

International Writers Speak Out About Censorship:

Q&A with Two Award-Winning Authors

Elizabeth Subercaseaux

Elizabeth Subercaseaux was born in Chile, the great-great-granddaughter of the German composer Robert Schumann. She is the best-selling author of ten books. Her nonfiction includes *Michelle*, a biography of the first woman to be elected president in Chile, and the amusing feminist manifesto, *The Ten Things a Chilean Woman Should Never Do*. She lives in Pennsylvania.



Q: Please describe the state of governmental control and restriction in Chile under Pinochet.

A: During the Pinochet dictatorship some opposition news magazines were allowed to exist: for example, *Análisis*, *Hoy* and *APSI*, for which I worked. All of these were funded by foreign organizations but their texts were reviewed by a group of (anonymous) government censors and if they found an article, interview, editorial or chronicle deemed displeasing to the government the magazine was immediately shut down. Journalists of the opposition were constantly persecuted, threatened and even some of them, like José Carrasco, who worked for *Análisis*, were murdered. Newspapers like *El Mercurio*, *La Nación*, *La Segunda*, and *Las Últimas Noticias*, all controlled by the political right, did not inform the public but rather censored any news related to human rights abuses. Television—all of its channels—was completely under the control of the military government.

Q: How were artists, writers and journalists treated, and to what degree were they considered to be a threat?

A: The great majority of Chilean writers of the period went into exile. Those of us who stayed behind had to send our texts, before publication, to the government where they were either subjected to the greatest of scrutiny by faceless censors or simply left forgotten in a drawer. Without even the courtesy of a reply. Of course, we could take the risk of publishing a book against the dictatorship, knowing that it could be requisitioned, burned or prohibited, as happened on so many occasions.

Another serious problem of the period was that there was practically no publishing house that would stand up for the writers of the opposition, with the exception of Galinost. It was the only one that dared to assume great risks in this regard. For this reason we published very little during those years and whatever Chilean literature did exist was

produced, for the most part, in exile (e.g. Isabel Allende, Poli Délano, Ariel Dorfman etc.) Toward the final years of the dictatorship I wrote a novel entitled *El general azul* (*The Blue General*). Zig-Zag, a very important publishing house at the time, bought the rights to the book even before I had it written, but once they read the novel they refused to publish it. They considered it too negative regarding Pinochet, and so the novel remained in a drawer at Zig-Zag until they sold it to a publisher in Argentina where it was published three years later. For all intents and purposes this novel didn't exist in Chile.

Q: What are your personal experiences with censorship and persecution?

A: I was persecuted as a journalist more than as a literary writer. The regime's henchmen even came to my home one Sunday night and beat me up because of a story I was preparing for *APSI*. Threats on the phone were a constant. They would call at two, three, four in the morning and leave terrifying messages. Instilling fear was the weapon of choice in dealing with journalists.

Q: Contrast your international experiences and worldview with your observations about censorship in North America. How does censorship manifest itself here?

A: Censorship of the press certainly does exist in the United States and it is due principally to the control exercised by corporate interests who finance the country's means of communication, particularly in the case of the mass media. These are interests that have little or nothing to do with the public's need to be well informed in a truthful and timely fashion.

Q: What advice would you give to tomorrow's budding journalists and writers?

A: Only one: it's not a question of what can be said or not said. Everything must be said. Let others censor you, let them fire you, but you, you must never censor yourself.

A WEEK IN OCTOBER

by Elizabeth Subercaseaux
Translated by Marina Harss

This extraordinary tale of love, death, deception, and resilience walks the line of suspense from page one to the unexpected, haunting ending that ponders the mysteries of a woman's heart, where truth is a lie and a lie is truth.

Note: Contains mature subject matter

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Karen Connelly

Karen Connelly lived for almost two years on the Thai-Burma border, among Burmese exiles and dissidents, many whose stories on which *The Lizard Cage* draws. She won the Governor General's Award for Nonfiction for *Touch the Dragon*, a Thai Journal, published in the United States as *Dream of a Thousand Lives*, a New York Times Notable Travel Book. *The Lizard Cage* is her first novel and was a finalist for the 2006 Kiriya Prize for Fiction.



Q: Please describe the state of governmental control and restriction in Burma during the 1990s.

A: Complete censorship. No free large-scale public media. Small magazines and all books have to be approved by the Censorship Board. Certain names, songs, and books were and continue to be completely outlawed. Even painters and singers have to submit their works before they can show or sing them publicly. There was, and continues to be, very little access to the internet.

Q: How were artists, writers and journalists treated, and to what degree were they considered to be a threat?

A: Artists, writers and journalists were and continue to be routinely harassed, arrested and imprisoned without due process, sometimes tortured, occasionally executed in prison. Sometimes they've died of the results of torture or mistreatment or lack of medical attention. All of this because they had written or publicized material—or been involved in political meetings that the dictatorship didn't approve of. Sometimes these writers were very young—in their teens or early twenties.

Even for those who remained free suffered an internalized censorship, and a lot of anxiety over what might happen to them or their families because of their work. Young artists and writers talk about how paralyzing it is to

try to become an artist in Burma, because so much is off-limits, not allowed to be said, explored, drawn, painted. It's very sad to talk to these talented, intelligent, and trapped people.

Q: What are your personal experiences with censorship and persecution?

A: *The Lizard Cage* is a novel about a young singer songwriter who becomes famous during public protests against the military dictatorship. His protest songs become songs of the movement. He is eventually arrested and imprisoned—the novel is about his struggle to remain free even in the prison. It's also about a young illiterate boy in the prison who is a child labourer; he and the young singer become friends.

In researching this book, I spent hours talking with Burmese people of all ages and backgrounds whose entire lives were censored because the military regime that rules Burma continues to deny its crimes. I learned that the most important thing a person has—the thing that belongs to them most deeply and gives them their true identity—is the story of their life. If you cannot tell the true story of your life, something is seriously wrong with your society, not with you.

Q: Contrast your international experiences and worldview with your observations about censorship in North America. How does censorship manifest itself here?

A: Well, a lot of people here cannot tell the true stories of their lives either. Or the truth of those stories is denied—people don't want to hear it. The poor and marginalized are censored all the time, because they don't have access to power. Or they don't know how to use their power. Children are often censored, particularly in situations where they are being abused. If you learn censorship very young, it goes inside you and works on its own; there doesn't need to be a bad government or a bad parent to enforce it.

More traditional censorship is still at work, too. Parents' groups still call up school boards and say that *Harry Potter* is a frightening book about witches and *The Golden Compass* is anti-Roman Catholic. I read banned books. Books that have been banned in the past, and books that are banned today. We should all read banned books. There has to be something interesting in them if they've been banned.

Q: What advice would you give to tomorrow's budding journalists and writers?

A: Read good books. Read good journalism. Go into the past. If what you want to write about is too difficult, or is driving you crazy, consider talking to a good counselor or therapist. (You won't be the first.) Find a writing mentor. Go to workshops. Travel, even if it's just around your own block, with open, honest, accepting eyes. Believe that it is possible. Follow your bliss. Follow your bliss. Remember your gift. Give thanks. Be generous. Be daring. ■



THE LIZARD CAGE

by Karen Connelly

Karen Connelly's award-winning debut novel is the story of Teza, a political activist who is imprisoned for 20 years in solitary confinement for singing songs of protest against the repressive dictatorship in Burma. Beautifully written, this book is a celebration of the resilience of the human spirit. Spiegel & Grau, TR, 978-0-385-52503-9, 464 pp, \$14.00

Winner, 2007 — Orange Broadband Award for New Writers

Nominee, 2006 — Kiriya Prize for Fiction
Nominee, 2006 — IMPAC Dublin Literary Award