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WHO KILLED AMERICA'S NEWSPAPERS?

By McKay Coppins

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Cover Story

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  Inside Alden Global Capital -- McKay Coppins

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Alden Global Capital, the Hedge Fund Killing Newspapers

By McKay Coppins

The Tribune Tower rises above the streets of downtown Chicago in a majestic snarl of Gothic spires and flying buttresses that were designed to exude power and prestige. When plans for the building were announced in 1922, Colonel Robert R. McCormick, the longtime owner of the *Chicago Tribune*, said he wanted to erect “the world’s most beautiful office building” for his beloved newspaper. The best architects of the era were invited to submit designs; lofty quotes about the Fourth Estate were selected to adorn the lobby. Prior to the building’s completion, McCormick directed his foreign correspondents to collect “fragments” of various historical sites—a brick from the Great Wall of China, an emblem from St. Peter’s Basilica—and send them back to be embedded in the tower’s facade. The final product, completed in 1925, was an architectural spectacle unlike anything

the city had seen before—"romance in stone and steel," as one writer described it. A century later, the Tribune Tower has retained its grandeur. It has not, however, retained the *Chicago Tribune*.

To find the paper's current headquarters one afternoon in late June, I took a cab across town to an industrial block west of the river. After a long walk down a windowless hallway lined with cinder-block walls, I got in an elevator, which deposited me near a modest bank of desks near the printing press. The scene was somehow even grimmer than I'd imagined. Here was one of America's most storied newspapers—a publication that had endorsed Abraham Lincoln and scooped the Treaty of Versailles, that had toppled political bosses and tangled with crooked mayors and collected dozens of Pulitzer Prizes—reduced to a newsroom the size of a Chipotle.

Spend some time around the shell-shocked journalists at the *Tribune* these days, and you'll hear the same question over and over: *How did it come to this?* On the surface, the answer might seem obvious. Craigslist killed the Classified section, Google and Facebook swallowed up the ad market, and a procession of hapless newspaper owners failed to adapt to the digital-media age, making obsolescence inevitable. This is the story we've been telling for decades about the dying local-news industry, and it's not without truth. But what's happening in Chicago is different.

In May, the *Tribune* was acquired by Alden Global Capital, a secretive hedge fund that has quickly, and with remarkable ease, become one of the largest newspaper operators in the country. The new owners did not fly to Chicago to address the staff, nor did they bother with paeans to the vital civic role of journalism. Instead, they gutted the place.

Two days after the deal was finalized, Alden announced an aggressive round of buyouts. In the ensuing exodus, the paper lost the Metro columnist who had championed the occupants of a troubled public-housing complex, and the editor who maintained a homicide database that the police couldn't manipulate, and the photographer who had produced beautiful portraits of the state's undocumented immigrants, and the investigative reporter who'd helped expose the governor's offshore shell companies. When it was over, a quarter of the newsroom was gone.

The hollowing-out of the *Chicago Tribune* was noted in the national press, of course. There were sober op-eds and lamentations on Twitter and expressions of disappointment by professors of journalism. But outside the industry, few seemed to notice. Meanwhile, the *Tribune*'s remaining staff, which had been spread thin even before Alden came along, struggled to perform the newspaper's most basic functions. After a powerful Illinois state legislator resigned amid bribery allegations, the paper didn't have a reporter in Springfield to follow the resulting scandal. And when Chicago suffered a brutal summer crime wave, the paper had no one on the night shift to listen to the police scanner.

As the months passed, things kept getting worse. Morale tanked; reporters burned out. The editor in chief mysteriously resigned, and managers scrambled to deal with the cuts. Some in the city started to wonder if the paper was even worth saving. "It makes me profoundly sad to think about what the *Trib* was, what it is, and what it's likely to become," says David Axelrod, who was a reporter at the paper before becoming an adviser to Barack Obama. Through it all, the owners maintained their ruthless silence —spurning interview requests and declining to articulate their plans for the paper. Longtime *Tribune* staffers had seen their share of bad corporate overlords, but this felt more calculated, more sinister.

"It's not as if the *Tribune* is just withering on the vine despite the best efforts of the gardeners," Charlie Johnson, a former Metro reporter, told me after the latest round of buyouts this summer. "It's being snuffed out, quarter after quarter after quarter." We were sitting in a coffee shop in Logan Square, and he was still struggling to make sense of what had happened. The *Tribune* had been profitable when Alden took over. The paper had weathered a decade and a half of mismanagement and declining revenues and layoffs, and had finally achieved a kind of stability. Now it might be facing extinction.

"They call Alden a vulture hedge fund, and I think that's honestly a misnomer," Johnson said. "A vulture doesn't hold a wounded animal's head underwater. This is predatory."

When Alden first started buying newspapers, at the tail end of the Great Recession, the industry responded with cautious optimism. These were not

exactly boom times for newspapers, after all—at least *someone* wanted to buy them. Maybe this obscure hedge fund had a plan. One early article, in the trade publication *Poynter*, suggested that Alden's interest in the local-news business could be seen as "flattering" and quoted the owner of *The Denver Post* as saying he had "enormous respect" for the firm. Reading these stories now has a certain horror-movie quality: You want to somehow warn the unwitting victims of what's about to happen.

Of course, it's easy to romanticize past eras of journalism. The families that used to own the bulk of America's local newspapers—the Bonfilses of Denver, the Chandlers of Los Angeles—were never perfect stewards. They could be vain, bumbling, even corrupt. At their worst, they used their papers to maintain oppressive social hierarchies. But most of them also had a stake in the communities their papers served, which meant that, if nothing else, their egos were wrapped up in putting out a respectable product.

The 21st century has seen many of these generational owners flee the industry, to devastating effect. In the past 15 years, more than a quarter of American newspapers have gone out of business. Those that have survived are smaller, weaker, and more vulnerable to acquisition. Today, half of all daily newspapers in the U.S. are controlled by financial firms, according to an analysis by the *Financial Times*, and the number is almost certain to grow.

What threatens local newspapers now is not just digital disruption or abstract market forces. They're being targeted by investors who have figured out how to get rich by strip-mining local-news outfits. The model is simple: Gut the staff, sell the real estate, jack up subscription prices, and wring as much cash as possible out of the enterprise until eventually enough readers cancel their subscriptions that the paper folds, or is reduced to a desiccated husk of its former self.

The men who devised this model are Randall Smith and Heath Freeman, the co-founders of Alden Global Capital. Since they bought their first newspapers a decade ago, no one has been more mercenary or less interested in pretending to care about their publications' long-term health. Researchers at the University of North Carolina found that Alden-owned newspapers have cut their staff at twice the rate of their competitors; not

coincidentally, circulation has fallen faster too, according to Ken Doctor, a news-industry analyst who reviewed data from some of the papers. That might sound like a losing formula, but these papers don't have to become sustainable businesses for Smith and Freeman to make money.

With aggressive cost-cutting, Alden can operate its newspapers at a profit for years while turning out a steadily worse product, indifferent to the subscribers it's alienating. "It's the meanness and the elegance of the capitalist marketplace brought to newspapers," Doctor told me. So far, Alden has limited its closures primarily to weekly newspapers, but Doctor argues it's only a matter of time before the firm starts shutting down its dailies as well.

This investment strategy does not come without social consequences. When a local newspaper vanishes, research shows, it tends to correspond with lower voter turnout, increased polarization, and a general erosion of civic engagement. Misinformation proliferates. City budgets balloon, along with corruption and dysfunction. The consequences can influence national politics as well; an analysis by *Politico* found that Donald Trump performed best during the 2016 election in places with limited access to local news.

With its acquisition of Tribune Publishing earlier this year, Alden now controls more than 200 newspapers, including some of the country's most famous and influential: the *Chicago Tribune*, *The Baltimore Sun*, the New York *Daily News*. It is the nation's second-largest newspaper owner by circulation. Some in the industry say they wouldn't be surprised if Smith and Freeman end up becoming the biggest newspaper moguls in U.S. history.

They are also defined by an obsessive secrecy. Alden's website contains no information beyond the firm's name, and its list of investors is kept strictly confidential. When lawmakers pressed for details last year on who funds Alden, the company replied that "there may be certain legal entities and organizational structures formed outside of the United States."

Smith, a reclusive Palm Beach septuagenarian, hasn't granted a press interview since the 1980s. Freeman, his 41-year-old protégé and the president of the firm, would be unrecognizable in most of the newsrooms he

owns. For two men who employ thousands of journalists, remarkably little is known about them.

If you want to know what it's like when Alden Capital buys your local newspaper, you could look to Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, where coverage of local elections in more than a dozen communities falls to a single reporter working out of his attic and emailing questionnaires to candidates. You could look to Oakland, California, where the *East Bay Times* laid off 20 people one week after the paper won a Pulitzer. Or to nearby Monterey, where the former *Herald* reporter Julie Reynolds says staffers were pushed to stop writing investigative features so they could produce multiple stories a day. Or to Denver, where the *Post*'s staff was cut by two-thirds, evicted from its newsroom, and relocated to a plant in an area with poor air quality, where some employees developed breathing problems.

But maybe the clearest illustration is in Vallejo, California, a city of about 120,000 people 30 miles north of San Francisco. When John Glidden first joined the *Vallejo Times-Herald*, in 2014, it had a staff of about a dozen reporters, editors, and photographers. Glidden, then a mild-mannered 30-year-old, had come to journalism later in life than most and was eager to prove himself. He started as a general-assignment reporter, covering local crime and community events. The pay was terrible and the work was not glamorous, but Glidden loved his job. A native of Vallejo, he was proud to work for his hometown paper. It felt important.

A month after he started, one of his fellow reporters left and Glidden was asked to start covering schools in addition to his other responsibilities. When the city-hall reporter left a few months later, he picked up that beat too. Glidden had heard rumblings about the paper's owners when he first took the job, but he hadn't paid much attention. Now he was feeling the effects of their management.

It turned out that those owners—New York hedge funders whom Glidden took to calling "the lizard people"—were laser-focused on increasing the paper's profit margins. Year after year, the executives from Alden would order new budget cuts, and Glidden would end up with fewer co-workers and more work. Eventually he was the only news reporter left on staff,

charged with covering the city's police, schools, government, courts, hospitals, and businesses. "It played with my mind a little bit," Glidden told me. "I felt like a terrible reporter because I couldn't get to everything."

He gained 100 pounds and started grinding his teeth at night. He used his own money to pull court records, and went years without going on a vacation. Tips that he would never have time to investigate piled up on a legal pad he kept at his desk. At one point, he told me, the city's entire civil-service commission was abruptly fired without explanation; his sources told him something fishy was going on, but he knew he'd never be able to run down the story.

Meanwhile, with few newsroom jobs left to eliminate, Alden continued to find creative ways to cut costs. The paper's printing was moved to a plant more than 100 miles outside town, Glidden told me, which meant that the news arriving on subscribers' doorsteps each morning was often more than 24 hours old. The "newsroom" was moved to a single room rented from the local chamber of commerce. Layout design was outsourced to freelancers in the Philippines.

Frustrated and worn out, Glidden broke down one day last spring when a reporter from *The Washington Post* called. She was writing about Alden's growing newspaper empire, and wanted to know what it was like to be the last news reporter in town. "It hurts to see the paper like this," he told her. "Vallejo deserves better." A few weeks after the story came out, he was fired. His editor cited a supposed journalistic infraction (Glidden had reported the resignation of a school superintendent before an agreed-upon embargo). But Glidden felt sure he knew the real reason: Alden wanted him gone.

The story of Alden Capital begins on the set of a 1960s TV game show called *Dream House*. A young man named Randall Duncan Smith—Randy for short—stands next to his wife, Kathryn, answering quick-fire trivia questions in front of a live studio audience. The show's premise pits two couples against each other for the chance to win a home. When the Smiths win, they pass on the house and take the cash prize instead—a $20,000 haul that Randy will eventually use to seed a small trading firm he calls R.D. Smith & Company.

A Cornell grad with an M.B.A., Randy is on a partner track at Bear Stearns, where he's poised to make a comfortable fortune simply by climbing the ladder. But he has a big idea: He believes there's serious money to be made in buying troubled companies, steering them into bankruptcy, and then selling them off in parts. The term *vulture capitalism* hasn't been invented yet, but Randy will come to be known as a pioneer in the field. He scores big with a bankrupt aerospace manufacturer, and again with a Dallas-based drilling company.

By the 1980s, this strategy has made Randy luxuriously wealthy—vacations in the French Riviera, a family compound outside New York City—and he has begun to school his children on the wonders of capitalism. He teaches his 8-year-old son, Caleb, to make trades on a Quotron computer, and imparts the value of delayed gratification by reportedly postponing his family's Christmas so that he can use all their available cash to buy stocks at lower prices in December. Caleb will later recall, in an interview with *D Magazine*, asking his dad why he works so hard.

"It's a game," Randy explains to his son.

"How do you know who wins?" the boy asks.

"Whoever dies with the most money."

Even in the "greed is good" climate of the era, Randy is a polarizing character on Wall Street. When *The New York Times* profiles him in 1991, it notes that he excels at "profiting from other people's misery" and quotes a parade of disgruntled clients and partners. "The one central theme," the *Times* reports, "seems to be that Smith and its web of affiliates are out, first and foremost, for themselves." If this reputation bothers Randy and his colleagues, they don't let on: For a while, according to *The Village Voice*, his firm proudly hangs a painting of a vulture in its lobby.

Around this time, Randy becomes preoccupied with privacy. He stops talking to the press, refuses to be photographed, and rarely appears in public. One acquaintance tells *The Village Voice* that "he's the kind of guy who divests himself every couple of years" to avoid ending up on lists of the world's richest people.

Most of his investments are defined by a cold pragmatism, but he takes a more personal interest in the media sector. With his own money, he helps his brother launch the *New York Press*, a free alt-weekly in Manhattan. Russ Smith is a puckish libertarian whose self-described "contempt" for the journalistic class animates the pages of the publication. "I'm repulsed by the incestuous world of New York journalism," he tells *New York* magazine. He writes a weekly column called "Mugger" that savages the city's journalists by name and frequently runs to 10,000 words.

Randy claims no editorial role in the *Press*, and his investment in the project—which has little chance of producing the kind of return he's accustomed to—could be chalked up to brotherly loyalty. But years later, when Randy relocates to Palm Beach and becomes a major donor to Donald Trump's presidential campaign, it will make a certain amount of sense that his earliest known media investment was conceived as a giant middle finger to the journalistic establishment.

How exactly Randall Smith chose Heath Freeman as his protégé is a matter of speculation among those who have worked for the two of them. In conversations with former Alden employees, I heard repeatedly that their partnership seemed to transcend business. "They had a father-figure relationship," one told me. "They were very tight." Freeman has resisted elaborating on his relationship with Smith, saying simply that they were family friends before going into business together.

Freeman's father, Brian, was a successful investment banker who specialized in making deals on behalf of labor unions. After serving in the Carter administration's Treasury Department, Brian became widely known —and feared—in the '80s for his hard-line negotiating style. "I sort of bully people around to get stuff done," he boasted to *The Washington Post* in 1985. The details of how Smith got to know him are opaque, but the resulting loyalty was evident.

After Brian took his own life, in 2001, Smith became a mentor and confidant to Heath, who was in college at the time of his father's death. Several years later, when Heath was still in his mid-20s, Smith co-founded Alden Global Capital with him, and eventually put him in charge of the firm.

People who know him described Freeman—with his shellacked curls, perma-stubble, and omnipresent smirk—as the archetypal Wall Street frat boy. “If you went into a lab to create the perfect bro, Heath would be that creation,” says one former executive at an Alden-owned company, who, like others in this story, requested anonymity to speak candidly. Freeman would show up at business meetings straight from the gym, clad in athleisure, the executive recalled, and would find excuses to invoke his college-football heroics, saying things like “When I played football at Duke, I learned some lessons about leadership.” (Freeman was a walk-on placekicker on a team that won no games the year he played.)

When Alden first got into the news business, Freeman seemed willing to indulge some innovation. The firm oversaw the promotion of John Paton, a charismatic digital-media evangelist, who improved the papers’ web and mobile offerings and increased online ad revenue. In 2011, Paton launched an ambitious initiative he called “Project Thunderdome,” hiring more than 50 journalists in New York and strategically deploying them to supplement short-staffed local newsrooms. For a fleeting moment, Alden’s newspapers became unexpected darlings of the journalism industry—written about by *Poynter* and Nieman Lab, endorsed by academics like Jay Rosen and Jeff Jarvis. But by 2014, it was becoming clear to Alden’s executives that Paton’s approach would be difficult to monetize in the short term, according to people familiar with the firm’s thinking. Reinventing their papers could require years of false starts and fine-tuning—and, most important, a delayed payday for Alden’s investors.

So Freeman pivoted. He shut down Project Thunderdome, parted ways with Paton, and placed all of Alden’s newspapers on the auction block. When the sale failed to attract a sufficiently high offer, Freeman turned his attention to squeezing as much cash out of the newspapers as possible.

Alden’s calculus was simple. Even in a declining industry, the newspapers still generated hundreds of millions of dollars in annual revenues; many of them were turning profits. For Freeman and his investors to come out ahead, they didn’t need to worry about the long-term health of the assets—they just needed to maximize profits as quickly as possible.

From 2015 to 2017, he presided over staff reductions of 36 percent across Alden's newspapers, according to an analysis by the NewsGuild (a union that also represents employees of *The Atlantic*). At the same time, he increased subscription prices in many markets; it would take awhile for subscribers—many of them older loyalists who didn't carefully track their bills—to notice that they were paying more for a worse product. Maybe they'd cancel their subscriptions eventually; maybe the papers would fold altogether. But as long as Alden had made back its money, the investment would be a success. (Freeman denied this characterization through a spokesperson.)

Crucially, the profits generated by Alden's newspapers did not go toward rebuilding newsrooms. Instead, the money was used to finance the hedge fund's other ventures. In legal filings, Alden has acknowledged diverting hundreds of millions of dollars from its newspapers into risky bets on commercial real estate, a bankrupt pharmacy chain, and Greek debt bonds. To industry observers, Alden's brazen model set it apart even from chains like Gannett, known for its aggressive cost-cutting. Alden "is not a newspaper company," says Ann Marie Lipinski, a former editor in chief of the *Chicago Tribune*. "It's a hedge that went and bought up some titles that it milks for cash."

Even as Alden's portfolio grew, Freeman rarely visited his newspapers. When he did, he exhibited a casual contempt for the journalists who worked there. On more than one occasion, according to people I spoke with, he asked aloud, "What do all these people do?" According to the former executive, Freeman once suggested in a meeting that Alden's newspapers could get rid of all their full-time reporters and rely entirely on freelancers. (Freeman denied this through a spokesperson.) In my many conversations with people who have worked with Freeman, not one could recall seeing him read a newspaper.

A story circulated throughout the company—possibly apocryphal, though no one could say for sure—that when Freeman was informed that *The Denver Post* had won a Pulitzer in 2013, his first response was: "Does that come with any money?"

In budget meetings, according to the former executive, Freeman hectored local publishers, demanding that they produce detailed numbers off the top of their head and then humiliating them when they couldn't. But for all the theatrics, his marching orders were always the same: Cut more.

"It was clear that they didn't care about this being a business in the future. It was all about the next quarter's profit margins," says Matt DeRienzo, who worked as a publisher for Alden's Connecticut newspapers before finally resigning.

Another ex-publisher told me Freeman believed that local newspapers should be treated like any other commodity in an extractive business. "To him, it's the same as oil," the publisher said. "Heath hopes the well never runs dry, but he's going to keep pumping until it does. And everyone knows it's going to run dry."

On March 9, 2020, a small group of *Baltimore Sun* reporters convened a secret meeting at the downtown Hyatt Regency. Alden Global Capital had recently purchased a nearly one-third stake in the *Sun*'s parent company, Tribune Publishing, and the firm was signaling that it would soon come for the rest. By that point, Alden was widely known as the "grim reaper of American newspapers," as *Vanity Fair* had put it, and news of the acquisition plans had unleashed a wave of panic across the industry.

But there was still a sliver of hope: Tribune and Alden agreed that the hedge fund would not increase its stake in the company for at least seven months. That gave the journalists at the *Sun* a brief window to stop the sale from going through. The question was how.

In the Hyatt meeting, Ted Venetoulis, a former Baltimore politician, advised the reporters to pick a noisy public fight: Set up a war room, circulate petitions, hold events to rally the city against Alden. If they did it right, Venetoulis said, they just might be able to line up a local, civic-minded owner for the paper. The pitch had a certain romantic appeal to the reporters in the room. "Baltimore is an underdog town," Liz Bowie, a *Sun* reporter who was at the meeting, told me. "We were like, *They're not going to take our newspaper from us!*"

The paper's union hired a PR firm to launch a public-awareness campaign under the banner "Save Our Sun" and published a letter calling on the Tribune board to sell the paper to local owners. Soon, Tribune-owned newsrooms across the country were kicking off similar campaigns. "We were in collective revolt," Lillian Reed, a *Sun* reporter who helped organize the campaign, told me. When the journalists created a Slack channel to coordinate their efforts across multiple newspapers, they dubbed it "Project Mayhem."

In Orlando, the *Sentinel* ran an editorial pleading with the community to "deliver us from Alden" and comparing the hedge fund to "a biblical plague of locusts." In Allentown, Pennsylvania, reporters held reader forums where they tried to instill a sense of urgency about the threat Alden posed to *The Morning Call*. The movement gained traction in some markets, with local politicians and celebrities expressing solidarity. But even for a group of journalists, it was tough to keep the public's attention. After a contentious presidential race and amid a still-raging pandemic, there was a limited supply of outrage and sympathy to spare for local reporters. When the *Chicago Tribune* held a "Save Local News" rally, most of the people who showed up were members of the media.

Meanwhile, reporters fanned out across their respective cities in search of benevolent rich people to buy their newspapers. The most promising prospect materialized in Baltimore, where a hotel magnate named Stewart Bainum Jr. expressed interest in the *Sun*. Earnest and unpolished, with a perpetually mussed mop of hair, Bainum presented himself as a contrast to the cutthroat capitalists at Alden. As a young man, he'd studied at divinity school before taking over his father's company, and decades later he still carried a healthy sense of noblesse oblige. He took particular pride in finding novel ways to give away his family fortune, funding child-poverty initiatives in Baltimore and prenatal care for women in Liberia.

Bainum told me he'd come to appreciate local journalism in the 1970s while serving in the Maryland state legislature. At the time, the *Sun* had a bustling bureau in Annapolis, and he marveled at the reporters' ability to sort the honest politicians from the "political whores" by exposing abuses

of power. “You have no way of knowing that if you don’t have some nosy son of a bitch asking a lot of questions down there,” he told me.

Bainum envisioned rebuilding the paper—which, by 2020, was down to a single full-time statehouse reporter—as a nonprofit. In February 2021, he announced a handshake deal to buy the *Sun* from Alden for $65 million once it acquired Tribune Publishing.

But within weeks, Bainum said, Alden tried to tack on a five-year licensing deal that would have cost him tens of millions more. (Freeman has, in the past, disputed Bainum’s account of the negotiations.) Feeling burned by the hedge fund, Bainum decided to make a last-minute bid for all of Tribune Publishing’s newspapers, pledging to line up responsible buyers in each market. For those who cared about the future of local news, it was hard to imagine a better outcome—which made it all the more devastating when the bid fell through.

What exactly went wrong would become a point of bitter debate among the journalists involved in the campaigns. Some expressed exasperation with the staff of the *Chicago Tribune*, who were unable to find a single interested local buyer. Others pointed to Bainum’s financing partner, who pulled out of the deal at the 11th hour. The largest share of the blame was assigned to the Tribune board for allowing the sale to Alden to go through. Freeman, meanwhile, would later gloat to colleagues that Bainum was never serious about buying the newspapers and just wanted to bask in the worshipful media coverage his bid generated.

But beneath all the recriminations and infighting was a cruel reality: When faced with the likely decimation of the country’s largest local newspapers, most Americans didn’t seem to care very much. “It was like watching a slow-motion disaster,” says Gregory Pratt, a reporter at the *Chicago Tribune*.

Alden completed its takeover of the Tribune papers in May. It financed the deal with the help of Cerberus—a private-equity firm that owned, among other businesses, the security company that trained Saudi operatives who participated in the murder of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

Three days later, Bainum—still smarting from his experience with Alden, but worried about the *Sun*'s fate—sent a pride-swallowing email to Freeman. After congratulating him on closing the deal, Bainum said he was still interested in buying the *Sun* if Alden was willing to negotiate. Freeman never responded.

Shortly after the Tribune deal closed earlier this year, I began trying to interview the men behind Alden Capital. I knew they almost never talked to reporters, but Randall Smith and Heath Freeman were now two of the most powerful figures in the news industry, and they'd gotten there by dismantling local journalism. It seemed reasonable to ask that they answer a few questions.

My request for an interview with Smith was dismissed by his spokesperson before I finished asking. A reporter at one of his newspapers suggested I try "doorstepping" Smith—showing up at his home unannounced to ask questions from the porch. But it turned out that Smith had *so many* doorsteps—16 mansions in Palm Beach alone, as of a few years ago, some of them behind gates—that the plan proved impractical. At one point, I tracked down the photographer who'd taken the only existing picture of Smith on the internet. But when I emailed his studio looking for information, I was informed curtly that the photo was "no longer available." Had Smith bought the rights himself? I asked. No response came back.

Freeman was only slightly more accessible. He declined to meet me in person or to appear on Zoom. After weeks of back-and-forth, he agreed to a phone call, but only if parts of the conversation could be on background (which is to say, I could use the information generally but not attribute it to him). On the appointed afternoon, I dialed the number provided by his spokesperson and found myself talking to the most feared man in American newspapers.

When I asked Freeman what he thought was broken about the newspaper industry, he launched into a monologue that was laden with jargon and light on insight—summarizing what has been the conventional wisdom for a decade as though it were Alden's discovery. "Many of the operators were looking at the newspaper business as a local advertising business," he said,

“and we didn’t believe that was the right way to look at it. This is a subscription-based business.”

Freeman was more animated when he turned to the prospect of extracting money from Big Tech. “We must finally require the online tech behemoths, such as Google, Apple, and Facebook, to fairly compensate us for our original news content,” he told me. He had spoken on this issue before, and it was easy to see why. Many in the journalism industry, watching lawsuits play out in Australia and Europe, have held out hope in recent years that Google and Facebook will be compelled to share their advertising revenue with the local outlets whose content populates their platforms. Some have even suggested that this represents America’s last chance to save its local-news industry. But for that to happen, the Big Tech money would need to flow to underfunded newsrooms, not into the pockets of Alden’s investors.

Before our interview, I’d contacted a number of Alden’s reporters to find out what they would ask their boss if they ever had the chance. Most responded with variations on the same question: Which recent stories from your newspapers have you especially appreciated? I put the question to Freeman, but he declined to answer on the record.

Freeman was clearly aware of his reputation for ruthlessness, but he seemed to regard Alden’s commitment to cost-cutting as a badge of honor—the thing that distinguished him from the saps and cowards who made up America’s previous generation of newspaper owners. “Prior to the acquisition of the Tribune Company, we purchased substantially all of our newspapers out of bankruptcy or close to liquidation,” he told me. “These papers were in many cases left for dead by local families not willing to make the tough but appropriate decisions to get these news organizations to sustainability. These papers would have been liquidated if not for us stepping up.”

This was the core of Freeman’s argument. But while it’s true that Alden entered the industry by purchasing floundering newspapers, not all of them were necessarily doomed to liquidation. More to the point, Tribune Publishing—which represents a substantial portion of Alden’s titles—was profitable at the time of the acquisition.

There's little evidence that Alden cares about the "sustainability" of its newspapers. A more honest argument might have claimed, as some economists have, that vulture funds like Alden play a useful role in "creative destruction," dismantling outmoded businesses to make room for more innovative insurgents. But in the case of local news, nothing comparable is ready to replace these papers when they die. Some publications, such as the Minneapolis *Star Tribune*, have developed successful long-term models that Alden's papers might try to follow. But that would require slow, painstaking work—and there are easier ways to make money.

In truth, Freeman didn't seem particularly interested in defending Alden's reputation. When he'd agreed to the interview, I'd expected him to say the things he was supposed to say—that the layoffs and buyouts were necessary but tragic; that he held local journalism in the highest esteem; that he felt a sacred responsibility to steer these newspapers toward a robust future. I would know he didn't mean it, and he would know he didn't mean it, but he would at least go through the motions.

But I had underestimated how little Alden's founders care about their standing in the journalism world. For Freeman, newspapers are financial assets and nothing more—numbers to be rearranged on spreadsheets until they produce the maximum returns for investors. For Smith, the Palm Beach conservative and Trump ally, sticking it to the mainstream media might actually be a perk of Alden's strategy. Neither man will ever be the guest of honor at the annual dinner for the Committee to Protect Journalists—and that's probably fine by them. It's hard to imagine they'd show, anyway.

About a month after *The Baltimore Sun* was acquired by Alden, a senior editor at the paper took questions from anxious reporters on Zoom. The new owners had announced a round of buyouts, some beloved staffers were leaving, and those who remained were worried about the future. When a reporter asked if their work was still valued, the editor sounded deflated. He said that *he* still appreciated their journalism, but that he couldn't speak for his corporate bosses.

“This company that owns us now seems to still be pretty—I don’t even know how to put it,” the editor said, according to a recording of the meeting obtained by *The Atlantic*. “We don’t hear from them ... They’re, like, nameless, faceless people.”

In the months that followed, the *Sun* did not immediately experience the same deep staff cuts that other papers did. Reporters kept reporting, and editors kept editing, and the union kept looking for ways to put pressure on Alden. But a sense of fatalism permeated the work. “It feels like we’re going up against capitalism now,” Lillian Reed, the reporter who helped launch the “Save Our Sun” campaign, told me. “Am I going to win against capitalism in America? Probably not.”

To David Simon, the whimpering end of *The Baltimore Sun* feels both inevitable and infuriating. A former *Sun* reporter whose work on the police beat famously led to his creation of *The Wire* on HBO, Simon told me the paper had suffered for years under a series of blundering corporate owners—and it was only a matter of time before an enterprise as cold-blooded as Alden finally put it out of its misery.

Like many alumni of the *Sun*, Simon is steeped in the paper’s history. He can cite decades-old scoops and tell you whom they pissed off. He quotes H. L. Mencken, the paper’s crusading 20th-century columnist, on the joys of journalism: It is really the life of kings. At the *Sun*’s peak, it employed more than 400 journalists, with reporters in London and Tokyo and Jerusalem. Its World War II correspondent brought firsthand news of Nazi concentration camps to American readers; its editorial page had the power to make or break political careers in Maryland.

But for Simon, that paper exists entirely in the past. With Alden in control, he believes the *Sun* is “now a prisoner” that stands little chance of escape. What most concerns him is how his city will manage without a robust paper keeping tabs on the people in charge. “The practical effect of the death of local journalism is that you get what we’ve had,” he told me, “which is a halcyon time for corruption and mismanagement and basically misrule.”

When Simon called me, he was on the set of his new miniseries, *We Own This City*, which tells the true story of Baltimore cops who spent years

running their own drug ring from inside the police department. By the time the FBI caught them, in 2017, the conspiracy had resulted in one dead civilian and a rash of wrongful arrests and convictions. The show draws from a book written by a *Sun* reporter, and Simon was quick to point out that the paper still has good journalists covering important stories. But he couldn't help feeling that the police scandal would have been exposed much sooner if the *Sun* were operating at full force.

Baltimore has always had its problems, he told me. "But if you really started fucking up in grandiose and belligerent ways, if you started stealing and grifting and lying, eventually somebody would come up behind you and say, 'You're grifting and you're lying' … and they'd put it in the paper."

"The bad stuff runs for so long now," he went on, "that by the time you get to it, institutions are irreparable, or damn near close."

Take away the newsroom packed with meddling reporters, and a city loses a crucial layer of accountability. What happens next? Unless the *Tribune*'s trajectory changes, Chicago may soon provide a grim case study. For Baltimore to avoid a similar fate, Simon told me, something new would have to come along—a spiritual heir to the *Sun*: "A newspaper is its contents and the people who make it. It's not the name or the flag."

He may get his wish. Stewart Bainum, since losing his bid for the *Sun*, has been quietly working on a new venture. Convinced that the *Sun* won't be able to provide the kind of coverage the city needs, he has set out to build a new publication of record from the ground up. In recent months, he's been meeting with leaders of local-news start-ups across the country—*The Texas Tribune*, the *Daily Memphian*, *The City* in New York—and collecting best practices. He's impressed by their journalism, he told me, but his clearest takeaway is that they're not nearly well funded enough. To replace a paper like the *Sun* would require a large, talented staff that covers not just government, but sports and schools and restaurants and art. "You need real capital to move the needle," he told me. Otherwise, "you're just peeing in the ocean."

Next year, Bainum will launch *The Baltimore Banner*, an all-digital, nonprofit news outlet. He told me it will begin with an annual operating budget of $15 million, unprecedented for an outfit of this kind. It will rely initially on philanthropic donations, but he aims to sell enough subscriptions to make it self-sustaining within five years. He's acutely aware of the risks—"I may end up with egg on my face," he said—but he believes it's worth trying to develop a successful model that could be replicated in other markets. "There's no industry that I can think of more integral to a working democracy than the local-news business," he said.

The *Banner* will launch with about 50 journalists—not far from the size of the *Sun*—and an ambitious mandate. One tagline he was considering was "Maryland's Best Newsroom."

When I asked, half in jest, if he planned to raid the *Sun* to staff up, he responded with a muted grin. "Well," he told me, "they have some very good reporters."

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James and Lindsay Sulzer's daughter, Livie, at home in Austin, Texas

A Peer-Reviewed Portrait of Suffering

The Freak Accident That Challenged Rehab Engineering

By Daniel Engber

The last words that Liviana Sulzer spoke, 18 months ago, were very much in character: "Now it's time for a song." This was often how she felt, living as she did inside a toddler movie-musical, where even just a spilled cup of milk could get her up onto a chair, twirling with her arms out wide and singing as loud as she could manage: *We just spilled our milk … It was messy on the table, and then we cleaned it up … And noooow it's aaaaall cleeeaaaned up!* When the song was over, she'd bend toward her brothers, ages 6 and 1, in a deep and gracious bow.

It was May 2020—a week before Livie's fourth birthday—and the kids were playing in the yard. Throughout the Sulzers' quiet neighborhood in

Austin, Texas, the Persian silk trees had begun to bloom in pink-tipped puffs. There were flowers in their backyard, too. Livie had a favorite one, purple and about as tall as she was. She called it Dr. Iris and, trapped at home by the COVID-19 shutdown, she'd made a game of scooting over to it in her push-car and spilling all her problems. (She often couldn't think of any when she got there.)

But the loneliest phase of the pandemic, with its makeshift games and spotty child care, was nearly over. Things were getting back to normal. A nanny had started just over a week before, and Livie's mother, Lindsay—a bioengineer and expert in regenerative medicine—was headed to the office for her first day back at work, at a local cell-therapy start-up. Livie's father, James, an assistant professor at the University of Texas at Austin who specializes in rehabilitation robotics, was grading papers in the walk-in closet that he'd turned into a home office. He'd asked his graduate students to propose studies or devices that might one day help a patient recover from a nervous-system injury.

The sky was clear and calm and sunny. Livie stood near the center of the yard, 30 feet below the overhanging branches of a pecan tree. Her two brothers were nearby.

"Now it's time for a song," she announced.

There was a crack, a whoosh, a scream.

Livie was unconscious when the EMTs arrived, her eyelids fluttering. In the ambulance, James overheard someone say "blown right pupil." He didn't know what that implied. A falling tree branch had knocked his daughter out, but there wasn't any blood. How bad could it be?

At Dell Children's Medical Center, a neurosurgeon named Winson Ho knew right away that it was bad—really bad. Livie's blown pupil, the fact that it was dilated and unresponsive to light, told him that her brain had been swelling for some time, pressed against the inside of her skull. Without rapid intervention, she could die. A CT scan showed a thick fracture across her crown that forked into a pair of smaller, twig-like cracks—as if the branch's shape had been imprinted in her bone. In the operating room, Ho

carved out a piece of Livie's skull, four inches wide and six long, to give her brain more space to bloat. If an older person had come in with that same degree of injury, he'd later say, doctors and family might have chosen not to intervene.

Livie spent the next two weeks in a coma. She had lesions on her right sensorimotor cortex, her left orbitofrontal cortex, and the tract of fibers called the corpus callosum that connects the brain's two hemispheres. James remembers being told that Livie might end up with a little trouble walking, and some difficulty concentrating on math problems. "It was devastating to think that she'd be permanently injured," he said.

In a grim coincidence, he'd spent his whole career devising ways to fix a damaged nervous system, and Lindsay had once worked on isolating stem cells out of body fat, an approach that has been used to treat traumatic brain injuries (TBIs) such as Livie's. The two had met as graduate students at Northwestern University in 2004; James had been training at the affiliated Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago, one of the world's leading hospitals for physical medicine and rehab. Between the two of them, James and Lindsay had decades of experience in biomedicine, and a large network of professional connections. "There's no treatment out there that we don't have access to," James told me.

While Livie was in the ICU, James reached out to friends and colleagues and asked them for advice: Which treatments should they try with Livie in the weeks ahead? Which technologies might help? He also started coming up with notions of his own. At the hospital, James and Lindsay had to stretch out Livie's joints three times a day to help prevent contractures, a shortening of the muscle fibers that can result in lasting disability. There must be some way to automate the stretching, James thought—perhaps he could design a robot that did it better and more often. "I was looking for opportunities to apply what I knew to help her," he said. But eventually he abandoned the idea. Building the stretching bot would take months, he realized—and even then it might end up pushing Livie's tiny joints too far and hurting her.

The risk of contractures soon gave way to other, graver ones. After two weeks, Livie came out of her coma, though only to a point. Her eyes were

open now and she was breathing on her own, but she wasn't making any sounds or responding to the world around her. "When Livie starts talking again, what will she sound like?" her older brother, Noah, asked his parents at one point. "She had such a cute voice."

Her voice returned, a few weeks later, in the form of wounded, mouselike shrieks—a high-pitched din of pain or maybe fear as she emerged from a semiconscious state. In mid-July, James flew with Livie to the Kennedy Krieger Institute in Baltimore, well known for its work with TBI in children; Lindsay took the boys to stay with family in Cleveland. (The parents would trade places twice a month.) In Baltimore, they rarely left their daughter's side, sleeping on a fold-out chair in her room, haunted by the sounds of her discomfort. The only way to make her shrieking stop, James found, was by giving her koala hugs: She was the bear; he was the tree.

As the founder of UT's Cellular to Clinically Applied Rehabilitation Research and Engineering Initiative, James had seen a thousand clever fixes for a person's brain: neural stimulators and electrode caps; full-body exoskeletons; sleek, motorized contraptions that facilitated movement at a single joint. At his lab there was a split-belt treadmill that could measure the force of each footstep. His colleague had a robot that could assist the movement of both arms at once.

James has always been a builder. In high school he was into woodshop, making coffee tables and armoires; later, he interned at Alcoa, the aluminum company, where he saw a massive forging press make wheels for trucks. As a college sophomore, he learned about advances in prosthetics, and it occurred to him that tinkering could serve a greater good. A boom was under way in the field of rehabilitation robotics; in graduate school, James made a powered brace to help stroke survivors bend their knees. Later, he shifted his focus to the brain itself, designing tools for neuro-feedback that used multimillion-dollar MRI machines to nudge a person's cortex into making new connections.

Working in an engineering lab, one tends to fixate on the engineering challenge: building the device. Whom exactly the device is for and what sorts of injuries it can help address are secondary concerns. Now that logic

had flipped around as James sat beside his daughter. He knew that Livie's brain could still send signals to her muscles, even if those signals weren't strong enough—or clear enough—to make her muscles work. So he came up with a way for Livie to exercise her neurons while her body remained still. With the help of a graduate student, he attached electrodes to her limbs and neck, to pick up even feeble spurts of muscle activation; then he linked them to a music playlist. Whenever Livie twitched her biceps or her triceps, even just a tiny bit, a favorite song, such as "Baby Shark," would play a little louder.

The electrode gadget checked all of James's boxes for design: It allowed Livie to participate in her own recovery; it encouraged her to practice; it made use of neural information that a doctor or a parent might never see during a normal course of treatment. Yet it proved as useless for Livie as the stretching bot that James had only pictured in his head. For one thing, placing the muscle sensors took too much time, time that could be spent on other forms of therapy; he also couldn't tell whether Livie understood the point, that she should try to make the music louder; and even if these other problems could be solved, Livie's muscles were so small that some activation might be missed.

Livie was making progress now, but in slow motion. In September, she moved back to Austin, where she started doing therapy sessions at home (nine hours every week, plus 30 more of exercise and "therapeutic recreation") and as an outpatient at Dell Children's (another seven hours). Still, she wasn't quite responsive; her eyes were misaligned; her head was cocked off to the left and couldn't seem to straighten up. She had trouble swallowing and had to take her meals through a tube connected to her stomach. Her right arm worked a bit, and her left leg too, but she hadn't figured out a way of rolling over. James and Lindsay knew about the crucial, early window for reshaping and remapping the brain—in many cases, a person's progress in the first few weeks or months after an injury can predict how things play out in the long term. The level of recovery they'd once imagined now seemed like foolish optimism.

In the months that followed, Lindsay took on the Herculean tasks of arranging Livie's care—hiring nurses and personal attendants, procuring

equipment such as wheelchairs, and setting up a never-ending carousel of feedings, medicine, and exercise, all while wrestling the Hydra of insurance claims. Lindsay also puts in a few hours a week at her cell-therapy start-up, and attends to her younger son, Reed, now 2 years old and almost always seeking her attention.

James assumed the role of in-house rehab scientist: the family's principal investigator into Livie's injury, and its chief adviser on how to treat her most effectively. Nature's whim had put his daughter in this awful place. Technology would help to bring her back. "I feel this weight of responsibility," he told me, "given what I feel I should know about the field."

Shortly after Livie's accident, while she was still unconscious in the ICU, James reached out to another dad he knew in Austin—a guy in commercial real estate named Barney Sinclair whose own daughter Charley had been injured several years before, when she was roughly Livie's age. Barney had been headed out to Oklahoma with three kids in the car. The highway was wet with rain; another car hydroplaned across the median and Barney smashed into its side. Charley's brain, like Livie's, started swelling in her skull; surgeons had to drill a hole to reduce the pressure.

Charley was treated at the same hospital as Livie would be. Barney, feeling helpless, started asking questions of her doctors and nurses: *If I were Bill Gates*, he'd say to them, *what would I be doing to help my daughter? You know, like, if resources were not an issue?* Eventually he landed on robotics, and in 2018 he started a nonprofit—he called it Project Charley—with a plan to purchase gait-training bots and other high-tech tools for rehab clinics in the Austin area. Charley would get the benefit of using them, and so would other people like her.

That's when James and Barney met. "I'm a real-estate guy, right? I build warehouses," Barney told me. "I don't know what equipment to buy, but I know how to tap into the smartest people in Austin and let them help me make smart decisions." So he visited James's lab and saw the split-belt treadmill and the two-armed robot; the dads had lunch and talked about virtual-reality therapies and rehab gadgets that seemed to have potential. "He was so gracious with his time. It's just tragically ironic that this

happened to him [a few] years later, and he was calling me," Barney said. "The thing that I kept going back to was that it was going to be okay, that we were happy, and that he's going to get there but it's going to be just unbelievably tough."

Charley, now 10 years old and half a decade past her accident, doesn't walk or talk, but even early on she had a way of saying yes (looking up) and a way of saying no (a shake of the head). At Dell Children's, she began using an eye-tracking device, selecting icons with her gaze and forming rudimentary sentences that way. She's since learned to read and write, and now sends texts to Barney while he's working. "She tells you what she did that day; she tells you what made her mad or what was funny," he said. "That's how Charley communicates."

For Barney and his wife, Shannon, the Bill Gates approach to rehabilitation has been successful. Two years ago, their nonprofit arranged to purchase one of the most expensive and widely used rehabilitation robots on the market—a half-million-dollar machine called the Lokomat, meant to teach people with brain injuries how to walk again—and installed it at a clinic several miles up the road from James's lab at UT. Charley has been training with it ever since. "We know it's been good for her," Barney told me.

James and Lindsay aren't wealthy, but resources haven't been an issue. Given their backgrounds and milieu, they can choose among a wide variety of interventions: stem-cell treatments, "diving" sessions in an oxygen tank, infrared-laser therapy, robotic exoskeletons. But as scientists, they've been discouraged by the paucity of data on whether any of these approaches really work. Clinical studies in the field are pretty scarce, even when it comes to the most common neural injuries, in adults who suffer strokes. Far less research has been done on injured children; for those like Livie, with damage spread across the brain, delivered by a violent blow, there's almost nothing.

"How do you make an informed, educated decision?" Lindsay said to me. "It's a huge challenge, and I think we have a harder time because we want to have some sort of scientific rationale." James agreed. "It's very easy, as a scientist, to just be skeptical of everything," he said. "But as a parent, you need to have some optimism, and you need to take leaps of faith."

I first spoke with James and Lindsay in the spring, as the first anniversary of Livie's accident approached. They'd been thinking back across their 12-month stretch of impossible calamity. The pandemic had meant that Livie (and her parents) couldn't have any visitors when she was in the hospital, and that every nurse or therapist who came to see her was also, to some degree, a mortal threat. Then came the winter storms in February and the power crisis and blackouts. Livie's medications grew warm inside the fridge, and the pump they used to give her feedings almost sapped its battery.

Now the Persian silk trees in the neighborhood were flowering again, along with Dr. Iris in the Sulzers' yard. On James's and Lindsay's smartphones, auto-generated galleries of snapshots taken "One Year Ago Today" approached a crushing turning point: There was Livie riding on her wheeled giraffe; Livie playing in the yard; Livie with her brothers; Livie in a coma. It was time for an accounting of all the things they'd tried to do to help with her recovery, and of how far she'd really come.

During Livie's year of rehabilitative therapy, she'd cycled through dozens of commercial products and devices from James's lab—bungee-cord harnesses, wireless electrodes, eye-tracking games, and so on—but none of them was perfect. None of them was even close. Her disabilities remain both diverse and severe: Like Charley, Livie cannot speak. She has a way of saying yes—she pumps her right arm up and down, like she's hitting an imaginary button labeled MORE—but her no, a left-foot stomp, is somewhat less reliable. She can walk, a bit, when someone's holding her, but her limbs have been weakened by osteoporosis. Her cognitive disabilities appear to be significant, but they're tricky to assess given the limitations of her movements. "We don't know what she'll recover," Lindsay said. "We don't know to what point she'll get, when that will be, will she ever talk again, any of those things. We don't know."

James, in particular, began to fixate on the mounting failures and uncertainties, and the ways his field had come up short. He began to wonder if the whole idea of rehab engineering—its deepest motivations—might be off the mark. Many of the problems Livie encountered had to do with a gadget's usability: It might be cumbersome to set up, or hard to learn, or

prone to breaking. Locating one of Livie's nerves with an electrical stimulator took 10 minutes, for example, and then you couldn't really tell whether the pulse was doing much to help her straighten out her foot. Given Livie's crowded schedule of care and treatments, even modest hiccups of this kind could make an intervention useless. "It's so frustrating, because all these ideas that I think are awesome wind up sucking," James told me. "I went into this to build devices to help people, but I never considered that building devices might not be the answer."

When they were at Northwestern, James and Lindsay had been trained to think of failure as a skill: To fail correctly—to do it "in an interesting way"—you had to sift through the rubble of your disappointment and ask, *How did things go wrong, and why did we expect a different outcome?* As the couple's fear and frustration over Livie's progress grew, these very questions came into their minds: *What happened here, and why?* The field of rehab engineering hadn't done that much for Livie. But now it seemed like maybe Livie could do something for the field.

By the time we first spoke, James and Lindsay had written up their observations. They were trying, as James would later say, to draw some meaning—and perhaps a fragment of relief—from what had been "this huge, loud, overwhelming noise" inside their heads. On April 7, the *Journal of NeuroEngineering and Rehabilitation* had published the remarkable result: a co-authored manifesto on the principles of technology design, but also a peer-reviewed portrait of their suffering. The paper, "Our Child's TBI: A Rehabilitation Engineer's Personal Experience, Technological Approach, and Lessons Learned," starts with brief biographies of James and Lindsay, and then a recitation of what happened to their daughter, referred to only as "B"—a private reference to her nickname, Boogie.

The text that follows is staggeringly personal. In a section called "Technologies Explored," James and Lindsay note how "the feeling of helplessness and rollercoaster of emotions is often temporarily assuaged with new treatments and devices." A subsection on "Emotional Trauma" begins like this:

The heart of the paper, though, its message and its purpose, comes later on, where it turns from pain to disillusionment. There the language slips from

“we” to “I,” from Livie’s parents’ point of view to her father’s, the rehab engineer’s. Like many in the field, he wrote, he’d never bothered to understand the very tasks that he was trying to automate. At the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago, patients were seen only one or two floors away from James’s lab, yet he did not take that walk downstairs; he did not watch the therapists at work, or see the role they played in troubleshooting problems and providing motivation, empathy, and guidance. “We kind of have this attitude that therapists are just too stupid to know the technology, or they’re afraid of losing their jobs, or they just don’t understand that robots can do what they do,” James told me. “But that’s not true. Therapists do a lot of things that robots will never be able to do.” It was just as wrong, the paper said, for engineers to disregard the most basic tools of rehab: a mat, a ball, a table. These possess the virtues of sturdiness and simplicity, virtues that robotics engineers too often overlook.

It wasn’t that James had given up on making gadgets—not at all. But he’d come to realize that innovation should be tailored to human needs, not dictated merely by technological possibility. This was the central lesson, as the paper put it, of James and Lindsay’s “immersive experience” of traumatic brain injury. In Figure 1 they provide a set of guidelines for rehab engineering: 11 threshold questions that should be answered for any new device. “Can the task be accomplished using simpler technology?” reads the first. “Can it be set up and cleaned up as quickly as a bench and some toys?” “Does it require expertise to operate properly?” “Can it be combined with other therapies?” If a new technology cannot pass these tests, it may not be worth the time and effort to develop.

“I’ve been one of those people promoting high-tech stuff for a really long time, just to explore and see if it works, because it could be revolutionary,” James said. Now he was pleading for a new approach, and his message was getting through. Two prominent professors in the field told me that they’ve made “Our Child’s TBI” required reading in their labs. James and Lindsay have been asked to give several talks related to their paper; one invitation, for them to serve as keynote speakers at the discipline’s most prestigious annual meeting, RehabWeek Virtual ’21, said that “Figure 1 of this paper should be printed out and hung up over the desk or bed or kitchen table of

every person working in our field. Eventually, it should become ingrained into our brains and become second nature."

At the Spero Rehab Clinic in central Austin, an elderly man stepped over tiny hurdles as he made his way around the gym. There were other basic tools for clients' use: a tilting table, parallel bars, a skateboard. But the site's clinical director, Brooke Aarvig, was showing me the bigger-ticket items. She took me over to an exoskeleton for training movements of the arm and hand, called the ArmeoSpring, and then to a VR setup and a motorized "hippotherapy" bench with stirrups, which resembled the world's tamest mechanical bull. And then finally to the clinic's prize machine, in the center of the workout floor: the Lokomat from Project Charley, an eight-foot-high, 2,200-pound marvel of rehabilitative tech—a treadmill with a hanging harness and robotic legs.

A young woman with chin-length hair and severe weakness on one side of her body was being strapped into the harness by a technician with a clipboard. He wrapped her left hand to the armrest with a bandage and braced her legs in the metal frames of the robotic legs; the machine then hoisted her up about six inches. A moment later, she was walking—or the Lokomat was walking. You couldn't really tell. When the movement started, she was still briefly suspended well above the treadmill's belt, loping queerly through the air.

"Interactive robotic therapists" emerged in the early 1990s, when growing interest in the science of "neuroplasticity"—the idea that the brain forms new connections in the course of learning or recovery—buoyed hope that the same process could be mechanized and made efficient. Robotic therapists could, in theory, help patients move in ways they couldn't on their own and then repeat those movements many times, while also measuring their progress. Each repetition would trigger currents in the brain and feed into a rehabilitative flow of neural signals. Eventually, the theory went, these would carve out new channels in the cortex—or reopen ones that had closed.

Alec Soth / Magnum for The Atlantic

By the end of the decade, a team at MIT led by the mechanical engineers Neville Hogan and Hermano Igo Krebs was running small clinical trials with what they called the MIT-Manus: a robotic arm that could assist (and challenge) a patient's own arm through different exercises. In a 1999 paper describing their accomplishments, the researchers boasted that "robotics

and information technology can provide an overdue transformation of rehabilitation clinics from primitive manual operations to more technology-rich operations." The Lokomat arrived a couple of years later.

Larger trials of the rehab robots turned out disappointing findings, though. A major study from 2010, in *The New England Journal of Medicine*, looked at patients who had suffered strokes and had impairment in their upper limbs. Across a 12-week intervention, those who'd been treated with the MIT-Manus robot did no better—though, to be fair, no worse—than those who'd gotten standard care. Another large study, published in *The Lancet* in 2019, reached a similar conclusion: 12 weeks of training on an MIT-Manus provided no improvement in upper-limb function for people recovering from a stroke compared with normal therapy. Results have been slightly better for lower-limb machines: A comprehensive survey of the research literature, published in 2020, looked at 62 studies of "electromechanical- and robot-assisted gait-training devices" for people who had trouble walking after a stroke—including 25 trials involving the Lokomat—and concluded that the use of these machines (especially in the first few months post-impairment) increased people's odds of being able to walk independently.

"The hype that robots are going to fix everything has not borne out at this point," says Theresa Hayes Cruz, the director of the National Center for Medical Rehabilitation Research at the National Institutes of Health, and one of James's former grad-school classmates. "I think what we've learned is that therapists bring a lot more than just the physical movement to a patient. There's that psychosocial interaction, motivation, things like that."

But rehab roboticists suggest that some clinicians may have been too quick to abandon a good idea. Physical therapists sometimes worry that the technology is "too complex" for them, says Arun Jayaraman, the director of the Max Näder Center for Rehabilitation Technologies and Outcomes Research at Shirley Ryan AbilityLab (as the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago, where James did his graduate studies, is now known). They may also think of robots as a threat. "It's the same issue with any automation," he said. "Factory workers are scared of robots in the car industry, or in any industry, because they think the robots are taking away their jobs."

Jayaraman concedes that the first generation of these devices was a little glitchy, but he says that's just how innovation works: You start with something, and then you make it better. "If you didn't do that first version of the iPhone, then you're not going to get the iPhone 12 Pro Max."

At Spero Rehab, the Lokomat seems to be working well for certain clients. A therapist might get tired while assisting a patient on a single lap around the gym, whereas the robot can help the same person do the equivalent of six to 10 laps. You can also dial up the robot's body-weight support over the course of a session, to keep the client going even as they tire out. It's like getting spotted when you're lifting weights—a way to land some extra reps.

But over the past two years, some therapists have grown wary of the Lokomat's power, and its magnetism. "This machine could be walking for you," one told me. Its motors can take on much of the exercise themselves. Indeed, the woman who was on the treadmill when I made my visit to Spero had been training in this very configuration with the guidance level turned up all the way, to 100 percent. That meant she had to use her muscles only to help support her body weight, while the robot worked her legs on the treadmill like a marionette's. There's little reason to believe that this form of repetition, especially when it's limited to movement in one direction and of one specific type, leads to any substantive motor learning or recovery, James told me at one point. "What we're supposed to know, as scientists, is that if you guide someone to do a movement that you already know how to do, it doesn't help."

Even when that guidance knob is turned down, and even when a person is really moving for themself, expectations for the Lokomat can run too high. According to a clinician who has worked with the device, people sometimes get so enamored with the mere idea of using a fancy robot—so addicted to its coolness and its automation—that they barely notice when their training doesn't yield results. Some people "really, really" benefit from using the Lokomat, the clinician told me, but others have been working with it for years without any signs of progress. "We ask them to decrease how often they do it," or else tell the insurance provider it's time to discontinue therapy. Yet these people still end up coming back, and paying out of pocket for another hour on the robot, and then another, and another—more time

spent without the hands-on work of traditional therapy. “People think this machine is a magic fix,” the clinician said, “and it’s not.”

The first thing you see, upon entering the Sulzers’ house, is a nine-by-nine metal frame suspended above a pair of sofas with a harness hanging down and space for Livie to walk. There’s a stander, too—a large device that helps Livie practice being upright. (James has been working on pressure sensors for the stander’s foot plate, hooked up to his smartphone via Bluetooth, to measure how Livie is balancing her weight.) When I first arrived, Livie was positioned on the rug, working with a physical therapist. She looked up—as she always does whenever someone new comes in—and gave a slow and happy-sounding greeting, a cross between a groan and a laugh. She has curly brown hair and thick, dramatic eyebrows of the sort that people try to fake. She smiles all day long, with mischief and enthusiasm, and delights in having James lean in to kiss her cheeks. “I’m going to chomp you,” he says. “I’m going to give you the chomps!”

Several of James’s students from UT also came by that day, to test out the latest prototype of Livie’s ride-on car. It’s a jeep for kids, pink with big black wheels—the kind of thing you might get at Walmart for $300, but with its accelerator pedal rewired to a hand-operated console. The students carried it out into the yard, 15 or 20 feet from the screened-in porch, almost to the very spot where the tree branch had fallen the year before. James lifted Livie, in her rainbow dress and sparkle sneakers, into the seat.

The team designed the console to make it work in lots of different ways. When Livie grasps and yanks a yellow ball, the car moves forward. With a different module in place, the controller rotates like a dial, to help Livie practice supination of her wrist. (“If a therapy is going to be really useful, it’s got to do multiple things at once,” James told me. “Everything’s got to be a Swiss Army knife.”) But after grabbing at the ball a few times without success, Livie lost energy, or patience. Her head began to droop a little farther to the left. She let go.

The idea they’re working from—to hack a ride-on car for use by kids with disabilities—comes from Cole Galloway, a professor of physical therapy at the University of Delaware, whom James consulted after Livie’s injury. In 2007, Galloway started GoBabyGo, a project to teach families how to

create their own mobility devices at very low cost. Galloway's cars aren't supposed to help a kid with a brain injury get "back to normal" in their basic motor functions, he told me. They're not designed, like fancy rehab robots, to fix problems within a narrow frame of brain function. Rather, they're meant to give kids a way to move around and interact with their peers, without the stigma that might attach to being in a powered wheelchair. A medical model of recovery often gives way to a social one, he said. "Most people eventually go, 'I no longer care as much about impairment level or function. I want my kid to be a citizen. I want them to be invited to a birthday party.'" But he wondered whether James was ready for that step. "He's very much an engineer. He's a builder at heart, meaning 'I fix things, and Livie is fixable.'" To Galloway, that mindset is a trap.

James and Lindsay's goal right now, they told me, is for Livie to develop "functional independence," by which they seem to mean being able to take care of herself, more or less, with the help of some assistive technologies. They acknowledged to me that this may not be realistic, but they'll keep pushing for that outcome—with new treatments and devices, and more therapy—until they're certain that her window of recovery has closed.

Livie's ride-on car, as James conceived it, reflects a focus on improving basic skills. It's not designed to be a way for Livie to move across the yard (even if that would be nice). Instead it's meant to make her more excited about an exercise that could, in theory, help her brain to fix itself. James and his students have made the car into a fancy version of the "Baby Shark" machine: If she pulls or twists the knob, she gets to zoom around! And if she gets to zoom around, she'll want to pull or twist the knob some more. The problem was, Livie didn't seem that interested. "I don't know," James said after several failed attempts. "Maybe she doesn't care about driving the car."

Back in the house, it was time for Livie's lunch. A nurse put her in the stander in the living room and set up an iPad for her entertainment while a pouch of chickpea formula emptied into her feeding tube.

James disappeared into his office and came out with a bin. He spilled its contents out onto the rug: an assortment of devices that he'd tried so far. He showed me a headband with symbols on it, meant to help a computer track

Livie's head motion, and a harness called an Upsee, in which your kid is strapped to your hips and legs and feet in such a way that the two of you can walk in tandem. There was a VR headset, a spinal-cord stimulator, and a wireless, force-tracking computer interface called FitMi. At his lab I'd seen a sensor he was working on with a colleague in the textiles-and-apparel department—it can be sewn into the collar of a shirt. James wants to use it to measure Livie's swallowing as she relearns to eat. He also had a plan to build a sheath that gently strokes her back, on the theory that it might reduce excessive muscle contraction.

I asked him whether he might decide, at any point, that enough is enough—that after having tried so many gadgets without significant success, it was time to stop. "Am I gonna give up? No. From what I've seen, there's always improvements to be made," he said. "At the same time, I do have to consider at what point does this stop benefiting Livie, and that's a tough question to answer, and I haven't confronted that yet." He went on, after a moment's thought: "That'll be a tough, tough question to ask myself, and hopefully, I can have the courage to say, 'Okay, you know what? We're better off doing other things rather than trying to help her that way.'"

During lunch, Livie's iPad cycled through a set of family photographs and videos. Like the pictures on the Sulzers' walls, they were all from before the accident. Many showed Livie herself. That's what she likes to see when she's strapped into the stander, waiting for her food, James said. He'd found that the pictures often work as motivation for her therapy, so he'd programmed some of them into her rehab devices too.

"What's sad is we've watched these videos so many times, the memories *are* the videos," he said. At first, he used to look at them and think, *Oh, hey, there's Livie*. Now he feels as though he's looking at a different person. "It's like I've developed a new relationship with her," he told me. "Now it's like I have two daughters, in a way. One that passed away, and now this one."

He'd said something similar the first time we talked, about seeing Livie split in half—as one girl in the pictures and videos, and another in the stander. "If I thought of it as that she died, and that there's this new child here, it felt like a release," he said. "I guess it's hard to explain why, but it made it easier." And yet James and Lindsay aren't quite ready to let go of

the girl in the pictures. “Emotionally, we’re not resolved in this at all,” James said. “There are flashes she shows of her former self, and we still hold out hope that she’s going to come back.”

The new Livie finished up her meal. The old Livie hovered like a ghost.

At dinner that evening, Livie’s brother Noah, now 7, sat to my right. He was biting into the crust of his pizza, making holes that looked like stars and boats and other shapes—a constant game for him, his parents said, finding pictures in his food. He pointed to a little glob of mozzarella that had several slices of black olive sticking out of it at different angles. “Hey, it’s like that building in Australia,” he observed.

Before the accident, Livie was Noah’s best friend. He still plays with her, and they like to lie in bed together and watch TV. But Noah struggles to understand what’s going on: whether Livie will get back to how she was before, and how long that getting-back might take. “He’s really gotten the shit end of the stick in this whole deal. He’s out of control of everything,” James had told me. Now Noah sat there while the grown-ups talked, studying his cheese-and-olives. “It’s the Sydney Opera House,” he said. “It’s the Austin Olive House.”

The month before, at one of James and Lindsay’s academic talks, Lindsay had brought up something Noah had asked her: “How come in stories there’s always a happy ending, and that’s not true in real life, like with Livie?”

No one had an answer to that question. “I’m worried that you don’t have a story,” James had told me earlier that day. “You don’t have an ending.” He’d hoped to find some resolution in sending out a message to his field. “It does feel good that people say, ‘I read your paper and I really liked it and I’m integrating it into my research,’” he said after dinner, “but I would say that in the end, it still feels kind of empty, because it doesn’t change our situation.” He wondered if he’d ever really had a message to begin with. “I mean, it’s like we’re all just putzing around trying to find what might work, and no one knows what might work, and it’s just a big mess. That’s not a story, and that’s what bothers me.”

James and I had spent many hours talking about Livie, and all the different ways he'd tried to help her. But Livie is not the only person who needs rehabilitation. Everyone in the family was traumatized by the accident, James and Lindsay wrote in their paper. Everyone in the family needs to get better; everyone is moving through their own windows of recovery, unsure of their prognoses, trying everything they can. There might never be a magic fix for Livie's injury, and there might never be a magic fix for James's, or Lindsay's, or her brothers', either. Each of them can only gird themselves for the grueling journey to a better place—or for the grueling task of making peace with where they are. Each of them can only use whatever tools they have.

For James, those tools are in his lab. Making gadgets has been therapeutic, even when those gadgets break or go awry. "It helps me feel like I have agency over her recovery, and that gives me hope," he said.

It was almost time for the kids to go to sleep. James and Lindsay were busy attending to the boys, so I sat down next to Livie in her room. She was in her bed, with green and pink pool noodles pressed up against the rail to prevent a fall. Her feeding tube was hanging from a pole. The nurse had said that Livie really likes a book called *Ada Twist, Scientist*, so I took it from the shelf and read aloud.

I looked up from the page and saw that Livie was staring at the wall. James had said that she sometimes has spells of inattention, and that he and Lindsay think they might be seizures. But when I paused to ask Livie if she wanted me to read some more, a smile quickly stretched across her face. She groaned at me and pumped her right arm up and down.

Yes, she signaled from the bed. Go on. The story isn't over yet.

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Slackers of the World, Unite!

How Slack Upended the Workplace

By Ellen Cushing

In 2014, the executives at a brand-new start-up called Andela made a decision whose consequences they would only understand much later. Andela's model was to recruit and train promising African engineers, then place them at Western tech firms, which meant its employees and clients were scattered across time zones; it desperately needed a way for its distributed workforce to share information and make decisions easily and asynchronously, ideally without subjecting anyone to a deluge of emails. So the company started using Slack.

The maker of the chat software had recently become one of San Francisco's trendiest new companies, based on a promise to make work communication more transparent and fluid. And at Andela, it did. As the company grew, Slack became its central nervous system, the place where business was conducted and where the company's culture was formed.

Over time, it also became the site of a workplace revolt, as the company's fellows—engineers in training—began to agree that they were being mistreated. The complaints started in private messaging groups, where they'd discuss priorities before big meetings, in order to act as a sort of bloc in front of senior leadership. But when the fellows stopped being invited to those meetings, they created a private Slack channel where they'd air their grievances, especially about pay.

In the summer of 2019, a glowing BBC article misrepresented how much the fellows were paid, saying they made a third of what clients paid Andela, when in fact the amount varied and was sometimes lower. First, the #general Slack channel lit up with complaints, mostly from employees who had been talking among themselves about the issue for months. "I would

like to know, did Andela at any point in time tell any news source we get 1/3?" wrote one. "This info has been flying around for a long time and it does not seem to bother Andela." In a private employee-only Slack, they took to calling Andela "The Plantation." Eventually, the fellows circulated a petition asking for higher pay—an effort organized over Slack. But by late 2019, the issue was moot: The company—citing "market demands for more senior engineering talent"—had laid off 400 people and shut down its fellowship program.

What became clear was that Slack was never just another piece of software at Andela. Instead, it was a whole new way for workers to talk to one another, and to demand answers from their bosses.

Thanks in large part to the coronavirus pandemic, Slack has now seeped out of start-up land and into all corners of corporate America, with more than 169,000 organizations—including 65 of the *Fortune* 100—paying for its services. Lyft, Airbnb, Venmo, Tumblr, and a raft of companies with names like Splunk and Deliveroo all use Slack—but so do Target, *The New York Times*, 1-800-Flowers, Harvard, AstraZeneca, and *The Atlantic*. So do Liberty Mutual, IBM, NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory, and countless local businesses and nonprofits. Donald Trump, Elizabeth Warren, Andrew Yang, Cory Booker, and Pete Buttigieg all paid for Slack during their 2020 presidential campaigns. The Taylor Creek Church, in rural Washington State, uses it to coordinate prayer requests. Arizona State University has more than 140,000 individual Slack accounts in its system; the IT department considers it a tool that students should become acquainted with in school, like Excel or PowerPoint, because they will likely be using it for their entire professional lives.

It's a safe bet: Last year, it was announced that Salesforce would acquire Slack for nearly $28 billion, in an ostensible bid to edge out Microsoft as the working world's digital center of gravity. For millions of people, Slack is a verb, a utility, and a way of life. It has spawned competitors from Facebook, Microsoft, and Google; all told, chat is now the second-most-common computer activity, after email, according to RescueTime, productivity software that tracks users' screen time.

But even if you don't use Slack, or something like it, you live and work in the world Slack helped create. It's a world where openness and transparency are prized; where work is something we are always kind of doing; where who we are at the office and who we are outside it are closer than ever before; where all of these dynamics mean that sometimes things go very wrong, especially for people in power.

# # #

Slack is probably the first enterprise software in history to convince people that it's cool. Its founder, Stewart Butterfield, became famous in Silicon Valley after starting the beloved photo-sharing site Flickr, which he and his partners sold to Yahoo for more than $22 million in 2004. He vaped and swore and majored in philosophy and had been born on a commune in British Columbia. He was funny, but the way he talked about software was almost tender. The tech press absolutely loved him.

In 2012, Butterfield and some friends were working on a video game, Glitch, that never really took off. But the team had become so enamored of the chat platform they'd built in the process that they decided to spin it off into the company that would become Slack. In an industry that fetishizes constructive failure so much that it repurposed a word for it, this was a spectacular pivot.

"We were like, 'Well, we like working this way,'" Ali Rayl, a Glitch alum who is now Slack's vice president of product, told me. "'And maybe other people would like working in this way too.' That was it: 'Let's try to make something that makes money so we can keep doing this thing that we like together.'"

Slack was explicitly an antidote to email—the formality, the clunkiness, the crush of useless messages, the bottomless reply-alls, and the chirpily false *I hope this email finds you well!* s. It organized information by subject (like a message board), not conversation (like email), and its architecture encouraged users to share knowledge broadly. Everything was saved by default, so all the flotsam and jetsam of daily work was captured in a sort of

running ledger. It worked on desktop and phone, and made switching between the two seamless.

“As soon as you were in, it was like, ‘Oh, this is better. This is what it’s going to be for everybody in five years,’” says the tech executive Anil Dash, whose company at the time, ThinkUp, was one of Slack’s very first customers. “I was pretty evangelical about it.”

Part of the appeal was the way the software felt. The company’s name was a wink, a self-aware joke, a sensibility: a hint at the kind of casual, effortless culture the companies that adopted it early seemed to be hoping to cultivate. The product itself was bubbly and bouncy, with a kindercore color scheme and a little cartoon robot that showed you the ropes. New messages announced themselves with a *swoosh-tap-tap-tap* that was inspired by jazz percussion and is, as the sound designer Josh Mobley told me when I called to ask about it, “Pavlovian,” “iconic,” and “very clever.” He added, “I wish I’d made it.” The interface supported GIFs and emoji and offered upbeat, cutesy messages as it booted up.

“It just felt like it wasn’t something made by, like, Microsoft,” Dash told me. “It just had a soul to it.”

Slack was the beneficiary of good press and word of mouth—when its preview version debuted in 2013, 8,000 companies signed up within 24 hours—but also of a larger trend. From the dawn of the office to the mid-2000s, the tools people used to do their jobs were largely dictated from the top down. But as technology became a consumer product—and especially after the first iPhone was released, in 2007—rank-and-file employees began doing work on their personal devices, using whatever software they wanted.

And so workers installed Slack’s free, low-feature version on their work-issued laptops and started chatting, until eventually they converted enough people that leadership had no choice but to pay for a professional license. Soon enough, and without advertising at all, Slack was a perk, if not a shibboleth, for a certain kind of employee and a certain kind of company.

Eight years, more than 10 million users, and an acquisition bigger than the GDP of El Salvador later, Slack has managed to mostly hold on to the

cachet of its early days. “All of the other messaging apps that we tested just felt sort of corporatey,” says Melanie Pinola, who wrote the Wirecutter review that declared Slack “by far” the best team-messaging app. “And the ones that were fun were really just imitations of Slack.” The user-experience researcher Michele Ronsen, who has done work for Slack and other global brands, told me that she’s seen no other product evoke such uniformly positive reactions among consumers. “When I recruit and conduct studies, over half of the people volunteer their love for the product and the platform and the benefits, completely unsolicited,” she said. “That does not happen very often.”

This is great for Slack, and also a little ridiculous: Enterprise software is meant to blend in, silently and only semi-effectively wringing more productivity out of us before we can call it a day. It is not supposed to create zealous brand loyalists. But Slack so thoroughly permeates companies’ culture that it changes them. It changes the language of the office and the texture of the workday. It enables a sui generis kind of communication, one that’s chatty, fast, stream-of-consciousness, and always on; one that often feels less like an email than a group text. It is work software that insinuated itself into our lives precisely by feeling unlike work software—and, in turn, it has made work feel less like work.

# # #

I first encountered Slack in 2015, when I went to work at *BuzzFeed*. I’d come from a tiny magazine where “workplace communication” meant volleying one-line emails over Outlook, and where chatting was something you did at the bar after work, not while you were in the office. This new way of working was a revelation. I loved talking to my new colleagues. Thanks to Slack I could spend hours sitting in an office, on a work-issued laptop, chatting away on work-sanctioned productivity software and not get a single thing done. This is what the writer John Herrman has called “a novel form of work-like non-work,” with all the superficial trappings of labor—thinking, typing—but very few actual results.

Indeed, Slack’s original motto was “Where work happens,” but the platform is also where quite a bit of nonwork happens. Especially in an officeless

office, Slack is the cubicle, the boardroom, the hallway, the watercooler, and the bar. It's where you talk about your performance with your manager, and where you then talk about your manager with your friends. It's where you flirt; where you joke around; where you complain; where you, in some sense, live. During the darkest days of the pandemic, Slack was where I felt most embodied, trading ideas with people I hadn't seen in months, engaging in an activity that sort of resembled conversation, being seen and being heard.

Slack is where office culture is performed, codified, and amplified, often through an ever-evolving lingua franca of custom emoji, inside jokes, and hyper-specific references. It's also where the characters and plotlines of the office emerge. Every Slack has oversharers and class clowns and bullies and try-hards and popular kids. It has people who love to ostentatiously keep their little green "active" light on as long as possible as proof that they're working late, and people who abuse the feature that lets you notify an entire channel when you've sent a message.

In-person work has its own archetypes too. But Slack can feel like a sitcom you are writing together. Sometimes, in a big channel, employees can get so riled up that Slack will inform you that *several people are typing*, which of course riles people up even more.

On Slack, anyone can create a group channel. These can be for projects (#salesforce-acquisition) or events (#winter-carnival) or teams (#HR). But depending on your workplace, you can have a channel for just about any affinity group, ranging from the genuinely meaningful to the entirely frivolous. Many companies have established Slack channels in which employees from underrepresented groups can find community and support; Stormy Jackson, a product designer, told me she "really heavily relied" on Lyft's Slack channel for Black employees in the months after George Floyd was murdered. *BuzzFeed* had channels for parents, queer employees, and women, but also for Rihanna fans, media gossip, exceptionally funny tweets, and people with the first name Matt.

Slack's setup also provides spaces for employees to gather out of view of the big bosses. Technically, management can access private messages and channels under certain circumstances. But craftier employees move them

onto Slack's free version, where they can really speak freely. Side Slacks are a place for workers to commiserate, gossip, and offer minute-by-minute color commentary on all-hands meetings, or the drama unfolding in the main Slack. All of this makes Slack even more irresistible: If you enjoy your job, Slack is like a party you get paid to attend. If you don't, you're probably in a side Slack, which is also like a party you get paid to attend. But parties have a way of getting out of hand.

# # #

A few years ago, Fatima was working as an engineering manager at a small education-tech start-up. (I am omitting their last name, because their current employer did not authorize them to speak to the press.) This was the kind of place with in-office happy hours, a game room, and a culture rife with inside jokes. Explaining any office's dynamics to an outsider is impossible in the same way that explaining a dream or a mushroom trip is. These things are private, all-encompassing, and very specific. But in an interview with me, Fatima tried: For reasons lost to time, the employees of this firm had developed an extended gag about ham. Then some started a Slack channel whose name was a pun on the word. And then they started using the term *The Ham* as sort of a dunce hat, or a kick me sign. Every week, a new person was designated "The Ham," sometimes with their consent and sometimes without.

Fatima didn't really think it was funny. "It was a fraternity-like mentality, like a 'Let me go pick on the pledge' kind of a thing. But in this instance, it's your co-workers, and you're doing it in a company-owned communication platform."

And although this is the kind of game you'd probably want to keep private, the channel was public, its chat history accessible to anyone who knew where to find it. "You could literally go look at that Slack channel," Fatima said, "and be like, 'Oh my God, these are all the things that they are saying about me.'"

People did look, and then HR looked. Two employees were fired, and the channel was archived. "There was a reckoning at the company where we

were like, 'Oh crap,'" Fatima said. "You feel like you have some semblance of safety and privacy, like, 'I can say whatever I want in here.' We sort of forget that we're in a professional workplace."

A lot of people seem to be forgetting that. In 2016, three teachers resigned from a Rhode Island high school after someone leaked a Google Doc containing screenshots of a private Slack channel in which they mocked students by name ("Here's how Hudson spelled Ta-Nehisi Coates: Tonahese quotes." "Fucking idiot"). This summer, three senior Netflix executives were fired after management saw a public channel in which they criticized their colleagues, sometimes while those colleagues were speaking in meetings. One CEO told me he had to step in after "a lot of man-bashing was occurring" in a women-only channel at his company. "It began as political, at which point it was like, 'Great.' And then it began to veer into specific employees." HR wanted to shut the channel down altogether; the CEO declined out of respect for "women needing a sense of solidarity in an environment where, you know, men can be shitheads." But the company did issue a reminder to the staff that "as a general policy, Slack is not a place to talk about your co-workers."

I have heard about employees being accidentally sent porn, of performance reviews being posted to public channels, of leadership bickering in front of their employees, of sloppy fingers and absent minds making for all kinds of horrifying accidents. Or horrifying nonaccidents: In her memoir, *Uncanny Valley*, Anna Wiener, a former tech-start-up employee, recalled that at one company she worked for, employees had set up Slack so that whenever someone typed "/giphy metronome" into the chat box of an all-company channel, an animated GIF of a swinging penis would appear.

If these incidents feel like something that would never happen on email, that's because Slack is more akin to social media than email. Proponents of Slack will point out that unlike social media, it is not algorithmically driven, and its profit mechanism isn't engagement. These things are true, and important: Facebook makes money every minute you spend arguing with your cousin about climate change; Slack makes money every time a CEO tells his buddy he found software that has made employees more productive. But in practice, Slack evokes many of the same feelings that,

say, Twitter and Reddit do, most saliently the feeling that what you are saying is categorically different, somehow less real, than what you'd say in another context.

"In a real-person meeting, at some point you're going to say, 'Stop it here,'" Maria West, a copywriter from Florida, told me. "But on Slack, you're like, 'Heh heh heh, this is juicy.'" Like many other people, West has found remote work much more bearable because of Slack. But, she conceded, "it also provides these festering pools of what CEOs are afraid of."

# # #

Stewart Butterfield prefers a different metaphor. Slack "makes people more powerful at communicating," he told me, not unlike the way a backhoe makes people more powerful at digging holes. "They can dig a lot more ditches than they do if they only have a shovel," he said. "But you can also accidentally knock over a building."

On Zoom at his home in Aspen, Colorado, Butterfield is candid, wry, and uncommonly reflective for a CEO. He is a lot richer than he was in 2013, but he's still charming. (He still vapes, too.) He sees Slack as inevitable—not in an egotistical way, but kind of the opposite.

"People were already chatting at work and with their friends. Something like Slack would have happened anyway. Maybe it would have taken longer. Maybe it would've felt very different. But [chat] is so much more efficient and so much more effective as a means of communication that I feel like it's going to happen no matter what."

Some hope that Butterfield is wrong. "I talk to other CEOs and they all hate it," Anil Dash said. (Butterfield: "I enjoy a rich tapestry of feedback from all kinds of people.") Part of that, Dash thinks, is because Slack largely came to them from the bottom up. "They would never articulate it this way, I think, but it has a radical architecture. They can feel it: *Slack lets people collaborate, organize, communicate in ways I did not expect [them] to and I did not choose*."

“Photoshop doesn’t do anything radical to your organization,” Dash continued. It’s just another technology license. CEOs “think of [Slack] in that category, because the same person in the organization approves the purchase. But it’s not at all like that. It’s something that changes the culture of your organization.”

On Slack, everyone has the same size megaphone, regardless of hierarchy or chain of command. And between the jokes and the special channels and the spontaneity and the freewheeling way of talking to your colleagues—who are also kind of your friends—it encourages a type of personal expression that is new to the American workplace.

A decade or two ago, identity formation, friendship, meaning-making, and political agitation were much more likely to be the things we did on nights and weekends. Now they're central to work. If you're an entry-level grunt, this might be thrilling. If you're a boss, it can be scary. In August, Apple blocked employees from starting a Slack channel devoted to discussing pay equity, citing a policy that Slack activity "must advance the work, deliverables, or mission of Apple departments and teams." (Channels about dad jokes, pets, and gaming were left alone.) In April, Basecamp, which makes software with a function similar to Slack's, banned "societal and political" discussions on its own Basecamp account. And in 2018, employees at the luggage company Away were fired after creating an unsanctioned private Slack channel where employees—particularly those identifying as LGBTQ and people of color—talked freely about what they felt was an inhospitable work environment.

Slack's inherent flatness means that anyone can emerge as a leader. In fact, the most influential person on Slack is almost never the boss, in part because in many organizations the more powerful you are, the less you use Slack. Being good at Slack is a skill, and it's a different one from being well liked, or effective in meetings, or even good at your job. It's more like being a social-media influencer. "People can amass power in the organization by being good at this tool," Dash said. "They are not elevated by an institution; they just happen to have mastered a technology. And that is a thing that people can find threatening or find upsetting or that can be misused."

Stephen Miles, an author and a consultant who has been coaching *Fortune* 500 CEOs for decades, sees this as "the really ugly side" of Slack: "In the workplace, you kind of garner your equity through the course of work and through the course of time, and you earn the right to weigh in at a certain level on various topics," he said. "This is sort of taking all that away."

Part of Slack's tremendous capacity to build culture is its ability to rapidly homogenize views, and police what's acceptable. "This is a struggle every day for every CEO that has a full-blown Slack environment," Miles said. "There's an amazing, powerful, positive side to Slack. The negative side is that you create an us-and-them dynamic in the context of your company across multiple dimensions. You create conflict and tension." Whether you view this as an opportunity or a threat probably depends on your place in the hierarchy.

Slack can make reaching consensus very easy. Sometimes that consensus is about where to go to lunch, or about how to solve a problem. Other times it's about exploitation or unfair treatment. Still other times, it's about a colleague, or a manager, or a corporate decision; in a very large channel, you can get piled on in the same way you can on Twitter—even if you're the boss. In June, CNBC ran a story that *BuzzFeed* would be going public. Almost immediately, employees gathered in a company-wide, 1,100-person channel called #aja, for "Ask Jonah"—as in CEO Jonah Peretti —"Anything."

They had a lot to say. "We would have liked to hear it directly from you first, Jonah, as most of us found out via CNBC," one person wrote; she quickly received a chorus of assent from her colleagues in the form of "point up" emoji reactions. Another employee then asked whether CNBC had simply scooped *BuzzFeed*. Another speculated about whether the company's partners had demanded confidentiality. "We like to hold our bosses accountable," the first employee responded, to more affirming emoji. "Opacity is not cute." Ultimately, Peretti said that the deal had been leaked to the press and that Securities and Exchange Commission rules had prevented him from informing employees before the public.

# # #

Slack isn't to blame for everything that goes wrong on the platform. People have been distractible and insensitive and insubordinate and hungry for better conditions at work for as long as we've been going to work. If you're a jerk in real life, you're probably one on Slack too. If your job is stultifying, or oppressive, or lonely, your Slack probably is too.

Andrew Braccia was one of Slack's earliest investors, back before it was Slack. He acknowledges the software's downsides. "You can get like-minded people that want to be destructive. You can get people driving discussions in negative directions," he told me. "So I think it can take a lot of work at the company level to control these things. It's an important evolution and maturation cycle that companies are going to need to go through." In other words: Slack gave every company a message board. Now those that want to hold on to their authority are hiring moderators.

Last summer, *The New York Times* published an op-ed by Senator Tom Cotton calling on then-President Donald Trump to "Send In the Troops" to quell Black Lives Matter protests. The *Times*' Slack quickly erupted as employees took to a channel called #standards to voice "serious concerns in the newsroom," as one put it. With the plus-sign emoji piling up, a Times standards editor stepped in to assure employees that the newspaper's top brass was addressing the matter. At least two editors would eventually step down.

"It was very clear in that moment what Slack was to each party," Charlie Warzel, a technology writer for the paper at the time, told me. "And it was different for everyone: Management thought it was a place for them to message. And a lot of employees were like, 'Here's where I'm going to vent and whip up support.'" Six months later, the *Times* posted a job listing for a vice president for culture and communications, tasked in part with developing "the way people at The Times give feedback to leadership."

As companies scramble to manage fallout from incidents like these, Slack Slacks on. The company is getting new client interest every day; Butterfield briefly shared his screen with me to show me Slack's #sales channel, which was lit up with good news and thumbs-up emoji. Slack advertises, but maybe it doesn't have to: The product has become embedded in our psyches. This summer, when the company ran TV ads during the Olympics featuring its distinctive notification sound, people took to Twitter en masse to complain about being reminded of work while trying to watch men's gymnastics. RescueTime has found that the average Slack user in its data set checks communication tools much more often than the average non-Slack user: every five minutes.

Slack is always there, in your pocket—but then again, so are emails, and text messages, and everything else. What makes Slack insidious is also what makes it appealing: It's the bottomless scroll, the jokes, the drama, the emoji exploding like confetti cannons after every banal dispatch from a life under wage drudgery. It's the itchy pull of something that was purpose-built by the cleverest minds in tech to feel essential. Slack is fun. Sometimes, when I am watching television or standing in line at the grocery store, I find my thumb absentmindedly moving over to Slack, the same way it does with Instagram and Candy Crush. I assure you it's not because I'm a hard worker.

A fun workplace is one you want to spend time at, and also one that contributes to your sense of identity. "We're like sharks who are sleeping with one eye open," says the design researcher Simone Stolzoff: never fully invested in leisure or in work. The problem with that state, he said—other than the fact that it is completely exhausting—is that "it doesn't give us containers to figure out who we are when we're not working." Kyle Mullins, who uses Slack in his capacity as the editor in chief of Dartmouth's student newspaper, told me he's already struggling against the feeling that "work is on all the time." He's 22 years old.

And when who you are at work and who you are outside of work blur—when work is your paycheck, but also your community and your source of purpose—you treat it a little more like the rest of your life, with all the stakes and all the messiness that implies.

# # #

Adopting any new technology is an act of ferocious optimism and deep stupidity. You don't really know what the thing is going to be—for you or for the world. How could you? How could anyone?

In September, I called Jeremy Johnson, Andela's CEO, to ask if he ever regretted installing Slack. What I heard surprised me.

"Honestly, no," he said. "Not at all."

“There are lots of days when I come home and say, ‘This is a giant challenge,’” he continued. But Slack “forces companies to be more transparent, forces companies to be more thoughtful about policies; it forces them to think about how these things will be interpreted. But these are all things that a good company should be thinking about anyway … And yes, that makes running the company harder. But it’s not a bad thing.” Since ending its fellowship program in 2019, Andela has become more like an outsourcing operation for engineers. It has thousands of employees and works with hundreds of clients in more than 80 countries, remotely and during a global pandemic. Without Slack, it wouldn’t be the company it is today. Regretting Slack isn’t an option.

Toward the end of my conversation with Stewart Butterfield, he returned to a thought he’d left unfinished earlier: “Before, I said the adoption of something like Slack is inevitable. I don’t mean that, like, if we didn’t make Camel-brand cigarettes, people would buy Winstons instead. I just mean it’s a general-purpose technology. And people do mostly good stuff with computers generally, but people also use computers to do bad stuff, like put ransomware on hospitals. There’s a fundamental kind of moral reckoning with technology right now that if a technology has a bad use and also many good uses, should we take it away in order to prevent the bad use?”

No, but it’s an irrelevant question. Entire organizations have rearranged themselves around Slack. Slack isn’t a backhoe, as Butterfield suggested—it’s a Trojan horse. We installed it on our computers because it was cool, and because it was easy, and because we looked around and everyone else was using it. A generation of workers has bought into this wholly new way of working—one that feels good enough, often enough; one that is interesting and addictive and natural. If companies took Slack away, they’d need to reorient their processes, contend with angry employees, and generally put a great deal of toothpaste back in a pretty big tube.

Whether Slack is better or worse than email, good or bad for workers and bosses, liberating or oppressive or dangerous or delightful or all or none of those things, it’s here.

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W. G. Sebald Ransacked Jewish Lives for His Fictions

Review: ‘Speak Silence,’ by Carole Angier

By Judith Shulevitz

The great German author W. G. Sebald died in a car accident in 2001 at the age of 57, 13 years after he’d published his first work of literature and five short years after the English translation of a book of stories set in motion his rise to international renown. (Months before his death, he was rumored to be a candidate for the Nobel Prize.) Throughout his career and afterward, critics struggled to find words to describe the hallucinatory quality of his deceptively sober prose. Sebald tells tales, that much one can say—ghost stories of a sort, as dark and translucent as smoky glass. Displaced Jews haunt some of these narratives; the shades of literary figures—Kafka, Stendhal, Nabokov—materialize in others. And yet Sebald writes like a man typing up case histories, and he accompanies his narratives with something like documentation—photographs of people, facades, notes,

newspaper articles, train tickets. These have no captions, and you don't always see how they relate to the text. But because photographs testify to the onetime existence of things, they give the weight of the real to stories that may or may not be made up. Sebald's refusal to respect the line between fact and fiction has become commonplace, especially among younger writers. But his adroitly artless synthesis of fable, history, photography, and artifact is still jarring.

The Sebald scholar Uwe Schütte called Sebald's method bricolage, which can mean both "collage" and "tinkering." The critic James Wood speaks of "fictional truth," and also offers this aptly mournful phrase: "cinders of the real world." The poet Michael Hamburger came up with "essayistic semi-fiction which gives rope to both observation and imagination." In her new biography, *Speak, Silence: In Search of W. G. Sebald*, the first life of the writer, Carole Angier calls that "the neatest summary" of Sebald's method that "anyone ever managed." I like "periscopic," which Sebald used, because it captures the subaqueous stillness of his worlds, and his disorienting angle of vision. Every great writer founds a new genre, Walter Benjamin decreed. "The twentieth-century writer who best passes that crazy test," Angier writes, "is W. G. Sebald."

In 1996, Angier was asked to review *The Emigrants*, the first book of Sebald's to be translated into English, and read it in a single night. The book consists of four stories about men who die from the delayed effects of catastrophe. Three are Jewish. Two of them had their lives upended by the Nazis. The fourth man is the German valet, traveling companion, and lover of the scion of a Jewish banking family from New York. Sebald disavowed the term *Holocaust writer*, and indeed the Holocaust forms just one piece of his vision of modernity as an ongoing disaster and a march toward the total destruction of nature. Yet the Holocaust holds a privileged place in Sebald's worldview. He told interviewers that it "cast a very long shadow over my life" because he grew up in an Alpine corner of Germany, blissfully unaware of the past (he was born in 1944, just before the end of World War II), and "I don't really know how I deserved it."

Angier agrees that *Holocaust writer* is inadequate, even as she anoints him "the German writer who most deeply took on the burden of German

responsibility for the Holocaust"—a "survivor's guilt" that, as the daughter of Jewish parents who barely escaped from Nazi Vienna, she thinks "all Germans should feel." Shortly after reading *The Emigrants*, she went to Sebald's office at the University of East Anglia, in Norwich, where he had been teaching on and off for more than 20 years, to interview him for *The Jewish Quarterly*. She had questions. Was *The Emigrants* fact or fiction? Who *was* this German who wrote about the tragedy of Jews?

A quarter of a century later, Angier, the author of biographies of Jean Rhys and Primo Levi, has produced a suitably unorthodox life of this singular writer. That was the only kind circumstances permitted. Sebald's widow refused access to any material relating to his family. Without permission from his estate, Angier couldn't quote directly from some privately held sources, even certain letters to which she had access, or cite his published works at any length. Angier's solution is to cut back and forth among the usual portrayal of an artist's ascent, in which she captures glimpses of the man; astute critical assessments of the work; and vivid accounts of her quest for the people and places that appear in his writing, many of them barely disguised. Her strategy pays off: This is an insightful, compulsively readable book.

However melancholy the artist, the man could be playful. Sebald's colleagues remember him as companionable and witty. He had a laugh in his voice; he made up mordant aphorisms; he captivated his students. As a high-spirited college student himself, he was nicknamed "Cocky." Yet Sebald also published crepuscular poems and prose in the student newspaper. He nursed his rage at his parents, particularly his father, who served as a transport officer during the Nazis' invasions of Poland, Russia, and France—and refused to talk about it. Sebald had episodes of terrible depression. By the time Angier met him, though, he had resolved his contradictions into a persona at once "kind, gloomy, and funny."

What interests Angier is how Sebald used his life, and that of others, in his art. Her curiosity has an edge. Back in 1996, when she asked whether he based his characters on real people, he said, "Essentially, yes, with some small changes"—an assertion repeated so often in articles about him that it attained the status of fact. Sebald told Angier about the man on whom he

based Dr. Henry Selwyn, the protagonist of one of the four stories in *The Emigrants*. In the story, the narrator and his wife rent rooms in a British manor owned by Dr. Selwyn, a courtly and eccentric recluse, and his wife. Doctor and narrator become friends, and eventually Selwyn divulges his secret: He is actually a Jew from a village near Grodno, in what used to be the Russian empire (now Belarus), who came to England as a child in 1899. A short time after Selwyn makes this confession, the narrator and his wife learn of his grim death.

The main difference between Dr. Selwyn and the doctor who was in fact Sebald's landlord, Sebald said, is that the real doctor told him about Grodno "sooner than I say in the story," and "very cursorily." Sebald already suspected something anyway, because at his landlord's Christmas party he met "one very incongruous lady," whom his landlord introduced as his sister from Tel Aviv.

In 2014, Angier arrived at the door of Abbotsford, the home of the model for Selwyn, the late Dr. Philip Rhoades Buckton. There she talked with members of his family and discovered that Sebald had flat-out lied. Buckton was not Jewish. He did not come from Grodno. He had no sister in Tel Aviv. He came from Cheshire and "didn't have a Jewish bone in his body," Angier writes.

Sebald had told Angier that he'd invented the minor details in *The Emigrants*, not the major ones. Instead, it is the story's minor details—which are Gothic and implausible—that turn out to be true to life. The narrator first spots Selwyn facedown on the grounds of his decaying estate, counting blades of grass. Yes, Buckton lay on his lawn to examine insects, plants, sometimes even blades of grass. The narrator used a strange exterior bathroom that teetered on columns and was reachable only by a footbridge. Yes, the bathroom was there until it was torn down. Then there's the maid in the story, who wears "her hair shorn high up the nape, as the inmates of asylums do," and croons all night long. The daughter-in-law confirms that the maid looked like that and mumbled to herself, then adds, "But he didn't have to say so." Nor did he have to advertise the particulars of Buckton's death, a move that enraged the family. What they do not mind, or so they

say, is that Sebald turned their paterfamilias into a Jew. “We have many close Jewish friends,” says Esther, a daughter.

Angier minds, though, or is at least confused: “*What was Sebald doing in his interviews?*” Sebald can’t have just forgotten that Buckton wasn’t Jewish. Of course, improving on life is what novelists do, and authors often don’t want to come clean about their sources. But the context of Sebald’s borrowings raises troubling ethical questions. As the husband of Buckton’s granddaughter asked Angier: Couldn’t Sebald’s embellishment of the truth and his confusing use of photographs, when he wrote about the Holocaust, encourage its deniers?

Sebald told a less innocent lie too. When Angier asked how he dealt with his models’ possible objections, he said he showed them his manuscripts, and if they were unhappy, he didn’t publish. “This whole business of usurping someone else’s life bothers me,” he told Angier in the 1996 interview. “But—unless they’re dead—I ask them.”

Untrue again. Sebald usurped a lot of lives, and he didn’t always ask permission. One example among others involves his character Jacques Austerlitz in *Austerlitz* (2001), Sebald’s final work of fiction, and his best-known. Austerlitz, an architectural historian prone to nervous breakdowns, believes himself to be the child of a dour Welsh minister and his chilly wife. Only when he is well into his 50s does he learn that he is really a Jew from Prague brought to London at the age of 4 on a *Kindertransport*, a train that carried Eastern-European Jewish children out of reach of the Nazis. Sebald based Austerlitz, in part, on a *Kindertransport* child from a Munich orphanage, Susi Bechhofer, who was also raised by a Welsh couple and recovered her identity late in life. She’d published a memoir, and when *Austerlitz* appeared in Germany, her publisher told her that the main character in the novel sounded very similar to her. She wrote to Sebald. He confirmed that he had availed himself of her history in *Austerlitz* and later sent her a copy of the translation. She was shocked. “*This was her story*,” Angier writes. “Here was her home in Wales, her minister father, her years in boarding school, her parents’ silence. Worst of all, here were the most traumatic moments of her life” reproduced almost exactly—the moments when she learned “that she wasn’t who she thought she was.” Bechhofer

published an angry article in the *Sunday Times* called "Stripped of My Tragic Past by a Bestselling Author." She planned to ask Sebald to acknowledge his debt, but he died before she could. Her lawyer asked his publisher, but nothing came of that.

Is this a theft worth worrying about? It's not technically plagiarism, and Sebald's pirating of Bechhofer's life is less injurious than, say, the revenge fiction Philip Roth wrote about his ex-wives. You could give Sebald a pass on the grounds that Bechhofer herself had made her life public. But Sebald expropriated more brazenly for another of the stories in *The Emigrants*, "Max Ferber." Ferber, a painter of spectral portraits made by the repeated application and rubbing-off of charcoal, is another Jew who came to London as a child, in flight from the Nazis; he remembers his past only in fragments. As an artist, Ferber shared many traits with the painter Frank Auerbach, also a refugee from Nazi Germany and also furious about having his identity pilfered. But like Bechhofer, Auerbach was a public figure. Sebald's other source for Ferber's backstory, his good friend Peter Jordan, was a private citizen.

Ferber's family and the details of his escape are faithful re-creations of Jordan's. Both sets of parents were deported from Munich in 1941; the fathers of both were art dealers who were interned in Dachau. The boys fled Munich in the same way, by flying alone to London, and attended similar boarding schools. The resemblances aren't the problem, though. In this case, Sebald *did* show Jordan a work in progress. Sebald even asked for corrections. But as Jordan shared his story with Sebald, he also loaned him family memoirs, including one by an aunt, Thea Gebhardt, about her childhood before the war. Sebald plundered many of Thea's "best bits," in Angier's words, enhancing here, subtracting there, and adding two romantic interludes. He attributed the passages to Ferber's mother.

What's striking is that they constitute the thickest description of German Jewish life in Sebald's oeuvre. His Jewish characters tend not to have recourse to the past; their memories are what history has suppressed. But Ferber's mother, courtesy of Gebhardt's memoir, evokes the daily life of a bourgeois family that is comfortably both German and Jewish. We see green-velvet armchairs, a china swan, a silver menorah, newspapers, the

works of the Jewish poet Heinrich Heine "ornately bound in red with golden tendrils of vine." The children go to a Christian nursery school, though they skip the morning prayers. Ferber's mother writes of a favorite long family walk on the Sabbath during the summer or, "if it is too hot," of just sitting with other Jewish families. In the shade of a chestnut tree, the men drink beer, the children lemonade. There are "Sabbath loaves" (presumably challahs) and salted (most likely kosher) beef. After that, they go to synagogue.

Where would Sebald have found such rich material, if not in the recollections of Jordan's aunt? He grew up in a world without Jews. No one spoke of them "at home or at school," Angier writes. "I never even knew what a Jew was," his sister Gertrud tells Angier. During Sebald's childhood, Germans remained closemouthed about two of the great horrors of the war: the genocide of the Jews and the wholesale destruction of German cities. The silence was "so complete that for the first eight years of his life, in the village of Wertach, and for several more in the small town of Sonthofen, he had no conscious knowledge" of these calamities. And yet, Sebald wrote, even as a small child he sensed "some sort of emptiness somewhere." Angier says that Jordan, whom he met when he was 22, was the first Jewish refugee he came to know, and that the friendship was a turning point for Sebald, "the moment he saw that historical events had happened not to numbers or even names, but to real people who had lived across the landing."

Jordan didn't foresee that Sebald would pass Gebhardt's memoir off as his own writing without attribution. That upset him. Sebald "should not have used it so closely without crediting it," he tells Angier. Weighing the evidence, Angier decides that most of Sebald's purloined histories amount to run-of-the-mill authorial borrowing, but in extreme cases like Bechhofer's, she wonders: "Can there be any defense of Sebald here, with his special empathy for Jewish victims, and his special awareness of the moral dangers of a German writing about them?" Her answer is no. She thinks he should have attached a short note at the beginning or end. "It wouldn't destroy the effect of his story to let us know that it is a fiction, *and that real people stand behind it*," she writes. "He is no longer here to make the decision. But his publishers could."

I'm not sure such a decision is called for. The effect of Sebald's stories has everything to do with the seamless weave of embroidery and fact. Disentangling the sources from the finished product is the job of a biographer, not a reader.

Did Sebald commit acts of what we now call cultural appropriation? Yes, but to condemn him for that would be to miss the layers of meaning that complicate moral judgment. Sebald, in writing about Jews, wasn't writing only about Jews. He was also writing about their absence—both from postwar Germany and, for those Jews who survived the Holocaust, from their own former selves. Nazi Germany forced into exile or murdered half a million German Jews and millions more elsewhere; it stole or burned hundreds of years of European Jewish culture. And it cut survivors off from, well, everything.

Angier notes that the most important things in Sebald's fiction "are almost invisible, almost inexistent." Perhaps the most consequential "almost invisible, almost inexistent" feature of his work is the Jewishness that his notably de-Judaicized characters have lost. His accounts of Jewish amnesia, without betraying the unique Jewish ordeal, share a root system, as it were, with German amnesia. The condition of not-knowing-yet-knowing that he attributes to some Jewish characters is sufficiently evocative of the national fugue state blanketing his childhood that we should not ignore the parallel, whether Sebald was conscious of it or not.

Absence is not just Sebald's theme; it's the essence of his style. Absence makes itself felt in Sebald's gorgeously hollowed prose, richer in literary references than in the things of this world. The emptiness and silence of his childhood reproduce themselves in the unpeopled landscapes through which his characters wander. The present is vacuous, a vessel for the past, and the dead are more real than the living. In *The Rings of Saturn* (1995), Jozef Korzeniowski (later Joseph Conrad) perceives the "bombastic buildings" of the Belgian capital as nothing more than "a hecatomb of black bodies"—that is, of the millions of Congolese who died under Belgian colonial rule. As for Austerlitz, one Sunday morning he follows a porter into the bowels of London's Liverpool Street Station for no reason he can explain and comes upon an abandoned ladies' waiting room, the very room in which, an

eternity ago, he sat waiting to be adopted. In the dusty gray light of the disused room, he sees himself, a small child clutching a rucksack, and the grim, unhappy couple who came to get him and divorce him from his Jewish past. Now long dead, they are dressed in the style of the ’30s, “a woman in a light gabardine coat with a hat at an angle on her head, and a thin man beside her wearing a dark suit and a dog collar.” This is a time in his life, he has just finished saying, when “the dead were returning from their exile and filling the twilight around me with their strangely slow but incessant to-ing and fro-ing.”

Contributing to the otherworldliness of Sebald’s narratives is the way that his characters float outside time. They can’t quite grab hold of the defining ruptures of their life. “I have always resisted the power of time out of some internal compulsion which I myself have never understood,” Austerlitz says. That sense of timelessness can follow a trauma. Angier tells us that Sebald often talked about an event in his childhood that he hadn’t been able to register when it occurred—a trauma, in short. This was the moment he learned the fate of the Jews. Angier summarizes the incident, but it’s worth reading Sebald’s own words, because they are so oddly depersonalized. In a 2001 interview (not with Angier), Sebald described how German schools dealt with the Holocaust in the 1960s: High-school students watched a documentary comprising footage of the liberation of the camps. With no preparation beforehand or discussion after, the teenagers saw mounds of emaciated corpses being bulldozed into mass graves, and other unassimilable horrors. “So, you know, it was a sunny June afternoon,” Sebald recalled, and “you would go and play football because you didn’t really know what you should do with it.”

I have to add a footnote here. Angier concludes that the film was “almost certainly” *Death Mills*, but doesn’t bring up the most shocking fact about this documentary: It never once mentions the Jews. The voice-over refers vaguely to victims from “all the nations of Europe, of all religious faiths, all political beliefs condemned by Hitler because they were anti-Nazi.” Sebald may not have remembered that the movie amounted to a further erasure of the Jews. But “these experiences lay down a sediment in you that somehow moves on, pushes itself on, like the moraine in front of a glacier,” he told another interviewer. You have to wonder whether this silence wrapped

around a silence made the unspeakable more potent, and even harder to speak of. Like the French filmmaker Claude Lanzmann, who took the same approach in his documentary *Shoah* (1985), Sebald refrained from trying to portray the horror of life after deportation, with one exception. In *Austerlitz*, he recounts how the Nazis forced the inmates of Theresienstadt, a way station to the camps, to disguise it as a resort for prominent Jews in order to fool visitors from the Red Cross. I take his inclusion of this grotesque farce as a caustic attack on attempts to reenact the concentration-camp universe. The only way to represent the unimaginable was to respect its unimaginability, to limit the audience's experience to the truth of non-experience. Anything else would be monstrous.

And yet this scrupulous author went ahead and stole the life histories of actual Jews. Why? Angier never quite explains Sebald's need to be underhanded, perhaps because it's inexplicable. But to the degree that Sebald culturally appropriated (if that's what you want to call it), I believe that, for him, understanding the Jewish quest for an obliterated past was inextricable from the work of excavation required to recover a usable German present. Literature is parasitical, sometimes in disturbing ways, and that is a source of its power.

I do sense an anxiety behind Sebald's compulsion to be oblique in his fiction, an impression reinforced when I encountered its opposite in his essay "Air War and Literature," included in a volume called *On the Natural History of Destruction*, published in English in 2003. Part investigation and part denunciation of the Allied firebombing of German cities, the essay—his most controversial piece of writing—lingers on scenes of human wreckage that are more explicitly gruesome than anything else Sebald ever wrote. We read of corpses "roasted brown or purple and reduced to a third of their normal size"; "the remains of families" that "could be carried away in a single laundry basket"; mothers who lugged their dead children around in suitcases; the stench; the rats, maggots, and flies, "huge and iridescent green," that fed on rotting flesh.

Perhaps Sebald could dwell on details like these because he felt a direct connection to this collective German tragedy, having experienced the inferno himself, albeit from a very peculiar position—that is, from the

womb. While she was pregnant with him, his mother watched Nuremberg go up in flames from a nearby village, a scene whose uncanny and lasting effect on him he described in his poem "After Nature." And he saw the aftermath firsthand—"houses between mountains of rubble," he once wrote, describing a childhood trip through Munich. Though in the essay Sebald relied on the accounts of those who had been there, he wasn't usurping. He didn't need periscopic figures of speech, because he couldn't be accused of capitalizing on the pain of others—of the most taboo Other in his universe. The firebombings were his disaster.

Shortly before he died, Sebald gave his last talk, "An Attempt at Restitution," a typically Sebaldian ramble through places and historical events. Toward the end, he chronicles the wanderings of the poet Friedrich Hölderlin, who was born in the late 18th century, a time "when the hope that mankind could improve and learn was inscribed in handsomely formed letters in our philosophical firmament." Yet Hölderlin felt estranged from his native land, "as if he guessed at the coming dark turn" that history would take. Sebald notes that at one point the poet happened to pass through a French town where, a century after his death, a division of the SS rounded up the inhabitants, sent some of them to labor camps, and hanged 99 men from balconies and lampposts.

"What is literature good for?" Sebald asks in his talk, and answers: "Perhaps only to help us to remember, and teach us to understand that some strange connections cannot be explained by causal logic." He continues, "There are many forms of writing; only in literature, however, can there be an attempt at restitution over and above the mere recital of facts." In *On the Natural History of Destruction*, Sebald recited the facts; in his novels, he set out to make the "strange connections" that transform them into something more memorable. If Sebald the man ransacked lives unscrupulously, Sebald the artist did so with superb literary tact. He saved both the living and the dead from the oblivion of a purely physical death, and gave them an afterlife that—one hopes—will haunt us forever.

This article appears in the November 2021 print edition with the headline "W. G. Sebald, Usurper of Lives." When you buy a book using a link on this page, we receive a commission. Thank you for supporting The Atlantic.

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The Largest Autocracy on Earth

Facebook Is an Authoritarian State

By Adrienne LaFrance

In 1947, Albert Einstein, writing in this magazine, proposed the creation of a single world government to protect humanity from the threat of the atomic bomb. His utopian idea did not take hold, quite obviously, but today, another visionary is building the simulacrum of a cosmocracy.

Mark Zuckerberg, unlike Einstein, did not dream up Facebook out of a sense of moral duty, or a zeal for world peace. This summer, the population of Zuckerberg's supranational regime reached 2.9 billion monthly active users, more humans than live in the world's two most populous nations—China and India—combined.

To Zuckerberg, Facebook's founder and CEO, they are citizens of Facebookland. Long ago he conspicuously started calling them "people" instead of "users," but they are still cogs in an immense social matrix, fleshy morsels of data to satisfy the advertisers that poured $54 billion into Facebook in the first half of 2021 alone—a sum that surpasses the gross domestic products of most nations on Earth.

GDP makes for a telling comparison, not just because it gestures at Facebook's extraordinary power, but because it helps us see Facebook for what it really is. Facebook is not merely a website, or a platform, or a publisher, or a social network, or an online directory, or a corporation, or a utility. It is all of these things. But Facebook is also, effectively, a hostile foreign power.

This is plain to see in its single-minded focus on its own expansion; its immunity to any sense of civic obligation; its record of facilitating the undermining of elections; its antipathy toward the free press; its rulers' callousness and hubris; and its indifference to the endurance of American democracy.

Some of Facebook's most vocal critics push for antitrust regulation, the unwinding of its acquisitions, anything that might slow its snowballing power. But if you think about Facebook as a nation-state—an entity engaged in a cold war with the United States and other democracies—you'll see that it requires a civil-defense strategy as much as regulation from the Securities and Exchange Commission.

Hillary Clinton told me last year that she'd always caught a whiff of authoritarianism from Zuckerberg. "I feel like you're negotiating with a foreign power sometimes," she said. "He's immensely powerful." One of his early mantras at Facebook, according to Sheera Frenkel and Cecilia Kang in their book, *An Ugly Truth: Inside Facebook's Battle for*

Domination, was "company over country." When that company has all the power of a country itself, the line takes on a darker meaning.

The basic components of nationhood go something like this: You need land, currency, a philosophy of governance, and people.

When you're an imperialist in the metaverse, you need not worry so much about physical acreage—though Zuckerberg does own 1,300 acres of Kauai, one of the less populated Hawaiian islands. As for the rest of the items on the list, Facebook has them all.

Facebook is developing its own money, a blockchain-based payment system known as Diem (formerly Libra) that financial regulators and banks have feared could throw off the global economy and decimate the dollar.

And for years Zuckerberg has talked about his principles of governance for the empire he built: "Connectivity is a human right"; "Voting is voice"; "Political ads are an important part of voice"; "The great arc of human history bends towards people coming together in ever greater numbers." He's extended those ideas outward in a new kind of colonialism—with Facebook effectively annexing territories where large numbers of people weren't yet online. Its controversial program Free Basics, which offered people free internet access as long as Facebook was their portal to the web, was hawked as a way to help connect people. But its true purpose was to make Facebook the de facto internet experience in countries all over the world.

What Facebook possesses most of all, of course, is people—a gigantic population of individuals who choose to live under Zuckerberg's rule. In his writings on nationalism, the political scientist and historian Benedict Anderson suggested that nations are defined not by their borders but by imagination. The nation is ultimately imaginary because its citizens "will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion." Communities, therefore, are distinguished most of all "by the style in which they are imagined."

Zuckerberg has always tried to get Facebook users to imagine themselves as part of a democracy. That's why he tilts toward the language of governance more than of corporate fiat. In February 2009, Facebook revised its terms of service so that users couldn't delete their data even if they quit the site. Rage against Facebook's surveillance state was swift and loud, and Zuckerberg begrudgingly reversed the decision, saying it had all been a misunderstanding. At the same time, he introduced in a blog post the concept of a Facebook Bill of Rights and Responsibilities, inviting people to share their feedback—but only if they signed up for a Facebook account.

"More than 175 million people use Facebook," he wrote. "If it were a country, it would be the sixth most populated country in the world. Our terms aren't just a document that protect our rights; it's the governing document for how the service is used by everyone across the world."

Since then, Facebook's population has swelled to 17 times that size. Along the way, Zuckerberg has repeatedly cast himself as the head of the nation of Facebook. His obsession with world dominance seems fated in retrospect—his long-standing preoccupation with the Roman empire generally and Augustus Caesar specifically, the digital version of Risk he coded as a teenager, his abiding interest in human psychology and emotional contagion.

In 2017, in a winding manifesto about his "global community," Zuckerberg put it this way: "Overall, it is important that the governance of our community scales with the complexity and demands of its people. We are committed to always doing better, even if that involves building a worldwide voting system to give you more voice and control." Of course, as in any business, the only votes that matter to Facebook are those of its shareholders. Yet Facebook feels the need to cloak its profit-seeking behavior in false pretenses about the very democratic values it threatens.

Pretending to outsource his most consequential decisions to empty imitations of democratic bodies has become a useful mechanism for Zuckerberg to avoid accountability. He controls about 58 percent of voting shares at the company, but in 2018 Facebook announced the creation of a sort of judiciary branch known, in Orwellian fashion, as the Oversight Board. The board makes difficult calls on thorny issues having to do with

content moderation. In May it handed down the decision to uphold Facebook's suspension of Donald Trump. Facebook says that the board's members are independent, but it hires and pays them.

Now, according to *The New York Times*, Facebook is considering forming a kind of legislative body, a commission that could make decisions on elections-related matters—political bias, political advertising, foreign interference. This would further divert scrutiny from Facebook leadership.

All of these arrangements have the feel of a Potemkin justice system, one that reveals Facebook for what it really is: a foreign state, populated by people without sovereignty, ruled by a leader with absolute power.

Facebook's defenders like to argue that it's naive to suggest that Facebook's power is harmful. Social networks are here, they insist, and they're not going anywhere. Deal with it. They're right that no one should wish to return to the information ecosystems of the 1980s, or 1940s, or 1880s. The democratization of publishing is miraculous; I still believe that the triple revolution of the internet, smartphones, and social media is a net good for society. But that's true only if we insist on platforms that are in the public's best interest. Facebook is not.

Facebook is a lie-disseminating instrument of civilizational collapse. It is designed for blunt-force emotional reaction, reducing human interaction to the clicking of buttons. The algorithm guides users inexorably toward less nuanced, more extreme material, because that's what most efficiently elicits a reaction. Users are implicitly trained to seek reactions to what they post, which perpetuates the cycle. Facebook executives have tolerated the promotion on their platform of propaganda, terrorist recruitment, and genocide. They point to democratic virtues like free speech to defend themselves, while dismantling democracy itself.

These hypocrisies are by now as well established as Zuckerberg's reputation for ruthlessness. Facebook has conducted psychological experiments on its users without their consent. It built a secret tiered system to exempt its most famous users from certain content-moderation rules and suppressed internal research into Instagram's devastating effects on teenage mental health. It has tracked individuals across the web, creating shadow profiles of people

who have never registered for Facebook so it can trace their contacts. It swears to fight disinformation and misinformation, while misleading researchers who study these phenomena and diluting the reach of quality news on its platforms.

Even Facebook loyalists concede that it's a place for garbage, for hyperbole, for mendacity—but argue that people should be free to manage their intake of such toxins. "While Facebook may not be nicotine I think it is probably like sugar," the longtime Facebook executive Andrew "Boz" Bosworth wrote in a 2019 memo. "Like all things it benefits from moderation … If I want to eat sugar and die an early death that is a valid position."

What Bosworth failed to say is that Facebook doesn't just have the capacity to poison the individual; it's poisoning the world. When 2.9 billion people are involved, what's needed is moderation in scale, not moderation in personal intake. The freedom to destroy yourself is one thing. The freedom to destroy democratic society is quite another.

Facebook sold itself to the masses by promising to be an outlet for free expression, for connection, and for community. In fact, it is a weapon against the open web, against self-actualization, and against democracy. All of this so Facebook could dangle your data in front of advertisers.

To one degree or another, this is something Facebook has in common with its subsidiary Instagram and its rivals Google, YouTube (which Google owns), and Amazon. All position their existence as somehow noble—their purpose is, variously, to help people share their life, to provide answers to the most difficult questions, and to deliver what you need when you need it. But of the behemoths, Facebook is most ostentatious in its moral abdications.

Facebook needs its users to keep on believing that its dominance is a given, to ignore what it is doing to humanity and use its services anyway. Anyone who seeks to protect individual freedom and democratic governance should be bothered by this acceptance of the status quo.

Regulators have their sights set on Facebook for good reason, but the threat the company poses to Americans is about much more than its monopoly on emerging technology. Facebook's rise is part of a larger autocratic movement, one that's eroding democracy worldwide as authoritarian leaders set a new tone for global governance. Consider how Facebook portrays itself as a counterbalance to a superpower like China. Company executives have warned that attempts to interfere with Facebook's untrammeled growth—through regulating the currency it is developing, for example—would be a gift to China, which wants its own cryptocurrency to be dominant. In other words, Facebook is competing with China the way a nation would.

Perhaps Americans have become so cynical that they have given up on defending their freedom from surveillance, manipulation, and exploitation. But if Russia or China were taking the exact same actions to undermine democracy, Americans would surely feel differently. Seeing Facebook as a hostile foreign power could force people to acknowledge what they're participating in, and what they're giving up, when they log in. In the end it doesn't really matter what Facebook *is*; it matters what Facebook is doing.

What could we do in return? "Socially responsible" companies could boycott Facebook, starving it of ad revenue in the same way that trade sanctions deprive autocracies of foreign exchange. In the past, however, boycotts by major corporations like Coca-Cola and CVS have barely made a ripple. Maybe rank-and-file Facebook employees could lobby for reform, but nothing short of mass walkouts, of the sort that would make the continued operation of Facebook impossible, would be likely to have much effect. And that would require extraordinary courage and collective action.

Facebook users are the group with the most power to demand change. Facebook would be nothing without their attention. American citizens, and those of other democracies, might shun Facebook and Instagram, not merely as a lifestyle choice, but as a matter of civic duty.

Could enough people come together to bring down the empire? Probably not. Even if Facebook lost 1 billion users, it would have another 2 billion left. But we need to recognize the danger we're in. We need to shake the

notion that Facebook is a normal company, or that its hegemony is inevitable.

Perhaps someday the world will congregate as one, in peace, as Einstein dreamed, indivisible by the forces that have launched wars and collapsed civilizations since antiquity. But if that happens, if we can save ourselves, it certainly won't be because of Facebook. It will be in spite of it.

This article appears in the November 2021 print edition with the headline "Facebookland." When you buy a book using a link on this page, we receive a commission. Thank you for supporting The Atlantic.

The Nasty Logistics of Returning Your Too-Small Pants

Free Returns Are Complicated, Laborious, and Gross

By Amanda Mull

Consider the dressing room. The concept began its mass-market life as an amenity in Gilded Age department stores, a commercial sanctuary of

pedestals and upholstered furniture on which to swoon over the splendid future of your wardrobe. Now, unless you're rich enough to sip gratis champagne in the apartment-size private shopping suites of European luxury brands, the dressing room you know bears little resemblance to its luxe progenitors.

Over the course of several decades and just as many rounds of corporate budget cuts, dressing rooms have filled with wonky mirrors and fluorescent lights and piles of discarded clothes. At one point in your life or another, as you wriggled your clammy body into a new bathing suit—underpants still on, for sanitary purposes—you have probably experienced the split-second terror of some space cadet trying to yank the door open (if you're lucky enough to have a door). Maybe you have heard your own panicked voice croak, "Someone's in here!"

Through the 1990s and into the 2000s, even as stores became dingy and understaffed, the dressing room try-on remained a crucial step in the act of clothing yourself. But as online shopping became ever more frictionless—and the conditions in the fitting room ever less desirable—Americans realized that it might just be better to order a few sizes on a retailer's website and sort it out at home. Estimates vary, but in the past year, one-third to one-half of all clothing bought in the United States came from the internet. More shopping of almost every type shifts online each year, a trend only accelerated by months of pandemic restrictions and shortages.

This explosive growth in online sales has also magnified one of e-commerce's biggest problems: returns. When people can't touch things before buying them—and when they don't have to stand in front of another human and insist that a pair of high heels they clearly wore actually never left their living room—they send a lot of stuff back. The average brick-and-mortar store has a return rate in the single digits, but online, the average rate is somewhere between 15 and 30 percent. For clothing, it can be even higher, thanks in part to bracketing—the common practice of ordering a size up and a size down from the size you think you need. Some retailers actively encourage the practice in order to help customers feel confident in their purchases. At the very least, many retailers now offer free shipping, free returns, and frequent discount codes, all of which promote more buying

—and more returns. Last year, U.S. retailers took back more than $100 billion in merchandise sold online.

All of that unwanted stuff piles up. Some of it will be diverted into a global shadow industry of bulk resellers, some of it will be stripped for valuable parts, and some of it will go directly into an incinerator or a landfill.

It sounds harmful and inefficient—all the box trucks and tractor trailers and cargo planes and container ships set in motion to deal with changed minds or misleading product descriptions, to say nothing of the physical waste of the products themselves, and the waste created to manufacture things that will never be used. That's because it *is* harmful and inefficient. Retailers of all kinds have always had to deal with returns, but processing this much miscellaneous, maybe-used, maybe-useless stuff is an invention of the past 15 years of American consumerism. In a race to acquire new customers and retain them at any cost, retailers have taught shoppers to behave in ways that are bad for virtually all involved.

The retail-logistics industry is split into two halves. Forward logistics—the process of moving goods from manufacturers to their end users—is the half most consumers regularly interact with. It includes postal workers, your neighborhood UPS guy, and the people who stock shelves at Target or pick items and pack boxes at Amazon warehouses. "Pick packing and shipping individual things to satisfy customer orders is a madness, but it's a straightforward madness," Mark Cohen, the director of retail studies at the Columbia University School of Business and the former CEO of Sears Canada, told me. The other half—reverse logistics—isn't straightforward at all.

"Reverse logistics is nasty," Tim Brown, the managing director of the Supply Chain and Logistics Institute at Georgia Tech, told me. The process of getting unwanted items back from consumers and figuring out what to do with them is time- and labor-intensive, and often kind of gross. Online returns are collected one by one from parcel carriers, brick-and-mortar stores, a growing number of third-party services, and sometimes directly from customers' homes. Workers at sorting facilities open boxes and try to determine whether the thing in front of them is what's on the packing list—to discern the difference between the various car parts sold on Amazon, or

the zillion black polyester dresses available to order from H&M. They also need to figure out whether it's been used or worn, if it works, if it's clean, and if it or any of its components are economically and physically salvageable.

Sometimes, the answers to those questions are clear. "Consumers say they're returning XYZ, but they really return a dead rat and a cinder block," Brown said. That kind of fraud accounts for 5 to 10 percent of returns. Usually, though, the situation is ambiguous. How used do jeans have to be for them to be considered used? Does a mere try-on count, if they've been removed from their packaging?

We can dispense now with a common myth of modern shopping: The stuff you return probably isn't restocked and sent back out to another hopeful owner. Many retailers don't allow any opened product to be resold as new. Brick-and-mortar stores have sometimes skirted that policy; products that are returned directly to the place where they were sold can be deemed close enough to new and sold again. But even if mailed-in products come back in pristine, unused condition—say, because you ordered two sizes of the same bra and the first one you tried on fit fine—the odds that things returned to a sorting facility will simply be transferred to that business's inventory aren't great, and in some cases, they're virtually zero. Getting an item back into a company's new-product sales stream, which is sometimes in a whole different state, can be logistically prohibitive. Some things, such as beauty products, underwear, and bathing suits, are destroyed for sanitary reasons, even if they appear to be unopened or unused.

Perfectly good stuff gets thrown away in these facilities all the time, simply because the financial math of doing anything else doesn't work out; they're too inexpensive to be worth the effort, or too much time has passed since they were sold. Fast fashion—the extremely low-cost, quick-churn styles you can buy from brands such as Forever 21 and Fashion Nova—tends to tick both boxes, and the industry generates some of the highest return rates in all of consumer sales. Imagine a dress that sold for $25 and was sent back without its plastic packaging at the end of the typical 30-day return window. Add up the labor to pick, pack, and dispatch the item; the freight both coming and going; the labor to receive and sort the now-returned item;

the cardboard and plastic for packaging; and the sorting facility's overhead, and the seller has already lost money. By one estimate, an online return typically costs a retailer $10 to $20 before the cost of shipping. And in the space of a month, the people who might have paid full price for the dress have moved on to newer items on the seller's website. At that point, one way or another, the dress has got to go.

Many products survive their initial return, and even get sold again—just not to the retailer's customers. Stores like Neiman Marcus and Target, which carry a bunch of different brands, are often able to return excess product to those brands for at least a partial refund. That might mean a pallet of polo shirts goes back to Ralph Lauren, or Hanes eats part of the loss on a new line of socks that didn't sell. At that point, the brand or wholesaler taking back the product has to decide whether it should be thrown away or sold.

Or, when someone returns a computer to Best Buy, for example, the company can try to sell it elsewhere, even if it's just for parts. Perhaps its outer case would be discarded and its processor and video card removed and off-loaded, along with thousands of others, to a middleman who flips them to repair services or retailers that sell refurbished parts. Bulk sales of intact merchandise supply much of the inventory in domestic deep-discount retailers such as Big Lots, according to Brown, and are also why so many people in countries without American stores wear American clothes. Unwanted clothing and other goods are sold off thousands of pounds at a time in shipping containers; the buyers discard what they can't resell and ship the rest overseas to wholesale it as fresh merchandise.

This is why it's difficult to accurately estimate what portion of returned merchandise is discarded, or even how much waste it adds up to, though we do know that billions of pounds of returns are thrown away in the U.S. every year. Joel Rampoldt, a managing director at the consulting firm AlixPartners, told me that most people in the industry believe that about 25 percent of returns are discarded, although the proportion varies widely depending on the product (clothing tends to be easier to resell than electronics that may contain user data, for example). There are so many points in an object's life where it could go to the trash heap instead of to a person who will use it, and once it's off the books—especially if it's out of

the country—American retailers are no longer keeping track. These practices are essentially unregulated; companies do whatever they deem most profitable.

Now is usually when people start wondering why more returns aren't just donated. Don't lots of people in the U.S. need winter coats and smartphones and other crucial tools of everyday life that they can't afford? Wouldn't providing those things be good PR for retailers? Wouldn't it be a tax write-off, at the very least? Donation would be the morally sound move. But companies have little incentive to act morally, and many avoid large-scale domestic donations because of what is politely termed "brand dilution": If paying customers catch you giving things to poor people for free, the logic goes, they'll feel like the things you sell are no longer valuable.

Some of the largest retailers, such as Amazon and Target, have begun to quietly acknowledge that it doesn't even make sense for them to eat the cost of reverse logistics to get back many of the things they sell. They'll refund you for your itchy leggings or wonky throw pillows and suggest that you give them away, which feels like an act of generosity but, more likely, is really just farming out the task of product disposal.

The birth of the returns problem is almost always pinned on Zappos. In the mid-2000s, the company persuaded millions of Americans to buy shoes online—a turn of events that, at the time, seemed extremely unlikely—by marketing its fast, free shipping and free, no-questions-asked return policy as ardently as it did its products. The easy-returns tactic was hardly new in retail (Nordstrom, among others, was long famous for being so lenient that the store would take back things it didn't sell in the first place in order to keep customers happy). But the free-returns model had never before been applied at such a large scale to online sales, where the logistics of giving buyers so much latitude is much more costly. Zappos's success helped shape how people understood online shopping to work. "It's so baked into consumer expectations, and consumers are very irrational about the cost of shipping and returns," Rampoldt told me. "To some extent retailers have created that, and now they're stuck with it."

Businesses often lose money in the pursuit of customers, hoping to make back the initial loss in the long run by creating durable economies of scale,

which Zappos has successfully done—Scott Schaefer, the company's vice president of finance, told me that it's profitable, and has no need or desire to tighten its shipping and returns policies. But Zappos's strategy had ramifications far beyond its own sales figures. By changing consumer behavior, it inadvertently pushed lots of other businesses to adopt the buy-it-all, return-it-later policies that have now become the industry standard, especially as e-commerce spending consolidates among a few mega-companies like Amazon, Target, and Walmart. Retailers of that size are better able to absorb the cost of return shipping and junked product than smaller businesses are. But many of those smaller businesses must adopt similar policies anyway to hold on to their customers.

Alarmingly, the problem almost never comes up in business education. "There's very, very, very, very little academic work in reverse logistics," Brown said. Meanwhile, "forward logistics and supply chain is taught in every business school in the country." People are taught to sell.

And stores don't want to talk about returns. Seven of the eight that I contacted for this story, which specialize in everything from cheap dog toys to luxury fashion, declined to comment at all. The issue is a nonstarter in almost every way: No company wants to draw attention to customers who are disappointed in their purchases. If a retailer admits that it wants to cut back on its generous policies, it risks headlines painting it as stingy. And once people start thinking about returns, they might start asking where all that returned product *goes*, which is a whole other can of public-relations worms.

This avoidance runs deep—public companies have to disclose a litany of financial details to shareholders every year, but regulatory agencies don't require them to include return rates or specify their financial impact, so they don't. When everyone's mouths are shut, the size of the problem becomes very difficult to discern.

Schaefer, from Zappos, said that the centrality of returns to the business's sales model means that the price of service has long been baked in. "I could be significantly more transactionally profitable if I cut off and said no returns," Schaefer told me. "But I would easily lose all of my customers and all my customer trust." Because Zappos doesn't carry fast fashion, it has an

advantage over some other apparel retailers; much of its return volume comes back unworn and is reintegrated into its regular inventory.

But even some of the biggest retailers in the world now see rampant returns as an existential threat. In recent years, many have started using third-party software to find and ban their highest-volume returners from sending things back, and sometimes from buying anything at all. Amazon, Sephora, Best Buy, Ulta, and Walmart, among many others, close shoppers' accounts or bar them from stores if their returns seem atypical or potentially fraudulent. Details on what these companies consider aberrant behavior are scant, but Mark Cohen oversaw one of the first such policies, at Sears Canada in the mid-2000s. In its sweep, he said, Sears found 1,400 people who were engaged in what he called "recreational shopping"—buying things nearly every week and returning all or almost all of them. What's more, many of these people even employed the tactic with big-ticket items such as tractors, lawn mowers, and refrigerators.

Third-party businesses have also sprouted up to wrestle returns into some kind of submission. If you shop online with any regularity, you've probably interacted with a post-purchase retail-logistics company such as Narvar, even if you didn't realize it. These companies notify buyers when things have shipped or they're about to arrive, clean up the tracking information into something understandable at a glance, and collect and organize data about why and how often certain products come back. Other companies promise to intervene in the physical logistics of moving $100 billion in online returns back to sellers. Roadie, for example, will pay gig workers to ferry returns back to sorting facilities in their own cars, ostensibly in situations where drivers are already heading that way. Happy Returns lets shoppers drop off their unwanted, unpackaged goods at "return bars" inside local businesses—drugstores, stationery shops, FedEx offices—which in theory minimizes the hassle, and thus speeds things up. Happy Returns then sorts and sends the items back to retailers, creating some measure of greater efficiency.

But returns don't seem like a problem that can necessarily get solved completely. As the places where people used to buy clothes or stationery or kids' toys in person are pushed out of business, online shopping becomes

even more of a necessity. And Americans will probably continue to buy more than they intend to keep, even if it means an extra trip to the UPS store. Prices will go up to account for how expensive it is to send all this unwanted stuff back and forth, and companies will make nonbinding sustainability pledges that attract positive headlines while still shoveling things into landfills. They will do so until that is no longer legal, or no longer profitable for the largest and most powerful retailers, at which point they'll force their customers to get used to something else.

When surveyed about their preferences, big majorities of Americans under 40 say that they'd happily pay more to patronize businesses that aren't wasteful or harmful to the environment. That is the right answer when another human asks you whether you care about the future of the planet. But the receipts tell a different story so far: Those same shoppers do a far larger portion of their shopping online than their older counterparts do, and they're also more likely to place big orders, buying items in multiple sizes and colors, with the intention of sending some back. That's the slick thing about shopping now. So much of it takes place in the same manner as returns—in the privacy of your own home, no human interaction or judgment required.

This article appears in the November 2021 print edition with the headline "Unhappy Returns."

Vinson Fernandez rode the bus for two hours a day to get to and from his apprenticeship at Bitwise Industries.

Climbing the Economic Ladder in Fresno, California

Photos by Ryan Christopher Jones: A Foothold in Fresno

By José Vadi

In 2015, after years of working low-wage jobs, Vinson Fernandez enrolled in a six-month web-developer training course at Bitwise Industries, a tech incubator in Fresno, California, whose mission is to build a more diverse, inclusive talent pool in the industry. Fernandez lived solely off government assistance, which meant he had just a few hundred dollars each month to support his two children, Lily and Tayvin, and his wife, Brittney, who was pregnant with their third child, Ila, and not working. He often skipped meals himself. Fernandez completed the program and secured a paid apprenticeship at a company affiliated with Bitwise. Later, he got a job as a back-end developer for an employee-benefits-software firm, where he

worked from 2017 until 2020. Last year, Bitwise hired him as a full-time back-end developer and instructor. His new career broke a multigenerational cycle of economic precarity. For the first time, Fernandez and his family could plan for a more stable future.

The Fresno-born photographer Ryan Christopher Jones has documented the Fernandez family's path for the past five years. Jones's photos chart their progress toward the middle class: scenes of joy (a new bunk bed for the kids) alongside moments of exhaustion (Fernandez working on his laptop with a child at his side). This kind of mobility is rare. Roughly one in five Fresno residents lives in poverty, and Latinos account for more than 50 percent of poor Californians even though they make up less than 40 percent of the population. Throughout the years that Jones has spent with the Fernandez family, Fresno's growing tech industry (and gentrifying downtown) has begun to transform the city's reputation as a farm town, and has increased the cost of living. The same industry that lifted the Fernandezes out of poverty threatens to make their gains short-lived.

The pride that Vinson Fernandez takes in his accomplishments is also tinged by worry about life's unknowns; a few years ago, a car accident caused by a drunk driver threatened his family's financial security. A pulsating fear of failure haunts Fernandez. "In the past, success was so temporary that I could never get too complacent," he told Jones last year. Even now, he said, "I don't want to feel like I'm doing enough."

This article appears in the November 2021 print edition with the headline "A Foothold in Fresno."

Culture & Critics

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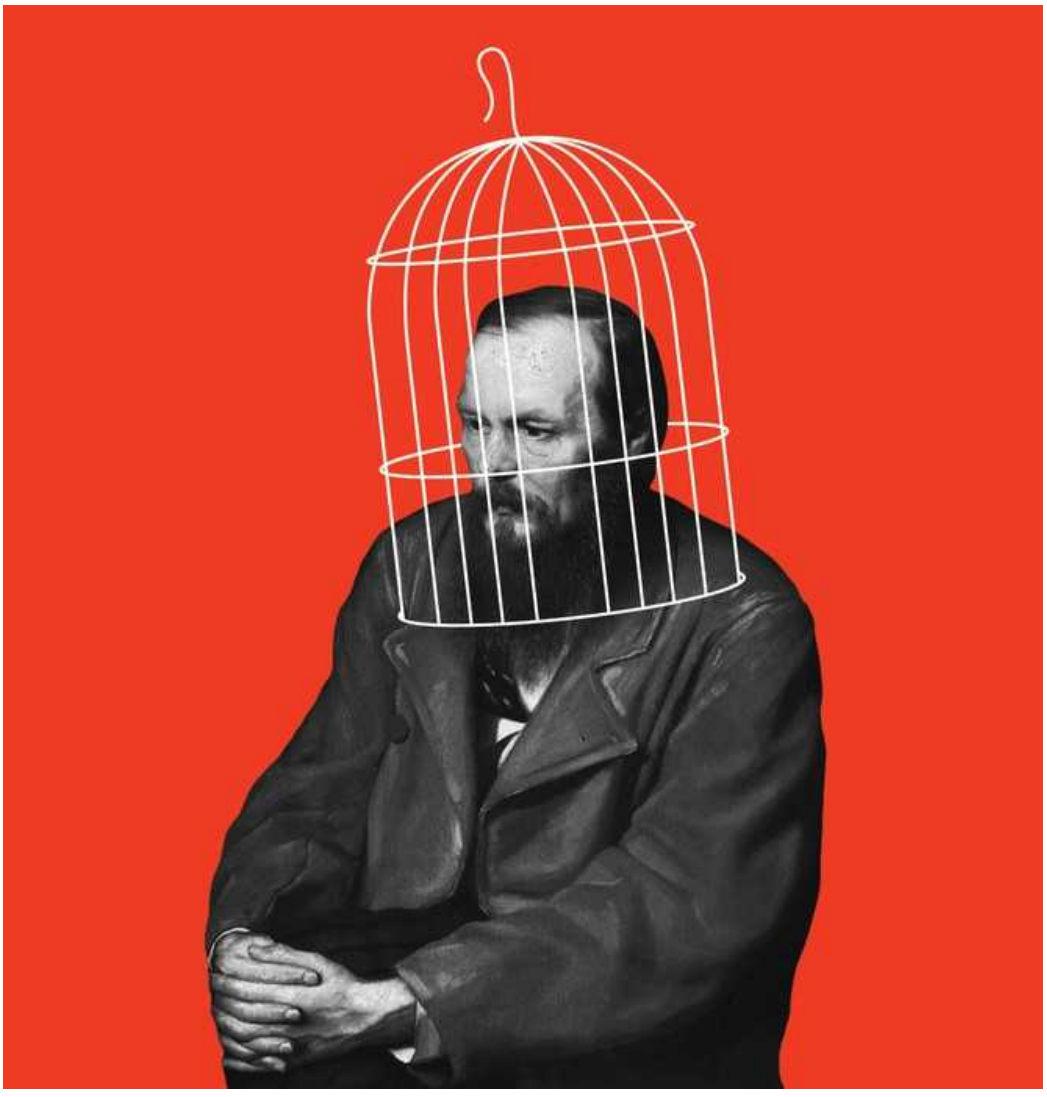
  He had no choice. -- James Parker
- **Jonathan Franzen's Best Book Yet**
  At last he's put aside the pyrotechnics and gone all in on his great theme: the American family. -- Becca Rothfeld
- **Spotify Has Made All Music Into Background Music**
  Is the collapse of genre boundaries and the erosion of fervent musical loyalties a good thing? -- Jack Hamilton

Why Did Dostoyevsky Write Crime and Punishment?

Why Did Dostoyevsky Write ‘Crime and Punishment’?

By James Parker



Jesus meets Dostoyevsky. He takes one look at him, peers for a diagnostic instant into those tunnels-of-torment eyes, and performs an immediate exorcism. Brisk and bouncerly, no fuss, in the Jesus style: *Party's over, little devil. Out you go*. A slight buzzing sound, and it's done. And Dostoyevsky, with the infernal reveler ejected, is relieved that second of his hemorrhoids, his gambling habit, his seizures, his fevers, his depression, his hypochondria, his appalling futuristic intuitions and obsessions. He is freed from the cell of his own skull. And he writes no more books, ever.

The Sinner and the Saint, Kevin Birmingham's inspired account of the genesis—philosophical and neurological—of *Crime and Punishment*, will leave you of two minds about Dostoyevsky, rather as the great Russian was of (at least) two minds about himself. On the one hand, you'll be in awe of his writerly stamina, his dedication to the depths of experience, his artistic fidelity, his fragility/durability, his unprotected imagination, and so on. On the other, you'll be wondering if a good chunk of *Crime and Punishment*—a baggy, sweaty book; a sprawl, a trial, as even its admirers will concede—might not be pure pathology.

You can scarcely call it a plot: The entirety of *Crime and Punishment* turns on one minute of violence. Raskolnikov, a haughty and penniless student flitting about the slums of St. Petersburg, brutally murders a nasty old lady—a pawnbroker—and her blameless, just-happened-to-be-there sister. Why does he do it? Why does he lift the ax? Not for money, not for kicks, and not for passion either, unless it be the cold passion of ideas, because Raskolnikov—in addition to being functionally insane—is kind of a philosopher: He ruminates upon the value (or not) of a single human life; the fallibility of criminals; and the power of an act, a decisive stroke, to transform reality. His disconnection from society, and from the matrix of human goodness, is complete. He's a troll, a lone wolf. In other words, to quote Iggy Pop, he's just a modern guy. He presents like a derelict out of Beckett; he prowls his own consciousness like someone from Kafka; he mutters to himself like Travis Bickle.

"To see only the cruel covering under which the universe languishes," wrote Dostoyevsky, pre–*Crime and Punishment*, in a letter to his brother Mikhail, "to know that a single explosion of will is enough to smash it and merge

with eternity, to know and be like the last creature … is awful!" But was he the last creature, or one of the first of a new age?

His biography is a sequence of events for which only the adjective *Dostoyevskian* will really do. The *Geist* seems to pursue him; the Hegelian world-spirit seems to have a cruel, experimental interest in him. His mother dies of tuberculosis when he is 15. Two years later, his father perishes mysteriously, probably murdered by restive serfs. Eking out a literary career in smelly St. Petersburg, the young Dostoyevsky falls into debt and personal squalor. Also into reformist politics, which are bubbling up all over ancien-régime Russia: secret meetings, ardent manifestos. In 1849 he is arrested in a sweep by the Czarist intelligence services and arraigned for sedition, conspiracy, the works. Hauled before a firing squad on the Semenovsky Parade Ground, in front of a large crowd, Dostoyevsky and his fellow freethinkers are theatrically reprieved (drumrolls, horsemen) by a last-minute gesture from Czar Nicholas I himself. With despotic generosity, with fierce absurdity, their sentence is commuted. Not death but exile: Siberia. Dostoyevsky does four years of hard labor in the Omsk prison camp, and another five as a soldier in the Siberian army.

And then, at age 38, he comes back to St. Petersburg. Birmingham is superb, in *The Sinner and the Saint*, on the intellectual environment, the vibrational stew, that greets him there. Nihilism, egoism, materialism … The human is being reconceived. A physiologist publishes an influential book called *Reflexes of the Brain*. Based on his experiments with a number of unfortunate frogs, he is prepared to say that mental activity is *all* reflexes. "Animation, passion, mockery, sorrow, joy, etc., are merely results of a greater or lesser contraction of definite groups of muscles." Dostoyevsky sees where this is all going: the individual, trapped in his head, at the mercy of his neurons.

Meanwhile his own brain continues to give him seizures—temporal lobe epilepsy, what Dostoyevsky calls his "falling sickness." And there's something else. He's been reading about the murder trial, in France, of a man named Pierre-François Lacenaire. Lacenaire is smooth, dandyish, unrepentant; he reads Rousseau; he writes poetry. He is a florid sociopath, a new kind of man. When they put him in the guillotine, he twists his torso

around so he can watch the blade come down. Dostoyevsky publishes a 50-page essay, translated from the French, about Lacenaire—"a remarkable personality"—in his literary journal *Vremya*. Murder trials, he writes in an introductory note, are "more exciting than all possible novels because they light up the dark sides of the human soul that art does not like to approach."

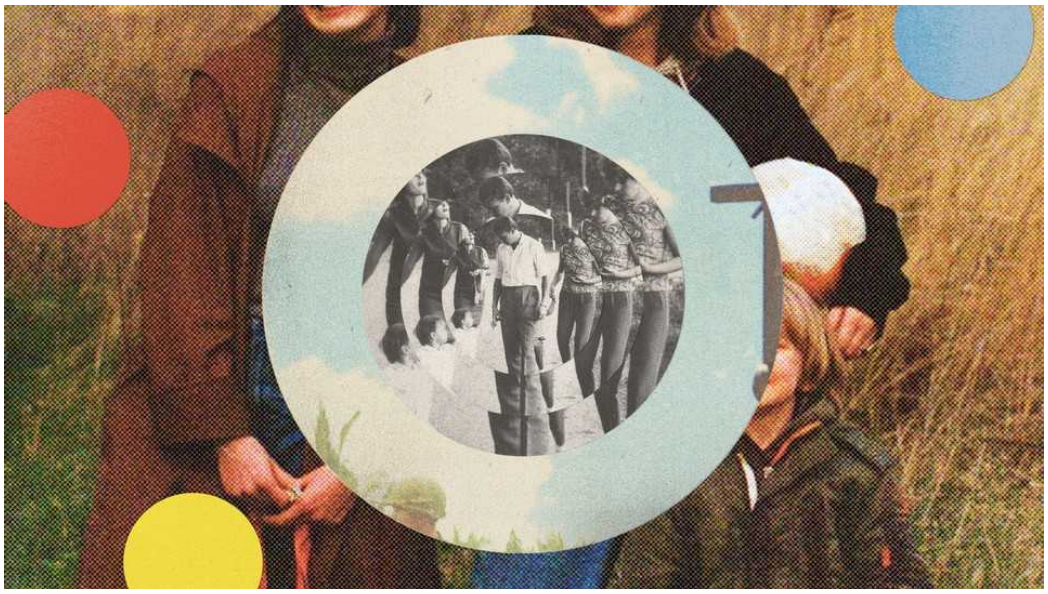
All of this, chaotically, courageously, goes into *Crime and Punishment*, which Dostoyevsky begins in September 1865 while half-starved and sleepless in a hotel in Wiesbaden, having lost all his money at the roulette table. It's a novel of warrenlike buildings, sooty doors, small rooms that smell of mice and leather. Hallucinations nibble at the edge of reality. Drunken degenerates say limpid and beautiful things. Interior monologues become audible. Above all it's a novel of *subjectivity*: the oppression of it, the turgid wrangle of it, the screaming loneliness of it. "Completely unneeded and unexpected details must leap out at every moment in the middle of the story," wrote Dostoyevsky in his notebook. Raskolnikov's motives, his redemption or lack thereof, the twists and turns of the plot—red herrings, in the end. *Crime and Punishment* is about your brain, your poor brain, being the seat of modern consciousness. It's about how that actually, really, *feels*.

"What is Hell?" Father Zosima asks in *The Brothers Karamazov*. "I maintain that it is the suffering of being unable to love." Seeking deliverance from terminal you-ness, from utter cranial confinement, you can either get your head chopped off like Lacenaire or abandon yourself to love—as Raskolnikov does in the not-very-convincing epilogue to *Crime and Punishment*. The love of his wife, Sonya, reaches him at last, redeems him, and his mind is transformed: "Now he was not deciding anything consciously; he was only feeling. Instead of the dialectic, life itself had arrived, and in his consciousness something altogether different had to be worked out." As is generally the case with Dostoyevsky, Jesus is in here somewhere—smiling, cryptic. Raskolnikov has the Gospels under his pillow, and he remembers how Sonya once read him the story of Lazarus. Love, you lunatic. Love, and be raised from the death-state.

And if you don't? In that same epilogue, Raskolnikov, lying in a Siberian prison hospital, has a fever dream: He sees a great plague coming "out of

the depths of Asia.” But wait—it’s a mental plague. “People who were affected immediately became possessed and insane. But never, never did these people consider themselves so intelligent and so infallible about the truth as when they were infected.” Individualism has reached its apex; the atomization is total. “Everyone was anxious, no one understood anyone else, each one thought that truth resided in him alone and, regarding all the others, suffered, beat his chest, wept, and wrung his hands.”

This article appears in the November 2021 print edition with the headline “Why Did Dostoyevsky Write Crime and Punishment*?”*



Jonathan Franzen's Best Book Yet

Review: 'Crossroads,' by Jonathan Franzen

By Becca Rothfeld

Jonathan Franzen writes big books about small lives. This may sound like a curious characterization of a writer who has sweated to position himself as an encyclopedic chronicler of wide-scale cultural change in each of his five fat novels to date, the shortest of them clocking in at 517 pages. Yet his fiction is typically set in claustrophobic enclaves. His characters don't hail from New York or Los Angeles, or even Boston or Minneapolis, but from the margins of already marginal cities. The protagonist of his debut, *The Twenty-Seventh City* (1988), languishes not in the eponymous city of St. Louis but in the unassuming suburb of Webster Groves, where Franzen himself grew up. *The Corrections* (2001), the book that launched him to celebrity, centers on the fictional midwestern suburb of St. Jude. In keeping with his commitment to the local, his latest novel, *Crossroads*—which is nearly 600 pages long and is only the first installment of a trilogy, the rather grandiosely titled *A Key to All Mythologies*—unfolds in the township of New Prospect, outside Chicago proper.

In fact, the real province of Franzen's work is even more narrowly circumscribed. His true territory is the quietly disintegrating household—and his most consuming interest is the existential distress that so often molders within it. In *The Corrections*, the winner of the 2001 National Book Award, his subjects were Alfred Lambert, a retired railroad engineer, and Enid Lambert, a disaffected housewife intent on enticing her three unhappy offspring home for Christmas. For all Enid's attempts at cheerful decoration, the once-tidy rooms of the Lambert residence are in revolt against her fantasy of order. Detritus accumulates, canned food succumbs to rot, and Alfred, who suffers from Parkinson's, has been urinating in stray coffee cans. The portions of *The Corrections* that follow the Lambert brood of Baby Boomers in their anxious adulthood take place in the late 1990s, but much of the novel dips back into the '70s of their youth, before the

advent of the internet afforded them the sort of global perspective we now take for granted.

Franzen also locates the Hildebrandts, the clan at the core of *Crossroads*, in the ’70s—and they, too, live in strained and stifling circumstances. Russ, the patriarch, is an associate minister consigned to what his drug-addled teenage son derisively calls “the Crappier Parsonage,” a building “more in need of razing than of renovation.” The same could be said of Russ’s job at the church, where he spends his days steeped in resentment of the charismatic pastor who has succeeded in winning over the hip adolescent members of the youth group from which the novel takes its title. The same could also be said of Russ’s relationship with his wife, the restlessly depressive Marion, who is roiled by her own resentments. As Russ becomes infatuated with a recently widowed member of his congregation, he and Marion take to sleeping not only in different bedrooms but on different floors altogether. The four Hildebrandt children, saintly 9-year-old Judson excepted, are likewise siloed in self-absorbed worlds. Yet for Franzen, if not for his characters, an inward focus is the ticket out. It is by way of smallness that he at last achieves monumentality, by way of entrapment that he at last promises escape.

Still, a reader may well wonder why Franzen has returned once again to such well-trodden terrain. Why the promise of a trilogy rooted in generational portraiture that his publisher says will “trace the inner life of our culture through the present day,” a description that could apply in large part to any piece of his oeuvre from *The Corrections* onward? By now, even Franzen himself has chafed at the cramped contours of life on the American periphery. In an interview in *The Guardian* in 2015, he confessed that he was stunned by the success of *The Corrections* precisely because “it was small, and I was embarrassed to have come from the innocent Midwest.” Elsewhere, he has suggested that the parochialism of towns like St. Jude can be morally corrosive. In an essay in his 2018 collection, *The End of the End of the Earth*, he warns against yielding to the lures of the prosaic, insisting that narrow preoccupations can obscure the collective responsibilities engendered by global catastrophes.

Perhaps Franzen's desire to engage with "the bigger questions"—including the fate of the planet and the fate of American society—can explain why he has so often resorted to grandiloquent contrivance. Almost all of his novels thus far have led uncomfortably dual lives. On the one hand, they are family epics, yet on the other, they are exercises in what the critic James Wood has called "hysterical realism." That is, they are sprawling and bombastic, prone to introducing conspiratorial subplots and desperately kooky coincidences.

Like the characters populating his novels, who are terrified of their own irrelevance, Franzen has a habit of proffering bells and whistles as compensation for the modest scope of the domestic sagas that engross him. Hence not only his urge to create characters who function as avatars of broader cultural tendencies, but also his compulsion to grasp at larger-scale historical signposts. *The Twenty-Seventh City* follows members of an Indian American crime syndicate who descend upon St. Louis in a bid to gain financial control of the city, while *The Corrections* features a washed-up Lithuanian politician who defrauds credulous Americans by selling them parts of a "for-profit nation-state." In *Freedom* (2010), the story of the unraveling Berglund family is nearly crowded out by anecdotes about crooked arms deals, environmental disasters, and endangered birds. *Purity* (2015), Franzen's fifth novel and *Crossroads*' immediate predecessor, is the worst offender of all: It is an incongruously cosmopolitan novel starring a deranged feminist recluse and a murderous celebrity hacker. Franzen knows better than anyone that even a pinprick on the map can swell into a spiritual universe—yet he has always had trouble resisting the allure of the sweeping systems novel, set everywhere and, therefore, nowhere.

Until now, that is. In *Crossroads*, Franzen is unabashed about bearing down on dramas with human dimensions—dramas that play out again and again in each subsequent generation. He reframes his abiding theme in newly timeless, even religious, terms. "My question … is whether we can ever escape our selfishness," 15-year-old Perry, the Hildebrandts' precocious third child, muses. "Even if you bring in God, and make Him the measure of goodness, the person who worships and obeys Him still wants something for himself. He enjoys the feeling of being righteous, or he wants eternal life."*Crossroads* is a rejection of *Purity*'s empty expansiveness on almost

every front. Its protagonists could not be less glamorous, its intrigues less international. Its action is concentrated within a crumbling community, its focus trained on a family's everyday recriminations. Though its stakes are high, psychically speaking, its core predicament is modest and emotional. Here we wonder not whether a bird species will go extinct, but whether any of the Hildebrandts can shed their selfishness and muster some measure of goodness.

Long a connoisseur of male myopia, Franzen is more acutely ruthless than ever in his portrayal of Russ, whose moral waffling he tracks in his close and merciless third-person narration. Outwardly virtuous but inwardly self-pitying, progressive in principle but regressive in practice, Russ is prone to failures of empathy; he has particular difficulty believing that women have inner lives. Upon glimpsing his extramarital love interest in her house for the first time, he is assailed by "an unsettling strong hit of her *reality*—her independence as a woman, her thinking of thoughts and making of choices wholly unrelated to him." Because he is in the business of penitence, Russ cannot avoid the certainty that he is a sinner, but he is also so constitutionally self-congratulatory that he finds a way to savor even his moral decay. Like a worm writhing in the mud, he luxuriates in his guilt: "The feeling of homecoming in his humiliations … was how he knew that God existed."

More surprising to Franzen's detractors, who often accuse him of writing flat female characters, will be the extent to which Marion crackles with humanity. She is the most memorable Hildebrandt, if not the most vividly living of all Franzen's creations. In *The Corrections*, the Lamberts tried, with mixed success, to conceal their wretchedness beneath a polite veneer. Marion, in contrast, becomes openly and extravagantly deranged. In her early 20s, she had a disastrous affair that landed her in a mental hospital, and many of her most extreme habits of mind return as her marriage splinters. At the height of her madness, she "felt trapped in a metal cube that was filling up with water, leaving only a tiny pocket of air at the top to breathe. The air was sanity." In her life with Russ (who relies on her to rewrite his sermons), she is initially suffocated but soon becomes irradiated with rage, toward both him and her own pliancy in the face of his demands and extortions. "Remembering how it felt to want to murder someone, she

thought, she might yet become a women's libber." When she finally explodes at Russ and begins chain-smoking at a crazed clip, her gloriously justified fury brings as much relief as a fever breaking.

For the most part, the Hildebrandt children are on the cusp of comparably drastic crises. Perry, who has a sense of irony so well developed that it would befit a Millennial, might have been lifted from the ranks of brilliant teens who populate the more contemporary world of *Infinite Jest*. Blessed with an IQ that has "been measured at 160" and cursed with a growing drug addiction, he is not dependent on any particular substance so much as on the habitual relief of plunging into the nearest abyss. For a brief period, Perry staves off his demons by participating in Crossroads, almost certainly modeled on the youth group Franzen attended as an adolescent, in which a "public display of emotion purchased overwhelming approval."

Ultimately, however, feel-good platitudes are not mind-melting enough for Perry, as he graduates from pot and quaaludes to Dexedrine, then finally lands on cocaine. Some of the finest passages in *Crossroads*, which brims with agile writing, evoke Perry's intensifying quest for oblivion. He is such an acolyte of extremity that, by the end, he cannot even conceive of a quantity of cocaine vast enough to satisfy him: "If three canisters was excellent, how much more excellent six would have been. Or twelve. Or twenty-four. Was there a multiple of three of whiteness large enough to permanently set his mind at rest?"

College-age Clem, the eldest Hildebrandt brother, is not an addict, but he, too, struggles to retain control over his own life. Though he is a pacifist and a staunch opponent of the Vietnam War, he agonizes over the deferment he secured in order to attend college, while those without access to higher education are shipped off to fight in his stead. Yet for him, Oedipal struggles take precedence over political forces. Clem is striving above all to distinguish himself from "his father, who merely professed to have sympathy for the underprivileged." *Crossroads* is a testament not to the singularity of the '70s but to the decade's continuity with our own. The novel's emotional dishevelments—and its aura of apprehensive urgency—feel viscerally contemporary. If not for the resounding absence of the internet, we could almost forget that the year is supposed to be 1971.

Insofar as *Crossroads* contains anything like Franzen's habitual gesture toward a grand system, a global frame is to be found in the Church. At Crossroads meetings and in Russ's self-serving prayer sessions, the rituals of religion serve mostly to numb. Yet they intermittently rear up into something more numinous, wrenching the Hildebrandts out of the particular and hurling them toward the universal. "To love God even a little bit … was to love Him more than she could love any person, even her children, because God was infinite," Marion reflects as she reminisces about her youthful experiments with Catholicism.

At the same time, the religious elements in *Crossroads* work to ennoble the minutiae that Franzen embraces at last. To God, even the tiniest trivialities—even outposts like New Prospect and sniveling sinners like Russ—are potent with import. Indeed, Russ, who was born into a rural Mennonite community, grew up feeling "closer to God" in the kitchen, where he watched his mother performing her roster of daily chores. "According to Scripture, earthly life was but a moment," he thinks, "but the moment seemed spacious." Ephemera swells into eternity, and smallness wells up into enormity.

Marion comes to a similar realization when she begins to recover from what looks like a relapse into mental illness and reflects that "tiny treats, an air-conditioned car, a drink by the pool, an after-dinner cigarette, could get a person through her life." Whether this insight and others like it are evidence of maturity or resignation, I am not sure, but I know that it is one of many tiny treats that add up in the end to a marvelous novel—and sometimes even offer the thinnest glint of grace.

This article appears in the November 2021 print edition with the headline "Jonathan Franzen Finally Stopped Trying Too Hard." When you buy a book using a link on this page, we receive a commission. Thank you for supporting The Atlantic.

Spotify Has Made All Music Into Background Music

Review: ‘Major Labels,’ by Kelefa Sanneh

By Jack Hamilton

I spent much of my youth in sprawling record stores, drifting through aisles marked by signs that said things like rock, R&B, hip-hop, and—it was the ’90s—alternative. Anyone who grew up in or near a city in the later decades of the 20th century probably remembers the dial locations of classic rock, country, modern rock, “urban.” (Of course, there were also the catchall behemoths of Top 40 and adult contemporary; young snobs like me looked down on them as the presets of dilettantes.) But these days, to judge by the omnivorous listening enabled by Spotify and the stylistic free-for-alls of mega-festivals like Coachella, the genre boundaries that once defined popular music and its fandoms may be collapsing.

On the one hand, that's hardly a surprise: Physical music stores and terrestrial radio—those two mainstays of 20th-century music consumption that depended on genre to segment and serve specific consumer markets—are coming to seem as obsolete as a yellow Sony Discman. On the other hand, the notion that musical genres might no longer matter as they once did feels more like a momentous cultural shift than merely like fallout from new distribution and marketing modes. Musical genres have long had a peculiar imaginative power and participatory quality. They aren't just labels imposed by an industry; they're shaped by passions and arguments, love and disgust, allegiances and disavowals.

A phrase like *action movie* or *mystery novel* calls to mind a particular aesthetic and emotional experience, but terms like *country*, *hip-hop*, and *punk* do more. They evoke a kind of person—an incomplete stereotype, certainly, but one that's instantly legible to anyone who's even minimally engaged with popular culture. And they also conjure communities: a crowd clad in black T-shirts, combat boots, and studded bracelets at a metal show; in Birkenstocks and cardigans at a folk club. Metalheads and folkies, separated by a chasm, each bond over a love for their chosen music, even if they might now both be endangered species.

As a guide to the erosion of fervent musical loyalties that seems to be under way, few could have better credentials than the *New Yorker* staff writer Kelefa Sanneh, who has published a delightfully provocative new book, *Major Labels: A History of Popular Music in Seven Genres*. Back in 2004, while a young critic at *The New York Times*, Sanneh wrote an influential rumination on genre and its relation to music fandom in the 21st century. This short and acute essay, "The Rap Against Rockism," introduced the wider public to a debate within music criticism that quickly became framed as "rockism" versus "poptimism." (Sanneh's article never used the latter term.)

Rockism was the tendency to judge every kind of popular music using standards set by a certain romantic ideal of rock music as a heroic ground of creativity—where every artist was "a rebellious individualist, not an industry pro," giving "listeners the uncomfortable truth, instead of pandering to their tastes." In practice, the verdict was almost always that

other musical genres were lacking—in intellectual sophistication, in artistic integrity, in that ill-defined but incessantly fussed-over quality of "authenticity." This "imperial" rockist attitude irked Sanneh. "Could it really be a coincidence that rockist complaints often pit straight white men against the rest of the world?" he wondered.

His essay heartily endorsed a more inclusive and less prescriptive approach to musical pleasure. The best way to engage with, say, Britney Spears's music wasn't simply to point out that it wasn't as wordy, sweaty, and self-consciously serious as Bruce Springsteen's. It was to appreciate the unique forms of enjoyment that her infectious pop brought to her fans, many of whom happened to be part of a demographic (young, female) that rockism had historically denigrated.

Like many ideological disputes in contemporary America, this one has long since devolved into a caricatured standoff between incoherent extremes. Doctrinaire rockism is no longer a tenable stance in professional music criticism, but overzealous rejections of its vestigial snobbery continue to thrive anyway. ("Olivia Rodrigo Is a Revelatory New Pop Voice on *Sour*. Deal With It," read the online headline of *Rolling Stone*'s review of Rodrigo's debut, as if in defense of an underdog—a strange tone, considering that *Sour* is one of the best-reviewed albums of 2021.) On the other side, poptimism's detractors characterize it as the belief that every popular song is necessarily a good song, which is absurd: Most critical best-of lists don't align with the year-end *Billboard* charts any more closely than they ever did.

In short, even in a Spotified music world that seems to be drifting toward a "post-genre" landscape, poptimist and rockist stereotypes live on—a sign that the factional impulse in music fandom may be harder to shake than you might think. Despite his own poptimist credentials, Sanneh himself isn't ready to simply embrace a boundaryless future, at least not without examining what may get lost in leaving fractious fandom behind. "When I was in high school, in the early 1990s," he writes, "popular music was going through an unusually tribal phase, and maybe that is why I wanted to write a tribal book." In particular, he is interested in the ways that genres—which are, he writes, "nothing more or less than names we give to

communities of musicians and listeners"—shape relations between artists and their fans and between fans and other fans. Perhaps precisely because musical tribalism may be going out of fashion, Sanneh wants to defend a spirit that he challenged back in its long period of dominance: the avid listening—and identity-defining arguments—that these fierce devotions can inspire and sustain.

M*ajor Labels* is an essayistic medley rather than a straight chronological history, with a generous helping of memoir included along the way. The autobiographical jags allow Sanneh to explore his own still-evolving relationship to music, and the various attachments and antipathies he's picked up and discarded as he goes. One of the most formative experiences was an adolescent musical conversion that he recounts in his chapter on punk (others are devoted to rock, R&B, country, hip-hop, dance, and pop). "Punk taught me that music didn't have to express consensus," he writes of his transformation into a true believer. "You could use music as a way to set yourself apart from the world, or at least *some* of the world. You could find something to love and something—perhaps lots of somethings—to reject. You could have an opinion, and an identity." The punk partisan surveys the diverse landscape of popular music and sees a battleground; more thrilling to the young Sanneh than the music itself was its summons to "total devotion, to be expressed as total rejection of the mainstream." Its appeal was "quasi-religious ... turning aesthetic disagreements into matters of grave moral significance."

Sanneh describes a rapturous teenage encounter with the Ramones in New Haven, Connecticut, "a blissful hour amid a sweaty group of aging punks and youthful poseurs, all shoving one another and shouting along," while his mother patiently looked on from the bar. (At 14, Sanneh could get into the show only with a legal guardian.) When he went to college and set out to join the punk-rock department of Harvard's radio station, the prerequisite was enrolling in a semester-long course in punk history and passing a written exam, "an old-fashioned indoctrination into a genre that was, in many important ways, stubbornly retro."

And yet the deeper he wandered down the narrowing corridors of punk supremacy, the more he was forced to reckon with some of the genre's

inconsistencies, and eventually the more he responded to the wider musical curiosity that his punk immersion stirred in him. “How do you stay loyal, anyway, to a genre built on defiance?” he asks. “Punk rock is fundamentally incoherent, an anti-traditional tradition that promises ‘anarchy,’ or a whiff of it, while providing its devotees something tidy and recognizable enough to be considered a musical genre.” Sanneh came to realize that the things he loved most about punk—its visceral excitement, its passions and investments, its electric sense of community, even its ugliness—could be found in forms like hip-hop, reggae, and classic rock. But to really look and listen meant ceasing to be a punk supremacist. He’s exhilarated that 21st-century punk itself doesn’t “seem cowed by all those decades of punk history,” that even a genre so fiercely protective of its own purity spawns heterodoxies, attracts new listeners.

In focusing on how much our sense of musical allegiance is shaped in relation to other people—the theme at the core of *Major Labels*—Sanneh can be fuzzy about the balance between the collective loving and the collective hating that go into forging tastes and identities; former punk that he is, he doesn’t flinch from defending zealous insularity, even as he also celebrates spiky debate across dividing lines. And his fascination with the cultures and subcultures of different musical genres also prompts a thorny, not-unrelated question: Do musical genres actually refer to music, or do they refer to a set of preordained beliefs about how music should sound, who should make it, and who should listen to it?

We take for granted that “country” is a coherent category, but if you ask 10 country fans to describe their beloved music, you’ll likely get 10 different visions of a canon that delineates what is country and, just as important, what isn’t. Hank Williams is unimpeachable, but Lil Nas X’s “Old Town Road” will continue to spark intra-genre brawls for years. Or we could note the glaring paucity of post-Hendrix Black artists on classic-rock-radio playlists, despite the fact that many Black musicians—Eddie Hazel, Nile Rodgers, and Prince, to name a few—continued to play electric guitars (and quite well!) after 1970. This absence might suggest that the rockist impulse to relentlessly guard musical boundaries betrays another ism that starts with *r*. Genres, as Sanneh’s discussions reveal, thrive on shared tenets, but need

to be flexible and resist the pull of prescriptive conservatism, or they will gradually devour themselves.

The memoirish bent of Sanneh's book lends a retrospective quality to his project. He ends up placing a heavier emphasis on what musical genres were rather than what they are—a slant that may lead a younger reader, reared on Spotify instead of Sam Goody stores, to reasonably wonder whether *Major Labels* is telling a story that's already over. In his introduction, Sanneh notes the current predominance of "hip-hop hybrids that exist just beyond the reach of genre," and asks, "Is it possible that, when we finally have easy access to just about any song we want, many of us end up wanting to listen to the same thing?" A Gen Z skeptic might add: In a streaming age when musical omnivorousness is more widespread than ever before, what's the point of categorization in the first place?

In his final chapter, Sanneh reflects on the original context of his "Rockism" essay, and how dramatically things have changed in the 17 years since. He seems mostly pleased with the demise of rockism's imperialist spirit, but is clearly ambivalent about the extent of poptimistic hegemony. The notion that all-embracing appreciation is the ideal state of musical fandom—that all tastes should be accepted as equally valid—bespeaks a broader musical homogeneity that lacks an edge: "highly compatible" pop songs "blending seamlessly" on playlists and positive reviews from critics becoming all too predictable. Perhaps most of all, Sanneh laments the waning of the fervent fan. "It's startling to think that we might now be choosing," he writes, "to take our musical tastes home and curl up on the couch." If complaining about music is indeed a way of complaining about other people, as he argues, it's also a way of connecting to those inside and outside our musical tribe—a sign of caring what they think, and of resisting the pull of atomized isolation.

Sanneh steps back to nod briefly at the future that such tamping-down of music-driven passions might portend, in which listening to popular music ceases to be a way to construct identity and becomes "merely a pastime, like watching movies," or a pursuit (like video games) that plenty of people simply choose not to engage in. I wonder if we're already there. Consider how many of Spotify's most popular playlists are structured not around

genres but rather around activities. The service offers whole categories of playlists designed for, say, working out, gaming, cooking, studying, even sleeping: in other words, music to be listened to while you're involved in something that's presumably more important to you than listening to music.

The auditory nature of music lends itself to this as no other art does. With the exception of instructional videos and maybe pornography, I can't think of much film that's explicitly marketed as something to be watched while you're otherwise occupied. Reading, too, doesn't leave room for multitasking. Spotify certainly didn't invent the idea of background music, but at least record companies didn't tend to sell you music on the explicit premise that you didn't need to pay attention to it.

Spotify's business model is expressly *not* rooted in music or musical quality. It's driven by the amount of time you listen to Spotify. The company doesn't sell songs; it sells subscriptions, and user data are probably its most lucrative commodity. Over the years, Spotify has been periodically accused of padding massively popular playlists like "Peaceful Piano" with "fake artists" and royalty-free music to avoid paying royalties to working musicians. Spotify has mostly denied the accusations, but their existence alone raises uncomfortable questions. Would listeners even notice? Would they care?

Arguing about genres and our rival musical tastes is a way of investing in music itself. Such debates are forms of engagement with art and with one another, exhortations to pay attention—and to refuse to allow music to be something that happens while we're doing other things. The punk hard-liner and the rap snob and the rockist may have all been insufferable, but no one ever accused them of indifference. Music and the people who make it need to be cared about—stridently, not gently.

This article appears in the November 2021 print edition with the headline "In Defense of the Insufferable Music Fan." When you buy a book using a link on this page, we receive a commission. Thank you for supporting The Atlantic.

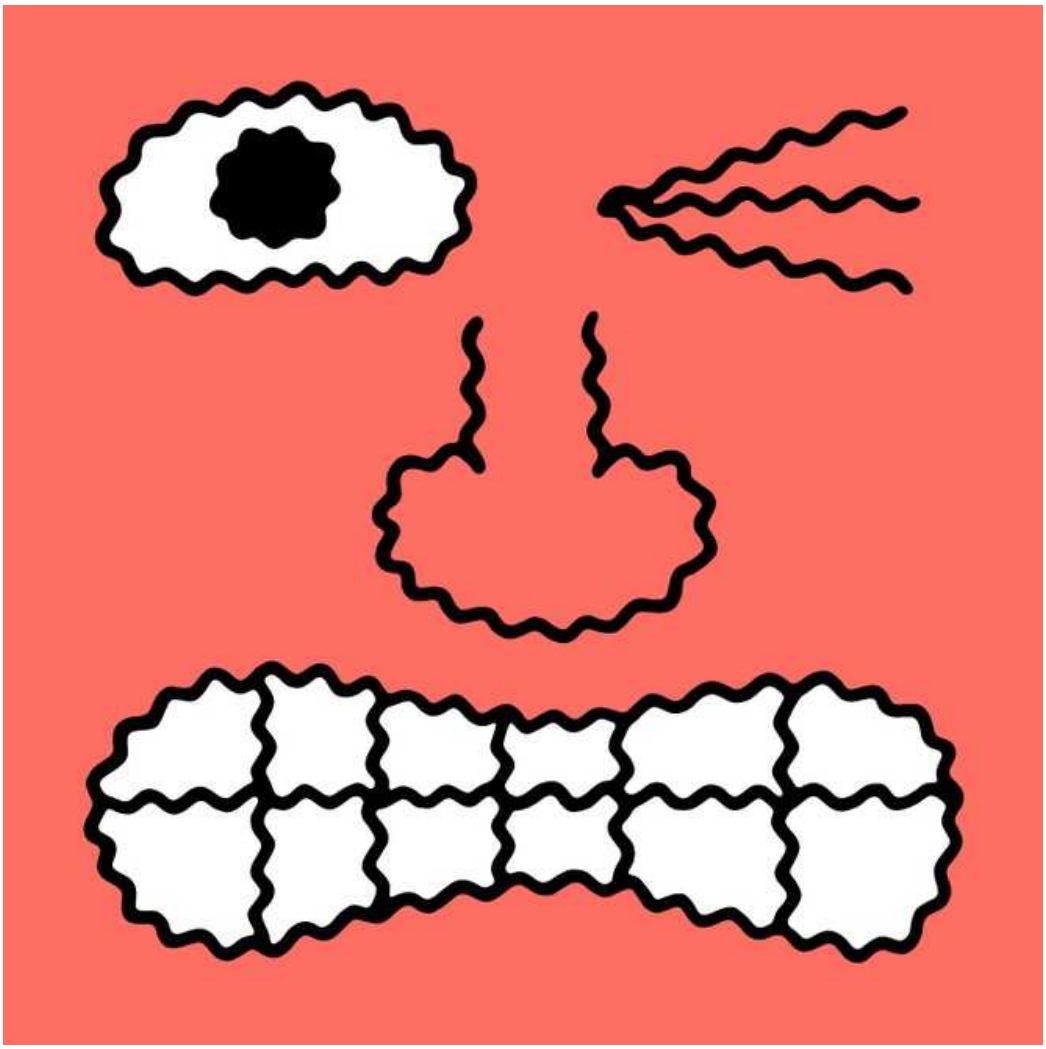
Departments

- **An Ode to Being Yelled At**
  Everyone, now and then, needs a good and thorough denouncing. -- James Parker

An Ode to Being Yelled At

Why It's Good to Be Yelled At

By James Parker



To start with, you probably deserve it.

Not for *this*—not for whatever it is you're being yelled at about—but for the other stuff. You know what I'm talking about. The innumerable tiny

offenses. All the evasions, hedgings, dodgings, half-assings, bloodless ill-doings, accumulated in darkness. In the present moment, the present state of yelled-at-ness, you may be the victim of a misunderstanding. An injustice, even. But in general, yes, you should be denounced. By the blow of a ram's horn in a beam of biblical light. Gongs of judgment should clash around you, even if they're the wrong gongs. Everybody, now and then, needs to be yelled at.

Let's go beyond morals. What about the *rush*? The eventful physiology of being yelled at? Your skin prickles; your armpits fizz. The lights in your limbic system are blinking on and off. Your amygdala is squawking like a car alarm. You're in a fascinating place. Look around: There might be treasures here, undiscovered images, poems wrapped glittering around the brain stem.

Then there's the yeller, the source of the noise. Can you appreciate *their* transformation, the changes *they* are going through? Before your eyes, a person is being *magnified*—rhetorically and physically inflated, pulsing with a wrathful radiance. You are seeing this person at twice their normal size. You are seeing them, in a way, in their splendor.

And also their vulnerability. Their preposterousness. Look at them, quivering away. You've really set them off. Do they even know what they're saying?

In my other gig, as an editor, I get yelled at by writers. Generally with complete justification. So I nod, I absorb, I mollify, etc. I try to follow the program of Adam Yauch—MCA from the Beastie Boys—a witty and ironical hooligan who in his later years became a wonderfully earnest Buddhist: "If others disrespect me or give me flak / I'll stop and think before I react / Knowing that they're going through insecure stages / I'll take the opportunity to exercise patience."

On one occasion, however, the yelling overwhelmed me. I took a slurp from the goblet of chaos and started yelling back. And like magic, it stopped. The universe of yelling was abruptly quieted. Some kind of elemental equalization had taken place. I felt like the great firefighter Red Adair, who

used to extinguish flaming oil wells by literally blowing them out with a blast of high explosives.

And then, post-yell, the world is altered. As in Ted Hughes's "Wind," after a stormy night "the hills had new places." You and the yeller may never forgive each other. But you know each other a little better. Next time, with luck and skill, you'll find a way not just to survive it, but to relish it. Is it difficult? Are *you* difficult? What if they're right? Open your ears, yellee, and take it.

This article appears in the November 2021 print edition with the headline "Ode to Being Yelled At."

Poetry

- **Ode to Joy**
  -- Billy Collins

Ode to Joy

Billy Collins: ‘Ode to Joy’

By Billy Collins

Friedrich Schiller called Joy the spark of divinity
but she visits me on a regular basis,
and it doesn’t take much for her to appear—
the salt next to the pepper by the stove,
the garbage man ascending his station
on the back of the moving garbage truck,
or I’m just eating a banana
in the car and listening to Buddy Guy.

In other words, she seems down-to-earth,
like a girl getting off a bus with a suitcase
and no one’s there to meet her.
It’s a little after four in the afternoon,
one of the first warm days of spring.
She sits on her suitcase to wait

and slides on her sunglasses.
How do I know she’s listening to the birds?

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