

# *In Conversation with* **Stephen Marche**

Charlotte Friesen

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*Stephen Marche is a novelist, essayist and cultural commentator. He is the author of half a dozen books and has written opinion pieces and essays for The New Yorker, The New York Times, The Atlantic, Esquire, The Walrus and many others.*

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**CJLPA:** Let's begin by outlining the main premise of your latest book, *The Next Civil War*. Who did you have in mind when you were writing it and what was your initial interest in the topic?

**Stephen Marche:** The subject of the book is the political leanings that are tending towards a disunion, a civil war in the United States, or the breakup of the United States in some form. I wrote it as a warning to Americans. It is not written out of contempt for America at all, in fact it's written out of deep affection for and love of America. I feel that they are in quite a bit of danger and that they've accepted certain political realities as normal when they're quite abnormal.

I originally started writing it when a Canadian magazine sent me to Washington to cover the Trump inauguration in 2016. That had a real kind of 'fall of Rome' vibe. I was walking around with anarchists and then I came back from buying cigarettes and they had all been arrested. Then I was standing on top of a limousine and somebody lit the limousine on fire. The police were right down the knife edge between left and right groups, and they could barely keep the peace. After that experience, I decided to dedicate the next four or five years to trying to figure out how much danger America is actually in. And the book is my answer to that.

**CJLPA:** You go through five dispatches in the book. Were there any outside of that which you considered writing about, or started writing about and decided not to continue with?

**SM:** Electoral outcomes really didn't make their way into the book; like what a challenged election would look like, what would happen if there was a contingent election, or no agreement on January 6<sup>th</sup> when they certified the election. I didn't include that because I wanted to base the dispatches on solid information, for which I had excellent, well-established models – like environmental models or models of civil war. It's very hard to find non-biased or non-political and non-agenda driven approaches to questions like those around contested or contingent elections.

Some models are stronger than others; economic models are not really worth anything. Nobody knows what's going to happen in the economy. We do know that by 2040, 50% of the American population will control 85% of the senate, and we do know that trust in institutions is in freefall. And the environmental models offer an incredible predictive capacity. I wanted to keep it on that level.

People get really confused in America about the importance of elections, whereas I think the trends that are really shredding the United States are well below and well above who gets elected. People are worried if Trump gets elected. I'm not really worried about that because I think the problems are a lot deeper than that.

**CJLPA:** There's a prevailing idea that issues as deep-set as those that you discuss in your book can only be diagnosed from a safe objective distance. I'm wondering how your being a Canadian brought a unique perspective to these issues and allowed you to consider them in a different way.

**SM:** We are very close to America. I've lived in America and I've worked in America. Most of my income has always come from American sources. I have family in America. But I'm not an American. I can go to America, and no one would know that I'm not an American, so that's also extremely helpful as a researcher.

Being a Canadian is the perfect amount of distance because you're right there geographically and culturally. But you also know that healthcare systems do not have to be as they are in America; gun control does not have to be as it is. There are other options. The realities that you see in America are not normal. A huge problem in America is that the educated elites have really managed to convince themselves, and have been taught from a very young age, that their political institutions are the solution to history, whereas to me they are just one option among many. I think that's the difference between myself and an American commentator, who on one hand really has to believe in their country, and on the other has been indoctrinated into believing that it is the greatest country in the world and an exception to history and so on. When of course there are no exceptions to history.

**CJLPA: I agree with your conclusion in the book that the hope for America lies with Americans, and that it is the fusion of opposites and the coming together of differing opinions that makes America so unique and allowed it to become what it is today. Great political thinkers like Hannah Arendt and Walter Benjamin view contrasting opinions as the highest good in politics. How do you think the University helps—or maybe doesn't help—in creating a space for dissent?**

**SM:** From the outside it looks horrible. I don't think anyone imagines that the university would be a place where you could openly explore ideas anymore. I would never have the inclination that if I really want to explore or open up ideas, I should make an appointment at a university and talk about it with some students.

The university really isn't the world. The humanities are falling apart, they cannot argue for a reason for their own existence. They get less powerful every year out of a willed powerlessness. And if you can't make arguments for why you should exist you won't exist.

**CJLPA: Where do you think that space of dissent could be or is?**

**SM:** My opinion generally is that these things go in cycles: political leanings, engagement, disengagement. There's a great temptation whenever we're in these situations to feel like we are in the ideology that's going to survive forever. One of the things that worries me is that the right-wing backlash to that will be so horrible that it will be worse than what we have now. The heroes that I had were renaissance humanists; people like Arendt and Benjamin, who maintained their humanism in very dark periods. I really believe in cosmopolitan humanism as an intellectual approach to the world, and that's the world that I want to be in. I don't feel like that's impossible at all. I feel like I can write and say what I want, and some people will hate me, and some people will like me, but I'm a journalist! You're supposed to be hated, that's part of the gig. I don't really feel all that threatened by any of that.

I feel like it's important to keep your eye on the prize of what you want to do and who you want to be intellectually, and to not respond to trends that are based in fear. Fear is quite overblown on these matters. I've been attacked a lot, but I think we should expect to be attacked. Sharing an opinion of the world comes with a price. I feel like there is still room for humanism, probably as much as there ever has been because it's never been very popular. Humanism is always under threat; it's never been the successor ideology but it's the one I have. It's all that I care about and want to do. And I can do it.

**CJLPA: Since you're a Shakespeare scholar and this is a British journal, is there any particular play, or even a scene, which you see as particularly illuminating to contemporary Canadian or American politics?**

**SM:** *Coriolanus* is a big one because it's about patriotic elites who turn into a globalized fascist force, which you don't have to look too far to find. Someone like Putin is very Shakespearean; people who manage to convince themselves of their own propaganda and become obsessed with their own rhythms of revenge, This is absolutely the Shakespearean mode.

The parallels are not exact, but there are a whole host of plays which can be related to the ongoing conflict between the Ukraine and Russia, like *Antony and Cleopatra* or *Coriolanus*. Unfortunately, they

are all tragedies. The tyrants of *Richard III* and *Macbeth* undoubtedly still apply. It's amazing how these works remain so in tune with the psychological process behind tyrannical behaviour. *Richard III* is pretty damn close to Putin. I don't think you're going to find a better representation, except maybe Boris Godunov.

**CJLPA: Thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me. I really appreciate it.**

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Charlotte Friesen is an honours graduate from King's College, Halifax, Nova Scotia. She wrote her thesis on early modern cookery manuscripts and cookbooks, and works as a bread baker when she's not writing or reading.

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