



A Memoir about
Academia,
Gaslighting, and a
Young Scholar's Fall
from Grace



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ABOUT THE BOOK

The Court of Star Chamber was a secretive tribunal in early modern England that dispensed the King's justice. Unconstrained by due process, it could mete out any punishment short of death, including whipping and mutilation. While abolished by Parliament in 1641, *The Star Chamber* lives on today as a symbol for unchecked inquisitorial power in all its forms.

In this academic memoir, Stanford Law graduate Rony Guldmann recounts his own star chamber trial at the hands of his alma mater. His tribulations begin after graduation when he is offered a fellowship to stay on at the law school and pursue research on conservatives' alleged cultural oppression by the liberal elites. Hoping to achieve a foothold in academia, he seizes the opportunity. But things go awry when the project metastasizes into an all-consuming obsession that thrusts Guldmann into headlong conflict with his milieu, and he soon finds himself gaslighted by a cabal of elites seeking retribution for his transgressions against the ideologies of academia and the chattering class.

What had started as an academic thesis now bleeds into the real world, as Guldmann comes before an invisible tribunal whose rules and proceedings will not be disclosed to him. Formerly a standout student and rising young scholar, Guldmann is steadily reduced to a mere conspiracy theorist. Yet this fall from grace becomes a philosophical awakening whereby he grows conscious of his systemic oppression by academia. Armed with this knowledge, he survives his gaslighting while scheming to unmask the perpetrators. *The Star Chamber of Stanford* is an all-American tribute to the renegade and underdog.

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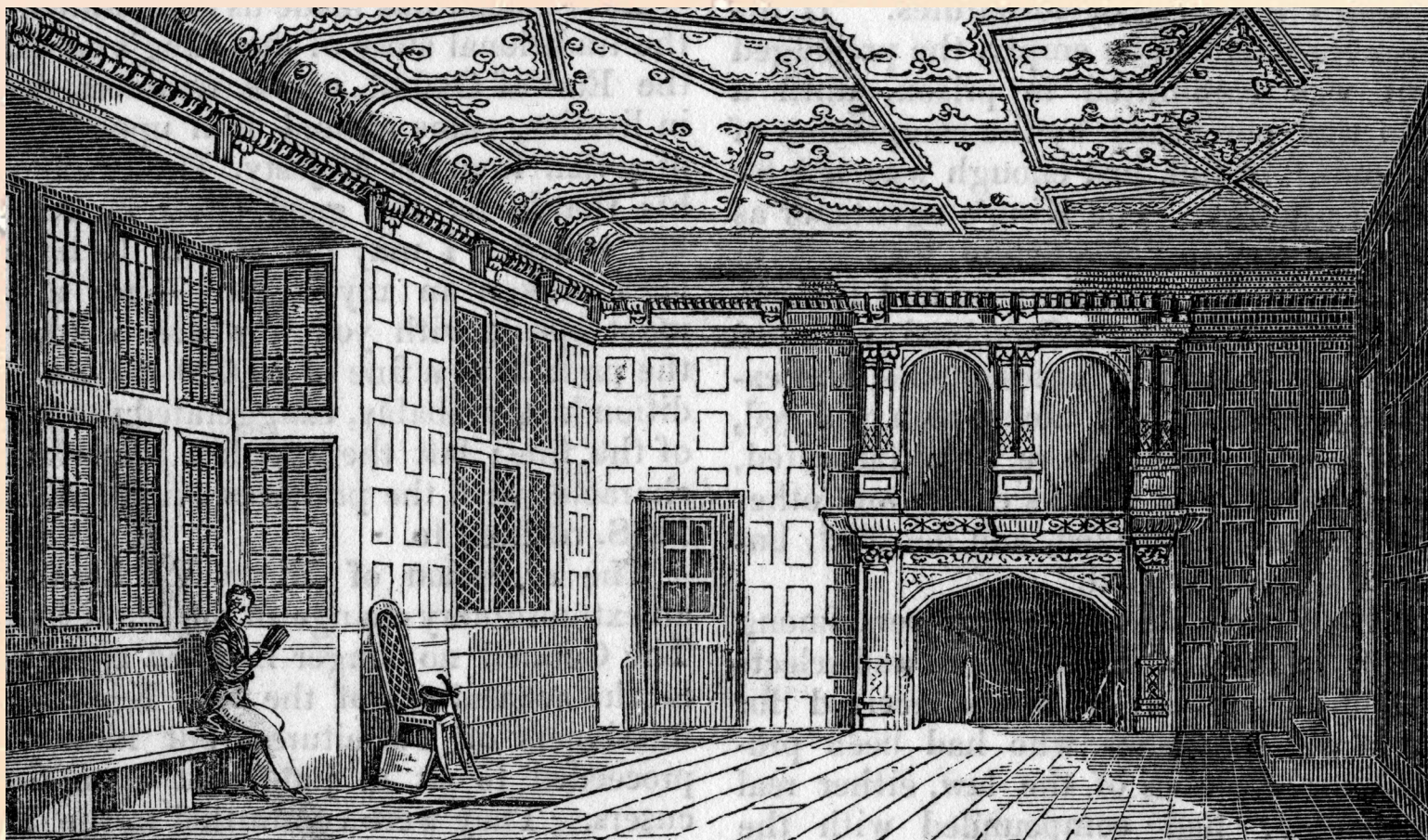
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Former room of the Court of Star Chamber, Westminster Palace, London, circa 1800.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rony Guldmann is a New York attorney who has fought the good fight against the twin scourges of product mislabeling and unsolicited commercial texting, setting his crosshairs on purveyors of fraudulent manuka honey, diluted olive oil, and deceptively oversized food packaging, among other villains. He received his B.A. in philosophy from the

University of Michigan, his Ph.D. in the same from Indiana University, and his J.D. from Stanford Law School, where he was the James C. Gaither Fellow after graduating. In a former life before the tribulations of *The Star Chamber*, Rony taught philosophy at Iona College, Hofstra University, and Fordham University in a bid to enlighten easily distracted young minds about human nature, ethics, and other lofty matters. He is the author of *Two Orientations Toward Human Nature*, published by Routledge, and lives in Astoria, Queens.



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The resulting dissonance only aggravated my mounting alienation from the ambient culture, my solipsistic retreat into a self-enclosed conceptual universe, a black hole from which no light escaped. What Joe had feared most was now coming to pass. I would manage to overlook my descent into insularity and obsession, however, as this vortex would take shape in small increments, each of which I could readily minimize. Even so, the cumulative truth of my steadily percolating estrangement and anomie would be communicated to me from myriad directions during the winter and spring of 2009. Like my advisers' disquietude in December, these incidents were subtle portents of things to come, incipient materializations of institutional headwinds that would in time place me in intractable conflict with the might of Stanford itself.



So what was going on here? Barbara was positioning herself as on my side, offering ostensibly well-intentioned constructive criticism in order to advance our mutual interest in the timely progression of my academic career. But “the truth of euphemism,” Bourdieu notes, “is revealed in the use made of it by professorial rhetoric any time that an unfavorable judgment has to be delivered within the limits of academic etiquette and/or prudence.” And here was that professorial rhetoric in all its subtlety and circumspection—as was to be expected of Barbara, whose prognosis was just as disingenuous as it was accurate. It was accurate inasmuch as it correctly gauged how the market would respond to my résumé. It was disingenuous, however, inasmuch as Barbara held herself out as merely tendering a prognosis, when what she was passing off as just educated guesses about others' hostile reactions also constituted her own reaction, which was identical to those from which she was distancing herself rhetorically.



I didn't know and didn't really care, as I was far more interested in my research agenda than traveling down this dark, disagreeable road. And yet the question could not but come to mind in a law school setting, which my advisers understood just as well as I. The legalization of our relations had commenced with the knockout email, was then ramped up by me in the works-in-progress email, and had now been cemented by the situation at hand. The existence of a controversy concerning the veracity of my dossier had been entered into the email record only the previous night. With the day's events coming right on the heels of



that deed, the question naturally presented itself. Nothing was certain beyond Barbara's disingenuity, which was a by-product of my own disingenuity and not unlawful. But an inference of defamation was scarcely capricious on a stylized Law School 101 kind of level. Indeed, it was quintessential LSAT reasoning in action. Everyone involved had more than enough schooling to put two and two together.



An explicit reference to Stanford wouldn't have been an admission of wrongdoing, but it would have confirmed that any suspicions thereof were grounded in some underlying reality—the unofficial reality that now enveloped me. I wasn't demanding such a confession, and Dick had no interest in volunteering it, so he acknowledged the situation by way of logical implication within the confines of the tacit dimension. Just like me when I fired off the works-in-progress email, Dick was resorting to allusion, intimation, and ambiguation (the willful creation of ambiguity) to communicate a clandestine meaning inaccessible to the casual bystander not privy to the situation's subterranean background. For reasons of both law and academic etiquette, his real meaning had to be histrionically encrypted in conversational irregularities that could then be decrypted into the actual message by those in the know.



I had reason on my side, but faith—the social faith that such things just can't happen—would override the reason of others. These San Francisco liberals could no more envisage Stanford professors machinating as alleged than could a medieval peasant envisage the village friar molesting the choirboys. They couldn't question Stanford because that would be to question themselves and their value system. Entranced by the facial outlandishness of it all and my attendant disorientation, they reflexively discounted my arguments as the rantings of a tinfoil hat conspiracy theorist. I may as well have been contending that the moon landings were faked or that the World Bank had been infiltrated by an alien race of reptilian shape-shifters. Gone were the high hopes of making vital contributions to Establishment Clause jurisprudence. Instead all my intellectual energies might now be occupied with the daunting task of defending my own sanity, a low bar for most.



There was, then, but one way to wiggle my way out of my subaltern status as one "most lacking in symbolic capital," and that was to mint symbolic capital out of my very oppression, a tried-and-true strategy in modern America.... Only by blowing the whistle on my own gaslighting could I rescue myself from the professional and intellectual oblivion to which my alma mater might seek to consign me. I would have to criticize and climb over the university itself by latching on to its symbolic capital in a gambit to appropriate some of it as my own.



Moreover, it was readily apparent that everything I had stood for over the years pointed ineluctably toward this Promethean feat. As I related in chapter 1, my first, abandoned dissertation topic took up Nietzsche's counsel "to examine and dissect the men of learning themselves for once, since they for their part are quite accustomed to laying bold hands on everything in the world, even the most venerable things, and taking them to pieces." Here was an opportunity to do just that, to fulfill a now-manifest destiny that had been lying in abeyance for a decade until crystallizing before me like a long-forgotten revenant.... Stanford was awash in both plausible deniability and cultural authority, but I had a liberal arts education, which I could at long last put to good use.



My own hands were hardly unsullied, so I couldn't sanctimoniously deplore my gaslighting as an unpardonable injustice. There was in fact an argument that I had it coming, some of which I have outlined for the reader. But there was another side of the story, too, and that it might never get aired would be an unpardonable injustice. This airbrushing from history of the unofficial reality was precisely the outcome willed by the star chamber of Stanford, and it would have to be averted by any means necessary. My advisers had excised their pound of flesh. With their claims now satisfied, I would advance my counterclaims and rescue my Stanford legacy from the memory hole in which they would inter it.



"Professionalism silently installs the New Class as the paradigm of virtuous and legitimate authority," notes Gouldner. But the unprofessional path of the fellowship had uncovered contingent power relations where the elites would see virtuous authority and deterministic social structures where they would see individual agency and desert.



Notwithstanding the authenticity of the works in progress, there was an underlying fraud. My advisers were within their rights to feel misled and betrayed because I had never truly been a "rising young scholar." That was just a socially respectable disguise, provisional camouflage under whose surface something darker was gestating perfidiously, something too primitive and barbarous to ever be welcomed by the highly civilized mandarins of the Wednesday faculty luncheon. Bob Weisberg's incandescent rage that Wednesday afternoon in September 2009 was the direct physiological expression of this bitter pill, which that day's fallout would teach me to swallow.

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FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Q: What's with the endnotes and bibliography? Those are unusual in a memoir.

A: *The Star Chamber of Stanford* is an academic memoir in the dual sense that it both recounts an academic experience and supplies academic commentary to illuminate that experience. As I explain in the introduction, this is “the story of a term paper that came to life, the paper that was written for Stanford before the force of its own inner logic made it become about Stanford.”

That said, the academic citation is pretty light compared to conventional scholarly fare, so readers shouldn't be deterred. True eggheads can turn to the companion works available on my website, which take a deep dive into the memoir's big ideas. They can also have a look at my published *Two Orientations Toward Human Nature*. But you don't need these to understand the memoir—just an open mind.

Q: What do you mean by “gaslighting”?

A: Gaslighting is a specific form of psychological manipulation that aims to undermine its victims' confidence in their own memories and perceptions—and possibly their very sanity. The term derives from a 1938 play, *Gaslight*, and its 1944 film adaptation, starring Ingrid Bergmann and Charles Boyer (spoiler alert). Set in Victorian London, the movie tells of a Janus-faced husband who schemes to convince his trusting young wife that she's losing her mind, so he can get her committed, seize her property, and recover lost jewels secreted away somewhere in the home. By stealthily displacing various household chattels while disclaiming responsibility for this, he persuades her that she's in the throes of unconscious kleptomania. Unbeknown to her, he spends his evenings rummaging for the lost jewels in the attic. When he ignites the attic gaslight, less gas becomes available to other gaslights in the



dwelling, causing them to dim, which the wife notices but cannot explain. The mystery initially drives her further into self-doubt but eventually becomes the husband's undoing.

Clinically speaking, gaslighting needn't involve this degree of premeditation, and the manipulation is typically verbal rather than environmental. The term has now seeped into political discourse, where it may denote a ploy to sow doubt about self-evident truths, though its meaning is often diluted to encompass run-of-the-mill intellectual dishonesty. The gaslighting in the memoir is more akin to what takes place in the movie than to this more elastic political usage, except that it's a great deal more intellectualized, as befits the setting. My story is quite involved, seeing as I was gaslighted by some of the country's leading minds. That's why I can't give you a quick and dirty rundown of what the hell I'm talking about and am reduced to making cryptic pronouncements. It simply defies familiar categories of human behavior, so you'll have to read the book.

Q: No offense, but could you be deluded about the gaslighting? You're holding yourself out as a sane actor who was gaslighted into a simulacrum of insanity, but might you be an insane one who only imagined being gaslighted?

A: No offense taken. It's a fair question. I ask only that people hear me out before trying to answer it. That's what the memoir is for. It's a rigorous defense of my sanity. At the end of the day it's for readers to judge whether yours truly is a crackpot or a lone crusader for truth. All I can do is make my strongest argument. If you're persuaded, great. If not, that's fine too. Readers have my permission to approach the book as literary fiction, if they wish.



Q: Is it fair to call you a conspiracy theorist?

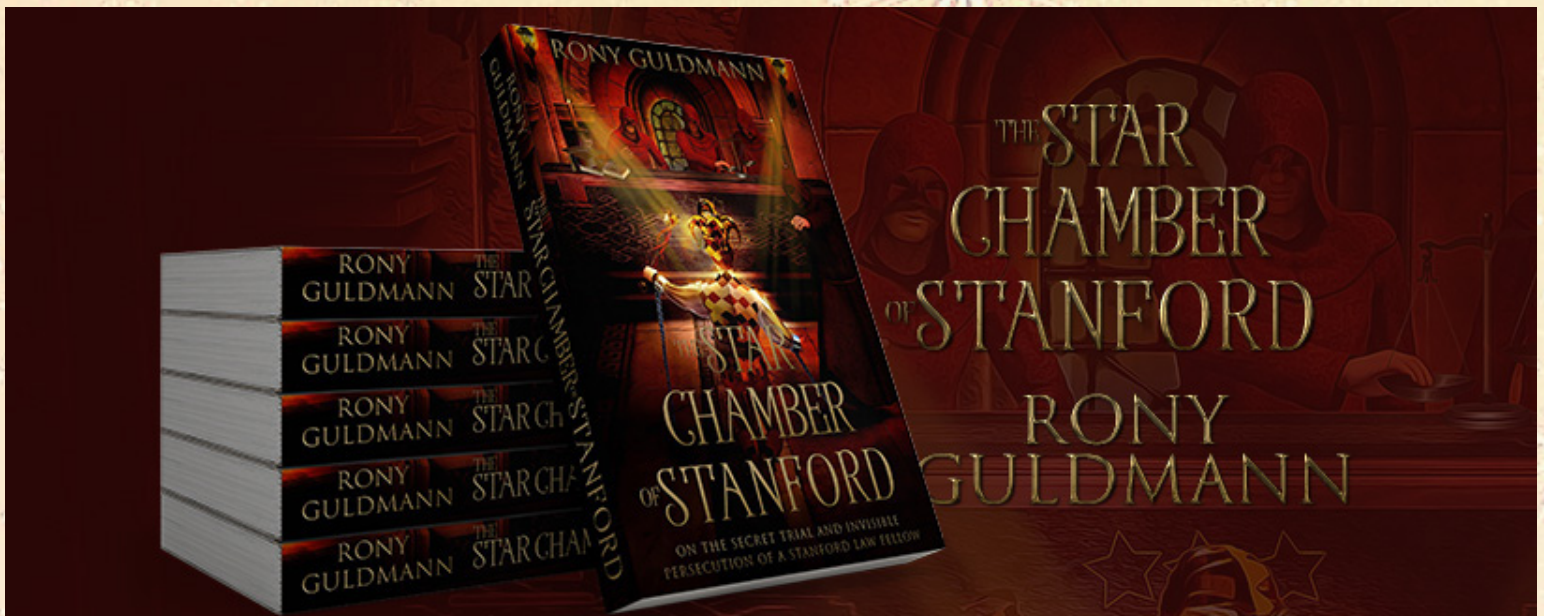
A: I'm alleging a conspiracy to gaslight based on circumstantial evidence and inference rather than direct observation. So, yes, I suppose it is. The memoir is a meticulously argued highbrow conspiracy theory for inquiring minds, and I wear my tinfoil hat with pride. I don't endorse every conspiracy theory out there, of course. I don't believe the moon landings were faked or that the World Bank has been infiltrated by an alien race of reptilian shapeshifters. Conspiracy theorists get a bad rap. But no matter the stereotypes we're not all alike, and our theories should be judged on their own merits. I know my allegations are stranger than fiction, but I think they hold up on close reflection. Plausible deniability is a thing, and extraordinary events do occur in the world from time to time. Did it all transpire *exactly* as I've theorized? Maybe not. Are my claims substantially true as to the big picture? I think so, but readers will judge for themselves. That's the fun of the book.

Q: Are you also a troll?

A: An agitator perhaps, but not a troll. Some of my methods may be trollesque, as I do have an impish streak, but my ends are serious.

Q: Aren't you exploiting your former affiliation with Stanford to raise your own profile?

A: People wouldn't be taking on all that student debt to attend Stanford and kindred institutions if not to thereby grow their symbolic capital. My strategy here may be unorthodox, but it was born of necessity, as the memoir explains. Stanford embraces diversity, so it shouldn't begrudge such transgressive undertakings. This kind of book isn't without precedent, by the way. William F. Buckley went after his alma mater in



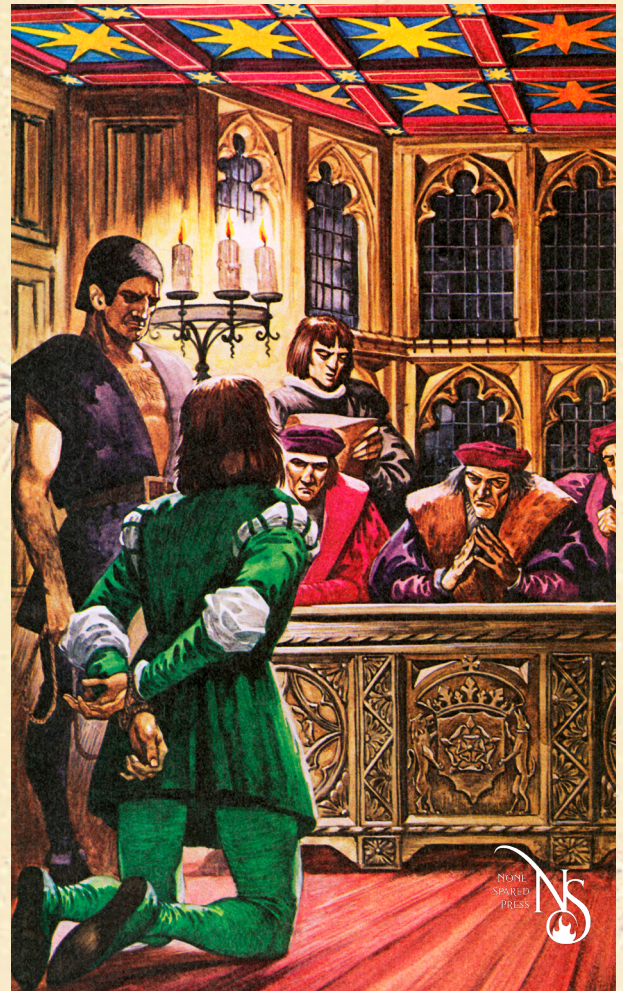
God and Man at Yale. John Leboutillier went after his in *Harvard Hates America*. Now it's Stanford's long overdue turn in the spotlight. That's just an occupational hazard of being a preeminent university. Academia is a dog-eat-dog world, and I'm punching up here, doing my bit to hold the elites to account, so please spare me the crocodile tears.

Q: I don't bother with conservative screeds. Why should I read this?

A: I do follow conservatives in redirecting the language and values of the Left against the Left, especially against the academic elites. But, as the memoir clarifies, I'm simply taking liberal principles to their logical conclusion, not defending conservatism as an overarching worldview. It's a mainstay of left-liberal thought that subtle forms of white, male, or heterosexual privilege blind us to the subterranean inequalities perpetrated by dominant ideologies. I'm bringing that critical spirit to bear on the ideologies of academia and the chattering class. By exposing the gaslighting, I expose those ideologies.

Q: But isn't it common knowledge that academia is fertile soil for all sorts of irrationality? Most academics would acknowledge this much, so what's new here?

Elites may be tempted to say, "Sure, we have prejudices and biases. We're only human, too, and have never denied that. So, there's nothing to see here. Please move on." And yet some of these same people display a keen, highly theorized, interest in the alleged prejudices of other social strata, or at least approve of that interest. The blasé banalization of academic irrationality is an ideological deflection mechanism. It's like discounting critical race theory and such with the refrain that everyone knows slavery and segregation were wrong—a dismissal that won't get much traction in elite circles. So, the banalization is really a kind of privilege, enjoyed by those who, as Bourdieu observes in *Homo Academicus*, "wish to objectify without being objectified." The memoir takes aim at that privilege. It's one thing to acknowledge academic irrationality with low-resolution platitudes but quite another to examine it under a psychophilosophical microscope in human subjects research. That's what the memoir accomplishes.

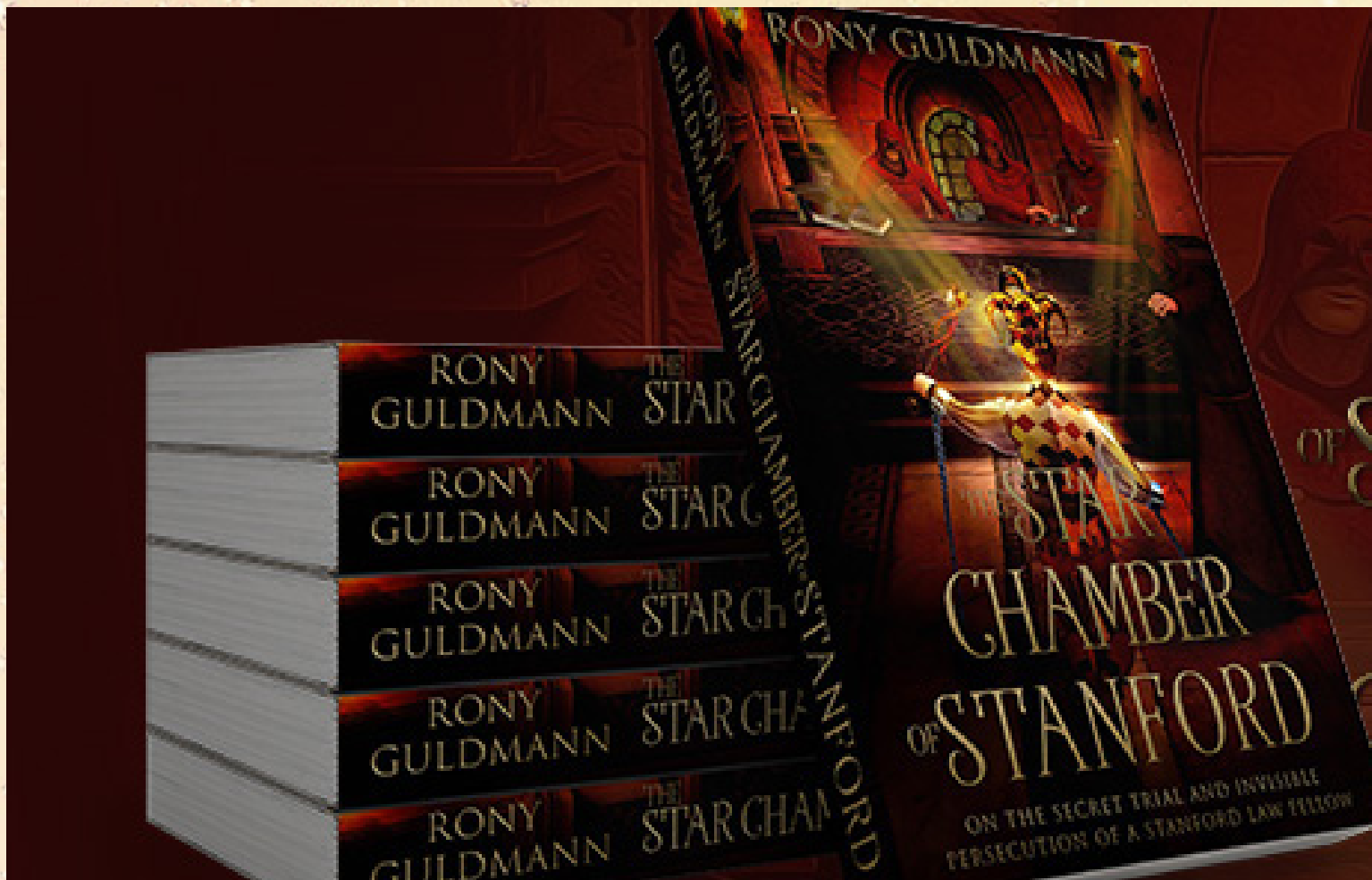


Q: Is this a revenge memoir?

A: Vengeance in moderation is a virtue, if reasonably proportioned to its causes. I leave to readers to judge whether I've hit that golden mean. My personal motives aside, I stress that the memoir is about a good deal more than just me. Viewed through a narrow lens, my saga was utterly sui generis. But grasped philosophically, it distilled forces that are structural to academia, and key events in the memoir make sense only as manifestations of those forces—which are hardly unique to Stanford.

Q: Why aren't these the grievances of a disgruntled former employee?

A: In whatever sphere the ruling class will have a vested interest in attributing structural inequalities to the personal shortcomings of those protesting the inequalities. Conservatives may do this to defend the status quo of race and class, but the liberal elites will do the same to protect their outsized symbolic capital, which the memoir problematizes. Given Stanford's vast power advantage, "disgruntled former employee" may resonate in certain elite circles. But I don't think the ad hominem will hold up in the long run, as I'm confident fair-minded readers will adopt a less hackneyed interpretation of my claims. Time will tell if that confidence is justified.



Q: Why are you only now going public with these allegations, over a decade after the relevant events? Some people are going to wonder why you took so long to come out of the woodwork. Doesn't that harm your credibility?

A: I play a long game. As you'll appreciate once you get through the book, making my case was never going to be easy. My argument is pretty strong now, I believe, but it took a lot of blood, sweat, and tears to get it there. Additionally, I wanted to have the more theoretical companion volumes I mentioned available to interested readers, at least as advanced drafts. These alone were several dissertations' worth of writing. Pile my day job on top of it all and there was no way I could have been ready any sooner to break my silence.

So the long delay shouldn't raise eyebrows. I'm actually glad the memoir is only now being released. Tell someone ten years ago that you'd been gaslighted and they likely would have had no clue what you were saying. Today there's greater awareness of gaslighting. People understand it's a problem and will listen to survivors.

Q: Are you claiming victimhood?

A: Philosophically speaking, I'm a victim of the times. Interpersonally speaking, I'm both a victim and a victimizer, as we are all. I faced more than my share of microaggressions at Stanford, as would anyone resisting the elites' hegemony over higher education, and I do draw rhetorically on the grievance culture. That said, I also try to stay clear of facile black-and-white moral judgments, so don't expect straightforward answers to such questions.

Q: Why the jester on the cover? Is he supposed to symbolize you?

A: Yes. The medieval jester or fool was a versatile entertainer whose wide skill set included dancing, juggling, acrobatics, singing, and magic tricks. He was also a stand-up comedian responsible for mocking his audience at court, where he had special license to openly ridicule and abuse kings and nobles without retribution, since he was not one to be taken seriously. This niche empowered him to voice frank criticisms and unpopular insights that the high and mighty dared not utter. So, the fool was really a sage who spoke truth to power through a veil of calculated buffoonery. *The Star Chamber of Stanford* channels the spirit and power of the jester.



Also by Rony Guldmann



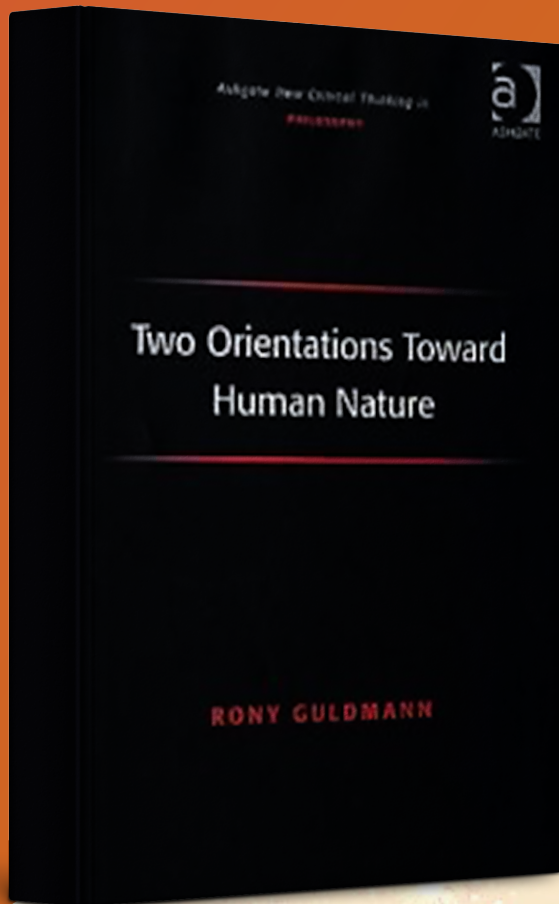
TWO ORIENTATIONS TOWARD HUMAN NATURE

Guldmann does an impressive job of pulling together a considerable range of historical and contemporary reflection into a well-crafted, synthetically-rich, and engaging tour of human nature.

*—Ronald Weed, **The Review of Metaphysics***

“Continental” tradition in philosophy after Kant is so often felt to compare favorably with its “analytical” counterpart. There is much to be said for the orientation [Guldmann] associates with the Continental tradition, and elaborates in ways that helpfully bring out many of its important contributions to our self-understanding.

—Richard Schacht, professor of philosophy, University of Illinois



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