

Jan Truss: An interview

Marie Davis

CCL editor Marie Davis interviewed Jan Truss, author of prize-winning novels such as *Bird at the window*, *Jasmin*, and *Summer goes riding*.



The full interview will appear in an upcoming issue; for this special issue on censorship we have excerpted a relevant section.

DAVIS: Since this issue of *CCL* focuses on censorship, perhaps we could begin with your views on that topic. A lot of your work, because its subject is young adults, will be considered by teachers for classroom instruction.

TRUSS: I have learned that you can easily offend parents, teachers, and librarians. One librarian said she couldn't possibly put *Summer goes riding* on the grade 6 bookshelf because I had written about horse turds. In *Cornelius Dragon* a young man in the play is at *breaking point*—he's at the end of his line—and he cries out "Shit!" I talked to a university class who were doing this play and I was asked by one very serious young man if I approved of bad language for adolescents. I said, "I have to know if it's appropriate. I don't think I advocate bad language." "Well," he said, "you use a bad word; I could *not* have my students say this." I said, "Well, what word is it?" And he said "s.h.i.t." And I said, "Oh, I thought that was rather mild for him; he's at the end of his line. I thought really he would say something stronger." "Well," he said, "I could not have that word said in a classroom of mine. . . would you let me change it?" So I said, "Why don't you have him say, 'Oh, poop!'" "Oh," he said, "would that be all right with you?" He'd missed the point. There was no concern about rightness or the dignity of the young man's expression. A number of students afterward agreed with him—these were third and fourth year students.

These views cannot go together with art and literature. Think of what was done to Margaret Laurence.

DAVIS: You mean what happened to Margaret Laurence's work in some Canadian high schools?

TRUSS: Yes, I think it killed her. That was the nail in her coffin. I still think Laurence's *The diviners* is a diamond. It's superb: warm, sympathetic, real, true

but not obvious, and I think it will last.

We have to fight for art. We have to stay open to the possibility of re-defining. Art really surprises us. If we're not open we may miss something. I might have missed *Catcher in the rye* because of my initial prejudice against the bad language and the jerky sentences. The suitability of that expression was absolutely devastating to someone expecting something written with dignity. I remember starting *Catcher in the rye* so many times, each time thinking, "Who wants to read this junk?" And then one day I went home from school with a cold, and it was there by my bed so I read it. I read it with patience and I read it to the end. And I knew that I had to rethink. I now define dignity as rightness, unity of subject matter, tone, intention, and character. And I now think *Catcher in the rye* is one of the most dignified and significant statements about a young man trying to live with hope and decency. I might have denied that novel to thousands of students who came after. What a loss it would have been! For thousands of people that loss was real: it was banned. I felt that I had to teach it; and I did.

At the same time that Salman Rushdie was fighting for his rights, the teacher up the road from us in the local school was in terrible trouble for teaching the Greek myths. She was as powerless in the community as Salman Rushdie is against his detractors. When society says you can't teach about other gods, even the Greek myths, it's ignorance, but it's powerful.

DAVIS: Does the writer have a social function, say, to challenge and question orthodoxy?

TRUSS: Absolutely, as a teacher does. And here and there there is a teacher who has fire in her, who has understanding, who is literary. I went into a junior high school in Saskatoon where a class had obviously taken up *Red*. I had this tremendously sympathetic audience—all these young men *leaning* into me. I thought "What wonderful students," and then I met their teacher, a rich scholarly woman who was a flame. Here and there it happens.

DAVIS: How did working as a teacher with children and adolescents influence your writing?

TRUSS: I think I was a good teacher and never treated young people with disrespect by presupposing what they'd be interested in. In high school, at the end of every day we put up our feet and read to each other. I can remember the year we discovered *The L-shaped room*, when the high school girls read through their recesses, and I remember the guy who'd never read anything and then discovered *Three against the wilderness* and introduced it to us. And I remember all the years when *Catcher in the rye* awoke wonder and passion and sympathy in high-school boys. The vision I have of teaching is not the accumulation of facts, it's designing the world for the next 20 years ahead.

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