

# People of the Book

Why do libertarians produce better literature than conservatives?

By Brian Doherty

AFTER GIFTING US with such lists as the top 50 conservative rock songs, this year *National Review* offered, under the guidance of political reporter John J. Miller, the “Ten Great Conservative Novels” of the postwar era.

Miller is a literature buff whose tastes are more inclusive of pop and genre fiction than were those of such highbrow conservative lit gurus as Irving Babbitt or T.S. Eliot. The novels *NR* selected, though, were all by reputable novelists, some with known conservative sympathies, some not. Their themes promote such modern conservative ideas as the evils of the Soviets, the counterculture’s erosion of proper culture, and the technological destruction of human nature.

*National Review* presented them not to celebrate a recognized right-wing canon, but to promote works of likely interest for conservatives craving ideological sympathy. As Miller told me, “I do think conservatives respond to art in certain kinds of ways and certain kinds of messages resonate with them. I’m not talking about propaganda, but about insight into human nature and shared worldviews—and a sense when reading this book that you are among friends or someone you can learn from.”

But when Miller sought suggestions for the list on his blog, various commenters protested that the project was unconservative in principle: Stalinists were the ones who had to categorize art politically. Someone who calls himself “Das” noted, “If a novel just plays out and lets life unfold I believe conservatives can claim it as a conservative

novel. Why? Conservatives invest themselves in life not politics. ... Conservatives don’t grind axes in art, they just let life play out.”

Now, it is true that conservatives have generally avoided the totalitarian temptation to squeeze everything into a political mold. But they have also managed to avoid the creative arts in the formation and shaping of their ideas—this despite their movement’s self-appointed reputation as keeper of the canons of Western culture.

Fiction is nearly absent in the offerings of the Conservative Book Club. The institutions and periodicals on the Right most dedicated to *belles lettres*, such as the Intercollegiate Studies Institute and *Modern Age*, are the most obscure outposts on the conservative frontier. The conservative godfather who most strongly advocated literary roots for political thought, Russell Kirk, is on a long downhill slide in influence while Sarah Palin rises.

The modern Right’s most popular contribution to humane letters, movement apparatchik William Bennett’s bestselling 1990s compilation *The Book of Virtues*—bits of prose and poetry meant to slam home lessons about self-discipline, honesty, work, and faith—might seem on the surface to fill Kirk’s bill. But that devotee of Eliot, Faulkner, and Waugh had his sights set on work that was more complicated, less reducible to an easily labeled fable. Kirk thought literature could deliver not just potted lessons but help us “perceive, beyond mere appearances, a hierarchy

of worth and certain enduring truths ... drawn from centuries of human experience.” Literature’s role in the cultivation of the moral imagination, Kirk wrote, is to transmit “to successive rising generations ... a body of ethical principles and critical standards and imaginative creations that constitutes a kind of collective intellect of humanity.” As Kirk scholar Donald Atwell Zoll put it, “central to Kirk’s social and political commentary was the conviction that ethical and normative truths are often best conveyed through a symbolic veil, as found, for example, in the medium of great poetry, rather than by the means of discursive explication.”

One important American political movement did find a huge part of its core understanding of “ethical and normative truths” conveyed not through “great poetry” in the traditional sense, but at any rate through imaginative literature. It included such marvelously entertaining pulpy hugger-mugger as a genius who invents an impossible energy-generating machine that shuts down a corrupt statist government, which tries to fight back with a death ray built by a mad scientist. Then there were the Moon rebels tossing giant rocks down on a repressive earth government to win their independence.

That movement is libertarianism, which unlike conservatism in its popular sense has deep roots in imaginative fiction—though not literature of the quality that Kirk, himself an author of genre fiction in the gothic horror vein, tended to promote. Libertarians’ literary

heroes are Ayn Rand and Robert Heinlein, whose *Atlas Shrugged* and *The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress* are respectively referenced above.

Over the years, right-wing thinkers have claimed novelists from James Fenimore Cooper to today's Tom Wolfe. But finding conservative activists who avow direct inspiration from them for launching their ideological lives would be quite a trick. In contrast, many, perhaps even most, movement libertarians of the 1960s-90s generation would have no problem admitting influence from works of fiction. While other novels, particularly the anarchistic *Illuminatus!* by Robert Shea and Robert Anton Wilson, have their devotees, Rand and Heinlein and their occasional epigones rule the literary libertarian roost.

Why is libertarianism more fictionally attuned than conservatism? Conservatives have had, especially in the past generation, more real-world accomplishments in politics and media for adherents to glom onto for inspiration. Perceiving themselves as closer to worldly power than libertarians can, young Republicans can locate living heroes. Who needs the emotional support and intellectual stimulation of the literary imagination when you can see the world you want either in the near pre-Obama past or in a future that's just a GOP electoral victory away? While traditional conservatism is historically rooted in many literary traditions and themes from the Greek and Roman classics to Shakespeare to the New Humanists and Southern Agrarians of the early 20th century, modern conservatism has become too much of politics to think much of art.

Libertarianism, by contrast, has remained something for which imagination is appropriate and necessary. The 20th century provided little useful fodder for contemplating the world as it should be from a libertarian perspective—what

### **Is anyone wondering what happened to all the pastel revolutions managed by the meddlers at the National Endowment for Democracy?**

The orange variety in Ukraine has turned turtle with pro-Russian president Viktor Yuschenko back in control. And there are questions being asked about missing money, including \$350 million that Ukraine received from the sale of Kyoto Protocol credits to the Japanese. The money was last seen in the hands of former prime minister and Western media darling Yulia Tymoshenko. An audit is underway in an attempt to determine the final disposition of the cash.

In neighboring Georgia, the Rose Revolution has also withered. The claim made by U.S. presidential candidate John McCain that "we are all Georgians" has particular resonance now as Tbilisi has decided that no government official can any longer hold dual nationality. Georgian Defense Minister Davit Kezerashvili, a major advocate of the aggressive policy that led to disaster, was also an Israeli citizen, as was another cabinet minister. And there were also French and Russian citizens at senior levels in the government.

There are also reports that the U.S. Department of Justice has launched a major investigation into massive fraud involving several billion dollars in American military assistance to Georgia prior to the war. The books of a number of Israeli and U.S.-based companies are being examined. Training of Georgian units by Israeli contractors was sometimes so perfunctory that the men did not even learn how to fire their rifles. But not to worry, the Pentagon is rearming the Georgians and will no doubt use the same contractors in hopes that the result will be different.



### **The White House is re-evaluating the CIA-run Predator drone program**

in the wake of the attempted Times Square bombing, which may have been motivated by the civilian death toll in Pakistan. Very few high-level terrorists have been killed by drones, and there is a growing perception that the negative press from civilian deaths has far exceeded any gain from the operations. Insurgents have reportedly adjusted to the attacks, and it has become so difficult to find and shoot at actual militants that the targets are now largely "infrastructure," meaning buildings and vehicles that the Taliban or al-Qaeda might be using. When one of these is hit, civilians most often constitute the bulk of the casualties. There are no reliable statistics on who is actually being killed. The Pakistani army frequently reports that many of the victims of the airstrikes are "militants," but that judgment frequently derives from the postmortem identification of someone carrying a rifle in a region where all males over the age of 13 normally do.

---

*Philip Giraldi, a former CIA Officer, is a fellow with the American Conservative Defense Alliance.*