



Giving Offense: Essays on Censorship

J.M. Coetzee

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J.M. Coetzee presents a coherent, unorthodox analysis of censorship from the perspective of one who has lived and worked under its shadow. The essays collected here attempt to understand the passion that plays itself out in acts of silencing and censoring. He argues that a destructive dynamic of belligerence and escalation tends to overtake the rivals in any field ruled by censorship.

From Osip Mandelstam commanded to compose an ode in praise of Stalin, to Breyten Breytenbach writing poems under and for the eyes of his prison guards, to Aleksander Solzhenitsyn engaging in a trial of wits with the organs of the Soviet state, *Giving Offense* focuses on the ways authors have historically responded to censorship. It also analyzes the arguments of Catharine MacKinnon for the suppression of pornography and traces the operations of the old South African censorship system.

Giving Offense: Essays on Censorship Details

Date : Published November 8th 1997 by University of Chicago Press (first published April 15th 1996)

ISBN : 9780226111766

Author : J.M. Coetzee

Format : Paperback 297 pages

Genre : Writing, Essays, Nonfiction, Southern Africa, South Africa, Philosophy, Politics, Cultural, Africa

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From Reader Review Giving Offense: Essays on Censorship for online ebook

Salvatore says

I've spent way too much time with the Erasmus essay here for me, ten years later, to see it with fresh eyes. Otherwise the essays collected here look at questions in the censorship game that might evade readers. From the more obvious 'how was *Lady Chatterley's Lover* defended and maybe it would have been best if DH Lawrence shut up?' and 'aren't South African censors really ridiculous?' to the estranged 'does the Stalin ode, written in duress, still "count" as something Mandelstam wrote?' and 'does [heterosexual] pornography harm women, leading to sexual/physical abuse and a degrading image?' The findings here are sometimes shocking, not always obvious.

Lukasz Pruski says

"The punitive gesture of censoring finds its origin in the reaction of being offended. The strength of being-offended, as a state of mind, lies in not doubting itself; its weakness lies in not being able to afford to doubt itself."

J.M. Coetzee's *Giving Offense* (1996) is a collection of 12 essays about the nature and essence of censorship, its various aspects and manifestations, and its effects on the society and on the artists (the subtitle of the book says it simply: *Essays on Censorship*). While a profound and highly scholarly work, meticulously researched and referenced on over 50 pages, this set of philosophical and literary criticism analyses is not at all impenetrable thanks to Mr. Coetzee's unsurpassed lucidity of writing. The depth and elegance of the author's analyses are so much above my ability to explain them that I am embarrassed writing this review, feeling like an elementary school kid tasked with annotating *Finnegans Wake*. I will thus limit my highly unqualified comments to a few selected essays, although each of the 12 fascinating studies deserves detailed analyses by scholarly-inclined readers.

Chapter Four, entitled "The Harms of Pornography: Catharine MacKinnon", is a devastatingly sharp critical analysis of Ms. MacKinnon's writings. Mr. Coetzee points out the parochialism and limitedness of some of her central ideas, as evidenced by her sole focus on the Western world, and her lack of interest in the widespread objectification and denigration of women in the world of advertising. Coetzee is at his most forceful when he criticizes what I would call a severe intellectual fraud perpetrated by Ms. MacKinnon who relativizes truth to gender and interprets female sexuality as a "construction of male power".

Allow me a personal aside here: Coetzee's writing resonates with me so strongly because he observes the social phenomena not from the perspective of what is "right" and what is "wrong" (which, of course, depends on who defines the rightness or wrongness and when and where the definition is constructed), but purely from the perspective of logic - through examining whether the arguments are valid. Coetzee's reasoning is so resoundingly refreshing because it goes strongly against today's prevalent mode of social discourse, driven by the so-called Political Correctness movement, the mode that eschews calm, logical analysis and instead focuses on attempting to right past wrongs, thus - incidentally - introducing new wrongs.

In Chapter Six, entitled "Osip Mandelstam and the Stalin Ode", the author offers an analysis of censorship and - more importantly - of self-censorship in 1930s, the darkest, Stalinist period of the Soviet history. In the next essay, "Censorship and Polemic: Solzhenitsyn", Mr. Coetzee, among many fascinating threads of analysis, mentions both proscriptive and prescriptive aspects of Soviet censorship and - most interestingly -

describes "the dynamic of spiraling mimetic violence precipitated by a collapsing of distinctions", referring to a dialectic embrace between the enemies (Solzhenitsyn vs. the regime).

Out of the remaining chapters I would like to mention one on the Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert, which is a little outside the main thrust of the collection. While it indeed deals with issues of censorship, it focuses more on the universal and humanistic values of Mr. Herbert's poetry and on his use of allusiveness as a "mode of humanistic affirmation", and his recognition of irony as an ethical value. In Chapter Eleven which deals with relationship between the philosophy of apartheid and the system of censorship in South Africa, Mr. Coetzee - who is a mathematician by education - introduces the "algebra of mixing blood" - a sharply ironic device to illustrate the madness of apartheid philosophy.

Giving Offense is one of the most profound books I have ever read. It took me almost 20 hours to get through the 240 pages - the effort was totally worthwhile and I am happy that the onset of my senility has so far been slow enough to allow me the enjoyment of the read.

Four and three quarter stars.

notgettingenough says

Dear GR management (GRM in this review). I assert my right as the author of this book to write what I consider to be relevant by way of a review. Please don't delete it!

Dear GRM, occasionally I write reviews for a shelf called 'pairs'. I copy the same review to the two different books I discuss. Please don't delete either - or both (how would you decide?) - though I appreciate it breaks your new rules. Reviewed as a pair with *Fair Play or Foul?* <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>

In the early nineties I wrote a book—this book—which examined various high profile cheating scandals in bridge. In a nutshell I suggested that maybe the people accused of cheating hadn't been, that the chiefly American accusers might be wrong as a consequence of strong cultural differences between their understanding of bridge and those of other nationalities. I also suggested that Ely Culbertson might have deliberately destroyed a competitor for the big money at stake in the 1930s by creating the idea that he was cheating. I sent this book to several publishers and was prepared for polite declinations. I was not expecting what actually happened which was that I received vitriolic angry rejections. My book was being censored by mainstream publishers; their problem wasn't whether it would sell, but they hated the ideas in it. What could I do? I thought I'd produced a good book that would sell, but I put it in a drawer and moved on. One day, however, I mentioned it to a top Australian player who asked if he could look at it. He took it home and brought it back first thing in the morning. Damn, I thought. It wasn't any good after all, if he hasn't even bothered reading it. But in fact what had happened was that he sat up all night with it and we now spent some hours talking about how wonderful he thought it was. He thought I should keep trying to get it published. I sent it to the editor of a UK magazine who serialised it. Then I self-published it.

Although it received nice reviews, soon after its release, the editor of the influential magazine *Bridge World* wrote a hostile editorial about it. A reader sent in a meek attempt to defend the book and that attracted more editorial anger. Wow, two hostile editorials. I could rest assured that I really had written something that was worthwhile at that point. Nobody else wrote to *Bridge World* to support me after that. Meanwhile the edition

quickly sold out and I started getting feedback from people which was unexpected and completely the opposite from the tone of criticism that appeared in Bridge World. More than one person said it had been life-changing for them and they really meant it. It let them be more tolerant to others, to be less paranoid and angry about other people. Many people read it in a night. Somebody wrote to say he'd stayed up all night reading it and went down to a shop to buy three more copies to give people the next day. A bridge partnership stayed up all night reading it aloud to each other. Non-bridge players read it. I was invited to present a talk to a magicians' convention in Vegas. Ten years or more later I still occasionally received these mails.

Lots of people wrote to say that they agreed with what I'd said.

But not one person wrote in public that they agreed with it.

Who could blame them when they saw what had happened to the first poor devil who made a stab at it in Bridge World? Some years later came another development. One of the ex-world champion US players who was a prominent accuser of others being cheats, published an autobiography in which he presented various evidence to support his case. Trouble is, some of his evidence was factually incorrect. Whether by mistake or not, he had materially changed the stories of played hands in ways that made it look worse for those accused. I collected together both his stories and, from official records, what actually happened in each case, wrote it up and sent it to Bridge World. It may not surprise you to hear that it declined to publish my article, but it surprised me. Now, this was surely an intrinsically interesting story—'world champ lies in book, were the Italians REALLY cheating?' — and yet he claimed that people weren't interested.

Please consider this. If all those people who wrote privately to me to support me had done it in public, the editor would most certainly not have been able to use this as his excuse. Meanwhile it has gone into history, this false evidence used to accuse some truly great players of cheating. Silence has consequences.

This was brought back to my mind recently, reading of a small business called booklocker.com. It filed a class action lawsuit against Amazon which was attempting to force POD publishers to agree that they had to pay Amazon to print their books. Her brave story is available online. She fought on her own. It could have been a victory for many. Instead nobody else joined her. They were too scared to speak up. "We were basically thrown to the wolves, and had to publicly fight on our own, with many publishers whispering to us in the background, but not publicly joining us on the front lines."

Silence has consequences. It is not neutral. And speaking where nobody can hear you — or where the people who need to hear you won't — that might as well be silence. So this review is addressed more than anything to people who may be in doubt about what is going on here at Goodreads, but are scared to speak, nervous to speak, or perhaps simply don't understand why it might be important. SPEAK!!! Don't be bullied. Not by GR management. Not by the protesters. Say what you think. If you disagree with GR management they will be unfailingly polite, whereas the free speech advocates can say what they like, how they like, where they like. And some of them do! Okay. Still speak! They are maybe a bit sharper with a pen than you are? So what. Still speak. Does free speech have any worth, does it really exist, without interaction? Here you can still do that. I have no idea if speaking up is ever a right, but it is surely sometimes a duty and I really think this is a case where it is a duty. How you are treated when you do, doesn't really matter. Those who disagree with you might tell you to fuck off, call you toxic — that's their definition of free speech. But live by yours. In the end that is all free speech can be: what YOU think it is. Not what GR management thinks. Not what Manny thinks. What YOU think. That is, it is what we all think, which makes it, of course, a right dog's breakfast.

But if you are doing that, exercising your right to free speech in a closed room on your own with the lights off, either through fear, or because other people have told you that you can say what you like but NOT where it counts, I assure you that this is not free speech, even if the free speechers tell you so. If that was free

speech, well, Soviet Russia was its most loyal supporter. There, after all, you weren't stopped from saying what you thought, only from saying it where anybody was listening. There is no difference between a bureaucracy telling you where you can say something and a bunch of people on GR telling you that. The effect is the same.

I am reminded of what happened recently in the much publicised situation of Colin McGinn. A group of academics stated in a public letter that "We recognize Dr. McGinn's right to free speech" but then went on to describe the ways in which it should be circumscribed. He was at perfect liberty to talk about anything that didn't actually matter to him. At the moment, you have more rights to free speech than this, and a great duty to use them. This ad appears on Amazon at the moment:

Forum Moderator

We like to think of our forums as a Free-Speech Zone.
And freedom works best at the point of a bayonet —
or a "Delete Post" button. As Forum Moderator, it'll
be your job to keep the forums safe and sanitary, while
highlighting the posts that actually have something valuable
to say. You'll slap the bad guys' hands and the good guys' backs.

If you are tired of Hydra, if you are thinking it doesn't really matter if such and such is deleted, keep in mind that this is really what you are fighting about. 'Safe and sanitary' scares the bejesus out of me. I can't distinguish it from something you'd see in a Soviet Russia or Communist China re-education camp. But that's just my opinion. PLEASE HAVE YOURS. And please remember that it doesn't really count if nobody can hear it.

G says

Excelente libro, válido para la época actual.

Chris says

~~BEEP! BEEP! I would have gotten more out of this book if I read more of the works that Coetzee discusses.~~

~~However, this book is extremely interesting because of the analysis of censoring on the writer.~~

The above review has been pre-empted to bring you the following review. The review below was written by Ruby Has Been Censored. She gave her permission for the below to be reprinted. Thank you Ruby!

Ruby's Most Wonderful and Brilliant Review

HYDRA ALERT!

The full review is available here on my blog, since the original was deleted by GoodReads for being "off-topic". I wouldn't want THIS book review to be deleted for being off-topic, so to that end, I've provided a few hundred words on the book. Stay with me...

I read this book from beginning to end. This is a bloody awesome book about dissent. What I liked most about this book about dissent were the examples. Haha! Fooled you. That's actually all there is. Examples. Starting with an example of dissent from around 1800BC, and illustrating how dissent has been with us throughout the ages. Well, up until about 2010 when the book was published. I'm guessing they couldn't go in and add the future examples of dissent, because that would just be silly. And involve bending time and space and shit. If they could have, I'm sure they would have included an example of the Hydra, which is, in my humble opinion, the best example of dissent yet. If you haven't heard about Hydra, you need to go and see Manny Rayner. Right now. I'll wait. I have not ever, EVER read a better one. Book about dissent, that is. Because that's what we're here to talk about. A book about dissent. You should totally buy this bloody awesome book about dissent, perhaps from Amazon, since they have been so nice in ensuring that all the reviews we see have been filtered of any off-topic content. So I read this book about dissent, which is, as I may have mentioned, a bloody awesome book about dissent. Okay, our captors have hopefully stopped reading by now, so I can probably get away with typing some random words: bookety, bookety, book about dissent. Opinion, opinion, opinion, opposing opinion, rebuttal, butt's a funny word, conclusion. Oh! Conclusion! Are we there already? Right. So in conclusion, this is a bloody awesome book about dissent even if it doesn't mention Hydra.

So yeah. My original review was censored for being off-topic. Not because it was critical of GoodReads' censorship policy at all, apparently, but because it talked about other things besides the actual book. Deleted for digression. I take this to mean GoodReads is intending to evaluate all of our book reviews from now on, in order to make sure they don't digress. After all, we wouldn't want a review that wanders into homage, satire or flash fiction now, would we? Just the product.. ahem... "book" review for us! So that's why I suggest that along with backing up our original reviews and re-posting them with the Hydra when they get deleted, we also help out poor old Kara & Co., by trawling through as many reviews as we can and flagging any that go off-topic. At all. In any way.

Now here's my original review, so you can see what GoodReads is attempting to save us from:

Giving Offense: Essays on Censorship, by J.M. Coetzee

Would GoodReads Censor A Review On A Book About Censorship? Let's find out, shall we...

I've been an active GoodReads contributor for a couple of years now. I review every book I read, I run a discussion group, I'm a GR Librarian. I spend countless hours every week, (well, they are probably countable but I can't be arsed), on this site creating content for GoodReads Amazon. I won't pretend I'm happy about that last bit.

When I first joined GoodReads, I spent a lot more countable-but-not-presently-counted hours up to my eyeballs in administrative tasks associated with the book data we all use. I stopped doing that when the mountains of data and content that I had created was sold to Amazon without my seeing a cent of the profits. Since Amazon have been here they've done some pretty shitty things, and they really don't seem to value the

hard work I've done for them. They seem to be quite content making out that they are doing us all a favour, providing us with a free (albeit dripping-with-advertising) service - rather than acknowledging that they're making a fortune from our content and data.

Now it seems GoodReads has decided to go hard with a policy of deleting reviews and bookshelves* they don't like. I really can't be much more specific than that, because that's about as specific as GoodReads has been. From what little they have communicated to us, it seems to be "anything anyone working for GR thinks could offend anyone else or could potentially be perceived by anyone else as an insult to a writer". There is no way of knowing what that might be. We've been told that any posts or shelves focussing on the author's behaviour will be deleted. This includes authors who harass GoodReads users, and presumably precludes us from even discussing something like *Mein Kampf*. This is censorship, as if you need me to point that out, and that is a very slippery slope.

The author of this book, J.M. Coetzee is a famously reclusive, reportedly humourless bloke. Am I allowed to mention that anymore?

GoodReads made these policy changes sneakily: no emails to us, no warning or notification of any kind for the people having their reviews deleted, no response to our reasonable concerns. Reviews and shelves are quietly being deleted, and there have been plenty of screenshots around to prove it. So now I am not only outraged by the knowledge that our posts are actively being policed and censored, but I'm quite frankly creeped out by the whole thing. Who is making the decisions? What are their criteria? Why do they refuse to talk to us about it? Why are they doing it so stealthily? Why can't they notify someone who's about to have their content deleted?

Most importantly of all..... where will it end? That last question I CAN actually answer: A site where the bulk of the reviews are positive and critique-free - whether or not that book deserves it. Where any negative reviews are limited to "it's my fault for not picking a book which is more suited to my peculiar tastes". A site where people can't talk about the elephant of author behaviour in the room.
A site where all reviews are suspect.

The whole value of GR has been that we can see honest reviews from people we trust. If people can't write an honest review about their experience with the book (and its author), then that review has no value.

GOODREADS: Please just do the right thing. People have invested a lot of time and effort in this site. They will cooperate with you IF you treat them respectfully. Censorship, though..... obviously that's going to go down like a tonne of bricks on a literature site.

*For the benefit of people who don't use GoodReads - "bookshelves" on GoodReads aren't just used to sort our lists of books, they are a tagging function. They are what we use to comment succinctly on a range of issues relating to that book. They are also what we use to warn each other about spammers, abusive authors, sock-puppet (fake) accounts, and anything else that a potential reader/reviewer may need to know before they engage with that book. I say "engage" because even shelving a book as "want to read", alerts the author that you have shown interest and can open the door to that author targeting you.

[edit] Postscript: What annoys me no end, is that the media and some other commentators are portraying GR users as if we're simply refusing to accept the corporate reality of a "free-service" that Amazon are providing us with. What they don't seem to be aware of is that, unlike many other sites, it's the users that created this database, including the book data, as well as all the content, as well as taking care of a lot of their administration, as well as a big chunk of their "help" functions etc etc. I don't think it's unreasonable for us to have certain expectations of the site we built & maintain.

[edit] Please also see Carol's excellent summary of ways you can help spread the word about this issue:

<https://www.goodreads.com/story/show/...>

[edit] Must Read: Ceridwen's Brilliant Analysis of the Deleted Review Data:

<http://soapboxing.net/2013/10/by-the-...>

This shows the authors associated with the deleted reviews & bookshelves as well as showing the real target of GR's censorship - The comments threads.

[Updated 13 Oct 13] Just to be absolutely clear: Other GoodReads users have my permission to repost this content freely.

Amy says

dry and dense.

Bettie? says

I wish to read this book as to aid my comprehension of why censorship is put in place. It seems to me that the people who censor must be wibbly-wobbly if not outright paranoid over their authority. I base these views on Stalin, Hitler, Mao etc etc.

This book was recommended by many good friends.

Sps says

Keen and conscientious thought and prose. More stodgy than his fiction, true to academic form, and definitely a collection of essays rather than chapters of a unified book. Both the ideas and the language are alive, though: "It is tempting to suggest that the logic of provocative name-calling, when used as a tactic of the weak against the strong, is that if the strong can be made to take offense, they thereby put themselves at least momentarily on the same footing as the weak." (3)

"Desire is mimetic--that is to say, it seeks models for itself." (92)

"The censor is the figure of the absolutist reader: he reads the poem in order to know what it *really* means, to know its truth." (161)

Daniel Taylor says

For those of us who live in countries like Australia, which has never been hidden behind the razor wire of

censorship like Coetzee is writing about, will find it difficult to see this book as anything but an academic adventure into the dark side.

Coetzee has lived in South Africa and the apartheid-inspired censorship there shows up as the topic in many of these essays.

As a writer myself, I'm left wondering what I would do under the oppressive gaze of a censor. The wannabe-hero in me says that I would be fearless. But I know me better, I'd write to conform, and then rationalize my choice.

This read is an academic one, so unless you either a) are an academic (or have been trained in critical thinking), or b) have an interest in censorship, or c) are a writer or other creative whose work comes under the domain of the censors, then this book could make for a more challenging read than warrants your time.

Leif says

Coetzee's prose is clinical, incisive, scintillating with the hard edges and clear gleams common to his narrative work also, but here he allows himself a direct access to political questions and theoretical discourse. With characteristic patience he traces censorship's relation to pornography, madness, apartheid, South Africa, and in the work of a select few writers: D.H. Lawrence, Catharine MacKinnon, Erasmus, Osip Mandelstam, Zbigniew Herbert, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Geoffrey Cronje, Andre Brink, and Breyten Breytenbach. Across these essays Coetzee's reach is capacious, his mind keen.

The most law-abiding countries are not those with the highest prison populations but those with the lowest offender rates. The law, including the law of censorship, has a dream. In this dream, the daily round of identifying and punishing malefactors will wither away; the law and its constraints will be so deeply engraved on the citizenry that individuals will police themselves. Censorship looks forward to the day when writers will censor themselves and the censor himself can retire. It is for this reason that the physical expulsion of the censor, vomited forth as a demon is, has a certain symbolic value for the writer of Romantic genealogy: it stands for a rejection of the dream of reason, the dream of a society of laws founded on reason and obeyed because reasonable.

With such demonstrable echoes of Franz Kafka, Walter Benjamin, and Michel Foucault, Coetzee's theoretical filiations are clear. However so too is his embattled position as a writer in a politically and ethically hostile climate, which lends additional heft to aesthetic and political asides, such as the following:

Writing does not flourish under censorship. This does not mean that the censor's edict, or the internalized figure of the censor, is the sole or even the principle pressure on the writer: there are forms of repression, inherited, acquired, or self-imposed, that can be more grievously felt. There may even be cases where external censorship challenges the writer in interesting ways or spurs creativity. But the Aesopian ruses that censorship provokes are usually no more than ingenious; while the obstacles the writers are capable of visiting upon themselves are surely sufficient in number and variety for them not to invite more.

In that last line, perhaps, might even be heard the echoes of a mocking laugh. Coetzee's book is not just well-researched and persuasively argued, after all. It also bears the sense of mild amusement which any writer might bear the earnest or repressive censor who, as Coetzee argues, misjudges the very nature of writing and

representation itself. *Giving Offense* is notable for a number of reasons but for none as good as this last, the laughing celebration of creativity itself in the face of censorship and its cultures.
