



ROBBIE MILLEN

Novelists aren't meant to be polite about everyone

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I want to be appalled. I want to read novels that make me splutter “I can’t believe they wrote that!”. Could you imagine a novel more offensive than one in which Anne Frank is depicted as a foul-mouthed, cat-eating old lady, found living in someone’s suburban attic after she survived the Holocaust? The only excuse for such a disgraceful book is that Shalom Auslander’s *Hope: A Tragedy* just happens to be one of the funniest satires of the past decade.

Such exuberant, devil-may-care artistic freedom is harder to achieve in the age of the perpetually offended. The novelist Kazuo Ishiguro, in an interview on Radio 4 yesterday, said that “I very much fear for the younger generation of writers” who feel they must self-censor because an “anonymous lynch mob will turn up online and make their lives a misery”.

He has a point. The brouhaha about *American Dirt* (how dare a white American woman write from a Hispanic perspective) must have had a chilling effect on aspiring writers. But it’s too easy to blame the online lynch mob. The problem starts in the publishing houses. Last year, Woody Allen’s autobiography was cancelled by Hachette after a staff rebellion. A few months later, at the same company, there was an internal campaign to dump “transphobic” JK Rowling. Who knows what books are not being commissioned because their authors have verboten views?

Auslander in his new novel *Mother for Dinner* satirises publishing’s obsession with identity. One running joke is that the main character, who works in a New York publishing house, has to wade

through manuscripts by ever-more hyphenated authors, such as a “Gender-Fluid-Hearing-Impaired-Liberal-Democratic-Palestinian-Canadian-American”.

With the multiplication of identities, it has become easier to cause offence; hence the rise of “sensitivity readers” who will proofread an author’s work to warn of transgressions. Here’s one picked at random: “I’m a disabled nonbinary Jewish queer person with ADHD”. It makes me queasy, this idea that “identity” is so sacrosanct that writers’ imaginations must be policed by self-appointed gatekeepers.

Back to Auslander’s new novel: “Identity had always been a prison he longed to escape — white, black, brown, American, European, Russian, male, female, straight, gay, They, Them, atheist, monotheist, polytheist — the ever-growing lists of cellblocks from which there was no release. And yet lately, all around him, the prisoners were proudly raising their shackles overhead and cheering their own bondage.”

Good fiction can make you look at things afresh. The horrible thought emerges: maybe a new generation of writers doesn’t really value that reckless freedom of imagination.