

A Statement on Author Appearances at Bookstores

Bookstores that provide a public forum for controversial authors often become the target of protests. While most critics would not go so far as to advocate banning the offending works, they draw the line at allowing the authors to read from their books and answer questions. Any bookseller who makes this possible is interested only in "selling books," they charge.

This view reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of bookselling. Bookstores are not like other stores. Because books contain ideas, bookstores play an integral part in the process by which ideas are disseminated and debated. Debate is essential in a free society, and we take seriously our responsibility to promote ideas, including those that we personally oppose. We do this in a variety of ways -- by suggesting titles to customers who are looking for books about particular subjects, recommending books to reading groups and announcing new releases in our newsletters. Hosting authors for readings and autographing is an important part of the process. It gives customers a chance to meet the person behind the book -- to listen to his voice, to observe her manner. Above all, it gives them an opportunity to ask questions and even to disagree. We are not primarily doing a favor for the author, who may, after all, fall flat on his face. We are providing our customers with an opportunity to make up their own minds.

The most mistaken notion about author appearances is that they always "sell books." Controversial ideas inevitably alienate some people, and when those people include some of our customers, we can lose business. While we do not wish to offend anyone, we cannot allow a minority to censor either the books we sell or the authors we host.