

Lionel Shriver Novelist

Lionel Shriver was born in North Carolina, which she schemed from an early age to leave and only appreciated was a lovely place to grow up after succeeding. Now retired, her parents were both religious professionals—Donald W. Shriver was president of Union Theological Seminary in New York, Peggy Shriver an executive with the National Council of Churches—which effectively inoculated their daughter against religion of any description for life. Nevertheless, a sneaky judgmental moralism, an attraction to same famously thorny questions that her ethicist father tackled in Christian terms, and tendency to plot novels with insidious allusions to the New Testament survived intact.

After earning a BA from Barnard College and MFA from Columbia University—both degrees in writing, about which she has always been vaguely ashamed (surely she should have studied history, something of substance)—Lionel taught at various New York universities as an underpaid, overworked adjunct, teaching kids who never believed her that the comma belongs inside quotation marks. Throughout her schooling and for years thereafter, Lionel ran her own catering business, thanks to which she is still an excellent cook and can never bring herself to make less than a double-batch of cornbread.

Before she had any idea of the kind of hellish future she was inviting, Lionel vowed at the age of seven to write and illustrate her own books. (In defiance of some killjoy adult's condescending observation that "grown-up books don't have any pictures," she would later illustrate her second novel with miniature pen-and-inks.) After writing one "practice novel" that never saw the light of day (says she, "there is a God"), Lionel published her first novel at 29 with Farrar, Straus & Giroux. *The Female of the Species*, about a renowned female anthropologist nearing sixty who falls in love with a boy of twenty-two with dubious intentions, received widespread critical praise, although its sales were modest. Critical acclaim and muted sales would prove a pattern both deadly and damnably difficult to break.

Two more novels with FSG followed: *Checker and the Derailleurs*, about a young rock-and-roll drummer in Astoria, Queens, and a second about an independent bomb-disposal expert cum political busy-body in Belfast, Northern Ireland. The ghastly last-minute title of the latter, *The Bleeding Heart*, Lionel leapt to change to *Ordinary Decent Criminals* when it was published in the UK. Although *Checker* slowly gathered a cult following and was blurbed by none other than Grace Slick, while *ODCs* proved one of the only "troubles novels" by an American that the British could actually stick, neither sold impressively, and for bottom-line reasons alone Jonathan Galassi at FSG was obliged to drop her from their list.

Game Control, perhaps Lionel's most ambitious novel to date—about a cynical demographer so convinced of the perils of human overpopulation that he plots to cull two billion people from the planet overnight—was only published in Britain by Faber & Faber. Likewise Lionel's fifth novel, *A Perfectly Good Family*, about an inheritance dispute between three siblings over a grand Reconstruction mansion in North Carolina. In hardback, *Game Control* sold no more copies than there are days in the year; *PGF* also sold but a handful and rapidly disappeared. Although both novels will soon be re-released by HarperCollins, at the time excellent notices for both books would have provided good lining for kitty litter boxes. Unfortunately, Lionel doesn't keep cats.

Double Fault, about career competition between two professional tennis players that destroys their marriage, got Lionel's hopes up. But a six-figure advance from Doubleday did not guarantee the company's support at publication. If widely well-reviewed, it sold a meager 5,000 copies, and the 1997 novel only went into paperback when released by Serpent's Tail in 2006. Lionel's (real) seventh novel, *The New Republic*, only went to show that it does not pay to be ahead of your time. She finished it in 1998, three years before anyone in the US gave two hoots about terrorism. *TNR* was never published at all.

This is a Little Engine That Could story. Broke and still little known yet already in her early forties, Lionel wrote *We Need to Talk About Kevin* as a last-ditch bid in fiction before she resigned herself to full-time journalism. *Kevin*, about a Columbine-style massacre

Casarotto Ramsay
& Associates Limited

Waverley House
7-12 Noel Street
London W1F 8GQ

T +44 (0)20 7287 4450
F +44 (0)20 7287 9128
www.casarotto.co.uk

told by

the mother of the killer, lost Lionel her New York agent, who hated it, and was roundly rejected by twenty more. Desperate, she sent the manuscript to an editor at Counterpoint who had published her in paperback at Penguin. Dawn Sefarian read the book over the weekend and made an offer on Monday.

Fast-forward: *Kevin* has now sold half a million copies in the UK alone, while garnering sixteen foreign rights deals and counting. In 2005, it won the UK's prestigious Orange Prize for Fiction. It is still selling a constant 10,000 copies/week in the UK, and 1,000/week in the US. The script is now in development with Lynne Ramsay of *RATCATCHER* fame and BBC Films. In short, Lionel did not have to beg anybody to publish *The Post-Birthday World*.

A chronic ex-pat, Lionel is widely traveled. After a six-month bike trip through Western Europe in 1985, she spent another six months in Israel before moving to Belfast, where she based herself for twelve years. Within that time, she also lived over a year in Nairobi and three months in Bangkok. She moved to London in 1999, where she still resides, although she returns to New York summers, ever drawn by the allure of its public tennis courts.

Not only because fiction didn't pay the bills for years but because she loves to mouth off and shove her too-copious opinions down other people's throats, Lionel has also published widely in journalism. In addition to working nine months full-time for *The Wall Street Journal* on the editorial page of its European edition, she has written numerous op-eds for the paper. She is the *Economist's* chief fiction reviewer, and is now under contract with London's *Daily Telegraph* as a fiction reviewer as well. She is an on-again-off-again columnist for *The Guardian*. Lionel has also written for *The New York Times*, *Vogue*, *Marie Claire*, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, *The Daily Mail*, *The Independent*, *The Globe and Mail*, *The Sunday Times*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *The Irish Times*, *The Belfast Telegraph*, Belfast's *Fortnight*, *Tennis Magazine*, *The Evening Standard*, *The Financial Times*, London's *Literary Review*, *Grazia*, *Harpers and Queen*, *The Jerusalem Post*, *Image Magazine*, *The Mail on Sunday*, *The Guardian Weekend Magazine*, *Salon.com*, *The Weekly Standard*, *The Independent on Sunday*, and—last but, to Lionel, most proudly—*Population and Development Review*.

Lionel has contributed to McMillan's "Encyclopedia of Population" and the HarperCollins essay collection, "Maybe Baby." She does frequent radio appearances in London, and for four years recorded weekly editorials for "Talkback" in Northern Ireland. She now appears regularly on BBC television's arts review program, "Newsnight Review."

In fiction, Lionel continues to write on a disparate variety of subject matter and even in different styles; she has never repeated herself, and doesn't plan to start now. Thus, to the disappointment of her fans, *The Return of Kevin*, *Son of Kevin*, and *Kevin Strikes Back* will all have to be authored by someone else.

Froufrou: At 49, Lionel is, like most boomers, neurotic about exercise, although tennis (at which she is happily crap) and perversely cycling everywhere do not, like running and calisthenics, fall into the category of the odious. For the last four years she has been married to an accomplished jazz drummer, Jeff Williams, who has played with the likes of Stan Getz and Lee Konitz.

Remarkably for an ostensible expert on motherhood, she has no children. She is one of the few fiction writers out there who has been known to give readings of her work that are not suicidally dull.