

I'M DELIGHTED TO HAVE BEEN INVITED TO THIS SPECIAL FESTIVAL FOR BOOK LOVERS, MORE IMPORTANTLY, FOR BOOK READERS. I HAVE A FORM OF LARYNGITIS SO I APOLOGIZE IF YOU'VE ANY PROBLEM HEARING ME. PLEASE LET ME KNOW IF I NEED TO BRING THIS MIKE CLOSER.

THE BOOK I'VE BEEN INVITED TO TALK ABOUT IS A NOVEL CALLED "IN TROUBLE". A HISTORICAL NOVEL THAT TAKES PLACE IN 1956.

I'D LIKE TO TALK WITH YOU ABOUT THE STORY I WROTE, THE CHARACTERS, HOW THEY EVOLVED, ETC., BUT I DON'T FEEL I CAN START THERE. I HAVE TO ADDRESS WHAT SOME HAVE CALLED THE BOOK – POLITICAL, A POLEMIC.

"IN TROUBLE" IS A NOVEL ABOUT TEEN PREGNANCY. IT'S ALSO VERY MUCH ABOUT FAMILIES AND FRIENDSHIP. TEEN PREGNANCY IS A PERFECTLY ACCEPTABLE SUBJECT IN A BOOK FOR YOUNG PEOPLE. BUT IN THIS BOOK ONE OF THE CHARACTERS ACTUALLY HAS AN ABORTION. AND THAT'S VERBOTEN.

ABORTION AS WE ALL KNOW TODAY IS A HOT BUTTON ISSUE—AT LEAST IN THIS COUNTRY. IN THE STORY THERE'S ALSO AN OLD HOT-BUTTON ISSUE – LEFTIST POLITICS.

"IN TROUBLE" TAKES PLACE IN 1956, ALMOST TWO DECADES BEFORE THE SUPREME COURT DECISION IN ROE V. WADE. SOME OF YOU MAY REMEMBER THOSE DAYS OF BACK ALLEY ABORTIONS, THE STRUGGLE EVEN TO FIND ONE OF THOSE, AND THE ICONIC IMAGE OF HANGERS USED BY DESPERATE WOMEN.

I'VE WRITTEN MORE THAN TWENTY BOOKS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE, BOTH FICTION AND NONFICTION, AND SOME ABOUT "CONTROVERSIAL" SUBJECTS. BUT I WAS STARTLED BY WHAT I'VE LEARNED IN TRYING TO FIND A PUBLISHER FOR THIS BOOK.

THE CHARACTERS ARE FOR THE MOST PART THE SAME ONES AS IN AN EARLIER NOVEL, "CATCH A TIGER BY THE TOE." THAT STORY TOOK PLACE IN 1953 AT THE HEIGHT OF THE MCCARTHY PERIOD. SENATOR JOSEPH MCCARTHY, THE RED-HUNTER.

JAMIE MORSE IN BOTH BOOKS IS MY FIRST-PERSON-SPEAKING PROTAGONIST, AND HER FATHER IN "CATCH A TIGER" IS SENT TO PRISON FOR REFUSING TO ANSWER SEN. MCCARTHY'S QUESTIONS. SAME FAMILY, SAME FATHER IN THIS SECOND BOOK, "IN TROUBLE."

IN A NOVEL IN WHICH AN ABORTION HAPPENS, NOW THAT'S HITTING THE PANIC BUTTONS. IT'S OKAY TO RAISE THE POSSIBILITY, BUT IT MUST BE EMPHATICALLY REJECTED.

I READ THE NEWSPAPERS (I SUPPOSE THAT MAKES ME A DINOSAUR...). I'M FAIRLY UP ON CURRENT EVENTS. I KNOW THERE'S A BACKLASH AGAINST WOMEN'S REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS. BUT I STUMBLED ON A WALL OF RESISTANCE THAT I BELIEVE IS SELF-CENSORSHIP, BOTH DELIBERATE AND SOMETIMES PERHAPS NOT CONSCIOUS.

WHEN A CHARACTER IS PREGNANT- IT DOESN'T MATTER IF IT'S FROM RAPE, INCEST, ANYTHING INVOLVING TORTURE – SO LONG AS A BABY IS BORN, THAT'S NOT CONSIDERED POLITICAL. IT'S THE "JUNO" SCENARIO.

IT WASN'T ALWAYS THIS WAY. EVEN AS LATE AS THE MID-1990S, THE FULL PANIC BUTTON HADN'T BEEN PUSHED, AND SOME EDITORS PUBLISHED MANUSCRIPTS IN WHICH EITHER AN ABORTION OCCURRED, ALTHOUGH NOT CENTRAL TO THE STORY; OR WAS MENTIONED AS A PAST EVENT. NO LONGER.

WITH "IN TROUBLE" I'M CERTAIN THERE WERE EDITORS WHO REJECTED THE MANUSCRIPT BECAUSE THEY REALLY DIDN'T THINK IT WORKED. THEY DIDN'T RESPOND TO THE CHARACTERS, THEY DIDN'T LIKE THE VOICE, ETC. AND WHEN YOU TEND TO GET THE SAME BASIC QUESTIONS ABOUT THE MS., MOST WRITERS PAY ATTENTION. I MAY NOT WANT TO HEAR THOSE CRITIQUES, BUT I KNOW I HAVE TO THINK ABOUT THEM. EVERY WRITER KNOWS THAT.

THAT DIDN'T HAPPEN WITH "IN TROUBLE." THE REJECTION COMMENTS WERE ALL OVER THE MAP. ONE EDITOR, A PERSONAL FRIEND AS WELL AS WORKING COLLEAGUE WAS UP FRONT: WE WILL NEVER PUBLISH A BOOK THAT HAS AN ABORTION IN IT.

WHAT'S TRULY STARTLING IS THAT THE FRANTIC AVOIDANCE TODAY IS NOT JUST WITH CHILDREN'S BOOK PUBLISHERS, BUT ALSO IN THE WORLD OF ADULT MEDIA.

A FEW EXAMPLES: "SEX AND THE CITY" – HYPER-SEXED URBAN, SOPHISTICATED WOMEN -- IS THERE ANYTHING THAT SHOW HASN'T COVERED, UNCOVERED, DARE I SAY "TOUCHED ON"? YES. ABORTION. IT WAS RAISED AND REJECTED.

PLAYWRIGHT THERESA REBECK (A PULITZER FINALIST) WHO WROTE FOR NYPD BLUE, COULDN'T SELL A SCRIPT TO THAT POLICE SHOW THAT HAD AN ABORTION STORYLINE. NYPD BLUE WITH NAKED TUSHES!

"FRIDAY NIGHT LIGHTS" DID HAVE AN ABORTION STORY, AND THE NYTIMES ARTICLE ABOUT THE SHOW HIGHLIGHTED THE FACT THAT THIS WAS AN EXTRAORDINARY EXCEPTION TO THE BLACKOUT ON THE SUBJECT.

MY FAVORITE EXAMPLE OF THE FREE-FLOATING FEAR ABOUT THE SUBJECT. MONTHS AFTER THE SUPREME COURT DECISION IN ROE V. WADE IN 1973, THE SOAP "ALL MY CHILDREN" FEATURED A LEGAL ABORTION IN A EPISODE.

THIRTY-THREE YEARS LATER THE EARLIER STORY WAS REWRITTEN WITH A MIND-BENDING PLOT TWIST—THE ABORTION HAD NEVER REALLY HAPPENED BECAUSE THE EMBRYO HAD IN FACT BEEN "KIDNAPPED," IMPLANTED IN ANOTHER WOMAN, AND BROUGHT TO TERM!

IN THE U. S. ONE IN THREE WOMEN WILL HAVE AN ABORTION IN HER LIFETIME, AND WE'RE TOLD IN ESSENCE WE CAN'T TALK ABOUT IT -- TO ADULTS OR TO YOUNG PEOPLE. ONE IN THREE -- THAT'S A HELLUVA NUMBER. THE MEDIA SILENCE HAS SILENCED ALL OF US, SO THAT WOMEN'S STORIES, COMMON TO SO MANY OF US, ARE NOT BEING TOLD.

HOW MANY OF YOU KNOW SOMEONE WHO'S HAD AN ABORTION? [NOTE: AT LEAST ¾ OF AUDIENCE HANDS WENT UP]

AND HOW ARE THESE STORIES DISMISSED? THE CHARGE, SOMETIMES AN ACCUSATION, IS THAT THE BOOK IS "POLITICAL." A POLEMIC.

PHILIP PULLMAN HAD A POWERFUL ANSWER TO THE ATTACKS ON HIS BOOK "THE GOOD MAN JESUS AND THE SCOUNDREL CHRIST." HIS NOVEL WAS NOT ACCUSED OF BEING POLITICAL, BUT HIS ANSWER TO HIS CRITICS IS RELEVANT FOR ALL ISSUES OF CENSORSHIP:

"NO ONE HAS THE RIGHT TO LIVE WITHOUT BEING SHOCKED. NO ONE HAS THE RIGHT TO SPEND THEIR LIFE WITHOUT BEING OFFENDED. NOBODY HAS TO READ THIS BOOK. NOBODY HAS TO PICK IT UP. NOBODY HAS TO OPEN IT. AND IF YOU OPEN IT AND READ IT, YOU DON'T HAVE TO LIKE IT. AND IF YOU READ IT AND YOU DISLIKE IT, YOU DON'T HAVE TO REMAIN SILENT ABOUT IT. YOU CAN WRITE TO ME, YOU CAN COMPLAIN ABOUT IT, YOU CAN WRITE TO THE PUBLISHER, YOU CAN WRITE TO THE PAPERS, YOU CAN WRITE YOUR OWN BOOK. YOU CAN DO ALL THOSE THINGS, BUT THERE YOUR RIGHTS STOP. NO ONE HAS THE RIGHT TO STOP ME WRITING THIS BOOK. NO ONE HAS THE RIGHT TO STOP IT BEING PUBLISHED, OR BOUGHT, OR SOLD OR READ."

SO, WHAT IS MEANT BY "POLITICAL" AND WHAT DOES SUCH A LABEL ACCOMPLISH?

THE DICTIONARY DEFINITION IS MOSTLY ABOUT GOVERNMENT AND SOCIAL POLICY MAKING. BUT IN OUR CONTEXT, CALLING A BOOK "POLITICAL" IS A SHORTHAND LABEL MEANING THE WRITER HAS AN AGENDA. WE DON'T HAVE TO LOOK AT SOMETHING CAREFULLY. WE CAN DISMISS IT. IN EFFECT, THE LABEL IS A SILENCER.

WOULD A BOOK BE WRITTEN OFF AS "POLITICAL" IF A TEENAGE PROTAGONIST BELONGED, LET'S SAY, TO A CONSERVATIVE CHRISTIAN CHURCH, AND WANTED THE 10 COMMANDMENTS POSTED IN HIS SCHOOL CLASSROOMS? THAT'S A STORY INVOLVING DEEPLY-FELT ISSUES OF

CONSCIENCE. IF, HOWEVER, A GROUP OTHER STUDENTS FOUGHT THAT, AND HEAVEN FORFEND THE ACLU CHALLENGED IT, THEN THE BOOK BECOMES A POLEMIC.

THE ONE MAIN EXCEPTION WE SEEM TO MAKE IS A STORY THAT TOUCHES ON THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT. NO AGENDA THERE WE SAY. JUST A GOOD STORY. AN ASIDE: WHEN THE WATSONS WENT TO BIRMINGHAM, BELIEVE ME THE CONTEXT WAS A POWERFUL POLITICAL MOMENT.

THERE IS A LARGER SOCIETAL CONTEXT FOR WHAT I'VE BEEN CALLING SELF-IMPOSED CENSORSHIP IN THE MEDIA.

WHEN GOVERNMENTS, FEDERAL AND STATE, IMPOSE RESTRICTIONS ON ABORTION, THAT'S NOT CENSORSHIP. VOTERS HAVE ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES WHO PROPOSE AND PASS LEGISLATION THOSE VOTERS ALLEGEDLY HAVE WANTED.

ONE GRAND EXCEPTION TO NO GOVERNMENT CENSORSHIP WAS THE MCCARTHY PERIOD.

AND NOW WE SEEM TO BE ENTERING ANOTHER PERIOD OF RESTRICTIONS—NOT YET DIRECTLY ON SPEECH, AS DURING THE MCCARTHY PERIOD -- THAT MAY, OF COURSE, DEPEND ON THE NEXT BIG ELECTION. THE OBJECT OF GOVERNMENT'S WRATH THIS TIME IS ABORTION, AND SO FAR IT'S AN ISSUE OF LIMITING ACCESS. MEMBERS IN U.S. CONGRESS AND STATE LEGISLATORS ARE ON THE ATTACK.

THAT, NOT MY NOVEL, IS THE POLITICS OF ABORTION, AND I'M SURE MOST OF YOU ARE FAMILIAR WITH IT – THE LAWS REQUIRING FORCED COUNSELING SESSIONS. WHAT MUST BE SAID AND WHAT CAN'T BE SAID BY REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS GROUPS AND DOCTORS.

IT IS CONFUSING, AREN'T THESE THE VERY PEOPLE WHO TALK ABOUT KEEPING GOVERNMENT OFF OUR BACKS?

ONE WOULD HAVE TO BE NAÏVE TO THINK THAT ALL THIS HASN'T HAD AN EFFECT ON THE MEDIA WORLD

SOME SILENCING HAS BEEN ACCOMPLISHED BY THE VERY TOOLS WE AS WRITERS USE: WORDS, LANGUAGE.

HOW DID PEOPLE, SO MANY OF WHOM LEAP TO SUPPORT CAPITAL PUNISHMENT, A FEW OF WHOM EVEN KILL ABORTION PROVIDERS, HOW DID THEY BECOME "PRO LIFE"? HOW DID "CHOICE" BECOME CODE FOR MURDER?

ONE THING THAT IS PROBABLY OBVIOUS TO YOU, BUT WAS A REVELATION OF SORTS FOR ME IN WRITING THIS BOOK: THE ANTI-ABORTION PEOPLE HAVE ABORTION PEOPLE SO ON THE RUN, THOSE ADVOCATING A WOMAN'S RIGHT TO CHOOSE CAN'T RUSH FAST ENOUGH TO SAY: NOBODY WANTS AN ABORTION.

PLEASE. IT'S NOT LIKE A WOMAN GETS UP ONE MORNING AND SAYS, "OH, WHAT A LOVELY DAY FOR AN ABORTION." DOES ANYONE WANT ANY UNNECESSARY MEDICAL PROCEDURE -- A TRIPLE BY-PASS OR AN APPENDECTOMY OR AN ABORTION?

IN SHORT, THEY'VE CHANGED THE SUBJECT. IT'S WHAT THEY WANT TO TALK ABOUT – THEIR "AGENDA."

SO , THE BOTTOM LINE: AS YOU MIGHT IMAGINE, IS IT'S DIFFICULT TO PUBLISH A NOVEL FOR TEENS TODAY WHEN A CHARACTER CHOOSES TO HAVE AN ABORTION.

AS I'VE SAID, IT'S NOT ALWAYS EASY TO KNOW WHY SOMEONE DOESN'T WANT YOUR BOOK, UNLESS YOU'RE TOLD DIRECTLY, AS I WAS BY THAT EDITOR. SO I WAS DELIGHTED WHEN ANDREW KARRE AT CAROLRHODA SAID YES. FOR ME HE WAS NOT JUST A FINE EDITOR, BUT A BRAVE ONE IN OUR NEW WORLD. AND SO I'M NOT RUNNING FROM WHAT I'VE WRITTEN. I THINK "IN TROUBLE" IS A GOOD STORY, A STRONG STORY, AND ONE THAT NEEDS TO BE TOLD.