

WRITERS in an Age of RAGE, LIES, and WILLFUL STUPIDITY

BY SARA PARETSKY

Acclaimed author Sara Paretsky was the featured speaker at a reception in Chicago last June honoring the winners of the 2017 Andrew Carnegie Medals for Excellence in Fiction and Nonfiction. Her speech, reprinted here, includes a few factual updates but appears largely as it was delivered to a wildly appreciative and supportive audience.



Steven Gross

Thank you for inviting me to speak here tonight, and welcome to my city, which I love, despite its many flaws.

The words *privileged* and *honored* are so overused lately, I try never to say them, but Matthew Desmond and Colson Whitehead have written such extraordinary works that sharing a stage with them truly is an honor.

The essayist Calvin Trillin has commented that “the shelf life of a modern hardback writer is somewhere between the milk and the yogurt.” If you want to know why that’s the case, turn to that astute social commentator, Sylvester Stallone. Broke and down on his luck, Stallone reportedly wrote the script for *Rocky* in three days. “Yo,” he said, adding, “I’m astounded by people who take 18 years to write something. That’s how long it took that guy to write *Madame Bovary*. And was that ever on a bestseller list? No. It was a lousy book and it made a lousy movie.”

In his inimitable way, Sly has spoken up for the industry. Although he often portrays the loner hero succeeding against all odds, Stallone became one of the richest actors in America by being a star, and by being bankrolled by the conglomerates he fights on-screen.

Conglomerates run the book world just as they do banks, health care, insurance, and, now, grocery stores. It took my agent a year to find a publisher willing to take a chance on a female private eye in America’s heartland, but he kept on plugging because there were more than 40 publishers to go to. They had names to conjure with: Knopf or Charles Scribner’s or Random House. When you said those names you, thought of books. You thought of Wharton or Hammett or Faulkner.

Today there are essentially five publishers, with names like CBS, Lagardère, News Corp. They don’t remind me of books but of Thomas Nast’s bloated tycoons, badly in need of Teddy Roosevelt’s trust-busters. It’s taking the guy, or gal, eight years—or even five, which is how long Flaubert actually spent working on *Madame Bovary*—to write about a provincial doctor’s wife? Dump the jerk. Or at least threaten him, or in my case, her, with legal action.

We are living in an age of rage, lies, and willful stupidity. The 24-hour news cycle keeps us on the brink of hysteria with tales of terrorists, pizza parlor pedophilia rings, the imminent imposition of

Sharia law on our nation, ISIS, climate change, and America’s horrific number of gun deaths. The outpouring of speech and action by young people galvanized by the Parkland massacre is heartening, but the attacks on them by the alt right are widespread and ugly.

The person who puts together the most compelling narrative out of these jostling fragments is the person who controls what we think, say, and, ultimately, do. When we don’t check for facts, when we don’t pay attention to the whole arc of an event long enough to build a reliable narrative, we’re at the mercy of unreliable narrators. This is why works like *The Underground Railroad* and *Evicted* are so important: they help us keep a plumb line to that most elusive quality, the truth.

Given how filled with rage and stupidity our society is today, it’s a wonder that the book survives at all, let alone that people take it seriously, but both statements are true, as we know when we look at the passions that books arouse. In 2014, the wealthy Dallas subdivision of Highland Park banned seven books from its high school. Among these was David K. Shipler’s *The Working Poor: Invisible in America*. At a packed school-board meeting, incensed parents read aloud passages that criticized capitalism. This criticism shocked most people present.

I’m with the parents here: personally, I hate it when the 99 percent whine about their lot. Do they think they’re entitled to the same cancer drugs, safe neighborhoods, and good schools as the one percent? If David Shipler is trying to tell our children that, I’d be up in arms as well. (Footnote: after a year, the school board decided to readmit the books to the curriculum and the school library.)

Sarcasm aside, the power of books is apparent in such efforts to censor. When Stalin’s secret police arrested someone, the first thing they searched for was what their victims were reading or, worse still, writing. Any direct or implied criticism of the supreme leader was a death sentence. When Osip Mandelstam wrote a poem describing Stalin’s mustache as a cockroach, and his fingers as worms, Stalin sent the poet to his death.

Mandelstam’s poem came to mind during president #45’s videotaped cabinet meeting a few weeks ago:

he toys with the tributes of half-men.
One whistles, another meows, a third snivels.



We are feeling a chill wind on speech in the United States. In the immediate aftermath of 9/11 and the Patriot Act, people were detained for reading foreign-language pages on public internet sites, or criticizing then-president Bush in chat rooms, or reporting the receipt of a National Security letter to their library's attorney, as happened to four Connecticut librarians, who were arrested for discussing a National Security letter with their counsel.

After a time, those extreme reactions to what we said and where we read died down.

However, in the last six months, new attacks on speech have erupted. They are even more frightening than those earlier ones because they are the result both of government acts, and of a level of mob fury not just condoned, but fanned by our government.

- At least six journalists were charged with felony rioting for covering violent protests near the January presidential inauguration. Some have been released; others are still facing charges, which carry a penalty of 70 years imprisonment.
- Daniel Heyman, from the Public News Service, was arrested in May for asking Health and Human Services Secretary Tom Price a question about the House health "care" bill. U.S. Congressman Gregory Gianforte knocked reporter Ben Jacobs to the ground for a question about the same bill.
- Former Homeland Security Secretary John F. Kelly suggested using sabers against reporters.
- Security guards roughed up *Congressional Quarterly* reporter John Donnelly for trying to ask questions during an FCC hearing.
- Reporters from media that criticize the incumbent are barred from White House press briefings.
- Pennsylvania talk-radio host Bruce Bond quit after management ordered him never to criticize the current occupant on air.
- As the occupant tweets endlessly about "fake news" and the evil press conducting a witch hunt against him (Shouldn't that be a warlock hunt? Does #45 have a gender-identity issue?), the slight check on the worsen angels of our nature has evaporated.

What is the appropriate response of a writer in times like these? I'm not a fan of the socialist realism school of writing, which says fiction should make a point: big business destroys the planet; climate change is a hoax; Democrats assault children; Republicans kill women. There's a reason the writers we remember from Stalin's Russia are Akhmatova and Pasternak, not Gribachev, who won the Stalin Prize for *Spring in the Victory Collective Farm*.

Instead, it's my job to fumble my way as close as I can to the truth, not to accept a slippery, slipshod misuse of language or ideas, not to allow fear to lead me into self-censorship.

A reader wrote me recently to tell me my job was to write escape fiction, and that by including unpleasant contemporary events in my work, I was betraying my readers. "Shame on you," she wrote. "I'm done with you."

This woman's reaction is the kind of thing publishers rely on as they pressure writers of genre fiction to stick to cut-and-dried formulas. There are now subscription services that report how much of an e-book readers read, where they lost interest, where their eye lingered longest. Publishers are understandably quite interested in such data. If graphic rape and dismemberment are where readers linger longest, then, by gum, that's what we writers should be giving them.

By the way, if someone reads 10 percent of a book, that counts as reading the whole book. I wish I'd been able to per-

suaude Miss Motley of that when I floundered through the class discussion of *Paradise Lost*.

I try to be aware of what readers want to read, but if I don't write first of all for myself, to explore situations and characters that matter to me, my work will be no better than painting by numbers. I would be happier in my old corporate job, selling computers to insurance agents, because at least then I had benefits and coworkers to talk to.

Writing to the market, or the notion that our creations are brands, like Pampers, is an invidious form of censorship. When the Dallas parents pull *The Working Poor* from the shelves, we can fight back through the Freedom to Read Foundation or the ACLU. But when the market is doing the censoring, there is no institution to support us.

The market these days is closely aligned with Amazon, which has an effectual monopoly in book sales. In its 2014 fight with the French publisher Hachette, over what to charge for e-books, Amazon removed Hachette titles from its website, or showed them to be out of stock. As a result, many writers published by Hachette's U.S. subsidiary, Little, Brown, saw their sales drop by 90 percent. I'm published in the UK by Hachette, and Amazon did not post the print version of my books on its website during their war on words.

When you buy a book from Amazon, or even click on a book, it sets up an algorithm for what you like to read. If you go to a library, or a bookstore, you browse, you see many books on many topics, you buy or check out what suits your mood or need of the day. But if you are only exposed to the result of the algorithm, not only are you personally cut off from many voices, but those writers with a lower profile than Paula Hawkins or James Patterson have trouble finding readers.

The use of algorithms and the reliance on a behemoth as our main distributor has its own invidious effect on speech. It's a more effective censorship tool than state control because we don't even know what voices we are missing.

By the way, all those clicks on Amazon have given Amazon owner Jeff Bezos a personal fortune of \$80.5 billion. It seems really mean-spirited of him to grudge us writers 75 cents on e-book sales.

I try to be aware of what readers want to read, but if I don't write first of all for myself, to explore situations and characters that matter to me, my work will be no better than painting by numbers.

I hold the written word as sacred. Five thousand years ago, the Sumerian miracle turned poetry into shapes pressed into a clay tablet; all these millennia later, we still can read the surviving words of the poet Enheduanna. More amazing than creating airplanes or ice cream, our ancestors created a way to speak through time and space. We degrade that miracle with our poisonous tweets and blogs and pornographies, but nonetheless, the word made visible is our most profound human achievement. Those words must be protected.

Even Bill O'Reilly's? I'll try. Even the *Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*? I'll get back to you on that one.

When I was preparing for this talk, I went to the University of Chicago library, my neighborhood library, to read histories of libraries. I was actually looking for a particular factoid that had lodged in my brain about a debate in Ohio in the 1850s or 1860s about whether to fund public libraries: the opponents



felt that paying taxes to support the common good was tantamount to socialism.

I couldn't find a source for this tantalizing fact, so I've dropped it from this talk, although it's a debate that resonates today. One county in Oregon recently voted to close its public libraries because they were used by the poor, and libraries only add to a sense of entitlement among the 99 percent.

In the middle of my fruitless search, I came on a book called *Books on Fire*, by Lucien Poulstron. It is a fascinating history, in a hideous way, because it details the tens of millions of books and scrolls and papyri that have been burned in the brief, 5,000-year life of the written word.

Faced with the many millions of books destroyed during the Second World War alone, some writers quoted in *Books on Fire* threw up their hands in despair. What was the point of writing anything, of adding to the world's philosophy or poetry, if people were still massacred by the millions? These writers felt so helpless that they retreated behind a self-created wall of silence.

I have the opposite reaction. I think instead that the passion books inflame is proof they are doing their job, and that we writers are doing our job. Stalin murdered the poets Mandelstam and Tsvetaeva, but their words have endured. Legend has it that when the Romans burned Rabbi Akiba at the stake 1,900 years ago, the Hebrew letters of the Sh'ma took physical shape and flew to heaven, where they guided home his soul. We remember Akiba's teachings, not the Romans who murdered him.

After Calvin killed the theologian Michael Servetus in Geneva

in 1553, a French philosopher wrote: "To kill a person does not destroy an idea. All it does is kill a person."

The Egyptian Pharaoh Ramses II, who died around 1,200 BCE, had his tomb built over his great palace in Thebes. Underneath the tomb are three chambers: one the dining hall; one the great reception hall; the third, his library. The scrolls have long since been looted, but chiseled over the library doorway is the inscription: "The Cure for the Soul."

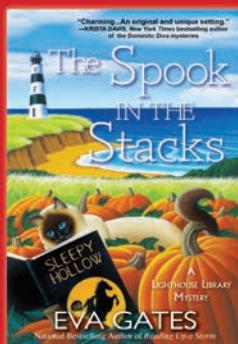
When I walk into a library, when I smell the books, the foxing, the binding, I feel as though I have come home. I hear the strong voices of other writers speaking to me. I hear Frederick Douglass and Harriet Beecher Stowe rouse a complacent North to the evils of slavery. I hear Sojourner Truth tell me that the hand that rocks the cradle can also rock the boat, and William Lloyd Garrison say, "I am in earnest, I will not be silenced."

Twenty-six-hundred years ago, the Greek poet Sappho wrote, "Although they are only breath / Words, which I command / Are Immortal."

My soul is cured when I stand among books. They give me strength for the journey. The word, which is only breath, has survived countless wars, fires, murders, dictators. How can we not believe, we in this room who have dedicated our lives to the written word, that this word will not only endure, but triumph?

SARA PARETSKY, author of the best-selling V. I. Warshawski series and a tireless advocate for books, reading, and libraries, last appeared in *Booklist* in our May 1, 2015, Mystery Showcase issue with her essay "The DOLLUS Syndrome: Diversity in Crime Fiction." Her latest Warshawski novel, *Fallout*, was published in April 2017 and received a starred review in *Booklist*.

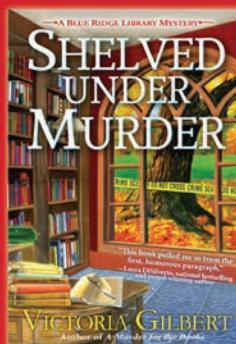
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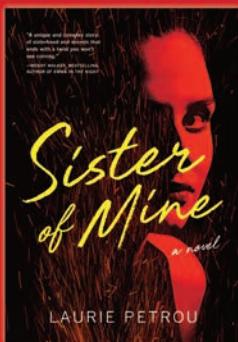
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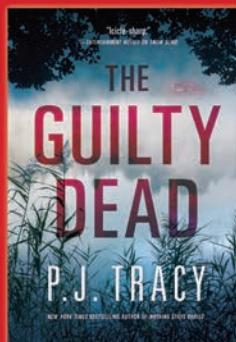
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