

## Alt-writing: how the far right is changing US publishing

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He compares feminism to cancer, called transgender people “retarded” and once labelled a BuzzFeed reporter a “thick-as-pig-shit media Jew”. So when “alt-right” figurehead Milo Yiannopoulos, who relentlessly delights in wild provocation, landed a \$250,000 (£203,000) book deal with Simon & Schuster, the publisher understandably – and almost immediately – issued a statement distancing itself from the views of the writers they publish: “The opinions expressed therein belong to our authors, and do not reflect either a corporate viewpoint or the views of our employees.”

But S&S’s disavowal sits uneasily with an assertion made by Louise Burke, head of its conservative imprint Threshold, which is publishing Yiannopoulos’s *Dangerous*. “This is an area where it really helps to be a believer. I don’t feel you can be successful in this particular genre if you are opposed to the message,” Burke said, when the imprint was created in 2006.

Of course, S&S is chasing sales. The financial demands of its parent company CBS are strenuous. On the one occasion I was granted an audience with CEO Carolyn Reidy during my three years working at the company’s Rockefeller Center HQ, she pointed out a “Mind the Gap” doormat at the entrance to her capacious top-floor office. Its slogan, she explained grimly, was repurposed from the London underground to emphasise the necessity of aligning the company’s revenues with her targets.

Threshold has certainly helped to deliver on that front, with five New York Times No 1 bestsellers in the past six years, including books by Dick Cheney and Laura Ingraham. It also published Donald Trump’s 2016 campaign book, *Great Again: How to Fix Our Crippled America*. Their success has been replicated at conservative imprints of other major houses, with their equally muscular names: Sentinel at Penguin, Broadside at HarperCollins and Crown Forum at Random House, all seeking to emulate the granddaddy of rightwing publishing, 70-year-old independent Regnery, which has seen 30 bestsellers in the last 10 years.

Rightwing blockbusters are often penned by retired politicians and TV personalities, especially from Fox News. Punditry and memoir by the likes of Glenn Beck, Ann Coulter, [Sarah Palin](#) and Megyn Kelly have sold strongly regardless of whether the US is led by a Democrat or a Republican. The year Barack Obama took office, Michelle Malkin, Bill O’Reilly, Mark Levine and Dick Morris appeared together in the New York Times’s top 10 bestsellers.

Books for believers ... Pat Morgenstern of Middleville, Michigan reads Sarah Palin's *Going Rogue* soon after its publication in November 2009. Photograph: Bill Pugliano/Getty Images

Part of the success of rightwing publishing rests with the fact that while the left, diverse and fractious, reads across a larger group of authors, conservatives tend to focus on a few big names. Book-business execs can't say no to the cash cows this herding breeds, no matter if it offends their more genteel sensibilities. After publishing a spoof of Sarah Palin's *Going Rogue* (titled *Going Rouge*) at the independent house I cofounded subsequent to leaving S&S, a senior executive at Palin's publisher HarperCollins whispered to me at a party that everyone in his office was reading our book. But that was about as strong as the industry pushback got.

So why all the furore over Yiannopoulos? Those objecting to *Dangerous* seems more concerned about its anticipated tone than any pernicious, new ideas it may contain. With the start of the Trump presidency comes fear of a new, more vituperative tenor in the mainstream, cementing a national lurch to the right. The American far right is characterised by, as Angela Nagle puts it, "a slippery use of irony"; its "hip elitism" allows prejudice to be disguised as harmless entertainment. Yiannopoulos, with his Hugh Grant-like bashfulness and potty mouth, perfectly fits this tawdry bill.

The last time a rightwing revolution was heralded, back in the early 1980s, it was not difficult to trace its intellectual precedents. The University of Chicago economics department, and well-funded research organisations such as the Cato Institute and the Heritage Center, were part of a network that prepared the free-market fare served up by Reagan and Thatcher. At the beginning of the decade, Heritage published *Mandate for Leadership*, a blueprint for reducing the federal government. It ran to 20 volumes, with an abridged version of 1,000 pages becoming a paperback bestseller.

Forty years later, today's American conservatives don't appear to have much new to say, beyond their brasher style. The far right has had to look to writers from abroad, including Europeans such as Tom Sunic, Alain de Benoist and Julius Evola. Brit-born Yiannopoulos credits the late Christopher Hitchens as an example of the valuable help being offered to the American right from overseas.

Milo Yiannopoulos, pictured in north London. Photograph: Richard Saker for the Observer

Conservative voices are not limited to nonfiction. As writer Val McDermid puts it, the threat of "the world turned upside down" makes thrillers friendly terrain for conservatives. Retired military men such as Stephen Coonts, as well as younger voices such as the late Vince Flynn – beloved by George W Bush – and self-described "conservatarian" Brad Thor sell in big numbers, with their tales of manly ex-service types taking on the terrorists.

Where the cool individualism of Ayn Rand and Christian writers such as CS Lewis once reigned in science fiction and fantasy, brasher, pulpier works by rightwing writers such as John Ringo, Brad R Torgersen and Larry Correia are now finding favour. United by their shared distaste for what they regard as the mainstream's crippling obeisance to political correctness, as well as their adeptness at internet promotion, these younger authors are vocal about feeling disenfranchised with the genre: Correia himself started the Sad Puppies movement, to tackle what he perceived as a liberal bias in sci-fi writing, and Torgersen continued it. As the latter complained: "Science

fiction isn't dangerous any more. It's been pasteurised and homogenised ... The formerly disenfranchised have ... cast out everyone who does not flatter a given set of progressively-couched orthodoxies."

The latest instalment of Correia and Ringo's Monster Hunter Memoirs series features "50-foot bipedal crocodiles" with "more monsters popping up than crawfish at a fais-do-do!" So they're not always overtly political. But their appeal utilises the same flash-bang delivery and emotive narratives as today's rightwing politicians – the image of the red-blooded hero, battling dark and alien evil.

The persuasiveness of today's new right rarely depends on the coherence or depth of its thought. Though Donald Trump – with co-authors – has published more than a dozen titles of his own, the next US president is not a book guy. In an interview last summer, Trump explained that he does not need to read extensively because he reaches the right decisions "with very little knowledge other than the knowledge I [already] had". Countering this kind of relentless self-belief requires more than evidence-based rationality. It is the very definition of "post-truth", as put together by Oxford Dictionaries last year: "Objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief."

"Politics lies downstream from culture," Andrew Breitbart once said. The political establishment of the US now belongs firmly to the right. It remains to be seen whether its opponents can develop a culture capable of wresting it back.