



The Censor's Perfect World

BY LLOYD JONES

I WAS A RECENT VISITOR TO THE KAFKA MUSEUM IN PRAGUE. That such a museum exists should come as no surprise. After all, Kafka spent most of his life in Prague. Furthermore, it is hard to imagine this one-time insurance employee turning into the writer of such novels as *The Trial*, *Metamorphosis*, and *The Castle* without Prague's Byzantine cobbled streets and tightly packed neighbourhoods influencing his creative wellsprings.

Yet, this same city, under the aegis of State paranoia banned publication of Kafka's titles after World War II. For nearly half a century, Kafka simply disappeared off the shelves. It required the "purple "revolution" in 1989, and the dissolution of the Communist regime for Kafka to be reinstated. His books are now back on the shelves. In fact, you can also buy Kafka t-shirts, posters, and key rings from the shop appended to the museum. How the wheel turns.

Still, I hadn't known about the censorship of Kafka. My initial shock came as a reader and writer. How could such wonderful books be locked away in the proverbial cupboard for so long? The answer, of course, is the danger of the writer leading avid readers to places the regime would prefer they not visit or dwell. The writer might lead the reader to ideas antagonistic to the regime.

The censor is congenitally afraid of what may be exposed as much as by what might be lost. The status quo is at stake; and the status quo always looks like a perfect world to those who control it.

Parents are our first censors. More often with the best will in the world, parental censorship seeks to protect. A parental control device on Internet access is not such a bad idea when a child is but two or three clicks away from pornographic sites. As parents and educators, we might join in a wider crusade and argue that less violence on screen might be a very good thing.

As parents, we may even occasionally over-step the mark, such as what happens in my novel, *Mister Pip*. Set on a small Pacific island during a period of civil war, a mother conceals a book from her daughter, Matilda. The book is *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens. Up until its concealment, Dickens' great classic is read to Matilda and her classmates by Mr. Watts, the last white man on the island.

The reading provides Matilda with her first powerful imaginative experience. She never expected to "feel the breath" of a made-up person, or discover that a book can deliver you to another world. She has found a friend in

Pip, who normally she might have expected to find up a tree rather than in a book. Obsessed by Dickens' character, she creates a small shrine on the beach and carves Pip's name out in the sand.

She tries to interest her mother, Dolores, in the book. Each night she recounts the chapter read to the class earlier in the day. The book fails to extend its spell to Dolores. More alarming, at least to Dolores, is the evident impact of the book on her daughter. Matilda has access to a world beyond her own reach, a world she can not access let alone understand. Matilda is growing in a wholly new and unexpected direction. Her world has expanded—grown beyond the village, beyond the island, beyond real time to Victorian England. In other words, it has grown beyond the grasp of the mother.

Dolores turns jealous. She is jealous of her daughter's expanding world, and at the same time bewildered and disappointed that her daughter is more interested in a made-up person than her own relatives. To restore the old



order, to bring her daughter back to the observable reality of their everyday lives, Dolores steals the book from the classroom and conceals it. She is willing to sacrifice the enjoyment of others for her own daughter. In a power struggle with Mr. Watts, the presenter of *Great Expectations*, she is attempting to bring Matilda back under her wing. Matilda is her daughter—not Mr. Watts'. *Great Expectations* is hardly the issue as much as control over her daughter.

The consequences of Dolores' action are far-reaching. She has concealed the book, thereby reducing its influence—at least she hopes. (Mr. Watts responds by setting his class the task of remembering the book so that they might collectively put it back together.) She has also removed a crucial piece of evidence.

When soldiers turn up to the village and take down the names of everyone in it, the whereabouts of Pip is demanded. After all, they know he exists. His name is written in big letters down at the beach. A Kafkaesque situation results with the commander of the soldiers giving the villagers two weeks to produce Pip. The book that might explain the misunderstanding cannot be found, and the consequences are devastating. ■

About the Writer

LLOYD JONES was born in New Zealand in 1955. His novels and collections of stories include the award-winning The Book of Fame, Biografi, a New York Times Notable Book, Choo Woo, Here at the End of the World We Learn to Dance, Mister Pip and Paint Your Wife. Lloyd Jones lives in Wellington.



MISTER PIP by Lloyd Jones

In a novel that is at once intense, beautiful, and fablelike, Lloyd Jones weaves a transcendent story that celebrates the resilience of the human spirit and the power of narrative to transform our lives.

On a copper-rich tropical island shattered by war, where the teachers have fled with most everyone else, only one white man chooses to stay behind: the eccentric Mr. Watts, object of much curiosity and scorn, who sweeps out the ruined schoolhouse and begins to read to the children each day from Charles Dickens's classic *Great Expectations*.

So begins this rare, original story about the abiding strength that imagination, once ignited, can provide.



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