

How Writing a Novel Can Get You Fired ... in London

A Publisher's Field Notes

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Do you remember what happened to Marzieh Rasouli? Or to Osip Mandel'shtam and Joseph Brodsky? Let me remind you: Rasouli, a journalist, was recently sentenced to fifty lashes and two years in prison for allegedly "spreading propaganda against the system," Mandel'shtam was sent to the Gulag for writing poetry, and Brodsky was incarcerated and exiled for social parasitism. Yes, these things do happen, we know only too well - in places like Iran and Russia - but certainly not in our very midst, or do they? You be the judge.

We recently published the debut novel of London-based author Stephen Grant, *A Moment More Sublime*. Inspired by real-life events (which novel isn't?) involving Richmond upon Thames College, London, where the author has, until recently, taught philosophy and been an elected representative of the University and Colleges Union, *A Moment More Sublime* is the fictional story of a London-based philosophy teacher, who finds himself unexpectedly embroiled in his union's struggle against a corrupt school administration and its plans to cut jobs under the pretense of modernization and fiscal austerity, just as he and his partner are getting ready to buy a home and start a family ...

No sooner had the novel been published than the author found himself caught up in the maelstrom of a totalitarian nightmare: his employer immediately initiated disciplinary proceedings against him, ostensibly, with a view to summarily dismissing him for "Gross Misconduct," which allegedly consisted in "failing to obtain appropriate permission in relation to the publication ... before entering into any agreement with the publisher," breaching the "legal limits" of "the right to 'express one's opinion'," and, more generally, not "abid[ing] by common law" in writing and publishing a novel that presumably brings Richmond upon Thames College "into disrepute."

During one of the "Investigative Meetings" conducted by officer Yvonne G., the college's head of HR, our author was asked: "... would you say ... that the reason you did not seek permission prior to the publication of the book was because you knew if you had you would not have received the College's permission?"

The college's frivolous accusation against our author of acting illegally and against common law, as well as the preposterous stipulation that an author seek his teaching institution's permission to publish creative work (or any kind of work, for that matter) aside (on the evidence contained in the college's investigative report, by the way, this stipulation was not part of our author's employment contract) - the claim that *A Moment More Sublime* allegedly brings "the College into disrepute" bears further scrutiny, since it constitutes the linchpin in the college's case against our author.

Reading the novel squarely and willfully as a more or less exact mirror of reality - something that wouldn't even fly in a 100-level Introduction to Literature course - officer G. took the naive stance, throughout the investigation, that certain depictions and characters in the novel could be directly correlated with, and consequently reflected poorly on, the college. Thus, to give only two examples: At one point, officer G. highlighted our author's ostensible lack of "respect for other colleagues" bespoken by the "bizarre physical attributes" ascribed to some of the novel's fictional characters. The passage explicitly referred to by officer G. is set in the novel's fictional college's IT support center, where the protagonist "is suddenly reminded of the bizarre physical aspect of its inhabitants. Three of the technicians are shaped like enormous footballs with smaller balls sitting on top. The fourth is a bearded, longhaired, stick-like creature who looks as if he has arrived on twenty-first-century Earth from *Planet of the Apes* to find himself in a Texan fat camp. At the far end sits Tony, roundest of them all." At another point in the investigation, officer G. averred that because the fictional college is situated close to a playing field (which college isn't?) and has a parking lot next to it (which college doesn't?), readers will invariably be lead to identify the novel's setting with the real Richmond upon Thames College. Here is officer G.'s summary of her "geopolitical" argument: "Stephen was asked about a particular passage in the book which refers to the location of the fictional College being a couple of hundred yards from the RFU (Rugby Football Union) stadium and how the RFU uses the College car park on match days. RuTC allows the usage of its car park on rugby match days. This provides a direct reference to the College's location and an association to RuTC. The association could lead the reader to conclude the book was written about RuTC and could potentially be damaging to the College."

In light of these and similar 'findings', officer G. summarily demanded that our author "arrange for (1) the removal of any advertisement of the publication from the Internet ... (2) notify the publisher to cease sales and remove it from any advertisement by the publisher [and] refrain from any conduct which seeks to sell or publish the novel more widely ..."

Now, purely for the record: inspired by real-life events that involved Richmond upon Thames College though it may be, nowhere does the novel mention Richmond upon Thames College or any of its employees, and nothing in the novel suggests that it is 'about' matters concerning Richmond upon

Thames College (which it is avowedly not, being about ongoing things at the fictional Sandford College). Even knowing that the author has taught at Richmond upon Thames College by no means suggests that the novel ought to be read as a roman-à-clef about Richmond upon Thames College. Only if you happen to know both the novel *and* Richmond upon Thames College does the alleged correlation become a tempting (if essentially untenable) possibility - but only in the so inclined, naive reader's mind (and not in the novel as such) - the same reader's who would also entertain the notion that Nabokov was a lecher and pedophile on the basis of *Lolita*, that Shakespeare was morose and potentially suicidal on the basis of *Hamlet*, and that Jeffrey Eugenides is gender-troubled and marriage-wary on the basis of *Middlesex* and *The Marriage Plot*, respectively.

Far more troubling, however, than the theoretical question of whether officer G. has a point or not (as any English teacher will tell you, she commits the gravest kind of category mistake in not accepting the fundamental premise of fiction, namely, the suspension of language's referential function) is Richmond upon Thames College's frivolous abuse of power in regard to a novel and its author - at the heart of a Western democracy, in 2014! - and what it might mean for authors and publishers more generally, should the College's actions go unremediated. After all, Richmond upon Thames College wished to extend its dictatorial reach to the publisher as well in mandating that we cease selling and promoting *A Moment More Sublime*.

It seems to me that what needs to be done is obvious: actions such as Richmond upon Thames College's against our author, his novel, and its publisher must be fought tooth and nail in the name of the core freedoms that subtend our Western democracies: in his case, those of speech and expression. As our author's case makes abundantly clear: these freedoms must not be taken for granted, they are not givens, their preservation and implementation is ever in need of our efforts and vigilance. And that is why we need authors, who in turn need publishers to be heard.

And while Stephen Grant's situation may objectively not be as dire as Rasouli's, Mandel'shtam's, Brodsky's and many others' in those faraway lands of dictatorial wantonness, essentially speaking it is the same: he has been willfully punished for exercising his right to free speech. (Ironically, as I found out when I wrote to PEN International headquarters in London in this matter, authors like Stephen Grant fall through the cracks of PEN's vigilance, which tends to train its gaze precisely on those "faraway lands ...," overlooking abuses of authors in their own backyard in the process.)

Neither our author nor we, his publishers, expected all this when we first embarked on the journey of turning a manuscript into a book. But in the process we have certainly been reminded of what noble and

necessary endeavors writing and publishing are at their core, insofar as they always involve the risk - which they must take - of falling foul of, and thus showing up, the powers that be.