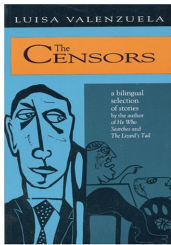


THE CENSORS BY LUISA VALENZUELA

HISTORICAL CONNECTION

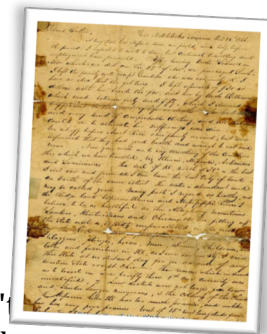


Although every form of government has employed censorship to some degree, especially in times of war, the strictest censorship is most often found in dictatorships. In the 1960s and 1970s, a number of Latin American countries, including Luisa Valenzuela's native Argentina, were governed by military dictators. These leaders often employed censorship to control their opponents and limit the free expression of ideas. Their measures included the closing of newspapers and magazines, the suppression of public meetings, and censorship of the arts, especially literature. "The Censors" focuses on a common type of censorship—the reading of personal letters in order to control the flow of information and guard against acts of rebellion. The story, inspired by the political situation in Argentina, takes place in a fictional Latin American setting.

THE CENSORS

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Poor Juan! He was caught off guard that day and he couldn't realize that what he thought was a stroke of luck was really an accursed trick of fate. Those things happen when you're not careful, and as sure as you're hearing me one gets careless very, very often. Juancito let happiness -- an otherwise disturbing sentiment -- overwhelm him when, from a confidential



source, he received Mariana's new address, now in Paris, and he knew that she hadn't

forgotten him. Without thinking twice, he sat down at his desk and wrote a letter. *The letter.*

The same one that now prevents him from concentrating on his work during the day and doesn't let him sleep when night comes (what did he put in that letter, what had stuck to that sheet of paper that he sent to Mariana?)

Juan knew there wouldn't be any problem with the text, that the text is irreproachable, innocuous. But the rest? He knows that they probe the letters, sniff them, feel them, read between the lines and their insignificant punctuation, even the accidental stains. He knows that the letters pass from hand to hand through the vast censorship bureaus and that few finally pass the tests and are able to continue their journey. Usually it's a question of months, years if complications arise, a long time in which the freedom and perhaps even the life of the sender and receiver are in suspense. And that's what has our Juan so deeply depressed: the idea that something could happen to Mariana, in Paris, through his fault. Mariana, of all people, who must feel so safe, so at ease there where she always dreamed of living. But he knows that the Secret Commandos of Censorship operate the world over and are granted a large discount on airline fares; therefore there's nothing to prevent them from going even to the darkest Paris *quartier*, kidnap Mariana and go home convinced of the nobility of their earthly mission.



So you have to outsmart them, you have to do what everyone does: try to sabotage the mechanism, throw sand in the gears, that is, go to the source of the problem in order to obstruct it.

That was the plan when Juan, like so many others, applied to be a censor. Not because of conviction like a few others or because he needed work like still others, no. He applied simply in order to try to intercept his own letter, not at all an original idea, but a comforting one. He was hired immediately, because more censors are needed every day and there's no time to be squeamish about references.

The Directorate of Censorship was aware of the secret motive behind the desire of more than one to work in the bureau, but they were in no condition to be too strict and anyway -- What for? They knew how difficult it would be for those poor innocents to find the letter they were looking for, and even if they did, what

importance does a letter or two that slips though the barrier cracks compared to the others that the new censor would shoot down. That's how our Juan was able to join the Censorship Bureau of the Ministry of Communications.

The building, seen from outside, had a festive air because of the smoked glass that reflected the sky, an air that was in total contrast to the austere atmosphere of its interior. And little

