

Giving Offense: Essays on Censorship

By J. M. Coetzee

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Winner of the 2003 Nobel Prize in Literature.

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.

"The most impressive feature of Coetzee's essays, besides his ear for language, is his coolheadedness. He can dissect repugnant notions and analyze volatile emotions with enviable poise."—Kenneth Baker, *San Francisco Chronicle Book Review*


"Those looking for simple, ringing denunciations of censorship's evils will be disappointed. Coetzee explicitly rejects such noble tritenesses. Instead . . . he pursues censorship's deeper, more fickle meanings and unmeanings."—*Kirkus Reviews*

"These erudite essays form a powerful, bracing criticism of censorship in its many guises."—*Publishers Weekly*

"Giving Offense gets its incisive message across clearly, even when Coetzee is dealing with such murky theorists as Bakhtin, Lacan, Foucault, and René; Girard. Coetzee has a light, wry sense of humor."—Bill Marx, *Hungry Mind Review*

"An extraordinary collection of essays."—Martha Bayles, *New York Times Book Review*

"A disturbing and illuminating moral expedition."—Richard Eder, *Los Angeles Times Book Review*

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

In this collection of eight essays, South African novelist J. M. Coetzee examines the complexities of censorship beyond the model of villainous censor and victimized artist. Having lived in a police state, Coetzee's experience is that "the same censors patrol the boundaries of both politics and esthetics." By contrast, in the United States, the way for artists to get away with representations that some find offensive or forbidden is to argue that their work has some political worth. Though Coetzee admits he doesn't know what to think of artists who "break taboos and yet claim protection of the law," he remains committed to free speech, conscious of how easily oppressive righteousness can rear its viscous head.

From Publishers Weekly

In South African novelist Coetzee's intriguing theory, censorship arises out of a paranoid mentality when a dominant class, church or state, lashing out in fear from a sense of latent powerlessness, suppresses a writer or artist whose truth-telling gives offense. He buttresses his argument by discussing Russian poet Osip Mandelstam, arrested in 1934 and commanded to compose an ode in praise of Stalin, and South African poet Breyten Breytenbach, imprisoned in 1974 and forced to repudiate his poem that condemned political execution and torture. The battle with the censor invades the writer's psychic life, as Coetzee demonstrates in his analysis of Alexander Solzhenitsyn's skirmishes with the Soviet state, leading to his exile in 1974; Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert's fight against Stalinist repression; and humanist satirist Erasmus's battle with Luther and the papacy. Coetzee implicitly rejects feminist Catharine Mac-Kinnon's antipornography stance ("her heart lies with the censors"). These erudite essays form a powerful, bracing critique of censorship in its many guises.

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From Library Journal

South African writer Coetzee (Master of Petersburg, LJ 9/1/94) promises a compelling collection of essays of the nature of political censorship in literature. However, this book falls short of that promise, delivering instead an overly erudite and dense dissection of the major works of frequently censored literature. To his credit, the collection of works Coetzee has amassed is impressive?from Lady Chatterly's Lover to Catherine MacKinnon's antipornography treatises, for example. His essay "Apartheid Thinking" is an important summary of a particularly painful chapter in the history of political censorship. Yet there is little here a general reader would find fresh or interesting. For larger academic collections.?Diane G. Premo, SILS, SUNY at Buffalo

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George Hyler:

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