

Free Speech Bites



Stephanie Merritt on Giordano Bruno

Nigel Warburton: *Stephanie Merritt is an author and journalist who has written a series of bestselling novels under the pen name S. J. Parris. I asked her to choose a free speech icon, someone whose life highlights the importance of free expression.*

Nigel Warburton: *Stephanie Merritt welcome to Free Speech Bites*

Stephanie Merritt: Thank you.

Nigel Warburton: *Now, who is your free speech icon?*

Stephanie Merritt: I've chosen the sixteenth century monk and philosopher Giordano Bruno.

Nigel Warburton: *What's known about him?*

Stephanie Merritt: Well he was born in 1548 near Naples and he went into the Dominican order like a lot of young men of his age who wanted to study. He remained as a monk: he was ordained he did his doctorate in theology and then the first we really know about him is that in his late twenties he had come to the attention of his abbot in his monastery of San Domenico Maggiore. Because he had started to take an interest in quite unorthodox views and beliefs: he'd been caught reading banned books in the toilet. He was rumoured to be a supporter of various unorthodox viewpoints, including potentially challenging the divinity of Christ. And it became clear that he was obviously a young man whose intellectual curiosity was too great for the scriptures of the religious order that

he'd gone into. And he was told that he was going to have to face the Father Inquisitor. So rather than be subjected to the questioning by the Roman Inquisition, he ran away from his monastery in the middle of the night. As a result of that he was excommunicated and he had to sort of go on the run through Italy. He was about, I think, 28 when that happened, and he really spent the most of the rest of his adult life travelling through Europe, trying to keep one step ahead of the Inquisition, trying to find a place where he could explore his heretical ideas and philosophies and write his books and have them published.

Nigel Warburton: *So he's leading this life of dissent following his beliefs about the nature of the universe and the nature of God and so on. How does it end?*

Stephanie Merritt: Well it ends rather sadly, a few times in his life he finds places where he thinks that he's able to settle and able to stay, and always there's some reason why he has to be moved on. And he ends up being lured back to Italy, we think probably on false pretences, where he is arrested by the inquisition. He then spends seven years in the prisons of the Inquisition in Rome undergoing various forms of torture. He has a trial in Venice, various trials in Rome – it's clear that the Roman authorities are not quite sure what to do with him, but in the end he won't recant, he won't go back on the things that he's published and the things that he's put out there, and so he does end up being burned on the stake in 1600.

Nigel Warburton: *That's quite amazing to think that somebody should survive seven years imprisonment by the Inquisition, presumably horrendous torture, and not change his views.*

Stephanie Merritt: Yes. I think part of the reason that he was in there for so long was that he was considering doing what several years later Galileo did which was to actually decide that he was going to take it all back. In the end he

decided it seems that he couldn't, he couldn't recant.

Nigel Warburton: *You've mentioned Galileo, Bruno like Galileo rejected the idea that the earth was the centre of the universe.*

Stephanie Merritt: Yes he was very interested in the Copernican theory. Obviously at the time was considered heretical by the catholic church. Bruno felt that Copernicus hadn't gone far enough, he felt that not only was the earth not the centre of the known universe but actually that our sun was only one of a number of stars in a universe that was potentially infinite, and that all these stars potentially had their own system of planets, quite possibly with intelligent life on. Although he wasn't the first person to put forward this theory, he was probably one of the first people to articulate it and to publish books that dared to suggest this. Something that we obviously take for granted now, but at the time it was even more bold and outrageous than what Copernicus was suggesting because the whole narrative of Christianity, that Christ came to redeem mankind was thrown into complete confusion by such an idea, that there were other races of people that there could be other types of people on other planets. Would they have their own saviours? Would they have their own systems of beliefs? It made a mockery of everything that the church was teaching, and it was really partly for that, that Bruno was considered to be so dangerous.

Nigel Warburton: *In a way he's what we would have liked Galileo to have been, somebody who stuck to his beliefs that were more or less the right beliefs it seems.*

Stephanie Merritt: Yes, and he's often regarded by some people as one of the first martyrs for science, and it's easy to forget that there were lots of other strands to his views and he was very interested to what they would have called at the time 'natural magic.' It's pushing it a bit to say that he was really a proto-scientist who died for scientific truth, but he certainly did, without really any

evidence beyond some very basic calculations, he did believe that this was the likely shape of the universe and this was the cosmos that we lived in. And again it seems that he did have more courage when it came to his convictions than Galileo who actually did recant and was not executed.

Nigel Warburton: *How did you get interested in Bruno?*

Stephanie Merritt: I discovered him when I was a student and I was working on a thesis about the effects of Renaissance occultism on the literature at the time. He must have been a very extraordinary person because he did rise very quickly wherever he went. He seems to have had this exceptional charisma. So from being a fugitive ex-monk he went to France where he ended up as personal tutor to the king of France and from there he came to England and became friends with some of the most eminent figures of the day. So one of his great friends was the poet and courtier Philip Sidney. So it was through Sidney that I discovered Bruno and I immediately became fascinated by his, his life I think, as well as his theories. But particularly the life that he was forced to live, he seemed to have this aspect of being a man who was just too modern for his age, man whose ideas were too progressive for the time that he lived in, who was always trying to find his place in the world and was living in this permanent exile and this permanent itinerant existence, and seemed to be just looking for somewhere where he would be free to write the books that he wanted to write. And for a time he found that in England. From the first time that I started looking into his life, from the first reference that I found to him, I thought that he would make a fantastic subject for a novel.

Nigel Warburton: *But you haven't just written one novel about him, you've now written three I believe?*

Stephanie Merritt: Yes I forgot, well I wanted to write about him, but then when I started writing fiction I forgot about him for a long time and I was

writing contemporary novels. It was a few years ago I went back to Bruno, back to investigating his life and thinking that I would like to return to him and I didn't know how to do it because there was just so much. There was a lot of his life that could have been interesting and good background to set a novel, and I wasn't sure how I was going to fit it all in. And then I came across the theory which is, I think it is not conclusively proved at all, but one or two academics have come up with a theory that while Bruno was living in England that he was working as a spy for Sir Francis Walsingham – who was Elizabeth the First's master of intelligence, and it's even possible that Bruno was instrumental in thwarting a plot against the life of Queen Elizabeth in 1583. So once I read that I thought that I thought it was the basis for writing stories about him, to set his life in the context of his potentially working as a spy. Given that he's in a protestant country where really his best works and his books that have survived and that most fully express his theories and his philosophy were the books that he wrote and published in England. So that became the basis of this series.

Nigel Warburton: *Which you've written under the pen name of S. J. Parris.*

Stephanie Merritt: Yes that was partly because I've written other books and I'd worked as journalist so the S. J. Parris name was to set this series apart and almost brand it as though this was going to be a series of books about Giordano Bruno and hopefully following his through to the conclusion of his life with a number of adventures on the way.

Nigel Warburton: *As an inspirational figure in the area of free expression though, what is it that you take away from this remarkable man?*

Stephanie Merritt: It's Bruno's boldness and the courage that he had in publishing the books that he published that I find most striking about him, and the fact that at any point, I mean really from the moment before he ran away from his monastery to right up until he was in the prison of the Inquisition, he

could at any point have decided to save himself to live an easy life, but he had these ideas and he felt, obviously, a compulsion to express them and to write them down to disseminate them, I guess. And so for him the constant threat to his life - and when he started writing and when he started coming up with his philosophies he was living in Italy where he knew from the beginning that it would be impossible for him to ever express these ideas without putting his own life in danger - so the fact that he chose to go on the run, to live a life in exile and to put himself at constant risk, every time he published a book it alienated somebody and it compounded the sentence on him, and yet the fact that he was willing to do that, and that he had the courage to do that, for me as a writer I find that very inspiring. Because it's so easy to take for granted the ability to publish within reason whatever we want to publish. And particularly as an atheist and as someone who has written for humanist magazines and atheist publications the idea that you might not be able to say that, that to challenge religious orthodoxy would put your life in danger: it's good to be reminded of how much liberty we really have to challenge ideas and to be reminded of somebody who took enormous risks in order to do that. He is recorded in the account of his trial when they pronounced the sentence of death by burning on him, he is supposed to have said 'I think it gives you greater fear to pronounce this sentence on me, than it gives me to hear it.' He was so convinced that his ideas would endure, convinced enough to go to the stake for them. And he must have believed that they would have had an impact and that he was right. I think that's the most telling thing at the end that he went to his death for ideas that were not, you know it wasn't a martyrdom as such: it wasn't that he was going believing in a better world or that he was dying for a cause he knew that he was dying because he believed in his ideas. I just think that's very inspiring.

Nigel Warburton: *Did he have anything to say about free expression itself?*

Stephanie Merritt: I'm not sure that he was as explicit as that, but he did write a long these lines. He wrote: 'He who desires us to philosophise must first of all doubt all things, he must not assume a position in a debate before he has listened to the various opinions and has considered and compared the reasons

for and against.' To take that view in an age where only really one viewpoint was tolerated, the idea that one must consider other people's opinions, one must consider different possibilities and different arguments, I mean that's certainly does embody, all his writings really are about the possibility of allowing other ideas and pursuing these ideas to various conclusions. And so I think from that point of view that is a very pro-free-speech argument. So he was certainly very interested in the exchange of ideas, which was a feature of the Renaissance - but then only up to a point and then when the ideas became too dangerous that exchange was shut down. That's where Bruno wasn't able to accept the limits for the Catholic Church Bruno was extremely dangerous and the ideas that he was promoting were threatening to do no less than overturn the whole order of the cosmos. That's what his theories were proposing, and I suppose for that, if you can overturn the order of the cosmos then it becomes very difficult for the Church to maintain it's hierarchy because that's all predicated on a very strict order of being. So I'm sure it's for that reason that the Church was so determined to exterminate him and his writings.

Nigel Warburton: *Stephanie Merritt, thank you very much.*

Stephanie Merritt: Thank you.

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