

Double Mischief

Wendy Caster



What Is Censorship Anyway?

In Paradigm Books, a lesbian-feminist bookstore, a question is posted on the bulletin board in the bathroom: "Is the feminist boycott of the publisher of 'American Psycho' censorship?"

I think this is a good and important question, and I was particularly pleased to see it up for discussion in a lesbian-feminist bookstore. This was an example of debate for the sake of honesty., which is a most wonderful form of debate.

I of course put in my two cents worth. I pointed out that censorship is when the government or some other ultimate power totally forbids the discussion or distribution of a book or idea or belief. Although "American Psycho" was turned down by one publisher, it was printed by another. And if it had been turned down by all the publishers in the United States, its author could still have distributed photocopies or floppy discs or self-published it. There was no threat of jail hanging over his head.

The boycott, on the other hand, is people using their Freedom of Purchase — a freedom perhaps as important as Freedom of Speech in a capitalist democracy — to express themselves. Why should women give money to a company that they perceive to be damaging? Money is power, and it's imperative to use it well.

But is it really a good idea to boycott a publisher's entire line of books because one of them is repellant? I can't imagine a publisher without a single book that in some way offended me or someone else; such a publisher would have to be printing very boring books.

In theory, I am glad "Am-

erican Psycho" was published because I believe in a thriving and varied market of ideas. In practice, however, I told off the owner of the bookstore for carrying it.

This wasn't my intention. I saw a copy in the store and commented on it. The bookseller said, "If you'd take the time to read it, you'd see it's actually anti-violence." I tried to explain to him that there wasn't enough time in 100 years for me to let that book into my psyche. I tried to explain that I get nightmares from depictions of anti-women violence and that, even if the book is ultimately against violence, the violence still would have "happened" to me if I read it. But I didn't get those points out clearly or well, because I was too disgusted that this man had read the book and was defending it.

Since then, I have heard from a number of people that the book isn't that bad — or ultimately is sort of interesting. These people are proud of having read the book. They judge things for themselves. And if the book were on any other topic, I would be on their side! I also prefer to choose for myself. I also think a book should be read before it is discussed.

But I have to check the back seat of my car for rapists. I get tall male friends to walk me to my car late at night. I worry that the plumber I let in is really a plumber. If I lived on the first floor, I'd sleep with my windows locked — except I wouldn't live on the first floor. And I'm not being paranoid: those are all ways that police and other authorities recommend that women take care of themselves. I don't need some male author adding more anti-woman violence to the world. And,

by the way, only one of the people I know who read the book is a woman.

A big question here is, "Can words lead to actual violence?" I believe sometimes they can. Many writers pooh-poo this idea, saying that words aren't that powerful. But then why are they writers? And isn't it still the violence that should be punished, not the words?

In the past, I have felt obligated to defend any book or music or television show or movie that was threatened with any sort of restriction. As a lesbian writer, I know that if censorship becomes acceptable in the United States, my work will eventually be censored. As a raving liberal, I believe in freedoms on top of freedoms on top of freedoms. And I think it's probably for the best that "American Psycho" got published. But I can't say I'm glad. I wish it would just sink without a trace.

So what is censorship? Is it Bret Easton Ellis having to go to a second publisher? I don't think so. Is it the gaping hole in mainstream media where the lesbian and gay characters should be? In a way. Is it one editor's choice not to publish a lesbian romance? No. Is it 1,000 editors' choices not to publish a lesbian romance? Maybe.

But a new question needs to be asked: Is it physical censorship when women know they can't safely take a stroll after dark?

Yes!

And when do we get our freedom?

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John [unclear] 5/31/91