

Into battle with a culture warrior

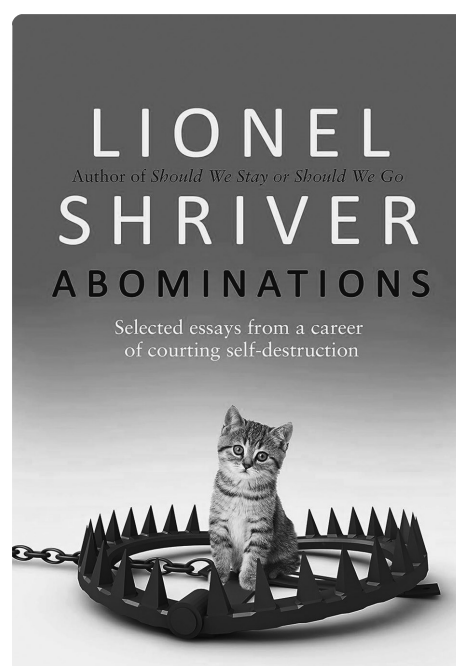
Abominations: Selected Essays From a Career of Courting Self-Destruction by Lionel Shriver

article by Rachel Cooke

(1) Of all the many hundreds of people I've interviewed down the years, only a handful have ever liked to refer to themselves in the third person, a habit I usually take as a sign of borderline insanity. About Lionel Shriver, however, I see no current cause for alarm. OK, so she does call herself Shriver in the introduction to her latest book ("Shriver supported Brexit," she writes, at the beginning of a sizeable list of the crimes she has committed in the eyes of the progressive and the pious). But her sanity, it seems to me, is not (or not yet) in doubt. Offer her a glass of fizzing, liberal-left Kool-Aid and her response will be to run, at speed, to the nearest tap in search of a generous gallon of cold water.

(2) In *Abominations*, a collection mostly of her journalism, Shriver splashes this icy water all over and it's very bracing; as I read, I thought of those scientists who tell us that a daily cold shower can help to boost the human immune system. It feels ever more vital to me — a matter of simple good health — that people try sometimes to read writers with whom they disagree (though I don't always disagree with her); to do so is akin to filling the lungs with oxygen. It's not only that we can't know what we really think unless we've something to push against; it should be possible, just occasionally, for us to change our minds. Almost nothing worries me more about our present culture than the fact that the words "I was wrong" are now almost entirely absent from public discourse.

(3) Among the subjects Shriver tackles in *Abominations* are free speech, identity politics and the language of gender ideology, though if this sounds hard going — another culture wars slog — the mix is leavened with pieces about her addiction to exercise, what it feels like to break up with a friend and a droll skit on all the things she didn't do during the first lockdown (learn Russian, read Proust, take a virtual tour of the British Museum). Nevertheless, a good place to begin might be with her 2016 speech to the Brisbane Writers festival in which she spoke — rightly, in my view — against the notion of 29



Novelists, she said, must be allowed to inhabit characters unlike themselves and to relate experiences alien from their own. “Writers are paid to step into other people’s shoes, and try on their hats,” is how she put it. As you may recall, not only did someone walk out; afterwards, the festival, which had signed off on the subject of Shriver’s address long before she arrived in Australia, panicked and, with utmost cowardice, organised a “right of reply” event.

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(5) According to Shriver, there have been three attempts so far to cancel her, of which this was the first (the second, and potentially most deleterious, occurred in 2018 when she ridiculed the language of diversity as it appeared in a questionnaire sent by Penguin Random House to its authors). The failure of such campaigns involves a certain satisfaction for both sides, I think. If Shriver is glad still to be in business — like anyone, she has bills to pay — her critics are able to regard the existence of a book such as *Abominations* as proof that cancel culture, supposedly an invention of the right, doesn’t really exist. But it’s not as simple as this, of course. Even if there are currently no forces actively moving against her at her publisher, I find it hard to imagine Shriver being invited, in 2022, to several of the festivals that commissioned pieces in this book. Whatever the reading public may feel, the organisers just don’t like her any more, whether or not they care to admit it.

(6) Even five years ago I would have mocked the idea that a writer in a country such as Britain could be considered “brave”; save your tears for those living under totalitarian regimes, I would have said, waving my PEN¹⁾ membership. No longer. Merely to ask questions — in some circles, about some subjects — is now thought to be a grievous, violent thing, a situation even the attempted murder of Salman Rushdie has, it’s already obvious, done nothing to change. I want to be clear. While I reserve the right, as Shriver does, not to use the term cis to describe myself, I disagree with her when it comes to immigration, Brexit and (to a degree) the bulldozing of statues. But I do like to read her on these subjects, and not only because — ha! — she confirms me in my own rightness. In rooms everywhere — at publishers and newspapers, at our national broadcaster and in meetings where literary prizes are judged — a certain silence has fallen. If people such as her don’t make noise 32 we’re going to end up in the kind of barbarous intellectual prison where bad jokes about sombreros are positively to be longed for.

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noot 1 PEN: a worldwide association of writers that, among others acts as voice on behalf of writers who are harassed or worse for their views