

## THE SHADOW OF THE TIGER: LAW AND THE LITERARY

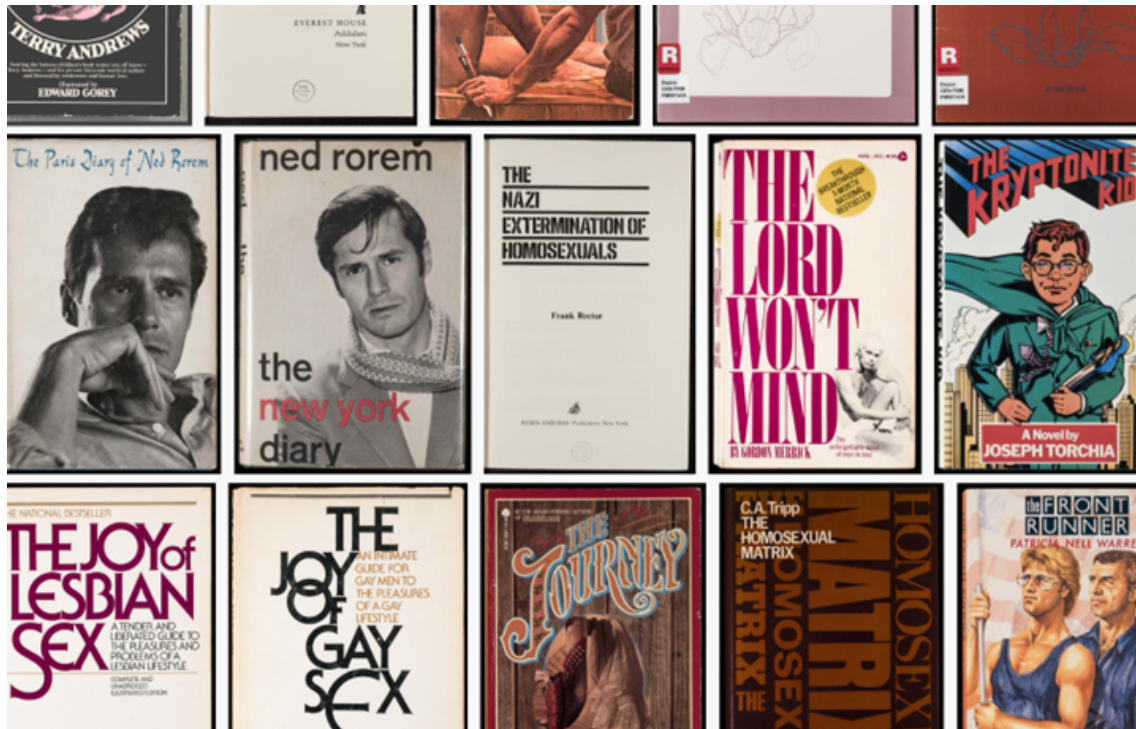
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*Exterior of Gay's the Word bookshop: CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons.*

Five years after Gay's The Word was established in 1979, it was raided by Her Majesty's Customs and Excise department on 10 April 1984. The booksellers were accused of illegally importing "indecent and obscene" materials in contravention of the 1876 Customs Consolidation Act. This raid, the seizure of over 140 titles, and the subsequent prosecution of Gay's The Word directors and staff on over 100 charges for conspiracy to import indecent books, was known as "Operation Tiger". Police also raided the directors' homes and seized additional materials at ports of



*Seized Books! exhibition, Senate House Library, University of London*

entry. Operation Tiger also affected Lavender Menace, an LGBT bookshop based in Edinburgh.

Following the promulgation of the Obscene Publications Act of 1959, neither the publication nor the possession of “obscene” material was criminalised outright. However, the protections of this Act only extended to works with literary or artistic merit which had been published in the United Kingdom (UK). The majority of the stock at Gay’s The Word had been imported from American institutions, such as the bookstore Giovanni’s Room in Philadelphia, since the LGBT publishing industry in the United States was much larger than that in the UK. Some of the seized titles included educational books and academic reference works, like *A Family Matter: A Parents’ Guide to Homosexuality* by Dr Charles Silverstein, *The Nazi Extermination of Homosexuals* by Frank Rector, and Christine de Pisan’s *The Book of the City of Ladies* published in 1405. The raid also targeted works of fiction, including Nancy Garden’s *Annie on My Mind*—one of the first lesbian young adult novels with a happy ending—and *Bodies and Souls*, a novel by the Mexican-American novelist and essayist John Francisco Rechy.

Over £9,000 of stock was seized on 10 April and thousands of pounds more in stock would be taken over the two years Operation Tiger ran. As a result, Gay’s The Word faced serious financial hardship. The incident

was reported in the LGBT newspaper *Capital Gay*, which also advertised the inaugural meeting of a community action and fundraising group to support the shop's legal defence. At the initial meeting on Sunday 15 April in South Bank, the community raised £500 for the shop's legal defence. Over the next 24 months, more than £50,000 was raised. Newspapers like *Gay News* and *Gay Scotland* also encouraged their readers to apply political pressure to their local Members of Parliament and to the Conservative Government in general. The prosecution initially appeared to progress when Giovanni's Room was named as a co-conspirator in 1985, but all the charges, including those against Gay's *The Word*, were dropped by HM Customs and Excise the following year.

Although this case was nominally about illegal imports, it obviously speaks to the relation between homosexuality and the legal definition of obscenity. For instance, *The Joy of Gay Sex* (Silverstein & White) was seized, but distribution of the heterosexual equivalent, *The Joy of Sex* (Comfort 1972), continued uninterrupted. No one was ever convicted in connection with Operation Tiger, but the bookstore, its books, its employees, and directors were nevertheless harmed by the selective application of the law. Indeed, above all, this incident evidences the ways in which censorship laws were, and often still are, preferentially weaponized as tools of control and repression against already marginalized groups.

## If you're visiting during opening hours...

... why not go inside and purchase a book? Browse the shelves or ask a member of staff for a recommendation.

### **About the author**

**Shekinah Vera-Cruz** is a final year PhD student in the Department of Classics at the University of Warwick, and their research is funded by the Wolfson Foundation. Their current work is an interdisciplinary study of ritual acts in Roman civil law, especially those which govern the creation of wills, alter the constitution of the family, and effect changes of status and citizenship.

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## References

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- de Pisan, Christine. *The Book of the City of Ladies*. 1405.
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## Legislation, Regulations and Rules

Customs Consolidation Act 1876

Obscene Publications Act 1959

## More on Operation Tiger and Gay's The Word

Kassir, Leila & Richard Espley. *Queer between the Covers: Histories of Queer Publishing and Publishing Queer Voices*. London: University of London Press, 2024.

[Operation Tiger trial: list of defendants.](#)

[Seized Books! Exhibition](#), University of London