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In his “best achievement to date” (Harold Bloom), National Book Award- winner Roger Shattuck gives us a “deeply learned, highly intelligent, and beautifully written” (New York Times) study of human curiosity versus the taboo, from Adam and Eve to the Marquis de Sade to biotechnology research. Index.

Forbidden Knowledge: From Prometheus to Pornography Details

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Stephen says

OK. I am not finished reading it, but here is my take.

The author starts out analyzing a couple of ancient forbidden knowledge myths: Prometheus and the Garden of Eden. The analysis is OK, but I go for Joseph Campbell's any day.

Next we proceed to a couple of modern myths: Frankenstein and Faust. Along the way, a tenuous link is made between the quest for scientific knowledge and sexual promiscuity. I don't know how it happens, but it happens in this section. I always viewed Frankenstein and Faust as cautionary tales against an excess of ambition, not necessarily about the quest for forbidden knowledge. I never viewed either tale as overtly sexual. I guess I missed something.

Then we proceed to *The Princess de Clèves* and Emily Dickinson. I guess the point here is chastity is good? I am not sure. *The Princess de Clèves* reeks of courtly love which is by its nature fake. Emily Dickinson was a slightly bookish and strange individual and not someone to model your life after. Who goes into years long seclusion because their boyfriend dumps them? More to the point: what do these two have anything to do with science or the quest for scientific knowledge? I cannot associate either *"Princess de Clèves"* or Emily Dickinson with scientific thought or research in anyway shape or form. I guess that what the author is trying to get at is that limiting sex and scientific research are both moral choices.

Now comes Robert Oppenheimer and the Human Genome Project. Again, the author is making tenuous associations between the morality of the Manhattan Project and the Human Genome Project. I don't get it. The Manhattan Project was pretty much directly responsible for Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Whether or not you believe that using the bomb on two undefended cities with high civilian populations was morally justifiable or not, I can't see how the Human Genome Project really compares. Somewhere the practice of eugenics by the Himmler and the Nazi's is discussed in a ridiculous manner. I missed the point.

Next we have a critique of Melville's *"Billy Bud"* and *"The Stranger"* by Albert Camus. The point the author is attempting to make (there is always a point) is that empathy can be dangerous. If we try too hard to understand something, we could end sympathizing with it. In the cases cited above, an accidental (or not) murder takes place that is described first by the perpetrator and then in a court setting. Yes I agree with the author here, murder cannot be forgiven even if you understand or sympathize with the person who committed it. I guess he is making a case against relativism, There are absolute rights and wrongs.

Here comes the tour de force. A discussion on the works of the Marquis de Sade. I tend to agree with the author about de Sade. Sexual freedom is OK and all, but a line is crossed when de Sade talks about rape, torture, and murder. OK so de Sade should not be viewed as a literary great or moral philosopher, I get that, but then the author takes a step further and states that the availability of works like de Sade are the direct cause of mass murderers like Ted Bundy. Hold on there. So how would censorship actually improve anything? Bundy was sick and twisted. He would have did what he did even if the Marquis de Sade was completely banned and unavailable.

This book is well written and has some interesting sections so I can't really give it one star, but I have no idea how the author can justify some of his conclusions. This book is best when it sticks to the literary criticism, but goes off track a little when it tries to extend its views into a more general moral system. There are some real leaps in logic that make my brain squirm. After thinking about it over the weekend, I think the thing that

bothers me most about this book is the use of literary examples as "cases" like case studies in a more scientific work. Almost all of the cases are fictional except Robert Oppenheimer, Emily Dickinson, Himmler, the Human Genome Project, and Ted Bundy (there are a couple more minor examples in there too). How do you prove something with fictional cases to back you up? I suppose the author backs this methodology up by stating that artistic accomplishments are more real and everlasting than other types of accomplishments. I don't buy it.

Ck says

Dense and deep, in a way which invigorates the mind. Discusses how Western civilization has allowed & disallowed certain forms of knowledge, a working answer to the question: "Is innocence worth ignorance?", particularly in regards to sexuality and immortality.

Colin says

This is, without a doubt, one of the best works I have ever read on epistemology. Shattuck offers a truly comprehensive view of the history of forbidden knowledge and the reasons it has been considered "forbidden."

Doug says

There's no way one can do justice to this book in a short review. It is a wide-ranging literary and philosophical argument that some knowledge, mostly for Shattuck the writings of the Marquis de Sade and scientific experimentation with the Human Genome Project, should be carefully controlled. Written in 1996, would he find the knowledge of HGP "dangerous" were he still alive today? At its core it is an ethical treatment of the literature and philosophy of experience vs. "the veil," i.e., that is the necessity of approaching knowledge judiciously. It is reasonably accessible though I have never read Goethe's Faust, any of the Marquis de Sade, or several of the other works Shattuck treats. I am familiar with Paradise Lost that he takes for his starting point and major thesis. What he doesn't treat are the advances in astrophysics from 15 years ago, but the book would perhaps be both quickly dated and impenetrable had he done so. As it is, it requires some concentrated thought despite the accessible language so uncommon among professors of comparative literature.

Jamie says

Hmmm...while there was much I thought was intriguing about this book and its premise, at times it seemed a bit more histrionic about some of the worst results of man's quest for knowledge. Though I do have to agree about de Sade's work, it has no particular value to people in general and just celebrates the basest of human drives and revels in the torture and degradation of others in order to achieve sexual fulfillment.

I also have trouble believing that Eichmann set up the Lebensborn program and instituted its practices because he didn't realize the profound moral boundaries he was blundering across. I believe that is entirely too succinct an explanation and way too pat a device. On some level he had realize that to carry on these

genetic experimentation was going to impact the human race at some level.

I hate that people now rely on the fact that evil is in essence, "stupid", and sometimes is just the result of someone not thinking through the results of their particular actions upon other people. I tend to believe that evil is more often a choice made to do what you want and damn the consequences for others.

A warning: The chapter dealing with pornography, most especially the chapter on de Sade, is extremely graphic in nature. There is even a warning at the beginning of the book telling of the inclusion of some materials from de Sade to let parents and educators know that this is a book that should be read by a mature audience.

alec says

Starting reading my first thought was, man... I hope this isn't another conspiracy disguise book written by some conservative 'wannabe' philosopher. Then Roger Shattuck started doing some serious book reviews on a number of brilliant gems like Goethe's Faust, Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, Camus's The Stranger and others. He spoke about the history of skepticism, the first appearance of agnosticism and its growth. It went really dark when he tried to cover some moral dilemmas on Hitler's dream of a pure Aryan race, how Einstein's knowledge drew him to work on the atomic bomb or how contemporary scientists remain at work on the Human Genome Project. He ends with a passionate discussion of sadism's creator himself, Marquis de Sade, drawing the conclusion that it was rationally grotesque the way his 'literature' reputation hyped through time.

My own perception of this book's theme is that one should be willing to accept 'not knowing' as a fact, for certain knowledge is beyond human's nature to understand. A fine piece of literary criticism, worthwhile if not for its philosophical outcome at least for the info within.

M Alan Cox says

Not a bad book, but I couldn't disagree with the stodgy and overly-traditionalist mindset more. It's quite telling that Shattuck much prefers Virgil's Ulysses to Homer's Odysseus.

Chris Craddock says

The Sphinx, the Syrinx, and the Unicorn

There was a warning about chapter VII so I started reading chapter VII about a certain Marquis. Interesting material. The other parts were interesting, too. It covers a lot of writers and philosophers that I haven't read but would like to study. The part I just read was about Thomas Huxley, father of Aldous, who just coined the term "agnostic." Used the word "neologism" to describe new word creation.

I really enjoyed this book but I took my time. Opposite of speed reading. Milton turns out to be a fascinating character who lived in interesting times. I must know more about him. He was Cromwell's press secretary. After the Restoration his life was spared in the general amnesty. Met with Galileo. Was blind while he wrote Paradise Lost. I am interested in hearing more about Milton & historical events he lived through & was a

part of. Puritan revolution, Cromwell, Restoration. The Rump Parliament (good name for a band or something, they could open for Fistful of Assholes). Must investigate further.

Next is a chapter on Faust & Frankenstein. Of Faust story, there were 2 versions by Goethe and also an earlier one by Marlowe. Goethe version too cumbersome for a play, but a tour de force of poetic style. Stunning achievement even if story has a lot of loose threads. Comparing Faust & Frankenstein, and also Don Juan & Don Quixote. All ambitious, grandiose men who were mocked by a servant. Mephistopheles, Sancho Panza, and Catalinón. Frankenstein had no mocking servant, but how about Igor (pronounced Eye-gore)? There is also a mocking servant character in Proust called Françoise. Furthermore, Socrates is a kind of mocking figure in Plato.

Faust is more of a Hamlet than a Prometheus or a Cain. He goes from action and experience to contemplation and pangs of conscience. Roger Shattuck also brings up Nietzsche at this point who has some pertinent things to say about action/experience versus conscience/consciousness. Prometheus made progress but a crime was involved. Cain was cursed, but then was protected against vengeance.

Next chapter talks about an obscure French novel where the heroine is in love with another man, tells her husband, but never acts on her love, even after her husband has died. She does it because by denying love it will increase not diminish, trapped in amber. The book is compared to *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* which is also a French epistolary novel. It's by Pierre Choderlos de Laclos, but in that one Love is denied because of cynicism.

"And you read your Emily Dickinson,
And I my Robert Frost,
And we note our place with bookmarkers
That measure what we've lost.
Like a poem poorly written
We are verses out of rhythm,
Couplets out of rhyme,
In syncopated time
Lost in the dangling conversation
And the superficial sighs,
Are the borders of our lives."

~ Paul Simon, from "The Dangling Conversation"

Emily Dickinson was discussed, and it made me think of this song. She was also someone who denied the physical expression of love.

Crime & Punishment is also mentioned. Did I mention that the Syrinx myth was factored in? In classical mythology, Syrinx (Greek Σϋρινξ) was a nymph and a follower of Artemis, known for her chastity. Pursued by the amorous Greek god Pan, she ran to a river's edge and asked for assistance from the river nymphs. In answer, she was transformed into hollow water reeds that made a haunting sound when blown across."

The next chapter dealt with curiosity in various guises. It summed it all up with Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, the original title of a novella written by the Scottish author Robert Louis Stevenson that was first published in 1886--and published that same year, Beyond Good & Evil by Nietzsche.

Next chapter is about science and technology, especially DNA research and the atomic bomb, and how that knowledge is applied to the real world. Really funny scene at a conference on biohazards of recombinant DNA research. When the lawyers spoke the scientists were horrified that they could be liable. Their horror

was equal to what the public would feel about one of their experiments escaping.

I was thinking about the Syrinx, the Sphinx, and Axe Cop. There was a character on Axe Cop that combined a Lion, a man, and a Cheetah. Axe Cop is written by a 6 Year-old & his brother. His child mind sometimes falls on cultural archetypes. The sphinx has a man's head on a lion's body. Science & Tech?

Really enjoying this book but taking my time. I read a little bit each day, then pause and reflect. Almost finished with a chapter on Science & Technology. Issues raised by mapping the genome project. If chronic disease is found should a fetus be aborted? Should humans interfere with this process, even to make people? What if people file wrongful life suits? Like, what if they question why they were allowed to be born defective? This part questions the HGP (Human Genome Project) and has a complex set of 10 reasons. There is talk of Gregor Mendal, but also an interesting Noble Prize winner who induced mutations in fruit flies with X-Rays. He was from Texas. 3 Ss instead of 3 Rs. Sex, Science, & Socialism. Proposed a genetic enhanced utopia. Brave New World. Also, Nazi experiments to achieve superior, pure blooded, men. This sparked a student rebellion.

Last part of book is a quote by Francis Bacon on the Sphinx and the Unicorn. It deserves further study, as does much of the literature discussed in this book.

In conclusion, this book was awesome and gave me lots of food for thought. Roger Shattuck is extremely well read and poses interesting questions. He ties the material together, places it in context, and clearly espouses his own opinions.

Fleur says

Fascinating book, where the author, using literature, philosophy and science to explore the benefits and consequences of mankind's natural inclination to push the boundaries of knowledge in areas considered forbidden throughout the ages. The author's breadth of knowledge is so vast, that I was riveted. Some inquires are outdated as the internet age has expanded since the release of this book and Shattuck's scientific suppositions toward the Human Genome Project came nowhere near to fruition. I did walk away from this book with an even longer reading list. It made me realize I should have paid more attention in college!

Sam says

Decent, but definitely not as enlightening as I was hoping for. I enjoyed the sections about Milton and I learned a few interesting tidbits, but overall, mildly disappointing.

Christin says

About a quarter of the way into the book Shattuck quotes Descartes:

"For it seemed to me that I would discover much more truth in the reasonings of men about what they know directly, men who will bear the consequences if they made a bad decision, than in the reasonings of a scholar in his study, who produces speculations without application and without consequence to him, except perhaps the vanity he finds in their remoteness from common sense..."

Shattuck that says it could be about Faust. I say it could be about Shattuck.

It's easy and fashionable to say that pornography corrupts, especially when you only briefly mention one or two studies from the seventies. But one or two serial killers read Sade and that ruins it for the rest of us? Shattuck makes the argument that since some people can't handle reading about violence on a psychological level it shouldn't be allowed. Yeah, and some people can't stop at one beer, but I don't see your book on prohibition.

I should have known this book was going to be trouble when he says things like "Milton quotes Raphael in Paradise Lost." It's not a quote if it's just made up dude. But Shattuck treats poetry and literature as sources. Because some novelists and poets wrote about bad things happening to curious people, curiosity is bad. He was thisclose to using the man in the yellow hat as a source.

My instinctual reaction to censorship is "NO NO NO" and I doubt anything is going to convince me otherwise, no matter how well argued, but I think this book was all over the place. Also, it made dumbass statements like "the term sadism was coined after the Marquis de Sade. Before that there had been no need of the term." ~facepalm~ Just because there was no need for the TERM, doesn't mean the practice didn't exist. Yeah, Caligula was a snuggler, NO. The de Sade maybe forced sadism into the mainstream (~hipster glasses~) but he didn't invent the practice.

So how about THIS for an argument? He says that what Sade wrote is the forbidden knowledge, the books itself, and that they should be hidden away, only to be shown to those well-adjusted folk after rigorous psychological tests. How about looking at the content, those bedroom activities that he wrote about that were mostly unknown? You can only be against violent sexuality (and, by extension, do something about it) if you know about it. And if you claim that you didn't know about it until de Sade, then who do you have to thank for making you aware of it? And you can leave those friendly fetish people alone with their books.

Jason says

I really liked this book. The author uses literature to question whether there are some things better left unknown. While I think the author is leaning towards the affirmative, he leaves the question open and allows the reader to shape his own views. A good read.

Comicfairy (Leanne) says

Other reviews have likely said it better so I'll just say that I have this on my shelf and go back to read it fairly often. Always entertaining!

Erin says

I liked this book because it presented an interesting point of view on the subject, but it was a VERY conservative one. Also, I wondered about some of the author's interpretations of the works he cited.

Chris Pederson says

a look at man's quest for knowledge and the taboos against it. He's more conservative than me in that I don't think there is such a thing as too much knowledge but I enjoyed reading it none the less.
