

Brace yourself for a wave of gloomy fiction

Hannah Devlin Science Editor

Hard times lie ahead for lovers of fiction, if researchers who say we could be heading for a new wave of "misery fiction" are to be believed.

According to their analysis of Google's digital library of more than 8 million books, novels become significantly gloomier in the decade after an economic downturn.

Some periods were relatively upbeat, but others, such as the 1980s — the decade after the energy crisis — when Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's*

'The results suggest that literature has a purpose. It informs people about the human condition'

Tale and Stephen King's *It* were published, were marked by a distinctly doom-laden literary output, they say.

Alex Bentley, an anthropologist at the University of Bristol, who led the research, said: "It looked like Western economic history, but just shifted forward by a decade. The correlation was exceptional."

Based on this model, he predicts that another increase in depressing books is on the horizon. "During the next decade, it'll start — I'm pretty confident about that," he said.

The study, published in the journal *PLoS One*, defined a

WARNER BROTHERS TELEVISION



Eighties examples

Books published from 1985 to 1986 included:

- Margaret Atwood *The Handmaid's Tale*
- Doris Lessing *The Good Terrorist*
- Isaac Asimov *Robots and Empire*
- Sue Townsend *Rebuilding Coventry*
- Stephen King *It*



- Cormac McCarthy *Blood Meridian*
- Bret Easton Ellis *Less Than Zero*
- John le Carré (above)
- A Perfect Spy

High on the misery index were books by Stephen King, whose *It* became

a hit horror film, Cormac McCarthy, Isaac Asimov and Margaret Atwood



in 1945, and Doris Lessing's *The Good Terrorist*, which features a cast of dysfunctional characters living in a London squat, came out in 1985.

"Perhaps this 'decade effect' reflects the gap between childhood, when strong memories are formed, and early adulthood, when authors may begin writing books," Professor Bentley said.

Bernard Cornwell, the crime writer whose *Sharpe* series was published throughout the 1980s, said that the observation made sense. "If you're a serious writer and not a hack like me, you probably do draw on the national mood in your work," he said, adding that his own work probably bucked the trend. "I tend to write series and they take on their own mood and direction," he said.

The researchers confirmed the finding using a German literary database. Despite preconceptions, German books were in general no gloomier than British or American fiction, although there was a "massive short-term peak in literary misery" in Germany in the late 1940s after the end of the war.

The one notable period when the literary misery index was well above that predicted by economics was the 1960s. The researchers put this down to working-class authors moving centre stage. "There was a burst of 'socialist realism' stuff, emphasising how gritty they all were," said Paul Ormerod, an economist at the London consultancy Volterra and co-author of the research. "The results suggest, contrary to Post-Modern literary theory, literature serves a purpose. It informs people about the human condition and the content adapts to the conditions of the time."

book's "misery index" as the number of negative words expressing sadness, anger or disgust, minus the number of joyful words. Economic misery coincided with the First World War (1918), the aftermath of the Great Depression (1935) and the energy crisis (1975), but in each case the literary response lagged by about a decade. Fitting the trend, *Animal Farm* was published