Novelist Lionel Shriver's *The Mandibles: A Family, 2029–2047* imagines an American meltdown

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A dystopian novel about the United States certainly might appear timely and I therefore looked forward to reading Lionel Shriver's 13th novel, *The Mandibles: A Family, 2029–2047*, with some interest. I wish I could say that the novel rose to the level of the crisis in which we live and that forms the background of the book. Unfortunately, however, the story, notwithstanding its sporadic witticisms and insights, falls far short.

Shriver—born in Gastonia, North Carolina in 1957—has been writing fiction since the 1980s and is best known for *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (2003), dealing with a fictional school massacre, and *Big Brother: A Novel*(2013), about a character with morbid obesity.

Shriver is not one to shy away from controversy and might be described as risk-seeking. And novels that choose to deal with the future have obvious built-in risks. The wisdom of baseball player Yogi Berra comes to mind: predictions are tough, especially those about the future.

Not that readers should be overly demanding about the likelihood of events set in the far, or even not-so-distant, future. Respect for a degree of artistic license is in order. Novels demand a degree of concreteness that is all the more difficult to maintain the farther out in time the author chooses to project. But the events should have a certain plausibility derived from an understanding of the driving forces of political and social life today—and in the past.

The author herself seems to appreciate the point when, in a passage cited by multiple reviewers, she has a character exclaim, "Plots set in the future are about what people fear in the present. They're not about the future at all. The future is the ultimate monster in the closet, the great unknown." Moreover, Shriver commented earlier this year, "Having, like the rest of us, gone through the whole 2008 financial debacle I thought I had plenty of material. My reading on what happened in 2008 is that we dodged a bullet. I feel as if that bullet is still whizzing around the planet." So far, so good.

A central problem, however, is that the present is deeply misunderstood by Shriver, and not simply the sphere of economics, which forms a key structural plank in her novel.

Without giving away the whole story, let us note that the Mandibles of the title are a generally middle-class clan living in New York City and descended from a patriarch, Douglas, who had inherited wealth. Two granddaughters, Florence and Avery, are central figures.

When we meet the cast of characters, the US is mired in economic crisis, driven largely by the growth of entitlement spending. Matters go from bad to worse as the government, seeking favor from a self-absorbed public, suspends debt repayment and currency convertibility. Joblessness, greater poverty, hyperinflation skyrocket. At one point, armed gangs evict the family from Florence's home. There is an allusion to widespread starvation.

There is nothing here to suggest that capitalism, the wealthy corporate executives or their hired guns are to blame at all. Rather, an indolent, self-indulgent, generally ignorant public is at fault. To be sure, there are exceptions, such as Florence's colleague, Chris. He is both diligent and intelligent, and does his best to set others right. But, as one character explains, "people who follow the rules are almost always punished." The explanation of social dynamics doesn't go much beyond this.

Shriver has taken some criticism for alleged racism in the text. Most notably, a review in the *Washington Post* took issue with her depiction of Luella, an African American and former beauty who wooed the patriarch from his wife only to later fall victim to dementia. She is shackled and chained at various points in the novel and suffers a rather ignominious demise. The depiction of Florence's black co-workers at the homeless shelter and those who are forced to reside there doesn't strike the reader as particularly tender either.

But it is the unsympathetic treatment of the characters in general that ought to jar, not simply the fact of their racial background. None of them are particularly deserving of empathy as they are drawn. The portraits all suffer from an affected cynicism, that seems, unfortunately, very much in vogue among contemporary novelists. Is it any wonder that the author could muse rather carelessly—in a talk earlier this year in Australia—that, "[M]ost fiction sucks. Most writing sucks. Most things that people make of any sort suck"? This judgment is not improved much by the next line, "But that doesn't mean we shouldn't make anything."

In her September 2016 keynote speech at the Brisbane Writers Festival (for which she took more criticism), Shriver attacked the notion of "cultural appropriation," which deems it impermissible for white authors, for example, to write about those of other backgrounds, particularly historically oppressed groups, except in

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certain limited and entirely uncritical ways. Her criticisms were confused, a mix of entirely legitimate complaints about identity politics and her peculiar brand of misanthropy.

She rightly pointed out that if novelist "Dalton Trumbo had been scared off of describing being trapped in a body with no arms, legs, or face because he was not personally disabled—because he had not been through a World War I maiming himself and therefore had no right to 'appropriate' the isolation of a paraplegic—we wouldn't have the haunting 1938 classic, *Johnny Got His Gun.*"

No serious writer, on matters contemporary or historical, could argue with that, or with her comment that identity politics seems to require that if "we choose to import representatives of protected groups, special rules apply. If a character happens to be black, they have to be treated with kid gloves, and never be placed in scenes that, taken out of context, might seem disrespectful." Shriver undoubtedly has the number of those who would attack fiction writing from the standpoint of identity politics, particularly with her comment that "offendedness is used as a weapon" to bludgeon artists with.

From here, however, Shriver veers far afield. Novelists, in her view, are *chiefly* equal-opportunity offenders. Of writers, she claims: "Who dares get inside the very heads of strangers, who has the chutzpah to project thoughts and feelings into the minds of others, who steal their very souls, who is a professional kidnapper? … This is a very disrespectful vocation by its very nature—prying, voyeuristic, kleptomaniacal, and presumptuous." Even taking it with a grain of salt, Shriver's notion is overblown and fundamentally flawed.

The great novelists have held "the mirror up to nature" and included all facets of reality, "warts and all," but certainly not warts alone. They were not principally interested in "protecting everyone's right to offend others," as Shriver also suggests. That is a very subsidiary task of the writer, a by-product perhaps in certain circumstances, but never an end in itself.

There is something false or unsound about her approach to her characters. She told a *Bomb* magazine interviewer in 2005 that she created characters who were "hard to love" and not merely "deeply flawed," but rather "all have something horribly wrong with them." Not to mince words, this strikes one as jaundiced and cynical, whatever the degree of affectation.

Notwithstanding her delving into the prediction business, Shriver, who describes herself as "liberal," was apparently quite stunned by Donald Trump's candidacy and ultimate victory. At a *Guardian Live* event in May 2016, Shriver said she was "completely baffled, and no little embarrassed [about Trump being then poised to become the Republican nominee]. I am not losing sleep yet, because I don't think he has a hope in hell in becoming president." She saw it as possible only as the outcome of another tragedy on the scale of September 11.

The novelist also remarked that, "[The US] is not generally a free country and most western countries are not free. The government considers everything we earn as its purview … I find the financial control by governments very unsettling. The west in general has become very controlling." Again, there is the odd mixture of legitimate concerns, "libertarian" rhetoric and arguments (as in *The Mandibles*) generally historically associated with the political right.

Shriver told her audience in May that *The Mandibles* was "not a celebration of the demise of the US" and that she felt "sorrowful about what has happened to my country." "I like the idea of the US and I wish it hewed more closely in reality to what it is in theory," she said. "And I feel mournful about the country in my mind, about what it perhaps used to be, and perhaps could be again—though I doubt it."

Her surprise at Trump's victory—she apparently burst out in shock and distaste at an airport when she learned of the final result—likely has much to do with her misreading of the present situation and her misplacement of responsibility. An example helps make the point: near the end of *The Mandibles*, shortly after America's complete breakdown, somehow the entire population is in perfect mental and physical health, the average lifespan is 92 and the elderly are helped along by a federal budget where 80 percent of expenditure is for Social Security and Medicare. Where does Shriver live? There is no serious attempt to work through or piece together the various social facts and contradictions the author observes.

To her credit, Shriver did say, in an interview on a Malaysian radio station after the US election, that while avoiding "complete panic," the public should be aware of "the ugly underbelly" reflected in the outcome. Of the president-elect, she said, "He has no real convictions, beyond how great he is."

If this review has quoted little from *The Mandibles*, it is, unhappily, because there really are not many compelling or memorable scenes or stretches of dialogues in the book. By way of exception, a scene between Florence and her tenant, Kurt, displays some rare moments of human warmth. Though she felt compelled to oust him, to make room for family members forced out of their dwellings, Florence comes up with a way to let him stay on with her family.

One scene alone is not enough to carry the novel. But perhaps in her next undertaking, the author will find a way to connect with the idea that beneath somewhat abrasive exteriors, a great deal of decency resides within most people. Circumstances place tests and stresses on human beings' better sides. A more profound appreciation of both character and circumstance would certainly be a welcome development in Shriver's fiction.

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