

Opinion

The Perils of Publishing in a #MeToo Moment

Ian Buruma's exit from The New York Review of Books threatens to inhibit our intellectual culture.

By **Laura Kipnis**

Ms. Kipnis is the author of a book about campus sexual harassment policies.

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Christine Blasey Ford's Testimony



Christine Blasey Ford Testimony Rivets the Nation and



How Americans Across the Country Are Reacting to

in New York, [might have been set up](#), I remember being shocked and appalled. If you accepted the evidence that the author, Edward Jay Epstein, had amassed (timeline inconsistencies, missing cellphones), you had to conclude that the accuser wasn't just lying, she was also collaborating with nefarious entities to bring down Mr. Strauss-Kahn, who happened to be planning a presidential run in France.

An international conspiracy on this scale seemed hard to credit, and still seems improbable. In the end, the criminal case against Mr. Strauss-Kahn was dropped because of significant discrepancies in the accuser's story; she accepted a settlement in a subsequent civil case against him. The various mysteries in the case were never cleared up.

The Epstein article came to mind with the abrupt departure this month of Mr. Silvers's successor, Ian Buruma, after he published an essay by another man accused of sexual assault, the former Canadian radio host Jian Ghomeshi, called "Reflections From a Hashtag." The consensus on social media seemed to be that running the Ghomeshi essay was an unforgivable mistake: Important facts were left out or misleadingly presented (for example, there were many more accusations against him than the ones that a judge acquitted him of), and giving Mr. Ghomeshi a platform was seen as equivalent to excusing or exonerating him. Mr. Buruma seems to have fatally underestimated the amount of pushback the essay would generate.

Ian Buruma at The New York Review of Books offices in 2017.

Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

Mr. Silvers and his longtime co-editor, Barbara Epstein, became legends by taking editorial risks; Mr. Buruma became an ex-editor by taking editorial risks. No doubt they all made their mistakes. Mr. Buruma [gave an interview](#) after the publication of the Ghomeshi essay that came off as cavalier about the omissions

in the piece, fanning the controversy. Do we now live in such unforgiving times that one problematic essay (or interview) guillotines a job? If so, my fear is that no editor in America will be taking editorial risks ever again. Whatever one thinks of the Ghomeshi essay — my purpose isn't to defend it; I understand why many found it sniveling and dissembling — I suspect that The Review's parting of ways with Mr. Buruma will change the nature and content of intellectual culture in our country.

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Mr. Buruma was my editor at The Review, so perhaps I'm not objective enough. And I don't know what precise calculations informed the decisions concerning his departure. But I have sympathy for The Review's owner-publishers, who perhaps feared possible economic repercussions (rumors circulated about advertisers threatening to flee). As someone who has occasionally taken [controversial stances](#) on sexual harassment policies, I myself fear the possible economic repercussions that being on "the wrong side" of this moment could entail: Will my own opportunities to write and publish, in The Review or elsewhere, be curtailed? Self-censorship is the pragmatic move right now.

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It would also be craven. What I found, writing for The Review under Mr. Buruma, was a rare opportunity — or rare in a periodical with significant

circulation — to take intellectual and stylistic risks, be offbeat in my opinions and get the last word in editorial scuffles. I also [got the chance to enthuse](#) about the impact and necessity of the #MeToo movement in an essay commissioned by Mr. Buruma last November, shortly after the first wave of accused men starting falling. I hear there are now a lot of victory dances about bringing down Mr. Buruma, too. What's painful about the stance of many now claiming the #MeToo mantle is the apparent commitment to shutting down voices and discussions that might prove distasteful or unnerving. What use is such an intellectually stifled version of feminism to anyone?

I recall, as a teenager, reading the former Black Panther leader Eldridge Cleaver's prison memoir "Soul on Ice" and being beside myself with fury at his description of raping white women as a political act (and black women for practice). It shook me up. It also demanded that I grapple with the experience of someone — a criminal, a rapist, an enraged black man — entirely unlike myself. Is this a book that could still be published at the moment?

What about Joan Didion's famously tough-minded [essay in The Review](#) in 1991 on the Central Park jogger case, which raised doubts about the guilt of the five accused teenagers, all of whom were black or Hispanic, while parsing the sentimentalized stories told about white rape victims? Would the savvy editor of today publish such an article?

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It's impossible to say whether another article by a person accused of sexual assault would arouse the response the Ghomeshi essay did, or whether the reaction to it was specific to its particular flaws. Allocution is a tough genre. But even when the account is disingenuous and self-pitying, I'm interested in what the accused have to say for themselves, including those I think are guilty and despicable and who haven't learned the proper lessons from their crimes. One of the reasons we read prison literature is because we're all guilty and despicable. One of the reasons we read literature as such is to know what it's like to be a criminal, a coward, a refugee, a pariah. In other words, human.

Something significant was lost last week. One consequence of Mr. Buruma's departure will be a new layer of safeguards we won't even know are in place, including safeguards from the sort of intellectual risks The New York Review of Books always stood for.

Laura Kipnis is the author, most recently, of "Unwanted Advances: Sexual Paranoia Comes to Campus."

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Correction: September 25, 2018

An earlier version of this article misspelled the name of a former French politician. He is Dominique Strauss-Kahn, not Dominique Strauss-Khan.

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