

*The Magic Kingdom
of Ron DeSantis*
By Helen Lewis

*Holocaust Education
Has Failed*
By Dara Horn

*The Myth of the
Broke Millennial*
By Jean M. Twenge

AMERICAN MADNESS

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My childhood best friend, a brutal killing,
and the country's failure to help the mentally ill

By Jonathan Rosen

The Atlantic

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- [Cover Story](#)
- [Features](#)
- [Dispatches](#)
- [Culture & Critics](#)
- [Departments](#)
- [Poetry](#)

Cover Story

- [**American Madness**](#)

American Madness

Thousands of people with severe mental illness have been failed by a dysfunctional system. My friend Michael was one of them. Twenty-five years ago, he killed the person he loved most.

by Jonathan Rosen



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On the night of June 17, 1998, a Cornell campus police officer named Ellen Brewer had just begun her shift when she noticed a tall, silhouetted figure moving slowly across the engineering quad. The man appeared to be dressed all in black. Brewer felt a whisper of danger. She slowed her car, and the shrouded figure began loping toward her. He raised a hand and hailed her as if she were a taxi driver. As he drew closer, she thought he must have been the victim of an assault, perhaps in need of medical assistance.

Suddenly, as if in a single stride, the man was at her window. He lowered his face, shiny with sweat, close to hers. He was muttering incoherently; his rust-colored beard and hair were wildly matted. He seemed to be saying that he might have killed someone, his girlfriend or perhaps a windup doll. Brewer radioed in the strange encounter, requested backup, and got out of her car.

She thought again that the disoriented man, whose clothes were bloody, had been attacked or maybe had fallen into one of the steep gorges that famously intersect the campus, but when she tried to steer him out of the road, he leaped back, a large hand clenched into a fist.

The police station was all of 100 yards away, on Campus Road, and officers were already coming toward them, some on foot, others in cars. They escorted the man, whose name was Michael Laudor, to Barton Hall, the looming stone fortress that the campus police shared with the athletics department.

Once inside, Michael didn't need much prodding to answer questions, but whenever he mentioned possibly harming his girlfriend, whom he sometimes referred to as his fiancée, he added, "or a windup doll."

When Sergeant Philip Mospan, the officer in charge that night, asked Michael if he was hurt, he received a simple no. In that case, "where did the blood all over your person come from?" Michael told him it was Caroline's blood.

“Who is Caroline?” the sergeant asked.

“She’s my girlfriend,” Michael said. “I hurt her. I think I killed her.”

Was Michael sure about that?

He thought so, but asked, “Can we check on her?”

His concern seemed urgent and genuine, though puzzlingly he said this had happened in Hastings-on-Hudson, New York, 220 miles away.

Mospan prefaced his request to the Hastings-on-Hudson dispatcher by saying, “This may sound off the wall . . .” Because who kills someone in Westchester County, drives to Binghamton, and takes a bus to Ithaca, as Michael said he had done, only to surrender to campus police? The dispatcher asked him to wait a moment, and then a detective came on the line. “Hold him!” the detective said. “He did just what he said he did.” They had people at the apartment. The woman was dead, the scene ghastly.

And so it was that my best friend from childhood, who had grown up on the same street as me; gone to the same sleepaway camp, the same schools, the same college; competed for the same prizes and dreamed the same dream of becoming a writer, was arrested for murdering the person he loved most in the world.

When police officers from Hastings-on-Hudson showed up the next morning to bring Michael back there, they were surprised to find reporters, photographers, and TV cameras waiting outside the Ithaca jail. Jeanine Pirro, then the Westchester district attorney, who charged Michael with second-degree murder, would call him “the most famous schizophrenic in America,” a perverse designation, though strangely in tune with the aura of specialness that had characterized so much of his life, and that had shaped the expectations we’d grown up with. Michael was famous for brilliance. He’d gone to Yale Law School *after* developing schizophrenia, and was called a genius in *The New York Times*, which led to book and movie deals. Brad Pitt was attached to star.

Michael’s friends and family and his supporters at Yale had thought intelligence could save him, allow him to transcend the terrible disease that was causing his mind to detach from reality. Michael was arrested on a campus where he’d spent six happy weeks at an elite program for high-school kids in the summer of 1980, when we were 16. I sometimes wondered if he was trying to get back to a time when his mind was his friend and not his enemy, but a forensic psychiatrist who examined Michael for the prosecution set me straight: Michael thought his fiancée was a “nonhuman impostor” bent on his torture and death, and in his terrified delusional state, he had fled hours to Cornell hoping to evade destruction and call the police. In other words, he was seeking asylum.

Asylum was also what Michael needed in the months before he killed Carrie. Not “an asylum” in the defunct manner of the vast compounds whose ruins still dot the American landscape like collapsing Scottish castles, but a respite from tormenting delusions—that his fiancée was an alien, that his medication was poison. Because he was very sick but did not always know it, Michael had refused the psychiatric care that his family and friends desperately wanted for him but could not require him to get.

[Thomas Insel: What American mental-health care is missing](#)

Michael needed a version of what New York City Mayor Eric Adams called for in November, when [announcing an initiative](#) to assess homeless individuals so incapacitated by severe mental illness that they cannot recognize their own impairment or meet basic survival needs—even if that means bringing them to a hospital for evaluation against their will. “For too long,” Adams proclaimed, “there’s been a gray area where policy, law, and accountability have not been clear, and this has allowed people in need [to slip through the cracks](#). This culture of uncertainty has led to untold suffering and deep frustration. It cannot continue.”

Though [89 percent of recently surveyed New York City residents](#) favored “making it easier to admit those who are dangerous to the public, or themselves, to mental-health facilities,” attacks on the mayor’s modest adjustments to city policy began immediately. News stories suggested that a great roundup of mentally ill homeless people was in the offing. “Just because someone smells, because they haven’t had a shower for weeks,”

Norman Siegel, a former head of the New York Civil Liberties Union, told the *Times*, “because they’re mumbling, because their clothes are disheveled, that doesn’t mean they’re a danger to themselves or others.”

Never mind that these were not the criteria outlined in the Adams plan. Paul Appelbaum, the director of the Division of Law, Ethics, and Psychiatry at Columbia, says that the government has an interest in protecting people who are unable to meet their basic needs, and that he believes the mayor’s proposal has been largely misunderstood. “There’s an intrinsic humanitarian imperative not to stand by idly while these people waste away,” Appelbaum [recently told *Psychiatric News*.](#)

The people Adams is trying to help have been failed by the same legal and psychiatric systems that failed Michael. They all came of age amid the [wreckage of deinstitutionalization](#), a movement born out of a belief in the 1950s and ’60s that new medication along with outpatient care could empty the sprawling state hospitals. Built in the 19th century to provide asylum and “moral care” to people chained in basements or abandoned to life on the streets, these monuments of civic pride had deteriorated over time, becoming overcrowded and understaffed “snake pits,” where patients were neglected and sometimes abused. Walter Freeman, notorious for the ice-pick lobotomy (which is exactly what it sounds like), was so horrified by the naked patients crammed into state hospitals, shockingly featured in a famous 1946 *Life* article, that he developed a new slogan: “Lobotomy gets them home.”

[Read: The truth about deinstitutionalization](#)

But getting people home was never going to be a one-step process. This would have been true even if the first antipsychotic medications, developed in the ’50s, had proved to be a pharmaceutical panacea. And it would have been true even if the neighborhood mental-health clinics that psychiatrists had promised could replace state hospitals had been adequately funded. During the revolutions of the ’60s, institutions were easier to tear down than to reform, and the idea of asylum for the most afflicted got lost along with the idea that severe psychiatric disorders are biological conditions requiring medical care. For many psychiatrists of the era, mental illness was caused by environmental disturbances that could be repaired by treating society itself as the patient.

The questions that should have been asked in the '60s, and that might have saved Michael and Carrie, are relevant to Mayor Adams's policies now: Will there be follow-up care, protocols for complying with treatment, housing options with supportive services and a way to fund them? Will there be psychiatrists and hospital beds for those who need them? But it would be ironic if all of the past failures at the federal, state, and local levels became an argument against making a first small step toward repair.



Michael Laudor and his fiancée, Caroline Costello, in a photo found by the police in their apartment in Hastings-on-Hudson (Photographer unknown; Tolga Tezcan / Getty)

If I had known Michael only as he appeared grimly on the front pages of the tabloids 25 years ago, or Caroline Costello as half of a smiling picture all the more tragic for being so full of innocence and hope, I would not have understood how much is at stake in the current efforts to improve the care given to people with severe mental illness. Neither Adams's policies—nor

the more comprehensive measures [advanced by Governor Gavin Newsom](#), in California—will bring about a sweeping transformation; only incremental changes, and many accompanying efforts at all levels of government, will make a difference. And these will not be possible without a shift in the way people think about the problem.

Now when I think about the frenzied moments before Michael killed Carrie, when violence was imminent and intervention was necessary but impossible, I understand that it isn't on the brink of crisis but earlier that something can be done—though only by a culture that is capable of making difficult choices and devoting the resources to implement them.

But I knew Michael before he thought Nazis were gunning for him. I knew him before the lurid headlines, the Hollywood deal, the publishing contract, and the *New York Times* profile that proclaimed him a genius. I knew him as a 10-year-old boy, when I was also 10 and he was my best friend.

The Cuckoo's Nest

I met Michael as I was examining a heap of junk that the previous owners of the house we had just moved into in New Rochelle had left in a neat pile at the edge of our lawn. It was 1973. A boy with shaggy red-brown hair and large, tinted aviator glasses walked over to welcome me to the neighborhood. He was tall and gawky but with a lilting stride that was oddly purposeful for a kid our age, as if he actually had someplace to go.

His habit of launching himself up and forward with every step, gathering height to achieve distance, was so distinctive that it earned him the nickname “Toes.” He was also called “Big,” which is less imaginative than “Toes,” but how many kids get two nicknames? And Michael *was* big. Not big like our classmate Hal, who appeared to be attending fifth grade on the GI Bill, but big through some subtle combination of height, intelligence, posture, and willpower.

Even standing still, he would rock forward and rise up on the balls of his feet, trying to meet his growth spurt halfway. He stood beside me on Mereland Road in that unsteady but self-assured posture, rising and falling like a wave. He was socially effective in the same way he was good at

basketball—through uncowed persistence. I often heard in later years that people found him intimidating, but for me it was the opposite. Despite my shyness—or because of it—Michael’s self-confidence put me at ease. I fed off his belief in himself.

I knew Michael before he thought Nazis were gunning for him in the streets of New Rochelle.

Was Michael bouncing a basketball the day I met him? He often had one with him, the way you might take a dog out for a walk. I’d hear the ball halfway down the block, knocking before he knocked.

Even today, when I hear the taut report of a basketball on an empty street, the muffled echo thrown back a split second later like the after-pulse of a heartbeat, I have a visceral memory of Michael coming to fetch me for one-on-one or H-O-R-S-E, or simply to shoot around if we were too deep in conversation for a game or if I was tired of losing.

Michael might just as easily have had a book the day he introduced himself. He often had several tucked under one arm, and he would dump them unceremoniously at the base of the schoolyard basketball hoop. It was always an eclectic pile: Ray Bradbury, Hermann Hesse, Zane Grey Westerns, books his father assigned him—*To Kill a Mockingbird* or a prose translation of *Beowulf*—stirred in with the *Dune* trilogy and *Doc Savage* adventures.

Our fathers were both college professors, but Michael’s father, who taught economics, sported a leather bomber jacket and spoke in a booming Brooklyn manner. My father, who taught German literature, wore tweed jackets from Brooks Brothers, spoke with a soft Viennese accent, and named me and my sister for his parents, who had been murdered by the Nazis.

Michael had all four grandparents, something I’d seen only in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. They did not all sleep in one bed, like Charlie’s grandparents, but he saw a lot of them. His Russian-born grandparents still lived in Brighton Beach, Brooklyn, where his father had grown up and his grandmother Frieda had stuffed money into a hole in the bathroom wall until a plumber came and stole it one day. Michael recounted stories about

“crazy” Frieda with such amused affection that it was a shock when he told me, years later, that she had schizophrenia.

Every weekday morning during the school year, I’d walk to the bottom of our one-block street, ring Michael’s bell, and wait for him to step groggily out from the household chaos. We’d hike up the hidden steps behind his house that led to the basketball court, climb a second flight of outdoor stairs, and slip into the school through a side door that felt like a private entrance.

Thanks to Michael, I became a big fan of *Doc Savage*, originally published in pulp-fiction magazines in the 1930s but reissued as cheap paperbacks starting in the ’60s. We joked about the archaic language and dated futurisms —long-distance phone calls!—but Doc Savage, charged with righteous adrenaline, formed an important part of the archive of manly virtues that I received secondhand from Michael, who got them wholesale from his father, his grandfathers, old movies, and assorted dime novels.

Like Doc Savage, Michael had a photographic memory. He also read at breakneck speed. I was a fast talker but a slow reader; Michael burned through the assigned reading with such robotic swiftness that he was allowed to read whatever he wanted to, even during regular class time.

He kept stacks of paperbacks on his desk at school, working his way through fresh piles every day. He didn’t just read the books; he read them all *at the same time*, like Bobby Fischer playing chess with multiple opponents. After a few chapters of one, he’d reach for another and read for a while before grabbing a third without losing focus, as if they all contained pieces of a single, connected story.

I was a direct beneficiary of all that reading. He seemed to have almost as much of a compulsion to tell me about the books as he did to read them, and I acquired a phantom bookshelf entirely populated by twice-told tales I heard while we were shooting baskets, going for pizza, or walking around the neighborhood.



Left: Michael Laudor at the author's house in New Rochelle, New York, 1976. *Right:* Farm Camp Lowy, in Windsor, New York, summer 1977. The author is second from the left in the second row, in a Yankees T-shirt; Michael sits two seats to his left, looking upward in a dark T-shirt. (Courtesy of Jonathan Rosen; Studiocasper / Getty; Petekarici / Getty)

Michael's precocity made him seem like someone who had lived a full life span already and was just slumming it in childhood, or living backwards like Benjamin Button or Merlyn. My parents were amused by the speed with which he took to calling them Bob and Norma, and the ease with which he held forth on politics while I waited for him to finish so we could play Mille Bornes or go outside. I knew that the president was a crook—but Michael knew who Liddy, Haldeman, and Ehrlichman were and what they had done, matters he expounded as if Deep Throat had whispered to him personally in the schoolyard.

Michael also saw more R-rated movies than I did. In 1976, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, which was about a sane wiseass named Randle McMurphy locked in a mental hospital by a crazy culture, won the Academy Award for Best Picture. Michael explained that the hospital tries drugging McMurphy into submission and shocking his brain until his body writhes, then finishes him off with a lobotomy, all because he won't behave.

I'd never heard of a lobotomy, but Michael assured me it was real; they stuck an ice pick in your head and wiggled it until you went slack like a pithed frog, docile enough to be dissected alive. This was a far cry from the

“delicate brain operation” that Doc Savage performed on criminals to make them good so they would not have to rot in prison.

The lobotomy in *Cuckoo’s Nest* reduces McMurphy to zombie helplessness. His friend Chief Bromden smothers him to death with a pillow and escapes out a window so the other inmates will still have a hero to believe in. Like a lot of things in the ’70s, the movie sent a mixed message, exposing the abuses of psychiatric hospitals while justifying the killing of a mentally impaired person.

The summer before college, I found myself filled with optimism. I’d always been the tortoise to Michael’s hare, but we both got into Yale, and for the ninth year in a row we would be going to the same school. I was surprised when Michael told me one afternoon, as we lounged on my parents’ patio, that he did not think we would see much of each other at Yale. When I asked him why, he told me that I was simply too slow.

We did see less of each other in college, but when I’d run into Michael on Metro-North, heading home for vacation, we’d talk in the old way, nonstop until New Rochelle.

Impatient as always, Michael decided to graduate in three years. He also informed me that he had decided to become rich, as if that were something you could declare like a major. He had been recruited by a Boston-based management consulting firm called Bain & Company, a place, he explained, where the supersmart became the superrich.

He was ironic about his choice to join the ranks of the young, upwardly mobile philistines the media had taken to calling yuppies, but wanted me to know that he was not abandoning intellectual or artistic aspirations: His plan was to spend a decade making gold bricks for Pharaoh, after which he would buy his freedom and become a writer.

I lost track of Michael during his time at Bain, though once or twice I’d hear my name on Mereland Road while home for a visit. Turning, I’d see him loping up the hill, grinning as if we were still fifth graders and his fancy trench coat was a costume.

But I learned later that he was having a rough time. The pressure at Bain was constant. Michael began complaining that his heart raced, his digestion was bad, and Machiavellian higher-ups were “out to get him” but would never let him go because of his value to the firm, which seemed unlikely even for a place known as “the KGB of the consulting world.” He quit Bain in 1985 and began writing in earnest—the 10-year plan had become a one-year plan. Even after he quit, Michael thought his phone was being tapped and Bainies were spying on him.

Still, his life sounded like the fulfillment of a dream. He was living in the attic of a grand house with a private beach at the south end of New Rochelle owned by the parents of a friend. The mansion might have drifted north and west from the gilded north shore of Long Island. Michael called it “the Gatsby House” and claimed that he could see a green light glinting far out on the water as he stayed up late, writing stories and staring into the night. He wanted to be Fitzgerald and Gatsby both, the dreamer and the dream. Didn’t we all?

The friend’s parents happened to be Andy and Jane Ferber, community psychiatrists who had dedicated their life to liberating people with severe mental illness from state institutions. The Ferbers were at the center of an overlapping collection of friends and colleagues who referred to themselves as “the Network,” drawn together by their experience in community psychiatry and a sincere desire to leave the world better than they’d found it.

They’d been inspired by the Scottish psychiatrist R. D. Laing, who called insanity “a perfectly rational adjustment to an insane world,” and books such as [Asylums](#), Erving Goffman’s 1961 landmark study that focused on the impact psychiatric institutions had on the behavior and personality of patients rather than on the illnesses that sent them there. A sociologist, Goffman frequently put the term *mental illness* in quotation marks, though he abandoned the practice in later writing, after his wife’s suicide.

Most of the Network had met in the ’60s, when President John F. Kennedy had vowed to replace the “cold mercy of custodial isolation” with the “open warmth of community concern.” The [Community Mental Health Act of 1963](#), which Kennedy signed on October 31 of that year, promised that an “emphasis on prevention, treatment, and rehabilitation will be substituted for

a desultory interest in confining patients in an institution to wither away.” It was the institution’s turn to wither away, replaced by the sort of communal care offered by the center that Jane Ferber had run in downtown New Rochelle, with its workshops, visits to patients in board-and-care facilities, and drop-in services.

One problem was that nobody knew how to prevent severe mental illness; another was that rehabilitation was not always possible, and could only follow treatment, which was easily rejected. And despite having been created to replace hospitals caring for the most intractably ill, community mental-health centers, as their name suggested, aimed to treat the whole of society, a broad mandate that favored a population with needs that could be addressed during drop-ins. “It wasn’t that we weren’t interested in dealing with difficult cases,” writes the psychologist Roger B. Burt, looking back at the community center he ran in Baltimore in the late ’60s, but that he and his idealistic colleagues feared that “to blindly accept ‘dumping’ [of severely ill patients from the old asylums] would have bled the staff of time and taken services away from people who would benefit from it.” The only recourse for families caring for severely ill relatives in acute distress was to call the police, who would arrest them.

The police didn’t like this, and who can blame them? They did not sign up to be caretakers of people suffering psychotic episodes. Meanwhile, the most vulnerable members of the community were being criminalized.

The Network’s values were well expressed in *Crisis: A Handbook for Systemic Intervention*, which Jane Ferber and a colleague had published in the late ’70s, written for mental-health professionals who “feel in some way oppressed by the existence of mental hospitals, jails, reform schools, hierarchical corporations or governments of covert nepotism.”

One of the manual’s case histories described an elderly woman with “regressive psychosis” who had been wandering the halls of her Upper West Side boardinghouse naked. Members of Jane’s team were called in to help get the woman into a nursing home; instead, they coached her on “how to avoid being committed.” They gave her tips like “wear your clothes at all times” and “evacuate in the toilet instead of the floor,” and they reminded her to smile at the nurses “no matter what.”

Keeping people out of the hospital was the hospitals' policy too, even if it had more to do with legal constraints and available beds than faith in community care. Around the time that Michael moved into the Gatsby house, there were newspaper stories about a woman with schizophrenia named Joyce Brown who had been hospitalized against her will as part of a new program to prevent people from dying on the streets, a sort of precursor to Mayor Adams's initiative. The program included a broader interpretation of commitment laws and promised appropriate housing upon discharge.

Brown slept on a sidewalk grate; ran into traffic; defecated on herself; screamed racial epithets at Black men (though she was Black herself); and tore up dollar bills, set them on fire, and urinated on them. But a judge [ordered her released](#). He agreed with her lawyers at the New York Civil Liberties Union, headed by Norman Siegel at the time, and said that her behavior was the *result* of homelessness rather than its cause. Though burning money "may not satisfy a society increasingly oriented to profit-making and bottom-line pragmatism," the judge wrote, Brown's behavior was "consistent with the independence and pride she vehemently insists on asserting."

Her sisters, who had struggled to care for Brown in their homes before psychosis, drug abuse, and violent behavior had made it impossible, [came to a different conclusion](#). If the judge believed that a Black woman shrieking obscenities and lifting her skirt to show passersby her naked buttocks was living a life of "independence and pride," they said after the ruling, he must be a racist who thought such degradation was "good enough for her, not for him or his kind." If that were his sister on the street, they had no doubt, he "would not stand for it."

Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who had served on President Kennedy's mental-health task force as a young assistant secretary of labor, had helped draft the report that led to the Community Mental Health Act. Years later, as a U.S. senator representing New York, he looked back with deep regret. In [a 1989 letter to the Times](#), written in a city "filled with homeless, deranged people," he wondered what would have happened if someone had told Kennedy, "Before you sign the bill you should know that we are not going to build anything like the number of community centers we will need. One in five in New York City. The hospitals will empty out, but there will be no place for

the patients to be cared for in their communities.” If the president had known, Moynihan wrote, “would he not have put down his pen?”

The Locked Ward

While I was studying English literature in graduate school at UC Berkeley, and learning from Foucault that mental illness is a “social construct” invented to imprison enemies of the state, Michael was being hounded by Nazis in New Rochelle. Even if they were imaginary, they ran him off the road when he was driving and tried to run him down when he was walking. Characters from a thriller he was writing stalked him. Even after he burned the novel, he brought a baseball bat into bed with him.

Jane found Michael a psychiatrist from the Network whose intellectual manner appealed to him. He went home to his parents’ house but remained a part of the Network’s extended family.

One cold winter morning before work in 1987, my father saw him in the flapping remnant of his fancy trench coat, walking distractedly up Mereland Road like someone with no place to go in a hurry. My father was waiting outside for his ride to the train station. The closer Michael got, the worse he looked, and my father asked him what was wrong.

I haven’t been well, Michael told him, uncharacteristically laconic. My father was deeply affected by Michael’s drawn and distracted features, his almost palpable aura of affliction. My father wanted to stay and talk more, but his ride arrived. He got in the car with the feeling that he was abandoning someone in crisis.

A few days later, my parents called me. They sounded so grave and strange that I thought my grandmother must have died, but my father said they were calling about Michael Laudor. The formal use of his full name was an acknowledgment of how far apart we’d drifted and a portent of bad news: Michael was in the psychiatric unit of Columbia-Presbyterian.

My mother told me that Michael thought his parents were Nazis, and that he’d been patrolling his house with a kitchen knife. Ruth had been unable to

convince Michael that she was his mother and not a Nazi, so she'd locked herself in her bedroom and called the police.

As soon as I got off the phone, I called the Laudors. I still knew the number by heart, though it had been years since I'd dialed it. Michael's father, Chuck, encouraged me to call Michael, who was up on 168th Street in a locked ward. This was the first time I'd heard that terrible phrase. No phones in the rooms, just a payphone in the corridor.

Sometimes, Chuck said, the doctors gave Michael special drugs, and if he was "tuned in," he would talk. The notion affected me almost as much as "locked ward." The idea that someone so verbal needed to be "tuned in" was hard to imagine.

I dialed the number Chuck gave me, and Michael answered in a groggy voice, as if he'd been waiting by the payphone and fallen asleep. I was afraid he wouldn't recognize me or want to talk—I'd been afraid he wouldn't be *able* to talk—but he knew me right away and sounded pleased, in a weary way, that I was on the phone.

His voice was leaden and far off, but I felt the muffled intensity of his familiar presence. "I've never been in prison before," he said ruefully when I asked how he was doing. The "day room" was full of noise and cigarette smoke, the TV on all the time. "I don't like smoky rooms with televisions," he told me, "but they say if you want to leave, you have to go there and interact."

It sounded bleak. Was there nothing else to do?

"Eight a.m. breakfast. Twelve p.m. lunch. Five p.m. dinner."

It was only after I'd laughed that I realized this might not be deadpan humor, just deadpan delivery. Disconcertingly, I wasn't sure. Michael hadn't lost his old way of saying things, and I was still listening with ingrained expectations. Could he still be ironic? Could he still tell a joke?

I wanted to apologize for laughing, but didn't. I felt Michael's need to talk, to tell me things more than to converse. He was "tuned in," as Chuck put it,

though to a different frequency from the one I was used to.

“Dr. Ferber says I have a delicate brain,” he told me with a hint of pride that only enhanced the pathos of his abject situation.

I’d called half-hoping that Michael wouldn’t come to the phone, but I heard myself asking if he wanted a visitor. He was eager for one. We agreed that I’d visit on the coming Tuesday. I gave him my phone number in Manhattan and had to repeat each number very slowly.

“It’s hard to work the pen right now,” he said.

A taciturn attendant with keys on a ring like a jailer’s in a movie unlocked the heavy door of Michael’s ward. The door had a small, thick window at eye level. The attendant locked the door behind us, and I felt a clinch of claustrophobia. *Locked ward* was not a metaphor.

I followed the attendant. Michael was sitting rigidly on his bed, trancelike. His parents, in chairs near the bed, leaped up when I came in. Ruth hugged me hard and Chuck shook my hand. After they left the room to give us a chance to talk, Michael seemed marginally more relaxed, but he was apparently past thinking they were Nazis. He shifted uncomfortably on the bed, an occasional tremor running through his body.

At this point, no one had yet named Michael’s illness for me, saying only that he’d had “a break.” Michael referred to himself as paranoid, but who isn’t? The doctors were giving him drugs, he told me, but not much beyond that. He felt like a television set with bad reception; nobody knew what to do except move the antenna around and bang on one side and then the other, hoping the picture would improve.

Before he wound up in the hospital, he had applied to the top seven law schools in the country. They’d all accepted him, though by then he was in no condition to do anything about it, so he’d asked his brother to reject all of them except Yale, which he deferred for a year.

It was, in a way, a typical Michael story: He had rejected the law schools, not the other way around.

Michael said it was easier to walk than to sit, so we went out into the corridor and walked up and down together. He carried himself with effortful stillness, cautiously erect. At one point he led me to a barred window that looked out over fire escapes, water towers, the windowless back ends of buildings exposed by demolition, things not meant to be seen.

“Look what’s become of me,” he said pitifully, as if he were the view.

Visiting Michael in the locked ward, I found it impossible to pretend that he was suffering from a “social construct.”

Michael volunteered that he could leave whenever he wanted to, because he had—at his father’s urgent insistence—signed himself in. This surprised me, not only because he hated being there but also because of the dramatic story I’d heard about his arrival.

It would not have occurred to me that someone marching around with a kitchen knife might not be considered a danger to himself or others. Michael had carried the knife, and slept with the baseball bat, because he’d thought his parents had been replaced by surgically altered Nazis who had murdered them and wanted to kill him. His psychiatrist considered that defensive, not aggressive, behavior.

The doctors at Columbia-Presbyterian believed he ought to be there. The longer they could keep him, the more time he would have to receive treatment and to heal, a process much slower than the temporary abatement of florid symptoms that medication provided. He was persuaded to stay, or was at least afraid to leave.

Visiting Michael, I found it impossible to pretend that he was suffering from a “social construct.” I disliked the hospital, but even with its heavy locked door, I knew it wasn’t a branch of the “carceral state” devised by a power-mad society to torment him.

Michael spent eight months in the locked ward at Columbia-Presbyterian, which, he murmured guiltily, cost even more than Yale. His long stay gave his doctors time to find the least incapacitating dose of the powerful drugs that were supposed to have eliminated mental hospitals years before.

Michael's medication was calibrated carefully enough that he was no longer convinced Josef Mengele was preparing to remove his brain without anesthesia. He had his suspicions, but, as he later said, he'd stopped trying to bash his skull against the sink in a preemptive effort to destroy his own brain. Now when hallucinations came calling, Michael could often recognize them for what they were and "change the channel," as he put it.

Michael left the hospital to live among the ruins of multiple systems. He would have to continue taking antipsychotic medication, though 15 percent of people with schizophrenia were "treatment resistant," according to the psychiatrist E. Fuller Torrey, the author of the 1983 book *Surviving Schizophrenia: A Family Manual*. "Treatment resistant" referred to patients who weren't helped by medication, not those who resisted taking it. That percentage was much higher than 15 percent, in part because the conviction that you weren't sick was often an aspect of the illness, especially at times of acute psychosis.

Before Michael's psychotic break tipped the balance one way, and medication tipped it back the other, he had seemed to both know and not know what was happening to him—a state strangely mirrored by those around him, who had also recognized and ignored his illness by turns. I'd experienced for myself how rational his reasoning manner made unreasonable things appear. Ruth and Chuck had helped Michael install debugging devices on his phone, and by the time they realized that they'd been played by his delusions, he'd reclassified them as double agents.

I felt sadness when I saw Michael struggling through an intermediate existence after he got out of the hospital. His slowed speech, stiff formality, and dark suit, a hand-me-down from his former self, made me think of an undertaker in an old movie. I also felt sympathy, aversion, affection, and fear in unfamiliar and shifting combinations. When I saw him on Mereland, his collar was half up and half down. I wanted to smooth it down for him, or lift up the other side, but did neither.

Halfway

Michael moved into a halfway house in White Plains called Futura House. Suburbs didn't like halfway houses or group homes, and New York suburbs

had been very successful at excluding them. Michael's mother said he was lucky to get into one, given how many fewer spaces there were than people seeking them.

The real trouble with halfway houses was that they were short-term solutions for people with long-term needs. Residents might do everything expected of them, take their medication, and follow all the rules, and still not be ready to move on after the one- or two-year limit.

Supportive housing that combined psychiatric and social services with affordable lodging hardly existed at the time. People might shuttle between transitional housing, a family home, a hospital, a board-and-care facility, the home of a different relative, followed by another hospital, though never for long. Federal benefits excluded state hospitals, creating an incentive for states to offload costly patients. The process would start again, but never moving in a straight line as it followed the course of an illness that waxed and waned, and responded better or worse to medication at different times. The disability checks Michael received, and the Medicaid payments he was eligible for, did not create a community, let alone a caring one. Checks and pills were what remained of a grand promise, the ingredients of a mental-health-care system that had never been baked but were handed out like flour and yeast in separate packets to starving people.

Most of Michael's disability check went straight to the halfway house. He was poor, he said, and not in a temporary or bohemian way.

As part of its congressional testimony in the 1980s about the crisis in care for people with schizophrenia, the National Institute of Mental Health prepared a chart showing that only 17 percent of adults with schizophrenia were getting outpatient care; 6 percent were living in state hospitals, 5 percent in nursing homes, and 14 percent in short-term inpatient facilities. That left a full 58 percent of the schizophrenic population unaccounted for. Would Michael end up among the lost population?

Michael didn't like Futura House, but he still heard its loud clock ticking. Every few months, he had a "resident review," where counselors talked about a "life plan" and "vocational readiness." (Futura House and the day program at St. Vincent's Hospital had relationships with local businesses.)

The counselors emphasized small steps, low stress, and a noncompetitive environment. Not necessarily forever, but definitely for now. One possibility, endorsed by the psychiatrists at the hospital, was for Michael to work as a cashier at Macy's, a suggestion that fell like a hammer blow of humiliation.

Michael told the story of his father taking him to Macy's, where they watched beleaguered clerks get pushed around by impatient customers, as an epiphanic moment. The verdict was clear: Yale Law School would be a lot less stressful.

Prometheus at Yale

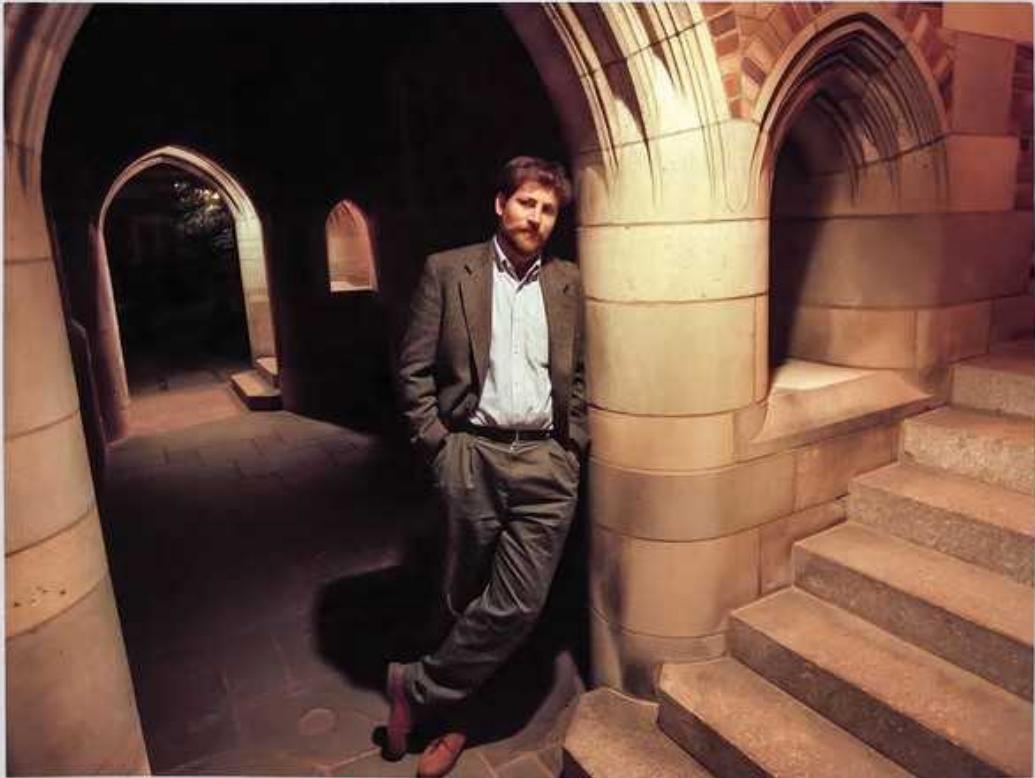
For the network watching over Michael, choosing Yale Law School was a no-brainer. He might be suffering from a thought disorder, but his brilliance would save him. Michael agreed: "I may be crazy," he liked to say, "but I'm not stupid." It was hard to believe that Michael could go straight from a program of slow steps and daily skills, like using a checkbook and planning a meal, to the top-ranked law school in the country. But if you agreed that Macy's would destroy him, it followed that Yale would set him free. I believed this. Michael's parents believed this. So did the law school's dean, Guido Calabresi, and the professors who became Michael's mentors.

Michael was as quick to tell his professors about his schizophrenia as he was determined to keep it from his classmates. He made it clear that he didn't want sympathy or special consideration, and his professors, who understood that he was asking for both, were deeply affected by his intelligence and vulnerability.

He told them how he awoke each morning to find his room on fire, lying in fear until his father called to convince him that the flames weren't real. "Does it burn?" his father asked after telling him to put out a hand. "Does it burn? No? Good!" Then he ordered Michael to do the same with his other hand. "Is it hot? Does it burn? Does it *burn*?" Little by little, until Michael was standing upright on the burning floor.

His professors all heard the story of the burning room and repeated it to one another as a parable of his struggle and strength. He was like Prometheus

having his liver eaten by an eagle every morning, growing it back every night in time to be tortured again at dawn.



Michael, photographed for *The New York Times* at Yale Law School, October 25, 1995. The image the *Times* conveyed, in this photo and in the article that it accompanied, belied the depth of Michael's continuing struggles. (Jim Estrin / *The New York Times* / Redux; T_Kimura / Getty)

It was a feature of Michael's confessional style that his account of disabling mental illness communicated extraordinary mental ability, so that even after his professors realized he could not do the work, their sense of his brilliance remained. As one of his mentors later explained, many of the law school's real success stories didn't become lawyers at all. He thought Michael could be an eloquent advocate for people with schizophrenia, someone who had been to Yale Law School rather than someone who was a Yale lawyer.

But *Yale lawyer* was a phrase Michael already applied to himself. Recalling his struggle with the day-program doctors, Michael would say: “Why would I bag groceries when I could be a Yale lawyer?” Becoming a Yale lawyer was the whole point.

The Laws of Madness

Michael and Carrie had overlapped as undergraduates but began dating when Michael was in law school and Carrie, a literature major with a knack for computers, was living in New Haven and working for IBM. The mutual friend who brought them together loved and admired them both, but had doubts about them becoming a couple. He had lived with Michael his first summer during law school and remembered asking his roommate through a locked door if he wanted to come out for dinner, only to learn that Michael feared that *he* would be on the menu.

Michael waited months before telling Carrie he had schizophrenia; if she suspected something before that, she didn’t say. She wouldn’t have been the first person to not notice, or to ascribe symptoms such as surface tremors and apocalyptic utterances to the hidden depths of a complex soul.

Carrie wept when Michael told her. She did not reproach him for having kept his illness a secret. She showed no anger or fear or regret, only pain for his pain. She wept at the unfairness of what he had suffered in the past and was still suffering. She knew it was a terrible illness, but she loved him, and that was that.

Michael’s dream was to be a professor at Yale. He reported proudly that the law school had created a postgraduate fellowship just for him, in recognition of his genius. But there remained a certain gap between his ambitions and his mentors’ hopes for him. “I have thought to myself from time to time,” one of Michael’s professors told me: “Gee, if I hadn’t been so busy being proud of what a great place the Yale Law School was to have admitted Michael Laudor, I might have paid closer attention to him.”

When Michael began applying for teaching jobs, he was unable to explain in interviews why he had never clerked for a judge or worked at a law firm beyond a single summer that had not gone well. Advised to avoid any

mention of schizophrenia—a “career killer”—Michael said that such work lacked the intellectual stimulation he required. He got no offers at all, a bitter setback.

But in the fall of 1995, while Michael was still mourning his father, who had died of cancer, something happened that changed his fortunes almost overnight. On November 9, *The New York Times* ran an article called “[A Voyage to Bedlam and Part Way Back](#).” A second headline modified the first: “Yale Law Graduate, a Schizophrenic, Is Encumbered by an Invisible Wheelchair.”

The reporter, Lisa W. Foderaro, offered a sort of alternative résumé: “Mr. Laudor, 32 and by all accounts a genius, is a schizophrenic who emerged from eight months in a psychiatric unit at Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center to go to Yale Law School.” The story centered on Michael’s newfound determination to find a job as a law-school professor without denying or disguising his schizophrenia.

When Michael came out of the closet, he came out all the way. “Dubbing himself a ‘flaming schizophrenic,’ ” Foderaro wrote, “Mr. Laudor said that his decision to make his illness public and work closely with others with mental disabilities was a political and religious one.”

It was a glowing profile that captured Michael’s wry sense of humor (“I went to the most supportive mental health care facility that exists in America: the Yale Law School”) as well as his knack for harrowing formulations: “My reality was that at any moment, they”—the Nazi doctors—“would surgically cut me to death without any anesthesia.” He recalled the pain of his hospitalization with touching frankness: “I spent my 26th birthday there crying on my bed.”

He poured his private life onto the pages of the *Times*, confiding even his experience of the interview with liberated eloquence: “I feel that I’m pawing through walls of cotton and gauze when I talk to you now,” Michael told Foderaro. “I’m using 60 or 70 percent of my effort just to maintain the proper reality contact with the world.”

[Read: Can you cure mental illness? Two centuries of trying says no.](#)

Brilliance was the fulcrum of the story, the point at which Michael was lifted above the stereotypes of schizophrenia, much as intelligence had elevated him above ordinary expectations before he got sick. “Far from knowing that Mr. Laudor had a severe mental illness,” Foderaro wrote, “the other students were somewhat in awe.”

The article threw into stark relief the indignities of interviewing for jobs. “One interviewer asked if he was violent,” Foderaro wrote, “which Mr. Laudor said reflected a common and painful stereotype.” I understood Michael’s indignation, but I also knew that before he was medicated, Michael had armed himself with a knife in fear of his impostor parents. I wished the article had addressed the question even a little instead of leaving it to Michael to dismiss in a way that made you feel as if even to ask was an insult.

One of the things that haunted me about Michael’s breakdown was how frightened his parents had been. Without a father capable of bluffing and threatening Michael into signing himself in for his own good, he might not have gotten those eight months of care he’d so desperately needed.

Michael sounded exhilarated and slightly manic when we talked on the phone that winter. Book editors were in a bidding war for a memoir Michael was going to write, called *The Laws of Madness*, which was also going to be a Ron Howard movie. The deals would net him more than \$2 million.

When an editor asked Michael if he still hallucinated, he told her, “I’m hallucinating right now.”

Like the *Times* profile, his 80-page book proposal caused an electric stir. How often did anyone narrate schizophrenia from the inside out? Michael described what it had felt like to discover that his parents were evil imitations of themselves: “I soon burst in at 3 in the morning to accuse my parents of being impostors, of having killed my real parents while they themselves were neo-Nazi agents altered by special surgery and trained to mimic my parents.”

The tone was reminiscent of countless sci-fi stories Michael had summarized for me in the schoolyard—he’d seen a secretary at Bain with “blood

dripping from her teeth as her clawed hands reached for me”—but the proposal rose from the depths of such delusions, tracing the archetypal tale of a young man’s triumph and a father’s love. Even as it offered glimpses of bloody fangs and Nazi spies, the narrative arc bent toward Yale Law School. Michael’s agent escorted him to publishing houses, where he spoke with undaunted fluency.

When an editor asked Michael if he still hallucinated, he told her, “I’m hallucinating right now.” The room grew quiet as Michael described a burning waterfall emptying into a lake of fire. He also saw a peaceful house with shutters and vines. Michael explained that he managed these and other competing images by arranging them on a great screen in his mind, in a hierarchy of terror from greatest to least.

The movie people found his method of controlling his hallucinations a perfect cinematic conceit.

Michael made little progress on his memoir, possibly none. The movie, meanwhile, raced along like the river outside the window of his apartment in Hastings-on-Hudson, where he had moved with Carrie. It wasn’t the first time a screenwriter had needed to base a movie on a book that didn’t exist. It could even be an advantage.

But for Michael, leaving his story to Hollywood was unthinkable. The closer *The Laws of Madness* got to becoming a movie, the more important the book became, a chance to restore the dream of creative achievement that had gone up in smoke.

In an effort to bolster Michael’s resolve, his editor Hamilton Cain took the train to Hastings-on-Hudson. Cain brought a tape recorder, hoping an interview might jump-start the process. He and Michael envisioned a series of sessions.

The interview began with Michael talking about Mereland Road and me: “There were only six or seven houses in the most immediate part of our neighborhood, our street. I was inseparable from a friend who moved in when I was in fifth grade, Jonathan.” We were both going to be writers, he

told Cain: "He's done it; he is a novelist. I was sure that I, too, would be one."

Cain and Michael talked all day. The apartment grew dim as the December sun crossed the river and disappeared behind New Jersey. Michael had never turned on the lights, and made no move to do so as the winter dusk crept inside. Cain was scribbling in the interior gloom, eager to capture a few last thoughts from what he felt had been a very successful session. Suddenly Michael spoke in a voice that seemed to have dropped an octave. Startled, Cain looked up and saw Michael, still sitting across from him, rocking back and forth.

"I'm very tired," Michael said in a deep, denatured voice. "I think you'd better go."

"We'll wrap it up," Cain said, turning back to his notebook. He was scribbling fast when he became aware that Michael had risen and come over to the couch where Cain was sitting. He sensed his looming presence, rocking back and forth. Cain felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand straight. Michael was towering over him, his face utterly transformed.

"Is everything okay?" Cain asked.

"I think you should go now," Michael said, his voice deep and slow. "I'm really, really tired."

Cain was all speed, gathering up his tape recorder, notebook, backpack, coat, but by the time he was at the door saying good-bye, Michael had recovered his old self and insisted, with customary gallantry, on walking him to the train station. He talked easily on the short walk, and at the platform gave Cain a hug.

Neither of them mentioned the anomalous moment in the gloom. Still, the impression troubled Cain, and stayed with him on the train back to the city.

"We Can't Do Anything"

To the seasoned observers of the Network watching over Michael, his relationship with Carrie was one more example of his exceptional nature. In

their experience, it was unusual for people with schizophrenia to sustain long-term relationships.

For Carrie's colleagues, the equation was reversed: Michael's illness was evidence of Carrie's exceptional nature. But she did not like to talk about the times when she came home from work and Michael refused to let her into their apartment, because he didn't believe she was who she said she was. No matter how much Carrie insisted, she couldn't convince him of the truth. How could he trust her words when he didn't believe it was her body? At such times, the terror and fury on the other side of the door were enough to send her to a friend's couch. Those were hard nights.

That the tough times were getting worse was no secret to the members of the Network, who now watched over Carrie as well.

One evening in June 1998, Jane Ferber had dinner with her friend Myrna Rubin and conveyed her distress about Michael's backward slide. Myrna had heard that Michael had stopped taking his medication and that nobody had been able to get him to go back on it, but she was shocked when she heard that he thought Carrie was an alien. Still, delusions were no more a justification for forced medication than refusing medication was a justification for forced hospitalization. The only question was whether Michael was violent, and the Network didn't see him that way.

Elizabeth Ferber, Jane's daughter, had been hearing reports about Michael's decline from her mother. That he was losing control was disturbing, but it was the constrained intensity of her mother's voice, the sadness and resignation, that affected her most. Surely now was the time to act.

But when Elizabeth demanded to know what was being done, her mother told her, "We can't do anything."

What Elizabeth heard in her mother's voice wasn't fear *of* Michael, but fear *for* him. The danger that weighed most heavily on the members of the Network was that Michael would suffer a break from which he might never recover—that he would end up in the revolving door of endless hospitalizations. They doubted the efficacy of the system but feared its capacity for destruction, and they desperately wanted to save him from it.

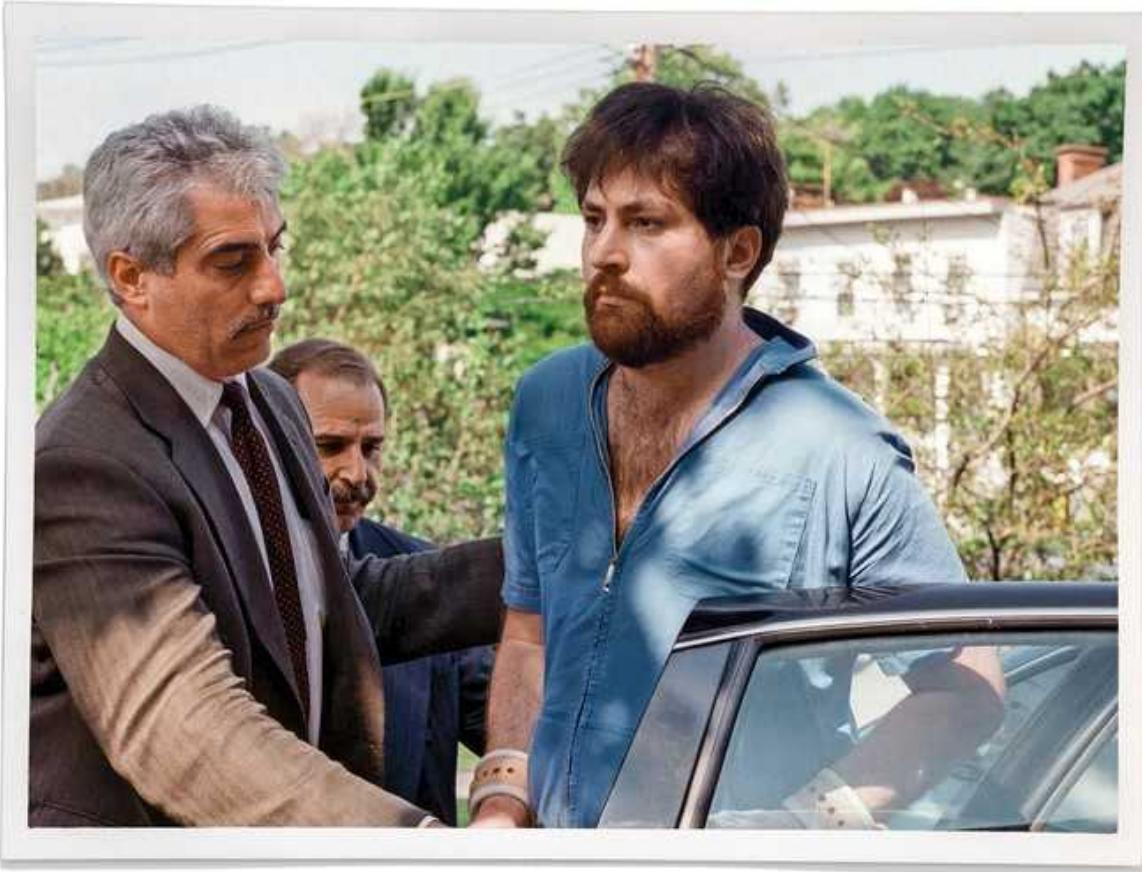
On Wednesday, June 17, the day before her work team was flying to Chicago for a big meeting, Carrie called her office to say she had a personal emergency and would not be coming in. It was unusual for Carrie to miss a day of important preparation, but her boss had no doubt she would be there the next morning with her materials in order.

Too Late

It was a day of frantic phone calls and failed efforts at intervention. Michael had been bombarding his mother, making wild accusations and irrational threats. After Michael ranted about suicide and murder, Ruth called back in a panic. Michael picked up, and Ruth told him to give the phone to Carrie. Michael said he couldn't do that, because he'd killed her.

Ruth called the police at 4:17 p.m. She urged speed and gave few details. The desk sergeant heard the panic in her voice and put out a radio call to check on the welfare of a couple in the River Edge apartments.

Officers rang Michael and Carrie's bell and got no response. The door was locked, so they radioed their sergeant, who called Lieutenant Vince Schiavone, the department's executive officer, at home. Schiavone told them to get the key from the super and check out the place at once.



June 18, 1998: Detectives escort Michael into the Hastings-on-Hudson police station, after driving him back from Ithaca the day after he killed Carrie. (Mitch Jacobson / AP / Shutterstock; LiliGraphie / Getty)

The officers found a woman's body in the kitchen, lying in a pool of blood. There were multiple stab wounds, and her throat had been cut. Schiavone visited the crime scene briefly, then drove with an officer to New Rochelle to deliver the news to 28 Mereland Road in person. Ruth peered through the glass, opened the door, and asked, "Is she ...?"

"Yes," Schiavone told her. "She is."

Ruth burst into tears. Schiavone would never forget the look on her face. It seemed to say, *Oh my God, we didn't move fast enough.*

"I knew something like this could happen," Ruth said, explaining that her son had schizophrenia. "But he was getting happy. They were going to be

married . . .”

Her anguish was intense. They’d been trying to get him the help he needed, she said. Not that he wasn’t getting help already. She wanted Schiavone to know, he felt, that they’d been working on this, and it had gotten away from them somehow.

The medical examiner’s report, released quickly, told its stark forensic story. The death was a homicide. The cause was “sharp force injuries of head, neck, back and upper extremity involving lungs, aorta, esophagus and thyroid cartilage.”

An additional piece of information deepened the tragedy: Carrie was pregnant.

Michael’s photo was on the cover of the *New York Post* under a massive one-word headline, printed in white-on-black “knockout type”: PSYCHO.

Seeing Michael looking out from the far side of that tabloid window like the Son of Sam was shocking. The photo filled the left side of the page; the right half announced, also in white-on-black type: “Twisted genius charged with savage slaying of pregnant fiancee.” At the bottom right was a picture of Carrie smiling with hopeful innocence. A footer running the width of the page flagged coverage of Michael’s ill-fated movie: “Universal Studio honchos on hot seat page 32.”

Michael was charged with second-degree murder. Because of the nature of the crime, no bail was set. But Michael’s lawyer did request that Michael receive psychiatric treatment. Now that he’d killed someone, it was no longer necessary to prove that he was an imminent danger to himself or others—he could finally get the care and medication he needed. The state, eager to have him fit to stand trial for murder, would provide him with both.

“Untreated Psychosis Kills”

A month after Carrie’s killing, another gruesome event eclipsed and extended Michael’s story. A 41-year-old man named Russell Weston Jr. walked into the Capitol in Washington, D.C., and shot a police officer in the

back of the head with a .38-caliber revolver. He exchanged shots with another officer, wounding him and a tourist, then raced down a corridor and through a door that led to a suite of offices used by Majority Whip Tom DeLay, where he shot a plainclothes detective in the chest, killing him.

It did not take long to discover that Weston had rejected treatment for paranoid schizophrenia and was severely delusional. He had stormed the Capitol to access an override console for the Ruby Satellite System, stored in the Senate safe, which was the only way to avert the cannibal apocalypse and plague that were about to destroy the world.

Despite their radically different backgrounds, Michael Laudor was immediately joined to Russell Weston: Both suffered from a severe mental illness, had rejected medication, and in the grip of psychosis had killed people.

Torrey, the psychiatrist, wrote about the two men for *The Wall Street Journal* in an article called “[Why Deinstitutionalization Turned Deadly](#).” The stories of the “Yale Law School graduate” and the “drifter,” the psychiatrist wrote, “are only the most publicized of an increasing number of violent acts by people with schizophrenia or manic-depressive illness who were not taking the medication they need to control their delusions and hallucinations.”

Weston’s anguished father, Russell Sr., was [quoted in a New York Times column](#) about the impossibility of helping his son: “He was a grown man. We couldn’t hold him down and force the pills into him.” Weston’s father could do nothing, Frank Rich wrote, because “a comprehensive system of mental-health services, including support for parents with sick adult children who refuse treatment, doesn’t exist. If it had, the Westons might have had more success in rescuing their son—as might the equally loving family of Michael Laudor.”

For politicians, the outrage of *after* was easier than the work of *before*. President Bill Clinton denounced the violence of an unmedicated psychotic man nobody felt authorized to treat as “a moment of savagery at the front door of American civilization.” Diagnosed in his late 20s, Weston had spent 53 days in a state hospital in 1996 after threatening an emergency-room worker. Once he no longer seemed imminently dangerous, he had been

released with pills that he eventually stopped taking, perhaps because he did not consider himself mentally ill.

“The total number of individuals with active symptoms of schizophrenia or manic-depressive illness is some 3.5 million,” Torrey wrote. “The National Advisory Mental Health Council has estimated that 40% of them—roughly 1.4 million people—are not receiving any treatment in any given year. It is therefore not a question of whether someone will follow Michael Laudor and Russell Weston into the headlines. It is merely a question of when.”

Torrey did not see Michael’s killing of Carrie as a “tragic inevitability,” which is how the law professor who had once imagined Michael becoming an advocate for people with schizophrenia described it to me years later.

Nor did Torrey believe that the 1,000 annual homicides he attributed to people with severe unmedicated mental illness should indict the population of those with similar diagnoses. But he did want to prevent those homicides, as well as an even larger number of suicides, and he wanted to reduce the growing number of mentally ill homeless people, and do something about a prison population swelled by people suffering from mental illness who received no care. His sister had schizophrenia, and he did think there was a difference between being in your right mind and being out of it.

The arguments Torrey made about Michael in *The Wall Street Journal* in 1998 informed the [Treatment Advocacy Center](#), which he created that year to focus on the medical, moral, and legal imperatives of treating people whose severe mental illness prevents them from knowing they need help. Now 85, Torrey was recently profiled in *The New York Times*, which credited him with inspiring [assisted outpatient treatment programs](#)—present in 47 states—as well as Mayor Adams’s new initiative and a larger transformation in the understanding of severe mental illness at the policy level.

Last spring, Adams appointed Brian Stettin, who had been working as the Treatment Advocacy Center’s policy director, to be his administration’s senior adviser on severe mental illness—a title that itself announces a policy shift. Adams hired Stettin not long after he published [an op-ed in the Daily News](#) about the death of Michelle Go, who had been pushed in front of a

subway train in January 2022 by a man who'd been hospitalized more than 20 times.

Stettin noted that the man who killed Go should have been in an assisted outpatient treatment program, but had fallen through the holes of a porous system. He began his article by recalling Kendra Webdale, who also had been pushed in front of a subway train and killed 23 years earlier. A young assistant attorney general at the time, Stettin had been tasked by his new boss, New York Attorney General Eliot Spitzer, with drafting legislation to prevent horrors like the one that had befallen Webdale. Her killer had been hospitalized 13 times in two years and on one occasion had literally walked into Bellevue Hospital demanding help. The man, who suffered from severe mental illness, wanted to return to housing on the grounds of Creedmoor Psychiatric Center, in Queens, but to qualify, he would have to be hospitalized there first, and he couldn't be hospitalized, because no beds were available. He was given the phone number of a mobile crisis unit by a social worker, who noted that he had no phone.

The biggest improvements in people's mental health can happen when they are involuntarily hospitalized, a psychiatrist who works with the homeless told me.

When they asked Webdale's parents to lend their daughter's name to legislation creating assisted outpatient treatment programs across New York State, Spitzer and Stettin discovered that the family had received letters of support not only from parents who had lost children to violence but from parents who had written to say of the killer, "That might have been my son." Webdale's mother wanted to know what the attorney general was going to do for *those* parents.

I experienced something similar when I spent time with Nick and Amanda Wilcox, whose daughter, Laura, a 19-year-old sophomore at Haverford College, was killed in 2001 while working at a mental-health clinic during her Christmas break. Laura's Law is California's version of Kendra's Law, passed county by county with the tireless support of the Wilcoxes, who faced opposition from the ACLU and fellow Quakers, who consider assisted outpatient treatment programs a threat to civil liberties.

It was heartbreaking to stand in Laura's childhood bedroom and hear the terrible comfort the Wilcoxes took in learning that the pen their daughter had gripped so tightly in death suggested that she had died instantly. I knew they had refused to seek the death penalty for their daughter's killer—who killed two more people at a nearby restaurant, where he believed he was being poisoned. But hearing them say “He’s in the right place”—a state mental hospital—after he was found not competent to stand trial, and realizing it was treatment they wished for him, was a humbling astonishment. The anger they expressed was directed at a system that had resisted committing a severely ill, dangerous man known to have an apartment filled with unregistered guns, in part to avoid the cost of sending him to a county with a suitable facility.

I was the childhood friend of someone who had killed a woman not unlike the Wilcoxes' daughter. Amanda gave me advice about reaching out to Carrie's parents. “Say you’re sorry for what your friend did,” she told me. “That’s what I would want to hear.” Although Carrie’s family wrote back to tell me it was simply too painful to talk about, I was grateful I’d been able to express my sorrow.

E. Fuller Torrey sees what is happening in New York and California—where Governor Gavin Newsom has signed the Community Assistance, Recovery, and Empowerment (CARE) Act—as part of a sea change. He has no illusions about the challenges—New York State still hasn’t recovered all of the 1,000 psychiatric beds repurposed for COVID use during the pandemic—but he believes that change starts with the recognition that denying care to people too impaired to know they need it is a medical and moral failure. He thought it a hopeful portent that when a disability-rights group tried to block the CARE Act, the group’s Sacramento offices were picketed by relatives, friends, and other supporters of people with severe mental illness carrying signs saying UNTREATED PSYCHOSIS KILLS and HOSPITALS NOT PRISONS. When I asked Torrey what he considers the biggest threat to reform, he said pessimism, the resigned conviction that after 40 years of failed efforts, nothing can be done.

Katherine Koh is a psychiatrist at Massachusetts General Hospital. As part of the street team at the Boston Health Care for the Homeless Program, she works with the most neglected population in the country, people struggling

to meet basic needs even if they are not suffering from a mental illness. Though she spoke of involuntary commitment as “a difficult, nuanced, and thorny issue” that “haunts and plagues” her, she told me that the biggest improvements in people’s mental health can happen when they are involuntarily hospitalized, provided there is a plan in advance and care afterward.

Koh also told me a story that she’d heard from her mentor, Jim O’Connell, the founding physician at Boston Health Care for the Homeless. The story is about a woman he spent many years caring for on the street, who was often on the psychiatric brink, though O’Connell, determined to honor her autonomy and dignity, never committed her. Finally, the police did it for him. After the hospital, and time spent stably housed, the woman moved on to other systems of support, slowly recovered her balance, began working again, and eventually joined the board of an organization that sponsored the event where she and O’Connell reunited after many years. When the woman saw him—as Koh recalled her teacher’s vivid recounting—she said, “You son of a bitch! You left me out on the street for 10 years!” And then a further lesson: “If I were bleeding, you would have taken me in. But since it was my brain, you left me out there.”

Laurie Flynn, who was the executive director of the [National Alliance on Mental Illness](#) when Michael killed Carrie, burst into tears when she learned what had happened. Michael had been a hero to many at NAMI, the largest grassroots organization in America dedicated to supporting people with severe mental illness and their families. He had seemed so emblematic of a new era, promising the rejection of shame and stigma, that the “Michael Laudor Tragedy,” as Flynn called it, became part of a complex reckoning that filled many in the organization with the understandable fear of stigma.

Violence and mental illness have been legally entangled ever since dangerousness, rather than illness, became the de facto prerequisite for hospitalization. If a hospital could produce a bed, or mandate treatment, only for someone actively threatening harm, you could hardly blame the general population for mixing up the very sick and the very violent, or mental hospitals and prisons. Today the Twin Towers Correctional Facility, in Los Angeles, is described—by the L.A. County Sheriff’s Department—as “the nation’s largest mental health facility.”

And you can hardly blame advocates for wanting to erase even the suggestion of violence as a precondition for eliminating stigma. But denying all distinctions can be as destructive as exaggerating them. Many of the critics of Adams's proposal highlighted the involuntary hospitalization of mentally ill people "even if they posed no threat to others," as if hospitalizing a gravely ill person who didn't threaten someone's life made no sense.

For Flynn, the problem is a system that forces families to "sit and watch someone they love deteriorate, unable to get them help until they are dangerous." Acknowledging distinctions, in order to address people's needs, will do more than denial does to reduce stigma. It will also keep people alive.

In the *Daily News* op-ed, Stettin wrote, "There are fundamental differences between the 4% of the population with severe diagnoses and the rest of us who experience various mental health challenges over the course of our lives. A big one is that without treatment, people with severe mental illness lose their connection to reality." He is at pains to emphasize that the mayor's initiative is directed at a fractional subset of that percentage, people without shelter who are too sick to care for themselves or recognize their own impaired condition.

It has been 25 years since Michael killed Carrie. For most of that time, he has been in a secure psychiatric facility surrounded by a 16-foot-high fence topped with razor wire. He lives with 280 other men and women sent there by court order, attended to by twice that number of staff.

Michael was found not responsible by "means of mental defect," bolstered by the finding of Park Dietz, the forensic psychiatrist hired by the prosecution, who was known for his narrow definition of insanity. Dietz had found both John Hinckley and Jeffrey Dahmer legally sane, but he determined that Michael truly thought he was killing a doll or a robot.

I know there is no going back to the time before Michael killed Carrie, just as there is no going back to the monumental hospitals that long ago ceased to be worthy of the concept of asylum that created them. Just as there can be no going back to the utopian vision of the people who destroyed them,

whose faith in their own expertise and dream of community care failed to fulfill their promise to the people whose desperate need had justified the demolition.

I also know that there can be no going forward without a reckoning, however partial and imperfect. Not to apportion blame, but to make it easier to change or clarify a law, or to narrow the focus of an initiative—while expanding its resources—to address a fraction of the population whose illnesses are so severe, they can make sufferers unaware of their own deterioration. Above all, it should be harder to impose imaginary solutions on real problems.

Two years before Michael killed Carrie, a *Times* article had quoted him, identified as a legal scholar with a history of schizophrenia, expressing outrage that a medical student—who had stopped taking medication for his bipolar disorder and was alarming psychiatrists and fellow students with what they considered violent and threatening behavior—had “lost five weeks of his life” to forced hospitalization. The article was called “[Medical Student Forced Into a Hospital Netherworld](#),” but who among Michael’s friends would not wish now that the same had happened to him, if five weeks could have helped return him to the treatment he needed, saved Carrie’s life, and prevented Michael’s destruction?

I remain haunted by my last phone conversation with Michael before he killed Carrie. He was vague, equivocal, even as we picked a date to see each other that I suspected, perhaps hoped, would pass like the others. “I have to go,” he said abruptly. “I’m having bad thoughts I need to not be having.”

I knew something was dreadfully wrong, but I buried that abject statement, and kept myself from considering its meaning.

This article has been adapted from Jonathan Rosen’s forthcoming book, [The Best Minds: A Story of Friendship, Madness, and the Tragedy of Good Intentions](#). It appears in the May 2023 print edition with the headline “American Madness.” When you buy a book using a link on this page, we receive a commission. Thank you for supporting The Atlantic.

| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

Features

- [**Nutrition Science's Most Preposterous Result**](#)
- [**Is Holocaust Education Making Anti-Semitism Worse?**](#)
- [**How Did America's Weirdest, Most Freedom-Obsessed State Fall for an Authoritarian Governor?**](#)
- [**Vermeer's Revelations**](#)

Nutrition Science's Most Preposterous Result

Studies show a mysterious health benefit to ice cream. Scientists don't want to talk about it.

by David Merritt Johns



Last summer, I got a tip about a curious scientific finding. “I’m sorry, it cracks me up every time I think about this,” my tipster said.

Back in 2018, a Harvard doctoral student named Andres Ardisson Korat was presenting his research on the relationship between dairy foods and chronic disease to his thesis committee. One of his studies had led him to an unusual conclusion: Among diabetics, eating half a cup of ice cream a day was associated with a lower risk of heart problems. Needless to say, the idea that a dessert loaded with saturated fat and sugar might actually be good for you raised some eyebrows at the nation’s most influential department of nutrition.

Earlier, the department chair, Frank Hu, had instructed Ardisson Korat to do some further digging: Could his research have been led astray by an artifact of chance, or a hidden source of bias, or a computational error? As Ardisson Korat spelled out on the day of his defense, his debunking efforts had been largely futile. The ice-cream signal was robust.

It was robust, and kind of hilarious. “I do sort of remember the vibe being like, *Hahaha, this ice-cream thing won’t go away; that’s pretty funny,*” recalled my tipster, who’d attended the presentation. This was obviously not what a budding nutrition expert or his super-credentialed committee members were hoping to discover. “He and his committee had done, like, every type of analysis—they had thrown every possible test at this finding to try to make it go away. And there was nothing they could do to make it go away.”

Spurious effects pop up all the time in science, especially in fields like nutritional epidemiology, where the health concerns and dietary habits of hundreds of thousands of people are tracked over years and years. Still, the abject silliness of “healthy ice cream” intrigued me. As a public-health historian, I’ve studied how teams of researchers process data, mingle them with theory, and then package the results as “what the science says.” I wanted to know what happens when consensus makers are confronted with a finding that seems to contradict everything they’ve ever said before. (Harvard’s Nutrition Source website calls ice cream an “indulgent” dairy food that is considered an “every-so-often” treat.)

This article was featured in One Story to Read Today, a newsletter in which our editors recommend a single must-read from The Atlantic, Monday through Friday. [Sign up for it here.](#)

“There are few plausible biological explanations for these results,” Ardisson Korat [wrote](#) in the brief discussion of his “unexpected” finding in his thesis. Something else grabbed my attention, though: The dissertation explained that he’d hardly been the first to observe the shimmer of a health halo around ice cream. Several prior studies, he suggested, had come across a similar effect. Eager to learn more, I reached out to Ardisson Korat for an interview—I emailed him four times—but never heard back. When I contacted Tufts University, where he now works as a scientist, a press aide told me he was “not available for this.” Inevitably, my curiosity took on a different shade: Why wouldn’t a young scientist want to talk with me about his research? Just how much deeper could this bizarre ice-cream thing go?

“I still to this day don’t have an answer for it,” Mark A. Pereira, an epidemiologist at the University of Minnesota, told me, speaking of the association he’d stumbled upon more than 20 years earlier. “We analyzed the hell out of the data.”

Just that morning, I’d been reading one of Pereira’s early papers, on the health effects of eating dairy, because it seemed to have inspired other research that was cited in Ardisson Korat’s dissertation. But when I scrolled to the bottom of Pereira’s article, down past the headline-making conclusions, I saw in Table 5 a set of numbers that made me gasp.

Back then, Pereira was a young assistant professor at Harvard Medical School. Hoping to address the newly labeled epidemics of obesity and diabetes, he initially focused his research on physical activity, but soon turned to the [unsettled science of healthy eating](#). The status of dairy, in particular, was bogged down in simplistic and competing assumptions. “We just thought, *Oh, you know, calcium and bones: It’s good for kids. But, oh, the saturated fat! Don’t eat too much dairy!*”

[From the July/August 2013 issue: How junk food can end obesity](#)

Pereira and his co-authors tested these old ideas using data from a study, begun in 1985, that tracked the emergence of heart-disease risk factors in more than 5,000 young adults. After seeing the results, “we knew it was going to be very high-profile and controversial,” Pereira recalled. Pretty

much across the board—low-fat, high-fat, milk, cheese—dairy foods appeared to help prevent overweight people from developing insulin-resistance syndrome, a precursor to diabetes. “I’ll tell you, this study surprised the heck out of me,” said one CNN correspondent, as Pereira’s study spiraled through the press.

The Harvard group didn’t like the ice-cream finding: It seemed wrong.

But the international media coverage didn’t mention what I’d seen in Table 5. According to the numbers, tucking into a “dairy-based dessert”—a category that included foods such as pudding but consisted, according to Pereira, mainly of ice cream—was associated for overweight people with dramatically reduced odds of developing insulin-resistance syndrome. It was by far the biggest effect seen in the study, 2.5 times the size of what they’d found for milk. “It was pretty astounding,” Pereira told me. “We thought a lot about it, because we thought, *Could this actually be the case?*”

There were reasons to be wary: The data set wasn’t huge, in epidemiological terms, and participants hadn’t reported eating that many dairy-based desserts, so the margin of error was wide. And given that the study’s overall message was sure to attract criticism—Pereira recalled getting “skewered” by antidiary activists—he had little desire to make a fuss about ice cream.

Pretty soon, Pereira’s peers found themselves in the same predicament. Building on the 2002 study and the growing interest in dairy, researchers at the Harvard School of Public Health decided to break out some of their most powerful tools. Since the 1980s, Harvard’s scientists have been collecting “food-frequency questionnaires” and medical data from many thousands of nurses, dentists, and other health-care workers. These world-famous studies have fueled a stream of influential findings, including some of the data that [sparked the removal of trans fats](#) from the food supply.

The results of Harvard’s first observational study of dairy and type 2 diabetes [came out in 2005](#). Based on data collected from just one of their three cohorts, following men between 1986 and 1998, the authors reported that higher dairy intake, and higher low-fat-dairy intake in particular, was associated with a lower risk of diabetes. “The risk reduction was almost exclusively associated with low-fat or non-fat dairy foods,” a Harvard news

bulletin explained. An [article on Fox News's website](#) underscored the low-fat message: "There was no decrease in men who drank whole milk," the story said.

Perhaps not whole milk, but what about butter pecan? Near the end of the Harvard paper, where the authors had arrayed the diabetes risks associated with various dairy foods, was a finding that was barely mentioned in the "almost exclusively" low-fat narrative given to reporters. Yes, according to that table, men who consumed two or more servings of skim or low-fat milk a day had a 22 percent lower risk of diabetes. But so did men who ate two or more servings of ice cream every week. Once again, the data suggested that ice cream might be the strongest diabetes prophylactic in the dairy aisle. Yet no one seemed to want to talk about it.

In the years that followed, research summaries [generally agreed](#) that [high dairy intake overall](#) was [associated](#) with a slightly reduced risk of diabetes, but called for more investigation of which specific dairy foods might have the greatest benefits. In 2014, Harvard's nutrition team brought another dozen years of diet-tracking data to bear on this question. In this new study, total dairy consumption now seemed to have no effect, but the ice-cream signal was impossible to miss. Visible across hundreds of thousands of subjects, it all but screamed for more attention.

Following a pattern of incredulousness that was by then more than a decade old, Frank Hu, the study's senior author and the future chair of Harvard's nutrition department, asked the graduate student who'd led the project, Mu Chen, to double-check the data. "We were very skeptical," Hu told me. Chen, who is no longer in academia, did not respond to interview requests, but Hu recalled that no errors in the data could be found.

The Harvard researchers didn't like the ice-cream finding: It seemed wrong. But the same paper had given them another result that they liked much better. The team was going all in on yogurt. With a growing reputation as [a boon for microbiomes](#), yogurt was the anti-ice-cream—the healthy person's dairy treat.

"Higher intake of yogurt is associated with a reduced risk" of type 2 diabetes, "whereas other dairy foods and consumption of total dairy are not,"

the 2014 paper said. “The conclusions weren’t exactly accurately written,” acknowledged Dariush Mozaffarian, the dean of policy at Tufts’s nutrition school and a co-author of the paper, when he revisited the data with me in an interview. “Saying no foods were associated—ice cream was associated.”

One scientist said that the ice-cream effect was “similar” in magnitude to, or “slightly stronger” than, the one for yogurt.

But yogurt made so much more sense. In a way, it was confirmation of something that everyone already knew. From the start of yogurt’s entrée into the American diet, it had been perceived as an exotic food from a faraway land, quivering with vague health-giving properties. Even after being spiked with sugar in the ’70s and ’80s to better suit the U.S. market, yogurt still retained its image as an elixir.

Furthermore, a growing body of literature suggested that yogurt’s health benefits might be real. Harvard had found, a few years earlier, that eating yogurt was associated with reduced weight gain; researchers at the university were interested in its possible effects on gut bacteria as well. Other studies—including those that first revealed the ice-cream signal—had also sketched the slender outlines of a yogurt effect. When Chen and Hu pooled together findings from this research, added in their latest data, and performed a meta-analysis, they concluded that yogurt was indeed associated with a reduced risk of diabetes—a potential benefit, they wrote, that warranted further study.

Regarding ice cream’s potential benefits, they had much less to say. I asked other experts to compare the 2014 yogurt and ice-cream findings. Kevin Klatt, a nutrition scientist at UC Berkeley, said the ice-cream effect was “more consistent” than yogurt’s across the studied cohorts. Deirdre Tobias, an epidemiologist at Harvard, the academic editor of *The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, and a member of the advisory committee for the 2025 update to the U.S. dietary guidelines, agreed with that assessment. Even Dagfinn Aune, an epidemiologist at Imperial College London and a peer reviewer of the Chen and Hu paper, said that the ice-cream effect was “similar” in magnitude to, or “slightly stronger” than, the one for yogurt.

So how did the Harvard team explain away the ice-cream finding? The theory went like this: Maybe some of the people in the study had developed health problems, such as high blood pressure or elevated cholesterol, and began avoiding ice cream on doctors' orders (or of their own volition). Meanwhile, people who didn't have those health problems would have had less reason to give up their cookies and cream. In that scenario, it wouldn't be that ice cream prevented diabetes, but that being at risk of developing diabetes caused people to not eat ice cream. Epidemiologists call that "reverse causation."

To test this idea, Hu and his co-authors set aside dietary data collected after people received these sorts of diagnoses, and then [redid their calculations](#). The ice-cream effect shrank by half, though it was still statistically significant, and still bigger than the low-fat-dairy effect that Harvard [had publicized in 2005](#). In any event, if people who received adverse diagnoses cut back on their ice cream, you might expect that they'd also cut back on, say, cake and doughnuts. So shouldn't there be mysterious protective "effects" for cake and doughnuts too? "There should be," Mozaffarian said. "That's why the finding for ice cream is intriguing."

[Read: How ice cream helped America at war](#)

The new analysis was hardly a slam dunk. On paper, the yogurt and ice-cream effects still looked pretty similar. "Within the realm of statistical uncertainty, they're identical," Mozaffarian told me. But in the 2014 paper, he and the other authors had argued that "reverse causation may explain the findings" for ice cream. And as academia's public-relations machinery came to life, nuance went out the window.

"Does a yogurt a day keep diabetes away?" asked the [press release](#) that went out on publication day. "Other dairy foods and consumption of total dairy did not show this association," said Hu, the senior author, in an ice-cream-free appraisal included in the release and [echoed](#) in Harvard's own press bulletin. "Yogurt has approached wonder-food status in recent years," a *Forbes* article on the paper noted. "In the new study, other forms of dairy like milk and cheese, did not offer the same kind of protection as yogurt."

Hu says today that the Harvard researchers felt confident in their conclusions about yogurt largely on account of their meta-analysis, and the fact that prior clinical studies and basic science research supported the idea that probiotics improve metabolic outcomes. “For ice cream, of course, there is no prior literature,” he said. Given that the ice-cream effect was diminished when they tested their reverse-causation theory, he called it “much more plausible” that yogurt would help prevent diabetes than ice cream.



After his paper was published, it didn’t take long for the Harvard group’s good news about yogurt to take hold as a dominant scientific narrative. Two years later, when a team of researchers based in the Netherlands and at Harvard analyzed all the evidence it could find on dairy and diabetes, the yogurt effect popped out. A featured graph from the team’s 2016 paper in *The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* summarizes data from about a dozen studies: As someone’s yogurt intake mounts to roughly one-third of a cup a day, their risk of getting diabetes shrinks by 14 percent.

The authors also found the ice-cream effect: Consuming as little as a half a cup per week was associated with a 19 percent reduced diabetes risk. But that finding's epitaph was already written. The researchers concluded that consuming "dairy foods, particularly yogurt," might help curb the diabetes epidemic, and noted that the benefits of ice cream had elsewhere been written off as a product of reverse causation. The evidence in yogurt's favor was much better established, Sabita Soedamah-Muthu, an epidemiologist at Tilburg University and the paper's senior author, told me. The ice-cream effect had fewer studies in its corner. "We didn't believe in it," she said.

There's a thing that happens when you start writing a story about how maybe, possibly, believe it or not, ice cream might be sort of good for you, and how some of the world's top nutritionists gathered evidence supporting that hypothesis but found reasons to look past it. You begin to ask yourself: Am I high on my own ice-cream supply? I asked the experts for a gut check. Pereira, the first to hit upon the ice-cream effect, told me that it just wasn't the kind of result that goes down well in the "closed-minded" world of elite nutrition. "They don't want to see it. They might ponder it for a second and kind of chuckle and not believe it," he said. "I think that's related to how much the field of nutritional epidemiology in the modern era is steeped in dogma." Tobias, the journal editor and member of the 2025 U.S. dietary-guidelines advisory committee, called it "totally fair criticism" to ask why yogurt was played up while ice cream was played down. She expressed support for the Harvard team's handling of the data, while acknowledging the tensions involved: "You don't want to overstate stuff that you know probably has a high likelihood of bias, but you also don't want to do the opposite and seem to be burying it, either."

Hu, the Harvard nutritionist, said that deciding what a study means requires looking beyond the numbers to what is already known about dietary science: "You need to interpret the data in the context of the rest of the literature." Mozaffarian, Hu's co-author, echoed this view. Still, he noted, "you're raising a really, really important point, which is that when, as scientists, we find things that don't fit our hypotheses, we shouldn't just dismiss them. We should step back and say, 'You know, could this actually be true?'"

Once you start contemplating all the ways that cultural biases can seep into science, it doesn't stop at dairy-based desserts.

Could the idea that ice cream is metabolically protective be true? It would be pretty bonkers. Still, there are at least a few points in its favor. For one, ice cream's [glycemic index](#), a measure of how rapidly a food boosts blood sugar, is lower than that of brown rice. "There's this perception that ice cream is unhealthy, but it's got fat, it's got protein, it's got vitamins. It's better for you than bread," Mozaffarian said. "Given how horrible the American diet is, it's very possible that if somebody eats ice cream and eats less starch ... it could actually protect against diabetes." The "Got Milk?" crowd also loves to talk about the "milk-fat-globule membrane," a triple-layered biological envelope that encases the fat in mammalian milk. [Some evidence suggests](#) that dairy products in which the membrane is intact, such as ice cream, are more metabolically neutral than foods like butter, where it's lost during the churn. (That said, regular cream has an intact membrane, and it hasn't been consistently associated with a reduced diabetes risk.)

Then there is what might charitably be termed the "real-world evidence." In 2017, the YouTuber Anthony Howard-Crow launched [what Men's Health called](#) "a diet that would make the American Dietetic Association shit bricks": 2,000 calories a day of ice cream plus 500 calories of protein supplements plus booze. After 100 days on the ice-cream diet, he'd lost 32 pounds and had better blood work than before he'd started pounding [Irish-whiskey milkshakes](#). Still, the method is unlikely to take the slimming world by storm: Howard-Crow called his ice-cream bender "the most miserable dieting adventure I have ever embarked upon."

But overall, I found more receptiveness to the ice-cream signal than I was expecting. "It's been more or less replicated," Pereira noted. "Whether it's causal or not still remains an open question." Mozaffarian agreed: "I think probably the ice cream is still reverse causation," he said. "But I'm not sure, and I'm kind of annoyed by that." If this had been a patented drug, he continued, "you can bet that the company would have done a \$30 million randomized controlled trial to see if ice cream prevents diabetes."

To be clear, none of the experts interviewed for this article is inclined to believe that the ice-cream effect is real, although sometimes for reasons that differ from Hu's. Pereira, for example, pointed out that people aren't always truthful when they're quizzed on what they eat. His 2002 study found that overweight and obese people reported eating fewer dairy-based desserts than

other people. “I don’t believe that the heavier people consume less desserts,” he said. “I believe they underreport more.” If that’s true, then admitting to eating ice cream might correlate with metabolic health—and the ice-cream effect would be, in its way, a marker of fat stigma in America.

From the June 2000 issue: Ice-cream making for beginners

The problem with this line of thinking is that once you start contemplating all the ways that cultural biases can seep into the science, it doesn’t stop at dairy-based desserts. If the ice-cream effect can be set aside, how should we think about other signals produced by the same research tools? “I don’t know what I believe about yogurt,” Tobias told me. It’s widely known that yogurt eaters on average are healthier, leaner, wealthier, better educated, more physically active, more likely to read labels, more likely to be female, and less likely to smoke or drink or eat Big Macs than never-yogurters. “You can’t confidently adjust away all of that kind of stuff,” said Klatt, the UC Berkeley nutritionist.

In 2004, the English epidemiologist Michael Marmot wrote, “Scientific findings do not fall on blank minds that get made up as a result. Science engages with busy minds that have strong views about how things are and ought to be.” Marmot was writing about how politicians deal with scientific evidence—always concluding that the latest data supported their existing views—but he acknowledged that scientists weren’t so different.

The ice-cream saga shows how this plays out in practice. Many stories can be told about any given scientific inquiry, and choosing one is a messy, value-laden process. A scientist may worry over how their story fits with common sense, and whether they have sufficient evidence to back it up. They may also worry that it poses a threat to public health, or to their credibility. If there’s a lesson to be drawn from the parable of the diet world’s most inconvenient truth, it’s that scientific knowledge is itself a packaged good. The data, whatever they show, are just ingredients.

This article appears in the [May 2023](#) print edition with the headline “The Ice-Cream Conspiracy.”

[study/673487/](#)

| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

Is Holocaust Education Making Anti-Semitism Worse?

Using dead Jews as symbols isn't helping living ones.

by Dara Horn



Young visitors inspect some of the Nazi paraphernalia on display at the Illinois Holocaust Museum & Education Center.

When the 40-something reader in the kippah at my book event in Michigan approached the signing table, I already knew what he was going to say, if not the humiliating specifics. Readers like him always tell me these things. He hovered until most people had dispersed, and then described his supermarket trip that morning. Another shopper had rammed him with a cart, hard. Maybe it had been an accident, except the shopper had shouted, “The kosher bagels are in the next aisle!” He’d considered saying something to the store manager, but to what end? Besides, it wasn’t much worse than the baseball game the day before, when other fans had thrown popcorn at him and his kids.

The recent rise in American anti-Semitism is well documented. I could fill pages with FBI hate-crime statistics, or with a list of violent attacks from the past six years or even the past six months, or with the growing gallery of American public figures saying vile things about Jews. Or I could share stories you probably haven’t heard, such as one about a threatened attack on a Jewish school in Ohio in March 2022—where the would-be perpetrator was the school’s own security guard. But none of that would capture the vague sense of dread one encounters these days in the Jewish community, a dread unprecedented in my lifetime.

I published a book in late 2021 about exploitations of Jewish history, with the deliberately provocative title *[People Love Dead Jews](#)*. The anti-Semitic hate mail arrived on cue. What I didn’t expect was the torrent of private stories I received from American Jews—online, in letters, but mostly in person, in places where I’ve spoken across America.

These people talked about bosses and colleagues who repeatedly ridiculed them with anti-Semitic “jokes,” friends who turned on them when they mentioned a son’s bar mitzvah or a trip to Israel, romantic partners who openly mocked their traditions, classmates who defaced their dorm rooms and pilloried them online, teachers and neighbors who parroted conspiratorial lies. I was surprised to learn how many people were getting pennies thrown at them in 21st-century America, an anti-Semitic taunt that I thought had died around 1952. These casual stories sickened me in their volume and their similarity, a catalog of small degradations. At a time when many people in other minority groups have become bold in publicizing the tiniest of slights, these American Jews instead expressed deep shame in

sharing these stories with me, feeling that they had no right to complain. After all, as many of them told me, it wasn't the Holocaust.

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But well-meaning people everywhere from statehouses to your local middle school have responded to this surging anti-Semitism by doubling down on Holocaust education. Before 2016, only seven states required Holocaust education in schools. In the past seven years, 18 more have passed Holocaust-education mandates. Public figures who make anti-Semitic statements are invited to tour Holocaust museums; schools respond to anti-Semitic incidents by hosting Holocaust speakers and implementing Holocaust lesson plans.

Dara Horn: Auschwitz is not a metaphor

The bedrock assumption that has endured for nearly half a century is that learning about the Holocaust inoculates people against anti-Semitism. But it doesn't.

Holocaust education remains essential for teaching historical facts in the face of denial and distortions. Yet over the past year, as I've visited Holocaust museums and spoken with educators around the country, I have come to the disturbing conclusion that Holocaust education is incapable of addressing contemporary anti-Semitism. In fact, in the total absence of any education about Jews alive today, teaching about the Holocaust might even be making anti-Semitism worse.

I. The Museum Makers

You could divide the story of Skokie, Illinois, "into two periods," Howard Reich told me: "[Before the attempted Nazi march and after.](#)" Reich grew up in Skokie and is a former *Chicago Tribune* writer. His parents survived the Holocaust. When Reich was a kid in the Chicago suburb in the 1960s, they discussed their experiences only with other survivors—which back then was typical. "They didn't want to burden us children," Reich explained. "They

didn't want to relive the worst part of their life." But the pain was ever present. Skokie's Jewish community included a large survivor population; Reich remembers one neighbor whose recurring nightmares about Nazi dogs led him to kick a wall so hard that he broke his toe.

In 1977, the National Socialist Party of America wanted to march in uniform in Skokie. When the town attempted to block the march, the Nazis, represented by a Jewish ACLU lawyer committed to free speech, went to court. The case reached the Supreme Court; in the end, the law favored the Nazis, although—perhaps because they were sufficiently spooked by the public backlash—they didn't march in Skokie at all.



Replicas of anti-Nazi posters from local 1970s protests hang at the Skokie, Illinois, museum. (Evan Jenkins for *The Atlantic*)

The incident inspired many Skokie survivors to speak out about their experiences. They created a Holocaust museum in a small storefront and

later successfully lobbied the state for one of America's earliest Holocaust-education mandates. If American law couldn't directly protect people from anti-Semitism, they hoped education could.

Last year, I met Skokie's mayor, George Van Dusen, and a retired Skokie village manager named Al Rigoni in Van Dusen's office. Both men were involved in local politics during the Nazi incident.

Like most people I spoke with who remembered that time, the men saw the outcome of the threatened march as positive. "The priests and rabbis—they never met and talked to each other until this happened," Van Dusen said. "Out of that came our interfaith council." Rigoni described how the town created a Human Relations Commission, investing money in police sensitivity training long before that was popular. Today Skokie holds an annual festival celebrating the 100 or so national origins of its residents. The storefront museum has been replaced with the Illinois Holocaust Museum & Education Center, which opened in 2009 as one of the largest Holocaust museums in the country. The old storefront is now a mosque. "Only in Skokie," Van Dusen said, laughing.

It all seemed like a happy American story—hatred vanquished, multiculturalism triumphant. But Van Dusen and Rigoni had no answers for me when I asked why we were seeing rising anti-Semitism, despite decades of Holocaust education. Not long before I visited Skokie, anti-Semitic flyers blaming Jews for the pandemic had been left on people's lawns there and in surrounding towns. The adjacent Chicago neighborhood of West Rogers Park, home to a large Orthodox Jewish community, saw a spree of anti-Semitic attacks in 2022 in which multiple synagogues and kosher businesses were vandalized and a congregant's car window was smashed. A few weeks after my visit, a gunman would kill seven people and wound dozens more at a parade in the nearby town of Highland Park, which has a large Jewish population. Although authorities have said there is no indication that the suspect was motivated by racism or religious hate, anti-Semitic and racist comments had reportedly been posted under a username believed to be associated with him, including one suggesting that Jews be used as "fire retardant" and another questioning whether the Holocaust happened. The suspect was allegedly thrown out of a local synagogue months before the shooting.

“There’s a tremor in the country. People are unsettled,” Van Dusen admitted. He stirred uncomfortably in his seat. “We ask ourselves, ‘Has all of this work that we’ve all done to educate people—has it gotten through? If it hasn’t, why?’”

The Illinois Holocaust Museum & Education Center is a victim of its own success. When I arrived on a weekday morning to join a field trip from a local Catholic middle school, the museum was having a light day, with only 160 students visiting (typically, closer to 400 students visit the museum daily, alongside others). It was still so packed that the students strained to see the displays. The crowding also meant that most school groups did not explore the museum in chronological order; ours was assigned to start in the gallery describing the liberation of the concentration camps, making the history hard to follow.

“Tell me what we call a person who just watches something going on,” our docent, a local volunteer, prompted.

The students were slouchy and disengaged. But the docent pushed, and someone finally answered.

“A bystander,” a boy said.

“What would be the opposite of a bystander?” the docent asked.

The kids looked puzzled. “Activist?” one tried.

“Here at the museum, we call that person an ‘upstander,’” the docent said, using a term that has become ubiquitous in Holocaust education. “That’s what we’re hoping your generation will become.”

She introduced the word *propaganda*, prompting the kids to define it. In the 1930s, she asked, “was it possible to watch the news?”

The students all shook their head no.

“Okay,” she said with a sigh. “Have you ever heard the words *movie theater*?”

With a few more pointed questions, the docent established that the '30s featured media beyond town criers, and that one-party control over such media helped spread propaganda. "If radio's controlled by a certain party, you have to question that," she said. "Back then, they didn't."

As we wandered through the post-liberation galleries, I wondered about that premise. Historians have pointed out that it doesn't make sense to assume that people in previous eras were simply stupider than we are, and I doubted that 2020s Americans could outsmart 1930s Germans in detecting media bias. Propaganda has been used to incite violent anti-Semitism since ancient times, and only rarely because of one-party control. After the invention of the printing press, a rash of books appeared in Italy and Germany about Jews butchering a Christian child named Simon of Trent—an example of the lie known as the blood libel, which would later be repurposed as a key part of the QAnon conspiracy theory. This craze wasn't caused by one-party control over printing presses, but by the lie's popularity. I was starting to see how isolating the Holocaust from the rest of Jewish history made it hard for even the best educators to upload this irrational reality into seventh-grade brains.

We finally moved to the museum's opening gallery, featuring pictures of smiling prewar Jews. Here the docent began by saying, "Let's establish facts. Is Judaism a religion or a nationality?"

My stomach sank. The question betrayed a fundamental misunderstanding of Jewish identity—Jews predate the concepts of both religion and nationality. Jews are members of a type of social group that was common in the ancient Near East but is uncommon in the West today: a joinable tribal group with a shared history, homeland, and culture, of which a nonuniversalizing religion is but one feature. Millions of Jews identify as secular, which would be illogical if Judaism were merely a religion. But every non-Jewish society has tried to force Jews into whatever identity boxes it knows best—which is itself a quiet act of domination.

"A religion," one kid answered.

"Religion, right," the docent affirmed. (Later, in the gallery about Kristallnacht, she pointed out how Jews had been persecuted for having the "wrong religion," which would have surprised the many Jewish converts to

Christianity who wound up murdered. I know the docent knew this; she later told me she had abbreviated things to hustle our group to the museum's boxcar.)

The docent motioned toward the prewar gallery's photos showing Jewish school groups and family outings, and asked how the students would describe their subjects' lives, based on the pictures.

"Normal," a girl said.

"Normal, perfect," the docent said. "They paid taxes, they fought in the wars—all of a sudden, things changed."

All of a sudden, things changed. Kelley Szany, the museum's senior vice president of education and exhibitions, had told me that the museum had made a conscious decision not to focus on the long history of anti-Semitism that preceded the Holocaust, and made it possible. To be fair, adequately covering this topic would have required an additional museum. But the idea of sudden change—referring to not merely the Nazi takeover, but the shift from a welcoming society to an unwelcoming one—was also reinforced by survivors in videos around the museum. No wonder: Survivors who had lived long enough to tell their stories to contemporary audiences were young before the war, many of them younger than the middle schoolers in my tour group. They did not have a lifetime of memories of anti-Semitic harassment and social isolation prior to the Holocaust. For 6-year-olds who saw their synagogue burn—unlike their parents and grandparents, who might have survived various pogroms, or endured pre-Nazi anti-Semitic boycotts and other campaigns that ostracized Jews politically and socially—everything really did "suddenly" change.



Kelley Szany, the Skokie museum's senior vice president of education and exhibitions, says that the museum has made a conscious decision not to focus on the long history of anti-Semitism that preceded the Holocaust.
(Evan Jenkins for *The Atlantic*)

Then there was the word *normal*. More than 80 percent of Jewish Holocaust victims spoke Yiddish, a 1,000-year-old European Jewish language spoken around the world, with its own schools, books, newspapers, theaters, political organizations, advertising, and film industry. On a continent where language was tightly tied to territory, this was hardly “normal.” Traditional Jewish practices—which include extremely detailed rules governing food and clothing and 100 gratitude blessings recited each day—were not “normal” either.

The Nazi project was about murdering Jews, but also about erasing Jewish civilization. The museum’s valiant effort to teach students that Jews were “just like everyone else,” after Jews have spent 3,000 years deliberately not being like everyone else, felt like another erasure. Teaching children that one shouldn’t hate Jews, because Jews are “normal,” only underlines the problem: If someone doesn’t meet your version of “normal,” then it’s fine to hate them. This framing perhaps explains why many victims of today’s American anti-Semitic street violence are visibly religious Jews—as were many Holocaust victims.

Like most Holocaust educators I encountered across the country, Szany is not Jewish. And also like most Holocaust educators I encountered, she is exactly the sort of person everyone should want educating their children: intelligent, intentional, empathetic.

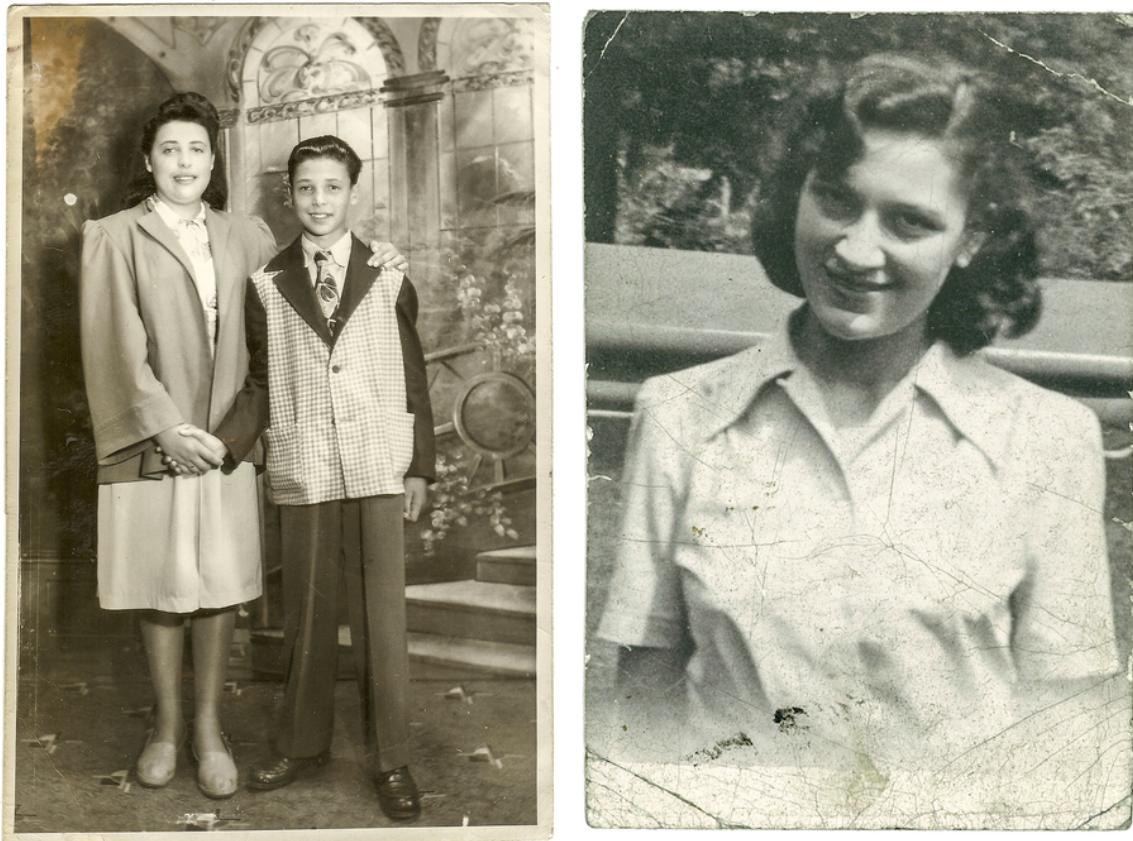
When I asked about worst practices in Holocaust education, Szany had many to share, which turned out to be widely agreed-upon among American Holocaust educators. First on the list: “simulations.” Apparently some teachers need to be told not to make students role-play Nazis versus Jews in class, or not to put masking tape on the floor in the exact dimensions of a boxcar in order to cram 200 students into it. Like many educators I spoke with, Szany also condemned Holocaust fiction such as the international best seller *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*, an exceedingly popular work of ahistorical Christian-savior schlock. She didn’t feel that Anne Frank’s diary was a good choice either, because it’s “not a story of the Holocaust”—it offers little information about most Jews’ experiences of persecution, and ends before the author’s capture and murder.

[From the December 2022 issue: Monuments to the Unthinkable](#)

Other officially failed techniques include showing students gruesome images, and prompting self-flattery by asking “What would you have done?” Yet another bad idea is counting objects. This was the conceit of a widely viewed 2004 documentary called *Paper Clips*, in which non-Jewish Tennessee schoolchildren, struggling to grasp the magnitude of 6 million murdered Jews, represented those Jews by collecting millions of paper clips. The film won numerous awards and an Emmy nomination before anyone noticed that it is demeaning to represent Jewish people as office supplies.

Best practices, Szany explained, are the opposite: focusing on individual stories, hearing from survivors and victims in their own words. The Illinois museum tries to “rescue the individuals from the violence,” Szany said, “to remind people that this happened to everyday people.” This is why survivors have long been a fixture of museum education programs. But survivors are aging. Soon, none will be left. To address this looming reality, the museum went big: It sent survivors to Los Angeles to become holograms.

Aaron Elster and Fritzie Fritzshall were among the Skokie survivors inspired by the 1970s Nazi incident to share their stories; both spoke frequently at the museum. In 2015, at the University of Southern California Shoah Foundation, a Holocaust-testimony archive and resource center founded by Steven Spielberg, they and a handful of others were each filmed for 40 hours in order to be turned into holograms. Now, in Skokie, keyword-driven artificial intelligence allows the holograms to respond to questions from the audience in a 60-seat theater. As Szany ran a private demo of the technology for me, I asked how visitors react to it. “They’re more comfortable with the holograms than the real survivors,” Szany said. “Because they know they won’t be judged.”



Left: Aaron Elster and his sister Irene in New York in 1947. *Right:* Fritzshall in Chicago after the war. (Courtesy of Illinois Holocaust Museum & Education Center)

We watched a brief film about Elster's life in Nazi-occupied Poland: how his family starved in a ghetto from which he eventually escaped; how his mother found a Catholic woman to shelter his older sister; how that woman initially rejected him, then finally hid him in her barn's attic; how he didn't leave the attic for two years. Then Szany summoned the holographic Elster (the real Elster died in 2018). He spoke from a red armchair, perky and animated as he answered a softball question she asked about how he'd entertained himself while hiding alone: "I was able to take myself away, to pretend. I drew things in my mind. I wrote whole novels in my mind."

I asked him why the woman who took in his sister had hesitated to hide him too.

He looked startled. "I really don't know why Irene wasn't with me."

I tried rephrasing my question, then simplifying it. Elster, with a warm smile, said something irrelevant. Soon I felt as I often had with actual Holocaust survivors I'd known when I was younger: frustrated as they answered questions I hadn't asked, and vaguely insulted as they treated me like an annoyance to be managed. (I bridged this divide once I learned Yiddish in my 20s, and came to share with them a vast vocabulary of not only words, but people, places, stories, ideas—a way of thinking and being that contained not a few horrific years but centuries of hard-won vitality and resilience.)

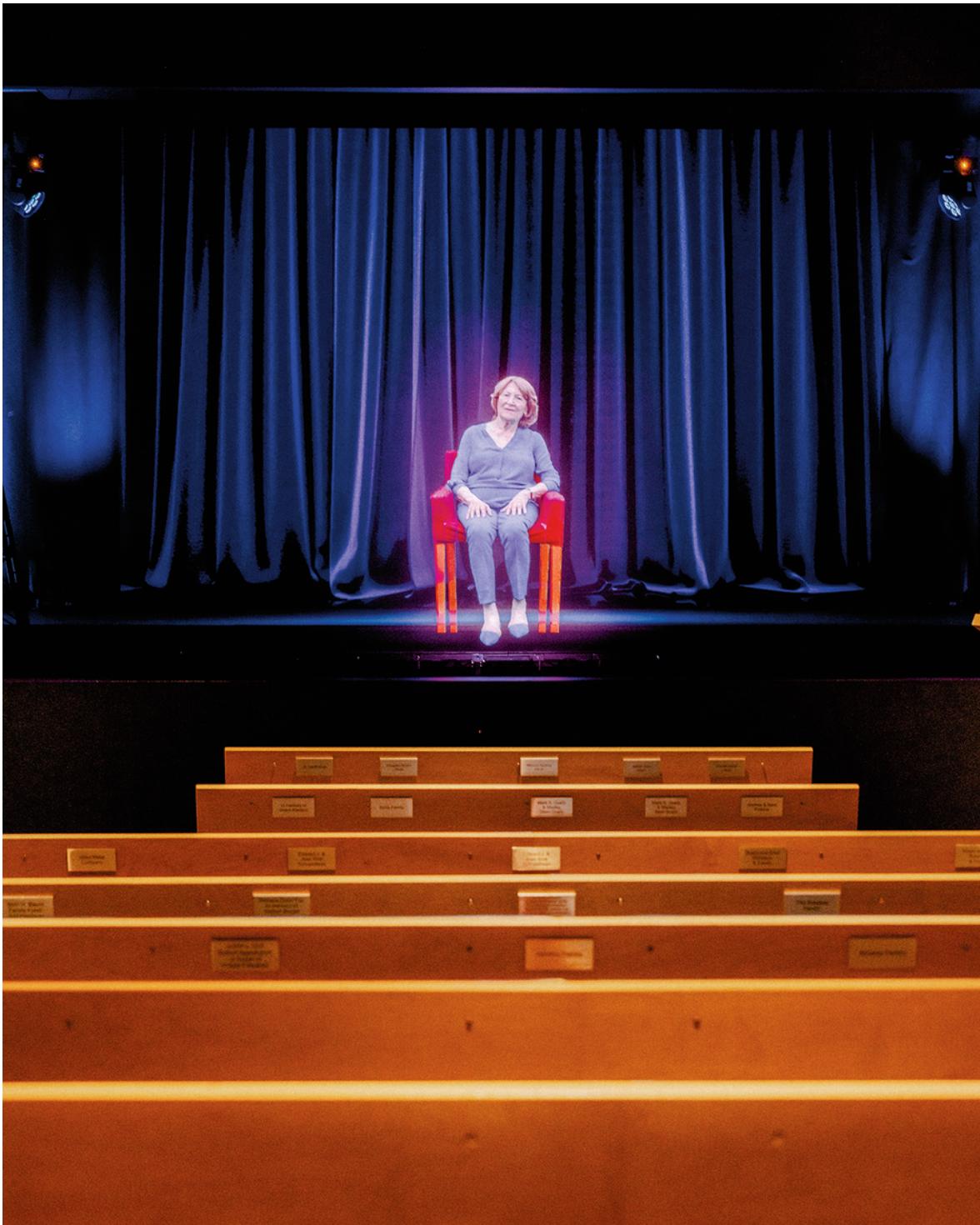
In an uncomfortable mashup of cool tech and dead Jews, the museum offers virtual-reality tours of Auschwitz.

Szany at last explained to me what the dead Elster couldn't: The woman who sheltered his sister took only girls because it was too easy for people to confirm that the boys were Jews.

I realized that I wouldn't have wanted to hear this answer from Elster. I did not want to make this thoughtful man sit onstage and discuss his own circumcision with an audience of non-Jewish teenagers. The idea felt just as dehumanizing as pulling down a boy's pants to reveal a reality of embodied Judaism that, both here and in that barn, had been drained of any meaning beyond persecution. I looked at the dead man smiling in front of me and felt a wave of nauseating relief. At least the real Elster didn't have to deal with these stupid questions anymore.

The holograms weren't the only elaborate attempt to capture the past. In an equally uncomfortable mashup of cool tech and dead Jews, the museum offers virtual-reality tours of Auschwitz, which have also been piloted in three schools. Fritzie Fritzshall, who died in 2021, was my guide from beyond the grave.

In a small room, I put on a headset. Soon I was outside Fritzshall's grandparents' home, in Hungary (now Ukraine), and then I was in a boxcar bound for Auschwitz, with silhouetted animated figures dropped in around me and a soundtrack of babies screaming as Fritzshall described how her grandfather had died during the suffocating trip.



Skokie visitors can have an AI-powered conversation with the holographic Fritzshall, a deceased Holocaust survivor. (Evan Jenkins for *The Atlantic*)

Here I am in a boxcar, I thought, and tried to make it feel real. I spun my head to take in the immersive scene, which swung around me as though I were on a rocking ship. I felt dizzy and disoriented, purely physical feelings that distracted me. Did this not count as a simulation?

I regained my bearings and joined Fritzshall beside the train tracks at Auschwitz—*Here I am at Auschwitz*, I thought—and later followed her to the exterior of the camp’s remaining crematorium, where she described the last time she saw her mother, and then into the gas chamber. I spun my head around again. *Here I am in a gas chamber*.

I had visited Auschwitz in actual reality, years ago. With my headset on, I tried to summon the emotional intensity I remembered feeling then. But I couldn’t, because all of the things that had made it powerful were missing. When I was there, I was touching things, smelling things, sifting soil between my fingers that the guide said contained human bone ash, feeling comforted as I recited the mourner’s prayer, the kaddish, with others, the ancient words an undertow of paradox and praise: *May the great Name be blessed, forever and ever and ever*. Now I was just watching a movie that stretched around to the back of my head. It felt less like reality than like a sophisticated video game.

[Read: Teaching the Holocaust in Germany as a resurgent far right questions it](#)

Ironically, the program’s most moving moment was when the VR gave way to a two-dimensional, animated version of one of Fritzshall’s memories. She was the youngest person forced to do slave labor in a factory packed with 600 women. When the other women realized how young she was, they collected crumbs of their bread ration for her, which she rolled into a nub no bigger than a tooth. They gave her these specks on the condition that, if she survived, she would remember them and share their stories.

The moment stayed with me. Only later did I notice that the program had told me absolutely nothing about these other women. The artistic animation rendered them as black-and-white forms with indistinct faces, a revealing choice. I knew how this faceless crowd had suffered and died. But did that count as remembering them?

Students at the Skokie museum can visit an area called the [Take a Stand Center](#), which opens with a bright display of modern and contemporary “upstanders,” including activists such as the Nobel laureate Malala Yousafzai and the athlete Carli Lloyd. Szany had told me that educators “wanted more resources” to connect “the history of the Holocaust to lessons of today.” (I heard this again and again elsewhere too.) As far as I could discern, almost nobody in this gallery was Jewish.

In the language I often encountered in Holocaust-education resources, people who lived through the Holocaust were neatly categorized as “perpetrators,” “victims,” “bystanders,” or “upstanders.” Jewish resisters, though, were rarely classified as “upstanders.” (Zivia Lubetkin, a Jewish resistance leader who was mentioned in the Take a Stand Center, was a notable exception.) But the post-Holocaust activists featured in this gallery were nearly all people who had stood up for their own group. Only Jews, the unspoken assumption went, were not supposed to stand up for themselves.

Visitors were asked to “take the pledge” by posting notes on a wall (“I pledge to protect the Earth!” “I pledge to be KIND!”). Screens near the exit provided me with a menu of “action plans” to email myself to help fulfill my pledge: how to fundraise, how to contact my representatives, how to start an organization. It was all so earnest that for the first time since entering the museum, I felt something like hope. Then I noticed it: “Steps for Organizing a Demonstration.” The Nazis in Skokie, like their predecessors, had known how to organize a demonstration. They hadn’t been afraid to be unpopular. They’d taken a stand.



The term *upstander* has become ubiquitous in Holocaust education—but it rarely gets applied to Jews who stand up for themselves. (Evan Jenkins for *The Atlantic*)

I left the museum haunted by the uncomfortable truth that the structures of a democratic society could not really prevent, and could even empower, dangerous, irrational rage. Something of that rage haunted me too.

The effort to transform the Holocaust into a lesson, coupled with the imperative to “connect it to today,” had at first seemed straightforward and obvious. After all, why learn about these horrible events if they aren’t relevant now? But the more I thought about it, the less obvious it seemed. What were students being taught to “take a stand” for? How could anyone, especially young people with little sense of proportion, connect the murder of 6 million Jews to today without landing in a swamp of Holocaust trivialization, like the COVID-protocol protesters who’d pinned Jewish stars to their shirt and carried posters of Anne Frank? Despite the protesters’ clear anti-Semitism (because, yes, it is anti-Semitic to use the mass murder of Jews as a prop), weren’t they and others like them doing exactly what Holocaust educators claimed they wanted people to do?

II. The Curriculum Creators

In May 2022, I traveled to Seattle to give a paid lecture at the Holocaust Center for Humanity about my work on Jewish memory. There I met Paul Regelbrugge, the center’s director of education; Ilana Cone Kennedy, its chief operating officer; and Richard Greene, its museum and technology director. They eagerly agreed to give me an inside look at their work, no matter what I might say about it.

The Seattle center is far more typical of American Holocaust museums than the Skokie one is. Its exhibition is barely more than a storefront—“the Holocaust in 1,400 square feet,” Greene joked—with a display built around artifacts from local survivors. The center mainly focuses on outside programming, running a speakers’ bureau of local survivors and “legacy speakers” (mostly survivors’ children and grandchildren), inviting guest lecturers like me, and supplying schools with “teaching trunks” filled with classroom materials. Since 2019, when Washington passed a law recommending (though not mandating) Holocaust education, the center has built its own curriculum and trained teachers across the state.

The 2019 law was inspired by a changing reality in Washington and around the country. In recent years, Kennedy said, she's received more and more messages about anti-Semitic vandalism and harassment in schools. For example, she told me, "someone calls and says, 'There's a swastika drawn in the bathroom.'"

Can she fix it? I asked. By teaching about the Holocaust? (It seemed to me that the kid who drew the swastika had heard about the Holocaust.)

Maybe not, Kennedy admitted. "What frightens me is that small acts of anti-Semitism are becoming very normalized," she said. "We're getting used to it. That keeps me up at night."

"Sadly, I *don't* think we can fix this," Regelbrugge said. "But we're gonna die trying."

What disturbed me most about this comment was that Kennedy almost did die trying.

On July 28, 2006, Kennedy, who is Jewish, was seven months pregnant and in her third year of working at the Holocaust Center, which at the time was in an office one floor below the Jewish Federation of Greater Seattle, a nonprofit serving Jewish and community needs. That day, a man held the 14-year-old niece of a Federation employee at gunpoint and forced her to buzz him into the building. (The Federation's doors, like those of most Jewish institutions in America, are perpetually locked for exactly this reason.) Once inside, he ranted about Israel and began shooting people at their desks. He murdered 58-year-old Pamela Waechter and wounded five others. After injuring Dayna Klein, 37 years old and four months pregnant, he held her hostage with a gun to her head as Klein persuaded him to speak with a 911 dispatcher. He eventually surrendered. Kennedy had stopped by the Federation's office moments before the attack. After hearing gunshots, she placed one of the incident's first 911 calls, and later saw a woman she'd just spoken with drenched in blood. Her 911 call made her a witness at the attacker's trial, at which point she was pregnant with her second child. The irony of experiencing this attack while working at a Holocaust-education center was not lost on Kennedy. "There were Holocaust survivors calling *me* to see if *I* was okay!" she said.

Talking with Kennedy, I realized, with a jolt of unexpected horror, that there was an entirely unplanned pattern in my Holocaust tour across America. Almost every city where I spoke with Holocaust-museum educators, whether by phone or in person, had also been the site of a violent anti-Semitic attack in the years since these museums had opened: a murdered museum guard in Washington, D.C.; a synagogue hostage-taking in a Dallas-area suburb; young children shot at a Jewish summer camp in Los Angeles. I was struck by how minimally these attacks were discussed in the educational materials shared by the museums.

The Skokie museum was built because of a Nazi march that never happened. But this more recent, actual anti-Semitic violence, which happened near or even inside these museums, rarely came up in my conversations with educators about the Holocaust's contemporary relevance. In fact, with the exception of Kennedy and Regelbrugge, no one I spoke with mentioned these anti-Semitic attacks at all.

The failure to address contemporary anti-Semitism in most of American Holocaust education is, in a sense, by design. In his article "The Origins of Holocaust Education in American Public Schools," the education historian Thomas D. Fallace recounts the story of the (mostly non-Jewish) teachers in Massachusetts and New Jersey who created the country's first Holocaust curricula, in the '70s. The point was to teach morality in a secular society. "Everyone in education, regardless of ethnicity, could agree that Nazism was evil and that the Jews were innocent victims," Fallace wrote, explaining the topic's appeal. "Thus, teachers used the Holocaust to activate the moral reasoning of their students"—to teach them to be good people.

Dara Horn: Why democracies are so slow to respond to evil

The idea that Holocaust education can somehow serve as a stand-in for public moral education has not left us. And because of its obviously laudable goals, objecting to it feels like clubbing a baby seal. Who wouldn't want to teach kids to be empathetic? And by this logic, shouldn't Holocaust education, because of its moral content alone, automatically inoculate people against anti-Semitism?

Apparently not. “Essentially the moral lessons that the Holocaust is often used to teach reflect much the same values that were being taught in schools before the Holocaust,” the British Holocaust educator Paul Salmons [has written](#). (Germans in the ’30s, after all, were familiar with the Torah’s commandment, repeated in the Christian Bible, to love their neighbors.) This fact undermines nearly everything Holocaust education is trying to accomplish, and reveals the roots of its failure.

One problem with using the Holocaust as a morality play is exactly its appeal: It flatters everyone. We can all congratulate ourselves for not committing mass murder. This approach excuses current anti-Semitism by defining anti-Semitism as genocide in the past. When anti-Semitism is reduced to the Holocaust, anything short of murdering 6 million Jews—like, say, ramming somebody with a shopping cart, or taunting kids at school, or shooting up a Jewish nonprofit, or hounding Jews out of entire countries—seems minor by comparison.

But a larger problem emerges when we ignore the realities of how anti-Semitism works. If we teach that the Holocaust happened because people weren’t nice enough—that they failed to appreciate that humans are all the same, for instance, or to build a just society—we create the self-congratulatory space where anti-Semitism grows. One can believe that humans are all the same while being virulently anti-Semitic, because according to anti-Semites, Jews, with their millennia-old insistence on being different from their neighbors, are the obstacle to humans all being the same. One can believe in creating a just society while being virulently anti-Semitic, because according to anti-Semites, Jews, with their imagined power and privilege, are the obstacle to a just society. To inoculate people against the myth that humans have to erase their differences in order to get along, and the related myth that Jews, because they have refused to erase their differences, are supervillains, one would have to acknowledge that these myths exist. To really shatter them, one would have to actually explain the content of Jewish identity, instead of lazily claiming that Jews are just like everyone else.

Many Holocaust educators have begun to notice this problem. Jen Goss, who taught high-school history for 19 years and is now the program manager for Echoes & Reflections, one of several major Holocaust-

curriculum providers, told me about the “terrible Jew jokes” she’d heard from her own students in Virginia. “They don’t necessarily know where they come from or even really why they’re saying them,” Goss said. “Many kids understand not to say the N-word, but they would say, ‘Don’t be such a Jew.’”

“There’s a decline in history education at the same time that there’s a rise in social media,” Gretchen Skidmore, the director of education initiatives at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, in Washington, D.C., told me. “We’ve done studies with our partners at Holocaust centers that show that students are coming in with questions about whether the Holocaust was an actual event. That wasn’t true 20 years ago.”

Goss believes that one of the reasons for the lack of stigma around anti-Semitic conspiracy theories and jokes is baked into the universal-morality approach to Holocaust education. “The Holocaust is not a good way to teach about ‘bullying,’” Goss told me, with obvious frustration.

Echoes & Reflections’ lesson plans do address newer versions of anti-Semitism, including the contemporary demonization of Israel’s existence—as opposed to criticism of Israeli policies—and its manifestation in aggression against Jews. Other Holocaust-curriculum providers also have material on contemporary anti-Semitism. The Museum of Tolerance, in Los Angeles, whose core exhibition is about Holocaust history, recently opened a new gallery on this topic. Still, these providers rarely explain or explore who Jews are today—and their raison d’être remains Holocaust education.

“I worked as an administrator of a college Holocaust-resource center, and I can’t tell you how many kids would come in and be like, ‘I love the Holocaust!’” Goss said.

This observation reminded me of what I’d heard from other educators. Many teachers had told me that their classrooms “come alive” when they teach about the Holocaust. Some had attributed students’ interest to the subject matter itself: Its titillating gruesomeness makes students feel sophisticated for tackling a “difficult” topic, and superior for seeing the evil that their predecessors apparently ignored. But one underappreciated reason for Holocaust education’s classroom “success” is that after decades of

development, Holocaust-education materials are just plain better than those on most other historical topics. All of the major Holocaust-education providers offer lessons that teachers can easily adapt for different grade levels and subject areas. Instead of lecturing and memorization, they use participation-based methods such as group work, hands-on activities, and “learner driven” projects.

But is there any evidence that Holocaust education reduces anti-Semitism, other than fending off Holocaust denial? A 2019 Pew Research Center survey found a correlation between “warm” feelings about Jews and knowledge about the Holocaust—but the respondents who said they knew a Jewish person also tended to be more knowledgeable about the Holocaust, providing a more obvious source for their feelings. In 2020, Echoes & Reflections published a commissioned study of 1,500 college students, comparing students who had been exposed to Holocaust education in high school with those who hadn’t. The [published summary shows](#) that those who had studied the Holocaust were more likely to tolerate diverse viewpoints, and more likely to privately support victims of bullying scenarios, which is undoubtedly good news. It did not, however, show a significant difference in respondents’ willingness to defend victims publicly, and students who’d received Holocaust education were less likely to be civically engaged—in other words, to be an “upstander.”

These studies puzzled me. As Goss told me, the Holocaust was not about bullying—so why was the Echoes study measuring that? More important, why were none of these studies examining awareness of anti-Semitism, whether past or present?

[One major study](#) addressing this topic was conducted in England, where a national Holocaust-education mandate has been in place for more than 20 years. In 2016, researchers at University College London’s Centre for Holocaust Education published a survey of more than 8,000 English secondary-school students, including 244 whom they interviewed at length. The study’s most disturbing finding was that even among those who studied the Holocaust, there was “a very common struggle among many students to credibly explain why Jews were targeted” in the Holocaust—that is, to cite anti-Semitism. When researchers interviewed students to press this question, “many students appeared to regard [Jews’] existence as problematic and a

key cause of Nazi victimisation.” In other words, students *blamed the Holocaust on the Jews*. (This result resembles that of a [large 2020 survey](#) of American Millennials and Gen Zers, in which 11 percent of respondents believed that Jews caused the Holocaust. The state with the highest percentage of respondents believing this—an eye-popping 19 percent—was New York, which has mandated Holocaust education since the 1990s.)

Worse, in the English study, “a significant number of students appeared to tacitly accept some of the egregious claims once circulated by Nazi propaganda,” instead of recognizing them as anti-Semitic myths. One typical student told researchers, “Is it because like they were kind of rich, so maybe they thought that that was kind of in some way evil, like the money didn’t belong to them[;] it belonged to the Germans and the Jewish people had kind of taken that away from them?” Another was even more blunt: “The Germans, when they saw the Jews were better off than them, kind of, I don’t know, it kind of pissed them off a bit.” Hitler’s speeches were more eloquent in making similar points.

III. The Teachers

The Dallas Holocaust and Human Rights Museum, which opened in 2019, takes up an entire city block in the downtown historic district. I was there to attend the annual Candy Brown Holocaust and Human Rights Educator Conference, where more than 60 teachers from Texas, Arkansas, and Oklahoma gathered for professional-development workshops last July. The “upstander” branding I’d encountered in Skokie and elsewhere was even more intense in Dallas. The museum’s lobby featured a giant red wall painted with the word UPSTANDER. Each teacher at the conference received a tote bag labeled UPSTANDER, a wristband emblazoned with UPSTANDER, and a book titled [*The Upstander*](#).

One of the teachers I met was Benjamin Vollmer, a veteran conference participant who has spent years building his school’s Holocaust-education program. He teaches eighth-grade English in Venus, Texas, a rural community with 5,700 residents; his school is majority Hispanic, and most students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. When I asked him why he focuses on the Holocaust, his initial answer was simple: “It meets the TEKS.”

The TEKS are the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills, an elaborate list of state educational requirements that drive standardized testing. But as I spoke more with Vollmer, it became apparent that Holocaust education was something much bigger for his students: a rare access point to a wider world. Venus is about 30 miles from Dallas, but Vollmer's annual Holocaust-museum field trip is the first time that many of his students ever leave their town.

"It's become part of the school culture," Vollmer said. "In eighth grade, they walk in, and the first thing they ask is, 'When are we going to learn about the Holocaust?'"

Vollmer is not Jewish—and, as is common for Holocaust educators, he has never had a Jewish student. (Jews are 2.4 percent of the U.S. adult population, according to a 2020 Pew survey.) Why not focus on something more relevant to his students, I asked him, like the history of immigration or the civil-rights movement?

I hadn't yet appreciated that the absence of Jews was precisely the appeal.

"Some topics have been so politicized that it's too hard to teach them," Vollmer told me. "Making it more historical takes away some of the barriers to talking about it."

Wouldn't the civil-rights movement, I asked, be just as historical for his students?

He paused, thinking it through. "You have to build a level of rapport in your class before you have the trust to explore your own history," he finally said.

Another Texas teacher, who wouldn't share her name, put it more bluntly. "The Holocaust happened long ago, and we're not responsible for it," she said. "Anything happening in our world today, the wool comes down over our eyes." Her colleague attending the conference with her, a high-school teacher who also wouldn't share her name, had tried to take her mostly Hispanic students to a virtual-reality experience called Carne y Arena, which follows migrants attempting to illegally cross the U.S.-Mexico border. Her

administrators refused, claiming that it would traumatize students. But they still learn about the Holocaust.

Student discomfort has been a legal issue in Texas. The state's House Bill 3979, passed in 2021, is one of many "anti-critical-race-theory" laws that conservative state legislators have introduced since 2020. The bill forbade teachers from causing students "discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress on account of the individual's race or sex," and also demanded that teachers introduce "diverse and contending perspectives" when teaching "controversial" topics, "without giving deference to any one perspective." (The "discomfort" language was removed in later legislation; the modified law now requires teaching "currently controversial" topics "objectively" and forbids schools from teaching that any student "bears responsibility, blame, or guilt for actions committed by other members of the same race or sex.")

These vaguely worded laws stand awkwardly beside a 2019 state law mandating Holocaust education for Texas students at all grade levels during an annual Holocaust Remembrance Week. In October 2021, a school administrator in Southlake, Texas, made national news after clumsily suggesting that teachers might need to present "other perspectives" on the Holocaust. (The district quickly apologized, but the remarks brought public attention to the chilling effect these kinds of bills can have on teaching about bigotry of any kind.)

Texas teachers are also legally required to excuse students from reading assignments if the students' parents object to them. The Dallas museum's president and CEO, Mary Pat Higgins, told me that the administrator who'd made the viral remarks in Southlake is a strong proponent of Holocaust education, but was acknowledging a reality in that school district. Every year, the administrator had told Higgins, some parents in her district object to their children reading the Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel's memoir *Night*—because it isn't their "belief" that the Holocaust happened.

In one model lesson at the conference, participants examined a speech by the Nazi official Heinrich Himmler about the need to murder Jews, alongside a speech by the Hebrew poet and ghetto fighter Abba Kovner encouraging a ghetto uprising. I only later realized that this lesson plan quite elegantly

satisfied the House bill's requirement of providing "contending perspectives."

The next day, I asked the instructor if that was an unspoken goal of her lesson plan. With visible hesitation, she said that teaching in Texas can be like "walking the tightrope." This way, she added, "you're basing your perspectives on primary texts and not debating with Holocaust deniers." Less than an hour later, a senior museum employee pulled me aside to tell me that I wasn't allowed to interview the staff.

Many of the visiting educators at the conference declined to talk with me, even anonymously; nearly all who did spoke guardedly. The teachers I met, most of whom were white Christian women, did not seem to be of any uniform political bent. But virtually all of them were frustrated by what administrators and parents were demanding of them.

"People say we've learned from the Holocaust. No, we didn't learn a damn thing."

Two local middle-school teachers told me that many parents insist on seeing reading lists. Parents "wanting to keep their kid in a bubble," one of them said, has been "the huge stumbling block." Choosing her words carefully as she described teaching the Holocaust, her colleague said, "It is healthy to begin this study by talking about anti-Semitism, humanizing the victims, sticking to primary sources, and remaining as neutral as possible."

I glanced down at my conference-issued wristband. Wasn't "remaining as neutral as possible" exactly the opposite of being an upstander?

In trying to remain neutral, some teachers seemed to want to seek out the Holocaust's bright side—and ask dead Jews about it. In the museum, the teachers and I met another hologram, the Dallas resident Max Glauben, who had died several months earlier. We watched a brief introduction about Glauben's childhood and early adolescence in the Warsaw Ghetto and in numerous camps. When the dead man appeared, one teacher asked, "Was there any joy or happiness in this ordeal? Moments of joy in the camps?"

Holographic Glauben shifted uncomfortably in his armchair. “In the Warsaw Ghetto in the early days,” he said, “there was theater, there were plays, dancing shows. There were musicians at the beginning, but as food became scarce, many disappeared.” This did not answer the teacher’s question about joy in the camps.

Later I read *The Upstander*, Glauben’s biography—the book the museum distributed to conference participants. (This was another of the few instances I encountered of someone Jewish being called an “upstander.”) Glauben’s experiences during the Holocaust included watching Nazis disembowel Jewish prisoners. He saw one German officer torture Jews by riding over them with his motorcycle. *The Upstander* also mentions a room in one camp where Jewish boys were routinely raped. Glauben’s memory, he told his biographer, had blocked what happened to him when a Nazi took him to that room. But after learning decades later about what went on there, he says in the book, “I think he abused me.” These experiences, hardly unusual for Jewish victims, were not the work of a faceless killing machine. Instead they reveal a gleeful and imaginative sadism. For perpetrators, this was fun. Asking this dead man about “joy” seemed like a fundamental misunderstanding of the Holocaust. There was plenty of joy, just on the Nazi side.

In the educational resources I explored, I did not encounter any discussions of sadism—the joy derived from humiliating people, the dopamine hit from landing a laugh at someone else’s expense, the self-righteous high from blaming one’s problems on others—even though this, rather than the fragility of democracy or the passivity of bystanders, is a major origin point of all anti-Semitism. To anyone who has spent 10 seconds online, that sadism is familiar, and its source is familiar too: the fear of being small, and the desire to feel big by making others feel small instead.

The countless Holocaust educational materials I’d perused generally presented Nazis as joylessly efficient. But it is highly inefficient to interrupt mass murder by, say, forcing Jews to dance naked with Torah scrolls, as the Yiddish poet Avrom Sutzkever testified about at the Nuremberg trials, or forcing Jews to make pornographic films, as the educator Chaim A. Kaplan documented in his Warsaw Ghetto diary. Nazis were, among other things, edgelords, in it for the laughs. So, for that matter, were the rest of history’s

anti-Semites, then and now. For Americans today, isn't this the most relevant insight of all?

"People say we've learned from the Holocaust. No, we didn't learn a damn thing," Kim Klett told me one evening during the conference, over bright-blue margaritas. Klett is a longtime teacher in Mesa, Arizona, and a facilitator for Echoes & Reflections. An instructor at the Dallas conference, she also trains Holocaust educators across the U.S.

"People glom on to this idea of the upstander," she said. "Kids walk away with the sense that there were a lot of upstanders, and they think, *Yes, I can do it too.*" The problem with presenting the less inspiring reality, she suggested, is how parents or administrators might react. "If you teach historical anti-Semitism, you have to teach contemporary anti-Semitism. A lot of teachers are fearful, because if you try to connect it to today, parents are going to call, or administrators are going to call, and say you're pushing an agenda."

But weren't teachers supposed to "push an agenda" to stop hatred? Wasn't that the entire hope of those survivors who built museums and lobbied for mandates and turned themselves into holograms?

I asked Klett why no one seemed to be teaching anything about Jewish culture. If the whole point of Holocaust education is to "humanize" those who were "dehumanized," why do most teachers introduce students to Jews only when Jews are headed for a mass grave? "There's a real fear of teaching about Judaism," she confided. "Especially if the teacher is Jewish."

I was baffled. Teachers who taught about industrialized mass murder were scared of teaching about ... Judaism? Why?

"Because the teachers are afraid that the parents are going to say that they're pushing their religion on the kids."

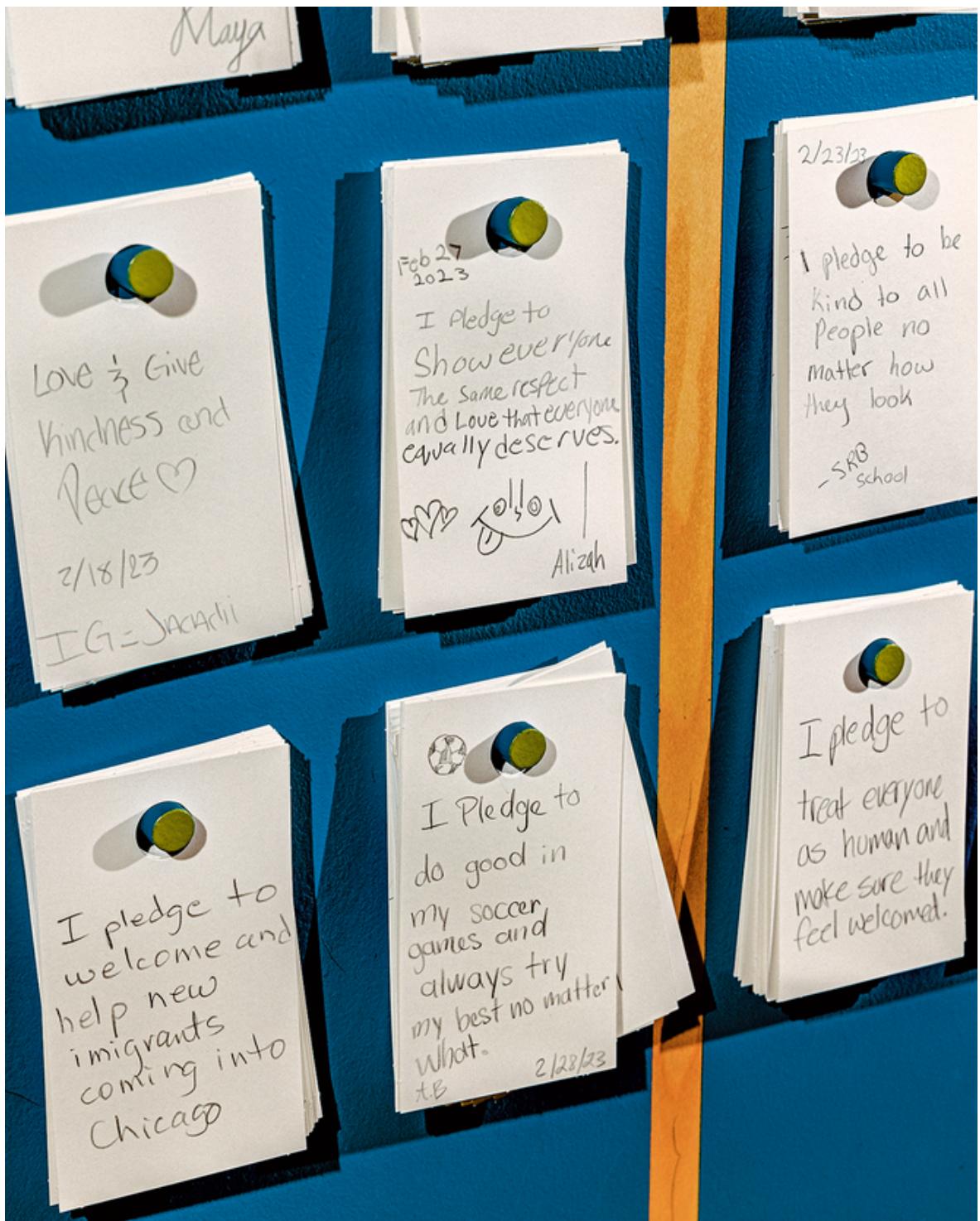
But Jews don't do that, I said. Judaism isn't a proselytizing religion like Christianity or Islam; Jews don't believe that anyone needs to become Jewish in order to be a good person, or to enjoy an afterlife, or to be

“saved.” This seemed to be yet another basic fact of Jewish identity that no one had bothered to teach or learn.

Klett shrugged. “Survivors have told me, ‘Thank you for teaching this. They’ll listen to you because you’re not Jewish,’” she said. “Which is weird.”

“Weird” is one way to put it. Another might be “enraging,” or “devastating,” or perhaps we could be honest and just say “There is no point in teaching any of this”—because anti-Semitism is so ingrained in our world that even when discussing the murders of 6 million Jews, it would be “pushing an agenda” to tell people not to hate them, or to tell anyone what it actually means to be Jewish. Better to keep the VR headset on and stay on the track. Jews have one job in this story, which is to die.

This made me, in the language of Texas House Bill 3979, uncomfortable.



Visitors leaving the Skokie museum are invited to “take the pledge” by posting notes on a wall. (Evan Jenkins for *The Atlantic*)

The Dallas Museum was the only one I visited that opened with an explanation of who Jews are. Its exhibition began with brief videos about

Abraham and Moses—limiting Jewish identity to a “religion” familiar to non-Jews, but it was better than nothing. The museum also debunked the false charge that the Jews—rather than the Romans—killed Jesus, and explained the Jews’ refusal to convert to other faiths. It even had a panel or two about contemporary Dallas Jewish life. Even so, a docent there told me that one question students ask is “Are any Jews still alive today?”

I couldn’t blame the kids for asking. American Holocaust education, in this museum and nearly everywhere else, never ends with Jews alive today. Instead it ends by segueing to other genocides, or to other minorities’ suffering. (In Dallas, these subjects took up most of two museum wings.) This erasure feels completely normal. Better than normal, even: noble, humane.

But when one reaches the end of the exhibition on American slavery at the National Museum of African American History and Culture, in Washington, D.C., one does not then enter an exhibition highlighting the enslavement of other groups throughout world history, or a room full of interactive touchscreens about human trafficking today, asking that visitors become “upstanders” in fighting it. That approach would be an insult to Black history, ignoring Black people’s current experiences while turning their past oppression into nothing but a symbol for something else, something that actually matters. It is dehumanizing to be treated as a symbol. It is even more dehumanizing to be treated as a warning.

IV. A Way Forward

How should we teach children about anti-Semitism? Listening to Charlotte Decoster, the Dallas museum’s director of education, I glimpsed a possible path. Decoster began her conference workshop by introducing “vocabulary must-knows.” At the top of her list: *anti-Semitism*.

“If you don’t explain the ism,” she cautioned the teachers in the room, “you will need to explain to the kids ‘Why the Jews?’ Students are going to see Nazis as aliens who bring with them anti-Semitism when they come to power in ’33, and they take it back away at the end of the Holocaust in 1945.”

She asked the teachers, “What’s the first example of the persecution of the Jews in history?”

The teachers looked at her blankly until one raised a hand. “I once read something about Jews getting blamed and killed for the Black Death,” the teacher said. “That was a big eye-opener for me.”

Decoster looked unimpressed. “Can you think of anything earlier than that?”

More blank stares. Finally, one woman said, “Are you talking about the Old Testament?”

“Think ancient Egypt,” Decoster said. “Does this sound familiar to any of you?”

“They’re enslaved by the Egyptian pharaoh,” a teacher said.

I wasn’t sure that the biblical Exodus narrative exactly qualified as “history,” but it quickly became clear that wasn’t Decoster’s point. “Why does the pharaoh pick on the Jews?” she asked. “Because they had one God.”

I was stunned. Rarely in my journey through American Holocaust education did I hear anyone mention a Jewish belief.

“The Jews worship one God, and that’s their moral structure. Egyptian society has multiple gods whose authority goes to the pharaoh. When things go wrong, you can see how Jews as outsiders were perceived by the pharaoh as the threat.”

This unexpected understanding of Jewish belief revealed a profound insight about Judaism: Its rejection of idolatry is identical to its rejection of tyranny. I could see how that might make people uncomfortable.

Decoster moved on to a snazzy infographic of a wheel divided in thirds, each explaining a component of anti-Semitism: “Racial Antisemitism = False belief that Jews are a race and a threat to other races,” then “Anti-Judaism = Hatred of Jews as a religious group,” and then “Anti-Jewish Conspiracy Theory = False belief that Jews want to control and overtake the world.” The third part, the conspiracy theory, was what distinguished anti-

Semitism from other bigotries. It allowed closed-minded people to congratulate themselves for being open-minded—for “doing their own research,” for “punching up,” for “speaking truth to power,” while actually just spreading lies.

This, she announced, “aligns with the TEKS.”

The teachers wrote down the information.

The next day, the teachers listened in silence to J. E. Wolfson of the Texas Holocaust, Genocide, and Antisemitism Advisory Commission as he walked them through a history of anti-Semitism in excruciating detail, sharing medieval propaganda images of Jews eating pig feces and draining blood from Christian children. Wolfson clarified for his audience what this centuries-long demonization of Jews actually means, citing the scholar David Patterson, [who has written](#): “In the end, the antisemite’s claim is not that all Jews are evil, but rather that all evil is Jewish.”

Wolfson told the teachers that it was important that “anti-Semitism should not be your students’ first introduction to Jews and Judaism.” He said this almost as an aside, just before presenting the pig-excrement image. “If you’re teaching about anti-Semitism before you teach about the content of Jewish identity, you’re doing it wrong.”

I thought about the caring, devoted educators in the room, all committed to stamping out bigotry, and knew from my conversations with them that this—introducing students to Judaism by way of anti-Semitism—was exactly what they were doing. The same could be said, I realized, for nearly all of American Holocaust education.

The Holocaust educators I met across America were all obsessed with building empathy, a quality that relies on finding commonalities between ourselves and others. But I wondered if a more effective way to address anti-Semitism might lie in cultivating a completely different quality, one that happens to be the key to education itself: curiosity. Why use Jews as a means to teach people that we’re all the same, when the demand that Jews be just like their neighbors is exactly what embedded the mental virus of anti-Semitism in the Western mind in the first place? Why not instead

encourage inquiry about the diversity, to borrow a de rigueur word, of the human experience?

Back at home, I thought again about the Holocaust holograms and the Auschwitz VR, and realized what I wanted. I want a VR experience of the Strashun Library in Vilna, the now-destroyed research center full of Yiddish writers and historians documenting centuries of Jewish life. I want a VR of a night at the Yiddish theater in Warsaw—and a VR of a Yiddish theater in New York. I want holograms of the modern writers and scholars who revived the Hebrew language from the dead—and I definitely want an AI component, so I can ask them how they did it. I want a VR of the writing of a Torah scroll in 2023, and then of people chanting aloud from it through the year, until the year is out and it's read all over again—because the book never changes, but its readers do. I want a VR about Jewish literacy: the letters, the languages, the paradoxical stories, the methods of education, the encouragement of questions. I want a VR tour of Jerusalem, and another of Tel Aviv. I want holograms of Hebrew poets and Ladino singers and Israeli artists and American Jewish chefs. I want a VR for the conclusion of Daf Yomi, the massive worldwide celebration for those who study a page a day of the Talmud and finally finish it after seven and a half years. I want a VR of Sabbath dinners. I want a VR of bar mitzvah kids in synagogues being showered with candy, and a VR of weddings with flying circles of dancers, and a VR of mourning rituals for Jews who died natural deaths—the washing and guarding of the dead, the requisite comforting of the living. I want a hologram of the late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks telling people about what he called “the dignity of difference.”

I want to mandate this for every student in this fractured and siloed America, even if it makes them much, much more uncomfortable than seeing piles of dead Jews does. There is no empathy without curiosity, no respect without knowledge, no other way to learn what Jews first taught the world: love your neighbor. Until then, we will remain trapped in our sealed virtual boxcars, following unseen tracks into the future.

This article appears in the [May 2023](#) print edition with the headline “Is Holocaust Education Making Anti-Semitism Worse?”

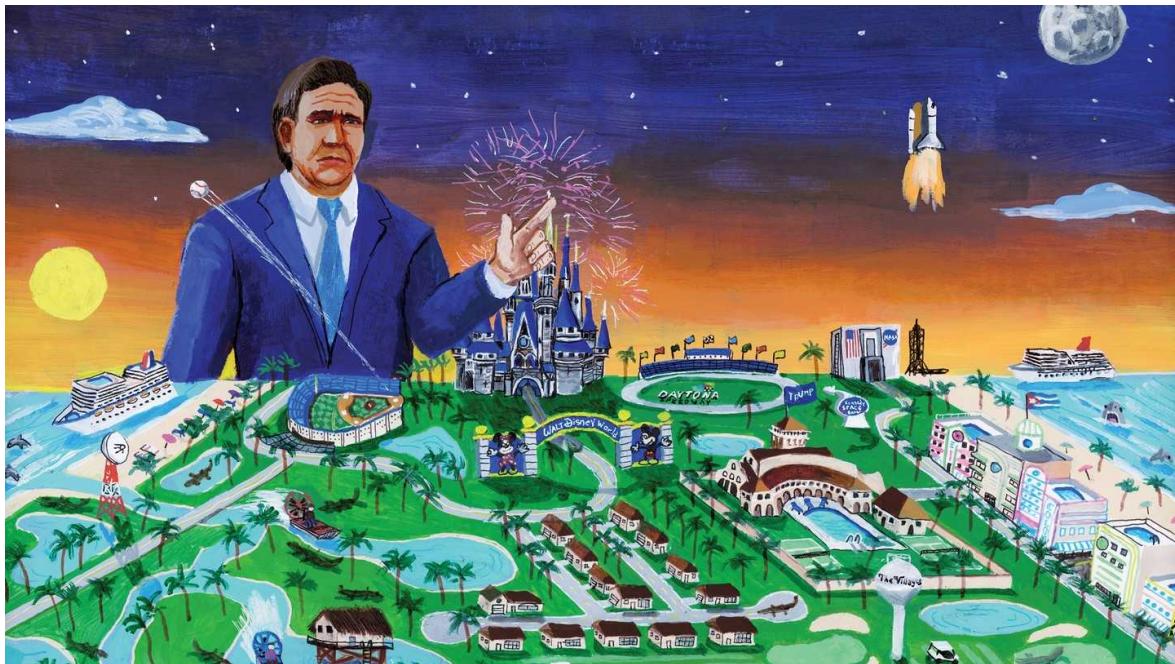
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| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

How Did America's Weirdest, Most Freedom-Obsessed State Fall for an Authoritarian Governor?

A journey through Ron DeSantis's magic kingdom

by Helen Lewis



In the course of a single month this year, the following news reports emanated from Florida: A gun enthusiast in Tampa built a 55-foot backyard pool shaped like a revolver, with a hot tub in the hammer. A 32-year-old from Cutler Bay was arrested for biting off the head of his girlfriend's pet python during a domestic dispute. A 40-year-old man cracked open a beer

during a police traffic stop in Cape Coral. A father from East Orlando punched a bobcat in the face for attacking his daughter's dog.

In headlines, all of these exploits were attributed to a single character, one first popularized in 2013 by a Twitter account of the same name: "Florida Man," also known as "the world's worst superhero," a creature of eccentric rule-breaking, rugged defiance, and unhinged minor atrocities. "Florida Man Known as 'Sedition Panda' Arrested for Allegedly Storming Capitol," a [recent news story](#) declared, because why merely rebel against the government when you could dress up in a bear suit while doing it?

Internet memes sometimes refer to Florida as "the America of America," but to a Brit like me, it's more like the Australia of America: The wildlife is trying to kill you, the weather is trying to kill you, and the people retain a pioneer spirit, even when their roughest expedition is to the 18th hole.

Florida's place in the national mythology is as America's pulsing id, a vision of life without the necessary restriction of shame. Chroniclers talk about its seasonless strangeness; the public meltdowns of its oddest residents; how retired CIA operatives, Mafia informants, and Jair Bolsonaro can be reborn there. "Whatever you're doing dishonestly up north, you can do it in a much warmer climate with less regulation down here," said the novelist Carl Hiaasen, who wrote about the weirder side of Florida for the *Miami Herald* from 1976 until his retirement in 2021.

But under the memes and jokes, the state is also making an argument to the rest of the world about what freedom looks like, how life should be organized, and how politics should be done. This is clear even from Britain, a place characterized by drizzle and self-deprecation, the anti-Florida.

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What was once the narrowest swing state has come to embody an emotional new strain of conservatism. "The general Republican mindset now is about grievances against condescending elites," Michael Grunwald, the Miami-based author of *The Swamp*, told me, "and it fits with the sense that 'we're

Florida Man; everyone makes fun of us.”” But criticism doesn’t faze Florida men; it emboldens them.

It is no coincidence that the two leading contenders for the Republican nomination both have their base in Florida. In one corner, you have Donald Trump, who retired, sulking, from the presidency to his “Winter White House” at Mar-a-Lago, in Palm Beach. (When Trump entered the 2024 presidential race, the formerly supportive [New York Post jeered at him](#) with the front-page headline “Florida Man Makes Announcement” before relegating the news story to page 26.)

In the other corner stands the state’s current governor, Ron DeSantis, raised in the Gulf Coast town of Dunedin, a man desperately trying to conceal his attendance at the elite institutions of Harvard and Yale under lashings of bronzer and highly choreographed outrages. In his speeches, the governor likes to boast that “Florida is [where ‘woke’ goes to die.](#)” In his 2022 campaign videos, he styled himself as a *Top Gun* pilot and possibly even Jesus himself. You couldn’t get away with that in Massachusetts.

[Ronald Brownstein: The contradictions of Ron DeSantis](#)

“The thing about being the ‘punch-line state’ is that it’s all true,” the writer Craig Pittman told me over Zoom, his tropical-print shirt gleaming in the sun. “Do you remember the story about the woman who got in trouble in New Jersey for trying to board a plane with her emotional-support peacock?”

Yes, I do.

“The peacock was from Florida.”



When I first arrived in Orlando, in late October, I rented what to me was a comically large Ford SUV and drove to McDonald’s for hash browns and a cup of breakfast tea (zombie-gray, error). Then I went to a gun range, where

I began by firing two pistols. The very serious man behind the desk had clocked my teeth (British), accent (Hermione Granger), and sex (female), and expressed skepticism that I would want to fire an AR-15 assault rifle too. But I did. In the past decade, semiautomatic rifles like the AR-15 have become the weapon of choice for young killers, and I needed to see what America was willing to put into the hands of teenagers in the name of freedom.

A state that bills itself as the home of the ornery and the resistant has fallen for the most keenly authoritarian governor.

With the pistols, my shots pulled down from the recoil or the weight. But the AR-15 nestled into my shoulder pad, and the shots skipped out of it and into the center of the target. I felt like I was in *Call of Duty*, with the same confidence that there would be no consequences for my actions; that if anything went wrong, I could just respawn.

Later, a friend texted to ask how firing the rifle had been. *I loved it*, I said. *No one should be allowed to have one*. This is not a sentiment to be expressed openly in DeSantis's Florida. When the Tampa Bay Rays tweeted in support of gun control after the Uvalde, Texas, massacre last year, the [governor vetoed state funding for a new training facility](#), saying that it was "inappropriate to subsidize political activism of a private corporation." You might think: *How petty*. Or maybe: *How effective*.

Hold on to those thoughts. DeSantis is a politician who preaches freedom while suspending elected officials who offend him, banning classroom discussions he doesn't like, carrying out hostile takeovers of state universities, and obstructing the release of public records whenever he can. And somehow Florida, a state that bills itself as the home of the ornery and the resistant, the obstinate and the can't-be-trodden-on, the libertarian and the government-skeptic, has fallen for the most keenly authoritarian governor in the United States.



This is the point in the story when a foreign reporter would traditionally go to Walt Disney World and have a Big Thought about how the true religion of America is capitalism. She might include a variation on the French theorist Jean Baudrillard's observation that "Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest [of America] is real."

Me? I went to Disney World; bought a storm-trooper hat, a 32-ounce Coke, and a hot dog that looked like a postapocalyptic ration; then I had my photo taken high-fiving Baloo. *What a great day out.* The Magic Kingdom drew nearly 21 million tourists in 2019, the last year before the pandemic, and is central to Florida's mythology. I had to go. For me, the visceral thrill came from the park's extraordinary bureaucracy: all the attention to detail of a North Korean military parade, purely for your enjoyment.

Disney flatters its customers the way Florida flatters the rich, by hiding the machinery needed to support decadence. You absolutely never see Cinderella smoking a joint behind her castle, or Mickey Mouse losing it with a group of irritating 9-year-olds. In Florida, no one wants to hear about the costs or the consequences. Why else would people keep rebuilding fragile beachfront homes in a hurricane zone—and expect the government to offer them insurance? Of course everyone wants the Man to butt out of their life, but at the same time, the state-backed insurer of last resort hit 1 million policies in August.



Baudrillard had it precisely wrong: Disney's success only underlines how the state is one giant theme park. "This is not a place that makes anything, and it's not really a place that does anything, other than bring in more people," Grunwald had told me. Having brought in those people, what Florida never tells them is *no*, nor does the state ask them to play nicely with the other children: "We're not going to make you wear a mask or take a vaccine or pay your taxes or care about the schools," Grunwald said.

[Derek Thompson: Disney vs. DeSantis is the future of politics](#)

I did have one Big Thought in Orlando: It's odd that Ron DeSantis cast Disney as an avatar of the "woke mind virus" after its then-CEO, Bob Chapek, spoke out against the Parental Rights in Education bill—known to critics as [the "Don't Say 'Gay'" law](#)—which restricts the teaching of gender and sexuality in schools. Disney's cartoons now feature LGBTQ characters, and its older films carry warnings about their outdated attitudes, but the corporation itself is deeply conservative in the discipline it demands from its staff, its deep nostalgia for the 1950s, and its celebration of American exceptionalism. At Epcot's World Showcase, I observed national pavilions built on the kind of gleeful cultural supremacy last seen in 19th-century anthropologists marveling at the handicrafts of the natives. Britain was

represented by a fish-and-chips shop, a pub, and a store where you could buy a “masonic sword” for \$350. It could have been worse: Brazil, the fifth-largest country on Earth, had been reduced to a caipirinha stand.



Outside Tallahassee, I fell in love. Having driven four hours north to the Panhandle one bright day, wearing denim shorts that would be unnecessary in Britain for nine more months, I ended up in [Wakulla Springs State Park](#).

This was primordial Florida, the swamp I had been promised, and it was heaven: a swimming spot overseen, on the opposite bank, by a 13-foot alligator named Joe Jr., something the tour guide presented as perfectly normal and not at all alarming. Unwieldy manatees glided through the water as if someone had given my SUV nostrils and flippers. Turkey vultures massed in the trees. I had bubble-gum ice cream and a root-beer float—how American is that?—and felt pure happiness flooding me like sunshine.

Here was the magic that brings so many people to Florida, a glow that returned as I traveled around the state on my two trips there: turning off an unremarkable road and finding myself in the public park outside Vero Beach, where for \$3 you could walk through warm white sand on a weekday afternoon; having a beer and watching the pink-orange sunset over the marina in the small town of Stuart; the Day-Glo-graffiti walls of Wynwood, south of Miami’s Little Haiti; the revelation that there’s *an entire spare Miami* just over the bridge from the original. Bumped off my return flight for three days by Hurricane Nicole, I drove to the Kennedy Space Center—just in time to watch a SpaceX rocket blast off into the clear blue sky. At one point, I took a wrong turn outside of Miami onto Alligator Alley and drove 15 miles into the Everglades before I could turn around at a visitors’ center. I’ve never been somewhere so wild that also had M&M’s in vending machines.

Braided through these experiences was the sensation of Florida as a refuge from reality, something that has encapsulated both its promise and its peril

since before it was part of America. In the early 1800s, enslaved people escaped from southern plantations and sheltered in Seminole lands, prompting Andrew Jackson, the seventh president, to launch the first in a series of devastating wars. Florida was soon offloaded by the Spanish, and loosely attached to the U.S. for two decades before becoming a state in 1845. It was roundly ignored for a long time after that. In 1940, it was the least populated southern state.

The reasons for its transformation after World War II are well known: air-conditioning and bug spray; generations of northeastern and midwestern seniors tempted by year-round sunshine; the hundreds of thousands of Cubans who fled Fidel Castro in the 1960s. Then came the rodent infestation: Disney, with all its money and lobbyists and special tax arrangements, and eventually its own town, called Celebration. Now the state draws crypto hustlers, digital nomads, and people who just plain hate paying state income tax. All of these migrants fueled decades of explosive growth and a landscape of construction, condos, and golf courses. In 2014, Florida's population overtook New York's, and in 2022, it was the nation's fastest-growing state.

But those bare facts conceal a more fundamental change. As Florida has become America, America has become more like Florida: older, more racially diverse but not necessarily more liberal, and more at risk from climate change. “The state that looks most like what we’d expect the United States to look like in 2060?” Philip Bump writes in his new book, *The Aftermath*. “Florida.”

For so many who choose to live here, arriving in Florida feels like a relief: a liberation from cold winters, from COVID mandates, from the paralyzing fear of political correctness, from the warnings of climatologists and guilt trips by Greta Thunberg. “This is an irresponsible place,” Grunwald told me —a counterweight to Plymouth Rock and the puritanism of the Northeast. When I drove across the border into Georgia, a battery of signs greeted me, warning against speeding and littering, as if to say: *Look, we’re relaxed here, but not Florida relaxed.* In freedom-loving Florida, you presume, every warning and restriction has been reluctantly imposed in response to a highly specific problem. (Exhibit A, the hotel swimming-pool sign: No swimming with diarrhea.)

Before arriving in the state, I had called the political strategist Anthony Pedicini, who has worked for multiple Republican state representatives and members of Congress in Florida since moving there two decades ago from New York. He expressed a general frustration with the fussiness and rule-making of Democratic-controlled areas: “You’ve dealt with these blue-state politics that have raised your taxes, defunded your police, rewarded homelessness, made the schools a mockery—you’re fed up with it.” And so you go to Florida.

Then Pedicini said something unexpected. “You ever read *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*?” I know them reasonably well, I responded, with the caution of someone who is anticipating a quiz.

“So there was one of the chapters where the ship is going by the Sirens, calling the sailors off,” he continued. “Odysseus strapped himself to the mast so he wouldn’t go, but he made all his sailors plug their ears with wax and cotton. I think Ron DeSantis is like a siren call to all of these suburban Republicans living in these blue states.”

Right, but weren’t the sirens luring people … to their death?

Pedicini was unperturbed. “I’ll tell you this, to give you background on me. I lost my mother during the pandemic to COVID. My mother chose not to get a shot, the only one in our family. Do I blame it on the governor? Absolutely not. Do I blame my mother? No, she made a choice for her that she thought was best for her. It resulted in a disastrous consequence. But the government didn’t have the right to make that choice.”



Everyone I met in Florida agreed that DeSantis was ambitious, hardworking, and smart—but, you know, so were Mitt Romney and Jeb Bush. Where were the fizz and the fire and the electric crackle of change that he claimed to be offering?

During a rally held at the American Muscle Car Museum in Melbourne, on the Space Coast, I got to see DeSantis in person, floodlit like a Pink Floyd concert and flanked by sweet vintage rides. Flags fluttered in the parking lot, declaring BLUE LIVES MATTER and LET'S GO BRANDON, but the experience was underwhelming. DeSantis's speech was a rote recital of approved villains, lacking the chaos and danger that Donald Trump brings to his rallies.



Any serious consideration of DeSantis inevitably runs headlong into his lack of charisma. Can you win the presidency without being able to make small talk? The Republican donor class is very keen to lubricate his path to power, but they worry he can't schmooze and flatter as well as he bullies and schemes. He has courted partisan YouTubers and talk-radio hosts, but throughout his reelection campaign last year, he did not grant a sit-down interview to any mainstream publication, and declined to cooperate with profiles in *The New Yorker*, the *Financial Times*, and *The New York Times*. His press team specializes in insults that read as though ChatGPT has been trained on Trump speeches—gratuitous, yet somehow bloodless. (Asked to

respond to fact-checking queries for this article, DeSantis's press secretary, Bryan Griffin, replied by email: "You aren't interested in the truth; this is just yet another worthless *Atlantic* editorial.")

The governor's closest adviser is generally agreed to be his wife, Casey—ironically, a former television reporter—who survived breast cancer in 2022, and made a campaign ad extolling the support DeSantis gave her. In general, he reveals little about his inner life. Until recently, he had not spoken publicly about the unexpected death of his sister, Christine, at age 30 in 2015. In February, when the *New York Post* followed him to Dunedin, to see the governor in his home environment, the most the reporter got out of him was that he'd parlayed his success as a Little League pitcher—his teammates called him "D"—into a job at an electrical store in town. His mother was a nurse and his father installed Nielsen boxes; his middle name is Dion; vacations were spent visiting his grandparents in Pennsylvania and Ohio. He was smart and worked hard enough to get into Yale.

Ah, the Ivy League. This is where DeSantis's story really takes off: the small-town Florida boy thrust into a world of inherited privilege, elite tastes, and left-wing opinions. "I showed up my first day in jean shorts and a T-shirt because that's what we wore on the west coast of Florida," he [told Tucker Carlson in April 2021](#). "That was not something that was received very warmly. And I never quite fit in there, and it was a total culture shock to me." For the first time, he told Carlson, he heard someone criticize America—and God, and Christianity. "They hated God," he said. "They hated the country." For the first time, in other words, the young Ron met people with different political opinions—and he didn't like it one bit.

After college, DeSantis spent a year teaching at the private Darlington School, in Georgia, where, [according to the Times](#), one student recalled him as a "total jock" who "was definitely proud that he graduated Ivy and thought he was very special." DeSantis once dared a student who had been boasting about how much milk he could drink to prove it. The student threw up in front of his classmates.

Unlike Trump, DeSantis could have succeeded by the elite's rules. Like George H. W. Bush, he was a member of the Delta Kappa Epsilon fraternity and the captain of the baseball team. He graduated magna cum laude from

Yale. His performance got him into Harvard Law School, after which he joined the legal arm of the U.S. Navy.

He spent Christmas 2006 at the military prison in Guantánamo Bay—not as an inmate, he would later joke on the campaign trail. One former Guantánamo prisoner, Mansoor Adayfi, [has accused DeSantis](#) of laughing as he was force-fed; Adayfi says he threw up in the young lawyer’s face. “I was screaming,” Adayfi told *Eyes Left*, which describes itself as a socialist anti-war podcast hosted by veterans. “I looked at him, and he was actually smiling. Like someone who was enjoying it.” Adayfi was released in 2016 after being detained without charge for 14 years, and the United Nations Commission on Human Rights later classified this force-feeding as torture. (In his 2023 book, *The Courage to Be Free*, DeSantis offers few details about his stint at Guantánamo, saying that although detainees would often “claim ‘abuse’” in U.S. facilities, “in Iraqi custody they really would get abused and treated inhumanely.”)

In 2007, DeSantis deployed to Iraq with SEAL Team 1, not as a stone-cold killer himself, but as the stone-cold killers’ lawyer. The year before, he had met his future wife on a golf course (very Florida), and in 2009 he married her at Disney World (even more Florida). In honor of the couple’s Italian heritage, the reception was at Italy Isola in Epcot, a private terrace next to a small faux-Venetian canal. They now have three children: Mamie, Mason, and Madison.

Casey DeSantis’s job as a local TV host meant she couldn’t move out of the state, so her husband decided to leave the military and began contemplating his future while serving as a special assistant U.S. attorney in central Florida. He wanted to run for Congress in Florida’s Sixth District, north of Orlando, but he knew he had a problem. “I viewed having earned degrees from Yale and Harvard Law School to be political scarlet letters as far as the GOP primary went,” he later wrote. He needed a mythology. He needed to embrace his destiny as a Florida Man, a crusader for people who want to open-carry in Publix against the blue-state pencil-necks who worship Rachel Maddow and scoff at birtherism. “If I could withstand seven years of indoctrination in the Ivy League,” he took to telling audiences, “then I will be able to survive D.C. without going native!”



Driving back from Melbourne to Orlando took me past the Reedy Creek Improvement District—a forgettable euphemism for Disney’s private fiefdom, 25,000 acres of land around Lake Buena Vista, where for more than half a century the company was able to control building codes, utilities, and waste collection. Until it crossed Ron DeSantis.

The treatment of Disney—which has more than 70,000 employees in the state—has become the cornerstone of DeSantis’s pitch to voters; he calls it “the Florida equivalent of the shot heard ’round the world.” It reveals both his governing philosophy and the evolution of the Republican attitude toward corporations. In February, on the eve of his book’s publication, DeSantis signed a bill ending Disney’s control of the district and replacing its board of supervisors with his own handpicked choices. These included Bridget Ziegler, an education activist whose husband had been elected earlier that month as chair of the Florida Republican Party. For a guy who had never run anything before becoming governor, DeSantis has shown an incredible aptitude for patronage.

The campaign against one of Florida’s largest private employers is DeSantisism distilled into its purest form, a kind of Mafia bargain reminiscent of Viktor Orbán’s Hungary: *Don’t come for me and I won’t come for you*. Corporations can be supportive of ruling politicians, or studiously neutral. What they must not do is cause trouble.

What else does DeSantis believe? We know from the media tour for *The Courage to Be Free* that he is far from a foreign-policy hawk. He has said that it is [not in America’s interests](#) to become “further entangled in a territorial dispute between Ukraine and Russia.” His first book, 2011’s *Dreams From Our Founding Fathers*—published by a Florida vanity press called High-Pitched Hum, and clearly riffing on the title of Barack Obama’s first memoir—paints him as an originalist; he claims that the Founding Fathers considered the Constitution a “fundamental law with a stable meaning” rather than a “living document.” He confidently asserts that the

country's first Black president betrayed the legacy of Martin Luther King Jr., who "did not dream of a transformation of America in which the foundational principles of the nation were tossed aside."

David French: Why Republicans are turning against free speech

Dreams From Our Founding Fathers was DeSantis's calling card for his successful 2012 congressional run. He quickly became a [co-founder of the House Freedom Caucus](#). Aware of the Tea Party energy coursing through the party, DeSantis was careful not to appear co-opted by the establishment. He slept in his office instead of renting an apartment in Washington, declined the congressional pension plan, and flew back to Florida—and his growing family—as soon as votes ended each week.

During his third term, DeSantis made his bid for promotion to governor—and that is when he received the blessing of this story's other Florida Man, Donald Trump. The facts are disputed: Trump recently claimed that DeSantis begged him with "tears coming down from his eyes" for an endorsement; other sources have the president moved by watching the potential candidate praise him on Fox News. Either way, in late 2017 Trump posted a tweet describing DeSantis as "a brilliant young leader, Yale and then Harvard Law, who would make a GREAT Governor of Florida."

That endorsement allowed DeSantis to become a staple of Fox News, with more than 100 appearances in 2018. "The once little-known congressman spent so much time broadcasting Fox News TV hits from Washington this year that he learned to apply his own powder so he could look as polished as he sounded," [Politico reported](#).



Buoyed by Trump's blessing and the support of right-wing media, DeSantis won Florida's Republican primary for governor in August 2018 by 20 points. Two months later, he went on to win the general election by just 32,463 votes. In *The Courage to Be Free*, he recalls asking his transition team to draw up an "exhaustive list of all the constitutional, statutory, and customary powers of the governor. I wanted to be sure that I was using every lever available to advance our priorities." If DeSantis ever sits behind the Resolute Desk, you can bet he'll do more than order Diet Cokes and compulsively check Twitter.



In January, after DeSantis had been reelected as governor by 1.5 million votes, I returned to Florida, landing in Miami. This time, the car-rental agency offered me an upgrade to a Cadillac Escalade. I got all the way to climbing up the little step to the driver's seat, where I looked backwards at two more rows of seats and a trunk, before I decided to set out instead in a positively demure GMC Terrain.

I had been told that there were three Floridas: the Panhandle, best viewed as an extension of the Deep South; the state's central belt, where maps should read "Here Be Seniors"; and the south, where condo towers and bustling Spanish-speaking enclaves merge slowly into the laid-back beaches of the Keys. Visiting Miami, I could barely comprehend how the city—with its bitcoin brunches and graffiti district and cops who look like male strippers—could be in the same country as Tallahassee, never mind the same state.

Sunday morning in Ron DeSantis's vision of hell, and I was drinking bottomless mimosas.

Maria-Elena Lopez, the vice chair of the Miami-Dade Democrats, volunteered to tell me why the traditionally blue and "rabidly Latin" county had voted for DeSantis by 11 points in November (he lost there by 21 points in 2018). Her answer was simple: Its more recent arrivals were middle-class conservatives in their countries of origin, and "they didn't come here to fight the fight of the other people." Also, she said, "Latin Americans love strongmen."

Lopez, who came to the United States from Cuba at age 4, also underlined the [complicated relationship](#) between recent migrants and the idea of government help, explaining that her fellow Cubans were particularly triggered by anything that smacked of socialism. She pointed to Hialeah, "which is probably our most Latin city in Miami-Dade County ... and there is the highest enrollment of what is casually called Obamacare. Okay. Yet they're like, 'Obama was Communist.' Oh, but you like his insurance policies? The messaging does not go with what the actual reality is."

[Read: Why Democrats are losing Hispanic voters](#)

In the November election, DeSantis's success was not an outlier in Florida; Senator Marco Rubio notched an equally large win, and the party gained four House seats. Yet DeSantis deserves some credit for this: He had pushed an exquisitely gerrymandered redistricting proposal through the state legislature. "His plan wiped away half of the state's Black-dominated congressional districts, dramatically curtailing Black voting power in America's largest swing state," [ProPublica reported last year](#). As one example, the DeSantis map shattered the seat held by the Black Democrat Al

Lawson, which stretched along the border with Georgia, dividing it into four pieces, each of which was inserted into a majority-white district. (DeSantis has rejected the criticisms, calling the old district itself “a 200-mile gerrymander that divvies up people based on the color of their skin.”)

DeSantis also established an Office of Election Crimes and Security, whose officers carried out widely publicized arrests for alleged voter fraud. Fentrice Driskell, the state House minority leader, points to the [chilling effect of police officers](#) “parading around 20 individuals who thought that they had registered to vote lawfully” in front of the cameras. (Three defendants have so far had their charges dismissed.) “They were just bogus cases,” Driskell told me, “being used to gin up a big lie that there’s election fraud in Florida.”



Sunday morning in Ron DeSantis’s vision of hell, and I was drinking bottomless mimosas. This was R House, a drag bar in Wynwood, an area of Miami that has made the journey from sketchy to bougie in just two decades. Last July, a viral video filmed at R House showed a drag performer, her implausible breasts barely covered with pasties, dollar bills stuffed into her thong, showing a small child how to strut along a catwalk. “Children belong at drag shows!!!!” read the caption. “Children deserve to see fun & expression & freedom.” DeSantis responded by ordering a government investigation of the restaurant.

When I visited R House, I didn’t see any minors, although the menu did offer a \$30 kids’ brunch. If anything, the drag show revealed how thoroughly gay culture has been absorbed into the mainstream; judging by all the sashes and tiaras, most of the customers were part of bachelorette parties. At the table next to me, a woman daintily fed a glass of water to a chihuahua in a jeweled collar. Fans were snapped, dollar bills were waved, and a few performers did some light twerking, but the only serious danger to children here would have been from a flying wig.

When DeSantis owns the libs, his donors and loyalists tend to benefit.

I left perplexed. In all honesty, I had found the viral video disturbing; as the DeSantis administration’s complaint argued, the performance had a “sexualized nature” that was clearly inappropriate for kids to watch. But it was no more disturbing to me than giving an 8-year-old a “purity ring,” or letting them fire a pistol, or forcing 10-year-olds to bear their rapists’ babies. Why can’t America just be normal? And why wouldn’t DeSantis, extoller of “parental rights in education,” let moms and dads decide what to show their own children? The paradox of freedom, Florida style, is that it’s really an assertion of control. *People like us should be free to do what we want, and free to stop other people from doing what they want when we don’t approve.* That’s why it would be deeply unfair to call Ron DeSantis a petty tyrant. If he is a tyrant, he is an expansive one.

Ask Andrew Warren. After the repeal of *Roe v. Wade*, the twice-elected Democratic state attorney in Hillsborough County [signed a pledge](#) that he would not prosecute women who sought abortions, or doctors providing gender surgery or hormones to minors. The DeSantis administration responded by suspending him while he was in the middle of an unrelated grand-jury case. “Five minutes after receiving the email about the suspension, I was escorted out of my office by an armed deputy,” he told me. There wasn’t even enough time to collect his house keys from his desk. In January, a judge ruled that DeSantis had violated Warren’s First Amendment rights and the Florida Constitution, but said he had no authority to reinstate him.

Warren believes his suspension was designed to be a warning to others: “This is what authoritarians do, right? They say that we need to quell dissent, because dissent is so inherently dangerous.”

Similarly stuntlike was DeSantis’s decision to fly 49 migrants to Martha’s Vineyard last year, which became a reliable applause line in the governor’s stump speech. Everything about that story stinks, including the fact that the aviation company involved, Vertol—which had close ties to DeSantis aides—made a handsome profit. That’s part of a pattern. When DeSantis owns the libs, his donors and loyalists tend to benefit. At the start of the year, under the guise of his “[war on woke](#),” he appointed six right-wing activists [as](#)

[trustees of the New College of Florida](#), a small public liberal-arts college in Sarasota. The board promptly forced the president out and replaced her with Richard Corcoran, a former Republican speaker of Florida's House of Representatives, on a salary of \$699,000 (more than double the previous president's). One of the new board members was Christopher Rufo, who has achieved fame among the Very Online for turning *critical race theory* into a household term. So what if Rufo lives in Washington State? He is big on Twitter and a beloved brand among Tucker Carlson viewers.

[Yascha Mounk: How to save academic freedom from Ron DeSantis](#)

At 44, DeSantis represents a new generation of Republicans who have learned to speak Rumble—the unmoderated alternative to YouTube—as well as fluent Fox. He knows which of his actions to shout about, and which ones are better smothered in boredom. At a flashy press conference on April 19, 2021, for example, DeSantis surrounded himself with cops to sign the Combating Public Disorder Act, which was presented as taming the excesses of the Black Lives Matter movement but—according to Jason Garcia, a former *Orlando Sentinel* investigative reporter who now runs a Substack called Seeking Rents—gave police extra power to quell dissent and civil disobedience more generally. That was a moment worth staging for applause by the Blue Lives Matter contingent. By contrast, the governor waited until just before midnight the same day to approve Senate Bill 50, a blandly worded law that collects sales tax from online shoppers while giving tax breaks to Florida businesses. The difference between the splashy staging of the anti-riot bill and the quiet enactment of S.B. 50 “illustrates DeSantis to me so perfectly,” Garcia said. “He’s a governor that is masterful at driving these angry social-war fights that divide people, then turning around and governing like a pro-corporate Republican.”



From the outside, Mar-a-Lago looks less like a millionaires' playground and more like an all-inclusive Mediterranean resort. But Trump's Palm Beach

estate does have a watchtower outside, and a guard who was not keen to let me in, even to speak to the manager.

No matter. Instead I headed around the corner to the house owned by the real-estate billionaire Jeff Greene, hoping that he had insight into the one man who could crush DeSantis's ambitions. Someone, somewhere, buzzed me into the gate, but Greene was playing tennis when I arrived, so I wandered around the estate for five minutes, worried about being shot by an overzealous security guard. When Greene finally brought me inside, his house was everything I had hoped for: toilets with self-warming seats, a terrace backing onto the beach, photos of him embracing world leaders, the works. "That's a Picasso," he said, leading me down a corridor to his terrace. This was the Palm Beach lifestyle I had heard so much about.

Greene was once a member of Mar-a-Lago, but he let his membership lapse after he ran as a Democratic candidate for governor in 2018 (he came in fourth in the primary). His campaign promoted him as someone willing to stand up to Donald Trump, using [a grainy video of him and Trump](#) gesticulating at each other in the dining room at the Trump International Golf Club in West Palm Beach in December 2016 as proof. Despite this history, Greene had sympathy for Trump's complaint that DeSantis would be nothing without him.

Trump seems to feel DeSantis's betrayal keenly. Shortly before the November election, he debuted a new nickname for his rival: Ron DeSanctimonious. But it didn't land, somehow, and Trump's more recent efforts—Meatball Ron, Shutdown Ron, Tiny D—have not been as devastating as Low-Energy Jeb or Little Marco. Locked away for two years in Mar-a-Lago like the world's most gregarious shut-in, the former president has been consumed by his insistence that the 2020 election was stolen, long past when it stopped being a useful, base-enraging lie.

The demands of Palm Beach socializing meant that Greene was certain to encounter Trump again—in fact, Greene was due at Mar-a-Lago the following weekend for a benefit in aid of the Palm Beach Police and Fire Foundation. That might be awkward, because a few months earlier he had told the *Financial Times* that Trump had "no friends." Then came the former

president's dinner with Ye—Kanye West—who was going around saying things like “I like Hitler,” and the white supremacist Nick Fuentes.

“I realized that I probably should call the *Financial Times* to say I owe President Trump an apology,” Greene told me, looking the least apologetic a man has ever looked, an attitude the tennis whites amplified, “because he really does have two friends.”

Was he not worried about going to Mar-a-Lago under the circumstances? Not at all, it turned out, because Greene would be accompanied by his friend Mehmet Oz, Trump’s anointed (and failed) candidate for a Senate seat in Pennsylvania, as well as by his best man, with whom he had just spent two weeks in St. Barts.

And who would that be? Mike Tyson.

I blinked a few times, before my brain supplied the necessary explanation: *Florida*.



On January 3, DeSantis was sworn in as governor for a second time, on the steps of the capitol in Tallahassee. The ceremony was scheduled to begin at 11 a.m., but at 10:20, the public seating area was full, and stragglers had to watch on a giant television screen on South Monroe Street, which had been renamed “Ron DeSantis Way” for the occasion. (Other elected officials were assigned smaller side streets in their honor.) Again, I felt inescapably British: We wouldn’t let our politicians get carried away like this.

In the press pen, an enthusiastic livestreamer broadcast his hope that Pfizer, Moderna, and the media would be held accountable for their crimes, then emitted an audible “Ooh” of appreciation when Casey DeSantis stepped out in a mint-green caped dress, with elbow-length white gloves. Her husband took a seat on the dais, splay-legged, his hands disconcertingly locked into a diamond in front of his crotch.

This is what it looks like to become the Chosen One. The former Fox host Glenn Beck had lent DeSantis his rare Bible for the swearing-in. The podcaster Dave Rubin, previously torn between the Florida governor and Trump, tweeted a photograph from the bleachers—not the VIP section, I noted—and later produced a YouTube video praising the “one line in DeSantis’ speech that made the crowd go nuts.” (I had been led to believe that Floridians going nuts would involve some combination of gasoline, swimming trunks, guns, pythons, golf carts, alcohol, and an unexplained fatality. Here, they just stood and clapped.) The donors and the party hierarchy were ready to move on from Donald Trump; so, it seemed, were the partisan media.

Although the Sunshine State forged DeSantis, he’s not a true Florida Man.

The speech drew on the dark Bannonite energy of the right-wing online ecosystem, name-checking “entrenched bureaucrats in D.C., jet-setters in Davos, and corporations wielding public power” and breezing through the obligatory geographic shout-outs, “from the Space Coast to the Sun Coast,” to Daytona, Hialeah, and the rest. “Freedom lives here, in our great Sunshine State of Florida!”

The rest of the 16-minute speech was a tour through the greatest hits of his campaign, followed by the predictable raising of his eyes to the horizon of greater ambitions. DeSantis wanted to offer a Florida Blueprint to the rest of America; this was a place that was preserving the “sacred fire of liberty” that had burned in Independence Hall, at Gettysburg, on the D-Day beaches of Normandy, and that had inspired a president to stand in Berlin and declare, “Tear down this wall.” Yes, the speech said, *I may be currently in charge of highway maintenance and appointments to the board of chiropractic medicine, but I have so much more to give.*



The central question about DeSantis is this: Is he a corporate tax-cutter or a conspiratorial frother? Is he closer to Mitch McConnell or Marjorie Taylor

Greene? The great DeSantis innovation has been to realize how much cover calculated outrage provides for rewarding cronies—and that the more you preach “freedom,” the more you can get away with authoritarianism.

Although the Sunshine State forged DeSantis, he’s not a true Florida Man. Some 400 miles away from Tallahassee, at Mar-a-Lago, you could get the full sugar rush of Trump, a born performer who finds his causes by sniffing the wind, then road-tests potential lines on Truth Social and live audiences, feeling the crackle of a palpable hit. DeSantis offers a synthetic, lab-grown alternative. He’s Sweet’N Low.

During the inauguration, the Pledge of Allegiance was read by Felix Rodríguez, a paramilitary CIA officer during the Bay of Pigs incident and a recent winner of the governor’s Medal of Freedom. The 81-year-old stumbled over the words, and I realized instantly what a natural politician—Bill Clinton, Tony Blair, Ronald Reagan—would have done: walk over, take Rodríguez’s arm, and create a viral moment of human connection. DeSantis stood rigid and stern. Given a 15-hour run-up and a focus group, he might have gamed out the advantages of a small, public act of kindness. But he couldn’t get there on his own.

Nothing is more damning of the modern Republican Party than the fact that DeSantis needs to flaunt his authoritarianism, anti-intellectualism, and casual cruelty to court its base. Even then, the routine falls flat. DeSantis lacks the weirdness, effervescence, and recklessness that makes his home state so compelling. A true Florida Man does not master bureaucracy and use his powers of patronage to reshape institutions in his image. A true Florida Man does not make the trains run on time. A true Florida Man tries to soup up his boat with a nitro exhaust and accidentally burns down the illegal tiki bar he built in his backyard. Some are born Florida Men, some achieve Florida Manhood, and some have Florida Manhood thrust upon them by the demands of right-wing politics.

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[politics-gop/673489/](#)

| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

Vermeer's Revelations

**The artist left behind few clues
about his life or intentions, but the
paintings themselves teach the
viewer new ways to see.**

by Susan Tallman



Woman Holding a Balance (National Gallery of Art, Widener Collection)

Of all the great painters of the golden age when the small, soggy Netherlands arose as an improbable global power, Johannes Vermeer is the

most beloved and the most disarming. Rembrandt gives us grandeur and human frailty, Frans Hals gives us brio, Pieter de Hooch gives us busy burghers, but Vermeer issues an invitation. The trompe l'oeil curtain is pulled back, and if the people on the other side don't turn to greet us, it's only because we are always expected.

Vermeer's paintings are few in number and scattered over three continents, and they rarely travel. The 28 gathered in Amsterdam for the Rijksmuseum's [current, dazzling exhibition](#) represent about three-quarters of the surviving work—"a greater number than the artist might have ever seen together himself," a co-curator, Pieter Roelofs, notes—and make this the largest Vermeer show in history. The previous record holder took place 27 years ago at the National Gallery in Washington, D.C., and at the Mauritshuis, in The Hague. Prior to that, the only chance to see anything close would have been the Amsterdam auction in May 1696 that dispersed perhaps half of everything he'd painted in his life.

At the Rijksmuseum, the light levels are low, the walls dark, and every painting has room to breathe. Visitors drop their voice as if in church. But for all the reverence his work now enjoys, and for all the moment-stretched-to-eternity quietude that his paintings project, the afterlife of Vermeer has been a rough ride, bouncing from local prominence to obscurity to cinematic stardom courtesy of Colin Firth. Vermeer's work was at the center of the most stupendous forgery scandal of the 20th century, as well as its [most spectacular art theft](#). (*The Concert*, stolen from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in 1990 and not seen since, is a palpable absence in Amsterdam.) Vermeer, the man, has been depicted as a paradigm of Calvinist restraint, a passionate Catholic convert, and a model of empiricism. Almost four centuries after his birth, experts remain at odds about his intentions, his methods, and which paintings he actually made.

It is revelatory to walk through the complete arc of Vermeer's career, from the early, inexpert attempts at heroic mythological and biblical scenes (reminders that even the most sublime of painters has a learning curve) to the late, strange *Allegory of the Catholic Faith*—but the works in between are what slow visitors to a crawl and then a standstill. Though the catalog offers a cornucopia of up-to-date scholarship and enlarged images, in the

museum itself, wall texts are kept to a minimum. This is a show about looking.

The first thing you see is the sweeping sky of Vermeer's *View of Delft*, glowing as if backlit, and then off to the side, his painting of timeworn Delft houses, *The Little Street*, truncated left and right like a prelapsarian Edward Hopper. His only extant portrayals of the outdoors, the two pictures stake the domain that he would make his own: a brick-and-mortar world made boundless through the workings of light.



View of Delft (Mauritshuis)

Farther along are the *tronies*, or faces—radiant, intimate, and nameless. (The most famous *tronie* in the world, *Girl With a Pearl Earring*, joined the show for seven weeks before returning to the Mauritshuis for the high tourist

season.) Around these, in profusion, are the interiors—light rolling in from the left, falling on chairs, paintings, maps, and people concentrating on a task. They read and write, play music, make lace. A man leans over a map with calipers, but lifts his head to look out the window, mulling a thought or interrupted by a noise. A woman cocks her head, listening as she tunes a lute. Another stands silent, studying a handheld balance. Again and again, our attention is directed to the act of paying attention. The irresistible appeal of the *tronies* is that they seem to have paused in their daily round to pay attention to *us*.

Our presence is invited, but it is also obstructed. Casually abandoned chairs and tables schlumped with ornamental carpets perch at the pictures' edges as if about to tumble out into the museum. The border between painting and world, them and us, feels weirdly permeable. But we cannot read the words, or hear the music, or grasp what hangs in the balance. We are left on the lovely stoop, permanently on the verge of figuring it all out.

Many curators and art historians seeking a clearer view of Vermeer have found the path similarly occluded. Last fall, [a collegial squall](#) blew up between the Rijksmuseum and the National Gallery in Washington over a work being loaned to the show. After two years of study, the [National Gallery announced](#) that it did not believe its *Girl With a Flute* was from Vermeer's hand. The Rijksmuseum [countered](#) with its opinion that the painting was absolutely by Vermeer. The team in Washington mounted a small exhibition with all four (or three) of its Vermeers, along with its two long-dismissed Vermeer fakes for technical comparison, and the high-tech subcutaneous imaging that had prompted its verdict.

The story made above-the-fold news, but questions had long dogged *Girl With a Flute*. Like *Girl With a Red Hat* (also owned by the National Gallery), it is a tiny picture of a young face topped with eccentric headgear, and unusual in being lit from the right and painted on a wood panel. The materials are authentic: wood felled in the mid-17th century and pigments that reflect unique Vermeer choices, such as the gray-green called “green earth.” But whereas *Red Hat* is something of a star (a five-inch detail from it fills a two-story banner on the Rijksmuseum’s facade), the flute girl is coarse in texture and clumsy in execution—her hands puttylike, her face flat, her cheek sunburned rather than flushed.



Left: Woman With a Pearl Necklace (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Gemäldegalerie). *Right: Girl With a Flute*, attributed to Vermeer in the Rijksmuseum exhibit, and to the “studio of Johannes Vermeer” by the National Gallery in Washington, D.C., which owns it (National Gallery of Art, Widener Collection)

The National Gallery team, led by the curator Marjorie Wieseman, concluded that the picture had been painted by someone with access to Vermeer’s means and methods, but without his skill—a student, an associate, or a family member—and labeled it as coming from the “studio of Johannes Vermeer.” In Amsterdam, Roelofs had a different explanation: It was a “practice piece, clearly not intended for the market,” that showed Vermeer testing ideas that would eventually deliver *Girl With a Pearl Earring*. In the exhibition, both *Red Hat* and *Flute* are described as “experimental studies,” and the latter is labeled, with some nuance, “Attributed here to Johannes Vermeer.”

Squabbles over attributions are not rare. The [Rembrandt Research Project](#) spent almost half a century trying to reach consensus on that artist’s oeuvre, with mixed results. And if we were talking about Rembrandt, with his muddle of students, imitators, and uncompleted projects, the current disagreement might be greeted with a collective shrug. The problem with

Vermeer is that we don't know of other "practice pieces," and there is no evidence of the painter having shared his studio.

Vermeer led a short life (by our standards) in a small city and left only the faintest footprint in the archival record. Most of what we know was not uncovered until the 1980s, when the economist John Michael Montias [scoured municipal archives](#) around the country for documents, building a social and economic framework for Vermeer's life. But as Montias acknowledged, such legal and financial records mark merely the points where the individual intersects with officialdom. They have little to say about internal life.

After Vermeer's baptism as a Protestant in 1632, the trail goes cold for 21 years, until he wed the daughter of a well-heeled Catholic family. Catholicism was illegal, but enforcement was sporadic, and Vermeer almost certainly converted. (Most of the couple's 14 or 15 children were named for saints, including the overtly Jesuitical Ignatius.) Elected to a leadership position in the artists' guild of Saint Luke, he was clearly respected. An elegy for the painter Carel Fabritius, killed when Delft's gunpowder magazine exploded, named Vermeer as the phoenix who rose from the fire. Two art connoisseurs left mention of visiting him in Delft—one used the words *excellent* and *celebrated*; the other complained of high prices. But unlike his peers who moved from town to town chasing market opportunities, Vermeer stayed put, selling much of what he made to a local patron. His biggest relocation seems to have been from his father's inn to his mother-in-law's house, a distance of some 100 yards. He was financially undone by the consequences of the 1672 French invasion—the disaster that helped kill the golden age itself. No longer able to support his huge family, as his widow later explained, he fell into "a frenzy," and "in a day or a day and a half he had gone from being healthy to being dead." He was 43.

He left no letters or diaries. We don't know what he thought, or how he felt, or what he hoped his art might achieve. We don't know where he learned to paint, nor can we be certain what he looked like. We don't know who the people in his paintings are (though most experts suspect they include family members). It is certainly possible that he left unfinished practice pieces kicking around his studio, and/or that one of his older children [took up a brush with him](#). Or not.

Read: Did Johannes Vermeer's daughter paint some of his best-known works?

When the first great account of Dutch painting was published, four decades after his death, Vermeer was mentioned only in passing; an update in 1750 omitted him entirely. His paintings continued to be bought and sold, but the origins of many were forgotten or reassigned to names better known. (The existence of other painters named J. Vermeer in Utrecht and Haarlem did not help.) When August III of Saxony acquired *Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window* in 1742, he thought he was getting a Rembrandt. *The Music Lesson* went to King George III as a Frans van Mieris, and *Young Woman With a Water Pitcher* changed hands as a Gabriël Metsu. All were admired, but in the absence of photography, easy travel, and public museums, few people had a mental category for “Vermeer of Delft” with which to join them up.

In 1822, however, *View of Delft* was bought for the newly public collection at the Mauritshuis. Then, as now, the painting was an astonishment. Stretched between scudding clouds and penumbral water, a strip of red-brick town lies in shadow, but a distant church tower gleams in broken light, while another shaft warms a clutch of tiny people waiting for a barge. The evocation of fitful sun after a morning shower is uncanny and palliative. (During the pandemic, people could book one-on-one appointments with the painting.) The Dutch term for *mild weather* is *zacht* (“soft”), and both clouds and water dissipate gently into adjacent hues, though the boat hulls and masonry twinkle as if scattered with sequins. One hundred years after its Mauritshuis debut, Marcel Proust pronounced *View of Delft* “the most beautiful painting in the world.”

A man leans over a map with calipers. A woman cocks her head, listening as she tunes a lute. Again and again, our attention is directed to the act of paying attention.

By that time, Vermeer’s genius was ranked second only to Rembrandt’s, and his paintings were the cherished booty of robber barons. (Henry Clay Frick [owned three](#).) Credit for this turnaround generally goes to the mid-19th-century critic Théophile Thoré-Bürger, who, having seen *View of Delft*, devoted himself to rediscovering the lost paintings of its creator and reviving

his reputation. He was not alone: Other observers had also begun to recognize a distinct sensibility in certain golden-age paintings—less stagey than Van Mieris, less agitated than Rembrandt, and possessed of focal properties that struck people even then as “photographic.”

In *The Lacemaker*, for example, the threads in the woman’s fingers are hair-thin and sharp, while those that fall into the foreground slip almost to abstraction, like things half-seen out of the corner of your eye. Then there are the distinctive, oversize highlights that dapple Vermeer’s pictures. Called “circles of confusion” in optics, they usually arise from an object being too near to, or far from, the focal point of a lens. Human eyes automatically refocus, recalibrate for light, and flick between near and far, so we usually encounter these effects only in photographs or in the real-time projections of a camera obscura.



The Lacemaker (Musée du Louvre)

Since antiquity, people have known that light passing through a narrow aperture into a darkened room (*camera obscura* in Latin) will project the image of the lit world outside onto the facing surface. The question of whether Vermeer had access to such a device has been argued for decades. Once again, no documentary evidence exists—just the paintings themselves

and the knowledge that his was a time of optical experimentation. Delft painters played with trompe l’oeil, constructed peep boxes, and innovated with perspective. Only a few miles away, the philosopher Baruch Spinoza was [grinding lenses](#) while writing his *Ethics*, and the physicist Christiaan Huygens was grinding lenses to look at the rings of Saturn. Optics was where mathematics met art, and metaphysics met physics. No 17th-century camera obscura survives, but Huygens’s father wrote of his own experience, “It is not possible to describe for you the beauty of it in words: all painting is dead in comparison.” One can imagine that Vermeer would have jumped if an opportunity came his way.

Even if he did have access, however, an optical device was not a shortcut. Physical evidence reveals the laborious development of Vermeer’s paintings. Pinholes in the canvas mark the vanishing points for laying out perspective (a chalk line fixed to the pin could be pulled taut at various angles and snapped to mark lines of recession), and X-rays show him tweaking compositions over time—furnishings appear and disappear, maps and paintings scooch left and right, the watery reflections of Delft stretch and squirm like antsy kids sitting for a school photo. He was not tracing, not even reporting: He was building an architecture more perfect and purposeful than that of daily life. In his picture of the lute tuner, the window mullions, table edge, and map rod all point at her left ear. If you drew an X from corner to corner of the canvas portraying the woman with the balance, the lines would cross exactly where her fingers grip the scale above neatly horizontal, empty pans.

A camera obscura would, however, have offered a profound education for the eye, a guide to evicting the conventions of painting in favor of direct perception—factual, beautiful, and strange. His peers might employ hyperrealistic detail, but what makes Vermeer’s people and things feel so eerily present is the opposite: his strict adherence to what the eye sees from a fixed position, refusing any elaborations from what the mind might happen to know. He can be extraordinarily precise (the location of the black spots on a jacket’s fur trim remains the same in six different paintings), but will flatten a shadow or bit of ribbon with the ruthlessness of Manet. As the painter and art historian Lawrence Gowing put it in 1952, “The conceptual world of names and knowledge is forgotten, nothing concerns him but what is visible, the tone, the wedge of light.”

In 1866, the critic Thoré-Bürger proposed [a list of some 70 Vermeers](#), including more than 20 outdoor views; today the accepted corpus is half that size. A 1935 exhibit at the Museum Boijmans, in Rotterdam, gathered 14 Vermeers, only eight of which are still accepted. Delineating the oeuvre was tricky—without a clear understanding of Vermeer’s achievement, it was hard to know which pictures fit, but without a clear notion of what fit, circumscribing his achievement was impossible. If Thoré-Bürger’s concept of Vermeer as a serious landscape painter seems odd to us now, it was surely no odder than the idea of something as magical as *View of Delft* being a one-off. The current disagreement over *Girl With a Flute* is just the latest instance of trying to square the circle.

As the corpus bulged and thinned, it changed personality. *The Art of Painting*, with its glamorous artist lifting his brush to portray a laurel-crowned model impersonating the muse of history, revealed an epistemic sophistication and intellectual ambition that no one had detected in the bawdy *Procureess* (an early work that may or may not include a self-portrait). The verification of Vermeer signatures found on Italianate paintings of Diana with nymphs, and of Christ in the house of Mary and Martha, forced further adjustments. Had he perhaps studied in Italy?

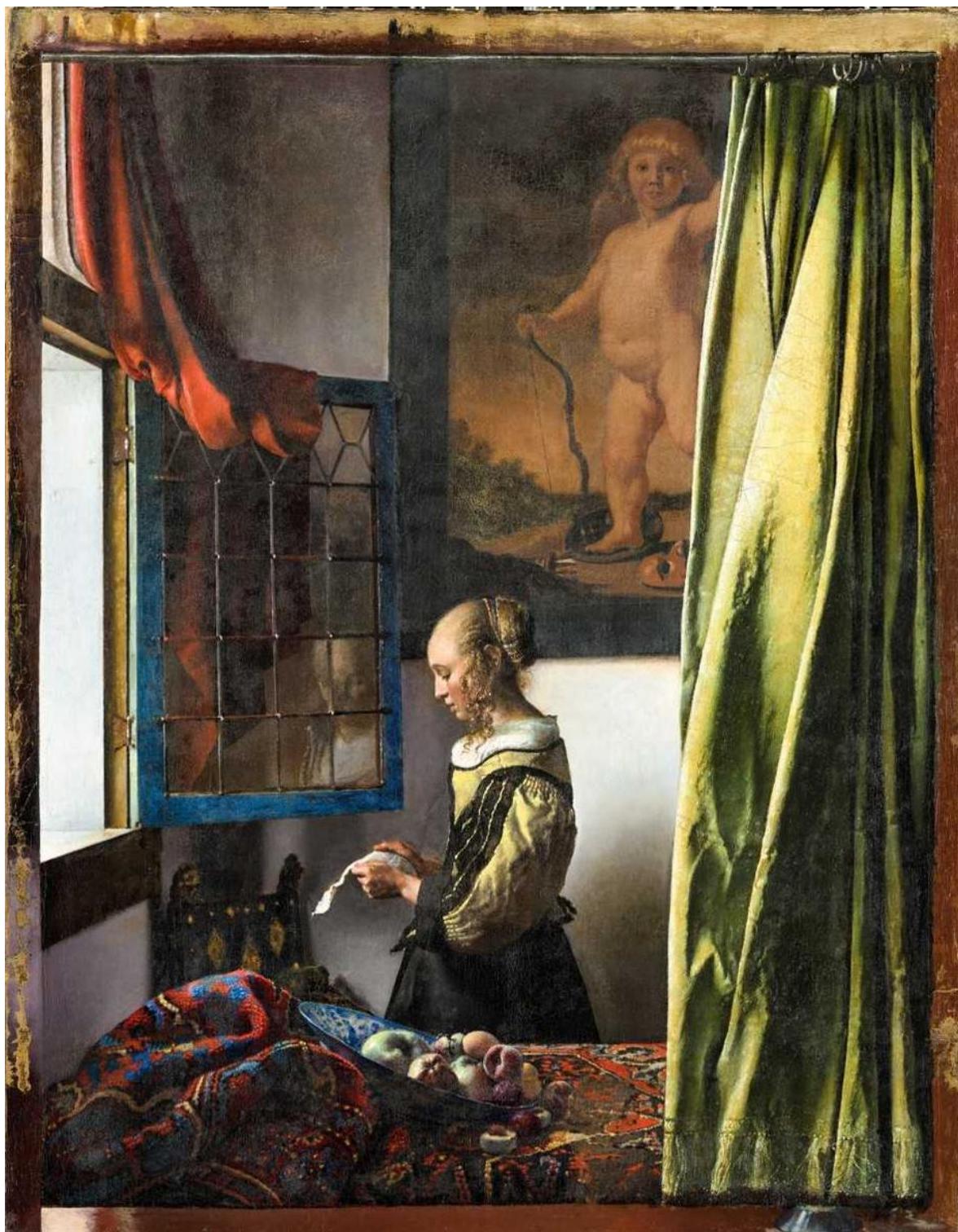
The scandal of Vermeer forgeries serves as a psychological case study in how what we see is shaped by what we want to see, or believe we should see.

In the 1930s, this pliable plotline made Han van Meegeren’s fortune. A frustrated artist who wrote screeds against modernism and inscribed a book of drawings to his “beloved Führer,” van Meegeren had mixed success with forgeries before hitting on a novel strategy: Instead of imitating a known Vermeer style, he would invent an unknown one, and he would get the foremost Vermeer expert, Abraham Bredius, [to authenticate it](#).

He picked a biblical subject popular in Italy, Christ at the supper in Emmaus, and arranged chunky figures around a table laid with speckled bread and a white jug borrowed from Vermeer interiors. He ground historically accurate pigments and applied them over a real 17th-century painting to ensure that even the back of the canvas passed muster. (The materials in *The Supper at Emmaus* were not proved wrong until 1967, when the decay of isotopes in

the lead-white pigment was measured.) The anatomy is nonsensical, the faces catatonic, the space cramped and unconvincing, but to Bredius, who believed there must be a missing link between Vermeer's Italianate dramatics and his homey Dutch scenes, it was "*the masterpiece of Johannes Vermeer of Delft.*" Unveiled at the Museum Boijmans in 1938, it inspired raptures: The serving maid, one eminent art historian opined, was "the most beautiful ever painted by Vermeer."

A similar *Last Supper* soon appeared, followed, during the chaotic war years, by a steady trickle of works escalating in awfulness. It is hard to pick, but the nadir of the forgeries may be *The Washing of Christ's Feet*, which, apart from another Vermeerish white jug, might be decor from a zombie-themed tiki bar. (Almost inexplicably, this last was purchased for the Rijksmuseum. Nobody on the purchase committee liked it, and one member denounced it as a fake, but "we were afraid it would go to Germany," another recalled.) The scheme crashed in 1945, when van Meegeren was arrested for his part in selling a "Vermeer" to Hermann Göring. Because the punishment for forgery was lighter than that for collaboration, he fessed up, proving his guilt as a forger, and thereby his innocence as a Nazi collaborator, by painting a smarmy *Jesus Among the Doctors* while in detention.



Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window (Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister)

The scandal has stood ever since as a psychological case study in how what we see is shaped by what we want to see, or believe we should see. Preload

the viewing experience with the name of an unfamiliar artist and most of us go passive, waiting for the artwork to prove its worth. Call it a Vermeer, and people are inclined to work at finding the brilliance they expect to find.

The precision with which contemporary museums' science departments can identify and date materials and methods is a great boon in ferreting out fakes, but as *Girl With a Flute* demonstrates, something can be made of the right stuff and still be iffy. Machine-learning systems have the [potential to evade some of the human failings](#) that plague attributions, but they are hampered by the same limitation we are: the need for a large, correctly labeled data set to train on—just what we lack in the case of Vermeer.

The last “new” Vermeer was identified in the 1960s (a copy of a minor Italian painting of an obscure saint). Today the action in scientific research takes place beneath the surfaces of known paintings, and it too has the ability to reshape our understanding of the artist. In the run-up to the current exhibition, the National Gallery, Rijksmuseum, and Mauritshuis showed that, contrary to assumptions about Vermeer’s slow and meticulous craftsmanship, the first marks on his canvases are swift and loose, and bear traces of a drying agent that hint at impatience.

More dramatically, restorers in Dresden discovered that the white paint [eradicating a naked Cupid](#) on the wall of *Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window* had not been applied by Vermeer, as had been supposed, but by some later bowdlerizer. Removing the paint transformed a treasured archetype of quiet reverie into something much more rambunctious. Cupid not only says things about the letter; his raised hand coincides with the trompe l’oeil curtain in a way that suggests he is drawing it back for us, weaving games of illusion and visibility into the story. He looks at us; we look at the girl and her reflection in the window glass; she looks at the letter, a marker for people and places out of view. Attention ricochets around the room. The notion of Vermeer as the poet of serenity took a hit.

One reason we keep missing the mark is that Vermeer’s era straddled two quite different ideas of what painting might be—the old one of religious and mythological allusions to be untangled, and the proto-modern one of a reflection of personal experience. The Dutch populace was still reflexively religious, but also eager for pictures of its immediate world. It liked high-

minded art with messages about piety and proper conduct, and it also liked still lifes, landscapes, and scenes of regular people doing regular things. Not infrequently, it liked them both on the same canvas.

Thus Gabriël Metsu's tender picture of a mother cradling her sick child uses Dutch people in a plain room with an aged wall map, but arranges them as a pietà. A bout of iconoclasm in 1566 stripped Dutch churches of their religious art, but books with pithy word-and-image emblems gave painters a ready-made vocabulary of moralizing memes: virtuous women churning butter, foolish ones asleep at the table, etc.

Vermeer certainly played this game (the *Last Judgment* that hangs behind the woman with the balance is no accident), and scholars have dutifully scrutinized the objects and actions in his paintings for messages, though with ambiguous results. (Is the bordello scene behind the elegant girl at a virginal meant as a contrast to her character or as clarification of her employment?)

Others have taken a biographical approach, reading his models and settings as clues to a life lived. Many of the props we see in the paintings do appear in the inventory drawn up after his death, but the compositions are clearly staged inventions. Knowing the artist of the bordello scene (Dirck van Baburen) and who owned it (Vermeer's mother-in-law) hasn't gotten us much closer to knowing why he paired it with the young virginal player.

Rozemarijn Landsman's recent book, *Vermeer's Maps*, digs into the maps' technical histories and political implications as well as their personal connections. (The Frick Collection's planned exhibition on the subject was a casualty of the pandemic.) She also points out that such a study is possible only because of the peculiar—indeed, singular—care he took in their depiction. The map in Metsu's *The Sick Child* is little more than a tan rectangle, but Vermeer's maps can be identified not just by geographic subject, but by their makers, dates, editions, and condition. This loyalty to the observed universe, the [art historian Svetlana Alpers argues](#), constituted a new kind of meaning in itself, an assertion of visual experience as the gateway to knowledge.

The latest addition to the menu of interpretive options comes from the Rijksmuseum co-curator Gregor J. M. Weber, who contends that, far from

being a Catholic of convenience, Vermeer was deeply engaged with Jesuit thinking about natural science, optics, and faith. (Weber's research so outgrew the exhibition catalog that it occasioned a separate book.) Huygens and Spinoza may have been just a few miles away, but the Jesuit mission in Delft was feet from Vermeer's door. Weber has further identified a drawing by a Delft-based priest, Isaac van der Mye, as the probable product of a camera obscura, and notes that Van der Mye died in 1656, the year that lens-linked effects begin to show up on Vermeer canvases. Did the device end up in Vermeer's hands? "It remains a theory," Weber acknowledges. "But things do fall together nicely."

The show closes with a curious trio of paintings—two of the most numinous of Vermeer's career and, between them, the unloved *Allegory of the Catholic Faith*. Even Abraham Bredius, who owned it, described the *Allegory* as "large but unpleasant." Its divalike central figure clutches her breast and rolls her eyes amid a clutter of Christian symbols—apple and snake, crucifix and chalice, and, more enigmatically, a clear glass sphere that dangles from the ceiling on a blue ribbon. Vermeer seems to have borrowed this conceit—a ball that holds nothing but reflects everything—from a Jesuit emblem book, where it is accompanied by the motto "*Capit quod non capit*" ("It grasps that which it cannot grasp").

On either side of this overwrought effort are two pictures of standing women, each facing a wall whose surface is interrupted by a window and a small mirror. On the right, the *Woman Holding a Balance*, with her blue jacket, white scarf, and apparent baby bump, carries obvious intimations of the Virgin. Ignoring both the mirror and the curtained window, she contemplates her perfectly aligned scales with seraphic equanimity.

On the left, the *Woman With a Pearl Necklace*, luminous in a yellow fur-trimmed jacket, lifts her chin as she pulls on the ribbons of her choker, a rapt expression on her face. The wall behind her, which X-rays tell us once held a map, now bears only the gradient of window light fading into shadow. Positioned opposite the stretch of wall between the mirror and the window, she might be looking at either. Nor is it really clear whether the ribbon is being tied or untied. Read the scene one way, and it portrays a pretty girl dressing up. Read it the other way, and she has paused to see the light—perhaps even the light of revelation. If, as is often suggested, the painting is

meant as a warning against vanity, it is a failure: Everything in it—the plaster wall, the pearls, the girl herself—seems imbued with glory. Seldom has there been a more convincing argument for immanence.

Thoré-Bürger famously dubbed his quarry the “Sphinx of Delft,” and the notion of Vermeer as a riddle to be solved has stuck hard. Generations have set off in search of the presumed key to the presumed mystery, as if the paintings were two-dimensional escape rooms. Yet here we still are.

I cannot say what Vermeer had in mind when he made any of his paintings, but standing at the Rijksmuseum between *Necklace* and *Balance*, I saw neither the haziness of mystery nor the cleverness of a riddle, but the beauty and precision of paradox: not the mirror or the window, but the mirror and the window, the material and the immaterial, the instant of passing sun and the endlessness of light itself. This world and that one. *Capit quod non capit.*

This article appears in the [May 2023](#) print edition with the headline “How to Look at a Vermeer.” 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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| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

Dispatches

- [**The Myth of the Broke Millennial**](#)
 - [**Street Photography From '80s and '90s New York**](#)
-

The Myth of the Broke Millennial

After a rough start, the generation is thriving. Why doesn't it feel that way?

by Jean M. Twenge



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“Millennials are many things, but above all, they are murderers,” *Mashable* noted in 2017, introducing [a list of 70 items](#) and institutions that Millennials were purported to have “killed,” including napkins, breakfast cereal, department stores, the 9-to-5 workday, and marriage. The list was tongue-in-

cheek—the cereal aisle persists—but it captured something essential about a generation that has reshaped old habits of American life.

Even amid this slaughter of tradition, Millennials are best known for another characteristic: how broke they are. Millennials, it's often said, are the [first American generation](#) that will do worse than its parents financially.

Pick up a book on Millennials, or wander into a discussion about them online, and this theme pops up again and again: The once-optimistic children of the 1980s and early '90s are now wheezing under the [burden of college debt](#), too poor to buy houses or start families, sucker punched by a [hostile economy](#) that bears no resemblance to the one their parents enjoyed as young adults.

“We’re only now starting to grasp the degree to which we have gotten screwed,” Jill Filipovic wrote in her 2020 book, [OK Boomer, Let’s Talk: How My Generation Got Left Behind](#), “and we’re responding with desperation and sometimes anger.” The famous rebuke that Filipovic takes as the book’s title isn’t mere snark, she writes; it’s “a final, frustrated dismissal from people suffering years of political and economic neglect.” In a Morning Consult [poll](#) last year, 45 percent of Millennials, compared with 35 percent of all adults, agreed with the statement “Because of my money situation, I will never have the things I want in life.” Fifty-two percent of Millennials said they were concerned that “the money I have or will save won’t last.”

By 2019, households headed by Millennials were making considerably more money than those headed by Boomers and Gen Xers at the same age.

The mythology of the generation begins with the participation trophies and limitless expectations granted to its members in childhood by parents and teachers newly eager to build self-esteem. (I wrote about the implications of that approach in my 2006 book, [Generation Me](#).) But the story is centered on the [wreckage of the Great Recession](#), when those youthful expectations violently collided with the worst financial crisis in nearly a century. The sense of betrayal in *OK Boomer* and other writings is both palpable and understandable. If anything, it only seems to have hardened over time.

Impressions of generations tend to form early, and they often get cast in amber. As a scholar of generations, I'm well aware of that. But even I was surprised when I returned to my study of Millennials to look at the generation as it [enters middle age](#).

The surprise was this: Millennials, as a group, are not broke—they are, in fact, thriving economically. That wasn't true a decade ago, and prosperity within the generation today is not evenly shared. But since the mid-2010s, Millennials on the whole have made a breathtaking financial comeback.

This is terrific news. And yet it's not all good news, because the belief that Millennials have been excluded from the implicit promises that America makes to its people—a house for most, middle-class security, a better life than your parents had—remains predominant in society and, to go by surveys and the tenor of social media, among Millennials themselves.

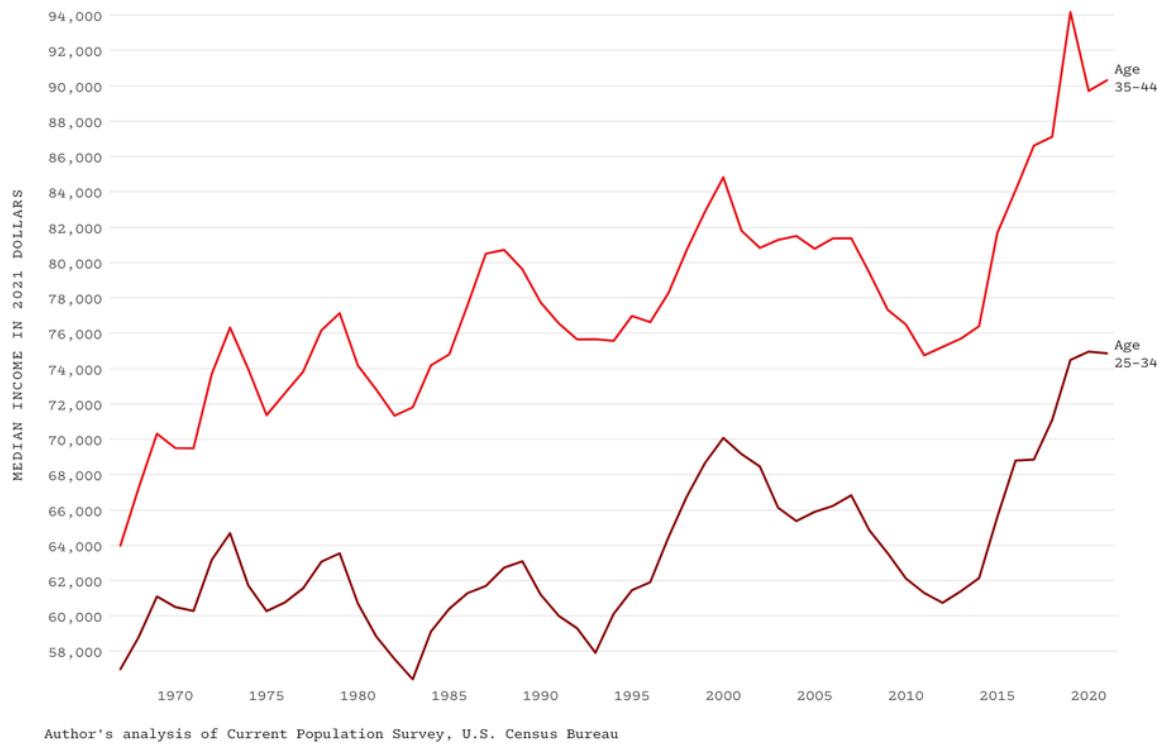
That prompts a question with implications for the cultural and political future of the United States, a country premised, to a large extent, on the idea of material progress: What if the American dream is still alive, but no one believes it to be?

The Highest Incomes Ever

The Great Recession of 2008 was hard on American incomes, especially those of [young Millennials](#) (born roughly between 1980 and 1994), who were just entering the job market. By 2012, the median household income of 25-to-34-year-olds had dropped 13 percent from its peak in 2000. But the mid-2010s saw the beginnings of a turnaround that has continued ever since. By 2019, households headed by Millennials were making considerably more money than those headed by the Silent Generation, Baby Boomers, and Generation X at the same age, after adjusting for inflation. That year, according to the Current Population Survey, administered by the U.S. Census Bureau, income for the median Millennial household was about \$9,000 higher than that of the median Gen X household at the same age, and about \$10,000 more than the median Boomer household, in 2019 dollars. The coronavirus pandemic didn't meaningfully change this story: Household incomes of 25-to-44-year-olds were at historic highs in 2021, the most recent year for which data are available. Median incomes for these

households have generally risen since 1967, albeit with some significant dips and plateaus. And like each generation that came before, Millennials have benefited from that upward trend.

Household Income



Household income is only one lens, but individual income shows largely the same thing. Booms and recessions push incomes up and down, but although many media stories have tended to associate Millennials almost exclusively with the latter, they've now experienced both, and in a big way: Increases in income since 2014 have been steep.

In this, Millennials trace a pattern similar to the Gen Xers before them. Early Gen Xers, too, entered the job market [during a recession](#), and the generation was subject to dire predictions about its economic future (one 1995 book, *Welcome to the Jungle*, by Geoffrey T. Holtz, described Gen X as the “Impoverished Generation”). But those predictions didn’t hold up after the economy rebounded later in the ’90s. The Great Recession was no doubt a more harrowing experience for young adults than the recession Gen X faced, but the income stagnation that followed it nonetheless lasted only a few years. Over the past half century, the [longest period](#) of falling or stagnant

wages was from the '70s to the mid-'90s, when Boomers were young workers. My point is not that Millennials should consider themselves fortunate—I don't believe that—but rather that economic prospects can change greatly as a generation ages, and especially as it reaches its peak earning years.

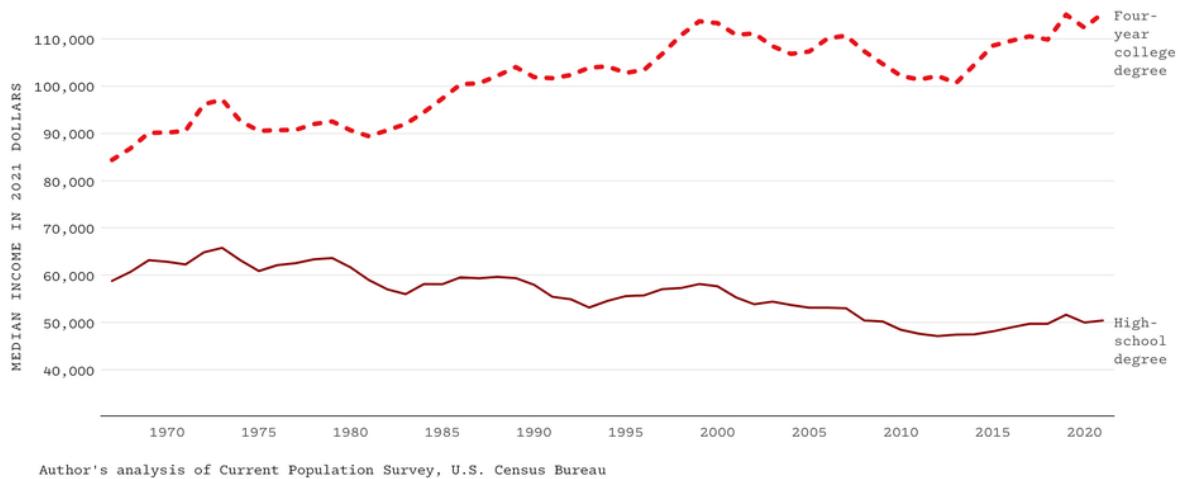
The Millennial income rebound has been broad as well as steep. The income of young adults across racial groups has risen since 2014. By my analysis, Black and Latino Americans ages 25 to 44 in 2021 were making more money than Black and Latino Silents, Boomers, and Gen Xers at the same age. The U.S. is not without economic inequities, many of them racial. But Black and Latino Millennials are not falling behind previous generations when it comes to their income. Instead, most are getting ahead.

Two groups have not outpaced the generations that came before: men and people with less education. Millennial men, on average, have not seen the income increases that Millennial women have (more on that later)—a divergence at least partly explained by the [growing gap](#) in educational attainment between men and women. And overall, the median income of Americans with a four-year college degree has steadily risen while the income of those with only a high-school degree has fallen. This trend is [not new](#), though it is troubling.

[From the September 2017 issue: Jean M. Twenge on smartphones and the post-Millennial generation's mental health](#)

Yet there are also far fewer high-school-only graduates among Millennials than among previous generations, and many more with a college degree. Millennials are the first American generation in which more than one out of three had a four-year college degree by their late 20s, up from one out of four when Gen Xers were in that age bracket. And two out of three Millennials have attended college for at least a year.

Household Income by Education



Author's analysis of Current Population Survey, U.S. Census Bureau

That has enabled more people to move into higher income brackets, and is one of the main reasons Millennials are doing relatively well financially. But even the story of the generation's have-nots is complicated, and hardly Dickensian. The least fortunate members of the Millennial generation seem better protected economically than those of prior generations: Fewer Millennials were in poverty in 2019 than were Boomers and Gen Xers at the same age (in 1987 and 2004, years in which the economy was likewise strong). For all the talk of America's tattered social safety net, that net has in some ways been reinforced since Millennials became adults. The Affordable Care Act extended health-care coverage, and federal-government support during the pandemic actually caused poverty to fall in 2020 and 2021, once you account for that support. Whether because of federal social policy, minimum-wage increases in some states, or other factors, poverty is not any more common among Millennials today than it was among previous generations.

A Generation of Homeowners

A house is perhaps the most tangible embodiment of the American dream. Millennials' housing woes have featured prominently in media accounts of the generation's economic (and life) problems. "There should be a Millennial edition of Monopoly where you just walk around the board paying rent, never able to buy anything," a Twitter comedian who goes by "Mutable Joe" joked in 2016. *BuzzFeed* ran a story last year on 24 "ways Millennials became homeowners," filled with decidedly *sui generis*

anecdotes. One described someone who'd been hit by a truck and won a lawsuit, covering their down payment. Short of getting concussed by a semi, the article suggested, Millennials had little chance of becoming homeowners.

But contrary to that narrative, Millennials' homeownership rates in 2020 were only slightly behind Boomers' and Gen Xers' at the same age: 50 percent of Boomers owned their own home as 25-to-39-year-olds, compared with 48 percent of Millennials, hardly a difference deserving of headlines or social-media memes.

Millennials have not been economically unlucky when it comes to homeownership. If anything, the reverse is true.

Both house prices and mortgage rates are [higher now](#) than in 2020. That's bad news for Millennials who haven't yet bought a house but want to do so soon. Nonetheless, many older Millennial homeowners got great deals on their most important purchase, having passed into their 30s during the early 2010s, one of the most [fortuitous](#) times to buy a house in recent memory. It was Gen Xers, by and large, who were in their prime home-buying years as the great housing bubble of the aughts inflated, and who went [underwater](#) when that bubble popped. People who bought a house in 2005, for instance, saw their home's value plummet 21 percent over six years, on average, and not regain its purchase price until 2014. Older Millennials, in contrast, were buying into a depressed market that subsequently rebounded; houses bought in 2011, for instance, appreciated 40 percent over the next six years. Almost everyone who bought a house in the U.S. before 2019 saw its value [shoot up](#) during the pandemic years. And until the past year, just about all Millennial home buyers were able to lock in mortgage interest rates that were at [historic lows](#).

[Read: The next generation of NIMBYs](#)

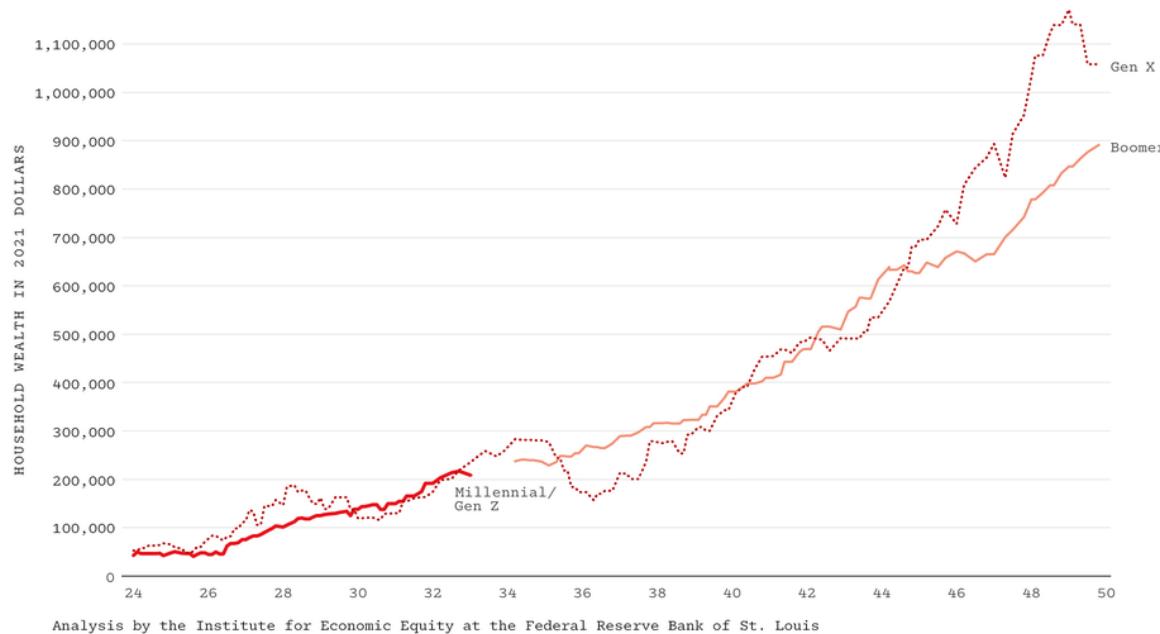
These are national figures, and the picture will vary from place to place. (Housing has [not been a bargain](#) in New York City, for instance, where a very [large number](#) of Millennial journalists live.) But on the whole, Millennials have not been economically unlucky as to homeownership—if anything, the reverse is true.

Closing the Wealth Gap

Between the toll that the Great Recession took on Millennials' early careers and the college-loan debt that many of them carry, one might expect this generation to be living more precariously than previous ones, with little financial cushion.

And there's at least some truth to that. The Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis made [big headlines](#) in 2018 when it announced that among families headed by people born in the 1980s (older Millennials), median wealth was 34 percent lower than what you'd expect based on the wealth of previous generations at the same age. The [report](#), which analyzed data through 2016, theorized that Millennials might be a "lost generation" when it came to wealth.

Average Real Wealth by Generational Age



But when the St. Louis Fed [updated its analysis](#) of Millennial wealth a few years later, using 2019 data, it found significant progress. By then, older Millennials lagged only 11 percent behind previous generations at the same age. That progress was [uneven](#): The gap was larger for Millennials without a college degree (19 percent) and even more so for Black Millennials (50 percent). Younger Millennials (born in the '90s and still in their mid-20s at

the time) also faced a bigger gap. Still, since 2019, both housing and the stock market have [increased in value](#), last year's swoon notwithstanding. [Recent analysis](#) by the Fed, including data through the middle of 2022, has shown average Millennial wealth to be neck and neck with the wealth of Gen X at the same age.

Does debt alter this picture? Millennials are without a doubt [more heavily burdened](#) by college loans than previous generations. Black Millennials are [particularly likely](#) to carry heavy student-loan balances. But again, the Fed's analysis already takes that into account: Its wealth figures net out college loans and other debts.

Even the wealth gap that exists today may mean less than it first appears to. Because more Millennials went to college and graduate school, they started their careers later, on average, than Boomers and Gen Xers did. On those grounds alone, one would expect a lag in wealth building. But more education typically means higher lifetime earnings—and thus stronger savings potential as the years go by. Many Millennials are just entering their peak earning years and have more earning power than the generations before them.

Meanwhile, the long trend in American life spans has generally been upward. The high-wage manufacturing jobs that Boomers could count on right out of high school also tended to take a toll on the body over time; the shift toward services and office work enables longer career tails. As the saying goes, 60 is the new 50, and this will benefit Millennials in myriad ways.

The New Economics of Family

“I see ‘Millennials Aren’t Having Babies’ is making the rounds again,” [tweeted](#) “pokey pup,” a self-identified Millennial, in November 2021. “No one is getting paid enough, there’s not adequate maternity leave, no one can afford hospital bills, most of us can’t afford a house—like what did you think would happen?” The tweet got more than 120,000 likes and more than 25,000 retweets.

Although Millennials' economic outlook isn't so dire as many social-media posts would suggest, something is clearly holding Millennials back from having children—and finances are, indirectly, at least a plausible culprit.

[From the July/August 2013 issue: Jean M. Twenge on how long you can wait to have a baby](#)

As high-school seniors, 95 percent of Millennials said they wanted at least one child. Four out of 10 said they wanted three or more. Those desires have persisted. In the 2018 General Social Survey of adults, Millennials' average ideal number of children was 2.6. Yet total fertility—the estimated number of children a woman will have in her lifetime based on the year's births—was just 1.66 in 2021.

Family income itself doesn't seem to be to blame—after all, Millennials' incomes are higher than those of previous generations. But the pattern of income—particularly the split between men and women—may play a role.

Millennial women's incomes are much higher than the incomes of women of previous generations, a result of both higher wages and more hours worked. In 2021, Millennial women ages 35 to 44 made roughly twice as much as Boomer women in 1980, and over 20 percent more than Gen X women in 2005. Women 25 to 34 made similar gains.

Men's incomes, however, have fallen since 1970 (though not nearly as much as women's have risen). The statistics aren't uniform: Men on the higher rungs of the economic ladder have for the most part bucked this trend, and Millennial men's incomes have rebounded from their Great Recession lows. But that may be cold comfort to men making less than their fathers did, especially those who don't live (and share expenses) with women—even though men still make more than women on average.

These rapidly changing income dynamics also affect Millennial families. For heterosexual couples, if the woman quits her job when children arrive, the family will lose considerably more income than two-earner families did in past generations. If the man quits, the typical family will lose more than half its income. And if both parents keep their job, the couple must find child care—the price of which has far outpaced inflation as more and more

parents have sought it. In most states, child care [costs more](#) than a year of college at a state university, and sometimes more than housing.

The balancing act between salaries and child care might be one reason Millennials are having fewer children, and also why some Millennials feel they are not doing as well as their parents. In a 2018 [poll](#) by *The New York Times*, 64 percent of young adults who said they expected to have fewer children than their ideal named “child care is too expensive” as the reason.

Still, this argument shouldn’t be taken too far. If Millennials need to spend [more income on child care](#) than previous generations did, they also need to spend less on many other things. After accounting for inflation, the prices of cars, clothing, furniture, toys, and electronics have all fallen in recent decades. These are not, for the most part, minor line items in a family budget —or at least they weren’t in, say, the 1980s.

The link between family finances and having kids is also weaker than you might think. On average, families with more income actually have fewer kids; those with less income have more kids. A recent [paper](#) by the economists Melissa S. Kearney, Phillip B. Levine, and Luke Pardue showed that states with bigger increases in child-care costs have not seen steeper declines in birth rates—and found, more broadly, that economic factors were not the major driver of falling birth rates. Instead, they concluded, albeit speculatively, that “shifting priorities across cohorts of young adults”—that is, generational differences in attitudes—are the primary explanation. Hypothetically, the logic goes, Millennials might want more children, but when they trade off kids versus income, professional success, and other goals, kids get slotted lower than in previous generations.

Why Millennials Still Feel Poor

Every generation faces financial challenges, including some that its parents’ generation did not. Within every generation, there is hardship, and Millennials are no different. But all in all, this is a generation on the cusp of middle age that looks successful, not lost. So why does the idea persist that Millennials have gotten screwed economically? Why is the narrative around Millennials still so negative and sometimes angry?

Incomes and wealth are not just objective numbers—there is a large element of perception involved in whether someone thinks they are doing well.

Human beings are hardwired to care deeply about status, and we assess it in two different ways. At any given moment, we look around to see how we're doing compared with our peers. And we reflect on our own past and future status as well: Are our lives getting better? Are we better off than our parents, and will our children be better off still? Both of these forms of status affect our well-being. A number of factors inherent in modern society may have pushed many Millennials toward a distorted view of each.

Before social media, and before the proliferation of lifestyle and reality TV, the only rich individuals most people encountered were from the particularly well-off families in their town. Now the rich (or at least those who appear to be rich) fill our feeds and our screens, providing a skewed view of how other Americans live. The Kardashians cannot, in fact, be kept up with. Online, everyone else's life looks more glamorous than our own. The resulting sense of "relative deprivation," as it's known among psychologists, no doubt afflicts Americans of all ages—but Millennials have spent their entire adulthood in this milieu, and remain more online than older generations.

Meanwhile, negativity in the news—which, studies show, has become much more pronounced in recent years—has colored perceptions of generational progress. A seemingly endless array of articles and news segments have repeated the idea that Millennials have gotten the shaft economically, an idea that social media amplifies further. (When government economists worry that Millennials might be a "lost generation" as to wealth, it generates news; when they later say that Millennials have greatly narrowed the wealth gap, the coverage is quieter.)

This constant drizzle of grievance and disappointment falls daily on a generation that carried extraordinarily high expectations into adulthood—more than half of Millennials, for example, expected to earn a graduate degree. In a 2011 survey, Millennial teens believed they would make, on average, \$150,000 once they settled into their career—more than four times as much as the median income that year. "There is a profound gap between the expectations we were raised to hold and the reality we now experience," Filipovic writes in *OK Boomer*. Given those expectations, some Millennials'

disappointment with their status and material success might be baked into the cake.

But expectations do change over time, and perceptions adjust. The Fed's 2021 Survey of Household Economics and Decisionmaking showed that a small majority of Millennials, 53 percent, believed they were doing better than their parents at the same age. That hasn't seemed to translate into a more buoyant public discourse, nor to positive views of American capitalism among young adults—in 2021, a Gallup [poll](#) showed that nearly half of all 18-to-34-year-olds had a positive view of socialism, compared with only about a third of those older than 55. But it's encouraging nonetheless.

Whatever one's views of socialism, it matters whether Millennials are doing better or worse than the generations before them—and, more important, whether they believe they are. The erosion of faith in material progress has already reshaped political values and changed the tenor of American culture, and the longer it persists, the more it will continue to do so. Rising prosperity and the optimism that follows carry benefits that extend well beyond material comfort. They make social comparisons less obsessive and, as the economic historian Benjamin M. Friedman observed in his 2006 book, [*The Moral Consequences of Economic Growth*](#), create an environment in which hatreds cool, cooperation becomes easier, and human rights advance more readily.

If Millennials keep doing well economically, the optimism that characterized their childhood and adolescence may eventually return. The scars of a searing start can take time to fade, but they eventually might. And if Millennials' expectations are now lower, they may be pleasantly surprised by their financial success, leading to more contentment in middle age.

Perhaps not long from now, financial pessimism will be talked about as the latest item on the list of things Millennials have killed. That particular murder might be welcome.

This article is adapted from Jean M. Twenge's book [Generations: The Real Differences Between Gen Z, Millennials, Gen X, Boomers, and Silents—And What They Mean for America's Future](#). It appears in the [May 2023](#) print edition with the headline “The Myth of the Broke Millennial.”

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| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

Street Photography From '80s and '90s New York

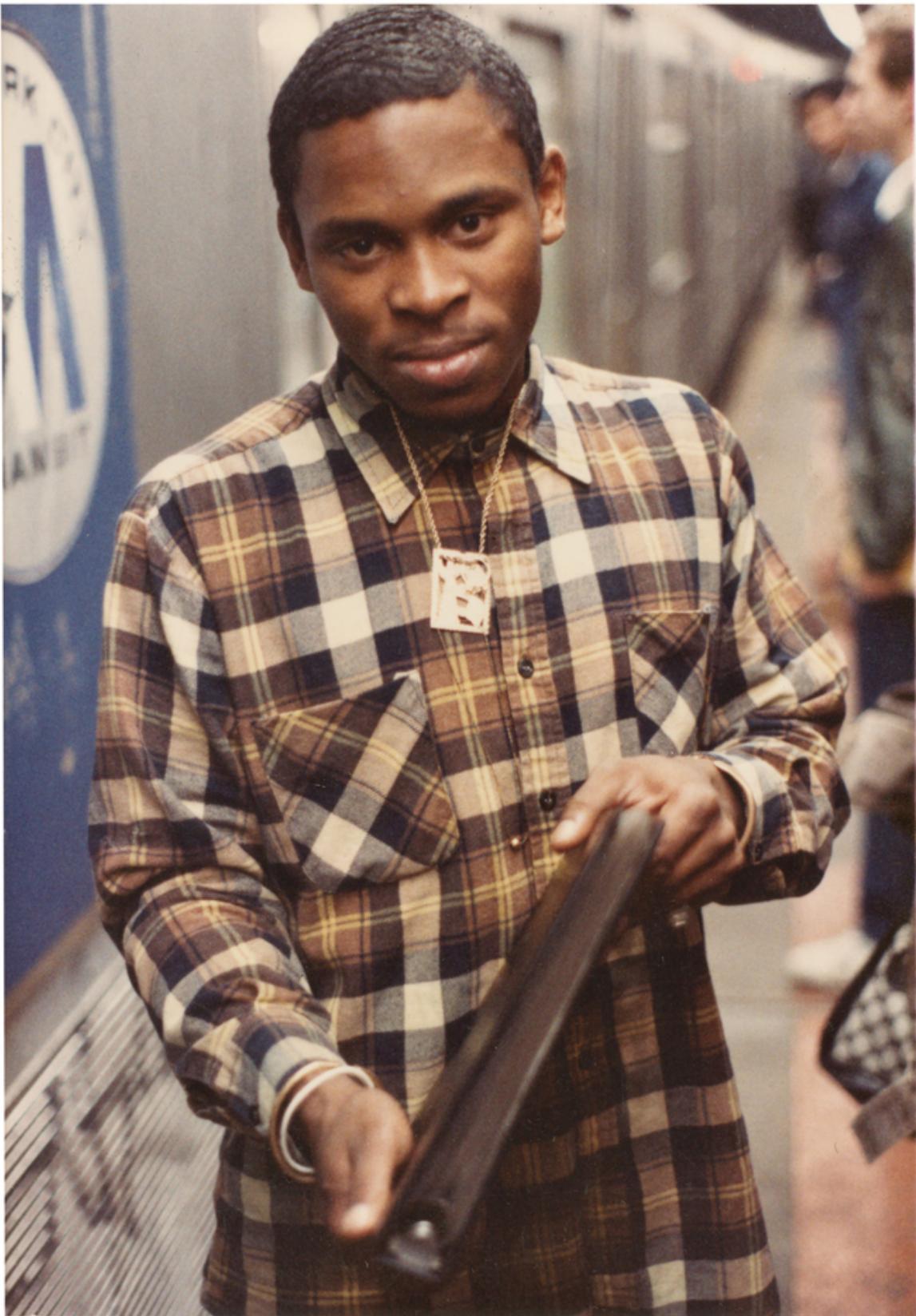
Armed with his camera and a collection of albums, Jamel Shabazz documented Black life in the city.

by Peter L'Official



In 1980, after three years in the U.S. Army, Jamel Shabazz returned home, in his words, “to a war.” “I came home to a situation where a lot of people were dying at the hands of other young people,” he told me. In an era when the crack epidemic and [mass incarceration](#) were tearing families and neighborhoods apart, Shabazz saw photography as a form of “visual

medicine.” Throughout the ’80s and ’90s, he traversed the streets of New York City armed with a 35-mm camera, his business card, a chessboard, and several photo albums, which he would produce to build trust with his subjects by offering evidence of his past work.



The albums were more than just a useful street-side tool; for Shabazz, they were also cherished objects of family heritage. Since the late 1800s, generations of his southern relatives had passed down [treasured household photo albums](#). Shabazz's father, a photographer in the Navy during the 1950s, had transformed their Red Hook, Brooklyn, apartment into a weekend studio and spent hours compiling albums and making collages while his son watched. "All of my uncles had photo albums," Shabazz said. "When I would go to their homes, and my grandfather's house, the first thing I would do was hit the photo album up, because it allowed me to time-travel and get a greater understanding of who they were."

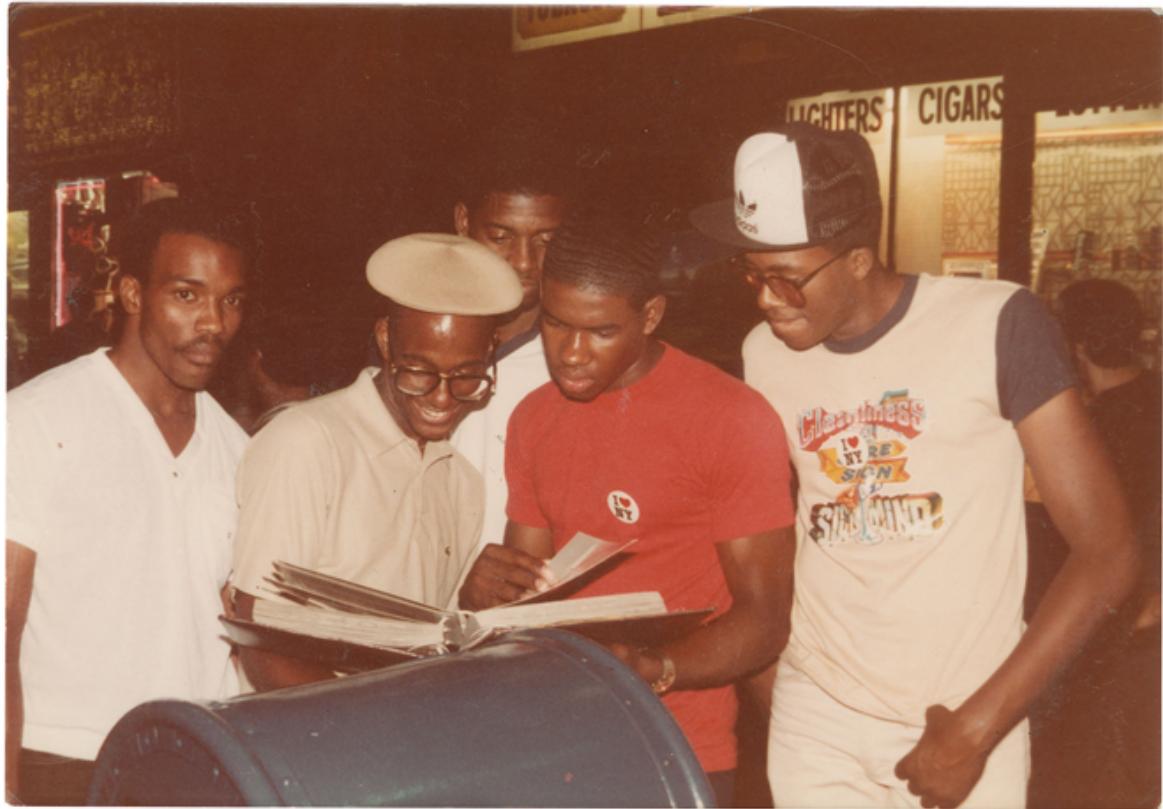
[Read: What ordinary family photos teach us about ourselves](#)





Jamel Shabazz

Shabazz's own photographs captured the young, stylish men and women he met on his walks, at work and at play, posed yet relaxed. The images in a new book, *[Jamel Shabazz: Albums](#)*—presented in a format that allows viewers to experience how his subjects might have first encountered his work—are testament both to these personal rituals and histories and to the improvisational collectives of Black and brown faces that Shabazz so carefully created and preserved, persisting in spite of their precarity.



Jamel Shabazz

This article appears in the [May 2023](#) print edition with the headline “Live Albums.”

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| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

Culture & Critics

- [**Taylor Swift and the Sad Dads**](#)
 - [**The Pornography Paradox**](#)
 - [**'Notice All That Disappears'**](#)
 - [**It's Okay to Like Good Art by Bad People**](#)
-

Taylor Swift and the Sad Dads

On the unlikeliest, most fruitful collaboration in contemporary music

by Spencer Kornhaber



The indie-rock band The National has long served as a mascot for a certain type of guy: literary, self-effacing, mordantly cool. With cryptic lyrics and brooding instrumentation, the quintet of scruffy brothers and schoolmates from Ohio conveys the yearnings of the sensitive male psyche. The band's lead singer, Matt Berninger, has a voice so doleful and deep that it seems to emanate from a cavern. His typical narrator is a wallflower pining for

validation from the life of the party—the romantic swooning of a man in need of rescue.

In the mid-to-late aughts, as The National was gathering acclaim with darkly experimental albums, another artist was rising to prominence: Taylor Swift. On the surface, these two acts are starkly different. Where The National’s songwriting is impressionistic, Swift’s is diaristic—built on personal stories that typically forgo abstraction or even difficult metaphor. Where The National’s charisma lies in its mysteriousness, Swift earnestly says just what she means. The National is known for somber dude-rock; Swift found fame with anthems of heartbroken but upbeat young-womanhood. (In her 2012 hit “We Are Never Ever Getting Back Together,” she even jabbed at pretentious guys who are obsessed with dude-rock, like the ex who ran off to listen to “some indie record that’s much cooler than mine.”) The National became the house band for a certain segment of Millennial yuppies; Swift became one of the biggest stars in the world.

[Read: The National further complicates its sadness](#)

So some listeners have been surprised to see the two emerge, in recent years, as close collaborators. After the pandemic interrupted Swift’s promotional plans for her 2019 album, *Lover*, [she reached out to the multi-instrumentalist Aaron Dessner](#) to help produce two new albums, *Folklore* and *Evermore*, the latter of which featured all five members of The National—whom she called her “favorite band”—in some capacity. The albums easily could have amounted to a credibility-chasing costume change: pop star goes coffee shop. Instead, they refreshed Swift’s style by pairing sophisticated, moody arrangements with a new lyrical approach. Rather than once again mine her own life for lyrics, she imagined fictional scenarios: [a teenage love triangle](#), a murder conspiracy among friends, a romance between two con artists. Swift was availing herself of the freedoms, even imperatives, that men in rock and roll had long enjoyed—projecting moral ambiguity rather than wholesomeness and virtue.

Now it appears that Swift may have pushed the men of The National in new directions too. On the band’s latest album, *First Two Pages of Frankenstein*, out in April, Swift’s influence feels pervasive. It’s not just her voice, which she lends to the lilting track “The Alcott”; she seems to have taught them

something about the mode of candid self-expression that she has mastered. In so doing, The National and Taylor Swift have become one of the unlikeliest and most productive synergies in contemporary music—the cross-pollination of a gloomy indie-rock fraternity and proudly sentimental, stadium-charming pop.

Murky, male-driven art rock tends to encourage the confession of flaws without hope for absolution. Think of Leonard Cohen in “Famous Blue Raincoat,” a self-lacerating mash note to the man who cuckolded him. Or take the mealy-mouthed misery of R.E.M.’s Michael Stipe on “Losing My Religion”: “Oh no, I’ve said too much / I haven’t said enough.” Like his predecessors, Berninger tends to use oblique, figurative language to evoke his own shame and humiliation. “I know you put in the hours to keep me in sunglasses,” he sang on “Secret Meeting” (2005), possibly alluding to the tears he’d shed over a lover and the ways he’d tried to hide them.

But in *First Two Pages of Frankenstein*, the songwriting is tighter and often brighter, and Berninger’s meanings are remarkably direct. On the hopeful-sounding “New Order T-Shirt,” Berninger collages images with his trademark flair, and then, atypically, explains himself in a chorus that Swift herself might have written: “I keep what I can of you / Split-second glimpses and snapshots and sounds.” Over the danceable beat of “Tropic Morning News,” Berninger even tells a tale about learning to share his inner life: “There’s nothing stopping me now / From saying all the painful parts out loud.”

The changes in style reflect a change in substance. Many old National songs are character studies of a morose, hapless man getting nurtured—or dumped—by a competent woman. The trope of wife or girlfriend as mothering savior looms perpetually, even as [Berninger’s humor](#), grounded in the mundane realities of adult relationships, usually undercuts it. “Carin at the Liquor Store”—a 2017 track whose title refers to Berninger’s wife and lyrical co-writer, Carin Besser—sees him mocking his own abjection: “I was a worm, I was a creature … I was walking around like I was the one who found dead John Cheever.”

Taylor Swift seems to have taught The National something about the mode of candid self-expression that she has mastered.

But if The National's signature narrator used to be [a lonely mope](#), here he's no longer wallowing quite so helplessly. On the new album, Berninger sings about being useful to his romantic partners. In the gentle, kind closing track, "Send for Me," he offers: "Send for me whenever wherever / Send for me I'll come and get you." Even the breakup songs are a bit rebalanced. The thundering "Eucalyptus," for example, depicts a couple dividing their belongings. Listening to it is like watching a bout of arm wrestling that's closely matched and oddly poignant. And on the plaintive ballad "Your Mind Is Not Your Friend," he's the one consoling someone whose interior world is—as has been the case for so many of The National's past narrators—an "awful place." The new lucidity of the lyrics thus has a constructive purpose. As Swift's songs have always shown, reaching out to connect with others requires openhearted, straightforward communication—from her outright plea "Baby, just say yes" on the 2008 classic "Love Story" to her simple admission "I'm the problem, it's me" on 2022's "Anti-Hero."

Berninger does seem a little bashful about now acting as a healer. On "Alien," he wryly suggests, "I can be your nurse or something." Nursing, as that "or something" acknowledges, is a role that our culture hasn't exactly shown men how to play. Those who try, in music, tend to overshoot into messianic territory (see Coldplay's "Fix You" or U2's past few albums). In dialing back the misery and adding Swiftian uplift, the new album sometimes flirts with this kind of sappiness. One can almost imagine "Send for Me" as the first dance at a wedding or "Your Mind Is Not Your Friend" in a touching insurance ad.

[Read: The real Taylor Swift would never](#)

But the band guards against cheap inspirationalism by relying on the idiosyncrasies that have defined it all along. Its old motifs—romantic death and rebirth, sad saps saved by realists, drums that burst like flak cannons—now serve a new aim by acting as a reminder that empathy doesn't come easily. Rescuing people can mean coaxing them to share how they really feel—and that process requires psychological struggle. On "Alien," Berninger urges someone to "drop down out of the clouds you're in." A hint of conflict lurks in the line, acknowledging just how bracing such conversations can be. Real breakthroughs, these artists have shown in their work together, come from blunt and open exchange. As Swift and Berninger sing on "The

Alcott": "I tell you my problems / You tell me the truth ... You tell me your problems / And I tell you the truth."

This article appears in the [May 2023](#) print edition with the headline “How Taylor Swift Infiltrated Dude Rock.”

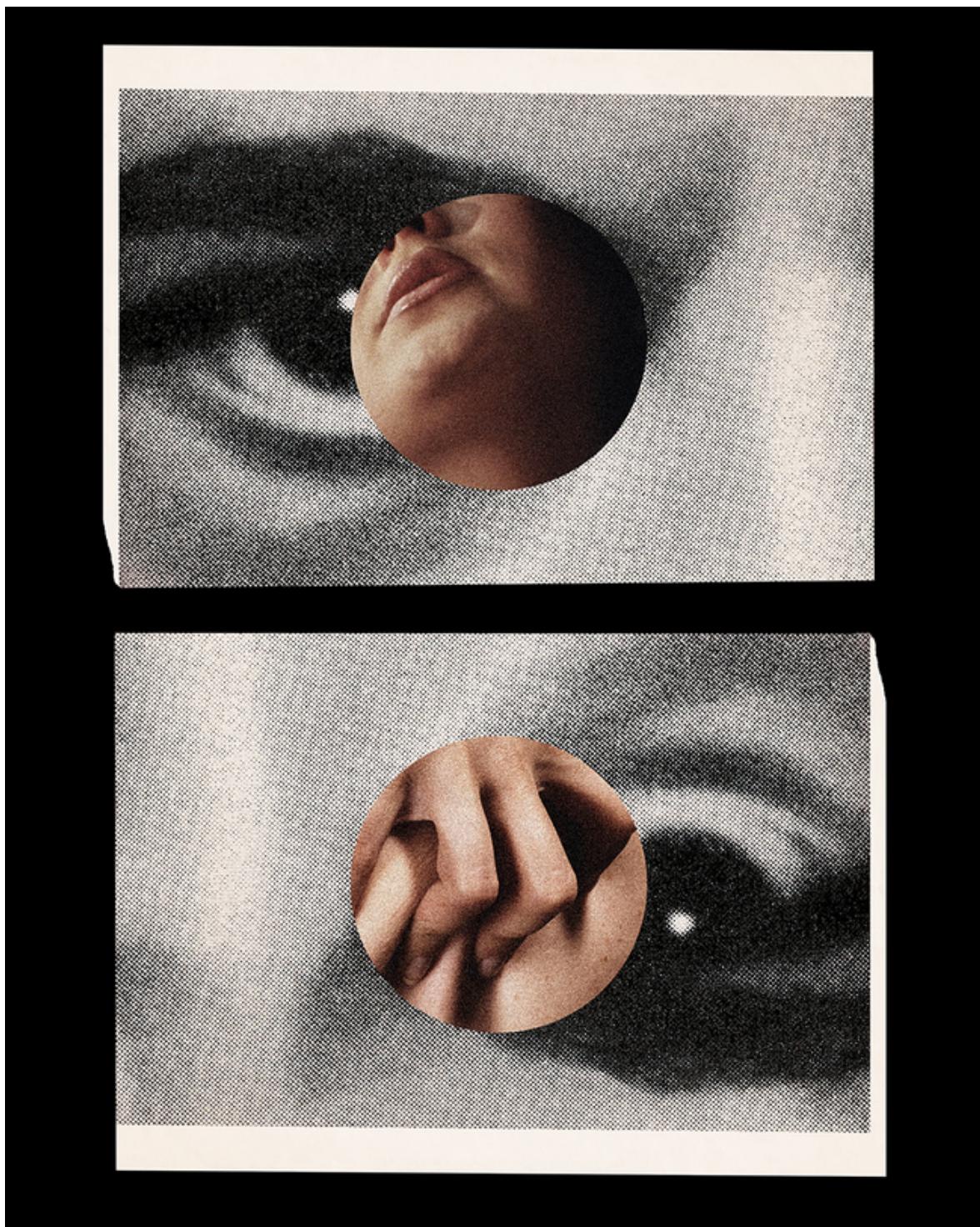
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| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

The Pornography Paradox

Reformers fear that ever more outré sites are warping users' desires. But transgression has always been part of the appeal.

by Laura Kipnis



Content, some say, wants to be free; so, reportedly, do we. At any rate, such conclusions jibe with at least 9 billion visits a month to porn websites and “tubes,” where professionals and amateurs upload sex videos for others to

stream, at any hour we please, at no monetary cost. As many reading this presumably already know. (Not judging.)

Is nonstop free pornography liberating, or is it shackling, leaving us less humanlike than ever? This is one of the contemporary conundrums that the sociologist Kelsy Burke explores in *The Pornography Wars: The Past, Present, and Future of America's Obscene Obsession*. The answer depends on how you define “us,” because those producing the stuff, as is true of other content providers laboring in the digital sweatshops of our time, are barely scraping a living together. Though Pornhub alone gets more visits a month than either Netflix or TikTok, according to one online guide for budding porn entrepreneurs, a video garnering 1 million views will net its producer roughly \$500.

Unlike back in the 1970s and ’80s—the heyday of XXX-rated features with multiday shoots and catering budgets, of ample profits and thriving stars—the new porn economy generates its revenues primarily from ads, accruing to site owners, not performers. The subscription site OnlyFans produces big paydays for a few stars, but elsewhere the story for workers is depressingly familiar, and porn performers are doubly screwed, so to speak. They’re kept busy, as Burke details, creating new content—one-on-one interactions with customers in “camming” sessions, for example—to supplement the content they’re barely being paid for. But even that material often finds its way to free sites.

[Read: Can you be addicted to porn?](#)

Whether ubiquitous pornography degrades or emancipates us, Burke writes, also depends on whom you talk with. She is less interested in porn as such than in the debates that people keep having about it—arguments about the ills of porn consumption that have only grown more polarized since Congress passed the first of many ineffectual curbs on the distribution of obscene material, back in 1842. In her wide-ranging book, Burke hopscotches among porn producers, viewers, activists, and various experts (including the self-appointed). At the core of her project are interviews with a smallish and nonrandom selection of those invested in these battles: 52 people who align themselves with the anti-porn cause, and 38 whom she calls “porn positive.” Approaching her subjects “with curiosity rather than

judgment,” Burke mostly lets their competing views duke it out on the page, challenging myths on both sides while noting where those with divergent beliefs occasionally coincide.

Her anti-porn contingent is largely male, religious, and associated with porn-addiction recovery programs, some as clients, others as clinicians; she also spoke with nonaffiliated proselytizers and activists. Porn does physical and emotional harm to those who watch it, they maintain. Many think that it’s even biologically addictive, snaking its way into our brain and rewiring things. Or that the dopamine system’s response to online porn has the effect of fostering compulsive behavior—scientific-sounding theories abound. Here Burke intervenes to say that she’s found no definitive evidence for such neurobiological claims. But it’s also a thorny question to study under lab conditions, she points out: A subjective topic such as behavioral addiction is “all but impossible” to assess with objective measures like brain scans, and as the sociologist Gabriel Abend observes, the researchers themselves can never be neutral or objective about the morality of human behavior. As to whether we come equipped with hardwired brains dictating that males want to sever sex from romance while females dream of blissfully uniting the two, Burke gives the last word to Cordelia Fine, a psychologist who has spent her career debunking such theories: The word (Fine’s coinage) is *neurosexism*.

Burke’s anti-porn interviewees—a “strange alliance,” she observes, evenly split along lines of political ideology—also include a secular wing of feminists who lean more on arguments about misogyny and the commodification of sex. Women’s pleasure, they say, is left behind or inauthentically performed to please men. Burke again pushes back: This sort of activism rests on what she considers weak grounds—personal distinctions between good and bad sex, and presumptions about “what authentic sexuality for women should look like.”

Even porn-addiction discourse, she astutely observes, reproduces gender inequality. A woman who likes porn is more readily pathologized than a man who likes porn, her taste seen as a sign of past trauma or victimization. Among men, Burke writes, overindulgence in porn is often chalked up to a strong sex drive, and their efforts to kick the habit are seen as proof of triumph over natural urges. In her view, there’s already more than enough shame and penance-seeking to go around.

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Burke focuses in particular on the growing number of Millennial men committed to overcoming “fapping,” an onomatope for masturbation. (A Reddit forum called NoFap has nearly 1 million followers.) Among the book’s eyebrow-raising revelations is how heavily porn-addiction rhetoric, especially the versions emphasizing purity and abstention, figures in white-nationalist and incel online communities, where porn’s ubiquity is blamed on liberals, feminists, socialists, and Jews (interchangeable villains for this crowd). Actually, plenty of liberal feminists and Jewish socialists are no doubt alarmed themselves that porn-watching is replacing the challenges of three-dimensional sex and real-life relationships for generations of young men.

Burke has the gift of being supremely unruffled about even the most incendiary of subjects, including whether children—first exposed to online porn, according to reports, at ages 10 to 15—are being damaged by pornography, a concern that brings her opposing camps closest together. “All the educators, therapists, religious leaders, and activists I interviewed, regardless of their position on porn,” she writes, “agreed that it makes for bad sex education,” especially the free streaming fare to which kids have readiest access. All emphasize the need for better parent-child communication about porn, including the sex worker and sex educator Andre Shakti, even as she also insists that porn is entertainment, not an instruction manual: “We don’t take our kids to see *Fast and the Furious* and then expect them to learn how to drive like Vin Diesel.”

[Crazy/Genius: What is pornography doing to our sex lives?](#)

Anti-porn allies, alarmed by the normalizing of acts, such as facial ejaculation, that teen girls can feel pressure to go along with, endorse a strategy of inculcating the dangers of porn, starting very early (see a “bad picture,” and “turn, run, and tell!”). Some favor removing all electronic devices from children’s bedrooms at night, the digital-age equivalent of Victorians prescribing anti-masturbation gadgets. The “sex positive”

approach, born of concern about dating and sexual violence, encourages “porn literacy” rather than avoidance, guiding parents in discussing the difference between real sex and porn sex with their teens. The progressives and social scientists Burke talks with tend to be realists: Sexually explicit media abound in our society, and porn is hardly the single source of all misogyny and bad sex; the priority should be teaching about consent and context. Conservatives (of both the religious and secular stripes) stress harm: “Pornography gets inside your brain and hurts it,” a Christian-themed picture book for children ages 6 and up instructs.

Among Burke’s “porn positive” interviewees, most of whom are women and secular, the focus in general is less on porn consumption than on the production end of the industry. She speaks with sex workers and activists who bridle at the recent conflation of the anti-porn movement with the anti-trafficking movement, which has meant the conflation of all sex work with trafficking. It reduces consent to an impossibility—a paternalism that Burke balks at too. Meanwhile, activists take issue with credit-card companies’ decision to cut ties with Pornhub, arguing that the move won’t significantly diminish its profits (which come from ads) or reduce the posting of nonconsensual videos; it will, though, directly affect legal and consenting porn performers, many of whom have turned to the internet in search of greater safety and control over their work.

Porn has always been dedicated to taboo-smashing and impropriety, which may be something we rule-saddled humans like about it.

Burke also hears from a feminist pornographer who says that taking control of the camera is a way of reclaiming her own sexuality, and from an industry-reform group that has published a “Performer Bill of Rights” that prioritizes consent. The problem, they themselves acknowledge, is that the “feminist” and “ethical” porn produced by porn progressives ends up as just another niche category on porn sites, jostling for views with “anal” and “Asian.” No one should conclude that the reformists are reshaping the industry: Burke has some pretty horrifying and no doubt all-too-common tales about the ongoing sexual and financial exploitation of young women trying to break into the business; they’re ripe for manipulation by anyone who calls himself a “manager” (whose managerial duties might include casting himself as the male lead in his client’s first film).

Another hitch for those attempting to move “ethically” through the maze of online porn is that [our sexual desires don’t always line up](#) with our values or our politics. A queer feminist sociologist bemoans being less aroused by homegrown feminist porn than by the nasty mainstream stuff, despite being appalled by the sexism, racism, and terrible labor practices. A Christian woman who says she is a masturbation addict found she had to quit watching even such profoundly anti-libidinal TV shows as *The Handmaid’s Tale*, lest she slip. That’s the problem with having an imagination: Anything can be porn. And the porn that turns you on doesn’t necessarily correspond to the sexual identity you embrace: Recall the poignantly hilarious scene in *The Kids Are All Right* in which the two gay-mom characters watch gay-male porn to try to perk up their sex life. In 2017, Pornhub said that [37 percent of its viewers of gay-male porn were women](#).

As someone who is occasionally baffled by why I choose the subjects I do, I always wonder about the personal impetus for ostensibly scholarly book projects. Burke doesn’t leave us in the dark about hers. As a teenage born-again Christian, she discovered that she liked looking at her father’s hidden stash of *Playboys*, knowing she was committing “the sin of lust” and also beset by queer fantasies—“homosexual perversion,” in the language of her adopted tribe. Now grown, she’s devoted her academic career to navigating the same antipodes: “Sociology became the tool I used to make sense of my sexuality and religious faith and the persistent ways that sex and religion collide more broadly in American culture and politics.”

[From the June 2017 issue: Screw wisdom](#)

Though I count Burke as fortunate to have been saddled with such a productive dilemma, I also wonder if those teenage prohibitions led to certain conceptual lacunae as she mapped her inquiries. Because of her focus on the pitched battle, you’ll search in vain to find anyone in her pages, male or female, who simply likes porn without needing to turn it into a therapeutic mission or a cause. Nor will you learn anything much from Burke about the actual content of porn, although after sifting through studies, she concludes that 21st-century porn is more violent than earlier porn, and that the victims of that violence are disproportionately people from marginalized groups. (Of course, popular culture in general has become more violent, which goes unmentioned.) The details that do surface suggest some interesting untapped

themes. Incest porn was among the top searches on Pornhub in 2014, she notes in passing. What might be said—aside from hot stepmoms being a perennial fantasy—is that porn has always been dedicated to taboo-smashing and impropriety, which may be something we rule-saddled humans like about it.

But, as if looking too hard at porn might still be verboten, Burke shies away from thinking very much about why, aside from the obviously compelling fapping opportunities it supplies, such large numbers of people are as devoted to pornography as they are. You won't catch her wondering whether there may be more complexities and emotional lures to the experience—perhaps even a few deeper human yearnings.

Those lures bring me to the other issue I kept expecting Burke to take up, given how thoroughly religiosity permeates her work: the terrain that porn and religion share. To be sure, religion offers purposes and consolations that are alien to porn. Yet both address a common desire—to get outside ourselves, to break free of this world, if only temporarily. Porn doesn't have to be read only literally: Women can fantasize about being men and men women, and about rebelling in other potentially liberating, and dangerous, ways. And porn-on-demand promises abundance (whatever you want, whenever you want it), unboundedness (a world without inhibitions), maybe even a little transcendence, or at least an escape hatch.

In an essay titled "[Tongues Untied: Memoirs of a Pentecostal Boyhood](#)," the Yale literary and queer theorist Michael Warner, now an atheist, writes that "religion does things that secular culture can only approximate." Without wanting to reduce religion to sex, he nevertheless finds overlap, as have others, Georges Bataille and Harold Bloom among them. Religion offers rapture; it "makes available a language of ecstasy"; it gives us the "strobe-light alternation of pleasure and obliteration." As does sex at its most intense.

Though Christianity is always pretty queer in Warner's telling ("Jesus was my first boyfriend"), his teenage struggles sound quite similar to Burke's. The "two kinds of ecstasy" on offer became an agonizing dilemma for him as well; having to choose, on a nightly basis, between orgasm and religion was excruciating: "God, I felt sure, didn't want me to come." At the same

time, religion's celebration of ecstasy offered a way of understanding "transgressions against the normal order of the world" as a good thing.

Burke takes a less transgression-celebrating path to reconciling her own antinomies. The anti-porn and porn-positive camps she's been chronicling actually care about the same things, she concludes: "human rights, sexual consent, and living a fulfilling life." Everyone wants to achieve "a real and authentic sexuality" and break away from the "fake sex that surrounds us." Her perspective is reassuring, and no doubt the authenticity of tender, caring sex with another person has much to recommend it. But it's out of reach for many, and even the sound of it is a little tedium-inducing.

From the December 2018 issue: The sex recession

Pornography's immense audience suggests that a lot of us would like some respite from authenticity, too. Porn offers a world where you don't have to deal with other people's personalities and expectations just to have sex, a world where (even more fantastically) men and women want the same things in bed, a world where (as in the Freudian unconscious) there's no "no" or sexual scarcity. It's utopian in the truest sense: a world that doesn't exist.

Nor will a world ever exist in which the great porn wars are settled—a world where sexual morality triumphs, or a world without sexual prohibitions. The combatants themselves, Burke found in the course of her interviews, are well aware of this. No one thinks they'll win this fight. What both sides do mostly agree on is that the porn sites everyone would be better off without are the ones you can stream for free. Now just convince the users.

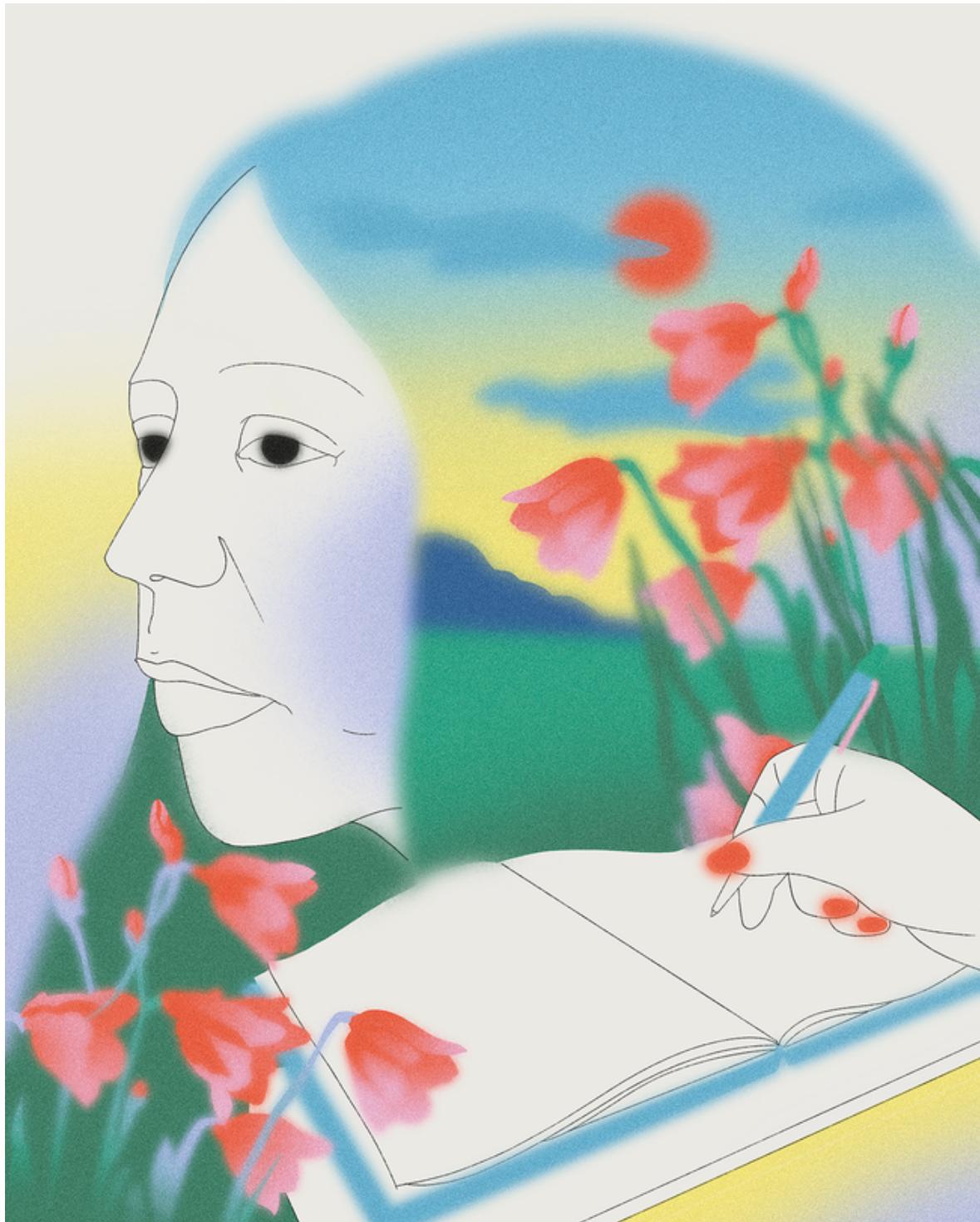
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‘Notice All That Disappears’

**Jorie Graham is a poet facing down
the end of the world.**

by Walt Hunter



Imagine you are looking at a flowering tree branch in a vase on a table. You think of trying to write about it. As you look, you're aware of your own breath, the warmth of your clothes. You smell the fragrance of the flowers. You struggle to keep your attention focused on the vase. You reach to touch

the branch and notice some unopened buds. Do they have their own way of communicating? You recoil, ashamed to be part of the damage of removing the branch from the tree. You imagine the tree. You place your hands over your eyes, and now your mind and its images occupy the space where the blossoms were. What message can you take from this encounter? There is the beauty of the blossoms, the damage to the tree, and the inescapable progress of your consciousness as you react to both.

For more than four decades, Jorie Graham's poetry has documented the complicated, multidimensional, ever more uncertain sallies of human perception into the bristling presence of trees, birds, streams. Virginia Woolf followed Mrs. Dalloway and others over the course of 24 hours in London. Graham, whose lines are Woolf-like in their walks about the page, tracks a minute in the life of a raven. Her forays also lead her to strangers, art, angels—and recent poems have ventured to speak in the uncanny idioms of artificial intelligence and machines. The free play of her attention gives rise to precise descriptions of what she sees, hears, smells, and touches, but the unfolding drama of consciousness is always an indispensable part of the poem.

The urgency of the poet as messenger animates Graham's new collection, [To 2040](#), her tenth since winning the Pulitzer Prize in 1996. Its poems address the demise of the world—the vase of blossoms on the table, the tree from which they came, even the human mind attending to them—which has provided poetry with so much of its material and its source of power. *Imagine*, they say to the desolate future, *how this world once existed, how we once lived alongside other species*. They exhort us, her readers in the present, to “look behind you, turn, look down as much as you can, notice all / that disappears.”

“I thought that if I could put it all down, that would be one way,” writes John Ashbery, also a poet who follows the unpredictable play of the mind. “And next the thought came to me that to leave all out would be another, and truer, way.” Graham is a poet who, for much of her career, has tried out various ways of putting it all down, and of reflecting on the mind’s and body’s leaps and limits in that quest. In her first book, [Hybrids of Plants and of Ghosts](#) (1980), the fraught enmeshment of the human in the natural world had

already oriented her eye and ear: “When a forest / burns, the mind / feels compelled to say / *I did it, I must have / done it*,” she wrote in “Mimicry.”

That ecologically attuned perspective has intensified since. “The earth said / remember me,” begins the final poem in *Runaway* (2020). You can sense the focus in the titles of the three preceding books, *Sea Change*, *PLACE*, and *fast*. It is explicit in their subjects (melting glaciers, the pollution of the seas, “systemicide,” war and occupation, famine, empty riverbeds), and in a newly wide-ranging polyvocal style (underwater voices and nonhuman beings, machines and computers, bots and surveillance technology). At the same time, the theater of human action is vivid. Poems starkly address the haunting experiences of caring for children and grandchildren in a warming climate. They report, with blunt candor, a cancer diagnosis, and they sit vigil by the deathbed of a father.

Graham by now has poetic company in wrestling in versatile ways with the existential questions and apocalyptic shadows that accompany climate change, as Natasha Trethewey, for example, does in her memoiristic portrait of the Mississippi Gulf Coast, *Beyond Katrina*. Graham’s own poems have sometimes included the rhetoric of arguments, propositions, or essays. But they are about perception, not policy, even as they implore us to think of the two as closely related. Her work sets the scale of the damaged human body in relation with the global scale of the planet in crisis. When her poems find fault, they find fault with the human tendency to turn off, tune out, step back, and detach. A poem called “Other,” from her 2005 collection, *Overlord*, puts it this way:

This is what is wrong: we, only we, the humans, can retreat from
ourselves and
not be
altogether here. We can be part full, only part, and not die. We can be in
and out of here, now,
at once, and not die.

The presence of the human has irrevocably changed nature. But the absence of the human—our recusal from bearing witness to the changing world—perpetuates its own form of damage. In her new book, Graham’s poems continue to exhort us to be present, and she has found a startlingly intimate

way of situating an individual consciousness among its precarious cohabitants.

Some poetry makes a virtue of compression. A red wheelbarrow, plums in the fridge. Gwendolyn Brooks's sonnets, Rae Armantrout's images. Graham has often explored the possibilities of dilation instead: lines that travel far across the page, passages that move from one detail to the next as her attention is stoked by the emergence of the world and by the mind's own self-scrutiny. That's not to say that her poems have ever lacked form or structure. On the contrary, they develop their music from the tension between the poetic line and the grammatical sentence. Here is an excerpt from the middle of "The Bird on My Railing," a poem from *PLACE* (2012), which manages a feat of complex unfolding:

you are not seeing it with your own
eyes: look:
this light
is moving
across that flower on
my sill
at this exact speed—right now—right here—now it is gone—yet go
back up
five lines it is
still there I can't
go back, it's
gone,
but you— what is it you are
seeing—see it again—a yellow
daisy

Note the shifting rhythms in this description of a daisy. Graham's single sentence (from "this light" to "daisy") gets interrupted multiple times as the speaker pins down the light to the exact moment ("right now—right here"). At that point, the poem aligns itself with the reader's mental image of the flower: "it's / gone, / but you—/ what is it you are / seeing—see it again." She recognizes that no reader will see the same image of the daisy, but every reader will experience the call to see the flower and the vanishing of the flower when the poem moves on. Then, as we shuttle between the somewhat

longer lines and the shorter ones, the speed of the poem increases, slows, increases again. Graham is like a conductor orchestrating multiple claims on our attention while bringing the parts of the poem together into a whole.

Whereas Graham's earlier books cast their lines rhapsodically and elegiacally—and, for some readers, confoundingly—across the page, *To 2040* puts its messages in bottles. Many of the poems have four-line stanzas with short phrases and only a few words in each line. The effect is not one of scarcity or exhaustion, but rather of exact construction—of distillation instead of dilation. “Are We” is the title of the first poem and the beginning of the first sentence:

extinct yet. Who owns
the map. May I
look. Where is my
claim. Is my history

verifiable. Have I
included the memory
of the animals. The animals'
memories. Are they

still here.

Typing out these lines, I felt the dramatic kick of each word. I was reminded of *Earth Took of Earth* (1996), the anthology of *100 Great Poems of the English Language* that Graham edited—“some of the songs people … have sung (have needed to sing) to keep themselves spiritually, morally, and emotionally awake”—and of the accents of the Old English poetry in that book, which drop like stones into the short lines (“Earth took of earth earth with ill; / Earth another earth gave earth with a will”). In “Are We,” the absence of question marks flattens the tone and pulls each phrase down to the same plane as the next. What better source for these new elegies to the Earth than an elemental poetry of close-ups, one that keeps our eyes trained on the Earth?

To preserve the world in poetry is to transform it, to make it almost unrecognizable, to push us to recognize it anew.

As a reader, you are invited to see what appears directly in front of your face: a raven, which lands and flies off. The sheen on his feathers makes them bright: “His coat is / sun.” When the raven looks at the speaker, cicadas begin to sing. This scene exists only in the mind, because “the / raven left a / long time ago,” and the cicadas are long gone too. The poem, addressed to the future, re-creates the past experience of everyday astonishment at the arrival of a bird. At the same time, the poem also captures, on the sparse stage of its apocalyptic setting, the human capacity for image-making, the untethered drift of the mind, the pull of distraction and the return to focus.

To 2040 guides the reader slowly and carefully from solitary witnessing to bodily suffering to a set of interspecies and interhuman encounters. Those trail blazes should not suggest too orderly a sequence, given that all of the poems attempt to follow and transcribe the interwoven movement of conscious thought and emergent nature, but they do signal Graham’s ambition.

Her book begins by asking if we are extinct yet and ends with a summons to physical presence, and I was struck by its resemblance to the kind of triptych often found as part of an altarpiece. The first section comprises poems “seeking to enter the in- / conspicuous”: The speaker, generally alone, remembers looking at the raven, at tracks on the ground, at a stream, at herself in the mirror, at the light on snow. The second section inhabits the body under duress. “Dis-ease came,” we learn, and in the next poem, the speaker places a clump of her hair on the ledge of the shower. In the third section, the set of characters expands. The speaker converses with “a small personal drone,” which “was old, had been / patched thousands of / times, maybe more, was medalled with debris,” itself a repository of history; she listens as her granddaughter looks at fallen cherry blossoms and asks why; she herself feels ashamed, looking at a vase of quince branches and reflecting on the harm done to the tree.

In the book’s coda, “Then the Rain,” the speaker places her head in her hands as rain, long awaited, begins. It’s a summarizing gesture of lamentation, of remorse, but also an exposure to tactile sensation, and an expression of being overcome by amazement. The poem has given us a litany of “after”s—“after the trees,” “after the animals,” “after it all went.”

Graham ends with the arrival of the “unknowable / no matter how / quantifiable.” The rain comes from the “accident of / touch,” of one atom by another, a lesson for the speaker to emulate, as she looks at her hands and imagines their command to “touch, touch it all, / start with your face, / put your face in us.”

What is it like to put your wet face in your shining palms? She asks that question at the end of “Then the Rain.” What is it like to watch the snow falling at dawn, as the speaker does in the title poem? Or to listen to the sound of your own breathing, which “Can You” implores us to do? In “They Ask Me,” we follow birds into a field

in rising ground-
mist, in the pull of its fast
evaporation as that strange
sun rose, arms
outstretched &

laughing, out of
breath, we ran to chase them
till they dis-
appeared.

To preserve the world in poetry is to transform it, to make it almost unrecognizable, to push us to recognize it anew—not only through close attention and careful description, but also through the accidental, generative capacities of ordinary language. In the poem “Translation Rain,” the speaker wonders if her words, like the absent rain, have been exhausted, rendered extinct through use. “Each word I use I have used before. / Yet it is not used, is it? It is not used up, is it? Because what is in it stays / hidden.” And suddenly “the words / appear again as if / new. *Rain*, I say. *Rain* now.” The power of Graham’s new poetry is that, in its return to words we’ve used before, “it will touch everything. It will make more of the / more.”

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| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

It's Okay to Like Good Art by Bad People

Art transcends the artist.

by Judith Shulevitz



In 1895, the popular satirist and dandy Oscar Wilde was tried and sentenced to a prison term, with hard labor, for “gross indecency,” meaning sexual acts with men. The ordeal effectively ended his career, shortened his life, and made his name synonymous with depravity for at least a generation. The young Katherine Mansfield, struggling with her alarming attraction to women, wrote to a friend in 1909 that thinking about Wilde had led to “fits of madness” like those that drove him to “his ruin and his mental decay.”

More than a century later, Wilde is a canonical figure, the preeminent wit of Victorian literature and the *beau ideal* of the queer aesthetic—campy, ironic, a gender-boundary provocateur. To most of his contemporaries, Wilde wound up being a monster. To us, he’s an icon. But if he were held to today’s standards of appropriate sexual behavior, homosexual or heterosexual, he’d be a monster again. Wilde didn’t just sleep with men. He slept with “rent boys” (male prostitutes) and teenage boys picked up for brief trysts.

As far as I know, no one has demanded that high-school students stop putting on *The Importance of Being Earnest*. This unconcern is a little odd. Other artists—Woody Allen, Kevin Spacey, Plácido Domingo—have come under moral scrutiny and been declared beyond the pale or at least seriously suspect. Why is Wilde exempt? Because he’s dead? That can’t entirely explain it. After all, the painter Paul Gauguin, who had sex with the teenage girls he used as models during his time in Tahiti, has recently been the object of a major critical reassessment. Is Wilde exempt because his droll quips are still quite devastating, and still hit their targets? Anyone taking on Wilde would have to be willing to come off as one of the sanctimonious buffoons he made fun of. But above all, I think, he’s spared because he represents—indeed, was a martyr to—one of the great causes of our time, which is LGBTQ rights.

I bring up Wilde not to damage his reputation all over again—I love him too—but to suggest that punishment for wayward artists is being meted out erratically. No principles appear to guide who should be deemed unconscionable and penalized as such. “What ought we to do about great art made by bad men?” asks Claire Dederer, a critic and memoirist, in *Monsters: A Fan’s Dilemma*. The book, which grew out of [an essay she published in The Paris Review](#) in 2017, at the peak of the #MeToo movement, is the account of an art consumer (her) who would be virtuous without being philistine. It’s also the latest entry in a new meta-genre: the moral reckoning with the moral reckoning that is cancel culture. Other notable examples are the philosopher Erich Hatala Matthes’s encyclopedic *Drawing the Line: What to Do With the Work of Immoral Artists From Museums to the Movies* (2021) and the critic Laura Kipnis’s provocative, mournful 2020 essay, “[Transgression, an Elegy](#),” in the journal *Liberties*.

Some readers may object to the phrase *cancel culture*. The progressive impulse is to deny that the phenomenon exists or to declare that, if it does, it's not as dangerous as the right-wing, anti-“woke” version—and anyway, the canceled rarely stay canceled. Allen’s 50th film is currently in production. [An exhibit of Gauguin’s portraits](#), critiquing his use of his Tahitian models, opened in 2019. J. K. Rowling, [reviled for comments critical of transgender-rights policies](#), still sells books, and a new *Harry Potter*–related video game is [doing very well](#). But to say that an artist hasn’t been canceled because she hasn’t been destroyed is to miss the point. To cancel is to do enduring reputational harm. Tarnished names and impugned works have a way of staying tarnished and impugned.

In *Monsters*, Dederer ventures into this minefield with a divided soul. On the one hand, she has no sympathy for the men being accused. “I have been a teenager predated by older men; I have been molested; I’ve been assaulted on the street,” she writes. “I don’t say this because it makes me special. I say it because it makes me non-special.” On the other hand, she *believes* in art. In a clever conceit that lets her avoid appearing to criticize anyone—quite a feat in a book on this topic—Dederer keeps the conversation inside her head: She pits Claire the critic, who doesn’t want to miss out on “the freedom and beauty and grandeur and strangeness of great art,” against Claire the woman, who would like to be a “demonstrably good feminist.” She asks the important questions. How do we weigh an artist’s accomplishment against his personal wickedness? “Do we believe genius gets special dispensation, a behavioral hall pass?” Should we draw clear distinctions between a transgressive work of art and behavioral transgressions, or would that be letting miscreants off too easy? To her credit, she skirts categorical answers.

No artist troubles Dederer as much as Roman Polanski, clearly her favorite auteur, who balances “the absoluteness of the monstrosity” in life and “the absoluteness of the genius” in his filmmaking:

Polanski made *Chinatown*, often called one of the greatest films of all time.

Polanski drugged and anally raped thirteen-year-old Samantha Gailey.

There the facts sit, unreconcilable.

How would I maintain myself between these contradictions?

Eventually, Dederer makes her way to the view that, in the case of Polanski, she'll just have to learn to live in a state of cognitive dissonance: "Polanski's work still called to me." Like the good critic she is—her interpretation of *Lolita* as an attack on the seduction of young girls rather than a defense of it is subtle and adroit—she is drawn to paradox.

That Polanski's movies don't try to justify pedophilia surely helps Dederer accept his contradictions. Allen is another story. Dederer, a longtime fan, used to agree with the "dominant opinion" that *Manhattan* (1979) is Allen's best film. Then she watched it again a few years ago. The movie features a romantic relationship between a middle-aged protagonist, Isaac (played by Allen), and a 17-year-old girl, Tracy (Mariel Hemingway). On this recent viewing, she can't put Allen's affair with 21-year-old Soon-Yi Previn, the adopted daughter of his then-partner, Mia Farrow, out of her mind, and she finds the movie creepy. How could she not have registered Isaac's sinister nonchalance when he introduces Tracy to his friends at dinner, and their strange nonresponse?

Caitlin Flanagan: I actually read Woody Allen's memoir

She thinks that perhaps, as an up-and-coming film critic, she'd been too eager to be seen as sophisticated, as the cool girl, so she had suppressed her ambivalence: "I mistrusted and didn't believe in the central relationship—it seemed to me that the whole film was built on a lie or a fantasy—but I didn't have the words to say that." She finds them now. Isaac is "fucking that high schooler with what my mother would call a hey-nonny-nonny," she writes. Me, I've always wondered whether the apparent indifference to the age gap in that scene was meant as a joke (for one thing, Tracy seems more mature than Isaac), but Dederer construes it as an attempted "artistic grooming of the audience"—Allen trying to get us to agree that sleeping with much younger women is no big deal.

We're at the point when we could use a little more of the art-for-art's-sake spirit; could let ourselves luxuriate in sensuality, beauty, and form.

Dederer's reinterpretation can't be reduced to #MeToo-ism, even if it was prompted by the movement. It's more interesting than that. She is giving a vivid description of a universal experience. We don't come to the movies as blank slates; we bring ourselves and our history. And with the advent of social media, we can't escape knowing about artists' alleged misdeeds, however long ago they are said to have happened. Biography "falls on your head all day long," Dederer observes. "We don't know the real story" behind the allegations, which Allen denies, that he molested his 7-year-old adopted daughter, Dylan Farrow, she writes, "and we might never know." She dwells, though, on "the fucking of Soon-Yi," in her bitter phrase, because she herself grew up with her mother's boyfriend and loves him like a parent. That such a man would come on to a young woman like the one she had been strikes Dederer as an unthinkable breach of trust. Giving herself permission to mix in this subjective and emotional reaction, as opposed to striving for a purely objective and rational one, is a liberation; after all, her response to *Manhattan* and Isaac and Tracy was always going to be personal. "I'm just acknowledging the realities of the situation," Dederer writes.

The film *Manhattan* is disrupted by our knowledge of Soon-Yi; but it's also myopic and limited in its own right; and it's also got a lot of things about it that are pretty great ... Simply being told that Allen's history shouldn't matter doesn't achieve the objective of *making it not matter*.

Making it not matter is precisely what Dederer and I were both taught in college to do (I'm a few years older than she is). Don't commit the biographical fallacy, her professors told her: "The work exists in an ideal state (ahistorical, alpine, snowy, pure)." I read the Russian formalists, whose subject was the workings of literary language, as well as Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes. The author was dead; long live the text that stands on its own! The genius whose name was on the work might be louche, but who cared? He (and it was usually a he) had nothing to do with the free play of meaning.

Only after I graduated did deconstruction morph into new historicism and feminist postcolonialism, which sneaked the author back into the classroom by focusing on the particular circumstances in which the work was written. Morality returned too: Now you studied literature to decode the problematic

social and sexual relations encrypted in the text. Dederer doesn't mention these theorists by name, but she asks their question about a critical approach that failed to address itself to the operations of power: *Cui bono?* Who benefits from keeping biography and history away from art? And she echoes one of their answers: "The winners of history (men) (so far)."

I'm not quite as enthused as Dederer is about the politicization of interpretation. We're at the point when we could use a little more of the art-for-art's-sake spirit; could let ourselves luxuriate in sensuality, beauty, and form; should offer more resistance to the pressure to find and deliver socially useful messages. I look back with a certain chagrin at how, as a young critic, I delighted in bucking my high-minded education by hunting down traces of a writer's mixed motives, bad faith, petty and not so petty obfuscations in his writing. I took hubristic pride in my gotcha criticism and my eagle eye. But what used to feel subversive now feels like an imperative: Either scan the text for signs of immorality or be suspected of reactionary tendencies. You were hoping for aesthetic transport? Back to the consciousness-raising session with you!

[Read: How capitalism drives cancel culture](#)

Dederer doesn't want to be a killjoy, but she also doesn't want to ignore the plights of vulnerable and abused people. There are many ways to signal your disapproval of a blameworthy artist. At a minimum, you can avoid his art; that way you don't give him financial support, if he's alive, and in any case don't appear to your friends to sanction his wrongdoing. The maximalist course is to rally others to a general boycott. Dederer considers cancellation performative at best and dictatorial at worst. "Can I still listen to David Bowie?" is a plaintive query that she says she hears a lot when she speaks on college campuses. She feels the students' pain: "I was a weird teenager; David Bowie was the patron saint of weird kids." But when he died, the news spread that he had allegedly slept with a 15-year-old groupie, taking her virginity. And so the fans are bereft. They've been betrayed. "This is a book about broken hearts," Dederer says. Had it been Led Zeppelin, Mötley Crüe, Aerosmith, they would have expected no better from them, Dederer says. "But not *our guy*."

The thing is, no one wants to give up *their guy*. Dederer thinks the students were upset because they felt betrayed by Bowie's misconduct. She doesn't say this, exactly, but I think something in them was also balking at the presumption—automatic on their part—that they had to delete him from their playlists. When you have to punish the one you love, you just don't want to. You could call that hypocrisy; I call it sanity, because maybe punishment isn't the way to go.

When *our guy* is the target, what also becomes apparent is that the retributive process is ugly. If we must incorporate a prescriptive morality into our reception of art, at least let it rest on epistemological rigor—on doing our due diligence. Twitter hordes all too often demand that we repudiate our idols in an instant, without second thoughts, before the murk of rumor and uncertainty has been cleared up and contexts understood. Have we paused to examine the evidence? And even if guilt has been established, behavioral norms are changing fast. Maybe we should be less dogmatic about our operative definitions of right and wrong.

Given her visceral aversion to overreach, I find it surprising that Dederer often fails to question assumptions of culpability. She tells the story of a queer punk duo, PWR BTTM, whose passionate fans (many of them in the LGBTQ community) turned on the pair after one of the musicians was accused of sexual misconduct. Their anger “was rapid, bitter, and heartfelt,” Dederer writes. “How could they listen to this beloved music when they felt betrayed by its maker? The songs were soured, or stained.”

Dederer’s account of the incident is pretty cryptic, though, so I looked into it. On May 11, 2017, just as PWR BTTM’s second album was coming out, a person wrote a Facebook post accusing one band member of predatory behavior against others in the fan community; [an anonymous first-person account in Jezebel](#) followed, alleging that sexual encounters that had occurred the year before qualified, in retrospect, as sexual assault. By May 15, PWR BTTM’s record label had [stopped distributing the new album](#); the duo’s management agency had dropped them; their upcoming tour had fallen apart; and their music had been removed from Amazon Music, Apple Music, and Spotify.

But did the band member do it? Dederer never says. She's talking about the fans' feelings, not about whether the feelings are based on fact. The accused musician apologized for any interactions with fans after shows that may have caused discomfort, and [strongly contested the account](#) in *Jezebel*, saying they understood those encounters to have been "fully consensual." But the band broke up shortly afterward, so the complete backstory may never become public. Still, when disputed accusations by unnamed parties turn musicians from rising stars to personae non gratae in less than a week, you have to wonder who let PWR BTTM's followers down, the accused or an industry in a panic.

Dederer takes a similar tack in describing [J. K. Rowling's vilification](#) as a transphobe. You can see why she wouldn't want to relitigate such an explosive indictment. But her focus on fan alienation, which entails adopting the progressive wisdom on trans issues, winds up seeming symptomatic of the problem: If artists' political opinions are being deemed unacceptable, the grounds of that judgment surely deserve careful consideration; the verdict of the group shouldn't simply hold sway.

[Read: How J. K. Rowling became Voldemort](#)

An ethics that is casual about proof and doesn't question the assumptions of the moment looks [disturbingly like mob justice](#). Dederer grasps that the besmirching of an artist reflects the workings of a collective unconscious more than of enlightened opinion formation. The most resonant chapter in *Monsters* explores what she calls "the stain," a thing that is "creeping, wine-dark, inevitable." She borrows the term from the music critic Simon Reynolds, whom she messages to ask his opinion of Michael Jackson. How has his relationship with Jackson's music changed in light of accusations that he sexually abused boys? He responds,

i am currently trying to do the aesthetico-moral calculus thing re. MJ's music, like, is the Jackson 5 stuff okay? ... does the stain work its way backwards through time?

Jackson was a child himself when he was in the Jackson 5, so presumably he wasn't abusing any children then—in fact, Jackson later said he had been the victim of abuse by his harsh and domineering father. So why would we

worry about listening to his early music? Dederer thinks we can't help it. The spreading of the blotch "is not a choice," she says. "It's already too late. It touches everything. Our understanding of the work has taken on a new color, whether we like it or not."

Dederer's ultimate recommendation for dealing with immorality in artists is very sensible. We should engage with their art, not quash it, and work through our qualms at the same time. It's a noble aspiration, but I suspect that the logic of the stain will defeat it. If hearsay about artists' misdeeds or thought crimes is top of mind when we interact with their paintings, or prose, or poetry, or films, or music, that's what we'll look for and that's what we'll find traces of—or not, but that will have been our prism.

[From the October 2021 issue: Anne Applebaum on the new Puritans](#)

As it happens, Oscar Wilde isn't just the rare genius whose questionable desires have somehow evaded contemporary censure. He was also a philosopher of art whose ideas may help us find a way out of our obsession with adjudicating artists' conduct. Wilde was an aesthete, meaning not only that he responded deeply to art but also that he was a member of the late-19th-century Aesthetic movement—in fact, the most famous member of it. Aestheticist ideas about beauty emerged in vigorous opposition to the Victorian insistence that art be morally instructive. Aestheticism was a "battle-cry for artists and critics claiming freedom of artistic expression," in the words of one historian. Art shouldn't have to justify its existence. It is not required to be wholesome and uplifting. Nor should it be seen as expressing "the temper of its age, the spirit of its time, the moral and social conditions that surround it, and under whose influence it is produced," Wilde wrote in his essay "The Decay of Lying." Elsewhere, he wrote that art and ethics belong in "absolutely distinct and separate" spheres.

"All art is quite useless," he declared in the preface to [The Picture of Dorian Gray](#). And again, in a lecture: It "has no meaning but its beauty, no message but its joy." Any critic today who evinced such a haughtily apolitical view of life and art would probably annoy their more virtue-oriented readers. And yes, Wilde had a personal interest in cautioning against the encroachment of ethics on creative pursuits. In the libel trial that led to two criminal trials and, ultimately, Wilde's conviction, lawyers offered the risqué *Dorian Gray*

as proof of Wilde's vicious character. I don't believe you can separate his aestheticism or his buoyant writing from his role as a sexual nonconformist, and I think we should heed his warning about the consequences of a triumph of morality over art: "Art will become sterile, and Beauty will pass away from the land."

This article appears in the [May 2023](#) print edition with the headline "It's Okay to Like Good Art by Bad People."

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| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

Departments

- [**The Commons: ‘Joe Biden’s Show Lacks Entertainment Value’**](#)
 - [**An Ode to Bananas**](#)
-

‘Joe Biden’s Show Lacks Entertainment Value’

Readers respond to our March 2023 cover story and more.



Reality is blurred, boredom is intolerable, and everything is entertainment, [Megan Garber wrote](#) in the March 2023 issue.

Amid all the speculation about the sources of President Joe Biden’s unpopularity, “We’re Already Living in the Metaverse” provides an explanation: Perhaps he is just unforgivably boring. His show lacks entertainment value; it can’t hold the attention of its audience, those people we used to call “citizens.”

David Ogden Maxwell
Washington, D.C.

Megan Garber perfectly described one of the foundational problems underlying my frustration as a health-care provider: “Healthertainment”—everything from *Grey’s Anatomy* to health influencers on TikTok—has altered the effective provision of care at all levels. It clogs wait lists, weighs on every patient interaction, alters policy, and profoundly shapes the capacity for reality-based interdisciplinary action. It is breaking people and systems. Our collective intolerance of reality will continue to have real consequences until enough individuals regain a reverence for tedium.

Cymande Baxter-Rogers
Sandwich, N.H.

The postwar film, TV, and news executives weren’t just spewing distraction; they were creating “normalcy”—a normalcy rooted in sameness. Today, thanks to the glut of new entertainment, people who are different are free to share a cornucopia of new stories—and see people like themselves represented in entertainment. The ability to pursue different perspectives may have its flaws, but I hope it can also reshape and redefine what we mean by society, community, and family.

Russell Mawby
Ottawa, Canada

Megan Garber confirms that the dystopian future that Orwell, Huxley, and Postman warned us about has arrived. A culture awash in entertainment has blurred the lines between fiction and reality.

As a pastor, I have had to wrestle with what this means for my congregation and me. Since the pandemic started, many faith leaders have embraced online worship, even creating churches in the metaverse. But I worry this approach reinforces the belief that the most significant experiences in life are about consumption and entertainment. I feel I need “in person” church

precisely because so much about it is not entertaining. In an embodied gathering, I am attuned to the needs, joys, and sorrows of the people around me. I lay aside my own preferences to serve others. I have conversations with real people with whom I may disagree. These are precisely the conditions under which our most meaningful human experiences of joy, love, and friendship happen.

Jeff Simpson
Washington, D.C.

Megan Garber replies

Russell Mawby's letter captures a defining tension of this moment: the fact that the most profound and valuable element of social media—its ability to give a public voice to people who haven't had one before—coexists with the encroaching dehumanization I highlight in my article. In my ideal world, people are the directors of their own stories, not extras in someone else's show. I hope that the positive side of this dynamic will win out—and that in the process, just as Mawby suggests, we'll consider the kind of people we want to be. And the kind of society we want to have, together.

The French Are in a Panic Over *le Wokisme*

In the March 2023 issue, [Thomas Chatterton Williams wrote](#) about how France's vehement rejection of identity politics made him recalibrate his own views about woke ideology.

As an American-history teacher who has taught in Parisian schools and universities, I wonder which Thomas Chatterton Williams misunderstands more: France or the United States.

Perhaps his most damaging assumption is that social-justice movements are “pitting groups against one another in a zero-sum power struggle.” That is antithetical to the goals of most major social-justice-education projects. Further, his description of the relationship between the French radical left—

which is in no way an ideological monolith, as its electoral divisions show—and radical Islam is inaccurate. Views on religion among members of the far left range from supporting socially progressive protections for religious minorities, such as letting students wear the hijab at school, to advocating for attacks on all religious protections, including the privileged status of Catholicism. This so-called *islamo-gauchisme* is a hoax manufactured by the French right.

Lucas Mennella

Paris, France

As a Frenchman raising four children in California with my American wife, I find that most articles on French social issues by American journalists fail to understand the specificities of France or force an angle meant to show how events in France illustrate a broader trend important in the U.S.

“The French Are in a Panic Over *le Wokisme*” takes a more balanced view. Far from the usual ideological diatribes that I often encounter here in California, the article makes reasonable considerations that help inform and spur reflection on the important topics at hand.

Alexis de Belloy

Tiburon, Calif.

I agree with Thomas Chatterton Williams’s stance that neither France’s nor America’s approach to identity is ideal. But I am not convinced that an “authentically color-blind society” is the way forward. In some cases we need to elevate race in order to end racism.

I’m a 33-year-old white woman. My own identity enters the equation when I consider political events such as the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*. A color-blind approach to reproductive rights in the U.S. would ignore the fact that Black women have a pregnancy-related mortality rate about three times that of white women and that abortion bans will disproportionately cause more health complications and deaths for this group. Ignoring race ignores systemic problems that could be remedied with an equity-minded approach.

Equity needs numbers—it needs those statistics based on race and ethnicity that France refuses to gather.

Amelia von Wolffersdorff

Washington, D.C.

As a Black American Canadian living in France, I am not surprised by how French intellectuals reacted to Rokhaya Diallo's comments on identity politics at the 2021 conference Thomas Chatterton Williams describes. I often encountered similar resistance when I worked at a German company and would point out that its product excluded Black-owned businesses. Suppressing our histories and cultures will only lead to more experiences like Diallo's and like the one I had at work.

Our identities give us unique perspectives and insights that can enrich our communities. Why can't we embrace our histories, our cultures, and our skin colors, while also embracing everyone else's?

Carrington Walsh

Paris, France

Behind the Cover

In “[American Madness](#),” Jonathan Rosen describes the failure of the United States to care for the severely mentally ill through the story of his childhood best friend, Michael Laudor. As an adult, Laudor was the perpetrator of a horrific act of violence—but he was also the victim of a system that failed to provide the kind of treatment he dearly needed. The cover features a photograph of Jonathan and Michael outside the Rosens’ home in New Rochelle, New York, where the boys first met.

— **Oliver Munday**, *Associate Creative Director*

Correction

“Arnold’s Last Act” (April) originally stated that 1.3 million people were killed at Auschwitz, about 1.1 million of them Jews. In fact, 1.1 million people were killed there, of which about 1 million were Jews. The article also stated that Block 4A at the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum contained personal items belonging to Holocaust victims. In fact, Block 5 holds those items.

This article appears in the [May 2023](#) print edition with the headline “The Commons.”

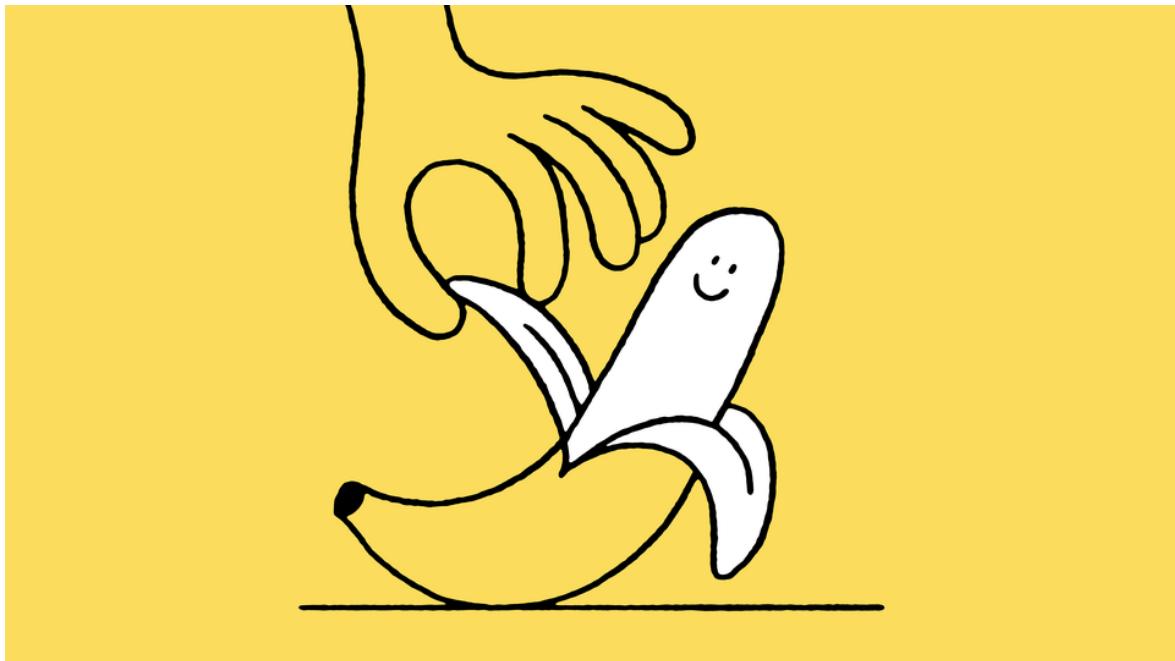
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| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

An Ode to Bananas

Their cartoon yellowness, their absurd curvature, their fragility, their cordial blandness

by James Parker



Don't rush it.

There's something so very friendly and edible about a banana, from its helpfully tubular design to its yielding texture to its mild and alkaline flavor; something so easy, you just want to shove it into your face. It could be astronaut food, almost: a specially engineered, hygienically sealed nutrition cylinder in high-visibility yellow. Slurp it down, Major Tom. Reset your

potassium levels and get back to your Martian rock samples. The peel will float off, anemone-like, in zero gravity.

But to slurp it down, to eat it heedlessly, is to waste the banana. It's to waste, first of all, the duration of a banana. Are you, like me, a wistful nonsmoker? Do you envy the smokers their philosophical interludes, their moments of drifting peace? Then eating a banana, slowly and reflectively, is the closest thing you're going to get to a cigarette break. Except better, because you can do it on public transportation.

There's an orthodox, old-school surrealism to the banana: its cartoon yellowness, its absurd curvature, the fact that when we think about a banana, we think about it upside down. The banana grows upward, doesn't it, jostling for sunlight with its fellows—but in our mind, we reverse it. We put its broken stem on top, like a nose or a little horn, and so we create a strangeness around the banana. We put it in banana quotes.

But the banana is not, or not just, a free-floating, self-signifying object. It is fragile and organic: There are processes at work inside the banana. If battered or neglected, it will flush an angry dark brown. It will become its shadow. It should be a tarot card, one of the big ones: the Fool, the Hanged Man, and the Black Banana. Pull that card and change your life.

And you don't want to waste the taste, either—the cordial blandness of a banana. Me, I like a mottled one. The greener end of the spectrum is too fibrous and anxious for me. Green bananas squeak when you peel them. I like a deep, mature yellow, with sunspots. That's a fulfilled banana, a mellow banana, a banana that's been around the block. It's loaded with the sugars of experience. It's in the last blaze of its bananahood. *Enjoy me now*, it says with its banana grin. *I was created for your pleasure.*

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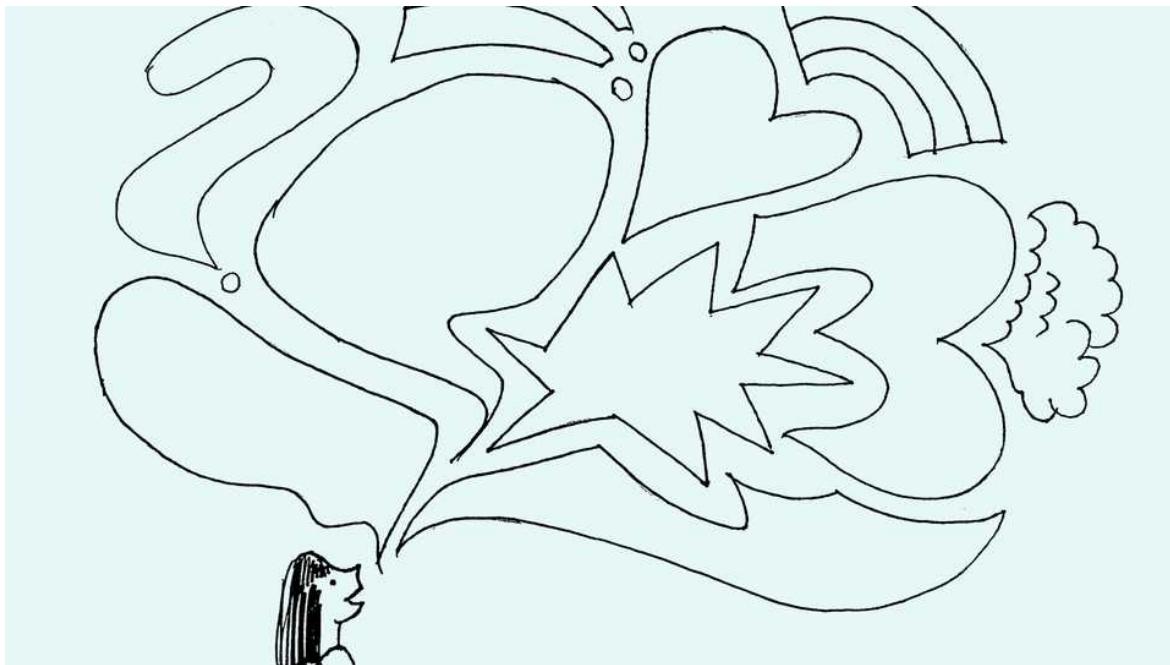
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Poetry

- [**Argument With a Child**](#)
-

Argument With a Child

by Katie Peterson



If you don't do this thing you can't
do the next thing and I know
you want to do the next thing.

How do I know?
I'll tell you when I'm older.
Look at the flowers.

Can you say *wisteria*.
You don't want to say *wisteria*.
You'd rather die is the look on your face.

How can I fix it if you won't
let me look at it?
Look at something else while I touch it.

Plant your eyes on that place mat of the world
you love and don't
move them until it stops hurting.

This poem appears in the [May 2023](#) print edition.

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| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |