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Of trolls, tragedies and conspiracies

What Nick Drnaso's graphic novel Sabrina reveals about the dark mood of the Trump Era

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It's nothing short of a small literary sensation: for the first time ever, a graphic novel has been nominated for the long-list of the high-profile Man Booker Prize. This is so unusual that even the *New York Times* thought it was worth reporting. Meanwhile, British author Zadie Smith, herself twice nominated for the award, is quoted on the cover text of the Montreal-published work calling it the 'best book – in any medium – I have read about our current moment' and confessing that it scared her.

So what is author Nick Drnaso, born in Illinois in 1989, trying to tell us? The plot goes something like this: the eponymous Sabrina disappears without a trace. Her distraught boyfriend Teddy ends up staying with an old school friend who is now employed by the US Air Force doing a mysterious 'desk job'. When it becomes clear that Sabrina has been the victim of a crime and a video of the horrific incident does the rounds on the internet, Teddy gets sucked into a maelstrom of conspiracy theories on social media and talk-radio discussions which call the motives, statements, and even the identities of those affected into question.

In the Trump Era, no-one can overlook the real-world backdrop against which this plot is set. After Alex Jones, in his webcast *Infowars*, claimed that school shootings were all staged and that survivors were in fact actors paid by the Democrats, several parents of victims of mass killings at schools have sued the right-wing populist presenter. And Jones has a long record of such claims: in all seriousness he accused Hilary Clinton and other leading Democrats of having run a child pornography ring out of the cellar of a Washington DC pizzeria ('Pizzagate').

American decency is dead

It would be all too easy to write this off as crazy-talk – if it weren't for the fact that Jones and many other 'shock jocks' have millions of dedicated

listeners, viewers, and followers. Fans of Rush Limbaugh, one of the original talk-radio extremists who is still very active, even refer to themselves as 'dittoheads' in pride at how they agree with absolutely everything their hero says – no ifs, no buts, no maybes. And that brings us to what scares Zadie Smith so intensely. If even the schoolgirls and boys who, after the 2008 massacre at their school in Parkland, Florida, set up a national movement to increase gun controls, can be vilified viciously by the demagogic likes of Alex Jones, then anything can happen. Decency is surely now officially dead.

Conspiracy theories have a long and distinguished history in the USA – as do accusations that activists are in fact actors in the pay of political opponents. In the 1860s, for instance, this form of defamation was used on Afro-Americans talking about their experience as slaves in the South. The fact that (white) youngsters who have survived a mass shooting, however, are now being attacked by (white) radio presenters in such a caustic fashion shows that political debate in the United States has indeed reached a new low of brutality.

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There are at least two reasons for this development. On the one hand, the internet makes it easier than ever to spread conspiracy theories and slanderous talk, all the while offering the protection of anonymity. On the other hand, a president is now in the White House legitimising precisely this kind of behaviour with his own words and tweets. What would previously have been rejected as indecent – not least by conservative republicans – now has presidential approval, and it's no coincidence that Donald Trump recently enjoyed a very friendly appearance on Alex Jones' *Infowars*.

The real-world consequences of *Infowars*

The case of Emma Jane Gonzalez is telling in this context. The Brooklyn cook happens to share her name, her Cuban heritage, and – for a short period – place of residence with one of the most prominent Parkland activists, Emma Gonzalez. Yet the fact that the former is 31 years old, lives in New York and not Florida, and has a completely different physical appearance from the notably shaven-headed schoolgirl has not been sufficient to stop actor-not-activist conspiracy-theorists launching a

witch-hunt against her on Reddit, Twitter, and WordPress. Gonzalez has, as far as they're concerned, been bought by the 'deep state' as part of a dastardly plot to rob Americans of their right to bear arms and thus deliver them into servitude to the state.

The parents of Noah Pozner, killed in a shooting at Sandy Hook primary school in Connecticut in 2012, have now sued Alex Jones, who has issued a counter-suit, claiming that his remarks were taken out of context and that they are, in any case, covered by his right to free speech. If anything, he opines, the Pozner's legal action just serves to demonstrate the depths to which the Democrats and anti-guns activists will sink.

Free speech as it is understood under American law does indeed cover a multitude of sins, and most of the hard-right shock jocks are usually clever enough to phrase their views as highly suggestive questions or take other precautions to stop them falling foul of the law. Not that this saves those on the sharp end of their invectives from verbal and even physical attacks. The Pozners have had to move seven times since 2012 because their address has continually been found out and they have received death threats; in 2016, a Jones fan was arrested for repeatedly threatening to murder the family.

The relevance of the graphic novel *Sabrina*

In *Sabrina*, weapons and violence are a part of the plot before we even find out what the core storyline is: guns are, after all, part of everyday life in America, a country in which many are haunted by the feeling that they need to protect themselves at all times. As soon as Teddy arrives, soldier Calvin shows Teddy where he keeps weapons hidden in the house; Sandra tells her sister Sabrina about an attempted rape and tells her not to worry about safety on her planned hike into the wilderness because 'the real wild animals stay in hotels'.

Through the medium of the graphic novel, Drnaso reminds us that Thomas Hobbes dictum – 'Man is a wolf to man' – remains as relevant in the 21st century as when it was written. It shows us what people will do to one another when the state is not there to keep order. In the story, the police play an insignificant part while the military seems concerned with its own matters: Calvin is continually reminded to record his current state of wellbeing on a bureaucratic chart. Politics is not mentioned at all, however, and as such, the reality of America in the Trump era actually feels worse than in this dystopian fiction because the President is playing a personal role in the polarising of an increasingly coarsened debate.

A small glimmer of hope: on 6 August 2018, Facebook, Apple, and YouTube announced that they would be blocking Alex Jones' accounts, if nothing else depriving him of easy access to his wide audience. Yet whether this step will be enough to stem his poisonous effect on the political discourse in the USA remains to be seen.

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