



## The Left's Libricide

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Recently, Erik Jensen, founding editor of the *Saturday Paper* and convener of the Horne Prize for essays, had been so struck by what he considered to be an intolerable amount of 'chauvinism and condescending accounts' contained within the essays themselves, that he set about changing the guidelines for submission.

Without consulting any of the four judges or the paper's proprietor, Mr Jensen decided that henceforward, the prize would no longer accept essays by non- Indigenous writers about the experience of the 'First Nations Australians' and it certainly would not accept essays about the LGBTQI community from people who 'have not had direct experience of this community.'

Happily, Mr Jensen's meddling was outed by a journalist, and his guidelines were decried as thoroughly untenable by sensible people around the country. Two of the judges, David Marr and Anna Funder immediately resigned on the grounds that such restrictions were injurious to both their profession and to freedom of speech. 'If we're not going to accept whites writing about Indigenous experience,' asked Marr, 'how can we have whites judging Indigenous writing?'



Following the brief controversy, the editor scrapped his guidelines. This is just as well, because as a member of the white male patriarchy, Mr Jensen would have to have disqualified his own book on feminist novelist and poet, Kate Jennings.

While this might well have been a small victory for common sense, the entire episode reveals the effect of identity politics on freedom of speech. This was raised two years ago by Lionel Shriver, when she donned a Mexican sombrero at the Brisbane Writers' Festival and delivered a speech in which she dared to point out that taken to their logical conclusion, identity politics and cultural appropriation would spell the end for writers of fiction. In that memorable address, she brought into sharp focus the potentially devastating effect on literature this ubiquitous movement would have, if it were permitted to continue unchecked.

Naturally enough, Shriver's address incurred the unassuageable wrath of the Left, which was exemplified by Yassmin Abdel-Magied who, ostensibly overcome with the 'stench of privilege in the air' marched out of the hall mid-speech and then penned a breathless article for the *Guardian* about just how offended she had been by Shriver and her attitude which had 'dripped with racial supremacy.'

In the last two years however, Shriver has dramatically changed the way in which she approaches her craft. These days, the author admits that she assiduously avoids incorporating non-white protagonists into her stories lest she be called a racist. Essentially, Shriver has felt it necessary to censor and curtail her imagination, thought and expression. The experience has also set her on a very different and rather unexpected path in that she has become a regular contributor to the *Spectator*.

In her life-changing speech, Shriver also remarked with optimism that she hoped cultural appropriation and identity politics would be nothing more than a passing fad. Unfortunately, this latest attempt by the editor of the *Saturday Paper* to impose identity politics on the Horne prize suggests otherwise.

It is difficult not to see identity politics and cultural appropriation as anything other than pre-emptive book burning. History is replete with instances of mass libricide committed by totalitarian regimes.

On 10th May 1933, German students gathered in Berlin to burn books which contained 'unGerman ideas'. Truth, rational thinking and knowledge, the cornerstones of Western civilisation, were condemned by students and professors alike in favour of mysticism, speculation and collective thinking towards a common goal. As the propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels gave a rousing speech, encouraging the students to commit 'to the flames the evil spirit of the past', they incinerated 20,000 volumes among which were works by Ernest Hemmingway, Thomas Mann, H.G. Wells, Marcel Proust and Emile Zola.

When Mao Zedong proclaimed that 'Revolution is not a dinner party!' and unleashed his red terror, any volume which failed to conform to party propaganda, among them sacred texts and Confucian



writings, were torched. Libraries were ransacked and destroyed, and in a matter of just a few weeks, 5,000 years of Chinese civilisation was annihilated. In contrast, more than a billion copies of the *Little Red Book* were printed and distributed to be used by students to accuse their own teachers of betraying the party.

In the 1970s, communist authorities in Vietnam posted lists of banned books in an effort to root out all remnants of the 'decadent South'. People were so terrified of being found with prohibited material and subsequently denounced, that they rushed to throw their books onto the ever growing pyres of paper. Under the Khmer Rouge, most of the books, bibliographical records and newspaper collections of the national library were burned because they were deemed to contain information contradictory to the Khmer Rouge view of history. Nearly all of Cambodia's 60 librarians were killed between 1975 and 1979, and the capital's library was gutted and used as a pigpen.

Back in 2012, when al-Qaida invaded Mali, it destroyed monuments and libraries in Timbuktu dating back seven centuries. Ancient manuscripts, which covered a range of subjects from astronomy, poetry, music, medicine and women's rights were seen as pagan writings, condemned as sinful and tossed into the flames. Mercifully, not all of sub-Saharan Africa's rich medieval history was lost, thanks to the heroic efforts of a librarian and his band of conspirators who over a six-month period, smuggled out manuscripts hidden under soft drinks and vegetables, in donkey carts.

In Ray Bradbury's prophetic classic novel *Fahrenheit 451* set in a not-too-distant future, books are burned by a special task force of firemen. In our not-too-distant future, this pre-emptive book burning will be carried out by the social justice brigade rather than the Fire Brigade. It is they who will be throwing our books onto the flames.

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