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Censorship of Cleis Press Authors — in 2004?!?

Tristan Taormino, Violet Blue Singled Out

The work of two Cleis Press authors was challenged in separate incidents recently — in one case resulting in the removal of a book from the open stacks of a public library, and in the other, resulting in accusations against a state university of using taxpayers' funds to "promote pornography and anal sex."

At the University of North Carolina, a conservative faculty member and columnist attacked the university administration for their sponsorship of a February 2004 lecture by Tristan Taormino entitled "Sexploration." In his online column, "Welcome to UNC Gomorrah," Associate Professor Mike Adams accused the university of funding "pornographic speech while suppressing the speech of conservatives." Student groups responded by mounting an effort to raise funds to bring Taormino back to campus.

In Pennsylvania, a Delaware County library patron protested the library's inclusion of *The Ultimate Guide to Fellatio* by Violet Blue, complaining to state legislators that the local library had become "the porn capital of Delaware and Chester counties." While the six other sex books listed in the patron's complaint were eventually returned to the stacks, Blue's guide was relegated to a spot behind the reference desk where patrons would have to ask for it by name.

Tristan Taormino, University of North Carolina-Greensboro

In the University of North Carolina-Greensboro (UNCG) incident, writer, columnist, and sex educator Tristan Taormino presented a lecture on sexual health and pleasure as part of the University's "Sexual Responsibility Week" in February. Mike Adams, a conservative associate professor from UNC-Wilmington, learned of Ms. Taormino's visit a month after it occurred, and in his online column attacked her credibility and chastised the University for inviting a her to speak at UNCG. "North Carolina taxpayers actually paid to promote pornography and anal sex in the name of 'wellness' and 'diversity,'" said the professor. (In fact, the money for Taormino's appearance came not from tax dollars, but from student activities fees, which students pay annually for a wide range of cultural events.)

Taormino says her lecture focuses on sexual health and pleasure and includes no explicit visual material. "Our culture is saturated with sex, but it's all image, no information," she says. "I try to present information — about sexual anatomy, communication, and safer sex — that young people may not have access to anywhere else." She has given similar talks at 20 colleges to date, and until UNCG there had never been a backlash.

Mr. Adams's criticisms, and the subsequent news coverage it generated, inspired a group of students to invite Taormino back. Unable to secure funding from the University, the students held an off-campus fundraiser to raise money for her appearance. Upon hearing of the lecture and fundraiser, Adam & Eve, the adult retailer based in North Carolina, announced that they will match all funding brought in by the students to make sure Taormino is able to speak at the university. "Once we were given the information behind this upcoming event, we knew we wanted to be a part of it. The opportunity to speak directly to college students about sexuality is important to all of us at Adam & Eve," says Katy Zvolerin, director of public relations for the company. Adam & Eve will host an in-store appearance with Taormino at their Winston-Salem store April 20 and at their Greensboro store the afternoon of April 21. Taormino will speak at the University the evening of April 21.

In addition to her columns in the *Village Voice* and work as a sex educator, Taormino is the author of three books, *The Ultimate Guide to Anal Sex for Women* (Cleis Press), *True Lust* (Cleis Press), and *Down and Dirty Sex Secrets* (Regan Books). Her website is www.puckerup.com.

Violet Blue, Marple Library, Delaware County, Pennsylvania

In Delaware County, Pennsylvania, Jack Whoriskey went to the Marple Library in late 2003 in search of a book on the Atkins diet. Discovering several books on sexuality on a nearby shelf, he borrowed Violet Blue's *The Ultimate Guide to Fellatio* (Cleis Press) and returned the next day to check out six others. Mr. Whoriskey showed the books to the county council, as well as state legislators and a representative of the local Pro-Life Coalition, explaining in the *Delaware County Times* that the books are pornographic and "there is no way they should be in a public library."

At meeting of some 75 residents to brainstorm what to do about the library's seven books on sexuality in January, Mr. Whoriskey declared the Marple Library "the porn capital of Delaware and Chester counties." Others recommended that residents contact their clergy and elected officials, withhold library donations, and organize a peaceful protest against the library.

However, the board of the Marple County Public Library voted unanimously to retain the books. "We feel the books met the criteria we have set for book selection," board president Marcy Abrams noted. But a compromise with the citizens group forced the library to make a tough decision: *The Ultimate Guide to Fellatio* is now kept behind the reference desk — not on the shelf — for patrons who request it. The six other sexuality books are shelved in the browsable stacks.

Author Violet Blue was surprised at the compromise. "The Marple Library will continue to make accurate information about sex available to the people in their community — and that's wonderful. But it's unfortunate, although perhaps not surprising, that a book on oral sex was singled out for removal from the shelves."

Incidents such as this one are by no means unusual. Since 1990, the American Library Association's (ALA) Office for Intellectual Freedom has recorded more than 7,000 book challenges, including 515 in 2002, the last year for which they have complete records. The ALA only counts as a "challenge" a formal, written complaint requesting a book be removed from library shelves or school curriculum. About 75 percent of all challenges are to material in schools or school libraries, and 25 percent are to material in public libraries. However, the Office for Intellectual Freedom estimates that less than one-quarter of challenges are reported and recorded. The American Library Association will celebrate the 23rd annual banned books week September 25–October 2, 2004.

Violet Blue is the author of three books, *The Ultimate Guide to Fellatio*, *The Ultimate Guide to Cunnilingus*, and *The Ultimate Guide to Adult Videos*, and she is editor of *Sweet Life*, *Sweet Life 2*, and *Taboo*, all published by Cleis Press. Her website is www.tinynibbles.com.

Cleis Press co-publisher Frédérique Delacoste said, "Universities and libraries are intended to foster the free exchange of ideas — it's tragic when these sort of challenges occur there."

"Sex educators like Violet Blue and Tristan Taormino are lightning rods for the ire of conservative columnists and community organizers whose strategy is to muster enough shock and moral outrage to stir up publicity for their agenda," says Cleis co-publisher Felice Newman. "We need writers like Violet and Tristan whose courage and openness continues to give us all permission to speak honestly about sex."

Based in San Francisco, Cleis Press has been publishing provocative books on sexuality, along with other subjects, since 1980. Other Cleis authors include Ann Bannon, Gore Vidal, Joan Nestle, Carol Queen, Achy Obejas, Patrick Califia, and Essex Hemphill. Cleis was named Outstanding Independent Press of 1997 and 1999 (Firecracker Alternative Book Awards), and its books and authors have won numerous Lambda Literary Awards.

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