

TETBURY ADVERTISER

Breaking The Code

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"When you're getting flak, it means you're over the target."

1 "The Curious Comfort of Unusual Books" by local author Debbie Young, in April's TETBURY ADVERTISER, described the code for book production brought in during the Second World War to reduce the quantity of paper used in books.

2 Books produced under the Book Production War Economy Standard more than halved paper use, placed more words on a page and reduced the amount of blank white space. The books were printed on thin paper, with light, plain covers. Far from being substandard, however, these wartime editions are faring better than more modern books.

3 [Debbie Young](#) writes fiction set in the Cotswolds, including the "cosy crime" Sophie Sayers Village Mysteries. Debbie's article in the Advertiser explains that the much slimmer books produced under the Book Production War Economy Standard – only about a third as thick as today's paperbacks – are easy on the eye despite the smaller fonts used.

Debbie asks:

"Why don't modern publishers emulate war-time practice to reduce paper use and shipping costs?"

What a great question!

The war scheme, according to a BBC article about the [Book Production War Economy Standard](#), was a voluntary one, with the word "voluntary" meaning the same as it does today - publishers who didn't agree to take part had their - already rationed - paper supply cut further.

In our increasingly eco-aware current society - supposedly - I am wondering - wouldn't a less flamboyant approach to books have a lot of advantages?

4 There's the obvious green benefit, of course. But what about all the *less obvious* benefits?

Going minimalist would attract attention to books and reading – and that's always an excellent thing. By, in effect, speaking softly wouldn't books get noticed more? We are all constantly shouted and yelled at – screens, displays, posters, placards begging us to look at them and notice them. Isn't the solution to the problem of how to get people to stop and notice something, to be calm? To be quiet? To present a simple, plain face – the book cover? To go small?

Doing so would be the visual equivalent of speaking softly – it makes people listen. Yes, we do judge whether we want to read a book by its cover, but what if all we had to go on was the title?

5 It seems to me that books are getting bigger all the time, like mobile phones. But is bigger always better? I'd say not.

My favourite books are relatively slim volumes, although to be fair, I'm a short story person rather than a blockbuster novel fan.

[11.22.63 by Stephen King](#) is the longest novel I have ever read. The book is simply *huge*.

It is a great read, but I'd have preferred it if Mr King [no relation] had pared the story down a tad. There was an incredible amount of detail in the story about the life of Lee Harvey Oswald before Kennedy's assassination, but I have niggling doubts about the need for all that detail.

Was it key to the story? Or was it in the book to support the "lone assassin" theory, which is simply not credible given the massive amount of evidence about Kennedy's shooting – including the idea of a bullet doing zig-zags and U-turns.

6 Debbie explains in her article that the Book Production War Economy Standard only related to the use of materials, not the subject matter of the books. All books were deemed worthy of being published. In this current age of increasing censorship – both explicit and implicit – this idea of publishing freedom – freedom for writers and readers of books – represents a most interesting phase of recent history.

Explicit restrictions on what people can say, write and publish relate to stated issues, such as official secrets, racism and "hate speech" to give a few examples. While many current *explicit* restrictions don't stand up to scrutiny, the *implicit* censorship that is becoming increasingly common nowadays is an even more dangerous form of censorship. I say this, not only because we don't always know which rules we are about to break, so it's almost impossible to avoid breaking them, but because of the increasing programming of our minds that results.

7 What do I mean by programming?
Let's take as an example, a poem that was recently read out in public on St Patrick's Day. Yes – THAT poem. It was written by the Irish rock star, Bono, and read out to a gathering in the US White House by the House Speaker, Nancy Pelosi. The poem was about Ukraine and this is it:

Oh Saint Patrick he drove out the snakes
With his prayers but that's not all it takes.
For the snake symbolizes
An evil that rises
And hides in your heart
As it breaks.

And the evil has risen my friends

From the darkness that lives in some men,
But in sorrow and fear
That's when saints can appear
To drive out those old snakes once again.

And they struggle for us to be free
From the psycho in this human family.
Ireland's sorrow and pain
Is now the Ukraine
And Saint Patrick's name is now Zelenskyy.

The reaction on social media and in the mainstream media to the reading of this limerick has been nothing less than absurd. The Daily Mail's coverage in [War's over. Thanks Bono... U2 front-man is mercilessly mocked over his 'unhinged' poem for Ukraine that was read aloud by Nancy Pelosi on St. Patrick's Day 'as if they'd ended the war'](#) is fairly typical.

Bono's poem has been criticised, to put it mildly. That isn't what bothers me. What bothers me is that there is only one view about this poem. When Nancy Pelosi chose to read this poem, that choice was out of Bono's hands. Despite this fact, people are calling on social media for sanctions to be placed on Bono. Not Pelosi for reading the poem.

Calling for sanctions on Bono is the same as calling for sanctions to be placed on the composer of a piece of music simply because, when the music was played at a gathering, it wasn't received well – at the event or on social media.

It was a poem, for heaven's sake. Who hasn't written a bad poem? If I send one of my bad poems to Nancy Pelosi, it's up to her whether she shares it in public or not.

It's the collective insanity over this poem that is bothering me. And it isn't just social media. The insanity has even reached [Writing Magazine](#), to which I am a long-term subscriber and reader. The magazine published a short article about writers supporting Ukraine. Fine. But Writing Magazine went on to discuss Bono's poem. I say discuss it – *if only*. The article did not *discuss* the poem – it merely *published* it. The article shared the view – *the view* – that the poem, the writing of the poem and the reading of it by Pelosi were beyond the pale – but it didn't say why.

Bono's poem strikes me as perhaps a little ambiguous in its meaning – and perhaps that is the issue here. Could the problem be that, in comparing a certain "leader" to Ireland's patron saint, Bono was making a certain point? A point that cannot be spoken aloud or even thought about – is this the issue? Or is it that the poem refers to a "psycho" and there is uncertainty over who that psycho is? Could it be, in other words, that Bono failed to show clearly that his views are the correct views – the views we are all supposed to hold – the views that Writing Magazine does not make explicit because – perhaps – to do so gives away that *there are other views*? Shock and horror!

The issue with Writing Magazine is particularly important because writers and other artists have long been associated with free speech - and with activism against wrongdoing. Often, they have been in conflict with regimes and governments. Are writers along with other artists and everyone else - now only supposed to have one view? *The view?* The view, by the way, that will not be defined or revealed - because it doesn't need to be - it is, after all, THE VIEW.

Programming of minds works best if things like this are not said - they remain invisible. Who can fight an invisible enemy?

So, did Bono's poem break a code - a code that we are all supposed to be compliant with, but never refer to? Could his poem suggest that Bono is not programmed? Or at least, not fully programmed? I don't know, because nobody is saying what all the fuss is about. Are we all just meant to *know* what all the fuss is about?

I can tell you what the fuss is NOT about. It is NOT about a duff poem. I know that because, if the quality of writing were the issue, the pop music industry would have collapsed by now.

8 Debbie Young quotes a Finnish writer, [Tove Jansson](#) - or rather, Tove's character Moominmamma - as saying:

"At last! Books! Now we'll get by."

As Debbie says, books and reading are ways that people who are living through difficult times - as we are - are sustained. All the time that a society is producing books and people are reading them, there is hope for us all.

I'd just like to add that the same goes for poetry. Even poems that we're *supposed* to disapprove of, for reasons we're *not supposed* to discuss. Especially those poems, in fact. After all, there's an old RAF saying:

"When you're getting flack, it means you're over the target."

CONNECT'S Maxim and Oath

Connect is only interested in finding and sharing the TRUTH.
In search of that TRUTH, we only pose questions - we have no answers.

By: Helen King

Source: Tetbury CONNECT: [Magazine](#)

3 [LINK](#): Debbie Young: author's website

3 [LINK](#): BBC: Book Production War Economy Standard

5 [LINK](#): 11.22.63: novel by Stephen King

7 [LINK](#): Daily Mail: "War's over. Thanks Bono... U2 front-man is mercilessly mocked over his 'unhinged' poem for Ukraine that was read aloud by Nancy Pelosi on St. Patrick's Day 'as if they'd ended the war'"

7 [LINK](#): Writers Online [website for Writing Magazine]

8 [LINK](#): Tove Jansson: author's website

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