

**Nicole Moore. *The Censor's Library: Uncovering the Lost History of Australia's Banned Books*. St Lucia: U of Queensland Press, 2012, 414 pp.
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Nicole Moore's *The Censor's Library* provides a detailed analysis of censorship in Australia during the twentieth century. She supplies an account of the way literary texts in particular were dealt with under Australian censorship laws. The books affected were for the most part imported and the archive on which much of Moore's research is based contains records and copies of the international publications that came under scrutiny for obscenity, blasphemy and/or sedition. Researchers seeking a detailed account of the history pertaining to key texts will find this book useful as a starting point to their own research. But Moore's book will also be invaluable to other researchers because it supplies an overview of the strategies, responses and consequences of censorship in a range of social and cultural spheres—in particular, determinations affecting the categories of sex and sexuality, deviancy, obscenity, religion and politics, elitism, class structure and historical-social constructions of gender. Further, although the censor's library to which the title refers contains books banned by Customs, Moore addresses domestic censorship at the state level and provides some interesting insights about the effects of what she terms overlapping regimes of censorship. Because this is such a detailed and lengthy text, the effect of these regimes will form the focus of my review.

The book's title refers to the catalogued publications 'removed from readers, sellers and importers' (x) over roughly the first 70 years of the twentieth century. It is not in actual fact a library, but has always functioned as a repository and more recently as an archive. By naming it a library—and the censor's library, at that—Moore is speaking to the loss that censorship effectively represents. Just as the empty columns of a newspaper convey the effect of censorship in visual terms (160), *The Censor's Library* is an attempt to represent the absence of those texts that were withheld from circulation early in their publication history and in many cases for several years or decades thereafter (340). In these terms, the title is demonstrative of the author's critical stance, which argues that the censorship of literature in Australia during the last century was exaggerated in its impact because it was performed by various bodies at federal and state level. These bodies included: local police responding to the directives of state authority (usually ministerial) or in the administration of laws relating to obscenity, the federal government (via Customs, for the most part), and the state and federal legislature through the passing of laws that were then processed through state and federal courts. Significantly, the denomination of the censor's library coalesces these diverse authorities, issues and decisions, which the author acknowledges under the term 'regimes of censorship', and presents the end result of these decisions as functioning unilaterally, as though the universal object of these various bodies presented a coherent negative outcome in respect to a responsibility that was abstractly the purview of 'government'—this 'responsibility' being the restriction of reading material deemed obscene, blasphemous or seditious.

It is, for this reason, rather sensational as titles go. The subject of censorship is understandably offensive in its own right wherever it functions paternalistically, as it arguably can only do in the case of literary censorship. However, to couch it in these terms is to create the kind of phantasm (153) that Moore protests against when she reviews the practices of the Literature Censorship Board—the main body whose authority and decisions are most relevant to key elements of her argument concerning the history of literary censorship in Australia and the construction of a reading public. I am against looking for

bogeymen when the real culprits are ill-defined beliefs and assumptions: so often in life, it is not what you have actually done that matters but what people think you have done. Censorship reflects this unstated principle at work most invidiously. The definition of obscenity ‘as having a tendency “to deprave or corrupt those whose minds are open to such immoral influences, and into whose hands a publication of this sort may fall”’ (10), imputes a guilty intention without making intentionality openly relevant. Nonetheless, and based on my reading of Moore’s careful and detailed history I would argue that, since the decision in the case of *Hicklin* (1868), from which this definition comes, censors and those effectively given the authority to censor have invariably got their moral fibre in a knot because a text’s tendency apparently derives from its author’s intention. Yet, without ever looking into the question of authorial intent—and this supplies the censorship regimes with the winning hand, if they play their cards right—the censor looks to the reader in determining the issue of guilt.

It is in this aspect of her argument that Moore excels, for she identifies a range of ‘readers’ for whom the censors read. Moore lists six types of reader: the ‘responsible’ reader—an elite category of readers very like the censors themselves; women readers, who ‘needed’ the protection of censorship; minor readers, referring to specialist readers professionally concerned with issues like identity formation (psychologists and medical professionals, for example); the ‘sexually unstable’ reader, who might lapse into ‘deviancy’ (which included homosexuality) if allowed to read certain texts; the popular reader (generally the working-class reader) who needed the protection of censorship because *his* critical skills were presumed inferior (I say, ‘his’, because women’s reading skills were already deemed inadequate if we accept Moore’s second category); and the deviant reader, who was not in need of protection but was someone from whom society needed to be protected (342-343). (I must admit, I am tempted to include the censored author in this last category on the basis that s/he embodies, in the censor’s mind at least, the kind of offensive behaviour from which society must be preserved.)

While these categories of readers may or may not have been stable entities, Moore’s argument reveals the flaw in censorship as a critical process: that an author is judged for what others think in response to what they do, or have done, in producing a text; and, more perversely, that what others think is to be presumed rather than canvassed in any meaningful way. The reading public, with all its inadequacies, cannot be called upon for its opinion if it is to be protected from obscenity. Censorship as a process necessarily presumes guilt until proven otherwise. Rather than looking to the effects of certain kinds of reading on different populations, censorship is at liberty to presume the worst. This presumption of course becomes ‘necessary’ precisely because it is not possible to identify the ‘harmful’ effects of reading on a social phantasm like the ‘sexually unstable’ reader; or, for that matter, the woman reader, who is, after all, a more complexly rendered social phantasm whose abilities, aptitudes and shortcomings have been composed according to similarly presumptive strategies of social formation. What this reveals of this imagined scenario is that the threat to society comes from society itself (212). The reading public is latently irresponsible, immoral and dangerous. This is no doubt the reason why many texts remained banned for decades. The presumption of a text’s ability to corrupt cannot be easily quashed while the reading public is characterised as corruptible.

On the whole, *The Censor's Library* offers a thoughtful analysis and account of censorship in Australia. Moore’s book documents the ways in which Australian society has been ‘protected’ from the firebrand that might ignite the bonfire of moral infirmity and corruptibility that censorship presumes. In the early part of the twentieth century these dangers predictably came from without, which accounts for the dominant role of Customs in censorship. Australian censorship was among the ‘worst’ in the world (5) and Moore argues

that this is possibly a consequence of its relationship to Britain as a former colony and its position in relation to other western nations. Australia's size and relative infancy as a nation meant that the majority of texts came from outside its borders. Since judgments had already been made about the obscenity of these texts where this was in issue, one might expect that they would be allowed entry based on that external authority alone. However, with the authority to censor already in place and patrolling Australia's borders, and needing to justify its existence in these terms, the censorship of literature that had passed censorship elsewhere resulted in a kind of double jeopardy effect, further intensified by the concentrated attention on questions of obscenity and the corruptibility of the reading public. The effect of multiple regimes of censorship within Australia's borders complicated this process of scrutiny even further.

What becomes clear is that the censorship of censorship enabled this state of affairs to continue for some years; but once the practice was publicly acknowledged in the late 1950s, and through to the 1970s when the censorship of literature ostensibly ended, the reading public revealed its capacity for critical reflection and judgment. We were not the nation of wowers that our regimes of censorship had determined us to be. Moore sees the censor's library as a negative history of a nation's knowledge, 'demonstrating what has been kept' from the Australian reading public (340). I would argue that this archive stands as a record of a set of mistaken beliefs about Australian society and Australian readers in particular. If it is a negative history, it is a history of what we were not.

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