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May 22, 1991

NEW YORK POST

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Literature's PC cops at work

Carol Iannone is a literature professor at New York University's Gallatin Division. During the 1980s, she emerged as one of the nation's more prolific and penetrating literary critics.

She has also played a leadership role in the National Association of Scholars, an organization which was one of the first to warn of the rise of intellectual intolerance now sweeping over the nation's universities.

One target of Iannone's criticism has been feminist scholarship — a field to which she devoted her doctoral dissertation. But she has also created a stir by criticizing "Literature by Quota" — as she described it in a recent essay published in *Commentary* magazine.

There Iannone argued against what she terms a growing tendency to award literary prizes on the basis of race and gender rather than literary merit — noting that the five finalists for this year's National Book Award just happened to make up a perfect "Rainbow Coalition."

Iannone also recalled that Toni Morrison won a Pulitzer Prize after a group of black writers took the unprecedented step of demanding one for her, and that the three awards given to Alice Walker's "The Color Purple" "seemed less a recognition of literary achievement than some official act of reparation."

We happen to think that Carol Iannone's judgment on these matters is pretty sound. But even if we didn't, it wouldn't be all that relevant to the matter at hand.

Iannone has been nominated for a seat on the National Council of Humanities — a board which advises the National Endowment for the Humanities on grant-giving.

Under normal circumstances the appointment of a woman with a doctorate

who teaches at a major university and has produced an extensive and respected body of literary criticism would be virtually pro forma.

But because Iannone has published articles which some of the reigning dogmatists of liberal academia have found politically incorrect, she is facing a large, well-orchestrated effort to undermine her appointment.

The highly politicized Modern Language Association has raised questions about Iannone's qualifications, and People for the American Way — a liberal group whose interest in the field of literary criticism has not previously been evident — has asked the Senate to "carefully review" the nomination.

It's clear enough what is going on here: Various liberal groups are trying to chill discussion about a number of issues in the country by imposing a standard of "political correctness."

If, like Iannone, you ridicule feminist scholarship, or think that Morrison isn't all that she's cracked up to be, they'll punish you by trying to prevent you from getting a job, or making sure you can't sit on a government board, or insinuate that you are — here's a potent slur — a "racist."

Even if the PC crowd doesn't win all its battles, it is managing to disseminate an element of doubt and fear in the minds of serious writers, forcing them to wonder which phrase, or which idea, might be taken up by the PCers, twisted around, and used as a weapon.

We have no doubt that Carol Iannone would survive very well without serving on the National Council of the Humanities.

But we fear for the intellectual life of this country should the odious orthodoxy Iannone's critics are seeking to promote by denying her this seat succeed.

Glimmer of hope on the crime front