

ROGER ROSENBLATT

ROGER ROSENBLATT is a columnist for *Time* magazine and appears regularly on PBS's *Newshour with Jim Lehrer*. He was born in 1940 in New York City and received a PhD from Harvard University. He has been a journalist and commentator most of his career, winning a Peabody, an Emmy, and two George Polk awards for his reflections on culture and politics. *Children of War* (1983), about children growing up in war zones around the world, won the Robert F. Kennedy prize. Rosenblatt's other nonfiction works include *Witness: The World Since Hiroshima* (1985), *Life Itself: Abortion in the American Mind* (1992), and *Anything Can Happen: Notes on My Inadequate Life and Yours* (2003). His most recent book is a novel, *Lapham Rising* (2006).

We Are Free to Be You, Me, Stupid, and Dead

This essay is the second chapter and the second reason in *Where We Stand: Thirty Reasons for Loving Our Country* (2002). (Some of the other reasons are “We Don’t Stop the Presses” and “We Shame Monsters.”) Here Rosenblatt champions the freedom of speech guaranteed by the First Amendment to the US Constitution. To show the courage of the Founding Fathers—the men who drafted the Constitution—he gives examples of both outrageous expression and outrageous attempts to stifle expression.

Everyone loves free expression as long as it isn’t exercised. Several years ago, Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf, a basketball player for the Denver Nuggets, refused to stand up for the playing of the national anthem because of personal religious convictions. The National Basketball Association greeted his decision by suspending him from the league until someone suggested that the Founding Fathers had actually meant it when they allowed someone to do something that would outrage the rest of us. 1

Similarly, major league baseball suspended John Rocker, the famous nut-case relief pitcher for the Atlanta Braves, when Rocker said that he did not want to ride New York City’s Number 7 subway with all those single moms, queers, and illegal aliens. The court did not interfere, perhaps because the Constitution only states that government has no right to prevent free expression; it grants no affirmative licenses. I don’t really get the difference between the two cases, but I know that Rocker had a perfect, or rather imperfect, right to sound like a jackass. 2

The rights of jackasses are more than a national staple. The strange beauty of American freedom is that it is ungovernable, that it always runs 3

slightly ahead of human temperament. You think you know what you will tolerate. A man on a soapbox speaks out for China. Fine. An editorial calls for sympathy with the Taliban. (Gulp) okay. But then a bunch of Nazis want to march around Skokie, Illinois, or Harlem, and, hold on a minute! And what the hell is this? An art exhibit called “African-American Flag” in New Jersey. Or this? An exhibit in the Phoenix Art Museum called “What Is the Proper Way to Display the US Flag?”

Now that one was a doozie. The exhibit required observers to walk across an American flag on the floor to get to what was displayed on a wall. “That’s my flag, and I’m going to defend it,” said a visitor to the museum as he tried to take the flag from the floor. “No son of a bitch is going to do that.”

The thing that I like best about sons of bitches doing that and worse, as long as they do not cry “fire” in a crowded flag, is (a) it enhances my appreciation of the wild courage of the Founders, and (b) it expands my mind, which could use some expanding. Freedom is like a legal drug. *How far will we go?* is not a rhetorical question here. Another exhibit in Chicago showed a flag with the word “think” where the stars should have been. Think. I hate it when that happens.

You think you know how far freedom will go in America, and then you meet another jackass. In the 1990s, I wrote a story for the *New York Times Magazine* about the Philip Morris company¹ called “How Do They Live with Themselves?” The answer to that question, which came from the company executives I interviewed, turned out to be “Quite comfortably, thanks.” The reason that their consciences did not seem to bother them about manufacturing an addictive lethal product was that their customers were engaging in the blessed American activity of freedom of choice. They were right—at least until new laws or lawsuits would prove them wrong. People technically had the choice of becoming addicted to cigarettes or not. I doubt that any of the Philip Morris people would ever step on the flag.

Since free is the way people’s minds were made to be, it has been instructive for me to spend time in places where freedom was limited. In the Soviet Union,² it was fascinating to see how many ways the workers of the world managed to squeeze free thought through the cracks of their utopian cells: the secret publication of books, the pirated music, the tricky subversive lines of poetry read at vast gatherings of tens of thousands. And the below-the-surface comedy. I was checking out of a hotel in Tbilisi. Checking out of Russian hotels was always a feat—they didn’t have dollars, they didn’t have

¹The largest manufacturer of tobacco products.—EDS.

²The former Communist federation of Russia and fourteen other republics.—EDS.

rubles, no one had ever checked out before. The clerk at the desk spoke little English, and she wanted to tell me that another, more fluent, clerk would be along shortly. “Mr. Rosenblatt,” she said. “Would you mind coming back in fifteen years?” We both exploded in laughter because we knew it was remotely possible.

The mind expands, the mind settles, then is shaken up, resists, and expands again. One of the great ongoing stupidities of the country are school boards and library committees that ban certain books they deem dangerous. On the positive side, though, the folks who do the banning offer some delightful defenses for their decisions. The three literary works most frequently banned in our country are *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, and *The Great Gatsby*.³ The reason school boards offer for banning *Macbeth* is that the play promotes witchcraft. Perhaps it does. One doesn’t think of *Macbeth* as promoting things, but if it did, witchcraft would be it. They don’t say why they want to ban *King Lear*. Promotes ingratitude, I suppose. I assume that *The Great Gatsby* promotes Long Island.

Sometimes the reasons offered for censoring certain works are obscure, thus intriguing. In Georgia, the Harry Potter books were recently burned because they were said to encourage kids to want to be sorcerers. In Spokane, Washington, they wanted to remove the children’s picture book *Where’s Waldo?* from the elementary school library. People objected to *Where’s Waldo?*, they said, because it contains “explicit subject matter.” A plea for surrealism, I imagine. In Springfield, Virginia, they banned a book called *Hitler’s Hang-Ups* because it offered “explicit sexual details about Hitler’s life.” Given the other tendencies of Hitler’s life, I should think the sexual details would be relatively acceptable. And, in the town of Astoria, Oregon, a book called *Wait Till Helen Comes* was challenged in an elementary school for giving “a morbid portrayal of death.” Now they’ve gone too far.

For a reading quiz, sources on Roger Rosenblatt, and annotated links to further readings on freedom of speech, visit bedfordstmartins.com/thebedfordreader.

³*Macbeth* and *King Lear* are tragedies by William Shakespeare (1564–1616). *The Great Gatsby* is a novel by F. Scott Fitzgerald (1896–1940), set on Long Island, New York.—EDS.

Journal Writing

Rosenblatt draws on some particularly controversial examples to illustrate his point about free speech. Which of these examples do you react to most strongly? Why? In your journal, explore your response to that example, explaining whether you basically agree or disagree with a person's right to free speech in that situation. (To take your journal writing further, see "From Journal to Essay" on the facing page.)

Questions on Meaning

1. What GENERALIZATION, or THESIS, governs Rosenblatt's choice of examples? Where does he state it most directly?
2. How do the examples of censorship in paragraphs 8–9 relate to Rosenblatt's thesis?
3. Is Rosenblatt suggesting that he agrees with the views of people such as John Rucker (par. 2) or the executives at Philip Morris (6)? How do these examples relate to Rosenblatt's PURPOSE in this essay?
4. Rosenblatt says that he likes the free expression of people "as long as they do not cry 'fire' in a crowded flag" (par. 5). What does he mean by this strange phrase?

Questions on Writing Strategy

1. Based on the content of this essay, how would you describe Rosenblatt's intended AUDIENCE?
2. In most of his essay Rosenblatt writes in the first PERSON (*I*). However, in paragraphs 3 and 6, he briefly switches to the second person (*you*). What is the EFFECT of this tactic?
3. How are the examples in paragraph 3 organized? What point is Rosenblatt making here?
4. In paragraph 9 Rosenblatt offers four examples of books that have caused controversy around the country. How does he use sentence variety to make the paragraph interesting to read?
5. **OTHER METHODS** How does Rosenblatt use COMPARISON AND CONTRAST in paragraphs 1 and 2? What point is he making with this comparison?

Questions on Language

1. Find three instances of Rosenblatt's SARCASM. What is the effect of this sarcasm?
2. Rosenblatt calls people "jackasses" several times throughout the essay. What is his point in using this derogatory term?
3. Look up any of the following words you don't already know: temperament, soapbox (par. 3); doozie (4); rhetorical question (5); utopian, subversive, feat, rubles (7); deem (8); explicit, surrealism, morbid (9).

Suggestions for Writing

1. **FROM JOURNAL TO ESSAY** Expand your journal entry into an essay arguing either for or against the right to free speech in one of the situations that Rosenblatt describes. You may need to do some library or Internet research to back up your argument.
2. Do some research on an issue related to free speech on campus. For example: Should schools adopt codes banning speech that might offend any group based on race, gender, ethnicity, religion, or sexual orientation? Should administrators have control over what students publish in school newspapers? What is the proposed Academic Bill of Rights, and how would its enactment affect the exchange of ideas on campuses? Write an essay in which you give background information on the issue and support your own view in a well-reasoned ARGUMENT.
3. In paragraph 5 Rosenblatt explains that he supports freedom of speech because “it expands my mind, which could use some expanding.” When has your mind been expanded by opening yourself up to a new experience or to a view that was different from your own? Perhaps you attended a religious service with a friend, visited another country, took a course with an instructor whose political views you disagreed with, or learned something interesting from a book you thought you would hate. What did you gain from the experience? Write an essay about the importance of expanding your mind, using concrete examples (or a single extended example) to support your point.
4. **CRITICAL WRITING** Free speech made international headlines in 2006 when a Danish newspaper published twelve editorial cartoons depicting the Islamic prophet Muhammad. The cartoons, which many people viewed as offensive, sparked protests and even violent riots around world. Research the controversy so that you understand the views for and against publication of the cartoons. In an essay, briefly SUMMARIZE the controversy, and then ANALYZE how you think Rosenblatt might have responded to it. How could he have used the incident as an additional example in his essay? Use PARAPHRASES and QUOTATIONS from the essay to support your point.
5. **CONNECTIONS** In “The Meanings of a Word” (p. 488), Gloria Naylor explains how African Americans redefined a demeaning term and gained power by confronting racist language head-on. Drawing on both Naylor’s and Rosenblatt’s essays as EVIDENCE, argue against a hypothetical law banning people from using derogatory labels. What benefits come from allowing people to speak their minds, even when their words might be hurtful?

Roger Rosenblatt on Writing

Visiting the University of Nebraska at Lincoln, Rosenblatt made a speech titled “Why Write About the World? The Moral Function of Storytelling.” In an interview before the speech, Jim Ballard asked Rosenblatt to summarize what he’d be talking about.

As a reporter you see so much of the destruction of the world and so many difficult things to write about. In recent years I've been in Sudan, in Rwanda, and before that in Cambodia, Northern Ireland, Israel, Beirut, and so forth. And after a while you ask yourself, "Why write about it? What good does it do to communicate?" If you don't learn to justify that, then I think you're in trouble professionally, maybe even personally.

Why write? Why tell a story? If you see cyclical patterns of really terrible and self-destructive things in the world, and you know writing about them isn't going to change the pattern, why do it? I came to the conclusion that it's almost a biological instinct. We do it because we're born to tell each other stories. That's the way we make a connection not just with one another in the present, but among generations. We're born storytellers, and we want to get one another's attention. We have something to say. I suppose ultimately the story we have to tell is the story of ourselves, of our lives.

For Discussion

1. What does Rosenblatt say is the purpose of writing if it isn't to change things? Do you agree with him?
2. When have you experienced the urge to write? Consider any situation from texting a friend to writing an essay about an event in your life to writing a research paper. What motivated you? What did you accomplish?