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Choice for humanities panel shows political-cultural split

By Stephan Salisbury

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Editor, Philadelphia Inquirer

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Debate over arts appointment shows cultural-political split

NOMINEE, from I-D

"depicting that Toni Morrison had not won either the National Book Award or the Pulitzer Prize and, in effect, demanded that she be awarded one."

"It’s a fact," Podhorez continued. "They did demand this... (Canaroe’s charge is totally irresponsible and ignorant.)

In January of 1988, the New York Times Book Review published a letter, signed by 48 prominent black writers, that pointed out that Morrison had never won the Pulitzer Prize or the National Book Award. The letter suggested this was the result of "oversight and harmful whiskeys." According to a later Times article, the authors of the letter stated that they were not seeking to influence the Pulitzer jury, only to praise Morrison.

After Beloved won the Pulitzer in April, Robert Christopher, secretary of the Pulitzer board, said the prize jury was aware of the black writers’ letter, "but, no, it didn’t affect their decision." Morrison’s prize, he said, was based "on merit."

Yesterday, Podhorez acknowledged that, in addition to the black writers, quite a few prominent literary critics praised Beloved when it was published and supported a prize for Morrison based on the quality of her work. "We agreed that it would be difficult to demonstrate a direct connection between a letter in the Times and the awarding of the Pulitzer Prize.

At the same time, she vigorously rejected the charge of racism. "Carol Iannone... judges novelists, all novelists, whatever color, whatever national origin, by the same high standards," he said. "She has been as tough on white writers as she’s been on some black writers. Conversely, she has praised black writers like Ralph Ellison, whom she calls a great novelist, and a Nigerian novelist, Chinua Achebe. She has even praised one of Toni Morrison’s novels, Song of Solomon, while attacking Beloved, which she thinks—and I agree with her—is a bad novel."

Iannone did not return several telephone calls, and Cheney declined to comment, citing the press of business.

The debate over Iannone began in early March when the 15-member executive council of the Modern Language Association (MLA), a professional organization of 25,000 university professors of literature and the Romance languages, voted to oppose the nomination—the first time it had ever taken such an action.

Iannone’s academic “record is currently too weak to justify such an appointment,” wrote Phyllis Franklin, the MLA’s executive director, in a March 4 letter to the Senate Labor Committee, which oversees endowment affairs. In particular, Franklin cited her executive council’s concern over Iannone’s “junior standing and slim scholarly production.”

“How sad it makes me to see the Modern Language Association’s executive council fall once again into the old elitist patterns,” Cheney wrote back on March 15. “Carol Iannone, a teacher of undergraduates, an editor of a periodical that addresses issues in undergraduate education, and a well-published writer on contemporary cultural matters, is well positioned to advise the endowment."

Iannone is being considered for a six-year term on the National Council on the Humanities, a 26-member panel appointed by the President. The NEH makes grants supporting a wide range of projects in literature, history, and the humanities.

Cheney told Franklin that the MLA seemed to be seeking the nomination of "only one kind of academic... someone from a research university who publishes in journals like Publications of the Modern Language Association."

"Such a standard," Franklin wrote back, "we would regard as absurd."

She said the MLA agreed with the legislative requirement that council members have records of distinction and reflect a diversity of views.

On March 27, Cheney again defended the nomination in a letter to Franklin:

"I fear that one of the many regrettable aspects of the MLA’s campaign against Iannone will be to damage the MLA’s own reputation."

As this exchange of “Dear Lynne” and “Dear Phyllis” letters continued, the American Council of Learned Societies, an umbrella organization for 50 scholarly groups, including the MLA, formally announced its opposition to Iannone. On April 5, the College Art Association, a 12,000-member association of scholars, teachers, and museum professionals, also announced opposition.

As these organizations were marshaling their forces, Iannone’s supporters began to speak out. Will, the conservative commentator, defended Iannone in his Newsweek column, primarily by attacking the MLA as a warren for devotees of “wacky Marxism.” A cultural battle rages, Will wrote on April 22, between the “tenured radicals” of the MLA and the forces seeking to conserve the “common culture that is the nation’s social cement.”

Buckley, who was asked by Cheney to defend Iannone, did so in an April 6 letter to the Senate Labor Committee. In the letter, Buckley ridiculed the MLA, likening it to “an association devoted to the study of Zarathustrian Mysticism.” He suggested that opposition to Iannone was motivated by politics.

Franklin denies that politics is behind the MLA position. She points out that the organization has supported a number of conservative council members in the past and would do so in the future.

The most recent evidence of the controversy is contained in the current issue of the Chronicle of Higher Education, the journal for university professionals. Writing there, Peter Shaw, a professor of humanities at St. Peter’s College in Jersey City, N.J., and a member of the humanities council, defends Iannone by comparing her resume with Franklin’s.
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