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Review: Peter McDonald, "The Literature Police: Apartheid Censorship and its Cultural Consequences"

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Peter McDonald. *The Literature Police: Apartheid Censorship and its Cultural Consequences*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009. xvi + 416 pp.

Censorship has, of course, been much discussed in South African literary studies. But Peter McDonald's *The Literature Police* is a groundbreaking book in two ways: first, it is to my knowledge the first book to attempt a comprehensive historical overview of censorship in apartheid South Africa and its effects, not just on writers, but on publishers, literary journals, writers' organizations, and other key institutions. Second, it is the first text to look closely and methodically at the paper trail left behind by the Board of Censors to analyze precisely which texts were banned and the reasons given. *The Literature Police* is densely packed with important and original findings, and will surely be a study that scholars of South African literature will have to acquaint themselves with for years to come.

The struggle between the writer and the censor is as old as writing itself; in the particular case of the censorship of literary works in South Africa, McDonald traces it to the "arrival" of literature itself, which his opening declaration sets at 1824—the year that Thomas Pringle and John Fairbairn launched the *South African Journal*, only to see it quickly suppressed by Governor Somerset: "Having arrived in March 1824, in other words, literature with all the significance Pringle and Fairbairn attached to it had by September effectively been closed down at the behest of the colonial state" (9). McDonald's point is that struggles over the definition and publication of literature began under British colonialism, which shaped later forms of state censorship under apartheid.

McDonald begins chapter 1 by discussing the Publications Commission headed by Geoffrey Cronjé from 1954 to 1957. Many of the commission's draconian recommendations were implemented in the Publications and Entertainments Act of 1963, which created a new Board of Censors. For McDonald, a crucial development in this reconstitution of the board was that respected Afrikaans literary critic Gerrit Dekker was appointed to be its first chair. Under Dekker's leadership, the new board came to define its role not only as guardians of apartheid and of a Christian moral order, but also as guardians of the literary, and specifically of what McDonald calls the "*volk* avant-garde" (28). McDonald argues the most significant consequence of this concession to literary considerations "was that it put the question of literature—what is it and who decides?—at the centre of apartheid censorship" (39).

The censors' self-appointed role as guardians of the literary did little to mitigate the repression engendered by vigorous state censorship. Instead, it introduced an element of perversity into the proceedings, resulting in rulings that were all the more capricious, unpredictable, and indefensible for being based on supposedly literary criteria. McDonald summarizes the situation of literary authors working under the threat of censorship: "versions of their own anxieties, which centered on the inextricably tangled questions of literature, censorship, and the ethics of writing, were built into the system itself, as a consequence of the government's initial compromises with the *volk avant-garde*" (165). Literary publishers as well were "entangled in an absurdly high-minded, asymmetrical, and potentially devastating rivalry with the censors over the idea of literature itself, which brought with it real risks of financial loss, imprisonment, or both" (85).

Because the censors' powers were so sweeping, and because so many texts were sent to them for review, *The Literature Police* by necessity becomes a history of South African literary production in the twentieth century. African-language publishing was so thoroughly co-opted in the service of Bantu Education that McDonald is able to dispense with that strand of the history fairly quickly. But his accounts of both Afrikaans and English literature in South Africa are expansive and deeply informed. Much of this is well-worn territory, but reading this history through the lens of censorship proves highly revealing. It sheds new light, for example, on such familiar narratives as the rise and decline of *Drum* magazine in the 1950s, and Nadine Gordimer's disagreement with J. M. Coetzee in 1988 over whether Salman Rushdie should speak at the Congress of South African Writers' conference. Indeed, Coetzee and Gordimer are well accounted for in this text, as are Andre Brink, Etienne Leroux, Breyten Breytenbach, Ezekiel Mphahlele, Njabulo Ndebele, and many other poets and fiction writers. By contrast, McDonald almost entirely ignores South Africa's rich theatrical history—one of the few quibbles I have with this book, though the omission of theater is not necessarily of concern to readers of *MFS*.

The Literature Police goes beyond the struggle between writer and censor, however. It provides a detailed institutional history of the censors themselves, and the effects of their decisions on publishers such as David Philip and Ravan, periodicals including *Drum* and *Staffrider*, and writers' organizations such as PEN-SA and the Writers' Circle. This institutional history occupies the first three chapters, totaling over two hundred pages. The remainder of the book consists of short chapters devoted to "singular situations/disruptive moments"

(217) focused on the relationship between particular writers and the censors. In these later chapters, McDonald's deep immersion in the archival record really pays off: he sifts through the initial reader reports and ensuing debates among the censors and the appeals board, and interprets their decisions in terms of conflicts over the very nature and definition of literature.

The fragmented organization means that McDonald visits some episodes again and again. For example: in chapter 1 we see how the controversy over Leroux's 1976 novel *Magersfontein, O Magersfontein!* served as a test case for the new Publications Act of 1974, which ushered in the most repressive period of censorship in the history of apartheid. Then, in chapter 2, we see how Afrikaans publishers reacted to the banning of *Magersfontein*, while in chapter 3 we read how it affected the future direction of the *volk* avant-garde, and how writers' organizations responded. McDonald recites the entire episode again in chapter 6, this time with a focus on the censors' reports and the debates over the novel's status as *volk* literature. With each return, the reader sees new layers of complexity in the cultural and legal battles over Leroux's novel. But this organizational scheme does require McDonald to indulge in a great deal of tedious signposting of the "as we have already seen" variety. And a reader new to South African literature might find the lack of a sustained linear narrative frustrating and difficult to follow (though the chronological chart in the back is very useful in this regard).

For a work of literary studies scholarship, *The Literature Police* takes a distinctly sociological and historiographical approach to its subject—the first 220 pages, in particular, could have been written without actually reading any of the works of literature in question, so little attention does the author pay to textual detail. But as an intellectual history of South Africa in the late twentieth century, McDonald's book now ranks among the most important, and is a must-read for anyone interested in the social, political, and intellectual milieu of cultural production under apartheid.

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