

The New Criterion

Notes & Comments April 2020

Cancel culture comstockery

On Woody Allen and the Hachette Book Group.

At The New Criterion, when we hear the name “Woody Allen,” we think first not of his movies but of an anecdote that Hilton Kramer, our founding editor, liked to tell. Attending a dinner at the old Whitney Museum on Madison Avenue and Seventy-fifth Street, Hilton was pleased to find himself seated next to an attractive and agreeable young woman. Woody Allen was also in attendance, but he was on the opposite side of the table facing a large window that looked out upon the street. Of course, the window also looked in upon the diners. Allen announced that he could not abide being seen by anonymous passersby and insisted that he change places with the young lady.

Settling into his new chair, he asked whether Hilton ever felt embarrassed when he met socially artists whom he had criticized in print. “No,” Hilton replied, “Why should I? They are the ones who made the bad art; I just described it.” Allen, Hilton recalled, lapsed into gloomy silence. It was only on his way home that Hilton remembered that he had written a highly critical piece on *The Front*, a PC movie about the Hollywood blacklist in which Allen acted.

That anecdote encapsulates something essential about Hilton’s practice as a critic: his focus was always on the work, not on the personality of the artist. It also encapsulates something essential about the querulous and brittle narcissism of the filmmaker. Woody Allen, although he continues to crank out movies, is a much-diminished presence on the cultural scene when compared to the Woody Allen of the 1970s and early 1980s. But last year he nevertheless found himself caught up in the #MeToo hysteria when Amazon backed out of a four-film deal, alleging that Allen “made a series of public comments suggesting that he failed to grasp the gravity of the issues or the implications for his own career.” According to Amazon, Allen’s tort was twofold. First, he was said to have expressed sympathy for Harvey Weinstein, then at the beginning of his downfall. He also accused his adopted daughter, Dylan Farrow, of “cynically using the #MeToo movement” when she publicly repeated allegations that Allen had abused her when she was a child. Fast forward to early March 2020. The Hachette Book Group suddenly announced that its Grand Central Publishing imprint would be bringing out *Apropos of Nothing*, a memoir by Allen, in early April. In an interview, Michael Pietsch, Hachette’s ceo, noted the controversy surrounding Allen but said that “Grand Central Publishing believes strongly that

there's a large audience that wants to hear the story of Woody Allen's life as told by Woody Allen himself. That's what they've chosen to publish."

A few days later, a group of Hachette employees staged a walkout to protest the book's publication. The next day, Hachette announced that it was hopping onto the cancel culture bandwagon and dropping the book.

"The decision to cancel Mr. Allen's book was a difficult one," said a spokesman for the publisher (so difficult it took twenty-four hours to achieve). "At hbg we take our relationships with authors very seriously, and do not cancel books lightly. We have published and will continue to publish many challenging books."

Translation: Hachette, as Oscar Wilde said in another context, can resist anything except temptation. Just so long as a book does not attract the ire of the politically correct establishment, the firm is all for publishing "challenging" books. (Item: *Commandant of Auschwitz*, a memoir by Rudolf Hoess, is published by Hachette.) But trespass on that PC orthodoxy and watch the capitulation, leavened by moralistic hand-wringing, begin. As Groucho Marx is supposed to have said, "These are my principles. If you don't like them, I have others."

Our interest in Woody Allen is minimal.

Yes, his early movies and writings are funny. Then he discovered Ingmar Bergman. The quantum of pretension and narcissistic self-seriousness proceeded to swamp the comedy. For us, the prospect of wading through "a comprehensive account of [Woody Allen's] life, both personal and professional" (as Hachette put it when the publishing skies were sunny) is queasy-making.

Hachette, as Oscar Wilde said in another context, can resist anything except temptation.

But Hachette had determined that many readers would be interested in Allen's life story. They simply forgot to check with the feminist commissars to see if Woody Allen passes muster in the age of #MeToo. He doesn't.

Allen, like many celebrities, has maintained a complicated personal life. In 1980, he started a long affair with the actress Mia Farrow, the former wife of both Frank Sinatra and André Previn. Allen and Farrow dated for more than a decade but never lived together.

The pack of children, mostly adopted, in the Farrow household is hard to keep straight. For this story, the important figures are Moses—whom Farrow adopted after her divorce from Previn and whom Allen himself adopted in 1991—and a daughter called Dylan, whom Farrow adopted in 1985 (Allen also adopted her in December 1991).

And then there is Satchel, born in 1987, whom the world knows by one of his middle names, Ronan, the New Yorker writer who specializes in investigating other people's sex lives, real

and imagined. Ronan, Mia Farrow acknowledged, might “possibly” be the biological son of Frank Sinatra, with whom she “never really split up.” Physiognomists would not find that surprising. (That Allen paid child support for Ronan for years usually goes unmentioned.)

There is also Soon-Yi Previn, an abandoned South Korean girl whom Farrow and Previn adopted in 1978 when she was about eight. Allen raised eyebrows in 1992 when he began an affair with Soon-Yi, then in her early twenties. He and Farrow split, acrimoniously. In 1997, Allen and Soon-Yi married.

So far, it is just the usual Hollywood sex circus. But around the time that Farrow and Allen split, he was accused of touching Dylan, then seven, inappropriately. Allen has always denied it. The facts remain somewhat murky. Connecticut’s prosecutor ultimately declined to pursue the case, despite announcing that he had “probable cause” to do so. The state police referred the case to the Yale New Haven Hospital Child Sexual Abuse Clinic, which concluded that “Dylan was not sexually abused by Mr. Allen.” The lead doctor of the clinic said under oath that Dylan “either invented the story under the stress of living in a volatile and unhealthy home or that it was planted

Dylan has periodically revived the charge against her adoptive father. Moses Farrow and Soon-Yi have taken Allen’s side. Ronan, whose book *Catch and Kill* was published by another imprint at Hachette, has led the charge against his estranged father. “Your policy of editorial independence among your imprints,” he thundered in an email to Michael Pietsch, “does not relieve you of your moral and professional obligations as the publisher of *Catch and Kill*, and as the leader of a company being asked to assist in efforts by abusive men to

whitewash their crimes.” But there are no crimes. There are only allegations. Even after two lengthy investigations, Allen was not charged. As the world saw during the course of Brett Kavanaugh’s confirmation hearings, the principle of “innocent until proven guilty” has been replaced with “innocent until accused.” It is a poisonous development.

In this context, it is worth noting that Ronan Farrow used his perch at *The New Yorker* to attack Kavanaugh during his confirmation hearings, adding fuel to the fire started by the fantasist Christine Blasey Ford. It was he, in a piece co-written by Jane “Dark

Money” Mayer, who introduced the world to Deborah Ramirez, one of the women who, once Kavanaugh’s nomination to the Supreme Court was announced, half- or quarter-remembered (with coaching) some drunken party at which Kavanaugh may or may not have been present when he, or possibly someone else, made lewd advances to her. Michael Avenatti also tried to bring

forward hazy accusers. In a long and thoughtful blog post published in May 2018, Moses Farrow laid out the particulars of the Farrow–Allen melodrama as he understood them. He paints a very different picture from that offered by Mia, Ronan, and Dylan Farrow. For one thing, after meticulously reviewing the details of Allen’s relations with his family, he concludes that “I never once saw anything that indicated inappropriate behavior at any time.”

There are no crimes. There are only allegations.

Regarding Allen's relationship with Soon-Yi, he notes that they "rarely even spoke during her childhood. It was my mother who first suggested, when Soon-Yi was 20, that Woody reach out and spend time with her. He agreed and . . . [t]hat's how their romance started." When the affair went public, many were appalled that Allen should be involved with his "step daughter." But Moses observes that Soon-Yi was "not Woody's daughter (adopted, step, or otherwise)." He acknowledges that the affair was

unorthodox, uncomfortable, disruptive to our family and it hurt my mother terribly. But the relationship itself was not nearly as devastating to our family as my mother's insistence on making this betrayal the center of all our lives from then on.

According to Moses, after discovering Allen's affair with Soon-Yi, Mia Farrow embarked on a campaign of vilification against them both, "drilling it into our heads like a mantra: Woody was 'evil,' 'a monster,' 'the devil,' and Soon-Yi was 'dead to us.' "

He goes on to describe a horrifying regimen of physical and psychological abuse meted out against the children by his mother. There was also this:

My mother, of course, had her own darkness. She married 50-year-old Frank Sinatra when she was only 21. After they divorced, she moved in to live with her close friend Dory Previn and her husband André. When my mother became pregnant by André, the Previns' marriage broke up, leading to Dory's institutionalization.

Not exactly Marmee in *Little Women*.

Reflecting on the decision to cancel Woody Allen's book, Suzanne Nossel, the ceo of pen America, noted sadly that "the end result" might well be that "readers will be denied the opportunity to read it and render their own judgments." But of course that is precisely what cancel culture is all about: deploying the mob to replace freedom and opportunity with stultifying moral disapprobation.

UPDATE: We were happy to get the news that Apropos of Nothing quickly found a more courageous publisher than Hachette. It is now available from Arcade Publishing, an imprint of Skyhorse Publishing, Inc.

This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 38 Number 8 , on page 1

Copyright © 2024 The New Criterion | www.newcriterion.com

<https://newcriterion.com/issues/2020/4/cancel-culture-comstockery>