

# the conversation

## ‘The perception is I’m an outspoken radical. In reality, I’m a shy person’

### Has Michael Moore mellowed with age? The former scourge of the American Right says that he is a conservative at heart, but he tells **Tim Teeman** that he’s still angry – and still gunning for the super-rich

**I**n Riverside Park, New York, with a sweaty fringe splaying from beneath a baseball cap, sunglasses fixed against the sun, the hulking, genial Michael Moore is smiling but insistent. “I’ve always thought I’m very conservative.” Really? The director of anti-Bush, anti-capitalist, anti-Right documentaries such as *Roger and Me*, *Bowling for Columbine*,

**WINNING STREAK**  
Michael Moore in New York last week, right; and receiving an Oscar in 2003 for *Bowling for Columbine*, below

*Fahrenheit 9/11*, *Sicko* and *Capitalism: A Love Story* is a conservative? In his bombastic mash-ups of fact, polemic and crude humour, Moore has skewered America’s healthcare system, war-baiting, gun addiction and shocking gaps between rich and poor. He seemed a dead-cert confrontational left-wing radical.

Last weekend Moore, 57, was in New York as the city marked the tenth anniversary of the terrorist attacks. “I thought the mood was fairly subdued,” he says. “There was sadness and grief over the lost lives that day, but also over how the dead had been dishonourably used to start two wars. People are just tired of that, tired of the fighting, tired of being afraid.”

His background is far from left wing. “My mother voted Republican until Reagan in 1980,” Moore says in his folksy, passionate drawl. He is, like his films, a combination of serious and scabrous, funny and angry, but in private — unlike the on-screen polemicist — shy. “My grandfather was the leader of the Republicans in Davison [Michigan, where he grew up]. Back then ‘conservative’ meant you didn’t spend money, you ‘conserved’ clean air, water, the environment. It didn’t mean ‘batshit crazy,’” Moore laughs. He and his wife, Kathleen, were the only parents at their daughter Natalie’s school objecting to a class of 16 to 17-year-olds drinking wine on a school trip to France. “They’re too young,” he insists.

He is “always” seated next to conservatives on planes. “I say, ‘You and I agree on more than we disagree on.’ We agree women should be paid the same as men for the same work, that those who have harmed others are separated from us. The things we disagree on make a small list: you think abortion is murder. I say, ‘Don’t have one, but don’t deny others that right.’ And all men who don’t like gay marriage or men having sex with men, I encourage you never to have sex with another guy. You’ll hate it.” He “really wants” conservatives to read his new book, *Here Comes Trouble*, “once they realise it’s not a rant and we share so many values”. The book is a patchwork of stories from Moore’s past that are pithy, moving and far from didactic.

He writes about his regret after making his anti-Bush speech at the 2003 Oscars (where he won Best Documentary for *Columbine*), which led to death threats and bodyguards for him and his family. There is the story of Moore helping a friend to find an abortion doctor when it was illegal; of him getting expelled from a seminary; the emergence of the radical as a teenager.

Moore has just come from Mass. Would he have made a good priest? “Yes,” he smiles, “but I would have been a terrible employee. We’ve recently learnt it’s an organisation which covered up crimes.”

He’s pro-choice and pro-gay — why is he still a practising Catholic? “Yes, it’s hard. I don’t support it as an institution but I believe in its principles and values.”

Moore crawled backwards as a baby, though he’s not sure if this is symbolic of his contrariness. “I was a lethargic kid and there is a lot of that still in me.” His mother emphasised the “importance of not violating your conscience” and like many young people, he says, “I felt indignant when I saw hypocrisy or something wrong”. He joined his school board after being whacked by a teacher. “Retribution motivated me, but it grew into something better: wanting to improve the standard of education.”

There’s a concordance between the teenage Moore telling the Davison Elks Club that their ban on black members stinks (then thinking, “What have I done?”) and the adult Moore making that fiery Oscars’ speech, which indicted — as he put it — a “fictitious president” fighting a “fictitious war”. “My conscience kicks in and I become a prisoner to it,” he says. “The perception is I’m this outspoken radical. In reality I’m a shy person. If I’m down to speak at a rally, I’m like, ‘eugggh, why am I doing this?’ I don’t sit around thinking about the next accolade to upset. But I’m not a reluctant radical. I own my politics. I don’t pull any punches. As you get older you’re supposed to mellow. I’ve probably gotten angrier.”

Moore’s teenage dating disasters are fascinating. When did he lose his virginity? “Oh man, I just came from Mass,” he says, stricken, but reveals that he was 19. “I’ve often wondered who that twisted Pope was in the 11th century that decided priests couldn’t marry. Maybe he’d had a bad date or performance issues.”

He and Kathleen have been married for almost 20 years and have been together for 30. She has worked on his films and was with him when he ran a radical newspaper (*The Flint Voice*) earning \$10,000 to \$15,000 a year. *Fahrenheit 9/11* broke the record for highest-grossing documentary (earning half a billion dollars worldwide) and Moore’s fortune has been estimated in eight figures. He declines to verify this, but feels “blessed and lucky”. “A big chunk goes towards continuing what I do, of having the freedom of never doing what a publisher or studio tells me. I call it ‘f\*\*k-you money.’”

Moore denies claims that his films are littered with dubious facts. “I’m very serious about accuracy. It’s always been a cheap shot thrown by those who disagree with my politics. I employ my own fact-checkers. I’m trying to make a political argument and if it’s based on things that aren’t true I’ve completely shot myself in the foot.” For his past three films he has offered a \$10,000 reward for anyone who finds inaccuracies, “and, gee, you know what — no takers.”

However, Moore admits to having misgivings over his grandstanding. “If I did it all over again, I’m not sure I would give that Oscars speech: principled stands are not much good if you’re six feet under.”

One of his tormentors was caught with bomb-making equipment. How did he come to terms with the risk of being killed? “I reached a place of peace where I said to myself, ‘I’ve been very fortunate, I’ve been a good husband, son, father, I’ve made a contribution.’”

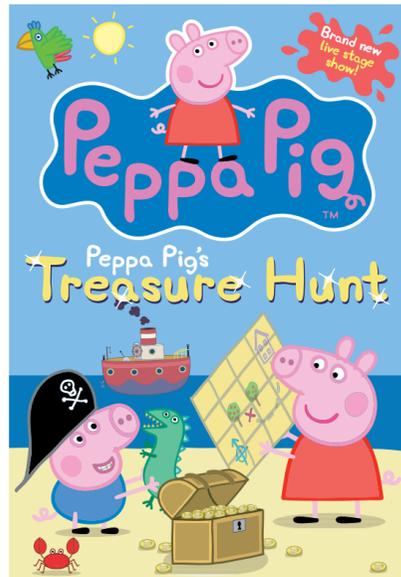
Through his own tears Moore blotted the ink of his vote for Obama on his voting slip in 2008, happy to be part of history, “making a black man President”. While he thinks that the Republicans and Tea Party have colluded to torpedo Obama’s first term, he is disappointed. “Obama came in with an olive branch, and when they smacked that out of his hand he should have bought an iron fist in a velvet glove. What part of having a ten million-vote victory doesn’t he understand?”

Moore “wouldn’t mind” seeing Matt Damon or George Clooney challenge Obama in the Democratic primaries, though he thinks that Obama will win a second term in 2012. “The American political system is ill. 400 Americans have as much wealth as 150 million Americans. The super-rich are our President and Congress.” Would he run for office himself? “Who knows what I’ll feel in a few years. Right now I’m doing the work I want.”

Moore sees himself as the voice for “millions and millions of Americans living pay cheque to pay cheque” and believes that he will live to see “an end to capitalism in its present form”. But he’s done all right under capitalism, I say. “Whatever money I have comes from people who like movies and books. I don’t make money off money. I don’t own a single share of stock. I don’t believe in the stock market. When I came to the UK the tabloids went nuts because I stayed at The Ritz. Under socialism people can still earn money and live well.”

Moore, who is working on a new film (the subject of which he won’t divulge) and another volume of memoirs, still lives in Michigan because “it’s lacking in pretension.” He laughs. “I’m considered somewhat svelte there. They call me Twiggy.” Ah, the infamous Moore girth. “I’m overweight,” he concedes, “but as two thirds of Americans are overweight I’m with the majority.” His relations, including his still-living father, lived into their nineties. “The genetic structure I’ve been given is for a long life, so I might as well live a comfortable life and enjoy sitting on an airplane or theatre seat.” If you find yourself next to Moore, prepare to be entertained: this is a radical intent on reaching out.

**Here Comes Trouble** is published by Allen Lane at £20. To buy it for £16.50, inc p&p, call 0845 2712134  
**Michael Moore will be performing live in the UK and Ireland from October 16 to 25 (michaelmoorelive.com)**



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