

2016

Iannone, Carol: News Articles (1991): News Article 40

Wayne Booth

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.uri.edu/pell_neh_I_36

Recommended Citation

Booth, Wayne, "Iannone, Carol: News Articles (1991): News Article 40" (2016). *Iannone, Carol: News Articles (1991)*. Paper 48.
http://digitalcommons.uri.edu/pell_neh_I_36/48

This News Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Education: National Endowment for the Arts and Humanities, Subject Files I (1973-1996) at DigitalCommons@URI. It has been accepted for inclusion in Iannone, Carol: News Articles (1991) by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@URI. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@etal.uri.edu.

212-477-9863

CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Post-It™ brand fax transmittal memo 7671 # of pages 1

To <i>Phyllis Franklin</i>	From <i>Quade Joffe</i>
Co.	Co.
Dept.	Phone #
Fax # <i>212-477-9863</i>	Fax #

07-24-1991 14:34

4871545

ENGLISH DEPARTMENT

P. 01/01

Phyllis - I don't seem to have noted the date of this - Jerry

Humanities panel nominee fails the 'distinguished service' test

By Wayne Booth

The Tribune editorial recommending the appointment of Professor Carol Lanonne to the National Humanities Council is attacking the Modern Language Association for opposing her appointment. It goes wildly astray as a past president of the MLA I might perhaps be expected to come to the defense of my organization. But my point is not to defend MLA. Rather it is to express the need for a closer look at the facts about Lanonne's nomination.

The only evidence offered to support it, aside from the claim that the Modern Language Association is opposing her for purely political motives, is that she is "outspoken." That is not exactly the criterion I thought that the Tribune would consider in itself adequate, and it is certainly not the criterion stated in the original legislation establishing the Endowment and the council. Nominees for the council should, the law states, "have established records of distinguished service and scholarship or creativity." Surely the crux about any appointment should not be whether a given opponent of the nominee has established, like all previous nominees to the council, a distinguished record of some

kind, scholarly or creative.

When one looks at Carol Lanonne's actual record, one finds that unlike the other two current nominees (who are equally "conservative"), and unlike the other present and past members of the council, she has no "distinguished" record whatever, only about 30 articles and short reviews, none in scholarly journals.

The Tribune editorial expresses a curious contempt for that word "scholarly," mocking work that is published in "obscure publications produced solely for scholars." I share the wish that more scholars would make their work more widely accessible, but the NEH was founded in part to ensure the highest quality of a kind of writing that cannot, by its nature, earn a very broad audience and thus support itself commercially. But even if we accepted the Tribune's curious denigration of scholarship, should we not ask, in the light of the law: Does Professor Lanonne show herself to be "distinguished," in her own kind of publication or any other—distinguished, that is, by any other standard than "outspokenness"?

I've recently read through a half dozen of her pieces—and I have no temptation to read any more. Once you get the pitch—something like "all non-traditional views of art are undermining the Republic"—you can predict what she'll say about any work she reviews. Though some of her attacks are in my view justified, as a group they are monotonous and frequently distorted skirmishes in what she herself calls

a "war of words." In one camp we see an increasingly beleaguered minority of right-thinking defenders of the faith, in the other a savage pack of politicized enemies of truth and light: feminist and black novelists; feminist critics; and indeed all writers, male or female, who do not embrace her special set of values.

Lanonne thus divides up the whole world into two poles, presenting a choice between "protest and transcendence, between suffering and strength, between determinism and personal will, between collective and individual identity" (Commentary, December 1987). Most of us will of course share at least some of her values (does anyone really prefer suffering to strength?). But I can find no evidence that Lanonne has ever addressed any question in the way that the scholars I admire address questions: with the open-mindedness and objectivity that she finds lacking in her enemies.

Such scholars, if their work is original and challenging, often find it cited by other scholars—though not usually in popular journals. When one looks for the record of citations of Lanonne's work, whether in scholarly or non-scholarly journals, one finds that she has been mentioned a total of eight times, as compared with the hundreds of citations for other members and nominees to the council. One can share the wish that more scholarship were less esoteric and still as cited. If this were a nomination for a national science council, would the Tribune favor appointing someone who had failed to gain the attention and approval of other scientists?

Wayne Booth is distinguished service professor emeritus in English language and literature at the University of Chicago.