

# Fictional Bias

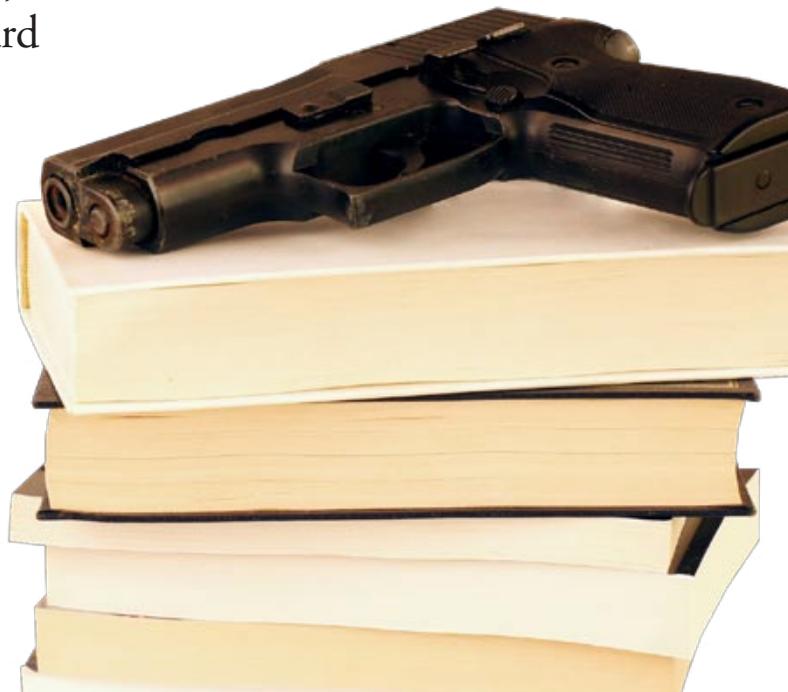
Even in popular fiction, political bias is a threat to plurality of views, writes **Michael MacConnell.**

**T**here is a very real and very pervasive left-wing bias amongst the majority of authors busily churning out product to stock the shelves of your local bookstore. This phenomenon is most readily visible within the non-fiction political sections, with the scathing critiques of John Howard and George W. Bush only outnumbered by the Barack Obama hagiographies.

The leftward slant of popular fiction authors is less obvious. The significance is in the influence that novelists possess when compared with those producing films in Hollywood. Michael Moore can craft a movie that carefully and deceitfully mocks guns, pharmaceutical companies, or capitalism

---

*Michael MacConnell is author of the novels Maelstrom (2007) and Splinter (2008).*



itself. How well made they are ultimately means little, as the bulk of people shuffling in and out of cinemas are not looking for a preachy, two-hour polemic. Even if they were, the experience of sitting for two hours in an uncomfortable seat, their bladders slowly constricting as the person behind them repeatedly kicks their seat does not allow for a long-lasting, psychological impression. Regular novel readers, however, are making a conscious investment of considerable time; deeply focussed on the novelist's work. Therefore, the chances of making a profound intellectual impact on the reader are greatly increased.

The more rabid social and political commentators of the right often claim that this bias is the result of a conscious design; a plot by those on the left to subvert the minds of readers. The less grounded of the social and political commentators on the left claim that there is no bias, or that if there is one, it is primarily conservative in nature. The moderates on both sides tend to agree that a liberal/left bias exists, but that it has been brought about by altogether more benign circumstances. In order to find out who was closest to the truth, I decided to speak with a group of writers, representing a diverse variety of political beliefs. Surprisingly, I found for the most part a consensus.

Novelists, like any artist, tend to be creative, expressive people. Many of them only come to writing later in life, after other artistic media have fallen short of their expectations. Others, like popular Australian author Karen R. Brooks, wrote successfully from a young age, and combined it with a variety of other artistic achievements. Brooks, who describes herself as a contrarian, has been at various times a law student, checkout operator, army officer, drama teacher, radio host, motion-picture actor, academic, columnist, playwright and novelist, now divides her time mainly between lecturing on cultural and media studies, writing a regular

column for the Courier Mail and crafting exotic and alluring fantasy worlds through her novels.

Brooks acknowledges that novelists tend toward the left of politics but argues strongly against the notion that the bias has resulted in an abandonment of conservative themes within popular fiction:

As far as one goes back, in terms of fictional works, from the *Illiad*, the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid*, right through to the biggest-selling titles on the shelves today, little has changed in terms of how the hero is represented, the trials he endures at the hands of his enemies and the outcomes he strives for.

Brooks received little attention within the Australian media for her use of popular television programs and movies in her lectures, which led to a lengthy stint as radio host at SeaFM and guest appearances on the ABC's *Einstein Factor*.

Great works of fiction tend to be a response to social upheaval and disenchantment. They are a reaction to inequality or injustice. The people who tend to be attuned to those things often tend to be attracted to progressive politics than conservative. There's no grand left wing conspiracy, it's just people using the medium of fiction to write about the issues that concern them.

The conservative commentator James Morrow, agrees that there is no conspiracy, but disagrees about how the left dominance came about.

The left are intellectually incurious. From university, where they are politically indoctrinated, to the liberal-dominated news organisations they eventually join, and the liberal publishers who print their books, they are surrounded by a set of common social and political assumptions.

There is no reason to buck the trend as there's no catalyst for change and no immediate profit in it. They aren't challenged to think critically, but rather respond to any given set of circumstances with empty, pre-approved buzzwords.

Does he think that conservative writers are at a disadvantage when trying to publish their work?

There is definitely a gatekeeper mentality at play, stemming from an inability of leftists to recognise that the public is primarily aligned to the centre-right. But they're oblivious to it. That's why you see an admittedly right Fox News outstripping the competition. It's probably not so obvious with the publishing companies because they aren't quite so much in the public eye. But the same process of bias and censorship is at play within all the big liberal media companies—this is why we're seeing the death of newspapers all over the place.

Brooks echoes Morrow's thoughts in regard to a slide of intellectual standards within universities.

Most novelists, if they haven't already, first seriously begin to think about writing as a vocation when exposed to the university atmosphere. That's a pity because frankly, they aren't being challenged in the way they should. There is a current culture of 'dumbing down' courses—especially within the arts—that has resulted in a decline of standards.

James Delingpole, libertarian, novelist, non-fiction author, journalist and political commentator finds much the same situation when he looks at the broader publishing industry:

My editor was very brave, when you think about it, because there really is a reluctance—based



mainly on ignorance of what libertarians and conservatives believe and why—to publish conservative views. We're derided as being the usual right stereotypes and our philosophies dismissed without being examined. There is a tendency to view anyone who isn't on the liberal-left as a troublemaker... what they don't fathom is that we don't say what we say to be contrarians, we really believe this stuff. Sadly, the left milieu who dominate don't know and don't want to know. They have their comfortable preconceptions and they'll stick with them to the bitter end.

But those preconceptions don't stand on their own; there is some very real ideological infrastructure reinforcing the status quo. As with most artistic fields, there are support mechanisms—mainly governmental—within the western world that seek to promote and reward the efforts of novelists. Through grants and awards, novelists gain financial backing, an elevated profile, and official recognition. Here too, in the opinion

of many conservatives, the liberal ideological bent predominates.

This unwillingness to explore and advance libertarian and conservative novels extends to other media of support, such as government-backed broadcasters. Of the BBC, Delingpole says:

They're a cosy coterie who talk a great deal about diversity, but when it comes to diversity of opinion, they aren't all that keen. I've been grudgingly used on a few programs as an alternate viewpoint and in each case, I was the sole libertarian/conservative present—and it wasn't just the guests.

The audiences themselves seemed strongly weighted to the left, and their reactions to what is being said makes a real difference to how the programs play out. This is how left writers get ahead and everyone else is left behind. All of the support mechanisms: grants, awards, publicity via the national broadcaster, etcetera, are supplied willingly to the left, and denied to the right.

Novelists give their ideological leanings form through the artful deployment of characterisation, plot, sub-plot and symbolism. The backbone of any novel is the two main characters: the protagonist and the antagonist. This is the simplest way in which politically-charged concepts can be put across to the reader, and one doesn't have to search far for repeat offenders.

There is a shortage of ideological diversity within mainstream fiction, but it's more the product of an intellectual evolution than conscious design. Young novelists are more likely to veer left studying arts at university. Once they leave, they are incentivised by grants and rewards that more frequently assist and recognise left perspectives. Their agents are likely to be left, as are their editors and the media that review their work. But their books still have to sell. As the late great Michael Crichton showed, you don't need to follow the herd in order to be hugely successful as a novelist. But you will have to be an awfully good storyteller and an equally skilled diplomat.

