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# THE RIGHT TO PUBLISH

As publisher of *The Satanic Verses*, **Peter Mayer** was on the front line. He writes here for the first time about an unprecedented crisis

Penguin had published Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* six months before Ayatollah Khomeini issued his fatwa. When we decided to continue publishing the novel in the aftermath, extraordinary pressures were focused on our company, based on fears for the author's life and for the lives of everyone at Penguin around the world. This extended from Penguin's management to editorial, warehouse, transport, administrative staff, the personnel in our bookshops and many others. The long-term political implications of that early signal regarding free speech in culturally diverse societies were not yet apparent to many when the Ayatollah, speaking not only for Iran but, seemingly, for all of Islam, issued his religious proclamation.

Had Penguin withdrawn the book, given the death threats and the ensuing, enraged mass protests around the world, what would the consequences have been? Would other publishers in other countries, who had previously been committed to the book, have pressed forward with its publication? We cannot know, but very possibly not. At the time of the fatwa, the book had only been published in English – not a language the Ayatollah could read. Informed analysts suggested quite reasonably that the

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unresolved Iran-Iraq war, and the background in Tehran of shifting political alignments, had as much to do with the fatwa as did religious considerations. The backdrop made the threats not a wit less real or frightening.

For those who felt mortally offended by what they considered Rushdie's blasphemy, his protestations and those of his publisher that the book was a novel – a creative act – were as irrelevant as the argument that under British and American law (and, presumably, the laws of most democracies) free speech was a cherished and protected civil right, ie the publication was by every standard in those countries completely legal. The many subtleties surrounding the definition of blasphemy under Islamic law were, it turned out, also irrelevant to the raw emotions the fatwa aroused in the Islamic world. Was the author a Muslim? He was after all born a Muslim. Had he converted, or left the faith, or did he still practice it, etc etc? All these widely aired judicial/theological questions proved to have no bearing on a peaceful resolution of the crisis or on a mutual understanding of the conflicting positions and issues.

In addition to the pieties on both sides, and the storm of media attention that the fatwa evoked (some of it unnecessarily provocative and self-serving), Penguin had much to consider. Rushdie and his book were, of course, the primary objects of our concern, but as the situation developed, many people within and beyond the company felt themselves menaced by the fatwa itself, the angry demonstrations, the media attention and the violence. And indeed they were. Many went to work frightened every morning, and with cause. Today, not everyone remembers the riots in India that took 60 lives, the two moderate Islamic clerics who were murdered in Belgium, the murderous assault on the Japanese and Italian translators or the shooting of the Norwegian publisher.

The problems of integrating Islamic religious values with those of a multicultural, secular society in which individual freedom is a basic pillar of political and social life are, obviously, extremely thorny. The issues are complicated for Muslims and non-Muslims alike. We must work with hope and open-mindedness toward a future in which civilised dialogue increases mutual respect for divergent points of view. The elimination of divergent points of view is, however, incompatible with the basic tenets of free societies. The fatwa crystallised the tremendous gulf of values and experience between a culture in which dissidence or heresy may be punishable by death, and one in which freedom of expression is a basic right. But these issues were often submerged beneath the understandable concern for the author's life, his right to be a free-spoken citizen in nations in


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which other religions are sometimes either the subject or the background of novels (and even non-fiction) at which offence might be taken by the devout.

In publishing this book, Penguin had, initially, done nothing extraordinary. We brought out a literary work by an author who had written several books previously, books of merit, one of them – *Midnight's Children* – a contemporary masterpiece. The political and religious issues that emerged certainly had not been considered when Penguin made its commitment to publish the novel. Should they have been or could they have been? This question, often asked, is not helpful. Rushdie's book was not a case of a non-fiction polemic. After the novel became a *cause célèbre*, with the lives of many put in danger, one could not look back usefully. A publisher should not have to be a student of the Quran, or a religious-social-political authority, to publish a novel by a well-known writer. (Somewhere along the way I was told by a student of Islam, whether the case or not, that Islam does not recognise any distinction between fiction and non-fiction.) How could one have foreseen the problems Penguin would ultimately face when the manuscript was submitted? But had they been foreseen, the novel would *still* have been entitled to publication.

Despite the crisis that emerged, and the fears that the fatwa's threats might be carried out, and despite the righteous din which sadly became personalised – at one point we were accused by those interested parties, who should have known better, of having *agents provocateurs* in our midst – the specifically publishing-related issues that confronted Penguin were in themselves actually rather clear. But the human stakes that the issues presented were high, and kept rising.

There will have been some voices within Penguin, and even within Penguin's ownership, who saw an offence felt by a minority as a reason to withdraw publication. There will have been others – frightened by rumours of death squads; by barricades and police perimeters; the guard dogs; X-ray machines scanning the mail for letters or packages with Semtex or bombs – who when they joined Penguin (or any other publishing house) did not expect that they were signing up for a dangerous occupation. In different departments of Penguin, the issues resonated differently. Questions of free speech, the freedom to publish, the freedom to sell (as a bookseller), and the freedom to read are not necessarily of primary concern to financial, clerical, or warehouse personnel, although throughout the company, there was both support for, and dissent from, the management's position.

As the chief executive, my position was unnerving. I was concerned not only for the author and the book, but also for the safety of Penguin employees

*Policeman outside the London headquarters of Penguin, 15 February 1989*
*Credit: Tony White/AP/PA Photos*

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in Britain, the US, Canada, New Zealand, Australia and even in our tiny export offices abroad – at least one of which had to close. And what of booksellers and wholesalers in ten countries who dealt with Penguin? The issue became not only more complex but more hazardous, since no Penguin employees anywhere had personal protection, except within their offices: every one of us had to go home at night by ourselves without security or cover. For the good of all, because of Penguin's visibility, we tried to keep a low profile, despite which I received death threats on my home phone and blood-stained warnings tucked into my letter box. We had had no reason previously to live anonymously. The life of my child was, in one case, threatened. At a critical juncture, a bomb was exploded at one of our Penguin bookstores – fortunately without injuries.

At ad hoc, in-house discussions and at formal board meetings, we chose to frame the argument as one not only respecting the central importance of free speech, but transcending the case of this one book. The fate of the book affected the future of free inquiry, without which there would be no publishing as we knew it, but also, by extension, no civil society as we knew it. As to the likely domino effects of a capitulation to the demands of a militant minority, any climb-down which withdrew the book would, we thought, have encouraged future terrorist attacks against other books that we or any publisher might ever publish if a book offended (even unwittingly as in our case) an individual or a group of individuals.

We did not spend too much time recalling Milton and Galileo. But I did think of books that we, and others, had published that some Catholics probably did not like; other books that offended some Jews or evangelical Christians, or minorities who felt their beliefs, values or ethnicity had been treated negatively. And what of books that offend *majorities*, a subject I heard no one raise? Cease to publish those books, too, when someone raised a hand against them?

Although my board was profoundly uneasy, we came to agree that all that any one of us, or a company, could do was above all to preserve the principles that underlie our profession, and which have, since the invention of movable type, brought it respect. We were *publishers*. I thought that meant something. I was lucky: I had a truly impressive staff that came to understand what mattered in the largest sense. And Penguin also had a tough and sophisticated ownership in Pearson. Uneasily, the parent company, too, saw the global implications for publishing based on how Penguin dealt with the issue. Our issues would indeed become everyone's issues down the line.

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Terror works. Recently, Random House, the world's largest publisher, decided not to publish a novel to which it had previously committed itself, *The Jewel of Medina*, a novel potentially offensive to Muslims. A wave of fear (called with face-saving, self-congratulatory piety and 'respect for minorities') leading to pre-emptive capitulation seems to be rolling up. Yet Gibson Square in the UK and Beaufort in the US – perhaps the world's smallest publishers – agreed to publish the book. The UK publisher's home has since been firebombed and the British edition postponed.

In that time, we also worried constantly that the decision of a small group – a board of ten – to continue to publish Rushdie's book might endanger the lives of many Penguin colleagues who were not part of the decision-making process. Such a responsibility was new to us too, both as a board and as individuals. Unlike the great legal battles that Barney Rosset, the publisher of Grove Press, fought in the 60s and 70s, setting an inspiring example *enlarging* our rights, the threat against the book, the author, and ourselves, was about *diminishing* everyone's rights. Those earlier battles were initiated bravely by Grove; our struggle was imposed upon us. Neither our first decision to publish, nor our subsequent one to continue to publish, was meant to put ourselves on the side of the angels. We were simply publishing a novel we wanted to publish by a well-known writer – our normal work. Whatever each one of us may have felt after the fatwa, we knew ours was a unique situation and that we had to make the right decisions. But what is 'right'?

Although Penguin's publishing structure is what is called 'corporate', the public concerns and human fears were such that we did not think corporately. We did not think of profitability and earnings per share first, as we piled on immense security costs all over the world and saw the rest of our publishing – the work of hundreds of other authors – disrupted for years. We knew we were taking a beating as we worried about Rushdie's life and our own safety.

If, indeed, the book, the author, and Penguin are here to tell the tale, the prognosis remains unclear for publishing regarding this and other confrontations with terror and censorship. Yes, terror can and often does work. I also know that muscles atrophy when they are not used, and in the corporate publishing world today, in the struggle for freedom of expression, they look flabby indeed. ❐


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**Peter Mayer** is president of the Overlook Press in the United States and Gerald Duckworth & Company in the UK. He was chief executive of Penguin Books Worldwide from 1978–1997