

Christopher Booker

Campaigning journalist who was the founding editor of *Private Eye*

CHRISTOPHER BOOKER, who has died aged 81, was an influential figure in the "Swinging London" of the early 1960s, writing scripts for David Frost and the BBC late-night satirical reviews *That Was The Week That Was* and *Not So Much a Programme More a Way of Life*, and becoming founding editor of the satirical magazine *Private Eye*; he built a following of millions of loyal newspaper readers, particularly of *The Sunday Telegraph*, where he was a columnist for nearly three decades, as a sceptical, brave, wide-ranging and often funny campaigning journalist.

In 1961 Booker was one of a group of school and university friends who started *Private Eye*. He had a considerable talent for parody, although his early writing was marked by sudden and unpredictable changes of ideological direction. Kenneth Tynan joked about the *Eye*: "When are you going to develop a point of view?"

Then, in 1963, Booker experienced a Pauline conversion. Abandoning atheism, he returned to the Anglican faith of his childhood, and under the influence of Malcolm Muggeridge became a fierce critic of the sexual permissiveness of the age.

The hallmark of Booker's later journalism was a quizzical scepticism, a good deal of which was focused on scientific orthodoxy, though he himself had no scientific qualifications. He was a prominent climate change sceptic, highlighting contradictions in the arguments of his opponents and pouring scorn on the view – supported by most scientific research – that global warming is a reality and that it is mainly the result of human activity.

He challenged medical experts on the toxicity of asbestos, the link between passive smoking and cancer, and the dangers to human health of the cattle disease BSE.

His determinedly contrarian assaults on the scientific consensus infuriated as many readers as they delighted, the more so since he continued to defend his opinions even when, as sometimes happened, they were shown to be based on inaccuracies.

He passionately opposed British membership of the EU and, with Dr Richard North, wrote two books attacking Brussels bureaucracy, *The Castle of Lies* (1996) and *The Great Deception* (2005). So it came as a surprise to some when, in the run-up to and after the 2016 referendum on Britain's membership, Booker emerged as one of the most articulate critics of the Vote Leave campaign and the European Research Group.



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In the debate over climate change, Booker stood accused of ignoring the evidence. Yet this was exactly the charge he levelled at those calling for Britain to leave the EU, the single market and the customs union, without a deal if necessary.

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When Donald Tusk tweeted that he had been "wondering what that special place in hell looks like, for those who promoted Brexit without even a sketch of a plan how to carry it out safely", Booker observed that the President of the European Council had been "entirely accurate in identifying the real cause of this insanely unnecessary shambles, the catastrophic consequences of which may be with us for decades to come".

Following this setback Booker was invited to link up with two old friends from Shrewsbury, Richard Ingrams and Willie Rushton, who were attempting to start a satirical magazine. The first issue of *Private Eye* appeared in October 1961, and within four months Booker had established himself as the editor. He held this position for just over a year.

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Christopher John Penrice Booker was born on October 7 1937 and brought up in Dorset near Blandford Forum in a prep school for girls run by his parents, John and Margaret Booker. He was sent to Shrewsbury School, where his headmaster later recalled that "he used to spend his Sundays collecting fossils". Owing to poor eyesight he avoided National Service

and instead read History at Cambridge. While there he declared that he wanted to "edit [his] own newspaper, marry a Duke's daughter and appear on television".

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Obituaries

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KEITH BERNSTEIN

climate change and the European Union

Snow was mocked for being blind. Sales increased, but Booker was no businessman and under his sometimes distracted leadership *Private Eye* ran into financial difficulties. A rescue operation was mounted by Peter Cook.

It was Cook who said: "Satirists are like spiders - we are always devouring each other", and in the summer of 1963 Booker was fired by his old school friends. They felt he had been spending too much time working for David Frost on television. Ingrams became the editor of *Private Eye* and remained at the helm for the next 23 years.

Booker never fully recovered from this loss, saying later that he had regarded the magazine as "my baby" and was "horrified to have it snatched from me".

After leaving *Private Eye*, Booker - now known as "The Deacon" by his former colleagues - retired to a bedsitter near Victoria Station and restarted his life. He had a fondness for "gurus" such as Laurens van der Post, whose entry in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* he wrote, later rebutting claims by his biographer JDF

Jones and others that van der Post was a fantasist.

As the 1960s went on Booker was drawn to the psychoanalyst Carl Jung's theory of "psychic epidemics", which held that the greatest danger to mankind was man. He embarked on a study of "the revolution in English life in the Fifties and Sixties", which was published in 1969 as *The Neophiliacs*, a critique of the obsession with "youth" and novelty in general which had in his view taken hold of British society.

Booker had come to see the early 1960s as a collective flight into fantasy - a time of satire but no irony. He had been well placed to write the book, he said, "because more than anyone else at *Private Eye* I was caught up in the absurdities".

Willie Rushton dismissed *The Neophiliacs* as "his *Private Eye* stuff with the jokes taken out". But Mugggeridge endorsed Booker's analysis, praising the young writer as "one of the most brilliant of his age".

Booker was one of the pioneers of attacks on skyscrapers and brutalism in architecture, and the destructive big-city property development boom of the 1960s and 1970s provided him with the material for his second book *Goodbye London*, which was published in 1973 and co-authored by Candida Lycett Green.

By the early 1970s he had made up his differences with Ingrams and rejoined the nucleus of humorists - including Rushton, John Wells and Barry Fantoni - who supplied much of the satirical content of *Private Eye*. Late in life he was still attending the fortnightly jokes meetings.

His renewed association with the magazine did not always go smoothly, however. In 1976, when *Private Eye* was on the point of being closed down by the enraged billionaire James Goldsmith, Booker joined in the attack. In an article in *The Spectator* he described the paper that was once again his principal employer as "on its day a strong candidate for the most unpleasant thing in British journalism".

He developed a particular animus towards Auberon Waugh, one of the *Eye's* most popular contributors. The feud would reach its climax in 1990 when Waugh managed to oust Booker as the author of the "Way of the World" column in *The Daily Telegraph*.

At this time Booker was also sitting on the unofficial "Klagenfurt Conspiracy Inquiry" (1986-90), chaired by Brigadier Anthony Cowgill, which attempted to clear Harold Macmillan and others of allegations that they had dishonourably assisted in post-war repatriations to the Soviet Union. One of the supporters of

the original allegations had been Waugh.

Booker listed "the psychology of storytelling" among his many interests - along with nature, music, playing village cricket and "teasing global warmists" - and in 2004 he published *The Seven Basic Plots*, a 700-page study which had been in gestation for more than 30 years.

In 1977 he had summarised its theme: "Dr Johnson, Goethe and many others have had the suspicion that there were only a very limited number of satisfactory 'plots'. What deep springs of the psyche throw up these curiously oft-repeated patterns - the Quest, Overcoming the Monster, Voyage and Return?" The others were Rebirth, Rags to Riches, Tragedy and Comedy.

Fay Weldon suggested that *The Seven Basic Plots* should be given to all creative writing groups, and John Bayley described it as a "deep-flowing masterpiece of critical assessment".

In middle age Booker acquired an "absent-minded professor" appearance that was not entirely misleading. Charged with driving his wife Valerie to hospital to have her first baby, he managed to run out of petrol in the middle of the night on a remote lane in Somerset. Happily mother and child came to no harm.

Other targets of his *Sunday Telegraph* column, which ran from 1990, included the secrecy surrounding the family courts, and he took up the causes of parents whose children had been taken from them by the decisions of social workers. His journalism carried an air of authority and his column was extremely popular among readers, who had the impression that they were at last getting a glimpse of the reality behind the scenes in the corridors of power.

With the many editors who handled his column Booker was always chatty and took an avuncular interest in the progress of their lives. He memorised telephone extensions by translating them into Beethoven opus numbers. With his deep knowledge of culture he was a skilful setter of quizzes.

He married, first, in 1966, Emma Tennant, a great figure in haute-Bohemia and a well-known novelist. The marriage was dissolved and he married secondly, in 1972, Christine Verity. That marriage too was dissolved, Christine subsequently marrying the historian Norman Stone.

Booker is survived by his third wife, Valerie Patrick, whom he married in 1979 and with whom he had two sons.

Christopher Booker, born October 7 1937, died July 3 2019