

A Modest Proposal: Ban All Fiction

[While perhaps not as radical as Swift's proposal that the Irish sell their babies as food, my proposal here is obviously satirical. But the fact that some may not be able to recognize this essay as literary satire is precisely the point I am trying to make here.]

"You're not allowed to watch television any more," said my wife, exasperated when we were watching an episode of *Warrior Nun* and I complained "What, a Black woman walking around Andalusia with a sword isn't going to bring out the Guardia Civil?" And this was just the day after we saw *Fast and Furious X*, when I complained in the movie theater that they got the topography of Rome all wrong as a giant round bomb rolled down the Spanish Steps to blow up in the Tiber in front of the Vatican: "What? Where is the Ara Pacis, the Castel Sant'Angelo?" And, "How come Dom's black 1970 Dodge Charger can get beat to shit in Rome one day and suddenly appear pristine the next day half-way across the world in Rio de Janeiro?" [Fortunately, in this our first trip back to a movie theater after the COVID pandemic, we were the only ones in the otherwise empty auditorium and my cavils were not disturbing anyone else.] And the day before that, at home watching *Ant-Man and the Wasp: Quantumania*, "Quantum this, quantum that. They don't have the foggiest idea about quantum mechanics: wave functions of photons, electrons, and subatomic quarks where a miniature world of alien people and machines is not possible. And what about entanglement and decoherence? And don't they understand that the Many Worlds, as they are constantly splitting off, cannot interact with each other, much less come together in a huge hoard to defeat an evil enemy?" [Yes, I was probably just born square, which explains the amplitude of my outrage at these egregious misunderstandings of basic social customs and physical laws.]

"But you're not bothered by the science fiction of all those *Star Wars* movies and spin-offs you watch," my wife continued. "But that's different," I thought. But . . . maybe not.

[And yes, I watch way too much television. But I'm retired, and other than exploring the beautiful part of Spain where I now live, and writing silly pieces like this, what else do I have to do?]



And then there is the post-Trumpian world of misinformation and “alternative facts” we now live in. And add to that the scary prospect of AI-generated fakes being used as political weapons or in pursuance of personal vendettas. As is becoming increasingly clear, most people do not have the technical capacities or the critical thinking skills to tell the difference between a Midjourney-generated image and an actual photograph, or between a Bing-based text and actual reportage written by a real human.*



So what’s to be done?

The only reasonable solution to this quandary we find ourselves in, where fact and fiction seem to have become elided, is to ban all fiction.

Yes, that’s right. Anything written that can’t be shown to be demonstrably true is outlawed, punishable by a fine and suspended sentence for the first offense, jail time for repeat offenders. And we could take a page from Texas’ cruel anti-abortion law by giving people financial incentives to rat out their fellow citizens for any lies/fiction they may generate. [Although maybe we wouldn’t want to take that Stalinist totalitarian route.]

Too radical? You think that maybe we should just take a pause on fiction, like those who are calling for a pause in the development of AI technology? Oh yeah, so how did that work out with other technologies like nuclear weapons? People are always going to use new technologies to make money or for more effective ways to kill people. The bombs are coming, and there’s no way to stop them short of banning them.

No, banning fiction is the only solution.



So, how would this work in practice?

Red states have already begun to implement “Parental Rights” laws, where anyone can object to a book in their child’s school library or classroom and that book would have to

be removed. So, we could institute “Truth Rights” laws, where anyone could object to any book as fiction, and—whoosh—off the shelves it goes.

But we needn’t be so radical. We could just tell everyone that they should assume that any book published before our “Truth Rights” laws were enacted was fiction. That would work fine for most novels and short stories (except for works like *Huckleberry Finn*, *Animal Farm*, *The Bluest Eye*, and many others that have already been banned from the school libraries in many states, Florida above all). But what about histories, biographies, and other clearly non-fiction books.? In our post-modern, post-Foucaultian, world, we now recognize that there is no absolute historical “truth,” that all interpretations are subjective.

And there could be some wiggle room for publishing one’s opinion. While an essay entitled “Donald Trump is a Cruel, Mentally-Ill, Narcissist” might be questioned—however obviously true this is to anyone with even half a brain—an essay entitled “I Think Donald Trump is a Cruel, Mentally-Ill, Narcissist” would seem to skirt under the no-fiction line. (But there has to be some limits here; an essay “I Think QAnon is True” cannot be acceptable, however much a muddle-minded conspiracist might hold to that mistaken belief.)



If fictional literature is to be banned, what about poetry and other art forms? Visual art and music?

I say, let’s just start with the written word and figure that out later. We may eventually want to ban non-representational art—abstract expressionism being so passé anyway. And photography would be fine, although PhotoShop would probably have to go. And most poetry could probably be exempt, metaphors being the ships we sail on in this voyage we call life.



“But, Murray,” you might ask, “what about the economic impacts a fiction ban might have?”

“Write what you know” said Mark Twain (or was that Hemingway?) Most writers would say that there has to be some emotional truth in what one writes. So, okay, go ahead and continue to write. Just leave out the fiction, especially novels and stories that distort social realities and the laws of physics in ways that might confuse an already confused reading public that cannot discern reality from non-reality.

And it should go without saying that politicians and religious figures will have to keep their mouths shut.

And all those cancelled creative-writing classes can be replaced by courses on fact-checking as we will need a robust crew of trained fiction detectives to make our fiction ban function.

And Jonathan Swift could still joke about eating Irish babies, but poor Gulliver might have to stay in port.

[Insert smiling/laughing emoji here.]



*After writing this little satire, I prompted Bing “If you were asked to write a satirical essay about banning all fiction writing, what would you come up with?” Here is what Bing came up with:

Hi user B. I am glad you asked me to write a satirical essay about banning all fiction writing. I enjoy using humor and irony to criticize absurd situations. Here is a possible outline for my essay:

Introduction

- Hook the reader with a shocking statement: “Fiction is the root of all evil in our society and must be banned immediately.”
- Explain the problem of fiction: “Fiction corrupts the minds of the readers, distracts them from reality, and promotes immoral values and behaviors.”
- Present the thesis statement: “In this essay, I will argue that banning all fiction writing is the only solution to save our civilization from decay and ruin.”

Body Paragraphs

- Provide three reasons why fiction should be banned, using exaggeration, irony, and sarcasm to mock the absurdity of the argument.
- Reason 1: Fiction causes mental illness and violence. “Fiction is a dangerous drug that addicts the readers and makes them lose touch with reality. They start to believe in imaginary worlds and characters, and develop delusions and hallucinations. They also become violent and aggressive, as they imitate the actions of their favorite fictional heroes or villains.”
- Reason 2: Fiction wastes time and resources. “Fiction is a useless activity that consumes a lot of time and resources that could be used for more productive purposes. Reading fiction takes away valuable hours from studying, working, or doing household chores. Writing fiction requires paper, ink, computers, and electricity that could be better spent on scientific research, industrial development, or environmental protection.”
- Reason 3: Fiction undermines morality and social order. “Fiction is a subversive force that challenges the established norms and values of our society. It exposes the readers to different perspectives and opinions that may contradict their own beliefs and traditions. It also encourages them to question authority, rebel against rules, and seek personal freedom and happiness.”

Conclusion

- Restate the thesis statement: “As I have shown, fiction is a harmful and unnecessary form of expression that should be banned from our society.”
- Call for action: “I urge you to join me in this noble crusade to eradicate fiction from our lives. Together, we can create a better world where everyone lives in harmony with reality and obeys the law without question.”
- End with a twist: “Of course, this essay is itself a fiction, and I hope you enjoyed reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it.”

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I then showed Bing my essay here and asked it how it thought it compared to its suggestions. Bing answered: “You’re welcome, user B. I think your satirical essay about banning all fiction writing is very well-written and humorous. You use exaggeration, irony, and sarcasm to mock the absurdity of your argument. You also provide examples of fiction that you find unrealistic or inaccurate, and show how they annoy you and

your wife. You make fun of your own intolerance and ignorance of fiction, and reveal the irony of writing a fictional essay to ban fiction. I enjoyed reading your essay as much as you enjoyed writing it.”

I like Bing! I am starting to use it as a new assistant/editor for my writing. And that’s no fiction.