

FICTION

Disgraced

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Did we not love The Author? Did we not take him to our hearts?

Of course we did.

Not while he was alive, of course. You can't evaluate someone's career until you see the full extent of his output. You need perspective. We need someone to point out how important his work is to us; we can't be expected to think this through for ourselves.

Yes, it is sad indeed that he didn't sell more than a few hundred copies of any one of his books while he was alive. And it's tragic, I suppose, that he died in poverty and was laid to rest in a commoner's grave. But that's the way things are if you want to be considered a creative. When you serve the people, the sacrifice is your reward.

We did not see how much we needed him while he was alive. How much he spoke to our souls. It turns out that he was the voice of the country and he said everything that we wished to say but did not have words for. He said it with a music that we didn't have the flair for. He gave a voice to those at the forefront of the political struggle, and in such a way that all of us finally understood what the issues were.

In death, The Author achieved a stature and an importance that he hadn't had in life.

We took up a public subscription so that a bronze statue of The Author, sagely stroking his chin, could be erected in the middle of the municipal park. We created a scholarship for promising young writers and stamped his name on a new literary prize. His works were added to the syllabus in high schools and colleges and adapted for the stage and screen. We held book discussions and invited academics to give public lectures about his works. Parents read abridged versions to their kids at night; illustrators created comic books.

We felt it was only right that we celebrate his most famous novel. Every year on the anniversary of the first publication of his magnificent Magnum Opus, we held street parties and readings where everyone would dress up as the characters. Some of us wore blue mops on our heads, some wore ballet tutus trimmed with sunflowers and roses, while others put on a bowler hat and carried a large, newspaper-wrapped carp.

His body was exhumed from its humble grave and the coffin paraded through the streets with a cortege of 35 bishops from neighbouring provinces. It was then reinterred in the nave of the cathedral along with several luminaries of the nation.

Just when we had ensured his immortality and place in everyone's hearts and minds, the rumours began. We heard them in the market, whispered behind hands. We tried them out tentatively on our own tongues to taste if there was any truth in them. The stories grew stronger in the telling, although the authorities tried their best to quell them with official statements in the newspapers. But in every mouth the scandals grew and shifted as lurid details were added.

Some said he had been a serial abuser of women, although neither his wife nor his previous lovers came forward to confirm this. Some said that he was secretly a racist and that he had called people with a different complexion from the east of the country names that we would blush to repeat here (although no solid evidence was presented to support this accusation). Some questioned his war record and claimed that his many medals had simply been purchased from a thief. Some academics set out to prove that his novels had been extensively plagiarized by running his manuscripts through supercomputers (which all crashed mysteriously before a conclusion could be reached).

But then a new and much more powerful take on the author and his works began to spread. We were determined to find offence and so we read behind the lines and through the lines and upside down to reverse the lines to find reasons to despise the works.

Perhaps the simple truth was that his work wasn't very good at all. Perhaps he had been just a government mouthpiece. We found so much righteous anger buried inside ourselves and we displayed it for the rest of the world to see.

How did the scales fall from our eyes? How did we undo generations of swallowing the official line in all things? None of us could say for sure, but there was definitely a current of anger that started in us as just a trickle, and then became a stream and finally a torrent.

Physical signs of this disillusionment were manifested. His statue had been neglected for some time now and had become target practice for pigeons. That corner of the park became overgrown with weeds. Then, one day, we found it had been daubed with red paint, making The Author look as if he had been involved in a massacre. Soon afterwards, angry mobs appeared bearing placards and insisted that the statue be torn down. One of the braver young men scaled the statue to fasten ropes around the statue's neck while the baying crowd yanked and pulled until it toppled into bushes, breaking off its nose which the cheering horde bore away with them.

His books were removed from the library and bookstore shelves. Although they were never burned (because how could we do that if we believed we had the higher moral ground?) the remaining copies languished in storerooms until the pages yellowed and they were sent away to be pulped.

Instead of celebrating Magnum Opus Day, we decided to set aside that holiday for a more worthy cause: End to Violence to Women Day or Solidarity with Purple Skinned Persons from the East Day. We could never make up our minds, so we simply named it Be Nice to All People Day.

The trouble is that whether we love or hate the author, we shan't forget him and can't forget him. He's more engraved in our consciousness than ever. Perhaps we will have to read his works again one day and make up our own minds?