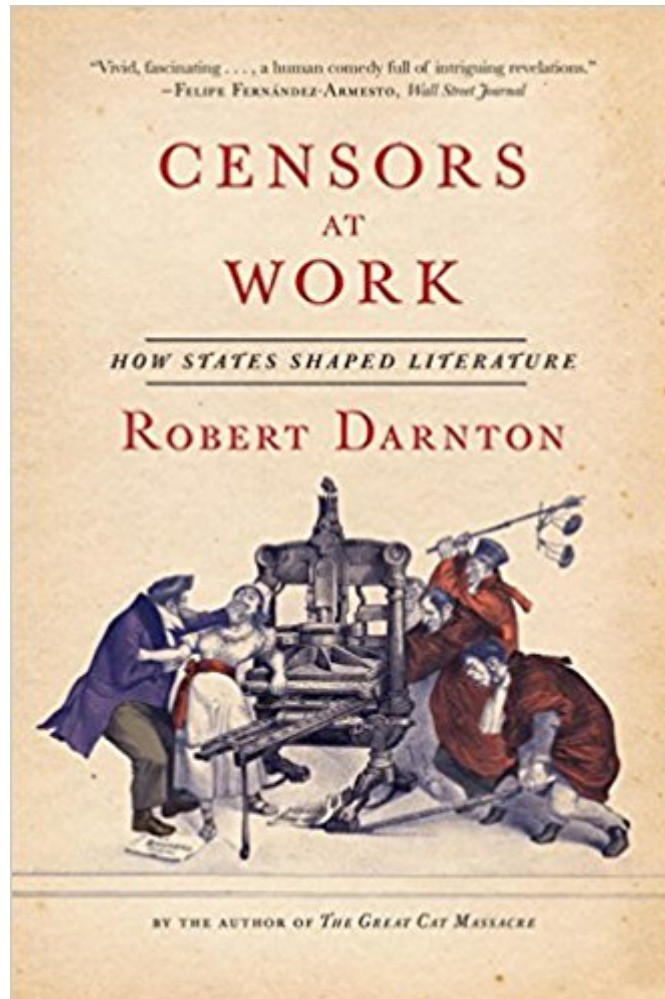


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Censors At Work: How States Shaped Literature



Synopsis

â œSplendid. . . . [Darnton gives] us vivid, hard-won detail, illuminating narrative, and subtle, original insight.â •â •Timothy Garton Ash, New York Review of Books With his uncanny ability to spark life in the past, Robert Darnton re-creates three historical worlds in which censorship shaped literary expression in distinctive ways. In eighteenth-century France, censors, authors, and booksellers collaborated in making literature by navigating the intricate culture of royal privilege. Even as the king's censors outlawed works by Voltaire, Rousseau, and other celebrated Enlightenment writers, the head censor himself incubated Diderot's great Encyclopedie by hiding the banned project's papers in his Paris townhouse. Relationships at court trumped principle in the Old Regime. Shaken by the Sepoy uprising in 1857, the British Raj undertook a vast surveillance of every aspect of Indian life, including its literary output. Years later the outrage stirred by the British partition of Bengal led the Raj to put this knowledge to use. Seeking to suppress Indian publications that it deemed seditious, the British held hearings in which literary criticism led to prison sentences. Their efforts to meld imperial power and liberal principle fed a growing Indian opposition. In Communist East Germany, censorship was a component of the party program to engineer society. Behind the unmarked office doors of Ninety Clara-Zetkin Street in East Berlin, censors developed annual plans for literature in negotiation with high party officials and prominent writers. A system so pervasive that it lodged inside the authors' heads as self-censorship, it left visible scars in the nation's literature. By rooting censorship in the particulars of history, Darnton's revealing study enables us to think more clearly about efforts to control expression past and present. 12 illustrations

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Customer Reviews

The standard story of how censorship works is that censors are stupid and simple minded and are easily fooled by authors who out maneuver them by concealing their criticism. In this wonderful book, Robert Darnton looks at the inner workings of the bureaucracy of censorship by three case studies: France during the Age of enlightenment, India under British rule and the German Democratic Republic. Surprisingly, Darnton finds that a large part of the censor's work are remarkably similar to what editors in publishing houses do. Censors, even in pre-revolutionary France, used to have a high level of knowledge of the subject and sometimes great literary taste of the books they were vetting. The censors were quite often hard working. Obviously they were true believers of the regimes they were serving. They wouldn't carry on their job without believing that they improved both literature and society by stamping out subversive ideas. Darnton sheds light on the constant battles the censors had to fight with the executive power on one front and authors and publishers on the other. The censorship system reached its most advanced stage in the German Democratic Republic, where each level in the state owned culture and publishing industry exercised its own policy while carefully subjecting to limitations imposed by their superiors. The bottom line is that state run censorship systems are more lot more complicated than some unsophisticated clerks spilling red ink on manuscripts or banning them altogether. The book's strength is Darnton's enormous expertise in 18th century French literary history, and his first hand experience from the fall of GDR and the opening of GDR's archives. I didn't get a totally new view of literary censorship (then I would give it 5 stars) but it was well researched full of amusing small stories from the archives shedding light on the censors clandestine work.

Robert Darnton's works should be on every scholars shelf and cited often.

Great book.

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