## The Great Trespass.

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The signs on the gate at the entrance to the path and along the edge of the reservoir were clear. ''No swimming,'' they warned, white letters on a red background.

On a chill mid-April day in northwest England, with low, gray clouds and rain in the forecast, the signs hardly seemed necessary. But then people began arriving, by the dozens and then the hundreds. Some walked only from nearby Hayfield, while others came by train or bus or foot from many hours away. In a long, trailing line, they tramped up the hill beside the dam and around the shore of the reservoir, slipping in mud and jumping over puddles. Above them rose a long, curving hill of open moorland, its heather still winter brown. When they came to a gap between a stone wall and a metal fence, they squeezed through it, one by one, slipping under strings of barbed wire toward the water below.

On the steep grassy bank above the reservoir, coats and sweaters came off, revealing wet suits and swimsuits. Thermoses of tea and hot chocolate were readied for quick access; someone had brought along a banged-up trumpet with which to provide the appropriate fanfare. There were seasoned winter swimmers, people who had stories of breaking through ice for a dip, and complete newbies, deciding as they shivered whether this particular symbolic act was really for them. There was a 7-year-old who swam in a knit beanie with a purple pom-pom and a man with a Yorkshire accent who told his wife, in mock horror, ''I had to ask a strange woman to zip me up, Mary!''

Down on the shore, giggling and shrieking people picked their way across slippery rocks. Then, with a great deal of cheering and splashing, they took to the water en masse, fanning out in all directions. Some carried a large banner that read, ''The Right to Swim.''

The water was somewhere around 50 degrees Fahrenheit, but it felt, a 61-year-old swimmer announced after climbing out and wrapping up again, ''bloody wonderful.'' She handed her sister a Cheddar-and-Branston-Pickle sandwich and told me she usually hates encountering crowds when they go swimming but that this one was delightful.

More rounds of cheers went up as new waves of swimmers splashed into the water. An older woman wearing a pink floral swimsuit paused on the shore to turn to the crowd still on land. ''Don't be beaten down!'' she shouted, raising a fist above her flower-bedecked bathing cap. ''Rebel!'' Then she, too, flopped into the lake.

On the bank above the reservoir, a choir serenaded the swimmers:

''He said 'All this land is my master's,'at that I stood shaking my headNo man has the right to own mountains,any more than the deep ocean bed.''

The song, by the folk singer Ewan McColl, was about another mass trespass, one that took place 91 years earlier above this very reservoir, during which protesters were arrested for daring to walk on hills they were told to keep off. Over the decades that followed, the protesters' contention that people had some inherent rights of access even to lands they did not own -- which in England is most land, because the vast majority of the country is in private hands -- was enshrined in law, guaranteeing public access to this and many other parts of the countryside.

Lately, though, the swimmers told me, those hard-won gains had begun to seem both less expansive and less secure than they once imagined. During the pandemic, many took up open-water swimming or paddling or walking, only to be surprised at the number of places they weren't allowed to go. (The reservoir, owned by a private utility company even though it is inside the Peak District National Park, was one such place: England's national parks are full of land that is privately owned -- and inhabited, farmed, mined and hunted.) The government began to push to criminalize forms of trespass never before considered to be crimes. Then, in January, the High Court sided with a wealthy couple who wanted to keep the public from camping on an estate they bought inside Dartmoor National Park, in an area called the Commons, the only place in England where wild camping, what we would call backpacking, was still considered a right. Robert Macfarlane, the English nature writer, called the ruling a nationwide wake-up call: Only when ''the last relic of a long-lost openness'' was threatened did it become clear just how much was at stake.

Like the trespassers whose anniversary they were commemorating, the swimmers believed they were fighting for something bigger than the chance to walk up a hill or swim in a river -- something fundamental about their relationship to the land where they lived.

''It's not so much that we need to be granted permission,'' explained a woman with long gray hair and a sweatshirt that read, ''Kayaking Is Not a Crime.'' ''It's that we need it to be recognized that we don't need permission.''

Centuries ago, high moors like those of Kinder Scout, the plateau that stretched above the reservoir, were considered King's Land, uncultivated areas to which access was free. In the villages below, land was often claimed by the aristocracy and gentry, who collected taxes from the peasants who worked it, but many villagers, called commoners, held shared rights to ''common'' land, where they could graze their animals or plant crops or gather firewood.

This type of land disappeared rapidly during the enclosure movement of the 18th and 19th centuries, when the wealthy claimed wild and common lands -- lands that, as the jurist William Blackstone put it, previously belonged ''generally to everybody, but particularly to nobody'' -- as their own. The movement leaned on the work of philosophers such as John Locke, who argued that people could gain ownership of ''waste'' lands by working and improving them. But there were others who believed that separating people from the land was a gross injustice. ''What crimes, wars, murders, what miseries and horrors, would the human race have been spared,'' wrote Jean-Jacques Rousseau, ''by someone who, pulling up the stakes or filling in the ditch, had cried out to his fellow humans: 'Beware of listening to this impostor. You are lost if you forget that the fruits are everyone's and the earth's is no one's!'''

As enclosure spread, many former users of the land were pushed out. With no way to make a living, they drifted to cities. Kinder is not far from Manchester and Sheffield, two early centers of the Industrial Revolution, whose residents liked to escape the choking air by going on long walks in the countryside. But many of the landowners who controlled the hills weren't fond of having walkers, known as ramblers, exploring properties they used for raising sheep and hunting grouse. They hired armies of gamekeepers, who sometimes used attack dogs, to kick the ramblers out.

Some ramblers, in their city lives, were involved in trade unions and other labor movements, and they began to bring the same spirit of organization and protest to their weekend walks. (As the most shoutable line of the McColl song has it, ''I may be a wage slave on Monday/But I am a free man on Sunday!'') The land they were walking might be private property, they argued, but its owners weren't the only ones with the right to use it: English law acknowledges that a right can be established through long custom, and the walkers were following ancient paths and bridle ways onto upland that had only recently been privatized.

Some walkers began holding rallies and undertaking purposeful trespasses in places where they knew they would be ejected. This had been going on for decades when, in April 1932, a rambler named Benny Rothman alerted the press that he and others would be heading up past the reservoir to the plateau above it, an area owned by the Duke of Devonshire. Hundreds of ramblers tussled with keepers, making national headlines. Six were arrested and five sentenced to as much as six months in jail.

At the time, England was home to a number of groups working to protect commons, parks and walking trails as part of what the campaigner Octavia Hill, at an 1888 meeting of what eventually became the Open Spaces Society (O.S.S.), called ''a common possession we ought to try to hand down undiminished in number and in beauty.'' Most saw the trespassers' actions as counterproductive. Eventually, however, the Kinder Trespass became what the O.S.S. now calls ''a sacred event in rambling circles,'' and its leaders' beliefs were more widely embraced. Beginning in the 1940s, Parliament began to codify the idea that people had an inherent right to move across the landscape, culminating in the Countryside Rights of Way (CROW) Act, in 2000. The act recognized the right not only to use designated paths but also to roam freely on certain mountains, moors, heaths and downs mapped as ''open country'' or on land registered as common. In 2009, the Marine and Coastal Access Act designated the shore as access land as well and promised an additional 2,700 miles of coastal footpaths.

Today there are about 140,000 miles of legally protected paths in England, and the countryside is full of signs marking public footpaths or rights of way. I found them leading past fields of rapeseed or sheep, along a creek that flowed behind the walls of private gardens, through woods to a country pub. The first time I encountered such a sign, it marked a charming little trail leading over a brook at the end of the lane where I was staying in Little Hayfield. I had other plans for the morning and only meant to take a tiny walk, but suddenly I couldn't help myself: Having grown up in rural Tennessee, where the ''No Trespassing'' signs were so ubiquitous as to hardly be necessary, I was overcome by the mere fact of permission. Here was a path, to who knew where, on which I was decidedly welcome -- not just welcome, in fact, but entitled. It would have felt almost disrespectful to ignore it.

To an American, traversing the land in rural England can feel a bit like looking in a fun-house mirror -- a system just different enough that it forces you to see your own expectations in a new way. Some of the people I met in England had heard that the United States has a lot of public land, which is true. But access to it depends a lot on where you live; nearly all federal land is in just 11 Western states and Alaska. (And even there, the courts are still working out what ''public'' really means, mulling, for example, when anglers are allowed to walk on public streambeds that run through private property or whether hunters can cross ''private airspace'' by using a ladder to get from one checkerboard square of public land to another.) Others had heard that the United States is a warren of private lands, governed by threatening signs and stand-your-ground laws: The week of the swim trespass, the news back home was full of stories of people being shot after accidentally driving up the wrong driveway or knocking on the wrong door. Kate Rew, the founder of England's Outdoor Swimming Society, remembered with shock when she arrived at the Pacific, eager to swim, but couldn't find a beach that wasn't private property. Another activist, Owen Hayman, told some friends he was visiting in Montana that he was headed out for a walk and was surprised when they replied that they would first need to drive him somewhere. A farmer I met in Gloucestershire, who thought the English already had plenty of access to his land, nonetheless seemed to sympathize with my plight as an American: ''You can't go anywhere, can you?''

After following that first right-of-way sign, I stumbled on a spring full of plump tadpoles and followed a red-striped bumblebee from flower to flower. I thought about how nice the word ''ramble'' was, how it evoked wandering and whimsy and openness instead of the determined, point-to-point rush of the American ''hike.'' I navigated a brief standoff with a pair of rams, soaked my feet in a boggy cow pasture and skirted private houses. One resident nodded politely from behind a sign, ''Please respect our privacy,'' that I liked rather better than the sign one of my mother's neighbors in the United States displays on her mailbox: ''If you can read this, you're in range.''

I emerged at the top of a hill called Lantern Pike, said to have gotten its name because it once served as a place to light beacon fires. In one direction, I could see the buildings of Manchester, and in the other, the long brown line of Kinder Scout, notched in the middle where a waterfall tumbles down. Below it were fields of bright green pasture squared in by dark stone walls.

A little over a decade ago, a young illustrator named Nick Hayes was staying with his parents in West Berkshire, not far from London, while he worked on a graphic novel. One day, walking near a lightning-struck willow, he spotted a kingfisher, the first he ever saw. He hoped to show it to his mother, but as they approached the tree, a man on a four-wheeler raced over, announcing: ''You've no right to be here. You're trespassing.''

The pair immediately turned around. Hayes walked home, struck by the power of that single word. He typed ''trespass'' into a search engine, surprised to learn that his actions were merely a civil offense, typically punishable only in the case of property damage, and that trespass hadn't always been considered an offense at all. The more he read, the more Hayes began to believe that the building of a wall, not the climbing of it, was the bigger crime. He began working on a book about what he was learning, taking himself on small trespasses around the country, climbing over the walls of large estates or slipping past them by kayak. Sometimes there was shouting, sometimes threats. Everywhere he found reminders of a long, ever-evolving relationship with the land. It was in the land use (the fox hunts and deer parks of the wealthy) and in the literature (all that wide-open walking in Tolkien and Wordsworth) and in the language: ''Beyond the pale'' originates from the Middle English word for fence, and acre comes from the Old English for ''open field,'' though the word eventually stopped meaning unoccupied land and came to define standardized measures by which land could be bought and sold.

''You can chuck a stone in England, and there's a story of land dispossession wherever it lands,'' Hayes told me when I first spoke to him last year. Fencing people off from nature, he believed, caused each to suffer: People felt bereft and disconnected, and problems like pollution or biodiversity loss became less visible, harder to care about. Hayes became convinced that society put too much emphasis on the sacredness of private property and the accompanying threat of trespass. Kinder Trespass was evidence of that: ''To cheer a man for walking through heather and likewise to beat him up for it are both absurdly disproportionate to the act itself,'' he wrote. ''But inside the logic of the bubble, such an act is tantamount to anarchy, because it threatens the spell.''

In this context, even the CROW Act began to look less like a victory for the public and more like a consolation prize that disguised how much had already been lost.

The right of way officially applies only to movement; paths are for walking (and bridle ways for riding), not for camping or picnicking or drawing or hula-hooping. Paths and access land are concentrated in the least populated rural regions and are scarce where most people live. Many protected areas are difficult to navigate. (People who spend time in the countryside rely on detailed maps from the government to figure out where they are or aren't allowed to walk. Echoing their military heritage, they're called O.S., or Ordnance Survey, maps.) Some places offer no real access, because they are islands floating in a sea of private property -- you would need a helicopter or a parachute to get to them -- while others require constant vigilance to keep open. In one famous case, a company associated with the tycoon Nicholas van Hoogstraten, who was known for his involvement in the killing of a business rival and once referred to ramblers as ''scum of the Earth,'' erected buildings and fences that blocked a protected right of way in East Sussex. The path was closed for 13 years before Hoogstraten lost in court and Kate Ashbrook, a former chairwoman of the Ramblers and now general secretary of the O.S.S., reopened the path by taking a pair of bolt cutters to a padlocked gate.

The CROW Act was also time-limited; there is likely less than a decade left during which new access paths can be certified. But the process for adding them is byzantine. To certify a right of way, you have to prove that you've never asked a landowner for permission to walk there (which turns a right into a retractable handout); that you have used it for at least 20 years (an accepted stand-in for proof that a right has been earned by virtue of being exercised since ''time immemorial,'' a period which, because of quirks of English law, officially ended with the death of Henry II in 1189); and that you and others have used the path openly without your right to do so being challenged. Open-access land cannot have been ''improved'' by agriculture, proof of which often requires expensive certifications by botanists. This can lead to absurdity, says Ashbrook, who likes to walk up a hill near her house in the Chilterns. It looks the same all over, but because of what Ashbrook described as ''botanical issues of great detail,'' only one side qualified as access land, open for rambling. The other is closed.

To Hayes, it seemed as if all these technicalities undercut the rights that the CROW Act was supposed to enshrine. They made clear that the rules about who owned what and who could go where were cultural and historical artifacts, not laws of nature. They were just choices.

Another approach was visible just across the border. In 2003, the Scottish Parliament passed a land-reform bill that recognized the uncontested right to walk, camp, cycle, swim, canoe and perform any other form of nonmotorized exploration throughout the country. Known as the ''right to roam,'' it came with a code of responsibilities: Access didn't apply to private gardens immediately around houses or to fields in active cultivation, and people were expected to clean up their litter and dog poop, to cook on stoves instead of open fires, to avoid rock climbing near nesting birds, to close gates behind them and so on. But it was clear and direct and not even unique to Scotland. Similar systems had long been in place in other European countries, including Finland, Norway, Iceland, Austria, Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, the Czech Republic and Switzerland. In some cases, the right was considered so old and so fundamental, so obvious, that for a long time no one bothered to codify it. In Sweden, the tourism board developed an ad campaign around the allure of what the country calls allemansrätten, or everyman's right. ''It's a right protected by the law that allows me to sleep and eat and walk pretty much wherever I want,'' the voice-over explains. ''Now you can, too.''

As Hayes began researching land ownership, he came across the work of Guy Shrubsole, an environmental campaigner who, in an effort to find out who owned the land whose management practices he was worried about, had spent years filing records requests and poring over maps, writing a blog and later a book called ''Who Owns England?'' In answering the question, Shrubsole painted a stark picture of inequality and secrecy: Only 5 percent of the country was owned by ordinary householders. Large chunks were held by corporations and by the aristocracy and gentry, often following boundaries that were relics of the land divisions and gifts made after the Norman Conquest in 1066. (The Land Registry does not track land using these categories.) ''A few thousand dukes, baronets and country squires own far more land than all of middle England put together,'' Shrubsole wrote. He cited a remark by the late Duke of Westminster, who advised aspiring entrepreneurs in Britain to ''make sure they have an ancestor who was a very close friend of William the Conqueror.'' If you wanted to know how much of England's land offered no right of access, even to ramblers, even after the CROW Act, the answer was 92 percent.

''Property,'' Shrubsole told me, ''isn't really a thing. It's a bundle of rights,'' a series of possible actions that are associated with tracts of land but that can be severed, bought, sold and expanded or curtailed by the specific legal codes that govern that land. This was why you hear people speak of mineral rights or surface rights or water rights or commoners' rights or treaty rights, which in the United States often include ongoing rights to fish, hunt and gather on land that tribes no longer control. ''Part of that bundle of rights in England for the last several hundred years has been the right to exclude other people from your land,'' Shrubsole says. ''The thing is, that's not always the case in every country, and even in other liberal, capitalist democracies.''

England had exported its view of private property to much of the world, but it also had its own long history of resistance to privatization. (Notable examples include the Diggers, who seized a hill in Surrey in 1649, planting crops and declaring to the gentry, ''The earth was not made purposely for you, to be Lords of it, and we to be your Slaves, Servants and Beggers, but it was made to be a common Livelihood of all.'') ''Sure, you can have private property,'' Shrubsole says. ''But does it always have to be on such extreme terms that you can't share it with anyone else?''

In late 2019, the Conservative Party was elected in a landslide and proposed charging unpermitted campers with criminal trespass. Hayes and Shrubsole started a petition opposing the idea. It received enough signatures to trigger a debate in Parliament, but the bill continued to move forward. Shrubsole remembers sitting with Hayes around a kitchen table in London, wondering what to do next -- how to convince their country that access to the land was a right worth fighting for.

Shortly afterward, Covid hit. Lockdowns were strict in England, where illicit parties were enough to eventually bring down a once-popular prime minister. Indoor gathering places shut down, and outdoor exercise, which was allowed only once a day and only in the area where a person lived, became precious. Catherine Flitcroft, of the British Mountaineering Council, told me that across the country, ''the outdoors became the new pub and the new playground,'' a lifeline for people who felt trapped and alone.

But many soon found that a frustrating amount of the countryside was closed off to them. Paths that people had assumed to be legal rights of way turned out to be only permissive paths; landowners, overwhelmed by the surge of eager walkers, some of whom left large messes behind, could and did revoke access. Swimmers, canoers, climbers and kayakers struggled to understand where they were allowed to go, because many landowners maintained that ownership of a lakefront or riverbed included a right to exclude people from ''their'' section of water. Though it was illegal to block public paths with gates or fences, or to hide signs designating them as such, or put up new ones threatening dangerous dogs or bulls, would-be walkers told me that they encountered all of this. And community leaders from marginalized groups pointed out that many barriers to access were invisible: People were often dissuaded from rambling at all because they had good reason to fear the outcome if they ended up somewhere they weren't allowed to be.

During that first Covid summer, Hayes's account of his explorations, ''The Book of Trespass,'' was released. The book argued that the hard-won public paths, in enshrining some rights, forestalled others: ''They simultaneously legitimize the space that is off limits.'' It soon became a best seller. Hayes and Shrubsole set up a campaign website, encouraging people to make their own respectful trespasses into areas that were closed off to them. They also started to work with other organizers to call for a full, Scottish-style ''right to roam'' in England.

''Our desire to access nature,'' they wrote, ''should not be a crime.''

The first trespasses were small: groups of friends poring over local maps, considering the land around them in new ways. In Totnes, the town in Devon where Shrubsole lives, he and a few others explored Berry Pomeroy, a nearby estate owned by the Duke of Somerset. There was a permissive footpath through one section, but though the estate dominates the landscape and though it receives taxpayer subsidies, they had never seen the rest. The woods turned out to be full of pheasants -- nonnative game birds imported to Britain each year by the tens of millions for shooting.

In Devon, local people began holding trespasses every month. As Hayes did while writing his book, they stayed well away from houses and stuck to actions that would be considered trespasses in England but legal in Scotland. Lewis Winks, a researcher and environmental campaigner who helped organize the gatherings, told me that it felt like being a detective in your own backyard: You were figuring out who owned what and why and suddenly realizing that there was a great deal more land around than you ever visited or even really noticed. Moving in a group, you felt empowered, almost immune to signs telling you that you didn't belong. You also noticed, he added, that a country that some politicians liked to describe as full or overcrowded, and therefore in need of tighter borders, was full of open space.

''You realize,'' Winks said, ''that we basically exist in the corridors between these big estates.''

In 2022, Parliament passed the promised anti-trespassing bill. The core group of Right to Roam organizers continued to grow, while encouraging people to form their own local chapters. In Northumberland, organizers arranged buses to take children who live in light-polluted cities into the countryside at night, because so many English people now grow up without being able to see the Milky Way. In Gloucestershire, trespassers climbed a stone wall into an estate owned by the Duke of Beaufort, where botanists taught attendees about the native plants they found there -- the idea being that people who feel attached to a landscape will be inspired to protect it. The campaigners organized another trespass at Berry Pomeroy, this time with hundreds of people, who carried a banner that read ''Right to Roam'' and picked up litter as they went. They walked together to a sunny hillside, where they picnicked.

The wholesomeness was purposeful: an attempt to show that people could use land not just responsibly but also in a nourishing way. Though the campaigns received a fair amount of positive coverage -- even the right-leaning Daily Mail offered a friendly account of the Berry Pomeroy trespass, quoting Shrubsole's ''Less room for pheasants, more room for peasants!'' quip in their headline -- there were plenty of doubters. Some seasoned organizers worried that a call for a right to roam might jeopardize the right-of-way system they have worked so hard to create or that embracing trespass could give all ramblers a bad name. Landowners' associations argued that the current system was adequate and that expanding it would risk public safety: ''How many more wildfires will there be? How many more sheep will be attacked by dogs? What damage will be done to crops?''

In his book, Hayes argued that what he called ''the cult of exclusion'' was possible because it was undergirded by a powerful story of inevitability, including the belief that open access would mean disrespectful or ignorant people mistreating the land. (In the United States, this idea was most vociferously articulated in an essay called ''The Tragedy of the Commons,'' written in 1968 by the ecologist and eugenicist Garrett Hardin, who argued that it was the fate of any communally managed property to be mismanaged and destroyed. Hardin's work has since been widely debunked, including by the Nobel Prize-winning political scientist Elinor Ostrom, who showed that communities around the world are capable of managing shared resources sustainably.) Right to Roam organizers countered that another story was possible, one in which people were educated to appreciate and protect places they saw as partially their own.

Amy-Jane Beer, one of the core organizers, likes to point to a study by researchers at the University of Derby, which compared 14 European Union countries according to their biodiversity and their residents' felt connection to nature. In each case, Britain ranked lowest. ''Those things are not disconnected,'' Beer says. ''People are losing without being aware of what they're losing.''

And then came Dartmoor.

In England -- unlike in the United States or in parks in Africa and elsewhere that are sometimes accused of practicing ''fortress conservation,'' cordoning off nature at the expense of local people -- there's little illusion that a national park is, should or even could be a wild place untouched by human history. Dartmoor is full of ancient archaeological sites as well as mining scars, good-size towns, uncountable sheep and ponies, military practice ranges and even a large prison. You can't visit without understanding the land as a balance of uses.

One of those uses, today, is camping. For decades, Dartmoor was the only park in England that recognized camping among the forms of recreation to which users are entitled. Elsewhere, some people still camp, but they do so somewhat stealthily -- ''you just set up late and pack up early,'' as Winks told me -- or with the understanding that they may be moved along. To quote the leader of a group of backpackers I met: ''We just kind of walk until we hit somewhere we can't, and then we go somewhere else.'' Many youth groups, and those who aren't comfortable camping where it isn't allowed, stick to Dartmoor.

In 2022, the hedge-fund manager Alexander Darwall and his wife, Diana, who had purchased a 4,000-acre estate inside Dartmoor, announced that they would be suing the park to keep people from camping on what was now their land. At first, the big access organizations didn't believe that wild camping could really be under threat and paid little attention. A small group of local residents, including Winks, a walking guide named Gillian Healey and others who were organizing trespasses nearby, decided, over pints at a pub, to plan a rally on one of Darwall's moors, to be held shortly after the court was scheduled to rule on the suit. ''We thought there'd probably be about 15 of us,'' Winks says, but no matter which way the decision went, they figured they would either want to celebrate or protest. They came up with a name for their group: the Stars Are for Everyone.

A week before the planned gathering, in January 2023, the Chancellor of the High Court ruled that the long-assumed right to camp in Dartmoor didn't actually exist. Darwall, and any other landowner who wanted to, could kick campers out right away. Suddenly, thousands of people wanted to join the protest, which was set to depart from Cornwood, a tiny village clustered around narrow lanes on the edge of the park. Organizers rented 10 buses to shuttle the protesters in. To help feed everyone, residents of the village baked pasties and delivered them to the local pub.

A parade of people set off on a two-mile walk to Darwall's land, using a right of way flanked on either side by private security guards holding dogs. It was, said one participant, ''a conga line of humanity.'' Many people told Healey that they weren't campers themselves but that they saw the decision as part of a much bigger story about their country and where they fit inside it. Healey agreed: To her, the loss was like a new form of enclosure. That, too, had been a gradual but devastating winnowing of rights.

When the crowd arrived at the top of a hill, organizers were waiting with a surprise. Hiding just behind the crest were a group of musicians and a giant puppet they called Old Crockern, after a mythic figure from Dartmoor's past who is said to be the spirit of the moor; in one story, he warns a rich man who has come to plow the land with a steam engine, ''if you scratch my back, I'll scratch out your pockets!'' When the puppet crested the hill into the slanting winter sunshine, crowds of children ran toward it, dancing.

The Dartmoor National Park Authority appealed the ruling. In the meantime, it came to an agreement with some of the other landowners, paying them to continue to allow camping. What had been a right became a mere permission. Winks found himself camping less because he was no longer sure where it was actually allowed. ''They've stolen the goose and are selling us back the eggs,'' he said, ''and we're told to be grateful.''

The Labour Party, for its part, reacted to the news by promising to introduce a Scottish-style Right to Roam bill the next time it came to power.

One spring morning about a week after the swim at Kinder Reservoir, and five months after the Dartmoor ruling, I met another group of trespassers. This time they gathered on the village green of a tiny place called Ham, under the branches of a blooming horse-chestnut tree.

Most of the 70 or so people who arrived for the walk came from Bristol, 20 miles away, home to a particularly active group of right-to-roam advocates who meet twice a month and go on outings that members take turns designing.

On this day, the walk leader was Jim Rosseinsky, a member of a local choir, who brought along some of his choir mates. Rosseinsky said that ''The Book of Trespass'' moved him to act because ''it was just so reasonable.'' Before setting out, he warned the group to watch out for ''sharp-branch-related jeopardy'' and to take care with where they placed their feet: ''We want to show that we can care for the land that we're walking on.''

The group set off down a narrow lane, crossed a bridge and passed a field where horses grazed. A large stone castle appeared in the distance. A woman named Mary Stevens, who had read ''Who Owns England?'' told those gathered that it was still owned by the same family to whom the land was granted in the aftermath of the Norman Conquest. They were also given considerable land in Bristol -- where, many of the walkers told me, they could not afford to buy houses -- including in the neighborhood where the choir practices.

The long trail of people wound through fields and into a tiny scrap of woodland, where the choir leader, Sorrel Wilde, led the group in an old chant: ''Put your roots down/put your feet on the ground/you can hear the earth sing/if you listen,'' we sang, until the words lost their cheesiness and began to feel profound and peaceful. It took ages to enter another glen, because there were so many people stepping so cautiously over the bluebells.

As they walked, people told me what had brought them to spend their bank holiday Monday trespassing around a castle with strangers. Many spoke about wanting more access to nature, but they also framed the walk in grander terms. Maria Fernandez Garcia, a botanist who had become a leader of the group, said it was a balm ''to hear other people's deep and similar feelings'' about the ways the country wasn't working for ordinary people and how it could do better. Danny Balla listed a series of things that he wished were seen as commons, to be shared and stewarded, but which were instead enclosed, privatized and exploited: gathering places in cities, the air, the water, the climate. A mother of two young children told me that as a renter, struggling amid Britain's cost-of-living crisis, ''it would be very easy to feel that I had very little power,'' but trespasses like this helped. The more of them she went on, the more illusory the borders that constrained her life felt. ''It's an antidote to everything feeling divided and enclosed,'' she said.

A woman named Holly Marjoram told me that while walking is often a solitary activity, this version made it feel like part of something large and powerful, connected to a whole world of people who would fight for the land. She had also been to the big trespass at Berry Pomeroy and the protest on Dartmoor.

A few months later, in mid-July, the Royal Courts of Justice would hear the park's challenge to the ruling that favored the Darwalls. Inside the court, the two sides debated what the park's bylaws meant by allowing ''open-air recreation'' -- Was a tent open-air? Are you recreating when you're asleep? -- while protesters filled the sidewalk outside. A ruling is still pending.

In Ham, after the trespass, the group stopped in a churchyard for lunch, where more thermoses of tea emerged from backpacks. ''It's nice to imagine a world where we can walk farther and feel freer,'' said a woman in tall rubber boots. And then it was back to the village green, where some people taught a folk dance, some drifted off to the pub next door and some sang along to a final song:

Ours is a wild and beautiful land

much unknown to us.

We are the land.

And the land is us.

Another group arrived late and dripping, having been lured into the cool river by the first hot day of spring. People kept asking Rosseinsky which parts of the walk were trespasses and which parts were within their rights. It had been hard for them to tell.

## What's Past is Prologue.

Wyatt Mason | July 30, 2023 | NYTMag

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''The weird thing about growing up kidnapped,'' Shane McCrae, the 47-year-old American poet, told me in his melodious, reedy voice one rainy afternoon in May, ''is if it happens early enough, there's a way in which you kind of don't know.''

There was no reason for McCrae to have known. What unfolded in McCrae's childhood -- between a June day in 1979 when his white grandmother took him from his Black father and disappeared, and another day, 13 years later, when McCrae opened a phone book in Salem, Ore., found a name he hoped was his father's and placed a call -- is both an unambiguous story of abduction and a convoluted story of complicity. It loops through the American landscape, from Oregon to Texas to California to Oregon again, and, even now, wends through the vaster emotional country of a child and his parents. And because so much of what happened to McCrae happened in homes where he was beaten and lied to and threatened, where he was made to understand that Black people were inferior to whites, where he was taught to hail Hitler, where he was told that his dark skin meant he tanned easily but, no, not that he was Black, it's a story that's been hard for McCrae to piece together.

''My grandparents,'' McCrae explained in a somewhat gloomy, book-laden office at Columbia University, where he teaches poetry in its M.F.A. program, ''were so actively keeping my father away from me -- they didn't want me to investigate him at all -- it was just normal.'' Normal, McCrae explained, because the story he had been told by his grandparents was that McCrae's father, whose name he didn't even know, abandoned him before he was born. ''They had been doing it my whole life,'' McCrae said matter-of-factly. ''I didn't think of it as, Oh, this is pretty strange.''

McCrae paused. ''The aftereffects of all that,'' he continued, ''it took me until -- to really understand that I had been a kidnapped child -- probably my early 40s when it finally started to make sense and I really got it, and I was like, Oh, this is a big deal. I had used the phrase before -- 'growing up kidnapped' -- but somehow used it without it really sinking in. It was a thing that I was aware of as, This is technically true, but without really understanding what that means.''

McCrae's new book, the memoir ''Pulling the Chariot of the Sun'' -- it is being released on Aug. 1 -- is his attempt to construct, at a remove of four decades, an understanding of what happened and what it has come to mean. The memoir takes the reader through McCrae's childhood, from his earliest memories after being taken from his father to when, at 16, he found him again. Like many accomplished memoirs that have followed from St. Augustine's pioneering ''Confessions,'' McCrae's explores memory's uncertain contours, but like few memoirs before it, ''Pulling the Chariot of the Sun'' offers the experience, in prose, of that uncertainty. It's essentially a 250-page avant-garde prose poem that has more in common with Virginia Woolf's (excellent, difficult) novel ''The Waves'' than with Hua Hsu's (excellent, not difficult) memoir ''Stay True'' -- or any memoir you might name. McCrae's sentences are constantly stating and retracting, moving forward and retreating, establishing a perimeter around an event while trying to penetrate it, to enter the chalk outline drawn around a body long buried, that of the boy McCrae was before he was taken. At first, the mode can be off-putting; decisions and revisions that a minute can reverse, the reader left to wonder why the same story -- McCrae's birth, say, as it was reported to him -- is told multiple times. But it's not long before the initial aesthetic perplexity resolves for the reader into the recognition that this is how a mind works with the past: eternal return, compulsive attempts to make something hold over which you have no control. And then the reader begins to welcome -- need, in fact -- McCrae's multiplicities, that straining for resolution. The memoir accumulates a hugeness of feeling that puts a lie to the idea that difficulty in a piece of writing is necessarily cold or aloof or incompatible with the kind of intense emotion that McCrae's narrative uncommonly yields.

''Until I was 13, I slept with the light on,'' McCrae writes midway through the memoir, ''the main light in my bedroom, the light in the ceiling, sometimes still wearing the clothes I had worn that day, sometimes even wearing my shoes. Most of my childhood I felt I had to be prepared to be taken from my life at any moment.''

''Pulling the Chariot of the Sun'' is the story of an undoing, but it is no less a story of becoming. McCrae takes the reader to the house where he was made to live with his grandparents; documents how he was thrown, at age 3, into a wall by his grandfather, because he was crying for his father; how he was knocked unconscious; how the beatings continued as McCrae matured, until his grandmother divorced the grandfather when McCrae was 14. There are visits from his mother and his brief, failed period living with her as a teenager; time at multiple schools -- three in ninth grade alone -- where he sat at the backs of rooms, a middling student, largely friendless. But there is also the freedom and pleasure he experienced skateboarding, at which he excelled enough to be able to see, vividly, the fine line that separated his skills from those of skaters who became pros. And there's McCrae's revelation, as a 10th grader who would go on to repeat the year, that a standardized test put his writing at an eighth-grade level, the metrics of the world reporting that he was, contrary to his sense of himself, stupid. Seeded within that plausible sadness and loneliness and horror and hopelessness is the story of the strange concatenation of events that produced the moment when McCrae found his path to poetry, first as anchor to life and then as avenue to himself. His memoir is, therefore, and perhaps most memorably, a Bildungsroman, a portrait of a poet as a young Black man -- a boy raised in a particular crucible of capture that, as part of its power, enacts the American story of seizure and captivity of Black people by white tormentors.

McCrae dropped out of high school and got an equivalency diploma. By 19, he was on his own, married, father of a daughter, but without a clear path forward, only a clear ambition to write poetry. Through that period, he kept to a strict regimen of reading 200 pages a day -- eight books at once in rotation, 25 pages from each -- absorbing writing from every era, understanding that, beyond his need to make it, he knew nothing about poetry. What he did know, having been an excellent skateboarder, was that if you wanted to land a reverse ollie, you needed your 10,000 hours to get there. He entered community college at 21; after transferring twice, he graduated from a good local college, Linfield, at 26, with an acceptance letter from the premier M.F.A. program in the world, the Iowa Writers' Workshop. Graduating in 2004, he went straight to Harvard Law School, to get a J.D., thinking that he would briefly support himself as a lawyer. McCrae didn't like law school but completed it, and as he was doing so, because he could take courses elsewhere at the university, he applied for a place in the poetry workshop of a poet he had been reading for years, Jorie Graham.

''It seemed at the start that he didn't know if he should be there, if he wanted to be there,'' Graham wrote to me. ''But, as we say, 'he had an ear.' He wrote a slightly conventional poem, and his heart was tight, and his natural voice was through clenched teeth. I felt anger on his page, repressed anger. I felt he had been beaten down by some great force -- some injustice beyond the injustice of being Black in America. But I could not break through to it.

''At some point he came to me in my office with a strange draft where a few lines broke apart at what would have been prosodical caesuras, and as we spoke, he shared a great personal grief and burden. And -- I remember this vividly -- I looked back and forth from his broad open suddenly vulnerable face to the lines broken open by a kind of stuttering breath, or a breath taken to squelch a sob, and I thought: Here it is, here we go, his ear is released.

''The next week he had a handful of poems in that form. The form worked because it correlated to the griefs he was undergoing.''

Since 2009, McCrae has published 13 books of poetry, hundreds of pages of supremely accomplished verse. He has written, autobiographically, on the dissolution of marriage and the challenges of fatherhood; on the reality of racism as he has encountered it and as American history has fostered it; and on sin and its purgation and transcendence, not in some abstract mode but from a decidedly Christian perspective (McCrae is a practicing Episcopalian). But these are just themes; every poet has them, and they say nothing about what might make verse notable, durable. It is McCrae's own deep knowledge, and use, of the history of poetic form that has marked his work and made it, identifiably, his own. McCrae has written scores of sonnets with the form's standard 70 beats and its characteristic meter of iambic pentameter, and yet a reader encountering these poems for the first time on the page, where they do not look like sonnets -- the lines are ruptured, gapped, slashed, broken at the ''wrong'' places -- would be hard-pressed to see a sonnet's shape hiding there in plain sight. But as you not so much push through them as are pulled along by the currents in them, a freight of feeling accumulates and, by the end of his best poems, detonates in final lines that are often so aggressively felt that you hardly notice the rigor of the meter that has gotten you there.

''I tend to think that poems,'' McCrae told me, ''they're smarter than the people who write them, and they're smarter than the people that read them. A poem that is successful is a poem that you can never entirely possess. It will always resist you through its sort of fathomless difficulty. That there's always going to be some new thing with the poem -- because you haven't gotten the whole thing.''

Many of McCrae's poems have addressed the pain in his own biography. The first poem, ''The Cardinal Is the Marriage Bird,'' in his first major book, ''Mule,'' ends with the word ''wound.'' A suite of poems follows in which McCrae takes on the role of the book's title animal, sired Black, dammed white -- poems set in the Texas to which he was taken, among them three different poems all called ''Mulatto,'' a word the Spanish root of which means ''young mule,'' capturing a boy's awareness of the rupture at the center of his nature; or ''Niggers on TV,'' a harrowing, but also strangely tender, poem that captures the effects of his grandfather's racism on a little boy who liked to dance along with the Huxtables, when ''The Cosby Show'' came on, with his grandmother (''I only ever saw her dance with me''-- which, not at all incidentally, dances along in iambic pentameter), a complicated act of love nesting within the horror.

Over the years, McCrae has burrowed into the ugliness of how whites have treated Blacks, imagining the voices of historical figures like Jim Limber, a mixed-race orphan adopted by the family of Jefferson Davis at the end of his time as president of the Confederacy, irreconcilable depictions of violence and love. All the while, McCrae has nudged closer to exploring the grotesquerie of his own treatment, earlier poems using the word ''taken'' before the newer poems incorporated, finally, the word that McCrae knows to be true: ''kidnapped.''

I wondered why McCrae felt he needed, now, to approach this history, already glimpsed in his mature work, through narrative.

''Up until that point,'' McCrae told me, ''I wrote stuff that I figured one would write: Being as how I was kidnapped, what is the sort of thing a person who was kidnapped would say? In a lot of my poems, that's the way I was thinking about it. But it wasn't until I wrote the memoir that I started to understand that it wasn't like being kidnapped was someone running up to you every day and shouting, 'Hey, you're kidnapped!' -- which is what the moment of the poem kind of feels like: a dramatization. Being kidnapped is just ... you're living your life, and no one is telling you what the premise is.''

''I used to think that there was something wrong with my emotional life,'' McCrae told me later, ''because I had difficulty conjuring up feelings about, like, when my grandmother died'' -- from complications of Alzheimer's, while he was in law school -- ''I was like, OK, well, here's something I'm supposed to feel. And I couldn't. I was aware that being taken from my father when I was, and my subsequent experiences, really broke something in my ability to connect with family that is generationally before me. What I feel is the absence of feeling things that I should.''

As I sought to fill in McCrae's early years, I felt I needed to speak with his mother and father. He expressed some hesitation, however, and before he ultimately said it would be fine with him and with them if I did, I spoke with one of McCrae's high school teachers, who shifted those conversations in an unexpected direction. The day after we spoke, she texted yearbook photos from when McCrae would have been in ninth and 10th grade. There he was, in two adolescent shots a year apart. His name was listed not as McCrae but as Baker.

''Oh, yes, that's right,'' Denise Baker, McCrae's mom, told me on the phone from her home in Portland, Ore. ''Baker was Shane's last name.'' Baker was the name of her stepfather, Morris, whom everyone called Morrie and whom Denise called, during our conversations, ''the monster.'' He was her mother's fifth and final husband; they married when Denise was 5. Denise says that when she was still small, he kicked her down a hallway so hard that it felt as if he broke her tailbone. When she became a teenager, they fought outright. He was a racist, and she had Black friends. Things got bad. Her mom and Morrie called her fat, worthless, stupid. She repeatedly ran away; when she was around 14, her parents told the state that she was out of control, and she was remanded to juvenile detention for a year. After she got out, she was emancipated from her parents. ''They didn't want to have to take care of me anymore,'' Denise told me.

Denise talked about meeting McCrae's father, Stanley, about which McCrae writes in the memoir -- how his eventual father ''approached her slowly from an impossible distance, somehow both in and beyond the Kmart, dressed, she would say, 'like Super Fly.' She would have been 15; he was most likely 17 or 18. She never told me what he ordered; she never told me what they talked about.''

As to why, three years later, Shane was born a Baker, and not a McCrae, as Denise tells it, a hospital staff member said that because she and Stanley weren't married, he wouldn't be able to put his name on the form. If he wanted to claim paternity, he could within six months if he filed a formal application. Soon after she was released from the hospital, she and Shane joined Stanley in Salem.

''We hung out and talked,'' Stanley told me from his home in San Diego. ''I'm like, When do I need to sign the birth certificate? And she was like, Well, actually, I wanted to talk to you about that because my dad'' -- Morrie -- ''can't have kids. And he was saying that if you let him put Shane in the Baker name, when he passes, everything he has will go to Shane. And I'm like, Really? Because I'm not a rich man. She said yes. And I'm like, OK, he can be in the Baker name. When he gets older, if he wants to change it, he can change it. So this is to me where the story began. All of a sudden, he's in the Baker name.''

It wasn't long after the birth that Denise and Stanley were no longer in a romantic relationship. Shane was initially with Denise in Portland. Sometimes she stayed with her parents, who were living there. By the time McCrae was nearing 3, Denise began to feel overwhelmed by the responsibility of being a parent -- afraid that she was going to be abusive to Shane the way her parents had been to her. Not long after, Stanley took Shane to Salem to live with him.

On June 2, 1979, Stanley's grandfather died. He told Denise he wanted to take Shane to the funeral in Arizona. Denise said that was fine. ''Probably that same day,'' Stanley recalled, ''the grandmother came over. I had bought Shane this little tricycle. And he just loved it. We were outside playing, he's riding on the tricycle, the grandmother pulls up and says, I'd like to see him before he leaves. I'm like, Yeah, absolutely. We're not leaving for a couple of days. And she says, Well, can he spend the night? I'm like, No problem, no problem. And she's like, I'll bring him back tomorrow. I thought nothing at all. But then the next day came, and he wasn't back. That morning. That evening. And I'm like, What the heck? She knows that I'm leaving. So I went over to her house. Now, I hadn't been to her house in several years, but I knew where she lived. And I went to the house, and the house was empty. The house is up for sale.''

I asked Denise about the house, a detail that didn't make sense to me, and she explained that her parents had moved before Shane was born, to a house in Portland where Stanley had never been. Naturally, I wanted to know what Stanley did when he saw the empty house. He said that he called Denise and that she said she told her mother that Stanley was taking Shane to Arizona for a funeral -- but that she had not told her mother to take Shane. Stanley was in touch with Denise for a week by phone, but nothing became clearer to him about where Shane was, only that Denise said he must be with them. And then, along with the grandparents and Shane, she disappeared.

Here's the part of the story that no one can clarify, but it seems that the essential sadness and horror is this: Denise's parents convinced her that they could give Shane a better life, and absolutely a better life than he would have with Stanley. At some point, Denise agreed that her parents could take him to Texas, where Morrie had a new job, and that once she got herself together she would come get Shane. Precisely when they moved, and precisely what degree of involvement Denise had in that move -- it's clear that she didn't tell Stanley what was happening. ''I don't know what I was thinking,'' Denise told me, clearly in tears, on several calls. ''I was so young. I was not ready to be a mom. And I will regret that for the rest of my life.''

Denise did try to take custody of Shane a year after her mother and stepfather moved to Texas. When she went down, Morrie threatened her. ''Well, if you try to take Shane,'' Denise told me Morrie said, ''we'll take him to Mexico, and you'll never see him again.'' Denise believed him. ''I was just scared to death,'' she said, ''but I have no idea why I didn't just take him.''

I asked Stanley what he did to try to find Shane.

''You know, at that particular time, back in the '80s, I'm in Salem, Ore., which is basically white,'' under two percent Black. ''I was Black, and his name was Baker.'' Stanley continued, ''The stuff I had been through with police in my life -- I didn't trust police.'' Stanley said he did speak with one white officer he knew, who said that without his son having his name, there wasn't going to be any chance of getting him back.

It felt like a stupid question, but I asked Stanley how he felt after Shane disappeared. ''Shane was my world,'' Stanley said. ''I was raised in church to believe that everybody had good in them. When I lost Shane, I totally turned to God. I'm like, I've evidently been messing up in my life, and I'm being punished. I became a deacon in the church and would pray on my knees and ask for my kid to show up and for me to be able to find him.''

When Shane would have been about 8 or 9, Stanley's sister, Carol, ran into Denise in Salem, and Denise went over to their mother's house to talk. ''I'm like, Where is Shane? And she was like, Well, he's at my parents'. And I'm like: Look, I agreed that your dad could use his name because he didn't have anybody carrying on his name. And I'm trying to be a good person. But now you guys have taken my kid and disappeared. I want Shane in my name now, and I want him.'' Stanley paused. ''So Denise is like, OK, well, yeah, we can put him in the McCrae name. She gave me a phone number for Shane, but it was a wrong number. And that was the last time I heard from Denise.''

Some eight years after that, 13 years after his abduction, Shane found his way back to his father. One day, Stanley recalled, he ''had been at work, and I was with my now-wife'' of more than 30 years, Kandace, ''and I got to my door, and I was like, Weird. And she's like, What? I'm like: I feel Shane. His scent seems to be around me. I haven't had that since he was 3 years old.''

''Everybody that I know,'' Stanley said, ''I'd always told about Shane. I mean, he's my first kid. We did everything together. We'd be riding down the road, and he'd go: That's a '56 Chevy! At 3 years old! That's a '57 Chevy! I'm like, Man, look at my smart kid. I was just so proud of him, watching the way that he grew, and then they just ripped him out of my life.''

A couple of weeks after he sensed Shane, Stanley told me, ''my wife called me and said: Hey, guess what? Shane called! I'm like, What?'' McCrae had gotten his father's name from his grandmother a few years earlier and, at a certain point, reached a moment in his life when he sought that name in a phone book and dialed the number next to it. ''So we made an appointment to pick him up. And when I got to him, I'm like: Dude, I told Kandace I got your scent. It seemed like you had been at my door.'' Some years later, McCrae changed his last name to match his father's.

Some people go through the worst in life, and it destroys them; others, no less beset, see it move through them. ''Some people think that I am troublingly optimistic,'' McCrae told me back in his office. ''I don't know if that's true. But it's rather more that I tend to believe, for reasons I can't fully explain, the good, or at least the least-complicated version that would fall on the side of good.''

It seemed to me that McCrae's optimism might be called faith. ''I got this tattoo when I was in law school,'' McCrae said, rolling his left forearm over to reveal a large, black Latin cross. ''When I did my very first reading, for my first chapbook, 'One Neither One'''-- from 2009, its cover a sketch of shackles that can look like a pair of eyes, staring at the reader -- ''I made sure to wear a jacket so nobody would see it. Because I was afraid.'' Growing up, McCrae continued, ''there was this kind of feeling that if you had a Christian belief, you can't believe in God and be smart. That was the feeling I got in the circles I ran in. And I felt really weird about it, really insecure, because I did believe.'' McCrae laughed. ''So when I was first trying to be a poet, I didn't want anybody to know I was a Christian. It was a source of worry for a pretty long time. I'm also really ashamed of how, at least the Christians that get attention in America, how a lot of them act. It fills me with dismay. And I didn't want to be associated with that.''

McCrae told me how, at 19, he'd asked God to give him a sign. If God did, McCrae would believe in him. The next day, McCrae went up to the Mount Angel monastery, a half-hour out of Salem, and there was a storm, thunder and lightning, and when he was getting ready to leave, the road out was blocked by two fallen trees. McCrae says he didn't feel that God would waste his time knocking down trees so a kid would believe, but he had asked for a sign, and there one was. McCrae tried Islam; Daoism, but eventually came around to Christianity. He was baptized a Christian at 29 while at Harvard Law. He had also been taking classes at the Episcopal divinity school -- had imagined, still imagines, another path for himself as a priest -- but after a term, he learned he wasn't eligible to take more. And yet, since then, the two things -- belief in art and faith in God -- have come together.

Fractured through McCrae's work, then, is what could be read as a very long poem that has appeared in parts through four books. There's a purgatory, a heaven, and a hell. McCrae is long done with purgatory and heaven, but ''The Hell Poem,'' which first appeared in 2019, keeps getting bigger. A few weeks before I wrote this article, he sent me the whole poem -- or rather all of it minus two sections he has yet to write. It's harrowing and strange and also extremely funny in moments; it completes what I can't help seeing as a kind of Commedia, written by someone who believes equally in the word and the Word.

I asked McCrae about the process by which he came to understand that Christ was God's son, and how the pain that God allowed to be brought upon Jesus, the wounds inflicted on his body, ended up making sense to him. In that context, I asked him why we suffer. ''It's actually a question that I don't think about all that much,'' he said, ''which feels terrible, because I'm so often on the verge of tears thinking about the suffering of others.'' He paused. ''It's God's universe. God can do what God wants. Which is kind of what St. Augustine said: God doesn't owe us happy lives.''

Throughout June and into July, I ended up going back and forth between McCrae's parents many times, trying to reconcile their individual versions of events. One day I got a text from Stanley. ''Denise contacted me on Facebook a couple hours ago. We ended up talking on the phone and she remembers a lot but, just like me she's forgot a lot. She does remember how upset she was when her mother lied to me and came and got Shane. I believe she was really hurt regarding that whole situation, and she seems to be struggling with how everything went down.''

I called Denise to ask her about the conversation with Stanley. ''It's ... it's really painful for me what Shane went through, and I feel extremely at fault. And it's something that I'll probably deal with forever. But I wanted to help change part of that. So I looked up Oregon laws to see if Stanley could get on his birth certificate even now, and it sounds like he could. So I reached out to Stanley.''

As Stanley understood it, the only thing he had agreed to, 47 years earlier, was that his son would have the Baker name. He had not known that the birth certificate would make no mention of him as the father. But now he had seen the evidence for himself. I asked if I could see it. He texted it along.

The Certificate of Live Birth shows that on Sept. 22, 1975, a child, in Box 1, Shane Alan Baker, was born at 6:59 p.m., to mother, in Box 6a, Denise Alynne Baker. Box 8a, for father, is blank. It is as if no such person existed.

Though McCrae says he was kidnapped from his father when he was 3, he is, in a way, wrong. It took place on the day he was born.

''I'm glad that's happening,'' McCrae said of adding Stanley's name to his birth certificate. ''Me changing my name to his last name when I was in my very early 20s was really important, and that was very meaningful to me. The public acknowledgment of him as my father had felt as if I was doing some small thing to right a wrong. It was emotional. I felt driven to do it. So whatever emotions would go with it were emotions that I already felt decades ago.''

On the first of July, Stanley and his wife, each on their separate Harley-Davidsons, began the 21-hour ride from San Diego to Oregon. Stanley wanted to take the forms in himself. Too much for too long had gone wrong; he wasn't about to let anything happen now.

If, in life, McCrae has met this advent with what might seem like a mildness of feeling, in art he has shown a fierce commitment to inventing forms that express significant emotion. The title of McCrae's memoir, ''Pulling the Chariot of the Sun,'' alludes to the Greek myth of a son seeking his father -- Phaethon, a mortal boy; Helios, a god. Phaethon had been told that his father was a god but had never met him. So he went on a journey to find him; did; and asked that the god give him proof of his patrimony. The god said, Anything you ask of me I will grant. The boy asked to drive the chariot of the sun, the one that Helios drove each day to make the sun rise, pulled by four horses of enormous power. The god knew that the boy was no match for the task, and yet he had given himself no choice but to say yes. So Phaethon took the reins at dawn; rose; and of course fell, literally dying to learn that his father's name was his own.

McCrae's version of the story inverts that myth. At his memoir's end, he finds his father, learns his name, and lives.

## Plastic Fantastic

Willa Paskin | July 16, 2023 | NYTMag

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The moment Greta Gerwig knew for certain that she could make a movie about Barbie, the most famous and controversial doll in history, she was thinking about death. She had been reading about Ruth Handler, the brash Jewish businesswoman who created the doll -- and who, decades later, had two mastectomies. Handler birthed this toy with its infamous breasts, the figurine who became an enduring avatar of plastic perfection, while being stuck, like all of us, in a fragile and failing human body. This thought sparked something for Gerwig. She envisioned a sunny-minded Barbie stumbling upon a dying woman in her barbecue area. Then Gerwig kept going. It was the beginning of the pandemic. Maybe no one would ever go to the movies again. Maybe no one would ever see what she was working on. Why not go for broke?

Why couldn't the movie begin with a methodologically faithful riff on the opening of Stanley Kubrick's ''2001: A Space Odyssey,'' with little girls bashing in their insipid baby dolls' heads after beholding the revelation that is Barbie? Why couldn't Barbieland be full of Barbies and Kens but free of wind, except when it made the dolls' hair look good? Why couldn't Barbie be overcome by irrepressible thoughts of death in the middle of a choreographed dance number? Why couldn't there be a dream ballet inspired by 1950s musicals and a recurring joke about the lyrics of a Matchbox 20 song? Why couldn't Gerwig love Barbie and criticize Barbie and try to make people feel something new about an object that has been making people feel things for nearly 65 years? Why couldn't she make a movie that would delight Barbie's protective corporate guardians at Mattel, the people at Warner Brothers who bankrolled the roughly $145 million production, the people who hate Barbie, the people who adore Barbie and also herself?

''There's a point in the movie where the Kens are riding invisible horses from their beach battle to the Mojo Dojo Casa Houses,'' Gerwig told me -- a Mojo Dojo Casa House is like a Barbie Dreamhouse, but for Kens -- ''and I think to myself, every time: Why did they let us do this?'' It was late May, less than two months until the movie's theatrical release, and Gerwig was putting in long hours on finishing touches, shuttling between postproduction facilities in Manhattan. Still, the very fact of the movie's existence continued to puzzle and delight her. Why did they let her do this?

The answer seems so obvious now. Mattel, Warner Brothers and the producers let Greta Gerwig make ''Barbie'' so that exactly what is currently happening would happen. So that the fizzy marriage of filmmaker and material would break though the cacophony of contemporary life and return a retirement-age hunk of plastic to the zeitgeist. So that Mattel, in particular, could rocket-launch its grand ambitions to become a proto-Disney and announce the activation of its entire intellectual-property back catalog with a fuchsia splash. So that Barbie stans and Barbie agnostics alike would find themselves bombarded by paparazzi snaps of Margot Robbie, as Barbie, and Ryan Gosling, as Ken, dressed in matching, radioactively vivid Rollerblading outfits -- plus ''Barbie'' trailers, #Barbiecore TikToks and wall-to-wall Barbie tie-ins. They wanted Gerwig, with her indie bona fides, feminist credentials and multiple Oscar nominations, to use her credibility to make this multibillion-dollar platinum-blond I.P. newly relevant, delivering a very, very, very pink summer blockbuster that acknowledges Barbie's baggage, unpacks that baggage and, also, sells that baggage. (The designer-luggage company Béis now offers a Barbie collection.) They wanted Gerwig to burnish Barbie. But why, exactly, did Gerwig want to do that?

Inquiries like this fluster Gerwig. She has been thinking about Barbie, nonstop, for years. But at the time, it had been a while since she'd talked it over with anyone who wasn't already immersed in the project. Suddenly, at the end of a long day, she was being asked to justify the fascination that possessed her the moment Margot Robbie, also one of the movie's producers, asked her about writing the script, which she would do with her partner, Noah Baumbach. ''I kept thinking: Humans are the people that make dolls and then get mad at the dolls,'' Gerwig explained. ''We create them and then they create us and we recreate them and they recreate us. We're in constant conversation with inanimate objects.''

She wanted in on that conversation. Yes, Barbie is a polarizing toy and a juicy hunk of I.P., but Gerwig leaped right to what else Barbie is: a potent, complicated, contradictory symbol that stands near the center of a decades-long and still-running argument about how to be a woman. If there is a kind of earnestness that once would have precluded a director from ''selling out,'' it is the same earnestness that now precludes them from thinking about that notion at all. (What is Barbie but a superhero in heels, older than Spider-Man and Iron Man?) Instead of aiming for a product you might grade on a curve as ''relatively thoughtful, for a Barbie movie,'' Gerwig devoted herself to threading a needle slimmer than the eyelashes painted on the doll's face. The movie is a celebration of Barbie and a subterranean apologia for Barbie. It is a giant corporate undertaking and a strange, funny personal project. It is a jubilant, mercilessly effective polymer-and-pink extravaganza whose guiding star turns out to be Gerwig's own sincerity. ''Things can be both/and,'' she said. ''I'm doing the thing and subverting the thing.''

Gerwig, who turns 40 this summer, loved playing with dolls so much that she did it until she was about 14. In hindsight, this seems like the behavior of a future director, but at the time she felt it was ''too late -- people were already drinking at parties.'' Some of her dolls were Barbies. She can remember, as a little girl, standing in a Toys ''R'' Us, gazing upon a display of Barbies in their really big boxes, wearing their really big dresses, their really big hair fanned out for maximal glamour, and she has tried to hold onto her feeling of never having seen anything more beautiful. While preparing the movie, her creative team considered hundreds of shades of pink, but Gerwig arrived one day convinced that they had let their adult sensibilities lead them astray: The pink had gotten too tasteful. They needed something supersaturated, bold and bright -- not salmon. Nothing about the movie should feel ''like an adult telling a little kid: 'Don't talk too loud. Don't chew with your mouth open.' You wanted it to be that exuberance of using the brightest color in the box.''

But it is not just a child's sensibility at play in ''Barbie.'' Gerwig's mother was not wild about the dolls, so they mostly trickled into the house as hand-me-downs. Even as she was gathering the intimate Barbie experience that's all over this film -- one character is constantly doing splits, as if enacting a sense memory of how ably the dolls hit 180-degree leg extension -- she was also imbibing the critique. ''The one that always felt the most pointed to me was that if she was a human being, she wouldn't be able to hold her head up,'' she recalls; Barbie's neck is, by most estimations, too thin to support her cranium. (The one that always stuck with me was the legend that if Barbie were real, she would have to crawl on all fours, weighed down by her massive mammaries.) ''If you're walking around,'' Gerwig says, ''congratulations, you don't look like Barbie.''

Gerwig understands both the love and the loathing for Barbie, but for many others, the doll remains an either/or proposition: Either she's feminist or she's really, really not. Arguments that she is feminist include the fact that she has had her own Dreamhouse since 1962, when women were routinely denied mortgages and credit cards. She went to the moon years before Neil Armstrong, and unlike any real-life American woman, she has been president. But a couple of years after becoming a homeowner, a Slumber Party Barbie came with a scale locked at 110 pounds and a ''How to Lose Weight'' manual, with the directions ''Don't Eat.'' (Perhaps the most famous Barbie movie before this one was Todd Haynes's breakout short ''Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story,'' which used dolls to stage a biopic about the singer, who died in 1983 of complications from anorexia.) Over the decades, there has been a persistent release of other Yikes Barbies, like the memorable Teen Talk Barbie that was programmed to say, ''Math class is tough!''

More holistically, Barbie was abhorred by second-wave feminists as an inescapable, white, blond, impossibly thin, impossibly stacked, glammed-up personification of the male gaze being pushed on generations of girls as the woman they should aspire to be. Gloria Steinem has said Barbie ''was pretty much everything the feminist movement was trying to escape from.'' A chant rang out at a women's-equality march in 1970: ''I am not a Barbie doll.''

When Robbie approached Gerwig about writing the film, the parameters were extremely broad: She could do anything she wanted. (One thing she really wanted to do was work with Robbie, who, she says, finishes meetings by asking, '' 'Does anyone have anything that they just really hate or want to bring up right now that's really bothering them?' She just, like, runs at danger.'' When Gerwig is quoting Robbie, she puts on an Australian accent, which she is good at.) But even though Mattel was involved, the film couldn't just be Barbie propaganda. It would have to deal with the whole scope of the conversation. ''People say, 'Well, what's the story of Barbie?''' Gerwig recalls. ''The story of Barbie is the fight that's been going on about Barbie.''

As the movie begins, Robbie's Barbie wakes in her Dreamhouse and cheerfully waves to all the other Barbies in their Dreamhouses, which she can do because none of the Dreamhouses have walls. (Barbies have nothing to hide, and nowhere to hide it if they did.) Barbieland is a multicultural Barbiarchy: The president is a Barbie and so are the Supreme Court justices, Nobel Prize winners, pilots, doctors and construction crews. The Kens, in contrast, have one job, the frustratingly ill-defined ''Beach,'' where they cheerlead and jockey in hopes of being noticed. The Barbies know that they are dolls -- that Mattel created them, that there is a real world where little girls play with them -- but they are otherwise blithely incurious. In Barbieland, every day is a good day, and every night is a girls' night. They imagine that the real world is just like Barbieland and that they have helped us solve all our ''problems of equal rights and feminism.''

Then come those pesky intimations of mortality. Later, a patch of cellulite appears on Barbie's thigh. Her naturally high-heel-ready feet fall flat. These ''malfunctions,'' Barbie is told, are probably a result of someone in the real world playing with her too hard -- and though she does not want to leave Barbieland to investigate, she really does not want cellulite. So with Ken and his Rollerblades in the back seat, and the radio blaring the Indigo Girls' 1989 acoustic anthem ''Closer to Fine'' (a song Gerwig has loved since growing up among ''hippie Christians'' in a Unitarian church), she drives her pink convertible toward reality, expecting a hug and a thank you from the women of America. Instead, a haughty teenager serves her the whole brutal read: Barbie, the plastic personification of ''unrealistic physical ideals, sexualized capitalism and rampant consumerism,'' has been making women feel bad about themselves since she was invented.

''I really thought of it like a spiritual journey,'' Gerwig says. The Barbies live in a world that has ''the comfort of fundamentalism''; there is no death, aging or shame, and ''you never have to wonder what you're meant to do.'' Then cellulite slithers into paradise. The idea that ''you're not going to follow a path that's been laid out for you,'' Gerwig says, ''comes with a fair amount of terror.'' The resonances aren't just religious: This is, as in much Gerwig material, the arc of growing up.

Gerwig brims with references and influences, many of which she marshaled to make the movie ''authentically artificial,'' with everything ''fake, but really fake'' -- make-believe and yet tangible, tactile, like playing with an actual toy. She called Peter Weir, the director of ''The Truman Show,'' to ask how to ''execute something that's both artificial and emotional at the same time.'' She tried to channel musicals like ''The Umbrellas of Cherbourg'' and ''Singin' in the Rain,'' which she says do the same. Many of the special effects were based on the analog techniques of 1959, a year chosen because that's when Barbie debuted. The mermaid Barbies we see splish-splashing behind Jeff Koons-esque plastic waves are being hoisted by a rig like a seesaw. The blue expanse hovering over Barbieland is not green screen; it's a vast backdrop of painted sky.

''Barbie'' has a bigger scope, budget and potential audience than any of Gerwig's previous work. This was part of its appeal: Gerwig has been scaling up, intentionally. And yet she remains focused on characters' baby-stepping into adulthood. (Her next project is a Netflix adaptation of the Narnia universe.) The protagonists she played in ''Frances Ha'' and ''Mistress America'' -- collaborations with Baumbach -- would probably make arch remarks about a Barbie I.P. blockbuster, but they, too, were figuring out who they were. So were the heroines of Gerwig's directorial debut, ''Lady Bird,'' loosely inspired by her own Sacramento childhood, and her follow-up, ''Little Women,'' based on her favorite childhood book.

''Barbie,'' too, is a coming-of-age story; the figure coming of age just happens to be a full-grown piece of plastic. ''Little Women'' would have been a fine alternate title for it. Same with ''Mothers & Daughters,'' a working title for ''Lady Bird.'' For Barbie, as in both those other films, growing up is a matriarchal affair. It is something you do with your mother, your sisters, your aunties. Or, in Barbie's case, with the women threaded through your product history.

In the beginning, there was Ruth Handler, eavesdropping on her daughter, Barbara, playing with paper dolls. As little Barbie Handler and a friend dressed the cutouts in different outfits, they imagined their careers and personalities. Her mother's quite feminist-sounding insight was that there were no three-dimensional dolls that let girls explore being grown women, only baby dolls that encouraged them to practice motherhood.

Handler and her husband, Elliot, were already running Mattel, a toy company they founded in their California garage in 1945. She ran the business, and he came up with the toys. Her proposal for a non-baby doll stalled until, traveling in Switzerland, she came upon a potential prototype. The Bild Lilli was a novelty toy, modeled on a blond vixen from a West German comic strip, that could be used to accessorize a grown man's car, like Playboy-silhouette mud flaps. Handler brought some home as proof of concept. Manufacturers, retailers and even Mattel weren't sure mothers would buy their daughters a toy with such a va-va-voom figure, but the company was advised by a famous Freudian marketing consultant that moms could be neutralized if they thought Barbie was teaching proper comportment. They might not like her sexual precocity, but they would put up with it to have her model mainstream femininity.

In 1959, Barbie, a ''Teenage Fashion Doll'' for 8- to 12-year-old girls, debuted in a black-and-white bathing suit. Soon she would be a fashion editor, nurse, flight attendant, ''executive career girl'' and astronaut, each in an exactingly crafted outfit, down to miniature zippers. Customers wanted her to have a boyfriend, and in 1961, Ken was introduced, named after the Handlers' son. (Wedding dresses had been on sale since 1959.) Now customers wanted Barbie to have a baby.

Little girls can make Barbies play mothers quite seamlessly; almost any toy will do, including Mattel's own Skipper, even though she's supposed to be Barbie's little sister. In all the hundreds of Barbie play sets that have been made, would one with her own child really have upended the fantasy? But Handler was a businesswoman with a complicated relationship to being a housewife -- ''Oh, [expletive], it was awful!'' is a direct quote -- and with what seems like the insistence of someone intimate with the stultification of child-rearing, she put her foot down. In 1963, the same year ''The Feminine Mystique'' was published, Mattel released a ''Barbie Babysits!'' play set instead. That Barbie has never had a child remains one of the most radical things about her.

Mattel had its troubles over the years -- Ruth Handler resigned after financial improprieties that would lead to charges from the Securities and Exchange Commission (she had a second act manufacturing breast prostheses for cancer survivors), and in the 1980s the company took a cash infusion from the junk-bond king Michael Milken -- but it was in the new millennium that Barbie faced existential threats. Namely, mothers began to defect. First a genuine competitor emerged: Bratz dolls dressed provocatively, mostly cared about shopping and had their own bizarre proportions, but they were sassy, fun and multiethnic. (Barbie had introduced Black, Hispanic and ''Oriental'' Barbies by 1981, but these remained secondary to the blond ''close your eyes and picture a Barbie'' Barbie.) By some estimates, Bratz took about a third of Barbie's market share before being hamstrung by Mattel's litigation.

By 2015, after years of declining figures, Barbie hit its lowest sales volume in a quarter century. A psychological study found that after playing with Barbies, girls thought themselves less capable of various careers than they did after playing with a control Mrs. Potato Head. Mattel's own findings were dire: Customers thought the doll was shallow, materialistic, too perfect and not reflective of the world around her. Mothers didn't feel comfortable giving Barbie as a gift at a birthday party. There had never been such fear, among the people who safeguard her, that Barbie might be staring down irrelevance.

So Mattel did something it had never needed to: It changed. In 2015, it began rolling out 100 different skin tones, hair textures, face shapes and eye colors, and four different body types for the flagship doll, which now comes in original, curvy, petite and tall. There has since been the introduction of a Barbie with vitiligo, a Barbie with Down syndrome, a bald Barbie and many others, plus a series modeled on inspiring women like Rosa Parks, Maya Angelou and Billie Jean King.

As Mattel changed, it became clear that the world around Barbie had changed, too. Years of corporate feminism, girl bosses and girl power had defanged the second-wave critique; now feminists could look like anything, and some chose to look like Barbie. The classic blond doll remains a megaseller, but once she was inclusive and aspirational, appearing in animated shorts to tell young girls that overapologizing ''is a learned reflex, and every time we do it, we take away from our self-confidence,'' the whole high-femme thing wasn't such a problem. Mothers started returning to the fold.

When Gerwig visited Mattel's very pink headquarters in El Segundo, Calif., in October 2019 for ''brand immersion,'' she learned about these changes for the first time. She also learned that, unlike when she was a child, there were no longer friend characters in the Barbie Universe. ''All of these women are Barbie, and Barbie is all of these women,'' she remembers the executives telling her. The same went for Ken. ''But this is extraordinary!'' Gerwig remembers thinking. ''This is a very high spiritual work that they've done! You can sort of stumble into poetry, that selfhood is contained amongst all these people.''

She laughed when she told me this, but she was not laughing at it, which is precisely the tone of ''Barbie.'' When working on the sequence in which Barbie's high-heeled foot falls flat, Robbie asked Gerwig how to play that moment: Is it a jolt? Is it painful? Gerwig told her: ''You know that feeling where you're like, 'Huh, did I just get my period?' Make that face.'' Robbie, like everything else in the movie, is perfectly artificial and thoroughly genuine at the same time, flabbergasted by her misbehaving body and the gnarly emotions that come with it. When she shows her feet to her friends, one bellows, ''Flat feet!'' like a panicked bullfrog, and the Barbies all begin to operatically dry heave, with intense, hilariously over-the-top disgust. (The only reason they aren't spewing vomit is that Gerwig and her colleagues decided there are no liquids in Barbieland.) ''If we made fun of it, it falls apart,'' Gerwig says. ''We have to be totally sincere.''

Someone more cynical than Gerwig might have been less moved by Mattel's corporate epiphany, 60 years into existence, that Barbie could sustain being a size 6, but cynicism is clearly not Gerwig's way. After watching ''Tiny Shoulders: Rethinking Barbie,'' the 2018 documentary chronicling Barbie's transformation from the inside of Mattel, she was taken by how anxious the female employees were in the run-up to the public reveal of the doll's updates. ''It's so amazing that they made these strides and yet there's just this impossible gantlet of contradictions you have to be walking all the time,'' she says. ''Did they change it in the right way? Did they do it right? Was it good enough?'' She wanted to home in on this feeling -- that modern womanhood is the perpetual experience of not meeting someone's standards, including your own -- and flip it. ''If Barbie has been a symbol of all the ways we're not enough, the only thing that made sense to me to tackle in the movie was: How could we turn it to be enough?''

After Barbie is eviscerated by that real-world teenager, she's way more distressed than when she left Barbieland. She thought she was adored, but in fact she is disdained, objectified, powerless. This is a lot for a doll, but the movie's gambit is to point out that it is table stakes for a woman. The movie sidesteps whatever role Barbie might play in perpetuating a narrow, idealized femininity; instead it gives this particular Barbie a crash course in modern misogyny. After decades of fretting about girls' wanting to be as perfect as Barbie, Gerwig serves up a Barbie struggling to be as resilient as us. This is the movie's brazen magic trick. Barbie is no longer an avatar of women's insufficiency, a projection of all we're not; instead, she becomes a reflection of how hard -- but worth it -- it is to be all that we are.

Helping Barbie navigate her topsy-turvy new existence are other women. Some are already embedded in her history: Ruth Handler (Rhea Perlman); a mother who used to play with Barbie (America Ferrera); the daughter those Barbies were passed on to (Ariana Greenblatt). But one is a stranger, a woman she notices while she sits on a bench, gathering herself. It's a type of woman she has never seen before, because there are no old women in Barbieland. This woman is played by the 91-year-old, Oscar-winning costume designer Ann Roth, a friend of Gerwig's. (''Do you have many friends who are, like, 90? I do, weirdly. I have three real friends, not pretend friends, who are now 91, 90 and 91.'') When Barbie looks at her, she finds her beautiful and tells her so. The woman already knows. Suddenly Barbie, the fraught aspirational figure, has beheld someone she might aspire to be, and it is a radiantly content nonagenarian, reading a newspaper on a Los Angeles bench, who knows what she's worth.

''The idea of a loving God who's a mother, a grandmother -- who looks at you and says, 'Honey, you're doing OK' -- is something I feel like I need and I wanted to give to other people,'' Gerwig says. When it was suggested that this scene, which Gerwig calls a ''transaction of grace,'' might be cut for time, she remembers thinking: ''If I cut that scene, I don't know why I'm making this movie. If I don't have that scene, I don't know what it is or what I've done.''

Midway through ''Barbie,'' a Mattel employee receives a phone call from the F.B.I.: A Barbie is on the loose. One thing leads to another, and Barbie finds herself racing, action-comedy style, through Mattel headquarters, with the company's entire executive corps in hot pursuit, eager to stuff her back into a life-size version of the pink box new Barbies come in.

As much as this set-piece owes to Gerwig and Baumbach's sly imaginations, it owes something to Mattel too. This is a corporation that has historically been so protective of Barbie that it sued the band Aqua over the pop smash ''Barbie Girl.'' Now there is a Nicki Minaj and Ice Spice collaboration that samples ''Barbie Girl'' on the ''Barbie'' soundtrack. How does a company go from dispensing cease-and-desist letters to gamely lampooning itself?

As with the great Barbie makeover of 2015, the answer has to do with survival. After Barbie's pivot, the brand was on better footing, but its parent company was not. In 2018, Mattel lost $533 million. Revenue had plunged $2 billion in five years, and the company had churned through three chief executives. The fourth was Ynon Kreiz, an Israeli-born businessman with a gleaming white smile, total message discipline and a history working in entertainment, not toys. Kreiz had a vision for a turnaround: Mattel would restructure, cut costs and stop being a toy company. ''We used to think of ourselves and present ourselves as a manufacturing company,'' he told me. ''The specialty was: We make items. Now we are an I.P. company that is managing franchises.''

If these are business-speak talking points, they are also the reason ''Barbie'' exists. Mattel has previously made the kind of predictable entertainments a toy company makes -- straightforward pro-Barbie material like successful animated shows for kids. But when Kreiz took charge, that kind of propaganda was not working broadly enough. He and his colleagues now say the same things over and over. That Barbie is not a toy; she is a pop-culture icon. That she does not have customers; she has fans. If you take that seriously, it outlines how to proceed. An icon who wants to stay at the center of the culture can't keep putting out the same old thing and suing anyone who riffs on it. She has to stay current.

So, six weeks into the job, Kreiz met with Margot Robbie, who had been keeping an eye on the Barbie rights and whose production company had a relationship with Warner Brothers. He also hired a veteran film producer, Robbie Brenner, who had made movies like ''Dallas Buyers Club,'' to head up Mattel films. Brenner has since assembled a master list of 45 Mattel properties that could be adapted, including Hot Wheels, He-Man, Polly Pocket and Uno; a number are currently in development, with talent including Tom Hanks, Daniel Kaluuya and Lena Dunham.

As Kreiz is quick to point out, using I.P. to drive a business is not an original strategy. Look at Disney, an I.P. company that sells loads of toys. (Mattel, despite no longer thinking of itself as a ''manufacturing company,'' has the contract to produce Disney Princess toys.) Look at the closest thing ''Barbie'' has to a blueprint: ''The Lego Movie,'' which has grossed $468 million. (It, too, features toys reckoning with the ways in which they're being played.) Look at Hasbro and the ''Transformers'' franchise (while averting your eyes from ''Battleship''). Look, even, at Mattel, back before Kreiz came aboard. A Barbie movie had been in development, with Universal and then Sony, since 2009, around the time Mattel allowed Barbie to appear in Pixar's ''Toy Story 3.'' But the project always fell through, even with talent like Anne Hathaway and Amy Schumer attached. In Schumer's script, Barbie was an inventor kicked out of Barbieland for not being perfect enough. Schumer has said she knew the Sony project wouldn't work after she got a note suggesting that the invention that gets Barbie exiled ought to be Jell-O high heels.

Despite Mattel's attempt to adopt a cucumber-cool corporate attitude for Gerwig's ''Barbie,'' it still did plenty of internal white-knuckling. There was consternation over the innuendos about Ken's sexual orientation, and it's not as if they didn't notice the film joking about the company's male leadership. (Will Ferrell, playing the chief executive, defends himself as ''the nephew of a female aunt.'') ''Oh, my God, did I have anxiety,'' says Richard Dickson, the president and chief operating officer, who has been at the company for almost 20 years. When he read the part of the script where the teenager eviscerates Barbie, he says, he was sure it needed to be different. They had done so much work to put this critique behind them; why bring it up? After weeks of discussion, he reached out to Gerwig. He and a group of executives flew to London, where the movie was being filmed. His attitude on arriving, he says, was, ''like: 'This page is changing! We can rewrite it right here!''' But after watching Gerwig and Robbie read the scene, he says, ''I was so embarrassed.'' Acknowledging the critique and co-signing the critique, he saw, were not the same. It's one thing to insult a plastic doll sold by a giant corporation, but it's quite another to throw those words into Margot Robbie's wide-eyed face. Gerwig has, literally, humanized Barbie. And Barbie, the big-hearted naïf, is brought to tears by all the unexpectedly harsh things humans think about her.

Everyone at Mattel adores the movie. They are using it to slather Barbie -- the icon, not just the product -- across the globe. This movie is full of lovingly showcased dolls, accessories, outfits, speedboats and tandem bicycles; there is a parade of short-lived dolls from Barbie history, like Earring Magic Ken, and the Barbie with a TV embedded in her back, and the Skipper whose breasts grew when you moved her arms. Yet many of these items are not available anywhere but eBay. The movie is dream product placement, but you cannot buy many of the products it places. It is Barbie the concept that is inescapable: Barbie pink, ''Barbie'' merch, Barbie tie-ins, Barbie licensing partnerships for rugs, candles, nail polish, frozen yogurt, pool floats, insurance and video-game consoles.

This is the bet: that a good movie will drive near-infinite brand synergies. It will make other talent keen to work in the Mattel Cinematic Universe. It will expand Barbie's demographic appeal. It will launder the doll and her content universe for naysayers and those still on the fence. It will make Barbie so omnipresent that children will turn to the adults in their life and say, ''I want a Barbie doll,'' and the adults will not wince. Kreiz is very clear on this: If the movie works, it will sell toys. That just couldn't be the starting point. People would see through it. So Mattel let Gerwig toy with its crown property, teasing the corporate mothership and winking at Ken's sexual orientation, and in exchange it got a movie that should serve its purposes better than any advertisement ever could.

We have come this far without attending to Ken, which is the predicament of Ken. While I was working on this article, I had Barbie books scattered around the house, and whenever my 6-year-old daughter saw a picture of Ken, she would push the book away in disgust and say, ''EWWWWW, KEN!'' When Gerwig first spoke with Ryan Gosling about playing the role, he told her that his daughters had a Ken and that he once found it beneath a rotting lemon. Both of these things are very Ken.

In the funhouse-mirror world that is Barbieland, Barbies have all the power, and the Kens are their accessories. Not to put too fine a point on it, but: Kens are the women of Barbieland. It's just that no one is objectifying them, because no one has the genitalia to make lust a thing. Ken would like a chaste good-night kiss anyway, but Barbie would prefer he leave, so he always does. When Ken hitches a ride into the real world, his experience is as eye-opening as Barbie's. She learns how difficult it is to be a woman. He learns how great it is to be a man. Ken gets red-pilled on patriarchy.

Gosling spent a year demurring about the role. ''There were times where I was sure I wasn't doing the film,'' he recalls. ''I would call my agent and ask who was playing Ken. And they would say, 'Greta says you are.''' Eventually he committed: ''She was just, in the end, more confident that I should play him than I was that I shouldn't.'' During that year of talking and the preparation that followed, it became clear that Ken needed an additional beat, some catharsis that wasn't in the script. If you are making a movie that is trying to take the contradictions of modern womanhood seriously and you have a character in your movie who cannot define himself or understand his own worth -- a character who kicks sand all day hoping just to be looked at by someone with power -- you have to take that plight seriously, even if the character is male. You don't have to do this because Mattel or Warner Brothers is insisting. You have to do this because the movie is insisting.

So it became clear: Ken needed a dream dance number. (Gerwig shrugs: ''I like dream ballets, and I like mothers.'') She has a habit of referring to ''Barbie'' as a musical, and that's not wildly inaccurate: It has a soundtrack, overseen by Mark Ronson, of original pop songs, and another big choreographed dance number besides Ken's. Gerwig screened musicals for the entire cast, and she thinks of the Mattel executives in the movie as being something like tuxedo-clad 1930s tap dancers. But there is only one character who breaks out into a power ballad, and it is Ken. ''I'm just Ken/Anywhere else I'd be a 10,'' Gosling wails as he heads to a Ken-on-Ken beach battle that leads to a Ken-and-Ken dream ballet that ultimately allows Ken to realize that he is ''Kenough.''

It is not a coincidence that the moment Gerwig singled out as always surprising her -- the one that makes her think, ''why did they let us do this?'' -- is the one that involves the Kens riding their invisible horses to their Mojo Dojo Casa Houses, after the dream ballet, after they have stormed the Barbieland beach and fought with lacrosse sticks and suction-cup arrows. It is in those moments that the movie has most completely slipped the bounds of anything a Barbie movie needed to do, shooting past the critique, and the subversion of the critique, and the upending, sidestepping, teasing and embracing of the critique, to go off into its own orbit. Liftoff has been achieved. Ken has momentarily run away with the picture.

''Barbie'' is a gigantic endeavor with hundreds of stakeholders and thousands of details, every single one of which has been obsessed over. (I haven't even told you about Barbieland's seven suns, so no one is ever in shadow, or Ken's black leather fringe vest and fanny pack with ''Ken'' emblazoned on it in the Metallica font!) This movie is a big, honking summer tent pole that has been finessed into a gulp of delectable entertainment that hits every single one of its marks. But the surprising thing about ''Barbie'' is not that it pulls off the difficult task of doing everything it needed to do; it's that it does something it didn't need to at all: It feels as if it was made by an actual person.

Yes, that person has her cake and eats it, too, dozens of times over, in this film. It's in how ''Barbie'' name-checks ''rampant consumerism'' as a sin and then makes every piece of plastic gleam so gorgeously that it feels as if the Pacific Garbage Patch might be worth it. It's in how Barbieland is full of insidious flaws -- it's literally a panopticon -- and yet it's going to sell a billion Dreamhouses. It's in how the movie insists that everyone is beautiful but contains no one even slightly plain. It's in how the movie speaks directly to women, mothers in particular, about the impossibility of perfection, so we can feel great about buying perfect Barbies for our babies. But maybe the most unexpected is that at the end of this movie, which will most likely glorify this doll for generations to come, Barbie finds herself echoing with her critics. Like those 1970s feminists, she does not want to be a perfect, plastic doll, however difficult it may be to live outside a box.

Gerwig loves Barbie, but she knows Barbie has made people feel bad, as if they don't measure up. And so she has made this 113-minute love letter to Barbie that is also an earnest attempt to make amends. This is the most subversive thing about the movie, this extratextual notion that Barbie might have things to make amends for. There is no reason Gerwig in particular should be the one trying to make those amends, except that she wanted to -- to take an immense, divisive toy brand and bend it to the heartfelt and counterintuitive purpose of making women feel good.

It's a testament to Gerwig's singular earnestness -- a level of sincerity unavailable to many of us -- that using Barbie to affirm the worth of ordinary women feels, to her, quasi religious. She told me that when she was growing up, her Christian family's closest friends were observant Jews; they vacationed together and constantly tore around each other's homes. She would also eat with them on Friday nights for Shabbat dinner, where blessings were sung in Hebrew, including over the children at the table. May God bless you and protect you. May God show you favor and be gracious to you. May God show you kindness and grant you peace. Every Friday the family's father would rest his hand on Gerwig's head, just as he did on his own children's, and bless her too.

''I remember feeling the sense of, 'Whatever your wins and losses were for the week, whatever you did or you didn't do, when you come to this table, your value has nothing to do with that,''' Gerwig told me. '' 'You are a child of God. I put my hand over you, and I bless you as a child of God at this table. And that's your value.' I remember feeling so safe in that and feeling so, like, enough.'' She imagines people going to the temple of the movies to see ''Barbie'' on a hot summer day, sitting in the air-conditioned dark, feeling transported, laughing, maybe crying, and then coming out into the bright heat. ''I want people to feel like I did at Shabbat dinner,'' she said. ''I want them to get blessed.''

Stylist: Valentina Collado; prop stylist: Ariana Salvato; hair: Rutger; makeup: Francelle Daly; clothing: Isabel Marant, the Row, Proenza Schouler.

## The Renters' Utopia.

Francesca Mari and Luca Locatelli | May 23 | NYTMag

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When Eva Schachinger married at 22, she applied for public housing. Luckily, she lived in Vienna, which has some of the best public housing in the world. It was 1968. Eva was a teacher, and her husband, Klaus-Peter, was an accountant for the city's public-transportation system. She grew up in a public-housing complex in the center of the city, where her grandmother, who cared for her from 6 in the morning until 6 at night, lived in one of five buildings arranged around a courtyard. Eva played all day with friends from the complex.

Her mother, who was renting on the private market after a divorce, had recently applied for public housing, too, and she was offered a unit first, in 1971. By then, Eva had a young daughter, and her mother decided Eva needed the spot more and offered it to her. The available unit was in the 21st District, on the northeastern edge of the city. Eva's father-in-law warned her -- not entirely jokingly -- that out there, they would be the first to be occupied by the Russians. But she and Klaus-Peter liked the floor plan: Although the apartment was an economical 732 square feet, it had two bedrooms, a living room, a dining room, a toilet and washroom and a balcony. The rent was 700 schillings. (That's about 55 euros, though the currency wasn't introduced until 2002.) Eva transferred her teaching job to the 21st District, to a school a 15-minute walk from her new apartment.

When I met Eva late last year, she looked smart in a jean jacket with a neatly tied silk scarf around her neck, small dangly earrings and cropped curly hair. Over the course of the last 44 years, as she continued to teach English to fifth through eighth grades, Eva's rent increased almost fivefold, to 270 euros from 55, but her wages increased more than 20-fold, to 3,375 euros a month from 150. Viennese law dictates that rents in public housing can increase only with inflation, and only when the year's inflation exceeds 5 percent. By the time she retired in 2007, Eva's rent was only 8 percent of her income. Because her husband was earning 4,000 euros a month, their rent amounted to 3.6 percent of their incomes combined.

That's about what Vienna was aiming for back in 1919, when the city began planning its world-famous municipal housing, known as the Gemeindebauten. Before World War I, Vienna had some of the worst housing conditions in Europe, Eve Blau notes in her book, ''The Architecture of Red Vienna.'' Many working-class families had to take on subtenants or bed tenants (day and night workers who slept in the same bed at different times) in order to pay their rent. But from 1923 to 1934, in a period known as Red Vienna, the ruling Social Democratic Party built 64,000 new units in 400 housing blocks, increasing the city's housing supply by about 10 percent. Some 200,000 people, one-tenth of the population, were rehoused in these buildings, with rents set at 3.5 percent of the average semiskilled worker's income, enough to cover the cost of maintenance and operation.

Experts refer to Vienna's Gemeindebauten as ''social housing,'' a phrase that captures how the city's public housing and other limited-profit housing are a widely shared social benefit: The Gemeindebauten welcome the middle class, not just the poor. In Vienna, a whopping 80 percent of residents qualify for public housing, and once you have a contract, it never expires, even if you get richer. Housing experts believe that this approach leads to greater economic diversity within public housing -- and better outcomes for the people living in it.

In 2015, before they bought an apartment on the private market, the Schachingers were making about 80,000 euros ($87,000) a year, roughly the income of the average U.S. household in 2021. Eva and Klaus-Peter paid 26 percent and 29 percent in income tax, respectively, but just 4 percent of their pretax income was going toward rent, which is about what the average American household spends on meals eaten out and half a percentage point less than what the average American spends on ''entertainment.'' Even if the Schachingers got a new contract today on their unit, their monthly payments would be an estimated 542 euros, or only 8 percent of their income. Vienna's generous supply of social housing helps keep costs down for everyone: In 2021, Viennese living in private housing spent 26 percent of their post-tax income on rent and energy costs, on average, which is only slightly more than the figure for social-housing residents overall (22 percent). Meanwhile, 49 percent of American renters -- 21.6 million people -- are cost-burdened, paying landlords more than 30 percent of their pretax income, and the percentage can be even higher in expensive cities. In New York City, the median renter household spends a staggering 36 percent of its pretax income on rent.

To American eyes, the whole Viennese setup can appear fancifully socialistic. But set that aside, and what's mind-boggling is how social housing gives the economic lives of Viennese an entirely different shape. Imagine if your housing expenses were more like the Schachingers'. Imagine having to think about them to the same degree that you think about your restaurant choices or streaming-service subscriptions. Imagine, too, where the rest of your income might go, if you spent much less of it on housing. Vienna invites us to envision a world in which homeownership isn't the only way to secure a certain future -- and what our lives might look like as a result.

Writing about housing in the United States, I've become depressed. I'm the scold at the dinner party, revolted by big investors speculating in the housing market, yes, but also by the thousands of small-time investors -- including some of my own friends -- who are pooling money to buy homes in states they've never seen or buying rental properties in gentrifying neighborhoods. But the math is hard to argue with. Buying a home near work is more lucrative than working. The growth of asset values has outstripped returns on labor for four decades, and a McKinsey report found that a majority of those assets -- 68 percent -- is real estate. Last year, one in four home sales was to someone who had no intention of living in it. These investors are particularly incentivized to buy the sorts of homes most needed by first-time buyers: Inexpensive properties generate the highest rental-income cash flows.

Real estate is a place where money literally grows on tree beams. In the last decade, the typical owner of a single-family home acquired nearly $200,000 in appreciation. ''Another word for asset appreciation is inflation,'' the academics Lisa Adkins, Melinda Cooper and Martijn Konings write in ''The Asset Economy,'' ''an increase in monetary value without any corresponding change in the nature of the good itself or the conditions of its production that would make it scarcer or justify an increased demand for it.'' That inflation is creating a treacherous gulch between the housing haves and have-nots. Harvard's Joint Center for Housing Studies found that, in 2019, the median net worth of U.S. renters was just 2.5 percent of the median net worth of homeowners: $6,270 versus $254,900. Last year, as higher interest rates slowed home sales and caused prices to plateau (and even soften in some overheated cities), the asking price of the median U.S. rental reached $2,000 a month, a record high, according to Redfin. Inflated rent prices line the pockets of landlords while preventing renters from saving for a down payment and ever getting off the treadmill.

The astronomical pace of appreciation is the culmination of decades of policy aimed at encouraging home buying. The fixed-rate, 30-year mortgage is a particularly American invention, possible only because the federal government insures the debt -- if a borrower defaults, the government is on the hook. (Only one other country, Denmark, offers the same instrument.) Then there's our tax code, which allows those affluent enough to buy homes and itemize their deductions to write off the interest they pay on their mortgages: the bigger the mortgage, the bigger the deduction. Homeowners can deduct up to $10,000 of their property taxes from their federal taxes too, and if they sell their primary residence, they may be able to avoid paying capital gains on profits of up to $250,000 per person ($500,000 for couples). As housing activists like to point out, everyone who has a mortgage is living in subsidized housing.

Last year, troubled by the seeming intractability of these problems, I began looking for solutions outside the United States. Could the answer be rent control, as in Berlin? It might have seemed that way a decade or so ago, before investors and new residents began pouring into the city, causing land values to quintuple; now, despite rent-stabilization laws, even the apartments that no one else wanted to buy 15 years ago are huge moneymakers. Many residents with affordable rental contracts are locked into them because it would be too expensive or competitive to move. Frustrated by the housing squeeze, tenant organizers recently put forth an ''expropriation'' measure, which called for landlords with more than 3,000 units to sell their holdings back to the government at below-market prices. In a 2021 referendum, 59 percent of Berliners voted in favor of it, but it's not clear whether it will ever be implemented.

Could the answer be loosening zoning restrictions, as Tokyo did in 2002? That has certainly helped. In 2014, there was more home construction in the city than in all of England. Since then, home prices have stabilized. Tokyo is largely celebrated as a model by YIMBYs (members of the ''yes, in my backyard'' movement) because they like its market-driven approach to housing abundance. They often point out that the city builds five times as much housing per capita as California. But Japan is a very different market because of its earthquake risk: Because regulatory codes and mitigation technologies are ever improving, structures often fully depreciate within 35 years. Older homes are often undermaintained because there's little expectation that any investment might be recaptured upon resale; they're thought of like used clothing or cars -- you resell at a loss.

Auckland, New Zealand, might seem like a more applicable example. In 2016, the city, which has one of the most expensive housing markets in the world, ''upzoned'' 75 percent of its residential land, increasing its legal capacity for housing by about 300 percent in an effort to encourage multifamily-housing construction and tamp down prices. In areas that were upzoned, the total number of building permits granted (a way of estimating new construction) more than quadrupled from 2016 to 2021. As intended, the relative value of underdeveloped land increased, because it could suddenly host more housing, and the relative value of units in densely developed areas decreased, tempering sky-high prices. But there are limits to what upzoning can do. Often the benefits of allowing greater density are captured by developers, who price the new units far above cost. It doesn't offer renters security or directly create the type of housing most needed: affordable housing.

That's what differentiates Vienna. Perhaps no other developed city has done more to protect residents from the commodification of housing. In Vienna, 43 percent of all housing is insulated from the market, meaning the rental prices reflect costs or rates set by law -- not ''what the market will bear'' or what a person with no other options will pay. The government subsidizes affordable units for a wide range of incomes. The mean gross household income in Vienna is 57,700 euros a year, but any person who makes under 70,000 euros qualifies for a Gemeindebau unit. Once in, you never have to leave. It doesn't matter if you start earning more. The government never checks your salary again. Two-thirds of the city's rental housing is covered by rent control, and all tenants have just-cause eviction protections. Such regulations, when coupled with adequate supply, give renters a level of stability comparable to American owners with fixed mortgages. As a result, 80 percent of all households in Vienna choose to rent.

The key difference is that Vienna prioritizes subsidizing construction, while the United States prioritizes subsidizing people, with things like housing vouchers. One model focuses on supply, the other on demand. Vienna's choice illustrates a fundamental economic reality, which is that a large-enough supply of social housing offers a market alternative that improves housing for all.

One afternoon last fall, I walked through central Vienna, past ornate buildings with lacy balconies, balustrades and porticos -- private apartments from the 19th century. They were interspersed with social-housing blocks from the 1920s and 1930s -- the Gemeindebauten, which stood out not only for their modernist architecture but also for the triumphant red block lettering on their facades, announcing: Erbaut von der Gemeinde Wien in den Jahren 1925-1926 aus den Mitteln der Wohnbausteuer. (''Built by the municipality of Vienna in the years 1925-1926 from funds from the housing tax.'') A stroke of political genius, I thought, as I waited for the tram: explanation and advertising. Half an hour later, I was in the 21st District, the ''Russian territory'' where Eva Schachinger used to live. Wohnpartner, the city agency that tries to foster community within the Gemeindebauten and helps resolve tenant conflicts, was having an open house at her old building, a flat, minimalist complex with orange elevator shafts.

Following Wohnpartner signs, I found the glass-walled community center and entered. Most of the attendees were mothers with small children or retired people. There was a painting station, table tennis and a plant exchange. People had brought their secondhand goods to give away, and a millennial Wohnpartner staff member offered tech help, which, surprisingly, no one seemed to need. Among the permanent fixtures was a library filled with free books and a play area with an array of wooden toys.

I took a seat with Eva in the communal kitchen, where someone had made a large pot of butternut-squash soup. (Some of Red Vienna's planners had hoped to centralize cooking in communal facilities with industrial-strength machines, but the fascists came first, and then, under capitalism, Austrian families quickly became accustomed to shelling out for their own KitchenAids, Vitamixes and Nespresso machines.) Since retiring, Eva has been collaborating with Malyuun Badeed, the building's caretaker, on a twice-yearly magazine for the complex that includes a recipe and a crossword, along with the latest community news. Badeed, who joined us in the kitchen, wore a black hijab with pearls and waved her hands as she spoke of leaving Somalia as a single mother in the 1990s. When she first arrived in Vienna, she hawked newspapers on the street; now she helped produce one.

Eva told me she often came back to the Gemeindebau to tutor students from the complex with a woman named Edith, an elderly neighbor who lived in a nearby Gemeindebau. Edith's next-door neighbors help buy and deliver her groceries, which she has difficulty carrying. In exchange, she watches over their three children. When Eva called to wish her a merry Christmas, Edith was busy wrapping 40 presents for the three kids; she hid them around her apartment so they wouldn't be found before Santa came to visit. ''The Gemeindebau is where socialization happens,'' Eva was fond of telling me, and this is what socialization looks like across the generations.

I learned that the average waiting time to get a Gemeindebau is about two years (at any given moment there are 12,000 or so people on the waiting list, and each year about 10,000 or more people are housed). Vienna residents -- anyone who has had a fixed address for two years, whether they are a citizen or not -- may apply, and applications are evaluated based on need. Florian Kogler, a 21-year-old university student, was considered an urgent case because he lived in an overcrowded two-bedroom apartment with his mother, stepfather and two siblings. He shared a room with his brother, while his parents slept in the living room. He also got priority because he was moving into his own apartment for the first time. Kogler was offered an apartment in about a month. ''That's unusually fast,'' he told me.

Applicants may decline up to two units; if they decline a third, they have to apply again. Kogler took the first flat offered to him, a 355-square-foot studio drenched in light overlooking a playground in the central 12th District. It cost 350 euros a month; his monthly income from working part time at a museum is about 1,000 euros. Those who need extra assistance to pay their rent receive individual subsidies. Students under 25, like Kogler, can qualify for 200 euros a month.

Every few years, there is a debate about whether the affluent should be forced to give up their Gemeindebau leases -- that is, whether the units should be means-tested. The face of this debate, for some, is Peter Pilz, a former member of Austria's Green Party in Parliament. Pilz lives in Goethehof, one of the largest Gemeindebauten by the Danube River. He moved into a unit as a university student to live with his grandmother, who had been there since the building opened in 1932. Before she died, he took over her contract. (He was, one might say, grandmothered in.) Pilz was elected to Parliament in 1986 and eventually started making more than 8,000 euros a month.

Even in Vienna, Pilz's tenancy raised eyebrows, making headlines in Austria's conservative paper, Ùsterreich, which claimed in 2012 that he was paying only 66.18 euros a month in rent. (Pilz says he was paying, including building costs, closer to 250 euros a month.) ''Given that Pilz's income is well over the usual tariff for social housing, it does look like we're talking about social fraud here,'' said the general secretary of the conservative Freedom Party of Austria.

Pilz did nothing illegal. Once in a Gemeindebau, you never have to leave. But is it unethical for the wealthy to stay? City housing officials point out that having wealthier tenants in the Gemeindebauten helps thwart the problems that accompany concentrated poverty, creating a more stable, healthier environment for everyone. Unlike in the United States, where public housing is only for the poorest -- the average resident's annual household income was $15,219 in 2019, well below the federal poverty line of $16,910 for a family of two -- the relative integration of the Gemeindebauten means that they are not stigmatized.

That's not to say they are problem-free. Noomi Anyanwu, the 23-year-old founder of Black Voices Austria, told me that she grew up in a Gemeindebau with an Austrian mother and a Nigerian father. When she wasn't more than 5, a white boy in the complex who was a bit older called her brother a racial slur while everyone was playing in the courtyard. Overhearing the spat, the fathers descended into the courtyard. But the white father didn't apologize; he doubled down, repeating what his son said. Just a few years later, Anyanwu said, her father left the country because of employment discrimination and racist treatment by the police.

So I was surprised when Anyanwu told me that, on the whole, her experience with social housing was positive. The Gemeindebau was its own village within the city, she said. She estimated that 50 percent of her Gemeindebau neighbors were immigrants -- ''it reflected society,'' she told me. (Vienna actually has a slightly higher percentage of foreign-born residents than New York City.) A girl her age named Safiya lived in an apartment across the hall from hers and would become her best friend. Safiya's father was also from Africa -- from Somalia -- and he, too, left because of racism. But the affordability of the Gemeindebau allowed the girls' mothers to maintain stability.

Esra Ozmen, the daughter of Turkish immigrants, grew up in Sandleitenhof, one of the largest Geimendebauten, which has villa-like courtyards and stonework. As an adult, she moved into her own Gemeindebau studio. Ozmen says affordable housing gave her the stability to study for a Ph.D. in fine art while also pursuing a rap career. She makes 1,000 to 2,000 euros a month from her shows and from organizing cultural events. ''I have a car,'' she told me. ''A Mercedes A-Class from the '90s. I eat out. I drink one coffee out every day. I don't have a lot of money. But I live rich.''

Social housing like Vienna's might seem inconceivable in America. But American politicians seriously considered it in the 1930s. After the stock-market crash of 1929, the U.S. housing market also collapsed; half of mortgage debt was in default by 1933. Both the right and the left agreed that the government needed to intervene. The question was how. According to the historian Kenneth T. Jackson in his book ''Crabgrass Frontier,'' at the time, the typical mortgage ranged from five to 10 years, and borrowers paid interest only until the end of the term, when full payment was due or a borrower refinanced. When President Franklin D. Roosevelt took office in 1933, Congress created the Home Owners' Loan Corporation to buy underwater mortgages and stabilize the housing market. Within two years, the H.O.L.C. restructured more than a million mortgages, covering 10 percent of all owner-occupied homes. Principal and interest were bundled together so that over about 20 years of manageable payments, borrowers became outright homeowners.

But that wasn't enough to salvage the real estate market or the economy. During the Great Depression, one-quarter of all Americans were unemployed, and the construction industry was hit particularly hard. The United States needed the same things as Vienna at the time: employment and better housing conditions for workers. Housing is ''the wheel within the wheel to move the whole economic engine,'' said Marriner Eccles, Roosevelt's Federal Reserve chairman. The Federal Public Works Administration, an emergency jobs program, funded construction of about 50 new public-housing complexes, including the Harlem River Houses in New York City, a project seemingly straight out of Vienna, with Beaux-Arts-inspired buildings along a central courtyard with a nursery school, health clinics and a public library.

Although this housing was admired, it was costly and mired in controversy, writes the historian Gail Radford, who chronicles the New Deal-era debate over social housing in her book, ''Modern Housing for America.'' Roosevelt sought a housing plan that didn't require the government to keep footing the bill. At a time when Communism was gaining traction, he preferred to wed Americans to capitalism. The best way to do that? Broaden the base of homeowners -- increase the number of Americans with a personal investment in property.

Congress's National Housing Act of 1934 would rescue the housing market and establish the housing policy that defines America today. It made permanent the fixed-rate, long-term mortgage that the H.O.L.C. had helped introduce. Banks were reluctant to assume risk over decades, so the act created the Federal Housing Administration (F.H.A.) to insure mortgage debt with the full backing of the U.S. Treasury as long as loans conformed to standards it set -- for instance, homes had to appraise for the purchase price and had to be in a stable-enough neighborhood, which meant a white-enough neighborhood, to make sure the government wouldn't lose money if a borrower defaulted. On its maps, the F.H.A. colored the neighborhoods deemed too risky for mortgage insurance in red -- a form of ''redlining,'' a policy that did a great deal to create the grave racial disparities in wealth that persist today. ''No agency of the United States government has had a more pervasive and powerful impact on the American people over the past half-century,'' Jackson writes.

But the Federal Housing Administration had no plan to address low-income housing needs. So Senator Robert Wagner, a New York Democrat, introduced a second bill, inspired by what the housing scholar Catherine Bauer had seen in Vienna and other European cities. As proposed, the Housing Act of 1937, which Bauer helped write, would have included financing for the construction of both limited-profit housing and public housing. Faced with fierce opposition from the real estate industry, Wagner and Bauer accepted five fatal compromises in order to pass the bill. First, support for nonprofit and limited-profit cooperatives was eliminated. Second, location decisions were left to local governments, many of whose constituents greeted public housing like the bubonic plague, as one commenter put it. Third, a provision was added for an ''equivalent elimination'' of slum property, meaning that for each new unit built, a slum dwelling had to be cleared. (That way, public housing wouldn't dampen landlords' profits by increasing the overall supply of units.) Fourth, public housing would be eligible only to those so poor that they could never secure decent housing in the private market.

Fifth and finally, construction costs were severely limited. The problem with America's public housing today isn't just that it's underfunded and poorly maintained. It's that it wasn't built well to begin with. Doors were left off closets; interior walls were thin and cheap. At a public-housing complex in Red Hook, Brooklyn, the elevator only stopped on every other floor. As Radford writes, ''Those who hated public housing remained hostile, while the minimal buildings produced by the [United States Housing Authority] attracted no new allies and discouraged some of the old ones.'' Indeed, America's public housing was designed to fail: to be unappealing to anyone who could afford to rent.

As Bauer predicted early on, housing programs targeting only the poor would lack the political support necessary to thrive. Only an integrated program, one that welcomed the majority like the Gemeindebau of Vienna, would be sustainable. But the U.S. government prioritized support for banking rather than construction. The 30-year mortgage was a huge economic boon for the millions of Americans who took one out, benefiting from the federal subsidies and the nation's long upward trajectory in home prices; the instrument leveraged many a renter and public-housing resident into homeownership and ''turned many a former dependent of the public sector into a small-time fiscal conservative,'' as Adkins, Cooper and Konings write in ''The Asset Economy.''

This constituency of middle-class homeowners is what the Dartmouth emeritus economist William A. Fischel calls ''homevoters'': a coalition of Americans who -- consciously or not -- vote to protect the value of their property. They tend to oppose local development and favor exclusionary zoning -- which ensures maximum appreciation and prevents their tax dollars from extending to poorer neighborhoods. This tendency, alongside stagnant wages, has transformed the nation's housing stock into an ever-scarcer and ever-more-expensive class of speculative asset. It's almost impossible to ''cater to the expectations of an existing constituency of middle-class homeowners without raising the barriers of entry for the rest of society,'' Adkins and her colleagues write. ''A middle-class politics of asset democratization has ended up undermining the conditions of its own viability.''

I wasn't the only American looking to Vienna for possible answers to America's housing crisis. I was there following a delegation from New York that had come to study the city's housing system -- 50 policymakers, researchers and activists invited by Housing Justice for All, an alliance of housing organizers across the state, and the Action Lab, a social-movement hub. One afternoon, I joined them on a tour of Karl-Marx-Hof, one of the largest housing complexes in the world.

Ever since Karl-Marx-Hof opened in 1930, it has been a sort of Rorschach test -- a domineering socialist monstrosity or a pioneering communitarian stronghold, depending on your political perspective. Exiting the subway station, the building shot up before me, seven stories tall and three-quarters of a mile long, a perimeter block that looks like a citadel. The core of the building is cream-colored, but its sandstone red elements draw the eye -- red balconies and red towers topped by staffs that can fly enormous banners that are visible miles away. Its six huge arched passageways, also red, give the complex the civic stature of an aqueduct.

Julia Anna Schranz, a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Vienna and our guide, wore Converse, jeans and a long red wool coat. She pointed out four grim ceramic figures mounted on top of the archways, explaining that they were personifications of enlightenment, freedom, welfare and physical culture. These embellishments -- commissions to increase employment during the period between the world wars, were also seen as an investment in the aesthetics of the Gemeindebauten and a tribute to its tenants.

Schranz opened the thick, thorny iron gates spanning one archway, and we passed into a grassy courtyard -- nearly two football fields in size. Painted an off-white that glowed in the morning sun, the interior was a striking contrast with the more formidable exterior.

''These are the projects,'' India Walton, a community organizer from Buffalo, said wryly. There was a rose garden. Children -- Black, brown, white -- were running and shrieking in a playground attached to an on-site kindergarten. Walton, now in her 40s, had twins when she was just 19 and raised them while working as a nurse. Decades later, she became politically active, and in 2021 she won the Democratic nomination for mayor of Buffalo, only to be defeated by a write-in campaign by the Democratic incumbent. Where would she be now if she had the option of living in a place like this? She would have left her marriage sooner, Walton told me. ''I might not have been a nurse, but a doctor.'' A child in the kindergarten waved at her, and she waved back.

When Karl-Marx-Hof opened, it housed 5,000 people in 1,400 apartments. These apartments were coveted. ''It had two central laundries, two communal bathing facilities with tubs and showers, a dental clinic, maternity clinic, a health-insurance office, library, youth hostel, post office, and a pharmacy and 25 other commercial premises, including a restaurant and the offices and showroom of the BEST, the city-run furnishing and interior-design advice center,'' Blau writes.

Now fewer than 3,000 tenants live in Karl-Marx-Hof -- not because it's undesirable but because living standards have improved and, in response, Vienna has allotted tenants more space. Vienna's housing authority believes that a family of four needs around 1,100 square feet, so it combined some of the units to create larger ones.

A bobblehead nodded from a balcony with potted plants and cairns. An older Austrian man waved. State Assemblywoman Emily Gallagher, a Democrat who had recently unseated the incumbent Democrat in the 50th Assembly District, which includes parts of Greenpoint, Williamsburg and Fort Greene, live-tweeted the tour on her phone. State Senator Julia Salazar, a Democrat representing the 18th State Senate District, which covers Bushwick, took notes with a gold pen on a notebook with black paper. Renette Bradley, a tenant organizer, wore a Nickelodeon shirt, overalls, a black New York beanie and lavishly long fake lashes. ''Can you be paroled here?'' she asked, her voice husky and direct. This affected many of Bradley's friends and relatives who, upon release from prison, were left homeless because they weren't allowed to join family living in public housing.

Schranz looked at her blankly.

''Can you come out of prison and live here?'' Bradley repeated.

''Of course,'' Schranz said. ''Why not? If you're out, you're out.''

The New Yorkers murmured. Schranz continued to look at us questioningly.

''There's like four or five problems baked into that question that they just don't understand,'' Joseph Loonam, a housing campaign coordinator with VOCAL-NY, said as we walked toward the laundry facilities. He told me that a member of his organization had been arrested more than 40 times because whenever he visits his family in the Gowanus projects, he violates the terms of his plea deal.

At the museum store, I bought a red potholder crocheted by a local women's co-op: a Red Vienna-era schema of the ''three evils'' seizing Europe (Nazism, Communism, monarchism), each represented by white arrows. Several organizers and state legislators bought one, too. When the college student working at the museum shop said he was all out, a lawmaker suggested that he could sell the potholders in the display case. ''We aren't used to this,'' the college student said, unlocking the case, by which he seemed to mean American patterns of consumption. The American need to own.

Vienna has succeeded in curbing the craving to own. It has done it by driving down the price of land through rezoning and rent control. In general, the beneficiaries of these land-use policies are less the Gemeindebauten (they stopped building from 2004 to 2015 and now only produce some 500 units a year) and more the limited-profit housing associations, the origins of which preceded Red Vienna and have built 3,000 to 5,000 units a year for the last four decades.

Today limited-profit housing accounts for half the city's social housing. Limited-profit housing associations are restricted to charging rents that reflect costs. Investors -- banks, insurance funds -- may buy shares of the limited-profit housing associations, generally to help fund initial construction. They are paid a low rate of annual interest on their shares. Any profits beyond that must be reinvested in the construction of new social housing. ''It creates a revolving flow of financing for social housing,'' said Justin Kadi, a professor in planning and housing at the University of Cambridge. Vienna's main outlay toward housing is now providing low-cost financing for construction -- and the government gets that money back.

On a gray Friday, Wilhelm Andel, a tall 84-year-old wearing jeans and a leather jacket, greeted me at the Alt-Erlaa tram stop to show me the limited-profit complex where he had lived for 40 years. Alt-Erlaa is one of the largest limited-profit complexes in Vienna, with 3,181 units in 18 futuristic towers, 23 to 27 stories tall, built between 1973 and 1986. As we approached, I saw that the towers had aged surprisingly well, maybe because greenery is timeless, and vegetation seemed to cascade off the tiered balconies. Willie had chosen a unit on the sixth floor. His rent for a nearly-1,200-square-foot apartment was 824 euros -- an amount that would be reasonable for Amarillo, Texas, or Shreveport, La., but out of the question in any of the 50 largest American metro areas.

Living in Alt-Erlaa, Willie enjoyed access to seven rooftop swimming pools, seven indoor swimming pools, tennis courts, gyms and acclaimed art. When the rest of the delegation joined us, he led us toward one of his favorite aspects of the buildings: two murals in the lobby of the second building meditating on the role of the news media and labor in society. They were by the Austrian artist Alfred Hrdlicka. ''They remind me of Orozco,'' said Dorca Reynoso, an employee at Verizon, referring to the political murals of the Mexican painter José Clemente Orozco. Reynoso's rent in Manhattan doubled in 2014 to $1,250. When her landlord proposed a 50 percent increase again in 2022, she was unable to pay and ratcheted up her organizing campaign against her landlord. ''They're so beautiful,'' she said, gazing at the paintings.

For this very reason, Vienna's limited-profit and nonprofit units were many of the delegates' favorites. Art and aesthetics matter. We visited a small nonprofit building, a co-op, that was successfully designed and developed by strangers who responded to a newspaper ad. The top floor had an expansive roof deck, a communal kitchen, a playroom and a sauna. ''You mean I could be in the sauna when my kids are in the playroom?'' said Julie Colon, a Bronx organizer who told me she gave birth alone while in the shelter system. ''This is crazy.'' Shanti Singh, a tenant-rights activist from the Bay Area with short, asymmetrically cropped hair, lingered in the sunny library with its tall windows and honey wood walls. ''I never want to leave,'' she said.

The spiral of overvaluation in housing, which makes the housing-haves rich and the have-nots desperately poor, has brought us to a point where only something radical can solve it. The problem with housing in the United States is that it has been locked in as a means of building wealth, and building wealth is irreconcilable with affordability. The housing crisis in the United States is proof. Even in 2017, before the pandemic, around 113 million Americans -- some 35 percent of the nation's population -- were living with a serious housing problem, such as physically deficient housing, burdensome costs or no housing at all, notes Alex F. Schwartz, an urban-studies professor at the New School.

Calls for a federal social-housing plan in America might sound far-fetched, but make no mistake: The United States government intervenes heavily in the housing market. It's just a two-tiered system, as Gail Radford, the historian, argues. There's generous support for affluent homeowners and deliberately insufficient support for the lowest-income households. In 2017, the United States spent $155 billion on tax breaks to homeowners and investors in rental housing and mortgage-revenue bonds, more than three times the $50 billion spent on affordable housing.

That $50 billion isn't nothing. In fact, in many U.S. cities, public spending per capita on housing and community-development subsidies is higher than in Vienna. But it seems clear that much of this money is misspent, whether through inefficient private-public partnerships like the low-income-housing tax credit; or through distortionary vouchers; or, most dubiously of all, through subsidizing homeowners, the people who need it least. ''If you give everyone demand-side subsidies, like vouchers, and there's a supply shortage, it's going to drive up prices,'' Chris Herbert, the managing director of Harvard's Joint Center for Housing Studies, told me. It costs the state more, and landlords often wind up pocketing the profits.

Though the Gemeindebauten represented a large initial government outlay, Vienna's social housing is now self-sustaining. Guess how much of the residents' salary goes toward the program. One percent. Social housing drives down rents in the private market by as much as 5 percent. Vouchers may appear cheaper in the short term, but directly financing well-regulated public and limited-profit construction is the only way to mitigate speculation and hedge against ever-increasing housing costs. In 2020, New York and California spent $377 and $248 per capita, respectively, in housing development, while Vienna spent just $124 -- and approximately half of Vienna's spending is on low-interest financing that will be repaid and then re-lent.

Social-housing programs have existed in America before, and they exist in America to this day. Local social-housing programs, many of them inspired by Vienna, are underway in Montgomery County, Md.; Seattle; and California. And they have a long legacy in New York, which built 66,000 affordable apartments and 69,000 limited-profit co-op apartment units from 1955 to 1981 under the Limited-Profit Housing Companies Law, also known as Mitchell-Lama, after the two legislators who introduced it. In combination with public housing, Mitchell-Lama units are a main reason economic diversity remains in the Lower East Side, Williamsburg and Chinatown.

Housing expense has been a staggering burden for so many of us, for so long, that it's hard to even contemplate what it would mean to have it recede in our minds. When I spoke to Peter Pilz, the politician who took over his grandmother's unit in Goethehof, I asked him, as I asked every Viennese tenant of social housing, what he did with all the money he saved thanks to his cheap rent. ''I haven't invested a single penny in the stock market,'' he told me. ''I would consider it an enormous waste of time to sit in front of my computer and study what the stock market is doing. I prefer to use my time writing, editing an online newspaper supporting interesting initiatives and having fun.''

Pilz was staying in Tuscany when we spoke, and he had spent the day bicycling. He stopped in Pienza to admire the small purple cathedral and sample the famous pecorino. Then he cycled on to Montalcino, where he sipped some Brunello, before returning to Bagno Vignoni to go swimming. ''That's my hard life,'' he told me. ''If people don't have to struggle all day long to survive -- if your life is made safe, at least in social conditions -- you can use your energy for much more important things.''

## Between Drought and Deluge

Brooke Jarvis | June 4, 2023 | NYTMag

*Brooke Jarvis is a contributing writer for the magazine. She last wrote about people stepping between the police and Black men.*

The shadows were long and the wind across the flatlands fierce as trucks and ATVs began pulling into Chepo Gonzales's yard one afternoon this March. ''Did you double up your socks today?'' Gonzales teased one of the arrivals, a man who complained about cold feet during the previous night's patrol. Another man leaned out the window of his truck and offered a more serious status report: ''There's a lot of water out there, but it's flowing north.''

There was so much water, in fact, that across the state it was spilling over the banks of rivers and bursting the walls of levees. For more than a week, Gonzales and his neighbors had been doing their rounds three to four times a day, looking for signs of danger along the various creeks and canals that surrounded Allensworth, a small town of houses, trailers and barns tucked amid the vast, flat farms of the San Joaquin Valley in central California. They had been ordered to evacuate -- the roads into the town were officially closed -- but here they still were. ''I'll live here till the day I die,'' Gonzales said. He loved the quiet and open spaces. If the water came high enough, he laughed, he would just move onto the roof of his house with a tent, a cooler and a grill.

Everyone knew the town was built on what had once been the shore of an enormous inland lake, called Tulare for the tules, or reeds, that grew around it. But the lake, once the largest west of the Mississippi, was long ago reduced to a memory: It was drained in the late 1800s to make way for wheat fields and orchards and dairies. Dust storms became a problem. So strong was the valley's thirst for water that even the groundwater beneath the lake's historical beds was rapidly disappearing, drawn by so many wells that the ground itself crumpled downward, in some places sinking by nearly 30 feet. In Allensworth, dwindling groundwater meant that the town well often drew water made toxic by high concentrations of agricultural runoff, and residents were advised to boil it. Creeks were marked blue on maps, but they were usually more like dusty ditches, Gonzales's 21-year-old son, Chepito, told me. Until this winter, the only way he really thought about them was as tracks for racing ATVs. But this winter had changed how people thought about a lot of things.

Since New Year's, storm after storm had pummeled the state, dropping epic quantities of water and snow. The water made its way toward the bottom of the valley, as it always had, coursing through waterways held in by earthen levees that, during drought years, grew desiccated and weak, pocked with squirrel burrows. In some parts of the valley bottom, the water wasn't really contained at all. Deanna Jackson, the executive director of the local agency that manages groundwater in the Tulare Lake Hydrologic Region, described the flooding to me as ''vagrant flows, wild flows,'' nearly unmanageable water sheeting across the landscape. Houses and farms and dairies flooded, and people were using excavators to hastily build earthen dikes around their properties. Some of these, around houses and small dairies, were a few feet tall; others, around the lands of the largest and richest agriculture companies, were towering and miles-long. Sometimes these fortifications enraged neighbors, whose land the water found instead. In a valley where powerful interests had long jockeyed for access to water, the arguments were now about who would bear the flood.

A few days before, a canal wall along a train track just north of Allensworth, visible from Gonzales's yard, began to crumble. A froth of brown storm water started to spread toward the houses. Neighbors grabbed shovels and came running; Gonzales and his son brought over the tractors that Gonzales usually uses to muck out paddocks. When they ran out of sandbags, their neighbor Ruben Guerrero, who rushed from work at a nearby elementary school to join the emergency response, had an idea: to fortify the canal wall with the help of a roll of sheet plastic he was planning to use for a house-painting project. The men finally forced the water back with a fix that was part berm, part sand burrito. As the flood pulse receded, they celebrated their victory. But it turned out to be another case of competing interests: The railroad company that owned the land dismantled their work, saying that by protecting their houses, they had threatened the company's property. So hour by hour, they patrolled the levee, watching the water flow through, quick and deep.

Shortly after, another alert went through town: A different levee, this one along Deer Creek, had given way. Floodwater was again flowing toward Allensworth. First, though, the water surged into a pistachio orchard, where it threatened to uproot trees and drown them in sediment. A video that later went viral captured the farmer's response: He drove two pickup trucks to the top of the levee, filled their beds with soil to weigh them down and then revved the engines and propelled the trucks straight into the flooded breach where the levee wall used to be. (One, fittingly, was a Chevy.) Heavy equipment and helicopter loads of sandbags from Cal Fire completed the job, but rumors swirled about why the breach had occurred. Jack Mitchell, the head of the local flood-control district, reported that it looked as if a cut had been made with machinery. Had someone intentionally cut the levee, jeopardizing Allensworth, not to mention someone else's farm, to save his own? ''I can't see how a tree, or a product, a vegetable, is more important than a life,'' Guerrero said, shaking his head. ''Tomatoes are not the only ones that matter. Our lives matter, too.''

Around town, houses were marked with what looked at first like little streamers but were really bits of caution tape, placed by a swift-water rescue team, as a preparatory measure, to mark which houses were still occupied: red if a house was empty, yellow if it wasn't. ''It's rare to see red ones,'' said Kiara Rendon, an Allensworth resident. Her car was packed with supplies, for herself and the younger siblings she cares for, but she had yet to leave: ''A lot of people didn't evacuate because this is all they have.'' A community leader in Allensworth named Denise Kadara told me the same thing. Allensworth was the first town in California to be established by African Americans. It is named for Col. Allen Allensworth, who escaped slavery by fleeing behind Union lines and then joined the Navy before making his way to California. It later became a home for farmworkers and people who couldn't afford to live elsewhere. Kadara felt certain that if residents had followed the order to evacuate, Allensworth would have been sacrificed to save other places deemed more valuable.

A few days earlier, Rendon came home to find her sister, five months pregnant and alone with a 3-year-old, shoveling mud as water rose in the field behind their house. Rendon took me to see the spot where a crew from Cal Fire helped the family make a small drainage ditch and where water was finally running away from their home. Her gaze kept drifting east, where the other legacy of the storms, a record-setting snowpack, 50 feet in places, glistened white on the distant mountains. All of that water, she knew, would have to find its way to low ground. She didn't know what would happen then.

''A lot of people would say, You live out in the desert,'' she said thoughtfully, as water rushed past her feet. ''But look at it now.''

In recent years, it is the dry side of California that has captured headlines: dwindling reservoirs where boat ramps lead only to sand, almond orchards ripped up for lack of irrigation water, catastrophic wildfires that rage through desiccated forests and into towns. In the longer view, though, the state's water problems have come just as often from deluge as from drought. Other parts of the country can count on reasonably steady precipitation, but California has always been different, teetering between drenching winters and blazing summers, between wet years and dry ones -- fighting endlessly to exert control over a flow of water that vacillates, sometimes wildly, between too much and too little.

As we've learned more about how humans are transforming the planet's systems, these swings have grown only more pronounced, leaving experts to wonder how the state will face a future balanced ever more precariously between wet and dry. Can it find ways to better handle -- to steward, even -- the overwhelming water when it does come? And will those measures be sufficient for it to withstand the times it doesn't? These questions matter not just to California and those who live there, but to anyone who eats the food the state produces, who is affected by the fluctuations in its economy or who lives in a place trying to manage its own climate-fueled ''extremification'' -- in other words, all of us.

California's very first biological survey began amid extremes. A botanist on that expedition described contending with clouds of dust and struggling to find enough water to keep the mules going. Then, on Christmas Eve in 1861, the rain began to fall, and it didn't stop for 43 days. In the floods and mudslides that followed, uncountable homes were swept away, and thousands of people (as well as hundreds of thousands of cows) died. ''Nearly every house and farm over this immense region is gone,'' the botanist wrote to his brother. Floodwater covered the Central Valley for 300 miles. In Sacramento, under 10 feet of muddy water, the new governor took a rowboat to his inauguration. But soon the young Legislature simply gave up and moved to the coast for six months while the capital dried out. It took another year before the bankrupted state was able to pay its employees again.

This founding story of statehood proved prophetic. The state's shifts into abundance or drought were often so complete that it became easy to believe, at least for a while, that you could live -- and build -- in one reality as if the other didn't exist. ''Even with geology functioning at such remarkably short intervals, people have ample time to forget it,'' John McPhee wrote in 1988, about why rich people in Los Angeles kept building homes on mountainsides that frequently collapsed in heavy rain. John Steinbeck described a similar amnesia among farmers in the Salinas Valley, where sometimes ''the land would shout with grass'' and other times it would crack and scab and the cows would starve. ''It never failed,'' he wrote, ''that during the dry years the people forgot about the rich years, and during the wet years they lost all memory of the dry years. It was always that way.''

But farming and cities depend on predictability, and as its population and industries grew, California sought to take control of its water destiny. The state built a vast plumbing system, in the form of dams and reservoirs and canals and aqueducts and levees and pumping stations, that could collect water and move it around, keeping it out of the places where it wasn't wanted and moving it to the places where it was. ''Everything depends on the manipulation of water,'' Marc Reisner wrote in the 1986 book ''Cadillac Desert.'' ''On capturing it behind dams, storing it and rerouting it in concrete rivers over distances of hundreds of miles.''

The system strained to adapt to what nature offered and was far from equitable, with the state's poor suffering the most during both flood and drought alike. In wet years, there were floods big enough to overwhelm levees and mad scrambles to get rid of water that quickly went from precious to perilous. The trucks in the Deer Creek levee were not an anomaly but part of a tradition: A few hundred yards from where Gonzales and his neighbors repaired the canal wall north of Allensworth, Gonzales pointed to the spot where he believes his father's '39 Plymouth still resides after being pushed into a different breach during a flood when he was a child. The elder Gonzales might have gotten the idea from J.G. Boswell, a land baron and farmer whom the journalist Mark Arax called ''the king of California'' and whose company was among those now throwing up impressive new earthenworks around the orchards it cultivated in and around the old lake bed. In 1969, when a key levee threatened to burst and flood his land, Boswell sent workers with pocketfuls of cash to every wrecking yard in the San Joaquin Valley. ''Using cranes, they laced eight miles of the big, curved levee with Chevys, Cadillacs, El Dorados, Pontiacs and Thunderbirds,'' Arax wrote. ''A bumper-to-bumper bulwark'' against the ghost of a lake.

In dry years, there were fights over how much water to leave flowing through rivers and the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, where fish and other species desperately needed it, but which looked to some farmers like waste. Year after year California borrowed heavily from its future, pulling from its groundwater as if overdrawing from a bank account, which caused new problems. The water left behind was increasingly unsafe to drink, and when the land above the extracted groundwater sank, the elaborate infrastructure atop it sagged and struggled to deliver water. When groundwater was depleted near the coast, it allowed seawater to intrude, turning coveted freshwater brackish.

Still, the system worked well enough for the state's population and farms to explode in size, and for some to make a rich living while riding the whiplash between wet and dry.

By the 1990s, scientists modeling the future impacts of the world's changing climate were predicting that one of the major problems for California would be the intensification of its already considerable precipitation extremes: a future of ever wilder swings between deeper droughts and more dangerous storms. It didn't take long for it to become clear that the shift was already underway. Although California's average precipitation stayed fairly steady, the averages masked important changes in the way water arrived. Less of it fell as snow, which was a problem because slowly melting snowpack acted as a natural reservoir -- a much more capacious one than anything the state could possibly build to replace it -- safely storing winter wetness and then meting it out in the dry summer. It came less often, which stretched out the time that plants and animals and soils and farmers had to suffer through drought. And when water did come, it was more likely to do so suddenly (so that parched and fire-scarred landscapes were less prepared to absorb it), with greater intensity (so that it caused flash floods and burst levees) and with overwhelming quantity (so that water managers ran out of safe places to put it).

By the 2010s, a decade in which so many forecast climate disasters began to arrive that the climate scientist Kate Marvel called it ''the decade we knew we were right,'' California was already beginning to seem like a different state -- or, put another way, more itself than ever before. The driest four-year stretch since the state began keeping records killed more than 100 million trees, fueled horrific wildfires and left taps dry -- and then gave way, in 2017, to California's second-wettest year ever. Flooding caused more than $1 billion in damage just to roads and highways; in Big Sur, landslides buried Highway 1 under more than 65 feet of rock and dirt. On the northwestern edge of the Central Valley, 180,000 people had to evacuate downstream from Oroville, California's second-largest dam, as it threatened to give way. And then came yet another whipsaw, back to drought.

The speed and severity of the transitions were sometimes dizzying. Paradise, the town where 85 people were killed by a drought-fueled wildfire, is less than 20 miles from the dam that nearly failed during the deluge the year before. And just weeks after the fire, some evacuees had to relocate again: Intense rain was battering the fire scars, and the camp they'd moved to was now in the path of flash floods.

The storms that pummeled the state in 2017 arrived, like much of California's rain, in the form of atmospheric rivers, great currents of water vapor that form over the tropics and flow through the sky, often turning to rain and wind when they collide with land. (This is true of the West Coast in general, and Oregon, Washington and British Columbia are all facing their own versions of future water whiplash.) The average such river, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, carries the same amount of water as the Mississippi does at its mouth, but a large one can carry 15 times as much. Sometimes the rivers arrive one after another, crashing like so many waves against a shore. The 1862 flood was this sort of event. The storms that caused it have since been estimated to be 100- to 200-year events, meaning that under historical conditions they would have a 0.5 to 1 percent chance of occurring in a given year -- rare enough that we could, like Steinbeck's farmers, allow ourselves to forget about the risk, but not nearly so rare that we should.

Of course, our present reality is such that historical conditions, and the risks and constraints associated with them, are becoming less and less relevant. In 2011, a team of more than 100 scientists, engineers and other experts convened by the U.S. Geological Survey modeled what a similar storm -- they called it the ARkStorm, for Atmospheric River 1,000 -- would do to the California of today, with its much larger population and expansive, vulnerable infrastructure. The answer included hundreds of landslides, millions of people evacuated and financial damages more than three times as high as what even a severe earthquake might bring. But that assessment looked only at the potential impacts of a storm of historic proportions. Climate change is not only making events like the 1862 catastrophe more likely to occur (by 300 to 400 percent, according to one estimate); it is also creating the conditions for storms that will make the 1862 flood look small. The two atmospheric rivers that led to a near catastrophe at Oroville, one study found, carried 11 to 15 percent more rain than would have been possible if humans had not altered the atmosphere. And the largest rivers of the future will be even bigger, last longer and carry water at a much higher density. They will also arrive more often.

When the climate scientists Xingying Huang and Daniel Swain modeled ARkStorms based on California's predicted conditions, they found that future storms would be able to douse California with a load of water 45 percent greater than anything that has been possible under historical conditions. Because the precipitation is likely to fall quickly and be tilted toward rain instead of snow, peak runoff would mean between two and four times as much water racing across the landscape as during the largest floods of the past.

That updated analysis was published in August 2022, when California was once again parched: More than 99 percent of the state was officially in drought, and large swaths were considered extreme or exceptional. ''The apparent irony of publishing research on the growing risk of a California megaflood in the midst of a severe drought is not lost on the authors,'' Swain wrote on his blog. At the time, forecasts called for the dry trend to continue, but Swain cautioned that California should not make the old mistake of forgetting the wet times during the dry ones. The research suggested, he wrote, that ''it's only a matter of time before this latent increase in severe flood risk becomes 'unmasked' in the Golden State.''

The months that followed were no ARkStorm but quickly offered a startling reminder of how unprepared the state is even for smaller events. By the end of March, 31 atmospheric-river storms, including six classified as strong and one as extreme, hit the West Coast. Near Sacramento, the Cosumnes River broke out of its levees. Three people died, and an evacuation order had to be rescinded when floods made the roads too dangerous for escape. A creek outside Planada filled the town with waist-high water, destroying houses and cars. In the Bay Area, high winds shattered the glass of skyscrapers, blew a couch from a high-rise apartment onto the sidewalk below and killed five people in a single day. Tornadoes touched down outside Los Angeles, and snow fell as low as the Hollywood sign. In the San Bernardino Mountains, the snow drifts piled so high that roofs collapsed, natural-gas lines fractured and caused fires and the Sheriff's Department had to airlift rations to people who were stranded. Water managers worried that the disaster some had started to call the Big Melt was just beginning.

Driving over the coastal mountains during one of this spring's weaker atmospheric rivers, I had to pull over to wait out blinding rain and a fusillade of flying tree branches. I was on my way to visit Pajaro, a town south of Santa Cruz. Nearly two weeks earlier, the Pajaro River broke through a levee at midnight, prompting a hurried evacuation of 8,500 people, many of them workers in the valley's berry and salad industries. Families were still sleeping in cars or in hotels or in the makeshift shelter at the county fairgrounds, their debts mounting while their homes sat empty and the fields were too flooded to be worked. Every day people gathered on the edge of the closed bridge leading to town, where the river still ran high and brown and tents dotted the riverside, to ask when they would be allowed to resume their lives. On the day they were permitted to re-enter town, nearly two weeks after the flood, I watched shopkeepers mucking out buildings and residents wheeling home bottles of donated water. The public water system was still inoperable.

Andrew Fisher, a professor at the University of California, Santa Cruz, who has studied the Pajaro River watershed since the 1990s, told me that he regards it as a microcosm of the problems and possibilities of California's water future. For decades, it has been known that the levees on the river were dangerously out of date, designed for the more moderate California of the past. By the time of this year's floods, the levees were prepared for only an eight-year flood, or one with about a 12 percent chance of happening in any given year -- hardly the contingency that infrastructure should be built to address. ''That's kind of putting up a flimsy garden fence around your property to keep out wildebeests,'' one hydrologist told me. Although federal funds were available, the towns in the valley weren't rich and never had the money to pay their share for a replacement. Decisions about levee updates -- which are sorely needed in much of the state but are currently governed by a hodgepodge of regulations and funding schemes -- are prioritized in part according to the value of the property to be protected. This too often leaves low-income areas high and dry, or, more accurately, low and wet. ''It's not the same as redlining,'' Fisher said, pausing as if to consider whether he agreed with his own statement. ''But it is a systematic problem if you have a decision process that essentially writes off poor people.'' To protect the most vulnerable communities, water experts have begun pushing the state to set much higher minimum standards for all levees. But that would take billions of dollars, and the political will to spend them.

The Pajaro Valley isn't attached to the large canal system on the other side of the coastal mountains. (The idea of building a connection was floated, but local critics saw the cost as a public subsidy for corporate farms and defeated it.) This means that there's already no infusion of water from outside the natural watershed, unlike in Southern California, which for decades has pulled large quantities of water from the hugely overdrawn Colorado River and is beginning to face a future of difficult cuts. There's also no access to snowpack from the Sierra -- a reality that will eventually and painfully come for the rest of the state as Sierra snowpack declines precipitously over the coming decades. ''That's more water than is stored behind all the dams in the state!'' Fisher said.

Because the Pajaro Valley already has to make do with its own limited water budget, farmers and water managers have learned to make some of the hard choices that are still pending in other regions. Statewide groundwater conservation has been required by law since only 2014. The valley still overdraws its groundwater, but by less than it used to, thanks to the recycling of wastewater, conservation measures and proactive efforts to recharge its aquifers. Withdrawals of groundwater in the valley are tracked, which isn't the case in most other places, and they are very expensive. Fisher believes that a lot more can be done to expand on these ideas and implement them elsewhere, but that any lasting solution will require a deeper understanding of what he calls hydrological services: the way that different parts of a healthy watershed can support the resilience of the whole if allowed to do so.

Before California was developed, rivers that coursed down from the mountains slowed as they reached the valley floor, then meandered across a landscape rich with oxbows and seasonal wetlands. Here, habitat for fish and other animals developed, and areas of slow water offered places for microbes, mussels and arthropods to clean pollutants out of water and for water to trickle down into aquifers, recharging them. A lot more of the land was porous, full of native plants and spongy soil instead of pavement and sunbaked agricultural fields, which meant that more water could be absorbed. (When researchers built a model of the predevelopment Pajaro Valley and then virtually rained on it, they found that significantly less water ran off as floodwater because so much was sucked into the landscape.) Groundwater was generally high enough that water was able to flow back and forth between rivers and aquifers, which helped regulate river temperatures and kept aquifers from filling with salts and pollutants. Today this connection has largely been severed.

In a future in which snowpack dwindles and good dam sites are already in use, the best place for water storage will be underground. The potential is enormous. While California's reservoirs can hold about 40 million acre-feet of water, the state has emptied three times that amount from its groundwater basins. But first the water needs an opportunity to penetrate those basins. Not all soils are good for groundwater recharge; you need areas with deposits of gravel, sandy soil instead of clay. Because rivers drop different sizes of sediments depending on how fast they are moving, finding these areas requires uncovering the historical hydrology below California's surface. Fisher showed me maps produced by electromagnetic survey that reveal the composition of soils. The places he wanted to target for recharge stood out in dark relief, snaking like the curves of long-forgotten rivers, which is exactly what they were.

''I see it as replumbing California for the future climate,'' said Julie Rentner, director of the conservation nonprofit River Partners. It was a bright, chilly day near Modesto, and Rentner was showing me some farms that were once typical of the Central Valley: laser-leveled fields sown in alfalfa and wheat. On that day, though, the land looked more like the valley of a couple of centuries ago. The San Joaquin and Tuolumne Rivers had broken their banks and flooded the fields -- which were no longer fields so much as copses of carefully planted trees and other native plants sitting four feet deep in water. Everywhere there were birds; a river otter darted across the top of a levee. Six months earlier in this spot, Rentner told me, you could ''ankle wade'' across the San Joaquin, a river once fed by the waters of Tulare Lake, back when the lake was sometimes high enough to overflow its banks. Now a little rill of wavelets across the surface of the flood was the only thing that marked the river's usual borders.

This land had flooded before, most notably in 1997, when levees broke in 17 places. River Partners later worked to buy the farmland from its frustrated owners, hoping to turn it into habitat for threatened native species. But soon, Rentner said, the group started hearing from flood-management people and groundwater-recharge people who were excited about how many different benefits a reimagined version of the property could provide for the state and for local residents, who had little access to natural spaces. The restoration project at the confluence of the two rivers, known as Dos Rios, appeared on the cover of the most recent Central Valley Flood Protection Plan, a template of what was possible. It is slated to become California's newest state park.

In Grayson, a town near Modesto that came close to flooding in January, a group of residents explored a different floodplain, where high waters now lapped against yards at the town's edge, that River Partners is helping to restore. John Mataka, who has lived in Grayson for almost 50 years, told me that he considers the restoration ''a form of reparations for the community.'' The San Joaquin, on which Grayson was once a stop for steamboats, supported a rich salmon fishery before dams and agriculture transformed the river. Today Grayson depends on groundwater, but the water supply has so much agricultural runoff that it requires advance treatment to meet safety standards for drinking. Mataka hoped that the restored floodplain would provide more and cleaner water. He was convinced that it had already protected his house from recent floodwaters that had entered the town. ''We would have been like Planada,'' he said.

After decades of delays, a plan to improve flood control on the Pajaro River finally received enough funding to move forward last September, months before the levee was breached in the middle of the night. The repairs will come too late for the displaced people of Pajaro, but Fisher and other experts and planners still see them as an opportunity -- a chance to rethink how water will flow in the valley and in the California of the future. Instead of containing the river within narrow walls, the new plan makes room for the water to begin to meander and spread as it once did. The group is pushing to design areas that can be allowed to flood when waters run high that can serve as wildlife habitats and places for water to re-enter the earth.

Fisher is also partnering with local landowners to set up experimental catchment and infiltration basins -- including some lined with wood chips or almond shells, whose carbon helps microbes remove pollutants -- for recharging groundwater. One farmer called Fisher after seeing him give a talk, determined to make sure the valley still had groundwater when it was his grandchildren's turn to farm. This, Fisher noted, was an all-too-rare motivator in a state where much of the land is owned by pension funds and other distant investors.

In the Central Valley, Helen Dahlke, a hydrologist at U.C.-Davis, is working with farmers to experiment with diverting floodwaters to their vineyards, fields and orchards: Where does it infiltrate best? What crops are most capable of handling it? She told me that when she first came to California 10 years ago, the primary goal for floodwaters was to get rid of them: to confine them to narrow channels, to move them off the landscape as quickly as possible. When she tried to push farmers to hold floodwater on their cropland so it could recharge the groundwater below, most thought she was nuts. Why deal with sediment or crop damage when there was an irrigation system that still pulled from reservoirs or aquifers? But the intervening decade of floods and droughts had made it difficult to ignore the role of floodwaters -- as potential resource and threat alike -- and farmers are growing more interested. This year, in particular, she said, ''I think a lot of people are finding that this land used to serve as spreading ground for flood retention every spring.''

Similar projects, using flooding and wastewater to replenish groundwater basins, are spreading -- but still tiny compared with the state's future needs. To really scale up, the state will have to tackle various regulatory and infrastructural hurdles, including dealing with California's complicated system of water rights and finding ways to move water where it needs to go despite inadequate canals. Planners and politicians will also need to get serious about the aspects of climate risk that are still under our control, such as whether we continue to build in the most dangerous places or grow the most water-intensive crops. Water experts also recommend taking large swaths of farmland out of production, because saving aquifers will require both reduced pumping and space for increased recharge. Floods and droughts, historically managed separately, will need to be tackled holistically, balancing, for example, the need to keep empty space in reservoirs for flood control and the need to use that space to capture as much moisture as possible to recharge groundwater basins.

It took nine different funding programs and more than a decade of work just to buy the Dos Rios land, Rentner told me. Negotiations to breach the levee that ran across it, keeping floodwaters off half the reserve, were still going on; decommissioning a federal levee can require an act of Congress. And the Dos Rios land is only a couple of thousand acres. Estimates suggest that California needs to retire hundreds of thousands of acres of agricultural land, at a minimum, to make way for a more resilient water system. In the fall of 2022, the state allocated $40 million for the restoration of natural floodplains, but then abruptly cut that funding when the economy sputtered and projections for state revenues ran low. The cuts were announced the same day that Planada was evacuated.

Still, the sun was sparkling off the water, and the levee was dotted with deer prints. The leaves of the submerged trees were turning the fresh green of spring. Rentner confessed herself to be ''hopelessly hopeful'' that, despite everything, a different sort of state was still possible.

To the south, in the basin that once held Tulare Lake, the floodwater was still coursing through rivers and canals toward the old lake bed. There had been so much land subsidence since the last flood that no one knew quite what the contours of this one would be: The low places and danger zones would be discovered as the waters arrived to fill them.

One morning, not far from Allensworth, I met up with Frank Fernandes, a third-generation dairy farmer in the valley, and Kathy Wood McLaughlin, a biologist and water consultant who sits on the board of the Tule Basin Land and Water Conservation Trust with him. Fernandes had spent the last week in a frenzy, checking on the cattle he raises with his brothers and clocking long nights helping his neighbors evacuate their herds to higher ground. (The trickiest part was not the evacuation itself, he explained, but finding places where the cows could continue to be fed and milked on their inflexible schedule.) Now he finally had a moment to take in the transformation of a world he'd known all his life.

It was a startling and confounding new geography. Helicopters buzzed in the skies above us, ferrying ever more sandbags into ever more breaches. Farmers in pickup trucks kept flagging Fernandes down -- he seemed to know everyone -- eager to trade news about whose land was flooding and where the latest breaches were and to offer tips about navigating this new world. ''Down this road,'' one advised, ''you just have to watch out for the sinkhole and then climb the hill from 'Dukes of Hazzard.''' We drove over a steep new embankment and past ruined cars abandoned in high water. At one point, we had to stop at a destroyed bridge, where a pair of beekeepers from Utah were stranded, puzzling over how to recover their hives, which they'd rented out to pollinate almond trees on the other side. Fernandes, who proved game to push his truck through impressive mud pits, offered to guide them the long way around.

It was still March, and the air was chilly, a small blessing. With so many canals already failing, no one wanted the record snowpack to melt into the valley any quicker than it had to. But water managers knew that they could only do their best to manage the water's arrival; nothing would stop it from coming. By mid-May, there would be hundreds of thousands of acre-feet of standing water, and the state would be scrambling to save the city Corcoran, as well as the large prison there, from the part of the flood that had yet to arrive. After weeks of flooding, the governor did an about-face on the flood budget, putting back the $40 million for floodplain restoration and adding $250 million for emergency response, including flood control on the Pajaro River, and raising the levees around Corcoran by four feet. But the region's thick clay soils, remnants of a lake far more ancient than Tulare, meant that the water would most likely take years to fully drain away.

Fernandes drove through fields of winter wheat that were revisiting their past as wetlands, thick with birds that Wood McLaughlin delightedly identified as coots and avocets and black-necked stilts, and onto a piece of land that the land trust bought to turn into restored floodplain and habitat. Flocks of white-faced ibises flew overhead, their long beaks and legs stretched elegantly against the sky.

A few wrong turns and levees later, we arrived at a place, just south of Corcoran, where we could finally go no farther. The water had risen over the road, over the land, up the sides of houses and abandoned vehicles, as far as we -- and the others who'd gathered to gawk at this astonishing sight -- could see. The old hydrology was reasserting itself, the lake bottom transmuted back into a lake.

At the site of yet another levee breach, Fernandes stopped to chat with a pipeline technician he knew, until he looked back and realized that the road we'd driven in on had disappeared under the rising water. ''We've got to go!'' he yelled, and we all scrambled back into the truck. We'd have to find a different way out.

### On Don DeLillo

(supp. Passed over for Nobel) Frank Guan Speaking in Tongues

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Don DeLillo: Three Novels of the 1980s. Ed. Mark Osteen. Library of America, 2022.

Don DeLillo: Mao II, Underworld. Ed. Mark Osteen. Library of America, 2023.

NOTHING BECOMES, OR DISTORTS, the Eighties so much as their end. The fall of the Soviet system would famously herald a new mode of globalized living, familiar by now, which went on to disable historical vision itself. Retrospective knowledge of the Eighties’ finish drains the period’s occurrences of much suspense: close perception is deferred by apprehension of an overwhelming fate, even as the will to recollect—for those not on the right—is sickened by it. Hindsight and immediacy can sometimes be the enemies of insight; the end of history has spoiled us in more ways than one. That decade’s essence is as mute to us by now as we are deaf to it.

Of course, the Eighties have some bearing on the present world. The demise of organized labor, the decline of real wages, and the diminution of consumer industries faced with third world outsourcing; the primacy of finance and the shift toward mass incarceration justified by draconian drug laws; the negative trade balances, federal deficits, and tax cuts evened out by massive foreign purchases of Treasury bonds—these interlinked phenomena form the basis of contemporary governance, and even casual political historians today know how they were first ramped up during the Eighties, and by whom. But our good materialist perspective of the Eighties may be too exact, too sure. The uniform, relentless quality of neoliberal policies as applied once the Nineties began is projected back onto their pivotal decade; the shaky and experimental elements of the eventual consensus in its fledgling years have been effaced by the foreknowledge of its universal triumph.

Much like developments in the contemporary USSR, China, and Iran, the neoliberal turn in the US was a seismic-grade reform of the economy whose final level of success was anything but foreordained. Concluding as a certainty, it was conceived in trial and error. If it paid off greatly, it started as a wager just as great, and was perceived as such. What we largely miss about the live experience of the Eighties is its sense of global and systemic risk—precisely the same modes of risk that the decade’s own outcome would end up eclipsing. Today’s would-be historian of the Eighties can be likened to a painter tasked to paint the sun that blinded them; the memory of the Eighties, to a sports car—cherry red, of course—whose keys are locked inside. Just as the barrier between the West and East went down, another one thrust up between the old and new. Though not concrete, it’s no less difficult to scale. What, on the other side, deserves the effort?

The answer can only be beauty. Presided over and—somehow or other—stimulated by the neoconservative tandem of Reagan and Bush, nonconservative America artistically retorted with the force and brilliance of a supernova. Pop songs, fine arts, bright screens, belles lettres: on every frequency the Eighties overflowed with star power. No single sector of the population was responsible. Virtually every demographic poured energies into a conflagration of such magnitude that the listing of its products indexed to a single letter—Basquiat and Blue Velvet; Beloved and Blade Runner; Raging Bull and Reign in Blood; Bad Behavior and Tar Baby; Blood Meridian and Hill Street Blues; Eric B. & Rakim—arguably matches any prior national decade’s total output. An authentic renaissance, a golden age to end all golden ages, sealed up by an oblivion just as absolute: what better way to sum up the US Eighties in all their paradoxical recursion, in their fusion of stark resplendence and deep mystery.

What’s offered by the recent Library of America compilation Don DeLillo: Three Novels of the 1980s, then, is a rare potential avenue into the heart of multiple enigmas. How did the Eighties feel and taste, and how did one novelist, whose gifts during the Seventies were as obvious as his limits, tap into those strange sensibilities to author works now firmly in the canon? How could the decade’s various American artists produce, as if in unison, so much collective radiance? And given that our sensibilities and theirs have had to grow so radically distinct from one another, how relevant can all these peaks in culture be for artists operating now?

LACUNAE ABOUND: many of the most pivotal Eighties events would occur well outside American borders, well beyond the classic 20th-century American context for overseas mass memory—that is, conscription into war. Nothing anchors cultural memory of the Eighties in the way that the world wars, Korea, or Vietnam did before. Though the decade did end, momentously and famously, with the devastation of America’s superpower nemesis, this triumph was owed not to American citizens in combat, but to an unlikely tag team of liberal demonstrators in the Soviet bloc and Islamic zealots in the greater Middle East. While the liberals were reliable worshipers of Western values, the jihadis were harder to surely predict: despising the impiety of both cold war camps, their violence was equally likely to endanger the interests of one as of the other.

Though the mujahideen in Afghanistan gained more attention in more recent years, no man summed up the volatility of Eighties jihad as much as the Ayatollah Khomeini, the Iranian theocrat whose revolutionary state sponsored the American embassy hostage crisis and the bombing of hundreds of American marines in Beirut while also massacring Iranian communists and indirectly funding cocaine-toting contra death squads near pro-Soviet Nicaragua. Inflaming a nation and army with militant faith, the cleric was no client but a genuine sovereign; his strategic decisions would largely determine the global economy’s vital supply of fresh Persian Gulf oil, and with it in large part the current account of the Soviet Union, a huge oil exporter. Few men were more central to the decade or more incomprehensible to the American imagination. Yet monitoring the moods and choices of the holy man, and those of people like him, was imperative for any group with deep investments in the region, American or otherwise.

A few months after Don DeLillo and his wife Barbara Bennett, backed by a Guggenheim grant, reached Greece in October 1978, Khomeini, backed by the street protests of millions of believers, forced the monarch of Iran to quit his throne. As stated in DeLillo’s new preface to The Names, the 1982 novel written during and about his years in Athens, the capital soon became a refuge for Iranians fleeing revolutionary chaos. Narrated by James Axton, an innocent abroad tasked by an American conglomerate with assessing the security of Middle Eastern governments in the revolution’s wake, the novel inducts its reader into a world still saturated with risks global and systemic—the coups d’état, the flows of oil and cash, the alternating menaces of left and right. Much like its period companions Ishtar, The Counterlife, and Mating, The Names is spurred by foreign turmoil to conduct prolonged reflections on romantic commitment and expatriate selfhood, its plot a weave of ties to lovers, links to homelands. There’s an unfaithful husband in transit between different ports, allured by alien communes while divided from his wife and son—a sort of late modern Odyssey, then, with jets and geopolitics replacing rafts and gods.

The distance between James and Kathryn, his estranged Canadian wife, is not unbridgeable. Yet Kathryn’s conviction that “there ought to be something higher than the corporation” pushes her to cast a cold eye on James’s new line of work, while his reply—“There’s the orgasm”—signals the loose, cool mentality that may part them for good. Having met and married while participating in the antiwar movement, James and Kathryn seem to represent two separate paths out of Sixties-style rebellion. She retains the ethics and matures into historical research; he keeps the thrill seeking and plunges eagerly into “the world of corporate transients,” its affairs. “Everything here is serious,” he exults to a friend. But he himself is not.

How James ceases being unserious—how he becomes the author of this well-wrought, morally grounded text detailing his unseriousness—is the mystery of The Names’s plot. Owen Brademas, the aging American supervisor of Kathryn’s archaeological dig in the Cyclades, discovers traces of a cult perhaps responsible for a recent area murder. Obsessed for reasons yet unclear, Owen transmits his discovery and obsession to James as well as Frank Volterra, an Axton family friend and independent film director hungry for radical subject matter. (Frank’s awareness that he might become one of “the once promising beginners who overextended, who burned out, who miscalculated, who didn’t deliver, who ran out of luck” could double as DeLillo’s take on his own situation as a noteworthy but not yet major artist.) Ranging over Greece, the Middle East, and India, they discover that the cult, dwindling and itinerant, worships language—their leading question for potential acolytes is “How many languages do you speak?” They select their sacrifices based on names: once they find a person whose initials match those of a nearby village, they kill them there.

The flaws of The Names are not many, but they are central. Since the emotional life of James and Kathryn’s genius son Tap remains opaque to the reader—his progenitors’ strife, itself depicted sharply, seems to have left no discernible scar on his psyche—he floats through the book at a saintly remove that is truly incredible. His father evinces some symptoms of psychic unrealness as well. By his own account, James is a baby boomer in his mid-thirties with no known experience of creative nonfiction outside of institutional copywriting, a man-child morally flexible enough to cheat on his family, ghostwrite for an Air Force general, and cheerfully rationalize his work in risk insurance as “the world’s biggest, richest companies protecting their investments.” Would such a person’s self-discovery—spoilers—as a dupe of the intelligence community actually suffice to help him change his ways, let alone start to transform his prose into the stern cascade of apt, momentous sentences that constitute the text at hand? Finally there’s the cult, Ta Onómata (in Greek, The Names), which gestures toward premodern legacies that were excluded from DeLillo’s prior novels even as its logically driven but ultimately senseless killing is presented as a distillation of the carnage of modernity wherein “the means to contend with death has become death.” Yet the cult lacks both the ancient imperative of divinity and the imperative of modernity’s substitute for divinity: politics. What could be more unreal than a 20th-century cult whose killings aren’t political? If it functions reasonably as a private cipher for the author’s death drive, the purity of its abstraction prevents it from taking on public significance. Properly speaking, the language cult as central metaphor is flat, inert. The fascination it exerts over the protagonist is as unearned as his subsequent repulsion from it is unfelt.

Unstable at the base, The Names is nonetheless precisely what DeLillo’s introduction claims it is: “a major departure.” An array of brilliant tangents steadies its unwieldy core conception. Secondary characters are crisply outlined, differentiated to a new degree. The native language of DeLillo’s Seventies novels—a metallic, private, quasi-mystical patois laced with penetrating quips—is pared back to make room for something like a genuine conversation, an engagement with diverging voices. The space overseas is here crucial. Bruised by adulteries on both sides, grappling with imperial decline, the obligatory pair of Brits respond in tones of gentle embitterment, maintaining their formation in retreat. A Greek, the British wife’s seducer, works for American firms but may also have ties to the radical left: his measured rants against the influence of NATO and the CIA in Greece are informed by the mentality of nations doomed to “being small and exposed, being strategic.” James’s American colleagues, his colony of business operatives and second wives, can be disarmingly personable, candidly seductive within reason. (No other novel captures so well the spontaneous camaraderie of professional Americans in foreign settings, the simultaneous easing of the ego-corset under common pressures.) In Athens an atmosphere surges, in equal parts luminous, mellow, and paranoid: very convincing.

The excision of bleak humor from DeLillo’s new style in The Names—nothing absurdly funny here—permits him to devote more energies to renovating physical reality.

The sun is obscured in dense ascending cloud. Soon the island is a silhouette, a conjecture or mood of light, scant and pale on the iron sea.

If Greek or Latin characters are paving stones, Arabic is rain. I saw writing everywhere, the cursive beaded slant in tile, tapestry, brass and wood, in faience mosaics and on the white veils of women crowded in a horse-drawn cart. I looked up to see words turning corners, arranged geometrically on mud-brick walls, knotted and mazed, stuccoed, painted, inlaid, climbing gateways and minarets.

We went to dinner in an old mansion near the U.S. embassy. Hardeman was inhaling short Scotches. The perfect part in his hair, the geometric glasses and three-piece suit seemed the achievements of a systematic self-knowledge. This was the finished thing. He was physically compact, worked neatly into well-cut clothes, and nothing attached to him that had not been the subject of meticulous inner testing.

Meeting light figures, foreign dimensions, and viceroys at striking, precisely honed angles—this is an outgoing style, a speech that does not know in advance what it will find. Its continual presence in the novel represents a fundamental shift in DeLillo’s narratives from zugzwang—the dilemma, however grim, of renouncing or participating in the social—to what might be called agoraphilia. Greece, after all, was where art first started differentiating itself from religion. It’s somehow fitting—harmonious, even—that the outstanding physicality and civic bonds that set the ancient Greek writers apart should play a role in reacquainting the estranged American author with his secular nature, his empire.

WHAT IS WHITE NOISE? This simple question, since the novel’s 1985 release, is the great unsolved problem of our fiction criticism. The experience of this book continues to evade even the most basic of analyses. Still, its force is dealt with not by facing up to it, but by ignoring it. Like Jehovah in the Sinai with the Hebrews, it has lit the way for forty years of readers while remaining firmly out of reach. No wonder the existing language equal to its impact has not been found in book reviews, but in eyewitness testimony to another, more contemporary desert cloud.

The lighting effects beggared description. The whole country was lighted by a searing light with the intensity many times that of the midday sun. It was golden, purple, violet, gray, and blue. It lighted every peak, crevasse and ridge of the nearby mountain range with a clarity and beauty that cannot be described but must be seen to be imagined.

What the Trinity nuclear test once achieved for American political thought, White Noise does on the plane of American post-Sixties fiction: it practically splits time apart, conjoining inferno and paradise with such intense craft that the world starts anew. The three major currents of cold war white fiction—realist, Jewish, and systems—are woven together as never before in White Noise. And the novel would rapidly birth its own school, a DeLillo lineage of many long-lived branches. On the basis, essentially, of one book, in under a decade, he became to a new wave of writers what Faulkner had been for DeLillo’s own cohort: not merely a great author, but something like the sum of literary possibility itself.

Before examining White Noise (DeLillo’s eighth novel) directly, it’s worth the time to first relate it to its predecessors. Since his 1971 debut, Americana, he had been engaged in a prolonged attempt to fuse the outbound scope and force of the American social novel with the ascetic focus and abstraction of European existential fiction. Having come of age during the dreadful Fifties, having been trained by Jesuits “to be a failed ascetic” before transitioning into Madison Avenue copywriting, DeLillo was from the beginning most keenly aware that the stasis and numbness presented as displaced conundrums in The Stranger or Molloy were real, emergent properties of postwar screen culture and social life whose importance had yet to be artfully gauged.

His protagonists were white Americans; his drama, their attempts to leave their own society. Their sectors of activity (TV development, football, rock music, big science, Wall Street, covert ops) and their motives for withdrawal (art, disobedience, boredom, exhaustion) could vary. What held true was the streak of modernity, a self-conscious detachment from all modes of nostalgia and unguarded feeling. “I don’t want to hear a word about the value of one’s heritage,” an offensive lineman says in End Zone (1972). “I am a twentieth-century individual. I am working myself up to a point where I can exist beyond guilt, beyond blood, beyond the ridiculous past. Thank goodness for America. In this country there’s a chance to accomplish such a thing.” As ever, the tone of the stoic was clearly sincere, even while it doubled as a pretext for dark humor. In its topical fixation on the DEATH quintet (drugs, espionage, adultery, television, Hitler), in its deft curation of the age’s verbal flak and fallout, and especially in its blank-faced incitements to laughter, White Noise is without a doubt the culmination of DeLillo’s novels of the Seventies.

But these relatively superficial parallels belie a more profound reversal. The innovative aspects of The Names—the shift in the protagonist’s relation to society from renunciant to joiner, the presence of children, the plot geared toward action rather than paralysis, the tenderness, the candor—these are all preserved and developed still further.

Heinrich’s hairline is beginning to recede. I wonder about this. Did his mother consume some kind of genepiercing substance when she was pregnant? Am I at fault somehow?

Waves of relief and gratitude flowed over me. The system had blessed my life. I felt its support and approval.

The truth is I don’t want to die first. Given a choice between loneliness and death, it would take me a fraction of a second to decide. But I don’t want to be alone either. Everything I say to Babette about holes and gaps is true. Her death would leave me scattered, talking to chairs and pillows.

Beneath the carapace of institutional bona fides lies a harried, baffled figure narrating his fantasies and crises in a semiconscious tone where poise and panic overlap. The absence of the stoic in Jack Gladney’s temperament, his enmeshment in and liability to social pressures, imbues him with the palpable presence required to keep the narration from folding too cleanly into Don DeLillo’s abstracted concerns. The famous chair in Hitler studies at the College-on-the-Hill is something of a fragile mess, but we all are at some level, and his honesty about his disarray soon renders him the most endearing and disturbing of the author’s leads to date. Bizarre as his existence and surroundings prove to be, this bond of character and reader founded on disheveled feeling anchors both in a reality at once berserk and wholly credible. Clear in delusion, deluded in clarity, Jack prevents us from drawing distinctions between mundane unease and extraordinary fear. He is, one cannot help but feel in hearing him so close, so little in control: he can neither live up to his “professional aura of power, madness and death” nor find a method to escape it. A lifetime of identifying with power has left him absolutely helpless—just as he leaves the reader absolutely helpless to deny it. The helplessness and fear, we find, comes with the job.

It’s not a question of good and evil. I don’t know what it is. Look at it this way. Some people always wear a favorite color. Some people carry a gun. Some people put on a uniform and feel bigger, stronger, safer. It’s in this area that my obsessions dwell.

Crowds came to form a shield against their own dying. To become a crowd is to keep out death. To break off from the crowd is to risk death as an individual, to face dying alone. Crowds came for this reason above all others. They were there to be a crowd.

For all his mordant skepticism regarding the motives, tactics, speech acts, capabilities, and apparel of the Sixties left, DeLillo had always taken seriously its assertion that US society as it actually existed was indistinguishable from the ideal of an exceptionally prosperous and long-lived fascism. It’s no more a coincidence that “Hitler studies” is housed in the same campus building as the department of “American environments” than it was that the Nazis modeled their rallies on American football games, their race laws on American apartheid, or their geopolitics on American frontier expansion. One man’s Nazi German theory is another’s white American practice, and both of these men are Jack Gladney. What surges forth in Jack’s experience of the nation—college gatherings glimpsed as upscale fascist rallies, reading Mein Kampf at the Dinky Donut while his wife and her ex-husband catch up—is far from a call for political counterforce. It’s a profile of the supine human spirit framed as a taxonomy of language, overdubbed by an anthology of whiteness framed as a catalog of noise. The commercial gabble and the misremembered trivia, the portentous lectures and the genocidal shrieks, the desperate love, the still more desperate phobias, the murderous aggression phrased in balancing accounts and Heideggerian cant, the accented rants of the nuns without faith like oneself: where do they all lead one, if not toward death? However, in centering his existential narrative on Gladney’s spongelike consciousness, DeLillo is conducting, perhaps inadvertently, psychological tests with political undertones.

Jack’s partially cartoonish presentation doesn’t mask the salient features of his class identity. With his Annie Hall–ish intellectual walk-and-talks and his conjugal erotica readings, his self-aware, ecstatic shopping sprees and his hands-off parenting of a blended family, he is, in fact almost too recognizably, a symbol of the millions who defined the Sixties cultural revolution by deserting settled standards of white manhood to forge a separate persona based on secularism, expertise, experiment, permissiveness, discernment in consumption, self-pleasure, sexual freedom, and above all wit. His outstanding and outlandish occupation brings into relief a mentality more quietly and commonly shared: that of the faithless white male, cleverly distanced from white power’s classically violent icons but still basically dependent on its ambiance for individual validation. As the novel progresses, his fears of being unmanned, contaminated, and eternally deceased1 increase until the salves of everyday consumerism and professional esteem no longer relieve. Just unnerve him enough, take his woman away, put a gun in his hand: thus the glad man reverts to the jackbooted fascist agenda of curing his fears by applying brute force to the racialized Other.

The construction of the plot of White Noise, the consolidation of Reaganism, and the emergence of the modern neo-Nazi terror movement all took place in the US between 1983 and 1984. Couple these with more seasoned, parallel phenomena abroad such as Western Europe’s Gladio terrorists, South African apartheid, and Latin America’s death squads—all US-sponsored, obviously—and the novel’s timeliness looks plain. But the radical pattern DeLillo describes in his book only grazes on Reagan’s more elderly, churchgoing base or the naked fanatical hate of militiamen armed to the teeth. The fascistic tendencies that interest DeLillo in White Noise are latent, not blatant; not on the cold war’s hardened, booming front lines, but deep inside the soft unspoken heart of liberal whiteness. To give them credit, the secular professionals of Gladney’s generation—DeLillo’s own—were generally disgusted by the Eighties’ rightward turn. In relation to his time, Jack’s situation is anomalous to the point of being taken for a thought experiment or farce. Only in the long duration since the novel’s publication does his figure start to loom, crossing over the horizon of reality to approach us at an ever-faster rate.

TO TRUST IN A CONSPIRACY is to believe in balance. The expenditure of energy required to break from the official tale is underwritten by a sense that truth, unveiled, will turn the tide. Ironically, this is how actual conspirators (some surely must exist somewhere) conduct themselves as well. The effort of planning and acting in secret implies that it matters, is making some difference.

Literature is not conspiratorial thinking. It seeks to describe the real balance of power, not to tip it. And if literature could be read as a conspiracy, even a global one, it would still only be the weakest one of all. It reveals truths that have been obvious from the beginning of the world—the facts of the heart over time. Ideology and politics are not illusions, but literature takes care to translate them to common motives and emotions so as to weigh them fairly. It knows that the heart is the ultimate balance.

One might say that the naming of Libra, DeLillo’s 1988 successor to White Noise, is already suggestive of such knowledge, but it’s certain that a different balance is achieved by contrasting the two major works. Chronologically, the prophetic White Noise is opposed to Libra, a novel centered on the Kennedy assassination—as if, having already driven his futurist vision to final frontiers, the author had no place left to turn except for history. The articulate shambles of Jack Gladney’s first-person fugue are far from Libra’s limber, magisterial third-person narration based on assiduous documentary research, a free indirect style smoothly crossing over into more than twenty-five characters. Compared to White Noise, the keening of commercial propaganda has been muffled; meanwhile the faint hum of the foreign policy machine (Jack’s ex-wives all had ties to the intelligence community) is amplified, brought forcefully home. The stage of White Noise was a thin geography located in a nameless state, its sites generic almost to the point of allegory: Blacksmith, Iron City, Glassboro, Farmington, Watertown, Coaltown. Libra pitches the tent of its plot on the poles of twelve genuine cities in four countries including the pinnacles of all three cold war worlds: New York and Washington, Moscow and Minsk, Tokyo and Mexico City. And if the protagonist of White Noise is a drooping member of the professional middle classes whose prolonged exposure to Hitler particles helps prime him for the murder of a nonwhite cipher, Lee Harvey Oswald, Libra’s antiracist antihero, couldn’t be more different.

“You mentioned politics,” he said. “How far left is this young friend of yours?”

“There is politics, there is emotion, there is psychology. I know him quite well but I wouldn’t be completely honest if I said I could pin him down, pin him right to the spot. He may be a pure Marxist, the purest of believers. Or he may be an actor in real life. What I know with absolute certainty is that he’s poor, he’s dreadfully, grindingly poor. What’s the expression I want?”

“Piss-poor.”

More than half of Libra’s chapters are devoted to narrating from within Lee’s odd biography, a life which in its brief span rubs against a dizzying array of secret operations run by the planet’s best and brightest agencies. From his introduction as a teenage underdog more emotionally committed to the metal shriek of New York subway trains than to family, friends, or school, Lee longs to merge his being with a higher power manifesting as an underground machine. As McCarthyism peaks, he checks out Marxist scripture from the New Orleans library. He imagines joining a Communist cell, carrying out secret missions, taking on a revolutionary alias. To escape his overbearing single mother, her unquenchable fretting and harping, he enlists in the Marines. Stationed at Atsugi air base in Japan, he hangs with Tokyo leftists while off duty. Once his service overseas ends, he defects to the Soviet Union. He informs the KGB about the U-2 spy plane’s powers and a false defector program run by United States naval intelligence. Soon disillusioned with Soviet society, he defects back with curious ease. “Trotsky is the pure form,” Lee now thinks in Fort Worth, New Orleans, Dallas. He still believes in Castro, still wants to strike a pure blow for the cause. But he has a wife and baby daughter to support, the jobs he finds pay poorly, and he’s known to authorities. The FBI bullies, the CIA baits him: to work, to inform. Whose side is Lee on? He agrees with everyone and goes his own weird way.

The broad cast of characters in Libra, a function of its lead’s mobility and mutability, provides DeLillo with a chance to deploy what might be called the institutional imagination. He characterizes not only individuals, but through them their organizations. His FBI agents and Mafia eminences have a family resemblance: both radiate a kind of blunt, bullish authority in common, only the wise guys have more humor, an earthy kick in their linguistics that demands and rewards being read out aloud. (“Speaking of Cuba, a couple of weeks ago I dream I’m swimming on the Capri roof with Jack Ruby. The next day I’m on Bourbon Street, who do I fucking see? You talk about coincidence.”) Oswald’s KGB inquisitor, a Marxist stalwart, thinks in terms of the collective underdog and indulges in self-conscious paranoia for a living: “Despite all the tests and interviews, we may know less about him than he knows about us.” CIA has a sleekness to it, a dominating grip as shadowy as it is steady. In Libra one is educated to the continuity of human personality in vast impersonal systems. Few novels go as far toward individuating the 20th century, systems and all.

He has thought about us—whoever we are—more than we have thought about him.

Tweet

Anchoring his fiction on the floor of real events, DeLillo frees himself to sift the tides of daily being for the indelible patterns of emotion that constitute identity. However chilling their designs, Libra’s three fictional CIA renegades come off as warm-blooded, men of real feeling. With his bookish temperament and suburban/academic setting, his deep attachment to his family and his ineradicable fear of death, Win Everett seems a prior avatar of Jack Gladney even when he doesn’t plan a shooting. Laurence Parmenter’s class, the smug sophistication and assurance that comes from being “part of the Groton-Yale-OSS network of so-called gentlemen spies,” manifests in knowing, droll exchanges between him and his wife. T. J. Mackey, the cowboy of the bunch, has burned through a marriage already: mistrustful and hardened, pulling lesser but like-minded men into his orbit, he sees himself as what he is without regret, “a man they used to pay to teach other men the fundamentals of deadly force.”

DeLillo’s attention to terror was hardly exclusive to right-wingers: he knew how violence and the threat of violence from the left formed crucial variables, however overshadowed, in the social equations defining cold war. Explosive characters identifying as anticapitalist shape the plots of Players, Running Dog, and The Names—they drive James Axton out of Athens once his cover’s blown. If Gladney’s path in White Noise illustrates the basic helplessness that fascist subjectivity roots in, Oswald’s odyssey in Libra plays out the dark potential for discovering one’s true self via Leninist initiative. To take stands against the behemoth of racist American capital takes uncommon commitment: Oswald is resilient, brave. But having spine is hardly proof against being pretentious, misguided, and poor. As Oswald’s schemes to enter history by paying back the President for America’s attempts to put down revolutionary Cuba start coinciding with the CIA rogues’ plot to pay back Kennedy for failing those attempts, the ideal of violent justice loses all heroic luster in the reader’s sight. The meaningful division in the world looks less like right or left—more like murder or life.

Wise, grand, and tender, DeLillo’s narration grasps all that aspiring assassins cannot. Through the eyes of his supporting characters, especially the wives, he perceives the vitality, hope, and delight of the Sixties before the killings turned them to “the Sixties.” “You could be happy now,” imagines Mary Frances, Win Everett’s wife, basking in the Texas suburbs of late spring. Parmenter’s wife Beryl thinks it possible to live “layered safely in, out of the reach of dizzying things.” Oswald’s Russian wife Marina is thrilled simply by the sight of neon, or walking through a Safeway: “The packages of frozen food. The colors and abundance.” The stolid forms and grisly energies of early postwar life did not preclude authentic elements of innocence and cheer amid prosperity; as he describes these childlike qualities, DeLillo underscores their loss. If an axiom can be distilled from Libra’s ramifying plots, it must be this: the more a character’s mentality approaches that of a child, the deeper the assassination wounds them. The book does not just clarify the killing as a cruel, inevitable outcome of cold war logic. In DeLillo’s hands, it serves as a Rosetta stone to translate all the towering machinery of that epoch into a simple principle: death’s relentless incarnation in the childish heart of daily life. Thus the novel concludes not with Kennedy or Oswald but with Oswald’s funeral as filtered through the testimony of his mother Marguerite, more childish even than children, her indefatigable drive to clear her boy’s name manifesting as a cataract of grief and grievance, an investigative frenzy, fragments of Greek tragedy with the Warren Commission standing in as silent chorus.

I am going through a death and it is hard.

I have a sixth sense, judge. People have remarked on my ESP. If Lee Harvey Oswald shot the President, why didn’t I know it at the time? It is a prevalent feeling every mother has when the phone rings and she knows it is her son. Why didn’t I sense he was in a window with a gun when the shots rang out? Even being his gun doesn’t mean he did the shooting. I will wear a camera. I will time his movements on the fatal day. I am ready to go round and round on this because there are stories inside stories, that the press is unaware.

My only education is my heart. I have to work into this in my own way, starting with the day I took him home from the Old French Hospital in New Orleans. I am reciting a life and I need time.

In the end, the scales of Libra’s title refer less to a court of law than to the fluctuating life that law attempts to bind. The novel is not a space where innocence and guilt can be assessed with certainty, nor is it, for all its tremendous political literacy, in any way polemic. What it attempts to do, and magnificently succeeds in doing, is to chart the myriad ambiguities of a life lived in interaction with different-minded systems, and to set that life forth as a valid symbol of historic life itself. Oswald is “a study in divided loyalties or in the irrelevance of loyalty”: he can’t make up his mind about what he stands for, and can’t tell who he’s ultimately working for. He splits the difference between purity and complicity, conspirator and scapegoat, adult and child, toughness and fragility, idiot and genius, transparency and impenetrability. As with so many in the 20th century, with him the only thing for sure is that he wants to join. Yet once enlisted, his peculiarity and particularity are such as to disrupt the steady operation of whatever scheme in which he’s being deployed. Bartleby aboard the Pequod: this is the paradox of Oswald, and the wildcard status it confers on him in spite of everything irradiates the other figures in the novel—redefines them, their affiliations, and their era in his indeterminable image. One opens the book wondering which one of their sides he’s on and concludes it half-suspecting that they’re all on his.

As the Soviet Union flickered out during the Eighties, the Marxist militancy that it sponsored faded too. In both practice and theory, conspiracies of violent transformation from the left soon ceased to be: the win over apartheid could not efface more general failure in Berlin, Managua, Addis Ababa, Kabul, Moscow. By resurrecting Oswald with its art to bury him again, Libra doubled as a farewell to the dying cold war balance that his life revealed. In its treatment of the bloody past—with great compassion and without the least nostalgia—it defined the only path for peace in years to come.

IN 1922, THE SOVIET POET and cultural historian Osip Mandelstam published an essay on “The Nineteenth Century” which concluded with a forecast of the 20th. “In the veins of our century there flows the heavy blood of extremely distant monumental cultures,” Mandelstam announced; faced with “this new age, turned cruel and immense,” artists were challenged to “humanize the twentieth century, to make it glow with a theological warmth.” Like much else vibrant in the Soviet Twenties, the poet and his ambitious program met a brutal end. Still, the situation he defined did not end with his life, nor was it restricted to his homeland. The defining feature of the 20th century was the worldwide maturation of administrative structures that, in dwarfing and depersonalizing the individual, disrupted all the settled certainties of art conducted on a human scale. There was no way to hide: what the modernist artist would make of the systems in art was conditioned by all that the systems were making of them, and their world.

The systems were made to wage war with each other, and did. In the wars’ intermissions, the artists made art that reflected the warfare, for better or worse. By the end of the Eighties, a singular outcome emerged. Of the two major systems, one was doomed to collapse very soon: bankrupt in all senses of the word, crippled by unprecedented peaceful people’s movements, it had nothing left to do except set fire to its final violent legacies and sink into the waters of oblivion. The other one, endowed with wealth, willpower, and the highest intelligence, had proven its fitness by thriving through years riddled with apocalyptic perils elsewhere on the planet. Its bold and wise administration of its many interests guaranteed that, in the coming new world order, its preeminence would be unrivaled. And among its most brilliant crown jewels were the dozens of artistic prodigies that had emerged under its auspices during the fateful decade.

Of the creators of these films, songs, paintings, television shows, poems, short stories, and novels, few were less suited or eager for fame, and none more unprepared for it, than Don DeLillo. With scarcely any intermission between composing White Noise and plunging into Kennedy assassination research, he had spent the Eighties hard at work on writing, in the sort of relative obscurity with which he was contented since his days as an unpublished author. Resurfacing near decade’s end to see how Libra fared, he found himself confined in a polemic hurricane. Taking time out from supporting George Bush in the impending 1988 election, George Will, heavyweight influencer of the established right, devoted his Washington Post op-ed column to broadsiding Libra. The book was senseless, irresponsible left speculation; its author was guilty of the crimes of “literary vandalism and bad citizenship.”

The message was clear: Having published consecutive prize-winning best-selling books that dismantled conservative national narratives, DeLillo was significant enough to warrant an extended public flaying. Be it phrased as infamy or celebration, fame would haunt him henceforth, injecting an unwelcome presence into his life and an unstable theme into his art. Could he have asked for any of this? Because his masterpieces challenged readers with their formal intricacy, controversial content, and above all discretion of tone, they triggered releases of simpleton critical bile with Pavlovian consistency: after two major works, his worst haters were already primed to combust from their rage. Meanwhile, his most devoted acolytes, typically talented writers themselves, considered him something like a god on Earth. For the quarter century from Reagan’s reelection to the Great Recession, the surest way to orient oneself in the entire US literary field would be to take a stand on Don DeLillo’s reputation. He became, himself, the kind of polarized public material about which he preferred to write.

The DeLillo referendum was unequal to the point of deep frustration. On the occasions when they weren’t reduced to sputtering epithets (“stupid—just plain stupid,” raged Dale Peck in the New Republic), the novelist’s foes were reduced to purveying demonstrable lies: that he’s “not especially good with character and plot” and focused on “sterile philosophizing” (Laura Miller), that “there are no human beings” (James Wood) in his books, that his characters lack “any genuine humanity” (Jonathan Yardley). Between these educators of the dull and the contenders for DeLillo’s genius there could be no significant contest. Stalinist debate clubs would have been more competitive.

The irony, however, should one happen to review the accolades bestowed on Don DeLillo by many of his literary fans, is that they bear clear traces of a cult of personality themselves. When the novelist is framed as “a tower of remoteness and command and intellect” (Jonathan Franzen), possessed with “oracular foresight” (David Foster Wallace), what sort of man is this, if man he be? By the time one hears out Martin Amis praising his “high intellect and harsh originality,” or scans Christian Lorentzen declaiming how he’s “more interested in probing the limits of consciousness and perception than in sketching inner lives,” or views Jonathan Lethem ambivalent, balking from DeLillo’s “chilly, intellectual grandeur,” the Great Leader vibes start to seem unmistakable. Still in the end it takes another GL to, as the phrase goes, seal the deal:

DeLillo is a tough guy. He has no patience for what doesn’t apply. It is cold, but it is a coldness one delights in. It’s part of what gives you the frisson you are reading for in DeLillo. That chilling knowing becomes a comfort in itself. One is warmed by the absolute correctness of it. In this respect he is our most visionary writer.

Already, by the Eighties, the fanatic proselytizer of a frigid cult of language centered on himself,2 DeLillo’s longtime crony Gordon Lish was certain to expound the virtues of a dictator of ice—impervious, untouchable, supreme. What’s striking about the contempt and the awe for DeLillo is how they refer to the same cold motifs. The man’s inaccessible thinking, his soulless and heartless approach to existence, is taken for granted. All that remains is to value it. More striking still is how this image fails to correspond in the least with the author DeLillo became in the Eighties. No intelligent person can experience The Names, White Noise, and Libra and conclude that their author is lacking in warmth, much less hostile to life on an everyday plane.

Where did the disjunction between the author and his image start? It’s one of the profounder ironies of literary history. White Noise, the novel that made DeLillo’s fame with younger readers by proving that TV an sich could be the subject of a literary masterpiece, introduces them to the author’s formidable yet lesser back catalog. From there, an image of the author is extracted that appeals to their secular, TV-besotted, and professionally anxious selves more than the actually existing author ever could. And these processes—the replacement of originals with their more emotionally gratifying images, the tendency for secular, TV-besotted, and professionally anxious selves to crowd beneath the images of great white men instead of facing up to the fear of insignificance and death alone—are precisely the materials of which White Noise is made. It is easier to identify with a hologram of Don DeLillo than to see yourself as Jack Gladney. What DeLillo describes as “our willingness to abandon ourselves to a strong personality” in “Silhouette City: Hitler, Manson and the Millennium,” a 1989 essay on fascist tendencies in Western culture, helpfully included in the LOA edition—this willingness is not restricted to the Nazis, neo-Nazis, and medieval cults that he discusses. As Mao II made clear, DeLillo saw the same impulse at work inside the mechanics of literary celebrity itself. The issue was what he could make of it besides just giving in.

I DIDN’T MUCH LIKE MAO II when I read it first. It’s not a masterpiece. The tone is leaden and the plot’s a whimper; still, even a reasonably clever teen boy could sense seriousness on the part of the author, and that’s what I was. The World Trade Center buildings had collapsed a couple years prior, clear proof of terrorists twisting the Western world’s narrative, just like the book said. The attack had become an excuse to wage war. I didn’t know much, but I hated the war. Something was wrong with my country, I had time to think. I lived in the suburbs, was heading to college. What more could I know? No one told me anything. I liked TV, the internet, lifting weights, CDs, and books; also, video games.

Mao II is supposedly about crowds. The future belongs to them. But the book’s reality, what it feels like over every page, is the protagonist’s depression over being a famous novelist. He prefers death to fame, and he dies. I still knew nothing about death, depression, or fame, so the book was inert. But I liked Don DeLillo, the name. It sounded like the Mafia. The Mafia was cool. It had the sense of Marlon Brando, Al Pacino. It was important to be cool, and you became cool by getting close to cool things: that was the thinking of people. I had thought Mao II was going to be about Mao. Mao, whom my parents called Old Mao, had started the Cultural Revolution, which some in the West thought was cool. I knew it was an evil time my parents lived through, but he died, it ended, and they went to school again. In the Eighties they moved to America. Two decades later, I was driving a convertible on cheap gas. The whole world seemed to say: You cannot touch me and you never will. I did my best to say it, too.

Some time after, not long, at the same Barnes and Noble, I chose to read White Noise. One year later I owned all his books and suspected I was meant to be a writer. Literature, I found, was like a high school. Certain people hang out with each other; there is gossip and grades. I read The Corrections and Infinite Jest; I read Pynchon from V up to Gravity’s Rainbow. Perusing the internet, I discovered that these books were called “systems novels” (because they were about the System); that certain critics greeted “systems novels” with vituperation; that certain critics liked them and aspired to be their authors. These people, of course, were all white, were all part of a system, but what can you do? Time comes for us all. Not everything cool or important remains as it is. The literary culture of the Aughts would dissipate, as if to say: Keep working and engaging and the tide will turn. The best words care for something other than mere coolness, and they always win out in the end—remember Melville, Faulkner, Ellison, DeLillo, Morrison.

Twenty years later, and almost unwittingly, it’s with Toni Morrison that I discover what I sought but never tracked down ever since the station wagons pulled up for another fall semester at the College-on-the-Hill: words equal to the power in Don DeLillo’s works. “They clamor, it seems, for an attention that would yield the meaning that lies in their positioning, their repetition, and their strong suggestion of paralysis and incoherence; of impasse and non-sequitur.” Discussing, in her 1992 study Playing in the Dark, the repeated figurations of impenetrable whiteness that stand out from the canon’s white American works, Morrison also produced a pitch-perfect summation of tensions that animate all of DeLillo’s protagonists. How whiteness performs as a symbol in Poe’s or in Hemingway’s tales has become, for DeLillo, the story itself. And when Morrison later concludes that “whiteness, alone, is mute, meaningless, unfathomable, pointless, frozen, veiled, curtained, dreaded, senseless, implacable,” it’s hard not to observe a deep concurrence with the dominating public image of DeLillo set forth by worshipers and haters both. If a serious novelist clarifies primary questions that vex their society, and if one of those questions involves the captivity of whiteness and various attempts to break free, then it seems a fitting judgment from the System’s critics that the mode of captivity known as the archetype “The Great White Writer” snare the only white man who has phrased the question fully in the six decades since JFK’s assassination.

To be widely known yet scarcely understood might be considered a success for actors, businessmen, or politicians; for a serious author it could only register as harsh defeat. The sense of Underworld as swan song, abdication—“Peace,” goes the last word and sentence—and the diminished horizon and joy of the books ever since, may not be attributable only to the termination of the cold war dualism that DeLillo thrived on.3 There may be a more personal factor involved, that of a novelist who gave his very best only to be disappointed—hurt, even—by the thoughtless scorn and admiration of the audience that ensued. The changes in contemporary society are not so drastic, nor has DeLillo’s soul grown so inflexible, that more ambitious labors should be past his reach. (If someone ever writes a classic novel covering professional video gaming [“e-sports”], it will be him.) What may be lacking isn’t so much talent or material as the motivation born from the hope—and the Eighties were especially rich in hope—that one will be read with the same care that one takes in writing.

Beneath the carapace of Don DeLillo’s institutional bona fides is a fantastic legend still worth telling. It pursues a young man from the outer city who, entirely on his own initiative, discovers the magic of novels—he’s awed by them, unfathomably hit. Their uncanny transportation, their rhythms of desire and loss, their intelligent drive into zones of the heart shunned by official discourse: all captivate him and inspire in him a life superior to the crude though not unpleasant routines of his daily world. Through war, political assassinations, and cultural revolution, the legend tracks a personal, not merely general, loss of faith in every institution: the Church, corporations, the media, political parties, armed forces, the nation-state, gender, and whiteness especially. More than this, though, the legend involves the discovery of one’s own involvement in all these systems regardless. Even though one needs to leave them, one cannot. Only the novel remains and is sure. The novel is the final form of truth. Still, in order to complete itself, this truth must take into account its own confinement and confess, however gracefully, its own accommodation—the nature that it shares with the destructive world of men.

There are good things as well. He will learn what it is to be happily married. He will learn, in an alien city, stripped of an unbending confidence, how to be open to the fragile side of being. He will become a great writer! And even if few understand him, the fact remains that he has thought about us—whoever we are—more than we have thought about him. If for most, art is only a game, for him it’s the only game. Beyond the lethal, petrifying image, he has his just reward: if language is the last truth and the truth is what survives, he lives forever. After him, what more have we to say?

ABSENCE OF VANITY; unceasing self-guided research in the era’s most colorful art forms; relentless focus on the texture and rhythm of words; challenging choice of material; fearlessness facing historical presences; apprehension of both power and powerlessness; taking death and world religion deadly serious—the ideal path to being a writer and the path that Don DeLillo took are one. This is his legacy, proof of the timeless imperative to live in one’s time.

Still, times change. In the Reagan years white Christian fundamentalism was felt by its enemies, and felt itself, to be a temporarily dethroned regime of culture with the potential for full restoration. The institutions of the corporatist state, solidified by cold war pressures, still commanded respectful attention from all—if only out of fear of thermonuclear annihilation. An infernal upsurge of the flagrantly uncool forced culture’s repo men and women to concoct new countermeasures to oppose them. (Entire corpuses of literary fiction were founded on coping with the awful TV of the Eighties.) The cultural summits of the Eighties are even more impressive for their prominence than for their elevation: beneath every Olympian crest, every Prince or Twin Peaks, slumbered hundreds of sulfurous piles.

The artists of the Eighties acted fast. They had to: there would be no future otherwise. But in battling the retrograde Reaganite look of the System, they knew they were its bastards nonetheless. They took on organized religion by altering its iconography, not destroying it. Consensus uncoolness, delivered through media, was countered by coolness more media-fluent. Faced with dead forms, they formed live ones in their image. You, too, have become a zombie; all the more reason to dance better than the others. I’m a government man. I am chairman of the department of Hitler studies at the College-on-the-Hill. The evil Frank Booth, in Blue Velvet, looks straight at the camera: “You’re like me,” he says. You’re part of what you fight: it’s the acceptance of this fact that breathes a spirit of unsqueamishness, engagement, and humility—the beauty of a dark truth brought to light—into the best art of the flagrant Eighties.

What the Eighties possessed is precisely what culture in our time is missing: a balance. Regardless of political administrations, the cultural changes unsealed in the Sixties have continued to progress: by now the contests between cool and uncool, libertarian and structural, and religious and secular are too lopsided to deserve the name. Religions, structures, and uncoolness have yet to vanish from the earth. Culture and reality are not the same. But culture and ideals are closely linked, and the prevailing ideal for the past sixty years, growing stronger with every new cohort of youth, is cool, libertarian, and secular, all to the point of consumerist digital death. White Noise, in 2023, is not only some myopic retread of the more banal aesthetic tricks from Eighties movies (though unfortunately, it’s that too). It’s a novel we live in—and yet not entirely, because we have art like White Noise. (Perhaps the scariest aspect of the novel’s setting was the total lack of artworks, set against the omnipresence of aesthetics, vibes, waves, auras, radiation.)

As if in compensation for how politics today amounts to little more than slow-mo sumo between liberal and reactionary capitalist parties, people have more access to great art than ever. The problem, however, is that we possess more Jack Gladneys than ever as well. Jack is a creature constituted by his insecurities, and neoliberalism means nothing if not insecurity for all. After many decades of the white man in America losing ground—in society quite slowly, in culture much faster—DeLillo’s latent archetype, his patient zero of American secular fascism, has spawned into real life, is becoming a nation of millions. Jack’s ludicrous symptoms, his ghoulish temptations now grow ever more common and prominent. His fantasies of a transcendent death, framed as the closing shots of a TV biography of Attila the Hun, are moronic; yet insipid holograms of a historical fantasy held up as glorious ideals (the Bronze Age, Tolkien, traditionalist Catholicism, the cold war) are intellectual currency in general circulation now. “Not everyone spoke English at the cash terminals, or near the fruit bins and frozen foods, or out among the cars in the lot”—coming from a late-middle-aged Hitler scholar terrified of his impending permanent demise, this already encapsulated, decades in advance, the future politics of neoliberal immigration. Jack’s unwarranted wariness in front of Asian kids, professionals, and industrial products is absurd; still, it presages all the envious, whinging hostility toward “the Chinese” typical of fascist ideologues today. (Why can’t we have an efficient dictator to battle theirs?) It’s beyond preposterous when Jack attempts to take shelter from his own inadequacies by kneeling at the image of a garrulous secular racist celebrity who’s also a historically proven, capital-L Loser. Fashioning facsimiles of cool through allusions to Nazi insignia. Reconciling liberty and structure through sadistic plots. Blending faith and secular identity in a materialist cult of personality. Hiding from death by inflicting it. It’s all too hysterical to make up real life, and still part of our world.

All this is held back less by moral qualms than by imperatives of economic growth and geopolitics; so far it has been, but it’s hard to be sure that it always will be. As screen culture advances, the avid viewers’ nerves become more vulnerable and tenderized, more easily influenced. The seas of white male insecurity keep rising. The agitprop foundations are already laid: the Jacks have bylines, thrive on mastheads, dribble memes. Apartheid legacies own social media. One’s political options are limited. Why hide the fact? But as far as art goes, one should look out for Jack. There’s a radioactive crater near the center of the culture where the white man used to stand. It’s best not to be squeamish and pretend that it will vanish with enough ignoring; best to take it as material for creative exploration and re-presentation. Like the Man in Lana Del Rey’s music or Cooper’s evil twin in Twin Peaks: The Return, Jack, too, is America, and his logic should be faced and understood, if only to be rooted out inside oneself. True art proffers no solutions, only a perfect phrasing of the questions: it’s here that, regardless of color,4 DeLillo can still be of service.

We may never attain to the patience and poise of an old soul whose childhood precedes TV’s rise, but the curve of his thought and career can prefigure our own, even now. Steeped in existential literature, DeLillo in the early Sixties had arrived already where we are today. In the silence or absence of God he committed himself to a cult of singularity revealed through a decisive style. Yet his journey to the Old World led to new turns in his thought, if not a full reversal. As The Names’s leads can’t help but notice in their travels, language throughout Greece and Asia is continually invested with sacred intention. “The river of language is God”: where scripture and prayers abound, the worship of language is close. His emergence into greatness coincides with a discreet relinquishment of secular self-will and a partaking in religious speech: James Axton’s last words are “Our offering is language.” However opposed in their style, White Noise and Libra are Dostoevskian novels, fueled by ideology. Both interrogate secular axioms by putting them into political action, thereby proving their tragic inadequacy. By the time of Underworld DeLillo is announcing in the New York Times—a bastion of secularism—that “at its root level, fiction is a kind of religious fanaticism, with elements of obsession, superstition and awe.”

Do you have to believe with DeLillo to see where he’s headed? Perhaps it’s some sort of—peculiarly encoded, no doubt—childhood faith resurfacing in old age. Perhaps it’s what a serious writer in a world that’s not is driven to to justify his task. Perhaps it’s just the truth. In any case, his statement, like his novels, exemplifies the “theological warmth” Osip Mandelstam predicted would be necessary to “humanize the twentieth century,” and maybe the 21st too. However they believe or fail to, writers are the bridges binding one world to the next. The dream of total literacy begins and ends with them. It doesn’t matter when it is: Should you be asked How many languages do you speak? among the tongues Religious, Secular, Structural, Libertarian, Cool, Uncool, Good, and Evil, then the answer should be Yes.

As if to reveal Jack’s precarious condition by contrast, White Noise’s only religious believers are also its only Black characters: a family of Jehovah’s Witnesses completely unfazed by the Airborne Toxic Event. “God Jehovah’s got a bigger surprise than this in store,” the wife predicts to Jack’s wife. The husband asks Jack how Jack plans to spend his resurrection—casually, “as though asking about a long weekend coming up.” ↩

No less than the Ayatollah Khomeini, Lish may well be a hidden influence on The Names: the cult is something like a sicko writing workshop, when you think about it. ↩

Note how in two of his three masterpieces, Libra and Underworld, the bivalence has been crystallized into the very titles. ↩

Without saying too much on the topic, it bears some importance that, out of the authors inspired by DeLillo, those of color learned best how to take what they need while dispelling anxieties of influence. ↩

## Why Boredom Matters

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*Why Boredom Matters: Education, Leisure, and the Quest for a Meaningful Life* by kevin hood gary cambridge, 200 pages, $29.99

Conservative commentators have long bemoaned the proliferation of “studies” fields in the university. Women’s and gender studies are well known, but now students can take courses in topics as unusual as “surf studies” and “fat studies.” Given all the boring lectures that undergraduates have endured throughout the ages, it’s amusing to note that this list now includes “boredom studies,” for which there is even a journal—the Journal of Boredom Studies. Anyone who has ever attended an academic conference will find some humor in its call for papers: “Submit a proposal for the 5th boredom conference.”

Much of this literature runs to the mundane or quantitative, but Kevin Hood Gary’s insightful book reflects his immersion in theology, philosophy, and literature. This is really a book about liberal education, as indicated by its subtitle: “Education, Leisure, and the Quest for a Meaningful Life.” If boredom is the problem, Gary argues, then the solution is learning how to be leisurely, in the classical sense.

It might be slightly misleading to say that the book is about a problem and its solution. In the tradition that runs from Aristotle through Aquinas to Josef Pieper, leisure is not a solution to anything, but an alternative way of being in the world. In Pieper’s formulation, leisure “runs at right angles” to the practical pursuits of work and achievement.

Following Pieper, Gary argues that we have become slaves to work and amusement, even though neither pursuit is truly fulfilling. Money and honor, the traditional rewards of work, do not satisfy because money begets the need for more money and honor is fleeting. Even pleasure is tiresome after a while. Who, in the waning days of a vacation, has not itched to get back to a “normal” routine?In reaching the limits of work and pleasure alike we are prone to boredom, disillusionment, and depression. Gary proposes that leisure and liberal education can remedy these unpleasant states. I agree. But the escape from boredom may require a still more radical transformation of will, and that transformation may be something we cannot accomplish by ourselves. I shall say more about this below.

Gary identifies different kinds and degrees of boredom. He first considers “situational boredom,” a state of mind that comes and goes and is usually related to a lack of agency. Every parent has heard the complaint of a child—“I’m so bored. What can I doooo?”—and answers are always deemed insufficient, no matter how many or how creative. The cure comes only in being swept up by some external force or in independently determining a course of action. Just as a person cannot be talked out of serious depression or anxiety, rational arguments against boredom seldom avail. A person must take interest in something, which requires initiative and energy.

Adults, in contrast, are too busy to be bored in the ways we were as children. If we find ourselves in a long line at the DMV or the post office, we chalk up our bad moods to impatience or overcommitment, not boredom. True situational boredom requires a significant stretch of time with no obligations, chosen or otherwise, and no electronic devices. When, now, is this likely to happen?

Yet many adolescents and adults are prone to a different and more serious kind of boredom, which Heidegger described as “existential.” Existential boredom is “characterized by a disenchantment with life and a struggle to find meaning,” writes Gary. This is a serious, fundamental boredom—closely related to ideas of despair, acedia, and ennui—that does not go away when circumstances change but permeates all of life as an “unsettledness or aimless restlessness.” A person who is existentially bored wonders why ordinary activities (like eating or making the bed) are worth doing since they must be done again the next day, why long-term projects should ever be undertaken since they seem so overwhelming, and perhaps implicitly why life is worth living at all. Such a person is tired and indifferent. Boredom—with its utter lack of interest, its humid, midday grayness—is a constant, unwanted companion.

Gary guides his readers through philosophical, literary, and theological sources as context for the modern experience of boredom—from the meaninglessness described in Ecclesiastes through the aimless “flitters” of democratic societies in Plato’s Republic to Evagrius, a fourth-century Christian monk who analyzed acedia. Gary examines Kierkegaard’s two notions of despair—of possibility and of ­necessity—and wrestles with the concern that “boredom-avoidance schemes,” to borrow Walker Percy’s phrase, exacerbate the larger problem of existential boredom. Heidegger hoped that cultivating a sense of authenticity might offer a permanent escape from existential boredom, but Gary is skeptical. He also discusses the movie Groundhog Day and ­David ­Foster Wallace’s essay, “Shipping Out,” a damning indictment of the so-called leisure industry.

Both kinds of boredom—situational and existential—are problematic, but the solution to the first intensifies the second. In various boredom-avoidance schemes, we escape situational boredom: While on tedious Zoom meetings, we doodle, eat, watch video clips, and scroll through social media. These activities offer temporary relief. The problem is that one thereby becomes the kind of person who doodles, eats, watches videos, and scrolls through social media. Our brains respond to these immediate forms of gratification, and sustained concentration is increasingly difficult.

This jumping from stimulus to stimulus is directly at odds with what is required to overcome existential boredom. Overcoming it requires deep, sustained thought about life’s purpose. It also demands concentration and perseverance in conceiving and completing long-term projects, because the most rewarding human activities are not quick or easy. They ask that we work through boredom instead of avoiding it.

One might even understand existential boredom as a wake-up call: Why does nothing seem interesting, everything dull and gray? The answer might be not that the world is boring, but that we ourselves are dull, shallow, and malformed. This ignorance and lack of formation is partly due to the usual suspects of modern culture—vacuous television programs, electronic devices in general, the advertising industry—but we have allowed these influences to shape us. It doesn’t have to be this way. Thus do we arrive at Gary’s therapy for boredom: liberal education understood as the practice of leisure.

If directed by an inspired teacher, a liberal education offers the (willing) student a vision of a better life, an expansion of the imagination, and escape from the tyranny of trivialities. “We can wander through this world,” writes Roger Scruton, “alienated, resentful, full of suspicion and distrust. Or we can find our home here. . . . The experience of beauty guides us along this second path.” In becoming alive to beauty in its myriad forms—moral, intellectual, spiritual, and aesthetic—one cultivates a disposition to delight in the “uselessness” of contemplation. The French writer Maurice de Guérin describes this as “letting [the] soul wander at will, living in idleness, but in a contemplative idleness open to all impressions.”

Leisured contemplation, however, requires setting aside everyday priorities. The idea is decidedly anti-modern and, in some respects, even anti-human: We engage in contemplation only insofar as there is a “divine element” within us, as Aristotle writes in the Nicomachean Ethics. It asks that we suspend attempts to improve the self and the world. As essayist Agnes Repplier observed in 1893, leisure is a “special form of activity, employing all our faculties . . . it is from his leisure that [a person] constructs the true fabric of self.” This countercultural activity may issue in an entirely new self-understanding, offering exhortations, even commands: Don’t be slaves to the world’s current standards of value! Pursue insight, live differently, make meaningful art, and build healthy local cultures! Resist becoming part of the world of total work!

If this attractive vision of life is in principle available to anyone who wants it—and if it is the antidote to boredom—then why don’t more people pursue liberal education and a contemplative, leisured life? Why, despite the efforts of thoughtful authors like Gary, do the vast majority of American undergraduates persist in majoring in fields like nutritional science and supply chain management?

The conventional response is that liberal education is an expensive luxury. Since college tuition is so high, students and their parents expect a tangible return on investment. A somewhat different response takes for granted the value system of contemporary America: The aim of life is to make a difference, change the world, save the planet, transform politics. Achievement is the measure of a life well-lived. But leisure and liberal education do not necessarily or directly contribute to this vision. They may even oppose it.

For although liberal education can have the salutary effect of producing good statesmen, citizens, and workers, this is not its primary aim. Someone who reads and loves novels is also apt to be a good reader of legal briefs and corporate reports; yet a love of reading is not essentially related to these practical tasks. Like liberal education understood broadly, reading is an intrinsic good. The practical outcomes that may result from it are always contingent and secondary, always subject to examination and revision.

In fact, liberal education asks people to approach all tasks and careers with equanimity and a certain disinterest. Is it best to be a lawyer, a politician, or a priest? A musician or an artist? The answer to these questions—and to so many others—is: It depends. The liberally educated person has been freed to ask and answer these questions for himself.

A more arresting response to “Why not leisure and liberal education?” has to do with the very structure of human desires. The American neuroscientist Jaak Panksepp found that of all human orientations, the most enjoyable is that of “seeking” or working toward a satisfaction. This seeking is even more pleasant than the consummation of a desire or possession of a desired object. In planning a party, for example, we are filled with purpose and anticipation; the pursuit of a romantic interest gives life energy and vitality; even in gambling and lotteries the thrill is not exactly in winning or losing but in wagering.

The point is that most of us, most of the time, crave excitement and purpose. Lacking those things, we incline not toward contemplation, stillness, and leisure but toward boredom. Oscar Wilde illustrates this fact in an anecdote from The Picture of Dorian Gray: “A certain philanthropist . . . spent twenty years of his life in trying to get some grievance redressed, or some unjust law altered. . . . Finally he succeeded, and nothing could exceed his disappointment. He had absolutely nothing to do, [and] almost died of ennui.”

The bitter truth is that we modern Americans are privileged to have enormous potential for leisure and liberal education; yet we cannot seem to understand or desire it. Our spare time is filled with distraction and amusement, not meaningful activity. Is there any way out of this predicament?

Gary suggests that we cannot think our way out of boredom but must rather act in ways that change us. He offers three directives for leisure: Become an apprentice, cultivate a spirit of study, and remember our epiphanies. In apprenticeship, one gives oneself over to a master, which requires both trust and patience. Anyone who has studied a musical instrument or a language knows that in the beginning much is boring and sometimes even embarrassing—learning the vocabulary, memorizing the notes on the staff, practicing scales, awkwardly trying to speak or play. Yet as skill develops, one sees intrinsic goods that were not evident at the outset. These goods appear only after significant time has been invested in the practice. A student must have faith that his mentor both knows things and cares about his learning.

The cultivation of “a spirit of study” is related to this kind of apprenticeship. The spirit Gary recommends is something akin to the faculty of intellectus, which is decidedly not the calculative, deductive, and intentional use of reason as ratio. Intellectus is receptive, appreciative, and calm in its willingness to look, trust, and be acted upon. A. G. Sertillanges observes that the intellect, “taking it all in all, [is] a passive faculty; one is intellectually strong in proportion as one is receptive.” How foreign this idea is to the modern university, where reason is so often a weapon or a point of pride.

Finally, Gary recommends that we “remember our epiphanies,” advice he gives not so much to young people just starting out as to those of us who have been around for a while. Boredom results not only from continuous distraction or youthful ignorance but also from jadedness about the world. Remembering our epiphanies means recollecting the first time we saw something in nature or perceived a philosophical truth. It means recalling our first meaningful musical performance or skillful painting, that long-ago sudden insight into the mind of another person, or our first falling in love. We must keep hold of epiphanies like these if we do not want to turn into boring, disenchanted old people ourselves.

I think Gary ultimately has it right: The cure for existential boredom must be a certain kind of liberal or “freeing” education, which simultaneously liberates us from the compulsive seeking of pleasure and achievement and shows us the beauty of contemplation. In this wondering, almost childlike mindset, the world is anything but boring. All the impressions, ideas, and happenings we see or receive become permanently ours, filtered through our minds or “inwardly digested,” in the words of Thomas Cranmer. In our idle moments, we no longer need to run from ourselves but have stored up provisions for the welcome times of real leisure.

The irony of self-examination, though, is that we may discover that our greatest happiness comes in paying attention to everything that comprises the not-self. This is a curious kind of self-forgetting.

To recall the apprenticeship that Gary recommends: When a person submits to the guidance of another in learning a musical instrument, for example, the activity takes place not just within the student’s mind but in the interaction between teacher, student, and instrument. The relationship is “triangular,” not self-focused. Similarly, when walking in nature, one observes the landscape not with an eye to how it affects one personally, but as an instance of God’s miraculous creation. Of course, it is we who perceive, but we are simultaneously aware of a creator and creation that have nothing directly to do with us. We are filled with wonder that anything exists, and that what does exist is so good. Such experiences offer temporary escape from the insistent demands of the self.

The stubborn characters who appear in C. S. Lewis’s book The Great Divorce illustrate the immense difficulty of such an escape. In this short fantasy, heavenly spirits welcome their visitors from Hell, urging them to forget themselves and embrace the great joy and release that await them in Christ.

Instead, almost to a person, the visitors refuse to relinquish their hard-won identities. The bishop wants to continue his intellectual questioning and paper-giving; the painter insists upon continuing to paint; the mother protests that her love for her son is more important than anything else. All perversely refuse to see the beauty that is right in front of them. If only they could let go of their obsessions with self and work, they would live ­eternally in the beauty of Heaven. God is calling them to be permanently free from triviality, self-obsession, and, of course, boredom.

This permanent freedom isn’t as easy for us, who live in the world and still face the task of self-making. Nevertheless, we can take from Lewis’s story the insight that escaping boredom requires not only a transformation of intellect through liberal education, but also a transformation of will. Perhaps only prayer can really deliver us from our willful pride and self-centeredness, traits that seem to stick with us despite our best efforts.

Gary did not write an explicitly religious book. He does not make the argument that escaping boredom requires conversion. But I think he would agree that a religious assumption lies deep within the notion of leisure itself. Something about leisure is divine, for Aristotle, or “festal,” to use Pieper’s term: It is a celebration of beauty, goodness, and the possibility of eternal life. In understanding leisure this way, we are invited to turn away for a time from our own insistent desires and our own self-imposed projects. We are free to cultivate that wonderful disponibilité to experience, an openness and availability that encourage us to “take interest” in the world and in the lives of others. This kind of affirmation may indeed be countercultural. But it is never, ever, boring.

## Memoir: Mere Belief

by Sallie Tisdale Harpers | Nov 23

Sliding down the curve of forgetting

A long time ago, I took a yearlong course of premed anatomy and physiology. Our professor, Dr. Welton, was tall and bald, wore a white lab coat, and knew a hundred of our names after the first week. I adored him and often attended his office hours, demanding to help him file or dissect.

Once, I asked him about memory. He had devoted a few weeks to the structure and function of the brain, but had barely mentioned memory. “Why are some memories more vivid than others?” I asked. We were in his office, standing in shadow by his desk. At a small lab table along one wall, a grad student prepared petri dishes. I waited for the mechanical answer—some neurochemical explanation for the floods and droughts of time, the way memory buries delight and shears off whole years. He was suddenly still, looking up to the corner where the wall met the ceiling. This man who always had an answer was silent for a long moment.

“I don’t know,” he finally said. It was the only time I heard him say that. “I remember being on a train, and I looked out and saw a window in a building. And it went by.” He looked back at me. “It was gone. And I remember that window as if it was right here.” He looked away. “I don’t know why.”

Iam standing in a dry field on a moonless night. Men are lifting heavy boxes, mumbling, grunting, laughing quietly. My father is a broad silhouette against the sky. Then I see a spark, hear the whistle of flight and the whump of a shell exploding, its lucent flower filling the sky. This scene is so clear, and yet so dreamlike that I am not sure it is real. Many of my memories are like this: A single scene, a tableau as still and bounded as a nativity. I am climbing a dirty heap of snow. I am holding a pair of gleaming bronzed baby shoes. I hear the distant cocktail chatter of adults. When I find the edge and pull to see what comes next, the whole thing is jerked from my hand. I am left alone, climbing a heap of snow. I am left with rubble.

Memory is mostly accurate, most of the time. We agree on the general picture of what happened far more often than we don’t. In this sense, what I remember of the past is basically true. But for a writer, the details are everything. What shifts are often the small details.

We are always losing more than we keep. In 1885, the German psychologist Hermann Ebbinghaus created the “curve of forgetting,” a graph corresponding to a mathematical formula that measured how quickly people lose the information they learn. The loss is exponential; more than half of what we lose is gone in an hour. The curve flattens, but within a few days a person will forget about 70 percent of any information acquired, unless she makes a conscious effort to remember. Remembering requires repetition—but repetition, as we shall see, changes what we remember.

People insist that they do remember, of course. In a foreword to his fantastically detailed memoir, Speak, Memory, Vladimir Nabokov bemoaned his “amnesic defects,” the “blank spots, blurry areas, domains of dimness.” But in fact he was proud of his recall. When he found himself at odds with a fact-checker at The New Yorker regarding the color of the funnel on a French ocean liner, Nabokov chose to omit the reference rather than admit he’d gotten it wrong.

When studying memory, neuroscientists sometimes refer to “persistence” and “transience.” Is memory a recording? A storehouse? A catalogue? More like vapor. There are mechanical explanations for the droughts and floods, but researching them is challenging, the operations strange, and the conclusions something of a disappointment. No rabbit emerges from the hat. While reading about how RNA-binding proteins affect the long-term potentiation of neurons, with a jolt I am reminded—that word, re-minded—that this is you and me. This is all of it. Making love. A near-mortal wound. The dried salty grit on your hands at sunset, returning to shore. The heap of snow. All of it.

I have been studying the science of memory, those mechanical explanations, for some time now. I can tell you that procedural memory (how to brush one’s teeth) is different from episodic memory (I brushed my teeth this morning), which in turn is different from semantic memory (I brush my teeth to avoid cavities). I can tell you this, and a little about those binding proteins, but I can’t explain memory. No one can. All these types of memory overlap and blur; little of what we know is purely one or the other. We live in a matrix of events, facts, meanings, contexts, brief jottings on a notepad. As a writer, I am generally concerned with what is called autobiographical memory, the broad tapestry of experiences that are unique to a person and—importantly—linked over time. We are not one self; our selves give way, each to the next in a ceaseless parade. But they are intricately connected. My autobiographical memory includes digging a mud puddle, taking an anatomy exam, sitting by my mother’s deathbed, and, now, drawing the line that ties all these moments together into a package I call me. This is the foundation of the conscious self: I am who I am because this happened. We trust it implicitly. We tend to forget that there is a gulf between autobiographical memory and autobiography itself.

Iwrite memoir sometimes, which is to say I write about the past. For a long time, I didn’t question this—neither the past nor my ability to know it well enough to write about it. Every writer makes a contract with the reader. That contract may be filled with fine print and subordinate clauses, but a few points are there in bold type. The story you are reading now is an essay, which means that it is not fiction. You are trusting me to tell the truth, that is, to use facts and lived events. I promise, pinky-swear, this is true. The same promise is made by memoir and autobiography. There is no firm line separating these forms; most definitions focus on the supposedly neutral, factual approach of autobiography and the personal, more emotional nature of memoir. Yet we are supposed to believe that both forms describe what happened.

Memoir makes a peculiar promise: it offers a true story rooted in the writer’s unique past, known only to the writer. I think of memoir as a revisitation and a retelling of what happened with a delicate and honest overlay of how it felt and what I believed and what it means. I write to evoke—an emotion, a state of mind, the stillness that overcomes one when the past intrudes. Often I am writing to evoke the peculiar, ineluctable sensuality of childhood, the world immense and intimate and present with the child at the center. I evoke, but I want also to invoke, to charm something dead back into life—perhaps that center of sensuality most of all.

I grant that this is an interpretive art. The point of memoir is memory, and memory can be little more than tattered prayer flags. So I am drawn to work like Angela’s Ashes, in which Frank McCourt uses dialogue sparingly, without quotation marks, letting the kind of conversation a child overhears become part of the description, like paint on the walls. The reader is always with McCourt in his memory, knowing it is memory.

I think most other memoirists would agree with my definition, but we often end up in different places. I have always maintained a strict (and, to many writers, too rigid) standard: no composite characters, no re-creating scenes I don’t honestly remember, no invented dialogue, no compressing of time or space or moving events around. I am out of fashion in the present vogue for unfiltered confessions, with my bending over backward to avoid signs of self-indulgence—a gift from my family. And I know, have known for a long time, that this avoidance is part of the story I am writing whether I intend it to be or not. Readers have sometimes taken me for a recluse of some kind. There are many kinds of recluses, of course.

I try to verify every fact I can. I read a lot. I use books, newspaper archives, photographs, maps, interviews, yearbooks, journals, letters, visits to museums and historical societies, just as I do research for an essay like this one. I also use myself: I invade, steal, rewrite, disavow, and in many other ways make use of everything I’ve written, considering it a good primary source. Still, I want to be willing to change my mind about what I remember, to admit that I don’t remember and sometimes remember wrongly.

I try to read new memoirs, but I often set books aside, unable to suspend my disbelief. Jeannette Walls’s The Glass Castle includes a nuanced description of the author’s serious burns at the age of three: the event, the hospital stay, the aftermath. Beautiful Country, by Qian Julie Wang, details a scene of the author’s immigration to the United States at age seven at such length and specificity as to surely be beyond the power of most adults to remember. Maxine Hong Kingston’s much-admired The Woman Warrior opens with a monologue by her mother that stretches more than two pages. Kingston says nothing of how she remembers this. She recounts many lengthy, and perhaps invented, conversations.

It is tempting to substitute today’s psychological truth for history. Memory is wet sand. This is what I want to interrogate: the slipperiness, the uncertainty. What is it about that window?

“Fresnel Lens,” by Patricia Voulgaris © The artist

Ihave always been bothered by memoir writers who are obviously making stuff up, but I am now also bothered by the possibility that we are all making it up, all the time. I know that I have blended and inverted events over time, perhaps invented one or two, and it startles me to discover this. I long to correct the record. But what have I missed? I started the research for this essay wondering how often my memories are false. As I write now, I wonder whether anything I remember is true.

Some of what we remember didn’t happen at all, and a great deal that did is not remembered. A small child knows faces, names, new words, how to use a toy. But she won’t remember her second birthday party. Children do not form retrievable autobiographical memories until around age three, a phenomenon called childhood amnesia. Such amnesia may exist because of the immature structure of the brain or because small children lack the language with which to form and express a memory. The answer is likely a combination of factors. Not until the age of around ten does a child’s autobiographical memory begin to seem like that of an adult.

People argue about this. (Some write memoirs.) They do remember, they say, of course they do. But many of our earliest memories are based on photographs or stories. One group of researchers describes this as a “scaffold” on which we construct a past. People recall details of things they cannot know, and know things they cannot recall. This is called belief without recollection. You may know that you had an operation when you were a baby. I know that my mother had a miscarriage when I was three. I know that I took swimming lessons, but I don’t remember them—I just remember being able to swim. Freud said of the confusion of memories he encountered in analysis: “It is difficult to find one’s way about in this.” In crucial ways we are made before age ten. So the conundrum appears: How can I possibly know who I was? I can’t, and yet I do.

Asingle memory is roughly the result of three separate actions: encoding, the creation of a pattern; consolidation, the storing of that pattern; and retrieval, the re-creation of that pattern. Imaging can now show us a little of this activity, but it can’t tell us what is happening in the mind. Our understanding of how memory works is so rough as to seem less like “imaging” than a crude drawing.

A man lifts a box, murmuring. The complexity this image represents is mind-boggling. He murmurs, a shadow in a shadow, and in a barely measurable instant, a surge of activity pulses across a few of the millions of miles of nerve connections in the brain. A complex of pathways is laid, much of it scattered in the medial temporal lobe. The hippocampus is critical, but memory isn’t filed any one place in particular; it shatters into spring rain. Memory is a kind of ceaseless remodeling. The pattern won’t stay without consolidation; it slides down the steep Ebbinghaus curve. Consolidation is a cascade of processes that may work by changing membrane strengths and voltage gradients in neural cells. Consolidation takes seconds or minutes, sometimes days or longer; many studies show that sleep aids consolidation. Then newly traced pathways are linked to earlier ones, and together these are organized in obscure ways that change over time as new traces are created, forming roads with many entrances and exits. And after the pattern is laid and patted into place, what remains? Potential. Capacity. Despite the microscopic shifts, memories don’t exist, exactly; they are not fixed objects. They are more akin to templates or molds—it is their empty space that counts.

How do we find the pattern again? In 1932, the great psychologist Frederic Bartlett performed a series of simple, ingenious experiments. He reported the results in his book Remembering. The work upended the field of memory science. Bartlett was able to demonstrate retrieval as a kind of creation. “Remembering is not the re-excitation of innumerable fixed, lifeless and fragmentary traces. It is an imaginative reconstruction, or construction,” he wrote. “It is thus hardly ever really exact, even in the most rudimentary cases.”

Bringing a memory into awareness is the work of an elaborate machine across a vast but measurable space. The machine does this over and over again, but never in exactly the same way twice. Each retrieval must be unique because the machine itself is always changing, updating, breaking down, repairing. A conscious memory is a combination of the specific pathway encoded at the time of the event and a lot of subsequent knowledge, inferences, beliefs, and experience. Inference but also interference. We get new overlays all the time—experience in the same place or with the same people, similar events, similar views, new knowledge. The brain sweeps this flotsam into the pattern every time we retrieve it. Siblings reconstruct memories from similar fragments but different experiences. Thus our memories are rarely exactly the same. Much diverges with time. In 1962, Daniel Offer interviewed seventy-three fourteen-year-old boys about their lives. He asked about relationships, punishments, families, dating, school. In 1996, he interviewed sixty-seven of the surviving seventy-one men, now forty-eight years old, using the same questions. Comparing the answers across the distance of more than thirty years, Offer found that virtually all their memories had altered so much that their “recollections were about the same as would have been expected by chance.”

Twenty-eight years ago, I wrote an essay called “The Basement,” about my brother and sister and me being required to play in our grandmother’s dim and empty basement when we visited her. I described what I saw as my older brother’s bravery with our unpredictable father, and mentioned that he hated football but knew quitting wasn’t an option. I called my sister “squeamish, chubby, pale, and black-haired—she’s the one left out, the baby.”

I sent my brother the essay, and he told me a few months later, “I liked football. Don’t know why you thought that.” Years later, my sister, angry with me about several old wrongs, complained about my description of her. “I was not,” she said. “Not like that.”

Yes she was, I thought. I pulled out old photos, their scalloped white edges beginning to curl. She is crying in many of them, forever left behind when my brother and I took off. But she’s not chubby. Why did I remember it that way? I was wrong. And I was right, for she was what I meant by that word—fragile, weak in a world where weakness was lethal. And why did I say my brother hated football? Because I felt the pressure he was under, the steady squeeze of our father’s demands. The psychologist David Pillemer says that we can, “from a functional perspective,” think of memory not as a mechanism for truth but “as a belief system.”

Perhaps, as many researchers think, our memories are as good as they need to be. Memoir writing aside, we function just fine with all this forgetting, because reconstruction is adaptive. And there is social merit in reminiscence; it strengthens intimacy and community. But reconstruction also allows us to imagine the future. Our false and shifting memories of the past don’t matter to anyone but ourselves. The future only cares about what we learn from them.

Even though I know that memory is not a recording, not a single thing, it feels as though it is. I smell chlorine’s damp tang and my brain flings me back into the deep end. I am in the dim locker room, wet concrete cool against my bare feet. A stretch of water flares in the light. The diving board sings its comic bounce. Autobiographical memories seem to be linked to a kind of network, so that the sound of the diving board brings the river to mind. And that links to the strange afternoon when we found a giant fish hovering under a boulder, and my brother and I tried to lasso it. I am treading slowly in ten feet of water. My brother is anchored on the beach, holding one end of the rope. I take a deep breath and turn over, swimming down to where sound thickens like porridge, the loop of rough rope in my hand. The fish hangs under the sunken boulder, one clear eye on me. I kick closer, rope at the ready. I am who I am because this happened. Because all this happened.

I think this happened.

Jules Feiffer says that writing is “mainly an attempt to out-argue one’s past.” We have a “self-enhancing bias”—that is, our memories gradually make us look better to ourselves. We arrange scenes in the most flattering way. The brain edits, gently but insistently shaping the wisps into coherent scenes. We may not even notice this shifting of perspective. One tends to remember a recent event from the position of the protagonist, living it again. But over time this perspective shifts to that of the observer. We watch ourselves.

One of my earliest bright memories comes from when I was six. My family was at the boardwalk amusement park in Santa Cruz. My little sister and I rode electric cars along a track, pretending to steer. Then our car stopped in the middle of the ride. I knew I was in charge of my sister and so I climbed out of the car onto the track and helped her out. I was rescuing her. I could hear distant shouts and see my mother waving from the bridge. Then a man ran out and met us, and that is the end of the memory. I see it only from above. I am standing beside my mother, watching two small girls in danger. I am yelling with the rest of the adults. And surely this memory is only a fragment, a scene built out of the many times I heard the story told.

Many memoirs are born of vibrant memories like this one. The phenomenon known as flashbulb memory usually refers to recollections of consequential events like assassinations or the attacks of 9/11, our memories of which may seem almost photo-realistic in retrospect. (Though they are sometimes wrong.) Most people also have flashbulb memories of ordinary events with no clear significance. You remember a window, and you don’t know why. I vividly recall perching in a cedar tree, swaying safe and high above an uncertain world. I can recall, as though it is happening now, the back patio on a summer evening as I take my turn at the handle of a big wooden ice cream maker. The cold, salty water pools under my feet. Adults mill about, cocktails in hand, and I lean in to the joyful work in the sweet twilight. And in one breath, I am again sitting at the dinner table when my father starts yelling, pulling my little sister out of her chair, spanking her; she is hollering and my mother is crying and I am leaping up and shouting at him to stop, to leave her alone, to leave us all alone. Then the film breaks, and there is nothing else—after the ice cream, after the shouting, what?

And so we mold our pasts into a story that may bear little resemblance to the genuine mess of actual life. When I write from memory, am I writing a history or a story? Isn’t it both? In the Eighties, the influential psychologist Jerome Bruner popularized what came to be called narrative theory, writing of memory that “we seem to have no other way of describing ‘lived time’ save in the form of a narrative. . . . We become the autobiographical narratives by which we ‘tell about’ our lives.” The story seems to come from the self, but in fact the self is partly constructed from the story.

My story: A girl with a stout heart. She holds her ground. She is lonely and fierce and does not believe everything she is told. A feral child, at home with lizards and trees. An odd girl anchored to a suffocating and unpredictable family. We rarely touched, never talked plainly. And I became a writer who prefers implication to explanation. I used to call my story one of self-reliance and independence: I left home at sixteen, my father’s predictions of disaster trailing me out the door, and made my way forward. But this story has a deeper theme: you have to take care of yourself, because no one else will. It is a story I have spent decades rewriting.

The psychoanalyst Donald P. Spence proposed that we carry two kinds of truths, one historical (verifiably true) and the other narrative (perhaps not true at all). For analysis, Spence thought, the latter is much more important. The many proponents of narrative theory today seem to assume that we are all sifting through debris to find the structure underneath—and not just that we do this, but that we have to do this, that sifting debris is a fundamental human need, that a self has to narrate to exist. But what if all the narration is a dream? We may know our history, the timeline of events, the key experiences, but many of us still seek a throughline. A unifying meaning or moral. We become both narrator and protagonist—because there has to be an explanation for all this. Doesn’t there? The trick is that sooner or later you have to climb down from the cedar tree.

Many people have written detailed accounts of the past, without comment: Virginia Woolf, Jean Rhys, Isak Dinesen, John Steinbeck. A few admit to imperfect recall: Janet Malcolm, Howard Norman, early Mary McCarthy. Others explore it: John Updike, Zora Neale Hurston. Some say they don’t care about the imperfections: late Mary McCarthy. Martha Gellhorn: “I forget places, people, events, and books as fast as I read them. . . .the situation is hopeless.” She wrote copious memoirs anyway. John Berger thought the autobiographer was freer than a novelist. “What he omits, what he distorts, what he invents—everything, at least by the logic of the genre, is legitimate.”

In her book on memoir, Mary Karr writes of McCarthy’s Memories of a Catholic Girlhood, published in 1957, and of McCarthy’s concern for the truth. To Karr, McCarthy pursued a standard appropriate for “histories and biographies and journalism.” Perhaps people of her time “were more gullible or more secretive or the standards more rigorous.” These days, the peculiar promise that memoir is true is more a wink and a nudge than a solemn handshake. “My own humble practices wholly oppose making stuff up,” writes Karr, who then lists what she actually does: invent dialogue, change names and details, compress time, and describe details that she didn’t observe in the moment. How Karr reconciles this dissonance is never clear. (It is not even explored.) The gap between my picky fact-checking and her pages of imaginary dialogue does not seem to me a matter of degree. I cannot remember what the adults milling around our ice cream socials said. I can guess, but a guess is all it is. Without it, I lose a little of the delicious intimacy of a scene, but otherwise, I am—and there is no way around it—making stuff up. Perhaps I am just as dissonant as Karr in the story I’ve come to tell. But I have tried to simply tell it, without adornment. Karr, seemingly at ease with the central conflict of our life’s work, adds that “deceit in memoir irks me so badly.”

If any one thing distinguishes current memoir from its progenitors (besides a concern with accuracy), it is the claiming of victimhood. In his study of American autobiography, Herbert Leibowitz proposes that its “grand theme . . .almost its fixation, is the quest for distinction.” Today autobiography seems to be a litany of injury, the recounting of loss and harm caused by abuse, racism, abandonment, poverty, violence, rape, and struggle of a thousand kinds. The reasons for such a shift in focus, a shift we see in every layer of our social, cultural, and political landscapes, are beyond my scope. One of the pivotal purposes of memoir is to unveil the shades of meaning that exist in what we believe. This is the problem of memoir; this is the consolation of memoir. Scars are fine; I have written about scars; it is the focus on the unhealed wound that seems new.

William Gass at his most disenchanted said of the “vulgar copulation” of history and fiction that “nowhere would one find the blend better blended than in autobiography.” To misuse history in this way “can only be to circumvent its aim, the truth, either because one wants to lie or now thinks lying doesn’t matter.” Or, he added, “because an enlivened life will sell better than a straightforward one.” More even than the wink, I find a dismissal, as though none of this is worth noting. Of course, the writer seems to say, I don’t remember this. But it’s a good story and it feels true. Many writers no longer pretend otherwise: of course the story is manipulated. Our ordinary lives are pretty messy, with a lot of filler, so let’s dispense with that. In which case, anything goes. Geoff Dyer: “Everything in this book really happened, but some of the things that happened only happened in my head.”

Things have gone exactly as Gass feared: mundane history has gleefully mutated into a grand reveal, an almost genetic modification of memoir into autofiction. This is personal history as an imagined journey, a felt truth in a manipulated past. Is autofiction the opposite of memoir or its evil twin? Do they stretch in opposite directions until they meet? This is one of the fundamental excuses of the memoirist: it may be untrue, but that doesn’t mean it isn’t correct.

Amnesia, while annoying, is less interesting to me than the honest mistakes, the ones we don’t even know we are making. I pulled out one of my own books recently, searching for a reference I could barely recall. Suddenly I was reading the story I was trying to write. I had forgotten that I’d written it already.

We swing between the poles of persistence and transience, and we all suffer from what one scientist refers to as a “proneness of memory to error.” As soon as a memory is activated, it is suddenly fragile again, subject to interference. It must be reconsolidated every time. With each pass, tiny deformations appear. You can’t tell what has changed, because each time you recall a memory it feels correct. Neruda: “Many of the things I remember have blurred as I recalled them, they have crumbled to dust, like irreparably shattered glass.” The act of studying our own past—sorting family photos, trading stories with siblings, writing memoir—destroys it.

I wrote memoir when I was young. It didn’t occur to me not to, that the events were too close. But of course all those stories are different now. That’s the thing. The story never ends, it is retold and remade, over and over, minor characters stepping forward, a major aria fading out. And the gun lying on the table in the first act will inevitably go off toward the end.

Most wrong memories are accidental. The brain mixes things up, the way our cousin shows up in a dream about the office. Reaching for peach, it finds apricot. Both carry the peculiar tingle of the familiar, and most of the time either will do. Neuroimaging studies of the past few decades have shown a little success in distinguishing false memories from true, based on a faint neural sensory signature. But we don’t live inside an MRI machine. The brain does not monitor itself for truth; once encoded, a memory is simply there, no matter how false it is, and a false memory can be as vivid, detailed, and laden with emotion as any other. The same neural networks are at play, and most of the time, we can’t tell the difference.

Neuroscientists use the term “imagination inflation” to describe one way that falsehood creeps into memory. Simply imagining an event several times can create a memory in essentially the same way as having the experience. The same voltage spark, the same synaptic tinsel. Such inflation is strongest when a person questions the memory and then writes about it in detail. Add fake evidence and a little persuasion, and you have “false feedback.” With relative ease, researchers have convinced people that they have had accidents, met famous people, nearly drowned, gotten lost, and committed crimes. In 2015, Elizabeth Loftus and Lawrence Patihis were able to convince more than 30 percent of research participants that they had seen a video of the crash of Flight 93 in Pennsylvania on 9/11. No such video exists. The participants maintained this false memory over time, even under rigorous questioning. The researchers concluded that “the misleading information has irrevocably replaced” the truth.

We can believe without recalling. But we can also recall without belief. A false memory can be undermined. With enough time, hard evidence, and supporting testimony, I could convince you that you have remembered an event wrongly. This is not easy to accomplish; people hold on tight. And I can’t take the memory away. Perhaps the most important point I’ve absorbed from months of reading about memory is that even when a memory is proven wrong beyond all doubt, a person still remembers it.

Suggestive responses help to create false memories, and it gets easier if the suggestions come from an authority figure. Every time I am rewarded for a memory—It’s true—I brighten the memory a bit. Every time I write about a memory, I am telling myself, That’s right. That’s what happened. Reassured, I strengthen the scene.

I used to think that I would be a good eyewitness. Now I no longer trust eyewitnesses at all. I am struck by how autobiographical memory is formed in the first place. Children live in a whirlwind of imagination inflation. Our parents and teachers have their own unreliable memories, their own constantly shifting contexts and biases, which they are only too happy to share. “You were so fussy when you were little. Don’t you remember all those tantrums?” “Wasn’t it exciting when Santa came last year?” All families have myths, and many families are fond of recalling them, passing stories about your childhood and your Uncle Joe and how Maria broke her leg around the dinner table like gems. Perhaps false memories feel true because of how often we visit them. Pillemer, among others, has studied how the ways parents reminisce with their children have “profound implications for the types of people that they will become.”

My parents and grandparents weren’t tale-tellers. We heard a few, the same ones told now and then: Grandpa driving a truck on the set of Errol Flynn’s The Adventures of Robin Hood. Our Uncle Gus panning for gold up in the hills. But never a word about my father’s service in the war. Not a word about how his father had died when he was just sixteen. I was endlessly curious, but too reserved (too proud) to ask questions; questions tended to be met with blank looks. Instead I explained things to myself and grew up to be a writer who likes to leave trails of breadcrumbs instead of explanations. Parental narration is not neutral. Parents make mistakes. Parents lie. The policeman will get you if you don’t behave. Boys don’t cry. We believe it all.

Since our memory is both true and false, so must be our memoir. Why not write the story that supports the inner truth—the narrative truth? Plenty of writers say that memoir is not about memory at all; that it is an attempt to explain oneself, to create coherence. To win an argument. I am casting shadow and light all the time; you have no idea what I’ve left out. But the rubble is what interests me, the fact that our pasts are unreliable. The fact that I am not sure and can never be sure. I want to explore what it means not to know, not to ever be able to know. Life is dead ends, conflict, dissonance, gaps, great clouds of confusion and misunderstanding. Do I tell a story, or do I tell you how it feels to have only the remains of one? The first is certainly a better story. But the second is better history. Which do I really want?

The philosopher Galen Strawson rejects the idea of life-as-story out of hand; he is antinarrative. Strawson, like me, doesn’t believe in a pearl of self traveling intact through time. We are each watching what seems a ceaseless parade of selves. He doesn’t experience his past or future as belonging to the self who is thinking about it. Saying This happened to me is a fallacy, and therefore I am who I am because this happened to me is a gross fallacy. The impulse to organize our lives into stories is “essentially a matter of bad faith, a radical (and typically irremediable) inauthenticity.” If everything we remember changes each time we remember it, if our efforts to remember are influenced by every comment and story and photo we encounter, if all that effort of sorting and talking and writing about our pasts moves us ever more toward watching an imagined self, how can we know ourselves? It is difficult to find one’s way about in this.

Did my father really throw the dog in the river that time? I think he did. I can see it happening, his meaty arms scooping up the shivering dog, the dog scrambling in the air, slamming into the water, climbing out onto the rocky beach. My father laughing. When I try to investigate this, when I question it—that beach wasn’t rocky, it was sand—all I find is an old photograph of my father squatting beside the dog on the riverbank, watching the camera with a curiously sad gaze. All I find is an unhappy man, a cowed dog, and the tapestry of living with him, with his sorrow and anger and power, for sixteen years.

Dr. Welton, one of the most sober people I have ever known, remembered a window with a shiver of pain and desire. I expected him to give me a kind of mechanical explanation, yet he had nothing. What I remember decades later is his face, suddenly soft. His brisk speech slowing. His lambent nostalgia. It knocked me sideways somehow, to see his wistful, wishing glance at an empty corner that only he found full. In a very rich year of human anatomy and physiology, that moment taught me as much about being a human as anything he said in his lectures. The cedar tree, the shouting. Mere belief.

This writer’s self can’t stop telling stories, but I may never write memoir again. At least, I won’t make the same promise. I can’t. This doesn’t feel like a loss or a change in the script; I am working on a book about the past right now. But the interrogation has changed. Lived life is past and present and future all receding at once. What we long to hold on to, we lose; what we remember is often what we would just as soon forget; the future is always bearing down, an endless distraction. I know myself as a glitter of synaptic activation, a flimsy thing easily swept aside. A ceaselessly increasing sum materializing out of nothingness, each integer instantly flung behind me. I am persistent. I am transient. Memory is not a fixed object, and neither am I.

## Lit Clubs: The First of a New Genus

Ann Kennedy Smith October 2023 Dublin Rev of Bks

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*Dinner with Joseph Johnson: Books and Friendship in a Revolutionary Age*, by Daisy Hay, Vintage, 528 pp, £10.99, ISBN: 978-1784701079

The Garrick Club in the West End of London was founded in 1831, making it one of the oldest gentlemen’s clubs in the world; for almost two hundred years women have been allowed in only as dinner guests. But Michael Beloff KC, the lawyer who pronounced in 2011 that women could continue to be excluded by the Garrick legally, has recently changed his mind. He said that, in his opinion, the word ‘he’ in the original wording of the club’s rules should be understood to include ‘she’ and warned that it was ‘likely to provoke an expensive lawsuit’ if it continued to exclude women from membership. Whether the club will agree to lift its ban on female members remains to be seen.

The Garrick is one of many gentlemen’s clubs that were founded in eighteenth and nineteenth century London. All offered intellectual exchange and conviviality, and several ‑ including the Athenaeum on Pall Mall, Brook’s in Piccadilly and the Savile Club ‑ made enough profit to take over grand premises, charge large membership fees and survive into the twenty-first century. But it’s worth remembering that often the swankiest of these clubs had humble origins as informal dining and debating societies, and ironic that ‘The Literary Society’, founded by William Wordsworth and others in 1807 and described as ‘Britain’s most distinguished and discreet literary dining club’, still meets monthly at the Garrick, even though it elected its first women members in 2000.

‘The evolution of the modern club has been so simple that it can be traced with great ease,’ writes Ralph Nevill in London clubs: their history and treasures (1911):

First the tavern or coffee-house, where a certain number of people met on special evenings for purposes of social conversation, and incidentally consumed a good deal of liquid refreshment; then the beginnings of the club proper ‑ some well-known house of refreshment being taken over from the proprietor by a limited number of clients for their own exclusive use, and the landlord retained as manager; and finally the palatial modern club, not necessarily sociable, but replete with every comfort, and owned by the members themselves. In such places, however, the old spirit of club-life is generally lost.

One of the most famous institutions was the Literary Club, usually simply known as ‘The Club’, which met at the Turk’s Head tavern in Soho. It was started in 1764 by Samuel Johnson and Joshua Reynolds, though another founding member, Edmund Burke, could claim to have had more experience of ‘the old spirit of club-life’. In 1747, while a sixteen-year-old student at Trinity College Dublin, he had started one of the first student discussion societies. In 1770 ‘Burke’s Club’ combined with TCD’s Historical Club to become the College Historical Society, popularly referred to as ‘The Hist’. This year it has been confirmed in the Guinness Book of Records as the world’s oldest continuously running debating society.

In Samuel Johnson’s club women seem to have been present only to bring in food and clear away the dirty plates, but Daisy Hay’s new book, Joseph Johnson: Books and Friendship in a Revolutionary Age, draws attention to another equally influential yet informal eighteenth century dining society that met for over thirty years at the home of the publisher Joseph Johnson. ‘All those who dined were connected by a web that spun outwards from Johnson’s house through the medium of paper,’ Hay writes, ‘as conversations begun within the privacy of the dining toom stretched out – often in public view – across the country and over the decades.’ Johnson’s many guests did not come because of the food ‑ usually it was the same ‘citizen’s dinner’ of boiled cod, roast veal and rice pudding – but for the conversation. From the start, women writers contributed to those stimulating discussions and were treated as equals.

It was the time of the Gordon Riots, the American War of Independence, the French Revolution and the Irish Rebellion, and repressive measures against the press had been introduced by William Pitt the Younger. Yet it was also an exciting, revolutionary period in science, medicine, poetry and education. Johnson was at the forefront of much of this, publishing periodicals, scientific texts and illustrated works for children. He was an advocate for religious and civil liberty and the education of girls and women, as well as an abolitionist and the leading publisher of The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano (1789) the autobiography of a former slave.

Joseph Johnson was born in 1738 into a Baptist dissenting family in the village of Everton, near Liverpool. As nonconformist Protestants his community rejected the oaths and allegiances of the Church of England, meaning that certain professions and civic offices were closed to them, as well as the possibility of studying at the universities of Oxford or Cambridge. So, at age fourteen, Johnson was sent to the City of London to serve a seven-year apprenticeship to the Baptist bookseller George Keith. It was an education, both in observing the sights of life in the street (as depicted in Hogarth’s Gin Lane) and learning the mechanics of the book trade, as new Baptist tracts rolled off the presses daily, many of them condemning those who sinned to eternal damnation.

In 1761 Johnson was twenty-two and had decided to become a publisher and bookseller in his own right. He rented temporary premises and began looking for new authors to publish and readers who might buy books that were more thought-provoking than religious pamphlets. His first success was in 1764 when he published An Authentic Narrative by John Newton, a former slave-trader who had become a Church of England minister. Ostensibly a moral tale, it combined conversion narrative, romance and seafaring adventure, and, as Hay writes, ‘proved popular with a reading public who were being shown by the new novels flooding the market that their reading could hold them in thrall to a good story even as it improved their morals’.

In 1767 Johnson joined forces with a bookseller called John Payne. Together they set up a bookselling and publishing business in Paternoster Row, living in modest quarters above the shop. Johnson became a regular at the nearby Chapter Coffee House, where scientific experimentalists and philosophers often gathered, as well as writers, to make connections and exchange views (Anne and Charlotte Brontë would take modest lodgings there in 1848 while meeting their publisher). His social and business circle was expanding, and he met the hard-up Henry Fuseli and soon became the Swiss-born artist’s lifelong friend and patron. Johnson generously offered him a room in his Paternoster Row house, and Fuseli described himself as ‘blissfully happy with my friend, Johnson, who I pay for my accommodation by means of drawings, and sometimes with writing’.

This peaceful domestic and professional arrangement ended abruptly when a fire broke out in the shop’s back office early one morning in January 1770. The business burned to the ground, and Johnson lost all his possessions and his entire stock. Fuseli lost his books, paintings, manuscripts and clothes and went abroad to train as a full-time painter. Unfortunately, the fire occurred during a period of re-evaluation, when the business was temporarily uninsured. Payne promptly gave up bookselling and moved out of London, and it looked very much as if young Joseph Johnson’s promising career was over too, until his close circle of bookseller and writer friends ‘came about him, and set him up again’. Six months later, he took a lease at 72 St Paul’s Churchyard, facing the west doors of the great cathedral, a lively area of tightly packed streets and flourishing bookshops, printers and taverns. Johnson would live and work there for the rest of his life.

He never married and was looked after by his two Liverpool nieces and a handful of domestic servants. The dining room above his bookshop served by day as his private office, where he would hold discussions with suppliers, tradesmen and authors, but in the evenings (which began at about 3 pm) this ‘little quaintly shaped upstairs room, with walls not at right angles’ hosted gatherings that were unique in literary history. Once a week, from the early 1770s until the end of 1809, Johnson invited a selection of writers, artists, scientists and philosophers of contrasting politics to gather at 72 St Paul’s Churchyard to dine with him. His regular dinner guests had no communal name and did not identify as a group, unlike Jonathan Swift’s Scriblerus Club or the Lunar Society in Birmingham. But there was an agreed way of being nevertheless. ‘Many of those who came to dinner understood that the weekly gatherings at St Paul’s Churchyard were emblematic of a broader interwoven community,’ Hay writes. ‘To dine with Johnson was to acknowledge one’s allegiance both to the bookseller and the network he enabled.’

His circle of friends and authors was, in effect, his family, and over the years included the political activist Thomas Paine, the statistician Thomas Malthus, the chemist Humphry Davy, the doctor and poet Erasmus Darwin, poets William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the chemist and natural philosopher Joseph Priestley and the scientist and writer Benjamin Franklin. Johnson published Franklin’s collected works just before a warrant was issued for his arrest and he sailed back to America in 1775. ‘He told me in general that he thought he did no good here,’ wrote Priestley, ‘and might do some in America.’ Fuseli had returned to England from Europe after nine years away, and once again became a welcome dinner guest at Johnson’s; by now he had become an established artist, and from 1781 his strange painting The Nightmare hung in pride of place in the publisher’s dining room. It must have looked particularly unsettling by flickering candlelight. William Cowper, who was Johnson’s bestselling author and prolific correspondent, was there only in spirit, as he never came to London or met his publisher in person. By contrast, William Blake lived close by, but was only an occasional guest; he was known simply as ‘Blake the engraver’ who illustrated Johnson’s books. Johnson was in fact Blake’s friend and patron, and encouraged him to display his more unusual illuminated and printed works in the bookshop’s window at St Paul’s Churchyard, giving him access to a wider readership.

From the beginning, Johnson also published the works of women, and included them socially at a time when the dining clubs, literary societies and coffee houses of the printing district were reserved for men. His most celebrated author and friend was Mary Wollstonecraft, whose first book, Thoughts on the Education of Daughters (1786), Johnson published while she was still working (unhappily) as a governess for the Kingsborough family in Cork and Dublin. He wrote to her, promising to stand by her if she chose to return to London and forge a path as a writer. This she did, and he simply recorded that ‘Mary came from Ireland in 1787 (Augt) and resided with me having determined to try to live by literary exertions & be independent.’

During her stay in his house, after the other dinner guests had left, Johnson made Wollstonecraft a remarkable offer. He would find her a house and a servant and pay for both, and in return, she would write original works and act as his reviewer and translator. It made her, as she proudly explained to her sister, ‘the first of a new genus’: the professional woman writer. ‘You would respect him,’ she told Everina, ‘and his sensible conversation would soon wear away the impression, that of formality ‑ or rather stiffness of manners, first makes to his disadvantage ‑ I am sure you would love him did you know with what tenderness and humanity he has behaved to me.’

Johnson was indeed a good and loyal friend to Wollstonecraft, and he was also a canny publisher who knew that she was a hard worker and that her writing would sell. She wrote her pamphlet A Vindication of the Rights of Men in immediate response to Burke’s hugely popular Reflections on the Revolution in France (1790); a few months later Thomas Paine’s The Rights of Man (1791) would echo Wollstonecraft’s title and arguments. It was in Johnson’s dining room that year that Wollstonecraft first met her future husband, William Godwin. He had come to hear Paine talk, but instead found himself arguing with Mary, and noted in his diary that they were ‘mutually displeased with each other’. Johnson published the first volume of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman in 1792, which concluded ‘Let women share the rights, and she will emulate the virtues of man.’

Wollstonecraft was not the only notable women writer among Johnson’s dinner guests. ‘Our evenings, particularly at Johnson’s, were so truly social and lively, that we protracted them sometimes till …’ the poet, essayist and writer Anna Laetitia Barbauld recalled. ‘But I am not telling tales.’ Barbauld was already a commercially successful author by the time Johnson published the first volume of her Lessons for Children from Two to Three Years Old in 1778. It grew into four volumes and went through many subsequent editions. It was the first book to be based on the idea that young children deserved good literature as much as adults did. Its innovative style was designed to appeal; it was printed on good paper, with a maximum of nine lines of type to a page. Its popularity was a testament to Johnson’s belief in a more liberal education for young children, and that books should reflect their experience and perspective.

Barbauld was a member of the Bluestockings, a circle of nine intellectual women who, in the second half of the eighteenth century, supported female education and promoted literary opportunities for women denied access to formal clubs, societies and universities (a precursor to the Cambridge ‘Ladies’ Dining Society’ that met from 1890-1914, which I write about in my blog: see details below). Barbauld’s literary achievements and concern with human rights greatly influenced Wollstonecraft’s Vindication of the Rights of Woman, and Coleridge was so impressed by Barbauld’s poetry that he walked from Nether Stowey to Bristol to meet her and ask for advice. Charlotte Turner Smith was another prominent novelist and poet at the end of the eighteenth century who dined with Joseph Johnson. Both Wordsworth and Coleridge greatly admired her Elegiac Sonnets (1784), which went into eleven editions. ‘My beloved William is turning over the leaves of Charlotte Smith’s sonnets,’ Dorothy Wordsworth wrote in her Grasmere Journal on Christmas Eve 1802, ‘but he keeps his hand to his poor chest, pushing aside his breastplate.’

Charlotte Smith’s poetry ‘influenced a new generation of young male poets in its presentation of nature as a source of emotional and mental strength during times of difficulty’, Hay writes. But she found it difficult to make a living as a writer, having to pay her estranged and violent husband’s debts. Johnson tried to help, advising her that ‘perhaps you cannot employ your time and extraordinary talents more usefully for the public & yourself than in composing books for children and young people, but I am very sensible it is extreamly difficult to acquire that simplicity of style which is their great recommendation.’ He published her children’s books and later her influential narrative poem Beachy Head posthumously in 1807.

The prolific Anglo-Irish novelist Maria Edgeworth was frequently at Johnson’s dining table, at first accompanied by her father, Richard Lovell Edgeworth. Influenced by Barbauld’s writing, Maria Edgeworth’s Letters for Literary Ladies was published by Johnson in 1795. She became his correspondent and lifelong friend, even visiting him in prison after he was targeted by the Anti-Jacobin Review and convicted in 1798 of spreading anti-government propaganda through his publications. Her stepmother, Frances, clearly disapproved, writing in her Memoir that ‘it was afterwards a disadvantage to Maria that her works were published by the printer of what were considered seditious and sectarian books’.

There was intellectual diversity among the women writers published by Johnson; in 1804 Barbauld robustly turned down Edgeworth’s suggestion of a journal written by and for literary ladies, telling her that ‘there is no bond of union among literary women, any more than among literary men’. As well as being spirited members of Johnson’s disputatious dining club, Charlotte Smith and Anna Barbauld were both generous poetic mentors to Wordsworth and Coleridge among others. Yet, as the fame of the male Romantic poets grew in the early nineteenth century, it seems that the voices of these eminent women writers increasingly were no longer heard. Mary Wollstonecraft still speaks to us, but most of the Johnson’s other women dinner guests have been erased retrospectively from what became the gentlemen’s dining club of British Romanticism.

## Becoming James Bond

D J Taylor (literaryreview.co.uk)

*Ian Fleming: The Complete Man* By Nicholas Shakespeare

Harvill Secker 864pp £30 order from our bookshop

Anthony Powell, two and a half years older than Ian Fleming, remembered him as ‘one of the few persons I have met to announce that he was going to make a lot of money out of writing novels, and actually contrive to do so’. Fleming and his older brother, Peter, turn up in Faces in My Time (1980), the third volume of Powell’s memoirs, in connection with the short-lived 1930s magazine Night and Day, with Peter filing editorial notes and Ian raising money for the magazine in the City. Coming across a bound volume half a century later, Powell was immediately struck by what he called the ‘Fleming impact’. One of the signature marks of Nicholas Shakespeare’s new biography is its terrific sense of clannishness. Rarely has there been a collective unit whose members looked out for, supported, interfered with and privately disparaged each other with such unrelenting tenacity.

Doubtless this fellow feeling was a consequence of the family’s meteoric rise to fame. The Flemings were one of those extraordinary, but far from unusual, mid-Victorian enterprises in which the grandfather makes the money, the second generation establishes the social position and the third pursues a sideways shift into the more exotic quadrants of literature and the arts. Robert Fleming, who grew up in poverty in Dundee, founded the private bank that bore his name. His son Valentine became Tory MP for Henley and died on the Hindenburg Line in 1917, leaving a legend of heroism and disinterested public service so profound that a framed copy of Winston Churchill’s obituary of him in The Times hung permanently on the wall beside Ian’s bed.

Valentine had four sons, of whom Ian, born in 1908, was the second. They eventually acquired a half-sister, a product of their widowed mother Eve’s carry-on with Augustus John. None of this made for an easy childhood, and most of Ian’s early years seem to have been undermined by the paralysing celebrity of his brother Peter; the third brother, Richard, went to work in the family bank, and a fourth, Michael, was killed in the Second World War. Shakespeare offers interesting parallels with the rivalry that existed between Evelyn and Alec Waugh, but whereas the younger Waugh soon left the author of The Loom of Youth’s reputation sprawling in the dust, Ian took nearly three decades to escape from his brother’s shadow. Captain of the Oppidans at Eton and head of Pop (or the Eton Society), the possessor of an Oxford first, tipped as a future editor of The Times, Peter spent the early 1930s writing up his adventures in far-flung parts of the world and, like T T Waring in Powell’s What’s Become of Waring (1939), being compared to ‘everyone who had ever written a successful travel book, Burton, Doughty, Hudson, and the rest of them’.

Ian, meanwhile, scraped by at school, showed early signs of a lifelong interest in the ladies, was thrown out of Sandhurst for contracting a venereal disease and failed to get a job at the Foreign Office. A brief interlude at Reuters gave promise of better things, but by the mid-1930s he was becalmed at Rowe & Pitman – ‘the worst stockbroker in the world’, Peter remembered, with only a single recognised client and a working brief that largely consisted of taking people out to lunch. Already the key elements of the Fleming personality had shifted into view. A ‘playboy puritan’, Shakespeare calls his subject, saturnine and self-absorbed, poised and diffident, womanising and crony-haunted, both focused on his family and oddly detached from it. The key Fleming leisure pursuit turns out to have been slaughtering wild animals; Ian’s happiest times seem to have been spent on the golf course, and at all times he seems to have existed at one remove from the people around him.

All through this early stretch of his career (whose social and cultural scenery Shakespeare handles with aplomb), another subtext is silently declaring itself. That is the tremendous old pals’ act of which upper-class English life in the interwar era consisted. No scapegrace younger son’s prospects are so benighted that they can’t be revived by familial influence; City jobs are bestowed out of respect to exalted grandpapa; no rock on the road to Le Touquet is so sequestered that it doesn’t harbour someone you messed with at Eton. In May 1939 a chum showed a couple of reports Ian had written on the European situation to some highly placed friends. Admiral Godfrey, director of naval intelligence, in search of a PA ‘who had to have contacts in the City, be a bit of a man of the world, get on with people and have imagination’, realised on the instant that he had struck gold.

In a book not short on detail – more of this in a moment – Shakespeare expends vast amounts of ink in trying to work out exactly how adept Commander Fleming, as he soon became, was at his job and how widely his operational net extended. Whatever Fleming’s precise achievements in Room 39 at the Admiralty Office, he clearly found himself at home in a milieu far more suited to his administrative and imaginative talents than any employment previously offered him. He was a resourceful and consistently adept man-manager at the very centre of the British intelligence machine, Shakespeare concludes, often seen at Bletchley Park and ‘a war-winner’, according to his old boss. Encouraged by the press magnate Lord Kemsley – another father figure in the Godfrey mould – he emerged into the post-1945 world as head of the Sunday Times foreign desk and with a long-term mistress, Lord Rothermere’s wife, Ann, who divorced her Daily Mail-owning husband in 1951 and married the usurper the following year.

Once again, the taint that seems to have hung over practically every aspect of Fleming life was soon making its presence felt. Tough-minded – sometimes to the point of callousness – and sociable, Ann was keen to populate the couples’ house in Victoria Square with her intellectual friends. Some of Shakespeare’s funniest passages take in the spectacle of her husband arriving home after a hard day at the office to find, as it might be, Cyril Connolly, Peter Quennell and Stephen Spender enjoying highbrow conversation with his wife. There was also an affair with Hugh Gaitskell, who became leader of the Labour Party in 1955. Forged in a crucible of marital strife and growing ill-health (the result of a seventy-a-day cigarette habit), Fleming’s first novel, Casino Royale (1953), was greeted by his family with typical hauteur. Several relatives professed themselves shocked by the novel’s vulgarity. Peter’s wife, the actress Celia Johnson, counselled friends not to mention it to her husband on the grounds that he ‘minds so dreadfully’.

Why exactly was it that Peter, his own professional star now slightly on the wane, minded so dreadfully about 007? Shakespeare is good on the creation of the Bond books, written at the rate of one a year and, for all their formulaic precision dredged up from somewhere deep within their creator’s psyche, mattering to him in a way that other aspects of his life did not, and affecting their vast readership on wildly differing levels. Bond may be Sapper’s Bulldog Drummond brought up to date but he is also a post-imperial Cold War warrior. Ripe for superannuation, too, as within a decade John le Carré would be redefining the world of counter-espionage to make it seem as mundane and workaday as any other civil service job. There was a moment, several books in, with sales no more than mediocre, when he almost gave up, only for press excitement over Anthony Eden’s post-Suez convalescence at Goldeneye (the Caribbean estate where Fleming wrote the Bond novels), a film deal, the backing of Lord Beaverbrook’s Express and a presidential endorsement to send the sequence whirling into the stratosphere.

Fascinating, well-researched, neatly written and suitably respectful of previous efforts by John Pearson (1966) and Andrew Lycett (1995), Ian Fleming: The Complete Man is at the same time way too long, a pudding so prodigiously over-egged that it will leave most readers fearful of slipping on the discarded shells. A sadistic master at Fleming’s prep school gets pages all to himself. The description of his louche maternal uncles goes on for seven paragraphs before Shakespeare reaches the rather disappointing (in the circumstances) conclusion that ‘Eve ensured that neither Ivor nor Harcourt came anywhere near her children’.

Fleming died at fifty-six, disillusioned by success and claiming that he would have been happy to swap material gain for ‘a healthy heart’. Caspar, his equally mysterious and solitary son, committed suicide at the age of twenty-three. What remains, after Shakespeare’s eight-hundredth page has ground by, is a desperate sense of melancholy and the thought of something, however obscurely, having gone badly wrong in the family unit. Shakespeare prints an odd little vignette from August 1964. Receiving the news by telephone of Ian’s death as he prepared to go out and reduce the grouse population on Rannoch Moor, his brother Richard told those present merely that he had to travel to England. Peter received the news on another Scottish estate 150 miles away. ‘Not wishing to spoil the shooting’, he said nothing at all.

## Dream of the Russian tropics

Imperial Russia had little access to the bountiful tropics that other empires enjoyed. So it created its own in the Caucasus (aeon)

Oleksandr Polianichevis a project researcher at Södertörn University in Stockholm, Sweden. His research focuses on colonialism and environment in the Russian Empire. Oleksandr Polianichev’s project ‘Tropics of Tsardom: Plants and Empire in the South Caucasus, 1800s–1917’, is supported by Sweden’s Riksbankens Jubileumsfond.

In the age of empires, seeds and saplings of tropical plants were making regular voyages throughout the world. Travelling across continents and oceans via metropolitan and colonial botanical gardens, they did not only transform, but also helped to construe the very notion of the tropics. The trans- and intra-imperial circulation of biota shaped a global web that connected colonial realms of the British, French, Dutch and other maritime empires. The Tsarist Empire is never thought of as a participant of this process, but it was one of the stopovers on the tropical plants’ round-the-world journey. It was in the South Caucasus where imperial botanists, agriculturalists and upper-class settlers invented Russia’s own ‘tropical’ domain.

This region lies nowhere near the tropical zone but, in the long 19th century, this geographical fact mattered little when confronted with the power of imagination. As Catherine Cocks has shown in her Tropical Whites: The Rise of the Tourist South in the Americas (2013), the term ‘tropics’ was used rather evocatively and indiscriminately, spreading into places like Southern California and Florida. Only at the turn of the 20th century, the term ‘subtropics’ firmly entered the imperial lexicon to lend an air of science to the idea of tropicality.

Victoria regia grown outdoors in Europe for the first time, planted in June 1912. Digital colour renderings from glass plates in the Prokudin-Gorskiĭ albums. All images courtesy the Library of Congress

The ‘tropics’ was, thus, a wandering notion, which travelled along with the plants that were its hallmark. In the South Caucasus, it roamed from one place to another – from the arid steppes of Azerbaijan to the river valleys of Georgia – before it finally became ensconced on the eastern Black Sea coast, in places like Sochi (today a resort city in Russia), Sukhum (or Sukhumi, the capital of Abkhazia) and, most comfortably, Batum (today’s Batumi, the second-largest city in Georgia, close to the border with Turkey).

Why did imperial Russia need the tropics? From the early 19th century onwards, the pursuit of tropical commodities was the main driving force of the acclimatisation of exotic plants. As the century wore out, the tropics took on a new meaning – as places of delight and self-indulgence. Ornamental exotic plants equalled – if not outmatched – useful ones in importance. Hotels, sanatoria and ‘climate stations’, where tsarist subjects succumbed to dolce far niente, dotted the littoral. Well-off settlers were coming in large numbers. Villas and vacation residences popped up throughout the coastline.

Tropicality entailed settler colonialism: the public and the government alike treated the Indigenous population as too indolent and primitive to be able to unleash the real potential of the local climate. The inflow of ‘pioneers’ and ‘Kulturträger’ from Russia proper and the empire’s European provinces was the only means to productively harness and economically uplift the region. Lastly, tropicality served imperialism as a symbol of grandeur. Many a member of tsarist society took pride in the very thought that their empire was immense enough to stretch from the polar ice caps as far as places where coconut palms and banana plants grew. In other words, if there were no tropics, they were worth to be made.

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In 1902, in an account of the years spent in Java, Modest Bakunin – the Russian imperial consul to the Dutch East Indies – reflected on his experience of living in a part of the world that few of his countrymen had a chance to see firsthand. Tasked with advancing trade opportunities, and searching for a colonial territory for the Russian Empire in Southeast Asia that would host a coaling station for tsarist ships, Bakunin felt disillusioned. For him, just as for a vast number of other colonial sojourners whose career paths took them to the warm oceans, his stay in an exotic place was about boredom and disappointment rather than about adventure and excitement. Homesick, he was ever more longing for the Old World he had left behind.

To escape the tedious routine, Bakunin took comfort in socialising with other Europeans, who for various reasons came to stay in the colony’s capital, Batavia. This was, as Bakunin described it, ‘a tight circle of colleagues, that is, real Europeans who, like me and my family, see their existence in Java as something temporary and transient.’ Indeed, the yearning for Europe, as well as the shared sense of Europeanness, was what brought them all together: ‘All of us keep and carefully maintain the “European” flame that unites us in our faraway captivity and all the time tells us about old Europe, better and nicer than which nobody has invented anything.’

Bakunin enthusiastically described the main advantages that the tropics could offer – colonial commodities produced from heat-loving plants. Cinchona tree, coconut palm, bamboo, rattan, teak and tea, among others, delivered enormous benefits to metropolitan societies. If the tropics, the ‘white men’s cemetery’, were of any use to Europeans, it was the immense exploitative potential of their vegetation. Whereas his own colonial mission proved an exercise in futility, Bakunin envisioned the introduction of exotic crops – particularly tea – to tsarist soil because Russia, he assured, had a territorial possession in the south that, in many respects, resembled the Dutch East Indies: ‘Transcaucasia for us is just the same colony that Java is for the Dutch metropole. The climatic and soil conditions of the Russian tropics allow planting in our domains and successfully introducing many of tropical and subtropical cultivars.’ Bakunin’s consular service in the tropics, if anything, made him an avid proponent of inter-imperial transfers of useful plants from Java to the South Caucasus.

Tsarist visitors discovered the South Caucasus as capable to yield ‘tropical’ commodities to satisfy the metropole

Writing about the latter as a tsarist tropical colony, Bakunin followed in the footsteps of many of his contemporaries and predecessors who propagated this view. Due to their efforts, by the turn of the 20th century, the South Caucasus had come to be firmly associated with the idea of tropicality. The dream of the Russian tropics was not a new fin-de-siècle passion. It had been haunting different layers of tsarist society since the moment Russia first secured its dominion over the region.

In the opening decades of the 19th century, imperial Russia expanded south of the Caucasus Mountains. Its challenge was to rule over not only an extremely variegated social, cultural and political landscape, but also over an environment that differed from the rest of the empire – the one that was expected to open new prospects for the imperial economy. Imperial travellers, scientists and officials appropriated various parts of this unfamiliar space through images and tropes that emphasised the luxurious, exotic and exuberant nature of its scenery. The spectrum of meanings attached to the South Caucasus was one way or another associated with the idea of the region’s purported tropicality. Much like in early 19th-century India, which increasingly came to be perceived as part of the broader tropical world – as David Arnold has shown in his study The Tropics and the Traveling Gaze (2006) – tsarist visitors discovered the South Caucasus as capable to yield ‘tropical’ commodities to satisfy the needs of the metropole. Speculations about its tropical climate conditions defined much of the imperial attitudes towards the region, believed to be able to produce nearly everything the southern climate might offer and nearly everything the imperial cause might need.

Different authors entertained different opinions as to which parts of the region best matched their expectation of the tropics. Such was the great lowland of modern-day Azerbaijan, which, an 1836 survey assured, ‘will become a nursery for tropical plants and will substitute for Russia Persia, India, and South America.’ This survey, commissioned by the imperial authorities as a compendium of statistical data about the South Caucasus to expose its natural riches, assessed that most of its territory possessed tropical qualities. To make them work for the empire, the improvement of local agriculture was needed so that ‘the South Caucasus, as a colony, could satisfy the demands of Russian manufactures by its tropical and southern production in raw form.’

Such an outspoken mercantile colonial vision of Russia’s new territorial acquisition, driven by fantasies about its alleged tropicality, was a product of discourses about empire and environment that tsarist officialdom borrowed from Western Europe. Colonialism was a joint enterprise, in which the cross-fertilisation of ideas and policies across imperial states and their dependencies contributed to the emergence of the shared vocabulary of imperialism, conceptualised by Christoph Kamissek and Jonas Kreienbaum as ‘the imperial cloud’. One of those who drew extensively on the trans-imperial repertoire of knowledge, images and practices was Egor Kankrin, the empire’s finance minister and one the first senior tsarist officials who formulated the concept of the South Caucasus as a colony of exploitation. In 1827, he wrote: ‘Not without reason, the Transcaucasian province can be called our colony, which should bring for the state very important benefits of the products of southern climates.’

In the second quarter of the 19th century, when these ideas proliferated, nobody knew what exactly these colonial commodities could be. Because of the want of any reliable scientific data, colonial fantasies of the imperial bureaucracy about the tropical climate of the region led them to believe that the abundant supply of sunshine in the South Caucasus would make for the cultivation of ‘southern’ and ‘tropical’ crops, much needed by tsarist commerce, medicine and industry.

Environmental imaginaries of this kind resulted in early ambitious undertakings by Russian imperial agents. Today, Aleksandr Griboedov is mostly known as a poet and playwright. However, apart from his literary passion, he had a passion for empire. As a tsarist diplomat in Persia, he took pains to expand Russia’s imperial sway south of the Caspian Sea. The neighbouring South Caucasus, in his eyes, deserved a special arrangement akin to that of India vis-à-vis the British Empire. In 1828, Griboedov put forward a project of the Transcaucasia Company, which would administer the province in a fashion similar to the East India Company. He bemoaned the fact that the Russian Empire imported commodities of the hot climates from abroad while it could obtain its own ‘southern and even tropical production’ from the South Caucasus. The Transcaucasia Company, as a concerted effort of entrepreneurial capitalists, would remedy the problem by producing, manufacturing and exporting ‘colonial products’ to the Russian metropole and the most distant parts of the globe. The death of Griboedov at the hands of an angry mob in Tehran the following year buried the project, but not the idea of tropicality.

The local administration was keen to employ foreign – mostly French – experts in tropical agriculture to put these ideas into practice. Among those who came to the South Caucasus was the botanist and agriculturalist Joseph-Elzéar Morénas, who had a long record of colonial service in India and Senegal. His stay in Africa made him a vocal critic of slavery and brought him to Haiti, where Morénas admired the achievements of the anticolonial revolution. He resented colonial slave trade but marvelled at colonial commodities. In 1829, he ended up in the South Caucasus at the invitation of the government. Instructed to bring out the most suitable areas for plantations of exotic crops, Morénas suggested introducing sugarcane, oranges, lemons, coffee tree, indigo and other ‘plants of the tropics’, arguing that some parts of this region were ‘not inferior to the best colonies’ in terms of its climate. The main hazard that awaited planters, he warned, were local fevers not unlike those in tropical colonies. Morénas fell victim to one himself in 1830.

The corollary of governmental pursuits – and an echo of Griboedov’s project – was the Transcaucasian Society for the Advancement of Agricultural and Manufacturing Industries and Trade. Established in 1833, it concentrated its efforts on the acclimatisation of exotic plants and their dissemination across the South Caucasus. In its own experimental farm and the garden in the region’s capital, Tiflis (today’s Tbilisi), the society attempted to cultivate Chinese indigo, olive trees, Egyptian cotton, tobacco, sugarcane and other crops, all with mixed success and almost no effect on the local economy. After its dissolution in 1845, the society gave way to the Caucasus Society for Agriculture, designed to put the issue of acclimatisation on scientific footing, while its experimental nursery was transformed into the Tiflis Botanical Garden, which also tried its hand at acclimatising southern plants for plantation purposes.

If any tangible results of this early phase of the tropicalisation endeavour were anywhere to be found, however, it was in another botanical garden in Sukhum, a major tsarist outpost in Abkhazia on the Black Sea coast. Founded in 1840 by Lieutenant General Nikolai Raevskii, the commander of the military fortified line along the coastline and a passionate botany aficionado, it could boast some of the most exotic plant species growing in the Russian Empire in the open air, including varieties of citrus trees. An officer who visited the garden in 1842 gleefully anticipated that, thanks to it, the empire would have its own ‘oranges, lemons, almonds, olives, cotton, the best tobacco, and, maybe, coffee, tea, cork as well as many pharmaceutical plants.’ In just a few years, the first tea shrubs germinated in the garden’s soil. At the time Britain introduced Camellia sinensis to the Darjeeling area to become self-sufficient in the production of its favourite drink, Russia pursued the same goals in the South Caucasus. Unlike the former, however, it took some more decades before the first large tea plantations were set up in the region.

The rise of tea cultivation in the South Caucasus was a trans-imperial story from the outset. Walter Tschudi Lyall was the man behind it. A British colonial officer in India, he was a nephew of the chairman of the East India Company. His younger brothers were senior officials in the service of the British Raj, whose careers made them governors of Punjab and the North-Western Provinces. In the 1860s, Lyall attempted to establish a tea plantation in the Himalayan foothills, but failed and tried his luck in Tiflis, where he introduced himself to the local authorities as a tea planter with almost two decades of experience, offering his service in founding a company for the cultivation of tea on a large scale. The company planned to bring, just as the British did, Chinese labourers to work on plantations and to ship tea seeds and seedlings from China. The plans never materialised for the lack of money and enormous difficulties that the company met in the corridors of tsarist bureaucracy.

No other development contributed more to the assertion of the South Caucasus tropical image than the war between the Russian and Ottoman empires that broke out in 1877. In the wake of it, Russia annexed the town of Batum on the Black Sea shore and the whole adjacent area. Villages in the region were remarkable for their orange groves, cultivated by the native population, which testified to the unique conditions of the local climate, evidently suitable for exotic crops. As the region was opened for Russian colonisation after the exodus of most of its residents to the Ottoman Empire, it was this milieu of Russian colonists who began introducing evergreen vegetation for ornamental purposes and for the sake of making their fortune. Among them was the Tiflis naturalist and ethnologist Nikolai Zeidlits, who attempted to cultivate tea, eucalyptus and other exotic crops in Chakva, north of Batum, but soon realised that this agricultural hobby obstructed his scholarly studies.

Nevertheless, Zeidlits, under the influence of Lyall’s manuscript about his tea experiments, encouraged another Chakva settler, the retired colonel Aleksandr Solovtsov, to start a tea plantation on his land. Planting material was brought from one of the largest centres of tsarist tea production, located well beyond the Russian Empire. The treaty port of Hankou in China (today part of Wuhan), one of the most important nodes of Russia’s informal empire, which subsequently hosted a Russian territorial concession, with its tea factories run by Russian entrepreneurs and employing Chinese manpower, became a supplier of the first tea plants for the emergent tea enterprise in the South Caucasus in 1884. Solovtsov’s plantation proved successful, and soon large capital followed suit.

Konstantin Popov, a scion of the founder of one of the largest tea companies of the empire, which also owned a plantation in Hankou, bought a large area next to Solovtsov’s estate in 1892 and established a cutting-edge tea plantation with a tea factory. Tea was not the only transfer from China that Popov implemented. Besides plants, he brought people – just like Lyall had proposed two decades before him. A dozen skilled Chinese tea farmers together with an expert on tea cultivation, Liu Junzhou, became the first example of labour transfer from a semi-colonial treaty port to this part of the Russian Empire.

<<Settlers from the metropole would cultivate whimsical plants for aesthetic pleasure and commodities>>

The bringing of the Chinese was preceded by heated discussions about the practicability of such a move, which betrayed acute racialised concerns among Russian commentators. The phantom of the ‘yellow peril’, well-entrenched in the mindset of tsarist society at the turn of the century, and the fear of race deterioration loomed large. As one article in the official local newspaper went, ‘however desirable it is to acclimatise the tea shrub here and free ourselves from the multimillion tribute that we pay to China for tea every year, it is nevertheless even more desirable to free ourselves from the necessity to acclimatise here the Chinese themselves.’ The author of this piece compared the Chinese with phylloxera, a grape disease that devastated vineyards across Europe, tsarist wine-growing areas being no exception, noting that it was still possible to fight the plant pest, ‘whereas one cannot rid of the Chinese by any means.’

The government was a latecomer to the tea plantation business in the South Caucasus. In 1895, when Popov’s workers were harvesting tea for the first time, it organised an expedition to China, Japan, Ceylon and the Himalayas to bring specimens of tea and other southern crops to the Russian Empire. As the expedition was off to the tropics, the Department of Crown Domains acquired nearly 17,500 hectares of land in Chakva to establish a state-owned experimental and, as its title suggested, ‘colonisation’ estate, the main purpose of which was to receive, acclimatise and grow exotic plants expected to be brought by the expedition. This venture resulted in astonishing success, turning the estate and, eventually, the vicinities of Batum into a quasi-tropical landscape with vast plantations of tea, citrus trees, bamboo, loquat, Japanese persimmon and many other exotic species. By 1915, the Chakva estate had the largest tea plantations amounting to almost 550 hectares. Popov lagged behind with 140 hectares, while 200 private farmers together cultivated slightly more than 200 hectares.

In the 1890s, two botanical gardens, one in Sochi and one in Sukhum, were established and, then a decade later, experimental stations were added. There were few people in the Russian Empire as obsessed with the tropics as the mastermind behind the latter’s creation, Pavel Tatarinov. He travelled extensively. His dreams about the tropical world took him to South America, where he admired the marvels of the ‘earthly paradise’ but remonstrated that ‘semi-civilised’ people were turning it into ‘hell’. He made trips to Algeria to explore the experimental Jardin du Hamma, and to the French Riviera, where he visited Villa Thuret in Antibes, a botanical garden and an acclimatisation and research facility dealing with tropical plants. In conversation with Tatarinov and, later, in a separate essay, its director Charles Naudin argued that the villa, inspired by British experimental colonial gardens, could, in turn, serve as a model for similar institutions in Russia’s southernmost possessions.

In 1885, Tatarinov took the most important decision of his life, purchasing land on the coast of the Black Sea near Sukhum. There, he used his important skills to reproduce a tropical oasis in the open air, which turned into the most spectacular showcase for exotic vegetation on the whole coast. Tatarinov envisaged turning the coastal part west and south of the Caucasus Ridge into a nearly tropical realm, where incoming settlers from the metropole would cultivate whimsical plants for aesthetic pleasure and the production of commodities. Inspired by the French, he spoke in favour of establishing experimental stations in Sochi and Sukhum and, as soon as it happened, he became the director of the latter.

The reality betrayed expectations, however. Debates over which kinds of plants should be given preference ensued in the forthcoming years. Many opted for more down-to-earth pursuits, such as the introduction of traditional fruit, cereals and vegetables to the coastal zone of Russian colonisation. Others insisted that wasting the close-to-tropical conditions of the region for plants of the temperate climate was unreasonable. More than a decade after, the new director of the Sochi, and later Sukhum, experimental stations, Vasilii Markovich, described the rivalry between the proponents of growing ordinary Russian plants and the supporters of southern vegetation as a battle between ‘cabbage and orange’, arguing that ‘where ananas [pineapple] and other exotic fruit grow, there cannot be room for cabbage and potato.’

Tatarinov would certainly agree. However, his quest for the Russian tropics took him southwards. Disillusioned with not uncommon freezing temperatures and snowfalls of Sukhum winters, he acquired a new estate near Batum in 1898, the climate of which seemed a much better fit for his tropical garden. By the time Tatarinov moved there, the region had already been recognised by scholars as the Russian Empire’s ‘subtropical’ corner. No one else did more for this idea to take hold in the imagination of fin-de-siècle Russia than Andrei Krasnov, one of Russia’s foremost scholarly experts in tropical flora. Krasnov was a member and the public face of the governmental tropical expedition of 1895. His resounding article, published the same year under the telling title ‘The Russian Tropics’, was meant to put the long-standing idea of the South Caucasus tropicality on a scientific footing. Krasnov argued that regions with a tropical outlook – humid, winterless and rich in rainfall – could be found far beyond the tropics themselves. ‘Subtropical’ thus meant ‘tropical’ in most respects save for the geographic one. With the warmest winters and the highest amount of precipitation in the Russian Empire, red laterite soil, and a number of indigenous evergreen plant species that formed the undergrowth of local woods, the Batum region reminded Krasnov of Java and Ceylon. What set it apart, in his view, was the want of genuinely exotic vegetation typical of tropical rainforests, which had existed here in the prehistoric era but had mostly perished during the Ice Age.

In his later writings, Krasnov suggested correcting this historical injustice and restoring the region’s appearance to its ‘authentic’ tropical condition by reintroducing exotic plants from the Global South. This endeavour underlined many activities of the Chakva estate in the Batum region. Krasnov did not feel it was enough, arguing that the tropical transformation of the local environment could be achieved only with the help of a botanical garden. This acclimatisation institution, similar to British colonial gardens in India and the garden of Dutch Buitenzorg in Java, as Krasnov wrote, would ‘restore’ the prehistoric flora in the area and would facilitate the dissemination of tropical and subtropical plants along the coast so that settlers would be able to produce ‘colonial’ commodities on Russia’s own home turf.

<<The imperial army advanced along the Ottoman coast, occupying lands with orange orchards and evergreen flora>>

The Batum Botanical Garden, established in 1912, was conceived by Krasnov as having a broader appeal for the public. He wanted it to host not only exotic plants, but also exotic human beings – to be an ‘ethnographic exhibition’ or an ‘exhibition park’. In essence, Krasnov designed a human zoo of unique proportions. While the structure of the garden represented various (sub)tropical parts of the globe – from Japan, Ceylon and Florida to Australia, New Zealand and Chile – the garden’s sections were to be populated by these places’ Indigenous people, ‘placed within the real conditions of the nature that nurtured them.’ Amid palm trees and banana plants, humans on display would feel at home and would serve visitors delicacies made of tropical fruit grown on the spot, sell handicrafts, and entertain their guests in many other ways.

Such a spectacle of tropicality and race was likely inspired by what Nigel Rothfels in his study Savages and Beasts: The Birth of the Modern Zoo (2002) termed the ‘Hagenbeck revolution’ – still a new way of exhibiting animals and people in their ‘natural habitats’, promoted by the zoo tycoon Carl Hagenbeck in the early 20th century. If implemented, Krasnov’s daring creation would have been unparalleled in the history and practice of human zoos in Europe, but his vision never materialised. The First World War halted the development of the garden, while Krasnov died in late 1914, unsure about what kind of future awaited the fruits of his years-long efforts.

Despite all the horrors and anxieties that the Great War brought to the Russian Empire and, particularly, to the South Caucasus, there was room for excitement. The empire was expanding in Asia – for one last time before its nearing end – and so did the tsarist (sub)tropics. In 1915, the imperial army advanced along the Ottoman coast, occupying new localities with orange orchards and evergreen flora. A correspondent of the official local newspaper excitedly wrote about the crossing of the border between the Batum region and Russian-occupied Ottoman Lazistan: ‘One more step to the south, and we are in our new subtropical possessions.’ With the transfer of Anatolian territories to Russia, he noted, ‘the dream of the poet of the Russian subtropics, the late professor A N Krasnov, comes true. The soil of these areas is suitable not only for the growth of oranges and lemons; tea will grow perfectly here.’ Indeed, Russian tea planters were quick to petition the officialdom with a request to start plantations in the ‘new’ regions. State agronomists began analysing which areas of Anatolia were most suitable for this cause, suggesting that up to 16,000 hectares were available for prospective plantations. As the Russian Empire disintegrated and Turkey reclaimed its territories in a few years, the Turkish government brought the idea of tea plantations in Anatolia into fruition and made it a reality in the 1920s.

Yet another success at tea planting in neighbouring Persia was at least partially based on the tsarist tropical experience. In 1901, Iran’s tea pioneer Prince Mohammad Mirza visited the Chakva estate and brought from there new knowledge about methods of tea cultivation and tsarist specialists. His first tea plantations in Gilan came into being thanks to Russian imperial expertise. Plant-based industries and transfers in the South Caucasus came hard on the heels of those undertaken by Russia’s imperial rivals and allies. Surprisingly, however, they also served as models for more southern countries to follow.

## The mystic art of gardening

In an era of 20th-century suburban sprawl, the great designer Russell Page infused soulful philosophy into his gardens aoen: Oct 23

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Russell Page (1906-85) was a brooding, chain-smoking loner who somehow became one of the most glamorous landscape designers of the 20th century. Born in Lincolnshire, England, he spent much of his career in Paris and worked all over the world, travelling to southern Europe, the Americas, Australia and the Middle East. Page designed grand gardens for aristocrats, industrialists and institutions, as well as many small-scale projects for his friends. His only book, The Education of a Gardener (1962) – a memoir blending historical and philosophical meditations with practical guidance – is still admired as a masterpiece of garden writing, reissued by New York Review Books (2007) and Vintage Classics (2023).

For all his shimmering success, however, Page is something of an outsider, hard to place in the canon of landscape design. Though he was widely regarded as a great artist, he did not establish his own innovative signature style, and most of his gardens have been remodelled or destroyed. The significance of Page’s career seems curiously obscure. ‘Where does this man stand in the history of garden making?’ Fred Whitsey, the longtime gardening correspondent for The Daily Telegraph, asked after Page’s death. ‘He remains elusive.’

The question of Page’s legacy is partly a matter of style. Although he made many different kinds of gardens, he was most famous for highly formal designs in the classical French and Italian traditions. If you have ever looked at pictures of the gardens at Versailles, created by André Le Nôtre for Louis XIV, then you have seen the iconic example of formal design, with its rigid geometries and tightly controlled planting schemes. Most 20th-century English designers, by contrast, favoured looser, more informal landscapes. In recent decades, new kinds of naturalistic gardens, such as those of the Dutch master Piet Oudolf, have won prestigious commissions on both sides of the Atlantic, and now a new movement for ‘wild’ gardening is designing garden habitats for biodiversity and ecological repair. To contemporary eyes, classical gardens have come to appear rigid, even soulless, in their efforts to control nature. And so Page might simply be seen as an outmoded artist, the last of the great formal designers, left behind by modern times.

In the foreground pink hydrangeas bloom on a raised terrace above a formal lawn that leads to the distant lakeside. Trees shade the lawn

A shady sycamore grove in Russell Page’s garden at Schloss Freudenberg, on Lake Zug in Switzerland. Photo by Michael Boys/Corbis/VCG/Getty

As it turns out, though, Page’s thinking about gardens is too strange and too beautiful to follow such an oversimple script. A closer look at his writing, especially The Education of a Gardener, reveals how deeply he considered his own place in the development of garden-making. Like other midcentury designers, Page found himself dealing with distinctly modern conditions, trying to envision a future for home gardens in the era of suburban sprawl. Unlike many others, he responded to this problem in an unorthodox way – by adopting a quasi-religious mysticism.

Far from soulless, Page devoted himself to an esoteric faith, influenced by the charismatic spiritual leader G I Gurdjieff and the Sufi teacher Idries Shah. After training as an artist in England and France, Page widened his perspective to study the design histories of many other, distant cultures. In The Education of a Gardener, he praised the forgotten landscape architects from ‘the Zen sect of Buddhism’ in 15th-century Japan and ‘the earlier Mogul gardens in India’. To see a path forward in the 20th century, Page proposed, Western garden-making needed to reconnect with the universal spirit that had guided ancient Eastern traditions.

This, I think, was Page’s real contribution to design history – not so much a distinctive kind of planting scheme as a special role for the designer. He cultivated an image of himself as an artist-mystic, spiritually estranged from British imperialism and consumer capitalism which, he felt, tended to create ugly, life-stunting landscapes wherever they imposed themselves. Against the backdrop of mass-produced suburbia, he created therapeutic sanctuaries of unique harmony and tranquility.

Reconsidered in this light, Page’s work speaks to our own moment in unsettling, surprising ways. While today’s naturalistic and wild styles might define themselves against his classical formality, they also unwittingly echo his spiritual critique of colonial and suburban landscapes. Page’s career shows how a vaguely orientalist ethos can be appropriated as a kind of high-end branding. At the same time, though, he offers unconventional theories and practices that anyone can use, on any scale, for making gardens in the ruins.

In his introduction to The Education of a Gardener, Page recalls how his professional career began in the early 1930s when, after art school and some years abroad in Paris, he took ‘a very subordinate job’ under Richard Sudell, a London-based landscape architect. The work, Page writes, involved ‘designing plantings for the endless new blocks of cheap flats then being built in the London suburbs.’ His tone is dreary, lightly snobbish. He needed the salary to get by but, from the start, suburban expansion weighed heavy on his spirits.

Soon, though, Page’s first big commission took him out of London and, like a fairytale, into an enchanted past. The site was Longleat House, a distinguished but deteriorating Elizabethan estate. Page’s client, Lord Henry Bath, the heir to Longleat, showed him around, providing what turned out to be a crash course in garden history.

In the 1600s, the marquesses of Bath had built grand gardens in a formal style influenced by continental models, with straight lines and tightly clipped hedges, to complement Longleat House, an impressive work of Elizabethan architecture. Such gardens were associated with Renaissance ideals of aristocratic power, ordered hierarchy and control over nature. In England, though, they eventually fell out of fashion.

Gardeners collected exotic plants and ornaments, like tourists buying souvenirs, then jumbled them together

By the late 18th century, in the eyes of England’s ruling classes, formal gardens came to look too rigid, too abstract – too French. The legendary garden designer Lancelot ‘Capability’ Brown was hired to replace Longleat’s formal plantings with pastoral parklands. Instead of neat parterres and abstract shapes, demarcated from the landscape beyond, Brown favoured naturalistic forms – a clump of trees, the bend of a river – so that the garden seemed to roll toward the horizon. The effect was picturesque, though it required huge investments of work and money. Brown and his followers remodelled so many estates in this way that the historian Roy Strong would later dedicate his study The Renaissance Garden in England (1979) to the ‘memory of all those gardens destroyed by Capability Brown and his successors’.

Longleat’s gardens were remodelled once again in the 19th century, this time by adding what Page called a ‘profusion of exotic trees and shrubs’ imported from around the empire. Such abundance displayed Britain’s global power, but Page didn’t like it. English design, he felt, had fallen victim to its own imperial excesses. Gardeners collected exotic plants and ornaments, like tourists buying souvenirs, then jumbled them together. There was too much material, not enough focused intention. Good design, in Page’s eyes, called for some restraint.

‘We walked the open parkland for days,’ Page remembered, analysing what ‘the composition of the landscape seemed to require.’ Longleat was a kind of palimpsest of historical styles: Renaissance formality, Romantic picturesque and Victorian extravagance. Page tried to peel away the most recent layer, to restore the parklands in the spirit of Capability Brown. He preserved clumps of 18th-century trees, especially beechwoods, while adding some limes and scarlet oaks to harmonise the views. Remodelling the site for its future owner, Page was also correcting the past errors that had spoiled its quiet elegance.

After the prestigious commission at Longleat, Page’s fortunes were rising. He found a kindred spirit in Geoffrey Jellicoe, a well-connected landscape architect. The two shared interests both in classical design – Jellicoe wrote Italian Gardens of the Renaissance (1925) with John Shepherd – and in esoteric theories of the soul, including Gurdjieff’s. Page and Jellicoe started their own firm, taking on prestigious commissions. They also became involved with a new professional organisation, the Institute of Landscape Architects, and its quarterly, Landscape and Garden, edited by Sudell.

Page’s beat for the magazine was international garden history. He travelled around Europe, taking photographs and writing short dispatches, exploring various traditions – 17th-century French classicism, Islamic influences in Portugal. Page published a two-page spread with a one-word title: ‘Urns’. But the point of learning history was not to imitate earlier fashions. ‘We have inherited relics of all these styles and travesties of style,’ Page wrote in The Education of a Gardener. Too often, the effect was a nostalgic pastiche rather than historical fidelity, kitsch instead of creativity.

What older gardens did provide, however, were models of an ethos. In each of the traditions that Page studied, he saw gardeners responding authentically to the character of their sites, in accordance with the values of their local cultures and their times. The challenge for modern landscape architecture was to express the spirit of its era, just as earlier gardeners had expressed their own. Page’s excursions into the past were not time-travel fantasies; he was looking for ways to reorient himself in the present. He was beginning to find his balance – philosophically modern, yet historically informed. But then a world war disrupted everything.

Visiting gardens abroad, he cultivated a cosmopolitan perspective in a time of violent nationalisms

‘Our practice ceased to exist,’ Page wrote, bluntly, ‘and all my modest accumulation of plans, photographs and 18th-century garden books went up in flames in the first London blitz.’ His firm was defunct, his archive in ashes, destroyed by the Luftwaffe. ‘Gardening belonged, it seemed, only to the past; there was no future – only the pressing present.’

Page joined Britain’s War Department, going south and east to distant stations – Egypt, India, Sri Lanka. He never publicly discussed his wartime work, which may have been propaganda, but the travels expanded his education. Page was learning ‘that life can be otherwise experienced than from the European point of view.’ Visiting gardens abroad, he cultivated a cosmopolitan perspective in a time of violent nationalisms. His writing emphasised the moving spirituality of Eastern cultures. ‘There were all the marvellous mosques to explore,’ he remembered of his time in Cairo, where he heard a voice ‘chanting verses from the Quran – every sound vibrant with meaning and devotion.’

Even on the other side of the world, though, Page saw the grim signs of British imperial expansion. In one telling passage, he talked about arriving in Sri Lanka, ‘with its ancient cities of a former Buddhist civilisation buried in the tropical forests and the thin veneer of 19th-century British red brick architecture which has made Colombo as commonplace as Southsea or the Bronx.’ Colonisation had imposed a generic, industrial surface not just onto the land but also on to human cultures, everywhere.

When peacetime came, Page found himself adrift. He had no money and no vocation. His mind was rattled. ‘I was totally at a loss in a world to which I had become unused,’ he confessed.

Page turned to friends for help. Under the mentorship of the Austrian émigré painter Oskar Kokoschka, who had settled in London, Page retrained himself, starting with ‘the problem of really drawing’. Before he could compose again, he had to rehabilitate his eyes. ‘To study the nature and form of the object in front of me gave me back the possibility of another kind of vision and another kind of discipline, and little by little a vast weight of accumulated superficialities fell away.’

Page understood his discipline as a practice of looking through surfaces until he discerned a deeper reality, then making shapes in harmony with what he found. This blend of meditation and composition became his postwar therapy. ‘I felt refreshed and quiet because I knew again that there is a continuing reality behind the appearances and problems of everyday.’

It is hard … to see Page’s gardens from his point of view without acknowledging how mysticism shaped his art

Two French acquaintances, Stéphane Boudin and André de Vilmorin, helped Page set up a new practice in Paris. He started over, working on many scales, from grand chateaux to smaller urban plots. He also joined the circle of bohemian intellectuals and artists who gathered in Gurdjieff’s salon on the rue des Colonels Renard. In 1947, Page married Lida Gurdjieff, often referred to as the famous mystic’s daughter, though some reference sources identify her as his niece.

Gurdjieff’s teaching appealed to educated Westerners who rejected mainstream Christianity but still craved some kind of transcendence – a spiritual vision beyond the confines of Church or nation. His ideas influenced Page’s former partner Jellicoe and the American architect Frank Lloyd Wright, as well as Page himself. Drawing from various world religions, Gurdjieff taught artists to align their work with universal principles of geometry and balance.

Even sympathetic readers of The Education of a Gardener have struggled to assimilate this aspect of Page’s thought. The Oxford historian Robin Lane Fox, in his introduction to the New York Review Books edition, waves it away as ‘the purest baloney’. The English gardener and television host Alan Titchmarsh, introducing the new Vintage Classics version, does not mention spirituality at all. But it is hard to understand Page’s book, or to see his gardens from his own point of view, without acknowledging how mysticism shaped his art.

Explaining his theory of composition, Page wrote that ‘every object emanates – sends out vibrations beyond its physical body which are specific to itself.’ The landscape designer Kevin Barton, who studied Page’s archives for a master’s thesis in garden history, shows how these comments echo Gurdjieff’s teachings. Page had learned to think about design as a way of recreating cosmic geometries. When the vibrations were in harmony, the composition worked; the garden attained its peculiar ‘magic’.

While Page’s philosophy became unorthodox and orientalist, his practice became more traditional and, on its surface, classically Western. After two decades away from England, he acknowledged: ‘my approach to designing was modified by the greater formality of classical French planning and the more sculptural approach of the Italian tradition.’

Page’s work from this era is richly presented in two coffee-table books, both published after his death: Marina Schinz and Gabrielle van Zuylen’s The Gardens of Russell Page (1991) and the American Academy in Rome’s Russell Page: Ritratti di Giardini Italiani (1998). Both feature the same garden on their covers. Two stone sphinxes stand guard over the entrance to the garden, which descends a steep hillside in three wide, rectangular terraces. A straight path through the upper terrace establishes the main axis. It runs between two rectangular parterres and then, by way of a few steps, down to the middle terrace, which is almost entirely taken up by a shallow, stone-edged pool. On the lower level, a tightly clipped hornbeam hedge forms a maze-like arabesque pattern.

This is Page’s garden at Villa Silvio Pellico, south of Turin, Italy, and it practically poses for the camera. The geometry is clear and orderly. No paths curve into darkness; no vines snake through the scene. Van Zuylen calls it: ‘proof of Page’s understanding of the classical Italian garden.’

Page continued to be appreciated as a formal designer, even when he worked in England and the United States, where more informal styles prevailed. In 1958, he won one of English gardening’s highest honours, a gold medal at the Royal Horticultural Society’s Chelsea Flower Show, for a kitchen garden with French details, its vegetable beds framed by boxwood hedges. Ernestine Carter of The Sunday Times praised the garden’s ‘delicate formality’. Later, for Manhattan’s Frick Collection, Page made a courtyard with neat flowerbeds, a few trees and a reflecting pool. A New York Times writer described it as an ‘exquisite little classical garden’, a museum piece in its own right.

Deeper than English informality or French formality, the Islamic tradition was Page’s greatest source of inspiration

While these observers celebrated Page’s works, they tended to cast him as a conservative artist, defending classical formality in an informal age. But this is a misreading. Page dismissed the whole question of formality and informality as a shallow one of secondary significance. ‘The degree of formality you will use will depend on the character of the house and the idiom of the landscape,’ he advised. The formal clipping of a hedge or the informal curve of a flower bed were just ‘superficialities’. The real art of design was the deeper structure – form as shape, not affectations of formality. Or, as Page put it: ‘I like gardens with good bones.’

The garden at the Frick Collection in Manhattan. Photo courtesy of Wally Gobetz/Flickr

He found his favourite kind of bones in southern Spain, near Malaga airport, when he went to see ‘a fine elaborate late 17th- or early 18th-century “Italian” garden of paved terraces, balustraded stairways, fountains and a quantity of statues.’ While Page appreciated these details, he ‘sensed that the site of both house and garden had been carefully chosen (as only the Moors knew how), and I set out to explore the less frequented areas of the garden.’ His hunch proved right, and ‘sure enough, I found an octagonal fountain of the 14th century falling to pieces in a cabbage patch and a long canal-like reservoir.’ The crucial thing was not the Italian ornamentation; it was the design below.

Deeper than English informality or French formality, the Islamic tradition that had made its way into Europe from North Africa was Page’s greatest source of inspiration. In it, he found a mystical view of garden-making as the art of bringing each site into harmony with itself and its environment – and so with the universe. This philosophy, as Page understood it, did not require him to imitate the surface details of ‘Moorish’ gardens. It allowed him to be flexible about style, using formal or informal touches as the site required. It also allowed him to salvage, rather than demolish, the best materials from his sites.

But there was a dark irony at the heart of Page’s career: very often, he worked for clients whose wealth came from the same mass-marketed consumer industries whose effects Page criticised so scornfully. His garden at Villa Silvio Pellico was funded by the Fiat automobile manufacturing fortune. His final project would be a sculpture garden for the world headquarters of PepsiCo. Page’s clients created and profited from the degraded suburban landscape; in his elegant sanctuaries, they enjoyed the privilege of retreating from it. What began as an ascetic reaction against consumer capitalism was now on the market as a luxury experience.

In the long run, Page’s design ethos became his true product. Clients who hired him were persuaded that his talent went beyond technical competence or a fashionable style. They were dealing with a deep soul whose gardens offered therapeutic – maybe even sacred – atmospheres.

Seen in this light, his legacy is not really elusive after all, nor is it confined to the classical tradition of formal design. We might detect Page’s influence in the orientalist minimalism of lifestyle magazines like Architectural Digest, with their glossy photographs of boutique meditation spas and Silicon Valley ‘Zen’ gardens. But we might also notice surprising resonances between Page’s ethos and the vital, progressive design movements that are actively reimagining gardens for social justice and ecological repair.

In 1985, the year Page died, a young landscape designer named Chris Baines introduced his ‘wildlife garden’ at the Chelsea Flower Show. In the midst of a festival known for elaborate, expensive floral displays, Baines used common, native plants to draw in pollinators and songbirds. Baines had recreated the home garden as an oasis of nature within the sterile expanses of suburbia. It was the sign of a new era, and now, almost four decades later, wild is ‘the word of the moment’, as one magazine writer observed in February 2022. The idea of the wild garden, which once seemed paradoxical, is ‘currently dominating design’.

The formal garden stands for abstract rationality, against the informal garden’s romance and spirituality

Reckoning with climate change and habitat destruction, garden design has begun to focus on sustainability, and some landowners have abandoned conventional gardening altogether. In the UK, Lowther Castle and the Knepp Estate – the kinds of sites that used to hire Page – are working with environmentalists on ‘rewilding’ missions, turning cultivated lands back into biodiverse ecosystems. On a smaller scale, gardener-activists like John Little in England, Mary Reynolds in Ireland and Douglas Tallamy in the US are reimagining home gardens as little wildlife sanctuaries, with biodiversity as their first principle.

Where does all this leave Russell Page? To some ecological gardeners, the classical style that characterises Page’s most famous works has come to represent the colonial, destructive arrogance of the modern West. Critics now describe classical gardens in almost monstrous terms. In Gardening in a Changing World: Plants, People and the Climate Crisis (2022), the English designer Darryl Moore calls them: ‘ostentatious displays of power and conspicuous wealth articulated through the medium of meticulously defined structural planting.’ From this point of view, the formal garden stands for abstract rationality, against the informal garden’s romance and spirituality. The formal garden represents imperial power and wasteful capitalism, as opposed to gentle sweetness.

On the surface, the new experiments in ecological garden-making look nothing like Page’s formal compositions. At the same time, though, in calling for a new ethos, the new designers often echo Page’s spiritual critique of Western culture. In A New Garden Ethic: Cultivating Defiant Compassion for an Uncertain Future (2017), for example, the American garden writer Benjamin Vogt asks readers to ‘open our hearts and minds and rethink beauty – a deeper, functional beauty designed for species and environments other than our own.’

At one level, Page’s story provides a cautionary tale. His career shows how any design ethos, even a spiritual protest against empire and consumer capitalism, can become a kind of branding – distinguishing itself against the ugliness of Western, middle-class excesses only to elevate its own market prestige. To redress our social and ecological crises in a substantial way, garden-making would have to help create open, rather than private, sanctuaries for people and nature on every scale, from rewilded urban lots to sustainably managed state and national conservation areas.

At another level, though, Page’s own work provides resources that might be put to use in new, progressive projects. In fact, one of Page’s own concerns was to help gardeners decide which valuable pieces should be kept, which useless ones discarded, when we are working with a mixed-up site. Page approached his work as a set of restoration projects on long-inhabited properties where, he felt, both ecology and culture had been degraded over time. In the ruins, he looked for salvageable forms, then turned them into new gardens whose futures he did not control.

At the end of his life, in the early 1980s, Page returned to the informal, picturesque style that he had first used at Longleat half a century earlier. His commission was to remodel the sculpture gardens surrounding the PepsiCo offices in Westchester County, New York. When he died of cancer in January 1985, the project was incomplete, but his designs were eventually carried out and, unlike most of Page’s other gardens, this one has been well preserved over time. On a bright, warm day in June, I went by myself to wander through the grounds.

Russell Page’s garden at the PepsiCo offices in Westchester County, New York. All photos by Peter Bond/Flickr

PepsiCo is the global distributor of soft drinks, Taco Bell franchises and Frito-Lay snacks and, as I made my way into the property, I had some uneasy feelings. I was thinking about how Page protested the flattening effects of consumer capitalism, yet worked for this conglomerate that suburbanised the planet. I was wondering whether his design might feel as sterile as an ordinary office park.

A small walkway, or ‘golden path’, led me into a garden of understated beauty. There was a pond in the centre of a green lawn, with a few mature weeping willow trees around its edges, swaying in the breeze. Tucked away in one corner of the larger park, I came upon Page’s small, elegant formal garden, where water lilies floated on rectangular pools. The overall impression was serene, but it was not lifeless. I recognised the sensibility that I first encountered in Page’s writing, and I thought again that there are some useful things to be taken from his work, despite its troubling complicities.

At its best, Page’s thinking leads beyond the oversimple debate between formality and informality, the artist’s composition and the ecosystem’s thrum. In one manuscript fragment, quoted in Barton’s thesis, Page pictured gardens as ‘ordered three-dimensional patterns fixed in time and space, through which flows nature, the vegetable world, proliferation, growing, dying, budding, flowering and seeding, impermanent undisciplined and usually the antithesis of order.’ He never wanted to dominate the earth by imposing abstract order on its thorny funk. He loved both art and plants alike with what he called his ‘verdant heart’. To a vision of the landscape’s future, he offers up a rebel spirit and an artist’s eye.

## The exam that broke society

Keju, China’s incredibly difficult civil service test, strengthened the state at the cost of freedom and creativity

This essay is adapted from the book The Rise and Fall of the EAST: How Exam, Autocracy, Stability and Technology Brought China Success, and Why They Might Lead to its Decline (2023) by Yasheng Huang.

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Edited bySam Haselby

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On 7 and 8 June 2023, close to 13 million high-school students in China sat for the world’s most gruelling college entrance exam. ‘Imagine,’ wrote a Singapore journalist, ‘the SAT, ACT, and all of your AP tests rolled into two days. That’s Gao Kao, or “higher education exam”.’ In 2023, almost 2.6 million applied to sit China’s civil service exam to compete for only 37,100 slots.

Gao Kao and China’s civil service exam trace their origin to, and are modelled on, an ancient Chinese institution, Keju, the imperial civil service exam established by the Sui Dynasty (581-618). It can be translated as ‘subject recommendation’. Toward the end of its reign, the Qing dynasty (1644-1911) abolished it in 1905 as part of its effort to reform and modernise the Chinese system. Until then, Keju had been the principal recruitment route for imperial bureaucracy. Keju reached its apex during the Ming dynasty (1368-1644). All the prime ministers but one came through the Keju route and many of them were ranked at the very top in their exam cohort.

Keju was sheer memorisation. Testing was based primarily on the Confucian classics. And there was a lot to memorise. There were some 400,000 characters and phrases in the Confucian classics, according to Benjamin Elman’s book A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China (2000). Preparation for the Keju began early. Boys aged as young as three to five began to practise their memorisation drills. After the immediate environs of their families, Keju was their first exposure to the world. Keju, which was open only to the male gender, was fiercely competitive. Using figures provided by Elman, during the Ming dynasty, 1 million regularly took the qualifying tests and, of these, eventually about 400 would make it to the final Jinshi round. Passing the first tier of Keju, known as the provincial exam, was a lot easier – working out to be 4 per cent on average during the Ming. Still, this was more cut-throat than getting into Harvard in most years.

The prestige of Keju was such that even an emperor coveted its bona fides. According to a legend, an emperor in the late Tang dynasty (618-907) hung on the wall of an imperial palace a wooden tablet proudly displaying his Keju degree – only it was fake. The emperor had it made for himself. This credentialism pervades officialdom today. Many Chinese government officials claim PhD degrees – earned or otherwise – on their résumés.

Much of the academic literature focuses on the meritocracy of Keju. The path-breaking book in this genre is Ping-ti Ho’s The Ladder of Success in Imperial China (1962). One of his observations is eye catching: more than half of those who obtained the Juren degree were first generation: ie, none of their ancestors had ever attained a Juren status. (Juren was, at the time, the first degree granted in the three-tiered hierarchy of Keju.) More recent literature demonstrates the political effects of Keju. In 1905, the Qing dynasty abolished Keju, dashing the aspirations of millions and sparking regional rebellions that eventually toppled China’s last imperial regime in 1911.

Keju cultivated and imposed the values of deference to authority and collectivism

The political dimension of Keju goes far beyond its meritocracy and its connection to the 1911 republican revolution. For an institution that had such deep penetration, both cross-sectionally in society and across time in history, Keju was all encompassing, laying claims to the time, effort and cognitive investment of a significant swathe of the male Chinese population. It was a state institution designed to augment the state’s own power and capabilities. Directly, the state monopolised the very best human capital; indirectly, the state deprived society of access to talent and pre-empted organised religion, commerce and the intelligentsia. Keju anchored Chinese autocracy.

Many young Chinese people are pictured in a long line outside an examination centre in a commercial district

Candidates queue for the national civil service examination on 27 March 2021 in Taiyuan, Shanxi province, China. Photo by Wu Junjie/China News Service via Getty

The impact of Keju is still felt today, not only in the form and practice of Gao Kao and the civil service exam but also because Keju incubated values and work ethics. Today, Chinese minds still bear its imprint. For one, Keju elevated the value of education and we see this effect today. A 2020 study shows that, for every doubling of successful Keju candidates per 10,000 of the population in the Ming-Qing period, there was a 6.9 per cent increase in years of schooling in 2010. The Keju exams loom as part of China’s human capital formation today, but they also cultivated and imposed the values of deference to authority and collectivism that the Chinese Communist Party has reaped richly for its rule and legitimacy.

But isn’t it the case that the West – Prussia, then the United Kingdom and the United States – all had their own civil service exams? How is it possible that a strong bureaucracy complemented rather than supplanted political and religious pluralisms in the West?

China and the West bureaucratised under an entirely different sequential order and under different contextual conditions, and these differences entail substantial implications for the subsequent political development. The civil service in the West was not a single-platform institution in the way that Keju was. There was a military civil service, a civil service for foreign affairs, for forestry, etc, etc. Multiple platforms of bureaucratic recruitment competed with one another and, collectively, they competed with other channels of mobility, such as the political parties and commerce. In the US, the Pendleton Act of 1883 removed the power of Congress and the political parties to control civil service appointments. Before the 1883 Act, federal appointees returned a portion of their salaries to the party that had appointed them. Civil service never replaced Congress or political parties in toto, as witnessed by the fact that Congress today wields enormous power over the bureaucracy, including the power of the purse that funds its operation.

Another difference – and this is a big one – is timing. In the 19th century, the US introduced bureaucracy when ‘[t]he two institutions of constraint, the rule of law and accountability, were the most highly developed,’ as Francis Fukuyama writes in Political Order and Political Decay (2014). The state in the US and the UK was already ‘a Shackled Leviathan’, to use the words of Daron Acemoglu and James A Robinson in their influential book, The Narrow Corridor (2020). The sequential order ran from politics to bureaucracy, not as in China from bureaucracy to politics. In the West, society was vibrant long before the state ramped up its administrative capacity. The rule of law, the principle of accountability, and the powers of the legislature and the political parties were already firmly entrenched. Yes, the Leviathan was shackled by society, but different parts of the Leviathan shackled each other. Bureaucracy in the US formed and gained power only under a myriad of constraints and contending forces, rather than the socioeconomic tabula rasa that greeted the arrival of Chinese bureaucracy.

The civil service in the UK and the US was ensconced in pluralistic societies that enjoyed a degree of religious freedom and a modicum of emergent electoral democracy. A world of competing forces and constraints attended the arrival of bureaucracy, even helped to create it. Government bureaucracy competed in some situations or complemented in others with church, universities, commerce and other social groups for human capital, legitimacy and resources. For political development, birth order really matters.

In his book Strong Societies and Weak States (1988), Joel S Migdal identifies a common problem in the developing world – the struggle of the state to acquire autonomy and capabilities. China, through history and today, is exactly the opposite. The state dominates society. Vladimir Putin’s Russia is autocratic but his autocracy pales in comparison with that of China’s president Xi Jinping. Harassed and targeted by the state, opposition parties are still legal and tenuously legitimate in Russia and some of Putin’s critics command a sizeable following. Even the power to commit violence – war fighting – was outsourced to a private force, the mercenaries led by Yevgeny Prigozhin, an arrangement not even remotely conceivable in China.

An anxious looking young woman and a young man are reading notebooks or textbooks outside an examination hall

Last-minute revision before the 2010 civil service examination in Hefei, Anhui province, China. Photo AFP/Getty

Since 2013, against the increasingly dictatorial Xi, there have been two prominent critics of the president and both were dispensed with summarily. Unlike Putin who has to rely on extra-legal means to silence his critics, suggesting some formal constraints on him, Xi directed the full apparatus of the Chinese state after his critics. The Chinese court sentenced the businessman Ren Zhiqiang to 18 years in prison, and Tsinghua University promptly fired Xu Zhangrun, a law professor who wrote an open letter criticising Xi. Standing forlornly by themselves, neither Ren nor Xu commanded any formal political organisations behind them. In 2022, the Chinese regime put almost 400 million people under some sort of COVID-19 lockdown, a feat that is unimaginable in any other country.

An ultimate autocracy is one that reigns without society. Society shackles the state in many ways. One is ex ante: it checks and balances the actions of the state. The other is ex post. A strong society provides an outside option to those inside the state. Sometimes, this is derisively described as ‘a revolving door’, but it may also have the positive function of checking the power of the state. State functionaries can object to state actions by voting with their feet, as many US civil servants did during the Donald Trump administration, and thereby drain the state of the valuable human capital it needs to function and operate. A strong society raises the opportunity costs for the state to recruit human capital but such a receptor function of society has never existed at scale in imperial China nor today, thanks – in large part, I would argue – to Keju.

Keju was so precocious that it pre-empted and displaced an emergent society. Meritocracy empowered the Chinese state at a time when society was still at an embryonic stage. Massive resources and administrative manpower were poured into Keju such that it completely eclipsed all other channels of upward mobility that could have emerged. In that sense, the celebration by many of Keju’s meritocracy misses the bigger picture of Chinese history. It is a view of a tree rather than of a forest. The crowding-out effect of Keju is captured succinctly in a book from the late 19th century:

Since the introduction of the examination system … scholars have forsaken their studies, peasants their ploughs, artisans their crafts, and merchants their trades; all have turned their attention to but one thing – government office. This is because the official has all the combined advantages of the four without requiring their necessary toil …

This is the larger impact of Keju. Its impressive bureaucratic mobility demolished all other mobility channels and possibilities. Keju was an anti-mobility mobility channel. It packed all the upward mobility within one channel – that of the state. Society was crowded out, and over time, due to its deficient access to quality human capital, it atrophied. This is the root of the power of Chinese autocracy and, I would argue, it is a historical development that is unique to China and explains the awesome power of Chinese autocracy.

China has legions of intellectuals, but it is bereft of an intelligentsia

Take intellectuals as an example. Keju inculcated literacy and helped create a vibrant book readership. Book ownership was widespread as early as the Ming dynasty. ‘More books were available,’ writes Timothy Brook in The Troubled Empire (2010), ‘and more people read and owned more books, in the late Ming than at any earlier time in history, anywhere in the world.’ Brook sums up the impressions of Jesuits visiting China: ‘More surprising, perhaps, is that complete illiterates may well have been a minority in the late Ming.’

But a striking fact is that no organised intelligentsia of any significant size and visibility ever emerged in imperial China. There were no Chinese equivalents of the Royal Society in Britain or the many learned societies in France. One that left a mark is the Donglin Academy, a private discussion forum founded in 1111 by intellectuals of the Song dynasty (960-1279). The academy lasted as long as its founders’ lifespan and vanished into obscurity after their expiry. It was revived in 1604 during the reign of the Wanli emperor (1573-1620), but it operated as a political rather than an intellectual force. The scholar-officials formed a Donglin Faction, later brutally put down by the powerful eunuchs of the Ming court. The grand total of the second life of the Donglin Academy is 21 years, from 1604 to 1625.

The term ‘scholar official’ is of Chinese coinage and it is evocative of China’s lacuna of intellectuals as an institutionalised establishment. Compare that situation with Tsarist Russia, another autocracy. Russians coined the term ‘intelligentsia’ – intellectuals as a class – and Russian intellectuals have a long tradition of standing apart from and defining their identity as separate to the state. China has legions of intellectuals, but it is bereft of an intelligentsia.

Prior to Keju and even during the early centuries of Keju, China had a plurality of upward mobility. Within bureaucracy, officials were appointed through nepotism, family ties, heredity and recommendations. Commerce, while always curtailed, was a nascent force, promising to burst forward. The Song dynasty experienced a vibrant development of commerce and a market economy. Although Confucianism was always the first among equals, other ideologies, such as Legalism, Daoism and Buddhism, cohabitated with Confucianism and vied with one another for the Chinese population’s attention and adherence.

But these societal forces were too nascent and too embryonic by the time Keju arrived and matured. They had yet to acquire their own unique identity, significant organisation and autonomous agency. In imperial China, there never was a level playing field between state and society, and over nearly 1,500 years, Keju further deprived the congenitally deficient society of its oxygen – human capital. Fukuyama is right to assert that the Chinese state was precocious, but it was precocious in a particular fashion: its precocity contrasted sharply with the immaturity of Chinese society.

The most direct way Keju decimated Chinese society is through talent monopoly but there were others. Keju also monopolised the time and mental energy of its candidates. Keju was not a one-shot deal. A candidate could take the test multiple times. In a dataset that has information on the 11,706 Keju candidates during the Ming dynasty, the average age passing the final stage of Keju was 32, approaching middle age at a time when average life expectancy was much lower than today. The oldest in the dataset was was probably Gui Youguang (1506-1571). Before passing the provincial examination in 1540 at the youngish age of 34, Gui had already failed it on six occasions. He then proceeded to toil for more than 24 years of his life and finally attained his Jinshi degree in 1565, although ranking near the bottom of his class and at the ripe age of 59. Unfortunately, he did not bask in his exalted status for long, as he died aged 65. For him, and many others, Keju was a life-long endeavour.

A man peers from a long line of cells constructed to ensure privacy during examination conditions. It is an old stereoscope pictur

View of the examination cells in Canton. Library of Congress

A central path is flanked by rows of examination cells

Examination hall in Canton. Library of Congress

Hundreds of examination cells spread before the eye in this aerial view of an old examination centre

Jiangnan imperial examination centre, Nanjing, c1913. Courtesy Historical Photos of China

The Keju curriculum was formidable and required memorising close to 400,000 characters. Is there spare residual energy, capacity and curiosity left to pursue other mentally taxing activities, such as ideation of new thoughts, new politics, and discoveries of natural phenomena? In my book The Rise and Fall of the EAST (2023), I show that Chinese technology began to stagnate as Keju gained dominance. The brain power that ended up in the state did not flow to Chinese society, the economy or human creativity.

Mental energy aside, the values drilled deeply into Keju candidates were pro-autocracy and authoritarian. Keju legitimates statism. Boys as young as three or four began to practise writing characters that were meant to instil admiration of, and devotion to, the ideas and teachings of the master – Confucius – which would eventually be tested on Keju. By the Ming dynasty, the initial plurality of the Keju subjects gave way to one subject only, Confucianism – ‘knowledge of classics, stereotyped theories of administration, and literary attainments’.

Autocracy and Keju became ever more intimately intertwined

Imagine repeated exposures to the statist values at that tender age, producing what psychologists call ‘an imprinting effect’. The autocratic values were incubated in substance but also by the format of Keju; this was standardised testing par excellence. When Keju was first established, candidates were tested on a wide range of subject matters but, after the Song dynasty, the Keju curriculum became progressively stratified and exceedingly narrow. Candidates were required to fill in the blanks with missing words or phrases in excerpted texts from the Confucian classics. The Yuan dynasty (1271-1368) narrowed the Keju curriculum further. Only a streamlined version of annotations of Confucian classics was allowed, the so-called Neo-Confucianism, which was the brainchild of the great Confucian scholar Zhu Xi (1130-1200) of the Song dynasty.

Neo-Confucianism is a pared-down version of classical Confucianism, and it strips away some of the moral veneer of its classical predecessor. Summarising a common view among historians, Peter K Bol observes in Neo-Confucianism in History (2010) that this version of Confucianism ‘provided a justification for seeking external authority in the ruler’ and stipulated the responsibility for transforming the world as that of the emperor alone. The Neo-Confucianist Keju curriculum was rigid, narrow and absolutist, and was single-minded in its advocacy of a hierarchical order – subordination to the ruler, to the elderly, and to the male gender. No scope for scepticism and ambiguity was allowed. Autocracy and Keju thus became ever more intimately intertwined.

There was, however, a massive operational advantage to the Neo-Confucianist curriculum: it standardised everything. Standardisation abhors nuance and the evaluations became more straightforward as the baseline comparison was more clearly delineated. There was objectivity, even if the objectivity was a manufactured artefact. The Chinese invented the modern state and meritocracy, but above all the Chinese invented specialised standardised testing – the memorisation, cognitive inclination and frame of references of an exceedingly narrow ideology.

Ming standardised Keju further: it enforced a highly scripted essay format, known as the ‘eight-legged essay’, or baguwen in Chinese (八股文), to which every Keju candidate had to adhere. A ‘leg’ here refers to each section of an essay, with a Keju essay requiring eight sections: 1) breaking open the topic; 2) receiving the topic; 3) beginning the discussion; 4) the initial leg; 5) the transition leg; 6) the middle leg; 7) the later leg; and 8) conclusion. The eight-legged essay fixed more than the aggregate structure of exposition. The specifications were granular and detailed. For example, the number of phrases was specified in each of the sections and the entire essay required expressions in paired sentences – a minimum of six paired sentences, up to a maximum of 12. The key contribution of the eight-legged essay is that it packed information into a pre-set presentational format.

Standardisation was designed to scale the Keju system and it succeeded brilliantly in that regard, but it had a devastating effect on expositional freedom and human creativity. All elements of subjectivity and judgment were taken out. In his book Traditional Government in Imperial China (1982), the historian Ch’ien Mu describes the ‘eight-legged essay’ as ‘the greatest destroyer of human talent’.

A bane to human creativity was a boon to autocracy. Standardised testing was conducive to authoritarianism. In his book Who’s Afraid of the Big Bad Dragon? (2014), Yong Zhao, professor at the School of Education of the University of Kansas, notes a natural compatibility between authoritarianism and standardised testing. Authoritarianism, he writes, ‘sees education as a way to instil in all students the same knowledge and skills deemed valuable by the authority.’ The standardised tests appeal to an authoritative body for correct answers; as Zhao said in an interview for the US National Education Policy Center, the tests ‘force students to comply with the answers or the way of thinking that the authority wants.’ The direction of deference is automatically established: ‘Then you hold the students, the teachers and, to a lesser extent, the parents accountable for being able to get the answers that the authority wants and to show that they have mastered the skills and the knowledge and possibly even the beliefs that the authority wants.’

Confucianism, thus, functioned as an equivalent of the abstruse and arcane vocabulary of the SAT

In his book The WEIRDest People in the World (2020), Joseph Henrich posited that the West prospered because of its early lead in literacy. Yet the substantial Keju literacy produced none of the liberalising effects on Chinese ideas, economy or society. The literacy that Henrich had in mind was a particular kind of literacy – Protestant literacy – and the contrast with Keju literacy could not have been sharper. Keju literacy was drilled and practised in classical and highly stratified Chinese, the language of the imperial court rather than the language of the masses, in sharp contrast to Protestant literacy. Protestant literacy empowered personal agency by embracing and spreading vernaculars of the masses. Henrich’s liberalising ‘WEIRD’ effect – Western, educated, industrialised, rich and democratic – was a byproduct of Protestant literacy. It is no accident that Keju literacy produced an opposite effect.

Why was there such a close affinity between Keju and Confucianism? The answer is not obvious. Ancient China boasted other great ideologies and traditions, such as Daoism, Mohism and Legalism, but they were completely absent in the Keju curriculum. This ideological single-mindedness of Keju is puzzling and it is puzzling still considering the following: in my book, I document that several emperors who played an instrumental role in inventing and developing Keju were not Confucianists themselves.

The answer may lie in an operational imperative of Keju. Standardised testing is necessary when you want to scale the evaluation. Subjective evaluations, such as relying on reputation, recommendations and interviews, are feasible when the number of candidates under evaluation is small. For example, the Big Three colleges in the US – Harvard, Yale and Princeton – began to embrace the SAT (the standardised test for college admissions) when they started recruiting beyond their traditional, narrow socioeconomic group – the white Anglo-Saxon Protestants (WASPs) in the elite private schools of the east coast. The Chinese emperors made the same decision when they expanded bureaucratic recruitment beyond the nobility and wealthy elites. Standardising and constricting the Keju curriculum were not an optional luxury; it was a necessity to scale Keju.

Confucianism offered an operational advantage. It is textually rich; the verbiage is massive, and the pontifications are incredibly involved, not unlike the verbal portion of the SAT. As noted before, there are approximately 400,000 characters and phrases in the Confucian classics. Using a website, Chinese Text Project, ‘an online open-access digital library that makes pre-modern Chinese texts available to readers and researchers all around the world’, I found that among the classical texts created before the Han dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE) Confucianism is paragraphically the richest, with 11,184 paragraphs. No other ideologies come remotely close. Legalism has 1,783 paragraphs; Daoism has 1,161 paragraphs, and Mohism has 915 paragraphs. Confucianism, thus, functioned as an equivalent of the abstruse and arcane vocabulary of the SAT, and it was most suited for screening and selecting the desired human capital from a large pool of candidates.

Is it at all possible that Keju successfully anchored and shaped the nature of the Chinese autocracy because of this accidental feature of Confucianism and on account of an operational technicality? Let’s pause, savour and ponder for a moment the momentous implications of this proposition.

## Praying in shoes

The Sunni movement of Salafism was born at the beginning of the 20th century, with the goal of modelling life on the 7th

Egyptian Salafis listen to a speech by a presidential candidate in 2012. Photo by Moises Saman/Magnum Photos

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There are tens of millions of Salafis today, male and female, and their ranks stretch from the Middle East and South Asia to western Europe and the United States. Members of this Sunni Islamic movement are bound by shared principles, including a literalist theological approach regarding God’s nature and a commitment to deriving all law from Islam’s holy text (the Quran) and the authoritative record of the Prophet Muhammad’s life (the Sunna). These shared principles manifest not merely in a comprehensive project of piety that defines these men and women’s lives, but also in a set of daily practices that visually distinguish Salafis not only from non-Muslims but also from fellow Muslims.

If one knows what to look for, one can identify a Salafi by sight. Salafi facial hair comprises a trimmed moustache and a beard that is a fist long, at minimum; Salafis dress in pants or robes that are shortened to the ankle; and Salafi social spaces are defined by separation of men and women. If one were to venture into a mosque, one could identify (some) Salafis by the distinctive practice of praying in shoes, which stands in contrast to the practice of the vast majority of Muslims, who pray barefoot (and have done so for centuries). Collectively, these practices enable Salafis to create a cultural boundary between themselves and other Muslims and non-Muslims with whom they disagree on core issues.

It is easy to dismiss bodily practices such as these as secondary or unimportant. But for Salafis, they are not merely powerful symbols of belonging but a key means of orienting themselves to God in daily life. Salafis, inspired by the theological vision of Ibn Taymiyya, a 13th-century scholar from Damascus in Syria, seek to live lives in which every action is oriented towards worship of God. The power of this vision derives in part from its challenge: to even aspire to live life in such a manner, one must be constantly on guard, ever vigilant not merely to influences from outside the Salafi community but also to one’s material and bodily desires. For some Salafis, this theological approach can also create practical problems when living under secular states. For example, does payment of taxes to a state that doesn’t rule by Islamic law – whether in the Middle East and South Asia or the West – constitute a rejection of God’s sovereignty over material wealth? Can men serve in the armed forces of a country that requires a particular dress code and no facial hair? And what should one do in the case that conscription necessitates service in the armed forces? These are but a few of the questions that Salafis face in seeking to live their theological commitments.

This description is likely not what you expected from an article on Salafism. When the term ‘Salafi’ is used, many in the US think of Osama bin Laden, the founder and late leader of al-Qaeda. And it is quite possible that many of those who think of Bin Laden when they hear this term also know a significant amount regarding his goals (global Jihad), his methods (attacks on civilians and military alike), his disdain for local Arab regimes (particularly Saudi Arabia) and even his death in May 2011 in a compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan. And, as not only al-Qaeda but also ISIS have challenged the international order over the past two decades, the common answer to explain this trajectory has been that these groups model themselves after the first three generations of the Muslim community, known as the ‘Pious Ancestors’ (al-Salaf al-Salih).

These associations are not wrong but they are incomplete. Bin Laden was certainly a prominent representative of Salafi-Jihadism, but Salafi-Jihadism is a minority within the broader Salafi movement. Similarly, it is correct that Salafis take the first three generations of the Muslim community as a model yet, in doing so, they are joined by billions of Muslims across the world of vastly different views. And while it would be accurate to note that Salafis pattern themselves after the Prophet Muhammad’s journey – first his preaching in Mecca and then a full-blown project fusing religion and politics in Medina – an aspiration to reproduce this model is not the same as reproducing it. Put differently, while Salafis take inspiration from the 7th century, they emerged in the 20th century.

Instead of assuming that Salafism is a reproduction of the 7th century and a violent one at that, we might begin in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In the shadow of French and British colonial occupation, Muslims from Cairo to Calcutta debated a basic question: who in the Muslim community should have authority? For a millennium, the answer to that question lay with the traditional schools of Islamic jurisprudence, known as the madhhabs. Scholars within these schools – which were not brick-and-mortar buildings but rather intellectual and social networks that knit together scholars across vast geographic distances – had long served as crucial mediators. They not only bridged the gap between lay Muslims and divine revelation and the Prophetic model, but also between the ruler and ruled. In the face of unprecedented political, social and economic challenges introduced by colonialism, however, Muslim reformers challenged the centrality of madhhab scholars.

These reformers were otherwise a highly diverse group who had little in common except shared opposition to the madhhab system. They came from Iran (Jamal al-Din al-Afghani), Egypt (Muhammad ʿAbduh), Syria (Jamal al-Din al-Qasimi and Muhammad Rashid Rida), and even Crimea (Ismaʿil bey Gaspıralı). Some such as ʿAbduh, Gaspıralı and Al-Qasimi sought change through education, while others such as Al-Afghani and Rida turned to Islam as a powerful source of solidarity to mobilise Muslims against colonial occupation. All, however, embraced the power of the written word to speak to Muslim audiences within and beyond their country of origin and, in doing so, modelled an understanding of a global Islamic community that depended on scholars and laymen alike. All were also concerned with an interlocking set of questions: what did it mean to preserve the Islamic tradition in the shadow of modernity? How could Muslims compete with Europe’s intellectual, political and economic might that manifested itself in colonial rule over Muslim-majority lands? Could the Ottoman Caliphate, which had stood for 500 years, be saved and, in doing so, offer a counterweight to colonial interference? To answer these questions, all proposed returning to Islam’s two ‘pure’ sources: the Quran and the Sunna.

The anti-madhhab reformers of the turn of the 20th century were hardly the first Muslim thinkers to reckon with the perceived drifting of Muslims from their foundational model of 7th-century Medina. Most notably, Muhammad Ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab and Muhammad al-Shawkani, two leading reformers of 18th- and 19th-century Arabia, sought to return Muslims to their two core sources. But Ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab and Al-Shawkani undertook reform without need to consider the challenge of European colonialism. Instead, they placed themselves within a longer history of revival and reform. These two reformers, however, modelled a powerful rejection of the status quo through religious purity from which Salafis would draw inspiration.

Salafis believe that their theological approach is the only valid way to worship God

Reformers from the turn of the 20th century, such as ʿAbduh and Rida, were leading religious authorities of their day, but they were not Salafis. They were united by an objection to the centuries-old system of Islamic law by which scholars needed to claim affiliation with a given madhhab and follow the prior authoritative rulings of that school. According to these reformers, the problem with the madhhab system was not simply that it was intellectually stagnant but that it was unsuited to handle the political, economic and cultural challenge faced by Muslims at this time. Their rejection of the madhhab system’s intellectual methods was also a political manoeuvre: Islamic reformists such as ʿAbduh, Rida and others sought to undermine their competitors’ base of political and social influence so that they could take their place.

In the 1920s and ’30s, Salafism emerged as part of the Islamic reformist camp. As they did so, Salafis brought together two previously independent positions: a literalist approach to God’s nature and attributes preserved in the Hanbali school, one of the four Sunni schools of law; and the rejection of the madhhabs’ authoritative positions in favour of direct recourse to the Quran and the Sunna. While theology might appear to be an unlikely source of distinction for a world-making project, Salafis believe that their theological approach is the only valid way to worship God.

The Salafi theological and legal position was not merely a view of theological or legal truth but also a claim to authority and authenticity. In the shadow of the radical changes of the 19th and 20th centuries – a period during which Muslims had lost control over their lands, in which the Ottoman Caliphate had fallen, and in which European colonial penetration had reshaped the political and economic backbone of the Middle East and South Asia – they argued that Muslims had lost their connection to Islam’s founding model. While such an accusation highlighted the rise of secular nationalism in Muslim-majority lands, it also applied to other pious Muslims who also prized Islam’s golden period, such as the premier Islamist movement of the time, the Muslim Brotherhood. In short, the Salafi claim was (and is) that their commitment to modelling themselves after the early Muslim community of 7th-century Arabia makes them the most authentic and thus legitimate claimants to Islamic leadership. Just as importantly, the repeated claim that Salafis were subject to God’s authority only in countries whose leaders and populations were overwhelmingly Muslim was a clear rebuke of the authority of secular nationalist states that had arisen following the end of colonial rule.

It is easy to think of Salafism as a throwback to the 7th century. And indeed, this is a core aspect of Salafism’s appeal: a return to the basics, pure and uncorrupted. But aspiring to return to Islam’s founding moment is very different from actually doing so. And, as Salafis sought to replicate this ideal model, they were deeply shaped by challenges of European rule and Western cultural influence, on the one hand, and the competing ambitions of fellow Muslims to chart a new direction, on the other. As Salafism emerged in the 1930s, paths to political power were blocked and the battle was to be found in society, with secular-nationalists and Islamists competing to offer distinct visions of the past and future alike. These bodily practices were important because they were a key site at which Muslim men and women laid claim to politics in daily life.

In my recent book, In the Shade of the Sunna: Salafi Piety in the 20th-Century Middle East (2022), I charted the history of Salafi efforts to reshape society with a particular focus on Egypt. Between roughly 1940 and 1950, Egyptian Salafis came to focus on a largely forgotten practice: praying in shoes. While Muslims had once prayed in shoes – and the record of the Sunna suggests that the Prophet Muhammad and His Companions did so – this practice had declined with Islam’s emergence as an urban civilisation (and the establishment of ornate mosques with plush carpets). Here, for Salafis, was an opportunity: a practice with clear precedent in Islam’s core sources that would distinguish Salafis from other Muslims in mosques. The fall of praying in shoes, however, was as rapid as its rise. In the 1950s, the costs of religious distinctiveness grew under the secular authoritarianism of Egypt’s president Gamal Abdel Nasser and the latter’s crackdown on the Salafis’ Islamist competitor, the Muslim Brotherhood. Instead of insisting dogmatically on this project irrespective of the costs, Salafis quickly marginalised it and did not return to discussing this style of prayer for another four decades.

The emergence of Salafi facial hair in the 1980s was no more straightforward. Muslim men had long worn substantial beards as statements of religious piety and masculinity alike. What Salafis needed, then, was a model of facial hair that could distinguish them from other Muslims and make a plausible claim to be derived from the Quran and the Sunna. The eventual result could certainly cite these sources, particularly the Prophet Muhammad’s command to Muslim men to grow a beard and trim the moustache. Just as importantly, Salafis needed a practice that would differentiate them from competing Islamic institutions and movements – many of whom wore beards – as well as from their secular-nationalist competitors who paired a shaved face with a moustache.

Suddenly, flaunting was not a prohibition against immodest female conduct but a call to gender segregation

This project pivoted on a seemingly secondary source: a record of the actions of the Prophet Muhammad’s companion, ʿAbd Allah ibn ʿUmar, the son of the second Caliph, ʿUmar ibn al-Khattab. What made the Salafi choice to cite Ibn Umar’s trimming his beard to a minimum length of a fist so striking, however, was that this practice was performed in a specific context: engagement in the Hajj or ʿUmra pilgrimages to Mecca. And, just as strikingly, the Muslim Brotherhood had beaten the Salafis to the punch on this hadith report: in the early 1940s, a leading figure in the Muslim Brotherhood, Sayyid Sabiq, had cited the Ibn Umar report to justify the closely trimmed beard sported by the organisation’s founder, Hassan al-Banna. Put differently, this was a case in which the same hadith report was cited to support radically different positions. Just as importantly, a core aspect of Salafism’s appeal is that the Quran and the Sunna are essentially self-explanatory and that Salafis can avoid being corrupted by un-Islamic influences through exclusive reliance on these sources. The fact that the history of the emergence of distinctly Salafi facial hair stretched across four decades suggests that this model was far from self-explanatory.

At other times, the practice in question was decidedly novel. While Salafis cited the Islamic society of 7th-century Medina as a model, they could not point to any proof of texts from the Quran or the Sunna that prohibited gender mixing or required gender segregation. Previously, when it came to the question of gender relations, scholars of Islamic law had been primarily concerned with preventing extramarital sex. Indeed, to the extent that gender segregation existed in Islamic history, it was difficult to point to examples beyond the mosque, where men and women had long prayed in separate sections. Thus, to make the case, Salafis in the 1970s had to discover a new interpretation for an old source, specifically the Quranic prohibition against women acting in a manner designed to draw sexual attention (known as flaunting themselves, or tabarruj).

The prohibition against flaunting was clear and derived from the 33rd verse of the 33rd chapter of the Quran, which commanded women, in part, ‘do not flaunt yourselves’ (wa la tabarrajna). Yet, to justify gender segregation, a leading Saudi Salafi scholar, ʿAbd al-ʿAziz ibn Baz (Bin Baz for short) argued that the prohibition against women flaunting was actually a prohibition against men and women mixing. Suddenly, flaunting was not a prohibition against immodest female conduct but rather a thorough call to gender segregation. Here, too, political competition beckoned: at this time, the Muslim Brotherhood, along with its allies in the Islamic student movement, had begun to offer gender-segregated seating on selected public buses and had lobbied for gender segregation in several Egyptian universities. In response to their competitors’ attempt to seize the mantle of public piety, Salafis argued for a stricter and more expansive vision of gender relations.

It is easy to dismiss such bodily practices as ‘secondary’ matters but to do so is to miss how and why Salafis have emerged as powerful shapers of the societies in which they live. In the absence of political power, Salafis seek to shape the societies from which they have emerged and to do so by visibly modelling a commitment to the Prophet Muhammad’s example. Indeed, from Egypt to Syria to Yemen to Saudi Arabia to the Indian subcontinent to Europe and the US, one can find Salafis today adhering to these theological and legal approaches and bodily practices.

While Salafis can be found across the Middle East, South Asia, western Europe and the US, it is difficult to come by firm numbers of adherents. This is partially a function of how Salafis understand themselves: most reject the formation of political parties let alone transnational Jihadist groups and, unlike their Islamist counterparts, do not generally pledge allegiance to a particular organisation. Evidence of popular support for Salafism, however, can sometimes be found when Islamist or so-called Politico Salafis run for office. In Egypt, three Salafi groups, most prominently the Nour party, formed a bloc in the 2011-12 parliamentary elections, receiving more than 7.5 million votes, which represented 27.8 per cent of all votes. Generally, though, the primary community for Salafi men and women is local and informal: the scholars and teachers, male and female, with whom they study at local mosques. Yet, Salafism is not exclusively local: particular Salafi scholars, including deceased figures such as Bin Baz, Muhammad ibn Salih al-ʿUthaymin and Muhammad Nasir al-Din al-Albani, exercised influence on adherents across the world and continue to do so through their writings.

The contemporary Salafi scene is defined by three main contingents: Quietists, Islamists (aka Politicos) and Jihadis. The Quietists believe in obedience to the existing ruler and shy away from any public statements that could be interpreted as criticism. Instead, they offer advice (nasiha) to the ruler in private while pursuing grassroots reform of Muslims’ theological beliefs and ritual life, a focus that Al-Albani termed ‘Purification and Education’. To the extent that Quietist scholars comment on the status quo, they do so exclusively from a ‘religious’ perspective, avoiding any indictments of the political elite. The approach of Quietist scholars to politics, however, should not be understood as apolitical, but rather as a principled view of the dangers of political disorder drawn from the Sunni political tradition. Quietist Salafis avoid political competition and criticism not merely because it is unwise but also because it exaggerates the capacity of the state to rear pious Muslims while necessitating compromise with non-Salafi Muslims such as Islamists of the Muslim Brotherhood. It is only through uncompromising and principled reform of society that a properly Islamic state can arise in the future, and shortcuts to such a state will inevitably be plagued by corruption that renders this project defective.

For Salafi-Jihadis, living under a secular state and paying taxes to it renders a professing Muslim an infidel

By contrast, those Salafis who belong to the Islamist or Politico camp meld a commitment to Salafi theology, law and social practice with a vision of religiopolitical change through explicit critique of the status quo and electoral competition. While they are aware of the Quietist concern with compromise, they reject it in favour of the opportunities offered by state power and an urgent desire to change the status quo. This understanding of religiopolitical change, in turn, is a legacy of the Muslim Brotherhood, particularly the ideas of its founder, Al-Banna. In Saudi Arabia, such Salafis emerged in the 1960s and ’70s under what is known as the ‘Awakening’ (Sahwa) movement, though the Awakening’s political prospects have been severely limited by the restrictions of the Saudi political system. In Egypt, on the other hand, this camp arose in earnest post-2011 to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the transition after the president Hosni Mubarak. Most prominently, a leading Salafi preaching organisation, the Salafi Call (al-Daʿwa al-Salafiyya) in the coastal city of Alexandria formed the Nour political party, which contested parliamentary seats and captured the second largest bloc next to the Muslim Brotherhood’s Freedom and Justice Party. Nour thus retains Salafi views of theology and law, but shares the Muslim Brotherhood’s goal of establishing an Islamic state.

Finally, the Jihadi camp is most prominently represented by groups such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS. Such groups meld Salafi theological and legal positions with a set of political concepts inspired by Sayyid Qutb in the 20th century on the one hand, and the 18th-century Arabian reformer Ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab on the other. In particular, this movement is distinguished by an emphasis on God’s sovereignty (hakimiyya) and declaring other Muslims to be infidels (takfir). Unlike the mainstream Sunni position that only acts of ‘flagrant disbelief’ (kufr bawwah), such as questioning God’s essential oneness, justify such excommunication, Salafi-Jihadis take the view that the mere act of living under the authority of a secular state and paying taxes to it renders a professing Muslim to be an infidel.

The Jihadi movement, however, was not always Salafi: in the 1980s, the vast majority of the fighters (mujahidin) in Afghanistan hailed from varied theological and legal approaches, a situation that would begin to change only in the early 1990s. Put differently, it is not only the case that the vast majority of Salafis are not Jihadis, but also a fact that the Jihadi movement emerges independently from the Salafi movement. By the early 1990s, however, the Jihadi movement had melded Salafism’s theological and legal approaches with an Islamist-inspired revolutionary political ideology and the purist inspiration of Ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab.

Over the past two decades, Salafism has emerged and persisted as a key question of US foreign policy. First with Al-Qaeda’s attacks on the US on 11 September 2001 and then with ISIS’s announcement of a Caliphate in parts of Iraq and Syria in 2014, Salafi-Jihadis became the most visible representatives of this movement. That Salafi-Jihadis would stake this claim is unsurprising, as they benefit from Salafism’s claim to authenticity. Islamists within the Salafi camp, too, have emerged as prominent players in the post-2011 Middle East. Yet, as a matter of both past and present, these two segments of the Salafi movement are a distinct minority compared with the millions of Salafi men and women who adhere to Quietism and live not only in the Middle East and South Asia but also in the US and western Europe.

Given this history, how should we understand Salafism today? Opponents of Salafism of varied political persuasions often frame the movement as ‘backwards’ or as seeking a ‘return to the 7th century’. While the former description partakes in a longstanding tradition of purist (often non-Western) religious movements being assessed negatively along a teleological vision of progress, the latter reproduce the Salafi’s own claim to authenticity, albeit in pejorative fashion. Salafis cannot, any more than any other 20th- or 21st-century movement, return to the past. Instead, like any other movement, they are firmly rooted in the questions and concerns of the present, and engage selectively with past traditions in search of answers to these questions and concerns.

In this regard, Salafis are fundamentally similar to both religious and non-religious movements today. Like their theologically traditionalist and socially conservative counterparts in Judaism and Christianity, they seek to preserve an imagined past in which religion defined the goalposts of social life, in which their religious tradition was dominant, and in which the knowledge about the world that mattered most was that of the scholars. Salafis, however, also have a great deal in common with their secular nationalist competitors, who themselves appeal to a mythological national history, shorn of complication, ambiguity and division, and defined by unifying commitment to a given purpose.

In conclusion, to be a Salafi is to seek to live a model in the 21st century that first emerged in the 7th century. Yet, in doing so, Salafis are aspiring to recreate a golden past, an idealistic aspiration shared among religious and non-religious movements alike. Salafi claims to fundamental difference have persisted as long as they have because the movements’ proponents and opponents share a basic ahistorical view: that Salafism replicates the 7th century. Yet it is only by acknowledging the impossibility of such a claim that we can begin to have a serious public conversation about Salafism and public life in both East and West today.

## Flat places

Whenever I stand in a flat landscape, I feel myself becoming weightless, taken out of my childhood full of painful nothing

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At the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust centre in Slimbridge, Gloucestershire, children zigzagged between the duckponds like bees performing a cryptic private dance. The sound of children screaming makes my hands judder, in half-remembered horror. But today I could bear it, because there were geese to feed; they ran after me, pistoning seed out of my hand and leaving crescents of mud behind. As we left the feeding area, birdwatching hides rose up from the path: dark and shady, with silence inside and long windows giving out on to the marshy flatlands around the Severn Estuary. This was more like it.

Very quietly, we unhooked the wooden window clasps and let the pane down. My friend settled in with his binoculars, while I, chin-on-arms, watched the flat landscape – the low, ironed green, sprinkled with buttercups; the patches of water like gleaming fallen coins. We’d come in summer: a bad time for wetland wildfowl, my friend told me. In wintertime, godwits and dunlin and grey plovers come in from northern Europe and Russia to nibble on Britain’s mudflats. But when the weather gets warmer, many of these nice solid wading birds go back to the Arctic Circle, and leave Britain’s flat landscapes to themselves. That was OK with me. I was really here for the bare, stretched horizons of the wetlands. The flat places with nothing much to look at.

So I looked. And gradually the noise in my head got quieter. It always does, when I’m in a flat place. Something in me stills and lines up with the horizon.

Flat places are the ground that my mind is built upon. Wetlands, fenlands, stretches of shingle: I never get tired of their clear, straight horizons. Whenever I stand in a flat landscape, I feel myself becoming weightless. Without mountains or hills, there’s nothing to catch on my vision, or distract me. I’m freed from hindrance. I could rise up, I think, into the air and float.

This isn’t a popular view, I know. I’m aware that people often find flat landscapes alienating. They can seem bleak, boring, even terrifying, because there’s nowhere to hide, and everyone can see you for miles. There’s no landmark to fix your gaze upon, and this makes it difficult to orientate yourself. That’s why people tend to prefer breathtaking mountains or lush forests or plunging valleys. Scenes with texture, that steer your vision comfortingly as you move from detailed foreground to rising background. People know where they are in varied, hilly landscapes. And they know who they are.

The experience of elation or awe in the face of a mountain is as old as literature. Gods lived on Mount Olympus, in ancient Greece. The Romantic poets climbed Mont Blanc to enthuse and gush. Loving a mountain means that you join a whole long line of mountain-loving humans, well-documented in novels and poetry and drama. Loving a mountain joins you to something bigger than yourself. I understand those preferences. But I am different. It is flat spaces that make me come alive. The lack of landmarks makes me feel I could do anything, or go anywhere I wanted. Uncontrolled and uncoerced: unsteered by other people’s beliefs or priorities. In a flat space, there are no focal points to fixate on, to force me to see some things and miss out on others. Looking out at the flat wetlands of Slimbridge, that summer’s day, my mind spilled out across the space like water over a floor: expanding, becoming sensitive and alive again, where life and work and other people had shut it up close.

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My life has made me strange. I don’t mind admitting that. I was born and raised in an odd house in Pakistan, dominated by an arrogant and grandiose father. He was a celebrated doctor, and he had big ideas: so big that they absorbed us all and left no room for anything else. He was a genius, he told us. Other people were stupid: we should stay away from them. Especially other Pakistanis. He saw them as benighted by religion. My father was a Pakistani in love with the West, with the very surface layer of its cultural touchstones: Mozart, Vincent van Gogh, Gilbert and Sullivan. He painted a copy of The Dance Foyer at the Opera on the rue Le Peletier (1872) by Edgar Degas, five foot by three, which he hung in the living room: the arms of the ballerinas bare and provocative and just a bit wrong in the elbows, where he’d misjudged the angles. Yet my father didn’t like British people any more than he liked Pakistanis; they didn’t defer to him in the way he thought he deserved. So he kept us away from everyone. We weren’t to speak to the neighbours, or visit friends from school. Our whole world was inside that house, our eyes trained upon him, braced for anything to happen. He might bring home chocolate. Or live turkeys. Or come in roaring and grabbing and throwing things. Anything could happen. And anything happened all the time.

Or maybe it was nothing. It felt like nothing: those long days cooped up in the hot dazed rooms. My father went out, and we didn’t. We were driven to school and driven back, and that was all. In the summers, when school was out, we went nowhere. There was nothing to do or look at or think about, except the floor, and the books we’d read and reread over and over, with the sound of the traffic shouting outside, and my uncles and aunts and grandparents shouting downstairs. Life was a bare landscape with nowhere to hide. I knew the other children at school didn’t live like this, but I couldn’t explain what this was. I lived my life in a daze. I wished there was more space.

‘You’re lucky,’ my mother said. White and British, she had moved to Pakistan to be with my father. All day she mopped and cooked and scraped up vomit. She roamed through the house, back and forth and back again, even more trapped than we were. ‘You’ve got enough to eat. You go to school. Do you know how many girls don’t go to school in this country? Should we take you out of school and just marry you off, so you can scrub floors for your in-laws all your life?’

My life in Pakistan, full of painful nothing, had left a flat landscape inside my head

I was lucky. And I went on getting luckier. I was lucky when my father disowned me, two weeks before my 16th birthday, and I fled with my mother and sisters to Britain. I was lucky when I got to go to school again, near my grandmother’s house in Scotland, and chose what I wanted to study, and could walk in the street by myself for the first time, and look at the sea and the grass. I was lucky when I got into Oxford to study English, floated by government grants and equal opportunity bursaries. But for some reason, throughout my 20s, my body didn’t seem to know I was lucky. It cried, and hurt, and clouded over, and numbed out. It was terrified of other people. It wouldn’t come close to them, wouldn’t be drawn to them, wouldn’t be caught up by passion. I kept falling asleep. I couldn’t want anything. And I couldn’t explain why. When I tried to share my feelings with other people, they couldn’t see what I saw. They couldn’t see the nothing of my life, which burned a thick stark line across my mind.

My life in Pakistan, full of painful nothing, had left a flat landscape inside my head. Not a bleak, dead one. That would almost have been easier. This flat landscape seared with painful livingness. It wouldn’t let me look away: kept me mesmerised by its agonised, intense emptiness. And it seemed more real than any of the strange world around me. Even in safe cosy Britain, where there were consequences for hurting your children and education was free, I sensed something sinister under the gleaming surface. Something stark and painful, and utterly relentless that refused to know how much its wealth and serenity was built on the pain of others, stripped for parts by white colonisers and taught to hate themselves.

It made it hard to be around people, in their happy ignorance. It made it hard to feel safe with them. So I lived in my own world, alone with what was real to me alone. I had no words to describe any of this. I loved my friends, but I couldn’t bring them in there with me. I knew the flat place was trying to tell me something important: something that Britain didn’t want to know. I just couldn’t work out what. And it hurt that no one else could see it.

When the wading birds go home for the summer, warblers from Europe and Africa take their place, eating, breeding and shouting seductively at each other. Little brown birds, mostly: flighty, quick, difficult to glimpse and to distinguish. Cetti’s warbler, Dartford warbler, grasshopper warbler. Garden warbler, marsh warbler, reed warbler, willow warbler, wood warbler, sedge warbler. So many and so alike, and in the summer the trees grow thick leaves to hide them from view. At Slimbridge, my friend peered at the reedy edge of a pond, binoculars to his eyes, muttering about a warbler, half to himself. I had no idea what kind of warbler it might be. Between the shivers of leaves, and the everyday swell and tremble of my vision, I could barely see the bird at all.

How do we see things? Usually we see what we know: what we expect to see. If there’s a mountain in the middle of a plain, we stop seeing the plain. The mountain ‘matters’; the plain doesn’t. Our cultures tell us what’s worth seeing and what isn’t. What counts as real and what doesn’t. In a flat place, we’re told there’s nothing to see. But the life I’ve lived has made me struggle to see what I’m supposed to: to focus on the right things, and ignore the wrong ones. What I can see instead, all the time, is the flat place.

As we went on along the path, the birdwatching hides fell away. Suddenly there was a high, raised bank on the left, a little furred comb of grass along the top, joining earth to sky. I knew what that bank held back from us: the flat stretch of the Severn Estuary, too muddy to step upon. The Bristol Channel brings up armfuls of brown mud, day and night: its funnel shape and sandy base turn the water heavy with silt. But in that mud lives delicious food for wading birds. Redshank, curlews, wigeon, shelduck, dunlin all gather to feast on ragworms and clams. If you cut a square metre out of the Severn mud, just 2.5 centimetres deep – like a big thick square of turf – it would contain the same number of calories as 13 Mars bars, all in snails and worms. There’s a richness in flat places, and the birds know it.

The smooth grass felt like hands running reassuringly over my head and down my neck

My friend was getting excited. Wading birds are his favourite, and they’d be out on the estuary. Birdwatching is a good hobby if, like my friend, you enjoy seeking focal points, ways of ordering your experience of nature. Giving things names. Yet there’s another kind of life, which is about living alongside things that have no names: memories that can’t be explained. The day something might have been put into my shoes, to smuggle it across a border. The day something was injected into me, at home, for reasons unknown. My grandfather, roaming the corridors with wide eyes, screaming and shouting for help. The men who came to the house and had conversations in whispers. And throughout, my father: mouth stretched with rage, throwing a metal box at me – its wires dangling and snapping – with a hatred even he couldn’t name.

Such a nameless life means that, normally, the longer I spend around people, the more I feel like I’ve been set on fire. But my friend is good at letting me be. He carries around my world respectfully, without prying, like a very polite bellhop with a lady’s handbag.

On our right were the inland flats: a river winding through, trees assembled at the back like an audience of mixed height, watching the bare stage of the level landscape, as I was: the prickling nothing that was happening all over it. Yellow flowers waved stiffly, out of sync, like buzzing made visible.

We passed through a tunnel of trees stretching over the path, almost touching overhead, and then – suddenly – the bank, which had been blocking our view, gave out, and there was clear flat land uninterrupted between us and the Bristol Channel. Salty grassland stretched out wide and, beyond, a little strip of sea. What was the land beyond, my friend wondered? Was it Wales? Already my mind was settling into straight quiet lines. The white shine on the green land and the smooth grass felt like hands running reassuringly over my head and down my neck. My friend walked ahead, towards the sea, and I took a photo of him, tiny on the path, in his pink shirt, with the blue sky arching over.

Four years ago, none of this – light, comfort, awe – would have seemed possible. I was 29. I’d just finished my doctorate, and got an academic job that would last a whole three years. This changed my life because it paid enough for me to start weekly therapy. I went into my therapist’s office – bony, exhausted and struggling to want to stay alive – and explained that nothing had happened to me, and could she maybe help, please?

My therapist was delicate and wise. She knew when to be offhand. Almost in passing, she mentioned complex post-traumatic stress disorder (cPTSD). I snatched up the term and went straight to books, to the internet, to strip it for meaning. Complex PTSD, I learned from the psychiatrist Judith Herman and the psychotherapist Pete Walker, is different from the sort of PTSD we associate with war trauma, or attack. It doesn’t turn on a single, traumatic memory, which marks the point when, for the survivor, the world turned from OK to not OK. In complex PTSD, the world may never have been OK in the first place. Complex PTSD is caused by ongoing events – often, where it feels like they’ll never end, or there’s no hope of escape. It’s worse when the traumas were caused by someone who was meant to take care of you. It’s worse if they start when you’re very young: too little to know what counts as an ‘event’. Or what counts as something being ‘not OK’.

I dug my toes into mud, traced shapes in shingle, and stared at long gorgeous horizons

This explained why the flat place in my mind had no landmarks I could pick out. No single terrible thing had happened to me, yet my whole life had been filled with a nameless terror and fear since I was born. I’d learned to dissociate to protect myself – to vanish from terrifying situations that I couldn’t fight or fly from. And that had been a wise response, said my therapist, to the situation I’d been in. Now, in Britain, a new way of handling life and its terrors might be more helpful. With my therapist, I started lining up what I could see, in my mind, with what I felt: sliding them up along the same straight horizon.

And I started going for walks in flat places. Morecambe Bay, in the northwest. The Cambridgeshire fens. Suffolk. Orkney. I dug my toes into mud, traced shapes in shingle, and stared at long gorgeous horizons in places that held themselves unapologetically in their strange refusal to be conventionally attractive to viewers, seducing them with hidden turnings or mystical peaks. In such places, I could be strange too: inscrutable, solitary, refusing to fit into an easy story that rose to a climax and fell to a satisfying ending. What was inside me found its counterpoint in the fens and mudflats. I was no longer alone.

From those flat places, drained and bare and empty, and which hid nothing – which, like me, couldn’t stop showing their damage – there rose up stories of more migrants from Asia and Africa. Not birds, this time, but cockle-pickers, farm-workers, a human zoo, a labour battalion. Migrants whom Britain does not know how to see; whom it prefers not to see. I wrote about these walks in my book, A Flat Place (2023). I put the flat place inside me on to paper, made it into a solid flat rectangle bound between boards, so that it didn’t need to surge up under my eyes any longer. I could show it to friends who loved me.

There were little birds out on the mud. I could see them but I didn’t know what they were. My friend had his binoculars out, and was muttering.

‘What do you think that is?’

As we relaxed into the space between us, birds started slowly to come into focus for me. I leaned in, peered through his binoculars.

‘I can see grey,’ I said. ‘And a bit of black. And maybe brown? Near the head?’

There was a pause.

‘Oh,’ said my friend. ‘It’s a wigeon.’

The plural of wigeon is either wigeons or wigeon. The males have brown-russet heads, peach chests, grey bodies.

It was the flatness, bigger and better than anything else in that landscape, full of brightness and clarity

We’d seen almost no one since we left the main centre, but now we stopped near a man who’d set up his camera on a tripod. His friend was sitting on the ground, nearby. They were both talking, neither of them listening to the other.

‘I was hoping we could have the soup at the centre,’ said the friend. ‘But I saw on the board, it’s tomato. I can’t stand tomato.’

‘Either a curlew or a whimbrel,’ said the cameraman, curving the lens round. ‘Earlier, the way it was moving made me think curlew. But now I’m not so sure.’

‘So I suppose we’ll just do sandwiches,’ said the friend. ‘I don’t know what they’ll have in the way of vegetarian though. If it’s just egg…’

‘This would be the right time of year for whimbrel,’ said the cameraman.

How can we ever know each other? How can we even know what we are seeing?

My vision ran over the clear brown land, mirrored with blue and white where the water had come in. It ran and ran as fast and as far as it wanted. It ran over the tiny birds, unseeing, over the wigeon and the curlews or whimbrels. It was the flatness I could see, bigger and better than anything else in that landscape, full of brightness and clarity. It didn’t have an existence for anyone but me, that day. But I could see it and felt I knew what it was.

Right at the end of the big map, printed on boards throughout Slimbridge, was a kingfisher hide, facing a river. When we got there, the hut was full, so we hovered waiting for a seat to become free. Who wouldn’t want to see a kingfisher? They are so beautiful and elusive: a rare, jewelled handful of blue and orange in among Britain’s collection of little brown birds. I’d seen a flash of blue down at a river, once, the year I was bones, but that was the closest I’d come. Once we were seated, my friend leaned next to me. This was allowed, because we were friends.

Intimacy is very, very hard for me. This is one of the most powerful and painful parts of cPTSD. At its root, complex trauma is relational trauma. It comes from being totally dependent on someone, for a long time, and being catastrophically betrayed by them – so catastrophically that they distort your sense of other people, and what they will do to you. Complex PTSD can mean feeling that other people aren’t real, or safe. That you are fundamentally different from them and can never share a world. Or, worse, that you are essentially defective and repulsive, and wise people should stay away from you.

Yet the only way out of cPTSD is relationship. It’s a cruel irony. The only way to start feeling better is to get close to people, and trust them: to have the experience of them not betraying you. It’s difficult, because everyone is busy and human and distracted, and makes mistakes. A little slip on their part will prove, beyond doubt, that you were right to be suspicious in the first place.

The third time – at last – I saw it. The kingfisher came out of the hole

My experience of cPTSD made it hard for me to imagine that anyone would want to be near me, ever. I always marvelled when my friends leaned in close or hugged me. But when I’m sure it’s safe and allowed – that I won’t harm them, or disgust them – I can’t take my hands off them. I drape myself over them, poke my chin into their clavicles, touch their heads. I’m sold. I’m theirs. I touch them again and again, to check they’re still real.

My friend put his binoculars over my head, and the lady sitting next to me told me where to look. The kingfishers were coming in and out of that little hole in the bank, she said. I tried to find it through the lenses. Twice everyone in the hide gasped and started clicking cameras, while I waved the binoculars frantically, unable to see what they were seeing. The third time – at last – I saw it. The kingfisher came out of the hole; it sat on the twig. I saw its orange tummy. I saw its little head turning, taking everything in, at peace.

I looked and looked until I felt guilty, and held the binoculars up to my friend. But he shook his head. ‘This is your first proper kingfisher,’ he said. ‘I’ve seen them before, lots of times. You enjoy it.’

I turned back to the bank, and went on seeing what everyone else could see, till the kingfisher went back into its hole and the moment was broken.

What I call the flat place inside me, now, is the feeling of intensity, of angry stubbornness: of knowing that I am real, and that what I know is real, even if the world can’t see it. I know what people can do to each other. What parents can do to their own children. Although the good moments get more and more frequent – when my friends and I find, even briefly, that we’re seeing the same thing at the same time – in the end, I wouldn’t trade the flat place for anything. Even if it means living mostly in my own world, alone with the memories without names that draw my eye endlessly but never rise into focal points in the flat place inside me. Shoes. A metal box. The scratch of a needle. The things I alone can see.

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