

# Propaganda in the guise of a novel

Pretty Birds by Scott Simon, Australia, Hodder 2005, 351pp.

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Scott Simon is an American journalist who has covered 10 wars from El Salvador to Iraq, and hosts US National Public Radio's "Weekend Edition Saturday." He became a Quaker and a pacifist in the 1960s but, in a similar fashion to a variety of erstwhile liberals, radicals and lefts—such as Susan Sontag, Daniel Cohn-Bendit, Jurgen Habermas and others—jumped on the militarist band-wagon during the Balkan conflicts in the early 1990s, after concluding that "all the best people can be killed by all the worst ones."

Subsequent events such as the September 11 attacks consolidated his new perspective that the struggle for "democracy" or "humanitarianism" had to be ceded to the military might of US imperialism. In 2001 Simon justified a war against Afghanistan in an article entitled "Even Pacifists Must Support This War" stating, amongst other things, that "The war against terrorism does not shove American power into places where it has no place. It calls on America's military strength in a global crisis in which peaceful solutions are not apparent" (see "Pacifist moralizers rally behind the US war drive").

Not satisfied with the medium of journalism for his pro-war efforts, Simon has written a novel—his first—about the Bosnian conflict. The book amounts to little more than propaganda for US military interventions through its demonisation of the Serbs and its completely one-sided portrayal of the civil war.

He adopts a moralising tone as a substitute for a more profound understanding of the complex social and political causes and consequences of the Balkan tragedy. In this regard, Simon is another middle-class impressionist who has lost his bearings since the collapse of the Soviet Union and various 'left' bourgeois nationalist regimes. These layers—now rather financially secure and established—have, without much internal struggle, accepted US capitalist "democracy", conveniently overlooking its numerous crimes against humanity.

America's current rendition program where suspects are picked up, locked up and then packed off to countries such as Egypt where they are interrogated using torture, or executed, are all accepted as legitimate in the "war on terror". Of course, depending on America's geo-political interests, these allies may tomorrow suffer the same fate as Hussein and Milosevic and become the 'enemies of peace' or part of the 'axis of

evil.' For individuals like Simon, going along with US imperialism, as it brands Milosevic, Hussein or whomever else the "new Hitler" or "Butcher of ———" [fill in the blank], is primarily a means of justifying their own rapid rightward shift.

Simon's novel is set just prior to and during the siege of Sarajevo in the early 1990s. Irena Zaric, a part-Muslim, 16-year-old high school girl and talented basketball player, her parents and most of the tenants in their building are ordered to leave by Bosnian-Serb militia forces. Irena has a brother who is out of the country, and her constant companion is Pretty Bird, her beloved parrot. After enduring rape, watching her father's brutal beating and the murder of their neighbour and random artillery fire raining on people and buildings, she is eventually recruited as a sniper.

Irena's activities as a sniper form the main thrust of this story. Conversations with other snipers and operatives and family members form most of the clichéd dialogue. Simon attempts to capture some of the supposed sardonic Balkan humour, but it feels terribly contrived. For instance, this bit from Tedic, Irena's recruiter, in what is an obvious swipe at the UN's futile role in the region, "Our army is an amorphous institution right now. Remember, we Bosnians declared that we wanted to be an unarmed and high-minded little state, striving to earn the plaudits of Jimmy Carter and the Dalai Lama. I'm sure they plan to drape the ribbons of their Nobel nominations graciously over our graves" (p.120).

In his attempts to be relevant and realistic, and probably to show in a condescending manner that Muslim teenagers are just like teenagers in the West, Simon has the obligatory sex-scene between Irena and her basketball coach, which takes place in her bedroom while her permissive parents watch television in the lounge room of their apartment.

Even the scenes of death and destruction evoke little emotion as they feel incidental to the main point Simon wants to make, which seems to be the collective guilt of Serbs in the ethnic cleansing of Bosnian Muslims. For example, in response to Irena's apprehension about killing Serbs indiscriminately, Tedic (Irena's recruiter) replies: "An old Serb lady ... who stood by when her Muslim neighbours were dragged away, then went into their apartment and took their teacups and television set. Some other Serb lady who cheers *Karadzic* when

he says Sarajevo must be cleansed. Or one of those enchanting Serb kids spraying slogans about *rag-head girls* on their classroom walls. Could a bullet meant for a Serb general skid off and hit such a person? Past the age of 12, I call *no one* here innocent” (p.161 [*italics in original*]). Naturally, such an explanation is enough to assuage Irena’s misgivings.

This sentiment is repeated and emphasised, relentlessly, throughout the whole novel. This is inadvertently underscored in a gushing review by *Kirkus Reviews*: “Irena is recruited as a sniper. In a coming-of-age no parent would wish on his or her children, Irena asks the hard questions: What about innocent Serbs? How are we different from Serb snipers? But she overcomes initial misgivings and excels at her work.” Other reviews such as those in the *Washington Post*, *Publishers Weekly* and one by author Scott Turow, to name only a few, heap similar praise on *Pretty Birds*.

For Simon, the world is divided into good and evil and the characters are arrangements of stereotyped and superficial traits, arranged syntagmatically to coincide with the exigencies of a wafer-thin plot.

Irena is supposed to be a typical teenager, but Simon appears to know as much about teenagers as he knows, or cares to know, about the more profound causes of the conflict in the Balkans. After discovering that teenage girls were used as snipers by both sides because of their supposedly superior qualities (calmer, more agile, patient) he interviewed several and from this garnered, it seems, just enough for a sketchy profile, which he has worked up into a full-length novel.

The only Serb character who has any semblance of a personality is Irena’s friend Amela, who turns out to be a sniper for the Serbian side, and has passed on information obtained from an unwitting Irena, which is used to kill a gathering of Irena’s cohorts. Amela is only redeemed by her confession that she was coerced into the spying and sniping after her family had been threatened and she had been raped by Serb militia.

Simon’s journalistic propaganda style is pedestrian, lacking serious artistic merit. There is no consistent or coherent imagery; most characters are indistinguishable from one another in their commitment to fight an enemy that seems to have emerged inexplicably, overnight. Implausibly, Irena, at 17, seems to have the maturity, the fearlessness, intellectual capacity and nous of Tedic and other adults, comprehending and adapting painlessly to her new role as sniper.

Descriptions of people, places and situations read like a catalogue of colourless facts. Characters are one-dimensional, lacking all complexity and contradiction, without inner lives or individual psychology and the cheap moralising tone pervading *Pretty Birds* makes it not so much a work of literature, but an amateurish political treatise. It is the literary equivalent of a colour-by-numbers painting. Form and content really do correspond in this instance.

Where Simon strives to be magnanimous, he is merely

patronising. The following passage, in which Tedic (who never *speaks* but intones sagely throughout the novel) waxes nostalgic about Sarajevo prior to the conflict, expresses this best: “‘Remember,’ he said, ‘all we wanted in Sarajevo was to be left alone. Left alone to smoke and drink, stay up late and listen to jazz, ski and screw, and otherwise pursue this brilliantly irrelevant mixed culture we have built over five centuries. Then one weekend that changed. They knocked down our doors. They dragged us out of our cafes in which we used to so wisely declaim about Kafka, Sidney Bechet, and Michael Jordan. They raped us, dear. Now they’re starving and shooting us. The Mandarins in Washington and London, the café crowd in Paris and New York wring their hands over our fate. They wail against war. But they don’t undo their fingers from their prayers or their espresso cups to help. Right now, five seconds only, the window is closing; we have at least the brief hope of a choice. We can stay with our frivolous, peaceful ways and die silently, leaving the world our names for another memorial. Or we can use every wicked trick they have used on us, and a few more we can think up, to strike back. And buy an extra day of life’” (p.165).

Not much more can be expected from a writer whose mission is not to reveal in an artistically truthful manner the effects or causes of war, but to propagate the official government and media line as fact. Had Simon spent less time detailing the banal intricacies of sniper shooting and moralising and more time on considering the roots of the tragic conflict, he would have discovered that neither the Bosnian Serbs, nor the Bosnian Moslems or Croats for that matter, were the “evil” in this conflict. Rather, all the peoples in the region were the victims of bankrupt nationalist politics of their various leaders—Milosevic, Tadjman and Izetbegovic—and the imperialist intrigues of Europe and the US. It was after all, the recognition of the independence of Croatia and Slovenia, first by Germany and then the US, which began the process of the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia, with tragic consequences. Simon, however, is not interested looking at such things.



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