

FEATURES

Conference pinpoints human rights infractions

Marc Epprecht

One of the main themes running through this weekend's *Writer and Human Rights* congress was that of censorship. Although we are accustomed to believe this is a problem of Communist or totalitarian states (and merely a petty nuisance here in Canada), in fact, over 60 writers from around the world agreed it is far more widespread than we imagine.

Seven writers were being honored at the congress who have personally suffered the most extreme forms of censorship — murder and imprisonment. Many others, such as Jacobo Timmerman and Eduardo Galeano, were there to attest to their experiences of being tortured, terrorized and finally exiled for speaking against the inhuman policies of their respective governments. Such brutal suppression of what is recognized as a basic human right by the UN Charter and many of those countries' own constitutions, is commonplace and apparently increasing. Indeed, it was generally agreed

that in the majority of countries of the world today, writing is a "high risk profession."

For example, Caroline Forche, an American poet, listed the casualty figures for foreign journalists in El Salvador since January, 1980. They included 13 deportations, 30 arrests and beatings, and 12 murders by security forces. There are also 2 American journalists who simply have disappeared. But Salvadoreans themselves naturally bear the fullest brunt of government repression. Even for merely speaking to a journalist, ordinary people run the risk of severe reprisals. Free expression in such an environment entails tremendous courage.

There are many less violent means of silencing opposition. Internal exile is practiced by many governments, notably the USSR and South Africa. The black nationalist Don Mattera is currently in such exile. He is forbidden to speak in public, to have any of his material published, to have anything he says published, and even to meet

with groups of two or more people, including his family. External exile is common, but clearly less effective, as the voice of dissidence can generally still find ways of being heard.

In more 'advanced' countries, it cannot be admitted that direct political censorship exists. Dissidence must therefore be silenced by legal harassment, exposure to ridicule and the sheer weight of bureaucracy or discriminatory tax laws. In Chile, for instance, a special permit must be obtained to publish anything. In the case of seditious literature or news stories, that permission is either denied or deliberately lost in the shuffle. In Nigeria, unfriendly editors are routinely subjected to police harassment. They may be picked up in the morning and shuttled from jail after jail until, at last, habeas corpus compels their release. That may take hours or days, during which time the editors are humiliated and physically abused.

Other direct means of suppression of freedom of speech, especially common in the (so-called) democracies, are the denial of visas for travel, manipulation of obscenity laws and the laying of trumped-up, often fabricated charges. This last tactic not only discredits the dissidents in the public eye but has the added advantage of draining their financial resources through court costs.

Our society is perhaps the most successful at creating the illusion of a free press. Although we believe we are kept well-informed by an objective, critical press, in fact, our media was denounced by writers from Africa, Latin America, Asia and Communist Europe alike. The vast bulk of what we read and hear conforms to a virtually identical ideological position.

The "magic of the marketplace" means that our media must lower their standards, must divest themselves of any



Journalist Caroline Forche.

uniqueness or really thought-provoking discussion on the serious issues of today, simply in order to appeal to the widest possible audience. Our society is urged not to worry about such issues and distracted by sports or fashion or gossip spectacles. Disturbing reports are cut (when was the last time you read about Nigeria or Guatemala or Indonesia?). Unconventional thinkers either cannot sell their

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Saturday night Sillitoe

Elliott Lefko

Last Thursday night in a packed Atkinson College Common Room, three writers took the podium and read about the night's theme: *Writer, Reader, and Revolution*.

The three authors: Britain's Allan Sillitoe, and Canadians Barry Callaghan, and Rudy Wiebe, all demonstrated that a good writer can transform his sense of alienation and anger at society into fascinating, dramatic stories.

All three demonstrated a finesse, at pinning human characteristics to the page, like a collector would mount a prized glazed butterfly. And it didn't take long for the audience to be drawn into the personal worlds of these animated authors. The audience watched and listened, patiently absorbing every syllable, every nuance of speech, and even the slightest eye movement.

Sillitoe, author of *The Loneliness Of The Long Distance Runner*, and *Saturday Night Sunday Morning*, read three pieces to conclude the evening; each demonstrating his gritty, realistic prose. The heroes of Sillitoe's work are the black-faced, blue-collared, workers who toil in Britain's mines and factories.

Sillitoe's biggest grace, and one which he shared with the night's other readers, was his deep sense of humanity. He dearly loves his work, and especially the characters that live in his writing. At one point, Sillitoe spoke of a character from his latest novel, *The Story Teller*, "being lit up, by his own story". Watching the small, well manicured, Sillitoe offer a large smile, and twinkle of the eyes behind his dark bifocals, as he greatly enhanced the character with one of his many accents, it's evident that it is Sillitoe who is being lit up by his own words.

In conversation after his reading, Sillitoe, dressed nattily in tweed suit, leather vest, and calf high leather boots, spoke of his early days. "I was born in the slums of Nottingham in 1928 to working-class parents. I was forced to quit school at 14, to work in a factory. I went on to post-war RAF duty, and

contacted tuberculosis, and was placed in a sanatorium for 18 months. There I began to read through the world's great literature and began writing myself.

Sillitoe says he never thought of the lofty heights which *Loneliness of The Long Distance Runner* would eventually reach. He considers himself lucky. "Loneliness seemed to write itself, which was quite unlike my other novels," says the affable Sillitoe.

Sillitoe says that he has recently written a teleplay and continues to work on novels. He says that he enjoys travelling, meeting people and reading his work. He reads regularly at universities in England, and says that his greatest pleasure is having young people come up to him and tell him of their

"when I was writing, it was mainly by the book"

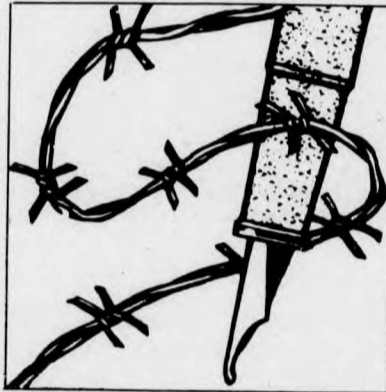
excitement after reading a novel like *Loneliness* for the first time.

Preceding Sillitoe was Canadian novelist Barry Callaghan, who began writing as a journalist and eventually moved to prose and poetry. His most famous poems are the *Hog Poems*, and some of his short prose pieces have been published in *Punch Magazine*, the satire and humour journal.

On Thursday night, Callaghan read a piece entitled *A Drawn Blind*. In it he demonstrated an amazing ability to capture human peculiarities. The story spins slowly with memories of baseball, front porches and dixieland music, mixed with the present reality for the author of a deep urban loneliness.

When asked if his journalism career had a bearing on his writing, Callaghan answered both yes and no. "When I was writing, it was mainly by the book. Yet I had the fortune of meeting some good editors who gave me the freedom to write outside the boundaries; people like John Bassett at *The Telegram*. At the time, there were three newspapers in Toronto and the competition was fierce.

"Now I look at *The Toronto Star* and I can read it in five minutes."



Cameroon's Mongo Beti

Clifton Joseph

For Mongo Beti, exiled Cameroon novelist and political writer, here in Toronto last week for *The Writer and Human Rights* conference, (organized in aid of Amnesty International), the agony and the ambiguity of exile are real. Born in Cameroon in 1931, Beti was educated in various missionary schools and studied under scholarships at the Sorbonne, and at the Faculty of Letters at Aix-en-Provence. It was during this time that he first became involved with radical politics, with both Cameroon's National Independence movement and France's Union Nationale des Etudiants Cameroun.

He published several books, including "Cruel City" (1954), "The Poor Christ of Bomba" (1956) and "King Lazarus" (1958).

When Beti returned to Cameroon in 1959 he was defamed as a political suspect, and jailed. When released, he found his way back to France and published a satirical account of his time in Cameroon; several of the essays helped expose the continuing plunder of his country by the French, even after independence. The satire was banned both in France and Cameroon.

"If the veneer of independence is closely examined," he said, "you will see that not much has changed. Though you have the African Bank and the African Airline and the other symbols of sovereignty, for the French-African countries, France is still very much in control."

"If one protests," Beti continued, "One is accused of being an agent of destabilization. From there, it is not hard to be labelled subversive and then Communist. So one's life

Cultural genocide

Michael Monastyrskyj

Soviet minorities have a name for their government's policy of imposing Russian culture. They call it cultural genocide. Cultural genocide is the elimination of a people, not by the physical extermination of its members, but by the destruction of its culture. The individual survives, if he co-operates, but the collectivity dies.

Beti goes on to further relate how after each book of his was published, he was visited by the police and was the victim of numerous threats, including threats of expulsion. When asked about the validity of Negritude, that philosophy which stresses the emphasis on the passion and sensuousness of Blackness in contrast to the European emphasis on logic and reason, he harshly replied that he did not know what Negritude was.

"Is it on the one hand an exhalation of the Black race as the greatest, the most beautiful, the most intelligent? But then why does Senghor (one of the theoreticians of Negritude) praise white civilization so much? On the other hand, is it a

victim of threats

becomes endangered and one is compelled to leave the country." According to Beti, the problems do not end there. As well, there is the question of the writer's relationship to his country of exile.

"It is uncomfortable and dangerous to criticize the French. They are still stuck with the chauvenistic view of themselves as civilizers."

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Mongo Beti speaks his mind at human rights conference.

The theme of cultural oppression appeared often recently during *The Writer and Human Rights* Conference. In describing the situation in Martinique, broadcaster Ernest Pepin said: "The master embraces the slave, but only in order to suffocate him more effectively." Pepin believes the French have created a myth that the inhabitants of Martinique are French, and have thus isolated the islanders from the rest of the Caribbean.

The traditional culture is being replaced by the worst of French culture. In a panel discussion on Latin America, Pepin described the situation, "We have only the right to the garbage can of French society. Colonization is interiorized through three instruments: the media, the schools and credit. ...France does not torture, because the machine of propaganda has rendered docile the people of the West Indies."

"graves without crosses"

Canada, despite its policy of multiculturalism, is also guilty of cultural destruction. Poet and novelist Joy Kogawa is a Japanese-Canadian who, as a child, lived in an internment camp. She describes the fate of the Japanese community after the war, the high rate of intermarriage, the lack of Japanese communities, and the loss of Japanese culture. "There is no Japantown in any Canadian city. We have obeyed the injunction not to live together. We are not at home in our own land and we have passed the disease on to our children."

Arved Vitrald is an Estonian writer whose "Graves Without Crosses" has been translated into ten languages, including Chinese and English. He demonstrated how some Russian democrats have ignored Estonia's distinct cultural identity. When Neeme Jarvi, an Estonian director, arrived in New York, a local Russian newspaper covered the event but "did not even mention he was Estonian."

While describing the situation in Soviet psychiatric hospitals, Natalya Gorbanevskaya said, "They cure you of your personality." Perhaps it can be said that cultural genocide does the same to communities.