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Positive Paranoia? Who Said That?

*Cal Poly English Professor to Discuss His Book 'Paranoia and Contentment’*
*In San Francisco June 16*

SAN LUIS OBISPO -- Cal Poly English Professor John Hampsey isn’t paranoid; people really are after him.

They are after him to speak about and sign copies of his groundbreaking 2004 book, "Paranoia and Contentment: A Personal Essay on Western Thought," which has received such wide interest and critical acclaim that it has nearly sold out of a second printing and will soon be available in paperback. The book is the first to view paranoia as a positive concept and to use it as a cultural lens to reinterpret the Western tradition, Hampsey said.

"‘Paranoia and Contentment’ is a sharply reasoned, humane, surprising and intellectually bold meditation on paranoic vision," said Tim O'Brien, author of the book “The Things They Carried." “Part scholarship, part personal essay, this beautifully written book turns upside-down our standard thinking about paranoia, creativity, imagination and what it is to be wholly human."

Howard Zinn, author of “A People's History of the United States," called the book "an extraordinarily original rumination on the human condition, ranging across a broad field of philosophical thought and Western literature . . . Hampsey's goal is to startle us into reconsidering our conventional ways of thinking, and I believe he has achieved that goal admirably . . . Eminently readable, often eloquent."

Hampsey will be in San Francisco Thursday, June 16, to give a talk-reading, his final in a national tour that has taken him to Boston, Los Angeles, Pittsburgh, New York City and Washington, D.C., His San Francisco appearance will be at 7:30 p.m. at the Modern Times Bookstore, 888 Valencia St., in the Mission District.

Marketed as a trade book aimed at the “general educated reader,” “Paranoia and Contentment” was first published by the University Press of Virginia in December 2004. It is available online at amazon.com for $30 and at bookstores locally and across the country.

Hampsey, a San Luis Obispo resident, has been teaching at Cal Poly since 1989. He was recently named a Cal Poly 2004-2005 Distinguished Teacher. For more information on Hampsey, visit his Web site http://cla.calpoly.edu/~jhampsey/.

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About “Paranoia and Contentment: A Personal Essay on Western Thought"

Amazon.com describes the book:

“Paranoia and Contentment” is a bold and original investigation into Western intellectual history. Hampsey approaches paranoia not as a clinical term for an irrational sense of persecution but from a uniquely positive
perspective, as a cultural truth -- a way of understanding the history of human thought and perhaps the best way to describe ‘Being’ itself.

“Paranoia"-- literally ‘beside the mind' -- was the Greeks' primarily negative term for thinking outside the usual thought processes, or beyond reason. Working from this classical definition, Hampsey sees paranoia operating in two distinctly different ways. First there is the paranoic, his name for off-track thinking that is expansive, creative, even visionary.

“This is opposed to the paranoidic, which is motivated by fear, delusion, and a pursuit of contentment so obsessive that it has crippled human imagination and diminished tolerance of those who are perceived to threaten that contentment. The distinction is especially significant because the paranoidic so dominates Western thought and culture that paranoic thinking has become nearly lost to us.

“Hampsey seeks to recover this expansive mode of thought by tracing an arc of paranoic moments in Western culture. Abraham, Jesus, Socrates, Hypatia, Joan of Arc, Goethe, Blake, Kierkegaard, Schreber -- these are only a few among the many figures whom the author examines in order to isolate moments in Western intellectual history when paranoic vision temporarily breaks through the barriers of paranoidic fear. As humanly engaging as it is erudite, ‘Paranoia and Contentment’ seeks to reclaim paranoic thinking as a crucial part of our consciousness and an indispensable component to understanding our cultural history.”