

# Burning Issues

by

Michael Bettencourt

67 Highwood Terrace #2, Weehawken NJ 07086

201-770-0550 • 347-564-9998 • [michaelbettencourt@outlook.com](mailto:michaelbettencourt@outlook.com)

<http://www.m-bettencourt.com>

Copyright © by Michael Bettencourt

Offered under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike License

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>

## DESCRIPTION

Love is politics by another name when it comes to burning sacred books.

## CHARACTERS

- Jaime
- Natasha

\* \* \* \* \*

*Early morning. JAIME sits outside on a deck at a table writing by hand. Coffee cup nearby. Second chair, empty, nearby. Perhaps an umbrella. Perhaps some background birdsong. Perhaps crumpled paper strewn around.*

*JAIME is exasperated—something is not working out.*

*NATASHA enters, coffee cup in hand, looking as if she has just gotten up. Sips, watches. JAIME, aware of her presence, tries to keep his irritation contained—but does not do it well.*

NATASHA

Not going well?

JAIME

No it's not.

NATASHA

Okay.

*Time passes. Some sipping. Some irritation.*

NATASHA

Anything I can—

No. JAIME

You're sure? NATASHA

Yes. JAIME

Okay. NATASHA

*Time passes as NATASHA sits, sips.*

NATASHA  
It's a tough assignment. That you've given yourself.

*JAIME pushes away the pad and paper, takes up his coffee cup.*

JAIME  
The dramatic situation—it's built right in—I mean, the conflict is right in there—but—

Uh-huh. NATASHA

Uh-huh. JAIME

*NATASHA sips, gazes outward, doesn't respond.*

JAIME  
You gave me the "uh-huh."

Uh-huh. NATASHA

JAIME  
I know that "uh-huh."

NATASHA  
Hmm—maybe.

JAIME

I know your catalogue of monosyllables—the “uh-huh.” The “hmm-hmm.” The “ah.” I know them [all]—

NATASHA

Because you’re so smart—

JAIME

Come on.

*NATASHA gives him a look.*

JAIME

Yes, I’m really asking—

NATASHA

Uh-huh.

JAIME

Really—

*NATASHA faces him.*

NATASHA

Dramatic.

JAIME

Yeah.

NATASHA

Really? That situation?

JAIME

Yes I do.

NATASHA

The one written there?

JAIME

Yeah.

*NATASHA shrugs in a loving way.*

JAIME

How can it not be dramatic?

NATASHA

“Conflict” I’ll buy, right in there, like you say—but drama—  
hmmm—

JAIME

Really?

NATASHA

I don’t think so—

JAIME

The Koran-burners on one side—

NATASHA

Yes—

JAIME

The the the the—

NATASHA

The non-Koran-burners?

JAIME

No—yeah—but I wouldn’t call them that—the the the the—

NATASHA

Good guys?

JAIME

Well, yeah, but that’s not the name—the defenders—

NATASHA

The defenders. Of what?

JAIME

Tolerance, toleration, freedom of religion—you know, like so you  
can go to Mass on Sunday—

NATASHA

Or Saturday—

JAIME

—to believe as one wants—

NATASHA

But also to disbelieve as one [wants]—

JAIME

Like disbelieving that this situation has drama.

NATASHA

My constitutional right—my freedom of speech.

JAIME

What does [that]—

NATASHA

Freedom of speech. Your defenders the defenders of that, too? I hope?

JAIME

Well, yeah.

NATASHA

And therein, mi amor, lies your problem.

*NATASHA sips, gazes out, waits out JAIME.*

NATASHA

I just love it out here—so restful, so—

JAIME

What problem?

*They look each other over.*

JAIME

What problem?

NATASHA

You never really like me to—

JAIME

But you brought it up.

NATASHA

No, I just—well—

JAMIE

Go on.

NATHSHA

You just looked so exasperated—

JAIME

I am—

NATASHA

And I just wanted to say that I can appreciate that—it's a tough writing assignment you've given yourself—

JAIME

And so what's the problem? My problem?

NATASHA

It's just a problem—touchy—

JAIME

Sorry—

NATASHA

Not needed—all right—in the way you told me last night about what you wanted to write this play about—

JAIME

Yeah.

NATASHA

Passionate, you know, very passionate—

JAIME

Because these yahoos—

NATASHA  
(overlapping)

The yahoos, right—I'm with you a hundred percent on that, one hundred percent. Bring, like you said, your writing to bear on the situation.

JAIME

Like a citizen. So what's the [problem]—

NATASHA

You call your set-up dramatic—book burners here, defenders there—let me finish—but I see you frustrated because you can't seem to get it to work in a way that makes it work as a play, right?, and I think—this is just a point for you to consider—that it's because your set-up isn't dramatic, isn't drama, but really just friction—yeah? Light, heat, rub it together, boom!, "I'm right!", "No, I'm right!", two faces, you know, nose-to-nose, neck veins ready to burst, moral principles on high alert—

JAIME

That's not drama?

NATASHA

That is exactly what I am saying.

JAIME

I'm not agreeing, I'm—I'm—

NATASHA

Think about it, like you usually do after I say such things to you. You're a smart guy.

*JAIME ponders.*

JAIME

Just friction?

NATASHA

Flint and tinder. Matches and, well, in this case, paper.

JAIME

You're saying that all I've got down here is a screamfest.

NATASHA

I don't know what you've got down there—you haven't given me anything to read—yet—I'm just going by the set-up you gave me last night—book burners on the one [side]—

JAIME

I get it.

NATASHA

I didn't want to pour water on anything—but you were so exasperated—watched you through the screen door for a while—bit my tongue—I can show you the bite marks—

*They gaze outward.*

JAIME

The whole thing just makes me so angry.

NATASHA

That is the thing about you that keeps me sparking with you. Ha ha—

JAIME

Ha ha—

*JAIME picks up the pad.*

JAIME

But you're right—it doesn't have any heart.

NATASHA

I didn't say that.

JAIME

Not outright.

NATASHA

I will say, like I always do, you're a smart guy.



JAIME

You always say that just before you say “but sometimes you’re too much in your head.”

NATASHA

Sometimes you are—that’s why I keep myself around—to free you up—put a pin in the balloon.

JAIME

But something needs to be said—I need to say—something—I need to—

NATASHA

You’re a smart guy, mi amor—what would give that—whatever you’ve got on your paper there—what would give that some heart?

*JAIME bangs his two fists together.*

JAIME

Each of them lost somebody in—

NATASHA

Sentimental—and crap.

JAIME

True. Audience would expect that, anyways.

NATASHA

What wouldn’t they expect? What would you not expect if you were sitting and watching?

*JAIME looks at NATASHA—she returns the gaze. Suddenly JAIME smiles.*

JAIME

You are so clever—

NATASHA

Me?

JAIME

The way you slip it in, what you said before—

NATASHA  
Which was?

JAIME  
Freedom of—

NATASHA  
Did I say that?

JAIME  
Because you knew. You knew.

NATASHA  
Always easier to critique someone else's work.

JAIME  
Something like this—

*JAIME bumps his fists together.*

JAIME  
“If you really believe in what you say you believe, then you will let me burn the Koran.”

NATASHA  
That would throw your Defender for a loop.

JAIME  
The unexpected—

NATASHA  
And the response—

JAIME  
Make that unexpected—

NATASHA  
Makes it dramatic—don't make it easy for them—

JAIME  
Screaming is the easy [thing]—

NATASHA

And the most boring.

*JAIME rips the written pages from the pad, hands some to NATASHA. He rips two-thirds of each page into thin strips so that when he holds them from the untorn bottoms and shakes them, it looks like the paper is in flames. NATASHA does the same thing.*

*And they laugh as they do it.*

*NATASHA gets up and leans over JAIME. She kisses him on the forehead and then slaps his cheek—just hard enough to make her point. JAIME stares at her.*

NATASHA

There's enough crap in the world, wordsmith. Don't add to it.

*NATASHA takes up her coffee cup and starts for the house.*

NATASHA

(over her shoulder)

I'll get you some more coffee.

*JAIME takes up the pad of paper and writes, with vigor.*

*NATASHA watches him.*

*Lights out.*

