



# The Trials of Lenny Bruce

*Ronald K.L. Collins , David Skover*

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## About the Author

Ronald K.L.

Collins graduated from Loyola Law School in Los Angeles and was a judicial fellow in the United States Supreme Court. He is currently the First Amendment scholar-in-residence at the First Amendment Center in Arlington, Virginia. He has written numerous scholarly articles in the Harvard, Stanford and Michigan Law Reviews, and more than 150 newspaper op-ed pieces. He edited *The Death of Contract and Constitutional Government in America*.

David M. Skover graduated from Yale Law School and clerked for Judge Jon O. Newman of the U.S. Court of Appeals, Second Circuit. He now teaches as a law professor at Seattle University Law School. Skover has written numerous scholarly articles in the Harvard, Stanford and Michigan Law Reviews, and coauthored (with Pierre Schlag) *Tactics of Legal Reasoning*.

Collins and Skover were the founding coeditors of *Books-on-Law*, a monthly online journal dedicated to book reviews and have written for a variety of publications, including the New York Times, Washington Post, Los Angeles Times and The Nation. Their first book together was *The Death of Discourse*.

Nat Hentoff writes weekly articles for The Village Voice and has written numerous articles, essays and books about politics, human rights and jazz. He has received numerous awards, including

the National Press Foundation Award for Distinguished Contributions to Journalism and the American Bar Association Certificate of Merit for Coverage of the Criminal Justice System.

## The Trials of Lenny Bruce Details

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# From Reader Review The Trials of Lenny Bruce for online ebook

## Nancy says

Lot's of great information about a character that enjoyed pushing the line of acceptance in a world so blinded by their prejudice

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## Stephen McQuiggan says

The story of a comedian persecuted and prosecuted for his words. A Kafkaesque trawl through the courts for the right of free speech. I can't say I ever found Lenny funny, but his importance is overwhelming; his act was really quite tame by today's standards, but without it there would be no Hicks, no standard bearers for the 'Truth'. The truth is a dangerous thing for a system built on lies and self deceit - the level of hypocrisy meted out by self righteous arbiters of 'taste' like Chief Justice John Murtagh and his ilk is really quite appalling. The legalese here could crack your skull with boredom; I guess that's how it works. The law should be plain, simple, fair, and not shrouded in obscurity - just like Lenny himself. We owe him a debt, that's for sure - remember, never take the Fifth.

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## Chuck O'Connor says

I came to an appreciation of Lenny Bruce, as I suppose most people might, during my youth, when the weight of growing up was mistaken as persecution, and Lenny could be patron saint to my perpetual sense of unique misunderstanding. Therefore, my knowledge of the man can only be seen with the patina of reverence for the rule-breaking liberality he symbolized. That is, until this book. The presentation of who Lenny Bruce was through the analysis of the many "People vs. Bruce" obscenity trials, with a dedicated commitment to a First Amendment narrative, rescues Saint Lenny from the cliched devotion I and all self-centered (and less courageous and talented than Bruce) Brucean "victims" might have, for a man caught in an unfortunate moment in history he helped change. The dedication of the authors to communicating the history and meaning of the law allow the reader to see Lenny's arrogance and recklessness and liberate his memory, so he can be a regular human being. It also provides technical ideas of free speech law with relevant historical context that are accessible and entertaining. This is a good read for people who love words and the protections we crave in saying them. It is also a great read for those of us who have minimized the human story of free expression by canonizing flawed people who make possible new cultural standards. It humbles with its insight that freedom of expression takes human courage, which can't afford the divine wisdom of martyrs. Most of all, it makes Lenny Bruce seem human. I liked that.

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## Jtack79 says

I liked learning about Lenny Bruce and his impact on a wide range of people from Margaret Cho to Hugh Hefner.

Where I agree with Skover and Collins is in their view of the fragile balance our society has with the first

amendment and how easily that social agreement can be skewed one way or the other if we as a society do not remain vigilant and open to discourse on language and what constitutes obscenity or social commentary.

I also like the inclusion of the linguistic origins of profanity; in which words like "fuck" and "shit" when examined historically are nothing more than remnants of french aristocratic dominion over anglo-saxon culture.

(Much like how white america tries to "correct" African Americans who use ebonics today because it gives them false sense of superiority in correcting the way others speak to suit their ears when the real disconnect at play is not in how a person speaks; but rather in how much is really lost from not listening to what is being said.)

I do disagree however with Skover and Collins (loosely interpreted summary on my part) pessimism about the future of free speech being equally endangered by self-censoring corporations and the historical institutions of governments and religions.

For when I look at the Lenny Bruce's, Allen Ginsburg's and Jack Kerouac's of the world, it's rather obvious that they are the artistic purists that corporations likely would have a tough time of finding a happy middle ground in which their works serve the interests of both parties.

Im not saying impossible.... just very unlikely.

So I think the people who want that artistic freedom will always find the audiences that crave it, with or without governments and corporations.... just my .02 cents.

Overall a great book about one of the most unique people to ever exist.

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### **Dave Peticolas says**

A legal history of Lenny Bruce's obscenity trials. This book is far more gripping than the subject matter might indicate. The authors document the series of misdemeanor obscenity trials which Lenny Bruce had to endure and which, arguably, contributed to his untimely death.

Bruce emerges from the book as a complex iconoclast hounded mercilessly by the authorities for daring to break cultural and religious taboos. Recommended.

A CD included with the book contains recordings of Bruce's bits, interviews with other comedians, and some of Bruce's secret recordings of his own trials. Just listening to a few of his bits makes me wish I could have seen him in person -- he must have been an amazing performer.

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### **Ryan Newman says**

The author was a rambling mess.

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**Andrew says**

I'd seen this title remaindered and never bought it because the book looked like a long list of court dates. I eventually picked it up last year for 50 cents, and I'm glad I did. Very well-written and insightful, tons of things I never new about Lenny, all laid out in a very clear narrative that doesn't overwhelm when it comes to legal mumbo jumbo. Totally fascinating book that shows how much Bruce was his own worst enemy. Being his lawyer would have truly sucked. Comes with a CD as well, various bits and audio narrated by the great Nat Hentoff.

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**Yvette says**

Great book about a man whose unconventional stand-up act tested the edges of what freedom of speech really means.

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**Joey says**

This book was a bit disturbing as far as how we treat and define obscenity in this country. to me, obscenity is generally a waste of time, sort of like jaywalking tickets. who gives a fuck? there are bigger things with which to deal. i don't know if lenny bruce is funny, but the authors of this book seem to think so (and so did a lot his contemporaries). the one thing i hate about biographies is how doting they seem to be.

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**Kristina says**

We, the American people, owe much to Lenny Bruce. He tested the limits of free speech and he won (eventually). Without him, our comedy would be much more lame and PG. It's amazing to me that he could get arrested for making jokes about religion and using mild profanity. Hooray for Lenny Bruce! Also, the accompanying cds are great. Some of the jokes aren't funny, but some are absolutely hilarious. I still remember a particular one about the Pope, Jesus, and Satan. Good stuff.

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**1sttime0ffender says**

Its a bit dry in places, a lot of places but for anyone interested in Lenny and his effect on 1st amendment rights its a must

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**Polstar says**

I bought this for my husband - it's virtually brand new with the disc inside. I can't wait to read it but it's

hardback which means I don't like to lug it about with me!

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## **Donna Davis says**

I cannot remember the last time I felt so strongly about a book I had bought. I have never, ever felt this strongly about a CD! I found, by a rare bit of luck, this hardcover book in brand new condition, in a used book store. The CD inside the cover was still sealed. It is not just an actor on the CD; it is actual footage of Bruce's voice performing (along with narration by someone else). It cost me all of five bucks. Unbelievable!

If you are a champion of free speech, you have to know that this amazing (though oh yes, profane) comedian broke new ground. It could be (and has been) argued that he paid with his life, that performing in a nightclub LINED with cops all up and down ultimately broke him, but he did not go gently.

The first time I heard the material was in the movie "Lenny", starring actor Dustin Hoffman in the title role. I knew it was good, but I was also young, had very tender ears, and I think there were times when the one-two punch of some of the words that I hadn't heard much, caused me to miss some of the point. Even then, I understood that this was a powerful thing, though.

This book and ESPECIALLY the CD, which provides not only the words, but the all-important inflections (transcribed, for those who miss some of what goes by in the snappy nightclub patter, in the book), is one of the most important pieces of primary evidence I have ever been privileged to hear, see, and own. I cannot believe the clarity of the sound! For those, like me, to whom the early sixties are not within the realm of memory, the book is essential for context. There are people who were well known at the time whose names go by like gunshots in his routine; two who come to mind were a cardinal and a bishop. The context that the CD does not provide is in the book.

The text itself is 442 pp. in length; the rest is meticulous documentation. Pictures of everyone...this is a treasure!

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## **Mr. says**

What a mess.

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## **Phil says**

The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution explicitly safeguards freedom of speech. That isn't just freedom to say what you like as long as it doesn't upset anyone - it means the right to say what you think, period. There is no qualifier.

This fact did not stop various police officers, District Attorneys, lawyers, and sundry other self-appointed guardians of public decency from trying to stop Lenny Bruce from exercising his First Amendment rights throughout the late 1950s to mid-1960s. Ostensibly, this was on grounds of the offensiveness of his language

during his scathing, foul mouthed, hilariously irreverent stand-up act: where Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes had famously declared that the First Amendment did not give licence to shout "Fire" in a crowded theatre, Bruce's antagonists sought to extend this principle to saying "Motherfucker" in a crowded nightclub. They did this by attempting to make local statutes, usually designed to suppress prostitution, stand above the Constitution; they ignored the non-public nature of nightclubs; they employed entrapment; they cited inaccurate and partial transcripts of Bruce's performances as "evidence"... It seems astonishing now, when the kind of language shockingly deployed by Lenny Bruce has become the routine stuff of American TV and film dialogue, but the suspicion must remain that the real reason for all this manufactured outrage was not so much Bruce's use of language, but rather the targets of his satire - politicians, hypocritical public moralists, religion... Here, the reaction of the powers that be is all too explicable, and enduringly familiar. As a Jewish New Yorker, the religious targets of Lenny Bruce's scorn tended to be Judaism and the Roman Catholic Church, with occasional sallies at Buddhism and Hinduism. One can only imagine the kind of reaction his contemporary equivalent might attract if, as seems very likely, he were to aim his satire at Islam.

Lenny Bruce was eventually vindicated in law, when the Constitutional principles one of his co-defendants had cited in an action against them were finally asserted on appeal, and their conviction overturned. But by this stage, Lenny was already dead, a victim of his own heroin addiction, chronic poor health, and general exhaustion from the harassment and stress he had suffered. It has to be said that he did little to help himself in his final years, attempting to defend himself in court despite a lamentable lack of legal knowledge, putting himself in contempt of court not one but three times by writing personally to the judge while a case was in progress, skipping state jurisdictions, and refusing to take advice from counsel he hadn't yet sacked. But this does not diminish the enormity of the persecution he faced, which remains a blot on the history of the U.S. justice system.

This book exposes in great and compelling detail how this happened, and does not shy away from the legal arguments involved. It is a fine contribution both to legal and social history. And as a bonus, my edition included a 74 minute CD containing live recordings of some of Lenny Bruce's contemporary satirical routines, which, for all their period relevance, remain abrasively funny and superbly timed. As the founder of what, 25 years after his death, became known as 'alternative' comedy, he still stands out as a true genius and innovator. "The Trials of Lenny Bruce" is a worthy tribute.

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## **James says**

Dig, I read this book about Lenny Bruce, *The Trials of Lenny Bruce: The Fall and Rise of an American Icon* by Ronald K.L. Collins & David M. Skover.

Collins and Skover, both lawyers, do not provide a traditional biography of the infamous "sick comic," but rather a legal lineage of his battles against misdemeanor obscenity charges brought forth as a result of his stand-up acts. The book also includes an audio CD of actual Bruce performances for which he was arrested. The supplementary interviews, commentary, and Bruce acts make for an incisive, illuminating account of this man's life.

There's plenty of relevant reasons to be reading about Lenny Bruce. That radical packet of papers we call a constitution just does not seem to go away. We've come a long way since the 60s when Bruce was prosecuted and persecuted for saying things like "dwarf motherfucker" and railing against the establishment. And if the constitution can eventually get around to protecting Bruce's raunchy, satirical-comic descendants (George Carlin, Richard Pryor, Eddie Murphy, Bill Hicks, Margaret Cho, Howard Stern, Sarah Silverman,



etc, et al), then certainly it must protect those confined and flabbergasted by the legal wrangling brought on by our modern culture's flogging of gay marriage and prisoner's rights.

Lenny Bruce is a fascinating case study in the progression of an open society's values, especially what a culture deems acceptable satire and criticism. Bruce's predicament was one artists will find themselves in for generations to come, just as Joyce, Flaubert, Miller, Ginsberg, Ferlinghetti, and Burroughs all struggled for the Freedom of Expression, the value of art free from censorship, the importance of liberating language from social constraints.

"Every age needs a Lenny Bruce and every age will try to kill him." – Peter Hall

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### **Matt Champagne says**

Kind of tedious, though passionate enough that I enjoyed it. And--let's say it--a lot of Bruce's stuff now just isn't funny. Compelling. But not funny.

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### **Mike Barnett says**

I've read a lot about Lenny Bruce, but this was the first book that covered it from the point of a legal analysis of his cases. Great book!

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### **Patrick Scattergood says**

Lenny Bruce is a man surrounded by myth, legend and a hell of a lot of hearsay but how much of it is true?

Here the authors create a fantastic look at one of the most infamous yet legendary stand up comedians of all time in the shape of Lenny Bruce.

Without Bruce there would be no George Carlin, no Bill Hicks and more so click to see the full review and see why.

<http://curiosityofasocialmisfit.blogs...>

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### **Judith says**

.....a different approach to the "dangerous Jew"...here, it is "comedy on trial", the five years during which Prosecutors sought to bust Father Bruce for "word crimes". Meticulously documents both litigants, and the literary scene of the 1960s, as taboos were broken in the struggle for Free Speech...there's a CD included with the book, of Lenny's own words.

Do you swing with the First Amendment?

5 Stars

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