Mr. David Streitfeld.Book World
Th e Washington Post
1150 15 St., NW
Washington, DC 20071

3/22/98

Dear Mr. Streitfeld,

Missing from the caption on your today's article is, "Political Prejudices." A correct caption would have been "Politics, Political Prejudices and the Writer."

What is missing from the article is any recognition of the responsibility for the lack of interest in major, especially political interest in the United States is its press, with the Post as an example.

(Please excuse my typing. I'll be 85 in two weeks, my health is seriously impaired, and I have to keep my right leg horizontal and My left with the heel higher than my heart, with the typewriter between my legs. And I still do write every day and because of the boycott of the subject-matter and of the writing, particularly by the Post, it will be a massive record for our history, most never to be set in type.)

Certainly the massacre at Chiapas was a terrible thing and shou;d have been widely reported. It did no harm to report it in this country so it got the attention it deserved here.

It and other issues did and do in Latin America and the writers are heard on them there at least in part because of the different attitude of that press.

In this country, the assassination of a president is a de facto coup d'etat, regardless of the intent of the assassin or assassins. It nullified our entire system. It is the greatest of subversion to those who believe in our systemm as distinguished from those who benefit from it and from violations of at least its intent.

I wrote the first book based on the record of the Warren Commission and had it finished the middle of February, 1965. That was five months after the Report was issued, three months after the appended 26 volumes were out. I had to become a publisher to open the subject up and, broke and in debt, I became the country's smallest publisher.

A friend who was my Republican Congressman took the ribbon copy of the manuscript to the Post after reading it. He knew some of the editors. The manuscript was given to the outstanding liberal on the news staff, the late Larry Stern. Tow or three months later when I asked for it from Larry, he had a marker at page 47 of the truplie-spaced ms. He'd gone no farthur in it.

After more than a hundred rejections internationally, without a single adverse editorial comment, I became a publisher. Made a success of that first book, too. Dell, which had turned it down twice as Bell and once as Dial, came to

me and asked to reprint it. It was Dell's only best-selling work of nonfiction for six months. Went through four printings, only three accounted for in a big screwing (and suing is a practucal impossibility for the average writer who has a suit) and even then not a paper, Post included, even mentioned that first book on our de facto coup d'etat.

That, with difficulty, I still keep available, and after more than 30 years I have not had a call or a letter from any of those of whom that work is so critical complaining that I was unfair or inaccurate in what I said of him.

At the Post its then review, if I remember his name correctly, it was Geoffrey Schmidt, like Whitewash: The Report on the Warren Report very much and wrote a favorable revliew. He and his secretary are my source for telling you he was told to kill it by Ben Bradlee, with the explanation he did not know enough to know whether in the book I was truthful or accurate.

(With that standard no Einstein ought ever write a book.)

I've published I think about 10 now, without one being reviewed by the Post or by any daily of which I know, or Sunday.

I was Andy Jackson's one determined man who became a majority in one of my earliest FOIA lawsuit of which there are about a dozen. In the 1974 amending of that most American of laws one of my suits was cited in the debates, or in the legislative history, as requiring the amending of the investigator files exemption.

That, of course, had no news value so no paper mentioned it. I worked on the Hill and in those days there was never a minute some reporter was not in the gallery. And, of course, it is in the Congressional Record. There was a detail that made it less newsworthy: it was the sole surviving Kennedy brother who saw to it that the legislative history would be clear, without question on this.

Recently the DJ Inspector General issued a report on the troubles with the FBI's lab. It confirmed troubles but said that at least the Lab did not use perjury. Which is a lie, it did.

That was a standard FBI means of opposing me in resisting compliance with that most American of laws, FOIA:It lied its head off under oath. In an unsuccessful effort to end that perjury in 1973 I put myself under oath, voluntarily, instead of hiding behind immune lawyers pleadings, to charge perjury to the FBI's lab. If I lied I was a perjurer, and the decision on whether to prosecute was by the FBI's counsel, the USA for the DC, with the Civil Divsion sometimes involved.

How did the FBI defends itself, how did it confront the one old man who was then ill, broke and in debt? Did it charge me? No, it actually told that court, copy on request, that I could make that charge ad infinitim because I

I knew more about the assassination and surrounding events than anyone working for the FBI. And the judge accepted that as an answer, a defense!

As did the press, which ignored all of that, too.

If I'd been in Chiapas my chances of being heard would have been better.

When that intendedly dishonest ~~Pz~~ Case Closed of Gerald Posner appeared, with a major publisher who places ads in the Post, the Post gave it a big play. When My Case Open appeared, refusing ~~Pesarr~~Posner, the Post ignored that. That it referred to Posner as unable to tell the trtuth even by accident was not mentioned, nor was his proven plagiarism also charged.

I have more than 20,000 latters from total strangers, despite the total boycott of the press, and my are some of them womderful!

When my last book was published commercially, a member of the Post staff bought a copy and gave it to your department in the hope it would be reviewed. It is titled NEVER AGAIN! There was a bit of butchery at Carroll & Graf but I challenge you to get that, read it, and tell me it was not worth any mention, leave alone a review.

I don't keep records on it but I am confident that ovsr the years well over a hundred reporters have been here, none agreeing with me that I know of, and like all writing in the field, they have also had free and unsupervised acess to the fruits of my work and third of a million pages I got by all those unreported FOIA lawsuits that were among the earliest. I have yet to get a complaint from any reporter that I was not honest and accurate in what I told him. Asking nothing in return.

This has become a new kind of investigative reporting and it has brought much to light. Not that the people have any way of knowing that from their press. I have done with books what the daily press should have done and refused to do.

But not in any Chiapas, and so it is not worthy of any mention or, horror of horros, any review.

We have those who would be our equivalent of Fuentes and Garcia Marquez but, nothing personal intended, what you represent makes that impossible.

What is news has changed so raducally since my daily reporting days ended in about 1934.

We had a coup d'etat and not a paper has mentioned it, explained it in any way to the people. We have a government that resorts to felonies to violate the law. Neither is newsworthy for neither has been mentioned in any part of the press of which I know.

There is more, much more, but I doubt you want to hear it and I have to unwind myself, move around a bit and then get back to work. Writing.

Sincerely,

Harold Weisberg

By David Streitfeld

Politics and the Writer

In South America, it's almost inevitable that novelists get involved in politics or regularly comment on political issues. In this country, it's closer to laughable. When Norman Mailer ran for mayor of New York and Gore Vidal for Congress, they were treated as celebrities rather than serious candidates.

Even the tradition of major American novelists going out among real people and committing journalism has fallen way out of favor since the days of Steinbeck and Hemingway. But Gabriel Garcia Marquez's latest book, *News of a Kidnapping*, was just such a piece of reportage, while Carlos Fuentes is a frequent commentator on the troubles in Mexico.

This world was on display earlier this month at the huge "Conference on the Americas" put on in Washington, D.C. by the Organization of American States to mark its 50th anniversary. Most of the events focused on politics and economics, with panels on such issues as "Human Rights in a Democratic Era" and "Overcoming Poverty."

But there was also a panel made up of six Nobel laureates, including West Indian poet Derek Walcott, Mexican chemist Mario Molina and the United States's Jody Williams, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize last year for the campaign to ban land mines. A couple of hours earlier, Fuentes delivered one of the keynote addresses, saying, among other things, that he had no fear of the most virulent present-day form of U.S. imperialism—the cultural variety. "Who's afraid of Mickey Mouse?" the novelist asked.

Afterward, a flock of reporters sought him out for comment on the geopolitical issues of the day. When it was my turn, I told him that U.S. writers avoided politics as if it were a virus that could make them sick.

"No, it's when the writer starts avoiding things like politics that he gets sick, because then he's living in a vacuum," Fuentes responded. For a Latin American writer, he added, it would mean abandoning his historic responsibilities. "The United States and Western Europe have developed civil societies throughout the centuries that respond to issues, that take positions, start debates, publicize problems. Whereas in Latin America, if the writer does not speak, sometimes nobody speaks."

Look at the December massacre of 45 Indians, many of them women and children, by a paramilitary group in the isolated Mexican state of Chiapas. "It's a tiny village. Why should this become an international event? In a real measure, because so many writers have spoken about it. Even today, the Chiapas massacre is an example of how the voice of information is essential in societies that still lack the proper institutions. We're creating them in Mexico, but there are still remnants of the old authoritarianism. Chiapas is a case of rapacious landowners, allied to the [ruling political party] PRI, exploiting agrarian labor and perpetuating massacres. So this is where the writer intervenes to say, as Emile Zola did a hundred years ago, *J'accuse*."

On the Nobel panel, Walcott proved much more hesitant than Fuentes. Since he was the sole writer on the panel, the moderator asked him early on to define the word "democracy."

"I'm very afraid of big abstract nouns," the poet responded. "I can't explain them, and don't think I have the authority to define them." Any attempt, he added, would be "sloganeering or cliches, and I don't want to do that."

In his other comments, he touched upon important ideas, taking issue for instance with Fuentes's dismissal of Mickey Mouse. "He comes from a very big country . . . It's very hard to conquer Mexico culturally. That's not true of the Caribbean."

The Caribbean, in fact, is well on the way to becoming an economic colony of the States. The beaches used to belong to the people, Walcott noted; now they're often fenced off for luxury hotels for tourists. This is all being done in the name of economic progress, he added, and if you tried to fight it you were accused of condemning the islanders to poverty.

The format of the panel wouldn't permit these ideas to be treated in depth, however. "The idea these days is, 'Hurry up and get to the point.' " Walcott noted to me later. "It even affects oral and written syntax. You can't have too many parentheses in a conversation. Henry James would have taken a long time to answer those questions."

As for writers making snap declarations, whether political, social or artistic, "I don't think they're good at that. I don't think they should be good at it. The process of examination that goes into creating anything—especially fiction or poetry—is obviously much more complicated. If anyone asks you to summarize it, you have a great fear of being glib or pompous. That's my fear, at least."

Yet while his own work is not considered especially political, he does share Fuentes's notion about a social role for writers. "I think it relates to the experience of poverty. This is a very well-off country, whereas the immediacy of poverty in places like Mexico and the Caribbean makes you aware, as it makes me aware daily, of the deprivation that does happen with people. And that the writer's responsibility lies with these people, not with the well-off in cities where things work and there is a comfortable rhythm to life."

Bear's Dinosaurs

Greg Bear is an award-winning science fiction writer, prolific enough to have published two new books last month. At a time when even very good sf writers are having some trouble making headway, last year was his best ever.

Nevertheless, Bear said, "If I were 20 years old, I'd be fighting to get into motion pictures. That's where the smart money would go—writing screenplays. I'd be horribly frustrated, driven crazy, never get anything produced, and make 10 times more money than I'm making now."

But would he be as happy?

"No, but I'd be rich. And in the '80s and '90s, that's far more important than being happy."

PHOTO © BY JOAN GERE

Greg Bear, winner of two Hugo and three Nebula Awards

The more interesting of the new books, to my mind, is *Dinosaur Summer*, Bear's first explicitly juvenile work.

"It's not explicitly juvenile," the author said. "It's just got a young character. Otherwise it's a completely adult novel. We categorize far too much."

And so it went for the next hour. Bear disagreed with almost everything I said, and vice versa. *Dinosaur Summer*, for instance, is most definitely a juvenile novel—the alternate-worlds story, narrated by 15-year-old Peter, of the efforts of a circus troupe to return some real-life dinosaurs back to their natural habitat in South America.

The illustrations, by Tony DiTerlizzi, are extremely good. Doing an illustrated book was, in fact, part of Bear's motivation. Another part was the desire to pay homage to his own childhood. "Basically, this goes back to where I started in science fiction, with the Ray Harryhausen movies."

In fact, he made the special effects wizard behind such classics as "It Came From Beneath the Sea" and "Twenty Million Miles to Earth" a character in the story. Harryhausen approved. In what must be one of the few cases where a character in the novel has also provided a blurb, he calls *Dinosaur Summer* "a vicarious and wonderful adventure."

Dinosaurs are of course standard fodder for children's novels, and adults' too. Think of Michael Crichton's *Jurassic Park*, a book that Bear dislikes. In fact, he seems to dislike everything by Crichton.

"In every single Crichton novel you find out that authority figures have badly designed something and screwed up horribly, and by third act everything goes back to the way it was. It's fake science fiction. Science fiction is about change. In this book, it's about growing up, fathers and sons, and the redemption of adventure."

Bear is an enthusiast for science fiction, which is only natural for a science fiction writer. Whereas it seems to an outsider like me that a sort of Gresham's law operates in the field, with the popularity of the bad writers driving out the good, Bear sees more sinister forces at work.

"Look how popular science fiction movies are," he says. "But if sf has won the war, it's lost the battle. And New York"—his shorthand for the publishing world—"is guaranteeing that this will continue. They actively do not support and do not like the fact that science fiction is popular. They don't believe it's had this major influence. They can't see it. So writers everywhere believe that you have to write like Henry James to be a good writer."

Or like Edith Wharton. "I saw Scorsese's version of *The Age of Innocence*. I thought this was a wonderful movie, it's brilliant, and it's as alien to me as *Dune* would be. There was nothing in that film I could attach to. None of these characters had any relevance to my life. But I'm being told, and the film is saying, that this is sacred text."

All this is arguable, but for a moment let Bear continue to criticize those who "come along and say that what I'm writing is [junk] because it has spaceships and talks about the future. I've never had in my entire career a book reviewed outside of the science fiction ghetto in the New York papers, or in Los Angeles."

His hometown of Seattle is worse. "Here, even with Microsoft and Boeing, the paper has a book section where the book editor stands up and says, 'I've never liked science fiction.' But 70 percent of the people who work on the upper levels of Microsoft are science fiction readers."

According to whom?

"Me. I've met them."

Maybe science fiction isn't as important, isn't as influential, as Bear thinks.

"You don't believe that. Go down to Toys R Us. The stuff I imagined when I was a kid in the '50s, the things I wanted to play with, is on the racks now: Starship Troopers toys, Star Wars, Star Trek, Conan, John Carter of Mars, Tarzan."

Or look at Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* series, which was influential in a different way. Bear's other new book is *Foundation and Chaos*, the second in a new series (the first was written by Gregory Benford) set in the *Foundation* universe.

This "sharecropping" on worlds created by others, I suggested, was part of the reason even the best science fiction writers, like Bear and Benford, get less respect than they deserve. You don't find Norman Mailer doing sequels to Gore Vidal books.

"I didn't have as much freedom as in one of my own books, because I'm writing in someone else's universe," Bear admitted. "But this is *the* universe, the one that went on to become the standard science fiction world that we see in motion pictures. If you watch 'Star Wars', then go back and read the original *Foundation* trilogy, you realize what George Lucas was reading when he was a kid."

Asimov was an odd duck, a genius who wrote voluminously partly because he never did anything else. He didn't drive, and hated to leave New York City. He seems an odd sort to write a series that ranges across intergalactic space. But then the books, as Bear points out, are true to his personality. "It was the first drawing room galactic empire novel. Everything happened between two or three people in small rooms, but the scope covered the entire galaxy."

At the end of our chat, exhausted, I told Bear he was one of the most opinionated writers I'd ever met.

"That's good. If you don't have opinions nowadays, you're not going to survive." ■

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY MARCH 22, 1999