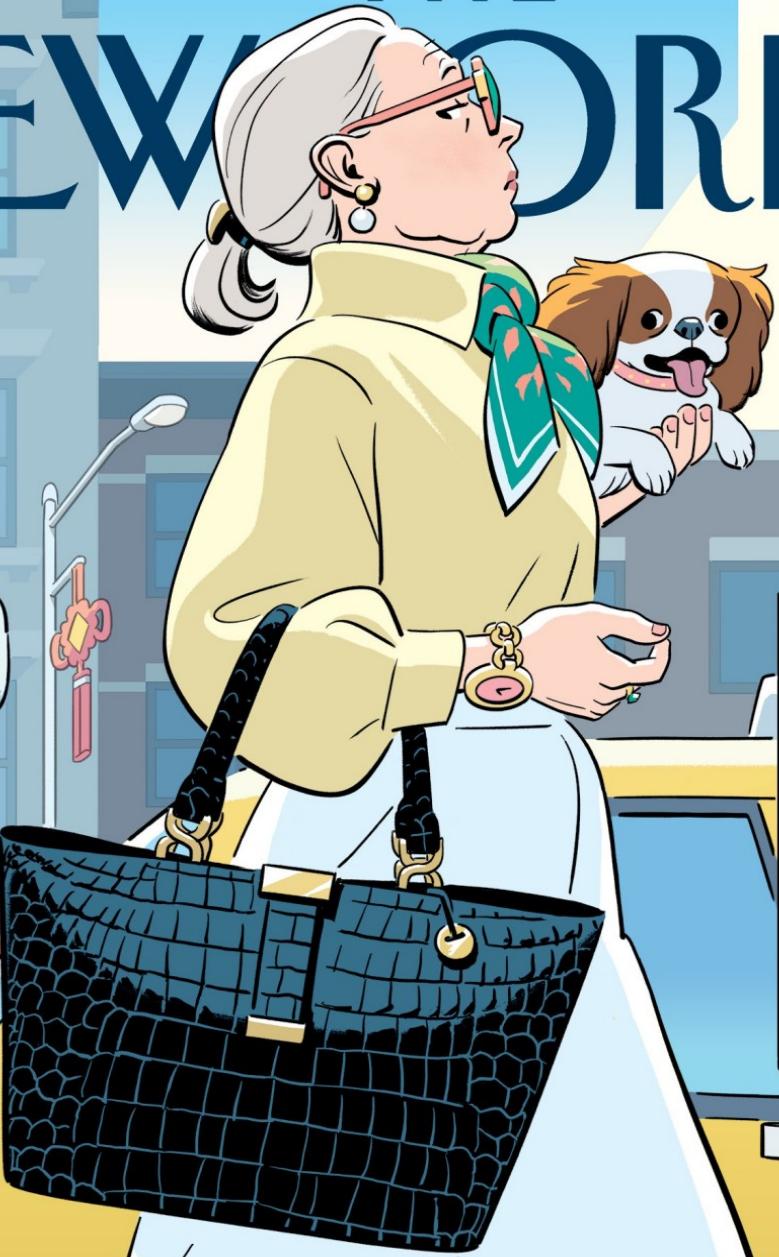


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KIKUO

May 27th 2024

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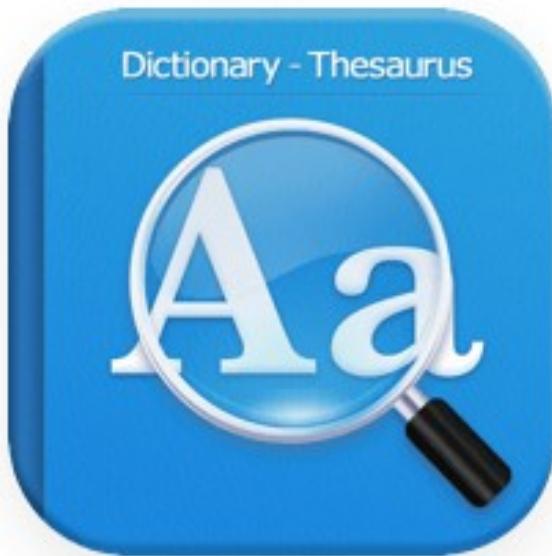


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Goings On

- [Richard Brody on Hong Sangsoo's Stories of Artists in Crisis](#)
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Going On

Richard Brody on Hong Sangsoo's Stories of Artists in Crisis

Also, Kelela's electronic R. & B., DanceAfrica at BAM, the New Group's "All of Me," and more.

May 17, 2024



[Richard Brody](#)

Staff writer

Filmmakers are considered storytellers, but the industry's golden rule is to show, not tell. One such artist who deftly overcomes this paradox is the prolific South Korean director **Hong Sangsoo**. He develops sharply contoured yet formally audacious stories—most involving crises in the lives of artists—from the wispiest of premises. Then, working rapidly with scant budgets, he turns them into some of the talkiest movies this side of Wes Anderson, and invests them with dramatic power and confessional candor. Hong's thirtieth feature, "**In Our Day**," opens on May 17, at Film at Lincoln Center. It exemplifies his singular style: in its simplicity, it turns out to be

immensely complex, and its modest domesticity touches on matters of life and death.

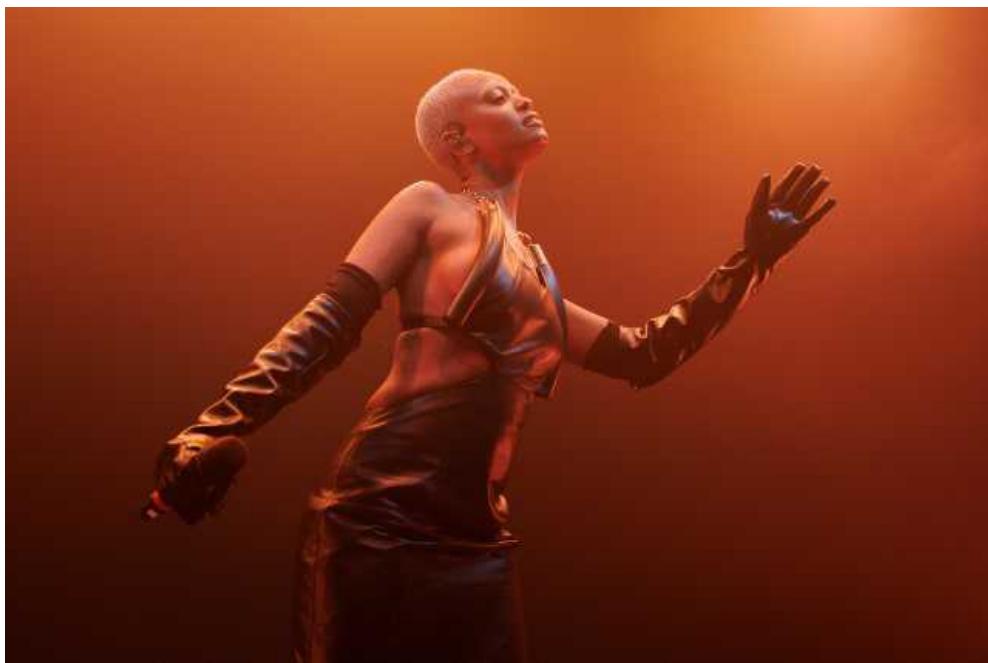


The movie contains two stories packed into one, about two trios of acquaintances. Sang-won, an accomplished actress who has left the profession, has recently returned to Korea. While staying in the apartment of a middle-aged woman named Jung-soo, Sang-won is visited by her cousin Ji-soo, a young aspiring actress in search of career advice. Meanwhile, an elderly poet named Hong Ui-ju, who's in ill health, is being filmed at home for a documentary portrait by a student named Ki-joo; during the shoot, a young aspiring actor, Jae-won, comes to see the elder artist, seeking his wisdom. The two fields of action, subtly connected, are intercut throughout, and what emerges from both is a quiet yet furious desperation. Ui-ju's frozen solitude makes his creative ferment feel vain and his life pointless. As for Sang-won, she repudiates the film industry in a remarkable monologue in which she decries actors' lack of freedom on movie shoots.

That's not a problem for actors in Hong Sangsoo's films. He grants his casts enormous leeway; performers improvise as if on a tightrope, in extremely long takes that offer no chance for cutting within the scene—providing them splendid showcases. One actress who has embraced Hong's method is Isabelle Huppert, who has made three films with him. The first two—"In

Another Country,” and one of his most daring masterworks, “Claire’s Camera,” shot at the 2016 Cannes Film Festival amid its events—are available to stream. The third, “A Traveller’s Needs,” which was completed after “In Our Day” and premiered in February, at the Berlin Film Festival, is still unseen here.

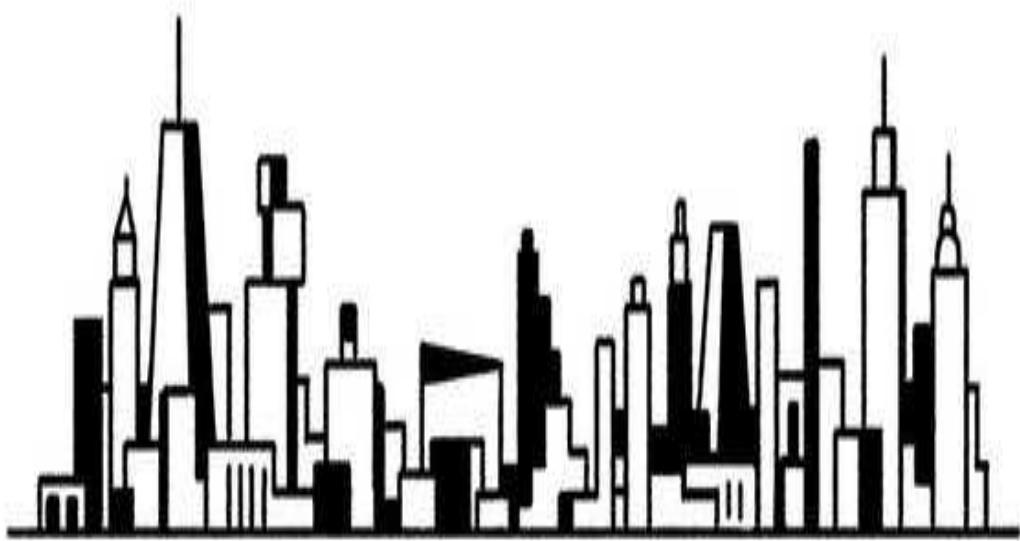
Spotlight



R. & B.

Kelela, starting with her 2013 mixtape “Cut 4 Me,” has been the mononymous force at the center of an R. & B. mutation, delivering a sleek, sharp-edged upgrade with an embrace of electronic music. She has spent the past decade building upon a reputation as a futurist—from the high-powered début album “Take Me Apart” to last year’s “Raven.” The latter, which ended a five-year hiatus, was inspired by the early-pandemic renewal of the Black Lives Matter movement, which stoked in the artist a desire to, as she put it to *Billboard*, “create a more liberatory model for myself.” That vision led to a more ambient sound, in pursuit of egalitarian dance-music practices.

A remix album, “RAVE:N,” only furthers this fantasy of an all-inclusive club.—[Sheldon Pearce](#) (*Blue Note; May 28-29.*)



About Town

Television

A strange early chapter of reality-television history resurfaces in the Hulu documentary **“The Contestant”**: in the late nineties, an aspiring young comedian, Tomoaki Hamatsu, thinking he was auditioning for a chance to hitchhike across Africa, was taken to a small Tokyo apartment, instructed to strip, and told that he couldn’t leave until he had garnered a million yen’s worth of magazine prizes. Fifteen months of solitary, naked travails were filmed for a segment of a show, making Hamatsu—whose strikingly long face earned him the nickname Nasubi (Japanese for “eggplant”)—an unlikely celebrity. A quarter century on, Nasubi is still reckoning with the consequences of his confinement, but it’s the story of Nasubi’s post-TV life that elevates **“The Contestant”** from a chronicle of exploitation to a tale of resilience and reinvention.—[Inkoo Kang](#) (*Reviewed on 5/2/24.*)

Soul

The Queens-raised singer-songwriter **Yaya Bey**'s voice has a naked honesty that fits her songs of self-guidance and candor perfectly. After three albums of quieter, acoustic musings, she finally broke through, in 2022, with "Remember Your North Star," a bluesy, grounded soul record about trusting yourself. Her new album, "Ten Fold," broadens the scope to include a greater range of dance-music forms, drawing from collaborators such as the drummers Corey Fonville, of the jazz group Butcher Brown, and Karriem Riggins. Both groovy and expressive, the music makes more space for cathartic humor amid inner turmoil, leaning into a boogie awakening—upbeat energy that Bey brings to a home-town show in Brooklyn.—S.P. (*Elsewhere*; May 23.)

Dance



Most years, alongside a bazaar, the honoring of elders, and performances from local groups, BAM's long-running festival **DanceAfrica** celebrates the mother continent by zeroing in on a country or region. This time, it's Cameroon. The guest company was supposed to be Cie la Calebasse, a

notable troupe from that nation. But, in a late substitution, Siren - Protectors of the Rainforest, a Brooklyn-based pan-African group, performs instead, leaning into the native traditions of its Cameroonian-born leader, Mafor Mambo Tse. The mighty vocal-and-percussion company Women of the Calabash is also on the bill.—*[Brian Seibert](#)* (*Howard Gilman Opera House; May 24-27.*)

Television

“Under the Bridge,” a new Hulu crime drama, is based on the real-life murder of a fourteen-year-old Indian Canadian girl named Reena Virk, by her peers, in 1997. The show’s interest lies in the following trial, and in the dynamic between the girls from a local group home, called the Bic Girls for their perceived disposability, and the uncool, middle-class, tragically impressionable Reena (Vritika Gupta). A disaffected Riley Keough plays a fictionalized version of Rebecca Godfrey (the author of the book from which the show is adapted), who is old friends with a policewoman (Lily Gladstone) probing the “schoolgirl murder.” The show is bloated and occasionally preachy, but it’s built on a shrewd, bone-deep understanding of how dopey and dangerous adolescent girls can be.—I.K. (*[Reviewed in our issue of 5/20/24.](#)*)

Off Broadway

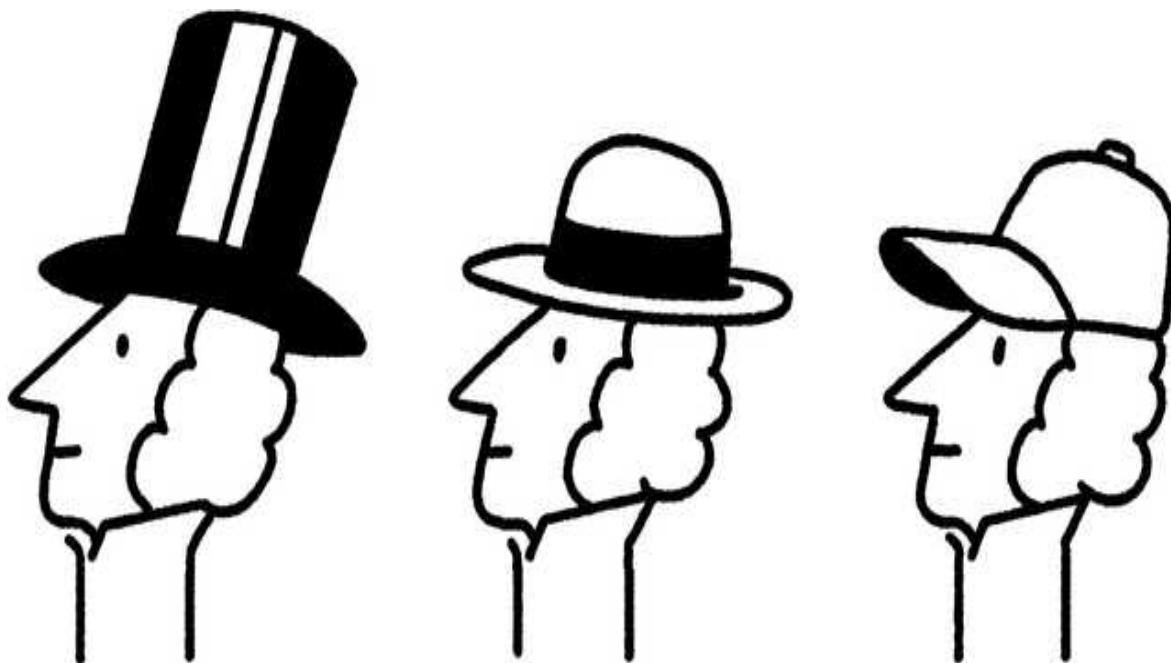


For all of today's clamor around diversity, disability is still a term that many people fear to use. The New Group's play "**All of Me**," vividly directed by Ashley Brooke Monroe, has no use for such tentativeness. It tracks a burgeoning romance between two twentysomethings: the reflexively sardonic Lucy (Madison Ferris), who uses a mobility scooter, and the sweet-natured Alfonso (Danny J. Gomez), who uses a power chair. Militating against the match are their overprotective mothers (Kyra Sedgwick and Florencia Lozano, respectively) and socioeconomic tensions. (Lucy is on disability welfare; Alfonso has a trust fund.) Laura Winters's mercilessly funny script gets even funnier in the hands of Ferris and Gomez, who leverage their physicality as often-ironic counterpoints to the robotic intonations of their augmentative-communication devices.—[Dan Stahl](#)
(Pershing Square Signature Center; through June 16.)

Movies

Michael Lindsay-Hogg's 1970 documentary "**Let It Be**," presenting the Beatles rehearsing and recording the album of that title in January, 1969, was doomed by circumstances: the band broke up the month before the movie's release, and as a result it was treated like a preprinted death notice, dour and unsavory. The film was long unavailable, and its outtakes were

mined by Peter Jackson for “Get Back,” his three-part, nearly eight-hour 2021 documentary. But the original eighty-one-minute movie, also restored by Jackson and now streaming on Disney+, is the superior work; here, Lindsay-Hogg offers tightly composed, patiently observed scenes of the foursome riffing, working out ideas, musically hanging out. When the Beatles move to the rooftop of their studio—for what would be their last public concert—the screen radiates irrepressible, cheeky joy.—*Richard Brody*



Pick Three

The cartoon editor [Emma Allen](#) shares three amusing things to watch.



1. My job necessitates the consumption of a staggering amount of aspirationally funny stuff—a thousand-plus cartoon submissions each week is just the beginning. So naturally, in my free time, I consume even *more* comedy. I recently enjoyed “**The Feeling That the Time for Doing Something Has Passed,**” a film by and starring Joanna Arnow, as an aimless thirty-something in various B.D.S.M.-ish relationships. Writing it inspired Arnow to start drawing single-panel cartoons, and you can see why—the script feels almost like a montage of cartoon captions, with hilariously jarring segues. It makes sense: Arnow’s depiction of casual sadomasochism and cartooning both thrive on trivial humiliation, dryly recounted. I’d love for someone to reverse-engineer a drawing for the line, “Thank you for forgiving me for mansplaining about L.A.”
2. I also saw “The Fall Guy,” which, though it’s not one of my picks, I mention because of my preparatory viewing: Buster Keaton’s stunt-filled “**The General.**” Ryan Gosling may be the Paul Newman of our era (or so I argued, after two spicy margaritas), but Buster Keaton is the Buster Keaton of all time—no one is funnier when silently almost getting hit by a train.
3. In honor of the hyped new production of “Uncle Vanya,” I then proceeded to rewatch one of my favorite sketches, “**Germans Who Say Nice Things,**” from the lone, 1996 season of “The Dana Carvey Show.” Russian realism is

fine, but can it beat Steve Carrell, in a turtleneck, bellowing, “It was a pleasure babysitting Kevin!”?

P.S. Good stuff on the Internet:

- [Fonts hanging out](#)
- [Chess club for bad actors](#)
- [The fantastical, Proustian imagery in the newest Casey MQ release](#)

The Food Scene

The Glittering Pleasure of a Perfect Raw Bar

Penny, in the East Village, has a polished, understated swagger that somehow makes the oysters taste even better.

By Helen Rosner

May 19, 2024



I love to watch an oyster get shucked. The heft of a calciferous shell in a steady hand, the sweep and pop of the knife, the liquor-slick shine of the reveal. The setting hardly matters: in a wood-walled New England fish shack, at a dusky uptown boîte, before [a table set up outside a Bronx fishmonger](#)—an oyster is an oyster is an oyster. Still, there's something especially pleasing about taking in that bit of invertebrate theatre in a room whose easy, briny sleekness matches the bivalve's own.



Penny, a stylish new seafood bar in the East Village, has a polished, understated swagger that somehow seems to make the oysters taste even better—the same sort of alchemy that made now-closed, well-missed places like [the John Dory Oyster Bar](#) and Pearl Oyster Bar such perfect places to slip in after work, or for a lingering lunch, to slurp down a dozen and feel a little bit more alive. It is owned by the restaurateur Chase Sinzer and the chef Joshua Pinsky, and is situated just upstairs from Claud, its sister restaurant, a slinky little bistro that's been a hit since its opening, in 2022. Where Claud is warm and sexy—soft light, buttery wood, tomato-burgundy accents—Penny is slick and sharp, all white and steel and marble. Even the illuminated exit signs suspended near the front door, and the glassy wall of frosted windows in the back, are a frigid blue, not safety orange. (Is that even legal? The effect is gorgeous, either way.) Despite the chilly aesthetic, the mood is welcoming and casual; there are no tables, just a long row of thirty or so seats set before the room's infinite-seeming raw bar, behind which an army of shuckers and slicers shuck and slice, reaching up into shapely wall-mounted troughs for a needed mollusk or crustacean. On one of my visits, a lobster, perhaps sensing the imminence of its final hour, attempted an escape, waving its claws forcefully enough to hurl itself off the ledge to the countertop below, only to be picked up by a cook, gently scolded, and returned to its compatriots in the bed of ice above.



The best way to take in the bounty is by way of the ninety-eight-dollar Ice Box Plus, Penny's version of a seafood platter. It's an exquisitely arranged, gloriously over-the-top tray that on my visits bore brawny oysters, plump smoked mussels, tiny periwinkles (a type of snail), a huge scoop of lightly dressed Jonah crab, a slippery-sweet scallop crudo, and a tangle of vividly pink cocktail shrimp, tails entwined. Most thrilling, among the jewels, are two shot-glass-size portions of vichyssoise (a chilled potato-leek soup), dolloped upon arrival with voluptuous portions of caviar, green-gold and sublime, which slide almost seductively beneath the opaque surface of the soup. It's not cheap eats, by any stretch, but it's the sort of thing that makes money feel well spent.

Two modestly hungry people could very happily make a meal out of the Ice Box Plus. (A smaller, less expensive option, the Ice Box, leaves out some of the more extravagant elements.) Order a bottle of skin-contact Spanish white to go alongside, or maybe splurge on a deep cut from the wine list's striking collection of white Burgundies. You could throw in a dish of flamingo-pink tuna carpaccio, drizzled with olive oil and a bay-leaf-infused vinegar and enlivened with slivers of cipollini onion and smashed green olives, or the razor clams, which are chopped up raw and tossed with a zippy oregano-flecked, celery-forward giardiniera. (Celery, to my great delight, appears to be a secret theme on Penny's menu, not only threatening to upstage the razor

clams but zhuzhing up the mignonette that comes alongside the oysters with a whispery, watery, bittersweet note. And the only soda on offer is Dr. Brown's Cel-Ray.) Round things out with a petite, fresh-baked loaf of squishy brioche with butter, which is perfect for sopping up any lingering dregs of sauce or oil. (The bread shows up on the brief dessert menu, as well, sliced thick and sandwiching a scoop of vanilla ice cream plus a smear of jam.)

Helen, Help Me!

[E-mail your questions](#) about dining, eating, and anything food-related, and Helen may respond in a future newsletter.

At Claud, Pinsky has displayed an aptitude for applying heat to marine creatures. His take on Spanish *gambas al ajillo*—in which a pile of sweet red shrimp are dropped raw into a serving dish that's slicked with sizzling, garlicky olive oil, which cooks them just barely—is straight-up fantastic. At Penny, the all-seafood conceit gives him even more room to explore. Oysters are confited in chicken fat until sumptuously rich, and served with spice-dusted Club crackers and a blob of crème fraîche. Squid stuffed with tuna and Swiss chard is charred to a tender, near-caramel sweetness. Its smoky, paprika-laden harissa sauce—a shocking red against the cool-toned room—pools on the plate with all the elemental intensity of blood. Dover sole arrives in a thick hunk, with ribs intact, topped with wobbly bits of bone marrow and drizzled in sauce Bordelaise—a normally fussy fish cleverly recast as a diminutive carnivorous feast. My apologies to that lobster who was seeking liberation. He (or perhaps it was his brother) was delicious, poached in court bouillon, dressed in a brown-butter vinaigrette, and served in pieces, arranged around an aromatic bundle of fresh sage and rosemary. It's easy eating, in all senses of the phrase.

Penny takes reservations, but it holds a considerable portion of the room for walk-ins, which gives the well-orchestrated operation a glittering edge of spontaneity. (When I did make a reservation, and had to cancel one day before dining, the restaurant charged me a hefty cancellation fee—possibly the first time that's happened in my significant Resy-using experience.) It might be tempting to try to have appetizers at Penny and finish the evening downstairs at Claud, but it would be something of a miracle to get into both in the same evening—and, more to the point, why would you want to leave?

Just as Claud has its showstopper dessert—a gargantuan slice of night-black chocolate cake—so, too, does Penny. It's a tidy serving of chocolate mousse, splashed with grassy olive oil and crowned with hazelnuts. Made from a carefully calibrated mix of dark and milk chocolates, it's dense and smooth and deep and sweet, a plate of pure, relaxed luxury. ♦

The Talk of the Town

- [Donald Trump's Abortion Problem at the Polls](#)
- [The Guy on Trial for the Same Thing as Trump](#)
- [Saying Yes to the Dress—at the Library](#)
- [Blood! Fur! Harvard's Latest Nightmare: Mice](#)
- [A Knicks-Loving Randle \(Not That One\) Takes to the Court](#)

Comment

Donald Trump's Abortion Problem at the Polls

Since Roe v. Wade was overturned, G.O.P. efforts to ban abortion have backfired with voters in many states—and they could do so again in November.

By Margaret Talbot

May 19, 2024



In the nearly two years since the Supreme Court eliminated a constitutional right to abortion, support for that right has been rising. The extreme measures that anti-abortion forces have taken in the wake of Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization have made that almost inevitable. In February, the Supreme Court of Alabama seized the opportunity to define frozen embryos as children, imperilling the practice of I.V.F. (State legislators knew that this tack was a loser: they hastily passed a bill protecting fertility treatment.) Earlier this month, a Louisiana state legislative committee rejected a bill that would have allowed exceptions to the state's abortion ban in cases of rape and incest for people younger than

seventeen. A policy blueprint prepared by the Heritage Foundation for a new Trump Administration calls for an all-out assault on abortion pills, urging officials to wield an antiquated anti-obscenity statute to ban them from the mails. And, in the coming weeks, the Supreme Court that brought us Dobbs will decide whether hospital emergency rooms in Idaho can deny abortions to patients who could suffer dire health consequences, but not actually die then and there, if they don't terminate their pregnancies.

Maybe the most persuasive factor is simply the realization that a bedrock decision about such intimate and life-altering matters could be wrested away by the state. According to a new survey by the nonpartisan Public Religion Research Institute, a majority of adults in most states, including those where abortion is now effectively banned, say that the practice should be legal in all or most cases. That includes seventy per cent of blue-state residents and fifty-seven per cent of red-state ones. In 2022, there were seven states where less than a majority favored abortion rights; last year, there were just five. According to a recent *Wall Street Journal* poll, nearly forty per cent of suburban women voters cite abortion rights as a top priority, and nearly three-quarters of them believe that abortion should be legal in all or most circumstances.

So it's not exactly surprising that Donald Trump, the man who pledged to appoint Supreme Court Justices who would overturn Roe v. Wade, and then did so, lately prefers to say that what he really did was hand the matter over to the states. "Democrats, Republicans, liberals, conservatives—they wanted to get abortion out of the federal government," Trump said at a rally in Wisconsin. "Basically the states decide on abortion, and people are absolutely thrilled with the way that's going on." He's also taken to saying that he doesn't support a federal ban—the ultimate goal for many in the anti-abortion movement.

"Absolutely thrilled" is a preposterous Trumpism in this context, but he is onto something. For decades, a dominant critique of Roe was that it short-circuited state-by-state democratic deliberation on a uniquely contentious social issue. Even some liberals who supported abortion rights—notably, Ruth Bader Ginsburg—shared this view. But it was most forcefully expressed by, and proved most useful for, anti-abortion jurists, including the Justices who overturned Roe. In a recent *Harvard Law Review* article, the

legal scholars Melissa Murray and Katherine Shaw argue that “the appeal to democracy and democratic engagement” served a rhetorical purpose, insulating the Court—or aiming to—from charges of judicial overreach.

That appeal has come to seem more and more like a fig leaf. The conservative majority in Dobbs clearly imagined that the abortion issue would be taken up mainly by state legislatures, and that they would produce more restrictive laws—and some twenty-one states did ban or severely restrict the procedure. (In the majority opinion, Samuel Alito wrote that Roe had closed off the democratic process for “the large number of Americans who dissented” from it.) As Murray and Shaw point out, there is some rich irony here: the majority that declared itself so committed to the democratic process where abortion was concerned has been busily undermining it in a series of cases curtailing the scope of the Voting Rights Act and allowing gerrymandering.

Yet the version of democracy that many of Roe’s critics invoked was, it turns out, limited. Dobbs also triggered a citizen-organized ballot-initiative movement. In seven states, residents have gone to the polls to weigh in on whether and to what extent abortion rights should be protected. In all seven, they voted to uphold those rights, in some cases by enshrining them in the state constitution. In November, voters in a dozen or so more states could be deciding on similar referendums. The reaction from Republicans at the state level has often been to quash the initiatives, will of the people be damned. In Ohio, when it became apparent that an initiative that would guarantee reproductive rights in the state constitution had garnered enough signatures to get on the ballot, the state G.O.P. engineered a special election to raise the threshold of voters needed to approve such an amendment. (Voters rejected that effort and later amended the constitution.) Republican-led legislatures in Missouri and Arizona are reportedly trying similar tactics. In South Dakota, a group called Dakotans for Health has gathered enough signatures to put an initiative on the ballot to overturn that state’s law, which bans abortion except to save the life of the mother. In anticipation, the legislature passed a bill—which Governor Kristi Noem signed—permitting signatories to remove their names from such petitions. A Republican legislator justified the bill on the ground that people could have been fed misleading information and not understood what they were signing. But many South

Dakotans must have easily understood what the legislature was trying to do: keep them from having their say on reproductive rights.

Trump's convenient embrace of the state-by-state approach is unlikely to drive away his anti-abortion and evangelical voters. They know that he's still by far their best chance of locking in more restrictions at the national level, even if those stop short of a federal ban. They can reasonably assume that he'll say whatever he thinks he needs to now, and then come through for them if he wins in November. But the abortion-rights initiatives could boost Democratic and independent turnout; the swing states of Arizona and Nevada are two of the states poised to vote on them.

And, of course, those initiatives and the effort it took to get them on the ballot matter in their own right. Justice Alito wrote in Dobbs that the Court could not possibly assess "the effect of the abortion right on society and in particular on the lives of women." The past two years have shown that many Americans have no trouble doing so. ♦

The Bench

The Guy on Trial for the Same Thing as Trump

At 100 Centre Street, another man charged with falsifying business records had a good day in court.

By Zach Helfand

May 20, 2024



Falsifying business records in the first degree is a class-E felony in the State of New York, carrying a possible prison sentence of four years. It's not often a marquee charge. A few years ago, for instance, a teacher in the Bronx gave her principal a fake vaccination card, in a bid to get a day off to recover from the side effects. Charge: falsifying in the second degree. (She pleaded guilty, and it was knocked down to a violation after she completed community service.) The public, however, has got pretty jazzed about the crime recently. At the Manhattan Criminal Courthouse, at 100 Centre Street, people have been standing in line down the block, sometimes a day in advance, for a chance to see a case in person. Some observers have said that the fate of the country hinges on falsifying business records. What's all the fuss?

The courthouse had two active falsifying cases the other day, before Judges Gregory Carro and Juan Merchan. Carro presided over courtroom 1300, part 32, on the thirteenth floor, off a corridor that looked as if the Penn Station basement had decided it was too bright. A window was open in the back, through which resounded loud hammering from construction next door.

The court was called to order, and defendants began coming forward for pretrial hearings. One looked dazed. One was missing a leg. Someone's cell phone rang in the gallery. "You gotta silence that phone!" an officer shouted. Every few minutes, a defense attorney, looking confused, walked the aisle yelling a client's name.

At last, the falsifying case. The defendant was called forward. No one appeared. His attorney, Brian Hutchinson, found Assistant District Attorney Karl Mulloney-Radke in the gallery and whispered to him, "He's in the bathroom. He's nervous." (Hutchinson said later that his client was a model citizen in court: "He's stayed awake the whole time.")

The defendant had been a New York City Health & Hospitals officer. According to prosecutors, a different officer had been escorting an inebriated man from Bellevue Hospital after discharge and had stomped on the man, then slammed him to the ground and left him there, apparently unconscious. The defendant was accused of holding the man down during the beating. Charge: official misconduct. Prosecutors said that he later filed paperwork about the incident which failed to mention the use of force. There's your falsifying rap.

The defendant appeared after a few minutes: skinny, middle-aged, bald, with glasses and a blue mask. He wore jeans and carried a blue plastic shopping bag.

Carro said, "All right. What's the offer?"

"On this case, the people's offer is for the defendant to plead to two misdemeanors," Mulloney-Radke said. The D.A. was seeking two years' probation, with a ban on employment as a peace officer in New York.

The defendant whispered to Hutchinson, who wore a black pinstripe suit and a purple tie. “He is interested in the offer, Judge,” Hutchinson said.

“The Assistant District Attorney is going to ask you some questions about the incident,” Carro said.

Mulloney-Radke addressed the defendant: “Do you admit that in New York County, on January 8, 2022, that with intent to defraud, you omitted to make a true entry in the business records of Bellevue Hospital, and, specifically, referring to a Health & Hospitals police-response card, you failed to report a use of force by another officer, in violation of your duty to do so? Do you admit that, sir?”

“Yes, sir,” the man said.

“That’s satisfactory to the people. Thank you, Your Honor.”

The man walked with Hutchinson to the elevator bank and left with his shopping bag. Hutchinson stayed behind. What did he make of the falsifying charge? “My opinion is that the paperwork was a lot less egregious than the actions of the other co-defendant,” he said.

The case, which was handled by the D.A.’s police-accountability unit, had taken a long time to complete. “I’ve had one other case with them,” Hutchinson said. “That was related to an escape attempt. My guy”—who’d been arrested, held at Rikers, then hospitalized—“managed to get out of a fifth-floor window.” The man had allegedly shimmied down a makeshift rope he’d fashioned from tied-together sheets, before falling. “Got up and walked away,” Hutchinson added. “Managed to get a taxi.”

Hutchinson said he didn’t know that his case was just one of two falsifying-business-records matters at the courthouse, perhaps because the other one was adjourned for the day. It seemed interesting, though, involving a lot of counts of falsifying—thirty-four in all. Word was, the case was in the middle of testimony from a famous porn star, who’d told the court that she’d used a magazine to spank the defendant, who subsequently told her that she reminded him of his daughter. The defendant, a seventy-seven-year-old man

originally from Jamaica Estates, in Queens, has thus far not pursued a plea deal. ♦

Library Finds

Saying Yes to the Dress—at the Library

A New Jersey librarian named Adele Puccio matches brides with pre-owned wedding gowns, from her office near Current Nonfiction.

By Henry Alford

May 20, 2024



In a corner of the Maurice M. Pine Free Public Library, in Fair Lawn, New Jersey—between shelves of current nonfiction and foreign-language DVDs, and near a six-foot-tall globe donated by local Rotarians—the gray carpeting is flecked with sequins. The flotsam of a drag-queen reading hour? The recent Barbra Streisand memoir, hemorrhaging fabulousness? Nope. These sequins herald the entrance to the office of the library’s director, Adele Puccio, who collects previously worn wedding dresses and then loans or gives them to any bride who needs one. Puccio currently has more than fifty such dresses, most hanging on racks in her office. “It’s a lot,” Puccio, a practical woman who had on a floral blouse and clear-framed eyeglasses, said. “It’s a little hard to maneuver in here.”

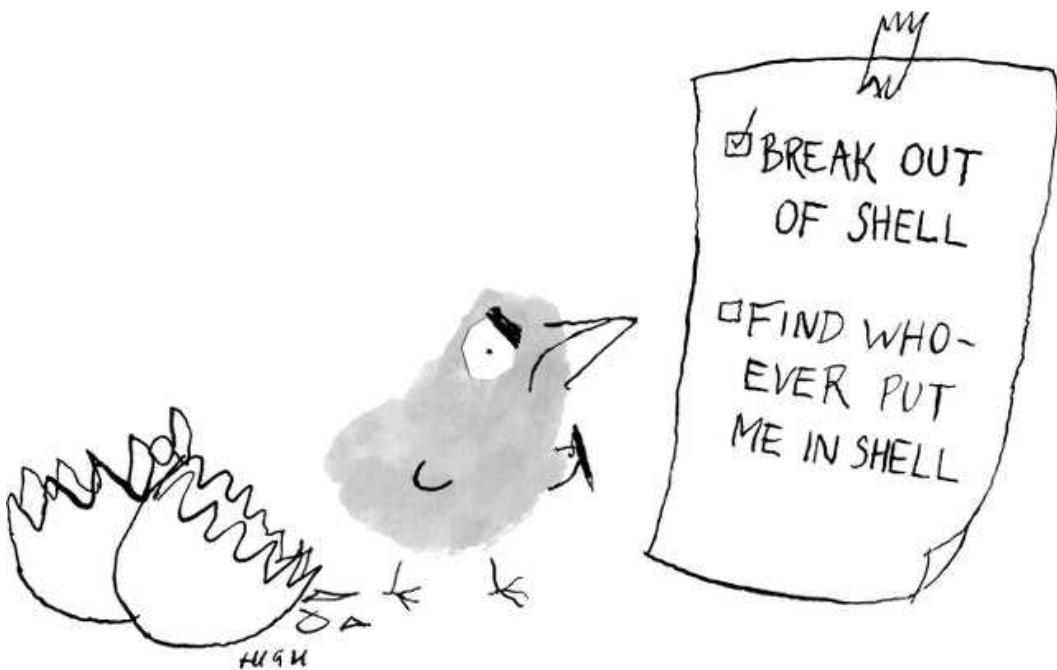
Matching needy brides with used wedding gowns isn't new. During the Second World War, both Eleanor Roosevelt and the romance novelist Barbara Cartland helped provide British military brides with wedding attire; in 2020, Sara Blakely, the founder of Spanx, loaned out her wedding dress to several women whose dreams for their big day had been derailed by the pandemic. But Puccio is in it for the fun. She allows women to try on dresses even if they aren't getting married.

Puccio got married in 1985, when she was nineteen, in a simple chiffon dress with sheer, puffy sleeves. She grew up in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, two blocks from the legendary bridal store Kleinfeld. "You needed an appointment, but I would go in and sell Girl Scout cookies, and hang out and watch," she said. "If they were, say, throwing out some old headpiece, I'd take it." She began collecting dresses for a bridal show that she staged, in 2000, at the public library in Bayonne, where she worked at the time. When the show was over, she kept at it: "I got one from freecycle.org in 2013—a strapless dress with a pick-up skirt that looked just like the dress on the poster for 'Bridesmaids.' The woman wrote, 'That's it, I threw his cheating ass out—I'm getting rid of the dress.'"

On a recent Wednesday afternoon, Puccio helped four young women look for dresses at the library. They used Puccio's office as a changing room, and, amid oohing and aahing, she persuaded them to parade down the hallway. "Come on out," she said. "We'll let our own Jewish mother have her way with you." She meant Gale Zetlen, who works in circulation. Zetlen, along with a scrum of other employees and patrons, adjudicated from the sidelines: a bridal Yalta.

One of the brides-to-be—a project manager who'd driven from Queens—began to cry when she looked at herself in the mirror wearing a strapless chiffon gown with a scalloped neckline: it was the one. "I feel great," she said. "I feel pretty."

The four brides offered one another encouragement and counsel. "How does it feel?" one asked, as another swept out of Puccio's office in an embroidered Oleg Cassini pouf.



“Can’t breathe,” the dress-wearer gasped.

One of Puccio’s greatest challenges is finding dresses that will fit her clientele. “Most of what I have is size 0, 2, or 6,” she said. “Women used to live on Tab, cigarettes, and diet pills.” Her collection is heavy on dresses from the nineteen-fifties, sixties, and seventies, and has included pieces by Scaasi, Badgley Mischka, Martina Liana, and Christos.

While the brides were trying on gowns, a Metuchen resident walked in with a donation: the tiered, tea-length dress that his recently deceased mother had sewn for her own wedding, in 1954. Puccio said that she’d also recently acquired a Priscilla of Boston dress that looked just like the one Rhoda Morgenstern got married in on “Rhoda.”

Eventually, the four brides headed home. Three had found dresses, and their faces wore serene but expectant expressions. Puccio sat down at her desk. This year, she has given away more than sixty dresses, to women who have come from as far away as Rhode Island, Tennessee, and Florida. One selected a dress and shipped it to her granddaughter in Poland.

Sara Blakely, the Spanx founder, approves of Puccio’s program. “Trying on dresses ignites something in us,” she said. “Probably from reading fairy tales in childhood.”

Puccio has set a couple of new goals for herself. One: she hopes to find the time, amid her library duties, to organize her collection by size and vintage. Two: she'd love it if brides contacted her by e-mail to schedule appointments—like at Kleinfeld. “I can’t make everyone happy,” she said. “But if someone says, ‘I want to look like my grandmother at her wedding?’ I’ve got it.” ♦

Harvard Postcard

Blood! Fur! Harvard's Latest Nightmare: Mice

The dean of students said a pro-Palestine encampment near freshman dorms was disrupting studies. But freshmen pointed to a different disruption: a rodent infestation.

By Eren Orbey

May 20, 2024



When a pro-Palestine encampment went up in Harvard Yard last month, the dean of students sent out an e-mail warning the campers that they faced punishment. The encampment, he wrote, was disrupting the residents of freshman dorms as they studied for finals. The *Harvard Crimson* found otherwise. “*Freshmen Say Noise From Harvard Yard Encampment Not Disruptive*,” a headline read. The paper did, however, find a different source of disturbance: “*‘Like a Horror Movie’: Freshmen Complain About Mice in Dorms*.”

“They sound like this,” Diane Sun, a prospective social-studies major from Seattle, said the other day, tapping her nails on the arm of a chair to mimic the mice that she hears skittering across her floor at night. She was sitting in the Yard, wearing a camel-colored coat and gray New Balances. Her first year on campus had already included billboard trucks plastered with students’ faces, billionaire-backed offensives against the university’s president, and, now, the fracas over the encampment. Of the protesters, Sun said, “They’re just out and about studying, painting, doing things like that. I’ve never heard anybody complain.” She added, “I’ve definitely heard a lot of people complain about mice.”

Somehow, Sun had made it through the fall without seeing a single mouse in her dorm, Hollis Hall, a fortresslike building that once housed George Washington’s troops. But this spring, after months of teasing friends in “mouse nests” like Straus and Canaday, Sun, returning to Hollis after class, saw a floor mate crouched outside the building in distress. “Did you forget your I.D.?” Sun asked. Then she smelled the peppermint oil—well known in Hollis as a D.I.Y. repellent. The mice had come for them at last.

Rodents are a fixture around Harvard, like the news crews during the run-up to President Claudine Gay’s resignation. The *Crimson*, 1939: “*MICE INUNDATION TROUBLES GRADUATE TEACHING SCHOOL.*” February 11, 1980: “*Winthrop Students Decry Mouse Population Boom.*” March 7, 1989: “*RATS IN YOUR DINING HALL.*” (“I don’t know what poison the exterminator feeds them, but they just keep getting bigger.”) In “Mahalia Mouse Goes to College,” a picture book by the Harvard alum John Lithgow, a precocious rodent foraging around Dunster House ends up in a student’s backpack and gets transported to a physics lecture. (Four years later—after “recitals and plays, Glee club and squash, a brief square-dancing phase”—she earns a bachelor-of-science degree.) “It’s almost a Harvard tradition,” Sun said.

She headed up to her dorm room—an impressively messy second-floor double with dark wainscoting, a nonworking fireplace, and plenty of hiding spots for stealthy vermin—to give a tour of the murine front lines. She pointed out snap traps in her closet, under her roommate’s dresser, and by their mini-fridge.

Sun isn't especially squeamish. In high school, she recited an original poem about scaling a carp ("its gills should be stark red—the intrusion of fate into viscera") for Jill Biden, at the White House. But the extermination efforts have got to her. She recently found a dead mouse in one of the traps. "I couldn't take a nap that day," she said. "I felt it looking at me." A classmate had to kill a maimed mouse using a bottle of mouthwash as a cudgel. Sun and a friend once spent an hour using Lysol wipes to clean blood and fur off the floor.

Sun has seen a live mouse only once, when she and her roommate were awakened at night by squeaking. "I turned on my flashlight and we saw it run," she said. "It had been eating something—probably the snacks in my roommate's backpack, which the mouse later shat in." They called Harvard Yard Operations and busied themselves with preventive measures. They plugged up holes in the heating grate and threw out their supply of instant noodles.

Some upperclassmen are inured to the vermin. Maia Patel Masini, a junior in Kirkland House, has seen a mouse in the cafeteria trying to drink from the nozzle of a milk dispenser. "They're honestly really cute from afar," she said. Harvard Yard Operations keeps a Mice F.A.Q.s guide online, but Sun and her friends don't consider it particularly helpful: "It's literally, like, 'Some people find mice to be a very rewarding part of Harvard!'" The Philosophical Musings section links to a YouTube video of the linguist Steven Pinker reading from the children's book "If You Give a Mouse a Cookie."

To test whether the mice were still in residence, Sun's roommate recently set out a cracker before bed; she was relieved to find it intact the next morning. But within a few days—shortly before the administration and the protesters negotiated an end to the encampment—the roommates found a tattered Mr. Goodbar wrapper behind a floor lamp. A mouse had left it. Sun explained, "We don't eat that kind of chocolate." ♦

Courtside

A Knicks-Loving Randle (Not That One) Takes to the Court

Julius Randle, the injured Knicks star, watches his seven-year-old son, Kyden, play a peewee game and reflects on missing the playoffs.

By Gideon Jacobs

May 20, 2024



After a Knicks playoff loss last week, Kyden Randle, the seven-year-old son of the Knicks All-Star Julius Randle, was playing in an A.A.U. game at Hoop Heaven, in Whippany, New Jersey. There were a few seconds left in the first half. “Hurry, hurry, hurry!” Randle shouted. He’d been out of the Knicks’ lineup since dislocating his shoulder in January, and was missing the team’s playoff run. “I knew going into surgery that it was going to fucking suck,” he said. “I knew we had a pretty special team.” Being available to attend Kyden’s games was a silver lining. “His tournaments revitalize me,” Randle said. “It really just makes me happy.”

Kyden missed a contested layup. “Rebound!” Randle yelled. Kyden did. “Go up!” Randle yelled. Kyden’s second shot fell short, and the buzzer sounded. Kyden’s team wore uniforms in orange and blue, like the Knicks. He had a pink sleeve on one leg. He looked toward his mother, Kendra, who offered reassurance: “Good try. It’s all right.” She noted, “It’s funny—all the other kids want Julius to say something to them, but Ky doesn’t.”

Randle and Kendra were watching from folding chairs on the sideline. He wore a gray velour jumpsuit and a black beanie. At halftime, children and parents lined up for photos and autographs. “I guess I’m the cool dad, but he also humbles me,” Randle said. “No matter how cool I am, he doesn’t want me hugging him in front of his friends.”

The family moved to New York in 2019, when Randle, then twenty-four, signed a three-year deal with the Knicks, who had just finished the season with the worst record in the N.B.A. “Things weren’t great,” he said. “They were shit.” But Randle blossomed, and so did the team. This season, in spite of a number of injuries, the Knicks posted the second-best record in the Eastern Conference. Kyden became a fixture at games, where he has hung out with 50 Cent, Roger Federer, Aaron Judge, and Pete Davidson.

“Everybody is, like, ‘He’s your twin. He’s a mini you,’ ” Randle said, of Kyden. “I’ll find myself looking toward him during the game. He’ll be, like, ‘Pick it up!’ He’ll coach me: ‘Dad, you have thirty-eight points, you need to go get forty.’ I had fifty-something one game, and he’s, like, ‘Dad, you have *this* much more to break the record.’ I was just trying to win.”

For the playoffs, Randle decided to watch from the bench for most home games and from the couch for road games. “Honestly, I watch by myself,” he said. “Kyden’s not that interested unless I’m playing.”

Most Knicks players live outside the city, near the team’s practice facility, in Westchester, but Randle and Kendra chose a place in Manhattan. “I love being able to walk in Central Park and interact with people,” Randle said. “People look at me: ‘Bro, why are you just walking around the city by yourself?’ Because I’m a normal person.” He and Kendra met at a party as students at the University of Kentucky. She was studying fashion design and merchandising, and had been a serious basketball player in high school.

There is a family-wide consensus that Kyden's smooth jump shot comes from her. "He has the most natural, pretty shot," Randle said. "I never had that as a kid." He and Kendra also have a two-year-old, Jayce. "A mama's boy," Randle said.

The third quarter began. Kyden's team was down big. A kid on the opposing team hit a turnaround jumper, and Randle said, "Luka!"—as in Dončić, of the Mavericks. On one possession, Kyden ended up on the floor, seemingly injured. "He's faking," Randle said. Kyden popped back up, fine and smiling. "He's seen too many N.B.A. games." On a drive to the basket in the fourth quarter, Kyden thought he was fouled but didn't get the whistle. "Calm down," Randle said. Kyden shot him a glare.

Kyden still wants his dad at all of his games. "When I'm not there, he's, like, 'Dad, where were you?'" Randle said.

The game ended, a lopsided 41–12. Bouncing around the gym nursing a bag of vending-machine potato chips, Kyden seemed unfazed. "I just try not to think about the last game," he said. "I try to think about the good games in the past." Kendra asked about his reaction to his dad's sideline encouragement. Kyden let out a hammy groan. "I can't do anything else!" he said. "He was telling me to do everything. To get the rebound. It's, like, Give me a break!"

The conversation turned to his father's missing the playoffs, and Kyden grew more serious. "I feel sad, because I really wanted to see him play," he said. "I feel like if I'm playing, he should be playing." ♦

Reporting & Essays

- [Can You Read a Book in a Quarter of an Hour?](#)
- [The Secrets of Suspense](#)
- [Is “Love Is Blind” a Toxic Workplace?](#)
- [How 3M Discovered, Then Concealed, the Dangers of Forever Chemicals](#)

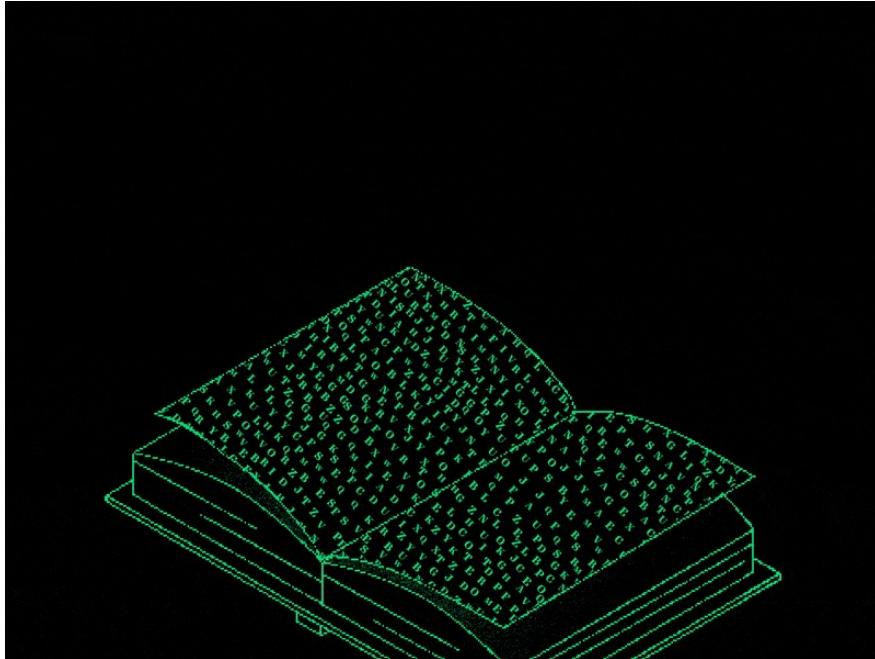
Onward and Upward with Technology

Can You Read a Book in a Quarter of an Hour?

Phone apps now offer to boil down entire books into micro-synopses. What they leave out is revealing.

By Anthony Lane

May 20, 2024



[Listen to this article.](#)

There are many reasons not to read a book. One, because you don't want to. Two, because you started reading, crawled to page 17, and gave up. Three, because the idea of reading never crosses your mind. (If so, lucky you. That way contentment lies.) Four, because it's Friday, which means that "W.W.E. SmackDown" is on Fox, which in turn means that [Marilynne Robinson](#)'s beatific [new exegetical study](#) of the Book of Genesis must, for now, be gently laid aside. Five, because reading a book is, you know, so *lame*. Only losers do it. And, six, because you simply don't have the time.

But what if the need to read won't go away? In a spasm of initiative and a sudden flush of guilt, you buy a Kindle and download "[The House of the](#)

Seven Gables,” fully intending to complete, on the subway, what you left unfinished in college. Three weeks in, though, and you still haven’t got as far as Gable No. 1. You toy with joining a local book club, on the principle that *having* to read something, to keep pace with your fellow-clubbers, will be a fruitful challenge; what holds you back is a fear that the conversation will swiftly turn to campus protests. Before you know it, people will be throwing glasses of Chardonnay and slapping one another on the base of the skull with copies of “Getting to Yes.”

The most potent enemy of reading, it goes without saying, is the small, flat box that you carry in your pocket. In terms of addictive properties, it might as well be stuffed with meth. There’s no point in grinding through a whole book—a chewy bunch of words arranged into a narrative or, heaven preserve us, an argument—when you can pick up your iPhone, touch the *Times* app, skip the news and commentary, head straight to Wordle, and give yourself an instant hit of euphoria and pride by taking just three guesses to reach a triumphant *guano*. Imagine, however, that your foe were to become your literate friend. Imagine getting hooked on a book, or on something recognizably book-esque, without averting your eyes from the screen. This is where Blinkist comes in.

Blinkist is an app. If I had to summarize what it does, I would say that it summarizes like crazy. It takes an existing book and crunches it down to a series of what are called Blinks. On average, these amount to around two thousand words. Some of the books that get Blinked are gleamingly new, such as “Leading with Light,” by Jennifer Mulholland and Jeff Shuck, which was published in March; other books are so old that they were written by people whose idea of a short-haul flight involved feathers and wax. In the realm of nonfiction alone, more than six and a half thousand works have been subjected to the Blinkist treatment. Across all platforms, there have been thirty-one million downloads on the app. Right now, there will be somebody musing over Blinks of “[Biohack Your Brain](#),” “[The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin](#),” or “[The Power of Going All-In](#),” which is, I am sorry to report, yet another study of successful leadership. Given the title, I was hoping that it might be about breakfast buffets, or the best way to behave yourself at an orgy.

When joining Blinkist, you are asked to nominate the categories that attract you most: “Mindfulness & Happiness,” for instance, or “Motivation & Inspiration,” or “Productivity.” Each section is marked by a defining logo: “History” by a vase with handles, “Psychology” by a head with the top of its cranium removed, and “Society & Culture,” somewhat nervously, by a tepee. Greedy for the Blinkist experience, I ticked every box, and was at once rewarded with tips for books “based on your past preferences.” By now, my past had lasted seven minutes—algorithmically speaking, a lifetime. And what was the upshot? Four items, all of them designed, I was told, to help me “Overcome Layoff Survivor Syndrome.” Thanks.

Once you are Blinked in, your days will follow a new pattern. Instead of being woken by an alarm, or by a bored spaniel licking your face, you will find yourself greeted by a Daily Blink. This will arrive, with a ping, on your phone, alerting you to a book that, suitably pruned, is ready to be served up for your personal edification. Thus, “Tired of losing arguments? Get the upper hand with today’s pick, *Win Every Argument*, and learn how to effectively communicate.” Or, “Discover the fundamental principles of economics with *The General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money!*” In other words, there is a proper time to acquaint yourself with the work of John Maynard Keynes, and that time is *now*. If that scares you, get a load of this, my favorite Daily Blink to date: “Dive deep into the philosophical masterpiece, *Being and Time*, as Martin Heidegger explores the nature of existence.” And you thought your almond granola would be heavy going.

In practice, there are two options for absorbing a Blink. Either you read it onscreen or you listen to it being recited. Seventy per cent of Blink fans prefer the latter mode, and you can see why; it allows them to combine their mental exercise with other activities. At the gym, say, they can ingest the gist of “[Salt Sugar Fat](#),” by Michael Moss, until their AirPods pop out under the strain of the squats. Alternatively, on the drive to the office, they can treat themselves to a quick scoot through Yuval Noah Harari’s “[Sapiens](#),” while trying to stop the *Homo neanderthalensis* in the red Bronco from cutting into their lane.

We all remember our first Blink. Mine was a way of catching up. Having failed to peruse Steven Pinker’s “[Enlightenment Now](#)” when it was published, in 2018, perhaps because I was too busy studying the helicopter

chase in “[Mission: Impossible—Fallout](#),” I decided, late in the day, to give it a whirl. But in what form? The Penguin paperback, comprising around four hundred and fifty pages of text, plus another hundred pages of notes, references, and an index? The full whack, on Audible, nicely narrated by Arthur Morey and lasting nineteen hours and forty-nine minutes? Or the same thing, reduced to a sequence of nine Blinks—ready to consume, on audio, in twenty-four minutes flat? No contest.

The version of Pinker’s argument through which I was hustled by the Blinks could charitably be described as broad brush. Broad enough, indeed, to paint entire swaths of cultural experience with one swipe: “If you’re familiar with European history, you’ve probably heard of the period known as the Enlightenment.” The brushstrokes are assertive enough to cover huge conceptual shifts: “Humanism also led to what’s known as cosmopolitanism, which can be seen in today’s modern values.” Cue the happy ending: “If we look at any number of graphs and hard factual data about the state of the world over the past hundred or more years, we can see that we’re still in the process of adding energy and greatly improving.”

But that’s the trick. We *can’t* look. On the page, Pinker’s thesis is amply supported by a host of graphs. None of them are reproduced by Blinkist, the purpose of which is to save us the bother of poring over finicky things like graphics and charts, and to steer us away from the confounding weeds of minutiae. As with Pinker, so with William James. His noble work of 1902, “[The Varieties of Religious Experience](#),” is crammed with what he calls “the palpitating documents” that have arisen, in the course of centuries, from individual crises and ecstasies of the spirit. Many such palpitations are quoted verbatim. (“I seemed to feel my earlier life, so smiling and so full, go out like a fire.”) Very few of them, however, survive in the calmer confines of the Blink, which concludes its abstract of James with a finger-wagging directive: “We should adopt a more critical study of religion.”



It's easy to decry this stripping down of complex reasoning, as if the app were bent solely on decluttering books of everything that lends them vitality. Yet you have to admit: if you'd never read Pinker or James, Blinkist *would* furnish you with a basic grasp of their intent—sufficient, perhaps, to do more than merely drop their names. If the topics that Pinker addresses happened to crop up in conversation ("Everything is so crappy nowadays, worse than it's ever been"), you could just about hold your own, at least over a cup of coffee. ("Well, there's this guy, Pink-somebody, who says that infant mortality is *way* down.") Is that what books are coming to, a handy social lubricant? Should you care if literature gets Blinked away, like an eyelash? To find out more, you need to go to Germany.

Blinkist is based in Berlin. The headquarters are halfway along Sonnenallee, an unlovely strip in the southeast quarter of the city. When I visit, the C.E.O. of the company, Holger Seim, tells me, "It was an up-and-coming area, but it never really came." Pass beneath a gloomy railway bridge, glance in awe at the poster for "Die Show der Megastars" at a nearby hotel, trot up to the second floor of a modern office block, and enter. Once inside, you can immediately tell that you've arrived at a booming tech firm, because there's a *swing* in the middle of the room. Other giveaways: the slogan "We Exist to Spark Understanding" writ large on a wall; a workplace photograph from 2020, with [Tim Cook](#), of Apple, sitting cross-legged at the front of the

crowd; and a number of small dogs that skitter and skid along the floor, going nowhere in a hurry and getting there fast.

Seim is trim, keen, approachable, and, most important of all, armed with banana bread. “Somebody brought it in today,” he says, offering a slice. The lack of detectable flaws in his spoken English should be no surprise. “English is not just specific to Blinkist but to the whole tech scene in Berlin,” he tells me. Some forty nationalities, he reckons, are represented in his busy hive of a hundred and sixty fellow-workers. It’s like a miniature U.N. without the suits.

Seim first thought of becoming an entrepreneur when he was in high school, in the way that other people want to be rock stars or astronauts. The difference is that he brought his plan to fruition. At the University of Marburg, an hour north of Frankfurt, he studied business administration and hatched the concept of Blinkist with three friends, Niklas Jansen, Tobias Balling, and Sebastian Klein. After graduating, they all found gainful employment—Seim worked at Deutsche Telekom—and bided their time. When they felt the moment was right, they quit their jobs and moved to Berlin. “This is it. If we don’t do this now, we never will” is how Seim recalls the mood. “Rents were still very cheap here. It was already an international magnet for talent.” Blinkist went live in 2013. Luck was on their side in the form of the iPhone, which was being updated—or, if you prefer, was cajoling the human brain ever deeper into a hostage situation—pretty much on an annual basis. “A lot of our ideas gravitated around knowledge management: how we can teach people something quickly,” Seim says. “We thought, What can we do with that new device? We naturally came to the idea: Wouldn’t it be good to have something that helps you *learn* on a smartphone, and spend those downtimes more meaningfully than playing Angry Birds?”

This takes us to the very nub of Blinkist. Apart from the vexed ontological question of whether blowing up little green pigs with crates of cartoon TNT does or does not have any meaning, in a universe already rich in absurdity, two features are worth noting. One, the mild shade of pedagogy in Seim’s gentle insistence on teaching and being taught. (German educators of an older and sterner school might well frown with approval.) Two, the way in which, far from denying that phones have assumed possession of our lives,

Seim leans into that stubborn fact. Why struggle? Why not collaborate with our captors and see what comes of it? “The social-media apps—they made us addicted to checking our screens all the time,” Seim tells me. “That is happening. That is a trend, whether we like it or not.” Since I’m fated to doomscroll anyway, I might as well channel that itchy-thumbed habit into browsing a Blink of Eric Schlosser’s “[Command and Control](#).” Or “[Chernobyl](#),” by Serhii Plokhy. Or something on Fukushima. Get me some *real* doom.

Whenever you explain, to the uninitiated, what Blinkist is, they tend to ask, “Who does the summarizing? And *is* it a who, or is it more of a what?” The answer is that it’s a bit of both. “Real people do it. We have a pool of subject-matter experts. They work for us as freelancers. Some of them are Ph.D. candidates, coaches, consultants,” Seim says. “They read the books for us, they take notes, they organize those notes. In the past, we had writers who would take those notes and write the texts.” Then came the narrators—an endangered species, it turns out. “These days, a lot of that is enhanced by [A.I.](#) When it comes to recording, the front-list titles we record still with people.” And the less popular Blinks, on the backlist? “We let A.I. narrate it,” Seim says. “We have voices that we trained. We cloned voices, basically.” Could the whole process be handled by A.I., with no flesh and blood, and no scrutinizing eyes? “Technically, we’re almost there,” Seim replies. “Legally, it’s not allowed,” he adds. “As soon as we just take a book, feed it into A.I., let A.I. produce a summary, and then sell that summary, it would no longer be fair use.”

Teasing out the various strands in this tangle of copyright law, artificial intelligence, and real, honest-to-God wordage is a tender task. Yet it can, I am pleased to report, yield delicious results. Some nameless soul must have agreed to whittle down Wittgenstein’s “[Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus](#)” into Blinkable form—a heroic undertaking, given that it’s hardly baggy with superfluities in the first place—because there it is, thinned to six slices, plus an introduction and a final summary. All yours in sixteen and a half minutes. I listened to it, savoring the faintly metallic tone of the narration, and was rewarded, at the climax, with this:

True meaning reverberates in the unspoken chasm between what we can show and what we can tell about it. O.K., that’s it for this Blink.

But before we let you go, we wanted to let you know that this Blink was narrated by an A.I.-generated voice model. That's me.

Imagine Wittgenstein, never less than agonized at the best of times, hearing those words. His head would explode like a grenade.

It should be stressed that Blinkist is not the only abbreviator on the block. There is also Sumizeit, a lesser animal, whose audio condensations last some ten to fifteen minutes. Nor, as any historian of the print trade will confirm, is Blinkist without precedent in its underlying desire. To cut a long story short, abridging has always been in vogue. Eighteenth-century parents, wishing to school their offspring in piety without the use of the whip, could turn to John Newbery's edition of the Bible, "adorned with Cuts for the Use of Children," published in 1764, or, only a year later, to a larger and fancier product—"An Abridgement of Scripture History designed for the Amusement and Improvement of Children: wherein the most Striking actions in the Old Testament are made plain to the youngest Capacities: adorned with head Peices expressive of the Subject of Each Narrative." (Is that not Blinkism *avant la lettre*?) If the goal was to shield the young from unsuitable material—for God's sake, don't let them read the stuff about honeycombs and lips in the Song of Solomon!—the title pages did not say so. Instead, their common emphasis was on adornment, the implication being that in whittling down a text you were not selling it short but buffing it up and adding to its appeal.

You could argue that the paring of prose for children is a specific discipline, and there is, indeed, a long tradition of classics being made palatable for youthful tastes. At bedtime in the early nineteen-hundreds, you could read out "Gulliver's Travels, Retold for Little Folk," by Agnes Grozier Herbertson, in the comforting certainty that any Swiftian unseemliness had been erased. (The subtitle, for a tale that is partly *about* little folk, is wonderfully tin-eared.) Rather more inspiring is the notion that the art of synopsis itself is, or was, considered a subject fit for the classroom. Samuel Thurber's "Précis Writing for American Schools: Methods of Abridging, Summarising, Condensing, with Copious Exercises" (1936) abounds with startling examples of what was once demanded. We are invited to inspect summaries of a Wordsworth sonnet, "The World Is Too Much with Us," which were, according to Thurber, "written in ten minutes by pupils of the senior year in high-school." He has harsh words for those students taking the

fall paper of the College Entrance Examination Board in 1919, who had to précis Keats's "On First Looking Into Chapman's Homer" and stumbled in the attempt. "Their knowledge of mythology was meagre," Thurber says with a sniff. Dumbass kids.

It is that generation, reared on the verbal need to squeeze, which grew up to become the target audience for the most comprehensive campaign of textual compression ever mounted. The *Reader's Digest* condensed-books club came into being in 1950, and within a year it had garnered more than half a million members. Four years later, that number had risen to two and a half million. In his 1958 study of the *Reader's Digest*, bearing the presumptuous—and, in the event, erroneous—title "Of Lasting Interest," James Playsted Wood describes the mechanics of condensation. "The editors read about 2800 books a year in the United States and 1000 in England," Wood writes. Once a lucky book is plucked from the throng, an editor makes the initial rough cut. Then:

Three more editors go over this first condensation, making further cuts, perhaps restoring some already made, making sure that the contents, the spirit, and the style of the author are retained in the shortened version. Nothing essential is changed.

In the light of that hard labor, it is a cruel irony that the condensed books should, over time, have dwindled into a byword for the redundant middlebrow. Unloved and unclaimed, they lurk on the shelves of thrift stores, the gleam all but faded from their embossed spines. (Some were clad in leatherette. Luxury!) Should you wish to take the pulse of postwar hankerings, however, you could do worse than run your finger down those spines and chart the contents. In the summer of 1952, for instance, subscribers could enjoy, in a single convenient volume, "[The Hidden Flower](#)," by Pearl S. Buck; "[The Dam Busters](#)," by Paul Brickhill; "[The City Boy](#)," by Herman Wouk; and "[My Cousin Rachel](#)," by Daphne du Maurier. Wouk it was who, after a work of his went under the knife, congratulated the *Digest*, claiming to be "astonished at the way the main plot was preserved, in about one-fifth the compass of the novel." To judge by the elephantine bulk of the average Wouk, this skillful lesson in economy is not one that he took to heart.

Wood's survey quotes Ralph Henderson, a long-standing *Digest* employee, in charge of the condensing squad, who was laudably clear in his intentions: to do "an honest job of representing good current books." He added, "It is insincere editing to give the customers something you don't like yourself." Such plainspoken confidence, especially in the contested field of reading, smacks of a vanished age, yet a direct line can be drawn, I would say, from Henderson to Holger Seim. Literary eras show their true selves when they decide what is worthy of encapsulation, and also in the prejudices that prevail, by no means consciously, when the blade is applied to the meat of a given text.

A case in point: when Blinkist entered the fray, in 2013, its list of abbreviated books ran to a hundred titles. Two more would be added every week. "Initially, we built a product for ourselves," Seim tells me. "So we said, like, 'Where do we start? What's our early-adopter audience?' Well, we thought, it's probably not the readers of politics and history books. It's more a young, tech-savvy audience, young professionals like us. What do they read? They read all the self-help books. '[The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People](#),' '[Getting Things Done](#),' '[Atomic Habits](#).' All that."

It's true that James Clear's "Atomic Habits" wasn't published until 2018, but Seim's proposition stands, and Blinkist is still overwhelmingly weighted toward that peculiar twenty-first-century zone where the sensitive upkeep of the self merges, without friction, into running a company and stroking the bulge in your bank account. What the app provides, to that extent, is a synoptic gospel. As I write, my Daily Blink has just landed, nudging me toward "[How to Make a Few Billion Dollars](#)," by Brad Jacobs, which is described on my screen as "an insightful road map to assembling a team that's equipped to catapult a company to staggering heights of success." From Pearl S. Buck to dollar billionaires. It's quite a trip.

The ideal Blinkist devotee, in other words, is the kind of person who would invent Blinkist. In an age defined by its grim-jawed polarization, is there not a risk in abetting so narrow a view of the world, and so militant a scheme to milk it? "On the one hand, we do not want to be missionary. We do not have a political agenda," Seim says. "We try to be neutral. Switzerland. On the other hand, we believe the concept of short-form content—Blinks—lends itself very well to moving out of a bubble." There was an attempt to try

randomization (that is, recommending a book unaligned with the Blinks that a reader had previously selected), but, as Seim admits, it proved unpopular: “If leaving people in their echo chambers drives more engagement, more renewals, more business value, then it’s hard to say we do the other things. We need to pay the salaries and make a living.”

Yet that is not the whole story. Far behind the walls of the front list, there are other stories, bedded deep in Blinkist, awaiting their turn. Say you’re a mid-level executive stuck in an airport lounge, staring wanly at your muffin. What if you *don’t* feel like catapulting your company to staggering heights? How about a gutsy thriller? You open Blinkist, swat aside the imprecations of Brad Jacobs, and search under “Crime.” Up comes a book you’ve dimly heard of but never read. Scrolling down, you hit the following sentence: “Raskolnikov bashes her again and again as blood gushes from her skull.” That’s the stuff. Headphones on. Half an hour later, as your flight is called, you sit there motionless, hearing only this:

The novel ends with Raskolnikov heading to a Siberian prison and experiencing a moment of divine grace—the beginning of his redemption. Thanks so much for listening. If you’d like, leave us a rating or a comment. We always appreciate your feedback. See you in the next Blink.

Canon to right of us, canon to left of us: what belongs in the ranks of lasting literature, whether it deserves to last, and why we ought to pay heed, let alone homage, to such weary classifications are all part of a debate that will never (and should never) draw to a close. It may also be beside the point. Furnished with compelling ethical objections to “[Huckleberry Finn](#),” we can in good conscience skip it altogether and avoid the toil and trouble of wrestling with its merits, or its alleged want of them, for ourselves. What with all the competing cultural forces raining down upon us, we need no second invitation *not* to read. So one has to ask: If Twain’s book, or Dostoyevsky’s “[Crime and Punishment](#),” can be scrunched down to a near-minimum, for speed-reading and easy listening, is that a travesty or a useful prop? Do little bits of literature retain the power to provoke us, and even spur us on to grander things, or are they, in fact, worse than no literature at all?



Seldom has this mystery been so cogently dramatized as it was on British TV in 1972. A voice-over, urgently suave, welcomed us to the finals of the All-England Summarize Proust Competition, explaining that “each contestant has to give a brief summary of Proust’s ‘À la Recherche du Temps Perdu,’ once in a swimsuit and once in evening dress.” Needless to say, we were in the land of Monty Python. The m.c., resplendent in a ruffled shirt, asked one finalist, Harry Baggott, “What made you first want to try and start summarizing Proust?”—or, as he stoutly pronounced it, “Prowst.” When his turn came, Harry, racing through the allotted fifteen seconds, gamely waffled on about “extratemporal values” but failed to make it past the opening page of “Swann’s Way.” As ever, Python had sought out a ridiculous problem and nailed it. The key to summarizing was to forget bland appraisals and cling to the concrete detail. Involuntary memory? Piece of cake.

Anyone who turns to “Crime and Punishment” rendered in Blinks will soon encounter a similar struggle between the overarching and the tactile. We learn about the murder weapon, of course, and about the stone under which Raskolnikov buries his loot. But a sentence from the novel such as “His face looked as if it had been smeared all over with grease, like an iron lock”—Dostoyevsky at his most memorably Dickensian—has no chance of creeping into the Blinks, whereas, thanks to the summarizer, we *are* granted a bizarre

excursus into the philosophy of nihilism and a comparison of Dostoyevsky and Nietzsche (who is never referred to in the book, and was only twenty-two when it was published). What shortening seems to encourage is the temptation to edit as one cuts and, weirder still, to smuggle in additions to the original where one's avowed duty is to subtract.

Jump from St. Petersburg to Regency England, and you will see Blinkist caving completely to this urge. Among the pleasures that I have derived from the app, few are more satisfying than the realization that Jane Austen, of all people, can be distilled into a babbling stream of consciousness:

Darcy's feelings for Lizzie have turned unequivocally romantic One afternoon, Darcy bursts in on her and bluntly proposes You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you, he says Lizzie is shocked and rejects him harshly, telling him, I have never desired your good opinion and you have certainly bestowed it most unwillingly

What is prompted by this unusual passage, if not the delightful sensation that “[Pride and Prejudice](#)” is in the midst of being rewritten by Lydia Bennet? The near-total lack of punctuation would cause Henderson, the edit king of *Reader’s Digest*, to have a fit of the vapors, and, should it emerge that artificial intelligence is responsible for the lapse, we would be right to fret. If this is how A.I. handles proofreading, just think how it would screw up the release of a nuclear warhead.

What is most informative about the babble is the revelation that Mr. Darcy is now “unequivocally romantic.” Only once does the word “romantic” appear in the novel, when Charlotte Lucas, announcing her engagement to the insufferable Mr. Collins, confesses, “I am not romantic, you know. I never was.” Austen’s attitude to the Romantic movement was, to say the least, fraught with skepticism. (“Common sense, common care, common prudence, were all sunk in Mrs. Dashwood’s romantic delicacy,” we are told in “[Sense and Sensibility](#).”) But as modern readers—and, evidently, as modern summarizers—we can’t help wanting to warm Austen up, as it were, and to loosen her classical and Christian stays. “A Timeless Tale Where Love Conquers Societal Norms” is the tagline that tops the Blinks of “Pride and Prejudice,” and, over and over, in wandering through Blinkist, we keep bumping into this vision of literature as a blueprint for breaking out. The

belief that the plight of fictional characters can and should be improved is, dare one say, almost Pinkerish in its optimism:

In the end, the novel charts the poignant journey of a young man struggling to find his place in a world constrained by rigid societal norms and offers a beautifully stirring affirmation of the power of self-expression.

That is how “[A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man](#),” in its Blinked-down guise, signs off. None of that nonsense, familiar to lovers of Joyce, about wanting to “forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race.” Just another dose of norm-busting (should the word “societal” not be banned on the ground of sheer ugliness?) and, beneath it, a faint suggestion that Stephen Dedalus, the young man of the title, needed help with his self-help. If only he’d read “The Power of Going All-In,” he could have saved himself a heap of pain.

Here’s the strangest thing of all. To reach peak Blinkist, you must pass beyond Jane Austen and James Joyce and head not upward but downward, into the fiery pit. There it is, in the Blink-friendly précis of “[Paradise Lost](#)” (yes, it genuinely exists) that we find the fallen angels: “They’ve just lost their first big battle against God and plummeted to hell. But despite their defeat, Satan wants to continue the struggle against God.” Brave fellow. And there’s more: “He assembles his demons to talk strategy.” Talk about the 7 Habits of Highly Effective People! Boy, have *they* overcome Layoff Survivor Syndrome. Such, to my dazzled eyes, is the crowning glory of Blinkist. Its high-tech alchemy, transmuting literature into business, turns the inhabitants of literature, even the ones with tattered wings, into businessmen. Listen, rapt, as the devils crunch the numbers and kick around ideas for going forward:

Moloch suggests open warfare against heaven. Belial advocates for doing nothing. Mammon argues for making hell a little nicer so they can all live a happy life of sin.

I’m with Mammon, all day long. Life is short, and so, if you look at your phone, is literature. Blink and you’ll miss it. ♦

The Secrets of Suspense

We love churning apprehension in fiction; we hate it in life. But understanding the most fundamental technique of storytelling can teach us something about being alive.

By Kathryn Schulz

May 20, 2024



In my dreams, the baby could talk. A one-day-old, apparently understanding the conversation going on around her crib, suddenly weighed in with a factual correction; a three-day-old, still in the hospital, piped up to agree that the surgical procedure being recommended was both unnecessary and outlandishly expensive; an infant, evidently inferring the entire universe from first principles, observed that soon she would be able to refer to her mother's sister's fiancé as her uncle. In the months before my partner's due date, I experienced so many variations on this recurrent dream that it finally took a turn for the meta. In that version, when our newborn began to talk, I turned to the assembled family members and exclaimed, "The dreams were prophetic!"

Awaiting the birth of a child is a very strange experience. Life is full of momentous events, but, as a rule, they either happen with no warning whatsoever—someone you love is killed in a car accident; you step into a café and meet your future wife—or occur on a foreordained day: you graduate from college; you get married; you gain your citizenship. Having a baby is not like this, a fact that becomes increasingly obvious toward the end of a pregnancy. At thirty-four weeks, your baby is almost equally likely to be born in seven days or in two months. This presents all kinds of practical problems: How are you supposed to schedule parental leave? For what date should the grandparents buy plane tickets? How long do you have to meet a work deadline or to find curtains for the nursery? If, in your famished late-pregnancy state, you eat all the snacks in the bag you packed for the hospital, will you have time to replace them?

Such logistical issues are vexing. But the final weeks of pregnancy, with all the uncertainty and anticipation that they entail, also foster a very specific emotional state, one produced only by the experience of waiting, for an indeterminate amount of time, for something momentous to happen. And so lately I have been thinking, in the context of life, about something I have thought about for years in the context of literature: the structure, function, and strange pleasures of suspense.

Like a lot of fun things, suspense has a bad reputation. Its detractors have long regarded it as a cheap trick, deployed by hacks or sellouts to entertain the masses. In the nineteenth century, when whole classes of overtly suspenseful books began to emerge, including mystery novels and detective fiction, highbrow critics were quick to denounce them as “preaching to the nerves”—that is, winning over readers by provoking curiosity and excitement, rather than by offering any ethical or aesthetic fulfillment. “Tawdry,” “hideous,” “ignoble”: thus did Matthew Arnold denounce so-called railway books, the potboiling precursors to airport fiction.

Such opprobrium rests on a logical flaw: yes, tawdry literature is full of suspense, but virtually every other kind of literature is, too. In fact, outside of phone books and instruction manuals, it’s almost impossible to find a written work that *doesn’t* make use of suspense to captivate its readers. With effort, I can think of a few exceptions: [Gertrude Stein](#), that grand doyenne of unconventional attraction, seldom uses suspense to seduce us, and books for

very young children, like “[Goodnight Moon](#)” and “[Pat the Bunny](#),” run on a different fuel entirely. But almost everyone else in the writing business is on Team Suspense. “[A Time to Kill](#),” “Rear Window,” “[Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy](#),” “[To the Lighthouse](#),” “[Beloved](#),” “[The Magic Mountain](#),” all of [Dickens](#), all of [Shakespeare](#), the Book of Job: each of these is borne forward at least in part by the engine of suspense. Snobbish critics who get worked up when that engine steamrolls other literary desiderata, from prose style to character development, forget that the suspense itself is not to blame. On the contrary, it lies close to the origins and the essence of literature. As E. M. Forster noted in “[Aspects of the Novel](#),” every work of fiction, no matter how lofty, must be built around a story, and, “qua story, it can have only one merit: that of making the audience want to know what happens next.”

As generations of would-be novelists can tell you, that is harder than it sounds. The mechanics of suspense are complicated and, like its moral and literary status, often misunderstood. Many people think that it’s created by withholding information, which is true—yet you cannot begin to create suspense without *providing* information as well. Take [Alfred Hitchcock](#)’s famous example, of a bomb going off in a film either with or without the audience’s foreknowledge. If it explodes with no warning, that’s surprising and disturbing, but it isn’t suspenseful. To feel suspense, viewers must know in advance that the bomb is there. If, say, you watched it getting wired to a car, all the subsequent scenes fill up with tension: the protagonist returning to fish an umbrella from the trunk, a police officer lingering to write a ticket, a crowd of elementary-school students swarming the crosswalk in front of the car. In other words, what creates the suspense is not that you don’t know what’s going to happen. It is that, broadly speaking, you do.

As all of this suggests, the experience of suspense is basically one of waiting. This is another counterintuitive fact about it: far from proceeding at a breakneck pace, suspense involves an artificial slowing down of time. Highly suspenseful books may indeed be “page-turners,” but that implies only that the *reader* moves quickly, not that the plot does. Once an audience’s curiosity has been piqued, the story line veers away from whatever might sate it, meandering rather than rushing toward its conclusion. This presents a challenge for the writer, since in many contexts—the D.M.V., the tarmac, on hold with Verizon—waiting is one of humankind’s least favorite activities. The secret to succeeding at suspense is

to keep readers interested despite keeping them on ice. That's why the most important part of a bomb, from a literary or cinematic perspective, is the timer. Counting from one to ten is boring, because what happens next is eleven. But counting from ten to one is gripping, because what happens next is: *BOOM!* As long as your audience knows that something important will happen soon, the act of slogging moment by moment through time ceases to be tedious and instead becomes thrilling.

Consider the following passage:

He picked up the raft, held it in front of him, and walked seaward. When the water reached his waist, he leaned forward. A swell caught the raft and lifted it, with the boy aboard. He centered himself so the raft lay flat. He paddled with both arms, stroking smoothly. His feet and ankles hung over the rear of the raft. He moved out a few yards, then turned and began to paddle up and down the beach.

So detailed is this description that it brings to mind the panel-by-panel illustrations for assembling *IKEA* furniture. The prose is pleasant enough, bobbing along like the boy on a becalmed surface. But it is not particularly suspenseful unless you encounter it in context: page 57 of Peter Benchley's "[Jaws](#)."

The most extreme version of this suspense-building strategy does not merely slow time down but effectively stops it, by yanking the reader away from the action just as it reaches its apex. This is the plot device known as the cliffhanger, a word whose putative origins lie not in pulp fiction but in a lesser-known [Thomas Hardy](#) novel, "[A Pair of Blue Eyes](#)." In the relevant scene, a man named Henry Knight is strolling with his love interest along the cliffs of Cornwall when his hat blows off. He chases after it, one thing leads to another, and soon he is dangling from a sheer wall of rock, nothing beneath him but six hundred feet of air terminating in the fanged and foaming surface of the ocean.

I cannot in good conscience recommend "[A Pair of Blue Eyes](#)," which brings to mind [T. S. Eliot](#)'s observation about Hardy—that "at times his style touches sublimity without ever having passed through the stage of being good." Still, the scene on the cliff is a tiny, self-contained masterpiece:

smart, riveting, and, so to speak, completely over the top. As his hero's life hangs in the balance, Hardy makes his leisurely way through five hundred million years of history. Knight looks at an ancient trilobite fossilized in the rock face directly in front of his eyes, and finds his mind turning toward all the countless intervening creatures that link the two of them, from the primordial iguanodon to the earliest human. Facing death, it is not so much his own life that flashes before his eyes as all of life on earth. He thinks about those millions of years of vitality and mortality, he thinks about his beloved, he thinks about the indifference that in his circumstances passes for the malevolence of Nature, he thinks about the meaning of his apparently too brief life, and all the while he is suspended above the unforgiving Atlantic—left hanging, not unlike the audience, for more than a dozen pages, easily the best ones in the book. Far be it from me to disclose whether or not Henry Knight survives his ordeal. Either way, thus was the cliffhanger born.

Speaking of birth: consider the phrase “a pregnant pause.” You might imagine that the idiom was derived from the condition—that we call such a pause pregnant because it is bulging with something important that is about to happen. But that is backward. In a bit of linguistic history that my partner and I found pleasing when we stumbled across it in the months before her due date, “pregnant” meant “laden with significance” before it meant laden with child.

A pregnancy is, in effect, a very long cliffhanger: a state of “expecting,” as the apt euphemism has it, that drags on and on and on. A pregnant pause, by contrast, is a very short cliffhanger: a conversational fermata that fills listeners with anticipation. That it can do so through a technique no more sophisticated than a simple pause suggests, correctly, that suspense does not derive only from the machinations of plot. Instead, it is what you might call fractal: it can be fostered at every level, from a seven-season TV series all the way down to a chapter, a paragraph, a scene, or even a silence.

On the page, where silence per se is not an option, the smallest possible unit of suspense is a sentence. We don't often think of a single line of prose as potentially suspenseful, but one of the essential jobs of a sentence is to encourage you to read the next one. (If it fails to do so, all the other possible aims of writing—explication, illumination, aesthetic pleasure, moral change

—are irrelevant.) To that end, sentences must sometimes work like stories; they must make readers want to know what happens next.

Here is a successful example. Recorded in the archives of the author Carl Carmer, it is the opening line of a bit of Southern Black folklore: *The knee-high man lived by the swamp*. That sentence contains no action (the knee-high man did not flee from the giant) and no overt tension (the knee-high man did not feel the hammering of his heart). It contains only a character, plunked down in a setting. Yet it is full of suspense. When you read it, there is no way not to wonder: What's up with the knee-high man? You might think that's just because knee-high men and swamps are intrinsically interesting, but most of the suspense in this sentence comes from its structure. “The old man lived by the railroad tracks”; “Mrs. Octavia Antoinette Varnish lived on the sixteenth floor of an apartment building on Park Avenue”; “Benjamin Mooney lived in an old house on a dirt road just beyond the town line”: all of these create suspense. It is a great gift to authors that, given the character and setting of a story, the human mind naturally starts wondering about its plot.

Other sentences create suspense by different means. “At first, he counted the days by tying knots in a rope”: that one is plucked from a Wikipedia entry about Poon Lim, a sailor who survived the sinking of a British ship during the Second World War, then spent a hundred and thirty-three days alone on a wooden raft until he was rescued off the coast of Brazil. Showing up where it does, in the middle of an account of Lim’s ordeal, it is just a plainspoken statement of fact. But, if you make it the first sentence of a story, you’ve got yourself a killer lede: who *wouldn’t* keep reading, with that kind of opening line? After just twelve words, we are already deep in the narrative, curious about what has happened, curious about what will happen next.



Screenwriters have long understood and exploited this start-in-the-thick-of-things trick. “Sunset Boulevard” begins with a murdered man floating in a pool for the same reason that countless Netflix shows begin at a moment of peak drama: to keep the audience watching for another two—or twenty—hours, waiting for the plot to catch up with, and clarify, the opening scene. Onscreen, such scenes are generally dramatic, as with the body in the pool, but on the page this *in-medias-res* technique doesn’t require anything beyond itself to work. To produce suspense in a single line, you do not need exceptionally interesting contents. “The doubts came later”—that sentence consists of one boring article, one boring noun, one boring verb, and one boring adverb. Yet the mind races ahead: What is it that’s suddenly under scrutiny? A memory? A marriage? A death? Nor do you need beautiful prose. “The event that came to be known as The Pulse began at 3:03 p.m., eastern standard time, on October 1”: that’s [Stephen King](#), in the opening sentence of “Cell,” being as spare as a railway announcer and entirely effective.

The ambiguity in these sentences—what doubts? what pulse?—seems like a prerequisite for suspense. But, as the late philosopher Aaron Smuts observed, it is possible to know everything about an upcoming event yet still experience it as suspenseful. Smuts points to the scene in “Psycho” where Marion Crane chats with Norman Bates while checking into his motel. The

first time you watch it, you will take in the creepy office and its creepy proprietor and feel a mild anxiety for Marion's well-being. Only on rewatching the scene, fully aware that she is minutes away from being murdered, does it become unbearably suspenseful.

It seems strange that we can feel intense suspense while waiting for something we know is going to happen. Yet, if we couldn't, we would experience far less suspense—and, accordingly, considerably diminished interest—while watching movies about familiar events, like "Titanic" and "Flight 93," or reading books like "[The Perfect Storm](#)," where we learn the outcome in the opening pages, or rereading "[Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets](#)" for the fifteenth time and knowing everything that lies in store. The fact that we do experience suspense in such cases suggests that we can suspend not only disbelief but also knowledge—that a sufficiently skilled storyteller can essentially make us forget what we know about the future for the duration of time that we are experiencing it anew in a creative work.

Interestingly, the question of whether a writer is sufficiently skilled can itself become a matter of suspense. In certain complex stories, we find ourselves wondering what lurks in the future not only for the characters (will Desmond reunite with Penny?) but also for ourselves and our own satisfaction (will the creators of "Lost" actually pull this off?). That kind of meta suspense simmers beneath many ambitious works, from novels like Eleanor Catton's "[The Luminaries](#)" and Francis Spufford's "[Golden Hill](#)" to pretty much every movie ever made by the Nolan brothers. The more intricate or sprawling a plot, the more we experience anxiety about its successful resolution. Will all its many pieces fall into place or fall apart? Is anyone in control of this story? These are the questions that haunt us when a narrative starts to feel inconsistent, poorly plotted, and only intermittently illuminating and gratifying—which is to say, when it starts to feel much like that other context in which we so often experience suspense: real life.

For philosophers, theologians, and everyday people in the throes of midnight or midlife soul-searching, the fundamental question about life is what it means: why are we here, what's it all about, does our existence even matter, et cetera. But for most of us, most of the time, the chief question that life poses is not about its meaning but about its plot. In other words, it is E. M. Forster's question: What happens next? Will you get the promotion? Who

will win the election? Will the woman you took out to dinner last week call you back? Will Jeannie Mae show her face in church on Sunday after what her son was caught doing Friday night?

In life, as in literature, suspense is a response to uncertainties like these—a state of agitation produced by the desire to know what the future holds. Because uncertainty is a fundamental part of the human condition, suspense is central to our emotional landscape. We can feel it about almost anything, at any scale of significance. The pause before a verdict is read aloud in court is suspenseful, but so is the *dot-dot-dot* that appears on your iPhone when someone is sending you a text message. The walk to the mailbox can be suspenseful (will there be an acceptance letter?); the weather can be suspenseful (will it rain on your wedding day?); the fifteen drab highway miles to the nearest service station can be extremely suspenseful if your gas gauge is sitting on empty.

In fiction, suspense is typically pleasurable no matter what occasions it. (Of course, there are some people who, finding it intolerable, avoid suspenseful works altogether, find spoiler-filled summaries, or skip to the end.) But in real life suspense comes in two varieties: a positive version, anticipation, and a negative version, dread. The positive version enhances our enjoyment of an experience by deferring it, much as a meal tastes better when you've waited until you are ravenous to eat it. That's why hammy m.c.s will say things like "Drumroll, please" and otherwise find ways to delay any big reveal. Wilkie Collins, that great nineteenth-century master of suspense, famously advised his fellow-writers to "make 'em wait," and we are often thrilled when life conforms to that wisdom. As the novelist Anthony Doerr once noted, "We want our games to go into overtime."

We do not, however, want our misfortunes and miseries to go into overtime. Why opt into dread? At best, it is mild and brief—as with, say, the unpleasant interlude while awaiting the dentist's drill—but at worst it is among life's most acute agonies. No one should ever be subjected to the suspense of waiting for the radiologist's report on an ambiguous ultrasound, or of waiting for a child who is not yet home long after curfew. Even happy resolutions to such situations do not compensate for the experience of dread, because relief, unlike suspense, is generally fleeting. You spend hours growing ever more convinced that the loved one who isn't answering your

increasingly alarmed voice mails has been killed in a car wreck; when you learn that the phone died instead, you get maybe two minutes of relief.

Curiously, though, despite the stark differences between anticipation and dread, they can feel remarkably similar. It is much worse to wait for the results of a biopsy than to wait for your crush to show up for your first date, but the experience—the nervous stomach, the inability to think about anything else—feels almost the same. Indeed, in some ways, the greatest determinant of how suspense feels is not what it is about but how much of it we experience. Like caffeine, opioids, and air pollution, it is governed by the rules of dose response.

Two factors affect the dose of suspense we receive: the importance of the event we are waiting for and the degree of uncertainty about its outcome. In situations of both high stakes and high uncertainty, our suspense will be extreme, no matter the source. It is vastly preferable to watch your daughter take her starting position for the four-hundred-metre sprint at the Olympics than it is to watch her being wheeled into the operating room for brain surgery, but both situations are maximized for suspense. Far-lower-stakes situations can also be suspenseful if their outcomes are sufficiently uncertain, while events with almost certain outcomes can be suspenseful if the stakes are sufficiently high. If you are ninety-five per cent sure that you know the answer to a question, you will not feel much suspense while awaiting the response—unless the question is “Will you marry me?”

Another factor in how we experience suspense is how *long* we experience it. Sometimes life, like Thomas Hardy, can supply a true cliffhanger, as you know if you’ve ever gone for a worrisome medical test on the Friday before a long weekend. In other words, real-life suspense, like its literary counterpart, is the product of a relationship between information and time. But that relationship is complex; although suspense does tend to increase with the passage of time, the change is not linear. For instance, back when my partner and I were first dating and still lived in different states, I became aware of a curious phenomenon: the closer we got to a visit, the more excruciating it became to wait to see her. Later, after we got married and decided to have a baby, I experienced that same strange inversion in the final stages of her pregnancy. Logically speaking, it should be hardest to wait for a baby when the wait is longest, but the opposite is true—a pregnancy is far

more suspenseful at week thirty-six than at week twenty-three. One wonders how the specific relationship between information and time which defines suspense has changed as the over-all relationship between information and time has dramatically accelerated. Which is more suspenseful: spending Election Night glued to social media as scores of results and anecdotes and theories pour in each minute, or twiddling your thumbs in 1796, waiting for the iron-on-stone sound of a messenger galloping in?

One final factor that determines how we experience suspense is wholly idiosyncratic: some people are simply more susceptible to it than others. I imagine that there is a smattering of souls in this world who are naturally incurious about the future; others have spent years trying to master the impulse to peer around the corner of the present, apprenticing themselves to one of the religious or philosophical traditions that encourage us to stay focussed on the here and now. That is surely sage advice, since thinking about the future can involve expending enormous amounts of energy on phantoms, but, for most of us, it is extremely difficult to follow. You can chalk that up to evolutionary exigency, because the act of prediction has always been central to our survival. No wonder we spend so much time speculating about what will happen next; we are built to be, as the philosopher Daniel Dennett once put it, “anticipation machines.”

That inheritance lives on with particular potency in some of us. My partner, for instance, is constitutionally impatient, not interpersonally but epistemologically; exceptionally inquisitive, she finds suspense unbearable and is relentless in the face of an unresolved mystery. These character traits, while admirable in countless ways, are something of a liability during pregnancy, a high-stakes, high-uncertainty situation involving dozens of micro and macro mysteries. When will you first feel the baby kick? What will the next ultrasound reveal? Will your baby be born in December or January, at two in the afternoon or four in the morning, in perfect health or in need of the *NICU*? Questions like these pile up throughout the endless days that it takes to gestate a human baby. And so, while others spend their pregnancies suffering from morning sickness or sciatica, my partner spent hers suffering chiefly from curiosity.

One tricky fact about real-life suspense: when we are thinking about our own future—as opposed to reading a novel—most of us assume that we

have some say over what happens next. Whether that is actually the case is one of humanity's oldest open questions. Is there an author of our existence, divine or otherwise, who has programmed the whole show? Are our lives determined down to the last detail by natural laws or an all-powerful God, or do we have a measure of free will—some way of wriggling out of our mortal constraints to change the course of private or collective history?

Experientially, most of us feel the sway of both possibilities. In countless ways, our lives seem, for good or ill, ours to manage; in countless other ways, including those related to many of the things that matter most, they feel maddeningly out of our hands. The only thing we know for certain is that, if the universe really is deterministic, its gears or gods are hidden from us. We are not like Laplace's demon, possessing perfect knowledge of the present state of every atom in existence and therefore able to see how all subsequent events will unfold. For that matter, even if we did possess such knowledge, it might not make a difference. Plenty of contemporary physicists think that the universe is indeterminate—that even an intellect gigantic enough to comprehend all the causes in the cosmos would not be able to correctly infer the effects and thereby foretell the future.

Either way, suspense still reigns supreme. As long as the future remains opaque, it will also remain frightening and exhilarating, the repository of our greatest fears and wildest dreams. This is perhaps the most important way that real-life suspense differs from the fictional kind: in books and movies, we do not necessarily care if the outcome for which we have been waiting is good or bad—our primary concern is that it resolves the feeling of suspense in a satisfying way. But in life we care about those outcomes desperately. We want our fears to prove unfounded and our dreams to come true; we want to be spared life's many possible devastations and gratified by its revelations and resolutions. This is, perhaps, the tenderest and most hopeful definition of suspense: it is the passionate wish, in the face of omnipresent doubts and dangers, that all will be well in the future.

And sometimes it is. After all that waiting, our baby was born in a great big hurry, one beautiful August evening, two days before her due date. She was healthy in every respect; if you ask me, she was, in every respect, perfect. Eleven months later, she said her first word. It was “book.” ♦

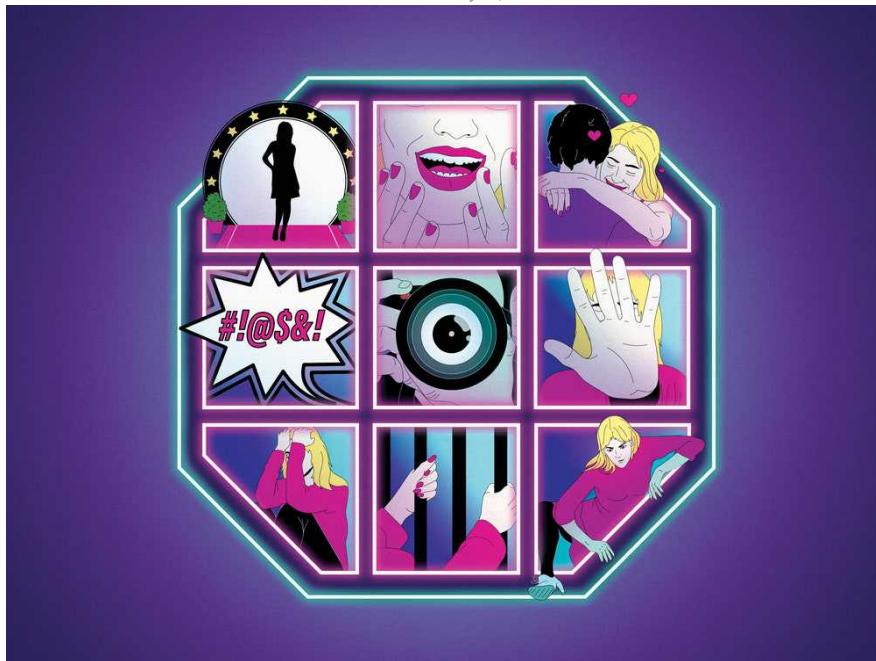
The World of Television

Is “Love Is Blind” a Toxic Workplace?

Reality-TV contestants are barely paid, and the experience can feel like abuse. Former cast members of Netflix’s megahit are speaking out—and calling for solidarity.

By Emily Nussbaum

May 20, 2024



Nine months into the pandemic, Nick Thompson, a marketer at a tech firm in Chicago, got a message on LinkedIn inviting him to apply to be a contestant on a Netflix reality show called “Love Is Blind.” Thompson, a Midwesterner with bright-blue eyes and a sheepish smile, didn’t watch much [reality TV](#), although he’d caught a bit of “The Bachelor” so that he could join a betting bracket at his office. He was more of a fan of W.W.E. wrestling, so much so that he’d once trained to become a wrestler himself. “For, like, a day,” he said, laughing—he’d busted his ankle, then quit.

The format of “Love Is Blind” sounded outlandish: fifteen men and fifteen women were gathered in Los Angeles, where they were ensconced in individual “pods” and flirted with strangers through a wall. After just a few

days of speed courtship, contestants fell in love and, amazingly, some got engaged, sight unseen. The show's producers, who worked for a company called Kinetic Content, emphasized that "Love Is Blind," despite its premise, wasn't some sleazy guilty pleasure like "Temptation Island." It was a sincere experiment in human intimacy—participants were placed on a "digital fast" designed to liberate them from all distractions, including physical appearance, so that they could form a deeper, more lasting bond with a partner. The producers weren't looking for clout-chasers but for emotionally mature adults, people who were ready to commit to marriage, for real.

Thompson, a psychology and self-help buff, was tantalized by the concept. By the time he was cast—after background checks, months of interviews, and an online psychological test—he'd seen Season 1, and he loved it. Contestants were secluded in cozy mini living rooms with sofas and nap blankets, a bit like the bottle in "I Dream of Jeannie." Between dating segments, viewers got an intoxicating God's-eye view of these "pods," which were nested side by side, a golden honeycomb buzzing with romance. A few days in, participants became visibly infatuated, particularly that season's breakout couple: Lauren, a warm, thoughtful Black model, and Cameron, a soft-spoken white scientist. After a dramatic "reveal," in which pairs met face to face, those couples who had got engaged took a group vacation to Mexico, and, finally, returned to their shared home town. (In Season 1, everyone came from Atlanta.) The couples met each other's families, lived together for several weeks, and planned weddings.

Not every couple ultimately said "I do," but the few who did seemed convincingly smitten, and for Thompson, who was thirty-five, the show looked like a welcome break from the ugliness of dating apps. He considered himself a "low drama" person; he was proud of the stability that he'd achieved as the first member of his family to graduate from college. After carefully reviewing his contract with Kinetic, he set out to follow the producers' mantra: "Trust the process."

In Los Angeles, Thompson found the isolation startling—doing the show was less like being in a genie's bottle than a casino, with no windows or wall clocks but lots of alcohol. For the first weekend, he was confined to a hotel room, forbidden to speak to other cast members, a status known as being "on ice." Thompson's phone was taken away; there was no Internet access. This

was all part of the digital fast, he understood, but when the ten-day shoot inside the pods began, that Monday, the hours were shockingly long: the cast had to be camera-ready at 8 *a.m.* and didn't return to their hotel rooms until 2 or 3 *a.m.* (Late-night dates were optional, but there were strong incentives to do them: if you failed to "make a connection" or the producers lost interest in your story, you could get cut.) Contestants were working for up to twenty consecutive hours. Each morning, producers gave them a journal to write in, along with a schedule of "dates" with other contestants and a list of questions to explore, with a theme for each day, such as sex or family. Sometimes they flirted in the pods as robotic cameras filmed them, and sipped drinks from the show's trademark gold goblets; other times, they sat in a communal "lounge" set to film conversations with contestants of the same gender or met privately with producers for "on the fly" interviews. There were only a few breaks, including brief chances to use the bathroom and, once a day, a moment when the unionized members of the crew got swapped out.

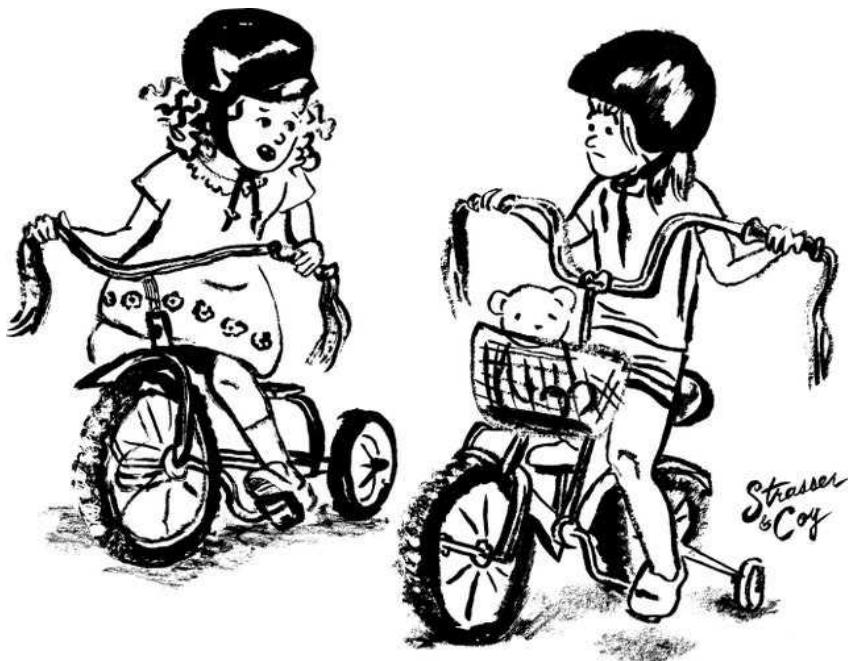
And then Thompson fell in love. After a few light flirtations, he felt a serious spark with Danielle Ruhl, a twenty-nine-year-old associate marketing director. In his journal, he surrounded Ruhl's name with hearts. When Thompson described those days to me, his voice grew dreamy: "We just had so much fun. Got deep about our family dynamics, all that stuff. Just listened, laughed, cried. . . . It was so genuinely not forced. And it kind of stayed that way, in the pods."

On the ninth day, Thompson proposed to Ruhl. (In the final edit, it would look as if their engagement occurred days before any of the others; in fact, all the proposals were filmed on the same day.) He felt giddy, in a fog of romantic bliss. The couples were then sent to a resort in Cancún, for the vacation sequence, and things began to shift. In the pods, Ruhl had spoken to Thompson about her struggles with anxiety, something that she'd also discussed during casting. Now the couple was sharing a room, and the fog began burning off.

The first day at the resort, the shoot was delayed because of a *covid* outbreak, and the couple had fun, getting drunk, ordering room service, and swimming in a pool just outside their room. The next day, at 6 *a.m.*, a team showed up to film a "makeout" scene in the shower. Thompson and Ruhl

complied, somewhat reluctantly: intimate moments like this were built into the show, requiring awkward collaborations with the crew. Then Ruhl began vomiting, possibly from a stomach bug. Although she'd tested negative for *covid*, the producers refused to let her attend a "couples' barbecue" that night—and they urged Thompson, who wanted to stay with her, to go by himself. After the event, he arrived at his hotel-room door, where the team surrounded him, ready to shoot: Ruhl was inside, and he was instructed to talk to her about the party, sitting as close as possible, since she wasn't miked up.

Thompson had no idea that, in his absence, Ruhl had spiralled into a panic attack, the first she'd had since her teens, when she'd attempted suicide. "It felt like swords were swimming through my veins. My heart hurt," she told me. "I lost my hearing—everything sounded like *womp, womp, womp*." Desperate to escape the production, she downed a bottle of wine and locked herself in her closet, sobbing, paranoid that the room had hidden cameras. (A crew member confirmed Ruhl's account of her distress.) She refused requests to put her microphone on, and later told her producer that she wanted to leave and felt like killing herself. (Kinetic has denied that Ruhl expressed suicidal thoughts to the production team, and says that it follows "rigorous protocols" to insure participants' "wellbeing.")



None of this wound up on the air. Instead, viewers saw the couple sitting stiffly on their bed, having a tense argument in which Ruhl moodily told her fiancé that she didn't trust "anything right now." What she was talking about, both parties agree, was her fear that the production team had been messing with them. Once Thompson realized that he'd been set up, he pulled his own microphone off and threw it. To viewers, however, it looked like a dramatic lovers' spat: Ruhl was jealous of Thompson talking to other women at the barbecue.

Four years later—after the couple said "I do," then appeared, apparently content, on a cast-reunion episode and an "After the Altar" special; after Ruhl filed for divorce, following months of struggle; after both participants were quoted in [a Business Insider article](#) about "Love Is Blind" that called the show "hell on earth"—Thompson kept thinking about that night in Cancún. If the producers thought that his fiancée might have *covid*, why didn't they think *he* was at risk of spreading it, too? In retrospect, he wondered whether he and Ruhl had been separated to spark a conflict—then manipulated, rather than supported, during a scary mental-health crisis. Given the crispness of the sound quality in the version that aired, he even wondered if there had been microphones in the room after all. It was hard to tell what was real when you were inside the casino.

Thompson had come to see the show he'd once embraced in a new way. His romantic adventure now looked like a cruel trick, an unethical exercise in which the people in charge used isolation, sleep deprivation, and emotional manipulation to control their subjects. Even a "good edit," like the one that producers had given his story line, didn't protect you. Mostly, though, Thompson recognized that he'd been naïve about the job he'd signed up for—and that he hadn't really understood it to be a job at all.

The reality genre has been around for seventy-five years, with roots that extend far past "Survivor" and "The Bachelor." Shortly after the Second World War, radio networks began airing what were then called audience-participation programs, shows like "Candid Microphone" (the beta version of "Candid Camera") and "Queen for a Day"—provocative, popular formats that put regular folks in the spotlight, then encouraged them to spill their secrets to the world. Élites dismissed these shows as crude gimmicks, but

executives ate them up. They were low-budget and strike-proof—a way to tell stories without having to pay pesky writers or actors.

In today's boom era for reality programming, with such shows less a novelty than a juggernaut, producers' calculations haven't shifted much. Most reality-TV crew members work brutal hours for low pay, with no benefits, on the margins of Hollywood. In recent years, there's been some progress for editors and camera operators—a subset of whom have organized through the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees—but most producers and crew members remain essentially freelancers. For the people they film, the situation is starker: there has never been any sort of coördinated labor movement for reality cast members. In part, this is because, like Nick Thompson, most people don't see going on a reality show as work. To unsympathetic eyes, and even to some sympathetic ones, it's simply a different category of behavior: gonzo volunteerism, or an audition for fame, or a kind of extreme sport, in which people agree to put themselves at risk, emotionally or physically, for an adventure or the chance of future opportunities. If something bad happens to reality stars (as in porn, cast members are always "stars"), they literally signed up for it. The standard contract makes it nearly impossible for cast members to complain—or even to talk about how the show was made.

In labor terms, reality cast members float in a strange limbo. They're not documentary subjects, who typically agree to be filmed for free but have some control over what hours they work and how much access they offer. They're not professional actors, who memorize scripts, or talk-show hosts or newscasters, who can speak off the cuff. Instead, according to the *sag-aftra* union's Network Code, which was first negotiated in the nineteen-fifties, when most television was aired live, they occupy a humbler niche: they're "bona-fide amateurs," who appear onscreen without any industry protections. The casts of "The Celebrity Apprentice" and "Celebrity Big Brother" are covered by *sag-aftra*; the casts of "The Apprentice" and "Big Brother" are not.

In the wake of [#MeToo](#) and the [Black Lives Matter](#) movement, and of last year's W.G.A. and *sag-aftra* strikes, there have been tremors of change, with talk in the press about a so-called reality reckoning, much of it focussed on Bravo, the network behind the "Real Housewives" franchise and its various

thrashing tentacles of content. Bethenny Frankel, the flinty-eyed former Housewife who launched the Skinnygirl brand of low-calorie wines and spirits—and whose success inspired a reality-contract tweak known as “the Bethenny Clause,” allowing Bravo to take a cut of cast members’ products—stepped up as an unlikely Norma Rae. In July, 2023, she posted a video captioned “This is a union,” in which she advocated for a new model of reality-star employment with fair salaries and residual payments, and stumped for solidarity among women infamous for backbiting and betrayal. In [a recent interview in the *Hollywood Reporter*](#), Bravo’s ringmaster, the producer and host Andy Cohen, waved that idea away: “You’re not drafted into the ‘Real Housewives,’ ” he said, arguing that “reality stars typically have other jobs” and parlay TV exposure into profitable ventures.

Since Frankel made her video, one lawsuit after another has been filed in the Bravoverse. But these have been pretty damp fireworks, sparking some headlines—about institutional racism or on-set neglect—but making little impact on public opinion. For onlookers, such revelations can be hard to distinguish from the drama the Bravo brand relies on, the bogus table-flipping and the genuine bankruptcies that are the network’s hallmark. It’s the Catch-22 of any reality soap opera: even legitimate workplace complaints look like spilled tea.

“Love Is Blind” has sold itself as a better breed of reality. Created by a former reality-TV agent named Chris Coelen, and co-hosted by the former boy-band heartthrob Nick Lachey—an O.G. reality star from MTV’s “Newlyweds”—and his wife, Vanessa, “Love Is Blind” was a smash hit for Netflix. It had the good fortune to début in February, 2020, with a format that eerily mirrored the loneliness of quarantine. The interracial lovebirds Lauren and Cameron struck many viewers as soothing counterprogramming to that year’s B.L.M. uprisings. And although the show was hardly the first to air live weddings—“Bride and Groom” did that shortly after the Second World War—there was an air of unfakeable spontaneity to its bottled courtships, a throb of authenticity that was generated, or at least intensified, by the artificial setting. Pure moments were framed by sillier ones, such as a hilarious sequence in which a tech-bro type tried to use eye drops to simulate tears, only to get outed by the editors, then villainized for the reality-show crime of not being on the show “for the right reasons.”

TV hits, like crushes, fade. Four years into its run, the show has become a staging ground for a nascent labor movement for reality stars. These efforts have taken multiple forms: first, various lawsuits against Netflix, Kinetic, and Delirium TV, the show's other production company, making such accusations as false imprisonment and abuse; second, the creation of the Unscripted Cast Advocacy Network (*ucan*) by two dissident "Love Is Blind" alumni, Nick Thompson and his Season 2 castmate Jeremy Hartwell, along with a sympathetic psychologist; and, finally, an attempt to redefine appearing on a reality show as a full-time job that deserves the protections other workers receive, including the right to complain publicly about mistreatment. All this activity is happening under the shadow of severe nondisclosure agreements—contractual clauses that make it legally risky for reality stars to discuss any aspect of production. As tentative and untested as these gambits are, they're the first genuine efforts to define cast members as more than fodder for the guilty-pleasure industrial complex.

The first case against "Love Is Blind" was a proposed class-action lawsuit filed in June, 2022, by Hartwell, who accused the production of "unsafe and inhumane" conditions, including sleep and food deprivation, in addition to multiple labor violations. A director at a Chicago mortgage company, Hartwell, like Thompson, wasn't a reality-television viewer before becoming a contestant, and he, too, was recruited online, in his case on the dating site Hinge. Reared by Christian fundamentalist parents, he was also the first person in his family to get a bachelor's degree, and he had a deep interest in "self-optimization." But, whereas Thompson went all the way down the aisle, Hartwell stumbled a few days into the filming and left early—he barely shows up, making a goofy remark during the pod sequence about getting horny when he's hung over.

When we first spoke, in February, Hartwell was vague about exactly what happened during filming: his N.D.A. is still in effect, and, as he made clear, there's a legal difference between talking about abuse and disclosing "proprietary trade secrets." But Hartwell said that in his short time on the show he felt "caught in the current" of the pods—the period when participants had marathon vulnerable conversations with strangers, falling in love or getting rejected, or sometimes both. Hartwell didn't leave of his own volition, he said; at the same time, he felt trapped, knowing that there was a fifty-thousand-dollar fine for quitting without a producer's consent—a

provision that was present in contracts through at least Season 5. (Coelen has said that Kinetic never collected on it.) Hartwell described to me what sounds like a breakdown: before that week, he considered himself a “stoic, levelheaded, chill, happy” person; in the aftermath, he was traumatized, angry, and confused. There was a twelve-hour period in his hotel room that he couldn’t account for: “The best way I can describe it is vague, dark shadows of despair.” His psychologist told him that it sounded as though he’d entered “a fugue state.”

Hartwell, feeling confident that Kinetic would want to avoid this outcome for future cast members, contacted the company, only to be ignored until he said that he was getting a lawyer. Then Kinetic’s lawyer told him to “fuck off.” (Kinetic did not respond to repeated requests for comment.) It took some time for Hartwell’s lens to widen, for him to stop viewing what he had experienced as “an oversight,” some accidental problem that was limited to his season or his show. “It was *all* of reality TV,” he told me. “And thousands of people have gone through this—many of them far worse off than I was.” The genre itself was a shell game, “created as a revenue-mitigation strategy.” The psychological-manipulation techniques that producers used bore a strong resemblance to those used by cults, which also cut people off from the world. But nobody took such harms seriously, because nobody took reality TV—or the people who starred on it—seriously. The legal problem struck Hartwell as especially severe, particularly an arbitration clause embedded in contracts which mandated that any complaints against the show be settled privately. As a result, the public never knew when something went wrong on a set—allowing the audience to accept the show’s methods as normal.

Hartwell’s lawsuit noted that “Love Is Blind” cast members were paid far below minimum wage: a thousand dollars a week, for up to twenty hours of filming a day, seven days a week, amounting to \$7.14 an hour. He also made an ambitious labor argument based on a new law in California, AB5, which required companies to classify many gig workers as W-2 employees. Hartwell believed that, since cast members were under the “substantial and excessive” control of their producers, they’d been misclassified as independent contractors. His suit demanded unpaid wages, compensation for missed meal breaks, damages for unfair business practices, and civil

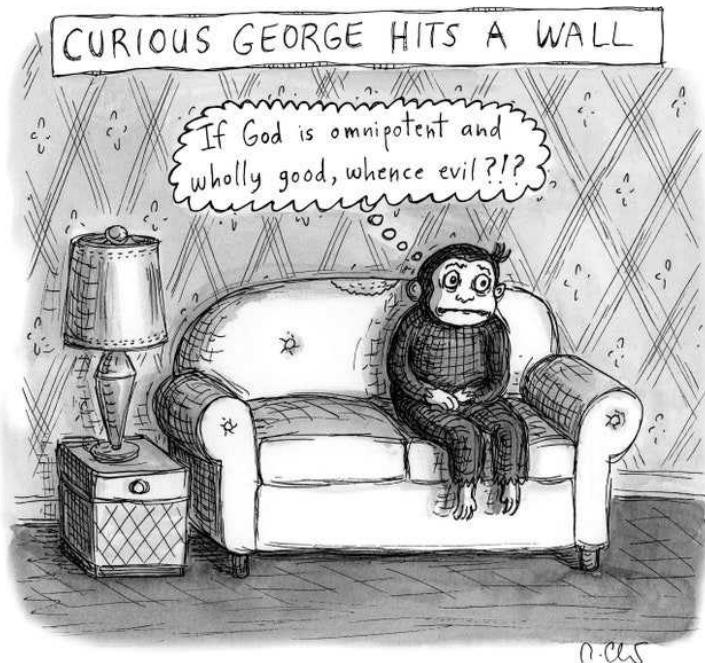
penalties for labor-code violations. (After the suit was filed, Kinetic responded that there was “absolutely no merit” to Hartwell’s accusations.)

In April, 2023, Hartwell, in collaboration with Thompson, incorporated *ucAn* as a nonprofit, putting up a Web site with the slogan “Cast members are people. NOT live props.” Reality alumni had been venting privately for decades, on text chains and e-mail threads, but *ucAn* aimed to build something more lasting and powerful: a mutual-support organization that doubled as a clearinghouse for legal and mental-health resources. Hartwell hoped to educate prospective contestants about the genre before they signed contracts. He also wanted to educate fans about how their favorite shows were made—to encourage them to be allies, not voyeurs.

Later that year, news emerged about another lawsuit, filed by Tran Dang, a cast member from Season 5, whose participants came from Houston. She alleged that, on the couples’ vacation in Mexico, her fiancé, Thomas Smith, had groped her, exposed himself, and assaulted her. When she shared what happened with producers, they chalked everything up to bad communication. In Houston, where Dang insisted on leaving the show, she was forced to film a final scene in which she was fed lines by hostile producers who insisted that she talk about the need for forgiveness. “I was made to repeat my lines over and over again until I faltered in desperation and gave them what they wanted,” Dang wrote. Many of the allegedly abusive events had been captured on tape, she claimed. Dang accused Smith, Kinetic, and Delirium of assault and battery; she also charged the production companies with negligence and false imprisonment—and argued that they were responsible for Smith’s misbehavior, because he was an employee. Smith, through his lawyer, denied the allegations. Dang’s lawyer, Benjamin Allen, told me in an e-mail that he was confident Dang would prevail, but that she couldn’t talk to me. Although Dang had the legal right to file her lawsuit, her right to speak to the press was less clear, “and as you know, these businesses like to sue their former participants.”

This was a clear reference to Renee Poche, another cast member from Season 5. Like Dang, Poche had filmed the show only to find that her relationship had not made the final edit. When she began to tell her story publicly, Kinetic sued her for four million dollars, a million for each of her public statements; it felt like a warning to every cast member. In response,

ucan found Poche a pair of top Hollywood entertainment lawyers in just a day. It was “proof of concept” for the organization, Hartwell told me, noting, “If she had been sued just three months earlier, she would have been another silent victim.”



In the spring of 2022, Brianne Newman, a twenty-eight-year-old resident of Houston, got word of a production-assistant gig on Season 5 of “Love Is Blind.” It was an opportunity too good to pass up, particularly since her sister was “fully addicted” to the show. On set, Newman was assigned to a team that followed one of the couples, Renee Poche and her fiancé, Carter Wall. From the start, she adored Poche, a thirty-one-year-old veterinarian from a Cajun background who impressed her as warm, funny, and clever, “a whole-ass career woman” who owned a beautiful home and a Porsche. Wall, on the other hand, struck her as a broke alcoholic with anger issues. It baffled Newman that Kinetic had cast him—he certainly didn’t strike her as marriage material.

Based on accounts from eight crew members, at many levels of production, Newman’s opinions about the couple were widely shared. Poche was described to me, variously, as “wonderful, with a good head on her shoulders,” “a very sweet young lady,” “just an absolute perfect human being,” and “TV gold!” She handed out drawings to crew members as gifts

(including a classy nude self-portrait that she had stuck to her fridge; after a P.A. complimented it, she gave it to him, infuriating Wall). She cooked for the crew. Poche was charismatic enough that many crew members—and several cast members—assumed that she'd be the season's breakout star.

Few people liked Wall. He compulsively chewed tobacco; on set, rumors flew that he had used slurs, including “faggot.” One crew member described him as “a racist, bigoted hillbilly who didn’t give a rat’s ass about anything.” Many people theorized that he was seeking “a sugar mama,” and also trying to get famous. But they acknowledged that he wasn’t alone in his pursuit of fame, especially by Season 5: when a reality show became a hit, the cast’s motives were no longer so simple, if they ever had been. The point of “Love Is Blind” was still to get married, but the show also offered a path to a glamorous life, from Instagram endorsements to Hollywood jobs. It was possible—and, really, it was logical—for cast members to dream of more than one thing.

Poche, who grew up in a Louisiana trailer park, was a politically liberal animal lover who was seeking an equal partner, someone with whom she could raise a child. Wall came from a more middle-class background. At first, in the pods, their relationship looked sunny, likely because their talk didn’t go deep. During dates, they drank and flirted, building a playful but superficial rapport. Wall often just mirrored back whatever Poche said about herself, telling her, among other things, that it was a relief to meet a fellow-atheist. One thing that Wall, a Texan, *was* transparent about was that he was unemployed, something that had turned other women in the pods off. Poche was O.K. with it, as long as Wall agreed to get a job when they returned to Houston.

After the “reveal,” though, things began unravelling. In Mexico, Poche and Wall, now engaged, hooked up, but it was sometimes suffocatingly hot in their hotel room, which they couldn’t leave. When they were filming a shower scene, Wall threatened to slap the camera operator. According to an account that Poche later gave on a podcast, he blew up at another crew member for not letting him spit dip tobacco into her water bottle.

When they left the resort, the couples got their phones back. Wall’s was dead, dropped for nonpayment. After it was revived, on the flight home to

Houston, Wall showed Poche his screen: he had negative two hundred dollars in his bank account. (He'd been expecting to live off the show's thousand-dollar-a-week salary and had failed to sign up for automatic deposits from Kinetic.) In Texas, Poche discovered that not only was Wall unemployed, he had no fixed address—as a stopgap, he was crashing at a female friend's house. In an apartment that Kinetic provided for Wall and Poche, he drank heavily, scarfed Adderall, and spent more time partying and fishing than working on his résumé. They went out for dinner and Poche suspected that he stiffed the waiter.

When Newman, the P.A., had watched "The Bachelor" in high school, she'd wondered if scenes were scripted. But the conflicts she witnessed between Poche and Wall felt unpleasantly authentic. "We would hide in the dark bedrooms while they would fight for, like, hours on end," she told me. After a couples' barbecue, the pair had a huge argument, with Wall calling Poche ugly names, including "thot"—for "that ho over there." Later, at the apartment, Newman saw Poche "barrelling out, sobbing, with her bags packed." She was moving back to her own house, although she kept showing up for shoots.

Why did Poche continue filming? Maybe she was still trying to salvage the relationship. Maybe she hoped to get a good edit, or, with so much footage in the hands of producers, maybe she feared a bad one. Maybe she simply wanted to complete the narrative—to walk down the aisle and say no to a bully, for the world to see. That was how reality production had always operated: the people in charge rarely had to threaten contestants with their contract, because the atmosphere on set did the work. On "The Bachelor," producers called this phenomenon the Bubble: the show came to feel like your whole world, its values your own. Your producers seemed like friends or therapists, sharing private jokes, guiding you through choices, hinting at love or future fame; they knew everything about you, having been filled in on your psychological makeup and having read your journal each night.

Sometimes, though, producers gave explicit directives. In Houston, Wall bought Poche some pet fish, then neglected them until they died. For Poche, this was the last straw: she was calling the wedding off. As a crew member looked on, unnerved, a producer, John (J.P.) Paul, told Poche and Wall that they couldn't stop filming now—they had to make it down the aisle, *then*

end it. He fed Poche a line that, he said, she could deliver like a threat: “I’ll see you at the altar!”

As one “Love Is Blind” crew member described it, Poche had been “soft-forced” to complete the season, despite her doubts. There was a sunk-cost fallacy to the whole thing: if your story never got told, what was it all for?

Toward the end of the Houston shoot, the couple’s producer, Paul, chauffeured Wall and Poche home from a date. Wall, who was in the back seat, blew up when Poche criticized him for spitting chewing tobacco. The crew buzzed with rumors about the incident—including that Wall had punched the back of Poche’s car seat. Newman, who told me that she’d come to think of the cast as “her little babies,” felt “petrified” for Poche. That day, her team settled on a new approach: they would never leave the couple alone.

Other crew members also felt concerned for Poche’s safety, including Khadijah Forte, whose job included compiling “hot sheet” summaries of plot points from a live audio feed. She heard Wall warn Poche, “You better be nice to me,” more than once. “I don’t know what he meant by that, but it just seemed threatening,” she said. One day, the couple fought over Wall using slurs and stealing from another cast member. When Forte logged the fight, Paul asked her to remove it from her summary.

This account of Wall is backed by a cast member, Maris Prakonekham, who left early, having never made a match, but who was invited by producers to the couples’ barbecue. A few drinks in, she laid into Wall. “I cussed him out!” she told me. “I was appalled at the way he was talking about Renee —‘That bitch doesn’t deserve me. She’s a whore.’ It was crazy that he was comfortable talking that way.”

When I recently reached Wall on the phone, he was driving to his job, as a bouncer at a strip club. His version of events aligned in many respects with the stories I’d heard, although he denied yelling or being abusive. (He hadn’t been in a fight since third grade, he said.) He had done short-term jobs in construction, on a fishing boat, and as a behavioral aide at a “kid prison,” but was out of work when a “Love Is Blind” casting person reached out to him on Facebook. “I was a professional drinker at that point,” he told me. “I

could hang with the big boys.” In the pods, he’d fallen for Poche, “my little barefoot Cajun girl,” only to have her pull away after she saw his bank balance. Wall told me that he felt “butt-hurt” by her judgment, seeing it as hypocritical, in part because of something that she’d told him in confidence, off camera, in Mexico: she’d once had an OnlyFans account, which she had since deleted.

As we spoke, Wall swung between praising Poche—and admitting that he’d blown the relationship because of his own immaturity—and making undermining remarks about her. (She was “a ‘free the nipple’-type gal,” “in the ninety-ninth percentile of both libido and income,” “a real freaky rich woman!”) He denied that he’d punched the car seat, done a dine-and-dash, stolen anything, said racist things, or acted in a threatening way. He did admit to calling Poche a “thot,” and to saying “Shut your ho-ass mouth” at the barbecue, while drunk. He had also used the word “faggot,” but said that it had been a joke. In addition, he acknowledged trying to sneak a woman into the Houston apartment he’d shared with Poche—something he’d justified as payback for her rejection—only to get caught by crew and cast members. When I asked Wall, who told me that he had recently found God, if he regretted having signed up for “Love Is Blind,” he initially said that he’d do it all again, except that he would get a job this time. Then he changed his mind: “No, I probably wouldn’t take it. The thought of people knowing things about me . . .” His voice trailed off. “I thought I wanted to have attention. I don’t want attention.”

If you watched Season 5 of “Love Is Blind,” you know that none of these events wound up on the show. Neither did the wedding ceremony that Poche stormed out of, ending her relationship with Wall for good. Instead, she shows up onscreen only in glimpses, a star turn trimmed into a cameo: she makes wisecracks in the pod lounge, and later on, in Houston, she perches on a sofa during another woman’s bridal-gown fitting, identified as a member of the “Pod Squad,” and mysteriously wearing white herself. Wall is barely present. The decision to cut the couple’s story was made around April, 2023—the month that the *Business Insider* exposé appeared. By that time, the initial edit had been completed, and in September many crew members tuned in, eager to see Poche, their favorite character, have her story told, only to realize that she’d disappeared.

According to interviews that she gave after the season began streaming, Poche herself learned about the decision in August. She didn't buy the explanation she got, which was that the story line was cut for time—the fifth season was eleven episodes, whereas the others had had at least fourteen—and that Kinetic hoped to spare her from reliving a bad experience. During this period, Kinetic also informed her that she hadn't been cast in a spinoff dating show, "Perfect Match," a competition show starring former reality stars.



Wall had a different explanation for their story being removed, one that squared with what most people I spoke to had heard: a close friend of his had called Kinetic, warning that he might kill himself if the season aired. Wall denied to me that he had been suicidal—his friends had overreacted to his drinking, he said—but he admitted to being worried about coming off as a loser on the show.

Another factor may have informed Kinetic's decision not to air the uncomfortable story of Poche and Wall's relationship: the sexual-assault lawsuit by Tran Dang. Shortly after Season 5 debuted, Dang's legal action—which had been filed fourteen months earlier—hit the press. Poche read an article in *People* in which Chris Coelen, the "Love Is Blind" creator, called Dang's false-imprisonment charge "preposterous," claiming that the set was

a secure, supportive environment, and insisting that Dang had never expressed concerns about her safety. Poche, who was one of Dang's friends from the pods, was livid—and began speaking out.

After Poche gave two interviews about the show, she received cease-and-desist orders, which she ignored; plenty of "Love Is Blind" cast members had done interviews without being sued. In a third interview, she talked in depth about her fear of Wall, beginning with that shower scene in Mexico. In Houston, she said, the production would cut scenes short when he got angry. "I think they were just as scared as I was," she said. "Eventually, I was, like, 'I don't want to be with him alone. Like, I'll go for filming, finish whatever we need to do . . . but I'm not staying at the apartment and I'm not even gonna be there during the day.'" The producers had agreed to this, she said, but nobody stepped in to protect her—instead, they kept urging her to give Wall the benefit of the doubt. When she told Wall that he frightened her, he guilt-tripped her, saying that he'd hit rock bottom: "He said it made him sad that I would think that. But he's six-foot-five, three hundred pounds—like, a huge guy with a really bad temper!"

Whereas Dang's lawyer was a Houston employment attorney, *ucan* set Poche up with Mark Geragos and Bryan Freedman, powerful Hollywood entertainment lawyers who had connections across the TV industry. Freedman had negotiated exit settlements for many celebrities, including the "Bachelor" host Chris Harrison and the "America's Got Talent" host Gabrielle Union. Geragos appeared regularly on cable news. Years earlier, Freedman had represented United Talent Agency in a dispute with Chris Coelen, who'd recently left the company. (Freedman has a legal history of his own: when he attended the University of California, Berkeley, a teenager claimed that he'd sexually assaulted her; although he denied that anything nonconsensual had occurred, he was party to a settlement of forty thousand dollars.)

Geragos and Freedman had begun building an extensive legal case against the reality-TV industry, snapping up clients, among them Bethenny Frankel and other litigants tied to Bravo shows. Neither lawyer watched much reality programming, but the working conditions in the industry struck them as shocking, even for Hollywood. "There are people signing contracts that aren't just illegal—they void the entire contract itself!" Freedman told me.

“There’s an ecosystem in which people bring therapists to the set and then those therapists break confidentiality and share information with executives and executive producers—and even lawyers for the studio. I mean, it’s unbelievable.”

In January, 2024, Poche filed a counterclaim saying she had signed up for a show that bragged about screening out men with “red flags,” only to find herself engaged to an unemployed serial liar who was “homeless, violent, estranged from his parents and actively addicted to alcohol and amphetamines.” (Wall denies that he is violent or estranged from his parents.) Now the company that she believed had put her in danger was suing her for telling the truth. Geragos and Freedman’s goal was to nullify Poche’s contract—which, they argued, contained multiple illegal clauses, all of them standard for reality shows—and to blow up that prohibitive N.D.A. If it was declared illegal, a piñata of revelations about the industry would split open. “If this doesn’t attract you as a lawyer, you should be selling oranges on the side of a freeway,” Geragos told me.

For decades, reality fame was the monkey’s paw of Hollywood. You were globally famous but flat broke—a household name, harassed by haters, with no prospect of an entertainment career. In the two-thousands, the [Kardashians](#) blazed a new path, and soon afterward Instagram opened up the path to anyone. By the time “Love Is Blind” began airing, many ordinary people had “followers,” and reality fame was more of an intensifier, like squirting accelerant on the flames of social media. Even low-level stars could cut branding deals; bigger stars could make a fortune as full-time influencers, like Lauren Speed-Hamilton and Cameron Hamilton, the Season 1 couple, who run a YouTube channel on which they posted a sponsored fifth-anniversary vow renewal at the Bellagio Hotel in Las Vegas. Stars could jump from one reality show to another, hoping for a do-over—and the more star power you accrued, the better you were treated. In the dream scenario, you might host a reality series and join *sag-aftra*.

In the eyes of Hartwell, these perks amounted to “golden handcuffs” as effective as any N.D.A. They kept former contestants tied to companies such as Kinetic, jockeying for favored status. Though only a few made it big, opportunities dangled in front of other cast members, if they played ball. “I won’t name names, but a lot of the cast, before the show aired, were angry,

railing against how they were treated,” Hartwell told me. “But here’s the thing—that feeling is rational! If you go on one of these shows, you’re not paid anything. You go through all this trauma, then all of a sudden you’re presented with an opportunity to actually make money off of it. . . . Who knows what I would have done.”

There were cast members for whom the experience felt worth it. Among these was Alexa Lemieux, from Season 3, whose experience resembled Nick Thompson’s, but with a happy ending. She, too, signed up on a whim, mid-pandemic, having swooned at Lauren and Cameron’s formative “I love you.” She, too, fell in love fast, in her case with a sales manager named Brennon Lemieux. They became the season’s “stable” couple, and were another cross-cultural pairing: he was from a rural, lower-middle-class Christian family; she was from an Israeli American family in Dallas that had become wealthy. Alexa Lemieux told me that she hadn’t found the experience in the pods cultlike, just “emotionally intense.” To her, the set had felt almost luxurious, a secure retreat where her requests (an espresso Martini, some sushi) were catered to by crew members whom she trusted.

The contestants, she argued, were all adults who had chosen to take a gamble. Nobody had to drink. She had stayed friends with her Kinetic producer and was especially close to Colleen Reed, her fellow-bride that season; only cast members truly understood the experience, she said. Both women had Instagram accounts on which they showed themselves trying out beauty products—and, in Lemieux’s case, maternity jumpsuits. She and Brennon were expecting their first child. For Alexa, the one downside of “Love Is Blind” was the viewers, who had sent antisemitic death threats and mocked her plus-size body. (On Instagram, she sometimes posted droll clapbacks to critics.) None of that would have been worth it if she hadn’t met Brennon, she said. But she’d never have met him without the show.

There is yet another monetizing option for ex-cast members: chatting publicly about the show they were on. That was the path taken by Deepti Vempati and Natalie Lee, who’d appeared alongside Thompson and Hartwell on Season 2. After Vempati’s fiancé rejected her for her looks, she spun her humiliation into a phoenix-from-the-flames brand. In the fall of 2022, she published a memoir, “I Choose Myself.” The following March, she and Lee launched “Out of the Pods,” a podcast on which they

interviewed former cast members, touting “exclusives” and “allegations” in between mental-health ads. According to *Fortune*, they’d each quit their day job and made half a million dollars in nineteen months. “Out of the Pods” was one twinkling star in a galaxy of reality gossip sites, TikToks, and podcasts, a bizarro-world form of investigative journalism that functioned as added content for fans of the reality genre—and as a way for participants to have their say.

When Poche decided to talk publicly about “Love Is Blind,” these platforms were waiting. In October, 2023, she did an upbeat interview on “Reality Life with Kate Casey,” staying positive while hinting that Wall had shown signs of volatility. On the Web site PopSugar, she described “an emotional roller coaster . . . which I will get into, but not right now.” On “Out of the Pods,” however, she opened up, flipping through her journal and tracing the path of her complicated feelings, from the playful flirtation with Wall in the pods to “farting around” in Mexico, where she ignored signs of trouble, to the uglier dynamic in Houston, as “all of the lies started to add up.” She told the hosts, “I fell in love with a pretend person.” She and Lee bonded, lamenting how hard it was to resist or even identify emotional abuse while stuck inside a TV show. One detail that Poche shared felt especially damning: producers had asked her to make sure that Wall couldn’t access a gun that she kept in her car for security. Poche also weighed in on Dang’s lawsuit: she described her former castmate as a kind, timid woman who, when she tried to quit, had been pressured to keep filming. “They don’t want me to tell my story,” Poche said of Kinetic, adding, “It’s *my* story—it’s for me to tell people.”

Throughout the fall of 2023, she posted on social media, using hashtags such as #releasethereneecut and posting a photograph of herself on set, trying on her wedding dress. Online, she snuffed out alternative narratives, like a rumor that she’d been married before appearing on “Love Is Blind.” (She got married afterward, to a different man, something she hadn’t mentioned during casting for “Perfect Match.”) At one point, Wall—whose friends had egged him on to respond—posted a video with the caption “Breaking the silence, unveiling the truth.” Wall, wearing a camo shirt, declared, “Time to fill y’all in on what happened between me and ol’ Miss Renee and address some of these frickin’ rumors that are *outlandish*.” With a nasty grin, he added, “And tell y’all a little something y’all don’t know about ol’ Miss Renee.” After a pause, he said, “Coming soon”—then he walked offscreen.

Poche stomped that scoop flat: she reposted Wall's video, adding a clown emoji, then delivered the news herself, as casually as a text: "Going to say that I used to have an onlyfans since I told him off camera. Lol ok." Around this time, Poche posted a photograph of herself and her friend Taylor Rue, a fellow cast member, wearing sexy tank tops and apprehensive expressions, under the words "Us wondering where our men were Jan 6." Wall deleted his video and went back to posting fishing shots. Poche continued to roll out an array of likable content, from a slide show about her travels in Cuba to a video called "A Day in the Life of a Shelter Veterinarian." She also promoted products such as lash serum and vegan deodorant.

"Love Is Blind" crew members followed these developments closely, some more sympathetically than others. One camera operator told me of the people she filmed, "They're insane." Another crew member, who felt enormous empathy for the psychological pressure that cast members were under, nonetheless found it frustrating when they expected to be treated like Hollywood stars: "It's not malicious, it's just the way things have been done! If you've only done unscripted work, you wouldn't think anything about this." A production manager found cast members' complaints irritating for a different reason: they were "coddled" compared with the crew, he argued. Yes, the contestants filmed for extremely long hours under tense conditions—for six weeks. He'd worked those same hours—and, often, longer ones—all year long, patching together spotty gigs without any chance of Instagram riches.

Nobody was closer to the cast members than the producers. John Paul, who worked with Ruhl briefly, in the pod sequence, and with Wall and Poche throughout their season, was in Vietnam when I reached him, where he was working on a show about middle-aged women seeking a fresh start. A promising athlete in college, he'd pivoted to entertainment after breaking his leg, spending fourteen years climbing the ranks from P.A. to producer and director. He told me that he loved to mix it up, shifting from emotionally draining shows such as "Temptation Island" to talent formats such as "MasterChef."

Dating shows were their own special challenge, he explained, requiring multiple producers to embody varied personae, from the "fun girl" to the "wise grownup." On "Love Is Blind," where he'd been hired as a specialist

in working with “difficult cast members,” his role was being “a bro or a dad figure,” a sports-loving dude at ease with blue-collar types. Male cast members felt comfortable sharing with him their confusion about women; with female contestants, he said, “I feel like I know how to ask them questions, because I’ve been dumped so many times! But I know how to touch their emotions, and to open them up and to make them cry.” He described himself as a true believer in the show’s psychological complexity. “Love Is Blind” offered him a greater creative challenge than other reality shows he’d worked on: instead of telling people what to say, his job was about shrewdly engineering scenarios that would elicit authentic responses, like a “meet the parents” scene. “We couldn’t push them to go to the altar,” he told me. “But you could have a woman talk it out and listen to her and see what she’s feeling, and then see what the guy’s feeling, and then help promote them to talk about it on camera the next day.” It was hard, round-the-clock work, he said: “It’s kind of your life for a while.”



Paul couldn’t go into detail about what had happened between Poche and Wall, but he told me that their narrative had begun as a fairy tale about “a beautiful veterinarian who cared about the world” and “a simple guy who fished and worked with kids and had so much promise.” In Houston, the gig got harder. “I cried with them,” he said. “I lost, you know, years out of my life dealing with them. My beard doesn’t grow anymore because of that one!”

But I was very close to both of them. And, with all the lawsuits that happened, I see both sides. And it's a tricky position to be in."

The reality-TV producers I've met are sharp observers skilled at getting strangers to open up. (Their profession shares something with that of journalists.) But they work inside the Bubble, too, honing skills that look far sketchier to outsiders, including aggressive interview techniques that one "Love Is Blind" contestant joked to me were like "therapy—but bad therapy!" A producer's job is to bond with cast members while savvily exploiting conflicts among them, turning raw emotion into story beats. Some cajoled, some bullied. Compartmentalization was key. Michael Carroll, who spent years as a producer on "The Bachelor" and now works in hospitality, told me that, in his reality-TV heyday, "every other season I'd have a moral come-to-Jesus moment." Then he'd get pulled back in—to make money, but also because the job was a thrill. Having left the industry, he now saw it in a different light. All of reality TV needed to be unionized, he said, but organizing casts would be the trickiest, because of how the industry viewed the people it filmed: "To us, as producers, for the longest time they were just a piece of a machine—they were commodities, to be honest."

In mid-March, [Netflix](#) streamed the cast-reunion episode of Season 6 of "Love Is Blind," filmed at a studio in L.A. It had been an odd, uneven season, with only one couple who'd got married. Maybe to compensate for that low hit rate, Kinetic had assembled a supergroup of couples from past seasons, who functioned as a Greek chorus, among them Alexa and Brennan Lemieux. (The Hamiltons had been invited, but they'd passed. Cameron's Instagram bio read "Yes, I'm still a scientist," but he was flacking a Hamilton-branded romantic retreat in Italy. The cost: \$4,590 per person.)

To informed observers, the reunion, hosted by Nick and Vanessa Lachey, felt like a coded response to all the public accusations. The Lacheys began by touting the show's impressive success rate—nine of eleven married couples were still together—and they kept underscoring one point: "Love Is Blind" was not a reality show but something more profound, an exploration of human closeness aimed at, and designed to be watched by, the pure of heart. It was a *privilege* to be chosen by Kinetic—one that you betrayed at your peril. This theme climaxed with the ambush of Trevor Sova, a Prince Charming-ish hunk who, in Season 6, had come across as a nice guy on the

losing end of a love triangle. Now Nick confronted Sova with evidence to the contrary: spicy texts that he'd sent an ex, before and after filming. The texts had been leaked to gossip outlets, which posted them shortly before the reunion was taped.

As Lachey read the texts, Sova froze like a pinned butterfly. He stammered, mumbling incoherent apologies, confessing to his "toxic" behavior, saying that he'd gone on the show for both "good and bad reasons" and that he needed "real therapy." The Lacheys looked on, stonily. Then Nick delivered his verdict. Being on "Love Is Blind" was a "once-in-a-lifetime opportunity," he said. He decried the kind of cast member who wanted fame or fortune, or who concealed something from the producers, or even who dared to call the show "entertainment," as one foolish Season 6 participant had done moments earlier. "For people who come here with ulterior motives, we've got to call you out for it," Nick said. "So, Trevor, I know you asked to leave—you can leave now, man."

Sova slumped away, having told his romantic partner from the pods that he'd been genuine with her, and that he'd apologize—but alone, off-camera. In April, he explained in an Instagram post that he'd had a panic attack on the air and that he was now seeing an "actual therapist." Soon afterward, his Instagram account was gone.

The brutal showdown suggested an I'm-rubber-you're-glue philosophy on the part of management. In Kinetic's eyes, the true exploiters on "Love Is Blind" were bad cast members, not puppet-master producers. Not only was "Love Is Blind" not harmful to the mental health of its subjects, it was itself a kind of mental-health treatment—if you trusted the process. Ideally, it served the same function for viewers: "Watching the show is like therapy," Brennan Lemieux said, describing how the couple used the show to help work through their own issues. When the Lacheys prompted cast members to name what they missed the most about filming "Love Is Blind," they glowingly said the crew and the food.

Watching these events, I kept thinking about those goblets with their thick gold coating, campy enough for a pirate movie. The cups popped up not only in the pods but at cast barbecues and during family visits, subbed in by a crew member for the household's regular glassware. Like everything else

on set, the goblets served a purpose: because you couldn't tell how much booze was in them, an editor could cut a scene in any order—if the level went up or down, you couldn't tell. That is the nature of all reality shows, however delightful they may be to watch: the power lies with those who design the experiment, who have thousands of hours of footage of cast members, often drunk or confessing to highly personal stories, which the company owns and is allowed to air or not air, at any time it likes, and in any order. The cast members have some choices of their own: they can play up to the producers, resist them, or try to work around them. Like gamblers in Vegas, everyone has a system. But the house always wins.

When I spoke to Hartwell a few weeks after the special aired, he sounded calm but also frustrated. It was the first anniversary of *ucan*, and he had struggled to secure funding—philanthropies had other priorities. After a year of working for free, he was looking for a paying job. Inspired as he had been by labor breakthroughs at places such as [Starbucks](#), he knew that the movement was in its infancy. Although he expressed deep appreciation for Bethenny Frankel's video gesture, he also joked that it was like “*The Office*”’s Michael Scott announcing, “I declare bankruptcy”: “You can’t just stand up and declare a union.” Hartwell still had big plans. He hoped to get a high-profile actor on board, for instance. And in a spirited Instagram post, he’d urged Kinetic to collaborate with his organization, an idea that struck me as the longest of long shots. But in May he had a breakthrough: it was reported that his class-action suit had been settled, for \$1.4 million.

Earlier this month, *sag-aftra*, which had previously not commented on the emergence of *ucan*, sent me a statement supporting the organization and its goals. It asserted that “reality performers deserve Union protection like other Hollywood workers in the industry.” It was a meaningful turn given the history of the reality genre, which has often set unscripted performers against scripted ones.

Unions are only one way to achieve workplace justice, of course. *ucan*’s mental-health director, Isabelle Morley, described a different model: an outside watchdog on reality shows, something like an intimacy coördinator or the guardians who keep track of the treatment of animals and children on sets. These concepts all spoke to the ultimate question: Is it possible to build a better reality-television workplace, for both cast and crew members? Or

does the genre rely on total control? The last time that I'd looked at Kinetic's Web page, which listed such shows as "The Ultimatum: Queer Love" and "Man vs. Bear," I'd noticed an unusual element: a page labelled "To All Potential Participants." It urged applicants to "contemplate the possible discomfort and emotional challenges they may face before, during, and after filming," and there were detailed sections about diligence during casting, and about what might happen onscreen. According to the Wayback Machine, this page was first captured on August 2, 2023, around the time that Poche was told she'd been mostly edited out of "Love Is Blind."

For now, Hartwell primarily wanted to get cast members talking to one another, to recognize that they had rights. A lot of the trauma of going on a reality show comes from recognizing that you were susceptible to manipulation in the first place, something that only people who've been through it can understand.

In March, Renee Poche's case hit a snag: L.A. Superior Court Judge Bruce G. Iwasaki rejected the suit, and denounced Geragos and Freedman for their "heated rhetoric." Poche's lawyers were preparing a petition for writ of mandate, which was similar to an appeal, but, if that does not succeed, her case will head into private arbitration, with the judge having ruled that there was "absolutely no evidence" that handling the matter secretly could cause Poche harm. "The court is stuck with the contract. That's the contract," he said, bluntly. The N.D.A. was holding, for now.

But there was promising news from a different courtroom, far from Los Angeles: Tran Dang's case, which was playing out in Texas, had had a victory. The Court of Appeals for the First District of Texas had backed an earlier ruling saying that Dang's claims fell under the Ending Forced Arbitration of Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment Act of 2021. When her case went to trial, it would be public, accessible to the press. It would be a show worth watching. ♦

A Reporter at Large

How 3M Discovered, Then Concealed, the Dangers of Forever Chemicals

The company found its own toxic compounds in human blood—and kept selling them.

By Sharon Lerner

May 20, 2024



This article is a collaboration between The New Yorker and [ProPublica](#).

Kris Hansen had worked as a chemist at the 3M Corporation for about a year when her boss, an affable senior scientist named Jim Johnson, gave her a strange assignment. 3M had invented Scotch Tape and Post-it notes; it sold everything from sandpaper to kitchen sponges. But on this day, in 1997, Johnson wanted Hansen to test human blood for chemical contamination.

Several of 3M's most successful products contained man-made compounds called fluoroochemicals. In a spray called Scotchgard, fluoroochemicals protected leather and fabric from stains. In a coating known as Scotchban,

they prevented food packaging from getting soggy. In a soapy foam used by firefighters, they helped extinguish jet-fuel fires. Johnson explained to Hansen that one of the company's fluorochemicals, PFOS—short for perfluorooctanesulfonic acid—often found its way into the bodies of 3M factory workers. Although he said that they were unharmed, he had recently hired an outside lab to measure the levels in their blood. The lab had just reported something odd, however. For the sake of comparison, it had tested blood samples from the American Red Cross, which came from the general population and should have been free of fluorochemicals. Instead, it kept finding a contaminant in the blood.

Johnson asked Hansen to figure out whether the lab had made a mistake. Detecting trace levels of chemicals was her specialty: she had recently written a doctoral dissertation about tiny particles in the atmosphere. Hansen's team of lab technicians and junior scientists fetched a blood sample from a lab-supply company and prepped it for analysis. Then Hansen switched on an oven-size box known as a mass spectrometer, which weighs molecules so that scientists can identify them.

As the lab equipment hummed around her, Hansen loaded a sample into the machine. A graph appeared on the mass spectrometer's display; it suggested that there was a compound in the blood that could be PFOS. That's weird, Hansen thought. Why would a chemical produced by 3M show up in people who had never worked for the company?

Hansen didn't want to share her results until she was certain that they were correct, so she and her team spent several weeks analyzing more blood, often in time-consuming overnight tests. All the samples appeared to be contaminated. When Hansen used a more precise method, liquid chromatography, the results left little doubt that the chemical in the Red Cross blood was PFOS.

Hansen now felt obligated to update her boss. Johnson was a towering, bearded man, and she liked him: he seemed to trust her expertise, and he found something to laugh about in most conversations. But, when she shared her findings, his response was cryptic. "This changes everything," he said. Before she could ask him what he meant, he went into his office and closed the door.

This was not the first time that Hansen had found a chemical where it didn't belong. A wiry woman who grew up skiing competitively, Hansen had always liked to spend time outdoors; for her chemistry thesis at Williams College, she had kayaked around the former site of an electric company on the Hoosic River, collecting crayfish and testing them for industrial pollutants called polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs). Her research, which showed that a drainage ditch at the site was leaking the chemicals, prompted a news story and contributed to a cleanup effort overseen by the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection. At 3M, Hansen assumed that her bosses would respond to her findings with the same kind of diligence and care.

Hansen stayed near Johnson's office for the rest of the day, anxiously waiting for him to react to her research. He never did. In the days that followed, Hansen sensed that Johnson had notified some of his superiors. She remembers his boss, Dale Bacon, a paunchy fellow with gray hair, stopping by her desk and suggesting that she had made a mistake. "I don't think so," she told him. In subsequent weeks, Hansen and her team ordered fresh blood samples from every supplier that 3M worked with. Each of the samples tested positive for PFOS.

In the middle of this testing, Johnson suddenly announced that he would be taking early retirement. After he packed up his office and left, Hansen felt adrift. She was so new to corporate life that her office clothes—pleated pants and dress shirts—still felt like a costume. Johnson had always guided her research, and he hadn't told Hansen what she should do next. She reminded herself of what he had said—that the chemical wasn't harmful in factory workers. But she couldn't be sure that it was *harmless*. She knew that PCBs, for example, were mass-produced for years before studies showed that they accumulate in the food chain and cause a range of health issues, including damage to the brain. The most reliable way to gauge the safety of chemicals is to study them over time, in animals and, if possible, in humans.



What Hansen didn't know was that 3M had already conducted animal studies—two decades earlier. They had shown PFOS to be toxic, yet the results remained secret, even to many at the company. In one early experiment, conducted in the late seventies, a group of 3M scientists fed PFOS to rats on a daily basis. Starting at the second-lowest dose that the scientists tested, about ten milligrams for every kilogram of body weight, the rats showed signs of possible harm to their livers, and half of them died. At higher doses, every rat died. Soon afterward, 3M scientists found that a relatively low daily dose, 4.5 milligrams for every kilogram of body weight, could kill a monkey within weeks. (Based on this result, the chemical would currently fall into the highest of five toxicity levels recognized by the United Nations.) This daily dose of PFOS was orders of magnitude greater than the amount that the average person would ingest, but it was still relatively low—roughly comparable to the dose of aspirin in a standard tablet.

In 1979, an internal company report deemed PFOS “certainly more toxic than anticipated” and recommended longer-term studies. That year, 3M executives flew to San Francisco to consult Harold Hodge, a respected toxicologist. They told Hodge only part of what they knew: that PFOS had sickened and even killed laboratory animals, and had caused liver abnormalities in factory workers. According to a 3M document that was marked “*Confidential*,” Hodge urged the executives to study whether the

company's fluorochemicals caused reproductive issues or cancer. After reviewing more data, he told one of them to find out whether the chemicals were present "in man," and he added, "If the levels are high and widespread and the half-life is long, we could have a serious problem." Yet Hodge's warning was omitted from official meeting notes, and the company's fluorochemical production increased over time.

Hansen's bosses never told her that PFOS was toxic. In the weeks after Johnson left 3M, however, she felt that she was under a new level of scrutiny. One of her superiors suggested that her equipment might be contaminated, so she cleaned the mass spectrometer and then the entire lab. Her results didn't change. Another encouraged her to repeatedly analyze her syringes, bags, and test tubes, in case they had tainted the blood. (They had not.) Her managers were less concerned about PFOS, it seemed to Hansen, than about the chance that she was wrong.

Sometimes Hansen doubted herself. She was twenty-eight and had only recently earned her Ph.D. But she continued her experiments, if only to respond to the questions of her managers. 3M bought three additional mass spectrometers, which each cost more than a car, and Hansen used them to test more blood samples. In late 1997, her new boss, Bacon, even had her fly out to the company that manufactured the machines, so that she could repeat her tests there. She studied the blood of hundreds of people, from more than a dozen blood banks in various states. Each sample contained PFOS. The chemical seemed to be everywhere.

When 3M was founded, in 1902, it was known as the Minnesota Mining and Manufacturing Company. After its mining operations flopped, the company pivoted to sandpaper, and then to a series of clever inventions aimed at improving everyday life. An early employee noticed that autoworkers were struggling to paint two-tone cars, which were popular at the time; he eventually invented masking tape, using crêpe paper and cabinetmaker's glue. Another 3M employee created Post-it notes, to help him bookmark passages in his church hymnal. An official history of 3M, published for the company's hundredth anniversary, celebrated its "tolerance for tinkerers."

Fluorochemicals had their origins in the American effort to build the atomic bomb. During the Second World War, scientists for the Manhattan Project

developed one of the first safe processes for bonding carbon to fluorine, a dangerously reactive element that experts had nicknamed “the wildest hellcat” of chemistry. After the war, 3M hired some Manhattan Project chemists and began mass-producing chains of carbon atoms bonded to fluorine atoms. The resulting chemicals proved to be astonishingly versatile, in part because they resist oil, water, and heat. They are also incredibly long-lasting, earning them the moniker “forever chemicals.”

In the early fifties, 3M began selling one of its fluorochemicals, PFOA, to the chemical company DuPont, for use in Teflon. Then, a couple of years later, a dollop of fluorochemical goo landed on a 3M employee’s tennis shoe, where it proved impervious to stains and impossible to wipe off. 3M now had the idea for Scotchgard and Scotchban. By the time Hansen was in elementary school, in the seventies, both products were ubiquitous. Restaurants served French fries in Scotchban-treated packaging. Hansen’s mother sprayed Scotchgard on the living-room couch.

Hansen grew up in Lake Elmo, Minnesota, not far from 3M’s headquarters. Her father was one of the company’s star engineers and was even inducted into its hall of fame, in 1979; he had helped to create Scotch-Brite scouring pads and Coban wrap, a soft alternative to sticky bandages. Once, he molded some fibres into cups, thinking that they might make a good bra. They turned out to be miserably uncomfortable, so he and his colleagues placed them over their mouths, giving the company the inspiration for its signature N95 mask.

Hansen never intended to follow her father to the company. She spent her childhood summers catching turtles and leopard frogs at the lake and hoped to have a career in environmental conservation. Her first job after earning her chemistry Ph.D. was on a boat, which took her to remote parts of the Pacific Ocean. But the voyage left her so seasick that she lost twenty pounds, and she soon retreated to Minnesota. In 1996, at her father’s suggestion, Hansen applied for a position in 3M’s environmental lab.

After Hansen started her PFOS research, her relationships with some colleagues seemed to deteriorate. One afternoon in 1998, a trim 3M epidemiologist named Geary Olsen arrived with several vials of blood and asked her to test them. The next morning, she read the results to him and

several colleagues—positive for PFOS. As Hansen remembers it, Olsen looked triumphant. “Those samples came from my horse,” he said—and his horse certainly wasn’t eating at McDonald’s or trotting on Scotchgarded carpets. Hansen felt that he was trying to humiliate her. (Olsen did not respond to requests for comment.) What Hansen wanted to know was how PFOS was making its way into animals.

She found an answer in data from lab rats, which also appeared to have fluorochemicals in their blood. Rats that had more fish meal in their diets, she discovered, tended to have higher levels of PFOS, suggesting that the chemical had spread through the food chain, and perhaps through water. In male lab rats, PFOS levels rose with age, indicating that the chemical accumulated in the body. But, curiously, in female rats the levels sometimes fell. Hansen was unsettled when toxicology reports indicated why: mother rats seemed to be off-loading the chemical to their pups. Exposure to PFOS could begin before birth.

Another study confirmed that Scotchban and Scotchgard were sources of the chemical. PFOS wasn’t an official ingredient in either product, but both contained other fluorochemicals that, the study showed, broke down into PFOS in the bodies of lab rats. Hansen and her team ultimately found PFOS in eagles, chickens, rabbits, cows, pigs, and other animals. They also found fourteen additional fluorochemicals in human blood, including several produced by 3M. Some were present in wastewater from a 3M factory.

At one point, Hansen told her father, Paul, that she was frustrated by the way senior colleagues kept questioning her work. Paul had recently retired, but he had confidence in 3M’s top executives, and he suggested that she take her findings directly to them. But as a relatively new employee—and one of the few women scientists at a company of about seventy-five thousand people—Hansen found the idea preposterous. When Paul offered to talk to some of 3M’s executives himself, she was mortified at the idea of her father interceding.

Hansen knew that if she could find a blood sample that *didn’t* contain PFOS then she might be able to convince her colleagues that the other samples did. She and her team began to study historical blood from the early decades of PFOS production. They soon found the chemical in blood from a 1969-71

Michigan breast-cancer study. Then they ran an overnight test on blood that had been collected in rural China during the eighties and nineties. If any place were PFOS-free, she figured, it would be somewhere remote, where 3M products weren't in widespread use.

The next morning, anxious to see the results, Hansen arrived at the lab before anyone else. For the first time since she had begun testing blood, some of the samples showed no trace of PFOS. She was so struck that she called her husband. There was nothing wrong with her equipment or methodology; PFOS, a man-made chemical produced by her employer, really *was* in human blood, practically everywhere. Hansen's team found it in Swedish blood samples from 1957 and 1971. After that, her lab analyzed blood that had been collected before 3M created PFOS. It tested negative. Apparently, fluorochemicals had entered human blood after the company started selling products that contained them. They had leached out of 3M's sprays, coatings, and factories—and into all of us.

That summer, an in-house librarian at 3M delivered a surprising article to Hansen's office mailbox. It had been written in 1981, by 3M scientists, and it described a method for measuring fluorine in blood, indicating that even back then the company was testing for fluorochemicals. One scientist mentioned in the article, Richard Newmark, still worked for 3M, in a low-lying structure nicknamed the "nerdy building." Hansen arranged to meet with him there.

Newmark, a collegial man with a compact build, told Hansen that, more than twenty years before, two academic scientists, Donald Taves and Warren Guy, had discovered a fluorochemical in human blood. They had wondered whether Scotchgard might be its source, so they approached 3M. Newmark told her that his subsequent experiments had confirmed their suspicions—the chemical was PFOS—but 3M lawyers had urged his lab not to admit it.

As Hansen wrote all this down in a notebook, she felt anger rising inside her. Why had so many colleagues doubted the soundness of her results if earlier 3M experiments had already proved the same thing? After the meeting, she hurried back to the lab to find Bacon. "He knew!" she told him.



Bacon's face remained expressionless. He told Hansen to type up her notes for him. She remembers him telling her not to e-mail them. (In response to questions about Hansen's account, Bacon said that he didn't remember specifics. When I called Newmark, he told me that he could not remember her or anything about PFOS. "It's been a very long time, and I'm in my mid-eighties, and just do not remember stuff that well," he said.)

A few months later, in early 1999, Bacon invited Hansen to an extraordinary meeting: she would have the chance to present her findings to 3M's C.E.O., Livio D. DeSimone. Hansen spent several days rehearsing while driving and making dinner. On the day of the meeting, she took an elevator up to the executive suite; her stomach turned as a secretary pointed her to a conference room. Men in suits sat around a long table. Her boss, Bacon, was there. DeSimone, a portly man with white hair, sat at the head of the table.

Almost as soon as Hansen placed her first transparency on the projector, the attendees began interrogating her: Why did she do this research? Who directed her to do it? Whom did she inform of the results? The executives seemed to view her diligence as a betrayal: her data could be damaging to the company. She remembers defending herself, mentioning Newmark's similar work in the seventies, and trying, unsuccessfully, to direct the conversation back to her research. While the executives talked over her,

Hansen noticed that DeSimone's eyes had closed and that his chin was resting on his dress shirt. The C.E.O. appeared to have fallen asleep. (DeSimone died in 2017. A company spokesperson did not answer my questions about the meeting.)

After that meeting, Hansen remembers learning from Bacon that her job would be changing. She would only be allowed to do experiments that a supervisor had specifically requested, and she was to share her data with only that person. She would spend most of her time analyzing samples for studies that other employees were conducting, and she should not ask questions about what the results meant. Several members of her team were also being reassigned. Bacon explained that a different scientist at 3M would lead research into PFOS going forward. Hansen felt that she was being punished and struggled not to cry.

Even as Hansen was being sidelined, the results of her research were quietly making their way into the files of the Environmental Protection Agency. Since the seventies, federal law has required that companies tell the E.P.A. about any evidence indicating that a company's products present "a substantial risk of injury to health or the environment." In May, 1998, 3M officials notified the agency, without informing Hansen, that the company had measured PFOS in blood samples from around the U.S.—a clear reference to Hansen's work. It did not mention its animal research from the seventies, and it said that the chemical caused "no adverse effects" at the levels the company had measured in its workers. A year later, 3M sent the E.P.A. another letter, again without telling Hansen. This time, it informed the agency about the fourteen other fluorochemicals, several of them made by 3M, that Hansen's team had detected in human blood. The company reiterated that it did not believe that its products presented a substantial risk to human health.

Hansen recalls that in the summer of 1999, at an annual picnic that her parents hosted for 3M scientists, she was grilling corn when one of the creators of Scotchgard, a gray-haired man in glasses, confronted her. He accused her of trying to tear down the work of her colleagues. Did it make her feel powerful ruining other people's careers? he asked. Hansen didn't know how to respond, and he walked away.

Several of Hansen's superiors had stopped greeting her in the hallways. When she presented a poster of her research at a 3M event, nobody asked her about it. She lost her appetite, and her pleated pants grew baggy. She started to worry that an angry co-worker might confront or even harm her in the company's dark parking lot. She got into the habit of calling her husband before walking to her car.

A year after Hansen's meeting with the C.E.O., 3M, under pressure from the E.P.A., made a very costly decision: it was going to discontinue its entire portfolio of PFOS-related chemicals. In May, 2000, for the first time, 3M officials revealed to the press that it had detected the chemical in blood banks. One executive claimed that the discovery was a "complete surprise." The company's medical director told the *New York Times*, "This isn't a health issue now, and it won't be a health issue." But the newspaper also quoted a professor of toxicology. "The real issue is this stuff accumulates," the professor said. "No chemical is totally innocuous, and it seems inconceivable that anything that accumulates would not eventually become toxic."

Hansen was now pregnant with twins. Although she was heartened by 3M's announcement—she saw it as evidence that her work had forced the company to act—she was also ready to leave the environmental lab, where she felt marginalized. After giving birth, she joined 3M's medical-devices team. But, first, she decided to have one last blood sample tested for PFOS: her own. The results showed one of the lowest readings she'd seen in human blood. Immediately, she thought of the rats that had passed the chemical on to their pups.

Hansen told me that, for the next nineteen years, she avoided the subject of fluorochemicals with the same intensity with which she had once pursued it. She focussed on raising her kids and coaching a cross-country ski team; she worked a variety of jobs at 3M, none related to fluorochemicals. In 2002, when 3M announced that it would be replacing PFOS with another fluorochemical, PFBS, Hansen knew that it, too, would remain in the environment indefinitely. Still, she decided not to involve herself. She skipped over articles about the chemicals in scientific journals and newspapers, where they were starting to be linked to possible developmental, immune-system, and liver problems. (In 2006, after the

E.P.A. accused 3M of violating the Toxic Substances Control Act, in part by repeatedly failing to disclose the harms of fluorochemicals promptly, the company agreed to pay a small penalty of \$1.5 million, without admitting wrongdoing.)

During that time, forever chemicals gained a new scientific name—per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances, or PFAS, an acronym that is vexingly similar to the specific fluorochemical PFOS. A swath of a hundred and fifty square miles around 3M’s headquarters was found to be polluted with PFAS; scientists discovered PFOS and PFBS in local fish, and various fluorochemicals in water that roughly a hundred and twenty-five thousand Minnesotans drank. Hansen’s husband, Peter, told me that, when friends asked Hansen about PFAS, she would change the subject. Still, she repeatedly told him—and herself—that the chemicals were safe.

In the 2016 book “Secrecy at Work,” two management theorists, Jana Costas and Christopher Grey, argue that there is nothing inherently wrong or harmful about keeping secrets. Trade secrets, for example, are protected by federal and state law, on the ground that they promote innovation and contribute to the economy. The authors draw on a large body of sociological research to illustrate the many ways that information can be concealed. An organization can compartmentalize a secret by slicing it into smaller components, preventing any one person from piecing together the whole. Managers who don’t want to disclose sensitive information may employ “stone-faced silence.” Secret-keepers can form a kind of tribe, dependent on one another’s continued discretion; in this way, even the existence of a secret can be kept secret. Such techniques become pernicious, Costas and Grey write, when a company keeps a dark secret, a secret about wrongdoing.

Certain unpredictable events—a leak, a lawsuit, a news story—can start to unspool a secret. In the case of forever chemicals, the unspooling began on a cattle farm. In 1998, a West Virginia farmer told a lawyer, Robert Bilott, that wastewater from a DuPont site seemed to be poisoning his cows: they had started to foam at the mouth, their teeth grew black, and more than a hundred eventually fell over and died. Bilott sued and obtained tens of thousands of internal documents, which helped push forever chemicals into the public consciousness. The documents revealed that the farm’s water contained PFOA, the fluorochemical that DuPont had bought from 3M, and

that both companies had long understood it to be toxic. (The lawsuit, which ended in a settlement, was dramatized in the film “Dark Waters,” starring Mark Ruffalo as Bilott.) Bilott later sued 3M over contamination in Minnesota, but the judge prohibited discussion of health repercussions; a jury ultimately decided in 3M’s favor. Finally, in 2010, the Minnesota attorney general’s office filed its own suit, alleging that 3M had harmed the environment and polluted drinking water. The company paid eight hundred and fifty million dollars in a settlement, without an admission of fault or liability. The A.G. also released thousands more internal 3M records to the public.

The A.G.’s records helped me report a series of stories for the Intercept about forever chemicals. Much of my reporting, which started in 2015, focussed on what 3M and DuPont knew, even as they continued to produce PFAS. But, as I reported on the coverup, I wondered what it meant for a sprawling multinational company to *know* that its products were dangerous. Who knew? How much, exactly, did they know? And how had the company kept its secret? For many years, no one inside 3M would agree to speak with me.

Then, in 2021, John Oliver did a segment on his comedy news show, “Last Week Tonight,” about forever chemicals. The segment, which mentioned my reporting, said that they could cause cancer, immune-system issues, and other problems. “The world is basically soaked in the Devil’s piss right now,” Oliver said. “And not in a remotely hot way.” One of Hansen’s former professors sent her the segment, and Hansen watched it at her kitchen table —a moment that would eventually lead her to me.

“This actually made me sad as there are so many inaccuracies,” Hansen wrote to her professor, in response. But, when the professor asked her what was incorrect, Hansen didn’t know what to say. For the first time, she Googled the health effects of PFOS.

Hansen was deeply troubled by what she read. One paper, published in 2012 in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, found that, in children, as PFOS levels rose so did the chance that vaccines were ineffective. Children with high levels of PFOS and other fluoroochemicals were more likely to experience fevers, according to a 2016 study. Other research linked

the chemicals to increased rates of infectious diseases, food allergies, and asthma in children. Dozens of scientific papers had found that, in adults, even very low levels of PFOS could interfere with hormones, fertility, liver and thyroid function, cholesterol levels, and fetal development. Even PFBS, the chemical that 3M chose as a replacement for PFOS, caused developmental and reproductive irregularities in animals, according to the Minnesota Department of Health.

Reading these studies, Hansen felt a paradoxical kind of relief: as bad as PFOS seemed to be, at least independent scientists were studying it. But she also felt enraged at the company, and at herself. For years, she had repeated the company's claim that PFOS was not harmful. "I'm not proud of that," she told me. She felt "dirty" for ever collecting a 3M paycheck. When she read the documents released by the Minnesota A.G., she was horrified by how much the company had known, and how little it had told her. She found records of studies that she had conducted, as well as the typed notes from her meeting with Newmark.



In October, 2022, after Hansen had been at 3M for twenty-six years, her job was eliminated, and she chose not to apply for a new one. Three months later, she wrote me an e-mail, offering to speak about what she had witnessed inside the company. "If you'd be interested in talking further,

please let me know,” she wrote. The next day, we had the first of dozens of conversations.

When Hansen first told me about her experiences, I felt conflicted. Her work seemed to have helped force 3M to stop making a number of toxic chemicals, but I kept thinking about the twenty years in which she had kept quiet. During my first visit to Hansen’s home, in February, 2023, we sat in her kitchen, eating bread that her husband had just baked. She showed me pictures of her father and shared a color-coded time line of 3M’s history with forever chemicals. On a bitterly cold walk in a local park, we tried to figure out if any of her colleagues, besides Newmark, had known that PFOS was in everyone’s blood. She often sprinkled her stories with such Midwesternisms as “holy buckets!”

During my second trip, this past August, I asked her why, as a scientist who was trained to ask questions, she hadn’t been more skeptical of claims that PFOS was harmless. In the awkward silence that followed, I looked out the window at some hummingbirds.

Hansen’s superiors had given her the same explanation that they gave journalists, she finally said—that factory workers were fine, so people with lower levels would be, too. Her specialty was the detection of chemicals, not their harms. “You’ve got literally the medical director of 3M saying, ‘We studied this, there are no effects,’ ” she told me. “I wasn’t about to challenge that.” Her income had helped to support a family of five. Perhaps, I wondered aloud, she hadn’t really wanted to know whether her company was poisoning the public.

To my surprise, Hansen readily agreed. “It almost would have been too much to bear at the time,” she told me. 3M had successfully compartmentalized its secret; Hansen had only seen one slice. (When I sent the company detailed questions about Hansen’s account, a spokesperson responded without answering most of them or mentioning Hansen by name.)

Recently, I thought back on Taves and Guy, the academic scientists who, in the seventies, came so close to proving that 3M’s chemicals were accumulating in humans. Taves is ninety-seven, but when I called him he told me that he still remembers clearly when company representatives

visited his lab at the University of Rochester. “They wanted to know everything about what we were doing,” he told me. But the exchange was not reciprocal. “I soon found out that they weren’t going to tell me anything.” 3M never confirmed to Taves or Guy, who was a postdoctoral student at the time, that its fluorochemicals were in human blood. “I’m sort of kicking myself for not having followed up on this more, but I didn’t have any research money,” Guy told me. He eventually became a dentist to support his wife and family. (He died this year, at eighty-one.) Taves, too, left the field, to become a psychiatrist, and the trail ended there.

Last year, while reading about the thousands of PFAS-related lawsuits that 3M was facing, I was intrigued to learn that one of them, filed by cities and towns with polluted water, had produced a new set of internal 3M documents. When I requested several from the plaintiff’s legal team, I saw two names that I recognized. In a document from 1991, a 3M scientist talked about using a mass spectrometer—the same tool that Hansen would use years later—to devise a technique for measuring PFOS in biological fluid. The author was Jim Johnson—and he had sent the report to his boss, Dale Bacon.

This revelation made me gasp. Johnson had been Hansen’s first boss and had instigated her research into PFOS. Bacon had questioned her findings and ultimately told her to stop her work. (In a sworn deposition, Bacon said that by the eighties he had heard, during a water-cooler chat with a colleague, that Taves and Guy had found PFOS in human blood.) What I couldn’t understand was why Johnson would ask Hansen to investigate something that he had already studied himself—and then act surprised by the results.

Jim Johnson, who is now an eighty-one-year-old widower, lives with several dogs in a pale-yellow house in North Dakota. When I first called him, he said that he had begun researching PFOS in the seventies. “I did a lot of the very original work on it,” he told me. He said that when he saw the chemical’s structure he understood “within twenty minutes” that it would not break down in nature. Shortly thereafter, one of his experiments revealed that PFOS was binding to proteins in the body, causing the chemical to accumulate over time. He told me that he also looked for PFOS in an informal test of blood from the general population, around the late seventies, and was not surprised when he found it there.

Johnson initially cited “four hundred and eighty pounds of dog” as a reason that I shouldn’t visit him, but he later relented. When I arrived, on a chilly day in November, we spent a few minutes standing outside his house, watching Snozzle, Sadie, and Junkyard press their slobbery snouts against his living-room window. Then we decamped to the nearest *IHOP*. Johnson, who was dressed in jeans and a flannel shirt, was so tall that he couldn’t comfortably fit into a booth. We sat at a table and ordered two bottomless coffees.

In an experiment in the early eighties, Johnson fed a component of Scotchban to rats and found that PFOS accumulated in their livers, a result that suggested how the chemical would behave in humans. When I asked why that mattered to the company, he took a sip of coffee and said, “It meant they were screwed.”

At the time, Johnson said, he didn’t think PFOS caused significant health problems. Still, he told me, “it was obviously bad,” because man-made compounds from household products didn’t belong in the human body. He said that he argued against using fluorochemicals in toothpaste and diapers. Contractors working for 3M had shaved rabbits, he said, and smeared them with the company’s fluorochemicals to see if PFOS showed up in their bodies. “They’d send me the livers and, yup, there it was,” he told me. “I killed a lot of rabbits.” But he considered his efforts largely futile. “These idiots were already putting it in food packaging,” he said.

Johnson told me, with seeming pride, that one reason he didn’t do more was that he was a “loyal soldier,” committed to protecting 3M from liability. Some of his assignments had come directly from company lawyers, he added, and he couldn’t discuss them with me. “I didn’t even report it to my boss, or anybody,” he said. “There are some things you take to your grave.” At one point, he also told me that, if he were asked to testify in a PFOS-related lawsuit, he would probably be of little help. “I’m an old man, and so I think they would find that I got extremely forgetful all of a sudden,” he said, and chuckled.

Out the windows of *IHOP*, I watched a light dusting of snow fall on the parking lot. In Johnson’s telling, a tacit rule prevailed at 3M: not all questions needed to be asked, or answered. His realization that PFOS was in

the general public's blood "wasn't something anyone cared to hear," he said. He wasn't, for instance, putting his research on posters and expecting a warm reception. Over the years, he tried to convince several executives to stop making PFOS altogether, he told me, but they had good reason not to. "These people were selling fluorochemicals," he said. He retired as the second-highest-ranked scientist in his division, but he claimed that important business decisions were out of his control. "It wasn't for me to jump up and start saying, 'This is bullshit!'" he said, and he was "not really too interested in getting my butt fired." And so his portion of 3M's secret stayed in a compartment, both known and not known.

Johnson said that he eventually tired of arguing with the few colleagues with whom he could speak openly about PFOS. "It was time," he said. So he hired an outside lab to look for the chemical in the blood of 3M workers, knowing that it would also test blood-bank samples, for comparison—the first domino in a chain that would ultimately take the compound off the market. Oddly, he compared the head of the lab to a vending machine. "He gave me what I paid for," Johnson said. "I knew what would happen." Then Johnson tasked Hansen with something that he had long avoided: going beyond his initial experiments and meticulously documenting the chemical's ubiquity. While Hansen took the heat, he took early retirement.

Johnson described Hansen as though she were a vending machine, too. "She did what she was supposed to do with the tools I left her," he said.

I pointed out that Hansen had suffered professionally and personally, and that she now feels those experiences tainted her career. "I didn't say I was a nice guy," Johnson replied, and laughed. After four hours, we were nearing the bottom of our bottomless coffees.

Johnson has strayed from evidence-based science in recent years. He now believes, for instance, that the theory of evolution is wrong, and that *COVID-19* vaccines cause "turbo-cancers." But his account of what happened at 3M closely matched Hansen's, and when I asked him about meetings and experiments described in court documents he remembered them clearly.



When I called Hansen about my conversation with Johnson, she grew angrier than I'd ever heard her. "He knew the whole time!" she said. Then she had to get off the phone for an appointment. "So glad I'm going to see my therapist," she added, and hung up.

I once thought of secrets as discrete, explosive truths that a heroic person could suddenly reveal. In the 1983 film "Silkwood," which is based on real events, Karen Silkwood, a worker at a plutonium plant, assembles a thick folder documenting her employer's shoddy safety practices; while driving to share them with a reporter, she dies in a mysterious one-car crash. In another adaptation of a true story, the 2015 film "Spotlight," a source delivers a box of critical documents to the Boston *Globe*, helping the paper to publish an investigation into child sexual abuse within the Catholic Church. Talking to Hansen and Johnson, though, I saw that the truth can come out piecemeal over many years, and that the same people who keep secrets can help divulge them. Some slices of 3M's secret are only now coming to light, and others may never come out.

Between 1951 and 2000, 3M produced at least a hundred million pounds of PFOS and chemicals that degrade into PFOS. This is roughly the weight of the Titanic. After the late seventies, when 3M scientists established that the chemical was toxic in animals and was accumulating in humans, it produced

millions of pounds per year. Scientists are still struggling to grasp all the biological consequences. They have learned, just as Johnson did decades ago, that proteins in the body bind to PFOS. It enters our cells and organs, where even tiny amounts can cause stress and interfere with basic biological functions. It contributes to diseases that take many years to develop; at the time of a diagnosis, one's PFOS level may have fallen, making it difficult to establish causation with any certainty.

The other day, I called Brad Creacey, who became an Air Force firefighter in the seventies, at the age of eighteen. He told me that several times a year, for practice, he and his comrades put on rubber boots and heavy silver uniforms that looked like spacesuits. Then a “torch man,” holding a stick tipped with a burning rag, ignited jet fuel that had been poured into an open-air pit. To extinguish the hundred-foot-tall flames, Creacey and his colleagues sprayed them with aqueous film-forming foam, or A.F.F.F. 3M manufactured it from several forever chemicals, including PFOS.

Creacey remembers that A.F.F.F. felt slick and sudsy, almost like soap, and dried out the skin on his hands until it cracked. To celebrate his last day on a military base in Germany, his friends dumped a ceremonial bucket on him. Only later, after working with firefighting foam at an airport in Monterey, California, did he start to wonder if a string of ailments—cysts on his liver, a nodule near his thyroid—were connected to the foam. He had high cholesterol, which diet and exercise were unable to change. Then he was diagnosed with thyroid cancer. “It makes me feel like I was a lab rat, like we were all disposable,” Creacey told me. “I’ve lost faith in human beings.”

It may be tempting to think of Creacey and his peers as unwitting research subjects; indeed, recent studies show that PFOS is associated with an increased risk of thyroid cancer and, in Air Force servicemen, an elevated risk of testicular cancer. But it is probably more accurate to say that we are all part of the experiment. Average levels of PFOS are falling, but nearly all people have at least one forever chemical in their blood, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. “When you have a contaminated site, you can clean it up,” Elsie Sunderland, an environmental chemist at Harvard University, told me. “When you ubiquitously introduce a toxicant at a global scale, so that it’s detectable in everyone . . . we’re reducing public health on an incredibly large scale.” Once everyone’s blood

is contaminated, there is no control group with which to compare, making it difficult to establish responsibility.

New health effects continue to be discovered. Researchers have found that exposure to PFAS during pregnancy can lead to developmental delays in children. Numerous recent studies have linked the chemicals to diabetes and obesity. This year, a study discovered thirteen forever chemicals, including PFOS, in weeks-old fetuses from terminated pregnancies, and linked the chemicals to biomarkers associated with liver problems. A team of N.Y.U. researchers estimated, in 2018, that the costs of just two forever chemicals, PFOA and PFOS—in terms of disease burden, disability, and health-care expenses—amounted to as much as sixty-two billion dollars in a single year. This exceeds the current market value of 3M.

Philippe Grandjean, a physician who helped discover that PFAS harm the immune system, believes that anyone exposed to these chemicals—essentially everyone—may have an elevated risk of cancer. Our immune systems often find and kill abnormal cells before they turn into tumors. “PFAS interfere with the immune system, and likely also this critical function,” he told me. Grandjean, who served as an expert witness in the Minnesota A.G.’s case, has studied many environmental contaminants, including mercury. The impact of PFAS was so much more extreme, he said, that one of his colleagues initially thought it was the result of nuclear radiation.

In April, the E.P.A. took two historic steps to reduce exposure to PFAS. It said that PFOS and PFOA are “likely to cause cancer” and that no level of either chemical is considered safe; it deemed them hazardous substances under the Superfund law, increasing the government’s power to force polluters to clean them up. The agency also set limits for six PFAS in drinking water. In a few years, when the E.P.A. begins enforcing the new regulations, local utilities will be required to test their water and remove any amount of PFOS or PFOA which exceeds four parts per trillion—the equivalent of one drop dissolved in several Olympic swimming pools. 3M has produced enough PFOS and chemicals that degrade into PFOS to exceed this level in all of the freshwater on earth. Meanwhile, many other PFAS continue to be used, and companies are still developing new ones. Thousands of the compounds have been produced; the Department of

Defense still depends on many for use in explosives, semiconductors, cleaning fluids, and batteries. PFAS can be found in nonstick cookware, guitar strings, dental floss, makeup, hand sanitizer, brake fluid, ski wax, fishing lines, and countless other products.

In a statement, a 3M spokesman told me that the company “is proactively managing PFAS,” and that 3M’s approach to the chemicals has evolved along with “the science and technology of PFAS, societal and regulatory expectations, and our expectations of ourselves.” He directed me to a fact sheet about their continued importance in society. “These substances are critical to multiple industries—including the cars we drive, planes we fly, computers and smart phones we use to stay connected, and more,” the fact sheet read.

Recently, 3M settled the lawsuit filed by cities and towns with polluted water. It will pay up to twelve and a half billion dollars to cover the costs of filtering out PFAS, depending on how many water systems need the chemicals removed. The settlement, however, doesn’t approach the scale of the problem. At least forty-five per cent of U.S. tap water is estimated to contain one or more forever chemicals, and one drinking-water expert told me that the cost of removing them all would likely reach a hundred billion dollars.

In 2022, 3M said that it would stop making PFAS, and would “work to discontinue the use of PFAS across its product portfolio,” by the end of 2025 —a pledge that it called “another example of how we are positioning 3M for continued sustainable growth.” But it acknowledged that more than sixteen thousand of its products still contained PFAS. Direct sales of the chemicals were generating \$1.3 billion annually. 3M’s regulatory filings also allow for the possibility that a full phaseout won’t happen—for example, if 3M fails to find substitutes. “We are continuing to make progress on our announcement to exit PFAS manufacturing,” 3M’s spokesperson told me. The company and its scientists have not admitted wrongdoing or faced criminal liability for producing forever chemicals or for concealing their harms.

Hansen often wonders what her father would say about 3M if he were still alive. A few years ago, he began to show signs of dementia, which worsened during the *COVID-19* pandemic. Every time Hansen explained to him that a

novel coronavirus was sickening people around the world, he asked how he might contribute—forgetting that the N95 mask he helped to create was already protecting millions of people from infection. When he died, in January, 2021, Hansen noticed some Coban wrap on his arm. It was shielding his delicate skin from tears, just as he had designed it to. “He invented that,” Hansen told the hospice nurse, who smiled politely.

After she left 3M, Hansen began volunteering at a local nature preserve, where she works to clear paths and protect native plants. Last August, she took me there, and we walked to a creek where she often spends time. The water is home to three species of trout, she told me. It is also polluted by forever chemicals that 3M once dumped upstream.

For most of our hike, a thick wall of flowers—purple joe-pye weed and goldenrod—made it impossible to see the creek bank. Then we came to a wooden bench. I climbed on top of it and looked down on the creek. As I listened to the gurgling of water and the buzzing of insects, I thought I understood why Hansen liked to come here. It was too late to save the creek from pollution; 3M’s chemicals could be there for thousands of years to come. Hansen just wanted to appreciate what was left, and to leave the place a little better than she’d found it. ♦

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Shouts & Murmurs

- Identified

Shouts & Murmurs

Identified

By Ian Frazier

May 20, 2024



A panel of scientific experts commissioned by NASA to study “unidentified anomalous phenomena,” more widely known as UFOs, said Thursday that it found no evidence that any of the reported objects were extraterrestrial in origin.

—*Washington Post.*

Man in blue tights, red cape. Confirmed origin: Metropolis.

Man in red clothing, sleigh. Confirmed origin: central Arctic.

Wizard in balloon. Confirmed origin: Oz.

Nanny with umbrella, suitcase. Confirmed origin: London.

Large-eared elephant with mouse. Confirmed origin: circus, U.S.A.

Prophet on flying horselike creature. Confirmed origin: Mecca.

Poet in flaming chariot. Confirmed origin: Sussex, U.K.

Singer flying toward moon. Confirmed origin: Las Vegas.

Adolescents on brooms. Confirmed origin: vo-tech acad., U.K.

Guru in ground-level hover. Confirmed origin: S. California.

Children in pajamas, top hat, nightgown. Confirmed origin: London.

Preadolescent male in green. Confirmed origin: Neverland.

Prophet with flaming chariot, horses. Confirmed origin: Mideast.

Adult male on throw rug. Confirmed origin: metro Baghdad.

Wraiths in white. Confirmed origin: New York Public Library.

Flying black sports-type vehicle. Confirmed origin: Gotham City.

Male with wings on shoes. Confirmed origin: Mt. Olympus, Greece.

Squirrel in aviator goggles. Confirmed origin: Frostbite Falls, Minn.

Undead in cape. Confirmed origin: Caucasus region.

Woman and cat in cauldron. Confirmed origin: near Boston.

Castle in air. Confirmed origin: deep forest, Central Europe.

Beanstalk and giant entering atmosphere. Confirmed origin: England.

Longhorn steers, brands on fire. Confirmed origin: West Texas.

Reported in so-called Area 52, Italian peninsula:

Monk with birds on shoulders. Confirmed origin: Assisi.

Bald friar in brown robe. Confirmed origin: Copertino.

Bodiless female head with halo over Siena. Confirmed origin: Rome.

Magus ascending, descending. Confirmed origin: Rome.

Reported in so-called Area 53, Spain:

Hovering female with halo. Confirmed origin: Ávila.

Female with halo, flying west. Confirmed origin: Ágreda.

Male with halo, ascending to low altitude. Confirmed origin: Loyola.

Additional notes from panel of scientific experts (P.S.E.):

1. Unidentified anomalous phenomena that have been reported include airborne spherical or oblong objects whose origins are directly traceable to human hands, feet, or heads, or to terrestrial objects such as bats, rackets, or flingers employed by humans. These sightings, usually in parks or over stadiums, number in the tens of millions, and we could not attempt to investigate more than a handful of them. It is possible, though unlikely, that one or two of the objects we did not check were of extraterrestrial origin.

2. The phenomena we did check, as per the (partial) list above, give a sense of how crowded and miscellaneous our planet's skies have become. No international body coördinates who goes up, or when, or how each phenomenon moves about once aloft. When a saint is translated to heaven (to give one example), the public is not alerted, nor are other passersby who might happen into the airspace. There have been many terrifying near-misses of which the media was never informed. The longhorn steers whose brands are on fire belong to the Devil, and the unfortunate cowboys who drive them must do so forever because of the sinful lives they led in dance halls while on cattle drives. As these riders cross the endless sky, they cry, "Yippie-yi-yay! Yippie-yi-oh!" and sometimes lean down to warn cowboys on Earth against sin so they won't end up in the same fix. During one such distracted

moment on March 21 of this year, the herd got away and came within one hundred feet of colliding with the nanny carrying the suitcase and umbrella. Only a quick adjustment of course on her part averted disaster.

3. Satellites: Mostly they keep to the orbital zones, and there have been no problems so far. When the giant entered the atmosphere—he and the beanstalk were falling, technically, after it had been cut down at the base—he hit a communications satellite and put it out of commission, but the signals were quickly rerouted through a spare unit orbiting nearby.

4. Other concerns: Bear in mind that some of these objects are on fire. If Elijah goes by in his flaming chariot, and his horses' manes are burning and their hooves are throwing off fiery sparks, there will be the temptation to take a closer look. Don't! Especially if you're in a World War I canvas biplane or a hydrogen-filled dirigible. You can see paintings of all the miracles you want in museums at no risk to your life. We want to keep everybody safe. ♦

Fiction

- [Thataway](#)

Fiction

Thataway

By Thomas McGuane

May 19, 2024



[Thomas McGuane reads.](#)

The two sisters were growing old now, but they went on gazing toward Palm Springs from this windblown prairie town as though to Mecca. Each was a widow, Mildred thrice over—her last husband had died after decades of work as a brakeman for the Burlington Northern—and now the sisters, if not on public assistance, were close to it, and, despite their uncertain compatibility, forced to live together in the same house, the house where they had grown up, with a brother whose success had once been the town's biggest story. Now Cooper lived in Palm Springs, within walking distance of the former home of Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz, and had among his conveyances a helicopter, with a portrait of him twirling a lariat painted on the side, which he used for visits to the chain of furniture stores he owned. Although, for a time, Cooper's home town cited him when listing its glories or courting a polluter unwelcome elsewhere, he never came back. He didn't remember his origins fondly. He remembered being pitied and ridiculed, ashamed of his shiftless parents and their binges.

Age and shared genetics made the sisters look enough alike that, though each wore shapeless wash dresses, they chose markedly different patterns to go with their tennis shoes, which were similarly coded with Nike swooshes. Constance wore her hair short; Mildred's was long enough to reach her waist when it wasn't piled atop her head. The sisters hadn't seen Cooper in almost a quarter century, but they hoped to before they died—an event they longed for, especially when they were very tired or when too many things had gone wrong, not necessarily earthshaking things but things with the house, the plumbing, or the car, which was good enough for buying groceries but not for going anywhere, leaving town, for instance, or getting away from each other. This last was implausible, because they each feared being alone in the car if it failed, which it had done twice already; the alternator, whatever that was, had gone bad. Mildred's obnoxious son, Wayne, could usually do the repairs, but he always made a stink about it. Once a mean adolescent, Wayne had not turned out well and sometimes threatened his mother. But the sisters argued whenever Constance referred to him as a "dope fiend," circumventing Mildred's preferred "dependency issues," language that annoyed Constance. "He's a bum," she said.

Mildred, once a looker, had grown very heavy, heavy enough that Constance had to tie her shoes for her. Constance supposed that the weight was what finally killed her—that and diabetes. The irritable old town doctor had told Mildred to watch her sugar or lose a few toes, "period." But she'd still gone through a death-defying carton of jelly rolls every few days. She'd had an enlarged heart since childhood, and it simply couldn't work that hard. Mildred expired in her bedroom with a last breath that was like the air going out of a tire.

[Thomas McGuane on small-town America.](#)

Constance heard her yelp as she fell and was at her side, neither of them quite suspecting the enormity of the moment, though Mildred played with the idea that this was the end for her and perhaps the thing that would bring their brother out of Palm Springs in his helicopter—a suggestion that Constance pooh-poohed on the ground that it was too far for a helicopter ride and he'd have to come by plane. But then Mildred actually died, and the minute Constance realized what had happened she was surprised by the feeling of envy that came over her. Then it passed, and she understood that

she was alone now, something she had feared since she'd retired after decades at the county clerk's office. She called the undertaker, and, with that, she felt release.

Mildred's triple widowhood had made her unsentimental about mortality; she was always aware that she would soon be, as she put it, on the business end of death. Wayne, who had left home years ago, was a middle-aged man now, but she had kept some of his toys around, including his metal seesaw, which now rested under her unfeeling calves. On the floor, she looked uncharacteristically peaceful. It really wasn't Mildred any longer. Constance needed someone, anyone, to come to the house soon, in case she was misunderstanding this.

In time, a flashy woman from the funeral home arrived, accompanied by two assistants in suits and ties. They placed Mildred on a kind of sled and, using ropes to ease it down the stairs, soon had her out the door. All three of them muttered, "Sorry for your loss," as Constance dusted off her hands.

Once it was quiet, she locked the front door and fell apart at the loss of her sister and companion, and perhaps at a glimpse of her life alone, or even with Wayne, who, upon inheriting half the house, might move back in. She hadn't seen him in a while but had always thought of him as an eyesore with his hand out.

Constance didn't entirely accept the new conditions of her life until she'd negotiated the cremation. Perhaps she was in shock. The undertaker, Terri, a keen businesswoman and a former runner-up Miss Big Sky, convinced Constance that she cared very much about her needs but went on trying to sell her things—cremation jewelry, a deluxe urn, and a coffin that was only going to burn up. Constance was worn out by the legal challenges of getting Mildred released to the funeral home, but she was sufficiently on top of things to pick the cardboard option and indignantly declined to view the cremation itself, unmoved by the once beautiful undertaker saying, "I wouldn't miss it for the world." She paid no attention to the urn slide show, or to the undertaker's suggestion that Mildred's size might run things up a bit. Looking at the beauty-pageant photograph above the undertaker's desk, Constance was fascinated by how much ground the woman had lost in only

a few years. Constance declined embalming, so the refrigeration fee was unavoidable.

Podcast: The Writer's Voice

[Listen to Thomas McGuane read "Thataway"](#)

The viewing took place in the anteroom of the funeral home, and, desperate to avoid being swept away by her feelings, Constance focussed not on Mildred but on the cardboard coffin. A few of Mildred's old friends straggled through, but Constance didn't recognize them or else considered them disreputable. There was a minor commotion over Constance's debit card, but she left with her hands over her ears, as though the roar of the furnace could be heard from the parking lot. If the car hadn't started, she'd have headed home on foot.

Cooper said that he was one hundred per cent unable to come to a funeral, mentioning the opening of his flagship furniture outlet in Encino. He'd had a terrible argument with his daughter, Bonny, who was staying at his place while making an unflattering documentary film about him, and he was still, as he said, trying to build up enough strength to kick her and her camera out of the house, but the thing had a huge lens, and she could see him all the way from the Ball-Arnaz house down the street. Who knew who lived there now that Lucille and Desi were gone—probably nobodies with more money than brains—but, from their lawn, Bonny's telephoto could see right into the wet bar unless the venetian blinds were firmly shut. Cooper made her leave the camera in the front hall when she came in at night, but her very presence was delaying his healing—from what went unstated. Anytime Cooper was tempted to lay down the law, a reminder of what Bonny had on him, thanks to her derelict mother, brought him to his senses. He was even compliant during interviews for the documentary if she stuck to his chosen topic: the handful of forgotten movies that had launched the cowboy persona that allowed him to open so many furniture stores. Cooper still thought of himself as an old-time cinema cowpoke, but that didn't mean it was fair of Bonny to intercut black-and-white footage of gunfights, cattle drives, and fleeing Indians with shots of brightly colored furniture. With so much bitterness on her part, fairness didn't really enter into it, and now she was starting to get interested in his lowly origins, unless, she said, those stories were just "more of his Horatio Alger bullshit."

The day that Cooper learned of the death of his sister Mildred, Bonny was shooting another film, at an industrial turkey farm outside Lancaster, and he had the house to himself. It was a fraught time to absorb the death of a sibling, and it was all he could do to keep memories of his gruesome home town out of his head. Mildred had protected him in boyhood; her reputation had been such that people feared crossing her. Living under her unwavering shelter had helped to make him who he was. Still, he'd stayed away for decades, and nothing his bossy sister Constance could say or do would change his mind about going there now. It was unfortunate that he felt this way, as his home town was, if nothing else, a place that turned a blind eye to his practice of throwing ersatz going-out-of-business sales that caught the attention of the Better Business Bureau. Constance was liable to press him to do the right thing and show up, and Bonny would love to get some grief on film, but, frankly, no dice.

Cooper was attached to his Cahuilla housekeeper, Gina, whom he had snatched up, decades ago, during a renovation of El Mirador; he'd had to compete for her services with the curators of the Elvis Honeymoon Hideaway. Gina was a small, self-possessed woman in her early sixties who wore colorful, freshly pressed clothes from the thrift store and who, over the years, had transformed herself into Cooper's hybrid housekeeper-caregiver. Cooper liked to tell people that Gina's family had got to Palm Springs ten thousand years before Frank Sinatra, adding, "She's no Mexican." Gina felt that Cooper was slowly returning to childhood, and she enjoyed looking after him but was indifferent to housekeeping. The place was a mess, and Cooper complained until Gina accused him of being persnickety. She made popcorn and watched "The Young and the Restless," rising reluctantly now and then to unload the dishwasher or tweak the thermostat. Cooper liked Gina's company and the peace of their life together. He had learned to buy groceries and watch sitcoms. The hours spent in his bathrobe had grown longer. Gina knew that he'd lost a sister but was more focussed on getting Bonny out of their lives. Bonny wanted Cooper to act his age, and Gina preferred him as a baby.

The remains were ready, and Constance drove over to the funeral home to get them. She was surprised by how heavy they were and was glad she'd declined the urn. Once she had the box in the front seat of the car, she was troubled by it. Those demanding ashes were Mildred saying, "I was always

the pretty one.” She *had* been very pretty, and that may have been the root of her problems: pregnant in high school, lost the baby, and hit the bars. She drifted to Henderson, Nevada, for several years, and God only knows what she got up to there. That was a lie: Constance knew what she got up to. Mildred was quieter on her return, adopted awful Wayne, and spent the rest of her working life at J. C. Penney, and her Sundays in church, where her air of repentance was the talk of a ministry divided between those who admired her courage and those who thought that showing her face was shameless.

Drivers blew their horns at Constance until she got back in her lane. Times had changed in town; no hesitation on the streets went unremarked by horn-blowing. Once home, she was reluctant to haul the box into the house, on the ground that Mildred didn’t live there anymore. But she couldn’t leave it in the car, so Mildred was back home after all, and on the mantel.

Two doors down, in a handsome Victorian cottage, lived the long-retired Charlie Parks, who had gone to school with the sisters. Constance had dated him briefly when she was the captain of the cheerleaders, and Charlie had tried to feel her up in his mother’s car parked out by the relay towers. She’d told him to keep his mitts to himself, which had ended the relationship if not the friendship. Not long afterward, she’d married handsome Phil Akers, who played the saxophone in a rockabilly band with Cooper (who had no musical talent whatsoever but was awarded a consolation tambourine). Phil played at school dances, imitating a forties style: pompadour, Mr. B collar, one-button-roll powder-blue jacket, and pegged pants. The girls simply craved him when he leaned back from the waist for his honking solos. It was the high point of his life, and forty years in the railroad shops never quite erased it. He hung on to his cynical musician’s smile all his life. He left childless Constance with a sufficiency and memories of mostly placid times, with several trips to Phoenix in their R.V. and one to Orange County, where they paid their respects to Cooper’s furniture store without actually seeing him, since he was tied up. They took pictures of each other in front of the store, which was having a “blowout” on Sealy Posturepedic mattresses. “*Treat yourself to better ZZZZZ’s!*”

Charlie Parks came by to offer his condolences, which was one of the things, besides duck hunting, that he did best in his retirement years. He had a pile of decoys under a tarp right in his yard, and a long-barrelled twelve-gauge

shotgun in the front hall with a sign on it that said “Not for Sale.” When Charlie was commiserating, his chin hid his Adam’s apple and his fists plunged so far into the pockets of his cardigan that the sweater was permanently disfigured.

“I don’t suppose it was really unexpected.”

“You’d be surprised,” Constance said. She had just returned from taking a carton of unlaced shoes to the Goodwill. “I didn’t expect it.”

She brought Charlie a cup of coffee. He tested it with his finger.

“I thought Cooper might show up.”

“No. He has too much to do out there. Charlie, he’s a cowboy in the movies,” she added sternly. “With numerous business interests.”

“They don’t make cowboy movies anymore. And the one that won an Oscar —Cooper was just in the posse, but I don’t suppose you ever heard the last of it.”

“We were quite proud of him, if that’s what you’re driving at.”

“I never saw him on a horse the whole time we were growing up, and, anyway, there’s nothing about that that prevents him from paying his respects to Mildred.”

“Well, something happened out there, something big, because he said he’s still . . . healing.”

“Yeah, right.”

Constance let it go. Charlie had been such a good friend to her and Mildred, taking them to various activities once their husbands were gone: Zumba for seniors, genealogical research at the library, open mike at the Hot Tomato, where Mildred performed Kay Starr’s “Wheel of Fortune” with unforgettable antics and a sardonic expression. Constance was mortified, Charlie enchanted.

Bonny had the digital video camera she'd rented from Red Letter in Burbank on a tripod. She stood slightly to the side of it while she interviewed her father, who was wearing a white yoked shirt with pearl-snapped closures, black trousers with a button fly and peaked flaps over the back pockets, and a horsehair belt with a silver Santa Fe buckle under dart-shaped belt loops. A baby-blue silk neckerchief wound around his neck. His daughter, in a T-shirt and bib-front overalls, thought he looked like a damn fool. He dressed like this at his furniture outlets. It was embarrassing. The room was adorned with Western memorabilia and art, bronzes of horses and Indian braves in the Remington manner, old vaquero saddles on wooden stands, black-and-white photographs of William S. Hart and Yakima Canutt. Cooper was sitting on a Molesworth sofa with gnarled tree trunks for legs, stylized cowboys and young-lady dudes in huge hats embossed on the leather cushions. Gina brought him a Scotch-and-soda while casting a suspicious glance at Bonny.

"This is a significant day for you, Cooper Parrott. Your eldest sister, Mildred, has passed away," Bonny said.

"You look like an out-of-work housepainter."

"I'm not in the film, Dad. You're in the film. You agreed to do this, Dad."

"Unfortunately."

"And you're too upset to travel to your home town for the services?"

"That is correct."



“Or so you claim.”

Cooper didn’t reply to this.

“Did you have strong and affectionate feelings for Mildred?”

“She was like a mother to me,” he remarked with bland assurance.

“But you had a mother?”

“Sure did. She was no use. Mildred did the heavy lifting.”

Cooper stood.

“C’mon, Dad, I want this on film. Prize-winning documentaries are characterized by unflinching intimacy.” She stopped the camera, and her arms hung at her sides.

Cooper left the room. He was abruptly homesick. He pictured his town as something glowing from the American past, a Norman Rockwell kind of place, but the picture faded. Little remained but Constance and a dump of a house. Even so, Palm Springs and Bonny, that product of his loins, seemed like a forty-year wrong turn. He felt crushed. It was time to turn back, to

heal, and to watch reruns. He considered what bad luck it had been to be named Cooper in the age of Gary Cooper. He'd accepted that he lived in John Wayne's shadow, and once dreamed of a ruddy John Wayne face calling him a Communist and threatening to beat him to within an inch of his life.

At breakfast the next morning, Bonny dangled a piece of toast in his face and said she would be leaving that afternoon to film Mildred's memorial. She didn't know if there was one planned, but she meant to throw something together, a pinch of Americana with cars on blocks and locals on bad diets.

"Knock yourself out," Cooper said. This was the love they had. What a mess.

"You really should be there."

"I bet you've got a million more where that came from."

"Aunt Connie's all the family you have left. Except for me, *mwahahaha*."

"Is this a purity test?"

"A humanity test, Dad. You need to show your home town that there's more to you than a tinsel cowboy. A man with a heart, sort of, not just a hat."

Cooper's annoyance recalled his brief encounter with Bonny's mother, a stunt double at a Nevada shoot and part-time dominatrix, and what became a very expensive quickie as he undertook the rearing of Bonny by extraordinary remote-control means: schools, nannies, camps, semesters at sea, wilderness studies for troubled teens, junior college, bail money, and abortions. Though he'd done what he could to help her career, invested in her films, she'd never felt that her efforts to reach out to her father quite landed. Bonny intended this documentary to flush her father out of hiding and—what? Revive his movie career? Make him admit that she existed?

Bonny's documentaries were noted for their predatory skill. She was celebrated for her pitiless charm when interviewing luxury-car dealers, so well concealed behind the baby-doll outfits and the daffy bimbo act that she used to get her victims—a stream of fat cats and deep-pocketed suckers—

talking. Aston Martin's lawyers had described that film as "baseless savagery," and she'd added the phrase to her business cards, along with "Jaguar, I'm comin' for ya."

Cooper considered the idea of attending Mildred's memorial. It filled him with terror. Was there even going to be one? What if he went? What if he didn't go? Should he man up? His anxiety was rising, and it overcame him. John Wayne would probably have gone, though it was not easy to picture the big doofus in such a shitty town. Cooper made himself a drink in the trophy room and left Bonny a message: "I'll be there."

She didn't believe him, and went on ahead to the tired old town by herself. A lifelong Southern Californian, Bonny had rarely experienced such a gloomy hole. She had dressed to blend in, with a loud flannel shirt and mannish pants, as she strolled around trying to get a feel for a place that to someone from the Golden West looked like a wax museum. She didn't see how to do this without Cooper—street interviews, maybe, or Constance's lamentations at his absence. All of this changed when Cooper's travel agent called to notify her of his arrangements and a room prepaid under the name William S. Hart. Bonny had better get a move on! She smelled blood.

Cooper arrived two days later, which was barely enough time for her to set the stage. She'd worked herself to exhaustion preparing for his arrival, getting minimal help from a chamber of commerce reluctant to deal with out-of-towners. Constance was alarmed at the idea that Cooper's long-awaited visit would be filmed. She found Bonny peculiar and couldn't understand why she dressed like a lumberjack.

Bonny met Cooper at the airport. He seemed dazed, pressing his closed eyes with thumb and forefinger.

"You all right?"

"Oh, hell no."

"We'll pick up Constance and . . . Mildred." He raised his eyebrows as if to ask if she thought this was funny.

The moment that Bonny turned onto the frontage road, he opened his mouth and gripped the seat with clammy hands. The water tower emblazoned with the name of the town emerged from the skyline. Cooper looked away.

Bonny said, "Seems like a nice little place to me. Tree-shaded streets, well-kept houses, angry fat people."

"What makes you think I'd enjoy this? I was a friendless loser here, O.K.? From a loser family, you follow?" She wanted to say that she would put her losers up against his any day, including her druggy waif of a mother.

Cooper averted his eyes as they passed the high school, the title company where, at age twelve, he'd mopped floors, Mildred's Methodist church, and the windswept park. They stopped at the house, compact and armored with asbestos shingles. While Bonny filmed from the car, Cooper ascended the porch steps. Before he could knock, Constance opened the door. She was bearing Mildred's ashes, gift-wrapped in red, white, and blue. She stared at Cooper, then said, "Hello, Cooper."

"Hello, Con."

"I wish you'd come sooner. Did you come in the helicopter?"

"Nah, commercial."

"But here you are."

"Yep."

"Can you come in?" Constance asked, her eyes observing Bonny in the car.

"For a sec, maybe. Bonny's got me on a short rope. Film deal."

They sat in the living room. Cooper concealed his dismay by grinning in approval at all he saw. A bowl held ceramic fruit. He paused at a picture of their parents, dressed for the photographer. "Must've borrowed the clothes," he said. The witticism fell on silence. "Ain't it funny how time slips away?" Connie nodded and smiled at her brother's awkwardness. "Love what

you've done with the house," he added. "Cozy. More furniture than when we were kids."

"I like it well enough."

"How long's Phil been gone?"

"Eleven years."

"I played tambourine in his band. Remember?"

"You were great."

"Was I?"

"No. But Phil thought you needed something to do."

"I found something to do."

They said nothing until the pause became uncomfortable.

"We're the family now, Coop. Does that mean anything to you?"

"I gotta think about it. We've gone separate ways. That's a fact. That's just a damn fact."

"Certainly, you have. I haven't gone anywhere except to the county building."

Constance got up to pull dead leaves from a potted African violet. She watched Cooper staring toward the window.

"You'll have to tell me about Bonny. She's yours, right? She gives you such fishy looks."

"Ha ha, you're sharp, Con. Which reminds me. She's waiting."

"I understand. I hope you'll stop back. Maybe you can see Wayne. He's quite unusual."

“I heard,” Cooper said, as Constance pressed the box of ashes into his arms.
“Heard about him. Wow, these weigh like lead.”

“They’ll remind you of all we lived through.” Cooper shrugged this off.

Without looking back, he walked to the car. Bonny had her cell phone atop the steering wheel and was reviewing footage so far. “I’ll put this box in the back. Let’s not forget it.” He wondered if he had seen the last of Constance.

“I hate to rush,” Bonny said, “but we’re late for the parade.”

Cooper locked eyes with her. “*What* parade? Is it for me?”

“Yeah. Sure is.”

“A big one?”

“Let’s find out.”

Constance gave a small ironic wave from the porch, and Cooper felt a pang, remembering the humorous detachment with which she had kept trouble at bay when they were kids. When he waved at her, she stepped into the house.

“Nice old lady,” Bonny said.

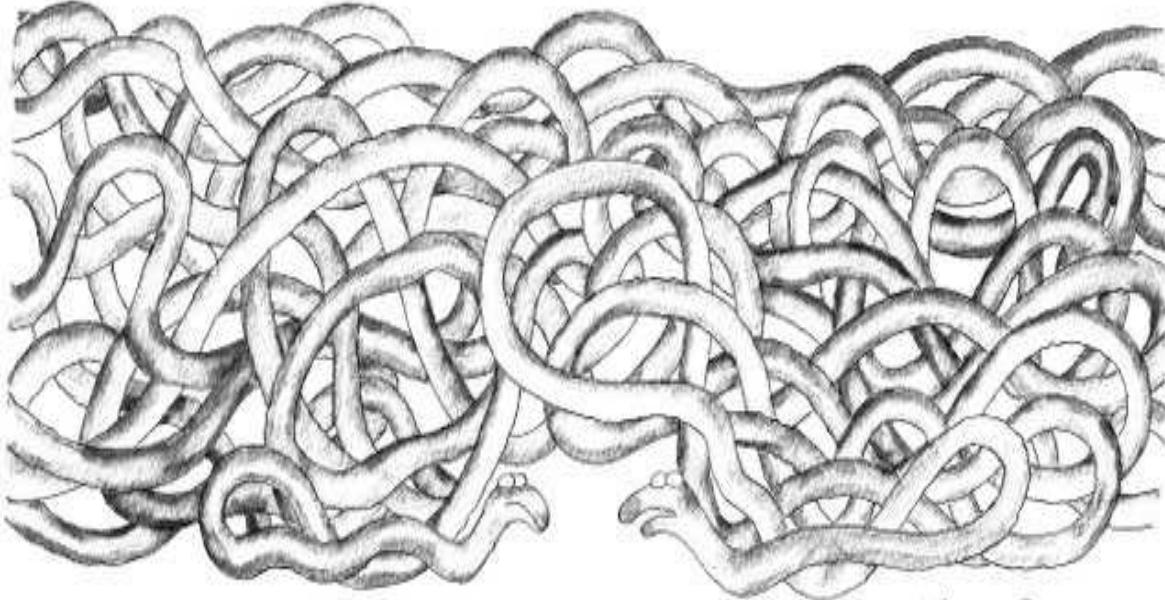
Cooper sat in the back seat of a vintage Chevrolet convertible with fins, flames painted on its hood. A portable boom box atop the trunk played Buck Owens’s “Act Naturally” in a recurring loop. Since he hadn’t anticipated a public appearance, he was wearing a zip-up leisure suit and a Lakers baseball cap, rather than his usual Stetson. He felt naked. The audience for the parade, meandering along the sidewalks on their way to stores, appointments, and school, were strangers, and seemed baffled by the “Cooper Parrott” banner adorning the car.

“They were all born after you left, Dad.”

“Maybe this is the first time they’ve ever seen a cowboy!”

“No need to shout, Dad.”

The driver said, "There's gotta be someone somewhere," and struck out into the side streets, where seemingly uninhabited houses flashed TVs behind drawn curtains. At a four-way stop, an elderly man in dashboard overalls and carpet slippers wheeled off his porch and ran to the car. He shouted out his name to Cooper, and Cooper threw back his head in delight and said, "Ah!"



"Who's this bird?" he asked Bonny out of the side of his mouth.

The man grasped Cooper's shoulders and said, "You have no damn idea who I am, do you?"

"Nope, but you're gonna tell me."

"Our family took you in when the whole lot of yiz didn't have a pot to piss in or a window to throw it out."

"Take your hands off me, Jerry, you dadgum jackass!"

Jerry tottered back to his house as Cooper straightened his clothes.

"Any more like that around here?" Cooper asked the driver.

Jerry's eyes burned in the shadow of the porch. Cooper's wave went unreturned.

"Lots."

"You need to spray 'em."

"Was your family ever homeless?" Bonny asked.

"Not always." Bonny got this last in a closeup. Something about the way he said it told her that it would be very strong during editing. Then he said it again: "Not always." That would have been a better take, but she'd missed it. Shit.

The driver and owner of the car, after describing its restoration in excruciating detail, offered to return Cooper to his childhood home.

"*No!*" Cooper shouted, then turned to Bonny and said, "Get me outta here."

The driver looked around at him, indignant and surprised. "No problem, pal. The young lady pays me by the hour."

He drove the two to Bonny's rented car, and stayed behind the wheel, staring straight ahead, as they got out. "Will this be an annual event?" he asked. Cooper told him to go to hell. Once in the rental car, he pointed through the windshield toward the airport and said to Bonny, "Thataway."

On the flight, Bonny and her father sat in anguished silence. Though Cooper wanted to get back to Palm Springs, he struggled to picture his life there. It seemed like living in an aquarium or maybe a nice hotel. He had a fleeting hope that the plane would stay up in the air. Bonny's heart ached as she flipped through the airline magazine. Cooper stared out the window until they crossed the Rockies, then slumped in his seat.

Back at Cooper's house, they gestured toward a hug but then just leaned and bumped shoulders; it was the best they could do. They'd left the ashes in the rental car, but a kindly manager at Hertz shipped Mildred to Bonny once law enforcement had confirmed that she was not a bomb. Bonny left the box on the porch of Cooper's house.

When asked by the backers of her documentary, “How’s the Cooper thing going?,” Bonny explained that she had punted. After the trip to his home town, she’d either been discouraged or lost interest. She felt that she knew her father insufficiently to give the film prize-winning depth. She’d lost the edge that had given such a sting to the Aston Martin piece, or to the brutes killing turkeys out in Lancaster.

Wayne turned up on the doorstep eight days after Mildred’s death. He said, “Mom was lucky to live that long.” Constance was startled by the cheer with which he delivered the remark. She asked him where he’d been. Since he felt that that was something she ought to know already, he declined to answer. Wayne was shorter than both his mother and his aunt, and stocky. He wore safety boots, loud on the wood floor, blue pants, and a shirt with his name over the pocket. He allowed that he would just go ahead and move in.

“Your old room?”

“I’ll let you know.”

Wayne departed to get his stuff from wherever he’d left it. Constance pulled the curtain back to see him drive off, then meandered through the house wondering which room Wayne would claim. She admitted to herself that, though she’d seen him grow up, she didn’t really know anything about him. Mildred had created a wall around Wayne to try to prevent Constance and her late husband from criticizing his erratic upbringing. All she knew was that Wayne had dreamed of being a surfer and often played “Wipe Out,” by the Surfaris, at top volume—especially the blood-curdling laughter. As Wayne had grown more difficult, a stretch of teen-age years in which the only respite was a brief residence at the Pine Hills youth reformatory, Phil and Constance had offered to move out of the house, but Mildred had rented a place a block and a half from Penney’s, a walk to work that she made daily for much of the rest of her life, from the time when she turned heads to when even the short walk was too difficult and she moved back in with her sister. Wayne was on his own by then.

Wayne chose Constance’s room, which admittedly had the best view—the back yard and not the street. She would move into Mildred’s, which looked toward the neighbor’s house, whose occupants Mildred had watched

religiously, chronicling births, deaths, college departures, and hanky-panky. “Take all the time you need,” Wayne said. “I’m on the road.”

She packed up Mildred’s things squeamishly, fearing that they’d disclose something she would rather not know. There were packs of letters bound with string, some yellowing with age. Constance thought, I’m not going there, and burned them in the fireplace.

She cooked for Wayne. Sometimes he ate what she’d prepared; sometimes he disparaged it. Constance failed to determine a pattern. He smoked after dinner, staring into the middle distance, while Constance, pretending to cross her arms to keep her hand inconspicuously close to her chest, fanned the smoke away. She worked at being unobtrusive, only to have Wayne accuse her of tiptoeing around in a creepy manner. In the end, he resorted to fast food, which he ate in his truck, leaving the remains on the front seat—pizza boxes, waxed paper from turkey wraps, empty Diet Coke bottles. He was sullen and smelly, and frequently reminded Constance that he co-owned the house now.

Soon enough, she was fed up. They would sell the house, she announced. “Suits me,” Wayne said. “I could use the money.” Advertised as a starter home, it sold in the winter to a gym teacher in town, a pretty girl with a baby. Constance had expected to be crushed to lose her childhood home. Instead, she was elated. After several arduous trips to a storage container, she retreated to the Hillcrest Hotel, an old pile on Main Street, to think. Wayne went to California with no plan to return. “We’ll see how it goes,” he said. Constance lost the nerve to ask him to write if he got work. She was tired of losing her nerve. That was new.

Gina went to the door. Cooper, still in his bathrobe, watched warily from the corridor. “Who is it?” he asked, raising his reading glasses.

“I can’t tell. The Uber guy is still unloading her luggage. It looks like she’s here to stay.”

“Lock the door!”

“Let’s find out who it is first!”

“I know who it is. Do as I say!”

Gina glanced at him indignantly, then opened the door.

“Hello, Con,” Cooper said with an exaggerated baffled look. “Where’re you headed?” He tightened his bathrobe and twirled his reading glasses.

“Headed? I have arrived! Is it a problem?” ♦

The Critics

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A Critic at Large

Why Liberals Struggle to Defend Liberalism

We may be months away from the greatest crisis the liberal state has known since the Civil War. How come it's so hard to say what we're defending?

By Adam Gopnik

May 20, 2024



“Don’t mention the word ‘liberalism,’ ” the talk-show host says to the guy who’s written a book on it. “Liberalism,” he explains, might mean [Hillary Clinton](#) and [Barack Obama](#) to his suspicious audience, alienating more people than it invites. Talk instead about “liberal democracy,” a more expansive term that includes [John McCain](#) and [Ronald Reagan](#). When you cross the border to Canada, you are allowed to say “liberalism” but are asked never to praise “liberals,” since that means implicitly endorsing the ruling Trudeau government and the long-dominant Liberal Party. In England, you are warned off both words, since “liberals” suggests the membership of a quaintly failed political party and “liberalism” its dated program. In France, of course, the vagaries of language have made “liberalism” mean free-

market fervor, doomed from the start in that country, while what we call liberalism is more hygienically referred to as “republicanism.” Say *that*.

Liberalism is, truly, the love that dare not speak its name. Liberal thinkers hardly improve matters, since the first thing they will say is that the thing called “liberalism” is not actually a thing. This discouraging reflection is, to be sure, usually followed by an explanation: liberalism is a practice, a set of institutions, a tradition, a temperament, even. A clear contrast can be made with its ideological competitors: both Marxism and Catholicism, for instance, have more or less explicable rules—call them, nonpejoratively, dogmas. You can’t really be a Marxist without believing that a revolution against the existing capitalist order would be a good thing, and that parliamentary government is something of a bourgeois trick played on the working class. You can’t really be a Catholic without believing that a crisis point in cosmic history came two millennia ago in the Middle East, when a dissident rabbi was crucified and mysteriously revived. You can push either of these beliefs to the edge of metaphor—maybe the rabbi was only believed to be resurrected, and the inner experience of that epiphany is what counts; maybe the revolution will take place peacefully within a parliament and without Molotov cocktails—but you can’t really discard them. Liberalism, on the other hand, can include both faith in free markets and skepticism of free markets, an embrace of social democracy and a rejection of its statism. Its greatest figure, the nineteenth-century British philosopher and parliamentarian [John Stuart Mill](#), was a socialist but also the author of “[On Liberty](#),” which is (to the leftist imagination, at least) a suspiciously libertarian manifesto.

Whatever liberalism is, we’re regularly assured that it’s dying—in need of those shock paddles they regularly take out in TV medical dramas. (“C’mon! Breathe, damn it! *Breathe!*”) As on television, this is not guaranteed to work. (“We’ve lost him, Holly. Damn it, we’ve lost him.”) Later this year, a certain demagogue who hates all these terms—liberals, liberalism, liberal democracy—might be lifted to power again. So what is to be done? New books on the liberal crisis tend to divide into three kinds: the professional, the professorial, and the polemical—books by those with practical experience; books by academics, outlining, sometimes in dreamily abstract form, a reformed liberal democracy; and then a few wishing the whole damn thing over, and well rid of it.

The professional books tend to come from people whose lives have been spent as pundits and as advisers to politicians. Robert Kagan, a Brookings fellow and a former State Department maven who has made the brave journey from neoconservatism to resolute anti-Trumpism, has a new book on the subject, “[Rebellion: How Antiliberalism Is Tearing America Apart—Again](#)” (Knopf). Kagan’s is a particular type of book—I have written one myself—that makes the case for liberalism mostly to other liberals, by trying to remind readers of what they have and what they stand to lose. For Kagan, that “again” in the title is the crucial word; instead of seeing Trumpism as a new danger, he recapitulates the long history of anti-liberalism in the U.S., characterizing the current crisis as an especially foul wave rising from otherwise predictable currents. Since the founding of the secular-liberal Republic—secular at least in declining to pick one faith over another as official, liberal at least in its faith in individualism—anti-liberal elements have been at war with it. Kagan details, mordantly, the anti-liberalism that emerged during and after the Civil War, a strain that, just as much as today’s version, insisted on a “Christian commonwealth” founded essentially on wounded white working-class pride.

The relevance of such books may be manifest, but their contemplative depth is, of necessity, limited. Not to worry. Two welcomely ambitious and professorial books are joining them: “[Liberalism as a Way of Life](#)” (Princeton), by Alexandre Lefebvre, who teaches politics and philosophy at the University of Sydney, and “[Free and Equal: A Manifesto for a Just Society](#)” (Knopf), by Daniel Chandler, an economist and a philosopher at the London School of Economics.

The two take slightly different tacks. Chandler emphasizes programs of reform, and toys with the many bells and whistles on the liberal busy box: he’s inclined to try more random advancements, like elevating ordinary people into temporary power, on an Athenian model that’s now restricted to jury service. But, on the whole, his is a sanely conventional vision of a state reformed in the direction of ever greater fairness and equity, one able to curb the excesses of capitalism and to accommodate the demands of diversity.



The program that Chandler recommends to save liberalism essentially represents the politics of the leftier edge of the British Labour Party—which historically has been unpopular with the very people he wants to appeal to, gaining power only after exhaustion with Tory governments. In the classic Fabian manner, though, Chandler tends to breeze past some formidable practical problems. While advocating for more aggressive government intervention in the market, he admits equably that there may be problems with state ownership of industry and infrastructure. Yet the problem with state ownership is not a theoretical one: [Margaret Thatcher](#) became Prime Minister because of the widely felt failures of state ownership in the nineteen-seventies. The overreaction to those failures may have been destructive, but it was certainly democratic, and [Tony Blair](#)'s much criticized temporizing began in this recognition. Chandler is essentially arguing for an updated version of the social-democratic status quo—no bad place to be but not exactly a new place, either.

Lefebvre, on the other hand, wants to write about liberalism chiefly as a cultural phenomenon—as the water we swim in without knowing that it's wet—and his book is packed, in the tradition of William James, with racy anecdotes and pop-culture references. He finds more truths about contemporary liberals in the earnest figures of the comedy series “Parks and

Recreation” than in the words of any professional pundit. A lot of this is fun, and none of it is frivolous.

Yet, given that we may be months away from the greatest crisis the liberal state has known since the Civil War, both books seem curiously calm. Lefebvre suggests that liberalism may be passing away, but he doesn’t seem especially perturbed by the prospect, and at his book’s climax he recommends a permanent stance of “reflective equilibrium” as an antidote to all anxiety, a stance that seems not unlike Richard Rorty’s idea of irony—cultivating an ability both to hold to a position and to recognize its provisionality. “Reflective equilibrium trains us to see weakness and difference in ourselves,” Lefebvre writes, and to see “how singular each of us is in that any equilibrium we reach will be specific to us as individuals and our constellation of considered judgments.” However excellent as a spiritual exercise, a posture of reflective equilibrium seems scarcely more likely to get us through 2024 than smoking weed all day, though that, too, can certainly be calming in a crisis.

Both professors, significantly, are passionate evangelists for the great American philosopher John Rawls, and both books use Rawls as their fount of wisdom about the ideal liberal arrangement. Indeed, the dust-jacket sell line of Chandler’s book is a distillation of Rawls: “Imagine: You are designing a society, but you don’t know who you’ll be within it—rich or poor, man or woman, gay or straight. What would you want that society to look like?” Lefebvre’s “reflective equilibrium” is borrowed from Rawls, too. Rawls’s classic “[A Theory of Justice](#)” (1971) was a theory about fairness, which revolved around the “liberty principle” (you’re entitled to the basic liberties you’d get from a scheme in which everyone got those same liberties) and the “difference principle” (any inequalities must benefit the worst off). The emphasis on “justice as fairness” presses both professors to stress equality; it’s not “A Theory of Liberty,” after all. “Free and equal” is not the same as “free and fair,” and the difference is where most of the arguing happens among people committed to a liberal society.

Indeed, readers may feel that the work of reconciling Rawls’s very abstract consideration of ideal justice and community with actual experience is more daunting than these books, written by professional philosophers who swim in *this* water, make it out to be. A confidence that our problems can be

managed with the right adjustments to the right model helps explain why the tone of both books—richly erudite and thoughtful—is, for all their implication of crisis, so contemplative and even-humored. No doubt it is a good idea to tell people to keep cool in a fire, but that does not make the fire cooler.

Rawls devised one of the most powerful of all thought experiments: the idea of the “veil of ignorance,” behind which we must imagine the society we would want to live in without knowing which role in that society’s hierarchy we would occupy. Simple as it is, it has ever-arresting force, making it clear that, behind this veil, rational and self-interested people would never design a society like that of, say, the slave states of the American South, given that, dropped into it at random, they could very well be enslaved. It also suggests that Norway might be a fairly just place, because a person would almost certainly land in a comfortable and secure middle-class life, however boringly Norwegian.

Still, thought experiments may not translate well to the real world. Einstein’s similarly epoch-altering account of what it would be like to travel on a beam of light, and how it would affect the hands on one’s watch, is profound for what it reveals about the nature of time. Yet it isn’t much of a guide to setting the timer on the coffeemaker in the kitchen so that the pot will fill in time for breakfast. Actual politics is much more like setting the timer on the coffeemaker than like riding on a beam of light. Breakfast is part of the cosmos, but studying the cosmos won’t cook breakfast. It’s telling that in neither of these Rawlsian books is there any real study of the life and the working method of an actual, functioning liberal politician. No [F.D.R.](#) or [Clement Attlee](#), Pierre Mendès France or François Mitterrand (a socialist who was such a master of coalition politics that he effectively killed off the French Communist Party). Not to mention Tony Blair or [Joe Biden](#) or Barack Obama. Biden’s name appears once in Chandler’s index; Obama’s, though he gets a passing mention, not at all.

The reason is that theirs are not ideal stories about the unimpeded pursuit of freedom and fairness but necessarily contingent tales of adjustments and amendments—compromised stories, in every sense. Both philosophers would, I think, accept this truth in principle, yet neither is drawn to it from the heart. Still, this is how the good work of governing gets done, by those

who accept the weight of the world as they act to lighten it. Obama's history—including the feints back and forth on national health insurance, which ended, amid all the compromises, with the closest thing America has had to a just health-care system—is uninspiring to the idealizing mind. But these compromises were not a result of neglecting to analyze the idea of justice adequately; they were the result of the pluralism of an open society marked by disagreement on fundamental values. The troubles of current American politics do not arise from a failure on the part of people in Ohio to have read Rawls; they are the consequence of the truth that, even if everybody in Ohio read Rawls, not everybody would agree with him.

Ideals *can* shape the real world. In some ultimate sense, Biden, like F.D.R. before him, has tried to build the sort of society we might design from behind the veil of ignorance—but, also like F.D.R., he has had to do so empirically, and often through tactics overloaded with contradictions. If your thought experiment is premised on a group of free and equal planners, it may not tell you what you need to know about a society marred by entrenched hierarchies. Ask Biden if he wants a free and fair society and he would say that he does. But Thatcher would have said so, too, and just as passionately. Oscillation of power and points of view within that common framework are what makes liberal democracies liberal. It has less to do with the ideally just plan than with the guarantee of the right to talk back to the planner. *That* is the great breakthrough in human affairs, as much as the far older search for social justice. Plato's rulers wanted social justice, of a kind; what they didn't want was back talk.

Both philosophers also seem to accept, at least by implication, the familiar idea that there is a natural tension between two aspects of the liberal project. One is the desire for social justice, the other the practice of individual freedom. Wanting to speak our minds is very different from wanting to feed our neighbors. An egalitarian society might seem inherently limited in liberty, while one that emphasizes individual rights might seem limited in its capacity for social fairness.



Yet the evidence suggests the opposite. Show me a society in which people are able to curse the king and I will show you a society more broadly equal than the one next door, if only because the ability to curse the king will make the king more likely to spread the royal wealth, for fear of the cursing. The rights of sexual minorities are uniquely protected in Western liberal democracies, but this gain in social equality is the result of a history of protected expression that allowed gay experience to be articulated and “normalized,” in high and popular culture. We want to live on common streets, not in fortified castles. It isn’t a paradox that John Stuart Mill and his partner, Harriet Taylor, threw themselves into both “On Liberty,” a testament to individual freedom, and “The Subjection of Women,” a program for social justice and mass emancipation through group action. The habit of seeking happiness for one through the fulfillment of many others was part of the habit of their liberalism. Mill wanted to be happy, and he couldn’t be if Taylor wasn’t.

Liberals are at a disadvantage when it comes to authoritarians, because liberals are committed to procedures and institutions, and persist in that commitment even when those things falter and let them down. The asymmetry between the Trumpite assault on the judiciary and Biden’s reluctance even to consider enlarging the Supreme Court is typical. Trumpites can and will say anything on earth about judges; liberals are far

more reticent, since they don't want to undermine the institutions that give reality to their ideals.

Where Kagan, Lefebvre, and Chandler are all more or less sympathetic to the liberal “project,” the British political philosopher John Gray deplores it, and his recent book, “[The New Leviathans: Thoughts After Liberalism](#)” (Farrar, Straus & Giroux), is one long complaint. Gray is one of those leftists so repelled by the follies of the progressive party of the moment—to borrow a phrase of Orwell’s about Jonathan Swift—that, in a familiar horseshoe pattern, he has become hard to distinguish from a reactionary. He insists that liberalism is a product of Christianity (being in thrall to the notion of the world’s perfectibility) and that it has culminated in what he calls “hyper-liberalism,” which would emancipate individuals from history and historically shaped identities. Gray hates all things “woke”—a word that he seems to know secondhand from news reports about American universities. If “woke” points to anything except the rage of those who use it, however, it is a discourse directed *against* liberalism—[Ibram X. Kendi](#) is no ally of [Bayard Rustin](#), nor [Judith Butler](#) of John Stuart Mill. So it is hard to see it as an expression of the same trends, any more than Trump is a product of Burke’s conservative philosophy, despite strenuous efforts on the progressive side to make it seem so.

Gray’s views are learned, and his targets are many and often deserved: he has sharp things to say about how certain left liberals have reclaimed the Nazi jurist Carl Schmitt and his thesis that politics is a battle to the death between friends and foes. In the end, Gray turns to Dostoyevsky’s warning that (as Gray reads him) “the logic of limitless freedom is unlimited despotism.” Hyper-liberals, Gray tells us, think that we can compete with the authority of God, and what they leave behind is wild disorder and crazed egotism.

As for Dostoyevsky’s positive doctrines—authoritarian and mystical in nature—Gray waves them away as being “of no interest.” But they *are* of interest, exactly because they raise the central pragmatic issue: If you believe all this about liberal modernity, what do you propose to do about it? Given that the announced alternatives are obviously worse or just crazy (as is the idea of a Christian commonwealth, something that could be achieved

only by a degree of social coercion that makes the worst of “woke” culture look benign), perhaps the evil might better be ameliorated than abolished.

Between authority and anarchy lies argument. The trick is not to have unified societies that “share values”—those societies have never existed or have existed only at the edge of a headsman’s axe—but to have societies that can get along nonviolently *without* shared values, aside from the shared value of trying to settle disputes nonviolently. Certainly, Americans were far more polarized in the nineteen-sixties than they are today—many favored permanent apartheid (“Segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever”)—and what happened was not that values changed on their own but that a form of rights-based liberalism of protest and free speech convinced just enough people that the old order wouldn’t work and that it wasn’t worth fighting for a clearly lost cause.

What’s curious about anti-liberal critics such as Gray is their evident belief that, after the institutions and the practices on which their working lives and welfare depend are destroyed, the features of the liberal state they like will somehow survive. After liberalism is over, the neat bits will be easily reassembled, and the nasty bits will be gone. Gray can revile what he perceives to be a ruling élite and call to burn it all down, and nothing impedes the dissemination of his views. Without the institutions and the practices that he despises, fear would prevent oppositional books from being published. Try publishing an anti-Communist book in China or a critique of theocracy in Iran. Liberal institutions are the reason that he is allowed to publish his views and to have the career that he and all the other authors here rightly have. Liberal values and practices allow their most fervent critics a livelihood and a life—which they believe will somehow magically be reconstituted “after liberalism.” They won’t be.

The vociferous critics of liberalism are like passengers on the Titanic who root for the iceberg. After all, an iceberg is thrilling, and anyway the White Star Line has classes, and the music the band plays is second-rate, and why is the food French instead of honestly English? “Just as I told you, the age of the steamship is over!” they cry as the water slips over their shoes. They imagine that another boat will miraculously appear—where all will be in first class, the food will be authentic, and the band will perform only Mozart or Motown, depending on your wishes. Meanwhile, the ship goes down. At

least the band will be playing “Nearer, My God, to Thee,” which they will take as some vindication. The rest of us may drown.

One turns back to Helena Rosenblatt’s 2018 book, “[The Lost History of Liberalism](#),” which makes the case that liberalism is not a recent ideology but an age-old series of intuitions about existence. When the book appeared, it may have seemed unduly overgeneralized—depicting liberalism as a humane generosity that flared up at moments and then died down again. But, as the world picture darkens, her dark picture illuminates. There surely are a set of identifiable values that connect men and women of different times along a single golden thread: an aversion to fanaticism, a will toward the coexistence of different kinds and creeds, a readiness for reform, a belief in the public criticism of power without penalty, and perhaps, above all, a knowledge that institutions of civic peace are much harder to build than to destroy, being immeasurably more fragile than their complacent inheritors imagine. These values will persist no matter how evil the moment may become, and by whatever name we choose to whisper in the dark. ♦

Books

We Must Defend the Bust

Breasts are subject to capricious restrictions and contradictory norms. What would it take to set them free?

By Lauren Michele Jackson

May 20, 2024



Who'll take pity on the breast man? If such a creature still exists, that is. The targets of his fixation have demurred in the face of changing tastes. The new millennium's Everyman, if we're to believe his representation in mass culture, no longer sniffs for cleavage like a truffle pig on the hunt. Take Jimmy Kimmel, who used to be the patron saint of drunk, red-blooded, horny guys watching television. His early-aughts Comedy Central production "The Man Show" flaunted a cast of "juggy girls" and ran its closing credits over footage of, as the tagline went, "girls jumping on trampolines." Kimmel has since suited up in the tasteful, white-collar interest of ribbing Donald Trump on late-night TV and at the Oscars. "The Man Show" aired its final episode in 2004, by the way, some months after that year's Super Bowl halftime show jerked America into temporary sobriety with the unsanctioned appearance of a pop star's decorated brown

breast. And, indeed, breast augmentation has been on the decline since 2007, our curiosity newly captured by the surgical pursuit of better buttocks.

Breasts (and butts, for that matter) have long been relegated to the stuff of underclass juvenilia. Fashion and ballet and black-tie anything have little use for such protuberances in their silhouettes. The evolved prefer a nicely turned pair of legs, so thinking has gone. But in recent decades we seem to have decided that breasts are not merely tawdry, not just child's play, but damn near regressive. For a relevant artifact, I think of "Pam & Tommy," Hulu's 2022 limited series about the storied nineties couple. Like so much current media about feminine icons, the show's professed aim is the redemption of its female subject. But it is as wary of Anderson's appeal as it is critical of misogynist recoil. The episode "Pamela in Wonderland" alternates between a vile deposition—"Mrs. Lee, do you recall how old you were the first time you publicly exposed your genitals?"—and flashbacks to a younger Anderson's earliest forays into selling her image. After an enchanted photo shoot at the Playboy Mansion, a young Pam contemplates the idea of—she gestures to her chest—"nothing major. Just, like, a cup size, two at most." She asks her mom what she thinks. "I think God made you perfect just the way you are," her mother responds. "But if you want to try and top him . . ." The tut-tutting is practically audible. Poor Alice.

Despite shifting cultural attitudes, the lessons have, of late, had problems sticking, as in the case of Sydney Sweeney, whose breasts have been turned into a talking point. Some fault resides with "Euphoria," the HBO series about troubled, sexually ferocious Zoomers for which Sweeney is still, though likely not for long, best known. She plays Cassie, distinguished by her developed—if you'll pardon the euphemism—figure. Her breasts act as synecdoche for her character, with Sweeney costumed and shot in kind. These creative decisions have been taken by audiences as license to scrutinize her chest elsewhere. After the release of the film "Anyone but You," knowing viewers tsk-tsked at the fit of Sweeney's bikini top, shown riding up in the telltale sign of improper sizing. Meanwhile, commentators on the right have tried ginning up debate over the twenty-six-year-old's cleavage, rejoicing in a perceived return to a bygone beauty standard in the wake of all that overzealous feminism they blame on the left. The day after Sweeney hosted "S.N.L.," the conservative pundit Richard Hanania posted a

clip from the episode, emphasizing the low neckline of her dress with the caption “Wokeness is dead.”

Sweeney herself has been such a good sport about this that it’s almost distressing. A snapshot from a recent vacation posted on Instagram shows her mugging in a gray crew-neck sweatshirt reading “*SORRY FOR HAVING GREAT TITS.*” In more sombre contexts, she has expressed discomfort with the nature of such scrutiny. “I had boobs before other girls and I felt ostracized for it,” she told the *Sun* last year.

What washes into the shallows of present-day pop culture emanates from a deeper societal dissonance regarding breasts. The prurient and the puritanical share custody, leaving breasts bound by a web of meanings that conspire to give a lousy time to the people who have them. This broad truth, that most American women “are dissatisfied with, indifferent to, or ambivalent about their breasts,” is the premise of Sarah Thornton’s “Tits Up: What Sex Workers, Milk Bankers, Plastic Surgeons, Bra Designers, & Witches Tell Us About Breasts,” a new book that wants to set these organs free with the goal of gaining a greater understanding of and appreciation for the women to which they are attached. The breast man was not consulted.

Thornton can well recall when she began to look upon her breasts as a liability. Her girls “made their debut on a summer’s day in the mid-1970s,” she writes. “Not yet a teenager, I imagined that my new assets might become a potent symbol of adult self-possession or a source of mesmerizing power,” à la Farrah Fawcett in a nipple-hugging Norma Kamali one-piece. That aspiration ended at fifteen, when the head chef at a local golf club palmed Thornton’s breasts during her shift. This assault marked “a sad day for my top half—a humiliating initiation to sexual aggression,” she writes. She lost faith in her breasts as symbols of womanly autonomy. By adulthood, she was armored with “a haughty feminist prejudice” against boob jobs and what such investments implied.

Then Thornton, in her fifties, became a woman with a boob job. In 2018, she underwent a double mastectomy after a series of biopsies revealed the presence of abnormal cells inside her milk ducts, called ductal carcinoma in situ, or D.C.I.S. Her breasts “departed for the mysterious afterlife of human tissue” and were replaced by a set of submuscular implants that were

covered (and encouraged) by her health-insurance plan. Thornton asked her male surgeon—also rumored to be a hobbyist painter and so, she assumed, “a doctor with an aesthetic sense”—for “something between an A and B cup.” She woke up to “unwieldy Ds,” which she named Bert and Ernie. The new set prompted wistfulness for the old one. Her breasts, mastitis and ticking time bomb of cancer aside, had served her well. It didn’t help that her dream of “small dignified orbs” had been thwarted by a duo that, like the Muppets, only aped naturalism. Deprived of her natural “breast perception,” Thornton could seldom predict their movements, and Bert and Ernie were constantly bumping into doorframes and passersby. Yet, after consulting with a second—woman—surgeon, she “realized that Bert and Ernie, those alien goofballs, were already being absorbed into a revised me.” Her urge to go back under the knife was replaced with another. “I now had an overwhelming desire to understand the multifarious meanings and uses of breasts.”

What we think of anything has everything to do with what we call it, and so emancipation often begins with a word. In Thornton’s case, it begins with sifting through the slate of nicknames bestowed upon the body part in question. There are so many. Breasts, boobs, melons, knockers, tatas, titties, twins, milkers, jugs. Then, there are the ones she doesn’t even cover: puppies, mosquito bites, fun bags, honkers, tig ole bitties. To Bert and Ernie add any other famous duo: there are Tia and Tamera, as in the 2019 single by Doja Cat, and “Mary-Kate and Ash-e-ley,” as Kim Petras whines in the ode “Coconuts.” The song, with its taste for produce metaphors—“Look at these margarit-ta-tas!”—aligns the German pop star with the American novelist Cormac McCarthy, who writes of “paps like wrinkled aubergines” in “Blood Meridian.”

Crass as the lingo can get, modesty brings its own, often shame-ridden, baggage in addressing that area, to the extent that it would rather not. To speak of a “developing” “bust” is as good as to see it managed and put away, perhaps with some sort of smock. But, as any bosomy gal knows, there will never be a neckline modest enough for the eye that sees breasts and thinks sex. This is to say nothing about our cultural avoidance of nipples. Despite their return to the mainstream—see them shaking in the recent music video for “360,” by Charli XCX—they have yet to be tasselled with elegant slang. (Though “nips” is pretty cute.) It turns out that the bra business is as

squeamish as the rest of us, preferring the term “apex.” As in, speaking to a fit model, “Amanda, could you point at your apexes please?”

Thornton struggles to find names that she likes from among the usual touchstones. Even “breast,” while “respectful,” she writes, is “also sterilized, medicalized, and privatized . . . associated with cancer and, to a lesser extent, infant nutrition.” “Boobs” is inept and unserious and too primed for calculator jokes. Thornton’s goal in “Tits Up” is not to neutralize breasts but to affirm them. Give ’em a semantic lift, so to speak. She thus lands on “tits” as her preferred term, choosing a directive from American show biz for her title. Going “tits up” in Britain means disaster, but in the U.S., within our culture of maniacal optimism, the phrase “reminds a sister to stand up, pull her shoulders back, and succeed.” And “tits” bears a sisterly relation to “titties,” a favored word among Black women. “When uttered by women, ‘tits’ can be out and proud—shame-free rather than shameless,” she writes in her introduction, a hint at the measured tenor of emancipation in this project. Accompanying her reclamation of “tits,” other epithets receive rehabilitation: “jugs,” “rack,” “chest,” and even “apexes” feature in a series of pithy chapter titles. In terms of volume, though, “breasts” remains the most common label.

Thornton’s book “favors enriching, enabling stories,” evidenced by the scenic case studies orienting each chapter. The author visits a “historic titty bar” in San Francisco called the Condor Club, where she observes and interviews strippers who regard their breasts as valuable parts of their labor power within the industry of sex work. She talks to the donors of a human-milk bank in San Jose, whose pumping reminds us of breasts’ essential function while militating against biological, racial, economic, and cultural obstacles to breast-feeding. Other sites that she visits include a surgeon’s operating theatre; the fitting room for a bra prototype; a pagan retreat named for a tarot card. Each locale provides the opportunity for Thornton to showcase what an “emancipated rack” might look like, be it performing whirligig feats on the burlesque stage or hanging free in the company of other tits of varying ages and degrees of elasticity.

Liberated breasts can do and be so many things. Thornton is less interested in how they appear than in how they can be put to work—by sex workers, activists, milk donors, midwives and lactation specialists, surgeons, lingerie

models, and swimwear designers. At the offices of Old Navy, a woman named Amanda submits to the stares of eight designers and engineers assembled to evaluate the fit and “fabric behavior” of a new bra, the most complex garment known to the apparel industry. Amanda’s job reveals the permeable line between on and off duty in her line of work. She is “the” exemplary size medium for the brand’s garments above the waist, a role that requires a steadfast set of measurements. But, like everyone else in the book, she’s affirmed by the work, remembering that she’s “bringing more to the table than just my body.”

Brassieres provide occasion for musing on “apex.” Thornton wonders why nipples seem uniquely taboo to so many. The answer that she receives depends on whom she asks. “Perhaps it’s because nipples are a functional part of the body that makes clear we’re animals?” one bra designer speculates. “Because they dispense liquids? Maybe men’s nipples are acceptable because they’re useless. I really don’t know.” Left unsaid is that freeing the nipple would be bad for the bra industry’s bottom line.

For Carol Leigh, a.k.a. the Scarlot Harlot, who protested topless in demonstrations for “breast freedom,” displaying nipples was a question of bodily autonomy. Measures against female toplessness have left (some) law books, only to migrate into the content moderation of social-media platforms like Meta’s Facebook and Instagram. As one might expect, automated moderation has proved ill-suited to the nuances of gender, leaving trans and gender-fluid users to guess what might be permitted. Of course, there is a simple way to sidestep these caprices—free the nipple for all.

Still, Thornton’s not here to judge.“A liberated rack is not dominated by aesthetic criteria,” she writes, a somewhat unusual statement for someone with an eye on the art world. Her previous two books, “Seven Days in the Art World” and “33 Artists in 3 Acts,” are ethnographic rather than critical; though the undergraduate degree in art history won’t be forgotten, she identifies, in terms of research, as a sociologist. In “Seven Days in the Art World,” she likens her approach to a “cat on the prowl, curious and interactive but not threatening.” That unobtrusive proximity persists in “Tits Up.” Its interest lies with the many interviewees in possession of behind-the-scenes knowledge, some of whom provide the book’s strongest views on breasts.

Regarding herself as a mere vessel, Thornton insists, in an aside on method, that “judgment gets in the way of vigorous research.” Her academic training, though, at times gets in the way of her aspirations to the role of, as she puts it, “titty connoisseur.” One cannot become a connoisseur of anything without developing one’s taste. During her time at the Condor Club, Thornton receives a lap dance for research purposes. The dancer, who calls herself Sativa, is a six-foot-tall Chicana with a tattoo of a sacred heart between her small breasts. Thornton, who cannot get into it, laments her lack of buzz. Then a “bizarrely obvious epiphany” arrives, with the visual of what it might be like to be hard in that instant. The brief yield to the erotic takes a pressure valve to the writing, which before had had all the sensuality of a root canal. Imagining “how an erect penis might participate in this gambol” brings about some of the most convincingly affirmative declarations in the entire book. “Tits are warm, complex, and deep,” Thornton writes. “Tits are wholehearted and droll. . . . If they resort to violence, they can only smother.”

An array of adjectives for breasts and the people to whom they belong lends credence to the assertion that a liberated rack can look like anything. And yet pesky aesthetic value intrudes. Breast augmentation could not exist without it. The success of Carolyn Chang, the cosmetic surgeon whose operating room Thornton visits, has everything to do with judgment—both Chang’s and her patients’. Clients like her preference for “natural aesthetics,” where “natural” corresponds to a certain look: “inconspicuous and discreet.” (As another surgeon tells Thornton, however, “Nothing we do is natural.”) There is a conspicuous lack of big boobs among the specimens Thornton examines, as though they were too tainted by lascivious looks and porn for scholarly inspection. The book’s implied preference for “small, shapely tits”—or the dignified, “sagacious” ones that Thornton witnesses at a retreat—is, too, the work of judgment.

Judgment is usually associated with bad feelings, and bad feelings about breasts can be traced back to the squickier ways breasts are often seen. Yet omitting aesthetic experience for its association with men’s pleasure thus shies away from situations in which women take pleasure in their racks as objects of beauty. In 2014, Rihanna accepted the Fashion Icon Award from the Council of Fashion Designers of America in a translucent gown covered in more than two hundred thousand Swarovski crystals, a look reminiscent

of Josephine Baker. Asked if she was comfortable with the slinky, braless getup, she replied with a laugh, “Yes, I am. Why, do my tits bother you? They’re covered—in Swarovski crystals, girl!” Tits are warm, complex, deep, wholehearted, and droll—and a sight to behold, not only for onlookers but for those who possess them.

Thornton knows this in practice even if her book doesn’t always approve. Toward the end of “Tits Up,” she visits Clarity Haynes, who paints portraits of women’s breasts as a therapeutic, but nonetheless artistic, practice. After sitting with Haynes, “my perspective on my top half had shifted,” Thornton writes. She reports feeling “less shame” and “more affection” for Bert and Ernie. But it is not only the act of sitting for a painting that has effected this transformation—there is also the fact of an art object, a painting that one must look at to appreciate. “The finished portrait is true to my reconstructed torso, but more beautiful than my perception of it due to Haynes’s thoughtful draftsmanship,” Thornton writes, putting her art-historian side to good use. “The drawing is prosaic, revealing asymmetrical breasts and bony middle-aged shoulders, but it also manifests a little poetry, suggesting that I’m a proud proto-crone.” ♦

Books

Garth Risk Hallberg Takes On the Life-and-Times Novel

The author's last project was determined to capture the social fabric of an era; in his latest, he shrinks his frame.

By Thomas Mallon

May 20, 2024



The Great American Novel is a long-dead cultural aspiration, extinguished by a healthy realization that the country is too big and too varied to generate any singular, definitive volume. American novelists tend, in our time, to earn public recognition of greatness in a steady, incremental (one is almost tempted to say un-American) way: through the long-term production of many books that arrive with a certain regularity and are roughly on the same scale, one to the next. For writers as different as Alice McDermott, [Colson Whitehead](#), and Richard Powers, the greatness classification comes more from accrual than from explosion.

Even so, some younger novelists with exceptional gifts seem to have a romantically persistent notion of the single-book catapult. Now in his mid-forties, but still boyishly author-photo'd, Garth Risk Hallberg continues to wobble with promise and perplexity. His novels, so far only three in number, sometimes murmur and sometimes roar, operating by wisps of inference or by maximalist elaboration. He has flirted with a kind of cosmic connectedness, or at least a large sociopolitical canvas, before subsiding—as he has done with his new book, “[The Second Coming](#)” (Knopf)—back into the super-circumscribed and familial. Looking at the three books together, a reader perceives not so much a multifarious œuvre as a series of make-or-break shots.

Hallberg’s first novel, “[A Field Guide to the North American Family](#)” (2007), was a sort of multimedia art project that originated on a Web site and got published first by a small press. On the verso pages, mini-narratives from various points of view melded into the shared story of two Long Island families, the Harrisons and the Hungates. The recto pages contained pictures, sometimes inscrutable (an X-ray of hands, a Saran-wrapped hunting trophy), taken by myriad photographers. Definitional captions, occasionally just clever, but often truly witty, offered a taxonomy for any extraterrestrial having a first encounter with the human species: “*Rumor, a resilient parasite, feeds on the Secret until its host is destroyed. In agricultural areas, Discretion is sometimes employed as a check on the Rumor population.*”

Hallberg was definitely a writer to watch, but when his second novel, “[City on Fire](#),” arrived, eight years later, it bore only traces of resemblance to “Field Guide,” sporting occasional photos and other collage elements, including small bursts of cursive writing, for which he has a continuing fondness. At nine hundred and eleven pages, “City on Fire” was a prolonged tour de force, a woven sheet determined to cover all of New York City while maintaining an extremely high thread count of detail. Its swing-for-the-fences literary ambition exhilarated and exasperated a reader in about equal measure—and it was inevitably appraised by some journalists in Great American Novel terms. Set mostly in the crumbled-norms New York of the mid- to late seventies, the book revolved around the tormented adult children of the rich Hamilton-Sweeney family. All of them, along with a vast array of characters in their orbit, were strobe-lit by Hallberg’s excellent attention to

everything depraved and vital in the city of that era: impending budgetary doom; downtown's skanky creativity; copious murders, both singular and serial; innumerable group liberations and personal traumas—all the phenomena that have left that time and place permanently subject to artistic awe and, in less dexterous hands, sentimentality.

Hallberg made it his fictional business to render the city in punk bands, New Journalism, police gumshoeing, xeroxed zines, spray-painted graffiti, and municipal bonds. A large part of the author's subject amounted to the sheer unity of things, whether it was human-engineered or simply fateful, propelled by a degree of coincidence that would make [Dickens](#) blush.

The book deserved most of the hype and some of the scorn it received; no one could deny its virtuosity, no matter how much it begged to be trimmed. Hallberg could never just let a phone ring, not when its ringing "seemed antique, somehow prematurely quaint, like the carillon of a village church slated for demolition." Period references would be shoehorned in (an excitable teen-age boy has "to picture the wobble of President Ford's jowls in order not to pop a full-blown bone"), and sentences occasionally wandered off into some private authorial sphere of meaning.

And yet the neologisms and catalogues and touches of lyricism more often than not excited readerly joy and writerly envy: a radio "played a big band song from before he was born, a slow, nostalgic, glimmering chandelier of a thing, around which a clarinet swooped and dove like a bird had got into the room." The book was so complicatedly constructed that it could be regarded as the opposite of autofiction, though its aspiring-novelist character, Mercer Goodman, provided a self-conscious meta moment: his manuscript "kept growing and growing in length and complexity, almost as if it had taken on the burden of supplanting real life, rather than evoking it." The same was true for Hallberg. The connectedness became so dense that the author's starry special effects threatened to collapse into a black hole, a world so excessively imagined that it could barely keep spinning.

Can there be, for a novelist this exuberantly inventive, a sweet spot between the oblique, inferential "Field Guide" and the gigantic particle accelerator that was "City on Fire"? Maybe not, since the nature of this writer's gifts seems irreconcilable with the very idea of middle ground. But that's what he

appears to be seeking in “The Second Coming,” only to wind up running too far away from the scope of his previous novel.

The book chronicles the attempts of Ethan Aspern—a onetime actor and twice-arrested drug addict—to reconnect with his barely teen-age daughter, Jolie. In 2011, while Ethan is trying to stay clean in California, Jolie, a progressively schooled New York City seventh grader, has already begun drinking vodka and has spent some time in a psych ward. A near-disastrous descent onto some subway tracks, initially made to retrieve a fallen smartphone, may also have included a sudden pursuit of suicidal opportunity. (The “second coming” of the novel’s title derives not from the Nicene Creed or Yeats but from an unlicensed Prince song that Jolie was about to select on her phone.)

At thirty-three, her father is a man-child who bears some resemblance to “City on Fire” ’s William Hamilton-Sweeney III. William tried but ultimately kept a reader’s patience, which may not extend quite so far or so long with Ethan, whose mother died from cancer while he was still in high school. He stole not only her prescription painkillers but also a piece of video art that she’d made, submitting it as his own creation when he applied to a theatre program at Fordham University’s Lincoln Center campus. His perpetual backsliding is soundtracked throughout the novel by an ongoing and grandiose self-analysis.

Ethan’s “fantasies of reconciliation” with Jolie, the child of a youthful marriage, are fuelled by the narcissistic belief that Jolie truly needs him—no matter that when she was a baby he thought of her as a “passion project,” more a means to his own personal development than an end in herself. Jolie, as it happens, is also her own passion project. She understands that she and her father are “still bound together on some deep level: associative mind, surface soft-heartedness, uncontrollable urges, and secret self-loathing.” But, once Ethan returns to New York, “a scant twenty-four hours in his presence . . . disabused her of the notion that his walking out on her three years ago had been anything but a gift.”

Jolie may have the excuse of youth for her gratingly angsty behavior and pronouncements, her constant sense of others’ betrayal, but what her father’s former probation officer thinks of as “Ethan’s special brand of madness”

seems decidedly off the shelf. At times, Hallberg invites readers to give up on his feckless protagonist, but one can't escape a sense that the author himself is often hoodwinked by his character.

Throughout, Hallberg shuffles the chronological pack in the manner of episodic television drama, demoting the linear to enemy of the artistic. What amounts to an epilogue begins on the sixty-fifth page of the novel's five hundred and eighty-six, an Ozempic reduction from the girth of "City on Fire." The book's climactic action takes place over Thanksgiving weekend, when Ethan, still on the East Coast on his rescue mission, violates custody arrangements by taking Jolie to a memorial service for his father in Ocean City, Maryland. *Amber Alert*-able calamity—and a father-daughter LSD trip—ensues. The novel briefly ponders "the distinction between substance and essence, quite possibly semantic, or even imaginary," and that disparity, once it's raised, inevitably starts to apply to the book itself, with its bravura attention to characters and complications that are less deep and more familiar than they ought to be.

The author's spot-on wit remains playfully evident, letting us hear, for example, "what, on the northern fringes of Manhattan's East Village on a Friday night in winter, passed for silence: ambulances screaming their heads off, housing-insecure pigeons winging darkly overhead." Gloomy Jolie takes lingering notice of one teacher's bookshelves because of their "umlauted authors and promises of disenchantment." Hallberg can sink so happily into his own wordplay that a quirky coinage becomes standard: rather than being opened, a wallet is "unvelcro'd" four times in the course of the novel. The author's dialogue remains satisfactorily implausible: a teen-age boy who goes to Putney isn't really likely to say, "The very nature of narrative is to falsify, right? Smooth away the tensions, or whatever . . . make them photogenic, jack them into fantasy." But Hallberg has made his choice, probably the right one, for dealing with this age-old authorial conundrum. We can't expect him to hide his verbal light under every adolescent bushel just for the sake of verisimilitude. It is largely the same with Jolie and with the book's renditions of her parents' younger selves: everybody's speech is somewhat heightened, and their thoughts, filtered through close third person, are amped up as well.

Still, readers have little chance to discern the social texture of 2011 while the characters are staring so deeply into themselves. We get a mention of the Tea Party and some glimpses of Occupy Wall Street, but “The Second Coming” is in no real way the kind of historical novel that “City on Fire” often successfully aspired to be. Hallberg has some fun Tom Wolfe-style chops (his New York *Post* headline for Jolie’s smartphone incident in the subway is “*APP-ETITE FOR DESTRUCTION!*”), but this is a book where the public and the political are constantly muffled in deference to the personal, the work of a virtuoso muralist forsaking murals for high-res miniatures. One wants an author of Hallberg’s particular talent for noticing to raise the blinds and look out the window, to give us the life and times of a culture instead of the compulsive repetitions of two individuals whose dynamic we grasp all too quickly.

In scaling back the [DeLillo-like](#) aspirations of “City on Fire,” Hallberg subsides into a kind of narrative stupor, falling past the thematic civics of Jonathan Franzen, almost all the way into the microscopy of Nicholson Baker’s early novels. At an especially tense moment, Ethan argues with his onetime probation officer out on the balcony of a motel in Ocean City, and Jolie retreats into the bathroom: “The rattling vent fan, in this context, was a blessing. So too the dripping tap, the wincingly uncinematic light above the mirror making plain that the maids hadn’t made it this far.”

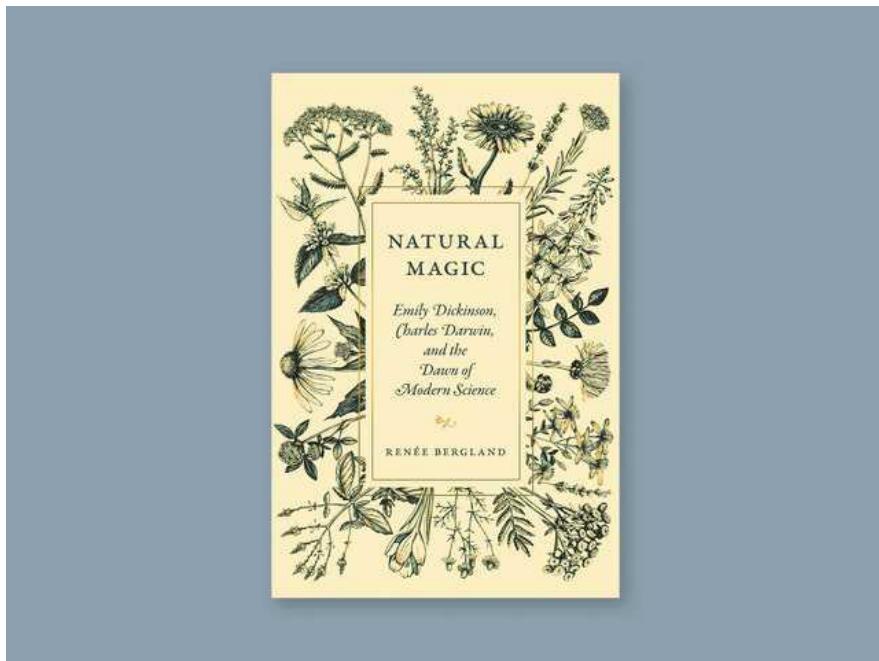
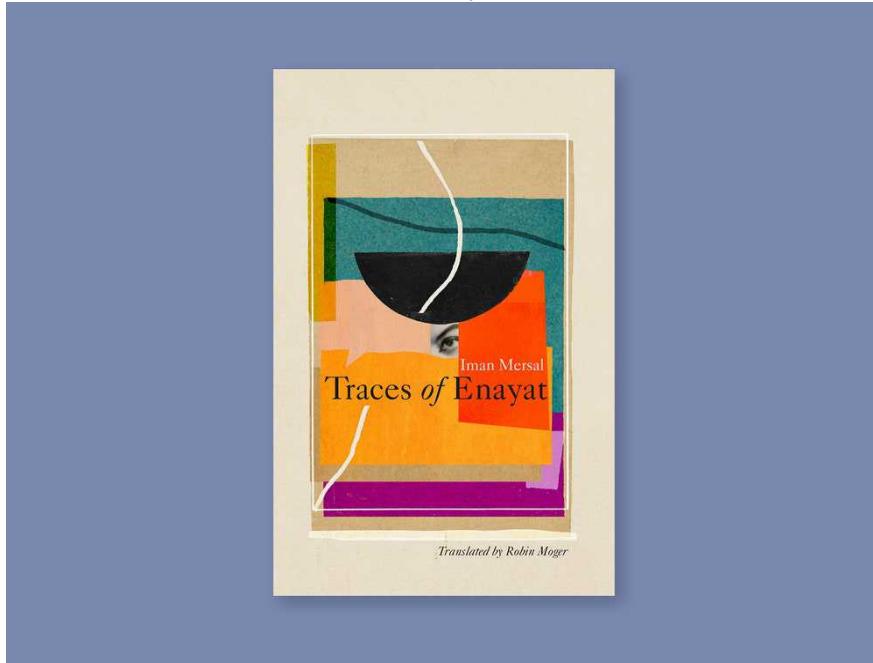
There is still more to fiction than feelings. One wants Hallberg to overreach, but by zooming out once more instead of zooming in. If the great national novel is an absurdity, perhaps the great municipal one remains possible. Hallberg may be the writer who produces a truly encompassing book of fiction set in the time of 9/11 or of *COVID*, neither of which has yet been written. Either of them is more likely to end in failure than in complete success, but he is sufficiently supplied with talent to make the attempt, and, even after this latest novel, one does remember that risk is his middle name. ♦

Books

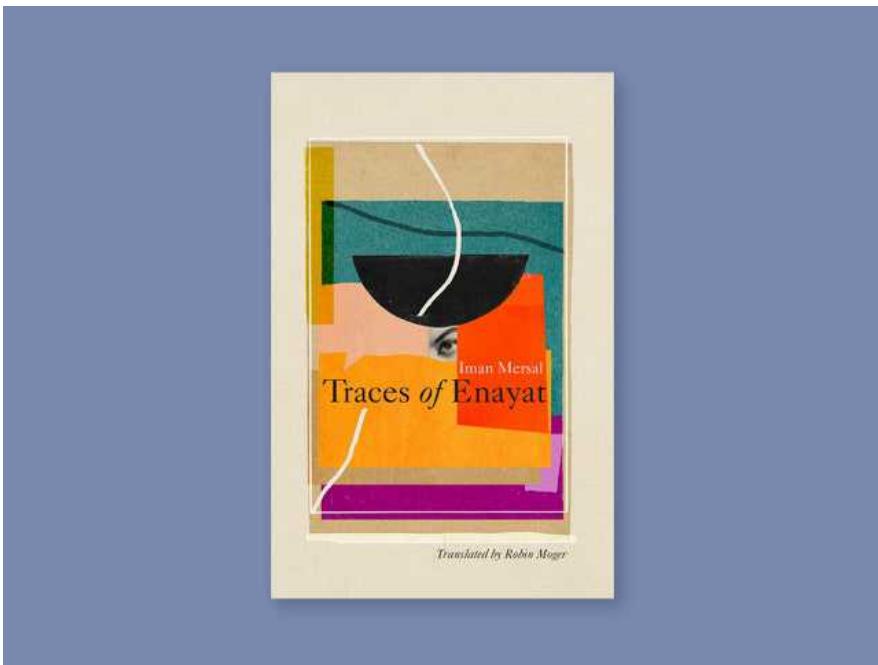
Briefly Noted

“Natural Magic,” “Traces of Enayat,” “Whale Fall,” and “Cinema Love.”

May 20, 2024



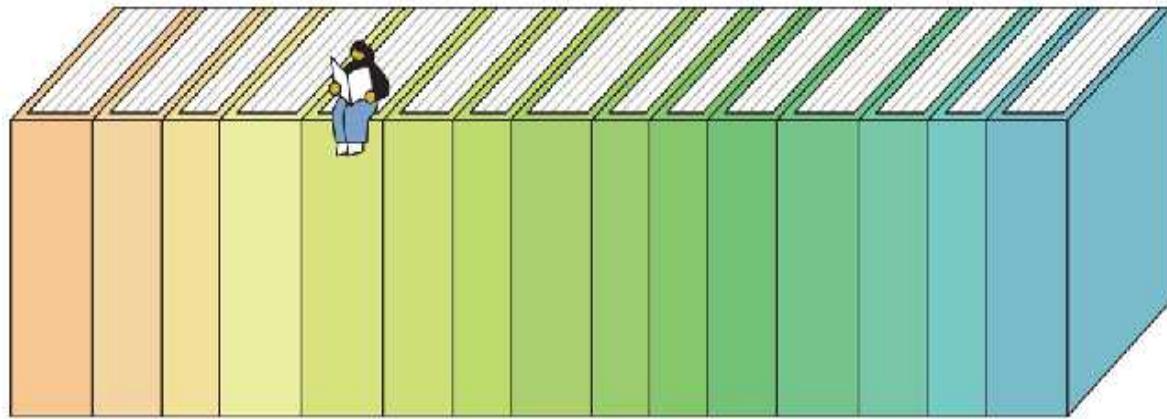
Natural Magic, by Renée Bergland (*Princeton*). Although Charles Darwin and Emily Dickinson are not known to have ever crossed paths, this study finds meaning in their shared enchantment with the natural world. In the eighteen-thirties, as “natural philosophy” began to be reframed as “natural science,” emotion and wonder were eclipsed by objectivity and mastery. Darwin and Dickinson resisted this binary: Darwin saw his theory of natural selection as an occasion for humility, relating humans to other species; Dickinson, whose poetry reflects her extensive scientific education and interest in Darwin’s ideas, depicted the natural world with both botanical specificity and attention to its splendors. Bergland links their thinking to an earlier tradition of “natural” (as opposed to supernatural) magic, which emphasized the interconnectedness of life and valued emotion as a form of understanding.



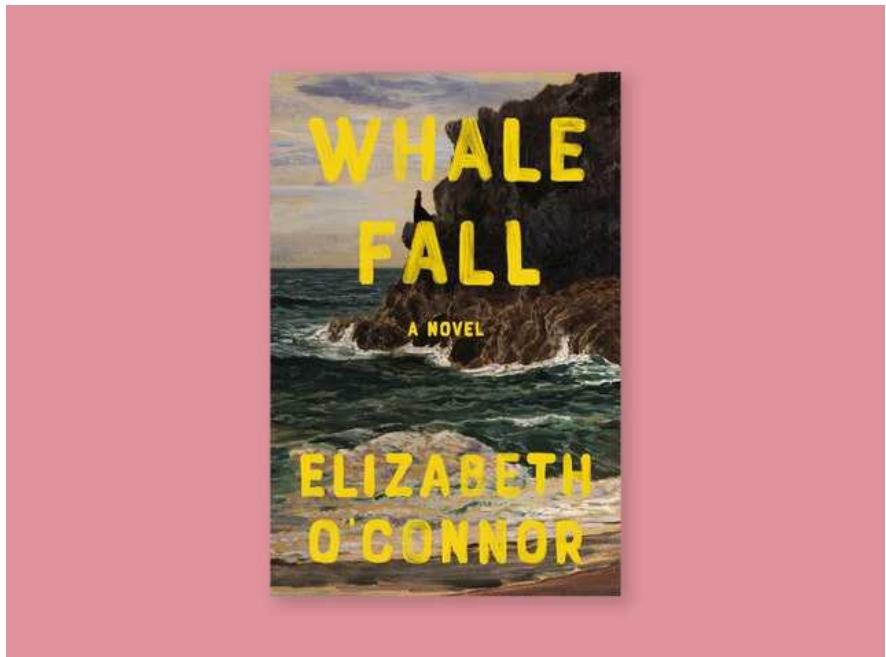
Traces of Enayat, by Iman Mersal (*Transit*). Literary obsession and detective work merge in this biography of Enayat al-Zayyat, an Egyptian writer who died by suicide in 1963, at the age of twenty-six, years before the publication of her only novel. Following the threads of al-Zayyat’s life, Mersal depicts the Egypt in which she grew up and the largely vanished Cairo where she lived, while chronicling her search for the forgotten author. “To trace someone,” Mersal writes, “is a dialogue that is perforce one-sided.” Indeed, despite assiduous research and interviews with surviving

friends and family, Mersal experiences “despair at the possibility of knowing” the true story of al-Zayyat, whose remnants she embroiders with photographs, speculation, and personal reflections, leaving behind a seductive mystery.

What We're Reading



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[**Whale Fall**](#), by *Elizabeth O'Connor* (Pantheon). Manod, the observant narrator of this début novel set on the cusp of the Second World War, lives on a sparsely populated Welsh island where, one night, a whale washes up on the beach and dies shortly thereafter. Soon, two researchers turn up to document the customs of the islanders. Manod agrees to assist them, translating phrases (such as “sheep farmer”) and cultural realities (the people cannot swim). In time, however, misunderstandings arise between researchers and subject, imbuing their relationship with both alienation and tenderness. Stubborn transgressions committed by the interlopers testify to the hazards of anthropology and the delusions of so-called progress.



[Cinema Love](#), by *Jiaming Tang* (Dutton). This moving if uneven début novel tracks a handful of characters who emigrate, in the nineteen-eighties, from rural China to Manhattan's Chinatown. They quickly find that it is one thing to leave home and another to move on from the world that has been left behind. That world includes a ramshackle movie theatre, the Mawei City Workers' Cinema, a place where gay men go to seek forbidden love—and where their wives go to look for them. Part ghost story, part love story, and part tale of hardscrabble immigrant life, this intricately plotted novel asks whether, in the end, it is better to forgive or to forget.

The Anxious Love Songs of Billie Eilish

Much of the artist's new album, "Hit Me Hard and Soft," is about wanting a relationship but failing, in some fundamental way, to sustain closeness with another person.

By Amanda Petrusich

May 17, 2024



Earlier this year, the singer and songwriter Billie Eilish, who is twenty-two, became the youngest two-time Oscar winner in history, collecting the Best Original Song award for "What Was I Made For?," a delicate existential ballad that she co-wrote for the film "[Barbie](#)." (She also won in 2022, for "No Time to Die," a moody and portentous Bond theme.) Incidentally, Eilish is also the youngest person ever to have a clean sweep of all four of the main Grammy categories (Best New Artist, Record of the Year, Song of the Year, and Album of the Year), which she achieved in 2020, for her début LP, "When We All Fall Asleep, Where Do We Go?" At that year's ceremony, moments before Album of the Year was announced, Eilish [can be seen](#) mouthing, "Please don't be me"; onstage, standing alongside her brother Finneas O'Connell, who is also her co-writer and producer, she seemed

bewildered, if not mortified. “We wrote an album about depression, and suicidal thoughts, and climate change,” O’Connell told the crowd. “We stand up here confused and grateful.” It’s both heartening and slightly mystifying that Eilish, who writes sombre, idiosyncratic, goth-tinged electro-pop about her loneliness and boredom, has become such a lodestone for industry accolades. “Man am I the greatest / God I hate it,” Eilish sings on “The Greatest,” a forlorn, walloping song from her compact but powerful new album, “Hit Me Hard and Soft,” which was just released.

Eilish is known for taking her time in a song, sometimes crawling through a melody as though it were a bowl of molasses, and she often chooses to sing in a whisper, letting a note hang in the air before it dissipates entirely. Her vocal style reminds me of an evanescing cloud of smoke after someone blows out a cluster of birthday candles—beautiful, fleeting, a little bit haunted. Yet, on “The Greatest,” Eilish belts and bellows. “I waited / And waited,” she wails, her voice getting bigger and bigger. It’s rare to find Eilish in bloodletting mode, but fury and loudness suit her, too. Lyrically, much of “Hit Me Hard and Soft” is about wanting a relationship but failing, in some fundamental and inescapable way, to sustain closeness with another person. It’s an interesting problem: desiring something, but also realizing you are incapable of having it. The twists and turns of Eilish’s emotional journey are reflected and amplified by O’Connell’s production; these songs are prone to sudden changes and reinventions, ups and downs. Faster, slower, close, far, here, gone. “L’Amour de Ma Vie,” a new song about a soured relationship —“You were so mediocre,” Eilish sings—shifts from a lovelorn, jazz-inflected torch song into a pulsing club banger, cold and threatening. In less assured hands, that transformation might be disorienting, but Eilish and O’Connell are masterly at finding the connective tissue between disparate feelings and sounds. Why can’t a love song be gentle and aggressive, grounded and spectral? Isn’t love?

From the start of her career, Eilish has never been particularly comfortable with celebrity, and at times she has appeared viscerally repelled by it; the anxiety and paranoia brought on by global fame are another theme here, and are perhaps directly responsible for Eilish’s romantic angst. On “Skinny,” the yearning ballad that opens the album, she reflects on coming of age under the scrutiny of strangers. “People say I look happy / Just because I got skinny / But the old me is still me and maybe the real me / And I think she’s

pretty,” Eilish sings, her voice feathery and resigned. (“The Internet is hungry for the meanest kind of funny / And somebody’s gotta feed it,” she points out.) “Skinny” is a gorgeous song, wounded and fragile, with a whiff of Lilith Fair folksiness. It ends with a mournful string figure by the Attacca Quartet, the only other musicians featured on the album besides Eilish, O’Connell, and Eilish’s tour drummer, Andrew Marshall.

Eilish writes often about control, an idea that manifests in images of closed doors and lyrics about feeling caged. (The cover art features a photograph of Eilish sinking into a deep-blue abyss, just below a white door.) “When I step off the stage I’m a bird in a cage / I’m a dog in a dog pound,” she sings, on “Skinny.” On “Chihiro,” she is imploring: “Open up the door / Can you open up the door?” On “Blue,” which closes the album, she returns to both images:

Don’t know what’s in store
Open up the door
The back of my mind
I’m still overseas
A bird in a cage

Claustrophobia, darkness, fear—these are all ideas that Eilish and O’Connell luxuriated in on “When We All Fall Asleep, Where Do We Go?,” but here they feel deeper, broader, and more dramatic. Partway through “Blue,” Eilish starts chanting, her voice so flat and filtered that at first I thought it might be O’Connell. For Eilish, fame and depression are entangled, heavy predicaments to endure and, she hopes, survive:

And I could say the same ’bout you
Born blameless grew up famous too
Just a baby born blue now

Musically, “Hit Me Hard and Soft” lands somewhere between “When We All Fall Asleep, Where Do We Go?” and Eilish’s second album, “Happier Than Ever,” from 2021. In recent years, Eilish’s songwriting has felt more indebted to jazz-adjacent pop singers such as Peggy Lee and Amy Winehouse than to the spooky despondency of Nine Inch Nails. “Hit Me Hard and Soft” is mature and nuanced, and that feels appropriate—the

spiritual distance between seventeen and twenty-two is vast—but I sometimes miss Eilish’s giddier and more puerile side. Many listeners first came to know Eilish through “Bad Guy,” the fifth single from “When We All Fall Asleep, Where Do We Go?” It’s a funny and inventive track, featuring a campy synthesizer riff and a dramatic tempo change. What made “Bad Guy” so intoxicating was the artful way it balanced youthful insouciance—that “Duh,” delivered at the end of each chorus, was so perfectly saturated with teen-age disdain it felt like getting hit in the face with a water balloon—and a kind of playful, empowered sensuality. In the song’s video, Eilish sports blue hair, and blood is smeared across her face; her eyes are vacant, unfeeling. But she also dances around like an enormous goof, wearing an oversized butter-yellow sweatsuit, and leads a gang of dudes down a suburban street from behind the wheel of a toy race car.

That particular combination—“Bad Guy” is equal parts serious and silly—reminds me of a lot of things, but especially of sex, which can be solemn, sometimes sacred, but also completely absurd. Eilish embraces her carnal appetites on “Lunch,” a new song about pure animal lust:

I could eat that girl for lunch
Yeah she dances on my tongue
Tastes like she might be the one

For all the hand-wringing about the [lagging sex drive of younger Americans](#), Eilish has been outspoken about the ways in which that sort of physical communion can be healing. In a [recent interview with Rolling Stone](#), she endorsed the myriad benefits of masturbation—“People should be jerking it, man”—and of female sexual pleasure more generally. “I think it’s such a frowned-upon thing to talk about, and I think that should change,” she said. “You asked me what I do to decompress? That shit can really, really save you sometimes, just saying. Can’t recommend it more, to be real.” “Lunch” is a weird, pulsing track, vigorous and horny. It’s also my favorite song on the new album, in part because Eilish sounds incredibly free, which is to say, she sounds like herself. ♦

The Theatre

The Chilling Truth Pictured in “Here There Are Blueberries”

Moisés Kaufman’s play dramatizes the discovery of a photo album of Nazis at leisure at Auschwitz, and the reckoning it provoked.

By Vinson Cunningham

May 18, 2024



There’s something awful about a lost picture. Maybe it’s because of a disparity between your original hope and the result: you made the photograph because you intended to keep it, and now that intention—artistic, memorial, historical—is fugitive, on the run toward ends other than your own. The picture, gone forever, possibly revived by strange eyes, will never again mean quite what you thought it would.

“Here There Are Blueberries”—a new play at New York Theatre Workshop, conceived and directed by Moisés Kaufman and written by Kaufman and Amanda Gronich—begins with [the discovery of a well-curated album of photographs](#). It’s not just one misplaced dispatch from a former world but

whole pasted-together pages of them, carefully arranged in order to tell a story. The album was found in the nineteen-forties, after the Second World War, by a man who describes himself, more than sixty years later, as an “87 year old retired U.S. Lieutenant Colonel.” It’s the early two-thousands, and he’s sent a letter to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. The photographs are from Auschwitz.

“Blueberries” moves forward artfully, telling the true tale of the pictures and their march through public consciousness. The photographs show Nazis at ease at the site of the world’s most famous death machine. The Nazis lounge at a chalet, flirt with the secretarial pool, offer cheese smiles to the camera. None of the camp’s Jewish prisoners are pictured in the photographs, only their murderers, in the moments between murders. The album is a placid, subtly horrifying log of the mundane aspects of those people’s daily lives.

Rebecca Erbelding (Elizabeth Stahlmann), an archivist on whose desk the lieutenant colonel’s letter lands, recognizes the faces of notorious Nazis. There’s Josef Mengele, the so-called Angel of Death, and Rudolf Höss, the administrative architect of Auschwitz, “responsible for everything we think of as the camp: the barracks, the electrified fences, the guard towers, the extermination infrastructure . . . the whole organization.” After some detective work, Rebecca discovers that the album was apparently created by an upwardly mobile functionary named Karl Höcker. He probably put it together in a triumphal mood, thinking that it would be behind-the-scenes evidence of a heroic victory. Later, in the war’s aftermath, having lost the thing, maybe he thought of it compulsively, hoping it stayed lost, wishing he could have set it ablaze. The pictures—thirty-two pages of them, a hundred and sixteen images in all—had escaped his intentions not once but twice (so far).

Kaufman’s staging of the play is noble but simple. Characters approach the lip of the stage and state their thinking plainly. Besides Rebecca, there’s the director of the museum’s photography collection, Judy Cohen (Kathleen Chalfant, a brilliant performer whose mere presence gives the proceedings a fitting gravity), and the museum’s director, Sara Bloomfield (Erika Rose). The lighting, designed by David Lander, is bright and clean, just how we imagine the back rooms of a great museum might look (the apt scenic design is by Derek McLane), except when it dims a bit, the better to illuminate a

picture from the album. Sometimes the flexible ensemble (which also includes Scott Barrow, Nemuna Ceesay, Noah Keyishian, Jonathan Raviv, Anna Shafer, Charlie Thurston, and Grant James Varjas) acts out a scene from a photograph—playing an accordion, laughing like schoolchildren on an exhilarating trip.

This is an institutional saga, the story of how a memorial museum—meant to honor and dramatize the lives of victims, not the idle pleasures of their captors—learned to metabolize Höcker’s difficult artifact. The play is based on real interviews conducted by Kaufman and Gronich, a documentary technique that Kaufman also employed for “The Laramie Project,” his renowned play about the death of Matthew Shepard. That method matches the art form that is this play’s spur: photography. Just like an interview, a photograph is a quivering, ambivalent, sometimes deceptive form of evidence, especially when the photographer is an amateur. You can suss out mood and tone, discern planetary facts like weather and time of day. But the spaces between exposures, before and after the questioning begins—who knows?

Even as “Blueberries” went about its business—it has the often dutiful tone of a high-quality PBS docuseries—I kept thinking about the lieutenant colonel who held on to the album for so many years, whose story the play must reasonably sweep past on the way to its forensics. In his initial letter to the museum, he says that he was sent to Germany to “do some work for the government.” What that work was he doesn’t specify. “While there,” he says, “I was housed in an abandoned apartment where I found a photo album. I salvaged the album and have kept it in my archives now for over sixty years.”

Sixty years! One wonders who, if anybody, he told of the record of horror living with him like a roommate in his home. How often did he look at it? How perfectly, over that span, had he memorized its faces, whether or not he was able—without a museum’s resources—to assign them any names? Why keep it for so long? What had he been thinking, at the outset and then for those many decades? That unknowable mystery, about the allure of evil and the power of photography, is sometimes captured by this play and sometimes not—a casualty, perhaps, of its fealty to pure fact.

One central concern of the play—what it means to look at the mundane when, somewhere just beyond the frame, there's a massacre afoot—makes it a kind of companion piece to "The Zone of Interest," the recent Oscar-winning film by Jonathan Glazer, very loosely adapted from the novel by Martin Amis. The movie tracks the home life of Rudolf Höss, the administrator who, with his distinct high-and-tight haircut, slick and floppy up top, recurs throughout the Höcker album. "The Zone of Interest" uses sound design—the crackle of flame, cries coming from invisible mouths—to create an underhum of terror, to make an unseen context the whole point of the domesticity that shows up onscreen. "Blueberries" makes that irony a clear pain point. The museum's staff worry about showing the photographs, but eventually, and rightly, decide that there's no way not to. To understand sickness like this, you need to see how the perpetrators are—in more ways than you might like—just like you.

Blood underpaints today's world, too, no matter how many lovelier colors fill our normal days. You go about your business; attend meetings on Zoom or at some office; ride the subway and watch the faces, with their plural origins, blur past; take walks through the warming spring air, admiring the onrushing green. Now and again, you look down at your phone, and here come the images: a bloody limb, a shell-shocked parent, a dead child caked in rubble and dust. Photographic evidence, the irrefutable cinematography of the smartphone amid emergency, death in vivid hue: this is how we know that things are wrong.

There is no leisure in these newer images, no blueberries and cream eaten by smiling accessories to a heinous passage in history—just the news, seemingly simultaneous with its happening. I sometimes wonder if these images and videos, for now fleeting on screens, illustrations on a scrollable feed, will one day adorn the walls of museums, or whichever repositories the people of the future choose for the display of their collective glories and great shames.

Auschwitz and the other camps whose names haunt our textbooks were mysteries to outsiders—this was part of their power. It took so many efforts of reconstruction like the one dramatized by "Here There Are Blueberries" just to know, belatedly, what exactly went on. Photography will also be part

of the story of today's traumas, but in a very different way. We won't be able to say we didn't see. ♦

The Current Cinema

The Madly Captivating Urban Sprawl of Francis Ford Coppola’s “Megalopolis”

After a thirteen-year absence, a great American director returns with an ambitious vision of a city—and a world—in need of renewal.

By Justin Chang

May 17, 2024



The subject of “Megalopolis,” [Francis Ford Coppola](#)’s first feature in thirteen years, is time. The movie begins with an image of a large city clock, and Coppola repeatedly invokes time’s relentless forward march. Yet the very nature of the movie, which is by turns aggressively heady, stubbornly illogical, and beguilingly optimistic, is to question our understanding of time as a finite resource. It muses about how we as people—designers, builders, inventors, artists—might succeed in circumventing time and bring about a utopia that resists the natural slide toward entropy.

Coppola's protagonist is a controversial architect and designer named Cesar Catilina ([Adam Driver](#)), who has the ability to pause time. "Time, stop!" he says, and everything freezes: people, cars, the clouds in the sky, even the crumbling of a public-housing development that was being demolished on Cesar's own orders. But his supernatural powers are limited. Eventually, he must allow time to start up again, with a reluctant snap of his fingers. (The film is laden with references to Shakespeare, Emerson, and Sapphic poetry, but the temporal gimmickry reminded me, irresistibly, of the late-eighties sitcom "Out of This World.")

Once time resumes, every passing moment brings human civilization closer to ruin—a catastrophic collapse foretold by the fall of Rome. In fact, the film takes place in a city called New Rome, though it is quite visibly New York, with recurring shots of the Chrysler Building and the Statue of Liberty. (The movie was filmed, with much visual and digital trickery, in Atlanta; the cinematographer is Mihai Mălaimare, Jr.) New Rome abounds in classical motifs: Doric columns prop up buildings adorned with Latin dicta, and a remarkable number of citizens wear gold laurel leaves, even the ones who aren't riding chariots around a mock Colosseum. The plot, a laborious but lively enough contraption, comes to us straight from the Catilinarian conspiracy of 63 B.C. Cesar is an update of the politician Lucius Sergius Catiline; his chief nemesis, Mayor Franklyn Cicero ([Giancarlo Esposito](#)), stands in for that other Cicero, the famed consul whom Catiline sought to overthrow.

The movie's full title is "Francis Ford Coppola's *Megalopolis*: A Fable," but Aesop might have blanched at Coppola's weakness for overexplanation. He has made a declamatory epic, in which the actors recite as much as they perform, and meanings are not suggested but superimposed, with baldly allegorical intent, over thickets of narrative. Cesar believes that New Rome's future rests on the construction of an experimental city, *Megalopolis*, which will be fashioned from a miraculous material called Megalon. By all appearances, Megalon's chief property is a pliability that enables it to be molded into giant, trippy structures, which resemble flowers and mushrooms; picture a [Frank Gehry](#)-designed "Alice in Wonderland" and you're halfway there. Mayor Cicero resists such costly, high-flown futurism, which prioritizes beauty over practicality. "People don't need dreams—they need teachers, sanitation, and jobs," he snarls at Cesar. No points for

guessing whose side Coppola, now eighty-five and still one of the great dreamers in American cinema, is on.

Most of the other major characters are delineated by their symbolic functions. The face of economic excess is Hamilton Crassus III (Jon Voight), a lecherous old schemer and the city's wealthiest man. The role of unchecked ambition is handily filled by Crassus's troublemaking grandson, Clodio (Shia LaBeouf). The venality of the media is embodied by a financial reporter, memorably named Wow Platinum, who is played with acerbic mischief by Aubrey Plaza. ("Fuck your stupid Megalopolis!" she yells at Cesar, perhaps trying to get ahead of the film's reviews.) There's more: an old murder investigation, an assassination attempt, an election campaign, night-club revellers posing on a unicorn, an outré fashion show, and a sex scene containing the unimprovable line "I want to fuck you so bad, Auntie Wow."

Amid this debaucherous sprawl are sustainingly poignant pleasures, starting with the presence of Coppola veterans such as Laurence Fishburne and Talia Shire (the director's sister), in small but striking roles. There is also the significant character of Julia Cicero (Nathalie Emmanuel), the mayor's daughter, who ultimately joins Cesar's cause, first as his employee and later as his lover. Tellingly, there are also Cesar's mournful visions of his late wife, who was such a luminous life force that Coppola has bestowed upon her the name Sunny Hope—a groaner, perhaps, but one I couldn't bring myself to groan at. I was too preoccupied thinking about the death, in April, of Eleanor Coppola, the director's wife and longtime creative partner, to whom "Megalopolis" is movingly dedicated.

When Coppola brought "[Apocalypse Now](#)" to the 1979 Cannes Film Festival, he famously declared, "My film is not about Vietnam. It *is* Vietnam." It was a testament to the film's extraordinary scope, scale, and verisimilitude, but it also spoke to the temperament of a filmmaker defined by outsized ambition and ego. Now, decades later, his latest movie has also premiered in competition at Cannes, and I am tempted to test out a similar formulation: "Megalopolis" isn't just about time; it *is* time—at least in the sense that the film, more than forty years in the making, comes to us as an astounding repository of the past.

Coppola first conceived of “Megalopolis” in the early eighties, hoping to follow “Apocalypse Now” with something comparably epic. But the project was scuppered by the critical and commercial failure of “[One from the Heart](#),” in 1982, after which a series of escalating personal and professional crises kept “Megalopolis” on the backburner for decades: actors came and went, and [9/11](#) forced a serious rethink of the material. Coppola ended up financing much of the production himself, selling off part of his wine business and reportedly putting up a hundred and twenty million dollars of his own money.

Such is the past of “Megalopolis,” whose future looks equally uncertain. In Cannes, where the movie is in contention for the Palme d’Or—a prize that Coppola has won twice, for “The Conversation,” in 1974, and “Apocalypse Now”—its fortunes have seemed to shift by the hour. A recent piece in [the Guardian](#) detailed anonymous complaints from the film crew about Coppola’s unorthodox techniques; more troublingly, some alleged that the director had behaved inappropriately toward women on the set. (Coppola’s team has issued a denial.) As for the movie’s box-office prospects, no one expects Wow Platinum numbers. A global *IMAX* release has been announced, but, as of this writing, the movie still lacks an American distributor.

This is not the first time a Coppola vessel has risked being dashed by the free-flowing waters of art against the unyielding rocks of commerce. But what is inescapably moving about “Megalopolis,” and what throws even its strangest excesses into meaningful relief, is the degree to which it has evolved into an allegory of its own making. Coppola has made a defense of the beautiful and the impractical, not just as principles of urban design or purposeful living but as art-sustaining forces in the cinema itself. This picture may find him near the end of a long, embattled career, but the mere fact that it exists, in its breathtaking and sometimes exasperating singularity, feels like an expression of hope.

The Rome-New York allegory, with its blunt collision of ancient and modern, creates its own aura of temporal dislocation, as do many visual and atmospheric peculiarities. Some of Coppola’s devices—three-way split screen, fadeout iris shots, spinning newspaper headlines, and the like—belong to an earlier era, as do such design flourishes as Cesar’s dark fedora

and the Art Deco touches in his studio. At moments, the artifice seems to bend in two directions; when Cesar and Julia ride in an exposed outdoor elevator, the buildings we see passing behind them seem to be a C.G.I. background, but they also call to mind one of those Old Hollywood rear projections. Here, as in a vertiginous sequence in which the pair walk on suspended construction beams, New Rome barely looks real, but that doesn't feel like a mistake. In Coppola's view, the city is a gloriously teeming abstraction, the stuff of dreams, open to endless possibility and reinterpretation.

Midway through the Cannes press screening of "Megalopolis" that I attended, a light suddenly appeared in the theatre, illuminating a man speaking at a microphone in front of the screen. I assumed that this was a temporary fix for a scene that was unfinished, but a representative for the film later told me that the moment was entirely deliberate, and that a live actor will appear at future screenings of the movie. How this could work for a commercial release, especially when it comes to streaming, will be a matter for the distributor and maybe TaskRabbit. Still, it was a quietly spellbinding moment, a rupture in the usually taut membrane between the bright fantasy of the screen and the dark reality of the theatre. For one instant, this cinematic vision of the future, steeped in the ghosts of the past, spoke to us, hauntingly, in the register of the now. ♦

Poems

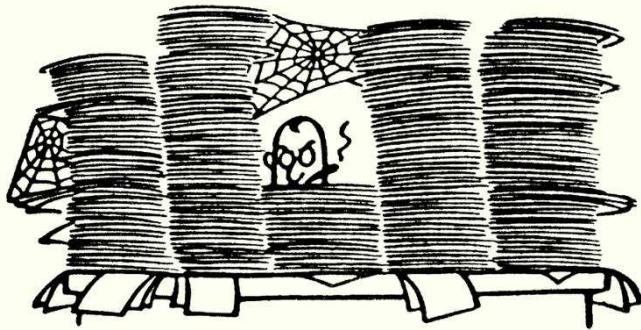
- [From “Heritage”](#)
- [The Call to Worship](#)

Poems

From “Heritage”

By Elise Paschen

May 20, 2024



[Read by the author.](#)

III

I was born in the month of the Blood Wolf Moon.

My mother said icicles shook the trees
as she and my father traipsed
along the black sheet sidewalk
to their convertible. Her timed contractions
stretched out, hours long, until almost midnight.

After how many miscarriages.
Hospital bedside, my aunt and uncle
smiled over the crib. Or was that just
a photograph? Tell me
about departure. Tell me
how often she left the newborn, jetted

away on Pan Am, tied up the ribbons
of her satin toe shoes.

I am not one to antagonize her.
I bow low to her voice. She who crossed
the Iron Curtain, searching for the baby
photos inside stamped envelopes.
Memory's sleight of hand.
I don't remember how she vanished,
or when, tiptoeing into the cape
of night, wrapped in ermine, in mink,
flabbergasting audiences
with every pirouette. Frozen, perfect,
the star blazing onstage.

IX

For the sake of a dime,
oblivious owners invented
names for teams: *Braves*,
Chiefs, *Redskins*. Football
zealots, my parents
rooted for the *Bears*. Last night,
someone holding a glass
of Sancerre at a posh
French restaurant said,
“Why should they care
about the name *Redskins*?
Why make such a fuss?”
My blond hair
fooled her. Our host whispered,
“Her family is Osage.”
After we pushed back
chairs, during goodbyes,
she apologized.

When my mother, Maria
Tallchief, danced the muse
Terpsichore in “Apollo”

on the stage of the Paris
Opera House, the audience
embraced her, shouting,
“Encore! Encore!”

The headlines of '47 read
“*Peau Rouge Danse a l'Opera.*”

Peau Rouge, Red Skin,
a phrase she learned
to ignore. Reading my friend's
manuscript, I'm stunned
to discover the origin
of Red Skins—*the bodies*
of Natives brought in for bounty.

During my youth,
every Sunday in the fall,
my parents bicycled
along Lake Michigan
to cheer their home
team playing in Soldier
Field, a stadium named
as a memorial to those who died
in combat, constructed
the year my mother was born.

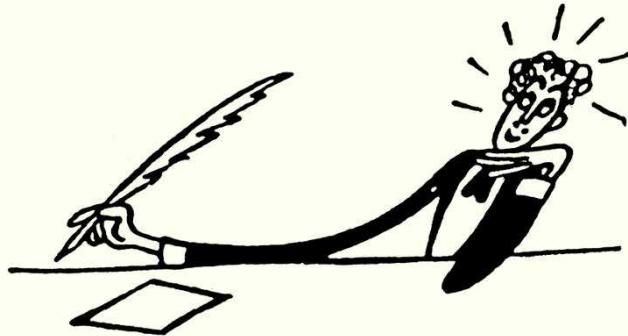
This is drawn from “Blood Wolf Moon.”

Poems

The Call to Worship

By Bob Hicok

May 20, 2024



The possibility that the zero gave birth to the universe,
that all our somethings come from nothing, the fear
of being alone like that, children of chance, orphans
down to our atoms, is mother to the idea of god. God

is a dress we slip over solitude, a mask
for oblivion to wear, a rule-giver in a world
where no flower or bear cares that we are here
or what we do.

I prefer a theology of silence, the eschatology
of the shrug, a religion of holding my wife's hand
for now.

But, if the industry of the church is what it took
to give me bells ringing Sunday mornings,

to which crows sometimes rise and deer turn,
I'm grateful for a sound that pulls me out of myself,
lifts my head toward sun and clouds, into the up
and all, the blue, the on and on of it, when I bend
the only knee I have to bend, feel
happily small, contingent, and held, by what
I can't say, short of everything.

Puzzles & Games

- [The Crossword: Monday, May 20, 2024](#)

Crossword

The Crossword: Monday, May 20, 2024

A challenging puzzle.

By Erik Agard

May 20, 2024



The Mail

- [Letters from Our Readers](#)

The Mail

Letters from Our Readers

Readers respond to Louis Menand's piece about threats to academic freedom and Alex Ross's essay about noise.

May 20, 2024

Not for Free

Louis Menand, in his essay about threats to academic freedom, overlooks one key factor (*A Critic at Large*, May 6th). The books that he reviews focus on how, during the past several decades, Congress and the Supreme Court have shaped institutions of higher education into arenas of tolerance—changes that have in turn inspired ire in our contemporary political climate. But there is a far more pernicious force working to erode universities' academic freedom: the exorbitant expense of college, which has changed how students relate to their educations.

As an administrator who has worked in universities in both the U.S. and the U.K., I have seen firsthand how, with spiralling tuition fees, students have increasingly come to view themselves as customers. With average tuition in the U.S. now ranging from more than ten thousand dollars per year for in-state students at public schools to nearly forty thousand per year at private schools, and student-loan debt averaging around thirty thousand dollars per borrower, it is little wonder that more students are insisting on a college experience that they feel delivers value for money, and, with that in mind, often push schools to embody their beliefs. At the same time, universities have grown more dependent on tuition and donations, making their leaders wary of doing anything that might antagonize students and diminish tuition revenue. Many schools, particularly those without large endowments, must also be mindful of how a controversy could affect donations, or what impact a state legislature could have on their budgets. As with so many other issues, academic freedom's decline can't be fully understood without an acknowledgment of the role of money.

*Julia Williams
Mendota Heights, Minn.*

Hear, Hear

The cornucopia of observations in Alex Ross's wonderful essay about noise brought to mind some memories of my late friend and colleague John Cage ("What Is Noise?," April 22nd & 29th). One summer, during a visit to the beach, Cage was annoyed to find many portable radios demanding his attention. This experience inspired his composition for multiple radios. After that, whenever he was subjected to a similar cacophony, he could always just imagine that he was hearing a performance of his own composition.

Later, during a discussion about what was the bare minimum required for something to constitute music, he startled me with a work composed only of very loud white noise and silence, alternating at chance-derived intervals. With irrepressible joy, he pointed out that the piece created an experience analogous to the way we see green after exposure to a bright-red light: when the white noise stops, the frequencies that have been heard less loudly than others (or not at all) suddenly become activated in the mind's ear, like a kind of sonic afterimage. This deeply individuated music distilled from noise occasioned Cage's usual laughing refrain: "Isn't that marvellous?!"

And, finally, at a recording session that had been paused to accommodate the passing of a garbage truck, he observed, again with a laugh, "That would have been a very expensive effect—if we had wanted it!"

*Raphael Mostel
New York City*

Ross's meticulous piece reminded me of my old physics professor's succinct yet unforgettable summary of the difference between music and noise: "Music," he said, "is the sound of your children's feet running up and down the stairs. Noise is the sound of your neighbor's children's feet running up and down the stairs."

*Mary Virginia Orna
Mount Vernon, N.Y.*

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Letters should be sent with the writer's name, address, and daytime phone number via e-mail to themail@newyorker.com. Letters may be edited for length and clarity, and may be published in any medium. We regret that owing to the volume of correspondence we cannot reply to every letter.

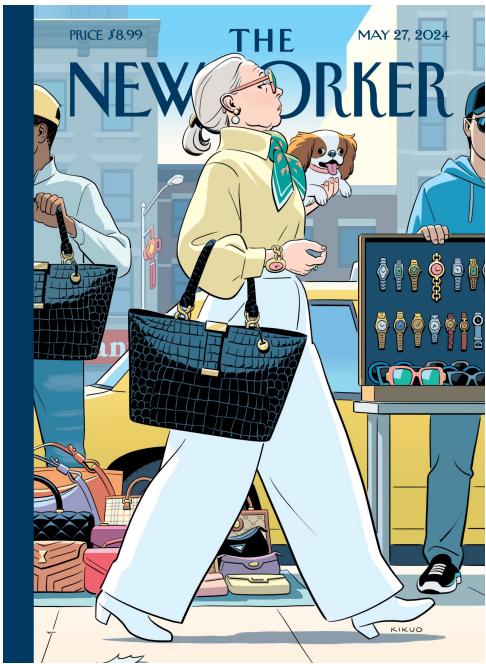


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