

On *Candide* and Voltaire
with Paul LeClerc,
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What was your first encounter with *Candide*?

I was first introduced to *Candide* when I was 18. I was a freshman at a Jesuit college, Holy Cross, and the problem was that *Candide* was listed on the Vatican's index of forbidden books. If you were a practicing Catholic at that point, and you wanted to read such a book, you had to get the written permission of your bishop. So being like Candide himself—young, naïve—I wrote to the bishop of western Massachusetts, whose name was Flanagan, as I remember, asking for permission to read *Candide*, *Madame Bovary* and *The Red and The Black*. All three of these books appealed to me, I guess, as forbidden fruit.

What do you like about the book?

What appealed to me, as an 18-year-old, about *Candide* was its irreverence. Its wit. Its satire. Its brevity: I still like 90-page books, as opposed to 900-page books. And, I guess, the fact that so many complex and important human elements were dealt with: war, rape, mayhem, theft, sexual trafficking; anti-Semitism is there, although Voltaire is not consciously seeing that as an evil. I think what he sought, and does indeed provide through this story and the way it evolves—and especially the ending of the story—is that we can and should deliberately structure our lives in a way that is, on the one hand, enlightened but, more importantly, becomes a bulwark, a defense, against evil that one person perpetrates against another.

The title of the book is *Candide: Or Optimism*. Was Voltaire an optimist?

No, I wouldn't call Voltaire an optimist. I think this is a very, very balanced book in terms of the way that it analyzes the notion of optimism or pessimism. You've got two characters, Martin and Pangloss, who represent those two opposing points of view. Pangloss: a sort of big mouth, the literal translation of the Greek words that make up the name. Pangloss is an irremediable optimist—he can't be remediated—he can't change, no matter what his experiences are, this conviction that all is for the best in the world. And then there's the other character of Martin, a total pessimist, killed off rather early in the text. But they represent the polar opposites that Voltaire was confronting and he comes out in the middle. So if I were to call Candide, the character, or Voltaire the creator, anything, it would be a meliorist: somebody who believes that there's a lot of evil all around but if you commit yourself to change, and you work at it, you can make things better, a bit, step by step. But, here's the key point, if you put a group of people together, or ultimately a society, that works collectively as well as individually to eradicate

evil, diminish its presence, then you get a better society. That's what Voltaire's politics are in this text.

How is America's publishing industry connected to *Candide*?

When Random House came into being, in 1928, those in charge of the company decided that the first book they would publish would be Voltaire's *Candide*—in a splendid limited edition, to be illustrated by Rockwell Kent, one of the single most important artists to illustrate books in America. And what I find very, very interesting is that on the colophon page there is a little house on the water. You could argue, I suppose, that this is the house that Candide and his companions lived in—at the end of the tale when they're cultivating the garden on the banks of the Bosphorus—but the house itself becomes the Random House logo. Many, round the world, are familiar with the Random House logo, but I doubt there are many people that know its origin is the last page, in effect, of the great Random House edition of *Candide*.

How would Voltaire view our world today?

First and foremost I think that Voltaire was, in the best sense of the term, a propagandist. He used all the means at his disposal, in the 18th century, to get across as effectively as he could his message, which was basically a message of change. I think he would embrace new media: he would embrace the Internet to get the message out. So I think that this is an age that he would capitalize on in terms of accessing people: consumers of information around the world instantaneously. So I think that would be a huge asset to whatever work he chose to be doing.

What is Voltaire's connection to human rights?

Somebody who was against war, to the extent that he was, he would be as horrified, as we all are, with not only the continuing presence of war in the world, but the vastly destructive power that we've created by which we can annihilate each other. The wars of the 18th century were brutal. They caused immense loss of life and suffering. But when you think of the 50 million people who lost their lives in the Second World War; when you look at the continuous warfare that we see in the world today; when you see the kind of want that exists—poverty, hunger, all these kinds of things—I guess Voltaire's conclusion is there's still lots of work to be done, that the world is still highly imperfect, and that one must continue to be militant, argue for justice, against intolerance, against superstition, argue for human rights. Some have said Voltaire was the founder of the human rights movement. That's a very legitimate claim to make for him because, in hindsight, he was one of the great heroes of a movement that is immensely important to society today. So I think that if he were to engage in anything now it would be the battle for human rights.

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