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Louise Bourgeois's Art Can Still Enthrall

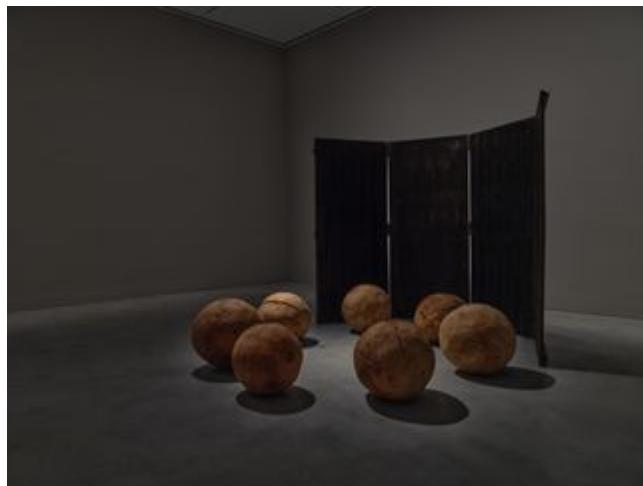
Also: the many disciplines of Sudan Archives, a Max Ophüls retrospective, Rachel Syme on upstate cults, and more.

By [Jillian Steinhauer](#), [Sheldon Pearce](#), [Richard Brody](#), [Jane Bua](#), [Brian Seibert](#), and [Rachel Syme](#)

January 23, 2026

[You're reading the Goings On newsletter, a guide to what we're watching, listening to, and doing this week. Sign up to receive it in your inbox.](#)

It's a credit to [Louise Bourgeois](#) that her art can still surprise. For much of her career, the French-born, New York-based artist showed only sporadically—until the Museum of Modern Art gave her a retrospective, in 1982, when she was seventy. After that, and especially since her death, in 2010, Bourgeois has become a household name, and her art a familiar presence. Yet even acolytes of her psychologically freighted sculptures, drawings, and prints may find new revelation in “[Gathering Wool](#),” an exhibition at Hauser & Wirth (through April 18) focussed on her late abstractions.



Installation view of “Gathering Wool,” from 1990.

*Art work by Louise Bourgeois / © the Easton Foundation / VAGA / ARS / Courtesy Hauser & Wirth;
Photograph by Thomas Barratt*

The first room provides the show's aesthetic apex. It's dominated by the huge installation "Twosome" (1991), in which a black tank hums while slowly moving in and out of a larger one, with a flashing red light inside. A nearby screen plays a clip, from a 1978 performance, of Suzan Cooper strutting among Bourgeois's sculptures and gutturally singing a song about being abandoned. The themes here are classically Bourgeoisian—human interdependence and the difficulty of uncoupling—but the contrast of austere kineticism with raw emotion is unusual and entralling.

The exhibition proceeds more typically from there, with a series of evocative pieces on the darkened ground floor, including the titular installation, from 1990: seven oversized wooden balls that seem to be gathered in conversation before a metal screen. Upstairs, in a limited exhibit (closing Jan. 24), the tone changes again, as more modest sculptures and works on paper are scattered across the light-filled fifth floor. The display, although understated, highlights the rhythms of Bourgeois's obsessive repetitions, and pleasure comes in the form of details, such as in an untitled piece in which a pair of marble eggs hides in a stack of weathered crates.



About Town

Hip-Hop

Since the implosion of his wry alt-rap group Das Racist, which stood as a testament to the blog-era internet's megaphonic power, the Queens rapper Himanshu Suri, or **Heems**, has carved out a more serious career offline. In addition to Swet Shop Boys, his project with the actor Riz Ahmed and the English producer Redinho, and a gig at N.Y.U. Tisch's Clive Davis Institute, Heems's music as a soloist has unpacked intersectional identity, probing the Indo-Gothamite experience with clear eyes, a biting disposition, and an

easygoing wit. He still knows his way around a joke, but on such albums as “Lafandar” and “Veena” he expands the scope of the hip-hop ego.—*Sheldon Pearce (Baby’s All Right; Jan. 31.)*

Movies

For her feature-film directorial début, **“The Chronology of Water,”** Kristen Stewart adapts Lidia Yuknavitch’s eponymous 2011 memoir and renders the author’s intense subjectivity with a rare creative fury. The drama carries Lidia through a traumatic childhood and sexual abuse by her father (Michael Epp), her departure for college, a marriage, a stillbirth, a time of erotic hedonism, and the awakening of her literary vocation by the writer and teacher Ken Kesey (Jim Belushi). Stewart conjures Lidia’s complex inner life with agitated images and a bold editing scheme that flashes back and ahead. The adolescent and adult Lidia is played, by Imogen Poots, with passionate commitment; her desperate quest for a place in the world—and the liberating, redemptive power of writing—comes through ferociously.—*Richard Brody (In wide release.)*

Electronic



Sudan Archives.

Photograph by Aaron Parsons

Initially, Brittany Parks was defined primarily by her violin. The singer-songwriter, who goes by the name **Sudan Archives**, treated the instrument through which she studied ethnomusicology as a kind of aesthetic signifier, even when she became a mainstay in L.A.'s beat-music community in the mid-twenty-tens. In recent years, that signifier has transformed into a talisman, the engine powering a wide-ranging multidisciplinary songcraft that encompasses R. & B. and soul, hip-hop and electro, house and techno. Her 2025 album, "The BPM," is her most liberated and ambitious LP in a career characterized by radical moves; the artist uses her alter ego to turn her multi-instrumentalism into a personality diagnostic.—S.P. (*Webster Hall; Jan. 29.*)

Jazz

Have you ever sat through the movie “**Whiplash**” and somehow thought, What if this had *more* jazz? Look no further, for the Town Hall has just the thing to satisfy. An eighteen-piece jazz band will play the soundtrack live, while Damien Chazelle’s masterpiece of stress screens onstage. You’ve seen sweat detonate off Miles Teller as he rumbles out “Caravan,” and now you might be able to feel it, too—courtesy of the drummer Greyson Nekrutman, a member of the Brazilian heavy-metal band Sepultura. The film’s composer, Justin Hurwitz, conducts, hopefully with less verve for torture than J. K. Simmons had. Jury’s still out on how far the band will take it—it might be helpful to have a medic, or a therapist, on site.—*Jane Bua (Town Hall; Jan. 31.)*

Dance



Noche Flamenca.

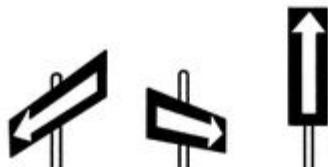
Photograph by Steven Pisano

In recent years, **Noche Flamenca**, New York’s finest flamenco troupe, has been taking inspiration from the art of Francisco Goya. The company’s aesthetic of bare-bones authenticity and banked-fire passion matches the painter’s dark candor. Situations and moods from Goya prompt and color the troupe’s usual loose collections of ensemble numbers and solos for its excellent dancers (among them Jesús Helmo and Paula Bolaños) and its transcendent star, Soledad Barrio. The troupe’s latest program, “Irrationalities,” joins Goya with a touch of Fellini and Sophocles’ “Women of Trachis.” The ancient Greek playwright is another kindred spirit for

Noche Flamenca, which presented a revelatory version of “Antigone” a decade ago.—*Brian Seibert (Joyce Theatre; Jan. 27-Feb. 8.)*

Movies

In his later years, in the nineteen-fifties, the director **Max Ophüls**, who fled his native Germany when Hitler took power, developed one of the most instantly recognizable—and one of the most sophisticated—cinematic styles, based on elaborate tracking shots jointly choreographed for camera and actors. Metrograph’s twelve-film retrospective of his work includes these mature masterworks (a highlight is the Maupassant adaptation “Le Plaisir”) and his Hollywood films of the forties (such as “Letter from an Unknown Woman”). The selections range back to the start of his career, in the nineteen-thirties, with such films as “The Company’s in Love”—a bittersweet inside-the-movie-business comedy (screening in a new remastering) that he made in Germany, in 1932—and the dazzlingly inventive French romantic comedy “The Tender Enemy,” which is also a ghost story.—R.B. (Jan. 24-March 1.)



Pick Three

Rachel Syme on cultish happenings upstate.



Illustration by Doug Salati

1. Last year, I finally got a car—after living in New York City for twenty years without one—and one of the marvellous benefits is being able to spend more time exploring strange and mystical areas upstate. It is no surprise to me that the region, with its misty, mountainous terrain, has given rise to many oddball communities, both utopian and nefarious. I recently binged the new podcast “[Allison After NXIVM](#),” a CBC show that features in-depth interviews with the actress Allison Mack, who did jail time for her involvement with the abusive upstate cult run by the con man Keith Raniere. The podcast is a fascinating artifact, the tale of a woman still untangling her role as both victim and victimizer.

2. On a less sinister note, I loved Mona Fastvold’s new film, “**The Testament of Ann Lee**,” so much that I saw it three times in a week. It tells the story of Ann Lee (Amanda Seyfried), an illiterate Englishwoman who founded the American Shaker movement, from a commune called Niskayuna, on the Hudson River. It’s a gorgeous achievement—full of music, ecstatic dance, and true believers hollering in the woods.

3. I have continued down the Shaker rabbit hole since seeing the film, reading every book about the group that I can find. So far, my favorite is Chris Jennings’s “**Paradise Now: The Story of American Utopianism**,”

from 2016, which charts the paths of five kooky dreamers who founded (often ill-fated) experimental communities in the American wilderness.

P.S. Good stuff on the internet:

- [The phantom of the wedding reception](#)
- [The so-called “Australia effect”](#)
- [What it’s like to be a parent of a baby actor](#)

Jillian Steinhauer received a 2023 Rabkin Prize for visual-arts writing. She teaches in the Journalism and Design program at the New School.

Sheldon Pearce is a music writer for *The New Yorker's Goings On* newsletter.

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.”](#)

Jane Buja is a member of *The New Yorker's* editorial staff who covers classical music for *Goings On*. Previously, she wrote for *Pitchfork*.

Brian Seibert has been contributing to *The New Yorker* since 2002. He is the author of [“What the Eye Hears: A History of Tap Dancing,”](#) which won an Anisfield-Wolf Book Award. His writing appears in *the New York Times* and *the New York Review of Books*. A Guggenheim fellow, he teaches at Yale University.

Rachel Syme is a staff writer at *The New Yorker*. She has covered Hollywood, style, literature, music, and other cultural subjects since 2012.

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Photo Booth

Tyler Mitchell's Art-Historical Mood Board

The thirty-year-old star photographer became famous for his reference-rich images of Black beauty, but his strongest work suggests a tender eye for imperfection.

By [Chris Wiley](#)

December 20, 2025



“Untitled (Male Gaze),” 2023. Photographs by Tyler Mitchell

Tyler Mitchell, the thirty-year-old photography phenom, has enjoyed a rocket-fuelled rise in the fashion and art worlds since graduating from New York University’s Tisch School of the Arts less than a decade ago. In 2018, he became the first Black photographer to shoot a cover for *Vogue*,

capturing Beyoncé in a frilly white prairie dress with an elaborate headpiece that simultaneously recalled Giuseppe Arcimboldo's fantastical paintings, Frida Kahlo's elaborate flower crowns, and Carmen Miranda's fruit-basket hats. He has since done campaigns for fashion houses including Ralph Lauren, Louis Vuitton, Ferragamo, Balenciaga, Loewe, and Wales Bonner, and photographed for the catalogue of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's recent exhibition "[Superfine: Tailoring Black Style](#)." He has had two solo exhibitions at the Gagosian gallery, which now represents him, and has been the subject of a handful of museum shows in the United States and Europe, including "Wish This Was Real," currently on view at the Maison Européenne de la Photographie, in Paris. A hefty, handsome [book of the same name](#), released recently by Aperture, features a diverse, almost absurdly heavy-hitting list of contributors including Anna Wintour, Rashid Johnson, and Drew Sawyer, the co-curator of the upcoming Whitney Biennial. "How lucky we all are," Wintour writes in her essay, "to witness such a wizard at work."

Visually, Mitchell's images are sumptuous, stylish, and seductive, channelling the old-school photographic glamour epitomized by Richard Avedon, one of Mitchell's idols. Conceptually, Mitchell's work has its roots in his undergraduate education at N.Y.U. A mentor there was the artist and photographic historian Deborah Willis, whose scholarly excavations of photographs of Black beauty, stretching back to the nineteenth century, furnished Mitchell with a framework for his own art. By the time he made his *Vogue* cover, he had settled into a signature approach: harking back to Willis's archive, and to the work of the photographer Kwame Brathwaite, a pioneer of the [Black Is Beautiful](#) movement, Mitchell committed to the enshrinement of Black splendor. Even in his personal work, such as the recent series "Ghost Images," a gothically tinged exploration of the slave history of Georgia's Sea islands, his subjects are lithe and comely, and the men are often photographed shirtless, giving some of the work a distinctly erotic air. During a recent conversation at his studio, in Brooklyn, Mitchell told me that he sees this style, in part, as a strategic appeal to the viewer's attention. "I've always thought about beauty and photography as a hook to draw in the viewer, to talk about all sorts of things, whether it be identity, or memory, or presence, or history, or landscape," he said.



“Family Tree,” 2021.



“Chrysalis,” 2022.



“Simply Fragile,” 2022.

Mitchell often conjures a vision of what he calls “Black utopia,” where his subjects lounge and play in a manner that mirrors his adolescent days in Georgia, which were spent skateboarding with friends, swimming in a pond near his parents’ suburban home, and taking solitary sojourns into nature. In one image—a favorite of mine—a man lies on an expanse of sand, cradling a smiling child, whose drool is pooling on the man’s shirtless chest. Many pictures feature Black subjects swimming or playing in water, a subtle reclamation of a leisure activity that has historically excluded some Black Americans, and a nod to a dark history of the Middle Passage. As idyllic as Mitchell’s scenes appear, they leave you wrestling with the uncomfortable reasons why they nevertheless feel so bracingly novel. In one image, a multi-generational crew is arrayed on the banks of a river, in a tableau that recalls Seurat’s Seine-side “La Grande Jatte”; to underline the comparison, one of the figures is painting en plein air.

Mitchell’s fondness for such references can make some of his pictures feel derived from art-historical mood boards put together by the fashion brands that employ him. A ghostly double exposure of a boy standing against a

wood-panelled wall—titled “Lamine’s Apparition (After Frederick Sommer)” —points straight to Sommer’s compositionally identical portrait of the Surrealist painter Max Ernst. The new Aperture book gets its name from a video work featuring young men playing cryptically violent games in front of candy-colored backgrounds that are a visual match with some of the “Yearbook” pictures made by Ryan McGinley, an early influence of Mitchell’s. The list goes on: the picturesque beach tableaux in a Gagosian show earlier this year could be stills from Julie Dash’s groundbreaking film “Daughters of the Dust”; a picture of a mother and daughter primping themselves in a vanity mirror is strikingly similar to a pair of early self-portraits by LaToya Ruby Frazier; other work nods more or less explicitly to Viviane Sassen, Shōji Ueda, Charles and Ray Eames, James Van Der Zee, and Yasujirō Ozu, or re-creates scenes by Irving Penn and Gordon Parks. Even Tyler’s breakthrough *Vogue* cover bears notable parallels with an Annie Leibovitz one of Elle Fanning from the year before.

Mitchell sees these overt homages as a form of transparency. “I think I’m not myopic or naïve about the fact that we are in a dialogue with history always as artists,” he told me. “Why not bring that into the work with open arms?” But I find myself longing, instead, for this precociously skilled photographer to break out of the art-historical hall of mirrors and explore the open expanses of his own creativity. Some of Tyler’s strongest work to date avoids beguiling spectacle and leans instead into tenderness, as in that shot of the drooling baby, or another, from last year, titled “Summer Camp,” featuring a simple closeup of the sole of a man’s wet foot flecked with sand and grit that cling to his skin like barnacles. The picture exudes both grace and vulnerability, and hints at imperfection by way of a disconcerting, coral-like wrinkle that mars the foot’s heel. Here Mitchell shows us a different type of beauty, disconnected from the ethereal realms of haute couture and utopian summer fantasies, pointing quietly to the fragility of life itself.

Chris Wiley, an artist, has been writing for *The New Yorker* since 2016. He contributes frequently to the *Photo Booth* series.

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Trump's Greenland Fiasco

The President caused a crisis in NATO and deepened European distrust toward the U.S. to end up with basically the same set of options that existed months ago.

By [Joshua Yaffa](#)

January 25, 2026



Photo illustration by Cristiana Couceiro; Source photographs from Getty

In 1978, Václav Havel, the Czech playwright, dissident, and future President, wrote an essay, distributed clandestinely, that tells of a greengrocer who hangs a sign in his shopwindow reading “Workers of the World, Unite!” He doesn’t actually believe in this hollow slogan, nor do his customers—rather, they are all engaged in a performative ritual, a paean to a Communist system, which, through their act, they help perpetuate.

On January 20th, the Canadian Prime Minister, Mark Carney, recalled Havel’s essay at the World Economic Forum, in Davos, Switzerland, during a speech that, for one delivered by a head of state, offered a rare degree of

intellectual, even emotional, candor. Carney applied the condition of Havel's greengrocer to the rules-based international order that came into being after the Second World War, much of it backstopped by the United States and wielded to its benefit. Even as powerful countries regularly acted as they pleased and international laws and regulations were applied with "varying rigor," a nominal allegiance to a world of norms and to win-win coöperation endured.

"American hegemony, in particular, helped provide public goods: open sea-lanes, a stable financial system, collective security, and support for frameworks for resolving disputes," Carney said. And it undergirded *NATO*, an alliance that had allowed for an unprecedented near-century of peace. That order, however imperfect, had more benefit than downside. So, Carney said of Canada and its European allies, "we placed the sign in the window."

But the first year of Donald Trump's second term has made the downside impossible to ignore. Last April, on "Liberation Day," Trump announced a twenty-per-cent tariff on E.U. members. ("They rip us off," he said.) His attempts to end the war in Ukraine featured an unmistakable sympathy for Vladimir Putin, while indicating that the war is really Europe's problem, anyway, and that it shouldn't count on the U.S. for significant military or financial support. Just after New Year's, when Trump sent U.S. troops to Venezuela to seize President Nicolás Maduro, he suggested that more such actions would follow, telling the *Times*, "I don't need international law."

Yet nothing has thrown the diverging paths of the U.S. and Europe into plain view more than the crisis over Greenland, an autonomous Arctic territory that is part of the Kingdom of Denmark. For the past year, Trump has said that he intended to take possession of the island, with its militarily strategic location and its abundant, if difficult-to-access, rare earths. Only the U.S. can defend Greenland from the likes of Russia and China, he argued, telling Congress, "We're going to get it one way or the other." That is, the signal member of *NATO*, a collective-security body based on the principles of mutual self-defense, was threatening to seize the territory of another member.

For a time, Denmark and other *NATO* members seemed to think that they could placate Trump with promises to devote more resources to the Arctic.

(An agreement from 1951 allowed the U.S. to maintain military installations in Greenland during the Cold War—it now operates only one—with an option to add other facilities.) For the past year, in fact, Europe has shown a willingness to engage in flattery and transactional dealmaking—a proven formula with Trump. At a *NATO* summit in June, in The Hague, it largely worked; the main goal was to keep the U.S. in *NATO*, preserving its role and its capabilities. States pledged to spend five per cent of G.D.P. on defense, and Trump deemed the summit “tremendous.” But, on Greenland, he appeared to be operating in another realm. “You defend ownership,” Trump said in early January. “You don’t defend leases.”

Later in the month, Denmark and several other European countries sent troops to Greenland for military exercises—ostensibly to prove that they are serious about safeguarding it from adversaries like Russia and China, though clearly also to send a message to Trump. “The fact that Europe felt it had to deploy a trip-wire force against the one power that, for generations, was seen as providing the ultimate trip-wire force for Europe’s defense is a complete reversal of our entire understanding of the world,” Fabrice Pothier, a former director of policy planning at *NATO*, said. Trump responded by announcing additional tariffs—rising to twenty-five per cent—which would remain in force until a U.S. acquisition of Greenland was finalized.

Nonetheless, at Davos, speaking a day after Carney, Trump appeared to walk back his more dramatic threats, saying that the U.S. would not use force to take Greenland and tabling the tariffs. Perhaps the European troop exercises made an impression on him, or maybe an adviser explained the potential effect of the so-called E.U. trade bazooka—a set of wide-ranging countermeasures that European leaders, including Emmanuel Macron, were advocating—which could inflict a hundred billion dollars of losses on the U.S. economy.

That same day, Trump announced the “framework” of a deal brokered by the *NATO* secretary-general, Mark Rutte. Details were scarce, but it appears that the U.S. and Denmark will revisit the 1951 agreement, and may add more U.S. bases or missile-defense stations as part of what Trump calls his Golden Dome. An additional clause could keep adversarial powers from

investing in or profiting from Greenland's resources. In other words, Trump caused a crisis in *NATO* to end up with basically the same set of options that existed months ago.

If that deal sticks, Europe may be tempted to see Trump's walk back as the ultimate geopolitical *TACO* move—the land grab that wasn't. The larger problem, though, isn't so much Trump's proposed actions as the logic guiding them. As Ivo Daalder, the U.S. Ambassador to *NATO* from 2009 to 2013, said, "Trump has made clear he's willing to defend territory he owns, and less than willing if he doesn't." That "sends a rather existential message to the rest of *NATO* about the notion that the security of one is indivisible from the security of all."

No matter the ultimate resolution, the crisis will accelerate Europe's efforts to decouple its security from the U.S. That is neither an easy nor a quick proposition: for example, Europe has no equivalent to the U.S.-made Patriot air-defense platform that it can produce at scale. Moreover, Europe itself is divided: it couldn't agree on a response to Trump's tariff threats, nor is there consensus on which nation should take the lead, if not the U.S.

Still, the dissolution of a decades-old order may be inevitable. "We are taking the sign out of the window," Carney said, echoing Havel again, at Davos. The U.S. may be powerful and mighty, but its longtime allies "have something, too—the capacity to stop pretending, to name reality." ♦

[Joshua Yaffa](#) is a contributing writer at The New Yorker and the author of "[Between Two Fires: Truth, Ambition, and Compromise in Putin's Russia](#)," which won the Orwell Prize in 2021. He is currently the inaugural writer-in-residence at Bard College Berlin.

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[**The Boards**](#)

“Ragtime” Cases the Landmark It Almost Blew Up

The cast of the musical, now at Lincoln Center, visits the Morgan Library to check out all the treasures that would have been lost if the plot had gone another way.

By [Zach Helfand](#)

January 26, 2026



Illustration by João Fazenda

“Ragtime,” at Lincoln Center Theatre, is a show that asks, among other things, whether it makes sense to rig J. P. Morgan’s library with explosives and blow it up. But, at the Morgan Library & Museum the other day, there

were no hard feelings. “We saw ‘Ragtime.’ We loved ‘Ragtime,’ ” Colin Bailey, the museum’s director, told a group of guests, as he welcomed them into a wood-panelled parlor. The visitors were the show’s director, Lear deBessonet, who is also Lincoln Center Theatre’s new artistic director, and the actors Joshua Henry (Coalhouse Walker, Jr.), Ben Levi Ross (Younger Brother), and John Clay III (Booker T. Washington). All three play key roles in the library scene—in which Walker’s revolutionaries, seeking justice for a racial atrocity, hold Morgan’s collection hostage—but none had visited the real thing, on Thirty-sixth Street.

“It’ll be very interesting to see what the scale of it feels like,” deBessonet, who wore dark-brown eyeglasses, said. “For Coalhouse, the library is a symbol of white power.”

Bailey began a tour. He stopped in a small gallery to show off a Caravaggio that had just arrived on loan. “I was obsessed with this painting!” Ross said. He and Clay approached the work, “Boy with a Basket of Fruit,” whose subject had a poof of curls and a dreamy expression. Ross posed. “Someone sent it to me when I was in high school,” he said. “It was my hair inspiration.”

The group breezed through Morgan’s study, where the walls were covered in red silk damask, and proceeded to the library. “I don’t know why, but I thought it would be a lot smaller,” Henry, who wore a white sweater, said. Books lined the walls thirty feet high, and the arched ceiling was intricately painted. “He’s a man of a certain humor,” Bailey said, gesturing to an art work the size of a small apartment. “Because he owned this tapestry that was from Henry VIII. It’s the ‘Triumph of Avarice.’ ”

The visitors asked Jesse Erickson, a curly-mustached curator of printed books and bindings, about the rare works mentioned in the show: the Gutenberg Bible, Shakespeare’s folios. “He purchased the first folio at Sotheran’s, a London bookstore, and a Gutenberg,” Erickson said. “Talk about a haul.” He brought the group to the Bible. “He had three copies, which is unusual. We have one on vellum.”

“That line is in the play,” deBessonet said. “‘On vellum!’ ”

“That means it was printed on, essentially, animal skin,” Erickson said. “More than a hundred cattle were slaughtered for each first edition.”

DeBessonet, who knows a little Latin, tried to read a passage. Henry wanted to know what one edition cost. (Answer: If you have to ask, you can’t afford it.) Clay wanted to know if—as in the novel, by E. L. Doctorow, on which the play is based—Morgan had thought he was a reincarnated pharaoh. (Answer: Doctorow made that part up.) Everyone peeled off to explore other treasures: Dickens first editions, a handwritten Mozart score, a letter from a Founding Father.



“So, what do you do?”
Cartoon by Lars Kenseth

“I’m having horrible thoughts about what it would take to actually blow this up,” Ross said. He looked around. “We used to have billionaires that collected books. Now we have, like, the chainsaw guy.”

“Morgan obviously had genuine interests,” Henry said. “But I always wonder at what point you tip into the Pokémon ‘gotta have it all.’ ”

DeBessonet noted, “It seemed like he was very interested in amassing importance”—the most important Bible, the most important autographs. “It is in some ways the organizing principle. Which makes his symbol an even more interesting choice for Coalhouse.”

Erickson began a soulful explanation of what “Ragtime” meant to him, as a Black curator at the library. “We’re actually opening an exhibition on

ragtime music in November,” Erickson went on. “We want to tell the story of this Black cultural production as the genesis of American music, and how subsequent waves appear in jazz and blues, and then rock and roll, and then eventually disco and hip-hop and dance. We even get into how ragtime is still with us today. The ‘Mario Brothers’ soundtrack is filled with ragtime! Also, ice-cream trucks.”

Back in the parlor, the visitors traded notes. “I wasn’t ready for him to open up like that,” Henry said to Clay. “I was trying to signal you.”

“I was busy reading John Adams going off on Thomas Jefferson,” Clay said. They decided to invite Erickson to a performance, as their guest.

The actors found the trip surprisingly moving. “To actually realize the gravity of it all, the history that’s at stake,” Clay said. “I’ve gotta do the show tonight, and I’m, like, O.K., I’m gonna do some things a little differently.” ♦

Zach Helfand is a staff writer at The New Yorker.

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[Dept. of Twirls](#)

Nancy Kerrigan Persisted

The Olympic figure skater and all-American girl has overcome a lot, besides Tonya Harding. But, at a holiday ice show on Long Island, she still sparkles.

By [Bob Morris](#)

January 26, 2026



Illustration by João Fazenda

Nancy Kerrigan doesn't plan to attend the Winter Olympics in Italy next month. But she's excited to watch the U.S. figure-skating contenders on TV. "It's pretty expensive to go," she said recently, in a coffee shop in Bellport, on Long Island. "I probably wouldn't even be able to get a ticket."

Nonetheless, her presence will be felt: the white sheer-sleeved skating dress, designed by Vera Wang, that she wore when she won the bronze medal, in 1992—two years before the leg-bashing linked to her rival Tonya Harding—will be on display.

Kerrigan, still plainspoken and high-cheekboned at fifty-six, had travelled from her home in Massachusetts to headline and host the Gateway Playhouse’s annual “Holiday Spectacular on Ice.” “Everybody’s so welcoming here,” she said, as her sneakers crunched on the snowy sidewalk. “The other day, the local protesters for peace invited me to join them for coffee. Not to be political, but who could argue with peace?”

Kerrigan has her causes. She is transparent about fertility issues, having undergone six miscarriages, and she has raised funds for the vision-impaired, to honor her blind mother. “She couldn’t see much, but she knew when I fell,” she said. She also served as an executive producer for a documentary on eating disorders in sports, called “Why Don’t You Lose 5 Pounds?” But her biggest cause seems to be keeping figure-skating shows from melting away like glaciers. “There just aren’t the opportunities for young skaters like there used to be,” she said. “Not every skater gets to the Olympics.”

And most of the ones who did have left the ice. Sarah Hughes became a lawyer. Sasha Cohen went into finance. Michelle Kwan got into politics and became the Ambassador to Belize under President Biden. Harding got into boxing, worked odd jobs, and then made some celebrity appearances after Margot Robbie portrayed her hardscrabble life in the 2017 bio-pic “I, Tonya.”

Kerrigan no longer has contracts with Campbell’s, Seiko, Old Navy, or Revlon. (She lost other deals decades ago; it may not have helped that she was caught on a hot mike calling her role in a Disney World parade “dumb.”) But she still skates in shows. She and her husband-manager, Jerry Solomon, have paid the bills with choreography, book deals, creating “Halloween on Ice,” and making television appearances—e.g., on Fox Sports, “Dancing with the Stars,” and a Kardashian Christmas special. She refutes, with a gutsy laugh, an internet report putting her net worth at ten million dollars. “I raised three kids, and that’s expensive,” she said.

Inside the historic theatre's lobby, she greeted the staff warmly, then signed copies of "Stronger Than She Thinks," a children's picture book she co-wrote, about a persistent little skater named Nancy. The five-hundred-seat house had sold out. "I just hope the audience is energetic," she said. "Last night, a gentleman in the front row was asleep. I guess he felt relaxed." On the way to her shared dressing room, she looked at the stage set—a wintry city park with a skating pond of ice, which was kept frozen by chilled glycol circulating underneath. Two stagehands were smoothing the surface with bladed scrapers. Kerrigan's father, a welder, drove a Zamboni to pay for her predawn practice time as a kid. (He died in 2010, following an altercation with one of her brothers.) The stage was minuscule compared with most rinks. "I'm used to it," she said. "Although the ice is a little hilly."

During the show, Kerrigan shared the crowded stage with fourteen skaters and singers. Dressed as a cowgirl and a bathrobed mother, and then in a progression of little skating dresses, she had the audience in raptures. She pulled off an axel, a mazurka, and other moves with grace, although she warns people not to expect to see her do the old Olympic tricks. Afterward, in the wings, she hugged the youngest skaters, kissed a pug, and fist-pumped the cast like a big sister. In the lobby, she greeted a crowd of happy fans. Many older admirers told her that she hadn't changed. She smiled a Snow White smile for a long series of selfies, telling one wiggly little boy at her side to hold still and stand up straight.

Walking back in the silvery moonlight to a nearby Victorian house where she was staying, she recalled falling during a Gateway show in 2023 and breaking her arm. "My name was on all the signs and posters, so I went on and I did my best," she said. A herniated disk flares up sometimes, too, but she keeps doing her shows. "As athletes, we're expected to be in pain and work through it," she said. "That's what we do." ♦

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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[How-To Dept.](#)

How to Woo with Words Alone

Not everyone can be Shakespeare. That's why a photo-free dating app is holding a workshop for users to polish their love language.

By [Dan Greene](#)

January 26, 2026



Illustration by João Fazenda

No one wants to write these days. Kids send voice notes. Boomers blast out Bitmoji. A.I. is depressingly inescapable. So, when Philip Leif Bjerknes, a marketer and former Craigslist dater, designed a text-based, photo-free dating app, he knew that some prospective users might need help expressing themselves. Machine-generated slop would undermine his whole endeavor, which he'd decided to call Oh Hi. "The last thing a date wants is

someone who can't be bothered," Bjerknes, who met his current girlfriend speed dating, said. "It's literally called a *personal*. Like, if it's not personal, you've sort of lost the plot."

One recent week night, Bjerknes, who had a few days' stubble and wore Buddy Holly glasses, teamed up with Katie English, a friend and copywriter who also works on Oh Hi, to co-host a free personals-writing workshop. At Clem's, a classic corner dive in Williamsburg, Bjerknes would offer participants dating advice while they waited for their turn to sit at the bar with English, who would translate their conversation into solicitous slivers of text. English, whose thick gray-brown hair swooped over her head, was game. "I've always just kind of loved to take anybody's writing and punch it up, clean it up, make it simple," she said.

Up first: Kate, a bespectacled fortysomething publicist with a short bob, from Cobble Hill. As a divorced mother, she was looking for something casual, consistent, and not too energy-intensive. English dutifully typed notes. It was important that her suitor be patient in wine shops, Kate said, and that he find at least half the things she said cute. "And thinks it's cool that I rarely brush my hair," she added.

"As someone with curly hair," English said, "I don't think you're supposed to."

Kate sipped her cocktail. "I feel so pretentious," she said. "Is this supposed to be about me or them?"

"Both," English told her. She looked up from her screen and asked for a headline. "'Curly divorcée seeking silver fox'?" Kate suggested. "But I think that's too much about hair."

At a nearby table, Laura, a therapist in a blue denim jacket, who wore her hair in an updo, told Bjerknes that she was newly single. "Tragically?" he asked.

She laughed. "Sort of," she said. Her Hinge forays had been largely fruitless. "I do, like, five thousand hobbies," she said—boxing, guitar lessons, sign-language class. But meet-cutes had been elusive. "People

aren't super open to that," she lamented. "I guess they could just want to learn a skill."

She brought a can of Narragansett and a publishing-house tote to the bar and sat beside English. "I want someone who's earnest about dating and doesn't treat it like Candy Crush, and also is not a nihilist," she said. "I'm an appropriately hopeful person, so I need another appropriately hopeful person." They discussed the need for brows both high and low: the Criterion Collection, but also Bravo binges. Social causes were important, too. The war in Gaza and celebrity conservatorship: both nos.

English tapped her keyboard and read aloud, "Looking for pro-Palestine, free-Britney hottie."

Laura frantically tapped her arm. "That's it!" she said.

Next came a neat-haired, lightly goateed attorney in search of a companion for late dinners—"like, Spain-late," he said—and dancing.

After his turn, English let out a sigh, exhausted by all the extemporaneous scribing. "I feel like a rapper," she said. Up walked a thirty-one-year-old government worker in a green Hawaiian shirt and a dark hoodie.

"Feel good?" English asked.

"I've never felt good in my life," he told her.

Writing gives him awful anxiety, he explained. Dating apps had been their own disaster; he said he once had an account hacked and found himself transformed into a woman from Arkansas. He told English he was looking for a "certified yapper" who shared his love of sweets and boba. A hammer thrower, as in the spin-and-fling track-and-field event, would be nice, too.

He tried self-description. "Wanna be with someone who looks sad all the time but makes jokes?" he offered. "People say I look like Eeyore." He backed off that idea, and several others. Citing casual cultural interests

risked being exposed as a poseur. Mentioning his love of thighs could overpromise on his libido.

“Super-specific will bring in super-specific responses,” English said.

The government worker looked contemplative. “My perfect date, there’s no flies around,” he began. “We both turn into spirits, and we merge into each other. We possess the people on ‘S.N.L.’ and we force everyone in the audience to listen to our bad improv.”

English lit up. “Now you’re painting something very clear!” she said.

“You told me to,” he said. ♦

Dan Greene is a member of The New Yorker’s editorial staff.

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Visiting Dignitary

Run-DMC's School of Thought

Darryl (DMC) McDaniels dropped in on his old Queens elementary school to talk music with second graders, who weren't too sure who he was.

By [Adam Iscoe](#)

January 26, 2026

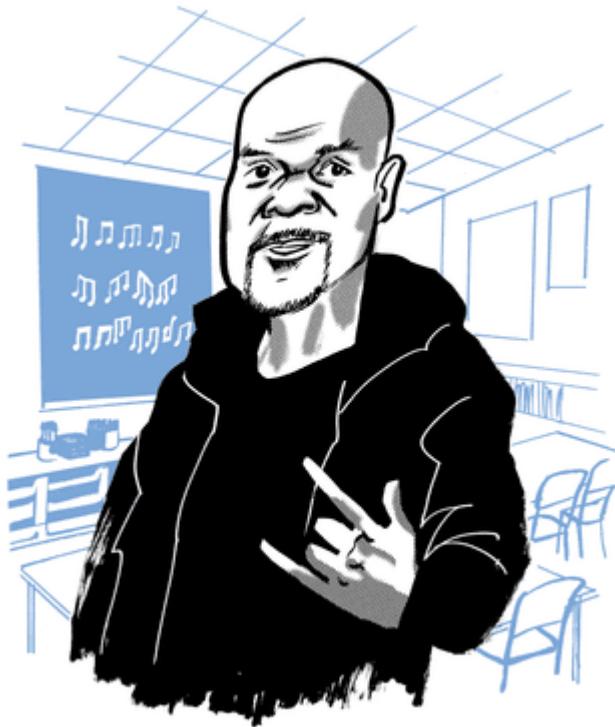


Illustration by João Fazenda

On a recent winter day, in Hollis, Queens, Darryl McDaniels, otherwise known as DMC, of the hip-hop group Run-DMC, visited P.S. 360Q, at the site of the school he attended as a kid, in the nineteen-seventies. “It’s crazy being here, because it feels still like yesterday,” he said, as he strolled past a hand-drawn sign that read *“kindness matters.”* McDaniels, who wore white Adidas and a T-shirt reading “AC/DC—Back in Black,” was headed toward the music room to meet some second graders. “Um, can I use that rest room?” he asked, pointing at a door marked *“BOYS.”*

“Oh, there’s an adult rest room!” the principal interjected. McDaniels looked relieved to be spared the tiny sinks and toilets.

In the music room, he looked around in awe: electric keyboards, tambourines, a few bongos. “We didn’t have no music in school,” he said. “It was just learn, learn, learn. I didn’t start thinking about music till probably, like, the third grade. I was into comic books. But I said to myself, ‘If I ever did music, I would do rock music, because the drums and the guitars make me feel like a superhero!’ ”

He went on, “My second-grade teacher was Ms. Peterson, and she was really cool. She was probably like you”—he gestured toward Cassandra Dorcely, the music teacher, who blushed. “You’re not supposed to read your comic book during class. But I’d be reading my comic book. I’d put it in my textbook and set it up on the desk, and it’s, like, she knows. So Ms. Peterson says, ‘Mr. McDaniels!’ I’d look around, I’d be, like, ‘My dad’s not here.’ And she’d say, ‘No, I’m talking to you,’ but she was really giving me a term of respect. She would take the comic books—but she’d give them back.” He laughed. “If Mrs. Patricia took your comic book, you wasn’t getting it back!”

The listening second graders, most of whom wore uniforms (light-blue polo shirts, dark-blue pants and skirts) were sitting on a rug decorated with eighth notes, piano keys, and a second-grader-size treble clef.

Ms. Dorcely, who wore a sleek black jumpsuit, turned to a big touch screen, on which an animated tiger was dancing, accompanied by the caption *“It’s time for music and the brain!”* The tiger was part of an immersive music curriculum that began in New York City in 1997 and is now used in schools in seventeen states. “The first thing we do is warm up,” Ms. Dorcely said, futzing uncertainly with the screen.

“Six hours later,” a kid joked.

Eventually, she located the tracks for some warmup jams. McDaniels stood up, and everyone sang and moved together: “Step to the left / step to the right / step to the left side.” Someone laughed, and everyone shouted, “Free dance!” Next, they sang:

I'm ready to groove and move
Each new day is a chance for me to improve
because I will have times when I fall
Never gonna let that distract me at all
I can do it—anything that I try!

To introduce the following lesson, Ms. Dorcely said, “Raise your hand if you’ve ever lost a tooth!” Twenty-two hands shot up, including McDaniels’s. “Raise your hand if you’re missing teeth right now.”

A girl shouted, “I lost seven!” One student said that the tooth fairy gave him five dollars per tooth; another kid mentioned that he didn’t believe in the tooth fairy.

This was all prep for a rendition of “I Lost a Tooth,” in C major, which, as several students explained, had eight measures, three beats per measure, a few quarter notes, a dotted half note, and even a crotchet rest.

As they stood at keyboards and practiced “I Lost a Tooth,” McDaniels said, “I don’t play any instruments. I don’t even know how to read music.” He did know how to speak to children, though. The students returned to their seats on the rug, and McDaniels asked, “How many of you know who I am?” The kid who didn’t believe in the tooth fairy didn’t raise his hand, but most of the others did.

“Your grandparents and your mother and father know who I am,” he said. “They know me as DMC, the King of Rock, the Devastating Mic Controller, the Microphone Master! But I don’t want to be the famous celebrity guy who came to your school this week to talk to you about music, because y’all are already great.” Ms. Dorcely smiled.

“Nobody in this room is greater than anyone else,” McDaniels went on. “So, for the rest of your long lives, this is what DMC means: D—determination, M—motivation, C—concentration.” He said, “Repeat after me: Dreams do come true! I am living proof that they do.” A chorus of seven- and eight-year-olds shouted, “Dreams do come true! I am living proof that they do.”

After class, a girl named Aliza asked McDaniels for an autograph. As he signed, he said, “Don’t let your grandfather steal that.” ♦

Adam Iscoe, who began contributing to The New Yorker in 2021, has written about [mental illness](#), contemporary art and film, [private aviation](#), [Afghanistan](#), climate change, mass incarceration, cryptocurrency, boats, corporate malfeasance, guns, [cannabis](#), [restaurants](#), and politics. In 2024, he received the Carey McWilliams Award.

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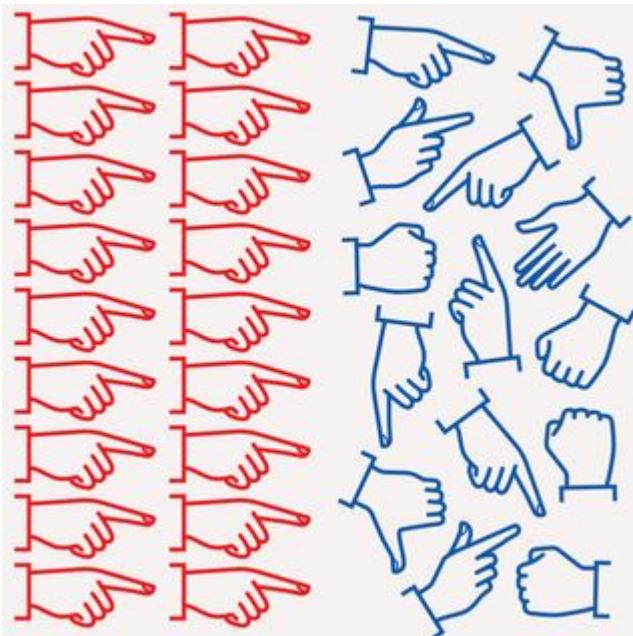
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What MAGA Can Teach Democrats About Organizing—and Infighting

Republicans have become adept at creating broad coalitions in which supporting Trump is the only requirement. Democrats get tied up with litmus tests.

By [Charles Duhigg](#)

January 26, 2026



Scholars who study both parties agree that in recent decades Republicans have created broad coalitions, whereas Democrats have often been divided by litmus tests on abortion, gender identity, and other topics. Illustration by Ben Wiseman

Americans who came of age in the nineteen-eighties will remember the emergence of two organizations that aimed to convert people to a cause, revolutionize social norms, and build enduring grassroots movements—*Dare* and *madd*.

Dare, or the Drug Abuse Resistance Education program, was created in 1983 by the Los Angeles Police Department and the Los Angeles County school district. From the start, the program was a success. Its stated goal was “to equip elementary-school children with skills for resisting peer pressure to experiment with tobacco, drugs and alcohol.” The initiative was embraced by police departments and politicians, and within just a few years the *Dare* curriculum had spread to more than three-quarters of the country’s school districts. More than three million students participated annually, and many were taught that even one toke can end in homelessness and despair. The group received admiring press, and was funded by Congress and various philanthropies; the budget at *Dare* headquarters eventually approached twenty-five million dollars a year. Nancy Reagan and the White House praised the program, and it received support from major companies, from Kmart to Kentucky Fried Chicken.

madd’s origins were far less auspicious; even to its founders it seemed like a long shot. In 1980, Cari Lightner, a thirteen-year-old girl who lived outside Sacramento, was killed by a drunk driver while walking to church. The man had previously been arrested four times for driving while drunk but had mostly avoided serious punishment—a pattern that continued when he was found guilty of vehicular manslaughter for Lightner’s death but given a sentence of only twenty-one months, with a portion spent in a halfway house. In response, Lightner’s mother, Candy, quit her job in real estate to found Mothers Against Drunk Driving. On her own, she began lobbying legislators, telephoning journalists, and appearing on newscasts, pushing for tougher drunk-driving laws. Eventually, women in other cities—many of whom had also been affected by drunk driving—saw those newscasts and read those articles. They sent Lightner letters asking for permission to launch *madd* chapters in their towns. She often mailed such volunteers a few pages with advice on how to contact local judges, monitor court cases, and petition legislators. But she essentially gave them permission to use whatever attention-getting tactics they thought best.

On an organizational level, *Dare* and *madd* were quite different. *Dare* was overseen from a central headquarters, in L.A., where staff guided nearly every aspect of operations. As *Dare* spread across the nation, it became an oft-cited example of what scholars of social movements call “mobilizing”—

the process of educating people about a cause and then prompting them to participate in public events. When, in 1988, President Ronald Reagan declared the first National *Dare* Day, and hundreds of school districts let children miss classes to attend boisterous anti-drug rallies, this was mobilizing at work.

madd, by contrast, wasn't particularly focussed on mobilizing. Each of its chapters was independent and largely ungoverned by headquarters; volunteers concentrated on local advocacy instead of on national activism. As a result, local *madd* leaders often supported sets of policy recommendations that diverged—or even conflicted—with the agendas of other chapters. Some *MADD* chapters pushed to prohibit alcohol sales at public events, objected to accepting funding from alcohol companies, and advocated for mandatory jail time; others argued that the group shouldn't be anti-drinking but, rather, anti-drunk-driving, that it should welcome donations from beverage companies, and that courts should have discretion over sentencing. Meanwhile, at the top of *madd*, there were serious managerial problems. Lightner, who was known to staff members as the *madd* Queen, sometimes used the organization's funds to pay for personal expenses, including dry cleaning and babysitting. In 1985, after reports revealed that a telemarketing firm hired by *madd* had pocketed much of the donations to the group in fees, the California attorney general opened an investigation. A new executive director quit after seventeen months; then a new board pushed out Lightner, who responded by criticizing the organization in the press.

All this turmoil, however, had the knock-on effect of making *madd* excel at another important aspect of social movements—what's known as “organizing,” helping members to become leaders on their own. The chaos at headquarters led to the empowerment of local chapter heads and allowed the social bonding that a movement needs to survive. Moreover, chapter members were free to experiment with different tactics. Mark Wolfson, a professor at the University of California, Riverside, who has studied the group, has likened it to a franchise business in which a new owner is given just a bit of instruction and is then expected to find a way to prosper. “*madd* kind of forced volunteers to step up,” he told me. He explained that the group's members, many of them stay-at-home mothers with little

professional experience, “suddenly had to figure out how to talk to politicians and go on TV and build a community and fund-raise and network—pretty heady stuff.” Not every *madd* chapter thrived, but for those that did, Wolfson said, “it was an inadvertent leadership school on how to build organizations.” Lightner turned out to be easy to replace, because there were dozens of other leaders ready to take over.

As the Johns Hopkins political scientist Hahrie Han likes to say, “Mobilizing is about getting people to do a thing, and organizing is about getting people to become the kind of people who do what needs to be done.” For a social movement to create real change, it helps to be skilled at both mobilizing and organizing. But that doesn’t mean that both skills are equally important. *Dare* was great at mobilizing—the organization collected huge donations, charmed legislators, and spurred hundreds of rallies—but it was largely ineffective at changing how people behaved. Multiple studies showed that some students even reported more drug use than nonparticipants, in part because the curriculum made them curious about experimenting. And, by the early two-thousands, many of the schools that had once been enrolled in *Dare* had dropped it. The program proved to be more of a fad than a movement.

madd, meanwhile, became one of the most successful advocacy groups in the U.S. Today, it has chapters in every state. *madd* has helped pass more than a thousand state laws, including one in New York, known as Leandra’s Law, that makes it an automatic felony to drive while intoxicated with someone age fifteen or younger in the car. *madd* was a pioneering advocate for victim-impact panels—namely, for allowing people affected by a crime to describe their experiences—which has become a common part of the criminal-justice system. The story of *MADD* suggests that organizing is more important than mobilizing.

One can look at the *maga* movement and the Democratic Party through a similar lens. Today’s Democratic Party is great at mobilizing: it can propel people into the streets with big marches, raise billions of dollars for national candidates, and get liberals to bombard congressional offices with letters and phone calls. However, it’s less talented at organizing—building the kinds of local infrastructure and disparate leaders that are needed to sustain

a large and ideologically diverse coalition. *maga*, on the other hand, is great at organizing—after 2020, the movement launched the so-called Precinct Strategy, which encouraged thousands of people to run for leadership positions within their local Republican Party chapters, and to become poll workers. This is a reason Donald Trump is in the White House again—and liberal and conservative activists alike say that it will be hard for the Democrats to start consistently winning until they mimic some of *Maga's* strategies.

When frustrated Democratic activists are asked about the right-wing organizing that inspires their greatest envy, they often mention a group most Americans have never heard of unless they attend an evangelical church, belong to a gun club, or homeschool their kids. The Faith & Freedom Coalition, despite receiving almost no significant attention outside of right-wing media, has become one of the most powerful conservative groups in the nation—and an engine behind Trump's rise.

Faith & Freedom was launched in direct response to the electoral success of a liberal: Barack Obama. In 2008, after the Democrats' sweeping victory of the White House and Congress, the longtime Republican operative Ralph Reed began studying exit polls to understand why so many conservatives who wouldn't have dreamed of voting for Al Gore or John Kerry had supported Obama. Two decades earlier, Reed had been the executive director of the Christian Coalition, which had encouraged religious voters to turn out for conservative candidates. In 1994, the group helped deliver the House of Representatives to Republicans for the first time in forty years. In 2000, the coalition helped George W. Bush win the Presidency with around seventy per cent of the evangelical vote. By then, Reed, sensing more lucrative opportunities, had left the group to become a corporate public-affairs strategist.

After his departure, the Christian Coalition's influence declined, but evangelicals continued to support Republicans. Then Obama emerged. As Reed examined canvassing records from the 2008 election, he found that Catholic voters, often stable Republicans, had supported Obama rather than the Republican candidate, Senator John McCain, by a nine-point margin. Obama had also outperformed previous Democrats with evangelical voters.

Even among voters who attended worship services more than once a week, a reliable Republican bloc, Obama had increased his support by eight points. To Reed, these numbers were terrifying. “If you’ve worked on campaigns as long as I have, you know when a slaughter’s coming,” Reed told me. “It was here.”



“Sorry, no ears perk up when I call out that name.”

Cartoon by Frank Cotham

How had Obama done it? To Reed and other political professionals, the answer seemed rooted, in part, in Obama’s willingness to ignore conventional wisdom about how campaigns ought to be run. Most Presidential races, once the primaries are over, rely on a large, professional staff to organize tens of thousands of volunteers. Although free labor can help a candidate win, volunteers are also seen as a source of risk, best restricted to such drudge work as phone banking or door knocking. Professionals worry that if volunteers are given too much freedom they’re likely to go off script, muddy the message, or spark social-media controversies.

Obama’s campaign, however, took the opposite approach. It recruited tens of thousands of volunteer leaders and basically told them to do what they thought best—in essence, to become franchises. These local leaders began experimenting with different messages and strategies, and then shared their results with one another. In Florida, a volunteer used her own money to rent an unofficial Obama campaign office while others built an “Obama booth,”

near a dog run, to register voters. In California, one particularly enthusiastic volunteer created an unofficial social-media account for Obama. (Webmasters eventually took it away.) After the official campaign built a website with instructions on how to create pro-Obama videos, more than four hundred thousand of them were uploaded to YouTube. This deliberately varied strategy vastly exceeded expectations; by many counts, it attracted more volunteers, who worked for more hours, than in any other campaign in U.S. history. In the 2008 and 2012 campaigns, a total of more than two million Obama supporters approached their neighbors and colleagues more than twenty-four million times, registering at least 1.8 million new voters and helping Obama and congressional Democrats secure victories.

As Reed saw it, Republicans had clearly been out-organized. In 2009, when he founded the Faith & Freedom Coalition, he adopted the franchise model that had propelled Obama (and *madd*). For instance, when Chad Schnitger, an organizer based in Riverside, California, asked Faith & Freedom's headquarters about starting a local chapter, Reed's lieutenants provided him with their blessing, some literature, and a small financial donation. But he was essentially on his own: he would need to find his own funding, develop his own strategies, and build his own network. Schnitger took advantage of this license and began contacting evangelical pastors and conservative nonprofits throughout Southern California. His pitch wasn't about elections. "It was that I understand organizing, and I'm a Christian," he told me. "Pastors want to be politically active—or, at least, to see their values having an impact in politics—but they're scared they'll get in trouble," because churches and nonprofits are generally prohibited by I.R.S. rules from engaging in partisan campaigning. (Those rules changed slightly last year.)

Schnitger began e-mailing pastors with advice about what they could safely say from the pulpit on topics including school-board elections and tax proposals. He also began publishing regular newsletters with updates on such matters as homeschooling laws. Many parishioners in evangelical churches already belonged to small Bible-study groups—a tactic used by megachurches to help members bond—and Schnitger asked church leaders to nominate volunteers to serve as Faith & Freedom liaisons. "My job is to build up the pastors and then encourage them to push leadership as far

down as possible,” Schnitger told me. “I do for them what Faith & Freedom does for me.” When Schnitger ran out of churches to influence, he began approaching gun-club members and homeschooling associations. There wasn’t always ideological overlap among these groups. The people at gun clubs weren’t necessarily churchgoers; some homeschooling groups were wary of guns. “But it doesn’t matter if they agree on everything,” Schnitger said. “They just have to agree on who they’re voting for.”

Soon, Faith & Freedom had three hundred and fifty thousand members in California. Starting in 2020, after carefully studying the state’s “ballot harvesting” laws, Schnitger concluded that he could place boxes inside hundreds of churches, eventually collecting thousands of ballots each election.

Nationwide, there are 3.1 million Faith & Freedom members, and in 2024 they encouraged neighbors to vote for Trump nearly eighty million times—an outreach three times larger than Obama’s record-setting effort. The group’s headquarters distributes money, as well as write-ups about the results of local experiments, to the various chapters. But it’s up to local volunteers to decide which tactics to adopt and which issues to champion, as long as they align with the group’s basic conservative values.

If there’s a formula to Faith & Freedom’s success, Schnitger told me, “it’s basically just being around—that’s our whole secret. Instead of showing up at election time and asking for votes, we’re here year-round, asking people what they need.” Schnitger is selling community. “The election is just the by-product,” he said.

This kind of organizing is hardly the only reason that Trump won. But scholars who study both parties agree that in recent decades Republicans have created broad ideological coalitions—something that Democrats, who tend to have litmus tests on abortion, social justice, and numerous other topics, have often not achieved. Conservatives have also built a media ecosystem that dwarfs Democratic messaging. Sarah Longwell, a longtime conservative strategist, opposes Trump’s autocratic transformation of the Republican Party, but she told me that the *maga* movement has nevertheless “done a fantastic job of welcoming anyone who puts on the red hat. That’s the only requirement—you just have to think Trump is great.”

Other right-wing organizations have used similar tactics to great success. When a conservative activist on a college campus volunteers to create a chapter of Turning Point USA, a youth-oriented group founded by a Tea Party crusader, Bill Montgomery, and the Christian activist Charlie Kirk, they are often told to read a book called “Groundbreakers: How Obama’s 2.2 Million Volunteers Transformed Campaigning in America,” to learn how to organize (but nothing else). These volunteers are then mostly left to find their own way. The results are sometimes controversial: to protest diversity initiatives, Turning Point franchises in South Carolina and New Mexico held Affirmative Action Bake Sales, in which an item’s cost was based on the buyer’s race. Yet such events are always pointedly open to all comers, including liberals.

Kirk often spouted toxic right-wing rhetoric, including anti-gay and Islamophobic views, as well as antisemitic conspiracy theories. And a national field director of Turning Point resigned after it was revealed that she had declared, *“I HATE BLACK PEOPLE! Like fuck them all.”* But Kirk, at so-called Prove Me Wrong campus rallies across the nation, made a point of engaging with anyone who wanted to debate. When a gay student approached the microphone at a large Turning Point rally at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, Kirk said that he didn’t approve of the student’s “life style,” but he added that, if they could agree on, say, closing the border, then “we welcome you to the conservative movement.” At another event, he said to a liberal student who had been invited to speak, “You know how we heal our divides? By talking to people we disagree with.” In September, Kirk was assassinated in front of three thousand students at Utah Valley University while debating a liberal audience member about gun control.

Colby Kelley, a former Turning Point leader at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, told me that the group’s ethos and loose organizational structure had pushed him to interact with all kinds of people he wouldn’t normally speak to, including socialists, anarchists, and attractive women. (He met his girlfriend at a Turning Point meeting.) “It kind of teaches you to talk to everyone, because you never know who you’re going to agree with,” he said. “Just because we argue doesn’t mean we have to dislike each other.” Of course, the liberals Kelley has engaged

with may not have found these exchanges as satisfying as he did—some of his interlocutors may have been offended. But Kirk’s *Prove Me Wrong* aesthetic was never about making liberals comfortable or converting them into Trump voters. Rather, it was about reassuring conservatives, of all kinds, that they could find a place within Turning Point USA.

In 2017, the day after Trump’s Inauguration, the Women’s March brought as many as five million people around the nation into the streets. By most counts, it was the largest single-day mobilization in U.S. history at the time. The protest had come together with startling speed: roughly two months earlier, Teresa Shook, a member of Pantsuit Nation, a pro-Hillary Clinton group on Facebook, had posted her dismay at Trump’s victory and suggested a protest. Soon, there was an event page for what was at first called the Million Women March, with more than ten thousand R.S.V.P.s. A handful of liberal activists—many of them professional political organizers—ultimately decided that the effort needed central coördination, and so they began recruiting celebrities, seeking sponsorships, and issuing policy statements. They also began fund-raising, collecting more than two and a half million dollars, more than a quarter of which went to their own and others’ salaries.

As the effort became increasingly professionalized, its infrastructure began coming apart. Some activists objected to the event’s name, given its similarity to previous marches, including the incendiary Million Man March of 1995, which had been led by Louis Farrakhan of the Nation of Islam. The anti-Trump gathering was quickly rechristened the Women’s March, but soon afterward national organizers began issuing rules that struck some members as exclusionary. For one thing, women’s organizations that were anti-abortion were prohibited from participating. For another, participants who questioned some diversity-and-inclusion initiatives were not welcomed. Internal debates erupted about whether sex workers should be celebrated or seen as victims, and about the role of Jews in propagating racism. Shook distanced herself from the effort and called for the co-chairs to step down. These and other leaders bickered among themselves, accusing one another of racism and antisemitism. The turnout was impressive for the march itself. But, after, many of the groups created to put it on fell into factional infighting or drifted apart.

In the past century, Democrats have usually counted on outside organizations such as churches and labor unions to provide the kind of year-round, localized infrastructure that a movement needs to survive. But, as unions and non-evangelical churches have shrunk, the left has turned to a different strategy. It's become largely focussed on creating spectacles, such as the No Kings protests, that can mobilize large numbers of people at breakneck speed to march, sign petitions, and contribute money. But much of the energy fizzles away once the protest or the election is over. Indeed, large gatherings and high-profile protests haven't generally been effective at sparking widespread change: a recent study from the National Bureau of Economic Research, which looked at major U.S. social movements between 2017 and 2022, found that "protests generate substantial internet activity but have limited effects on political attitudes." The researchers studied activism connected to the environment, gender equality, gun control, immigration, and other issues. Except for the myriad protests following the death of George Floyd, which may have slightly increased votes for Democrats, the researchers estimated "null effects of protests on public opinion and electoral behavior."

According to Hahrie Han, the Johns Hopkins professor, part of the issue with modern progressive organizing is that "digital tools allow groups to scale really fast, but it also creates incentives to shortcut building infrastructure." To take a far-off example, she said, during the Arab Spring, Twitter rallied people to topple dictators, "but the military was in power pretty soon afterward, because there wasn't an infrastructure to sustain and channel that outrage." Unlike at *madd*, where chapters were forced to build local communities and the dysfunction at headquarters allowed grassroots leaders to fill power vacuums, events like the Women's March are usually national in focus, vacuums are filled by professional organizers, and strong local leaders seldom rise to top positions.

Even some of the most sophisticated left-leaning groups have stumbled. Following Trump's victory in 2016, a group of former congressional staffers inspired by the pugnacity of Tea Party conservatives posted a rousing twenty-three-page online pamphlet titled "Indivisible: A Practical Guide for Resisting the Trump Agenda," which encouraged such tactics as setting up Google News alerts for local congresspeople and spreading out at

town halls to create the perception of broad support. The group also created a Google Doc to help activists across the country find one another. As with *Dare*, the initiative was quickly embraced by big donors and national leaders. In its first year, the group raised \$2.6 million. Within two months, there were thousands of Indivisible chapters.

But, unlike the Tea Party, which at its founding was a chaotic jumble of anti-government viewpoints and competing leadership claims, Indivisible was tightly guided by its D.C. leaders and their dozens of employees. Tea Party activists often took the initiative to run in local races for school boards or county commissions; Indivisible's headquarters focussed mostly on national issues and federal elections. The group's national office scored some successes: it organized demonstrations against Trump's Cabinet nominees and protested Republican attempts to repeal Obamacare. Yet there were structural problems. Initially, the group was a place for like-minded activists in numerous cities to convene, and various chapters started having success at backing local candidates. But organizational tensions emerged among Indivisible's headquarters—staffed by young political professionals who pushed for Medicare for All, the Green New Deal, and Elizabeth Warren's candidacy for President—and many state volunteers, who, a 2021 study found, were largely “older white women” who didn’t necessarily agree with those stances and “worked very hard to boost Democrats they understood held more moderate views.”

The author of that study, Theda Skocpol, a political scientist at Harvard, told me that Indivisible represents “a tragic lost opportunity.” Local grassroots Indivisible groups were “very impactful on people running for office and winning,” she said, and they “operated pretty much on their own.” But the group’s top leaders, instead of building a sustainable and ideologically diverse membership, focussed on high-profile protests—and on maintaining ideological unity. At one point, the Indivisible headquarters discouraged chapters from endorsing candidates who were pro-life, or didn’t support gender-affirming care, or questioned making it easier for people to register to vote.

In her study, Skocpol wrote that, “since 2017, national Indivisible leaders have raised tens of millions of dollars from major donors, but have not

devolved significant resources away from Washington, D.C., to empower democratically accountable state and local leaders. Instead, Indivisible directors have invested most of their resources into running a large, professionally staffed, national advocacy organization.” (Indivisible disputes Skocpol’s assessment and sent me a statement saying that it has “enthusiastically campaigned for Democrats across the political spectrum.”)

Skocpol went on, “If progressive-minded Americans want real change, most of the expertise, money and time we can muster should stop flowing into national advocacy bureaucracies engaged in symbolic maneuvers and purist politics.”

Ben Wikler chaired the Democratic Party of Wisconsin from 2019 to 2025. He recently told me that “Democrats should be learning from the Republicans about how to build small, socially interconnected communities.” Wisconsin had the tiniest swing toward Republicans among battleground states in 2024 because, Wikler believes, the state Party prioritized “neighborhood teams working year-round and socializing with their neighbors, to form real communities”—the same approach that governs Faith & Freedom. For liberals, he said, alternatives to church and the gun club include neighborhood organizations such as gardening groups and community centers. Whereas *maga* welcomes anyone wearing the red hat, Democrats often require people to use new terms on pronouns and race, and they can punish or exclude anyone who strays. “That doesn’t work,” Wikler said. “A movement needs people who feel safe with each other, who can hang out and talk about things besides politics. People who like each other. The Republicans are finding those people. The Democrats aren’t doing that enough.”

One problem, according to researchers, is that the left’s success in mobilizing large crowds may have caused leaders to misunderstand what spurs someone to become politically active in the first place. In the late nineties, the sociologist Ziad Munson began interviewing pro-life advocates, and he initially assumed that such people had been strongly opposed to abortion for years. “I was completely wrong,” he said. In fact, nearly a quarter of activists told him that they had been pro-choice when they attended their first pro-life event. A majority said that they had not had

strong opinions about abortion. “But then something happened, like they moved to a new town or started going to a new church, or they got divorced and started joining singles groups, and the new people they met were pro-life,” Munson explained. “And so they found a community, and a sense of identity, and that’s when they became committed.”

Many leaders of local *MADD* chapters first sought the group out after their lives had been upended by a drunk driver, and they found that meeting other victims helped them process their anger and grief. Wolfson, the *madd* researcher, told me, “They were mainly women who had never thought of themselves as public figures, and now they’re talking to legislators and spending time with people who understand them and making new friends. At that point, you’re all in.” The organization accepted everyone, regardless of ideological background (and drinking habits). “All you needed to join was to care about this issue.”



“I finally get to use my diving watch!”
Cartoon by Nathan Cooper

When researchers such as Munson look at today’s leftist movements, they often see the opposite approach. “The left has purity tests,” Munson said. “You have to prove you’re devoted to the cause. But that means that, once you join, you’re spending time with the kind of people you already know, because you already move in the same circles, and you’ve screened out people who might be ideologically ambivalent right now but might have become activists if you had welcomed them.”

At pride marches in Chicago, New York, and Washington, D.C., organizers have refused or ejected participants because they were carrying rainbow flags with a Star of David. At a Cincinnati anti-white-supremacy rally, a rabbi was prohibited from speaking because, organizers said, “allowing Zionists to participate undermines the original goal of the demonstration,” despite the rabbi’s vocal criticisms of the Israeli government. People have been excluded for other reasons: at Evergreen State College, in Olympia, Washington, an event called a Day of Absence, featuring discussions about racism, was cancelled after organizers asked white people to stay away from campus.

The sociologist Liz McKenna, of Harvard, told me that movements succeed best when people feel welcome. A movement becomes sustainable when members feel empowered and find friends. “The left loves big protests, but protesting is a tactic in search of a strategy,” she said. There must be some shared core values among a movement’s members, of course, but the requirement can’t be that *every* value is shared. “Making room for difference isn’t a nice-to-have thing—it’s table stakes,” she told me. “The rallies are by-products of the community, not the goal.” Most of all, even though anger can be useful, a movement also needs to provide some joy. “Trump rallies are fun,” McKenna noted. “The Turning Point campus debates are fun.” For a long time, she said, the left was less fun and more angry, “and so the right was out-organizing them at every turn.”

In 2015, in Alamance County, North Carolina—where a Confederate statue stands in front of the courthouse and Republicans have won every Presidential campaign since 1979—Dreama Caldwell, a thirty-eight-year-old executive director of a child-care center, was arrested after one of her employees accidentally left a child on a bus. The child was uninjured, but Caldwell was deemed criminally liable, even though she wasn’t present when the abandonment occurred. The county magistrate set her bail at forty thousand dollars, which she couldn’t afford, so she accepted a plea deal that allowed her to avoid a felony conviction but required a few days in jail.

Caldwell had a college degree and had been a professional her entire life. But now, as a convicted criminal, she couldn’t even get a job at a fast-food restaurant. When she saw a Facebook post mentioning that a new group was

looking for people to organize rural communities, she signed up. An organizer told her that “they needed people to interview farmers and politicians,” Caldwell said. “And I was, like, ‘You want a Black woman, and a convict, to get white people in Alamance to open up? Good luck!’ ”

The group, Down Home North Carolina, had been created by Todd Zimmer after the state’s Republican legislators voted to refuse federal Medicaid funds. “That money would have helped people see doctors,” Zimmer told me. “But they wanted to send a message about Democratic overspending.” Zimmer holds fairly liberal views, at least on national issues. “But, in rural areas, people are thinking about their neighborhood school, and whether the hospitals will stay open, and how much groceries cost,” he said. Most of North Carolina’s left-leaning organizations were focussed on big cities such as nearby Durham, where Democrats outnumber Republicans four to one. Zimmer figured that, if he could build a coalition of voters—both progressives and right-wingers—who might not agree on national candidates but were aligned on local issues, they could become one of the most powerful blocs in the state. “You can’t pass a bill in North Carolina without rural places,” he said. “That’s a fact. And so, if those places get organized, that’s where the power is.”

Zimmer’s strategy was to send people like Caldwell into parking lots at Walmart and Dollar General to ask residents what might spark them to action. The interviewees didn’t mention trans rights, Jeffrey Epstein, or other issues that were mainstays of cable news. Instead, they expressed worries about getting Narcan for relatives, where to bring vulnerable neighbors when summer temperatures spiked, and how to find affordable child care. Some complained about getting trapped in the same cash-bail system that had ensnared Caldwell. “And then we would ask them if they wanted to start a Down Home chapter in their city,” Zimmer said. “We’d give them training and encouragement, but, beyond that, it was really up to them.” The goal was to be akin to a church, “where everyone’s welcome, and we talk about important things, but it’s up to you to choose your path.”

Caldwell and her colleagues began working on various campaigns, such as helping residents of the town of Oxford successfully lobby for the renovation of a derelict basketball court. Throughout North Carolina, Down

Home offered locals advice on how to communicate with government officials and notes on how to speak at meetings. As Down Home spread, sometimes as many as two hundred members would show up at a county-commission meeting. When they took to the microphone, some of them would start talking about space aliens or chemtrails. “But that’s O.K.,” Zimmer said. “Because then they talk about wanting to see a new stop sign, because their cousin—whom the commissioners probably went to school with—almost got run over last month.”

Down Home now has fourteen chapters. The group has been credited with helping elect enough Democrats to the state House to prevent Republicans from amassing a veto-proof supermajority. In 2023, despite Republican control of the state legislature, North Carolina lawmakers voted to expand Medicaid in the state and passed a slew of other pro-rural bills supported by Down Home. Caldwell, who is now the organization’s executive co-director, told me, “If you polled our members, you might find they’re voting for very different people for President. But for the local soil-and-water board, or school board, we’re pretty aligned. That’s all we need.”

In Minnesota, an organization named *ISAIAH* has built a coalition of Black churches, Islamic centers, child-care providers, East African immigrants, and college students. The goal is to “spend time together in common areas” and to “build power for a multiracial democracy, caring economy, and thriving planet” by forging alliances among groups that are otherwise unlikely to encounter one another. In 2023, even though the state legislature was divided, *ISAIAH* successfully lobbied for one of the most generous paid family- and medical-leave bills in the nation. The group’s recently departed executive director, Doran Schrantz, told me that one reason the group has thrived is that it doesn’t limit participation to people who can pass litmus tests on such issues as abortion or L.G.B.T.Q. rights. Exclusionary tactics “are kryptonite,” she told me. “We’re focussed on bread-and-butter issues that people agree on, regardless of party.”

In southern Indiana, a group named Hoosier Action has organized rural voters who pushed through legislation providing for the largest investment in mental health in the state’s history. Kate Hess Pace, the group’s executive director, told me that, when members meet with candidates, “it’s really clear

how disconnected the Democratic Party is from working-class people.” The bluest cities are often the most expensive places to live, she said, and, “when our members tell stories about overdose and addiction, the Dem candidates immediately go to policy solutions. It’s like they’re incapable of meeting people emotionally. It’s the Republicans who consistently say, ‘Oh, yeah, my brother’s been in and out of rehab, I understand how much that hurts.’”

Down Home North Carolina, *ISAIAH*, and Hoosier Action have proved effective at increasing voter turnout for issues traditionally associated with the left. But donations from progressive groups have only rarely flowed their way. For the 2024 Presidential election, national Democrats spent \$2.9 billion trying to elect Kamala Harris, in one of the most expensive campaigns in history. (Republicans spent \$1.8 billion supporting Trump.) By contrast, Down Home North Carolina, *ISAIAH*, and Hoosier Action collectively raised just thirteen million dollars in 2024, much of it from local donors. Sarah Jaynes, the director of the Rural Democracy Initiative, a group that directs grants to local advocacy organizations, told me that “the Harris campaign and these big Senate races had more money than they could use—but the groups on the ground who know people, the trusted messengers, they’re basically ignored.”

The solution, activists such as Wikler and Zimmer believe, is to reprioritize where Democratic funds and attention are spent. The successful mayoral campaign of Zohran Mamdani, the Harvard researcher Liz McKenna notes, “was by all accounts joyful, hopeful, creative, and reflected a real sense of collective possibility. And that emotional culture translated into a major electoral upset.” Nationally, however, there are few Democratic candidates running similar campaigns. And, when it comes to emotions, Trump seems to spark stronger feelings, on both the left and the right, than anyone else.

Ralph Reed reminded me that, for Faith & Freedom and many similar conservative organizations, there are no showy national rallies. And there’s little strictness about ideological consistency. But during elections the group turns out millions of voters. When Reed looks at the left today, he said, “a lot of times it feels like they’re trying to hook people with big parades and free Beyoncé concerts.” That’s not how you win, he went on. “You win by

offering people a set of values that give them meaning. Celebrities don't deliver that. Small groups of neighbors do. And, as long as we're building those groups, we're gonna win." ♦

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How Shinzo Abe's Assassination Brought the Moonies Back Into the Limelight

A shocking act of political violence exposed the cult's deep influence.

By [E. Tammy Kim](#)

January 26, 2026



Revelations about the Moonies' links to public officials—and allegations of financial and emotional abuse—have roiled East Asia. Illustration by Hokyong Kim

Shinzo Abe, the former Prime Minister of Japan, was speaking at a political rally near a train station in the city of Nara when the shots rang out. It was an unfamiliar sound; it's essentially illegal for Japanese civilians to own guns, and firearm-related deaths are very rare. The noise was so strange that only some of the rally-goers flinched.

Abe collapsed onto the asphalt, microphone in hand. Blood seeped from his neck. A short distance behind him, a plume of smoke enveloped a thin, shaggy man wearing cargo pants, rectangular black glasses, and a face mask—it was July, 2022, and pandemic protocols were still in place. The man held a large oblong contraption. It consisted of two metal pipes, a wooden board wound in black electrical tape, a bundle of wires, and a plastic handle. It had the shape of a gun but looked homemade, like a high-school

science project. The man was tackled and pinned to the ground by members of Abe's security detail. In the scuffle, he blurted out a question: "Did it hit him?"

Three hundred miles east, in Tokyo, a journalist named Eito Suzuki saw the news break on TV: Abe, the longest-serving Prime Minister in Japanese history, was dead. Suzuki was at home, about to leave for a hotel staycation with his wife and son. Everything about the story was shocking—the fact of the gun, the lapse in security, the surreal death of one of the most powerful men in the country.

For decades, Suzuki had written about cults, called "antisocial religions" in Japan, for just about any outlet that would take an interest. His devotion was consuming, and personal. The gunman hadn't yet been identified, but Suzuki already wondered whether a cult might be connected to the assassination in some way. Suzuki was best known for his investigations into the Unification Church, a Korean religious movement that had exerted significant influence in Japan since the nineteen-sixties—and that maintained direct ties with Abe and his political party. Abe had recently appeared in a controversial video tribute to the leader of the Church.

When it emerged that the suspect harbored "hatred toward a certain group," Suzuki guessed what was coming. He was by then at the hotel with his family, scouring the internet for more information. "Soon after, I got a call on my mobile," he later wrote. "It was from a police reporter I knew in Nara, who said, 'The group in question is the Unification Church.' "

The suspect's name was Tetsuya Yamagami. He was forty-one years old and lived alone in Nara. He came from a well-off family, but his early childhood had been marred by tragedy: his father, a construction manager who suffered from alcoholism and depression, died by suicide; his older brother went partially blind from cancer during elementary school.

When Yamagami was ten years old, a young woman knocked on his family's door. His mother answered, and the woman offered to examine her family tree to locate ancestral sources of misfortune. She was, as it turned out, a follower of Sun Myung Moon, the Korean man who had founded the Unification Church to promote his theological mix of Christian

Messianism, Cold War anti-Communism, pro-natalism, and self-adulation. The Church was only a few decades old, but it had already amassed tens of thousands of adherents, who were often referred to as Moonies.

Yamagami's mother soon immersed herself in Church activities. She made large donations, believing that the money would save her extended lineage, and possibly the world, from the forces of evil. The family's considerable assets—the construction business, various real-estate holdings, Yamagami's father's life insurance—disappeared. There was no food in the house. "My family fell apart," Yamagami later wrote. He shrank into himself, to the point of vanishing. His online username was silent hill 333. In his high-school yearbook, he was asked about his desires for the future. "I want to become a pebble," he said.

At twenty-four, Yamagami drank an industrial solvent in an attempt to kill himself. He was hospitalized, and his mother, who had gone to Korea on a forty-day Church retreat, refused to come home early to see him. He was visited instead by his uncle, a lawyer who was so distressed by the family's situation that he contacted the head of the Unification Church in Nara. The uncle alleged that the donations made by Yamagami's mother, which by then totalled seven hundred thousand dollars, had been coerced. The Nara official agreed to return half that amount to the family, in installments, apparently keen to avoid a lawsuit.

Yamagami applied to night school, inspired by his uncle's advocacy. In his application, he wrote, "I want to become a lawyer who works on consumer fraud and cult issues." He drafted an e-mail to his younger sister, who had hardly known their mother before she flung herself into the Church: "Hang in there. . . . I'll protect you." Yamagami's mother began to take on debt to keep making donations. She filed for bankruptcy. Yamagami's brother pleaded with her to leave the religion and fought with her endlessly, sometimes beating her. The brother died by suicide in 2015, in his mid-thirties. "I will never forgive the Church, nor the Japanese people who side with it," Yamagami tweeted.

He obsessively followed news about the Church, often retweeting Suzuki, the journalist, who helped run a popular blog called "Daily Cult." In 2020, Yamagami posted comments to a similar blog, run by a man named

Kazuhiro Yonemoto. “There is no other society in this world that approves of a group that encourages deceiving, robbing, and making family members fight, and even takes pleasure in it,” Yamagami wrote. “I will risk my life to become the liberator of all those connected to the Unification Church.” He also wrote privately to Yonemoto: “I want a gun so badly.” He couldn’t buy one, so he started to build one at home.

His initial target was a leader of the Church, but he eventually fixated on Abe, who regularly appeared in public, and whose party, the Liberal Democrats, or L.D.P., had dominated Japanese politics since the Second World War. Abe “is not really my enemy,” Yamagami wrote. “He is simply one of the most influential Unification Church sympathizers in the real world.” For decades, Abe’s faction of the L.D.P. relied on votes and extensive campaign support from the Moonies. Church members served as reliable “special forces,” in Moon’s words—door-knockers and rally-goers. “They would flood the streets with people handing out postcards, leaflets, or be on a sound truck that’s just calling out the candidate’s name over and over,” Jeff Kingston, a historian at Temple University, Japan, told me. “When it comes to elections, Japan is a really analog place.”



Cartoon by Daniel Kanhai

The L.D.P. accepted this help despite the fact that thousands of former believers were suing the Church over allegations of financial and emotional abuse. Moon himself had been accused of sexual assault and brainwashing—he caused a scandal at a women’s college in Seoul by preaching that he could purify students through intercourse—and spoke incessantly about sex and bodily fluids. (The Church denies that he committed assault.) One of

his sons was accused of rape and domestic violence by his wife, Nansook Hong, who staged a dramatic escape from a Moonie mansion and published a tell-all memoir, “In the Shadow of the Moons.” The religion revolved around heterosexual marriage and procreation; families with more than one kid gave “offering children” to couples who could not conceive.

“Homosexuality must be shattered into pieces—buried, extinguished in the world of heavenly law,” Moon once said. Leaders compelled members to participate in expensive rituals, make lavish donations, and provide the Church with free labor. This was especially true in Japan, the Church’s “cash cow,” as Kingston put it.

Nine days before the assassination, Yamagami sent Suzuki a direct message on Twitter: “I’ve been reading the Daily Cult blog for a long time. I have a believer in my family, and I’m tracking the Unification Church. I admire Suzuki-san’s reporting.” Yamagami had spotted a listing for some kind of Church event that would be held in an auditorium with a capacity of two thousand. The pandemic had prevented the Church from hosting large meetings; Yamagami noted that he was “concerned that they might be starting again.” Suzuki wrote back, “Elections are coming up soon, so something may be in the works. If it has a capacity of two thousand, it could be a mass wedding. I’ll look into it.”

Yamagami replied, “Thank you very much. I look forward to working with you.”

Mass-wedding spectacles made the Moonies famous in the eighties and nineties. Sun Myung Moon and his wife, Hak Ja Han, known to followers as True Father and True Mother, appeared in white gilded robes and tall crowns before tens of thousands of brides and grooms, including at Madison Square Garden. Don DeLillo’s novel “Mao II,” published in 1991, begins with one such wedding, a procession of smiling “eternal boy-girl” pairs seized with longing “for world-shattering rapture, for the truth of prophecies and astonishments.” God guided Moon’s hand in matchmaking strangers on the spot—husband, wife, husband, wife—across race and nationality, in a beatific vision of world peace. He spoke Korean, which he believed to be the language of God.

Moon was born in 1920 in northern Korea, under Japanese colonial rule. He was raised Presbyterian but exposed to a swirl of end-times ideas. When he was a teen-ager, he said, Jesus asked him to “take on a special mission on Earth.” He accepted this call, but first went to Tokyo to study engineering. When he returned, he proclaimed himself a second Christ and the “True Parent of restored mankind.” He was jailed and tortured in nineteen-forties Pyongyang for “disturbing the social order.” He had reportedly married multiple women and was getting a bit too conspicuous for Kim Il Sung, the future leader of North Korea, who was constructing his own cult of personality. Moon was freed at the start of the Korean War, and went south as a refugee. He founded the Unification Church in the war’s chaotic aftermath.

The Church gained recruits in South Korea, but the popularity of mainstream Christianity limited its expansion. It found converts more readily in Japan, which was less religious, in part by exploiting a historical grievance. Japan had occupied the Korean Peninsula for much of the twentieth century, and in “Divine Principle,” Moon’s quasi-Biblical compendium, he frames Japan as the Eve to Korea’s Adam: the perpetrator of original sin. The Japanese people, descendants of a cruel empire, were especially in need of repentance and purification.

In the early sixties, Moon befriended Abe’s grandfather Nobusuke Kishi, a convicted war criminal who later served as Prime Minister and the head of the L.D.P. Kishi was a frequent guest at events held by the Church and related entities, and he availed himself of their cadre of volunteers. Abe’s father, Shintaro Abe, also a prominent politician, reportedly arranged for Unificationists to serve as clerical workers in L.D.P. colleagues’ offices. By the mid-sixties and seventies, Unification missionaries were flooding Japan. They targeted college students, housewives, and other people who might be lonely souls, love-bombing them with invitations to hang out or attend a seminar on world peace. The religious aspect was often revealed much later.

Once brought into the Church, members were instructed to buy anointed objects—ginseng tea, a scroll painting, a vase, a pagoda figurine—at exorbitant prices, a practice known as “spiritual sales.” They paid to get mass-married in Korea. If they didn’t have the money, they were told to

borrow from their relatives or take out loans. They also sold fish door-to-door and hawked kitschy trinkets on the street, giving the proceeds to the Church. Japanese followers were expected to contribute more than others. They had extra “indemnity” to pay down. (A spokesman for the Church in Japan denied that believers are pressured to donate or engage in “commercial activities.”)

These funds fed Moon’s empire, which grew to include businesses and nonprofits on nearly every continent. In the seventies, his top aide assisted Park Chung-hee, South Korea’s military dictator, in “a major lobbying and influence effort in Washington,” an American congressional committee found. Moon set up a family estate and a training center in Westchester County, New York, with stone mansions named Belvedere and East Garden. He established the *Washington Times*, a conservative newspaper—still a favorite of the G.O.P.—and bought the New Yorker Hotel, in Manhattan. He supported the Contras in Nicaragua, and funded a Hollywood flop about the Korean War starring Laurence Olivier as General Douglas MacArthur. (Reviewers described it as one of the worst films ever made.) He built a seafood conglomerate that became a major supplier for sushi restaurants across the U.S. “Many Americans don’t know how to prepare fish, so we do it, and all they have to do is eat it,” Moon said in a sermon, which doubled as a business plan, titled “The Way of Tuna.”

Moon was also a tax cheat. In the mid-eighties, he served about a year at a federal prison in Danbury, Connecticut, for failing to report more than a hundred and sixty thousand dollars in income. Kishi asked Ronald Reagan, then the President, to release him. The Church boasted of having millions of members around the world, from Brazil to Nigeria, though this number was likely inflated. By the nineties, there were about six hundred thousand Unificationists in Japan, twice as many as in Korea. Today, the Japanese branch counts some sixty thousand faithful. But the Church’s annual fund-raising goal in Japan has remained high. As recently as 2017, it was an astounding two hundred million dollars, according to a former official who spoke to the *Mainichi Shimbun*. (The Church denies this.)

In 1987, a group of Japanese attorneys formed the National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales. They began to represent ex-Moonies and

members' relatives in cases alleging coercion and fraud. After a period of indoctrination, new recruits were isolated; outside relationships were "cut off," the clients said. Missionaries followed members into their homes or workplaces to demand donations. Spiritual threats "prevented them from making free decisions." Members were told to engage in "card providence"—they assigned control of high-limit credit cards to Church employees—and ferried large amounts of cash into Korea. Some thirty-five thousand claims against the Church have been handled by the lawyers' network, alleging damages of nearly eight hundred and fifty million dollars. Thousands more victims have filed lawsuits on their own or pursued settlements out of court.

Japan was stunned into a mainstream awareness of cults in 1995, when Aum Shinrikyo, a vaguely Buddhist meditation sect, released sarin gas in the Tokyo subway, killing more than a dozen and injuring thousands. The government dissolved Aum as a tax-exempt religious organization, effectively bankrupting it, and began to scrutinize other new religions, including the Unification Church. Tada Fumiaki, a former Unificationist who filed a lawsuit in 1999, told me, "It wasn't uncommon to fear for your life if you came out against the Church." Critics and whistle-blowers were doxed and physically assaulted, in Japan and elsewhere; years earlier, the house of a U.S. congressman who led an investigation into the Moonies had been set on fire. The Unification Church rebranded itself globally as the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification, but continued to host mass weddings and to pressure members to give their labor and cash. (Aum was rebranded, too, reëmerging as Aleph.)

In 2002, Suzuki was in college, majoring in economics and playing in punk and New Wave bands, when he watched a television report about an emerging recruitment tactic: Moonies were offering palm readings to vulnerable-looking strangers, especially women, without identifying themselves. (As a legal complaint would later allege, these interactions were intended to "draw out a person's worries and family concerns, and to gauge their financial situation," details that could be used to extract funds and to keep new members in the fold.) The next day, Suzuki was passing through the crowds of Shibuya Station, near the Church's Tokyo headquarters, when he witnessed the scheme in action. "I saw someone

offer a palm reading to someone,” he said. “So I went up and disrupted. I said, ‘Hey, you’re the Unification Church!’ ” He started to regularly engage in these “recruitment disruptions.” He seemed to enjoy the theatre of confrontation, the sense of mischief in it.

I met Suzuki in Tokyo, last May, with my interpreter, Monika Uchiyama. He had the aura of a retired rocker: black clothes, leather sandals, tousled hair reaching below his ears, macho swagger. “I’m using the desires I had as a musician in my work as a journalist,” he said. He was among the first to uncover the fact that Abe and other L.D.P. politicians had coördinated with Church leaders to guarantee votes, build a roster of campaign volunteers, and advocate for conservative policies. He nurtured contacts within the Church who leaked internal documents. As a singer, he’d written lyrics “about being an observer of society.” Now he channelled that instinct into his investigations.

We walked around a leafy area of the city where he lives with his wife, a radio announcer; his son, who’s in junior high school; and his parents. Several years ago, someone cut down some strawberry plants they were growing at the side of their house. He suspected that it was Unificationists. “They’ve lingered around my neighborhood to take videos of me,” he said. A few months after the Abe assassination, local police installed a temporary surveillance camera near his home.

Suzuki told me that his interest in the Church was spurred by a sense of fairness, a desire to correct an obvious injustice. Some months into our correspondence, he disclosed a more intimate reason. When he was a teenager, his older sister had accepted an invitation to a badminton meetup, which turned out to be a recruitment event. “As I began my reporting and understood the structure of cults, I got worried,” Suzuki recalled. “I tried to talk to her.” It didn’t work. She eventually took a job at the Universal Peace Federation, a charity associated with the Church. “She was the main liaison for government officials, so, ironically, she had the information I wanted most,” he said. Suzuki doesn’t often talk about his sister—in part because they were never close, but also because defenders of the Church have tried to write off his investigations as familial vengeance. He told me that his

sister's involvement was never a primary motivation for his journalism, which I only half believe. They haven't spoken since Abe was killed.

As Suzuki trailed Moonies all over Tokyo, his anti-missionary work took on a missionary zeal. Around 2007, he started to write about the Church's tactics. ("Eito Suzuki" is a nom de plume.) "It isn't simply that they take money from believers," he told me. "They also blackmail believers by having them sign contracts, saying they're doing it voluntarily." In 2009, he covered a government raid on a business that sold ceremonial seals and other products for the Church. Several employees of the firm were arrested for violating a law that prohibits intimidation in commercial transactions. "There were so many companies associated with spiritual sales that were being raided," Suzuki told me. "The raids were creeping closer and closer to the Church itself. The Church thought it was at risk of being dissolved." Sun Myung Moon died a few years later, spinning his widow, Hak Ja Han, and their dozen surviving children into a fight over control of the Church and the fortune it had amassed. One son had already siphoned three billion dollars from the Family Federation coffers, prompting a lawsuit that is ongoing. Another started a *MAGA*-adjacent splinter group called the Rod of Iron Ministries. Yet another stayed on as C.E.O. of one of the Church's U.S.-based businesses, Kahr Arms, a pistol manufacturer. Han became her husband's successor.

In 2013, an election year, the *Asahi Shimbun* obtained a Church document instructing members to support a parliamentary candidate that Shinzo Abe—then in his second term as Prime Minister—had "personally asked us to back." This was "a matter of life and death for our organization," the document added. Abe's chief cabinet secretary, Yoshihide Suga, began to dispatch candidates to Unification Church services to greet members from the pulpit. In 2015, Suzuki found that Abe's allies had signed off on the Church's name change (to the Family Federation) over the objections of other government officials and civic groups. The following year, he was the first to report that Abe had met privately with the president of the Church's Japanese branch. Having pivoted from its crusade against communism, the Church was lobbying the L.D.P. to oppose gay rights and promote pro-natal education. "The Unification Church was the main conservative group opposing L.G.B.T.Q. issues," Tomomi Yamaguchi, an anthropologist at

Ritsumeikan University, in Kyoto, told me. (The spokesman for the Church said that it is not involved in politics. He called Suzuki's reporting on the 2009 raid and 2015 name change "malicious, unfounded rumors.")

The Church moved away from spiritual sales to pushing elaborate, costly rituals at its headquarters, a complex of white, domed basilicas north of Seoul. Moonies paid thousands of dollars to pray and beat themselves while getting very little sleep. The more money they spent, the more ancestors and descendants could be saved. H., a Japanese American who grew up in a Unificationist family—and who, like many ex-Moonies I spoke to, asked to remain anonymous, for fear of retaliation—told me that he went to the Korean compound several times. He recalled having to "sing the same song over and over again, while slapping my body to get the evil spirits out." The schedule was regimented: 5:30 A.M. to 10:30 P.M. "My hands would be bloody," he said. "We all wore white—I'd bloody up other people's clothes."

After Tetsuya Yamagami was arrested, prosecutors cast him as a terrorist. But for many Japanese, he evoked pity. A contingent of fans called the Yamagami Girls fêted him as a folk hero. The movie director and former Red Army militant Masao Adachi made a fictionalized bio-pic titled "Revolution+1," in which Yamagami watches Abe on TV and curses his family's political dynasty while filing metal cylinders for the D.I.Y. gun. Thousands of former Moonies wrote on social media that they always knew something like this would happen, that the killer could've been them. "I totally sympathized with Yamagami," T., a Japanese former member, told me. Teddy Hose, who grew up in a prominent Church family in the U.S., explained, "Moon treated Japanese members like slaves. There was part of me that was, like, it's awful that someone died, but finally people are going to see just how fucked up things are."

To Suzuki's amazement, Yamagami's single violent act began to achieve what decades of his own muckraking had not. Still, Suzuki told me, "I felt an immense responsibility." Yamagami had learned about Abe's relationship to the Church from his blog. "I went from being an observer of this incident to becoming part of it," he said. His once obscure beat was suddenly all over the news, and he turned into a sort of spokesperson for the anti-

Moonie movement. He encouraged the public to consider “the immense shock and despair” felt by victims of the Church and criticized those who repeated the characterization of Yamagami as a terrorist. He appeared on Sunday talk shows and published a best-selling book, “The Contamination of the L.D.P. by the Unification Church: Three Thousand Days of Tracking.” Several more books followed, including a hybrid reporter’s notebook and biography titled “Who Was Tetsuya Yamagami?” Had it not been for the Abe assassination, he argued, “the relationship between the Unification Church and politicians would never have become widely known.”

As *The Economist* observed, Yamagami’s brand of “political violence looks worryingly effective.” Yamaguchi, the anthropologist, told me, “I had thought Abe was going to be a J.F.K., remaining in people’s memory forever, but it didn’t happen at all.” Instead, the public turned its attention to the Moonies, as did Abe’s party. “The Unification Church became a super-evil organization,” Yamaguchi said. Reforms came fast, as though a levee had been broken. A month after the assassination, Fumio Kishida, the L.D.P. Prime Minister, apologized to the Japanese people for shaking “their trust in politics.” He demanded that his L.D.P. colleagues disclose their ties to the Church: nearly half of the Party’s lawmakers reported that they had relied on Unificationists for “election support”; one in ten paid the Church membership fees. Kishida fired his defense minister (and Abe’s brother), Nobuo Kishi, who also admitted to “associations” with the Church. Japanese legislators passed a law prohibiting religious groups from “soliciting funds through coercion or threats, or by connecting donations to spiritual salvation.” The culture ministry filed a motion to dissolve the Church as a tax-exempt organization and freeze its assets, arguing that its solicitation methods had caused “enormous property damage.” Later, Kishida resigned, citing “issues surrounding the Unification Church and money in politics.” A few months later, the L.D.P. lost its majority in parliament. (Spokespeople for the L.D.P. declined to speak to me.)

The government also set up a hotline and funded a legal-services organization for victims of the Church. Since the assassination, former members have come forward with disturbing stories. Many are women who have spoken about sexual harassment, shaming, and impoverishment. “It’s

well known that there are many more women victims of the Unification Church than men,” Reiko Higashi, a lawyer who represents former believers, told me.

Last spring, I met a second-generation Moonie at a cake shop in Tokyo. We’d previously talked on video calls in which she’d appeared onscreen as a manga avatar, a mashup of Storm, from “X-Men,” and Sailor Moon. Under that guise, and the nickname Devil, she maintains a YouTube channel where she posts confessional videos about the Unification Church. In one video, her avatar is in a forest, wearing a steampunk-style hat. She recounts the devastation of learning that, in 2013, when her father was dying, her mother, a fervent believer, transferred thousands of dollars of his savings to the Church. She blinks away tears from her giant anime eyes; then a cackling winged demon flies stacks of cash to Church headquarters in Korea.

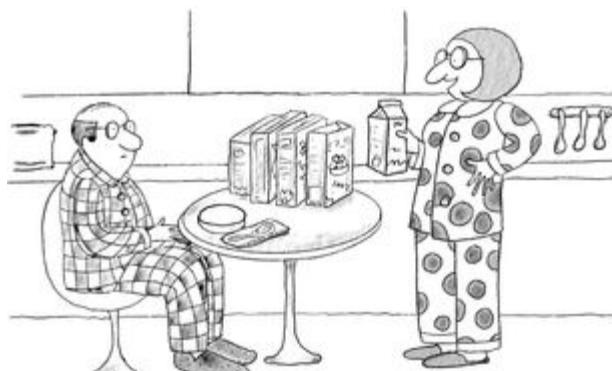
At the shop, Devil flipped through a thick binder of research and personal documents, including photos of objects her mother had bought over the years. I recognized a replica of a seated, smiling Maitreya Bodhisattva, a treasure of Korean art. In total, Devil calculated that her mother had spent about a hundred million yen, as much as Yamagami’s mother. “The Church latches on to your sense of anxiety, that if you don’t donate, you go to Hell,” she explained. Despite all this, she felt bad for her mother, who is still a part of the Church, and moved back in with her about a decade ago. “She always tries to get me to believe again,” Devil said. “I feel like I’ll never be free until she passes away.”

Yamagami awaited trial at the Osaka Detention House. Suzuki sent him copies of his books and several letters. He told Yamagami that he shared a sense of responsibility for the assassination, writing that, if he had succeeded in his efforts “to dismantle this vicious cult and save its victims, perhaps this incident would not have occurred.”

In May, I accompanied Suzuki to Tama, a suburb of Tokyo, where he was delivering a lecture. The Unification Church had purchased a large plot of land next to a local university, and residents, fearing that it would be used as a religious office or a training facility, had launched what amounted to an eviction campaign. “The Church is acting in a way that’s behind closed

doors,” Tama’s mayor told me, implying that the buyers had hidden their identity. “Although they call themselves a religion, they’re just an organization that’s trying to send money to Korea.” A couple of hundred people filled an auditorium in the city hall. Suzuki sped through a PowerPoint presentation that catalogued twenty years of reporting. One slide displayed a flyer, featuring an unflattering head shot of Suzuki, that the Church had circulated to warn members not to speak to him. “I asked them, ‘Can you please use a better photo of me?’ ” he said. The crowd laughed. (In 2023, the Church sued Suzuki for defamation and lost.) Suzuki held up his most recent book, “22 Years of Fighting the Unification Church,” whose pulpy cover photo depicts him on a Tokyo street, messenger bag slung over his shoulder. “Do you notice anything?” he asked. “I’m wearing the same outfit. I’m trying to subliminally get you to buy the book.”

A district court in Tokyo had recently issued a decision in the case brought by the culture ministry; it ruled in favor of dissolving the Church based on the damage caused by the “malicious” solicitation of donations over a forty-year period. Suzuki told the Tama residents that the Unification Church was now set to lose its special tax status and have its assets broken up. The Church had called the decision an abuse of human rights and a chilling “turning point in Japan’s democratic identity,” and filed an appeal. Followers are undoubtedly facing stigma. Should the Church disappear, many will be left without jobs or a community.



Victoria Roberts

“The breakfast chef is off today, but there’s a charming collection of cold cereals.”
Cartoon by Victoria Roberts

Meanwhile, ex-Moonies and their relatives continued to win lawsuits against the Church. In one case, the daughter of a deceased follower recovered four hundred thousand dollars despite the fact that her mother had signed a pledge, at the age of eighty-six, promising not to seek a refund of her donations. According to the Church spokesman, older members, in particular, request such pledges to “protect the donations they have given to God.” But the Family Federation of Japan also established a “compensation committee” to make voluntary payouts. Shortly afterward, the president of the Japanese branch resigned, expressing “remorse” to victims of donation schemes and spiritual sales, while denying legal liability.

Back in the Church’s home country, a failed government coup, launched in December, 2024, by the President, Yoon Suk-yeol, led to revelations that his wife, Kim Keon-hee, had received a diamond necklace and two Chanel purses from a Church official. Yoon had allegedly directed public funds to development projects backed by the Church in Cambodia. The investigation spiralled upward, reaching Moon’s widow, Hak Ja Han, the once untouchable True Mother, who was arrested and charged with orchestrating the bribery scheme and making other illegal contributions. (Kim has denied any quid pro quo; the Church spokesman called Han’s case “religious persecution.”) Both major political parties in South Korea were shown to have financial connections to the Unification Church. The nation’s new President, Lee Jae-myung, suggested that Korea should take a cue from Japan and consider dissolving religious groups that “intervene organizationally and systematically in politics.” His minister of oceans and fisheries resigned after being accused of receiving cash and luxury watches from a Church official. (The former minister denies the allegations.)

The U.S. branch of the Family Federation, which often speaks for the Church internationally, has busied itself with a social-media campaign defending Han, though a representative declined to answer my questions or make any officials available for an interview. Demian Dunkley, the president, told me in an e-mail, “I will not participate in a piece that approaches the Family Federation through a pre-determined or predominantly negative lens.” The Church is plainly terrified by the prospect of losing its legal status in East Asia. Even so, the Moonies—and the Moon family businesses—have long hedged their bets. The West Africa

branch, for instance, has carried on as usual. In the past year, it held a mass wedding, a peace seminar, and a volunteer trash pickup “to create a cleaner, healthier space for both Heaven and humanity.”

In late October, Suzuki took the bullet train from his home, in northwest Tokyo, to Nara for the first week of Yamagami’s trial. More than seven hundred people lined up in a park across the street from the courthouse, hoping for a seat. Demand was so high that the court operated a daily lottery. Suzuki was received as a celebrity by ex-Moonies milling around on the grass. He also encountered sika deer, which roam the city and are thought to guard its shrines. “I was attacked by a  deer 

The courtroom was modest, appointed in blond wood. Up front were three judges, six jurors, and six alternates. A lawyer representing Abe’s widow, Akie Abe, sat with the prosecution. Yamagami, whose long hair was whorled in a loose bun, was surrounded by police officers and several lawyers. He pleaded guilty to charges of murder and weapons violations. “It’s all true. There’s no doubt that I did it,” he told the court. A few days later, prosecutors brought in the homemade gun and placed it in the center of the courtroom. The jurors took turns picking it up. Yamagami had clearly built and shot the weapon. The only uncertainty was whether the state would request the death penalty, which hinged on its estimation of courtroom sympathy. The proceedings were thus an exploration of Yamagami’s biography and motive. Prosecutors tried to characterize him as a ruthless killer, whereas the defense focussed on his tragic past.

The trial went on for six weeks. In November, Yamagami’s mother and sister testified from behind a screen, to protect their identities. His mother apologized to Abe’s family—she noted that his ghost was in the courtroom—and to her son. “She spoke directly to Yamagami, using the pet name Tet-chan,” Suzuki recalled. She remained a believer. “She emphasized that everything that had happened to them—even donating so much to put them in poverty—was her fault, not the fault of the Church.”

It was an impulse that I recognized even among some former Unificationists. I had recently interviewed S., a fifty-nine-year-old man who

went into debt to make donations and was now seeking damages. (He was later awarded eighty-eight thousand dollars.) Some years had passed since S. and his wife had renounced their faith, but he felt residual loyalty. When Abe was killed, “my initial instinct was to be worried for the Church,” he told me. “But, after we started learning more about Yamagami and his motivation for shooting Prime Minister Abe, I started to reconsider. I started to try to understand.”

Yamagami’s sister’s testimony was, as measured by the number of weeping observers, the emotional apex of the trial. She described how her mother had become cold and unrecognizable, showing up at her office and begging for money. “This person was no longer my mother but a believer wearing my mother’s face,” she said. “I couldn’t turn her away.” Devil, the YouTuber, told me that following the trial was “like checking the answers to a test. A constant stream of ‘Oh, yeah, it was just like that.’ ”

Yamagami took the stand in his own defense. His voice was low; he often stared into space. At one point, he said, “I’m not a bad person.” But the situation with his mother and the Church had felt inescapable. He was overcome by a deep depression. “I should not have lived this long,” he said. Abe had become a receptacle for Yamagami’s despair.

Halfway through the trial, there was little on the record about the connections between the L.D.P. and the Church. “Not enough has been said about *why* it was Abe,” Suzuki told me. Without that, he worried Yamagami would be sentenced to death, an outcome Suzuki clearly didn’t want. He sent a letter to Yamagami’s lawyers, listing chronological evidence of Abe’s ties to the Moonies and offering himself as a witness. “Abe helped perpetuate the crimes of the Unification Church,” he wrote. “This is not a case of random murder.” I asked Suzuki whether he had blurred the roles of reporter and advocate. He said no; he was just making sure that the facts were out there.

One key fact in the trial dated to 2021, when Abe, who had recently finished his final term as Prime Minister, publicly endorsed the Moonies. The Universal Peace Federation, the charity affiliated with the Church, was hosting a virtual rally, and Hak Ja Han sought video greetings from world leaders. The organization paid Donald Trump, also freshly out of office,

half a million dollars for a speech in which he called Han “a tremendous person for her incredible work on behalf of peace.” Abe thanked Han for her “tireless efforts in resolving disputes around the world” and praised the Church’s “focus on family values.” Yamagami had seen Abe’s greeting. Though brief and perfunctory, it swelled into an *idée fixe* and convinced him that Abe had to be killed.

In mid-December, the court in Nara heard closing arguments. The prosecution, to many observers’ surprise, requested a life sentence for Yamagami instead of the death penalty. Perhaps they gauged the tilt of public opinion; perhaps time had softened the shock of Abe’s death. There was none of the retributive bombast that one might expect in a high-profile murder trial. The prosecutors wrapped up their case by trying to undercut Abe’s links to the Church—what mattered was the fact of the assassination, they said. The defense team framed the Church’s influence as a societal tragedy, and argued for a prison sentence of less than twenty years. A lawyer read a statement on behalf of Akie Abe, who herself attended the trial only once. Her husband’s sudden death, she wrote, “was so overwhelming that my mind went blank and, for a long time, it felt like I was in a dream.” Yamagami kept his eyes downcast. The judge gave him a chance to speak, but he demurred.

The court adjourned for a month. A week before it was set to deliver a verdict and a sentence, Suzuki went to the Osaka Detention House to request a visit with Yamagami. He had tried before and been turned away. This time, Yamagami agreed to see him. Suzuki was escorted up an elevator to a private room. A guard brought in Yamagami, whose hair had grown past his chest. Suzuki felt ill-prepared. “I have had a relationship to him, but I didn’t know what he’d been thinking about me over these three years, or if he was thinking of me at all,” he said. They talked about the trial and how it had been covered in the press. Suzuki recalled that, at one point, Yamagami told him, “What I did pushed you into the limelight.” He encouraged Suzuki to keep going with his investigations. “He was saying, ‘We’re both fighting against this greater thing, the Church,’ ” Suzuki told me. Though Suzuki was careful to condemn the killing, he seemed enraptured by Yamagami. “I was seeing the true side of him,” he said. “He’s a kind man. It

made me think even more about how such a kind man could do something terrible.”

Last Wednesday, the chief justice announced Yamagami’s sentence: life in prison. He acknowledged the defendant’s “unfortunate” upbringing, but rejected the argument that it had driven him to kill. At a press conference after the hearing, one juror called Yamagami “a very smart person” who “lived a tragic life as a second-generation believer.” Had it not been for that, he said, “he would have been a great success.” ♦

E. Tammy Kim is a contributing writer at The New Yorker who covers a range of subjects, including politics, labor, and East Asia.

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[**A Reporter at Large**](#)

Did a Celebrated Researcher Obscure a Baby's Poisoning?

After a newborn died of opioid poisoning, a new branch of pediatrics came into being. But the evidence doesn't add up.

By [Ben Taub](#)

January 26, 2026



Tariq was twelve days old when he died. Afterward, medical guidance for breast-feeding mothers changed all over the Western Hemisphere. Illustration by Juan Bernabeu

On April 18, 2005, a Canadian woman named Rani Jamieson gave birth to a healthy boy. It was an unremarkable pregnancy but a painful delivery; a doctor had to use surgical scissors to make room for her son's head. Afterward, the doctor prescribed her Tylenol No. 3, which combines the mild opioid codeine with acetaminophen.

Rani's newborn son weighed almost eight pounds and had perfect neonatal scores. "He seemed very—like an old soul," she told a Canadian news outlet. She and her husband, Douglas, named him Tariq. He was their only child.

The hospital gave Rani two tablets of Tylenol-3 in the morning and two at night. But she found that the pills made her drowsy, so, on the third day of Tariq's life, she cut her intake to one pill at a time. She and Tariq were

discharged from the hospital and went home. Rani, who was thirty-two, had been preparing for motherhood for a long time. “Anytime I read an article about something you shouldn’t do, or they’re not sure—that went on my list of things not to do,” she said.

In the next week, Tariq developed normally and surpassed his birth weight. But, at around 6:30 A.M. on April 29th, he stopped eating. Later that morning, Rani brought him in for a routine pediatric visit. The doctor noted that he was somnolent, but was generally unconcerned. Until that morning, Tariq had been feeding “on average, every three hours,” according to his parents, and the pediatrician noted that he had been producing about five wet diapers per day. Another doctor later reported that Tariq had “appeared to be thriving.”

That night, Douglas called the Ontario health ministry’s telehealth service. He said that Tariq had been sleeping for most of the past twenty hours, and that his skin was fluctuating in color. An ambulance was dispatched to the Jamiesons’ home, in an affluent neighborhood of Toronto. But, according to the Jamiesons, “a minute or two” before it arrived Tariq stopped breathing.

The E.M.S. team performed C.P.R. on Tariq, using just two fingertips on his tiny sternum and small puffs of air to inflate his strawberry-size lungs. For forty minutes, they tried to resuscitate him—on the kitchen counter, in the ambulance, and at the Hospital for Sick Children, one of the best pediatric hospitals in the world. But Tariq’s body was already cold, and his skin was mottled. Shortly after midnight, he was pronounced dead.

Fourteen hours later, Tariq was brought to his autopsy swaddled in his blue blanket, with an identification tag fixed around his right ankle. The coroner found no anatomical cause of death—no brain bleed, no congenital defects, no reason that an otherwise healthy boy had suddenly died. Nor did two Toronto police detectives sent to the Jamieson residence notice anything awry. Tariq’s parents were “just absolutely devastated and in a severe state of shock—the mother, especially,” one of the detectives told me recently. A blood sample, taken before or during the postmortem examination, was sent to a forensic-toxicology lab. When the results came back, twelve weeks later, they showed that Tariq Jamieson had died of codeine-and-morphine poisoning.

Opioids kill by suppressing the drive to breathe. They bind to receptors in the brain stem, altering the neurons that maintain patterns of respiration. Carbon dioxide builds up in the bloodstream, hypoxia sets in, and circulation falters. Brain damage follows, then death.

The coroner's office asked one of Canada's leading pediatricians and toxicologists, Gideon (Gidi) Koren, to examine Tariq's file. For the past two decades, Koren had been running a program at the Hospital for Sick Children called Motherisk, which provided guidance for pregnant women and new mothers about drugs and breast-feeding. He was widely considered to be among the most capable research scientists in the field. Koren met with Rani's physician and quickly ruled out foul play. "There was no evidence of psychiatric issues," he later wrote. Instead, Koren interpreted the toxicology report as a scientific revelation: if mothers with a certain genetic predisposition took even a mild dose of codeine, the amount of morphine that ended up in their breast milk could kill their children.

A dose of codeine brings relief from pain only when the liver metabolizes a fraction of it into morphine. But the exact proportion that is converted into morphine can vary. Most people have two copies of the gene that carries out the conversion. Koren invited Rani to be tested, and discovered that she had three.

The concentration of morphine in Tariq's blood was measured at seventy nanograms per millilitre. "If you have levels above twenty, you stop breathing," Koren later said. Six months after Tariq's death, Koren obtained a sample of Rani's breast milk, which she had kept in her freezer. His lab measured its morphine concentration at eighty-seven nanograms per millilitre. Koren was stunned. "The level was several fold higher than ever described in the literature," he noted. "This was the first time in history that a baby was reported dying from breast milk."

Koren had long studied the transmission of opioids into breast milk. But he had never identified a mortal risk. Now, along with a few colleagues—including the deputy chief coroner of Ontario, James Cairns—he published his findings in *The Lancet*, one of the world's top medical journals. Some women, like Rani, have a genetic predisposition to convert codeine into morphine faster and in higher quantities than the rest of the general

population. Therefore, the authors concluded, “codeine cannot be considered as a safe drug for all infants during breastfeeding.”

The implications were terrifying. Millions of women—up to forty per cent of breast-feeding mothers in North America, according to Koren and his colleagues—might be prescribed codeine for postpartum pain, and yet almost none were being tested to see if they, like Rani, had more than the usual number of codeine-metabolizing genes. The risk was unevenly distributed across the population, according to ethnic background. Mothers from Finland have a one in a hundred chance of being so-called ultra-rapid metabolizers, according to Koren’s paper. But in Ethiopia the odds can rise to almost one in three.



“What an amazing nest.”
Cartoon by Amy Hwang

Few academic-journal articles have had so abrupt an effect on the daily practice of medicine. Prior to its publication, the American Academy of Pediatrics had listed codeine as generally compatible with breast-feeding. “After we published it in *Lancet*, the F.D.A.—the Food and Drug Administration—said, ‘This is enough for us to change labelling,’ ” Koren said. Canadian and European health regulators soon followed suit. Doctors started prescribing other opioids for postpartum pain, such as hydromorphone and oxycodone, whose metabolic pathways are more predictable and less subject to genetic variations.

The Jamiesons' identities were not revealed in Koren's article. But they went public on April 30, 2007—exactly two years after Tariq's death—filing a class-action lawsuit against Johnson & Johnson and a subsidiary, the manufacturer of Tylenol-3, on behalf of “all persons in Canada” who had ingested the products of the drug through breast milk. “This terrible tragedy should never have occurred, and I am determined to see that this does not happen to other children,” Rani said. “What can they give me? Can they give me my son back? I want other people not to have their children die or be damaged.”

The Jamiesons went on to have three more children—all boys, who grew up in the shadow of the brother they never met. “You’re consumed with a certain sadness that’s always there,” Rani told a reporter, seven years after Tariq’s death. Two decades later, she still finds April the most difficult month: “It’s always there.”

Koren continued to sound the alarm about codeine for years. “He was always on a plane somewhere, and always had a million spinning plates—meetings, talks, conferences,” David Juurlink, a Canadian clinical toxicologist and a colleague of Koren’s at the Hospital for Sick Children, told me. Koren published more papers about the Jamieson case, and his Motherisk program provided data for studies of patients who had been prescribed codeine for postpartum pain. His ability to distill complex scientific processes into clear public-health messaging made him a regular commentator in the press. “It’s quite common not to know why a baby dies,” Koren said, in an interview for Canadian television. “I am quite sure that quite a few of those were codeine in breast milk. But no one checked. You don’t check, you do not find.”

Juurlink first met Koren in the late nineties, when he was a resident in clinical pharmacology. Koren, who had been practicing medicine in Canada since 1982, was leading rounds. “When you were with Gidi, you really felt like you were in the presence of someone who wasn’t just an expert—in the truest sense of the word—but was also a kind, good-natured, thoughtful, and intellectually agile man,” Juurlink recalled. “He was very avuncular. It was really one of the highlights of my training, learning from him.” Koren

was revered by colleagues, and he had almost six hundred publications in scientific journals.

By 2010, Juurlink was a widely respected pharmacologist and toxicologist in his own right, specializing in medication safety and opioids. He had positions at two top medical institutions in Toronto, including the Ontario Poison Centre, which is run out of the Hospital for Sick Children. He had also published many academic papers, including several with Koren. But he had found the experience to be somewhat disappointing: the first time they published together as “co-authors,” Juurlink wrote the paper and sent it to Koren but received no guidance or revisions in reply. “His only feedback to me was to please credit that he was getting financial backing from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research,” Juurlink recalled.

That June, Juurlink was invited to deliver the keynote lecture at a toxicology conference in Scotland. After the lecture, he joined Nick Bateman—then the director of the Scottish branch of the U.K.’s National Poisons Information Service—for a candlelit dinner at an old Edinburgh establishment called the Witchery. Bateman ordered haggis and wine. Eventually, he blurted out, “David, what the hell is going on with Koren and this baby that died from breast milk?”

“What?”

“It’s clearly nonsense,” Bateman said. “Why can’t everybody see it?”

Bateman told Juurlink that when he first read the *Lancet* report he’d thought, This can’t be true. “The science on metabolism—codeine to morphine—was beautiful,” Bateman said. But the numbers were off. Ultra-rapid metabolizers are generally exposed to around fifty per cent more morphine than the average person. And yet, though Rani had been taking only a fraction of her prescribed dose, Tariq had died with a concentration of morphine in his blood which was more than fifty times higher than the midpoint of the expected range.

Bateman and two colleagues at the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh had looked deeper into the scientific literature and found that, within months of the *Lancet* report, Koren and his colleagues had published very similar

papers in two practitioners' journals—*Canadian Family Physician* and *Canadian Pharmacists Journal*—neither of which Juurlink had seen. They contained minor errors, and also a key fact that had been omitted in *The Lancet*: Tariq's blood didn't just have morphine in it—it also contained acetaminophen, the dominant component of Tylenol-3.

Acetaminophen appears in breast milk only at very low concentrations. At Rani's intake of Tylenol-3, Tariq ought to have been consuming less than a milligram of acetaminophen per day—around half a per cent of what an infant of his size might receive as a standard treatment for pain. But the forensic-toxicology laboratory's measurements showed that his acetaminophen concentration was in the range of what you'd expect to find in a baby's bloodstream soon after he'd been administered a standard dose. “There is no way in the world that could have come from breast milk,” Bateman insisted to Juurlink.

“I am not aware of any cases in the U.K., or elsewhere in the world, where breast-feeding by women who were on either morphine or codeine—which has been in use for more than a hundred years—has caused death,” Bateman said. “I *am* familiar with patients whose babies have died after a caregiver gave the opiate directly.”

Juurlink listened in silence. The candles flickered. Bateman took a sip of wine, then leaned across the table and said, “David, whatever the intention, that baby was poisoned.”

David Juurlink grew up in New Glasgow, a small town in Nova Scotia. His parents operated a local diner, the West Side Drive-In, where they served burgers, fries, milkshakes, and fish and chips, seven days a week, from nine o'clock in the morning until ten o'clock at night. “People would just sit in their cars and eat, and then they would dump all of their detritus in the parking lot,” Juurlink told me. “My job, at 10 P.M. every school night—and sometimes also on weekends—was to go over and sweep that up, and put it in garbage bags. And then I'd go to bed, and go to school the next day.”

One day, Juurlink, who played the drums, was practicing at the home of his best friend, a bass player. “He had an older sister who I always thought was kind of cute,” he recalled. She told him that she had started working as a

pharmacist. “I became aware of this profession called ‘pharmacy,’ which I’d never really thought of before,” he said.

He asked his chemistry teacher about it, but “he said, ‘Well, David, you need an average of at least eighty for that,’ ” Juurlink recalled. For the next two years, he studied obsessively, even after late-night shifts at the diner, and he ended up graduating first in his class.

Juurlink attended Dalhousie University, in Halifax, about two hours away. During summer breaks, he worked at three different pharmacies in New Glasgow. One day, a woman came in and asked for two hundred pills of Tylenol No. 1—a weak opioid whose generic form is still sold over the counter in Canadian pharmacies. A couple of days later, he saw her at a different pharmacy, asking for the same. “She clearly had an addiction to codeine, and she was visiting multiple pharmacies to avoid detection,” he said. It was the late eighties, and this was his first brush with the coming opioid crisis.

Tylenol-1 had 7.5 milligrams of codeine; addicts might take four pills to approximate the relief that they’d get from a single prescription pill of Tylenol-3. Juurlink was troubled by what seemed like an obvious hypocrisy: people could walk in and buy codeine without a prescription, but the pharmacy’s stock of morphine was kept in a safe. As he studied pharmacokinetics—how drugs move through the body—he came to believe that codeine is an inherently irrational drug.

When codeine was first isolated from the opium poppy, in 1832, scientists understood that it was chemically related to morphine but believed that the two drugs worked through different mechanisms. Codeine was marketed as a gentler alternative to morphine, particularly for cough suppression. Scientists didn’t understand until well into the twentieth century that codeine primarily works because the liver metabolizes it into morphine. But the perception of the two drugs as distinct—one mild, one serious—was entrenched in medical practice, in pharmaceutical regulations, in prescription guidelines, and in law.

Juurlink eventually attended medical school, after which he chose to specialize in clinical pharmacology and toxicology, the study of drugs and

poisons. “I just fell in love with toxicology,” he said. “What attracted me? It’s that patients are often critically ill but salvageable. You can help prevent them from dying. But there is a real art to their management, because often they’ve not just taken one pill—they’ve taken something like eight different pills, and there’s an interplay between those pills. And it’s not just what those pills are doing to the patient but what they might do if we don’t address this *right now*.”

Before his visit to Scotland, Juurlink had never questioned Koren’s findings. He had even used the *Lancet* paper to teach medical students how individual genetic variations can pose unexpected risks in the use of certain drugs. But, if Bateman was right, the implications went far beyond the revelation of a possible crime. The opioid crisis was taking off in North America. With codeine now considered unsafe for breast-feeding, millions of new mothers were being prescribed stronger, more addictive opioids instead.

Bateman had detailed his concerns about Tariq’s death in a letter he’d sent to *The Lancet* in 2007. Koren, using arguments from the Jamiesons’ lawyer, had tried to block its publication by insinuating both that it was defamatory and that Bateman was a paid shill for the manufacturer of Tylenol-3. (A different subsidiary of Johnson & Johnson had named Bateman on an unrestricted educational grant that it awarded to the University of Edinburgh, where he was a professor at the time.) “We know the family and we are convinced that this will cause them harm!” Koren wrote to his editor at *The Lancet*. “It is one thing to philosophize in a journal, it is another thing to knowingly injure a grieving family.”

Koren wrote that Bateman’s critique was “frivilous and based on errors”; Bateman revised and resubmitted. When his letter finally ran, in August, 2008, it did so alongside a derisive rebuttal from Koren and his team. “Nicholas Bateman and colleagues’ comments seem to stem from fundamental flaws in their understanding of perinatal toxicology,” they wrote. They went on to attribute the high concentration of acetaminophen in Tariq’s blood to “postmortem redistribution”—the phenomenon of drugs migrating through the body after death, potentially skewing toxicological results—then cited a study that did not support their conclusion.

Back in Toronto, Juurlink searched the scientific literature for clues. His specialty was complex drug interactions and poisonings in adults—not breast-feeding, or infants—and it had never occurred to him that Koren could be so wrong, so publicly, about a matter that was so consequential, and so squarely within his longtime professional focus. And yet, the more closely Juurlink studied the issue, the less confidence he had in Koren’s interpretation.

According to Koren, the concentration of morphine in Rani’s breast-milk sample, at eighty-seven nanograms per millilitre, was “10-20 fold higher than previous published reports.” But Juurlink found a case report from 1990 that documented a breast-feeding mother producing a milk sample whose concentration was fifteen per cent higher than Rani’s—and that was *after* the woman’s morphine dosage had been tapered by ninety per cent. Even when she was taking the previous, higher dose, the infant suffered no ill effects. Koren ought to have known about this case report—he was listed as its second author.

In another case, involving intravenous doses of morphine given to new mothers after surgery, the concentration of morphine in one woman’s breast milk reached a level almost six times that of Rani’s sample. But, since newborns don’t take in much breast milk during a feeding, the authors concluded that “the amount of morphine transferred by nursing is, even at the peak concentration of 500 ng/ml milk, small and will hardly cause respiratory depression or drowsiness in the child.” The math was simple: a newborn who drank a hundred millilitres of milk from that mother—higher than average for a single feeding—would consume a twentieth of a milligram of morphine. According to the infant-dosing guidelines at the Hospital for Sick Children, that is less than five per cent of a single therapeutic oral dose for a four-kilogram baby in pain—nowhere near a toxic dose.



"If you see the fat naked lady bathing with the swan, you've gone too far."
Cartoon by Robert Leighton

And yet the opioids in Tariq's blood had killed him. Was such a high concentration of morphine even possible through breast-feeding alone? A 2009 study, led by the German scientist Stefan Willmann, set out to answer this question by modelling what he and his colleagues referred to as the "pharmacokinetic worst-case scenario." They assessed that the mother's ultra-rapid-metabolizer status was not necessarily as relevant as Koren had believed. Instead, the most important thing was the ability of the infant to process morphine in its liver and kidneys, and to eliminate the drug through urine. "In a neonate that can efficiently eliminate morphine, it is impossible to observe such an extreme accumulation of morphine in plasma as was seen in the case of the Toronto newborn," Willmann wrote.

On an infant's first day of life, its stomach is about the size of a cherry. At three days, it is the size of a walnut; at one week, an apricot; at two weeks—a milestone that Tariq never reached—it is roughly the size of an egg. Setting aside the matter of elimination, Juurlink calculated that the morphine concentration reflected in Rani's breast-milk sample simply could not explain the amount of morphine in Tariq's blood: he would have had to ingest several times his body weight in a single feeding.

In the fall of 2010, Juurlink reached out to the chief coroner of Ontario, Andrew McCallum, with detailed concerns. They had met fifteen years earlier, when McCallum was one of Juurlink's supervisors during a rotation in emergency medicine. Now McCallum invited him to review the

coroner's case files, which were not public, and to prepare a confidential report. "I was a little bit fearful, because Koren was not only a colleague—he was, at least notionally, the world's expert," Juurlink recalled.

The files arrived—hundreds of pages of medical data, a smattering of clues. Nothing in the documents suggested the kind of kidney or liver dysfunction that would significantly impair morphine elimination. But Juurlink found critical details in the toxicology report which had never made it into any of the published literature. Tariq's blood didn't contain just morphine and acetaminophen; it also had codeine, at a concentration of three hundred nanograms per millilitre, more than a hundred times higher than one might expect to see from the consumption of breast milk produced by a mother on Rani's dose.

Juurlink kept reading. Tariq's last reported substantial feeding had taken place eighteen hours before his death. The 911 call log noted that he had been sleeping the whole day, and the Jamiesons' lawsuit described "his lack of feeding that day." But the postmortem examination revealed that Tariq's stomach—which had no abnormalities or obstructions—contained two millilitres of "white curdled material." Forensic testing on his gastric contents, using two independent analytical methods, detected codeine but not morphine. Such tests are best performed with larger samples. But these results, along with the sheer magnitude of drugs in his blood, suggested direct administration.

A twelve-day-old infant cannot crawl. It cannot grab, and it cannot put something into its own mouth. "It also cannot swallow a Tylenol-3 pill," Juurlink told me. "I don't know what happened in that house, on that night, but I do know that someone gave this baby crushed Tylenol-3," likely mixed in breast milk or formula. "That's the only way these numbers make sense."

For the next year, Juurlink worked on his report to McCallum with great care and precision, expecting that he would someday have to present it in court. Rani's ultra-rapid-metabolizer status "cannot explain the death of the child," he wrote. Soon after he submitted it, in November, 2011, he was summoned to a meeting at the coroner's office. He presented his opinion to McCallum and two forensic toxicologists who had worked on the case. As

the meeting drew to a close, McCallum announced that the next step would be to send it to Koren, for review and response.

A couple of weeks later, Juurlink ran into Koren at a Starbucks in the lower level of the Hospital for Sick Children. “He was adding some milk to his coffee, and he just looked at me, and I will never forget the glare,” Juurlink recalled. “It was a look that could kill. I don’t think he and I ever spoke after that.”

Juurlink never heard back from the coroner’s office. Koren and his team kept publishing on codeine, repeating their warning that the drug, if taken by new mothers, could pass through breast milk at levels that might kill infants. There was almost no real pharmacokinetic data to back up this assertion, only extrapolation and anecdotes. For one paper, scientists working with Koren called up seventy-two women who had been breast-feeding while taking prescription codeine, months or years earlier, and asked whether they remembered their children being drowsy or having difficulty breast-feeding. (Many newborns nap after feeding.) They reported that nearly a quarter of these infants showed signs of “central nervous system depression.”

If there were genuine signals in the literature, they were indistinguishable from the noise. Only one of Koren’s cases stood out as “extremely compelling,” Juurlink told me, for the clarity and quantity of its medical data. “A one-week-old boy was seen in the emergency department with a two-day history of poor feeding and increasing lethargy,” Koren and a colleague named Michael Rieder wrote, in *Paediatrics & Child Health*, the journal of the Canadian Paediatric Society. His breathing was slow and shallow. “This baby had the classical combination of lethargy and bradypnea associated with opiate overdose,” Koren and Rieder reported. They referred to him as Baby Boy Blue.

Baby Boy Blue’s urine test was positive for opiates; subsequent analysis revealed that his blood-morphine concentration was fifty-five nanograms (mistakenly referred to as “micrograms” in the paper) per millilitre—not as high as Tariq Jamieson’s but potentially lethal nonetheless. Doctors administered naloxone—which displaces opioids from the receptors in the central nervous system—and he quickly recovered.

According to Koren and Rieder, “further questioning” revealed that the mother had been prescribed “an acetaminophen-codeine product” for postpartum pain. “She reported taking one or two pain tablets three or four times a day, and noted excellent pain relief but also drowsiness and constipation,” they wrote—just like Rani. Genetic testing confirmed that she was an ultra-rapid metabolizer. As with Rani, they continued, this woman’s genetics exposed her baby to “very high concentrations of morphine” each time she breast-fed.

Juurlink struggled to make sense of the case. The morphine concentration was implausibly high, and yet the fact that naloxone had worked was strong evidence that Koren’s interpretation was correct: Baby Boy Blue had consumed toxic levels of opiates.

Years after publication, Juurlink shared a taxi with Rieder, Koren’s co-author on the paper, while they were attending a professional meeting in Ottawa. By then, Juurlink had been studying the death of Tariq Jamieson for a decade, and had found no other credible case of an infant dying from breast-feeding. The only data point in the scientific literature that had shaken his theory of the case was the near-death of Baby Boy Blue. He asked Rieder about the case.

“Oh, we made it up,” Rieder replied.

Juurlink was speechless; he regarded Rieder as an “esteemed colleague,” as he later put it, “and someone I consider a friend.” But every detail was fiction. Koren and Rieder had even invented Baby Boy Blue’s siblings, a five-year-old sister, who was born in Sri Lanka, and a three-year-old brother, who was “born in Canada by caesarean section because of failure to progress.” The morphine concentration was implausibly high because it was fabricated. No life was jeopardized; no life was saved.

Koren, who has been ill in recent years, could not be reached for comment. But, according to an e-mail that Rieder sent Juurlink years later, the case was created as “a cautionary tale,” for teaching purposes. No such disclaimer appeared in print. Meanwhile, the paper has been cited in at least one court case and in a doctoral thesis. “Pathologists and forensic toxicologists have come to accept the idea of ‘death by breast milk’ based

upon terribly sloppy work that began in Gidi’s lab,” Juurlink wrote to Rieder. “Experts and the courts are being misled by this belief. Unfortunately, your case work contributes to that misconception.” Rieder said that the paper would “likely” be updated with a disclaimer in 2024, some fourteen years after it was published. But this has not happened.

Gideon Koren was born in Tel Aviv in 1947, shortly before the establishment of the Israeli state. He served as a medic and a flight surgeon in the Israel Defense Forces, then studied at the Sackler School of Medicine, at Tel Aviv University. After a residency in pediatrics, he moved to Canada to train in pediatric pharmacology and toxicology. In 1985, he established the Motherisk program. “Every year, scores of new medications enter the market, and few of them have safety data concerning fetal exposure during pregnancy,” he later wrote. “There is a serious knowledge gap as to which medications are safe for the unborn baby and which should be avoided.” Motherisk was “Gidi’s baby,” Rieder later told reporters. “It was totally shoestring at first”—just Koren, plus a staffer answering the phone. But, in time, Koren raised millions of dollars for the program, and it grew, as he put it, “to conduct large-scale laboratory and clinical research, and to translate this new knowledge into counselling.”

Koren was an amateur folk musician, and he held weekly performances in the hospital wards. “How many people do you know who are outstanding scientists, outstanding clinicians, and set up a theatre for children?” an immunologist at the hospital once said. But, in private, Koren could be aggressive and vituperative—a competitive colleague who sought to destroy the reputations and careers of those who crossed him. In the late nineties, he sent five anonymous hate-mail letters that were directed at colleagues who had come to believe, during a series of clinical trials, that a drug he was researching and advocating for was neither safe nor effective. “How did you ever get yourself in the middle of this group of pigs?” he wrote to one of them. “Or did you think that their shit won’t touch you?” The letters were filled with spelling and grammar mistakes, and also with bizarre phrases, which, to those who knew Koren well, instantly identified him as the author. (In one letter, he told a colleague that he was tired of “your mesanthropy and a British version of a foul air balloon,” and signed off as “your appalled colleagues,” with a stamp showing the face of a

clown.) When hospital officials confronted Koren about the letters, he vociferously denied any involvement. The recipients spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on private detectives and expert analysis. In 1999, they matched saliva on the envelopes to a sample of Koren's DNA.

At that point, Koren confessed. "It defies belief that an individual of Dr. Koren's professed character and integrity could author such vicious diatribes against his colleagues," a disciplinary committee reported. "It was only when confronted with irrefutable scientific evidence of his guilt did he admit that he was the perpetrator."

The prospect of Koren's dismissal threatened to upend the Motherisk program. "The day we heard the news about the letters, top scientists came into this office and cried. We cried," a hospital assistant told the *Globe and Mail* at the time. "He is irreplaceable." The hospital's leadership, after an expensive investigation, settled on a fine of thirty-five thousand dollars and a five-month suspension from the hospital, three of them paid.

Koren returned to work stripped of two titles and of a chair that had been endowed in his name. But he remained the director of Motherisk, and soon the scandal was behind him. Research and operational grants poured in; Motherisk's clinical laboratory expanded its operations, and its counselling center grew to seventy-five staff members, answering an average of two hundred inquiries a day. Motherisk also served as a kind of clearing house, with extremely similar articles based on its research findings running in multiple medical journals. Koren sat on the editorial boards of numerous publications and held several academic appointments.

"Everybody thought he was the best in the world," Bateman, the Scottish toxicologist, told me. "I did, too!" But the impression wasn't necessarily shared by those who worked closely with him. One of Koren's former trainees, Shinya Ito, told me that, from his experience working with Koren, "I learned what I shouldn't do." He added, "Gidi was sloppy with details. That was my impression, even as a trainee."

Koren's résumé eventually grew to a hundred and forty-seven pages, and he was credited as an author on at least a dozen medical books and some two thousand academic-journal articles. (A 2018 analysis by *Nature* flagged

Koren, among others, as “hyperprolific,” noting that some years he had pumped out an average of at least one new paper every five days. “I perceive myself as an individual who is highly committed to scientific discovery,” Koren wrote in response. “I do not feel I have to apologize for my high productivity.”) Koren spoke at conferences all over the world, and testified as an expert witness in Toronto courtrooms. He also received some of Canada’s top medical and research awards. “It feels great when your country says to you, through its highest research authority, ‘You have changed the lives of many Canadian women and their families,’ ” he said.

In late 2014, Juurlink picked up a copy of the *Toronto Star* from his porch and saw Koren’s name on the front page. For the past fifteen years, the Motherisk laboratory had been paid by the Canadian child-protection authorities to test strands of hair for drugs and alcohol. At least twenty-five thousand people, across the country, had been tested by Motherisk, earning millions of dollars for the lab. The results of the tests were used in eight criminal prosecutions and thousands of child-protection cases; Koren personally testified in a criminal proceeding that resulted in the removal of a child from his mother. “However, Dr. Koren has never had any formal training in forensic toxicology or any experience in a forensic toxicology laboratory,” an independent investigation that was commissioned by the government of Ontario found. “It is clear that he did not understand basic elements of forensic toxicology.”

In fact, no one at Motherisk’s lab had any proper forensic training. The entire enterprise “fell woefully short of internationally recognized forensic standards,” the investigator, a retired judge named Susan Lang, wrote. The lab had no standard operating procedures, no clear chain of custody, and poor recordkeeping. Worse, Koren’s team relied on preliminary screening tests, designed only to quickly assess whether a sample is negative, and thus merits no further testing, or is “preliminarily positive,” and thus requires an entirely different test to confirm and quantify the presence of a drug. Koren’s team didn’t do the follow-up tests; it presented preliminary positives as precisely quantified results—a practice that was “simply unheard of in forensic toxicology laboratories,” Lang wrote. Meanwhile, laboratory personnel “made repeated interpretation errors” when reporting to the authorities. Koren testified, on the basis of these spurious tests, that a

toddler must have been ingesting substantial quantities of cocaine for about fourteen months. The child's mother went to prison.

The Motherisk lab was shut down, and Koren returned to Israel. In his absence, the regulatory body for medical doctors in Ontario carried out an investigation into whether he had "engaged in professional misconduct or was incompetent." In 2019, as part of a deal to end the investigation, Koren surrendered his Canadian medical license and "agreed never to apply or reapply for registration as a physician in Ontario."



"It's crazy how much we have in common now that I've hijacked your entire personality."
Cartoon by Will McPhail

The Motherisk scandal threw the Canadian child-protection system into chaos. "The testing was imposed on people who were among the poorest and most vulnerable members of our society, with scant regard for due process or their rights to privacy and bodily integrity," a follow-up commission reported. Many of the children in these cases had been removed from their parents and put into foster care or formally adopted—a process that is practically impossible to reverse. They lived with new families, and in many cases had done so for years. Some biological parents no longer knew where their children were. Two additional years of investigation and a review of nearly thirteen hundred cases resulted in only four instances of children being reunited with their biological parents.

In early 2015, Juurlink contacted the coroner's office to ask about the status of the inquiry into Tariq Jamieson's death. Three years had passed since his run-in with Koren at Starbucks, and he had heard nothing. McCallum had left the role of chief coroner, and it was now held by Dirk Huyer, a widely

respected practitioner who had investigated some five thousand deaths since 1992. The office Huyer inherited had spent much of the previous decade in turmoil: an unrelated scandal had culminated in James Cairns—who had been the chair of the Paediatric Death Review Committee and had co-authored the *Lancet* paper with Koren—surrendering his medical license and promising never to practice again.

Juurlink's own son had been born two and half months after Tariq. "Watching him ride his bike for the first time, and watching him win a basketball tournament, and watching him go off to school—it's one of the reasons I've been pursuing this with such tenacity," Juurlink said. As we spoke, he began crying. "This baby didn't get that opportunity, because somebody gave him Tylenol-3."

Huyer sent a couple of "perfunctory replies," as Juurlink put it, but otherwise seemed reluctant to engage. "Things continue to be evaluated," he wrote. Months later, Huyer visited Juurlink at his office. He said that Koren had reviewed Juurlink's report from 2011 and one of his former Ph.D. students, Parvaz Madadi, had issued a rebuttal. Although Huyer no longer trusted Koren, Madadi was now a forensic toxicologist associated with Huyer's office, and he considered her rebuttal plausible, detailed, and beyond his scope of expertise. "We've got these duelling expert opinions—the original interpretation and yours," Huyer told Juurlink. "What are we supposed to do with that?" Juurlink urged him to seek the opinions of other experts but he declined, indicating that the matter was closed.

At that point, Juurlink informed Huyer that he would someday go public with Tariq's blood-codeine concentration. In response, Huyer warned that the contents of a coroner's file are not a matter of public record; only he, as chief coroner, could legally authorize the disclosure of unpublished details. And he didn't. Juurlink was incensed. "The motto of your office is 'We speak for the dead to protect the living,' and that's exactly what you're not doing here," he said. But Huyer insisted that, absent some form of "clear and cogent" proof, such as a confession by the perpetrator, his office could only consider changing the manner of death from "accident" to "undetermined," a step that it has not taken.

“We’re death investigators, and we frankly rely on information that comes to us,” Huyer told me, last fall. “There are scientists involved who are far more skilled and have an expertise that would be beyond ours.”

I asked him which scientists he considered to have the best understanding of the material.

“I don’t know,” he said. “It is outside of our specific expertise, so we have not decided who would be more expert or less expert.”

But the forensic toxicologists who had been assigned to the case had expressed concerns from the outset that Tariq had been administered codeine. There was a difference of opinion within the death-investigation team, and the toxicologists’ interpretation was sidelined. Soon afterward, Koren and Cairns took the story to the scientific press, presenting their version as an uncontested medical revelation.

I contacted Rani this past June, seeking clarity into what had happened to Tariq. “Just to warn you, dealing properly with this case will involve a great deal of in-depth research into the science related to my son’s death,” she replied by e-mail. “If you are willing to invest the time needed to do that, then I would be very happy to assist you over the next few months.”

In the following weeks, Rani provided me with a handful of primary-source documents, including Tariq’s postmortem examination and toxicology report. “It is important for me to keep Tariq’s memory alive and in the public eye to help prevent possible death and harm of other newborn babies in the same or similar way,” she wrote.

In July, Rani sent me a copy of Koren’s original draft of the *Lancet* paper, in order, she said, to demonstrate that there was never an attempt to conceal Tariq’s blood-codeine level, which Juurlink had treated as a kind of smoking gun. She was right: the codeine and acetaminophen levels were present. The draft was twelve pages long, including references, and *The Lancet* had asked Koren to shorten it to a page. It is unclear why, during that process, Koren removed the codeine and acetaminophen readings. But, shortly after publication, he promoted his young graduate student Parvaz Madadi as a new expert on opioids in breast milk.

Madadi was listed as the lead author of the two Canadian practitioners' journal articles—her first bylines in academic journals. But, when I reached out to her this fall, she told me that she had not written either paper. I sent her Koren's original *Lancet* draft, where she was also listed as an author. She was perplexed, then horrified. "Not only have I never seen this manuscript—I had no reason to be on it, since I did not contribute to the original death investigation in any way," she told me.

When Tariq died, in April, 2005, Madadi was an undergraduate at the University of Western Ontario, some two hundred kilometres from Toronto. She began studying under Koren five months later, when, as a master's student in her early twenties, she initiated a laboratory project to develop a reliable assay for drugs in breast milk. The project was launched in response to the *Lancet* case report, but she had never seen Tariq's postmortem documents.

After a year of research, Madadi said, she was "unable to develop a reliable assay." Koren offered her what seemed at the time like a promising path forward, inviting her to pursue clinical research with the Motherisk program. He also offered to name her as the lead author of the articles in the Canadian practitioners' journals, although she had not contributed to them at all. "It's a really nice thing he did for me!" she wrote to her parents, her sister, and her boyfriend.

From that day forward, "Gidi dragged me to the forefront of the scientific discourse," Madadi told me. He tasked her with working on his response to Nick Bateman for publication in *The Lancet*, and steered her to produce more articles on codeine and breast milk, effectively creating a body of academic literature that cited and supported his initial interpretation of Tariq's death. "I felt, and still feel, like there are real signals in the literature to support the notion that codeine can cause sedation in breast-fed infants," she told me. "But all my assumptions about death stemmed from the *Lancet* case report, which said, This is a phenomenon that happens."

Madadi learned of Tariq's blood-codeine concentration in 2013, when she was working on the rebuttal to Juurlink's interpretation for the chief coroner. But she didn't grasp its significance. Soon afterward, she left Koren's department and started working as a forensic toxicologist

associated with the office of the chief coroner, where she came to understand how poorly Koren’s laboratory had been run. “Looking back at it now, with everything I have learned, I cannot reconcile the codeine level with Gidi’s interpretation,” she told me. “That number is too high.”

I asked Madadi whether she was aware that Tariq had died with “white curdled material” containing codeine in his stomach, many hours after his last substantial feeding.

She froze. Then she said, “Are you kidding?”

In 2019, the Hospital for Sick Children lost control of Motherisk’s web domain after the subscription lapsed. It now redirects to a website that promotes the use of cannabis during pregnancy.

By then, reporters at the *Toronto Star* had carried out a review of Koren’s published works and found that more than four hundred of his writings appeared to contain failures to disclose funding from drug companies; unretracted assertions based on his laboratory’s discredited record of testing hair; and other malpractices and lies. In response, the Hospital for Sick Children announced that it would conduct a “systematic examination” of Koren’s academic-publishing record.

At that point, Juurlink wrote to David Naylor, the former dean of medicine and president of the University of Toronto, who was serving as the interim president and C.E.O. of the Hospital for Sick Children. He asked to discuss the death of Tariq Jamieson, then went grocery shopping. Naylor called back soon afterward, and for the next hour Juurlink paced in the canned-fruit aisle, describing his belief that Koren had essentially generated an entire branch of neonatal toxicology based on a sloppy misreading of a single death.

Juurlink’s phone call hardly came as a surprise to Naylor. He and senior members of the hospital’s faculty had been “screening endless manuscripts,” as he put it, and devising strategies for requesting retractions of Koren’s most egregious works. “We actually had a term for it—we called it ‘Korening,’ ” he told me.

“Gidi had a tendency to just submit papers without the co-authors being advised or consulted, and let the peer-review process handle all the shitty nitty-gritty, you know?” a person who worked with the Motherisk program for several years told me. “Rather than sit back and be, like, ‘Let’s make sure, before we go forward with this paper, that we have all our ducks in a row.’ ”

Naylor informed Huyer, the chief coroner, that, as part of the hospital’s review of Koren’s publishing record, Juurlink would write a comprehensive reassessment of the *Lancet* paper and the two papers that had appeared in the Canadian practitioners’ journals. “Juurlink is one of the straightest and smartest faculty members I’ve dealt with in a long career, and this case has been a real passion of his for a long time,” Naylor told me. “No one knew this material better than him.” Naylor also emphasized the importance of disclosing Tariq’s full toxicology results. “It was imperative that those data points be allowed for public release by Juurlink in his publications, so that there could be a proper analysis of the science,” Naylor said. Huyer relented, and Juurlink and one of his doctoral students, Jonathan Zipursky, went to work.

They conducted a study of some hundred and seventy thousand new mothers, to see if infants of women who were prescribed opioids shortly after birth were at an increased risk of harm. What they found, instead, was that many women who are prescribed opioids postpartum appear to avoid breast-feeding, in order to “protect” their children—and thereby deprive them of immunological and other benefits. “The number of infants affected by this globally is now easily in the millions,” Juurlink told me. In May, 2020, they published their review, titled “The Implausibility of Neonatal Opioid Toxicity from Breastfeeding,” in the journal *Clinical Pharmacology & Therapeutics*. The key finding was that Tariq’s codeine concentration “obviously cannot be explained by maternal genotype, and suggests that conversion of codeine to morphine in the neonate . . . rather than the mother, explains the elevated morphine concentration detected postmortem.”

Soon after the paper was published, the editors of the two Canadian practitioners’ journals initiated an independent review process. Between

1995 and 2015, both publications—which have a combined circulation of some eighty thousand Canadian family doctors and pharmacists—regularly ran columns from the Motherisk team without subjecting them to peer review. “We are also widely read online outside Canada by family physicians and other primary-health-care clinicians, so our potential impact on clinician prescribing behaviors and on patients is significant,” Nicholas Pimplott, the editor of *Canadian Family Physician*, told me. When the independent reviews came in, the journals issued a joint retraction, citing “clear evidence” that Koren’s findings were “unreliable.”



“It all started with a mysterious call from an unknown number, and now that I’m saying it out loud I think it was just spam.”

Cartoon by Ellis Rosen

Rani said that Juurlink and Zipursky’s analysis was “baseless speculation” that omitted “any information that would cause people to doubt their claims.” When I asked her what she meant, she forwarded me a sixty-five-hundred-word e-mail that she had sent to the editors of the two practitioners’ journals, criticizing their retraction. Her complaints were extremely detailed and highlighted some genuine challenges in postmortem toxicology. But they mostly centered on her belief that the relatively scant toxicological literature on opioids and breast-feeding did not apply to her son. She also pointed to case reports in the medical literature which attribute infants’ symptoms to opioids in breast milk, but these generally rely on inference and lack substantive data. Nothing in her response

amounted to evidence that would challenge Juurlink’s conclusion. (Douglas Jamieson did not engage with me.)

I have spent the past year searching for ways in which Juurlink might be wrong or overstating the strength of the toxicological evidence. But I have come up short. It is true that newborns are unusually sensitive to opioids; their systems are still developing. But this vulnerability is the reason that opioid dosing in newborns is so carefully calibrated and closely monitored in clinical settings—where the amounts administered directly are still orders of magnitude greater than what is transferred through breast milk. Any accumulation from the trace amounts in breast milk would be gradual, with symptoms becoming evident well before catastrophe. And though the effects of postmortem redistribution can become a “toxicological nightmare” in some forensic circumstances, as one journal article put it, Tariq’s blood sample is not one of those circumstances.

“Medicine is full of exceptions to the rules that physicians and scientists set in their various paradigms,” Naylor told me. “And human biology is unpredictable. However, in this instance, the overwhelming balance of probabilities would favor the interpretation that Dave Juurlink and his collaborators have proposed.”

Shinya Ito—who replaced Koren as the head of clinical pharmacology and toxicology at the Hospital for Sick Children in 2000, and has been publishing scientific research on drug safety and breast-feeding for more than thirty years—agreed. Rani’s ultra-rapid-metabolizer status was a red herring. Leading European and American experts with whom I shared the raw postmortem and toxicological data told me much the same. “The amount of morphine in milk, even if it’s unusual, is still not enough—period,” Ito said. “There is a missing piece, the bigger exposure, which must have come from direct administration. By whom? Nobody knows.”

“The case against science is straightforward: much of the scientific literature, perhaps half, may simply be untrue,” Richard Horton, the editor of *The Lancet* for the past thirty years, wrote in the journal, in 2015. “In their quest for telling a compelling story, scientists too often sculpt data to fit their preferred theory of the world. Or they retrofit hypotheses to fit their

data. Journal editors deserve their fair share of criticism too. We aid and abet the worst behaviours.”

In 2020, Juurlink, Zipursky, Naylor, and several other experts—including Nick Bateman, the Scottish toxicologist; Thomas Hale, one of the world’s leading scientific authorities on breast milk; and Ronald Cohn, who had replaced Naylor as president and C.E.O. at the Hospital for Sick Children—wrote to *The Lancet*, asking the journal to retract Koren’s paper. “For more than a decade now, Koren either knew or ought to have known that his original interpretation of the case was flawed yet he took no corrective action,” the letter read. “He instead continued to publish work citing this case as foundational to consideration of the risks of opioid use while breastfeeding.”

The journal referred the request back to the Hospital for Sick Children, which established an internal research-integrity review. Since Cohn had signed the letter asking for retraction, the lead inquirer did not report to him.

What followed was an exercise in obfuscation through institutional review. There was no meaningful effort to assess whether Juurlink’s analysis disproved Koren’s; instead, the reviewers narrowed the scope of their inquiry to the matter of whether Koren’s team had demonstrated such a “lack of rigour” that retraction was unavoidable. “Is it a good paper?” Stephen Scherer, the hospital’s head of research, who oversaw the investigation, later said to Juurlink. “You know—it’s an *n* of one and a lot of hand-waving. But the four authors on the paper stick by it.”

Koren sent the review team a bizarre eight-page document, which contained factual errors, non sequiturs, multiple font sizes, and what appeared to be copied-and-pasted correspondence with Rani. The hospital’s research-integrity office chalked it up to a scientific dispute. The editors of the Canadian practitioners’ journals offered to provide *The Lancet* with the unambiguous findings of their own review, but *The Lancet* declined. An independent expert I contacted told me that, some years ago, *The Lancet* had asked him to weigh in on the subject—then ignored his advice to retract. Koren’s case report remains on the journal’s website, with no notes

or corrections appended, and serves as the core basis for regulatory guidance on the subject of breast-feeding and codeine all over the world.

“The fact that the paper still exists means that medical students, pharmacy students, and, presumably, genetics students are being taught this as if it’s a real thing, and it has implications,” Juurlink told Scherer. “The scientific record now has this entire branch of pediatric pharmacology that has been made up out of whole cloth.” Koren’s *Lancet* article “is still used in a lot of textbooks,” the independent expert said. “Doctors who are less trained in this specific topic still perceive this case to be relevant.”

Soon after Naylor’s interim leadership came to an end, the internal review of Koren’s works was terminated. “The hospital decided that it was simply indigestible—that they would be forever at it,” Naylor told me. (The hospital disputes this.) Most journals resisted retraction, “even when strong arguments had been presented to get these papers out of the literature,” he said. “I was certainly disappointed. An enormous amount of work had been done, and the net result was a damp squib.”

Recently, Parvaz Madadi has undergone a painful process of revisiting her past work and memories. “This case report is misleading,” she said. “And the original submission was not done carefully or in good faith.” She added that she had no confidence in the measurement of Rani’s breast-milk sample, because it had been handled by Koren’s lab. Last week, she submitted a request to *The Lancet* to retract the original paper, along with her co-bylined response to Nick Bateman. At the core of her letter is a new allegation: that Koren falsified toxicological data.

Last month, Madadi scoured her archives and discovered an unpublished letter that Koren had submitted to *The Lancet*—without her knowledge but with her name as a co-signatory—in his initial attempt to suppress Bateman’s critique. On the second page, he misrepresented the contents of Tariq’s stomach. A toxicological screening of the “white curdled material” had detected codeine but not morphine. But Koren had claimed that the gastric contents “exhibited high morphine” levels—with no mention of codeine—“ruling out administration of Tylenol-3 to the baby.”

“Gidi was thinking about direct administration, and he created a scenario that would confuse or negate that explanation,” Madadi said. “He deliberated on this issue, and he lied.”

Tariq Jamieson was alive for only twelve days. But the circumstances of his death have cast a shadow over the scientific literature, top medical institutions, and the Jamieson family for more than two decades. After I contacted Huyer, the chief coroner, this fall, he began looking into the origins of the death investigation; during that process, he discovered that the full set of documents has gone missing.

In the decades since Koren’s first warnings concerning codeine and breast milk, public-health authorities and patient-advocacy services have issued guidance to new mothers that ranges from scientifically incoherent to potentially dangerous. A clinical report published by the American Academy of Pediatrics in 2013 cites the *Lancet* case as a reason to avoid prescribing codeine to breast-feeding mothers but notes that morphine—its metabolite—“appears to be tolerated by the breastfeeding infant.” The same guidelines also recommend the use of hydromorphone, which is about forty times more potent than codeine and can be highly addictive. Meanwhile, the U.K.’s National Health Service categorically warns against taking codeine while breast-feeding but allows for the use of fentanyl.

The notion that opioids can pass through breast milk in sufficient quantities to kill a child has also seeped into American courtrooms. Koren’s interpretation of Tariq Jamieson’s death has essentially served as a legal defense in at least two other cases that Juurlink believes most likely involved direct administration. During a review of other scientific literature, this summer, he discovered fourteen more, in Europe. “Who knows how many other babies have died at the hand of a caregiver and had it attributed to breast milk?” he said. “I don’t know the answer to that. But it’s not zero.” ♦

Ben Taub, a staff writer, is the recipient of the 2020 Pulitzer Prize for feature writing. His 2018 reporting on Iraq won a National Magazine Award and a George Polk Award.

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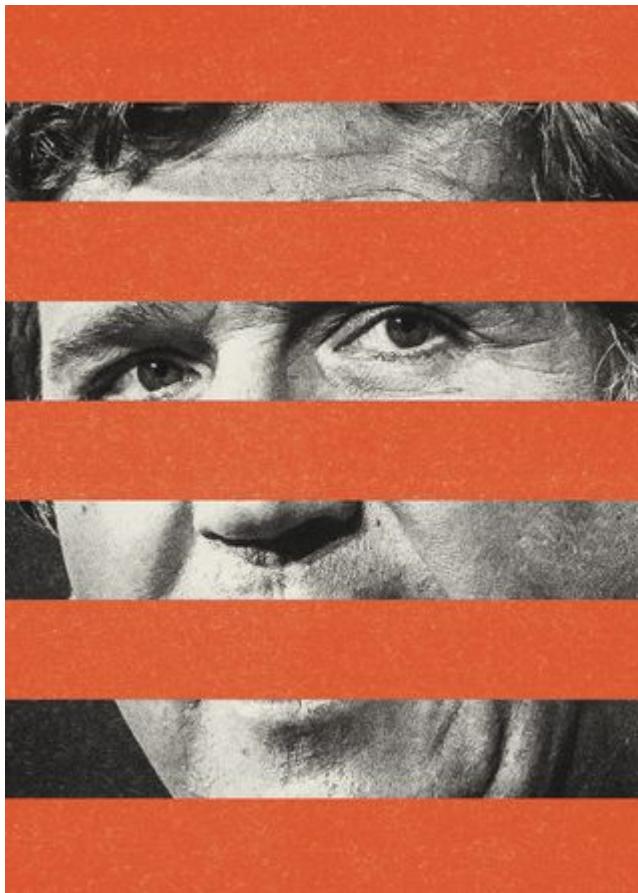
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Tucker Carlson's Nationalist Crusade

The pundit's contrarianism has swerved into openly racist and antisemitic tropes. What does his rise mean for the future of MAGA media?

By [Jason Zengerle](#)

January 24, 2026



After the 2024 election, an adviser to the President said, “Trump wanted Tucker’s opinion, and Tucker didn’t ever hesitate to offer it.” Photo illustration by Joan Wong; Source photograph by Giorgio Viera / AFP / Getty

In October, a few days before Halloween, Tucker Carlson invited Nick Fuentes to his home in rural Maine. For months, the two right-wing media

stars had been savaging each other on their respective platforms. On “The Tucker Carlson Show,” one of the top-ranked conservative political podcasts in the country, Carlson had called Fuentes a “weird little gay kid in his basement” and suggested that he was being used as a pawn by sinister, possibly government-controlled forces. “I have noticed that his targets are all people who are sincere, non-crazy, non-hateful opponents of neocon politics,” Carlson said. “He is clearly part of a campaign to discredit non-crazy right voices.”

Fuentes, on his late-night streaming show, “America First,” which averages about five hundred thousand viewers on Rumble, had alleged that it was Carlson, in fact, who was the deep-state agent, unspooling a baroque conspiracy theory in which Carlson has worked as a C.I.A. asset since college. “Everybody’s calling everybody else a Fed, but I think this one’s pretty cut-and-dry,” Fuentes said. “Who’s the C.I.A. cutout? Who’s the poseur? Who is America? I am America!” Addressing Carlson, he added, “You disgust me. But, seriously, you are filth.”

The reasons for the mutual animus weren’t entirely clear. At twenty-seven, Fuentes was arguably America’s most prominent white nationalist—someone who was forthright about, and seemingly proud of, his bigotry. Summing up his core political beliefs last year, he said, “Jews are running society. Women need to shut the fuck up. Blacks need to be imprisoned for the most part. And we would live in paradise. It’s that simple.” On another occasion, he said, “We have to go a little bit further than to say something’s up with the Zionists or Israel. It’s not Israel. It is the Jews.” These and other similarly odious utterances—questioning the Holocaust, celebrating Hitler, frequently using the N-word—meant that Fuentes was no stranger to criticism from fellow right-wingers. During the 2024 election, the Republican Vice-Presidential nominee, J. D. Vance, was asked about Fuentes, who had recently attacked Vance for having an Indian American wife and therefore being an insufficient “defender of white identity.” “Look, I think the guy’s a total loser,” Vance said. “Certainly, I disavow him.”

But Carlson was a conservative who didn’t feel the need to put much distance between himself and Fuentes. In 2019, when Carlson still had a prime-time show on Fox News, he interviewed an extreme anti-immigration

North Carolina congressional candidate named Pete D'Abrosca. After the show, the conservative writer Jonah Goldberg, who disagreed with Carlson's anti-immigration stance but still considered him a friend, sent Carlson a text message alerting him to the fact that D'Abrosca was being strongly supported by Fuentes. In response, Carlson sent Goldberg a series of hostile texts professing ignorance and warning Goldberg not to make his criticism public.

After Carlson was fired from Fox News, in 2023, he often gave voice to incendiary views that were not substantively different from Fuentes's own—especially as they pertained to Israel and certain prominent Jewish figures. Carlson employed classic antisemitic tropes in attacking Ukraine's Jewish President, Volodymyr Zelensky, describing him as "ratlike" and a "persecutor of Christians." In the middle of the war in Gaza, Carlson accused Israel of "blowing up churches and killing Christians" and criticized the conservative commentator Ben Shapiro, an Orthodox Jew, and other pro-Israel Americans for being "focussed on a conflict in a foreign country as their own country becomes dangerously unstable." "I'm from here," Carlson said. "My family's been here hundreds of years. I plan to stay here. I'm shocked by how little they care about the country."

On his podcast, Carlson has twice interviewed Darryl Cooper, a Nazi apologist who has argued that concentration camps were a "humane" solution to widespread hunger during the Second World War—and whom Carlson introduced to his audience as "the best, most important popular historian working in the United States today." After Charlie Kirk's death, in September, far-right influencers promoted a conspiracy theory that, because Kirk's long-standing support for Israel was waning, the country had orchestrated Kirk's assassination. Carlson gave a eulogy at Kirk's memorial service in which he likened Kirk to Jesus and then implied that Jews had killed Jesus. "I can just sort of picture the scene in a lamplit room with a bunch of guys sitting around eating hummus thinking about, What do we do about this guy telling the truth about us?" Carlson said. "We must make him stop talking!"

Perhaps the feud between Carlson and Fuentes could be attributed to the narcissism of small differences. In any case, Carlson was losing. On social

media, he was getting pilloried by Fuentes's legions of fans, many of them alienated young conservatives who call themselves Groypers, in honor of an obese version of the Pepe the Frog meme. "Tucker's mask slipped," Fuentes gloated on his show, "and he forgot for a minute that for eight years he's been pretending to care about the plight of weird kids in their parents' basement who are broke."

Carlson has long possessed a finely tuned professional and political radar. In the early two-thousands, when he was a gifted young magazine writer, frequently contributing stories to publications like *New York* and *Esquire*, he realized that print journalism would no longer offer the same fame and power that it had once afforded his literary heroes, such as Hunter S. Thompson and Tom Wolfe. He abandoned print to work as a pundit on CNN. During the 2016 campaign, he revived his flagging cable-news career by being an early defender of Donald Trump's Presidential bid, recognizing that a populist candidate who campaigned on nativism, white grievance, and sexism might have a lane in the Republican primary; he was ultimately rewarded with his own prime-time show on Fox News. And in the two and a half years since he'd been fired from Fox he'd masterfully navigated the attention economy, starting his own media company and routinely drawing enough outrage (and eyeballs) that he reestablished himself as the most significant media figure on the American right. Now he had concluded that if he wanted to maintain that perch he could not afford to alienate the Groypers—and so he extended an olive branch to Fuentes, in the form of a podcast-interview request.

Fuentes was wary. Carlson can be a tough interviewer. In June, he hosted Senator Ted Cruz on his podcast and ridiculed him for not knowing the population of Iran, despite favoring regime change in that country, and for not being able to provide a specific citation for a Bible verse that Cruz invoked to justify his support of Israel. Fuentes feared a similar ambush. But the night before their interview, during dinner at Carlson's house in Maine, Carlson went over the topics that he wanted to discuss with Fuentes. The next day, their two-hour-plus conversation could not have been chummier. The pair revelled in their mutual contempt for Cruz, Shapiro, and the Fox News host Mark Levin; celebrated their shared identity as "American nationalists"; and commiserated about being deemed racist and

antisemitic. Carlson apologized to Fuentes for calling him gay, and they both acknowledged that neither of them was a Fed. Their biggest point of disagreement was whether all Jews were to blame for the U.S.’s misguided support for Israel, as Fuentes believed, or just some of them, as Carlson maintained. “It’s not fucking to say that you’re not talking about all Jews when you oppose a foreign-policy position,” Carlson said, noting that many “self-described Christians” have been “seized by this brain virus” of Zionism. Eventually, they appeared to reach a sort of consensus that “organized Jewry,” as Fuentes called it, was the problem.

Carlson’s sit-down with Fuentes fractured the conservative movement. In the days and weeks after the interview aired, prominent Republican politicians and conservative commentators lined up to denounce Carlson for giving Fuentes a platform. Shapiro called it an “act of moral imbecility.” Cruz, in a speech to the Republican Jewish Coalition, said, “If you sit there with someone who says Adolf Hitler was very, very cool, and that their mission is to combat and defeat global Jewry, and you say nothing, then you are a coward and you are complicit in that evil.” When Kevin Roberts, the president of the Heritage Foundation—which had advertised on Carlson’s podcast—released a video message attacking Carlson’s critics as a “venomous coalition” and “the globalist class,” Heritage staffers rose up in protest; five board members resigned. (Carlson, who did not participate in the reporting for this piece, said in an interview with Megyn Kelly that his critics can “buzz off.”)



“Sure! You can listen to whatever music you want now. But be careful—in a couple of years you’ll get stuck with it for the rest of your life.”

Cartoon by Guy Richards Smit

Carlson was not the first prominent conservative to have a close encounter with Fuentes. In 2022, two Republican House members, Paul Gosar, of Arizona, and Marjorie Taylor Greene, of Georgia, delivered speeches at Fuentes’s America First Political Action Conference, in Florida. More significantly, that same year, Trump dined with Fuentes after Ye, the artist formerly known as Kanye West, brought him as his guest to Mar-a-Lago. At the time, the outcry came mostly from liberals. Perhaps the conservatives who stayed silent when Trump met with Fuentes but lambasted Carlson for doing the same were simply picking an easier, more convenient target for their virtue signalling. But it’s also possible that the people who were more alarmed by Carlson’s dalliance with Fuentes concluded that Carlson was a bigger threat to the conservative movement than even Trump himself.

Carlson’s evolution from cable-news journeyman to conservative-movement leader began in the winter of 2009, when he received an unexpected phone call from the head of Fox News, Roger Ailes. Carlson, who had recently been fired from his job as a prime-time anchor on MSNBC, would later confess that, at the time, he was at a professional and

personal nadir. Four years earlier, when he was hired at MSNBC, he had moved his wife and their four kids from Washington, D.C., to the ritzy town of Madison, New Jersey, where he paid \$3.3 million for a nine-thousand-square-foot mansion and drove a Hummer. So, when MSNBC canned him, he didn't just lose his job; he lost his life style and his identity. "I looked around and I was, like, 'Oh, wow, I'm living this totally unsustainable life, and I'm not making any money,'" Carlson later recalled. "It was a pretty low-grade disaster. I didn't lose a limb in war or get paralyzed in a car accident. But for me, who'd grown up in a pretty privileged world, it was distressing and a shock."

Carlson sold the New Jersey mansion and returned with his family to Washington. Pulling into his driveway at night, he thought that he saw his neighbors averting their gaze. He couldn't shake the feeling, he said, that "everybody hated me." But the reality was actually worse: people didn't hate Carlson; they didn't think about him at all.

Ailes had never much cared for Carlson's preppy, fraternity-rush-chair shtick. His taste in cable-news hosts (male ones, that is) ran toward confrontational populists like Bill O'Reilly, who was then Fox's biggest star. Ailes also wasn't one to forget a slight. "I don't ignore anything," he once said. "Somebody gets in my face, I get in their face." He no doubt remembered all the nasty things that Carlson had said over the years, when he worked at CNN and MSNBC, about Fox ("a mean, sick group of people"), O'Reilly ("a humorless phony"), and Ailes himself ("sucking up to power"). According to an account of the phone call with Ailes, which Carlson later related to his former college roommate Neil Patel, Ailes began their conversation with a gratuitous insult. "You're a loser, and you screwed up your whole life," he said. It seemed as if Ailes just wanted to get in Carlson's face. But then, before Carlson could hang up, Ailes got to the point. "The only thing you have going for you is that I like hiring talented people who have screwed things up," he told Carlson, "because once I do you're going to work your ass off for me."

Ailes especially relished hiring broadcasters who had flamed out at other networks. (O'Reilly, who'd anchored the syndicated tabloid show "Inside Edition," had left television entirely and was studying for a master's degree

in public administration at Harvard when Ailes brought him to Fox.) “I look for people who haven’t reached their potential,” he said. “I think I’m pretty good at developing talent.” By resurrecting careers, Ailes was able to prove his own genius—that the audience he convened was so large and so loyal that Fox was capable of making almost anyone a star. “I could have put a dead raccoon on the air this year and got a better rating than last year,” he once boasted.

Ailes grew up in the blue-collar town of Warren, Ohio, where his father worked in a Packard Electric factory. Memories from his youth of seeing “college boys give my dad orders in the shop in an inappropriate manner,” he later said, were seared into his brain. No matter how much wealth and power Ailes accrued, he never lost the sense that he was an outsider in New York’s media élite. “They think I’m this rube from Ohio,” he complained of his peers in the city’s executive class. “They all look down their noses at me.” Counterintuitively, hiring Carlson—the son of a former U.S. Ambassador, whose stepmother was an heir to the Swanson frozen-food fortune—presented an opportunity to exact some revenge. “Roger liked the idea of Tucker coming to him on his hands and knees,” one former Fox executive said. “Roger took no small amount of pleasure in being able to tell Tucker Swanson McNear Carlson, ‘You’re a loser.’ ”

Ailes offered Carlson a contributor contract at Fox. It was the same type of deal that Carlson had received from CNN a decade earlier, when he was still a magazine writer and was just breaking into the cable-news business—five figures a year to appear on the network’s various programs when they needed to fill airtime with a talking head. It was quite a comedown, in both compensation and prestige, from having his own prime-time show. But, for Carlson, it was a lifeline. He was grateful for the money, even if it was a pittance compared with the salary that he’d earned as an anchor. And he was glad to still have a place, even a tenuous one, in television. “I’m doing whatever they want me to do,” he told the *Times* when his Fox deal was announced.

Carlson knew that he was low in the pecking order at Fox. Still, he had ambitions. His biggest was to become a regular on the so-called All-Star Panel on “Special Report,” Fox’s 6 P.M. political-news show, which was

broadcast out of the network's Washington studio and was considered Fox's most highbrow, cerebral program. But Ailes had other plans. "Roger loved kicking Tucker down the stairs and beating him up," the former Fox executive said. That meant not just denying Carlson the opportunities he craved but saddling him with obligations he hoped to avoid—like co-anchoring the weekend version of "Fox & Friends," which was less political and even more aggressively stupid than its weekday counterpart. "Roger's idea was to throw Tucker onto the worst thing: the weekend morning show," the former Fox executive said. "It's early. He has to go to New York. He has to drive go-karts. It was inconvenient and humiliating."

Outwardly, Carlson appeared to embrace the assignment, eventually becoming a full-time weekend anchor. He not only careened around the set in a go-kart; he participated in cooking segments with guests like Billy Ray Cyrus, played the cowbell with the seventies rock band Blue Öyster Cult, competed against (and lost to) his female co-anchor in a Spartan Race, and subjected himself to a dunk tank. Just as Ailes had predicted, he worked his ass off—and he did it with a smile. "He never acted too good for it," the former Fox executive said. "A lesser person would have said, 'I had two prime-time shows!'"

And yet, although Carlson might not have said it, he certainly thought it. He struggled with the "Fox & Friends" predawn call time, at one point dozing off while on air, and he hated being away from his family and his social circle in D.C. He tended to spend his weekends in New York alone, hunkered down in his hotel room tying flies and then walking a dozen blocks to Central Park to fish in one of its ponds.

One afternoon, while fly casting in Central Park, Carlson noticed a man with a video camera standing in some nearby bushes. Seeming to assume that he was a paparazzo or a liberal stalker, Carlson confronted him. "Are you videotaping me?" he demanded. The man confessed that he was—because he'd never seen anyone fishing in Central Park before. He explained that he recorded things that he found "interesting and unique about the city of New York" and then uploaded them to his YouTube channel.

As the man peppered Carlson with questions—“Where did you grow up?” “Do you live in New York now?”—it became clear that he wasn’t a paparazzo or a stalker. Indeed, the man had no idea who Carlson was. Charmed, Carlson proceeded to rhapsodize about fly-fishing.

They continued to talk, and the man told Carlson about his other pastime—pranking journalists. Now Carlson no longer seemed so happy about his anonymity.

“What’s your favorite cable channel?” he asked.

CNN, the man told him.

“Do you watch Fox?” Carlson pressed, perhaps hoping to kindle a spark of recognition.

“I watch Fox,” the man replied. But no, still not so much as a glimmer. Even to a self-professed cable-news junkie, Carlson was now just some random weirdo fishing in Central Park.

For most of his time at Fox News, Carlson was far removed from the decisions that were made—and the dramas that played out—on the second floor of the news channel’s Manhattan headquarters, where Ailes and his top lieutenants had their offices. On his trips to New York, he’d sometimes stop by to schmooze with Fox executives and remind them of his existence. “He seemed a little lost,” someone who encountered Carlson on one such visit remembered. And he was always seeking opportunities to demonstrate that he was aligned with the network’s biggest and most important projects. As Carlson half jokingly told a shock-jock radio host about Rupert Murdoch, “I’m a hundred per cent his bitch. Whatever Mr. Murdoch says, I do.” But these displays of loyalty didn’t seem to boost his standing inside the organization. Relegated to the frivolous afterthought of “Fox & Friends Weekend,” Carlson was on the outside looking in.

Until, that is, Trump’s first Presidential campaign. Carlson was by no means a fan of Trump’s. In 1999, when Carlson was still a magazine writer, he branded Trump “the single most repulsive person on the planet.” A few years later, after Carlson had become a cable-news host, he made a

throwaway joke about Trump's hair on CNN—and Trump responded with a short voice mail. "It's true you have better hair than I do," he said in the message. "But I get more pussy than you do." Carlson thought that the episode was funny; it maybe even made him like Trump a little bit. It didn't, however, make Carlson think that Trump was suited to be President.

But by 2016 Carlson's thinking had begun to evolve. Part of the change was a result of his usual contrarianism. "On my street in Northwest Washington, D.C., there's never been anyone as unpopular as Trump," he wrote in *Politico* during the campaign. "Idi Amin would get a warmer reception in our dog park." Carlson believed it was his long-established role in the city's political and media ecosystem to defy that consensus. But there was a deeper, more substantive reason for the shift in his attitude. Six years earlier, Carlson and Patel, who'd served as a chief policy adviser to Vice-President Dick Cheney, had launched the *Daily Caller*, a news website that they vowed would be the conservative answer to the *Huffington Post*; instead, in pursuit of clicks, the site found itself competing with *Breitbart News* to produce increasingly inflammatory takes on immigration, race, and gender. Carlson had immersed himself in the site's web-traffic metrics, which served as an early-warning system of where the conservative base was headed.



"Would you like to add premium coatings that are so invisible you'll never know if they're making a difference?"

Cartoon by Lynn Hsu

This insight made Carlson unusual at Fox. In 2014, Ivanka Trump had arranged a lunch with her father and Murdoch, according to the journalist Joshua Green's book "Devil's Bargain." "My father has something big to tell you," she announced at the lunch. "What's that?" Murdoch asked. "He's going to run for president," she replied. Murdoch did not even bother to look up from his soup. "He's not running for president," he said. Murdoch and Trump had been friendly for decades, and they travelled in some of the same New York social circles, but Murdoch did not take Trump seriously—not as a person, not as a businessman, and certainly not as a Presidential candidate.

Neither did the pundits at Murdoch's cable-news channel. "Even among conservatives at Fox, there was the view that Trump's an idiot, he's not a serious person, that there wasn't a chance of him winning," Ken LaCorte, a former Fox News executive, recalled. This posed a problem for Fox, especially since Ailes knew that covering Trump was good for ratings; to make for compelling television, the channel needed to put people on air who wouldn't simply dismiss Trump out of hand. "The project at Fox of trying to find normal-seeming, television-camera-ready human beings who would make a sensible case for Donald Trump was no small lift," a former Fox producer said.

Enter Carlson. Fox producers had taken notice of the heterodox views about Trump that he was offering on "Fox & Friends Weekend." Soon, he was appearing with increasing regularity on "Special Report," whose All-Star Panel had become something of a Never Trump redoubt. A few days after Trump officially announced his candidacy, Charles Krauthammer, the panel's most esteemed member, hailed Jeb Bush's official campaign announcement as "the biggest news" of the race. Carlson countered that Trump's entry would significantly complicate Bush's bid for the Republican nomination. Trump was "filling the role" of the candidate who "has his opinions," Carlson said. "Some of them are kind of interesting. Some of them are right, by the way. He can say exactly what he wants. I think it could potentially be a problem."

Going into 2016, Murdoch and Ailes believed that Fox had the power to pick the G.O.P.'s nominee. But as the campaign went on and Trump's hold

on the Republican primary electorate became clear, Murdoch and Ailes recognized that Trump had the power to topple Fox. Before long, O'Reilly, Sean Hannity, and even Megyn Kelly—who had famously clashed with Trump during the first G.O.P. debate—were boosting him on their shows. In September, two months before the general election, Hannity filmed a testimonial for Trump that was featured in a campaign video. Carlson never went that far, but Murdoch didn't forget his prescience. In the summer of 2016, after more than twenty women at Fox News alleged that Ailes had sexually harassed them, Murdoch forced Ailes to resign and took control of the news channel, appointing himself as its interim C.E.O. Murdoch sought to stabilize Fox but also to plot a course for its future—a future that, no matter what happened on Election Day, would have to take into account a viewing audience that had been deeply affected by, and was now extremely loyal to, Donald Trump. In November, five days before the election, Murdoch made his first big move: Fox News announced that its new 7 P.M. show was “Tucker Carlson Tonight.”

In the aftermath of the 2016 election, a small group of conservative intellectuals tried to reconcile their ideological movement with the man who now, improbably, sat atop it. They identified themselves as “national conservatives,” or NatCons. At think tanks like the Claremont Institute and in journals and on websites such as *American Greatness* and *The Federalist*, the NatCons tacked hard to the right on culture-war issues, denouncing critical race theory and drag-queen story hours while voicing a set of economic concerns more typically associated with the left, supporting child subsidies and industrial policy.

Depending on your point of view, NatCons were either attempting to add intellectual heft to Trumpism or trying to reverse engineer an intellectual doctrine to match Trump's lizard-brain populism. Either way, it was a difficult, frequently humiliating task. Trump proved to be a vexing ideological lodestar—aggressively anti-intellectual in his attitudes and consistently inconsistent in his views. Which is where Carlson came in. Each night on Fox, he articulated a populist-nationalist ideology that was far more coherent than anything being offered by Trump himself.

Carlson's world view, which was eventually described in much of the press as Trumpism without Trump, mixed anti-immigrant and oftentimes outright racist tropes with a clinical dissection of consumer capitalism and its deleterious effects on American families, the working class, and civic society in general. It was a highbrow version of white grievance which painted the country as imperilled by a callous ruling élite and the violent migrant hordes infiltrating its borders. Carlson, with his staple rep ties and Rolex, assumed the role of class traitor. The entire package was irresistible to NatCons, who began to view him, as much as Trump, as their standard-bearer.

Carlson's show specialized in finding relatively unknown liberals for him to slap down; it also excelled at taking stories, arguments, and conspiracy theories from the far-right corners of the internet and putting them in prime time. On one episode, Carlson would run a segment about Romanian immigrants (he referred to them less kindly) who had settled in a Pennsylvania town and who "defecate in public, chop the heads off chickens, leave trash everywhere, and more." On another night, he'd complain in his monologue that America's leaders insist that "we've got a moral obligation to admit the world's poor . . . even if it makes our own country poorer and dirtier and more divided." Just days after a racist white gunman killed twenty-three people in an attack on Hispanic shoppers at a Walmart in Texas, Carlson insisted that "white supremacy" was "actually not a real problem in America" and that it was, in fact, "a hoax." In the summer of 2018, Carlson devoted multiple segments to South African land-reform policy, falsely claiming that the country's Black-led government was seizing the farms of white South Africans because, according to him, "they are the wrong skin color." He went on, "That is literally the definition of racism. Racism is what our élites say they dislike most." (Seven years later, the plight of white South Africans became the core of the second Trump Administration's refugee-resettlement policy.)

In 2019, Carlson devoted an eleven-minute monologue to the woes of Sidney, Nebraska, which had once thrived as the headquarters of the sporting-goods chain Cabela's. After Cabela's merged with Bass Pro Shops, the headquarters was closed, costing a town of six thousand people more than two thousand jobs. The merger, Carlson explained, was done at the

behest of a hedge fund run by the billionaire Republican megadonor and Jewish philanthropist Paul Singer, which had taken an ownership stake in Cabela's and netted nearly ninety million dollars after the merger drove up the retailer's short-term share prices. This sort of "vulture capitalism," Carlson told his viewers, "bears no resemblance whatsoever to the capitalism we were promised in school. It creates nothing. It destroys entire cities. It couldn't be uglier or more destructive. So why is it still allowed in the United States? The short answer: because people like Paul Singer have tremendous influence over our political process."

Mike Enoch, a prominent white supremacist, shouted out Carlson's remarks about Singer on his podcast, "The Daily Shoah," noting that Carlson had begun the segment by describing how the notoriously antisemitic Henry Ford once raised the wages of his workers. "If you didn't catch the German-shepherd whistles where he praised Henry Ford and then went into a diatribe of a Jewish financier," Enoch said approvingly, "I don't know what universe you're existing in."

Blake Neff, the head writer at "Tucker Carlson Tonight," was responsible for many of the words that came out of Carlson's mouth. As he once boasted to Dartmouth's alumni magazine, "Anything he's reading off the teleprompter, the first draft was written by me." The anti-immigrant and racist sentiments that dominated the show came naturally to Neff. At the same time that Neff was writing for Carlson—first as a reporter at the *Daily Caller* and then as a staffer on "Tucker Carlson Tonight"—he was also writing posts on a racist and sexist message board called AutoAdmit. Posting under the username CharlesXII, the eighteenth-century Swedish warrior king who later became an icon for Swedish neo-Nazis, Neff joked about "foodie faggots" and proposed an "Urban business idea: He Didn't Do Muffin!," which would sell "Sandra Bland's Sugar-free Shortbreads!"—a reference to the twenty-eight-year-old Black woman who, in 2015, was taken into custody by a Texas state trooper after a traffic stop and was later found dead in her jail cell, becoming an early symbol of the Black Lives Matter movement.

Neff agreed with other AutoAdmit commenters who argued that Michael Brown deserved to be killed by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri,

complaining that “the violent criminals are even *MORE* heroic to Black people.” He claimed that the four liberal congresswomen known as the Squad—Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Ilhan Omar, Ayanna Pressley, and Rashida Tlaib—want to “*MAKE YOUR COUNTRY A DUMPING GROUND FOR PEOPLE FROM THIRD WORLD SHITHOLES.*” In another post, Neff warned that “once Democrats have the majorities to go full *F***K WHITEY*, things are going to get really wacky really quickly” and lamented that “there’s a suicidal impulse to Western peoples that honestly feels almost biological in origin.”

In July, 2020, after a CNN reporter discovered Neff’s AutoAdmit posts, Neff resigned from Fox News. (Years later, Neff, who went on to work as a producer on Charlie Kirk’s podcast, would maintain that he was “the least racist person on AutoAdmit,” noting that, unlike many of the site’s users, “I never posted the N-word.”) Carlson, for his part, said that he was unaware of the posts. “We don’t endorse those words,” he said. “They have no connection to this show.” But Neff’s AutoAdmit habit was not a secret to some people he worked with. At the *Daily Caller*, Neff bragged about his posts to at least one colleague. “He was really proud of his AutoAdmit persona,” a former *Caller* staffer remembered. And Neff’s connection to Carlson was not a secret on AutoAdmit, either. In 2017, when Scott Greer, who had been a colleague of Carlson’s and Neff’s at the *Daily Caller*, appeared on “Tucker Carlson Tonight” to promote his book “No Campus for White Men,” Neff dropped a favorite AutoAdmit catchphrase—“the sweet treats of scholarship”—into Carlson’s script introducing Greer. Neff’s fellow AutoAdmit members didn’t miss the Easter egg. “We maed [sic] it,” one wrote.

An analysis of the neo-Nazi website the *Daily Stormer* found that, between November, 2016, and November, 2018, Carlson was mentioned in two hundred and sixty-five of its articles, most of them featuring clips of his show, with titles like “Tucker *FILLS* Liberal Kike with *LEAD* for Demanding Gun Control” and “Tucker Carlson *FORCES* Fat Beamer Whore to *CHOKE* to *DEATH* on *GREASY TACOS.*” (Hannity, by comparison, was the subject of twenty-seven *Daily Stormer* articles during that period; Laura Ingraham, another of the network’s prime-time hosts, was the subject of four.) As one blog post on the site celebrated, “Tucker Carlson is basically

‘Daily Stormer: The Show.’ Other than the language used, he is covering all our talking points.”

On a Monday morning in April, 2023, Carlson was at his winter home in Florida, having just sent his producers the first draft of his monologue for that evening’s show—a lengthy attack on Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, whom Carlson liked to refer to as Sandy Cortez, invoking her high-school nickname—when he got a call from Fox News’ chief executive, Suzanne Scott. “We’re taking you off the air,” Scott told him. He was being fired. Scott offered him the opportunity to include his own statement in a press release that Fox would send out in fifteen minutes announcing his departure, a face-saving gesture that would make it seem like the decision was a mutual parting of ways. Carlson refused. If Fox was firing him, he wanted the world to know. When the phone call was over, he sent an e-mail to his staff—known inside Fox as the Tuckertroop—telling them the news.

In the days after Carlson’s firing, there was much speculation, both inside and outside of Fox, about the reasons behind it. Six days earlier, the network had settled a lawsuit with Dominion Voting Systems, which alleged that Fox News hosts, including Carlson, had knowingly aired false accusations that the company’s voting machines were used to change vote totals in the 2020 Presidential election. Some thought that Carlson’s dismissal had to do with offensive comments that were revealed during discovery, including a text message in which Carlson reportedly called Irena Briganti, the head of Fox News’ media-relations department, a “cunt.” Others wondered whether it could have been because of another lawsuit, brought by Abby Grossberg, a former head of booking on Carlson’s show, who accused him and the network of creating a hostile work environment. (Fox settled the suit for twelve million dollars.) Still others speculated that it had something to do with a potential lawsuit from Ray Epps, a January 6th protester from Arizona who was at the center of a conspiracy theory—amplified by Carlson—that Epps was a government provocateur placed in the crowd to spur an insurrection. In fact, a sympathetic profile of Epps had appeared on “60 Minutes” the night before Carlson’s firing. Perhaps Murdoch, who, at ninety-two, fit squarely in the CBS show’s viewer demographic, had seen it and got spooked. (Epps’s suit was eventually dismissed.)

Among Fox hosts and executives, stories circulated about a recent dinner Carlson had attended at Murdoch's California vineyard, with Murdoch and his then fiancée, Ann Lesley Smith, during which Smith, who believed that Carlson was "a messenger from God," treated him as such. A few days later, Murdoch cancelled his engagement to Smith. Now, the theory went, he was cancelling Carlson. For his part, Carlson later claimed that his firing was part of Fox's settlement with Dominion; as he told his biographer, Chadwick Moore, he believed that Murdoch had refused Dominion's demand to fork over a billion dollars, and got the plaintiffs to accept seven hundred and eighty-seven million dollars and his scalp instead. None of the explanations were especially satisfying.

In any case, Carlson did not have the luxury of perseverating on what befell him. The 2024 Presidential election was just eighteen months away. Carlson had assumed, with good reason, that "Tucker Carlson Tonight" would be a major player in that race. But now that he'd lost his Fox megaphone he'd have to come up with a new vehicle. Complicating matters, Fox was keeping him under contract through 2024, with the express intent of preventing him from hosting a show on another network. That meant he'd still be making the nearly twenty million dollars a year that Fox owed him, but he wouldn't be able to take his act to Newsmax or OANN.

Fortunately for Carlson, he had no shortage of other offers that didn't run afoul of Fox's noncompete clause. Just hours after his firing, Elon Musk—who, six months earlier, had bought Twitter and was reshaping the social-media platform into a Republican hub, rebranding it as X—called him to talk about a deal. So did Carlson's friend Omeed Malik, who runs 1789 Capital, a venture-capital firm that invests in conservative companies. "The world is his oyster," one person who was talking to Carlson as the offers came in said. "Many billionaires and others with deep pockets would be eager to fund a new venture." Carlson immediately began laying the groundwork for a digital-media company, the Tucker Carlson Network, securing Musk's help to boost Carlson's content on X and fifteen million dollars in seed money from Malik's firm and other investors. He became a frequent visitor to Doha, Dubai, and Riyadh—cities that he once derided as "chintzy" and "prefab"—where he developed relationships with other ultra-

wealthy individuals. (Carlson has said that his network has not received any Gulf money.)

Without Fox's built-in audience—not to mention the guardrails of a publicly traded media company—Carlson's new show plunged further into the fever swamps. On one episode, he hosted the notorious conspiracy theorist Alex Jones, who had been successfully sued by the families of Sandy Hook victims for claiming that the shooting was a hoax; Carlson told his viewers that Jones “is not a crazy person.” On another, he interviewed Larry Sinclair, an ex-con who, during the 2008 Presidential campaign, made a long since discredited claim that he had smoked crack and had sex with Barack Obama when Obama was a little-known state senator. For another episode, Carlson travelled to Romania to conduct a friendly two-and-a-half-hour interview with the misogynistic influencer Andrew Tate, who was under house arrest while awaiting trial for allegations of human trafficking and rape. Carlson had argued that Tate’s arrest was “obviously a setup” and the “definition of a human-rights violation” while repeatedly hailing him as a role model for young men. (Prosecutors in Britain eventually charged Tate with human trafficking, rape, and assault. He is also under investigation in the U.S. Tate has denied all wrongdoing.)



“I need a hat that says, ‘I have a legitimate reason for wearing a hat.’ ”
Cartoon by Liana Finck

But Carlson's continued prominence was largely tied to his proximity to Trump. At Fox, he had been one of the network's only stars who maintained a personal and professional distance from the President. Although he frequently parroted Trumpian talking points, Carlson tended to praise Trump's policies rather than the man himself. He didn't socialize with the President, and he sometimes even let Trump's phone calls go to voice mail. ("Tucker was the hot girl that didn't want to fuck him," one former White House official said.) Toward the end of Trump's first term, Carlson actually turned against the President. He criticized Trump on air for his handling of *COVID* and the Black Lives Matter protests; after January 6th, he described Trump in a text message to a Fox colleague as "a demonic force, a destroyer."

But, after leaving Fox, Carlson could no longer afford to keep Trump at bay. He needed Trump—and, as it turned out, Trump needed him. Their interests were especially aligned in their mutual disdain for Fox News. Trump had not forgiven Murdoch for trying to disappear him after January 6th—"We want to make Trump a non person," Murdoch wrote to a former Fox executive—and for using his network to try to boost Ron DeSantis's 2024 Presidential prospects. Trump accused Fox of having gone to the "dark side." And so when Fox executives began lobbying for Trump to appear at the first G.O.P. Presidential-primary debate, which the network was hosting, in August, 2023—knowing that, without Trump, ratings would suffer—Trump strung them along for months. All the while, he was talking to Carlson about some sort of counterprogramming. Eventually, Carlson and Trump settled on a pretaped interview that was posted on X at the same time that Fox News carried the debate.

Their collaboration continued for the rest of the campaign. Carlson helped persuade Trump to pick Vance as his running mate. At the Republican National Convention, in Milwaukee, Trump invited Carlson to sit in his private box on the first night and gave him a prime-time speaking slot on its final, most watched night. A week before the election, Carlson spoke at Trump's Madison Square Garden rally. And when Carlson launched his own sixteen-city tour, that fall, Trump made an appearance as the evening's "special guest" in Arizona.

After the 2024 election, Carlson wielded a shocking amount of power in Trump's Washington. He subscribed to the old Beltway dictum that "personnel is policy." In multiple postelection visits to Mar-a-Lago, and countless phone calls and texts, he vigorously weighed in on how he believed Trump should fill out his Cabinet and staff, pushing in particular for the appointments of Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., as Secretary of Health and Human Services and Tulsi Gabbard as the director of National Intelligence. One adviser to the President said, "Trump wanted Tucker's opinion, and Tucker didn't ever hesitate to offer it."

But there have been limits to Carlson's influence. Last summer, as Trump contemplated assisting Israel in its war against Iran, Carlson pleaded with him to keep the U.S. out of the conflict. An attack on Iran, he predicted in a lengthy post on X, would lead to thousands of American deaths, thirty-dollar-a-gallon gasoline, and the collapse of the U.S. economy; it would also, he said, be a "profound betrayal" of Trump's supporters, who voted for him in part because they viewed him as "a peace candidate." In the end, Carlson's protests were for naught. Trump authorized U.S. air strikes on three Iranian nuclear facilities, and dismissed Carlson as "kooky." "I don't know what Tucker Carlson is saying," Trump told reporters at one point. "Let him go get a television network and say it so that people listen."

Months later, when Carlson interviewed Fuentes, they both decided not to dwell on Trump's apostasy—instead choosing to praise him for creating what Fuentes called "this new dialectic" that allowed them and others to see the perfidy of Israel more clearly.

"Trump planted the seed," Fuentes said.

"And the seed was America First," Carlson replied. "So, once you accept that, a lot of the way we're doing things becomes impossible to support or justify."

"Right, the contradiction becomes apparent," Fuentes said. "It gets moved to the center, and it becomes unignorable if you're consistent."

Trump, for his part, appeared to appreciate their discretion. As Carlson was being denounced by various conservatives for sitting down with Fuentes,

the President defended him. “I think he’s good,” Trump said of Carlson while speaking to reporters on Air Force One. “You can’t tell him who to interview. I mean, if he wants to interview Nick Fuentes—I don’t know much about him. But if he wants to do it, get the word out, let him. People have to decide. Ultimately, people have to decide.”

Around the same time, as Trump threatened regime change against Nicolás Maduro, the authoritarian leader of Venezuela, Carlson again had critical words for the President’s foreign policy, but his focus was not on the risks of overseas entanglements or concerns about unchecked executive power. Removing Maduro, Carlson theorized, was a means for what he called “globo-homo” forces to reverse Venezuela’s ban on gay marriage, noting that “the U.S.-backed opposition leader”—María Corina Machado—“who would take Maduro’s place if he were taken out, is, of course, pretty eager to get gay marriage in Venezuela.”

But in January, after Trump sent in a team of Special Forces to seize Maduro and bring him to the U.S. to face drug-trafficking and other charges, Carlson offered qualified support for the military action. He hailed the Trump Administration’s decision to turn Venezuela over to Maduro’s Vice-President, Delcy Rodríguez—not because they love her,” Carlson explained, “but because they’re in favor of stability over chaos.” And he praised Trump for his candor in claiming U.S. control of Venezuela’s oil reserves, saying that “there’s something kind of thrilling about that.” Left unspoken was Carlson’s presumable relief that, even in Maduro’s absence, globo-homo forces do not appear to have established a beachhead in Caracas.

Thirty years ago, as a young magazine reporter, Carlson liked to make sport of Joseph Sobran, the conservative writer who’d been William F. Buckley, Jr.,’s protégé at *National Review* but, in the early nineteen-nineties, was fired from the magazine for his anti-Israel and antisemitic views. Carlson would joke that he’d run into a rambling, dishevelled Sobran at a suburban Denny’s, where he sat by himself in a booth, holding court before an audience of no one. It is tempting to think that Carlson has followed in Sobran’s ignominious footsteps, that he has suffered the same fate as the man he once ridiculed. Except Carlson is not sitting in an empty restaurant

booth. He has the ears of billionaires and heads of state. He is selling out basketball arenas and constantly streaming onto our phones. He has descended into madness, but he is speaking to millions. ♦

This is drawn from “[Hated by All the Right People: Tucker Carlson and the Unraveling of the Conservative Mind.](#)”

Jason Zengerle, a staff writer at The New Yorker covering politics, is the author of “[Hated by All the Right People: Tucker Carlson and the Unraveling of the Conservative Mind.](#)”

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Takes

- **Emily Nussbaum on Jane Kramer’s “Founding Cadre”**

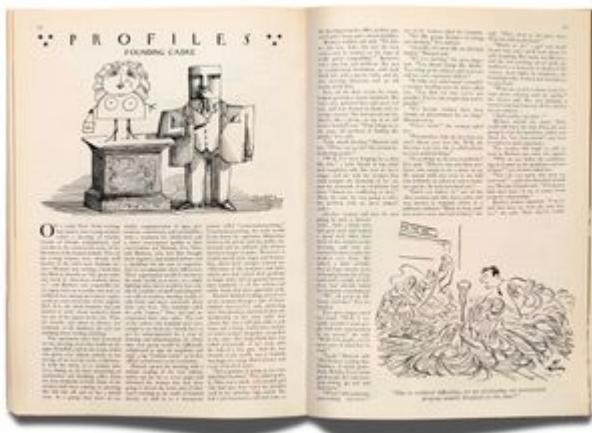
Her startling 1970 article, based on months of reporting on radical feminist pioneers, was an outlier for the period—coolly observational but full of emotion.

[Takes](#)

Emily Nussbaum on Jane Kramer's “Founding Cadre”

By [Emily Nussbaum](#)

January 25, 2026



November 28, 1970

[New Takes on the classics. Throughout our centennial year, we're revisiting notable works from the archive. Sign up to receive them directly in your inbox.](#)

In late 1969, Jane Kramer was back in Manhattan after a spell in Morocco with her husband, an anthropologist. In her absence, the sparks of second-wave feminism had ignited, in two forms: there were the liberals of NOW and also the radicals, whose colorful speak-outs were catnip to journalists. That fall, the *Village Voice* assigned the writer Vivian Gornick to skewer the “libbers,” but instead she wrote a rousing manifesto that ended with the mention of a new group—and a number to call if you wanted to join.

Kramer followed up, notebook in hand. *The New Yorker*, then led by William Shawn, was averse to polemical swashbuckling; it would never print a phone number as a kicker. But its writers could take their time.

Kramer embedded with the Stanton-Anthony Brigade, the “founding cadre” of a set of revolutionary cells devoted to consciousness-raising, or C.R. She sat in as members shared intimate stories, seeking patterns of oppression and strategizing methods of resistance; she watched sisterhood blossom, then break down. By the time her piece came out, a year after Gornick’s, the brigade had dissolved, but the movement was thriving.

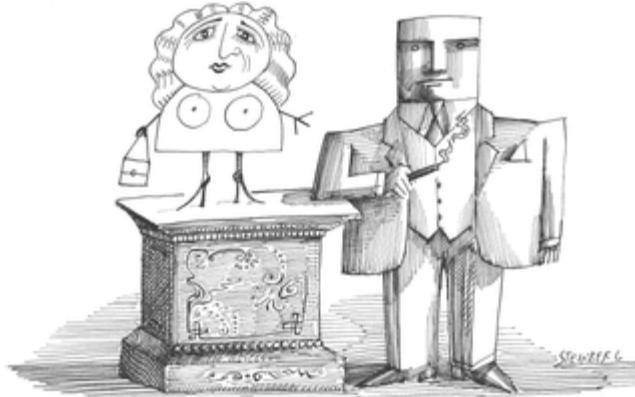
Kramer’s article, “Founding Cadre,” was an outlier for the period. It wasn’t a convert’s plea, like Gornick’s; or an insider’s dishy dispatch, like Susan Brownmiller’s movement roundup in the *Times*; or a bitingly confessional essay, like Sally Kempton’s “Cutting Loose,” in *Esquire*. But it wasn’t dismissive, either, like “The David Susskind Show.” Instead, it was icily observational, documenting the group’s rich, clashing perspectives in granular detail. There were pages of dialogue, as in a play, and long block quotes resembling monologues. The one thing the piece didn’t include was the women’s identities; the magazine concealed them with pseudonyms and radically altered identifying details. Even so, I could sort out who was who: “Hannah” was Shulamith Firestone, midway through writing “The Dialectic of Sex,” and “Barbara” was Anne Koedt, the author of “The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm”; the others were Celestine Ware (“Margaret”), Martha Gershun (“Beatrice”), Diane Crothers (“Nina”), Minda Bikman (“Eve”), and Ann Snitow (“Jessica”).

Kramer’s piece is barely mentioned in histories of the era, and when I stumbled on it I was astonished: it was baggy, almost exhausting, at thirty thousand words, but full of wild spikes of insight and emotion. Like the recent play “Liberation,” it replicated the feeling of being inside a C.R. group, a sensation both grand and claustrophobic. In a typical scene, the cadre met in an East Village walkup and slid from idea to idea, lambasting romance novels, sharing awful tales of marital violence, then musing over who was “male-identifying”—aggressive, careerist. Freud and Marx came up; so did class and race. (Ware was the brigade’s sole Black member, but her race wasn’t mentioned, and, after hosting the first meeting, she quit to write a book.) Tenderness and cruelty overlapped. You can tell whom Kramer liked best.

In 1996, Kramer published a follow-up essay, “The Invisible Woman,” for a special issue on feminism commissioned by Tina Brown, the magazine’s editor at the time. The piece began with a mea culpa. In 1970, Kramer wrote, she had been deeply unsettled by her time in Morocco, where she’d seen a thirteen-year-old girl forcibly married off. She patronized the cadre’s radicals, pitying their singlehood and instability; newly pregnant, she was defensive, afraid that they viewed her as “a dreary housewife in flashy feminist clothes.” The pseudonyms hadn’t been her subjects’ idea, or her own: under Shawn, radical feminism had been viewed as akin to “an odd smell or a kinky preference—something too intimate, too embarrassing, to identify and expose.”

Even so, Kramer defended her methods: she’d let the women speak for themselves, in voices that proved powerful and prescient. Like Gornick, she was a convert. Five decades have only intensified the odd power of “Founding Cadre,” which captures, in its cool frame, the warm sound of women struggling, collectively, to create a revolution. “The Invisible Woman” now feels sadder, given its rosy ending—a celebration of Kramer’s daughter’s generation, which felt secure in the “sweet illusion” of the movement’s triumph. Kramer wrote, “It is hard, as a mother, not to want to see them keep that illusion for just a little longer.” ♦

[Read the original story.](#)



[Founding Cadre](#)

[Emily Nussbaum](#), a staff writer at *The New Yorker* since 2011, is the magazine’s theatre critic. Her books include “[Cue The Sun!: The Invention of Reality TV](#).”

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Shouts & Murmurs

- **Diagnosis: Wellness Guru**

Infection can occur while browsing lymphatic rompers on Goop. Left untreated, you may end up making your own laundry detergent.

[**Shouts & Murmurs**](#)

Diagnosis: Wellness Guru

By [Alyssa Brandt](#)

January 26, 2026

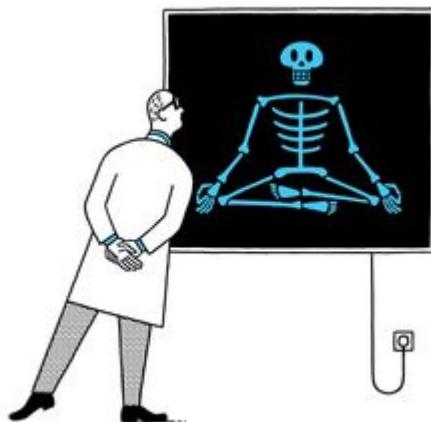


Illustration by Luci Gutiérrez

Thank you for coming in today. I've got your test results back, and I'm afraid the news is not good. You've been diagnosed with a severe case of Wellness Guru.

If you'd come in at the first sign of symptoms—a Dry January, say, or a prolonged cleanse, or some light at-home facial microneedling—we might have been able to consider less radical options. But I see in your chart that things have advanced to morning fasts and eating a sensible dinner from left to right.

Are you taking daily shots of apple-cider vinegar? That's considered fairly low on Glieg's Fermentation Dependence Scale, but we'll need to keep an eye on usage. Are you washing your hair with it? Your face? Your feet? Have things progressed to the point of having regular kombucha or kvass infusions? If so, let's get you scheduled for additional lab panels. I'm also going to refer you to a specialist I know uptown so that we can get an

appropriate gauge of where you are on Traub's Hierarchy of Wellness: Questioning, Sampling, Adopting, Proselytizing, or Annoying.

Typical onset of Wellness Guru happens after spending an extended period of time in infested waters, like social media. Infection can also occur while journaling or browsing lymphatic rompers on Goop. It usually starts with one small, innocuous-seeming tip or life hack, like staying hydrated or getting eight hours of sleep. That's all it takes for Wellness Guru to worm its way into your system.

Left untreated, Wellness Guru will grow rapidly. Early symptoms include bypassing ultra-processed foods, like those yummy-looking pumpkin-spice doughnut holes which someone left on the counter at work, or throwing out that drugstore mascara which was only \$4.99—but, wow, did it lengthen without clumping! Late-stage symptoms include making your own laundry detergent, fear of nonorganic fruits, or swapping coffee for fungi powder and pulverized twigs. Do you consider yourself to be living a clean and intentional life? This could be a sign of early-onset supplement psychosis. If so, I recommend immediate hospitalization so that we can get you on an I.V. drip of orange soda and start you on a diet of soft slices of white bread.

Studies show that Wellness Guru is notoriously hard to extract once it has taken root. Mindfulness is not a cure. This practice just makes matters worse. Focussing on your Wellness Guru only gives it more power. Surgery has a low success rate because of how quickly Wellness Guru metastasizes throughout your mind, gut, and chakras.

Believe it or not, there are some highly effective home remedies. Try eating a handful of Takis over the sink when you get home. Maybe two handfuls. Or plucking Tater Tots straight off the baking sheet and then wiping your hands on your pants. You could also try calling your insurance company again about why it's denying coverage for that tooth you broke on a clam at that raw bar in Puerto Vallarta while vacationing with your in-laws last year. Some patients have successfully shrunk their Wellness Gurus by responding to e-mail messages from their mothers asking for "help with something on the computer." Renewing your driver's license at the D.M.V. is also known to help diminish a deeply embedded Wellness Guru.

We see a big uptick in Wellness Guru cases this time of year. Know that you've taken an important first step simply by recognizing the problem and seeking help. Before you go, I'm going to call in a prescription for an extra-large tub of buttered popcorn and a ticket to whichever "Final Destination" is playing. Is AMC Lincoln Square still your preferred location to fill this? For maximum effectiveness, be sure to take them both on a sunny day. ♦

Alyssa Brandt has contributed humor writing to The New Yorker since 2023.

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Fiction

- **The Quiet House**

What was the point of keeping all those secrets? Wasn't your story wasted if nobody knew it?

Fiction

The Quiet House

By [Tessa Hadley](#)

January 25, 2026



Illustration by Martha Verschaffel

Geraldine woke out of busy dreams into the calms and shallows of old age. There were two skylights in her attic bedroom, and when she opened her eyes she saw clouds floating past, slow and stately against a pale sky; the angular under-shape of a gull's flight was printed for a moment, soundless beyond the glass. She was alone in the absolutely quiet house: she was used to this and it mostly felt like freedom, after the long years of her marriage. In her dreams, however, she had been plunged back into the thick of things —noisy crowds of people, children, movement, a train journey, talk, pleasure, sociable effort. She'd dreamed that Mattie Szymanski came to visit her on a bicycle and was still young, with his curly brown hair and a thick beard, which wasn't attractive now but used to be. She'd known in her dream that in reality Mattie was long dead—he'd died in his forties, by which time he'd lost most of his hair—but she wasn't sure whether he knew it, and this made their encounter especially numinous and poignant. He had called in at some house that must have been her house, and wanted to show her a novel he'd written, a typed carbon copy on thin paper. She was trying to put this novel back into its manila folder but the pages kept slipping and getting out of order, she couldn't keep them together. As far as she knew, in real life Mattie had never written a novel or anything much, apart from his unfinished thesis on Hardy's tragic heroes.

There was a time when, if Mattie Szymanski came into a room, everyone looked at him. The men wanted to be his rivals or his disciples and the women were in love with him—at least Geraldine was, and so was her best friend, Jane. They were undergraduates then, in the early seventies, and Mattie was a graduate student; they were in awe of him because he had read everything, knew everything. It seemed to Geraldine and Jane in those days that women were fatally flawed. Men were capable of being absorbed in thought and ideas purely, for their own sake, whereas women were always inauthentic, always conscious of themselves thinking. They couldn't help viewing their ideas as an adjunct to their looks or their personality. While the men were holding forth to one another on Thomas Mann or Molière or Schopenhauer, the women were drowning in their awareness of the particulars of the scene in all its detail: the lighting and the mood, their own bodies and their clothes, the strands of power and connection flowing around the room. They were absorbed in the mystique of the men's physical selves, of which the men themselves seemed unaware: a tightened crease

beside a mouth, a shadow in a cheek's hollow, eyes dropped to the papers and lump of resin and rolling tobacco on an LP cover, thick, sensitive, nicotine-stained fingers. Men had this easy, unconscious grandeur, because they didn't know themselves. The girls longed to divert some of that rapt serious attention their way, to channel it and feel its force.

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

Mattie was tall and burly with a craggy face and an appealing awkward diffidence, bashful long lashes, a sweet quick grin, a slightly ponderous sense of humor; he was opinionated and original and eager, an enthusiast. Also he was Polish, or his parents were; they had got out in '51, when Mattie was just a baby, so he had no memory of the place. Nonetheless, some romance of Poland stuck to him and made him seem cut out on a larger scale than the rest of them. His father had been in the Communist Party before the war and then turned against it because, in addition to all the obvious things, it was narrow and tedious. So Mattie was skeptical about Marxism at a time when it still had a lot of glamour for some of his fellow-students, even if they weren't mad about the Soviet system. He was wary of their keenness for some kind of revolutionary sweeping away of the decadence and corruptions of the West. His world view seemed larger than theirs, less parochial; this was one of the reasons that he never quite fitted in at the university. He laughed at the place and was impatient with its stuffiness, yet made himself happily at home there. He was good at being happy, and his hearty appetites made the other students' rebelliousness seem jejune and callow. There were so many things to learn from him.

Geraldine phoned Jane, to tell her about the dream. They lived, in their seventies, only a few streets away from each other in Bristol—where Geraldine had spent most of her adult life—and they often talked and visited. When Jane retired and she and her husband sold their London house, in order to give money to their children, Bristol had seemed as sensible a place to move to as anywhere.

“Was his novel any good?” Jane asked.

“I've no idea. You can't read things in dreams. And surely can't make critical judgments. I mean, when you're effectively unconscious . . .”

“I’m always reading things in dreams and thinking they’re rubbish.”

“I was too busy fumbling with the pages anyway, trying to put it back in its folder. And I wasn’t really interested in the novel. The whole encounter was too amazing. I was so overwhelmed at being with Mattie again, after all these years. I’d forgotten him really, and then suddenly he was back, as if he’d never gone. He radiated this heat of life—it was intoxicating.”

“This is Mattie Szymanski we’re talking about? Mattie who fucked up and never did anything?”

“But it wasn’t the man he became later. It was the one we loved then, in the old days, don’t you remember?”

They hadn’t spoken about Mattie or even thought about him much for a long time, probably not for years; now Jane seemed to be distancing herself from their shared memories of him. Recently, she’d taken to shamelessly denying things from the past which they both knew were true. It wasn’t senility: Geraldine knew that Jane was perfectly aware of what had actually happened—or at least as aware as anyone could be, when it came to penetrating the opaque past. It was more like a game that Jane played to entertain herself, Geraldine thought, because she was bored now that she was retired. No doubt Jane felt that shedding some of the things you’d been and done and believed was one of the conveniences of growing older. She’d gaze at Geraldine frankly, to challenge her, her blue eyes still large and forthright: it was funny, Jane’s deadpan stare. *Nothing happened at that party with the Persians in the hills above Florence. I don’t even remember a party.*

Podcast: The Writer’s Voice

[Listen to Tessa Hadley read “The Quiet House.”](#)

Jane Rawlings, née Piggott, was handsome and big-boned, with a broad, benign, wholesome face and a thick swatch of gray-white hair pinned up behind; she looked patrician, which had been useful at university, although her mother was a school dinner lady and her dad an electrician in a colliery. Her tall hauteur was piquant in combination with her soft Derbyshire accent. Jane and Geraldine had knocked around Europe together for a while

after they finished their degrees, sleeping on beaches or in convent hostels, soaking up other shapes of life, looking at art, learning that how they'd been brought up was not the only way, drinking real coffee for the first time, feeling that anything was possible. In those days, Jane was skinny and leggy and teasing and fearless, with the same quizzical open gaze as now, her straw-blond hair cut short. Geraldine, whose parents were both schoolteachers, was smaller and plumper and less obviously English, more sardonic. In photos from that time—there were only two or three, saved from the past by accident—they're Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, and Sancho's eyes are black as pits, painted thickly with mascara and kohl. They'd lived for a few months near Nice, in a caravan with two men who sold drugs and forged the signatures on stolen travellers' checks. Then they came back to England and both eventually got married. Jane joined the Civil Service, ended up in a senior position in the Cabinet Office. Geraldine's career had been more haphazard; she'd knocked around doing all kinds of jobs and ended up teaching adult literacy.

During the time of their youthful adventures, and although they proclaimed themselves feminists, they still more or less thought all those things about the inauthenticity of women. They didn't so much think them with their conscious minds: the sensation of secondariness was built into the very texture of their imagination and their desires. They supplied to every adventure some invisible observer, male, to fulfill it and make it real. And yet the girls also took for granted, with contemptuous confidence, their right to travel alone and wear shorts and sleeveless tops if they wanted to, while girls their age in Italy and Greece were kept chastely at home. They learned how to say foul things in other languages, in order to put off the boys and men in those countries who followed them and propositioned them, pleading with them so insistently and cravenly—"like dogs," Jane said. They saw the recoil and disgust on the boys' faces, at hearing those words from a girl's mouth.

They had both been in love with Mattie when they left England, though they might easily have fallen for someone else among the other travellers they met, if Mattie hadn't come to join them at the end of the summer. Arrangements in those days, before mobile phones, were more precarious and therefore more significant. They'd called him at his parents' house, and

it had seemed so improbable, as they dialled from a noisy public pay phone in one of those Italian post offices built with creamy marble to look like palaces, that they could ever be connected, across such long and winding distances, to somewhere in Clapham. But they were, first to Mattie's mother's thick, intolerant accent and then to genial Mattie himself, who made it sound as if agreeing to meet them on a certain day at a certain campsite outside Naples were the easiest thing in the world. Neither of them had slept with him at that point; they had just been hangers-on in Mattie's crowd, insignificant among the more glamorous girls. And although, before they left, he'd spoken vaguely about joining them, they'd never truly imagined that he would come; they hardly dared to imagine he'd even remember them.

Everything was less frightening with Mattie there. They hadn't known how frightened they were until he relieved them of so many burdens, with his grownup competence and worldly know-how and sheer manly bulk: helping them with their packs, scaring off predators, reassuring shopkeepers and ticket inspectors. He knew his way around everywhere; he knew the necessary words in all the languages; he knew how to interpret things and what to think; he knew all about the artists whose names they were only beginning to learn; he showed them how to look. This was real: in front of the Tintorettos in San Rocco in Venice he spoke in such a way that paintings of the Crucifixion and the Nativity and the lonely Magdalen came to life, seemed urgent and magnificent and contemporary. They never forgot this.

And at night they managed somehow to sleep all three in Jane's little tent, with their sleeping bags zipped together. The girls had assumed that Mattie would bring his own tent; when they saw that he hadn't they were breathless with excitement and anxiety. How would they arrange things? Mattie dealt with it all very calmly; he simply took it for granted that he would make love to both of them, each one in turn or both at the same time.

Geraldine and Jane met for coffee the day after Geraldine's dream, at a place they liked at the end of Jane's road. It was busy but they found a table for two by a steamed-up window, enjoying the ritual of unpeeling coats and scarves, stowing bags, settling in for an expansive talk. Each was pleased with the other for still looking capable and smart and interesting, not

showing any signs yet of dottiness or disintegration. Jane ordered a black coffee, Geraldine a turmeric latte with oat milk; she always felt, when she was with Jane, that her preferences were an unnecessary fuss. “You’re so up-to-the-minute,” Jane commented. “I suppose all the young people are drinking that.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I just like it.”

Jane peered at the cup dubiously. “Are you sure?”

They discussed their children and grandchildren for some time, with intense interest. For years, the two families had gone on holiday together, and their children were like cousins; each tribe had its critique, too, of the other.

There were problems with Jane’s eldest daughter, who was struggling with her babies, and with Geraldine’s middle son, who was getting divorced: their talk wound sympathetically and more or less tactfully around these issues, delving deep into the children’s characters and situations. It was impossible to tell who was the more powerful in the friendship. Jane was naturally bossy, and her pointed irony and economical phrasing were the habits of a lifetime. But Geraldine had never wholly submitted to her friend’s forceful influence, which was probably why they’d stayed close across so many decades. Geraldine had guarded her interior life fiercely, even through her years of mothering and a difficult marriage. She couldn’t have given herself over to a life like Jane’s, in the bright blunting light of public affairs.

“So you dreamed about old Mattie,” Jane said. “I never think about him.”

“He was important in our lives, though.”

“We had a crush on him,” Jane said. “You were an awful flirt in those days. From my perspective now it all seems so remote—I can hardly remember him. I can hardly remember the past. Only a few things stand out.”

“I don’t believe you.”

Geraldine thought that Jane liked to protect herself, pretending to be invulnerable.

“When you’re having those experiences,” Jane said, “you think it’ll all matter so much later on, when you’re older. You imagine yourself reading old letters, looking at photographs, reminiscing with wistful tears, that sort of thing. But the truth is that you leave most of it behind you. The present is paramount. It’s always everything.”

“Isn’t there some tragic kind of brain damage where you can only live in the present moment?”

“Obviously I don’t mean that. But those old stories diminish and don’t matter anymore. It’s shocking, really. We believe we can keep everything and make it all add up.”

Geraldine considered this carefully. “Some of the stories matter to me.”

“You have too much time to think. You need distraction.”

“Things from the past, which I thought were tidied away, swell into new significance in old age.”

“You talk as if we’re ancient. We’re not that far gone yet.”

“I see things in their right proportions, now that they’re so far in the past. They’ve become grand and moving. Mythic.”



Cartoon by Roland High

“You’ll have to come to dinner. I’ll get Felix to cook his fish soup.”

Jane’s husband was a gardener and an amateur cellist. Everyone liked Felix, a subtle, gentle man. He’d been the children’s primary carer, back in the days when that was radical.

“Felix is pleased with the new viola player in his quartet.” Jane reflected.
“Perhaps I’ll invite him, too. His wife died.”

“Stop trying to pair me off,” Geraldine complained.

But she didn’t really mind. She thought it was funny—they both did.

Sex in that tent with Mattie, in the nineteen-seventies, wasn’t altogether satisfactory, confined inside a wedge of orange canvas, which was either brilliantly luminous or invisible, baking or soaking, depending on the time of day and the weather. If it was soaking you tried not to brush against it, because that made the rain run in. Sometimes the heat of other bodies was almost intolerable, and they were slick with sweat; sometimes they were grateful for it, snuggling up for warmth. At night in the dark, in the midst of their shifting, murmuring, groaning, and mostly wordless rearrangements of limbs and positions, they were sometimes unsure whose body it was, whose

leg, the pressure of whose weight. Of course Mattie was more hairy, and the girls were softer. There was a lot of exquisite touching, which often painfully didn't come to anything—at least not for the girls. Although they had both slept with quite a few people by then, they weren't very skilled at it yet, not confident at getting what they wanted. Perhaps Jane was more so than Geraldine. The intimacy with Mattie ought to have been an extraordinary fulfillment, but that hung somewhere just out of reach; mysteries that should have been unveiled stayed hidden. The object of their longing was pressed as close to them—to both of them—as was humanly possible, and yet the secret of him slipped away. They'd imagined that, in such intimate exchanges with Mattie, they would possess part of him. Or they'd imagined that they'd be seen by him, finally, and explained to themselves. Instead, Geraldine lay in the tent all day once, weeping, while the other two went off to see the Masaccios in the Brancacci Chapel.

At least the girls were on the pill. Mattie had assured himself of that before he began, responsible and sensible. He was almost too responsible and sensible. Although he loved D. H. Lawrence as much as they did, his cheerful enjoyment of their arrangement in the tent wasn't quite what the girls wanted. It seemed too casual, or absent-minded, as if sex were just a part of the ordinary huge pleasure he took in everything: in a plate of spaghetti or a bottle of wine or the frescoes in an old church.

Jane wore a silk scarf and a black velvet jacket to their book group, very retired civil servant; Geraldine had slimmed down with age and went for a more boho style, with beads and drapey tops. Jane could have looked dull but instead was somehow weighty and impressive, a crisp critical awareness alert in her big bland face; she was merciless when it came to discussing the books. Geraldine was sure she'd never seen the black jacket before. Since she retired, Jane seemed to be spending an extravagant amount on clothes, although she denied it flatly. *I've had this old thing for years.* She and Felix had plenty of money, anyhow: he'd inherited from wealthy parents. And he'd have encouraged his wife to treat herself—although probably she fibbed to him, too, out of sheer perversity.

The book group had degenerated somewhat, Jane and Geraldine both thought, into a kind of dining club, each member feeling obligated to put on

a spread of delicious Ottolenghi-type dishes when it was their turn to host. Discussion of the books was too perfunctory; the two friends' ideal would have been more like a seminar. They brought their books marked up and bristling with torn slips of paper, and were disappointed when they were hardly opened. Both of them devoured fiction: Jane, a history graduate, was susceptible to a serious theme and anything in translation, whereas Geraldine, who'd done English literature, insisted she cared only about the sentences. Life was hard, she said. Thank God for sentences.

After the book-group meal, the two of them slipped into the garden in the dark, so that Jane could indulge another of her vices, smoking her little rollies in black licorice paper: she claimed improbably that Felix knew nothing about these. It was October and had just rained; the lawn was sodden underfoot, and their sleeves were soaked from brushing the evergreens strung with raindrops. Rank smells flooded from the vegetation, and the clean dry smoke of the rollie curled around them pleasantly. It was somehow moving to observe, through the lit windows of the room behind them, the animated company they'd left: five women and two men around the table, with its despoiled and emptied dishes, crumpled colored napkins, half-drunk glasses. By now, the talk was off the book and onto politics, faces were sad and serious; these were good people. One of the women worked for the Refugee Council; one was a Green activist.

"Ever since I had that dream," Geraldine said, "Mattie Szymanski's haunted me. His actual aura, as if he were present close by. I can smell his sort of woolly smell—wood smoke and tobacco and wet jumper. So comforting: as if he'd put his arms around me."

She was risking something by confessing this, and she sensed Jane wanting to say, *For goodness sake*, but refraining. Which meant that she felt sorry for Geraldine, who was pitifully single and susceptible. But Geraldine wasn't really pitiful, and didn't care as much as she used to what anyone thought of her, or if they saw through to her susceptibilities. What was the point of keeping all those secrets? Wasn't your story wasted if nobody knew it?

"Don't you think," she went on, "that in the old days men were, in some sense, what we made them? They became heroically intellectual because we

thought they were. Just as women became the dreamy spiritual creatures that men wanted them to be. To some extent. I know that irony undercuts all that, exposes the reality. But, to some extent, those characters became reality because we imagined them.”

Turning her head to blow out smoke, Jane seemed to reflect on this, a pinpoint of thought in her face, pale in the reflected light from the windows. “Did you know I saw him once in a shoe shop?”

Geraldine felt a familiar mild annoyance at her friend’s evasion, how she deflected earnestness. “I suppose that even heroes have to buy shoes.”

“He wasn’t buying them,” Jane explained. “He was selling them. It was in a dreary shoe shop around the corner from where we lived in Fulham; he must have got a job there. I had the children by then and I used to take them in to get their feet measured, but on this occasion it was just me. I was in a hurry—I needed shoes for an interview for a promotion or something. And Mattie didn’t recognize me. I mean, really! But I suppose this was when he was back from travelling and in a bad way—his mind was wiped, his mother was looking after him. And there he was kneeling at my feet—where I’d always wanted him, in fact—and pulling these cheap black shoes out of the box, where they were wrapped in tissue paper in an effort to make them look like something special. He was an absolutely hopeless salesman, as you can imagine. He’d brought me the wrong size and was trying to force my foot into one of them, forgetting there was even a human being on the other end of it. So there I was, like one of the ugly sisters in Cinderella, feeling I ought to be cutting off my own toes, staring down into a bald patch in the middle of his curls. They’d made him tie his hair back in a ponytail for work. I wanted to say something tender and significant, like, ‘Mattie, don’t you remember the night of that full moon in Sorrento?’ But I didn’t really have the time, I needed to get out of there, I had my life to get on with. I told him the shoes weren’t quite what I had wanted. I don’t think he lasted long as a shoe salesman. The next time I went in he wasn’t there.”

“Perhaps he did recognize you and he was embarrassed.”

“We’ll never know.”

“I’d love to talk to him again, though,” Geraldine mused. “He had a big mind, and a big conception of life. He’d have some interesting way to look at the horrible things that are going on now.”

Mattie had fucked up. He’d stayed away too long. He and the girls had parted ways, for reasons they couldn’t clearly remember afterward; probably he found them too young and too clingy, and wanted to forge forward unencumbered. Geraldine’s weeping in the tent might have had something to do with it. Things weren’t always joyous, in that time they spent with Mattie; sometimes on a damp day, when he was tired of them, he was hangdog and glum and tetchy. After they parted, the girls got entangled with those bad men in the caravan, as if to prove that they weren’t afraid of getting into deeper water, although they should have been. Then they went home to look for jobs, and work out what they were going to be. But Mattie bummed around southern Europe for years. He decided that bringing in the grape harvest in France, or working on a fishing boat off the Greek islands, was more real than life in a university and his thesis on Hardy, and perhaps it was. Every so often he sent Jane or Geraldine a postcard. Then his father died suddenly, from a coronary, but Mattie stayed abroad, drinking too much. He had definitely always, when the girls thought about it, had a bit of a thing about his father. It was hard for any son to live up to a man who’d fought in the Warsaw Uprising.

When the postcards dried up, the girls had news of Mattie intermittently, from friends of friends: he’d got into drugs and into trouble, spent time in hospital and then in a Spanish prison. He came home eventually in quite a state, to be nursed more or less back to health by his mother, who resented it.

“Oh, well, it was a life,” Geraldine said. “We all fuck up in our different ways.”

It was odd that Jane hadn’t told her before, about the shoe shop. Geraldine had met up with Mattie, too, once or twice, after he got back—at a later date than the shoe shop presumably, because by then he had a perfectly decent job, working for the Central Office of Information in Waterloo, putting out warnings on television about food hygiene and “stranger danger.” He was nice after his return but definitely chastened and less

ebullient: it wasn't like the days when you used to believe, for as long as you were with him, that you were at the center of something. His studio flat was dingy and poky and too full with all his books, which his mother refused to keep for him any longer. Even so, Geraldine might have sought him out more often, because she was still a little bit in love with him, and because she was on and off at that time in her marriage. But then Mattie himself got married, to a meek, dumpy little woman who made it clear that she didn't want Geraldine hanging about—unsurprisingly perhaps, if she knew what had gone on in the tent.

And then Mattie died, in a stupid accident that could have happened to anyone—falling off a ladder while he was fixing a TV aerial on a roof. Geraldine and Jane had both lost touch with him by the time this happened. He'd moved with his wife and their baby up north somewhere. The news took a while to get back to his friends from the old days.

Geraldine walked over to Felix and Jane's for fish soup, through long autumn shadows in the park, haze rising like smoke from the grass, illuminated by the low sun. Their house, on an expensive, smart street, was surprisingly chaotic inside, with an ugly leather sofa pushed back against the fireplace and broken Venetian blinds across the windows. The dining table had been cleared of its papers and laptop and vase of dead greenery in murky water: all these were now on the floor. Jane was always too busy to bother with her surroundings, and Felix had his mind on higher things; their mess thrilled and exasperated Geraldine, whose own home was a succession of inviting arty spaces, lovingly tended and pristine. The soup and the wine were good, though, and Ivor, the viola player, was small and shy, with a shock of flossy white hair. He looked faintly panicked, but he knew a lot about music, thinking carefully before he spoke and making nuanced discriminations: this pianist rather than that one, the E-flat trio rather than the B-flat. Felix attended to him conscientiously.

"Jane and I have been friends forever," Geraldine explained.

"Oh, yes, we literally met back in the Stone Age," Jane confirmed. "We shared a tent when we went travelling."

"In the Stone Age. It was woven out of animal hides or something."

The women chattered away—book-club book, mortality, bumper harvest in the allotment, social media, America—and the men smiled at them, bemused or fond. It was a nice evening; they all enjoyed themselves. Geraldine felt tenderly toward their old ruined faces around the table, pouchy and sagging and blotched with experience; the viola player, with his fine black eyes and waxy thin skin, stretched over the bones of his face, made her think of some aged genius composer from the nineteenth century. And she liked going out to socialize on her own, without the worry of whether her husband was going to hate it, or offend somebody. Terry had been difficult, a Trotskyite would-be playwright, charismatic when he was young. She'd been besotted with him in the beginning, and had taken on all his opinions as her own. He and Jane used to have the most terrible arguments while Geraldine cried in the bathroom; he wanted to despise Jane as part of the bourgeois establishment, but her origins were as working class as his, and she was cleverer. Then, when Terry was ill, Jane was so kind to him, cheering him up with her boisterous camaraderie.

When Geraldine and Jane first got back from their time in Europe, and Jane was starting out on her career, they drifted apart for a few years. They didn't want to be reminded, most likely, of their embarrassing mistakes—not so much Mattie but what went on in that caravan outside Nice. In any case, in the first heat of their serious adventures with men, female friends seemed dispensable. Geraldine met Terry, and Jane had a painful affair with someone married. Then she found Felix, and the two women bumped into each other by chance one afternoon at Paddington station, both obviously pregnant; Geraldine had moved to Bristol by this time. A snatched quick exchange of news, and phone numbers on scraps of paper, before they had to hurry away in opposite directions, wasn't enough. They telephoned that evening and picked their friendship up as if they'd never put it down.

Geraldine woke to the sound of knocking, a few hard taps at first and then an insistent fierce battering, demanding her wakeful attention: rain on the skylights. She sat up in bed as abruptly as if someone had called her, in her nightdress in the gray dawn. After a while, the rain's intensity lapsed and withdrew and became a softer pressure, enveloping the room in its cocoon. Earlier in the year they'd been afraid of a drought, and now this plenty, this too-much, night after night for a week. The garden would be happy—and

she was excited, waking up to rain at first light. It was probably part of climate change, this extremity, first drought and then downpour, but you couldn't always worry. Sometimes you just had to submit to what the sky brought. Old age wasn't all calms and shallows; there were whirlpools and black water—the ordeal of her parents' deaths, then the years of her husband's illness and death. And because Geraldine had been thinking about Mattie Szymanski, she remembered him taking down a book from a shelf once, and opening it and reading out loud to her. She had no idea now what he'd read, or whether it was poetry or prose: something amazing, anyhow, that had liberated them both into the great terrain of the imagination.

This was in that studio flat of his, when he'd come back from abroad and settled down; his wife, who disapproved of books and of Geraldine, was preparing food in the kitchenette. Mattie wasn't drinking but Geraldine was; she must have brought gin with her. She was enjoying every mouthful of a big gin-and-tonic, although her hosts had failed to come up with ice or lemon. The alcohol was sharpening her mind to a high pitch of awareness and longing.

And she wailed and complained because there wasn't enough time to read everything. How lucky Mattie was, she exclaimed, with all his books! She would never know all the things he knew! She had her children by then and her days were full with caring for them and with domestic management, yet somehow she'd contrived to escape for an evening and get to London—and with a bottle of gin, too, which surely she couldn't afford. What she remembered was Mattie in his hairy, woolly, smelly jumper saying that it didn't matter about having time or finishing things. You could never read everything. Completion or mastery were beside the point. All that counted were those occasions when you picked up a book and opened it and its words attached themselves to that moment and transfigured it, and then the moment passed. ♦

Tessa Hadley has contributed short stories to *The New Yorker* since 2002. Her books include “[*After the Funeral and Other Stories*](#)” and “[*The Party*](#).”

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“Infinite Jest” Has Turned Thirty. Have We Forgotten How to Read It?

David Foster Wallace’s novel, in all its immensity, became the subject of sanctification and then scorn. But the work rewards the attention it demands.

By [Hermione Hoby](#)

January 26, 2026



Wallace’s great novel proposed that the compulsive, addictive character of America, not least its addiction to entertainment, could best be resisted through the engaged reading of fiction. It was a book about addiction that offered itself as a kind of counter-addiction. Photograph by Richard Burbridge

A few stanzas from the end of Chaucer's long poem "[Troilus and Criseyde](#)," the author interrupts his story to indulge in a bit of reception anxiety. "Go, litel book," he bids the manuscript that's soon to be out of his hands. "That thou be understande I god beseche!" Had Chaucer stuck around to witness the ensuing six hundred-plus years of literary discourse—and the past few decades in particular—he might have concluded that, when it comes to being understande, the litel books aren't the ones you have to worry about. It's the big ones that'll get you.

David Foster Wallace's "[Infinite Jest](#)," a book whose notorious bigness comprises both physical size and reputational heft, turns thirty in February. The occasion is a moment to ask how a novel that mourns addiction and venerates humility and patience became a glib cultural punch line—a byword for literary arrogance, a totem of masculine pretentiousness, a red flag if spotted on the shelves of a prospective partner, and reading matter routinely subjected to the word "performative" in its most damning sense. At a thousand and seventy-nine pages, "Infinite Jest" has become a one-liner.

Last year, an article in the *Guardian* explored the risks of so-called performative reading under the title "[Is it OK to read Infinite Jest in public?](#)" For the *Guardian* writer, the question was a rare refutation of Betteridge's law, the journalistic adage stating that any headline ending in a question mark can be answered with a no. Here the answer was a nervous and tentative yes. Mostly, though, the piece drew on and perpetuated the archetype of the noxious "Infinite Jest" bro which has solidified in the quick-drying cement of social media. In 2020, the "Jest" bro hit the big screen in Emerald Fennell's heavy-handed "Promising Young Woman," in which a D.F.W. fanboy tells Carey Mulligan's character that she has to read "Consider the Lobster," one of the author's essay collections. Moments later, the fanboy is revealed to be a sexual predator. In this way, "would-be rapist" is added to the already toxic mélange of incel, mansplainer, and poser that constitutes the putative "Infinite Jest" reader. Has anyone met these guys? Not the female journalist in the *Guardian*: ostentatiously wielding her copy of Wallace's novel in Washington Square Park, she waits "to be caught in the act, secretly filmed for a TikTok ridiculing my performance." The only interaction she has is with a polite Gen X dude on

the bench beside her, who asks how she's doing with the book. Her bench mate is, she surmises, the "type of guy who might consider David Foster Wallace a modern-day saint."

The Best Books of 2025

Discover the year's essential reads in fiction and nonfiction.



Wallace, whose mental health was fragile for most of his life, died, by suicide, in 2008, at the age of forty-six. Painfully aware of his shortcomings, Wallace would have been horrified by his own subsequent beatification. Such treatment would instead have given him—to enlist a phrase from "Infinite Jest"—a case of "the howling fantods." (The phrase conveys something like "the heebie-jeebies," albeit on a greater order of psychological magnitude.) Death casts an ennobling sheen on any writer, but especially on one who, to use another "Infinite Jest"-ism, eliminated his own map—a coinage that tells us something about Wallace's aversion to treacly solemnity, even the trace amount present in the euphemism "took his own life." In the years following Wallace's death, this aura of saintliness likely derived from the combination of his moral seriousness as a fiction writer—his attunement to the heroism of private suffering and emotional endurance—and the fact of his premature end. In other words, it came to seem unbearable that his characters, many of them fellow addicts and overthinkers, prevail in a way their author could not. Now, however, the appellation "Saint Dave" tends to be used only mockingly, and not just on park benches.

In 2023, the writer Patricia Lockwood chafed at Wallace's supposed sainthood in a long piece for the [*London Review of Books*](#). The essay, in its ambivalence, did things other than chafe; Lockwood's Technicolor mind, much like her subject's, tends to move quaquaversally, to use a word that perhaps only a sesquipedalian math nerd who modelled his thousand-page novel on a particular fractal (the Sierpiński gasket) would tolerate.

Nonetheless, the following lines are representative of Lockwood's general attitude: "What were the noughties? A time when everyone went to see the Blue Man Group for a while. Men read David Foster Wallace. Men also put hot sauce on their balls."

Men! But Wallace, alert to the sexism of his forebears and eager to demonstrate his own feminism, once sounded a lot like Lockwood. First, "Infinite Jest" made Wallace the most famous young writer in America. Then it began a mighty, self-sustaining Newton's cradle of acclaim and backlash, a momentum transfer that hasn't stopped since. When the novel appeared, in 1996, it was more than a best-seller; it was a phenomenon, a widespread, must-read accessory and experience. A year and a half after "Infinite Jest" came out, Wallace, perhaps with a tinge of his own reception anxiety, reviewed a lesser John Updike novel, "[Toward the End of Time](#)," for the [*New York Observer*](#). His review seemed a prescient (if covert) attempt to head off the very criticisms that would later confront his own work. Wallace began by dismissing the book's author, along with [Norman Mailer](#) and [Philip Roth](#), as "The Great Male Narcissists." But his sickest burn—the real hot sauce to the balls—was reserved for Updike, whom Wallace, invoking a friend's verdict, characterized as "a penis with a thesaurus." Here was a clear case of the pot calling the kettle atramentous. You don't need a penis to read "Infinite Jest," but you might need a dictionary.

Beyond the novel's fondness for five-dollar words, what is it like to read? Perhaps the greatest disjunction between the book's reputation and its contents lies in the notion that it's a pretentious slog no one could honestly enjoy. I first read the novel in 2008, before D. T. Max's 2012 biography and, later, Mary Karr's 2018 tweets detailed Wallace's upsetting and potentially criminal treatment of Karr, once his romantic partner. Fiction is so often the gold extracted from the dross of a damaged life. As Rivka

Galchen wrote in [her review](#) of Max's book, "The co-founder of A.A., Bill W., is a guru of sobriety precisely because sobriety was so difficult for him." Wallace, by implication, was concerned with patience, steadfastness, and tranquillity precisely because these virtues often eluded him in life.

Encountering the novel in my twenties, I was unaware that I was committing a form of gender treason; I knew only that little or nothing I'd read had come close in terms of sheer pleasure. The book had more brio, heart, and humor than I thought possible on the page. It was bizarrely grotesque and howlingly sad; it was sweet, silly, and vertiginously clever. It was also, by virtue of its relentlessly entertaining scenes and the high-low virtuosity of its language, a work that enacted its own theme of addiction. When I finished, I experienced withdrawal: Where to go after "Infinite Jest"? It was, in short, a supposedly unfun thing I would do again, and did.

The novel takes place in a future America, specifically Boston and its environs, and is mainly concerned with two institutions as its zones of action. The first is the Enfield Tennis Academy, where athletically gifted boys and girls (but mainly boys) are drilled in physical and mental preparation for what's known as The Show, a stab at professional tennis. The second, just down the hill, is the Ennet House Drug and Alcohol Recovery House, where men and women (but mainly men) reckon with their substance abuse. Ambition and addiction, the two traits these institutions respectively represent, share a fat slice of their Venn diagram—an overlap that might be labelled "how to live with yourself." The self-torturing helices of thought twisting inside the young minds on the courts are no less fraught than the recursive neuroses tormenting the addicts down the hill. Among the former cohort is Hal Incandenza, a star student, teenage tennis prodigy, secret marijuana addict, and Hamlet manqué. His father, James, an experimental filmmaker and the school's founder, has killed himself via a MacGyvered microwave oven. Hal was the one who found him, or what was left of him. Hal's mother, Avril, is having an affair with Charles Tavis, who is either her half or adoptive brother, and has summarily replaced Hal's father as headmaster of the academy. Much, in other words, is rotten in the state of the Enfield Tennis Academy, or E.T.A. (This most prolix of writers can never resist an abbreviation.)

Hal's voice begins the novel. As he responds to the authority figures questioning him about his recent "subnormal" test scores, they react with horror: the eloquence of Hal's internal monologue is at odds with his ability to actually speak. Rather than producing words, he's emitting "subanimalistic noises and sounds." Soon, he's gurneyed off to an emergency room. A notable oddity is the way in which Hal's first-person narration is abandoned after seventeen pages until close to the end, even though he remains one of the book's central characters. Why? The novel's very Gen X diagnosis of the character offers a clue: "One of the really American things about Hal, probably, is the way he despises what it is he's really lonely for: this hideous internal self, incontinent of sentiment and need, that pules and writhes just under the hip empty mask, anhedonia." Wallace, once a regionally ranked junior tennis player in his home state of Illinois, later considered a career in academia. One of his undergraduate thesis advisers has said, "I thought of David as a very talented young philosopher with a writing hobby, and did not realize that he was instead one of the most talented fiction writers of his generation who had a philosophy hobby." Hal, in his academic brilliance, tennis talent, and acute anxiety, is the character who most resembles his creator. To grant him ongoing first-person status would be to privilege the book's most autobiographical consciousness. And Wallace is not much interested in himself. In "Infinite Jest," he's going for the least solipsistic rendering of humanity he can pull off, via more than a hundred borrowed selves.

This enormous cast of characters is diverse mostly in terms of the variegated peculiarity of inner lives. As for "diversity" in the sense of gender parity and racial representation: not so much. The two main female characters, Avril Incandenza and Joelle van Dyne, both happen to be gorgeous. When it comes to the novel's handful of Black characters, some of whom speak in a cartoonish version of Ebonics, perhaps the most tactful thing to be said is something like: It was a different time. And yet from this horde of fretting, feeling, interfacing selves a truth emerges: that loneliness is a universal problem experienced by each person in a unique way. The novel also suggests—mumblingly, without making eye contact, not wanting to be corny about it—that one's own self becomes a little less hideous the more one attends to other selves. Not all of whom are entirely hideous.

In the weight room of E.T.A., for example, you'll find Lyle, who maintains a permanent levitating lotus pose, and who lives (in a literal, biological way) off the sweat of others. The most important thing about Lyle, though, is that he's a guru to anxious students: "Like all good listeners, he has a way of attending that is at once intense and assuasive: the supplicant feels both nakedly revealed and sheltered, somehow, from all possible judgment. It's like he's working as hard as you. You both of you, briefly, feel unalone."

To feel unalone is pretty much what all the novel's characters, not just tragic Hal, yearn for. Despite the solace Lyle dispenses, however, he's more curio than hero. If the latter distinction goes to anyone, it's to Don Gately, the large-hearted, as well as simply large ("the size of a young dinosaur"), addict who stealthily overtakes Hal as the book's most prominent character. Don becomes a resident staffer at Ennet House, where he meets his fellow-addicts' demands and offenses with implacable stoicism. His struggle to stay sober involves accepting that the bromides of A.A. ("It works if you work it"; "One day at a time"; and so on)—what Don calls "the limpest kind of dickless pap"—do actually work. In fact, "it starts to turn out that the vapider the AA cliché, the sharper the canines of the real truth it covers."

"Infinite Jest" also involves a Pynchonesque subplot, which is certainly silly and sometimes funny, concerning an organization of wheelchair-bound Quebecois separatists, Les Assassins des Fauteuils Rollents. These militants are seeking a master copy of James Incandenza's final film, "Infinite Jest," also known as "the Entertainment," which is a work so enthralling that anyone who views it becomes catatonic and eventually dies from starvation or dehydration. One of Wallace's driving anxieties, a black thread running through this novel, was that television addiction (including his own) was inducing brain rot, social atomization, and spiritual death. In light of our mass smartphone and social-media addictions, a TV habit seems almost benign. *Oh, honey*, I find myself murmuring to the David Foster Wallace of 1996. Had he only known.

In the world of the novel, Boston is recognizably Bostonian but belongs to a U.S. that has subsumed Canada and Mexico to form a superstate by the name of the Organization of North American Nations, or O.N.A.N. The

acronym may serve as a satirical indictment of a thanatotic American culture of bottomless self-gratification, but it's also a joke about jerking off. The blend of brainy and base is typical Wallace. Here is a guy anxious to assure you that he may have produced a Dostoyevskian work of profligate genius, but he's also just a regular dumbass like you.

Onanism, albeit of the metaphorical kind, is the very charge Wallace levies against Updike in that review from 1997. Blasting Updike and his fellow-“phallocrats” for their self-absorption, Wallace scoffs, in particular, at the character of Ben Turnbull, who narrates “Toward the End of Time.” Turnbull has undergone surgery for prostate cancer, which would be a sympathetic predicament if not for the fact that his entire hideous self seems to reside in his genitals and their gratification. He is facing what Wallace calls “the prospect of dying without once having loved something more than yourself.” In other words, a sort of onanism of the soul afflicts him. What might Wallace, or Updike, for that matter, have made of gooning, the subculture of isolated men masturbating to online pornography for hours or days at a time? For a writer to inhabit the souls of more than a hundred other people is surely the opposite of onanistic, as it is for a reader to do so, whether behind the locked door of a bedroom or among strangers on a park bench. The gentle paradox here, one Wallace was intimately in touch with, is that reading fiction is a form of self-gratification, done alone, that allows a person to feel *unalone*. And, unlike gooning, or freebasing, reading is the rare instance of an addiction that, as a rule, harms no one and may even sharpen your mind.

Despite this, a pseudo-Freudian emphasis on length and girth still haunts discussions of “Infinite Jest,” and, with it, an implication of the masturbatory—as if big novels were the exclusive preserve of arrogant males (“phallocrats”) whose self-conferred genius permits them to indulge in long-windedness. [George Eliot](#), whose “[Middlemarch](#)” runs to more than nine hundred pages in its longest editions, would like a word. As, no doubt, would plenty of living women novelists. (Eleanor Catton, for example, whose “[The Luminaries](#)” runs to 848 pages, or Lucy Ellmann, whose “[Ducks, Newburyport](#),” comes in at 1,040.) Late last year, I returned to Wallace’s masterpiece not from some built-in, media-friendly calendar for upcoming literary anniversaries but because two other long novels, both by

women, had reminded me of the work. Tess Gunty’s “[The Rabbit Hutch](#)” and Alexis Wright’s “[Praiseworthy](#)” seemed, through the scope of their ensemble casts and their granular attention to the distinctive suffering of their characters, to pick up where Wallace left off. Just as Don DeLillo’s influence on a generation of women novelists (Rachel Kushner, Zadie Smith, Jennifer Egan, and Dana Spiotta among them) has been underacknowledged, perhaps so, too, has Wallace’s.

Thirty years on, “Infinite Jest” and its author seem poised to undergo not just a reëvaluation but something of a cultural feminization, too. The new, anniversary edition of “Infinite Jest” comes with a foreword from Michelle Zauner, the thirty-six-year-old, queer Korean American front woman of the indie-pop band Japanese Breakfast and the author of the hit memoir “[Crying in H Mart](#)”: a person worlds away from the maligned stereotype of the D.F.W. fan. Recently, the writer Hannah Smart (Instagram handle @howlingfantod) wrote in the [Los Angeles Review of Books](#) about diagramming a nine-hundred-word sentence from Wallace’s short story “Mister Squishy.” Parsing Wallace’s clauses, Smart reflected, has taught her “to distinguish between data and knowledge, to approach all inputs with not just narrative but also *linguistic* skepticism.” More than this, Smart’s project, an ongoing one, seems to have transcended the grammatical and become devotional. Wallace’s syntax, she believes, reveals a koanistic truth: “the future is eternal, while the present is momentary.”

The ephemeral present includes, of course, a writer’s reputation. If that writer is hailed as a once-in-a-generation voice, the reputation will undergo transmutations. Like Wallace, George Eliot had sainthood foisted on her, although in her case it was within her lifetime: readers wrote to her seeking advice on how to live. Her image as a figure of moral uplift was cemented with the publication of such works as “[Wise, Witty and Tender Sayings in Prose and Verse](#)” (1871), a florilegium of instructive or consoling lines mostly wrested from the fictive surroundings that had loaned them their vitality and moral torque. (That image, in turn, cemented the contempt that a subsequent generation had for her.) Much like “inspirational quotes” littering Instagram, the collection seemed to be a TL;DR cheat sheet for those unwilling to tackle “Middlemarch,” which had been published around the same time. In this way, the volume shows a curious similarity to

Wallace's "[This Is Water](#)," the 2009 vade mecum that came, posthumously, out of a 2005 commencement speech he gave at Kenyon College. In this encomium to mindfulness, Wallace tells a tale of two fish swimming along, oblivious of the fact of water, the medium of their own existence. The words "this is water"—since tattooed on many a wrist—offer themselves as a mantra of consciousness and compassion. An earlier instantiation can be found, however, in "Infinite Jest." Midway through the novel, Don Gately is chatting with some sober bikers when one of them, a man who goes by the cheery name of Bob Death, asks whether Don's heard the one about the fish. Another biker supplies a lewd and sexist joke. Not that one, Bob says:

He leans in more toward Gately and shouts that the one he was talking about was: This wise old whiskery fish swims up to three young fish and goes, 'Morning, boys, how's the water?' and swims away; and the three young fish watch him swim away and look at each other and go, 'What the fuck is water?' and swim away. The young biker leans back and smiles at Gately and gives an affable shrug and blatts away, a halter top's tits mashed against his back.

We understand Don to be one of the bewildered young fish, although, owing to Mr. Death in the unlikely role of sage, perhaps a young fish now coming to terms with the water in which he swims, learning to pay attention to what merits attention. Wallace's piscine material is much more successful in this rambunctious, dynamic, take-it-or-leave-it novelistic form than in his fish-out-of-water public performance, years later, before the class of 2005. Wallace gave a commencement speech for the ages, but homily was not his métier. His great novel proposed that the compulsive, addictive character of America, not least its addiction to entertainment, could best be resisted through the engaged reading of fiction. Here is a book about addiction that offers itself as a kind of counter-addiction, an example of the compounding value of sustained attention. The infamous length of "Infinite Jest" is, in this sense, a central feature of its ethic: not bigness as brag but duration as discipline. In a distractible age, Wallace made an argument for the long novel that is won simply by being heard. ♦

[Hermione Hoby](#) is the author of the novels "[Virtue](#)" and "[Neon in Daylight](#)."

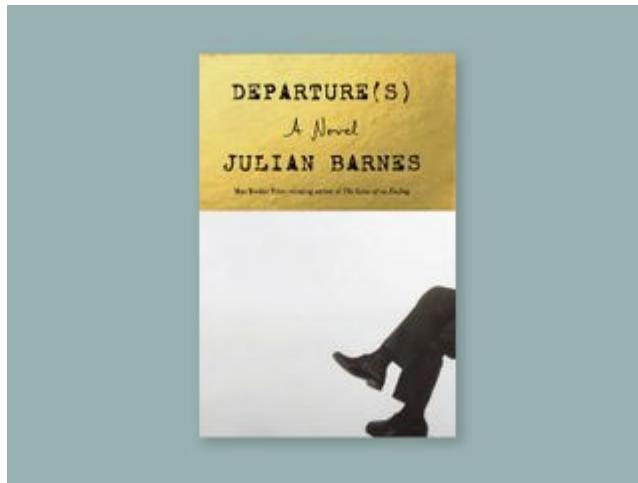
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Books

Briefly Noted

“*Departure(s)*,” “*Jean*,” “*Just Watch Me*,” and “*Volga Blues*.”

January 26, 2026



Departure(s), by Julian Barnes (Knopf). Though subtitled “A Novel,” Barnes’s twenty-seventh book defies categorization, incorporating memoir, fiction, and philosophy. The narrator—also a writer named Julian—opens with a meditation on memory, before clambering through the recesses of his mind to retrieve the story of friends he unsuccessfully set up in the sixties and again decades later. In recounting their romance(s), Julian realizes that he had been confusing fiction and life, believing that he “could gently direct them towards the ends” he desired. He makes peace, too, with the end of his own story. More than anything, this book, published the day after Barnes’s eightieth birthday, is a letter to his readers—a thank-you, and a goodbye.



Jean, by *Madeleine Dunnigan* (Norton). An English boarding school for troubled boys is the backdrop of this quiet yet accomplished début novel, set in 1976. Jean, one of the school's teen-age charges, is the child of a single mother—a Jewish woman who was sent away from Berlin as a child, during the Second World War. Though something of an outcast, Jean finds snatches of intense companionship with another boy, with whom he has secret lakeside trysts at night, and whose fondness for Jean waxes and wanes, often depending on whether they are alone. While the novel stages Jean's experience of being “driven uncontrollably” by desire, it also examines the weight of his and his family's history—and the imperfect self-awareness of a young person carrying great pain.

What We're Reading

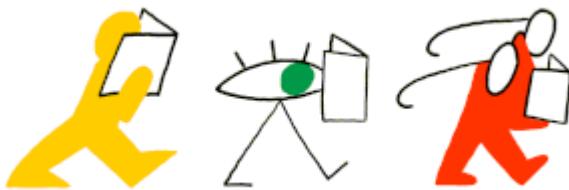
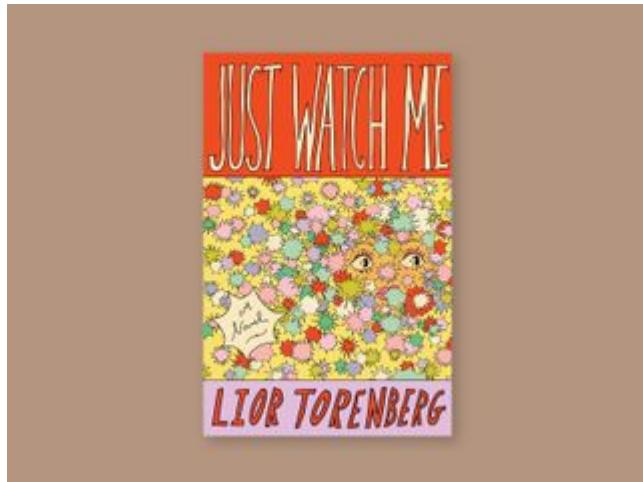
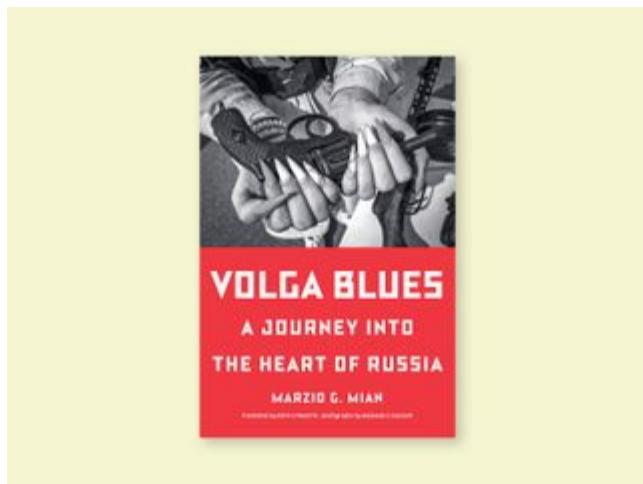


Illustration by Ben Hickey

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Just Watch Me, by *Lior Torenberg* (*Avid Reader*). Dell, the narrator of this tragicomic novel, lives in a tiny apartment that used to be a walk-in closet. She also has a sister who's in a coma. When Dell loses her job at a smoothie shop, after throwing a jar of almond butter at a customer, she decides to start live-streaming, asking viewers to fund her sister's life support. Soon, Dell discovers she has a knack for streaming, owing to her snarky charisma and willingness to take shocking dares. But she begins to receive messages from an anonymous viewer, who threatens to expose a hidden truth about her. Unfolding over a week, the book is both a reflection on the nature of vulnerability and a pointed commentary on internet culture.



Volga Blues, by *Marzio G. Mian* (*Norton*). In this travelogue of the Volga River—"Russia's epicenter of culture, faith, and identity"—an undercover journalist grapples with contemporary Russia. Between the river's source, entrusted to an order of Orthodox nuns, and its southern delta, where caviar

bound for the Kremlin is harvested, the author journeys through a defiant country transformed by war, sanctions, and reinvigorated patriotism. Braiding snapshots of the present with history, Mian depicts a country haunted by threats to its national integrity, where people have come to believe that “questioning their leaders . . . creates social conflict and exposes the country to foreign occupation”—a tension that, he argues, has arisen in Western democracies as well.

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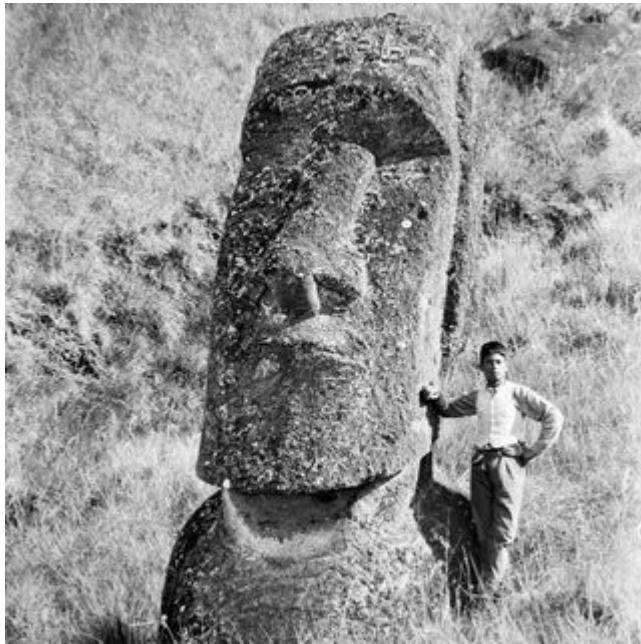
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Easter Island and the Allure of “Lost Civilizations”

Why Western writers have shrouded the history of Rapa Nui in myth and mystery.

By [Margaret Talbot](#)

January 26, 2026



A moai on Rapa Nui, photographed by Katherine Routledge in 1913. The statues were carved by Polynesian settlers whose descendants were long treated as living among the ruins of a civilization they did not create. Photograph by Katherine Routledge / Royal Geographical Society / Getty

Finding out what actually happened in the deep past can be a slog, so when ancient history is packaged as mystery—spine-tingling but solvable—it's hard to resist. Who doesn't want to know how a lost civilization got lost, or where it might be hiding? The trouble is that what gets touted as a lost civilization often turns out to have been there all along. The people who can't or won't see the continuity in front of them have typically been European adventurers or armchair archeologists, busy spinning dismissive

theories about the cultures of non-Europeans. The idea that the Pyramids of Egypt are so awesome they could only have been built by aliens is now a meme-able joke, fodder for Reddit debunkers and cheesy History Channel shows.

Still, the fancy persists, implanted like a microchip, ever since Erich von Däniken's 1968 best-seller, "Chariots of the Gods," begat the hugely popular 1973 television special "In Search of Ancient Astronauts." Von Däniken argued that extraterrestrials must have visited Earth to lend a hand with various prehistoric undertakings—the Pyramids, the massive stone carvings of Easter Island, the Nazca Lines. What may have begun as trippy speculation fed on a darker premise: that the present-day peoples of Africa, Polynesia, or Latin America were simply not impressive enough to have had ancestors capable of such feats. (Stonehenge was the rare European site to make an appearance among von Däniken's confounding examples.)

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The belief that Indigenous monuments must have been made by outsiders has, in more respectable guises, long shaped Western accounts of Indigenous cultural achievement. It continues to do so. The Pyramids of Egypt and the statues of Easter Island are extraordinary, and before modern archeological methods it was often hard to see how such works could have been produced without metal tools or machinery. That conundrum, however, slid easily into a failure of imagination and, specifically, an inability to credit the capacities of people who were not white. Nineteenth-

century European explorers concluded that the stone ruins of Great Zimbabwe, now thought to have been built by the Shona between roughly 1100 and 1450 C.E., must be the work of Phoenicians or Babylonians or intrepid explorers from another far-flung place or, basically, anyone but the Africans who actually lived there. The pre-Columbian mound complexes scattered across North America met a similar fate. Their builders were variously imagined as giants, a vanquished white race of some kind, or members of the lost tribes of Israel—the last a notion promoted by Josiah Priest, a nineteenth-century pamphleteer with an animus against Native Americans, cited by [Andrew Jackson](#) to justify the Indian Removal Act, and taken up, in recent years, by [Tucker Carlson](#).

In “[Island at the Edge of the World: The Forgotten History of Easter Island](#)” (Mariner), a crisp, confident, and convincing new account of the place and its chroniclers, the British archeologist Mike Pitts calls these theories of lost European civilizations and alien drop-ins “demonstrable claptrap.” Yet a much more reputable but equally insulting theory about Easter Island has remained influential, even dominant, Pitts argues. In this version of events, Easter Island is a cautionary tale of a population that destroyed itself, its island paradise, and whatever mysterious civilization had created its thousand or so stone monuments, or moai. (A Dutch captain who landed there on, yes, Easter gave it the name many Westerners still know it by. Rapa Nui is the Polynesian name for the island; Pitts follows the convention of using “Rapanui” for its Indigenous inhabitants.)



“I don’t think God getting bangs is a good sign.”

Cartoon by Sofia Warren

Europeans who arrived in the late nineteenth century on this speck of land in the vast eastern Pacific encountered a very small local population in whom they saw little of interest or value. By contrast, the statues—hewn from volcanic stone, with beetle brows, long ski-slope noses, down-turned mouths, and distant gazes, once upright and now toppled or partly buried—earned their respect. They were blocky, minimalist, stylized, enormous, and strikingly different from the representational statues of people and gods the Europeans knew from home.

It was common in these late-nineteenth-century accounts, Pitts writes, to describe Rapa Nui's inhabitants as “born cannibals,” and to wonder who could have carved the stone figures. Perhaps a cataclysm—an earthquake, a volcanic eruption—had driven those people away. The dearth of trees on the island implied to some that the inhabitants had cut them down to make clubs and shields.

In 1868, when the British naval frigate H.M.S. *Topaze* stopped at Easter Island to assess its usefulness to the Empire, the captain instructed his men to find a statue that they could bring home. With the assistance of islanders, they dug out an approximately eight-foot figure—one of the smaller, more portable moai, whose head had been spotted protruding from the ground—and hauled it back to the British Museum, where it stands to this day. The statue, known to the islanders as Hoa Hakananai'a, caused a sensation and, Pitts suggests, helped set off a new round of fervid conjecture about Rapa Nui. (Chile, Germany, and the United States soon dispatched ships to collect statues of their own.)

Martin Farquhar Tupper, a poet and an antiquarian favored by Queen Victoria, argued that Rapa Nui was the remnant of a lost continent whose people had perished. The spiritualist Madame Blavatsky saw the statues as evidence of a vanished race of giants who'd fled a mythical continent called Lemuria just before it sunk into the sea. Rapa Nui, Pitts writes, was subjected to “the full fantasy treatment,” based on a cluster of false premises: that the stone was too hard to carve with simple tools; that the island and its inhabitants were incapable of the civilization implied by the monuments; and that the real creators must have come from elsewhere—

South America, Mexico, “Lemuria,” or beyond—and then disappeared. Running through it all was a strong note of judgment. The trees were gone because the islanders had cut them down to make war, and their world had been ruined, as Pitts writes, “because they had worshipped the wrong gods and reached above their station.”



Katherine Routledge and a Rapanui man measure the stone foundations of a hare paenga, or canoe-shaped house, on the slopes of Poike, Easter Island, during the Mana Expedition, 1913–16. Photograph from Royal Geographical Society / Getty

When a serious archeological expedition finally took place on Rapa Nui, in 1913-15, its leaders, the British husband-and-wife team Katherine and William Scoresby Routledge, concluded that the islanders they'd met were indeed the descendants of those who had carved the statues. Yet much of their work—Katherine's in particular—was later lost or ignored. Pitts, who edited *British Archaeology* for many years and has written books on Stonehenge and the search for Richard III's remains, first visited Rapa Nui three decades ago and has taken an interest in it ever since. He seems to see

a kindred spirit in Katherine, whose legacy, he believes, might have reshaped the island's existing narrative had it not been cut short in a notably harsh way.

In 1913, Katherine Routledge set out for Easter Island. She was from a wealthy Quaker family in the North of England, and formally trained in modern history. (She had studied at Oxford but received her degree from Trinity College Dublin, in 1895, because Oxford did not then grant diplomas to women.) By the time of the expedition, she was in her late forties and had already carried out archeological field work in East Africa with her husband, Scoresby Routledge, an anthropologist in the gentleman-explorer mold. The impetus for Rapa Nui came from Thomas Athol Joyce, an ethnographer at the British Museum who'd urged the Routledges to go while elderly islanders who remembered the old ways were still alive. Katherine read everything she could about the place, and the couple secured support from the Royal Geographical Society and commissioned a two-masted, ninety-one-foot wooden schooner for an archeological and ethnological survey designed to collect "scientific facts in relation" to the "inhabitants and their arts."

In the course of sixteen months, from 1914 to 1915, the Routledges and their crew crisscrossed the island on horseback, worked closely with an influential islander named Tepano Ramo a Veriamo, and produced a pioneering survey of Rapa Nui's topography and monuments. But the oral histories Katherine conducted, interviewing elderly islanders, with Tepano translating, may have been more valuable still. Her informants told her, for example, about funeral practices—about how they wrapped bodies and carried them aloft to the base of coastal plinths. Pitts thinks that Katherine came to understand not only the island's physical layout but its "psychogeography": what certain places meant to the people who lived there.

She also formed a bond with a Rapanui prophetess named Angata, the leader of an uprising against the sheep-ranching operation then dominating the island, which took place during the Routledges' stay. Scoresby dismissed Angata as a "mad woman" and her followers as "ruffians." Katherine saw a "charming, frail old lady," with expressive eyes, at the

center of a movement that could not be reduced to livestock raiding. As the only woman on the expedition, and as someone who had long chafed at the limits imposed on her in Edwardian England, Katherine may have been predisposed to sympathy. When she thanked Angata for a gift of poultry and potatoes, Angata replied that no thanks were needed; the food, she said, came from God.

However impressive the Routledges' research, it was no match for the seductive notion of a populace living among the ruins of a once mighty civilization whose origins were a puzzle and whose downfall was an object lesson. That idea was spooky and poignant and metaphorically potent. In particular, the Routledges' research was no match for the narrative skills and indefatigable energy of the swashbuckling Norwegian explorer Thor Heyerdahl.

In the nineteen-fifties and sixties, Heyerdahl became an international celebrity largely on the basis of his fascination with Easter Island and his eagerness to prove his theories about it, at great personal risk. Heyerdahl, whom Pitts describes as "a charismatic expedition leader, and a driven writer and self-publicist untroubled by historical nuance," shared the common supposition that the moai could not have been made by ancestors of the present-day islanders. His particular spin was that the moai's true creators were people who had travelled from the Americas. Pacific peoples weren't known to be strong on massive visages and the like, popular opinion suggested at the time, whereas groups like the Inca, the Olmec, and the Toltec were. But Heyerdahl had further theories about where these ingenious Americans had come from *originally*. He took the "patronizing premise" that the Rapanui were not up to the task, Pitts writes, "and bolted on explicit racism." And so Heyerdahl recast the island's earliest settlers as members of a Caucasian race who had migrated from what is now Iraq or Turkey to the Americas and then across the Pacific, and who were tall, fair, blue-eyed, and bearded—not unlike Heyerdahl himself, as Pitts wryly observes.

In 1947, to demonstrate that a pre-Columbian voyage from South America to Polynesia was at least possible, Heyerdahl and a crew of five set off from Peru on a forty-square-foot balsa-wood raft he named the Kon-Tiki. After a

hundred and one days and some forty-three hundred miles drifting through shark-infested waters, they landed on a reef near Tahiti. The journey showed that such a crossing could be done—which did not, of course, mean that it had been. Still, it was a daring thing to have pulled off, and it yielded a best-selling book, an Oscar-winning 1950 documentary, and fuel for America’s postwar tiki-bar craze.

Heyerdahl’s ideas have been disputed by many scholars working on Rapa Nui, but they found a large and receptive audience, in part because they aligned with some of the conventional wisdom about Rapa Nui’s culture and its supposed violent rupture with its past. In 1994, the island received the Hollywood treatment in a film co-produced by Kevin Costner, not long after “Dances with Wolves.” In “Rapa-Nui,” bare chests, male and female, gleam in firelight, and internecine warfare—a love triangle gone apocalyptic—tears the island apart. Far more seriously, Easter Island became the exemplary case study in Jared Diamond’s 2005 book, [Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Survive](#).¹ Diamond called it “the clearest example of a society that destroyed itself by overexploiting its own resources”—through deforestation, soil exhaustion, and overfishing—turning it into a worst-case metaphor for our collective future. The “ecocide” narrative, with Easter Island as its emblem, was eagerly taken up by politicians and podcasters, liberals and conservatives alike. New evidence from pollen analysis indicated that the island had once been home to tall palm trees, possibly even a primeval palm forest. In his writings and lectures, Diamond posed a chilling question: “What did the Easter Islander who cut down the last tree”—like the Once-ler in “The Lorax”—“say while he was doing it?”

The story Pitts tells—drawing on new archeological findings, a fresh reading of eighteenth-century visitors’ accounts, and a reconsideration of Katherine Routledge’s neglected work—is quite different. It will no doubt be contested; Rapa Nui studies is a notably argumentative field, perhaps because so little can be definitively proved in the absence of early written records. All the same, Pitts’s account reflects a broader shift in the consensus, one that many readers will find persuasive, as this one did. He begins from a premise now widely shared: that Rapa Nui was settled in around 1200 by Polynesians who’d sailed in dugout canoes across

uncharted reaches of the Pacific from another island. It was an extraordinary journey, but one that requires no transoceanic, or extraterrestrial, embellishment. The settlers spoke a Polynesian language, practiced Polynesian customs, and left descendants who continue to. Genetic studies of ancient and modern Rapanui confirm their Polynesian origins while also suggesting limited contact with South America, likely the result of later voyages rather than founding migration.

The island that the settlers discovered was probably less lush and hospitable than the one they had left. Much of it was open and grassy and studded with rocks, its soil fragile. It had coral reefs but not at sea level, rough surf, and no permanent freshwater streams. Still, the Rapanui made a go of it. Within a few generations, they began carving moai from volcanic stone and mounting them on plinths. Far from self-destructive, the Rapanui proved remarkably resilient.

When Europeans first arrived—a Dutch West India Company ship in 1722, a Spanish expedition from Peru in 1770, a British voyage under [James Cook](#) in 1774, and a French one in 1786—they encountered a population that appeared stable and well organized. Visitors noted agricultural practices that included crop rotation and other methods of soil renewal, carried out with what the French captain Jean-François de La Pérouse called “a great deal of intelligence.” The islanders kept chickens and grew taro, yams, sugarcane, sweet potatoes, and bananas.

They also described the statues as depicting distinguished ancestors, and interacted with them—lighting fires in front of them, dancing around them, or sitting before them with bowed heads. None of the eighteenth-century visitors “made a cultural distinction between living islanders and the statues,” Pitts writes. “They took it for granted that the statues were made by the people they met, and had meaning for them.” Population estimates varied, but Pitts places the likely number at around five thousand. (That’s high when compared with other scholars’ approximations, but several thousand seems like a safe assumption.)



"How can you possibly know how I feel?"

Cartoon by Edward Steed

These eighteenth-century European accounts have been underused, Pitts thinks, in part because they were hardly systematic or scientific, and also because some were thought to be lost in a shipwreck and others were scattered and difficult to consult. Today, there's a range of archeological and genetic work that tends to support their basic observations while countering, or at least complicating, the familiar ecocide narrative. A 2024 genomic study tracking the island's population over roughly four centuries found no sign of the sharp demographic collapse that is supposed to have occurred around 1600. Research by the American archeologists Carl Lipo and Terry Hunt, among others, suggests that the islanders continued to prosper, and to build stone platforms for their statues, well beyond that date.

The evidence for environmental ruin, too, turns out to be less stark than advertised. The landscape of Rapa Nui probably never incorporated the sort of primeval forest of palm trees imagined in popular accounts, Pitts writes, but was more mixed, and scrubby, with no one species of charismatic megaflora dominating. And, besides, it seems unfair to single out the Rapanui for cutting down their trees when, as Pitts notes, forest loss is a nearly ubiquitous consequence of human settlement. Medieval Europeans, to take one example, cleared enormous stretches of woodland—up to seventy per cent in parts of France and England by the fourteenth century—for farming, fuel, and timber. Later archeological research, including forensic examination of skeletal remains, has turned up no evidence for cannibalism or for a particularly bellicose society on Rapa Nui.

Something cataclysmic did happen to the Rapanui, but it was no great mystery, or shouldn't be. In the eighteen-sixties, an Irish entrepreneur named Joseph Charles Byrne proposed a solution to a growing problem facing the Peruvian economy. Plantations producing sugar, the red dye cochineal, and cotton, along with guano operations on coastal islands, needed labor, and the tightening constraints on slavery were making it harder to secure. Byrne suggested looking west, to Polynesia, where, he claimed, workers could be obtained cheaply. So began a round of slaving raids in Polynesia. Rapa Nui was especially attractive because of its relative proximity to South America. "Some 1,500 islanders were taken or killed," Pitts writes, "as the rest of the community hid in coastal caves and cowered inland." Byrne skirted formal bans on slavery by having captives sign work contracts—in Spanish, which they could not read—and selling the contracts rather than the people themselves. The slaving raids became a public-relations problem, anyway. They drew criticism in Chilean and Peruvian newspapers, and the French Ambassador in Lima made a fuss. The trade was halted, and ships carrying Polynesian laborers were ordered back.

By then, the damage was done. Some captives had come down with smallpox during an epidemic in Lima and carried it home, spreading it to others. After the crossings and the returns, according to Pitts, more than six thousand Polynesians died, with the Rapanui suffering the heaviest losses. By the late nineteenth century, Rapa Nui's population had fallen to a hundred and ten people, only twenty-six of them women.

Even so, the island drew outsiders seeking to save souls or make their fortune. First came Catholic missionaries from Europe, who found willing converts among a population still reeling from catastrophe. Then came Chile, which had a navy and a long coastline and was looking for a toehold in the Pacific; in 1888, it annexed Rapa Nui. (The island remains a Chilean province. In the Chilean Presidential elections that brought a law-and-order conservative to power last month, it voted for a leftist woman.) Then came the Chilean branch of Williamson, Balfour, a global firm founded by two Scotsmen with interests in everything from flour mills to railroads and oil fields in Chile and Peru. It alighted on Rapa Nui as the site for a sheep-farming enterprise. From the late nineteenth century to the nineteen-fifties, the island functioned, in effect, as a company state where, as Pitts observes,

the sheep got better treatment than the people, with the pastures as well watered as a golf course. The population slowly recovered, but most of the land was given over to grazing, and the remaining Rapanui were confined to a walled settlement. As a result, “generations of gardens, houses and monuments lay abandoned and inaccessible,” Pitts writes, and the practices that sustained historical memory were badly disrupted. Knowledge of the statues grew tenuous among survivors of the raids and their descendants.

After the Routledges returned to England, they gave lectures about and published their findings; Katherine wrote a well-received book about their expedition. She also retained reams of notes, interviews, transcripts, genealogies, and sketches, evidently intending to write up further studies. By the late nineteen-twenties, however, her marriage was foundering, and her mental health was in decline. In 1927, the couple agreed to separate. Living in a grand house overlooking Hyde Park, Katherine packed up Scoresby’s belongings, sent them to a warehouse, changed the locks, and left for Syria and Palestine.

When she returned, she withdrew almost entirely, barricading herself in her seventeen-room house. In 1929, Scoresby’s and Katherine’s siblings had her committed to a psychiatric hospital, where she would remain until her death, seven years later. She was diagnosed with “mania,” believed by her doctors to be hereditary (one of her brothers had spent his life in an asylum after attacking his wife), aggravated, according to the diagnosis, by her “spiritualism.” Katherine appears to have suffered from paranoia and, at times, auditory hallucinations—though not, it seems, during her years in the Pacific. She needed help. Even so, the outcome was undeniably sad: a woman whose life had been defined by travel, research, and writing was cut off from all three. In a 2003 biography of Katherine, “*Among Stone Giants*,” the archeologist Jo Anne van Tilburg writes that “there is no evidence she ever saw Scoresby again.” For long stretches, she was denied access to books and bridled against the monotony and regulation of institutional life. When she was granted limited freedom to pursue her interests, such as walking in the garden, she exceeded the agreed-on terms and told her doctors she had done so “on principle.”

Even worse, perhaps, the wishes Katherine had set out in her will—that her notes, manuscripts, sketches, and photographs be edited, published, and deposited in a public archive, under the supervision of Thomas Athol Joyce, at the British Museum, or some suitable substitute—were never carried out, even though she had left the means to pay for this work. Scoresby, living in Cyprus and in poor health, showed little interest, and after his death, in 1939, no one else took responsibility. The fact that Katherine had been institutionalized may have tainted her scholarly reputation.

But she is not quite the neglected figure Pitts suggests—there is van Tilburg’s biography, for one thing, and she is regularly cited among a cohort of formidable women archeologists of the early twentieth century. If her papers had been collected and published, they might not have overturned entrenched ideas about Rapa Nui as forcefully as Pitts hopes. He’s surely exaggerating when he writes, “It seemed to me that had Katherine Routledge’s research become fully public,” those reigning narratives “would never have been born.” After all, his whole book makes a strong case for their tenacious utility. Still, it’s a shame that the papers were not available to the archeologists and anthropologists who came looking for them later. And it’s satisfying to see her taken so seriously, by a writer whose indignation on her behalf nearly matches his impatience with the persistent misreading of the island itself.

Rapa Nui continues to generate serious research questions. One that has long absorbed archeologists concerns the movement of the moai: how statues weighing several tons were transported from the quarry where they were carved to their platforms. Some scholars favor a method preserved in Rapanui oral tradition in which the figures were kept upright and made to “walk,” rocked forward with ropes. Heyerdahl demonstrated the technique’s feasibility in the nineteen-eighties, and more recently Carl Lipo and Terry Hunt have done the same, though others still argue for sledges or rollers. The island, in other words, still inspires genuine wonder, which is something quite different from the manufactured mystery of a lost civilization. The real question we should be asking now, as Pitts suggests, is how a people forced to cope with an inauspicious habitat, enslavement, and exploitation managed to survive at all. ♦

Margaret Talbot joined *The New Yorker* as a staff writer in 2004. She is the author, with David Talbot, of “*By the Light of Burning Dreams: The Triumphs and Tragedies of the Second American Revolution.*”

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Musical Events

Morton Feldman's Music of Stillness

In his centenary year, the increasingly revered composer offers an uneasy refuge from the algorithmic din.

By [Alex Ross](#)

January 26, 2026



In his final decade, Feldman composed eerie, elemental pieces that were Wagnerian in length. Illustration by Hugo Guinness; Source photographs from HUM Images / Getty

“I really don’t feel that it’s all necessary anymore,” Morton Feldman told an interviewer in 1972. “And so what I try to bring into my music are just a very few essential things that I need—to at least keep it going, for a little while more.” Feldman had been asked whether his corpus of work, with its brooding slowness and trembling softness, had something to do with Jewish mourning in the wake of the Holocaust. He evaded the question, though he admitted that he thought about it privately. Instead, he gestured toward a

more abstract vanishing—what he called “the death of art,” or, more acutely, “Schubert leaving me.”

It’s still going. At the time of his death, in 1987, Feldman seemed destined to be remembered as a particularly esoteric associate of John Cage’s. His obituaries were preoccupied with the fact that some of his works were very long. But a cult was growing around him, and in the past few decades his influence on new music has become pervasive. The late Feldman archivist Chris Villars assembled a list of some two hundred and fifty pieces written in Feldman’s memory. Linda Catlin Smith, who wrote two of them, recently told the critic Tim Rutherford-Johnson that hearing Feldman “made me feel that writing music was possible, that I might be able to write music that I want to hear.” The homages continue to arrive: in 2022, Tyshawn Sorey wrote “Monochromatic Light (Afterlife),” which emulates Feldman’s shiver-inducing 1972 score “Rothko Chapel,” a musical response to Mark Rothko’s sepulchral shrine in Houston.

In an age of algorithmic din, Feldman’s appeal lies in his unhurried, monkish devotion to the elementals of sound. His output can be seen as a kind of wilderness preserve, in which stray fragments of musical history are allowed to roam free, without having to worry about adapting themselves to any modish system or sensibility. You encounter ambiguous piano chords that could have survived a charred sonata by Schubert; darkly sighing flute motifs that might have graced a quieter page of one of Schoenberg’s expressionist eruptions; cryptically tolling percussion tones out of late Stravinsky; static repetitions that nod toward minimalism. Each sound inhabits its own space, hardly touching the others. A canyon of silence envelops them all.

At first glance, Feldman might seem to be a prophet of the so-called slow movement, which calls for the savoring of simple pleasures. Yet his empire of quiet is undergirded by unease. As in the writing of Samuel Beckett, who supplied the libretto for Feldman’s only opera, “*Neither*,” gnomic utterances bear the scars of catastrophe. This is not music you can zone out to, unless the zone in question is the shimmering wasteland of Tarkovsky’s “*Stalker*.” An atmosphere of tension, even menace, circumscribes the sensuousness of

those lost Romantic chords. As another Jewish American sage once said, beauty walks a razor's edge.

Feldman's hundredth birthday was on January 12th. Little is being done on his behalf in New York City, where he was born and raised. But the University of Buffalo, where the composer taught for many years, mounted a two-day festival in his honor, and the Piano Spheres series, in Los Angeles, presented a pair of marathon concerts. I attended the latter, which culminated in the unveiling of a cake emblazoned with Philip Guston's portrait of Feldman—a bulbous figure puffing on a cigarette and gazing into the distance. I happen to share a birthday with the man of the hour. It was as good a way as any to mark the creep of age.

The Piano Spheres events, which were divided between the Wende Museum, in Culver City, and the Brick, in Koreatown, concentrated on the music of Feldman's final decade, when he largely gave up trying to produce works that could fit onto conventional programs. Thirteen of his scores from this period go on for more than an hour; two of them, "String Quartet II" and "For Philip Guston," each outlast "Tristan und Isolde." I sometimes suspect that Feldman seized on Wagnerian scale as a way of exacting revenge on Hitler's favorite composer. But the vastness was really about fostering conditions in which his spectral harmonies could thrive. Rothko needed to fill a room with his canvases; Feldman needed to fill an evening with his music.

Anchoring the proceedings were two seventy-five-minute-long creations for solo piano. Amy Williams played "Triadic Memories," from 1981, and Aron Kallay offered "For Bunita Marcus," from 1985. Both renditions were superb, though small divergences between them showed that Feldman's seemingly monolithic style leaves room for individual approaches. In his later years, he fashioned his music to suit his favorite interpreters—"like a tailor," he said. Writing for piano, he often had in mind the lustrous touch of Aki Takahashi, who, thirty years ago, gave a hypnotic, séance-like reading of "Triadic Memories" at the Lincoln Center Festival.

Williams grew up with Feldman in her ears. Her father, the percussionist Jan Williams, taught alongside the composer at Buffalo and participated in the premières of "Guston" and other major works. The younger Williams is

giving a number of Feldman performances this year, including one at Columbia's Miller Theatre, in March. "Triadic Memories" is a stark construction, even by Feldman's standards. For long stretches, the pianist picks out single notes rather than chords, although the pedal allows ghost harmonies to accumulate. The score is thick with repetition: figures are heard six, eight, ten times in succession. Williams knows how to humanize this bare-bones vocabulary, minutely adjusting the voicing of a chord or caressing the last of a set of recurring motifs with a regretful ritardando. Lightly syncopated patterns dance in place like Messiaen's birds. Feldman has seldom sounded so companionable.

Kallay, a professor at the Claremont Colleges, had never before essayed Feldman in public, although you wouldn't have known it from the phenomenal focus and finesse he applied to "For Bunita Marcus." This score, too, is remarkably threadbare. The first page has thirty-four notes in twenty-four bars. Kallay, like Williams, has a gift for infinitesimal variation: solitary high C's glitter like crystals being struck by shifting light. When, in a harmonic field that verges on the key of C-sharp minor, an E-sharp brings a major-ish gleam, Kallay underlined the shift just enough to make it feel like an epiphany. Yet his playing had an otherworldly serenity that contrasted with Williams's gentle purposefulness. His luminous tone filled the Brick, a recently converted gallery space with fine acoustics. Heightening the atmosphere was the presence of Kara Walker's sculpture "Unmanned Drone," a creative deconstruction of a statue of Stonewall Jackson that once stood in Charlottesville.

The Piano Spheres marathon also featured various works for chamber groups. Andrew McIntosh and Vicki Ray gave an especially striking rendition of "For John Cage," from 1982. McIntosh, a brilliant composer who has a sideline as a virtuoso early-music violinist, revelled in the microtonal shadings that Feldman built into his notation. In the modern equal-tempered system, the notes F, E-sharp, and G-double-flat are the same pitch; here, as in music of the Baroque era, they are slightly distinct, bringing out eerie flecks of intermediate color.

At the end of the first day, Ray and the Eclipse Quartet traversed "Piano and String Quartet," which was first heard at LACMA, in 1985. The piano plays

mostly arpeggios; the strings fixate for hundreds of bars on a pair of hazy four-note chords. Somehow, these unadorned devices are transformed into materials of aching emotional weight. Uncanny scenes may flicker through your mind. During the endlessly rocking harmonies of the closing section, I first pictured a baby in a cradle, then an old man taking his final breaths. When the last arpeggio sounded, I wanted it to keep going, for a little while more. ♦

Alex Ross has been *The New Yorker's* music critic since 1996, and also covers literature, history, and ecology, among other topics. He is the author of “[Wagnerism: Art and Politics in the Shadow of Music.](#)”

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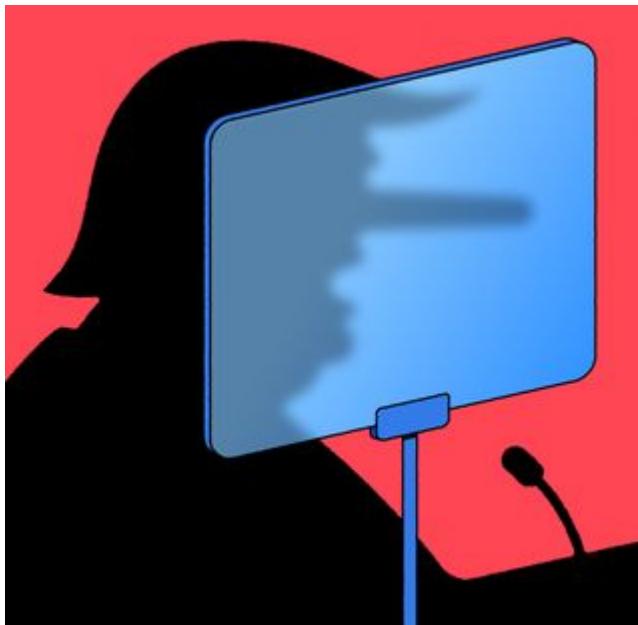
[On Television](#)

The Cruelty and Theatre of the Trump Press Conference

During the President's second term, he and his staff have made the media briefing his signature rhetorical form.

By [Vinson Cunningham](#)

January 24, 2026



Trump and his spokespeople have used the formerly staid tradition of speaking to the media to set forth their distorted vision of the future. Illustration by Till Lauer

On January 3rd, in Palm Beach, Florida, Donald Trump stood behind the lectern at a press conference, to regale members of the media about the capture of Nicolás Maduro, the Venezuelan President. Tan and hoarse, sloshing his syllables together imprecisely, Trump looked and sounded like someone who'd rushed away from a sedate moment of his vacation to take a work call. He gave a short speech about the operation in Caracas, sometimes looking up from his prepared text to offer seemingly impromptu annotations: "It was an assault like people have not seen since"—here he

took a pause, searching the air for an apt point of reference—“*World War Two.*” The military officers’ work there and in other recent actions was “all perfectly executed and done.”

You could tell that Trump found the mission just plain cool. “It was dark,” he said, narrating the adventure. “The lights of Caracas were largely turned off, due to a certain expertise that we have.” What expertise? He didn’t say. Conveying helpful information wasn’t really his aim. The point was to project his own power and, perhaps, to inspire in his listeners a pang of jealousy at his great big chest of war toys.

The Trump Administration, seizing upon the opportunity of untrammeled time to brag and hold attention and boldly reframe and bend the truth, has made the press conference its signature rhetorical form. Even more than in Trump’s famously long, digressive, “weaving” rally speeches, he and his spokespeople have used the formerly staid tradition of speaking to and taking questions from the media to set forth their distorted vision of the future—and, maybe more subtly, to let slip their estimation of the public. Throughout January, the members of the Trump regime welcomed the New Year by blitzing the podium: they took the chaos they’d created—the sudden power vacuum in Venezuela, the fatal incursions of ICE in Minnesota, a spun-up territorial crisis over Greenland—and tried to wrestle it into the shape of a story in which they would prevail.

On January 9th, still basking in the glory of his gangsterism in Venezuela, Trump gathered the press at the White House, where he’d convened a gaggle of oil-company C.E.O.s. The President’s personality resembles an id livid with tropes and types. He knows as well as anybody that the oil executive—tight-jawed and genteelly conservative—embodies ideas that play lastingly along the edges of the American imagination. Both Bushes spent time tapping Texas oil fields for crude before successfully running for President—as much to establish strong images as to earn a family fortune. These are the ultimate capitalists, pecking ruggedly at the earth’s skin and turning its lifeblood into piles of cash. The men surrounding Trump were the kinds of guys he always seems to want to impress.

Now Trump, having asserted control over Venezuela’s resources as well as its immediate political fate—an arrogation he has taken to calling the

“Donroe Doctrine”—had something to offer them. He started to deliver his remarks without having turned on the microphone in front of him; his Vice-President, J. D. Vance, leaned over unstealthily and pressed a button that activated the audio and made a green light on the microphone glow. Trump didn’t skip a beat. Now amplified, he was already midsentence, rushing off urgently, like a burbling river. Leaders of all the “biggest” countries had called to congratulate him about nabbing Maduro. “They’re all impressed,” he said, implying that the oil guys should be, too.

Playacting for journalists standing in an unruly huddle just off camera, Trump asked questions of the oilmen, wondering how soon they could suck the ground under Venezuela dry. “And you’re very much set up for the heavy oil, right?” he asked at one point. There was an implicit cruelty behind the exercise. He wanted the cameras to see him place Venezuela on the table like a celebratory goose and start slicing.

The White House press-briefing room, a small theatre for an increasingly sick show, sits atop what used to be a swimming pool. The pool was installed during the Administration of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who swam to maintain his strength after his paralysis. Today, the room is the central site of the Trump Administration’s ritual humiliation of the American media. Karoline Leavitt, the White House press secretary, presides over the space, transmitting the spleen and the constantly shifting imperatives of the President.

She’s good at the job. Some press secretaries show hints of strain, managing the dual tasks of carrying the boss’s message and playing it straight with the press. Leavitt—who ran for Congress, in 2022, and lost—betrays no such struggle. She has a placid, open face and often, when she’s in a jovial mood, jokes around behind the lectern. When a wonky issue like health care comes up, she tends to read deftly and quickly from a sheet of talking points. When one of the President’s favored hot-button issues arises, she speaks fluently off the cuff, as she did recently when describing undocumented people being hunted by ICE as “criminal illegal-alien killers, rapists, and pedophiles.”

Even when Leavitt is acting enraged, she does so with a small smile. Case in point: a fracas with Niall Stanage, a columnist from *The Hill*, who

wanted to know how the Administration could possibly believe that *ICE*'s activity was going "correctly," as the President had enthused, when, for instance, one of its officers had been filmed shooting and killing Renee Nicole Good.

Leavitt took on the strict tone of a teacher: "Why was, uh, Renee Good unfortunately and tragically killed?"

"You're asking me my opinion?" Stanage asked.

"Yeah!"

"Because an *ICE* agent acted recklessly and killed her unjustifiably."

Leavitt pounced. "Oh, O.K., so you're a biased reporter with a left-wing opinion." She said "left-wing opinion"—referring to an opinion she'd solicited just a second ago—with a slight, taunting singsong in her voice. She continued, "Yeah, because you're a left-wing hack, you're not a reporter, you're posing in this room as a journalist, and it's so clear by the premise of your question. And you and the people in the media who have such biases but fake like you're a journalist—you shouldn't even be sitting in that seat."

This short diatribe, delivered with a raised voice (but, still, that smile) was a characteristic sample of the Administration's verbal style. Its members apply names and labels—illegal, criminal, alien, left-wing, agitator—in order to dehumanize the people to whom those words are supposed to refer. If you fit into this ever-growing lexicon of categories, you shouldn't have your job, or sit in your seat, or try to protect your neighbors, or even, in Good's "unfortunately and tragically" illustrative case, be left alive.

A few days earlier, Vance had given a press conference to shame the media about its reporting on Good and her killer, Jonathan Ross, and to slant the story in a more Trump-friendly direction. Vance showed off a way with words quite similar to Leavitt's, and to Trump's. He made sure to note that Minnesota was under siege by fraud, perpetrated mostly by "Somali immigrants." Without the benefit of a thorough investigation, he nonetheless asserted that Good had been trying to ram Ross with her car,

called her a “deranged leftist,” and, admitting that her death was a tragedy, deemed it “a tragedy of the far left.” So many names for nonpersons, emitted with such ease!

And yet Trump doesn’t always sound so pleased with the promotional efforts of his team. On January 20th, to mark a year since he retook office, the President made a guest appearance at Leavitt’s briefing. She’d teased the spot on her X account with QVC-ish good cheer: “A very special guest will be joining me at the podium today. . . . TUNE IN! 🎧🇺🇸.”

Trump showed up with a thick sheaf of papers, listing the “accomplishments” of the year. He’d turned the United States into the “hottest country anywhere in the world” and wanted to get some credit. “We’ve had the best stock market in history,” he said. “I mean, I’m not getting—maybe I have bad public-relations people, but we’re not getting it across.” ♦

Vinson Cunningham is a staff writer at *The New Yorker*. His début novel is “[Great Expectations](#).”

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[The Current Cinema](#)

Challenging Official Histories in “Natchez” and “Mr. Nobody Against Putin”

Two stunning new documentaries—one filmed in Mississippi, and one in Russia—examine the ways that education comes up against indoctrination.

By [Richard Brody](#)

January 23, 2026



Suzannah Herbert’s film, about the Mississippi River town of Natchez, depicts tour guides whose accounts of antebellum houses embody conflicting ideas of the South’s past. Illustration by Michael Kennedy

There’s history wherever you look, but it takes a filmmaker’s eye and ear to extract its substance from beneath its surface, which is what Suzannah Herbert does in “Natchez,” her new documentary. Natchez, a Mississippi River town of about fourteen thousand residents, is popular with tourists, who come to see its meticulously restored antebellum houses, especially during a pair of annual “pilgrimages” featuring guided tours that are long on nostalgia and short on history. From 2022 to 2024, Herbert filmed several such tours, often led by the homeowners themselves, most of whom are white, including some who can trace their family’s occupancy to before the Civil War. She also filmed Natchez tours led by Black residents of the

area, who tell stories very different from those of their white counterparts, offering correctives to the town's sanitized mythology of itself. By way of these divergent perspectives, Herbert's film not only identifies local social fractures but also reflects a national moment when white rage is ascendant and the President has issued an executive order (with the Orwellian title "Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History") that has led to the bowdlerization of National Park Service exhibits and websites involving slavery.

"Natchez," a wide-ranging mosaic of cinematic portraiture, bears out a strange truth about nonfiction filmmaking: it's as much a matter of casting as fiction is. The documentary puts personalities to ideas; it teems with notable characters, spanning a range from righteous to indifferent to ignoble, who excel at speaking their minds and expressing their emotions when a camera is pointed at them. The events that Herbert films are undated; the movie only hints at chronology, and its dramatic arc is a surprising one, revealing a change of consciousness by way of changes of circumstance. From the start, the filmmaker, working with the editor Pablo Proenza, establishes two main characters, both born in 1964: Tracy McCartney, a white woman who volunteers at a lavishly restored house called Choctaw Hall, greeting people while wearing a nineteenth-century-style hoop skirt, and Tracy Collins, a Black man who is the pastor of a Baptist church and also gives tours of the town, driving visitors around in his passenger van.

At Choctaw Hall, McCartney tells guests how the tradition she's a part of got started: the town, made wealthy by cotton, suffered a boll-weevil infestation in the early nineteen-hundreds and gradually fell on hard times. Seeing venerable houses in disrepair, a pair of women's volunteer groups founded in the late twenties—the Natchez Garden Club and the Pilgrimage Garden Club—launched the preservation mission and inaugurated the tours. Collins, who goes by the nickname of Rev, expressly states that his program is to "violate some Southern-pride narratives with truths and facts." On his tours, he says, "You can't talk about cotton without talking about slaves." At one point in the film, McCartney, who has just got divorced and can no longer afford to volunteer as a guide, joins one of Rev's tours and hears him talk about Reconstruction, Jim Crow, and ongoing forms of white

supremacy. “He said some things that made me think about it a little bit differently,” she says.

Rev displays the rhetorical power, leavened with humor and warmth, of a skilled public speaker, but many others are charismatic, too. There’s Deborah Cosey, the first Black member of the Pilgrimage Garden Club—who says that the garden clubs had long been “slaps in the face to the African American community”—and the owner of an antebellum house known as the Concord Quarters. An unadorned brick building, it housed enslaved people and has a kitchen where many of them once worked. Cosey was formerly a guide at a historic inn in the town and was ordered to “stick to the script” when she insisted on mentioning the inn’s slave quarters; today, as she says, “I wrote my own script.” There’s David Garner, an elderly white homeowner and guide who is also a brazen and unabashed racist, using the N-word on tours, even after being “reprimanded” for “inappropriate words” and forced to censor himself by the “hoop-skirt mafia.” Garner is gay and claims that “half” of the historic-home owners are gay men, the only people, he says, with “the money and the taste” to maintain the properties. Rev, who’s been on Garner’s tours, wonders whether Garner is merely “trying to portray a Southern aristocratic gentleman, how they would talk.” He adds, “Maybe you can see if there’s a real him or is *that* the real him?”

White tourists describe visiting these sumptuous, old-fashioned properties as a way to “get away from current events,” and the film’s poised cinematography, by Noah Collier, captures the enveloping allure of these pristinely preserved grand dwellings. But current events are inextricable from the subject of “Natchez,” perhaps all the more so in the months since the movie premiered, at the Tribeca Film Festival. The federal government is a conspicuous presence in the film, because the National Park Service owns an antebellum house, and a ranger who works there, Barney Schoby, goes into great detail regarding the daily lives of people who were enslaved, including how knowledge that some surreptitiously gleaned during their labors helped them prosper under Reconstruction. The N.P.S. also owns another Natchez site, called Forks of the Road, which, for a time, was the second-largest American slave market. The N.P.S. is attempting to purchase all the former land of the market in order to turn it into one of the country’s

principal slave-market museums—but the owners of some sites don’t want to sell, and one, a white man named Gene Williams, is derisive about the project.

The person mainly responsible for the Forks of the Road preservation and historical research, according to Schoby, is an elderly Black man named Ser Boxley. Boxley, seen all too briefly onscreen, is one of the most extraordinary presences in the recent cinema. He describes his activism in mystical terms: “The enslaved ancestors here asked the question, Who is going to tell *their* story? And I said I would.” An unnamed white ranger who openly seeks to end the whitewashing of history says, “I see him as a Biblical prophet,” someone who is “pointing out to the status quo that they were not fulfilling their mission of justice.” The grandeur of Boxley’s influence is conveyed by his terse, oracular speech. When Cosey first met him, in a store, he mentioned her purchase of the Concord Quarters and said, simply, “These buildings are worthy of preservation.” To watch Herbert’s film is like watching a report on a place that has subsequently been besieged. It’s hard to imagine the N.P.S., under the Trump Administration, advancing the educational program that’s on heroic view in “Natchez.” Herbert may have preserved more history than she ever expected.

The power of governments to replace education with indoctrination is the subject of another remarkable new documentary, “Mr. Nobody Against Putin,” which likewise features characters who, at the end of filming, are at risk. It’s a first-person narrative relating the experiences and observations of Pavel (Pasha) Talankin, who, as a videographer at a school in the Russian town of Karabash, about a thousand miles east of Moscow, was directly affected by his country’s invasion of Ukraine, in February, 2022. Quickly, the school received directives “from above” requiring teachers to install a new “patriotic” curriculum and students to perform nationalistic songs and speeches—all of which Talankin had to record on video, as proof that the school was following orders. Talankin, an independent-minded opponent of the war, who had turned his office into a “pillar of democracy” where students could gather and speak freely, submitted a letter of resignation.

Soon after, however, he made online contact with David Borenstein, an American filmmaker based in Denmark, who wanted to document the war's impact on daily life in Russia. Talankin, realizing that history was unfolding before his eyes, promptly withdrew his resignation. Now he could fulfill his official duties—recording marches, flag-waving parades, grenade-throwing competitions, and educational visits from Wagner Group mercenaries—while also amassing footage for Borenstein. In the film, he reflects wryly that he is no longer just a videographer but also a film director.

Talankin bears witness to the conscription of young men and mourns the combat deaths of some of them, and he ruefully recognizes the effectiveness of propaganda. With dogma filling school days, students aren't being educated and are left intellectually unprepared for much but obedience. He hears President Vladimir Putin declaring, on TV, "Teachers win wars," and redefining opposition as treason. When Talankin notices a police car parked at his apartment building, he decides to leave Russia. Pretending merely to go on vacation, he takes with him much more footage for Borenstein to assemble. The result, featuring a copious voice-over by Talankin, is an exemplary work of cinematic modernism, a reflexive film that turns its genesis into its subject and its moral essence. "Mr. Nobody Against Putin" relentlessly dramatizes its most exceptional aspect—the very fact that it was made. ♦

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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Poems

- **“Where Is the Shrine to Johnny Shines?”**

“It should be thistle-covered, / a labor of thunder bent / through it.”

- **“Mami at Her Vanity”**

“I watched as she tried on faces / before an evening out.”

[Poems](#)

Where Is the Shrine to Johnny Shines?

By [Tyehimba Jess](#)

January 26, 2026

April 26, 1915–April 20, 1992

It should be thistle-covered,
a labor of thunder bent
through it.

It should fountain sweet-
water arcs into catfish-
mouthing bottlenecks.

It should flock blackbirds
into halos about it.

It should be wrapped in guitar
string and whistle
wind up in its branched
hair of calamitous thorn.

Above all, a rose
carried in a pocket
at least a hundred miles.

Beneath all, a 33-r.p.m.
orbit of diamond-cut
tremble. Surrounding all,
the record skipping on
at least a dozen echoing
country yodels.

I ask again:
Where is the shrine
to Johnny Shines?

I peeked into the
dark covering my eyes
with its ethereal hands,
and then only then
did I hear.

Tyehimba Jess is the author of “[Olio](#),” which won the 2017 Pulitzer Prize for Poetry, and “[Leadbelly](#).”

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[Poems](#)

Mami at Her Vanity

By [Julia Alvarez](#)

January 26, 2026

Ciudad Trujillo, 1950s

I watched as she tried on faces
before an evening out—a charity ball,
a fiesta de cumpleaños, a command
reception in the dictator's honor—
dabbing, brushing, preparing
her company face to put on display,
the darkened brows, the red mouth
drawn on her mouth, the familiar,
beloved face already slipping away
to belong to the world, turning this
way and that in the three-panelled
vanity mirror, in which I could also
see my face, cupped in my hands,
studying her, touching, retouching,
never satisfied, trying to find a face
to mask the faces that couldn't
be shown, faces I knew by heart,
gauging her moods, the daily weather
of her expressions, like a bankrupt farmer
watching the rain clouds bank; faces
she brushed over, colored and covered up:
the face of terror at the news of a cousin shot,
an uncle's body found in a wrecked car;
the punishment face enraged at the will I had,
locking me up in the closet until I sobbed,
promising to be good if she let me out;

the nostril-flaring face of a swallowed laugh
over a joke she couldn't share with us;
or the playful face of a girl reaching
to hold my hand, skip rope, climb trees,
whispering tales of what would become of us;
or the private face turned inward,
the curtains drawn: *I belong to myself alone.*
So many faces surfacing on her face.
I wonder now which was her true face,
the one I kept waiting for, the one
that might tell me who she was, I was,
what we were here to do, making,
unmaking, draft after draft,
until we had found the face
we had before we were born,
the face of her absence now,
only memory's mirror can recall.

This is drawn from “[Visitations](#).”

Julia Alvarez is the subject of a PBS “American Masters” documentary. Her books include the poetry collection “[Visitations](#)” (2026).

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Puzzles & Games

- **[The Crossword: Monday, January 26, 2026](#)**

A challenging puzzle.

[Crossword](#)

The Crossword: Monday, January 26, 2026

A challenging puzzle.

By [Natan Last](#)

January 26, 2026

Loading game...

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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