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# The New Yorker Magazine

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## Goings On

### • **Misty Copeland's Ballet Send-Off**

Also: Doechii's star turn, Agosto Machado's collaged worlds, Jafar Panahi's new drama, and more.

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[Goings On](#)

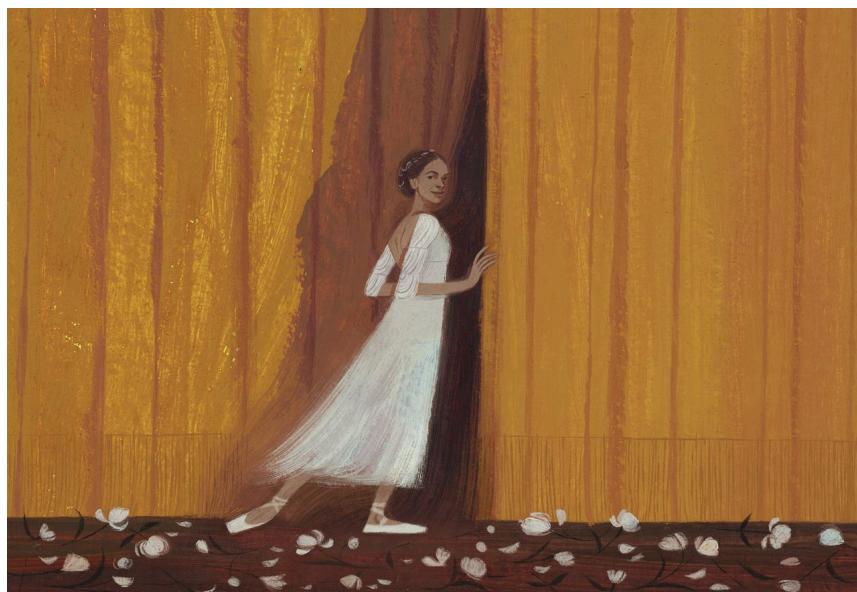
## Misty Copeland's Ballet Send-Off

*Also: Doechii's star turn, Agosto Machado's collaged worlds, Jafar Panahi's new drama, and more.*

By [Marina Harss](#), [Holden Seidlitz](#), [Helen Shaw](#), [Sheldon Pearce](#), [Jane Bua](#), [Hilton Als](#), [Richard Brody](#), [Paige Williams](#),  
[Rachel Syme](#), and [Jennifer Wilson](#)

October 10, 2025

**Sometimes a return** is also a farewell. Misty Copeland, the first Black female principal dancer at **American Ballet Theatre**, may be the most famous American ballerina of her generation, but she hasn't actually performed a ballet in five years, since before the pandemic. In the interim, she has not been idle: she published several books, had a child, and established a foundation that provides mentoring—and ballet training—to kids in under-resourced areas. Her career, and her advocacy for Black dancers, have had a measurable effect in reversing attitudes within the field. But something was still missing: the classic ballet farewell. The tinsel, the mountains of flowers, the tears. So she's coming back for one final performance, on Oct. 22, as part of A.B.T.'s fall season at Lincoln Center's [David H. Koch Theatre](#) (Oct. 15-Nov. 1).



*Illustration by Hayden Goodman*

It's hard to overstate the effort and the will power it must have taken Copeland to get back on pointe after such a hiatus. At her farewell, she will perform a rapturous pas de deux from Kenneth MacMillan's "Romeo and Juliet" and an excerpt from Twyla Tharp's sultry "Sinatra Suite." And Kyle Abraham, a choreographer who has lately infused ballet with his seductive, sinuous style, has been brought in to compose a valedictory piece for Copeland and her longtime colleague Calvin Royal III. (Royal followed in Copeland's footsteps, rising to the top of the ballet hierarchy at A.B.T.)

The rest of A.B.T.'s three-week season is a hodgepodge of old and new. One program offers three ballets from the company's earliest years, including Antony Tudor's 1938 "Gala Performance," a spoof of ballet mannerisms and ballerina airs. Another looks back at Twyla Tharp's long association with the company, which began in 1976 with "Push Comes to Shove," a tour de force of vaudevillian humor and bravura that she created for the recently arrived Mikhail Baryshnikov. (It will be danced by two of the company's current crop of virtuosos, Isaac Hernandez and Jake Roxander.) Yet another program combines a new work by the Brazilian-born Juliano Nunes with one of the most powerful works created for the company in the past decade, Alexei Ratmansky's "Serenade After Plato's Symposium."—*Marina Harss*



## About Town

Indie Rock

The Burlington indie rocker **Greg Freeman** quietly released his 2022 début, “I Looked Out,” a masterwork of doomy Americana, sans label or marketing campaign. Influenced by the blue-collar poetry of alt-folksters such as Jason Molina and Jay Farrar, Freeman chronicled union strife, transatlantic drives, communions with nature; his harsh, boyish melancholy garnered cult attention. “Burnover,” his latest—on which he plays ten instruments, including glockenspiel, violin, and concertina—is more boisterous, siphoning gritty exuberance from his live show, where he and his band have caught the attention of the nineties synth-rock legends **Grandaddy**, who are taking them on tour this fall. Freeman awes crowds with a squealing drawl that threatens to break but never quite does.—*Holden Seidlitz* ([Brooklyn Steel](#); Oct. 15.)

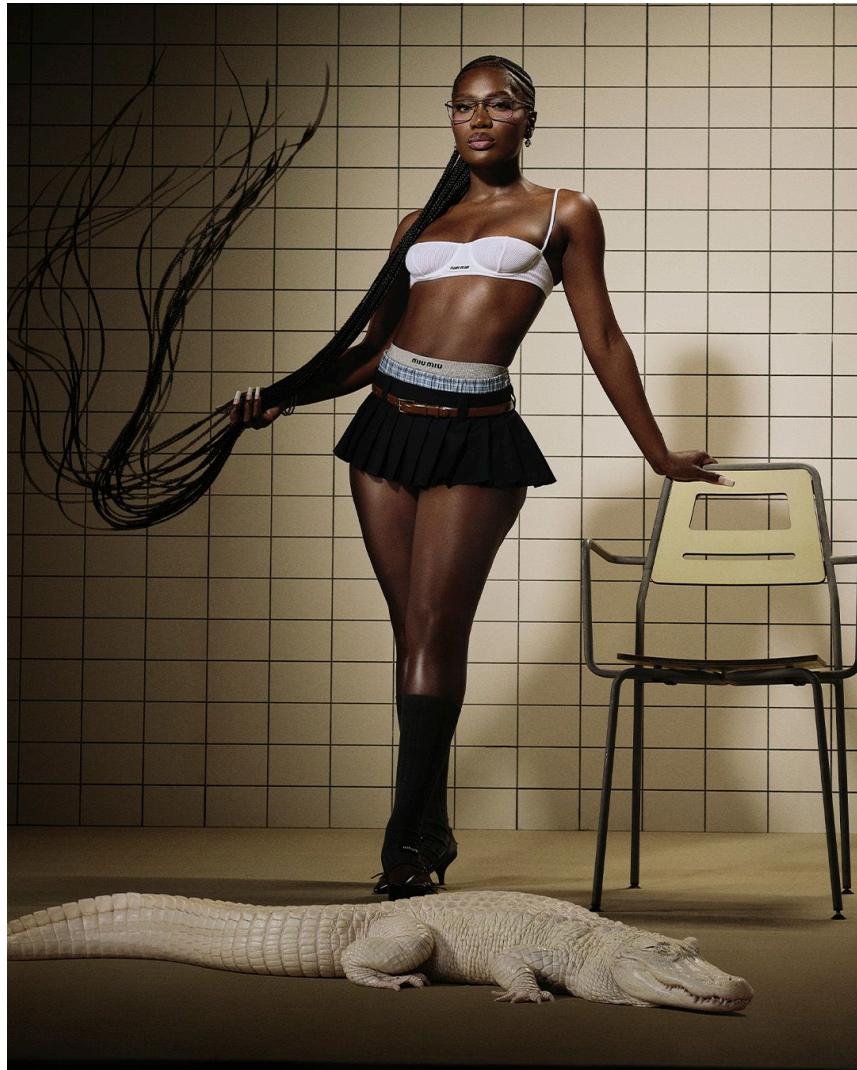
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## Off Broadway

In the exhilarating, bilingual two-man musical “**Mexodus**,” directed by David Mendizábal, Brian Quijada and Nygel D. Robinson—virtuosic composer-performers—tell the story of Henry (Robinson), an enslaved man who flees Texas for Mexico, which is fully emancipated by 1829. Carlos (Quijada), the Mexican ex-medic who rescues Henry from the Rio Grande, teaches him the phrase “*Todos estamos juntos en esto*,” and musically, too, the pair emphasizes solidarity, using live-looping technology so the two men can sound like a thousand. In their hands, everything is border music: ranchera, rap, classical piano, heavy-bottomed funk. In one stunning, fine-picked duet, their guitars communicate with deft sweetness where the not-yet-friends still fumble.—*Helen Shaw* ([Minetta Lane](#); through Nov. 1.)

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## Hip-Hop



Photograph by C Prinz

When **Doechii** became only the third woman to win the Grammy for Best Rap Album, in February, it felt less like a coronation than a vision coming to pass. The long-awaited full-length mixtape that won, “Alligator Bites Never Heal,” was dynamic and multitudinous, bursting at the seams with an eagerness to be great. In 2022, the Tampa rapper parlayed viral success into record deals with Top Dawg Entertainment and Capitol Records, launching a star turn that felt preordained. Her wordplay is elastic, her flows animated, and she finds just the right balance between classic and modern sensibilities. Doechii seemed to channel all of her zeal into her Grammy performance, which officially marked her transition to the big time.—*Sheldon Pearce ([The Theatre at MSG](#); Oct. 20.)*

## Classical

In 1613, Dutch colonialists and the Haudenosaunee made a peace arrangement, now known as the Two Row Wampum Treaty. The agreement is one of the oldest on record in the long, complex, and cruel history between European interests and Indigenous nations in North America. Language, dates, and names from treaties like this one appear in the composer Jerome Kitzke's twenty-four-part libretto "I Wonder If This Ground Has Anything to Say (A Treaty Illumination)." The work, presented in its world première by the contemporary music collective **thingNY**, sheds light on the continuing—and underaddressed—injustices facing Indigenous peoples, and the obligations of the U.S. government to honor its agreements.—*Jane Bua ([Merkin Hall](#); Oct. 16.)*

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## Art

Two outstanding shows at [Gordon Robichaux](#) have a similar theme: the things left behind and what we do with them. In the artist **DW Fitzpatrick's** minimal works, their use of chewed-on pencils and a plastic cast of a thumb evoke absent bodies, but the spirits of the living are powerfully present. Fitzpatrick's knowing eye informs the witty and wise clock face for the sculpture "Arm Got Lost on Way to Sleeve" (2025). The sixty-one-year-old artist's colors, when they use them at all, are muted, whereas the wonderful performer and collagist **Agosto Machado's** worlds are defined by color and density. In his devastating "Anna May Wong (Altar)" (2025), the great Chinese American star is seen in photographs juxtaposed with a rose-colored shawl and an iron—evoking the stereotypical view of a Chinese woman as a laundress. The brilliant "Untitled (Obituaries)" is a collage of death notices of the artist's friends, showing how early time ran out for many gay people with the advent of *AIDS*, and how time continues to run out for us all.—*Hilton Als (Through Oct. 26.)*

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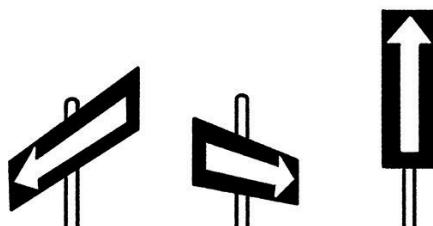
## Movies



*"It Was Just an Accident."*  
Photograph courtesy NEON

In the Iranian director Jafar Panahi's new drama, **"It Was Just an Accident,"** a political thriller made clandestinely in and near Tehran, a driver called Eghbal brings his car to a garage on a remote country road. There, a workman named Vahid, a former political prisoner, thinks he recognizes Eghbal as an officer who tortured him. After kidnapping Eghbal and while preparing to kill him, Vahid doubts his own memory (he was blindfolded in detention) and, packing the captive into a van, visits other former political prisoners to seek confirmation; they offer a wide range of responses. The story runs on fable-like coincidences and moral abstractions, but they're outweighed by the overwhelming details of lives shattered and minds shaped by unspeakable horrors.—

*Richard Brody (Opening Oct. 15.)*



## Pick Three

*Paige Williams on crime narratives that advance the genre without wrecking the soul.*

**1.** Before David Simon created “The Wire,” he took time off from his reporting job at the Baltimore *Sun* to produce a book, **“Homicide: A Year on the Killing Streets,”** one of the more accurate depictions of police work. (Read it for a colorful exposition of the Miranda warning alone.) The 1991 book quickly generated an eponymous NBC show starring the glorious, late Andre Braugher (pictured). All seven seasons are now streaming on Peacock. It’s nice to see Detective Frank Pembleton again.

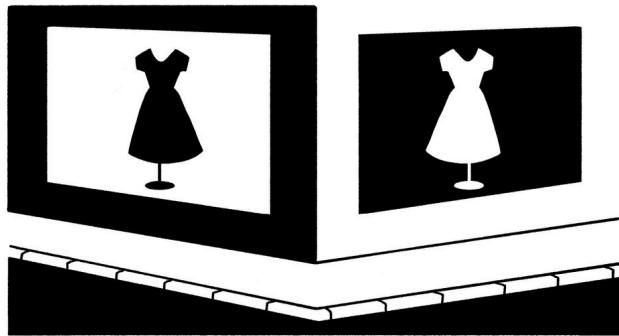


Photograph from NBC / Getty

2. “[Spotlight: Snitch City](#),” a podcast by the Boston *Globe*’s highly decorated Spotlight investigative team, starts with one cop trying to hold another accountable for troubling activities involving confidential informants in New Bedford, Massachusetts, Herman Melville’s old fishing grounds. The exposé functions, vividly, as a reminder that the country’s well-being hinges on safeguarding journalism’s constitutionally protected authority to scrutinize those in power. At least one commanding officer has resigned.

3. James Graham's "**Punch**," a play that's running both on Broadway and on London's West End, tells the true story of British parents who chose to embrace, not hate, a stranger who randomly sucker-punched their son, a paramedic in training, killing him. This type of reconciliation process—facilitating relationships between perpetrators and victims—is called restorative justice, and it's rarely in the limelight. Graham couldn't have been more apt when he recently told the *Times* that "Punch" explores "how you create empathy in a cruel society."

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## On and Off the Avenue

*Rachel Syme on cowgirl couture.*

In Albuquerque, New Mexico, where I grew up, cowboy boots are arguably as ubiquitous as tennis shoes. Boot-cut jeans were never a passing trend in the desert Southwest; they are considered timeless, the ideal marriage of fashion and utility. For many of my classmates, the zeal for riding gear seemed to be less about raw functionality and more about flair; there was a deep yearning to be part of a dusty tradition, even if you spent more time ambling through the mall than tending to the stables. It was a teen-age rite of passage to visit [Dan's Boots & Saddles](#), a Western-wear emporium that has been serving the Albuquerque area since 1953, where hundreds of boot varietals, from snakeskin to ostrich leather, line the walls. I had a pair of silver calf-height boots (known in the business as "roper boots," for their shorter length) that I paired with

every outfit, from denim shorts to sundresses. I wore them until I wore them out.



Illustration by Sunny Wu

I recently thought about those boots again, when I walked into the massive new New York flagship store for **Tecovas**, a fast-growing brand hailing from Austin, Texas, that is attempting to own the nouveau Western-wear craze in the United States. In many ways, Tecovas is the exact opposite of Dan's Boots & Saddles—it was never meant to be a down-home mom-and-pop business. It was founded, in 2015, by Paul Hedrick, a Dallas-born entrepreneur who left Texas for Harvard and then went on to work at a private-equity firm in Greenwich, Connecticut. Hedrick, who was on the hunt for a fresh brand idea, discovered that the American market for Western boots alone was worth more than three billion dollars at the time, and Hedrick emptied out his 401(k) to make a go of it. According to *Texas Monthly*, Hedrick then travelled to León, Mexico, where many of the most popular boots in the world (including Lucchese) are made, and contracted artisans who also make high-end brands to work on his idea. Within five years, he'd opened a giant headquarters in Austin and raised almost thirty million dollars from investors who'd also backed Warby Parker and Bonobos. (Hedrick stepped aside as C.E.O. in 2022, but remains chairman.)

What Tecovas is selling is not local charm but streamlined ease; it offers simple styles in accessible colors at a mid-level price point (its best-selling knee-high women's boot, the Annie, costs three hundred and forty-five dollars). Western wear has surged in recent years—the market is expected to reach a hundred and thirty-five billion dollars by 2030—and Tecovas has rushed in to fill the demand with a range of classic cowboy-chic staples; it now operates fifty stores across the country and counting. The New York outpost, in SoHo, is, at forty-five hundred square feet, the brand's largest yet—and the one with the most bells and whistles. It features a boot-shining station, a bourbon bar, and stretching and embossing services. Yee-haw.

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## This Week with: Jennifer Wilson

*Our writers on their current obsessions.*

**This week, I loved** the movie “Love,” though not as much as I enjoyed “Sex.” But my favorite of the three loosely connected films that make up the Norwegian director Dag Johan Haugerud’s “Oslo Trilogy” is the final installment, “Dreams,” which just ended its run at Film Forum but can be [streamed on Mubi](#). I would describe the films as experimental Nordic mumblecore: a set of slightly surreal meditations on how enlivening a new erotic connection can be, even as, or perhaps especially when, it wrecks your life beyond recognition.

**This week, I’m consuming** the book “[Night People](#)” by the d.j. turned mega-producer Mark Ronson. It’s not exactly a memoir; it’s more of a set list of some of the wildest nights Ronson spent working the turntables in the nineties, from Puff Daddy’s infamous twenty-ninth birthday party at Cipriani’s to the release party for D’Angelo’s iconic album “Voodoo.” It’s a fun snapshot of the era’s night-life culture, and Ronson’s not afraid to bite the hands that

once fed him, critiquing the arrival of bottle service, a cash grab that cut into the dance floor, literally and spiritually.

**This week, I'm stuck on** an electrifying play from my cherished Philadelphia Eagles' Week Four win against the Tampa Bay Buccaneers. The tight end Cameron Latu blocked a punt return from Tampa Bay's Riley Dixon, upon which our safety, Sydney Brown, recovered the ball and ran it in for a touchdown. "We're like a '[Space Jam](#)' team!" I texted my mom, the Eagles' most devoted and loyal fan.

**This week, I cringed at** *Rolling Stone*'s [five-star review](#) of the divisive new Taylor Swift album, "The Life of a Showgirl." The flat writing, coupled with the magazine's orange-and-teal "homepage takeover," made the whole thing feel like sponcon and of a piece with a broader culture of genuflecting to billionaires. I don't have strong feelings about this album, but I chuckled at a line from [Pitchfork's blistering review](#), which described "Wood," a single about Travis Kelce's manhood, as having "the spiritual energy of bachelorette-party penis décor." What can I say—I like music criticism with B.D.E.



*Documentation of the 2006-8 performance "A Room of One's Own: Women and Power in the New America."*

*Art work by Coco Fusco / Courtesy the artist / Mendes Wood DM*

**Next week, I'm looking forward to** the exhibition “Tomorrow, I Will Become an Island,” the first U.S. survey of the Cuban American artist Coco Fusco, at [El Museo del Barrio](#). I saw this show in 2023, in Berlin, when it was at the KW Institute for Contemporary Art, and I’m looking forward to seeing how certain parts of the exhibit—such as Fusco’s mixed-media exploration of photography and its role in the F.B.I. manhunt of Angela Davis—might get recontextualized for an American audience in 2025, when we’ve all been watching *ICE* raids on our phones.

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## P.S. Good stuff on the internet:

- [\*Don’t crash out\*](#)
- [\*Molly Young’s spiritual practice\*](#)
- [\*Happy birthday, Thelonious Monk\*](#)

[Marina Harss](#) has been contributing dance coverage to *The New Yorker* since 2004. She is the author of “[The Boy from Kyiv: Alexei Ratmansky’s Life in Ballet](#).”

[Holden Seidlitz](#) is a member of *The New Yorker*’s editorial staff.

[Helen Shaw](#) joined *The New Yorker* as a staff writer in 2022. She received a 2025 Grace Dudley Prize for Arts Writing.

[Sheldon Pearce](#) is a music writer for *The New Yorker*’s Goings On newsletter.

[Jane Bua](#) is a member of *The New Yorker*’s editorial staff who covers classical music for Goings On. Previously, she wrote for *Pitchfork*.

[Hilton Als](#), a staff writer at *The New Yorker*, won the 2017 Pulitzer Prize for criticism. He is the editor of “[God Made My Face: A Collective Portrait of James Baldwin](#).”

[Richard Brody](#), a film critic, began writing for *The New Yorker* in 1999. He is the author of “[Everything Is Cinema: The Working Life of Jean-Luc Godard](#).”

[Paige Williams](#), a staff writer, writes U.S. Journal, a series that Calvin Trillin created, in *The New Yorker*, in 1967. She is the author of “[The Dinosaur Artist](#)” and the winner of a 2024 Mirror Award.

[Rachel Syme](#) is a staff writer at *The New Yorker*. She has covered Hollywood, style, and other cultural subjects since 2012. She is the author of “[Syme’s Letter Writer](#),” about the joys of handwritten correspondence.

[Jennifer Wilson](#) is a staff writer at *The New Yorker* covering books and culture. In 2024, she received a Robert B. Silvers Prize for Literary Criticism.

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<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/goings-on/misty-copelands-ballet-send-off>

# The Talk of the Town

- **[The Real Problem Is How Trump Can Legally Use the Military](#)**

Congress wrote statutes with the apparent assumption that whoever held the office of the Presidency would use the powers they granted in good faith.

- **[Heather Christian, MacArthur's Newest Genius](#)**

The composer and playwright just received the coveted grant. On a visit to the Hayden Planetarium—which includes a video narrated by Pedro Pascal—she considers the cosmic collisions that got her here.

- **[Greg Cope White Asks and Tells](#)**

The author and former marine served the country in the closet. Now, amid Pete Hegseth's anti-L.G.B.T.Q. military mission, Cope White is prouder than ever—just look at his new Norman Lear-backed Netflix show, "Boots."

- **[Will Patrick McCollum Save Us All?](#)**

The jeweller turned reverend says he'll rescue the world from destruction. Even Jane Goodall was on board. It's a busy time in the universal-scale-peace business—is he up to the task?

- **[How Long Will You Live?](#)**

Smoking a cig takes twenty minutes off your life. But thinking about Rudy Giuliani's downfall might add some time back.

[Comment](#)

# The Real Problem Is How Trump Can Legally Use the Military

Congress wrote statutes with the apparent assumption that whoever held the office of the Presidency would use the powers they granted in good faith.

By [Jeannie Suk Gersen](#)

October 12, 2025



*Photo illustration by Cristiana Couceiro; Source photographs from Getty*

The militarization of American cities, including [Los Angeles](#), Portland, and Chicago, has brought home a perverse irony. Throughout the history of the United States, immigrants have come here to escape authoritarian governments. But, in the twenty-first century, it is Donald Trump's crackdowns on immigration, and on the protests against them, that are giving him momentum in the

direction of ersatz dictatorship. The President has also threatened to deploy troops in more cities, such as San Francisco, Baltimore, and New York, against the will of the states' governors.

At the nation's founding, James Madison warned that "a standing military force, with an overgrown Executive will not long be safe companions to liberty," because of the temptation to turn soldiers into "instruments of tyranny at home." The Constitution divides power over the military between the President, who is the Commander-in-Chief, and Congress, which funds and regulates the military, declares war, and provides "for calling forth the Militia to execute the Laws of the Union, suppress Insurrections and repel Invasions." In the Posse Comitatus Act of 1878, Congress spelled out that it is generally forbidden to use the military for civilian law enforcement. But, in a statute from 1956, Congress gave the President the authority to federalize any state's National Guard in the event of an "invasion by a foreign nation" or a "rebellion" against the federal government, or in cases when "the President is unable with the regular forces to execute the laws of the United States."

In June, President Trump first mobilized thousands of National Guard troops and hundreds of marines to L.A. to protect *ICE officers* and other federal employees, functions, and property at sites where people were protesting against the Administration. Those deployments provoked more protests, which, in turn, fuelled the Administration's claims that troops are needed to quell them. The sight of armed soldiers outfitted for war on city streets strikes many Americans as a frightening escalation from a President seemingly bent on punishing those who oppose him. The problem, though, is not what's illegal but what isn't. The lawfulness of Trump's actions hinges on circumstances specified by Congress, and the courts have not been uniform in evaluating them.

A federal district court in California temporarily blocked the deployment of troops to L.A. in June. But the Ninth Circuit lifted

the block, recognizing that courts are “highly deferential” to a President’s assessments. It found that Trump likely had a “colorable basis” for claiming to be “unable with the regular forces to execute” federal immigration law, given the evidence that some protesters had violently interfered with law enforcement by throwing things at *ICE* vehicles and federal officials, utilizing “dumpsters as a battering ram” at a federal building, lobbing Molotov cocktails, and vandalizing property. The California district court later ruled that the Administration had violated the Posse Comitatus Act by using soldiers to execute federal law, and an appeal is pending.

Last week, an Oregon federal district judge, Karin Immergut, who had been appointed by Trump, found that the President probably lacked the authority to federalize the National Guard to deploy in Portland in September. That conclusion rested largely on the contrast between Portland and L.A. in the weeks leading up to the President’s orders regarding each city. That is, unlike when Trump sent troops to L.A., “it had been months since there was any sustained level of violent or disruptive protest activity in Portland.” The Justice Department’s claims of disruptive protests in September included “setting up a makeshift guillotine,” posting a photo of an *ICE* vehicle online, and shining flashlights in drivers’ eyes—all of which, Judge Immergut said, could be successfully handled by law enforcement.

The President didn’t help his case by spreading outlandish falsehoods. He posted on Truth Social about “War ravaged Portland,” “*ICE* Facilities under siege from attack by Antifa, and other domestic terrorists,” and “Chaos, Death, and Destruction.” Even affording “a great level of deference” to the President, Judge Immergut concluded that the claim that Trump had been unable to execute federal law was “simply untethered to the facts.” But this commonsense point about Trump’s credibility may be controversial, too, because of the difficulty in determining when judicial second-guessing of the President’s assessments amounts to

usurping the power that Congress has delegated to him. The Ninth Circuit may well ignore Trump's posts and find that even low-level disruptions in recent weeks, or violent incidents from months earlier, are sufficient for him to send troops to protect federal officials' ability to do their jobs. Meanwhile, a district court temporarily enjoined the deployment of troops in Illinois, noting that the Administration's perception of events is "simply unreliable," which was a polite way of rejecting the warping of reality entailed in viewing the protests in Chicago as a "rebellion."

What is perhaps most concerning is that wide judicial deference to a truth-indifferent President may mean that there is effectively little to no constraint on what he can do, which would quickly erase the separation of powers, not to mention the federalism, that the Constitution is supposed to insure. The statute on federalizing the National Guard is only one of many laws that allow the President to decide whether certain circumstances exist—an invasion, a rebellion, an emergency, an "unusual and extraordinary threat"—and so exercise an extraordinary power. Last week, Trump said that, if necessary, he would invoke another statute, the Insurrection Act, which creates an exception to the prohibition on using the military for law enforcement: "If people were being killed and courts were holding us up, or governors or mayors were holding us up, sure, I'd do that." The Insurrection Act, which Trump has frequently mentioned in the past, gives the President staggeringly broader power. For instance, it permits him to use military force inside the U.S. "as he considers necessary to suppress" any "conspiracy" that "opposes or obstructs the execution" of federal law. Judges and state officials must surely understand that, if they stymie Trump, he is poised to unleash a more dangerous and harder-to-check power that Congress has already handed him.

Congress wrote such statutes with the apparent assumption that whoever held the office of the Presidency would use the powers they granted in good faith. Courts, for their part, developed legal doctrines that require them to presume the President's good faith in

deferring to him. The law may therefore be on the President's side, which is troubling for what it suggests about its capacity to protect against tyranny. Judge Immergut insisted that "this is a nation of Constitutional law, not martial law." We must hope that they do not turn out to be one and the same. ♦

*Jeannie Suk Gersen is a contributing writer at The New Yorker and a professor at Harvard Law School.*

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<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/10/20/the-real-problem-is-how-trump-can-legally-use-the-national-guard>

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[Genius Dept.](#)

## Heather Christian, MacArthur's Newest Genius

The composer and playwright just received the coveted grant. On a visit to the Hayden Planetarium—which includes a video narrated by Pedro Pascal—she considers the cosmic collisions that got her here.

By [Adam Green](#)

October 9, 2025



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

A few days before Heather Christian was announced as one of the recipients of this year's MacArthur "genius" grants, she wandered through the glass cube of the Rose Center for Earth and Space, expounding on supernovas, dark matter, and Oort clouds. With her bleached hair, elfin frame, and oversized sweatshirt, not to mention her ease with the niceties of the cosmos, she could have been mistaken for an Astronomy 101 teaching assistant, but in fact she is a forty-four-year-old composer, librettist, and performer, whose ineffable musical theatre (not musical-theatre) pieces have won her a cult following. Christian, who had been given a heads-up about the MacArthur Fellowship, said, "I always held hope in my heart that one day this would happen. But that 'one day' to me was, like, when I'm sixty-five, and I've written enough weird shows to where they're, like, 'You know what? You've kept at it. Have a cookie.' "

She was taking a break from tech rehearsals for the latest production of one of those shows, "Oratorio for Living Things," at the Signature Theatre. Inspired by, as she puts it, "the three Carls"—Sagan, Orff, and (Carlo) Rovelli—"Oratorio" is a musical meditation, for twelve singers, on time, memory, and what it means to be human on a turbulent planet at the edge of cataclysm. "Time is as mysterious and subjective as the concept of God and the concept of ourselves," she said, with a twang that revealed her Natchez, Mississippi, upbringing. "We can't understand it because we are made of it." She has a darting, birdlike keenness, and as she weaved through a pack of slower-moving fellow-humans into the Hayden Planetarium, for a showing of "Encounters in the Milky Way" (narrated by Pedro Pascal), she went on, "I think I've always been chasing mystery—looking into questions that are not built to be answered. And that just tickles me. I think that's part of being alive."

Inside the auditorium, the lights went down, and, overhead, laser-projected dust clouds from exploding stars formed new galaxies and the Milky Way collided and started to merge with the

Sagittarius Dwarf Galaxy. “We are a product of cosmic encounters,” Pascal purred through the speakers.

Afterward, another attendee reported a sense of awe much like the one he’d felt as a teen-ager during Laserium shows set to [Pink Floyd](#)’s “Dark Side of the Moon,” after a few bong hits. Christian reacted with the sang-froid of a professional. “The whole third act of ‘Oratorio’ is about collision and cosmic violence and how we measure time in space,” she said. “So, yeah, if we’re going to define time as a collection of encounters or collisions, how do you let that be a frame over what’s happening on the quantum level? And how do you let that be a frame over how you’re living your life?”

As she made her way through the Hall of the Universe, offering a stream of commentary, it was clear that her scientific knowledge had been braided with a hunger for creative expression and religious ritual since her childhood in the Deep South. A self-described “peculiar and not very popular” girl, she wrote poetry about ghosts and angels, played the piano, and served as the musical director at her church, while also starting a “Save the World” club and obsessively collecting rocks. (In front of a volcano exhibit, she mentioned a song in her show about the eruption of [Vesuvius](#) in A.D. 79, and said, “We are overdue for a planetary revision, for another great, late heavy bombardment.”) At N.Y.U., she augmented her experimental-theatre curriculum with courses in physics, astronomy, and quantum mechanics.

While writing “Oratorio,” Christian was determined to make its scientific scaffolding solid. (She’s delighted that the Cambridge University physicist Suchitra Sebastian came to the first preview and returned for the next two performances.) But her aims are more than academic. “The only way that I understand it is from a poetic standpoint—I am not a scientist,” she said. “But I see these patterns and these themes that sort of repeat themselves as extended metaphors across multiple scales, and that is best represented

musically. You can do counterpoint, you can do fugue, and you can do canon, repetition—all of that stuff. And even for people who don’t pick up on that, I want them to feel it emotionally and realize it in their bodies.”

On her way out of the Rose Center, she stopped in the planetarium gift shop, where she noted a T-shirt that read “Made of Stars.” She laughed and said, “That’s it right there. We’re all just bumping around and into each other, and we do have a natural proclivity towards volatility because we are forged from hydrogen, helium, and all the same shit as the stars.”

Since learning of the MacArthur, she’d been reflecting on the seemingly random collisions that landed her here, and on how, as she sees it, the main prize, along with validation and financial freedom, is time. She has at least thirteen projects in the works, including operas based on the myths of Dido and Aeneas and *Gilgamesh*, an adaptation of Faulkner’s “As I Lay Dying,” a musical based on Madeleine L’Engle’s “A Wrinkle in Time,” a collaboration with Taylor Mac about Clarence Thomas, and a double album with her band Heather Christian and the Arbornauts. “And then I’m adapting the Book of Revelation, but I don’t know how that’s a show,” she said. “Yet.” ♦

*Adam Green*, a contributing editor and theatre critic at *Vogue*, has written for *The New Yorker* since 1993.

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<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/10/20/heather-christian-macarthurs-newest-genius>

[Halls of Montezuma](#)

## Greg Cope White Asks and Tells

The author and former marine served the country in the closet. Now, amid Pete Hegseth's anti-L.G.B.T.Q. military mission, Cope White is prouder than ever—just look at his new Norman Lear-backed Netflix show, "Boots."

By [Bob Morris](#)

October 13, 2025



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

At Greg Cope White's interview for the Marine Corps, a handsome recruiter asked him if he'd ever had a homosexual thought or

experience. It was 1979, years before “don’t ask, don’t tell.” White lied and answered that he had not—“even though I was having one right there,” he said the other day, standing outside a military-recruitment center in Times Square.

Cope White is the author of “The Pink Marine,” a spirited memoir, published in 2015, about his time in basic training, which forms the premise of the new Netflix series “Boots.” He was in town from L.A., and he’d stopped to look at the recruiting station, which sports a wall-size L.E.D. American flag. He rang a buzzer, and an unkempt man in Army fatigues (known as utilities) opened the door.

“Hi, I’m a marine, and I wanted to say hello,” Cope White, looking chic in all black and small tortoise-shell spectacles, said. The door closed as if the place were a speakeasy. “I could see he had two potential recruits in there,” he said, figuring that the guy didn’t want to be interrupted. “Marines would *never* recruit in that outfit. We always put out a crisp image, with royal-blue trousers and red stripes.” He mentioned a stiffener in the jacket collar, then added, “We also wear impossibly shined black shoes. It’s all very gay.”

Cope White, a cheerful Texan raised by a peripatetic single mother, joined the Marines with his straight best friend. They arrived at Parris Island, in South Carolina, to find trainers calling them “faggots” and “retards.” After serving his six years and leaving the Corps as a sergeant, Cope White moved to Manhattan and then to Hollywood, to write for TV. [Norman Lear](#), a decorated Air Force veteran, took him under his wing. One of his first jobs was revising a script for Arnold Schwarzenegger about a Marine drill instructor who moonlights as the tooth fairy.

“Norman was a mensch,” Cope White said. Lear wrote a foreword for “The Pink Marine” and helped sell “Boots” to Netflix before his death, in 2023. He also insisted on casting a gay actor to portray Cope White. (Miles Heizer plays the role.) The series takes place in

the nineteen-nineties, though at one point Lear wondered whether they should set it in the present day.

“But it’s legal today,” Cope White said.

“Yeah, but is it cool?” Lear replied.



*“I don’t want to improve so much that I feel like I have to participate in a triathlon.”*

Cartoon by Frank Cotham

Maybe not. [Pete Hegseth](#), in his diversity-purging rampage, has removed the name of the assassinated Navy veteran Harvey Milk from a battleship. Military bases have had to remove Pride flags. And [President Trump](#) has banned transgender people from the military.

“It’s scandalous,” Cope White said. “They’ve served their country for twenty years and suddenly they’re worthless and denied pensions.” Not that the “don’t ask, don’t tell” years were so great. “It was a witch hunt if someone wanted to get you in trouble,” he said.

Still, he remains an almost evangelical enthusiast of the armed forces. In Los Angeles, he mentors veterans in a screenwriting

program run by the Writers Guild Foundation. And, wherever he goes, he looks for fellow-marines. Later, outside the Intrepid, an aircraft carrier turned museum, he introduced himself to a volunteer guide who had served in [Vietnam](#). “Semper fi!” Cope White called out. The older man wore a badge with a photo of himself as a new recruit. Cope White showed the boot-camp photo he had on his phone. “The difference between that photo and Hollywood is that in boot camp you only get one take,” he said. The guide, heading home to New Jersey, where his local V.A. hospital takes care of him despite budget cuts, pulled a Marine Corps Challenge Coin from his pocket.

“Here, take one,” he said, pressing it into the younger man’s hand.

“Wow,” Cope White said, locking eyes with him. “Thank you, what an honor.”

While two helicopters buzzed over the Hudson (“They’re in formation, so I assume they’re military and not taking people to the Hamptons,” Cope White said), he chatted with a young female security guard who wanted to join the Air Force. He leaned in. “Now, don’t be insulted, but it’s just a vibe I’m picking up,” he said. “I’m wondering if by any chance you are L.G.B.T.?” She said that she was. “O.K.,” he said in an affirming tone. “Are you concerned about what’s happening today?” She was. “Don’t let that stop you, because the people you’re going to serve with will love you,” he said. “It’s the people on the outside who are hating.” He congratulated her for wanting to serve her country and for not hiding her rainbow under a bushel. Then he showed her a proper salute: arranging his feet at a forty-five-degree angle, he brought his hand up to his smiling face with stiff intention, and it vibrated there like a tuning fork.

“That’s a snap and pop,” he said. “Not like Trump. When he salutes, it drives me crazy.” ♦

*Bob Morris first contributed to the magazine in 1995. His books include “Assisted Loving: True Tales of Double Dating with My Dad” and “Bobby Wonderful.”*

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<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/10/20/greg-cope-white-asks-and-tells>

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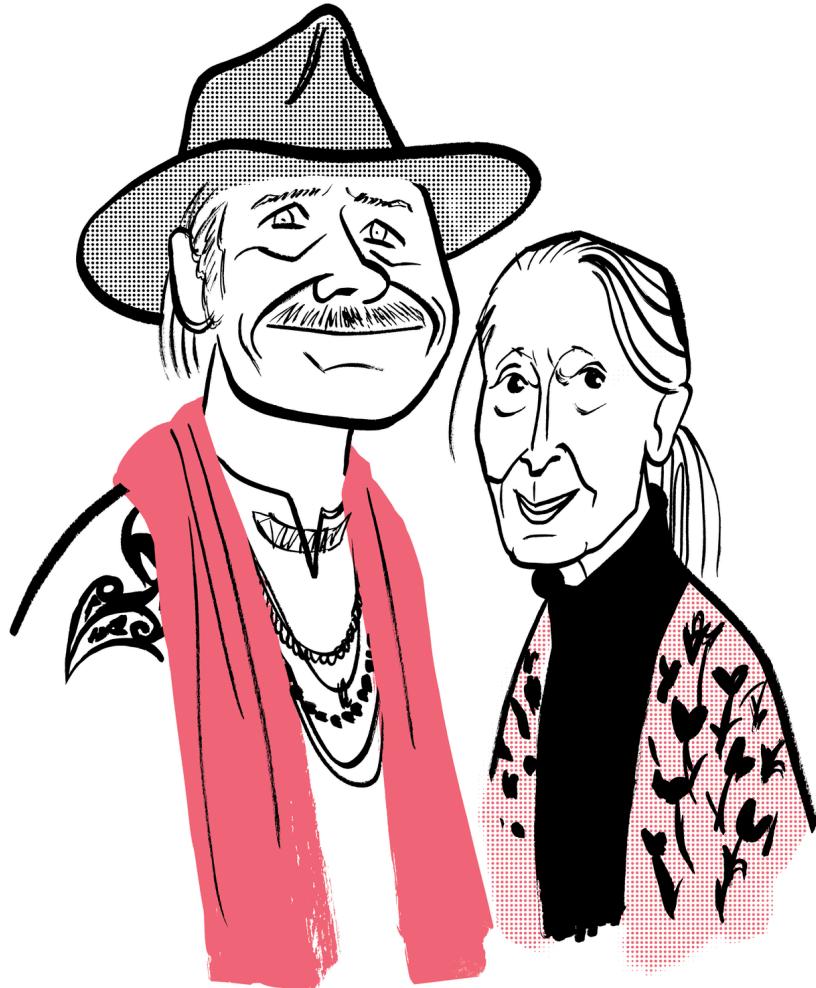
[Prophecy Dept.](#)

## Will Patrick McCollum Save Us All?

The jeweller turned reverend says he'll rescue the world from destruction. Even Jane Goodall was on board. It's a busy time in the universal-scale-peace business—is he up to the task?

By [Zach Helfand](#)

October 13, 2025



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

His Excellency the Reverend Patrick McCollum, a peace activist from California—who, according to an Indigenous South American prophecy, will unite all the people of the Amazon in order to save the region (and thereby the world) from destruction—was near the

Battery Park City ferry landing the other day when he got a call with sad news. “Jane died,” he reported, a little teary, after he hung up. “[Jane Goodall](#), one of my closest friends.” McCollum and Goodall happen to star in a documentary that comes out this week by the director Gabe Polsky, “The Man Who Saves the World?,” which details McCollum’s efforts to fulfill the prophecy. In the film, Polsky seems unsure whether to view McCollum as a saint or a wack job. (An investigator Polsky hired found that most of McCollum’s claims are “true or have a basis of truth,” but that some “cannot be fully corroborated.”) Then he interviews Goodall, who calls McCollum “probably the most extraordinary person I’ve met.”

“I had a special and a different relationship with her,” McCollum said. They were supposed to meet up in a few days for what Goodall, who was ninety-one, was calling farewell drinks. “The work we do sounds glorious, but it’s very hard,” he went on. “It’s nice to have someone who understands that. She’s the one I called, and I’m the one she called. It’s just that I will never be able to call her again.” He said that she’d willed him some of her ashes.

A few hours earlier, McCollum, who is seventy-five and wore a kurta and an Indiana Jones-style hat, had visited the [National Museum of the American Indian](#). At a metal detector, a guard gestured to his many necklaces and pendants. “Can you remove that stuff, or is it sacred?” the guard asked.

“Deeply sacred,” McCollum said.

He did an inventory. “I made this myself,” he said, lifting up a medallion. (“I was once a jewelry designer—I did stuff for the Queen of England,” he explained.) “In India, there was the largest gathering of humans in history, and I was given the honor of blessing the Ganges for a hundred million people. Had to clean their karma. The gurus decided this pendant is what I should do it with.” He fingered another necklace. “This was given to me in the

Amazon by the Jaguar People. They believe in the prophecy. This —the first war I ever stopped was in Africa, and this necklace designates me as a chief and a king of a small region. This one, long story. I met a maharaja.”

He spread his arms to get wanded. “You’re good,” the guard said.

McCollum’s peace work is difficult to define. He gives out business cards that say, “Creating peace on a universal scale through promoting a meta-narrative, which establishes that everyone and everything is sacred and essential.” With the world being what it is, it’s a busy time in the universal-scale-peace business, but when is it not? “I’ve got a lot of stuff going on,” McCollum said. “I’ve got my Amazon things. I’m one of the co-leaders organizing what’s called the State of the World Forum.” It was started by Goodall, [Desmond Tutu](#), and other eminences. “I’m kind of taking [Gorbachev](#)’s place,” he said. He’s also working with an A.I. group that he says analyzed his brain: “To create a baseline for A.I. that would only do things I would do. You know, so that they wouldn’t kill people and such.” So far, he hasn’t fund-raised. “I finance ninety per cent of everything I do with my Social Security,” he said.

Where does he find the energy? “My life centers around my Mocha Frappuccino,” he said.

McCollum had never been to the museum. “All of my trips to New York have been to the U.N.,” he said. “Except when I had to meet [Modi](#) at Madison Square Garden.” He breezed through the exhibits, then struck up a conversation with a security guard.

“This section is mainly South America,” the guard said. “I was born myself in Guyana. My dad was a parachute instructor for the G.D.F., the Guyana Defence Force. The parachute-jumping was in the Amazon. I was actually fortunate to meet the Waiwais.”

“I know them,” McCollum said.

“I spent two years with them,” the guard said. “They taught me how to make fishing rods, light fires, clean dirty water.” He went on, “We’re drifting further from nursing planet Earth. In Guyana, we spent every Saturday in the back yard, with a fork, shovel, seeds. When I came to America, I realized everyone is planting with gloves. You can’t use a glove. You’ve got to feel the dirt.”

“So, I’m the person who’s running the largest project in history to save the Amazon,” McCollum said. “Everything you’re talking about, I fully understand.”

He gave the guard a card. “This happens all the time,” he said later. “That guy, at some point, will text me or e-mail me, and I will connect him with other people. Trust me.” He looked energized. He weighed that energy with the death of his friend, and said, “A good day and a bad day.” ♦

*Zach Helfand* is a staff writer at *The New Yorker*.

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<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/10/20/will-patrick-mccollum-save-us-all>

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## How Long Will You Live?

*Smoking a cig takes twenty minutes off your life. But thinking about Rudy Giuliani's downfall might add some time back.*

By [Greg Clarke](#)

October 13, 2025



*Drinking a Martini*

**-5 MIN**



*Petting a Cat*

**+5 MIN**



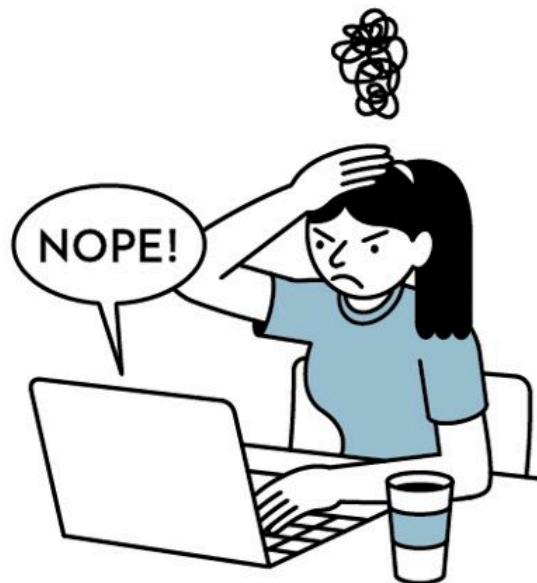
*Smoking a Cigarette*

**-20 MIN**



*Walking Two Miles*

**+20 MIN**



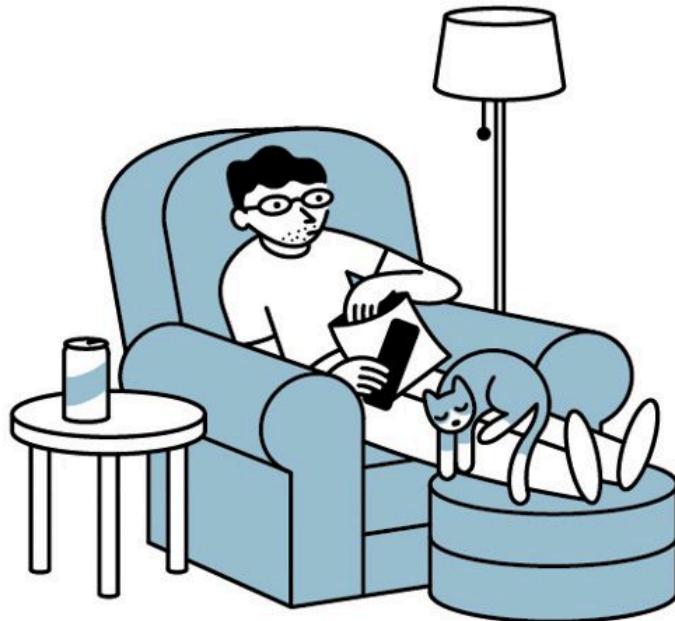
*Being Asked by Your Device for  
Your Apple I.D. Password*

**-45 MIN**



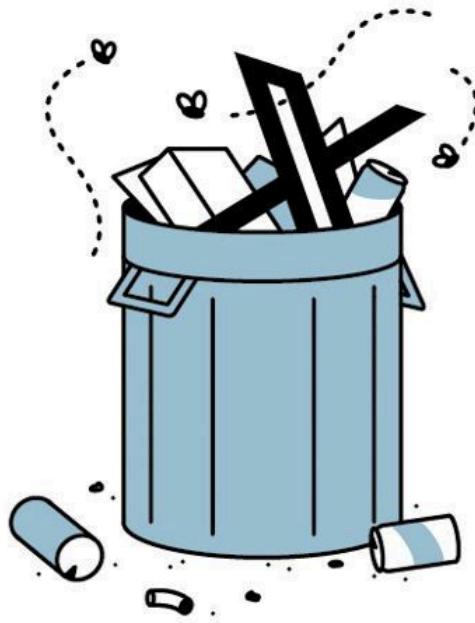
*Experiencing a Moment of  
Schadenfreude Over Rudy Giuliani*

**+45 MIN**



*Binge-Watching 'Ancient Aliens'*

**-25,300 MIN**



## *Leaving the X Platform*

**+25,300 MIN**

*Greg Clarke* is an illustrator. He co-authored, with Monte Beauchamp, “[A Sidecar Named Desire: Great Writers and the Booze That Stirred Them](#).”

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<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/10/20/how-long-will-you-live>

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# Reporting & Essays

- **[Inside the Trump Administration’s Assault on Higher Education](#)**

How conservatives learned to stop worrying and love federal power.

- **[A Forgotten Queen Bee of Modern Poetry](#)**

A débutante, a burlesque dancer, and a poet, the shape-shifting V. R. Lang—who died at thirty-two—wrote some of the most aching, entrancing lines of the twentieth century.

- **[What Zohran Mamdani Knows About Power](#)**

The thirty-three-year-old socialist is rewriting the rules of New York politics. Can he transform the city as mayor?

- **[A Tech Millionaire’s Costly Quest to Prove His Brother Was Murdered](#)**

Steve Johnson became convinced that his brother was the victim of an anti-gay hate crime. Decades later, a man was convicted for the killing. But did the police solve the case or perpetrate a miscarriage of justice?

[Annals of Higher Education](#)

# Inside the Trump Administration's Assault on Higher Education

How conservatives learned to stop worrying and love federal power.

By [Emma Green](#)

October 13, 2025



*Trump has frozen hundreds of millions of dollars in federal funds for universities.*  
*Photo illustration by Adam Maida*

It's easy to forget how bleak January, 2021, felt for conservatives in Washington. Donald Trump had lost the election. The January 6th Capitol riot was seen as an irredeemable scandal. The pandemic was raging, and the country was still reeling from the George Floyd protests. "Republicans had been run out of town," one Trump Administration official told me. "I thought, I'll go to Texas, where I

might still be able to get a job with a scarlet ‘T’ on me. It’s like, this city, and the federal government—it’s over.”

Those who stayed in D.C. hunkered down in think tanks, preparing for a long winter in the opposition. Some were convinced that Trump’s first term had been a missed opportunity. The Administration had been slow to hire, and many staffers were unfamiliar with the intricacies of bureaucratic combat. As Trump loyalists planned their return to power, they studied up. Jim Blew, an Assistant Secretary in the Department of Education during Trump’s first term, recalled fielding dozens of calls about arcane processes like negotiated rule-making. “We all realized it really helps to understand these things,” Blew said.

During this period, Republicans also watched American culture shift dramatically. Companies and universities pledged to do more to support racial minorities, expanding their D.E.I. bureaucracies. Lia Thomas, a swimmer at the University of Pennsylvania, became the first transgender athlete to win a women’s N.C.A.A. Division I national championship. The October 7th attacks in Israel led to campus protests nationwide. Conservatives were particularly outraged by Joe Biden’s higher-ed agenda. Biden officials attempted to use the *HEROES* Act—a law passed after 9/11 allowing the government to waive student-loan requirements in a national emergency—to cancel billions in student debt, long after the pandemic’s peak. Bob Eitel, a senior counsellor at the Department of Education during the first Trump Administration, helped mobilize lawyers who ultimately challenged the debt-forgiveness efforts in court and won. The Biden Administration also pushed for colleges to allow transgender athletes to compete in women’s sports. The proposal stalled, but Republicans saw it as a glaring federal overreach. Eitel said the Biden years made him feel that there was a “stark, almost unbridgeable difference” in the two parties’ understanding of reality.

In all this upheaval, there was a common theme: campuses were the battleground. Conservatives have long viewed universities as radical enclaves. In 2021, when J. D. Vance gave a speech called “Universities Are the Enemy,” he was echoing Richard Nixon. What has changed is that higher ed itself is arguably weaker than ever. Both parties have denounced its soaring costs, crushing debt, and degrees that don’t yield jobs. The culture wars gave Republicans political permission to target not just progressive bias in higher ed but the basic structures of the sector. This was, according to Preston Cooper, a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, “a once-in-a-generation opportunity to push through some real conservative reforms.”

In Washington backrooms, a playbook took shape, centered on two insights. First, nearly all universities depend on federal money. There’s student aid, and there’s research money—at some top schools, federal funding has made up a quarter or more of their revenue in recent years. Even Harvard, with the country’s largest endowment, cannot afford to walk away from the government, which awarded it nearly seven hundred million dollars for research in 2024. Second, some conservatives believed that research funds could be frozen or cancelled almost instantly, giving a future Administration a powerful tool to pressure universities.

By the time Trump returned to office, the higher-ed playbook was ready. The person in charge of coördinating it was May Mailman, then a policy deputy to Stephen Miller, one of Trump’s closest advisers. Mailman, a Harvard-trained lawyer, previously led the Independent Women’s Law Center, arguing in court that biologically male athletes who identified as transgender had undermined legal protections for female athletes. (“May Mailman is my Taylor Swift,” Riley Gaines, a swimmer who became a prominent activist after competing against Thomas, wrote on X in February.) Mailman told me that the Administration’s critique of higher ed has roughly three parts. The first is that many of these institutions are too rich to deserve endless public largesse. “We

have a thirty-six-plus-trillion-dollar national debt, and American taxpayers are paying billions to élite universities with extremely generous endowments,” she said. The second is that universities are failing in their basic mission. Instead of producing citizens who will “propel our country into the next generation of greatness,” they are, in her view, creating “indebted students with useless majors who hate our country and like to go to riots.” The third is that the so-called woke aspects of campus culture—D.E.I., transgender athletes, unchecked antisemitism—violate federal laws.

Over the past nine months, the Administration has waged an effective, unrelenting assault on higher education. D.E.I. programs have been dismantled nationwide. Columbia will pay more than two hundred million dollars to settle allegations of antisemitism and violations of antidiscrimination laws. The N.C.A.A. ruled that athletes “assigned male at birth may not compete on a women’s team.” This campaign has been framed by Trump officials as existential. Max Eden, a former Domestic Policy Council staffer who wrote a brief outlining how to “destroy Columbia University,” published a Substack post likening the second Trump Administration to the Battle of Agincourt, in which an outnumbered English Army crushed the French. The Administration has also pledged to abolish the Department of Education altogether—a long-held goal among conservative activists, who believe education should be managed locally. “They can’t repeal the department,” James Kvaal, Biden’s Under-Secretary of Education, told me. “So they’re vandalizing it.”

A decade ago, higher education was “an away game for Republicans,” Rick Hess, a senior fellow at A.E.I., said. That has changed. “The Trump Administration’s very aggressive moves against Columbia and Harvard in 2025 would have been unthinkable in 2017,” Eitel, the former Education Department official, told me. As Trump’s assault on higher ed has unfolded, conservatives have learned to stop worrying and love federal power. “For so long, conservatives were, like, ‘We can get there by

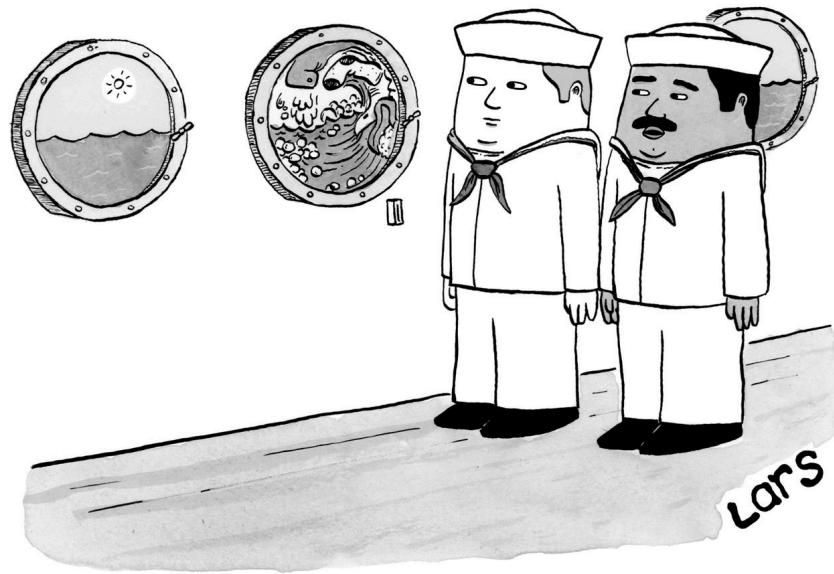
hoping,’ ” Mailman said. “ ‘We’ll write some op-eds. We’re going to be nice to people.’ ” That approach has failed, she said. This Trump Administration marks a new era. “You don’t feel like a bunch of losers anymore,” Mailman told me. “You have a seat at the table.”

The Department of Education building is ugly in a distinctly Washington way—a concrete shoebox more suggestive of bureaucratic toil than of any grand vision of government. Directly in front of it stands a memorial to Dwight Eisenhower, which includes a metal tapestry of the Normandy cliffs, where Eisenhower oversaw troops on D Day. When Eisenhower, a Republican, was elected President in 1952, the memory of World War Two and the pressures of the Cold War shaped every aspect of politics, including education. He championed the National Defense Education Act and poured federal money into universities to advance weaponry and space technology. Eisenhower’s investments built on a long history; in the nineteenth century, the U.S. government had created numerous land-grant universities, which became the backbone of America’s public-university system. There was a compact between the federal government and higher ed: taxpayers would fund research and student aid. In return, universities would deliver scientific breakthroughs and educate citizens who could defend the nation.

This compact was broadly popular. Conservatives groused about ideology—in the nineteen-fifties, the public intellectual William F. Buckley, Jr., blasted Yale as dogmatically secular; in the eighties, the political philosopher Allan Bloom decried relativism—but the consensus held. “The general feeling about American higher education was that it was the finest in the world,” Margaret Spellings, who served as George W. Bush’s Education Secretary, told me. “People came from all over the world to study here. It was a major driver of our economy. Scholars and academics were widely respected.” Republican reformers worked within that consensus: Spellings convened a commission to push for greater

affordability and accountability, asking colleges to provide better data on things like student outcomes and employment, but “the university community was, like, ‘Hell no—give us our money and leave us alone,’ ” Spellings recalled. “It does make me wonder if we had read the room and rung the bell back then, whether that would have prevented some of this cynicism.”

Around this time, a political scientist named Jonathan Pidluzny was launching his academic career. Universities, he told me, are “where young people are empowered to live good lives—to think, to write, to appreciate beauty.” These schools ought to drive the economy, bolster national defense, and serve as “repositories of our civilizational inheritance.” All this, he said, has been “imperilled by the woke takeover of higher education.”



*“That one’s just laundry.”*  
Cartoon by Lars Kenseth

In January, Pidluzny joined the Department of Education, becoming the deputy chief of staff for strategy and implementation. He came from the America First Policy Institute, a conservative

think tank, where he argued that D.E.I. was fuelling antisemitism and the spread of “transgender ideology.” In his writing, he urged concessions from universities accused of enabling antisemitism, including an audit of D.E.I. offices and academic programs that allegedly promote “anti-Israel bias.” He called for the government to revoke visas of students suspected of supporting Hamas and to penalize universities that failed to disclose large foreign gifts, which violates federal law and arguably exposes schools to ideological influence. Under Trump, much of this has become policy. “How did I get to where I am?” Pidluzny said. “It’s watching something really valuable to our way of life slip away.”

Pidluzny’s perspective reflected the broader conservative mood: disillusionment with the cultural dogmas of the left, fused with populist anger toward élite hoarding of wealth and influence. His cultural critiques were unmistakably right-wing, but his scorn for the corporatization of universities might have come from the mouth of a disaffected leftist. “With very few exceptions, universities are or aspire to be hedge funds, welded to multinational corporations, welded to think tanks,” he said at a 2022 conference. “They teach a few courses to keep tax-exempt status.”

In January, Trump signed an executive order pledging to fight antisemitism on campuses, citing instances when Jewish students had been physically threatened and blocked from libraries and classrooms. The D.O.J. soon assembled a task force. Pidluzny joined, as did officials from Health and Human Services, which controls much of the nation’s scientific-research funding. Josh Gruenbaum, an investor who grew up in an Orthodox Jewish household and had been tapped to run the Federal Acquisition Service—the government’s clearing house for goods, services, and contracts—was invited to join, too. “I was literally sitting in the delivery room right after my son was born, and this executive order came down,” he recalled. “The galaxy is telling you, ‘This is a moment.’ ”

One key to combatting campus antisemitism, Gruenbaum believed, lay in the billions of dollars' worth of federal contracts that the government has with universities. "The way we need to be thinking about these things is: we are making an investment," Gruenbaum said. "It is a privilege to do business with the federal government." Every contract requires compliance with federal law, including Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which bars discrimination based on race, color, or national origin in federally funded programs. The theory behind the task force was simple: formal civil-rights investigations are slow, but agencies could quickly freeze or cancel funds on the ground that the schools had violated their federal contracts, forcing universities to try and cut a deal.

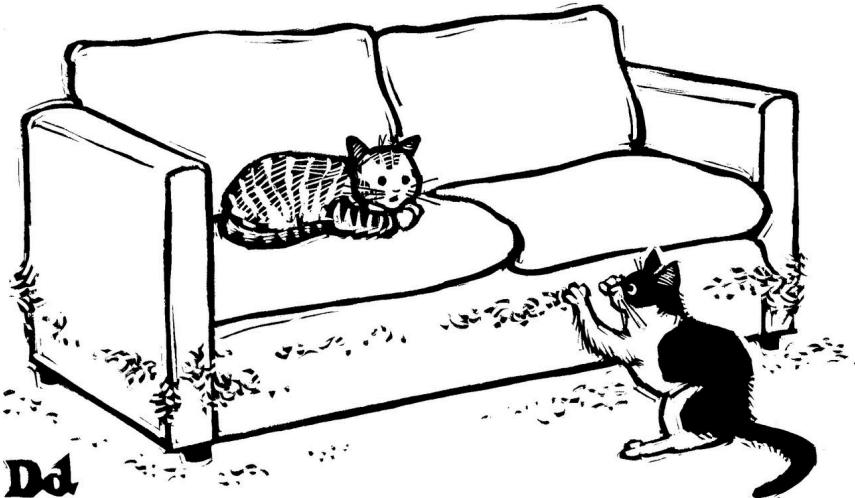
The task force met at least once a week and reported developments to Mailman, the White House point person. The schools it targeted had some of the most visible conflicts after October 7th: Columbia and Harvard, along with peer institutions such as Brown, Cornell, and Northwestern. "All of higher ed takes its cues from the élite institutions," Pidluzny told me. "They're also the places where the alleged violations of law have been most significant." When schools were targeted for investigation, multiple agencies would issue press releases or letters in quick succession, creating the effect of a strike team. Veterans of past Administrations were astonished. "I remember how difficult it was to get cross-agency coöperation on anything when I was in the Obama and Clinton Administrations," Bob Shireman, a senior fellow at the Century Foundation, told me. The fact that it's happening now, he said, suggests that there's "muscle from the White House."

The Administration also scrutinized schools for things like offering race-specific scholarships and for charging in-state tuition to undocumented students, arguing that these benefits disadvantage American students. Mailman called it a "whole-of-government" strategy. "It's one thing to go give some speeches," she said. "It's another thing to actually say out loud that we, the federal government, are no longer sponsoring, promoting, or supporting

wokeism.” Mailman even claimed that some universities were grateful for the political cover to course-correct: “Finally, now, there’s almost an excuse—they can just act normally.”

Meanwhile, the Department of Government Efficiency was recommending cuts to federal grants and contracts, often targeting proposals with progressive-sounding keywords. Many of these cuts were to scientific research, something that, for decades, both parties had treated as sacrosanct, steadily boosting funds for the National Institutes of Health and the National Science Foundation. Not so under Trump. He proposed a forty-per-cent cut to the N.I.H. budget and a cap on the reimbursement rate for indirect costs, which includes spending on things like equipment and maintenance. The Administration has also targeted science funding at the schools under investigation, largely by freezing grants. Pidluzny pushed back on the notion that this is a crackdown on the scientific enterprise; the Administration has simply recognized that science funding is the most valuable leverage it has. Schools “need to understand that the consequences would be real,” he said. “Élite institutions tend to be responsive to two things: prestige and money.”

Gruenbaum made a claim that I heard from numerous other Trump officials: if the endangered research is truly vital, universities can figure out other ways to fund it, such as donor dollars. Penny Gordon-Larsen, the vice-chancellor for research at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, was less optimistic, arguing that companies are “market-driven” and unlikely to “sink money” into university research that might take decades to pay off. Lon Cardon, who runs a biomedical-research institution called the Jackson Laboratory, noted that even the richest companies and foundations cannot replace federal science spending. “It is absolutely impossible to fund the scale of basic research needed in this country or anywhere” with just philanthropic and private funds, he said.



*“But what kind of couch are we going to be leaving for the next generation?”*  
Cartoon by Drew Dernavich

The Administration has leaned into the optics of a fight between Trump and Harvard. It's a useful spectacle: the President taking on wealthy institutions that embody upper-crust privilege. But in reality the Administration's focus has stretched far beyond the Ivies. In March, the Education Department announced that it would investigate or monitor sixty colleges and universities for alleged antisemitism, including large, red-state publics such as Ohio State and the University of Tennessee. The department opened inquiries into schools such as the University of Alabama-Birmingham and the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities for allegedly awarding “impermissible race-based scholarships”; it has announced investigations into universities in Nebraska and Florida, among other states, for giving scholarships to undocumented students.

After working as Bush's Education Secretary, Margaret Spellings served as the president of the U.N.C. system, which has lost significant federal funds under Trump. At schools like this, she said, the researchers “are the best and the brightest scientists.” She added, “This is what I'm really worried about.” Undermining faith in big public institutions “is a scary, slippery slope.”

In February, President Trump convened a bipartisan group of governors at the White House. “He was in a rambunctious mood,” Janet Mills, the governor of Maine, told me. He brought up an

executive order titled “Keeping Men Out of Women’s Sports,” which had been drafted by Mailman. “Is Maine here, the governor of Maine?” Trump asked. Mills stood.

A few days earlier, a transgender student had competed in a pole-vaulting event at a high-school track-and-field meet in Maine. Last year, the student had tied for ninth in the boys’ division; this year, competing in the girls’ division, the student had placed first. A Republican state legislator, Laurel Libby, had posted side-by-side photos with the athlete’s first name, using male pronouns—which went viral.

Trump asked whether Mills would follow the executive order. “I’m complying with state and federal laws,” she told him. One state law, the Maine Human Rights Act, prohibits discrimination on the basis of gender identity.

“We are the federal law,” Trump replied. “You better do it, because you’re not going to get any federal funding at all if you don’t.”

“See you in court,” Mills replied.

“I look forward to it,” Trump said. “And enjoy your life after, Governor. Because I don’t think you’ll be in elected politics.” Mailman later told me that this was Trump’s announcement: Maine was his next target.

Federal agencies started investigations across the state, including into the entire University of Maine system. The Department of Agriculture, which provides significant grant money to the university, announced that it would be reviewing the system’s compliance with Title IX, which prohibits sex-based discrimination at federally funded schools and protects women’s access to sports. Soon afterward, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration informed the university that funding for its Maine Sea Grant program, which supports coastal communities, had been

discontinued. Joan Ferrini-Mundy, the university's president, was at a dogsled race near the Canadian border when she got the news. She rushed to a hot-cocoa stand and called Senator Susan Collins.

Maine can feel like a small town. It has about one and a half million people, with true "Mainer" status reserved for families who have lived there for generations. UMaine embodies this ethos. It's the state's only flagship public school and its only top-tier research university. Maine's politics are purple: Democrats hold the governor's mansion and the legislature, but Trump carried one of the state's four electoral votes in 2024, and Collins, a Republican whose family has deep UMaine ties, has held her Senate seat for nearly three decades. When Collins heard about the Sea Grant cuts, she had just returned from the Maine Fishermen's Forum, a gathering for the state's fishing industry. The potential consequences of the cuts couldn't have been clearer.

On a recent morning, Gayle Zydlewski, the director of the Maine Sea Grant program, took me out on the Damariscotta River, near the coast. The water was dotted with signs of a nearly invisible ecosystem: clamdiggers on the shore, kelp lines in the current, rows of what looked like small floating oil drums, which turned out to be an underwater oyster farm. Sea Grant helps keep this ecosystem functioning.

We stopped at a wooden platform in the middle of the river and hopped up. Beneath our feet were trapdoors, which opened to reveal trays of about two hundred oysters. Workers hauled them up, sorted them by size, hosed them off, and bagged them so that they'd be ready to sell. Brendan Parsons, who owned the oyster farm, explained how Sea Grant had supported his business: the Maine Oyster Trail, a statewide tourism program developed by Sea Grant staff, funnels visitors to his farm and restaurant. About half his workers had taken a Sea Grant training course. UMaine's researchers are also developing cheaper methods of growing

oysters. “This isn’t some willy-nilly program,” Parsons said. “It’s just astonishing that people would think that there’s waste there.”

UMaine is a land-grant university, with a mission to support agriculture and forestry. Researchers joke that Sea Grant is the university’s “salty extension.” “A lot of people in the country, when they think of research institutions, they tend to think of the Ivy League colleges,” Collins told me. But much more of higher education looks like UMaine. The school’s scientists are developing blight-resistant potatoes and testing ways to make jet fuel out of the wood in Maine’s forests. “This is not research that is likely to be picked up by a Harvard or a Yale,” Collins said.

The senator recalled having at least five conversations with Howard Lutnick, the Secretary of Commerce—which oversees NOAA—about Sea Grant. Within days of receiving the termination letter, UMaine was told that the funding would eventually be restored. But the narrative around the university had been set, and the crackdown was just beginning. As Andy Harris, a Republican congressman, wrote in a statement about UMaine a week later, “Women and Girls’ sports must be protected from woke identity politics.”

When the U.S.D.A. opened its Title IX review of UMaine, in February, the school’s leaders responded but never heard back. Two weeks later, Griffin Dill, who runs UMaine’s Tick Lab, forwarded them an e-mail he had received, stating that the U.S.D.A. had been directed to pause all funding to Columbia and the University of Maine system. Dill’s lab, which dissects ticks to check for Lyme and other diseases, seemed far removed from campus culture wars. “No one likes ticks,” he said.

As the spring went on, the confusion deepened. Grant administrators logged in to federal dashboards to draw down funds that had been awarded, only to find money missing. One vanished U.S.D.A. grant was for a *STEM* program for rural high-school girls,

including “students from minority, immigrant, refugee, and asylum-seeking families.” When the university wrote to the U.S.D.A., program officers explained that the funds had been paused “during the transition of government” but wouldn’t elaborate; when UMaine officials tried to call, no one answered. A program officer for a different grant, related to soil health, wrote that his department had been told to pause any Biden-era funding. “I am very sorry and know this is causing much turmoil on your side,” he added.

Ferrini-Mundy told researchers that whenever they discovered that money was missing, received a notice letter, or even heard a rumor about a funding change, they were to report it. At town halls, professors worried aloud about their labs, staff, and graduate students, whom they employed with federal money. It wasn’t even clear which grants were being frozen as part of a Maine-specific Title IX crackdown, which ones were part of the broader *DOGE* dragnet, or what other mysterious government machinations might be to blame.

In April, UMaine learned that a Department of Energy grant for a floating offshore wind-turbine project was suspended—on the same day that a three-hundred-and-seventy-five-ton platform had been hauled to a dock in Searsport. The university couldn’t fund the project’s launch, but it couldn’t leave the platform in port, either, forcing school officials to find emergency funds to move forward. Trump, who has called wind turbines “ugly,” had issued an executive order pausing leasing and permitting for offshore wind projects. Yet when UMaine contacted the Department of Energy, a program officer explained that the suspensions were tied to *another* executive order: “Keeping Men Out of Women’s Sports.” Different political priorities had gotten tangled together. Offshore wind had become part of a debate about transgender athletes, rather than a debate about offshore wind.

But there was one pesky detail in all this talk about Title IX: the university didn't *have* any known transgender athletes on its women's teams. Mailman told me the Administration was concerned with university policy, which is "hard to know without asking." UMaine didn't want to make a public announcement, which risked looking like a disavowal of its trans students, but it did provide information to the U.S.D.A. showing that it was in compliance with Trump's executive order. The U.S.D.A. then issued a press release headlined "University of Maine System Chooses Sanity."

It seemed as though the university's internal strategy was to look as *MAGA* as possible. One administrator sent a boilerplate e-mail to program officers for any grant that had been inexplicably frozen, stating that UMaine "does not permit a male studentathlete" to participate in "women's sports by selfidentifying as female." (The phrasing mirrored the Administration's, avoiding the word "transgender.") Zydlewski worked with Collins's office to revise Sea Grant's funding application, specifying how the program aligned with Administration priorities. Collins had many conversations with Susie Wiles, Trump's chief of staff, and Vice-President Vance. "Frequently, it was just getting them past certain verbiage," she said. When Samantha Warren, the spokesperson for the UMaine system, took me around the campus in Orono, she highlighted projects that seemed to have *MAGA* appeal: new manufacturing techniques that might create jobs, 3-D-printed components for a nuclear-energy facility. Damian Brady, a marine-science professor, noted that Sea Grant-funded research could reduce the nation's trade deficits. "We're trying to make America's seafood great again," he said.

While the university has focussed on back-channel diplomacy, Maine's Democratic government has gone to court. Aaron Frey, the state's attorney general, said that Maine is involved in thirty-six lawsuits, including defending itself against a Justice Department suit over its K-12 Title IX policy. The complaint cites just three

examples of transgender athletes on girls' teams in Maine, including the pole-vaulter. "There is nobody who is identifying as transgender in order to win a medal," Frey told me. "They know that the most powerful person in the world is going to target them." Unlike UMaine, he sees no point in compromise. "I don't think any deal that we make with the Trump Administration behind the scenes is going to be worth whatever it's written on tomorrow," he said.

Governor Mills has become something of a resistance folk hero. A sign reading "*DO NOT CAPITULATE*" sits in her office. A constituent mailed her a doily embroidered with the words "see you in court." "What really blew me away was when the President stood there and said, 'We are the law,'" Mills told me. "That's just wrong. Law isn't created by executive orders and tweets and social-media posts." She said the Administration isn't actually protecting women and girls, the way it purports to. "They're targeting a small number of kids, and ignoring everything else that girls and women really need in life."

After the state representative Laurel Libby posted about the pole-vaulter, the Maine legislature stripped Libby's voting and speaking privileges, arguing that she had endangered the student, and demanded an apology. "I think it was politically inadvisable," Libby said, of the censure. "It made folks more aware of the issue than they would have been otherwise." (In May, the Supreme Court ordered the legislature to reinstate Libby's voting privileges.) Still, she said that UMaine didn't deserve to lose federal funds. "It's unfortunate that Governor Mills and the Democrat majority are embroiling them in this by insisting on their extreme stance." Mailman argued that the pressure on UMaine was justified, because universities have influence beyond their campuses: if the school took a public stance on Title IX, it could shift the rest of Maine. "There is a role that the university plays in the state that maybe even *it* minimizes," she said.

Meanwhile, at UMaine, administrators spent the spring and summer more or less searching the couch cushions for quarters to keep various research projects afloat. The main campus looks classically New England—handsome brick buildings in decay, with about a billion dollars in deferred maintenance. Ferrini-Mundy joked that the leaky air-conditioners were exacerbating her allergies; Warren, the spokesperson, referred to one science lab as a “hovel.” At the end of August, UMaine was still missing about thirty million dollars in grants. It was unclear when, if ever, any of the money would be reinstated.

When students hear that the President wants to slash science funding, Collins told me, “they wonder, ‘Is America the place for me to pursue my goals?’ ” For Collins, this period of global competition is precisely the time to strengthen the compact between the government and higher ed. Congress has pushed back on Trump’s proposed cuts to the N.I.H. budget, instead supporting funding increases. “We don’t want to lag behind in discovery and scientific research,” Collins said. “That’s the risk if this link is stretched too thin or broken.” She added, “If we break that compact, the damage will last for generations.”

Trump’s battles with individual universities have made headlines, but the structural reforms happening in the background may prove more lasting. This summer, Madison Biedermann, a press aide, showed me around the Department of Education. “When I first came to work in January, it was a ghost town,” she said—everyone was still working remotely. Then Trump ordered federal employees to return to the office. The department has been focussing on team-building; we passed a wall that was covered with photos of puppies, whose names and owners colleagues had to guess.

In the spring, the department laid off nearly fourteen hundred of its more than four thousand employees, after roughly six hundred workers had already taken buyouts. Twenty states and the District of Columbia sued the Administration, arguing that the layoffs were

meant to hobble the department out of existence, but the Supreme Court allowed the cuts to move forward.

The Department of Education was created by Jimmy Carter in 1979, fulfilling a campaign promise to a prominent teachers' union. His goals were to increase attention to education with a Cabinet-level secretary and streamline funding. Conservative activists have spent the past forty-six years arguing that this was a terrible mistake. "If you were going to design an education system from scratch, I doubt very many people would say they're going to tax local taxpayers, send it up to Washington, and filter it through the bureaucracy at the Department of Ed," Lindsey Burke, a former Heritage Foundation scholar, told me. Burke helped draft a line-item blueprint for dismantling the department in 2020, and she wrote the chapter on education in Project 2025. In June, she joined the department with the aim of shrinking it.

Conservative K-12 activists like Burke have long led the charge to close the department. The irony is that much of its spending goes not to K-12 but to higher ed, for student grants and loans. At \$1.6 trillion, the student-loan portfolio is only slightly smaller than the assets of Citigroup. Trump has said that he wants to move the portfolio to the Small Business Administration, an idea that former officials dismiss. "S.B.A. makes, in a year, about the number of loans that the department makes to Arizona State," Jordan Matsudaira, the chief economist at the department under Biden, told me. Another idea, to transfer the portfolio to the Treasury Department, gets more serious consideration; Treasury has a legal mandate to collect debt owed to the government and has the tax data to streamline income-driven repayment. Still, the portfolio isn't a flash drive that someone could just walk from Education to Treasury. It's more like a tremendously complicated, resource-starved digital network, with platforms for various loan functions grafted onto one another. Much of the work of administering federal student aid is basically I.T.—maintaining the data systems and overseeing contractors who deal with borrowers. "In

practicality, it's just far too complicated to get done," Colleen Campbell, who previously led the student-loan office at Federal Student Aid, said.

Besides, moving the portfolio would be like trying to disassemble a plane mid-flight. Conservatives passed major reforms in the One Big Beautiful Bill Act, which shifted higher ed away from the Obama-era ideal of "college for all." It awards federal funds to low-income students to pursue certain short-term certificates or training programs—an initiative that the Education Department will oversee. The department also has to implement the bill's changes to federal student aid: it limits how much some people can borrow and eliminates certain types of borrowing entirely, such as Grad Plus loans, which conservatives see as subsidies for useless master's degrees. The bill also establishes penalties for degree programs whose graduates can't earn a basic income.

There are more reforms ahead: conservatives want to overhaul the accreditation system, which gives schools access to billions in federal financial aid. Trump has called this his "secret weapon," and new accreditors, including an association championed by Florida's governor, Ron DeSantis, are now working to become gatekeepers for that money. The Administration has also offered a handful of universities special access to federal funds if they agree to follow Trump's vision for things like admissions and "maintaining a vibrant marketplace of ideas."

"One form of conservatism is, we use the government tools to make this sector look like what conservatives like about higher education. That's the heavy-handed approach," Beth Akers, a senior fellow at A.E.I., said. "Then there's the more ideologically pure, small-government version, which is to do less and let the sector evolve." What the Administration has produced, she said, are "mashup compromises." She added, "I think it's generous to call it being in tension, rather than straight-up hypocrisy."

There's one major unresolved question about the Administration's higher-ed agenda: whether it's legal. Civil-rights laws, including Title VI, prescribe a long, detailed process for resolving alleged violations, which includes giving universities a chance to respond and fix things voluntarily. The Administration has sidestepped this process by maintaining that its conflicts with universities, though centered on civil rights, are not civil-rights *investigations* but contract disputes; universities are allegedly violating the agreements they made with the government by breaking the law.

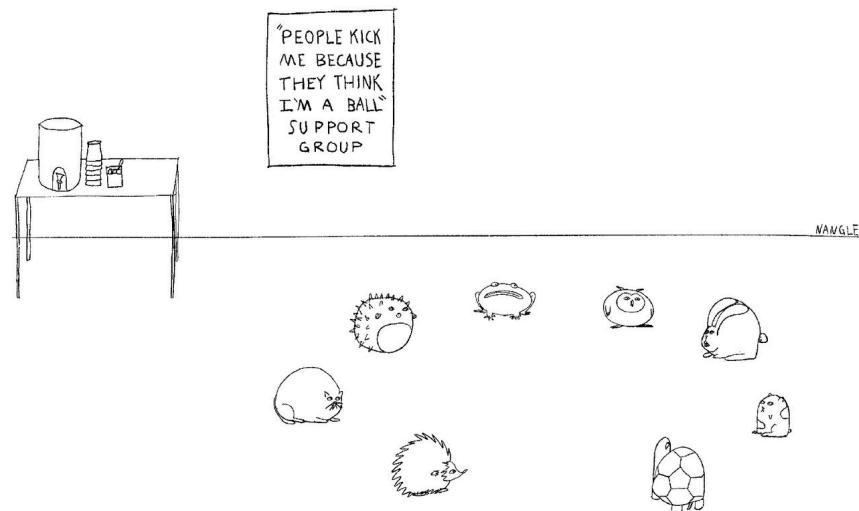
"No lawyer worth their mettle would think that they could actually defend that this is a contract dispute," Catherine Lhamon, who ran the Office for Civil Rights at the Education Department under Obama and Biden, told me. "I am the most aggressive civil-rights lawyer I know. Had I thought we could use this approach to protect civil rights, we would have." In May, the Education Secretary, Linda McMahon, told CNBC that "universities should continue to be able to do research, as long as they're abiding by the laws and are in synch, I think, with the Administration and what the Administration is trying to accomplish." For Lhamon, that remark was "jaw-dropping": "That is thought control, that we have a President who dictates what can be researched, what can be learned and understood in every university in the country."

In September, Harvard scored a significant legal victory when a district-court judge concluded that the Administration had "used antisemitism as a smokescreen for a targeted, ideologically-motivated assault," violating the First Amendment, administrative law, and Title VI along the way. Recently, two preliminary injunctions forced the government to restore more than five hundred million dollars in grants to U.C.L.A. Another district-court judge deemed the Education Department's D.E.I. guidance—which threatened investigations into the "pervasive and repugnant race-based preferences" in diversity offices on campuses—unconstitutionally vague. In another case, involving hundreds of millions of dollars in terminated science grants, William G. Young,

a Reagan-appointed district-court judge, invoked the long-standing compact between the federal government and higher education.

“The American people have enjoyed a historical norm of a largely apolitical scientific research agency supporting research in an elegant, merit-based approach,” he wrote. “That historical norm changed on January 20, 2025.”

And yet these wins may be temporary—the Administration is pursuing appeals. The Supreme Court has signalled sympathy for the Administration’s argument that its conflicts with universities are largely contract disputes; it has issued an order allowing N.I.H. funding cuts to move forward. The Justices have also harshly criticized lower-court judges who have blocked the Administration’s actions, including Young, who went so far as to apologize from the bench.



*Cartoon by Jared Nangle*

To hear conservatives tell it, the techniques that they’re using against universities were pioneered by Democrats. “If there is an original sin in what changed the landscape of higher ed, it was when the Obama Office for Civil Rights decided to use some extraordinarily dubious research regarding campus sexual assault,” Hess, the A.E.I. senior fellow, told me. The Administration put schools on notice to address sexual-misconduct claims more aggressively, or else they’d be penalized or investigated. “The last thing you wanted to do was to be dragged in court and have the

federal government accuse you of being a rape apologist,” Hess said.

Officials from former Democratic Administrations didn’t exactly sign on to this Frankenstein-like narrative. (“You have created a monster, and it will destroy you!”) They argued that there’s a difference between threatening to investigate and jumping straight to the punishment. “We can use legal words for it, like ‘due process’ and ‘procedural rights,’ ” Toby Merrill, a former principal deputy general counsel under Biden, told me. “But ultimately, threatening to obliterate anyone to try to get them to do something that you want them to do, when that thing is not legally required—it doesn’t seem to me like treating people fairly.” Lhamon put it more bluntly: “We don’t live under a king in this country. We don’t give unilateral authority to the President to make decisions about every walk of life for all Americans. This President is operating as if we do.”

Even if Trump doesn’t win on the legal merits, by the time cases are finally resolved, serious damage will have been done. Colleges “don’t get put back to where they were,” Kvaal, the Biden Under-Secretary, said. “They’ve had to make due without that research funding, without those student visas, under a cloud of uncertainty.” The result, he said, is “a climate of fear. You don’t want to be targeted by the Administration, even if you feel that the facts and the law are on your side.”

This summer, I met Kvaal for lunch at Immigrant Food, a “gastroadvocacy” restaurant that has become something of a gathering spot for exiled Democrats in D.C. He was in a reflective mood. “I don’t think they get enough credit for picking issues that make us”—Democrats—“really mad, but where most people don’t agree with us, like due-process rights for El Salvadoran gangsters,” he said. Kvaal, who helped design Biden’s student-loan-forgiveness plans, admitted that these efforts, along with the proposed

transgender-athlete policies, showed that Democrats are often “responsive to the groups more than a broad segment of voters.”

“The groups”—a shorthand for the advocacy organizations that drive the Democratic base—“are very good at articulating where we need to get to,” Kvaal said. “But part of democracy is persuasion, and perhaps because our country has been a fifty-fifty country for so long, we’ve kind of lost sight of that. You can’t help people if you’re not going to win elections.” He understands the populist backlash against higher education. “A small number of élite institutions have really benefitted from growing inequality,” he said. “Their endowments have skyrocketed with the stock market. The value of their ticket to the upper class has grown. While those of us in the higher-education community see ourselves as proponents of upward mobility, there are ways in which we have also benefitted from our role as gatekeepers.”

And yet, for all of Kvaal’s soul-searching, he kept returning to a basic point: this is not how the government is supposed to work. “If they had gone to Congress and said, ‘We want to eliminate these programs, and we want to lay off these staff,’ and Congress had voted, at least you would have a policy-making legitimacy,” he said. “Instead, they’ve done it in an extralegal way.”

Just before the school year began, I visited Hunter Farm, in central Maine. Sue Hunter has owned the property since 2009; before that, it belonged to her husband’s family. For years, she raised dairy cows and grew grass and corn for animal feed. Then, in 2021, she learned that her fields were contaminated with high levels of PFAS—the “forever chemicals” used in Teflon and Gore-Tex. The problem, now affecting farms across the country, is grave: PFAS exposure can increase the risk of thyroid issues, cancer, and other diseases.

The farm contamination was a result of government policy. In the seventies, after Congress passed the Clean Water Act, forbidding

sewage dumping, the E.P.A. encouraged wastewater-treatment plants to offer sewage sludge to farmers as fertilizer. What seemed like a win-win—cheap sewage disposal, free nutrients for farms—was actually toxic. Hunter’s farm was rendered almost unusable. At fifty-nine, she took a job as a home health aide in order to keep her land. “Many people said, ‘Sell it. Put solar in it. Put houses in it.’ I didn’t want to,” she told me. “It’s a legacy, being in our family and being a farmer.”

The state connected Hunter with researchers, including some from UMaine, who were tackling the PFAS crisis. Agronomists tested her soil and proposed ideas, such as mixing a form of charcoal with the soil to neutralize the chemicals. With grants from federal agencies, including the E.P.A., they launched a multiyear research project at Hunter Farm. She and her family members came on as subcontractors, preparing research plots and tilling the land; the money kept them afloat.

Then, just before their first sampling, the researchers received a letter from the E.P.A. saying that the project’s funding had been terminated, as it “no longer aligned with agency priorities.” Similar projects in Texas and Michigan also received termination notices. “The research is so important, and these numbers are so needed—there was no way I was going to let the season go by,” Ellen Mallory, a UMaine scientist, told me.

When I visited Hunter Farm, three UMaine students were weeding research plots—Gen Z kids in wide-legged pants and matching baseball caps. One of them, Lilli Mandras, told me, “I just want everyone to feel better and have good food.” The sentiment wasn’t explicitly *MAHA*. But it wasn’t *not MAHA*. When UMaine filed its appeal to the E.P.A., the university emphasized the connection to the Make America Healthy Again agenda. The Administration has signalled its own concerns about PFAS contamination: in May, Brooke Rollins, the Secretary of Agriculture, testified that this issue “is very close to my family’s heart.”

About a month after the grant was cancelled, it was restored, although the E.P.A. claimed this decision was unrelated to the university's appeal. You could read the reversal as an instance of government responsiveness: the government moved to make a cut, the university argued against it, and the government changed course. But academic research doesn't work on that timetable. "If somebody can send you an e-mail just eleven days before your first sampling and say, 'Stop right now,' what do we do?" Mallory asked. All their earlier work was a taxpayer investment, and it was nearly wasted. "Scrambling will not work in the long term," she said.

Mallory pointed out that PFAS is an American problem. Companies have mass-produced waterproof jackets and nonstick pans, and we've all used them. Similarly, "our little effort here—we need it to be a federal response," she said. It's ultimately the government's responsibility to find solutions to the problems it created—and it can do so only with the help of universities, these imperfect institutions that create knowledge, support communities, and train the next generation to care about fixing the country. "We do need the federal resources," Mallory said. "But the feds, and society at large—they need us, too." ♦

*Emma Green* is a staff writer at *The New Yorker* who covers education and academia.

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<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/10/20/inside-the-trump-administrations-assault-on-higher-education>

[Life and Letters](#)

## A Forgotten Queen Bee of Modern Poetry

A débutante, a burlesque dancer, and a poet, the shape-shifting V. R. Lang—who died at thirty-two—wrote some of the most aching, entrancing lines of the twentieth century.

By [Anthony Lane](#)

October 13, 2025



*Attempting to describe the world that bred Lang, who was born in Boston in 1924, leaves you clutching at terms as quaint as historical artifacts—good family, the smart set, the right sort.*

*Illustration by Lauren Tamaki*

The American poet Violet Ranney Lang was born in 1924 and died in 1956, of Hodgkin's lymphoma, at the age of thirty-two.

Although last year marked the centenary of her birth, the occasion passed without much ceremony. “[The Miraculous Season](#),” a selection of Lang’s verse, was published in the U.K. by Carcanet Press, but it will not appear in the U.S. until next April, under the aegis of [NYRB Poets](#). In her native land, Lang remains half honored, at best, or guarded like a secret by a devoted few.

The secret deserves to be shared. No tyro, Lang may have been cut off in her prime, but her prime is indisputably her own. Her singular blend of severity and skittishness is unrivaled in the poetry of her peers. Mind you, the task of presenting Lang to a larger public is not without its pitfalls, as she herself was gleefully aware:

This is Miss Lang, Miss V.R. Lang. The Poet, or  
The Poetess . . .      Bynum, would you introduce  
Someone else as      this is J.P. Hatchet  
Who is a Roman Catholic? No. Then don’t do  
That to me again. It’s not an employment,  
It’s a private religion. Who’s that over there?

These lines by Lang, tart and forbidding, arise—complete with spacings, as awkward as gaps in conversation—in a sequence titled “Poems to Preserve the Years at Home.” The scene, she tells us at the start, is a cocktail party (“I’ll wear pale green silk stockings”). It is typical of Lang that she comes across as being both quite at ease in such a setting and all too eager to smash the social rules. If the young Katharine Hepburn had been so inclined, she might have written in such a voice. Call it screwball verse. Yet the light volubility is stilled and clouded by another mood entirely: “Attempt no descriptions. / Talk about flames. Suicides. Terror in sleep.”

## [What We’re Reading](#)

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Attempting to describe the world that bred Lang leaves you clutching at terms as quaint as historical artifacts, dusty with disuse —good family, the smart set, the right sort. Her nickname alone sends her back in time; she was always known as Bunny. It's such a Jazz Age appellation. [Edmund Wilson](#) was a Bunny (he had his mother to thank, or to blame, for the sobriquet), as was the British tennis player Henry Austin, who reached the Wimbledon finals in 1932 and 1938. Lang, like Elizabeth Bennet, belonged to a sister-infested household. She was of Bostonian stock, and most of her existence was played out on the East Coast. She was educated at the Hannah More Academy, in Maryland, which was once, as a plaque boasts to passersby, the “oldest Episcopal boarding school for girls in the United States.” It is now defunct.

Lang was a *débutante*—a métier that has gone the way of the duellist and the scullery maid. In 1942, she enrolled at the University of Chicago, where she was an editor on the *Chicago Review*. After a few semesters, she left and, being too young to join the U.S. military, enlisted in the Canadian Women’s Army Corps. After the Second World War, she returned to Chicago before dropping out and heading back home, not merely to Boston but to the family brownstone, overlooking the Charles River, where she dwelt with her increasingly petulant father. By then, the money was running dry, as even old money tends to do. Lang’s encomium to her mother, who died in 1949, has the ring of a vanished era, not least in its peculiar list of priorities:

Dogs loved her, horses loved her, the servants we had all loved her, they would do anything for her. Pa simply worshipped her.

Outside that environment, Lang's life was giddy with multiplicity; she made many friends from Harvard, took many lovers, and tried her hand at many jobs, to pique her curiosity and to earn some ready cash. What makes her enticingly hard to pin down is this mismatch between her background, which has the dull shine of old silver, and the drama of her elected foreground—all too obtrusive, and verging on scuzziness and outrage. On one occasion, nettled by a man she had dated in New York, she launched a vendetta, arranging for the printing of a thousand pink labels. Each bore the announcement “My Name is Stanley and I am a Pig.” The labels were posted up in the ex’s favorite bar, his local subway station, and the bathrooms of his office on Madison Avenue. Is that a mean stunt, or an experiment in action poetry? Joe LeSueur, a poet and a Mormon exile from Southern California, first bumped into Lang in a bathroom in New York, where she lay naked in a “grimy, grayish bathtub” and invited him to make drinks, perch on the toilet, and chat to her. Such etiquette *might* have been taught at the Hannah More Academy, but probably not.

How she reconciled these opposing worlds is a story that has yet to be told in full. There is no biography of Lang. The closest thing we have is a [short memoir](#) of her by the novelist Alison Lurie, privately published in 1959. Rosa Campbell, the editor of “The Miraculous Season,” deems the memoir “heartfelt but frivolous” and “less than flattering,” but those are qualities that Lurie partly shares with Lang, and we should count ourselves lucky to have such a perspicacious account. Lurie, after all, won the Pulitzer Prize in 1985, for her novel “[Foreign Affairs](#),” and readers can profitably prick their fingers on “[The Language of Clothes](#),” her needle-sharp study of dress and fashion. Fittingly enough, when she recalls her initial encounter with Lang, it is the outer wrappings that she mentions first and not the woman within:

I remember what Bunny wore when we met, in June 1949, at a party on Beacon Hill: a white strapless piqué dress, very tight on top, up over which bulged brown shoulders. Apparently growing out of the cleft between her breasts was a large mauve orchid.

Like any good novelist, Lurie knows that surface details lead us inward, into the recesses of temperament. To anyone as bookish as Lang, orchids may have summoned a whiff of Proust and Wilde. (In “[The Picture of Dorian Gray](#),” Lord Henry Wotton claims that a particular orchid is “as effective as the seven deadly sins.”) On the other hand, maybe she just wanted to make an entrance, and to put on a sprightly show. Her poems are strewn with festivity. Galloping rhythms, worthy of Edward Lear, race toward the ominously odd:

A party, a party, we went to a party!  
We toasted to hope and the health of our host  
In the cup of his porcelain eyes.

We should not be surprised to learn that one of Lang’s places of employment was the Old Howard burlesque theatre, in Boston, where she wore high heels, sequins, and not much else. Glimmers of the experience found their way into a poem, “Anne, a Chorus Girl Quitting the Line, to Society,” which informs us that “next week’s routines / Are done with roses and balloons.” Throughout Lang’s brief career, there were hints of fancy dress—of the little girl who rootles around in a box of grownup costumes, trying out one look after the next. There are worse ways to learn the art of verse.

It was at another shindig that Lang came upon the poet [Frank O’Hara](#), who would become the most ardent of her kindred spirits. (“We troupers in private know / all about carnival gestures,” he wrote in a poem titled “A Letter to Bunny.”) Writing in the *Village Voice* in 1957, one year after her death, O’Hara harked back to the spark that lit the flame:

I first saw Bunny Lang 10 years ago at a cocktail party in a book store in Cambridge, Massachusetts. She was sitting in a corner sulking and biting her lower lip—long blonde hair, brown eyes, Roman-striped skirt. As if it were a movie, she was glamorous and aloof. The girl I was talking to said: “That’s Bunny Lang. I’d like to give her a good slap.”

By the time he met Lang, O’Hara was a senior at Harvard. His contemporaries included the poets [John Ashbery](#), Kenneth Koch, [Donald Hall](#), and Robert Bly. O’Hara, Ashbery, and Koch would later form the nucleus of what became known as the [New York School](#) of poets. Also in residence at Harvard was the artist [Edward Gorey](#), who appeared to have escaped from a Victorian gothic romance, possibly via the tomb. It’s a delicate task, seven decades later, to clarify the role that Lang performed in such company; my best guess would be a mixture of Sally Bowles, Mistress Quickly, and queen bee. The novelist [Harold Brodkey](#) witnessed a symptomatic scene. “I once saw Frank and Bunny dance on the tables of the Hayes-Bickford cafeteria,” he recounted. “They did a Fred and Ginger routine. It was marvellous.”

For all the revelry, there was a tough, discursive seriousness in the approach that Lang and O’Hara took to their labors in the late forties and early fifties. “We sounded each other out for hours over beers, talking incessantly. We were both young poets and poetry was our major concern,” O’Hara wrote. (There is a flush of the early nineteenth century here, as if he and Lang were lusty Romantics in a London pub.) Lang reckoned that O’Hara overrated Rimbaud. O’Hara, in return, thought that she was too sweet on [W. H. Auden](#), and there’s no denying that some of her verses bear a smack of Auden’s thrilling menace:

On the thirtieth day  
Drink only water. Wear only secret clothing.  
Speak to no one. Proceed out by moonlight only.

So close is the entangling of Lang and O’Hara, intense and nonsexual (he was gay), that some readers, confronting their respective styles, have struggled to tease the two apart. Indeed, one of Lang’s works was mistakenly included in the first edition of O’Hara’s “[Collected Poems](#).” On further inspection, however, you see the soulmates pursuing very different paths, and a single word can be enough to trigger a comparison. Here is O’Hara at his most strollingly expansive, in “Second Avenue,” glancing off this and that:

Candidly. The past, the sensations of the past. Now!  
in cuneiform, of umbrella satrap square-carts with hotdogs  
and onions of red syrup blended, of sand bejewelling the  
prepuce  
in tank suits, of Majestic Camera Stores and Schuster’s

And here is Lang, in an unnamed poem, in dialogue:

A: If you threaten me, I shall die.  
B: If you are threatened, you should know why.  
A: Dying is the last place love can go.  
It is its cave, and dark love  
Is silent and cuneiform.

At once we sense a closing in. The lines are curter, slanting toward aphorism; a rhyme rings out; and “cuneiform,” which for O’Hara is one verbal flourish among many, allows Lang to deliver a singular shock. What’s clear is that to position her as O’Hara’s “muse,” as more than one commentator has called her, is demeaning and dead wrong. They were creative trading partners, and the trade was mutual and free. “At 11 each morning, we called each other and discussed everything we had thought of since we had parted the night before,” O’Hara wrote. In one poem, dedicated “To V. R. Lang,” he hymns her as “friend to my angels (all quarrelling),” and in “A Letter to Bunny” he pays tribute to her editorial gifts. When one of his poems threatens to turn into “a burner full of junk,”

O’Hara says, it is Lang who comes to the rescue. “You enable me, by your least / remark, to unclutter myself, and my / nerves thank you for not always laughing.”

One project that consumed both Lang and O’Hara was the Poets’ Theatre, which was founded in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1950. The opening night, on February 26, 1951, was attended by such luminaries as Thornton Wilder, Richard Wilbur, and Archibald MacLeish. Among the delights on offer that evening was a play by O’Hara, “Try! Try!” (hardly the most propitious of titles), with set designs by Gorey. It was directed by Lang, who also played a character named Violet—clad, in the words of O’Hara’s biographer Brad Gooch, “in her rattiest white sneakers and a faded red and white apron.”

The very phrase “Poets’ Theatre,” it must be said, does not inspire huge confidence, being a compound of two unstable elements. One might as well speak of embezzlers’ Jell-O. The atmosphere, according to Alison Lurie, who observed it at close quarters, was one of “rehearsals, feuds, affairs, debts, and parties.” Yet solid achievements were registered in the ensuing years, such as a reading of Djuna Barnes’s “[Antiphon](#),” which was attended—at Lang’s brazen invitation—by T. S. Eliot. Lurie argues that, although Lang was not much of an actress (she reserved her most expert shape-shifting for life offstage), her trick was to treat those around her as if *they* were playing parts. “They were excited to be told, and often behaved afterwards in line with Bunny’s definition,” Lurie writes.

To be honest, the whole setup sounds exhausting. Things came to a head when Lang wrote a play of her own, “Fire Exit,” which had its première in 1952. “She directed it, produced it, and starred in it. She also chose the cast, designed the costumes and sets, arranged the music and lighting, did the publicity, and managed the theatre,” Lurie tells us. For some of the in-house regulars, evidently, such imperiousness was too much, and a campaign was mounted to

“Stop Bunny.” On the other hand, you have to ask: Was Lang beset by anything more than the exasperation of every poet and every novelist—the loss of control that arises when words are released from the confines of the page and encouraged to run free in the theatre, or onscreen, at the whim of other voices and under the guidance of other hands?

The irony is that “Fire Exit,” whatever the ordeal of its conception, emerges as a careful comedy, touched with pathos. How performable it might be, these days, is open to debate, but Lang’s ear for casually loaded prattling does not desert her:

MRS. BLANCHE: I think there’s someone, Pol,  
She’s waiting on. A long time.  
You know, you met him. A musician.  
A classical.

MRS. POLLY [*decidedly*]: He ain’t no one for her.  
Kind of funny-looking, I thought.  
She needs a Real Man.



*“I need more structure in my life than just being told what to do and what to say by the people who control me.”*

Cartoon by P. C. Vey

The woman these people are talking about is Eurydice—often hailed as “Eury”—and the musician is Orpheus. Lang’s leaning into myth recurs in her second play, “I Too Have Lived in Arcadia.” (Neither drama is reprinted in “The Miraculous Season,” but both were appended, with a generous helping of poems, to Lurie’s memoir when it was reprinted in 1975. Beautiful spidery illustrations by Gorey preface each section of Lurie’s book.) “Arcadia” sprang from an agonized affair between Lang and an abstract painter named Mike Goldberg; as *dramatis personae*, they are Chloris and Damon, who inhabit a desolate Atlantic island. They are joined by an irate third party, Phoebe, plus a poodle named Georges. He is not a happy dog: “Lady, not to eat and not to love / And to no purpose but to live it up / And have a ball, was I brought into life. / The plot grows sad, no longer good for laughs.”

For anyone who champions Lang, the question has to be: Could you spot her work without her name attached? What, if any, are its distinguishing marks? Well, for one thing, get a load of the animals—an arkful of them prowling the poetry, frequently when they are least expected. “O he has a wildebeeste’s eyes, not nice, / And a tongue like an ice pick.” To and fro Lang ranges in creaturely time, back into prehistory: “The Brontosaurus / Stand and watch, their pale, already weedy eyes / Are hurting them, and their unmanageable crusted limbs.” Human beasts are rarely alone, and far from secure at the apex of the animal kingdom. “Cats walked the walls and gleamed at us,” “Where lovers lay around like great horned owls,” and “We lay fat cats under a milkweed sky.”

Those last three, it should be emphasized, are all first lines. Lang is, in the richest sense, a promising beginner. Out of the blocks she launches herself, like a sprinter in spiked shoes. Feel the whoosh as her openings hurtle by: “Darling, they have discovered dynamite.” “Here was the fright, the flight, the brilliant stretch.” “Spring you came marvellous with possibles.” (The last of those is from “[The Pitch](#),” which was published in *Poetry* in 1950. It should be anything *but* possible to write an arresting line about springtime,

more than half a millennium after Chaucer, yet Lang pulls it off.) As often as not, the preliminary burst is comic, as we barge into a tête-à-tête or the fallout from a filthy private joke: “Why else do you have an English Horn if not / To blow it so I’ll know to let you in?”

Lang’s titles can be equally startling. The naming of poems is a difficult matter, and a knack for it, like Lang’s, is a minor but enviable gift. Her titles include “Things I Have Learned in Canada,” “How to Tell a Diamond from a Burning Baby,” and “Who Is the Real Oscar Mole?,” a puzzle left deliciously unsolved by what follows. Then, there are the titles that set a scene with unblushing candor: “To Our Friend Who Married a Bore and Who Is No Longer One of Us by Choice.” We all know someone like *that*.

In a way, Lang is tapping into a well-used mode of address. You hear it in Robert Burns (“To a Mouse, on Turning Her Up in Her Nest with the Plough”), or in Alexander Pope, whose most redolent short poem is titled “Epistle to Miss Blount, on Her Leaving the Town, After the Coronation.” Lang is echoing Pope when she dedicates a poem “To the Guardian Angel of an Aesthete Going to the Middle West to College.” But she pushes further, topping some of her verses with subtitles—strange little snippets, not quite dedications and not quite epigraphs, that nudge a poem off course at the outset. “Lines for Mrs C.,” for instance, comes with a gloss on Mrs. C.’s area of expertise: *“about to annihilate, in a long succession of cat murders, two old stray cats with ether, in her washing machine, with the cover on.”* Only then does the poem get under way: “O you cats, go home to God, / Kitties, where the saints have trod.” That final phrase is lifted from the hymn “Onward, Christian Soldiers.” Oh, the blasphemous Miss Lang!

The best and the loapiest of the snippets are also the most personal. At the top of one poem, she cites her sister’s dentist: “The tongue is a great magnifier, Mrs Dubois.” Is that a genuine quotation,

however, or is Lang merely fooling with us? The distinction matters, because it hooks into the larger issue of what species of writer she was. No one would label her as a confessional poet, and admiring readers will cherish the ease with which she sways into the surreal. “I remember his rapt paws caught in the first instance, / And the big teeth that sparkled when he talked to lawyers,” she writes, in a poem called “The Bear.” Even here, though, is there not an autobiographical ache? “I miss him! I shall never be over missing him,” the poem concludes.

Once you hunt for the aching, you find it everywhere—in a movie theatre, say, where the poet’s feelings are wounded by the realization that those of her companion are unharmed. No entry in a journal could sound more smartingly fresh:

How to move you? who sat unmoved  
Through the greatest movie ever made, while  
We beside you, inches less in stature,  
Choked with tears, and on our candy-bar?

Such pleasurable pains, at their most chronic, or their most carnal, can keep Lang occupied for the length of a stanza. How warmly the lines overflow, reluctant to come to rest:

If I lay thinking about the heat,  
Still pond, cradling the sun,  
No one but you would come  
Into it, I would turn over  
Taking the sun on my skin  
Opening and closing my hands,  
Still pond, hair damp at the roots on my head,  
Listening alone to the underground  
Drum sound my heart would make  
Into the blanket, sun all damp on my skin,  
Caraway seeds on my tongue.

What stirs the last phrase is an impatience with cliché. We are so accustomed to hearing sex extolled as “spicy” that it needs someone as brisk as Lang to break the habit. You can imagine her asking, “Well, *what* spice? Was it a nutmeg kiss, or a cinnamon quickie, or what?” Caraway gets rid of the old chestnut. Time and again, Lang can be relied upon to supply what she calls “the piercing clean detail”—the visible fact that pokes through a crowd of difficult emotions and takes us by surprise:

You kill me. Yes you do.  
I know no one else who'd  
Buy a sparrow (I  
Didn't even know they *sold* sparrows)  
Just to feed it watermelon  
And in public, too.

Every afternoon I think of you  
Out there, flushed and fair  
Scraping the exhausted rind with a spoon.  
Every day! All winter.

That's a whole poem, untitled, and what scrapes against our attention, of course, is the rind—as unforgettable as the slice of watermelon that is munched, coolly and postcoitally, by the philanderer in Chekhov's “Lady with the Lapdog.” Browsing Lang's work, in “The Miraculous Season,” is like leafing through a sheaf of old photographs and being brought up short by small, irrefutable scraps of noticing. Whether they record something that truly happened to Lang is not the point; a thought can occur to us, after all, as strikingly as an event. (Many of the scraps, one sincerely hopes, are leftovers of dreams: “Spent late last night with stinking brigands, / Who capered through my sleep like dirty clowns.”) Either way, such details compel belief, and we are left with the unnerving illusion, as we close the book, that it was written by somebody we know. If we are granted access to her

sufferings, it is made easier, not harder, by the recognition that here is a poet who never stops playing games:

I stayed and I stared at a fingernail  
Now I stare at a bird in a tree  
Outside my window, he's singing to me

Accidie, accidie, acci-dee-dee-dee

This is a pun born of courage. “Accidie” is a term with a long pedigree. In early Christian thinking, its connotations of languor and listlessness, within the spirit no less than the body, lent it the status of a sin—a turning aside from God for the sake of earthly sorrow. One could plausibly claim, perhaps, that accidie foreshadows our modern concepts of depression; yet here is Lang deploying it as a piping rhyme for birdsong. What manner of person would think of that? A highly determined character, I’d say. Or someone who knew, beyond question, that she was going to die.

One problem with “The Miraculous Season” is that no dates are assigned to the poems. (An annotated edition of Lang would be as welcome as a biography.) We cannot be certain, therefore, how many of them were written after Lang was made aware that she had Hodgkin’s lymphoma—or, for that matter, during the twilit prelude to the diagnosis. Her infirmity, Lurie says, began in July, 1953, but tremors of premonition course through her work from first to last, as though sickness were naturally expected to arrive, like a punctual guest. In quizzical parables and homemade fairy tales, she sees something coming:

This year the creeping itch was apparent in the left hand,  
This year perhaps it will sneak to the right, we will see.  
The eye shivered at the slack it saw it did not understand;  
The white crow never came to kiss us under the pear tree.

As for the tone, it varies as wildly as one might predict—the noise of a vital soul, staggered by the prospect of its termination. “*Not to finish becomes the challenge*,” she writes, in a dense metaphysical conceit; it means simultaneously that she is resolved to stay alive and that, like any obsessive poet, she can’t stop tinkering with the text. Elsewhere, she grows furious, vowing vengeance on those who have the temerity to survive:

Sitting so, she unlocked her throat,  
And spitting her last, defied her creditors:

“When I die, leaving loneliness triumphant on this earth,  
When I die as the impoverished sun snuffs out in a bag  
When I die let them tell all the world what I know:

That the wise are devoured by fools with red eyes  
Now let wild pigs claim the rest of you.”

At other junctures, in shorter lines, an air of resignation, numb and slumped, steals over the verse like a chill:

Powers go still, time runs out, God I am so tired.  
There is only the black center in my head  
To reconstruct, to ache, to take dictation.  
I never once thought about death  
Before I started to die.

What we know of Lang, from those who loved her, is that she squared up to the facts of death, as she had to the facts of life, with her usual cheerfully desperate bravado. Think of her as a kind of Holly Godarkly—a fun seeker ever alert to the speed with which the fun could run out. Lurie recalls a troubling trip to the movies:

“Oh, there you are,” Bunny said.

“Bunny, I—”

“I can’t go around telling everybody I’m dying, can I?” she interrupted, standing on the dirty, thick carpet patterned with blood-red flowers which is in the lobby of the University Movie Theatre.

“But—”

“It just embarrasses them. What can they say? I don’t expect you to say anything. All right, get it out if you must.”

“I just wanted to say, if the doctors were wrong once they could be wrong again, you know.”

“I suppose so.”

“They don’t know everything.”

“I suppose not. Let’s get some popcorn.”

It is the popcorn that sticks in the throat—a late-breaking, heartbreaking sequel to the candy bar and the scraped rind on which Lang’s poetry snagged. There is not much more to tell. Out of the blue, Lang married a painter, Bradley Phillips, and embarked on a crazed acquisition of nice new things, as if they could be piled up like a dam against her fate. She died on July 29, 1956. The funeral took place in the Cambridge church where her wedding had been solemnized sixteen months earlier. In Mt. Auburn Cemetery, she was buried in the family plot.

One of the likable things about Lang is that, as Lurie says, she “read nothing but the best poetry—and nothing but the worst prose.” Right now, why on earth should you be reading Lang, when there are so many other criers—more recent, more urgent, less privileged and less eccentric—competing for your custom? Because it would be rude not to, I suppose; because she’ll give you hell if you don’t; and because the poems keep collaring you and refusing to shut up until you listen. Whatever the reason, she

deserves to be reclaimed. By rights, she belongs to Boston. Harvard, though she was not an alumna, might care to name Lang as one of its more unfamiliar moons. And let us not ignore the sensory report that she filed, in much amusement, from New York:

The monuments and palaces of interest  
That do renown this city  
The campanile in mid-town Manhattan  
The Lexington Avenue friary  
And the palm tree  
Blooming forever, madly, at the Plaza  
(Martinis and silk-sheathed knees in that bee-loud glade)  
Offer no shade  
To the dusty, hot, be it said  
Sweaty traveler.

Who would not raise a glass to the memory of so vexed a merrymaker, under whose spell the city is transformed into an exotic pastoral? Somehow Violet Lang barely seems to have been real; one can picture her passing into legend. Yet exist she did, annoying as many people as she entranced along the way. “I wish you disaster, nothing permanent,” she wrote in one poem, bequeathing the most mixed of messages for us to brood upon. The homage that was proposed by Frank O’Hara strikes me as munificent and just: “It is now five years since she died; it seems a moment, it seems it didn’t happen at all. She is calling us long distance in these poems, telling us how it is with her, how bright things can be, how terrible things are.” He ends in acclamation: “We are so lucky to have something of her still!” ♦

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<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/10/20/a-forgotten-queen-bee-of-modern-poetry>

[Profiles](#)

## What Zohran Mamdani Knows About Power

*The thirty-three-year-old socialist is rewriting the rules of New York politics. Can he transform the city as mayor?*

By [Eric Lach](#)

October 9, 2025



*Many people who knew Mamdani before his mayoral run confessed to some shock at his victory in the primary. “Zohran, I think, surprised himself,” an ally said.*

*Photographs by Victor Llorente for The New Yorker*

Zohran Mamdani is thirty-three years old—young enough that, despite not regularly working out, he has run the New York City Marathon twice in the past three years. In 2022, his second year in the New York State Assembly, he ran wearing a T-shirt that read “Eric Adams Raised My Rent!” and finished in six hours and four minutes. Few spectators paid him any mind. Last year, less than a month after launching his [mayoral campaign](#), he trotted through the city at a 12:54-per-mile pace, wearing the same T-shirt, with “Zohran Will Freeze It!” added to the back. Again, he caught barely anyone’s attention. This year, Marathon Sunday falls two days before the New York mayoral election. Polls have Mamdani fifteen points ahead of his nearest competitor, the former governor Andrew Cuomo. Mamdani’s aides say that he’s not running the course this

time, though it wouldn't be out of character. His instinct is to be on the move, out in the city, where people can see him.

To walk through New York with Mamdani this spring and summer has been to watch a [star being born](#), a process that is as spectacular and gaseous on earth as it is in Heaven. On the morning of the primary, in June, Mamdani crisscrossed the city as fast as his new security detail could drive him. Giddy commuters on a subway platform in Jackson Heights missed their trains just to show him their "I Voted" stickers. Aboveground, he dispatched an aide to a nearby Indian restaurant, to pick him up *paan*, a betel-leaf wrap, which he chewed daintily, careful not to spill any of the filling on the dark suit and tie that he has adopted as his political uniform. In Inwood, even a pair of volunteers for Cuomo sheepishly stopped him for selfies.

At a moment when the country is consumed with nativist fervor and New York appears a nest of cynical cronyism—eight months ago, Mayor [Eric Adams](#) agreed to [go along](#) with President [Donald Trump](#)'s mass-deportation program, to save himself from corruption charges—Mamdani is running a campaign that embraces the city as a beacon for immigrants like him. His [win in the primary](#) was a shock to the political establishment, and the powerful began to slink in his direction. Barack Obama gave him a call the next day. After a chilly summer courtship, Governor Kathy Hochul, a hypercautious moderate, warmly endorsed him. The Reverend Al Sharpton, who has not endorsed Mamdani or any other candidate, recently told me, "He has had the best entry into citywide politics of any candidate I have seen, probably, in my life."

In certain ideological precincts, Mamdani's name has become totemic—shorthand for everything wrong with New York, which itself is shorthand for everything wrong with America. Trump has called him a "100% Communist Lunatic" on Truth Social. Jeff Blau, the C.E.O. of the real-estate giant Related Companies, and

his wife, the investor Lisa Blau, recently called for an emergency breakfast meeting of the wealthy. “If we fail to mobilize, the financial capital of the world risks being handed over to a socialist this November,” the invitation read. A real-estate lobbyist told me that he does not know anyone who is leaving the city because of Mamdani, though he does know “several who may pied-à-terre.” John Catsimatidis, a supermarket mogul and a Trump confidant, said, “Fidel Castro had the same smile.”

Senator Chuck Schumer and Representative Hakeem Jeffries have held off on endorsing Mamdani, reportedly in part because of his criticism of Israel. Meanwhile, much of the rest of the city’s political class is jostling for position around him. Kathryn Wylde, the longtime head of the Partnership for New York City—a lobby group representing the city’s business leaders—brokered meetings this summer between Mamdani and her members; many remained skeptical, but some left with a strange new respect for the kid. “After I did the meetings with, say, three hundred executives, somebody asked me, ‘How would you rate their reactions on a scale of one to ten?’ ” Wylde told me. “I said, ‘One to ten.’ ” Patrick Gaspard, an Obama Administration official and the former president of the Center for American Progress, has been quietly advising Mamdani since last fall. He describes Mamdani as a prototype for a new generation of American politicians, forged in the Palestinian-rights movement. “He’s the first to arrive on the shore, but, just over the horizon, you can see more ships coming in,” Gaspard said.

In person, Mamdani is as self-possessed and quick to a punch line as he is in his [campaign videos](#), which regularly go viral. He is also tactical and shrewd, careful with his words. From Bernie Sanders, whose 2016 Presidential race inspired him to embrace socialist politics, Mamdani has learned how to pivot relentlessly back to his economic agenda, and it’s rare for him to speak for more than a few minutes without returning to his pledges to freeze the rent in the city’s rent-stabilized apartments, make buses free and faster, and

provide universal care for kids starting at six weeks of age. But unlike Sanders, who loathes talking about himself—“Zohran doesn’t need any political advice from me,” the senator told me, in September—Mamdani has found power in telling his story.

I met Mamdani in person for the first time in late March, at Qahwah House, a Yemeni coffee shop in Morningside Heights. It was the morning after the end of Ramadan, and polling in the primary showed him in the teens—in second place, but well behind Cuomo. He ordered a pot of Adeni chai for us to share, and, if the guy behind the register clocked him, he didn’t show it in his face. The previous day, Mamdani had been in Bay Ridge, Kensington, and Jamaica—home to large Muslim communities in Brooklyn and Queens—for Eid prayers, addressing some twenty-five thousand people. He expressed polite incredulity at the press’s lack of interest in those numbers. “That’s where I feel a sense of confidence,” he told me.

Mamdani has a solicitous, animated way of speaking that can verge on *TED* talk. He gestures prolifically, displaying the thick silver rings he wears, and likes to pull quotations from Nelson Mandela, F.D.R., Toni Morrison, Aristotle. Sipping his chai, he spoke with precision, not just about what he’d do as mayor but about the voters who were going to help him win—Muslims and South Asians, renters, young people, Democrats who oppose Israel’s war in Gaza. When prodded about the inevitable backlash to his more expensive proposals, Mamdani shrugged. “I am not afraid of my own ideas,” he said. When I mentioned the difficulty of what he hoped to pull off, he smiled: “I think for far too long we’ve tried not to lose, as opposed to figuring out how to win.”

About a month after Mamdani won the primary, he woke up at 3 A.M. in Kampala, Uganda, to an urgent call from Morris Katz, one of his closest aides. It was evening in New York, and there had been a mass shooting in an office building on Park Avenue. Mamdani was in Uganda to belatedly celebrate his wedding, a trip

that would give him and his wife, Rama Duwaji, a chance to say goodbye to private life. (The couple had eloped at the city clerk’s office in February.) Four victims and the shooter were dead. Early, sketchily sourced posts on social media suggested that someone had yelled “Free Palestine!” in the vicinity of the violence. One of the victims was an off-duty N.Y.P.D. officer. The shooting was already being described as a leadership test for Mamdani. Private life was over.

New Yorkers can be unforgiving when a mayor is caught out of town at the wrong time. (In 2011, Michael Bloomberg was nearly done in when he was rumored to be in Bermuda during a New York snowstorm.) Mamdani got on the next flight out of Entebbe, but the trip took twenty-two hours. While he was in the air, his opponents pounced. Cuomo, who is now running as an Independent, started calling reporters to slam Mamdani’s views on policing. The *Times*, which in both its news and opinion coverage has been overtly skeptical of Mamdani’s fitness to be mayor, [speculated](#) that the shooting “may lead some to further scrutinize” him. Laura Loomer, the Trump ally and far-right troll, suggested that the State Department ban Mamdani from reëntering the country—a scenario that his aides took seriously enough to run by lawyers.

But when Mamdani arrived at J.F.K., at 7 A.M., he breezed through customs. The N.Y.P.D. had confirmed that the Park Avenue shooter wasn’t motivated by pro-Palestinian sentiment; he was a casino worker from Las Vegas who had sustained brain injuries while playing football in high school, and his target had been the N.F.L.’s headquarters, in the same building. From the airport, Mamdani was whisked into a waiting S.U.V. and driven straight to the home of the deceased N.Y.P.D. officer, Didarul Islam. A Bangladeshi Muslim immigrant who’d been working a side gig as a security guard at the office building to help pay his family’s mortgage, Islam was the kind of New Yorker who Mamdani had recognized was often overlooked in the city’s politics. At Islam’s home, in the Bronx, Mamdani was received by the officer’s parents, his

pregnant widow, his children, and other grieving relatives. He wept with them for a few minutes. Then, with Bangladeshi hospitality, the family served the candidate breakfast.

On the morning of Islam's funeral, the streets of Parkchester, a neighborhood of brick row houses and big-box stores, were blocked off on both sides of the expressway. In front of the mosque, the Parkchester Jame Masjid, thousands of officers watched silently as hundreds of men and boys prayed on mats unfurled on the streets and sidewalks. Helicopters flew low overhead. It wasn't so long ago that the N.Y.P.D. treated many Muslim communities like fronts in the war on terror, yet more Muslims are joining the force every year, for largely the same reason that the Irish did a hundred and fifty years ago—the N.Y.P.D. is one of the only big employers in town where working-class immigrants can reasonably hope for advancement.

Officer Islam, by department custom, was promoted to detective first grade at his funeral. Inside the mosque, Adams, Hochul, and other invited officials sat in chairs close to the front, dressed in dark suits. Mamdani sat on the other side of the room, on the floor among the mourners. During the primary campaign, Mamdani had visited the mosque on three separate occasions, and he has continued to visit Islam's family since the funeral. "He was the one who would cut his father's beard," Mamdani told me.



*"I apologize for the wait. What kind of silverware would you like?"*

Cartoon by Lonnie Millsap

Policing is an awkward subject for Mamdani, who if elected will be in charge of a department that he was once in favor of defunding. In June, 2020, at the height of the George Floyd protests, he tweeted, “We don’t need an investigation to know that the NYPD is racist, anti-queer & a major threat to public safety.” Much like his comments on Israel, Mamdani’s past statements on the police have been obsessively picked apart by his detractors—a key difference is that managing the cops is an everyday part of the mayor’s job.

The legacy of every New York mayor in recent history has been shaped by the N.Y.P.D. Bloomberg’s accomplishments running the city will always be stacked against his support of stop-and-frisk policing. Bill de Blasio, who was in office during the early days of Black Lives Matter, never forgot watching hundreds of officers turn their backs on him at the funerals of two cops who were killed on the job. Eric Adams, who started his career as a transit cop, was undone in part by his dealings with corrupt old friends from the department. During the campaign, Mamdani abandoned the

language of “defund”; he recently pledged to work with the N.Y.P.D. if elected. He told me that he now believes policing is a public good, in that it is “a critical part of how we deliver public safety.” But he has struggled to explain why he changed his mind, apart from the fact that he is running for mayor.

One of Mamdani’s more poetic campaign motifs is “public excellence”—the idea that socialists need not compromise on quality-of-life concerns. In the past few months, Mamdani has attempted to reframe his suspicion of police as a human-resources issue, an obstacle to excellence: rank-and-file cops are regularly asked to handle distressing situations outside their skill set, such as dealing with the homeless and the mentally ill. He hopes to take those tasks off their hands by creating a Department of Community Safety, though, by his own admission, some of the details are “still to be determined.” At the prompting of a *Times* interviewer, in September, Mamdani half-apologized for his old tweets about the N.Y.P.D., but he rejects the notion that his views have evolved. “The principles remain the same,” he told me. “There are also lessons that you learn along the way.”

No small number of Mamdani’s detractors wonder if someone of his age and experience will be capable of running the biggest city in the country. New York has a hundred-and-sixteen-billion-dollar budget, three hundred thousand employees, and a police department larger than the Belgian Army. For more than a century, people have wondered if the city is ungovernable; with the exception of Fiorello La Guardia, who had New Deal money raining down on him, every idealistic leader who has been elected mayor has left City Hall in some way battered by it. “The good mayor turns out to be weak or foolish or ‘not so good’ . . . or the people become disgusted,” the muckraker Lincoln Steffens wrote in 1903. A City Hall veteran recently told me, “You’re constantly making bad decisions that you know are bad decisions. You’re presented with two bad options, and you’ve got to pick one, and that’s your day.”

If Mamdani is elected, the N.Y.P.D. may well continue to sweep up homeless encampments and forcibly remove protesters who block bridges or roads; he hasn't yet ruled these things out. ("His administration will not seek to criminalize peaceful protest or poverty," a Mamdani aide said.) At a recent forum on public safety sponsored by the policy journal *Vital City*, he was asked about police involuntarily detaining the mentally ill. "It is a last resort," Mamdani said. "It is something that—if nothing else can work, then it's there."

Mamdani was born in Kampala, Uganda, in 1991. This was the same year that his mother, the filmmaker [Mira Nair](#), released "Mississippi Masala," about a romance between a spunky Indian Ugandan exile (Sarita Choudhury) and a straitlaced Black carpet cleaner (Denzel Washington) in small-town Mississippi. While scouting for a location to set the scenes of her protagonist's childhood in Uganda, Nair found an airy hilltop property in Kampala, overlooking Lake Victoria. The home appeared in the movie, and Nair and her husband, Mahmood Mamdani, bought it. Zohran spent his first five years there, playing in the lush gardens under jacaranda trees. In a [Profile](#) of Nair from 2002, John Lahr wrote that the director's "talkative doe-eyed son" was known by "dozens of coinages, including Z, Zoru, Fadoose, and Nonstop Mamdani." (Mamdani's staff today still call him Z, though recently some have started, winkingly, to address him as Sir.)

Nair met Mahmood while she was researching "Mississippi Masala." The daughter of a stern, high-ranking Indian state official, she studied at Harvard, and by her thirties had garnered attention for films that examined life on the margins of Indian society: among cabaret dancers, street children, visiting emigrants. Mahmood was born in Bombay in 1946 and grew up in Uganda, part of the Indian diaspora that emerged in East Africa during the British colonial period. In 1962, the year Uganda became independent, Mahmood was awarded one of twenty-three scholarships to study in America which were offered to the new

country's brightest students. (Barack Obama's father had come to study in the U.S., three years earlier, under a similar program for Kenyan students.) He returned home after his studies abroad, and, like the protagonist Nair later imagined for "Mississippi Masala," was exiled in Idi Amin's 1972 expulsion of some sixty thousand Asians from the country. The event became a focus of Mahmood's writing on the pains of decolonization; for Nair, it became the backdrop for a love story. "He's some kind of lefty," Nair told her collaborator, Sooni Taraporevala, the day they planned to meet Mahmood for an interview.

In 1996, Mahmood published his breakthrough work, "[Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism](#)," which described the persistence of colonial structures in independent African nations. He dedicated it to Nair and to Zohran, who, he wrote, "daily takes us on the trail that is his discovery of life." Three years after the book was published, Columbia offered Mahmood a tenured professorship. The family moved to New York, into a faculty apartment in Morningside Heights, where they often had Edward and Mariam Said and Rashid and Mona Khalidi over for dinner. "For Zohran, they were 'uncles' and 'aunties,'" Mahmood told me in an e-mail.

During the fall of 1999, Mamdani's parents enrolled him at the Bank Street School for Children, a private school. The first year, he felt singled out—"being told again and again that I was very articulate with my English," Mamdani recalled. Eventually, though, he settled into a typical Upper West Side childhood: Absolute Bagels, soccer in Riverside Park, listening to Jay-Z and Eiffel 65 on his Walkman on the way to school. In 2004, Mahmood took a sabbatical, and the family returned to Kampala for a year. One day, Mahmood went to Zohran's school, to see how his son was adjusting. "He is doing well except that I do not always understand him," Zohran's teacher told him. On orders from the headmaster, the teacher had asked all the Indian students to raise their hands.

Zohran had kept his down, and, when prodded, he'd protested, "I am not Indian! I am Ugandan!"



*Mahmood Mamdani, Mira Nair, and Zohran in Kampala, Uganda, in 1991.*  
*Photograph courtesy Mira Nair*

On a Saturday morning this summer, I met Mamdani outside the Bronx High School of Science, his alma mater, to walk around with one of his favorite old teachers, Marc Kagan, who happens to be the brother of Elena Kagan, the Supreme Court Justice. Kagan, the author of "Take Back the Power"—a firsthand account of his years as a radical organizer in the city's transit union—taught social studies at Bronx Science for ten years. He inspired fervent admiration in his students, some of whom (Mamdani included) called themselves Kaganites. In his classes, Kagan talked about how race, gender, and class had shaped world events. "We got away from the great-man theory of history," Kagan, a bespectacled, gray-bearded guy in his late sixties, said as we crossed the school's sunken courtyard. Mamdani caught my eye and mugged. "There's just one," he said, nodding toward Kagan.

Mamdani sat down on some steps and looked up at Kagan, relieved to slip into a comfortable old dynamic. Kagan recounted a parent-teacher conference with Mahmood during Zohran's freshman year. "I didn't know who your father was—I just figured him as one of these striving parents," he said. "He was grumping about your grade." Mamdani tensed up. "He wasn't grumping, like, 'Why aren't you giving my son a better grade?' It was, like, 'Zohran should be able to do better.' And I said, 'Never mind the grade, because the wheels are spinning in your son's head.' And he just floated out of the room."

Mamdani credits Kagan with showing him how to command an audience. He remembered the start of class one day during his senior spring, when moods were light and attentions were drifting: "Everybody's talking, having a great time, and then you just hear the sound of this machete hit a desk." Kagan had chopped a stalk of sugarcane in half. "And he says, 'Sugarcane was one of the most valuable crops in the New World,'" Mamdani said. Kagan handed out slices of the sugarcane, so that his students could touch and taste it.

The world of Bronx Science—a selective public school of some three thousand students, many of them the children of working-class immigrants—differed dramatically from the affluent intellectual milieu of Mamdani's childhood. He remembers seeing students of color rehearsing in a jazz combo during his tour of the school. "It was almost a level of parody how aware we were of race," Mamdani told me. "There would be, like, Ultimate Frisbee games where the two teams were 'immigration nation' and 'white nation.' With no malice. Simply, these were the two teams." On a 2016 episode of the podcast "Encompassed," an oral history of Bronx Science, a twenty-four-year-old Mamdani joked about a teacher who had chased him down the hall for stealing hall-pass forms. "Keep in mind, this guy is a graduate of the Israel Defense Forces," he said. "He's tailed brown guys for a long time."



Cartoon by Adam Sacks

In 2008, Mamdani played on the school's cricket team, which was mostly made up of other South Asian kids. It was the first year that the Department of Education oversaw a cricket league, and many of the other teams were from Queens, where Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and other South Asian immigrant communities were growing. "My social circles shifted," he told me. "By the time I graduated, my closest friends lived in Bath Beach, Glen Oaks."

For college, Mamdani went to Bowdoin, a bucolic liberal-arts school in Brunswick, Maine. (Columbia, where his father taught, rejected him.) Though Bowdoin was whiter and preppier than Bronx Science, Mamdani found his way. The writer Erica Berry, a close friend from college, said, "Walking through the dining hall with him would take longer than with other people, because he'd be stopping at random tables, giving high fives." In chatty columns for the school paper, the *Bowdoin Orient*, Mamdani regularly sounded off on the topics of the day. On [relations](#) between athletes and non-athletes: "I propose . . . we start a process of integration."

On dance-floor [etiquette](#): “Whether it’s grinding, the placement of your hands or leaning in for a kiss, you need to get consent.” On the “horrible choice of pump-up music” at the [student gym](#): “How can I be expected to pump five-pound weights with Enya as my soundtrack?”

In time, his columns looked beyond life on campus. “I had arrived in a society where privilege was a different color,” Mamdani [wrote](#), in 2013, about spending the summer studying Arabic in Cairo, as Mohamed Morsi was deposed by the Egyptian military. “Gone was the image of the white Christian male that I had grown accustomed to, and in its place was a darker, more familiar picture—one that, for the first time, I fit: brown skin, black hair, and a Muslim name.” The focus of the piece was Mamdani’s decision to grow a beard, which had started as a “symbolic middle finger” to the bearded-terrorist stereotype in America but acquired a different meaning during his time abroad: “Many of my Egyptian friends—first jokingly and then more seriously—told me that I looked *ikhwani*, like a member of the Muslim Brotherhood.”

Mamdani majored in Africana studies and wrote his thesis on the post-colonial theorist Frantz Fanon and the Enlightenment philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Berry remembers him holding court in the dining hall about Israel and Palestine—an unusual sight at Bowdoin, a fairly apolitical school. Matthew Miles Goodrich, who was a year behind Mamdani, and who became a founding member of the Sunrise Movement, told me, “We had a professor who liked to say that Bowdoin was a hotbed of social *rest*.”

As a junior, Mamdani co-founded a chapter of Students for Justice in Palestine, which only a handful of his classmates joined. The following year, he exchanged public statements with Bowdoin’s president, Barry Mills, over Mills’s rejection of a call to boycott Israeli academic institutions. Mills characterized the demand as an infringement on academic freedom. Mamdani and a co-writer countered that Mills was “ignoring how the boycott has instead

served as the catalyst for greater discussion of Israel’s human rights abuses.”

The occupation of Palestine was a formative moral and political issue for Mamdani. He says that his views were shaped by two years that his family spent in South Africa before moving to New York. “Hearing the words of Mandela about the interconnectedness of the struggle for freedom with the struggle for Palestinian human rights, and then coming here and seeing the very different way in which that same conversation was being had,” Mamdani told me, “there was a glaring exception to the supposedly universal beliefs when it came to applying them to Palestinians.” In an e-mail, Mahmood recalled discussions with his colleagues in Cape Town about “whether particular strategies for combatting apartheid—such as the global boycott of apartheid South Africa—were relevant for the struggle to decolonize or dezionize Israel.” He added, “Zohran was a listener. . . . I doubt that he remained unaffected by the exchange on these issues.”

Two weeks before the primary, Mamdani was invited to appear on “The Late Show with Stephen Colbert” alongside Brad Lander, the New York City comptroller, who was polling third in the race. Taking advantage of the city’s ranked-choice primary voting system, Mamdani and Lander had recently cross-endorsed each other as part of an anti-Cuomo strategy pushed by the Working Families Party and other progressive groups. The pair’s appearance wouldn’t come with an endorsement from the host, but it would air the night before the election. Cuomo was counting on high turnout in wealthy, Colbert-watching neighborhoods.

A few days before the taping, Colbert’s producers held a prep call with the candidates and their aides. The sample questions covered basic political topics, such as the meaning of democratic socialism. Right before the candidates went onstage, the producers appeared in the greenroom and said that they wanted to go over a few more questions. Earlier that day, a group of prominent Jewish figures,

including Elisha Wiesel, the son of Elie Wiesel, had sent a letter to Colbert demanding that he grill Mamdani on his views of Israel. According to people who were in the room, one of the producers suggested a “thumbs-up or thumbs-down” segment: “Thumbs-up or thumbs-down: Hamas. Thumbs-up or thumbs-down: a Palestinian state.”

Mamdani’s face dropped. “I just couldn’t believe what was happening,” he told me. “That a genocide could be distilled into a late-night game.” His aides were incensed. “You have the first Muslim candidate for mayor in the history of New York,” Zara Rahim, a senior adviser to Mamdani, told one of the producers. “You don’t want to ask him a question about that?” (CBS did not respond to a request for comment.) In the end, the game didn’t happen, but Colbert did ask Mamdani whether he believed that Israel had the right to exist. “Yes, like all nations, I believe it has a right to exist,” he said. “And a responsibility also to uphold international law.”

Mamdani got this question so many times during the campaign that he came to feel besieged by it. “It’s Islamophobia, the way it’s posed and repeated,” a prominent Muslim leader in the city, who has talked to Mamdani about this, told me. Cuomo, who, as part of his return to political life last year, joined the legal team defending Benjamin Netanyahu in the International Criminal Court, hoped to make Mamdani’s criticisms of Israel the defining issue of the election. “It’s very simple: anti-Zionism is antisemitism,” the former governor declared, shortly after entering the race. A pro-Cuomo super PAC mocked up a mailer claiming that Mamdani “Rejects Jewish Rights.” It included a photo altered to make his beard look darker and bushier.

Throughout the primary, Mamdani was [steady in his support](#) of Palestinian rights, though he did hone the language that he used to talk about Israel. Whereas he once made jokes about the I.D.F., he adopted a more solemn tone this year, emphasizing a sense of

shared humanity. He often quotes prominent Israelis, such as the Holocaust historian Amos Goldberg, who has described Israel's destruction of Gaza as a genocide, and the former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, who has condemned the war as cruel and criminal. Mamdani tends to focus on Israel's violations of international law, which are the basis of his pledge to arrest Netanyahu, in deference to a warrant issued by the International Criminal Court, if Netanyahu comes to New York. (This is arguably his most tough-on-crime policy.) He emphasizes that New Yorkers don't have to share his views on foreign policy to think he'd be a good mayor. When asked about how he'll win over Zionist voters, he's partial to a line from Ed Koch: "If you agree with me on nine out of twelve issues, vote for me. If you agree with me on twelve out of twelve, see a psychiatrist."

One of the few times Mamdani got tripped up was in June, when he appeared on the podcast of the right-leaning publication *The Bulwark*. He declined to denounce the phrase "globalize the intifada," which many supporters of Israel interpret as an incitement to anti-Jewish violence. "It's a word that means 'struggle,'" Mamdani said, referring to "intifada." After he won the primary, performing well with Jewish voters, especially those under forty, he said that he would "discourage" his supporters from using the slogan.

Many of Mamdani's detractors believed that his stance on Israel would sink his campaign. But Mamdani and his earliest allies, having watched Joe Biden and Kamala Harris lose support over their refusal to oppose the Netanyahu government's destruction of Gaza, were confident that his position on the war would be a strength. In February, when Mamdani was still unknown to many voters, Álvaro López, a leader in the New York City chapter of the Democratic Socialists of America, published a memo detailing a campaign strategy for him that relied in part on mainstream Democrats who had been "radicalized" by Gaza. "A big issue with the Palestinian-solidarity movement was that they were kind of two

steps ahead of where the majority of working-class people were at,” López, who grew up in Brooklyn and spent ten years as a natural-wine rep before becoming a full-time union organizer, told me. “The connection wasn’t being made to, like, ‘This is why your eggs are so expensive.’ ”

That disconnect—between calls for social justice and appeals to working-class voters—was an issue for Mamdani. His base appeared to be whiter, richer, and more educated than the city as a whole. His supporters have been caricatured as striving transplants who can’t decide if they’re upwardly or downwardly mobile—denizens of what the New York City data journalist Michael Lange has termed the Commie Corridor, in gentrified Brooklyn and Queens. In the primary, Mamdani did best in neighborhoods where the median income is between fifty thousand and a hundred and fifty thousand dollars. Cuomo won in rich and white neighborhoods, but also in poor and Black ones.

Conscious of this, Mamdani spent many Sundays this summer in church, courting Black congregations around the city. In August, he appeared at the First Baptist Church of Crown Heights, in Brooklyn, and read an obscure passage from the Book of Lamentations. “Even jackals offer their breasts to nurse their young,” he recited. “But my people have become heartless, like ostriches in the desert.” That drew some “all right”s and “amen”s, but the skepticism in the room was palpable. “Zohran knows by now that I will be on him,” Rashad Raymond Moore, the church’s senior pastor, said, after Mamdani finished speaking. “As soon as he won, I said, ‘Now, are the people who voted for you the same people who are pricing us out?’ He’s been in that tension.”

The summer of 2017 was known, in the New York City transit system, as the [Summer of Hell](#). Track fires broke out regularly. Riders crammed armpit to nostril on train platforms. One in three trains ran with delays, the worst performance since the city’s near-bankruptcy in the nineteen-seventies. “Just three days ago, we

literally had a train come off the tracks,” Cuomo, who was governor at the time, said in June, declaring a state of emergency in the tunnels.

Most days that summer, Mamdani, then twenty-five years old, caught the 1 train at 116th Street, a few blocks from where he lived with his parents. Then he’d brace himself for the hour-and-a-half-long, three-train commute to Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, where he was working for the City Council campaign of the Reverend Khader El-Yateem, a Palestinian Lutheran pastor and community organizer. Mamdani had struggled with claustrophobia since childhood—he avoided elevators when he could—and he came to remember that summer as the worst of it. When a train stalled in a tunnel, as often happened on the N as it left Atlantic Avenue, Mamdani would feel his anxiety rising. He began inviting strangers to talk to him, about anything. “It makes all the difference when you feel the walls closing in on you,” he recalled. “And then the train would get moving.”

Before he got involved in politics, Mamdani tried to make a career as a rapper, tutoring high-school kids to pay for studio time. He recorded multilingual songs under the name Young Cardamom, rapping in Luganda and Hindi, as well as in English, and filmed puckish, elaborate music videos. (The best one is for “Wabula Naawe,” in which Mamdani and his collaborator HAB play feuding guerrilla leaders.) But, eventually, Mamdani recalled in a podcast interview this spring, “there was a point at which my dad said, ‘I think it’s time for a real job.’ ” When I recently asked Mamdani if his mayoral run was a complex ploy to boost his Spotify streams, he shook his head. “I can tell you—they’re not up,” he assured me.

In 2015, Mamdani volunteered for the City Council campaign of a Queens lawyer named Ali Najmi, whom he learned about from a *Village Voice* interview with Heems, a former member of the rap trio Das Racist. Mamdani took a particular liking to canvassing. “Climbing a six-story walkup, getting to that top floor, and having

a senior open their door—you see a glimpse into what it is that they live with every single day,” he said. He soon became a paid hand, working on several local campaigns in quick succession. El-Yateem’s campaign, in Bay Ridge—the sturdy, middle-class enclave immortalized in “Saturday Night Fever” as the home of John Travolta’s character—would become a template for his own.



*“I don’t want to do anything for my birthday. But I want you to do a bunch of things for it.”*  
Cartoon by Sophie Lucido Johnson and Sammi Skolmoski

El-Yateem, or Father K, as many know him, was born in the West Bank town of Beit Jala in 1968. At the age of nineteen, when he was a student at Bethlehem Bible College, he was arrested by the Israeli military, tortured, interrogated, and held for fifty-seven days with no charges. Six years later, he was assigned to be a pastor at a church in Bay Ridge, where the pews, once occupied by Norwegian immigrants, were filling up with Arab Christians, many of them Palestinian exiles.

El-Yateem was one of the first local candidates endorsed by the rejuvenated New York City D.S.A. after a membership boom that followed Bernie Sanders's first run for President. Rather than advocating loudly for radical policies, El-Yateem emphasized cost-of-living issues and argued that the Democratic Party should expand its political tent by engaging the city's Arab, Muslim, and South Asian communities, which together numbered about a million people yet had few representatives in local government. "We need to be part of the decision-making," El-Yateem told NBC News.

On Election Day, El-Yateem lost, placing second in a five-way race, with more than thirty per cent of the vote. At that time, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez was still a bartender at a Mexican restaurant near Union Square. El-Yateem's showing looked to Mamdani like a breakthrough. The fact that a socialist Arab immigrant who supported the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions movement could pull thirty per cent in Bay Ridge was enough to make him think that he could run for office himself. "Bernie gave me the language of democratic socialism," Mamdani said. "Khader El-Yateem showed me that all my different politics, they had a place that they could belong."

After the Summer of Hell, perhaps sensing that he'd one day need to keep his cool on the train, Mamdani saw a behavioral therapist, to address his claustrophobia. For their last session, Mamdani and the therapist rode the subway together. To both of their alarm, the train stopped in a dark tunnel. "The therapist was, like, 'Did you stall this train?'" Mamdani told me, laughing.

Mamdani lives in a six-story, yellow-brick apartment building in Astoria, Queens. It's an old-fashioned, H-shaped pile, built in 1929, with mostly one-bedroom apartments, and a communal laundry room. On a Sunday evening in early September, he came to his door wearing a spotless white collared shirt, a dark tie, and house slippers. "Shoes off," he told me.

He found the apartment on StreetEasy, in 2018. It was advertised as spacious, with an eat-in kitchen. In reality, it's tiny, what a broker might creatively call a classic three. The living room, which has a single window, is decorated with elegant vintage couches, healthy-looking houseplants, and posters for old Bollywood movies. On a bookshelf I spotted a copy of "[The Power Broker](#)," Erica Berry's "[Wolfish](#)," and Kal Penn's memoir, "[You Can't Be Serious](#)." (Nair has credited a teen-age Zohran with persuading her to cast Penn in her adaptation of Jhumpa Lahiri's "[The Namesake](#)" after he saw "[Harold & Kumar Go to White Castle](#).") "Chicken or goat?" Mamdani asked, flipping the contents of plastic takeout containers onto plates and handing one to me. An aide had run out for biryani.

After Mamdani moved to Astoria, he took a job as a foreclosure-prevention counsellor at Chhaya, a community-development organization that serves South Asian and Indo-Caribbean immigrants. His salary was forty-seven thousand dollars; the apartment was rent-stabilized. When Mamdani signed the lease, the rent was two thousand dollars a month. Now he and Duwaji, his wife, pay twenty-three hundred. (Duwaji, an illustrator who has contributed to *The New Yorker*, did much of the decorating.) Sitting on a purple-and-gold sofa, Mamdani tasted his biryani and frowned. It was a little bland. "We won't reveal where I got this," he said. He ate with his hands—something that has become a fixation among right-wingers—and offered me a fork and knife.

Working with Chhaya clients who were facing foreclosure, Mamdani got an intimate look at the little insanities of the city's housing crisis. Many of his clients were small landlords—immigrant owners of two-family properties who relied on tenants to stay afloat. He tried to match clients with government programs that might help them, but often there was nothing he could do. "I remember talking to this Pakistani guy, who only spoke Urdu," he said. "I asked him, 'Did you know that the lien on your house is about to be sold?' And he said, 'No, I had no idea.' "

From the beginning, a centerpiece of Mamdani's campaign has been his proposal to freeze the rents for the city's million or so rent-stabilized units—generally found in buildings of six or more apartments which were built before 1974. A mayor can do this, in effect, because the mayor appoints all nine members of the Rent Guidelines Board, which determines how much the owners of these buildings are allowed to raise the rent each year. What Mamdani and some of his allies in the tenants'-rights movement appreciated is that the board isn't some sleepy arm of the city bureaucracy—it is full of political potential. De Blasio backed rent freezes three times in his eight years as mayor; under Adams, rent for these apartments has been allowed to increase, cumulatively, about twelve per cent. "The Rent Guidelines Board is sort of like a Swedish social-democracy institution," Cea Weaver, a D.S.A.-aligned tenant organizer who has been advising Mamdani, said. "Organized tenants and organized landlords come together in front of a city board appointed by the mayor, who is reflective of the general populace."

A decade and a half ago, an elaborately coiffed stunt candidate named Jimmy McMillan ran for governor of New York with the indelible catchphrase "The rent is too damn high!" At the time, the tagline got mostly laughs; Kenan Thompson played McMillan on "Saturday Night Live." But, just a few years later, socialist candidates in the outer boroughs discovered that McMillan had been on to something. Tascha Van Auken, who managed a network of fifty thousand volunteers during Mamdani's primary campaign, told me, "People were feeling the affordability pinch extra, extra urgently." Van Auken, who also recently served as the artistic-direction manager for Blue Man Group, was involved with Ocasio-Cortez's first campaign and ran or helped out on several other D.S.A. races that toppled Democratic incumbents. In every local campaign she's worked on, Van Auken said, the pain of rising rents was one of the first things people talked about when they answered their doors. Local D.S.A. politicians tried to get their neighbors to

see “renter” as a political identity; Mamdani made “freeze the rent” a citywide rallying cry.

If Mamdani is elected and secures a rent freeze next year, one of his biggest opponents will be an old friend. Kenny Burgos, who was two years behind Mamdani at Bronx Science, was elected to the Assembly in 2020, and the two sat next to each other in the legislature. Burgos, a Democrat but not a D.S.A. member, shocked many in Albany last year when he gave up his seat to become the C.E.O. of the New York Apartment Association, a lobby group that represents the landlords of rent-stabilized buildings. Like Mamdani, Burgos is fluent in the new political language of social media. Earlier this year, when the N.Y.A.A. contributed two and a half million dollars to a super *PAC* backing Cuomo in the primary, he texted Mamdani a *GIF* of Wesley Snipes weeping while shooting his friend, from the movie “New Jack City.” Mamdani gave it a “*HA HA*” reaction.

Burgos’s members have been making noise since 2019, when tenants’-rights groups in Albany pushed Cuomo to impose stringent regulations on them. “The 2019 rent laws systematically destroyed parts of the real-estate industry,” Jason Haber, a co-founder of the American Real Estate Association and a senior broker at Compass, who has advised an anti-Mamdani super *PAC*, told me. Old apartment buildings get more expensive to maintain as they age; when rents stay flat, owners can feel squeezed. (Mamdani likes to point out that the Rent Guidelines Board’s most recent data show net operating income for landlords of rent-stabilized buildings up 12.1 per cent in a single year.) Weaver, the tenant organizer, worries that a freeze will prompt landlords to engage in a “capital strike,” in which they withhold updates and repairs to their properties. “Zohran holds the political cards, but landlords are able to create the narrative that the buildings need more money,” she said. “It’s what keeps me up at night.”

Mamdani knows that a rent freeze won't solve New York's housing crisis: rent-stabilized units make up only about a quarter of the city's housing stock. The median rent for an apartment on the open market has topped thirty-five hundred dollars. High-end condos in Manhattan can sell for five thousand dollars a square foot. Some hundred and forty thousand New York City schoolchildren are homeless. Part of Mamdani's strategy has been to cast the affordability problem as one that affects everyone, even the rich. "This is a crisis that is suffocating many rungs of life," he told me. "It's one crisis that has varying levels of intensity, all deeply felt."

Effectively addressing the problem will require the construction of hundreds of thousands of housing units in a city already stuffed with them, and major help from the state government in Albany, which Mamdani isn't guaranteed to get. He's advocated for the city to become more involved in housing construction and development, but he's also flirted with the rhetoric of "abundance," and expressed an openness to private development. According to the *Times*, Mamdani suggested at a meeting with Black executives in July that the rent freeze might not be permanent. ("He has said time and time again that the policy commitment is for four years," an aide told me.) When I asked Mamdani what was negotiable and what wasn't, he put up his hands, declining to rule anything out. "I'm not running to punish landlords," he said. "We know it's a broken system."

Many people who knew Mamdani before his run for mayor confessed to some astonishment at the success of his campaign. "Zohran, I think, surprised himself," Jasmine Gripper, a co-director of the Working Families Party in New York, told me. Several lawmakers who served with Mamdani in Albany have described him as more show pony than workhorse—he got only three bills passed, and one had to do with where beer could be sold within the confines of the Museum of the Moving Image, in Astoria. Jessica

Ramos, a state senator from a nearby district, who also ran for mayor this year, has said, “I wish he was a harder worker.”

Burgos disagreed with that assessment. “He got stuff done,” he told me. Burgos mentioned the hundreds of millions of dollars in debt relief that Mamdani helped taxi-medallion owners win from City Hall in 2021, in part by going on a fifteen-day hunger strike, and a pilot program that made one bus route in every borough free. “Find me another new Assembly member who got tens of millions of dollars for an individual program,” Burgos said.

Burgos remembered talking to Mamdani after Adams won the 2021 Democratic mayoral primary: “He was, like, ‘Who are we going to get to run against this guy in four years?’ I said, ‘Why don’t you do it?’ He said, ‘I’m too young, they won’t take me seriously.’ ”

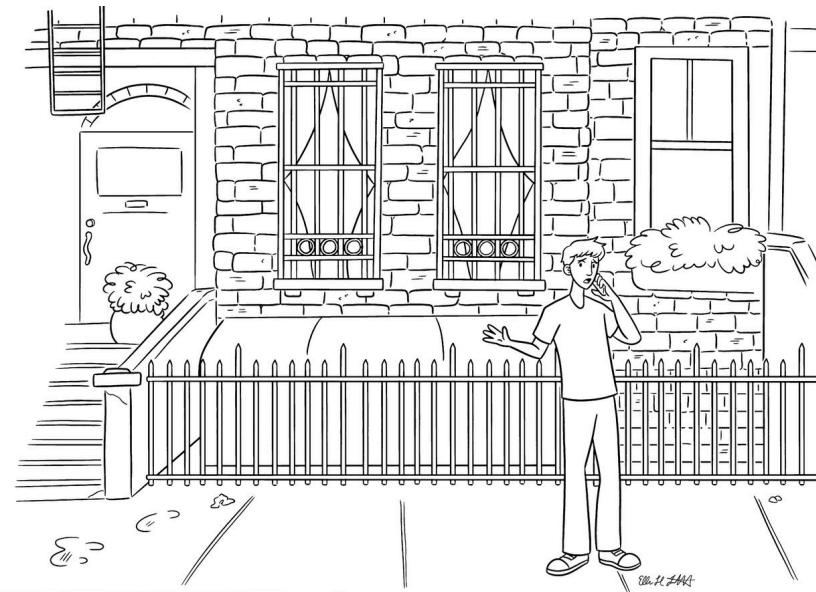
Mamdani was then becoming a prominent figure in D.S.A., which had positioned itself against the mainstream Democratic Party. In Albany, Mamdani attended weekly meetings of the Socialists in Office Committee, and he considered himself an ambassador for the organization. “For me, there’s no point in doing this without D.S.A.,” he [told](#) the leftist magazine *Dissent* in 2022.

Since D.S.A. started winning elections in the late twenty-tens, it’s had to confront the challenge of having allies in power. Last year, national D.S.A. leaders withdrew their endorsement of Ocasio-Cortez because she strayed from the organization’s line on Israel. Mamdani has encouraged members to put on the pressure. “It’s a good thing that the rank and file of the organization has been emboldened to make demands of elected officials,” he told *Dissent*. “We cannot count on our electeds going into these spaces coming out the way they were sent in.”

In the spring of 2023, Mamdani introduced the Not on Our Dime! act, a measure that would prohibit New York nonprofits from sending any money to support illegal settler activity in Gaza and the West Bank. He argued that tens of millions of dollars were

passing through local groups to support “violations of international law.” “The leadership came down on it harder than any bill I’d ever seen,” a veteran Democratic state senator told me. “They said it would never get a floor vote.” Dozens of colleagues, including Burgos, signed a letter denouncing Mamdani and his co-sponsors. The bill “was only introduced to antagonize pro-Israel New Yorkers and further sow divisions within the Democratic Party,” the letter said. Burgos spoke with Mamdani shortly afterward. “He said, ‘I’ll never pass another bill in this town again,’ ” Burgos told me.

When I asked Mamdani if he’d thought his career in Albany was over at that point, he shook his head. “I lived through many ends in Albany,” he said. A few months later, the Hamas attacks of October 7th, and the ruptures they immediately produced in the U.S., gave new shape to Mamdani’s politics. On October 13th, he was arrested during a ceasefire demonstration outside Chuck Schumer’s apartment in Park Slope. He conferred with other Muslim leaders who were concerned about Islamophobic backlash in the city, and some of them became part of the brain trust of his mayoral campaign.



*“Hey, I’m going to be late. They took down the scaffolding that’s been up since I moved in, and now I have no idea where I am.”*

*Cartoon by Ellen Liebenthal*

That winter, Mamdani was invited by leaders of the Working Families Party to a series of meetings with other elected officials who were considering challenging Eric Adams in the primary. (It's hard to remember now, but this was before Adams was indicted, before Trump got re-elected, and before Adams and Trump cut a deal.) The W.F.P. was floating the idea of having several candidates run as a collaborative slate, to avoid the infighting that they believed helped Adams win in 2021. The other candidates, for the most part, didn't know Mamdani or trust D.S.A. "The movement against the war is growing, Zohran is at the center of it, and we thought, He needs to be at the table," Ana María Archila, the W.F.P.'s other New York co-director, recalled. "I can't tell you how much resistance there was to his presence." Meanwhile, some D.S.A.-affiliated officials worried that Mamdani would look like a "spoiler" and hurt the organization's standing with progressive Democrats. "This is unfair to our project as a whole and could be ruinous," Emily Gallagher, an Assembly member from Brooklyn, wrote to members of the New York chapter, ahead of a vote on endorsing him.

Mamdani's campaign began in earnest last fall, after Trump won his second term. Many people's first encounter with him was a video he posted in November, in which he interviewed Black and brown New Yorkers in working-class neighborhoods about why Trump had done better with their cohort—and why some of them hadn't voted at all—in 2024. Some talked about food prices and the cost of living; others talked about being demoralized by war. "I like the Democrats, but I don't like this in Gaza—a lot of people are dying," a bearded older man said. At a moment when Democrats appeared clueless about social media and out of touch with working-class people, Mamdani came across as curious and undaunted.

So began a campaign that fused blunt political messaging with bighearted moving images—a sensibility not unlike that of Nair's films. In a video promoting the rent freeze, Mamdani plunged into

the frigid waters of Coney Island on New Year's Day and emerged with his suit and tie sopping; he made late-night visits to halal venders to discuss the rising costs of chicken and rice. In all his videos, an affectionate and softly romantic vision of the city came through. In May, the W.F.P. ranked Mamdani at the top of its slate of endorsements, and though his competitors kept waiting for him to slip, he only kept up his run of deft politicking.

The week before the primary, one of Mamdani's aides, Julian Gerson, suggested that he walk the length of Manhattan, meeting voters along the way. The rest of the campaign staff thought it was impractical, but Mamdani was taken with it. That Friday night, at dusk, Mamdani set out from Inwood. The resulting video, of a young candidate striding through the city into the early-morning hours, getting cheers everywhere he went, convinced more than a few holdouts that something was happening.

In the summer of 1964, Mahmood Mamdani, then a student at the University of Pittsburgh, took a sightseeing bus trip across America. From Pittsburgh he went to Chicago, Salt Lake City, San Francisco, Los Angeles. He spent a night in Las Vegas and blew some cash at the slot machines. Early the next morning, he boarded a bus bound for Taos, New Mexico, and gazed out the window at the desert as the sun rose. Around noon, he approached the bus driver and asked if it would be possible to pull over for a few minutes, so that he could go outside and pray. "What kind of a religion is that?" the driver asked. "I am a Muslim," Mahmood replied.

He recounts this story in "Slow Poison: Idi Amin, Yoweri Museveni, and the Making of the Ugandan State," his latest book on African politics, published this month by Harvard University Press. In Mahmood's recollection, the bus driver, after being informed of his young passenger's religion, reached for his microphone. "Folks, we have a Muslim with us," he said. "He wants to stop for ten minutes so he can pray."

The driver asked for a show of hands—how many on the bus would be O.K. with an unscheduled stop? Everyone raised a hand. The driver pulled over. When Mahmood got out, the other passengers followed him. They formed a circle around him and watched as he prostrated himself. Then everybody got back on the bus together.

Mahmood told me in an e-mail that he did not feel afraid when the other passengers surrounded him. “I assumed an innocent curiosity on their part,” he wrote. “No one I had met thought that Muslims are naturally inclined to terrorism. . . . The overwhelming belief was that political consciousness was learnt, and taught, through engagement and encounters. Thinking of my fellow travelers in the bus, there was nothing threatening about them, no reason for me to give it a second thought.”

Zohran Mamdani grew up in the world that has emerged since that bus trip. One of his early memories of New York is from after 9/11, when a teacher pulled him aside and said to tell her if anyone tried to make him feel bad about his religion. He was nine. This past summer, Mamdani endured death threats, racist harassment, and accusations of antisemitism. “It takes a toll,” he said, tearing up, at a press conference amid the controversy after the *Bulwark* podcast. “When I speak, especially when I speak with emotion, I am characterized by those same rivals as being a monster, as being at the gates—language that describes almost a barbarian looking to dismantle civilization.”

The same qualities that make Mamdani a generational figure have already made him a target. “There’s no ‘if’ about it—as soon as Zohran puts his hand on the Quran and is sworn in as the first Muslim mayor of New York, Donald Trump will start firing away,” Gaspard, formerly of the Center for American Progress, said. Bernie Sanders, practically yelling into the phone, reminded me of the repression that has historically kept socialists at the margins of

American politics. “There was extraordinary opposition, illegal opposition,” Sanders said. “You know that, right?”

Mamdani spent the summer meeting with people who are trying to assess how much of a break from the past he’ll actually be. Not every Wall Street suit who met Mamdani hated him. “He’s not looking for a government takeover,” one told me, with measured optimism. “I don’t *think* he’s a socialist.” City Hall veterans have emphasized that, apart from Trump’s incursions, Mamdani’s ability to govern will be defined by the people he surrounds himself with—and that he may have to choose between people who are experienced and people who share his political program. “His circle is small,” a former deputy mayor told me. “He’s going to have to take chances and be prepared to be wrong.”

Mamdani has said that, until the evening of the primary, he had doubts about whether he could win. He spent an hour and a half furiously writing a victory speech after Cuomo called him early that night to concede. Sitting with Mamdani in his living room, as the single window darkened, I got the sense that the feeling of surprise had worn off. It was around 9 P.M. when he nudged me toward the door. “My brother,” he said, slapping his hands on his knees and rising from the sofa. Mamdani’s night wasn’t over. There were more calls with aides, more interviews to prepare for. He took our dishes to the kitchen and started rinsing them in the sink. He was still wearing his tie. ♦

*Eric Lach, a staff writer, has contributed to the magazine since 2008. He writes regularly about New York City politics, people, and more.*

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<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/10/20/zohran-mamdani-profile>

[Letter from Australia](#)

## A Tech Millionaire's Costly Quest to Prove His Brother Was Murdered

*Steve Johnson became convinced that his brother was the victim of an anti-gay hate crime. Decades later, a man was convicted for the killing. But did the police solve the case or perpetrate a miscarriage of justice?*

By [Eren Orbey](#)

October 13, 2025



*Scott Johnson's fall from a cliff top near Sydney was deemed a suicide. His brother became convinced that Scott had been the victim of a hate crime.*

*Photograph by Adam Ferguson for The New Yorker*

Scott Johnson was found dead at the base of North Head, a sandstone promontory in Manly, Australia, that looms two hundred feet above the craggy shore of the Tasman Sea. A pair of spear fishermen were walking along the water on a humid morning in December, 1988, when they came upon his body, which was naked and badly disfigured. A storm had swept the coast the night before, washing away most of the blood, but seagulls were picking at bits

of innards strewn across the rocks. One of the men left to call for help; the other waited for the police to arrive and hiked with them to the top of the cliff. Thirty feet from the edge, they spotted a neatly folded pile of clothes and a pair of sneakers stuffed with personal effects, including a rail pass. There were no signs of foul play, and there was no suicide note.

Scott was a twenty-seven-year-old American who had been living with his partner, Michael Noone, in the capital city of Canberra, three hours south of Manly. Late that evening, Noone arrived home to find a message on his answering machine from the police. When he called back, he was asked to come identify Scott's body as soon as possible. Before making the drive to Manly, Noone called Scott's older brother, Steve, a graduate student who lived in Cambridge, Massachusetts, with his wife and their newborn. The brothers were close, and Scott had stayed with Steve for six weeks that summer. Steve later recalled, of learning the news, "I can still feel the paralysis of those first quiet moments."

Steve got on the next flight to Australia. By the time he arrived, the police had deemed Scott's death a suicide. Steve refused to believe this. "It just didn't seem possible that he would have killed himself without saying goodbye," he later said. Scott had been a star academic finishing up a Ph.D. in mathematics. He'd travelled to Sydney regularly to meet with an adviser, who told Steve that they'd made a date for the following week. Yet Steve recalled a constable saying, of North Head, "This is where people go to jump, mate—especially homosexuals," as if that settled the matter. Steve was dismayed to learn that, although Scott's wallet hadn't been found, the cliff top hadn't been treated as a possible crime scene. The police had moved Scott's clothes before photographing them, compromising potential evidence, and they hadn't canvassed the area for witnesses. Steve pressed for a thorough investigation, but a coroner's inquest, conducted to ascertain the manner of death, concluded that, "in the absence of anything to the contrary of the evidence," the suicide finding was sound.

Any unexplained death leaves room for competing narratives, but Scott's death involved a particularly vexing set of ambiguities. It was unclear why he'd been in Manly, a scrappy suburban surf town across Sydney Harbour, and no one could account for how he'd spent the day and a half before he was found. His injuries from the fall were so severe that a medical examiner couldn't determine whether his body had suffered prior violence. For nearly two decades, Steve lived with questions but didn't know what to do with them. When his brother's name came up in conversation, he'd say that Scott had died in a fall or an accident, or by "what the coroner said was suicide, but we're not sure."



*Scott Johnson in 1985. His death has been compared to that of Matthew Shepard.*  
*Photograph courtesy Michael Noone*

One morning in 2005, Steve was sorting through mail in his kitchen when he found a manila envelope from Noone. It contained a pair of news clippings from the *Sydney Morning Herald* concerning three men who'd died or disappeared in the nineteen-eighties along the cliffs of Bondi Beach, a popular tourist site less than an hour from North Head. One article explained that the Bondi headland was a well-known cruising spot, or "beat," where gangs of teen-agers were known to attack and rob gay men. The cases of the three victims had originally been left unresolved or chalked up to "misadventure." Now, however, after a new investigation, a coroner had concluded that at least two of the men had likely been

thrown to their death from the cliffs. As Steve read and reread the pages, he felt a long-sought sense of certainty: “It’s safe to say that I instantly thought, *This is what happened to my brother.*”

In a recent memoir, Steve writes that he always saw himself as Scott’s “protector, supporter and confidant.” The boys had a tumultuous upbringing in and around Los Angeles. Their father, who worked in construction, left the family when they were young, and their mother struggled to support them and their older sister while working odd jobs. Both brothers were intellectually precocious, but Scott could be shy to the point of speechlessness. Their mother began a relationship with a swaggering alcoholic, their future stepfather, who mocked Scott for being soft. Steve felt bad leaving his brother behind when he went to college, at the University of Southern California, and he encouraged Scott to apply to nearby Caltech. Scott got a scholarship to attend, and the brothers would often spend weekends together. Old photographs show them on windblown mountain peaks, looking scruffily handsome and nearly indistinguishable. They fantasized about building revolutionary computer programs and, for tech-consulting work, printed themselves business cards that read, cheekily, “Johnson and Johnson.”

After Scott’s death, Steve achieved the brothers’ dream on his own, selling a software startup to America Online, in 1996, for seventy million dollars. He went on to found other companies, and by the time he read about the deaths at Bondi he’d amassed more than enough money to do something that he could never have afforded when Scott died: pay for a private investigation himself. Over the next two decades, in part by building shrewd alliances with L.G.B.T.Q. activists and the Australian media, Steve managed to prompt a second coroner’s inquest and a new police investigation —and then, when the results were inconclusive, a third inquest and yet another investigation. The journalist Rick Feneley, who covered the case at the *Morning Herald*, told me that Steve’s success was the result of his “dogged campaigning and force of personality.”

Duncan McNab, a local detective turned crime writer, once described Steve, admiringly, as “the American with the big swinging dick,” adding, “He had lots of money to throw at the case, and he didn’t give up.” In 2020, following a highly publicized police reward and a covert operation, investigators finally arrested a man who they said had confessed to Scott’s murder.

The catching of a culprit—more than three decades after the fact, without forensic evidence or eyewitnesses—was heralded as an overdue reparation for police negligence and as a civil-rights milestone for Australia’s gay community. The story drew attention around the world: “How a Tech Tycoon Spent 30 Years Battling Corrupt Police to Nail His Gay Brother’s Killer,” ran a headline in the *Daily Mail*. Scott’s death has been compared to that of Matthew Shepard, the young gay American brutally beaten and left to die in Wyoming, in 1998, who became an emblem for a reckoning with anti-gay violence. In 2023, Scott’s case was chronicled in a four-part ABC News docuseries, “Never Let Him Go.” Steve’s memoir, “A Thousand Miles from Care: The Hunt for My Brother’s Killer,” has been optioned as part of a Hollywood film adaptation.

Last fall, I visited Steve at a Colonial Revival home that he shares with his wife, Rosemarie, on a quiet street near Harvard Square. Sixty-six years old, with a rangy frame and a thicket of silver hair, he projects a watchful, self-assured charm. After serving us tea in Starbucks souvenir mugs from Australia, he led me upstairs to an office where he keeps an archive of files related to his quest. “The killing of my brother was one of two crimes here,” he told me. “The other was the police ignoring the case.” Steve refers to his allies in the investigation as Team Scott, and he has likened their mission to those of storybook heroes combatting the “dark forces” of evil. He picked up a framed photograph from his desk which was taken on the day that Scott’s convicted killer was sentenced. It showed Steve and his family striding triumphantly out of court, flanked by a team of investigators. “We look like Guardians of the Galaxy,” he said.

One figure missing from Team Scott is his partner, Michael Noone, who for decades has avoided speaking to the media about the case. Steve's memoir casts him not as a grieving quasi-brother-in-law but as a cold, withholding character who seems "eager to put the whole thing behind him." After Scott's death, Noone, a musicologist, took jobs in Hong Kong, New York, and eventually Massachusetts, where for years he chaired the music department at Boston College. By coincidence, he ended up living several miles from Steve, but by the time Noone sent him the Bondi Beach clippings the men hadn't spoken in sixteen years.

When I reached out to Noone, he was initially hesitant to break his silence about the case, but during a conversation last winter at his home, where he lives with his husband of thirteen years, he became surprisingly voluble. Whereas Steve has the no-frills style of an American tech executive, Noone carries himself with a certain theatrical flair. He is a trim, tweedy man of sixty-nine with the kind of refined Australian accent that could be mistaken for British. In a sitting room decorated with prints of seventeenth-century string instruments, he recounted meeting Scott, at the University of Cambridge, in 1984, at a lunch for gay students. Scott was completing a yearlong master's program in mathematics, and Noone, a doctoral candidate five years his senior, was charmed by the contrast between his good looks and his diffidence. "Here was this Californian blond bombshell in a corner, *utterly* tongue-tied," Noone said.

Nobody in Scott's family knew that he was gay, and he agonized about coming out to them. When he told Steve and Rosemarie, they "were a bit more shocked by it than I had thought they would be," Scott later recalled in a letter. In the spring of 1985, after Scott had moved back to the U.S. to start a Ph.D. at the University of California, Berkeley, he and Noone travelled to Boston to visit Steve. Noone later said that the encounter "felt a bit like meeting the prospective bride's father." He and Scott had planned to stay with Steve and Rosemarie, but they didn't, and the reason for this

has remained a point of contention ever since. Steve maintains that his grad-school apartment was too small to host the couple comfortably, but Noone remembers being told that Rosemarie wanted “none of that”—gay intimacy, Noone presumed—in the household. (She has denied this.) The two couples met instead for what Noone recalled as a stiff dinner in Harvard Square. The next year, Scott decided to drop out of Berkeley and follow Noone to Australia, despite his brother’s reservations. “He knows I love you,” Scott wrote to Noone. “So there’s no more debate.”



*“Eye of frog is much healthier, and you can’t taste the difference.”*  
Cartoon by Ellis Rosen

Back then, same-sex marriage was still a distant fantasy. As one Australian official reportedly put it, “Two blokes and a cocker spaniel don’t make a family.” In lieu of a legal union, Noone and Scott wrote each other into their wills, joking that they had nothing to bequeath but debt. In Canberra, they settled into a quiet domestic routine, commuting together to the campus of the Australian National University, where Scott continued his Ph.D. work and Noone had a teaching job at an adjoining music school. They often spent evenings at a friend’s place on a homestead, and Scott, who during college had worked at NASA’s Jet Propulsion Laboratory,

would lie in the pasture at night, identifying constellations. At times, he appeared to get restless in Canberra. In a letter to Steve, he lamented that “nothing much happens in this city after 5 P.M.” and that most locals seemed “content with the routine.” Scott enjoyed his trips to Sydney, where he joined a university choir and an ice-skating club made up of suburban housewives. He applied for Australian residency, under a visa program that allowed same-sex couples to remain united on humanitarian grounds. His application was approved in December, 1988, just a few days after his body was found.

Scott’s death thrust Steve and Noone into sudden, uncomfortable proximity. “We were supposed to be like family,” Steve writes, “but we were really two strangers.” They stayed at Noone’s parents’ house, in the Sydney suburbs, sleeping in twin beds in the same room that Scott would use when visiting. Steve asked Noone to take him to see the Manly police. At the station, an officer brought up something that Noone had reported: Scott had made a suicide attempt several years before. Steve was incredulous: “*What attempt?*” he asked. According to Noone, Scott, while at Berkeley, had confessed to a one-night stand and said that afterward, guilt-ridden and worried he’d contracted H.I.V., he’d come close to jumping off the Golden Gate Bridge. Noone told investigators that he could think of no reason since then that Scott would have wanted to end his life. Nevertheless, Steve concluded that Noone had concocted the “alleged Golden Gate attempt” in order to make Scott’s death seem like a suicide.

On the day of Scott’s funeral, Steve skipped the reception to go back to the police and voice these suspicions. The next morning, he confronted Noone: Were he and Scott having problems? Had their relationship gone sour? The exchange escalated until Noone’s mother told Steve that he was no longer welcome. Steve left with a box of his brother’s ashes, which he and Noone had divided between them. Months later, Noone learned that Steve was telling the police that Noone might be trying to “throw a cloak over the

whole affair” out of latent shame over his homosexuality. Steve speculated that Noone might have even been “with Scott on the cliff”—never mind that Noone had been on a trip to Melbourne that week, hundreds of miles away.

In the years after Scott’s death, Noone tried to find a measure of closure. He’d lost his teaching job, so he moved back in with his parents, burying his half of the ashes beneath a tree in their yard. A grief counsellor suggested to Noone that Scott might have folded his clothes as a final gesture instead of leaving a suicide note; in daily life, he’d been incorrigibly messy. Noone said that he’d always seen the Golden Gate Bridge episode as something safely in Scott’s past. Now he wondered whether he’d overlooked more recent evidence of despair. He told me, “There’s a strong sense of guilt that accompanies a finding of suicide: ‘I missed all the signs,’ ‘I’m a horrible person.’ ”

He also laid an element of blame on Steve. In a police statement, he wrote that Scott had placed “an exceptionally high premium” on his brother’s approval, implying that feelings of rejection may have influenced his decision to take his life. Later, Noone would tell the authorities that Scott had been fascinated by the famed British mathematician Alan Turing, who died by cyanide poisoning, in what was ruled a suicide, after being prosecuted for his homosexuality. Was Scott brimming with optimism for the future, as his brother maintained, or privately tormented, as his partner believed? The men’s opposing theories, murder versus suicide, became entangled in a rivalry over who had known and understood him best.

At first, the news of the Bondi Beach reinvestigation seemed to give Steve and Noone common cause. If Scott had been the victim of a homophobic attack, then each man could be exonerated in the other’s eyes. They met outside Boston to brainstorm how to push for a new police inquiry. In the end, though, Noone would come to regret their reunion because of all that it unleashed—including, he

feared, a miscarriage of justice. Since the conviction, he told me, he had worried that the man held responsible for Scott's killing had been "stitched up" for a crime that he didn't commit.

Over the years, Steve's suspicions alighted on various other figures: a friend who'd spoken to Scott by phone the week he died; the fisherman who'd waited with his body. (In his memoir, Steve writes that the latter's tale of Good Samaritanism "never felt right to me.") In 2007, he hired a former *Newsweek* journalist named Dan Glick, who'd gained some prominence covering the murder of JonBenét Ramsey, to travel to Australia and investigate homophobic violence in the area where Scott died.

Once there, Glick quickly gathered information that contradicted claims the authorities had made in ruling out foul play. The police had insisted that North Head wasn't a gay beat, but Glick met sources who said otherwise, including an employee from a local water-treatment plant who described men making "love nests" in the brush. Sydney in the eighties was sometimes called the San Francisco of the Southern Hemisphere, known for its drag clubs and bathhouses dotting a downtown strip nicknamed the Golden Mile. Yet the *AIDS* crisis created a climate of homophobia, and at gay beats the same anonymity that made for convenient hookups also provided cover for violence. Members of a certain generation told Glick that "poofter bashing" had been a kind of national sport among youths; a few assailants had Grim Reaper tattoos, which were suspected to be a symbol of homophobia, referencing an anti-*AIDS* ad campaign from the time. But many of the attacks went unpunished because victims were afraid to come forward—filing a police report could get you outed in the next day's paper—and officials were largely indifferent. As David Marr, one of Australia's most prominent gay journalists, put it to me, "There was a sense that these men got what they deserved."

Glick recently recalled that as he learned more "the scales just kept tipping" toward murder. He added, of the police's suicide finding,

“Lazy? Bungling? Homophobic? Institutional intransigence? Take your pick.” In June of 2007, the *Morning Herald* published a piece about Glick’s burgeoning theory under the headline “Maths Genius Thrown Off Cliff Top by Gay-Hate Gang.” Though “not 100 percent accurate and a little hyperbolic,” as Glick later wrote to Steve, the story yielded new leads. He heard from one local advocate who’d spent more than a decade pressing the authorities to review the cases of gay men who’d died under suspicious or unexplained circumstances; she put the odds that Scott had been murdered at 99.9 per cent.

Building a case for foul play required showing not only that the beat at North Head had a history of anti-gay violence but that Scott might have been visiting the beat in the first place. Steve’s working theory was that Scott had gone there for a hookup to celebrate a recent breakthrough in his Ph.D. project, but he needed Noone’s knowledge of Scott’s private life to help support his hunch. In an e-mail correspondence, Steve reeled off questions about Scott’s “sexual habits” and about an awkward incident, several months before his death, when Scott had brought home a case of pubic lice. Noone was incensed. “Is this the lurid stuff Glick wants to splash all over the media?” he wrote back. “Is this how you really want me (us?) to remember Scott?” Noone’s responses could be imperious and inconsistent, signalling readiness to help Steve’s investigation one moment and resistance the next. He wrote Glick off as an “ambulance-chasing checkbook hack” and privately advised friends not to engage. At the same time, he saw, as Steve apparently couldn’t, that Scott’s past infidelity, like many would-be clues, was, as he put it, a “pancake,” suggesting either suicide or murder depending on “which way it lands.”

At the second inquest, in June, 2012, a coroner returned an “open” verdict: the suspicious deaths at Bondi had “sown a seed of doubt” about the suicide ruling, she wrote, and the court could no longer say how Scott had fallen. His death was referred to the police’s cold-case division, but the team had a long backlog of higher-

priority assignments. Steve recognized that the “tragic case of a young gay American” had media appeal, and that public interest could put pressure on the police. He began pitching his story to various Australian journalists, sometimes over swanky restaurant meals. Glick himself had published a feature about the case in a major magazine, operating both as a reporter from the outside and as a paid investigator from within.

Later that year, Steve heard that a popular television program called “Australian Story” wanted to do a segment on Scott’s death. He wrote to Noone, urging him to participate, but received no reply. Noone, meanwhile, warned the producer off working with Steve, describing him as “a person struck with huge grief seeking someone to blame.” When Steve learned this, he accused Noone of sabotage, then threatened to expose him as an “unproud homosexual” who’d tried to “scuttle an investigation out of fear of being ‘outed.’ ” Noone, who told me that he was “no closet case,” was appalled to see Steve’s accusations erupt anew. He became further alienated as he watched Steve promote himself as a gay-rights activist, marching alongside the mayor of Sydney in the city’s annual Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras parade while wearing a pink T-shirt that read “Justice for Scott Johnson.”

The “Australian Story” episode went ahead without Noone’s involvement. Steve, who believed that the media attention created a “hero opportunity” for law enforcement, invited the police to co-host a press conference after the première. Over e-mail, members of the force privately agreed that, though there was “very little if any factual material” behind Steve’s claims, his public campaign seemed to have them “in a corner.” The following week, they held the press conference at police headquarters and issued an announcement: detectives would be reinvestigating the case and offering a hundred-thousand-dollar reward for information.

The head of the unsolved-homicide team, Pamela Young, was a nearly thirty-year police veteran with a sharp blond bob and a

reputation for unflappability. She had helped solve a string of previous high-profile cases, including one involving a killer who'd disemboweled a gay shopkeeper and arranged his intestines on a silver platter. Steve was initially pleased to learn that Young would oversee the investigation, having heard that she was "as tough as any cop on the force."

From the start, however, Young was rankled that the case had been given special treatment. Cold cases were generally prioritized according to the likelihood that they could be solved; Scott's death had been given a "nil" priority rating on that basis, and Young was alarmed that media outlets were prematurely characterizing it as a hate crime. When she met with Steve and Glick, they showed her a PowerPoint presentation summarizing their findings on gay bashings and suggesting leads to follow, but Steve recalls that she rebuffed them, saying to leave the investigating to the police. She was particularly put off when the men, citing past cases of police corruption, suggested that law enforcement might have somehow been implicated in Scott's death.

In October, 2014, Steve obtained an early copy of Young's report from the coroner's office. Its contents left him aghast. Young had looked into more than a hundred persons of interest, but she'd been unable to identify a single victim of a gay-hate assault at North Head, let alone an assailant who could be tied to Scott. Her most promising lead, a man code-named Freddy, had come via Steve and Glick. He'd told them that he'd acted as "bait" for gay bashers in Manly in the eighties, including at North Head. But phone taps conducted by Young's team produced nothing linking him or his associates to the case. (He later said, somewhat dubiously, that he'd mixed up North Head with another nearby beat.) Although Young allowed the possibility of a hate crime, she found suicide plausible and—drawing on Noone's story of Scott's prior anguish after a tryst—noted that Scott might have visited North Head for sex *and* ended up killing himself there.

To preempt Steve's objections, the police submitted Young's report to an independent crime commission for review, and it judged her investigation to be complete and thorough. But Steve remained disgruntled, and Young's undisguised indignation at his tactics—meddling with sources, leaking information to the press—made her a less than diplomatic spokesperson for her police work. On April 13, 2015, after lobbying by Steve, a third inquest was announced. That evening, Young went on an Australian news program to defend her findings. She accused officials of “kowtowing” to Steve and brushed off his concerns about the original police investigation, saying that it had adhered to the “standard of the day.” Steve, capitalizing on her dismissiveness, told reporters that she was determined to bury the case and ought to be removed. Privately, Young's boss had praised her work and had vowed to protect her from “any criticism or blow-back.” But now the police took her off the job.

In Australia, only one other death was known to have been the subject of a third inquest—that of Azaria Chamberlain, a nine-week-old whose disappearance, in 1980, during a family camping trip, gave rise to the phrase “A dingo ate my baby!” (A coroner eventually concluded that a dingo *had* taken Chamberlain, but the ruling came after her mother had served time for her death.) The first two inquests in Scott's case had each lasted a single day. The third, completed in 2017, spanned two weeks of hearings, and the courtroom was packed with press.

Team Scott hired a prominent Australian barrister named John Agius, who challenged any testimony that lent credence to the suicide theory. One witness was Wally Grealy, a retired psychiatric nurse who'd had a long talk with Scott at Scott's last birthday party, a week before his death. According to Grealy, the men's conversation turned to depression, and Scott mentioned that he'd had thoughts of jumping off bridges in both San Francisco and Sydney. Grealy testified that he had previously kept these

recollections to himself out of a sense of guilt that he hadn't taken Scott's disclosures more seriously.

Much of the inquest was devoted not to Scott's death per se but to arguments about the larger pattern of homophobic violence in and around Sydney at the time. One of several gay bashers who testified had served a prison sentence for murdering a gay man at the Bondi beat, by striking him until he stumbled over the cliff's edge. (The perpetrator had described this act as feeling no more consequential than throwing "a chip wrapper into a bin.") None of the bashers could be linked conclusively to activity at North Head, but Agius aimed to put forth "such a wave of information" that the coroner—who issues rulings based on a "balance of probabilities"—would deem homicide "more likely than not." In the end, this strategy prevailed. The coroner's report, which he read aloud in a final court appearance, effectively nullified Young's investigation. "I am persuaded to the requisite standard that Scott Johnson died as a result of a gay hate attack," the report concluded.

"I've walked the ten metres from Scott's clothes to the cliff edge a thousand times in my mind," Steve writes in his memoir. The psychiatrist Edward Rynearson, in the book "Retelling Violent Death," argues that those who lose loved ones to sudden violence often become stuck in an all-consuming "reenactment of that drama." Rynearson's wife died by suicide, and he asks readers to imagine a counterfactual scenario in which she'd developed a terminal disease and he'd had a clear part to play as her caretaker, with time to prepare for "a purposeful ending to a story we had constructed together." Instead, her death left him feeling like a "helpless witness" in search of "a role for myself in her dying story."

Steve writes that his family worried that "keeping Scott's case alive" was preventing him from moving on to "a less painful stage of grief." In the ABC News docuseries, the youngest of his three children, Tessa, recalls wondering, "When will it be enough?"

(“We never used the word closure,” Steve writes. “*Enough* was our word.”) Whenever Steve considered what ending his quest might look like, however, “Australia would surprise me with a new development.” The filmmaker who is adapting the story, a young gay Australian named Nicholas Verso, told me that he was compelled by Steve’s implacability: “How do you stop Sisyphus pushing his rock?”

The third coroner’s ruling cleared the way for a new investigation. It was assigned to a team led by Peter Yeomans, a seasoned detective from the sex-crimes squad, who assured Steve from the get-go, “Your brother was murdered.” In December, 2018, almost thirty years to the day since Scott’s death, the police upped the reward for information tenfold, to a million dollars.

During Yeomans’s investigation, which lasted two years, Steve came to see him “almost like a brother”; the acknowledgments in Steve’s memoir include a shout-out to Yeomans’s wife’s “world-class” lasagna. The million-dollar reward elicited hundreds of tips. Yeomans’s team pursued them one by one, but each proved to be a dead end. When he would phone Steve with updates, he’d always remind him, “Please don’t get your hopes up.” Finally, in February, 2020, Yeomans called and asked whether Steve was alone. He had some news: the team was closing in on a suspect, and they needed his help.

The suspect, Scott White (born Newman), had come to the police’s attention via a letter from his ex-wife, Helen. The son of alcoholics, he’d moved to Manly as a teen and spent much of his time there homeless, sleeping on benches. At the time Scott Johnson died, White was eighteen years old. By his twenties, he’d racked up dozens of arrests for what a judge later described as “assaults, stealing, malicious damage, offensive language, and similar offences.”

According to Helen, White took her surname when they got married, in the early nineties, in order to distance himself from his criminal history. Her letter to the police, however, depicted a man who'd remained abusive and bragged about gay bashing, saying, "The only good faggot is a dead faggot." She described seeing him meet a gay man at a Manly pub, take him to the beach, and rob him after ordering him to remove his clothes and "fold them neatly." ("He would do exactly the same thing to me right before he raped me," Helen wrote.) Near the end of their marriage, in 2008, White was charged with assault, and, as later court documents noted, a restraining order prevented him from contacting her or their children. The same year, as Helen told the police, she asked White about the Scott Johnson case after reading about it in the paper. "He talked about this blonde girly looking poof he had bashed up at north head," she wrote. "I mentioned that this guy had died and Scott said 'not my fault the dumb c@\*t ran off the edge of the cliff.' "

As Yeomans's team soon discovered, White had a younger half brother, Shane Newman, who'd briefly been considered a person of interest during Young's investigation. Newman had a documented history of assaults at gay beats—and a Grim Reaper tattoo—but he'd denied involvement in Scott's death, and his medical records turned up a leg injury that likely would have prevented him from getting to the top of North Head at the time. Newman's record listed an attack on a man in a public bathroom, but this was apparently an error: a mug shot revealed that White, not Newman, had been arrested for the crime. If Newman couldn't have killed Scott, the police reasoned, perhaps his brother had.



*Michael Noone, Scott's partner, catalyzed Steve's investigation but came to distrust its findings.*  
*Photograph by Adam Ferguson for the New Yorker*

The detectives brought in White for questioning, then tapped his phone calls, but produced no evidence linking him to Scott's death. So, as a last resort, they devised an undercover operation in hopes of extracting a confession. This is where Steve came in: in March, 2020, at Yeomans's request, he flew to Australia and, in a ploy meant to generate more press, announced a fake additional million-dollar reward of his own money.

Steve has praised the subsequent operation as a “ruse that was worthy of ‘Mission Impossible.’ ” In the docuseries, he explains that undercover officers approached White, pretending to be out for the reward money, and that White gamely offered to bring them to North Head to demonstrate how he'd killed Scott, saying, “Let me

take you up there and show you.” According to White’s account and an agreed statement of facts later filed in court, White met Scott at a bar and they went together to North Head, then got into a fight; during an exchange of blows, White struck Scott and Scott stumbled off the cliff’s edge. But the Australian media have been subject to a non-publication order pertaining to the evidence, so the entirety of what he told the police has never been made public.

Rick Feneley, the *Morning Herald* journalist, has published several articles supporting the narrative of justice fulfilled, but he told me, “The great dissatisfaction of the case is that we still don’t know what the hell really happened on that cliff top.”

Even Steve wasn’t fully satisfied by White’s confession. He’d always pictured Scott alone at North Head, sunbathing in the nude, suddenly ambushed by attackers. He couldn’t imagine his laconic little brother, who didn’t drink, socializing with a homeless stranger a decade his junior, much less getting into a physical altercation. “Scott Johnson never threw a punch in his life,” Steve later said in a victim-impact statement. “This is something a big brother knows better than anyone.”

The operation targeting White involved three encounters with undercover officers in the course of a week. Through a source associated with the case, I obtained transcripts of those meetings. The first occurred on March 13, 2020, when an officer visited White’s apartment, in an affordable-housing complex outside Sydney. White was living by himself on a disability pension. His mother had died a year and a half before, and he had taken in her pet dog. The floor of the home was littered with the animal’s feces.

The officer introduced himself as a private investigator named Mitch and asked to chat about a “business opportunity.” He explained that he’d been looking into Scott Johnson’s death for an American firm when a more lucrative idea occurred to him. A relative of Mitch’s had terminal cancer, he said, and wanted to “make the best of a shit situation.” Mitch added, “He wants some

money, I want some money, and I'm hoping that you, you want some money too."

White didn't seem interested. "Ah, I'm right, mate," he said—Aussie for "I'm O.K." Mitch then said that, according to sources involved in the investigation into Scott's death, White was already "square in the frame" for the crime anyway. The dying relative, Mitch explained, was willing to take the fall for Scott's killing; then someone else would turn him in, claim the reward money, and split it with them. But the relative lacked enough information about the crime to seem like a credible culprit. If White could meet with the dying fellow and coach him on what to tell the cops, he could dodge the charge and get a cut of the money.

"I don't know," White said. "I haven't done anything."

Mitch told him, "I just wanna make sure you understand everything I'm saying."

"I don't," he replied. Psychological evaluations of White for the prosecution and the defense later deemed him fit to stand trial but said that he was suffering cognitive defects stemming from some combination of alcoholism and congenital factors. A statement that White's sister provided to a forensic evaluator for the defense listed tasks that he couldn't complete on his own, including making appointments and reading a restaurant menu.

"What am I supposed to say?" White told Mitch. "I just—I don't know what's going on."

Mitch tried to go back over the plan, but White apologized and said that he'd wait and see "what happens with the coppers."

Mitch returned a few days later and told White, "It's getting even worse for you." He pulled out a news story about Steve's million-dollar addition to the reward.

“I don’t want nothing out of it,” White said. “It’s got nothing to do with me.” The story quoted Yeomans saying that the police had zeroed in on a suspect.

“That’s you,” Mitch told White.

“I didn’t do it, that’s the thing,” White said. He still seemed confused about what the plan entailed. “I’m slow, mate,” he explained. Mitch then presented White with what he said was a police document. “The investigation is now focused on a particular individual, Scott White Newman,” Mitch read aloud. White again insisted that he had nothing to do with Scott’s death, saying, “I’ve never seen that guy in my life.”

Two days later, Mitch returned once more, accompanied by an officer posing as his sick relative, named Harry, and White continued to deny any involvement. But he appeared increasingly distressed by his inability to deliver what the men needed, and increasingly receptive to the notion that he might be implicated, as the putative police document claimed. “If they’re saying that I did, I must have did it,” White said. “I don’t know.”

“Do you think that it was you and you just can’t remember?” Mitch asked.



*Victoria Roberts*

*“Dance, Howard. It’s the only cure for now.”*

*Cartoon by Victoria Roberts*

“Yeah, probably.”

“Why do you think that?”

White replied, “Well, it says it in the paper, so.”

It was the undercover officers, not White, who introduced the idea of visiting the site of Scott’s death. “Jump in my car,” Mitch said. “We’ll drive to Manly.” The transcripts from their subsequent trek up North Head call into question the validity of White’s confession as well as the way it has been presented by authorities and reproduced in the press.

As the three men entered a trail at the base of the headland, Mitch told White, “You lead the way.” In the docuseries, one of Yeomans’s co-investigators, John Breda, explains that the trio hiked to the cliff top with White “directing where to go.” But as they proceeded White repeatedly indicated that he was unsure where he was heading. He knew the area but said that he hadn’t been there for decades. “I don’t think I would’ve come this far,” he said at one point. Mitch and Harry asked him about the “right spot,” but all he could offer was “North Head” and “near the ledge.” When they pressed, he said, “I don’t know. Let’s go back.”

During the drive to Manly, White had mentioned that since Mitch’s first visit he’d had a dream in which he was with Scott “up at North Head.” Now, when the officers fished for recollections of the night of Scott’s death, White said, “Well, in my dream I was with him. You know, he got undressed or something. I don’t know.”

“Just think about it, mate,” Mitch said, encouraging slippage between dream and memory. Harry asked why Scott had taken off his clothes, but White seemed uncertain. Harry asked where the

two had met, and White said, “Uh, the Brighton,” referring to a pub in Manly. Harry asked how they’d got up to North Head.

“How would I get up here?” White wondered aloud.

Brushing aside the question, Mitch said, “Anyways, you come up and what happened?”

“We were just talkin’ and that. That was in my dreams. That’s about it.”

At one point, White stopped at what he thought could be the site of Scott’s death. In fact, they’d overshot, arriving at a lookout where a metal railing guarded the cliff’s edge. Mitch pressed again for a description of what had happened. White’s fragmentary response forms the core of the story that was used to convict him.

“Tryin’ not to make things up,” White said. “I think we had a fight. That’s all I can remember.” Mitch prodded him further.

“Mmm, he fell,” White said. Mitch said that he still needed more.

“I hit him,” White finally offered. “He hit me. He stumbled back. I went to grab him and he just stumbled back.” White seemed to lose confidence that they were in the right location. “I’m not quite sure if this is the place where he fell,” he said.

In the docuseries, Steve says, “Only the killer would know the specific rock where it happened.” But the relevant stretch of North Head spans several hundred feet and features a series of similar outcroppings, so it is hardly safe to assume that someone would remember a precise location on the cliff’s edge which he’d visited more than thirty years before. (Mick Fuller, who was the police commissioner at the time of the operation, went to the site; he told me, “I don’t think I could take you back to the spot,” not seeming to realize how this might undermine the very premise of the exercise.) It was a sweltering day. White griped about the heat and

said that his back was killing him. The men began retracing their steps, but now White maintained that the spot with the railing was the right one.

“Let’s go home,” he said again. “I can’t deal with this anymore.” Harry kept prodding him about what he and Scott had done, but White’s answers were scant and inconsistent. Did they have sex? “Nuh.” Why did Scott get naked? “I dunno.” During Young’s investigation, she had often warned Steve against publicizing information about Scott’s case. To test confessions, the police need “holdback evidence,” details that only someone with firsthand knowledge of a crime would be able to provide. But when the officers asked White for even widely reported details, such as how Scott’s clothes had been left, White couldn’t give a clear response.



*Steve Johnson exerted pressure on the police in part by building shrewd alliances with L.G.B.T.Q. activists and the Australian media.*

*Photograph by Dan Himbrechts / AAP Image / Reuters*

Harry told him, “It sounds like you’re just makin’ it up to please me, mate, you know? You can’t do that.”

“Yeah.”

Mitch kept asking about the clothes. “Come on, mate,” he said.

“Stop pushin’ me,” White replied.

The detectives had installed hidden cameras along the trail. White and the officers eventually reached an outcropping about thirty feet away from the correct site—close enough to be captured on video but, as aerial police photos of the cliff top that I obtained show, still not at the actual ledge from which Scott fell. Breda, who was watching a live feed with Yeomans from an unmarked car at the base of North Head, has touted this as the operation’s eureka moment. In the docuseries, he says, “When Scott White walked into view, we knew then we had the right person.”

According to a report later filed by Mitch, he prompted White to describe his alleged struggle with Scott. White again said that Scott had staggered backward off the edge, but the officers didn’t seem satisfied that he meant it. Harry asked, “Scotty, you’re not just sayin’ this to help me, are you?”

“Huh?”

“You’re not just—”

“No,” White replied. “I’m sayin’ it to help me, too.”

Two months later, Yeomans arrested White outside his home. The police recorded the perp walk and shared it with the press. Though the story that White had told the undercover officers didn’t suggest an intentional killing, he was charged with murder. His legal team planned to contest the admissibility of the undercover evidence, but at a hearing in January, 2022, just as a judge’s associate began reciting the charges against him, White interrupted.

“Guilty!” he exclaimed. “I’m guilty.”

Blindsided, White’s solicitor and barrister rushed him out of the courtroom to confer. According to notes from their conversation, White apologized and said, “I am better off in here. I’m safe in here. This is too much stress.” He had raised the idea of changing

his plea before, but that morning his barrister, Belinda Rigg, had confirmed with him that he planned to plead not guilty. “I didn’t do it, but I’m saying I did it,” White now told her.

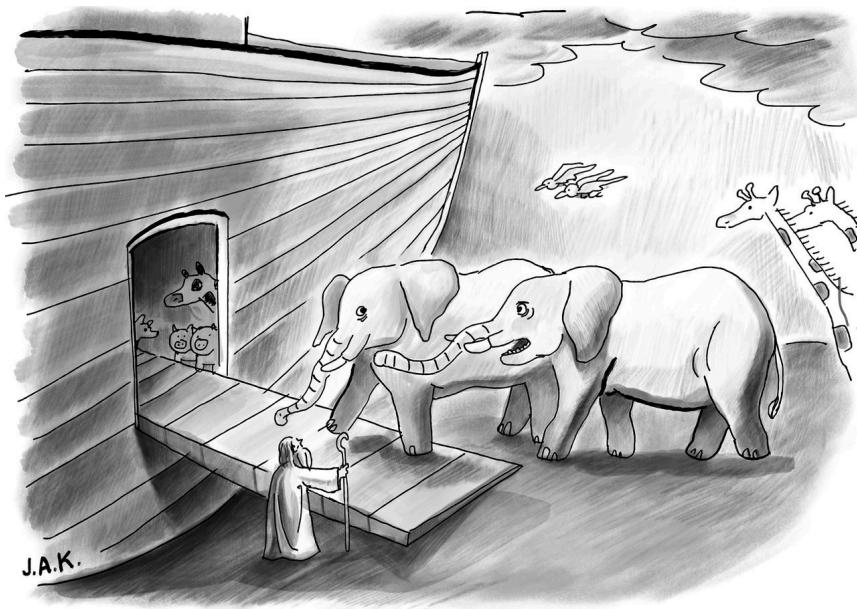
Rigg explained that they had a strong case to make that both his admissions and Helen’s accusations were unreliable. Helen claimed to have first asked White about Scott’s death in 1998, after reading a news article around the tenth anniversary of his fall. As Rigg noted elsewhere, though, the case didn’t become a subject of media interest until Steve’s campaign began years later, and database searches of two papers that Helen mentioned turned up no coverage from 1998. Helen also claimed that she’d written to Yeomans without knowledge of the police reward, but she’d come forward—having allegedly wondered about White’s involvement for years—just a few weeks after the first million dollars was announced. In the end, she received a portion of that money. (Through Breda, Helen declined to be interviewed, and she did not respond to my attempts to reach her by phone or e-mail.)

White agreed to continue contesting the charges, but the judge did not allow his guilty plea to be withdrawn. Several months later, he was convicted of murder. Although the case had been widely described as a hate crime, the judge noted explicitly in her ruling that White’s offense did not meet that standard, because he’d “made no admission” of acting out of “hatred towards a particular group.”

Soon after, Yeomans met with Steve to show him a selection of the evidence against White. In Steve’s book, portions of which he says were “fact-checked” by Yeomans, he describes a police interrogation of White following his arrest. Steve writes that White initially denied his guilt and claimed that he’d falsely confessed, but then “made a thrusting motion” and said, “*I pushed him. He went over.*” Steve adds, “At that point, the suspect seemed to realise he had said too much.” But this account takes White’s words out of context. In the full transcript of the interview, White is not

confessing but, rather, narrating what he'd told the undercover officers, and he immediately adds, "Like I said, that was all full of shit because I just had to say somethin' to get these guys off me back."

The murder conviction didn't last. White's legal team challenged it, and in late 2022 an appeals court ruled that the judge had erred in not letting White withdraw his guilty plea. White could now apply to do so and then argue his innocence, but a barrister familiar with the case, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, told me that White's cognitive limitations and emotional "lability" complicated the prospect of a murder trial. "He sort of agrees with the last person he has spoken to, which is really problematic," the barrister explained.



*"You insist we're 'just friends,' but then you invite me to stuff like this."*  
Cartoon by Jason Adam Katzenstein

That October, White was recorded talking to a niece by phone from prison, and she brought up a TV segment about his arrest that she'd seen. According to a transcript of their conversation, which someone close to the case read aloud to me, the niece recalled discussing the segment with a relative, saying, "It shows Uncle Scott, and he's telling the police that he pushed—"

White interrupted her and, as if in his own defense, said, “He hit me, I hit him, and I went to grab him. That was all there was, so I don’t know where that push come from.”

White’s legal team was already in talks about a manslaughter plea, and Yeomans seized on the recorded exchange to clinch the deal. Accounting for the time that White had already served, the court sentenced him to nine years in prison.

Yeomans has given many interviews about the investigation. In the docuseries, drawing on Helen White’s testimony, he describes Scott White as a career criminal with an established method of “befriending gay men in pubs, in hotels, and then taking them to a secluded spot, assaulting them and robbing them.” Yeomans explains that, according to Helen, White collected his victims’ wallets. For the police, she sketched pictures of some of them from memory, and one, Yeomans says, was “very, very similar to the type of wallet Scott Johnson had.” He adds, of White’s alleged modus operandi, “So the old saying ‘A leopard doesn’t change their spots’ is very apt.”

Yeomans declined to speak with me, but Breda, his co-investigator, who is now retired, admitted that their team had been unable to recover any wallets or verify a single incident in White’s past which matched the pattern Helen described. Breda brought up two other sources, however, who had helped to implicate White. A prison informant alleged that White had told him about looking over the cliff’s edge and seeing Scott’s body, Breda said. And an old friend of White’s, who was thought to have associated with gay bashers in the Manly area, claimed to recall White saying, in December, 1988, that something “terrible” had happened at North Head. I asked to see these witnesses’ police statements, but Breda could not provide them, and both the prosecutor’s office and the court refused to share the prosecution’s filings on the ground that the materials had never been presented at trial. (My attempts to reach the friend were unsuccessful.) Breda did tell me that, along

with Helen, both the friend and the prison informant received a share of the million-dollar reward.

It's possible, given White's violent history and his cognitive impairments, that he could have killed Scott and simply forgotten, as the undercover officers repeatedly suggested. (Experts for the defense concluded that White had alcohol-induced dementia.) But Breda acknowledged that the statements from Helen and the other witnesses would mean little in court without White's self-implicating remarks. "If he didn't say anything, we would have nothing," Breda told me.

The laws regulating undercover operations are relatively lenient in Australia; in Canada, which has long used similar tactics, judges have challenged the targeting of suspects who are socially isolated or cognitively impaired. A psychologist who evaluated White for the defense told me that she'd worked on another Australian case involving a similar undercover strategy and found White's case uniquely concerning for the "unrelenting psychological pressure" that it placed on someone who "didn't have the capacity to deal with that pressure." A second barrister familiar with the proceedings said, of the initial judge's uncritical acceptance of White's guilty plea, "I don't think I've seen a case that's ever disquieted me the way this did." Yet almost no media coverage has questioned the outcome, in part because the evidence has been inaccessible.

One exception is an article that appeared in the Australian magazine *Inside Story* in 2023. Written by Jeremy Gans, a scholar of criminal law, it points out that, in the various court proceedings between Scott's death and White's conviction, five different judges and coroners came to five different conclusions about what had happened. "None of the previous four stood the test of time," Gans writes. In other circumstances, he told me, this convoluted procedural history might have attracted more scrutiny. In Scott's case, though, progressives who would usually be attuned to abuses

in the Australian criminal-justice system are the same figures demanding accountability for unredressed hate crimes. White's conviction seemed to offer a satisfying resolution not only on a personal level, for Steve's family, but on a societal one. As Gans put it, it's politically inconvenient to acknowledge the possibility that "one miscarriage of justice would end up resulting in another."

This past spring, I travelled to Sydney. Steve declined to come with me, but I arranged to be there when Noone was in town for a wedding. One morning, we drove out to the Cessnock Correctional Centre, a prison two hours north. Inside, we passed through security and joined visiting families in a fluorescent-lit gathering area. A guard opened a door, and about a dozen inmates clad in prison greens filed in. All but one headed straight to meet their guests. The last man lingered by the door, looking mildly confused. He had a ruddy face and a pronounced underbite. Noone, recognizing him as White, strode over.

"Scott!" Noone exclaimed, with put-on familiarity. "You don't remember me, do you?"

White shook his head. "My memory is going," he said. He'd slimmed down in the five years since his arrest, and his reddish-brown hair, once dishevelled, was now buzzed short. He directed us to a table that was strewn with bits of potato chips and, in a sheepish gesture of hospitality, swept them off with his hand.

"We've only actually looked at each other once, at your sentencing," Noone said. "I've always wanted to talk to you, and I haven't known—"

"I didn't do it," White interjected. "I've never met the guy in my life." Then, with a chuckle, he added, "But that's what we all say."

Noone explained that Scott Johnson had been his romantic partner, and White's face betrayed a momentary alarm. But then he nodded.

“I’m sorry about what happened,” he said quietly.

“Thank you,” Noone replied.

White couldn’t recall the last visitor he’d had in prison. He and Helen have six children, but he explained that he’d fallen out of touch with all of them. According to a psychological evaluation, he blamed Helen for the loss of his relationship with his children and claimed that she had “made up false allegations of assault.” He told me that Helen was “a backstabber,” but he added, “She’s the mother of my kids. I love her.” Newman, his brother, lives two hours away and is raising a son on his own. He and White speak often by phone but rarely see each other. (Newman later told me that he had turned his life around after becoming a father and was loath to visit a prison with his kid, because “monkey see, monkey do.”) White spends his days working in the prison’s recycling facility and watching TV. “I don’t mix much, but I have a few mates,” he said.

One of the many questions stemming from White’s statements is that of his sexuality. At North Head, White told the undercover officers that he was gay but that he didn’t want his brother to find out. In the docuseries, Tessa, Steve’s child, who identifies as queer, describes this as an added dimension of the tragedy, saying, “There has to be some really intense self-hatred involved to do what he did to a fellow gay person.” But both Helen and the police have accused White of lying about being gay in order to avoid a hate-crime charge. In Helen’s letter to the police, she wrote that White and other homeless young men in Manly used to perform sexual favors on an older man in exchange for drug money. Breda, the detective, cited this as a tidy explanation for White’s alleged crime. “That’s why he hated gays,” he told me. “So now we’ve got a motive.”

White’s own comments on the subject, however, suggest a more tortured conflation between homosexuality and sexual abuse. He

told one forensic expert that he had nothing against gay people but that he disliked “poofs,” whom he defined as older men who preyed on vulnerable youths. When the expert asked whether White had been abused, he replied that the topic was “a can of worms you just don’t want to open.” During my prison visit, he spoke of “pedophiles” who gave the gay community “a bad name” by molesting boys in public bathrooms. Later, during a video call, White said that he’s not gay. I asked why he’d told the police that he was, but he didn’t give a clear answer. At one point, he glanced left and right, looking agitated, as if preparing to divulge a terrible secret. “We’ve got no privacy,” he said. Then he buried his face in his hands and began crying.

At Cessnock, I asked White why, if he was innocent, he had pleaded guilty twice. He repeated what he’d told his legal team: “I wanted it to be over and done with.” White has a history of depression and suicidality, and during a jail stint in the nineties he tried to hang himself. He told the undercover officers that if he were locked back up he’d do so again. His brother was a “hard man,” White explained to me, but he himself was “soft,” and he feared the police, who’d been violent during past run-ins. The conditions at Cessnock, however, turned out to be better than he’d expected. He’d managed to get sober, and he was receiving medication for his back pain and for Type 2 diabetes. Through Helen’s reward money, he added, he was indirectly providing for his family. “I reckon Scottie’s reached out and given me a gift, if you believe in that kind of thing,” White said. His sentence ends in 2029, and he is up for parole next year. But he explained that he hoped to find a way to stay in prison indefinitely.

After Pamela Young was removed from Scott’s investigation, she took a leave from the police force and never returned. Over the years, though, she and Noone stayed in touch, nursing a shared resentment at how Steve had sidelined them. One day in April, Noone and I rode a ferry from downtown Sydney to Manly, where Young met us on the wharf. She was dressed in a breezy ensemble

of white and pink, and her bob had grown out, but she'd retained the punchiness that she'd displayed on the force.

She joked to Noone about Steve, "The irony is we actually have a friendship *because* of him."

"But we got rid of the middleman," Noone replied.

It was a blindingly bright afternoon. On the Corso, a pedestrian mall running from harbor to sea, surfers and barefoot children streamed past juice bars and shops selling novelty Speedos. We walked in the direction of the beach, past the Brighton, White and Scott's purported meeting place, where patrons sat watching rugby on giant screens. Tracing the path that Scott and White would have travelled on the night in question, we followed the shoreline to a hiking trail that led to a sandstone wall marking an informal boundary of the beat. Noone recalled that he had accompanied Young to the site of Scott's death once before, during her investigation. He'd brought along his husband, and together the men had built a "silly little pyramid" of rocks in Scott's honor. Back then, Young had G.P.S. coördinates to guide them to the correct spot. Now she and Noone had to rely on memory to determine where to turn off the trail toward the cliff's edge.

After trudging a few hundred yards through waist-high scrub, we emerged onto a rocky ledge overlooking the sea. I gazed out. The sky was a smooth gradient against the slurred surface of the water. The drop was vertiginous and terrifying, but Young sidled right up to the edge. "You'll get used to it," she said. She and Noone examined the topography and agreed that we weren't on "Scott's rock," as they called it. (On Young's first visit to Scott's rock, she'd lain on her stomach and had her deputy grip her ankles while she peered down, to "see what the victim saw.") Noone said, "I wonder if we should try one farther along."

He charged ahead, his fingers fluttering anxiously at his sides as if playing invisible piano keys. Our pilgrimage provided a chance for him to challenge Steve's control over Scott's legacy. Noone said that he found it offensive to see Scott flattened into a "poster child" for anti-gay violence. Steve writes proudly that Scott would "blush" to know of his public image, but Noone told me, "He would have absolutely hated it." The true, private Scott had been "swallowed up" by the media narrative and "replaced by something he had no part in creating," he said. Noone was eager to revisit certain "pancakes" from the case. He'd always wanted to believe, for instance, that Scott had visited North Head to be in nature, not to have anonymous sex. Gesturing around us, he said, "Scottie was very handsome. He didn't *need* to do this kind of thing."

Young's views on the case are aligned with Noone's in most respects, but on this point she pushed back. "Anything is possible," she said. "Loved ones behave in surprising ways."

Young and I hung behind while Noone wandered farther and farther along the edge of the headland, scouting other outcroppings. He vanished now and then behind the brush, discernible only by the brim of a sun hat. Eventually, he returned to us, still unconvinced that he'd found the exact spot. "Let's get out of here," he said. On the walk back to the road, we could still hear the ocean's incessant churn. "I wish I could remember him without having to think about the death," Noone said. "And sometimes I can."

In 2022, prompted in part by Scott's case, the government of New South Wales, the Australian state that encompasses Sydney, launched a Special Commission of Inquiry Into L.G.B.T.I.Q. Hate Crimes. A report from the commission, released the following year, criticized systemic police negligence in cases involving gay victims and found that anti-gay bias was a factor in many deaths that had gone uninvestigated. In one case from the nineties, officers told the daughter of a middle-aged man who'd been bludgeoned to death

that he'd died of a heart attack, leading her to unwittingly dispose of evidence in the form of a used condom. Another case involved the fatal assault, in Sydney's gay district, of Crispin Dye, a former manager for the rock band AC/DC. The police had failed to send his bloodied clothing to forensics for analysis or even to check the pockets of his shirt.

Scott's death lay outside the special commission's purview because the criminal proceedings were under way at the time. But the report included a list of confidential recommendations to law enforcement. One of them, I heard from several sources, was a proposal that Scott's death be reexamined yet again. The head of the commission, a judge named John Sackar, retired last year after a long and decorated career. During a conversation at his stately, taxidermy-filled home in Sydney, he told me that he hadn't seen the undercover evidence against White but that he had no doubt about the integrity of the conviction; in his report, Sackar describes Young's findings as tainted by "institutional defensiveness." Though he denied that he'd issued a formal recommendation on Scott's case, he said that he believed it warranted a further look because he suspected that White may not have acted alone. Notwithstanding the fact that the police had ruled out Shane Newman as a suspect in the investigation, Sackar raised a theory I'd heard bandied about: that both brothers could have been involved in the crime. "If you start looking at the shelves in that cupboard, it's highly likely you'll find other lines of inquiry that have never been undertaken," Sackar said.

For more than two decades, Steve stored his half of Scott's remains in his study, "wanting to keep him with me until I had more answers." After the second inquest opened the possibility of a murder investigation, in 2012, he climbed the Matterhorn, which he'd first scaled with Scott after college, and scattered his brother's ashes at the summit. Steve often speaks of his quest for justice as if it were one of those hikes from the brothers' youth—a steep ascent to a hard-won pinnacle where everything is clear. But in his

memoir he recounts a poignant moment of doubt at the time of White's arrest. As he watched the "hopeless fellow I saw being handcuffed and placed in a police car on TV," he writes, "I wanted to believe White was the killer, but I had to ask myself if my love for Scott blinded me." Breda said that Steve had never seen the complete police transcripts, and when I returned from Australia I e-mailed Steve offering to show them to him. He declined, citing "legal impediments" to disclosing them.

A tragic irony of the case is that the person who is most sanguine about White's conviction seems to be White himself. The court hearing where he blurted out his guilty plea wasn't open to the public, but Steve was granted special permission to attend. After a family vacation in Hawaii, he flew on to Sydney alone. It was his twentieth trip to Australia. He was sitting in the gallery watching as White was whisked away to confer with his counsellors in private. White told them, "I just want it to be put to rest, for Scott, for the brother. He needs to let this go." During my visit with White, he said that the outcome had given "everyone what they wanted" and that he worried his claim of innocence might disturb whatever sense of peace Steve had achieved. White explained that he understood an older brother's sense of protectiveness, and he brought up Newman. "We're like this," he said, raising two crossed fingers. "If I'd lost my brother, I'd do the same." ♦

*Eren Orbey, a contributing writer, has been writing for The New Yorker since 2016.*

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<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/10/20/did-a-brothers-quest-for-justice-go-too-far>

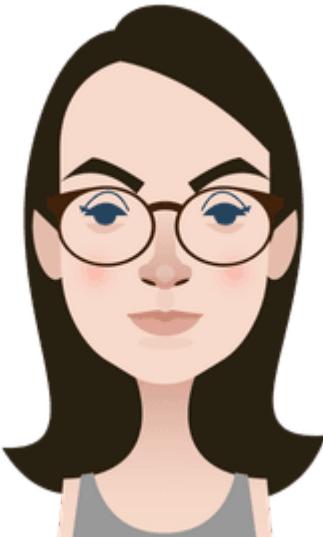
## Takes

- **[Alexandra Schwartz on Joan Acocella's “The Frog and the Crocodile”](#)**

Acocella doesn't plead for her subject, or condemn her. She reads Simone de Beauvoir's work and life in light of each other, and the results illuminate our understanding of both.

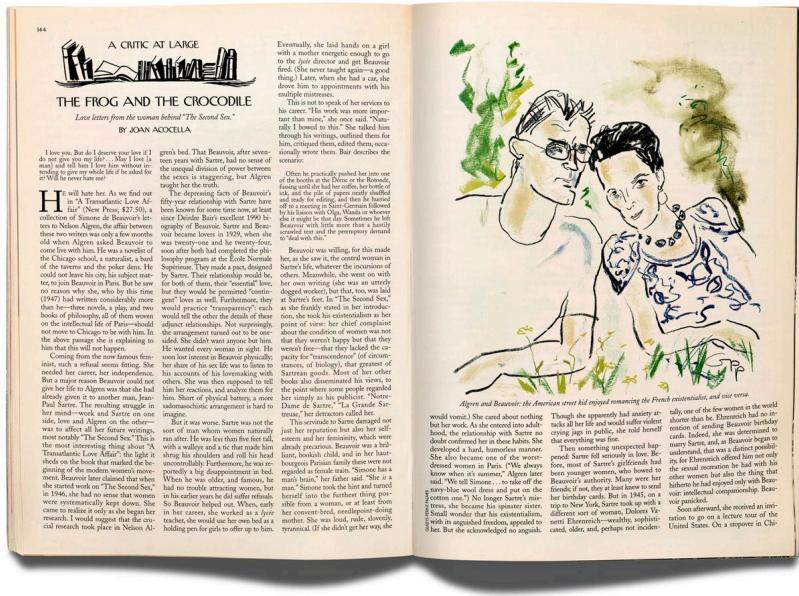
## Takes

## Alexandra Schwartz on Joan Acocella's "The Frog and the Crocodile"



*By Alexandra Schwartz*

October 12, 2025



*August 24 & 31, 1998*

When I am stuck on a sentence or trying to wrestle an idea into shape, I turn to Joan Acocella. As a critic, I admire the sophistication of her thought; as a reader, I love the funny,

unpretentious plainness of her language. Criticism can be gruelling to write—all that explication! all that judgment!—but it should be a pleasure to read. This may be one reason that Acocella, who got a Ph.D. in comparative literature, left academia for magazines, arriving at *The New Yorker* in 1992, at the start of Tina Brown's tenure as editor. It may explain, too, why one of my favorite Acocella pieces is “[The Frog and the Crocodile](#),” which takes pleasure, and the practical and moral complications it creates, as its subject.

Acocella’s essay deals with the improbable five-year affair between the Left Bank philosopher Simone de Beauvoir and the tough-guy Chicago writer Nelson Algren—its title comes from their pet names for each other—and was occasioned by the posthumous publication of Beauvoir’s love letters. Acocella begins with a block quote from one of the letters, a rarely attempted flex that may be the critic’s equivalent of opening a song with the bridge. We hear Beauvoir, unimpeded, as she professes her love and confesses her insecurity: Will Algren hate her if she cannot devote her life to him? Then, where Algren should answer with sweet reassurance, we get Acocella, shining the bright light of truth in our eyes. “He will hate her,” she writes. Talk about cutting to the chase.

“[The Frog and the Crocodile](#)” was published in 1998, in an issue whose theme was private lives. This sounds fun, and it is. Beauvoir’s letters show a softer, surprisingly endearing side of the pioneering feminist, and Acocella mines them for the delightful and the dirty. The same formidable woman who produced “[The Second Sex](#)” and “[The Ethics of Ambiguity](#)” also declared herself Algren’s “own little love token,” enthusing over his “peculiar ways in boat-cabins” and erotic use of mirrors. Is it gossip to examine such things in print? Maybe. But gossip has a legitimate purpose; it gives us human news. It’s also touching. With Algren, Beauvoir experienced sexual happiness for the first time. “Good for her,” Acocella writes, and she means it.

Some critics insist that the private lives of artists and thinkers should have no bearing on how we receive their work. But books and music and paintings and ideas come from somewhere; they are human pursuits. The modern tendency, as Acocella notes, is to go in the opposite direction and insist “that celebrated authors’ lives be as admirable as their books.” This fear of moral contamination has only grown. The challenge of evaluating Beauvoir is that both her life and her work were extraordinary in ways that are deeply, bafflingly contradictory. How could the woman who wrote so piercingly about women’s subjugation subjugate herself to not just one but two men? As Acocella observes, “A major reason Beauvoir could not give her life to Algren was that she had already given it to another man, Jean-Paul Sartre.”

Acocella doesn’t plead on Beauvoir’s behalf or condemn her. Instead, she reads the work and life in light of each other, and the results illuminate our understanding of both. Take “The Second Sex,” which Beauvoir wrote during her liaison with Algren. In that book, Acocella says, “we see the reverberations of Beauvoir’s discovery of the power of sex, its ability to create hunger in the woman.” Algren, stung by Beauvoir’s independence, treated her miserably. But it took her a long time to leave. To Beauvoir’s disgusted diagnosis of women’s “masochistic madness,” Acocella responds, “These words, I am sorry to report, were written before, not after, Beauvoir hung around Algren’s summer cabin for two years in a row, apologizing for her tears.”

Yet, Acocella goes on, “it is possible that the best writers on social injustice—certainly the most moving—are those who grew up when the injustice in question was not viewed as a problem, and who therefore say things that get them in trouble, later, with holders of more correct views, views that they themselves gave birth to.” This is an important point, one that acknowledges the complexity of living a life bounded, as all lives are, by history. It is easy to be harsh to the blinkered past. But Acocella shows that

generosity and rigor are complementary critical tools, and that our own lives are richer for grappling with those of others. ♦

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## **Read the original story.**



### **The Frog and the Crocodile**

Love letters from the woman behind “The Second Sex.”

*Alexandra Schwartz has been a staff writer at The New Yorker since 2016, and is a co-host of the magazine’s Critics at Large podcast.*

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<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/takes/alexandra-schwartz-on-joan-acocellas-the-frog-and-the-crocodile>

# Shouts & Murmurs

## • [Ask the Dog Doc](#)

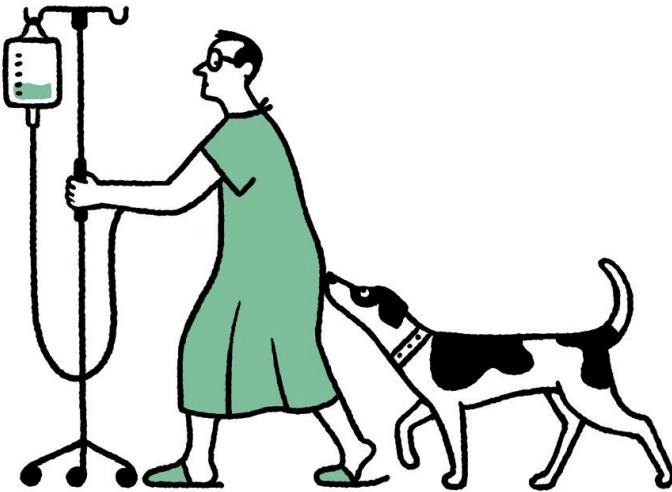
C'mon, I'm a dog. We sense these things. It's a tumor. I give the guy two weeks.

[Shouts & Murmurs](#)

## Ask the Dog Doc

By [Bruce Headlam](#) and [Stephen Sherrill](#)

October 13, 2025



*Illustration by Luci Gutiérrez*

Dogs with pessimistic personalities are better than more optimistic dogs at detecting cancer.

—*Scientific American, August 12, 2025.*

*Scene: The morning break room inside a busy metropolitan hospital. Two doctors and a dog sit around a table reviewing patient files.*

*Doctor A:* That brings us to Mr. Henderson, who came in last week. Still weak, blood pressure low. It's a mystery.

*Dog:* Henderson's got cancer. The only mystery here is what Sylvia in radiology sees in you.

*Doctor A:* What makes you think there's something between Sylvia and me?

*Dog:* C'mon, I'm a dog. We sense these things. I give it two weeks.

*Doctor B:* Why do you think Henderson has cancer?

*Dog:* Smelled some organic compounds on his breath. Picked up traces of blood in his stool. It's either cancer or the worst case of Happy-Tail Syndrome I've ever seen.

*Doctor B:* I don't buy it. I want a full workup. Blood, imaging.

*Dog:* While you do that, I'll do a full workup on a hair ball the size of a colostomy bag. Tomorrow, I'll still be right and there's a good chance your patient will be dead.

*Doctor B:* Yeah, but I went to medical school.

*Dog:* Look to the left of you, look to the right. Only one of us has other people pick up his poop in a bag. And it isn't you, "Doctor."

*Doctor A:* What do you recommend?

*Dog:* Surgery. Open the bastard up. If I had opposable thumbs, I'd do it myself.

*Doctor B:* You can't be serious.

*Dog:* My nose is a hundred thousand times more sensitive than any human's. And right now I'm smelling a rat. Why don't you tell me what's going on, Valdez?

*Doctor A:* Administration has been giving us grief. About you.

*Dog:* What is it this time?

*Doctor A:* Last week, you lifted your leg on the attending.

*Dog:* He wouldn't let me near the patient. That's my territory.

*Doctor A:* There was another incident. Remember Mrs. Levy?

*Dog:* Sure, I picked up a scent from her.

*Doctor A:* Only she wasn't a patient. She was hosting the hospital's gala fund-raiser. Her husband is our single biggest donor.

*Dog:* So?

*Doctor B:* So you shoved your nose into her groin.

*Dog:* And he's upset because that's his job? I'm a dog. Putting my nose where it doesn't belong is just part of the deal.

*Doctor A:* It's not just that. Hopkins says you missed a tumor last week.

*Dog:* Hopkins wouldn't leave the exam room. The only thing I could smell was his cologne. Nice if you like chloroform.

*Doctor A:* We can't—you can't—afford those kinds of mistakes. We're bringing in backup.

*The door opens. A cat comes in and sits at the table.*

*Doctor A:* This is Daisy. We had her look at Mr. Henderson. Came up negative.

*Dog:* You're kidding me, right? Cats can't detect cancer. They're basically ferrets without the personality.

*Cat:* Meow.

*Doctor A:* We're just asking you to work with her, dammit. Why make everything so hard?

*Dog:* And why don't you just bring in monkeys and throw feces at the patients? At least that would be fun.

*Doctor A:* This hospital puts up with you because you've been damn good for a long time. Maybe the best. But, if you're slipping, I can't protect you. I'm getting pressure, too. From downtown.

*Dog:* A squirrel?

*Doctor A:* The mayor!

*Dog:* Oh, right. Well, if you need an emotional-support animal, get yourself a doodle. They weren't bred for their brains, either.

*The doctors and the cat file out, leaving the dog alone.*

*Scene: The same room the next morning, the dog at the table. The doctors and Daisy come in.*

*Doctor A:* The surgeon called. She opened up Henderson last night. You were right. Cancer. She got it all. You saved his life.

*Doctor B:* Who's a good boy?

*Dog:* Somebody tell me he didn't just say that.

*Doctor A:* Mr. Henderson will be awake soon. He'll want to thank you.

*Dog:* I did my job. I don't need a pat on the head. If I was right—again—why the hell is the cat still here?

*Doctor A:* You should thank Daisy. She's the one who persuaded the surgeon to trust your instincts. She came to this hospital because she said she wanted to work with the best. You.

*The doctors leave.*

*Dog:* Listen, Daisy, this isn't easy for me to say. I was wrong about you. You're O.K., Daisy. I guess you can teach an old dog . . . well, you know what I mean. [Pauses.] Dammit! The vending machine is out of Milk-Bones again.

*Cat:* Meow. ♦

*Bruce Headlam* is the editorial director of Aventine, a nonprofit research institute, and a host of the podcast “Broken Record.”

*Stephen Sherrill* has contributed to the magazine since 1997.

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<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/10/20/ask-the-dog-doc>

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# Fiction

- **To Each His Own**

Listen to yourself—you’re like a big hate machine!

- **“Intimacy”**

Not long before my lunch with the author, an editor had told me in passing that she was bored of books about motherhood.

[Sketchbook](#)

## To Each His Own

*Listen to yourself—you’re like a big hate machine!*

By [Roz Chast](#)

October 13, 2025















Roz Chast has been a New Yorker cartoonist since 1978. Her books include the graphic narrative "[I Must Be Dreaming](#)," published in 2023.

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<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/10/20/to-each-his-own>

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[Fiction](#)

# Intimacy

By [Aysegül Savaş](#)

October 12, 2025



*Photograph by Elinor Carucci*

I first became acquainted with the author through mutual friends from our part of the world. Even though they were all well established in the city, they hadn't given up on the old ways. They introduced newcomers to the group, helped them with logistics—finding housing, doctors—whenever they could. I, too, had

benefitted from their warm welcome when I moved to the city, even though I was usually suspicious of such generosity—not of receiving it but of offering it up, as if such openhandedness might make a fool of me.

It was a surprise that the author agreed to meet with me. In fact, he was the one who suggested it. I was far enough along in my career to know that people like him didn't usually have time for such meetings. I could now reëvaluate my disappointment of earlier years when writers I admired had politely declined to read my books, or to meet me following a public event that had brought them to the city. At one time, I had felt angry at them; I took their refusal as selfishness, a hardness toward the world. But years had passed, and, though I had not gone as far in my writing as I might once have dreamed, I, too, received messages from strangers—readers, countrymen, students—who wished to connect, to discuss, to marvel at all that we had in common, and I had no qualms about ignoring them.

That was why it seemed surprising that I would meet the author on such relaxed terms. We had no formal ties, nothing that bound our careers. I doubted that he had even read my work. I'd admired him for nearly two decades, since the days when I first wanted to become a novelist, though my admiration of writers was not what it used to be—that is to say, all-consuming. I now allowed myself to see the weaknesses in their books—the clumsy moments, the unbelievable plots—rather than convincing myself that these were signs of a genius that was at a remove from me. It was like this for the author's work as well. In my youth, I had thought of his books as exemplary, perfectly shaped; I no longer found that to be the case. Especially his recent works. I could easily identify their defects, which I noted fondly, as if they were signs of age, of a body softening, becoming round.

[Read an interview with the author for the story behind the story.](#)

I should say, before I continue, that this isn't a story about writing, about making art. At one time, that was all I cared about—books and their authors, the anecdotes I collected about them like gems. That Stevenson had proposed a new method of producing intermittent light in lighthouses. That Joyce was Svevo's English teacher and Borges studied runes. That So-and-So *famously* said . . . I lived in this sphere of words and connections, and I thought it was all I needed in order to make sense of the world. I have always admired people who have been able to remain there, dedicating themselves to that peculiar life.

The author suggested that we meet for lunch at one of the city's old-fashioned restaurants. I was relieved that he made the choice, because I would have been too self-conscious to pick a place. Despite what I've just said about recognizing the moments of clumsiness in his work, I could not quite shake the feeling that I would be meeting with a different type of person—almost a different species.

To my embarrassment, I was more than ten minutes late. As I approached the restaurant, I saw that, rather than going inside to find a table, the author had waited for me at the door. He was shorter than I'd imagined: no doubt I had exaggerated the embodiment of a great mind. He was immaculately dressed—as I'd known from his photographs he would be—in a vest and jacket, worn and polished brogue shoes. It was not necessary for me to introduce myself. He beamed when he turned his head and saw me walking toward him.

"I've been looking forward to our meeting," he said. "Come. We have so much to talk about."

After some deliberation by the author, we took a table by the window. I was aware of waiting to be told what to do, like a child.

Once we sat down, the author began examining the menu, giving it his full attention. I followed his lead, and, like him, ordered an appetizer with my meal, though it seemed like too much food.

## **Podcast: The Writer's Voice**

*Listen to Aysegül Savaş read “Intimacy.”*

“Now,” he said, when the waiter had left, “tell me everything.”

I wasn’t prepared for such a request. I’d thought we might talk about our common friends, the city, writing. I did not know where to start, or what was expected of me. But I did know, from the very beginning, that the conversation must stay in the realm of the mind and curiosity. That it should not deteriorate, as it were, into practicalities.

Whereas my life at that time consisted purely of practicalities. I had a daughter and a son, two and three years old; that I’d even managed to come to lunch—albeit late—was a miraculous feat of scheduling with my husband, since the day care was closed that afternoon. I hadn’t wanted to suggest another date, fearing that the author might change his mind or be put out by my schedule. I had learned, or perhaps I’d subconsciously internalized, that the schedules of parents were bothersome, and that parents with limited availability would eventually be swept aside.

I told the author that I had recently returned from a trip back home. Each trip, I said, was painful for me; the speed of change was unbelievable. I felt as if my own history were being demolished, day by day. Even hour by hour. This was true, though on that particular visit the pain had to do mostly with the need to take the children to play areas buzzing with sounds and lights, with not having any leisurely meals or time to wander.

However, I continued, I’d gone to some old haunts—I mentioned neighborhoods and bookshops that were likely dear to the author as

well—and remembered just how much of the city remained the same. And it was true that I had visited these places, though I'd been constantly distracted by the children's needs, their outbursts and mischief.

The author listened attentively as I recounted the trip. He had spent formative years as an exile in my country before immigrating to the West, which is why I had always felt an affinity for his particular vantage point, finding it at once intimate and strange. I thought that he was able to see something essential about the country, about my people, that I'd always known but looked away from.

Despite everything, I went on, art in the country was thriving. Art always thrived in hardship, I said. But comfort deformed it, made it lax.

“Do you really think so?” the author asked, with some bemusement.

What did I really think? I could not summon the energy to make a convincing case. I'd lost all the rigor—the anecdotes, the turns of phrase, the elasticity of wit—that I'd once possessed. And I no longer quite believed in these abstract ideas, or, rather, did not have time to consider them in a meaningful way.

It was, nonetheless, a pleasant lunch. The author was so warm that I soon began to relax as well. When he asked me what I was working on, I started telling him about an idea I'd recently had, for a novel set in my father's home town. A young and idealistic doctor from the capital would get involved in a tragedy affecting the townspeople, at the center of which would be a poor family, who were the doctor's patients. At first, the doctor's sympathies would be with the family, who seemed helpless given their lack of autonomy and the dictates of their circumstances. But, slowly, the doctor would start to understand how much they were implicated in their own suffering.

I was flattered that the author took the idea seriously, asking detailed questions: Would the story be told from the doctor's perspective? Would he be the one to unearth the family's secret? How would I relate to the townspeople and write about them with humanity, even if some of them had committed unpardonable acts?

It was evident that these were questions of the uttermost importance, that storytelling, for him, was an inquiry into truth and empathy, into surfaces and depths.

Of course, I did not tell him that I had not been able to work on anything for the past two years.

Those were difficult months. The day care closed repeatedly, because of transportation strikes and public holidays that seemed to happen weekly, putting our lives on hold. My husband and I had never paid attention to these dates—the long weekends for which many working people planned a year in advance. We'd been flexible enough in our careers to travel as we wished; besides, we never wanted to have a break from our work, because we loved what we did. And we hadn't been prepared for the changes that parenting would bring about—that old cliché. There was, also, the fact that the children were often sick. We received each ailment with frustration cloaked in tenderness. Or, rather, a genuine tenderness unfolding alongside frustration and impatience.

Not long before my lunch with the author, an editor had told me in passing that she was bored of books about motherhood. She said this in gratitude for the fact that my own work hadn't gone in that direction. Perhaps I had mentioned my idea to her as well, the one I recounted to the author. The editor's own children were now teenagers, which must have been why she was suddenly bored of the narrative of motherhood, wanting to finally take off the sweaty, dishevelled cloak of caring that she'd worn for years.

Still, her words stuck with me, and became a judgment of my own. I could not help feeling bored by the accounts whenever I encountered them—how granular they were, how tedious. How often they repeated the same material facts: the little clammy hands, the sleeplessness, the lack of time, the mess and splintered focus, the wonder of new speech and its ingenious formations. The problem, I thought, was that these descriptions never reached beyond themselves, beyond the concrete reality of the situation. But what was the purpose of their repetition? Was it just that we yearned to be heard? Was there a genuine need within this yearning, as basic as nourishment?

On the days when we were taking care of the children, my husband and I would try to give each other a few free hours—to do some urgent work, go to the gym, or rest. We could, of course, use this time to meet up with someone for coffee—most of our friends' schedules were flexible, as ours had once been—but this never seemed worth it. We would have had to ask the friends to accommodate our limited time. It seemed like too much work for everyone, when it should have been a simple, leisurely encounter.

I wrote to the author two weeks after our lunch to suggest another meeting. He responded immediately that he would be delighted. I let him suggest a time and place, sorting out the logistics with my husband afterward. Once again, he proposed an old-fashioned restaurant. I could see that he was set in his ways, that these were the places that made up his world, and I was eager to habituate myself, to know the details of his life.

I arrived on time, we studied our menus, and once we had ordered—sea bream and steamed potatoes for both of us—the writer started talking about a book he had read in his youth which he had recently come across by chance. At one time, he had included this book among the titles that made up his formative reading, but now he could remember nothing about it. Rereading it, he found it confusing. In fact, he had no idea what it was about.

“What I can’t figure out,” the author said, “is whether I was smarter back then or just pretending to understand what I read. That wouldn’t be unusual, you know. One is in such a hurry to get an education, to have read it all.”

I was amazed that he said this. I could only picture him immersed in whatever he was reading, able to see right into the text’s heart.

“Or whether,” he went on, “and this is the more interesting possibility, I made up an interpretation that was loosely based on the words of the book but was actually an exercise in imagination.”

He took a bite of his fish then put down his fork and knife.

“This is rather bland, don’t you think?”

It was on our third meeting that I met the author’s wife. Some time had passed since our last lunch—the author had told me when we were parting that he had a busy few weeks ahead. Out of some insecurity, I didn’t ask him what he would be doing.

I was hoping that the author and his wife might invite me to their home, and, indeed, the author mentioned in his message that they would love to have me over one day, but it was a glorious afternoon and it would be a shame to waste it indoors.

The author’s wife was elegant and formal. She shook my hand with a measure of affection, saying how highly the author had spoken of me. It was clear that she was accustomed to playing this part, to showing interest. No doubt she accompanied her husband to festivals and ceremonies, to dinners with editors, to events in the author’s honor. I felt apologetic for taking up her time—I thought that she should be spared all but the most important social gatherings. Perhaps it was to make up for the imposition that I focussed my attention on her, asking her many questions, and she responded in kind.

“I knew the two of you would hit it off,” the author said fondly, and I felt happy about this comment, as if I had been singled out.

The author’s wife asked me about my family. I’d told the author briefly that I had two young children, and he had not followed up with any questions. I did not mind—in fact, I preferred to stay clear of the topic—but I also assumed that the author had no imagination for such a conversation, that he wouldn’t know what to ask. He had a son, around my age, and we had only ever talked about him as an adult, a fully made person. Whereas I still believed that it would be impossible for me to separate these years of caring from the people my children would become. In any case, the son was a cardiologist and lived far away, so we did not have much reason to talk about him.

The author’s wife, on the other hand, had drawn out the heart of the matter within minutes.

“Those are difficult ages,” she said. “I remember, at that time I barely had a moment to brush my hair. And to have two, so close together. Really, I can’t imagine.”

I nodded my head in agreement. It must have been the look on my face that prompted her to add, “Don’t worry, this time will pass.”

I wanted to ask how it had been for her, when she’d finally had the time to brush her hair, though I could tell that the author was showing only polite interest in our conversation. I didn’t want to violate my resolution to keep the tedium to myself, and I soon changed the subject.

There was, nevertheless, a new sense of familiarity in our relationship after that meeting. During our lunches, the author and his wife treated me with affection, as if I were their niece. Like I said, I felt childishly happy about their fondness, and I tried hard to keep up my side of the act, to be attentive, caring, light of spirit. I

teased them cordially, tried to remember their anecdotes and turn them into little inside jokes. Not that I did not enjoy it; of course I did. And I felt that my presence brought the author and his wife together, as if it gave them a reason to be tender with each other.

A few months into our new friendship, the author's wife wrote to say that she had just finished my first novel. It was a long message, and I was touched by how carefully she had read the book, finding many similarities with her own life and youth. "And above everything else, it's so YOU," she said, a phrase I found surprising coming from her, as I did the fact that she had an idea of who I was in essence and could see it both in the writing and in our interactions. I did not know whether to be flattered by this remark, whose source I could not locate. I was nonetheless happy that she'd read the book and told her so. And, I must admit, I hoped that she had talked to the author about it.

The author would be travelling for a few weeks, and his wife suggested that she and I meet up, perhaps for a picnic in the park. We could get sandwiches and find a spot in the sun, she wrote. We agreed on the day and time, early enough that I could make it back to the day care in time to pick up the children.

Unlike the days when we had met at restaurants, she was dressed casually, in loose trousers and sneakers. She was carrying a picnic basket and had packed a blanket, a thermos of tea, grapes. I apologized for having arrived empty-handed. "You have enough to think about," she said. We walked together to a bakery, then set up on the grass in the park.

"Isn't this nice?" she said. "It's been so long since I've done this sort of thing."

She was feeling guilty for not having joined her husband on his trip, she told me, though she sounded giddy. Her husband had been the one who suggested that she stay behind, and she hadn't

protested, even though she knew he would have liked her to come along.

“But you join him on so many occasions,” I said. “Surely one time doesn’t matter.”

“Of course, you’re right,” she said. “But it’s just like with your children. You feel a little guilty every time, regardless of how much you’ve already cared for them.”

“I’ve always loved being part of his work,” she went on. “Knowing his publishers, attending his talks. Even if that sort of thing is not so much in fashion these days. To be—how should I put it—the supporting wife. But it’s simply a fact that I’ve enjoyed it. And sometimes I enjoy doing other things. Like being with you.” She put her hand on my knee.

I felt, then, contempt for the author. Not on his wife’s behalf but, rather, for the fact that he’d been given this luxury, had spent his life tending to his mind in the space that his wife had cleared for him.

“And when your son was younger? Did you have time to be involved in your husband’s work?”

“Not so much,” she said. “You are in a sort of suspension, in those years.”

“And then it passes?”

“Let’s say that it eases. But you can’t stop feeling responsible for your children, even if they no longer need you. So maybe that feeling of being suspended lingers for many years.”



*“You have to have us over when you’re moved in, sweetheart, so I can tell you everything that’s wrong with your organizational and decorative choices.”*

*Cartoon by Jeremy Nguyen*

She went on to tell me a story about her son seeing a decrepit Teddy bear in a trash bin when he was young. To deter him from taking the Teddy home, she had explained that it was, in fact, waiting for its owner to come back. The following morning, she’d found the boy sobbing in bed, overwhelmed with worry for the bear.

“He’s grown up to be a very capable person,” she said. “Very strong and rational. But, you know, I’ve never stopped feeling that he is still that same sensitive child who was sobbing in bed.”

I told her jokingly that it sounded exhausting.

“But *of course* it is,” she said, without the least sign of resentment. “There’s nothing like it.”

Then she said that she was feeling a bit tired, and would perhaps go home to nap. “I feel like I’m boasting,” she apologized. “I know you don’t have any time for naps.”

I don't know why I haven't mentioned already that her name was Marian. She was such a gentle person.

We received a call from the day care one afternoon, telling us that our daughter had been crying for several hours. I remembered suddenly that she'd been unusually fussy that morning. In fact, she had cried when I dropped her off, though I'd assumed it was just the usual anxiety of separation; she had mostly calmed down by the time I left and had even waved goodbye.

In any case, the head of the day care told us that there had been nothing out of the ordinary for most of the day. Our daughter had played well, eaten all her lunch, taken her nap. Shortly after waking up, her mood had soured, and she had been crying ever since. From the way our daughter held herself, it appeared that she'd hurt her shoulder, though the staff could not identify any incident that might have caused the pain.

We hurried to the day care, picked up both children, and headed to the hospital, where my husband entertained our son at a vending machine while I sat with our daughter. Some hours later, we left with the diagnosis that she had broken her clavicle. The doctor had explained to us that our daughter's fracture was fairly common among children, though of course it was not something that happened spontaneously—there must have been an impact.

The following morning, when we dropped off our son by himself, our daughter's caretaker said repeatedly that there had been nothing out of the ordinary the previous day—no fall or rough play. She was at once defensive and perturbed. She insisted that she was fully aware of the children's whereabouts at all times—and yet she could not explain how our daughter had broken a bone under her watchful eye. Such a thing had never before happened to her, she explained, but this did nothing to assuage our worries.

Our daughter spoke only a handful of words, none of which helped clarify the situation. She alternately nodded and shook her head each time we asked her whether she had fallen.

For several days, we were immersed in tests to rule out other possibilities. Because there were, after all, conditions in which children were extremely fragile and did spontaneously break their bones.

We couldn't shake the feeling that something terrible had befallen us, and that there was worse to come. It was difficult to believe just how carefree we had been before the incident, when our only worry was the tedium of child care, the public holidays we had to spend at home and in the park.

Once all other explanations had been ruled out—except for a Vitamin D deficiency, our daughter seemed perfectly healthy, and her fracture would heal with time—we were left with a different sort of fear, regarding the care of our children by others. Our daughter's gentle caretaker, whom we had trusted fully until the incident, now seemed menacing to us. There was no explanation for what had happened; the only fact we could hold on to was that she had not witnessed the moment of impact. And it was up to us to decide whether this was misconduct, whether she was essentially flawed.

We had not told the day care about our daughter's fussiness on the morning of the injury. We'd briefly considered the possibility that something had happened before I dropped her off. Perhaps she had adjusted to the pain, calming down for a few hours, until she could no longer bear it. My husband recalled vaguely that his sister had broken a toe in childhood and it had taken almost a day for her to be hit with the pain. But, no, we concluded, this was an unlikely explanation.

I had worked very little during this period, and had responded only to the most urgent messages. Most of our friends were unaware of what was happening. We had no time, and, besides, it seemed overwhelming to try to put the situation in words, to spell out all the permutations that we were thinking through daily. Perhaps an outsider would say that we should take our children to a different day care immediately—but how were we to trust strangers, how did we know that something similar would not happen at another place? Or our friends might simply offer sympathy and assure us that all would be well—a meaningless consolation, intended only to force us to focus our attention elsewhere.

I'd received three messages from Marian, the first to tell me that she had read another one of my novels, and the second asking whether I would like to get together soon. In the two weeks that I did not write back, she messaged me again to ask if something had happened. "You must be very busy," she said. "But just checking that everything is all right." With all that had piled up, I forgot to write back to her.

Our children stayed at the day care, but the process—there had been an investigation, in part prompted by us—had changed something in our relationship with the caretakers. When we picked up our son and daughter in the evenings, we no longer lingered to chat, to exchange anecdotes and insights. The caretakers were matter-of-fact with us, giving us all the details of our children's days as soon as we arrived.

My husband and I discussed whether things could have turned out differently. Of course we'd been worried, we reasoned: our child had broken a bone while at the day care. And we had not accused the day care of malpractice but had wanted only to make sure that all procedures were followed. But it was true that we'd shut down in the weeks after the incident. We'd responded curtly to the messages from the day care; we had not shared the medical developments with our daughter's caretaker. And perhaps we

hadn't considered how worried she was—not for herself but for our daughter. Still, wasn't it natural that we had closed off as a family in that moment of crisis, that our loyalties were to one another alone? I suppose it was difficult to undo that simple acknowledgment, to go back to the friendliness of earlier times.

There was a gathering at the home of the expatriate couple who had introduced me to the author. I assumed that Marian and the author would be there as well, and was happy for this occasion to get together—I hadn't seen them in quite a long time.

I arranged the logistics with my husband and arrived at the dinner with flowers and wine. The house was packed with guests. A large oval table had been placed in the middle of the living room, covered with trays of food. I took a plate and slowly filled it. The author and Marian were not there, even though the party had been going for several hours. Most of the guests I knew only superficially or not at all.

I was the youngest person there, and this made me feel, if not exactly bored, then burdened. I moved around the room so that I would not become tied to a single conversation. When the food was cleared to make space for a tray of desserts from our region, I texted my husband that I would try to be home early, and to wait for me before going to bed.

The hosts walked me to the door when I announced my departure.

“It's always so nice to see you,” the wife said, kissing my cheeks.  
“We must have your whole family over soon.”

It would be a pleasure, I said. Perhaps we could even invite the author.

I saw her face cloud over, and then she told me vaguely that it was a difficult period for the author and his wife.

“What’s the matter?” I asked, and finally learned that there was a health concern, though the information was once again delivered in unclear terms. Perhaps the hosts did not know that the author and I had become friends since that first introduction and did not wish, therefore, to betray anything personal. To let them know of my familiarity, I said that Marian and I had been trying to get together for a long time and that I would write to her immediately to ask after the author.

“No, no,” the woman told me, almost chiding. “It’s not a good time to do that. It’s Marian who is sick. She’s in no state to see anyone.”

I didn’t write for some time. I was embarrassed about my silence, about the fact that I had disappeared without explanation. And perhaps I was also embarrassed that I hadn’t been informed of her illness, because the omission clarified that we were simply acquaintances.

Finally, I sent Marian a text message asking how she was doing. I added that our daughter had broken a bone, but was now almost recovered. I sent her a photo of the children I had taken at the playground the previous afternoon, of the two of them squeezed onto a rocking horse.

“How delicious they are,” Marian wrote back. “I’m sorry for that poor bone. What a fright you must have had.”

“How are YOU?” I wrote. “Can I see you soon?”

“Our son is visiting for some time,” Marian responded. “Hopefully we will have a chance to see each other again.”

But we didn’t. I found out through our mutual friends that Marian’s illness had suddenly progressed and that she had been taken to the hospital, where she passed away. Later, these friends shared with me the details for the funeral.

By the time the son had arrived, it had become clear that Marian was very sick, though no one had foreseen that she would leave them so quickly. “Leave them”—this was the term that one of their friends used after the funeral, when she told me about Marian’s last months. We were at the author’s home, which was filled with people who had arrived from all over the world. It was as if the guests had entered into a sort of communal chant in praise of their friend; the memories were spilling out of them. Marian, it was clear, had changed them with her friendship, had touched them in some deep place. I don’t know why I was taken aback to realize the breadth and richness of her life. I knew that she and the author had many friends in many countries; I knew from my own experience how warm they were. Perhaps it was once again embarrassment—of understanding that I had been a near-stranger. Or maybe it was surprise—that, despite her full life, Marian had given me her undivided attention in the short time we spent together. It was the surprise of her generosity.

The friend who told me about the final weeks of Marian’s illness was a very small woman. Her sadness, which was palpable, made her appear even smaller, as if she were shrinking, though she was at the same time bright and energetic. I had known her vaguely from the group of expatriates, and I now gathered that she had been one of Marian’s closest friends. She knew her way around the apartment; she greeted newcomers and managed the caterers. I sensed that she had taken pity on me, because I barely knew anyone, and had decided to fill me in. Perhaps she was acting as Marian would have, making me feel welcomed, and necessary.

I had followed the group back to the apartment after the service in part because I had not managed to offer my condolences to the author. I was thinking I would slip out once I had done so. At the same time, I felt uneasy about talking to him, in case he knew that I hadn’t written to Marian, had not answered her messages for so many weeks. It was such a silly assumption, that my silence would have mattered to Marian once she realized her life was ending.

The friend motioned to Marian's son to join us. She introduced me, then wrapped her arm around him.

"Are you really still growing?" she asked. "Or do I just keep getting smaller?"

The son, David, told her that he was only growing around the waist.

"Don't even get me started," the friend said. "If anything, we need to feed you more." I felt like an intruder on their familiarity.

"And you must be my father's friend," David said. The author had told him about a new writer acquaintance.

"A recent friend of your parents," I said, adding that I had heard so much about him.

"Uh-oh," David said. "You never know what these parents of mine are saying behind my back."

"Only good things," I told him, and I felt pity that he hadn't yet adjusted to the reality, that he continued to speak in the present tense. His eyes were sunken, mourning. I kept seeing flashes of Marian in them, though I did not concentrate long enough to fully locate the resemblance.

But I can't say it was pity that made me recount to him the story I'd heard from Marian, about the Teddy in the trash bin. It was only a wish to assert myself, to show that we had been close.

In any case, David did not remember any such incident with a Teddy. He looked at me a bit quizzically.

"Marian told me that you cried and cried," I went on, knowing that my words were beside the point. "She said you had always been a very sensitive person."

It was a ridiculous statement.

“That might be true,” David said. “My mother thinks of me that way.”

Soon afterward, I found the author and conveyed my condolences to him. My words sounded like a script, which of course they were, agreed on beforehand so we would not have to search for anything truly meaningful at such times. To him, I did not offer any story of knowing Marian intimately. He, of course, would have seen right through it.

He asked after the children. Marian had told him that our daughter had had an accident.

Once he’d had some time to recover, the author said, he would be happy to meet up, and hear what I’d been up to with my project. “About that poor doctor who must decide where his loyalties lie.”

He did not know that I had already given up on the idea. I did not think that I could pull it off, or have any great insight into lives so different from my own.

Before leaving, I bid David farewell. I told him I was sorry for his loss.

And I considered, on my way home, that perhaps I hadn’t related the story I’d heard from Marian very well. I might have missed some details. Perhaps I hadn’t listened carefully enough. ♦

*Aysegül Savas* is the author of the story collection “*Long Distance*,” in addition to novels and a memoir.

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<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/10/20/intimacy-fiction-aysegul-savas>

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## The Hunt for the World's Oldest Story

From thunder gods to serpent slayers, scholars are reconstructing myths that vanished millennia ago. How much further can we go—and what might we find?

By [Manvir Singh](#)

October 13, 2025



*The quest to unlock mythology's origins reveals recurring patterns that stretch back thousands of years and continue to shadow the stories we tell today.*

*Illustration by Shane Cluskey*

I read George Eliot’s “Middlemarch,” sometimes hailed as the greatest British novel, in a rain forest in western Indonesia. I was there as a graduate student, spending my days slogging through mud and interviewing locals about gods and pig thieves for my dissertation. Each evening, after darkness fell, my research assistant and I would call it a night, switch off the veranda’s lone

bulb, and retreat to our separate rooms. Alone at last, I snapped on my headlamp, rigged up my mosquito net like a kid building a pillow fort, and read.

Those were good hours, although, honestly, little of the novel has stuck with me—except for Casaubon. The Reverend Edward Casaubon is Eliot’s grand study in futility: an aging, self-important, faintly ridiculous clergyman who has dedicated his life to an audacious quest. Casaubon is convinced that every mythic system is a decayed remnant of a single original revelation—a claim he plans to substantiate in his magnum opus, “The Key to All Mythologies.” He means to chart the world’s myths, trace their similarities, and produce a codex that, as Eliot puts it, would make “the vast field of mythical constructions . . . intelligible, nay, luminous with the reflected light of correspondences.”

The ill-fated project founders between the unruly diversity of cultural traditions and the fantasy of a single source, between the expanse of his material and the impossibility of ever mastering it, between the need for theory and the distortions it introduces. These failures are deepened by Casaubon’s limitations—his pedantic love of minutiae (he “dreams footnotes”) and his refusal to engage with scholarship in languages he doesn’t know (if only he’d learned German).

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Casaubon's quest stands as both an indictment of overreach and a warning about the senselessness of such sweeping comparisons. But is this entirely fair? The patterns are out there. Floods, tricksters, battles with monsters, creation and apocalypse—sometimes the resemblances are uncanny. The people I worked with in Indonesia, the Mentawai, would occasionally point out affinities between Jesus and their own legendary hero, Pageta Sabau, who was also said to have been born without a father and resurrected from the dead.

Casaubon's "Key to All Mythologies" lingered with me less as a cautionary tale than as a temptation. Like Dorothea Brooke—Casaubon's much younger, idealistic wife and the novel's protagonist—I found his vision thrilling. As an aspiring anthropologist, I understood the seduction: the promise that somewhere, beneath the confusion of gods, ghosts, and rituals, there might be a hidden order. Of course, my method was different. I was mud-caked and by myself on a remote island, chasing a crocodile spirit; Casaubon was at his desk, trying to map out myths he barely knew. But, amid all the pedantry, I recognized a kind of kinship.

I'm hardly alone in feeling the pull. However much "[Middlemarch](#)" mocks Casaubon's obsession, the urge to find patterns in myth runs deep and wide. In the Victorian era, scholars like Max Müller and, later, James Frazer tried to systematize the world's myths. Frazer's "[The Golden Bough](#)" (1890), a sprawling, scandalous synthesis, plotted cultures on a trajectory from magic to religion and then to science, and argued that many myths and rites—including the pillars of Christianity—were the residue of primitive fertility cults and sacrificial kingship. It left its mark on everyone from William Butler Yeats to Jim Morrison, though its absence of rigor has not aged well. Decades later, Robert Graves's "[The White Goddess](#)" (1948) enchanted a generation of poets and novelists with its vision of mythic unity; Joseph Campbell's "[The Hero with a Thousand Faces](#)" (1949), a meandering treatise on the

universality of the hero's journey, inspired "Star Wars." Meanwhile, Freudians and evolutionary psychologists trawled folktales for evidence to shore up their theories. "Stereotypical stories stay at home, archetypal stories travel," Robert McKee declares in "[Story](#)" (1997), his classic screenwriting guide, keeping alive the hope that mythic comparison can be commercially, as well as intellectually, rewarding.

The key that Casaubon craved is particularly alluring. He wasn't just tracing similarities; he was hunting for a primordial mythology, a long-lost ancestor dimly visible in its descendants. He happened to believe this original tradition was Christian truth, but set aside the apologetics and there's still something intoxicating about the quest for a key: the notion that, by sifting through myth, we might retrieve the imaginative worlds of the earliest storytellers. Nor is the quest just a scholarly game; it's an attempt to prove, against all odds, that our wild, warring species shares something irreducible at its core.

Nowadays, we can unearth bones, extract DNA, even map ancient migrations, but only in myths can we glimpse the inner lives of our forebears—their fears and longings, their sense of wonder and dread. Linguists have reconstructed dead languages. Why not try to do the same for lost stories? And, if we can, how far back can we go? Could we finally recover the legends of our earliest common ancestors—the ur-myths that Casaubon so desperately pursued?

If any field lends credibility to the dream of a Casaubonian key, it's Indo-European studies. Where Frazer's method was freewheeling, Indo-Europeanists are exacting. The discipline is usually said to have begun in 1786, when Sir William Jones, a colonial judge stationed in Bengal, addressed the Asiatic Society. Years of studying Sanskrit had convinced him that it closely resembled Greek and Latin—"indeed," Jones said, "no philologer could examine them all three without believing them to have sprung from some common source, which, perhaps, no longer exists." He

suggested that Germanic and Celtic languages, as well as ancient Persian, might belong to this same lost family. Others had glimpsed such affinities before, but Jones did more than notice; he set off a scholarly chase, and a popular fascination, that has yet to run its course.

Today, it's broadly accepted that languages as different as English, Welsh, Spanish, Armenian, Greek, Russian, Hindi, and Bengali descend from a single ancestor: Proto-Indo-European. Linguists have mapped how words spoken five thousand years ago have branched into the webs of vocabulary we know now. My first name, Manvir, for example, fuses two Sanskrit roots with clear European cousins: "man," meaning "thought" or "soul"—related to "mental" and "mind"—and "vir," meaning "heroic" or "brave," as in "virtue" and "virile."

But reconstruction didn't end with nouns and verbs. Gods dance on our tongues, and, as scholars compared Indo-European languages, they found striking mythological congruences, too. The British journalist Laura Spinney, in her recent book, "[Proto: How One Ancient Language Went Global](#)," begins with a paternal sky god. Sanskrit speakers worshipped Dyaus Pitr, or Sky Father. In Greek myth, Zeus Pater ruled the gods. North of the Alps, Proto-Italic speakers likely revered Djous Pater. Among the tribes that settled near Rome, this name became the Latin Jupiter. With further analogues in Scythian, Latvian, and Hittite, many researchers now think that the early Indo-Europeans prayed to a sky father known as something like Dyeus Puhter.

Spinney brings in other elements of Indo-European mythology, though the most comprehensive treatment in English is still M. L. West's "Indo-European Poetry and Myth" (2007). German readers, meanwhile, can turn to the new "Indogermanische Religion," by Norbert Oettinger and Peter Jackson Rova. Both works build on a method championed by Calvert Watkins, whose "How to Kill a

Dragon: Aspects of Indo-European Poetics” (1995) set the standard for the field.

Watkins himself was something of a mythic figure. Casaubonian in his learning and drive but without the tragic vanity, he was born in Pittsburgh in 1933 and raised in New York, inheriting from his Texan parents a pride in the Lone Star State, along with a lingering twang. He arrived at Harvard with the class of 1954, and then stayed, first for his Ph.D., and then as a faculty member in linguistics and classics until his retirement, in 2003. His intellectual range was prodigious. By fifteen, he was immersed in Indo-European studies; his knack for languages was so uncanny that people joked he could board a train at one end of a country and disembark at the other fluent in its national tongue. He forgot nothing, and his eye for hidden connections bordered on supernatural. In 1984, reading a fragmentary Luwian text—a cousin to Hittite—he picked out the phrase “steep Wilusa,” a twin to the Greek “lofty Troy [Ilios],” and speculated that it pointed to an epic tradition about Troy that predated Homer. The discovery landed on the front page of the *Times*.

“How to Kill a Dragon” showed that ancient mythology could be reconstructed not just from scattered names or motifs but from shared poetic formulas—bits of old myth embedded in texts like slabs of pagan altars lodged in the foundations of later temples. Watkins’s prime example was the phrase “he/you slew the serpent,” a formula that crops up everywhere: in Vedic hymns, Greek poetry, Hittite myth, Iranian scriptures, Celtic and Germanic saga, Armenian epics, even spells for healing or harm. “There can be no doubt that the formula is the vehicle of the central theme of a proto-text,” he wrote—a core symbol in Proto-Indo-European culture. His approach made the reconstruction of myth seem less like a guessing game and more like real historical work.

The serpent-slaying formula likely traces back to an old Indo-European myth. A storm god—brawny, bearded, full of thunder—

defeats a snake that hoards something precious: cows, women, or the waters of life. This god, maybe called Perkwuhnus, rode a goat-drawn cart and wielded a weapon of stone or metal. In India, he became Indra; among the Hittites, Tarhunna; in Old Church Slavonic, Perún; in Lithuanian, Perkūnas; in the Norse world, Thor. In Greece, the job of storm god passed to Zeus, though Perkwuhnus' name persisted, half disguised, in Zeus' thunderbolt, Keraunos.

The slaying of the serpent was a mythological superspreader, mutating and proliferating across the Indo-European world and beyond. According to books like Ola Wikander's "[Unburning Fame](#)" (2017), the story may even have spread to Semitic-speaking peoples—Yahweh's fight with Leviathan echoes Indra and Vritra, Apollo and Python, Beowulf and his dragon.

Evolutionary thinkers have long argued that humans evolved to notice snakes, which might explain why these creatures slither into a vast number of mythologies, from Quetzalcoatl in Mexico and Damballa in West Africa to celestial dragons in China. But the classic dragon—reptilian, treasure-hoarding, and doomed to be slain—feels distinctly Indo-European. Siegfried versus Fafnir, Bilbo versus Smaug, Harry versus the Basilisk: they all recycle the designs of the earliest Indo-European poets.

Indo-European mythology is about more than a sky father and a snake. There's Sky Father's consort, Mother Earth; his daughter, Dawn; and his sons, the Divine Twins. There's a cosmogony in which the world is fashioned from the corpse of a slain giant or a protohuman, and another in which a hero, Prometheus-style, steals fire from the gods and gives it to mortals. Nymphs and river goddesses abound, along with an all-seeing Sun God, who, once the spoked wheel was invented, traverses the sky in a horse-drawn chariot.

The richness of this reconstructed realm raises a bigger question: If we can piece together such a detailed mythoscape from five or six thousand years ago, why not go back further? The Proto-Indo-Europeans are recent arrivals in our species' story; the Ice Age ended twelve thousand years ago, the out-of-Africa migration took place around sixty thousand years ago, and *Homo sapiens* emerged about three hundred thousand years ago. Do we still carry stories from those far earlier times?

Some scholars say yes. They're Casaubon's heirs, but with better tools, better German, and, sometimes, better judgment. The earliest myth is their holy grail. One of the boldest attempts was undertaken by Michael Witzel, a comparative mythologist at Harvard. In "[The Origins of the World's Mythologies](#)" (2012), Witzel proposed that the world's myths fall into two superfamilies. One, Laurasian, stretches from Europe and much of Asia to Polynesia and the Americas; it supposedly preserves a story line, at least twenty thousand years old, that runs from creation to apocalypse. The other, Gondwanan, found mostly in sub-Saharan Africa, New Guinea, and Australia, is older still, but less coherent; it has a heavenly High God, trickster low gods, and the creation of humans from trees or clay, but lacks a unifying plot.

Witzel, a celebrated Indologist and the founder of the International Association for Comparative Mythology, seemed poised to deliver the key to all mythologies. Yet his theory leans on outdated models of deep history. He believed, wrongly, that New Guineans and Aboriginal Australians split off in a separate early exodus from Africa; genetic evidence shows otherwise. The framework also carries uncomfortable racial overtones: darker-skinned peoples are said to have more archaic, less structured mythologies. The ambition is tremendous, but the result feels mostly like a dead end.

A rival approach puts its faith in data. Yuri Berezkin, a professor at European University at St. Petersburg, has spent nearly sixty years reading some eighty thousand myths and folktales, coding each one

for motifs—anything from a crocodile without a tongue to a butterfly stealing fire. The result is a database of unprecedented reach; no earlier folklorist has worked with so many texts from such a range of societies. For Berezkin, patience is everything. When I e-mailed him in 2018 to ask if his summaries could be mined for patterns in heroic tales, he replied, “I think, No. Everything that is easy and quick can hardly be good.”

Berezkin’s project has its limitations. Coding motifs is a subjective business, and, with so much of the work done by a single person, it’s hard to rule out bias. Still, two recent studies—one from a team led by European geneticists, another from researchers affiliated with the Santa Fe Institute—suggest that his mythemes track real signals: patterns in his database align with genetic data and migrations stretching back tens of thousands of years. If true, it’s evidence that stories preserve a surprisingly durable cultural inheritance.

Yet the hunt for the world’s oldest stories is not exactly triumphant. The European study identified eight motifs whose global spread indicates that they could date to more than sixty thousand years ago, before humans left Africa. If so, this would be a find about ten times older than Proto-Indo-European, and well past the limits of what linguists think language can preserve. But most of these motifs—rainbows linked with snakes, a woman entering the house of a dangerous creature—are so broad and intuitive that it’s just as plausible that they were invented independently, again and again.

Similarly, the Santa Fe team identified three “keystone motifs,” stories that are globally popular, widely elaborated upon, and possibly relics from before the out-of-Africa migration. But these motifs—doglike tricksters, a figure visible on the moon, a man who performs difficult tasks to win a bride—are all frustratingly generic. Do they really descend from tales told by our distant ancestors, or are they merely the sort of stories any species with

minds and bodies like ours would keep inventing? The question remains open.

This is the core problem for seekers of ur-myths: they lack the names, formulas, and fossilized phrases that make Indo-European studies persuasive. People across continents might link rainbows with snakes, or see rabbits on the moon, or cast foxes, jackals, and coyotes as tricksters. But without recurring lines of verse, without epithets worn smooth by generations, the search for a universal key risks a Casaubonian fate: grand in vision, romantic in intent, and ultimately thwarted by the bounds of what can be known.

Among critics of “Middlemarch,” there’s a long-running debate about Casaubon’s “Key to All Mythologies.” Was the project doomed by Casaubon’s foibles and limitations, or was it an impossible mission from the start? Was Casaubon too small, or was the job too big? A century and a half later, the evidence leans toward the latter. If the key is taken to be some primordial tradition, echoing faintly across world literature after tens of millennia, any effort to pin it down looks hopeless. Over such spans, change overwhelms continuity; too much simply disappears. Casaubon’s “mythical fragments” may be out there, but we don’t have the tools to identify them with any confidence. Dorothea, Casaubon’s wife and eventual widow, comes to recognize this. She sees that Casaubon’s bold claims “floated among flexible conjectures.” His mistake wasn’t so much searching for a key, though, as it was imagining that he had the methods to find it.

Return to the fact that striking parallels do exist. Books about tricksters and hero’s journeys may sound tired or reductive, but they point to genuine regularities. Annie Baker’s 2017 play “[The Antipodes](#),” set in a TV writers’ room, includes a memorable scene in which the characters debate how many kinds of stories there are. “There are seven types of stories in the world,” one says, listing those from Christopher Booker’s “[The Seven Basic Plots](#). ” “There are thirty-six types of stories in the world,” another insists, rattling

templates from Georges Polti's "The Thirty-six Dramatic Situations." The exchange mocks our urge to impose order on the messiness of narrative. Yet the categories—Rags to Riches, Overcoming the Monster, Crime Pursued by Vengeance, All Sacrificed for Passion—still ring true to anyone who's dipped into folklore or chilled with Netflix.

Spurred by Casaubon's failed ambition, I set out on my own hunt for patterns after returning from Indonesia. With a colleague, I began building a new database and delved into a century's worth of comparative analyses. Of the many patterns I found, my favorite was the triumphant orphan, a figure who shows up everywhere: in Eurasian folktales (Cinderella, Snow White), Victorian novels (Pip, Jane Eyre), Disney movies (Simba, Elsa), modern fantasy (Harry Potter, Jon Snow), and in stories from the Igbo of Nigeria to the Karen of Myanmar.

Such patterns persist only because they strike a chord. At bottom, stories are cognitive technologies: they must arouse curiosity and suspense, tap into our fears and hopes, and offer something that repays the time we spend with them. Robert McKee, in "Story," writes that a successful composition "triggers a global and perpetual chain reaction of pleasure that carries it from cinema to cinema, generation to generation." The basic thought here explains why certain motifs—triumphant orphans, lunar silhouettes—appear in Berezkin's database and beyond. Whether they originate in some ancient tradition or arise wherever humans tell stories, they thrive because they work.

These motifs are archetypes, then, but not in the strict Jungian sense; they're not latent forms waiting to surface in dream or art. Rather, everything that shapes our attention and emotion—the architecture of our minds, the forms of our societies, the worlds we move through—primes us to respond to them. We feel for orphans because we instinctively pity those who suffer early losses; we see faces on the moon because primates like us are wired to search for

faces and agents, and are awed by that glowing, glorious orb in the sky.

Today's mythographers have access to sources and tools that Casaubon could never have imagined—vast digital archives, instant machine translation, pattern-finding algorithms that would have sounded like science fiction a decade ago. Yet what they keep unearthing is not so much some hidden code or lost ur-myth as the ubiquitous contours of human experience. If there's a key to all mythologies, it isn't buried in vanished languages or ancient ruins; it lies in the basic patterns of how we think, feel, and tell stories.

We are living proof of narrative's power to reach across time and space. We hear stories from distant lands and discover that they're not altogether unfamiliar. We read about snake killers and thunder gods and find ourselves enthralled. That is the mythographer's true accomplishment: tracing the social, cognitive, and emotional lines of force that continue to bind us to one another—and to our most ancient tales. It's what makes the mythographer's job both daunting and vital. Forget Casaubon's footnotes or his ignorance of German. His real mistake was to treat myths as dead fossils rather than as living instruments—still moving minds, still shaping worlds. ♦

*Manvir Singh*, an assistant professor of anthropology at the University of California, Davis, has written for *The New Yorker* since 2022. He is the author of “*Shamanism: The Timeless Religion*.”

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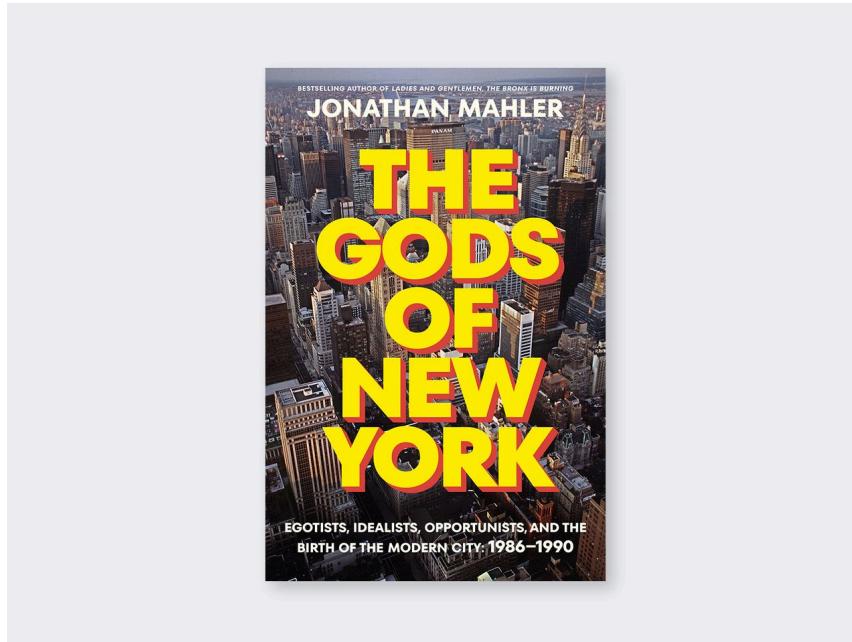
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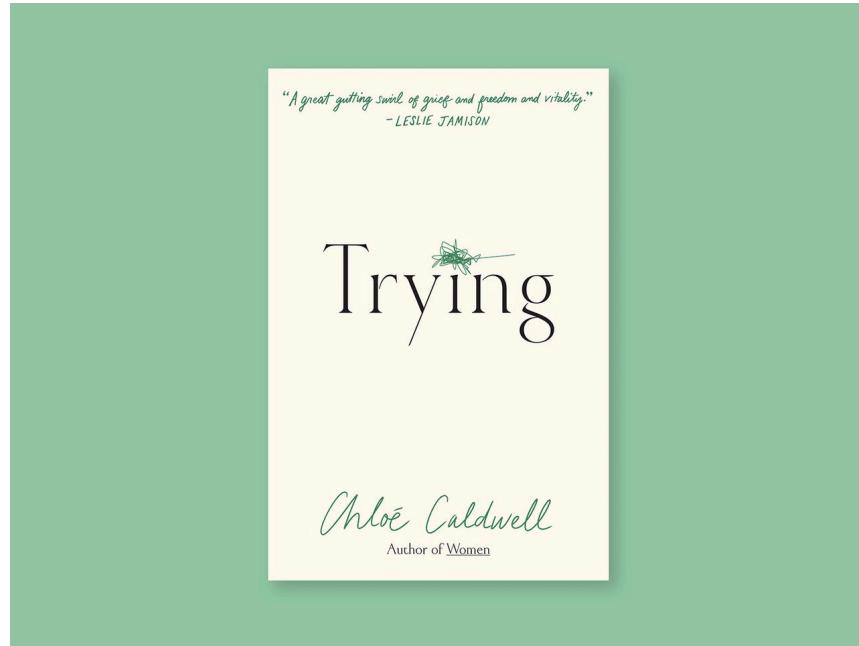
## Briefly Noted

“*The Gods of New York*,” “*Trying*,” “*This Kind of Trouble*,” and “*The Gossip Columnist’s Daughter*.”

October 13, 2025



**The Gods of New York**, by Jonathan Mahler (Random House). This chronicle of New York City covers four “convulsive and consequential” years in its history, 1986 through 1989, an era that included the AIDS and crack epidemics, rolling corruption scandals, rising crime, and a giddy Wall Street high on junk bonds. The book tracks activists, artists, politicians, and tycoons—Larry Kramer, Spike Lee, Ed Koch, Rudy Giuliani, and Donald Trump, among others—as they vie to make their marks, creating legacies still palpable today. Each chapter covers a single year, shifting between characters and story lines in a narrative as sprawling and multifaceted as the city itself.



**Trying**, by Chloé Caldwell (*Graywolf*). In this electrically candid memoir about attempting to get pregnant without I.V.F., Caldwell writes, “Supposedly the definition of insanity is to do the same thing over and over but expect different results, but isn’t that precisely what trying to get pregnant and failing is?” Caldwell, an essay writer and teacher, manages to be funny while handling tender subjects, such as infertility and the discovery that her husband has an extramarital sex addiction. “I knew something was wrong,” she recounts. “I thought it was perhaps blocked fallopian tubes, and it ended up being sex workers in Geneva.”

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## What We're Reading

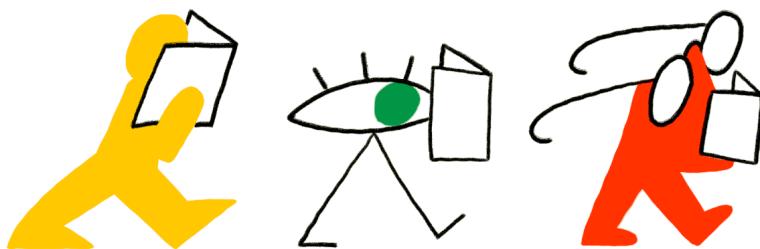
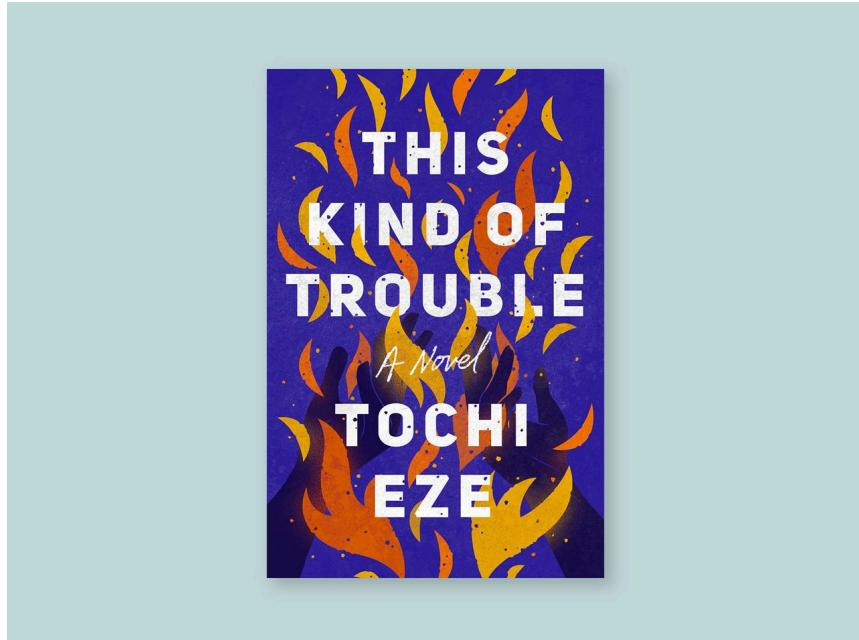
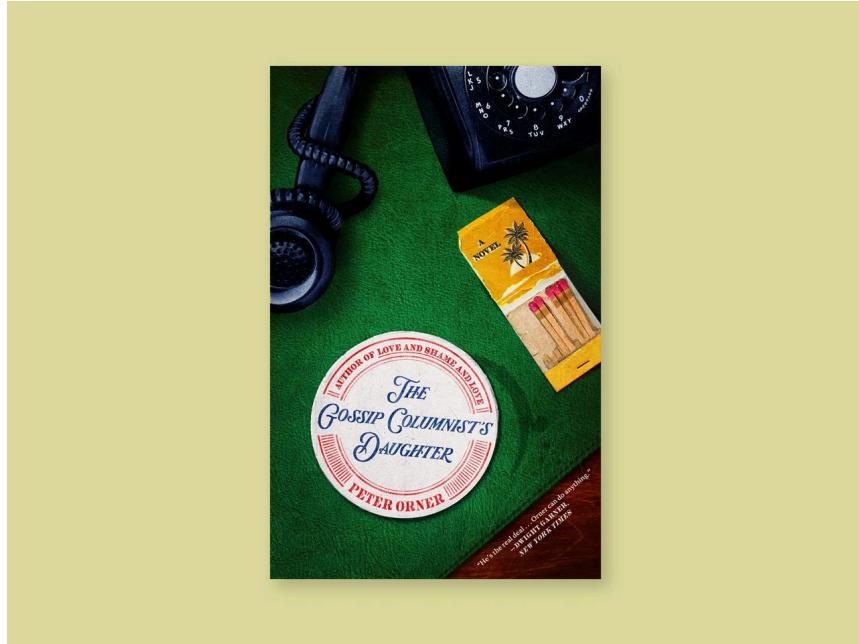


Illustration by Ben Hickey

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**This Kind of Trouble**, by Tochi Eze (*Tiny Reparations*). The two main settings of this layered début novel are Lagos in 2005 and Umumilo, a small village in Nigeria’s southeast, in 1905. The first plotline follows Benjamin and Margaret, who reconnect after a brief marriage in their youth. The second focusses on the couple’s grandparents, who lived in Umumilo when it faced the arrival of British colonizers. When Benjamin and Margaret first married, they did so despite the objections of Umumilo villagers, who described unpaid debts on both sides: Margaret’s grandfather had committed an unpardonable crime, and Benjamin’s grandmother helped him. While the novel examines clashes between diverging approaches to justice, honor, and community, its looping chronology illustrates the inescapable ripples of national and family histories.



**The Gossip Columnist's Daughter**, by Peter Orner (Little, Brown). This chatty yet reflective novel explores the relationship between two real-life couples: Lou and Babs Rosenthal (the author's grandparents) and Irv Kupcinet, a longtime gossip columnist for the Chicago *Sun-Times*, and his wife, Essee. After many years of close friendship, the couples became estranged following the unsolved murder, in 1963, of the Kupcinets' daughter, Karyn, a Hollywood actress. As the narrator, a professor separated from his wife, obsessively researches the death, his investigation fuels his parenting and relationship woes and leads him into a thicket of conspiracy theories. Throughout, Orner weighs the slippery connections among family, identity, and history: “The truth is I’ve never been drawn to stories with answers. I’m lured to the ones where people, for whatever reason, don’t want an answer.”

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<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/10/20/the-gods-of-new-york-trying-this-kind-of-trouble-and-the-gossip-columnists-daughter>

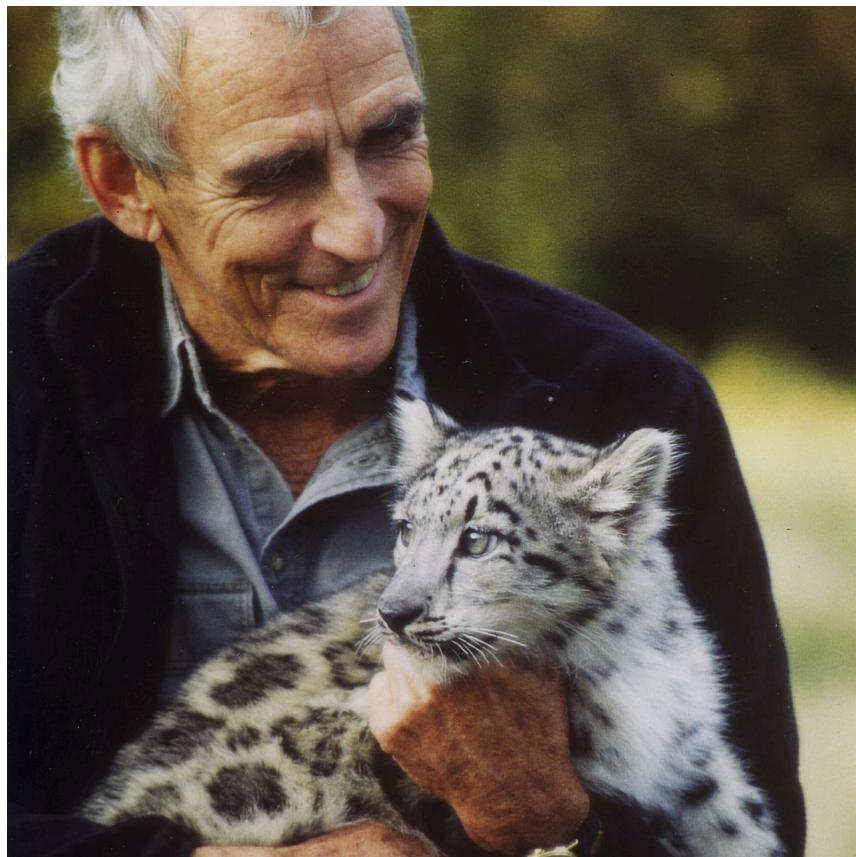
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## Peter Matthiessen Travelled the World, Trying to Escape Himself

He was a spy, a crusader, an obsessive advocate for neglected people and places—yet his work was shaped, too, by an inner crisis.

By [Maggie Doherty](#)

October 13, 2025



*In “True Nature: The Pilgrimage of Peter Matthiessen,” Lance Richardson depicts a writer constantly struggling to enact his ideals in daily life.*

*Photograph courtesy Jessie Close*

On November 20, 1959, at a pier in Brooklyn, the writer Peter Matthiessen boarded the M.V. Venimos, a freighter bound for Iquitos, a port town deep in the Peruvian Amazon. He was fresh off the publication of “Wildlife in America,” a travelogue-cum-polemic that lavished attention on the endangered species of North

America, indicted the humans who had destroyed their habitats, and established Matthiessen as a nature writer in the tradition of Henry David Thoreau and John Muir. Now he was ready for wilder climes. As Matthiessen stepped across the ship's gray deck, the writer William Styron, his close friend, looked on with admiration. More than twenty years later, Styron recalled the scene: "He might have been going no farther than Staten Island, so composed did he seem, rather than to uttermost jungle fastnesses where God knows what beast and dark happenings would imperil his hide."

Matthiessen liked peril; one could even say he courted it. In the course of a long literary career, during which he wrote thirty-three books and was celebrated for both his fiction and his nonfiction, he travelled to places most writers would never dare to go. He flew through thick fog across the Bering Sea in pursuit of musk oxen. He accompanied a crew of Caymanian turtle hunters on a barely seaworthy schooner. He roamed solo across the Serengeti, dodging predators and scrutinizing dead prey. Most memorably, in 1973, he accompanied the famed field biologist George Schaller on a late-autumn hike in the Dolpo Mountains of Nepal. Schaller was looking for rare Himalayan blue sheep; Matthiessen was looking for enlightenment, which he compared to the elusive snow leopard, sensed but seldom seen. The book that resulted from this trip, "The Snow Leopard" (1978), won Matthiessen the first of two National Book Awards.

At the same time, he accumulated many of the trappings of an upper-middle-class life: four children; a house on Long Island; a devoted wife, followed by another, and then another. Yet he never let domesticity tie him down. A solitary type, at once charismatic and cold, Matthiessen conducted himself like a man beholden to nothing save his work. He said yes to nearly every months-long research trip suggested to him; when home, he sequestered himself in his writing shed. Blessed with rugged good looks that complemented his adventurous life style, he practically had a girl in every port. "I still seem to be pathologically restless in some way

and am no fit mate for anybody,” he wrote, after the breakup of his first marriage, to his friend George Plimpton, with whom he’d co-founded *The Paris Review*. His daughter, Rue Matthiessen, described him similarly: “My father always had a stunning ability to move on, sometimes shucking earlier associations like fresh snow from his shoulders.”

## What We're Reading

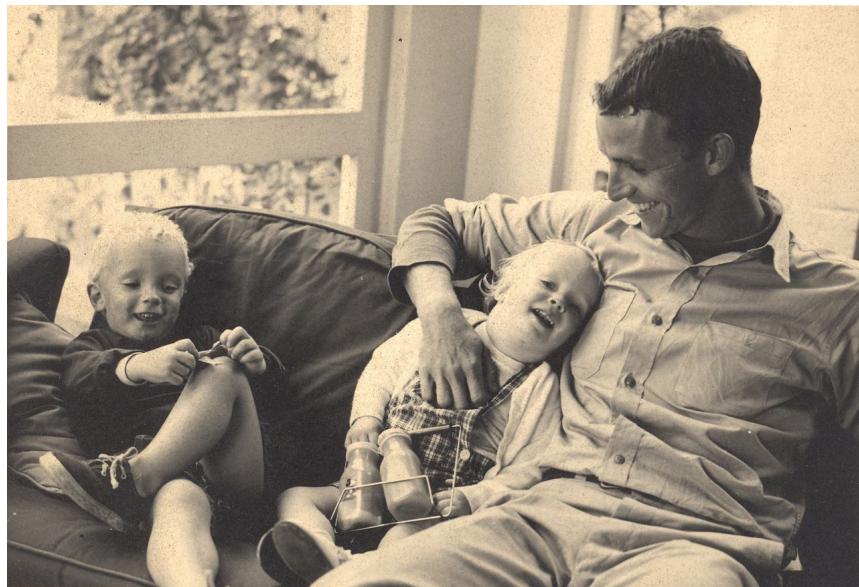
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For a certain type of literary man, Matthiessen was nothing less than awe-inspiring. Here was an artist who had stared death in the face and lived to write reasonably well about it. For his intimates, however, he was a more complicated figure, sometimes attentive and engaged, at other times incredibly callous. In truth, even as he neglected his family, Matthiessen was preoccupied with what it meant to be a responsible person—particularly in a world where nature, and those whose livelihoods depended on it, was threatened by the unchecked forces of modernity. His roving life inevitably prompts questions. What was Matthiessen looking for? And what was he running from?

Lance Richardson’s “True Nature: The Pilgrimage of Peter Matthiessen” (Pantheon) offers some answers. The first biography of the writer, and an engaging one at that, the book narrates how a child of privilege evolved into an esteemed naturalist-writer and a crusader for various left-wing causes. Matthiessen was born in

1927 to a pair of well-off, chronically depressed New Yorkers, people who were more likely to pour a stiff drink or take to their beds than to talk openly about their feelings. The family split their time between a house in Irvington, a suburb of New York City, and an apartment on Fifth Avenue near the prestigious St. Bernard's School, which Matthiessen attended from the age of six. (Plimpton was a classmate.) In 1937, Matthiessen's father, Matty, an architect, moved the family to rural Connecticut, where Peter and his siblings could roam freely.



*Matthiessen with Lucas and Sara Carey, his children with Patsy Southgate.  
Photograph courtesy Peter Matthiessen estate*

The second of three children, Matthiessen was the resident troublemaker. He mouthed off. He cursed. At the family's summer house, on Fishers Island, in Long Island Sound, he used a hunting rifle to take out an attic window. Ill at ease at home, and in New York's high society more generally, he found solace in the natural world. As an adolescent, he developed a birding habit that would endure for decades. Fishers Island, with its kelp-strewn beaches and diverse wildlife, loomed in Matthiessen's mind as a kind of "prelapsarian Eden," as Richardson puts it. During summers there, he could immerse himself in verdant beauty and live untouched by social expectations. Richardson argues that, even as an adult,

Matthiessen longed to find some similar paradise. Each time he set out for a far-off place, he was looking for another Eden.

Had he been born into a different family, or a different social class, Matthiessen might have trained for a job that let him spend most of his time outdoors. As it was, he was expected to attend an élite preparatory school and an Ivy League college, then pick a respectable profession and marry well. He rebelled whenever he could. At the Hotchkiss School, he was an indifferent student and was voted “Biggest Operator” by his peers. At Yale, where he matriculated in 1947, following a brief stint in the Navy that almost ended in a court-martial, he skipped class to go on nature walks.

But it wasn’t until he arrived in Paris, during his junior year abroad, that he could truly nurture his bohemian streak. The city was still reeling from the Second World War. The power went out intermittently, and families scrimped to get enough food. But to Matthiessen, a wealthy American who benefitted from a favorable exchange rate, it was a place of increased freedom, far from the reach of his parents and governed by entirely different rules. He lingered in cafés, had love affairs, and read Baudelaire and Proust. “I can’t describe the feeling of relaxation and complete ease which is partly based on France itself and partly on escaping from those endless messes and complications at home,” he wrote to one of several women he was seeing at the time.

By this point, Matthiessen was already toying with the idea of becoming a writer. Back in New Haven, he took creative-writing classes and read Steinbeck and Faulkner. He published a short story in *The Atlantic Monthly*, secured a literary agent, and attracted the interest of a publishing executive, the stepfather of a close friend—all before turning twenty-five. It was a confidence boost for a young man who didn’t really need one. He was thus surprised to have other stories rejected by magazines, and further surprised when his agent wrote to say that his novel in progress had already been written by James Fenimore Cooper. Decades later, he

described such rejection as “a salutary experience for a young writer,” although one imagines it didn’t quite feel that way at the time.

But Matthiessen didn’t stew over his failures. He was on the move once again, headed back to Paris with his wife, Patsy Southgate, a Smith graduate who would eventually become a key figure in the New York School of poetry. Like many of his contemporaries—James Baldwin, Richard Wright, Styron—Matthiessen was in Paris to channel the legacy of literary modernism and to write innovative fiction. But he was also there on a clandestine mission for the recently formed Central Intelligence Agency, which had recruited him out of Yale and charged him with surveilling Communists and fellow-travellers. (The experience would form the basis for his second novel, “*Partisans*,” published in 1955.) He founded *The Paris Review*, with Plimpton and the writer Harold L. (Doc) Humes, in part to give himself a more substantial cover story. As Richardson notes, it’s not clear how much, if any, C.I.A. money went to the magazine. What is clear is that Matthiessen’s socializing with left-leaning French and expatriate artists served the deep state’s agenda.

Matthiessen’s time with the C.I.A. sits uneasily within his biography. He rarely spoke of it, but at least once called it “the one adventure of my life that I regret.” In the years that followed, he tried to make up for his collaboration with the federal government by practicing “advocacy journalism,” much of it written for this magazine. He championed migrant farmworkers, defended traditional Inuit whaling practices, and, at a time when few white Americans took Indigenous rights seriously, supported the American Indian Movement (AIM), a loosely organized, occasionally militant grassroots group that promoted Native traditions and political interests.

This advocacy work culminated with “In the Spirit of Crazy Horse” (1983), a controversial account of the trial of the Native activist

Leonard Peltier, who was convicted of murdering two F.B.I. agents, and the F.B.I.’s “war” against *aim*. Matthiessen, not without reason, portrays the Bureau as paranoid, dishonest, and in league with corporate interests. Soon after the book was published, two libel suits—one from an F.B.I. agent, the other from William Janklow, the South Dakota governor, who was once accused of raping a Lakota girl—took it off the shelves. The book would remain out of print for the duration of an eight-year legal battle that ultimately saw Matthiessen and his publisher, Viking, absolved.

In “Crazy Horse,” Matthiessen collates dozens of Native voices, who speak of a desire for liberation: from landlessness and poverty, from the indignities of reservation life. Matthiessen contextualizes their demands within the history of colonial violence, and persuasively argues for the release of Peltier, who spent nearly fifty years behind bars before his sentence was commuted to house arrest by President Joe Biden, this past January. The heft of the book—at more than six hundred pages, it is exhaustively researched and exhausting to read—reflects the writer’s convictions. Unlike many of his peers, Matthiessen was anti-consumerist, anti-imperialist, and antiwar. But the book might also reflect his strenuous effort to escape his past mistakes, to atone for the years he spent spying on his fellow-artists. If Matthiessen couldn’t turn back time, he could write his way toward repentance.

In 1953, Matthiessen quit the C.I.A. and, accompanied by Patsy and their newborn son, Lucas, returned to New York, where they rented a cottage on the East End of Long Island. (Seven years later, following his divorce from Patsy, Matthiessen would buy a house in Sagaponack, which would function as a home base until his death, in 2014.) The area was popular with summer tourists, but in the off-season it was inhabited by poor fisherman-farmers known as Bonackers. Matthiessen idolized his neighbors, particularly the men: tough, laconic types who prized independence and who weren’t afraid of hard work. Courting their approval, he fished on their boats from late spring through fall, then spent the cold months

working on his fiction. In “Men’s Lives” (1986), his poignant study of the trials facing commercial fishermen on Long Island, he recalls these years spent partly on the water as “among the most rewarding of my life.”



*Matthiessen with Deborah Love, who introduced him to Zen Buddhism.*  
Photograph courtesy Peter Matthiessen estate

Even as he tried to disavow his wealthy background, living hand to mouth and engaging in hard physical labor, Matthiessen knew that he would never truly belong among the sun-battered men he so admired. As Richardson notes, in “Race Rock” (1954), Matthiessen’s first novel, the protagonist and authorial alter ego, George McConville, compares himself unfavorably with the male laborers who live in his village: he is “a canary among crows,” a sensitive type with soft hands. He envies men from the working class and those with Native heritage; he believes they are “on closer terms with life than he had ever been.”

This conviction—that those in Indigenous or traditional communities live more simply and thus more authentically—would crop up again and again in Matthiessen’s writing. In “The Tree Where Man Was Born,” his 1972 book about the people and animals of East Africa, he waxes romantic about the Hadza tribe, a hunter-gatherer community. “For people who must live from day to

day, past and future have small relevance,” he writes. “They live in the moment, a very precious gift that we have lost.” More than twenty years later, he described the Inuit in similar terms: “The traditional hunter is far more aware of all life, being a part of it . . . than the angry, strident people who abuse him.” Even his family picked up on his preference for the exotic other. As his daughter Rue writes in a memoir, “He saw us as sort of spoiled and had no respect for that, in the same way he hadn’t any respect for himself.” She recalls her half sister Sara Carey’s quip on the same theme: “In his eyes you were no good unless you were ‘washing the foot of a leper.’ ”

Matthiessen explored this belief most rigorously in “At Play in the Fields of the Lord,” his breakthrough novel, from 1965. Based partly on his reporting trip to the Amazon, “At Play” follows two pairs of married missionaries charged with converting the fictional Niaruna tribe, who live in isolation on resource-rich land coveted by the region’s government. One of the men, Martin Quarrier, is fascinated by the Niaruna and makes little effort to convert them; if anything, it is they who influence him. His curiosity is mirrored by that of Lewis Moon, a free-spirited drifter with both Cheyenne and Choctaw ancestry, who has been contracted by the government to drop bombs on the Niaruna, in an effort to scatter the tribe. Instead, Moon, high on ayahuasca, crashes a plane into their territory, effectively disappearing himself from civilized society. Eager to live as the natives do, he walks barefoot through the jungle, puts down his gun, and helps the tribe defend itself against missionaries and mercenaries alike. “He had never envied anything so much as the identity of these people with their surroundings, nor realized quite so painfully how displaced he had always been,” Matthiessen writes—words that could apply to the author himself.

All this makes “At Play” seem like the story of the noble savage and the modern man who saves him. But the novel goes on to complicate such an interpretation. Moon impregnates a Niaruna woman; he also infects her with a virus that her body can’t resist.

The illness spreads through the tribe, sickening one of its leaders and creating division and disorder. When Moon appeals to the missionaries for modern medicine, they criticize him for putting “personal ambition” above the well-being of the people he claims to love. The novel thus points up the threat posed to traditional communities by even the best-intentioned envoys of modernity. Moon, like Matthiessen, can’t help but be complicit in the very structures and forces he deplores.

In many ways, “At Play” is Matthiessen’s most successful novel: it contains well-rounded characters, a sense of narrative momentum that is absent from much of his work, and prose as lush as the jungle it describes. (Early in the novel, Moon looks out the window of a plane to see “a nether world of dark enormous greens, wild strangled greens veined by brown rivers of hot rain, the Andean rain, implacable and mighty as the rain that fell on those sunless days when the earth cooled.”) A “Heart of Darkness” for the nuclear age, the manuscript also stood out at a moment when American fiction was dominated by a kind of domestic realism—sad tales of alcoholic office workers and desultory extramarital affairs. Eight different publishers competed over the book. Random House eventually won by offering Matthiessen fifteen thousand dollars, ten times what he’d earned for his second novel. Nearly fifteen years after he’d sold his first short story, his career as a fiction writer was finally under way.

Until the very end of his life, Matthiessen insisted that he was a fiction writer first, a journalist second. He was convinced that, if he were known after his death, it would be for “At Play” and the novels that followed during his life: “Far Tortuga” (1975), a Melvillean sea saga written in Caymanian dialect, and the three novels that make up the Watson trilogy, about the nineteenth-century planter and outlaw Edgar (Bloody) Watson, which were published in a single volume, “Shadow Country,” in 2008. (“Shadow Country” won the National Book Award for Fiction, despite some controversy over whether the novel constituted new

work.) Though his nonfiction books were often well received —“The Tree Where Man Was Born” was a finalist for the 1972 National Book Award—Matthiessen downplayed their significance. “Nonfiction at its best is like fashioning a cabinet,” he told *The Paris Review*, in 1999. “It can be elegant and very beautiful but it can never be sculpture.”

Matthiessen was ultimately wrong about his legacy. Today, he is best known for “The Snow Leopard,” a diaristic account of his gruelling trek through the Himalayas which doubles as a prose elegy for his second wife, Deborah Love, who died of ovarian cancer in 1972. The book is renowned for its blend of observation and meditation, both of which were influenced by Matthiessen’s newfound commitment to Zen Buddhism. He had been introduced to the practice by Love, a fellow writer and spiritual seeker, but didn’t pursue it in earnest until after Love’s death, when its concepts of nonattachment and impermanence provided solace. Although meditation might seem ill suited to a man who couldn’t sit still, the austerity of Zen appealed to him, as did its emphasis on knowing, and thus mastering, the mind. If he couldn’t become a pre-modern person, he could at least become responsible for himself.

The spirit of Zen infuses “The Snow Leopard.” In Richardson’s words, “it is steeped in science and spirituality,” moving “between these seemingly incompatible modes with startling ease.” At one moment, Matthiessen watches “a flock of vermillion minivets, blown through a wind-tossed tumult of bamboo.” At another, he contemplates the “profound consolation” of prana, the life force that preëxists the individual and transcends mortality. Following Schaller and their hired Sherpas across the icy slopes, Matthiessen strains to stay in the present, to simply “be” in the way that Zen monks advise.

“The Snow Leopard” is noticeably sparer than most of Matthiessen’s other nonfiction books, which tend to be padded with

historical research. But what truly distinguishes the book is its personal nature. From early in his journalistic career, Matthiessen had abhorred the use of the first person, which he associated with a “*National Geographic* style of expedition writing,” sensational and unserious. In “The Snow Leopard,” however, he lets the “I” lead the way, offering access to his inner life, even as he questions the entire concept of the self. “Why is death so much on my mind when I do not feel I am afraid of it?” he asks at one point.

“Between clinging and letting go, I feel a terrific sense of struggle.”

It’s tempting to read “The Snow Leopard” as a work of confessional writing, in which Matthiessen details his weak points as a husband and a father. Reflecting on his marriage to Love, Matthiessen remembers how he “found her goodness maddening, and behaved badly,” though he doesn’t expand on how. He also recalls their eight-year-old son Alex’s tears upon hearing that his father was about to leave him, alone and motherless, for a months-long trip halfway around the world: “ ‘That’s much too long,’ he wept, and this was true.”

But Richardson’s biography, which is grounded in remarkably candid interviews with Matthiessen’s family members and lovers, reveals that any confessions made in “The Snow Leopard” are but partial. While in Nepal, Matthiessen was writing to two different women: one a longtime girlfriend, Jane Stanton, with whom he’d been involved during his marriage to Love, and the other Maria Koenig, a married woman twelve years his junior who would become his third wife. Prior to the expedition, he gave Koenig, who had two young daughters, an ultimatum that she leave her husband before he returned from the Himalayas; at the same time, he planned a European vacation with Stanton. While the grief Matthiessen relates in “The Snow Leopard” is surely sincere —“love was there, half-understood, never quite finished,” he writes of the enduring bond between him and Love—his mourning process was significantly more complex than the spiritual pilgrimage he describes. Illuminated by Richardson’s biography,

“The Snow Leopard” becomes an even more intriguing object. It is both a record of a man’s failings and a book written to avoid confronting them.

Matthiessen and Love sometimes argued about who would die first. It was a strange competition, as if the one closer to death were more enlightened than the other. Matthiessen put forward the idea that he wouldn’t live past forty. “Death at forty: I do not take the idea too seriously, but even so, I am conscious now of a certain restlessness, and apprehension,” he wrote in his journal in 1967.

In the end, Matthiessen lived to eighty-six; like Love, he died of cancer. (His diagnosis was acute myeloid leukemia.) But the restlessness he felt in 1967, and arguably much earlier, never went away. It was with him throughout his thirty-four-year marriage to Maria, who organized his home, managed his social calendar, and edited his manuscripts, and whom he cheated on countless times, despite her evident suffering. It was with him in his writing shed, where he spent thirty years drafting, then painstakingly revising, the tripartite Watson epic, an ambitious project that he never felt was truly finished. And it was with him on his travels, which continued right up until his cancer diagnosis. He went to Kenya, to Siberia, to Australia. He attended a meditation retreat at Auschwitz-Birkenau, the inspiration for his final novel, “In Paradise.” (The novel was published three days after his death.) It was only when he was too ill to take full advantage of an expedition in the Gobi Desert that he came to something like a stop.

Near the end of “The Snow Leopard,” Matthiessen relates, with admirable frankness, the disappointment he felt during the last week of his hike. “I am spent,” he writes.

The path I followed breathlessly has faded among stones; in spiritual ambition, I have neglected my children and done myself harm, and there is no way back. Nor has anything changed; I am still beset by the same old lusts and ego and

emotions, the endless nagging details and irritations—that aching gap between what I know and what I am.

The journey had not changed him, nor had it meaningfully closed the distance between the person he was and the person he wanted to be. Alone in a tent, during a rare moment of stasis, Matthiessen had to reckon with the harm he'd done to others. Then he packed up camp, boarded a plane, and put his time on the mountain behind him. ♦

*Maggie Doherty* is the author of “*The Equivalents: A Story of Art, Female Friendship, and Liberation in the 1960s*.” She teaches at Harvard.

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<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/10/20/true-nature-the-pilgrimage-of-peter-mattiessen-lance-richardson-book-review>

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[The Current Cinema](#)

## Art and Life in Richard Linklater’s “Blue Moon” and “Nouvelle Vague”

*The director’s new films—about Lorenz Hart and Jean-Luc Godard—form a kind of diptych, but the contrasts are as important as the similarities.*

By [Richard Brody](#)

October 10, 2025



*In “Blue Moon,” Ethan Hawke, as Hart, projects an anxious sense of a man whose career is over; in “Nouvelle Vague,” Guillaume Marbeck portrays a Godard anxious that his career may never even get started.*

*Illustration by Javi Aznarez*

Leave it to [Richard Linklater](#) to see how, in art, the fundamental things apply. In his two new movies—“Blue Moon,” about the lyricist Lorenz Hart, and “Nouvelle Vague,” about the director [Jean-Luc Godard](#)’s making of “Breathless”—the central conflicts involve time. Linklater has made two dozen features in a career now in its fourth decade; having learned to work the clock, he finds pathos in the idea of two artists at risk of being late. “Blue Moon” and “Nouvelle Vague” are being released two weeks apart (on October 17th and 31st, respectively), a happy accident highlighting their connections in Linklater’s cinematic universe.

“Blue Moon” is set in New York, mainly in the bar at Sardi’s, on March 31, 1943—the night of the première of “Oklahoma!,” the musical that Hart’s longtime collaborator, the composer Richard Rodgers, created with another writer, Oscar Hammerstein II. Hart ([Ethan Hawke](#))—let’s call him Larry, as people do in the movie, to distinguish the character from the real-life Hart—walks out on the show’s title number and takes refuge at the bar. He’s bitter and jealous, aware that the show will be a big hit and that he could never have written it. But he’s nonetheless sincere when venting to the bartender, Eddie ([Bobby Cannavale](#)), that it’s sentimental and phony, and that this artificial sweetness is crucial to its success.

The story involves two waiting games. Larry knows that he’ll have to put on a brave face when Rodgers, Hammerstein, and their entourage arrive. He’s also waiting for a woman, who, he tells Eddie, is twenty and beautiful. He is forty-seven, with a slicked-down comb-over, and all too conscious of being short and wizened. In other words, the vainly hopeful Larry is about to endure twin humiliations, leaving him feeling bumped out of his life and into the past—a has-been, instantly old. Eddie, like many, assumes that Larry is gay, but the songwriter says that he’s “omnisexual,” a conceit that’s vital to his creativity: “How can you be the chorus of the world without having the chorus of the whole world inside you?”

Without Rodgers, though, Larry’s inner chorus is silenced. When Rodgers ([Andrew Scott](#)), known as Dick, enters, Larry courts him with sarcasm and self-promotion. Dick assures him that their collaboration needn’t be over but demands that Larry, who is alcoholic, stop showing up late (or failing to show up at all) to songwriting sessions. “It’s a business,” Dick says. But their differences are creative, too. When Larry criticizes “Oklahoma!” and suggests that they join forces on a caustic satire, Dick says, “People want shows to have some emotional core. They want to feel what we’re fighting for.” Dick has his finger on the pulse of wartime America; Larry doesn’t.

Linklater, working with a script by Robert Kaplow, brings in an array of historical characters, including *The New Yorker's E. B. White* (Patrick Kennedy), who commiserates with Larry's feeling of being "superannuated"; a viperish child musical-theatre prodigy called "little Stevie" (Cillian Sullivan), whose last name, though never stated, is evidently Sondheim; and, above all, Larry's date, Elizabeth Weiland (Margaret Qualley), an aspiring production designer studying at the Yale School of Fine Art. (Weiland's correspondence with Hart survives, and Kaplow based his script on it.) Larry's extended tête-à-tête with her in the bar's cloakroom, a mutually thrilling and embarrassing psychosexual tangle, is bruising for him—even in ways that, perversely, he'd planned—yet he somehow comes out with his dignity just about intact.

Much of Larry's dignity is intellectual. Kaplow's script gives him waspishly insightful riffs on theatre, music, movies, and life—torrents of thought and feeling that, in the compact form of his lyrics, remained dammed up. "Blue Moon" revels in a fine mind and a great soul, and Hawke's embodiment of both is exalted and startling. His makeup (including dark contact lenses that lend his fixed gaze wild intensity and fathomless depth) renders him unrecognizable and is eerily compelling, while his vocal self-transformation is nothing short of miraculous. The force of Larry's personality forges the movie into a seemingly uninterrupted image of time passing—and passing him by.

"Nouvelle Vague" suggests Linklater's ambition by way of its title—not "The Godard Story" or "The 'Breathless' Story" but the name of a movement, the New Wave, announcing this as a collective portrait. The film, shot in French, anchors veneration of Godard in the portrayal of two groups from which the first flowering of his art was inextricable. One group comprises his fellow-critics at *Cahiers du Cinéma*—foremost, [François Truffaut](#), [Jacques Rivette](#), [Claude Chabrol](#), and [Éric Rohmer](#)—who fought alongside him for the concept of auteurship (the artistic primacy of the director), and then put this doctrine into action in movies of

their own. The other is the cast and crew of “Breathless,” who didn’t share his artistic obsession but deferred to his peculiar methods.

Linklater tells the story of a young man in a hurry. It is 1959 and Godard—or, rather, the character Jean-Luc (Guillaume Marbeck)—calls himself a failure for not having made his first feature by twenty-five, the age at which Orson Welles made “Citizen Kane.” Moreover, his four closest *Cahiers* friends all have first films completed or under way; Truffaut’s “The 400 Blows” is about to première at the Cannes Film Festival. Fearful of being left behind, Jean-Luc steals money from the *Cahiers* cash box and heads to the festival. There, he manages to persuade the producer Georges de Beauregard (Bruno Dreyfürst) to produce “Breathless,” based on an outline that Godard and Truffaut had written years before.

Most of “Nouvelle Vague” shows Jean-Luc at work. He casts the French actor Jean-Paul Belmondo (Aubry Dullin), then little known, and the internationally famous American actress Jean Seberg (Zoey Deutch). He assembles a crew and organizes the shoot in unorthodox ways that arouse skepticism, bewilderment, and even anger. First, there’s no script; Jean-Luc writes each day’s lines just before shooting. Second, the movie is shot silent (dialogue was to be dubbed), which allows him to call out instructions to cast and crew as the camera rolls. Third, he shoots only when he feels inspired—some days for just a few hours, and other days not at all. This infuriates Georges: time, after all, is money. But, for Jean-Luc, money is time—which is to say, the producer is paying for time that Jean-Luc will use as he sees fit. In “Blue Moon,” Dick orders Larry to treat songwriting like a business and show up for a full day’s work. In “Nouvelle Vague,” Jean-Luc, treating movies as art, refuses to keep to a businesslike schedule.

Linklater’s cast features near-look-alikes whose acting is mainly impressive impersonation. Marbeck conveys Jean-Luc’s lofty grace

and intellectualized physicality but smiles too much, missing the forbidding quality that keeps the director's associates on eggshells. Dullin captures Belmondo's streetwise whimsy and athletic energy. Deutch's performance is the exception: she endows Seberg with star power while also expressing the famous actress's vulnerability and the risks to her career that Jean-Luc's destabilizing method poses. (Belmondo is up for the adventure, but Seberg is miserable throughout the shoot and considers quitting.)

“Nouvelle Vague” is heady with meticulous reconstitutions of period places and styles, and the script—written by Holly Gent and Vincent Palmo, Jr., and adapted into French with dialogue by Michèle Halberstadt and Laetitia Masson—gives snippets from Godard’s actual interviews and writings to Jean-Luc’s character. Yet it drastically differs from the remedial portraiture of “Blue Moon,” which puts a behind-the-scenes genius belatedly into his spotlight. Godard cultivated a public image, so Linklater’s challenge isn’t to show what he was like but rather what he did. “Nouvelle Vague” is a personal film about the making of a personal film—about how Godard, working in the pop format of the gangster movie, burst its seams in order to express himself fully and openly, as if speaking through the screen in his own voice.

A film about a great director and his ensemble, “Nouvelle Vague” is a vision of auteurship itself, of the risks that filmmakers incur in order to seize the freedom needed for their art—the freedom, above all, to choose their methods and invent their own system. The corollary is in the conflicts that such directorial freedom causes with collaborators, especially the actors. Linklater’s film asserts, gently but unbendingly, that a movie isn’t made for the actors’ pleasure, and that their enjoyment of the experience is no measure of the results. As the shoot of “Breathless” grows increasingly chaotic, Suzon Faye (Pauline Belle), the script supervisor, wonders whether the footage can be edited into a coherent film. Raoul Coutard (Mathieu Penchinat), the intrepid cinematographer, is unfazed, saying of the stars, “Good thing the camera loves these

two.” If the camera loves the stars, it doesn’t matter whether the stars love the job; the director has taken care of business.

“Nouvelle Vague” isn’t a portrait of Godard by Linklater but a feature-length thank-you note, from Richard to Jean-Luc, for freeing him to make films his own way. It didn’t reach Godard, who died in 2022, in time. ♦

*Richard Brody, a film critic, began writing for The New Yorker in 1999. He is the author of “Everything Is Cinema: The Working Life of Jean-Luc Godard.”*

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<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/10/20/blue-moon-movie-review-nouvelle-vague>

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# Poems

- **[“I Consider Myself”](#)**

“When Soto went crosstown I couldn’t / believe it, the traitor, the bat in front of / that sculpture Judge.”

- **[“Library of Congress”](#)**

“Here’s a book / on neutrinos captured in Antarctica, / here’s another on solar flares.”

[Poems](#)

# I Consider Myself



By [Natan Last](#)

October 13, 2025

When Soto went crosstown I couldn't believe it, the traitor, the bat in front of that sculpture Judge, to be a Yankee only to slum it with the Mets. Often I worry I'm a class traitor because I love my Yanks, love 'em the way you love a skyscraper like a long-legged burlesque peeling off her fishnets, glitter underneath, the wet cement smell of wealth and more of it coming—that's the thing, I'm walking on the beaches of Tulum trying to get the guys into a club, when a hat shows the white skyscrapers of our logo, I say *¿Qué pasó con Soto?*, the guard thumbs his pointer and middle, *Dinero*, uses his hand to wave the team of us inside. You couldn't etch the Mets' logo onto the beaches

of Tulum if you tried, that's a tryhard font, serifs like clearing throats, the putrid orange of nostalgia, but the Yanks are all future, that's why they're clean-shaven, every day could be the day a chubby southpaw from South Bay throws a perfect game in perfect pinstripes, lines as crisp as architectural drawings, mowing the hitters down like shaving them, removing the grass and debris to expose pure beach underneath. If you think for a second every guard in Tulum or kid from the D.R. up in the South Bronx doesn't want in on a dynasty, you don't get class. My father would fight kids in the schoolyard, all of them white, who said Mantle was better than Mays, but remember the yellowed icon of that era is an over-the-shoulder basket catch, defense with Mays facing away from us. You and I want doubles. We want the slow jackhammer of the bat as a demolition of this world, construction begun on tomorrow's, Gehrig preparing the future with his echo, *Today today, the luckiest luckiest man man*, that's me and you, like McCarthy's Judge, enormous and iron-batted and the right amount of evil and swearing we will never die, *the face the face of the earth of the earth.*

*Natan Last, an immigration advocate and a poet, is the author of “Across the Universe: The Past, Present, and Future of the Crossword Puzzle.”*

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<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/10/20/i-consider-myself-natan-last-poem>

[Poems](#)

# Library of Congress

By [Arthur Sze](#)

October 13, 2025

You peer down a lit corridor  
on the fifth tier of stacks  
where a million books breathe  
on shelves; here's a book  
on neutrinos captured in Antarctica,  
here's another on solar flares.

A curator displays a book  
in Vai script and points to a triangle  
with two dots; you wonder  
if you are looking at a pregnant  
woman, an enslaved man,  
or a human ear; you pull a book  
off a shelf and, opening it,  
hear *Del aire al aire, como*

then snap it shut: the air hums  
with honeybees. A second curator  
points at glittering gold script;  
though you can't divine a word,  
you guess *Farsi* and dive  
into the marlin-blue depth of the page.

A third curator shows you  
woodblock printed on mulberry paper,  
and as you read *a distant mind*  
*leaves the earth around it,*  
you smell daylilies in a courtyard  
and know you may caravan

to Timbuktu, but there's no  
pear-blossom end to what's within reach.

*Arthur Sze was appointed the twenty-fifth U.S. Poet Laureate in 2025. His books include “[Into the Hush](#)” and “[The White Orchard: Selected Interviews, Essays, and Poems](#). ”*

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A beginner-friendly puzzle.

**Crossword**

# The Crossword: Wednesday, October 8, 2025

A beginner-friendly puzzle.



By [Erik Agard](#)

October 8, 2025

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*Erik Agard is a co-founder of the Crossword Puzzle Collaboration Directory, a resource for aspiring puzzle-makers from underrepresented groups.*

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