1. Introduction

On the morning of April 19, 1995, Timothy McVeigh parked a large rented moving truck packed with more than 4,000 pounds of explosives made from ammonium nitrate fertilizer and race car fuel right in front of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City and calmly walked away. At exactly 9:02 a.m. the truck exploded and the building collapsed, killing 168 people, including 19 children in day-care, and leaving more than 500 wounded. The Murrah Building was the local headquarters for several government organizations, including the Secret Service and the national drug enforcement and firearms agencies. At the time it was the worst act of terrorism in the United States and still remains the worst case of domestic terrorism in the country. (Kushner, 2003, pp. 224–225)

In the fictional storyworld of Andrew Macdonald’s notorious neo-Nazi novel *The Turner Diaries* (1978), on the morning of October 12, 1991, the novel’s protagonist and narrator Earl Turner has one of his accomplices park a stolen delivery truck packed with two and a half tons of explosives made from fertilizer and gasoline in the loading docks of the FBI headquarters in Washington, D.C. Turner and his co-conspirators calmly walk away, and at exactly 9:15 a.m. the blast decimates the building, killing hundreds, destroying the Bureau’s records, and effectively crippling its actions against Turner’s organization for the near future.

Following McVeigh’s arrest 90 minutes after the explosion in Oklahoma City, FBI agents found photocopies in McVeigh’s car of the pages in *The Turner Diaries* that describe the truck bombing of the FBI headquarters. *The Turner Diaries* was McVeigh’s favorite book. He used to travel around the country, selling the book at gun shows for less than what he had originally paid (Turk, 2004, p. 279).

Unfortunately, while the Oklahoma City bombing is the most infamous act of violence connected with *The Turner Diaries*, it is neither the first nor was it the last. The novel directly inspired several neo-Nazi organizations,
the most influential being Robert Jay Mathews’ group from the early 1980s called the Order, named for the elite revolutionary cadre in *The Turner Diaries*. Mathews’ plan was to follow the story in the novel to the letter (Hoffman, 1995, p. 277). Mathews is best known for the murder of the liberal talk radio host Alan Berg and is considered a “saint” in the white supremacist movement, having died in a battle with federal agents in 1984 after a crime spree to fund his organization. Famous hate crimes have also been connected to *The Turner Diaries*, for example the murder of James Byrd, Jr. in 1998, which eventually led to the Hate Crimes Prevention Act of 2009. (Jackson, 2004)

Most readers, even sympathetic ones, will not act violently on the basis of *The Turner Diaries*. Nevertheless, readers receptive to its message are likely to harden their attitudes based on the reinforcement offered by the novel. Clearly, *The Turner Diaries* is an ethically suspect work of fiction.

Accordingly, I answer the question posed in my title—whether we can do wrong with fiction—in the affirmative. Fiction can indeed be used to unethical ends. *The Turner Diaries* is not just a work of fiction; it is also political propaganda that encourages hate and racial violence. It pursues this goal primarily through two interrelated strategies of narrative persuasion. First, it invites empathic identification with hateful characters, potentially leading to emulative behavior in real life. Second, it creates a strong sense of racist group identity by excluding non-radical readers from emotionally engaging with the work. Together these strategies of empathy and exclusion have the potential to strengthen a prejudiced reader’s sense of racial enmity.

*The Turner Diaries* was originally published as a serial novel in a neo-Nazi propaganda tabloid called *Attack!* in the early 1970s. The novel’s real author is William Luther Pierce (1933–2002), the founder and life-long leader of the National Alliance, then and now the most influential and widely funded white supremacist group in the United States (Hilliard and Keith, 1999, pp. 165–166). *Attack!* was a publication directed at young people, primarily the children of neo-Nazi families in America (Griffin, 2001, p. 116). *The Turner Diaries* reflects this: it is a piece of propaganda masquerading as a boys’ adventure novel. This is precisely why it is an illuminating, albeit repulsive work of narrative persuasion.

The FBI calls *The Turner Diaries* the “bible of the racist right,” and it is not only the most widely read book in white supremacist and neo-Nazi circles, but also has become a staple of terrorism studies and a source of keen interest for people involved in terrorism prevention (Jackson, 2004).

Before going any further, a short disclaimer is necessary. First, *The Turner Diaries* is of questionable legality. As an openly neo-Nazi work, it is illegal in Germany, and has been banned in several countries, even in places that are not traditionally linked with book censorship, such as Canada. Although *The Turner Diaries* has not been published outside the United States,