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Why the ALOUD Controversy Did Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night

Adam Leipzig · Wednesday, November 21st, 2018

Management and board members of the Library Foundation of Los Angeles have wondered why the ALOUD controversy — triggered by the abrupt August 27 firing of its director, Louise Steinman, and its associate director, Maureen Moore — hasn't blown over. Nearly 90 days later, audience members are still demonstrating, the [petition](#) is still circulating, and members of the literary community are still protesting. (Foundation president Ken Brecher and I spoke about this, and future matters, [in our recent interview](#).)

Los Angeles's philanthropic community has wondered too. "But the Foundation does such good work," one of LA's most wealthy patrons told a friend of mine. She continued, "Why don't you just let it go?"

Indeed, even the people protesting have asked themselves why they care so much. Rubén Martínez, in his open letter to Foundation President Ken Brecher [published in the Los Angeles Review of Books](#) on October 18, wrote, "Truthfully, there are other matters that deserve my attention, personally and politically. Perhaps that's one of the reasons I'm so angry about the mess you've caused: it pales in comparison to the cruelties of our time."

However, I'll argue that it is precisely because that the issue seems so small — so trivial in the larger scheme — that it has not yet gone away.

You have to understand that the people protesting, the people signing the petition and showing up at events with signs, are writers and they are readers.

Writers' job is to express themselves. They do not like to be quiet, and they get angry when they are told to be quiet. Unfortunately, in our society, writers often struggle. They struggle to get their books published, to get their words read; they struggle to be heard.

The ALOUD series, as its name implies, gave writers a significant forum in which they were heard. When Brecher fired Steinman and Moore, he did so without inclusive discussion with the writers who have supported ALOUD for 25 years. One might argue that Brecher had no obligation to have such a discussion; but that does not take away the sting from ALOUD partisans who felt, at that moment, as though their significance in the community was not being recognized. Then, when the Foundation's board [issued a statement](#) that they were "listening to many voices" but had not, in fact, spoken to any of the writers protesting... well, writers can read.

Further, writers can read between the lines, in that the statement, the first the Library had made on the matter, did not mention Louise Steinman or Maureen Moore to credit or thank them. Writers read the words that are said, and the words that are not said.

Then, on November 16, the Foundation issued a statement that implied that the voices of protest were “intimidation tactics”. To quote: “LFLA Board Chair Gwen Miller noted that in recent weeks, supporters of the two former administrators have published opinion pieces, circulated a petition, called for Brecher’s resignation, and confronted Foundation Board members through emails and in person. In one incident, a protestor jumped on stage at an event where Brecher was speaking. ‘I recognize there are some people who don’t understand Ken’s decision to restructure the ALOUD program because they are not aware of all the facts, but this case went over the line,’ said Miller. ‘The Board does not condone these types of intimidation tactics.’”

If writers were angry already, that ill-worded statement raised their anger further. To equate opinion pieces with intimidation? And that such an equation was being made by the *Library Foundation*? To quote again, this time Susan Orlean, who spoke of her new book, *The Library Book*, at a recent ALOUD event: A library offers “something precious, to have a space that is shared by everyone.” (That Susan Orlean quote was tweeted by LA City Librarian John Szabo on November 13. The LA City Library is not the Library Foundation; the former is a public part of city government, while the Foundation is an independent 501(c)3.)

In addition to the writers, there are the readers. Everyone who came to ALOUD events, if they were not a writer, was a reader. (Writers, of course, are both.)

The audience — the readers — also can read the signs. Readers get annoyed when they are not respected. Look at what happened when Sir Arthur Conan Doyle tried to kill Sherlock Holmes by sending him over Reichenbach Falls. Readers felt betrayed. Doyle tried to withstand the pressure, but could not. Shattered by his readers’ intransigence, Doyle had no choice; he brought Sherlock Holmes back to life.

It only inflamed the situation that the Foundation maintained resolute silence, punctuated by dismissive statements, until last week; and then, in its first explicit statement on why it was changing the ALOUD program, implicitly tied the need for change to a need to stand up to “intimidation tactics” and threats of violence. (You can read the Foundation’s full statement [here](#).) Only this week has Brecher begun to have discussions with the press.

The Mayor’s office has not yet weighed in on the issue, even though the Mayor is an ex-officio member of the Foundation board. Eric Garcetti is trying to run for president; why would he want to tangle with a bunch of patrons, on the one hand, and a bunch of angry writers, on the other?

City Librarian John Szabo, also an ex-officio member of the Foundation board, is likewise well-parsed in his reactions. He is in a specific political position, as the City Library benefits from the Library Foundation’s largess.

Still the issue will not go away. Because it is not so “small.” Writers and readers — people mandated to express themselves, and people hungry to listen — become angry when they are not heard. If I were to write their interior monologue in a play, it would be something like this:

If we cannot affect this, if we cannot protest this successfully, this seemingly ‘small’ thing, well, then, what affect can we have on the world at all?

Many of those protesting walked precincts and dialed at phone banks in the recent mid-term elections. Some of them were the people who helped flip the House and turn Orange County blue. They were protesting the Foundation's actions during campaign season; now, with the election is over, they have even more time on their hands.

Yesterday, Ken Brecher and I did an interview. You can [read it here](#). It is an important step forward, in a process that will need to be inclusive and open to restore a damaged relationship.

Audience at an ALOUD event earlier this year. Photo by Gary Leonard.

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