

AlbertMohler.com

'Checkpoint' - Assassination Porn Hits the Bookstores

Postmodernism thrives on a steady diet of the outrageous, as postmodern authors push new boundaries in order to "transgress" conventional morality. But transgression takes on an altogether new meaning when, in Nicholson Baker's new novel, a central character seriously contemplates the assassination of President George W. Bush.

Tuesday, August 10, 2004

Postmodernism thrives on a steady diet of the outrageous, as postmodern authors push new boundaries in order to "transgress" conventional morality. But transgression takes on an altogether new meaning when, in Nicholson Baker's new novel, a central character seriously contemplates the assassination of President George W. Bush.

Checkpoint, released just today by publisher Alfred A. Knopf, is structured as a dialogue between two men—and their dialogue is beyond the pale. Jay, a middle-aged misfit who has failed at both life and love, has called his old high school friend Ben to meet him at a Washington area hotel. Ben, a professor of history who specializes in the Cold War, discovers quickly that Jay wants to talk about killing the sitting President of the United States.

"I'm going to assassinate the president," Jay matter-of-factly announces to Ben. From there, Baker takes the reader into a macabre conversation between two men united in a hatred of George W. Bush, if not in the determination to kill him.

Ben's initial response to Jay's proposal is disbelief, but this quickly passes when Jay's seriousness becomes clear. Ben coldly argues that "the country has no need for this service," even as Jay insists that he must lance the "boil" from the nation.

As Ben sees it, assassination is just unnecessary. "No, I'm serious, he'll be out of power eventually. Either he loses and he's out, or he wins, and then he's out a little later. Either way, his time will pass in a twinkling. Many years from now you'll be reading the comics in some cafe somewhere, and you'll think, 'Boy oh boy, I'm sure glad I didn't do that.'" Jay isn't interested in Ben's futurism: "I'm going to do it today."

Checkpoint's dialogue is an intermingling of two left-wing rants—one just crazier than the other. Ben is a cool cucumber, but his is no voice of moral reason. At points, his main concern is his own danger of prosecution. "If the FBI and the Secret Service and what's his name, Tom Ridge, come after me because I have been hanging out with you in a hotel room before you make some crazy attempt on the life of the president, I'm totally cooked. I'm totally cooked, all right? I'll have to say, 'Well, what we were talking about was—you know.' What am I going to do, lie? I can't lie. You and I sat here talking about the pros and cons of— of— Yes, you were talking about a lot of delusional gobblydegook about homing bullets but basically your intent was clear. I'll have to say that."

That dialogue reveals the real evil of the book itself. Jay and Ben are indeed talking about the pros and cons of assassinating the president of the United States. Not a fictional president, mind you, but President George W. Bush. Baker's fictional plot is just too close to current events, too filled with hatred toward the President, and too irresponsible to be released by a major American publisher. This represents a new low in American publishing history, and it may represent a clear danger to the President. Could the novel serve as a catalyst for a real assassination attempt?

The venom against President Bush is voiced by both men, but Jay takes the lead. He refers to the President "muttering over his prayer book every morning" even as he coldly orders soldiers to fire upon innocent Iraqi civilians. At one point, he refers to the President as "George W. Tumblewad," and promises that he will soon be "one dead armadillo."

Ben shares Jay's leftist hatred of Bush, arguing against the assassination plan on the grounds that it would make Bush a martyr. "You don't have any idea what you might set in motion, what kind of uproar, what kind of clamping down would follow. There's no way to predict," he argues. "You want this wastebasket of a man to become a martyr?"

Jay cloaks his case for assassinating the President in language reminiscent of the French Revolution and other radical bloodlettings. "I'm going to prevent a certain amount of bloodshed," he argues. "By causing a minor blip of bloodshed in one human being I'm going to prevent further bloodshed." It is as if Maximilien Robespierre speaks from the grave.

The Iraq War stands as the great insult to humanity that prompts Jay to do his plotting. The war is an "abortion" he explains. "It's an abortion performed on a whole country." Jay, it turns out, is against abortion.

With this literary device, Baker cleverly succeeds in slandering the pro-life movement even as he dignifies an assassination attempt on President Bush. By making Jay anti-abortion, he deftly—if dishonestly—throws even more moral confusion into his narrative.

The novel is serious about the assassination plan, even as it toys with Jay's delusions about radio-controlled flying saws and uranium boulders. Jay may believe that his gun is filled with "face recognition" bullets, but his gun is real—and so is his intent. Nicholson Baker cannot deny responsibility for his novel and its unconscionable realism. In our current political context, this novel is like a time bomb ticking on bookstore shelves.

Nicholson Baker is known for his minimalist style and his postmodern devices. His previous works include *The Mezzanine*, a novel that traces the inner life of a man riding an escalator after buying shoelaces, *Vox*, a pornographic novel about phone-sex, and *Fermata*, about a man who can stop time—and does so in order to fulfill his sexual fantasies. Nevertheless, he is considered a major American man of letters and is a key figure in contemporary literary circles—which goes a long way toward explaining the depravity and moral bankruptcy of much of today's literary world.

Alfred A. Knopf, also the publisher of former President Bill Clinton's autobiography, *My Life*, attempts to rationalize its publication of *Checkpoint* by explaining, "Baker's book does not suggest violence is ever an appropriate response. But in order to understand the reasons why a violent act is always a mistake, one must first look at the contemplation of such an act." That is moral nonsense, pure and simple. Does Knopf have the arrogance to claim that it is serving the nation's interest to publish a book contemplating the assassination of its president? Is there no shame?

As reviewer Leon Wieseltier wrote in *The New York Times*, "Like all of Baker's books, this one is much too close to its subject. The novel whose subject is wild talk is itself wild talk, and so another discouraging document of this age of wild talk."

Nicholson Baker may claim to stand at a distance from his characters and his plot, but he has given all that away by his own admissions. As he told David Gates of *The Washington Post*, the novel grew out of his own anger and outrage at the Iraq war. "I was plodding along, writing my little books, and then suddenly this thing speared into my life and it just took me over." Baker also told of crying as he wrote the novel during the siege of Fallujah. "I'd never had that experience before," he said, "and I don't think this even comes through in the book. But it was as if I was mourning the war, the stupidity and the wastefulness of what we did. There was no other way to deal with this than to take on the most extreme and the most horrifying response, and see why somebody would consider that, and, ultimately, why it's wrong."

In a post-9/11 world, those words ring hollow and self-serving. A novel contemplating the assassination of a sitting president—or any real person—would be immoral under any circumstances, but in the specific context of today's political climate and the threat of terrorism, *Checkpoint* represents a complete moral breakdown. As one reviewer summarized, the book is "assassination porn."

When a Knopf spokesman tried to justify the book by claiming that *Checkpoint* "is a portrait of an anguished protagonist pushed to extremes," and claimed that Nicholson Baker is simply "using the framework and story structure as a narrative device to express the discontent many in America are feeling right now," the publishing house succeeded only in deepening its complicity with Baker's moral darkness. This novel is nothing less than evil, and its publication cannot be morally justified.

Nevertheless, it appears that the book is probably a legal form of “assassination porn.” Secret Service officials have declined to comment on the book until it is released and reviewed by the agency, but legal specialists have argued that Baker has probably committed no crime, since he does not actually call for the assassination of the president. This would not be the case in many other nations. A book with a similar plot—featuring the assassination of a German politician—was recently banned in that nation, even though Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder was not even identified by name.

Nicholson Baker, Alfred A. Knopf, and Checkpoint deserve the nation’s moral outrage and public condemnation. As the late Dorothy Parker once famously advised: “This book is not to be tossed aside lightly. It should be thrown with great force.” The sales figures for this book will tell us much about the moral state of the nation.

Content Copyright © 2002-2010, R. Albert Mohler, Jr.