



Dirt for Art's Sake: Books on Trial from "Madame Bovary" to "Lolita"

Elisabeth Ladenson

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In *Dirt for Art's Sake*, Elisabeth Ladenson recounts the most visible of modern obscenity trials involving scandalous books and their authors. What, she asks, do these often-colorful legal histories have to tell us about the works themselves and about a changing cultural climate that first treated them as filth and later celebrated them as masterpieces?

Ladenson's narrative starts with *Madame Bovary* (Flaubert was tried in France in 1857) and finishes with *Fanny Hill* (written in the eighteenth century, put on trial in the United States in 1966); she considers, along the way, *Les Fleurs du Mal*, *Ulysses*, *The Well of Loneliness*, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, *Tropic of Cancer*, *Lolita*, and the works of the Marquis de Sade. Over the course of roughly a century, Ladenson finds, two ideas that had been circulating in the form of avant-garde heresy gradually became accepted as truisms, and eventually as grounds for legal defense. The first is captured in the formula "art for art's sake"?the notion that a work of art exists in a realm independent of conventional morality. The second is realism, vilified by its critics as "dirt for dirt's sake." In Ladenson's view, the truth of the matter is closer to ?dirt for art's sake?"the idea that the work of art may legitimately include the representation of all aspects of life, including the unpleasant and the sordid.

Ladenson also considers cinematic adaptations of these novels, among them Vincente Minnelli's *Madame Bovary*, Stanley Kubrick's *Lolita* and the 1997 remake directed by Adrian Lyne, and various attempts to translate de Sade's works and life into film, which faced similar censorship travails. Written with a keen awareness of ongoing debates about free speech, *Dirt for Art's Sake* traces the legal and social acceptance of controversial works with critical acumen and delightful wit.



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