

# Letters to the Editor From Steven Pinker, Jonathan Gottschall, and Others

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Jan. 14, 2022

## One-Sided Narratives

To the Editor:

Timothy Snyder's review of my book "The Story Paradox" (Jan. 9) is a smear of ad hominem, dark insinuation and failures in basic reading comprehension. Snyder begins by mocking a scene from my conclusion where, he claims, I reveal myself as a vainglorious Quixote — the first person to take on "the 'science' of how stories work." In fact, the book is based on extensively cited research conducted by others, and even the scene he mocks only complains of this research's neglect by mainstream psychology.

Next he has me arguing for a universal story structure in which "everything gets worse until it gets better," before listing some stories that break the pattern. This is certainly not how I describe storytelling's universal structure, though I do comment upon an average tendency in which fiction makers engineer last-minute happy endings. Triumphantly citing some counterexamples to refute an average tendency, as Snyder does, is like naming some very tall tennis players to refute the claim that basketball players are generally taller than tennis players.

"The Story Paradox" describes how rationality is distorted by a human tendency to live inside morality tales where we are the good guys and our opponents are caricatured villains. Snyder's relentlessly mean and inaccurate attack is a fine illustration of this point, while justifying my concerns about another phenomenon he doubts: an increasingly merciless intolerance for nonconformist perspectives in higher education.

Jonathan Gottschall  
Washington, Pa.



To the Editor:

Timothy Snyder took some time out from his carpet-bombing of Jonathan Gottshall's witty and insightful "The Story Paradox" for some equally intemperate strafing of my books "The Better Angels of Our Nature" and "Enlightenment Now."

He claims I "cherry-picked" data on modern death tolls "from a source so obviously ideological that I was ashamed to cite it in high school debate." With this predilection for condescension over content it's impossible to know what he's referring to. In reality I cited every extant quantitative data set on war and genocide, plotting the meticulous estimates from the Peace Research Institute Oslo and the Uppsala Conflict Data Program in their entirety. As for "ideology," as Joan Robinson remarked, it is like breath: You never smell your own.

Snyder then blows off the massively documented Flynn effect, in which I.Q. scores rose by three points a decade for a century, claiming they are "in decline." In fact, the recent partial backtracking of the Flynn effect has been found only in some Western European countries where it had been going on the longest; as best we can tell it continues in the rest of the world.

But Snyder's claim that I embrace a libertarianism that would lead to the "dissolution" of the modern welfare state is nothing short of hallucinatory. In reality I celebrated the rise of social spending on the vulnerable and government regulations on safety, the workplace and the environment as major chapters in the annals of human progress.

Steven Pinker  
Cambridge, Mass.

*The writer is the Johnstone professor of psychology at Harvard University.*

## A Writer's Identity

To the Editor:

Regarding Gish Jen's review of "To Paradise," by Hanya Yanagihara (Jan. 9): Why would she even have to ask if an Asian American woman can write a great American novel? It seems pretty apparent to me that anyone of any race or gender can write a great American novel.

Lynn Klyde-Allaman  
Lafayette, Colo.

## Postcard

To the Editor:

My thanks to Liesl Schillinger for recommending Tim Parks's "The Hero's Way: Walking With Garibaldi From Rome to Ravenna" (Dec. 5). And thanks to Parks for suggesting that the reader use Google Maps to see all the charming hill towns he walked to in Garibaldi's footsteps. The author seamlessly interweaves Garibaldi's trek with his own walk, making one feel like a companion to both.

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