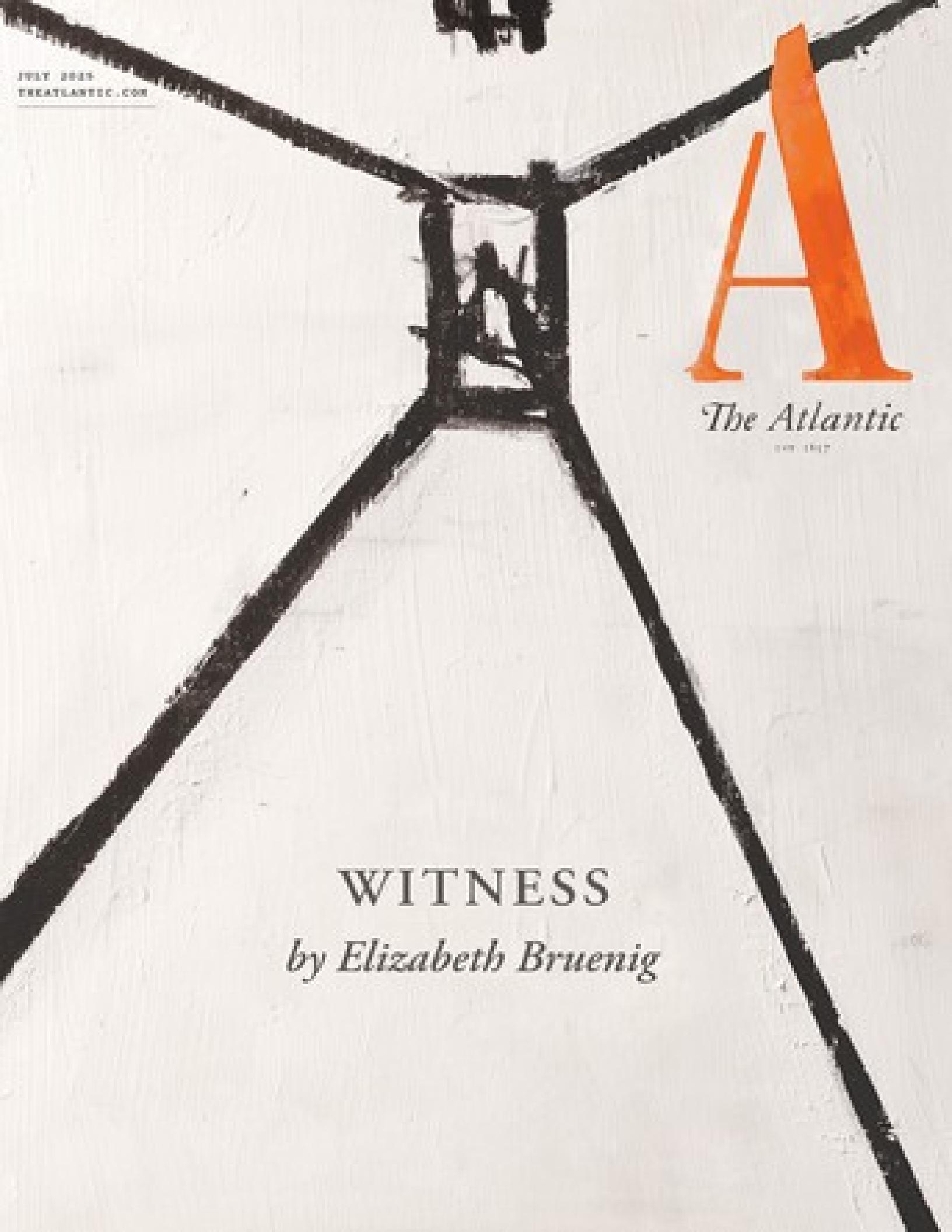




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## WITNESS

*by Elizabeth Bruenig*

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# The Talented Mr. Vance

**J. D. Vance could have brought the country's conflicting strands together. Instead, he took a divisive path to the peak of power.**

by George Packer



J. D. Vance poses a problem, and at its core is a question about character. In the years after the 2016 election, he transformed himself from a center-right memoirist and public speaker, offering a complex analysis of America's social ills and a sharp critique of [Donald Trump](#), into a right-wing populist politician whose illiberal ideas and vitriolic rhetoric frequently out-Trump

the original. According to [Vance](#) and his supporters, this change followed a realization during Trump's first term that the president was lifting up the fallen working class of the heartland that had produced young J. D. To help his people, Vance had to make his peace with their champion. According to his critics, Vance cynically chose to betray his true values in order to take the only path open to an ambitious Republican in the Trump era, and as a convert under suspicion, he pursued it with a vengeance. In one account, a poor boy from the provinces makes good in the metropole, turns against his glittering benefactors, and goes home to fight for his people. In the other, the poor boy seizes every opportunity on his way up, loses his moral compass, and is ruined by his own ambition.

Both versions suggest the protagonist of a 19th-century novel—Pip in Dickens's [Great Expectations](#), Lucien in Balzac's [Lost Illusions](#). A novelist who set out to narrate the decline of the American empire in the 21st century might invent a protagonist like J. D. Vance. He turns up in all the key places, embodying every important theme. He's the product of an insular subculture (the Scots-Irish of Appalachian Kentucky) and grows up amid the ills (poverty, addiction, family collapse) of a dying Ohio steel town ravaged by deindustrialization. He escapes into the Marine Corps in time for the Iraq War, and then into the dubious embrace of the cognitive meritocracy (Yale Law School, West Coast venture capital, East Coast media). At a turning point in his life and the country's—in 2016, with the [surprise success](#) of [Hillbilly Elegy](#) and then the surprise victory of Trump—Vance becomes a celebrity, the anointed spokesman for the 40 percent of the country that comprises the white working class, which has sudden political power and cultural interest. He's tasked with [explaining the world he came from](#) to the world he recently joined.

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With his gifts of intellect and rhetoric, Vance might have brought the country's conflicting strands together. They had combined to make him, and he knew them deeply—their flaws, their possibilities, their entwined fate. Instead, he took a path of extreme divisiveness to the peak of power, becoming a [hard-line convert to the Catholic Church](#), post-liberal populism,

and the scorched-earth cause of Donald Trump. Vance became a scourge of the elites among whom he'd found refuge, a kingpin of a new elite, avenging wrongs done to his native tribe.

At every step the reader wonders: Is our hero motivated by conviction, or is he the creature of a corrupt society? Does he deserve our admiration, our sympathy, or our contempt?

Still only 40, Vance is likelier than anyone to be the next president. (The biggest obstacle, for several reasons, is Trump himself.) His rise has been so dramatic and self-dramatized that he calls to mind those emblematic figures from history who seem both out of a storybook and all too human, such as Shoeless Joe Jackson and Huey Long. In the end, the question of Vance's character—whether his about-face was “authentic”—is probably unanswerable. Few people are capable of conscious, persistent self-betrayal. A change that begins in opportunism can become more passionate than a lifelong belief, especially when it's rewarded. Ventriloquize long enough and your voice alters; the mask becomes your face.

What's more important than Vance's motive is the meaning of the story in which he's the protagonist. More than any other public figure of this century, including Barack Obama (to whom his career [bears some similarities](#)), and even Trump, Vance illuminates the larger subject of contemporary America's character. In another age, his rise might have been taken as proof that the American dream was alive and mostly well. But our age has no simply inspiring and unifying tales, and each chapter of Vance's success is part of a national failure: the abandonment of American workers under global neoliberalism; the cultural collapse of the working class; the unwinnable forever war; a dominant elite that combines ruthless competition with a rigid orthodoxy of identity; a reaction of populist authoritarianism. What seems like Vance's tragic wrong turn, the loss of real promise, was probably inevitable—it's hard to imagine a more hopeful plot. After all, the novel is about a society in which something has gone deeply wrong, all the isms have run dry, and neither the elites nor the people can escape blame.

The power of Vance's story depends on the image of a hick struggling to survive and escape, then navigating the temptations and bruises of ascent. At the start of his memoir he describes himself as an ordinary person of no real

accomplishment who avoided becoming a grim statistic only by the grace of his family's love. This self-portrait shows the early appearance of Vance the politician, and it's belied by the testimony of people who knew him. Friends from the Marine Corps and Yale described to me an avid reader, confident and well-spoken, socially adept, almost universally liked—an extraordinary young man clearly headed for big things. (Vance himself declined to be interviewed for this article.)

As an enlisted Marine, Vance worked in public affairs, which meant that he saw no combat in Iraq during some of the most violent years of the war. Instead, he acquired a sense of discipline and purpose in a fairly cloistered milieu. He was already interested in political philosophy, and on the sprawling Al-Asad air base, in Anbar province, Vance and a close friend discussed Jefferson and Lincoln, Ayn Rand, Christopher Hitchens and the "new atheists," even Locke and Hobbes. He was also a conservative who revered John McCain and was, the close friend joked, the only one on the base who wasn't disappointed when a mystery visitor turned out to be Dick Cheney rather than Jessica Simpson. But Vance began to have doubts about the war before he ever set foot in Iraq. In a chow hall in Kuwait, officers on their way home to the States described the pointless frustration of clearing Iraqi cities that immediately fell again to insurgents. The ghost of Vietnam had not been vanquished by the global War on Terror.



In 2003, still in his teens, J. D. Vance enlisted in the Marines and was deployed to Iraq, where he read thinkers such as Locke and Hobbes, who had influenced the American Founders. (Courtesy of Curt Keester)

“I left for Iraq in 2005, a young idealist committed to spreading democracy and liberalism to the backward nations of the world,” Vance wrote years later. “I returned in 2006, skeptical of the war and the ideology that underpinned it.” Whether that ideology was called neoconservatism or liberal interventionism, its failure in Iraq led in a straight line to a new ideology that was also old: “America First.” On foreign policy Vance has been pretty consistent for two decades. When, while running for a U.S. Senate seat in 2022, he remarked, “I gotta be honest with you, I don’t really care what happens to Ukraine one way or another,” you could hear the working-class Iraq vet taking a shot at elites who send others to bleed for abstractions and are indifferent to the human collapse of Middletown, Ohio.

“America First” wasn’t the only available response to disillusionment with Iraq. Other veterans who’d entered politics—Dan Crenshaw, Jason Crow, Tammy Duckworth, Seth Moulton—continued to be concerned about human suffering and the fate of democracy abroad. Nor have they abandoned liberal democracy for blood-and-soil nationalism. Vance is a politician with an unusual interest in ideas and a combative nature fed by an old wound. The combination makes him capable of going a long way down an ideological road without paying attention to the casualties around him.

Raised loosely evangelical, Vance became a libertarian atheist in his 20s—the stance of many smart, self-taught young men of the aughts in search of totalizing positions that could win mostly online arguments. “I prided myself on an ability to overwhelm the opposition with my logic,” he wrote years later. “There was an arrogance at the heart of my worldview, emotionally and intellectually.” Both Rand and Hitchens took him away from the community of his upbringing—from a poor white culture of non-churchgoing Christians whose identification with the Republican Party had nothing to do with tax cuts. Libertarianism and atheism were respectable worldviews of the new culture that Vance badly wanted to enter.

“I became interested in secularism just as my attention turned to my separation from the Marines and my impending transition to college. I knew how the educated tended to feel about religion: at best, provincial and stupid; at worst, evil,” [he would write in 2020](#), after his conversion to Catholicism. “Secularism may not have been a prerequisite to join the elites,

but it sure made things easier.” This ability to socialize himself into new beliefs set a pattern for his career.

Vance took just two years to graduate from Ohio State, and in 2010 he was accepted by Yale Law School. Entering the Ivy League put him through what the sociologist J. M. Cuddihy called “the ordeal of civility”—repression of one’s class or ethnic background in the effort to assimilate to the ways of a dominant culture. As Vance later wrote, he had to get used to the taste of sparkling water, to learn that white wine comes in more than one variety. In an earlier time, the dominant group would have been the WASPs. In the early 21st century, it was a liberal multiethnic meritocracy for which a Yale law degree opened the way to power.

In this world, there was nothing odd about a descendant of several centuries of native-born white Christian Americans taking as his “Yale spirit guide” the daughter of Hindu immigrants from India. The route to New Haven is in some ways shorter from Andhra Pradesh than from the hills of eastern Kentucky. What counts is class, and class is largely a matter of education and credentials. Usha Chilukuri [had all the right qualities to civilize Vance](#): raised in a stable, high-achieving family of California academics; Phi Beta Kappa at Yale College; master’s degree from Cambridge University; even-tempered, politically opaque, hyper-organized, mapping out her work and life with Vance on Post-it notes, whiteboards, and spreadsheets. When Vance’s friend from the Marines visited New Haven, Usha told them both that they’d done a good job of “course correcting” their lives. In Vance’s memoir she’s a kind of life coach, counseling him to unlearn hillbilly codes and habits—helping him talk through difficult subjects without losing his temper or withdrawing, expressing pride when he resists going after another driver who flips him off in traffic.

### David Frum: The J. D. Vance I knew

*Hillbilly Elegy*—both book and film—makes much of a scene in which Vance is so baffled by the complicated tableware at a Yale dinner with recruiters from a white-shoe law firm that he has to leave the room and call Usha for guidance. “Go from outside to inside, and don’t use the same utensil for separate dishes,” she tells him. “Oh, and use the fat spoon for soup.” The picture of a raw youth going from outside to inside with the help

of his super-striver girlfriend is a little misleading. “I never got the sense that he was worse off because he hadn’t gone to Yale or Harvard, just because he was so well-spoken,” a law-school friend of Vance’s and Chilukuri’s told me. “He was intriguing to Usha, and to the rest of us too.” Being a chubby-faced working-class Marine from the Midwest might have brought cultural disadvantages, but it also conferred the buoyant charisma of a young man who made it out. Regardless of place settings, Vance [quickly mastered the essential Ivy League art of networking](#). Classmates picked him out early on as a political leader.

The earnest, sensitive narrator of *Hillbilly Elegy* sounds nothing like the powerful politician who sneers at “childless cat ladies,” peddles lies about pet-eating Haitian immigrants, sticks a finger in the face of the besieged president of Ukraine, and gets into profane fights with random critics on X.

Everyone who met Vance in those years seems to have been impressed. He didn’t have to put on Ivy League airs, or wave a hillbilly flag, or win sympathy by reciting the saddest chapters of his childhood. He kept stories of his abusive mother and her checked-out partners almost entirely to himself—a close friend was surprised by the dark details of his memoir—but he didn’t cut himself off from his past. He watched Ohio State football every Saturday with another Buckeye at Yale, and he remained close to his sister, Lindsay, and to friends from his hometown and the Marine Corps.

In the early 2010s, when he began to publish short articles on David Frum’s website FrumForum and in *National Review*, they were mainly concerned with the lack of social mobility in the working class. His voice was perfectly tuned to a moderate conservatism, strengthened by his authentic origin in heartland hardship—skeptical of government programs for the poor, but with a sense of responsibility to the place he came from. *I’m making it*, he said, *and so can they if they get the right support*. In an [early essay, from 2010](#), he defended institutions like Yale Law School against a rising right-wing populism that saw a country “ruled by perniciously alien elites.” This burn-it-down politics was a luxury that poor people couldn’t afford. His “political hero,” according to *Hillbilly Elegy*, was Mitch Daniels, the centrist Republican governor of Indiana. His [choice for president in 2012](#) was Jon Huntsman Jr., the former Utah governor and ambassador to China, who made Mitt Romney seem a bit extreme.

[Read: How the ‘Tiger Mom’ convinced the author of \*Hillbilly Elegy\* to write his story](#)

Vance planned to write a policy book about the problems of the white working class. But when he came under the wing of the professor Amy Chua, the author of [Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother](#), who fostered his relationship with Usha and recommended him for coveted jobs, she [urged him to write](#) the story of his life.



In 2017, when Vance was still a progressive darling due to his ability to explain Donald Trump's appeal among white working-class voters, he went on *Late Night With Seth Meyers* to promote *Hillbilly Elegy*. (Lloyd Bishop / NBCUniversal / Getty)

At the end of *Hillbilly Elegy*, Vance describes a recurring nightmare, going back to childhood, in which he's pursued by a terrifying antagonist, a “monster”—in at least one dream his unstable mother. While he was at Yale she became addicted to heroin, and he later had to drive to Ohio to keep her from ending up homeless. The nightmare returned just after he graduated—but this time the creature being chased is his dog, Casper, and the enraged

pursuer is Vance. At the last moment he stops himself from hurting his beloved pet, saved by his own capacity for self-reflection. The dreamer wakes to a bedroom filled with all the signs of his happy new life. But the past is still alive, and the nightmare leaves a haunting insight: “I was the monster.”

Reading the book today is like the reversal of roles in Vance’s dream. The earnest, sensitive narrator of *Hillbilly Elegy* sounds nothing like the powerful politician who sneers at “[childless cat ladies](#),” [peddles lies about pet-eating Haitian immigrants](#), [sticks a finger in the face of the besieged president of Ukraine](#), and gets into [profane fights](#) with random critics on X. Vice President Vance is the pursuer. So it’s a little disorienting to return to *Hillbilly Elegy* and spend a few hours in the presence of a narrator who can say: “I love these people, even those to whom I avoid speaking for my own sanity. And if I leave you with the impression that there are bad people in my life, then I am sorry, both to you and to the people portrayed. For there are no villains in this story.”

In an essay for this magazine in 2016, Vance called Trump “cultural heroin”—the most apt metaphor possible. Trump is a drug that has led the white working class to resentment, bigotry, coarseness, delusional hope.

As a writer, Vance passes the most important test in a work of this kind: He’s honest enough to show himself in an unfavorable light—hotheaded, cowardly, often just sad. He’s wary of any simple lessons or wholly satisfying emotions. He loves his family and community, but he is unsparing about their self-destructive tendencies. He rejects the politics of tribal grievance and ostentatious piety that now defines the populist right. If the book has a message, it’s the need to take responsibility for your own life while understanding the obstacles and traps that blight the lives of others—to acknowledge the complex causes of failure without giving in to rage, self-pity, or despair. “There is a cultural movement in the white working class to blame problems on society or the government,” Vance warned, “and that movement gains adherents by the day.”

[From the January/February 2024 issue: George Packer on what the working class really wants](#)

It's not a message to impress the MAGA mind. The author's nuanced analysis and policy ideas might well make Vice President Vance retch. In countless interviews and talks related to his *New York Times* No. 1 best seller, Vance spoke movingly about his childhood, criticized the low standards that both right and left impose on his people, and offered no easy answers for their desperate lives, only a kind of moral appeal to self-betterment and community that sounded like the centrist commentary of David Brooks. In his open-collar shirt and blazer, with smooth cheeks and boyish blue eyes, a fluent delivery and respectful responses, Vance appeared to be living proof that the meritocracy could take a self-described hillbilly and make him one of its own, creating an appealing celebrity with an important message for comfortable audiences about those left behind.

So *Hillbilly Elegy* is a problem for right-wing populists—and also for Trump opponents who now loathe Vance, because it takes an effort not to sympathize with the book's young hero and admire the eloquence of its author. By 2020, when Ron Howard's movie was released, at the end of Trump's first term, critics who might have turned to the book for insight had soured on the white working class, and they excoriated the film. (Tellingly, it was far more popular with the general public.) By then it was no longer possible to have an honest response to a book or movie across political battle lines. *Hillbilly Elegy*, published four months before the 2016 election, came out at the last possible moment to shape a national conversation. It belongs to an era that no longer exists.

Other than learning how elites get ahead, Vance made little use of his law degree. He spent a year clerking for a Kentucky judge, and less than a year at a corporate firm in D.C. Even at Yale he knew that practicing law didn't interest him. What he later called "the most significant moment" of his law-school years was a talk in 2011 by the billionaire venture capitalist Peter Thiel. I spent time with Thiel for a magazine profile that year, so I'm familiar with the pessimism of his thinking: America is going through a period of prolonged stagnation; supposedly revolutionary digital technologies like the iPhone and social media have turned out to be trivial, while chronic problems in the physical world—transportation, energy, bioscience—haven't improved; and this lack of dynamism drives elites like the ones in Thiel's audience to compete furiously for a dwindling number of prestigious but ultimately meaningless jobs.

This analysis of a soulless meritocracy in a decadent society held more than intellectual interest for Vance. Thiel was describing what Vance had already begun to feel about his new life among the credentialed: “I had prioritized striving over character,” Vance later wrote. “I looked to the future, and realized that I’d been running a desperate race where the first prize was a job I hated.” The talk gave an abstract framework for the psychological conflicts besetting a refugee from decline: burning ambition, and the char of guilt it leaves; longing for elite acceptance and resentment of elite disdain (the professor who scoffed at state-school education, the classmate who assumed that Marines must be brutes); what Vance called the “reverse snobbery” that a poor boy from flyover country feels toward the Yale snobs who know about butter knives while he alone confronts a belligerent drunk at the next table in a New Haven bar. In an [interview with Rod Dreher](#) of *The American Conservative* upon the publication of *Hillbilly Elegy*, Vance said, “It’s the great privilege of my life that I’m deep enough into the American elite that I can indulge a little anti-elitism.” He added, “But it would have been incredibly destructive to indulge too much of it when I was 18.”

Elite anti-elitism—contempt from a position of strength, the ability to say “Thanks but fuck you”—offered a way out of the conflicts. This was the first of many gifts from Thiel, and Vance would go on to indulge it every bit as destructively as his new mentor could wish. But not yet. He was still hard at work earning his credentials and preparing to enjoy their fruits.

The author of *Hillbilly Elegy* could only have a complex view of Donald Trump: an intuitive grasp of his appeal for people in Middletown, and horror at his effect on them. In an essay for this magazine published just a few weeks after the memoir, in the summer of 2016, Vance called Trump “[cultural heroin](#)”—the most apt metaphor possible. Trump was an overwhelmingly tempting drug that brought relief from pain but inevitably led to self-destruction, enabling all the ills—resentment, bigotry, coarseness, delusional hope—of a white working class in rapid decay. Shortly before the election, Vance warned that a refusal by Trump to accept its results would further alienate his supporters from politics, saying he hoped Trump “acts magnanimous.” Late on Election Night, when Trump’s shocking victory appeared imminent, ABC News, suddenly in need of an authority on Trump voters, pulled Vance from Yahoo News into its main studio as a native informant. “What are they looking for from Donald Trump?” George

Stephanopoulos asked. “What do they want tangibly?” Vance replied that they wanted a change in direction, and that if Trump failed to bring one, there would be “a period of reckoning.” Then he added with a slight smile: “I do think that folks feel very vindicated now, right? They believed in their man. They felt like the media didn’t believe in their man.”

What did Vance believe in?

Trump’s win brought the author of *Hillbilly Elegy* to new prominence as a national voice. It also placed a roadblock directly in the path of his ambitions. He had identified himself as a Never Trump conservative, [privately wondered](#) if Trump was “America’s Hitler,” and voted for neither major-party candidate. Suddenly the establishment that had embraced him and elevated him beyond his dreams could no longer offer means of ascent. Just about everyone who knew Vance assumed he intended to enter politics, but the Daniels-Huntsman-Romney species of Republican was halfway to extinction.

In January 2017, a week after Trump’s inauguration, a group of about a dozen conservatives—adherents of “reform conservatism,” a modernizing, more inclusive strain that took seriously issues such as inequality and the environment—gathered with Vance at the Washington offices of the Hoover Institution to advise him on his political future. These were policy intellectuals who had encouraged and validated young Vance. They discussed what their agenda should be now that a Republican few, if any, of them had supported was president. Were there positive aspects to be gleaned from Trump’s populism on issues like immigration? How far should Vance go to accommodate himself to the cultural-heroin president? One thing was certain: The people in the room were already losing their value to Vance.

A week later, on February 3, he spoke about *Hillbilly Elegy* and Trump at David Axelrod’s Institute of Politics, in Chicago. He gave [one of his most thoughtful performances](#), trying to tie the unraveling threads of the country back together, urging his audience to see the common ground between working-class Black and white Americans, arguing that both the cultural left and the racist alt-right represented a small number of mostly coastal elites. But he also made a startling claim about Trump that he would return to in the coming months and years: “If you go to one of his rallies, it’s maybe

5 percent him being really outrageous and offensive, and 95 percent him talking about ‘Here are all the things that are wrong in your community, here’s why they’re wrong, and I’m going to bring back jobs.’ That was the core thesis of Trump’s entire argument.”

Never mind the tone, Vance was saying, it’s trivial—pay attention to the content. But his percentages weren’t remotely accurate, and he was ignoring the inextricable bond between inflammatory language and extreme policies that held Trump’s speeches together and thrilled his crowds: What’s wrong in your community is *them*. Vance, too intelligent not to sense the hollow core of his claim, was taking a step toward Trump.

He also informed his audience that he was [moving back to Ohio](#).

According to a classmate, while still in law school Vance had gotten in touch with Thiel, who extended an open invitation to come see him in Silicon Valley. After graduation, marriage to Usha, and short stints in the legal profession, he moved to San Francisco and, in 2016, started working at Thiel’s venture-capital firm Mithril. But technology investing seemed to hold little more interest for him than corporate law. What excited him was politics and ideas. Thiel was preparing to endorse Trump and was mounting a radical attack on America’s sclerotic and corrupt institutions—universities, media, corporations, the regulatory state. His rhetoric became extreme, but his goals remained vague. Trump was an experiment: Thiel [wanted to blow things up and see what happened](#), and if it all went wrong he could move to New Zealand, where he’d invested millions of dollars and acquired citizenship. The alliance between Thiel (monopoly advocate, cognitive elitist, believer in supermen, admirer of the antidemocratic thinkers Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss) and Vance (son of the common people, who get screwed when things go wrong and have no way out) shows that reactionary populism is capacious enough to appeal to every resentment of the liberal status quo.

It’s hard to see the hand of Catholic humility in Vance’s public life. His conversion anticipated a sharp turn in how he went about pursuing power.

With prolonged exposure to the master class—the junkets in Aspen and Sun Valley—Vance collected disillusioning stories that would later help justify

his political transformation: the tech CEO whose answer for the loss of purpose among displaced workers was “digital, fully immersive gaming”; the hotel mogul who complained that Trump’s anti-immigrant policy made it harder for him to find low-wage workers. One feels that these clueless capitalists, like the condescending Yalies of half a decade earlier, played a genuine role in Vance’s turn away from the establishment, but that he enlisted them disproportionately. Incidents like these provided a kind of indulgence that allowed him to feel that he wasn’t with the elites after all, wasn’t betraying his own people while explaining their pathologies over dinner to the superrich—a role that was becoming more and more distasteful—and under the table he and Usha could quietly signal to each other: *We have to get the hell out of here. These people are crazy.*

The Vances moved first to Columbus in 2017, then bought a mansion in Cincinnati the following year and filled it with children while they both pursued the extremely busy careers of the meritocracy. Vance explained his return to Ohio as a desire to give back to his troubled home region and help reverse its brain drain; his political ambitions went unmentioned. He announced the creation of a nonprofit to combat the opioid epidemic, but the group, Our Ohio Renewal, [raised almost no money](#) and folded before it had achieved much more than placing a couple of op-eds. He put more effort into funding regional start-ups with venture capital, but [one of his biggest bets](#), an indoor-agriculture company in Appalachia, went bankrupt. With seed money from Thiel, in 2019 Vance co-founded his own firm, Narya Capital, and invested in the right-wing video-sharing platform Rumble and a prayer app called Hallow. Like Thiel’s Mithril Capital and big-data company, Palantir, the name Narya comes from Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*—a novel that obsesses a certain type of brainy conservative, particularly younger religious ones, with its hierarchical social order and apocalyptic battle between good and evil. As Vance turned away from classical liberalism, Locke and other Enlightenment philosophers gave way to Tolkien and C. S. Lewis. That same year, he became a Roman Catholic.

Around Easter 2020 Vance [published an essay about his conversion](#) in the Catholic journal *The Lamp*. It describes a largely intellectual experience, informed by reading Saint Augustine and the literary critic René Girard, driven by disenchantment with the scramble for credentials and consumer goods, and slowed by his reluctance to embrace a form of Christianity that

would have been alien to Mamaw, his late grandmother. He finally made up his mind when he “began to see Catholicism as the closest expression of her kind of Christianity: obsessed with virtue, but cognizant of the fact that virtue is formed in the context of a broader community; sympathetic with the meek and poor of the world without treating them primarily as victims.” Vance hoped that Catholicism would help him to care less about professional prestige, “let go of grudges, and forgive even those who wronged me.” However he is doing in private, it’s hard to see the hand of Catholic humility at work in his public life. His conversion anticipated a sharp turn in how he went about pursuing power, and it coincided with a wave of high-profile conservatives turning to religion. The essay was titled “How I Joined the Resistance.”

Vance didn’t give up his former beliefs all at once. It took him four years, from 2017 until 2021, to abandon one politics for another—to go from Never Trump to Only Trump. Compared with the overnight conversion experiences of innumerable Republicans, this pace seems admirably slow, and it probably reflects Vance’s seriousness about political ideas. He took time to make them intellectually coherent; then the moral descent was swift and total.

### Tom Nichols: The moral collapse of J. D. Vance

A close friend of Vance’s, another Ohioan, gave the most generous explanation of his political conversion. “His views have always been kind of rooted toward doing good for the working-class segment of America,” the friend told me. Progressives embraced an identity politics that placed Vance’s people somewhere near the bottom, and standard conservative policies hadn’t worked for them, especially on trade. In Ohio, Vance found that his people had become big Trump supporters. By 2018, the friend told me, Vance believed that Trump “was committed at least to doing the things he said and fixing the problems that J.D. also identified as problems”—the loss of jobs and decline of communities. In 2017 Vance had said that manufacturing jobs had been lost mainly to automation, and that protectionism wouldn’t bring them back. Before long he was blaming globalization, China, and the Republican donor class. “At that point J.D. realized he was very aligned with Trump on the issues,” the friend said.

In 2018, Vance told an acquaintance that he was thinking of voting for Trump in 2020. Onstage with Amy Chua that same year at the Aspen Ideas Festival, he said that people he knew in Ohio were angrier at Wall Street and Silicon Valley types than at ethnic- or religious-minority groups, and that Trump’s speeches, though “tinged with criticisms of Mexican immigrants or Muslims,” directed 85 percent of their vitriol at “coastal elites.” Another doubtful calculation—but it allowed Vance to align Trump’s more acceptable hostilities with those of his people and, by implication, his own. He wasn’t going to insult Mexicans and Muslims in front of an Aspen crowd, but the crowd itself was more than fair game.

The next year, at a pair of [conservative conferences](#), Vance argued that libertarianism didn’t have the answer for what ails American parents and children, workers and communities. He championed a “pro-family, pro-worker, pro-American-nation conservatism,” and he said: “In my own life, I’ve felt the demons that come from a traumatic childhood melt away in the laughter and the love of my own son.” The policy implications weren’t entirely clear. He was against abortion, Facebook apps designed to addict children, pointless wars that got his Marine buddies killed, and CEOs who didn’t care about American workers and families; he was for mothers and kids. He ended one speech by saying, “Donald Trump has really opened up the debate on a lot of these issues, from foreign policy to health care to trade to immigration.”

By 2020 Vance had publicly turned away from the residue of Reaganism toward what came to be called “the new right,” “national conservatism,” or simply “populism.” In a sense, he was following the well-trod path of his generation of conservatives. The Republican establishment had failed, the reformers hadn’t amounted to much, the Never Trumpers had lost—here was the obvious alternative.

But what had Trump actually done for people in the postindustrial heartland? The fentanyl crisis raged on, manufacturing job growth remained anemic, and the president’s main achievement—a tax cut—benefited corporations and billionaires far more than the working class. Vance knew all of this, and in early 2020 he wrote to one correspondent: “Trump has just so thoroughly failed to deliver on his economic populism (excepting a disjointed China policy).” But the political winds had turned, and now he massaged his public

remarks about Trump into vague approval while keeping his criticism private. Vance was getting ready to enter politics.

The generous account of Vance's political conversion contains some truth. It still fails to explain what followed.

A change in his view of tariffs didn't require Vance to go to Mar-a-Lago with Peter Thiel in early 2021 to seek the disgraced ex-president's forgiveness, then start and never stop repeating the very lie about a stolen election that he had warned against in 2016. In moving away from the Enlightenment and globalist neoliberalism, he could have stopped at the reactionary writer Christopher Caldwell or the post-liberal scholar Patrick Deneen. He didn't need to spend 90 minutes schmoozing with an alt-right podcaster and rape apologist who goes by Jack Murphy (his real name is John Goldman), insisting ominously: "We are in a late-republican period. If we're going to push back against it, we have to get pretty wild and pretty far out there and go in directions that a lot of conservatives right now are uncomfortable with."

#### [Cassie Chambers Armstrong: ‘Hillbilly’ women will get no help from J. D. Vance](#)

Vance could have run for the Senate as a populist without maligning half his compatriots—liberals, immigrants, women without children—as hostile to America. He could have become a father without devoting a speech to mocking the “childless left.” The Catholic Church didn’t command him to stop caring about human beings in other countries, or to value Israel more than Ukraine because most Americans are Christian and Jesus was born in Bethlehem, not Kyiv. He could have turned away from his Ivy League credentials after they stopped being useful without declaring war on higher education and calling professors “the enemy.” He could have put aside his law degree and still held on to what it taught him about judicial independence and due process.



The 2024 Republican National Convention, in Milwaukee, where Vance became Trump's nominee for vice president (Joseph Rushmore for *The Atlantic*)

After 2020 the prevailing politics on the right was apocalyptic, vituperative, and very online. Vance, ever skilled at adaptation, went with it all the way. If, as his patron Thiel argued, the country was under the control of a totalitarian, brain-dead left, almost any form of resistance was justified. When Vance argued that “the culture war is class warfare,” he was giving himself license to stigmatize large groups of Americans and flout the rule of law as long as he did it in the name of an abstraction called the working class.

But Vance never got away from elites. He simply exchanged one set of benefactors for another—traded Yale professors and TED audiences and progressive Silicon Valley CEOs for the money and influence that came with Peter Thiel, Tucker Carlson, and Donald Trump Jr. One elite elevated him to justify their contempt for the working class; the other championed him in order to burn down the first. Vance is interesting not only because he changed camps and was talented enough to thrive in both, but because the camps themselves, out of the lesser sin of decadence or the greater sin of nihilism, have so little to offer the country.

Vance transformed himself into the fullest incarnation of the Trump reaction —fuller than Trump himself, because Vance is more intelligent and disciplined, less likely to wander and stop making sense. He willed this change on himself because he had a lot to atone for and he was in a hurry. It won him Trump’s blessing in 2022 in a U.S. Senate race that Vance was losing, which gave him the Republican nomination and the election, leading to his choice as vice president in 2024, which could make him Trump’s 44-year-old successor in 2028.

Vance’s political transformation is so complete that it’s also physical. In the film adaptation of the Vance novel, imagine a scene in which the protagonist’s features in 2016 dissolve into a very different face circa 2025. The round cheeks and pudgy chin are now hidden by the growth of a Trump Jr. beard. The blue eyes, no longer boyish, are flatter, and they smile less. And the voice, which used to have an almost apologetic tone, as if he wasn’t sure of his right to hold the stage, now carries a constant edge, a kind of taunt. He’s more handsome but less appealing, and the loss of appeal comes from the fact that, like the movement that now runs the country, he’s animated by what he hates.

Like Trump, Vance shows no interest in governing on behalf of anyone outside MAGA. But the various phases of his life story make him—and him alone—the embodiment of all the movement’s parts. In a speech in March at a business conference, he [called himself](#) a “proud member of both tribes” of the ruling coalition—meaning of the populists like Steve Bannon, and of the techno-futurists like Elon Musk. He discounted the likelihood that they’ll fall out, and he insisted that innovations such as artificial intelligence will benefit ordinary Americans, because—despite the evidence of the past half century—“it’s technology that increases the value of labor.” MAGA can’t breathe without an enemy, and workers and innovators have “the same enemy”: the government. But MAGA is now the government, and the contradictions between its populists and its oligarchs are obvious.



Vice President Vance arrives in the Rose Garden for the president’s announcement of his “Liberation Day” tariffs on April 2, 2025. (Andrew Harnik / Getty)

Vance’s transformation has another advantage besides the obvious one for his political prospects. When he [grins slyly and says](#), “I’m gonna get in trouble for this” before launching an attack on some despised group, you can

feel him shucking off constraints that he's had to impose on himself since that recruitment dinner at Yale—or even earlier, since he was a boy in Middletown surviving the violence of adults. This more aggressive Vance has drawn closer to that hillbilly culture he long ago escaped. The vice president of the United States doesn't let a challenge to his honor pass. He's quick to anger, ready with a jibe, picks fights on social media, and brandishes insults such as "[moralistic garbage](#)" and "[smug, self-assured bullshit](#)." He divides the world into kinfolk and enemies, with steadfast loyalty for those in the first category and suspicion or hostility for the great majority consigned to the second. He justifies every cruel policy, blatant falsehood, and constitutional breach by aligning himself with the unfairly treated people he grew up with, whether or not his administration is doing them any actual good. His idea of American identity has gone hard and narrow—not the encompassing creed of the founding documents, but the Appalachian dirt of the graveyard where his ancestors lie buried.

To succeed in the world of elites, Vance had to let himself be civilized, at a psychological cost. When that world no longer offered what he wanted, he found a new world of different elites. They lifted him to unimagined heights of power, and at the same time they brought him full circle, to a return of the repressed.

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# Inside the Creepy, Surprisingly Routine Business of Animal Cloning

**“Really and truly, a horse can be alive forever. Forever and ever.”**

by Bianca Bosker



Updated at 10:30 a.m. ET on June 30, 2025

Twenty-seven years ago, Ty Lawrence began to be haunted by a slab of meat.

The carcass, which he spotted at a slaughterhouse while doing research as a graduate student, defied the usual laws of nature. The best, highest-quality steaks—picture a rib eye festooned with ribbons of white fat—typically come from animals whose bodies yield a relatively paltry amount of meat, because the fat that flavors their muscles tends to correspond to an excess of blubber everywhere else. This animal, by contrast, had tons of fat, but only where it would be delicious. “In my world,” Lawrence told me, “people would say, ‘That’s a beautiful carcass.’”

As Lawrence watched the beef being wheeled toward a meat grader that day, an idea hit him: *We should clone that.*

The technology existed. A couple of years earlier, in 1996, scientists at the Roslin Institute, in Scotland, had cloned Dolly the sheep. Lawrence lacked the funds or stature to make it happen, but he kept thinking about that beautiful carcass, and the lost potential to make more like it.

He was gathering data at another slaughterhouse in 2010 when, late one evening, he spotted two carcasses resembling the outlier he’d seen years before. Lawrence—by then an animal-science professor at West Texas A&M University—immediately called the head of his department. It was nearly 11 p.m. and his boss was already in bed, but Lawrence made his pitch anyway: He wanted to reverse engineer an outstanding steak by bringing superior cuts of meat back to life. He would clone the dead animals, and then mate the clones. “Think of our project as one in which you’re crossbreeding carcasses,” he told me.

A few years later, Lawrence and his team turned two tiny cubes of meat, sliced off exceptional beef carcasses at a packing plant, into one cloned bull and three cloned heifers. After breeding the bull with the heifers, Lawrence slaughtered the offspring to assess the quality of the meat, and found it to be just as terrific as the originals’. The next generation’s meat was even better than that—superior, even, to that of animals bred from the cattle industry’s top bulls.

Ranchers who are keen to mimic Lawrence’s results have since bought thousands of straws of semen from his bulls. One even tried to purchase his entire stock of sperm *and* animals, though Lawrence declined. The clones’

offspring and *their* offspring have, in turn, entered the food supply. “The progeny of the clones would’ve been eaten by, oh, I don’t know, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of people,” Lawrence said. Of the four original clones, two have died of old age. The remaining two are still on the university’s ranch—“grazing, drinking water, living their best second life,” Lawrence told me.

Increasing numbers of animals are getting a similar do-over. In the three decades since [Dolly proved](#) that a fully grown mammal could essentially be reborn, cloning has proliferated. By now, [nearly 60 different species](#) and subspecies have been cloned, including fruit flies, fish, frogs, ferrets, French bulldogs, and [monkeys](#), a feat [long thought to be nearly impossible](#), given the architecture of primate eggs.

### [Read: The truth about Dolly the cloned sheep](#)

Once confined to research labs, the technology has become reliable and lucrative enough to be the basis for companies around the world, which are churning out clones of super-sniffing police dogs, prizewinning show camels, [pigs for organ transplantation](#), and “high-genomic-scoring” livestock—which is to say, ultra-lactating dairy cows and uncommonly tasty beef cattle. The top-ranked polo player, Adolfo Cambiaso, has more than 100 clones of his best horses and once won a match riding six copies of the same mare at different points throughout the competition. At [a 2023 championship game](#), all four members of his team rode clones of that mare to face off against their opponents—who were mounted on the clones’ offspring. A video homage to the cloned horse listed her birth and death dates as “3 February 2001–∞.”

The public hasn’t necessarily warmed to this genetic tinkering, which strikes many as creepy: As of 2023, [a majority of Americans opposed cloning](#), in almost equal numbers as when Dolly was born. But whether or not they realize it, many thousands of clones have already been produced as the cloning process has become more and more routine. “We passed the number of where we kept track a long time ago,” says Diane Broek, an embryologist and a sales manager at Trans Ova Genetics, which specializes in cloning livestock. If you want a clone today, you’ll probably have to join a waiting list.

Many clones start their lives as a paste of bloody cells in a mirrored-window storefront that sits between a quilt shop and Diamond S Rustic Decor in Whitesboro, Texas (population 3,852, according to a road sign). Whitesboro is the headquarters of ViaGen Pets & Equine, the world's leading producer of cloned cats, dogs, and horses. "That's what we usually get: It's like, 'You do *what* in there?'" a receptionist said when I visited this past fall.

ViaGen's waiting area had the antiseptic comfort of a doctor's office, complete with several magazines on animal husbandry and a struggling houseplant. Beyond that was a long corridor flanked by brightly lit rooms that held lab equipment, freezers, and several of the embryologists who are among ViaGen's nearly two dozen full-time employees.

Technically, a clone is a genetic replica of another living creature that is "made"—professional cloners refer to themselves as *making* animals—without any of the sexual athletics that traditionally accompany reproduction. This level of human control over the biological order of things has provoked concern that these companies are playing God. In an effort to dispel misgivings about the technology, cloning firms have almost universally adopted the tagline that a clone is "an identical twin born at a later date."

The late billionaire founder of the University of Phoenix established ViaGen in 2002 by licensing patents from the lab that cloned Dolly. Eventually, his family's mutt was cloned four times. (This was done by a lab in South Korea, as ViaGen wasn't yet offering pet cloning.)

Cloning has since been embraced by wealthy clients accustomed to having their desires catered to exactly. Past ViaGen customers include Barbra Streisand, who received three clones of her late Coton de Tulear dog, and the family of Pablo Escobar, which cloned a horse.



Frozen clone embryos are stored using liquid nitrogen. (Brian Finke for *The Atlantic*)

ViaGen's office is hung with dozens of portraits of saucer-eyed kittens and bow-tie-wearing puppies—all made in its lab. “Lasting Love” is the company’s slogan, and its website features nearly 200 endorsements from pet owners, such as the grieving companion of the late Ceaser the cat, who writes, “What’s a splurge on luxury items when you can bring back a piece of your heart that you thought was broken forever.” The lasting love does not come cheap: \$50,000 for a cat or dog, or \$85,000 for a horse, payable online via credit card with all the ease of buying a blender. Once cloning is

complete, the company provides clients with a DNA test, performed by an independent lab, confirming that the resulting baby is, in fact, a clone.

ViaGen eagerly shares the emotional rewards of cloning, but it can be less forthcoming with certain details about the process itself. To copy your animal, you must first send ViaGen a few pieces of its flesh, which will be used to grow new cells to supply the DNA for the clone. If the so-called founder animal is still alive, ViaGen suggests a sunflower-seed-size patch of skin from someplace it won't be missed, such as the abdomen. If the clonee is dead, the company requires a sliver of ear—"For some reason, that grows really, really well," a ViaGen technician told me—which should be sliced off within five days of the animal's death and kept chilled but not frozen to avoid being damaged. Exceptions can be made. Once, a customer sent in the room-temperature scrotum of a sheep that had been dead for nearly a week.

Your animal's tissue will be minced with a scalpel, bathed in a solution of nutrients and antibiotics, then put into an incubator that mimics the environment of the mammalian body. "Each one of the cells in there has the blueprint to make an animal," Shawn Walker, ViaGen's chief science officer, told me as we bent over an incubator to inspect a clear plastic flask where thousands of dog skin cells were proliferating in pink goo. The growing cells need to be regularly supplied with the nutrient mixture, and the incubator was fluttering with Post-it-note reminders to "feed Thursday."

After about a week in the incubator, ViaGen will harvest a minimum of 1 million cells from the flask—a sample that, in theory, could be grown and regrown to make an infinite number of copies of the original animal. ViaGen will then freeze the cells until the client is ready to clone. Currently, ViaGen's record for the most clones for a single customer is 50 horses, the company's CEO, Blake Russell, told me. "And there have been lots of clients"—who also cloned horses—"in the 20s."

Although ViaGen says it has introduced its own refinements over the years, the cloning process, called somatic cell nuclear transfer, still follows the same basic steps first developed in 1952 by researchers in Philadelphia to copy a frog embryo. It requires removing an unfertilized egg (an oocyte) from a donor animal, then wiping it clean of its own DNA so it can carry the clone's. Working at a microscope beside a photo of Paris Hilton posing

poolside with her cloned Chihuahua, a ViaGen lab technician uses a glass-tipped pipette to suck out the oocyte's genetic material and, in its place, insert one of your animal's newly grown cells, which contains its DNA—and thus all the information, from fur hue to leg length, to grow a twin.

When animals mate the old-fashioned way, sperm cells have to contribute their genetic information to the oocyte; in this case, they're irrelevant. The lab technician zaps the egg with a static-electricity-strength electrical pulse that stimulates it to divide, and after a few more days in a body-temperature incubator, you have the embryo of a future clone. Dog, cat, and horse embryos are each kept in separate units. "We wouldn't want a mix-up," Walker said.

Now you need an animal to impregnate.



The cloning process, called somatic cell nuclear transfer, still follows the same basic steps first developed in 1952 to copy a frog embryo. (Brian Finke for *The Atlantic*)

For this, ViaGen frequently turns to a 70-year-old veterinarian named Gregg Veneklasen, who, in his 22 years working with the company, has had extensive experience dealing with the most contentious and least publicized parts of the cloning process: supplying eggs and wombs, and, when all goes well, delivering healthy baby animals.

Veneklasen, whose chest-length gray beard and rotating aloha shirts bring to mind Moses by way of Margaritaville, runs a vet clinic with a lived-in homeyness that is a far cry from ViaGen's buttoned-up operation. Located just outside Amarillo, Texas, a landscape of such unending red flatness that it looks like it was created by copy and paste, the clinic has bookshelves overflowing with animal bones; its floor is covered with stacks of textbooks, and its waiting room is presided over by a pair of languid tortoises. While scientists at ViaGen's headquarters handle the sterile lab work involved in cloning, Veneklasen and his colleagues—including a pair of identical twins he calls “my human clones”—are busy ultrasounding fetuses with their arms up mares' rectums and watching newborns take their first wobbly steps.

One morning, I arrived at Veneklasen's office to find him sitting at his desk in the dark with blood on his work boots and crimson smears of placenta in his beard, wearing the same aloha shirt he'd had on the day before. He'd been at the clinic since 4:30 a.m. helping a mare deliver a clone, the second version of the same bucking horse born in as many days. “It's pretty cool,” said Veneklasen of the newborn. “That thing was a piece of skin.”

Though Veneklasen specializes in horses, including million-dollar rodeo mounts and champion polo ponies, his fascination with reproduction has inspired him to tackle more offbeat cloning projects with ViaGen, including big-antlered deer for sport hunters, [an endangered Przewalski's horse](#) for the San Diego Zoo, cattle for Ty Lawrence's study at West Texas A&M, and genetically modified feral pigs with bright-orange snouts (to tell them apart from regular swine)—hundreds of animals in total.

Veneklasen guided me into a barn crowded with knee-high metal canisters that together contained a small cavalry of frozen clone embryos from ViaGen awaiting transfer into mares. He opened the top of one container, which spewed clouds of liquid-nitrogen vapor as he removed a metal basket of what looked like plastic coffee stirrers, each with a yellowish-white lump at the bottom: the embryo. Later, I'd watch a vet thread a thin stainless-steel syringe through a mare's vagina, then deposit the embryo in her uterus with the push of a plunger.

Veneklasen had started saving each straw as a keepsake after it had been emptied, and dozens of them were taped to one wall of his barn, like baby

photos at a pediatrician’s office. “There’s a Whistle, there’s a Bobby Joe,” he said, reading the names of cloned horses handwritten on the straws. “There’s another Whistle—they wanted tons of Whistles.” He rattled off a couple more, then immediately backtracked and asked me not to print one of the names. “This guy—I don’t know why, but he doesn’t want anybody to know.”

Plenty of people won’t cop to owning clones, or making them. ViaGen works with a variety of contractors, which it calls “production partners,” to source oocytes and surrogate females for the animals they clone, but aside from Veneklasen, most prefer to remain anonymous. “They’re a little nervous about maybe being associated with us,” Russell, the CEO, said. Many scientists who work with clones withhold the location of their facilities out of concern that they will be targeted by animal-rights activists. ViaGen does the same with the kennels where it keeps cloned pets, Russell told me, fearing “sabotage.”

A Gallup survey from 2023, the most recent year for which data are available, found that 61 percent of Americans considered animal cloning “morally wrong”—a number that has held steady over the past two decades, even as the technology has progressed. Enabling a mortal creature to be born anew, ad infinitum, seems to some like human overreach, and cloning can involve biological tinkering that feels unsettling. In 2002, researchers tried to clone giant pandas by injecting their genetic material into rabbit oocytes, which they then implanted into a cat. (It didn’t work.) Even the more pedestrian cloning procedures often jumble breeds together in a way that lends birth a jack-in-the-box quality, as if anything might come out. To keep up with demand, ViaGen will regularly put several dog embryos from multiple clients into a single surrogate—meaning that, as [a ViaGen employee told Wired](#) last year, a beagle could theoretically “give birth to a litter of a cloned Chihuahua, a cloned Yorkie, a cloned miniature pinscher.”



Blake Russell, the CEO of ViaGen, has a 1,000-acre ranch near Whitesboro, Texas, that includes multiple air-conditioned barns for the comfort of cloned foals. (Brian Finke for *The Atlantic*)

And that's when everything goes as hoped. Opponents of cloning object that it does not reliably produce healthy animals. ViaGen doesn't publish its data on the grounds that doing so would reveal proprietary information. Russell did tell me that 60 to 70 percent of ViaGen's cloned horse embryos will, after being transferred, result in a pregnancy—a success rate on par with the industry standard for regular embryo transfers. Yet cloned mammals that make it to term have been born with enlarged tongues, abnormal kidneys,

overdeveloped muscles, defective hearts, and malformed brains, among other ailments. Kheiron, an Argentine company that clones horses, [told \*Vanity Fair\* in 2015](#) that a quarter of its foals suffered from “serious or fatal health issues.”

Veneklasen told me that in the early days of cloning, he’d seen problems along these lines. “Fifteen years ago, it was hell,” he said. “They had big umbilical cords. And, some, they were contracted”—meaning the tendons of foals’ legs were unable to fully extend. But in the past decade, he said, “I haven’t seen any of that.” A 2016 study of 13 cloned sheep, including four Dolly clones, found them all aging normally. The latest evidence suggests that if a clone is born healthy, it will live as long and as well as any regular peer.

These days, cloning works well enough that companies often wind up with more animals than they need. Scientists’ inability to predict exactly how many embryos will make it, paired with customers’ impatience to get the animal they ordered, can lead to the implantation of extra embryos—say, six to eight to get a single puppy. At ViaGen, these “overproduction animals” will be offered at a discount to the client or adopted by an employee, Russell said. (A ViaGen spokesperson stressed that the company does not euthanize extra clones.)

Even if a clone is born healthy, other animals can suffer along the way. To create [the first cloned dog, in 2005](#), South Korean researchers extracted eggs from dozens of females, then surgically implanted 1,095 embryos into 123 dogs—yielding only two cloned puppies, one of which died of pneumonia shortly after birth. The process has since become more efficient, but harvesting oocytes and transferring embryos to dogs’ wombs still requires them to undergo surgery.

### [Read: Are pet cloners happy with their choice?](#)

In a paddock a short walk away from the frozen embryos, Veneklasen kept nearly 60 “recipient mares”—“recips” for short—which kicked up dust and nuzzled the dirt while they waited to have eggs removed, embryos implanted, or foals delivered. I watched one of Veneklasen’s twin colleagues, with the efficiency of a line cook, ultrasound several dozen

horses to monitor gestating clones or check mares' ovulation cycles, which the clinic controls with hormone injections that bring them into heat more quickly than usual so they can carry more foals.

Veneklasen argues that cloning is "zero inhumane." Almost all of his recipis are rescues, he told me—mostly quarter horses that didn't work out as mounts and, instead of being slaughtered across the border (the practice is effectively illegal in the U.S.), have been conscripted into a life of perpetual reproduction. "She's had 13 babies, and we just put them"—new embryos—"right back in," he said, pointing to a 22-year-old mare.

The surrogates are indisputably seen as more disposable than the clones they carry. One of the twins, Hannah Looman, described rescuing a clone by performing a C-section on a pregnant recip, which died from the surgery. "Unfortunately, the clone is going to be way more valuable than the mare, so we've got to focus on saving the clone first," she told me.

The mares I saw at Veneklasen's clinic had glossy coats and well-nourished flanks. Besides being healthy, a recip's key qualification is to be "just sweet," Veneklasen said. ViaGen's dog and cat surrogates, which include a range of breeds to accommodate offspring of varying sizes, are generally not rescues, but are specifically bred to be "docile," with good maternal instincts, Russell told me. (The company gets cat oocytes from spay clinics it sponsors, and buys dog eggs from vets and breeders.)

Cloning has sparked fears that we could copy our way to a dangerously limited gene pool. But ViaGen has actually experimented with using the process to reintroduce genetic diversity into inbred populations of endangered species, such as the black-footed ferret. A female ferret's cells were frozen at the San Diego Zoo after her death in 1988. Later, she was cloned; one of her clones was mated to a male and, in November, birthed two healthy kits. The endangered Przewalski's horse that Veneklasen helped ViaGen clone has yielded two colts—both copies of a stallion born in 1975—that will be bred with mares at the San Diego Zoo. Other labs have cloned rare species such as gaur and bantengs.

As if to settle the question of clones' well-being, Veneklasen brought me over to see the two recently delivered foals, both less than 48 hours old, that

had been cloned from a bucking horse buried not far from the recip's pasture. A clone's markings can differ slightly from the original's because of the way pigmented skin cells develop in utero, and the younger colt has a white star on its forehead that its predecessor did not. Hannah Looman and her identical twin—both with long, dark hair and wearing matching jeans with zippered vests over long-sleeved shirts—sat cuddling the younger newborn in its stall. "People get really freaked out by cloning, but you just have to say to them, 'It's no different than identical twins,'" Looman told me.

Veneklasen insists that spending time around clones is enough to convince anyone of cloning's merits. "I mean, all you have to do is go outside and start petting animals," he told me. "And everybody's like, 'Man, this is cooler than heck! That horse has been dead for five years, and yet, there he is.'"

Leslie Butzer cloned her first horse six years ago, but she's been a reproduction enthusiast for much longer. She has six children, about 40 or 50 horses ("I don't count or I have to tell my husband"), and three stables, where she's constantly striving to breed "the best ponies in the country"—a goal she reiterated to me four times. "People call me 'Mother Earth,'" Butzer told me by phone from her home in Florida. "I like to breed myself. I like to breed ponies."

Breeders have long intervened in the process of natural selection, deliberately mating animals to ensure that their offspring can produce more milk or fit into our purses. But even the most carefully orchestrated pairing yields a genetic unknown, whereas cloning guarantees an exact replica of a top animal. This has made it an enticing tool for professional breeders, and cloning firms' clients range from family farms to biotech companies. "Did I mention this is addicting?" one pork farmer wrote in a testimonial for Trans Ova, the livestock-cloning firm. Some breeders have even introduced gene editing in an effort to further upgrade their animals—manipulating bovine DNA, for example, to make drought-resistant cows. This process makes use of the same technology developed for cloning, although here the oocyte's genetic material is replaced with cells from an animal whose DNA has been modified for desirable traits.



The waiting area at ViaGen's office in Whitesboro (Brian Finke for *The Atlantic*)

Butzer's husband and daughter, who are both vets, have helped numerous clients clone their pets, but Butzer first got interested in using the technology herself after striking up a conversation with a ViaGen employee at a veterinary conference. Soon after, she called Blake Russell to discuss her exceptional pony Rico Suave. Then 18, solidly middle-aged in equine years, Rico was clever, athletic, and sound—everything Butzer wanted in a horse. Ponies of this caliber can be leased for as much as \$250,000 a year, and in the decade that she'd owned him, Butzer had made about \$2 million leasing

him to riders, including the Bloomberg family. Rico's only shortcomings: He was mortal and had no testicles.

Like most stallions, Rico had been castrated to make him more docile. But because cloning replicates only what's encoded in DNA—and none of the physical changes an animal experiences post-birth—Rico Suave II was born fully intact and is, at age four, a father of three with two more on the way. Even now, this strikes Veneklasen as something of a magic trick: “Sperm from a gelding!” he hooted as we watched the un gelded clone of a castrated horse ejaculate into a plastic sleeve held by one of the identical twins. (Some equestrian disciplines, such as thoroughbred racing, do not allow clones to compete; others, such as rodeo, show jumping, and polo, have embraced the practice.)

Far more livestock than pets are cloned annually, and for reasons more practical than sentimental. The FDA approved the sale of meat and milk from clones in 2008, though cloned livestock are typically born to be bred, not slaughtered; their value lies in propagating their genes. Take Apple, a copper-colored Holstein with an imperious pout and a mammary system of near-bouncy-castle proportions. Mike Deaver, a former dairy farmer, told me he became “completely obsessed” with Apple after seeing the then-two-year-old heifer at a nearby farm in Wisconsin in 2006. Deaver recalled having less than \$1,000 at the time, but he scraped together \$60,000—an astronomical sum for such a young heifer—to buy her. Within a few months, he had skin samples taken so he could get her cloned.

Apple quickly distinguished herself: She was unusually fit, produced as much milk as top cows, and, at the 2011 World Dairy Expo, won Grand Champion in her division, a prize that recognizes the best genetics in a breed. With Trans Ova, Deaver made nine clones of Apple, essentially stockpiling her DNA. Then he began selling the genetic material to dairy farmers. They bought offspring (\$190,000 for Apple's first heifer), clones (as much as \$50,000 each), and semen from her bull calves (which, at \$50 a straw, brought in about \$3 million). Apple now has descendants in more than 100 countries. “I’m going to say she generated us \$10 million,” Deaver said. Apple’s genetics were so impressive that at the 2013 World Dairy Expo, one of her clones took the top award, Apple came in second, and Apple’s daughter placed third.

Thanks to cloning, an exceptional creature's genetics are no longer in short supply—"We make the irreplaceable animals replaceable" is a Trans Ova sales pitch—and this has complicated the issue of who owns what. "With five minutes with a horse in the stall, I could get enough DNA to have it cloned," simply by slicing off some of its skin, one breeder and ViaGen client told me. Cambiaso, the polo player, sued a former business partner, alleging that he'd violated their agreement to make "limited first-edition clones" of Cambiaso's top horse by selling "unauthorized" copies to competitors. Cambiaso argued that this constituted a misappropriation of his trade secrets. After a jury sided with Cambiaso, a judge required the business partner to return every clone, as well as all the tissue samples that had been used to make them.

En route to Blake Russell's ranch, a 1,000-acre property near Whitesboro that includes multiple air-conditioned barns for the comfort of cloned foals, Russell pulled over beside a fenced-in field and hopped out. "Let me show you something cool," he said.

Inside the pasture were seven clones of the same mare, all two years old or younger and being kept for a polo client. The chocolate-brown fillies looked so similar, it felt like a trick of the eye, although it was their behavior that caught me off guard. Instead of scattering around the meadow, they all grazed in a clump, and when they saw us walking through the pasture, they trotted over, moving in unison like a murmuration of starlings. Each one explored me in the same affable way as they took turns sniffing my sneakers, notebook, and hair. All seven trailed us back to the car.

To many of ViaGen's clients, cloning is appealing because of the potential they see to replicate an animal's physical *and* mental makeup. ViaGen's website assures customers that a clone can share the original's temperament and intelligence. But some people have come to believe that clones get even more from the founder animal than that: They theorize that past experiences can be recorded in an organism's cells through a process they refer to as "cellular memory," and transmitted just like eye color. "There's not a scientist in the world who will agree with me, except that I've seen it," Veneklasen said.



Norman, Winston, Sven, Fred, and George are all clones of a horse named Dynamo. (Amy Lynn Powell for *The Atlantic*)

The cloning community abounds in anecdotes: six-month-old puppies that supposedly complete agility courses as well as a five-year-old dog would; horses with the founder animal's same fear of garden hoses or antipathy toward men. ViaGen studiously avoids making promises about cellular memory, which remains firmly a theory. Only a handful of studies have compared the behavior of clones with more traditionally bred animals, and these have found negligible differences. A 2003 paper that analyzed nine cloned pigs found that their habits and preferences varied as much as—and in some cases more than—those of eight naturally bred pigs. To what degree anyone's behavior is shaped by genetics versus other factors continues to be a mystery, one I couldn't help thinking of as I watched the identical twins at Veneklasen's clinic doing their rounds. "It is funny: We both ended up doing the same thing," Looman told me. "I don't think we would've thought that."

When a beloved horse dies, Veneklasen said, he and his twin colleagues "always tell each other, 'She'll be back.'" Our tendency to project a consistency of behavior onto copied creatures speaks to what people are

eager to see in them: that they are the animal we treasured, back again for another round at life. A clone can't resurrect the original. But in a way, it can ensure that the original never dies. "Really and truly, a horse can be alive forever. Forever and ever," Veneklasen told me. It's hard not to wonder whether we will turn that technology on ourselves.

In 2014, a team of researchers in California [removed skin cells from a 75-year-old man](#), implanted his DNA into four dozen oocytes taken from human egg donors, and successfully created a cloned human embryo that developed into stem cells—the precursor to a fully fledged fetus. Neither that embryo nor several others that were made were transferred into a womb; the hope is that the technology could one day be used to, say, grow you a new kidney in a lab. But human cloning is no longer such a hypothetical.

Russell told me that ViaGen has been approached by people keen to explore it. But, he said, "we try to make it very clear our door is not even cracked open for that discussion."

More than 80 percent of Americans [consider human cloning "morally wrong,"](#) although 12 percent now approve of it—a number that has ticked up over the past two decades. Some proponents argue that in the interest of discovery and progress, science should never be hemmed in. But from the moment Dolly the sheep was unveiled, cloning has rattled people's faith in scientists to self-regulate. "I'm trying to think of any single announcement short of the atomic bomb that made people as nervous," a bioethicist told me.

Certainly, the risk of public condemnation hasn't been enough to prevent some determined individuals from experimenting with human cloning. At least four different people or groups have, since the early 2000s, claimed to be working toward the goal. These include one of the senior-most leaders of a cult, an Italian physician sentenced to prison for drugging a nurse and harvesting her eggs, and a South Korean scientist who faked data and [was convicted of embezzlement and ethics violations](#) in a case that revealed women had been paid to donate their eggs for his experiments. None of them, as far as we know, has succeeded in copying a person.

[From the June 2002 issue: Cloning Trevor](#)

But what's actually stopping anybody from trying to clone themselves or someone else? In the United States, human cloning is legal at the federal level. Although some states outlaw the practice, more than two dozen others, including Texas, Florida, and Pennsylvania, have no prohibitions. The U.S. government does not allow the use of federal dollars for human cloning. But given the appetite for immortality among Silicon Valley elites and others, private funding might be relatively easy to come by. "You don't need that much to try human cloning," says Hank Greely, the director of the Center for Law and the Biosciences at Stanford University. "You need an IVF clinic, basically, and a small lab." (He added that it would be "deeply wrong and unethical" to attempt it.)

I spoke with one person who remains eager to give it a go. Panayiotis Zavos, a fertility specialist in Kentucky, [claimed in 2009](#) that a human clone was forthcoming: He said he had, at an undisclosed location, implanted 11 cloned human embryos into the wombs of four women. Whether he really did this is unclear; no babies were born. Though he is not actively pursuing cloning research now, Zavos told me, he's still interested in copying a person. He wouldn't say what he would need to restart his efforts, for fear of being inundated with requests. "The activity can be turned on by a switch by tomorrow, if need be," he said. Only a few hours before we spoke, he said, he'd received a call from a German woman dying of liver cancer who was curious to explore whether she could twin herself and leave her clone her fortune. That, or harvest its liver.

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*This article appears in the [July 2025](#) print edition with the headline "The Clones Are Here." It originally stated that Panayiotis Zavos was a physician. In fact, Zavos has a doctorate of reproductive physiology.*

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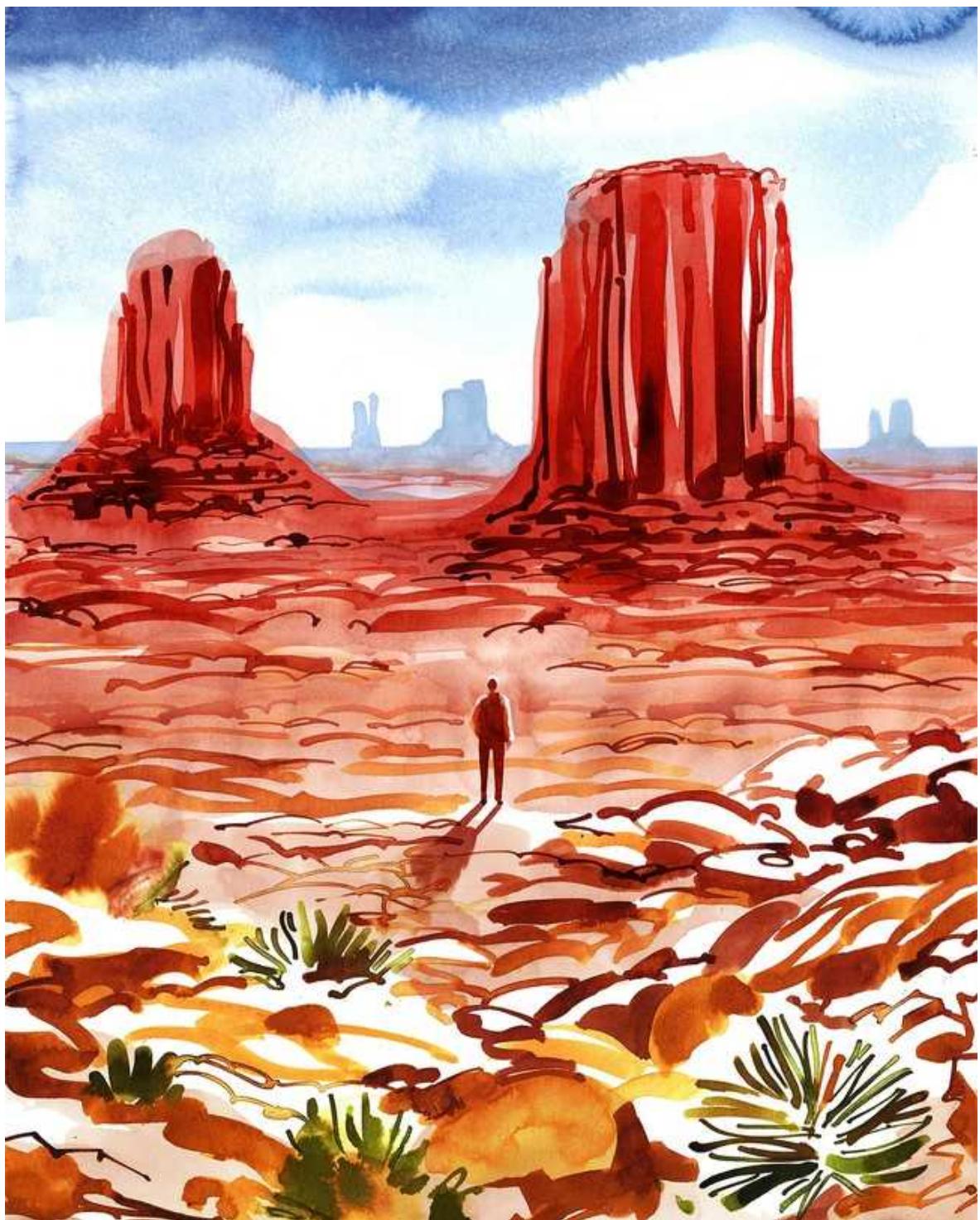
# Fiction

- [\*\*Weepers\*\*](#)

# Weepers

## A short story

by Peter Mendelsund



You can see the buttes and mesas easily—see them from the road. But to see them in all their glory, you have to walk a ways off the asphalt. That's true for the rest of it as well: the dried riverbeds, gullies, hoodoos, and hogbacks. The sky you can see from anywhere, but go farther into the land and it

becomes bluer, deeper, and the whole shebang becomes just stupidly scenic, like something a cartoon roadrunner would paint to outwit a cartoon coyote.

Meaning death might lurk behind every vista.

My father and I used to go out there together. The “together” being a concession to my mother, a concession granted bitterly and retributed upon me in various ways. He would hunt. Desert mule deer, mostly. He didn’t say much to me on those trips. No life lessons. It was mostly us tramping around, him shooting, animals dropping, me bearing dumb witness.

*Out among arroyos, beneath the steepled skies ...*

That line came to me once on such a trip.

On that particular outing, Dad had been worse off than usual, and when our car wove into the lot and stuttered into park, he listed over, hat falling. I listened to the dash beep for a full minute before I turned the key from the passenger side. The engine pinged a while. And when it was clear that he wasn’t waking up anytime soon, I got out and walked off into the scrub alone.

I walked and walked. The buttes came into focus. Up closer, they were ribbed, like a bunch of lady-giants gathering in their skirts (and I thought of that line, about “the giants” and their “skirts,” then too).

Anyway, back on that hike of mine, I was intent—as I often was as a teenager—on trying to write something, in this case about the sanctity of the landscape I was then toiling through. And by the time the sun was all the way up, I was sitting on a rock in the shadow of one of those behemoth formations, still trying to tie together those themes. I couldn’t make the poem work.

Yet that day, on my own, without my dad’s oppressive squint, and without the silence-splintering gunshots, the world opened itself up before me, and though I couldn’t wrangle that poem into anything usable, I was just full of metaphor.

As the sun moved, I moved with it, and I came eventually all the way up to touch that great butte, where I plopped down again. Ate my lunch. Drank most of the powdered tea. Saw clouds complete a full passage across the sky. The shadow receded. I kept having to move to stay inside it.

I wrote some more.

After a while, out in the scree, it occurred to me that if Dad hadn't woken up, he'd be frying in the car, maybe dead. So I put my notebook away, gathered myself up, and went back. I was panting and half dead myself by the time I got to the lot.

Car was gone.

I walked home beside the highway—took the whole rest of the day, into evening, to get there—tee tied above my charred brow, canteen empty, head swimming, hot metal shrieking past.

That night I had to sleep in a full tub, and the pain of those burns didn't subside for a long while.

After my father lost the ranch, he took whatever job he could find, landing finally on insurance, meaning he sold it. Sold policies to dry cleaners, quick-service food operations, down-market rodeos, strip clubs, pool-maintenance firms, bowling alleys, lube joints, moving companies, wrecking crews, pawnshops, lumberyards, sewage-removal units, taxidermists, pest-control outfits, massage parlors, go-cart tracks, gas stations, brick-facers, laser-tag arenas, drive-ins, that place that sells local shit on Interstate 23 (meteorites, Native memorabilia, petrified wood), the Motel El Rancho, the barbers and the ladies'-hairdo spots, spirit vendors, pet groomers, general contractors, karate dojos—that is, whatever small-business interests managed to stick it out through the long drought and downturn, the same one that forced him off his land.

He did not love his new life, it's safe to say, as it is safe to say that risk assessment and liability were not the subjects of his childhood dreams. Horses and cattle were, and the thwarting of those dreams—the daily defeat of unattainable desires—accounted for much of the serious mean he had on

him (the drink accounted for the rest), and by the time I was 10, he could be red-faced and despicable all the way from breakfast through bed. We never saw him for dinner, but sometimes after, when I was already tucked in, I'd hear that stammering tread, and wince. His unpleasantness was rank, a herd in the parlor, trampling and snorting, squeezing the rest of us into tight spaces, or straight out of the room.

Then the next drought. And the next slump. Everything blighted, including those local concerns, and so too the selling of insurance. Money, always a hardship for us, became a desperate need, and notices began appearing—first in the mail and then on the door—at the new place we rented in town. Then came the death of my mother's sister back East from cancer in her uterus, with her parents following not long after. And next, one result of the mounting losses, came my mother's discovery of Christ.

This was completely out of nowhere, and calamitous. Calamitous for two reasons, one of which was that it drove a wedge between her and me, as though she had newly birthed—and then favored—a whole other son. Soon after, she ceased reading books, once her daily bread: gave up reading them to herself, and reading them to me, her (true) son, just as she gave up all of those wonderful and various words she tendered to me for my benefit. *Impassive. Wan. Burnish. Epitaph. Susurration. Cumulative. Staccato.* All language, that is, that wasn't dictated by the Lord in his book.

She also ceased using that sweet, teaching voice of hers, and spoke to me instead with a disappointed-sounding voice, as if I was beyond hope.

*When had I got beyond hope?* I thought.

I had already begun to recognize that when she spoke to me in that new delivery of hers, she was not in fact speaking to me at all, but to those, generally, who had not seen, and never would see, the holy light (a company of the condemned, which also included the squirrels, the detergent, the porch, the desert, the sky, the dead).

The second calamity was that her newfound path antagonized my father, who had always stored up and slung his trademarked nastihoods at the faithful, taking their ways and manners as a personal affront, as if they were

leveling accusations. And so he would spout off about those who would collude in mockery of him:

—Hell's better than church.

Just as Mom became “raised up,” his degradation metastasized into true hate, and he became even more “lowered down.” Barely seemed possible then, though by now, at my age, I’ve seen that there’s always room in a body for more poison to drink.

He started to appear in all kinds of places where he had no business being. He was found in the town dump. He was found asleep in a parked bus he had broken into. Once, inside the car wash, the one with the colorful, riffling little flags. They were about to turn the machines on—the hard, hot bristles; that steaming rubber octopus—when someone saw him lying down there.

Several times he passed out in a public park and quite a few times ended in lockup.

On some of these occasions, we were the ones who found him. Those were the lucky times.

Mom always cleaned him up after, her expression strangely more satisfied than ever—a look of blushing fulfillment as she scoured him from top to bottom in the tub.

And so we maintained. Maintained through that whole year, until the new minister took over at the church on Holland, a church that my mother was then just beginning to attend. That’s what finally did it for us. Or started to, anyway.

We found out about the new minister on a day Dad and I had come home early from hunting. My father had expended all his rounds into the dirt and air, having missed every living thing, missed because the sun was too fierce, Dad too unsteady. He was already in a dark state on the drive home, and I was treated to short bursts of well-rehearsed invective about who exactly should be blamed for his ill fortune, his conclusions on this matter having nothing to do with himself, but rather focused on a blurry band of cutthroats,

teat-suckers, and layabouts who fully intended to rob him blind of everything he loved, owned, and, most importantly, was owed—him being owed everything from his rifle to his undershorts, his commemorative-coin collection, his bolo, his brown liquors, his slurs and spurs, his Tiparillos, his gasoline, his hamburger sandwiches, his lawn chair, his pomade, the hitch in his stride, the music that sprang up in his Pontiac mid-twang as soon as he turned the key, his drawl, his self-reliance, that famous mustache of his, his pocket change, his confetti of lottery tickets, the deed on the old ranch.

At heart, this “owed to him” was mostly (what he saw as) his position at the top of the pile, this bit coming in direct contravention of another lecture of his, concerning the importance of initiative, an initiative he never showed a lick of himself (a lecture I would entitle “Get-Off-Your-Ass,” or, often, “Where’s-My-Fucking-Beer?”), and why anyone as train-wrecked and delinquent as my dad should be owed a single cent for his lousiness was hard to square. But of course I never said anything as he went on and on until we pulled in the driveway. And as we entered the house on that day, I heard the muted cadence of pleasant conversation, a thing as strange to hear—as out of place in my home—as the sound of an ocean suddenly lapping gently at the front yard.

The minister was sitting down to a soda with my mother in our kitchen.

Or rather, he was rising quickly as we entered—in the manner in which polite men might, when caught out alone with a woman. Pushing his chair away, backing up a tick. He even stuck his hands up and pumped his palms, smiling, as if to say, *Whoa there*.

—I’m Reverend Monroe. I was just telling Eileen about our new ministry.

I thought to wonder if I’d ever seen a Black man in our house before, but looking at one standing there, I became damned sure I had not.

Dad looked perplexed, truly taken aback. The world took a breath.

—Come join us, my mother said, patting the seat beside her.

But my father's look had shifted. And he was suddenly, dangerously amused.

He gave a dry laugh and said:

—It's so kind of you to look in after my wife.

—James was just telling me about his work overseas, said my mother, overly quick.

—James? said my dad, eyes of slits.

I felt then the release of something bitter and cold, a hazardous vapor—like the liquid nitrogen from a coolant truck.

I spun around without anyone even noticing. Went out the front door, and the wind closed it behind me such that I involuntarily jumped over the three steps down to the pavement. I started off east.

I found myself at my best friend Dill's. We spent our afternoons out in the culvert those days, living on jerky, throwing rocks at other, bigger rocks. Clinging to railway trestles and feeling that thunder above. Dill and I ended up going to the mini-mart for bottle rockets and snappers and then went to the parking lot to expend our ordnance. I wasn't home again until the evening. When I did get there, I headed upstairs.

My father's voice cannoned out at me from the living room.

—Where is your ma? it said, and I knew this as demand, not question.

I searched the house, and then went back into the darkening streets and visited the neighbors, but she wasn't anywhere. I came home—empty-handed—and luckily Dad was asleep on the couch, his back hunched away from the entrance. I took off my shoes and finally got to my room.

The next day, I learned that Mom had been at the clinic in town. Dad was, as usual, God knows where. But there was Mom, back in the kitchen, humming something and wiping down a counter. She turned and I saw.

A week later, she returned to that church on Holland. This was willfully unwise. But it was an expression of hope, and at least someone in that disfigured family of mine was drawn to consecrated places.

Of course there was an aftermath. Another one. A bigger one. And I have decided to let that all happen offstage and I certainly don't intend to continue making a big federal-style case out of it. Except for one aspect of the smacking-around (Mom's, mine), which is this: the overdeveloped sympathy that I feel for Dad, a prime example of my ability (or need) to inhabit the shoes of another, even the shoes of the antagonist, though such shoe-borrowing can be kleptomania, a disease.

Now, I'm not saying I forgive. No. I am sure I do not. But anger and resentment do not prohibit my exploring my father's corroded heart and finding in myself, if not love, then some understanding of the hateful engine that drove him.

And so, despite the unseemliness I feel around it all (which, given that I am a card-carrying commiserative, must seem odd, but believe me when I say I do worry that these stories of my youth are too maudlin, even for me, a very duke of mawkishness), I will tell some more (if only a little).

Only one more instance, and this was when Dad hit me in front of Mom, and because of Mom, and I did not hit back, and how that—as it were—set a tone.

I was slightly older then—must have been around 17. I had been spending an increasing amount of time out of the house, for the usual reasons, those being Dad, and one day had been invited out by my teen associate Marvin Grosvenor, whose cousin had a car we could borrow to drive with Dill to the dog track over in Coolidge.

We did that.

Spent the day at the dogs, lost some money, won some, and lost it again, and after, we went to the culvert to shoot our mouths off and shotgun beers.

I came home pretty late, which wasn't a thing as Dad was out and Mom had choir practice. But the following morning, the phone rang, and I could hear through the floorboards the indistinct sound of my mother's voice, and as the pauses between her speaking became longer, and the pitch dropped to something lower and more serious, I began to fret. When I came downstairs, she told me that Marvin's mother had called. Turned out the car we'd taken had not belonged to Marvin's cousin, but had been Mrs. Grosvenor's own—that it had not been so much borrowed as hijacked, and that Marvin, when confronted with evidence of his crimes, had spilled the beans on me and Dill, not just for the joyride but also for the gambling, the beers. The total rat. And as I stood there under the kitchen's exceedingly bright lights, captive to a litany of my transgressions, I considered the notion that I'd rather be slapped around than see my mother so dispirited.

—Shame on you, is what she said.

And I felt it.

That hot shroud of shame.

Still, I found myself saying then, as fatigue and hangover began to encroach upon reason, as if someone else had got hold of my vocal cords (and shame-heat being so proximate to anger-heat):

—It's none of your business, Mom.

(Shame: redoubled.)

At that moment, Dad walked in.

—What'd you just say to your mother?

—Nothing.

—Wasn't nothing.

—Didn't mean it.

My mother made some small noise.

—Fuck no, he said to her, and she did not say or do a thing.

Then, turning toward me and stepping up closer, he whispered:

—What you got, boy?

I looked at the floor, saying, quietly as I could:

—...

And the fist hit me on the right cheek.

When I got to my feet again, the thing of it was—not pain but—the feeling I had experienced of skin on skin. What I mean to say here is that the punch was shattering, yes, like all the others—I don’t think he ever touched me except to hit me—but shattering because of how intimate this one was. I had smelled his breath and seen the individual bristles on his chin, the marbling of his eyes, the birthmark on his brow. It felt (I am embarrassed to say it) almost romance-like. A shared secret.

Skin on skin. The rough, hairy ridge of that man’s knuckles meeting my smooth cheek.

He swung again, but I had put my arm up by then, and so it was more of a glancing thing, and then a grapple, which increased our congress to an unbearable level as I could feel the ambient warmth coming off him, his scent and sweat, hear his heavy snorts (and I wonder now if he felt what I felt in that moment: that beneath his fury were the dim traces of other, kinder embraces. I doubt it, but I know now that such belligerence-judo is always a kissing cousin to a tenderness-judo, and so it is with some men, and so it has always been, and so it always will be, and anyhow).

I pushed away and stood up fully.

—You want more? he said, but gasping.

I realized at that moment—with the fast and fierce intelligence of a cornered animal—that if I were to punch back, I would score a few hits of my own, more than a few, and good ones, as I was by then big and strong enough,

which I think he, in that wild moment, clocked as well, because he looked even angrier then, squared up as if he could have well and truly killed me. And I believe he could have (and maybe would go so far as to say definitely would have) had there been something to swing at me then, anything at all instead of his bare hands. And I don't mean the extension cord or that belt he favored, but if he had:

... a coffee mug or a beer bottle or a pipe or the bronze statue on our mantel of the man riding the bucking horse, a regional insurance award that he had won—way back somehow and against all reason—or one of the two table lamps, or a claw hammer, or a chair, or a leg from a chair, or the TV remote, or one of his two guns, or a kettle, or the fire poker, or the phone receiver, or a loose doorknob, or a tire iron, a paperweight, a letter opener, a kitchen knife, a bowling ball, a rake, that old rail spike he kept as a memento of a prelapsarian age, a rolling pin, a crowbar, a baseball bat, a broom handle, a can of soup ...



Ben Pearce

That is: I used to do such an inventory of the house, tracking items in it according to their potential use as weaponry. But though I could see him look around quick (milk carton, dish towel, cigarette pack), he had nothing at hand, and so I was able to duck and slip around him and be out of the kitchen before anything more could happen, him shouting hellfire after me, though I know now that I ran not because I didn't think I could take him, but because I could have, and I needed that whole sick, combative closeness to end.

I ran, landing back up among the buttes and mesas.

So that was grievous and lousy, seriously so, and I do not forget how grievous and lousy it was. And it was several years later when I received that automated message on my machine that went:

Hello. The \_\_\_\_\_ Correctional Facility for \_\_\_\_\_ regrets to inform you of inmate \_\_\_\_\_'s recent demise. Our extended sympathy for your loss. For more information, please contact \_\_\_\_\_ at \_\_\_\_\_.

*[Dial tone.]*

To this day I do not know how exactly it went down for him, as I had not cared to inquire.

But now I do wonder. And I imagine a hard end for Dad there, given the setting, and I think about how, in my nightmares, the eyes of my father became the frantic ones of those destroyed deer, and I feel bad, but then again, he earned his end—all of us are our own arsonists of the world—and so with regard to him, I rarely reproach myself for those moments of ill will and nasty thinking.

But still, still: It should also be said that I am, occasionally, reminded of the way back—when the suit and tie were still new to my father. Memories of kindnesses, strewn like a scant handful of seed. Memories of the view from his shoulders. A sing-along. Before life roughed him up. When he still dressed for the office. Those moments actually happened.

They stopped, of course, but at first he would teeter between the loving and the violent, and even exhibited the two overlapping, in that he might cry as he pulled out that extension cord and called for me. I still don't know who his tears were supposed to be on behalf of, but I think of them as a prime example of the thin boundaries between feelings, how they can come together, like anger and shame, and feed on one another.

That day of (what was to be) his final attempt on me, I heard my mother's voice as I ran from the house, and I looked over my shoulder, and caught through the diminishing doorway a momentary sight of him, red-faced but

also: wet-eyed . . . and these eyes have become almost like an emblem of the whole event, a sign for it, the thing it strangely comes wrapped in. That is, when I think back on it all, wincing, I dwell upon his wet eyes.

Those wet eyes, though, I'll think. Those wet eyes.

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*This story has been excerpted from Peter Mendelsund's third novel, [Weepers](#). It appears in the [July 2025](#) print edition.*

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# Dispatches

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# Feudalism Is Our Future

## What the next Dark Ages could look like

by Cullen Murphy



Judging from news accounts and interviews, numerous people in and around the Trump administration are beguiled by imperial Rome. They see themselves as interpreters of its lessons—beware immigration; uphold masculinity; make babies—and inheritors of its majesty. A banner at this

year's Conservative Political Action Conference, in Washington, D.C., [depicted Donald Trump in Augustan profile](#), his brow garlanded with laurel leaves. Elon Musk styles himself "Imperator of Mars" and [has named](#) one of his many children Romulus. Steve Bannon [keeps a bust of Julius Caesar](#) in his Capitol Hill office.

Two decades ago, when *maga* was just a Latin word for "enchantress," I [wrote a book](#) about ancient Rome and modern America. The book didn't touch on masculinity or the birth rate, and it didn't try to explain the fall of Rome; the idea was just to [sift through the story of a past society](#) for clues to the one we live in now. Researching a bygone empire brought me into contact with prominent scholars who generously gave me their time. One man I think about often is the late Ramsay MacMullen, a historian at Yale and the author of the classic 1988 study [\*Corruption and the Decline of Rome\*](#) —a book whose lessons retain their grip.

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*This article was featured in the One Story to Read Today newsletter. [Sign up for it here.](#)*

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MacMullen was nearing 80 when I met him, still an active outdoorsman, and at the time considered the greatest living historian of the Roman empire, an honorific bestowed by the American Historical Association. We got together initially for lunch in New Haven, Connecticut, and afterward kept up by phone and email. I already knew him as a jaunty writer, spelunking among funerary inscriptions and papyrus fragments and bits of ancient poetry. In person, his short, tousled white hair complemented the way he spoke: confident, casual, polydirectional. At lunch, MacMullen brought up a wide range of topics—perhaps dwelling too long on early Church councils—but again and again came back to a single theme: what happens to a polity when central control and common purpose are eroded by expediency, self-interest, and profit. This had been the subject of his book on corruption—a word, as MacMullen used it, with connotations broader than bribery and graft.

What interested him, he explained, were the mechanisms that kept the Roman empire functioning, and how grit worked its way inexorably into the cogs. Rome never had an administrative state as developed as anything we know today, but when it worked, it worked pretty well. What MacMullen

called a “train of power” linked authority at the center to faraway commanders and distant magistrates, to minters of coin and provisioners of ships—all the way “to a hundred cobblers in the Bay-of-Naples area, a hundred peasant owners of ox-carts in Cappadocia.”

[From the October 2003 issue: Cullen Murphy on medieval characteristics of the present day.](#)

And then it came undone. MacMullen described the problem: Over time, layers of divergent interests came between command and execution, causing the train of power to break. The breakage could come in the form of simple venality—somewhere along the way, someone found it profitable to ignore distant authority. Or it could occur because a public task was put into private hands, and those private hands had their own interests to protect. The military was largely farmed out to barbarian contractors—*foederati*, they were called—who did not always prove reliable, to put it mildly. In many places, the legal system was left to the marketplace: A bronze plaque survives from a public building in Numidia listing how much a litigant needed to pay, and to whom, to ensure that a lawsuit went forward.

MacMullen had many examples of such breakage—a whole book of them.

A political scientist might use the phrase *externalization of state functions* to capture much of what MacMullen was looking at. A more familiar term would be *privatization*, the word MacMullen himself used. By the early 2000s, after two decades of deregulation and denationalization, the term had gained wide currency in a different context: to describe the path taken by governments in the West, notably the United States and Great Britain, as ever larger chunks of public responsibility—for security, finances, education, infrastructure, data—were lopped off and put into private hands. Independent fiefdoms were coming to life everywhere. I [had written about this process](#), and it became a big part of my book.

I found myself returning to *Corruption and the Decline of Rome* in the early days of the current Trump administration, and wondering how MacMullen would have reacted to the rapid dismantling of government agencies and the mass firing of government workers. More and more public functions are now likely to be outsourced. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth has been [pushing for years to privatize health care](#) for veterans. Another

administration official, Mehmet Oz, has [argued for privatizing Medicare](#)—a program he now oversees. The administration has shown interest in [taking apart the National Weather Service](#) and spinning off some of its functions. It is looking into [fully privatizing Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac](#), which underpin the nation’s mortgage industry.

The president has [floated the idea of privatizing](#) the United States Postal Service. On his first day in office, he issued an executive order allowing the Justice Department to again [send inmates to prisons run by private companies](#), reversing the Biden administration’s policy. He has promised to deport millions of undocumented people, and elements of that effort are also being privatized. *Politico* reported this spring that investors led by Erik Prince, the founder of the mercenary group once known as Blackwater, had sent a proposal to the White House [arguing for the creation of a private military entity](#) to set up “processing camps” and conduct roundups, possibly with the help of private citizens deputized to make arrests. The administration has as yet said nothing about that idea, but it did [award a \\$151 million contract](#) to the charter company CSI Aviation to operate deportation flights—an opportunity “[too valuable not to pursue](#),” according to an executive of one of CSI’s subcarriers.

### [Adam Serwer: The new dark age](#)

MacMullen died three years ago, so I can’t ask him about any of this. I do remember two questions I posed when we met. The first I had thought almost preposterous: Could he summarize the evolution of imperial Rome in a single sentence? He said he could do it in three words: “Fewer have more.”

The second question was about privatization, and where it leads. MacMullen was too careful a scholar to venture any grand pronouncement. There is no “must” in history, he explained. He could speculate only about how certain processes had played out in ancient Rome. That said, he liked comparing cultures and time periods (he later sent me [a paper he’d written on corruption](#) in Rome, India, and China in three different eras), and he liked to explore ideas. He thought about my question, then bounced it back: “Are you thinking about the Middle Ages?” he asked. “Or are you thinking about right now?”

The Middle Ages and I had a deal, or so I thought. For my part, I gave them sincere respect (the rise of universities, the revival of philosophy, the invention of eyeglasses) and romantic admiration (the mossy arches, the mottled stained glass, the wafting aroma of spit-roasted boar). I studied medieval history in college and for many years collaborated with my father on Prince Valiant, a comic strip set in the Middle Ages. Dank masonry and a roaring fire still bring a feeling of peace.

From the February 1994 issue: Cullen Murphy on Prince Valiant's England

In return for my love, the Middle Ages were supposed to stay where they were. But they have not. With the accelerating advance of privatization, they seem to be moving our way in the form of something that resembles feudalism. Medievalists argue over what that word really means, parsing it with contentious refinement. Was it even understood at the time? Stripped bare, though, the idea is simple enough.

In Europe, as imperial power receded, a new system of organization took hold, one in which power, governance, law, security, rights, and wealth were decentralized and held in private hands. Those who possessed this private power were linked to one another, from highest to lowest, in tiers of vassalage. The people above also had obligations to the people below—administering justice, providing protection. Think of the system, perhaps, as a nesting doll of oligarchs presiding over a great mass of people who subsisted as villeins and serfs.

The idea of governments as public ventures with a public purpose and some degree of public voice—what the Mayflower Compact called a “civill Body Politick”—took a long time to claw its way back into existence. Most people in the developed world have been living in a civill Body Politick, or something that aspires to be one, for several centuries. I won’t overstate how successful this experiment has been, but it’s the reason we have police forces rather than vigilantes, and safety nets rather than alms thrown haphazardly from horseback by men in tights.

In the 1980s and ’90s, privatization started gaining traction again, and it had plenty of help. Anti-government sentiment created opportunities, and entrepreneurs seized them. Privatization was also pushed by policy makers

who saw outsourcing as inherently more efficient. And besides, the public sector can't do everything. Case by case, privatization of this or that may well make sense. The problem comes in the sheer accumulation. In the U.S., even before Trump took office a second time, there were [roughly twice as many](#) people employed by private contractors to [do the federal government's business](#) as there were federal employees.

As the pace of privatization picked up in the 21st century, the idea of “neo-feudalism” or “techno-feudalism” began to interest scholars and theorists—[Joel Kotkin](#), [Jodi Dean](#), [Robert Kuttner](#), and [Yanis Varoufakis](#), among others. Most of the scholars are profoundly wary: They foresee an erosion of transparency, a disregard for individual rights, and a concentration of power among an ever smaller group of wealthy barons, even as the bulk of the population is relegated to service jobs that amount to a modern form of serfdom. For their part, theorists on the techno-libertarian or neo-reactionary fringe, observing from egg chairs in the Sky Lounge, see all these same things, and can't wait.

The meaning and consequences of privatization may be up for debate, but the phenomenon itself can't be argued away. To run through a few examples:

Holding a monopoly on control of the money supply was once a hallmark of public power. In the span of a decade, [private cryptocurrencies have undermined that control](#) while at the same time enabling a wide range of illicit activities. Cryptocurrencies are [hard to regulate](#) even when there's a will, which there often isn't. In the U.S., Trump and his family are heavily involved in the crypto business. In April, [the president announced](#) that he would invite the top 220 investors in his \$TRUMP meme coin to a private dinner; the value of the meme coin rose within hours by 60 percent.

A monopoly on the legitimate use of force—replacing the knights and pikemen of sundry vassals with professional standing armies—was another traditional hallmark of public power. [Donald Rumsfeld famously observed](#) that “you go to war with the army you have,” but another option today is “the army you rent.” Globe-spanning [private military companies](#) such as the Wagner Group and Triple Canopy recall the roving mercenary *Landsknechte* of yore. The world is awash with mustered-out veterans of recent wars. Governments and corporations alike often want kinetic solutions without

legal oversight. (“Like medieval mercenaries,” [a 2019 report from National Defense University](#) observes, today’s freelance personnel “can prove overly brutal when executing contracts.”) From 2007 to 2012, the U.S. alone spent \$160 billion on private security contractors. Growing up alongside them—an industry even larger in size—are the [private intelligence-gathering companies](#), such as Palantir, on which the U.S. spends a significant portion of its intelligence budget. The very name Palantir seems to harken back, via Tolkien, to a feudal world.

Public police forces with a mission to protect everyone are largely a 19th-century invention. But police forces [are shrinking](#). In the U.S., anyone with money and a need now [hires private security guards](#), who [outnumber police officers](#) by a ratio of 2 to 1. Among companies based in the U.S., the [third-largest global employer](#)—after Amazon and Walmart—is a private security firm, Allied Universal. Private guards patrol small towns and swaths of entire cities. A consortium of hundreds of businesses in Portland, Oregon, [hired a company](#) named Echelon Protective Services to secure their downtown precinct, day and night. During the fires that devastated Los Angeles in January, the wealthiest residents of Brentwood called in [the secretive security firm Covered 6](#) to protect their homes from looting. As for personal protection, the market has no ceiling. Mark Zuckerberg’s [reported annual budget for personal security](#) is \$23 million, five times more than the pope pays for the Swiss Guards.

As in medieval times, the affluent withdraw behind barriers. If it were built today, Windsor Castle would be described in the sales prospectus as a “privately governed residential community.” In the 1990s, when the economist Robert Reich began writing about “the secession of the successful,” some 3 million American housing units were lodged inside gated communities, which protected a population of about 8 million. Today, [gated communities](#) encompass 14 million housing units. On its website, a real-estate company in Florida earlier this year asked readers, “Is a Moat Right for You?” It was an April Fools’ joke, but not a very good one, because modern moated residences already exist. Perhaps the most exclusive gated community in the world is actually an island—[Indian Creek Village](#), in Biscayne Bay, Florida, with 89 residents (including Jeff Bezos, Ivanka Trump, and Jared Kushner) and a perimeter-security radar system designed

by the Israeli company Magos. Officers in speedboats intercept anyone venturing too close.

Privatization has also upended the law. One example from an ambitious survey by Robert Kuttner and Katherine V. W. Stone in *The American Prospect*: the growing use of compulsory arbitration, written by corporations into private contracts, as a way of settling consumer and employment disputes. The public court system is clogged. Arbitration—the “outsourcing of jurisprudence,” as the authors call it—creates a parallel private system, one in which efficiency may be more highly valued than public oversight or due process.

Oversight more broadly—of the environment, food, drugs, finance—has been drifting for decades into the hands of those being overseen. In their 2021 book, *The Privatization of Everything*, Donald Cohen and Allen Mikaelian documented the loss of public control over water, roads, welfare, parks, and much else. The deliberate dismantling of government in America in recent months, and its replacement with something built on privatized power and networks of personal allegiance, accelerates what was long under way. Its spirit was captured decades ago in a maxim of Ronald Reagan’s economic adviser Murray Weidenbaum: “Don’t just stand there—undo something!”

One of the most watched television programs in the U.K. last year was the ITV series *Mr Bates vs the Post Office*, a [dramatized version of events](#) that took place starting decades ago. Britain’s postal system, once overseen directly by a government minister, became a (government-owned) statutory corporation in 1970. In time, parts of it were spun off—since the days of Margaret Thatcher, the nation has pursued privatization more aggressively than most other countries—and the legal and oversight structure was subjected to continual tinkering. In [a deal originating as a “public-private partnership”](#) arrangement, the Post Office in the late 1990s computerized its accounting and other operations; the system was supplied by a U.K. company that was then acquired by the technology giant Fujitsu. Glitches in the software soon resulted in hundreds of rural postmasters being falsely accused of theft and summarily fired. Several went to prison. A number committed suicide. Fujitsu has acknowledged the errors; [it does not accept blame](#) for the entire cascade of injustice. [Inside the Post Office](#), corporate

opacity and dispersed responsibility made concealment easy and accountability hard. Without [investigative reporting by the trade publication Computer Weekly](#)—and, of course, the TV series—there might have been no accountability at all.

In the end, the head of the Post Office suffered an ironically feudal fate: Formerly a Commander of the Order of the British Empire, she had her CBE status revoked by King Charles III. And Mr. Bates, the local postmaster who organized resistance by the subpostmasters, was knighted.

*Mr Bates vs the Post Office* enjoyed great storytelling advantages—a gnomish hero, angry villagers, and all that verdant countryside. But grit working its way into the cogs of government is rarely cinematic or even in public view. The consequences may reveal themselves slowly, and often come down to the fine print. In 2008, desperate for cash, [Chicago privatized its parking meters](#), selling off the rights to all the revenue for 75 years to a group of investors led by Morgan Stanley. A “true-up” provision in the contract requires the city to compensate investors for lost revenue when meters are taken out of service—a provision that [weighs on decision making](#) whenever the city considers projects that would eliminate meters or favor mass transit over cars. The rights to operate toll highways have been sold off by some jurisdictions to private companies, including foreign ones. The [fine print in the contracts often prevents improvements](#) to adjacent roads on the grounds that such enhancement would create undue competition. [Private prisons generally put a quota clause](#) into their agreements. States and municipalities may be hoping, as a matter of policy, to reduce their prison populations, but the beds in private prisons must be filled regardless.

Evoking the train of power that enables effective government, MacMullen wrote: “At every point of connection the original intent must be transmitted as it was received. Otherwise it will come to nothing.” Control and accountability are the bedrock. Control: Who makes the decisions and who decides whether they will be executed—and for whose benefit? Accountability: Who determines whether something has gone wrong, and who determines whether the problem is fixed? In a privatized world, government becomes “diffuse, unstable, unpredictable,” and the skein of responsibility more and more attenuated. Contractors hire subcontractors, who hire subcontractors of their own. “I can’t tell you about the sub to the

sub to the sub,” [a NATO official told \*The New York Times\*](#) in 2010 when asked about convoy guards in Afghanistan who turned out to be in league with the Taliban. Throughout much of our spun-off government today, “the sub to the sub to the sub” is almost a job description.

Is feudalism our future? There is no “must” in history, and the present is as much a riddle as anything that lies ahead. A privatized world may be a temporary aberration, a new stage of development, or just the default setting of human society. Our own era doesn’t have a name yet, and it won’t be up to us to give it one. From the perspective of some far-distant vantage point, the age we inhabit may even come to seem “Middle.” With contentious refinement, historians will parse what “privatization” might have meant, and wonder whether we understood it at the time.

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# The World's Hardest Bluffing Game

**Why are some Iraqis so good at figuring out when a person is lying?**

by Jason Anthony



By 4 a.m., a breeze had begun to blow across the stadium near the center of Baghdad, but Qaid al-Sheikhli was still sweating through his dishdash. He was six hours into a championship quarterfinals match of mheibes, one of

the world's most challenging mental sports. His team, al-Sa'doun, was down by 10 points. The clock was running out.

When you hear the game described, mheibes doesn't sound difficult. It sounds impossible. Assembled on the court in front of al-Sheikhli were his opponents: 45 men from the city of Najaf, arranged in three neat rows. One of these players held a silver ring. It was al-Sheikhli's job to determine which one—and in which fist he held the ring—judging only by his facial cues and other tells.

Al-Sheikhli had already made significant progress toward this goal: He and his fellow captain had narrowed the field of suspects to four. A referee in a red vest hovered nearby with a stopwatch. Each team started with just five minutes to find the ring, per that year's tournament rules; if that time elapsed, their opponents got the point.

Now al-Sheikhli bore down on one of the remaining defenders, a middle-aged man in a light-blue robe. "Fists and face!" he barked in Baghdadi-accented Arabic. The Najaf player stretched out his arms, fists still clenched, and lifted his head to look into the captain's eyes. He held this pose for three seconds, as required by the tournament's rules, while al-Sheikhli scanned his face. "*Taliq!*" the captain cried, while slapping at the man's two hands in quick succession. He thought the fists were empty, and he was right. When the man exposed his palms, al-Sa'doun fans in the bleachers rose to their feet, roaring in approval.

By narrowing the field to three men, al-Sheikhli had earned his team a bit of bonus time—two extra minutes on the clock. He huddled with his fellow captain. In several earlier rounds, they'd managed to identify Najaf's ring bearer, but had picked the wrong hand and lost the point. "It was the Najaf fists," al-Sheikhli told me later. "They were difficult."

When the captains broke their huddle, al-Sheikhli called to the crowd, his arms outstretched. The al-Sa'doun fans answered with another cheer. Now he turned on one of the three remaining suspects, a young man with shaggy hair and his jacket pulled up around his neck—a common move to hide the pulsing of the carotid artery. Al-Sheikhli called for "fists and face" again, and the referee pulled back the man's hair so that his face was fully visible.

For the full three seconds, the captain stared him down. Finally, he gestured to the man’s right hand. “*Jiib*,” he said. *Give it to me.* The man opened his hand, and the stadium lights reflected, at last, on a glint of silver.

Lying is a fundamental human act, and bluffing games of one sort or another are found in cultures around the globe. Latvian children play a ring-hiding game of their own, and “hunt the slipper” was a popular hiding-and-bluffing game in Victorian parlors. Across North America, Indigenous groups enjoy a sport not unlike mheibes, in which players must find bones hidden in the fists of an opposing team.

The great U.S. contribution to bluffing games, of course, is poker, now a global industry worth approximately \$100 billion. I covered poker for about a decade, and I’ve met some of the game’s virtuosos in the art of spotting tells. Even so, when I first learned about mheibes, and started poring over the match videos posted on YouTube and Facebook, I was awestruck by the captains’ skill. A poker player might need to study eight other people at their table. A mheibes captain takes stock of perhaps 45 distinct opponents—or, really, 90 different fists. Mheibes captains do not succeed at this task every time. But I came to understand that top players spot the ring with shocking regularity.

I had to see this for myself. Last year, I went to Baghdad, where the game is said to have been invented, and where it’s played, by tradition, on nights during the holy month of Ramadan, after the breaking of the fast. The details of its origins remain unclear: Some say it started in the 1500s, during the Ottoman era; others trace it back to the Abbasid caliphate many centuries earlier.

Mheibes-league officials told me the modern rules began to take shape during the 1990s, under the regime of Saddam Hussein, who made the game a symbol of the nation. The game endured even after Hussein was toppled (due in part to his own failed attempt at bluffing). Since then, the number of teams competing has grown more than tenfold, and organized tournaments, once confined to Baghdad, now pop up from Basra, in the south, to Erbil, in the north. Last year, in a groundbreaking move, the Baghdadi Museum hosted a public mheibes game for women.

My seat for the April 2024 match between al-Sa'doun and Najaf was by the judge's desk. Sitting to my right was Jassem al-Aswad—the judge himself, a grand figure in a green dishdasha. Al-Aswad is the greatest mheibes player in living memory, and his fame among Iraqis extends beyond the game. In 2008, when the country was mired in sectarian violence, he marched a team onto the Bridge of the Imams, which connects a neighborhood that contains a holy Shiite shrine to a Sunni stronghold across the Tigris. The span had been the site of one of the Iraq War's greatest civilian calamities, and had only just reopened. One night, al-Aswad brought out players from both sides of the river, who met up in the middle to play for peace.

Al-Aswad, now in his early 70s, seemed to enjoy his new role on the sidelines. He took evident pleasure in shouting to the fans, and playing with the kids who ran up to him with their fists closed, hoping to fool the great man. He also kibitzed with his old friend Ali al-Lami, the octogenarian retired captain of the al-Habibiya team, who sat nearby. We watched together as the teams from al-Sa'doun and Najaf launched into the next round of their match. It was after 5 a.m. Now al-Sa'doun would hide the ring.



Supporters brought out a stretch of gold-fringed fabric to obscure the team's choice of ring holder. In mheibes, defensive strategy is just as crucial as offense, and the placement of the ring unfolds with Masonic complexity. A team captain might put his hands over each player's fists in turn, either placing a ring inside of one or pretending to. (If players know which teammate has the ring, they might betray that knowledge on the court.) Sometimes a captain places extra rings and steps back to scan his teammates' faces. Have the men with rings begun to sweat? Are their fists uneven? Using all of this information, a captain makes a second pass, and perhaps a third, until he has removed all the rings but one.

When al-Sa'doun had finished and the players settled in their rows, the Najaf captains stepped onto the court. As they made their rounds among the rows of al-Sa'doun men, al-Lami leaned across me. "Jassem," he said to al-Aswad. "Second row. In the green, near the end. Eh? It's him. Only I can't tell which fist."

"Right fist," al-Aswad replied. "I've played that guy before."

We were at least 20 feet away from the nearest player, and the man they were talking about was maybe another 30 feet from there. I squinted at the man they'd identified. My eyes, younger by decades than either al-Lami's or al-Aswad's, couldn't make much out. Neither could Najaf's star captain. When he stopped in front of the man in green to study his fists and face, he gave no sign of seeing anything unusual.

A minute or two later, the Najaf captains began eliminating players. They counted out several in the second row. But before they could continue, one of those dismissed cried out "*Baat!*," which meant he had the ring. It was the man in the green dishdasha—the one al-Lami and al-Aswad had pegged from about 50 feet away. And just as al-Aswad had predicted, the ring was in his right fist.

A mheibes captain's talent can seem miraculous, or even suspect to the non-Iraqi viewer. But if mheibes were a sham—if its matches were scripted in advance, like some kind of Iraqi WrestleMania—then the private conversation I'd just observed would have to have been prewritten too. Mheibes suggests a more compelling possibility, which is that the art of peering into people's faces and uncovering deceit may be honed to astonishing precision.

Some researchers believe that people can be prodigies at lie detection. Other scholars aren't sure these so-called wizards are real. Mark Frank, a communication professor at SUNY Buffalo, is in the former camp, and helped create some of the most ambitious lie-detection studies to date. But when I showed him some clips of mheibes captains' feats, even he was taken aback. Frank wondered at the circumstances that had led them to develop such extraordinary skill. A curious pattern had emerged from the early work on wizards, he told me: A large number of them had experienced a

tumultuous childhood. Some were the children of alcoholics. Later research found wizards who were raised in institutions or in violent environments. Scholars theorized that for these people in particular, the ability to read adults' expressions when they were young might have been lifesaving. (This made me think of Jerry Yang, one of poker's face-reading masters—and an ethnic Hmong who grew up, for a time, in a Thai refugee camp.)

The past two generations in Iraq have endured an almost unthinkable progression of wars, mass migrations, and humanitarian crises. Even in the relative calm of recent years, bombings still occur with regularity. "That," Frank told me, "is an environment ripe for producing people who are good detectors of subtle clues."

When I got the chance to float this theory to actual mheibes players, they were unimpressed. Mheibes has been around for longer than the recent conflicts, al-Sheikhli, al-Sa'doun's co-captain, told me. And one generation of modern players grew up in the 1970s, when Baghdad was a mostly peaceful, modernizing oasis.

"I grew up watching other captains. I played a lot. That's how I learned," al-Sheikhli said. He grabbed a ring for demonstration and closed his fist around it. Then he pointed to a spot between his second and third knuckle. There's a tendon there that fastens the dorsal interossei muscle to bone. It's almost invisible. But al-Sheikhli said it sometimes bulges out a tiny bit when someone has the ring, and captains learn to spot it only through extensive practice. (His willingness to share this tip surprised me. Over months of interviews, I'd learned that most mheibes players won't discuss their strategies at all.)

But even a captain's favored methods may lose efficacy as a match wears on. Ali al-Lami warned me that mheibes changes after sunrise. Finding the ring can get more difficult, he said. Whether from the return of fasting or sheer exhaustion, players may become impassive. The captains, too, may start to wilt. One viral video on TikTok shows a captain toward the end of a 15-hour match, probing his opponents in the daytime heat, as run-down as a senator in the final moments of a filibuster.

The quarterfinals match I saw finished shortly after 9 a.m., when Najaf scored its 13th point and won the game. Fans streamed to the exits, food stalls closed, players boarded buses. Eventually, a few men came over to where I was sitting, picked up the judge's desk, and walked it back into the small stadium office where it's stored. If this had been a neighborhood game, the winners would have received, by tradition, a plate of sweets. In the mheibes major leagues, however, no such prize is offered. For once, all of the Najaf players were empty-handed.

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*This article appears in the [July 2025](#) print edition with the headline “The World's Hardest Bluffing Game.”*

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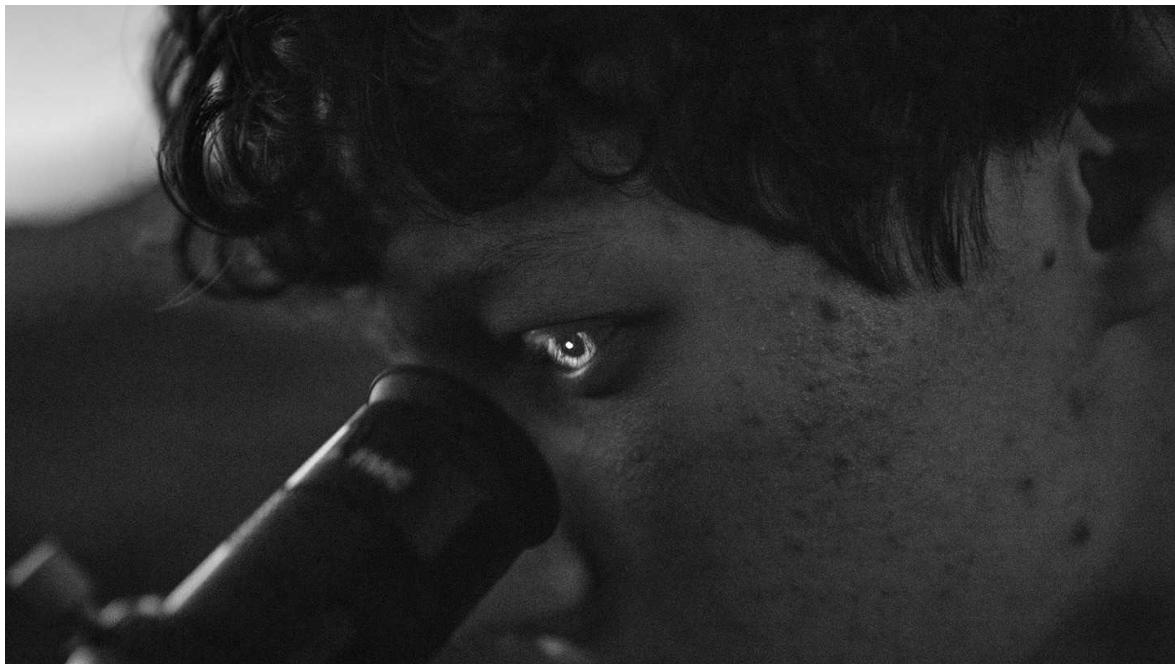
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# Looking Up

## What we see when we stare at the night sky

by Tyler Austin Harper



A man peers through a telescope at the moon, Arizona, 2023.

Walking through her neighborhood in Ghent, Belgium, in 2020, Bieke Depoorter came across a man named Henk, bent over a telescope, gaze trained on the moon. “I realized that I never really look up,” she told me, describing the chance encounter. She found herself intrigued by this man, who was “comforted by the cosmos.” The Magnum photographer’s new book, *Blinked Myself Awake*, combines memoir and image in a series of eclectic riffs on the history of astronomy, the practice of stargazing—both

amateur and professional—and the relationship between photography and objectivity. But more than anything, Depoorter is interested in observing others observing, animated by the conviction that looking up is intimately related to the practice of looking inward and backward.

In a diary entry written when she was 14, Depoorter mused on the moon, fascinated by the idea that people throughout history had all gazed at the same object. That evening, she took her first photograph of the moon. She reminded me that all of the stars we see in the sky are snapshots from the past: images of them not as they are, but as they were before their light traveled across the vacuum of space—memories played out in real time.



*Three stargazers at Mount Teide, in Tenerife, Spain, 2023* (Bieke Depoorter)

Her true subjects are not celestial bodies but people—a young man with his eye, moon-bright and glowing against the gray scale, fixed on his lens; a nightscape of Henk with his telescope, framed in the gateway of a chain-link fence; a laser pointer, aimed toward space, that neatly parallels the gable roof of a home; three stargazers readying their tripods in the shadow of a

mountain. At a moment when ever more human activity is oriented toward looking down at our phones, fixated on screens that reflect ourselves back at us, Depoorter's subjects, with their monastic devotion to what lies above and beyond them, remind us that all knowledge begins first with wonder.

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# Culture & Critics

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# The Rolling Stones Play Zydeco

## How the legendary rock band discovered the music of Clifton Chenier

by Reya Hart



The story I'd heard was that Mick Jagger bought his first Clifton Chenier record in the late 1960s, at a store in New York's Greenwich Village. But when we talked this spring, Jagger told me he didn't do his record shopping in the Village. It would have been Colony Records in Midtown, he said, "the

biggest record store in New York, and it had the best selection.” Jagger was in his 20s, not far removed from a suburban-London boyhood spent steeping in the American blues. I pictured him eagerly leafing through Chess Records LPs and J&M 45s until he came across a chocolate-brown 12-inch record—Chenier’s 1967 album *Bon Ton Roulet!*

On the cover, a young Chenier holds a 25-pound accordion the length of his torso, a big, mischievous smile on his face. *Bon Ton Roulet!* is a [classic zydeco album](#) showcasing the Creole dance music of Southwest Louisiana, which blends traditional French music, Caribbean rhythms, and American R&B. This was different from the Delta and Chicago blues that Jagger and his Rolling Stones bandmates had grown up with and emulated on their own records. Although sometimes taking the form of slower French waltzes, zydeco is more up-tempo—it’s party music—and features the accordion [and the rubboard](#), a washboard hooked over the shoulders and hung across the body like a vest. Until he discovered zydeco, Jagger recalled, “I’d never heard the accordion in the blues before.”

Chenier was born in 1925 in Opelousas, Louisiana, the [son of a sharecropper and accordion player](#) named Joseph Chenier, who taught his son the basics of the instrument. Clifton’s older brother, Cleveland, played the washboard and later the rubboard. Clifton had commissioned an early prototype of the rubboard in the 1940s from a metalworker in Port Arthur, Texas, where he illustrated his vision by drawing the design in the dirt, creating one of a handful of instruments native to the United States and forever changing the percussive sound of Creole music.

Within a few years, the brothers were performing at impromptu house dances in Louisiana living rooms. They’d begin playing on the porch until a crowd assembled, then go inside, pushing furniture against the walls to create a makeshift dance hall. Eventually, they worked their way through the chitlin circuit, [a network of venues for Black performers and audiences](#). They played Louisiana dance halls where the ceilings hung so low that Cleveland could push his left hand flat to the ceiling to stretch his back out without ever breaking the rhythm of what he was playing with his right.

Influenced by rock-and-roll pioneers such as Fats Domino, Chenier incorporated new elements into his music. As he told one interviewer, “I put

a little rock into this French music.” With the help of Lightnin’ Hopkins, a cousin by marriage, Chenier signed a deal with Arhoolie Records. By the late ’60s, he and his band were regularly playing tours that stretched across the country, despite the insistence from segregationist promoters that zydeco was a Black sound for Black audiences. He started playing churches and festivals on the East and West Coasts, where people who’d never heard the word *zydeco* were awestruck by Chenier: He’d often arrive onstage in a cape and a velvet crown with bulky costume jewels set in its arches.

Chenier came to be known as the King of Zydeco. He toured Europe; won a Grammy for his 1982 album, *I’m Here!*; performed at Carnegie Hall and in Ronald Reagan’s White House; won a National Heritage Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. He [died in 1987](#), at age 62.

### [Read: What happens when Cajun and Zydeco meet classic rock](#)

This fall, the Smithsonian’s preservation-focused Folkways Recordings will release the definitive [collection of Chenier’s work](#): a sprawling box set, 67 tracks in all. And in June, to mark the centennial of Chenier’s birth, the Louisiana-based Valcour Records released [a compilation on which musicians who were inspired by Chenier](#) contributed covers of his songs. These include the blues artist Taj Mahal, the singer-songwriter Lucinda Williams, the folk troubadour Steve Earle, and the rock band the Rolling Stones.

In 1978, Jagger met Chenier, thanks to a musician and visual artist named Richard Landry.

Landry grew up on a pecan farm in Cecilia, Louisiana, not far from Opelousas. In 1969, he moved to New York and met Philip Glass, becoming a founding member of the Philip Glass Ensemble, in which he played saxophone. To pay the bills between performances, the two men also started a plumbing business. Eventually, the ensemble was booking enough gigs that they gave up plumbing.

Landry also embarked on a successful visual-art career, photographing contemporaries such as Richard Serra and William S. Burroughs and premiering his work at the Leo Castelli Gallery. He still got back to

Louisiana, though, and he'd occasionally sit in with Chenier and his band. (After Landry proved his chops the first time they played together, Chenier affectionately described him as "that white boy from Cecilia who can play the zydeco.") Landry became a kind of cultural conduit—a link between the avant-garde scene of the North and [the Cajun and Creole cultures](#) of the South.

[From the July 1987 issue: Cajun and Creole bands are conserving native music](#)

Landry is an old friend; we met more than a decade ago in New Orleans. Sitting in his apartment in Lafayette recently, he told me the story of the night he introduced Jagger to Chenier. As Landry remembers it, he first met Jagger at a Los Angeles house party following a Philip Glass Ensemble performance at the Whisky a Go Go. The next night, as luck would have it, he saw Jagger again, this time out at a restaurant, and they got to talking. At some point in the conversation, "Jagger goes, 'Your accent. Where are you from?' I said, 'I'm from South Louisiana.' He blurts out, 'Clifton Chenier, the best band I ever heard, and I'd like to hear him again.'"

"Dude, you're in luck," he told Jagger. Chenier was playing a show at a high school in Watts the following night.

Landry called Chenier: "Cliff, I'm bringing Mick Jagger tomorrow night."

Chenier responded, "Who's that?"

"He's with the Rolling Stones," Landry tried to explain.

"Oh yeah. That magazine. They did an article on me."

It seems the Rolling Stones had yet to make an impression on Chenier, but his music had clearly influenced the band, and not just Jagger. The previous year, *Rolling Stone* had published [a feature on the Stones' guitarist Ronnie Wood](#). In one scene, Wood and Keith Richards convene a 3 a.m. jam session at the New York studios of Atlantic Records. On equipment borrowed from Bruce Springsteen, they play "Don't You Lie to Me"—first the Chuck Berry

version, then “Clifton Chenier’s Zydeco interpretation,” as the article described it.



*Left:* Clifton Chenier performs in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, in 1970.  
*Right:* Chenier circa 1980. (Gijsbert Hanekroot / Redferns / Getty; Tom Copi / Michael Ochs Archives / Getty)

Chenier was in Los Angeles playing what had become an annual show for the Creole community living in the city. The stage was set at the Verbum Dei Jesuit High School gymnasium, by the edge of the basketball court. Jagger was struck by the audience. “They weren’t dressing as other people of their age group,” he told me. “The fashion was completely different. And of course, the dancing was different than you’d normally see in a big city.”

The band was already performing by the time he and Landry arrived. When they walked in, one woman squinted in Jagger’s direction, pausing in a moment of possible recognition, before changing her mind and turning away.

Chenier was at center stage, thick gold rings lining his fingers as they moved across the black and white keys of his accordion, his name embossed in bold block type on its side. Cleveland stood beside him on the rubboard. Robert St. Julien was set up in the back behind a three-piece drum kit—just a bass drum, a snare, and a single cymbal, cracked from the hole in the center out to the very edge.

Jagger took it all in, watching the crowd dance a two-step and thinking, “*Oh God, I’m going to have to dance. How am I going to do this dance that they’re all doing?*” he recalled. “But I managed somehow to fake it.”

At intermission, a cluster of fans, speaking in excited bursts of Creole French, started moving toward the stage, holding out papers to be autographed. Landry and Jagger were standing nearby. Jagger braced himself, assuming that some of the fans might descend on him. But the crowd moved quickly past them, pressing toward Clifton and Cleveland Chenier.

Before the night was over, Jagger himself had the chance to meet Clifton, but only said a quick hello. “I just didn’t want to hassle him or anything,” he told me. “And I was just enjoying myself being one of the audience.”

The next time Mick Jagger and Richard Landry crossed paths was May 3, 2024: the day after the Rolling Stones performed at the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival. During their set, the Stones had asked the accordion player Dwayne Dopsie, a son of another zydeco artist, Rockin’ Dopsie, to accompany the band on “Let It Bleed.”

A meal was set up at Antoine’s, in the French Quarter, by a mutual friend, the musician and producer C. C. Adcock. Adcock had been working on plans for the Clifton Chenier centennial record for months and was well aware of Jagger’s affection for zydeco. He waited until the meal was over, when everyone was saying their goodbyes, to mention the project to Jagger. “And without hesitation,” Landry recalled, “Mick said, ‘I want to sing something.’”

As the final addition to the album lineup, the Stones were the last to choose which of Chenier’s songs to record. Looking at the track listing, Jagger

noticed that “Zydeco Sont Pas Salé” hadn’t been taken. “Isn’t that, like, the one?” Adcock recalls him saying. “The one the whole genre is named after? If the Stones are gonna do one, shouldn’t we do *the one*?”

The word *zydeco* is widely believed to have originated in the French phrase *les haricots sont pas salés*, which translates to “The snap beans aren’t salty.” *Zydeco*, according to this theory, is a Creole French pronunciation of *les haricots*. (The lyrical fragment likely comes from *juré*, the call-and-response music of Louisiana that predates zydeco; it shows up as early as 1934, on [a recording of the singer Wilbur Shaw](#) made in New Iberia, Louisiana.) Many interpretations of the phrase have been offered over the years. The most straightforward is that it’s a metaphorical way of saying “Times are tough.” When money ran short, people couldn’t afford the salt meat that was traditionally cooked with snap beans to season them.

The Stones’ version of “Zydeco Sont Pas Salé” opens with St. Julien, Chenier’s longtime drummer, playing a backbeat with brushes. He’s 77 now, no longer the young man Jagger saw in Watts in 1978. “I quit playing music about 10 years ago, to tell the truth,” he said when we spoke this spring, but you wouldn’t know it by how he sounds on the track. Keith Richards’s guitar part, guttural and revving, meets St. Julien in the intro and builds steadily. The melody is introduced by the accordionist Steve Riley, of the Mamou Playboys, who told me he’d tried to “play it like Clifton—you know, free-form, just from feel.”

It’s strange that it doesn’t feel stranger when Jagger breaks into his vocal, sung in Creole French. His imitation of Chenier is at once spot-on yet unmistakably Jagger.

#### From the May 1971 issue: Mick Jagger shoots birds

I asked him how he’d honed his French pronunciation. “I’ve actually tried to write songs in Cajun French before,” he said. “But I’ve never really gotten anywhere.” To get “Zydeco Sont Pas Salé” right, he became a student of the song. “You just listen to what’s been done before you,” he told me. “See how they pronounce it, you know? I mean, yeah, of course it’s different. And West Indian English is different from what they speak in London. I tried to

do a job and I tried to do it in the way it was traditionally done—it would sound a bit silly in perfect French.”

Zydeco united musical traditions from around the globe to become [a defining sound](#) for one of the most distinct cultures in America. Chenier, the accordionist in the velvet crown, then introduced zydeco to the world, influencing artists across genres.

When I asked Jagger why, at age 81, he had decided to make this recording, he said, “I think the music deserves to be known and the music deserves to be heard.” If the song helps new listeners discover Chenier—to have something like the experience Jagger had when he first dropped the needle on *Bon Ton Roulet!*—that would be a welcome result. But Jagger stressed that this wasn’t the primary reason he’d covered “Zydeco Sont Pas Salé.” Singing to St. Julien’s beat, Jagger the rock star once again becomes Jagger the Clifton Chenier fan.

“My main thing is just that I personally like it. You know what I mean? That’s my attraction,” he said. “I think that I just did this for the love of it, really.”

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*This article appears in the [July 2025](#) print edition with the headline “When Mick Jagger Met the King of Zydeco.”*

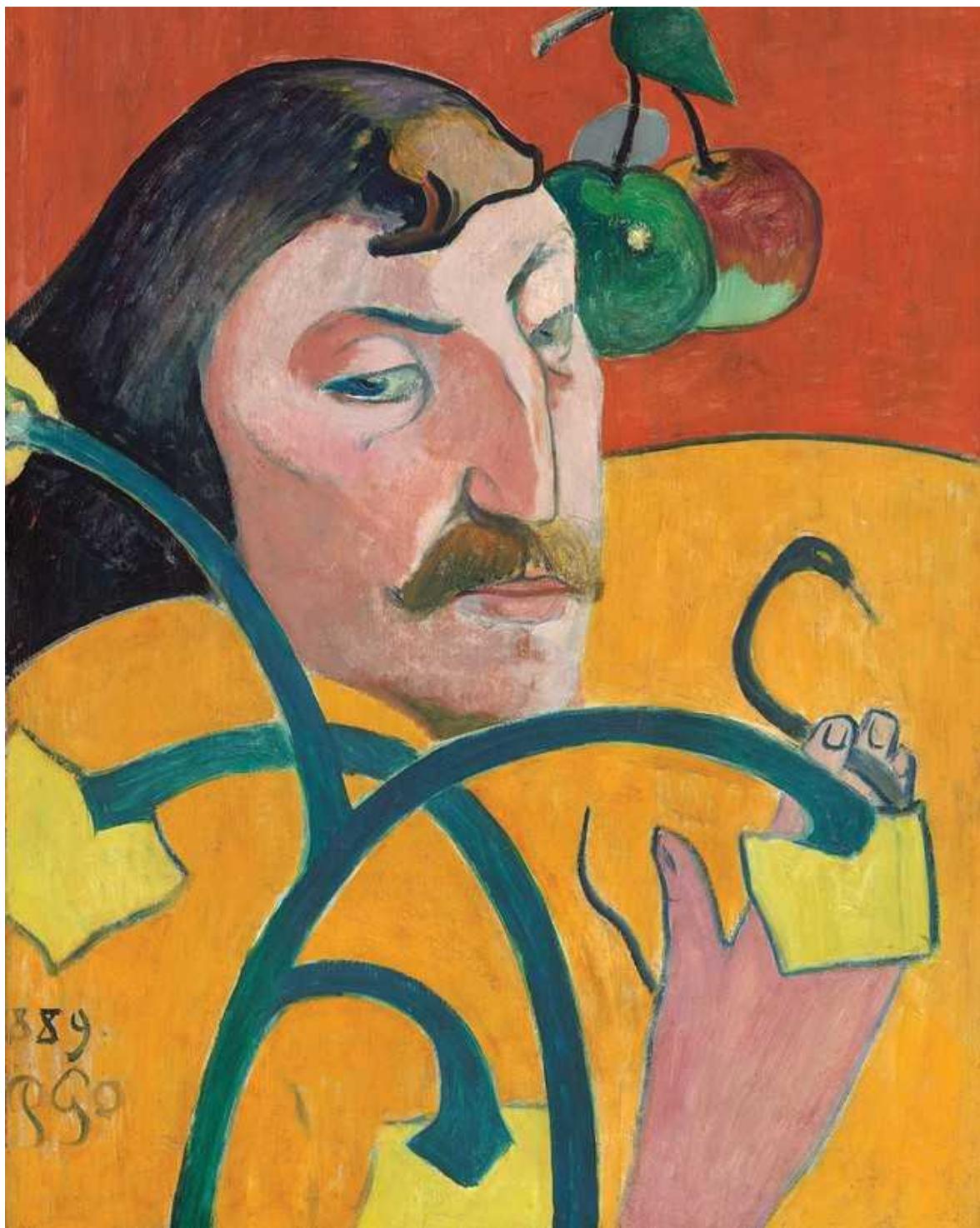
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# How to Look at Paul Gauguin

**He was misunderstood, then  
adored, then vilified. Who was he  
really?**

by Susan Tallman



“Self-Portrait,” 1889 (Heritage Images / Getty)

The life of Paul Gauguin is the stuff of legend. Or several legends. There’s the Romantic visionary invoked by his friend August Strindberg—“a child

taking his toys to pieces to make new ones, rejecting and defying and preferring a red sky to everybody else's blue one." There's the voracious malcontent whom Edgar Degas pegged as a "hungry wolf without a collar." There's the accomplished swordsman and brawny genius hammed up by Anthony Quinn in *Lust for Life*, who takes a break from bickering with Vincent van Gogh to growl, "I'm talking about women, man, women. I like 'em fat and vicious and not too smart." And there's the 21st-century trope of the paint-smattered, colonizing Humbert Humbert, bedding 13-year-old girls and sowing syphilis throughout the South Seas.

This arc from rebel to swashbuckling art hero to repellent villain tells us less about the artist than it does about the audience (Quinn won an Oscar for that moody growling in 1957). Still, given the hand-wringing and self-righteous mudslinging that have accompanied recent Gauguin exhibitions, the time is ripe to ask what we actually know, and how that knowledge should impinge on our experience of art, if at all.

*Wild Thing*, Sue Prideaux's new biography of Gauguin, aims "not to condemn, not to excuse, but simply to shed new light on the man and the myth." Charting his life from birth (in Paris in 1848) to death (in French Polynesia in 1903), she makes use of the recently recovered manuscript of his stream-of-consciousness semi-memoir, *Avant et après*, as well as fresh conclusions about his sexual health suggested by his teeth. More broadly, she chooses to consider events in view of historical circumstance rather than moral dicta. (Prideaux, whose previous books have examined the lives of Strindberg, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Edvard Munch, has a gift for disrupting snap judgments about difficult men.) If the Gauguin who emerges here is not easy to love, he does seem of a piece with the willfully contradictory, persistently gripping art he left behind.

The biographical facts are improbably cinematic. On his mother's side, he traced his ancestry back to the Borgias; the family tree included a pope, a saint, the viceroy of Peru, and his grandmother, the rabble-rousing feminist Flora Tristan. (Karl Marx was a fan.) Gauguin's childhood might have been dreamed up, tag team, by Gabriel García Márquez and Émile Zola. When he was an infant, his family set sail for Peru, where his journalist father planned to establish a left-wing newspaper and his mother hoped to reclaim an inheritance. His father dropped dead en route in Tierra del Fuego, but his

mother continued on to Lima with her two small children, joining the palatial household of a great-uncle. She never got the money, but as one of the rare Europeans to take a serious interest in pre-Columbian art, she acquired a substantial collection of ancient Moche ceramics. Those animated dogs and portrait heads would burrow deep into her son's imagination.

For his part, Gauguin recalled running free in the streets with the enslaved girl who was his closest companion and being visited in the night by a madman who lived on an adjacent roof. When he returned to France at the age of 7, he couldn't speak the language and understood none of the social codes. "I am a savage from Peru" was the belligerent self-explanation he would use for the rest of his life. Boarding school provided a bit of classical education and a habit of skeptical inquiry, but he flunked out of higher education and, with no discernible skills, went to sea as a lowly ship's boy at 17.

Returning six years later, he took up a position trading futures on the Paris Bourse arranged for him by Gustave Arosa, a financier, an art collector, and his de facto stepfather. (Arosa and Gauguin's mother had had a very French arrangement.) Improbably, Gauguin excelled. He disdained most of his colleagues—"prosperity did not make him clubbable," Prideaux notes—but he made lots of money, fell in love, and married a Dane, Mette Gad, who shared his indifference to bourgeois convention. "Carelessly rich, gleefully opulent," Gauguin began, for the first time, to take an interest in art—initially as a collector of [the new Impressionism](#) and then dabbling on his own. He enlisted the help of Arosa's friend Camille Pissarro and began painting softly churning landscapes *en plein air*. Within a few years, he was showing with the Impressionists himself. Money continued to roll in from the Bourse and, Prideaux writes, "delightful babies magically appeared at two-year intervals."

[From the December 2024 issue: Susan Tallman on the exhibit that will change how you see Impressionism](#)

This halcyon bliss was too good to last. When the market crashed in December 1882, Gauguin was wiped out and lost his job. He and Gad had saved nothing, and Arosa, his safety net, died within months. In lieu of any new employment opportunities, Gauguin decided that he would support his

wife and five children as an avant-garde painter. (Like many people who enjoy early success in the markets, he did a lot of magical thinking about money.) To economize, they moved to Copenhagen, but his painting stalled, so they decided that he should return to France and send for the family once he was again on a secure footing. Gad would stay in Copenhagen with the children, teaching French and sometimes selling things from his art collection to make ends meet.

Prideaux depicts Gauguin's ensuing poverty without romance—the cold, the filth, the food insecurity. The son he briefly had charge of grew malnourished and contracted smallpox. The only job Gauguin managed to get was pasting up posters. As for the Paris art world, it was abuzz with Georges Seurat, color theory, and Pointillism. Gauguin, who never met a system he didn't despise, was exasperated. He decamped to Brittany, with its dramatic coast and folkloric peasants speaking their strange Celtic tongue, and there his art stopped looking like anybody else's.

Where Impressionist landscapes had dissolved in light, Gauguin's grew solid. The brushwork flickered, but the edges were hard. *Breton Women Chatting* (1886) is packed with elbows and aprons and acrobatic headdresses. He cribbed its tipped-up perspective from Japanese woodcuts; the square-shouldered, profile posture from ancient Egypt; the girl fiddling with her shoe from Degas. This kind of appropriation and stitching-together had been practiced by Degas and Édouard Manet, but Gauguin's painting doesn't look like theirs either. The strange mix of naturalism and frozen poses, the lasso-like outlines, the marriage of the familiar and the otherworldly would become his brand.

### [Read: Tearing down the myth of Paul Gauguin](#)

Gauguin's new mode attracted fervent acolytes among younger artists, but it produced nothing resembling an income stream, so he sailed to Panama with a friend in pursuit of a job through his sister's husband. He was again disappointed. From there he went to Martinique ("I have always had a fancy for running away," he wrote), where he lived in a hut, contracted malaria, and painted dense landscapes that suggest the interlocking shapes and eventful surfaces of tapestries. Those paintings stunned Vincent van Gogh and his art-dealer brother, Theo, who proposed that the two painters spend

some months together in Arles, living and working on Theo's dime. The experiment ended in a bloody spectacle, with a straight razor, a severed ear, and Gauguin briefly accused of murder when the police thought that the razor was his and that Van Gogh was dead. (The Van Gogh brothers held him blameless, but the experience was harrowing for everyone.)

Soon afterward, the 1889 Exposition Universelle, with its unprecedented display of distant cultures, gave fresh fuel to Gauguin's wanderlust. He was far better traveled than most Europeans, but the Javanese dancers and the full-scale replica of a tower from Angkor Wat were revelations—alternative ways of conceptualizing narrative and space, of arranging figures, of living. He was now in his 40s and years had passed since he'd left Copenhagen, but he and Gad remained married and he continued to seek means of uniting his family. He began applying for jobs in French colonies, hoping for something in Tonkin (for its proximity to Angkor Wat) or perhaps Madagascar with a friend. In the end, he headed for Tahiti, without a job but with an agreement from the government to buy a painting produced there. Before leaving, he wrote Gad promising that they would all be together within three years.

Papeete, the capital, was a disappointment: brick buildings laid out in a grid, populated by pompous Frenchmen and Native women cloaked in missionary-imposed smocks known as Mother Hubbards. It was, he wrote, "the Europe which I had thought to shake off" only worse, given "the aggravating circumstances of colonial snobbism, and the imitation, grotesque even to the point of caricature, of our customs, fashions, vices, and absurdities of civilization." He alienated the officials who might have offered him work and washed out as a portrait painter. (Flattery was not in his wheelhouse.) So he went off to a remote village in search of the prelapsarian Tahiti of his imagination.

Gauguin had little money, lacked the ability to fish or farm, and was bad at languages, yet the Tahitians accepted and assisted him. Somehow he soon became "married" to a teenager named Teha'amana, or so the story goes; our key source of information about her and the relationship is Gauguin's romanticized account of his early Tahitian adventures, *Noa Noa*, written after the fact for a French audience to build a poetic context for his paintings. (*Noa noa* means "fragrance.") In one passage, he writes about another woman in his village, calling her "not at all handsome according to

our aesthetic rules. She was beautiful.” The same might be said of the paintings that now poured forth, described by Prideaux as “a collective hymn of love” for Teha’ama “and, through her, for the place and its people.”

In his extraordinary 1891 painting *Ia Orana Maria* (“Hail Mary”), an Indigenous Mary carries an Indigenous Christ child on one shoulder (both with halos), while Indigenous worshippers pray and a yellow-winged angel lurks in flowering bushes. (The nonwhite casting, Prideaux notes, was considered “blasphemous for over half a century.”) It’s a mash-up of Renaissance iconography, Javanese postures, and the busy patterning of the Pre-Raphaelites, but everything fits together with the kind of breathless sublimity you see in Fra Angelico: a world that is both physical and metaphysical, intoxicating and inevitable.



*Ia Orana Maria* ("Hail Mary"), 1891 (Heritage Images / Getty)

This idyll was interrupted by, of all things, success. Van Gogh had died in 1890, but in Copenhagen, the first joint exhibition of his work and Gauguin's, in 1893, had stirred great excitement. Urged to return to Europe, Gauguin made the 10-week voyage back. Remarkably, he still aimed to bring his European family to Tahiti, but once again, his sales proved insufficient. He took a studio in Paris, and then, on a trip to Brittany, he got into a row with some locals, who shattered his leg. Months in the hospital were followed by years of dependence on laudanum and morphine. The leg never fully healed, but by July 1895 he was well enough to re-embark for the South Seas.

Though Papeete was even worse than he remembered, his need for medical attention kept him nearby. He built a hut in a village a few miles from the capital. Teha'amana came to visit for a few days, but in Gauguin's absence she had taken a Tahitian husband, to whom she returned. A new teenager, Pau'ura, filled her place, and Gauguin returned to his easel, painting dreamy narratives with mythological overtones, such as *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* (1897–98), but his life refused to settle into the old idyll. He lost his home, and even attempted suicide. Unable to pay his hospital bills, he was declared "indigent."

Eventually Gauguin got a job as a draftsman for the department of public works and began writing political commentary for a local paper, but his sense of having betrayed his values and gifts in Tahiti's colonial milieu only grew. In 1901, he moved on to the remote island of Hiva Oa, in the Marquesas. Pau'ura chose to remain in Tahiti with their infant son. In Europe, his paintings began to turn a profit at long last, but two years later he was dead, at 54.

Posthumous exhibitions cemented Gauguin's status as the most transformative of the post-Impressionist painters. His willingness to reimagine the visible world pointed the way to symbolism, expressionism, and abstraction. Meanwhile, the warmth and muscular grace of his Polynesian paintings made them perennially popular. For a time, this combination of wayward emotional expression and cultural openness, this embrace of other forms of beauty, seemed to embody a new, modern ideal.

All of this got turned on its head beginning in the 1970s, as the art world became sensitized to the deep inequities between men and women, white and nonwhite, colonizer and colonized. Paintings whose reverence for Indigenous people had once shocked were now held in contempt, viewed as defiling those same people. Gauguin was castigated for failing to shake off European pictorial traditions, and for appropriating non-European traditions. The man who from the age of 7 had considered himself an outsider to Western civilization was now seen as the abusive beneficiary of its entitlements. Because political power was vested in European men, interpersonal relations were presumed to follow suit. A [narrative of exploitation](#) was inferred. A Gauguin retrospective last year [occasioned the headline](#): “Paul Gauguin Was a Violent Paedophile. Should the National Gallery of Australia Be Staging a Major Exhibition of His Work?” Its description of the artist as a “serial rapist” has been widely repeated online.

We have no testimony from Teha’ama, and other than Pau’ura’s late-in-life recollections of a man she fondly referred to as a “rascal,” none from his other partners, so this accusation presumably reflects current definitions of statutory rape. Prideaux sees Teha’ama as a victim of her own family, who apparently offered her up before Gauguin had asked, as well as of “the lust of the much older European man.” She is also at pains to note that even in France itself the age of consent was then 13 (in most American states, it was even younger), and that sex between teenagers and adults was “unremarkable.” People today may find this repugnant, but what Teha’ama felt about it all, we cannot know.

#### [From the May 2023 issue: It's okay to like good art by bad people](#)

New scientific evidence, however, sheds light on one charge. An excavation of Gauguin’s Hiva Oa property in 2000 [turned up four teeth](#) whose DNA matched that of his father’s remains and of living descendants in Europe and Polynesia. Tests run for cadmium, mercury, and arsenic—the standard treatments for syphilis—were negative. Absence of treatment is not absence of illness, of course, but given how much time Gauguin spent in hospitals, that such a familiar disease would have been missed seems unlikely. Actual evidence for his syphilitic status appears to be nonexistent.

For a man whose sex life has attracted so much attention, Gauguin appears surprisingly circumspect in Prideaux's telling. Surrounded by randy young artists helping themselves to everything on offer in Brittany, he remained "strait-laced about casual sex." Of brothels, he commented to a friend: "Not my cup of tea."

In art, he derided the pliant painted ladies who dotted the walls of the Paris Salon clad in nothing but allegorical pretense, calling them "bordello art." The women he depicted, by contrast, come across as individual, self-possessed people. They rarely smile and are never coy. The girls in his Tahitian village, he wrote, "made me timid with their sure look, their dignity of bearing, and their pride of gait." The one European nude he deeply admired was Manet's *Olympia*, with her hauteur, her calculating gaze, her hand clamped firmly over her crotch. He kept a reproduction with him throughout his adult life, along with the books of his radical-feminist grandmother. In a diatribe on the Catholic Church, he wrote that a woman "has the right to love whomever she chooses" and "to spit in the face of anyone who oppresses her."

One might be tempted to blame that "fat and vicious and not too smart" line from *Lust for Life* on the macho art ethos of mid-century writers. But on page two of *Avant et après*, you can read in Gauguin's own hand, "*J'aime les femmes aussi quand elles sont vicieuses et qu'elles sont grasses*" ("I also like women when they're kinky and fat").

He might have been speaking from the heart, though his statement—as so often—has the ring of a provocation. Gauguin never outgrew the juvenile urge to scorn, shock, or just prank the elders. For his last home, he carved a horned portrait of the local monseigneur dubbed *Father Lechery*. And after all, contradiction was his stock-in-trade. Some pages further on in *Avant et après*, he observed that "precision often destroys the dream, takes all the life out of the Fable."

It was a sloppy life, full of colliding impulses, thwarted aspirations, and scattered commitments. But in his paintings, prints, and sculptures, he could make it right—building a world where unreasonable combinations contrive to make unexpected sense and things that don't belong nonetheless fit.

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*This article appears in the [July 2025](#) print edition with the headline “How to Look at Paul Gauguin.”*

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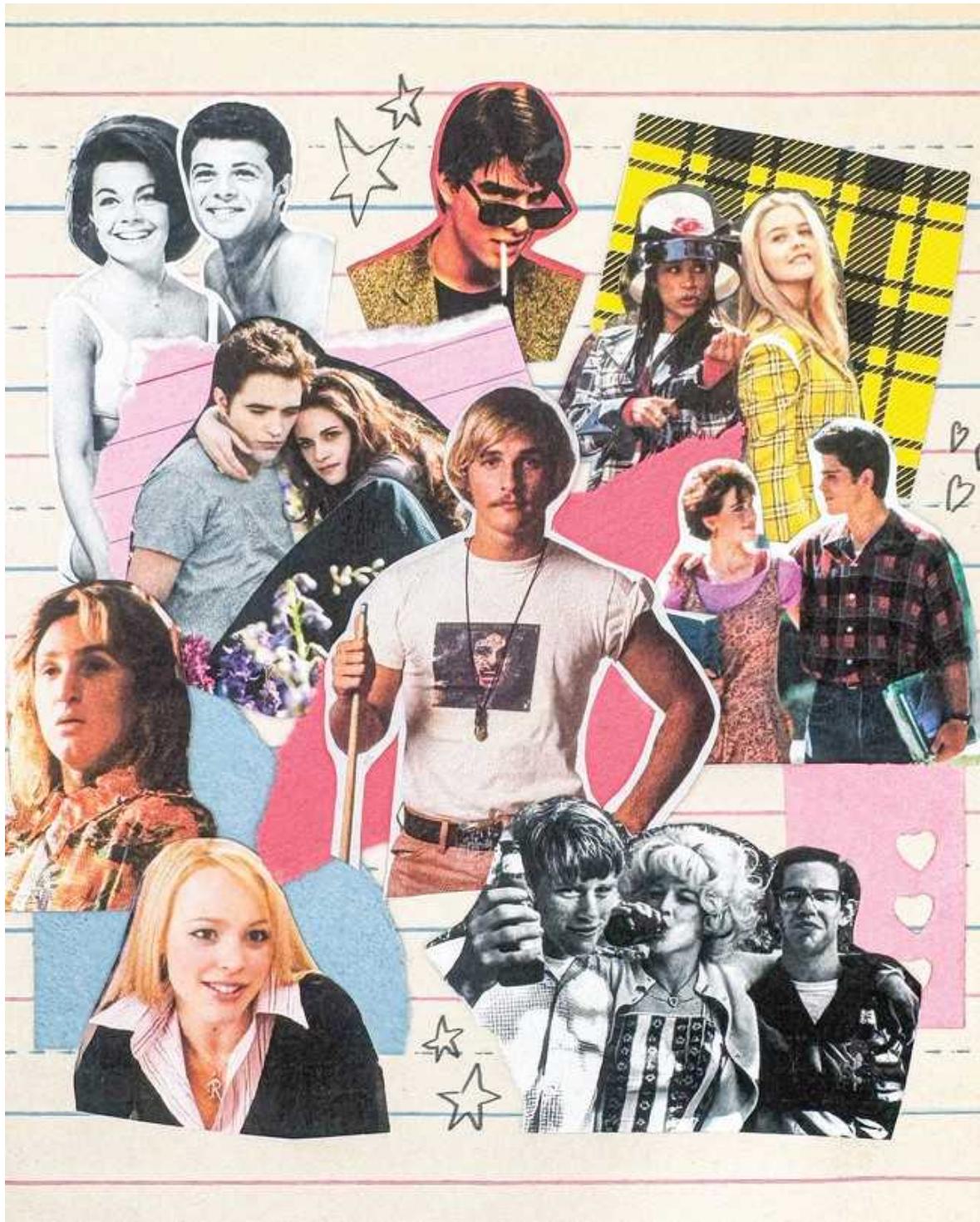
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# Fast Times and Mean Girls

## What the great teen movies tell us about American adolescence

by Hillary Kelly



In the early spring, I caught a preview at my local Alamo Drafthouse Cinema for its [forthcoming stoner-classics retrospective](#): snippets of *Monty Python's Life of Brian*; *Tommy Boy*; a few Dada-esque cartoons perfect for zonking out on, post-edible. The audience watched quietly until Matthew

McConaughey, sporting a parted blond bowl cut and ferrying students to some end-of-year fun, delivered a signature bit of dialogue. “Say, man, you got a joint?” he asked the kid in the back seat. “Uhhh, no, not on me, man.” “It’d be a lot cooler if you did,” he drawled. The crowd, including me, went wild.

Richard Linklater’s *Dazed and Confused*, in which a fresh-faced McConaughey appears as Wooderson, the guy who graduated years back but still hangs with the high-school kids, is that kind of teen movie: eternally jubilance-inspiring. Set in 1976 and released in 1993, it’s a paean to the let-loose ethos of a certain decade of American high school. And boy do these kids let loose.

On the final day of the school year, a group of rising seniors in small-town Texas set out with custom-made paddles to whack the bottoms of soon-to-be freshmen, and then take a couple of them to a “beer bust” out by a soaring light tower. Along the way, they shoot some pool, cruise the town, smoke joint after joint. If the film has a point, it’s that the teens want to party all night and still wake up in time to buy Aerosmith tickets in the morning. (The last frame shows them driving into the sunrise.)

What makes *Dazed and Confused* so pleasurable is its adherence to a devil-may-care freedom just inside the bounds of believability. You can really imagine a group of mid-’70s high-school boys throwing a bowling ball through a car window. You can really envision (especially if you went to my high school, which held on to similar hazing rituals well into the 2000s) senior girls screaming at rising ninth graders, ordering them to lie on the ground and “fry like bacon” while being squirted with ketchup and mustard. And if you’re as jealous of a ’70s upbringing as I am (largely thanks to *Dazed and Confused*), you can daydream about a version of adolescent life with nary an adult to correct you or even shake their head. Only the school’s football coach tries to hold the line on drugs, and he’s roundly mocked. Wild partying is just a rite of initiation.

As Bruce Handy—a journalist, critic, and fellow *Dazed and Confused* fan—writes in his new book, [Hollywood High: A Totally Epic, Way Opinionated History of Teen Movies](#), relaxing the strictures on kids in the throes of puberty and letting them call the shots has been the modus operandi of the

teen filmscape for decades. Teenagers coalesced as a demographic group and a niche market in the 1940s and soon became box-office-boosting conveyors of cool. By the time the first batches of Baby Boomers were graduating from high school in the mid-1960s, teens had arrived as “the prime movers of American popular culture,” Handy writes.

Over the ensuing six decades, “teenagers and teen movies would come of age hand in hand,” stirring moral panic along the way. In Handy’s astute and spirited account, grown-ups live in fear of the culture that teens have helped create—unnerved again and again by what they learn on-screen about an age cohort hell-bent on charting its own detour on the way to adulthood.

“They’re just afraid that some of us might be having too good a time,” the coolest kid in *Dazed and Confused* concludes about his elders. As the genre has evolved, their unease has extended well beyond that.

From the start, Handy argues, the on-screen adventures in teen movies have been targeted to a double audience of rebellious teens and anxious adults. Kindly caretakers of youths in prewar times (Judge Hardy in the *Hardy* films helps his aw-shucks son navigate chaste first kisses, etc.) retreat from view. Early-1950s headlines such as “Youth Delinquency Growing Rapidly Over the Country” are the backdrop to Jim Stark (James Dean) in *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), roaring across the California landscape in his Mercury Coupe, morally adrift and crying out for adult guidance he never gets. Posters billed the movie as a challenging drama of today’s juvenile violence, savvily marketing it to hell-raisers and handwringers alike.

Handy, who presides as a proudly pro-teen Boomer, is a clear-eyed critic who’s not about to buy into the panic himself. Digging into movie backstories, budgets, ticket sales, and social trends, he is interested in how the films repeatedly glamorize adolescent acting-out in charged and timely ways.

He situates the *Beach Party* series of 1963–65 (“crap, but interesting crap”) amid early-'60s worries that teens would take over the culture. Watch out, warned a 1963 book called *Teen-Age Tyranny*; they’re “permanently” imposing “teenage standards of thought, culture, and goals.” Or lack of goals. The seven *Beach Party* films feature airheads enjoying sandy weekend fun, no teachers or parents in sight—though an anthropologist on

the sidelines scrutinizes youthful mating habits through a telescope. The fact that no sex was in sight either (even visible navels were deemed off-limits) didn't stand in the way of ad copy that deployed titillation and terror. "When 10,000 Bodies Hit 5,000 Blankets ..." invited thousands of viewers to fill in the blank with their imagination.

In Handy's telling, teen culture rapidly became a lucrative feedback loop: Teenagers repeat the behaviors they see on-screen, Hollywood in turn tailors scripts to shifting concerns about kids, and the results both lure teens to theaters and encourage further antics—rattling adults even more in the process.

Surging late-'70s drug-use statistics dovetail with Cameron Crowe's *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982), based on the year Crowe spent undercover at a real California high school. Its memorable pothead character, Spicoli (a young Sean Penn), literally rolls out of a smoke-filled VW van on his first day of school—and has the last laugh, flouting the history teacher who tries to set the wasted kid straight. But the movie makes room for more sober realism too, with its teen-pregnancy subplot and kids juggling jobs. These teens aren't just hedonistic idlers; they've prematurely saddled themselves with grown-up burdens they can't always handle.

And in John Hughes's films, teens do what adults dread most: cast blame on their elders. In *The Breakfast Club* (1985), the kids consigned to Saturday-morning detention (a microcosm of high-school social tribes) conclude that it's their "wintry, stone-faced" parents, as Handy puts it, who "are the root of all their children's problems." Hughes, who insisted on happy endings, grants the students victory: The film wraps with a freeze-frame of a freshly released detainee's defiantly raised fist—and it belongs to Bender (Judd Nelson), the disaffected, angry loner most inclined to stick it to the grown-ups.

More recently, the flavor of the moral panic has changed in a way that Handy doesn't quite latch on to. Adults were once afraid *of* teens: the greasers of *Rebel*, the boppers of *Beach Party*, the stoners of *Fast Times*, the screwups of *The Breakfast Club*. They were threats to the order of things, both too grown-up to control and not grown-up enough to properly wield control themselves. But since the arrival of the 21st century, teen films have

taken a turn. Adults have become afraid *for* teens, and newly distressed about their own role (or lack thereof) in the troubles facing them. The mode of anxiety has shifted, and the culture of concern is playing catch-up.

As A ninth grader in April 1999, I came home one Tuesday to a news bulletin that [showed a boy dangling](#) from a window [at Columbine High School](#), desperately trying to escape two schoolmates on a shooting rampage. That day, real-life teenagers entered a new era, one of victimhood. The fraught terrain has steadily expanded since, and now encompasses fears about social media's pernicious influence on teens, their growing anxiety and loneliness, their future in a polarized society on a warming planet.

Handy does not underrate the bleak fallout in teen films of “our current wretched century.” He also rightly identifies the rise of “girl power” as a force in teen culture, and the popularity and quality of girl-centered movies, even as old-school sex romps (the *American Pie* franchise) never disappear. Tina Fey’s 2004 film, *Mean Girls*, is near the top of his list of best teen films, as it is of mine, and he embeds it in a discussion of articles and parenting guides (Fey drew on [Rosalind Wiseman’s \*Queen Bees & Wannabes\*](#)) that sounded the alarm about aggression and insecurity in the world of American girlhood. But in emphasizing bullying’s links to the usual teen-film theme of high-school tribalism, Handy stops short of recognizing the portrayal of it, both comic and horrifying, as part of a larger shift toward incisive psychological probing that skewed dark: When Fey watched the movie with test audiences, she took note that girls were responding to it less as a teen movie and more “like a reality show.” They weren’t “exactly guffawing.” Recently out of high school myself at the time, though I laughed, I also remember wincing at the no-safe-spaces aura of the cruelty.

### [Read: Revisiting \*Mean Girls\* with Rosalind Wiseman](#)

In his choice of other 21st-century films to focus on, Handy veers away from depictions of teens whose newly stressful struggles for autonomy portend dire consequences. He omits Sofia Coppola’s excellent and grim feature-length directorial debut, *The Virgin Suicides* (based on [Jeffrey Eugenides’s 1993 novel](#) and set in the mid-’70s), which was released with a sickening thud in 2000—a bookend of sorts to the freewheeling laxity of *Dazed and Confused*, set in the same era. When 13-year-old Cecilia, the youngest of

five spectrally beautiful sisters whose severe parents keep them cloistered, throws herself out a second-story window in the middle of a rare party at their house, she is the first of the girls to successfully take her own life; the rest follow. With the haze of inexplicable death clouding every sequence, *The Virgin Suicides* reset the barometric pressure of teen movies. Who could or would protect these kids from themselves?

Instead, Handy homes in on the biggest teen blockbusters of the 21st century —*The Twilight Saga* (2008–12) and *The Hunger Games* (2012–23)—two series, one fantasy and the other science fiction, in which teens succeed in summoning rare strength not just to manage their own hormones but to deal with their elders' destructive drives. The themes are familiar: sexual initiation for Bella Swan (Kristen Stewart) in *Twilight* and peer competition for Katniss Everdeen (Jennifer Lawrence) in *The Hunger Games*. But a vampire boyfriend for Bella and gladiatorial combat in a totalitarian dystopia for Katniss—and ultimate wind-in-the-hair domestic bliss for both—leave the current social realities of teen life behind.

The pressures of a hyper-meritocratic, social-media-saturated world surface elsewhere, with girls again in the foreground. Handy mentions the [hilariously incisive Booksmart](#) (2019) only in passing, but its two super-stressed-out, overachieving Los Angeles seniors, Molly and Amy (Beanie Feldstein and Kaitlyn Dever), embody a strain of contemporary, and contradictory, fears about teenagers: Have they been so intent on molding themselves into some optimized version of young adulthood that the only thing they're headed for is burnout or disappointment? If they just chill, though, what about their future productivity? On the last day of school, the two girls are busy resolving student-council-budget issues—only to be jolted into questioning their rule-following zeal. Together, they dare to let loose before it's too late. *Booksmart* delivers a giddy quest-for-a-party ride, while also feeling like a heady glimpse into a teen therapist's session notes.

For poignant scrutiny of the digital revolution's repercussions for teens, Handy might have explored the [sweetly rendered Eighth Grade](#) (2018), which arms a fledgling adolescent with her own camera. Kayla (Elsie Fisher), a painfully shy and insecure 13-year-old, is glued to screens, a voyeur obsessively scrolling for glimpses of lives that seem intimidatingly alien and glamorous. At the same time, she's a vlogger, posting wishfully

affirmative videos online. Set during the last week of the school year, the movie deftly captures a kid caught between the digital and real worlds, trapped in her own head and stranded on the margins of an inaccessible peer scene. Finally daring to show up at a pool party, she doesn't reach for beer or pot; she has a panic attack.

I couldn't help comparing [the scene of Kayla](#), in an all-wrong bright-green one-piece, anxiously descending into the pool, head down as if to make herself invisible, with a memorable moment in *Fast Times*: the sexually-savvy-beyond-her-years Linda (Phoebe Cates), clad in a fire-engine-red bikini, majestically emerging from the water, a symbol of an era freighted with such different fears.

By now, in the TikTok-teen era (vlogging Kayla was a little ahead of her time), the feedback-loop premise of Handy's history shows signs of being under strain. Teens, once Hollywood's lucrative market, no longer flock to theaters. And the place where their adventures are playing out isn't as readily accessible as it once was, even to hyper-hoovering adults. If teens are still showing up at parties, they're on their phones there; if they still venture out to whatever malls they can find, they're on their phones there. When they're at school, they're mostly on their phones there, too.

And what they are consuming is content produced by other teens—stories and TikToks and straight-to-camera diatribes more real to them than any film written by adults and shot through their anxious, or nostalgic, lens. The cohort that took over mass culture more than half a century ago has now built a sprawling culture for itself, by itself. In 2025, the most potent media produced about teenagers will likely emerge on those pocket-size life changers, and most grown-ups will never get wind of what's on display. How's that for something to worry about?

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\* Lead image sources: Getty; Steve Schapiro / Getty; Paramount / Everett Collection; Universal / Everett Collection; Lionsgate Entertainment; CBS Photo Archive / Getty; Silver Screen Collection / Getty.

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# Yes I Will Read <em>Ulysses</em> Yes

## How Richard Ellmann made James Joyce a hero to generations of readers and scholars

by Eric Bulson



When Richard Ellmann's [James Joyce](#) hit the shelves in 1959, the sheer size of the book (842 pages, 100 longer than [Ulysses](#)) was as dazzling as the degree of detail. Joyce, who had been dead for 18 years, vividly inhabited its chapters, getting drunk, going blind, spending money, spiting enemies,

cogitating, and, of course, creating a series of works that immediately made literary history. Moving briskly across the first half of the 20th century (not just a single day in Dublin), Ellmann spun a tale about the formation of a writer whose name could be mentioned in the same breath as Homer's without irony.

Ellmann owed his triumph, in part, to being in the right place at the right time. By the early 1950s, he had spent a year at Trinity College Dublin researching his prizewinning dissertation on William Butler Yeats, received a Ph.D. from Yale, and become an ambitious 30-something professor at Northwestern University. Yeats's widow was ready to provide introductions in Dublin; Joyce's most important patron, Harriet Shaw Weaver, and his dear friend Maria Jolas [released a trove of unpublished letters](#). Stanislaus Joyce, [his brother](#), had shared material from his diaries and unfinished memoir. Nelly Joyce, Stanislaus's widow, unleashed holy-grail-grade manuscripts; so did Jolas. And Sylvia Beach, [a fellow American and the fearless publisher](#) of *Ulysses*, was still knocking around Paris willing to entertain questions.

### [From the April 1957 issue: Letters of James Joyce](#)

You also need charm, lots of it, to make a biography like *James Joyce* happen. Ellmann, a virtuosic schmoozer, could get people to do his bidding without ever seeming too pushy. A delivery of coal during the winter; some chocolates, cigarettes, cocoa, or tea in any season—accompanied by a carefully worded request, such offerings could go a long way when he needed to gain (or restrict) access to material.

*James Joyce* (Ellmann wisely heeded his mother's advice to drop the subtitle, *The Hawk-Like Man*) was immediately recognized as a masterpiece—not just a comprehensive life-and-art account of Joyce, but a genre breakthrough. Developing a style that was at once detached and ornate, Ellmann works as a historical novelist, using facts as a springboard for a subtle psychological portrayal intertwined with layered critical interpretations.

Consider, for instance, the moment when the young, unknown Joyce arrives in Rome to take a job at a bank. It's 1906, a few years after his voluntary exile from Ireland; Joyce is all but penniless at 24. Ellmann wants to capture

the way the eternal city, strewn with ruins, acts on someone who is homesick. Joyce's "head was filled with a sense of the too successful encroachment of the dead upon the living city," he writes. "There was a disrupting parallel in the way that Dublin, buried behind him, was haunting his thoughts." Like the newly married, disillusioned Dorothea Brooke in George Eliot's Middlemarch, the young, impressionable Joyce feels psychologically unmoored by his time in Rome. He loves and hates Ireland all at once, and out of this emotional struggle, he will end up producing "The Dead," the final story in Dubliners. It is set in Dublin, but through Ellmann, we come to appreciate that it is also a ghost story with Roman roots—and a prelude to the universal sweep of *Ulysses*.

In his quest for a definitive biography of Joyce as a cosmopolitan artist, above the parochial fray, Ellmann downplayed Joyce's interest in politics. In fact, before Joyce ever published a book, he wrote newspaper articles and delivered lectures in Italian about Irish nationalism and his disdain for British imperialism in his native country, work that shed helpful light on his fiction. "My political opinions," he summed up in a letter to his brother, "are those of a Socialist artist." His work is saturated with references to Irish history, politics, geography, and culture—rich in allusions, both explicit and puzzlelike, to major figures and events.

### From the December 1946 issue: James Joyce

Still, to say that Ellmann is to Joyce what James Boswell is to Samuel Johnson is not too big a stretch: He didn't arrive in time to befriend Joyce, but he got to the posthumous scene first; gathered fresh accounts; captured not just the context, but his subject's character and his creative process. Not least, Ellmann emerged, as Boswell did, with a mold-breaking portrait that has retained an enduring power over the readers and scholars who have followed.

Ellmann the portraitist has now come in for a portrait of his own. (So did Boswell, though not until two centuries after his one-of-a-kind work was published.) In Ellmann's Joyce: The Biography of a Masterpiece and Its Maker, Zachary Leader—who has written engaging lives of Kingsley Amis and Saul Bellow—has cobbled together a curious two-part chronicle. Part one is a meticulously researched account, woodenly rendered, of Ellmann's

not particularly colorful life up until 1952, when he began work on his Joyce biography. In part two, Leader explores in detail topics involved in the book's creation—sleuthing methods, rivals, reviewers—as well as its afterlife (a second edition appeared in 1982, the centenary of Joyce's birth, by which time errors had been unearthed, critiques launched). A coda skims over Ellmann's life until his death, in 1987 (and includes what [the publisher's blurb bills](#) as “a startling secret,” which can be revealed without spoiling a thing: The happily married Ellmann had a late-in-life affair after his wife, Mary, suffered an aneurism and was confined to a wheelchair).

What you won't come away with are insights into why Ellmann was so fascinated by Irish writers (he went on to write about Oscar Wilde too), or how the intellectual questions he asked about his subjects might illuminate his own life and scholarly trajectory. Surely Ellmann's Jewishness in the WASP-dominated precincts of elite literary studies, I found myself thinking, played a role in priming his interest in the outsiders he wrote about. Leader doesn't pursue such potential connections.

So why bother with a biography of a biographer who spent decades doing what academics usually do: reading, researching, writing, teaching, repeat? If nostalgia was part of the project's attraction for Harvard University Press, that's entirely understandable. Ellmann and his achievement represent a moment in American cultural history when pulling off a book like that was possible: a door stopper with appeal inside the academy and out. When *James Joyce* appeared, the rigidly narrow siloing of literary fields still lay ahead; for medieval scholars, 18th-century historians, and Romanticists alike, Ellmann's book was an event not to be missed.

The biography made Joyce approachable for generations of readers. And if some dove into Ellmann to *avoid* reading Joyce, others clung to Ellmann for dear life as they navigated the dense pages of *Ulysses* and [\*Finnegans Wake\*](#). Joyce's wife, Nora, dismissed his last work as nothing but “chop suey,” but Ellmann uses anecdotes and snippets of Joyce's conversations as well as written passages to make it cohere. *Finnegans Wake*, in his skillful hands, is a tapestry of all the works Joyce ever wrote, the final and protracted project of a writer who could never stop thinking about Ireland.

[From the March 1958 issue: The perceptions of James Joyce](#)

For *Ulysses*, too, Ellmann showed how the network of cryptic allusions and the experiments with syntax were part of a bigger plan to capture something true about the intricate crosscurrents of life. He wove together hundreds of biographical stories (some apocryphal) and concise plot summaries so that the critical interpretation was barely noticeable. Ellmann had an “intelligence of expression,” as his friend Ellsworth Mason noted, that obscured his tendency to lean heavily on the fiction as a source of facts about its author’s life.

What kept me turning Leader’s pages were the glimpses of the academic Atlantis that Ellmann inhabited. Running in the background of this meta-biography is a history of literature as a discipline in America. Ellmann came of age during a period of unprecedented abundance. From 1920 to 1970, the higher-education professoriat grew tenfold, and a new university press was founded every year or so. Thanks to the legendary GI Bill (which, after Ellmann’s stint in the Office of Strategic Services during the war, partially paid for his graduate work at Trinity College), undergraduate enrollment exploded, along with federal subsidies for university libraries under the National Defense Education Act.

As Ellmann was quietly assembling materials for his biography, specialization was on the rise in American literature departments, as the critic Erich Auerbach warned, auguring the decline of a general humanities education. Literary subfields that had been defined by genre or historical period were giving way to a narrower focus on single authors of much more recent vintage than Shakespeare and Milton. An infrastructure of professionalism—conferences, along with scholarly journals and societies—had begun to emerge. A writer like Joyce, whose works inspired exegetical devotion, was clearly at the forefront of likely 20th-century candidates for academic canonization, and the arrival of Ellmann’s biography as the 1950s ended helped spur his elevation to Saint James status in the postwar university.

But Ellmann himself was a Joycean *avant la lettre*. With no “Joyce industry” yet in place, he had the freedom to shape his subject as he chose. Leaf through the mass of footnotes at the back of *James Joyce*, and you’ll find fewer than 20 books of criticism in the mix. Citations abound of unpublished archival sources—mounds of letters, diaries, telegrams—and exclusive

interviews. Size counted for the clout of a pioneering endeavor. At one point, Ellmann had envisioned “a short book of perhaps 150 pages,” combining biography with reminiscences from Joyce’s contemporaries. By 1953, when he signed a contract with Oxford University Press, nervous about the huge \$1,500 advance, no competitors were on the horizon, and he had something substantially larger in mind that could serve as an introduction to a barely plumbed subject.

#### From the September 1995 issue: *Ulysses* in Chinese

His ambition paid off, not just in attracting a broad audience, but in advancing his career, at a time when crossover appeal added to academic luster. The accolades poured in for his monumental book, printed on large-format pages with a dark-blue cover and gold lettering on the spine. Ellmann won the National Book Award for biography in 1960, and dream-job offers from Harvard, Yale, and Oxford (where he landed in 1970) soon followed. Like Lionel Trilling before him, Ellmann leaned out of the ivory tower and gained stature within it as departments of literature were specializing.

By the early ’80s, when the revised edition appeared and he was at work on Wilde, literary studies had already moved in a very different direction. A decade earlier, Theory (with a capital *T*) had arrived from France, and soon Lacanians and Freudians; Marxists and feminists; deconstructionists, queer theorists, and postcolonialists had flooded the field. Whereas the focus on single authors had been a boon for a book like *James Joyce*, the emphasis on Theory proved a bane. The previous approaches to literary works were now suspect, and new questions came to the fore: about their status as commodities in a capitalist system; about the text itself as part of a power struggle and language as an expression of the unconscious. Biography Ellmann-style was left looking hopelessly naive in its effort to understand the work by understanding its writer’s life. The author was dead, as Roland Barthes put it, so what was the point of searching for intentionality behind the words on the page?

When I entered graduate school in the late ’90s, Joyce was a dartboard for every theoretical trend available. Reading him (and most major authors) in a suitably cutting-edge way entailed two steps: picking an available theory and applying it. In Columbia University’s English department, where I was and

where theoretical allegiances were fierce, I still went ahead and read Ellmann, considering it a guilty pleasure, almost like cozying up with a romance novel. But I shouldn't have felt apologetic, nor should Leader, who feels compelled to explain that Ellmann "had little time" for theory. Ellmann didn't need to make time for theory. *James Joyce* has long outlived many of the theoretical interventions that seemed so urgent back then, propelling academic careers even as they deterred nonspecialists from reading Joyce.

Ellmann's *Joyce* is not just a product of its era, but an index of our age. No responsible adviser in a doctoral program in English now would recommend a single-author dissertation if a tenure-track job in the profession is the goal —an ever more daunting one, given the implosion of literature departments, and of so many disciplines across the humanities. In a tighter job market, students aiming to be professors now need to demonstrate range as they pursue a particular problem or literary historical period.

The fate of Ellmann and his Joyce biography highlights the disorienting transformation of literature as a field of study. The canons dismantled during the Theory incursion of the 1970s and '80s introduced a more inclusive world of letters, even as the upheaval left English departments fragmented. Harold Bloom, a lightning rod for controversy, responded with [The Western Canon](#) in the mid-1990s. In his survey of mostly white, male authors, he argued against the so-called school of resentment, which believes that literature can "save society" or drive social change and reform. The response was swift, and Bloom became a punching bag for leftist critics, who valued literature's power to deliver social and political messages for the underrepresented.

Joyce has made the cut in the 21st century, but just barely. I teach graduate students, most of whom arrive without ever having read a story from *Dubliners*, let alone tackled *Ulysses*. Literary historians and critics of various stripes might be willing to acknowledge his value, but in academia, Joyce has long since become one more specialized topic. Those already [intimidated by the difficulty](#) are likely to be further put off by the experts' gatekeeping.

[From the October 2013 issue: Why we're still struggling to make sense of modernism](#)

Given how rarely literary scholars and critics these days read outside their field, just imagine the difficulty of reaching a wider nonacademic audience, among whom reading at all is an endangered pastime. A National Endowment for the Arts survey revealed that fewer than half of American adults read more than a single book in 2022. If the data were refined further to rank reading by genre, I’m willing to bet that literary criticism would be close to the bottom. Which makes Ellmann’s achievement all the more remarkable.

Being able to shape strong sentences, elegantly weave together plot strands, and bring characters to life (even with some inventive fudging)—that may sound like the obvious recipe for any good story. Still, it’s no small feat, especially if you add in the pressure to provide interpretive guidance. All the way back in 1938, when he was a Yale senior, Ellmann was convinced that he had to choose between two professions: academic or writer. Thankfully, he managed to be both.

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# A Reporter in the Death Chamber

## On capital punishment, and <em>The Atlantic's</em> July 2025 cover story

by Jeffrey Goldberg



On June 22, 2000, Thomas Loden Jr., a 35-year-old Marine recruiter, kidnapped a 16-year-old girl named Leesa Marie Gray from the side of a road in Itawamba County, Mississippi. Loden raped and sexually battered Gray for four hours. Then he strangled her to death. When police found him, they discovered that he had carved the words *I'm sorry* into his chest.

Loden pleaded guilty to capital murder. I first met him 21 years after the killing, on death row at the Mississippi State Penitentiary, which is better known as Parchman Farm.

Loden told me conspiratorial tales about the murder and spoke mainly in non sequiturs. Unlike some men on death row, who either are honestly transformed or at least put on a convincing performance of penitence, Loden seemed to me to be an unreconstructed killer. But he asked me to read documents about his case, and I agreed. In the year that followed, Loden sent me handwritten letters, some 20 pages in length, that did nothing to aid the cause of exculpation.

When he told me that he was soon scheduled to be executed, I volunteered to be a media witness. I had a specific reason to do so; I wanted to experience firsthand what one of our staff writers, Elizabeth Bruenig, has chosen as her vocation. In my job, I send people to dangerous places, and I try to do so carefully. America's death chambers are worthy of sustained journalistic coverage, but there are hazards involved—not the sort one associates with war reporting, but psychological and spiritual hazards. Witnessing clinical barbarism is not good for one's soul, or one's sleep.

What you will learn when you read [Liz's new cover story](#)—among the very best and most important that *The Atlantic* has ever published—is that she possesses an almost-otherworldly toughness that has allowed her to witness, again and again, the unnatural act of state-sanctioned killing. I cannot do her story justice in a few lines, but I will say that she does not flinch from any of the ugliness of capital punishment, and, crucially, she does not flinch from the [appalling crimes](#) committed by so many of the men on death row.

#### [From the July 2025 issue: Elizabeth Bruenig on sin and redemption in America's death chambers](#)

Liz's motivations for pursuing this specific journalistic practice are several: Like many writers, she's drawn to outsiders, victims, and life's losers. She's drawn to this work because she sees injustice and has a pen. And she pursues these stories because, she told me, Jesus said, "I was in prison and you visited me."

The state of Alabama has banned Liz from its prisons; her reporting has repeatedly embarrassed its corrections department. But she is [continuing her work](#) in other states, and on the federal government's death row.

I support her in her pursuit, but I worry. I've seen people die in horrible ways—in terrorist attacks and minefields and artillery strikes. Watching Thomas Loden die because the state of Mississippi injected him with lethal chemicals was a very different thing—coldly medieval and arrogant. My sympathy is with the family of Leesa Marie Gray, but Loden's killing was a reminder that humans have a great capacity for vengeance. It was also a reminder that our continued use of the death penalty places the United States in a category that includes such countries as Iran, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and China. No democracy should be in this club.

### [Jeffrey Goldberg: Rehabilitation and reform in Angola penitentiary](#)

For understandable reasons, people turn away from the subject of capital punishment. But Liz has done a remarkable thing here—she has written a propulsive narrative about [redemption](#) and sin and invested her story with humanity and grace. I've told her that she should stop witnessing executions whenever she feels it is enough. But she remains committed to bearing witness, for all of us.

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*This editor's note appears in the [July 2025](#) print edition.*

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# We Need to Reckon With Ronald Reagan's Legacy

## Readers respond to our May 2025 cover story and more.



### Everything We Once Believed In

*Trumpism has replaced conservatism's core values with just one: the raw pursuit of power, [David Brooks wrote in the May issue](#).*

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I didn't wake up today thinking I would write a thank-you to *The Atlantic*, but after reading David Brooks's "Everything We Once Believed In," I feel compelled. For so long, I've felt the pain and embarrassment of seeing my

country forsake its honor while most of the people I used to see as political allies cheered—but I've never been able to express it adequately. Brooks put my feelings to words. His article gives me hope that our nation can and likely will be made stronger over time.

**Tom Dornish**

*Lincoln, Neb.*

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I always look forward to David Brooks's articles and often agree with much of what he writes. However, his continued lionization of the Reagan administration—and Ronald Reagan himself—strikes me as an odd blind spot.

Brooks's critiques of progressive missteps, including those outlined in "[How the Ivy League Broke America](#)" and reiterated in his recent article, have given me much to reflect on. But I don't believe Brooks has paid sufficient attention to the role the Reagan Revolution played in undermining the American dream and weakening the working class.

Consider Reagan's massive tax cuts, which drove a marked rise in income inequality. His firing of unionized air-traffic controllers dealt a major blow to organized labor, and his divisive racial rhetoric—his use of the infamous "Welfare Queen" trope; his "States' Rights" speech in Philadelphia, Mississippi—feels in keeping with the reactionaries of today whom Brooks criticizes.

This doesn't diminish the legitimate critiques of the left. But a fuller reckoning with Reagan's legacy—by Brooks, especially—would offer a more balanced and persuasive analysis. It might also help his critique of liberal excesses land with readers who see Reagan not as a paragon of leadership, but as a key architect of our current inequality and division.

**Adam Udell**

*Downington, Pa.*

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It's not every day that a public intellectual castigates himself for a "pathetic" lack of foresight, and David Brooks is to be commended for doing so. I was struck, though, that nowhere in his discussion of 19th- and early-20th-century reform movements, nor in his call for a "Whig-like working-class abundance agenda," does he mention labor unions. As Brooks surely knows, there would never have been a middle class in the United States if unionized workers hadn't fought to obtain a fairer share of the fruits of their labor. I am a proud union member at *The New Yorker*. Any viable "working-class abundance agenda" must recognize and celebrate workers' right to organize in the workplace.

**Douglas Watson**

*New York, N.Y.*

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I did not attend an elite university of the kind David Brooks describes until graduate school. But I never experienced anything that would have ignited the bitterness that Brooks diagnoses in the reactionaries. I don't think it's fair to blame universities for our current political predicament. My higher-education experiences promoted ethical behavior and instilled in me a commitment to serve society with the knowledge I gained.

**Barbara K. Sullivan-Watts**

*Kingston, R.I.*

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David Brooks's "Everything We Once Believed In" was characteristic of all his work: insightful, and chastening but hopeful. I wish I shared his optimism that conservatism may yet find its way back.

I think Brooks may misunderstand the ascendant right. Although he correctly identified its source in the snark of *The Dartmouth Review*, the ascendant right is anything but reactionary—it is triumphalist. Triumphalism is the kissing cousin of nihilism. Those of us who joined the conservative movement in the late '70s and early '80s had read our Edmund Burke too well to imagine conservatism sweeping away all before it to establish a conservative utopia. Indeed, we were conservatives precisely because we believed there was no such thing: *Here we have no abiding city*. We were a

distinct minority fighting an uphill battle that we could never truly win. Those who joined the movement during the second Reagan administration and later were, I think, more attracted to power for its own sake. That is what we are seeing today.

Brooks fails to properly blame conservatives for the rise of this triumphalist right. Conservatism is institutionalist, but the one institution we neglected in the '90s was the most important of all: the family. We got distracted by the culture wars and ignored the economic challenges that families faced. We were reading Milton Friedman when we should have been reading Pope Leo XIII. If the triumphalist right has seized control of conservatism, then we conservatives have only ourselves to blame.

**Stephen Danckert**

*Rockland, Mass.*

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I am genuinely heartened by the constructive honesty in David Brooks's mea culpa. Still, after reading through his article several times, I am left with the sense that he has not yet thoroughly plumbed the questions his reflections raise.

Why didn't Brooks see this coming? Did conservatives in the 1980s really think that reactionaries would simply pave the way for the conservative agenda and then allow themselves to be shunted aside? Perhaps conservatives then, as now, saw themselves as working with the lesser of two evils. To bring about the civic renewal Brooks hopes for, however, they will need to fully separate themselves from the reactionaries and focus again on the public interest.

In 1895, an article in *The Atlantic* described a group of politicians called the "mugwumps," who worked to free themselves from party affiliations and focused on what was best for the country, to significant effect. The mugwumps, it noted, "form a class, never a large one, of persons who possess the power of seeing fairly the opposite sides of a question, and who lack the barnacle faculty of sticking tight to whatever one is attached, whether it be the steadfast rock or the restless keel." If just a handful of

members of Congress from both parties were willing to act in a similar manner, the rebirth Brooks hopes for might actually become a reality.

**Nicholas Pagon**  
*Westport Island, Maine*

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I applaud David Brooks's essay on not foreseeing the current "conservative" takeover of the country. What I don't share with Brooks, though, is his optimism regarding the United States' ability to recover. Although he cites numerous historical examples of nations that bounced back after disaster, there is one variable that wasn't present in those cases: climate change.

The Trump administration has moved to gut decades-old environmental regulations, as well as federal expertise and oversight. It has eliminated funding for climate action and doubled down on fossil fuels. This means that even our current, arguably modest efforts to reduce carbon emissions are being reversed, potentially making it impossible to prevent catastrophic climate change. Once this happens, the wildfires, floods, and extreme weather of recent years will seem like paradise.

So while the United States as a democracy may eventually recover, it will likely be too late for our planet.

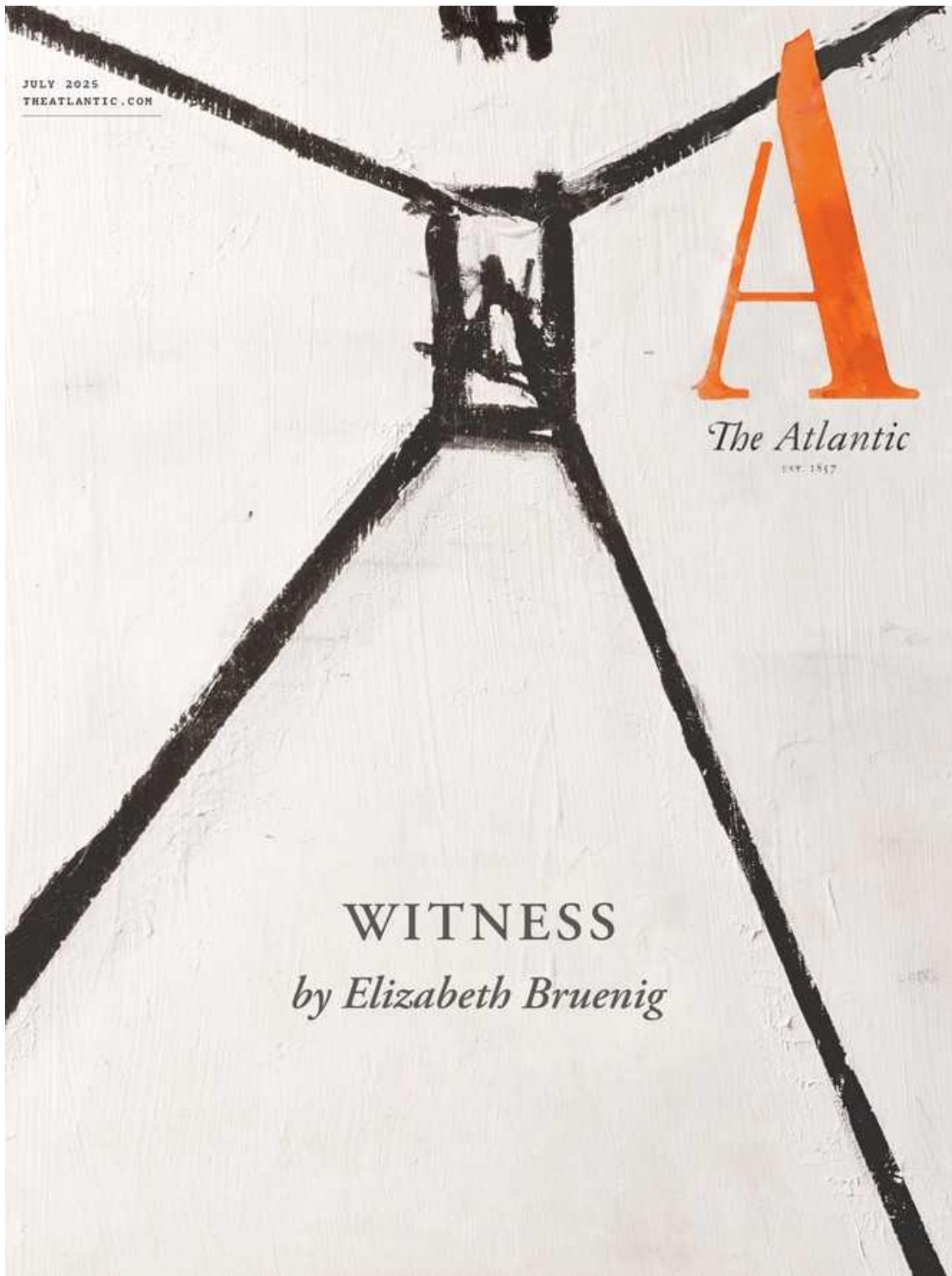
**Michael Wright**  
*Glen Rock, Pa.*

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### Behind the Cover

In this month's cover story ("[Witness](#)"), Elizabeth Bruenig describes her experience watching executions during her years of reporting on the death penalty. What she has seen has not altered her conviction that capital punishment must end, but, as she writes, "it has changed my understanding of why." The death penalty promises justice, or at least vengeance, but it forecloses the possibility of mercy. For our cover, *The Atlantic*'s creative director, Peter Mendelsund, painted an image of the corridor leading to an execution chamber, and a prisoner lying prone on the table within it.

— Paul Spella, Senior Art Director



*This article appears in the [July 2025](#) print edition with the headline “The Commons.”*

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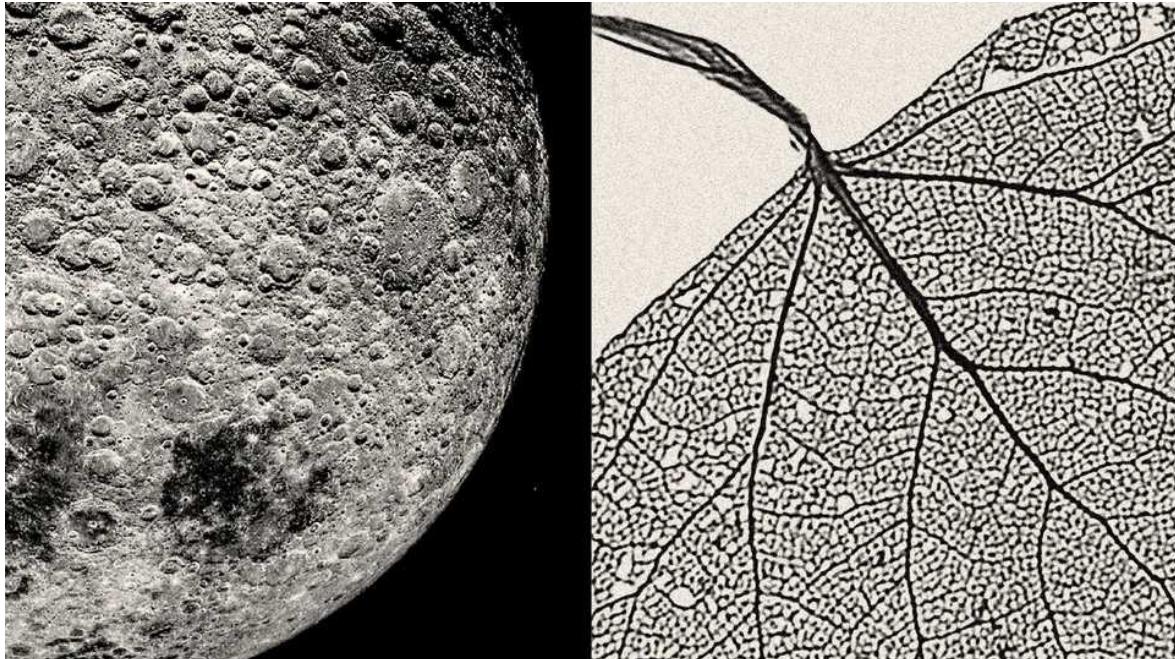
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# Poetry

- [Under a Supermoon](#)

# Under a Supermoon

by Arthur Sze



Gazing at a supermoon when a portion of Earth's shadow  
slides across the lunar surface,

I have no desire to twirl in space on an oxygenating cord;  
I have no desire to plunge

to the bottom of the Mariana Trench and observe snailfish.  
On the highway, someone

is driving to lab, to pueblo, to abandoned uranium mine  
and is always driving farther,

driving faster. I slow it down and rejoice in minutiae:  
a gold flare in cottonwood leaves,

the smell of split piñon and juniper in a garage,  
and recall Blake's

*if the fool would persist in his folly he would become wise.*  
I don't know that I am any wiser,

but I have persevered; as I gaze at the darkening craters  
and smell apples on branches

and on grass, I catch how this life has exploding, exploded,  
and birthing stars inside it.

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

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