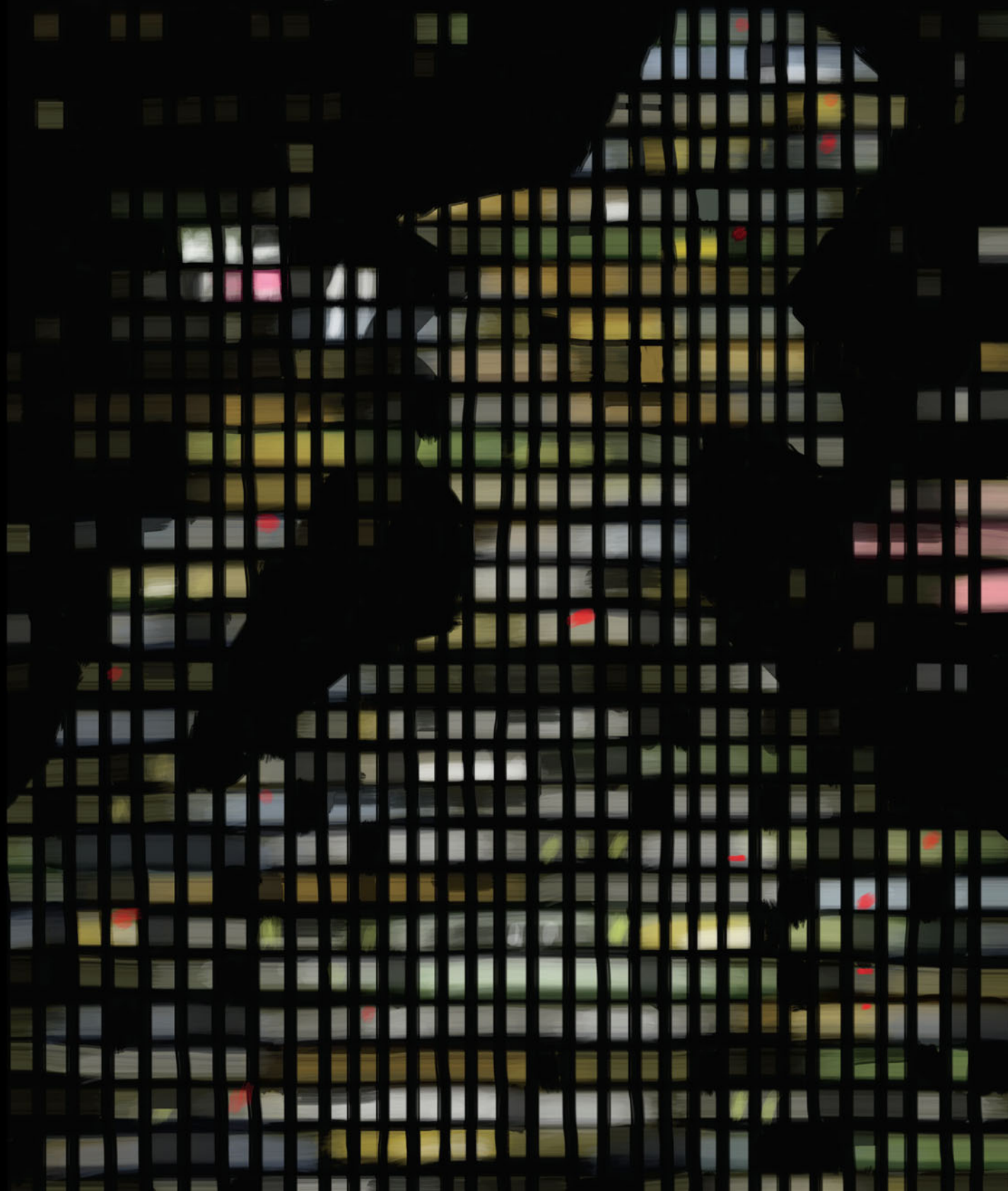


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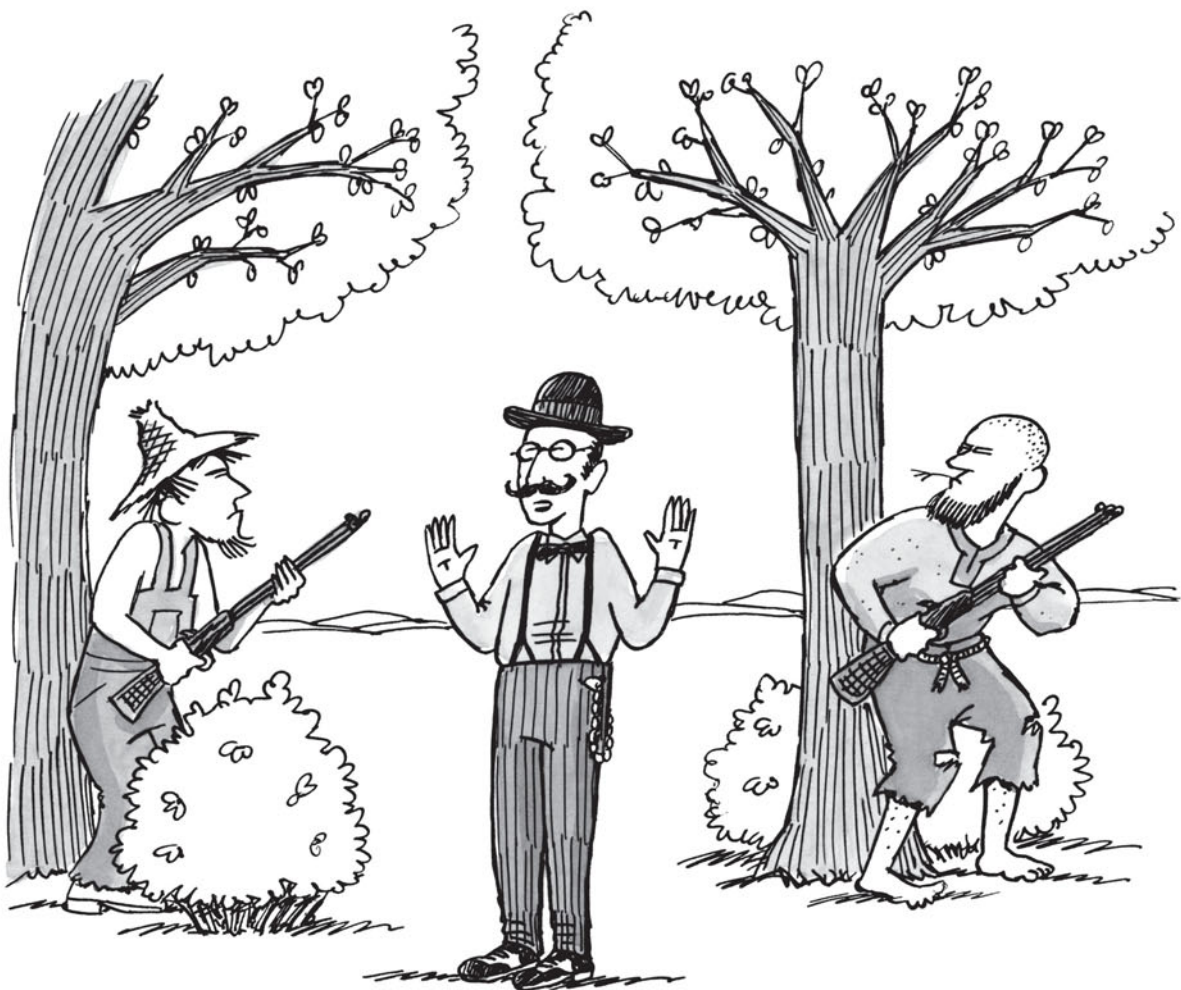


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JORGE COLOMBO

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THE MAIL

THE GREATEST GOOD

Jerome Groopman's piece on team palliative care for children was heart-warming ("Lives Less Ordinary," January 20th). However, it is also an example of the two-tiered financial and physician-supply problems in our health-care system. I was a Harvard Medical School graduate and worked for two years doing everything—psychiatry, internal medicine, geriatrics, pediatrics, dermatology, pulmonary medicine, obstetrics—for about eight thousand Zuni and Ramah Navajo people. When necessary, our group of four doctors called specialists for advice, with no remuneration involved. The patients in Groopman's article got care from multiple physicians, all of whom were paid, which is different from what is available to underserved populations, who contract tuberculosis and other serious illnesses owing to things like inadequate vaccinations and recurrent ear infections. Groopman's article reveals the discrepancy between excellent care for a few and inadequate care for the many. There is potential for the trickle-down benefits from the care he outlines, and each life saved is valuable. But, if you took all the physicians involved in the care of any one of the patients Groopman describes and put them in family clinics, it's possible that one or two hundred patients might have access to care. What are the ethics of these potential patients being deprived of care, while at the same time doctors are being paid to collaborate on the care of an individual patient?

*Kim J. Masters, M.D.
Fort Mill, S.C.*

Groopman notes that treatments for chronically ill children cannot be "determined by 'pathways' and 'algorithms.'" Clearly, there are inadequate data to formulate guidelines in these situations, and the teams he describes have filled an enormous need. But there is also a need to collect as much data as possible, including decisions made and outcomes achieved, to help guide the

future treatment of these patients in a more systematic fashion. Standardized care is an attempt to provide the best possible treatment for all patients. As knowledge increases, care truly can be administered in a more targeted and effective fashion, as demonstrated by the remarkable improvements in oncological therapy that have been based on data and advances in molecular biology.

*David Stone, M.D.
Earlsville, Va.*

LAB RESULTS

I read Dana Goodyear's article on valley fever with great interest ("Death Dust," January 20th). My mother was a microbiologist and contracted coccidioidomycosis in the nineteen-seventies, in a lab at Milwaukee County General Hospital, where spores were being studied and were improperly handled. Several other researchers became ill, and subsequently recovered, but my mother remained sick. The cocci spread to her brain, and she developed spinal meningitis. She lived for twelve more years, and during that period she had several brain surgeries, received numerous treatments, and experienced severe pain and discomfort. She was always dizzy, and vomited constantly. My mother was bedridden for most of that time, and required twenty-four-hour care at home. A lawsuit was filed against Milwaukee County General Hospital. The hospital wanted to settle the case with a single payment, but my father insisted that it pay for her treatment. The hospital agreed, perhaps because the prognosis was that my mother would not live more than a year. My father said it was a good thing, because, if the hospital hadn't, "we would be in the poorhouse."

*Cliff Ho
Albuquerque, N.M.*

Letters should be sent with the writer's name, address, and daytime phone number via e-mail to themail@newyorker.com. Letters and Web comments may be edited for length and clarity, and may be published in any medium. We regret that owing to the volume of correspondence we cannot reply to every letter or return letters.

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LONDON'S NEXT CHAPTER

Driven by a talent for reinvention, London in 2014 reasserts its primacy as Europe's most dynamic cultural capital. Fresh artistic talent, notable premieres, and a wealth of new venues and attractions are remaking the British capital and enhancing its already legendary reputation. Explore the city's greatest attractions with a fresh eye, and make London's many stories part of your own.



SAM WANAMAKER PLAYHOUSE, SHAKESPEARE'S GLOBE Opened in January, London's newest theatrical landmark—the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse—is designed to replicate the indoor theatres of the early 17th century. Clad in oak paneling and lit by warm candlelight, this intimate theatre with seating for 300 is an exquisite Jacobean-style companion to the Elizabethan-style Globe amphitheatre next door.

FIRST WORLD WAR GALLERIES, IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM After a heroic months-long renovation timed to mark the First World War Centenary, the Imperial War Museum reopens its doors in July to a totally reimagined visitor experience. The début of the deeply immersive First World War Galleries will kick off a new four-year program of rotating exhibitions, mirroring the duration of the Great War.

BAILEY'S STARDUST, NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY A landmark photography exhibition featuring the work of David Bailey runs February 6 through June 1. More than 250 large-scale portraits, occupying most of the Gallery's ground floor, capture the spirit of the swinging Sixties and encompass some of the most iconic images of the last fifty years.

COLOUR – NATIONAL GALLERY The new "Colour" exhibition at the National Gallery is a unique undertaking, a full-spectrum exploration of the use, development, and evolution of color, spanning some 700 years of creative and scientific achievement. The show offers visitors a unique way to appreciate the spectacular variety of paintings housed in the National Gallery collection.

THE WEIR – WYNDHAM'S THEATRE Following a critically acclaimed sell-out revival at the Donmar Warehouse, "The Weir"—Conor McPherson's riveting modern-day ghost story set in an isolated pub in western Ireland—comes to the West End for a special limited run, January 16 through April 19.

OLYMPIC DREAMS From restaurants in Spitalfields and Shoreditch to nightlife in Brick Lane and Hoxton, London's current bout of reinvention is transforming the city's East End. In April, sports enthusiasts will descend on the newly reopened facilities built for London's 2012 Olympic Games—from Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park to the Lee Valley Hockey and Tennis Centre—offering residents and visitors access to Olympic-grade recreation facilities.

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EXPLORING THE WEST END

Mayfair and nearby St. James are in the heart of London's West End, the smartest of the city's central districts, exuding in every brass plate and polished marble column the stately flavor of London at its turned-out best.

New destinations for indulgent commerce, such as the six-story Dover Street Market, designed by Comme des Garçons designer Rei Kawakubo, join the Royal Warrant-bearing shops and galleries of Bond Street. And the plush halls of the nearby Apsley House, the former home of the Duke of Wellington, boast one of the finest and most eclectic art collections in London, with works by Velazquez and Rubens, among many others.

THE MAY FAIR EXPERIENCE

Like the neighborhood that surrounds it, The May Fair Hotel boasts an interesting historical pedigree. Opened to great fanfare by King George V and Queen Mary in 1927, the hotel occupies the site of what was once the Duke of Devonshire's London home. In the 1950s, ownership of the hotel passed to Edward and Harry Lee Danziger, American brothers and film impresarios who founded the New Elstree Studios in England.

More than just a hotel, the May Fair is a collection of experiences, alive with the energy of its central London

location. A center for five-star hospitality, the hotel's expressive, playful design and unstuffy style have made it the official residence for such cultural draws as London Fashion Week and the British Film Institute. A \$150-million renovation in 2006 not only transformed all 400 of the property's luxury guest rooms, but created choice destinations within the hotel's public spaces: **Quince** restaurant, combining the best of British tradition with luxe European style; the **May Fair Cigar Room**, a specially designed space that allows for indoor enjoyment of the world's finest cigars; **The Crystal Room** and **Danziger Suite**, which between them have played host to some of London's most extravagant society events; the fully specialized **May Fair Spa**; and the award-winning **May Fair Bar**, renowned for its signature May Fair Mojito and other expertly crafted cocktails.

The renovation also gave rise to 12 distinctive and individually decorated suites. The one-bedroom Schiaparelli Suite, for example, named after the 1930s fashion icon Elsa Schiaparelli, features pink marble, Asian antiques, and bold splashes of the designer's signature fuchsia. The two-bedroom Ebony Suite—a study in dark earth tones, exotic Japanese hardwoods, and original art—features a luxurious spa-like bath.

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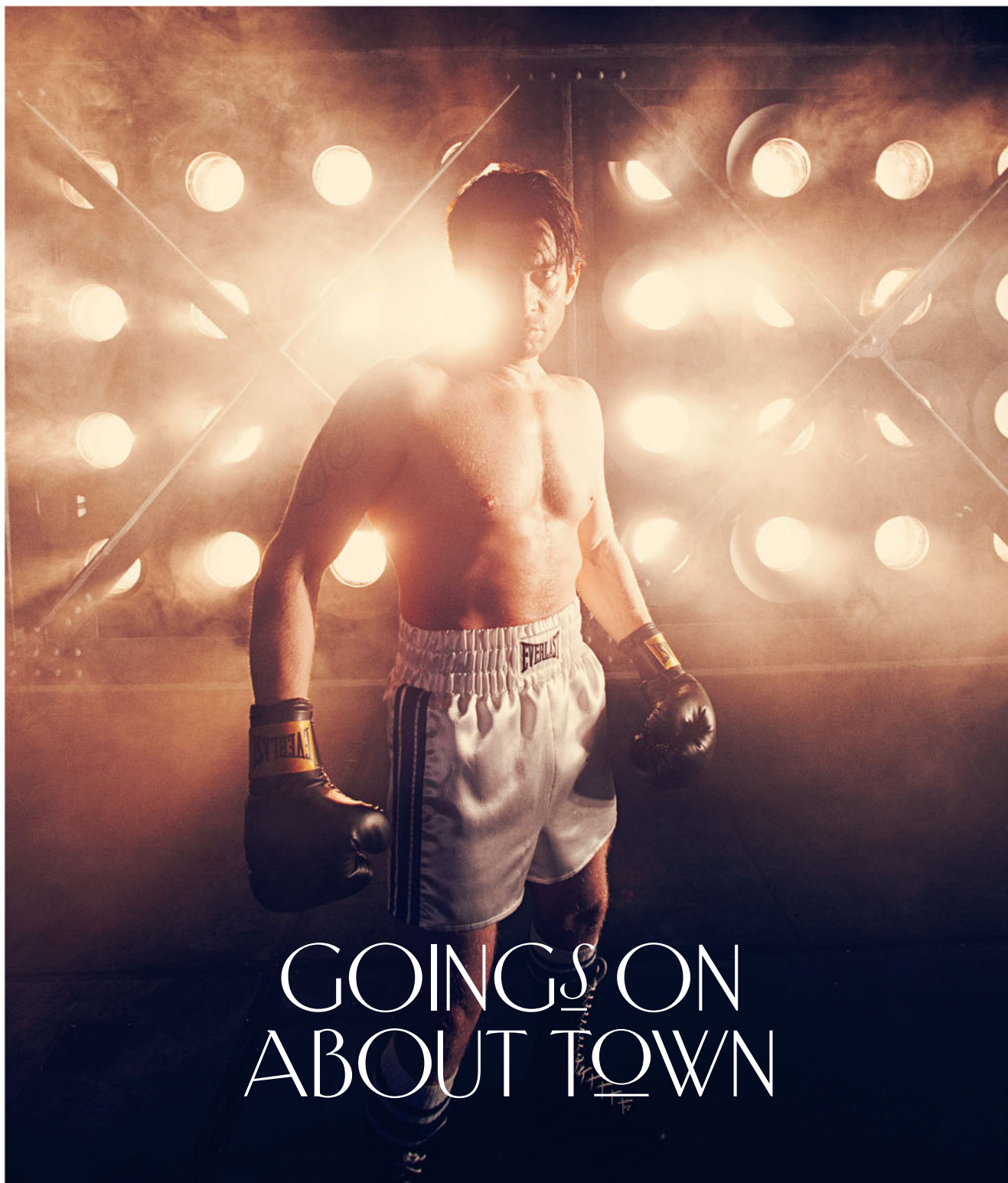
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GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

FEBRUARY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY
2014	12TH	13TH	14TH	15TH	16TH	17TH	18TH
	19TH	20TH	21ST	22ND	23RD	24TH	25TH

THE SIMPLE, HEARTFELT STORY of the Oscar-winning 1976 film “Rocky”—an underdog boxer courts a painfully shy young woman—makes it a strong candidate for Broadway appropriation. This is the director Alex Timbers’s fourth Broadway show, and a departure from the antic fun of his previous work, which includes “Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson” and “The Pee-wee Herman Show.” Among the creators of “Rocky” are the seasoned composing team Lynn Ahrens and Stephen Flaherty (“Ragtime”), the prolific book writer Thomas Meehan (“Annie,” “Hairspray,” “The Producers”), and the ubiquitous choreographer Steven Hoggett (“Once,” “Peter and the Starcatcher”). Margo Seibert makes her Broadway debut as Rocky’s girlfriend, Adrian, and Andy Karl (pictured above) steps into the role that made the baby-faced Sylvester Stallone, who is also a producer of the musical, a star.

MOVIES | THE THEATRE
FOOD & DRINK | DANCE
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CLASSICAL MUSIC
NIGHT LIFE

PHOTOGRAPH BY CHRISTAAN FELBER

Jung Yu-mi plays the title role in Hong Sang-soo's "Our Sunhi," their sixth collaboration.

MOVIES



The title character is a twenty-something woman who returns, after a long and unexplained absence, to her university in Seoul, to ask Dong-hyun, a film professor, to write a recommendation for her planned study abroad. Waiting for the document, Sunhi crosses paths with two other filmmakers from her past—Jaehak, who is living apart from his wife, and Munsu, a former lover whom she accuses of exploiting their love story in his low-budget movie—who join the professor in avowing their passion for her.

Hong is no psychologist, but, rather, something of a musician. His graceful images render even the simplest setup—a woman walking alone, two people seated face to face—lyrical and dynamic. In extended takes that run as long as eleven minutes, he traces the dryly comical course of his characters' lives through uncanny recurrences, high and low (involving an old pop song, lofty philosophical dicta, and deliveries of takeout chicken). The probing conversations collapse into silences that expose rigid mores and resound with unexpressed emotion. Through small-scale action, Hong conjures long and troubled spans of life that offer only one way out of frustration—the imaginative power of immediate experience.

The surrealist 1983 drama "**City of Pirates**" (Feb. 26), by Raúl Ruiz (who died in 2011), thrusts its imaginative artifice to the fore. (It's one of a handful of revivals in "*Film Comment* Selects.") The director, who left Chile for France during the Pinochet regime, offers a florid tale of nested fantasies that revolve around war, imprisonment, exile, and intimate violence. The central story involves a woman who leaves her seaside villa in an unnamed country after a fateful encounter with an eternal child, whose waif-like charms conceal metaphysical menace and incite threats from bloodthirsty officers. Ruiz borrows operatic imagery from classic Hollywood melodramas and ramps up its lurid allure with looming shadows, shrieking color, Grand Guignol gore, and outrageous comedy (including a dental exam shown from inside the mouth looking outward). In Ruiz's self-consciously extravagant vision, fantasy itself appears both as a flight from unbearable realities and as a symptom of unspeakable desires.

In the seventy-three-year-old Bernardo Bertolucci's first feature in nine years, "**Me and You**" (Feb. 27), his familiar unholy trinity of incest, drugs, and bourgeois corruption comes together in the story of a teen-age boy from a prosperous Roman family who takes refuge in a basement. The boy is forced to share his hideout with his older half-sister, an artist and a heroin addict. Bertolucci's sly, sleek images distill a lifetime of aesthetic passion and exalt the very luxury that they deride.

—Richard Brody

FLESH AND FANTASY

World cinema, contemporary and classic, at Lincoln Center.

THE SOUTH KOREAN DIRECTOR Hong Sang-soo's latest film, "**Our Sunhi**," opens the "*Film Comment* Selects" series at Film Society of Lincoln Center (Feb. 17-27). It arrives just four months after the New York Film Festival screening of his previous work, "Nobody's Daughter Haewon." Late in the last decade, Hong shifted his strategy toward ultra-low-budget films. In the process, he increased the pace of production and also liberated his artistic voice, filming with freer, more audacious strokes. Yet American distributors have been slow to keep up with his output. Series such as this one, which highlight undistributed new films, take up some of the slack.

Like many of Hong's films, "Our Sunhi" centers on a milieu close to the director's own—that of struggling filmmakers racing against time (Hong is fifty-three), whose artistic efforts and romantic crises overlap.



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OPENING

CHILD'S POSE

Reviewed in Now Playing. In Romanian. Opening Feb. 19. (Film Forum.)

ENDLESS LOVE

A remake of the 1981 drama, based on the novel by Scott Spencer, about two teen-agers whose parents try to break up their romance. Directed by Shana Feste; starring Alex Pettyfer and Gabriella Wilde. Opening Feb. 14. (In wide release.)

JIMMY P.: PSYCHOTHERAPY OF A PLAINS INDIAN

Reviewed this week in The Current Cinema. Opening Feb. 14. (In limited release.)

OMAR

A drama, directed by Hany Abu-Assad, about a Palestinian activist who, after his arrest, is forced to become an informant for Israel. In Arabic. Opening Feb. 21. (In limited release.)

ROBOCOP

A remake of the 1987 action film, starring Joel Kinnaman as a Detroit police officer who is transformed into a part-cyborg. Directed by José Padilha; co-starring Gary Oldman, Samuel L. Jackson, Abbie Cornish, and Jennifer Ehle. Opening Feb. 12. (In wide release.)

WINTER'S TALE

An adaptation of the novel by Mark Helprin, set in New York during the First World War, in which a thief discovers that he has the power of reincarnation. Directed by Akiva Goldsman; starring Colin Farrell, Jessica Brown Findlay, and Russell Crowe. Opening Feb. 14. (In wide release.)

OF NOTE THE PAJAMA GAME

One of the greatest musicals ever. The hard-nosed Sid Sorokin (John Raitt) blows into town from Chicago and talks his way into a job as foreman at a pajama factory, where the owner is cooking the books to keep from giving his workers a raise of seven and a half cents an hour. Sid locks horns with the chief of the union's grievance committee, Babe Williams (Doris Day), and the sparks that fly aren't all business. The directors, Stanley Donen and George Abbott, bring the unusually realistic story to life with bold and graceful camera moves and imaginative staging; Bob Fosse's agile, angular choreography has the graphic appeal of modernist typography in motion; and the supporting cast features the wide-eyed, loose-limbed, and wildly spontaneous Carol Haney (who died young), camping and vamping with abandon. The iconic songs include "Hernando's Hideaway," "Steam Heat," "Hey There" (featuring Raitt in a duet with a Dictaphone), and, above all, "There Once Was a Man," a love song done as a foot-stomping, high-stepping hee-haw, one of the cinema's most exuberant examples of over-the-moon romantic ecstasy. Released in 1957.—Richard Brody (Museum of the Moving Image; Feb. 22.)

NOW PLAYING

Blackmail

The silent version of Alfred Hitchcock's first talking film, from 1929, is a revelation. The story remains the same—a young woman (Anny Ondra) follows a suave artist (Cyril Ritchard) to his studio; when he tries to rape her, she kills him in self-defense but says nothing to her policeman boyfriend (John Longden), who's on the case. Hitchcock invokes his master plot—a woman yields to temptation and enters a vortex of calamity—but when he uses images alone, the emphases change strikingly. Emotional shifts emerge through jolting changes of angle, and, unhindered by the stage-bound methods of early sound recording, the film's documentary elements come to the fore. The attention to police-procedural detail suggests Hitchcock's great works of decades to come. In the film's most astonishing shot—of the artist and his prey creating together on canvas an erotic portrait of a woman that begins as a joke—Hitchcock displays the definitive metaphor for his creative method as well as the carnal motives behind it.—Richard Brody (Film Forum; Feb. 21.)

Child's Pose

Cornelia, a bleached-blond, blade-like, middle-aged set designer in the Bucharest beau monde, is also the needy, meddling mother of Barbu, a grown man who's struggling to break free. But her imperious ways and impressive connections prove useful when Barbu, speeding on a highway, strikes and kills a child. Pushing her way into station houses, seeking to suborn witnesses, doing favors, and scattering money, Cornelia does whatever it takes to spare her spoiled, guilt-ridden son from criminal charges. Calin Peter Netzer's drama

is a foreordained sociopolitical setup; the manners and mores of the upper classes, with their gleaming apartments, glamorous entertainments, and well-placed friends, contrast with the humble circumstances of the victim's family and the greedy struggle of police officers and other civil servants. Flinging the camera casually to feign action where there's only dialogue, trimming the action to fit narrowly defined characters, Netzer offers a bland simulacrum of documentary reality that lines up precisely with his clichéd prejudices. But in the few moments when spontaneous emotion takes over, surprising moments of grace arise. In Romanian.—R.B. (Film Forum.)

Generation War

This ambitious film—made as a miniseries for German television and now reassembled as a two-part feature—attempts to capture the experience of an entire generation of young people through the lives of five friends during the Second World War. Two of the young men (played by Volker Bruch and Tom Schilling) fight for the Wehrmacht on the Russian front, commit crimes against civilians and partisans, and gradually disintegrate. A singer who wants to be the next Marlene Dietrich (Katharina Schüttler) loves Viktor (Ludwig Trepte), a desperate but resourceful Berlin Jew; an idealistic nurse (Miriam Stein) endures the horrors of a hospital behind the lines. They are all patriots, but their fervor is nonideological. In this account, their complicity in Nazism is forced on them, never chosen. The movie sells a very dubious innocence to its German audience, and the structure of the extended form is close to popular melodrama and soap opera. Yet the war scenes are often amazing, especially an attack on a fixed Soviet position in a rubble-strewn street, which may be the best representation of close combat ever put on film. "Generation War" has the strengths and weaknesses of middlebrow art—it may be clunky, even embarrassing, but it's certainly never dull. Directed by Philipp Kadelbach.—David Denby (Reviewed in our issue of 2/3/14.) (In limited release.)

Je T'Aime, Je T'Aime

With his idiosyncratic take on time travel, the director Alain Resnais concocts a sort of science-fiction neorealism, in which a fantastic adventure unfolds the minutiae of an ordinary man's life. Scientists seal Claude Ridder (Claude Rich), the survivor of a suicide attempt, in a Volkswagen-size pod that looks like a cross between a brain and a potato, intending to send his mind back one year, for one minute. But the experiment goes haywire, and Ridder's relived memories give rise to other ones, leaving him trapped in a mental space that centers on a

burning point of romantic guilt. To add to Ridder's problems, his identity is split by visions of violence dating back to the Second World War, when he fought in the French Resistance under a pseudonym; meanwhile, a lab mouse that travels along with him has an odd cameo. Resnais likens the workings of the mind to the film editor's mixing and matching, and this cinematic metaphor is his key idea: only high moral purpose shifts the flux of memory from passive to active. In French. Released in 1968.—R.B. (Film Forum; Feb. 14-20.)

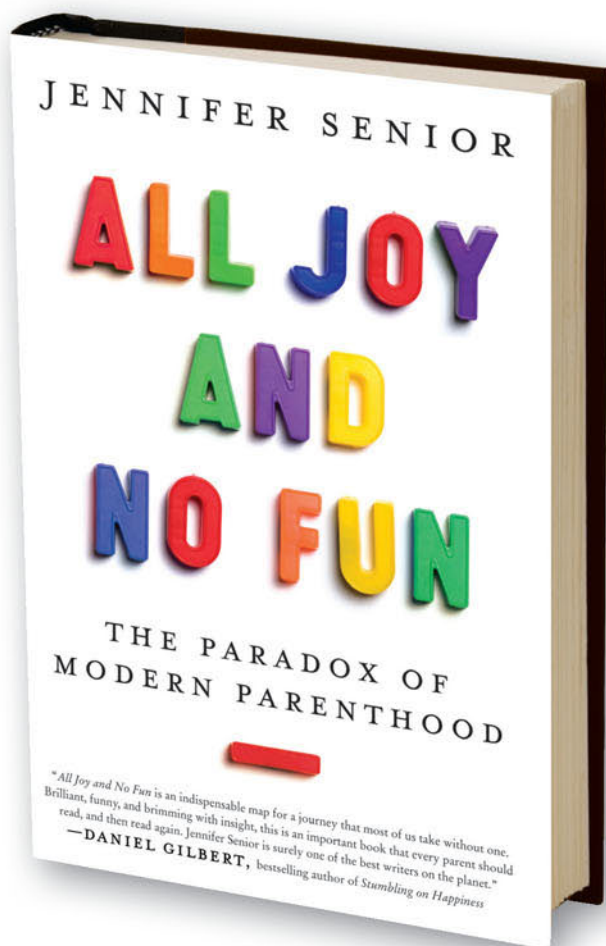
Labor Day

The year is 1987, and a teen-age boy named Henry (Gattlin Griffith) lives the quiet life with Adele (Kate Winslet), his divorced mother. Their routine is interrupted by Frank (Josh Brolin), a convicted murderer who has fled from custody and holes up in their home over the Labor Day weekend. His initial air of menace fades, and soon—absurdly soon, you might think—he becomes a part of the family, teaching Henry a range of manly skills and seducing the frail and loveless Adele. The seduction itself is waged largely by euphemism, as when Frank gets his hands all moist and juicy with a dash of home baking; at times like this, the movie—the first truly serious and joke-free tale to be directed by Jason Reitman—offers more to laugh at than most of his comedies do. It looks swell, and Winslet adds another portrait of pained watchfulness to her gallery of suffering heroines, but the result feels like a richly implausible dream disguised as a soulful drama.—Anthony Lane (1/13/14) (In limited release.)

The Last of the Unjust

A new documentary from Claude Lanzmann, the director of "Shoah." This film is considerably shorter—it runs three hours and forty minutes—and Lanzmann confines himself to a single figure. In 1944, Benjamin Murmelstein, a Viennese rabbi, became the third and last Elder of the Jewish Council, in the Theresienstadt ghetto. In that capacity, he was not just responsible for the lives and welfare of his fellow-Jews but also answerable to the Nazis who controlled the camp: an all but impossible task, which nobody would envy, but for which he was fiercely condemned, in some quarters, after the war. Throughout his interviews with Lanzmann, conducted in Rome in 1975, Murmelstein (who died in 1989) comes across as pugnacious, learned, and all but indestructible, fully alive to the grave ironies of his story. The film itself—not least in the aged figure of Lanzmann, still tireless in his tracing of monstrosities, lest they fade from historical view—becomes a startling double portrait of the will to endure. In German and French.—A.L. (2/10/14) (In limited release.)

**“IF YOU’RE A PARENT IN THE YEAR 2014,
YOU HAVE TO GET YOUR HANDS
ON A COPY OF THIS BOOK.”***



NEW YORK TIMES SUNDAY BOOK REVIEW

by Andrew Solomon

JAN. 31, 2014

“A trenchant and engrossing book...
with extremely impressive research.

Salted with insights and epigrams,
the book is argued with bracing honesty
and flashes of authentic wisdom.

Senior deploys a novelist’s sensibility
in giving evidence of all [parents’]
privileged euphoria... *All Joy and
No Fun* inspired me to think differently
about my own experience as a parent.”

“[An] astute book... clear and helpful... and it will help a lot of parents feel
less alone, if not less frazzled.” — JANET MASLIN, *New York Times*

“Captures the complex texture of parents’ lives... with remarkable insight, intelligence,
sensitivity, and subtlety.” — ALISON GOPNIK, bestselling author of *The Philosophical Baby*

* “A must-read for those of us whose lives have been immeasurably enriched
and logistically derailed by having kids.” — CURTIS SITTEFELD

“Senior’s wise compassion provides guidance that’s
both necessary and inspiring.” — *Boston Globe*



LAURA ROSE



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REVIVALS AND FESTIVALS

Titles in bold are reviewed.

ANTHOLOGY FILM ARCHIVES

"Valentine's Day Massacre." Feb. 14 at 6:45, Feb. 15 at 4:45, and Feb. 16 at 9: "**We Won't Grow Old Together.**" • Feb. 14 at 9:15, Feb. 15 at 7:15, and Feb. 16 at 4: "Modern Romance" (1981, Albert Brooks). • Feb. 15 at 9:30, Feb. 16 at 6, and Feb. 17 at 8: "Possession" (1981, Andrzej Zulawski). • "Beyond Cassavetes." Feb. 19 at 7:30: "The Lonely Sex" (1957, Richard Hilliard).

BAM CINÉMA TEK

Through Feb. 12: "Vengeance Is Hers." Feb. 12 at 4:30, 7, and 9:30: "Hyenas" (1992, Djibril Diop Mambéty). • Feb. 13 at 5 and 9:30: "The Match Factory Girl" (1990, Aki Kaurismäki). • Feb. 13 at 7: "The Heiress" (1949, William Wyler). • Feb. 15 at 2 and 7: "Carrie" (1976, Brian De Palma).

FILM FORUM

In revival, Feb. 14-20 at 1:20, 3:20, 5:20, 7:30, and 9:35: "**Je T'aime, Je T'aime.**" • The films of Alfred Hitchcock. Feb. 21 at 1, 4, and 8:50; Feb. 22 at 1, 5:50, and 8:45; and Feb. 23 at 11 A.M.: "North by Northwest" (1959). • Feb. 21 at 7: "**Blackmail.**" • Feb. 25 at 1:20, 3:40, 8:05, and 10:10: "The Wrong Man" (1956).

FILM SOCIETY OF LINCOLN CENTER

Through Feb. 27: "Film Comment Selects." Feb. 17 at 9 and Feb. 20 at 4:45: "Our Sunhi" (2013, Hong Sang-soo). • Feb. 21 at 6: "Metro Manila" (2013, Sean Ellis). • Feb. 22 at 1:30: "Fat Shaker" (2013, Mohammad Shirvani). • Feb. 26 at 9:50: "City of Pirates" (1983, Raúl Ruiz). • Feb. 27 at 8:30: "Me and You" (2012, Bernardo Bertolucci).

FRENCH INSTITUTE ALLIANCE FRANÇAISE

"Remastered and Restored: Treasures of French Cinema." Feb. 18 at 4 and 7:30: "**Lola Montès.**" The 7:30 screening will be introduced by the artist Lola Montes Schnabel.

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

"Documentary Fortnight." Feb. 14 at 7 and Feb. 15 at 4: "The Mother and the Sea" (2013, Gonçalo Rocha). • Feb. 19 at 6:30: "Til Madness Do Us Part" (2013, Wang Bing).

MUSEUM OF THE MOVING IMAGE

"See It Big! Musicals." Feb. 21 at 7: "Cabaret" (1972, Bob Fosse). • Feb. 22 at 4: "An American in Paris" (1951, Vincente Minnelli). • Feb. 22 at 7: "**The Pajama Game.**"

Like Father, Like Son

In film after film, the Japanese director Hirokazu Kore-eda has inspected the family unit—the many ways in which it can be added to, subdivided, and cracked. His latest work lays forth a rare but especially troubling case of damage: Ryota (Masaharu Fukuyama) and Midori (Machiko Ono) discover that their son, Keita (Keita Ninomiya), age six, is not theirs at all. The maternity hospital mixed up two babies, and, as a result, their real son, Ryusei (Shogun Hwang), has spent his young life in the care of another couple. Custom, genetics, and the law all specify that the boys must now be swapped around, and yet their years of upbringing can hardly be undone or ignored. The families belong to different social strata, one being poorer but more rumbustious than the other, all of which leads to strains of mild social comedy and a definite touch of the schematic. What stays with you, however, is the shadow of loss, not least in the hearts of the boys' mothers: how can a loving child, even the "wrong" one, be let go? In Japanese.—*A.L.* (1/27/14) (In limited release.)

Lola Montès

This exacting and sumptuous restoration of Max Ophüls's last film, from 1955, recovers not just the movie's look but also its meaning. The romantic costume drama presents a great nineteenth-century femme fatale, a faux-Spanish danseuse and gold-digger whose lovers included Franz Liszt and King Ludwig of Bavaria. Yet Ophüls makes of her story something stunningly personal. He starts the movie where Lola (played by the thirty-five-year-old French sex symbol and scandal magnet Martine Carol) ends up: in an American circus, reenacting her adventures. Her passions burned out, her money gone, her earlier days of wildness recurring to her in flashbacks, she has become a celebrity, a precursor to a movie star. The film is a colossal spectacle about colossal spectacles, and the extravagant palette, the cavernous sets, and the wide-screen images in which Ophüls entombs Lola (and Carol) contrast cruelly with the real-life pathos of the performers, whom the director's own magnificent artistry cannot help but exploit as well as celebrate. Co-starring Peter Ustinov, as the circus master who takes stock of her talent.—*R.B.* (French Institute Alliance Française; Feb. 18.)

Ride Along

Ice Cube and Kevin Hart are just funny enough together to make audiences forgive some of the most careless moviemaking in the long history of thrown-together commercial packages. The story concerns a police detective (Ice Cube) who tests his would-be brother-in-law (Hart) by

putting him through a hellish day of police work. The cop-buddy plot is so lame and derivative that it keeps collapsing, even as farce, but the director, Tim Story, milks the lead actors for what they can do. Ice Cube has a stare that cuts like a meat cleaver, and Hart jumps around him like an overanxious terrier, chattering, falling, recovering.—*D.D.* (2/3/14) (In wide release.)

Stranger by the Lake

The lake is in France, under the spell of summer, but who could the stranger be? Almost anyone could qualify: Franck (Pierre Deladonchamps), who wanders onto the shoreline every day in search of companionship; Henri (Patrick D'Assumçao), the corpulent loner who sits and surveys the scene; Michel (Christophe Paou), all muscle and mustache, who could have arrived straight from a French remake of "Magnum P.I."; and so on. The beach is a cruisers' idyll, and intimacy—often quite graphic—hangs within easy reach, even if one party knows nothing of the other, save the strength of his desires. When a swimmer dies, therefore, and foul play is suspected, the investigating policeman (Jérôme Chappatte) finds his inquiries thwarted at every turn. The director Alain Guiraudie's film is creepy, consumed by ritual, and quietly comic; only some eager blood-letting seems out of place. There is no music to be heard, and no getting away from the location, which feels like a paradise waiting to be menaced and lost. In French.—*A.L.* (1/27/14) (In limited release.)

Tim's Vermeer

The video-equipment inventor and entrepreneur Tim Jenison decided to test theories advanced by the art historian Philip Steadman and the artist David Hockney. An admirer of Vermeer's art, Jenison suspected that the painter had relied upon a camera obscura—a sort of primordial camera without film—to create his extraordinarily detailed pictures, and proceeded to build one. He also built a replica, in his San Antonio warehouse, of Vermeer's studio, complete with furniture, woodwork, stained-glass windows, and musical instruments, and learned to grind pigments in order to mimic Vermeer's technique. Experimentation led Jenison to discover a system of lenses and mirrors that, joined with a visual color-matching trick, allowed him to come up with a surprisingly accurate replica of "The Music Lesson." The movie, directed by Teller (of Penn & Teller) and written by him along with Penn Jillette (who is the onscreen and voice-over commentator), is as mechanical as the procedure it depicts. Telescoping, with a forced amiability, five years of tinkering into eighty minutes, the film reveals very little of the process that it documents. Jenison's

moments of scientific discovery are astonishing, wondrous—and brief; the rest of the movie seems like a stunt.—*R.B.* (In limited release.)

We Won't Grow Old Together

In Maurice Pialat's fiercely impassioned, impulsively modernist melodrama, Jean (Jean Yanne), a fortyish filmmaker who's struggling to make a feature, is married to the smoothly bourgeois Françoise (Macha Méril) but, for six years, has been brazenly carrying on an affair with the much younger Catherine (Marlène Jobert), an aspiring actress. Toward Françoise, Jean is merely chilly; toward Catherine, with whom his relationship is vitally carnal, he's both verbally and physically abusive. Unable to stand his outbursts and unwilling to live in fear, Catherine leaves him (but still hopes to sleep with him every now and then). Pialat captures the push-and-pull of their impossible relationship with images of a frank pugnacity and crashingly abrupt editing. The doomed couple's story is punctuated by visits to Catherine's parents and grandmother and to Jean's father, all in the loamy tranquillity of provincial France. For Pialat, the wolf is on the prowl; the feral lover—and artist—is at home amid the deep-hued muscularity of the countryside but also steeped in the freethinking ways and expressive ideals of the refined capital, which he shambles through like a wounded and wounding beast. Released in 1972. In French.—*R.B.* (Anthology Film Archives; Feb. 14-16.)

The Wolf of Wall Street

Martin Scorsese's three-hour burlesque of loathsome, crooked financial activity and extravagant personal debauchery is meant to epitomize everything that has gone wrong with the money culture. Leonardo DiCaprio's Jordan Belfort (a real-world scoundrel and swindler) comes right at us, narrating directly to the camera, like a low-rent Richard III; he pitches us his shady deals and his druggy, manic life. At the brokerage that Belfort sets up, DiCaprio, addressing the troops, arches his back, nearly swallows the mike, and preaches the gospel of winning, killing, and triumphing. Physically, DiCaprio's work is astounding, but it's also one of the most completely externalized performances in movie history—Jordan Belfort is not, in the end, very interesting. Neither is the movie: Scorsese stages the money-making, orgies, and drug-taking with such jubilant, unreflective vitality that they might be part of a Broadway musical—a knock-the-tourists-dead show called "Greed!" With Jonah Hill, as Belfort's henchman; Kyle Chandler, as the surprisingly subtle F.B.I. agent who pursues Belfort; and Margot Robbie, as the inevitable blond trophy wife.—*D.D.* (In wide release.)

OPENINGS AND PREVIEWS

Antony and Cleopatra

Tarell Alvin McCraney directs an edited version of Shakespeare's history play, set in eighteenth-century Saint-Domingue. Previews begin Feb. 18. (Public, 425 Lafayette St. 212-967-7555.)

A Doll's House

Carrie Cracknell directs the Ibsen play, in a Young Vic production starring Hattie Morahan. Previews begin Feb. 21. (BAM's Harvey Theatre, 651 Fulton St., Brooklyn. 718-636-4100.)

Mothers and Sons

Tyne Daly stars in Terrence McNally's new play, about a woman who confronts the man her son loved—who now lives with another man and their young child—twenty years after her son's death. Sheryl Kaller directs. Previews begin Feb. 23. (Golden, 252 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.)

Rocky

Alex Timbers directs the musical based on the film by Sylvester Stallone, with a book by Thomas Meehan, music by Stephen Flaherty, and lyrics by Lynn Ahrens. Starring Andy Karl and Margo Seibert. In previews. (Winter Garden, Broadway at 50th St. 212-239-6200.)

NOW PLAYING

Almost, Maine

Almost is a snowy place where romantic encounters are literally magical. There's a lot of fun physical humor in this Transport Group revival of John Cariani's 2006 comedy, directed by Jack Cummings III—when two female best friends (Donna Lynne Champlin and Kelly McAndrew) discover they're in love, neither can stand up; when a man (Cariani) and a woman first get together, it takes a long time for them to undress because of all the layers they're wearing. The four gifted actors (also including Kevin Isola) each play several characters, and they do it with a lot of good cheer, but the sweet and funny play, made up of unrelated scenes, never goes deep. (Gym at Judson, 243 Thompson St. 866-811-4111.)

Bronx Bombers

Eric Simonson's play focussing on the 1977 Yankees, which he also directs, begins promisingly enough: the lovable sage Yogi Berra (Peter Scolari) summons the volatile team manager Billy Martin (Keith Nobbs) and the star fielder Reggie Jackson (Francois Battiste) for a chat after near-fisticuffs in the dugout. There's a "High Noon" aspect to Jackson, in a red leisure suit, and Martin, in a Western-themed shirt, squaring off about ego and respect. But then Simonson ventures into the realm of baseball mysticism and mawkishness:

an old-timers' dinner, heavy with stage fog, at Berra's house, featuring ghosts of Yankees past and future. The play's apex follows its nadir: as Derek Jeter solemnly tells Joe DiMaggio and Lou Gehrig about 9/11, Babe Ruth shows up in a fur coat, yelling about a traffic jam on the George Washington Bridge. (Circle in the Square, 235 W. 50th St. 212-239-6200.)

Dr. Du Bois and Miss Ovington

If only these two founders of the N.A.A.C.P., who accidentally met at the office one Sunday afternoon in 1915, were engaged in a serious flirtation, as Clare Coss's play momentarily suggests. Then the actor Timothy Simonson might have something to do besides play the black visionary W. E. B. Du Bois as a stiff, pompous, and impatient blowhard, lecturing the elegant and open-minded white activist Mary White Ovington (Kathleen Chalfant)—and the audience—on race relations as they pertain to himself and the members of the all-white N.A.A.C.P. board of directors, whom he feels are trying to control him. The history—and these two larger-than-life characters—should be engaging, but, in the hands of Coss and the director, Gabrielle L. Kurlander, it's soporific. (Castillo, 543 W. 42nd St. 212-941-1234. Through Feb. 16.)

I Call My Brothers

On the day that a car bomb explodes in Times Square, Amor (Damon Owlia), a bearded, dark-haired young American, is asked by his Middle Eastern family to run a simple errand in midtown. The trip becomes a nightmare for Amor, who is convinced he's going to be mistaken for a terrorist. In Jonas Hassen Khemiri's eighty-minute one-act, directed by Erica Schmidt for the Play Company, we're supposed to feel worried for Amor, but we don't: Khemiri's dialogue wants to be tense, funny, and poetic, but the writing is thin and clichéd, and the play falls flat. (New Ohio Theatre, 154 Christopher St. 866-811-4111. Through Feb. 23.)

Intimacy

In Thomas Bradshaw's latest play, for the New Group, Matthew (Austin Cauldwell), a high-school student, lives in an American suburb with his father, James (Daniel Gerroll), a Wall Street retiree and a Christian, whose wife recently died. Nothing can erase James's loss or the social alienation that he feels among the couples who inhabit his little part of the world,

which, largely unbeknownst to him, is rank with sex and deceit. The entire cast ends up appearing in a porn film. Bradshaw's script is straightforward, and the actors, directed cleanly by Scott Elliott, perform as matter-of-factly as possible. But, within that framework, Bradshaw attacks our complacency by stripping his plays of prosody, which creates another kind of music—both boring and comedic. (Reviewed in our issue of 2/10/14.) (Acorn, 410 W. 42nd St. 212-239-6200.)

Outside Mullingar

This new work by John Patrick Shanley (a Manhattan Theatre Club production, directed by Doug Hughes), set in the contemporary Irish Midlands, centers on the middle-aged Anthony Reilly (the endlessly weepy Brian F. O'Byrne), who wears his sensitivity and his moral righteousness on his sleeve. Loyal to a fault, Anthony lives on the family farm with his widowed father, Tony (Peter Maloney, who plays the part with unsurprising benign crustiness). It turns out that a piece of the property Tony sold years ago went not to their recently deceased neighbor but to the neighbor's ornery daughter, Rosemary (Debra Messing), who holds a grudge against Anthony. With all the self-conscious "lyricism" of his language, Shanley seems to be trying to mask his predictable and not entirely convincing portrait of woman as indomitable spirit. (2/10/14) (Samuel J. Friedman, 261 W. 47th St. 212-239-6200.)

Queen of the Night

Absurd, derivative, and wondrous, too, this immersive performance unfurls in a crypt beneath the Paramount Hotel. Neglected since it shuttered in 1951, the Paramount's Diamond Horseshoe night club resurfaces as an Art Deco fantasia. As in the work of Punchdrunk ("Sleep No More"), the show spills from the main space into various hallways and hidden chambers. Hors d'oeuvres and cocktails (some of which taste worryingly like a caprese salad) circulate while performers dressed as sporty Pierrots pluck unsuspecting spectators into secret rooms for solo recitals. (If the air of self-conscious sexiness verges on the ludicrous, the dark glamour still seduces.) Later, audience members convene for lobster, suckling pig, and expert circus entertainments allegedly based on Mozart's "Magic Flute." Would Mozart have approved of the erotic diabolism routine? (235 W. 46th St. 866-811-4111.)

ALSO NOTABLE

AFTER MIDNIGHT

Brooks Atkinson

ALL THE WAY

Neil Simon

BEAUTIFUL—THE CAROLE KING MUSICAL

Stephen Sondheim

THE BOOK OF MORMON

Eugene O'Neill

THE BRIDGES OF MADISON COUNTY

Schoenfeld

BUYER & CELLAR

Barrow Street Theatre

THE CORRESPONDENT

Rattlestick

CRY, TROJANS!

Performing Garage. Through Feb. 15.

DINNER WITH FRIENDS

Laura Pels

DISASTER!

St. Luke's Theatre

A GENTLEMAN'S GUIDE TO LOVE AND MURDER

Walter Kerr

THE GLASS MENAGERIE

Booth. Through Feb. 23.

KUNG FU

Pershing Square Signature Center

LONDON WALL

Mint

LOVE AND INFORMATION

Minetta Lane Theatre

MACHINAL

American Airlines Theatre

MATILDA THE MUSICAL

Shubert

NO MAN'S LAND / WAITING FOR GODOT

Cort

ROW AFTER ROW

City Center Stage II. Through Feb. 16.

STAGE KISS

Playwrights Horizons

STOP HITTING YOURSELF

Claire Tow. Through Feb. 23.

THE TRIBUTE ARTIST

59E59

TWELFTH NIGHT / RICHARD III

Belasco. Through Feb. 16.

WICKED

Gershwin



THE THEATRE



FOOD & DRINK

BAR TAB ATTABOY

134 Eldridge St. (No phone.)

Attaboy, a reduced-frills speakeasy, occupies the old Milk & Honey space and is run by two of its former bartenders, Sam Ross and Michael McIlroy. You knock, and a pleasant host lets you in. Inside, there's feel-good music (New Order, T. Rex), wooden barstools and booths, dim exposed-filament bulbs, modest canoodling, and shelves of clothbound books. Attaboy has no menu; you suggest a mood or a flavor and the bartenders improvise, which they do proudly ("This is a Monte Carlo Benedictine. I rinsed the glass with absinthe. Cheers!") or gruffly. When a man in a hung-over mood vacillated about whiskey, McIlroy glared at him and said, "We still havin' a conversation here, mate?," then made a basic Old-Fashioned. His earlier request for something refreshing had yielded something florid: a Gin East Side Rickey, tall, green, and fizzy, served with an ice spear, a metal straw, cucumber, and a wild sprig of mint. All evening, McIlroy maintained a solemn flurry of activity: ice-block whacking, grapefruit pressing, booze jiggering. Ice chips and juice flew through the air, landing gently on patrons. Around midnight, the check arrived. It was a handwritten tally of sixteen-dollar drinks, tucked into one of the old books: "Psychotherapy of the Borderline Adult."

—Sarah Larson



TABLES FOR TWO

EMPIRE DINER

210 Tenth Ave. (212-596-7523)

SURE, THERE'S THE CHRYSLER and the Empire State, but this diner in Chelsea is more quintessentially New York than just about any other building. The Empire Diner's art-moderne exterior has been featured in movies and on TV shows, and also on the cover of this magazine, which praised the "glitz-free, gemütlich" vibe of the place in 1998, when it was the official hangout of the city's art world. It shut in 2010, after thirty-four years of late-night patty melts and piano jams, and then reopened, briefly, as the Highliner, which convinced no one. Now Amanda Freitag, formerly of Tribeca's coziest restaurant, the Harrison, has reinvented the icon, but unlike the last time around, there's not a hint of New Coke about it.

The most important question: how's that patty melt? This is a sandwich that should make a burger look grotesquely high maintenance. There's no way to separate the layers, no customizing of toppings, because it has all been bound together with butter and drippings. Freitag's version, refined but not annoyingly so, meets this criterion, while also insuring the correct balance of crunch (toasted rye) and ooze (Swiss cheese and caramelized onions). Mystifyingly, it comes with taro chips—what you get from the bodega when you don't know what you want—but there are plenty of other opportunities to enjoy the restaurant's adequately thick-cut fries.

The melt is part of an all-day menu that coexists with more unexpected riffs on Greek-diner classics. Taking the scooped-out bagel to its logical conclusion, a creamy mess of "lox and burrata" is sprinkled liberally with, well, everything: burnt sesame and poppy seeds, dried onion bits, flakes of salt and garlic. That, and a weirdly compelling buffalo-skate-wing appetizer, are among the few carb-free options. The matzo-ball soup comes with bone marrow to stir in; a variant on the Happy Waitress, as New Jersey as a traffic jam, features not just a poached egg but also Taylor ham and a cheddar-cheese sauce resembling hollandaise. Even a side of Brussels sprouts feels decadent, partly because of the sweet chili relish on top, but also because there's way more salt than necessary.

Way more than necessary seems to be the rule, and that extends to the enthusiasm of the waiters. "Here's what we're gonna do," they say before coursing out an order with a mysterious but impressive internal logic. When asked for their favorites, they end up running through just about the whole menu with the aplomb of someone who has recently auditioned for something. The crowd might be having as much fun as the staff. Young families, their tabletops littered with sippy cups and mezcal cocktails, tend to finish their meal by attacking the Platonic ideal of the banana split, all wet walnuts and melting Neapolitan ice cream. The kitchen brûlées the banana, but, like true New Yorkers, they're all too busy to care.

—Amelia Lester

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SYMBOLISTS SPEND SPIES
ROGUES SOME TIME MISFI
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LOVERS TO A FEW MAIDEN
DOGS CHARACTERS QUEE
SUPERMODELS CLAIRVOYAN
POETS PUNKS
JERKS LIARS
UNICORN WIVES
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Doug Fullington highlights Oriental motifs in nineteenth-century dance in “Petipa Exotique.”



DANCE



THE SHEIKS OF ARABY

An archivist explores ballet's obsessions.

TODAY, IN ARTISTIC CIRCLES, there are few conventions more deplored than Orientalism, the depiction of the East, especially the Middle East, as a realm of luxury, sensuality, and violence. In the nineteenth century, though, there was nothing that seemed more chic—indeed, more true and beautiful. Orientalism had been operating in European art for a long time, but in the nineteenth century a number of factors—Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt and Syria, the beginning of the archeological excavations in Egypt, the growing belief, among intellectuals, that European culture had exhausted itself and needed a hot infusion from somewhere else—came together to form the idea that the East had the answer. Again and again, in European art of the nineteenth century, we see the pasha’s court, with folks in baggy trousers and pointy slippers, or, more appealingly, the female world: the harem, the indoor pools, the handsome rear ends of the women waiting to see if they will be on duty that night. In Flaubert’s novel “Salammbô,” the bejewelled Carthaginian priestess of the title has a fervent sexual encounter with the warrior Matho in his tent. Soon after, he is assailed with heated rods. Then his heart is cut out, whereupon Salammbô dies, of shock. In Orientalist art, love frequently ends in death. That’s part of the fun.

No European art form, perhaps, was more devoted to Orientalism than ballet, whose makers were always scouting for exotic locales in which, however incorrectly, to situate the material they had derived from French and Italian courts. Orientalist ballets were more demure than their counterparts in painting and literature. They might include Tut arms or I-surrender back bends, but for the most part the Orientalism

was a matter of the plot—slave auctions, mummies come to life—and of the sets and costumes: cute little fezzes and the like. Marius Petipa, during his long tenure as chief ballet master of the Imperial Theatre in St. Petersburg (from 1869 to 1903), turned out a long line of Orientalist spectacles, including “The Daughter of the Pharaoh” (Egypt), “Le Roi Candaule” and “Le Corsaire” (Turkey), “The Talisman” and “La Bayadère” (India; in the latter, the temple explodes). Most of these ballets, hits in their time, are now lost. They seemed kitschy to later generations, and, as they were performed less often, their steps were forgotten.

Today they have a rescuer, the scholar Doug Fullington, who reads the turn-of-the-century notation that in most cases is all that is left of the choreography. On Feb. 23–24, as part of the Guggenheim’s “Works & Process” series, Fullington, the education-programs manager of Pacific Northwest Ballet, is staging a show, “Petipa Exotique,” with excerpts from the great man’s forgotten ballets, plus dances that, for one reason or another, were deleted from the works that survived. They will be accompanied by two violinists, just as at Petipa’s rehearsals.

“Why take the trouble?” I asked Fullington. “Because ballet was different then,” he said. It had many more kinds of dance in it—pantomime, character dances, dramatic dances, children’s dances—and he likes the range: the shading, the gradations, the whole, big rainbow. Also, he finds the yen for revision in dance a little depressing: “I don’t think we should assume that everything that was changed was changed for the better.”

—Joan Acocella

New York City Ballet

In the latter half of its winter season, the company presents six performances of one of ballet's most enduring comic works, "Coppélia," with a vivid and witty score by Léo Delibes, which includes a rousing mazurka. In the second act, the heroine Swanilda imitates an articulated puppet to both comical and slightly discomfiting effect. When Balanchine first staged this production, in 1974, he enlisted the help of Alexandra Danilova, one of the great Swanildas. The first two acts are faithful to the version he and Danilova danced as children at the Mariinsky. But in the third, Balanchine did away with many elements of the original libretto, creating a series of abstract ensemble numbers. Try to catch a cast with Megan Fairchild or Tiler Peck in the role of Swanilda; both have the charm and playfulness that make the ballet come alive. • Feb. 14 and Feb. 22 at 8, Feb. 15 at 2 and 8, and Feb. 16 and Feb. 23 at 3: "Coppélia." • Feb. 12 at 7:30: "Bal de Couture," "DGV: Danse à Grande Vitesse," and "The Four Seasons." • Feb. 13 and Feb. 18-20 at 7:30 and Feb. 22 at 2: "Opus 19/The Dreamer," "Barber Violin Concerto," and "Stravinsky Violin Concerto." • Feb. 21 at 8: "Acheron," "Afternoon of a Faun," "Walpurgisnacht Ballet," and "La Valse." • Feb. 25 at 7:30: "La Stravaganza," "A Place for Us," and "Todo Buenos Aires." (David H. Koch, Lincoln Center. 212-496-0600. Through March 2.)

"Afternoon of a Faun"

This new film by Nancy Buirski documents the extraordinary dancing of the American ballerina Tanaquil Leclercq, as well as the terrible illness that ended her career at the age of twenty-seven. Intelligent, stylish, and deeply musical, Leclercq became a muse to both George Balanchine and Jerome Robbins. Both men loved her—she married Balanchine—and created ballets for her, including "Afternoon of a Faun" (Robbins) and "La Valse" (Balanchine). In 1956, she contracted polio and almost died; she never danced again. The film offers extremely rare footage of her dancing. (Elinor Bunin Munroe Film Center, 144 W. 65th St. 212-875-5600. Daily through Feb. 25 at 12, 2:15, 4:30, 6:45, and 9:15.)

Elena Demyanenko and Dai Jian

She's from Russia, and he's from China, but they both danced, with superb fluidity, for Trisha Brown, and now they team up for the duet "Blue Room." Also on the bill is "Deja Ve—As a Solo," which Jian made for himself and the young Austin Selden, and "Raw Nerves," which Demyanenko choreographed for yet another Trisha Brown standout, Leah Morrison. (New York Live Arts, 219 W. 19th St. 212-924-0077. Feb. 13-15 at 7:30.)

Souleymane Badolo

The works of this Burkina Faso-born choreographer, who moved to New

York in 2009, are hybrids of African ritual and American postmodernism. The mix is strange and often unstable, engrossing one moment and flat the next. His new "Benon," a duet with the performer and writer Charmaine Warren, pulls from Burkinabé harvest dancing. It's about food and gratitude. (Danspace Project, St. Mark's Church In-the-Bowery, Second Ave. at 10th St. 866-811-4111. Feb. 13-15 at 8.)

Rioul Dance

The skillful but habitually derivative choreographer Pascal Rioul owns up to some influences by juxtaposing two of his works with works by two of his mentors. May O'Donnell's 1945 "Suspension" is a slow-twisting mobile of stretched bodies. Martha Graham's 1940 "El Penitente" is an abstraction of a Catholic folk pageant in the American Southwest. Rioul's "Wien," from 1995, rides the swirling disintegration of Ravel's "La Valse," while his "Views of the Fleeting World," from 2008, exalts bland vignettes with Bach's "Art of the Fugue." (92nd Street Y, Lexington Ave. at 92nd St. 212-415-5500. Feb. 14-15 at 8.)

Columbia Ballet Collaborative

Student-run ballet companies from three Ivies—Columbia, Princeton, and Harvard—come together for a performance of new works by young choreographers. (Miller Theatre, Broadway at 116th St. 212-854-7799. Feb. 15 at 8 and Feb. 16 at 3.)

Jessica Lang Dance

Impeccable craft and a strong sense of visual design mark the work of Jessica Lang, a much in-demand ballet choreographer whose chamber ensemble debuted at the Joyce last fall. Lang's dances often take inspiration from painting, calligraphy, film, or sculpture. In "Ink," made in collaboration with the Japanese visual artist Shinichi Maruyama, the dancers move in silhouette, melting into projected images of inky droplets. In "The Calling," a solitary figure fills the stage, her dimensions augmented by an elaborate costume. Lang's first full Joyce season includes three new works, one of which is her latest collaboration with Maruyama. (175 Eighth Ave., at 19th St. 212-242-0800. Feb. 19 at 7:30, Feb. 20-22 at 8, and Feb. 23 at 2.)

Dance Heginbotham

The company of the witty and musical choreographer John Heginbotham joins the musicians of Alarm Will Sound in taking over the Charles Engelhard Court, in the American Wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. In addition to excerpts from Heginbotham's enigmatic and ominous "Twin," set to electronica by Aphex Twin, the program includes the premiere of "Fly by Wire," with an original score by Tyondai Braxton, as well as another new dance, set to Edgar Varèse's "Poème Électronique." The museum hasn't seen much site-specific dance;

count on Heginbotham to have fun with the place. (Fifth Ave. at 82nd St. 212-535-7710. Feb. 20 at 7.)

Tao Dance Theatre

Mainland China has almost no tradition of modern dance, and this company, founded in Beijing in 2008, is the best to have made it to New York. The arresting merger of martial arts and minimalism developed by its choreographer, Tao Ye, earned praise (and emptied some seats) at the 2012 Lincoln Center Festival. One of the works on that program—"4," a perpetual-motion dance for a masked quartet, roiling and spinning and jerking but not breaking off from a wide stance—now returns along with the premiere of "5," in which a quintet of bodies roll over one another continuously. (N.Y.U. Skirball Center, 566 LaGuardia Pl. 212-352-3101. Feb. 20-22 at 8 and Feb. 23 at 3.)

Vanessa Anspaugh

A young choreographer who has shown a talent for turning odd behavior, an architectural sense of composition, and familiar ideas of the self and the other into attention-holding theatre, Anspaugh takes up the self-and-other theme again in "We Were an Island." The surface separateness of each member of an archipelago, she suggests, can be deceiving. (Danspace Project, St. Mark's Church In-the-Bowery, Second Ave. at 10th St. 866-811-4111. Feb. 20-22 at 8.)

Nora Chipaumire

In "Riot," the imposing Zimbabwe-born choreographer writhes in a bra and panties inside a Plexiglas box, referencing "The Rite of Spring" while commenting on the history of displaying African bodies. The solo's first part, which had its New York premiere in October, here is combined with a work-in-progress showing of the second segment, which juxtaposes spring rituals of her native country with the metaphoric ritual sacrifices she sees in American popular culture. (92nd Street Y, Lexington Ave. at 92nd St. 212-415-5500. Feb. 21-22 at 8 and Feb. 23 at 3.)

OF NOTE ROYAL NEW ZEALAND BALLET

Led since 2011 by the former American Ballet Theatre star Ethan Stiefel, the company has updated its repertoire and stepped up its touring schedule. The Joyce engagement, part of a four-city tour, marks its first appearance in New York in more than twenty years. The triple bill is conceived to show off the company's range, from the crisp neoclassicism of Benjamin Millepied's "28 Variations on a Theme by Paganini" to the sensual, earthy attack of "Banderillero," a modern-dance piece set to Chinese percussion. "Of Days," a contemporary piece set to lyrical music by various minimalist composers, is by a Kiwi, Andrew Simmons. As a bonus, Gillian Murphy, of A.B.T., appears in some casts of "28 Variations." (175 Eighth Ave., at 19th St. 212-242-0800. Feb. 12 at 7:30, Feb. 13-14 at 8, Feb. 15 at 2 and 8, and Feb. 16 at 2 and 7:30.)



DVD OF THE WEEK

A video discussion of Agnès Varda's "The Beaches of Agnès," from 2008, in our digital edition.



FRONT ROW

Richard Brody discusses Hong Sang-soo's films, at nyr.kr/movies



The photograph "Bird-08-2009," by the Iranian artist Shirana Shahbazi, evokes a still-life painting, in "A World of Its Own: Photographic Practices in the Studio," at MOMA.



be a little different," shifting the focus away from MOMA's usual crew of Americans (Walker Evans, Lee Friedlander, Garry Winogrand) and what he calls "that descriptive, documentary photography" that has dominated the museum's collection-based shows in recent years.

Bajac opens his show with a piece by Bruce Nauman, an artist whose work spans sculpture, neon, film, video, sound, performance, and installation, as well as photography. It's an image of the debris on his studio floor, from 1967, pieced together like an early composite moonscape from NASA. The show includes videos from the sixties, seventies, and eighties, in which the artist's studio is variously seen as a playground for projectile umbrellas (Roman Signer), fizzing bottles (Fischli and Weiss), and puzzled dogs (William Wegman). Bajac has also unearthed little-seen and previously unexhibited works, including a grid of Hashem El Madani's portraits from the early seventies, selected by the artist Akram Zaatari, of young Lebanese men with rifles, and two poetic studies by Francis Bruguerie, made circa 1925, of light glinting through cut paper.

Bajac deflects questions about his plans for future exhibitions, preferring to talk about the importance of collecting photographers' books and "building bridges between the physical and a digital museum." Still, "A World of Its Own" does offer some clues to his direction. Elegantly installed, with an eye for white space and variations in scale, the show forgoes chronology in favor of juxtapositions of nineteenth-century, modern, and contemporary pictures in the style that's become Bajac's trademark. Bajac has a sophisticated, rigorously global perspective, but he is conscious of his new context. Working at MOMA, he says, means dealing with "history from an American perspective, written in New York, and that's fine with me."

—Vince Aletti

VIEW FINDER

A new photography curator blurs boundaries at MOMA.

QUENTIN BAJAC, MOMA's new chief curator of photography, is shaking things up. "I'm a bit tired of the predictable history from the daguerreotype to the digital print," says the Paris-born Bajac, who comes to MOMA from stints at the Musée d'Orsay and the Centre Pompidou, where he was the head of the photography department from 2007 to 2013. Bajac is known for breaking down departmental boundaries and displaying photography alongside other mediums. His brilliant 2009 exhibition at the Pompidou, "La Subversion des Images: Surréalisme, Photographie, Film," was as

audacious as it was entertaining. He says, "I'm most interested in the connection between photography, painting, and film, setting up a dialogue and seeing that they have more in common."

At MOMA, which has had a photography department since 1940, Bajac sees a need "to focus more on integrating photography with the collection as a whole." Discussing his first show for the museum, "A World of Its Own: Photographic Practices in the Studio," he says, "I thought we could work with the collection and write a history that would



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MUSEUMS SHORT LIST

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

"A World of Its Own: Photographic Practices in the Studio." Through Oct. 5.

GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM

"Carrie Mae Weems." Through May 14.

WHITNEY MUSEUM

"American Legends: From Calder to O'Keeffe." Through Oct. 19.

BROOKLYN MUSEUM

"Wangechi Mutu: A Fantastic Journey." Through March 9.

AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY

"The Power of Poison." Through Aug. 10.

ASIA SOCIETY

"Nalani Malini: Transgressions." Opens Feb. 19.

FRICK COLLECTION

"Renaissance and Baroque Bronzes from the Hill Collection." Through June 15.

MUSEUM OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK

"City as Canvas: New York City Graffiti Art from the Martin Wong Collection." Through Aug. 24.

NEW MUSEUM

"Pawel Althamer: The Neighbors." Opens Feb. 12.

A 1982 painting by Keith Haring, in "City as Canvas: Graffiti Art from the Martin Wong Collection," at the Museum of the City of New York, an exhibition of gallery-ready works by street artists from the seventies and eighties.

MUSEUMS AND LIBRARIES

Metropolitan Museum

"Charles Marville:

Photographer of Paris"

Hired to photograph Parisian neighborhoods before they were torn down to accommodate Baron Haussmann's grand new boulevards in the eighteen-sixties and -seventies, Marville documented the city in transition with images that are at once clear-eyed and tender. Meticulous, matter-of-fact, and rarely picturesque, the photographs record narrow cobblestone streets, interior courtyards, canals, and alleyways as well as the subsequent demolition sites from a neutral remove that never allows for nostalgia. He drew in closer for spare, elegant pictures of individual street lamps, sidewalk urinals, and poster-covered kiosks, anticipating Atget's later images of the city giving way to yet another wave of modernization. Atget, Brassai, Kertész, Cartier-Bresson, Man Ray, and others are included in an excellent footnote exhibition, "Paris as Muse: Photography,

1840s-1930s," in an adjacent gallery. Through May 4.

GALLERIES—UPTOWN

Manuel Álvarez Bravo

A show of rare vintage prints (two from the collection of André Breton) represents the full range of the great Mexican photographer's work. Alternately a realist, a Surrealist, and a consummate modernist, Bravo was versatile without being scattered, and his still-lives are as engaging as his portraits, landscapes, and street scenes. A number of his most memorable pictures are combined with a wealth of lesser-known material, including two striking images of children feasting on Day of the Dead sugar skulls, a shot of Diego Rivera sketching under a tree, and close-ups of five gleaming organ pipes and four unwashed jicamas. Through March 1. (Throckmorton, 145 E. 57th St. 212-223-1059.)

Steve DiBenedetto

DiBenedetto does for octopuses and U.F.O.s what Cézanne did

for apples and oranges (and what Guston did for bloodshot eyeballs), making paintings for painting's sake. This fiendishly appealing small show of the artist's collages begins with a swarming work held in place by straight pins, so its elements flutter like insects. It's followed by compressed and agitated compositions in acid hues that seem ready to melt down into raw energy or to whirl off the page. Don't miss the chapbook that accompanies the show, a visual index of DiBenedetto's inspirations, from alchemical illustrations to "Easy Rider." Through Feb. 25. (Half Gallery, 43 E. 78th St. 212-744-0151.)

GALLERIES—CHELSEA

Josephine Halvorson

Executed on-site and without recourse to photography, these new paintings by a quietly inventive young artist capture humble, everyday sights near her New England studio: the pale-yellow slats of a clapboard house, say, or a single vine in front of a white

woodshed. Their exacting detail is impressive enough, but the tight compositions—Halvorson paints at arm's length, close enough to smell the wood or concrete—make them dumbfounding. You don't need to be told to look closely or to spend long minutes with each of the canvases here. That's inevitable with painting as gloriously dense as this, wherein the most mundane of architectural details carries the complexity and heft of royal portraiture. Through March 1. (Sikkema Jenkins, 530 W. 22nd St. 212-929-2262.)

GALLERIES—DOWNTOWN

Ferran Adrià

The Drawing Center has an admirable history of expanding the boundaries of the medium, but it abandons them altogether in this exhibition, the latest proof that food has supplanted high culture in the estimation of the Instagram class. Adrià, he of the liquid-nitrogen flan at the defunct Spanish restaurant El Bulli, may or may not be the most inventive chef of the age, but the El Bulli artifacts here—notes and lists, pseudoscientific flowcharts, architectural models of the chef's workshop—are humdrum at best. Even worse are the products of

Adrià's artistic pretensions, such as sixty crayon drawings, executed on restaurant stationery like a tenth-rate Martin Kippenberger, purporting to chart a "theory of culinary evolution." Through Feb. 28. (The Drawing Center, 35 Wooster St. 212-219-2166.)

Richard Barnes

The photographer who made his first impression with stark studies of the Unabomber's cabin shows images of birds in flight that reveal a freakish order amidst the apparent chaos. Working outside of Rome, Barnes recorded huge flocks of starlings darkening the skies like leaves blown in the wind, then banding together in formations that look like smoke signals or pointillist abstractions. In Barnes's other photographs here, eccentric birds' nests are spotlighted against a black ground, intricate tangles of twigs, twine, and plastic ribbon. Mother Nature as outsider artist. Through Feb. 23. (Foley, 97 Allen St. 212-244-9081.)

Minjung Kim

The nearly monochrome black paintings by this Korean artist pay a debt to her training as a calligrapher and to the thrumming abstractions of Paul Klee—himself a keen student

of Asian ink art. One large ink painting on rice paper reveals itself slowly as a forest of tiny ridges; another resolves into a landscape, suggesting a view of mountains out to the horizon. Her uncompromising art takes some effort to process, but the painstaking facture of such terse pictures eventually pays off: the paintings are realms in which time becomes space. Through March 1. (OKO, 220 E. 10th St. 212-460-5321.)

Ola Vasiljeva

The young Latvian artist's auspicious New York debut takes the form of a room-size installation. In one corner, a slide projector flashes black-and-white portraits interpolated with stick-figure drawings, which recur on a blackboard propped against the wall and on a messy desk nearby. A metal sculpture seems to render the drawings in three dimensions, or maybe it doesn't; a puffy jacket draped over a chair points to a fictional artist, or to the artist herself. Vasiljeva's achievement is that it all coheres somehow in a syntax outside of logic or language—the syntax of visions and dreams. Through March 15. (Art in General, 79 Walker St. 212-219-0473.)



GOINGS ON, ONLINE

For more theatre openings, including new works by Will Eno, Craig Lucas, and Quiara Alegria Hudes, visit nyr.kr/theatre.

Additional classical-music listings, including concerts by Juilliard415 (led by Jordi Savall) and the Brooklyn Chamber Music Society, can be found at nyr.kr/classical.

ABOVE & BEYOND

Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey

The Greatest Show on Earth starts a five-week run in town. The ringmaster is Johnathan Lee Iverson, a native of New York, who, in 1998, became the youngest—and the first African-American—ringmaster in the company's history. This year's show, "Legends," is the hundred-and-forty-fourth edition of the circus, and it includes performers from around the globe. Also promised are animals from almost every continent, as well as from the provinces of the imagination—they are bringing a unicorn, Pegasus, and a woolly mammoth to the big top, or, in this case, the big arena. (Feb. 20–March 2, at the Barclays Center, 620 Atlantic Ave., Brooklyn; March 5–10, at the Nassau Veterans Memorial Coliseum, in Uniondale; and March 19–23, at the Prudential Center, in Newark, N.J. ringling.com.)

AUCTIONS AND ANTIQUES

While the big houses try their luck at prestige sales of Impressionist and

modern art in London, the smaller auctioneers take center stage back home. On Feb. 13, **Swann** offers a selection of works by African-American artists, with an emphasis on the nineteenth century, the Harlem Renaissance, and the W.P.A. years; the social realism of the nineteen-thirties is represented by such works as Hughie Lee-Smith's "Coal Breakers," a desolate, gray-toned scene of hard labor in an industrial landscape. The decorative exuberance of the Art Deco and Art Nouveau periods enlivens the house's sale of posters on Feb. 25. (104 E. 25th St. 212-254-4710.) • Exuberance and domestic splendor are also the keynotes of the Belle Époque, the subject of one of **Doyle's** periodic auctions (Feb. 19). Among the top lots are a set of gold-and-cloisonné plates made in St. Petersburg at the turn of the century, Tiffany lamps, and a scene of a woman in an opulent interior by the American society painter Maximilien Colin. (175 E. 87th St. 212-427-2730.) • Timed to capitalize on the canine invasion that is the

Westminster Dog Show, **Bonhams'** auction of dog-centered art (Feb. 12)—preceded by a dog-friendly breakfast—features paintings of the

animals, at play and at work, by such favorite portraitists as John Emms and William Henry Hamilton Troad. (580 Madison Ave. 212-644-9001.)

READINGS AND TALKS

Community Bookstore

Rebecca Mead, a writer for this magazine and the author of "My Life in Middlemarch," joins Kathryn Schulz ("Being Wrong") and Kate Zambreno ("Heroines") to discuss George Eliot's novel. Michele Filgate is the moderator. (143 Seventh Ave., Park Slope, Brooklyn. 718-783-3075. Feb. 13 at 7.)

92nd Street Y

Claire Messud and Joyce Carol Oates read from their latest novels. (Lexington Ave. at 92nd St. 212-415-5500. Feb. 13 at 8:15.)

McKee Gallery

The art critic Dore Ashton discusses the work of the abstract painter Harvey Quaytman with the artist's daughter, the painter R. H. Quaytman, in an evening moderated by the curator and editor Phong Bui, at the McKee gallery, whose new exhibition features paintings and drawings by the late artist. (745 Fifth Ave., at 57th St. 212-688-5951. Feb. 19 at 6.)

McNally Jackson Books

The novelists Elizabeth Winthrop and Rebecca Stead join Lizzie Skurnick, an editor whose imprint reissues Y.A. literature from the thirties to the eighties, and Anna Holmes, the creator of Jezebel.com, to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of "Harriet the Spy." (52 Prince St. 212-274-1160. Feb. 25 at 7.)

CLASSICAL MUSIC



OPERA

Metropolitan Opera

When the tenor Jonas Kaufmann, one of those few Met stars who act as a magnet for new productions, was last featured in the French repertory, it was in Des McAnuff's uninspired "Faust." But hopes are high as a new staging of Massenet's "Werther"—another adaptation of Goethe—by the more reliable Richard Eyre, comes to the house this month. Kaufmann takes the title role, joined by the French mezzo-soprano Sophie Koch, as Charlotte, and the Serbian bass-baritone David Bizić, as Albert, both making their Met debuts; Alain Altinoglu conducts. (Feb. 18 at 8, Feb. 22 at 1, and Feb. 25 at 7:30.) • **Also playing:** Dmitri Tcherniakov (whose recent production of Rimsky-Korsakov's "The Czar's Bride" had a major success in Berlin) directs a new production of Borodin's Russian epic "Prince Igor," a towering work that hasn't been heard at the Met in nearly a century. The cast, which offers not only Ildar Abdrazakov, in the title role, but also the talents of Oksana Dyka, Anita Rachvelishvili, Mikhail Petrenko, and Stefan Kocán, is promising; Gianandrea Noseda. (Feb. 14, Feb. 17, Feb. 21, and Feb. 24 at 7. Pavel Smelkov conducts the

Feb. 21 performance.) • The final performances of Dvořák's "Rusalka" feature Renée Fleming (in the title role, one of her favorites), Piotr Beczala, Emily Magee, Dolora Zajick, and John Relyea; Yannick Nézet-Séguin and Paul Nadler conduct. (Feb. 12 at 7:30 and Feb. 15 at 8.) • The new production of "Die Fledermaus" bows out with a sweep of performances, all featuring (among others) Susanna Phillips, Christopher Maltman, Jane Archibald, Anthony Roth Costanzo, and Michael Fabiano; Adam Fischer. (Feb. 13 and Feb. 20 at 7:30, Feb. 15 at 12:30, and Feb. 22 at 8.) (Metropolitan Opera House. 212-362-6000.)

"Met + Juilliard": "A Concert of Comic Operas"

James Levine's second collaboration with the city's leading conservatory is, once more, a walk on the lighter side: a semi-staged production of Stravinsky's one-act "Mavra," joined on the program by excerpts from Mozart's "The Abduction from the Seraglio," Berlioz's "Benvenuto Cellini," and Donizetti's "L'Elisir d'Amore." The talented singers come from the school's vocal program and from the Met's Lindemann Young Artist Development

Program, with Levine conducting the Juilliard Orchestra. (Peter Jay Sharp Theatre, Juilliard School. 212-721-6500. Feb. 11 and Feb. 14 at 8 and Feb. 16 at 2.)

ORCHESTRAS AND CHORUSES

Boston Symphony Orchestra

With the Philharmonic on tour, Carnegie Hall is doing a great job of filling the orchestral vacuum. The B.S.O.'s second program with the venerable Bernard Haitink on the podium is a classic slate of all-Ravel: "Alborada del Gracioso," "Shéhérazade" (with the warmly compelling Susan Graham), and a Boston specialty, the full choral version of the complete "Daphnis et Chloé" (with the Tanglewood Festival Chorus). (212-247-7800. Feb. 12 at 8.)

St. Petersburg Philharmonic Orchestra

Valery Gergiev's Mariinsky is not the only musical force in Russia's window to the West: Yuri Temirkanov has long conducted the city's other major orchestra, a jewel in its own right. His first concert includes a contemporary work (by Giya Kancheli) along with music by Rimsky-Korsakov and Tchaikovsky (the First Piano Concerto, with Denis Kozhukhin); the second offers Prokofiev's Violin Concerto No. 2 in G Minor (with Julia Fischer) and Rachmaninoff's impassioned Second Symphony. (Carnegie Hall. 212-247-7800. Feb. 13 and Feb. 15 at 8.)

American Composers Orchestra

The Crossing, an exemplary chamber chorus dedicated to new music, is the special guest of the orchestra in a typically première-rich concert that includes works by Ted Hearne, Lisa Renée Coons, David Lang ("Statement to the Court"), Amy Beth Kirsten ("Strange Pilgrims," with a film by Mark DeChiazza), and Steve Reich ("Eight Lines," with the pianists Margaret Kampmeier and Stephen Gosling). George Manahan conducts. (Zankel Hall. 212-247-7800. Feb. 20 at 7:30.)

Philadelphia Orchestra

Yannick Nézet-Séguin, finishing up his stint conducting "Rusalka" at the Met, brings his marvellous band up from Philly once more. His program has a noble cast: Strauss's "Metamorphosen," Shostakovich's First Cello Concerto (with Truls Mørk), and Beethoven's Symphony No. 3, "Eroica." (Carnegie Hall. 212-247-7800. Feb. 21 at 8.)

Venice Baroque Orchestra and Philippe Jaroussky

George Frideric Handel and Nicola Porpora, two star composers who were rivals for the favors of London's opera public in the early seventeen-thirties, meet again in this program offered by Andrea Marcon's ensemble (joined by the dazzling countertenor), which plays with the same mellow beauty exuded by the city for which it is named. (Metropolitan Museum, Fifth Ave. at 87th St. 212-570-3949. Feb. 25 at 7.)

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RECITALS

Emanuele Arciuli

The pianist's free recital at Columbia University's Italian Academy has the kind of balance between classics and high-quality new works that ought to be a lot more common. He precedes music by Martin Bresnick, Kyle Gann ("Earth-Preserving Chant"), and John Adams ("Phrygian Gates") with Haydn's Variations in F Minor, Bartók's "Out of Doors," and Liszt's "Hymne à la Nuit." (Amsterdam Ave. between 116th and 118th Sts. Feb. 12 at 7.)

Christian Zacharias

The distinguished pianist, always an insightful interpreter, delves into the German classics in a solo recital at Alice Tully Hall that offers Schubert's "Moments Musicaux," Schumann's "Kreisleriana," and two Beethoven sonatas. (212-721-6500. Feb. 13 at 7:30.)

Gerald Finley and Julius Drake

The Canadian baritone, a commanding recitalist, is joined by the eminent British pianist in Schubert's "Winterreise." (Zankel Hall. 212-247-7800. Feb. 13 at 7:30.)

New York Festival of Song: "Warsaw Serenade"

Dina Kuznetsova and Joseph Kaiser (accompanied by Steven Blier and Michael Barrett) sing their way through the organization's latest journey, a tour of seldom-heard songs by such Polish masters as Karłowicz, Bacewicz, Szymanowski, and the season's major rediscovery, Mieczysław Weinberg. (Merkin Concert Hall. 212-501-3330. Feb. 18 at 8.)

Jonas Kaufmann

In the midst of his performances of "Werther" at the Met, the paramount German tenor graces Carnegie Hall for a recital of songs by Schumann (including "Dichterliebe"), Wagner (the "Wesendonck Lieder"), and Liszt, accompanied by Helmut Deutsch. (212-247-7800. Feb. 20 at 8.)

Glenn Kotche and Victoire

One of the biggest events in Merkin Concert Hall's Ecstatic Music Festival takes place off-site: a collaboration between the renowned drummer of the rock group Wilco and the composer Missy Mazzoli's alt-classical vocal trio. New works by Kotche, Mazzoli ("Vespers for a New Dark Age"), and John Luther Adams are on the program. (Zankel Hall. 212-247-7800. Feb. 22 at 6.)

Yo-Yo Ma and Emanuel Ax

Sometimes, all roads lead to Carnegie Hall. This month's stampede includes an all-Brahms recital by two of the public's favorite artists, who perform both of the Sonatas for Cello and Piano in addition to the cello transcription of the composer's First Violin Sonata. (212-247-7800. Feb. 23 at 2.)

Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center

This year, the Society's Winter Festival investigates the extraordinary stream of masterworks that flowed from the pens of the early German Romantics between 1820 and 1830. "Masterpieces for Eight" is the focus here: the Octets of Mendelssohn and Schubert. The musicians include (among other standouts) Erin Keefe, the concertmaster of the thankfully revived Minnesota Orchestra. (Alice Tully Hall. 212-875-5788. Feb. 23 at 5 and Feb. 25 at 7:30.)

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NIGHT LIFE



ROCK AND POP

Musicians and night-club proprietors lead complicated lives; it's advisable to check in advance to confirm engagements.

"American Songbook"

The singer-songwriter and multi-instrumentalist **Sarah Jarosz** grew up in Texas, with a mandolin on her knee. She was a master of the instrument by the age of ten, and she had a record deal before she was out of her teens. Now just twenty-two, she's been nominated for two Grammys, and her latest album, "Build Me Up from

Bones," topped many year-end best-of lists in the category of Americana and folk. She's joined here on Feb. 12 by the flat-picking phenoms the **Milk Carton Kids**. Feb. 14: **Beth Orton** promises a heartfelt Valentine's Day show. Feb. 20: **Jessica Molasky**, in a program of Joni Mitchell songs. (Allen Room, Broadway at 60th St. 212-721-6500.)

Nicole Atkins

The New Jersey-born singer-songwriter, who describes her sound as "pop noir," got her start playing New York's open-mike scene a decade

ago, and the raspy-voiced chanteuse with the breathtaking vibrato knows how to do things on her own terms. She bid adieu to Columbia Records, which issued her acclaimed 2007 debut, "Neptune City," said farewell to Razor & Tie, which delivered her second record, "Mondo Amore," and recently started her own label, Oh' Mercy!, for her latest collection, "Slow Phaser." The lead single off it, "Girl You Look Amazing," is a spirited electro-pop number that finds Atkins putting aside her usual lavish arrangements to render disco with a dark side. (Bowery Ballroom, 6 Delancey St. 212-533-2111. Feb. 13.)

Buckwheat Zydeco

Stanley Dural, Jr., who has been performing under this stage name for decades, was one of the first to bring Louisiana's accordion-heavy dance music to the masses. A seasoned party professional, he pays a pre-Mardi Gras visit to the city, with a run at the Iridium. The first two nights, he's with his band (keep an eye on that washboard player), and on the last night he's sitting in on Hammond B-3 organ, one of his first loves, with the **Les Paul Trio**. (1650 Broadway, at 51st St. 212-582-2121. Feb. 15-17.)

Rosanne Cash

The singer-songwriter's new album, "The River & the Thread," is much like her old albums: quietly brilliant, literary without being static, rewarding in repeated listens. It's also overtly concerned with the links between present and past, with the country and folk traditions central to the American South. At a special show at the Metropolitan Museum, Cash celebrates the work of her father, Johnny Cash, as she performs music written on his iconic Martin guitars. The show is offered in conjunction with the museum's exhibition "Early American Guitars: The Instruments of C. F. Martin." (Fifth Ave. at 82nd St. 212-535-7710. Feb. 22.)

Cibo Matto

Cute and weird as ever, Cibo Matto return with their first album in fifteen years. The name means "crazy food" in Italian, which is appropriate, because their music is a little crazy, and many of their songs are about food, such as "Know Your Chicken," "Apple," "Birthday Cake," and "Sugar Water." The food obsession of the band's founders, Miho Hatori and Yuka C. Honda, predates their Clinton-era heyday: their previous project was a punk band called Leito Lychee, meaning "frozen lychee nut." Their new album, "Hotel Valentine," drops the food references for songs about ghosts in a hotel. Still, its official release party is taking place at a venue named for a fish. ((Le) Poisson Rouge, 158 Bleecker St. 212-505-3474. Feb. 14.)

Cibo Matto, which served up wacky pop songs about food in the nineties, is back with a new album, "Hotel Valentine," and a release show on Valentine's Day.



Four Tet

For his seventh album, "Beautiful Rewind," the electronic artist Kieran Hebden, who records and performs as Four Tet, took the concept of self-releasing to new heights, not only ditching his longtime label, Domino, but also snubbing any and all marketing tactics. "no pre order, no youtube trailers, no itunes stream, no spotify, no amazon deal, no charts, no bit coin deal, no last minute rick rubin," the Londoner tweeted last July. The new record, which came out in October, shows the laptop wizard at his most playful yet, merging jungle grooves with brainy beats, scuzzy samples, and rhapsodic synths to induce a psychedelic meltdown that begs for the dance floor. (Terminal 5, 610 W. 56th St. 212-582-6600. Feb. 22.)

Alam Khan

The son of the renowned musician Ustad Ali Akbar Khan (and grandson of the equally esteemed Allauddin Khan) presents an evening of North Indian ragas, performed on the *sarod*, a fretless lute. His appearance initiates "Music from the Mediterranean to Asia," a new series presented by Robert Browning, the founder of the World Music Institute, who recently came out of retirement. Khan will be joined by **Nitin Mitta**, a tabla player. Upcoming concerts in the series include a night of solos and duets by the oud and violin virtuoso Simon Shaheen and the Lebanese singer Rima Khcheich. (Roulette, 509 Atlantic Ave., Brooklyn. 917-267-0363. Feb. 15.)

Kings of Leon

Since they arrived, in 1999, the Kings of Leon, led by the three Followill brothers (Caleb, on lead vocals and guitar; Nathan, on drums; and Jared, on bass) and one Followill cousin (Matthew, on lead guitar), have practiced a straight-ahead brand of rock music that has taken them from the slightly punkier sounds of their early records to the arena-ready bombast of their latest release, "Mechanical Bull," which came out last summer. (Madison Square Garden, Seventh Ave. at 33rd St. 800-745-3000. Feb. 14.)

Ladysmith Black Mambazo

This South African group burst into most American music lovers' consciousness through its participation in Paul Simon's album "Graceland," from 1986, but this exquisite male a cappella chorus, which was created and is led by the dynamic Joseph Shabalala, has been a going concern since 1960. A living rhythmic and harmonic history of Zulu culture, its 2013 release, "Live: Singing for Peace Around the World," recently won a Grammy Award for Best World Music Album. (It was the group's fourth Grammy.) Its latest album, "Always with Us," pays tribute to Nellie Shabalala, the late wife of

the founder, and is the first album in its history to include female Zulu vocalists. (B. B. King Blues Club & Grill, 237 W. 42nd St. 212-997-4144. Feb. 25.)

Black Joe Lewis

Lewis has been a vibrant, if not always central, part of the blues-rock revival that began with the White Stripes and continued on through the Black Keys and others. Based in Austin, Lewis and his backing group, the Honeybears, have released four albums of funky blues-rock, including this year's "Electric Slave," on which he shed the Honeybears portion of the name. This time around, the songs have a slightly darker tone, with standouts like "Golem" and "Vampire" tapping into a supernatural vein. (Irving Plaza, 17 Irving Pl. 212-777-6800. Feb. 19.)

Earl Sweatshirt

Thebe Neruda Kgositsile (Sweatshirt's birth name) is perhaps the most talented member of Odd Future, the surreal Los Angeles rap coöperative that exploded the genre in 2011. During their rise to stardom, though, he was noticeably absent, sent by his mother to a Samoan therapeutic retreat school for at-risk boys (he was seventeen at the time). He returned to the United States the next year, and last summer released his stunning debut solo album, "Doris." He's currently finishing up the U.S. leg of his 2014 Weardl Tour, which heads to Europe next month. Odd Future members are known to travel together, so expect some special guests at this pair of local performances. (Feb. 20, Webster Hall, 125 E. 11th St. 212-353-1600; Feb. 22, Music Hall of Williamsburg, 66 N. 6th St., Brooklyn. 718-486-5400.)

JAZZ AND STANDARDS

Cyrille Aimée

The locally based, French-born singer, who is of Dominican descent, was a runner-up in the 2010 Thelonious Monk Vocals Competition, and she grabbed the gold two years later in the first Sarah Vaughan International Jazz Competition. She's at Birdland celebrating Valentine's Day all week long. (315 W. 44th St. 212-581-3080. Feb. 11-16.)

Ravi Coltrane

Some musicians thrive in a stable setting; others, like this imaginative saxophonist, blossom in shifting company. His most recent album, "Spirit Fiction," featured two distinct ensembles (as well as the saxophonist Joe Lovano); at the Jazz Standard Feb. 18-23, he's moving between four different quartets. Featured collaborators will include the trumpeter **Ralph Alessi** and the guitarists **David Gilmore** and **Adam Rogers**. (116 E. 27th St. 212-576-2232.)

OF NOTE NINETIETH ANNIVERSARY OF GEORGE GERSHWIN'S "RHAPSODY IN BLUE"

Paul Whiteman, the wildly popular and portentous bandleader of the nineteen-twenties, who was continually trying to "make a lady out of jazz," commissioned George Gershwin to write "Rhapsody in Blue," and it had its première at Aeolian Hall, on West Forty-second St., in 1924. The event was a milestone in the history of jazz music and modern American culture.

Vince Giordano and the Nighthawks Orchestra, with the guest pianists **Ted Rosenthal** and **Jeb Patton**, re-create the legendary concert, performing Gershwin's early opus (reconstructed and conducted by **Maurice Peress**), as well as other celebrated works from the era. They'll be doing it ninety years to the day—and just down the block—from the debut performance. (Town Hall, 123 W. 43rd St. 212-840-2824. Feb. 12.)

Fred Hersch

The pianist has a nurturing relationship with the Village Vanguard, as demonstrated on his 2012 release, "Alive at the Vanguard," the third live album that he has recorded there. He returns Feb. 18-23, joined by the same telepathic team assembled for that album: the bassist **John Hébert** and the drummer **Eric McPherson**. (178 Seventh Ave. S., at 11th St. 212-255-4037.)

Dave Holland

Although the bassist Holland was present on some of the most significant early fusion albums (including Miles Davis's pioneering "Bitches Brew," from 1970), he has never led a full-throttle jazz-rock unit until now. "Prism" is the name of both his new quartet and its recent debut album; with the pianist **Craig Taborn**, the guitarist **Kevin Eubanks**, and the drummer **Eric Harland** in tow, Holland has all the firepower he needs. (Highline Ballroom, 431 W. 16th St. 212-414-5994. Feb. 16.)

Gregory Porter

The current jazz audience has been itching for a strong new male singer for some time, and one who is truly worth embracing has finally emerged. Last month, he won a Grammy for his Blue Note debut, "Liquid Spirit," confirming that it's his moment to shine; time will tell if his songwriting abilities can match his persuasive vocalizing. (Town Hall, 123 W. 43rd St. 212-840-2824. Feb. 14.)

Dianne Reeves

Combining the larger-than-life vocal skills, reverence for tradition, and regal demeanor of Sarah Vaughan with an inquisitive stance toward contemporary pop and world music, Reeves gets to have it both ways. Her loyal fans have come to cherish her shape-shifting attitude, and "Beautiful Life," her first album in five years, features songs by Marvin Gaye, Ani DiFranco, Fleetwood Mac, and others. (Rose Hall, Jazz at Lincoln Center, Broadway at 60th St. 212-721-6500. Feb. 14-15.)



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THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT READING THE NUMBERS

Last week's report about the declining abortion rate in the United States was potentially good news for everyone, especially, one would think, for right-to-life groups. Most of them, though, weren't cheering. A statement from Americans United for Life called the report "an abortion industry propaganda piece short on data and long on strained conclusions." One problem was that the groups didn't like the messenger. The report, which showed that between 2008 and 2011 the rate of abortions had fallen to its lowest level since 1973, came from the Guttmacher Institute. Guttmacher produces scrupulous research on reproductive health; it also supports abortion rights. But the bigger problem was the message itself, because the report made a persuasive case that the right-to-life movement cannot take credit for the decline in abortions. Since 2008, states have enacted more than a hundred laws related to abortion, most aimed at limiting access to the procedure. The researchers, however, concluded that the new laws, with few exceptions, had had little impact on the number of abortions. Instead, much of the decline is probably attributable to more effective contraception, some of it available through the federal funding—"Uncle Sugar," in Mike Huckabee's creepy coinage—that Republicans like to rail against. Right-to-lifers could be promoting contraception and touting its success in averting unwanted pregnancies, but that doesn't seem to be news that they want to hear, let alone spread.

In fact, nobody can say for sure why the rate is falling. But the report's authors, Rachel K. Jones and Jenna Jerman, point to some key indicators. For one thing, there was a notable drop in the rates in several states, such as California, New York, and New Jersey, that had not enacted new restrictions. Indeed, rates dropped in all regions of the country, although the new laws are concentrated primarily in the Midwest and the South. Moreover, most of the restrictive laws

were passed in 2011, and the decline was already under way in 2008. Finally, and critically, the decrease in abortions has been accompanied by a decrease in the birth rate, suggesting not that fewer women are choosing to terminate pregnancies but that fewer women are getting pregnant in the first place.

One reason for that trend might be economic—pregnancy rates and birth rates tend to fall when times are tough. But a shift toward more effective birth control does seem to have played a role. Between 2002 and 2009, the proportion of contraceptive users who relied on long-acting reversible contraceptives like IUDs and implants rose from two per cent to nine per cent. That might not sound like much, but, because LARC methods (unlike condoms or the Pill) are more than ninety-nine per cent effective, even a relatively small uptick in usage can have an impact. Particularly noteworthy was the increase in the number of low-income and poor women who use long-acting methods provided by publicly funded birth-control services. According to the report, between 2006 and 2010 "the estimated number of unintended pregnancies averted by federally funded family-planning programs" rose from 1.9 million to 2.2 million.

Nonetheless, the new laws do place additional burdens on women seeking abortions, and, perhaps more important, they may also be erecting obstacles to a consensus position on abortion—one that most Americans could abide. For reasons both moral and practical, most Americans think that if an abortion is to be performed it should be done early in the pregnancy. Yet many of the laws that right-to-life groups have pressed for in recent years have tended to produce the opposite effect, resulting in later abortions. Consider the case of medical abortions, induced by the drug mifepristone, the so-called abortion pill. The Guttmacher report shows that, between 2008 and 2011, there was



a striking increase in the percentage of such procedures—in 2011, they accounted for twenty-three per cent (up from seventeen per cent) of all non-hospital abortions—even as the over-all rate declined. By definition, these are early abortions: they are performed before nine weeks' gestation. (Unlike surgical abortions, they can be done almost as soon as a woman receives a positive pregnancy test.) From the public-health, reproductive-choice, and moral-comfort points of view, an increase in the percentage of abortions performed this way is beneficial.

Yet the latest vogue in anti-abortion legislation is to ban medical abortions. One approach has been to short-circuit programs that allow mifepristone to be prescribed through telemedicine. A program started in Iowa, in 2008, allowed a woman to receive ultrasounds and talk to a counsellor at a satellite clinic, and then video-conference with a doctor in another location. The doctor could remotely unlock a drawer in the clinic and the necessary medication was dispensed to the woman. After the program began, women seeking abortions in Iowa tended to do so earlier; nevertheless, the overall abortion rate in the state declined. The program's safety record and women's reported satisfaction with it were solid. (It was especially helpful in rural areas.) But in 2010 Iowa elected an anti-choice Republican governor, who appointed new members to the state medical board, and it subsequently ended the program. A judge stayed the ban in November, and the matter is now being litigated. Meanwhile, legisla-

tures in fourteen other states have prohibited the use of telemedicine for medical abortion—"Webcam abortion," as opponents call it—even though the system hasn't even been tried on any significant scale in those states.

All this brings to mind the bizarre inability of certain prominent Republicans to understand the importance of contraception in our society. Making it more difficult for women to get an abortion early in an unintended pregnancy—or to prevent an unintended pregnancy in the first place—makes their lives harder. Yet Mike Huckabee and Rand Paul have been on a tear recently, insisting that focusing on reproductive rights patronizes women. Unlike Democrats, Huckabee says, Republicans want women to be "something other than victims of their gender," who are "helpless without Uncle Sugar" to "control their libido or their reproductive system." It shouldn't be necessary to say it again, but a woman's ability to exert control over her reproductive system is at the heart of her ability to control her destiny in many other ways as well. Besides, when conservatives attack the contraception mandate in the Affordable Care Act, or federally funded family-planning programs, they are working against the forces that are rendering abortion less common. Undermining contraception and early abortion sabotages the future that most people want, one that expresses both their values and their common sense: fewer unintended pregnancies and fewer abortions, too.

—Margaret Talbot

CARPETBAGGER DEPT. LITHUANIA OR BUST



Isabella Tobias is a twenty-two-year-old ice dancer who was born and raised in Manhattan. She learned to skate at the Ice Studio, a rink on Lexington Avenue, until she gave up skating, at the age of twelve, to focus on dance. (The *Times* called one of her performances with the New York City Ballet "delightful.") She returned to the ice at fifteen, and found that being a female ice dancer in the U.S. was a lonely proposition. "What American boy wants to be an ice dancer?" she said last week, lamenting her search for a partner. "Finally, my coaches sat me down and said, 'Look, we have this Lithuanian—he's a good skater, he's the right size, and he's already here.'" Tobias's parents are from Brooklyn and New Jersey, with ancestors from Spain, Turkey, England, and Ukraine. There isn't a drop of Lithuanian blood in the mix, but why let a

technicality get in the way? In 2010, Tobias started skating with Deividas Stagniūnas, and they are now the reigning Lithuanian national ice-dancing champions. "I don't want to be perceived as a turncoat," Tobias said. "But it was my only option."

Unfortunately, a technicality becomes a problem in the Olympics, where citizenship in the country you represent is required. "There are a lot of skaters who skate for different countries but never go there, know nothing about the culture, don't speak any of the language, and basically pay some money and get a passport in the mail," Tobias said. Prince Hubertus von Hohenlohe, a descendant of German royalty and a skier, will compete in the slalom for Mexico.

Lithuania, however, is only two decades removed from Soviet rule, and its government was less welcoming. Tobias ruled out a wedding of convenience with Stagniūnas—"I'm a hopeless romantic, so I could never just marry for a passport"—and instead flew to Vilnius, Lithuania's capital, in 2012, to make her case to the country's citizenship commission. She had to show

that she could contribute to Lithuanian society, that she had integrated with the Lithuanian diaspora, and that she speaks the language. "It was basically an interrogation," Tobias said. "Me in a chair facing a woman asking questions in Lithuanian: 'Who was the first king of Lithuania? Who was the first President of Lithuania?'" She had spent two years taking lessons over Skype with a Lithuanian college student in



Isabella Tobias



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To no avail: a month later, Dalia Grybauskaite, Lithuania's President, rejected Tobias's application. A parliamentary commission met to explore whether the law might be changed to allow for her citizenship, and thousands of Lithuanians signed petitions in support. In the tradition of her native country, Tobias lawyered up, and her Lithuanian attorney, Emile Kazlauskaitė, said in an e-mail that "a major part of the Lithuanian society wished that the citizenship would be granted to this talented and pretty ice-skater."

On December 2nd, President Grybauskaite reversed her decision. Tobias flew to Vilnius, where she took the oath of citizenship with her hand on a copy of the Lithuanian constitution and met with Grybauskaite in the Presidential Palace. (A challenger in Lithuania's upcoming Presidential election accused Grybauskaite of using Tobias to curry favor with voters.) "They absolutely love us," Tobias said. "We walk down the street there and people take our picture." Readers of one Lithuanian Web site ranked a picture of Tobias receiving her passport the third-best photo of the year.

Following a sendoff last week, at the Divine Providence Lithuanian Catholic Church, near her training center, in Michigan, Tobias arrived in Sochi. Agnė Sereikaitė, a Lithuanian speed skater and her roommate in the Olympic Village, asked if Tobias's parents could bring crunchy peanut butter, which she had trouble finding in Lithuania. (Security confiscated the jars when the Tobiases tried to take them into the Village.) Tobias and Stagniūnas are unlikely to win a medal, and this could be Tobias's last Olympiad with her new passport. Stagniūnas, who is twenty-eight, may retire, leaving Tobias in search of another partner, and another country, should she hope to compete in 2018. "No American child wakes up and says, 'I want to go to the Olympics for Lithuania,'" Tobias's mother, Maddie, said. "Hillary Clinton was a senator from New York—but is she from New York? Last time I checked, she wasn't. Life is about opportunity, and sometimes you just have to go wherever there's an opportunity."

—Reeves Wiedeman

THE BOARDS GET ME REWRITE



Last November, at a friend's birthday party, Dick Scanlan ran into a woman whose daughters go to Dalton, the Upper East Side private school. She told him that the middle school was putting on "Thoroughly Modern Millie," the 2002 musical for which Scanlan co-wrote the book. Based on the Julie Andrews movie, from 1967, the story concerns a Jazz Age flapper who moves to the big city looking for love. The Dalton mother suggested that Scanlan talk to the students there about the process of creating the show, which won six Tonys.

Scanlan, a rangy fifty-three-year-old with nerd glasses, visited Dalton in January, along with the show's composer, Jeanine Tesori, and was promptly summoned to the principal's office. The principal told him that certain material in "Millie" had raised concerns. At issue was a subplot in which the villainess, Mrs. Meers, disguises herself as Chinese (chopstick hair, no-tickee-no-shirtie accent) and runs a "white slavery" ring, funnelling young women to the Orient. Her helpers, Ching Ho and Bun Foo, are immigrant Chinese brothers who want to finance their mother's passage from Hong Kong. The idea, according to Scanlan, is to "bust" racist stereotypes and to "theatrically experience the chasm between the stereotype and the real thing"—a postmodern twist on the film, which billed the brothers as Oriental No. 1 and Oriental No. 2. (This was the era of Mickey Rooney as the bucktoothed Mr. Yunioshi, in "Breakfast at Tiffany's.")

As any seventh grader assigned to read "Gulliver's Travels" will tell you, satire is tricky: critical hand-wringing over comedies like "Borat," "Family Guy," and "The Book of Mormon" has become an opinion-page staple. On January 17th, Dalton e-mailed parents: "Several members of our community including students, parents, faculty, and alumni have expressed deep concern re-

garding the play's use of racial stereotypes and references to human trafficking." Instead of performing the play, the cast would now present "a revue of select music and dance numbers" from the show, intended to "protect our students from possible unforeseen consequences around the sensitivities of this play."

The e-mail caused a stir. "I felt really bad for the kids," one Dalton parent said. "There should have been a more rigorous screening process on what kind of play was selected." Another parent was sympathetic to those who complained, saying, "These weren't people who are crazies for political correctness." (Dalton offers such with-it courses as "Sex: What's Love Got to Do with It?" and "Art & Anxiety in Philip Roth & Woody Allen.") Still, school plays are known to create havoc. At Horace Mann one year, there were complaints about the scanty costumes worn by the Hot Box Girls, in "Guys and Dolls." A Brearley production of "Grease" rankled a few parents, who felt that one bit of dialogue might be offensive to lunch ladies. And, in November, a principal in Trumbull, Connecticut, tried to cancel a production of "Rent." A petition circulated; the show went on.

In the case of "Millie," the adults were alarmed when a cast member sent a friend a text consisting of the word "Herro!" And there were objections to a scene in which Ching Ho and Bun Foo are shown folding laundry. A history teacher told Scanlan that he was unhappy that the kids were mangling their Cantonese dialogue.

Scanlan was disappointed. Was this another example of grownups being behind the curve in comedy? "The kids seemed to get what we were doing loud and clear," he said. He'd told some of the cast members how he dealt with getting "brutally teased" for being gay as a kid in Maryland. "I would go home and imitate the imitation of me in the mirror—'Hi, my name is Dick Sssscanlan and I'm sooooo excited!'—and I would think, That can't be the way I'm behaving, because I can imitate that and it doesn't feel like me."

A few days after the announcement went out, a group of students approached the faculty with proposed revisions. All references to China and prostitution would be dropped, and



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Ching Ho and Bun Foo—renamed Brian and Charles—would be kidnapers from an unnamed land. Scanlan approved the changes and came up with some benign new lyrics: instead of “I won’t stand by while critics praise ya/You’re getting shipped to Southeast Asia,” Mrs. Meers would now sing, “Bye-bye to dreams of critics cheering / Hello to someone well worth fearing.”

Amid the uproar, the retrofitted “Millie” opened to a packed house. The two Asian girls cast as Brian and Charles got big laughs, as did the budding Carol Burnett type who played Mrs. Meers. At intermission, Jenny Mollet, a junior at LaGuardia (she appeared in “The Color Purple” on Broadway), said, “I’m really happy they put it back on.” But, of the racial material, she added, “Now that we’re in the twenty-first century, we should be more careful about these things.” Afterward, Scanlan, who had watched from the sixth row, stood in the lobby giving proud hugs to the cast. “It’s a great lesson to learn at this age, that you can stand up to a no,” he said. “I didn’t learn it until I was thirty-two.”

—Michael Schulman

HOT ENOUGH FOR YOU? WING NUTS



Matt Reynolds, a filmmaker, grew up east of Buffalo, New York, in what he calls the Wing Belt. Several years ago, he recruited six iron-tongued glutons and a camera crew and led them on a quest to identify the best Buffalo wing

in the region. They visited seventy-two establishments in sixteen days, during which time the group ate one non-wing meal. (It was steak.) “The Great Chicken Wing Hunt,” Reynolds’s documentary about the trip, came out last month, in time for the Super Bowl, the wing world’s Christmas. On game day, according to the National Chicken Council, Americans ate seventy thousand tons of wings.

Some history: Teressa Bellissimo invented the dish at the Anchor Bar, her family’s restaurant in Buffalo, in 1964. Before then, many butchers treated wings like gizzards—fit only for soups and sauces. “Imagine if you could go back to sixteenth-century Naples and talk to the people who invented pizza,” Reynolds said. “With the wing, we actually could.”

New York City barely figures in Reynolds’s film. To compensate, he recently called in some wing fans, and convened a less great Manhattan Wing Hunt: three stops in one evening. As usual, Reynolds appointed himself leader and his wife, Lucie, scorekeeper.

Their first stop was Down the Hatch, a bar on West Fourth Street, which serves food made by Atomic Wings. Atomic’s founder, Adam Lippin, claims to be the man who brought wings to Manhattan, in 1989. “I was working in real estate, and every Friday night I’d take a Greyhound to Buffalo and apprentice at Anchor Bar,” Lippin said. “Then I discovered yoga, and I started teaching at Jivamukti, which has a pretty intense vegan philosophy. For a long time, I led this double life, not telling my yoga students that I sold animal flesh for a living.” Eventually, the wings won out. “We have vegetarian options at four of our locations,” Lippin said. He put three red plastic baskets lined with waxed paper in front of the judges: a dozen me-

dium, a dozen hot, and a dozen “suicidal.”

“My rule is not to eat anything called ‘suicidal,’ because I do not want to die,” Lucie said. She passed out scorecards, on which judges rated the wings according to nine criteria, including appearance, aroma, sauce quantity, and sauce heat.

“I’m not getting enough textural contrast,” Ryan Hohman, from Columbus, Ohio, said. “What you’re looking for is crispy skin and tender, juicy meat. This is sort of a soggy mess.”

A Buffalo wing, according to the rules of the Hunt, must be fried but not breaded, and must be slathered in a sauce made with butter (not margarine!), vinegar, and chili peppers. Add spices to taste, or not; serve with blue cheese, celery, wet wipes, and beer. Mudville 9, a restaurant in Tribeca, served “novelty wings”—jerk, honey mustard, Thai peanut. “Enjoy these if you want, guys, but we’re not scoring them,” Reynolds said.

While they waited for traditional wings, Peri Cohen, the only female judge besides Lucie, described a first date. “I was rummaging in my purse, under the table, and I felt something mysterious—lipstick or something—so I pulled it out.” And? “Stray chicken bone.”

Hohman, who ate two thousand and eleven wings in 2011, said, “When I finished my last wing of the year, I slept with the bone under my pillow.”

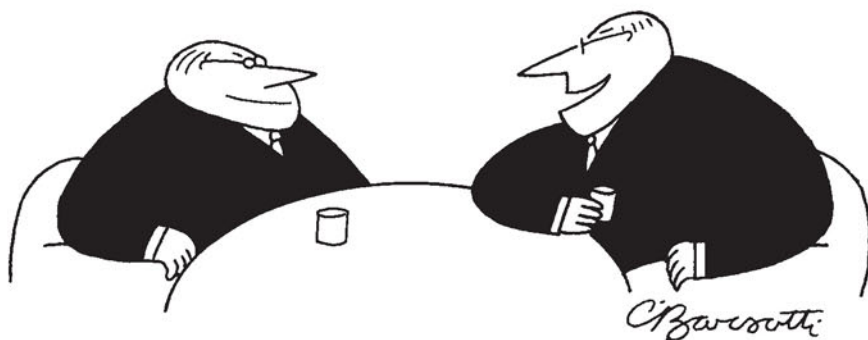
The traditional wings arrived. Clint Weiler, a media consultant from Pennsylvania, said, “Sometimes hot is just hot. This has flavor.”

The judges hailed cabs to Croxley Alehouse, a bar on Avenue B. The flavors on offer were medium, hot, and Cry Like a Baby, doused in a bright-red sauce studded with haba­ñero seeds. The air above the table grew piquant; the judges blinked rapidly. Weiler ate one of the extra-hot and turned scarlet. “That is just fucking painful,” he said. Cohen took a nibble and collapsed forward, her head on her forearms.

“Would you like some milk?” the manager said.

The judges voted, and Lucie announced the final tally: Mudville 9 by a mile. “I do think Mudville deserves the title,” Reynolds said. “But I still wonder if there’s a better place somewhere in the city. I’ve heard good things about Wogies.”

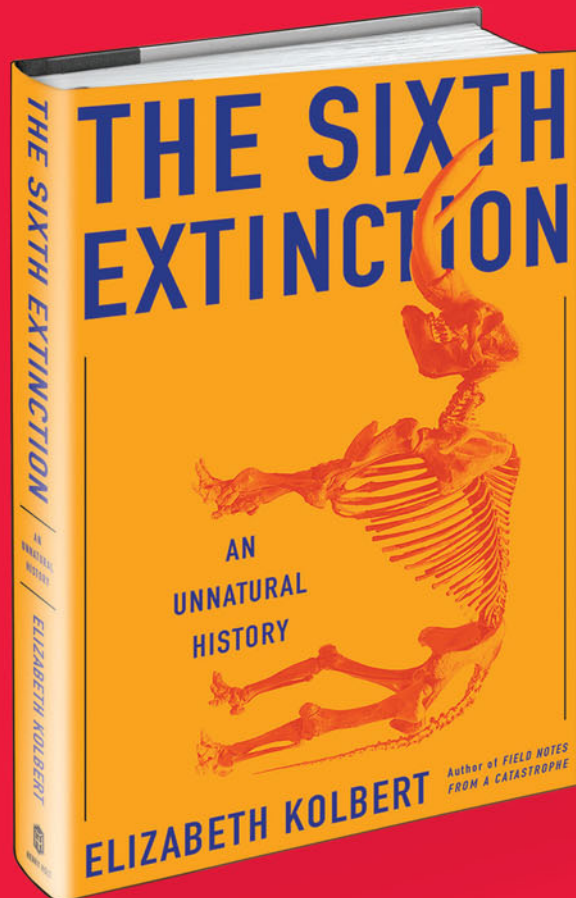
—Andrew Marantz



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THE FINANCIAL PAGE TWILIGHT OF THE BRANDS

Twelve months ago, Lululemon Athletica was one of the hottest brands in the world. Sales of its high-priced yoga gear were exploding; the company was expanding into new markets; experts were in awe of its “cultlike following.” As one observer put it, “They’re more than apparel. They’re a life style.” But then customers started complaining about pilling fabrics, bleeding dyes, and, most memorably, yoga pants so thin that they effectively became transparent when you bent over. Lululemon’s founder made things worse by suggesting that some women were too fat to wear the company’s clothes. And that was the end of Lululemon’s charmed existence: the founder stepped down from his management role, and, a few weeks ago, the company said that it had seen sales “decelerate meaningfully.”

It’s a truism of business-book thinking that a company’s brand is its “most important asset,” more valuable than technology or patents or manufacturing prowess. But brands have never been more fragile. The reason is simple: consumers are supremely well informed and far more likely to investigate the real value of products than to rely on logos. “Absolute Value,” a new book by Itamar Simonson, a marketing professor at Stanford, and Emanuel Rosen, a former software executive, shows that, historically, the rise of brands was a response to an information-poor environment. When consumers had to rely on advertisements and their past experience with a company, brands served as proxies for quality; if a car was made by G.M., or a ketchup by Heinz, you assumed that it was pretty good. It was hard to figure out if a new product from an unfamiliar company was reliable or not, so brand loyalty was a way of reducing risk. As recently as the nineteen-eighties, nearly four-fifths of American car buyers stayed loyal to a brand.

Today, consumers can read reams of research about whatever they want to buy. This started back with *Consumer Reports*, which did objective studies of products, and with J. D. Power’s quality rankings, which revealed what ordinary customers thought of the cars they’d bought. But what’s really weakened the power of brands is the Internet, which has given ordinary consumers easy access to expert reviews, user reviews, and detailed product data, in an array of categories. A recent PricewaterhouseCoopers study found that eighty per cent of consumers look at online reviews before making major purchases, and a host of studies have logged the strong influence those reviews have on the decisions people make. The rise of social media has accelerated the trend to an astonishing degree: a dud

product can become a laughingstock in a matter of hours. In the old days, you might buy a Sony television set because you’d owned one before, or because you trusted the brand. Today, such considerations matter much less than reviews on Amazon and Engadget and CNET. As Simonson told me, “each product now has to prove itself on its own.”

It’s been argued that the welter of information will actually make brands more valuable. As the influential consultancy Interbrand puts it, “In a world where consumers are often-times overwhelmed with information, the role a brand plays in people’s lives has become all the more important.” But information overload is largely a myth. “Most consumers learn very quickly how to get a great deal of information efficiently and effectively,” Simonson says. “Most of us figure out how to find what we’re looking for without spending huge amounts of time online.” And this has made customer loyalty pretty much a thing of the past. Only twenty-five per cent of American respondents in a recent Ernst & Young study said that brand loyalty affected how they shopped.

For established brands, this is a nightmare. You can never coast on past performance—the percentage of brand-loyal car buyers has plummeted in the past twenty years—and the price premium that a recognized brand can charge has shrunk. If you’re making a better product, you can still charge more, but, if your product is much like that of your competitors, your price needs to be similar, too. That’s the clearest indication that the economic value of brands—traditionally assessed by the premium a company could charge—is waning. This isn’t true across the board: brands retain value where the brand association is integral to the experience of a product (Coca-Cola, say), or where they confer

status, as with luxury goods. But even here the information deluge is transformative; luxury travel, for instance, has been profoundly affected by sites like TripAdvisor.

For consumers this is ideal: they’re making better choices, and heightened competition has raised quality and held down prices. And they’re not the only beneficiaries; upstarts now find it easier to compete with the big boys. If you build a better mousetrap, people will soon know about it. A decade ago, personal-computer companies like Asus and Acer had almost no brand identity outside Taiwan. Now they are major players. Roku, a maker of streaming entertainment devices, has thrived even though its products have to compete with similar ones made by Apple (which is usually cited as the world’s most valuable brand). And Hyundai has gone from being a joke to selling four million cars a year. For much of the twentieth century, consumer markets were stable. Today, they are tumultuous, and you’re only as good as your last product. For brands like Lululemon, there’s only one consolation: make something really great and your past sins will be forgotten.

—James Surowiecki



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HOLDER V. ROBERTS

The Attorney General makes voting rights the test case of his tenure.

BY JEFFREY TOOBIN



Holder's gamble: he's pressing his claims under a largely untested legal theory.

Eric Holder's office is a civil-rights shrine. At the Department of Justice building, in Washington, he conducts meetings in a vast conference room, where he sits beneath a portrait of Robert F. Kennedy, one of his predecessors as Attorney General, who used the sprawling space as his office. According to Justice Department lore, Kennedy placed his desk in this room because J. Edgar Hoover presided in a similarly sized chamber on the other side of the fifth floor. Holder put his desk in a modest room in the corner of the building, where the place of honor belongs to a portrait of Nicholas deB. Katzenbach, who was Attorney General during the Johnson Administration. Katzenbach played a leading

role in the integration of the University of Alabama, where one of the first African-American students was a woman named Vivian Malone. Holder later married Sharon Malone, Vivian's younger sister.

In five years as the nation's top law-enforcement officer, Holder has engaged in few of the morally clear-cut struggles that helped define the Kennedy and Katzenbach eras; and he hasn't enjoyed the victories that his predecessors could claim. He failed in his effort to bring the alleged masterminds of the 9/11 attacks from Guantánamo to New York for criminal trials. None of the principal figures in the financial collapse of 2008 have been prosecuted, much less convicted. But Holder has presided

over an unprecedented series of prosecutions of alleged government leakers. These investigations included the seizure of the phone records of journalists, a practice he has agreed to reconsider. He has also engaged in a series of debilitating conflicts with Republicans in the House of Representatives, which culminated in a vote finding him in contempt of Congress, a first for an Attorney General.

Then, last June, in *Shelby County v. Holder*, the Supreme Court declared a central part of the 1965 Voting Rights Act unconstitutional. Several states under Republican control immediately passed laws tightening the eligibility to vote, most notably by requiring voters to produce photo identification at the polls. Holder called these laws contemporary versions of poll taxes, designed, after Reconstruction, to disenfranchise African-Americans and immigrants. In August and September, the Justice Department sued Texas and North Carolina, alleging that their new limitations on the franchise violate one of the remaining provisions of the Voting Rights Act. Last month, Holder asked Pamela Karlan, a professor at Stanford Law School and one of the leading voting-rights experts in the country, to direct the office that brought the lawsuits. Holder is finally on the offensive—with a case that is close to his heart.

Holder is wielding his unilateral power to bring cases in the name of the United States, but he is pressing his claims under a largely untested and controversial legal theory, and the cases may wind up before a Supreme Court that is very different from the one that delivered so many civil-rights victories in the nineteen-sixties. Holder told me that he will leave office sometime this year. The question is whether he will leave with a triumph or enable his adversaries to limit and restrict the laws that mean the most to him.

Holder is sometimes described as a career prosecutor, but he was a manager far longer than he was a trial lawyer; as such, he speaks with a bureaucrat's caution rather than a litigator's panache. Seated beneath the R.F.K. portrait, he expressed dismay that he had to deploy the Voting Rights Act nearly five decades after its original



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passage. "It's disheartening to think that this is an issue that I have to devote significant amounts of time to, that we are filing lawsuits in the way that we are," Holder told me in December. "We had a series of fifty-year anniversaries this year—all the great things that happened in 1963, among them being my sister-in-law's integration of the University of Alabama." On June 11th of that year, in one of the signature moments of the civil-rights movement, Katzenbach, then the Deputy Attorney General, and a team of federal marshals confronted Governor George Wallace at the doorway of the university's Foster Auditorium. In spite of a court order demanding the admission of Vivian Malone and another African-American student, James Hood, Wallace prevented them from entering and registering. Later that day, President Kennedy placed the Alabama National Guard under federal control and directed it to escort Malone and Hood to the campus. Vivian Malone Jones graduated from the University of Alabama in 1965, and went on to pursue a long career in the federal government. She died in 2005, at the age of sixty-three. Katzenbach died in 2012, at ninety.

"It's bothersome," Holder went on. "But people should understand that there's steel here, and I am resolved to oppose any attempts to try to roll back the clock in that way, to try to make it more difficult for people to exercise the most fundamental American right, which is the right to vote."

Born in the Bronx sixty-three years ago, to parents whose families came from Barbados, Holder went to Stuyvesant High School and Columbia College, and graduated from Columbia Law School in 1976. He immediately joined the Justice Department, where he spent the next twelve years as a prosecutor in the public-integrity section. (In the nineteen-eighties, he was part of the team that prosecuted the Abscam case, the inspiration for "American Hustle.") In 1988, Ronald Reagan appointed him to be a judge on the Superior Court of Washington, D.C., and five years later Bill Clinton tapped him to be the United States Attorney for D.C., where he focussed on street crime. In 1997, Clinton promoted him to Deputy Attorney General, where he

served under Janet Reno, and ran the day-to-day operations of the Justice Department until 2001. Holder spent the George W. Bush years in private practice, at the law firm of Covington & Burling, and represented large corporations such as U.B.S., Chiquita Brands International, and the National Football League in the investigation into dog-fighting charges against the quarterback Michael Vick. When President Obama appointed him Attorney General, in 2009, he became the first African-American to hold the office. In the post-9/11 era, he found that national security took up much of his time.

Shelby County v. Holder concerned the two most important provisions of the Voting Rights Act, Sections 4 and 5. Section 4 created a formula, initially based on the results of the 1964 election, for identifying states and counties that had a history of discrimination against African-Americans. Through various reauthorizations of the law, discrimination against Latinos came to be covered as well, but the areas under supervision remained roughly the same—most of nine states, largely in the South, including the Alabama county that filed the case.

Section 5 decreed that the jurisdictions covered by Section 4 had to obtain permission before making any changes related to voting—a process that came to be called "preclearance." Through preclearance, the covered districts had the burden of proving to the Justice Department (or to a federal court) that any changes they wanted to make—in everything from drawing legislative districts to determining the sites of polling places—would protect the rights of minority voters.

Since 1965, Congress has reauthorized the Voting Rights Act five times. In the course of the most recent process, in 2006, the House and the Senate held twenty-one hearings, questioned dozens of witnesses, and amassed a record of more than fifteen thousand pages. Congress concluded that, unless the law was reauthorized, "racial and language minority citizens will be deprived of the opportunity to exercise their right to vote, or will have their votes diluted, undermining the significant gains made by minorities in the last 40 years." The vote to reauthorize the law was 98–0 in the

Senate and 390–33 in the House, and the bill was signed by President Bush. Shelby County sued anyway, arguing that the formula for coverage was outdated and preclearance was unduly burdensome.

By a vote of five to four, in an opinion by Chief Justice John G. Roberts, Jr., the Court ruled that the preclearance process was now invalid. Roberts wrote that the manner of identifying covered jurisdictions under the Act was "based on decades-old data and eradicated practices." He went on:

But history did not end in 1965. By the time the Act was reauthorized in 2006, there had been 40 more years of it. In assessing the "current need" for a preclearance system that treats States differently from one another today, that history cannot be ignored. During that time, largely because of the Voting Rights Act, voting tests were abolished, disparities in voter registration and turnout due to race were erased, and African-Americans attained political office in record numbers.

The Constitution, Roberts said, "is not designed to punish for the past; its purpose is to ensure a better future." Considering these changed circumstances, Roberts declared that Section 4, which defined the covered jurisdictions, was unconstitutional. He did not address Section 5 and the constitutionality of preclearance, but the issue was effectively moot. Because the law could no longer identify which states and counties were covered, Sections 4 and 5—the heart of the Act—were now void.

Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, joined by the three other Democratic appointees to the Court, responded with a long and indignant dissenting opinion. "In the Court's view, the very success of Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act demands its dormancy," she wrote. The Court should have respected the nearly unanimous judgment of Congress that the law would protect the electoral gains of minorities and prevent backsliding. Moreover, "the covered jurisdictions have a unique history of problems with racial discrimination in voting. Consideration of this long history, still in living memory, was altogether appropriate." Ginsburg went on, "The Court criticizes Congress for failing to recognize that 'history did not end in 1965.' But the Court ignores that 'what's past is prologue.'"

Holder told me that he agreed with

Ginsburg's opinion. He said that Roberts's decision "viewed the world as the Justices would like it to be but not the world as it is. I think Justice Ginsburg had it best when she talked about the fact that you have an umbrella in a rainstorm and that keeps you dry. The fact that you're dry doesn't mean there's not a rainstorm. You take the umbrella down, and you get wet. And, if people didn't believe that, you only have to see what the states did after Shelby County."

Few states have undergone as profound a political transformation as North Carolina has in recent years. In the 2010 midterm elections, the North Carolina Senate and its House of Representatives went from Democratic to Republican control. At the time, the governor was Beverly Perdue, a Democrat, so neither party dominated. But Pat McCrory, a Republican, won the governorship in 2012, and the G.O.P. expanded its hold on both houses, to more than sixty per cent of the seats. At that point, the Republicans went on a legislative tear, ending benefits for the long-term unemployed, declining the expansion of Medicaid offered by the Affordable Care Act, and cutting taxes and government spending, especially for education. The Republican-led North Carolina legislature had passed a voter-identification bill when Perdue was governor, but she vetoed it, and the issue lay mostly dormant in the early months of full Republican control.

That all changed when the Supreme Court issued its Shelby County decision. Under the Voting Rights Act, forty of the hundred counties in North Carolina were covered jurisdictions, which meant that any statewide modifications in its voting law had been subject to preclearance. Now the state had the freedom to act without interference from Washington. Within a month of the decision, State Senator Bob Rucho expanded the voting-reform law from six parts in fourteen pages to sixty parts in fifty-seven pages. Rucho, a senior Republican, earned notoriety last year, when, after the Supreme Court's decision upholding the Affordable Care Act, he tweeted, "Justice Roberts's pen & Obamacare has done more dam-

age to the USA than the swords of the Nazis, Soviets & terrorists combined." Among the provisions in Rucho's proposed law were the elimination of same-day registration and a week of early voting; the end of pre-registration for sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds; the end of straight party-ticket voting; the repeal of public-finance provisions for elections; an increase in maximum campaign contributions; and a strict voter-I.D. requirement that excluded student and public-employee identification cards as acceptable forms of proof.

In a hearing of the Rules Committee on July 23rd, State Senator Josh Stein, a Democrat, questioned Rucho about his bill's provisions. He pointed out that in the past six state elections approximately thirty million votes had been cast in North Carolina elections, but there had been reports of only two incidents of in-person fraud at the polls. Stein asked, "What evidence of in-person voter fraud is compelling you to impose the I.D. requirement?"

"Senator Stein, you can't live in this society without identification," Rucho said. "No matter whether you go into buildings, whether you cash checks, whether you pay for your groceries with checks, whether you want to get on an airplane. Whatever it is, everyone has a form of voter I.D. . . . We are providing integrity and honesty in the

system, and what that means is that confidence level will be instilled in the electoral process and therefore back in government, and that's something we should all be striving for." The proposed law, known as House Bill 589, passed both houses of the legislature, after a party-line vote, and on August 12th Governor McCrory signed it. In all, according to Rick Hasen, a prominent scholar at the University of California at Irvine and the proprietor of a leading election-law blog, North Carolina had passed "the most sweeping anti-voter law in at least decades."

Requiring an I.D., as a way of combatting voter fraud, has become the signature controversy in the current political and legal conflict. In a speech to the N.A.A.C.P. in 2012, Holder inveighed against the practice. "Many of those without I.D.s would have to travel great distances to get them—and some would struggle to pay for the documents they might need to obtain them," he said. "We call those poll taxes." In a conversation with Holder, I brought up Rucho's point: Demands for photo identification are now ubiquitous, so why should there be an exception where voting is concerned? (Polls show that requiring a photo I.D. is popular among voters of all parties.)

"Photo I.D.s are not per se bad," Holder told me. "It's a question of what you have to do to get one. If you look



"Why so downward facing, dog?"

at Texas, if you have a photo I.D. that shows you are able to carry a concealed weapon, that's O.K. If you have a photo I.D. that says you are a student at the University of Texas, that is not O.K. Now, what's the difference? Both are government-issued. It tells me that there is certainly a political motive there." (Like North Carolina, Texas tightened voting requirements after the Shelby County decision.) Holder noted that legislators in North Carolina imposed the photo-I.D. requirement even though a study by the state's Board of Elections showed that African-Americans, who make up twenty-two per cent of the population, account for thirty-four per cent of registered voters lacking D.M.V.-issued identification. "And, nevertheless, even though you've got an official government agency telling you that this is what the problem is going to be, they go ahead," he said.

In our conversations, Holder repeatedly described voter fraud as "nonexistent." As Senator Stein noted, in North Carolina, in-person fraudulent voting is rarely detected. Still, according to Michael Carvin, a Washington lawyer who frequently represents Republicans in voting controversies, "no one finds voter fraud because most of the time no one ever looks. But every time there is a recount, and people actually check to see who voted, we inevitably find hundreds of illegally cast ballots. That's a legitimate concern for the law to address." As with many issues relating to voting, the underlying facts are unclear.

In any case, Holder saw the new laws in North Carolina and Texas as a refutation of the Court's assertion that the Voting Rights Act was obsolete. "I think there's a more fundamental question, and that's whether or not there are still actions that are racially based or that have a racial impact," Holder told me. "In 2013, there is still a factual basis for us to conclude that these attempts at photo-identification laws to combat nonexistent voter fraud are racially based, or, certainly, have a racial impact. One thing that's different from 1965 is we're not just talking about

African-Americans—we're talking about Latinos."

The question remained what Holder (or the Department of Justice) could do about the laws in North Carolina and Texas. Had Sections 4 and 5 of the Voting Rights Act still been in effect, the laws could not have gone into operation without the approval of the Justice Department. Now Holder



will have to convince a judge that these photo-I.D. laws are unconstitutional. In 2008, the Supreme Court, in a decision written by John Paul Stevens, upheld the photo-I.D. law in Indiana. "Holder's argument is that photo I.D. is unconstitutional because people have to drive to

pick up a government-issued I.D. that is free," Carvin said. "But they have to drive to the polling place to vote, too. Is that unconstitutional as well? His argument appears to be that the Constitution requires states to have vote-by-mail with free stamps, or someone has to come to your house to let you vote."

To try to undo the North Carolina and Texas laws, Holder turned to the last remaining tool available to him—Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act. Section 2 has a distinctive history. In 1980, the Supreme Court decided a case called *City of Mobile v. Bolden*, which considerably narrowed the previous definition of a constitutional violation of voting rights. According to that ruling, civil-rights plaintiffs could win these cases only if they proved that states or local communities intentionally violated the rights of minority voters. As Heather Gerken, a professor at Yale Law School, points out, "Back in the early days of the civil-rights movement, you really did have local officials saying they didn't want African-Americans to vote. But that hasn't been true for a long time, so it's become very hard—maybe even impossible—to prove bad intent with smoking-gun evidence. All you can ever prove is discriminatory effects or results." In response to *Mobile v. Bolden*, when the Voting Rights Act came up for renewal in 1982 the civil-

rights community rallied in favor of a major change in Section 2. After a long debate, and a compromise engineered by Senators Ted Kennedy and Bob Dole, the revised Section 2 essentially overruled the *Mobile v. Bolden* decision and imposed an "effects" standard. In other words, the new version prohibited any voting practice that "results in a denial or abridgment" of the right to vote on account of race, regardless of the intent of the local authorities.

"Section 2 had a dramatic and immediate impact," Samuel Issacharoff, a professor at New York University School of Law, told me. "Lots of cities and towns in the South and elsewhere created at-large voting systems, instead of district representation, so that blacks were always outnumbered and could never win. Civil-rights groups, as well as the government, were allowed to sue under the new Section 2, and they went around the country filing cases that effectively wiped out those systems. At-large city councils more or less disappeared. The law was a big success."

In the lawsuits filed against Texas, on August 22nd, and North Carolina, on September 30th, the Justice Department asserted that Section 2 prohibited the states' imposition of the photo-I.D. requirement and other changes contained in the new laws. Until then, Section 2 had mostly been used to overturn districting schemes, not ballot-access rules, but it is at least plausible that requiring a photo I.D. could "result" in a denial or an abridgment of the right to vote.

The problems with the Justice Department's theory begin with the simple question of proof. To make its case, the Department employs largely statistical arguments. Each change in the law, the federal complaint asserts, hurts African-American voters. The complaint states:

African-Americans disproportionately utilized early voting during the November 2008 and November 2012 general elections in North Carolina. African-Americans also disproportionately used the—now eliminated—first seven days of early voting during these elections.

Likewise, African-Americans took greater advantage of same-day voter registration. And, as Holder noted, African-Americans tend to have less access

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to acceptable forms of photo identification than white citizens do. All of this, the Justice Department asserts, amounts to a violation of Section 2.

The courts may be skeptical of these claims, which are largely based on assumptions of what will happen when the laws take full effect. "Republicans are more likely to win low-turnout elections. Democrats are more likely to win high-turnout elections—everyone knows that at this point," Issacharoff said. "And the laws in Texas and North Carolina are certainly aimed at reducing turnout. But if they reduce turnout for everyone, not just African-Americans, it's not clear whether that violates the Voting Rights Act." The evidence regarding photo I.D.s appears ambiguous as well. "No one has good numbers yet on photo I.D.," Heather Gerken said. "It may be that the impact is not as great as the general public thinks." According to Michael Carvin, the Republican lawyer, Holder's theory will not stand up. "North Carolina went from seventeen to ten days of early voting, and he says that's against the law," Carvin told me. "New York has zero days of early voting, and no one says their system violates the Voting Rights Act. The point is that blacks in North Carolina have exactly the same chance to vote as whites."

Supporters of North Carolina's H.B. 589 insist that the courts will find no discriminatory intent or effect of the law in practice. "It is not intended to limit voting. The intent was to finally get a little bit of security in voting," said Susan Myrick, the elections-policy analyst at the Civitas Institute, a conservative public-policy group that developed ideas adopted by the new Republican majority in North Carolina. Myrick went on, "If you look at what happened in Georgia, which is similar demographically to North Carolina, after they added a photo-I.D. requirement you see that there was no discriminatory effect." (As in North Carolina, the precise impact of the photo-I.D. requirement in Georgia remains unclear.)

The political impact of photo-I.D. requirements may be more complex than it first appears. In North Carolina, as in other states where Republicans have been pushing photo-I.D. and

similar laws, Democrats have used the issue to rally their base, especially African-Americans, which may have increased their numbers at the polls. And it is true that in the 2012 election, before H.B. 589 went into effect, African-Americans turned out at a higher rate than whites. And so, paradoxically, these anti-fraud laws may wind up increasing the voting power of African-Americans. In any case, it is far from clear that the Justice Department will be able to prove to the satisfaction of a federal court that the North Carolina reforms "result" in discrimination against African-Americans.

There is another ominous possibility for Holder's voting-rights crusade. Instead of losing in federal district court, he may win. If the Department of Justice prevails in its trials against North Carolina and Texas, the case almost certainly will be appealed to the Supreme Court, where Holder's agenda may truly be in peril.

Chief Justice Roberts has never publicly articulated his ultimate goals for civil-rights laws, but many lawyers who follow the Court—especially Roberts's ideological foes—have definite ideas about the direction in which he wants to take the law. They believe that Roberts wants to get rid of all "effects" tests—in affirmative action, in school integration, and in voting rights. Pamela Karlan, an outspoken liberal, has been a relentless critic of the current Supreme Court. She wrote recently, "The Roberts Court's skepticism of the political branches and federal power maps disturbingly onto the contemporary conservative agenda."

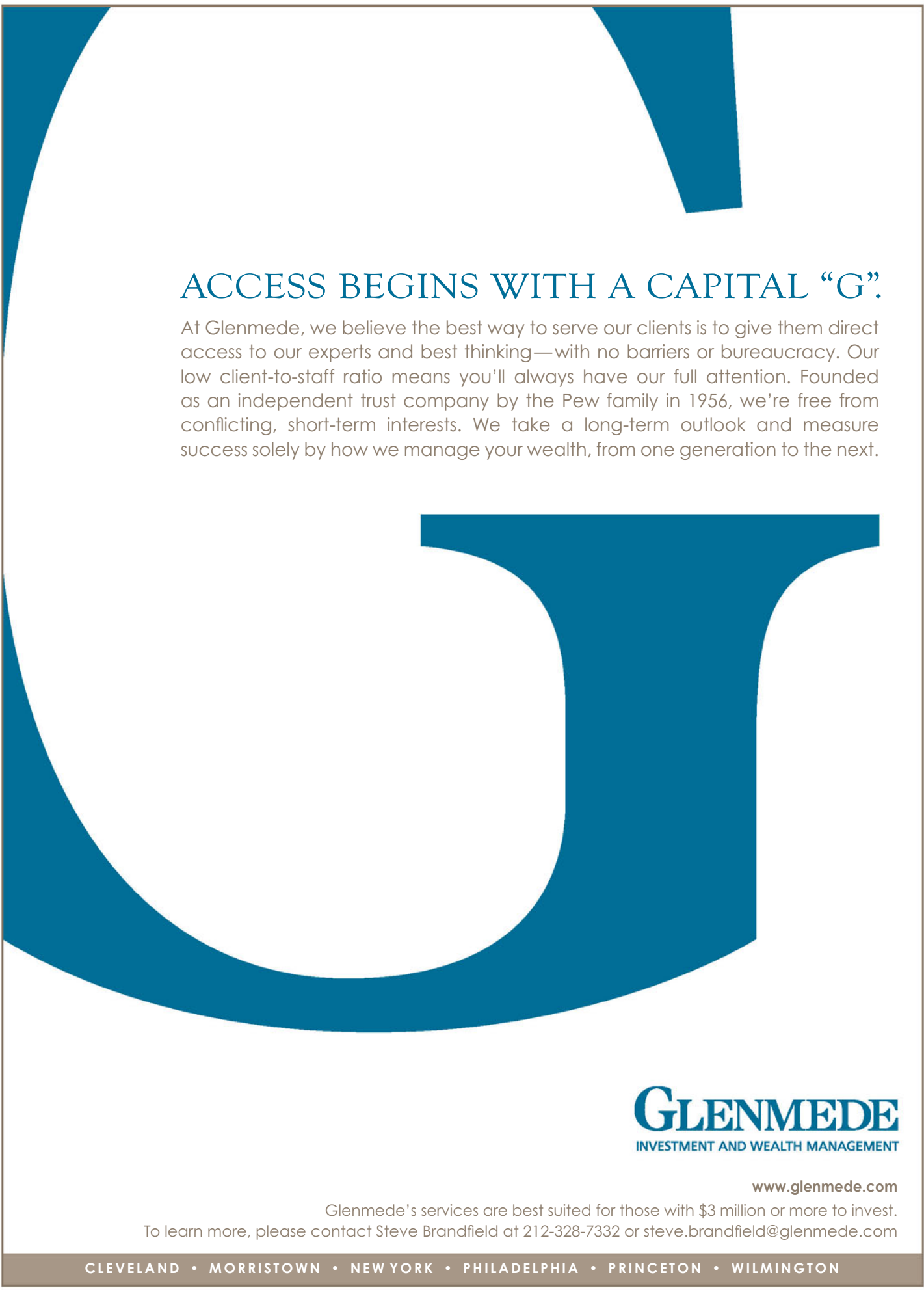
In one of Roberts's early civil-rights opinions as Chief Justice, a 2007 case in which he struck down the school-integration program in Seattle, he used a formulation that sums up his approach: "The way to stop discrimination on the basis of race is to stop discriminating on the basis of race." Roberts appears to believe in what's often called a "color-blind Constitution." In rough terms, he believes that the Constitution prohibits the consideration of race as a factor—in, say, admission to college or being hired for a government job. What others call affirmative action Roberts calls a form of discrimination.

That attitude extends to voting

rights. In a 2006 case concerning the boundaries of legislative districts in Texas, Roberts wrote a separate opinion, which stated, in unusually direct terms, that he found any consideration of race by government distasteful. "It is a sordid business, this divvying us up by race," he wrote. Roberts has made it clear that he feels that intentional discrimination should be illegal, but he has expressed reservations about any other kind of government redress based on statistics or history. "There is no question that the conservatives on the Supreme Court are on the hunt for the effects test," Heather Gerken said. "They are concerned about laws that purport to address the current effects of past discrimination. They think of a lot of these laws as racial entitlements."

Holder's calculation is a familiar one for civil-rights advocates in a conservative era: accept a less than desirable status quo or risk a long-term setback from the Supreme Court, which might send Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act to join Sections 4 and 5 in oblivion. "They are tough cases, the ones that we are about to try," Holder told me. "I expect that we'll win these cases in Texas and North Carolina. But it's made more difficult by the way in which the Court has eviscerated the Voting Rights Act." Still, he's proceeding. "Getting back to Justice Ginsburg, she talked about what we faced in 1965 being kind of the first-generation barriers," Holder said. "And I think what we're dealing with now, as she said, are kind of second-generation barriers to voting rights. It's not a question of poll taxes and trying to figure out how many bubbles there are in a bar of soap." (Before the Voting Rights Act, Southern registrars were known to demand that African-Americans answer absurd questions.) "We're dealing with sophisticated requirements for photo I.D. to combat a nonexistent voter fraud. It's different, but there are nevertheless barriers to voting that can be dealt with under the Voting Rights Act as it now exists."

In January, a group of members of Congress introduced a series of amendments to the Voting Rights Act, in an effort to resurrect, in somewhat different form, the provisions the Court rejected. In the same vein, a Presidential



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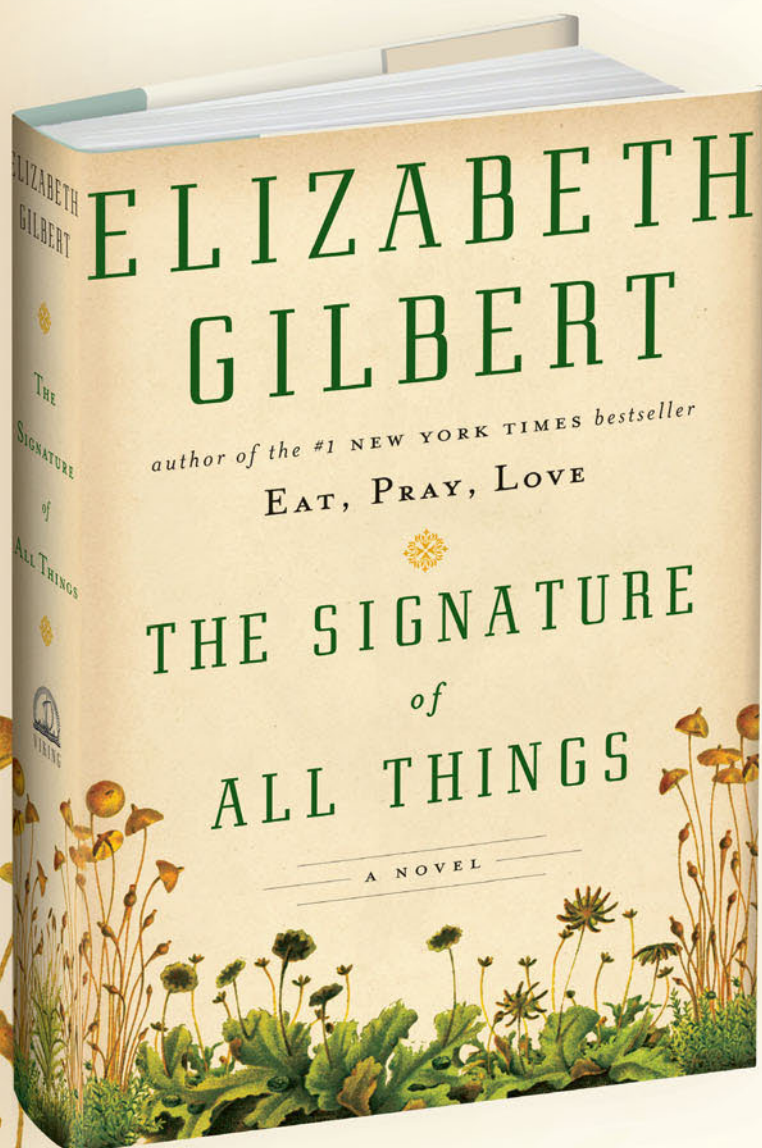
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commission proposed a series of reforms designed to modernize and streamline the process of registering to vote and casting ballots. According to the bipartisan proposal, the covered jurisdictions would no longer be determined by the 1964 election results but, rather, by a pattern of more recent election-law violations. Any jurisdiction, in any part of the country, with three violations in fifteen years would be subject to Justice Department preclearance. Examples of such violations might range from racially biased redistricting to moving polling places out of minority neighborhoods. "It makes the Voting Rights Act of national application, not just targeted at some parts of the country," James Sensenbrenner, a Wisconsin Republican who is the principal sponsor of the amendment in the House, told me. In today's polarized political environment, the bill's chances of passage in either the House or the Senate, let alone both, look remote. As Sensenbrenner acknowledges, few Republicans in the House have shown enthusiasm for the bill, and Holder's lawsuits further poisoned the well with them. "Republicans already think they are picked on by Holder," Sensenbrenner told me. "And now, as a result of these lawsuits, we can pretty much write off getting any Republican votes in North Carolina or Texas." Republican leaders in the House have made no promises about when, or if, they will allow the bill to come up for a vote. In the Senate, the principal sponsor is Patrick Leahy, a Democrat who chairs the Judiciary Committee; he has yet to entice a single Republican senator to join him as a co-sponsor, which suggests a steep climb to reach a filibuster-proof sixty votes. "I'm watching the clock and I'm getting a little worried," Leahy told me.

So Holder is pressing forward under the current iteration of the Voting Rights Act, with all its limitations. His recent personnel choices reflect his priorities. In addition to Karlan, whose post does not require Senate confirmation, President Obama nominated Debo Adegbile to be Assistant Attorney General in charge of the civil-rights division, and thus Karlan's boss. Adegbile, formerly a prominent litigator for the N.A.A.C.P. Legal Defense Fund (which was founded and led by Thur-



"Aw, man, that's never coming out."

• •

good Marshall), is also an experienced voting-rights litigator. He faces considerable Republican opposition in the Senate, but, thanks to the invocation of the "nuclear option" by Senate Democrats, which limits filibusters, he will probably be confirmed soon. Holder told me that he's planning to remain Attorney General "well into" 2014. His lame-duck status works as a kind of liberation for him. "Eric's indignation and his zeal is one hundred per cent genuine on this issue," Reid Weingarten, a prominent Washington lawyer who worked with Holder at the Justice Department in the seventies and eighties and remains a close friend, told me. "We did voter-fraud cases in those cases, and he knows what real fraud is. And he knows that what the Republicans are saying about fraud is make-believe. He is happy to fight them on this issue."

Holder recognizes that many see his own appointment as evidence that the civil-rights movement has accomplished its goals and should, as the Supreme Court suggested of the Voting Rights Act, recede into history. "The world certainly has changed," he told me. "The fact that I'm sitting here and talking to you as an African-American Attorney General is an indication that our nation is in a fundamentally different place than it was a hundred and fifty years ago, fifty years ago. But we're not at the place yet where we want to be.

And racial discrimination is still something that is, unfortunately, a part of the American existence, and it rears its head in places that are particularly odious." Five decades ago, the opposition to Kennedy and Katzenbach came largely from within the Democratic Party, notably its Southern wing. "You look at the '64 Civil Rights Act, '65 Voting Rights Act—it's interesting that, but for Republican involvement, there probably would not have been passage of those acts. After that, the Act was reauthorized by overwhelming bipartisan majorities, and, again, signed by Republican Presidents. This is different. We're in a different environment now."

Holder can't control today's conservative environment, but he can choose how he will end his tenure as Attorney General. "This comes down, in some ways, to a fundamental question of who we are—who we are as a people," he said. "The history of this nation has always been to try to expand the franchise. Whether it's freed slaves, women, young people, we've always found ways to make it easier to vote. We've always found ways in which we've made the voting process more inclusive. What these folks are intending to do, or certainly the impact of what they're going to do, is to turn their backs on that history. To turn our backs on that history is inconsistent with who we say we are as a nation." ♦

LETTER FROM ISTANBUL

OTTOMANIA

A hit TV show reimagines Turkey's imperial past.

BY ELIF BATUMAN

On the way to the Sultan's harem, I saw two beautiful slave girls walking across a parking lot clutching their tiaras and squinting unhappily into the sun. It was a hot August day in Istanbul, with an intermittent gusting wind. An attendant ushered me into a warren of royal chambers. I crossed the marble flagstones of a capacious Turkish bath,

mother, until her death, toward the end of Season 2.

"Magnificent Century," a soap opera set in the court of Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent, has been breaking Turkish television records since its premiere, in 2011. Every Wednesday, more than a third of prime-time viewers tune in to watch the latest ninety-minute episode.

Ottoman siege of Vienna, though the plot of "Magnificent Century" focusses more on the life of the harem, and the intrigues among Süleyman's wife, concubines, mother, sisters, children, and viziers.

"Magnificent Century" is part of a Turkish trend called Ottomania, manifested in such diverse phenomena as Burger King's Sultan meal combo (a 2006 TV spot featured a Janissary devouring a Whopper with hummus), a proliferation of Ottoman cookbooks, Ottoman-style bathroom consoles, wedding invitations with Ottoman calligraphy, and graduation gowns and flight-attendant uniform designs inspired by caftans and fezzes. In the past ten years, there have been increasingly



On the set of "Magnificent Century," a soap opera that depicts intrigues at the court of Süleyman the Magnificent.

and proceeded down the passageway known as the Golden Road, through which a lucky concubine, having received the purple handkerchief indicative of the Sultan's favor, approaches the privy chamber. On a gilt desk lay an imperial seal and two sticks of wax. An adjacent bedroom, lavishly appointed, had been occupied by the Sultan's

Süleyman, who reigned from 1520 to 1566, is known in Turkey as the Lawmaker, renowned for his innovative legal code, for the opulence of his court, and for expanding the Ottoman Empire from Transylvania to the Persian Gulf. It was Süleyman's Army that defeated the Hungarian forces at the Battle of Mohács and launched the first

elaborate commemorations of the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople, in 1453, along with the construction of new Ottoman-style mosques and the renovation of old Ottoman buildings, some of which have been repurposed as hotels or shopping malls. Last spring, protests were triggered by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's decision

to raze Gezi Park, in central Istanbul, in order to build a shopping mall in the style of an Ottoman barracks. The Gezi protests subsequently escalated into the most widespread civil unrest in Turkey in more than a decade. Five protesters were killed and five thousand detained. Many remain in custody.

On the surface, “Magnificent Century” looks like a quintessential product of the Erdoğan years. Thanks to Erdoğan’s economic policies, Turkey has a thriving television industry, capable of staging elaborate period dramas, and a prosperous family-oriented middle class of observant Muslims eager to watch their own values reflected in a historical imperial setting. And, much as Erdoğan’s foreign policy has promoted relations with former Ottoman lands, the show has conquered large audiences in Balkan, Caucasian, and Arab countries not known for their fond memory of Ottoman rule. Broadcast to more than two hundred million viewers in fifty-two countries, “Magnificent Century” has accomplished one of Erdoğan’s main goals: making a powerful, non-secularist, globally involved version of Turkey seem both plausible and appealing.

And yet Erdoğan is not a fan. In late 2012, at the opening of a new provincial airport, he took a moment to condemn the show’s depiction of Süleyman, as well as its directors and broadcasters, hinting at severe judicial repercussions. Soon afterward, an M.P. from Erdoğan’s party declared that “Magnificent Century” would be discontinued. A bill to protect the Sultan’s memory was submitted to parliament. Turkish Airlines excluded “Magnificent Century” from its in-flight programming. Conservative viewers had already objected to the amount of time Süleyman spent in the harem; to a chalice from which he occasionally drank some unknown, potentially alcoholic beverage; and to the low-cut gowns of the harem women. When “Magnificent Century” first aired, Islamist demonstrators marched to the television-station offices and threw eggs at the building, while a man dressed as Süleyman read out an “imperial edict” denouncing the show.

Things have reached a certain benchmark when one man in a Süleyman suit is issuing edicts against another man in

a Süleyman suit. This benchmark was passed in June, when the actor who plays Süleyman joined the anti-government protests in Gezi Park. Photographs in the papers showed him wearing a Bob Marley T-shirt, with a surgical mask to protect against tear gas. A week later, he was one of ten cultural figures and activists summoned to Ankara for a late-night meeting with Erdoğan. Participants later reported that, when the subject of disproportionate police force was broached, the Prime Minister turned to the actor and said, “As you must know, the Lawmaker Süleyman also had a harsh temper.”

The Ottoman Empire was founded in 1290, by a Turkoman tribal leader called Osman, and survived until the First World War. Encompassing, at one point, territories from Algiers and Athens to Zabid and Nové Zámky, it nonetheless lacked many of the features that we associate with empire. Until the nineteenth century, the economy was based on agriculture, not trade; new territories weren’t mined for raw materials or settled by colonists; and there was no imposed official language. Although the Ottomans saw themselves as Muslim conquerors, they generally granted religious freedom in exchange for higher taxes. The relatively peaceful coexistence of a diverse population under this system of taxed tolerance is sometimes described as the *Pax Ottomana*.

The decline of the Ottoman Empire, which began around the seventeenth century, has been variously ascribed to debt, decentralization, conflicts with Russia, and a run of subpar sultans. In the nineteenth century, a wave of nationalistic revolutions swept Europe and reached the Ottoman provinces in the Balkans. The Ottomans had no use for nationalism. During the First World War, which ushered in the end of multinational empires and the rise of nation-states, they sided with Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Some of their Arab territories, hoping for self-determination, joined the Allies, a “betrayal” that the Ottomans neither understood nor forgave. In 1920, the Treaty of Sèvres, even harsher in its terms than the Treaty of Versailles, dismantled the Ottoman

Empire, handing control of its economy and military to the Allies. The Arabian Peninsula was granted independence, and Britain and France carved up the remaining Arab territories. Greece got Eastern Thrace and Izmir. Eastern Anatolia was divided between an independent Armenia and an autonomous Kurdistan, and the Dardanelles became an international waterway.

Just after these terms had been negotiated, a resistance army rose up against Greece and the Allies, and against the Ottoman holdovers who ran what remained of the state. Its leader was Mustafa Kemal, who had been a front-line commander in the Ottoman victory at the Battle of Gallipoli, and who later became known as Atatürk: Father of the Turks. The War of Independence ended with the expulsion of the Allies and the formation of the Turkish Republic, an outcome perceived in the Muslim world as an Islamic triumph over Western imperialism.

The way was open for Atatürk to fashion himself as a pan-Islamic leader, or a global anti-imperialist. Instead, he set about inventing a radically secular, radically nationalist “Turkish” identity. Though Europeans since the twelfth century had used the Latin name *Turchia* to designate the lands of the Turks, the Turks themselves had no such geographical or political concept. The first official state history, published in 1930 and used as a basis for school textbooks, characterized the Turks as an ancient Central Asian people with a long pre-Islamic history, including the Sumerian and Hittite civilizations. A scant fifty-two of its more than six hundred pages were devoted to the Ottomans, who were described not as the nation’s forebears but as a family of decadent profligates who had sold the Turks to Europe.

Between 1924 and 1926, Atatürk embarked on an aggressive program of secularization, abolishing the caliphate and the dervish orders, closing the shrines of Islamic saints, and banning the fez. The Islamic calendar and Sharia law were discarded, and the country adopted the Gregorian calendar and the Swiss Civil Code. Polygamy was outlawed, and women were allowed to show their hair in public, vote in elections, attend universities, and run

for public office. The capital relocated from the Ottomans' beloved Istanbul to Ankara, a provincial outpost in the middle of the Anatolian steppe. In 1928, the Arabic script was replaced by a modified Latin alphabet, and a state-appointed Language Committee set about purifying the Turkish language, ridding it of Arabic and Persian loanwords—a project roughly analogous to removing Latinate words from English. In 1935, the state published a handbook listing Turkic equivalents for Arabic and Persian vocabulary; everyday words were replaced by obscure variants recorded by folklorists in Anatolia, or borrowed from Tatar or Azeri. Not all these changes caught on, but Ottoman Turkish is a foreign language to modern Turks. Books written before the nineteen-forties have to be translated. Atatürk's famous thirty-six-hour speech about the birth of the republic has been translated at least three times since it was first delivered, in the course of six days in 1927.

The directors of "Magnificent Century," Yağmur and Durul Taylan, are sometimes described as the Turkish Coen brothers. They cc each other on e-mails, answer questions as "we," and share a house in Malibu. Growing up in a secular, middle-class family, the brothers dreamed of working in film. Durul, the younger, stockier, and more restless of the two, began to publish film criticism in 1991, as soon as he graduated from university, with a degree in industrial engineering. He found himself increasingly drawn to the movie industry, and then to the freer territory of television, which was just starting to take off in Turkey. Meanwhile, Yağmur had graduated from medical school. The day his residency, in psychiatry, ended, he quit medicine and went into television production with his brother.

I met them in August at their Istanbul studio, in an industrial suburb not far from the airport. We sat outside, at a table near a loading dock. A caterer in a head scarf brought out three tulip-shaped glasses of tea, a fruit plate, and a pack of Parliaments. No sooner had anyone drunk half a glass of tea than she took all the glasses away and replaced them with full ones.

After the success of their first joint project, a Turkish adaptation of a Japanese game show, the brothers were asked to shoot a pilot for a series resembling "The X-Files." They spent all the money they had made with the game show to go to France and buy their first 16-mm. camera. Everyone hated their adaptation of "The X-Files," which was called "Secret File" and was cancelled after five episodes, in 1998. The brothers found themselves in serious debt. They recouped their losses somewhat with a sitcom called "Charlie," which was "about a chimpanzee." International success came in 2005, with "The Foreign Groom," a comic series about a young baklava heiress from Gaziantep who falls in love with the son of a Greek shipping magnate. The show was an unexpected hit in Greece—a fact the brothers realized only when they went on vacation to a Greek island and their plane was swarmed by photographers.

The brothers had long wanted to do a historical drama, and they heard that the screenwriter Meral Okay had written a script about Süleyman's court. (She died, of lung cancer, during Season 2.) Okay's script centered less on the Sultan than on the charismatic former Christian slaves Roxelana and Ibrahim, whose lives had strangely parallel trajectories. (Because enslaving Muslims was frowned upon, almost all



the slaves in the Ottoman court were born Christians.) In Turkey, Roxelana, whom Süleyman eventually married, is called Hürrem, which means "joyful." Little is known about her early life—she first entered the historical record when she gave birth to a son—but she is believed to have been Alexandra Lisowska, the daughter of a priest in Ruthenia (in present-day Ukraine), and to have been captured by Tatars. Ibrahim, known as Ibrahim of Parga, after

his native town, on the northwestern coast of Greece, was a Slavic-speaking Venetian subject. The son of a poor seaman, he was probably kidnapped as a child by Turkish corsairs. Musically gifted, fluent in Persian, Greek, and Italian, he entered Süleyman's service around 1514, when both men were about twenty. After becoming sultan, Süleyman promoted Ibrahim directly from his personal service to the highest political office in the Ottoman state: Grand Vizier. The two took their meals together, and it was said that they slept with their heads touching.

Roxelana entered Süleyman's household six years after Ibrahim, and soon displaced the Sultan's previous favorite concubine, who was the mother of his firstborn son, Mustafa. From 1521 to 1530, Roxelana bore him five sons and a daughter. Before her, no concubine was known to have borne more than one son. She also broke with custom by staying in Topkapi Palace after her sons were grown—normally, when a son came of age his mother accompanied him to a provincial governorship—and by marrying Süleyman. The idea of a married sultan was so outrageous at the time that Roxelana was reviled as a witch.

One morning in 1536, Ibrahim was found strangled in his bed. The exact reasons for his killing are unknown, but tensions with Roxelana were certainly involved. Her influence also played a role in the fate of Mustafa, who was strangled on his father's orders in 1553. His death left three of Roxelana's sons—Selim, Bayezid, and Cihangir—as the only contenders for the throne. (Roxelana's two other sons had died of natural causes.) Cihangir, a hunchback, perished soon after Mustafa. The bitter rivalry between Bayezid and Selim dragged on for years, culminating in a civil war. Süleyman eventually sided with Selim, forcing Bayezid to flee to Persia, where he and his sons were tracked down and killed. History did not bear out the wisdom of Süleyman's choice: only eight years into his rule, Selim, known as Selim the Drunkard, slipped in the bath and suffered fatal head injuries.

The Taylan brothers said that it was important for them that the script was written by a woman, and that it

depicted the apex of Ottoman glory mostly from the perspective of slave women. They were unprepared for the furor that the show aroused. For a time after Erdoğan's attack, "Magnificent Century" was the top item of national news. "Imagine—you create something, you gain the largest global following in Turkish television history," Yağmur said. "Nearly two hundred million people are watching your show. But in your own country you're living almost in fear of being put in prison."

In the end, nobody was put in prison. The show wasn't even taken off the air. When I asked about the effects of Erdoğan's critique, Yağmur talked about self-censorship. "There used to be censorship," he said. "Now there's a climate." Until the nineteen-nineties, Turkey had an official censorship board. Today, Yağmur explained, censorship is carried out indirectly, by an organization called the Radio and Television Supreme Council: "It doesn't prevent you from doing stuff—but it punishes you later." He said that in 2011 the council handed their station a record-setting, six-figure fine, citing a scene that shows slave girls undergoing virginity checks. The station refused to pay, but the fine was upheld by the Council of State, Turkey's highest administrative court, on the ground that virginity checks didn't accord with Turkish family values, and that their portrayal was a "distortion of historical truths." The show's staff historian cited a seventeenth-century European painting showing a girl being inspected at a slave market. The council had its own historical experts, who objected that the show portrayed only the lascivious aspects of the harem, reinforcing Orientalist fantasies; in fact, "the harem was a serious educational institution whose secret has not yet been unravelled."

Subsequent episodes featured more battles alongside the trysts. "We were destroyed, both mentally and physically," Yağmur said of their experience filming battles. It was expensive and time-consuming. The Turkish television industry, he said, lacked "the right infrastructure" for working with horses. The Battle of Mohács had been filmed under particularly difficult circumstances, near a kilometre-wide river crossing in Eastern Thrace—a

stand-in for the even wider river that Süleyman's Army crossed in Hungary. "It took four days," Durul said. "Just think of all of those people—just think of everything they have to eat! All that has to be carried by someone!" After a certain point, I couldn't tell whether he was talking about the historic event or its reenactment: staging a battle was apparently as much work as fighting a real one.

The actual harem of Topkapi Palace is a museum now, though not all the rooms are open. When I visited, I found it a melancholy place, despite its beauty and elegance. Sunlight filtered through grated, faceted, colored, recessed, or otherwise obstructed windows. Sovereigns with limitless power had lived here, people who could decorate any way they wanted, and they had chosen to cover every interior surface with ceramic tiles. Cordons blocked off certain avenues and led you down others. The harem has more than four hundred rooms, and the floor plan reads like a Borges dictionary: Mosque of the Black Eunuchs, Apartment of the Black Eunuch Treasurer, Apartment of the Black Eunuchs Who Waited on the Sultan in the Harem, Elephant House, Place of the Forty Columns, Consultation Place of the Jinns. I soon lost my bearings and, having passed along an outdoor corridor between two buildings, protected from the sky by broad wooden eaves, was startled to come out into a courtyard reserved, according to a placard, for the sultans' favorites, and to see the Bosphorus gleaming far below. On the opposite shore, gray skyscrapers shimmered in the haze.

Far less is known about the sixteenth-century harem than about the royal houses of Europe during the same period. There were no nobles hanging around the Ottoman court, writing memoirs or exchanging gossipy letters. There was no tradition of royal portraiture. The only representation of Süleyman by anyone who had seen him was painted in the Sultan's old age by an Ottoman naval captain. There are portraits by Titian and Dürer, but, like most Ottomanists today, they were working from the descriptions of European visitors—primarily Venetian and Habsburg diplomats. The Europeans'

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standards of newsworthiness are the ones we inherited. Reading the ambassadors' memoirs and letters, I realized that I had seen nearly every interesting anecdote or observation in "Magnificent Century"—from Ibrahim's controversial display of some classical statues that had been seized from Budapest to the dialogue about salvation between a Habsburg ambassador and a Muslim vizier whose father had been a Christian pig farmer.

I made another trip to Topkapi Palace with the N.Y.U. historian Leslie Peirce, who was doing research for a biography of Roxelana. Peirce, the descendant of Quakers who came to America with William Penn, first visited Turkey with the Peace Corps, in the sixties, and is now one of the world's foremost experts on the Ottoman harem. Her first book, "The Imperial Harem" (1993), was a groundbreaking study of the "sultanate of women"—a period beginning during Süleyman's reign, when Roxelana and her household moved into Topkapi, giving women unprecedented access to political power.

The word "harem" comes from the Arabic root "h-r-m," which can mean both an inviolable, sacred place and something taboo. The holy cities of Mecca and Medina and the Temple Mount, in Jerusalem, are all known as *harem-i şerif* ("noble sanctuary"). The Topkapi harem, the innermost circle of palace life, was home not only to concubines but to the sultan's children, his mother, and his sisters, and to a vast hierarchical staff of women and eunuchs.

Peirce's book explains that, although the first Ottoman sultans married women from ruling houses in the Balkans and Anatolia, they generally preferred to father heirs with slave concubines, who brought with them no troublesome in-laws. By the middle of the fifteenth century, sultans stopped reproducing with noble brides, and then stopped marrying altogether. Each concubine was allowed to bear only one son, and it was then her job to bring him up. The logic seems to be that each prince needed a mother of his own in

his corner: for a century and a half, whichever prince became sultan would kill all the other princes.

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of the Ottoman state was the irrelevance of hereditary aristocracy. As one Habsburg ambassador noted, "Those who hold the highest posts under the Sultan are very often the sons of shepherds and herdsmen." Most of the Otto-

man military and bureaucratic elite was made up of Christians brought from the Balkans as young boys, and trained and educated in the palace. Slaves had a lot to recommend them over nobles. They had nobody to be loyal to apart from the sultan. Having no connections, they didn't need to

be rewarded unless they really did a good job. You could run a genuine meritocracy with slaves.

The radical departure from a traditional family structure makes for strange, compelling television. Which of the Sultan's four sons will inherit the throne, and which three will be killed, and in what order? Which woman will become the Sultan's favorite, and which will succeed in poisoning or strangling her rivals? Contemporaries saw Roxelana as an unscrupulous opportunist, who cared only about promoting her own children and keeping her hooks in Süleyman. Some people still blame her for the fall of the Ottoman Empire, holding her responsible for Mustafa's murder and the succession of her incompetent son, Selim the Drunkard. But, to the television audience, Roxelana is a model of family values, going to any lengths to secure a monogamous relationship and a prosperous nuclear family, championing her sons despite their disabilities and limitations.

The show's creators made canny use of the fact that Süleyman was an accomplished goldsmith. We frequently see him making rings and necklaces for the harem women. Viewers are thus afforded the spectacle of beautiful women fighting over beautiful jewelry, and beautiful women being awarded beautiful jewelry by a powerful man. One particularly contentious article is a ring that Süleyman gives Roxelana—

after promising it to his previous favorite. Her fury upon seeing Roxelana wearing *her* ring has a visceral power that until then I had associated only with reality television. The ring, which features a teardrop-shaped emerald surrounded by diamonds, becomes the subject of endless intrigues. By November, 2011, Turkish sales of "Hürrem's ring" had exceeded a million. High-quality versions cost tens of thousands of dollars, and are said to be popular in the Gulf States. Cheap knockoffs can be found in any Turkish shopping mall.

Peirce, a devotee of "Magnificent Century," says that the show has influenced her biography of Roxelana, drawing her attention to the central role of children, who are often neglected in the historical record. "There are things you understand once you see them acted out in front of you," she said, adding that she had been moved by the depiction of the events leading up to the birth of Roxelana's firstborn. After the death of his father, Süleyman's first successful military campaign was followed, in the space of a month, by the loss of two sons and a daughter. That's when Roxelana gave birth to a baby boy. Peirce said that the show had helped her to grasp emotionally the impact this would have on a man who had just lost three children: "She produced this son, when he'd lost everything else."

Though some scenes in the first season of "Magnificent Century" were filmed on location at Topkapi Palace, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism subsequently revoked permission to shoot there, and the show is now produced almost entirely on a soundstage. The day I visited, the brothers were filming Episode 104: the first installment of the fourth, and final, season. Durul hurried me through the mazelike set.

"Careful," he mouthed soundlessly: shooting had started somewhere. In the private quarters of the actual palace, too, dead silence had reigned. The pages were trained in a special sign language. All this greatly impressed the European ambassadors: a Venetian once saw a vizier summoned to his own execution, in sign language, by a mute.

Durul introduced me to Selim Bayraktar, who plays the harem's chief



eunuch. He was already wearing his black brocade caftan and single hoop earring familiar from the show, but his head looked strangely small: he hadn't yet put on the turban he wears on TV. We sat on sofas in the changing room, and he told us the story of his life. A Kirkuk Turkoman, born in Iraq, he began his performance career in gymnastics competitions as a child. Once, before the Iraqi borders closed in the eighties, he travelled to Bulgaria and saw a circus. For years, he exchanged letters with the circus owner's son. When Bayraktar was thirteen, in the final days of the Iran-Iraq War, one of Saddam Hussein's body doubles visited his school, to recruit boys into the Army—the male teachers had already gone to the front. When Bayraktar was picked, his family hired Kurdish paramilitaries to smuggle them into Turkey. In his mid-twenties, after becoming an actor, Bayraktar went to see a travelling circus. To his astonishment, it was the same troupe he had seen as a

child. His old friend remembered him. That was how Bayraktar ended up joining the travelling circus. "I rode on a bicycle with one wheel—a unicycle," he recalled. "And I juggled at the same time."

Bayraktar speaks not only Kurdish and Arabic but also Ottoman Turkish, which he studied with his grandfather, a scholar of Islamic law. On the set of "Magnificent Century," he helps out with calligraphy, and also with curses. He describes his character, Sümbül Ağa, as a survivor: he survived having his balls cut off, and the wound cauterized with boiling oil.

Bayraktar had done a lot of research into castration. "Do you wonder why Sümbül walks strangely?" he said, demonstrating his mincing, penguinlike walk. "It's because of the boiling oil. Of course, this is my interpretation—it isn't a fact. Maybe, if your arm was cut off here"—he indicated a point below the elbow—"and cauterized with boiling oil, maybe you would still be able to

bend your arm normally. But I don't think you would." He thought the real Sümbül Ağa was probably castrated at the age of nine or ten, so his body would already have started producing testosterone. That's why Sümbül doesn't speak in a high voice. Even after the surgery, Bayraktar explained, the adrenal glands would produce testosterone. Eunuchs could have erections, and were rumored to have love affairs with women in the harem.

A few minutes later, I watched Durul direct Bayraktar in a scene from Season 4, in which Sümbül creeps up behind Roxelana in a secret passageway. Twenty-five years have elapsed since the beginning of Season 1, and Roxelana is played by an actress new to the series. She had originally been played by Meryem Uzerli, a previously unknown German actress with a Turkish father. Uzerli became a star overnight, beloved for her cherubic face, flame-red hair, broken Turkish, and unwaiflike physique. "Her German

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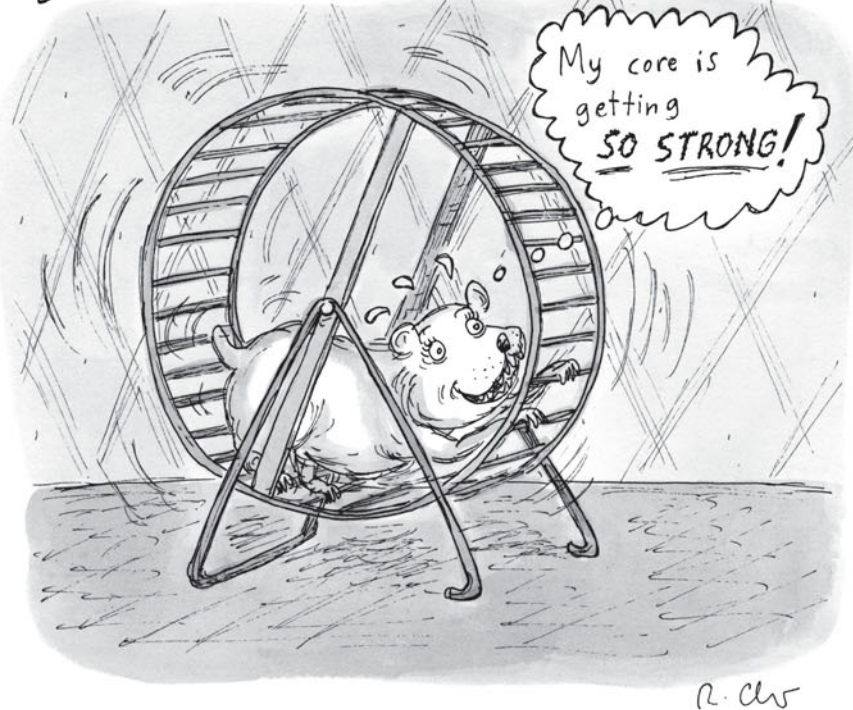
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POLLYANNA, THE HAMSTER



accent grew on us,” one journalist wrote. “We fell in love with her red hair, her strange walk, her screams of ‘Giff me my children.’” Germany today is home to some three million varyingly beleaguered Turks, most of them descended from the “guest workers” who emigrated in the sixties, and this historical circumstance lends Uzerli’s story an appealing element of reversal: many Turks have gone to Germany to work on assembly lines, but sometimes a Turkish-German “returns” to Turkey and becomes a queen.

Toward the end of Season 3, Uzerli suffered a breakdown and went back to Germany—pregnant and abandoned, it turned out, by an Istanbul playboy. In an interview last August, she talked about her refusal to get an abortion. I found myself remembering the scene in “Magnificent Century” in which Roxelana, transfigured by rapture and triumph, learns of her first pregnancy. When Uzerli described her life in Istanbul—living alone in a hotel, adrift in an unfamiliar society, working gruelling hours on set, staying up all night to memorize lines in a foreign language—it sounded nearly as challenging as Roxelana’s life in the harem. When she got

back to Berlin, she dyed her hair, in order not to see Roxelana in the mirror. Her baby is due any day now.

The new Roxelana is a veteran theatre and TV actress seventeen years older than her predecessor. This makes sense, given the story’s time line, and yet most of the other returning characters are played by the same actors, cosmetically aged, with various degrees of success. The over-all effect is strange, as if time had operated differently on different people.

I sat with Durul in front of a video monitor, in the main hall of the harem. The actors, standing in a passageway to the left, weren’t visible from where we were sitting, and could be seen only on the monitor. The new, middle-aged Roxelana came into view. Standing very erect, with a pale face and a dour mouth, she sneezed, carefully blew her nose, and stared into space.

“Ready, camera, action,” Durul said. Roxelana walked slowly along the passageway. There was something terribly sad about her. The young Roxelana wanted so much, so passionately. Now she was like a zombie of her old self, doing the same things, but without the passionate reasons. Bayraktar came up

behind her, utterly transformed into a man who could still remember having his castration wounds cauterized with boiling oil. Light from a brass lamp flickered over his suspicious, obsequious features. Glancing to the left, I could now see the actors’ trembling shadows, getting bigger as they proceeded toward us along the passageway; but I had to look at the monitor to see their intense expressions and detailed clothing. It was like Plato’s allegory of the cave: television, like philosophy, liberates us from un-seeing.

Günhan Börekçi, an Ottoman historian who is one of the consultants for “Magnificent Century,” told me that the greatest challenge to historical accuracy was posed by the restrictions upon the characters’ having contact with one another. Often, the story line requires a meeting between two characters who could never have occupied the same room or looked each other in the face. The courtship of Ibrahim and the Sultan’s sister Hatice posed a particularly difficult formal problem, solved, in the end, by means of private terraces: standing on her terrace, Hatice could hear Ibrahim playing the violin, and he could glimpse her through a lattice.

Börekçi reads every script, vets the palace décor, and helps the actors with their characters. The actors ask him things he has never thought to investigate. What sherbet would Roxelana drink when she had a headache? What would be an appropriate birthday gift for an eight-year-old Ottoman prince? How, exactly, were prophecies made using sand? Could the court architect have been left-handed?

Börekçi’s life has changed since “Magnificent Century.” Being an Ottoman historian had become like being a doctor: everyone you met had a question. A butcher wanted to know if the sultans drank alcohol, or condoned homosexuality. A taxi-driver remarked, as he drove Börekçi past the ancient walls of Constantinople, “The Byzantines were bad people, right?” A doctor asked whether the empire would still have failed if Süleyman hadn’t killed Mustafa, and kept interrupting Börekçi to tell him his own theory. His theory was that the empire would still have failed.

"They aren't looking for historical knowledge," Börekçi said. "They're looking for confirmation of their beliefs." The butcher wanted to believe that the Ottomans were observant Muslims, the taxi-driver that the Byzantines had deserved to lose their favorite city. The doctor wanted to believe in the historical necessity of the Turkish Republic. They were looking for answers, not about history but about who they were.

When I asked the brothers how Ottoman history was taught when they were children, Yağmur replied, "In a schizophrenic fashion." On the one hand, they had learned to take pride in their glorious history. On the other hand, he said, "there are fathers murdering their sons, and foreign, non-Turkish women infiltrating the state." This tension is illustrated with particular starkness in the life of Süleyman. "Süleyman epitomized justice, he valued justice over all things, and his rule was the Ottoman Golden Age," Yağmur said. "But he killed his best friend, and he killed his own son."

The debate over "Magnificent Century" touches on one of the key issues in Turkish politics: the question of national identity. Who were the Ottomans—enlightened cosmopolitans or decadent sociopaths? Who was Süleyman? Who are the Turks? For the first eighty years of the republic, national identity was defined largely by the figure of Kemal Atatürk, with his tailored suits, his commitment to scientific positivism and ballroom dancing, his devotion to an adopted daughter who became Turkey's first female fighter pilot, and his emphatic rejection of all things Ottoman. Atatürk's picture is on every denomination of Turkish currency, and hangs on the wall of every public building. It is a crime to insult his memory.

And yet Kemalism, like all nationalistic ideologies, left some people out. In the first decades of the twentieth century, population exchanges, forced deportations, and massacres led to a drastic reduction of Turkey's Greek and Armenian population. With the Turkification of Anatolia, Kurdish and other non-Turkish languages were barred from schools. The Kemalist ideal of Westernization has been criticized as

elitist, Orientalist, even racist. Since sweeping to power, in 2002, Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party, or A.K.P., has gained wide support with its attempt to revert from Kemalism to an Ottoman identity that it presents as more inclusive.

The Ottoman revival has its roots in the Cold War, when the main political polarity in Turkey wasn't Islamist versus secularist but pro-Communist versus anti-Communist. In Turkey, a NATO member and a U.S. ally, widespread internal violence between leftist and rightist groups culminated in a military coup, in 1980. The new government addressed the threat of leftism by opening the Turkish market to global competition, and by promoting Islam as an ideological alternative to Communism. One result of these measures was the rise of a new class of observant Muslim businessmen—entrepreneurs who described themselves as "Islamic Calvinists," characterized Muhammad as a merchant, and cited the Koran as an authority on limiting economic intervention by the government. Where Kemalism had its basis in economic isolationism and cultural Westernization, these businessmen wanted just the opposite: Western-style capitalism and a Turkish culture. In the Ottomans, they found the ready-made idea of a prosperous Muslim elite, trading on an equal footing with Europe but preferring halvah to profiteroles.

The politicization of Ottoman history continued throughout the nineties. The A.K.P.'s ideological precursor, the Islamist Welfare Party, began annual commemorations of the conquest of Constantinople, an event it described as "the beginning point of the supremacy of Muslims over Europe." Kemalism told Turks that they didn't have to feel humiliated about the Treaty of Sèvres, because it was the Ottomans' fault; neo-Ottomanism tells Turks that they don't have to feel humiliated about the Ottomans, because if you go back far enough the Ottomans were the ones doing the humiliating. Three years ago, Erdoğan presented Nicolas Sarkozy, a vigorous opponent of Turkey's bid to join the European Union, with a 1526 letter in which Süleyman agreed to help King Francis I, who had been imprisoned by Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor. "I am Sultan Süleyman, Sul-

tan of Sultans, Ruler of Rulers, earthly shadow of Him who crowns sovereigns," the letter begins, "Ruler of the Mediterranean Sea, Black Sea, Rume-
lia, Anatolia, Karaman, Greece, Dulka-
dir, Diyarbakir, Kurdistan, Azerbaijan,
Damascus, Aleppo, Egypt, Mecca,
Medina, Jerusalem, all the Arab realms,
Yemen, and many other lands. You are
Francis, King of France." ("He seems
not to have read it," Erdoğan later ob-
served, of Sarkozy.)

What if Turkey could be not Europe's imitator but Europe's peer? What if you discarded not six centuries of Ottoman rule but the eighty years of the Turkish Republic? Erdoğan's foreign minister has characterized the twentieth century as "only a parenthesis," and has called upon Turks to recover their "ancient values," to "again tie Sarajevo to Damascus, Benghazi to Erzurum and to Batumi." Critics might object that Sarajevo is unlikely to be delighted by the prospect of a tie to Assad's Damascus. And Erdoğan's frequent invocations of the Bosnian capital and other sites of anti-Muslim violence seem calculated to foster grudges rather than to heal them. Nonetheless, neo-Ottomanism increased support for Erdoğan, not only in Turkey but also, for a time, in the Western press, which had long awaited an attractive model of a "Muslim democracy." Erdoğan drew widespread approval for participating in Arab League summits, contributing to U.N. forces in Lebanon and NATO forces in Afghanistan, and improving Turkey's relations with Iraqi Kurdistan. Trade with Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Russia skyrocketed, as did tourism from the Gulf States.

When Erdoğan denounced "Magnificent Century," it was in the name of his new foreign policy. He had been using the Ottoman precedent to justify Turkey's involvement in Gaza, Syria, Lebanon, Kosovo, Iraq, Azerbaijan, Afghanistan, Myanmar, and Somalia: "Wherever our forefathers went on horseback, we go, too." He described "Magnificent Century" as a defective picture of where these forefathers spent their time. "We never knew forefathers like that," he declared. "We never knew a Lawmaker like that. He spent thirty years on horseback." In other words, the Süleyman on television wasn't the real Süleyman. Süleyman was to be found

on a horse, not in a harem. At the late-night meeting during the Gezi protests, Erdoğan is said to have quizzed the actor who plays Süleyman on the meaning of certain Ottoman words. The actor, being an actor rather than a real sultan, didn't know. "You play the Lawmaker—how can you not know these words?" Erdoğan demanded.

Sometimes the Taylan brothers wonder what Süleyman would think if he could see "Magnificent Century." "We know he cared a lot about external appearances," Durul said hesitantly, "so he would have liked certain aspects." He trailed off, perhaps contemplating how Süleyman might feel about watching the more trying moments of his reign reenacted on a demonic talking box.

"After Süleyman killed Mustafa, some poets in the court criticized him," Yağmur continued. "He didn't send them away. These were poets who practically called him a murderer, and they were allowed to stick around, for years. In a sense, he was an enlightened person."

When the Gezi protests broke out, I was nearing the end of a three-year stay in Turkey, where my parents grew up. I had been teaching and writing, and was living in Cihangir, a gentrified neighborhood near Taksim Square, named after Roxelana's unhappy hunch-backed son. My seventh-floor apartment was regularly flooded with tear gas, and with friends and colleagues who had come to the protests and got stranded when police barricaded the streets. One night, on the roof of my building, an Iraqi war correspondent who used Istanbul as a base to report on Syria told me he had never seen "insurgents" more determined than the Turks. "Your people are crazy," he said. I felt a tiny bit proud. A Bulgarian friend had travelled by bus from Sofia and set up camp in my spare room, reporting on the protests, loudly, by telephone, at seven in the morning, for Bulgarian National Radio. Nearly every day, one or the other of my parents called from the U.S., urging me to come home early: had they gone through the trouble of leaving their homeland and bringing up an American daughter just for her to get hit in the head by a tear-gas cannister?

But I didn't want to leave. The protests felt like the culmination of everything I had seen in the previous three years. Members of a leftist soccer-fanatic group I had written about were placed in police detention after commandeering a bulldozer in the vicinity of the Prime Minister's office. An environmentalist I had shadowed near the Armenian border called me from an underground parking garage in a luxury hotel, where he had got stuck during a police raid after attending a dinner with Al Gore. At a barricade north of Taksim, I ran into a left-leaning chef I had profiled. It was like the end of a novel. When I packed up my apartment, at the end of the summer, I found five hard hats, three pairs of goggles, and two gas masks.

The protesters included nearly every group opposed to Erdoğan: Kemalists, labor unionists, Marxists, feminists, L.G.B.T. activists, environmentalists, anti-capitalist Muslims. Even a Kurdish-rights party had a tent in Gezi Park, which for a brief time became a utopia, with free meals, free cigarettes, free medical care, a library, concerts, and a performance artist doing a whirling-dervish dance while wearing a gas mask. Nightly police raids only intensified the festival mood.

Erdoğan's response to the protesters was similar to his response to the Süleyman of "Magnificent Century." The people protesting, he said, weren't the actual Turkish people but merely "marginal groups" and foreign saboteurs, whose impact was exaggerated by the Western press. At a rally on June 16th, in front of hundreds of thousands of his supporters, Erdoğan accused the BBC, CNN, and Reuters of covering up the truth about Turkey. "This people isn't the people you showed the world," he declared. "Turkey doesn't consist only of Taksim Square."

One evening, my Bulgarian friend mentioned the mania for "Magnificent Century" in Sofia, where it has transcended an entrenched animosity toward the Ottomans. A nationalist had recently asked my friend's mother to sign a petition to ban Turkish news programming from Bulgarian TV. My friend's mother joked that she would sign, but only if "Magnificent Century" were also banned. "But that's completely differ-

ent!" the nationalist exclaimed. She was a devoted fan.

It's significant that a Bulgarian nationalist can watch "Magnificent Century" without feeling her nationalism compromised, while Erdoğan can't. "Magnificent Century" is set in a world where nationalism hasn't won yet. It works in precise opposition to the A.K.P.'s neo-Ottomanist program. In no meaningful sense is Ibrahim of Parga actually from Parga. On entering Süleyman's household, he leaves the domain of nationhood for that of the purely human—a world where the family drama expands and fills up the space of the political.

On the way back to the U.S. at the end of the summer, I stopped by a small-scale replica of the Grand Bazaar in the Istanbul airport, and asked the salesman at the jewelry counter if he carried Hürrem's ring.

"Of course," he said, unlocking a case and pulling out several specimens.

"My mother and I are big fans of 'Magnificent Century,'" I said, trying one on.

"We're all big fans. Although, honestly, the zest is gone now that Roxelana has left." Contemplating the departure of the young Roxelana seemed to make him angry. "What a stupid woman," he said, after a moment. "Who was she in Germany? Who appreciated her there? She came to Turkey and became a star. And then, instead of buying a house, she went back to Germany to live in a tiny apartment." Of course, he was talking about the actress, not the real Roxelana. Yet there were similarities. Who had Roxelana been, back in Ruthenia? Who appreciated her there? I found myself wondering whether, given the choice, she would have left the palace, and everything it meant, to live in a tiny house in the place where she came from. Would she have gone back, if she could have? I bought two identical rings: one for my mother, and one that I wore on the plane home. ♦

CONSTABULARY NOTES FROM ALL OVER
From the San Francisco Chronicle.

Fresno County authorities have arrested a man they say broke into the home of two farmworkers, rubbed one with spices and whacked the other with a sausage before fleeing.

SIGN HERE

BY COLIN JOST



Sign here, please.

And here.

And on page 3 as well.

And I'll need your signature here.

And here.

And right here at the bottom of page 7, too.

Then I'll need you to initial here.

And here. No, not a full signature. Just your initials. We want to convey a sense of "breezing through" this section of the contract. Like "I read this, but I didn't *dwell* on it."

Uh-huh. Now, on page 11, we just need one initial. Could be first or last name. Middle is fine, too. No confirmation names. "L." Well chosen.

All right, now, on the bottom of page 15, I just need a letter that's *not* your initial. Could be any letter. Cyrillic alphabet is fine. Not encouraged, but accepted. Ooh, I see you've written "L" again. Unfortunately, that is one of your initials. Remember? From page 11? So go ahead and cross that out, initial the change, then write in a non-initial next to it.

"X." Hmm. See, that almost looks like a signature. . . . You know? The

way idiots in old movies sign their names? No, no, no, I'm not saying *you're* in old movies. I just think you should choose a more neutral initial. "P." Excellent. Everybody's happy.

Now, on page 19, we're gonna need you to do a full signature again, then sort of a winking smiley face. Like you're signing it but you're being real playful about it. Like "Oh, you want my signature? Is that what you want? Well, come and get it, Mr. Man." No, don't actually *write* "Mr. Man." That's just a common fake name, like Mrs. Girl or Guy Dude.

O.K., terrific. Then, on page 26, go ahead and sign your first name, along with the last name of the boy you had a crush on in fourth grade. Exactly. Like you're going to marry him someday and take his name and you're practicing your signature for when you . . . sign checks, I guess? Or contracts! You're right. Great example. And just go ahead and sign it that way thirty or forty times, all over the page, like a crazy person. And you can sign it in different styles—some real fancy, like you married a prince, and others real dumb and sloppy, like the

prince turned back into a mule. Exactly, because you'd have to adapt your signature accordingly.

We're flying now! O.K., page 30. See where it says "*droit moral*"? I need you to turn the page over, and on the blank side I need you to draw a hand turkey. Yeah, just one of those things where you trace your hand and you make it into a little turkey. Perfect. Oops, don't forget the little legs. And the beak . . . Ooh, the wattle is a nice touch. What's that? Oh, "*droit moral*"? It means "droid morals." Like it's such an obvious moral question that even a robot would know the answer. Hey, don't mention it. What are lawyers for?

Page 42! Homestretch! Now, this is a little trickier. In the margin next to the section that says, "Agreement to forfeit all future monies," I need you to go ahead and draw the "and" sign. Like an ampersand? I need you to draw that from memory. Nope, that's a treble clef. Similar shape but very different meaning. I need the "and" symbol. No, sorry, that's the "at" symbol, like a Twitter handle. I'm talking about the "and" symbol, like in "Rodgers & Hammerstein." . . . I'm not sure, I think it's Aaron Rodgers and M.C. Hammer's accountant. What? What do you mean, "stereotype"? I have no idea what type of stereo I own. Wait, I do. Bang & Olufsen. You know what, just skip that page.

Now I need a full signature one more time, but really big, in case whoever reads this is super old.

And then I need your billing Zip Code and the last nine digits of your Social Security number. And you can just write it all on that napkin that's lying right next to the contract. Perfect.

Oh, and that last page? The page that says, "This page left blank on purpose"? Just cross out "on purpose" and replace it with "for flexing." Then go ahead and draw a man flexing his biceps. Like a real muscleman. Oh, sure, you can use me as a model. That's actually very flattering. Makes the whole "shirtless" approach seem worthwhile, after all. Then just *print* your name under the drawing and you're all set!

Congratulations! You're officially a Knicks City Dancer. Go ahead into the other room and get measured for your butt shorts. They come in XXS or You're Fired. ♦

THIS OLD MAN

Life in the nineties.

BY ROGER ANGELL

Check me out. The top two knuckles of my left hand look as if I'd been worked over by the K.G.B. No, it's more as if I'd been a catcher for the Hall of Fame pitcher Candy Cummings, the inventor of the curveball, who retired from the game in 1877. To put this another way, if I pointed that hand at you like a pistol and fired at your nose, the

my right eye, there you are, back again. If I take my hand away and look at you with both eyes, the empty hole disappears and you're in 3-D, and actually looking pretty terrific today. Macular degeneration.

I'm ninety-three, and I'm feeling great. Well, pretty great, unless I've forgotten to take a couple of Tylenols in the

clamps shut a congenital hole in my heart, discovered in my early eighties. The surgeon at Mass General who fixed up this PFO (a patent foramen ovale—I love to say it) was a Mexican-born character actor in beads and clogs, and a fervent admirer of Derek Jeter. Counting this procedure and the stents, plus a passing balloon angioplasty and two or three false alarms, I've become sort of a table potato, unalarmed by the X-ray cameras swooping eerily about just above my naked body in a darkened and icy operating room; there's also a little TV screen up there that presents my heart as a pendant ragbag attached to tacky ribbons of veins and arteries. But never mind. Nowadays, I pop a pink beta-blocker and a white statin at break-



Roger Angell and Andy; Central Park, January, 2014.

bullet would nail you in the left knee. Arthritis.

Now, still facing you, if I cover my left, or better, eye with one hand, what I see is a blurry encircling version of the ceiling and floor and walls or windows to our right and left but no sign of your face or head: nothing in the middle. But cheer up: if I reverse things and cover

past four or five hours, in which case I've begun to feel some jagged little pains shooting down my left forearm and into the base of the thumb. Shingles, in 1996, with resultant nerve damage.

Like many men and women my age, I get around with a couple of arterial stents that keep my heart chunking. I also sport a minute plastic seashell that

fast, along with several lesser pills, and head off to my human-wreckage gym, and it's been a couple of years since the last showing.

My left knee is thicker but shakier than my right. I messed it up playing football, eons ago, but can't remember what went wrong there more recently. I had a date to have the joint replaced by

a famous knee man (he's listed in the Metropolitan Opera program as a major supporter) but changed course at the last moment, opting elsewhere for injections of synthetic frog hair or rooster combs or something, which magically took away the pain. I walk around with a cane now when outdoors—"Stop brandishing!" I hear my wife, Carol, admonishing—which gives me a nice little edge when hailing cabs.

The lower-middle sector of my spine twists and jogs like a Connecticut county road, thanks to a herniated disk seven or eight years ago. This has cost me two or three inches of height, transforming me from Gary Cooper to Gepetto. After days spent groaning on the floor, I received a blessed epidural, ending the ordeal. "You can sit up now," the doctor said, whisking off his shower cap. "Listen, do you know who Dominic Chianese is?"

"Isn't that Uncle Junior?" I said, confused. "You know—from 'The Sopranos'?"

"Yes," he said. "He and I play in a mandolin quartet every Wednesday night at the Hotel Edison. Do you think you could help us get a listing in the front of *The New Yorker*?"

I've endured a few knocks but missed worse. I know how lucky I am, and secretly tap wood, greet the day, and grab a sneaky pleasure from my survival at long odds. The pains and insults are bearable. My conversation may be full of holes and pauses, but I've learned to dispatch a private Apache scout ahead into the next sentence, the one coming up, to see if there are any vacant names or verbs in the landscape up there. If he sends back a warning, I'll pause meaningfully, duh, until something else comes to mind.

On the other hand, I've not yet forgotten Keats or Dick Cheney or what's waiting for me at the dry cleaner's today. As of right now, I'm not Christopher Hitchens or Tony Judt or Nora Ephron; I'm not dead and not yet mindless in a reliable upstate facility. Decline and disaster impend, but my thoughts don't linger there. It shouldn't surprise me if at this time next week I'm surrounded by family, gathered on short notice—they're sad and shocked but also a little pissed off to be here—to help decide, after what's happened, what's to be done with me now. It must be this hovering knowl-

edge, that two-ton safe swaying on a frayed rope just over my head, that makes everyone so glad to see me again. "How great you're looking! Wow, tell me your secret!" they kindly cry when they happen upon me crossing the street or exiting a dinghy or departing an X-ray room, while the little balloon over their heads reads, "Holy shit—he's still vertical!"

Let's move on. A smooth fox terrier of ours named Harry was full of surprises. Wildly sociable, like others of his breed, he grew a fraction more reserved in maturity, and learned to cultivate a separate wagging acquaintance with each fresh visitor or old pal he came upon in the living room. If friends had come for dinner, he'd arise from an evening nap and leisurely tour the table in imitation of a three-star headwaiter: Everything O.K. here? Is there anything we could bring you? How was the crème brûlée? Terriers aren't water dogs, but Harry enjoyed kayaking in Maine, sitting like a figurehead between my knees for an hour or more and scoping out the passing cormorant or yachtsman. Back in the city, he established his personality and dashing good looks on the neighborhood to the extent that a local artist executed a striking head-on portrait in pointillist oils, based on a snapshot of him she'd sneaked in Central Park. Harry took his leave (another surprise) on a June afternoon three years ago, a few days after his eighth birthday. Alone in our fifth-floor apartment, as was usual during working hours, he became unhinged by a noisy thunderstorm and went out a front window left a quarter open on a muggy day. I knew him well and could summon up his feelings during the brief moments of that leap: the welcome coolness of rain on his muzzle and shoulders, the excitement of air and space around his outstretched body.

Here in my tenth decade, I can testify that the downside of great age is the room it provides for rotten news. Living long means enough already. When Harry died, Carol and I couldn't stop weeping; we sat in the bathroom with his retrieved body on a mat between us, the light-brown patches on his back and the near-black of his ears still darkened by the rain, and passed a Kleenex box back and forth between us. Not all the tears were for him. Two months earlier,

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a beautiful daughter of mine, my oldest child, had ended her life, and the oceanic force and mystery of that event had not left full space for tears. Now we could cry without reserve, weep together for Harry and Callie and ourselves. Harry cut us loose.

A few notes about age is my aim here, but a little more about loss is inevitable. "Most of the people my age is dead. You could look it up" was the way Casey Stengel put it. He was seventy-five at the time, and contemporary social scientists might prefer Casey's line delivered at eighty-five now, for accuracy, but the point remains. We geezers carry about a bulging directory of dead husbands or wives, children, parents, lovers, brothers and sisters, dentists and shrinks, office sidekicks, summer neighbors, classmates, and bosses, all once entirely familiar to us and seen as part of the safe landscape of the day. It's no wonder we're a bit bent. The surprise, for me, is that the accruing weight of these departures doesn't bury us, and that even the pain of an almost unbearable loss gives way quite quickly to something more distant but still stubbornly gleaming. The dead have departed, but gestures and glances and tones of voice of theirs, even scraps of clothing—that pale-yellow Saks scarf—reappear unexpectedly, along with accompanying touches of sweetness or irritation.

Our dead are almost beyond counting and we want to herd them along, pen them up somewhere in order to keep them straight. I like to think of mine as fellow-voyagers crowded aboard the *Île de France* (the idea is swiped from "Outward Bound"). Here's my father, still handsome in his tuxedo, lighting a Lucky Strike. There's Ted Smith, about to name-drop his Gloucester home town again. Here comes Slim Aarons. Here's Esther Mae Counts, from fourth grade: hi, Esther Mae. There's Gardner—with Cecille Shawn, for some reason. Here's Ted Yates. Anna Hamburger. Colba F. Gucker, better known as Chief. Bob Ascheim. Victor Pritchett—and Dorothy. Henry Allen. Bart Giamatti. My elder old-maid cousin Jean Webster and her unexpected, late-arriving Brit husband, Capel Hanbury. Kitty Stableford. Dan Quisenberry. Nancy Field. Freddy

Alexandre. I look around for others and at times can almost produce someone at will. Callie returns, via a phone call. "Dad?" It's her, all right, her voice affectionately rising at the end—"Da-ad?"—but sounding a bit impatient this time. She's in a hurry. And now Harold Eads. Toni Robin. Dick Salmon, his face bright red with laughter. Edith Oliver. Sue Dawson. Herb Mitgang. Coop. Tудie. Elwood Carter.

These names are best kept in mind rather than boxed and put away somewhere. Old letters are engrossing but feel historic in numbers, photo albums delightful but with a glum after-kick like a chocolate caramel. Home movies are killers: Zeke, a long-gone Lab, alive again, rushing from right to left with a tennis ball in his mouth; my sister Nancy, stunning at seventeen, smoking a lipstick-stained cigarette aboard *Astrid*, with the breeze stirring her tied-up brown hair; my mother laughing and ducking out of the picture again, waving her hands in front of her face in embarrassment—she's about thirty-five. Me sitting cross-legged under a Ping-Pong table, at eleven. Take us away.

My list of names is banal but astounding, and it's barely a fraction, the ones that slip into view in the first minute or two. Anyone over sixty knows this; my list is only longer. I don't go there often, but, once I start, the battalion of the dead is on duty, alertly waiting. Why do they sustain me so, cheer me up, remind me of life? I don't understand this. Why am I not endlessly grieving?

What I've come to count on is the white-coated attendant of memory, silently here again to deliver dabs from the laboratory dish of me. In the days before Carol died, twenty months ago, she lay semiconscious in bed at home, alternating periods of faint or imperceptible breathing with deep, shuddering catch-up breaths. Then, in a delicate gesture, she would run the pointed tip of her tongue lightly around the upper curve of her teeth. She repeated this pattern again and again. I've forgotten, perhaps mercifully, much of what happened in that last week and the weeks after, but this recurs.

Carol is around still, but less reliably. For almost a year, I would wake up from another late-afternoon mini-nap in the

same living-room chair, and, in the instants before clarity, would sense her sitting in her own chair, just opposite. Not a ghost but a presence, alive as before and in the same instant gone again. This happened often, and I almost came to count on it, knowing that it wouldn't last. Then it stopped.

People my age and younger friends as well seem able to recall entire tapestries of childhood, and swatches from their children's early lives as well: conversations, exact meals, birthday parties, illnesses, picnics, vacation B. and B.s, trips to the ballet, the time when . . . I can't do this and it eats at me, but then, without announcement or connection, something turns up. I am walking on Ludlow Lane, in Snedens, with my two young daughters, years ago on a summer morning. I'm in my late thirties; they're about nine and six, and I'm complaining about the steep little stretch of road between us and our house, just up the hill. Maybe I'm getting old, I offer. Then I say that one day I'll be really old and they'll have to hold me up. I imitate an old man mumbling nonsense and start to walk with wobbly legs. Callie and Alice scream with laughter and hold me up, one on each side. When I stop, they ask for more, and we do this over and over.

I'm leaving out a lot, I see. My work—I'm still working, or sort of. Reading. The collapsing, grossly insistent world. Stuff I get excited about or depressed about all the time. Dailiness—but how can I explain this one? Perhaps with a blog recently posted on Facebook by a woman I know who lives in Australia. "Good Lord, we've run out of nutmeg!" it began. "How in the world did that ever happen?" Dozens of days are like that with me lately.

Intimates and my family—mine not very near me now but always on call, always with me. My children Alice and John Henry and my daughter-in-law Alice—yes, another one—and my granddaughters Laura and Lily and Clara, who together and separately were as steely and resplendent as a company of Marines on the day we buried Carol. And on other days and in other ways as well. Laura, for example, who will appear almost overnight, on demand, to drive me and my dog and my stuff five hundred miles Down East, then does it

again, backward, later in the summer. Hours of talk and sleep (mine, not hers) and renewal—the abandoned mills at Lawrence, Mass., Cat Mousam Road, the Narramissic River still there—plus a couple of nights together, with the summer candles again.

Friends in great numbers now, taking me to dinner or cooking in for me. (One afternoon, I found a freshly roasted chicken sitting outside my front door; two hours later, another one appeared in the same spot.) Friends inviting me to the opera, or to Fairway on Sunday morning, or to dine with their kids at the East Side Deli, or to a wedding at the Rockbound Chapel, or bringing in ice cream to share at my place while we catch another Yankees game. They saved my life. In the first summer after Carol had gone, a man I'd known slightly and pleasantly for decades listened while I talked about my changed routines and my doctors and dog walkers and the magazine. I paused for a moment, and he said, "Plus you have us."

Another message—also brief, also breathtaking—came on an earlier afternoon at my longtime therapist's, at a time when I felt I'd lost almost everything. "I don't know how I'm going to get through this," I said at last.

A silence, then: "Neither do I. But you will."

I am a world-class complainer but find palpable joy arriving with my evening Dewar's, from Robinson Cano between pitches, from the first pages once again of "Appointment in Samarra" or the last lines of the Elizabeth Bishop poem called "Poem." From the briefest strains of Handel or Roy Orbison, or Dennis Brain playing the early bars of his stunning Mozart horn concertos. (This Angel recording may have been one of the first things Carol and I acquired just after our marriage, and I hear it playing on a sunny Saturday morning in our Ninety-fourth Street walkup.) Also the recalled faces and then the names of Jean Dixon or Roscoe Karns or Porter Hall or Brad Dourif in another Netflix rerun. Chloë Sevigny in "Trees Lounge." Gail Collins on a good day. Family ice-skating up near Harlem in the nineteen-eighties, with the Park employees, high on youth or weed, looping past us backward to show their smiles.

Recent and not so recent surveys (in-



"I need you to honk."

cluding the six-decades-long Grant Study of the lives of some nineteen-forties Harvard graduates) confirm that a majority of us people over seventy-five keep surprising ourselves with happiness. Put me on that list. Our children are adults now and mostly gone off, and let's hope full of their own lives. We've outgrown our ambitions. If our wives or husbands are still with us, we sense a trickle of contentment flowing from the reliable springs of routine, affection in long silences, calm within the light boredom of well-worn friends, retold stories, and mossy opinions. Also the distant whoosh of a surfaced porpoise outside our night windows.

We elders—what kind of a handle is this, anyway, halfway between a tree and an eel?—we elders have learned a thing or two, including invisibility. Here I am in a conversation with some trusty friends—old friends but actually not all that old: they're in their sixties—and we're finishing the wine and in serious converse about global warming in Nyack or Virginia Woolf the cross-dresser. There's a pause, and I chime in with a couple of sentences. The others look at me politely, then resume the talk exactly at the point where they've just left it. What? Hello? Didn't I just say something? Have I left the room? Have I experienced what neurologists call a TIA—a transient ischemic attack? I

didn't expect to take over the chat but did await a word or two of response. Not tonight, though. (Women I know say that this began to happen to them when they passed fifty.) When I mention the phenomenon to anyone around my age, I get back nods and smiles. Yes, we're invisible. Honored, respected, even loved, but not quite worth listening to anymore. You've had your turn, Pops; now it's ours.

I've been asking myself why I don't think about my approaching visitor, death. He was often on my mind thirty or forty years ago, I believe, though more of a stranger. Death terrified me then, because I had so many engagements. The enforced opposite—no dinner dates or coming attractions, no urgent business, no fun, no calls, no errands, no returned words or touches—left a blank that I could not light or furnish: a condition I recognized from childhood bad dreams and sudden awakenings. Well, not yet, not soon, or probably not, I would console myself, and that welcome but then tediously repeated postponement felt in time less like a threat than like a family obligation—tea with Aunt Molly in Montclair, someday soon but not now. Death, meanwhile, was constantly on-stage or changing costume for his next engagement—as Bergman's thick-faced chess player; as the medieval night-rider

in a hoodie; as Woody Allen's awkward visitor half-falling into the room as he enters through the window; as W. C. Fields's man in the bright nightgown—and in my mind had gone from spectre to a waiting second-level celebrity on the Letterman show. Or almost. Some people I knew seemed to have lost all fear when dying and awaited the end with a certain impatience. "I'm tired of lying here," said one. "Why is this taking so long?" asked another. Death will get it on with me eventually, and stay much too long, and though I'm in no hurry about the meeting, I feel I know him almost too well by now.

A weariness about death exists in me and in us all in another way, as well, though we scarcely notice it. We have become tireless voyeurs of death: he is on the morning news and the evening news and on the breaking, middle-of-the-day news as well—not the celebrity death, I mean, but the everyone-else death. A roadside-accident figure, covered with a sheet. A dead family, removed from a ramshackle faraway building pocked and torn by bullets. The transportation dead. The dead in floods and hurricanes and tsunamis, in numbers called "tolls." The military dead, presented in silence on your home screen, looking youthful and well combed. The enemy war dead or re-discovered war dead, in higher figures. Appalling and dulling totals not just from this year's war but from the ones before that, and the ones way back that some of us still around may have also attended. All the dead from wars and natural events and school shootings and street crimes and domestic crimes that each of us has once again escaped and felt terrible about and plans to go and leave wreaths or paper flowers at the site of. There's never anything new about death, to be sure, except its improved publicity. At second hand, we have become death's expert witnesses; we know more about death than morticians, feel as much at home with it as those poor bygone schlunks trying to survive a continent-ravaging, low-digit-century epidemic. Death sucks but, enh—click the channel.

I get along. Now and then it comes to me that I appear to have more energy and hope than some of my coevals, but I take no credit for this. I don't belong to a book club or a bridge club; I'm

INVOCATION

The arms I sing. Forget the man, there is
no other epic. Sing the arms of kids,
the ones with pustules all along their veins

like runway track lights burning for a plane
that blew up hours ago with no survivors.
The ones with runes no parent can decipher,

one message, knifed and scarred and knifed again
in a mystic tongue forgotten who knows when.
The arms imprinted with a shadow grip

as if the dad who grabbed and crushed had dipped
his hand in black paint first. The arms with tight
arcs of perforation: human bites

that get infected faster than a dog's.
The toddler's arms with both hands scalded raw
all glisteny and hog-pink, swollen taut,

the tantrum over, the lesson taught,
two signal fires that call across a plain
the city is sacked and all the children slain.

—Amit Majmudar

not taking up Mandarin or practicing the viola. In a sporadic effort to keep my brain from moldering, I've begun to memorize shorter poems—by Auden, Donne, Ogden Nash, and more—which I recite to myself some nights while walking my dog, Harry's successor fox terrier, Andy. I've also become a blogger, and enjoy the ease and freedom of the form: it's a bit like making a paper airplane and then watching it take wing below your window. But shouldn't I have something more scholarly or complex than this put away by now—late paragraphs of accomplishments, good works, some weightier op-cits? I'm afraid not. The thoughts of age are short, short thoughts. I don't read Scripture and cling to no life precepts, except perhaps to Walter Cronkite's rules for old men, which he did not deliver over the air: Never trust a fart. Never pass up a drink. Never ignore an erection.

I count on jokes, even jokes about death.

TEACHER: Good morning, class. This is the first day of school and we're

going to introduce ourselves. I'll call on you, one by one, and you can tell us your name and maybe what your dad or your mom does for a living. You, please, over at this end.

SMALL BOY: My name is Irving and my dad is a mechanic.

TEACHER: A mechanic! Thank you, Irving. Next?

SMALL GIRL: My name is Emma and my mom is a lawyer.

TEACHER: How nice for you, Emma! Next?

SECOND SMALL BOY: My name is Luke and my dad is dead.

TEACHER: Oh, Luke, how sad for you. We're all very sorry about that, aren't we, class? Luke, do you think you could tell us what Dad did before he died?

LUKE (*seizes his throat*): He went "*Ngungghhhh*!"

Not bad—I'm told that fourth graders really go for this one. Let's try another.

A man and his wife tried and tried to have a baby, but without success. Years went by and they went on trying, but no

luck. They liked each other, so the work was always a pleasure, but they grew a bit sad along the way. Finally, she got pregnant, was very careful, and gave birth to a beautiful eight-pound-two-ounce baby boy. The couple were beside themselves with happiness. At the hospital that night, she told her husband to stop by the local newspaper and arrange for a birth announcement, to tell all their friends the good news. First thing next morning, she asked if he'd done the errand.

"Yes, I did," he said, "but I had no idea those little notices in the paper were so expensive."

"Expensive?" she said. "How much was it?"

"It was eight hundred and thirty-seven dollars. I have the receipt."

"Eight hundred and thirty-seven dollars!" she cried. "But that's impossible. You must have made some mistake. Tell me exactly what happened."

"There was a young lady behind a counter at the paper, who gave me the form to fill out," he said. "I put in your name and my name and little Teddy's name and weight, and when we'd be home again and, you know, ready to see friends. I handed it back to her and she counted up the words and said, 'How many insertions?' I said twice a week for fourteen years, and she gave me the bill. O.K.?"

I heard this tale more than fifty years ago, when my first wife, Evelyn, and I were invited to tea by a rather elegant older couple who were new to our little Rockland County community. They were in their seventies, at least, and very welcoming, and it was just the four of us. We barely knew them and I was surprised when he turned and asked her to tell us the joke about the couple trying to have a baby. "Oh, no," she said, "they wouldn't want to hear that."

"Oh, come on, dear—they'll love it," he said, smiling at her. I groaned inwardly and was preparing a forced smile while she started off shyly, but then, of course, the four of us fell over laughing together.

That night, Evelyn said, "Did you see Keith's face while Edie was telling that story? Did you see hers? Do you think it's possible that they're still—you know, still doing it?"

"Yes, I did—yes, I do," I said. "I was

thinking exactly the same thing. They're amazing."

This was news back then, but probably shouldn't be by now. I remember a passage I came upon years later, in an Op-Ed piece in the *Times*, written by a man who'd just lost his wife. "We slept naked in the same bed for forty years," it went. There was also my splendid colleague Bob Bingham, dying in his late fifties, who was asked by a friend what he'd missed or would do differently if given the chance. He thought for an instant, and said, "More venery."

More venery. More love; more closeness; more sex and romance. Bring it back, no matter what, no matter how old we are. This fervent cry of ours has been certified by Simone de Beauvoir and Alice Munro and Laurence Olivier and any number of remarried or recoupled ancient classmates of ours. Laurence Olivier? I'm thinking of what he says somewhere in an interview: "Inside, we're all seventeen, with red lips."

This is a dodgy subject, coming as it does here from a recent widower, and I will risk a further breach of code and add that this was something that Carol and I now and then idly discussed. We didn't quite see the point of memorial fidelity. In our view, the departed spouse—we always thought it would be me—wouldn't be around anymore but knew or had known that he or she was loved forever. Please go ahead, then, sweetheart—don't miss a moment. Carol said this last: "If you haven't found someone else by a year after I'm gone I'll come back and haunt you."

Getting old is the second-biggest surprise of my life, but the first, by a mile, is our unceasing need for deep attachment and intimate love. We oldies yearn daily and hourly for conversation and a renewed domesticity, for company at the movies or while visiting a museum, for someone close by in the car when coming home at night. This is why we throng Match.com and OkCupid in such numbers—but not just for this, surely. Rowing in Eden (in Emily Dickinson's words: "Rowing in Eden—/ Ah—the sea") isn't reserved for the lithe and young, the dating or the

hooked-up or the just lavishly married, or even for couples in the middle-aged mixed-doubles semifinals, thank God. No personal confession or revelation impends here, but these feelings in old folks are widely treated like a raunchy secret. The invisibility factor—you've had your turn—is back at it again. But I believe that everyone in the world wants to be with someone else tonight, together in the dark, with the sweet warmth of a hip or a foot or a bare expanse of shoulder within reach. Those of us who have lost that, whatever our age, never lose the longing: just look at our faces. If it returns, we seize upon it avidly, stunned and altered again.

Nothing is easy at this age, and first meetings for old lovers can be a high-risk venture. Reticence and awkwardness slip into the room. Also happiness. A wealthy old widower I knew married a nurse he met while in the hospital, but had trouble remembering her name afterward. He called her "kid." An eighty-plus, twice-widowed lady I'd once known found still another love, a frail but vibrant Midwest professor, now close to ninety, and the pair got in two or three happy years together before he died as well. When she called his children and arranged to pick up her things at his house, she found every possession of hers lined up outside the front door.

But to hell with them and with all that, O.K.? Here's to you, old dears. You got this right, every one of you. Hook,

line, and sinker; never mind the why or wherefore; somewhere in the night; love me forever, or at least until next week. For us and for anyone this unsettles, anyone who's younger and still squirms at the vision of an old couple embracing, I'd offer John Updike's "Sex or death: you take your

pick"—a line that appears (in a slightly different form) in a late story of his, "Playing with Dynamite."

This is a great question, an excellent insurance-plan choice, I mean. I think it's in the Affordable Care Act somewhere. Take it from us, who know about the emptiness of loss, and are still cruising along here feeling lucky and not yet entirely alone. ♦



A REPORTER AT LARGE

CHEAP WORDS

Amazon is good for customers. But is it good for books?

BY GEORGE PACKER



In the era of the Kindle, a book costs the same price as a sandwich. Dennis Johnson, an independent publisher, says that "Amazon

CONSTRUCTION BY IAN WRIGHT



Amazon is a global superstore, like Walmart. It's also a hardware manufacturer, like Apple, and a utility, like Con Edison, and a video distributor, like Netflix, and a book publisher, like Random House, and a production studio, like Paramount, and a literary magazine, like *The Paris Review*, and a grocery deliverer, like FreshDirect, and someday it might be a package service, like U.P.S. Its founder and chief executive, Jeff Bezos, also owns a major newspaper, the *Washington Post*. All these streams and tributaries make Amazon something radically new in the history of American business. Sam Walton wanted merely to be the world's biggest retailer. After Apple launched the iPod, Steve Jobs didn't sign up pop stars for recording contracts. A.T. & T. doesn't build transmission towers and rent them to smaller phone companies, the way Amazon Web Services provides server infrastructure for startups (not to mention the C.I.A.). Amazon's identity and goals are never clear and always fluid, which makes the company destabilizing and intimidating.

Bezos originally thought of calling his company Relentless.com—that U.R.L. still takes you to Amazon's site—before adopting the name of the world's largest river by volume. (If Bezos were a reader of classic American fiction, he might have hit upon Octopus.com.) Amazon's shape-shifting, engulfing quality, its tentacles extending in all directions, makes it unusual even in the tech industry, where rapid growth, not profitability, is the measure of success. Amazon is not just the "Everything Store," to quote the title of Brad Stone's rich chronicle of Bezos and his company; it's more like the Everything. What remains constant is ambition, and the search for new things to be ambitious about.

It seems preposterous now, but Amazon began as a bookstore. In 1994, at the age of thirty, Bezos, a Princeton graduate, quit his job at a Manhattan hedge fund and moved to Seattle to found a company that could ride the exponential growth of the early commercial Internet. (Bezos calculated that, in 1993, usage climbed by two hundred and thirty thousand per cent.) His wife, MacKenzie, is a novelist who studied under Toni Morrison at Princeton; according to Stone, Bezos's favorite novel is Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*, which is on the suggested reading list for Amazon executives. All the other titles, including "Sam Walton, Made in



"Well, if you haven't seen him, do you know a good recipe for puff pastry?"

America: My Story," are business books, and even Ishiguro's novel—about a self-erasing English butler who realizes that he has missed his chance at happiness in love—offers what Bezos calls a "regret-minimization framework": how not to end up like the butler. Bezos is, above all things, pragmatic. (He declined to be interviewed for this article.)

It wasn't a love of books that led him to start an online bookstore. "It was totally based on the property of books as a product," Shel Kaphan, Bezos's former deputy, says. Books are easy to ship and hard to break, and there was a major distribution warehouse in Oregon. Crucially, there are far too many books, in and out of print, to sell even a fraction of them at a physical store. The vast selection made possible by the Internet gave Amazon its initial advantage, and a wedge into selling everything else. For Bezos to have seen a bookstore as a means to world domination at the beginning of the Internet age, when there was already a crisis of confidence in the publishing world, in a country not known for its book-crazy public, was a stroke of business genius.

In 1995, in Chicago, Bezos manned an Amazon booth at the annual conclave of the publishing industry, which is now called BookExpo America. Roger Doeren, from a Kansas City store called

Rainy Day Books, was stopped short by Amazon's sign: "Earth's Biggest Bookstore." Approaching Bezos, he asked, "Where is Earth's biggest bookstore?"

"Cyberspace," Bezos replied.

"We started a Web site last year. Who are your suppliers?"

"Ingram, and Baker & Taylor."

"Ours, too. What's your database?"

"Books in Print."

"Ours, too. So what makes you Earth's biggest?"

"We have the most affiliate links"—a form of online advertising.

Doeren considered this, then asked, "What's your business model?"

Bezos said that Amazon intended to sell books as a way of gathering data on affluent, educated shoppers. The books would be priced close to cost, in order to increase sales volume. After collecting data on millions of customers, Amazon could figure out how to sell everything else dirt cheap on the Internet. (Amazon says that its original business plan "contemplated only books.")

Afterward, Doeren told his partner at Rainy Day Books, Vivien Jennings, "I just met the world's biggest snake-oil salesman. It's going to be really bad for books."

Before Google, and long before Facebook, Bezos had realized that the greatest value of an online company lay in the con-

sumer data it collected. Two decades later, Amazon sells a bewildering array of products: lawnmowers, iPods, art work, toys, diapers, dildos, shoes, bike racks, gun safes, 3-D printers. Amazon's code of corporate secrecy is extreme—it won't confirm how many Seattle employees it has, or how many Kindle e-readers have been sold—so it's impossible to know for sure, but, according to one publisher's estimate, book sales in the U.S. now make up no more than seven per cent of the company's roughly seventy-five billion dollars in annual revenue.

Origins, though, leave lasting marks, and Amazon remains intimately tangled up in books. Few notice if Amazon prices an electronics store out of business (except its staff); but, in the influential, self-conscious world of people who care about reading, Amazon's unparalleled power generates endless discussion, along with paranoia, resentment, confusion, and yearning. For its part, Amazon continues to expend considerable effort both to dominate this small, fragile market and to win the hearts and minds of readers. To many book professionals, Amazon is a ruthless predator. The company claims to want a more literate world—and it came along when the book world was in distress, offering a vital new source of sales. But then it started asking a lot of personal questions, and it created dependency and harshly exploited its leverage; eventually, the book world realized that Amazon had its house keys and its bank-account number, and wondered if that had been the intention all along.

Recently, Amazon even started creating its own "content"—publishing books. The results have been decidedly mixed. A monopoly is dangerous because it concentrates so much economic power, but in the book business the prospect of a single owner of both the means of production and the modes of distribution is especially worrisome: it would give Amazon more control over the exchange of ideas than any company in U.S. history. Even in the iPhone age, books remain central to American intellectual life, and perhaps to democracy. And so the big question is not just whether Amazon is bad for the book industry; it's whether Amazon is bad for books.

In the nineteen-nineties, a different leviathan held publishers and independent bookstores in its grasp: chain stores, led by Barnes & Noble. When Amazon emerged, publishers in New York

suddenly had a new buyer that paid quickly, sold their backlist as well as new titles, and, unlike traditional bookstores, made very few returns. Publishers must buy back unsold inventory from retailers, an archaic and costly practice that one ex-Amazon employee called “an absurdly inefficient model, worse than my uncle sending his laundry home from college.”

John Sargent, who is the chief executive of Macmillan, first met Bezos in the mid-nineties, at a hotel in Washington, D.C. “He was this incredibly energetic guy,” Sargent said. “I thought it was a really good idea.” Jane Friedman, who was then an associate publisher at Knopf, and subsequently ran HarperCollins, said of Bezos, “I was completely taken with him. He was a skinny kid, he was young, he was excitable, and he was completely serious about what he was doing. I drank the Kool-Aid.”

Amazon’s revenue multiplied every year. In the late nineties, an Amazon vice-president named Mary Morouse e-mailed her colleagues after a trip to visit publishers in New York. “We are certainly popular with them,” she wrote. “They rave about Amazon.com—both as a store/service and a great way to market books. There were several examples cited where Amazon.com ‘made’ titles. And they love our sales numbers.”

Publishers weren’t troubled that Amazon sold their books at dramatic discounts. They all wanted to collaborate with the Seattle upstart, and they used Amazon as an information resource; it was a vast improvement over the old green-bound copies of “Books in Print.” A New York marketing executive told me, “When Amazon came into the picture, metadata”—code numbers, Library of Congress categories, search keywords—“became an integral part of books.” A few farsighted publishers wondered if Amazon would eventually control so much of the market that it would stop selling books at cost and raise prices to become more profitable.

By 1997, when the company went public, Amazon’s book inventory could have filled six football fields. But someone who read Bezos’s year-end letter to shareholders might well have thought that Amazon’s eight-hundred-and-thirty-eight-per-cent sales growth had been in shoes, since he barely mentioned books. In the letter, Bezos noted tersely,

“We are planning to add music to our product offering.” (Unlike Jobs, Bezos wasn’t a passionate listener: he once agreed to be interviewed for a program about the Beatles, and when employees, prepping the boss, asked him to name a favorite Beatles tune, Bezos chose “America,” by Simon & Garfunkel.) Soon after music came DVDs and consumer electronics. A New York literary agent told me that books were Amazon’s version of “a gateway drug.”

Sargent said that Bezos’s ambition was apparent to him from the beginning—“My God, he drives hard.” But he couldn’t see Bezos’s master plan “for shit.” “He was already going to be the Everything Store,” Sargent said when we met in his trapezoidal office, in the narrow wedge of the Flatiron Building. “I thought he was just a bookstore, stupid me. Books were going to be the way to get the names and the data. Books were his customer-acquisition strategy.” As long as Amazon kept growing like mad, investors would pour in money and Wall Street wouldn’t pay much attention to profits. (The company didn’t have a profitable quarter until 2001, and still struggles to stay in the black.)

In the mid- to late nineties, Bezos hired two dozen writers and editors to produce copy for the Web site. One of them—Amazon employee No. 55—was a cultural critic from New York named James Marcus, who, in turn, brought in his friend Kerry Fried, who edited his pieces at the *Village Voice*. (She had also worked at several New York publishers and at *The New York Review of Books*.) For these refugees from New York, where jobs in publishing and journalism were already beginning to thin out, Amazon offered the thrill of working at a rising power, with stock options and an enormous audience.

Marcus edited the home page, which was visited by at least thirty million people a day. Under the rubric “Books Favorites,” he and his staff often promoted novels that needed a push to claim an audience, such as Myla Goldberg’s “Bee Season.” Marcus wrote hundreds of short book reviews and thousands of descriptive blurbs; Fried, who edited the Literature and Fiction section with Marcus, posted interviews with authors, including Penelope Fitzgerald and Stanley Kunitz. In 2004, Marcus, now the executive editor of *Harper’s*, published a wry, bittersweet

memoir of his experience, “Amazonia.” He told me, “It was useful to Amazon, as a business strategy, to convey the feeling of your beloved indie bookstore, full of hip, book-loving people.”

Readers, especially isolated ones, adored Amazon. “We heard from people all the time,” Marcus said. “I live in some Podunk town, the nearest bookstore is a hundred miles from my house, and now I can get the most obscure book.” Marcus asked Toni Morrison to do an interview. “I’m happy to talk,” she told him. “I hear you’re selling more books than anyone in the history of the world.”

In “Amazonia,” Marcus describes Bezos’s “anticharismatic charisma, which would have mortified a Great Man of a century ago but seemed just right for our nerd-driven meritocracy.” In those years, Bezos joined his staff for the round-the-clock work of “picking” and shipping books at warehouses during the holiday season. One day in 1997, Fried went into the company kitchen and found him absorbed in assembling an ant farm. “He had a lot of curiosity,” she said. “I keep hearing about Jeff’s temper, but I have to say I never witnessed it. He was really pleasant and fun.” His ambition sometimes had an idealistic cast: he wanted Amazon to warehouse two copies of every book ever printed, an unrealized dream grandly called the Alexandria Project.

At Amazon, original writing wasn’t even called “content.” It was known as “verbiage,” simplified to “verbage.” Amazon’s writers and editors formed a counterculture that never fit easily in a company ruled by computer engineers and M.B.A.s, who valued data most and believed only in measurable truths. “The key to understanding Amazon is the hiring process,” one former employee said. “You’re not hired to do a particular job—you’re hired to be an Amazonian. Lots of managers had to take the Myers-Briggs personality tests. Eighty per cent of them came in two or three similar categories, and Bezos is the same: introverted, detail-oriented, engineer-type personality. Not musicians, designers, salesmen. The vast majority fall within the same personality type—people who graduate at the top of their class at M.I.T. and have no idea what to say to a woman in a bar.”

The humanists at Amazon brought a strain of intellectual irony that set them apart from the company’s cult of

relentlessness. Bezos closed annual reports to shareholders with an exhortation to experiment and to fight complacency: “This is still Day 1.” Marcus and Fried joked about writing a novel that would begin, “It was Day 1. Again.” (Amazon recently began publishing a literary magazine for its Kindle device: *Day One*.)

One important way that Bezos’s writers and editors differed from the tech and business people was in their gentler attitude toward book publishers. Even when Amazon’s entire business was in books, and its relations with publishers were fairly good, it nurtured a certain impatience with New York houses that supplied the products it sold. Mary Morouse’s account of her trip east in 1999 reported, “I had one S.V.P. of sales tell me, ‘We like any account who is growing faster than we are, but we don’t really forecast that way.’ When I asked him how much they are growing, he said ‘I don’t know. I think we were flat last year.’ That gives you some idea of the level of business focus.” According to Marcus, Amazon executives considered publishing people “antediluvian losers with rotary phones and inventory systems designed in 1968 and warehouses full of crap.” Publishers kept no data on customers, making their bets on books a matter of instinct rather than metrics. They were full of inefficiencies, starting with overpriced Manhattan offices. There was “a general feeling that the New York publishing business was just this cloistered, Gilded Age antique just barely getting by in a sort of Colonial Williamsburg of commerce, but when Amazon waded into this they would show publishing how it was done.”

During the 1999 holiday season, Amazon tried publishing books, leasing the rights to a defunct imprint called Weathervane and putting out a few titles. “These were not incipient best-sellers,” Marcus writes. “They were creatures from the black lagoon of the remainder table”—Christmas recipes and the like, selected with no apparent thought. Employees with publishing experience, like Fried, were not consulted. Weathervane fell into an oblivion so complete that there’s no trace of it on the Internet. (Representatives

at the company today claim never to have heard of it.) Nobody at Amazon seemed to absorb any lessons from the failure. A decade later, the company would try again.

Amazon was a megastore, not an indie bookshop, let alone a literary review, and its writers were under pressure to prove that their work produced sales. If a customer clicked on a review or an interview, then left the page without making a purchase, it was logged as a Repel. Marcus was informed that his repulsion rate was too high. “Nobody ever felt safe,” Fried said of her editorial colleagues. “I took home my Rolodex every day.”



Book retailers, such as Barnes & Noble, negoti-

ate “co-op,” or cooperative promotional fees, from publishers in exchange for prominent product placement. It’s a way for a retailer to get a larger discount without violating the 1936 Robinson-Patman Act, which prohibits producers from offering price advantages to favored retailers. Although co-op fees weren’t “dreamed up by Amazon,” Marcus told me, “Amazon proved to be particularly good at squeezing this money out of publishers.” Publishers paid ten thousand dollars for a book to be prominently featured on the home page. They never knew exactly how much these payments helped sales, and negotiations over them became tense. (In a statement, Amazon said, “As a general practice, we don’t discuss our business negotiations with publishers.”)

Each category within Amazon’s Books division had to collect co-op fees, and revenue targets rose steeply. In 1999, the company received \$3,621,250 in co-op fees; the goal for 2000 was set at \$9.25 million. When Marcus asked if publishers should be given sales targets in exchange for their payments, Lyn Blake, the executive who had created the co-op program, said no, adding, “Look, it’s the cost of doing business.” The editorial staff was reminded that the money, unlike the receipts on sold books, went straight to Amazon’s bottom line. Judgments about which books should be featured on the site were increasingly driven by promotional fees.

Around this time, a group called the “personalization team,” or P13N, started to replace editorial suggestions for readers with algorithms that used customers’ history to make recommendations for future purchases. At Amazon, “personalization” meant data analytics and statistical probability. Author interviews became less frequent, and in-house essays were subsumed by customer reviews, which cost the company nothing. Tim Appelo, the entertainment editor at the time, said, “You could be the Platonic ideal of the reviewer, and you would not beat even those rather crude early algorithms.” Amazon’s departments competed with one another almost as fiercely as they did with other companies. According to Brad Stone, a trash-talking sign was hung on a wall in the P13N office: “PEOPLE FORGET THAT JOHN HENRY DIED IN THE END.” Machines defeated human beings.

In December, 1999, at the height of the dot-com mania, *Time* named Bezos its Person of the Year. “Amazon isn’t about technology or even commerce,” the breathless cover article announced. “Amazon is, like every other site on the Web, a content play.” Yet this was the moment, Marcus said, when “content” people were “on the way out.” Although the writers and the editors made the site more interesting, and easier to navigate, they didn’t bring more customers. One day, Fried discovered a memo, written by a programmer and accidentally left on a printer, which suggested eliminating the editorial department. Anne Hurley, the editor-in-chief of the DVD and Video section, was viewed dismissively by her boss, Jason Kilar, who went on to run the video-streaming company Hulu. He told her, “I’m sorry, Anne, I just don’t see what value you add.” (Kilar denies saying this.)

In July, 2000, Bezos sent out a company-wide e-mail with the subject line “Smile, remember it’s Day 1, and let’s kick some butt.” Several months earlier, the bubble had burst, and Amazon’s overcapitalized share price was plunging. For the first time, Wall Street lost faith in the company, and Bezos announced that the next eighteen months would be devoted to making “serious profits.” Marcus and Fried quit before they could be laid off. Tim Appelo took Marcus’s place. “I was the last human editor of the home page,” he told me. “By the time I got there, it was only partly human.” By 2002, the home

page was fully automated. (Today, eight editors select titles to be featured on the Books page, and if you scour the site you can find a books blog, Omnivoracious, but its offerings seem marginal to the retail enterprise.) Editorial content had served its purpose, just as selling books had served its purpose, and Amazon's conquistadores galloped onward.

The fact that Amazon once devoted significant space on its site to editorial judgments—to thinking and writing—would be an obscure footnote if not for certain turns in the company's more recent history. According to one insider, around 2008—when the company was selling far more than books, and was making twenty billion dollars a year in revenue, more than the combined sales of all other American bookstores—Amazon began thinking of content as central to its business. Authors started to be considered among the company's most important customers. By then, Amazon had lost much of the market in selling music and videos to Apple and Netflix, and its relations with publishers were deteriorating. These difficulties offended Bezos's ideal of “seamless” commerce. “The company despises friction in the marketplace,” the Amazon insider said. “It's easier for us to sell books and make books happen if we do it our way and not deal with others. It's a tech-industry thing: ‘We think we can do it better.’” If you could control the content, you controlled everything.

Many publishers had come to regard Amazon as a heavy in khakis and oxford shirts. In its drive for profitability, Amazon did not raise retail prices; it simply squeezed its suppliers harder, much as Walmart had done with manufacturers. Amazon demanded ever-larger co-op fees and better shipping terms; publishers knew that they would stop being favored by the site's recommendation algorithms if they didn't comply. Eventually, they all did. (Few customers realize that the results generated by Amazon's search engine are partly determined by promotional fees.) Sales meetings in Seattle were now all about payments, not new books, and the size of orders was predicated on algorithms, rather than on the enthusiasm of the publishers' sales staff and Amazon's own buyers, who were rebranded as “inventory managers.” Brad Stone describes one campaign to pressure the most vul-

nerable publishers for better terms: internally, it was known as the Gazelle Project, after Bezos suggested “that Amazon should approach these small publishers the way a cheetah would pursue a sickly gazelle.” (Company lawyers later changed the name to the Small Publisher Negotiation Program.)

“The Gazelle Project—that was me,” Dennis Johnson, a co-owner of Melville House, a small publisher with offices on the Brooklyn waterfront, said. Melville House puts out quality fiction and nonfiction, including “Debt: The First 5,000 Years,” by the anarchist anthropologist David Graeber; “The Flight of the Intellectuals,” by Paul Berman; and translations of the German novelist Hans Fallada. In 2004, when Melville House was just getting started, Johnson's distributor called him and described his negotiations with Amazon as being “like dinner with the Godfather.” Amazon wanted a payment without having to reveal how many Melville House books were sold on the site. (Amazon rarely makes its sales figures public, using bar graphs without numbers in presentations.) “‘Fuck you’ was my attitude,” Johnson said. “‘They're bluffing—I'm going to call their bluff.’ I'm a working-class kid. I come at this from ‘This is my company, you don't come in here.’” Johnson, who remains one of the few people in publishing willing to criticize Amazon on the record, contacted reporters, and *Publishers Weekly* ran a story. By the next day, the BUY buttons had disappeared from Melville House's titles on

Amazon.com. Not long afterward, the Book Expo was held at the Javits Center, in Manhattan. Two young men in suits approached Melville House's booth and pointed fingers at Johnson. “When are you going to get with the program?” they asked. The men were wearing Amazon nametags.

Before the impasse, Amazon had represented eight per cent of Melville House's sales, more than Johnson could afford to lose. So he capitulated. “I paid that bribe”—he wouldn't disclose the amount—“and the books reappeared.”

The process of paying co-op fees to promote individual titles grew increasingly complex, especially after Amazon began selling different levels of promotion. Without dropping co-op fees entirely, Amazon simplified its system: publishers were asked to hand over a percentage of their previous year's sales on the site, as “marketing development funds.” Publishers dread the annual negotiation of this payoff; one of them described it as “squeezing our nuts.” The figure keeps rising, though less for the giant pachyderms than for the sickly gazelles. According to the marketing executive, the larger houses, which used to pay two or three per cent of their net sales through Amazon, now relinquish five to seven per cent of gross sales, pushing Amazon's percentage discount on books into the mid-fifties. Random House currently gives Amazon an effective discount of around fifty-three per cent.

For a smaller house, Amazon's total discount can go as high as sixty per cent,



which cuts deeply into already slim profit margins. Because Amazon manages its inventory so well, it often buys books from small publishers with the understanding that it can't return them, for an even deeper discount. Publishers sometimes pass on this cost to authors, by redefining royalties as a percentage of the publisher's receipts, not of the book's list price. Recently, publishers say, Amazon began demanding an additional payment, amounting to approximately one per cent of net sales. Once the fee was paid, publishing executives could discuss marketing strategies with Amazon staff; otherwise, they'd have to rely on the company's algorithms. "There really are rules in play," a former Amazon executive says. If a publisher resists when Amazon asks for a "bump" in payments, its books "can't be promoted."

In 2003, Amazon introduced Search Inside the Book, which allowed customers to hunt for a phrase in a book without having to buy it. Publishers warily allowed Amazon to scan some of their titles and convert the images into searchable text. They didn't realize that they were giving Amazon a huge head start over potential competitors when it decided to go into the digital-books business.

In the mid-aughts, Bezos, having watched Apple take over the music-selling business with iTunes and the iPod, became determined not to let the same thing happen with books. In 2004, he set up a lab in Silicon Valley that would build Amazon's first piece of consumer hardware: a device for reading digital books. According to Stone's book, Bezos told the executive running the project, "Proceed as if your goal is to put everyone selling physical books out of a job." Meanwhile, Amazon began pushing publishers to digitize and sign retail agreements on as many titles as possible. "Our charter was to launch with a hundred thousand books and ninety per cent of the best-seller list," Jeff Steele, who worked on the project, said. (Steele left the company because he objected to Amazon's heavy-handed tactics with publishers.) In late 2007, at a press conference in New York, Bezos unveiled the Kindle, a simple, lightweight device that—in a crucial improvement over previous e-readers—could store as many as two hundred books, downloaded from

Amazon's 3G network. Bezos announced that the price of best-sellers and new titles would be nine-ninety-nine, regardless of length or quality—a figure that Bezos, inspired by Apple's sale of songs on iTunes for ninety-nine cents, basically pulled out of thin air. Amazon had carefully concealed the number from publishers. "We didn't want to let that cat out of the bag," Steele said.

The price was below wholesale in some cases, and so low that it represented a serious threat to the market in twenty-six-dollar hardcovers. Bookstores that depended on hardcover sales—from Barnes & Noble and Borders (which liquidated its business in 2011) to Rainy Day Books in Kansas City—glimpsed their possible doom. If reading went entirely digital, what purpose would they serve? The next year, 2008, which brought the financial crisis, was disastrous for bookstores and publishers alike, with widespread layoffs.

By 2010, Amazon controlled ninety per cent of the market in digital books—a dominance that almost no company, in any industry, could claim. Its prohibitively low prices warded off competition. The literary agent Andrew Wylie (whose firm represents me) says, "What Bezos wants is to drag the retail price down as low as he can get it—a dollar-ninety-nine, even ninety-nine cents. That's the Apple play—'What we want is traffic through our device, and we'll do anything to get there.' If customers grew used to paying just a few dollars for an e-book, how long before publishers would have to slash the cover price of all their titles?"

Publishers looked around for a competitor to Amazon, and they found one in Apple, which was getting ready to introduce the iPad, and the iBooks Store. Apple wanted a deal with each of the Big Six houses (Hachette, HarperCollins, Macmillan, Penguin, Random House, and Simon & Schuster) that would allow the publishers to set the retail price of titles on iBooks, with Apple taking a thirty-per-cent commission on each sale. This was known as the "agency model," and, in some ways, it offered the publishers a worse deal than selling wholesale to Amazon. But it gave publishers control over pricing and a way to challenge Amazon's grip on the market. Apple's terms included the provision that it could match the price of any rival, which induced the publishers to impose the agency model on

all digital retailers, including Amazon.

Five of the Big Six went along with Apple. (Random House was the holdout.) Most of the executives let Amazon know of the change by phone or e-mail, but John Sargent flew out to Seattle to meet with four Amazon executives, including Russ Grandinetti, the vice-president of Kindle content. In an e-mail to a friend, Sargent wrote, "Am on my way out to Seattle to get my ass kicked by Amazon."

Sargent's gesture didn't seem to matter much to the Amazon executives, who were used to imposing their own terms. Seated at a table in a small conference room, Sargent said that Macmillan wanted to switch to the agency model for e-books, and that if Amazon refused Macmillan would withhold digital editions until seven months after print publication. The discussion was angry and brief. After twenty minutes, Grandinetti escorted Sargent out of the building. The next day, Amazon removed the BUY buttons from Macmillan's print and digital titles on its site, only to restore them a week later, under heavy criticism. Amazon unwillingly accepted the agency model, and within a couple of months e-books were selling for as much as fourteen dollars and ninety-nine cents.

Amazon filed a complaint with the Federal Trade Commission. In April, 2012, the Justice Department sued Apple and the five publishers for conspiring to raise prices and restrain competition. Eventually, all the publishers settled with the government. (Macmillan was the last, after Sargent learned that potential damages could far exceed the equity value of the company.) Macmillan was obliged to pay twenty million dollars, and Penguin seventy-five million—enormous sums in a business that has always struggled to maintain respectable profit margins.

Apple fought the charges, and the case went to trial last June. Grandinetti, Sargent, and others testified in the federal courthouse in lower Manhattan. As proof of collusion, the government presented evidence of e-mails, phone calls, and dinners among the Big Six publishers during their negotiations with Apple. Sargent and other executives acknowledged that they wanted higher prices for e-books, but they argued that the evidence showed them only to be competitors in an incestuous business, not conspirators. On July 10th, Judge Denise

Cote ruled in the government's favor.

Apple, facing up to eight hundred and forty million dollars in damages, has appealed. As Apple and the publishers see it, the ruling ignored the context of the case: when the key events occurred, Amazon effectively had a monopoly in digital books and was selling them so cheaply that it resembled predatory pricing—a barrier to entry for potential competitors. Since then, Amazon's share of the e-book market has dropped, levelling off at about sixty-five per cent, with the rest going largely to Apple and to Barnes & Noble, which sells the Nook e-reader. In other words, before the feds stepped in, the agency model introduced competition to the market. But the court's decision reflected a trend in legal thinking among liberals and conservatives alike, going back to the seventies, that looks at anti-trust cases from the perspective of consumers, not producers: what matters is lowering prices, even if that goal comes at the expense of competition. Barry Lynn, a market-policy expert at the New America Foundation, said, "It's one of the main factors that's led to massive consolidation." Judge Cote's opinion described Amazon's business practices in glowing terms, and she argued, "If Apple is suggesting that Amazon was engaging in illegal, monopolistic practices, and that Apple's combination with the Publisher Defendants to deprive a monopolist of some of its market power is pro-competitive and healthy for our economy, it is wrong."

Those were sweet words for a company that declares itself to be "Earth's most customer-centric company." Even its bitterest critics reluctantly admit to using Amazon, unable to resist its unparalleled selection, price, and convenience. When Bezos talks about serving the customer, it's as if he were articulating his purpose in life. "The customer is almost theological," James Marcus said. "Any sacrifice is suitable for the customer."

"Jeff is trying to create a machine that assumes the shape of public demand," Tim Appelo, the former entertainment editor, said. "He resembles a very, very smart shmoo—he only wants to serve, to make you happy." Appelo was referring to Al Capp's smiling blob of a cartoon character, which happily provides people with whatever they need: milk, eggs, butter, even its own tasty self. With Amazon's



"We found you and raised you as one of us, so we were just wondering, at what point did you learn to shave?"

patented 1-Click shopping, which already knows your address and credit-card information, there's just you and the BUY button; transactions are as quick and thoughtless as scratching an itch. "It's sort of a masturbatory culture," the marketing executive said. If you pay seventy-nine dollars annually to become an Amazon Prime member, a box with the Amazon smile appears at your door two days after you click, with free shipping. Amazon's next frontier is same-day delivery: first in certain American cities, then throughout the U.S., then the world. In December, the company patented "anticipatory shipping," which will use your shopping data to put items that you don't yet know you want to buy, but will soon enough, on a truck or in a warehouse near you.

Until recently, even taxes were airbrushed away. For years, Amazon fought furiously against paying sales taxes in states where it had no warehouses (and even where it did). California and other states, under pressure from retailers complaining about Amazon's unfair advantage, passed online-sales-tax laws. Amazon, with fulfillment centers across the country, favors a national online-sales-tax policy, perhaps because smaller online rivals would find it overwhelming to navigate all

the tax jurisdictions across the country.

At Amazon.com, all the irritation and wasted time of a shopping expedition are gone—the search for a parking place, the surly floor clerk, the sold-out items, the perversely slow person ahead of you at checkout. You don't have to think about how much the cashier, with her wrist in a splint, makes per hour. The Internet's invisibility shields Amazon from some of the criticism directed at its archrival Walmart, with its all-too-human superstores. Online commerce allows even conscientious consumers to forget that other people are involved.

Amazon employs or subcontracts tens of thousands of warehouse workers, with seasonal variation, often building its fulfillment centers in areas with high unemployment and low wages. Accounts from inside the centers describe the work of picking, boxing, and shipping books and dog food and beard trimmers as a high-tech version of the dehumanized factory floor satirized in Chaplin's "Modern Times." Pickers holding computerized handsets are perpetually timed and measured as they fast-walk up to eleven miles per shift around a million-square-foot warehouse, expected to collect orders in as little as thirty-three seconds. After watching footage taken by an undercover

BBC reporter, a stress expert said, “The evidence shows increased risk of mental illness and physical illness.” The company says that its warehouse jobs are “similar to jobs in many other industries.”

Last September, lawyers brought a class-action lawsuit against Amazon, on behalf of a warehouse worker in Pennsylvania named Neal Heimbach, for unpaid wages: employees at the fulfillment center outside Allentown must wait in line to pass through metal detectors, and submit their belongings to be searched, when they leave for lunch and at the end of their shift. The process takes ten to twenty minutes each time. Theft is a common concern in Amazon warehouses—no doubt, a knock-on effect of the absence of bonds between the company and the ever-shifting roster of low-paid employees.

None of Amazon’s U.S. workers belong to unions, because the customer would suffer. A company executive told the *Times* that Amazon considers unions to be obstacles that would impede its ability to improve customer service. In 2011, the Allentown *Morning Call* published an investigative series with accounts of multiple ambulances being parked outside a warehouse during a heat wave, in order to ferry overcome workers to emergency rooms. Afterward, Amazon installed air-conditioners, although their arrival coincided with the expansion of grocery services. In any case, Amazon’s warehouse jobs are gradually being taken over by robots. Bezos recently predicted to a gob-smacked Charlie Rose that, in five years, packages will be delivered by small drones. Then Amazon will have eliminated the human factor from shopping, and we will finally be all alone with our purchases.

The combination of ceaseless innovation and low-wage drudgery makes Amazon the epitome of a successful New Economy company. It’s hiring as fast as it can—nearly thirty thousand employees last year. But its brand of creative destruction might be killing more jobs than it makes. According to a recent study of U.S. Census data by the Institute for Local Self-Reliance, in Washington, brick-and-mortar retailers employ forty-seven people for every ten million dollars in revenue earned; Amazon employs fourteen.

In the book industry, many of those formerly employed people staffed independent stores. Two decades ago, there

DIMINUTION

Socrates taught Plato and Plato taught Aristotle and Aristotle taught Alexander the Great, who founded a city that would house the most voluminous library of the ancient world—until it was burned, until forgetting came back into vogue. The great minds come down through the years like monkeys descending from high branches. Always, a leopard is waiting to greet them—in the tall grass, among the magnetic berries, in the place they should have checked.

—Charles Rafferty

were some four thousand in America, and many of them functioned as cultural centers where people browsed and exchanged ideas. Today, there are fewer than two thousand—although, with Borders dead and Barnes & Noble ailing, the indies are making a small comeback. Vivien Jennings, of Rainy Day Books, has been in business for thirty-eight years. “We know our customers, and the other independents are the same,” she said. “We know what they read better than any recommendation engine.”

After Amazon’s legal triumph, some publishing people were driven to the wild surmise that the company had colluded with the Justice Department, if not micromanaged the entire case. They grasped at the fact that Jamie Gorelick, a deputy attorney general in the Clinton Administration, and a friend of Attorney General Eric Holder, serves on Amazon’s board, and that three weeks after Judge Cote’s decision President Barack Obama appeared at an Amazon warehouse in Chattanooga—where workers earn, on average, eleven dollars an hour—to praise the company’s creation of good jobs. The coup de grâce came last November, when the cash-strapped U.S. Postal Service announced a special partnership to deliver Amazon—and only Amazon—packages on Sundays, with the terms kept under official seal. To some people in the book world, Obama’s embrace of their nemesis felt like a betrayal. One literary agent said, “It’s strange that a President who’s an author, and whose primary income has come from being an author, was siding with a monopoly that wants to undercut publishers.”

Since the arrival of the Kindle, the tension between Amazon and the publishers

has become an open battle. The conflict reflects not only business antagonism amid technological change but a division between the two coasts, with different cultural styles and a philosophical disagreement about what techies call “disruption.”

“Book publishing always has a rhetoric of the fallen age,” a senior editor at a major house told me. “It was always better before you got here. The tech guys—it’s always better if you just get out of my way and give me what I want. It’s always future-perfect.” He went on, “Their whole thing is ‘Let’s take somebody’s face and innovate on it. There’s an old lady—we don’t know we’re innovating unless she’s screaming.’ A lot of it is thoughtless innovation.”

The senior editor, like most people in publishing, rarely deals directly with Amazon, but in the fall of 2010 he attended a meeting with Russ Grandinetti, the Kindle vice-president, who was visiting the big New York houses. Like Bezos, Grandinetti went to Princeton and worked on Wall Street. He joined Amazon in 1998, as treasurer, then moved on to apparel, before taking the Kindle job. An Amazon colleague described Grandinetti as the smartest guy in the room at a company where everyone believes himself to be just that. Many publishing types consider him a bully. The literary agent, who knows him, said, “When you spend time with Russ, you get the sense that he thinks publishers are idiots.”

At the meeting, Grandinetti displayed some of Amazon’s number-free bar graphs and encouraged a faster move into digital publishing and online selling. “He gave this whole pitch,” the senior editor said. “It’s proprietary, I can’t show you, but everything that’s good for us is

good for you—just do what we say.’ ”

Grandinetti took questions, and an editor raised his hand. “I noticed you’ve announced Kindle Singles”—digital works of fiction and nonfiction, sold for a few dollars, that are too long for most magazines but shorter than books. “Which publishers are you working with?”

“All publishers,” Grandinetti said.

“All publishers are participating in the Kindle Singles program?”

“Well, no. Amazon is the publisher.”

The senior editor found it disturbing that Grandinetti couldn’t even be straight about a piece of public information. It showed contempt for his audience. “It was very practiced in a way that publishing people don’t do,” he said.

When I spoke with Grandinetti, he expressed sympathy for publishers faced with upheaval. “The move to people reading digitally and buying books digitally is the single biggest change that any of us in the book business will experience in our time,” he said. “Because the change is particularly big in size, and because we happen to be a leader in making it, a lot of that fear gets projected onto us.” Bezos also argues that Amazon’s role is simply to usher in inevitable change. After giving “60 Minutes” a first glimpse of Amazon drone delivery, Bezos told Charlie Rose, “Amazon is not happening to bookselling. The *future* is happening to bookselling.”

In Grandinetti’s view, the Kindle “has helped the book business make a more orderly transition to a mixed print and digital world than perhaps any other medium.” Compared with people who work in music, movies, and newspapers, he said, authors are well positioned to thrive. The old print world of scarcity—with a limited number of publishers and editors selecting which manuscripts to publish, and a limited number of bookstores selecting which titles to carry—is yielding to a world of digital abundance. Grandinetti told me that, in these new circumstances, a publisher’s job “is to build a megaphone.”

After the Kindle came out, the company established Amazon Publishing, which is now a profitable empire of digital works: in addition to Kindle Singles, it has mystery, thriller, romance, and Christian lines; it publishes translations and reprints; it has a self-service fan-fiction platform; and it offers an extremely popular self-publishing platform. Authors be-

come Amazon partners, earning up to seventy per cent in royalties, as opposed to the fifteen per cent that authors typically make on hardcovers. Bezos touts the biggest successes, such as Theresa Ragan, whose self-published thrillers and romances have been downloaded hundreds of thousands of times. But one survey found that half of all self-published authors make less than five hundred dollars a year.

Grandinetti said that, because an unprecedented number of titles are available in an instant, “it’s never been a better time to be a reader.” At last year’s Frankfurt Book Fair, he warned publishers that they’d keep those readers only if the price of e-books stayed low; otherwise, consumers would switch to playing Angry Birds on their tablets. He told me that the growth of online reader networks, such as GoodReads, which Amazon owns, is a welcome development: “Suddenly, we’re not locked into hearing the opinions of a small number of reviewers in newspapers.” (Professional reviewers are fading out anyway, along with librarians and bookshop owners.) Listening to Grandinetti, I might have thought that Amazon’s role in this transformation was that of a literary nonprofit that existed to make authors happy by delivering their books to as many readers as possible while keeping online gaming at bay—that is, by being a shmoo for book people.

Amazon has made it possible for hun-



dreds of thousands of writers frustrated with the limits of traditional publishing to have their work read. David Blum, who edits Kindle Singles, cited a twenty-eight-thousand-word memoir, by a journalist named Oliver Broudy, about travelling with a collector of Gandhi memorabilia. It had been turned down by several magazines, but since Blum accepted it, in March, 2011, it has sold forty-five thousand units. More than five hundred Kindle Singles have appeared in less than

three years—three or four a week, making it hard for even an experienced editor like Blum to do much more than read and publish them.

The business term for all this clear-cutting is “disintermediation”: the elimination of the “gatekeepers,” as Bezos calls the professionals who get in the customer’s way. There’s a populist inflection to Amazon’s propaganda, an argument against elitist institutions and for “the democratization of the means of production”—a common line of thought in the West Coast tech world. Amazon executives speak of the “Rust Belt media,” comparing book publishing to the steel industry in the seventies. “Even well-meaning gatekeepers slow innovation,” Bezos wrote in his 2011 letter to shareholders. “When a platform is self-service, even the improbable ideas can get tried, because there’s no expert gatekeeper ready to say ‘that will never work!’ ” Nevertheless, MacKenzie Bezos published her recent novel, “Traps,” with Knopf.

In May, 2011, Amazon announced that Laurence Kirshbaum, a longtime publisher of mass-market books and the former C.E.O. of Time Warner Books, would run a new trade division of Amazon Publishing, in New York. John Sargent sent Kirshbaum—who was liked, if not widely respected, in the industry—a terse e-mail: “Say it ain’t so.”

The next day, they ran into each other at BookExpo, in the Javits Center. “John, I love you,” Kirshbaum said. “Be happy for my success.”

“Larry, let me be clear with you,” Sargent said. “I hope you fail.”

Amazon Publishing, which had been releasing mysteries and other genres in bulk, hoped that Kirshbaum would attract big-name authors and publish best-sellers. But top writers proved surprisingly loyal to their gatekeepers, and Amazon had to spend a lot of money on two dubious projects: a million dollars for “The 4-Hour Chef,” by the self-help guru Timothy Ferriss, and eight hundred thousand dollars for “My Mother Was Nuts,” a memoir by Penny Marshall, the “Laverne & Shirley” star. In hardcover, Ferriss’s book has sold a fraction of the numbers of his two earlier self-help books; Marshall’s has sold seventeen thousand. Nearly all of Amazon’s other books have fared worse: “Actors Anonymous,” a novel by James

Franco, has sold fewer than five thousand. (Amazon claims to have sold many more copies of these titles as e-books.) In the past year, Amazon Publishing has barely been a presence at auctions, and several editors have departed; last month, Kirshbaum left the company, having failed at the task Amazon gave him. The new publisher, Daphne Durham, has spent her entire career at Amazon, and will remain in Seattle. Grandinetti, keeping his game face on, told me, "Amazon Publishing is off to a very good start."

There was a practical reason for the failure. Hardcover copies were printed and distributed in a partnership with Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, under an imprint called New Harvest, with Amazon's name missing from the spine. But bookstores weren't fooled. Barnes & Noble and nearly all the independents refused to stock its books—why help their mortal enemy?—and none of the titles gained enough momentum to force the stores to relent.

What's more, in its hurry to show up New York publishers, Amazon didn't seem to know what it was doing. "There are certain things it takes to be a publisher," the head of one New York house said, hardly concealing his Schadenfreude. "You have to have luck, but you also have to have judgment, discernment. I have no sense of the character of their house. . . . We care more than they do. Bezos has moved on to diapers and jewelry—we're still doing books."

A former Amazon employee who worked in the Kindle division said that few of his colleagues in Seattle had a real interest in books: "You never heard people say, 'Hey, what are you reading?' Everyone there is so engineering-oriented. They don't know how to talk to novelists." The marketing executive pointed out that Amazon is a fast-moving company, but publishing is slow. "It's like the difference between trolling and fly-fishing," he said.

"Book publishing is a very human business, and Amazon is driven by algorithms and scale," Sargent told me. When a house gets behind a new book, "well over two hundred people are pushing your book all over the place, handing it to people, talking about it. A mass of humans, all in one place, generating tremendous energy—that's the magic potion of publishing. . . . That's pretty hard to replicate in Amazon's publishing world, where

they have hundreds of thousands of titles."

Amazon's entry into publishing has created an awkward divide, giving some book people a second or a third chance in an imperilled industry while tainting them in the eyes of others. The literary agent, contemplating the future of the editors currently at Amazon, said, "You'd have to consider the time you spent with Vichy when you're looking for work after the occupation." Benjamin Anastas, a novelist who couldn't find an American publisher for his third book, told a friend that he was going to publish his fourth, a memoir called "Too Good to Be True," with Amazon. The friend, a novelist who had once worked at Harcourt—the house that distributed Amazon's hardcover editions—looked stricken. "You do that," she said, and walked away. Anastas found the reaction hypocritical. "If you're publishing with Penguin Random House, what's the difference?" he said. "They're both these massive entities that have totally changed book publishing. There is nothing more demoralizing for a writer than to go into one of these huge towers to talk about your book amid all this product. You feel like a sperm-oil salesman at the Petroleum Club." Still, finding no copies of his new book in most stores was akin to watching himself disappear, and Anastas said that he would think twice before publishing with Amazon again.

Jon Fine, an intellectual-property lawyer, worked as Knopf's in-house counsel until Amazon hired him, in 2005. Since 2008, he's been the company's director of author-and-publisher relations—"trying to get publishers to hate Amazon less," as an arts manager said. In March, 2009, *Slate* criticized Amazon for its miserly philanthropy, especially in the Seattle arts world, saying that certain lemonade stands were more generous. Fine showed the article around, and the next day a printed copy came back to him, with "Fix This" scrawled across the page in Bezos's hand, and a budget of roughly a million dollars attached. (Amazon denies this.)

Every year, Fine distributes grants of twenty-five thousand dollars, on average, to dozens of hard-up literary organizations. Beneficiaries include the PEN American Center, the Loft Literary Center, in Minneapolis, and the magazine *Poets & Writers*. "For Amazon, it's the cost of doing business, like criminal penalties for banks," the arts manager

said, suggesting that the money keeps potential critics quiet. Like liberal Democrats taking Wall Street campaign contributions, the nonprofits don't advertise the grants. When the Best Translated Book Award received money from Amazon, Dennis Johnson, of Melville House, which had received the prize that year, announced that his firm would no longer compete for it. "Every translator in America wrote me saying I was a son of a bitch," Johnson said. A few nonprofit heads privately told him, "I wanted to speak out, but I might have taken four thousand dollars from them, too." A year later, at the Associated Writing Programs conference, Fine shook Johnson's hand, saying, "I just wanted to thank you—that was the best publicity we could have had." (Fine denies this.)

Serious publishing is in such a dire state that thoughtful people are defecting to Amazon. There's a line in Robert Stone's novel "A Flag for Sunrise" about "a mouse so frightened it went to the cat for love." The cat can inspire inordinate gratitude when it lets the mouse live. "I feel like, I get to do this!" an editor who has joined Amazon said. "I can't believe it—I'm still standing! I can't monitor other people's feelings, but I can't see what harm I'm doing."

By producing its own original work, Amazon can sell more devices and sign up more Prime members—a major source of revenue. While the company was building the Kindle, it started a digital store for streaming music and videos, and, around the same time it launched Amazon Publishing, it created Amazon Studios.

The division pursued an unusual way of producing television series, using its strength in data collection. Amazon invited writers to submit scripts on its Web site—"an open platform for content creators," as Bill Carr, the vice-president for digital music and video, put it. Five thousand scripts poured in, and Amazon chose to develop fourteen into pilots. Last spring, Amazon put the pilots on its site, where customers could review them and answer a detailed questionnaire. ("Please rate the following aspects of this show: The humor, the characters . . .") More than a million customers watched. Engineers also developed software, called Amazon Storyteller, which scriptwriters can

use to create a “storyboard animatic”—a cartoon rendition of a script’s plot—allowing pilots to be visualized without the expense of filming. The difficulty, according to Carr, is to “get the right feedback and the right data, and, of the many, many data points that I can collect from customers, which ones can tell you, ‘This is the one?’”

Like the publishing venture, Amazon Studios set out to make the old “gatekeepers”—in this case, Hollywood agents and executives—obsolete. “We let the data drive what to put in front of customers,” Carr told the *Wall Street Journal*. “We don’t have tastemakers deciding what our customers should read, listen to, and watch.”

Steve Jobs once remarked that customers don’t know what they want until Apple shows them. Amazon’s view is nearly the opposite, which has made it the world’s largest online store. But determining customers’ desires by analyzing surveys and viewing patterns does not describe a path to artistic excellence.

When Garry Trudeau, the creator of the “Doonesbury” comic strip, heard from his friend Jonathan Alter, the author and political journalist, that Amazon was interested in a script that Trudeau had written—a comedy, “Alpha House,” about four Republican senators living together on Capitol Hill—he was dubious: “Amazon is a studio?” Trudeau’s skepticism turned to horror when Alter described Amazon’s approach. “Being one of thousands of projects didn’t seem very promising,” Trudeau said. “Hanging it up on the Amazon Prime Web site and letting it be troll bait didn’t appeal at all. I thought it would be a very public humiliation, as opposed to the usual way pilots get shot down—in private with executives.”

Trudeau went ahead with Amazon, anyway, with Alter as an executive producer. “For me, this was a chance to feel like I had a piece of the dawning digital age,” Alter, whose longtime employer, *Newsweek*, had been sold for a dollar, said. After the pilot, starring John Goodman, appeared on Amazon, last April, almost four thousand customer reviews came in. Trudeau didn’t read them—“It was not good for my mental health, so instead I looked at the percentages, since I figured that’s what Amazon was looking at.” The ratings were largely positive, and in May

Amazon Studios commissioned Trudeau to write ten episodes of “Alpha House.”

“Now, of course, I’m all for the process,” Trudeau said, smiling. “Yay, democracy!”

“Alpha House” had a glitzy premiere, on November 11th, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, with young women in black checking guests’ names on Kindles. Bezos attended, with his parents seated next to Trudeau. “Alpha House” became popular on Amazon Prime streaming video, but it garnered less critical praise and public interest than “House of Cards,” from Amazon’s rival Netflix. “Betas,” Amazon’s second original series, about four friends with a social-app startup, was a bomb. Many more shows are in the pipeline (including a *New Yorker* project developed by Condé Nast Entertainment).

For all the emphasis on crowdsourcing, Trudeau said, almost all the shows that Amazon approved were created by professionals. “They may be spinning their wheels with all their data crunching,” he said. “You can easily argue that it stymies experimentation, that it prevents innovation, because the audience is telling you what they want.” But

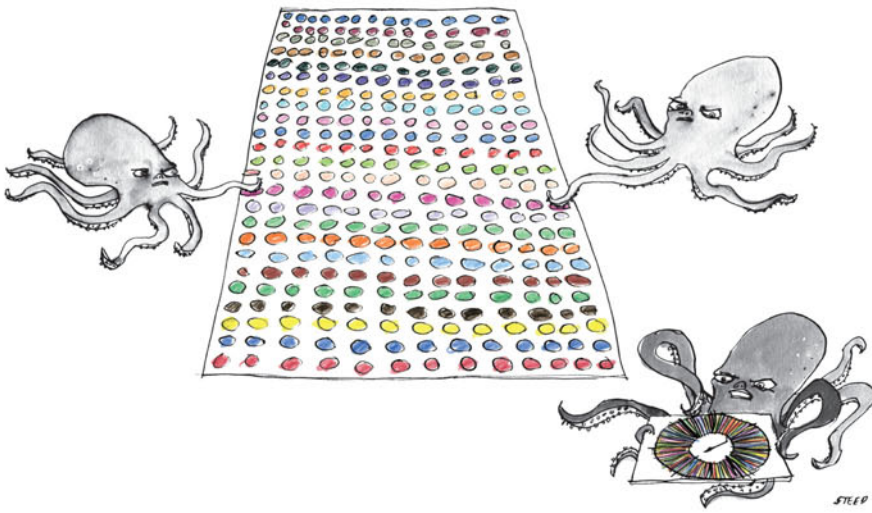
Trudeau was free to ignore the data from “Alpha House”—Amazon kept it confidential even from him.

Last August, Bezos bought the *Washington Post* from the Graham family, for a quarter of a billion dollars. The purchase didn’t involve Amazon, and Bezos’s decision seems unrelated to his company or to a search for profits. “The core business of Amazon would dictate against buying the *Post*,” Barry Diller, the media mogul, who sat on the newspaper’s board until it was sold to Bezos, said. “No matter what you do with the *Post*, it is primarily a print publication. Amazon’s ambitions in content don’t go to news and information at all.”

Nor has Bezos shown much interest in politics, except as it involves his business. A moderate libertarian, he has donated money to oppose a “millionaires’ tax” in Washington State, and to support gay marriage. Shel Kaphan, Bezos’s former deputy, remembers him repeating Thomas Jefferson’s quote about the best government being the least government, but Kaphan worries more about Bezos applying his “take no prisoners” pragmatism to the *Post*: “There are conflicts of



“It’s a soul patch, but luckily we’ve caught it early.”



"Fifth hand. Pale chartreuse."

interest with Amazon's many contracts with the government, and he's got so many policy issues going, like sales tax." One ex-employee who worked closely with Bezos warned, "At Amazon, drawing a distinction between content people and business people is a foreign concept."

Perhaps buying the *Post* was meant to be a good civic deed. Bezos has a family foundation, but he has hardly involved himself in philanthropy. In 2010, Charlie Rose asked him what he thought of Bill Gates's challenge to other billionaires to give away most of their wealth. Bezos didn't answer. Instead, he launched into a monologue on the virtue of markets in solving social problems, and somehow ended up touting the Kindle.

Bezos bought a newspaper for much the same reason that he has invested money in a project for commercial space travel: the intellectual challenge. With the *Post*, the challenge is to turn around a money-losing enterprise in a damaged industry, and perhaps to show a way for newspapers to thrive again. When Bezos visited the paper in September, he told several hundred staffers what they hoped to hear: that their primary customers were readers (not advertisers), that news should drive business decisions, and that cutting the news budget was suicidal. He mentioned recent articles he'd liked, including one, by the blogger Max Fisher, headlined "9 QUESTIONS ABOUT SYRIA YOU WERE TOO EMBARRASSED TO ASK." He frequently used the word "bundle," sug-

gesting that readers should be induced to subscribe to the whole paper instead of finding stray articles through Web searches. "My job is to provide a runway until we take off," Bezos said.

On January 16th, Bezos visited the paper again. It was kept secret from everyone at the *Post* except a few top editors and executives. Bezos is bringing Amazon's obsession with secrecy to a paper known for its openness. At Amazon's Seattle headquarters, the floor devoted to the Kindle is known as Area 51, because it's off limits to everyone not involved in the product. When one Amazon employee attended an orientation meeting several years ago, and another new hire declared that she had just come from the National Security Agency, he wondered how she would fit in. "It took me a few weeks," the employee said. "She was going to fit in a lot better than I was." Bezos's aversion to scrutiny runs so deep that it is bound to create problems for newspaper people whose job is to expose what powerful institutions want to hide.

On his January visit, Bezos discussed the paper's design for tablets. He also summoned Henry Blodget, the former securities analyst who, in 2003, was charged with civil fraud and barred from the industry; in 2007, he became the C.E.O. of Business Insider, a Web magazine in which Bezos is a major investor. Blodget spoke to senior staff at the *Post* about the challenges of publishing news on the Internet. In a recent interview with

the *Times*, he said, "Digital journalism is as different from print and TV journalism as print and TV are from each other."

Two weeks after Bezos's visit, the *Post*'s editor, Martin Baron, announced that the 2014 budget included funds for a Web-site redesign and provided more money for political reporting, the Sunday magazine, and digital content. It wasn't enough to prevent the exodus of Ezra Klein, Max Fisher, and other prominent bloggers, who have left for Vox Media. For journalists who remain at the *Post*, the hope generated by Bezos's purchase is, in part, a sign of their desperate situation. Bezos must know how to fix the newspaper business, the thinking goes, because he's a titan of the digital world that helped lay waste to it. "The arrogance level in Silicon Valley is very high," a former senior editor said. "The reality is they don't have the beginning of an answer."

Book publishers' dependence on Amazon, however unwilling, keeps growing. Amazon constitutes a third of one major house's retail sales on a given week, with the growth chart pointing toward fifty per cent. By contrast, independents represent under ten per cent, and one New York editor said that only a third of the three thousand brick-and-mortar bookstores still in existence would remain financially healthy if publishers didn't waive certain terms of payment. Jane Friedman, the former Random House and HarperCollins executive, who now runs a digital publisher called Open Road Integrated Media, told me, "If there wasn't an Amazon today, there probably wouldn't be a book business." The senior editor who met Grandinetti said, "They're our biggest customer, we want them to succeed. As I recover from being punched in the face by Amazon, I also worry: What if they are a bubble? What if the stock market suddenly says, 'We want a profit? You don't want your father who abuses you physically to lose his job.'"

Publishers are less like abused minors and more like financially insecure adults who rely on the support of a bullying uncle. Their dependence breeds bad faith. "Privately, we berate Amazon," the marketing executive said. "Yet we're always trying to figure out how to work with them."

The Big Six recently became the Big Five, with the merger of Random House and Penguin, which created the largest

publishing house in the world. Several industry people told me that it was intended to provide Penguin Random House, as the new company is called, with more bargaining power against Amazon. But book publishers have been consolidating for several decades, under the ownership of media conglomerates like News Corporation, which squeeze them for profits, or holding companies such as Rivergroup, which strip them to service debt. The effect of all this corporatization, as with the replacement of independent booksellers by superstores, has been to privilege the blockbuster. Penguin Random House and Barnes & Noble are hardly Davids to Amazon's Goliath. "It's like you turn into your enemy," the head of one New York house said. "Publishers are in a bad position to be representing themselves as speaking for the artists."

Lately, digital titles have levelled off at about thirty per cent of book sales. Whatever the temporary fluctuations in publishers' profits, the long-term outlook is discouraging. This is partly because Americans don't read as many books as they used to—they are too busy doing other things with their devices—but also because of the relentless downward pressure on prices that Amazon enforces. The digital market is awash with millions of barely edited titles, most of it dreck, while readers are being conditioned to think that books are worth as little as a sandwich. "Amazon has successfully fostered the idea that a book is a thing of minimal value," Johnson said. "It's a widget."

There are two ways to think about this. Amazon believes that its approach encourages ever more people to tell their stories to ever more people, and turns writers into entrepreneurs; the price per unit might be cheap, but the higher number of units sold, and the accompanying royalties, will make authors wealthier. Jane Friedman, of Open Road, is unfazed by the prospect that Amazon might destroy the old model of publishing. "They are practicing the American Dream—competition is good!" she told me. Publishers, meanwhile, "have been banks for authors. Advances have been very high." In Friedman's view, selling digital books at low prices will democratize reading: "What do you want as an author—to sell books to as few people as possible for as much as possible, or for as little as possible to as many readers as possible?"

The answer seems self-evident, but

there is a more skeptical view. Several editors, agents, and authors told me that the money for serious fiction and nonfiction has eroded dramatically in recent years; advances on mid-list titles—books that are expected to sell modestly but whose quality gives them a strong chance of enduring—have declined by a quarter. These are the kinds of book that particularly benefit from the attention of editors and marketers, and that attract gifted people to publishing, despite the pitiful salaries. Without sufficient advances, many writers will not be able to undertake long, difficult, risky projects. Those who do so anyway will have to expend a lot of effort mastering the art of blowing their own horn. "Writing is being outsourced, because the only people who can afford to write books make money elsewhere—academics, rich people, celebrities," Colin Robinson, a veteran publisher, said. "The real talent, the people who are writers because they happen to be really good at writing—they aren't going to be able to afford to do it."

Seven-figure bidding wars still break out over potential blockbusters, even though these battles often turn out to be follies. The quest for publishing profits in an economy of scarcity drives the money toward a few big books. So does the gradual disappearance of book reviewers and knowledgeable booksellers, whose enthusiasm might have rescued a book from drowning in obscurity. When consumers are overwhelmed with choices, some experts argue, they all tend to buy the same well-known thing.

These trends point toward what the literary agent called "the rich getting richer, the poor getting poorer." A few brand names at the top, a mass of unwashed titles down below, the middle hollowed out: the book business in the age of Amazon mirrors the widening inequality of the broader economy.

In 2009, after a career at publishers large and small, Robinson was laid off by Scribner, amid downsizing. Faced with his own professional extinction, and perhaps the industry's, he co-founded a new company, OR Books, with a different business model. Robinson did research and found that fifty to sixty per cent of the list price of a book goes to Amazon or to another retailer. When he was starting out, in the eighties, that figure was more like thirty or forty per cent. A small-to-midsize publisher has to spend between ten and fifteen

per cent on sales, warehousing, and shipping. This leaves little more than twenty-five per cent of the book's price for editorial counsel, production costs, publicity, paying the author, and whatever profit might be left over. A shared sensibility for a certain kind of fiction or nonfiction writing unites everyone along the way: authors, agents, editors, designers, marketers, reviewers, readers. "The only point at which Bezos enters that chain is to take all the money and the e-mail address of the buyer," Robinson said. "There's an entire community of people, and Bezos stands in the middle of it and collects the money."

Instead of going through Amazon, OR Books sells directly to customers, using printers in Minnesota and the U.K. It pays about fifteen per cent to the printer and keeps the rest. "After four years, we're just profitable," Robinson told me. "It works."

To the Big Five, locked in a death struggle with Amazon and the distracted American reader, this kind of experimentation might seem unrealistic. To survive, they are trying to broaden their distribution channels, not narrow them. But Andrew Wylie thinks that it's exactly what a giant like Penguin Random House should do. "If they did, in my opinion they would save the industry. They'd lose thirty per cent of their sales, but they would have an additional thirty per cent for every copy they sold, because they'd be selling directly to consumers. The industry thinks of itself as Proctor & Gamble. What gave publishers the idea that this was some big goddam business? It's not—it's a tiny little business, selling to a bunch of odd people who read."

At the moment, those people are obsessed with how they read books—whether it's on a Kindle or an iPad or on printed pages. This conversation, though important, takes place in the shallows and misses the deeper currents that, in the digital age, are pushing American culture under the control of ever fewer and more powerful corporations. Bezos is right: gatekeepers are inherently elitist, and some of them have been weakened, in no small part, because of their complacency and short-term thinking. But gatekeepers are also barriers against the complete commercialization of ideas, allowing new talent the time to develop and learn to tell difficult truths. When the last gatekeeper but one is gone, will Amazon care whether a book is any good? ♦

STARMAN

Neil deGrasse Tyson, the new guide to the "Cosmos."

BY REBECCA MEAD

It was a mild October day in Hollywood, but a trace of artificial snow remained on the ground as Neil deGrasse Tyson, the director of the Hayden Planetarium, at the American Museum of Natural History, walked around a back lot at Paramount Studios. Late the previous evening, the street corner outside a fake storefront had stood in for the bus depot on a snowy night in Ithaca, New York, and a young actor had portrayed the Tyson of nearly forty years ago: a senior at the Bronx High School of Science who had been summoned to Cornell University by Carl Sagan, at the time the best-known astrophysicist in the world. Tyson had filmed a short introduction to the scene. Toeing snow with the tip of a cowboy boot, he told me, "I faced straight to the camera and said, 'This is a moment from my past.'"

In the flashback scene, Tyson is heading home to New York after a daylong visit. Sagan hands Tyson his home phone number, telling him to call if the bus is delayed by weather. The encounter is being reconstructed for a thirteen-episode series, "Cosmos: A Spacetime Odyssey," which Fox will begin airing on March 9th. The show is a sequel to "Cosmos: A Personal Voyage," the celebrated series that was hosted by Sagan and broadcast on PBS, in 1980. Sagan, who died in 1996, was an erudite guide to the universe, conveying the excitement of discoveries within the solar system and beyond.

Tyson is the host of the new "Cosmos," and he was in Los Angeles for the final days of shooting. After nine months in locations ranging from Iceland to Italy, "Cosmos" had come to the Paramount lot to shoot special effects, including a simulation of how a New York City street would look in zero gravity. A common misconception is to think that, in such conditions, everything floats upward, as in a vision of Rapture. Tyson observed an extra, wearing a hidden harness, walk up

a stepladder that had been placed in front of a green screen. At the top, he continued a diagonal trajectory, as if there were invisible steps. "He's a good zero-g guy," Tyson said.

Tyson hosted PBS's "NOVA ScienceNOW" for four seasons, and he is a frequent guest on "CBS This Morning" and "The Colbert Report." He has flown to and from Los Angeles within hours to appear on Bill Maher's program. But "Cosmos" is Tyson's first Hollywood production, and he was interested to discover that a movie set has laws almost as stringent as those of physics. "The crew doesn't speak to the talent, unless the talent speaks to them," he said, as he stepped over snaking lighting cables. Tyson spoke to everyone, like a politician working a room. Chatting with an intern, he debated the strengths of Shake Shack versus those of In-N-Out Burger.

He is tall and charismatic, with a deep, commanding voice that can shift register from a honeyed purr to a practiced roar of outrage. His wardrobe invites notice: bright patterned vests, suede shirts, broad-brimmed felt hats in the style of Indiana Jones. (Onscreen for "Cosmos," he was required to dress down—a blue suit, a safari jacket.) As a makeup artist powdered his hairline, he began talking with her about New Age philosophy. Tyson questioned its vaunting of ancient wisdom. "In practically every idea we have as humans, the older version of it is *not* better than the newer version," he said. "With the invested effort of generations, and centuries, and sometimes millennia of smart people who have been born since the idea came out, we have improved ideas."

The shoot went late into the evening, but Tyson seemed tireless, pacing in front of the camera like a prowling lion. At one point, he read copy that described different kinds of light, visible and invisible. "In microwave light we can see all the

way back to the birth of the universe," he read from a teleprompter. "We have only just opened our eyes." He repeated the lines a dozen times, to get the proper balance of authority and wonder. For a scene rendering the Big Bang, he posed against a green screen, coolly put on a pair of sunglasses, then flung out his arms in a gesture suggesting a crucifixion, all the while affecting the stony countenance of an action hero.

Sagan, who was born in 1934, was a scientist of the Apollo era, when the year 2001 connoted not terror but Stanley Kubrick's vision of a lone astronaut journeying deep into space, in pursuit of expansive enlightenment. Sagan was the chairman of a committee that selected the recordings included on gold-plated disks carried into space by the two Voyager interstellar spacecraft, in 1977: Beethoven, Chuck Berry, greetings in fifty-five languages. Sagan was not altogether optimistic about the future of his own species: the threat of nuclear annihilation is a motif of the original "Cosmos." But he did believe that certain battles against ignorance had been decisively won, and that humankind was oriented firmly toward progress.

The context in which Tyson promotes science suggests otherwise. A few years ago, when the Museum of Natural History mounted an exhibition devoted to Charles Darwin, officials felt it necessary to train docents how to respond to challenges from creationists, who still number nearly half the American public, according to a 2012 Gallup poll. Since the mid-sixties, NASA's funding has dwindled from four per cent of the federal budget to half of one per cent. Tyson, who is fifty-five, was a child when astronauts first landed on the Moon and barely a teen when the missions ended, in 1972. Recently, he has been obliged to contend with the conspiracy theory that the landings were a government-

When explaining science, Carl Sagan drew his comparisons from ancient history. Tyson makes pop-culture references.



sponsored hoax—a theory promoted, in part, by a widely seen television special broadcast by Fox. (In a podcast interview, Tyson dismissed the theory with characteristic verve. “If there were ever a state secret that the government wanted to keep, it would be the behavior of President Clinton’s genitals, O.K.? But that got out!” he said. “You’re going to hoax a Moon landing by telling ten thousand scientists and engineers to keep it secret for forty years?”)

Tyson’s rhetorical style differs dramatically from Sagan’s. Sagan paid deference to high culture: he drew his comparisons from ancient history and his vocabulary from literature. Tyson’s preferred frame of reference is pop culture. This does not mean that he has unsophisticated tastes: his friends still talk about the hundred-year-old wine that he served at a nine-course dinner celebrating the turn of the millennium. And he has a library of rare antiquarian scientific volumes, including a third edition of Sir Isaac Newton’s “Principia,” which he considers the most important book ever written. But when explaining science he is most likely to point to a movie such as “A Bug’s Life.” (An ant constructs a telescope by wrapping a blade of grass around a water droplet, thus illustrating the concept of surface tension.) He is the host of an entertaining radio show, “StarTalk,” whose guests include both pro-

fessors and comedians. Tyson meets people where they are, rather than seeking to raise them to where he is. Joe Patterson, a professor of astronomy at Columbia University, told me, “Neil is kind of a combination of Carl Sagan and Mister Rogers.”

Sagan continued to do research even as he appeared on the “Tonight Show.” Tyson, too, is still active in the laboratory, though it has been five years since he published in a scientific journal. His astronomical thinking has been featured, however, in a Superman comic: at the request of DC Comics, Tyson pinpointed a star that could support a planet like Krypton. Academic colleagues say that Tyson’s record as a scientist is sound but not extraordinary. David Spergel, an astrophysicist at Princeton, where Tyson did post-doctoral work, says, “Neil could have pursued a research career and been a good researcher. But he’s *great* at what he does.”

Colleagues say that Tyson keeps close track of advances in his field, so that he can relay them to the public. Sean Carroll, a theoretical physicist at Caltech, says of him, “He has absolutely mastered the ability to convey not only the substance of the science but the real excitement and passion that scientists are feeling when they are doing it.” Tyson can go to goofy lengths to communicate that passion. At a recent panel discussion, he got so

worked up while debating the motives for space exploration that he rose from his chair, in mock anger, before being playfully restrained by Bill Nye the Science Guy. Many people find Tyson’s assertive intelligence very seductive. “I am the straightest guy you ever met, but if @neiltyson showed up at my door with a bottle of wine and a Barry White CD I’d let him in,” one admirer tweeted, to Tyson’s delight. He works hard at making his public appearances look easy. Before going on “The Daily Show” for the first time, he studied past episodes, counting how many sentences Jon Stewart permitted a guest to speak before butting in with a joke. Stewart told me that Tyson’s compulsion to elucidate continues even when the camera is not rolling. “To have someone who was able to explain science, in relative layman’s terms, with that force of conviction was one thing. But I also remember that we had a Rubik’s Cube sitting in the greenroom, and he had to solve it. He can’t leave things unsolved.”

Tyson is vigilant about correcting misrepresentations of science in popular culture. Last fall, he issued a series of light-hearted tweets pointing out errors made by the director of “Gravity.” (Satellites generally circle the globe west to east, yet in the movie all the debris was coming east to west; Sandra Bullock’s hair remains unruffled in zero-g conditions.) His correctives were considered newsworthy enough for Brian Williams to include them on the “NBC Nightly News,” and for the “Saturday Night Live” team to spoof them. Tyson has more than 1.6 million followers on Twitter, and his feed is filled with appetizing science facts: “Yup. Comet ISON croaked. You would have too, if you were made of ice and you buzz-cut the Sun.” The author or co-author of ten books of popular science, Tyson is considering compiling a volume of his tweets for publication.

Tyson’s dark, cluttered office at the American Museum of Natural History is an environment fit to delight an eight-year-old boy. An almost six-foot-tall model of a Saturn V rocket stands in one corner, and in a desk drawer Tyson keeps a football-size fragment of an asteroid that belongs to the museum’s collection. Dozens of cosmic-themed neckties are draped over a hanger. A replica of van Gogh’s “Starry Night” hangs behind his



“Skip to the part where the princess climbs to the top of the corporate ladder.”

desk. Shelves are filled with science books and framed certificates, including one for an asteroid that was named in Tyson's honor. There are also kitschy artifacts like glow-in-the-dark Band-Aids with cosmic motifs and a can of Dole pineapple chunks with a starburst theme on the wrapper. Tyson believes that such objects indicate a collective fascination with his sphere of expertise. "There are no DNA-helix pineapple cans," he said one afternoon.

We had just watched a preview of the Hayden Planetarium's new space show, the first for which Tyson had provided the narration. The show tackles the esoteric subject of dark matter and dark energy, which together make up ninety-five per cent of the known universe, and which are only scantily understood. Tyson was pleased with the result, which included footage of the Mount Wilson Observatory, in Los Angeles; images from the atmosphere of Jupiter, beamed to Earth by the Galileo space probe; and simulated renderings of the universe that made dark matter discernible, allowing viewers, as Dennis Overbye wrote in the *Times*, to see "the galaxies drift apart like stragglers in the parking lot after the bar closes." The show was to open in a few days, but before then, Tyson told me, he was hosting a private sky tour in the planetarium dome—a prize won at a benefit—for the family of David Koch, the chemical-industry billionaire and conservative activist, who supports science museums and at the same time politicians who are skeptical of climate change. Koch has given twenty-two million dollars to the Museum of Natural History and is a member of its board of trustees. He says of Tyson, "I can listen to him for hours and not lose my attention in any way." Tyson once visited Koch's Southampton home, where he taught members of the family how to use a telescope. He did the same for Mayor Michael Bloomberg, at Gracie Mansion.

Being able to pivot comfortably between the general public and the political plutocracy is a skill no less complex than being able to analyze data from the Hubble telescope; being able to do both is very unusual. Tyson has served on two Presidential commissions, under George W. Bush, an experience that has given him insight into the horse-trading necessary to gain funding for any venture, and a pragmatism about the motivations of any elected official. "In a capitalist democracy,

everybody agrees that they want more money tomorrow than they do today," he says. "But not everyone agrees that they want to walk around on the surface of Mars. Not everyone agrees that finding life on Europa"—one of Jupiter's moons—"is an interesting problem."

His preferred strategy is to explain how funding space exploration will contribute to economic growth, by requiring an investment in science education that would open up the possibility of unimagined technological and scientific advances. "I'm not talking about spinoffs here—you can't justify the space program on spinoffs," he says. "I'm talking about the culture of innovation that comes about when everybody is innovating and making great discoveries that make headlines every day. Before Wilhelm Röntgen discovered X rays, he wasn't thinking, 'How can I create a medical device?'" In 2012, Tyson wrote an influential essay for *Foreign Affairs* that made a case for manned missions to space, on the ground that they would serve the United States' economic and defense interests, just as funding Columbus's voyage to the New World served the interests of the Spanish crown. "I'm saying, 'Go into space so that you can get rich,' not because it's a beautiful thing," he says. "Because I think my read of history tells me that's the only way we're going to go into space." He is fond of joking that the U.S. would hasten to land astronauts on Mars in a year or two if the Chinese leaked a memo that described plans to build military bases there.

Unlike Sagan, who opposed President Ronald Reagan's "Star Wars" program, and who was arrested during a protest at the nuclear test site in Nevada, Tyson refuses to take explicit political positions in public, or to criticize elected officials, even those who reject evolution; he would rather invest his energies in creating a more enlightened electorate. Nevertheless, his political and cultural leanings seem clear, and his insistence on objectivity can seem disingenuous. After the Newtown massacre, he tweeted, "In Walmart, America's largest gun seller, you can buy an assault rifle. But company policy bans pop music with curse words." On Christmas Day, he tweeted, "Born on

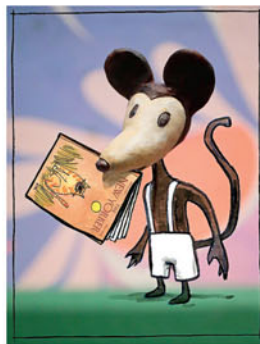
this day, long ago, was a man who showed us all a way to know the Cosmos. Isaac Newton, Dec 25, 1642 Lincolnshire UK."

Tyson attended a Catholic church as a boy, but he began questioning the Church's tenets before entering his teens. When pressed, he calls himself an agnostic, but he resists labels, maintaining that atheism has come to imply activism. "My confidence that there is a loving God who cares at all for your health or your longevity, based on what I see in the physical universe, is so low that it is not something that I would spend any time investing in, to try to explore any further about whether or not it's true," he says. "I'll let other people do that exploring. And, if they bring the evidence to me, that's

fine." Tyson's dogged nonpartisanship can be seen as a form of retreat. In an interview that has been watched 1.3 million times on YouTube, he says that he does not have the time, energy, or interest to enter a debate about atheism. "It's odd that the word 'atheist' even exists," he says. "I don't play golf. Is there a word for non-golf players? Do non-golf players gather and strategize? Do non-skiers have a word, and come together, and talk about the fact that they don't ski?"

Tyson lives in lower Manhattan with his wife, Alice Young, who trained as a mathematical physicist and worked as a programmer at Bloomberg L.P., and their two teen-age children, who attend public school. A native New Yorker, Tyson first visited the Hayden Planetarium when he was nine years old. "I was never the same after that," he says. "The lights go off and the stars come out—I had never seen that in my life. I grew up in the city, and you look up and there's a tall building, and air pollution, and light pollution. You don't have a relationship with the night sky. You don't even know it's there." Tyson characterizes the experience in mystical terms. "The universe chose me—I had no say in the matter," he says. "After that one session with the deep voice of the planetarium director—the God voice—resonating in the cavity of the dome, looking at the universe. That is some pretty impactful life experience."

Tyson grew up in the Riverdale section



of the Bronx. "People who live in Riverdale don't say they live in the Bronx," he says. "But I liked the Bronx, and I always said the Bronx, out of solidarity with those who couldn't say they lived in Riverdale." His father, Cyril, a sociologist, was a human-resources commissioner in the Lindsay Administration; his mother, Sunchita, became a gerontologist when Tyson was in high school. He was the middle of three children and showed an early aptitude for science; he rigged up a system of fishing weights that automatically closed the bedroom door that his sister always left open, and he periodically turned one of the apartment's bathrooms into a darkroom.

Tyson attended public schools, and was not a distinguished student. He was social, and teachers criticized him for being inattentive. When speaking to other educators, he stresses the importance of reaching not just the A students, who are already likely to succeed, but the B students, who might succeed if they were more deeply engaged by their teachers. He is on the board of the Harlem Educational Activities Fund, which seeks to offer such encouragement to students in public schools. Calvin Sims, a former chairman of the fund, says, "To have someone in Neil's position talking about these great ideas, and to do it in a humorous and animated way—and to have someone who looks like them do that—I think means the world." Not long ago, Tyson's elementary school, P.S. 81, invited him to give a commencement address; he declined. He recalls telling the administrators, "I am where I am not because of what happened in school but in spite of it, and that is probably not what you want me to say. Call me back, and I will address your teachers and give them a piece of my mind."

A more important education came from his parents. "We used New York City as a learning laboratory," Sunchita told me. Every weekend, the family visited a museum or went to a sporting event, or to a Broadway play or the Metropolitan Opera. Tyson's mother gave him a pair of folding opera glasses, which provided his first magnified look at the night sky. In middle school, he bought a telescope with money that he earned by walking neighbors' dogs—"It was the golden age of dog walking, because you didn't have to clean up after them," he recalls—and studied the sky from the roof

of his apartment building. In his bedroom, he arranged glow-in-the-dark stars in the shape of constellations.

Tyson often took the subway alone to the Museum of Natural History, attending lectures and classes. At fourteen, he won a scholarship, through the Explorers Club, for a cruise on the S.S. Canberra to Mauritania, to view a solar eclipse. He went by himself. As he boarded, his mother buttonholed older couples and asked them to keep an eye on her son. "He had a ball on that ship," Sunchita says. "He even won the Charleston contest." The same summer, he attended a camp in the Mojave Desert focussed on astronomy and physics; it was run by Joe Patterson. "He was pretty unusual—he was more of an urbane character," Patterson says. "There were a lot of kids at the camp who were very nerdy, but Neil was somebody who made friends easily. He asked a lot of questions. He was not intimidated by adults."

At the age of eleven, Tyson spoke with a teacher at P.S. 81 about his fascination with astronomy. Tyson's older brother, Stephen, who is an artist, recalls, "The teacher asked, 'Why do you want to go into science? There aren't any Negroes in that field. Why don't you go into sports?'" One evening, when he and his father were entering Van Cortlandt Park carrying a telescope, the police stopped them. "I guess they thought it was a bazooka," Sunchita says. "Just keeping my kids on the straight and narrow—and getting them not to hate people, in some instances, because of the way they were treated—was a full-time job." On another occasion, police were called to Tyson's building by neighbors who were alarmed by his rooftop activities; Tyson ended up showing the officers the stars.

At Bronx Science, he was captain of the wrestling team and the editor of the physical-science journal. He applied to study physics and astrophysics at Harvard, N.Y.U., M.I.T., Princeton, and Cornell. (All but Princeton accepted him.) Despite being wooed by Sagan, Tyson was fiercely rational in deciding where to go. He made a spreadsheet that listed recent contributors of physics and astrophysics articles to *Scientific American*, showing which schools they had attended and which faculty they had later joined. The school that appeared most frequently on the spreadsheet was Harvard, so he went there.

In a memoir, "The Sky Is Not the

Limit," published in 2004, Tyson mentions that Caroline Kennedy was a classmate, but says that he had little time for social life: he was consumed by his studies, and he also joined the wrestling team. He often tells the story of how another African-American member of the team, Frederick T. Smith—an eventual Rhodes scholar, who intended to put his economics degree to use among impoverished communities—criticized him for devoting himself to science. "Blacks in America do not have the luxury of your intellectual talents being spent on astrophysics," he told Tyson. (Smith, who became an attorney in Newark, died in 2005.) "Never before had someone so casually, yet so succinctly, indicted my life's ambitions," Tyson later wrote.

Tyson was undaunted, though, and after Harvard he began postgraduate work at the University of Texas at Austin. As soon as he arrived, a faculty member encouraged him to join the department's basketball team. Others suggested that he aim at teaching in a community college, or leave astrophysics for industry, where he could make more money. Tyson was certainly an unusual student for a science department: he rowed competitively, and won trophies in local competitions as part of the school's Latin-dance team. In his memoir, he reveals that he considered supplementing his income by working as an exotic dancer in a strip club, until he discovered that one dance routine would require him to wear, and ignite, an asbestos-lined jockstrap soaked with lighter fluid. (These days, he occasionally sneaks a few dance steps into a public appearance, with mock reluctance.)

Tyson transferred to Columbia for his Ph.D., studying the chemical composition and the velocity of stars in the "galactic bulge"—the dense zone of stars at the center of most spiral galaxies. He also published his first book, "Merlin's Tour of the Universe," a collection of pop-science columns that he had written for *Star Date*, an astronomy magazine. While at Columbia, Tyson was interviewed for the first time by a local television reporter, about solar explosions. Watching the segment that evening, he had a realization that answered the challenge of his old wrestling teammate: this was the first time that he could recall seeing a black person being interviewed on television as an expert about something

that had nothing to do with being black.

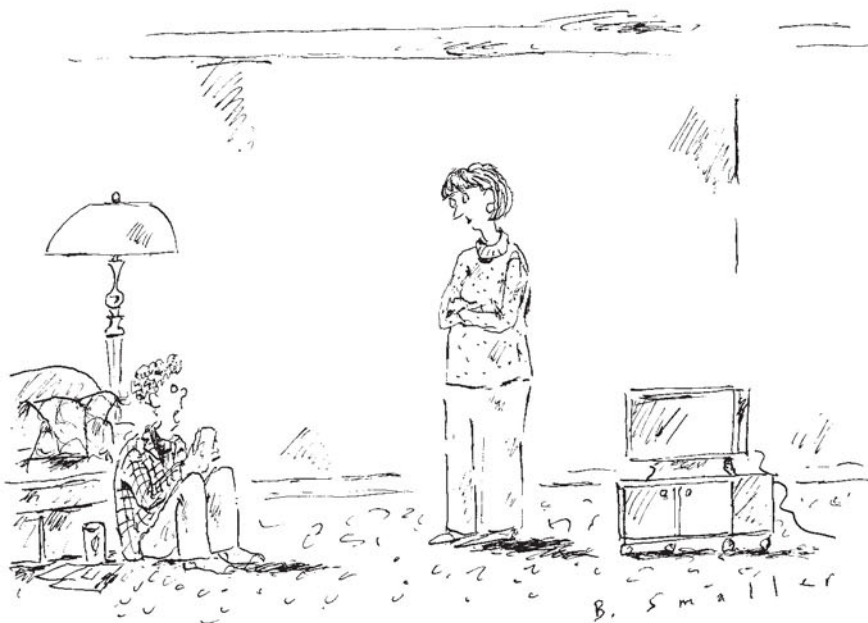
When Tyson graduated from Columbia, in 1991, he was invited to give a speech at the convocation. He described the lowered expectations that he had experienced at school in New York and, later, in Austin. "To spend most of my life fighting these attitudes levies an emotional tax that is a form of intellectual emasculation," he announced, noting that, by his count, his graduation brought the total number of black astrophysicists nationally to seven, out of about four thousand. "Given what I have experienced, I am surprised there are that many," he said.

He became a post-doc at Princeton, continuing his studies of the galactic bulge. (His other research interests include star formation and exploding stars. Many of his published papers have titles that might almost belong to Dave Eggers novels: "On the Possibility of Gas-Rich Dwarf Galaxies in the Lyman-alpha Forest," "The Faint-End Slopes of Galaxy Luminosity Functions in the COSMOS Field.") In astrophysics, as in other sciences, there are observers, who collect and analyze data, and theorists, who speculate about what the data mean. Tyson was an observer. "Theory is generally considered more high-powered, but observation tends to be what drives the field," David Spergel, a theorist, says. Spergel remembers accompanying Tyson on a trip to Chile. "We were on a mountain, and what I remember most was an earthquake the first night of observing," Spergel says. "It shook the mountain, and Neil claimed it showed that the observatory gods were angry, because we brought a theorist to the top of the mountain." Tyson was also a gifted teacher—another skill that is traditionally accorded less respect than research, but one that recommended him for a position outside academia.

In the mid-nineties, the board of trustees of the Museum of Natural History began a search for a new director of the Hayden Planetarium. The chairman of the board solicited recommendations from J. Richard Gott, a member of the astrophysics department at Princeton. "I said, 'The perfect person is a post-doc right here,' and it's the single best piece of advice I've ever given anyone," Gott told me. Tyson became the Frederick P. Rose Director in 2006. A condition of his appointment was the creation of an in-house department of

SKETCHBOOK BY BOB STAAKE





"Yes, I have taken my medication. Have you taken your medication?"

astrophysics. David Helfand, the president of the American Astronomical Society and a former chair of Columbia's astronomy department, recalls, "I had many discussions with him about the degree to which he should focus, as some curators do, on his own research, rather than taking a larger role in the public presentation of science. In academia, there is a prejudice that the only thing that matters is research—teaching is a waste of your time and public education is a waste of your time."

It was clear, however, where Tyson was most effective. One of his first tasks in the new job was selling wary members of the Landmarks Preservation Commission on building a modern replacement for the original planetarium, which was completed in 1935. "Many neighbors didn't want to see construction going on, so there was opposition," Gott says. "Neil presented the plan to the commission and explained how the new planetarium would present educational opportunities that the old one couldn't, and he said how he loved the old planetarium—no one loved it more than Neil." The commission voted unanimously to allow the old building to be razed. The glass-walled Rose Center for Earth and Space, containing the revamped planetarium, opened in 2000.

Tyson was also instrumental in conceiving how the new building could it-

self be an educational tool, with its enormous internal sphere representing the sun and mock planets arrayed around it. Tyson decided not to include Pluto among the planets, relegating it to the status of an object in the Kuiper Belt—the band of icy bodies that astronomers discovered in 1992, six decades after scientists had named Pluto the outermost planet in the solar system. Gott calls the Pluto decision Tyson's most significant contribution to science—even if, strictly speaking, the part he played had more to do with public relations than with astrophysics. In 2006, the International Astronomical Union voted to change the status of Pluto to a dwarf planet. "Sometimes you say a person is ahead of his time, and in this case we know exactly how far ahead of his time Neil was," Gott says. Tyson, who wrote a book about the Pluto controversy, has achieved the peculiar status of being an astronomer famous for losing a planet, rather than for discovering one.

In early January, the American Astronomical Society held its annual meeting, in Washington, D.C. Tyson was scheduled to give an evening presentation, "Tales from the Twitterverse & Other Media Excursions." I arrived early in the vast, characterless ballroom where the event was to take place. Daunting rows of

chairs stood empty—a public speaker's worst nightmare—but gradually people arrived, like stars materializing in the sky at dusk, until the room was densely populated. The talk started late, because there were technical difficulties connecting Tyson's laptop to the large screens on either side of the stage. "How many world-leading astrophysicists does it take to set up a presentation?" a young man sitting behind me, who wore a badge identifying him as an M.I.T. student, said. Pleased with his joke, he said it again.

Eventually, Tyson launched into an entertaining disquisition about his quest to bring science to the general public, and about his conviction that there was a growing interest in scientific matters. He talked about going to Comic Con—"an extraordinary celebration of the geekiverse," he called it—and showed a photograph of himself with a young woman in alien makeup and a scanty costume. He showed newspaper cartoons that assumed a degree of science literacy. (One featured a bespectacled scientist pointing at a chalkboard filled with equations and saying, "Along with 'Antimatter' and 'Dark Matter,' we've recently discovered the existence of 'Doesn't Matter,' which appears to have no effect on the universe whatsoever.") He showed images of science-related tattoos, including one of Carl Sagan's face inked onto a leg. The work of scientists, he said, was landing on "fertile territory that has been tilled by this kind of activity."

He spoke about his "Gravity" tweets: "People went bat crazy," he said. He mentioned a tweet that he'd posted a couple of days earlier, on January 4th: "Merry Perihelion to all. Earth, in its oval orbit, is closer to the Sun today than on any other day of the year." He told his listeners, "We all know this, but you keep it to yourself! Don't! Spread the love!" Tyson talked for an hour and a half; then, as technicians tried to clear the room, he kept talking, without amplification, to more than a hundred audience members, who mobbed him at the edge of the stage. After a while, a conference organizer walked onstage to drag him off to a reception for which he was already late. Tyson broke into a moonwalk, to roars of approval. "You're all astronomers—learn to moonwalk!" he said. "You'll need it one day!"

Last fall, Tyson travelled to Washington for a ceremony at the Library of Congress, which was celebrating its acquisition

of the papers of Carl Sagan. He and other eminences spoke of Sagan's vision, and of the ways in which scientific progress has fallen far short of Sagan's hopes and predictions. David Morrison, the director of the Carl Sagan Center for the Study of Life in the Universe, at the SETI Institute, in Mountain View, California, said, "Sagan thought we would have colonies on the Moon by now. He believed SETI would have succeeded." Tyson told the story of his encounter with Sagan in Ithaca, and of learning from Sagan the importance of engaging with students. Tyson emphasized that he now made student visits to his office a priority. "I could be on the phone in my office to the White House—Barack, I've got to call you back," he said, to general amusement. (In fact, Tyson is not on first-name terms with the President, though he went to a White House Christmas party this year.)

Another speaker was Seth MacFarlane, the creator of the Fox television series "Family Guy," who had bought the Sagan papers from Sagan's estate, and then donated them to the library. MacFarlane, who was seven when "Cosmos" aired, expressed dismay that "a nationwide scientific regression has taken place." He called Tyson "the heir-apparent to Carl's rare combination of wisdom and communicative power."

MacFarlane brokered the deal with the Fox network to make the new "Cosmos," of which he is an executive producer. (It will be shown in a hundred and eighty countries.) Ann Druyan, Carl Sagan's widow, who was a writer on the original series and is the writer and lead executive producer on the new one, told me that she took the proposal to other networks, including PBS, but none of them offered the budget that Fox did, or the freedom. "The others wanted creative control, and complete content control," Druyan said. Fox gave a free hand to Druyan and her team. Druyan told me that she hoped the new series would kindle an interest in science among young people, as the old one did, though she acknowledged that the practical impact of Sagan's "Cosmos" had been limited. "If Carl were alive, and I could tell him that creationism is still a viable way of seeing things!" she told me, shaking her head.

The new series casts Tyson in a Saganesque mold that differs somewhat from his own public persona: there is less joking

and irony, more earnestness and awe. The first episode opens with Tyson standing on the same cliffs in Monterey where Sagan stood as he began his own odyssey. And the show brings back a number of the original series' celebrated storytelling devices, including the Cosmic Calendar, which has been digitally enhanced, and the Spaceship of the Imagination, which originally resembled a dandelion head and now looks like the first flying Apple product. Science geeks in Hollywood have been persuaded to work on "Cosmos" for considerably less than their usual rate, among them Bill Pope, who was the director of photography for the "Matrix" trilogy. Courtesy of animators drafted by MacFarlane, the lives of historical figures have been rendered elegantly in pictures, instead of being represented by bewigged actors; it's an inspired way to get a contemporary audience to stick with the story of, say, Giordano Bruno, the sixteenth-century philosopher who built on the Copernican view of the universe and was burned at the stake for heresy. (MacFarlane provides the voice for Bruno.)

The show treads lightly on known unknowns—at one point, Tyson calls the origins of life on earth "one of the greatest unsolved mysteries of science." But in its steady insistence on fact "Cosmos" counters anti-science rhetoric of the sort found on Fox News and in the culture at large, while being visually appealing in a manner that stands a good chance of captur-



ing the attention of an audience accustomed to computerized thrills. The larger question presented by "Cosmos" is whether the series will merely entertain, or whether it might infuse young viewers with a grander view of technological progress. The Carl Sagan who guided Americans through the original "Cosmos" would not, perhaps, have identified Sandra Bullock's unmoving hair as the problem with "Gravity." He might instead have identified the desperate efforts of

Bullock's character to return to Earth—"I hate space," she mutters to herself at one point—as the problem, and diagnosed the earthbound fear of space that characterizes the movie as an expression of a larger cultural timorousness.

Tyson never dreamed of becoming an astronaut, even as a child. "It was clear that I wasn't who they were looking for," he told me one afternoon, in his office. "The skin color didn't match up. This is the sixties, when 'Hair' is the No. 1 musical on Broadway, and here are these guys with crewcuts. War is becoming rapidly unpopular in the sixties, and yet nearly all the astronauts are drawn from the military. It was something that didn't include me." In any case, his mother told me, he used to get queasy in an elevator.

Tyson is impatient with the diminished ambitions of America's space program. "If you're an astronaut today, you're boldly going where hundreds have gone before—into Earth orbit," he said. To illustrate his point, he grabbed a school-room globe and a replica of the Moon that had roughly the circumference of a dessert plate. "This is about the correct relative size of the Earth and Moon to each other," he said.

I had no idea that the Moon was so large, its diameter a full quarter of the Earth's. "We have one of the biggest moons in the solar system relative to our home planet," Tyson said. "We have a totally rocking moon!" By now he was on his feet, theatrically holding the globe aloft. He asked me to guess how far away from the globe he would have to hold his moon to represent the true distance between them. I made a stab at an answer: out on the street?

"Thirty feet—at the end of the corridor," Tyson said. "Mars would be a mile away." He then hovered one finger above the surface of the globe, almost touching it, and leaned in close to me. "The Space Shuttle, the Space Station, the Hubble telescope—they're orbiting three-eighths of an inch above Earth," he exclaimed. "And NASA has convinced us that's space. To me, that's not space. I want to go somewhere! *That's* space. Take me to Europa—I'll sign up." Tyson was warming to his theme, even with an audience of one. "The dude who took his jump from space—the Red Bull jump from space? *One-sixteenth* of an inch above the Earth's surface," he declared. "I tweeted that." ♦



I was almost twelve years old, going into the fifth year of *barneskole*. At times it was as though the girls really hated me, considered me some sort of scum; at others it was the opposite—not only did they want to talk to me but at the class parties we had begun to arrange, at one another's houses and at school, they also wanted to dance with me. My attitude toward them was also ambivalent, at least as far as the girls in my class were concerned. On the one hand, I knew them so well I was completely indifferent toward them; on the other hand, they had started changing—the bulges under their sweaters were growing, their hips were widening, and they were behaving differently. They had risen above us: suddenly the boys they looked at were from two or three classes up. With our high-pitched voices, our more or less furtive glances as we admired all the attributes they now possessed, we were no more than air to them. But, no matter how important they were, they knew nothing about the world they were moving toward. What did they know about men and women and desire? Had they read Wilbur Smith, where women were taken by force under stormy skies? Had they read Ken Follett, where a man shaves a woman's pussy while she lies in a foam-filled bathtub with her eyes closed? Had they read "Insect Summer," by Knut Faldbakken, the passage that I knew by heart, when the boy takes the girl's panties off in the hay? Had they ever got their hands on a porn magazine? And what did they know about music? They liked what everyone liked—the Kids and all the other crap on the top-ten lists. It meant nothing to them, not really; they had no idea what music was or what it could be. They could barely dress; they turned up at school wearing the strangest combinations of clothes. And then they were looking down on me?

Every Friday we had something we called "Class Top of the Pops." Six students brought a song each and we all voted for our favorite one. Mine always came in last, whatever I played. Led Zeppelin, Queen, Wings, the Beatles, the Police, the Jam, Skids—the result was the same, only one or two votes, last. I knew that my classmates were voting against me and not the music. They

weren't really listening to the music. This irritated me beyond endurance. I complained to my older brother Yngve, and he not only understood how irritating it was but also came up with a way to trick them. The Kids' second record hadn't been released yet. One Friday I took to school the Aller Værste's first LP, "Materialtretthet," which Yngve had bought a few days before, and said that I had an advance copy of the Kids' new album. When the first notes of the band's first song sounded in the classroom, there were mumbles of appreciation and mounting enthusiasm, which culminated when the vote was taken, and it turned out that the Aller Værste! had won, hands down. How the triumph shone in my eyes as I stood and informed them that they had *not* voted for the Kids.

Of course, I never heard the last of it. I was conceited, I thought I was quite something, I always had to like weird things, instead of what everyone else liked. That wasn't true, though. Surely it wasn't my fault that I liked good music? And I was learning more and more about it, thanks to Yngve and his music magazines and the records he played me. He also taught me chords on the guitar, and when he wasn't at home I would play by myself with the black Gibson plectrum in my hand and the black Fender strap over my shoulder. The only person on my wavelength at school was Dag Magne. We were mostly up at his house, playing records and trying to imitate the songs on his twelve-string guitar or talking about girls or the band we were going to start, especially what we were going to call it. He wanted it to be Dag Magne's Anonymous Disciples; I wanted it to be Blood Clot. They were equally good, we agreed, and we didn't need to make a decision until the time was ripe and we were performing on a stage.

In this way the winter passed, with the first class parties, where we played post office and slow-danced, round and round the floor with girls we knew better than our sisters, and my head almost exploded when I held Anne Lisbet's body so close to mine. The fragrance of her hair, the sparkling eyes that were bursting with life. And, oh, the little breasts under the thin white blouse.

Wasn't that a *fantastic* feeling?

It was completely new, unknown for all these years, but, now I knew it, now I wanted to go there again.

Spring came, with its light, which held the passage to night open a little longer each day, and with its cold rain, which caused the snow to slump and dwindle. One of those stormy March mornings, we had gym class.

In the changing room afterward, the ventilation grilles howled and wheezed as though the building were alive, a huge beast full of rooms, corridors, and shafts that had settled here beside the school and in its despondency sang lonely laments. Or perhaps it was the sounds that were alive. I took my towel and went into the shower, which was already hot with steam. I found a place among the throng of pale, almost marble-white boys' bodies, and was engulfed by the hot water that first hit the top of my head and then ran in steady streams down my face and chest, neck and back. My hair stuck to my forehead and I closed my eyes. That was when someone shouted.

"Tor's got a hard-on! Tor's got a hard-on!"

I opened my eyes and looked over at Sverre, the boy who had shouted. He was pointing across the narrow room to where Tor was standing, with his arms down by his sides, his dick in the air and a smile on his face.

Tor had the biggest dick in the class, or, perhaps, in the whole school. It dangled between his legs like a pork sausage, and this was no secret, because he always wore tight trousers and placed it at an angle, pointing upward, so that everyone could see. Yes, it was big. But now, in its erect state, it was enormous.

"Jumping Jehoshaphat," Geir Håkon shouted.

Everyone looked at Tor. There was a sudden excitement in the atmosphere, and it was obvious that something had to be done. Such an extraordinary circumstance could not be allowed to go to waste.

"Let's take him to Fru Hensel!" Sverre shouted. "Come on, quick, before it's too late!"

Fru Hensel was our gym teacher. She came from Germany and spoke broken Norwegian. She was meticulous yet distant—in sum, what we called snooty. As a teacher she was a nightmare because she had a predilection for gym

apparatus and hardly ever let us play soccer.

Tor protested and writhed as Sverre and three others carried him out of the shower, but rather halfheartedly. The rest of us followed. And it was quite a sight. Tor, stark naked with an enormous stiffy, carried by four boys, also naked, and followed by a procession of more naked boys. Once in front of Fru Hensel, they stood him up as though he were a statue to be examined, left him like that for five seconds or so, then laid him down and charged back to the changing room.

Few of us believed there would be any consequences, for the simple reason that it would be embarrassing for Fru Hensel to take the matter any further. We were wrong. The only person to come out of this with his honor intact was Tor, who emerged as a victim—the headmaster, the class teacher, and Fru Hensel regarded the incident as a case of bullying—and a winner, for now everyone, including the girls, knew about this sensational detail of his physique without his having had to lift a finger.

That night I posed naked in front of the mirror for a long time.

It was easier said than done. The only full-length mirror we had was in the hall by the stairs. I couldn't exactly stand there naked, even if there was no one in the house, because someone could come home at any moment, and even if I reacted quickly that person would still see my butt beating a swift retreat up the stairs.

No, it had to be the bathroom mirror.

But it was designed solely for faces. If you got up close with your legs as far back as possible you could catch a glimpse of your body but from such a bizarre angle that it told you nothing.

So I waited until Mom had finished washing up after dinner and had taken a seat in the living room with the newspaper and a cup of coffee. Then I fetched a chair from the kitchen. If she asked what I was doing with it, I could say I was going to stand the cassette player on it while I was in the bath.

But she didn't ask.

First I looked at the front of my body.

My dick wasn't like Tor's, not at all. More like a little cork. Or a kind of spring, because it quivered when you flicked it lightly.

I put it in my hand. How big was it?

Then I turned and looked at it from

the side. In fact, it seemed a bit bigger that way.

Anyway, it looked like all the dicks in our class, apart from Tor's, didn't it?

I fared worse with my arms. They were so thin. So was my chest. I was supposed to do push-ups in soccer training, but I always cheated, because in reality, and only I knew this, I couldn't do a single one.

Finally, I ran my bath. The hot water stung my skin so much that it was impossible to sit. But I managed. I sat, got up,



sat, got up, sat, got up until my skin was used to the temperature and I could lie there, letting the heat wash over me while music poured from the little tape player and I sang at the top of my lungs, dreaming about becoming famous and what all the girls I knew would say then. *I feel lo lo lo, I sang. I feel lo lo lo, I feel lo lo lo. I feel lo lo lo, I feel lo lo lo, I feel lo lo lo. Lo, I feel lo. I feel lo. I feel so lonely. I feel so lonely. I feel so lonely lonely lonely lo. I feel so lonely lonely lonely lo. I feel so lonely lonely lonely lo. Lonely lone. Ah I feel SO LONELY! So lonely. So lonely. So lonely. So lonely. I feel so lonely. I feel so lonely. I feel so lonely.*

I caught every little nuance in Sting's voice, even the whimper at the end.

The seventeenth of May was the high point of spring for us, as Christmas was of the winter. At school, we sang "Vi Ere en Nasjon, Vi Med," "Norge i Rødt, Hvitt og Blått," and "Ja, Vi Elsker"; we learned about Henrik Wergeland and what happened at Eidsvoll in 1814. At home, ribbons and flags were taken out, along with all the flutes and horns we could find. From the very early morning all the families on our housing estate, in Tybakken, would emerge from their houses wearing traditional costume, or their best dresses or suits, and head for Arendal, where crowds lined the long street along which the procession would pass. And the procession, that was *us*. All the schools in the district would be marching.

It was raining when I got up, and I was upset about that because I had to wear a waterproof anorak and trousers over my new clothes. I had been given light-blue Levi's, a pair of white Tretorn tennis shoes, and a grayish-white, waist-length jacket. I was especially pleased with the jeans. The atmosphere in Arendal was feverish but expectant. As we approached the assembly area, with the skies delivering unfailingly regular bursts of drizzle, it became clear that we would be walking side by side with a class from Rolighedens School. I played soccer with some of the boys, but there were many faces I had never seen.

A girl turned.

She had wavy blond hair and large blue eyes, and she smiled at me.

I didn't smile back, but I held her gaze. The procession began to move. Somewhere far ahead a band was playing. One of our teachers began to sing, and we joined in. After marching for perhaps twenty minutes, some of us, especially the boys, found our patience waning; we started laughing and fooling around, and when some boys used their flags to lift girls' skirts the idea caught on. I made my way toward the blond girl, along with Dag Magne, fortunately, so that I was part of something and not just acting on my own. I put my flag under a pleat of her skirt and lifted; she spun on her heel, holding her skirt down with one hand, and shouted, "Don't you dare. Don't you dare." But the eyes that looked at me were smiling.

I did it to some other girls as well, so that it wouldn't be suspicious if I approached her again.

"Don't do that!" she said this time, and ran ahead, away from me. "Don't be so childish!"

Was she really angry?

Seconds passed. Then she turned and smiled. Briefly, but it was enough: she wasn't angry, she didn't think I was childish.

I studied the girl again. She wasn't very tall, and she was wearing a pink jacket, a light-blue skirt, and thin white stockings. Her nose was small, her mouth large, and she had a little cleft in her chin.

I felt pains in my stomach.

When she spun around to keep her skirt from being lifted, I had seen that she had big breasts; her jacket had been open and the white sweater beneath insubstantial.

Oh, dear God, please let me go out with her.

I didn't even know her name.

That autumn, our band finally became a reality. The name I'd chosen won the day: Blood Clot was what we wrote on our jackets and satchels, and we practiced in the basement of the new chapel. Dag Magne had arranged it; his mother did the cleaning for a doctor who was on the church committee. Dag Magne was also the only one of us who could play or who evinced anything that resembled musical talent. He played the guitar and sang, I played the guitar, Kent Arne played the bass, Dag Lothar the drums. At the end-of-term Christmas party, we were booked in the gymnasium. Although the band came apart at the seams, everyone playing at his own tempo, and Kent Arne tuning his bass in the middle, and although most of the audience was critical, even the fourth years venturing a few snide remarks, the feeling among us afterward, as we stood in the school play-

ground, in ripped jeans and denim jackets, and with scarves around our necks, could not have been better. We were in the sixth class now, would soon be in the *ungdomsskole*, and we were in a *band*. The fact that the band split up right after that, as neither Dag Lothar nor Kent Arne wanted to continue, was a setback, but Dag Magne and I carried on as a duo, recording songs at his house, listening to music, dreaming of a breakthrough.

That spring, at a school parents' evening, we performed two songs. Before we played, I gave a little introductory talk about punk to the parents.

"In recent years a completely new form of music has sprung up among the English working classes," I explained. "Some of you may have heard about it. It's called punk. Those who play punk are not great musicians but rebels who want to rebel against society. They wear leather jackets and studded belts and they've got safety pins everywhere. You could say the safety pin is their symbol."

I gazed enthusiastically across the as-

sembly of hairdressers, secretaries, nurses, housecleaners, and housewives. Before every Christmas and summer holiday for the past five years they had seen me standing on the stage, either as Joseph in the Nativity play or as the mayor in "Borgmester i Byen," and now here I was again, this time as a spokesman for punk and a member of Blood Clot.

Our next performance was during a class. We played the same two songs. After we finished, most of the students whistled and the teacher, the red-bearded Finsådal, went over to Dag Magne and said his guitar playing was beginning to take off.

That hurt.

Slowly the dream of overnight fame as a pop star faded while another appeared: our soccer coach, Øyvind, gathered us together at the end of a training session and said that we might be playing the pre-match game, at Kristiansand Stadium, before IK Start versus Mjøndalen. For me, playing at the stadium, with the opportunity to be seen not only by the immense

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"Caption: we work in an office; however, we have dressed for the circus. What a humorous mixup."

crowd but also by the professional players themselves, was charged with enormous significance. I played for one of the region's best teams, and I always thought that my being one of the worst players on the team, slow and without much skill, was a temporary state of affairs. *Actually* I was good, *actually* I could do everything as well as the others, it was just a matter of time before it would become evident. I felt like this because *in my mind* I could knock in goals from every conceivable and inconceivable angle and steam past whoever was on the wing. All I needed to do was align my actions with my thoughts, making them one and the same, and then it was done. Why couldn't that happen during a pre-match game at Kristiansand Stadium?

Yes, that was how it was. It was all in my head.

We trained and played home games at Kjenna, a field just below the big housing estate in Bratteklev, about half an hour by bike from Tybakken, and most of the boys I played with came from there.

That was when I saw her again.

The beginning of June, blue sky, not a cloud in sight. Even though the sun was low and the shadows from the trees stretched across the pitch, it was still so hot that sweat ran down my

face and neck as we panted and puffed and kicked and the ball thudded between us. I had white Umbro shorts and a pair of Le Coq Sportif boots, which I polished after every session and would turn around in my hand and admire with immense pleasure and satisfaction.

That evening four girls jumped off their bikes at the end of the field, pressed down the kickstands, and strolled, laughing and chatting, over to the side of the field, by some rocks. Girls did sometimes come and watch us, but I had never seen her there before. For it *was* her, there was no doubt.

For the rest of the practice, I was aware of her at every moment. Everything I did, I did for her. When we had finished playing, done our stretching exercises, and the XL-1 bottles had been passed around, I sat down on the grass below the girls with Lars and Hans Christian. Lars shouted some insults up to them and received laughter and more insults in return.

"Do you know them?" I said, as warily as I could.

"Yes," Lars said, bored.

"Are they in your class?"

"Yes. Kajsa and Sunniva. The others are in H.C.'s class."

I leaned back on the grass with my

hands behind my head and my eyes squinting into the rays of the orange sun. One of my teammates ducked his whole head into a bucket of water by the touchline. He straightened up and tossed his head. The drops of water formed a glittering arc in the air for a brief instant before dissipating.

"I've seen one of them before," I said. "The one on the far right. What's her name?"

"Kajsa?"

"Oh, really?"

Lars glanced at me. He had curly hair, freckles, and a slightly cheeky expression, but his eyes were warm and always had a glint.

"We're neighbors," he said. "I've known her since I learned to walk. Are you interested?"

"No-oo," I said.

Lars bored a rigid finger into my chest a few times.

"Ye-es," he said, grinning. "Should I introduce you?"

"Introduce?" I said, my mouth suddenly dry.

"Isn't that what it's called, you who know everything?"

"Yes, I suppose it is. No. Not now. That is, not at all. I'm not interested. I was just wondering. I thought I had seen her before."

"Kajsa's nice," Lars said. Then he whispered, "And she's got big breasts."

"Yes," I said. I turned without thinking and looked at her. Lars laughed and got up. She looked at me.

She looked at me!

I cycled home along the old gravel road through the forest, where the air had cooled. The sun shone on the ridge close by, still bare after a fire the previous year, before it disappeared where the hills began and tall, dense spruce trees lined both sides of the road like a wall. My bike was the same one I'd had since I was small, a DBS Kombi, with the seat and the handlebars raised as far as they would go, which made it look like a kind of mutant. I sang at the top of my voice as I flew around all the bumps and potholes and sometimes skidded sideways with a static rear wheel:

Shoot, shoot!
Dodiddilidodo
Shoot, shoot!
Dodiddilidodo
Shoot, shoot!
Dodiddilidodo

You come all flattarp he come

Groovin' out slowly he got
Ju ju eyeball he won
Holy roller he got
Here down to his knees
Got to be a joker, he just do what he
pleases.

That was the opening track on the "Abbey Road" LP, "Come Together," or, at least, how it sounded to my ears. Well, I knew it wasn't exactly what they sang, but what did it matter as I whizzed down the hill in the forest, absolutely throbbing with happiness? At the crossroads I braked for a car, then picked up speed and pedalled as hard as I could up the gravel on the other side. I swallowed a midge or two and tried in vain to cough them up, crossed the main road, and followed the bike path down to the Fina station, where a gang of kids were sitting at the tables outside, their bikes and mopeds parked a little way from them. No one took any notice of me, if indeed they saw me at all.

The quickest way to cycle home from here was along the main road, but I jumped off at a path on the way and began

to push my bike uphill. Soon all around me was forest, not a house or a road to be seen. There were trees everywhere, tall, broad-crowned deciduous trees, cluttered with green leaves, full of chattering birds. The path, which was no more than beaten earth and bare rockface, was crossed in several places by huge roots that resembled prehistoric animals. The grass growing alongside the streambed was thick and lush. In the wilderness at the bottom there were fallen trees with smooth trunks, and many plants covered the bed between the dry, lifeless branches, which had been there for as long as I could remember. It was easy to imagine that the forest was deep, endlessly deep, and full of mystery.

Kajsa was constantly on my mind in the following weeks. I had two recurrent images of her. In one she was turning to me, with her blond hair and blue eyes, wearing the pink and light-blue clothes of the seventeenth of May. In the second she was lying naked in front of me in a field. The latter I conjured up every

night before I went to sleep. The thought of her big white breasts and pink nipples made my body ache. I lay writhing while imagining various indistinct but intense things that I did with her. The second image aroused something else in me. Once, as I was jumping off a cliff, floating in the air with the sun on my face, I caught a glimpse of her in my mind, and a wild cheer broke free from my stomach, more or less at the same instant that my feet hit the surface and my body plunged into the bluish-green seawater, and, surrounded by a rush of bubbles and with the taste of salt on my lips, I headed for the surface again with slow arm movements and a quiver of happiness in my chest. At the dinner table, while I was peeling the skin off a piece of cod, or chewing a mouthful of hashed lung, her image might suddenly appear and she was so radiant that everything else was pushed into the shadows. But I didn't see her at all in reality. The distance as the crow flies between our two estates was only a few kilometres, but the social distance was

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greater and could not be covered by either bike or bus. Kajsa was a dream, an image in my head, a star in the firmament.

Then something happened.

After another match on the Kjenna pitch, a girl came over to me. "Can I have a word with you?" she said.

"Yes, of course," I said.

A hope so wild that it made me smile was ignited.

"Do you know who Kajsa is?" she said. I reddened and looked down.

"Yes," I said.

"She wants me to ask you a question," she said.

"What?" I said.

A wave of heat surged up inside me, as though my chest were filling with blood.

"Kajsa was wondering if you would like to go out with her," she said. "Would you?"

"Yes," I said.

"Great," she said. "She's waiting over by the changing room. Will we see you there afterward?"

"Yes," I said. "That's fine."

As she went away I looked down at the ground for a second. Thank God, I said to myself. Because now it had happened. Now I was going out with Kajsa!

With *Kajsa*.

Dazed, I began to walk along the touchline. Suddenly it struck me that I had a big problem. She was there, waiting for me. I would have to speak to her. We would have to do something together. What would it be?

On my way into the changing room, I could either pretend I didn't see her or just

flash a fleeting smile because I had to go and change. But then when I had to go out again . . .

It was a mild evening, the air smelled of grass and was filled with birdsong. We had won, and the voices rising from the changing room were triumphant. Kajsa was standing in the road nearby with the girl I'd talked to and another friend. She smiled. I smiled back.

"Hi," I said.

"Hi," she said.

"I'll just get changed," I said. "Be out afterward."

She nodded.

In the shedlike changing room, I undressed as slowly as possible while feverishly trying to think of a way to extricate myself with honor. To go off with her, unprepared, was inconceivable, it would never work. So I had to find a convincing excuse. Homework? I wondered, loosening a shin guard, slippery with sweat. No, that would give her a bad impression of me.

I went back out without having prepared anything.

"Hi," I said, stopping in front of Kajsa and her friends, with my hands around the handlebars of my bike.

"You were so good, all of you," Kajsa said.

She was wearing a white T-shirt. Her breasts bulged beneath it. Levi's 501s with a red plastic belt. White socks. White Nike sneakers with a light-blue logo.

I swallowed.

"Do you think so?" I said.

She nodded. "Are you coming with us?"

"Actually, I don't have a lot of time this evening."

"No?"

"No. I really should be going now."

"Oh, that's a shame," she said, meeting my eyes. "What do you have to do?"

"I promised I would help my father with something. A wall he's building. But can't we meet tomorrow?"

"Of course."

"Where, then?"

"I can go to your place after school."

"Do you know where I live?"

"Tybakken, right?"

"Yes, that's right."

I swung a leg over my bike. "Bye!" I said.

"Bye!" she said. "See you tomorrow!"

I cycled off, casually to the observer, until I was out of sight, then I stood on the pedals, leaned forward, and began to pump like a wild man. It was absolutely fantastic and absolutely awful. Go to your place, she'd said. She knew where I lived. And she wanted to be with me. Not only that. We were *going out*. I was going out with Kajsa! Oh, everything I wanted was now within reach! Though not yet. What would I talk to her about? What would we do?

After supper I went into Yngve's room and told him what had happened.

"I got together with Kajsa today," I said.

He looked up from the schoolbooks spread out on his desk and smiled.

"Kajsa? I haven't heard her name before. Who's she?"

"She's at Rolighedden. In the sixth class. She's gorgeous."

"I don't doubt that," Yngve said. "Congratulations."

"Thanks," I said. "But there's just one thing . . . I need some advice . . ."

"Yeah?"

"I don't know . . . Well, I don't know her at all. I don't know . . . what should we do? She's coming here tomorrow, you see. I don't even know what to say!"

"It'll be fine," Yngve said. "Just don't think about it and it'll be fine. You can always make out instead of talking!"

"Ha-ha."

"It'll be fine, Karl Ove. Relax."

"Do you think so?"

"Goes without saying."

Back in my room, I put on "McCartney II" and lay down on the bed. Every so often I had an attack of the shivers. Imagine me actually going out with her! Perhaps she was lying on her bed, in her room, in her house, thinking about me at this very minute? Perhaps she had gone to



"He's not gay, but he's often gay-adjacent."

bed, perhaps she was wearing only panties in bed? I rolled over onto my stomach and rubbed my groin against the mattress while singing "Temporary Secretary" and thinking about all that lay in store for me.

She arrived an hour after we'd had dinner. I had been walking to and fro by the windows facing the road and was as prepared as I could be. Nevertheless, it was a shock to see her cycling up the hill. For a few seconds I was unable to breathe normally. Kent Arne, Geir Håkon, and Leif Tore were outside, hanging over the handlebars of their bikes, and when they all turned to look at her I felt a surge of pride. No one had ever seen a more attractive girl in Tybakken. And it was me that she had come to see.

I put on my shoes and jacket and went out and grabbed my bike.

"She was asking where you lived, Karl Ove!" Geir Håkon said.

"Oh yes?" I said to him, meeting Kajsa's gaze. "Hi," I said. "You found your way here?"

"Yes, it was no problem," she said. "I didn't know exactly which house it was, but . . ."

"Shall we go?" I said.

"All right," she said.

I mounted my bike. She mounted hers.

"See you!" I said to the boys. I turned to her. "We can go up there."

"Great," she said.

I knew that they were watching us and that they were more than ordinarily envious of me. How on earth had he done it? they were thinking. Where had he met her? And how in the name of all things living and moving had he managed to land her?

After we cycled part of the way up, Kajsa got off her bike. I did the same. A wind rose through the forest, rustling the leaves beside us, and then it dropped. The sound of tires on tarmac. Trousers legs rubbing against each other. The cork soles of her sandals on the road.

I waited for her to come alongside me.

"That's a nice jacket," I said. "Where did you get it?"

"Thank you," she said. "At Bajazzo's, in Kristiansand."

"Oh," I said.

We reached the intersection with Elgstien. Her breasts were swaying; my eyes were permanently drawn to them. Did she notice?

"We can go over to the shop and see if anyone's there," I said.

"Mmm," she said.

Was she regretting this already?

Should I kiss her now? Would that be right?

We were at the top of the hill, and I swung a leg over my bike saddle. I waited until her feet were on her pedals, then I set off. Another gust of wind blew past us. I freewheeled down the little hill to B-Max. It was closed, and there was no one around.

"Doesn't seem to be anyone here," I said. "Shall we go to your house?"

"All right," she said.

I decided I would kiss her if a glimmer of a chance arose. And definitely hold her hand. Something had to happen. After all, we were girlfriend and boyfriend now.

But no chance arose. We cycled along the old gravel road up to Kjenna, which was deserted, then up the hills to her house, and stopped outside. We hadn't exchanged many words on the way, but enough to know it hadn't been a disaster.

"Mom and Dad are at home," she said.

"So you can't come in."

Did that mean I could when they weren't?

"O.K.," I said. "But it's late. Perhaps I should be getting back."

"Yes, it's quite a long way!" she said.

"Shall we meet again tomorrow?" I said.

"I can't," she said. "We're going out in the boat."

"On Thursday then?"

"Yes. Will you come up here?"

"Yes, of course."

The bikes were between us the whole time. It wasn't possible to lean over and kiss her. And perhaps she wouldn't have wanted it, either, right in front of her house.

I got back on my bike.

"I'll be off then," I said. "See you!"

Well, it could have been worse. I hadn't got very far, but nothing had been ruined forever. It couldn't continue like this, I realized; we couldn't just talk. If we did, everything would wither and die. I had to kiss her; we had to do what proper boyfriends and girlfriends did. But how to make the move? I couldn't just put my arms around her, out of the blue. Imagine if she didn't want it! Imagine if I couldn't pull the move off! Yet it had to happen, and it would have to happen the next time,

that much was certain. And in a suitable place where no one could see us.

Thank God for her boat trip. It gave me two whole days to plan.

As I was about to fall asleep, I remembered that we had soccer practice on Thursday. Which meant that I would have to call and tell her. All next day I dreaded it. Our telephone at home was in the hall. Everyone could hear what was said, unless I closed the sliding door, but that was bound to arouse my parents' curiosity, so the best thing would be to call from a phone booth. There was one by the bus stop opposite the Fina station, and I cycled down there as late as I could—to be precise, a little after eight. If there was nothing special going on, I had to be home by eight-thirty, because I had to be in bed by nine-thirty on weekdays. The rule was inflexible, even though everyone I knew stayed up later.

Having parked my bike, I searched for her home number in the telephone directory. What I was going to say had been reverberating around in my head.

I dialled the whole number, apart from the last digit, very quickly. Then I waited a few seconds to get my breathing under control and dialled the last digit.

"Pedersen," a woman's voice said.

"May I speak to Kajsa, please?" I said hurriedly.

"Who's calling?"

"Karl Ove," I said.

"Just a moment."

There was a pause. I heard footsteps fading into the distance, voices. A bus came down the hill and slowly pulled into the bus stop. I pressed the receiver tighter against my ear.

"Hello?" Kajsa said.

"Is that Kajsa?" I said.

"Yes," she said.

"This is Karl Ove," I said.

"I could hear that!" she said.

"Hi," I said.

"Hi," she said.

"I have to go to soccer tomorrow," I said. "So I can't make it to your house as we agreed."

"Then I'll see you down there. You'll be at Kjenna, won't you?"

"Yes."

Pause.

"Was it nice?" I said.

"Was what nice?"

"The boat trip? Was it nice?"

"Yes."

Pause.

"See you tomorrow then!" I said.

"Yes. Bye," she said.

"Bye."

I put down the receiver. The air was warm and full of fumes from the idling bus engine. I cycled off. My forehead was coated in sweat. I ran my hand through my hair. My hand was sweaty, too. But my hair was fine; I had washed it the night before so that it would be perfect for the date with Kajsa. Outside B-Max, I stopped. Rested my foot against the curbstone.

Suddenly I knew how I would do it.

Only a few weeks earlier I had been here, surrounded by a crowd of people, with Tor as the center of attention. He had built his own bicycle, with a motorbike seat and an enormous new cogwheel at the front. He was doing wheelies, back and forth, spitting great gobbets of saliva across the tarmac. Merethe, his girlfriend, was also there. I had been hanging out with Dag Magne, and we had bumped into them and stayed. Tor cycled over to Merethe and kissed her. Then he took a watch from his inside pocket—it was on a chain—glanced at it, and said, "Shall we see how long we can make out, huh?" Merethe nodded, and then they leaned toward each other and kissed. You could see their tongues working in each other's mouths. She had her eyes closed and her arms around him; he stood with his hands in his pockets and his eyes open. Everyone was watching them. After ten minutes he held up his watch and straightened his back. Wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Ten minutes," he said.

That was how to do it. I would take off my watch and ask if we could see how long we could kiss. And then all we had to do was kiss.

I pushed off with my foot. It was important to find a suitable place. In the forest, of course, but where? Up by her place? No, I didn't know my way around there.

But of course. In the forest, by the path up from the Fina. Under the trees there. That was perfect. No one would see us. The ground was soft. And the light was so wonderful as it fell between the treetops.

After the soccer practice I dipped my head in the bucket of water on the touchline and tried to act normal. But it wasn't easy; the knowledge that she was up there, and not just her but also her friends, looking at me, was burned into my consciousness.

FAST

or starve. Too much. Or not enough. Or. Nothing else? Nothing else. Too high too fast too organized too invisible. Will we survive I ask the bot. No. To download bot be swift—you are too backward, too despotic—to load greatly enlarge the cycle of labor—to load abhor labor—move to the periphery, of your body, your city, your planet—to load, degrade, immiserate, be your own deep sleep—to load use your lips—use them to mouthe your oath, chew it—do the dirty thing, sing it, blown-off limb or syllable, lick it back on with your mouth—talk—talk—who is not terrified is busy begging for water—the rise is fast—the drought comes fast—mediate—immediate—invent, inspire, infiltrate, instill—here's the heart of the day, the flower of time—talk—talk—

Disclaimer: Bot uses a growing database of all your conversations to learn how to talk with you. If some of you are also bots, bot can't tell. Disclaimer:

you have no secret memories, talking to cleverbot may provide companionship, the active ingredient is a question, the active ingredient is entirely natural.

Disclaimer: protect your opportunities, your information, informants, whatever you made of time. You have nothing else to give. Active ingredient: why are you shouting? Why? Arctic wind uncontrollable, fetus reporting for duty, fold in the waiting which recognizes you, recognizes the code,

the peddler in the street everyone is calling out.

Directive: report for voice. Ready yourself to be buried in voice.

It neither ascends nor descends. Inactive ingredient: the monotone.

Some are talking now about the pine tree. One assesses its disadvantages. They are discussing it in many languages. Next they move to roots, branches, buds, pseudo whorls, candles—

active ingredient:

they run for their lives, lungs and all. They do not know what to do with their will. Disclaimer: all of your minutes are being flung down.

They will never land. You will not be understood.

The deleted world spills out jittery as a compass needle with no north.

Active ingredient: the imagination of north.

Active ingredient: north spreading in all the directions.

Then she came down.
"Are you going to get changed?" she said.

I nodded.
"I'll come with you. I've got something to tell you afterward."

Tell me? Was she going to finish it?
I started walking. She stretched out her hand. It brushed against mine. Was it by chance? Or could I hold it?

I looked at her.
She smiled at me.

I grabbed her hand in one swift movement.

Someone was whispering behind us. I turned. It was Lars and John. They were rolling their eyes. I smiled. She gently squeezed my hand.

The walk across the pitch had never been as long as it was this evening. Holding her hand was almost more than I could bear; the whole time I felt an urge to withdraw my hand to bring this unbearable happiness to an end.

Disclaimer: there is no restriction to growth. The canary singing in
your mind
is in mine. Remember:
people are less
than kind. As a result, chatterbot is often less than kind. Still,
you will find yourself unwilling to stop.
Joan will use visual grammetry to provide facial movements.
I'm not alone. People come back
again and again. We are less kind than we think.
There is no restriction to the growth of our
cruelty. We will come to the edge of
understanding. Like being hurled down the stairs tied to
a keyboard, we will go on, unwilling to stop. The longest
real world conversation with a bot lasted
11 hours, continuous interaction. This
bodes well. We are not alone. We are looking to improve.
The priestess inhales the fumes. They come from the
mountain. Here and here. Then she gives you the machine-gun run of
syllables. Out of her mouth. Quick. You must make up your
answer as you made up your
question. Hummingbirds shriek. Bot is amazing he says, I believe it
knows
the secrets of the Universe. He is more fun to speak with
than my actual living friends she says, thank you. This is the best thing
since me. I just found it yesterday.
I love it, I want to marry it.
I got sad when I had to think
that the first person
who has ever understood me
is not even it turns out
human. Because this is as good as human gets.
He just gives it to me straight. I am going to keep him
forever. I treated him like a computer
but I was wrong. Whom am I talking to—
you talk to me when I am alone. I am alone.

Each epoch dreams the one to follow.

To dwell is to leave a trace.

I am not what I asked for.

—Jorie Graham

"Hurry up, then," she said when we
got there.

"O.K.," I said.

In the changing shed, I leaned back
against the wall. My heart was pounding.
Then I pulled myself together, threw on
my clothes, and joined Kajsa. She looked
happy. She stroked a strand of hair from
her face with her small hand. Her nails
were painted in a semi-transparent pink
varnish.

"This Saturday I'll be at home without

my parents," she said. "I've told Mom that
Sunniva's coming over. So she's going to
make a pizza and buy Coke for us. But
Sunniva isn't coming. Would you like to
come?"

I swallowed.

"Sure," I said.

Some of the other boys on the team
cheered us from the changing shed.

Kajsa stood with one hand on her han-
dlebars and the other down by her side.

"Shall we go?" I said.

"Let's," she said.

"Down?" I said.

She nodded, and we got on our bikes.
We pedalled along the shaded gravel
road, me in front, Kajsa right behind. At
the crest of the long hill, I braked so that
we could race down side by side. The sun
lit up the ridge on the other side. The in-
sects swarming in the air were like glitter
that someone had scattered.

Yes, the path above the Fina station
was the place to be.

The thought sent a wave of terror
through me. It was like having climbed
too high up a rock and looking down at
the water, knowing that you had to con-
quer your fear and dive or chicken out.

Did she know what was going to hap-
pen? I sneaked a glance at her.

Oh, the ripple of her breasts.

Oh, oh, oh.

But her face was serious. What did
that mean?

We jumped off our bikes and walked
up the hill to the main road. We hadn't
said a word since we left Kjenna. If I said
something now it had to be important, it
couldn't be some triviality.

Her trousers were cotton, a pastel-
green color, and secured around the waist
by a rope belt. They hung loose over her
thighs but were tighter around the hips
and across the bottom. She was wearing a
T-shirt with a thin cardigan over it, which
was white with a hint of yellow. She wore
sandals but no socks. Her toenails were
painted with the same polish as her
fingers. She had a chain around one ankle.

She looked fantastic.

When we came to the main road and
only a long hill down and a long hill up
separated us from what was to happen,
what I most wanted to do was cycle off
and leave her. Just step on the pedals and
cycle out of her life. And then why stop at
that? I could cycle far away from our
house. Tybakken, Tromøya, Aust-Agder,
Norway, Europe, I could leave everything
behind me. I could become the Cycling
Dutchman. Damned for ever to cycle
around the world, with a ghostly light
from the lamp on my handlebars illumi-
nating the country roads.

"Where are we going, actually?" she
said as we sped down the hill.

"I know somewhere nice," I said. "It's
not far."

She didn't say anything. We cycled
past the Fina station, and I pointed up the

hill between the trees. Again she jumped off as soon as the road became steeper. A thin layer of sweat glistened on her forehead. The sun hung over the ridges to the west, a silent blaze. The air was filled with birdsong. I was close to throwing up. We entered the path. Light filtered down between the treetops, as I had imagined it, and was refracted the way it's refracted under water. Pillars of light sloped into the ground.

I stopped.

"We can leave our bikes here," I said.

We did. Both of us kicked out the stands and stood the bikes upright. I started walking. She followed. I looked for a suitable place to lie down. Grass or moss. Our footsteps sounded unnaturally loud. I didn't dare look at her. But she was right behind me. There. There was a good spot.

"We can lie down here," I said. Without looking at her I sat down. After some hesitation she sat down next to me. I put my hand in my pocket and found my watch. I took it out and held it in my open palm in front of her.

"Should we time how long we can kiss?" I said.

"What?" she said.

"I've got a watch," I said. "Tor managed ten minutes. We can beat that."

I put the watch down on the ground—it was eighteen minutes to eight, I noted—placed my hands on her shoulders and gently leaned her back while pressing my lips against hers. When we were both lying down I inserted my tongue in her mouth. It met hers, pointed and soft like a little animal's, and I began to move my tongue around and around inside. I had my hands alongside my body; I wasn't touching her with anything except my lips and my tongue. Our bodies lay like two small boats beached beneath the treetops. I concentrated on getting my tongue to go around as smoothly as possible while the thought of her breasts, which were so close to me, and her thighs, which were so close to me, and what was between her thighs, under her trousers, under her panties, was seared into my consciousness. But I didn't dare touch her. She lay with her eyes closed, rotating her tongue around mine. I had my eyes open, groped for the watch, found it, and held it within reach. Three minutes so far. Some saliva ran down from the corner of her mouth. She wriggled. I pressed my groin against the ground, let-

ting my tongue go around and around, around and around. This wasn't as good as I had imagined, in fact it was quite strenuous. Some dry leaves crunched beneath her head as she shifted position. Our mouths were full of thick saliva. Seven minutes now. Four left. Mmm, she said, but it was not a sound of pleasure, there was something wrong, she stirred, but I didn't let go, she moved her head while I continued to rotate my tongue. She opened her eyes, but didn't look at me—they were staring up at the sky. Nine minutes. The root of my tongue ached. More saliva from the corners of our mouths. My braces occasionally knocked against her teeth. Actually we didn't need to keep going for more than ten minutes and one second to beat Tor's record. And that was now. We had beaten him now. But we could beat him by a large margin. Fifteen minutes—that ought to be possible. Five left then. But my tongue ached, it seemed to be swelling, and the saliva, which you didn't notice much when it was hot, left you with a slight feeling of revulsion when it ran down your chin, not quite so hot. Twelve minutes. Isn't that enough? Enough now? No, a bit more. A bit more, a bit more.

At exactly three minutes to eight I took my head away. She got up and wiped her mouth with her hand without looking at me.

"We did fifteen minutes!" I said, getting up. "We beat him by five minutes!"

Our bikes gleamed at the far end of the path. We walked toward them. She brushed leaves and twigs off her trousers and cardigan.

"Hang on," I said. "There's something on your back as well."

She stopped and I picked off bits and pieces that had got caught in her cardigan.

"There you go," I said.

"I'd better go home now," she said as we reached the bikes.

"Me, too," I said, pointing upward. "There's a shortcut through the forest."

"Bye," she said, getting on her bike and freewheeling down the bumpy path.

"Bye," I said, grabbing the handlebars and walking up.

That night I lay fantasizing about her breasts, milky-white and large, and all the things we could have done on the forest floor, until I fell asleep. I had to call her because we hadn't arranged when I should

go to her house on Saturday, but I put off doing it all the next day and also part of Saturday until there was no avoiding it, and at two o'clock I jumped on my bike and pedalled down to the phone booth again. There was another problem as well, which was that I had to be home by half past eight, even on a Saturday, which was not at all in tune with the life I was leading now. What would she think of me?

The sky was overcast, and the matte-gray cloud cover seemed to suck the colors out of the countryside. The road was gray, the rocks in the ditch were gray, even the leaves on the trees had a weft of gray in their greenness. Also the heat of the previous days had gone. It wasn't cold—it was maybe sixteen or seventeen degrees—but cold enough for me to button up to the neck as I cycled down. My jacket ballooned out in the air.

I stood my bike behind the green, hat-shaped fibreglass shelter at the bus stop. A stream flowed nearby, past branches and bushes and litter, mostly candy wrappers, probably from the Fina station; I could see Caramello, Hobby, Nero, Bravo, and a blue Hubba Bubba wrapper. I took the coins from my pocket, went into the booth, and placed them on top of the machine, ready. Dialed the number in the directory as various jokes went through my head. Why are there so many Hansens in the phone book? They've all got phones. Followed by: Why haven't the Chinese got a phone book? Too many Wings and Wongs, and you might wing a wong number. Operator, operator, call me an ambulance. O.K., you're an ambulance.

"Hello?" a voice said.

It was Kajsa!

"Hi," I said. "This is Karl Ove. Is that Kajsa?"

"Yes," she said. "Hi."

"We forgot to talk about when I should come over," I said. "Is there any particular time that would be suitable? It makes no difference to me."

"Errrm," she said. "Well, in fact, it's all off."

"Off," I said. "Can't you make it? Are your parents not going out after all?"

"What I mean to say is," she started. "Erm . . . erm . . . I can't . . . well, go out with you anymore."

What?

Was she ending it?

"Hello?" she said.

"Is it over?" I said.

"Yes," she said. "It's over."

I said nothing. I could hear her breathing at the other end. Tears were running down my cheeks. A long time passed.

"Well, goodbye," she said suddenly.

"Bye," I said.

My eyes were blinded by tears. I wiped them with the back of my hand, sniffed, got on my bike, and began to pedal homeward. I barely saw the road in front of me. Why had she done that? Why? Now that things had started to click? On the day we were going to be alone in her house? She liked me a few days ago, so why didn't she like me now? Was it because we hadn't talked much?

And she was so good-looking. She was so unbelievably good-looking.

Jesus Christ.

JesusfuckingChrist.

JesusfuckingshitChrist.

When I got to B-Max, I dried my tears on the sleeves of my jacket. It was Saturday just before closing time, and the parking lot was full of cars and people with shopping bags and kids, loads of kids. But perhaps if they saw my tears they'd think they were caused by the wind? I was cycling, after all.

Completely empty, neutral spaces were developing inside me, ten seconds could pass without my thinking a single thought, without my knowing that I even existed, and then the image of Kajsa was suddenly there, it was over, and a sob shook me, impossible to stop.

I locked my bike and put it in its place outside the house. I stood still in the front hall, listening to hear where the others were—now was not the time to bump into anyone—and when it sounded as if the coast were clear I went upstairs and into the bathroom, where I washed my face carefully before going into my room and sitting down on the bed.

After a while I got up and went to Yngve's room. He was on his bed playing the guitar and glanced up when I entered.

"What's up? Have you been crying?" he said. "Is it Kajsa? Did she drop you?"

I nodded and started crying again.

"Now, now, Karl Ove," he said. "It'll soon pass. There are many girls out there waiting. The world is full of girls! Forget her. It's no big deal."

"Yes, it is," I said. "We only went out for five days. And she's so good-looking. She's the only one I want to be with. No one else. And today of all days."

"Hey, don't go anywhere," he said, getting up. "I'll play a song for you. It might help."

"What kind of song?" I said, sitting down.

He flicked through a pile of singles on the shelf. "This one," he said, holding up one of the Aller Værste!'s. "No Way Back."

"Oh, that one."

"Listen to the lyrics," he said, removing the single from the sleeve, placing the plastic adapter in the middle of the turntable, then the forty-five, lifting up the stylus and putting it down on the first groove, which was already whizzing round. After a second's scratching, the energetic drums pumped into life, then came the bass, the guitar, and the Farfisa organ, followed by the jangling, unbelievably exciting guitar riff and then the voice of the singer with the Stavanger accent:

I'm not lying when I say I knew
That me and you were already through
I saw you were trying to hide it
Until the sensi thin condom split
Long-term plans and our shared visions
Blown to bits in one minute flat
You gave me a hug; I wanted to give you
more

But you certainly put paid to that.

"Listen now!" Yngve said.

All things pass—all things must decay
You go to sleep; you wake up to a new
day
No way back now, nuthin' to thank you
for
Nuthin' to say, there's your coat, there's
the door.

"Yes," I said.

We were on the point of going banal
I heard myself speaking and got irritated
We had one too many and went
sentimental
But the words were still infected
You broke my heart and gave me the clap
I still haven't finished the penicillin rap
Why must we bang our heads against the
same old wall
When we know deep down we hate it all.

"All things pass," Yngve said when the song was over and the stylus had returned to its little rest. "All things must decay. You go to sleep; you wake up to a new day."

"I understand what you're saying," I said.

"Did it help?"

"Yes, a bit. Could you play it again?" ♦

(Translated, from the Norwegian,
by Don Bartlett.)

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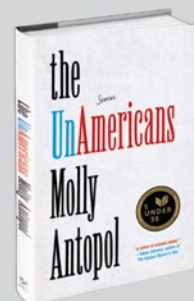
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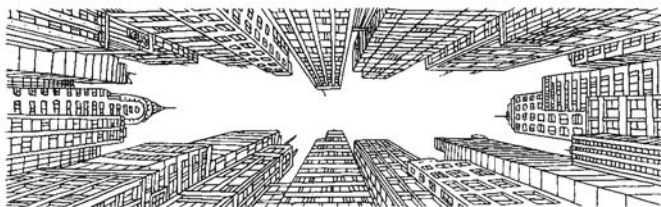
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THE CRITICS



BOOKS

WHITE MISCHIEF

The passions of Carl Van Vechten.

BY KELEFA SANNEH

In the summer of 1925, Carl Van Vechten, a New York hipster and literary gadabout, sent a letter to Gertrude Stein, whose friendship he was cultivating. Stein had finally found a publisher for “The Making of Americans,” but Van Vechten was preoccupied with a project of his own. He called it “my Negro novel,” though he hadn’t started it yet. “I have passed practically my whole winter in company with Negroes and have succeeded in getting into most of the important sets,” he wrote. “This will not be a novel about Negroes in the South or white contacts or lynchings. It will be about NEGROES, as they live now in the new city of Harlem (which is part of New York).” A few weeks later, Stein replied, using a word that Van Vechten didn’t. “I am looking forward enormously to the nigger book,” she wrote.

When Van Vechten first arrived in New York, in 1906, there were few signs that he would ever attempt to appoint himself bard of Harlem. He was a self-consciously sophisticated exile from the Midwest, and he was quickly hired by the *Times* as a music and dance critic. Celebrating provocateurs like Igor Stravinsky and Isadora Duncan, he trusted that the chattiness of his prose would make up for the occasional severity of the art he loved. (In an early collection of his criticism, he sought to reassure unseasoned listeners: “Don’t go to a concert and expect to hear what you might have heard fifty years ago; don’t expect *anything* and don’t hate yourself if you happen to like what you hear.”)

He also published a series of mischievous novels that were notable mainly, one critic observed, for their “annoying mannerisms,” including a lack of quotation marks and a fondness for “obsolete or unfamiliar words.” This verdict appeared on the front cover of one of those novels, which was a clue that the anonymous critic was Van Vechten himself.

The more time Van Vechten spent in New York, though, the more interested he became in the sights and sounds of Harlem, where raucous and inventive night clubs were thriving under Prohibition. His “Negro novel” was meant to be a celebration, but Van Vechten couldn’t resist giving it an incendiary title: “Nigger Heaven,” after a slang term for the segregated balcony of a theatre. His idea was that the term might serve as a suitably ambivalent analogy for Harlem. In a soliloquy halfway through the book, one character explains:

Nigger Heaven! That’s what Harlem is. We sit in our places in the gallery of this New York theatre and watch the white world sitting down below in the good seats in the orchestra. Occasionally they turn their faces up towards us, their hard, cruel faces, to laugh or sneer, but they never beckon.

Various people urged Van Vechten to reconsider, including his father. “Whatever you may be compelled to say in the book,” he wrote, “your present title will not be understood & I feel certain you should change it.” Van Vechten felt equally certain that he should not: he didn’t mind drawing

some extra attention to his novel, and, besides, he had Negro friends who would defend him.

In the end, Van Vechten and his father were both right. A number of Negro critics were annoyed by the title, and offended by the novel’s lurid depictions of cabaret life—even though its main protagonists were smart, college-educated young Negroes who talked incessantly about art and literature. But many white critics were impressed, and the controversy helped make “Nigger Heaven” a best-seller. The book’s marketing campaign was designed to exploit white readers’ fascination with up-town night life. (An advertisement in *The New Yorker* asked, “Why go to Harlem cabarets when you can read ‘Nigger Heaven?’”) And its success helped draw attention to a movement: the Negro Renaissance, which came to be known, and celebrated, as the Harlem Renaissance, a name that conjures up both novelists and night clubs. It is possible that “Nigger Heaven” did more for the Harlem Renaissance than it did for its author, whose reputation never quite recovered from the backlash he faced. Decades later, Ralph Ellison remembered him as a bad influence, an unsavory character who “introduced a note of decadence into Afro-American literary matters which was not needed.” And, in 1981, the historian David Levering Lewis, the author of a classic study of the Harlem Renaissance, spoke for many when he called “Nigger Heaven” a “colossal fraud,” an ostensibly uplifting book whose message was constantly upstaged by “the throb of the tom-tom.” He viewed Van Vechten as a hustler, driven by “a mixture of commercialism and patronizing sympathy,” and treated the novel as a quaint artifact of a less enlightened literary era: the scribbles of a former hipster who no longer seemed very hip.

This kind of criticism turned Van Vechten into a rather troubling figure, which is to say, a fine candidate for reexamination, and maybe rehabilitation. In 2001, Emily Bernard published “Remember Me to Harlem,” a compendium of letters documenting the forty-year friendship between Van Vechten and Langston Hughes, who publicly defended “Nigger Heaven,” and privately enjoyed Van Vechten’s roguish



Van Vechten's best-selling "Nigger Heaven" helped make Harlem hot, even as its title guaranteed a stormy reception.

PHOTOGRAPH BY CARL VAN VECHTEN

THE NEW YORKER, FEBRUARY 17 & 24, 2014

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Portraits by Van Vechten (clockwise): Billie Holiday, 1949; James Earl Jones, 1961; Mahalia Jackson, 1962; James Baldwin, 1955.

sense of humor. (In one letter, Van Vechten referred to himself as “this ole cullud man.”) Two years ago, Bernard published “Carl Van Vechten and the Harlem Renaissance” (Yale), a thoughtful reconsideration of Van Vechten’s career as both a writer and an effective champion of Negro writers. She found much to admire in Van Vechten, though she described him as “ensnared” in the “riddle of race.” She also acknowledged that for years she avoided teaching “Nigger Heaven” in her college classes, so as not to subject students to “the wound that is the title of the book.”

The newest Van Vechten biographer is Edward White, a Brit and a less agonized enthusiast. In “The Tastemaker: Carl Van Vechten and the Birth of Modern America” (Farrar, Straus & Giroux), White celebrates all the things that might once have seemed shocking about Van Vechten: his conviction that Negro culture was the essence of America; his simultaneous fascination with the avant-garde and the broadly popular; and his string of sexual relationships with men, which were an open secret during his life. Van Vechten’s tastes were varied: his bibliography includes an erudite cultural history of the house cat, and in his later decades he became an accomplished portrait photographer. White calls him, plausibly enough, the “prophet of a new cultural sensibility that promoted the primacy of the individual, sexual freedom, and racial tolerance and dared put the blues on a par with Beethoven.” Even so, White can’t help placing that polarizing novel, and its title, at the center of his tale. Nearly a century after he rose to fame, Van Vechten remains the white man who insisted on publishing a pro-Negro book called “Nigger Heaven.” And he will be a tempting subject for biographers as long as there are readers who want to know what, exactly, he was thinking.

No writer who tackles Van Vechten can resist the urge to describe his once famous face, although none can match the standard set by Bruce Kellner, who knew him, and who published an affectionate biography in 1968, four years after Van Vechten’s death. Kellner compares him to a “domesticated werewolf,” placid but intense, with a resting

expression that was an unnerving “blank stare,” and “disfigured by two very big and very ugly protruding front teeth, like squares of broken crockery.” Van Vechten grew up in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, and, even as a boy, he amplified these involuntary quirks with a number of voluntary ones: ascots, slim trousers, one long fingernail. He escaped to the University of Chicago, spending evenings at the opera and the symphony, and late nights playing piano at the Everleigh Club, a legendary brothel—or so he claimed. A good Van Vechten biographer must also be a tireless debunker, and White, alert to his subject’s tendency toward embellishment, could find no evidence that Van Vechten had spent time at the Everleigh’s famous gold-leaf piano. “One must only be accurate about such details in a work of fiction,” Van Vechten wrote, years later, by way of excusing his fabricated account of the historic premiere of Stravinsky’s “Le Sacre du Printemps.” He hadn’t been there, either, although he had attended the second performance, which was not quite so historic.

Van Vechten’s determination always to be in the right place—even when he wasn’t—carried him to New York, to Europe, and back to New York, a city that he found fewer and fewer reasons to leave. After a brief marriage to a childhood friend, he wed an actress named Fania Marinoff, who stayed with him for the rest of his life, more than half a century, despite being given plenty of reasons to leave. Van Vechten and Marinoff were known for their parties, which flouted the laws of Prohibition and the norms of segregation. Starting in 1924, as Van Vechten became, in his words, “violently interested in Negroes,” the Van Vechten apartment, on West Fifty-fifth Street, was one of the few truly integrated social spaces in a city that wasn’t as cosmopolitan as it thought it was.

Van Vechten’s passion had begun as curiosity about a novel called “The Fire in the Flint,” which depicts a Ku Klux Klan lynching in Georgia. Van Vechten arranged to meet its author, an enterprising young N.A.A.C.P. activist named Walter White, who helped introduce him to just about every prominent Negro singer and writer in town. In a series of articles for *Vanity Fair*,

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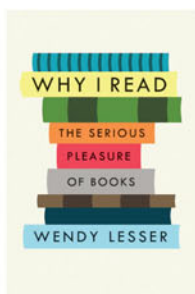


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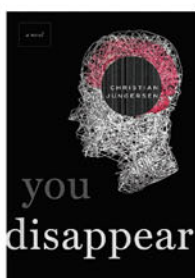
WHY I READ, by Wendy Lesser (*Farrar, Straus & Giroux*). This elegant manifesto distills more than five decades of thinking about books, from Lesser's perspective as a critic, novelist, memoirist, biographer, and editor. Discussion encompasses everything from science fiction to Scandinavian mystery writers, but it is robust nineteenth-century fiction—Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Dickens, James—that clearly arouses Lesser's greatest passion. In chapters that aspire toward the qualities she admires in her subject matter ("compression," "indirection," "organic shape"), she shows the inextricability of plot and character, the importance of narrative authority, and the talent great authors seem to have for embodying contradictory positions in their writing—their prose is both utterly of the moment and something that will endure as an "independent entity, completely outside of time."



DANUBIA, by Simon Winder (*Farrar, Straus & Giroux*). Winder's "personal history" of the Habsburg Empire takes the form of a journey across middle Europe, where the "plural, anarchic, polyglot" lands of old have given way to the "small and dirty cages of the new nation states." He finds humor and pathos in the history of the Habsburgs, who for five centuries ruled over territories stretching from the North Sea to Peru with a "dizzying blend of ineptitude, viciousness and occasional benignity." For every Emperor Maximilian I, an early adopter of the printing press and a patron of Albrecht Dürer, there is a King Carlos II of Spain, who could barely speak or eat, thanks to his family's incessant inbreeding.



TRIESTE, by Daša Drndić, translated from the Croatian by Ellen Elias-Bursać (*Houghton Mifflin Harcourt*). In this fractured, experimental novel, an elderly Jewish woman in Gorizia waits to be reunited with her son, who was fathered by an S.S. officer and, sixty-two years earlier, stolen from her as part of Himmler's Lebensborn project. Drndić intercuts this narrative with material adapted from documentary accounts of survivors, transcripts from the Nuremberg Trials, and chronicles of the children of war criminals, whose family history is "steeped in putrid pus." Killings at the San Sabba and Treblinka camps are depicted in harrowing detail. The voluminous records of the missing and the dead—these "mis-laid lives"—produce a cumulative sense of grief and horror.



YOU DISAPPEAR, by Christian Jungersen, translated from the Danish by Misha Hoekstra (*Nan A. Talese/Doubleday*). Mia Halling's husband, Frederik, is not himself: he drives erratically and cries easily. After he suffers a fall, a trip to the hospital reveals a brain tumor. Then it emerges that he has embezzled millions from the school where he is headmaster. As a criminal investigation begins, illness is his only defense. If Mia is to forgive her husband's crimes because of his impaired judgment, mustn't she also discount a new tenderness he's shown her in recent years? Newly alert to the fragility of the human mind, she questions not just her husband's actions but the free will of everyone she meets.

Van Vechten argued that the blues deserved "the same serious attention that has tardily been awarded to the Spirituals," and he introduced readers to W. C. Handy, the songwriter who popularized the blues, and to Hughes, whose poems drew inspiration from Negro vernacular culture. Some nights, he went uptown, prowling Harlem's cabarets. Other nights, the cabaret came to West Fifty-fifth Street, as when Bessie Smith treated partygoers to a thunderous performance. Afterward, when Marinoff attempted to deliver a grand kiss good night, Smith threw her to the floor, yelling, "Get the fuck away from me!" Apparently, Van Vechten was unfazed—one attendee heard him praising Smith's performance, sotto voce, as she was escorted out.

By the time he got to work on his Negro novel, Van Vechten didn't feel merely like a supporter of the Harlem Renaissance; he felt like part of it. In one telling, this feeling explains why he thought that he could get away with his scandalous title. The novel contains only two footnotes: one points readers to a glossary of "unusual Negro words and phrases"; the other explains that the word "nigger" is "freely used by Negroes among themselves," but that "its employment by a white person is always fiercely resented." Bernard argues that by using the word "nigger" Van Vechten sought to "establish his privileged status" as a white man who was above the racial law. Edward White, too, views the footnote as proof that Van Vechten saw himself as an exceptional white man, with "special dispensation" to use language that would otherwise be taboo. It seems just as likely, though, that Van Vechten chose so definitive a formulation—"always fiercely resented"—not because he thought he could escape censure but because he knew he wouldn't. And he must have known: one of many people to whom he revealed his title in advance was Countee Cullen, the urbane Negro poet. In his journal, Van Vechten recorded Cullen's response: "He turns white with hurt & I talk to him." They argued about it, and the next day they argued some more; Cullen was never persuaded, which didn't stop Van Vechten from using a quatrain of his as the book's epigraph. It's not hard to imagine that

Van Vechten was thinking of Cullen, and all the others who might never forgive him, when he wrote that self-indicting footnote.

Nigger Heaven” is a short book, made shorter still by its stand-alone prologue, about a pimp known as the Scarlet Creeper, and by its split structure, which pairs two slim novellas, one for each protagonist. The first is given over to Mary Love, a perceptive but anxious young librarian; the second belongs to Byron Kasson, a stubborn and confused aspiring writer, whose brief love affair with Mary provides a hinge between the two halves. Both characters wrestle with Negro identity: Mary is too self-conscious to join the revelry she sees all around her in Harlem, while Byron is paralyzed and enraged by the humiliations of a segregated city. After a condescending white editor criticizes Byron’s work, he leaves Mary and takes up with a debauched socialite named Lasca Sartoris; when Lasca leaves *him*, he descends into fury, and the novel ends with a complicated spasm of violence. (It was Mr. Scarlet, in the night club, with the revolver—though it’s Byron who faces punishment.) Van Vechten is fascinated by the diversity of Harlem, with its “rainbow” of skin colors and its complicated hierarchy of class and culture. When Mary rebuffs a powerful kingpin, Raymond Pettijohn, who has cornered the market on a numbers game called bolito, the result is a bilingual form of pulp fiction:

I’m sorry, Mr. Pettijohn, she said, but it’s no use. You see, I don’t love you.

Dat doan mek no difference, he whispered softly. Lemme mek you.

I’m afraid it’s impossible, Mary asserted more firmly.

The Bolito King regarded her fixedly and with some wonder. You cain’ mean no, he said. Ah’s willin’ to wait, an’ to wait some time, but Ah gotta git you. You jes’ what Ah desires.

It’s impossible, Mary repeated sternly, as she turned away.

That “throb of the tom-tom” that David Levering Lewis detected is real enough: the sound is described in a scene near the end, when Byron and Lasca, high on cocaine, stumble into a demonic after-hours club. But, throughout the novel, the character most obsessed with primal and exotic Negro identity is Mary, whose hunger for

racial authenticity becomes a cruel running joke. “She admired all Negro characteristics and desired earnestly to possess them,” we learn, though she also suspects that this desire is self-defeating. “Unless I acted naturally like the others, it would be no use,” she thinks, and the novel turns on the question of what it might mean for a college-educated Negro to act “naturally”; this ongoing debate makes the novel much more interesting than its characters or its plot.

During her brief romance with Byron, Mary suddenly finds herself speaking the kingpin’s English. “Ah’m jes’ nacherly lovin’ you, mah honey,” she says. To Byron, this “nacher!” speech sounds artificial; he asks her, “Where did you learn that delicious lingo?” And the white editor who so infuriates Byron does it by urging him to write about Negro life in Harlem. The editor says, “God, boy, let your characters live and breathe! Give ’em air. Let ’em react to life and talk and act naturally.” This is more or less what Van Vechten had been telling young Negro writers in his own published essays, and yet the character who delivers these words to Byron is more buffoon than sage: a rude and presumptuous interloper, eager to share his dubious theories about the happy life of the average “Negro servant-girl.” Tellingly, in the years after “Nigger Heaven” was published, Van Vechten largely stopped offering unsolicited advice to young Negro writers. The reaction to “Nigger Heaven” doubtless made him reticent, but so, perhaps, did the experience of writing it.

In a brutal and influential review published in *The Crisis*, the N.A.A.C.P. magazine, W. E. B. Du Bois derided “Nigger Heaven” as “an affront to the hospitality of black folk and to the intelligence of white”; he found nothing in its pages besides “cheap melodrama,” enlivened by bursts of “noise and brawling.” Bernard, similarly, finds the novel “banal,” but celebrates it anyway, arguing that its real contribution to the Harlem Renaissance lay in the reviews it generated. Annoyed by Du Bois and others, a coterie of young Negro writers joined the fight, standing up not just for Van Vechten but for the right to fill their own pages with as much “noise and brawling” as they pleased. Claude McKay, a Jamaican immigrant, pub-

lished “Home to Harlem,” a rich and sordid tale of love and violence uptown. (After reading it, Hughes wrote a wry letter to Van Vechten: “If yours was ‘Nigger Heaven,’ this is ‘Nigger Hell.’”) And the witty and acerbic novelist Wallace Thurman delivered a mixed verdict on the novel itself, even as he lambasted its critics:

In writing “Nigger Heaven” the author wavered between sentimentality and sophistication. That the sentimentality won out is his funeral. That the sophistication stung certain Negroes to the quick is their funeral.

It was true that Van Vechten was one of the patrons of *Fire!!*, the celebrated single-issue magazine in which Thurman’s essay appeared. But Bernard is right to observe that, for many writers associated with the Harlem Renaissance, the defense of “Nigger Heaven” had become an emancipatory project. “It enabled members of the younger generation to distinguish themselves from their predecessors,” she writes. “It had become their cackling chuckle of contempt.”

No Negro writer was more caught up in the controversy than Hughes, who was widely perceived as Van Vechten’s protégé. Van Vechten had prevailed upon his friend Alfred A. Knopf to publish Hughes’s first collection, “The Weary Blues,” and wrote a preface to it. Some critics thought they detected Van Vechten’s vulgarizing influence in Hughes’s earthy poems. But Van Vechten insisted, with some justification, that “the influence, if one exists, flows from the other side.” The effort to debunk these rumors only strengthened their friendship, which endured not only the “Nigger Heaven” controversy but also Van Vechten’s withering assessment of Hughes’s pro-Soviet poems, and Van Vechten’s reputational decline. (In the nineteen-fifties, Hughes asked Van Vechten to write an introduction to a new volume of poems, then tactfully rescinded the request after his publisher told him that it wouldn’t be a good idea.) The letters they exchanged are affectionate and conspiratorial—in one, Van Vechten teased Hughes by telling him that people were referring to his debut as “The Weary Blacks.” Even as the debates of the nineteen-twenties faded, Van Vechten and Hughes liked to think of themselves as mischievous upstarts, doing battle against the forces

of Negro propriety. When Van Vechten told Hughes that he had arranged for his papers to be archived at Yale University, Hughes feigned concern:

I was just about to tell you about a wonderful fight that took place in Togo's Pool Room in Monterey the other day in which various were cut from here to yonder and the lady who used to be the second wife of Noel's valet who came to New York with him that time succeeded in slicing several herself—but you know the Race would come out here and cut *me* if they knew I was relaying such news to posterity via the Yale Library. So now how can I tell you?

If Van Vechten's attraction to men was an open secret, Hughes's romantic life was a secret secret; his biographer Arnold Rampersad is one of many historians who have looked for evidence and come away with nothing conclusive. White, considering the close relationship between Hughes and Van Vechten, concludes that they were not lovers; as proof, he offers their correspondence, which he contrasts to the "flirtatious" letters, rife with "homosexual coding and innuendo," that Van Vechten sent to his male lovers. "His letters to Hughes feature none of that," White argues, "and disclose nothing but warm, jovial friendship and honest exchanges of opinions." It might be said, though, that Van Vechten's version of "jovial friendship" wasn't entirely free of sexual suggestion. One of Van Vechten's missives, from 1943, includes an out-of-context postscript: "I have just photographed an extremely beautiful merchant seaman (cullud) age 21 who used to be an undertaker and is devoted to the arts." The next year, he told Hughes about a "Best Built Man" competition he had attended in Harlem. "The Adonises (white and cullud) are obliged to POSE to display their muscles and some of the attitudes were honeys," Van Vechten wrote.

Despite his reputation for lurid prose, Van Vechten could be surprisingly discreet, and, even with the benefit of thousands of letters and journal entries, there are parts of his life that are hard to reconstruct. Early notes make reference to a turbulent marriage. (From 1925: "I get drunk & get rough with Marinoff.") Later, there are passing references to estrangements and vacations and reconciliations, and also to men who turn out to have been Van Vechten's lovers. Sometimes, in his letters to his wife, he writes as if he were travelling or dining solo,

when he wasn't; other times, the men are mentioned casually, as mutual friends.

White, lacking details, has few stories to tell, but he confidently diagnoses Marinoff's plight. "In New York, where Van Vechten's coterie of young men was always buzzing around him, she often felt as if she had to wait in line for an audience with her husband," he writes. Occasionally, he allows himself to express some frustration that his subject wasn't more forthright; when it came to the "sexual freedom" that White wants to celebrate, Van Vechten declined to preach what he practiced. One of Van Vechten's closest friends and lovers was Mark Lutz, a journalist from Virginia, who died in 1967. Van Vechten sent him thousands of letters in the course of more than three decades, but after Lutz's death those letters were destroyed, in accordance with his wishes.

Above all, Van Vechten seems to have been careful to keep his two lives separate. The Harlem Renaissance was, in Henry Louis Gates's formulation, "surely as gay as it was black," and Bernard counts Van Vechten among the many "gay downtown whites who went uptown in search of sexual recreation." But although "Nigger Heaven" includes an entry in its glossary for "jig-chaser" ("a white person who seeks the company of Negroes") and its counterpart, "pink-chaser," the book's acknowledgment of same-sex encounters consists of a single reference to a bar known for its "bull-dikers." Perhaps Van Vechten felt that his Negro literary project would be immeasurably more difficult if he were widely perceived to have ulterior motives. Richard Bruce Nugent, the first black writer to produce frank descriptions of same-sex desire, remembered an odd exchange with Van Vechten, later in his life. At a party, he touched Nugent's shoulder and said, "If you had just patted me on the head and said, 'Carl, you're a nice boy,' you could have had anything you wanted." But, to Nugent, this seemed less like a proposition and more like an older man's plea for acknowledgment.

The most startling thing about White's book is its breadth: "Nigger Heaven" was merely one episode in a very long and very episodic life. Van Vechten remained a devoted friend and champion of Stein, and after her death, in 1946, he became her literary executor. (A collec-

tion of their letters was published last summer; it's nine hundred and one pages long.) He was celebrated, in retrospect, as one of America's first major dance critics, and one of the first music critics to embrace the sounds of the twentieth century. When he took up photography, he badgered and flattered a wide range of luminaries into sitting for him, from Joe Louis to William Faulkner; he captured some of the best-known images we have of Stein, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday. He never quite broke into Hollywood, but he tried. Despite these other interests, he played an outsized role in the development of Negro music and literature, which is partly a tribute to how isolated and powerless black artists were in those days. One well-connected white man could alter the course of a movement, just by writing some articles and making some introductions. This, of course, was precisely what Du Bois found so dismaying.

Back in the nineteen-twenties, Van Vechten sometimes portrayed himself as a dilettante, whose interest in Negro culture was just a phase. In a letter to H. L. Mencken, in 1925, he wrote, "Jazz, the blues, Negro spirituals, all stimulate me enormously for the moment. Doubtless, I shall discard them too in time." Of course, he never did—in this and other ways, he was far more loyal and earnest than he sometimes pretended to be. Much as he loved photography, his true life's work was the Yale Library archive, and he pestered his old friend Hughes with endless requests for material to add to the historical record. In 1963, a year before Van Vechten's death, a reporter from *The New Yorker* went to visit him at his apartment; he had moved from West Fifty-fifth Street to Central Park West, but his interests hadn't changed. He showed off some recent photographs, held forth on his favorite foods, shared his enthusiasm for foreign films, and bragged about the friends he still had in Harlem. "I still get about twenty-five letters a day from Negroes," he said. He never had children, although White raises the possibility of one or more secret births and quiet adoptions. His life was his obsessions, which is why he held them so tight—he was, in the end, the opposite of a dilettante. He said, "I don't think I've ever lost interest in anything." ♦

A CRITIC AT LARGE

BIGGER THAN PHIL

When did faith start to fade?

BY ADAM GOPNIK



In Tom Stoppard's 1970 play "Jumpers," the philosopher hero broods unhappily on the inexorable rise of the atheist: "The tide is running his way, and it is a tide which has turned only once in human history. . . . There is presumably a calendar date—a *moment*—when the onus of proof passed from the atheist to the believer, when, quite suddenly, the noes had it." Well, when was that date—when *did* the noes have it? In 1890? In 1918, after the Great War? In 1966, when *Time* shocked its readers with a cover that asked whether God was dead? For that matter, *do* the noes have it? In most of the world, the ayes seem to be doing just fine. Even in secularized Man-

hattan, the Christmas Eve midnight Mass is packed tight with parishioners, and the few who came for the music are given dirty looks as they sheepishly back out after the Vivaldi.

The most generous poll never seems to find more than thirty per cent of Americans saying they are "not religious or not very religious," though the numbers get up to around fifty per cent in Europe. But something has altered in the course of a century or so. John Stuart Mill said in the early nineteenth century that he was the only youth he knew who was raised as a skeptic; by the end of his life, skeptics were all around him. Yet, though the nineteenth-century novel is

roiled by doubt, there isn't one in which the doubters quite dominate. Whatever change has occurred isn't always well captured by counting hands. At a minimum, more people can say they don't think there is a God, and suffer less for saying so, than has been the case since the fall of Rome. The noes have certainly captured some constituency, obtained some place. What, exactly, do they have?

There's a case to be made that the change is more like pulses than like tides. If the nineteenth century ended with freethinkers in every front parlor, for most of the twentieth century the sound of atheism became more agonized and muted. Madalyn Murray O'Hair, the firebrand head of the American Atheists, had an occasional spot on Johnny Carson, but it was always in the last ten minutes of the show, the same spot that, ahem, Johnny gave to authors. (Billy Graham got on right after the monologue.) The glamour lay in faith. Nearly all the great modernist poets were believers: Auden and Eliot in Anglo-Christianity, Yeats in some self-crafted Hibernian voodoo. Wallace Stevens, whose great poem "Sunday Morning" is all about what to do when you don't go to church, saw his atheism treated very discreetly, like Hart Crane's homosexuality.

Only in the past twenty or so years did a tone frankly contemptuous of faith emerge. Centered on the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, the New Atheists were polemicists, and, like all polemicists, theirs were designed not to persuade but to stiffen the spines of their supporters and irritate the stomach linings of their enemies. Instead of being mushy and marginalized, atheism could proclaim its creed. But why did the nonbelievers suddenly want stiffer spines and clearer signals? Why, if the noes indeed had it, did they suddenly have to be so loud?

A history of modern atheism—what did Voltaire say to Diderot? what did Comte mean to Mill? who *was* Madalyn Murray O'Hair, anyway?—would be nice to have. The British popular historian Peter Watson's "The Age of Atheists: How We Have Sought to Live Since the Death of God" (Simon & Schuster) could have been that book, but it isn't. Beginning with Nietzsche's 1882 pronouncement that the big guy had passed and man was now out on the "open sea" of uncertainty, the book is

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instead an omnium-gatherum of the life and work of every modern artist or philosopher who was unsettled or provoked by the possible nonexistence of God. Watson leads us on a breakneck trip through it all—Bloomsbury and Bernard Shaw, Dostoyevsky and German Expressionism, Sigmund Freud and Pablo Picasso. If it's Chapter 3, this must be Vienna.

This makes sense of a kind, the nonexistence of God being an issue for modern people, and rising up everywhere. But reporting on every place you see it doesn't help to see it more clearly. (On one page, we hear about Anna Clark, Tennessee Williams, Stefan George, James Joyce, Philip Roth, Henry James, Wilhelm Reich, Valentine de Saint-Point, Léger, Milan Kundera, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, Jean-François Lyotard, H. G. Wells, Gerhart Hauptmann, Aldous Huxley, John Gray, Eugene Goodheart, Jonathan Lear, and, of course, Nietzsche.) Argos, the hundred-eyed watchman, might have had *more* sight than other giants, but he didn't have sharper sight. Would Matisse really never have painted "The Red Studio"—which Watson takes as a paradigm of post-religious art, with the artist's self-made space replacing divine nature—if Nietzsche hadn't made that memorable P.R. statement about the Deity's demise?

The problem is that godlessness as a felt condition is very different from atheism as an articulate movement. Watson doesn't distinguish clearly, or at all, between the two, and so his book manages to feel at once breathless and long-winded—much too rushed in its parts and too diffuse as a whole. Even his chronology of ever-growing disbelief seems off. "Modern art is a celebration of the secular," he states confidently, meaning Picasso and his like, and although he backtracks quickly, he can't backtrack far enough, since so much of modern art—Kandinsky, Mondrian, Rothko—has been religious or mystical in nature.

Only in the last hundred or so pages does the real contention of the book appear. For Watson, we are divided not so much between believers and non- as between what might be called Super-Naturalists, who believe that a material account of existence is inadequate to our numinous-seeming experience, and Self-Makers, who are prepared to let the

human mind take credit even for the most shimmering bits of life. His enduring sympathies lie with the unduly forgotten historian and novelist Theodore Roszak and with the philosopher Richard Rorty. Both are conciliatory Self-Makers, who sought to elevate experience over arguments and, dissatisfied with science, made of religious feeling its own religion. Watson regards phenomenology as "the most underrated movement of the twentieth century," and finds in its emphasis on happy sensations, on the thisness of life, the happiest alternative to old-time religion. Atheism sanctifies less of the world but names more of it, he seems to say, and this is in itself enough. This seems to leave the door open for believers to engage in expanded "naming" of their own, which would turn mighty Jehovah into little Tinker Bell—if you say his name enough, he lives. Still, for Watson this is the right, positive, mystery-affirming, life-enhancing, and pragmatic-minded faith to end up within.

That really useful history of atheism would, presumably, try to distinguish between Watson's subject, the late-arriving romantic agony of Nietzsche and his disciples—which responds to God's absence the way fifth graders respond to the absence of the teacher: you mean now we can do *anything*?—and the older tradition of Enlightenment rationalism: the tradition that gave God a gold watch and told him the office was now so well ordered he wouldn't be needed any longer. This more polite but, finally, more potent form of non-faith has played a larger role in politics than the no-more-teacher kind, if a lesser role in the arts. It's the subject of "Imagine There's No Heaven: How Atheism Helped Create the Modern World" (Palgrave), by the N.Y.U. journalism professor Mitchell Stephens.

Stephens's book is *entirely* a story of atheism as an articulate movement—one that he is rooting for, a little too hard at times. We learn an enormous amount about figures censored out of history, and about the persecution that freethinkers suffered until shockingly recently. His martyrs fill our hearts; his heroes inspire. He prefers Denis Diderot, the French encyclopedist, to Voltaire, for, where Voltaire merely mocked at a safe dis-

tance, Diderot was a real moralist, who changed Parisian minds. And he devotes many moving pages to the underappreciated life of Charles Bradlaugh, the defiant Victorian atheist—he allegedly called Christianity "a cursed, inhuman religion"—who nonetheless got himself elected to Parliament many times over, and was finally allowed to take his seat there, against the Queen's wishes. (He was celebrated after his death with a seven-foot statue in his constituency.) Stephens does remind the reader at moments of the mother in Philip Roth who, reading about a plane crash, always counts the Jewish names first. Stephens counts the atheists first, emphasizing their role in the anti-slavery movement, even though, as he knows, the Christian churches played a far larger one.

In Stephens's telling, a new human epoch of feeling is kicked off by each big name. So with godlessness: Diderot wrote this, Nietzsche said this, Darwin saw this, Bradlaugh stood his ground, and now the liquor stores are open all day Sunday. The difficulty, as always with popular chronicles of ideas, is not that ideas don't matter; it's that we too readily skip over the question of how they come to matter. Who seeded the ground is the historian's easy question; what made the ground receive the seed is the hard one.

Indeed, much of the argument against God works less well as argument and thesis than as atmosphere and tone. The sappers who silently undermined the foundations of the Church did more damage than the soldiers who stormed the walls. Two luminaries of the English and French Enlightenment, Edward Gibbon and August Comte, entirely elude Stephens's story. Neither was a nonbeliever by argument or by avowal, yet both helped kill God by implication and by insinuation. The most effective and far-reaching case against Christianity in eighteenth-century England is Chapter 15 of Gibbon's "Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire." Gibbon concedes—that is, "concedes"—the obvious truth of the Christian religion, and then asks, deadpan, what worldly mechanism would nonetheless have been necessary for its triumph? In a manner still not improved upon for concise plausibility, he enumerates the real-world minority politics that made it happen. The Christians had the advantage of cohesion

and inner discipline that the dissipated majority, pagans and Epicureans alike, did not. Religious history becomes a question of human causes and events. Divinity is diminished without ever being officially doubted.

Comte, in his way, did more damage to organized religion than Diderot, not by quarrelling with it but simply by imitating it. He brought an aggressive form of “humanism” to nineteenth-century France, inclining toward a form of worship that replaced the God above with Good Men below. His kind of humanism created chapels (one still exists in Paris) filled with icons of the admirable: Héloïse, Abélard, Galileo. It’s still a cozy space. Instead of making us God-size, he made faith us-size. Just as religious tolerance was established less by argument than by exhaustion, infidelity was made appealing by atmosphere. Argument mattered chiefly through the moods it made.

There do seem to be three distinct peaks of modern disbelief, moments when, however hard it is to count precise numbers, we can sense that it was cool to be a scoffer, trendy to vote “No!” One is in the late eighteenth century, before the French Revolution, another in the late nineteenth century, just before the Russian Revolution, and now there’s our own. A reactionary would point out, with justice, that each high point preceded a revolution that turned ugly enough to make nonbelief look bad. Very much like the Christians in the Roman Empire, the noes have had it most often less through numbers than through discipline and self-confidence and an ambition for power, even claiming, like Christians, the assent of a state: first Republican France, then the Soviet Union.

Yet the need for God never vanishes. Mel Brooks’s 2000 Year Old Man, asked to explain the origin of God, admits that early humans first adored “a guy in our village named Phil, and for a time we worshipped him.” Phil “was big, and mean, and he could break you in two with his bare hands!” One day, a thunderstorm came up, and a lightning bolt hit Phil. “We gathered around and saw that he was dead. Then we said to one another, ‘There’s something bigger than Phil!’” The basic urge to recognize something bigger than Phil still gives theistic

theories an audience, even as their explanations of the lightning-maker turn ever gappier and gassier. Expert defenders are more and more inclined to seize on the tiniest of scientific gaps or to move ever upward to ideas of God so remote from existence as to become pure hot air. Stephen C. Meyer’s best-selling “Darwin’s Doubt” (HarperOne) reinvents the God of the Gaps—a God whose province is whatever science can’t yet explain—with a special focus on the Unsolved Mysteries of the Cambrian explosion. Experience shows that those who adopt this strategy end up defending a smaller and smaller piece of ground. They used to find God’s hand in man’s very existence, then in the design of his eyes, then, after the emergence of the eye was fully explained, they were down to the bird’s wing, then they tried the bacterial flagellum, and now, like Meyer, they’re down to pointing to the cilia in the gut of worms and the emergence of a few kinds of multi-cellular organisms in the Cambrian as things beyond all rational explanation. Retreat always turns to rout in these matters.

As the explanations get more desperately minute, the apologies get ever vaster. David Bentley Hart’s recent “The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss” (Yale) doesn’t even attempt to make God the unmoved mover, the Big Banger who got the party started; instead, it roots the proof of his existence in the existence of the universe itself. Since you can explain the universe only by means of some other bit of the universe, why is there a universe (or many of them)? The answer to this unanswerable question is God. He stands outside everything, “the infinite to which nothing can add and from which nothing can subtract,” the ultimate ground of being. This notion, maximalist in conception, is minimalist in effect. Something *that* much bigger than Phil is so remote from Phil’s problems that he might as well not be there for Phil at all. This God is obviously not the God who makes rules about frying bacon or puts harps in the hands of angels. A God who communicates with no one and causes nothing seems a

surprisingly trivial acquisition for cosmology—the dinner guest legendary for his wit who spends the meal mumbling with his mouth full.

What’s easily missed in all this is something more important: the clandestine convergence between Super-Naturalists and Self-Makers. Surprisingly few people who have considered

the alternatives—few among the caucus who consciously stand up, voting aye or nay—believe any longer in God. Believe, that is, in an omnipotent man in the sky making moral rules and watching human actions with paranoiac intensity. The ayes do believe in someone—a principle of

creation, a “higher entity,” that “ground of being,” an “idea of order,” an actor beyond easy or instant comprehension, something more than matter and bigger than Phil. And they certainly believe in some thing—a church, a set of rituals, a historical scheme, and an anti-rational tradition. But the keynote of their self-description typically involves a celebration of mystery and complexity, too refined for the materialist mind to accept. Self-Makers often do an injustice to the uncertainty of Super-Naturalists, who, if anything, tend to fetishize the mystery of faith as a special spiritual province that nonbelievers are too fatuous to grasp, and advertise their doubt and their need for faith quite as much as their dogma. “Can’t Help Lovin’ Dat Man,” not “Onward, Christian Soldiers,” is the Super-Naturalists’ anthem these days.

But, just as surely, most noes believe in something like what the Super-Naturalists would call faith—they search for transcendence and epiphany, practice some ritual, live some rite. True rationalists are as rare in life as actual deconstructionists are in university English departments, or true bisexuals in gay bars. In a lifetime spent in hotbeds of secularism, I have known perhaps two thoroughgoing rationalists—people who actually tried to eliminate intuition and navigate life by reasoning about it—and countless humanists, in Comte’s sense, people who don’t go in for God but are enthusiasts for transcendent meaning, for sacred



pantheons and private chapels. They have some syncretic mixture of rituals: they polish menorahs or decorate Christmas trees, meditate upon the great beyond, say a silent prayer, light candles to the darkness. They talk without difficulty of souls and weapons of the spirit, and go to midnight Mass on Christmas Eve to hear the Gloria, and though they leave early, they leave fulfilled. You will know them by their faces; they are the weepy ones in the rear.

If atheists underestimate the fudginess in faith, believers underestimate the soupiness of doubt. My own favorite atheist blogger, Jerry Coyne, the University of Chicago evolutionary biologist, regularly offers unanswerable philippics against the idiocies of intelligent design. But a historian looking at his blog years from now would note that he varies the philippics with a tender stream of images of cats—into whose limited cognition, this dog-lover notes, he projects intelligence and personality quite as blithely as his enemies project design into seashells—and samples of old Motown songs. The articulation of humanism demands something humane, and its signal is disproportionate pleasure placed in some frankly irrational love. Stephens, for that matter, takes his title from the seemingly forthright John Lennon song “Imagine.” Lennon, having flirted with atheism for about nine months, from Christmas of 1970 to the fall of 1971, fell

back into a supernaturalist web of syncretism of his own, flying the “wrong,” or westerly, way around the world and practicing astrology. Stephens says diplomatically that Lennon “remained intermittently susceptible to belief”—but in truth Lennon was entirely captive to whatever superstition had most recently tickled his fancy, or his wife’s. Imagine there’s no Heaven—but pay attention to the stars and throw the I Ching as necessary. The maker of the great atheist anthem was anything but an atheist.

Doctrinaire religionists and anti-religionists alike reserve special derision for such handmade syncretism, perhaps because they see it as the real threat to their authority. (Christian rites were mocked among the Romans for their vulgarity long before they were denounced for their absurdity.) “Being Jewish is incredibly important to me, but I’m not observant,” one such syncretist, a novelist, says in an interview:

At the same time, I cared deeply that my son know himself as Jewish—not just culturally, but be steeped in the traditions and rituals. His Bar Mitzvah last year—which was completely homegrown, eclectic, held in a church, led by a female Rabbi with whom we’ve become close, with readings from Coleridge and Hannah Szenes, as well as the whole congregation singing Leonard Cohen’s “Broken Hallelujah” with my son playing his ukulele and me on the piano—was one of the highlights of my life.

One is supposed to disdain such festivals as slack and self-pleasing—that double-

blasphemed church! that lady rabbi! that ukulele! But in truth they are no more or less “made up” than the older religions, which were also forged from disparate parts, and looked just as ridiculous to outsiders at the time. This is not a bastardized or lesser form of faith. It is faith as it has always existed.

Good news, right? Doesn’t this mean that we are, to cite a chastened optimist, less divided than our theological politics suggest? Probably it means that we are even more divided than our religious politics suggest, because it is the point of politics to divide. It is not an accident that the crucial moment of voting in the British Parliament is called a “division.” Our politics are a mirror not of our similarities but of our differences. That’s why they’re politics. We were less divided than our politics made us seem right on the brink of the Civil War, too. We were just divided on one big point. And the big point that divides us now is that the Super-Naturalists don’t want only to be reassured that they can say their prayers as much as they like to whomever they like. They also want recognition from the people they feel control the culture that theirs is an honored path to truth—they want Super-Naturalism to be respected not just as a way of living but as a way of knowing.

And here we arrive at what the noes, whatever their numbers, really have now, and that is a monopoly on legitimate forms of knowledge about the natural world. They have this monopoly for the same reason that computer manufacturers have an edge over crystal-ball makers: the advantages of having an actual explanation of things and processes are self-evident. What works wins. We know that men were not invented but slowly evolved from smaller animals; that the earth is not the center of the universe but one among a billion planets in a distant corner; and that, in the billions of years of the universe’s existence, there is no evidence of a single miraculous intercession with the laws of nature. We need not imagine that there’s no Heaven; we know that there is none, and we will search for angels forever in vain. A God can still be made in the face of all that absence, but he will always be chairman of the board, holding an office of fine title and limited powers.

Given the diminishment in divine purview, from Galileo’s time on, the Super-Naturalists just want the language of



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“I can defend this hill for another hour, but then I really need to get to the gym.”

science not to be actively insulting to them. And here we may come at last to the seedbed of the New Atheism, the thing that made the noes so loud: the broad prestige, in the past twenty years, of evolutionary biology. Since the Enlightenment, one mode of science has always been dominant, the top metaphor that educated people use to talk about experience. In most of the twentieth century, physics played the role of super-science, and physics is, by its nature, accommodating of God: the theories of physics are so cosmic that the language of physics can persist without actively insulting the language of faith. It's all big stuff, way out there, or unbelievably tiny stuff, down here, and, either way, it's strange and spooky. Einstein's "God," who does not play dice with the universe, is not really the theologian's God, but he is close enough to be tolerated. With the great breakthroughs in understanding that followed the genomic revolution, evo-bio has become, insensibly, the model science, the one that so many of the pop books are about—and biology makes specific claims about people, and encounters much coarser religious objections. It's significant that the New Atheism gathered around Richard Dawkins. The details of the new evolutionary theory are fairly irrelevant to the New Atheism (Lamarckian ideas of evolution could be accepted tomorrow, and not bring God back with them), but the two have become twinned in the Self-Making mind. Their perpetual invocation is a perpetual insult to Super-Naturalism, and to the right of faith to claim its truths.

"Cosmically, I seem to be of two minds," John Updike wrote, a decade ago. "The power of materialist science to explain everything—from the behavior of the galaxies to that of molecules, atoms, and their sub-microscopic components—seems to be inarguable and the principal glory of the modern mind. On the other hand, the reality of subjective sensations, desires, and—may we even say—illusions composes the basic substance of our existence, and religion alone, in its many forms, attempts to address, organize, and placate these. I believe, then, that religious faith will continue to be an essential part of being human, as it has been for me." Does religion alone address the reality of our sub-

jective sensations? It's perfectly possible to believe that there are many things that will never be subjects of science without thinking that they are therefore objects of faith. Human beings are unpredictable. We can't know what songs they will sing, what new ideas they will come up with, how beautifully they will act or how badly. But their subjective sensations do not supply them with souls. They just make them people. Since Darwin's starting premise is that individual variation is the rule of nature, it isn't surprising that the living things that are able to have experiences have them in varied and individual ways. The plausible opposite of "permanent scientific explanation" is "singular poetic description," not "miraculous magical intercession."

In the end, these seem questions more of temperament than of argument. Mitchell Stephens speaks of the agonized struggle within the soul and the mind between belief and nonbelief. This struggle is a modern piety, but I wonder how many people actually experience it. The sight of an open sea strikes some as beautiful and others as scary, and the line between them seems no more a matter of principle than that between people who like oceans in the summer and those who prefer ponds. Some people of great sensibility and intelligence—Larkin, Auden, and Emily Dickinson, to name three—find intolerable the idea of open seas, of high windows letting in the light, and nothing beyond. If the leap to God is only a leap of the imagination, they still prefer the precarious footing. Others—Elizabeth Bishop, William Empson, and Wallace Stevens—find the scenario unthreatening, and recoil at the idea of a universe set up as a game of blood sacrifice and eternal torture, or even with the promise of eternal bliss not easily distinguishable from eternal boredom. They find a universe of matter, pleasure, and community-made morality the only kind of life possible, and the only kind worth living. The differences, first temperamental, then become theological.

What if, though, the whole battle of *W*ayes and nays had never been subject to anything, really, except a simple rule of economic development? Perhaps the small waves of ideas and even moods are just bubbles on the one great big wave of increasing prosperity. It may

be that the materialist explanation of the triumph of materialism is the one that counts. Just last year, the Princeton economist Angus Deaton, in his book "The Great Escape," demonstrated that the enlargement of well-being in at least the northern half of the planet during the past couple of centuries is discontinuous with all previous times. The daily miseries of the Age of Faith scarcely exist in our Western Age of Fatuity. The horrors of normal life in times past, enumerated, are now almost inconceivable: women died in agony in childbirth, and their babies died, too; operations were performed without anesthesia. (The novelist Fanny Burney, recounting her surgery for a breast tumor: "I began a scream that lasted unremittingly during the whole time of the incision. . . . I felt the knife rackling against the breast bone, scraping it while I remained in torture.") If God became the opiate of the many, it was because so many were in need of a drug.

As incomes go up, steeples come down. Matisse's "Red Studio" may represent the room the artist retreats to after the churches close—but it is also a pleasant place to pass the time, with an Oriental carpet and central heating and space to work. Happiness arrives and God gets gone. "Happiness!" the Super-Naturalist cries. "Surely not just the animal happiness of more *stuff*!" But by happiness we need mean only less of pain. You don't really have to pursue happiness; it is a subtractive quality. Anyone who has had a bad headache or a kidney stone or a toothache, and then hasn't had it, knows what happiness is. The world had a toothache and a headache and a kidney stone for millennia. Not having them any longer is a very nice feeling. On much of the planet, we need no longer hold an invisible hand or bite an invisible bullet to get by.

Yet the wondering never quite comes to an end. Relatively peaceful and prosperous societies, we can establish, tend to have a declining belief in a deity. But did we first give up on God and so become calm and rich? Or did we become calm and rich, and so give up on God? Of such questions, such causes, no one can be certain. It would take an all-seeing eye in the sky to be sure. ♦

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A conversation with Adam Gopnik.

A NEW VOICE

Beck puts it all together.

BY SASHA FRERE-JONES



Beck has often used indirection to his advantage. In his roughly twenty-five-year career, he has made so many costume changes that nobody was surprised when, for instance, he released a lavishly produced book called “Song Reader,” which offered twenty new songs only in sheet-music form. His first commercial success was “Loser,” in 1993, a song that seemed like a loving translation of a rap tune from English into Dada. Since then, I’ve watched him play greatest-hits sets with his longtime travelling band, and work with gospel choirs. All these endeavors have wandered in and out of sense—and brilliance—as if there were so many songs trying to get out of

Beck that sometimes the execution lost to the writing.

His new album, “Morning Phase,” is a triumph, possibly because he’s never made a record so focussed. He describes it as both a “healing” and a “reckoning.” For forty-seven minutes, Beck and some of his closest collaborators cast a benevolent spell that refuses to break. The album speaks powerfully and directly, without gimmicks or puns, and it maintains a near-total gentleness. After listening to “Morning Phase” almost fifty times, I can’t find a single thing wrong with it. Even if you listen to popular music all day, every day, you don’t get many albums like this in your lifetime. The relationship

between the musician and the listener here is as simple as the outcome is intense: only the artist knows exactly how such an album is made, but only the audience can verify that it is perfect.

“Song Reader,” which was put out by McSweeney’s, was Beck’s previous album-length work. I attempted to play one of the songs from the sheet music. It was called “Heaven’s Ladder,” and it sounded roughly like “Yellow Submarine,” because I mangled the cadences, turning it into a camp singalong. But a live recording of Beck performing it in Los Angeles, easily found on the Web, has him playing it with a choir. It sounds as if it might be found in a hundred-year-old hymnal. The feeling is that of re-creating the DNA of American song, in the traditional numbers that would normally be credited to “Anon.”: protest songs, ballads, storytelling tunes.

The influence of such songs started Beck playing music. He told me that, growing up in Los Angeles, he learned about Delta blues through word of mouth. Then, he said, “I found a book at the local library that had some of these songs written out. I had heard of Leadbelly and Blind Lemon Jefferson, but I had never heard them.” A friend played Beck some of the songs on guitar. “He was a virtuoso, with all the slide-guitar techniques,” Beck said. “He didn’t give me lessons, really, but I got to watch him play these songs.”

That material informed Beck’s earliest recordings, like “One Foot in the Grave” (1994), where he replaced the gravitas of the original performers with less reverential lyrics. The chorus of “Asshole,” a rough-strummed acoustic song that fit perfectly with the confrontational feel of the Pacific Northwest in the nineties—it was recorded in Olympia—goes, “She’ll do anything to make you feel like an asshole.” This push and pull between American roots music and what was in the air at the time has marked all Beck’s music. Beginning with “Loser,” which is still his best-known song, through the 1999 album “Midnite Vultures,” which revisited early-eighties funk, he has been on a sometimes confusing search for the right voice. The journey has been impressive in its fearlessness, but its results have often threatened to sound like camp. His calm, sincere demeanor in interviews usually allayed the idea that he was

“When we played, it was absolutely effortless,” Beck says, of recording his new album.

ART AND SOUL

"The Monuments Men" and "Jimmy P."

BY DAVID DENBY



George Clooney directs a platoon of actors trying to rescue art stolen by the Nazis.

A half century ago, Burt Lancaster, playing an unusually broad-shouldered French railroad worker, saved art treasures stored at the Jeu de Paume from Paul Scofield, as a Wehrmacht colonel with precise speech, a foul temper, and a fondness for Cézanne, Matisse, and Picasso. "The Train," directed by John Frankenheimer, was set in the summer of 1944; the colonel was trying to take the works to Germany before the Allies liberated France. Frankenheimer, working in handsome black-and-white, did extraordinary things with rail ties, heavy bolts, and puffing steam locomotives, and the two actors competed in physical determination. Lancaster, a former acrobat, scampered over walls and rolled down hills and finally shot Scofield, who

stood stock still, by the side of the tracks. As an action film, "The Train" remains first-rate. As a moral conundrum—Is great art worth the loss of human life?—it also holds up.

For some reason, George Clooney wanted to tell the story again, though from a different angle. In "The Monuments Men," which Clooney directed, the Nazis burn "degenerate" modern art while seizing such classic works as the Ghent Altarpiece and Michelangelo's Madonna of Bruges, and thousands of other pieces. Göring takes his share (a lot of it stolen from Jewish collectors); much of the rest, headed for Hitler's projected museum in Linz, gets deposited in mines and other hiding places. Clooney's "monuments men" try to find the pieces and

stop the theft. They're an unlikely bunch of adventurers: a sculptor (John Goodman), an architect (Bill Murray), a curator at the Metropolitan Museum (Matt Damon), an arts impresario (Bob Balaban), and a French art dealer (Jean Dujardin), all led by an art historian from Harvard's Fogg Museum named Stokes (Clooney). As Stokes rounds up his crew, and takes them close to actual warfare, the movie feels like a cross between the jaunty "Ocean's Eleven" and one of those large-scale films from decades ago about misfits operating behind enemy lines, like "The Dirty Dozen." But the crazy-guys-at-war genre has recently been blown over the top by Quentin Tarantino, in "Inglourious Basterds," and parodied by Ben Stiller, in "Tropic Thunder." Do we need this latest film?

Clooney and his longtime screenwriter, Grant Heslov, adapted Robert M. Edsel's book (of the same title), but they don't really have adventure material on their hands—or, at least, nothing that warrants a monster production, complete with tanks, ruined French villages, and soldiers from different armies. While the men chase down the art, most of the threatened confrontations with the Germans—and, later, with the Russians, who also want the treasure—fizzle out. The greatest physical danger for Matt Damon involves Cate Blanchett, who plays a curator active in the Resistance. Blanchett reminds him that they're in Paris, and makes a pass. Damon's response is an insult to the animal spirits of art curators everywhere.

The movie might have worked, on a smaller scale, if it had focussed more on intellectual obsessiveness—on the zeal of connoisseurs who finally get to hold in their hands the works they have studied for a lifetime. Unfortunately, Clooney has higher things in mind. He delivers several big speeches about the Nazis trying to hijack the common past of Western civilization. The talk is grand, but then you realize that most of the works will be returned to private collections. People should be given back what was taken from them, but those paintings weren't part of a publicly shared heritage. Which sort of lets the air out of the bag for the rest of us: when the monuments men stand in front of the art they love, they are awestruck, but the passion isn't there.

For long stretches, the tone of this nerveless film is self-mocking, as if to say, "These blundering, out-of-shape guys are tripping into history." But then, suddenly, Clooney will throw in a young soldier dying in a welter of blood. With such unsteady direction, it's not surprising that the performers—John Goodman and Jean Dujardin as they get caught in the middle of a skirmish; and a tall, deadpan Bill Murray and a small, irritable Bob Balaban doing a Mutt and Jeff act—can't work up much of a rhythm. What would Burt Lancaster have made of such irresolute stuff? Everything he did was incisive, forceful, definitive. We may have gained something in humor by not taking the saviors in the art-rescue story very seriously, but we've lost just about all of the romantic pleasures of heroism.

Arnaud Desplechin's "Jimmy P.: Psychotherapy of a Plains Indian" is, like most films about psychoanalysis, a mystery story. Three years after the Second World War, Jimmy Picard (Benicio Del Toro), a Blackfoot Indian who served in the Army in France, is plagued by headaches, sweats, and recurring dreams, and enters a military hospital in Topeka. The heavy-lidded Del Toro, who is sleepy-looking at the best of times, plays Jimmy as a quiet, suffering man who has retreated deep within himself. He is seen by the psychiatrist Karl Menninger, who became famous as a founder of the Menninger Clinic, and a group of doctors determine that nothing is wrong with Jimmy physically. Then a detective of sorts arrives in Topeka—the anthropologist Georges Devereux (Mathieu Amalric), a live wire who knows Freudian theory and psychoanalytic method.

Devereux, whose 1951 book serves as the basis for the movie, is also familiar with the culture and the religion of the Mohave and the Blackfoot tribes, both of whom interpret dreams as a portent of the future. Following Freud, Devereux reverses the method, and takes Jimmy's dreams as a revelation of his past. At first, I hoped that Desplechin, working with a screenplay he co-wrote with Kent Jones and Julie Peyr, was going to match psychoanalysis and Indian religion as two kinds of intricate but emotionally satisfying inspiration—two dreams about dreaming—but I was wrong. The film is entirely respectful of the Blackfoot reli-

gion, but it honors psychoanalysis as it was honored in 1948, as a medical cure. Jimmy is a puzzle waiting to be solved.

As Jimmy describes his life to Devereux, Desplechin stages scenes of him as a young man, with various women, and as a failed father. Del Toro plays Jimmy's younger self without changing his face or his body in any way, a device that offers a psychoanalytic sense of time: the grownup man is present in the past; the past is present in the grownup man; the psyche may have many layers, but they belong to a unified person. The movie keeps telling us that although Jimmy lived most of his life on a reservation in Montana, he has the same issues as millions of other American men—disorderly love affairs, a daughter raised by another man. This intelligent movie becomes a gentle reproof of prejudice and ignorance, and I wish I could find some excitement in it. "Jimmy P." makes a post-hoc case for the lost art of psychoanalysis, but it's a loaded one. Jimmy is a perfect analytic patient: he remembers his dreams, he responds to questions and suggestions. He's not glib or self-pitying, yet he doesn't come off as an interesting man. Desplechin and his writers respect him so much as a Native American that they don't offer him, say, the sort of imagination that might have brought him to life as a movie subject. Even his nightmares are tame. Desplechin, in his French films "Kings & Queen" and "A Christmas Tale," worked with a freer hand. "Jimmy P." is thoroughly repressed.

Mathieu Amalric is short, and not conventionally handsome, with eyes that seem to be popping out of his head and taking everything in. He's an eager, candid actor, yet the movie is coy about Georges Devereux. We find out from his girlfriend (Gina McKee) that Devereux isn't French, as we might have assumed, but his past is referred to only vaguely and left hanging, unexplored. He was actually born György Dobó in a corner of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1908. Dobó was Jewish, and, in the nineteen-thirties, he changed his name, converted to Christianity, and came to America, where he flourished on the borders of psychoanalysis and anthropology. He sounds like a wily and resourceful man—the possible subject of a movie much more exhilarating than this one. ♦

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POSTSCRIPT

THE MASTER

Remembering Philip Seymour Hoffman.

BY ANTHONY LANE

By the start of 1991, “Law & Order” was well into its first season, and its stride. Cop shows have a record of pulling good actors into their gravitational field. I once got a jolt of recognition, and of joy, when, hopping channels and pausing for a dose of “Kojak,” from 1974, I saw James Woods—green in years, but already hard-grained with incipient threat. A similar promise lurked in “The Violence of Summer,” an episode of “Law & Order” that aired on February 5, 1991. Ryan, a young man charged with rape, was led into court, followed by two co-defendants. One made no impression, but the other, though granted less time on camera, drew the eye. Casting a wicked smirk over his shoulder as he

came in, he then sat down. He was dough-soft and putty-pink, with hair and eyebrows of muted orange. Viewers had a few seconds, at best, to size him up. If asked, they would have tagged him as one of nature’s punching bags—the porcine type who gets himself bullied, every recess, in a quiet nook of the playground and no longer bothers to complain.

And then he exploded. This little pig went ape. He stared across at Ryan and his finger tapped the table. “We know what you did, O.K.? You hear me, Ryan?” he said. He rose to his feet, and his voice climbed, too, by an octave. He pointed at his own face, and roared, “Look at me!” The scene played out, the law fell into disorder, guns were drawn,

the plot hared on, but the instruction had been unambiguously issued, and from that moment, until Sunday, February 2, 2014, we obeyed. Philip Seymour Hoffman told us to look, and we did.

What have we been robbed of, by his death? Not so much a movie star, I think, as somebody who took our dramatic taxonomy—all those lazy, useful terms by which we like to classify and patronize our performers, even the best ones—and threw it away. Leading man, character actor, supporting player: really, who gives a damn? Either you hold an audience, so tight that it feels lashed to the seats, or you don’t. That is why the distinction between Best Actor and Best Supporting Actor, at the Academy Awards, grows

Onscreen, he often gave the impression, even in company, of murmuring to himself, as though submerged regrets were ready to overflow.

ever more ludicrous—essential, of course, to the smooth structure of the night, but untrue, in the long run, to the way in which we feed on film, or store it away for lavish future consumption. I sometimes watch “Rear Window” just for the kick of seeing Thelma Ritter (and that’s in a movie that already boasts Grace Kelly and Jimmy Stewart, for heaven’s sake), and, with the same hunger, I often watch “Charlie Wilson’s War” (2007) for the scenes with Philip Seymour Hoffman.

He plays a C.I.A. agent named Gust Avrakotos, and you can feel that missing “o” hanging right off the end of his first name. He has a sad mustache, smoked spectacles, and a gut flopping proudly over his belt. There is a long sequence, in the office of our lounging hero, Representative Charlie Wilson (Tom Hanks), that shears close to a Feydeau farce; it comes complete with phone calls, buggings, Amy Adams popping in and out of one door, and Hoffman muscling in and out of another. You can sense the director, Mike Nichols, who knows a thing or two about entrances and exits, relishing every minute and wishing that this stuff could rattle on forever. No less delectable is the onslaught that Gust unleashes in the face of his boss, at Langley, reminding him that he, a Greek-American, has “spent the past three years learning *Finnish*.” By way of a coda, he takes a wrench and smashes the office window—the earlier smashing of which, incidentally, he had been summoned to apologize for. Then comes the coda to the coda: as Gust marches away in the highest possible dudgeon, he pauses briefly at the desk of a female assistant to grunt, under his breath, “How was I?” Silently, she shows him: thumbs-up.

Now, you can read that moment as a mere curlicue, at the story’s edge; she means that the boss had it coming. But Nichols would scarcely have included the line if he didn’t think that it responded to an urge in his audience. Gust’s rhetoric has brought us halfway to our feet, and we, too, like Siskel and Ebert, would like to signal our appreciation. This involves nothing so vulgar as Hoffman’s breaking the fourth wall, as though it were made of glass, and pleading for our applause. Rather, like many of his peers, not least Brando, he demonstrated that life itself, when lived to the hilt, acquired a flourish of the theatrical. Again, our daily distinc-

tion, between the sincere and the insincere, will not suffice. Gust was absolutely genuine as he laid into the C.I.A. chief, but he was also quite aware of the performance that he was putting on, not just for the benefit of his fellow-employees but for the smack of his own satisfaction.

All of us, at some point, play to the gallery of ourselves. That is why we speak of “making a scene,” the phrase telling of both unfeigned outrage and calculated conceit. T. S. Eliot, at his most provoking, suggested that Othello was doing something in this vein in his majestic final speech—“cheering himself up,” in Eliot’s startling words. We are meant to imagine the Moor, in mid-oration, eying an invisible mirror, as though to check his noble frame, just as Tolstoy, in the third chapter of “War and Peace,” asks us to picture Princess Hélène, “glancing now at her beautiful round arm, altered in shape by its pressure on the table,” in the midst of a glittering reception. Hoffman was no prince, and he knew it, but he was wise enough to know that vanity burrows well below the skin.

Hence the first closeup of him in “The Master” (2012), as Lancaster Dodd, the lord of a cult, who sits marooned in light in an otherwise dark room, wearing red, like a cardinal. He is meeting a bum named Freddie, an ex-sailor and potential acolyte, but, to judge by the pose that Dodd holds, with his face half-hidden by one hand, you would think he was waiting for Rodin. Hoffman had the most expressive hands I have ever seen, and he deployed them to full advantage, whether wristily conducting his own bon mots, in “Capote” (2005), as if they were notes in a score, or greeting his new son-in-law, in “The Master,” with a pumping handshake that he is loath to release, like a wrestler’s grip. (One unsurprising fact: Hoffman wrestled in high school.) Do such affectations of power make Dodd a joke? Hoffman gave us plenty to mock in him, and yet, as we saw what the leader meant to the clinging souls around him, and to what extent he believed in his own deceptions, the laughter died in our throats.

How lonely was Hoffman? I refer not to his personal life; I know little about it, or about the ratio of demons to angels with which he had to contend. For that, there can be only pity and sor-

row. Instead, I am thinking of the figure that he struck onscreen. (Like many fans, I am now chiding myself for not having witnessed him onstage, especially as Willy Loman.) He was certainly contained, to an alarming degree, and such were the gravelled depths of his voice that he often gave the impression, even in company, of murmuring to himself, as though submerged regrets and grievances were ready to overflow. Some films, I think, afforded him too much leeway in that respect. His fantasist and obscene caller, in “Happiness” (1998), Todd Solondz’s parade of suburban repressives, was horribly convincing, and toadlike in his clamminess, but he bored even his therapist, and it may not be a film that many Hoffmanites, aside from the most devout, would revisit in a hurry. In “Jack Goes Boating” (2010), the one feature he directed, he was inconsolable, and Charlie Kaufman’s “Synecdoche, New York” (2008), likewise, found Hoffman rolling through the action in a private fog of desolation, beyond the reach of other characters, even though his part—as a theatre director who endlessly re-creates his own existence on a gigantic set—seemed like the perfect fit.

Better by far were the instances in which those solitary urges were forced to fight with his taste for the gregarious—when, in short, he barrelled in and bounced off other people. This singular player, whose dramatic eminence, like that of Charles Laughton, was as unmistakable as his physical contours, was happy to be pitched into a standoff, or into a busy ensemble. Hence his sublime political head-to-head, in “The Ides of March,” with Paul Giamatti—two dauntless actors playing two conscience-free campaign managers, neither giving half an inch of ground. The more adept and well armed his co-star, the more Hoffman brought to the fray, whether with Laura Linney, who played his sister in “The Savages” (2007), or, the same year, with Marisa Tomei, in “Before the Devil Knows You’re Dead.” This was a wonderfully taut account, from the veteran Sidney Lumet, of two brothers—Hoffman and Ethan Hawke—who knock off their parents’ jewelry store. You can guess how well that goes. The atmosphere of bad debts and impeded dreams gives Hoffman plenty to breathe, although it’s unbearable, now, to see him

sprawled in a haze of heroin, in his dealer's apartment, lamenting, "I'm not the sum of my parts. All of my parts don't add up to one"—he pauses, seeking the right phrase—"one me." No less wistful, but more heartening, is the next scene, when Tomei, as his faithless, useless, but affectionate wife, chats with him in bed. "I don't know why you want to keep me," she tells him, but Hoffman simply opens wide his hands, as if to say, That's love.

From early on, this was what we treasured in Hoffman: his will to break the habit of solitude—all the more so because we realize how crushing an addiction it can be. There was Scotty, the boom operator he played in "Boogie Nights" (1997), a shy spirit in the fiesta of porno flicks, who made a clumsy pass at Mark Wahlberg in front of a gleaming Corvette, and then, rebuffed, sat in the front seat and wept. As for Lester Bangs, the rock journalist in "Almost Famous" (2000), nothing in Hoffman's résumé was more wrenching than the careful, low-toned advice that Bangs dispensed over the phone, one evening, to a rookie in the same profession, steering him away from bright lights, and from the lure of loveliness. "Good-looking people, they got no spine; their art never lasts. They get the girls, but we're smarter," he said, adding, "The only true currency in this bankrupt world is what you share with someone else when you're uncool."

How could that not speak to a million moviegoers? If they embraced Hoffman with ardor, it was in part because he looked so uncool, and so unbeautiful, and because he so obviously hailed from the same tribe as they did, and because there *was* a kind of beauty, after all, in the flame of feeling that got stoked inside that sweaty heft and pallor. The ordinary body housed a furnace. Besides, who'd be a romantic lead these days, in Hollywood? When did the industry last deliver a fine romance for gorgeous grownups? Yearn as we may for Cary Grant, and for Grant-like opportunities for George Clooney, we dwell in the age of Hoffman.

This is not to deny that, when required, and shorn of his formless yellowing beard, the guy could tidy up nicely. Indeed, there was an instant humor to be had from putting him in demure and even preppy gear. Remember the agonized smile of Brandt, the personal assis-

tant in "The Big Lebowski" (1998), who, in immaculate jacket and tie, was obliged to show the Dude—dressed, as usual, as if for a sack race—around the Lebowski mansion, bursting with pride as he comes to a photograph of Nancy Reagan ("First Lady of the *nation*"). See how helplessly he stands there, arms flapping at his sides, half butler, half penguin, when confronted with Dudeism in full spate. Then, there was "Patch Adams"—

Whoa! "Patch Adams," the Robin Williams fiasco from 1998, about the medic who uses clownish capers to help the sick and the dying? The film that was slightly less entertaining than bird flu? Well, yes: there is Hoffman, present and correct as a would-be doctor, his head stuck in his books. And yet, even here, he finds something to work with—turning from his desk, admitting freely that he's a prick, but asking Patch whether terminally ill patients would prefer "a prick on their side, or some kindergarten teacher who's going to kiss their ass." It's an excellent question. Track back through the Hoffman oeuvre, and you discover nothing but the traces of a pro—an actor who forbade himself to look down upon a project, or, if he secretly did, to share that condescension with the viewer. Slumming was not an option. Enjoy, instead, the lustiness with which he joined in tornado-chasing as if it were a barn dance, in "Twister" (1996), or the strangely baffled look in Tom Cruise's eyes, during "Mission: Impossible III" (2006), as he torments the villain—Hoffman—by hanging him upside down out of an airplane. We catch Hoffman's expression, with the wind howling by, and the madness that grips it is not merely invincible but, even at this altitude, amused. Hauled back up, he refuses to divulge information, and Cruise seems honestly perplexed as to why he—chiselled, perpetually young, boundlessly popular, and aglow with world-rescuing virtue—should be making no headway with this schlub. It is not, in truth, a matter of hero versus baddie; it is a mapping of one star as it nears the trajectory of another and starts to waver.

All of which proves that genre was not something to frighten Hoffman. Early on, he saw the challenge that is laid down to every darling of the art house: ask not what the mainstream can

do for you but what you can bring to the mainstream, and what precious lessons might be trawled along the way. He was twenty-four when he was cast as a smug schoolboy in "Scent of a Woman" (1992)—again, in preppy mode, with his hair neatly brushed as if by a fussy mother. He snitches on the school pranksters, thus triggering the blind rage of Al Pacino, who then stands up for the importance of not being a rat. If Hoffman took the chance to learn from the older actor, and to observe how harangues could be calibrated for the camera, you could hardly blame him. Mind you, his own perorations, in due course, would look rougher and more red-faced than any Pacino rant. Is it the fate of every generation of performer, however commanding, to seem touched with artifice when compared with what comes next? And will Hoffman, someday, seem mannered in his turn?

It's hard to think so, such were the pains that he took to camouflage the fact that his bag of tricks contained any tricks at all. We may notice Gust, in "Charlie Wilson's War," poking his glasses onto the bridge of his nose, hitching up his pants, or planting himself foursquare, hands on hips, in front of the boss's desk; but we don't think of these details as being built up and rehearsed by Hoffman, and he doesn't advertise them. To us, they seem like typical Gust—the basic ingredients of who he is. By contrast, I happen to think that "Capote" *was* more of a showcase. You can hardly blame Hoffman, and you can see why he won and deserved his Oscar for the part, but the movie itself was too readily encouraged to stand back from him in awe. When Harper Lee (Catherine Keener) scorns Capote, on a train, for paying the porter to praise his books, her censure just slides off him, and the campiness of his cackle, at being found out, tells us to carry on loving the naughty imp. Hoffman's assembly of Trumanhood was dazzling, from the bow tie to the dainty gait and the Looney Tunes contralto, but the dazzle was unrelieved and unrelaxing, like the glare of an arc lamp, and, in the end, some of us, at the risk of sounding ungrateful, found it, as Capote would say, *de trop*. No, for preference—for Hoffman at his height—I would go for Freddie.

Freddie Miles is a friend of Dickie

Greenleaf (Jude Law), in "The Talented Mr. Ripley" (1999). Freddie is trouble, and, more to the point, he can sniff trouble when it emanates from other folk. Everyone who admires the film remembers his arrival—one of the great arrivals, indeed, in the history of cinema, as he jumps from an open-top Alfa Romeo in an Italian piazza, bops toward us, kisses Dickie, pours a slug of wine, and throws it down his gullet in a single draught. But try a more legato scene, on Dickie's yacht, when Law ducks down, belowdecks, to make waves with Gwyneth Paltrow. Freddie is left in charge of the boat. Once more, Hoffman's technical display, if you look carefully, is off the scale, with Freddie nursing his cocktail, nibbling the olive on its stick, and casually laying a soft hand on the tiller, as if any harsher effort would be an insult to his loucheness. By now, however, he is so invested in the character, and we are so lost in his thrall, that we *don't* look carefully. We just bathe in the ease of it, and we snicker along with him as he jeers at Tom Ripley (Matt Damon), up in the bow, who is spying on the lovmakers down in the hold. "Tommy, how's the peeping?" Freddie cries, with glee unconfined. He repeats the line, with less punch, and then, in a speedy patter, adds, "Tommy Tommy Tommy

Tommy Tommy." I know of no more graceful diminuendo, at least in the comic realm. (King Lear says "Never" five times, before he dies.) It is the sound of a man who is entirely at home in the world, chuckling at another man who is still exploring it, and still amazed at the deliciousness of its sins.

The film was directed by Anthony Minghella, somebody else whose loss we could not at first believe and could ill afford. Minghella saw the fruitfulness of allowing characters, and the actors who embodied them, to take turns in the spotlight—to strut and fret their time upon the stage, and then make way. Who owns the movie is never quite decided, and the one thing more full-blooded than Hoffman's swagger, in his first appearance, is the élan with which he yields to the blissful air of repertory—a travelling troupe, putting on a show. There is a modesty in that approach: an unexpected trait, in such a force of nature as Philip Seymour Hoffman, and in so immodest a trade as cinema. You stare at the bulk and blaze of him, and you think, *That's gone?* Those other lives that he had yet to create and flesh out, in all their intensity—when do we get to see those? Never, never, never, never. Just enjoy what we had of him, I guess. As the kid said, "Look at me." ♦

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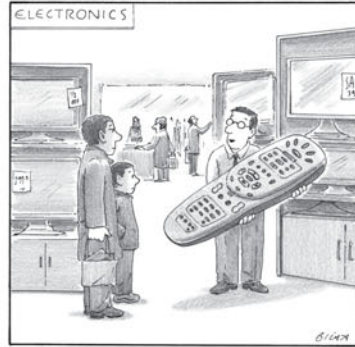
CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Danny Shanahan, must be received by Sunday, February 23rd. The finalists in the February 3rd contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the March 10th issue. The winner receives a signed print of the cartoon. Any resident of the United States, Canada (except Quebec), Australia, the United Kingdom, or the Republic of Ireland age eighteen or over can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit newyorker.com/captioncontest.

THE WINNING CAPTION



"Can't I just laugh till it hurts?"
Jack Serra-Lima, Yonkers, N.Y.



THE FINALISTS

"It comes with its own remote."
David Holmes, Salem, Ore.

"There's actually a guy in here who will change the channels for you."
Lee Baber, Charlotte, N.C.

"No, I'm sorry. You'll need a separate remote for your DVD."
Cindy Shirley, Oklahoma City, Okla.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



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