

# Amend \$t!

by Jill Lepore

The Atlantic

100.00

*The authors of the Constitution believed that it could, and should, change over time. The process of amendment is built into the document. Why have we abandoned — and all but forgotten — this essential democratic tool?*

*This is the story of how partisans of the legal philosophy known as originalism have undermined the process of constitutional evolution envisioned by the Founders. The Constitution is not a living document, originalists say. In the words of the late Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia, it is “dead, dead, dead.” And the only people who can be trusted to interpret its meaning, they argue, are the originalists themselves.*

# The Atlantic

[Thu, 02 Oct 2025]

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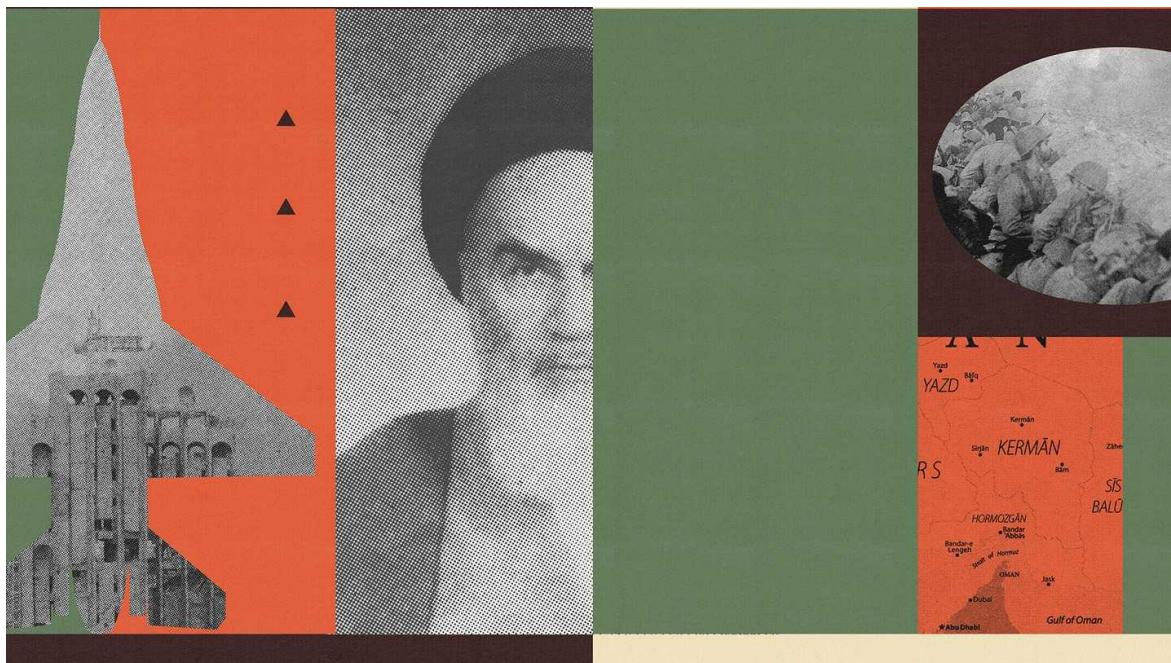
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# The Neighbor From Hell

**Israel and the United States  
delivered a blow to Iran. But it  
could come back stronger.**

by Graeme Wood



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Shortly after the end of the Iran-Iraq War, the United States Institute of Peace held an event in Washington, D.C., to discuss the Middle East's delicate prospects. Panelists suggested ever more intricate ways to give regional peace a chance, until the neoconservative Michael Ledeen spoke

out heretically. “You have heard the case for peace,” he said. “I rise to speak on behalf of war.” He said that the conflict, which lasted from 1980 to 1988 and killed perhaps a million people, had been “a good war.” And he said that any “peace” between the United States and a government as malevolent as Iran’s would be a sham, and a prelude to more war. Peace is what happens “when one side imposes conditions on another,” Ledeen told me in 2013. He said it is not enough for both sides to stop fighting. One of them must lose. Ledeen [died in May](#), well into his fifth decade of arguing against peace, or at least a sham peace, with Iran.

War had its chance just weeks later. On June 13, Israel assassinated high-ranking Iranian officials and neutralized Iranian air defenses. [During the next 12 days](#), Israel and Iran traded missile strikes. About 1,000 Iranians and dozens of Israelis died. Iran’s “Axis of Resistance,” its federation of militias and other allies, did not show up to fight. On June 22, the U.S. bombed three Iranian nuclear sites and declared the conflict over. The Trump administration said that the country’s nuclear program had been “obliterated,” but no public evidence has confirmed that claim. Ledeen, if he were alive, would no doubt note that at the end of the war, Iran did not accept any cease-fire conditions. In fact, Iran’s official position is that it never accepted a cease-fire at all.

Now that talk of what happens after war is back, I rise to make the case for déjà vu. The region risks reverting to its default setting, which is peace that has characteristics of war, with Iran planning to attack its enemies but not actively doing so, and vice versa. “This is a regime on its last legs, but it could last like that for another 20 years,” Michael Doran, a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute, told me. “They took a blow, but I see no signs that it’s ready to fall.” In the past, Iran has recovered from its tribulations by revising its strategy and finding novel ways to subvert the United States, Israel, and their interests. It should be expected to recover once more.

Even before the Axis of Resistance turned out to be an Axis of No-Shows, the Islamic Republic had suffered humiliating defeats: bombings and assassinations inside Iran itself; the [decimation of Hezbollah](#), its most sophisticated proxy; the slow and bloody dismantling of another proxy, Hamas; the collapse of its main state ally, Bashar al-Assad’s regime in Syria. In December, Iran’s 86-year-old supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, said that his

country's predicament reminded him of the absolute nadir of the Islamic Republic, which was the Iran-Iraq War. He noted for his audience members that few of them were alive—but he was—when Iraqi warplanes bombed Tehran.

"I was giving a speech at a factory near Tehran's airport," Khamenei reminisced, in an especially portentous installment of Imam Story Hour. "I saw an Iraqi plane descending, dropping its bombs on the airport and then flying away. We have witnessed these things." He said the belief that these difficult moments were setbacks was mistaken. He spoke optimistically of Iran's allies. "The Resistance Front is not a piece of hardware that can be broken, dismantled, or destroyed," he said. "It doesn't weaken under pressure; it also becomes stronger."

Some of this was bluster. Khamenei could hardly have delivered a speech acknowledging that the double act of Great and Little Satan had won. But his rendition of the history of the Axis of Resistance—from its birth out of necessity, to its success, to its present adversities—is largely accurate. In the past year, I visited several countries where Iran has made inventive use of its limited resources. The trip was a survey of destruction and dismay. The Axis, which bought Iran 20 years of survival and "peace," wrecked the places where it operated. This wreckage was intentional. Iran prefers weak allies over strong ones, and corrupt and corruptible governments over ones that respond to their citizens' needs.

The purpose of Iran is Shiite theocracy, for its own sake and as a counterweight to democratic, secular, and Sunni governments allied with the United States in the region. Khamenei has made the argument to his own people that the Islamic Republic is an anti-fragile empire. It gets closer to its purpose and stronger when attacked and should therefore be patient and steadfast, focusing on surviving to learn from its failures. To Iran's enemies, he has inadvertently made the opposite argument: that defeating Iran means vigorously prosecuting the war now, giving no chance for Iran to survive, and finally imposing a peace that will last.

The Axis of Resistance is a simple concept: a network of armed friends of Iran, spread across the region and on call to fight against Iran's enemies. As of mid-2024, this network was a cordon around the country itself, a line of

what Iran called “forward defense” that kept its enemies busy hundreds of miles away from Iran’s own border. Its main members were Hezbollah in Lebanon, Shiite militias in Iraq, the Houthi de facto government in Yemen, the Alawite government of Syria, and Hamas in Gaza. Iran, by far the world’s largest Shiite-majority country, encouraged these groups—mostly Shiite minorities—by scouting them, nurturing the most promising, and building trust and fellow feeling. Iran’s leaders and allies spoke of a “unity of the arenas.” Any attack against one could draw retribution by another, somewhere far away.

For years, members of the Axis armed themselves and conducted regular harassment operations—for example, rocket attacks against Israel and American bases in Iraq. Before Israel began a counterattack against Hezbollah in September 2024, this strategy was reckoned brilliant by Iran’s supporters and adversaries alike. A U.S. diplomat had told me the month before that “the Iranian strategy works to this day.” He said time was on Iran’s side. “I suspect we’ll be out of the region before they’re out of business.” One Lebanese Shiite politician told me that the United States and Israel should stop being such sore losers. “Don’t blame Iran,” he said. His voice was pitying and patient, like a peewee-soccer coach imparting a lesson of sportsmanship. “If we play, you lose the ball, and I shoot, I score, it’s your mistake,” he said. “Move on.”

Within a matter of months, the Axis line of defense had been broken. Only the Houthis remain more or less intact, and indeed resilient against Israeli and American retaliation.

Although the Axis is in shambles now, it was no failure. It dictated the terms of Middle East geopolitics for 20 years and allowed a poor, isolated nation, run by partisans of a small religious sect, to keep stronger and richer countries scrambling, spending billions of dollars just to maintain a status quo in which those countries were periodically peppered with rockets and drone attacks.

The strategy was thrust upon the Islamic Republic after others failed. Directly after its 1979 revolution, Iran busied itself with internal enemies. It labored mightily to suppress and, when convenient, murder those reluctant to support the revolution’s leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. In 1980,

when Iraq's president, Saddam Hussein, seized oil fields on the Iranian border, under the assumption that Iran was too distracted to object, Iran saw an opportunity to pivot to fighting external enemies. Far from letting Iraq take its land, Iran fought back and recovered its territory within two years. Saddam sued for peace, but Iran rejected him and opted to turn the war into a death match. It lasted for the next six years. The United States and other Western powers were delighted to watch both countries suffer. Sunni monarchies propped up Iraq when it looked ready to collapse. The war prompted the most reptilian of Henry Kissinger's quips: "It's a pity," he reportedly said, "they can't both lose."

But they did both lose, and badly. One would have to look back to Passchendaele, the Somme, or Stalingrad to find a similarly pointless churn of death at this scale. Iraq used chemical weapons and other outré methods of killing, such as putting electrified cables into bogs and zapping Iranian infantrymen as they waded through. ("We are frying them like eggplants," an Iraqi officer [told the \*Los Angeles Times\* in 1984](#).) Iran deployed human-wave attacks and recruited child soldiers as human minesweepers. In his book about the war, the scholar Efraim Karsh quotes an Iraqi officer who faced an Iranian human wave:

They chant "Allahu Akbar" and they keep coming, and we keep shooting, sweeping our 50 millimetre machine guns around like sickles. My men are eighteen, nineteen, just a few years older than these kids. I've seen them crying, and at times the officers have had to kick them back to their guns. Once we had Iranian kids on bikes cycling towards us, and my men all started laughing, and then these kids started lobbing their hand grenades and we stopped laughing and started shooting.

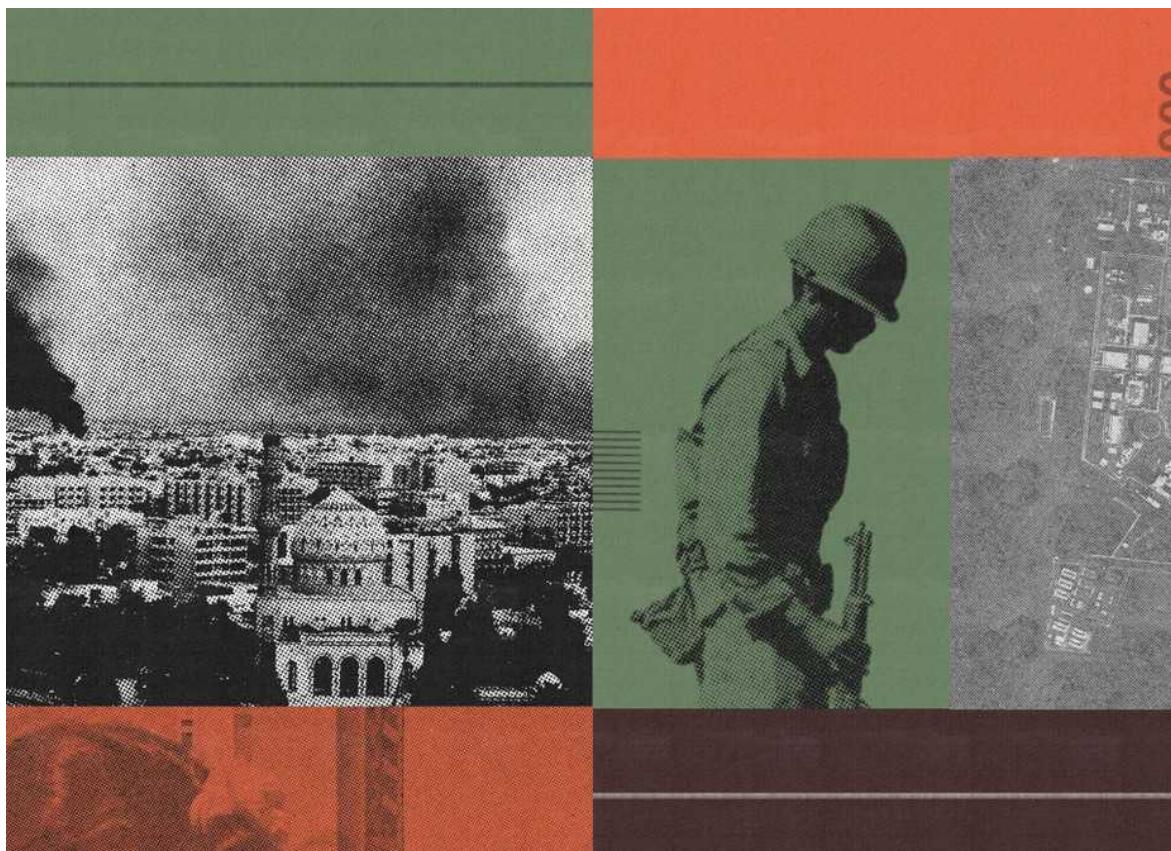
The war ended in 1988 without strategic gain for either side. Both were exhausted. Khomeini [died in 1989](#). A 49-year-old minor cleric named Ali Khamenei succeeded him as leader of an Islamic Republic that was a mutilated shadow of its revolutionary self.

Virtually all of Iran's recent military leaders, including the architect of the Axis of Resistance, General Qassem Soleimani, fought in the Iran-Iraq War and learned its main lesson: not to do *that* again. Big wars are catastrophic. After this miserable experience, Iran spent the 1990s and early 2000s like a

sailor in port: wandering, getting in trouble, never quite mustering long-term planning or vision. Because it had an international reputation as mad, bad, and dangerous, it had little choice but to innovate. “The Iranians took a good, hard look at themselves,” a former U.S. intelligence official told me. “They said: *We've got no technology. We have no friends. We don't have money.* They said, *We need an unconventional approach.*”

That approach originated in Lebanon. In 1982, several years into the Lebanese civil war, Israel invaded Lebanon to dismantle the Palestine Liberation Organization, then headquartered in Beirut. Iran trained and supported Hezbollah to counter Israel, the United States, and the Sunni and Christian Lebanese militias. No party in the war was blameless, but Hezbollah distinguished itself by outright rejecting norms of war and diplomacy. It took hostages and tortured them. It attacked embassies and civilians, inside and outside the country. It pioneered the use of suicide bombs. In 1983, a Hezbollah operative blew up 241 American soldiers and Marines in their barracks next to Beirut International Airport. The bomber is said to have been grinning as he sped past the checkpoint and crashed into the building.

Hezbollah was built to fight. In 1989, when all other Lebanese groups agreed to give up arms and become political entities, Hezbollah remained armed so that it could continue fighting Israel. Hezbollah persisted until Israel's withdrawal from southern Lebanon in 2000—a moment of celebration and vindication for Hezbollah, and for Iran, a sign that the Hezbollah model held promise elsewhere. Hezbollah took advantage of its win to dig tunnels and stockpile missiles for the sole purpose of attacking Israel. Iran now had a seasoned fighting force, assembled at minimal cost out of Arab Shiite volunteers, with nary an Iranian among them to be shot or electrocuted on the battlefield. When Hezbollah killed Americans and Israelis, it received little in the way of punishment or retribution. It drove out enemy invaders, and it held its own against Israel in a monthlong war in 2006. Later, when Syria looked ready to fall to Sunni jihadists, Hezbollah answered the call and crossed the border to terrorize the population and keep the Assad regime in power.



The Hezbollah model followed a three-step recipe: create a proxy; arm it to fight by any means necessary; wait for it to outlast the enemy. An alternative to creating a proxy is finding one. Because the Middle East is rife with hostility toward America as well as domestic governments, Iran found these friends easily. An Axis member could flourish as long as there was a vacuum of responsibility, where no competent government was present to discipline it. Acute chaos helped, allowing Iran to provide guns and training. Most but not all of the proxies were Shiite. Hamas, for example, is Sunni, and the Houthis of Yemen and Alawites of Syria practice forms of Shiism distinct from Iran's. The phrase *Axis of Resistance* was coined by a Libyan journalist in 2002, as an alternative to the "Axis of Evil" tag applied by President George W. Bush to Iran, Iraq, and North Korea that same year. Soon, Iranians were using it themselves.

#### [David Frum: The enduring lessons of the ‘Axis of Evil’ speech](#)

Just as Iran needed Israel's occupation of Lebanon to cultivate Hezbollah, it needed the U.S. occupation of Iraq to fertilize and grow Axis partners there.

Iran did not initially welcome the 2003 invasion. Its first response was to put its entire nuclear program on ice, almost certainly out of fear that it would be invaded next. The early months of the U.S. occupation of Iraq went well compared with the years that followed, in part because the senior Shiite cleric in Iraq, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, was then—and continues to be, at the age of 95—a sort of anti-Khomeini, at least in his attitude toward the role of religious scholars in politics. He prefers to influence politics from a distance rather than seize the state and rule directly. U.S. officials figured out how lucky they were that al-Sistani differed from Khomeini in this regard, and eventually they went to great lengths to seek his favor and refer to him by honorifics (“his Eminence,” “Sayyid”) they would not bother applying to other clerics.

Al-Sistani’s patience during the early months of the occupation kept Iraqi Shia from zealously fighting the Americans. Iraqi Sunnis were resisting but without great effect. The Americans’ success was frustrating to Iran’s high echelons. Finally, in 2004, they did something about it, by intervening the only way that seemed to work: by Lebanonizing the fight. Find a proxy; arm it; let it fight so you don’t have to. Iraq became proof that the model would work across the region, with Hezbollah serially midwifing the proxies that Iran sired.

By February 2004, two non-Iraqi figures were quietly turning Iraq’s Shia against the occupation and preparing them, militarily, to inflict pain on the Americans. The first was Soleimani, the commander of Iran’s Quds Force. The second was the most wanted Shiite jihadist in the world: Imad Mughniyah, the military chief of Hezbollah. Both men would eventually die violently at the hands of the United States and Israel. But until then, they managed to undermine those enemies’ interests, at minimal cost.

Because Iraq’s al-Sistani would not militarize his followers, Iran went mullah shopping and found another more inclined to do so. That ornery cleric was Moqtada al-Sadr, the son of Mohammad Sadiq al-Sadr, a grand ayatollah assassinated almost certainly by Saddam’s order in 1999. The position of ayatollah is not hereditary: Clerics tend to be graybeards who have distinguished themselves through scholarship. Al-Sadr, who was 29 at the time of the invasion, instead distinguished himself through resistance.

He visited Iran for the first time in 2003 and met with Supreme Leader Khamenei. In the months after his return, he mobilized his followers into a militia, the Mahdi Army. By early 2004, the Mahdi Army was in an all-out war with the Americans in the streets of Najaf. The United States was better armed and trained. But the very fact that the battle was taking place was ominous for the U.S. and its allies, and al-Sadr cut a worrisome contrast to the American commanders. He was young and tubby. The American failure to neutralize this preachy butterball suggested serious limits to the occupying force's control of the situation. At a press conference, the commander of U.S. ground forces in Iraq, Lieutenant General Ricardo Sanchez, announced that his objective in Najaf was "[to kill or capture Moqtada al-Sadr](#)." One could not help but notice, though, that al-Sadr delivered sermons before crowds, whereas Sanchez, during his press conference, appeared to be [hiding in a bunker somewhere](#).

For the next few years, the Mahdi Army and the Iranians shared a goal: to bleed the American occupiers. Iraq had plenty of small arms and ammunition, which could kill Americans but would often plink harmlessly off their armored vehicles. As the occupation wore on, the Iraqis became proficient at building roadside bombs in basements, garages, and other insurgent test kitchens spread across Baghdad and Anbar. The Iranian contribution was leveraging the R&D from elsewhere in Iran's area of operations—chiefly Lebanon—and multiplying the Iraqis' lethality. The key Iranian ingredient was explosively formed penetrators (EFPs). Instead of blasting in all directions, like a primitive roadside bomb, an EFP directs and concentrates the force of its explosion. It forms a molten metal blob and fires it like a cannon. The United States estimates that at least 603 of the approximately 3,500 American soldiers killed in combat in Iraq were victims of Shiite militias. Many more were maimed, and almost all the carnage was the direct and intended result of Iran's nascent Axis.

Success in Iraq gave Iran confidence to try the same model elsewhere. In Syria, it had a state partner, led by Assad, and when Assad's grip began slipping in 2011, at the onset of the Syrian civil war, Iran at first sent its own soldiers—Iranians, in uniform—to help put down the Sunni and American-backed uprisings. But the real force deployed to keep Assad in place was Lebanese Hezbollah, its hands relatively idle since 2000, showed up and crushed rebels. Iraqi Shiite militias, idle after the end of the American

occupation there, appeared too, and, in tandem with Russian mercenaries, kept Syria in a grim stalemate. By 2018, Assad had control of Damascus and Aleppo, and the rebels were confined to a jihadist ministate in Idlib.

Emboldened, Iran began reviving or concocting proxy forces in yet more locations. In Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, it found fellow Shia eager to overthrow Sunni monarchies. In Yemen, it found a remarkable, and remarkably weird, partner in the Houthis. The Houthis are led by a family of clerical megalomaniacs who have been prophesying apocalyptic war since the early 2000s. With Iran's and Hezbollah's assistance, they managed to kick out Yemen's Saudi-backed government and get into a long-distance shooting war with the United States and Israel. The Houthis' success is due in part to the rock-bottom price they place on human life (including their own), and in part to the sophisticated weaponry they have received from Iran. In late 2023, they fired anti-ship ballistic missiles at commercial and military vessels in the Red Sea. They were the first such missiles fired in anger in the history of the world.

### [Read: The Houthis are very, very pleased](#)

By the mid-2010s, these proxies were connecting, networking, sharing plans and technical knowledge, and operating in sync. Iran had made its own army redundant, and assembled a more agile and creative alternative in its place. “Suddenly, they have this whole keyboard to play a tune, instead of just one or two notes,” the former U.S. intelligence official told me. The polyphony of proxy groups could now harmonize and syncopate so that the United States and its allies would always be offbeat.

The sentinels of conventional wisdom settled on the view that the Iraq invasion was one of the great own goals of American foreign policy, and that its beneficiary was Iran. “The Bush administration has done more to empower Iran than its most ambitious ayatollah could have dared to imagine,” the *New York Times* editorial board declared in 2006.

Those fortunes were made and squandered rapidly—Iran went from bereft during the Iran-Iraq War, to unbeatable two decades later, to resoundingly beaten a little less than two decades after that. But the Axis was guaranteed to fail, and the signs of that failure were visible long before the Axis started

wobbling. No country in the region has wobbled more vertiginously than Lebanon, and no country has had a longer history of Iran's sustained attention. Those distinctions are not coincidental. In the summer of 2024, I met the historian Makram Rabah in his office at the American University of Beirut. He likened Hezbollah to "Iran's strategic consultants—the proxies' brain, the force that gets them running," a jihadist McKinsey that multiplies the Iranian proxies' power. He said Hezbollah's brilliance in this endeavor came at the expense of its competence at any task that might make Lebanon a functional democratic state.

"Hezbollah is a parasite that kills its host," Rabah told me. A group that exists only to fight, and prepare to fight, develops weaknesses and limitations, because it never learns to do anything else. That leaves it friendless, brittle, and uncreative—and, paradoxically, that leaves it vulnerable when fighting, too. Hezbollah, Rabah said, never sought conversion into a strong, durable political force, because it was never meant to be that. Since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, he said, the group had treated Lebanon as a base and traveled the region on a series of bloody adventures, while growing less interested in its home country. "Domestic politics became a nuisance for Hezbollah," Rabah said. He compared Hezbollah unfavorably to its Shiite Lebanese cousin, Amal, which disarmed after the civil war and set to work learning the dark arts of politics: backroom dealing, parliamentary maneuvering, and plundering a system rife with old-fashioned corruption within an acceptable range. The Hezbollah members "who try to be politicians are all actually intelligence people or military people," Rabah said. "They're all Sparta, no Athens."

"Other political parties have taken up arms in Lebanon because they wanted a better seat at the table," he said. "But Hezbollah never cared about having a state of their own. Lebanon became a shell for them, something to protect them while they fought abroad." Fighting abroad overextended Hezbollah. And because its soldiers used phones and posted images online, the Israelis were able to [map out the whole group](#). Ultimately, they became a regional problem instead of a local one. "They grew into a beast that couldn't be brought back into the barn," Rabah said.

That Lebanon is a catastrophe is beyond dispute. Parts of Beirut seem to have been written off, after a series of disasters even a minimally competent

government could have averted. In 2020, the Port of Beirut exploded when a 2,750-ton pile of ammonium nitrate caught fire in a warehouse. It normally takes a nuclear blast for a city to be so suddenly and awesomely ripped apart by a percussion wave. In downtown Beirut, one can still see windows blown out and buildings uninhabited. In 2019, Lebanese depositors discovered that their banking system had, in effect, just been kidding about those savings accounts. The money was gone. The Lebanese pound lost nearly all its value, and nowadays if you fly into Beirut, once a center of banking, it's wise to strap foreign currency to your body, like a drug mule. The biggest advertising billboard I saw in downtown Beirut was for a service that will help you get a second passport.

What the *New York Times* columnist Thomas L. Friedman once called the "[Pottery Barn rule](#)"—you break it, you own it—has an analogue in civil conflict: If you have the guns, you have the responsibility. And Hezbollah, as the most heavily armed and violent element of Lebanon's menagerie of factions and sects, wanted the guns without the responsibility. With adventures to be had in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, and patrons to please in Tehran, Hezbollah had little time left over (let alone inclination) to build up the country it purported to defend.

I spoke with Fouad Siniora, a former prime minister of Lebanon, who said that Iran's backing of Hezbollah had unbalanced the country's system, which was set up to make sure that all the largest sects—Christians, Sunnis, Shia, Druze—have power. But when one faction is supercharged by support from overseas, the balance is lost, and, with it, the ability to govern. "In a democracy, you have a majority that rules and an unmarginalized opposition that actually wants to get rid of the majority" by winning elections, he told me. What could never work, he said, is a system where the government coexists forever with a shadow entity lacking democratic intentions. He quoted the Quran, which says that only one God exists, because if there were multiple gods, all would be ruined. There can be only one government, one leader. That is true of a state, of a family, of a company, Siniora said. Or as his father used to say, two captains "will sink the ship."

As a tool for threatening Israel, however, Hezbollah for almost a quarter century had no real rivals. It was Iran's key instrument for deterrence and punishment: *If you touch us, we will use Hezbollah to touch you.* The end of

that era came slowly, through the pathetic collapse of Syria and Lebanon as functioning states, and then quickly, when Israel began touching Hezbollah in unexpected places.

In September 2024, Israel blew up the group's pagers, causing gruesome injuries as the devices detonated in Hezbollah operatives' pockets. The Quran says that God is closer to a man than his jugular vein. The pager operation showed that Israel was only a few inches away from Hezbollah's femoral artery. Devastating pinpoint strikes showed that Israel had near-complete knowledge of the group's structure, whereabouts, and leadership. Israel then invaded and occupied southern Lebanon again. Its incursion ended with an agreement between Israel and the Lebanese government that was humiliating for Hezbollah and Lebanon. The Lebanese government affirmed that it would keep southern Lebanon free of military buildup by Hezbollah, and Israel reserved its right to defend itself. Because Israel had never conceived of its attacks on Hezbollah as a war of aggression in the first place, the assertion of this right amounted to a threat to return to Lebanon for further rounds of demolition. The deal was an embarrassment to Iran as well. Iran was supposed to defend its proxies, to reciprocate for their many years of fighting for Iran. Now Iran would not, or could not, protect them.

In parallel, Israel had begun dismantling Hamas. As of this writing, Israel has not finished doing so—and Hamas's mere survival, after nearly two years of bombing and siege, is for the group's stalwarts a victory in itself. But the ability to harass Israel and lob rockets at it in perpetuity has never been Iran's main use of the group. Hamas's real value to Iran is as a threat to the Palestinian Authority, the West Bank-based secular Arab autocracy seated in Ramallah, and by extension the secular Arab governments that are Iran's other targets in the region.

If Hamas took over the West Bank (ejecting the Palestinian Authority, as it did in Gaza in 2007), it would establish a jihadist state on the border of Jordan, one of the closest regional allies of Israel and the United States. More than half the population of Jordan is of Palestinian descent, and the presence of Palestinian refugees is a persistent source of instability. A Hamas-controlled West Bank would threaten Jordan's secular Sunni monarchy. The war in Gaza has not destroyed Hamas, but it has mortally

wounded the version of Hamas that could have served this purpose for Iran. Hamas lives, but Hamas as a strategic asset for Iran is dead.

[Read: Can one man hold Syria together?](#)

The last of the proxy defeats was preordained. Syria's regime could not survive without Hezbollah. Syria was like a dialysis patient: guaranteed to die if left to its own resources, but kept alive through costly intervention. At the beginning of the Syrian civil war, Iranian soldiers arrived to save Assad. Hezbollah and Iraqi militias reinforced the government further, and Russian soldiers joined them in 2015. But when Israel began escalating its own strikes against targets in Syria, even the Iranians left. Last year, when an army of erstwhile Sunni jihadists marched on Damascus, each of these saviors had more important chores to take care of: Hezbollah was depleted from fighting Israel; Russia was fighting Ukraine; Iraq's Shiite militias mostly preferred to stay home; and Iran itself was gun-shy after its recent losses there. Syria's military lacked the will to defend its cities, and Damascus fell just 10 days after the offensive began.

These defeats happened faster than anyone predicted. But Iran's model decayed even in places where Israel and the United States had not attacked for some time. The most ironic is Iraq, given that Iraq was, after Lebanon, the site of Iran's greatest success. Iran had the chance to install a government that would mimic its own theocracy. Shiite parties dominate Iraq's politics, and Iraqi politicians who spent years during Saddam's rule living in Iran have led Iraqi Shiite parties and served as prime minister. By 2008, Americans were withdrawing, and combat deaths were subsiding to their lowest level since the start of the occupation. Iran seemed to have won, and whether the next game was electoral or military, most observers assumed that Qassem Soleimani and the Iranian government would decide who would end up in charge and what they would do.

To the surprise of many Shiite factions who thought they had Soleimani's support, they were both right and wrong: Iran had raised them all, and now rather than seeing any one of them dominate, it preferred for them all to fight. The internecine squabbling was immediate. The Mahdi Army controlled large parts of Basra. In 2008, it came under attack—not only by the Americans but also by Iraq's Shiite-led government. The Iraqi prime

minister at the time, Nuri al-Maliki, was a Shiite sectarian with close ties to Iran, and many of his fellow Shia thought he could be relied on to listen to Iran's wishes and find a way to avoid clashing with an Iranian proxy militia. But Iran did little to stop the fratricide. By custom, every subsequent Iraqi government has been Shiite-led. Many, including the present one, are beholden to Shiite militias with strong ties to Iran. The militias are powerful and, because of their control of smuggling and other criminal activity, profitable. They are also engaged in constant bickering over the spoils of illicit trade and corruption.

Not long ago, these militias' tendency to bicker was mitigated by the deft orchestration of Soleimani. He had helped create and coordinate many of them, and sometimes played them off one another. After the United States killed him in a missile strike in 2020, the whole unruly gang of militias started pursuing their own interests. Many of the militias were incorporated into the Iraqi government in 2016, as the Popular Mobilization Forces. But rather than strengthen the Iraqi state, they have undermined it from within, by using their government privileges to streamline their corruption. "They use the PMF units to do things outside the government chain of command," Hamdi Malik, an associate fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, told me. In practice, PMF vehicles are exempt from investigation by any other Iraqi security services, as if they have diplomatic immunity from their own country's police and customs agents. "They have total freedom of movement, and that's why they can smuggle," Malik added.

Baghdad, it must be said, is flourishing now. When I visited in August 2024, I was moved to see that city, which I had known only as a site of murder and oppression, beset by the comparatively venial sin of gentrification. I found freshly built shopping malls and cafés with the interchangeably chic aesthetic of Dubai or Miami, filled with men and women bearing all the signs of new wealth: makeup, tanklike SUVs, beach bodies. At a bakery, I bought a pastry that tasted awful, because it was gluten-free. Downtown, I ate a burger from a food truck and lingered over cold drinks, without wondering whether I should scram before someone decided to kidnap me and videotape my beheading.

On previous trips to Baghdad, I had wanted to visit Mutanabbi Street, a narrow lane of booksellers that terminates at one of the Arab world's great

remaining literary cafés. To stop there before would have been a risk—and indeed, in 2007, someone blew the whole place to bits, killing dozens. This time I browsed every bookstall, at leisure. The goods were odd. In English, I found copies of Assyrian histories, printed in England in the middle of the last century. In stock in Arabic were books by Margaret Atwood and Steve Harvey and Hitler. As a souvenir, I bought a recent translation of the Unabomber’s manifesto, and read it in the reopened literary café, over a hot tea.

Iraqis warned me that this new peace conceals rot. “It’s totally peaceful, and you can go anywhere,” Ali Mamouri, who advised Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi on strategic communications from 2020 to 2022, told me. But he said there is a “deep dark side.” The country’s large businesses, such as power companies, refineries, and financial institutions, still operate under the influence of the militias, he said. “You have to pay protection money to this or that militia.” I said that the protection seemed to be working, because the streets felt safe, and no one seemed afraid. “They get security,” he said. “But they mostly do not get the security from police, or from the government.” He said that the arrangement was going to be fatal for Iraq eventually, because the Mafias demanding protection money were a temporary measure, and they were at risk of descending into conflict in the streets. Iraq’s lasting prosperity demanded the building of a state.

I saw signs of that state-building. At an intersection in central Baghdad one morning, I noticed about 30 men dressed identically for what appeared to be a casting call for a Mesopotamian remake of *Reservoir Dogs*: cheap black suits, thin black ties, white shirts. They were, in fact, cadets—officers in training at the Ministry of Interior, a main organ of Iraqi state security.

But never far from the sites of state-building were signs of others undermining that same state. I thought of the ominous line from the poet Shelley: “I arise and unbuild it again.” In this case, the undermining agent occupied prime real estate just across from the Interior Ministry: an administrative headquarters for the PMF. It sprawled over a large block in central Baghdad. On the right, a state-building site; on the left, a site for unbuilding it, through the efforts of militias widely suspected of answering to another country’s government.

Within the PMF headquarters, the group's leaders barely disguise the fact that their allegiances are split between Iraq and Iran. Photos of Khamenei and Soleimani are everywhere. The militias that make up the PMF have units that operate independently from the Iraqi state and are even more proudly sectarian and loyal to Iran. Some are listed by the Americans as terror groups. I spent an hour in a political office of one of the more extreme of these groups, Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba. "Nujaba is quite simply the closest militia to Iran," Malik said. "It is Iran's military wing in Iraq. They get their commands directly from Tehran." The friendly spokesperson, Hussein al-Musawi, compared his group's fondness for Iran to the natural alliance, based on shared interests and values, between the United States and Israel. Look in the mirror, he said. "America and Israel have their alliance, and we have ours." It was odd, though, that Iran had so *many* friends, and that even with such dominance, they could not come together to form a coherent government.

The reason for this incoherence, other Iraqis told me, is that incoherence has always been in Iran's interest. If you were Khamenei, or Soleimani, and had spent your early life listening to Iraqi-bomber raids on Tehran, or reading reports of your countrymen being fried like eggplants by Iraqis, wouldn't you be cautious about conjuring an Iraqi government as powerful as your own? Any tool that a Shiite government could build might become an American, Sunni, or Kurdish one, if power shifted. The safest course would be to force out the Americans, persecute the Sunnis, and then let the Shiite factions bicker forever. The most dangerous of all scenarios, for the Iranians, would be the rise of an Iraq with its own interests and means to pursue them at Iran's expense. Iran built an Axis to serve Iran, but built it in such a shoddy and corrupt way that, in Iraq, it often prefers to serve only itself.

Just two years ago, it appeared that Iran had three guns pointed at Israel's head. One was Hezbollah, with its much-vaunted rockets; another was Iraq, with battle-hardened militias ready to send drones and rockets, and possibly even fighters, through Syria; and the last was Yemen. When Israel decided to strike Iran, two of the guns didn't fire. Hezbollah was caught by surprise and decimated in the first attack. Iraq's militias were understandably concerned about facing the same quick denouement as Hezbollah. Only Yemen's Houthis took their shot—multiple drones and missiles, aimed straight at

Israeli population centers—but without partners, they were not enough to substantiate the threat that the Axis represented.

By 2025, the Axis was in disarray. Iran’s leaders still had their old distaste for direct confrontation. No direct confrontation and no indirect confrontation means no deterrence. Israel’s dominance in those other corners of the arena gave it the confidence to start June’s 12-day war, in which the last remaining Iranian strategic tool was its ballistic missiles. The war ended with a lopsided Israeli victory, and with Iran scrambling to find more ways to punish and deter Israel if hostilities resumed.

How long will Iran take to find an alternative to the Axis? When Iran was bereft before, finding another way forward took 15 years. Maybe it will never recover, and the Axis will turn out to be Iran’s last good strategic idea. Maybe the next idea will be much better than the Axis—a nuclear weapon produced with unprecedented stealth, say, or something more clever than my own small mind can contemplate. Michael Doran, of the Hudson Institute, suggested that one possible fate was that of Castro’s Cuba: Iran would swap its first generation of charismatic leaders for a military junta. “By some lights, the reign of the mullahs ended a long time ago, and it’s already an IRGC regime,” he told me, referring to Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. The ideology of the regime is evolving from revolutionary Shiism to Persian nationalism, he said. But that shift would not mean that enmity with the United States and Israel would evaporate. A diminished Iran, sapped of its charisma, would continue seeking ways to harass Israel and the United States. This behavior is a singular and consistent feature of the Islamic Republic. Even when the regime has looked more amenable to peace with the U.S., through deals and compromise, it has labored mightily for the opposite.

“The resistance is an inextricable part of the Islamic Republic’s identity,” Karim Sadjadpour, a scholar at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, told me. Khamenei has made feints and tactical adjustments. But the attempt to lead a revolutionary international movement against the United States and Israel, Sadjadpour said, is nonnegotiable. “Death to America, death to Israel, and hijab,” he told me, seem to be points of stubborn insistence, not subject to reassessment.

In 2015, the Obama administration’s nuclear deal with Iran established unprecedented access to its nuclear sites, and strict but temporary limits on enrichment. It did nothing, though, to dull Iran’s enthusiasm for attacking the United States and Israel. In anticipation of a deal, and during the years the deal was in effect, Iran accelerated its support for the Axis. It used extra resources and latitude to become more aggressive. It intensified its support for Assad (having already prolonged a civil war); it strengthened its ties to the Houthis; it gave money and rockets to Hezbollah; it reportedly plotted and carried out terrorist attacks overseas. After the United States exited the nuclear deal, Iran allegedly tried to kill former National Security Adviser John Bolton, former Secretary of State Michael Pompeo, and the Iranian dissident Masih Alinejad.

Peace is not overrated. Many Iranians who hate their government nonetheless cheered the end of the war, and decried the senseless death of their countrymen at the hands of a faraway government whose concern for Iranian life was open to doubt. But not all peace is equal, and this strange, eventful history offers many reasons to suspect that the present peace with Iran will be a brief parenthesis in the long story of mutual enmity.

When Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini agreed to end the Iran-Iraq War, he likened the peace to drinking from a poisoned chalice. He did not—he could not—perform the elementary self-criticism that would have been involved in admitting that his decision to prolong the war and multiply its miseries was catastrophic. The peace at the end of the recent war with Israel is similarly marked by a lack of Iranian introspection or remorse.

Many Iranians wonder why their government spends so much money and effort on picking fights with Israel, the United States, and their allies, rather than on fixing its own corruption. I see no sign that the government itself wishes to reassess those priorities. Instead, it will do what it always does, which is look for bold new ways to pursue those priorities, with renewed vigor. The suffering of Iranians would be bad enough. But Iran’s determination to spread that suffering around to its friends and enemies alike makes it a uniquely awful neighbor, in peace as well as in war.

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# The Invention of Judd Apatow

## How a kid from Long Island willed his way to the top of American comedy

by Adrienne LaFrance



In the fall of 1983, Judd Apatow made his way down to a musty room in the basement of Syosset High School and stumbled upon his secret weapon—he just didn't know it yet.

Apatow was 15 years old, deep into an infatuation with comedy, but had nowhere to channel it. Boyhood on Long Island was something like a John Hughes movie: idyllic on the outside and tormented on the inside. “A lot of what formed some aspects of my personality was that there was an enormous amount of sports happening and I wasn’t good—I would always choke and panic,” Apatow told me recently.

This happened, he emphasized, all the time: in gym class, at pickup games during lunch, after school. “Imagine not being very good,” he said, “and having to be picked close to last multiple times a day,” and then being given a position “so far out in right field that I was almost in the middle of Jericho Turnpike.”

The jocks may have been the kings of high school, but Apatow came to understand that theirs was a fleeting achievement. “I remember as a kid thinking, *It doesn’t matter if you’re good at this*,” he said. “You become suspicious of how everything works—power structures; whatever the caste systems are—and then you’re drawn to comedians who are always calling out the different parts in life that are bullshit.”

He worshipped Lenny Bruce, Steve Martin, Albert Brooks, Gilda Radner, George Carlin, Martin Short. He wanted a friend to talk about *Saturday Night Live* with every week, but couldn’t find one. Comedy wasn’t cool—at least not among the teenagers he knew. “People weren’t interested in it,” he said.

Apatow was describing all of this to me in his office in West L.A. On this particular morning, he had asked me to come by at 7:30 a.m. (Apatow is a morning person, a quality that vexes his fellow comedians.) When I arrived at 7:23, he was already outside waiting, carrying a half-eaten banana and blaring classic rock from his smartphone. Inside, we settled into a couple of chairs around the long table in his writers’ room—a writers’ room that actually has windows, he proudly pointed out—and talked about loneliness.

While his classmates were out playing baseball, he holed up in the public library, poring over microfiche of old newspapers so he could learn about Lenny Bruce’s obscenity trials. He didn’t apply the same rigor to academics. He sweet-talked his way into advanced physics, only to find himself out of

his depth—he started cheating, got caught, and dropped the class. (“The teacher’s name was Richard Lesse,” Apatow told me. “So people called him Dickless.”)

But things were different at [the high-school radio station](#). In that basement studio, he got his hands on a clunky green tape recorder that would allow him to waltz into the world of show business. WKWZ 88.5 FM was, to Apatow, a “nerd’s paradise,” though he likes to joke that the signal barely extended beyond the school parking lot. The teacher who oversaw the station, Jack DeMasi, is now nearly 80. He lovingly described WKWZ to me as a smelly “rat hole” for “misfit kids.” He remembers Apatow as an affable teen despite troubles at home. The teachers knew that his parents had gone through a hellish divorce, and that money troubles had followed.



From a young age, Apatow knew he wanted to perform. (Courtesy of Judd Apatow)

“Judd said the scariest thing that any adviser faculty member at an FM-broadcast high-school radio station could ever hear,” DeMasi recalled. “He says, ‘I want to do a comedy show.’” DeMasi feared that Apatow would do a show so off-color that it would get the station shut down. “One of the things about adolescent boys is that they frequently think they’re funny, and they’re just stupid,” DeMasi said. But Apatow had something different in mind.

DeMasi had long encouraged his students to go out and talk to real people. One kid interviewed Mario Cuomo, then the governor of New York; another, R.E.M. To Apatow, this was a revelation: The tape recorder in his hand could provide a direct line to the comedians he idolized. If he could just talk to them, he could ask them how they did what they did, what it took to be funny, what their lives were like—so that maybe, one day, if he worked hard enough (though he dared not admit this to anyone), he could do it, too.

#### [From the July/August 2023 issue: Judd Apatow’s interview with Mel Brooks](#)

When Apatow requested interviews, he identified himself—accurately, though misleadingly—as calling from WKWZ 88.5 FM in New York. People like Garry Shandling, Jay Leno, Harry Anderson, and Steve Allen [agreed to speak with him](#) not knowing he was a teenager, only to be (mostly) charmed when they eventually found out. Apatow tells the story of walking into Jerry Seinfeld’s apartment circa 1983 and seeing the bemusement on Seinfeld’s face. “His apartment had nothing on the walls, no books in the bookshelves—he was just there to write his jokes,” Apatow recalled in his 2022 book, *Sicker in the Head*. “And he looked at me when I walked in like, *I can’t believe I have to do this with this child.*”

Apatow’s descriptions of these early interviews are laced with self-deprecation and hero worship. (Lena Dunham told me she loves them in part because his [Long Island accent](#), which he retains, was even stronger when he was young—*audience* and *autograph* are *aww-dience* and *aww-to graph*, and he always drops the *h* in *humor*.) But when you listen closely, what you also hear is poise—and a kid trying to chart a course for his own future. In a 1984 conversation, he asks Martin Short, “How does Second City work?” and “Did you ever do stand-up comedy, like in a club?” and “Did you go to college?” In his interview with John Candy, Apatow asks how many takes it took to get the shot where Candy gets nailed in the back of the head with a

racquetball in *Splash*. (“Three takes,” Candy responded. “I was lucky.”) Apatow then asks Candy about a rumored three-picture deal with Touchstone Films. Candy hadn’t even signed the contract yet.

Apatow told me he can’t remember how he knew to ask about that. He would hoover up information about the world of comedy anywhere he could find it. He’d hold his tape recorder to the television so he could record, play back, and transcribe *SNL* sketches in an attempt to figure out what made them funny. Apatow was so obsessed, so focused on doing whatever it took to enter that world, that it wasn’t until much later that he thought to ask himself, *Why comedy?*

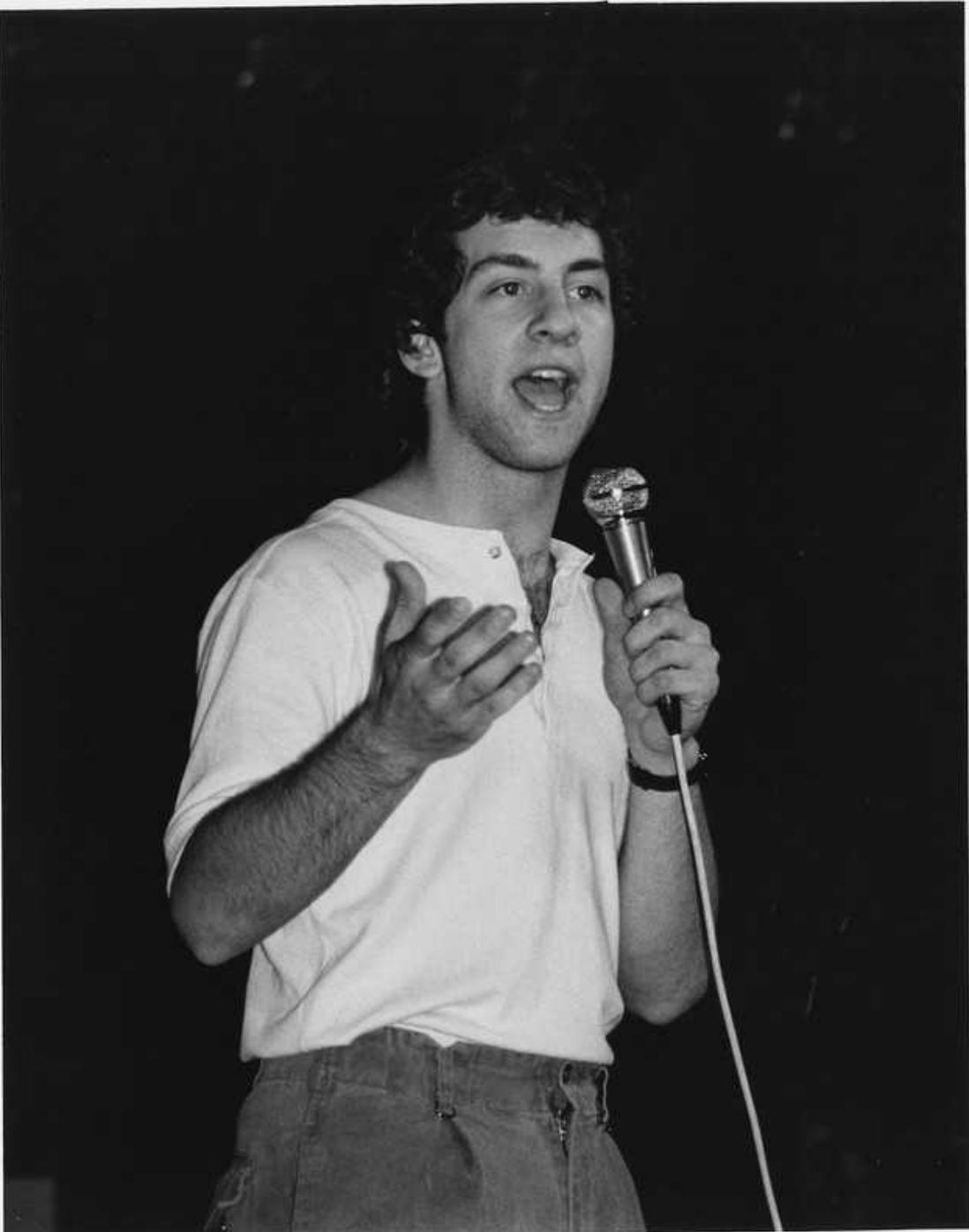
If you’ve never bombed—and I mean really bombed, bombed so badly that the crickets hear crickets—you can’t possibly know what it feels like to have a room turn on you. There are two kinds of dying onstage, both painful: The first is the quiet kind, where nobody laughs. Then there’s the loud kind, where the audience openly ridicules you. Apatow has experienced both.

While he was doing his interviews for WKWZ, Apatow was also spending as much time in comedy clubs as he possibly could. He took a job as a dishwasher at the East Side Comedy Club a couple of towns over, only to realize that he couldn’t hear the comedians onstage when he was stuck in the kitchen. (He switched to busboy.) Once in a while, Eddie Murphy, still in his early 20s, would drop by to try out new material. Apatow tells the story of a time Murphy showed up, got heckled, and quickly shot back, “I don’t care what you say, because I’m 21, I’m Black, and I have a bigger dick than you.”

This exchange might have been on Apatow’s mind the first time he ever did stand-up, when he was 17, at Chuckles, a comedy club also on Long Island. “I had thought about getting onstage for a really long time, and was really scared,” Apatow told me. “I didn’t have a cocky attitude about it. I was shitting a brick.” He had been offered a five-minute slot late at night, typical for a rookie, and brought his best friends, Ronnie and Kevin, along for moral support. Somewhere in those five minutes, Apatow floated an idea to the audience: *I’m just starting out and I don’t know how to handle hecklers, so help me out by heckling me.*

This was deranged. The local scene at the time was marked by an affection for a particularly brutal form of insult comedy—Don Rickles, only meaner. Comedians mercilessly mocked their audiences, and audiences liked to punch back. Apatow was not prepared for what he had unleashed. People were shouting “You suck!” and “Get the fuck off the stage!” It got so bad that Ronnie and Kevin turned around and started threatening the hecklers. Apatow can still remember hearing their voices: *You better shut up or I'll kick your ass.* “They were trying to calm the room down for me,” Apatow said. “Unsuccessfully.”

Apatow is not proud of his early stand-up. Some of the material is still funny 40 years later—a joke about his back hair getting so long that he can see it in his shadow—but much of it was a product of its time. “I don’t even know what I was thinking, to tell the truth. I’m embarrassed that I was even out there, and I hope no one remembers any of it,” he told me. One recurring bit involved jamming the palm of his hand into his eye socket, something he referred to as “the eye fart.”



Apatow in his early stand-up days (Courtesy of Judd Apatow)

There would be other bad sets, but none as disastrous as that first night at Chuckles. From then on, Apatow kept a line in his back pocket for when a

set started to sour: “The great Jerry Lewis said you learn nothing by being funny. You only learn by not being funny. And I have gotten a college education here tonight. Thank you.” That actually worked. The line would always bring the audience back around “no matter how bad I bombed,” he said.

After Apatow graduated from Syosset, he went to the University of Southern California to study filmmaking. When he got there, he was startled to learn that his classmates “had been watching Truffaut and Godard at home, and I’m watching Abbott and Costello.” One classmate, Matt Reeves, went on to direct movies such as *Cloverfield* and the forthcoming *Batman II*. “His films were so good, and I showed mine and I just felt like such a fool,” Apatow said.

Sophomore year he landed a spot on *The Dating Game*, a quiz show that involved competing against two other young men for the affections of a bachelorette who had to choose a winner without laying eyes on the contestants. As Bachelor No. 1, Apatow—all dressed up in a blazer and tie—looked like a lost uncle from *Full House* going for a job interview. But he was in his element, making fart noises (with his hands this time, not his eye) and generally hamming it up in a charming way. When he won the competition, and the trip to Acapulco that came with it, he took it as a sign. He was already behind on tuition payments, and was so focused on doing stand-up that he wasn’t finishing his assignments. It was either final exams or Mexico. He decided to drop out.

“I was young and so stupid,” Apatow said. “All those decisions didn’t make any sense, and I had no one to discuss them with. I don’t think I debated these moves with my parents or any friend. I had no mentor. I just was an idiot who was like, *I don’t want to miss this Acapulco vacation.*” He also felt that his *Dating Game* victory was validation that he could make it in Hollywood. It amuses him now to think of how naive that was, but at the time he really thought, “This is show business.” If he could make it on *The Dating Game*, maybe he could make it big.

The trip to Acapulco was “terrible”: He got sunburned on the first day, forcing him to spend the whole next day in the hotel room. And it was immediately clear that there would be no actual love connection with the

bubbly, blond bachelorette. (“I’ve seen her Instagram lately, and it seems like she’s had a very happy life,” he told me.) Looking back, Apatow thinks his parents were as relieved as he was to lose the tuition pressure. Nobody even feigned an attempt to persuade him to stay in school.

### Dear Therapist: My son has an impractical, ridiculous career plan

His grandmother lived in Los Angeles, and after he dropped out, Apatow slept on her couch for two years, toiling away at open mics and emcee gigs, where he met a couple of unknowns named Adam Sandler and Jim Carrey. (Apatow became roommates with Sandler and introduced Carrey to his manager.)

It was around this time that he hunted down the complete scripts for 42 episodes of *Taxi*, the classic James L. Brooks sitcom. “I would sit and outline them and study them, and I figured out that there were common structures in them,” he said. “I could see how these shows were made.” He was also spending a lot of time at the Ranch, a nickname given to the group house where a bunch of aspiring actors and comedians lived, way out in the Valley, where rent was far cheaper than it was in Hollywood. At the Ranch, he was exposed to a different breed of comedian—not the exuberant, sharp-elbowed Jews of his Long Island comedy-club upbringing, but midwesterners who were, in his telling, just as funny in a softer way.

Apatow also started writing jokes for other comedians, something he had learned was possible from the director and actor Harold Ramis, whom Apatow had interviewed back in high school. (Ramis, whom Apatow adored for *Caddyshack* and *Stripes*, had told him he’d written jokes for Rodney Dangerfield.)

Apatow was emceeing comedy shows at the Comedy & Magic Club, in Hermosa Beach. “That’s how I met a lot of my heroes,” he recalled. One of those heroes was Garry Shandling. When Shandling was doing a set one night, Apatow’s manager floated the idea to Shandling that Apatow should write some jokes for him. Shandling didn’t seem remotely interested; they had “no connection whatsoever” that night, Apatow said. But a few months later, out of the blue, he called to see if Apatow wanted to help him write a

few jokes for his upcoming gig hosting the 1990 Grammys. The answer was *Yes, God yes, of course yes*.

Apatow stayed up all night and gave Shandling, to his surprise, a list of 100 jokes to choose from. [Shandling rewrote every punch line](#)—which, to those who knew Shandling, says more about him than it does about Apatow. The way Apatow tells it today is that they made a good team: Apatow knew way more about music, and Shandling was simply funnier. This was the beginning of one of the most important relationships in Apatow’s life.

One of Shandling’s friends, the actor-writer-director Albert Brooks, told me he remembers hanging out at Shandling’s house in the early ’90s when Apatow started coming around. “He was like Garry’s shadow,” Brooks said. “What I’ve always loved about Judd is that more than anyone, he’s a comedy savant. I would describe him as a human Friars Club. And I love that about him. Because he didn’t just love it; he knew everything. And he was funny! It was like, *Who is this kid?*”

The more time Apatow spent around comedians and writers in L.A., the more he began to think he wanted to be in comedy—but not as a stand-up. “I was such a fan that I was very aware of how good people were,” Apatow told me. “I knew how funny Andy Dick was and Ben Stiller was and Jim Carrey was.” Walking away from stand-up, “there was probably a little part of me that died,” Apatow said, but it made space for something new, too.

In 1990, he and Stiller created *The Ben Stiller Show*, which appeared on MTV (and later Fox), and starred up-and-comers such as Andy Dick, Janeane Garofalo, and Bob Odenkirk. It produced sketches beloved by comedy nerds—see: “Legends of Springsteen”—but was barely given a chance to take off. (The show won an Emmy for outstanding writing just after it was canceled.) Furious, Apatow took a trip to Hawai‘i to wallow in the tropics, and by some cosmic turn of fate ran into Shandling near the hotel where Apatow was staying.



For comedy nerds, this photo will evoke the famous Steve Martin character “The Great Flydini,” a vaudeville magician who pulls tricks out of his pants, including, in the coup de grâce, an opera-singing hand puppet. (Apatow bought the original puppet at auction for \$3,520.) (JR)

Shandler coached him on how to cope with the cancellation, and offered him a job writing for a series he was developing for HBO called *The Larry Sanders Show*. “Garry said writing is a way to figure out who you are,” Apatow told me. “It’s all about self-exploration. I didn’t think that. I just thought I was writing a funny wife joke for Rodney Dangerfield. I didn’t think spiritually about any of it. It was like, comedy is about knowing yourself? What? I thought it was just punching the horse in *Blazing Saddles*.” It wasn’t until then that he felt “some sort of calling” to write.

For the next several years, Apatow worked obsessively, toggling between writing gigs for the animated series *The Critic* and *The Larry Sanders Show*. Set behind the scenes at a Johnny Carson–style late-night show and featuring a parade of A-list comedian guest stars, *The Larry Sanders Show* was beloved by critics and industry insiders. It launched the careers of numerous comedians, and pioneered a documentary-style format that influenced shows such as *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, *The Office*, *30 Rock*, and *Parks and Recreation*. Apatow parlayed that success into writing the 1995 film *Heavyweights* and producing *The Cable Guy*, starring Jim Carrey, in 1996. Both flopped but have since achieved cult status. This dynamic would become excruciatingly familiar to Apatow: splashy failures on projects that only grew more beloved over time.

During casting for *The Cable Guy*, a young actor named [Leslie Mann](#) came in to audition for the female lead, and Apatow read Carrey’s part with her. He remembers leaning over to Stiller and saying something to the effect of *I can’t believe the future Mrs. Apatow just walked into the room*. (The encounter was not as indelible for Mann. She doesn’t remember it at all, she told *Vanity Fair* years later. “Is that bad?”) By the summer of 1997, they were married. Later that year, they had their first child together—a girl named Maude. Another girl, Iris, followed.

When Maude was still a toddler, one of Apatow’s friends from the Ranch, the actor and director Paul Feig, proposed making something together. “He

literally handed me a manila envelope with *Freaks and Geeks* in it,” Apatow said. He was astonished by what he read. He ended up developing and executive-producing the show. Around this time, the teen drama *Dawson’s Creek* was an enormous hit. Apatow and Feig wanted to make something that was nothing like it.

*Freaks and Geeks* was unusual in a number of ways. Feig and Apatow cast actors who looked like real kids, rather than finding Hollywood-ready teens grown in a lab to appear on the cover of *Tiger Beat*, and the characters those actors played were complex, not mere vessels for sexual objectification or moral lessons that could be neatly resolved in 22 minutes. *Freaks and Geeks* also collapsed the distance between pain and humor in a way that made it feel true: Going through puberty isn’t just terrible and awkward; it’s hilariously terrible and awkward.

Apatow and Feig infused the show with their own adolescent agony. The gut punch of Apatow’s life was when his parents got divorced while he was in middle school. The split was beyond ugly; it scattered the family. His brother moved in with his grandparents in California. His sister lived with his mom. Apatow lived with his dad.

One by one, all of Apatow’s friends’ parents got divorced too. They talked about divorce constantly with one another, but barely with their own parents. (Apatow’s father once left a book out on the coffee table called *Growing Up Divorced* but never said a word about it.) Apatow remembers he and his friends thinking, “We can’t listen to these people. They don’t know what the hell they’re doing.”



From top left: On the set of the Netflix series *Love*; on the set of *This Is 40*; Apatow with Lena Dunham and the cast of *Girls*; Seth Rogen, Jay Baruchel, and Apatow on the set of *Knocked Up*; Iris and Maude Apatow, Paul Rudd, and Leslie Mann on the set of *This Is 40*; Apatow with the *Trainwreck* stars

Amy Schumer, LeBron James, and Bill Hader. (Suzanne Hanover; Universal Studios Licensing; Dimitrios Kambouris / Getty; Moviestore Collection / Alamy)

That feeling gave rise to the conviction that he had to learn to take care of himself—through comedy. “I built this obsession that I thought would free me at some point,” Apatow told me. “I had a very clear thought my whole childhood, which was: *This will pay off. One day, people will be interested in this.* It’s almost maniacal.”

In one of our conversations, Apatow brought up the episode in which one of the geeks of *Freaks and Geeks*, Neal Schweiber (played by Samm Levine), confronts his philandering father by telling hostile jokes about him through a ventriloquist puppet. “I really related to that,” Apatow said. “There was a moment where I thought, *I need to learn how to juggle fire and perform at birthday parties*—that desire to get a skill because you’re so traumatized by what’s happening in the house.”

One of Apatow’s closest friends, the comedian Pete Holmes, told me that he always saw Apatow as another of the geeks, Bill Haverchuck (Martin Starr). In [one of the series’ unforgettable scenes](#), Haverchuck comes home from school to an empty house, makes himself a grilled-cheese sandwich and pours a tall glass of milk, pulls out the TV table, and dissolves into laughter watching Shandling do stand-up while the Who’s “I’m One” plays over the scene. That “raised-by-television latchkey thing,” Holmes told me, “that’s Judd. That’s all you need to know about Judd.” He went on: “It’s an isolated fan who used his love of comedy to make himself not isolated.”

Today, *Freaks and Geeks* routinely shows up on critics’ lists of [the best shows ever made](#). But [NBC canceled it](#) after just 12 episodes, citing low ratings. Apatow was devastated, again.

It was around this time that he began having serious panic attacks. The worst of them happened during a meeting with Lorne Michaels at the Beverly Hills Hotel’s Polo Lounge. “We were seated in a round booth I couldn’t easily escape from,” he told me. Apatow sat in silence, screaming on the inside and wondering if he would have to fabricate a story about food poisoning to get out of the room. (“I made it through. No one seemed to notice.”)

Even when Apatow's not panicking, his mind tends to race. He remembers sitting and watching *The Merv Griffin Show* as a child, tapping his toes constantly, counting the syllables of the words being said on TV. He is not prone to catastrophizing so much as compulsively planning ahead. Over the years he's developed tactics for staying calm, first by white-knuckling it through episodes of panic and later with obscene amounts of therapy and mountains of self-help books.

### From the November 2023 issue: What is comedy for?

After *Freaks and Geeks* was canceled, Apatow focused on finishing the series, even though he knew it wouldn't be renewed. He wanted to do right by the cast of young actors, which included Seth Rogen, Busy Philipps, Linda Cardellini, Jason Segel, and James Franco, all of whom eventually became stars. Working with all of that nascent talent on one show was "like discovering a music scene," Apatow told me. "It was like discovering Seattle or Manchester." He told himself that if he could finish the show and know that, just once, he had gotten something exactly right, it would be enough. In the end, NBC never even aired the complete series—three of the show's 18 episodes reached audiences only when Fox Family reran the series later that year.

In a clever act of desperation, Apatow used the show's website to ask fans for help demanding that *Freaks and Geeks* be released on DVD, something that never happened for a canceled show, and which ultimately helped *Freaks and Geeks* find its audience.

But when the same experience happened—"almost beat for beat"—with the cancellation of his 2001 television show, *Undeclared*, Apatow was livid. That same year, he filmed a pilot for *North Hollywood*, starring Segel with the up-and-comers Amy Poehler, January Jones, and Kevin Hart, which got scrapped before it even aired. "That became the fuel," he told me. He just kept thinking, "You're wrong. I think all these people are great. All these writers and directors are so strong. Let's just try to prove everybody wrong."

When *Undeclared* was canceled, *Time* magazine had just [named it one of the 10 best television shows that year](#). Apatow sent a framed copy of the article to the chair of the Fox Television Entertainment Group, who also happened

to be the man who had canceled *The Ben Stiller Show*. The note said: “I don’t know if you just fucked me in the ass again or you just never took it out in 1992. Merry Christmas, Judd.”

The people who know Apatow best will tell you that his willingness to burn bridges is legendary in comic circles. “Just really tough with studio executives—like, *You need to let us make this show what it is*,” the comedian Mike Birbiglia told me. He went on: “When you’re in show business long enough, you start to see that there are people who are rooting for themselves, and then there are people who are rooting for the art form at large. He’s the quintessential example of ‘He’s rooting for the art form at large.’”



From top left: Apatow with Rogen and Katherine Heigl on the set of *Knocked Up*; the cast and crew of *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*; Apatow with Norman Lear, Mel Brooks, and Dick Van Dyke; Jason Segel and John Francis

Daley in *Freaks and Geeks*; Jonah Hill, Michael Cera, and Christopher Mintz-Plasse in *Superbad*; Matthew Broderick and Jim Carrey in *The Cable Guy*. (Universal Studios Licensing; Courtesy of Judd Apatow; Gabe Sachs; Cinematic Collection / Alamy; AJ pics / Alamy)

Apatow can also be impressively petty. Some of the same friends who expressed to me their undying loyalty to Apatow described him as sometimes “defensive” and “biting,” the kind of person you have to work to win over. He once got into a [prolonged email argument with the television producer Mark Brazill](#) that was so over-the-top, *Harper's* ended up publishing the entire thing. Brazill signed off one email to Apatow with “Get cancer,” and another with “Die in a fiery accident and taste your own blood.” Apatow, ever the comedy savant, accused Brazill of stealing the “taste your own blood” line from Sam Kinison’s 1986 album, *Louder Than Hell*: “That’s a Sam Kinison line you stupid fuck!!!! Hypocrite!!!! J’accuse!!!!”

Yet Apatow described himself to me as someone who wants to be liked and who tries to avoid conflict. He worries about upsetting people. “Comedians are sensitive,” he said. “Comedians are aware of all the dynamics that are happening, and they’re feelers.” The only time in all of our many hours of conversations that he ever balked was when I asked him whom he considers his closest friends. “You want me to list them?” He was horrified by the idea of making anyone feel bad.

Apatow has, over time, mellowed out. One of the people who has seen this up close is Seth Rogen, who was an unknown 16-year-old when Apatow cast him in *Freaks and Geeks*. “He was the first boss I ever had,” Rogen told me. He was terrified of Apatow at the time, and desperate to impress him. After *Freaks*, Apatow asked Rogen to be a writer on *Undeclared*.

The first movie they made together was *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*, Apatow’s 2005 directorial debut and a blockbuster. Rogen remembers the moment Apatow came up with one of the scenes that drew the biggest laughs in the film, in which Steve Carell’s character awkwardly tries to relieve himself while aroused. It is “forever tattooed in my mind,” he told me. They’d been working on the script and Apatow left to pace around, get coffee. When he returned, “he was laughing so hard,” Rogen said, and he went on to describe

the whole scene, with Carell's character having to "tilt down" to pee. Rogen lost it too. "We were laughing so hard," he said. He kept thinking, "They would have never let us do that on television." (Apatow told me that coming up with a joke that perfect feels like you've "finally connected to God.")

Apatow made the jump to directing films at precisely the right moment. Studio executives had realized that audiences actually loved big comedic films starring actors who weren't traditional leading-man material. Will Ferrell, who in 2003 successfully leaped from *SNL* to the big screen with the Todd Phillips hit *Old School*, was a catalyst for the golden decade of big comedies that followed.

Apatow's success, when it came, hit like a tsunami. It is difficult to overstate his influence on American comedy. Critics started using the ungainly term *Apatowian* to describe his imitators.



Apatow and his onetime roommate Adam Sandler (Courtesy of Judd Apatow)

[Knocked Up](#) was an even bigger hit than *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*, grossing nearly \$220 million on a \$30 million budget. The film told the story of an

underachieving stoner (Rogen) and an ambitious TV reporter (Katherine Heigl) who, after their one-night stand results in pregnancy, must navigate the complexities of becoming parents while getting to know each other. It was raunchy, tender, absurd, and hilarious.

Apatow had worried that *Knocked Up* wouldn't come together at all because he couldn't figure out the casting. Eighty women had read for the lead part, and none of them clicked until Heigl showed up. When you find the right person for a role, "you almost feel relief," he told me. "Because when people read it and they're not right for the part, the scene doesn't work. So you're watching your scene not work over and over again."

Heigl may have been perfect for the part in Apatow's eyes, but she criticized the movie after it came out, touching off a larger debate about Apatow's work at the time. She called *Knocked Up* "a little sexist," and described the women characters he had written—including her own—as "shrews" who were "humorless and uptight." (Apatow, clearly bruised, reacted by calling her choice of the word *shrew* something out of the 1600s.) To him, the argument was unfair. He is interested in flawed characters and what they have to do to become good people, a theme that runs through his work going back to *Freaks and Geeks*.

Amy Schumer told me she never understood people who dismiss Apatow's work as sexist. The men in *Knocked Up* don't seem to understand what the women in their lives are going through. Seen one way, that's evidence of sexism; seen another, it's an honest portrayal of how some men behave in their relationships. The subject seemed to exasperate Schumer: "His house is all girls, his cats are girls, he made the show *Girls*, he made my movie." I will confess that I find the debate somewhat tiresome myself. Sometimes the flawed characters Apatow focuses on are men; sometimes they're women. As Schumer noted, he guided her and Dunham toward realizing their own creative visions for *Trainwreck* and *Girls*, respectively.

Apatow has filmed almost all of his movies in Los Angeles because he didn't want to be away from his family, especially when the girls were little, and he famously casts Mann and his daughters in his movies (*Knocked Up*, *Funny People*, *This Is 40*). This has provoked inevitable eye-rolling about nepotism, but Mann is a comedic star in her own right. She is the first person

who reads his scripts. “She has come up with some of the great moments and scenes in all of the movies we’ve collaborated on,” he told me.



Apatow, Mann, and their daughters in 2018 (Jon Kopaloff / Getty)

The Apatow girls—both now in their 20s, both actors—first appeared on-screen when they still had their baby teeth. Apatow likes to point out, swelling with pride, that then-8-year-old Maude completely improvised her character's hilarious explanation of where babies come from in *Knocked Up*. "I think a stork, he drops it down, and then a hole goes in your body, and there's blood everywhere, coming out of your head, and then you push your belly button, and then your butt falls off, and then you hold your butt, and you have to dig, and you find a little baby." Mann's character deadpans in response: "That's exactly right."

After a long pause, Apatow started doing stand-up again about a decade ago, and has been doing it ever since. One of his regular venues is Largo, a gem of a comedy club in West Hollywood with the prettiest twinkle lights and the least comfortable chairs you can imagine.

The greenroom at Largo is a small shrine to great talent. Images of David Bowie and Gilda Radner are tacked up on one wall. On a recent visit I found Apatow there with Stephen Merchant, a co-creator of the original *The Office*. Merchant and Apatow were discussing the best place in the world to see Bruce Springsteen (Milan, they concluded), while the musician Pete Yorn stood in the hallway tuning his guitar. A few minutes later, Sarah Silverman wandered in. Ali Wong showed up after that.

Apatow had assembled this group of comedic super-talent for Judd Apatow and Friends, a semi-regular benefit he hosts that combines stand-up and live music. For each show, he picks a different lineup, and a different cause—on this night, proceeds were going to the ACLU. Apatow had with him a chaotic pile of notes—scrawled by hand, photocopied, clearly out of order, some upside down. If he was nervous, it did not show.

Apatow's set had a relaxed, funniest-dad-at-the-barbecue feel. He got huge laughs, from both old material (the hairy-back-shadow joke) and new, much of which involved confronting the indignities of aging. ("Don't you hate diverticulitis? Isn't it the worst when your high-school girlfriends start dying of natural causes?") He also recounted a story about a quasi-religious experience he'd had while tripping on ayahuasca. (He'd told me the story before. "That really did happen," he said.)

Apatow's style is predicated on a confessional sort of self-deprecation, while Wong's, for example, is more brash and confrontational—she told a story about a one-night stand that was so vulgar, a man sitting near me was actually honking with laughter, which prompted the people around him to start laughing even harder.

[Read: The king of comedy is okay with not being funny](#)

Apatow's approach was clearly influenced by Shandling. Like his mentor, Apatow pushes a joke to get funnier until there is nowhere left to go. When he's directing, he's known to shout out one punch line after the next for actors to try, and then chooses which one to use in editing. (He still stewes about bits of his films he wishes he could change.)



Apatow at his office. His approach is to push a joke to get funnier until there is nowhere left to go. (Maggie Shannon for *The Atlantic*)

If Shandling taught Apatow to be exacting in his writing, he also helped him find ways to calm his galloping mind. It was Shandling who introduced Apatow to [Ram Dass](#), the author of the best-selling 1971 book *Be Here Now*, which popularized Eastern spirituality in the West. When I first started reading Ram Dass, at Apatow's urging, my immediate reaction was that it seemed very Los Angeles—we're all just cosmic vibrations made to love one another, that kind of thing. It wasn't until I listened to one of Ram Dass's lectures that I had a revelation: Ram Dass's belief system may have been Buddhism-flavored, but his delivery is basically a form of stand-up. He talks about going to India and meditating until he achieved transcendence. "I mean, light was pouring out of my head and I was some combination of the pure mind of the Buddha and the heart of the Christ"—here he pauses for just a beat before delivering the punch line—"which, for a Jewish boy, is not bad, you know?" The audience roars.

One of the best pieces of advice Apatow gives to other writers—which Schumer, Rogen, Birbiglia, and others all repeated back to me—is to write comedy like you're writing a drama. The story has to work on a human level before it can be funny. "I think what he's trying to get at almost always in all of his films and television is the vulnerability of the characters, and the comedy is secondary," Birbiglia told me. "And because he's so funny and he's so comedy-obsessed, the comedy ends up being the thing he's known for. But actually it's the other thing that he's extraordinary at."

Apatow put it to me this way: "The jokes can't work if the story doesn't work. The whole thing will crumble. So the most important part is that you have a great dramatic story that you care about that tracks, and then you can figure out how to ornament humor where it's needed. I think movies are usually bad when they haven't figured that out."

The director and *Simpsons* co-creator James L. Brooks told me about taking his 15-year-old son to see *Superbad*, a raunchy but sweet caper about a couple of teenagers trying to hook up with their crushes before they go off to college. Brooks's son left the theater feeling like someone had "looked into his heart," Brooks told me. Rogen, who co-wrote *Superbad* with his childhood best friend, told me he'd learned how to tell that story by watching Apatow (who produced the film). When you think about all of the talented actors, writers, and directors who do what they do because of

Apatow, “I mean, the group of actors is big,” Brooks said. “He raised puppies.”

In the 1970s, when Steve Martin hit it big, Apatow went crazy for him. “I bought every album he put out—and couldn’t stop doing an impression of him for the next five years,” he recalled in one of his books. To a kid who worshipped the gods of comedy, Martin was the biggest of them all. So when Apatow was 13 years old, on a visit to California to see his grandmother, he persuaded her to drive him out past Martin’s Beverly Hills home. When they arrived, Apatow couldn’t believe his eyes: There was Martin, taking out the trash. He seized the moment, hopped out of the car, and asked for an autograph. Martin politely declined, saying he had to draw the line at signing autographs at his home. Apatow, ever quick-witted, suggested that they simply step into the street. But Martin insisted he could not.

When Apatow got back home, he wrote Martin an obscenity-laden, joking-but-not-joking letter, asking Martin why he treated his fans like garbage and threatening to share his home address with a Hollywood celebrity bus tour unless Martin responded with an autograph. When the reply came, it included a copy of Martin’s book *Cruel Shoes*. “Dear Judd,” the inscription reads, “I’m sorry. I didn’t realize I was speaking to *the* Judd Apatow.”

Years later, after Apatow had broken out, he and Martin were in a meeting together and someone asked Apatow to tell the story. “I told it,” Apatow recalled in *Sicker in the Head*. “And at the end, they asked Steve if that was how he remembered it. And he said, ‘In my memory, I knocked on Judd’s door.’”

Apatow is no longer the young apprentice—he has long since become a master himself. Now comedians constantly come to him for advice. Rogen runs every big creative project by Apatow, he told me. “I, to a fault, to an inappropriate degree, run everything by him,” Schumer said. “He honestly only gives good advice,” Dunham told me. The best advice he ever gave her is that a good note of feedback can come from anywhere. She took that to mean that real artists are confident enough to release a bit of control. (“Though he did once take me to a Who concert after a long workday, and I fell asleep and he took photos.”)

And yet Apatow has lost none of his enthusiasm for studying comedy. He has a scrapbook of a memoir coming out in October, *[Comedy Nerd](#)*, which tells the story of his life and is filled with the many photos, studio notes, and other documents he has hoarded over the years. He has continued to interview comedians, and published two books filled with those conversations. This is how I first got to know him. I had long wanted to find a way to [get Mel Brooks into the pages of \*The Atlantic\*](#). I knew that Apatow shared my adoration of Brooks, and figured he was more likely to pick up a call from Apatow than from me. So I got in touch with Apatow to ask if he would do the interview. He said yes right away—and Brooks said yes to Apatow.

Apatow is now making a documentary about Brooks, while also developing films about Norm Macdonald and Maria Bamford. These projects follow his documentaries *The Zen Diaries of Garry Shandling*; *George Carlin's American Dream*; and *Bob and Don: A Love Story*, about the friendship between Bob Newhart and Don Rickles. The same thread runs through all of these films: a deep curiosity about how people, despite their flaws and fears, find a way to keep going.

Apatow is drawn to comedians who deal directly with suffering. He executive-produced Gary Gulman's stand-up special *The Great Depresh*, as well as Ricky Velez's special, *Here's Everything*, both of which are steeped in pain. When I caught up with Gulman recently, he described Apatow to me as a hybrid of Springsteen and Hal Ashby. Springsteen because of his relentlessness; Ashby because “there’s always that gut punch in Judd’s movies,” Gulman told me. “Even the ones that are almost absurd in the amount or the concentration of comedy.” Maybe especially those ones.

Not long ago, I had a conversation with Kelly Carlin, daughter of George, about what makes someone become a comedian in the first place. She had gotten to know Apatow when he [made the documentary about her father](#), and had known Shandling as well. It is clear to her why Shandling had taken Apatow under his wing. “I really do think he saw that Judd was a very soulful, human guy,” she said, and that his reverence for comedy was real. For people like her father and Shandling, when you make something that you hope will make people laugh, and it works, “it’s like all’s right in the universe.”

“It’s a form of church,” Carlin went on. “There’s something about that shared space. My dad used to say that when you’re laughing, your heart and your mind are open.”

Shandling, who died from a blood clot in 2016, did not come easily to the wisdom that Apatow so admired him for. He spent his life working through the childhood death of his older brother from cystic fibrosis, and struggled to maintain relationships.

Apatow has experienced his own losses. During one of our conversations, he told me what it was like to be with his mother in the hospital as she was dying. She had ovarian cancer, and had developed sepsis. It was a terrible night and everything seemed to be falling apart. Right before she died, she looked up at her son and said: “Can you believe this shit?”

“That’s what comedy is,” Apatow told me. “We just have to laugh at how hard it is, and also really enjoy when we get a good moment.” The story made me think of a page in one of Shandling’s old diaries that Apatow is obsessed with. On it, Shandling had scrawled, in all caps: “GIVE MORE, GIVE WHAT YOU DIDN’T GET, LOVE MORE.”

I once asked Apatow if he tends to juggle multiple projects at once because, on some level, he thinks about Shandling, who died at age 66, and hears a clock ticking. Apatow said that wasn’t it. (“My dad is a young 83 so I feel I am going to live long, like the Russians in the old yogurt commercials,” he said.) He works so hard because he understands that most things never get made in the first place, and that plenty more get canceled when they shouldn’t.

For all of his success, Apatow still dreads failure. It’s much harder for anyone to make big comedic films than it used to be, even for Apatow, though Universal is fast-tracking his latest—a still-untitled film he is directing about a country-music star who has hit rock bottom. He told me that, long ago, he decided he would be content as the Elvis Costello of comedy: not the person who sells out Madison Square Garden but the person who makes great art for its own sake, for an audience who appreciates it, even if that audience is smaller. But several of his friends told me that he quietly worries about staying relevant.

Recently, I told Apatow that I'd come to believe he is the most well-adjusted anxious person I've ever known—few people can worry as much as he does and still come off as easygoing. "That's just a solid facade," he told me. "That's why I probably just am drowning in pop-psychology books and religious books—because I don't get me at all. I just don't."

What Apatow has learned, what he knows for sure, is that the good and the bad will come. No matter what you do, no matter how hard you work or how talented you are, life entails suffering. But you get to choose what you do with pain. If you surround yourself with people you love and respect and believe in, if you refuse to take yourself too seriously, then you begin to see that the darkness contains more light than might seem possible.

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*This article appears in the [October 2025](#) print edition with the headline “The Invention of Judd Apatow.”*

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# A Tale of Sex and Intrigue in Imperial Kyoto

**A thousand years ago, Murasaki Shikibu wrote <em>The Tale of Genji</em>, the world's first novel.  
Who was she?**

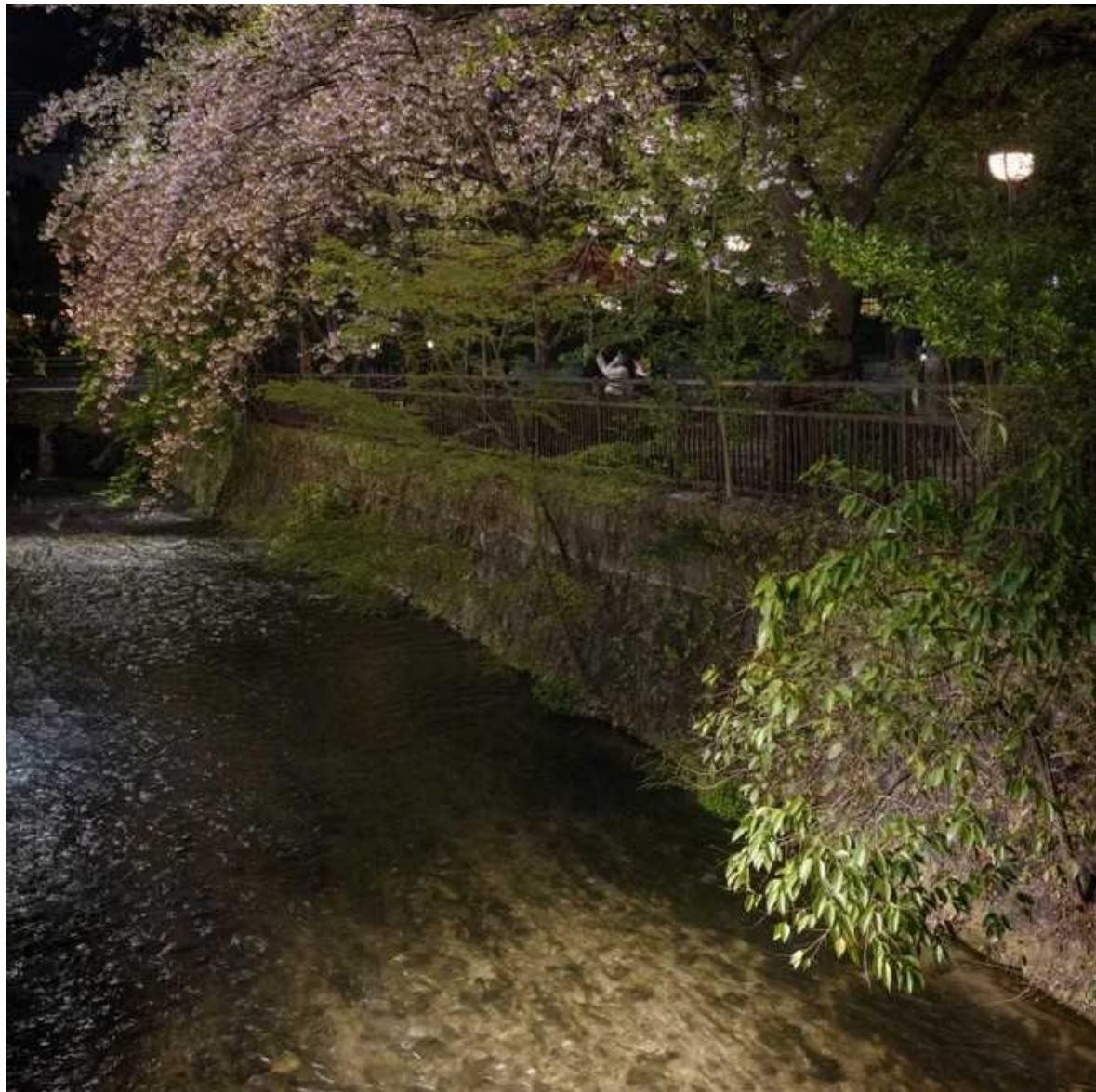
by Lauren Groff

In mid-April, I flew to Japan because I'd become obsessed with an 11th-century Japanese novel called *The Tale of Genji*. I also had a frantic longing to escape my country. At its best, literature is a way to loft readers so far above the burning present that we can see a vast landscape of time below us. From the clouds, we watch the cyclical turn of seasons and history, and can take a sort of bitter comfort in the fact that humans have always been a species that simply can't help setting our world on fire.

I was bewildered that *The Tale of Genji* had such a hold on me at this particular moment: It is a wild, confounding work that [many consider to be the first novel ever written](#), by a mysterious woman whose true name we'll never know, but whom we call Murasaki Shikibu, or Lady Murasaki. The novel is more than 1,000 pages long, more than 1,000 years old, and larded with enigmatic poetry. It's about people whose lives differ so much—in custom, religion, education, wealth, privilege, politics, hierarchy, aesthetics—from the lives of 21st-century Americans that most of their concerns have become nearly illegible to us through the scrim of time and language.

Even so, this novel, which I first encountered almost three decades ago, returned insistently. Once again, I was caught up in its radically unfamiliar world and literary form. Unlike most Western books, Lady Murasaki's tale isn't guided by an Aristotelian arc of action that steadily rises to a climax, followed by a denouement. Instead, the novel is episodic and patterned with recurring images and ideas: swiftly fading cherry blossoms, clouds moving through the sky, autumn leaves, the aching transience of life on this planet. The spirits of jealous lovers possess and sicken primary characters; scandals in one generation echo, transformed, in the next. Nine centuries before Gabriel García Márquez was born, Lady Murasaki infused her story with magical realism. Classics resonate through time for a reason, but what *The Tale of Genji* was saying to me so urgently was far too faint to hear. I wanted to track down the ghost of its author in her own city, now Kyoto, which was then the capital of imperial Japan. I wanted to get her to speak to me a little louder.

Medieval women have long fascinated me, particularly artistic medieval women whose work seems to push against the limits of their era and, as a result, show the places they write about in a strange new light. In my 2021 novel, [\*Matrix\*](#), I imagined a life of the 12th-century writer Marie de France, the first known female poet in the French language, whose *Lais*, a series of courtly poems, brims with weird vitality, and about whom only two facts are known: that her name was Marie, and that she came from France but lived in England. I have lived in both of those countries, but the Heian era (794–1185) in Japan is thrillingly distant to my imagination.



Kyoto at night (Takako Kido for *The Atlantic*)

What we know of the contours of Heian imperial-court culture makes *The Tale of Genji*'s very existence miraculous. The lives of high-born women within the court were both isolated and political: They were pawns in a clan system by which men acquired social status and power through marriage. Polygamy prevailed in the aristocracy, and a husband's various wives were ranked in importance. Once married, women in the ruling class lived almost entirely in seclusion, and were forced to hide their faces behind screens and fans. Almost no court women were taught to read or write Chinese, the language of the imperial bureaucracy.

In response, women in the court developed a written form of Japanese, which was still relatively new when Lady Murasaki, likely born in 973, was growing up. Along with monogatari, fictional tales drawn from the oral tradition, the first fully Japanese prose texts were women's autobiographical writings. The other famous work from the era that remains famous today was a racy diary about the Heian court, *The Pillow Book*, by a contemporary of Lady Murasaki named Sei Shōnagon. Men in the imperial aristocracy also avidly read texts in Japanese, but nobody, male or female, bothered to retain for the historical record the actual name of *The Tale of Genji*'s author, even though she was recognized during her lifetime as a supremely skilled writer. She was given her pen name, which means "purple," in homage to one of the central female characters in her tale: the child-wife—and dearest beloved—of the eponymous Genji, who is a prince of both imperial and common blood. *Shikibu*, which means "ministry of ceremonials," has nothing to do with the writer, either: It refers to the position of her father at court.

On the night I arrived in Kyoto with my husband, I was delighted to bump my suitcase down Teramachi Street, where Lady Murasaki is rumored to have lived with her father at some point in her youth. In the dark, Kyoto is at its most magical. It emanates a deep softness and hush, despite the hordes of tourists eager to touch the layers of history that the city so conscientiously maintains. The buildings are traditionally wood, and so most of Kyoto has been repeatedly subject to fires, razed and rebuilt many times over the past millennium. Still, the streets of the city's old sections, though immaculate and nearly odorless, seem to retain some of their medieval flavor, with small buildings pressed closely together, and tiny storefronts on the bottom floors gently illuminated by round lanterns.

Teramachi Street, much of which is now a covered arcade, surely looks nothing like it did in Lady Murasaki's time, yet its refined-but-accessible vibe tracks with the known outlines of the writer's life. She was born into a family waning in power, a minor offshoot of the most prominent clan at the time, the Fujiwaras. Her pedigree was literary: Her father, grandfather, great-grandfather, and brother were all celebrated poets. Her diary offers intimate glimpses of her private thoughts. It tells how, as a young girl, she eavesdropped on her father as he taught her brother Chinese, and proved herself the far better student. "What a pity she was not born a man!" she describes her father saying. To be a woman fluent in Chinese was so freakish

that she “pretended to be incapable of reading even the inscriptions on the screens” that divided rooms and shielded women’s bodies from view. She “worried what people would think if they heard such rumors” of her abilities.

In the year 996, still unmarried at a time when marriage in very young womanhood was expected for the aristocracy, she accompanied her father north to Echizen; he’d been appointed a regional governor, which was considered something of a dishonor, as power diminished with distance from the capital. She returned to Kyoto in her mid-20s to marry a much older relative, Fujiwara no Nobutaka, who is vividly described in *The Pillow Book* as a flamboyant character with many other wives. He died two years later in an epidemic, leaving her with a young daughter who would eventually become a poet known as Daini no Sanmi. During her widowhood, in the early 1000s, out of grief or boredom, Lady Murasaki began writing *The Tale of Genji* in Japanese.

Because *The Tale of Genji* described scandalous love affairs, reading it became a craze, something like watching a prestige television series today. Around the same time that its circulating chapters won admirers, Lady Murasaki was summoned to the aesthetically refined court of Emperor Ichijō. There she entered the service of Shōshi, the second empress and the daughter of the most powerful man of the day, Fujiwara no Michinaga, the controlling figure behind the emperor’s throne. Shōshi surrounded herself with ladies talented in music, drawing, and poetry, and when she discovered that Lady Murasaki could read and write Chinese, she asked for secret lessons.

Lady Murasaki’s diary suggests a sort of singing-bird entrapment—a sense of being under immense pressure to add new chapters to her tale; Michinaga would even go into her private space to steal her work in progress. She was lonely at court and reserved among the competitive women. One moment in her diary has always stood out to me, when the careful screen of convention slips and a piece of the too-bright self flares through. She is talking about the ladies of the court and how they see her: “No one liked her,” she writes, ventriloquizing their views of her. “They all said she was pretentious, awkward, difficult to approach, prickly, too fond of her tales, haughty, prone to versifying, disdainful, cantankerous, and scornful.” Sometime after 1013,

the year she may have turned 40 and the date of the last mention of her in court records, she died.



The Kodo Hall of the Ishiyama-dera Temple (Takako Kido for *The Atlantic*)

I discovered an onsen, or a hot collective bath segregated by gender, in the basement of our ryokan, a small traditional inn, in an old part of Kyoto. My husband and I descended from our room in slippers and traditional cotton robes (yukatas), which we'd been instructed to fold left over right before fastening them with the embroidered obi, because right over left is how the Japanese dress their dead. Then we scrubbed ourselves pink with bucketfuls

of water before climbing into the pool. It was very late, and the heat drew out the travel weariness from my bones. I floated and dreamed, and I had an inkling that, though my love of Lady Murasaki could be explained only through beautiful abstraction—by meeting her mind in her work—I might begin to understand something tangible about her through the wordless animal body.

*The Tale of Genji*'s early chapters are rooted in fairy-tale monogatari, but the book soon metamorphoses into its own strange thing, a courtly romance that follows Prince Genji over his half century of life, and then, after Genji's death, takes up the lives of the next generation. Genji, called "The Radiant Prince," is the son of an emperor and his most beloved wife, who has no powerful family to protect her child. Like Lady Murasaki herself, Genji is both an insider and an outsider. As a young boy, he enters the court with the rank of a commoner, but he becomes by far the most beautiful and talented of men, easily outshining his half brother, the future emperor. He is also wildly, and audaciously, sexy: As a teenager, he seduces and has a son with one of the wives of his father, the current emperor. Though Genji goes on to marry several times, he continues to make a game of seducing as many of the most beautiful women at court as he can, a game as much of spiritual and poetic yearning as it is of bodily lust. When he's about 26 years old, his scandalous behavior leads him to years of exile in Suma, by the seaside. There he begins another relationship, one that produces a child who becomes an empress. When he returns to court, restored from disgrace, he never stops chasing women.

My husband and I rise early; even in Japan, we were up with the birds. Nothing opened for hours, so we descended to the onsen again, then went out on a quest for coffee—not easy to find in Japan before 8 a.m., we learned, unless you like cold coffee in cans from the vending machines on every street. This is how we discovered the wonders of the Japanese 7-Eleven, full of tasty fresh foods such as onigiri, seaweed-covered rice pyramids, and the internationally and justly famous egg-salad sandwiches, with their incredibly soft white bread and tangy, smooth egg filling, which became our favorite anytime snack. I had a surreal moment while we sat on the clean-swept Kyoto curb, drinking hot coffee and eating egg-salad sandwiches, when the barely dawn-touched streets were entirely empty of people. I suddenly felt myself living outside time for a brief spell, not within

the 21st century or any of the other centuries visible in Kyoto's smooth palimpsest, but within the hovering dual-time that is the experience of reading a great novel.

I do think *The Tale of Genji* is a great novel, and some of its greatness comes from its self-contradictions. Prince Genji is held up as a courtly ideal, yet he's also a renegade; he's an amorous adventurer, yet also deeply attached to one of his beloved wives, Murasaki. The narrative sporadically darts into his consciousness, reflecting a conflicted conscience and a degree of interiority that make the book revolutionary. I believe interiority is necessary to define a novel as a novel, and its absence disqualifies the other books that scholars have proposed as alternative "first novels" in the history of literature, such as Apuleius's *The Golden Ass*.

Interiority is especially fraught in the evocation of Genji and his young wife Murasaki's relationship. He discovers her as an enchanting child of about 10, kidnaps her, secludes her in a lonely house, molds her into the perfectly accomplished wife he wants, and marries her when she is a teenager, which the narrative presents as something of a romantic coup. But the prose simultaneously makes clear what is happening from Murasaki's point of view: This man, who first presented himself to her as her adoptive father, comes to her bed when she is still a child and violates her painfully, against her will and to her immense distress. None of the people who care for her lifts a finger to help her.

Genji pursues many other affairs, then suddenly the narrative reveals that he has died at the age of 52. At this point, *The Tale of Genji* does a spin in the air: There are 13 more chapters, set primarily in Uji, a city south of Kyoto, which feature two men of the next generation vying for the love of the young princess Ukifune. She is driven to despair by their caddish treatment, and her suffering becomes the focus of the narration. This final section closes the book cryptically and counter-romantically—Ukifune renounces the world and becomes a nun—and delivered a jolt when I first read it, because it goes against any epiphanic or revelatory ending that I've been taught by Western narratives to expect.

[From the November 1958 issue: Arthur Waley on translating \*The Tale of Genji\*](#)

When I returned to the book with the idea of visiting Kyoto, I began to read the final chapters as the novel's firm renunciation of itself. The tale turns its back savagely on its previous concerns, saying that the things it had taught us all along to think of as so important—the heartache, the rise and fall of fortunes, the attention to aesthetics—in the end actually mean nothing; it is as if the author has lost patience with male callousness, upheld for so many pages as the signature of courtly elegance.

The reader of any text provides half of its meaning. To me, an American woman in the early 21st century, prickly and free-spirited Lady Murasaki now appears to have been chafing under conformist pressures in the Heian court. I read her radical evocations of characters' internal states as though they are eruptions of the author's own rebellious soul. Perhaps this subversive interpretation is wish fulfillment on my part. But Kyoto itself seemed to agree with it. The city is a place for people who love history and appreciate ambiguity. Shinto shrines are everywhere, meticulously maintained and restored, robust memento mori of the many generations of humans who have lived and died adoring them. The April cherry trees, with their brief pink opulence, seem infused with the spirit of *mono no aware*—the Japanese idea of the transience of things, the gentle sadness yet also the beauty of impermanence. This is a place where Lady Murasaki's work has never disappeared, yet also has never ceased to take on new shapes and transform to fit the current moment.

By dawn, we were driving along the Kamo River next to runners confettiied by the last of the cherry blossoms. We were joined by Takako Kido, our spark plug of a photographer, and her friend (and fellow hip-hop dancer) from college, Masaaki Kaga, who had once been a historical tour guide for schoolchildren, and had been roped into being our driver that day. When I asked them about *The Tale of Genji*, Takako shrugged. "Everyone knows *Genji*," she said. "It's in our bones." But neither she nor Masa had read the book in decades.

As a millennium-old, omnipresent reference in Japan, like Shakespeare's work in the Anglophone world, the book "no longer has to be actually read in order to have been 'read,'" Dennis Washburn, a professor at Dartmouth College, writes in an introduction to [his 2015 translation](#) (in my opinion the best one, with its clear and accessible prose). Soon after *The Tale of Genji*

appeared, it inspired fan fiction and painted illustrations, and artists in every century since have used the tale as a prism to refract the aesthetic, political, and spiritual concerns of their times. Its legacy is everywhere you turn—in Noh drama, erotic parodies, Buddhist rituals, advertisements, manga books, games, anime films. At the Tale of Genji Museum, in Uji, we watched one film that featured a teenage girl who turns into a cat and ends up in the arms of Genji with a bizarre expression of ahegao, or “sexual ecstasy,” on its face. The homage to the novel is eclectic and ever-evolving, both irreverent and faithful. One can find echoes of the work, too, in places frequented long ago by Lady Murasaki and her characters that can be visited today.

It was still dawn when Masa brought us to one of the oldest Shinto shrines in Japan, the Shimogamo, the original version of which was built in 678 and would have already been antique by the time Lady Murasaki venerated its deities there. Shintoism is an Indigenous animist belief system that predates Buddhism’s arrival in Japan, and Shinto sites of worship now exist comfortably alongside Buddhist temples. The forest that surrounds the shrine itself is a kami, or “powerful spirit,” and when we watched people, out giving their Shiba Inus an early-morning walk, bowing to individual trees that wore rope belts from which dangled paper lightning bolts, we discovered that the trees were also kamis. Genji visits these woods before his exile to Suma and composes a poem wishing that the forest might one day see the injustice against him reversed. As the sun rose, the vermillion paint that decorates most Shinto shrines to ward off evil and misfortune began to shine dazzlingly. At the main shrine, Masa taught us how to pray: throw a small coin into a slatted wooden trough, bow twice, clap twice, pray, then bow again. We prayed, feeling a great spiritual potency in the place, and because it never hurts to send sparks of gratitude into the world.

Kamis can have negative power, too, and shrines are not always portals to peace. In *Genji*, the Kamigamo shrine—loud and crowded and too bright in the hot mid-afternoon sun when we arrived there—appears often, sometimes as a place of conflict. In a memorable scene, one of Genji’s lovers, the intensely jealous Lady Rokujō, and his first wife, Aoi, have both come in ox-drawn carts to Kamigamo to see Genji ride by during the Aoi Matsuri, or wild-ginger festival, and are soon jostling for the best viewing spot. Rokujō’s jealous spirit eventually enters and sickens Aoi’s body until she dies. Later, young Murasaki is also possessed by that bad spirit.

We were too early for the wild-ginger festival, which takes place in mid-May, when celebrants in Heian-era costumes process to the shrine from Kyoto's Imperial Palace. I was happy to be spared the crowds jostling for views. The palace itself, which burned down many times over the centuries and in 1855 was rebuilt in the Heian style, is breathtaking in scale, with astonishing roofs curving up at the corners, constructed of layers of cypress bark lashed into place with bamboo strips. Its surrounding lawns of raked gravel and its park of pruned trees made it appear even bigger.

Takako had never visited before—"this is an entirely new Japan for me," she murmured. A moment later, a loud alarm went off: She had leaped across the moat surrounding the wall to take a photo, and leaped nimbly back, laughing, after she was scolded by the guards. Inside the palace, the rooms were dark and very large; in the days of the Heian court, they would have been partitioned off by screens and curtains. I thought of Murasaki Shikibu trying to write in this place, separated from the noises and voices and smells of others by thin silk, trying to lose herself and her worries in the composition of her text. I saw that the book she was writing would have been another screen between herself and the world, even as the fame the book brought would have, paradoxically, served to bind her even tighter to that world.

Although Lady Murasaki wrote in her diary of her loneliness and alienation at court, one of her childhood homes was only a couple of miles away. Rozan-ji is a dark-wood Tendai Buddhist temple on the grounds where her family house is said to have been. Fire destroyed the original residence centuries ago, but in rooms off the temple's quiet courtyard is a small exhibition of scrolls and gilded clamshells decorated with scenes from the novel. A sign at the front gate lays claim to Lady Murasaki, proudly calling her a Great Woman of The World.

Masa brought us to another quiet courtyard just off a busy road, where we found the grave site of Lady Murasaki. Inside were two neatly maintained mounds, with two markers. Her ancient bones are thought to lie beneath the big mound; under the smaller one are those of Ono no Takamura, a poet who lived two centuries before she did, and who was considered to be a protector of souls sent to languish in hell. No one knows how they were paired up, but legend has it that Lady Murasaki's admirers, fearful that her scandalous

book had consigned her to punishment in the afterlife, put them side by side so that he could help her travel out of the underworld. I said a quiet thank-you to her remains for the book I love so much. I was answered by birdsong and traffic on the street beyond the walls. The solemnity was broken by a garbage truck putttering by, singing out in a recorded loop a warning in the voice of a small Japanese child.

Perhaps the most important location for the book is an eighth-century temple called Ishiyama-dera, east of Kyoto on a hillside overlooking Lake Biwa, the largest body of fresh water in Japan. The myth is that Lady Murasaki, during a visit there after her husband died, was struck with the inspiration to write her chef d'oeuvre while gazing up at an August moon. Although Ishiyama-dera is the most stunning of the shrines we saw, with hiking paths and high views of the lake, we encountered very few other tourists, perhaps because the trip from Kyoto requires two train transfers. The grounds were dotted with statues of Lady Murasaki, all of which depict a woman with a large forehead and loose hair, her writing brush in hand. As soon as we entered the gates, I felt a strange, holy energy.



The garden at the Ginkaku-ji Temple (Takako Kido for *The Atlantic*)

I believe that places, like people, hold memory, and when place memory announces itself, it does so through the body. A tiny museum on the grounds displayed ancient scrolls on which Heian hands had written, sculptures of ancient Buddhas to which Lady Murasaki might have prayed. The temple of Ishiyama-dera rising up from huge, jagged slabs of wollastonite; the pagodas perched like little hats atop the hill; the dangling purple wisteria; the lake glittering below; the way the cool wind and the April sunshine filtered through the leaves and pressed upon our skin—an ambiguous understanding that I'd been searching for arrived. There, my body recognized something of

the long-gone body of Lady Murasaki, who had also once stood, an animal like me, seeing the stones, smelling the woods and the lake, feeling the breeze and the warmth on her flesh. I was gripped by the truth of something I'd known only intellectually: how much courage Lady Murasaki, as a woman in her era, had to summon, how much loneliness and insecurity she must have felt, when she dedicated her life to literature in Heian Japan.

We climbed the steps to the great temple, where we found a statue of Kannon, the Buddhist deity of compassion and mercy. We tossed the money, rang the bells, clapped, and prayed to Kannon for the sake of our wounded world.

By the end of our trip to Japan, I knew less than ever about the real Murasaki Shikibu. She did not visit me as a ghost in the night. Although I sensed in Kyoto a more rebellious artist than I'd imagined her to be from her work, I didn't hear a clear message from her to blow up the poisonous narratives that have created the tragedies of the current age. I didn't understand much more of the heartache of her life, the person beyond the words.

Yet my body understood *The Tale of Genji* and its marvelous writer far better. First through the sense of taste: At a ryokan near Lake Biwa, famous for its geothermal onsen, we ate a kaiseki dinner, which is a seasonally inspired sequence of courses, their flavors and textures and aromas carefully choreographed. There was no Aristotelian arc in this meal, no central main dish. Every course was equally important, to be savored in its own way. Soup gave way to sashimi so fresh that I could swear it twitched, and this gave way to simmered salted fish, which gave way to a grilled course, and on and on, for three exquisite hours. The meal was episodic, patterned, refusing the very concept of climax in its devotion to the moment.

The sense of sight taught me other things when, at the Zen Buddhist Tenryuji Temple, we walked through the most stunning garden I've ever encountered. Japanese gardens aren't subservient to symmetry in the way that many European gardens are. They aren't built around any central focus point. Instead, they are created with keen attention to texture and color and season. The one at Tenryuji is said to remain as it was when it was built in the 14th century, when the designer and head priest, Musō Soseki, integrated

the surrounding hills into the garden's pattern, in a tradition called shakkei, or "borrowed scenery." As a result, any place in the garden has its own perfect view; every spot holds something new to contemplate. The neat lines of raked gravel around the buildings bring awareness to the present moment and to the impermanence of all things. As I walked its paths, I became hyperconscious of pattern, repetition, texture, transience, the shifting of viewpoint: koi, pond, stone, azalea, camellia, pine, weeping cherry, hill beyond in its gradients of green. I felt I had been given a three-dimensional map of *The Tale of Genji*.

And then, at a tea-and-meditation ceremony at the Shunkō-in Temple, the Reverend Takafumi Zenryu Kawakami, in his splendid purple robes, gave voice to the things that my body had been telling me in its wise, oblique way. We sat on cushions in a room that opened out onto a cool garden, and were led through a long meditation, after which the reverend spoke, telling us that of course there is no single definition of enlightenment. The self is a shifting, inconstant phenomenon, brain and body ever transforming in time and space, with no clear delineation between what is self and what is other. Westerners want certainty but we should embrace ambiguity, he told us; ambiguity is part of nature. He said that to taste tea that has been steeped in cold water, first we should taste with the tip of the tongue, then with the back of the tongue. First you taste umami, then you taste the floral. First you taste the bitter, then you taste the sweet.

## Travel Notes

### Kurama Onsen

The closest one gets to a genuine geothermally heated onsen in Kyoto is 30 minutes outside the city. Canny travelers go straight from checking into their hotels to the electric train up the mountain to watch the sunset while steaming away their jetlag in the outdoor baths. We were too tired to do this our first night and regretted it for the rest of our trip. Learn from our mistake! This onsen is said to be especially gorgeous in winter, when snow is falling. As is true at most onsen, Kurama's baths are separated by gender, and although tattoos are forbidden at many geothermal public baths in Japan, people we know had no problem with their body art here.

## 520 Kuramahonmachi, Sakyo Ward, Kyoto, 601-1111, Japan

Tea and Zen Meditation Ceremony at the Shunkō-in Temple

*Shunkō-in* means “Temple of the Ray of Spring Light,” and Reverend Takafumi Zenryu Kawakami, in his purple robes, is also a brilliant ray of sunshine, funny and wry and so full of insight that you’ll wish this experience were twice as long. He leads tourists—seated on cushions (though chairs are available for the stiff in hip)—through two short Zen meditations; shows them how to taste excellent green tea from Uji; gives a tour of the temple; and delivers a philosophical lecture with so much to chew on that you’ll find yourself recalling his words months later. The gardens outside the meditation room are full of flowers and butterflies. The gilded screens inside are decorated with cypress trees and cranes and peonies, the work of the 19th-century painter Kanō Eigaku. This is a calm respite to help you gather your forces before visiting yet more shrines.

## 42 Hanazonomyoshinjicho, Ukyo Ward, Kyoto, 616-8035, Japan

Kyoto Handicraft Center

One of the lessons from Reverend Takafumi’s talk was about how, traditionally in Japan, art and craft are the same; there’s no hierarchy of makers. Hold a perfectly balanced, handcrafted knife in your hand, and you’ll understand how an everyday object can be as much a work of art as a Picasso painting. Although plenty of stores in Kyoto specialize in specific crafts, the sheer range and diversity of the goods in this quiet, well-lit place —ceramic tea sets, graceful prints of birds and flowers, silk kimonos—will have you buying a bigger suitcase to get all your gifts home.

## 17 Shogoin Entomicho, Sakyo Ward, Kyoto, 606-8323, Japan

Late-Blooming Cherry Blossoms at the Ninna-ji Temple

The Japanese take the sakura (cherry blossom) so seriously that the Japan Weather Association puts out a nationwide sakura forecast every spring. If you miss the peak in Kyoto, the Ninna-ji Temple, in the northwest of the city, has late-blooming Omuro-zakura varietals beyond mid-April. I found

the experience surreal: It was very hard not to be moved by the pink field of cherry blossoms swaying in the wind under Ninna-ji's picturesque five-story Edo-period pagoda, and at the same time, I felt as if I had somehow found myself a three-dimensional postcard picturing the most Japanese experience possible.

[33 Omuroouchi, Ukyo Ward, Kyoto, 616-8092, Japan](#)

### Ryō-shō

Michelin-starred restaurants abound in Kyoto, but it's hard to find one as intimate (only eight counter seats and a private room) and inexpensive, with food as fresh, as the two-starred Ryō-shō, located down an atmospheric street, lit by red lanterns, in Gionmachi Minamigawa. Chef Makoto Fujiwara creates a beautiful, leisurely, many-course omakase meal right in front of diners; pairs each course with a carefully selected beverage; and personally escorts diners to the door at the end of the meal to thank them. The spirit of hospitality was part of the meal's flavor. I'm pescatarian—I don't believe that fish have souls—but I couldn't resist a bite of my husband's Himegyu beef, which was soft and buttery and so excellent that I didn't feel bad about eating a soulful creature: The chef's extreme care seemingly mitigated the sacrifice. *Ryō-shō* means "to eclipse the sky," and each luscious mouthful is enough to momentarily make you forget about anything other than what you're tasting.

[570-166 Gionmachi Minamigawa, Higashiyama Ward, Kyoto, 605-0074, Japan](#)

### Nijō Castle

I focused on the Heian period during our trip to Kyoto and found the Imperial Palace overwhelming, but Nijō Castle, built in the Edo period (1603–1868), the time of the Shōgun rulers, is hard not to be cowed by. This is intentional. The Ninomaru Palace within it was the first shōgun's residence while he was in Kyoto, and it was designed with maximal awe in mind. Each room—I have no idea how many there were, because rooms led onto rooms, and I soon went into a fugue state—had a superabundance of gilded screens and wood carvings. The floors are called "nightingale" floors,

and they sing underfoot in little bird chirps; some say the sound effect is an anti-theft measure, but in reality, it's a result of nails squeaking against floorboard clamps. The twittering noise, the scent of tourists' bodies pressed together, the darkness of the wood, the minimal windows, the elaborateness of the decor—all can make a 21st-century visitor feel as if they're walking through a fold in time.

### [541 Nijojocho, Nakagyo Ward, Kyoto, 604-8301, Japan](#)

#### Ponto-chō Alley

The wildest, most thrilling meals we had in Kyoto were the accidental ones. We loved the experience of wandering into a restaurant, hovering our Google translator over the menu, and pointing to whatever looked interesting, or like something we couldn't possibly get anywhere at home in Florida. I had the best smoky eel of my life in a place with large plastic bins where strange, spiky, unidentifiable (by me) sea creatures sat waiting to be plunked into baskets and fried. This alleyway, right next to Kyoto's main Kamo River, is packed with tiny, pristine bars and yakitori, an excellent place to sit outside and watch people—of all ages and nationalities and levels of tipsiness—flow by.

### [Nakagyo Ward, Kyoto, 604-8014, Japan](#)

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*This article appears in the [October 2025](#) print edition with the headline “The Ghost of Lady Murasaki.” When you buy a book using a link on this page, we receive a commission. Thank you for supporting The Atlantic.*

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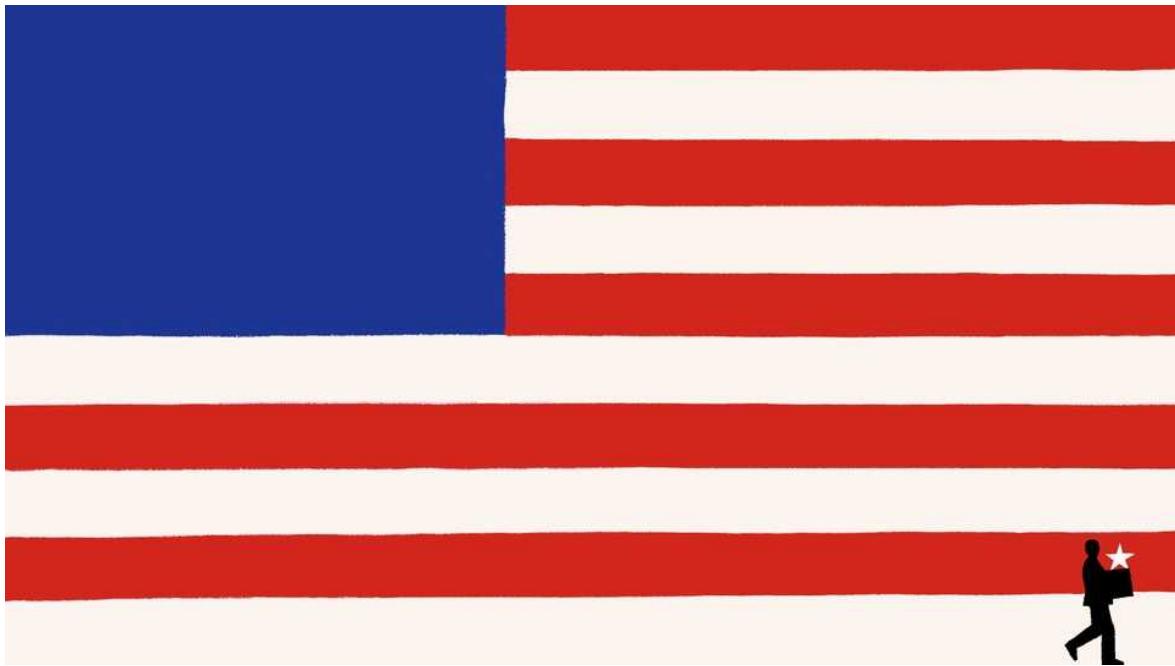
# Dispatches

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-

# A Letter to America's Discarded Public Servants

## You all deserved better.

by William J. Burns



*Sign up for [National Security](#), a newsletter featuring coverage of rising authoritarianism, military intelligence, and geopolitical conflicts.*

Dear Colleagues,

For three and a half decades as a career diplomat, I walked across the lobby of the State Department countless times—inspired by the Stars and Stripes and humbled by the names of patriots etched into our memorial wall. It was heartbreakng to see so many of you crossing that same lobby in tears following the [reduction in force in July](#), carrying cardboard boxes with

family photos and the everyday remains of proud careers in public service. After years of hard jobs in hard places—defusing crises, tending alliances, opening markets, and helping Americans in distress—you deserved better.

The same is true for so many other public servants who have been fired or pushed out in recent months: the remarkable intelligence officers I was proud to lead as CIA director, the senior military officers I worked with every day, the development specialists I served alongside overseas, and too many others with whom we've served at home and abroad.

The work you all did was [unknown to many Americans](#), rarely well understood or well appreciated. And under the guise of reform, you all got caught in the crossfire of a retribution campaign—of a war on public service and expertise.

Those of us who have served in public institutions understand that serious reforms are overdue. Of course we should remove bureaucratic hurdles that prevent agencies like the State Department from operating efficiently. But there is a smart way and a dumb way to tackle reform, a humane way and an intentionally traumatizing way.

If today's process were truly about sensible reform, career officers—who typically rotate roles every few years—wouldn't have been fired simply because their positions have fallen out of political favor.

If this process were truly about sensible reform, crucial experts in technology or China policy in whom our country has invested so much wouldn't have been pushed out.

If this process were truly about reform, it would have addressed not only the manifestations of bloat and inefficiencies but also their causes—including congressionally mandated budget items.

And if this process were truly about sensible reform, you and your families wouldn't have been treated with gleeful indignity. One of your colleagues, a career diplomat, was given just six hours to clear out his office. "When I was expelled from Russia," he said, "at least Putin gave me six days to leave."

No, this is not about reform. It is about retribution. It is about breaking people and breaking institutions by sowing fear and mistrust throughout our government. It is about paralyzing public servants—making them apprehensive about what they say, how it might be interpreted, and who might report on them. It is about deterring anyone from daring to speak truth to power.

I served six presidents: three Republicans and three Democrats. It was my duty to faithfully implement their decisions, even when I didn't agree with them. Career public servants have a profound obligation to execute the decisions of elected leaders, whether we voted for them or not; that discipline is essential to any democratic system.

Many of your fellow officers purged at the State Department were doing just that—faithfully executing decisions that ran contrary to their professional advice and preferences. They may not have supported the [cancellation of Fulbright scholarships](#), the [resettlement of Afrikaners](#), the [expulsion of the Afghan partners](#) who fought and bled with us for two decades, but they implemented those policies anyway. Still, those officers were fired.

Tensions between elected political leaders and career public servants are hardly new. Each of the presidents I served harbored periodic concerns about the reliability and sluggishness of government bureaucracy. Although individual officers could be remarkably resourceful, the State Department as an institution was rarely accused of being too agile or too full of initiative. There is a difference, however, between fixing bureaucratic malaise and hammering professional public servants into politicized robots.

### *Good on Paper: Maybe we do need DOGE*

That's what autocrats do. They cow public servants into submission—and in doing so, they create a closed system that is free of opposing views and inconvenient concerns. Their policy making, their ability to realize their aims, suffers as a result.

Vladimir Putin's foolish decision to invade Ukraine in February 2022 offers a powerful example. Putin operated within a tight circle in the run-up to the war. He relied on a handful of long-serving advisers who either shared his

flawed assumptions about Ukraine's ability to resist and the West's willingness to support it, or had learned a long time ago that it was not career-enhancing to question Putin's judgment. The results, especially in the first year of the war, were catastrophic for Russia.

For all its flaws and imperfections, our system still allows disciplined dissent—and it's better for it. Just as it is the duty of public servants to carry out orders we don't agree with, it is also our duty to be honest about our concerns within appropriate channels—or to resign if we can't in good conscience follow those orders. Sound decision making suffers if experts feel like they cannot offer their candid or contrary insights.

I could not have done my job as an ambassador, as a deputy secretary of state, or as the CIA director unless my colleagues were straightforward about their views. When I led secret talks with the Iranians more than a decade ago, I needed the unvarnished advice of diplomats and intelligence officers to help me navigate the complex world of nuclear programs and Iranian decision making. I needed colleagues to question my judgment sometimes, and offer creative, hard-nosed solutions.

There is a real danger in punishing dissent—not only to our profession, but to our country. Once you start, policy can become an extension of court politics, with little airing of alternative views or consideration of second- and third-order consequences.

Like some of you, I'm old enough to have lived through other efforts at reform and streamlining. After the end of the Cold War, budgets were cut significantly, and the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency and the U.S. Information Agency were absorbed into the State Department. Years later, when I was serving as the American ambassador in Moscow, we reduced staff by about 15 percent over three years. None of those was a perfect process, but they were conducted in a thoughtful way, respectful of public servants and their expertise.

Long before any of us served in government, amid the escalation of the Cold War, in the 1950s, McCarthyism provided a vivid example of an alternative approach, full of deliberate trauma and casual cruelty. A generation of China specialists was falsely accused of being Communist sympathizers and driven

[from the State Department](#), kneecapping American diplomacy toward Beijing for years. Today’s “reform” process—at State and elsewhere across the federal government—bears much more resemblance to McCarthy’s costly excesses than to any other era in which I’ve served. And it’s much more damaging.

We live in a new era—one that is marked by major-power competition and a revolution in technology, and one that is more confusing, complicated, and combustible than any time before. I believe the United States still has a better hand to play than any of our rivals, unless we squander the moment and throw away some of our best cards. That’s exactly what the current administration is doing.

We cannot afford to further erode the sources of our power at home and abroad. The demolition of institutions—the dismantling of USAID and Voice of America, the planned 50 percent reduction in the State Department’s budget—is part of a bigger strategic self-immolation. We’ve put at risk the network of alliances and partnerships that is the envy of our rivals. We’ve even gutted the research funding that powers our economy.

If intelligence analysts at the CIA saw our rivals engage in this kind of great-power suicide, we would break out the bourbon. Instead, the sound we hear is of champagne glasses clinking in the Kremlin and Zhongnanhai.

Of course we should put our own national interests first. But winning in an intensely competitive world means thinking beyond narrowly defined self-interest and building coalitions that counterbalance our adversaries; it requires working together on “problems without passports” such as climate change and global health challenges, which no single country can solve on its own.

At our best, over the years I served in government, we were guided by enlightened self-interest, a balance of hard power and soft power. That’s what produced victory in the Cold War, the reunification of Germany, the coalition success in Operation Desert Storm, peace in the Balkans, nuclear-arms-control treaties, and the defense of Ukraine against Putin’s aggression. The bipartisan PEPFAR program is a shining example of America at its best—saving tens of millions of people from the deadly threat of HIV/AIDS

while also fostering some measure of stability in sub-Saharan Africa, establishing wider trust in American leadership, and keeping Americans safe.

We weren't always at our best, or always especially enlightened, as we stumbled into protracted and draining conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, or when we didn't press allies hard enough to contribute their fair share. Criticism of the current administration should not obscure any of that, or suggest a misplaced nostalgia for an imperfect past.

[From the December 2022 issue: George Packer on a new theory of American power](#)

The growing danger today, however, is that we're focused exclusively on the "self" part of enlightened self-interest—at the expense of the "enlightened" part. The threat we face is not from an imaginary "deep state" bent on undermining an elected president, but from a weak state of hollowed-out institutions and battered and belittled public servants, no longer able to uphold the guardrails of our democracy or help the United States compete in an unforgiving world. We won't beat hostile autocrats by imitating them.

Many years ago, when I was finishing graduate school and trying to figure out what I wanted to do with my professional life, my father sent me a note. He was a career Army officer, a remarkably decent man, and the best model of public service I have ever known. "Nothing can make you prouder," my dad wrote, "than to serve your country with honor." I've spent the past 40 years learning the truth in his advice.

I am deeply proud to have served alongside so many of you. Your expertise and your often quietly heroic public service have made an immeasurable contribution to the best interests of our country. You swore an oath—not to a party or a president, but to the Constitution. To the people of the United States.

To protect us. To defend us. To keep us safe.

You've fulfilled your oath, just as those still serving in government are trying their best to fulfill theirs. So will the next generation of public

servants.

All of us have a profound stake in shaping their inheritance. I worry about how much damage we will do in the meantime. There is still a chance that the next generation will serve in a world where we curb the worst of our current excesses—stop betraying the ideals of public service, stop firing experts just because their statistics are unwelcome, and stop blowing up institutions that matter to our future. There is still a chance that the next generation could be present at the creation of a new era for America in the world, in which we’re mindful of our many strengths but more careful about overreach.

There is, sadly, room for doubt about those chances. At this pivotal moment, there’s a growing possibility that we will inflict so much damage on ourselves and our place in the world that those future public servants will instead find themselves present at the destruction—a self-inflicted, generational setback to American leadership and national security.

But what I do not doubt is the abiding importance of public service, and the value of what you have done with yours. And I know that you will continue to serve in different ways, helping to stand watch over our great experiment, even as too many of our elected leaders seem to be turning their backs on it.

With appreciation to you and your families,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bill Burns". The signature is fluid and cursive, with "Bill" on the left and "Burns" on the right, connected by a single stroke.

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*This article appears in the [October 2025](#) print edition with the headline “You Deserved Better.”*

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# What Lisette Model Saw in Jazz

**Her portraits capture the joy and wariness of the genre's luminaries.**

by David A. Graham



Ray Nance (left) and Duke Ellington (right) at the Newport Jazz Festival, July 1956 (Lisette Model\*)

“I was absolutely overwhelmed by jazz because I knew that was America,” the photographer Lisette Model once said. America is many things—joy and pain, freedom and repression—and Model’s photos of jazz musicians and their audiences captured the full range. Model, a Viennese Jewish émigré, is best known today for her street photography, but in the early 1950s, she set out to create a book of jazz pictures, with an accompanying essay to be

written by Langston Hughes. But as the art historian Audrey Sands writes in an essay included in [a new book of Model's photos](#), suspicion of her leftist politics led to the project's collapse; Model herself was investigated by the FBI and Senator Joseph McCarthy. When she died in 1983, Model left behind some 1,800 negatives from her jazz project, most of which were never printed.



Billie Holiday at the New York Jazz Festival, 1957 (Lisette Model\*)

Model loved to document audiences in moments of rapture. What jumps out in her images of musicians, however, is the wariness in their eyes and gestures—even from the courtly Duke Ellington. “I know of no photographer who has photographed people as inwardly as Lisette Model,” the photographer Berenice Abbott wrote. Perhaps shared experiences of persecution connected Model, who had fled the Nazis in Europe, with her subjects. Even as the U.S. government used jazz to promote America’s image abroad, the genre’s luminaries suffered racism and violence at home. Miles Davis was brutally beaten by a police officer during a break in one of his own shows at a Manhattan nightclub, the worst of many incidents with law enforcement throughout his career. The drummer Art Taylor eventually relocated to France, where he and many other Black musicians sought better conditions. Billie Holiday, who for years had been harassed by the Federal Bureau of Narcotics, was arrested as she lay dying of liver and heart disease in the hospital. Model took a series of poignant postmortem photographs of Holiday, then never shot another jazz image again.

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*\*Photographs of Davis, Ellington, Nance, and Taylor:* © Lisette Model Foundation, courtesy of Eakins Press Foundation / Lisette Model fonds, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives

*Photograph of Holiday:* © Lisette Model Foundation, courtesy of Eakins Press Foundation / The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles

*This article appears in the [October 2025](#) print edition with the headline “Jazz Legends.”*

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## Culture & Critics

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# For Those About to Mock

**Forty years after *Spinal Tap*, history's most hapless band turns it up to 11 one last time.**

by James Parker



On July 5, a couple of days after I saw *Spinal Tap II: The End Continues*, Black Sabbath [played its final show](#), at Villa Park, in Birmingham, England. Not only are these two phenomena related; they seem to have been impishly synchronized: Just when the troupe behind Rob Reiner's *This Is Spinal Tap*,

the mockumentary that satirically exploded the genre of heavy metal, reunited after four decades for a sequel, [the band that invented heavy metal called it quits.](#)

And then, two weeks later, Ozzy died: Ozzy Osbourne, Sabbath's front man, who at Villa Park had sung sitting down, enthroned on what looked like a satanic office chair, heroically managing a host of ailments (including Parkinson's disease). [No one was more metal than Ozzy.](#) At the same time, no one in metal was funnier, more in touch with his own bathos, more post-*Spinal Tap*, in a sense, than Ozzy, especially in his shambling-paterfamilias incarnation on MTV's reality show *The Osbournes*. At Villa Park, his frailty was epic, defiant, even as his bandmates labored drastically to summon the power of 50 years earlier. Still, Sabbath sounded amazing, the band's distinctive vibe of limitless cosmic encumbrance, of Man squirming under the thumb of Fate, God, madness—the essential heavy-metal vision—somehow magnified by the venerable wobbliness of its playing.

[Read: Ozzy Osbourne's wild, normal life](#)

*Spinal Tap II* (which arrives in theaters on September 12) also concerns itself with last things. As the movie (again directed by Reiner) begins, Spinal Tap the band—ultra-English, ultra-deluded as to its own quality and status, basically a slavish amalgam of every trend in hard rock since 1966—is no more, its members long dispersed and out of touch with one another. Lead guitarist Nigel Tufnel is the proprietor of a guitar-and-cheese shop; guitarist-vocalist David St. Hubbins makes on-hold Muzak and soundtracks for true-crime podcasts; bassist Derek Smalls runs the New Museum of Glue. But upon the death of Ian Faith, Tap's posh-sounding, cricket-bat-wielding manager, his daughter, Hope (Kerry Godliman), inherits from him a contract for one last Spinal Tap show. Initially underwhelmed by this concept, Hope happens to catch a clip of Garth Brooks sound-checking with a Spinal Tap song. The clip has gone viral; people love it; Tap has accidentally re-impinged on pop consciousness. There's money to be made. She must get the band together again for a final outing, for a grand farewell fling. She books the Lakefront Arena, in New Orleans.

*This Is Spinal Tap* was an almost-clinical study in anticlimax, in rock-and-roll humiliation. Again and again, the band falls (petulantly, peevishly, with

English accents and English swear words) into the gap between its bombastic self-image and the facts on the ground, the dwindling ticket sales and tiny sandwiches and spontaneously combusting drummers. The world is against the members of Spinal Tap: Everything undercuts them; everything ironizes them. Their way to rock-and-roll sublimity, to headbanging apotheosis, is comprehensively barred.

And as dead-on comedies will sometimes do, the [movie claimed a piece of reality](#). After *This Is Spinal Tap*, any band, in any genre, could have a Spinal Tap moment: taking a wrong turn on the way to the stage, being caught out by malfunctioning gear, suffering through an in-store appearance. For musicians, and metal musicians in particular, it was a new and liberating form of self-awareness.

[From the May 2011 issue: James Parker on how heavy metal is keeping us sane](#)

Does the world need another Spinal Tap movie? Obviously not, no more than—inside the movie—the world needs another Spinal Tap concert. But the redundancy, the extraneousness, is exactly the point here. Prior to their reanimation by Hope and her magic contract, the Tappers are in a state of almost-hysterical obsolescence. The cheese, the Muzak, the glue museum—they’re all doing, with complete conviction, completely useless things. They are post-rock, post-culture, post-history in a sense. An inferno of triviality. A cameo by Elton John, along with glancing appearances from Metallica’s Lars Ulrich and the Red Hot Chili Peppers’ Chad Smith, contributes to the sense of the movie as an End Times in-joke. And we’re all in on it.

I don’t want to argue that rock and roll is over, its teleology exhausted, its [glorious arc attenuated and made vague](#) by Spotify and nostalgia and stylistic recyclings and concert tickets that cost \$400 and blah blah blah—I’d die if I really believed that. But it certainly *feels* over. (For the definitive account of this feeling, and the reasons for it, read Simon Reynolds’s [Retromania: Pop Culture’s Addiction to Its Own Past](#).)

[From the June 2025 issue: Is this the worst-ever era of American pop culture?](#)

Next question: Is *Spinal Tap II* funny? I'll give you a qualified yes. The sensation of a new comic universe popping into being is absent, because you can do that only once, but the original elements are still vital: the luminous deadpan stupidity of Nigel Tufnel (Christopher Guest), the wheedling vanity of David St. Hubbins (Michael McKean), the spacey sentimentality of Derek Smalls (Harry Shearer). These are great comedians, working up their scenes, as before, from hours of improv. There's some lovely in-studio bickering as Tufnel and St. Hubbins lock horns over a complex new musical arrangement. (St. Hubbins: "Why is it so hard for you to grasp?" Tufnel: "I'm grasping it! And my fingers are saying ... *don't.*") Also, as before, the occasional shamelessly scripted gag. St. Hubbins, in his solo career, is working on the soundtrack for "a horror movie that takes place in a retirement community. It's called *Night of the Assisted-Living Dead.*" We learn of a new addition to the dark lineage of deceased Spinal Tap drummers—Skippy Scuffleton; cause of death: sneezing fit—and we watch the band rustically keening its way through a folk song: "I loved me a lass whose hair was long / And brown as the finest stew."



In *Spinal Tap II*, guitarist-vocalist David St. Hubbins (Michael McKean), bassist Derek Smalls (Harry Shearer), and guitarist Nigel Tufnel (Christopher Guest) reunite for an absurd final show. (Kyle Kaplan / Bleecker Street)

Speaking of drummers, Valerie Franco—hired in the movie for that final gig at the Lakefront Arena—is almost too good. Driven by her smooth and emphatic playing, Spinal Tap comes close to losing its special lumpy Tap groove, its farcical Deep Purple mega-thump, and begins to sound disconcertingly like a proper band. But it's okay, because here comes the cameo of cameos: Paul McCartney! He wanders into the rehearsal studio with his long Liverpudlian face and ironic O-mouth, takes Tufnel's side in the aforementioned musical dispute, and then sits down with the band for—yes!—a full-length version of “Cups and Cakes”: “Cups and cakes, cups and cakes / Oh what good things Mother makes.” It’s a number from Tap’s psychedelic infancy, and—in its pastiche-y, chamber-musicky way—wonderfully McCartney-appropriate: It’s like “Martha My Dear” written by ... Spinal Tap.

Last question: Will *Spinal Tap II* put a dent in actuality, refine the consciousness of musicians, in the same way as its predecessor? Time will tell. With my own eyes, I have seen the uncanny afterlife of *This Is Spinal Tap*. I have witnessed the movie creating, as it were, new scenes for itself, new great lines. In 2006, for example, I [saw Iron Maiden](#), perhaps the most potently theatrical (and ultra-English) heavy-metal act ever, at an arena in Boston. At one point in the set, during a characteristically epic, multipart number, the music turned moody and the stage blacked out. From up in the rafters, a single spotlight coldly blazed. Its unfortunate operator, however, couldn’t seem to find his target. His beam wavered on a patch of blankness, or the corner of an amp, and then began to roam the stage in desperation, scanning here and scanning there—until, from the darkness, the voice of Bruce Dickinson, Iron Maiden’s singer, was heard. “I’m over here,” he said dryly. “On top of the speaker. Twat.”

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\*Lead-image sources: Bleecker Street; Album / Alamy; United Archives GmbH / Alamy; rapid eye / Getty

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

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# Is This the End of the Dictionary?

**<em>Obsolete </em>(adj.): no longer in use or no longer useful**

by Stefan Fatsis



In 2015, I settled in at the Springfield, Massachusetts, headquarters of Merriam-Webster, America's most storied dictionary company. My project was to [document the ambitious reinvention of a classic](#), and I hoped to get some definitions of my own into the lexicon along the way. (A favorite early

drafting effort, which I couldn't believe wasn't already included, was *dogpile*: "a celebration in which participants dive on top of each other immediately after a victory.") Merriam-Webster's overhaul of its signature work, *Webster's Third New International Dictionary, Unabridged*—a 465,000-word, 2,700-page, 13.5-pound doorstop published in 1961 and never before updated—was already in full swing. The revision, which would be not a hardback book but an online-only edition, requiring a subscription, was expected to take decades.

Not long after my arrival, though, everything changed. Pageviews were declining for Merriam-Webster.com, the company's free, ad-driven revenue engine: Tweaks to Google's algorithms had punished Merriam's search results. The company had always been lean and profitable, but the financial hit was real. Merriam's parent, Encyclopedia Britannica, was facing challenges of its own—who needed an encyclopedia in a Wikipedia world? —and ordered cuts. Merriam laid off more than a dozen staffers. Its longtime publisher, John Morse, was forced into early retirement. The revision of Merriam's unabridged masterpiece was abandoned.

Call it the paradox of the modern dictionary. We're in a golden age for the study and appreciation of words—a time of "meta awareness" of language, as one lexicographer put it to me. Dictionaries are more accessible than ever, available on your laptop or phone. More people use them than ever, and dictionary publishers now possess the digital wherewithal to closely track that use. Podcasts, newsletters, and Words of the Year have popularized neologisms, etymologies, and usage trends. Meanwhile, analytical software has revolutionized linguistic inquiry, enabling greater understanding of the ways language works—when, how, and why words break out; the specific contexts for expressions and idioms. And all of that was true long before the rise of AI.

But these advances are also strangling the business of the dictionary. Definitions, professional and amateur, are a click away, and most people don't care or can't tell whether what pops up in a search is expert research, crowdsourced jottings, scraped data, or zombie websites. Before he left Merriam, Morse told me that legacy dictionaries face the same growing popular distrust of traditional authorities that media and government have encountered.

Other big names in American lexicography were already receding. In 2001, a decade after releasing an edition dubbed the “[politically correct dictionary](#)” for [its inclusion of womyn, herstory, waitron, and more](#), Random House abandoned dictionary making altogether. *Webster’s New World Dictionary* cycled through corporate owners until its last edition, in 2014. *The American Heritage Dictionary*, published in 1969 to challenge Merriam’s *Third*, is an infrequently updated shell of its legendary self.

By the start of this decade, the once-competitive American dictionary business was essentially down to two players: Merriam-Webster, with its 200 years of tradition and brand recognition, and Dictionary.com, whose founders, 30 years ago, beat Merriam to the URL by a few weeks. After it was acquired in 2008 by the media and internet giant IAC, Dictionary.com’s small editorial staff had innovated. When I visited its offices in 2016, the company’s verticals for slang, emoji, memes, and terms related to gender and sexuality were robust, and its periodic dictionary updates were trendy and substantial—a batch of entries included [superfood](#) and [clicktivism](#). The company reportedly had [more than 5 billion annual searches](#) in the mid-2010s, and in 2018 was [among the internet’s 500 most-visited websites](#).

In 2018, Dictionary.com was purchased by the mortgage-industry titan (and Cleveland Cavaliers owner) Dan Gilbert’s company Rock Holdings—apparently just because Gilbert was a fan of dictionaries. He took a personal interest in the project, and for a few years, it seemed like the digital future of the lexicon was at hand. The line inside the company was that Gilbert wanted “to own the English language.” And he did seem genuinely interested in the work of the dictionary. “Every so often he would ask a question that a reader might ask,” John Kelly, a longtime Dictionary.com editor, told me. For instance, Gilbert was into extreme weather, Kelly said, and had subordinates brief him on terms such as *bombogenesis*. When Rock Holdings’ mortgage and financial companies went public in 2020, Dictionary.com remained privately held, shielding the site from shareholder pressures.

[Read: The philosophy behind the first American dictionary](#)

In 2023, Dictionary.com hired three full-time veteran lexicographers—including Grant Barrett, a co-host of the public-radio show [A Way With](#)

[Words](#), and Kory Stamper, a former longtime Merriam-Webster editor and the author of the memoir [Word by Word](#)—to bolster a team of about a dozen freelancers. The goal was to modernize the dictionary, which was a gigantic undertaking. Dictionary.com was based primarily on *The Random House Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language* (published in 1966, updated in 1987), which was based on *The New Century Dictionary* (published in 1927), which was based on *The Century Dictionary* (published in 1889), which was based on *The Imperial Dictionary of the English Language* (published in 1847). Some of the entries were more than 100 years old.

The lexicography team revised frequently viewed terms such as *theory* and *hypothesis*, which generate lots of traffic at the start of the school year. It enhanced entries with new pronunciations, etymologies, and alternative senses, such as a new adjectival use of *mid* (“mediocre, unimpressive, or disappointing”). It removed sexist and archaic language and diversified names in example sentences. (“‘John went to school,’” Barrett told me. “Why not Juan or Juanita or Giannis? This is a multicultural society.”)

Barrett designed a reading program to help flag emerging lexical items and turbocharge additions, tripling the volume of new words added in the site’s periodic updates over the course of a year. A February 2024 rollout included [Barbiecore](#), *bed rotting*, *slow fashion*, *range anxiety*, and *enshittification*, which the American Dialect Society had chosen a month earlier as its 2023 Word of the Year. (Of those words, only *enshittification* has since been added by Merriam, and only to a new slang portal, not the official dictionary.) The lexicography team was revising a database to more quickly update entries and post them on social media, and developing a synonym-based game. It was training new lexicographers.

Dictionary.com couldn’t match Merriam’s history or reputation. Instead, the company was trying to position itself to “capture language at the pace of change,” to be “hipper and more experimental, but also rigorous AF,” Kelly said. (Dictionary.com added the slang initialism for *as fuck*; Merriam still has not.)

The piecemeal efforts improved the dictionary’s quality and cool quotient. Barrett also loved the work: He was surrounded by colleagues who cared

about language and how it was presented, verbally and visually. For a time, Barrett could plug his fingers in his ears and tune out the sobering reality: Although he and his colleagues were getting paid well, “the dictionary business was crumbling,” he said. “So ride it ’til the wheels fall off. And the wheels fell off.”

Not long after Rock Holdings took over, the industry grew more challenging. Google’s “knowledge boxes” were hogging the top of search pages with definitions licensed from the British dictionary publisher Oxford, including synonyms, antonyms, and, eventually and predictably, AI-generated summaries of words’ meanings. The proprietary clutter pushed down traditional-dictionary links, and Dictionary .com’s traffic fell by about 40 percent. At the same time, the pandemic drained advertising revenue. The site tried to stanch the decline with more ads, only to create a worse user experience.

#### [Read: Who made the \*Oxford English Dictionary\*?](#)

Dictionary.com rolled out a K–12 online tutoring service, AI writing software, and other education products. None of it aligned with a dictionary’s mission, and none of it worked, staffers said. Then, as interest rates rose, revenue at Gilbert’s core mortgage business plunged, resulting in nearly \$400 million in losses. Even for a billionaire who was in the comparatively low-budget dictionary business less for profit than for fun, the bottom line mattered, and the pressure to make money and cut costs was inescapable.

In April 2024, Rock Holdings announced that it had sold Dictionary.com to IXL Learning, the owner of Rosetta Stone, Vocabulary.com, and other online ed-tech brands. Within a month, IXL laid off all of the dictionary’s full-time lexicographers and dumped most of its freelancers. Including non-lexicography staff, Dictionary.com had started 2024 with about 80 employees. After the sale, only a handful remained. (A representative for IXL said that the company retained some of the freelancers, brought in its own lexicographers, and now has a staff larger than it was at the time of the acquisition.)

When he lost his job, Barrett wasn't bitter, or surprised. Dictionary.com hadn't aspired to have a full staff in the tradition of the books on which it was based, he said. It didn't have Merriam's advertiser base, print backlist, or historical mission to preserve, protect, and define American English. Barrett understood its more circumscribed project. "Dictionary content is expensive," Barrett said. "Just the cost of lexicographers—people are expensive, and the output is low. It is very difficult to justify that just for the sake of completism. You will never have enough staff to keep up. People are too productive in the creation of language."

It's hard to know what future business model might save the industry. Getting swallowed by a tech giant expecting hockey-stick growth has proved untenable. A billionaire willing to let the dictionary just be the dictionary—a self-sustaining company with a modest staff performing an outsize cultural job that might not always be profitable—looks less likely after Dan Gilbert's foray. A grand national dictionary project—some collaboration among government, private, nonprofit, and academic institutions—feels like the Platonic ideal. But with universities and intellectual inquiry under assault in 2025, I'm not holding my breath.

At Merriam-Webster, the standard capitalist model is working, at least for now, as is its hybrid print-digital approach. The publisher has rebounded from its mid-2010s struggles. It was a social-media darling during the first Trump administration, racking up likes and retweets for its smart-alecky and politically subversive social-media persona. (When Donald Trump tweeted "unpresidented" instead of "unprecedented," [the Merriam account responded](#): "Good morning! The #WordOfTheDay is ... not 'unpresidented'. We don't enter that word. That's a new one.") Britannica invested in software, hardware, and humans to enable Merriam to better navigate Google's algorithms. Merriam added a phalanx of games, including Wordle knockoffs and a dictionary-based crossword, to attract and retain visitors.

Merriam has outlasted a long line of American dictionaries. But plenty of household media names have been humbled by the shifting habits of digital consumers. Even before Google's AI Overview began taking clicks from definitions written by flesh-and-bone lexicographers, the trajectory of the industry was clear.

After Merriam shut down its online unabridged revision, I stuck around the company's 85-year-old brick headquarters, reporting and defining. I eventually drafted about 90 definitions. Most of them didn't make the cut. But a handful are enshrined online, including politically charged terms such as *microaggression* and *alt-right*, and whimsical ones such as *sheeple* and, yes, *dogpile*.

While I'm proud of these small contributions to lexicography, my wanderings through dictionary culture convinced me of something far more important: the urgent need to save this slowly fading business. Twenty years ago, an estimated 200 full-time commercial lexicographers were working in the United States; today the number is probably less than a quarter of that. At a time when contentious words dominate our conversations—think *insurrection* and *fascism* and *fake news* and *woke*—the need for dictionaries to chronicle and explain language, and serve as its watchdog, has never been greater.

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*This article was adapted from Stefan Fatsis's new book, [Unabridged: The Thrill of \(and Threat to\) the Modern Dictionary](#). It appears in the [October 2025](#) print edition with the headline “Whither the Dictionary?”*

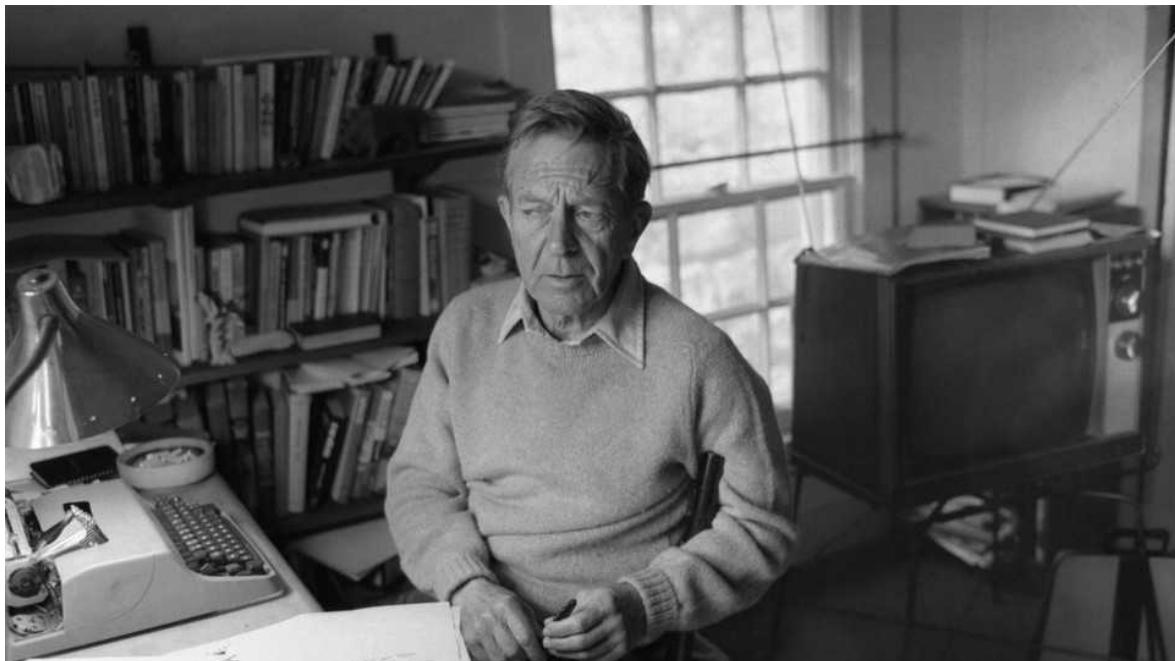
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# John Cheever's Secrets

**In a new memoir, Susan Cheever searches for the wellspring of her father's genius.**

by Adam Begley



About 20 miles south of Boston, under a big maple near a white clapboard church, John Cheever is buried next to his parents and brother. He's also buried under an accretion of myth and myth-busting. A restaurant on the edge of the cemetery, just yards from the family plot, calls itself the Cheever Tavern. Advertising a "tasteful setting," it invokes the great writer's mid-1960s public persona as the bard of suburbsville. The author of a dazzling flow of *New Yorker* stories, he was [hailed on the cover of Time](#) as "Ovid in

Ossining” and presented in the accompanying article as a monogamously married father of three living in a grand house with the obligatory Labrador retrievers. “I had no idea that my father was anything but the country squire he pretended to be,” Susan Cheever writes in her new book, [When All the Men Wore Hats](#). He himself linked his best stories to “a long-lost world when the city of New York was still filled with a river light,” as he wrote in the preface to [The Stories of John Cheever](#) (1978)—a time, he went on, “when almost everybody wore a hat.”

Forget the hats. Fedoras and bird dogs are not the key to Cheever. But neither is the sordid flip side, the anti-myth that ought to gut any misguided hankering after a mid-century golden age. In [Home Before Dark](#), a “biographical memoir” published in 1984, two years after her father’s death, Susan Cheever outed him as doubly tortured: a closeted homosexual promiscuously unfaithful to his wife with both men and women, and a self-destructive alcoholic who dried out after nearly dying of drink and only then accepted his gay identity. She discovered his “sexual imposture” (his phrase) after he died, when she began writing about him. Her memoir was eventually followed by reams of corroborating evidence, including his private writings, [The Journals of John Cheever](#) (1991), and Blake Bailey’s long, excellent, and desperately dismal [Cheever: A Life](#) (2009). That biography supplied the final indignity: the surprising news that, less than 30 years after his death, even his best books were no longer selling. In 2012—Cheever’s centennial—the novelist Allan Gurganus regretted that his friend was “now unfairly known as the gloomy, sodden satyr of suburbia.”

For those who love the stories, the shrinking readership is what’s most regrettable. By turns lyrical and satirical, funny and heartrending, they show us a paradise of sorts, a dream America—and then reveal [terrible depths of discontent](#). His own estimation of his fiction, as recorded in the *Journals*, is itself a hyper-condensed Cheever story: “flighty, eccentric, and sometimes bitter work, with its social disenchantments, somersaults, and sudden rains.”

### [Read: How John Cheever wrote inner turmoil](#)

His most famous story, “The Swimmer,” fits the bill. Sitting by a friend’s pool, one hand dabbling in the water, the other curled around a glass of gin, Neddy Merrill decides to swim the eight miles to his home, traversing the

county pool by pool. “The day was beautiful, and it seemed to him that a long swim might enlarge and celebrate its beauty.” But during this quixotic journey, the seasons change—there’s a sudden rain. Lovers grow hostile and old friends make cryptic, damning remarks about his “misfortunes.” He weakens, “stupefied with exhaustion,” and arrives at his house only to find it locked, empty, abandoned—no sign of his wife and four daughters. The meaning of this disturbing tale is suggested when he’s not even halfway home. “He could not go back,” Cheever writes. “He had covered a distance that made his return impossible.” Neddy’s life is a mess; we don’t know exactly what happened to him and his family, but the moral is clear: We cannot recapture remembered bliss or recover bygone happiness.

At the end of his life, in a speech at Carnegie Hall accepting the National Medal for Literature, Cheever insisted that “a page of good prose remains invincible.” His daughter uses that hopeful sentence as an epigraph in *When All the Men Wore Hats*; it’s a fair summary of her theme, as is another epigraph, taken from the *Journals*: “Literature is the salvation of the damned.” Her first book about her father fused memoir and biography; this one fuses memoir and literary appreciation. She aims to help us read Cheever’s best stories, and if in this “sequel of sorts” she seems to be squeezing one last drop, she provides welcome context, clues to her father’s very particular genius.

As a writer and a daughter of a writer, she’s also exploring the wellsprings of creativity, which she does with openhearted elegance. When young Susie, already an avid reader, discovered that little girls very much like her appeared in her father’s stories, she was indignant; he laughed at her concerns. “Fiction is not crypto-autobiography,” he pronounced. And yet Susan Cheever now also knows that “good writing does not require pure intentions.” In the Cheever household, the boundaries between art and life were blurry at best. “Our truths often appeared as fiction; the fiction of my father’s heterosexual nature appeared as truth.”

Perhaps the eeriest example, noted in Bailey’s biography but more powerful in Susan’s first-person account, is [her interview with her father](#) when she was a 33-year-old working at *Newsweek*; the cover story was a profile of him just after he’d published *Falconer* (1977), which features a love affair between the protagonist, incarcerated for fratricide, and a fellow inmate. The

journalist daughter asked, “Did you ever fall in love with another man?” The novelist father artfully replied that it could indeed happen, “but I would think twice about giving up the robustness and merriment I have known in the heterosexual world.” Robustness! Merriment! She then asked point-blank if he’d ever had a “homosexual experience.” Instead of answering in the negative as she expected, he said, “I have had many, Susie, all tremendously gratifying.” A dreadful pause before he continued, laughing, “and all between the ages of 9 and 11.”

[Read: John Cheever’s short stories published in \*The Atlantic\*](#)

She took that as a no and soldiered on with the interview; the curious exchange was printed in the magazine. And she continued to think of her father as straight until she started reading his journals a couple of months after cancer killed him, at age 70. She decided that she should be the one to reveal his sexuality, and resolved to find “a loving way to do it.” Tender, sad, and respectful, *Home Before Dark* is a proud daughter’s elegy for an unhappy parent.

But there’s no loving way to present the torment he endures in the journals, whose posthumous publication he approved. Gurganus called the several million words—mostly typed, stashed away in 29 loose-leaf notebooks—“a ten-thousand-page suicide note.” Only about one-20th of it has been published, the winnowing expertly done by Robert Gottlieb, Cheever’s editor at Knopf, who described the work as the most difficult editorial project he ever attempted—because “it was disturbing to be so immersed in the hell of Cheever’s inner life.” The landmark features of that hellscape are resentment of his wife, a losing battle with alcohol, and his “galling otherness.”

Cheever desperately wants to honor the vows made to his wife and children, he writes, “but my itchy member is unconcerned with all of this, and I am afraid that I may succumb to its itchiness.” Here’s what happens when he does (hardly for the first time): “We sped into the nearest bedroom, unbuckled each other’s trousers, groped for our cocks in each other’s underwear, and drank each other’s spit.” His postcoital detachment is clinical, merciless:

I remember the acute lack of interest with which I regarded his nakedness in the morning when he returned to bed after having taken a piss. He was merely a man with a small cock, a pair of balls, and a small ass suitable for cushioning a chair or a toilet seat and for nothing else.

And yet he believes he's in love. "Lunching with friends who talked about their tedious careers in lechery, I thought: I am gay, I am gay, I am at last free of all this. This did not last for long."

The writer and critic Geoff Dyer believes that in the "shapeless privacy" of the published *Journals*, Cheever most fully plumbs "the complex depths of his being." Psychologically acute and full of glorious lyricism ("incessant inventories of light and landscape"), they are his greatest work, according to Dyer, "his principal claim to literary survival."

Susan Cheever puts her money on the short story as the form in which her father's vision found its most exact and astonishing expression; in an appendix she reprints six of them, all among those Gottlieb selected for the massive *Stories of John Cheever*, a runaway best seller and the winner of the 1979 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction as well as a National Book Critics Circle Award. She calls attention to sexual ambivalence as an essential creative catalyst and theme (noting Gottlieb's alertness to it), and indeed it's hard to argue against the idea that Cheever's sexual charade generated tension in his life that helped produce some brilliant fiction. But there were other tensions squeezing him.

In "The Housebreaker of Shady Hill" (it's in her appendix and surely the inspiration for the new television series *Your Friends & Neighbors*), money is the root of Johnny Hake's troubles. A businessman with an archetypal suburban lifestyle, he loses his job and, to avoid bouncing checks, starts sneaking into wealthy friends' houses in the middle of the night to steal cash. (It turns out that an 11-year-old Susie, though she never stole a thing, also enjoyed slipping into neighboring houses: She "liked watching rich people sleep"—"an inherited taste," she writes, bending the laws of genetics to establish a link between her father's fiction and a childhood eccentricity.)

Johnny Hake steals because financial disgrace would undoubtedly end his life in Shady Hill and exile him from his wife and four children. In a bravura sentence, Cheever gives us the measure of Johnny's enchantment:

We have a nice house with a garden and a place outside for cooking meat, and on summer nights, sitting there with the kids and looking into the front of Christina's dress as she bends over to salt the steaks, or just gazing at the lights in heaven, I am as thrilled as I am thrilled by more hardy and dangerous pursuits, and I guess this is what is meant by the pain and sweetness of life.

After his fall, dismayed by his thievery, he exclaims: "Oh, I never knew that a man could be so miserable and that the mind could open up so many chambers and fill them with self-reproach!"

In 1956, Cheever sold the movie rights to "The Housebreaker of Shady Hill" for \$25,000—a rare windfall. Still, he was chronically plagued by financial anxiety, in part because *The New Yorker* consistently underpaid him. He could plausibly exclaim, *Johnny Hake, c'est moi!* But his daughter is inclined to see the story as springing from a different kind of anxiety. She quotes Blake Bailey: "Beneath it all, of course, was an escalating terror of homosexuality, and living among the dauntingly normal citizens of Scarborough didn't help." In this reading, Cheever's "galling otherness" is more worrisome than money troubles, though the son of a traveling shoe salesman who lost his job in the 1920s and his investments in the Crash will always be sensitive to financial stress. It was a crucial ingredient in his cocktail of anguish and inspiration.

#### From the August 1968 issue: Alfred Kazin on middle-class storytellers

"The Country Husband" is a coruscating story about love and death, or, anyway, about infatuation with the babysitter and a near-fatal airplane crash. It features an indelible description of "public chastisement" for sexual misconduct. The protagonist, Francis Weed, sees a waitress passing drinks at a Shady Hill party and realizes that he recognizes her from the war. He'd seen her once before, at a crossroads in a village in Normandy. She'd been condemned for sleeping with a German officer, and he'd watched with the crowd as her head was shaved. Then she was forced to strip naked. "One

woman spat on her, but some inviolable grandeur in her nakedness lasted through the ordeal.” Her sexual crimes, and the grim punishment, resonate powerfully, though Francis recognizes that “the atmosphere of Shady Hill made the memory unseemly and impolite.”

Can Cheever’s fear of being outed, of public chastisement for his “sexual imposture,” have been the sole impetus for this story, which Vladimir Nabokov singled out for praise as “a miniature novel beautifully traced”? I would argue that economic anxiety was at work here too—and Susan Cheever supplies evidence to back me up. “The Country Husband,” she tells us, was written to pay for her orthodontics. “I am proud,” she writes, “to have had the crooked teeth that inspired it.” Her “expensive overbite” gave us a story in which a pilot sings, “I’ve got sixpence, jolly, jolly sixpence. I’ve got sixpence to last me all my life” as the plane he’s flying drops out of the sky and the panicked passengers see “the spreading wings of the Angel of Death.”

Angst is angst, whatever the cause. Circumstance may constrain, ambivalence paralyze, but great artists—miraculously, mysteriously—transform ambient pressure into exquisite cultural artifacts. In her two books about her father, Susan weighs every ounce of the burden of stress he carried; she takes note of his literary alchemy and also of the emotional bruises inflicted on his wife and children.

“The lens through which he saw the outside world for the purposes of his work was as sharp as the light on a cold winter day,” she writes; “the lens through which he saw his family was hot, blurry, and sometimes self-serving.” She herself is both clear-eyed and compassionate. She gives an astute reading of a story she loves, “Reunion,” about a divorced father who meets an estranged teenage son for lunch and gets drunker and drunker and never orders food. She recognizes her father’s voice: *He* is the dreadful drunken boor. “I am outraged at this portrait of him, until I remember he wrote it.”

“My deepest feeling about Cheever,” [the critic Alfred Kazin wrote](#), “is that his marvelous brightness is an effort to cheer himself up.” That may sound dismissive—Susan Cheever finds it “mean”—but I think it points to the secret engine of his best work (yes, it’s the stories; his daughter is right). His

anguish and his piercing joy are inseparable. When we strip away all the extratextual padding, the myth and the countermyth, we discover, reading slowly and lovingly, a writer whose tremendous talent for emotional oscillation allowed him to traverse, in a sentence or even in a clause, the gamut of human hope and despair—as in “The Housebreaker of Shady Hill,” which ends, “and off I went, whistling merrily in the dark.”

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*This article appears in the [October 2025](#) print edition with the headline “John Cheever’s Secrets.”*

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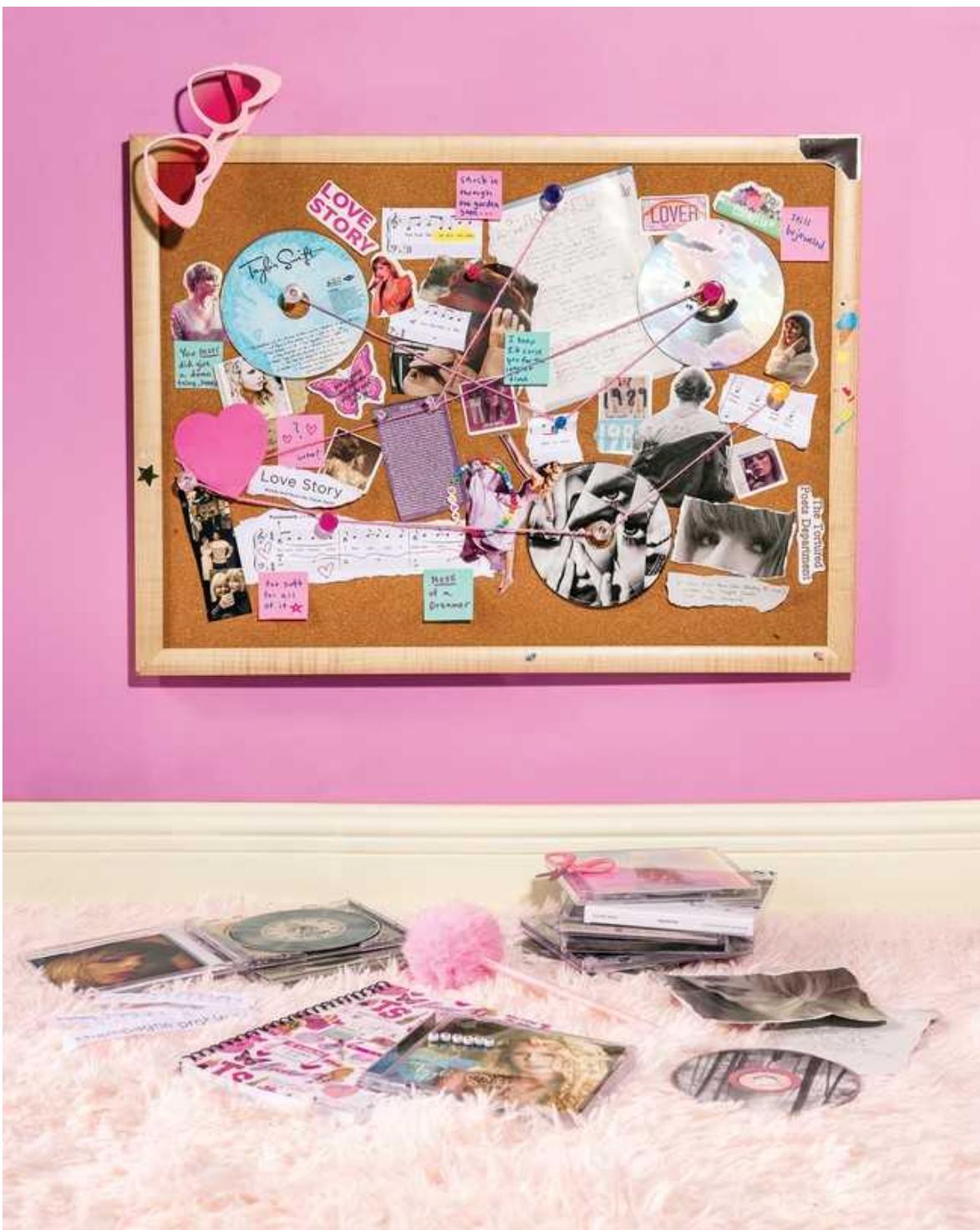
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# How Did Taylor Swift Convince the World That She's Relatable?

# **The tidiest explanation for the pop star's success is that she befriended an underestimated audience of girls and young women. That's only part of the story.**

by Spencer Kornhaber



A great way to ruin a party is to put on a Taylor Swift playlist. The Swift fans in the crowd will stop what they're doing to sing along, but pretty soon the non-Swifties will start to complain—about the breathy and effortful singing, or some fussily worded lyrics, or the general vibe of lovelorn

sentimentality cut with dorky humor (“This. Sick. Beat!”). You’ll soon find yourself hosting another round in the endless debate about whether Taylor Swift is a visionary artist or merely a slick product of marketing. Both camps will be reacting to the defining feature of Swift’s music: There’s just so much of her in it.

Pop isn’t supposed to work this way. The most consequential American singer of the past 20 years, Swift can claim [commercial achievements that equal or surpass](#) those of the Beatles, Madonna, and Michael Jackson. But Swift still has the feel of an acquired taste, albeit one that millions have acquired. Her success owes less to smash singles—though she has them—than to the obsessive listening she elicits from fans. She is the perfect entertainer for our socially fractured era, in which internet-forged tribes—led by charismatic, love-’em-or-hate-’em idols—have upended politics and popular culture.

Why her? What is the essence of Swiftness? [Taylor’s Version: The Poetic and Musical Genius of Taylor Swift](#), by Stephanie Burt, is a thorough and thoughtful elaboration of the conventional answer. An influential poet and a Harvard professor, she made headlines for [teaching an English course](#) called “Taylor Swift and Her World” last year. Burt writes in a sober, ruminative fashion that departs from the overheated tone of so much Swift-related commentary. Rather than limit her comparisons to contemporary pop stars, she puts Swift in conversation with writers such as Alexander Pope and Willa Cather. Still, the book ultimately reinforces the consensus among critics, fans, and even haters that Swift’s extraordinary success stems from how ordinary she seems—a consensus that both underplays her achievement and insulates her from critique.

### [Stephanie Burt: Taylor Swift at Harvard](#)

Burt knows that the subtitle of her book contains a major claim, and she addresses it early and directly. The *genius* label is “more often applied to artistic revolutionaries, to rule-breakers who stand above and apart from the crowd, and (not by coincidence) to men,” she writes. They tend to follow Ezra Pound’s famous dictate to “make it new,” leaving an entire discipline transformed. But Swift, as Burt sees her, isn’t that kind of genius. She is “a versatile creator who understands her audiences; who brings us along with

her; who figures out all the rules, then uses those rules.” Burt goes through Swift’s catalog album by album, showing how every phase hews to what she sees as the three pillars of Swift’s brilliance: her songwriting acumen, her work ethic, and her relatability.

That last term, *relatability*, is the [watchword of almost all Swiftology](#)—understandably enough. The tidiest explanation for Swift’s success is that she befriended an audience the music industry had underestimated: girls and young women. Swift’s 2006 self-titled debut (released when she was 16) and subsequent two albums of country-pop embodied the point of view of a teen navigating first crushes and schoolyard rivalries. “Fifteen” mentioned Swift’s friend losing her virginity; “The Best Day” was inspired by being shunned by the popular girls. These topics were the concerns of neither the *Billboard* Hot 100 nor mainstream country at the time. In [a 2009 interview](#), Swift explained, “All the songs I heard on the radio were about marriage and kids and settling down. I just couldn’t relate to that.” The inner lives of girls are so often treated as trivial—but Swift’s hopeful voice and assertive melodies conveyed confidence that her, and her audience’s, experiences were as important as anyone else’s.

As Swift matured from teenage newcomer to name-brand celebrity, she managed to sing about her personal dramas—her trysts with actors, [her feud with Kim Kardashian](#)—in ways that sounded recognizable to ordinary young women. “Dear John,” from 2010, was clearly [a kiss-off to her ex John Mayer](#), the rocker who met Swift when she was 19 and he was 31. But Swift’s narrator was simply “the girl in the dress” who “cried the whole way home”—an archetype that many listeners could see themselves in. Swift’s dismay about a powerful ex became a fable for any girl courted by an older guy. “When Swift sings about men, especially bad men,” Burt writes, “she’s often singing to, and for, other women, and she’s usually giving advice.”

Swift’s sisterly relationship with her audience is only part of her role-model appeal. Her songs portray her as [a specific sympathetic type](#): the good, hardworking girl straining to exceed personal and social expectations, all while caddish guys and jealous rivals do her wrong. Pop culture loves to valorize underdogs, and Swift’s trick has been making the figure of the “careful daughter” (to quote “Mine”) into one. She’s a “people-pleaser, driven both by her wish to follow the rules and by her own persistent artistic

ambition,” Burt writes. “But that ambition also leaves her vulnerable. What if she fails? What if people think she’s fake?” To anyone with a hint of a pleaser in them, those questions will remain poignant no matter how little Swift’s life resembles their own—as concert crowds who dress up in Swift’s image readily attest.

### Read: Taylor Swift’s adulthood blues

But relatability can also be a reductive, even belittling lens through which to view any artist’s work. It downplays the exceptional qualities of an entertainer—magnetism, talent, unpredictability—as well as the curiosity and flat-out awe that draw audiences to them. Swift skeptics tout the relatability thesis when they say that she’s done nothing original other than identify an eager audience to exploit. And the logic of *She’s just like us* renders even the claim of Burt’s subtitle as faint praise. Swift, in Burt’s view, has merely tinkered with a formula. She’s used her songwriting acumen and work ethic to model a feminine sort of genius, in which fastidious care—not disruptive innovation—creates a body of nourishing art. In this interpretation, her achievements should be attainable for anyone who puts their mind to it. Really, though, Swift has done precisely what Pound commanded. She’s made pop music into something new.

These days, every influencer and brand consultant seems to want to call themselves a storyteller. It’s a 21st-century buzzword, perhaps because narrative—the open-ended, mythic kind sustained across Marvel movies and the MAGA movement—has turned out to be one of the few ways to capture and hold attention in a distractible, content-flooded culture. And yet many familiar narrative forms—stand-alone books, movies, concept albums—can hardly compete anymore. Swift’s greatest legacy is already clear: overhauling pop into a vital, contemporary storytelling medium.

Music has always had narrative aspects: Lyrics can tell stories, and the pleasure of a chord progression is in the movement from beginning to middle to end. But music is also an art form of pure sensation whose power surpasses words. For pop music in particular, narrative can be fundamentally in tension with other imperatives. The more plot, specificity, and complication in a song, historically, the less likely it is to work as a sing-along for everyone.

Great artists have transcended this contradiction. Joni Mitchell's and Bruce Springsteen's hits, for example, are simultaneously tuneful and rich with story. The work of both artists is among the many precedents for what Swift has accomplished. But their catalogs are also filled with music that skews away from pop palatability in order to tell woollier tales. They have songs of sharp political observation, something Swift's only clumsily stab at, and songs describing abstract ideas in abstract ways, which Swift's concrete style and first-person vantage tend to preclude. (Mitchell's song "Blue" is a riddle of ambiguous images and phrases; Swift's "Red" opens, "Loving him is like driving a new Maserati down a dead-end street.") And neither Mitchell nor Springsteen enjoyed a sustained duration of chart success on the scale that Swift has. Her commercial echelon, again, is more akin to pure pop artists like Madonna, whose lyrical narratives—while memorable—aren't usually packed with diaristic detail.

Swift's breakthrough has been finding ways to saturate sugary tunes with information. Whether banger or ballad, her tracks make room for characters, settings, twists, a tidy ending, a cliff-hanger. The tracks interlock with other tracks—and with extramusical artifacts, headlines, and rumors—to build a larger story that makes each individual work more enjoyable. (For example, the 2022 song "Question ... ?," describing a mysterious kiss at a crowded party, is deepened by piecing together how this kiss ripples over years of Swift's life—and through the rest of her catalog.) Listening to a Swift song is like eating a candy bar that transmits a personal essay into your memory. If you eat enough candy bars, it becomes a novel, and then a series of novels, and then (this is when you become a Swiftie) a virtual-reality, open-world video game you play with friends and strangers. If that all sounds nonsensical, it's because Swift has pulled off something that's never quite been done before. The closest comparison might be to show tunes—but for a one-woman play that's gone 19 years without a curtain call.

How does she do it? Burt is helpful here. "Every sound and word in almost every Taylor song not only solicits attention but rewards it," she writes. "Time that we spend on her work won't feel wasted or pointless." Swift's moment-by-moment choices play on both the listener's ear and intellect. She works to turn the audience's brain on rather than—as pop often seeks to do—off. But the truth is (and this is an actual sign of genius), there's no single,

simple answer to the *how* of Swift. With every song, her skills meet her assignment in a new way.

Take “All Too Well,” Swift’s best track by wide acclamation. The original 2012 version is a five-minute strummed reminiscence that was never released as a single; [the now-canonical version](#), released in 2021, is 10 minutes long. No song of this length had ever, as this one did, hit No. 1 on the Hot 100. And perhaps no song of this length has ever been so compulsively listenable. Within that form of distended pop song—verse, chorus, verse, chorus, bridge, instrumental passage, outro—she does riveting work with music and lyrics. Burt digs into the poetics:

The song amounts to a masterpiece not just in how images move within the restricted space of a pop song, but also in rhyme and off-rhyme and consonance. “Gaze,” “upstate,” “place,” and “days” shift as if each word sought, but couldn’t quite settle into, its perfect rhyme. “Asked for too much” chimes with “tore it all up”; “break me like a promise” matches “name of being honest” (notice the *t*’s in the first pair, the *b*’s in the second).

She observes that “these devices might come off as not much more than basic competence in hip-hop, where rapid off-rhymes across lines are what we expect. In Taylor’s kind of pop song, though, where everything has to fit a melody, and verse-chorus patterns aren’t optional, it’s bravura technique.”

Burt’s allusion to hip-hop hints at another way in which Swift breaks ground: As her career has progressed, Swift’s adventuresome approach to genre has helped her write ever richer chapters. Country music, that classic stronghold for story-songs, was a smart place for her to begin her career. (Intentionally so—at age 13, she moved from the Pennsylvania suburbs to Nashville, where she adopted a twang.) When she began to turn away from country, with 2012’s *Red*, she embraced electronic-dance-music elements—not simply as trendy tropes, but as punctuation marks in the musical stories she was telling about her giddy, exploratory 20s. The results were jolting and sui generis. One struggles to think of any precedent on the charts for a song like “I Knew You Were Trouble,” in which chipper surf-rock verses careen into headbangable choruses of synth-fortified wailing—signifying the moment when she realizes how ill-advised her crush is.

Swift kept experimenting to make her music more pungent, more extreme, even more her. Burt identifies how her swerves into synth pop (for 2014's *1989*) and hip-hop and R&B (for 2017's *Reputation*) broadened both how Swift wrote and what she wrote about. She tried on different attitudes, different subplots, and different notions about how words and rhythm and notes interact. A soft dancehall groove on "Delicate" matched her tale of secretive, tiptoeing courtship; the disco spiral of "Style" framed a romance that "has no particular destination," Burt writes. Her 2020 duo of albums, *Folklore* and *Evermore*, channeled the sound and sensibility of indie rock, refracting her perennial personal themes through a dark, blurry lens of fantasy and allegory. She was moving into a newly rewarding phase: making emotionally ambivalent, sonically omnivorous music about the anxieties of her 30s—aging, work, commitment. Her 2022 album, *Midnights*, first scanned as a return to the safety of beats-driven pop, but the lyrics were bracingly candid, the confessions of a onetime child star wondering if she would ever truly grow up.

Swift's zigs and zags were well timed for cultural and technological shifts that were dissolving the very meaning of pop. Thanks to streaming—which started to take off after the release of *Red*—success in music no longer always entails landing a hit single that drives album sales. Luring as many people as possible to listen to your music as compulsively as possible is now the goal. Even as Swift balked at Spotify's pay rates (she pulled her catalog off the platform from 2014 to 2017), she took the opportunity afforded by its influence to deepen and densify the classic format of the pop song. This thrilled her base—and annoyed many casual listeners.

Much of pop now follows her example. A cohort of young female singer-songwriters—including Sabrina Carpenter, Olivia Rodrigo, and Gracie Abrams—has arisen over the past five years, delivering storytelling-driven, personally revealing bubblegum. These artists no doubt saw themselves in the plucky perspective that Swift's lyrics conveyed. But more important, they've clearly studied her methods in order to express their experiences in a way that—like any well-delivered yarn—can resonate broadly.

[From the May 2023 issue: Taylor Swift and the sad dads](#)

As for Swift, she's been straining the pop format nearly to its breaking point. Her 2024 album, *The Tortured Poets Department*, is—even among fans—[her most divisive work](#). Its full form (the “Anthology” edition, which was released the same night as the normal edition) contains 31 songs. Grokking it fully requires knowing the convoluted backstory about an early midlife crisis of sorts. It’s an album about restlessness, impulsivity, consequences, and a very specific-to-Swift brew of personal hurt and public judgment. More than anything, it’s an album in which narrative trumps all. The songs ramble and double back and change shape; she and her producers (Jack Antonoff and Aaron Dessner) use perplexing time signatures and unsettling, bittersweet chord patterns. *Tortured Poets* is almost her crowning artistic achievement, containing the most complex and unguarded—and gorgeous—songs of her career.

Almost. The problem with *Tortured Poets* highlights a problem with Swift that’s been there all along. If she is a genius—and here’s my faint praise—she’s a genius at making diamonds out of doggerel. Her best songs daisy-chain clichés into novel shapes (“The Archer” on 2019’s *Lover*: “Easy they come, easy they go / I jump from the train, I ride off alone / I never grew up, it’s getting so old”). Her worst songs lumber along with clanging metaphors and leaden coinages (“Willow” on *Evermore*: “Every bait and switch was a work of art”). Fans mostly don’t mind this, and as a listener, I often don’t either; the overall effect of her music is what counts. But the stark, brooding palette of *Tortured Poets* casts an unforgiving light on some of the least consistent writing of her career. I adore the melty, country-trip-hop sound of “Guilty as Sin?,” except for the part where the arrangement slows down and she says this: “You’ve haunted me so stunningly,” precisely enunciating the last word, as if it made much sense.

[Read: \*The Tortured Poets Department\* is a muddle \(with some magic\)](#)

I’d hoped that Burt, herself a wordsmith, might have some gentle feedback to give about such clunkiness. Instead, she praises the album’s multisyllabic excess for executing a conceptual bit: Swift making herself into a tortured poet trying to outdo a pretentious, typewriter-wielding ex. This effort, in Burt’s telling, reflects the broader female experience of falling for a dashing, manipulative “art monster.” Swift is kind of doing this—the delightful title track goes, “You’re not Dylan Thomas, I’m not Patti Smith / This ain’t the

Chelsea Hotel, we’re modern idiots”—but that shouldn’t necessitate ruining otherwise great songs. The search for a mote of relatability has led Burt to excuse-making. Any claim for Swift’s genius should reckon with her lapses into imprecision and pomposness. She has the chops to do better than she often does.

That criticism doesn’t hold Swift—who just announced her 12th album, *The Life of a Showgirl*—to an unfair standard. It recognizes the level she’s long aspired to and has often hit. Swift’s trajectory and the hype around it embody a utopian dream: the perfect marriage between pop music and art music. The two were never separate, really, but pop is an art of compromise—and these days, Swift seems less bound by limits. Can she get deeper, realer, less relatable without sacrificing the pleasure of a tale well told or a song well sung? Might she branch out from the *I*? Or might she rewrite her narrative again in a way only someone as singular as her could? The suspense is part of the story.

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*This article appears in the [October 2025](#) print edition with the headline “Songs of Herself.”*

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# ‘Society Neglects the Nuclear Threat at Its Peril’

**Readers respond to our August 2025 issue and more.**



Eighty Years on the Edge

*In the August issue, [Atlantic contributors examined](#) the past eight decades of life in the Atomic Age.*

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Thank you for your series of articles on nuclear warfare. I was especially moved by the essays on [Japanese internment](#) and [Kurt Vonnegut](#), but all of

them led me to wonder why we humans seem so incapable of learning from the past.

Noah Hawley was correct to note that our current age is rife with innovations that are technically sweet but have rarely been subjected to the question *Just because we can, should we?* I wonder what Vonnegut would say if he were alive today.

**Ellen Vliet Cohen**

*Arlington, Mass.*

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One question is not answered in *The Atlantic*'s August issue: What can really be done to rid the world of nuclear weapons? Perhaps it is time that this topic reentered public discussion.

My proposal is that the 186 countries that don't have nuclear weapons assemble and draft an ultimatum to the countries that do, stating that unless the nuclear-armed states get rid of their weapons, they, the non-nuclear-armed states, will band together to conduct the research and development necessary for each of them to have their own weapons. That's it. Risky? Yes. But is it riskier than the present situation? Perhaps not. Ross Andersen, in "The New Arms Race," predicts that the nuclear club may double under existing conditions. Staying on the present course assures us of only one thing: that we will eventually, by intention, misjudgment, human or technological error, or just plain bad luck accomplish our mutual assured destruction. The ultimatum risks nothing more than that.

**Red Slider**

*Sacramento, Calif.*

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How can I describe the feeling I had when I turned to "The Light of a Man-Made Star" and saw the photographs from Michael Light's *100 Suns*? First among them is a photograph of the Hood test, to which I, as a small child, was exposed. My father, a mineral exploration geologist interested in uranium, had brought my brother, mother, and me to Nevada that summer.

I was young, and my memories of that time are few: lifting my pillow off the floor in the bunkhouse to expose a rattlesnake, the ghostly rise and fall of a player piano's keys. Years later, many residents of the area contracted cancer from the fallout. Danger, secrecy, and the unnatural—these were the hallmarks of my own private nuclear age.

The following year, in 1958, my father went to work on a feasibility study for Project Chariot, to determine whether the government should use nuclear devices to bomb a harbor into the coast of northwestern Alaska. The project was classified, and he didn't speak of it until the year I turned 12, when I accidentally discovered a book-length document titled "The Effects of Nuclear Weapons" in our bookcase. The chapter that I most remember was titled "Effects on Personnel." It contained photographs of *hibakusha*—Japanese atomic-bomb survivors—with their bodies exposed to display the kimono patterns that had been burned into their backs. I've never shaken these images from my mind, or forgotten that those photographed were treated in the text not as victims but as subjects of an experiment.

My father continued to prospect in Alaska for radioactive minerals. The summer before the Cuban missile crisis, he found a large deposit of beryllium, an element crucial to the workings of nuclear weapons; it earned him a write-up in *Newsweek* and a citation from the Alaska legislature. I grew up to become an English professor, and I taught Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle* in a course on nuclear issues that I developed in the early 2000s. Vonnegut's portrayal of Felix Hoenikker struck close to home.

**Alison Sainsbury**  
*Bloomington, Ill.*

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I read "[Damn You All to Hell!](#)," Tom Nichols's article discussing films about nuclear war, with interest. He left out an obscure contribution to the genre: In 1964, Rod Serling wrote a TV movie starring Peter Sellers, *Carol for Another Christmas*, which portrayed a nightmarish future of nuclear destruction. My father was active in groups that urged a nuclear-test-ban treaty. He was so impressed with the movie that he bought a copy, got a projector and a screen, and went around Chicago showing it to anybody who

would watch. I was a teenager and it frightened me—it seemed that we were all doomed to die in nuclear war. The movie remains worth a watch today.

**Judith Jacobson**

*Baltimore, Md.*

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I appreciated “Damn You All to Hell!” and could relate to Tom Nichols’s anecdote about teaching today’s students about nuclear war. After 23 years on active duty in the Army, I also went into academia, teaching courses in political science and intelligence studies. When I first taught a class on homeland security, I shared videos of “duck and cover” drills and received similarly incredulous reactions from my students, who after 9/11 were living with the threat of terrorism—not nuclear war. At one of the colleges where I taught, I had a colleague who owned a home with a fallout shelter constructed in the 1960s. I took students to see it so they could imagine what it would have been like to actually live there. It wasn’t until I showed them the 1999 movie *Blast From the Past*, however, that they fully grasped what a fallout shelter would have to look like for a family to survive a nuclear war.

**Richard Kilroy**

*Charlottesville, Va.*

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Eleven years ago, I visited Manzanar with my wife, never having known that such a place existed. We were told that the word *manzanar* means “apple orchard” in Spanish, because the land where the internment site stood had originally been an apple orchard. Now, we discovered, it was a national historic site. Trying to imagine life in the prison camp was impossible. We couldn’t visualize how families had been ripped from their homes and crammed into barracks surrounded by guard towers and barbed wire. Our visit ended in Manzanar’s cemetery, which people still visit to see the graves of their ancestors. What we did not hear or see were the firsthand stories of the people who lived there. Andrew Aoyama’s “[The Expatriate](#),” about Joseph Kurihara, was an article we needed to read, even 11 years later.

**Richard Grove**

*Philadelphia, Pa.*

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I appreciated Jeffrey Goldberg's article, "[Nuclear Roulette](#)," which quotes me in its last sentence: "Most of all, we forget the rule articulated by the mathematician and cryptologist Martin Hellman: that the only way to survive Russian roulette is to stop playing."

Society neglects the nuclear threat at its peril. If we would honestly face that threat—and others, such as climate change—they could transform into opportunities to finally build the more peaceful, cooperative world we have dreamed of for ages, but thought ourselves incapable of achieving. To quote a paper I wrote some years ago, "Technology has given a new, global meaning to the Biblical injunction: 'I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life that you and your descendants may live.'"

**Martin E. Hellman**  
*Stanford, Calif.*

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### Behind the Cover

In this month's cover story, "[How Originalism Killed the Constitution](#)," Jill Lepore considers why the process of constitutional amendment has all but vanished from American politics. The Framers designed the Constitution to be adaptable, Lepore argues, but a conservative legal philosophy has undermined attempts to change it. For our cover design, the calligraphers Sean Freeman and Eve Steben of There Is Studio wrote out the headline and subheadline using fountain pens and traditional brushes, their tapered strokes evoking the lettering of the Constitution's preamble.

— **Liz Hart**, *Art Director*

# Amend It!

by Jill Lepore

*The Atlantic*  
EST. 1857

*The authors of the Constitution believed that it could, and should, change over time. The process of amendment is built into the document. Why have we abandoned — and all but forgotten — this essential democratic tool?*

*This is the story of how partisans of the legal philosophy known as originalism have undermined the process of constitutional evolution envisioned by the Founders. The Constitution is not a living document, originalists say. In the words of the late Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia, it is “dead, dead, dead.” And the only people who can be trusted to interpret its meaning, they argue, are the originalists themselves.*

“[The New Arms Race](#)” (August) stated that Japan’s centrifuge program reprocesses nuclear waste into plutonium. In fact, this process occurs in separate waste-reprocessing plants. “[The Judgments of Muriel Spark](#)” (September) stated that T. S. Eliot converted to Catholicism. In fact, he converted to Anglo-Catholicism.

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# Poetry

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# Summertime

## A poem

by Rosanna Warren



Ash-brown tatters lofted on pheromones,  
gypsy moths flutter among boughs and across the meadow  
like confetti. Beyond hunger. Only sex  
drives the males. The females wait  
folded within crevices in bark. They've lost their mouths.  
Admirable to be so single-minded.  
Just days ago, as creepy adolescents  
they chewed the branches bare, littered the path  
with skeleton leaf-stalks, tore new craters  
out of the canopy so the sky fell through:  
we, too, could strip a forest, strip

a continent, but not so lacily.  
The lanyard on our neighbor's flagpole clanks  
in the wind, the fraying stars and stripes  
fluster and droop. The lime-green  
katydid impersonates a folded leaf  
pressed to the maple trunk, chiding, rasping,  
preparing to mate and chew. Along the road  
wild Sweet William and purple chicory  
festoon derelict beer cans and vodka bottles in the ditch.  
We have everything we need, but we want more,  
and faster. The crushed garter snake  
is scrawled on the tarmac in an ampersand.

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*This poem appears in the [October 2025 print edition](#).*

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