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Guest Editorial

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The Pilgrim's Scrip

GUEST EDITORIAL

By **Barry Fast** (Scholarly Book Center)

As 1990 ended two events took place that have some interesting, and perhaps disturbing, consequences. Salmon Rushdie announced from his hideout in Britain that he would not permit a paperback edition of *The Satanic Verses*, nor would he allow any more translations of his controversial novel. Apologizing for any offense he caused, he reaffirmed his respect for and belief in Islam.

In capitulating to his tormentors, Rushdie gained nothing. The Mullahs insisted that the death sentence imposed upon him by the dead Ayatollah cannot ever be lifted. His recantation cannot be viewed by First Amendment absolutists, among whom I number myself, as anything but a sellout, and a vain one, to the forces of censorship.

Of course it is easy for me to write this criticism. I have not suffered, I was not threatened. But I did wholeheartedly support Rushdie, admire his bravery, and especially admired the courage of bookseller and librarian colleagues who displayed the book prominently and never gave in. My friends at Collets had their London bookshop bombed. Innocent workers at Viking worried about their safety at work, and managers feared for the safety of their families. All for Rushdie, and now he has let them down, as well as those who hate censorship.

During this whole affair there were only a few people or institutions that lived up to the ideals that were symbolized by Rushdie's ordeal. Our government, preoccupied with a volatile mid-east political situation and lead by man who thought deeply only about the movies, was barely heard from. No strong condemnation emanated from Washington, and what little hand wringing there was, subsided in

less than a year. The British government, with a much larger responsibility to protect its own subject and his right to free speech, was even more disappointing. When British Moslem leaders sued for suppression of the book on the basis of blasphemy, the courts said that the British blasphemy laws applied only to Christianity. Here was an opportunity to confront this issue, this anomaly in a democracy. Instead of taking the opportunity to remove blasphemy from the criminal statutes,

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the Thatcher government weaseled their way out. As they say in the House of Commons, "Shame, shame."

Now it is all over. No principle was established, no lofty goal achieved, while Salmon continues to write unreadable books from his hideout, still the potential victim of some Moslem aspiring to a special place in Heaven.

And then, as 1990 turned into 1991, we moved from the loss of principle to the rise of bad taste. I am talking about the book, *American Psycho*, soon to be published, and bought, and achieve bestsellerdom, and become a made-for-tv movie, and be discussed by very serious people on Phil Donahue. Bret Easton Ellis, the author, is the sadist's Tom Wolfe. The title role in this tome is played by one Patrick Bateman who is a shallow sort of guy into designer clothes and trendy restaurants. Besides these yuppyish flaws, which many of us share and most of us are sick of reading about (enough already, why can't we be shallow; it's our money), Patrick has a nasty habit of doing vicious things to the bodies of women, both alive and dead. According to excerpts in *Time*,

Spy, and the *New York Times Book Review* (see December 16, 1990, page 3) our hero has developed some of the sickest, most revolting methods of killing his short term girl friends. These excerpts are so stomach-wrenching I will not, indeed cannot, buy this book for my late night reading pleasure. So I am violating at least one of my rules by commenting on a book I have not read. Forgive me this time; I won't do it again, but I do have a point to make.

Simon and Schuster was all set to publish *American Psycho* when the *Time* magazine article appeared condemning the book. Martin Davis, head of Paramount, parent of S&S, allegedly called Richard Snyder, head of S&S, and ordered that the book be withdrawn. Mr. Snyder made some uncomplimentary comments in public about his editors at S&S Adult Trade, and publication was halted. Mr. Bret Easton Ellis got to keep his large advance. Then that canny businessman, Mr. Sonny Mehta, head of Knopf and Vintage, picked up the book from S&S and will publish *American Psycho* soon. S&S can afford the loss of the advance, Vintage will make out fine on this, Bret gets another advance, and everyone involved comes out smelling like a, well, you put in the simile.

In my view, this is not a censorship issue. Publishers have the right to choose what they will publish, and they make decisions all the time about whether a particular book fits their list or taste. They must have that right. Knopf has made the decision to publish *American Psycho* while S&S decided not to.

What should librarians do about this book? Although I have not read it, I trust the opinions of those who have. It seems to be a book that portrays violence against women in a particularly vivid manner. Will some sick readers act out fantasies engendered by this book? Should we who have a professional, and in many cases, a deeply felt abhorrence of censorship, act as censors? Should libraries buy fewer copies than they normally would, or even none at all? Is that censorship?

I think librarians cannot act as censors, and especially when a book is controversial. When libraries buy fewer copies they make the book less accessible. That is partial censorship, in my view. If they buy none, that is indeed censorship, because it makes the book inaccessible to many people.

I believe that booksellers also have a responsibility to make sure that books never fall victim to the censor, even offensive or disgusting books. But booksellers are generally private

companies; perhaps they, like publishers, can decline to handle a book that they individually find particularly offensive. After all, they decline to handle some types of books because those titles do not fit their business plan. Or they refuse to carry certain publishers' books, simply because they do not like the business practices of that publisher. While booksellers must resist government attempts at censorship, perhaps they are acting responsibly in refusing to handle a book they hate. Perhaps, I say, because I am not sure.

The worst aspect of this whole affair is that it stinks of hypocrisy. If the Knopf people simply said that they knew this would be a good seller because it will engender controversy, I could accept that. Publishing is a business, and usually a pretty decent one. It becomes indecent when publishers dress up trash to masquerade as literature. If Sonny Mehta feels like being Al Goldstein for a day, that is his choice. It's his reputation that is now attached to

American Psycho, just as Al Goldstein's is attached to Screw Magazine. But Al, at least, pretends to be nothing but a pornographer, laughing all the way to the bank. I'll always choose an up-front pornographer over a literary pretender.

To boycott Knopf, as some feminist and fundamentalist groups are doing (strange bedfellows), is another brand of hypocrisy. Book boycotts are dangerous, and people who hold controversial opinions, like feminists and fundamentalists, should be in the forefront of free expression. The deed is done, the book is being published. Think what you want of Sonny Mehta's taste or business acumen, but blackmailing a publisher is as disgusting as *American Psycho*. ☛

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