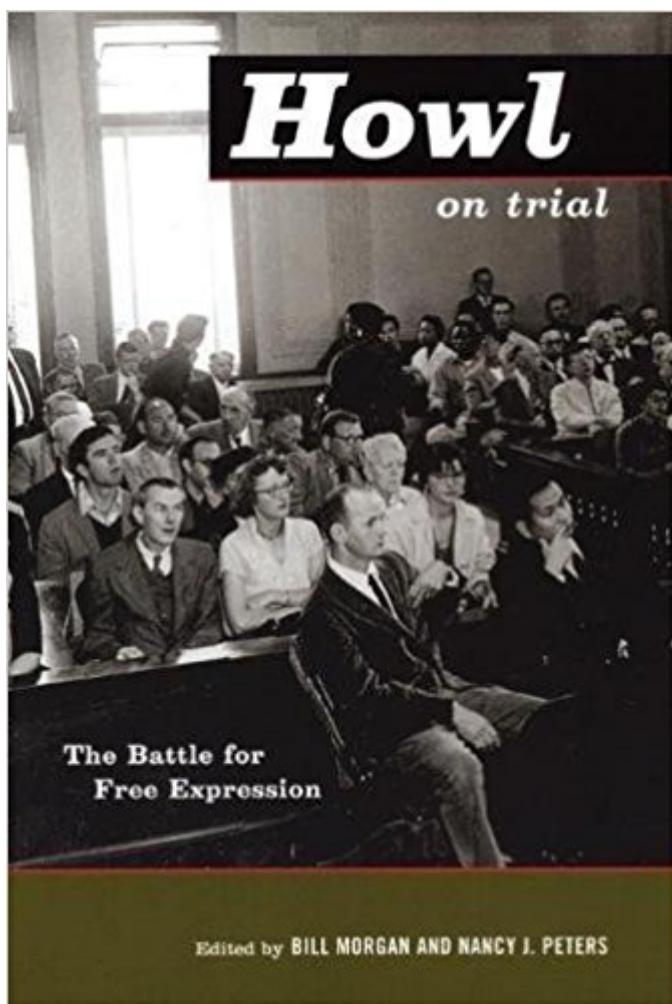


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# Howl On Trial: The Battle For Free Expression



## Synopsis

To celebrate the 50th anniversary of Howl and Other Poems, with nearly one million copies in print, City Lights presents the story of editing, publishing, and defending Allen Ginsberg's landmark poem within a broader context of obscenity issues and censorship of literary works. This collection begins with an introduction by publisher Lawrence Ferlinghetti, who shares his memories of hearing "Howl" first read at the 6 Gallery, of his arrest, and the subsequent legal defense of Howl's publication. Never-before-published correspondence of Ginsberg, Ferlinghetti, Kerouac, Gregory Corso, John Hollander, Richard Eberhart, and others provides an in-depth commentary on the poem's ethical intent and its social significance to the author and his contemporaries. A section on the public reaction to the trial includes newspaper reportage, op-ed pieces by Ginsberg and Ferlinghetti, and letters to the editor from the public, which provide fascinating background material on the cultural climate of the mid-1950s. A timeline of literary censorship in the United States places this battle for free expression in a historical context. Also included are photographs, transcripts of relevant trial testimony, Judge Clayton Horn's decision and its ramifications, and a long essay by Albert Bendich, the ACLU attorney who defended Howl on constitutional grounds. Editor Bill Morgan discusses more recent challenges to Howl in the late 1980s and how the fight against censorship continues today in new guises.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

For the 50th anniversary of the publication of Allen Ginsberg's Howl and Other Poems, the poet's

archivist and biographer Morgan and City Lights publisher Peters, and City Lights was Howl's original publisher) have assembled this intermittently fascinating collection of documents, mostly related to the book's obscenity trial in San Francisco in 1957. These documents provides a coherent narrative of the composition of the poem, as well as the prosecution of publisher Lawrence Ferlinghetti and one of his City Lights employees and their eventual exoneration. The poet's letters discussing the publication of his book are often illuminating, particularly the massive letter to John Hollander that dissects every element of Howl, but not all the correspondence is equally interesting. Similarly, the lengthy trial transcript is entertaining at times, but would have benefited from being rendered into prose and excerpted appropriately. The book is certainly useful as a reference tool for those researching Ginsberg or obscenity law, and will interest Ginsberg completists, but this isn't a smooth read for a general audience. (Nov.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Adult/High School "This compilation of essays, correspondence, court transcripts, memoirs, newspaper accounts, and photographs concerning the 1956 publication of Allen Ginsberg's Howl and Other Poems adds up to a fascinating account of one of the most significant cases of censorship in U.S. history. The editors do a superb job of setting the stage leading to the court case and of providing thoughtful testimony to its lasting importance. Among the many helpful features: a chronology of Howl the book and Howl the case; another of censorship in general; reproductions of several San Francisco Chronicle articles, editorials, and letters to the editor; and the complete text of the poem. By far, though, the most compelling parts of the book are the "Howl Letters" and large sections of the official transcript from the 1957 trial. Most of the correspondence is between Ginsberg and Lawrence Ferlinghetti, but there are letters to and/or from Jack Kerouac, Gregory Corso, John Hollander, Richard Eberhart, Louis Ginsberg, and Neal Cassady. These letters provide a window into the meaning and significance of Ginsberg's great poem. Besides Ginsberg and the chief defense lawyer, J. W. Ehrlich, the other person who shines brightly in these pages is Ferlinghetti, a longtime champion of free expression. This book is a gold mine for reports on censorship, especially those in need of primary-source material." Robert Saunderson, Berkeley Public Library, CA Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Very good chronicle of the trial, from confiscation to media coverage to trial transcript and a few extras, including the City Lights version of "Howl". I'm going to start including it as required reading

for my undergraduate Humanities course on San Francisco at SF State. Bravo!

Nicely edited book on everything to do with Howl and the trial. The trial transcript excerpts are the best part. Absolutely wonderful.

When I read this book I felt a certain nostalgia, because the "Howl" obscenity trial took place fifty years ago when I was a kid, and the Beatnik writers, of whom Ginsberg became the most famous, seem so rarified to me now. It's as though they had been filmed in black and white and the movies now jump and rattle as we watch them, the images scratched, browned and antiquarian. Also, it gave me considerable pleasure to know that the government censorship that the "not guilty" judgment in that trial abolished had remained abolished ever since. In October, 2007, however, I learned that this is not true. For the fiftieth anniversary of the trial, Pacifica Radio, the organization made up of the community-supported radio stations KPFA, KPFK, WBAI and others, considered the possibility of broadcasting a reading of the poem "Howl". It happens that, besides being the object of a landmark First Amendment freedom of speech judgment in a court of law, "Howl" is one of the truly remarkable poems of the twentieth century. So a commemoration of it seemed altogether laudable. But because of feared Federal Communications Commission rules on what constitutes obscene or unacceptable speech on the public airwaves, Pacifica determined not to do the broadcast on its stations. They worry that if the FCC fines them for broadcasting unacceptable speech, they will have to involve themselves in a freedom of speech trial, the costs of which could bankrupt Pacifica and put the stations out of business. So the problem is subtler now than it was in 1957. You don't have to wait for actual censorship itself. The very fear that it will come causes organizations to muzzle themselves now. Perhaps you'd win in a trial. But you don't test the waters willy-nilly because you'll drown in the attorney fees that will result, no matter the judgment in court. Luckily, though, we have the internet. The rules regarding broadcasting do not pertain to webcasts, and Pacifica has posted a reading of "Howl" by Ginsberg himself on their site [...] as part of a longer program in which a very illuminating discussion of the history of the poem's publication, the 1957 trial and the importance of the poem as literature can also be found. Besides the poem itself, the highlight of the program is a conversation with Lawrence Ferlinghetti, now eighty-eight years old, the San Francisco poet and bookseller who originally published "Howl." The First Amendment right guaranteeing free speech is the issue here, even though it's being obscured by the FCC's self-important view of what constitutes "acceptable" speech. But even though the situation highlights the true dunderheaded silliness of the FCC's point of view, all is not bad,

because the censorship of an artistic event by the government usually results in unruly fame for that event. Poetry is not much read in the United States, and without the 1957 trial, "Howl" would probably have remained an important work by an obscure poet, read only by students in the academy and the struggling few who actually write poetry themselves. But because of the trial, *Howl, And Other Poems* has now sold almost a million copies, and continues to sell briskly. Happily, it is such a fine poem, so terrifying a view of contemporary society, and one so beautifully written that it is my opinion that few who read it will be unaffected by it. Ginsberg was culturally prescient as well. In the second section of the poem, a long accusation of American industrial/government rapaciousness, he uses the figure of Moloch as a symbol of corporate indifference to the individual. "Moloch whose mind is pure machinery! Moloch whose blood is running money! Moloch whose fingers are ten armies! Moloch whose breast is a cannibal dynamo! Moloch whose ear is a smoking tomb!" The biblical Moloch was one of the princes of Hell. A terrifying demon, he is described by Milton in *Paradise Lost* as "besmeared with blood/Of human sacrifice, and parents' tears," a fearsome devil who eats the children of the faithful. Ginsberg's Moloch is the self-serving corporate entity who, for money, foments armed conflict. A more accurate metaphor for the current war footing of the United States cannot be found. Perhaps the muffling of "Howl" in 2007 will bring about the same firestorm of wild enthusiasm on the part of a general public that the 1957 trial caused. As was the case as described in this fine book by Nancy J. Peters and Bill Morgan, this would be a humorous and good thing, and it may just happen. One hopes that imaginative minds will prevail against the FCC watchdogs of your public morals, in the way that Judge Clayton W. Horn prevailed, who officiated at the 1957 "Howl" obscenity trial. He wrote in his opinion, "Would there be any freedom of press or speech if one must reduce his vocabulary to vapid innocuous euphemism?" The answer, of course, is no. *Howl and Other Poems* (Pocket Poets)

Celebrating the 50th anniversary of the publication of Allen Ginsberg's "Howl and Other Poems", *Howl on Trial: The Battle for Free Expression* presents the inside story of editing, publishing, and defending the poem *Howl* in the context of censorship of literary works, and the 1957 obscenity trial in San Francisco that supposedly represented "the people" versus City Lights, the bookshop that published and sold "Howl and Other Poems." *Howl on Trial* includes correspondence between Allen Ginsberg and numerous others concerning the poem and efforts to censor it; a selection of newspaper reportage, magazine essays, cartoons, photographs, and letters to the editor that reveal the cultural climate of the mid-1950s; excerpts from the trial transcript; ACLU defense counsel Albert Bendich's reflections on the *Howl* case; and much more. A fascinating examination of the battle for

free speech in microcosm, offering insights into the ongoing struggle for the right to express ideas without fear or harassment.

I purchased this book and Ginsberg's Howl at the City Lights bookstore in San Francisco. What a great experience it was to peruse the shelves and aisles of this literary landmark. Howl on Trial is a great read into the Beat culture and San Francisco Renaissance of the North Beach area in the 1950s.

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