

In the Lions' Den – Book Review

Jack Selzer, Penn State professor emeritus

You may recall that while he was president of Penn State, Graham Spanier hosted a regular television show entitled “To the Best of My Knowledge.” That could also serve as an alternative title to Spanier’s book *In the Lions’ Den*, his first-person testimony about the long series of events that he participated in from 2011 (when a former Penn State employee was charged with victimizing children) to 2021 (when Spanier was incarcerated for a misdemeanor conviction).

Spanier’s deposition comes highly anticipated. He was silenced, you may recall, by Penn State’s Board of Trustees in November 2011 because the Board wanted to manage the crisis themselves (how well did that turn out?); Louis Freeh wasn’t interested in hearing much of Spanier’s side of the story while Freeh was conducting his notorious “independent” investigation; and Spanier wasn’t able to speak to journalists very often or even to testify on his own behalf at his trial because his attorneys advised against those things. So until now his perspectives have not been recorded. Whether Spanier’s extended testimony here will moderate hardened judgments is for people to decide for themselves; but without a doubt *In the Lions’ Den* will endure as a lasting insider’s account, an enlightening narrative concerning every detail of the case’s lengthy course.

In the Lions’ Den gives Spanier’s testimony in the space of thirty chapters. The early ones introduce some of the main characters and provide necessary background, but the plot thickens when Spanier recounts how he learned about the 2001 shower incident and elaborates the details of the subsequent 2011 investigation. Chapters 8 through 11 – in many ways the center of the book – offer testimony about exactly what happened in the days before and after “the November massacre.” Chapters 13 and 16 recount and critique the Freeh Report, and 18 and 19 describe how principals in the NCAA, the Big Ten, and the Pennsylvania justice system, encouraged by that report, fixed their attention beyond Sandusky and toward Spanier, Joe Paterno, and Penn State. Chapters 20 through 27 (notably Chapter 24, “The Trial”) recount the complex legal maneuvers, counter-maneuvers, lawsuits, trials, appeals, and other details of the subsequent months and years, climaxing with the setting aside of Spanier’s conviction and subsequent reversal of that judgment months later. The final three chapters reflect on Spanier’s treatments by the media and conclude with an eye-opening and compelling description of the humiliations and privations visited upon people in our prisons.

People with various points of view will read this book and decide for themselves how to evaluate the case. But no matter what conclusions they come to, I predict that just about everyone will agree on two points: First, always respect due process – for when you don’t, it leads to trouble. When you think it’s obvious that due process isn’t necessary, when the circumstances tempt you to truncate or override established processes and policies, that’s when you most need to resist that temptation.

And second, if you are a Pennsylvania citizen, you are going to be embarrassed by the conduct of those entrusted to prosecute our justice system.

Jack Selzer joined the English Department faculty at Penn State in 1978 and is now an emeritus professor. He taught many courses in composition, technical writing, and rhetoric; served as Director of Composition, president of the Association of Teachers of Technical Writing, and associate dean for graduate and undergraduate studies.

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