

Lionel Shriver's Address on Cultural Appropriation Roils a Writers Festival

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ABSTRACT

There was a backlash at an event in Brisbane, Australia, after Ms. Shriver said it was acceptable for white writers to appropriate minority culture in their work.

FULL TEXT

Corrections Appended

BRISBANE, Australia -- Officials in charge of an Australian writers festival were so upset with the address by their keynote speaker, the American novelist Lionel Shriver, that they publicly disavowed her remarks.

Links to her appearance were also temporarily unavailable on the festival website, leading supporters of Ms. Shriver to complain of censorship, but festival officials said it was only a technical malfunction on their website, which was repaired later.

The event, the Brisbane Writers Festival, which ended Sunday, also hurriedly organized counterprogramming, billed as a "right of reply" for critics of Ms. Shriver, whose speech belittled the movement against cultural appropriation. They scheduled the rebuttal opposite a session Saturday afternoon in which Ms. Shriver was promoting her new novel, "The Mandibles."

Ms. Shriver had been billed as speaking on "community and belonging" but focused on her views about cultural appropriation, a term that refers to the objections by members of minority groups to the use of their customs or culture (or even characters of their ethnicity) by artists or others who do not belong to those groups.

Ms. Shriver criticized as runaway political correctness efforts to ban references to ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation from Halloween celebrations, or to prevent artists from drawing on ethnic sources for their work. Ms. Shriver, the author of 13 novels, who is best known for her 2003 book, "We Need to Talk About Kevin," was especially critical of efforts to stop novelists from cultural appropriation. She deplored critics of authors like Chris Cleave, an Englishman, for presuming to write from the point of view of a Nigerian girl in his best-selling book "Little Bee."

Ms. Shriver noted that she had been criticized for using in "The Mandibles" the character of a black woman with Alzheimer's disease, who is kept on a leash by her homeless white husband. And she defended her right to depict members of minority groups in any situation, if it served her artistic purposes.

"Otherwise, all I could write about would be smart-alecky 59-year-old 5-foot-2-inch white women from North

Carolina," she said.

Ms. Shriver donned a sombrero for much of her speech -- an allusion to a case in the United States in which articles of impeachment were drawn up (and later rescinded) against non-Mexican student government members for doing the same during a fiesta-themed tequila party at Bowdoin College. To frequent laughter from the audience, Ms. Shriver warned that the anti-cultural-appropriation movement that began in America had already reached Britain -- where she lives most of the year -- and might be headed to Australia.

Actually, it seems to have already arrived. In the middle of Ms. Shriver's speech on Thursday night, an Australian writer of Sudanese and Egyptian origin, Yassmin Abdel-Magied, got up and walked out, making live posts on Twitter about her dismay at what she described as "a poisoned package wrapped up in arrogance and delivered with condescension."

"I have never walked out of a speech," Ms. Abdel-Magied wrote in a post published on Medium.com and Guardian.com . But Ms. Shriver's, she added, "became a celebration of the unfettered exploitation of the experiences of others, under the guise of fiction."

The movement against cultural appropriation has grown in recent years, targeting singers like Miley Cyrus, who "twerk" onstage, and white men who wear dreadlocks.

After her Brisbane speech, Ms. Shriver was accosted by a festival participant in the hallway of the State Library of Queensland, who shouted, "How dare you come to my country and offend our minorities?" The author said that the woman had clearly not actually heard her speech, which made no mention of Australian minorities.

The festival's director, the poet Julie Beveridge, responded to the outrage by organizing the "right of reply" session, inviting as speakers Ms. Abdel-Magied, as well as the Korean-American author Suki Kim, whose best-selling book "Without You, There Is No Us," was based on her six months working undercover as an English teacher in North Korea.

Ms. Kim complained that books by white male writers on North Korea were better received in some quarters than books like her own. Adam Johnson's "The Orphan Master's Son" won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 2013, though Mr. Johnson did not speak Korean and had spent only three days in North Korea, Ms. Kim said. She attributed that acclaim at least partly to racism from institutions dominated by white men.

"The reality is that those from marginalized groups, even today, do not get the luxury of defining their own place in a norm that is profoundly white, straight and, often, patriarchal," Ms. Abdel-Magied said in her criticism of Ms. Shriver.

Ms. Beveridge wrote on the festival's website, after links to Ms. Shriver's speech were taken down, "As a festival of writers and thinkers, we take seriously the role we play in providing a platform for meaningful exchange and debate."

She could not be reached on Monday to ask why links to Ms. Shriver's speech were removed from the festival website. Links to the rebuttal remained active .

Ms. Beveridge has said that the festival's keynote speech was intended to set the tone for the festival, which drew scores of authors to this eastern Australian city. "Lionel Shriver, by her own admission, did not speak to her brief," Ms. Beveridge said. "The views expressed during her address were hers alone."

Ms. Shriver described the festival's response as "not very professional," and, at a later appearance at the festival, said

she was disturbed by how many of those on the political left had become what she described as censorious and totalitarian in their treatment of artists with whom they disagreed.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction: An article on Tuesday about a controversy at the Brisbane Writers Festival in Australia, where the American novelist Lionel Shriver's keynote speech belittled the movement against cultural appropriation, referred incorrectly to information about Ms. Shriver's appearance that was on the festival's website. It was temporarily unavailable because of a technical malfunction, the festival said, not because it was censored. Because of an editing error, the article misstated the given name of the author of "Little Bee," a Briton who has been criticized for writing that book from the point of view of a Nigerian girl. He is Chris Cleave, not Clive Cleave. The article also misspelled part of the title of a novel by Adam Johnson. It is "The Orphan Master's Son" (not "Sun").

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction: An article on Sept. 13 about a controversy at the Brisbane Writers Festival in Australia, where the American novelist Lionel Shriver's keynote speech belittled the movement against cultural appropriation, referred incompletely to the impeachment of two student government members at Bowdoin College for wearing sombreros during a fiesta-themed tequila party. While articles of impeachment were drawn up, they were later rescinded; there was never a final impeachment.

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