

Writers, biographers protest W.W. Norton's decision to "permanently" remove Blake Bailey's biography of Philip Roth from print

David Walsh
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On April 27, publisher W.W. Norton announced it was "permanently" removing Blake Bailey's biography of American novelist Philip Roth (1933–2018) from print. Several individuals have accused Bailey of sexual wrongdoing, including rape. None of them have come forward with any evidence to back up the claims.

We argued on the WWSW that this was "a major act of censorship, with chilling implications for democratic rights. ... 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."

Bailey's book, likely to be the standard work on Roth's life for some time to come, has been "pulped" and its author turned overnight into a "non-person." There is no precedent for this in recent times.

Bailey has labeled the allegations "categorically false and libelous." 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."

As we have noted, no one claims that *Philip Roth: The Biography* contains errors or falsehoods, or that the author is guilty of plagiarism. Bailey has fallen foul of a dubious "morals charge."

Who is safe from such accusations? Any person can come forward and accuse a writer, musician, artist or political figure of "sex crimes" and the media will instantly and obediently paint the individual as an evildoer and help banish the accused from public life. It has already happened over and over again, with no elementary legal rights respected, including the presumption of innocence, or even considered, and no recourse. This is McCarthyism of an especially pernicious character.

The WWSW contacted a number of writers, biographers and scholars about the Bailey-Roth issue, asking for comments and protests. We post the replies below.

We encourage others to send in their comments.

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Novelist, memoirist and short-story writer James Morrison:

Even if Blake Bailey were charged, tried, and convicted of a crime, it would still be indefensible for W. W. Norton to pulp his book. Can American readers not have the option to think for themselves? The "#MeToo movement" might have accomplished something if it had facilitated the prosecution of cases involving harassment or assault, but it has resulted in something like the opposite: a bizarre spectacle of social panic, moralist shaming, and public burning, based on floating accusations in media. Norton's cancellation of Bailey's book is not the action of a free institution in a democratic society. It is the procedure of craven functionaries deep in a politburo.

James Morrison is the author of a memoir, *Broken Fever* (2001), a novel, *The Lost Girl* (2007), and a collection of short stories, *Said and Done* (2009), as well as several nonfiction books on film and numerous short stories and essays in literary quarterlies such as *Ploughshares*, *Massachusetts Review*, *Raritan* and *Michigan Quarterly Review*. He lives in southern California, where he currently teaches film, literature and creative writing at Claremont McKenna College.

Author and film historian Max Alvarez:

This brazen act of censorship on behalf of W.W. Norton, coupled with the professional ruination of a biographer based on anonymous accusations, reads like a crude satire not only of Philip Roth but of Franz Kafka. That our so-called "intelligentsia" (who never tire of exhibiting their complete lack of intelligence) would support such fascistic repression of art and culture, and at the expense of our alleged "democratic process," would be hilarious were it not so horrifying. Even Philip Roth might have rejected this chilling narrative as being too exaggerated for one of his tales.

As an author, educator and historian, I condemn the right-wing actions of W.W. Norton as well as corporate media compliance in the defamation of Blake Bailey. I have had the great privilege of lecturing on Roth and the films adapted from his novels, and I have no intention of banishing the novelist from my repertoire of speaking topics. I also eagerly look forward to reading Bailey's acclaimed Roth biography in defiance of the sickening actions by his disgraceful publisher.

Max Alvarez is an author, film historian, and public speaker who has been lecturing on world cinema culture for over two decades. A former visiting scholar and guest lecturer for The Smithsonian Institution and film curator at the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C., Alvarez's latest book, *The Cinéphile's Guide to the Great Age of Cinema*, is scheduled for publication this summer. He has also written *The Crime Films of Anthony Mann* for University Press of Mississippi and was a major contributor to the Northwestern University Press anthology, *Thornton Wilder/New Perspectives*.

Fantasy and science fiction author Steven Brust:

In 1995, Rob Reiner directed a minor but entertaining film, written by Aaron Sorkin, called *The American President*. At its climax, the President, delightfully played by Michael Douglas, delivers a speech in which he

says, “You want free speech? Let’s see you acknowledge a man whose words make your blood boil, who’s standing center stage and advocating, at the top of his lungs, that which you would spend a lifetime opposing at the top of yours.”

It was a fantasy of a President who expressed the wishes of the extreme left wing of the Democratic Party in the mid-90s.

How things have changed! To these same forces in 2021, the question is no longer, “How are we to be sure that everyone, even those we hate, but especially the most oppressed voices, can be heard?” Now it is, “How can we find ways to stifle the expression of those we disagree with, and if that means the most oppressed are also silenced, well, no problem.” And, worst of all, it often has nothing to do with disagreement; rather, it is frequently nothing more than the basest career advancement, with simplistic moralistic phrases thrown out as a smokescreen.

Sometimes, in the interaction between the political and the artistic, things get complicated. Other times, they’re pretty simple.

When a publisher pulps a book—that is, not only stops printing it, but destroys existing copies—because of unproven allegations about the writer’s character, because of the results of a trial taking place in the media, a trial in which the defendant is not permitted to cross-examine witnesses, a trial in which the defendant is not permitted to confront his accuser, a trial in which the defendant is not permitted to even mount a defense, it’s not complicated. We have nothing here that is in the least progressive. Any artist who does not feel threatened by this, is an artist who has no intention of ever challenging the status quo politically, socially or artistically.

Mob justice is not justice. Trial by media is not justice. These are tools of oppression. And to censor a work, not even because one is frightened of its ideas, but because of the character of the artist, is vile and works against the free exchange of ideas that is a weapon in the hand of the most oppressed layers of society. And when even that, even the character of the artist, is based on unproven allegations, it becomes utterly wretched.

To use fear of reprisal to silence artists is the method of the extreme right. To passively accept it is craven.

Steven Brust is an American fantasy and science fiction author of Hungarian descent. He is best known for his series of novels about the assassin Vlad Taltos, one of a disdained minority group of humans living on a world called Dragaera. His recent novels also include *The Incrementalists* (2013) and its sequel *The Skill of Our Hands* (2017), with coauthor Skyler White.

Film historian, professor and author Tony Williams:

This latest incident of #Me-Too political correctness resembles a nightmare version of a 21st century Gothic dualistic fantasy where progressives duplicate actions of 20th century Nazis in a hideous culture war. However, what makes this more serious are echoes of the burning of the Alexandria library by rabid Christians who murdered head librarian Hypatia, the lack of due process and the McCarthyite fear it will instill in those who will now fear “rocking the boat” and attempting to combat the dumbing down of “popular consciousness and awareness,” as the WSWS notes.

Tony Williams is professor of English at Southern Illinois University. Educated at Manchester and Warwick Universities, his research interests include representations of Viet Nam in literature and cinema, film and literature, classical Hollywood cinema, the writings of Jack London, film genres, and naturalism and cinema.

Recent publications include *The Cinema of George A. Romero*:

Knight of the Living Dead (2015); *James Jones: The Limits of Eternity* (2016), Editor of *Postcolonialism, Diaspora, and Alternative Histories: The Cinema of Evans Chan* (2015), and co-editor of *Hong Kong Neo Noir* (2016).

Author, editor and blogger Kathleen Spaltro:

Thomas Aquinas clarified that the aesthetic value of art has nothing whatever to do with whether the artist is a good person. The artist may be a good person, or not, but that is the moral question faced by the artist as a person, not by the artist as an artist.

Judging the value of art—whether a film or a novel or a biography—on the basis of the author’s good or bad character is an error. Therefore, censoring a work of art on that basis is also an error.

Blake Bailey’s biography of Philip Roth, as well as Roth’s own vast output of fiction and nonfiction, deserve positive or negative judgment on their own merits.

At the same time, talent or genius does not excuse or extenuate bad or criminal behavior and cannot serve as a defense.

People confuse judging the author/creator with judging the creative work all the time, but this sort of thinking is poor.

Aesthetic judgments have nothing to do with the moral character of artists, nor does artistic genius excuse bad behavior or crimes. One is a misapplied moral judgment; the other is a misapplied aesthetic judgment. The realms are separate and should not be confused.

Kathleen Spaltro is the author *The Great Lie: The Creation of Mary Astor* and *Restoring the American Promise: John Peter Altgeld and Eugene V. Debs*, coauthor of *Royals of England: A Guide for Readers, Travelers, and Genealogists* and editor of *Genealogy and Indexing*.

“The light which puts out our eyes is darkness to us. Only that day dawns to which we are awake. There is more day to dawn. The sun is but a morning star.”—Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*

Film historian, biographer, screenwriter, author and educator Joseph McBride:

When I once asked the formerly blacklisted writer-director Abraham Lincoln Polonsky how he thought liberals behaved during the (previous) Hollywood blacklist, he said, “The liberals were the worst.” Many liberals and even such liberal organizations such as the American Civil Liberties Union and the anti-communist Americans for Democratic Action cooperated with the Witch Hunt; some of these liberals purged and otherwise betrayed their former friends and colleagues. It is dismaying during this current blacklist period to see that so many of the people supporting the new witch hunt again are (faux) liberals. Their latest target is Blake Bailey, the authorized biographer of Philip Roth. The accusations against Bailey led to the withdrawal of his already published book *Philip Roth: The Biography* and his 2014 memoir, *The Splendid Things We Planned*, by his publisher, W. W. Norton, without giving him due process under the law.

In defiance of our Constitution, due process is largely a thing of the past in this country when it comes to allegations of serious sexual misconduct. When people are charged with crimes, the media generally find them guilty in trial-by-media. I first noticed this kind of thing happening when I was sixteen years old and saw Lee Harvey Oswald calling out vainly on national television, “I do request someone to come forward to give me legal assistance.” Oswald was never even arraigned on the charge of assassinating President Kennedy but was tried and found guilty by the media and executed by lynching on live TV in the basement of the Dallas

police station while surrounded by about sixty policemen and many members of the media.

Woody Allen's autobiography, *Apropos of Nothing*, was dropped by the Hachette Book Group in 2020 for reasons of allegations of serious personal misconduct, like Bailey, even though in Allen's case extensive investigations by two states, Connecticut and New York, have cleared him of the accusations made by his former partner Mia Farrow, and he has never been charged with a crime or even sued by the Farrows. The American news and entertainment media, including in a 2021 HBO documentary, nevertheless largely have decided that Allen is guilty of the heinous crime of molesting a child. His films are blacklisted in this country, and Amazon dropped a filmmaking contract with him (later they reached a settlement). Hachette, Ronan Farrow's publisher, bowed to demands made during a walkout by some of its own staff members to drop Allen's book, setting a terrible precedent (Allen's book was later picked up by Arcade and has been widely published abroad as well). Similarly, pressure has been applied on Simon & Schuster by more than 200 of its employees and 3,500 outside supporters, including some of its own authors, to drop its deal with former Vice President Mike Pence, who has contracts for two books with the publisher. That publisher already canceled a book deal with Senator Josh Hawley, a supporter of President Trump's attempted coup, but it continues to have a book deal with former Trump aide Kellyanne Conway.

The issue is not whether one agrees or disagrees with these authors' political views or approves of their behavior or with the sometimes questionable decisions by the publishers to sign books by controversial authors to often lucrative contracts in the first place. To borrow what Cary Grant says to his aunts in *Arsenic and Old Lace*, when a publisher breaks a book contract if charges are made against an author without due process, "it's not only against the law, it's *wrong!*" The issue is freedom of speech and freedom of the press for authors, regardless of ideology or personal history. In addition to my adherence to the Constitution, I take this all personally because I have had a similar experience with a leading American publisher. I recently wrote a book, *Frankly: Unmasking Frank Capra* (Hightower Press, Berkeley, 2019), about the four-year legal battle I fought with my publisher (Alfred A. Knopf/Random House) and Capra's archivist (Jeanine Basinger of Wesleyan University) who tried to kill a book under contract, my biography *Frank Capra: The Catastrophe of Success*. I eventually prevailed but had to take the book to another publisher (Simon & Schuster) and cut and/or summarize unpublished material by Capra that I was not given permission to quote, despite previous promises by Wesleyan.

All writers and readers are threatened when books are threatened in these ways. The fire chief in François Truffaut's film version of Ray Bradbury's novel *Fahrenheit 451* makes a memorable speech giving voice to what is now called "political correctness" by declaring that because various groups find various books objectionable, all books should be burnt, ranging from *Othello*, *Robinson Crusoe*, and *Madame Bovary* and Nietzsche and *Mein Kampf*. The ironic parallels of this movement with Nazi book burning are obvious. We are in danger of a comparable widespread conflagration if this madness does not stop. This is a fundamentally anti-art movement, for art inherently is disturbing. "You see," says the fire chief, "... we've all got to be alike. The only way to be happy is for everyone to be *made equal*." Liberals and/or leftists should be in the vanguard of opposition to such censorship rather than lending support to it. But everyone of every political stripe should be alarmed. It could happen to any author.

Joseph McBride is the author of biographies of film directors Frank Capra, John Ford and Steven Spielberg; three books on Orson Welles; and the forthcoming critical study *Billy Wilder*:

Dancing on the Edge (Columbia University Press). Many of his books have been published in foreign editions; the French edition of his work on Ford, *A la recherche de John Ford*, won an award in 2008 from the French film critics' association as Best Foreign Film Book of the Year. McBride was a reporter, reviewer, and columnist for *Daily Variety in Hollywood* for many years. He is a professor in the School of Cinema at San Francisco State University, where he has taught since 2002.

Film critic, film historian and author Jonathan Rosenbaum:

Cancel culture, perhaps the most poisonous and befuddled offshoot of "political correctness," is a totalitarian expression of impotence, not any real exercise of political power. It's a way of saying that because one can't defeat racism or misogyny or abuse in the real world, at its sources, one can pretend to defeat it symbolically, by canceling words, sounds, images and other forms of communication, thus pretending that the people and communicators one disapproves of can be "canceled" (i.e., ignored and suppressed). It's an insult to the principles of free expression that can only be practiced by defeated bigots who've given up on free expression and democratic processes, and by gamblers who prefer to cheat.

Jonathan Rosenbaum has been a prominent film critic for decades. He was the head critic for *The Chicago Reader* from 1987 to 2008, when he retired. His most recent book is a two-volume work, with the overall title of *Cinematic Encounters*, published by the University of Illinois Press. His other books include *Moving Places: A Life in the Movies* (1980/1995); *Film: The Front Line 1983* (1983); *Placing Movies: The Practice of Film Criticism* (1995); *Movies as Politics* (1997); *Movie Wars: How Hollywood and the Media Limit What Films You See* (2000); *Discovering Orson Welles* (2007) and *Goodbye Cinema, Hello Cinephilia: Film Culture in Transition* (2010).

Poet and professor Randy Prus:

Logically, the attack on Blake Bailey's book is an "ad hominem" attack, which any student of logic and rhetoric would recognize. But the logic of late capitalism both assumes and yet resists logic, to form its own. If, in Marx and Engels' early critique of capitalism, that the bourgeoisie control the means of production, and that the liberating response would be democracy, who, then, controls democracy in late capital? The voice of resistance, the "Me Too" has, itself, been thoroughly commodified, not as a critique, but, as capital itself, a need to be circulated. Capital is about both accumulation and circulation. The bitcoin phrase, "Me Too," is now accepted by most major "credit" cards. It will get you into most publications of your choice.

As far as eliminating Roth from the canon, we would need to indite and question an American literary line. Roth's own autobiography in his fiction re-creates himself as a "clown prince" of his own invention. Should we then question Franklin, Whitman, Twain, Ginsberg, Kerouac and others? The myth of America is the myth of the invention of the self. Should we eliminate a Jersey-born (Newark, NJ), American Jew from participating in this tradition? Historically, capitalism has always rested on the figure of the Jew (and Black, and Indian, etc.). But I don't mean to make this the issue. Nor do I want to diminish the "Me Too" movement. This is about Power. As Frederick Douglass understood, power is about both oppression and resistance, and somewhere between lies the respect, and a recognition of, and for, the dignity of others.

Randy Prus is a professor of English and Humanities at Southeastern Oklahoma State University, where he also chairs the Department of English, Humanities, and Languages. He is the author of *On the Cusp Of Memory* and *Ice*, collections of poems.



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