

MARCH 2022  
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ESTD. 1857



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# The Man in the Midnight-Blue Six-Ply Italian-Milled Wool Suit

A perfect suit, made by an expert tailor out of superlative fabric, would do nothing less than transform me.

by Gary Shteyngart



A fine suit made just for me. From the best fabrics. By the best tailor. Paired with the best bespoke shoes.

A suit that would make me feel at ease, while declaring to others, “Here is a man who feels at ease.” A suit that would be appreciated by the world’s most heartless maître d’. A suit that would see me through the immigration checkpoints of difficult countries. A suit that would convince readers that the man in the author photo has a sense of taste beyond the Brooklyn consensus of plaid shirt and pouf of graying hair.

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The suit would serve as the perfect carapace for a personality overly dependent on anxious humor and jaundiced wit, a personality that I have been trying to develop since I saw my lightly mustached *punim* in the mirror as a pubescent boy and thought, *How will I ever find love?* The suit would transcend my physicality and bond with my personality directly. It would accompany me through the world’s great salons, the occasional MSNBC appearance, and, most important, the well-compensated talks at far-flung universities. The suit would be nothing less than an extension of myself; it would be a valet preceding me into the room, announcing with a light continental accent, “Mr. Gary and his suit are here now.” Finding this perfect suit, made by the most advanced tailor out of superlative fabric, would do nothing less than transform me.

Before there is a suit, there is a body, and the body is terrible.

First there is my shortness (5 foot 5 and a half, with that “half” doing a lot of work). Being short is fine, but those missing inches are wedded to a narrow-shouldered body of zero distinction. Although I am of Russian and Jewish extraction, the continent whose clothing stores make me feel most at ease is Asia. (I once bought an off-the-rack jacket in Bangkok after the clerk examined me for all of three seconds.) However, this is not exactly an Asian body either, especially when I contrast myself with the natural slimness of most of my Asian friends. Just before my bar mitzvah, I got a set of perfect B-cup knockers and had to squeeze into a “husky” suit to perform the ritual yodeling at the synagogue. But that’s not all. Some hideously mismanaged childhood vaccination in Leningrad created a thick keloid scar running the length of my right shoulder. The shame of having this strange pink welt

define one side of me led to a slumped posture favoring my left shoulder. When I finally found people to have sex with me—I had to attend Oberlin to complete the task—my expression upon disrobing resembled that of a dog looking up at his mistress after a bowel movement of hazmat proportions.

The clothes before the suit were as bad as the body.

I was born in the Soviet Union in 1972 and was quickly dressed in a sailor's outfit with white tights and sexy little shorts, then given a balalaika to play with for the camera. The fact that Russia now fields one of the world's most homicidal armies can partially be explained by photos such as this. On other occasions I was forced to wear very tight jogging pants with a cartoon bunny on them, or a thick-striped shirt dripping with medals from battles I had never seen. These outfits did make me feel like I belonged to something—in this case, a failing dictatorship. I left the U.S.S.R. before I could join the Young Pioneers, which would have entailed wearing a red tie at a tender age, while prancing about and shouting exuberant slogans such as "I am always ready!"

I was born in the Soviet Union in 1972 and was quickly dressed in a sailor's outfit with white tights and sexy little shorts.



*Top:* The author, about 6 years old, in Leningrad, dressed as a sailor and forced to play balalaika under a hanging carpet. *Bottom:* About a year later, in Rome, his parents buy him a normal Western sweater. (Courtesy of Gary Shteyngart)

What I wasn't ready for, however, was immigration to Queens. I arrived in New York in 1979 with the immigrant's proverbial single shirt, although my parents had managed to snag a cute Italian V-neck sweater during the few months we spent in Rome on our way to America, a sweater that would serve me for the next half decade (as mentioned, I did not grow much). The Hebrew day school to which I was sentenced for eight years began a clothing drive for me, and I was rewarded with pounds of old Batman and Robin T-shirts, which made me look like a Soviet-refugee poster child. It's worth noting that, growing up, I never thought, *They hate me for my clothes or my poverty or my lack of English skills*. This realization would come later, in hindsight. For the longest time, I thought that I was hated for the essential state of being myself; the clothes were more a symptom than a cause. My school may have been Jewish, but I somehow found myself in the throes of Calvinist predestination. For as long as I was myself, I deserved these clothes. Around this time, the idea of becoming an entirely different person took root—*How will I ever find love? This is how*—an idea that would be expanded for four decades, until it finally led me to The Suit.

High school found me trying to blend in with a suburban outlay of clothes that my now middle-class family could finally afford. These were surfer T-shirts from Ocean Pacific and other brands that suburbanites who survived the 1980s might remember: Generra, Aéropostale, Unionbay. Unfortunately, I did not go to high school in Benetton Bay, Long Island, but in Manhattan, where these shirts were immediately a joke. (This would become a pattern. By the time I figure something out fashion-wise, I'm already two steps behind.) At a high-school job, my boss bought me a set of colorful *Miami Vice*-style shirts and jackets. These proved ridiculous at Oberlin, where dressing in janitor uniforms from thrift shops was considered the height of style. (Ironically, I had worked as a janitor during the summer, at the same nuclear laboratory that employed my father.)

After college, I fell in with a crowd of artsy, ketamine-addicted hipsters, and together we managed to gentrify several Brooklyn neighborhoods during the late '90s. One of my friends, who was especially fashion-conscious, began to dress me at the high-priced secondhand emporium Screaming Mimis. The clothes she told me to buy were very itchy, mostly Orlon and Dacron items from '70s brands such as Triumph of California, but these tight uniforms, like their Soviet predecessors, made me feel like I was playing a part in a

grander opera, while also serving as a form of punishment. On nervous dates, I would sometimes have to run to the bathroom to try to angle my acrylic armpits under the dryer.

Because I was a writer who worked in bed, I mostly did not need a suit, although when I got married, in 2012, I went down to Paul Smith to get a herringbone number that I thought was just fine, if not terribly exciting. I bought a J.Crew tuxedo for black-tie benefits. Once, I did a reading sponsored by Prada and was given a nice gray jacket, pants, and a pair of blue suede shoes as compensation. Come to think of it, there was also a scarf. As a final note, I will say that I am incredibly cheap and that shopping for clothes has always raised my blood pressure. Leaving Screaming Mimis after spending more than \$500 would always end in me getting terribly drunk to punish myself for the money I had blown on such a frivolous pursuit.

When I reached the age of 50, mildly prosperous and with a small family, I met a man named Mark Cho. We discovered each other because of a mutual love of wristwatches (a costly middle-aged hobby I had recently acquired), and because I knew about his classic-menswear store, [the Armoury](#), with locations in New York and Hong Kong. The Armoury has been called “a clubhouse for menswear nerds”; if you’re looking for, say, a cashmere waistcoat in “brown sugar,” you have found your home. I had even given one of the characters in my latest novel, a dandy from a prominent Korean chaebol family, an article of clothing from that store to wear.

### [Read: The future of marketing is bespoke everything](#)

We met for dinner at Union Square Cafe, and I liked him (and his clothes) immediately. Mark was almost always dressed in a jacket and tie, and would often sport a vest along with spectacles made of some improbable metal. What I loved about him was how comfortable he appeared in his medley of classical attire, and how, despite the fact that all of his garments had been chosen with precision, he gave the impression that he had spent very little time and thought on which breathable fabrics to settle over his trim body. He looked like he was, to use my initial formulation, at ease.

Later, I would learn that this whole look could be summarized by the Italian word *sprezzatura*, or “studied carelessness,” and later still I learned of something that the Japanese had discovered and refined: “Ivy style,” which is basically studied carelessness goes to Dartmouth. For the time being, I knew that I liked what I saw, that my inner lonely immigrant—the one who is always trying to find a uniform that will help me fit in—was intrigued. Mark once gave me an Armoury safari jacket, the very same one worn by the character in my novel, and its light, unflappable linen proved perfect for my summer readings around Germany and Switzerland that year.

Everywhere from starchy Zurich to drunken Cologne to cool-as-fuck Berlin, the jacket would pop out of a suitcase and wrinkle itself in seconds, yet it was also stylish and seemingly impervious to the odors of my non-Teutonic body. It was, to use Hemingway-esque prose, damn well perfect, and I immediately knew I wanted more.

I had lived in Italy in my 30s and met many aristocrats there. Those bastards had *sprezzatura* to burn, but when I asked them the make of their suits and jackets, they would smile and tell me it was the work of a single tailor down in Naples or up in Milan. *Ah*, I would say to myself, *so that's how it is*. Given my outlook on life, owning a bespoke suit was not an outcome I was predestined for. The Prada jacket I had been given, which fit me well enough, was the most that my Calvinist God would ever grant me.

But over more martinis and *onglets au poivre* with Mark, I began to understand the parameters of a fine bespoke suit and its accessories: bespoke shirts and bespoke shoes. I also began to timidly ask questions of a financial nature and learned that the price of owning such a wardrobe approached and then exceeded \$10,000. I did not want to pay this kind of entry fee. Given my own family’s experience in fleeing a declining superpower, I try to have money saved with which to escape across the border. Unlike watches, a suit could not be resold in Montreal or Melbourne.

The suit would be nothing less than an extension of myself; it would be a valet preceding me into the room, announcing with a light continental accent, “Mr. Gary and his suit are here now.”

A brief but generative conversation with my editors at this magazine soon paved the way for my dream to become possible. At a particularly unsüber

dinner with a visiting Japanese watchmaker, I whispered to Mark the extent of my desires. Yes, it would take a lot of work, a lot of research, and possibly travel to two other continents. But it could be done. At the right expense, with the most elegant and sturdy of Italian-milled fabrics, and with the greatest of Japanese tailors, a superior suit could be made for anyone, even for me.

In religious school, I studied the Torah and the Talmud, which were okay but failed to leave a deep impression. At Oberlin, I read Gramsci's notebooks from prison; those were fine, but a little too carceral for my airy disposition. Mark sat me down with the foundational texts more relevant to my lived experience, as they say. Or at least the experience I hoped to live. The canonical texts of male fashion, and I urge them upon any aspiring dandy, are *Dressing the Man*, by Alan Flusser, and *True Style*, by G. Bruce Boyer (that name alone deserves a cummerbund). I would also slip in an interesting national study, *Ametora: How Japan Saved American Style*, by the well-dressed intellectual W. David Marx, whom I would meet in Tokyo soon enough. Like the diligent student I had rarely been before, I took copious notes: *American look, dart, London shrunk, natural shoulder, weft, warp*. I have worn clothes all my life but never known a single thing about them. It was like not knowing the difference between freshly caught tilefish and farm-bred tilapia; each fills your stomach, but only one tastes good.

Formal male fashion traces back to two personalities: Beau Brummell, the sharp-witted proto-dandy of the early 19th century without whom the modern suit would be unthinkable (and who reportedly spent five hours a day getting dressed), and Edward VIII, the Nazi admirer and short-term king better known as the Duke of Windsor. These two insufferable assholes are mostly responsible for how men dress today. "With Brummell," Flusser notes, "male style became a matter of impeccable fit and cut, exquisite detail, and immaculate cleanliness." Before Brummell, the aristocracy dressed in rich, smelly materials; after, styles were adapted from military uniforms—think of the broad shoulders of a British pinstripe suit, for example. The duke took Brummell's simplicity and "ran to Baroque elaboration," Boyer wrote. "District checks, windowpane plaids, bold stripes, and tartans were his true métier."

In the battle between the 19th-century dandy's stark simplicity and the duke's playful elaborations, I find myself choosing the former. My personality is colorful enough without tartans; let the suit merely contain it. Whatever the duke's "district check" is, I will leave it uncashed.

On May 24 of the fateful year 2024, a plane from Tokyo landed in New York City, carrying one of the most meticulously attired men in existence. His name is Yuhei Yamamoto, and he is the preeminent representative of Ivy style, that mode of dress that Americans appreciate yet only the Japanese fully understand.

The British suit, in all its City of London severity, morphed into different shapes around the world. The Italians made particularly interesting work of it. The Milanese suit was the most British-like, but as you traveled farther down the boot to Florence, Rome, and Naples, the tailors became more freehanded; the colors and fit became jauntier and more Mediterranean, more appreciative of bodies defined by crooked lines and curves and exploded by carbohydrates. Meanwhile, in America, as always, we went to work. The suit became a uniform that stressed the commonality and goodness of Protestant labor and church attendance without any further embellishments. It came to be known as the "sack suit." In the 1950s, Brooks Brothers furthered this concept with an almost subversively casual look: a jacket with natural-width shoulders that hung straight from the body, and plain-front trousers. This, along with other American touches, such as denim, became the basis for Ivy-style clothes that the Japanese of the '60s made into a national obsession, and that culminated in a wholly different approach to workwear, office wear, and leisure wear. Today, you can't go into a Uniqlo without seeing the aftereffects of Japanese experimentation with and perfection of our "Work hard, pray hard" wardrobe ethos.

I met Yamamoto-san at the Upper East Side branch of Mark Cho's Armoury empire. The moment I first saw him, I was scared. No one could be this well-dressed. No one could be so secure in a tan three-piece seersucker suit that didn't so much hang from his broad shoulders as hover around them in expectation. No one's brown silk tie could so well match his brown polka-dot pocket square and the thick wedge of only slightly graying hair floating above his perfectly chiseled face. This man was going to make a suit for me? I was not worthy.

Yamamoto-san examined me briefly and said, “Sack suit.”



The author's chest is expertly measured by the master tailor Yuhei Yamamoto at the Upper East Side location of the Armoury. (Peter Fisher for *The Atlantic*)

The diagnosis stung at first. I was already aware of the provenance of the sack suit, which had clothed men up and down the very avenue (Madison) right outside Mark's store for almost a century. Was I not more than an Excel jockey or a finance bro whose oppressive job had him ready to be put into a sack? Were my curves, at least the double trouble posed by my tatas (true, they had shrunk and mellowed with age), not worthy of something with a little bit more Florentine flair, if not full-on Neapolitan decadence?

“Sack suit,” Yamamoto-san repeated. He then explained through a translator that I was, in his eyes, “full of character.” I had heard this sentiment before, and not always in the form of a compliment, but wanted elaboration. “You're a character,” he said. “You're an authentic New Yorker. You transcend fashionable suits. As an authentic New Yorker, you need a sack suit.”

He and Mark began to talk about the master plan for my body. Yamamoto-san would make a drape-cut suit that would emphasize my slimness, and “flatter” my chest. The pants would accentuate my legs while making me look taller than 5 foot 5 (and a half).

“You can hide a multitude of sins with a good suit,” Mark said. The Calvinist inside me blanched.

For the first time in my life, I felt nonphysician, nonlover hands all over me —measuring, prodding, taking stock. The thousands of dollars being spent on this project were not just creating a garment; they were affording me a new level of care and involvement. It was the sartorial version of having a concierge doctor. “At the fitting stage,” Mark said, “you’ll feel like a woman getting haute couture. Why should women have all the fun?”

*Yes, I thought. Why should they?* We retired to the Armoury’s garden to smoke half a dozen short Davidoff cigars and discuss matters some more. “Clothing is a visual language,” Mark said. “What we have to divine is: What is a Gary Shteyngart suit?”

I puffed on my cigar, feeling seen. “Your head has to sit in a certain way on your frame,” Mark said. I pictured my head above the suit, like the dot at the top of an inverted exclamation point. The suit, according to Mark, would focus attention on my head, which was definitely where I wanted the attention to fall. After mastering English in Hebrew day school and social democracy at Oberlin, I had always made the right sounds with my head. (“I want to make a suit that accentuates my client’s character,” Yamamoto-san had told me. “I don’t want a suit that speaks more than the character.”)

“The best body type for a suit,” Mark went on, “is one that is slightly unathletic and also stoops slightly so that it hangs better.” *That’s me!* I thought, shocked that what I’d considered a debility had turned out to be a strength. “Yamamoto-san will make a softer, rounder, more natural shoulder,” Mark continued. “He will cut closer to the hips. You don’t want a pumpkin shape.”

“Most certainly not,” I said.

Back inside, Yamamoto-san had set the music system to his beloved Chuck Berry and had spread out ancient *Esquire* and *GQ* magazines. “I will make you a suit from the golden age of American style,” the tailor was saying. “I will make your legs even more beautiful.” We were looking at intimidating books of fabric swatches. I had signaled that I wanted the suit to be ready for nights of leisure as well as labor; drunken dinners at Frenchette as well as university readings and television appearances. This led us to the darker side of the color spectrum, until we settled on midnight blue. “Six-ply is more durable, and it travels well,” Mark was saying. “There’s more return. See how it bounces back more quickly? Fewer wrinkles.”

That all sounded great, but I was both intrigued and confused. What the hell is “six-ply”? How is yarn even made? Mark invited me to attend a fabric fair in Milan in July, then to journey to the nearby fabric mill, where the materials for my suit would be prepared. Next, we would fly to Hong Kong to have the appropriate shirts made by the fine shirtmaker Ascot Chang, and on to Tokyo for a second fitting with Yamamoto-san, as well as a fitting for a pair of shoes at the atelier of the master shoemaker Yohei Fukuda.

“Sure,” I said.

Somewhere in the heavens, my Calvinist God was preparing his lightning bolts.

There are many days between May and July. How many exactly I cannot tell you, as I am not a mathematician, but definitely too many when you’re waiting for a series of garments to change your life.

In the meantime, Mark threw a black-tie party to celebrate 10 years of the Armoury in New York, and I put on my J.Crew tuxedo, hoping no one would sneer at its humble pedigree. The party was sponsored by Campari, and I was soon coasting on boulevardiers and chatting with a gaggle of short menswear nerds and the attractive women who loved them. As with most Midtown parties, the mix had its share of financiers, but also included war-crimes prosecutors and museum executives. “Are you in fashion?” I overheard one attendee asking another. “No, I’m a Marxist.” (And, I later found out, an architect.)

## From the June 2009 issue: Fashion in dark times

Alex Seo, a Korean American man dressed stunningly in a white double-breasted, peak-lapel tuxedo jacket, told me that when his grandfather, an academic, had landed in the Midwest from Korea many years ago without a proper outfit, the man who'd sponsored him had said, "Every professor should have a tweed jacket," and then handed him his own. The story reminded me of the clothing drive that was started for me at my yeshiva, although this tale had a kinder, more midwestern ending (Alex's father and his Armoury suit were also at the party). Looking around the room and talking to people, I realized just how many of us were either immigrants or the children of immigrants. The need for a fine suit became obvious. It was the final certificate of naturalization.

I tried to take my mind off my desperate need for bespoke clothing. A conference brought me to Tbilisi, Georgia, and then I tooled around Istanbul, Rome, and Lucca for a bit. Finally, the fabric fair arrived, and, accompanied by my old friend, the stylish Tuscan resident, art historian, and translator Shilpa Prasad, I traveled to Milan, where Mark was waiting for us.

"We're starting way upstream," Mark told me, meaning that we were going deep into the nitty-gritty of how a suit is made. Amid the city's heartless July humidity, he took us to a neoclassical palazzo, where [Dormeuil](#), a family-run French maker of high-end fabrics, presented us with endless espresso and samples. I wasn't here to shop, just to learn what was possible.





Testing crease-resistant fabric at Vitale Barberis Canonico, the oldest fabric mill in Italy (Bea De Giacomo for *The Atlantic*)

What followed was an impressive display of discernment. Mark and his colleague Jan would feel the square of a fabric swatch, then scrunch it up and watch as it regained its composure. “Fabric drives our collection,” Mark said. “For Hong Kong, this is good winter fabric,” he said of one sample. Because Hong Kong represents a large portion of his business, he is very attuned to that part of his clientele. “This one’s too hairy,” he said of another. “Hong Kong people don’t like things that are hairy.” *Most people don’t, I thought, sadly.*

Shilpa was amazed by how Mark and Jan knew which samples they would buy from just a cursory feel. “It’s like muscle memory,” Jan told her.

“We’ll take four meters,” Mark told the fabric salesman, and the barcode adjoining one swatch was zapped. The price for this particular fabric, which would become a three-piece suit for another client, was about 68 euros a

meter. Shilpa lovingly stroked cloth flecked with gold that clocked in at 380 euros a meter, and visualized the shawl that could be made from it.

Mark explained that some fabrics are better for business suits, others for leisure suits. As an example of the former, he showed me the kind of slightly shiny wool-and-mohair blend that could have been worn by members of the Rat Pack. The fabric for my suit should bridge the gap, Mark said. It should be both beautiful and travel-resistant. “More texture, less sheen.”

The Milano Unica fair took place in a typical soulless convention center on the city’s edge. The booths where the vendors had set up shop were grouped by the type of goods they were hawking: Shirt Avenue, for example. The sellers we visited each gave us a fine cup of espresso and sometimes even a little chocolate, so that by the time I left the fair, I was orbiting Neptune.

We stopped by the esteemed Somerset cloth maker [Fox Brothers](#), which produced the fabric that once draped Winston Churchill and Cary Grant. They favor undyed sheep’s wool and are known for their wool flannel, the kind that was used to make Fred Astaire’s trousers. The clothes made from their fabrics, one trench coat in particular, were gorgeous, but I would have needed to buy a Land Rover to complete the look.

Next we headed down the “street” to the booth for [Vitale Barberis Canonico](#), the mill tasked with producing the fabric for my suit. After we had another coffee, the attractive representatives of the brand presented us with bolts of cloth to feel. “This reminds me of going to sari shops in Bombay,” Shilpa said as we felt our way through the sensuous wares, gasping in delight. I was reminded of Mark’s quip: “Why should women have all the fun?”

A sample of the fabric that would be used for my suit was finally presented to me—the 21 Micron. I was told that the mill’s 21 Micron is made from the wool of Argentinian and Uruguayan sheep that live high in the mountains. Regular, less important sheep are subjected to the cruelty of mulesing, where strips of wool-bearing skin are removed from around their ass, to prevent the parasitic infection of fly larvae. My sheep were not subjected to such horrors. “They are happy sheep,” one dapper representative told me with a wolfish smile.

Touching the yarn as it was being spun was like strumming a gently weeping guitar.

Despite its South American origins, the fabric had a heavy British solidity. I crumpled it up in my fist as I had seen Mark and Jan do, and when I let go, the fabric opened like a flower. “21 Micron is the more exclusive fabric,” the mill’s representative told me. “It is breathable, high-twisted yarn; it will not wrinkle.” Unlike most suits, mine would be made of six-ply yarn. The fabric’s weight, exclusivity, sturdiness, and expense came from the fact that there was simply more of it.

“Six-ply is for the brave,” the dapper man assured me, a sentence I did not understand, but cherished nonetheless.

“Your suit will be business luxury,” Mark told me. “You can wear it into the ground.”

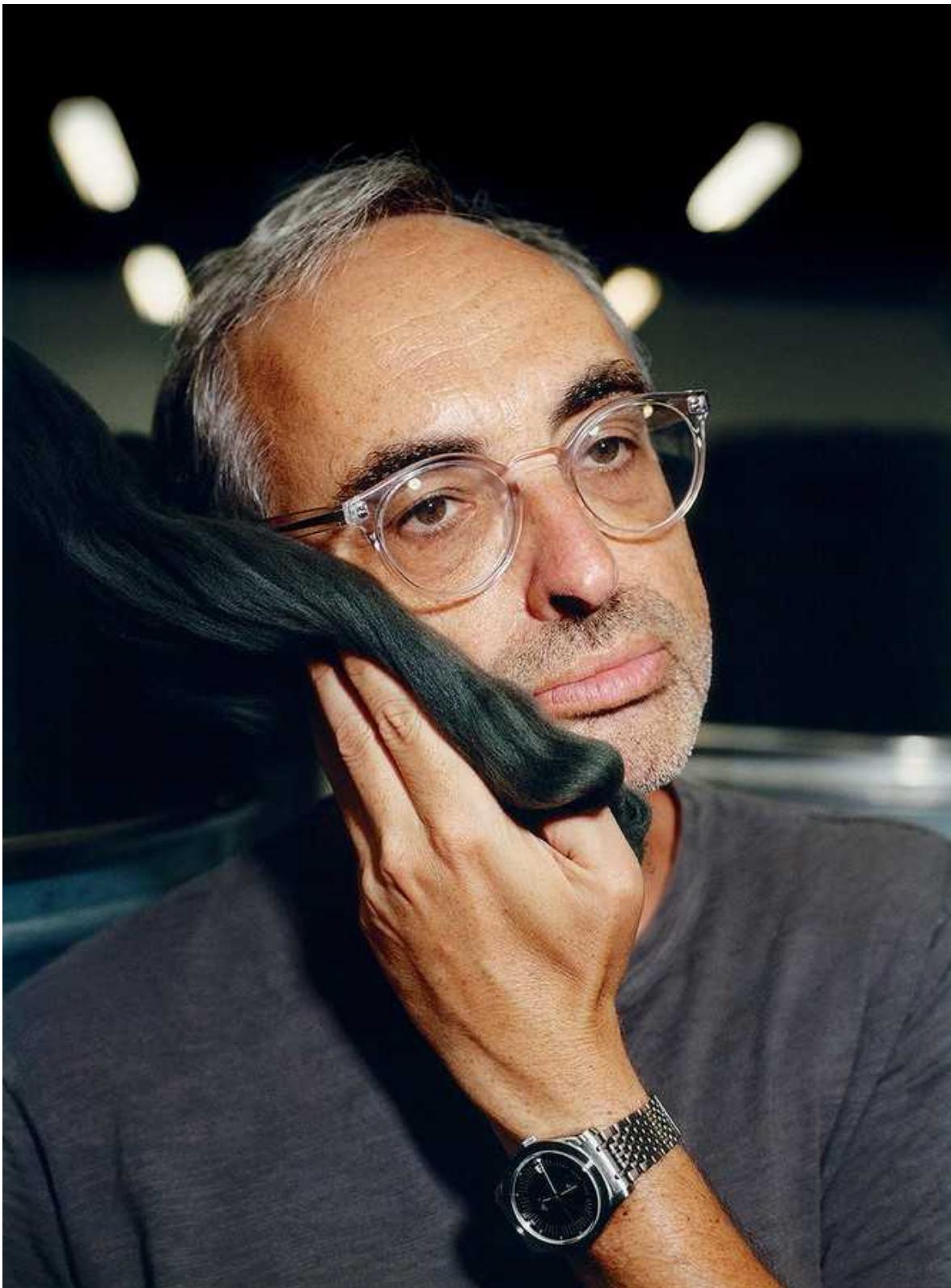
I stared into the fabric, which looked as inky blue as the eternity I hope to fall into after I expire, many fathoms deeper than the Baltic Sea by which I was born. *Soon, I thought, this magical fabric will cover me from my ankles to my neck. And then, maybe, I will be another person.*



The author is confronted with endless amounts of wool at Vitale Barberis Canonico. (Bea De Giacomo for *The Atlantic*)

The next day, Mark and I traveled west of Milan, past rice fields and solar-power farms and shirtless men yawning on balconies, to a village in the Biella region of Piedmont, where Vitale Barberis Canonico is based. The mill's waiting room was filled with volumes that had titles such as *I Am Dandy*, and the magazines *Monsieur* and *The One: Yacht & Design*. Yachtless and without a French appellation, I wondered what the hell I was doing there. The executive offices surrounded a lovely Japanese garden, and as we began our tour, the members of a visiting group of fabric buyers from Taiwan, China, and Japan shyly snuck photos of Mark.

First mentioned in documents in 1663, Vitale Barberis Canonico is truly canonical, the oldest fabric mill in Italy. Our tour guides explained that the water in the Biella region has a very low concentration of minerals, making it soft, unlike the harsh water in other parts of Europe. This adds an extra softness to the fabric, much as pizza crust in Naples would be unimaginable without the city's *acqua*. I touched a clump of Australian wool, and noted how superior my South American sheep was to its antipodean cousin. The seven steps for making wool fabric were explained: washing, gilling (aligning the wool fibers and removing short strands), spinning, dyeing, warping, weaving, and finishing. Giant machines are dedicated to these tasks, and they run all day, mostly without human intervention. The weaving, in which the weft, the horizontal structure, is inserted into the fabric's vertical structure, the warp, is conducted in the world's quietest weaving room. Touching the yarn as it was being spun by a machine was like strumming a gently weeping guitar. I was told that my six-ply yarn was the strongest that Vitale Barberis Canonico produced, and that it had been worsted to eliminate some of its hairiness (Hong Kong readers, rejoice). Finally, this exemplary fabric had been put into a massive machine called the Dolphin 1200, which finishes the fabric and prevents it from shrinking.



The author snuggling with some alarmingly soft wool at the Vitale Barberis Canonico mill (Bea De Giacomo for *The Atlantic*)

In the mill's archives, we examined order books dating back to 1846, as well as a photo of King Charles III and his fun-loving wife, the Queen Consort, who both appear to be fans of the brand. I saw an advertisement for my fabric, which featured a drawing of sheep standing on a road, next to a man leaning against a sports car. A sign behind him pointed to the *ruta del fin del mundo*, "the route to the end of the world." The tagline read: "21 Micron is the final destination of a long journey in search of a family of cloths of the highest quality that guarantee unparalleled strength and crease resistance."

*Is this it?* I thought. *Has my long sartorial journey finally come to an end?*

But my journey had only begun.

On the way to Asia, I watched one of Wim Wenders's latest films, *Perfect Days*, and was struck with the teariness that often hits at 30,000 feet. The film follows an older toilet cleaner in Tokyo, exulting in the care with which he performs his task, the way he makes his work anything but menial. The toilet cleaner's devotion reminded me of something Mark had said about how a true craftsman focuses on just one item, asking himself constantly, *Is this as good as it can be?*

In Hong Kong, Mark brought his obsession with individual crafts to a 100-year-old building off Queen's Road Central, known as the Pedder Building. On the fifth floor, a 6,000-square-foot space called the Pedder Arcade has a distinctly Wong Kar-wai feel, punctuated by broad arches and spinning overhead fans. The Armoury may be the Pedder Arcade's flagship store, but it is just one part of a lifestyle hub for the intelligent moneyed class, where you can buy a signed first-edition set of John le Carré's *Karla Trilogy* for about \$7,000. Mark himself works out of a space called "The Study," where people feel free to drop in and smoke a cigar—some of the world's best cigars are sold out of an anteroom, with the more intense aged Cuban variants smelling, according to Mark, "as good as God's armpit."

Mark is Malaysian Chinese by heritage, but grew up in London, Hong Kong, and Los Angeles and speaks perfect American English, though he will occasionally break a word like *forgotten* into two, adding to his charm. He got his bachelor's degree in economics from Brown and started out in finance. We are similar in that neither of our fathers was perfectly happy

with the career we ultimately chose: wordsmithing and clothes selling. In Milan, I had asked Mark how he'd resolved things with his father. "He died," Mark said.



At the Ascot Chang factory, in Hong Kong, sewers and cutters produce about 45 meticulously made shirts a day. (Leung Man Hei for *The Atlantic*)

In the island's oppressive heat, Mark and I strolled over to a neighboring mall, where [Ascot Chang](#), the renowned maker of shirts and suits, has one of its stores. Justin Chang, the grandson of the founder—the family has been making shirts in Hong Kong since 1953—greeted us and pulled out rolls of fabric (the store has more than 7,000 variations).

I was to have four shirts made to complement my suit. Justin and Mark talked over each other as I pawed at the crisp fabrics.

The fit was good. The fit was perfect. Through the industry of a thoughtful team of cutters and sewers on the edge of Asia, I had finally reached a détente with my body.

We chose four fabrics for the different shirts: a spread-collar dress shirt made in a fine cotton piqué, a traditional white oxford button-down, a vintage-1970s cotton shirt with blue stripes, and my favorite, a chambray shirt with a button-down collar whose uneven yarn gave it a cool and casual look. I reveled in the by-now familiar, almost therapeutic feel of several men pressing measuring tape against my shoulders, chest, and arms. Because I am a watch aficionado, Mark requested that the diameter of the left cuff be slightly larger to expose my timepieces. The formal shirt must not have a pocket, he said, but the easygoing chambray could have a pocket with a button on it. “What does this button convey?” I asked Mark, trying to master all the rules.

“It conveys, *I have a button on my shirt.*”



The author visiting Ascot Chang in Hong Kong to select fabric and be fitted for four bespoke shirts (Leung Man Hei for *The Atlantic*)

One of the shirts had to be rushed for my second fitting with Yamamoto-san in Tokyo in a mere two days. Back at the Pedder Arcade, as I tried on a pair of artisanal-denim jeans, Mark told me that this was a particularly difficult task for Ascot Chang, because of my body's many quirks. "There's a large drop to your right shoulder," Mark said. "It makes it difficult to dial in."

I also apparently have something called "rounded shoulders," which results from a forward head position and a forward pelvic tilt. When I looked up my diagnosis online, I discovered that it is also called "mom posture," a malady that usually afflicts mothers, who have to bend down to take care of their children. I wanted to congratulate myself on my devotion as a parent, but realized that my mom posture must result from a lifetime of slouching my shoulders to hide my breasts and, possibly, from constantly nursing my other child, my phone, while walking.

As I modeled the artisanal denim, Mark and I discovered something else: I have no ass. This is why all my pants fall off me.

"No," I said, immediately predicting what Mark would prescribe. "I can't. It's too *Wall Street*, the movie."

"Suspenders," he said.

The next day, we left the fancy Central district and crossed the bay for the industrial hum of Kowloon East, to see the shirt that was being rushed for our Tokyo departure. In the warm, bright light of the factory, a host of workers was making my chambray shirt. I smiled sheepishly at the men and women toiling overtime to create the special differing armholes that would compensate for my dropped shoulder. Thirty-eight workers at the Ascot Chang factory produce about 45 shirts a day. The cloth cutters are mostly men; the sewers, who do the more complex engineering, such as the cuffs and collars, are mostly women.



The author touring the Ascot Chang factory. The Chang family has been making shirts in Hong Kong since 1953. (Leung Man Hei for *The Atlantic*)

The next morning, the chambray shirt was ready. I tried on my first-ever bespoke garment with trepidation. In the wooden glow of the Ascot Chang shop, I witnessed my first transformation. This was not the suit, but it was the pre-suit, an exquisite blue thing with gleaming charcoal mother-of-pearl buttons and, as I was told by Mark, “quite a strong collar for someone your size.”

But for the first time in my life, the fit was right. The fit was good. The fit was perfect. Through the industry of a thoughtful team of cutters and sewers on the edge of Asia, I had finally reached a détente with my body. I looked at myself in the mirror and there I was: a well-dressed middle-aged man.

Armed with one Ascot Chang shirt, with three more on the way, we left Hong Kong for Tokyo for the final steps of the bespoke journey—the second fitting with Yamamoto-san and a shoe fitting with [Yohei Fukuda](#), “arguably the best shoe money can buy,” according to Mark.

Tokyo is the city for craftspeople, and I was happy to watch Mark buzz around like a hummingbird, searching for perfect accoutrements for his clients. We visited the Ginza branch of [Atelier Jean Rousseau](#), where men in white lab coats perfected a watch strap for a customer's Patek Philippe Ellipse. "Do you have a real rose-gold stitch?" Mark asked. "I know they cost a lot of money."

We cabbed across Ginza to Ortus, a maker of elite bags from materials including hippo, elephant, and seal, where Mark had commissioned a briefcase for an underemployed man of means that contained nothing but a Monopoly set (the Hong Kong–tram edition, naturally, the pieces made in silver). "Does he go around Hong Kong playing Monopoly with his friends?" I asked.

"Well, he's hoping this will make him some friends," Mark said.

That evening I had dinner with W. David Marx, the author of the aforementioned *Ametora*. David is a 6-foot-4 southern WASP-Catholic-Jew hybrid, who also counts Yamamoto-san as a tailor. "It makes you look like an adult," he told me of the suit I would soon wear. "Which is not what people want to look like anymore."

The next morning, I climbed the steps to the second floor of Yamamoto-san's atelier, [Tailor Caid](#), in the hip Shibuya section of Tokyo. Welcome to Caid modern tailoring proclaimed a sign next to a silhouette of a man in a fedora toting a briefcase down an imaginary Madison Avenue. We are not fashion snobs, the sign continued, but we know a few simple rules.

Inside, Yamamoto-san was resplendent in another seersucker suit, this one light blue, a dark-blue pocket square providing contrast. A record player was spinning not just Ella Fitzgerald, but a rare Japanese edition of her work titled *Ella and Nice Guys*. A Harvard pennant hung in the bathroom. There were old, yellowing copies of the Japanese magazines that had made Ivy style synonymous with Japan, with titles such as *Popeye* and *Hot-Dog Press* and headlines including "We Are Real IVY Leaguers." And, finally, I was confronted with the work in progress, draped over a wooden hanger: my midnight-blue suit held together with white basting thread.

I relieved myself beneath the Harvard pennant and, with shaking hands, put on the suit. At this stage in the bespoke process, the basting thread disfigured the jacket, dividing it into quadrants, and the buttons were nothing but stickers. But I could begin to imagine the wonder that the suit would become. The heavy six-ply fabric felt primordially satisfying, like a light suit of armor, but one that managed to cling to my body with near perfection. This second fitting would remove the *near*.

“There is an extended shoulder, but no pad,” Yamamoto-san explained through a translator, negating the horrors of the shoulder-pad-stricken ’80s, but also managing to support my dropped right shoulder. “There is an empty space in the chest,” Yamamoto-san pointed out. Because I stoop so profoundly, he had used the draping technique to, in Mark’s words, “give your chest a little more volume.” The jacket cleverly made my chimichangas all but invisible, while ironically providing them with new space to roam.

“Damn, this is dramatic,” the usually unflappable Mark said.

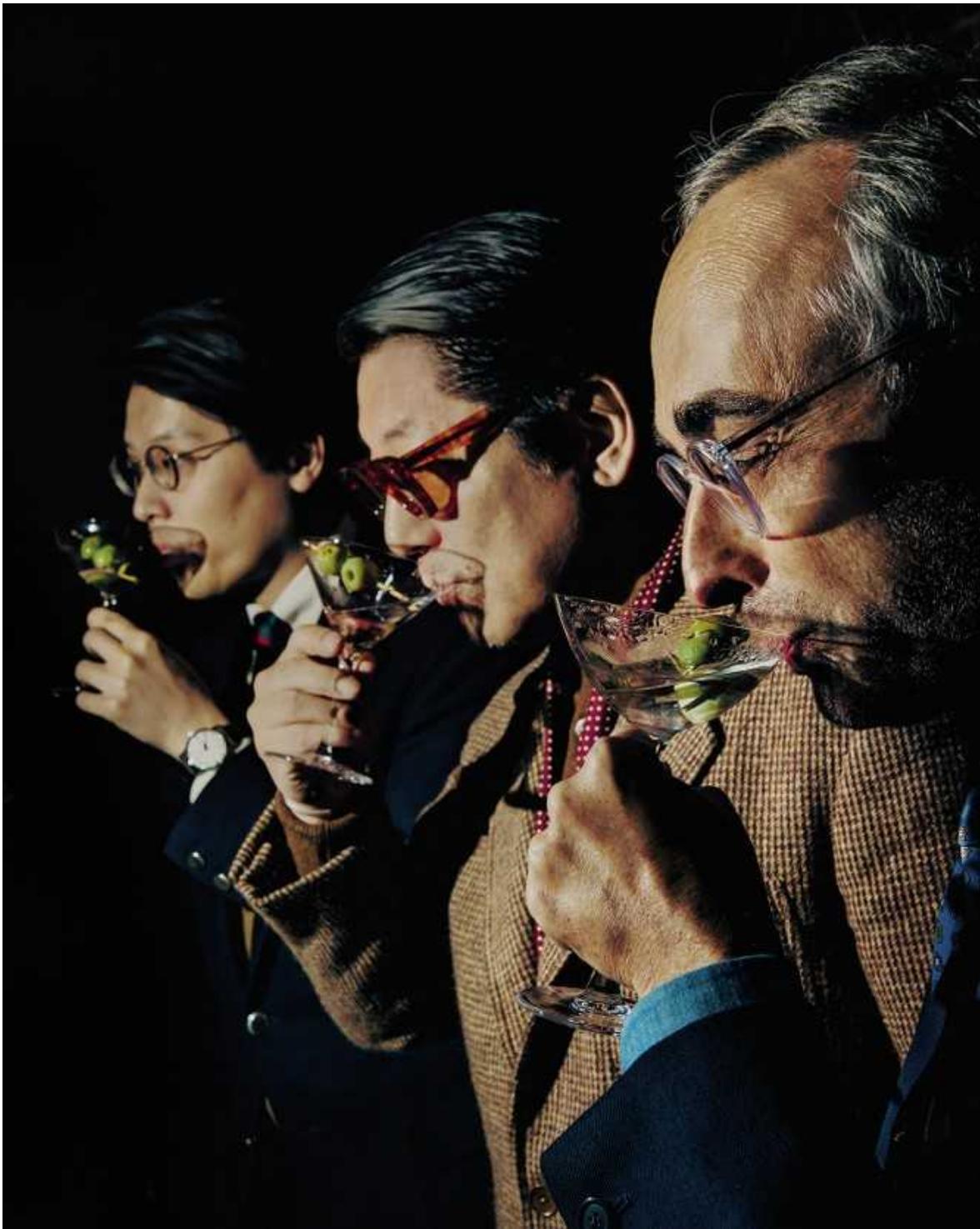
“The way you wear this,” Yamamoto-san said, “it looks like ’50s France, or Alain Delon in the ’60s.”

We talked about areas that needed improvement. I lifted my arms and turned around. “What do we do with Gary’s behind?” Mark asked as the two men searched for my ass. “Apparently you lost some butt since the first fitting.”

“He should wear his pants as snug as possible,” Yamamoto-san said. The dreaded word *suspenders* came up again. “When the pants are above the belly button, everything is in line.”

“He could do some squats,” Mark said, an opinion I would not dignify with a response.

We chose a beautiful turquoise lining to contrast with the outer sobriety of the suit, and also navy buttons made out of nuts. “Into each life, some rain must fall,” Ella crooned on the record player, but I was hardly listening to her.



The author with Mark Cho, the owner of the Armoury (*left*), and Yamamoto-san (*middle*), enjoying a drink at Martiny's bar, in New York City (Dina Litovsky for *The Atlantic*)

To celebrate the suit, we retired to the tailor's favorite bar, Le Zinc, a few minutes' walk from his atelier. Yamamoto-san is the type of Japanese man who surrounds himself with so much perfection that it would be interesting to take him someplace awful, like Hudson Yards or Westfield Garden State Plaza. Le Zinc felt like it had floated in from a former America, too spare and beautiful to provoke nostalgia, only awe. My martini was so excellent, I struggled not to cry. "There's a sentiment in Japan," my tailor said. "We don't want to come to a bar without being well-dressed. There is a sentimentalization of Western culture."

"A Western culture that barely exists," I said.

A few martinis and highballs into our celebration, Yamamoto-san began to talk at length. He'd idolized America since he was a child. He listened to jazz in elementary school and saw the men wearing suits, and he couldn't wait to wear a suit as well. He fell in love with the show *Bewitched*, in which an ad executive named Darrin (originally played by Dick York) was married to a witch named Samantha (Elizabeth Montgomery)—but more important for Yamamoto-san, Darrin worked on Madison Avenue and wore fabulous suits.

I have to pause this story for a minute. Back in Queens, when I was wearing my Robin the Boy Wonder T-shirts and watching television on my grandmother's failing 1960s Zenith set, *Bewitched* had managed to bewitch me as well. My nearly pubescent eyes lightly male-gazed Samantha, but I was equally in love with Darrin and his stark but perfect suits and ties. Though separated by a continent and an ocean, the young Yamamoto-san and I had entertained the same ideas of male fashion.

"A lot of young people today are anti-aging," he continued. "They want their clothes to show their youth. I like the idea of aging, the kind of aging you see in vintage furniture or a vintage watch. Aging is beautiful. When I see a 70-year-old man in Manhattan picking up after a dog while wearing a suit, I applaud."

We continued our discussion over bottles of Barolo at his favorite restaurant, which featured Lucchese cuisine. I had been to the actual Lucca just a month earlier, but the Japanese version of the food, like my Ivy-style suit in

progress, seemed to both canonize and elevate its inspiration. If this part reads like a love letter to Japan and its pasta makers and toilet cleaners, I assure you it is.

According to ancient Japanese custom, a night of karaoke followed, about which I recall only singing Suzanne Vega's child-abuse classic "Luka," to which my audience nodded politely. In the middle of the night, I tripped over the complicated stairs of my hotel suite and almost broke my nose. But I felt fine.

The next day would see the last piece of my wardrobe fall into place. The back-order list for Yohei Fukuda's shoes is so long, the atelier has stopped accepting bespoke-shoe orders from new clients. For the time being, it is near-impossible to get his shoes, so please allow me to enjoy mine by myself. Fukuda-san and his assistants make only eight pairs a month, and each takes 130 to 140 hours of work. The soles are stitched by hand, which makes them a lot more flexible. Much like Yamamoto-san, who interned with a Boston tailor, Fukuda-san attended two years of "shoe college" in Northamptonshire, England, and then worked his way up from repairing soles to creating leather masterpieces in his atelier, by Tokyo's Olympic stadium.

Fukuda-san is perfectly bald, with a luxuriant mustache. His work has been described as "kind of British," which means he references and perfects traditional British shoes with the same brio as my tailor's approach to Ivy style. The British did fine; Yohei Fukuda does better.



The atelier of the shoemaker Yohei Fukuda, in Tokyo (An Rong Xu for *The Atlantic*)

Mark has this theory that bespoke oxfords are not really worth the money, because many fine examples can be found off the rack. But he believes in bespoke loafers. So now is the time to confess another of my body's deficiencies: One of my legs happens to be longer than the other. Since I was a child, I've had to wear inserts in my shoes to account for this discrepancy, and so an easygoing loafer, the pride of America's aristocratic New England class, is sadly not for me.

We surveyed the gleaming shoes arrayed along the length of Fukuda-san's atelier, like icons in a church. "Derby shoes," Mark suggested. I looked over a couple. They were not quite as formal as oxfords, nor as floppy as loafers. Unlike oxfords, they had an open-laced construction that would comfort my calloused piggies during my daily six-mile walks around the countryside.

My final row of samples to examine was rolled out, a collection of hides that would allow us to choose a color. "For derbies, the best place to start is the darkest brown," Mark suggested. I remembered Boyer writing in *True Style*

about how the Italians had taught the world not to be afraid of mixing brown shoes with blue suits.

“Coffee,” Fukuda-san suggested, as we flipped through the hides.

“Maroon,” Mark offered.

“Brown pepper!” I said, as I ran my hands across a suede that seemed spicier, more intense, more brown than the others. Fukuda-san measured and traced every part of my foot, as we discussed adding a big rubber heel for better traction, and a steel toe. As with Yamamoto-san’s suit, my comfort and pleasure would be the biggest factors here; there would be no room for ostentation. *No one must know that these shoes cost \$3,000*, I thought. *No one*.

My derbies would be lined with forest green to remind me of the forests behind my dacha. “Would you like your shoes monogrammed?” Fukuda-san asked. I was tempted to allow this to happen, but my Oberlin education still had some sway. My shoes remain anonymous.

Just over two months later, Yamamoto-san arrived back in New York with my suit. My shoes had emigrated through different channels.

It was November 7, two days after an important American election. I was trying to practice self-care. I couldn’t make my adopted country fall out of love with fascism, but at least I could enjoy my new shoes. Also, I suspected that our new leader would cut my taxes as he had in the past, shuffling money from his supporters into my piggy bank. As an immigrant who had moved from one failed superpower to another, I had learned to take my pleasures wherever I could.



Mark educates the author on how to tie an Old Bertie knot during his final fitting at the Armoury. (Dina Litovsky for *The Atlantic*)

On the night of my suit's unveiling, Mark threw yet another party at the Armoury's Upper East Side location. The evening was warm, almost

summery. Before I was ready to put on my suit, Yamamoto-san showed me how to steam-iron it with his beloved Panasonic travel iron. The Yohei Fukuda shoes were presented to me in a beautiful blond-wood box. “There’s no nail in that box,” one of the Armoury’s salesmen said. “Like a Jewish coffin.”

The suit was a part of me now. “What we have to divine is: What is a Gary Shteyngart suit?” Mark had once asked. Well, now we have divined it.

But as I put on the suit, I felt less Jewish than distinctly Christian, Episcopalian if not Calvinist; in any case, born again. I walked out of the changing room and looked into a mirror. I was contained by midnight blue, my shoulders weighed down with six-ply pleasure, each of my feet covered by what felt like the product of a heavily personalized cow.

“*Yokatta!*” Yamamoto-san cried—roughly, “Thank goodness!”

“*Yokatta,*” Mark said, smiling.



The author stroking the iridescent lining of his suit during his final fitting  
(Dina Litovsky for *The Atlantic*)

While I stood there yammering my gratitude, I noticed that despite the tailor's best efforts, my pants were still sliding off the ghost of my ass. "I also have no tuchus," the Armoury salesman who'd likened my shoebox to a Jewish coffin explained. "There's no shelf on our bodies."

To compensate, I was strapped into a pair of suspenders, and Mark lovingly tied a polka-dot tie around my neck in an Old Bertie knot. Even though I was at least a decade older than he was, I had started to think of Mark as my parent. He demonstrated how using a Bertie knot instead of the usual four-in-hand would benefit a shorter man like me by ending my tie at the waist, not the groin, where our returning president likes his. He thrust his index finger below the knot of my tie and explained that he was making a dimple.

"Braces and polka dots, matching, wow!" Yamamoto-san said in English. He motioned to my nearly transparent Selima Optique frames. "And with glasses color, very nice!"

We'd had many discussions about whether my pants would come with buttons instead of a zipper, to avoid the dreaded "pants tent." But after I had demonstrated to him my love of martinis and the many bathroom visits they inspire, Yamamoto-san had relented with a zipper.

I left the fitting room and walked out into the crucible of menswear society. Although my suit felt Episcopalian, men gathered around me as if I were a bar mitzvah at the bimah. They touched the fabric; they touched my shoulders; they touched my arms and my collar. They followed me out into the Armoury's well-lit backyard.

"It looks like it was painted on you," one man said.

"The back is so clean."

"Your shoulders slope, and this just hugs them."

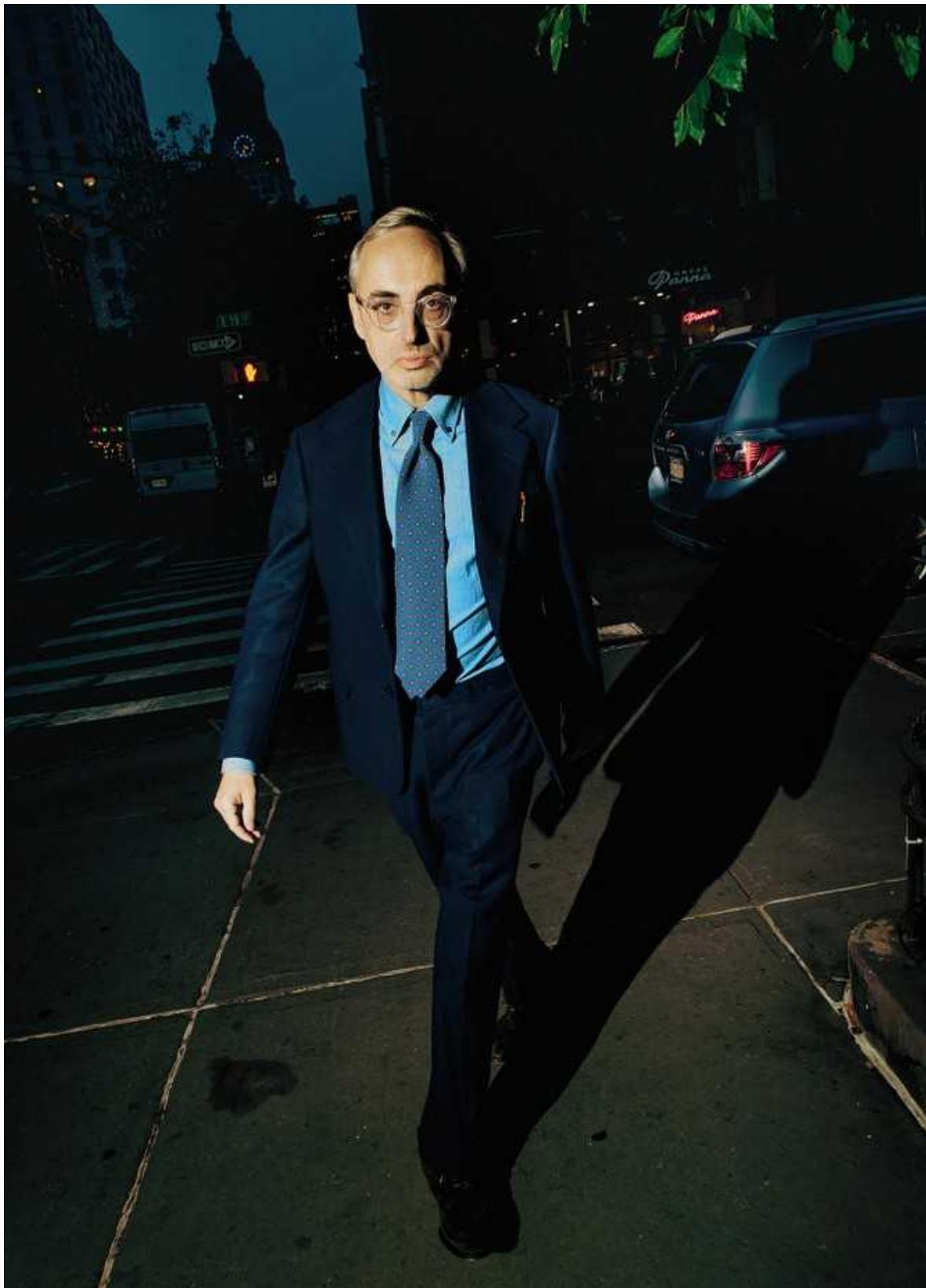
"The neck hugs the collar with no wrinkle."

“The stitching adds texture and visual interest.”

“The weight helps it hang, the drape.”

“That’s a good lapel length.”

“You’re shaming us all tonight.”



The author strolling through New York with his newfound self-esteem (Dina Litovsky for *The Atlantic*)

I opened up my suit, shyly and then proudly, to let folks touch the iridescent lining within. Is this what it was like to be loved in this country? Yamamoto-san took me aside and told me that I must wear my suit all the time, and wear it casually, not just for special occasions. The suit was a part of me now. “What we have to divine is: What is a Gary Shteyngart suit?” Mark had once asked. Well, now we had divined it.

“If this becomes just for special occasions, I haven’t done my job,” Yamamoto-san said.

I promised him that I would never abandon the suit. Every week, I would find a use for it.

And I have kept my promise. I wear my suit regularly and with joy. I can do the Bertie knot in my sleep now. The different Ascot Chang shirts combine with either the polka-dot tie or its less formal counterpart, a silk foulard tie, to create different personalities. “You look like a crooner from the ’50s,” my wife, Esther, said of one combination. “You look like an English deacon,” she said of another.

“Bitch! You’re ready for anything now!” Shilpa wrote from Tuscany.

“I feel like you’re walking differently than you usually do,” my friend Sarah remarked. “You’re strutting a little.”

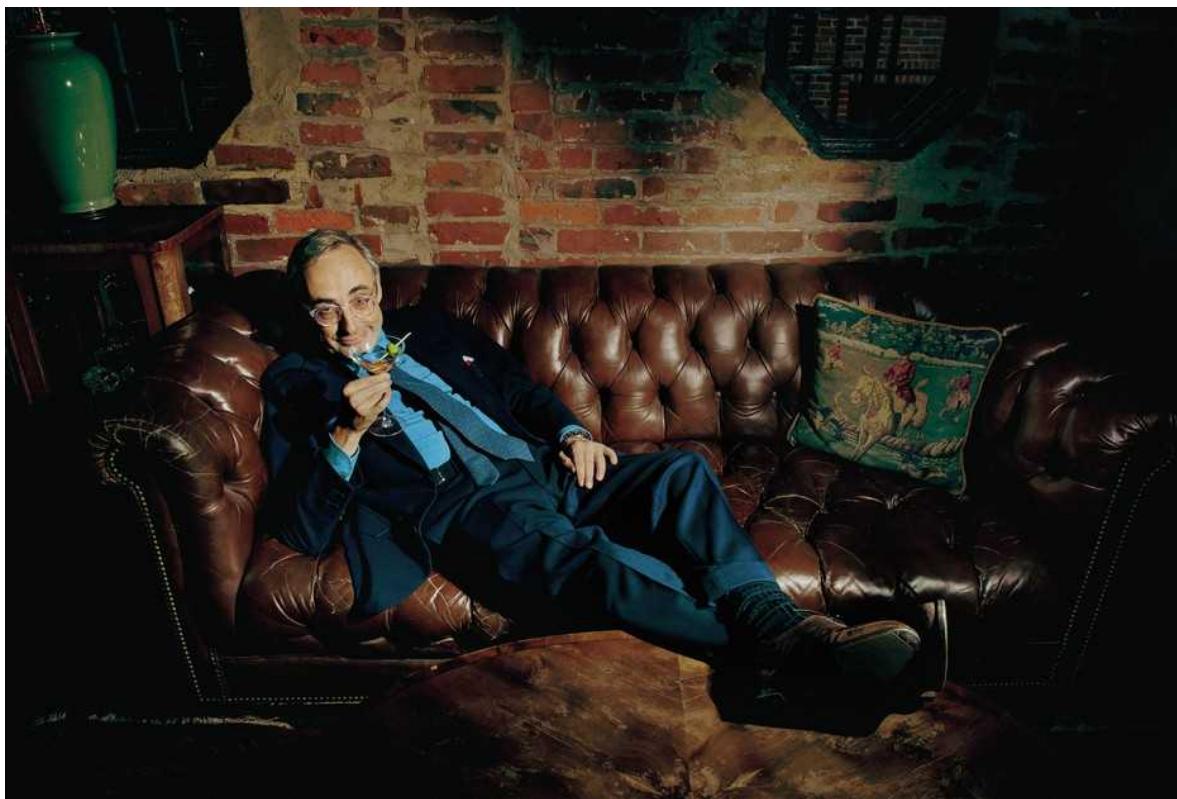
Only my 11-year-old son, Johnny, was unimpressed. “I wear a less comfortable version of that every single day,” he told me, pulling at the collar of his school uniform.

I began to wear my suit to all my meals and to take it into consideration when I ordered. *What would my suit like to eat?* I would ask. The suit wanted shrimp cocktail. Even after the noon hour, the suit wanted steak and eggs with Tabasco sauce and a Bloody Mary. I traveled with my suit to give a reading at the University of Pennsylvania. The suit was a perfect

companion. It sprang out of my suitcase like a golden retriever, with not even the afterthought of a crease on it.

My head floating above the perfect triangle effectuated by my lapels, I gave one of the best readings of my life. Why shouldn't I? I had always been content with my mind, but now I loved my body. It was no longer an object of discomfort and derision. I loved the small flickering muscles beneath my chest. I loved the roundness of my posture, my settled state. Like a character out of a James Salter novel, I loved my physique, my physicality. And I loved myself.

We did a photo shoot at Martiny's, a Japanese-style cocktail bar on 17th Street. Yamamoto-san insisted that he would help supervise. He parted the tie for me as I lay on a couch to make me look more at ease, more Ivy style. He made sure that only half of the watch I had chosen for the shoot, a gilt-dial 1963 Rolex Explorer, would flash from beneath my cuff.



Afterward, Mark and I were walking through Tribeca past an immensely popular French bistro. It was the weekend, a prime dining hour; the place looked packed.

“Let’s get a table,” Mark said.

“Are you kidding?” I said. I mentioned several other restaurants down the street that might prove a better bet.

“Just go in and try,” Mark said. “I have to make a phone call.”

I approached the beautiful maître d’ alone, but instead of the usual sniveling noises I make in these situations, the excuses for not making a reservation, my understanding that I might have to wait for an hour or more for a table to open up, I stated forthrightly that my friend and I were in need of immediate sustenance.

A microsecond passed among myself, the maître d’, and my suit. A brief nod was issued. “Would you like the dining room or the bar?” she asked.

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*This article appears in the [March 2025](#) print edition with the headline “Behold My Suit!” When you buy a book using a link on this page, we receive a commission. Thank you for supporting The Atlantic.*

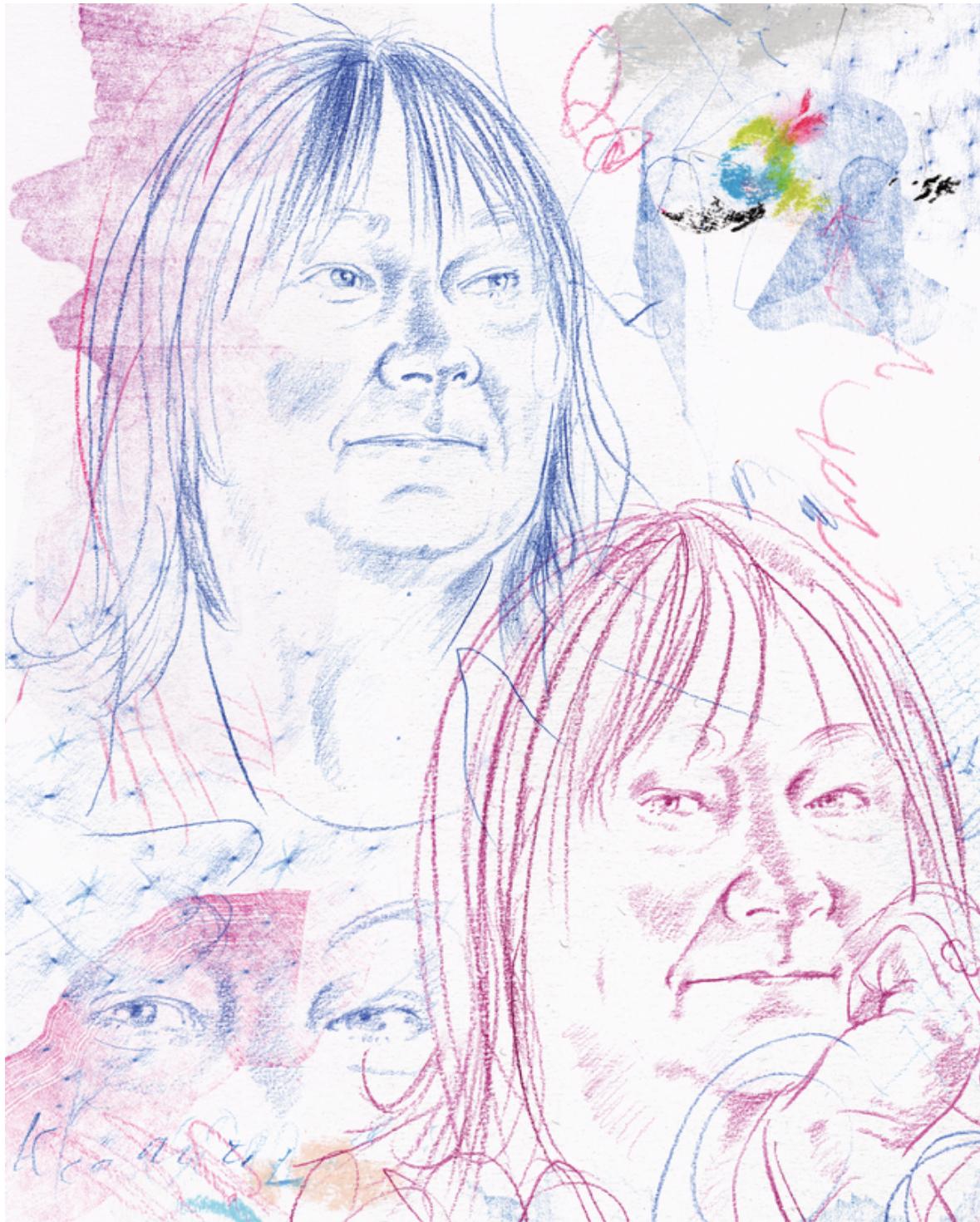
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# A Novelist Who Looks Into the Dark

**Ali Smith scrambles plotlines, upends characters, and flouts chronology—while telling propulsively readable stories.**

by Adam Begley



On a late summer's day in Cambridge, England, the writer Ali Smith sat with me on a wooden bench in a patch of garden across from the brick rowhouse where she works. Her new novel, *Gliff*, was due out before long; she described it as a "dystopian pony book," clearly pleased to have

invented a new genre. She flashed impatience when I suggested that she frequently expresses political views both in her fiction and outside it. After a tart “Do I?” she continued, “I think I’m always in the realm of fiction.” A pause before she allowed, “Well, I’m a citizen.” At that moment, I knocked over the water glass I’d carelessly balanced on one arm of the bench. It shattered, and Smith said merrily, “See what happens when you talk politics?” I apologized, and she told me, “If you want to break another one, I’ll break one with you.”

Funny, cheerfully provocative, at once friendly and sharp-elbowed: That’s Smith in person, and also in her copious fictional output (13 novels and six story collections over the past 30 years). Her books are challenging—experimental and unabashedly literary—yet welcoming to all, eminently readable even when they’re disorienting; they engage the reader, demanding collaboration. (Her fifth novel, published in 2011, has a fill-in-the-blank title: *There but for the*.) Most writers with a foot in the avant-garde achieve cult status at best; Smith collects awed reviews at home and abroad, wins prizes and honors, and sells lots and lots of books to avid fans.

She breaks rules with gleeful abandon, mocking convention, asking her publisher to do things that the industry instinctively abhors. After *Gliff* will come *Glyph*—a pair of homophone titles guaranteed to trip up booksellers and buyers for years to come. (Smith adores wordplay, the quirks of language: puns, rhymes, bizarre etymologies, neologisms, contronyms—words that have developed contradictory meanings.) According to her publisher, the two books will “belong together.” Could she tell me more about *Glyph*? “Absolutely not”—she hadn’t yet started writing. I backed off, reminded of a line from *Artful* (2012), a novel first delivered as a series of Oxford lectures, much of it literally ghostwritten (that is, written by a ghost): “Sequence will always be most of the word consequence.”

I’ve been thinking about Smith for more than 20 years. In 2006, just after her third novel, *The Accidental*, was named Whitbread Novel of the Year and shortlisted for the Booker Prize, I reviewed it, and did a little research. I found a short essay by her fellow novelist Jeanette Winterson in which Smith asks, rhetorically, “Do you come to art to be comforted, or do you come to art to be re-skinned?” This is what Smith does: First, she confuses you—Who’s talking? When did this happen? Where am I?—then she hooks

you with a flash of storytelling genius or a dazzling formal innovation. You read on, and the world seems strange to you, and you seem strange to yourself. The flimsy illusions offered up by conventional literature seem hollow (life *is* stranger than fiction), as do the certainties you live by (are you yourself truly a coherent character?). You have been reskinned.

The hook sometimes looks like a gimmick. It's not. At Smith's behest, [her obliging publisher hurried each of the four books](#) of the [Seasonal Quartet](#) (2016 to 2020) onto bookstore shelves only about six weeks after she'd delivered each manuscript—an unthinkably quick turnaround. Smith's ambition, from the time she conceived the project in the 1990s, had been to graft the rush of current events onto the everlasting cycle of the seasons. Soon after she finally sat down to write the first book at the end of 2015 came the United Kingdom's Brexit crisis. [Galvanized by the shock result](#) of the referendum, she told herself as she began to write, "This book has to meet the contemporary head-on, or there's no point to this sequence of books." Hence the superfast schedule: [Autumn](#) appeared just four months after the vote.

### [Read: Ali Smith's \*Autumn\* is a post-Brexit masterpiece](#)

Although the press labeled it "the first Brexit novel," the word *Brexit* is never uttered in the book. A seemingly random yet oddly menacing chain-link fence, topped with barbed wire and security cameras, is erected near an ordinary English village. A woman battles bureaucracy to renew her passport at the local post office; the petty hurdles are dismaying, ominous, comical. Spanish tourists visiting England are heckled at a train station: "This isn't Europe ... Go back to Europe." Appalled, a sympathetic witness realizes that "what was happening in that one passing incident was a fraction of something volcanic"—a compact summary of Smith's narrative strategy.

At the Edinburgh International Book Festival in 2018, Nicola Sturgeon, then first minister of Scotland, [interviewed Smith onstage](#)—since when does a nation's leader host an experimental novelist at a literary festival?—and read aloud a passage from *Autumn* that for her perfectly captured the post-referendum mood:

All across the country, people felt it was the wrong thing. All across the country, people felt it was the right thing. All across the country, people felt they'd really lost. All across the country, people felt they'd really won. All across the country, people felt they'd done the right thing and other people had done the wrong thing. All across the country, people looked up Google: *what is EU?* All across the country, people looked up Google: *move to Scotland.*

The echo of Dickens (the first line of *Autumn* is “It was the worst of times, it was the worst of times”) carries on and on: 46 consecutive sentences begin with “All across the country.”

Every volume of the *Seasonal Quartet* was a best seller in the U.K.; the most conspicuously topical of the four, *Spring* (2019), tackled the “migrant crisis” and reached the top of the *Sunday Times* best-seller list. Migration has been one of Smith’s abiding concerns. “We’re ignoring it,” she said in an interview more than a dozen years ago. “As our countries and our world become smaller … we’re bordered, everything is about the stranger.” She eventually went to see for herself what detainees in the U.K. are put through and was shocked to find “a razor-wire fence so high and encircling such a tiny yard space that it would pass as a literal example of surrealism.” In *Spring*, a brutal Immigration Removal Centre is described in distressing detail—but Smith also imagines a kind of underground railroad for migrants anxious to avoid the authorities.

“I grew up on the margins,” she said. “I inherited all the value of the margins.”

Bad guys versus good guys? Part of Smith’s appeal is that she shows us warm-hearted progressive ideals in action, a spirit of inclusion feeding hope and healing hurt. As one character in *Spring* puts it, “What looks fixed and pinned and closed in a life can change and open.” But nothing in Smith’s fiction is that simple. In *Winter*, two sisters are mourning the death of their mother. One says, “It takes a death sometimes to make us all live a bit more.” The other thinks, “Platitude, cliché.” If your sympathy is divided, that’s because with Smith, every either/or is complicated by a both/and. A maxim from *The Accidental*: “The word *and* is a little bullet of oxygen.”

## Read: Ali Smith spins modernity into myth in *Winter*

The stories she tells spill out of stories that spill out of other stories. She's an inveterate flouter of chronology—a timeline for almost any of her books, including the quartet, would look like a manic Etch A Sketch scribble: Rather than plot or the forward sweep of the clock's hands, it is Smith's voice, her many voices, that propels the reader. As though on a whim, she'll take an unexpected detour into art history or natural history or literary criticism. Finger-on-the-pulse backdrops are balanced by cultural or historical or scientific deep dives. Against the grim tidings of the day, news of pain inflicted by strangers on strangers, she pits, in *Spring*, the oddly charming tale of Katherine Mansfield and Rainer Maria Rilke spending several weeks in 1922 in the same small Swiss town—and never meeting. A hack screenwriter wants to rework that non-anecdote into an erotic TV costume drama, the two writers screwing in a swinging cable car high above a picturesque snowy valley. Appalled, the director he hopes to hire flees and ends up in the Scottish Highlands, where he crosses paths with the network of people dedicated to helping migrants.

Like every Smith novel, *Spring* is about human connection, how hard it is—how damned important it is—to acknowledge humanity in the other and embrace it. Yet Smith has talked about how she loves the spirit of alienation in Mansfield's writing: "Distance, foreignness, knowing you're out of place or in limbo ... and however much you feel at home, you're fooling yourself, and however strange you feel in the world ... it's natural, it's the most natural thing." Sometimes there simply is no connection. Force it, and you get schlock.

When I [interviewed Smith for \*The Paris Review\* in 2017](#), a few years after the Scottish-independence referendum, she told me, "I like edges but not borders." Born in Inverness in 1962 and raised by an Irish mother and an English father, she calls herself "Scottish by formation" (quoting another of her heroes, the Scottish-born Muriel Spark). "I grew up on the margins," she said. "I inherited all the value of the margins." Her working-class parents brought her up in council housing. She was much younger than her four siblings, and looking back, she recognized that she'd had "a remarkably lucky childhood, cosseted and bullied both in that lovely family way, with nobody following me, no rivalries." Her parents had both won scholarships,

but had been obliged to leave school to go to work. They were adamant that their children would be educated. All five graduated from university.

“I was a proficient, happy, versatile child,” Smith told me. She went to Roman Catholic primary school, then a state-run high school. She read all the time. “I thought of myself as a poet through my teens,” she confessed to another interviewer. “I was pretty dreadful.” At the University of Aberdeen, she studied English literature and language, graduating with highest honors. She then spent five years studying for a Ph.D. at Newnham College, Cambridge. Alongside her studies, she wrote plays; Sarah Wood, who became her life partner, directed five of them. The doctorate, meanwhile, never materialized. Her examiners requested changes to her dissertation on three Modernist masters (James Joyce, Wallace Stevens, and William Carlos Williams); she refused. She was nevertheless offered two teaching jobs, and accepted the one at the University of Strathclyde, in Glasgow.

That stint lasted 18 months, cut short by a debilitating bout of chronic fatigue syndrome. At the time, the illness felt “like I’d been hit from the back with a baseball bat—after which I … went into a kind of physical breakdown.” Smith returned to Cambridge to recover, but the symptoms lingered, resurfacing intermittently. Though she found it painful to write longhand, she scratched out her first collection, *Free Love and Other Stories* (1995), which scooped up a couple of prizes. She persuaded her publisher, Virago, to take a chance on her debut novel, *Like* (1997), and from then on, she was a writer only.

When I asked Smith about the legion of ghosts in her fiction, she shrugged and said, “I just don’t think death makes that much difference.”

Her second novel, *Hotel World* (2001), was shortlisted for both the Booker and Orange Prizes, success of the kind that heralds a major career. In *The Guardian*, the novelist Giles Foden wrote, “I have never seen the tenets of recent literary theory (the impossibility of the coherent subject, or substantive character, for instance) so cleverly insinuated into a novel.” It begins with the voice of a ghost. A teenage chambermaid working at a fancy hotel in a dour northern city has fallen down a dumbwaiter shaft to her death. Her ghost, itching to feel again (“What I want more than anything in

the world is to have a stone in my shoe”), would like to know how long it took her to fall:

(and this time I’d throw myself willingly down it wooo-

hoooooo and this time I’d count as I went, one elephant two eleph-ahh if I could feel it again, how I hit it, the basement, from four floors up, from toe to head, dead. Dead leg. Dead arm. Dead hand. Dead eye. Dead I, four floors between me and the world, that’s all it took to take me, that’s the measure of it, the length and death of it, the short goodb  
—.

A classic, manically ludic Smith passage, grim and comical, pushing at the edge of too much, yet as easy to swallow as a spoonful of honey.

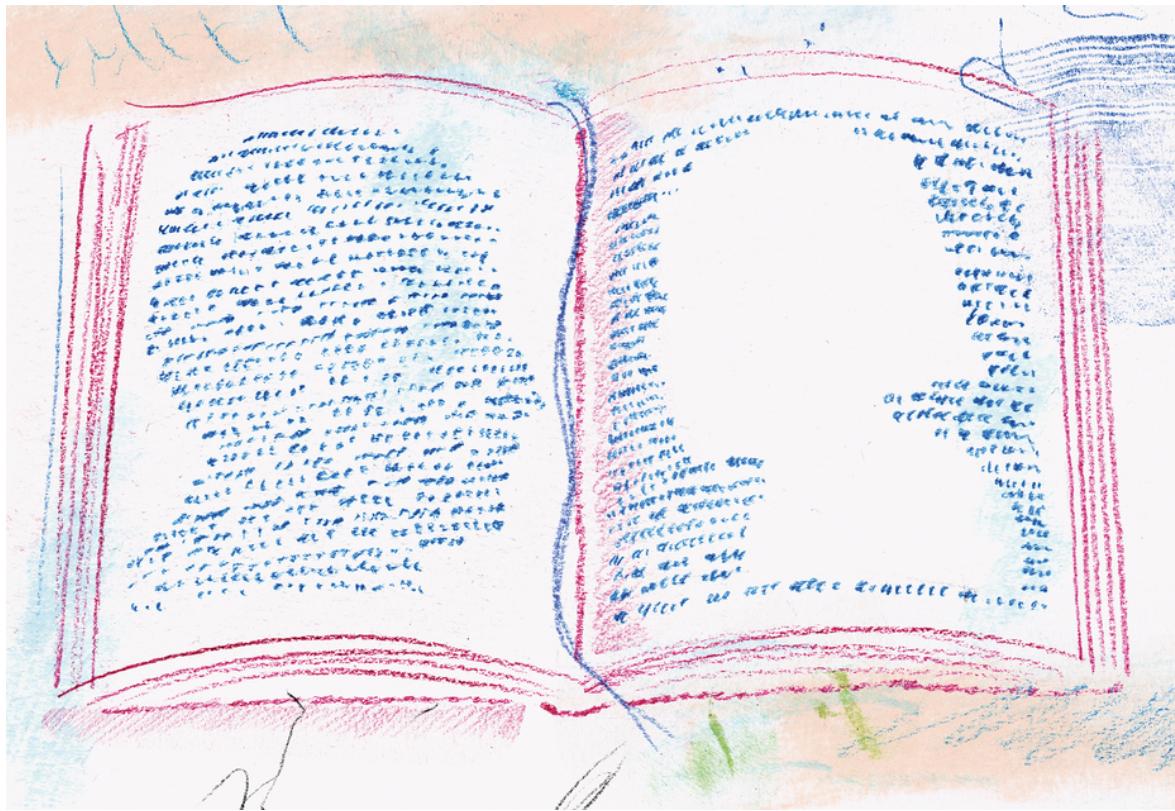
Having given voice to the dead, Smith takes it away; the ghost girl is losing her ability to speak, losing language. Her last message to the living:

Remember you must live.  
Remember you most love.  
Remainder you mist leaf.

When I asked Smith about the legion of ghosts in her fiction, she shrugged and said, “I just don’t think death makes that much difference.” Sounding like Gertrude Stein, she elaborated: “We carry with us all the people who have made us and the people we make and the lives we make, and the world we make continues on from what we make of it.”

The realm of fiction where Smith says she “always” dwells is mostly populated by family and friends, the people we’re most comfortable with, who also drive us crazy. Often the setting is the home we long for and can’t wait to escape. The premise of *The Accidental*—borrowed from Pier Paolo Pasolini’s 1968 film, *Teorema*—is the reskinning of an unhappy bourgeois family: mother, son, daughter, and stepfather. In musical notation, an “accidental” changes the pitch. In the novel, the accidental—the catalyst—is a mysterious character who rings the doorbell and announces, “Sorry I’m late. I’m Amber. Car broke down.” Though she’s very much flesh and blood (her flesh is desired by every family member, young, old, male, female), this

uninvited guest might as well be a ghost, an inexplicable apparition with uncanny powers. The daughter thinks of Amber as “the kind of superheroine that can draw things to her and repel them away from her at the same time.”



The reader watches as the family’s world disintegrates, and the idea, I believe, is that the reader molts in sympathy. The daughter, in her old skin, needs everything to be mediated, filtered, distanced. A bright, lonely 12-year-old, she’s obsessed with her video camera (and has a verbal tic, using *i.e.* ad nauseam). Amber drops the girl’s camera from a pedestrian bridge onto a busy highway below—deliberately. Amber does everything deliberately. In her new skin, the younger girl accepts that “her responsibility” is about “actually seeing, being there.” That may sound like a New Age mantra, but the transformation, slight and subtle, is also plausible and moving. The parents fare less well; the fractured family will never be whole again. (Smith doesn’t do happy endings.)

In my mind, the 12-year-old from *The Accidental* reappears, four years older and much sadder (her mother has died), in my favorite Smith book, [How to be both](#) (2014), a novel in two parts published in vice-versa editions: with

the same cover, but with the order of the parts reversed—in effect, different novels packaged identically and released simultaneously. This older girl, George, is also bright and lonely, and she's pedantically fixated on correct grammar—"a finite set of rules," she insists. George, too, will be reskinned. Among other things, she slowly discovers her erotic love for another girl. Her evolution is watched over by the ghost of an actual Italian quattrocento painter from Ferrara, Francesco del Cossa.

One part of *How to be both* is narrated by the bewildered painter, who can't comprehend 21st-century England and decides he's in an afterlife "purgatorium," condemned to traipse after George, whom he mistakes at first for a boy. The other part is told from George's perspective, close third-person. She remains unaware of the ghostly observer who's following her around. Which part you read first depends on which edition you happen to have bought, and to discover which sequence works best, you'll have to reread. Should the tale of a 600-year-old artist, with its technical asides on the art of the fresco, come before the tale of modern-day teenage angst? Do the parts of the puzzle fit either way?

The painter's confusion about George's gender is an ironic echo (or foreshadowing) of the backstory Smith has invented for him: He was born a girl but disguised himself as a boy to become a painter. ("Nobody will take you for such a training wearing the clothes of a woman," warned his father, a brickmaker.) The adventures of this talented cross-dresser make a mockery of binary ideas about gender. What the painter learned centuries ago in Ferrara, what George learns in 21st-century London, is that no finite set of rules applies.

Back on the sunny Cambridge bench, Smith told me about the origins of *Gliff*, which is full of characteristic quirks and revisits her abiding concerns—gender, boundaries, the importance of unmediated engagement with the world. But it's darker fiction, with some acutely painful passages. It began as a short story written "very fast" in August 2023, a commission for an anthology: "I was supposed to write something that was tangentially Kafkaesque," she explained, after which she turned to work on a new novel. But she was ambushed by a "horrendous" bout of insomnia, "three months of almost no sleep," and realized that she was writing the wrong book, and

that the short story “was not going away, was waiting, rather like characters do, at the back of your head.”

Where did the title come from? “I was playing about online one day thinking, *Is this a nonsense word or not?* And I looked up the word that sounded like *glyph* but was spelled differently, and found out it wasn’t a made-up word—it was actually a northern word, a Scottish word.” It has many meanings, among them a glimpse, a sudden fright, or a brief moment. It’s also the name of the horse in this dystopian pony book, but we’ll get to that.

A *glyph* is a mark—as Smith said, “The smallest unit of meaning,” a scratch on a cave wall, an ornamental carving on a primitive tool. In the *Paris Review* interview, when I asked about the building blocks of her prose, Smith explained that “the rhythmical unit of the syllable is at the back of all of it—the word, the phrase, the sentence, the syntax, the paragraph, and the way the heart moves when you read it.” Now she’s taken the next step, training her attention on the gesture that precedes even the syllable. In *Gliff*, she shows us prehistoric cave art and the head of a horse carved many thousands of years ago onto a rib bone.

She also steps for the first time into the near future: A brutal totalitarian state has been rounding up, interning, and reeducating people whom the regime deems “unverifiable.” The climate is as much Orwell as Kafka: 24/7 surveillance, grotesque euphemisms, justified paranoia. Britain’s not quite there yet—but, Smith insisted, “could be.” She added, sitting up taller, “If we just raise our heads from thinking it’s not happening, we’d see that most of the book is happening right now somewhere.”

The authorities have started drawing red lines around the unwanted unverifiables—literally. They have a comically low-tech machine called a “supera bounder” that applies paint around houses, around vehicles. Demarcated houses are demolished, vehicles towed away: rapacious capitalism combining punishment and profit.

Two siblings, a young teenager and a younger sister, more or less abandoned in an empty house, find themselves on the wrong side of the red line. The older sibling—our narrator, Bri, cautious and protective—worries about the

meager supply of canned food, and tries hard to lift the spirits of the younger one, who finds seven horses in a nearby field, one of which, a gray gelding, she adopts (or is adopted by). She gives him his name.

Gliff the horse is the moral center of *Gliff* the novel, and also the occasion of some arresting descriptions:

The grey horse's bones were close to its skin all over it and it seemed huge even though it was quite a small horse, the smallest one in this field. It moved with laidback strength and with a real weightiness though it wasn't weighty at all, it was as spare as a bare tree ...

The eye was shocking.

It was really beautiful.

You could see light in its dark, and it also had in it, both at once, two things I had never seen together in one place, gentleness, and—what?

Five years later, in a moment of crisis, Bri realizes that the missing word is “equanimity.”

When Smith was a child in Inverness, about 4 or 5 years old, she discovered a stable behind an ice rink. “Between the age of 7 and 11,” she said, “I went every Saturday in the summer and hung out. We did do a little grooming—very small ponies in my case. What I know about horses all comes from that place at the back of the ice rink, where 12 or 13 horses lived in the field.” She paused. “You know, being on the back of a horse teaches you everything about everything.”

The writing about Gliff the horse does more than bring the living creature into focus. “His mouth was decisive without force, a soft lipped line. It made him look resigned, noncommittal, but also poised, as if waiting.” That “soft lipped line” is the antithesis of the supera bounder’s garish, excluding red. Yet Smith is in the business of complicating binaries as well as erasing boundaries; she won’t tolerate a simple dichotomy.

“Fiction’s only agenda is to be fiction,” she replied, “but lies have an agenda.”

Which brings us back to the two siblings. The younger one is Rose, wild, fiercely loyal, fiercely stubborn. Bri, kind and caring and, like so many of Smith’s characters, obsessed with words and their meaning, is also Briar or Brice. (“Why did I myself really like having more than one name, as if I had more than one self?”) When asked, bluntly but without malice, “Are you a boy or a girl?,” the answer is, “Yes I am.”

Flash-forward five years and—a spoiler follows—Bri now serves the state. Reeducated? Lured by the promise of elevated status? Tortured? It’s not clear what has happened, but Bri is complicit in the horrors of the regime, and this lover of words has been silenced: “That’s as much of that story as I care to tell. One line about it is more than enough.” The unspoken, the unspeakable, is more frightening than anything else in the novel.

Four cats patrol the alley next to where Smith and her partner live and work. The cats came and went, occasionally pausing near our bench to lick a paw and ignore us ostentatiously. I wondered which ones were hers, and she said, approvingly, “They kind of live everywhere.”

[From the April 2023 issue: Adam Begley on why you should be reading Sebastian Barry](#)

I asked again about politics, suggesting mildly that sometimes she deploys her dazzling skills in the service of ideology. In *Winter*, she quotes Keats: “We hate poetry that has a palpable design upon us.” Does she agree? “Fiction’s only agenda is to be fiction,” she replied, “but lies have an agenda.” Her soft, lilting voice was buttressed by quiet conviction: “All you do is tell the story. What you do is write and write, and you tell the story that arrives—and it really is like being on the back of a horse.” But what about the wild complexity of her narratives, the abrupt swerves and unannounced excursions? As though to allow for nuance, she said, “Of course it will be political when it’s written, because everything is. But I believe deep in my own bones that story is about something that cancels division between us.” She added, “We cross those lines every time we listen to someone or are heard by someone.”

Some early reviewers of *Gliff* have complained that it feels too “on the nose.” The book’s horrors—climate catastrophe, internment camps, genocidal wars, high-tech surveillance—are too familiar to serve as prophecy. Is it fair to complain that the future is almost already upon us? Who needs prophecy when dystopia is now? The novel thrums with Smith’s urgent need to tell a story about where our divided present could lead us. “We cannot look away at the moment,” she said to me. “We must not look away from the darkness. And if I didn’t look at the dark, what kind of a writer would I be?”

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\* Lead-image sources: Lorentz Gullachsen / Contour by Getty; Leonardo Cendamo / Getty.

This article appears in the [March 2025](#) print edition with the headline “The Experimentalist.”

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# The Moron Factory

## A short story

by George Saunders



April 20:

Sometimes feel life stinks, everything bad/getting worse, everyone doomed.

Then day like today occurs, reminding one that yes, although life stinks, does not always stink to same extent, i.e., variation can occur in extent to which life, from day to day, may stink.

Today strange.

Strange day at work.

Sally Gear = extremely tall co-worker with perpetual explosion of unbrushed gray hair. Nice lady. Many kids: three from previous marriage, four adopted. Plus, usually, one or two foster kids. Also 12 cats, nine dogs, five rescued ferrets, all living on run-down farm outside of town. Is always explaining: reason she looks so bad/ragged = totally swamped with kids/adopted kids/foster kids/pets/farm. Her husband, Sid, also tall, w/ same gray hair-explosion. When together, always laughing, leaning into each other, looking unkempt, happy, bellowing out story re latest wacky thing done by kid, foster kid, ferret, and/or donkey they keep tied to tree. When Sid comes to office to pick Sally up, will say, "So this is how they do it in the big city!" or "Say, this is one heckuva fancy orifice!" (Which is odd: Sid not country, Sid = Wesleyan grad, grew up in Philadelphia, family owned famous shoe store.)

This week, one of their foster kids selling candy bars for Swim Team. Sally has put box of candy bars in Break Area, with sign: DON'T BE ALL WET! BUY A CANDY BAR FROM TERENCE.

Liv VanUster annoyed by presence of candy bars, emails Sally: this = place of business. How would Sally like it if she, Liv, brought in ton of magazines, encouraged all to buy magazines, for her Women's Personal History Group? Sally says sure, no problem, she can just scoot candy bars over. What magazines do they have anyway? Any about ferrets/foster kids/growing organic vegetables in limited space?

Liv emails back: no, Sally missing point. Sally being rude, making it impossible for people to decline to buy crappo candy bars, i.e., Sally letting her weird life choices overflow into Break Area.

Liv = tough = big complainer. Complains if someone tracks in snow: slip-and-trip hazard. Once complained janitor had given her "predatory glance,"

demanded that Ed Finer (our boss) reprimand janitor. Turned out, janitor legally blind. Was not giving predatory glance, was trying to ascertain if thing on Liv's lapel = spider.

Liv apologized to janitor, rushed back to Finer, said that although, yes, she is, of course, #1 advocate for visually impaired, on other hand, why pay blind janitor full salary, since blind janitor likely incapable of getting anything truly clean?

Sally hurt by Liv's email. Replies to entire office. Says her life choices not "weird." Swim Team "weird"? Having husband "weird"? Having kids "weird"? Having certain modicum of warmth/affection in life "weird"?

This raises ante: Liv single, never married, no kids, no current boyfriend.

Office tense all morning.

Just before lunch, Liv sends Sally email of apology, also to entire office:

*Sally, I was out of line. It was rude of me to characterize your life as "weird." Many apologies. Your life actually strikes me as admirable: the kids, the pets, the ferrets. Wow. You do so much for others. Sometimes my own unhappiness will drive me to become overinvolved in things that might easily be overlooked. Please trust that I am working on this. I sincerely apologize.*

Everyone impressed. This gracious, this surprising, should end whole thing.

But no.

Within minutes, Sally replies:

*Nice try, Liv. That is so typical! You get your dig in, then retreat to higher ground? "Your life actually strikes me as admirable." Ha! I bet. My hubby may be bony and countrified but at least I've GOT one. You have the nerve to call my life weird? Then real quick apologize, as if you are all holy? Everyone knows you color your hair! I am sick and tired of your fakeness. You jabbed me and now have got me going. Not going to fly, sister. You wear*

*makeup like clown makeup. Stay out of my way or I don't know what might happen.*

This crazy. This not like Sally. Sally kind. Sally sweet. Often so happy in morning, will do jig in Break Room. Will sometimes, for no reason, make brownies at home, bring brownie to desk of each person in office, with person's initials, in M&Ms, on brownie.

Apparently, Liv has hit nerve.

Finer calls Sally in. Tells Sally enough = enough: Liv has apologized, is time for Sally to accept Liv's apology, put this behind us.

Sally storms out, sends email in which she says she knows everyone against her, everyone siding with "sneak-thief," just because "sneak-thief" = wealthier, younger, more attractive.

This dubious. Liv possibly wealthier. But younger? No. Sally younger. Liv more attractive? Debatable, Kate G. says, in Break Area. Sally has weird gray hair-explosion, true, but, Kate points out, Liv has prominent jaw + is strangely wide at hip.

Finer goes to Sally's office to talk her down. Sally gone (!). All her stuff gone. Pics of her ferrets gone, special clogging shoes + apron gone, box of Swim Team candy, formerly in Break Area, gone.

On Post-it note on Sally's desk: I QUIT!!!

Rest of morning, Liv roams around office like martyred queen, saying she did her best, does not know how else she might have handled, feels she bent over backwards to pull thing out of fire, etc.

All confident Sally will be back. Sally/Sid not rich. Kids + foster kids + animals not cheap. Plus, Sid has bad knees, extreme asthma, cannot work outside of home/farm, i.e., no way Sid + Sally can make it without Sally's paycheck.

Have lunch in Finer's office, with Finer. Jill (my wife, my person, we have been through wars together) texts: *How are things @ Moron Factory?*

(As joke, between selves, we sometimes call my workplace “Moron Factory.” Re my workplace, Jill pities me. Comes to office Christmas party, is bored/annoyed whole time, rolling eyes if anyone talks shop. Her attitude: Sweetie, these people, my God, you are true champ, how do you even bear? Is true: our office odd. No one stable. Everyone nuts in his/her own way. Usually, at work, I keep to self. Don’t socialize. Just do my work, head straight home.)

Just then, Paige (receptionist) calls, says Sid calling, for Finer.

Finer raises eyebrows at me, puts Sid on speaker:

Sid: Ed, are you sitting down?

Finer is. Is sitting. Ergo, can honestly say yes, he is sitting.

Sid, on speaker: Sally’s gone.

Finer: Where’d she go?

Sid: She’s dead.

What harsh things did we say to Sally over years? What nice things? What jokes did we make behind back of Sally?

Finer freezes. Was about to pick up pen, tap lamp with pen in way he does when bored. But now: no. Hand frozen over pen in shape of hand about to pick up pen, he widens eyes at me, as in: This really happening?

Sid: Her poor old heart finally gave out. Because of you people. That gal was such a softie. But you people harried her and condescended to her and insulted her and never gave her the time of day.

Finer protests: We did, we did give Sally time of day. We liked Sally, loved Sally. Hopes Sid will recall last August, pool party at Finer’s house, when all sang “Happy Birthday” to Sally as Sally stood blushing at shallow end of pool holding overflowing plate of nachos.

Sid breaks down. Seems to drop phone. Can hear him sobbing. Dog barks, truck goes past, donkey brays from out in yard, presumably tied to tree.

Finer calls office-wide meeting to announce Sally = dead.

Weeping breaks out. Oh, Sally, we feel, you were always just *there*, passing out your brownies, giving each of us a cheerful word, bringing our copies to us if we had left them on the Minolta, coming in dressed as witch on Halloween when no one else even wearing costume, taking trouble, whenever someone dropped by your office, to quickly don long, warty nose, then cackle.

All examining own consciences. What harsh things did we say to Sally over years? What nice things? What jokes did we make behind back of Sally? Well, we feel, cannot just go around all day, assuring every person he or she = valued. Even cavemen, in ancient, simpler times, could not merely sit around in cave admiring/praising one another, but had to hunt, fight, compete with members of own group for status.

All feel a bit sick.

I go down, sit a moment in Sally's empty office. Look at own hands. These hands someday dead, bluish, crossed on chest? Cross hands on chest. Think: Sally dead. Just this morning, was right here, alive. Now, no. Just then, someone passes in hallway. Yikes, I think, did he/she see me sitting in chair of recently dead lady, crossing hands over chest like corpse in coffin? Spring to feet. Step briskly into hall. Moving steadily away down hall: Maxine. Maxine turns, gives me wave + sad smile, quality of which indicates she did not, thank God, see me imitating posture of Sally dead in coffin.

Dodged bullet there.

Life not easy. Life = tightrope. Most days, we stroll along rope, all fine, gazing off at distant hills, making future plans. But down below: those who have fallen. For them, all not fine. No future plans. Glad that not me, we may think. But ultimately, we too will fall. All must. Trouble will find us, shake tightrope, down we too will fall.

Today, Sally has fallen, Sid has fallen.

We, as office, have fallen.

How might we, as office, begin to make amends?

Raise money for charity of Sid's choice? Foster care? American Heart Association? Donkeys who are sick? Donate money directly to Sid, who, no doubt, will need?

Go to see Finer. He is in there with someone, door closed.

Must wait.

Out little window overlooking Parking: our Taurus. Baby rattle on dash. Not our baby's rattle. We have no baby. Chose not to. Also, could not, as it turned out. Actually, was other way around: wanted, found out could not have, decided did not want. This was years ago. Big drama at time. All fine now. Tershers, friends of ours, came to town last month, left behind rattle of their baby (Marco). Tershers live across state. Could mail rattle. But postage = double price of rattle. Could just throw rattle away. Is cheap rattle. But throwing away rattle sans Tershers' permission seems weird. But also seems weird to call Tershers, say, Hey, okay to toss your rattle? Tershers may feel: Oh, gosh, right, sad: sight of our rattle must remind them they have no baby. But no. Does not. Or, rather, maybe does, slightly, i.e., every time I get in car, see rattle, I think: Still fine we have no baby? Then assure self: yes, yes, of course, still fine, that ship sailed long ago, are at peace with, we two have great life full of laughs + tenderness.

Door flies open, Liv bolts out.

Inside, Finer has head down on desk.

Says Liv just told him most horrible story: When teen, Liv got in huge fight with dad. That night, dad cut off own leg with chain saw in woods, bled out while attempting to crawl back to house. Dad had owned chain saw for years, never used, did not know how to use, but that night, upset with certain things Liv said during fight re his failings (too passive + wishy-washy), made big manly point of storming decisively out of house into woods, taking

chain saw, with which he had zero experience, accidentally applied chain saw to large boulder that he, in dark, believed to be stump. Crawling back to house, bleeding out, wrote note on back of shopping list, only too bad: big storm swept in, rain fell all night, so, by time they found dad dead in morning, his note = too smudged to read.

Today, Liv having flashback: feels she once again caused tragic event via reckless speech, i.e., picked fight with Sally, sent Sally over edge, gave Sally heart attack, i.e., “killed” Sally.

I suggest we go find Liv, comfort Liv. Finer: Yes, yes, of course, how stupid and thoughtless am I?

However, Liv not in her office. Nowhere to be found. Paige (receptionist) says Liv raced past in huff, appearing “muy weirded-out,” briefly paused at door, as if could not recall how to open. Paige rose, opened door, Liv thanked Paige, albeit calling her “Piper.”

Leaving work not like Liv. At all. Liv super-responsible. When having appendix out, Liv constantly texting Finer from hospital bed, reminding Finer they had agreed that new coffee maker in Break Room must meet or exceed quality of current coffee maker. Immediately post-surgery, Liv dictated text to nurse, specifying acceptable models, suggesting Finer poll office on desired color.

Finer = former military. Saw some things over there. Way we know this is: he never talks about. If someone asks if he saw some things, he will say: No, had quiet tour, mostly did ordering for cafeteria. Then his face will change in way that makes anyone seeing it doubt what Finer has just said re not having seen some things.

At moment, Finer = mess.

Asks me to send flowers to Sid. On day of service, you mean? I say. Finer says yes, day of service, right, for sure. But also today. We’re sending flowers twice. At least. Two separate sets of flowers. He feels so bad. This happened in office of which he was in charge? What does this say about his leadership style? Not sure he will ever live down, ever feel better about.

Wants Sid to know we are thinking of him. Not enough flowers in world, he feels, to make this thing up to Sid.



Photo-illustration by Ben Denzer. Source: Paul Denzer.

I mention my idea of starting fund for Sid. Finer feels this may be one too many. Does not want to concede liability for Sally's death. Oh God, he says, listen to me, Mr. Corporate, evading responsibility already. No, yes, that great idea, he says, let's do fund. Also, let's get Sid on horn immediately, give direct, heartfelt apology, accept all blame, see if there is anything at all, even smallest thing, we can do for Sid, poor Sid, after which we'll send first set of flowers, get started on details of fund.

Call Sid.

Guess who answers?

Sally (!).

Finer: You're not dead?

Sally: Not that I know of.

Long pause.

Sally (yelling): Sid, you jamoke! You didn't! Why would you? I told you no! What a dumb idea, Butch!

Sid takes phone, apologizes. Says if we are wondering who Butch is, is him. Sally sometimes will call him Butch. Is pet name. As for death business? Sorry, sorry, bad call. That on him. Loves Sally so much, was going just nutty watching her mope all heartbroken around house feeling undervalued. He did not, perhaps, it would now appear, think thing all the way through. Double-dang-it. Is deeply sorry for any confusion he may have caused, promises he will never do again.

Sally, in background: You won't do it *again*, Butch? You think? Are you out of your gourd? Damn straight, dingbat!

Sally grabs phone, says she is coming in, will be right down.

Fifteen minutes later, all dressed up, in suit, hair combed for once, she arrives, goes around from office to office, apologizing on Sid's behalf.

Is strange. No one mad. Sally so dignified. Because all believed her dead, she is now like celeb. Many pull her aside to tell her how dear she is to them, how often, over the years, they have found selves wondering, "What would Sally do?" how sad it has been today to walk past her office, not be greeted by crumpled-up paper ball rolling into hall which would, when unwrapped, be found to say, "Come on in, you!" or "Work SUX!"

Finer glowingly watching Sally accepting hug after hug. Asks me to call Liv at home, tell her good news, i.e., Sally = not dead after all.

I dial, put phone on speaker.

No answer. Message new. Old message: professional, crisp. Included numbered lists of categories into which caller should place his or her call. New message: "You've reached Liv. Who is not available. Ever again. Where I go now, I should have gone long ago."

At kitchen table: Liv, slumping, looking like she is in hell of own making, several bottles of pills spread out before her on table, rifle (!) in lap.

Yikes, we feel. All have heard rumor re Liv's recent breakup with nutty spa-supply salesman, Wayne: she did not, in fact, go to Italy to learn to make pasta in authentic way but, rather, in bathroom at Denny's on Clover, lit several candles, which she had snuck into bathroom in tote, then took many pills, nearly died, was given CPR by special-needs bus girl, recuperated for month at sister's tiny apartment in Blanket Farm Estates, out near airport.

We leave message. Leave two messages, three. Just keep calling.

Soon voicemail full.

Finer and I fly off through town in my Taurus. Finer gives me glance, as in: Why rattle on dash of guy with no baby? Tosses rattle into glove box, slams glove box closed.

Everywhere people moving around, happy to be alive. On Tooley Bridge, under fat white clouds, two friends throw arms around each other, each holding cup of coffee far out from body so as not to spill on other while hugging. In front of hospital, old man talking to equally old woman makes

motion of throwing football, does victory shimmy, she shakes head as in:  
That, my friend = one bad shimmy.

Finer says, tensely, that, at end of day, Liv savvy, Liv smart, Liv too  
egotistical to kill self.

Me: Hope so.

Him: Oh God. If she does? If she has? Already? That's the end of me. I  
mean it. I had a thing happen. When I was serving. Did I ever tell you?

Me: No.

Him: Later.

We arrive at Liv's.

Through front window: lit candles everywhere (on coffee table, atop microwave, all the way up staircase). At kitchen table: Liv, slumping, looking like she is in hell of own making, several bottles of pills spread out before her on table, rifle (!) in lap.

What to do? Am afraid to knock on window. May push Liv over edge (?). On other hand, if do not knock, Liv may take pills or suddenly shoot self before we have chance to convey happy news re Sally (i.e., Sally = not dead).

Tense moment. Wish I was anywhere else. But Finer bold, Finer hero: knocks sharply on window, shouts: Liv, open up! Liv doesn't budge. Finer punches out window (!), reaches in, opens window, climbs through. Liv sits frozen, watching him come, as if she wishes to be saved but cannot possibly imagine what might do trick.

Finer: Sally's alive, Sid's a big a-hole. You did no harm: everything's fine, all is well.

Liv stands slowly, sets rifle on table gently, as if afraid it may go off on own.

Finer's arm, shoulder bleeding from broken window. Liv holds up finger, as in: wait. Walks off, comes back with first-aid kit, has Finer remove shirt, sits on chair before him, tends to his wounds, picking out shards, putting bloody shards on table, applying salve.

We drive back to office, Finer in back, Liv in front w/ me, looking out window. All three silent whole time.

Odd: everyone gone from streets. Town like empty stage. Purple clouds rolling in. Papers racing along sidewalks in wind, as if rushing home to common apartment complex where all loose pieces of paper required to live.

At office, Sally is in Bullpen, telling funny story re their donkey in lively way to small group of rapt admirers.

Turns, sees Liv.

Am watching Liv's face. Anger flares up, replaced by look of: No, no, anger must find no home in me, am done with that, it has cost me too much these many years.

Sally gestures to Liv: Come, come here, please forgive. Liv hesitates, does awkward stumble toward her, drops head onto Sally's shoulder.

Colleagues = non-good dancers. All trying, at least. One will catch eye of other, as in: Can you believe we are doing? + Don't laugh at me, I won't laugh at you.

Just then, Sid hobbles in. Has been waiting out in car, per Sally's orders, he says, for nearly two hours, reading newspaper as instructed, but is tired; is so hot in car, is sweating like pig, has read entire paper three times, knows all news by heart, time to go home.

Sid looks even more agitated + flinchy than usual, as if, in addition to expecting to be referred to as hick for his country ways, is also expecting to be called liar, be banned forever from premises. At sight of Sid, all anger flees room. Office, at the moment, if I may say it this way = swollen with mercy.

Sid, sensing he has been forgiven by group, lopes across Bullpen in ungainly way, on wobbly long legs, seizes Sally's hand + Liv's hand, shakes resulting hand-cluster overhead, as in: Winners, still champions!

What does it even mean? Are not winners, are not champs of anything. If anything, are champs of being difficult, goofballs, needy, problematic.

I sneak away, call Jill.

How to tell her all that has occurred?

Decide to wait. Will tell all tonight, at length.

For now, just want to hear her voice.

Jill: What is up with you? You sound high.

Is true, yes, am high, a bit.

Tell her I will give her full scoop later.

Jill (dryly): Can't wait.

Finer orders pizza, Kate G. puts on music, Paige (receptionist) throws open windows to let crazy pre-rain breeze blow through.

In Bullpen, improbably, colleagues begin dancing. Strange to see colleagues dancing in Bullpen space where we normally spread out in-progress reports, store broken printers, leave our bikes, if have biked to work. Colleagues = non-good dancers. All trying, at least. One will catch eye of other, as in: Can you believe we are doing? + Don't laugh at me, I won't laugh at you.

Pizza guy bursts in, chin on top box of stack, as if chin's job is to hold big stack steady. So young. Mere child. Red cheeks, yellow pants, purple hair. Shoots room baffled look, as in: What gives? Why you oldsters dancing in socks to quaint old-time music? Why so happy? Do you not know you are wasting lives in dull corporate space? Unlike me, who will soon take world by storm?

Feel like saying: Yes, guilty, are happy. Today, lost none of our number. All still here. Will not be here forever. But all here now.

Finer calls out from Bullpen: T! T!

(I am Thomas. Hence = “T.”)

Finer: Dance with us, brother!

What is there to do but join?

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*This story appears in the [March 2025](#) print edition.*

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# Why the COVID Deniers Won

## Lessons from the pandemic and its aftermath

by David Frum



*Updated at 11:26 a.m. ET on February 12, 2025*

Five years ago, the coronavirus pandemic struck a bitterly divided society.

Americans first diverged over how dangerous the disease was: just a flu (as President Donald Trump repeatedly insisted) or something much deadlier.

Then they disputed public-health measures such as lockdowns and masking; a majority complied while a passionate minority fiercely resisted.

Finally, they split—and have remained split—over the value and safety of COVID-19 vaccines. Anti-vaccine beliefs started on the fringe, but they spread to the point where Ron DeSantis, the governor of the country's third-most-populous state, launched a campaign for president on an appeal to anti-vaccine ideology.

Five years later, one side has seemingly triumphed. The winner is not the side that initially prevailed, the side of public safety. The winner is the side that minimized the disease, then rejected public-health measures to prevent its spread, and finally refused the vaccines designed to protect against its worst effects.

### David A. Graham: The noisy minority.

Ahead of COVID's fifth anniversary, Trump, as president-elect, nominated the country's most outspoken vaccination opponent to head the Department of Health and Human Services. He chose a proponent of the debunked and discredited vaccines-cause-autism claim to lead the CDC. He named a strident critic of COVID-vaccine mandates to lead the FDA. For surgeon general, he picked a believer in hydroxychloroquine, the disproven COVID-19 remedy. His pick for director of the National Institutes of Health had advocated for letting COVID spread unchecked to encourage herd immunity. Despite having fast-tracked the development of the vaccines as president, Trump has himself trafficked in many forms of COVID-19 denial, and has expressed his own suspicions that childhood vaccination against measles and mumps is a cause of autism.

The ascendancy of the anti-vaxxers may ultimately prove fleeting. But if the forces of science and health are to stage a comeback, it's important to understand why those forces have gone into eclipse.

From March 2020 to February 2022, about 1 million Americans died of COVID-19. Many of those deaths occurred after vaccines became available. If every adult in the United States had received two doses of a COVID vaccine by early 2022, rather than just the 64 percent of adults who had, [nearly 320,000 lives would have been saved](#).

[From the January/February 2021 issue: Ed Yong on how science beat the virus](#)

Why did so many Americans resist vaccines? Perhaps the biggest reason was that the pandemic coincided with a presidential-election year, and Trump instantly recognized the crisis as a threat to his chances for reelection. He responded by denying the seriousness of the pandemic, promising that the disease would rapidly disappear on its own, and promoting quack cures.

The [COVID-19 vaccines were developed](#) while Trump was president. They could have been advertised as a Trump achievement. But by the time they became widely available, Trump was out of office. His supporters had already made up their minds to distrust the public-health authorities that promoted the vaccines. Now they had an additional incentive: Any benefit from vaccination would redound to Trump's successor, Joe Biden. Vaccine rejection became a badge of group loyalty, one that ultimately cost many lives.

We want to believe that somebody is in control, even if it's somebody we don't like. At least that way, we can blame bad events on bad people.

A summer 2023 study by Yale researchers of voters in Florida and Ohio found that during the early phase of the pandemic, self-identified Republicans died at only a slightly higher rate than self-identified Democrats in the same age range. But once vaccines were introduced, Republicans became much more likely to die than Democrats. In the spring of 2021, the excess-death rate among Florida and Ohio Republicans was 43 percent higher than among Florida and Ohio Democrats in the same age range. By the late winter of 2023, the 300-odd most pro-Trump counties in the country had [a COVID-19 death rate more than two and a half times higher](#) than the 300 or so most anti-Trump counties.

In 2016, Trump had boasted that he could shoot a man on Fifth Avenue and not lose any votes. In 2021 and 2022, his most fervent supporters risked death to prove their loyalty to Trump and his cause.

Why did political fidelity express itself in such self-harming ways?

The onset of the pandemic was an unusually confusing and disorienting event. Some people who got COVID died. Others lived. Some suffered only mild symptoms. Others spent weeks on ventilators, or emerged with long COVID and never fully recovered. Some lost businesses built over a lifetime. Others refinanced their homes with 2 percent interest rates and banked the savings.

We live in an impersonal universe, indifferent to our hopes and wishes, subject to extreme randomness. We don't like this at all. We crave satisfying explanations. We want to believe that somebody is in control, even if it's somebody we don't like. At least that way, we can blame bad events on bad people. This is the eternal appeal of conspiracy theories. *How did this happen? Somebody must have done it—but who? And why?*

Compounding the disorientation, the coronavirus outbreak was a rapidly changing story. The scientists who researched COVID-19 knew more in April 2020 than they did in February; more in August than in April; more in 2021 than in 2020; more in 2022 than in 2021. The official advice kept changing: *Stay inside—no, go outside. Wash your hands—no, mask your face.* Some Americans appreciated and accepted that knowledge improves over time, that more will be known about a new disease in month two than in month one. But not all Americans saw the world that way. They mistrusted the idea of knowledge as a developing process. Such Americans wondered: *Were they lying before? Or are they lying now?*

In a different era, Americans might have deferred more to medical authority. The internet has upended old ideas of what should count as authority and who possesses it.

The pandemic reduced normal human interactions. Severed from one another, Americans deepened their parasocial attachment to social-media platforms, which foment alienation and rage. Hundreds of thousands of

people plunged into an alternate mental universe during COVID-19 lockdowns. When their doors reopened, the mania did not recede. Conspiracies and mistrust of the establishment—never strangers to the American mind—had been nourished, and they grew.

The experts themselves contributed to this loss of trust.

It's now agreed that we had little to fear from going outside in dispersed groups. But that was not the state of knowledge in the spring of 2020. At the time, medical experts insisted that any kind of mass outdoor event must be sacrificed to the imperatives of the emergency. In mid-March 2020, federal public-health authorities shut down some of Florida's beaches. In California, surfers faced heavy fines for venturing into the ocean. Even the COVID-skeptical Trump White House reluctantly canceled the April 2020 Easter-egg roll.

And then the experts abruptly reversed themselves. When George Floyd was choked to death by a Minneapolis police officer on May 25, 2020, hundreds of thousands of Americans left their homes to protest, defying three months of urgings to avoid large gatherings of all kinds, outdoor as well as indoor.

On May 29, the American Public Health Association issued a statement that proclaimed racism a public-health crisis while conspicuously refusing to condemn the sudden defiance of public-safety rules.

The next few weeks saw the largest mass protests in recent U.S. history. Approximately 15 million to 26 million people attended outdoor Black Lives Matter events in June 2020, according to a series of reputable polls. Few, if any, scientists or doctors scolded the attendees—and many politicians joined the protests, including future Vice President Kamala Harris. It all raised a suspicion: *Maybe the authorities were making the rules based on politics, not science.*

The [politicization of health advice](#) became even more consequential as the summer of 2020 ended. Most American public schools had closed in March. “At their peak,” [Education Week reported](#), “the closures affected at least 55.1 million students in 124,000 U.S. public and private schools.” By September, it was already apparent that COVID-19 posed relatively little risk to children

and teenagers, and that remote learning did not work. At the same time, returning to the classroom before vaccines were available could pose some risk to teachers' health—and possibly also to the health of the adults to whom the children returned after school.

### [David Frum: I moved to Canada during the pandemic](#)

How to balance these concerns given the imperfect information? Liberal states decided in favor of the teachers. In California, the majority of students did not return to in-person learning until the fall of 2021. New Jersey kept many of its public schools closed until then as well. Similar things happened in many other states: Illinois, Maryland, New York, and so on, through the states that voted Democratic in November 2020.

Florida, by contrast, reopened most schools in the fall of 2020. Texas soon followed, as did most other Republican-governed states. The COVID risk for students, it turned out, was minimal: According to a 2021 CDC study, less than 1 percent of Florida students contracted COVID-19 in school settings from August to December 2020 after their state restarted in-person learning. Over the 2020–21 school year, students in states that voted for Trump in the 2020 election [got an average of almost twice as much in-person instruction](#) as students in states that voted for Biden.

Any risks to teachers and school staff could have been mitigated by the universal vaccination of those groups. But deep into the fall of 2021, thousands of blue-state teachers and staff resisted vaccine mandates—including [more than 5,000 in Chicago alone](#). By then, another school year had been interrupted by closures.

By disparaging public-health methods and discrediting vaccines, the COVID-19 minimizers cost hundreds of thousands of people their lives. By keeping schools closed longer than absolutely necessary, the COVID maximizers hazarded the futures of young Americans.

Students from poor and troubled families, in particular, will continue to pay the cost of these learning losses for years to come. Even in liberal states, many private schools reopened for in-person instruction in the fall of 2020. The affluent and the connected could buy their children a continuing

education unavailable to those who depended on public schools. Many lower-income students did not return to the classroom: Throughout the 2022–23 school year, poorer school districts reported much higher absenteeism rates than were seen before the pandemic.

Teens absent from school typically get into trouble in ways that are even more damaging than the loss of math or reading skills. New York City [arrested 25 percent more minors for serious crimes](#) in 2024 than in 2018. The national trend was similar, if less stark. The FBI reports that although crime in general declined in 2023 compared with 2022, crimes by minors rose by nearly 10 percent.

People who finish schooling during a recession tend to do worse even into middle age than those who finish in times of prosperity. They are [less likely to marry, less likely to have children, and more likely to die early](#). The disparity between those who finish in lucky years and those who finish in unlucky years is greatest for people with the least formal education.

Will the harms of COVID prove equally enduring? We won't know for some time. But if past experience holds, the COVID-19 years will mark their most vulnerable victims for decades.

The story of COVID can be told as one of shocks and disturbances that wrecked two presidencies. In 2020 and 2024, incumbent administrations lost elections back-to-back, something that hadn't happened since the deep economic depression of the late 1880s and early 1890s. The pandemic caused a recession as steep as any in U.S. history. The aftermath saw the worst inflation in half a century.

In truth, the story of COVID is a story of strength and resilience.

In the three years from January 2020 through December 2022, Trump and Biden both signed a series of major bills to revive and rebuild the U.S. economy. Altogether, they swelled the gross public debt from about \$20 trillion in January 2017 to more than \$36 trillion today. The weight of that debt helped drive interest rates and mortgage rates higher. The burden of the pandemic debt, like learning losses, is likely to be with us for quite a long time.

Yet even while acknowledging all that went wrong, respecting all the lives lost or ruined, reckoning with all the lasting harms of the crisis, we do a dangerous injustice if we remember the story of COVID solely as a story of American failure. In truth, the story is one of strength and resilience.

Scientists did deliver vaccines to prevent the disease and treatments to recover from it. Economic policy did avert a global depression and did rapidly restore economic growth. Government assistance kept households afloat when the world shut down—and new remote-work practices enabled new patterns of freedom and happiness after the pandemic ended.

The virus was first detected in December 2019. Its genome was sequenced within days by scientists collaborating across international borders. Clinical trials for the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine began in April 2020, and the vaccine was authorized for emergency use by the FDA in December. Additional vaccines rapidly followed, and were universally available by the spring of 2021. The weekly death toll fell by more than 90 percent from January 2021 to midsummer of that year.

The U.S. economy roared back with a strength and power that stunned the world. The initial spike of inflation has subsided. Wages are again rising faster than prices. Growth in the United States in 2023 and 2024 was faster and broader than in any peer economy.

Even more startling, the U.S. recovery outpaced China's. That nation's bounceback from COVID-19 has been slow and faltering. America's economic lead over China, once thought to be narrowing, has suddenly widened; the gap between the two countries' GDPs [grew from \\$5 trillion in 2021](#) to nearly \$10 trillion in 2023. The U.S. share of world economic output is now [slightly higher than it was in 1980](#), before China began any of its economic reforms. As he did in 2016, Trump inherits a strong and healthy economy, to which his own reckless policies—notably, his trade protectionism—are the only visible threat.

In public affairs, our bias is usually to pay most attention to disappointments and mistakes. In the pandemic, there were many errors: the partisan dogma of the COVID minimizers; the capitulation of states and municipalities to favored interest groups; the hypochondria and neuroticism of some COVID

maximizers. Errors need to be studied and the lessons heeded if we are to do better next time. But if we fail to acknowledge America's successes—even partial and imperfect successes—we not only do an injustice to the American people. We also defeat in advance their confidence to collectively meet the crises of tomorrow.

Perhaps it's time for some national self-forgiveness here. Perhaps it's time to accept that despite all that went wrong, despite how much there was to learn about the disease and how little time there was to learn it, and despite polarized politics and an unruly national character—*despite all of that*—Americans collectively met the COVID-19 emergency about as well as could reasonably have been hoped.

The wrong people have profited from the immediate aftermath. But if we remember the pandemic accurately, the future will belong to those who rose to the crisis when their country needed them.

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*This article originally misstated the U.S.'s gross public debt in 2017 and early 2025. It appears in the March 2025 print edition with the headline "Why the COVID Deniers Won."*

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# Europe's Elon Musk Problem

**He and other tech oligarchs are making it impossible to conduct free and fair elections anywhere.**

by Anne Applebaum



During an American election, a rich man can hand out \$1 million checks to prospective voters. Companies and people can use secretly funded “dark money” nonprofits to donate unlimited money, anonymously, to super PACs, which can then spend it on advertising campaigns. Podcasters, partisans, or

anyone, really, can tell outrageous, incendiary lies about a candidate. They can boost those falsehoods through targeted online advertising. No special courts or election rules can stop the disinformation from spreading before voters see it. The court of public opinion, which over the past decade has seen and heard everything, no longer cares. U.S. elections are now a political Las Vegas: Anything goes.

But that's not the way elections are run in other countries. In Britain, political parties are, at least during the run-up to an election, [limited to spending no more than £54,010 per candidate](#). In Germany, as in many other European countries, the state funds political parties, proportionate to their number of elected parliamentarians, so that politicians do not have to depend on, and become corrupted by, wealthy donors. In Poland, courts fast-track election-related libel cases in the weeks before a vote in order to discourage people from lying.

Nor is this unique to Europe. Many democracies have state or public media that are obligated, at least in principle, to give equal time to all sides. Many require political donations to be transparent, with the names of donors listed in an online registry. Many have limits on political advertising. Some countries also have rules about hate speech and indict people who break them.

Countries apply these laws to create conditions for fair debate, to build trust in the system, and to inspire confidence in the winning candidates. Some democracies believe that transparency matters—that voters should know who is funding their candidates, as well as who is paying for political messages on social media or anywhere else. In some places, these rules have a loftier goal: to prevent the rise of antidemocratic extremism of the kind that has engulfed democracies—and especially European democracies—in the past.

But for how much longer can democracies pursue these goals? We live in a world in which algorithms controlled by American and Chinese oligarchs choose the messages and images seen by millions of people; in which money can move through secret bank accounts with the help of crypto schemes; and in which this dark money can then boost anonymous social-media accounts with the aim of shaping public opinion. In such a world, how can any

election rules be enforced? If you are Albania, or even the United Kingdom, do you still get to set the parameters of your public debate? Or are you now forced to be Las Vegas too?

Although it's easy to get distracted by the schoolyard nicknames and irresponsible pedophilia accusations that Elon Musk flings around, these are the real questions posed by his open, aggressive use of X to spread false information and promote extremist and anti-European politicians in the U.K., Germany, and elsewhere. The integrity of elections—and the possibility of debate untainted by misinformation injected from abroad—is equally challenged by TikTok, the Chinese platform, and by Mark Zuckerberg's Meta, whose subsidiaries include Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and Threads. TikTok says the company does not accept any paid political advertising. Meta, which [announced in January that it is abandoning fact-checking on its sites in the U.S.](#), also says it will continue to comply with European laws. But even before Zuckerberg's radical policy change, these promises were empty. Meta's vaunted content curation and moderation have never been transparent. Nobody knew, and nobody knows, what exactly Facebook's algorithm was promoting and why. Even an occasional user of these platforms encounters spammers, scammers, and opaque accounts running foreign influence operations. No guide to the algorithm, and no real choices about it, are available on Meta products, X, or TikTok.

Musk's personal X account has more than 212 million followers, giving him enormous power to set the news agenda around the world.

In truth, no one knows if any platforms really comply with political-funding rules either, because nobody outside the companies can fully monitor what happens online during an intense election campaign—and after the voting has ended, it's too late. According to declassified Romanian-intelligence documents, someone allegedly spent more than \$1 million on TikTok content in the 18 months before an election in support of a Romanian presidential candidate who declared that he himself had spent nothing at all. In a belated attempt to address this and other alleged discrepancies, a Romanian court [canceled the first round of that election](#), a decision that itself damaged Romanian democracy.

Not all of this is new. Surreptitious political-party funding was a feature of the Cold War, and the Russian government has continued this practice, sometimes by offering deals to foreign businesspeople close to pro-Russian politicians. Press moguls with international political ambitions are hardly a novelty. Rupert Murdoch, an Australian who has U.S. citizenship, has long played an outsize role in U.K. politics through his media companies. John Major, the former British prime minister and Conservative Party leader, has said that in 1997, Murdoch threatened to pull his newspapers' support unless the prime minister pursued a more anti-European policy. Major refused. Murdoch has said, "[I have never asked a prime minister for anything](#)," but one of his Conservative-leaning tabloids, *The Sun*, did endorse the Labour Party in the next election. Major lost.

That incident now seems almost quaint. Even at the height of its influence, the print edition of *The Sun* sold 4 million copies a day. More to the point, it operated, and still does, within the constraints of U.K. rules and regulations, as do all broadcast and print media. Murdoch's newspapers take British libel and hate-speech laws into consideration when they run stories. His business strategy is necessarily shaped by rules limiting what a single company can own. After his journalists were accused of hacking phones and bribing police in the early 2000s, Murdoch himself had to testify before an investigative commission, and he closed down one of his tabloids for good.

### [McKay Coppins: Europe braces for Trump](#)

Social media not only has far greater reach—Musk's personal X account has more than 212 million followers, giving him enormous power to set the news agenda around the world—it also exists outside the legal system. Under the American law known as Section 230, passed nearly three decades ago, internet platforms are not treated as publishers in the U.S. In practice, neither Facebook nor X has the same legal responsibility for what appears on their platforms as do, say, *The Wall Street Journal* and CNN. And this, too, has consequences: Americans have created the information climate that other countries must accept, and this allows deceptive election practices to thrive. If countries don't have their own laws, and until recently most did not, Section 230 effectively requires them to treat social-media companies as if they exist outside their legal systems too.

Brazil broke with this pattern last year, when a judge demanded that Musk comply with Brazilian laws against spreading misinformation and political extremism, and forced X offline until he did. Several European countries, including the U.K., Germany, and France, have also passed laws designed to bring the platforms into compliance with their own legal systems, mandating fines for companies that violate hate-speech laws or host other illegal content. But these laws are controversial and hard to enforce. Besides, “illegal speech” is not necessarily the central problem. No laws prevented Musk from interviewing Alice Weidel, a leader of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party, on X, thereby providing her with a huge platform, available to no other political candidate, in the month before a national election. The interview, which included several glaringly false statements (among others, that Weidel was the “leading” candidate), was viewed 45 million times in 24 hours, a number far beyond the reach of any German public or private media.

Only one institution on the planet is large enough and powerful enough to write and enforce laws that could make the tech companies change their policies. Partly for that reason, the European Union may soon become one of the Trump administration’s most prominent targets. In theory, the EU’s Digital Services Act, which took full effect last year, can be used to regulate, fine, and, in extreme circumstances, ban internet companies whose practices clash with European laws. Yet a primary intent of the act is not punitive, but rather to open up the platforms: to allow vetted researchers access to platform data, and to give citizens more transparency about what they hear and see. Freedom of speech also means the right to receive information, and at the moment social-media companies operate behind a curtain. We don’t know if they are promoting or suppressing certain points of view, curbing or encouraging orchestrated political campaigns, discouraging or provoking violent riots. Above all, we don’t know who is paying for misinformation to be spread online.

In the past, the EU has not hesitated to try to apply European law to tech companies. Over the past decade, for example, Google has faced three fines totaling more than \$8 billion for breaking antitrust law (though one of these fines was overturned by the EU’s General Court in 2024).

A group of American oligarchs want to undermine European institutions because they don't want to be regulated.

In November, the European Commission fined Meta more than \$800 million for unfair trade practices. But for how much longer will the EU have this authority? In the fall, J. D. Vance issued an extraordinarily unsubtle threat, one that is frequently repeated in Europe. “If NATO wants us to continue supporting them and NATO wants us to continue to be a good participant in this military alliance,” Vance [told an interviewer](#), “why don’t you respect American values and respect free speech?” Mark Zuckerberg, echoing Vance’s misuse of the expression *free speech* to mean “freedom to conceal company practices from the public,” put it even more crudely. In a conversation with Joe Rogan in January, Zuckerberg said he feels “optimistic” that President Donald Trump will [intervene to stop the EU from enforcing its own antitrust laws](#): “I think he just wants America to win.”

Does America “winning” mean that European democracies, and maybe other democracies, lose? Some European politicians think it might. Robert Habeck, the German vice chancellor and a leader of that country’s Green Party, believes that Musk’s frenzies of political activity on X aren’t the random blurts of an addled mind, but rather are “logical and systematic.” In his New Year’s address, Habeck said that Musk is deliberately “strengthening those who are weakening Europe,” including the explicitly anti-European AfD. This, he believes, is because “a weak Europe is in the interest of those for whom regulation is an inappropriate limitation of their power.”

Until recently, Russia was the most important state seeking to undermine European institutions. Vladimir Putin has long disliked the EU because it restricts Russian companies’ ability to intimidate and bribe European political leaders and companies, and because the EU is larger and more powerful than Russia, whereas European countries on their own are not. Now a group of American oligarchs also want to undermine European institutions, because they don’t want to be regulated—and they may have the American president on their side. Quite soon, the European Union, along with Great Britain and other democracies around the world, might find that they have to choose between their alliance with the United States and their ability to run their own elections and select their own leaders without the

pressure of aggressive outside manipulation. Ironically, countries, such as Brazil, that don't have the same deep military, economic, and cultural ties to the U.S. may find it easier to maintain the sovereignty of their political systems and the transparency of their information ecosystems than Europeans.

A crunch point is imminent, when the European Commission finally concludes a year-long investigation into X. Tellingly, two people who have advised the commission on this investigation would talk with me only off the record, because the potential for reprisals against them and their organizations—whether it be online trolling and harassment or lawsuits—is too great. Still, both advisers said that the commission has the power to protect Europe's sovereignty, and to force the platforms to be more transparent. “The commission should look at the raft of laws and rules it has available and see how they can be applied,” one of them told me, “always remembering that this is not about taking action against a person’s voice. This is the commission saying that everyone’s voice should be equal.”

At least in theory, no country is obligated to become an electoral Las Vegas, as America has. Global democracies could demand greater transparency around the use of algorithms, both on social media and in the online-advertising market more broadly. They could offer consumers more control over what they see, and more information about what they don’t see. They could enforce their own campaign-funding laws. These changes could make the internet more open and fair, and therefore a better, safer place for the exercise of free speech. If the chances of success seem narrow, it’s not because of the lack of a viable legal framework—rather it’s because, at the moment, cowardice is as viral as one of Musk’s tweets.

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*This article appears in the [March 2025](#) print edition with the headline “Can Europe Stop Elon Musk?”*

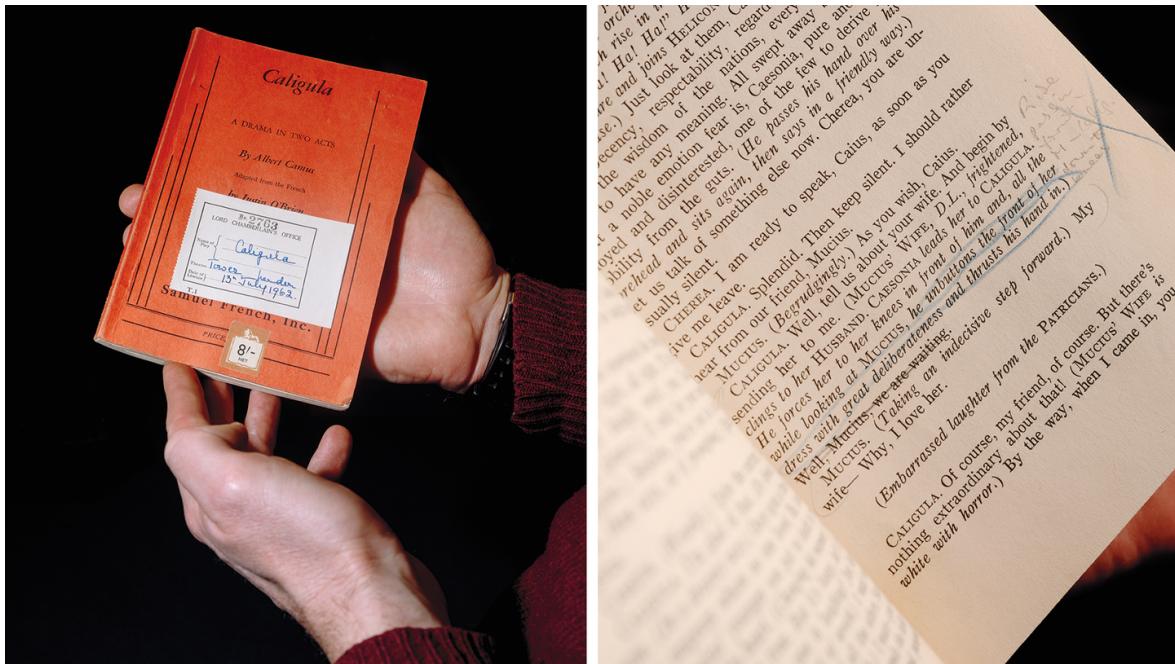
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# All the King's Censors

## When bureaucrats ruled over British theater

by Thomas Chatterton Williams



The script of Albert Camus' *Caligula*

Several stories below the British Library's Magna Carta room, alongside a rumbling line of the London Underground, is a brightly lit labyrinth of rare and historic items. Past a series of antique rifles chained to a wall, past an intricate system of conveyor belts whisking books to the surface, the library stores an enormous collection of plays, manuscripts, and letters. Last spring, I checked my belongings at security and descended to sift through this

archive—a record of correspondence between the producers and directors of British theater and a small team of censors who once worked for the Crown.

For centuries, these strict, dyspeptic, and sometimes unintentionally hilarious bureaucrats read and passed judgment on every public theatrical production in Britain, striking out references to sex, God, and politics, and forcing playwrights to, as one put it, cook their “conceptions to the taste of authority.” They reported to the Lord Chamberlain’s Office, which in 1737 became responsible for granting licenses to theaters and approving the texts of plays. “Examiners” made sure that no productions would offend the sovereign, blaspheme the Church, or stir audiences to political radicalism. An 1843 act expanded the department’s powers, calling upon it to block any play that threatened not just the “Public Peace” but “Decorum” and “good Manners.”

Hardly chosen for their artistic sensibilities or knowledge of theatrical history, the men hired by the Lord Chamberlain’s Office were mostly retired military officers from the upper-middle class. From the Victorian era on, they scrutinized plays for references to racial equality and sexuality—particularly homosexuality—vulgar language, and “offensive personalities,” as one guideline put it.

“Omit the business and speeches about flybuttons.”

Twentieth-century English theater was, as a result of all this vigilance, “subject to more censorship than in the reigns of Elizabeth I, James I and Charles I,” wrote the playwright and former theater critic Nicholas de Jongh in his 2000 survey of censorship, *Politics, Prudery and Perversions*. The censors suppressed or bowdlerized countless works of genius. As I thumbed through every play I could think of from the 1820s to the 1960s (earlier manuscripts, sold as part of an examiner’s private archive, can be seen in the Huntington Library in California), it became clear that the censors only got stricter—and more prudish—over time.

[Read: When the culture wars came for the theater](#)

“Do not come to me with Ibsen,” warned the examiner E. F. Smyth Pigott, nicely demonstrating the censors’ habitual tone. He had “studied Ibsen’s

plays pretty carefully,” and determined that the characters were, to a man, “morally deranged.”

In cardboard boxes stacked on endless rows of metal shelving, string-tie binders hold the original versions of thousands of plays. The text of each is accompanied by a typewritten “Readers’ Report,” most of them several pages long, summarizing the plot and cataloging the work’s flaws as well as any redeeming qualities. That is followed, when available, by typed and handwritten correspondence between the censors and the applicants (usually the play’s hopeful and ingratiating producers).

These reports can at times be as entertaining as the plays themselves. On Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, one examiner wrote: “Omit the business and speeches about flybuttons”; on Sartre’s *Huis Clos*: “The play illustrates very well the difference between the French and English tastes. I don’t suppose that anyone would bat an eyelid over in Paris, but here we bar Lesbians on the stage”; on Camus’ *Caligula*: “This is the sort of play for which I have no liking at all”; on Tennessee Williams: “Neuroses grin through everything he writes”; and on Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*: “A good play about negroes in a Chicago slum, written with dignity, power and complete freedom from whimsy. The title is taken from a worthless piece of occasional verse about dreams deferred drying up like a raisin in the sun—or festering and exploding.”

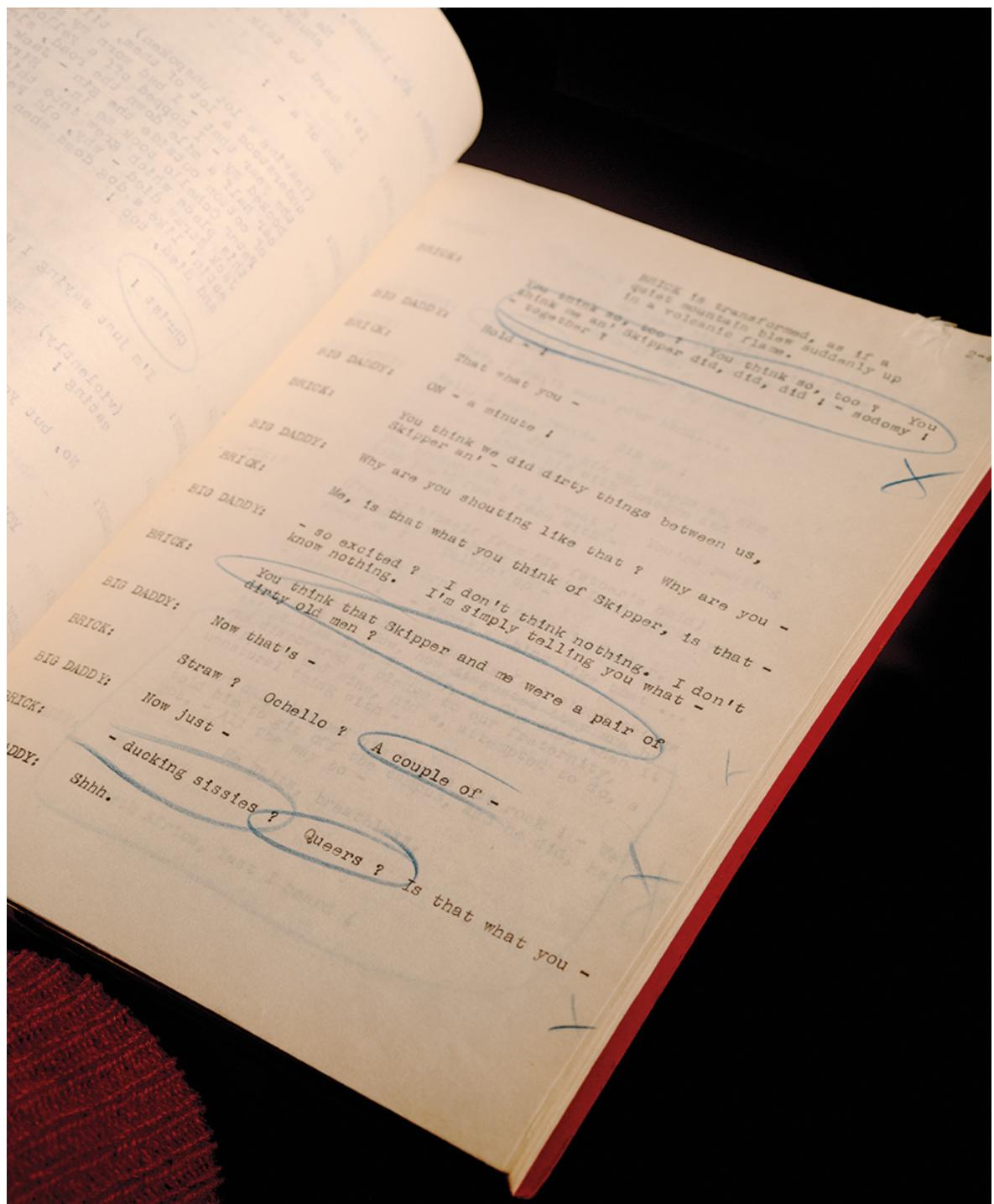
#### [Ethan Zuckerman: America is no longer the home of the free internet](#)

These bureaucrats were eager, as one of them wrote, to “lop off a few excrecent boughs” to save the tree. They were anti-Semitic (one successful compromise involved replacing a script’s use of “Fuck the Pope” with “The Pope’s a Jew”) and virulently homophobic. In response to Williams’s *Suddenly Last Summer*, in 1958, one Lieutenant Colonel Vincent Troubridge noted: “There was a great fuss in New York about the references to cannibalism at the end of this play, but the Lord Chamberlain will find more objectionable the indications that the dead man was a homosexual.”

But the censors could also, occasionally, aspire to the level of pointed and biting literary criticism. “This is a piece of incoherence in the manner of Samuel Beckett,” the report for a 1960 production of Harold Pinter’s *The*

*Caretaker* begins, “though it has not that author’s vein of nihilistic pessimism, and each individual sentence is comprehensible if irrelevant.” One gets the impression that, like the characters from a Bolaño novel, at least some of these men were themselves failed artists and intellectuals, drawn to such authoritarian work from a place of bruised and envious ego.

Indeed, one examiner, Geoffrey Dearmer, considered among the more flexible, had written poetry during the Great War. He reported to the Lord Chamberlain alongside the tyrannical Charles Heriot, who had studied theater at university and worked on a production of *Macbeth* before moving, still as a young man, into advertising, journalism, and book publishing. He was known, de Jongh wrote, for being “gratuitously abusive.” (Heriot on Edward Bond’s 1965 *Saved*: “A revolting amateur play … about a bunch of brainless, ape-like yobs,” including a “brainless slut of twenty-three living with her sluttish parents.”) Another examiner, George Alexander Redford, was a bank manager chosen primarily because he was friends with the man he succeeded. When asked about the criteria he used in his decision making, Redford answered, “I have no critical view on plays.” He was “simply bringing to bear an official point of view and keeping up a standard. … There are no principles that can be defined. I follow precedent.”



An examiner's notes on Tennessee Williams's *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (Chris Hoare for *The Atlantic*)

The director Peter Hall, [writing in \*The Guardian\* in 2002](#) about his experiences with the censors, said that the office “was largely staffed by

retired naval officers with extraordinarily filthy minds. They were so alert to filth that they often found it when none was intended.” Once, he called to ask why some lines had been cut from a play he was directing:

“We all know what’s going on here, Hall, don’t we?” said the retired naval officer angrily. “It’s up periscopes.” “Up periscopes?” I queried. “Buggery, Hall, buggery!” Actually, it wasn’t.

As comic as these men seem now, they wielded enormous, unexamined power. The correspondence filed alongside the manuscripts reveals the extent to which the pressures of censorship warped manuscripts long before they even arrived on the censors’ desks. Managers and production companies checked scripts and suggested changes in anticipation of scrutiny. In a 1967 letter, a representative of a dramatic society eager to stage *Waiting for Godot* writes, “On page 81 Estragon says ‘Who farted?’ The director and myself are concerned as to whether, during a public presentation, this might offend the laws of censorship. Awaiting your advice.” Presumably, the answer was affirmative.

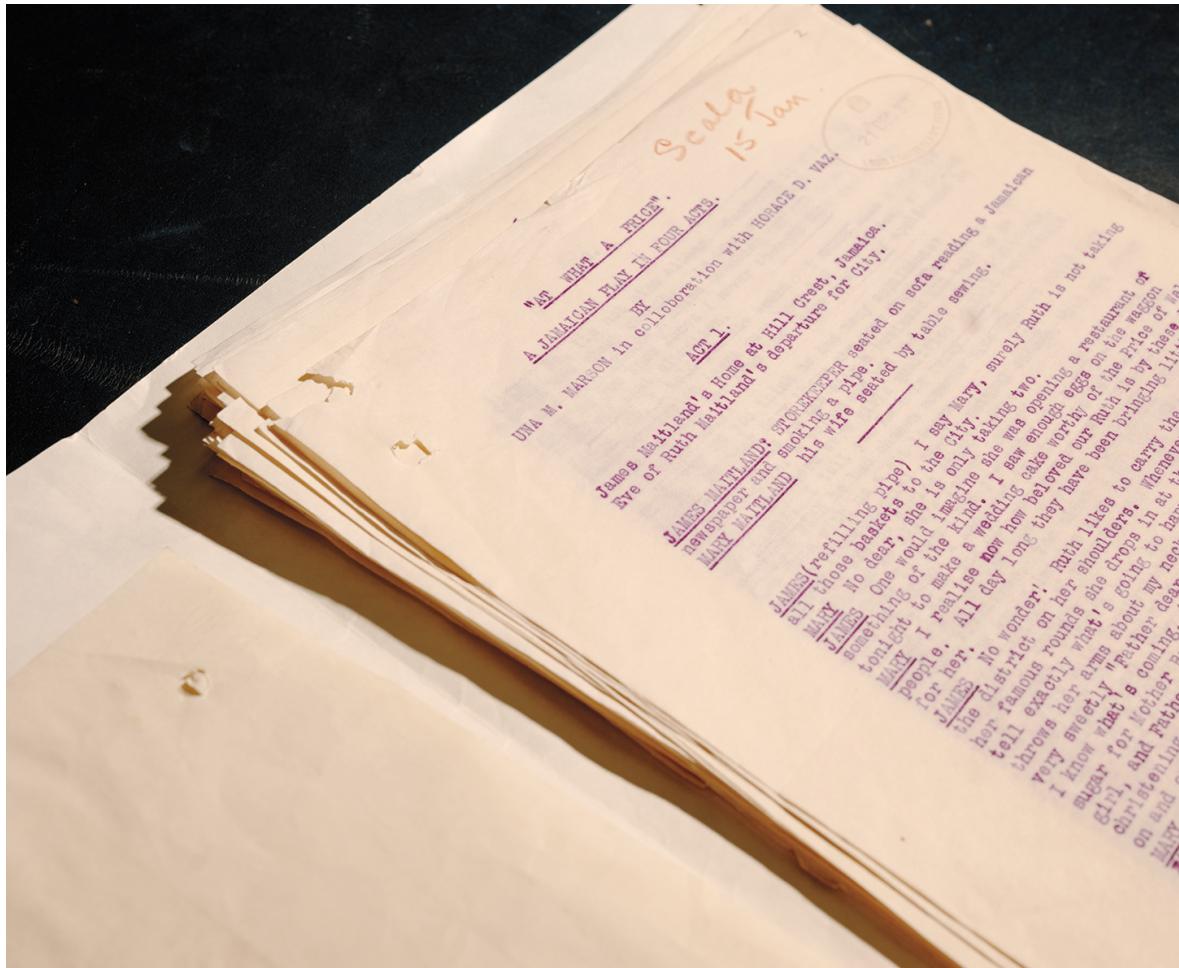


## An examiner's report on Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (Chris Hoare for *The Atlantic*)

Playwrights also performed their own “pre-pre-censorship”—limiting the scope of their subject matter before and during the writing process.

According to the 2004 book [\*The Lord Chamberlain Regrets ... A History of British Theatre Censorship\*](#), as far back as 1866, the comptroller of the LCO, Spencer Ponsonby-Fane, “explicitly commended examiners for operating this ‘indirect system of censorship’ because it enabled the Office to keep the number of prohibited plays to a minimum and forestall concerns about repression.”

Some plays made it past the censors only as a result of human error. When I met Kate Dossett, a professor at the University of Leeds who specializes in Black-theater history, she told me that [the case of the playwright Una Marson](#) is an example of what “gets hidden in this collection.” Marson’s 1932 play, [At What a Price](#), depicts a young Black woman from the Jamaican countryside who moves to Kingston and takes a job as a stenographer. Her white employer seduces—or, in today’s understanding, sexually harasses—and impregnates her. The drama is a subtle exploration of miscegenation, one of the core taboos that the LCO often clamped down on. But the play was approved because the examiner—confused by the protagonist’s class markers and education—didn’t realize that she was Black.



### The script of Una Marson's *At What a Price* (Chris Hoare for *The Atlantic*)

"This play is to be produced by the League of Coloured Peoples but it seems to have no particular relation to the objects of that institution except that the scene is in Jamaica and some of the minor characters are coloured and speak a more or less diverting dialect," the report states. "The main story is presumably about English people and is an old-fashioned artless affair."

From the beginning, [some prominent figures fought against](#) the system of censorship. Henry Brooke's [\*Gustavus Vasa\*](#) bears the distinction of having been the first British play banned under the Licensing Act of 1737. The work, ostensibly about the Swedish liberator Gustav I, was interpreted as a thinly veiled attack on Prime Minister Robert Walpole. Responding to the ban in a satirical defense of the censors, [Samuel Johnson wrote](#) that the government should go further, and make it a "felony to teach to read without a license from the lord chamberlain." Only then would citizens be able to

rest, in “ignorance and peace,” and the government be safe from “the insults of the poets.”



### Sweeping the Stage. ("New Brooms.")

Box Book-keeper. "STALLS, MADAM? WELL,—REALLY,—THE FACT IS, THE LORD CHAMBERLAIN,—THAT IS—AHEM!—WE'RE JUST NOW *CLEANING THE STAGE*, MADAM, AND HOPE TO HAVE THE THEATRE QUITE FIT FOR LADIES BY CHRISTMAS."

A cartoon from 1874 satirized the Lord Chamberlain's attempts to clean up the stage. (Universal History Archive / Getty)

Henry James, in his day, spoke out in defense of the English playwright, who “has less dignity—thanks to the censor’s arbitrary rights upon his work—than that of any other man of letters in Europe.” So, too, did George Bernard Shaw. “It is a frightful thing to see the greatest thinkers, poets and authors of modern Europe, men like Ibsen,” Shaw wrote, “delivered helplessly into the vulgar hands of such a noodle as this despised and incapable old official.”

By the time the Theatres Act of 1968 abolished the censorship of plays, social attitudes were changing. The [influx of workers from Jamaica and other countries in the Commonwealth](#) in the 1950s challenged the stability of racial dynamics; sex between men [was decriminalized in England and Wales in 1967](#); divorce became more common; and the rock-and-roll era destigmatized drugs. For years, theaters had been taking advantage of a loophole: Because the LCO’s jurisdiction applied only to public performances, theaters could charge patrons a nominal membership fee, thereby transforming themselves into private subscription clubs out of the censors’ reach.

It must have gotten lonely, trying to stand so long against the changing times. “I don’t understand this,” Heriot wrote, plaintively, about *Hair*. The American musical was banned three times for extolling “dirt, anti-establishment views, homosexuality and free love,” but in the end, one gets the impression that the censors just gave up. Alexander Lock, a curator at the library, pointed me to Heriot’s report on the final version of the musical. The pain of defeat in his voice is almost palpable: “A curiously half-hearted attempt to vet the script” had been made, he wrote, but many offenses were left intact.

*Hair* opened at the Shaftesbury Theatre in September 1968. That month, by royal assent, no new plays required approval from the Lord Chamberlain’s Office, which was left to devote its attention to the planning of royal weddings, funerals, and garden parties.

Some may be tempted to dismiss the censors' legacy as limited to, as a 1967 article in *The Times* of London had it, "the trivia of indecency." But the damage was far deeper. The censors, de Jongh wrote, stunted English theater, kept it frivolous and parochial, and prevented it from dealing with "the greatest issues and anguishes of this violent century." No playwrights addressed "the fascist regimes of the 1930s, the process that led to the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the ghastliness perpetrated by Hitler and Stalin, or the tyrannies experienced in China and under other totalitarian leaderships. No wonder. Their plays would have been disallowed. In the 1930s you could not win licences for plays that might offend Hitler or Mussolini or Stalin." Shakespeare never "had to put up with" censorship so "rigorous and narrow-minded," Peter Hall wrote. His "richest plays and his finest lines, packed with erotic double meanings, would have been smartly excised by the Lord Chamberlain's watchdogs."

#### From the January 1930 issue: Edward Weeks on the practice of censorship

These practices may strike us today as outlandish and anachronistic. Many of us take for granted creative license and the freedom of expression that undergirds it. But the foundation upon which these rights—as we think of them—are situated is far less immutable than we would like to imagine. As recent trends in the United States and elsewhere have shown, advances toward greater tolerance are reversible.

Indeed, many Americans on both the right and the left correctly sense this, even if they do not always understand what genuine censorship looks like. Activists on college campuses have confused the ability to occupy and disrupt physical space for the right to dissent verbally. Meanwhile, Elon Musk warns that "wokeness" will stifle free speech even as he uses the social-media site he owns to manipulate public debate.

Perusing the plays in the Lord Chamberlain's archive is, among other things, a reminder of what censorship really is: government power applied to speech to either limit or compel it. And it is also a reminder that in the long term, many such attempts backfire. They reveal, as Sir Roly Keating, who was chief executive of the library from 2012 until the beginning of this year, told me, more about the censors' own "fears, paranoias, obsessions" than they ever succeed in concealing.



Inside the archive (Chris Hoare for *The Atlantic*)

There is also the sheer fact of what Keating called “this extraordinary imposition of bureaucracy.” Just as the Stasi archive provides unparalleled insight into the interplay of art and politics in postwar East German society, and the Hoover-era FBI’s [copious files on Martin Luther King Jr., James Baldwin, and other Black American luminaries](#) amount to a valuable cultural repository, the Lord Chamberlain’s archive can now be seen as one of the preeminent collections of Black and queer theater in the English-speaking world. It includes not just the plays that were staged, but also those that were rejected, and in some cases multiple drafts of them. These are precisely the kinds of works that, without the backing of institutions that have the resources to protect their own archive, might have been lost to history.

“Theater’s an ephemeral medium,” Keating told me. “Early drafts of plays change all the time; many don’t get published at all.” Among the many

ramifications of censorship, I had not adequately considered this one: the degree to which methodical suppression can create the most meticulous collection. It is a deeply satisfying justice—even a form of revenge—that the hapless bureaucrats who endeavored so relentlessly to squelch and block independent thought have instead so painstakingly preserved it for future generations.

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*Support for this article was provided by the British Library's Eccles Institute for the Americas & Oceania Phil Davies Fellowship. It appears in the [March 2025](#) print edition with the headline "All the King's Censors." 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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# Capitulation Is Contagious

**When fear spreads in a society,  
powerful people who know better  
are often the first to show their  
weakness.**

by Adrienne LaFrance



A sketch of Ann Telnaes's cartoon that was killed by The Washington Post  
(Ann Telnaes)

*This article was featured in the One Story to Read Today newsletter. [Sign up for it here.](#)*

At the height of his powers, Jay Gould was known by many names, few of them flattering. People called him the Skunk of Wall Street, the Napoleon of Finance, and Mephistopheles himself. Gould, alongside rivals such as Cornelius Vanderbilt and John D. Rockefeller, was a captain of industry—or, as they would all come to be known, a robber baron.

These men were stupendously powerful, and ruthlessly devoted to the perpetuation of their own wealth and influence. They battled one another for control of America's railways. They hoarded gold, manipulated markets, and exploited workers. They bribed journalists to win favorable coverage and, when that didn't work, threatened the writers and editors who displeased them.

These threats carried weight. Rockefeller's Standard Oil could crush a newspaper by pulling advertising if it didn't like what it saw. Eventually Gould and Rockefeller bought or otherwise invested in newspapers, in an attempt to exert greater influence over how they were covered. Gould even bought a majority interest in Western Union, which gave him power to control the flow of vital information.

Even so, muckrakers such as Ida Tarbell took on Standard Oil. Cartoonists such as Thomas Nast and Joseph Keppler lampooned the unconstrained power of the industrialists and the corruption of Tammany Hall and its leader, William "Boss" Tweed. Tweed was fixated on the political cartoons that mocked him. "I don't care so much what the newspapers write about me —my constituents can't read," he said. "But, damn it, they can see pictures."



Joseph Keppler's "The Bosses of the Senate" (1889) (Nawrocki / ClassicStock / Getty)

The brave few who stood up to the magnates of the Gilded Age came to mind this month, when Ann Telnaes, a *Washington Post* cartoonist, resigned over the paper's refusal to publish a cartoon in which she skewered today's titans of industry—Jeff Bezos, the owner of the *Post*, among them. After resigning, Telnaes [posted a rough sketch of the cartoon on Substack](#), and *The Atlantic* is publishing it here with her permission. It shows Bezos and other tech and media giants (along with Mickey Mouse, representing his owner) kneeling and prostrating before a colossal Donald Trump. Telnaes, in explaining her departure, wrote that there have been “instances where sketches have been rejected or revisions requested, but never because of the point of view inherent in the cartoon’s commentary.”

Telnaes told me that she didn’t see her resignation as courageous, merely necessary. “When a newspaper decides to turn its head away from holding government and powerful people accountable, it threatens a free press and, by extension, democracy,” she said.

David Shipley, the newspaper's Opinions editor, has said he spiked the cartoon because he [wanted to avoid “repetition” with columns that the section had published or assigned](#). His reasoning was unpersuasive. There have been numerous signs that Bezos, who successfully stewarded the *Post* through its “Democracy Dies in Darkness” years, has shifted his position on Trump. Once a champion of journalists who refuse to be intimidated by bullies, Bezos is now behaving in a more accommodating way. Last fall, he killed the paper’s planned endorsement of Kamala Harris days before the election. The day after the election, he tweeted “[big congratulations](#)” to Trump, who has vowed to imprison Americans who say or write things he doesn’t like. Bezos then traveled to Mar-a-Lago to meet with Trump and Elon Musk—and had Amazon pledge \$1 million to Trump’s lavishly oversubscribed inauguration fund.

### [Brian Stelter: The real story of the crisis at \*The Washington Post\*](#)

The cartoon I first thought of when I read about Telnaes’s resignation was Joseph Keppler’s 1889 drawing “The Bosses of the Senate,” in which bloated monopolists totter into the Senate chamber, each top-hatted and bearing the name of his own special interest: Standard Oil Trust, Sugar Trust, Copper Trust, Coal, and so on. The cartoon was more than an ephemeral jab. Alongside journalistic investigations into these same powerful interests, “The Bosses of the Senate” helped citizens see in the clearest possible terms how the powerful put themselves and their fortunes ahead of the public good.

In today’s information-soaked world, a single political cartoon rarely makes much noise. Telnaes’s did, though not for the reasons she’d hoped. The suppression of her cartoon has become a symbol of spinelessness—of a once-intrepid American newspaper now too afraid to lampoon the richest men on Earth for their obsequiousness. Sycophancy has a kind of momentum. Like any form of groupthink, it is part conformity, part self-preservation. The first person to grovel is undignified, but each subsequent act of cowardice allows the next person to acquiesce more easily.

Trump promises to punish people for disagreeing with him. Lately, he’s found that such threats are sufficient to bring many of his perceived enemies in line. This was certainly the case when the leaders at Disney rolled over

after Trump sued ABC for alleged defamation by George Stephanopoulos, in a case that First Amendment lawyers widely believed Disney would have won. This is one way that institutions fail: not because they are forced into submission, but because people in positions of power collapse all on their own.

Today, the three richest men in America are Bezos, Musk, and Mark Zuckerberg. These new robber barons have proclaimed their commitment to free speech. When Trump, in his second term, makes good on his promises to seek revenge against the American citizens who work as journalists, we will see whether they choose to back up that commitment. Like the robber barons who preceded them, Musk and Zuckerberg seem less interested in the public good than in their own personal enrichment. Musk, in particular, has built a platform designed to advance his political goals and discredit his opponents. But Bezos, too, has gone so far as to write a column in his own newspaper blaming its journalists for public distrust in them. Somehow, he managed to leave out any mention of Trump's years-long campaign to cast them as "enemies of the people."

Plenty of Americans can still see all of this quite clearly—those who believe in truth, and who know that freedom of speech and freedom of the press are God-given rights, not granted to us by the government, or Elon Musk, or anyone else, but rights that we are born with, and that many of our fellow Americans have died for.

Sycophancy, as we see, has momentum, but so too does courage. Ida Tarbell, in her investigation of Standard Oil, documented a pattern of bribery, fraud, and monopolistic business practices. She described a culture in which "business is war" and "morals have nothing to do with its practice." But she also implored her fellow citizens: "What are we going to do about it? For it is *our* business. We, the people of the United States, and nobody else, must cure whatever is wrong in the industrial situation." There is much talk of the institutions that protect democracy, and how crucial they are to the American project. But those institutions work only because of the individuals who make them work. For every powerful person who capitulates, there are among us many more who see the world as Tarbell did, and as Telnaes does, and are willing to act on their principles.

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*This article appears in the [March 2025](#) print edition with the headline “Capitulation Is Contagious.”*

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# Shipwrecked in the Amazon

## Photographs of the worst drought in the river basin's recorded history

by Alex Cuadros



An Amazon lake east of Manaus, Brazil

Threaded throughout the Amazon, the world's largest rainforest, is a system of rivers. More than 1,000 tributaries collect rain and glacial runoff from a basin nearly the size of the contiguous United States. They gather into a waterway so expansive that oceangoing vessels can travel 900 miles inland from the Atlantic coast and dock at the river port of Manaus, Brazil.



Two fishermen push a boat toward a stretch of still-navigable water next to Lago do Aleixo, east of Manaus. (Musuk Nolte)

At least under normal circumstances. A drought that began in 2023 deepened last year into the worst in the Amazon's recorded history. In Manaus, a sprawling city of more than 2 million, the depth of the Rio Negro, a major branch of the Amazon River, reached an all-time low of 40 feet in October, almost [25 feet lower than would be typical](#) at that time of year. The Peruvian photographer Musuk Nolte has documented the drought's impact on Manaus's outlying communities. Many residents live in houses [meant to float on the water](#); the drought has left them effectively shipwrecked. One river trader, who typically transported his bananas by boat, told Nolte that he was forced to carry them overland in 104-degree heat. Others saw no choice but to abandon the lives they'd always known and try their luck in the urban tumult of Manaus itself.



*Left:* Falling water levels have made it difficult for Raimundo Silva Do Carmo, a river trader, to navigate the area around Puraquequara, where he works. *Right:* A river trader stands on the deck of his family's home, which used to float on the river. (Musuk Nolte)

Through years of reporting in the Amazon, I've gotten to know the region well. Viewing Nolte's photos is like waking up in an alternate reality: a sea turned to desert. But the transformation shouldn't come as a surprise. Over the past 50 years, an [area of the rainforest larger than the state of Texas has been razed](#) to make way for farmland and cattle pasture. Scientists have long warned that this could disrupt the virtuous cycle through which trees fuel rain clouds by releasing water vapor. Nolte's photos seem to show the results.



Fishermen traverse a dry riverbed in Manacapuru, a city west of Manaus.  
(Musuk Nolte)

One of his images features a mostly dry riverbed, its sand mysteriously streaked. Nolte told me that the marks had been left by outboard motors riding perilously low as water levels plunged. He calls them scars, visible signs of a wounded planet.

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## Culture & Critics

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# **Bridget Jones Isn't a Postfeminist Relic**

## **How the beloved British diarist outlasted her critics**

by Sophie Gilbert



Bridget Jones, as a character, has always hovered uncomfortably between the hard light of reality and the rosy glow of romance. When she first appeared, in newspaper columns written by the British journalist Helen Fielding during the mid-1990s, the 30-something Bridget was claimed as a

totem of womanhood at the time: a calorie-counting, self-improvement-obsessed, [chain-smoking, wine-guzzling singleton](#) (a neologism Fielding immortalized); an earnest [vassal of \*Cosmo\* culture](#) and the embodiment of [fearmongering \*Newsweek\* coverage](#) about the plight of unmarried career girls. With Bridget, Fielding “articulated the traumas of a generation,” the writer [Alain de Botton observed](#).

But when Bridget’s diary entries were published in book form, in 1996, her true narrative arc was revealed. It didn’t chart a postmodern Gen X nightmare. It was lovingly cribbed from *Pride and Prejudice*. The most notorious single woman of an era, as her fans learned in the book and its 1999 sequel, and from the movies they inspired in 2001 and 2004, would be largely protected by the tired old trappings of the marriage plot: She would bag her Mr. Darcy and live happily ever after—with a few detours—in his dreamy detached house in Holland Park.

### [Read: How \*Bridget Jones’s Diary\* predicted the age of oversharing](#)

Her trajectory over the next decade-plus (in another round of newspaper columns; another book; and a third movie, *Bridget Jones’s Baby*, in 2016, not based on a book) certainly had its requisite stumbles. But the character was steadied throughout by the Texan actor Renée Zellweger as the very English Bridget, an unpredictably brilliant piece of casting that just works.

On paper, Bridget can be compellingly hard to pin down, inconstant and ironic, messily self-aware, undeniably human. Early on, she cops to highly compromised feminist principles: She will not “sulk about having no boyfriend, but develop inner poise and authority and sense of self as woman of substance, complete *without* boyfriend, as best way to obtain boyfriend.” On-screen, though, Zellweger makes her all heart, guileless as a toddler, impossibly hopeful and lovably absurd. Whatever cards she’s dealt—not least professional humiliation and an accidental pregnancy (paternity unclear, thanks to separate one-night stands and a box of expired eco-friendly condoms)—she muddles through with gusto. We know that Bridget will get her happy ending; this is just about the last romantic-comedy franchise standing. But Zellweger makes us also deeply want her to win, formulaic predictability be damned.

How will the last cockeyed optimist in popular culture deal with the desolation of a husband's death?

*Bridget Jones: Mad About the Boy*, an adaptation of the slapdash third novel that starts streaming on Peacock on February 13, keeps the trope-laden structure, but finds surprising depth in a devastating plot twist. Bridget, now in her 50s, is single once again: Her beloved husband, Mark Darcy (played in grand metafictional form by an actor who played the other Mr. Darcy, Colin Firth), has died while on a humanitarian mission in Sudan, leaving Bridget to raise their two children alone. The book uses Mark's death mostly as a narrative device to launch Bridget, with her typically obsessive energy, into cougardom: She starts dating a hunky man in his late 20s named—inanely—Roxster, which exposes Bridget to a whole new range of body-image issues, and exposes Roxster to her children's head lice.

### [Read: The glorious return of Bridget Jones](#)

The movie, though, is more interested in documenting Bridget's loss, and in the process, it presents a more honest and moving version of her than we've seen before. How will the last cockeyed optimist in popular culture deal with such desolation? Widowhood is no laughing matter, parenting alone even less so—though we have to laugh at Bridget burying her face in the fridge to curse, and being surprised by her son's uptight science teacher while buying an astonishing variety of contraceptives. Pathos underpins the plot. "Do you miss Dada sometimes?" Mabel, Bridget's daughter, asks her in the movie. "I miss him all of the times," Bridget replies.





*Top:* Bridget Jones (Renée Zellweger) with Mark Darcy (Colin Firth) in *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason* (2004). *Bottom:* With Roxster (Leo Woodall) in *Bridget Jones: Mad About the Boy* (2025). (Tony Jones / Getty; Peacock)

Grief is a tough sell for a rom-com, which is maybe why the movie has marketed itself as something more timely, once again positioning Bridget as representative of her moment. Cinema lately has been consumed with what viewers call the “age-gap romance,” or, less decorously, the “MILF setup.” In 2024’s *The Idea of You*, Anne Hathaway plays a divorcée not unlike Bridget in her ditziness, who careens her way into a love affair with a handsome British boy-bander. In two separate movie projects within the space of a year, *A Family Affair* and *Babygirl*, Nicole Kidman parses the

power differentials at play when older women find fulfillment with younger men.

Bridget's adventures with the age gap are characteristically sweet and laced with goofiness: When she meets Roxster, she's shinnying up a tree that both of her children have managed to get stuck in. When he later messages her on Tinder, it's via an account that her friends have set up: "Tragic Widow Seeks Sexual Awakening." Mortification, for Bridget, is only ever a degree or two removed from triumph.

Yet *Mad About the Boy*, for all its familiar, delightful notes, is also wincingly astute regarding modern-day dynamics, good and bad, for women of Bridget's age. When her friends encourage her to pursue Roxster, the idea is plausible not just because Zellweger is still luminously endearing in midlife, but because the world really has changed: Women can date men a decade or more younger without inciting mass hysteria. But they've remained undesirable in other ways: Bridget works as a producer for a daytime TV show where formerly hard-hitting female news reporters now gush their way through cooking segments and softball interviews. For female journalists over a certain age, "HDTV was an extinction-level event," Bridget's friend Talitha mutters.

The tension between sharp contemporary verisimilitude and age-old romantic archetype helps explain why Bridget potters on while so many other '90s heroines have fallen by the wayside. (Remember Ally McBeal? She of the miniskirts and the catfights and the ludicrous workplace dilemmas?) The book version of Bridget has come in for derision as an embarrassing relic of postfeminism, screwing up even the most basic personal and professional tasks, and fixated on her thigh circumference and her office crushes. In 2023, a *New York Times* retrospective finally declared her "nuttiness and self-loathing" to be well past its expiration date for modern readers. Yet her movie comebacks continue to be irresistible, in part because no one is more aware of her failings than Bridget herself.

Crucially, she never lets her self-critique shake a confidence lodged someplace inside her (even if she's not quite sure where). The academic [Kelly A. Marsh has argued](#) that despite her ongoing preoccupation with becoming better, Bridget at her core represents, through all her phases, the

victory of self-acceptance. She flourishes not just because of the love stories that the novels’ framing forces on her, but thanks to the faithful love of her friends and her own stouthearted spirit.

There’s something poignant, too, about seeing Zellweger in the role, despite all the indignities the actor has suffered along the way—the [2000 cover shoot for Harper’s Bazaar, rudely shelved](#) because Zellweger had gained weight for the role and was deemed too fat for a fashion magazine; the tabloid coverage declaring her “scary skinny” when she then duly dieted; the discourse about [her changing face](#), so rabid and intrusive that she had to strike it down [in a personal essay for HuffPost](#). At 55, Zellweger is in what Germaine Greer once cited as a decade of new “invisibility” for women—a phenomenon that Bridget herself analyzes in her diary. And yet here they both are: undaunted, blond, adorable, enduring, changing the world by refusing to shrink away from it. That, as Bridget might say, is v.v. good to see.

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*This article appears in the [March 2025](#) print edition with the headline “Bridget Jones Never Gets Old.”*

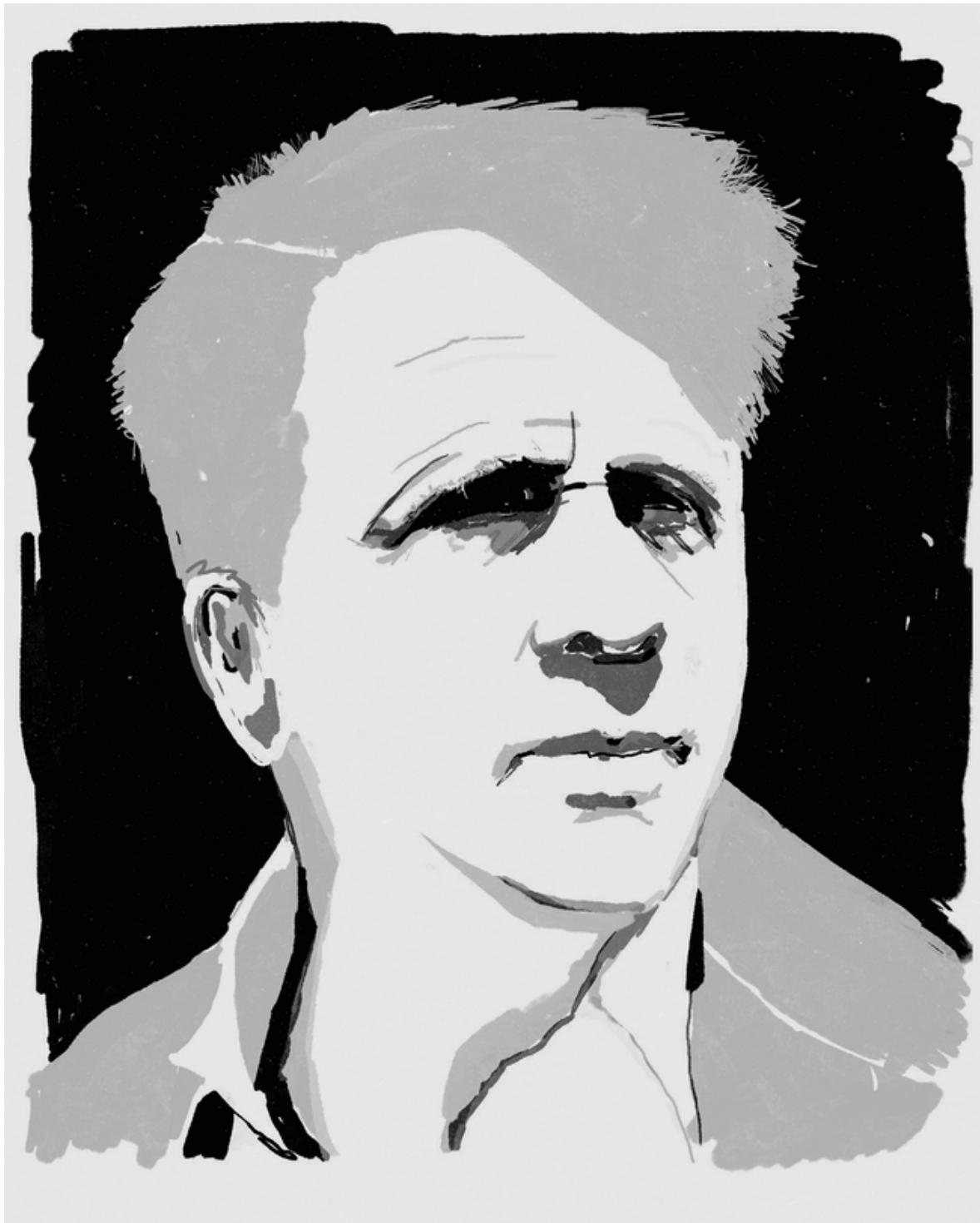
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# When Robert Frost Was Bad

**Before he became America's most famous poet, he wrote some real howlers.**

by James Parker



Bad poems never die, never really go away: The vigor of their badness preserves them. Up they float into bad-poem limbo, where their bad lines, loose and weedlike, drift and coil and tangle with one another eternally. Robert Frost, who turned 20 in 1894, uncertain of his gift, bouncing among

stray gigs (actor's manager, repairer of lights at a wool mill) in Lawrence, Massachusetts, had written a poem called "My Butterfly." It begins like this: "Thine emulous fond flowers are dead too, / And the daft sun-assaulter, he / That frightened thee so oft ..." It is what it is, a bad poem. A random-feeling extrusion of lyrical matter, like something that might come out of the tube when you pull the lever marked POETRY.

Nevertheless, for this poem, and for the first time in his career, Frost got paid—\$15, by the editor of a New York weekly called *The Independent*. "On reading 'My Butterfly,'" Adam Plunkett writes in his new *Love and Need: The Life of Robert Frost's Poetry*, "the poetry editor called the rest of the staff over to listen because she had just discovered a poet." A woman whose literary perspicacity exceeded my own, clearly. I would have left him to molder in the slush pile.

Plunkett, whose book offers close readings of the poems as well as the life, quite likes "My Butterfly." For him, it "reads like a spell that conjures the experience of grace." Frost himself thought enough of the poem to include it, 19 years later, in his first collection, *A Boy's Will*—where it acts as a kind of remedial concentrate, strengthening the poems around it with homeopathic doses of its own badness. "To the Thawing Wind," for example, opens with three lines of sub-Shelleyan puff: "Come with rain, O loud Southwester! / Bring the singer, bring the nester; / Give the buried flower a dream ..." (Flowers again.) But the fourth line—"Make the settled snow-bank steam"—that's Frost. You can see the steam rising, hear it hiss across those sibilants. And the next line is better still, blunter, Frostier, more concrete even as it hums with the voltage of symbol: "Find the brown beneath the white." The growth beneath the crust of death.

Through his poetry, with his poetry, Frost thought about symbols a lot. Were things as they merely appeared, or were they representative of something else, some higher or lower order of being? Was the world made of matter saturated in spirit, or the other way around, or neither? "God's own descent / Into flesh was meant / As a demonstration / That the supreme merit / Lay in risking spirit / In substantiation," he declared in 1962's "[Kitty Hawk](#)," writing in the philosophical doggerel of his late manner.

Many of his poems turn on the problem of having a mind—of simply being conscious, observant, in our weird human way, while existence churns through us and beyond us. Of coming upon an abandoned woodpile in the middle of winter, a thing of utter dereliction, and being unable not to invest it with some kind of personality, watching it “warm the frozen swamp as best it could / With the slow smokeless burning of decay.”

Shortly after writing “My Butterfly,” Frost had a bit of a blowout with his girlfriend. He’d just dropped out of Dartmouth; she wasn’t ready to drop out of St. Lawrence. Did she even want to marry him? Plunkett suggests that he’d been “generally making a pain of himself in the role of jealous lover.” Badly upset, and in a state of screw-it-all young-man desperation, Frost packed his bag, left Lawrence (“without even a note to his mother,” tuts Jay Parini in his *Robert Frost: A Life*, from 1999), and headed for the Great Dismal Swamp—which sounds allegorical but is a real location, a forbidding stretch of wetland on the Virginia–North Carolina border.

#### From the June 1951 issue: Robert Frost’s America

Frost seems to have never been to the Great Dismal Swamp, to have had no connection to it at all. I’m speculating, but surely his only possible reason for going there was literary: the Bunyanesque name of the place (“Being the creature of literature I am,” as he would later write in *“New Hampshire”*). He was on his own Pilgrim’s Progress, his own symbolic quest, and he wanted to pass through his own Slough of Despond.

By train and by ship, he got himself in there—into the doom-bogs, into the fen of misery, and he did some lonely wandering. Then he came back out. He took a steamer, hooked up with a party of drunken duck hunters, hopped a freight train, got robbed by the brakeman, stayed in a hobos’ camp, made it to Baltimore, wired home for cash. It’s a great burlesque episode. Someone should write a little book, *Frost in the Swamp*. Plunkett rather rattles through it; Parini takes it slower, noting that a chunk of Frost’s poetic psyche was forged on this trip, down there in the great dismalia, among the mulchy ground and the dark trees: “If Frost can be said to have an archetypal poem, it is one in which the poet sets off, forlorn or despairing, into the wilderness, where he will either lose his soul or find that gnostic spark of revelation.”

“The [Road Not Taken](#),” “[Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening](#)”—these aren’t really poems anymore. Decades of mass exposure have done something to them, inverted their aura. Now they’re more like ... recipes. Or in-flight safety announcements.

[From the August 1915 issue: Robert Frost’s “Birches,” “The Road Not Taken,” and “The Sound of Trees”](#)

Not really Frost’s fault, of course. But then again, he did love being famous. He embraced being famous. After so many years of hidden toil, scratching out a living through his 20s and 30s as a teacher and poultry farmer in Derry, New Hampshire, he adored—who wouldn’t?—his [huge, unpoetic popularity](#) when it finally arrived. And it wasn’t just the general reader, the middlebrow poetry lover—he had the respect of the bigwigs, too. Four Pulitzer Prizes (1924, 1931, 1937, and 1943), a pileup of other honors and sinecures. To John F. Kennedy [he was Mr. Rabbit Frawst](#); the president-elect invited him to read at his inauguration, where Frost fumbled over his prepared text before reciting [“The Gift Outright”](#) from memory: “The land was ours before we were the land’s ...”

The interesting comparison, fame-wise, is with Dylan Thomas, who in early-'50s America went off like a rocket while Frost was steadily expanding his audience. But Thomas was fragile and buzzing and not long for this world; Frost was solidifying. He would become an institution.

[From the February 1964 issue: John F. Kennedy’s eulogy for Robert Frost](#)

And yet I found it strangely easy to avoid him. To go right around him. For a long time there was a perfectly Frost-shaped hole in my understanding of American poetry. And it wasn’t a problem, because there’s something hermetic about his legacy: Frost sits alone, sealed, seeming to touch or connect with none of the poets around him. He did live, to a greater degree than most poets, in his own atmosphere, but it’s more than that. “What does it mean?” is always the wrong question in poetry. A poem is what it does, the effect it has, not what it narrowly and explicably means. And yet with Frost somehow—equivocal, enigmatic, withholding, hide-and-seek Frost, the Frost of [“Mowing”](#) and [“Birches”](#) and [“Mending Wall”](#), rustic-inscrutable (or affecting to be), full of dark hints, so plainspoken and so

tricky—this is the question you keep helplessly asking: What's he on about here?

In his creaky, earthy style, Frost was ushering in something just as shock-of-the-new as anything the modernists would produce.

Take, for instance, the famous penultimate line of 1913's "Mowing": "The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows." It's pregnant-feeling, aphoristic, winking away with compressed significance. But I don't know what it means. Do you? Frost, the old gnome, once told an audience, "There's one of the keys to all my life [and] thinking in one line." Plunkett is all in; he calls this line "a creed," adding that it "set a standard for the rest of Frost's poetry." But his explanations of it don't really help me: "The creed declares that the richest aesthetic experience of imagination, the sweetest dream, is to be had by using the power of imagination to contemplate the world at hand." Or again:

Of the creed's manifold meaning, the double meaning most fundamental is of realist and idealist visions of knowledge, the *fact* as the sweetest dream that labor knows or the fact as the sweetest *dream* that labor knows, as if the facts of the world, like dreams, were knowable through imagination.

Perhaps I'm being obtuse. Or perhaps the necessity of any explanation at all has already short-circuited my intellect.

So I go back to the great poems, the undeniable, straightforwardly mysterious, no-explaining-required, knock-you-on-your-ass poems. The glittering miniatures ("Fire and Ice," "Dust of Snow"), the mighty midrangers ("An Old Man's Winter Night"), the great statements ("Desert Places"), and the shaggier, madder excursions into monologue and dialogue, his special brand of agitated farmhouse talk: "A Servant to Servants," "The Witch of Coös." ("Mother can make a common table rear / And kick with two legs like an army mule.")

[From the August 1915 issue: Robert Frost, a new American poet](#)

Between *A Boy's Will* (1913) and *North of Boston* a year later, something happened: The Muses tapped him, lightning struck, poetry broke upon him in a big way. What had happened, actually, was that he had crossed the Atlantic—upped sticks, with his family, in 1912, and decamped to England for three years. A solid career move. In prewar London he met Yeats and Pound, and the extraordinary poet-critic T. E. Hulme. He hung around with lesser Georgians like Wilfrid Gibson and Lascelles Abercrombie. He bonded profoundly with Edward Thomas. He had arrived, in other words, at just the moment when—and just the place where—poetry's ancien régime was about to be dynamited by modernism.

The change was under way in his own poetry. In his creaky, earthy Robert Frost style, he was ushering in something just as shock-of-the-new as anything the modernists would produce. The drunkard on the bed in “[A Hundred Collars](#)”: “Naked above the waist, / He sat there creased and shining in the light, / Fumbling the buttons in a well-starched shirt.” It has the too-real physical exactitude of the later war poets, of Wilfred Owen or Robert Graves—but the war hadn’t happened yet. The working title for *North of Boston* was *Farm Servants and Other People*, and in its spooked, unreliable rural scenes, Frost had only one true peer at the time, the English poet Charlotte Mew. Her “[The Farmer’s Bride](#)” was published in *The Nation* in 1912: “When us was wed she turned afraid / Of love and me and all things human; / Like the shut of a winter’s day. / Her smile went out.”

*North of Boston* was Frost coming into his birthright as a poet. No more strained lyricisms, fewer flowers. “I cannot rub the strangeness from my sight”: Now that—from “[After Apple-Picking](#)”—that’s a creed, that’s a motto for a poet. The confessional throb of the line seems to place it right between Wordsworth’s “[I cannot paint what then I was](#)” and Robert Lowell’s “[My mind’s not right](#). ” Listen, indeed, to [the 1951 recording of Frost reading “After Apple-Picking”](#) and you’ll realize how close you are in this 1914 poem to Lowell’s “Skunk Hour” 44 years later, how you’re shivering on the same visionary frequency and hearing the same chanted, haunted cadence. Both poems take place in the hallucination chamber of a New England autumn. Frost’s narrator is being dragged into a death-doze by the scent of freshly picked apples, caught between his body and his dreaming mind, his instep still sore from all the hours spent up a ladder even as he goes into a trance: “Magnified apples appear and disappear”—the plumpness in that

double-*p* sound, hypnotically renewed—“Stem end and blossom end, / And every fleck of russet showing clear.” It’s like a YouTube ad for apples, endlessly rolling, evilly glistening apples, a sumptuous close-up for which the technology did not yet exist.

Frost was a complicated fellow, not always using his powers for good. By the end of *Love and Need*, you’re glad to escape his company. He certainly had his trials—the death of his wife, the suicide of his son—but somehow more depressing is Plunkett’s portrait of the strange and stifling coterie around him in the latter years, the grand-old-man years, when he was playing one would-be biographer against another and maintaining a kind of zombie love triangle with his manager-secretary and her unfortunate husband, all while reaping large amounts of the especially bland worldly acclaim you get when you’re already acclaimed.

The work, all the way through, was crazily uneven. *A Witness Tree* (for which, naturally, he won another Pulitzer, in 1943) contains the sonnet “[The Silken Tent](#),” which Plunkett regards as a masterpiece and I regard as a card-carrying bad poem. From the first line, “She is as in a field a silken tent,” that slithery is/as/in—we feel the ickiness of the whole creepily extended woman-as-tent conceit. But turn a few pages and you find “[The Most of It](#),” which begins like this:

He thought he kept the universe alone;  
For all the voice in answer he could wake  
Was but the mocking echo of his own  
From some tree-hidden cliff across the lake.

Here we are: modernity. The current condition. This is the trapped subject, the voice crying out in the wilderness, seeking a response from the Everything but getting only the scornful bounce-back of itself.

But then we shift. The cliff across the lake, it turns out, is not a metaphor, or not just a metaphor. It’s an actual (if phantasmagoric) place. It’s like the Great Dismal Swamp: It exists and it super-exists. And now something, or some thing—an “embodiment” (brilliant, terrifying word)—noisily enters the water on the far side of the lake. Splash, and here it comes, paddling toward us—the universe’s reply. And the embodiment, the apprehended

sound, that report of something unseen and solid crashing into the lake, now takes a form: “As a great buck it powerfully appeared, / Pushing the crumpled water up ahead.”

Read: Robert Frost’s poems and essays in *The Atlantic*

So Frostian: right between reality (“crumpled”) and otherness. The word *antlers* is not in the poem, but somehow you see them, the great rearing trees of bone. This buck is a monster—wordless energy, wordless strength—and with its snorting and triumphantly chaotic arrival on the shore, it brings the Message, which is no Message, from the far side. The meaning is there is no meaning. It “landed pouring like a waterfall, / And stumbled through the rocks with horny tread, / And forced the underbrush—and that was all.”

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*This article appears in the [March 2025 print edition](#) with the headline “When Robert Frost Was Bad.”*

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# The Modern Voice of War Writing

In *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Erich Maria Remarque reinvented a genre.

by George Packer



Every war begins in blind folly and ends in unimagined suffering. This is true of all wars but especially of the First World War. Its catalysts were so trivial and its consequences so apocalyptic that they belong in a Swiftian satire of human stupidity: the shooting of a bewhiskered potentate, followed by a botched game of diplomatic chicken, armies mobilized across Europe and cheered on by delirious publics, a whole generation sent to die by the millions in industrial warfare—all for a few miles of mud and barbed wire.

Between the assassination in Sarajevo, the mass slaughter in the trenches, and the stagnant front lines lie disproportions so immense that cause and effect lose all relation. The conflict is a sustained demonstration of war's essential inanity. "Every war is ironic because every war is worse than expected," the critic Paul Fussell wrote in [The Great War and Modern Memory](#). By this standard, World War I was the most ironic war in history.

What did the soldiers of the Great War think they were going off to defend? King, kaiser, czar, empire, democracy, European civilization, national honor—the reasons, in hindsight, make no sense. By 1917, the meaninglessness of the sacrifice had become clear enough to the combatants, if not to civilians back home: French and Russian troops mutinied, tens of thousands of soldiers on both sides deserted, the British poet and captain Siegfried Sassoon [made a public anti-war declaration](#), and English war poetry [turned brutal and bitter](#). Yet most soldiers, including Sassoon, fought on, under intolerable conditions—rain-soaked and hungry; facing machine-gun fire, shelling, and chlorine gas; surrounded by the half-buried corpses of their comrades and enemies—until the last minute of the last hour before the armistice on November 11, 1918, when, to quote John Kerry, an unknown soldier became "the last man to die for a mistake."

In some ways, the enormous casualty figures are less staggering than the survivors' endurance. After all, the living soldiers had to withstand the example of the dead. Near the end of Erich Maria Remarque's classic novel, [All Quiet on the Western Front](#), the soldier-narrator, Paul Bäumer, says, "Isn't it remarkable that ... regiment after regiment heads into the increasingly hopeless fight, and one attack after another is launched, even as the line recedes and crumbles?" Why did they keep fighting?

Remarque—born Erich Paul Remark in 1898—was a lower-middle-class Prussian, conscripted into the Imperial German Army at age 18, and wounded in action in Flanders after a few weeks at the front in the summer of 1917. That was the end of his combat experience, but the emotions and images of the war haunted him for the next decade. *Im Westen nichts Neues* was a sensation in Germany in early 1929, and was [translated into English](#) later that year. Soon it was available in dozens of languages, and to date it has sold more than 20 million copies—the best-selling German novel ever.

From the July 1929 issue: Edward Weeks's review of *All Quiet on the Western Front*

A few months ahead of Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, which appeared in September 1929, *All Quiet on the Western Front* invented a genre: the warrior's anti-war testament. Even those who haven't read the novel are likely to recognize its English title as a sort of requiem for the dead—not ironic like the original German ("Nothing New in the West"), but as sad as the playing of "Taps." So much that's become familiar about this genre can be found in Remarque's book: the journey of the protagonist from youthful idealism through hard experience to bitter realism; the worm's-eye view of the common soldier, with his narrow focus on danger, physical discomfort, and food, and his hatred of authority; the sense of immediacy, anxiety, and inescapability that comes with episodic, present-tense narration; the unflinching details; the band of brothers that slowly diminishes as they're killed one by one.

The narrative is fragmentary, nonlinear, and as static, in a way, as trench warfare.

A version of these literary features can be found in earlier writers—Homer, Stendhal, Tolstoy, Stephen Crane. But Remarque gave war writing its modern voice, understated and terrifying, harsh and tender, a voice that says: *This is what it's like. You may not want to hear, but I have to tell you.* A passage such as this one in Remarque's novel—where the first-person narrator is trapped in a watery shell hole with the corpse of an enemy soldier he's stabbed to death—couldn't have existed in earlier fiction about war, but it's become almost standard ever since, without losing its power:

The sun is shining at a slant. I'm numb with exhaustion and hunger. Yesterday is like a fog to me, I have no hope of getting out of here. So I doze off and don't even notice when evening comes. Dusk is falling. It seems to me it's coming quickly now. Just one more hour. Three more hours, if it were summer. Just one more hour.

These sentences come from a new translation by Kurt Beals, which renders Remarque's German in a colloquial register—sometimes caustic, sometimes lyrical—that is itself a product of the Great War. As he explains in his

introduction, the [original English version of 1929](#), by an Australian veteran of the war named A. W. Wheen, “is frequently stilted and labored,” as if its prose belongs to an earlier period and wasn’t forged in the fire of the story it tells. In this passage from Wheen, the soldiers have just been inspected by Kaiser Wilhelm II:

Tjaden is quite fascinated. His otherwise prosy fancy is blowing bubbles. “But look,” he announces, “I simply can’t believe that an emperor has to go to the latrine the same as I have.”

Here is Beals’s translation:

Tjaden is completely fascinated. His mind isn’t usually so lively, but now it’s bubbling over. “Look here,” he announces, “I just can’t fathom that a kaiser has to go to the latrine just like I do.”

He gives us a version that can stand as Remarque’s contemporary.

The huge popularity of *All Quiet on the Western Front* is a tribute to its universal accessibility. The novel’s force is undiminished by either its familiarity or its historical distance; the story it tells is at once time-bound and timeless. It doesn’t require any interpretive feats—it simply demands that the reader not look away. The narrative is fragmentary, nonlinear, and as static, in a way, as trench warfare. Young Paul Bäumer and his classmates in a provincial German town are exhorted by their schoolmaster to go defend the fatherland. Half a dozen enlist in the same regiment, are trained by an abusive corporal named Himmelstoss (a mailman in civilian life), and soon find themselves under fire somewhere on the Western Front. They learn the specific noise and lethality of each type of artillery, how to find cover in the open, where to forage for piglets and turnips. When one of them dies of his wounds, the others compete for his excellent boots. By the end, only Paul is left.

At one point, Paul and his old schoolmates discuss the reasons for the war. Who started it? Did the kaiser want it? Don’t both sides think they’re right? Who stands to gain? Not the common people, only politicians and generals. “It’s more like a kind of fever,” one of them says. “Nobody really wants it, but all of a sudden it’s there.” Finally they agree to drop the subject. From

their point of view, the biggest questions about the war are unanswerable and change nothing. All they know is that they have to keep fighting to stay alive.

### From the December 2013 issue: The war no image could capture

This is true for soldiers in any war, including “good” ones. In his essay “[Looking Back on the Spanish War](#),” George Orwell, who fought in Spain against fascism, wrote: “A soldier anywhere near the front line is usually too hungry, or frightened, or cold, or, above all, too tired to bother about the political origins of the war … A louse is a louse and a bomb is a bomb, even though the cause you are fighting for happens to be just.” Accounts from eastern Ukraine suggest that even soldiers who go off to fight with high morale to defend their country and freedom are eventually overcome by disillusionment not unlike that of Paul and his comrades.

When the Nazis came to power in 1933, they banned *All Quiet on the Western Front* and later revoked Remarque’s citizenship, accusing him of being at least French and maybe Jewish. They had their reasons: The great success of an anti-war novel threatened German nationalism and militarism. Hitler, himself a veteran of the Great War, hated any [view of it as pointless slaughter](#). And yet *All Quiet on the Western Front* has no clear politics; its pacifism, too, is never stated, only implied. “This book is intended neither as an indictment nor as a confession,” Remarque declares in an epigraph, but as “an account of a generation of people who were destroyed by the war—even if they escaped its shells.” The novel presents the Great War as a crime perpetrated by the old against the young, the powerful against the ordinary, and civilians against soldiers.

This last conflict is the one that matters most—more than that between opposing combatants or political outlooks. Before *All Quiet on the Western Front*, alienation from the home front was rarely a concern of war literature, but it’s become a central theme, as indicated by the title of the Iraq veteran Phil Klay’s collection of short stories, [Redeployment](#). In Remarque’s novel, the horror of the trenches is so radically separate from the rest of life that Paul finds being at home intolerable. When he returns on leave, he can’t bear his mother’s sorrowful love, his sister’s forced good cheer, his father’s fatuous pride, or the bullying of a rear-echelon major whom he encounters

by accident. The attitude of civilians amounts to “Thank you for your service” and “On to Paris.” Paul’s only pleasure is seeing his jingoistic schoolmaster, now called up in the reserves, humiliated by one of his former students in the same pointless marching exercises that Paul once suffered through in the name of defending the fatherland.

From the July 1937 issue: A review of Erich Maria Remarque’s *Three Comrades*

Paul is like a ghost revisiting his past. But as he moves through the world of his childhood, the identity that’s allowed him to survive the trenches —“indifferent, and often hopeless”—is undone by the feeling that surges back, by the pain of wanting his mother’s comfort. He can’t be both a son and a soldier, and he chooses the second. “I never should have gone on leave,” he thinks, and when it ends, he returns to the war with a kind of relief.

This sequence plays a key role near the end of [the 1930 American film adaptation of \*All Quiet on the Western Front\*](#). Its 13 minutes are the movie’s quietest and saddest, but [the subplot never appears in the 2022 German production](#), which won several Academy Awards. The omission is strange, rendering a relentlessly, grotesquely violent film less wrenching. In our time, with military service in most democracies, including America, limited to a small professional army, the chasm between civilian at home and combatant at war has never been greater. One result is that a filmmaker seeking to represent the horror of war as intensely and immediately as Remarque did is likely to make the mistake of showing little other than blood and mud. But Paul’s return home is pivotal to the novel, because in Remarque’s telling, war’s ultimate crime is to make soldiers fit for nothing else. The survivors, winners and losers alike, will come back “tired, broken, burned out, rootless, and hopeless”; incapable of understanding or being understood by the previous generation and the generation to come; doomed to live in their own tortured memories; “superfluous to ourselves.”

[Read: The \*All Quiet on the Western Front\* remake flattens the complexity of war](#)

Here is a partial answer to why the soldiers of the Great War kept fighting long after it was hopeless. They fought to avoid punishment, they fought for their brother soldiers, they fought out of lingering patriotism, and they went on fighting because they saw no way back.

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*This article appears in the [March 2025](#) print edition with the headline “The Warrior’s Anti-War Novel.”*

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# Hanif Kureishi's Relentlessly Revealing Memoir

## How a tragic accident helped the author find his rebellious voice again

by Hillary Kelly



Updated at 5:43 p.m. ET on February 11, 2025

“That’s what’s great about being a writer,” Hanif Kureishi [told an interviewer a decade ago](#). “Every 10 years you become somebody else.” He was 59 then, looking back on his younger days; in his 30s, he’d made his

mark on a newly multicultural literary scene in London with the Oscar-nominated screenplay for *My Beautiful Laundrette*, followed by the prizewinning debut novel [\*The Buddha of Suburbia\*](#). The son of an English mother and a Pakistani father, he was a bad boy in the spotlight, intimate with working-class locals and worldly elites, unabashed about smoking weed and sleeping around, and funny. He invoked P. G. Wodehouse and Philip Roth, and struck a chord with upstart young readers and writers (among them Zadie Smith). His boldly nonconformist voice was his own.

Then, at the age of 68, in December 2022, he became somebody unimaginably different after he keeled over onto a hard floor in Rome and [came to consciousness a tetraplegic](#). Trapped in a paralyzed body in a hospital bed, he tweeted two weeks later, via his son: “An insect, a hero, a ghost or Frankenstein’s monster. Out of these mixings will come magnificent horrors and amazements. Every day when I dictate these thoughts, I open what is left of my broken body in order to try and reach you, to stop myself from dying inside.” And suddenly, Kureishi was back in the spotlight. People around the world were listening. [He kept dictating](#).

When I went to visit him in London two years later, this past December, he was in his power chair, in the ground-floor living room of his colorful, cluttered house in Shepherd’s Bush. His hospital bed is in one corner, with stacks of books he cannot reach packing the shelves above it; his partner, Isabella d’Amico, and his 24-hour health aide, Kamila, sleep in bedrooms upstairs, next to his large, now-unused study. He had been sick with diverticulitis and had smoked half a joint and drunk half a beer, he told me, on the fateful day when he fainted and “fell literally flat on my face. Bang. Without putting my arms out or anything. I fell flat on my fucking face and broke my neck.” While we talked, his right hand, in splints to keep it from clawing up, fluttered in front of him, almost as if it were strumming a guitar —ironic, because Kureishi used to passably play the blues. His mobility is limited to controlling his chair, leaning forward, and wiggling his hips. Drugs, now a cocktail of pharmaceuticals, are very much back in his life: He’s taking 12 or so a day; he isn’t really sure. “It’s to make me shit. It’s to stop my bladder doing this. It’s for this, that, the other. God knows.”

He went cold turkey on virtually everything else, compelled by another need. Right away, he was “mad to fucking write,” he told me. “And I still

am mad to write. It's holding me together." At first, the fragmented, dispatch-like nature of Twitter gave [his individual utterances](#) a suspenseful intensity: "Sitting here again in this dreary room for another week, like a Beckettian chattering mouth, all I can do is speak, but I can also listen," he tweeted a few days into his new life. And then, "I wouldn't advice [sic] having an accident like mine, but I would say that lying completely inert and silent in a drab room, without much distraction, is certainly good for creativity."

### [Read: Hanif Kureishi is tweeting for his life](#)

Two weeks after the accident, Carlo, one of his three sons, revived the dormant Substack, [The Kureishi Chronicles](#), that his father had once launched. The dictations began to coalesce into essays that combined tales of his former, able-bodied life with unvarnished assessments of his medical and mental conditions. "Experiencing the press coverage you might receive had you died," in his words, spurred him on, and in July, just after he moved from an Italian rehab facility to London's Chelsea and Westminster Hospital, his agent agreed that the entries would work as a book. [Shattered](#), a bare, tumultuous memoir of the first year of Kureishi's new life, published in the United Kingdom in October 2024, is now out in the United States. It's simultaneously the story of his mind's entrapment in his body and his attempt to outrun that restriction with radical transparency.

Back in the 2014 interview, he'd spoken of forging "a new kind of English realism" as his career took off. After reading *Shattered*, I wondered if the multigenre experimenter had, quite literally, stumbled into a new kind of illness realism.

Nobody is equipped for the kind of calamity that struck Kureishi. But the body, with all its spewing, writhing, lustng, hunger, and degradation, had long been his obsession. His fiction had traced his own arc from young renegade to disgruntled middle-aged father to ailing older man. Pain and pleasure were his recurring catharsis points. He wanted to explore whether, and how, the body could really satisfy the curiosities of the mind.

*My Beautiful Laundrette* is bookended by two beatings similar to ones inflicted on an adolescent Kureishi by punks who regularly chased him

home from school. Pain conveys its bearer, whether it's the Pakistani British Omar or his former skinhead lover, Johnny, to a new level of self-realization. *The Buddha of Suburbia*—with more plotlines pulled from Kureishi's young life—follows teenage Karim on lust- and creativity-fueled escapades that end with the kind of sex that includes a leather hood, ropes, and a candle inside an orifice. “What do you do?” he asks the woman involved in this act. “Pain as play,” she responds. “A deep human love of pain. There is desire for pain, yes?” In the wincingly autobiographical novel *Intimacy* (1998), a married man who leaves his wife for another woman has aging very much on the brain.

But *The Body* (2002) most uncannily foreshadowed Kureishi's current situation. The novel is narrated by a writer in his mid-60s whose medical ailments have left him broken—“I don't go to parties,” he moans, “because I don't like to stand up.” But a secretive new surgery transplants his brain into a young, fit body for six months, which he uses to screw women across Europe, take ecstasy, and contemplate how experiencing a body's failure elevates your appreciation of just how good you can feel. “After the purifications and substitutions of culture,” he thinks, “I believed I was returning to something neglected: fundamental physical pleasure, the ecstasy of the body, of my skin, of movement, and of accelerated, spontaneous affection for others in the same state.”

Anointed with unexpected establishment credentials (Queen Elizabeth II [named him a Commander of the Order of the British Empire](#) in 2008), Kureishi was mellowing in the 2010s. As he put it to me, “I was bored with my own imagination and ... I was happy having a good life. I was living part of the time in Italy, part of the time here; the kids were grown up. So I thought, *Fuck it. Why should I spend all day working?* So I was taking it easy and I had—I didn't have much of a desire to write anymore. Not with the enthusiasm I had when I was younger. Then I had the accident.”

Writing fiction no longer merely strikes him as boring. To “make up shit” has become impossible. “It just seems frivolous to do that,” he told me. Some other writers, I pushed him, might retreat to the relief of fantasy in his situation. Not Kureishi. “I'm not writing fiction,” he said. “I'm not writing some stupid story, made-up story. I'm writing it directly about what happened to me.” Forget easing into his late phase as a writer. Kureishi has

been ambushed by the physical infirmities of age in a rare way. He has always drawn on his own experience, but by choice. A vulnerable, relief-seeking self-exposure is now a necessity, a compulsion—a mode of connection, even as his world has shrunk. It has also offered a way to again rebel against the dominant modes of storytelling. He has one story, and it's his own, and the only way he wants to tell it is to spit it out raw.

In 1926, after a bout with a devastating flu and a series of earlier nervous breakdowns, Virginia Woolf published an essay on why we don't—but perhaps ought to—treat illness as a subject as valuable and enlightening as “love, battle, and jealousy.” [“On Being Ill”](#) considers illness as a foreign land, a place where “the whole landscape of life lies remote and fair, like the shore seen from a ship far out at sea.” Properly rendering the miasma of sickness and the “daily drama of the body,” argues Woolf—who endured her share of forced confinements in bed—is so difficult that the challenge is rarely undertaken. The ill usually write after they've recovered, when the palpable sensations of debilitation are gone, and “our intelligence domineers over our senses.”

Kureishi's mode is impromptu exposé: He has no distance from himself or his condition, and refuses to add any.

Nearly a century later, fiction about illness is still relatively uncommon. Even the best of the genre, such as Helen Garner's [The Spare Room](#) and Elizabeth Strout's [My Name Is Lucy Barton](#), are told from a caretaker's perspective or maintain a veil of silence over the specifics of the chemical and mechanical horrors that a body can endure. Excessive depictions of pain, as in Hanya Yanagihara's [A Little Life](#), can curdle understanding into a kind of grimy sympathy or, worse, distaste. The illness memoir, however, is a well-trodden contemporary genre. First-person tales about cancer, freak accidents, chronic disease, and mental breakdowns regularly make their way onto best-seller lists (or into remainder bins). They typically take one of two approaches: Either the writer finds redemptive lessons in the path toward death or disability, as Paul Kalanithi did in his posthumous megahit, [When Breath Becomes Air](#), or, as in Meghan O'Rourke's [The Invisible Kingdom: Reimagining Chronic Illness](#), a previously [unexamined world of disease](#) is made manifest while the writer explores what we know, and don't know,

about its properties. The hope in both types of books is to impose sense—for the writer and the reader—on the mysterious.

[From the September 2019 issue: Meghan O'Rourke on life with Lyme disease](#)

The illness narrative usually benefits from months or years of deliberation: It's a reckoning with how injury or sickness edges into a life and then cracks it wide open. As Kureishi tilted his chair forward and backward, he blithely told me that he hadn't had a chance to read Woolf or any other books in the illness canon (he can't hold a novel and doesn't want to be read to), and that in *Shattered*, "there isn't much reflection." His writing method during the post-accident year he chronicles hardly changed, even when, halfway through, he knew that a book would emerge. Once he was home and stabilized, the suspense petered out, but his from-the-trenches method continued. For a few hours each day, he sat with his son, recording a routine newly cluttered by physiotherapy bills and National Health Service red tape. What winnowing they did was minimal. *Shattered* is akin to a war diary, prizing immediacy above all else.

Kureishi never planned to produce a stylized memoir. He simply documented the uncertainty and emotional convulsions of the moment. At night, when visitors left his hospital room, he was alone, awake, and imprisoned in his body. "I would write the whole scheme of the piece in my head," he told me. "One sentence, one paragraph, one paragraph, one paragraph, and kind of hold it there. I could see it visually like a picture." He'd keep it in his mind until morning, and then dictate in a rush. In an early entry, he notes that he hopes to one day "be able to go back to using my own precious and beloved instruments," meaning pen and paper, then swerves. "Excuse me, I'm being injected in my belly with something called Heparina, a blood thinner," he says, then gets right back to praising longhand.

The book's tone leaps and crashes with Kureishi's post-accident moods. A model of bountiful gratitude, he praises the Italian doctors and nurses who feed him and move him, who "wash your genitals and your arse, often while singing jolly Italian songs." When someone comes to measure him for a wheelchair, he writes, "I've had enough of this shit." He turns on himself frequently, worrying that he is "both a helpless baby and terrible tyrant."

Memoirs are designed for revelation, but Kureishi, a connoisseur of shock, invades his own privacy more than most. Nothing is off-limits, including the butt plug he wears in hydrotherapy: His rectum cannot be trusted to control itself. He can't resist stories, such as one about a threesome he had years ago in Amsterdam, that remind him and us of his wild old days and magnify the contrast with his current straits. How many (sometimes tedious) details we might really want to hear doesn't concern him. *Shattered* practices what Woolf calls "a childish outspokenness in illness"; she goes on to note how "things are said, truths blurred out, which the cautious respectability of health conceals." Kureishi's mode is impromptu exposé: He has no distance from himself or his condition, and refuses to add any.

For readers, this lack of filter makes *Shattered* bluntly intimate, demanding in its sharing. For Kureishi, it reflects the urgent purpose of his confessional writing, which is partly financial. "It costs me a thousand pounds a week just to have physio and to go swimming and all that shit," he told me. Friends donate to a fund, but he'd like to contribute to it himself, with a book that really sells. The urgency is also partly—probably mostly—existential. If Kureishi can't be out in the world, he needs his voice to be.

Kureishi's emotions, as you'd expect, surface readily. He cried a few times while we talked, once when I asked him about the knife attack that maimed his friend Salman Rushdie. The two men suffered nearly fatal injuries within months of each other: Rushdie was stabbed onstage at a literary festival in August 2022 and has lost sight in one eye and the use of one hand. They emailed each other daily during Kureishi's months in the hospital. Rushdie has written his own memoir, *Knife: Meditations After an Attempted Murder*, in which he carefully and solemnly recounts the way the attack punctured and then reinflated his sense of self. *Knife* favors a narrative of growth; it aims for closure. *Shattered* rejects both, never leaving the insistent and unceremonious present tense.

### Read: Salman Rushdie strikes back

Just as Kureishi hasn't read the illness canon, he hasn't read his own memoir. "People tell me it holds together," he said. He doesn't seem to need or want proof of that; he knows it's fragmented. He's interested in his daily creations as evidence of what feels like newly unfettered access to his mind

—of his power to delve into its recesses and skim its surfaces, mobile as he can be nowhere else. That drive shows no signs of ebbing as he now works on a sequel and a movie, his son at his side. “I’ve never felt such a strong desire to be a writer,” he said. “It’s a relief that to be a writer for me is to be a human being, to be sentient.”

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*\*Lead image sources: Stuart C. Wilson / Getty; Universal History Archive / Getty; Neville Elder / Corbis / Getty; Print Collector / Getty*

*This article originally misstated the nature of Hanif Kureishi’s injury. It appears in the [March 2025](#) print edition with the headline “I Am Still Mad to Write.”*

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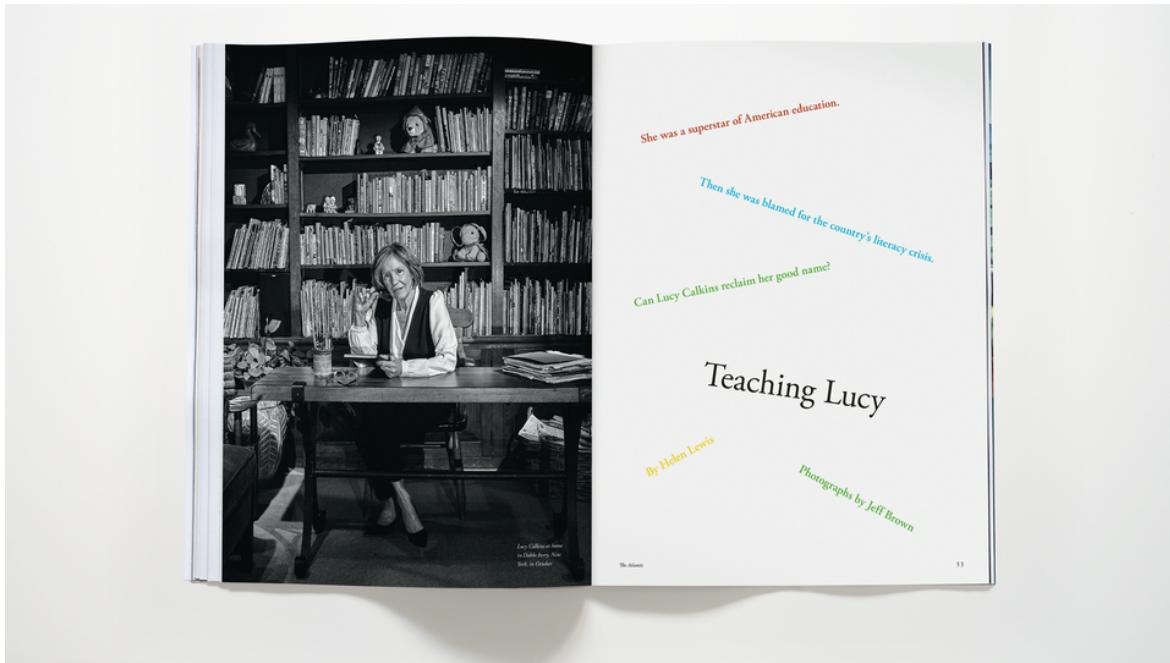
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  - [\*\*Caleb's Inferno: March 2025\*\*](#)
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# ‘There Is No One-Size-Fits-All Approach to Reading Instruction’

## Readers respond to our December 2024 issue and more.



### Teaching Lucy

In the December 2024 issue, [Helen Lewis wrote](#) about how one woman became the scapegoat for America’s literacy crisis.

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A heartfelt thank-you to Helen Lewis for her reporting on Lucy Calkins and the most recent phase of the “reading wars.” As a career English teacher whose mother was also a career English teacher, I have had a front-row seat

to the reading wars for decades. Emily Hanford's *Sold a Story* podcast was particularly frustrating to me for its oversimplification of Calkins's reading workshop and its all-too-typical sidelining of teachers' voices. Wise educators have known for a very long time that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to reading instruction; effective teachers combine phonics with other strategies that help develop a student's identity as a reader. It is shocking to none of us that the solution is "both, and" and not "either/or." Lewis's article was a breath of fresh air. Calkins is by no means flawless, but her Units of Study remain some of the most comprehensive and useful language-arts curricula out there in a sea of flashy, colorful nonsense.

**Trish Manwaring**  
*San Rafael, Calif.*

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Helen Lewis's interesting article on Lucy Calkins sadly missed some of the substance behind the "phonics"—versus—"whole language" debate. Beginning-reading teachers immediately encounter a reality Lewis doesn't mention: Although many other languages are highly phonetic, English is not, so an approach that relies mostly on teaching the sounds of letters can leave children confused and frustrated.

In fact, some of the most common English words are nonphonetic. For example, the words *to* and *do* do not rhyme with *so* or *go*. *One* and *gone* don't rhyme either. And why are *to*, *too*, and *two* all pronounced the same? Only context and experience with real texts can help readers learn which pronunciation is appropriate.

Programs that rely mostly on phonics impose reading materials on children that tend to exclude nonphonetic words in order to make the text "decodable." That sounds great in theory, but nonphonetic words are so common in English that when you leave them out, the resulting texts are nonsensical. Many sound so stupid that they can turn kids off from reading.

This is what Calkins was trying to avoid. This inherent challenge in teaching reading in English is studiously ignored by the *Sold a Story* podcast. The nature of the English language makes a balanced approach combining phonics and normal texts the most sensible strategy for teaching reading.

**Nick Estes***Albuquerque, N.M.*

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When I was in grad school at Columbia's Teachers College, I worked as a student teacher at P.S. 87 in Manhattan, a so-called Lucy school. I was placed in a kindergarten class and a fourth-grade class. It was apparent to me that a significant number of children were not benefiting from the curricula and needed phonics to launch them into reading. To have continued with Calkins's method of instruction alone would have been ludicrous. You have to tailor your technique to the needs of each student.

Although some students may not need phonics instruction and may even be bored by it, others need it to succeed academically. Teachers should have the independence to make decisions about which children will benefit from which type of instruction and how much instruction they will need. It will vary from student to student—and teachers and supervisors need to be trained to recognize that and make the appropriate educational decisions.

**Laurie Spear***New York, N.Y.*

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I began my teaching career in 1976. I was a kindergarten teacher, trained well in my California district, and I've watched the conflicts over reading and writing instruction ever since. At some point in my teaching journey, I learned about Lucy Calkins. I loved what she had to say. I know two things are true: Lucy Calkins has been a great contributor to the knowledge of how to teach literacy, and many of us have asked too much of her. Teachers cannot take a blanket approach to teaching literacy. Calkins provided many good things over her long career, even if she did not provide everything, and for that I am grateful. Educators and administrators should be learners, too, who understand the complexity of teaching reading. Shame on those who left Calkins hanging out to dry.

**Wendy Zacuto***Playa Vista, Calif.*

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I appreciated Helen Lewis's article about Lucy Calkins because it added some much-needed nuance to the conversation about reading instruction in American schools. I am a former teacher, and I attended Lucy Calkins's trainings at Columbia. But I've learned a lot since then.

Our education system suffers from several problems that have made it possible for flawed instructional methods to achieve wide reach. Many states and districts push teachers to adopt curricular programs with "fidelity"—that is, without ever questioning them. Even in schools where teachers have a little more freedom, they're rarely given the tools or time to evaluate the quality of instructional methods themselves. I remember being handed Calkins's reading curriculum in my third year of teaching, and I wondered about the research that undergirded its methods. But the curriculum books didn't provide much information. I didn't know where else to look, and even if I had known where to find the facts, I didn't have time to do research on my own, because I had just three days to set up my new classroom.

Ask any veteran educator, and they will tell you that our school systems have a knack for repeating the same mistakes. I worry that the new "science of reading" movement is being co-opted by curriculum publishers, professional-development providers, and "experts" who are seeking profits by promoting a silver bullet—just as they have with other *en vogue* methods in the past. My kids' school district just adopted a new curriculum that allegedly reflects the "science of reading," but it seems like the same type of mediocre curricula that have been peddled to big school systems for decades.

If we really want research-based instruction in our schools, we have to be humble about what we know and don't know about effective reading instruction. We have to be wary of anyone pushing quick fixes, and we need to teach teachers how to be critical consumers of research and users of curricula. Educators can't do this alone: We need more nuanced reporting like Lewis's so that all of us—educators, parents, citizens—can better understand the problems we face and how we might solve them.

**Jennie Herriot-Hatfield**  
*San Francisco, Calif.*

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Helen Lewis replies:

*I loved reading these responses, because the spread of opinions echoed what I heard while doing my reporting: that people with significant expertise can come to wildly divergent conclusions about the roots of America's "reading crisis." What first attracted me to this story was the idea that bad outcomes can happen without anyone involved having bad intentions. Debates over curricula make sense only in the wider context of American education—ever-changing standards, racial and class disparities, a sometimes chaotic bureaucracy, politicized decisions at the state level. Also, Nick Estes is entirely right to point out that English is very irregular. For a while, Finland's strong performance in reading was attributed partly to its strongly phonetic language. But in the past few years, that country's reading scores have fallen precipitously—and no one can really say what's changed. A good reminder that this subject demands caution and humility.*

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### Behind the Cover

In this month's cover story, "[Stuck In Place](#)," Yoni Appelbaum explores why Americans, once the most mobile people on the planet, have become less and less apt to move to new homes in new places over the past 50 years. The decline in geographic mobility, he argues, is the most important social change of the past half century, shaping our politics, our culture, and how we relate to one another. For our cover image, the artist Javier Jaén designed an abandoned moving truck resting on concrete blocks, symbolizing a nation that has stopped moving to seek new opportunities.

— **Liz Hart**, *Art Director*

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Corrections

“The Loyalist” originally stated that Kash Patel did not include the events of October 30, 2020, in his book. In fact, Patel did include a brief narrative of events for that day. “Modi’s Failure” originally stated that Narendra Modi was formerly the governor of Gujarat. In fact, Modi was chief minister.

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*This article appears in the [March 2025](#) print edition with the headline “The Commons.”*

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# Poetry

- [\*\*Reflections\*\*](#)

# Reflections

by Czesław Miłosz



An ant trampled, and above it clouds.  
A trampled ant and above it a column of azure sky.  
And in the distance, marking its blue steps,  
The Vistula or the Dnieper on its bed of granite.

This is the image reflected in the water:

A city ruined, and above it clouds.  
A ruined city and above it a column of azure sky.  
And in the distance, stepping over blue thresholds,  
The remains of History or the Spring of myth.

A dead field mouse, and beetle gravediggers.  
On the footpath, running, a seven-year-old joy.

In the garden a rainbow-colored ball and laughing faces  
And the yellow luster of May or April.

This is the image reflected in the water:

A defeated tribe, armored gravediggers.  
Along the road, running, a millennial joy,  
A field of cornflowers blooming after the fire,  
And the silence is blue, everyday, normal.

This is the image reflected in the water.

— Warsaw, 1942—Washington, D.C., 1948

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*This poem, translated into English for the first time, is included in a new volume of Czesław Miłosz's work, [Poet in the New World](#). It appears in The Atlantic's [March 2025](#) print edition.*

[David Frick](#) is the author of [Kith, Kin, and Neighbors](#).

[Robert Hass](#) is the author of seven books of poetry and co-translated several volumes of poetry with Czesław Miłosz.

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