At his best, Roth offers a troubling, disruptive view of things. The affluent petty bourgeoisie—essentially satisfied with itself and the way things are—always and everywhere mistrusts serious art and, given the proper circumstances, strives to discredit and suppress it.

Instinctively, the American ruling elite, terrified of the inevitable emergence of mass opposition, encourages every attempt to dull popular consciousness and awareness. It inevitably fears any work that sensitizes and alerts the viewer or reader, or encourages a searching, thoughtful approach to public matters. In that sense, every significant attack on democratic rights is an attack on the working class and its political progress.

The Democratic Party wing of the ruling elite is the most vigilant and therefore the most censorious in this regard. No one at the *Times*, the *Washington Post*, *Salon* or the *Nation* has uttered a serious protest about Norton's scandalous action. On the contrary.

Roth also faces expulsion from the canon because of his personal life, including his numerous affairs. Why should this high-minded campaign stop here? Any writer or artist who has a personal life that in any fashion provokes the disapproval of the moral crusaders risks "permanent removal." The current atmosphere almost guarantees a vast culling of writers, leaving untouched only those who embraced monogamy or purely platonic relationships. Who shall escape a "whipping" under that scheme of things? We are not convinced it will ensure the finest art is left to us. All of this simply has no relation to reality as it is actually lived.

We unequivocally denounce Norton's censorship, call for Bailey's defense and defend Roth's right to represent the world as he saw it.

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