



# The Murdoch Wars

Lachlan, James, and the battle for Rupert's empire

By McKay Coppins

# The Atlantic

[Wed, 02 Apr 2025]

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# Turtleboy Will Not Be Stopped

A profane blogger believes an innocent woman is being framed for murder. He'll do anything to prove he's right—and terrorize anyone who says he's wrong.

by Chris Heath



*Updated at 12:52 p.m. ET on March 25, 2025*

On overpasses and by roadsides they gather, holding banners and placards. In the early days, only a few people showed up, congregating at chosen times and scattered locations around Boston. But their cause has grown and

their numbers have swelled. For Labor Day 2024, plans were made for “standouts,” as the organizers called them, in more than 70 places—all over Massachusetts, yes, but also in Ohio, Kansas, Florida, California, and elsewhere.

These assemblies are the most visible manifestation of what is usually referred to as the Free Karen Read movement. If in the fullness of time it will seem strange that such unity and passion should have been mustered in defense of a 45-year-old Massachusetts financial analyst and adjunct college professor accused of killing her police-officer boyfriend by backing into him with her car ... well, not to these people gathered today. Young and old, and nearly always dressed in something pink, they joyfully express their shared belief to passing motorists through slogan: most often just FREE KAREN READ, though sometimes the signs convey more grandiose sentiments—LIBERTY AND JUSTICE FOR ALL, STOP THE CORRUPTION, INJUSTICE THRIVES IN SILENCE. And some are impenetrable to anyone not already following the case’s legal intricacies and surrounding hoopla: BUTT-DIALS GALORE, COLIN WAS IN THE HOUSE, WHERE’S CHLOE?

In most assessments, a large part of the credit for how all of this has come to be—or, according to the haters and detractors (and there are plenty), the blame for it—belongs to a man named Aidan Kearney. I met Kearney early one May morning last year outside the Norfolk County Superior Court in Dedham, just southwest of Boston, a month into Read’s trial for, among other things, second-degree murder. It was raining, so we sought shelter on the steps of the Registry of Deeds, across the road. A gaggle of Free Karen Read protesters were already beginning to congregate a block or so away, though they were required to keep themselves outside a judge-ordained 200-foot buffer zone. Because of the pink dress code among FKR supporters, the effect is as if, at a seemingly random point on a Dedham street, a color filter kicks in.



Aidan Kearney poses with Turtleboy fans outside the courthouse. (Jessica Rinaldi / *The Boston Globe* / Getty)

Kearney isn't one for small talk, and he was soon in full flow. "It's so obvious that she's innocent," he told me. "The critics will say 'Oh, he's like a cult leader—he's brainwashing these people.' I assure you, I am not that charming. These are educated people that are getting into this story because they're not stupid. And they look at all the facts of this case, and they're like, 'It's undeniable that this is a cover-up.'" He gestured toward the gradually swelling cohort in the distance. "These people are out here every day. Rain or shine, it doesn't matter."

As we spoke, a woman standing nearby interjected.

"Sorry, I'm not eavesdropping, but I'm eavesdropping," she said, then asked us: "So are you with them?"

"I'm the leader," Kearney said evenly.

"You're the leader?" she said.

“Yeah,” he replied. “I’m Turtleboy.”

On the morning of January 29, 2022, not long after 6 a.m., the body of a 46-year-old man was found in the snow outside a house in the Boston suburb of Canton. His name was John O’Keefe, and he was an officer with the Boston Police Department. Three days later, an explanation was offered for how he had come to die there. It was reported that O’Keefe had been drinking early the night before with his girlfriend, Karen Read, and that, not long after midnight, she had driven him to a gathering at the home of another police officer, Brian Albert. Read said she’d dropped O’Keefe off in front of the house and driven away. But prosecutors were now implying that she had backed into him with her car. To Kearney, reading the news reports at the time, the story seemed clear enough. “I remember I was like, *That’s sad for her,*” he said. “And him. Because it was framed in the media as an accident —this horrible accident.”

Kearney is from Worcester, about an hour’s drive from Canton, and for the first 11 years of his adult life, he was a history teacher; he still rhapsodizes about how much he liked teaching lessons on World War II and the civil-rights movement. Eventually he would marry another teacher, and have two children. But he also became a kind of citizen-blogger, in the beginning mostly concentrating on Boston sports and matters around Worcester, at AidanFromWorcester.com. He wasn’t afraid to rub people the wrong way, specializing in calling out perceived hypocrisies, and gleefully relishing any chance to cut against political correctness.

As his audience and his reputation grew, these two roles, teacher and internet provocateur, proved incompatible. In an attempt to make his blogging anonymous, he adopted the name Turtleboy, but when the secret didn’t hold, his choice was made: He would be a full-time blogger.

As Turtleboy, Kearney made enemies aplenty, but he also gathered a lot of followers who liked what he was saying and doing, and the unfiltered way in which he did it. Before too long, he was making a healthy living via digital advertising and merchandise sales, as well as donations and subscriptions. When he first read about Read and the death of O’Keefe in early 2022, he sized up its possibilities as a story. Kearney is instinctively pro-police—“I’m a ‘Back the blue’ guy”—and the death of a police officer seemed like a

subject with Turtleboy potential. “But I didn’t write about it, because I’m like, *Well, I don’t really have a strong opinion on this*,” he recalls. “It’s like: *What a tragedy. This guy gets killed. I couldn’t imagine living with the guilt of accidentally running your boyfriend over and then not knowing it.* And then I totally forgot about the story.”

In the summer of 2022, while Kearney wasn’t paying attention, the charges against Read were upgraded from manslaughter to second-degree murder. Evidence had emerged suggesting that the couple’s relationship had been fraught, and that Read and O’Keefe had been arguing; Read was now accused of knowingly hitting O’Keefe, with an intent to kill him. Kearney still didn’t take notice in April 2023, when the defense filing laid out a detailed counternarrative, arguing that Read was being framed, and that O’Keefe had actually been murdered by those in the house he was visiting.

By that point, the story had more or less vanished from public consciousness: I couldn’t find a single mainstream-media mention of Read and O’Keefe in the six months leading up to the April 2023 filing. Even these new defense assertions generated only a smattering of stories in Massachusetts newspapers.

“Karen Read is a completely innocent woman, wrongly charged by corrupt cops who would see her rot in prison in order to cover up a murder of a fellow officer.”

That week, Kearney was preoccupied with what, back then, was fairly typical Turtleboy fare. He’d faced down what he called “An Antifa Child Drag Queen Mob”; he’d interposed himself in a dispute involving parents who had claimed that their child was facing racist abuse at a cheer gym; he’d set up the latest installment of his annual Turtleboy Ratchet Madness competition, in which his followers would vote, round by round, to name the worst of the “ratchets”—hypocrites, spongers, and other miscreants—his blog had identified in the previous year; and he had documented, or intervened in, sundry other disputes, while also describing how he had been swatted twice that week, with the police arriving at his home to follow up on bogus reports from Turtleboy haters that Kearney was suicidal.

That was what Kearney's life was like. More than two years earlier, after some personal turbulence had prompted him to reassess his approach, he'd announced a wish to change gears. "I still love the ratchet stuff and always will," he'd said. "But at the end of the day I'm more interested in exposing people who actually matter, rather than going the Jerry Springer route ... I don't want [my kids] to grow up and think their father pays the bills by writing a vulgar, smut-filled blog. I feel like it's possible to make the same points I've always made while avoiding usage of *jizz donkeys* and *spunk guzzlers*. Plus, my favorite stories are the ones that expose corrupt systems in power." He had gone on to write some stories in that genre, but so far the adjustment appeared to have been modest. Now another chance presented itself.

At lunchtime on April 17, 2023, a retired police officer named Brian Johnson sent Kearney the following message on Facebook:

Hi, not sure if you're following the case of Boston police officer, John O'Keefe death but here is a recent motion. John was a great guy. Started his career in Duxbury. His sister passed away and he adopted his niece and nephew. My sources tell me that Brian Albert, a Boston police K9 officer, is a loose cannon. His dog mysteriously disappeared and he's since sold his house. It looks to me like the girlfriend was set up. Something's not right.

Johnson attached a PDF of the defense motion, then followed up with: "Oops, I left out that John was found with bite marks."

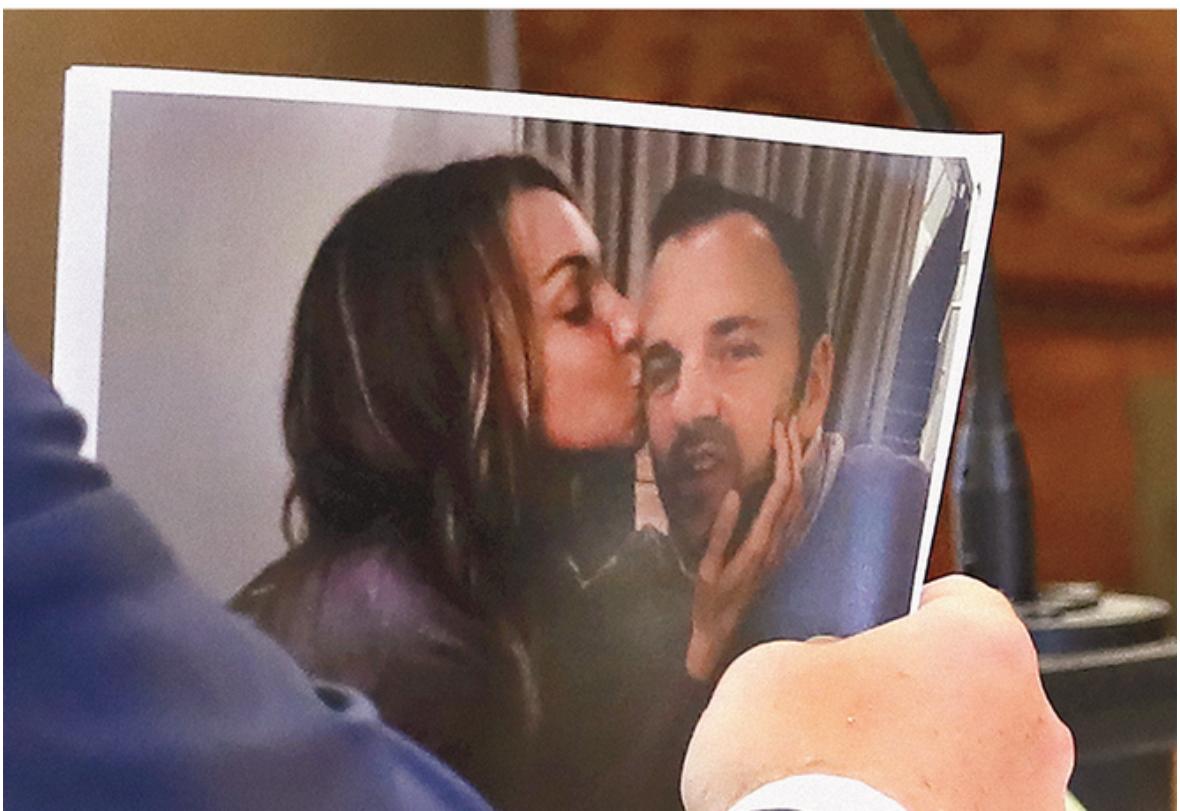
Kearney says that his reaction to reading the defense filing was: "Holy shit, this is story-of-the-century stuff." Early that evening, as he worked on an article about the Read case for the Turtleboy blog, he posted on social media, as a preview, the first words he would write about it:

I am currently working on perhaps the craziest story I've ever written, involving a Boston cop possibly being involved in murdering another cop, followed by an elaborate coverup designed to frame the murdered cop's girlfriend ... My jaw is currently on the floor.

He tweeted that he hoped to have the story out that night.

A follower immediately contacted him. She explained that she'd been in touch with a confidant of Read's named Natalie Berschneider Wiweke, and she connected them via Facebook. Throughout the evening, as Kearney continued to write, he bombarded Wiweke with questions and requests, and Wiweke, who seemed supremely well informed on the minutiae of the case, provided him with material.

A few hours later, Kearney published his post, several thousand words long: "Canton Cover-Up Part 1: Corrupt State Trooper Helps Boston Cop Coverup Murder of Fellow Officer, Frame Innocent Girlfriend." (Two of the many ways that Kearney's work practices deviate from conventional journalism are his speed to certainty, and his full-throated advocacy.) From this first outpouring, he was all in: "Karen Read is a completely innocent woman, wrongly charged by corrupt cops who would see her rot in prison in order to cover up a murder of a fellow officer."



*Top:* Karen Read listens to testimony during her murder trial, May 13, 2024.  
*Bottom:* A photo of Read and the man she is accused of killing, the Boston police officer John O'Keefe, which the defense presented at trial. (Pat Greenhouse / *The Boston Globe* / Getty; John Tlumacki / *The Boston Globe* / Getty)

Going forward, there would now be two completely different and competing versions of Read's story. The narrative conveyed in the prosecution's public filings ran along these lines: After an evening of heavy drinking, Read set off in her car with O'Keefe, whom she had been dating for about two years, heading for an after-party. They were texted the address of their destination, 34 Fairview Road, by a woman named Jennifer McCabe, whose brother-in-law Brian Albert, a Boston police officer, lived there. Sometime after midnight, McCabe saw what she believed to be Read's Lexus pull up outside the house, then, sometime later, pull away. Just before five in the morning, McCabe received a call from Read, distraught and hysterical, saying she was looking for O'Keefe. Read and McCabe soon met up at McCabe's house, and headed out to search for O'Keefe. Along the way, Read asked McCabe, "Could I have hit him?" and mentioned that her car had a cracked taillight. Approaching 34 Fairview Road, Read spotted a body even though McCabe couldn't immediately see it in the snow. She screamed and ran over, then began CPR; she also twice yelled at McCabe to Google *How long do you have to be left outside to die of hypothermia?* (Searches to this effect were found on McCabe's phone.) One of the firefighters who responded to the emergency call spoke with Read at the scene and reported her saying, "I hit him, I hit him, I hit him." O'Keefe's autopsy determined that his death had been caused by a combination of blunt-force trauma to the head and hypothermia. Pieces of broken taillight subsequently found at the scene matched the missing pieces from Read's Lexus.

O'Keefe's teenage niece, who lived at O'Keefe's home, where Read often slept over, reported overhearing O'Keefe tell Read a week earlier that their relationship was unhealthy and had run its course. Text messages between the couple that week further documented this strain. After Read left 34 Fairview Road that night, she had called and texted O'Keefe multiple times. In one voice message, she screamed that she hated him.

The prosecution's implied narrative was clear: After an argument outside 34 Fairview Road, Read had drunkenly reversed her Lexus into O'Keefe, who had been sufficiently incapacitated that he didn't move, and subsequently died of hypothermia. Her actions in the hours that followed were a combination of self-incrimination ("I hit him") and cover-up.

Diving deep into the defense's recent filing, complemented by his own supplementary research, Kearney laid out a very different narrative. He poured scorn upon the notion that O'Keefe's stated injuries—"six bloodied lacerations varying in length on O'Keefe's right arm ... from his forearm to his bicep"; "cut to the right eyelid of the victim"; "two swollen black eyes"; "cut to left side of nose"; "approximately two inch laceration to the back of the head"; "multiple skull fractures"—were consistent with the impact from a reversing car. He also focused on what would become a talisman for those convinced of Read's innocence: According to the defense expert called to do a forensic analysis of McCabe's phone, McCabe had initially Googled the phrase *hos [sic] long to die in cold* at 2:27 a.m., several hours *before* she and Read returned to 34 Fairview and discovered O'Keefe's body, and then had taken steps to delete this and other incriminating information from her phone. If true, this seemed impossible to square with the prosecution's version of what had happened.

Presented as similarly complicating for the prosecution's narrative was O'Keefe's iPhone data from that night. According to the defense, the Apple Health app showed O'Keefe in the vicinity of 34 Fairview Road between 12:21 and 12:24, taking 80 steps and climbing the equivalent of three floors. (The Albert residence has three floors.) Between 12:31 and 12:32, O'Keefe apparently took 36 more steps. This also fits poorly with the notion that he was hit by Read's car and never entered the house.

Kearney, drawing on the defense's assertions, proposed an alternative version of events: Read had dropped O'Keefe off at 34 Fairview Road, then watched him enter the house from her car; when he didn't answer her calls once inside, she left. By Kearney's reckoning, there were 11 people already in the house. One of them was Brian Albert's then-18-year-old nephew, Colin—a "notorious hothead" and "out of control meathead," according to Kearney; Colin had appeared on social media after O'Keefe's death with visible abrasions on his knuckles. Kearney suggested that soon after entering

the house, O'Keefe got into a physical confrontation with Colin Albert, and that his uncle Brian, a trained mixed-martial-arts fighter, joined in. The altercation riled up the family's German shepherd, Chloe, who in Kearney's telling caused the injuries to O'Keefe's arm. (The implication, which Kearney hadn't yet spelled out, was that a fatally injured O'Keefe was then dumped outside on the lawn.)

All 11 people in the house, Kearney argued, must have either witnessed or been aware of the murder of John O'Keefe. It was McCabe, Kearney asserted, who suggested to Read that she might have hit O'Keefe, and falsely suggested that Read appeared to spot O'Keefe's body before she could have realistically seen it. Echoing the defense's case, Kearney argued that McCabe connivingly repeated the *hos long to die in cold* search on her phone so that she could pretend that this had been at Read's request in the moment, all in an attempt to disguise the fact that McCabe herself had made that same search hours earlier, before Read even knew that O'Keefe's body was lying in the snow.

Kearney also detailed the preexisting relationship between the lead investigator on the case, Michael Proctor, and the McCabe and Albert families; the defense's evidence that the initial crime report was changed; and the fact that crucial pieces of taillight were recovered from the crime scene not on the morning of O'Keefe's death but much later, after Read's car was in police possession. He argued that the taillight was actually broken in an incident captured on O'Keefe's Ring camera when Read, heading out to search for him in the morning, clipped O'Keefe's car as she backed out. Kearney also noted that the Alberts had gotten rid of their dog, Chloe, four months after O'Keefe's death and had then sold the house—"yet additional evidence of consciousness of guilt," in the words of the defense. At the end of his article, Kearney recommended that "Trooper Proctor, Brian Albert, Colin Albert, and Jennifer McCabe should all spend [a] significant amount of time in jail, and two of them should be charged with murder."

Those Kearney implicated would later dispute almost everything he suggested. During the trial, both Colin and Brian would deny that O'Keefe had ever entered the house that night or that they fought him. Brian Albert would testify that getting rid of Chloe and selling his home had nothing to do with O'Keefe's death. Jennifer McCabe would deny deleting any calls or

searches on her phone and any involvement in a cover-up, and would tell the court that she “never would have left John O’Keefe out in the cold to die.” For his part, Michael Proctor admitted to having a personal relationship with Brian Albert’s brother and his wife, but he denied that this influenced the investigation in any way.

Still, plenty of people found Kearney’s narrative compelling. “I published it,” Kearney told me, “and it, like, broke the website. I had to upgrade my servers.” His YouTube broadcast the next evening, in which he again went through this material, drew far more viewers than ever before. He had titled the initial article “Part 1” because he realized that this was one of those stories that might require more than a single dive; occasionally in the past, his blog had returned to an interesting story four or five times. But this story just kept going: As of this writing, his series about Read has nearly 500 installments, complemented by hundreds of lengthy YouTube broadcasts. “I rarely have time for anything else now,” he told me when we first met. “Every day, I’d wake up and I wouldn’t know what I was going to write about. Now I do. I’m going to write about Karen Read.”

As Kearney’s audience grew, he relentlessly seeded the idea that a great injustice was taking place, and Read was its victim. Kearney is not shy about taking credit for the effect he’s had. During Read’s trial, he would declare, “You never would have heard of this trial without me.”

Kearney’s detractors—there were many even before he started writing about Read, and they have grown in number and fervor since—point out that he was not the first person to write about the story, suggesting that he is taking credit for causing something when all he did was sail in its slipstream. Maybe. But there’s a solid argument that the whole public discourse around the trial—not just the heightened interest in it but the galvanizing of a small movement of people committed to defending Read against what they believed was an imminent injustice—was catalyzed mainly by his interventions.

Kearney likes to say that he is three things at once—a journalist, an activist, and an entertainer. Here are two particularly vivid examples of his rather unorthodox approach to covering the Read case.

First: On June 5, 2023, he turned up unannounced in the bleachers at a high-school lacrosse game where Jennifer McCabe and her family were watching their daughter play. “Why did you Google *How long to die in cold*, Jen?” Kearney asked, as he filmed everything. “I’m just curious.” McCabe sat there, a pained smile on her face, head turned toward the game, as Kearney repeated this question seven times. Told that he was bothering people, he retorted: “Well, they killed a cop. She’s a cop killer! These are cop killers! You know they’re cop killers, right?” When I asked Kearney what he was thinking as he filmed this, he replied, “*This is great content. And also, I’m glad somebody’s saying something to her.*”

Second: On July 22, 2023, he convened a “Rolling Rally,” in which he led a convoy of supporters on a tour of the Canton area, stopping at the crime scene, the police station, the courthouse, and the homes of those he claimed were implicated in John O’Keefe’s death, livestreaming all the while, and reciting the facts as he believed them through a bullhorn outside each property. Several dozen enthusiastic supporters can be seen on the video; Kearney has claimed that as many as 300 participated across the day. From the video footage, this Rolling Rally’s apparent atmosphere was less that of a vengeful mob than of a lively campaigners’ day out, though I imagine that distinction might seem moot to its targets. The first stop was the house Brian Albert had moved into after selling 34 Fairview Road. Standing outside, Kearney proclaimed through the bullhorn, “I do kind of feel bad for the neighbors. But, sorry, murderers moved in, so it’s unfortunate.”

Putting aside questions about the legality of these actions, it’s times like these when Turtleboy’s certainty is most striking. Especially when you consider just how deeply horrible these actions would be if he’s wrong.

The first time I met Kearney, we had the following conversation:

*You’d agree that if Karen Read didn’t do this, then this is a horrendous thing that she’s been put through.*

“Yeah. Definitely. Yeah, I mean, it goes without saying.”

*But conversely, do you agree that if the people you’re pointing your finger at didn’t do it, then they’re being put through a pretty horrendous experience?*

“Yeah, but there’s no way they didn’t do it. If there was any way possible that he was not killed inside 34 Fairview Road, I would not be taking the position I am. If I thought there was a 1 percent chance that he was not killed inside that house, I would not be taking the position I am. I’m 100 percent that he was killed inside that house.”

*But to say that there’s a zero percent chance of the state’s narrative being true, or some version of it being true, is a pretty hard-core determination.*

“I think it’s the most logical determination.”

*What if it isn’t?*

“I can’t answer that question, because it’s impossible for it not to be true. If I say, ‘Well, then I’d feel bad,’ then it makes the reader believe that I think this is a possibility. I don’t. I’ve never been so sure of anything in my whole life. I would literally bet everything I’ve ever owned on the fact that he was inside that house and beaten up.”

Kearney seems to have a traditional reporter’s dogged obsessiveness in search of evidence, sources, and telling details. But from the start, he has also frequently seemed to have the best information on the Read case, particularly about details that strengthened the defense’s argument.

In the second half of 2023, as the case drew more coverage and as Kearney’s role in both popularizing it and turning public opinion in Read’s favor gained notice, he was sometimes asked whether he was colluding with Read or her defense team. He would deny any direct dealings with Read. That denial was, Kearney now acknowledges, a lie. Not long after he was connected via Facebook to Read’s friend Natalie Berschneider Wiweke, in April 2023, he became aware that his source was more than simply well informed: She was channeling messages from Read—in fact, Kearney said Wiweke was “nothing but a copy-and-paste for Karen.” A few weeks after his first article, Kearney and Read began to communicate directly. Just how often they did so was revealed when Read’s phone was seized by state police in January 2024. Over seven and a half months, from May 7 to December 21, 2023, 189 calls, cumulatively lasting more than 40 hours, were logged

between Kearney and Read. Beyond that were all the text messages and some calls they had exchanged on Signal.

It is a peculiar irony that while Read has thus far spent only two nights in jail, Kearney, the loudest supporter of the Free Karen Read movement, has served 60 days behind bars during the unfolding of the case.

“Yeah, I denied it,” Kearney told me. “Because I didn’t have her permission. She was an anonymous source.” He sees nothing to apologize for. “I’m a journalist writing a story,” he argued. “This is the subject of the story. She’s allowed to talk to me.” What this was, he maintained, was just him doing his job well. “I had the best source of information. She could give me information that no other journalist could get ahold of. And none of it was illegal.”

Yet even if everything Kearney has done is legal, many of his critics have suggested that he’s either knowingly or unknowingly being exploited by a murderer to sway public opinion and bolster her defense—that, as Kearney put it, “the dastardly Karen Read was like the grand puppet master of this whole thing.” Or maybe even, in a more nuanced way, that Read had managed to find a patsy smart and motivated enough—but also credulous enough—to carry her water farther than she could have ever dreamed possible. All she’d needed to do was sketch out a plausible framework within which she might be innocent; with his unstoppable drive, Kearney had filled in the gaps.

Kearney dismisses all such possibilities. He is adamant that he has neither accepted anything Read has told him uncritically, nor allowed himself to be steered into writing what she wanted him to write. “If anyone can show any evidence that Karen Read has been dishonest with me or is somehow hiding something, I will blast her,” he told me. “I would just rip Karen to shreds. But she always brings evidence to back up everything she’s saying.” (Read and her attorneys did not respond to requests to comment for this story.)

When I first met him, Kearney brought up, unbidden, a related accusation. “This is the car they think Karen Read’s brother bought for me,” he said as we approached a 2023 Lexus RX 350, parked among the pink FKR battalion outside the courthouse. Read’s brother works for a Lexus dealership.

Kearney said that his bank records were pulled to investigate, but that nothing was found, because there was nothing to find. (Kearney also tweeted a copy of his \$59,186.56 purchase contract.) The reality, he said, is more prosaic: “I am making more money than I used to. But I’m not being paid by Karen Read. I’m being paid by people like you’re seeing there”—he gestured at the pink-clad crowd—“that buy T-shirts and donate and buy subscriptions and everything like that. I’m doing something and I’m doing it well, and it’s paying off.”

Kearney couldn’t have imagined all the repercussions this story would have for his own life. It is a peculiar irony that while Read has thus far spent only two nights in jail—on the night of her first arrest, February 1, 2022, three days after O’Keefe’s death, and a second night in June of that year when she was arrested and charged with second-degree murder—Kearney, the loudest supporter of the Free Karen Read movement, has served 60 days behind bars during the unfolding of the case.

Exactly how that happened—well, that takes a little explaining.

Toward the end of August 2023, the Norfolk County district attorney, Michael Morrissey, issued a lengthy video statement that appeared to be a direct response to Kearney’s activities. “The harassment of witnesses in the murder prosecution of Karen Read is absolutely baseless,” he said. “It should be an outrage to any decent person—and it needs to stop.”

Kearney, predictably, was far from impressed. He livestreamed a response from his car as he watched Morrissey’s video. “No, it doesn’t need to stop—it needs to accelerate, baby … It’s not gonna stop; it’s gonna go a million times harder than it did before. Wooo!” Before signing off, Kearney added: “You are my enemy, Michael Morrissey—just know that. I will not rest until you are completely destroyed.”

Only later did Kearney come to see Morrissey’s video in a somewhat different light. “That was my one and only warning to cut the shit or else I was going to jail,” he told me. “That video was for me.”

On the morning of Wednesday, October 11, 2023, Kearney had just seen his two children onto the school bus when he was arrested, brought to court in

handcuffs, and then released on bail. He would be charged with a list of crimes—most significantly, eight felony counts of witness intimidation, each carrying a potential 10-year sentence. (More charges were subsequently added.) Among the many episodes referred to in the charges were the lacrosse game and the Rolling Rally.

“It sounds very serious on paper,” Kearney told me. “But my attorney is just not the least bit worried.” In legal filings, his primary lawyer characterized Kearney’s work as “peaceful investigative journalism, satire, and political hyperbole.”

Kearney argued that these charges have been deliberately engineered to discredit him, “because my reporting has been so effective in galvanizing public support for Karen Read.” He elaborated: “The reason they charged me with witness intimidation isn’t to convict me. They know everything I’ve done is legal and free speech and protected. The reason is so that they can just point to me and say, ‘You believe that guy? He’s charged with 16 felonies. He’s a bad person.’”

The conventional legal advice, if you’ve been charged with something, is not to repeat or compound or talk about the alleged offenses, at least until the matter is resolved. This is not the Turtleboy way. Each time a new prosecution document has spelled out his supposedly criminal words and deeds, Kearney has gone through it on one of his live broadcasts, paragraph by paragraph, justifying everything. Partly this is business pragmatism —“I’m paid to talk, so I have to”—but he says it’s a matter of principle, too. The way Kearney sees it, when he confronts those who were at Brian Albert’s house that night, he is facing down those who abuse their power. “These people are all thugs and bullies and mean girls. And somebody, for once, is standing up to them.”

Kearney’s own case has been moving slowly through the courts; any resolution is not expected until later this year. This might quite reasonably leave one wondering how, then, Kearney has already spent 60 days in jail. The explanation requires a detour into Kearney’s sometimes messy personal life. His current career sat poorly with his wife, Julie. “She married a teacher,” he told me. Turtleboy “is not what she signed up for, and I get it.” Kearney was reluctant to clarify too much, but various stories he’s told about

his life in recent years seem to involve relationships with other women. He has referred to “sneaking around, living this double life I shouldn’t have been living.”

Toward the end of 2023, Kearney was in a relationship with a woman named Lindsey Gaetani. Then they split up. The exact details of what took place between them are contested in court filings, and are also poisonously debated on social media to this day. (There is a fecund online ecosystem devoted to poring over Kearney’s perceived evils—the “anti-Turtleboy industrial complex,” he calls it. He says one of his lawyers told him, “I thought Alex Jones was the most hated client I ever had until I had you.”)

What is undisputed is that, some weeks after their relationship had notionally ended, Kearney visited Gaetani’s home. Each would offer a very different account of who initiated this meeting, and of what took place during it. Kearney says that she asked him over to discuss a summons she had received relating to the Read case, and believes he has evidence that suggests she was deliberately colluding with the police to entrap him; Gaetani alleges that he assaulted her. Kearney strongly denies this. Problem is, if you are already on bail when you face an accusation like this, your bail may be revoked, and that’s what happened.

On December 26, his 42nd birthday, Kearney was taken to Norfolk County Jail. Against his wishes, he was placed in isolation—“because of my high profile,” he told me. Kearney has been on Adderall for nearing 20 years, and now he had to do without; that adjustment was difficult: “I couldn’t stay awake during the day. And because of that, I couldn’t sleep at night.” He missed his son’s first basketball game. He missed his daughter’s cheer competitions. (He told his kids that he was away for work. “In a way, I was.”)

But Kearney says prison was not so bad. He ran five or more miles a day, and he read: *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which he hadn’t liked in high school but did now; *The Happiest Man on Earth*, about a centenarian Holocaust survivor; then *1984*. He also began to build a relationship with a Read supporter named Meredith O’Neil, who’d sent him supportive messages. By the time he was released, they were a couple. Soon afterward, the assault-

and-battery charge that had triggered his bail revocation was dropped. (It could still be refiled, but has not been as of this writing.)

“You put me in jail for 60 fucking days—big deal,” he declared on one of his broadcasts after he was released. “I lost 10 pounds … I got close to my parents. I built new relationships. I met a much better girl. Like, life is so much better now. It’s, like, one of the best things that ever happened to me. All I do is win. I hope they know that. Putting me in jail turned out to be one of the best things that ever happened to me. So thank you, motherfucker.” And he raised two middle fingers.

That’s the face Kearney seems most comfortable presenting to the world. Still, his first night out of jail, when he went to bed on his wife’s couch for probably the final time (they have since divorced), and he couldn’t sleep, and he kept looking at his kids’ photos on the wall, and thinking about how he would never leave them again, he reconsidered everything. For the first time, he found himself wondering: Should he stop writing about Read? “Because look at what’s at risk right there,” he told me. “Like, I could lose them. Nothing’s worth that, you know? Should I just stop?”

He didn’t stop. The incessant episodes about the Canton “cover-up” and YouTube live broadcasts soon resumed. On Thursday evenings, Kearney does a private broadcast for members of his Turtle Club. (Cheapest membership level: \$15 a month.)

Being Turtleboy has been very profitable for Kearney. *Boston* magazine recently estimated that he earns \$45,000 to \$50,000 a month. He doesn’t explicitly dispute this, but notes that he has operating expenses, as well as a quarter-million dollars in legal fees. To explain how *Boston* came up with those numbers, he told me the writer simply estimated a figure based on his roughly 2,000 paying subscribers. When I pointed out that he had other revenue streams too—his website advertising and a wide range of merchandise (you can get a Free Karen Read pet hoodie in a range of sizes and colors, and a pink Free Karen Read baby onesie), as well as potential movie and book deals—he said that he had no clear sense of what he was earning. “I’m not a money guy,” he said. “I’m a content guy.”

One evening last June, I joined Kearney as he prepared to deliver his Turtle Club broadcast from his girlfriend's Boston apartment. Seconds before going live, he took his seat, slipped a Turtleboy cap on his head, and started streaming.

After more than an hour of monologuing, he started reading out what he calls Turtlechats: People send him money—typically \$5 to \$20, though sometimes more—and in return, Kearney reads out their questions or comments. There's apparently an understood etiquette here, one best not to fall afoul of. Seeing one message, he said sternly to the camera: "You can't send a dollar. If you send a dollar, I ain't reading your shit. It's insulting."

In response, a message soon came through from someone named Ben taking exception to this, informing Kearney, "You lost me bro." What happened next reflects something fundamental about Kearney. Instead of brushing off Ben's message, Kearney escalated dramatically.

"Let me be very clear, Ben. I couldn't be happier to lose you. I hope you never come back and watch any of my shows again. I actually fucking hate you with every ounce of my being, and I'd be proud to have you unsubscribe to the channel."

Kearney has brought the same hyper-incendiary instincts to his coverage of the trial. When I visited him last May, he had just been banned from YouTube for a week because of an online poll he'd posted asking his followers a question about the trial's most recent two witnesses: "Who is the bigger piece of shit?" He told me he is just using his platform to say out loud what regular people watching the trial stream are thinking. "It's guy-on-the-street talk," he said, adding: "I'm rough around the edges, certainly. I have a potty mouth. My mother is always telling me to tone it down, and I'd like to. It's something I'm working on." Perhaps not that hard, though. Here's a brief excerpt—not even the worst part—from his livestreamed commentary about the testimony of a witness named Julie Nagel:

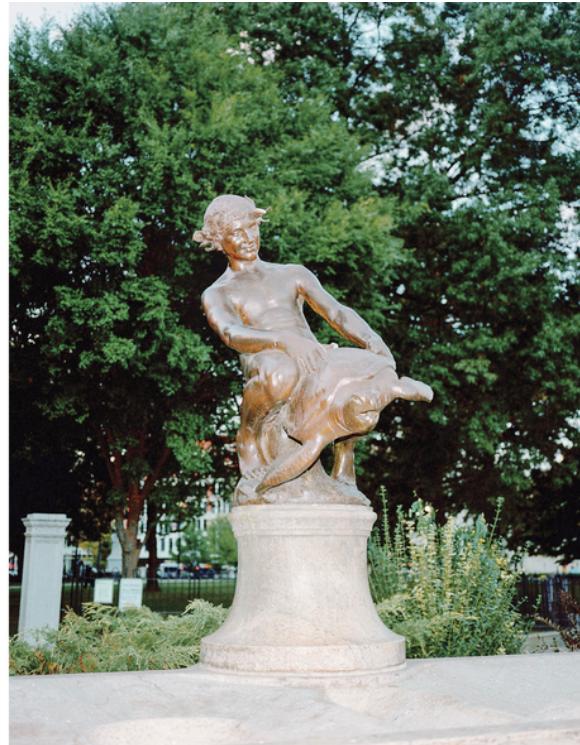
This is a goddamn murder trial. There's an innocent woman whose life is on the line. And all these townie fucking whores can do is get up on the stand and lie their fucking asses off. I hope you burn in eternal hell

because that's where you fucking belong, you stupid fat cow. You deserve to be fat and disgusting, because you disgust me.

But even as he's delivering crude, derogatory commentary like this, he's also providing cogent, detailed, and deeply knowledgeable analysis of the trial. This is a man who, on and off camera, can pivot in an instant from saying things like "townie fucking whores" to offering a deconstruction of subtle contradictions in testimony, or explaining how the last famous and controversial trial at the Norfolk courthouse was of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, the Italian anarchists convicted of murder and executed in the 1920s. "Sacco and Vanzetti didn't have Karen Read's lawyers," he says.

As the prosecution presented its case at trial, Kearney appeared to grow even more confident that Read would be found not guilty. It was not hard to see things his way. Day after day, witnesses for the prosecution seemed to be brought to the stand less for purposes of showing how and why Read was responsible for O'Keefe's death than to undermine the defense's alternative theory that O'Keefe was killed inside 34 Fairview Road. I told Kearney that I assumed there must be some careful but as-yet-unveiled prosecutorial plan at work, but Kearney was skeptical, never wavering from what he told me the day we met: "This is going to be the quickest acquittal you've ever seen."

Kearney's nom de blog comes from an infamous statue in the center of his hometown, one with its own messy history. The Burnside Fountain, now found on the southeast corner of Worcester Common, was built in the early 20th century, and features a bronze statue that the sculptor who was commissioned to construct it, Charles Harvey, named *Boy With a Turtle*. His design depicted a naked boy holding a hawksbill sea turtle. As he undertook the work in his New York studio, Harvey apparently heard voices, sometimes said to have come from the unfinished statue itself, telling him to kill himself. Heeding them, he went to the bank of the Bronx River and slit his throat. Another artist completed the statue.



*Left:* Free Turtleboy hats are among the abundant trial-related merchandise for sale. *Right:* The statue that inspired Kearney's pseudonym, on Worcester Common, in Massachusetts. (Lila Barth for *The Atlantic*)

But that is not why Harvey's final work became famous. It's not entirely clear whether Harvey's intention was to depict a boy riding a turtle upon the seas or to capture the moment of releasing a turtle into the wild. But one scenario easily comes to mind for many observers. As Kearney succinctly put it: "The statue obviously looks like a boy having sex with a turtle."

The idea to use the name Turtleboy was not Kearney's own. Inviting suggestions for what to call a new iteration of his blog in 2013, which at the time he intended to be anonymous, he considered "Word From the Woo" (*Woo* being a local term for "Worcester") and "Jogger Blogger." Then a follower proposed "Turtleboy Sports." Kearney knew immediately that it was right—"What better name for a Worcester guy? Turtleboy!"

His followers soon became known by the name they have to this day: Turtle Riders. When I asked Kearney why, he said, "Well, it's better than Turtle Fuckers."

One day in the first week of June, a trial half day, Kearney and I arranged to talk at lunchtime while he drove back to Worcester to see his kids after school. But when he emerged from the courtroom, he asked whether I minded if we made a detour. Some Turtle Riders were gathering for lunch.

At first I couldn't understand why they'd chosen a restaurant nearly half an hour's drive from the courthouse. Then it became clear: The Turtle Riders' chosen meeting place was the Waterfall Bar and Grille in Canton, the final place where Karen Read and John O'Keefe drank together on January 28, 2022. It's where they mingled with Brian Albert and several others who would soon head to Albert's home.

But that's not all I would see on our drive.

"By the way," Kearney said as we neared Canton, "do you want to see 34 Fairview Road?"

He took a left turn, and soon we arrived. "They say she was parked right here," he said, "and that John just stood back there by the flagpole, and that she gunned it in reverse and hit him."

Kearney is fond of experiments and reenactments, both for his own edification and to create content for his viewers. In September 2023, he had come here in his Lexus and tried to duplicate what the prosecution said Read did based on its interpretation of data from her fancier 2021 Lexus LX 570: abruptly reverse 62 feet and reach a speed of 24 miles an hour. Kearney said that despite multiple tries, his best "pedal to the metal" attempt couldn't get him above 19 miles an hour. He pointed to a spot some distance from the curb. "That's where John's body was found."

As we talked through various scenarios, a car pulled up in the middle of the street, right next to us.

"Oh my God!" screamed one of the two women in the car.

"Shut up!" screamed the other. "We were just fucking talking about you!"

They couldn't believe what they'd chanced upon: Turtleboy, in the flesh, at the geographic epicenter of their obsession.

“Nice to meet you,” he said, in a way that seemed both friendly and designed to chill the temperature a little. When they asked for a photo, he got out of the car and posed with them.

At the Waterfall, he knew most of the people joining for lunch—maybe a couple dozen Turtle Riders who seemed to be part of some informal inner circle—and he didn’t grandstand at all. Instead, Kearney sat at the edge of the room, talking quietly with whoever came by but making no pronouncements. This wasn’t bullhorn Turtleboy.

On the next morning’s “bus-stop live,” he told the Turtle Riders about me and what I’d gotten to see while hanging out with him and his crowd: “He got a taste of Turtle World.” He said I’d seen “how cool these people are. And, the lies that have been spread about who we are and what we do—and that we’re dangerous and bloodthirsty, and, you know, intimidating witnesses. We’re not about that, man. We’ve never been about that.”

June 10, 2024—day 22 of testimony in the Read trial—began with Kearney tweeting photos of the gathered FKR protesters at dawn, with this message: “Sometimes I can’t believe I created this movement, but I’m really glad I did.” Early in the day’s proceedings, taking exception to the latest ruling by Judge Beverly Cannone—who, in Turtleboy world, is only ever referred to as “Auntie Bev”—he tweeted, “Auntie Bev is being extra cunty today.” One darkly comic measure of how much influence Kearney has had on this trial is that this affection for giving offensive nicknames to people he doesn’t like leached out of the sideshow and into the official trial record. One of the police investigators, Yuri Bukhenik, had been mischievously rechristened by Kearney as “Bukkake,” the term for a very specific multiperson sexual act; on the stand, a witness named Julie Albert, Brian Albert’s sister-in-law, referred to Bukhenik from the witness box as “Trooper Bukkake.” “Everybody in the courthouse looked at me,” Kearney said afterward. “It was so satisfying, because I’m like, ‘Oh, she listens to my show.’”

Kearney’s intemperate Auntie Bev comment was soon forgotten, because the time had come for the lead police investigator in the case, Michael Proctor, to take the stand. Another complexity in this case was that, unbeknownst to the jury, there had been a federal grand-jury investigation into the Read investigation—a step toward justice, if you’re a Read supporter, or a

misguided fishing expedition that the Read side somehow manipulated into existence, if you’re not. And although no charges have been filed as a result of this grand jury, it unearthed material that consequently became available in Read’s trial—including some deeply problematic private text messages sent by the lead investigator.

After inviting Proctor to share the details of the police investigation, the state’s attorney led him through much of this problematic material. It was a remarkable spectacle—the prosecution guiding its own witness toward such unhelpful testimony—but presumably the attorney had calculated that all of this would have been even more devastating if first presented by the defense. Still, the effect of this material was incendiary: In a volley of texts to friends, family, and colleagues, Proctor had referred to Read as, among other things, “a whack job cunt,” “a nutbag,” and “retarded”; he’d also joked about looking for nudes of her on her phone, and mocked her medical history. “She’s got a leaky balloon knot,” he texted, presumably in reference to her Crohn’s disease. “Leaks poo.” Most of the crudest texts didn’t speak directly to Read’s guilt or innocence, but when combined with other unprofessional asides—“Nope, home owner is a Boston cop,” he’d texted to a friend, in a way that could be read as implying that Brian Albert was consequently beyond investigation—they appeared corrosive to the prosecution’s case.

Kearney certainly thought so. “You can’t truly appreciate how OVER this trial is,” he tweeted from the courtroom, “unless you see the faces of the jurors while Proctor reads these text messages.”

Media coverage of the trial grew and grew, in tandem with a teeming online scrum in which Read’s innocence or guilt was incessantly debated. It was apparently easy to survey the same morass of evidence and then with fierce assurance come to completely different conclusions. Almost everyone seemed to be sure of the truth, and to think that anyone who didn’t agree with them was a fool.

As the trial neared its end, Kearney retained complete confidence that Read would be fully acquitted. But he was also clearly exhausted. “I’m kind of looking forward to it being over,” he had told me earlier. “I’m Karen Read-ed out. I enjoy the professional success I’ve had from it, but I don’t enjoy the stress that I’ve gotten from all these charges.”



Aidan Kearney at home outside Worcester, Massachusetts, where he blogs and livestreams on his various Turtleboy platforms about the Karen Read murder trial, October 2, 2024. (Lila Barth for *The Atlantic*)

Arguably the most significant testimony came in the trial's final days. The prosecution's vehicular-crash expert argued that O'Keefe's injuries were consistent with impact from a reversing car (though his explanation of exactly how O'Keefe had been hit, and how his body had ended up where it was found, seemed murky), and its digital-forensics experts argued that the 2:27 time stamp associated with the words *hos long to die in cold* on Jennifer McCabe's phone was actually tied to when the tab was first opened (to search for basketball scores), not when the potentially incriminating phrase was typed; they also testified that there was no evidence of deliberate data deletion. The defense pushed back hard.

On June 21, day 29 of testimony, just before 11 a.m., the defense began to present its case. Read's attorneys called a snowplow driver who said that when he drove by 34 Fairview at about 2:45 in the morning, he saw nothing on the lawn where O'Keefe's body was later found, suggesting that the body had been placed there afterward; a doctor who argued that the marks on O'Keefe's arm were dog bites; a digital-forensics expert who maintained that the *hos long ...* search did indeed occur around 2:27 a.m.; a forensic pathologist who testified that O'Keefe's injuries were not consistent with being hit by a car at 24 miles an hour; and two accident-reconstruction experts who testified that the damage both to the car and to O'Keefe didn't tally with the kind of collision proposed by the prosecution. Scarcely a day after it started, the defense rested.

Kearney, who had been studying the jury members' reactions over the past few weeks, told me he thought there was a 70 percent chance that they would issue the inevitable not-guilty verdict after less than a day's deliberation. There was just a 30 percent chance that they would need a second day, he said. No other outcome seemed conceivable to him.

But the first day passed, and then the second, and then the third. Now it was the weekend. And before the jury reconvened, two things happened. First, on Saturday, Kearney's mother, who had pancreatic cancer, died. The second event, Kearney learned about only as jury deliberations resumed on Monday morning. A person contacted Kearney via Facebook to say that the police were at Kearney's parents' house in Worcester. Kearney called his father, who told him why: At 8:30 that morning, one of Kearney's brothers had stepped out of the house and found a large turtle hanging by its neck on a

rope from the porch railing. Dead. The turtle had “what appeared to be a gun shot wound on the back of the shell,” according to the police report, “and an exit wound … near its belly.” Kearney’s father, the police report went on to say, “explained that his son, Aidan Kearney, is Turtle Boy; a popular article writer. Mr. Kearney also mentioned that he and his family have been the victims of harassment for some time now due to his son’s occupation, but nothing to the extent of today’s incident.”

Kearney’s father sent him a photo. He immediately began speculating about who was responsible, throwing out different public accusations. “There’s no shortage of people who I think would do this,” Kearney told me. As of this writing, the dead-turtle investigation remains unsolved.

On Monday, after the jury had sent several notes suggesting that it was at an impasse, the judge declared a mistrial. Kearney was deflated. Though one can make a strong argument that, absent Kearney’s involvement, Karen Read would have been much more likely to have been found guilty, he took little succor in that.

A new trial was scheduled for this past January, then deferred until April. But in the weeks following the trial, an extraordinary thing happened. Read had been facing three separate charges. A number of jurors came forward to say that they had unanimously agreed to acquit Read on the most serious charge—second-degree murder—as well as the charge of leaving the scene of a crime; they had reached an impasse only on the lesser manslaughter charge (where a majority of them favored a guilty verdict). But during the court proceedings, no one had asked them if they’d reached unanimity on any of the individual charges. Read’s legal team argued that she could not be fairly tried again on these charges, as this would be double jeopardy; the prosecution argued that as no such verdicts had been officially recorded, double jeopardy did not apply. The issue is working its way through the courts.

After recovering from his initial dismay at the mistrial, Kearney carried on undeterred. He conducted new field experiments, explored new angles, and covered every new development. He got a juror to speak on the record about the deliberations. According to this juror, those who believed Read guilty of manslaughter focused on how drunk she’d been, and on the acceleration data

from the car; those who believed her not guilty did not buy that O'Keefe's injuries could have been caused by a collision with a reversing car. Many of the issues Kearney considered most important—the alleged 2:27 a.m.

Google search, the Apple Health data suggesting that O'Keefe had gone into the house, Officer Proctor's prior relationship with the Albert family—were apparently not central to their deliberations. "I'm in this world where I consume Karen Read content every day, and we all know it like the back of our hand," he told me. "But the people deciding the case didn't really seem to know it that well, if that makes sense."

On a livestream shortly after speaking with the juror, Kearney let rip. Yes, the jury had unanimously taken murder off the table, but how could any sentient juror have believed what he now knew some of them did? If you were to question any of the jurors who voted guilty on the manslaughter charge about whether they would have staked their children's lives on that verdict being correct, he asked rhetorically, what would they say? "Would you bet your children's lives on that fact, that Karen Read's guilty? Would you? Would you? Because I would bet anyone's—like, literally anyone's—life that Karen Read is not guilty and not think twice about it ... I'm that fucking positive." He couldn't understand how the jurors who'd considered Read guilty of anything could think otherwise. "I hope they burn in hell, to be perfectly honest with you, those people. I really do. They're fucking terrible people."

Kearney and Read had stopped talking just before he was imprisoned, in December 2023, and some trial commentators had speculated that she was done with him. But on June 6 of last year, when I met him after court, he told me, "I actually talked to Karen for the first time in six months today," and explained how he'd asked her a question outside court about footage of her car's taillight, and she'd answered him with a big smile.

Kearney told me that he and Read resumed private contact a few days after that conversation in the street. The ice broke on June 10, the day of Michael Proctor's catastrophic testimony. "I sent her a message on Signal, and I just said, 'Good day. Now the whole world knows what an asshole he is.'" Read replied, concurring. "That reinvigorated conversation between the two of us," he said. Now they're back in more regular communication. "We just

discuss various things about the trial and our thoughts on it,” he said. “My thoughts on it, basically.”

When Kearney sometimes talks about the cause of defending Read’s innocence as a kind of calling, he can sound jarringly grandiose. If he were to allow his arrest on “trumped-up, ridiculous charges” to cause him to back off, he told me one day, “I feel like I would be almost disrespecting everything our Founding Fathers believed in and risked their lives for. Our Founding Fathers were rich, all of them. And so they had the most to lose. People like Benjamin Franklin, John Adams. They could have just gotten along under British rule. They would have been fine. But … principles mattered with these people. And when they signed the Declaration of Independence, they knew that it was probably a 90 percent chance they had just signed their own death warrant. But it was worth it. It was worth it to abolitionists. To people like Martin Luther King. The great people in American history are the people who risked their own well-being for something bigger than themselves. I’m not comparing myself to them …”

*People listening to that are going to say, “So you’re saying there’s a lineage: Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, Martin Luther King … Turtleboy?”*

“Yeah, well, I think what’s happening with Karen Read is along those lines … Obviously this is a smaller scale. I’m not George Washington. But I just feel like you have to speak up about this.”

And so on he goes—fighting his own witness-intimidation charges while chronicling, with renewed intensity, each twist in the Karen Read saga. “I’m going to ride this out as long as I can,” he told me, “because it’s my thing.”

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*This article appears in the [April 2025](#) print edition with the headline “Turtleboy Will Not Be Stopped.” It originally misstated the number of nights Karen Read has spent in jail.*

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# I'd Had Jobs Before, but None Like This

**The time I spent working on the  
Canadian National Railroad  
changed the course of my life.**

by Graydon Carter



Decades ago, and probably extending well before that, there was a custom among middle-class Canadian families to send their sons out West to work on the railroad for a spell. The parents' intention was not only to get the boys out of their hair for a while but also to toughen them up and introduce

them to the ways of the world well beyond what would now be called their comfort zones. As it happened, one of my father's sisters, Aunt Irene, was a vice president of the Canadian National Railways, a sprawling transportation network of trains, steamships, and grand hotels. It was as much a part of the Canadian national identity as the *Bonanza* star Lorne Greene and *Hockey Night in Canada*. Aunt Irene was a tall, thin, dignified woman. I don't think I ever saw her when she wasn't wearing a twinset and pearls. Family lore had it that during the final chapter of World War II, she had been the wire operator who sent word of Hitler's death to news organizations across Canada. Afterward, she went to work for the Canadian National Railways, also as a wire operator, and rose through the ranks.

Egged on by my parents, I wrote to her, asking for a job. I was 19 at the time. As she described it in her letter back to me, there were two types of positions available. I could be a groundman, at \$2.20 an hour. Or I could be a lineman, at \$2.80 an hour. Like any sane person, I had a fear of heights and said that I'd like to get a groundman's job, which I was told entailed lugging equipment to the linemen, who climbed telegraph poles all day. Aunt Irene told me to report to the Symington Yard, in Winnipeg. With only a dim idea of what I was getting myself into, I boarded a train heading 1,300 miles west, to the capital of Manitoba.

I stayed with my aunt the first night and reported to the railroad's headquarters at 7 o'clock the next morning with a duffel bag of my belongings: a few pairs of shorts, jeans, a jacket, a couple of shirts, a pair of Kodiak work boots, and some Richard Brautigan and Jack Kerouac books, acceptable reading matter for a pseudo-sophisticate of the time. The Symington Yard was one of the largest rail yards in the world. On some days, it held 7,000 boxcars. Half that many moved in and out on a single day. Like many other young men my age, I was slim, unmuscled, and soft. In the hall where they interviewed and inspected the candidates for line work, I blanched as I looked over a large poster that showed the outline of a male body and the prices the railroad paid if you lost a part of it. As I recall, legs brought you \$750 apiece. Arms were \$500. A foot brought a mere \$250. In Canadian dollars.

There were about 10 of us, and we were led to a room where a severe-looking nurse peered down our throats, checked our hearts, and then asked

for urine samples. I filled the beaker to the very top by accident, and when the nurse attempted to pick it up off the table, she couldn't help but spill a bit down her hand. Two of the tougher-looking recruits behind me thought this was funny, and one patted me on the back.

By the afternoon, I was on a train to a small town out on the endless Saskatchewan prairie—my head leaning against the window, my stomach aching from hunger—trying to think of a way that I could get out of this in a few weeks and go home. This was my parents' idea of what I should be doing. Certainly not mine. A man with the big, meaty hands of someone who used them in taxing labor was sitting beside me. He had brought his own food, and out of a small pouch he pulled a roll that had been wrapped in waxed paper. His sandwich was like nothing I had ever seen before.

I blanched as I looked over a large poster that showed the outline of a male body and the prices the railroad paid if you lost a part of it.

To me, a sandwich was something made of white Wonder Bread, with baloney or peanut butter and jam inside. But this was a round, soft roll, and the meat was thick and breaded. The man noticed me looking at the sandwich and quietly brought another one out of his pouch. He indicated that I should take it. I made a gesture to say, *No, no, I couldn't*. But he just smiled and put it in my hand. I wasn't sure if he spoke English. I unwrapped the waxed paper and bit in. It was breaded chicken with a glorious sauce. To this day, I don't think anything I have ever eaten was as welcome or delicious. I thanked him profusely over and over, and he just kept nodding and smiling.

We pulled up to a siding, where the conductor said I had to get off. I did as I was told and stood by the tracks as the train pulled away. When it was gone, I looked around. The land was as flat as a billiard table and stretched for miles in every direction. On the siding was a collection of boxcars. A man waved to me in a menacing manner, indicating that I should get over to him, chop-chop-ish. I looked behind me and then turned back to him and gave a *Who me?* gesture. He nodded, and I hurried over and introduced myself. He said nothing. He was in his mid-40s and built like a refrigerator. His blond hair was short on the scalp. Enormous veins ran down his forehead and around his nose. He had terrifying bright-blue eyes and hands the size of a

catcher's mitt. His incisors were pointed, and one of his upper teeth was enameled in gold. He looked through me, pointed to a boxcar with windows on the side, and left. I walked over to the boxcar, climbed the steps, and opened the door.

It was a Saturday, not only a day off but also the day of new arrivals. Men of various ages and sizes were stretched out on the wooden bunks or settling in. There were eight beds on one side of the door and eight on the other.

Nobody said a word, but a fellow who was lying down pointed a nicotine-stained finger in the direction of a bottom bunk at the back of the car. I thanked him and sat on the bed and looked around. I was the youngest in the group. Everyone was smoking. Everyone had a mustache. And everyone looked a lot scrappier than the people I was used to. The bed was as hard as the floor. There was a single pillow and a worn gray blanket that lay folded at the foot. As I was to learn in the coming days, all but one of the men had some sort of record—breaking and entering being at the bottom rung of achievement and grand theft auto being at the top. Petty thievery and criminal mischief were almost entry-level accolades. Working on the railroad may have been a hardening regimen for doughy middle-class boys; for others, it was a sort of French Foreign Legion way station between prison gates and semicivilized society.

We ate in what was known as the reefer car, a refrigerated boxcar. It was broken up into three parts. One part was the cold box, where ice and frozen meat and other provisions were stored; one part housed the kitchen; and the last part held a long communal dining table. On my first day, I sat down at the end of the table and was joined by a tall, fair-skinned fellow with curly red hair and a decent mustache. His name was Craig Walls. He wanted to be a writer and was taking a year off to earn money for his tuition at the University of Winnipeg. Canadian kids in those days tended to pay their own way through school. Annual college costs were in the \$1,200 range, and therefore within striking distance if you worked in construction or on the railroad during the summer. There was a certain pride in the deepness of the blue in the blue-collar job you took. Construction was good. The railroad was better. Working in the oil fields of northern Alberta was the deepest blue of all.

Two others at my and Walls's end of the bunk car became part of our circle, if you could call it that. One was a short, funny, wiry kid named Ernie, who had grand theft auto on his résumé. The other was Errol, a darkly handsome lady-killer. He had syphilis and said that it required him to have a small whisk device inserted into his penis at regular intervals to remove the thin scabs that formed there. I don't know if he was kidding or not, but when he told us this, Walls and Ernie and I could barely speak. But it did make Errol seem awfully cosmopolitan.

The next morning, the newbies were called out by the fellow who had waved to me from the siding. He never announced the fact, but he was the foreman, and his name was Herb Harzbeck. He was German, and there was some talk among the vets on the crew that he had been in the war—on which side was up for debate. The vets called him “Squarehead” behind his back.

On the ground were piles of equipment for the newcomers. We were told to grab a set each. There was a big leather belt about four inches wide with slots for tools. There were also spikes attached to braces, with leather straps to hold them to your legs. These were called pole gaffs. The braces went from the instep to just below the knee. They strapped around the top of the calf and at the ankle, and there was another leather strap that went under the boot. After a few false starts, we managed to get the pole gaffs on and hobbled around a bit, the way skiers do with a new pair of boots. There was a pile of leather gloves with long gauntlets that came up almost to the elbow. We sifted through the lot, trying to find pairs that matched and fit. When we were suited up, Herb brought us over to one of the telegraph poles to show us how to climb: hands on either side of the pole; lean back, but not too far. And then drive the first spike into the wood. When that was set, drive the next spike in a little higher. Then the next one, and so forth. He was essentially walking up the pole, and he made it look easy.

It was not easy. I'd seen telephone repairmen back home climbing poles that had metal footholds all the way up, almost like ladders. But they wore safety belts that allowed them to lean back and fix whatever needed fixing. Here there were no foot grips. I asked Herb where the safety belts were, and he gave me a dismissive look. There were no safety belts. We took turns trying to climb the pole. There were a number of false starts and tumbles. I could get up maybe three steps before my arms gave out or one of my spikes didn't

dig in deep enough and I fell to the ground. *This was all a terrible mistake*, I kept thinking. At the end of the demonstration and my own feeble attempts, I worked my way over to Herb and said that there had been some sort of error—that I had signed on to be a groundman. “No groundmen,” he barked. “Just linemen.”

Over the next couple of days, my general fear of heights and my more specific fear of falling off a telegraph pole began to subside. I managed to climb a 20-foot pole. And then a 30-foot pole. I began to get cocky, and in an attempt to scramble up one of the taller poles, I slipped near the top and shot straight down. In my shock and embarrassment, I didn’t notice it at first, but I had torn the front of my shirt and ripped big patches of skin off my chest. One of the patches held the few chest hairs I had grown by this point in my life. Herb took me to the reefer car. He cleaned off the blood and put a block of ice on my chest, which eased the pain. Then he wrapped my chest in a bandage. The skin began to heal in a couple of weeks, and within months was back to normal. And lo, where there had been a few sprigs, something approaching actual chest hair began to appear.

### Graydon Carter: Christopher Hitchens was fearless

That summer, I had been trying to grow my hair long. I wanted to be a hippie—or at least look like one. But one day, Herb motioned to me and Walls and made us sit down in front of him. He pulled an electric shaver out of his vest and shaved us to the scalp. Aside from the lack of a criminal record, which in this group was like working in a hospital without a medical degree, I wanted to stand out. There is nothing more parochial or bland than being a soft, white Anglican kid from Ottawa. I feigned being something of a Jewish intellectual. In this crowd, the mere fact that I had brought books singled me out as a great thinker. A few of the tougher hands took to calling me “Professor.”

Those telegraph poles you see alongside train tracks served two purposes back then. One was for sending telegrams. The other was to enable dispatchers to know where the trains were at any given moment. The telegraph wires would eventually wear out, and our job as linemen was to haul fresh wire up the pole on our shoulders, remove the old wire, let it drop to the ground, and then connect the new wire to the glass insulators on the

horizontal wooden spars. Once we had mastered the fine art of climbing, we were ready to be put to use. We were awake at 5 a.m., and after breakfast we suited up and stood around anxiously. Even in late spring, it was cold on a Canadian-prairie morning, a few degrees above freezing. We would wear two or three layers on top to stay warm. A group of us would climb onto a motor car—not one of those contraptions from silent movies, with hand-operated seesaw locomotion, but a motorized cart with benches big enough for five or six men on either side. We would be dropped off half a mile apart, on the assumption that we could each cover half a mile of track before lunch.



On that first morning, I jumped off the motor car. There was already a climber half a mile behind me. And in minutes, one would be deposited half a mile in front of me. Other than that, it was just me and nothing but flat prairie. The new telegraph line had been laid out alongside the track. The poles up ahead looked to be no taller than 20 feet. It took me two or three attempts to reach the top of the first one. Like all the others, it was covered in creosote, a black, sticky, coal-tar coating that preserved the wood but stuck to gloves, jeans, and skin. I survived the first pole. I survived the second pole. In four hours, I made it to the spot, half a mile beyond, where the climber after me had been dropped off earlier in the day. The temperature had risen 30 degrees between sunrise and noon, and I had gradually started to remove layers of clothing.

The motor car appeared in the distance and came my way. It stopped to pick up other climbers, and then every few hundred yards or so, we'd stop and grab the clothes we had all discarded as the temperature rose. This was in the days before bottled water, and by the time we were picked up, we were parched. There was a big cooler on the motor car, and a ladle. I opened the top and saw that it indeed contained water, but not just water. The surface was awash with dead flies and bits of grass. I dipped the ladle into the cooler and gingerly managed to get it out without picking up any extras. The water was warm and fetid. But it was wet, and I learned to appreciate it. We returned to the railcars for lunch, then went back out for another four hours.

One morning, Herb threw a bunch of canvas hats on the ground. "Take them," he said. We each grabbed one. The hats came with a fine mesh that fell from the brim onto our shoulders. They were mosquito hats. We were heading into a patch where the black flies were horrendous. Black flies are not like houseflies. Canadian black flies are the size of a thumb tip, and they bite. For three days, we lived in those hats. We never took them off. We lifted the netting when we were eating to make way for food. We slept with them on too. At night, the sound of black flies smacking against the mesh screens was unnerving.

Evenings were spent smoking, drinking, playing cards, and reading. Then the whole ordeal started again the next morning. Weekends were different. At sundown on Friday, we were given passes on the Canadian National trains and could travel as far as we wanted, as long as we were back at work

and ready to climb at 5 o'clock sharp on Monday. On one of our first weekends off, Walls and I decided we'd try to make it to Winnipeg, about 600 miles to the east. I resolved to take a shower before leaving. The routine for this was highly labor-intensive. It involved going to the reefer car and chipping off a chunk of ice about half the size of a cinder block. You put the ice in a pail and then onto a stove to melt it. Then you took the pail and poured the water into a contraption that looked like a watering can and hooked it to the ceiling over the shower area. You pulled the nozzle down a bit, wetted yourself, soaped, and prayed there'd be enough water left to rinse off.

There were no sleepers available on that trip to Winnipeg, so they put us in the mail car, near the end of the train. We slept on sacks with the Royal Mail Canada logo on them. Old locomotives in those days had bunks right in the engine, and on a subsequent trip, Walls and I were allowed to sleep there. Meals were taken in the dining car. We were a pretty scruffy lot, so they usually sat us in the back, near the kitchen, where big, muscular men cooked up meals on long grills heated by gas jets.

### In Focus: Jack Delano's color photos of Chicago's rail yards in the 1940s

By most Fridays, though, we were too worn out to travel. Saturdays were for writing home, reading, and the occasional water fight. The siding was equipped with dozens of fire extinguishers. They were big red canisters that you filled with water and then strapped to your back. There was a pump that you compressed with one hand, and a hose for the other hand. We'd load them up and divide into teams. Often it would escalate. During one fight, we climbed to the roofs of the boxcars and scampered across the tops the way gunfighters did in old Westerns.

During one such water battle, we noticed an enormous machine off in the distance. As it approached along the track, we realized that it was a vehicle maybe two stories high and two or three times as long as a boxcar. It crept ahead slowly, deliberately, replacing old track with new track. Half of its large crew loosened the rails in front of the machine. And the other half tightened the new rails down in its wake. As the machine got closer, it became apparent that this was a much rougher-looking crew than ours. We

put away our water cannons and just watched as the machine made its way slowly by us.

The water cannons were always filled for emergency use. Often this involved putting out brush fires that started in the midday sun when what were called “hot boxes” went by. These were overheated axle bearings that could accidentally ignite the brush. We’d be sent out on motor cars to extinguish the flames. On my first fire call, the wind picked up, and the flames licked skyward and singed my eyebrows down to almost nothing. They grew back, but never as thickly as they had been before the fire.

We were advised to stand well clear of the ditches that border the rails when the Super Continental, the railroad’s gleaming passenger train, whisked by every day. One rookie hadn’t heard this bit of useful information, and on his first day, as the train sped through, he got too close. He was soaked and a bit more: Someone had flushed a toilet. Back then, there were no holding tanks on trains; when you flushed, the waste just emptied onto the tracks. The Super Continental came by at the same time every day. Often we’d make a pact to pull our pants down and moon the passengers.

Our cook got sick at one point and was sent home to Saskatoon. Herb announced that we’d each take turns cooking a meal. We had complained about the food when the cook was there. But with him gone, it deteriorated rapidly. I had never cooked a thing in my life. When my time came, I went to the reefer car to scout the provisions. There was a large leg of something, so I brought it to the kitchen. A coating of green covered parts of it, and I cut those sections off with a knife. And then I put the meat in the oven. I had no idea what temperature to set the oven at or how long to leave the meat there. I didn’t want to burn it, so I set the oven at medium heat and left it for three hours. I told Walls about this, and he told me I was out of my mind. We raced to the kitchen and opened the oven door. The meat had barely cooked at all. And given that it was about a foot thick, he told me that we would need another four or five hours at high heat. Dinner was late that night, and as we picked through the stringy, undercooked meat, I kept my head low to avoid the looks coming my way from my fellow diners.

Our pal Errol had a habit of heading into town to pick up local girls. One night he returned a bit drunk and fell into his bunk. The lights were out and

he drifted off to sleep. Sometime in the middle of the night, the door to the bunk car was kicked open, and all of us inside were jolted awake. Three men stormed in with flashlights, going from bunk to bunk. When the light shone into my eyes, I covered them with my hand. The men continued to move down the car until they got to Errol's bunk. Two of them grabbed him and hauled him outside. We couldn't see much in the dark, but clearly they were working Errol over pretty badly. Then they left, screaming obscenities, and made their way, flashlights in hand, across the open field. Walls and I ran outside to see if Errol was okay. He was. But just. He had a broken rib and a black eye and was bleeding from the head. We woke Herb and he came and bandaged him up.

In the morning, we heard the backstory. It seemed that Errol had tried to pick up one of the men's girlfriend, and she was up for his affections. He left the crew a few days later, and we never heard from him again.

I had signed on for six months, and as my tour of duty was coming to an end, I was still unsure about what I was going to do with my life. I'd had jobs before, but none like this. My parents weren't alone in making sure their kids were busy during the summer, working at something, anything. An "allowance" was a thing we read about in American books and magazines. As a result, I was always digging around for pocket money. During winters, I had worked as a ski instructor at a local club and sorted mail at the post office over Christmas break. In the summers, I worked as a camp counselor and canoe instructor. I worked as an unarmed bank guard one hot summer, and I pumped gas.

Nothing I had done before, or pretty much anything I did after, could match the sense of accomplishment and sheer exhilaration of that half year on the railroad. I liked being around the crew, most of whom had endured hardscrabble childhoods and had just naturally gotten into a bit of trouble in their teens and 20s. When my stint was done, I packed my gear into my duffel bag and said my goodbyes to the other fellows. Walls and I kept in touch for a while, but in the days before the internet, this wasn't easy. One day, a letter I had sent him came back with a stamp saying he had moved. A decade or so ago, I heard from a friend of his that Walls had died, which saddened me terribly.

Out on the line on one of my last days, just before dusk, I was preparing to get picked up for the trip back to the bunk car when I saw the Super Continental in the distance. I clambered up to a field beside the tracks to watch it go by. It was traveling slowly, and in the pink late-afternoon light, I could see into the dining car. There was a young couple seated inside. They were nicely dressed and looked to be having a good time in the amber glow of the table lamp by the window. Lonely, tired, and dirty, I felt a million miles away from the attractive couple. It was then that I resolved that, whatever I did, I was done with showering at the end of the week rather than the beginning of the day. It was time to get on with the life I envisioned for myself. I wasn't completely sure what that was going to be. But I knew one thing: I wanted to be on the other side of that window.

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*This article was adapted from Graydon Carter's new memoir, [When the Going Was Good](#). It appears in the [April 2025](#) print edition with the headline "On Track."*

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# The Trump World Order

**In the MAGA vision of the national interest, might will make right.**

by George Packer



The best way to dismantle the federal government, then repurpose it as a tool of personal power and ideological warfare, is to start with the soft targets. Entitlements and defense, which comprise more than half of federal spending and a large share of its fraud and waste, enjoy too much support for

Elon Musk to roll them up easily. But nothing is less popular than sending taxpayers' money to unknown people in poor, faraway countries that might be rife with corruption. Americans dislike foreign aid so much that they [wrongly believe it consumes at least a quarter of the budget](#) (in the previous fiscal year, aid [constituted barely 1 percent](#)). President John F. Kennedy understood the problem, and after creating the United States Agency for International Development, in 1961, he told his advisers: "We hope we can tie this whole concept of aid to the safety of the United States. That is the reason we give aid. The test is whether it will serve the United States. Aid is not a good word. Perhaps we can describe it better as 'Mutual Assistance.'" At another meeting, Kennedy suggested "International Security."

USAID continued for the next six decades because leaders of both parties believed that ending polio, preventing famine, stabilizing poor countries, strengthening democracies, and opening new markets served the United States. But on January 20, within hours of his inauguration, President Donald Trump signed an executive order that froze foreign aid. USAID was instructed to stop nearly all work. Its Washington headquarters was occupied and sensitive data were seized by whiz kids from Musk's Department of Government Efficiency, or DOGE. One of their elder members, a 25-year-old software engineer and Matt Gaetz fan named Gavin Kliger, acquired an official email address to instruct the staff of USAID to stay home.

Contractors were fired and employees were placed on indefinite leave; those on overseas missions were given 30 days to return to the States with their families. Under orders to remain silent, they used pseudonyms on encrypted chats to inform the outside world of what was going on. When I spoke on Signal with government employees, they sounded as if they were in Moscow or Tehran. "It felt like it went very authoritarian very quickly," one civil servant told me. "You have to watch everything you say and do in a way that is gross."

The website [usaid.gov](#) vanished, then [reappeared with a bare-bones announcement of the organization's dismemberment](#), followed by the message "Thank you for your service." A veteran USAID official called it "brutal—from some 20-year-old idiot who doesn't know anything. What the fuck do you know about my service?" A curtain fell over the public information that could have served to challenge the outpouring of lies and

distortions from the White House and from Musk, who called USAID “a criminal organization” and “evil.” If you looked into the charges, nearly all turned out to be outright falsehoods, highly misleading, or isolated examples of the kind of stupid, wasteful programs that exist in any organization.

A grant for hundreds of ethnic-minority students from Myanmar to attend universities throughout Southeast Asia became a propaganda tool in the hands of the wrecking crew because it went under the name “Diversity and Inclusion Scholarship Program”—as if the money were going to a “woke” bureaucracy, not to Rohingya refugees from the military regime’s genocide. The orthodoxy of a previous administration required the terminology; the orthodoxy of the new one has ended the students’ education and forced them to return to the country that oppressed them. One of Trump’s executive orders is called “Defending Women Against Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government”; meanwhile, the administration [suspended the online education of nearly 1,000 women in Afghanistan](#) who had been studying undetected by the Taliban with funding from the State Department.

But hardly anyone in this country knows these things. Contesting Musk’s algorithmically boosted lies on X with the tools of a reporter is like fighting a wildfire with a garden hose.

With no workforce or funding, USAID’s efforts around the world—vaccine campaigns in Nepal, HIV-drug distribution in Nigeria, nutrition for starving children in Sudanese refugee camps—were forced to end. Secretary of State Marco Rubio (who championed USAID as a senator and now, as the agency’s acting head, is its executioner) issued a waiver for lifesaving programs. But it proved almost meaningless, because the people needed to run the programs were locked out of their computers, had no way to communicate, and feared punishment if they kept working.

The heedlessness of the aid wreckers recalls Nick Carraway’s description in [The Great Gatsby](#) of Tom and Daisy Buchanan: “They were careless people, Tom and Daisy—they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made.” An agency of 10,000 employees is shrinking to about 300 and, despite its

statutory independence, being dissolved into the State Department. The veteran USAID official I spoke with foresaw a skeletal operation reduced to health and food assistance, with everything else—education, the environment, governance, economic development—gone. But even basic humanitarian programs will be nearly impossible to sustain with the numbers that the administration envisions—for example, 12 staff members for all of Africa.

“This is the infrastructure and architecture that has given us a doubling of the human lifespan,” Atul Gawande, the writer and surgeon who was the most recent, and perhaps last, head of the agency’s Bureau for Global Health, told me. “Taking it down kills people.”

Trump and Musk’s destruction of USAID was a trial blitzkrieg: Send tanks and bombers into defenseless Poland to see what works before turning on the Western powers. The assault provided a model for eviscerating the rest of the federal bureaucracy. It also demonstrated the radicalism of Trump’s view of America’s role in the world.

Every president from Franklin D. Roosevelt to Barack Obama understood that American power was enhanced, not threatened, by attaching it to alliances, institutions, and values that the American people support, such as freedom, pluralism, and humanitarianism. This was the common idea behind Harry Truman’s Marshall Plan for postwar Europe, Kennedy’s establishment of USAID, Jimmy Carter’s creation of the U.S. refugee program, and George W. Bush’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief. These weren’t simple acts of generosity. They were designed to prevent chaos and misery from overwhelming other countries and, eventually, harming our own. They expanded American influence by attraction rather than coercion, showing people around the world that the Leviathan could benefit them, too. Political scientists call this “soft power.”

Every president betrayed these ideas in one way or another, making U.S. foreign policy a fat target for criticism at home and abroad, by the left and the right. Kennedy used foreign aid to wage a bloody counterinsurgency in South Vietnam; Carter put human rights at the center of his policy and then toasted the repressive shah of Iran; Bush, claiming to be spreading democracy to the Middle East, seriously damaged America’s global

legitimacy. USAID antagonized host governments and local populations with its arrogance and bloat. “We had a hand in our own destruction,” one longtime official told me. “We threw money in areas we didn’t need to.”

But the alternative to the hypocrisies of soft power and the postwar liberal order was never going to be a chastened, humbler American foreign policy —neither the left’s fantasy of a plus-size Norway nor the right’s of a return to the isolationist 1920s. The U.S. is far too big, strong, and messianic for voluntary diminishment. The choice for this superpower is between enlightened self-interest, with all its blind spots and failures, and raw coercion.

Trump is showing what raw coercion looks like. Rather than negotiate with Canada and Mexico, impose U.S. demands with tariffs; rather than strengthen NATO, undermine it and threaten a conflict with one of its smallest, most benign member countries; rather than review aid programs for their efficacy, shut them down, slander the people who make them work, and shrug at the humanitarian catastrophe that follows. The deeper reason for the extinction event at USAID is Trump’s contempt for anything that looks like cooperation between the strong and the weak. “America First” is more imperialist than isolationist, which is why William McKinley, not George Washington or John Quincy Adams, is Donald Trump’s new presidential hero. He’s using a techno-futurist billionaire to return America to the late 19th century, when the civil service was a patronage network and great-power doctrine held that “might makes right.” He’s ridding himself and the country of restraining codes—the rule of law at home, the rules-based order abroad—and replacing them with a simple test: “What’s in it for me?” He’s unilaterally disarming America of its soft power, making the United States no different from China, Russia, or Iran. This is why the gutting of USAID has received propaganda assistance and glowing reviews from Beijing, Moscow, and Tehran.

Transactional logic has an obvious appeal. Dispensing with the annoying niceties of multilateral partnerships and foreign aid brings a kind of clarity to international relations, showing where the real muscle is, like a strip-down before a wrestling match. Set loose, the U.S. might be strong enough to work its will on weaker friends and neighbors, or at least claim to do so. Trump’s threat of tariffs to intimidate Colombia into allowing deportation

flights to land there was like the assault on USAID—an easy demonstration project. His domination of the propaganda sphere allows him to convince the public of victories even where, as with Canada, there was never much of a dispute to begin with. If NATO dissolved while the U.S. grabbed Greenland, many Americans would regard it as a net win: We'd save money and gain a strategic chunk of the North Atlantic while freeing ourselves of an obligation whose benefit to us wasn't entirely clear.

It isn't obvious why funding the education of oppressed Burmese students serves our national interest. It's easier to see the advantages of strong-arming weak countries into giving in to our demands. If this creates resentment, well, who said gratitude mattered between nations? Strength has its own attractive force. A sizable cohort of Americans have made their peace with Trump, not because he tempered his cruelty and checked his abuses but because he is at the height of his power and is using it without restraint. This is called power worship. The Russian invasion of Ukraine won Vladimir Putin a certain admiration in countries of the global South, as well as among MAGA Americans, while Joe Biden's appeals to democratic values seemed pallid and hypocritical. The law of "might makes right" is the political norm in most countries. Trump needs no explaining in Nigeria or India.

Coercion also depends on the American people's shortsightedness and incuriosity. Trump's flood of executive orders and Musk's assault on the federal government are intended to create such chaos that not even the insiders most affected understand what's happening. An inattentive public might simply see a Washington melee—the disrupters against the bureaucrats. Short of going to war, if the U.S. starts behaving like the great powers of earlier centuries and the rival powers of our own, how many Americans will notice a difference in their own lives?

A sense of loyalty and compassion is at the core of American national pride, and its betrayal exacts a cost that can't be easily measured.

According to Rubio, the purpose of the aid pause is to weed out programs that don't advance "core national interests." Gawande compared the process to stopping a plane in midair and firing the crew in order to conduct a review of the airline industry. But the light of the bonfire burning in Washington makes it easier to see how soft power actually works—how most aid

programs do serve the national interest. Shutting down African health programs [makes monitoring the recent outbreak of Ebola in Uganda, and preventing its spread from that region to the rest of the world, nearly impossible](#). In many countries, the end of aid opens the door wider to predatory Chinese loans and propaganda. As one USAID official explained: “My job literally was countering China, providing development assistance in a much nicer, kinder, partnership way to local people who were being pressured and had their arms twisted.” When 70 Afghan students in central Asia, mostly women, had their scholarships to American universities suddenly suspended and in some cases their plane tickets canceled, the values of freedom and open inquiry lost a bit of their attractiveness. The American college administrator responsible for the students told me, “Young people who are sympathetic to the United States and share our best values are not only not being welcomed; they’re having the door slammed in their faces.”

Most Americans don’t want to believe that their government is taking lifesaving medicine away from sick people in Africa, or betraying Afghans who sacrificed for this country. They might disapprove of foreign aid, but they want starving children to be fed. This native generosity explains why Trump and Musk have gone to such lengths to [clog the internet with falsehoods](#) and hide the consequences of their cruelty. The only obstacle to ending American soft power isn’t Congress, the bureaucracy, or the courts, but public opinion.

One of the country’s most popular programs is the resettlement of refugees. For decades, ordinary American citizens have welcomed the world’s most persecuted and desperate people—European Jews after World War II, [Vietnamese after the fall of Saigon](#), Afghans after the fall of Kabul.

Refugees are in a separate category from most immigrants: After years of waiting and vetting by U.S. and international agencies, they come here legally, with local sponsors. But Trump and his adviser Stephen Miller see them as no different from migrants crossing the southern border. The flurry of executive orders and memos has [halted the processing of all refugees and ended funding for resettlement](#). The story has received little attention.

Here’s what the program’s shutdown means: I spoke with an Afghan special-forces captain who served alongside Americans—when Kabul was about to

fall in 2021, he prevented armed Taliban at the airport from seizing U.S. weaponry, but he was left behind during the evacuation. Arrested by the new regime, the captain was imprisoned for seven months and suffered regular and severe torture, including the amputation of a testicle. He managed to escape with his family to Pakistan in 2023 and was near the end of being processed as a refugee when Trump took office. He had heard Trump criticize the Biden administration for leaving military equipment behind in Afghanistan. Because he had worked to prevent that from happening, he told me, “that gave me a hope that the new administration would value my work and look at me as a valuable person, a person who is aligned with all the administration is hoping to achieve, and that would give a chance for my kids and family to be moved out safely.” Biden’s ineptitude stranded the captain once; Trump’s coldheartedness is doing it again.

A sense of loyalty and compassion isn’t extraneous to American identity; it is at the core of national pride, and its betrayal exacts a cost that can’t be easily measured. The Biden administration created a program called Welcome Corps that allows ordinary Americans to act as resettlement agencies. (My wife and I participated in it.) In Pennsylvania, a retiree named Chuck Pugh formed a sponsor group to bring an Afghan family here, and the final medical exam was completed just before Inauguration Day. When resettlement was abruptly ended, Pugh found himself wondering, *Who are we? I know what I want to think, but I’m just not sure*. The sponsor group includes Pugh’s sister, Virginia Mirra. She and her husband are devout Christians and ardent Trump supporters. When I asked her early this month how she felt about the suspension of the refugee program, she sounded surprised, and disappointed—she hadn’t heard the news. “I feel sad about that,” she said. “It does bother me. It’s starting to sink in. With these people in danger, I would wonder if there would be an exception made for them. How would we go about that?” Her husband frequently sends American-flag lapel pins to Trump, and I suggested that he write the president about the Afghan family. “I will talk to my husband tonight,” Mirra said. “And I will continue to pray that the Lord will protect them and bring them to this country by some means. I do believe in miracles.”

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# The Real Goal of the Trump Economy

**The president isn't trying to engineer prosperity for Americans. He's seeking power for himself.**

by Jonathan Chait



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

A quarter century ago, Vladimir Putin gathered [21 of Russia's top oligarchs](#) in the Kremlin to let them know that he, not they, held power in Russia. The young Russian president (not yet for life) informed them that they could

keep the wealth they'd amassed if they complied with his political goals. Partnership with Putin held out the prospect of safety, and even greater riches. "We received confirmation," an attendee named Mikhail B. Khodorkovsky said, "that the development of Russian business is one of the state's top priorities."

Most of the oligarchs submitted, but those who didn't went to prison or into exile, lest they fall prey to the country's epidemic of window-plunging deaths. (Khodorkovsky was imprisoned, putatively for fraud and tax evasion, but really for supporting independent media and opposition parties.) Since then, affinity for Putin has been a sine qua non of high-level economic success in Russia.

An eerily reminiscent scene played out late last year at Mar-a-Lago, Donald Trump's Winter Palace, where Stephen Miller, one of Trump's loyalty enforcers, met with Meta's CEO, Mark Zuckerberg. The weather was more pleasant, and presumably neither party contemplated defenestration as a settlement alternative, but many other details seemed to echo. "Mr. Miller told Mr. Zuckerberg that he had an opportunity to help reform America, but it would be on President-elect Donald J. Trump's terms," [\*The New York Times\* reported](#). Because [Trump had recently warned](#), "We are watching [Zuckerberg] closely, and if he does anything illegal" during Trump's second term, "he will spend the rest of his life in prison," this opportunity must have sounded enticing. Zuckerberg indicated that he would not in any way obstruct Trump's agenda, according to the *Times*, and foisted blame for any prior offenses onto subordinates.

By the time Trump assumed power, Zuckerberg was lavishing him with praise. "We now have a U.S. administration that is proud of our leading companies," he gushed of the man who had once threatened him with prison, "that prioritizes American technology winning. And that will defend our values and interests abroad." His rehabilitation complete, Zuckerberg assumed a place of pride at Trump's inauguration, alongside Jeff Bezos, Elon Musk, and other titans of industry. His eyes were now on the future, and the promised Trumpian Golden Age.

The president's public communion with the business titans who have submitted to him has been analyzed as a signal of his authoritarianism and

his alliance with the rich. But it also reveals another emerging aspect of Trumpism: his rejection of the capitalist principles that ultimately generate prosperity.

Trump has never believed in the invisible hand—in leaving people alone to pursue self-interest in a free market; in letting market forces allocate capital and arbitrate any given company’s success or failure. Nor does he even believe in traditional mercantilist protection. He believes, like Putin, in political control of the economy’s commanding heights—success for those executives and companies who please him, failure for those who don’t. And he seems to be seeking that control more actively than he did in 2016.

Already, Trump’s words and actions have brought about a psychological transformation within the executive class. Presidents and business leaders have sometimes tangled, or formed partnerships, but the combination of fear and solicitousness that Trump now commands is wholly new.

After the election, [\*The Wall Street Journal\* reported](#), businesses began looking at steps such as “buying the Trump family’s cryptocurrency token” and scrubbing their websites of Democratic-friendly language. Stanley Black & Decker took down an old post-insurrection statement saying it would “use our voice to advocate for our democracy and a peaceful transition of power,” and donated \$1 million to Trump’s inauguration fund. A steel executive hoping to win Trump’s approval to purchase U.S. Steel held a press conference in Butler, Pennsylvania—a holy site in the MAGA universe since the assassination attempt at a rally there in July—where he declared, “America First!”

Bezos has not renewed his financial support for the Science Based Targets initiative, which works with businesses looking to cut emissions. After Trump gave Musk, the largest donor to his campaign, a limitless portfolio to reshape federal policy, businesses began to see Musk’s commercial empire as a route to political favor too, as [\*the Financial Times noted in February\*](#). Visa struck a payment-processing deal with Musk’s controversial social-media site, X, while Amazon boosted its planned marketing there. Musk’s former rivals hastily reconsidered their rivalries: JPMorganChase dropped a lawsuit against Tesla (the company said the timing was coincidental), and

Jamie Dimon announced on CNBC that he had “hugged it out” with Musk after a long feud.

The *Journal*, as America’s most prominent business paper, has documented this cultural transformation in remarkably clear terms. Sentences like this began appearing regularly after the election: “Executives across the corporate sphere are working to get in the good graces of the new administration” (November). “Titans of the business world are rushing to make inroads with the president-elect, gambling that personal relationships with the next occupant of the Oval Office will help their bottom lines and spare them from Trump’s wrath” (December). “Companies seeking Trump’s favor have plenty to gain” (January). The newspaper that American capitalists consult to find out how to run their businesses is informing them that they must gain Trump’s favor if they want to get ahead.

It would be naive to depict this behavior as totally novel. For decades, big companies have spent great sums on lobbying, and their executives have long made pilgrimages to Washington to advance their interests. And they’ve often gotten results.

But Trump appears to be ushering in a change not only in the degree of government favoritism, but also in kind. And the velocity of the transformation, coming as it does alongside a cascade of tumbling norms, can obscure how differently he is operating.

The change can be seen most blatantly in the media industry, which has drawn Trump’s gaze more than any other. Bezos, the owner of *The Washington Post*, and Patrick Soon-Shiong, who owns the *Los Angeles Times*, spiked endorsements of Kamala Harris, claiming they would give off the appearance of bias, but then after the election made personal statements praising Trump or his Cabinet picks, as if that somehow wouldn’t. Since then, several major companies have settled lawsuits that Trump had brought against them, and that likely would have been defeated if not laughed out of court. ABC, owned by Disney, donated \$15 million to Trump’s presidential library to settle his complaint that George Stephanopoulos had described Trump as having been found liable for rape (he was found liable for sexual abuse). After incoming Federal Communications Commission Chair Brendan Carr warned Paramount executives that their merger bid could be at

risk because of Trump's anger at CBS, which Paramount owns, the network [reportedly began talks to settle a frivolous \\$10 billion lawsuit](#) complaining that *60 Minutes* had edited out unflattering portions of its interview with Harris. Even after the presiding judge expressed extreme skepticism at the merits of Trump's lawsuit against Meta for suspending him from Facebook after the January 6 insurrection—a right it clearly possessed as a private entity—Zuckerberg offered up \$25 million in penance.

### [Read: Trump says the corrupt part out loud](#)

Putting the screws to media owners in particular, especially early on, seems to follow the same playbook that Putin and other strongmen have used to consolidate their power. So does finding opportunities for personal enrichment along the way. (Putin, a lifelong public servant, has become one of the world's wealthiest men.) Filing weak or groundless lawsuits and expecting his targets to settle for fear of government retribution appears to be a perfectly legal way for Trump to collect baksheesh.

Although Trump has so far devoted the most attention to media businesses, he has not ignored the broader economy. Every economic-policy decision he makes is a potential weapon to punish dissent or reward his friends, beginning with tariffs.

### [David Frum: The price America will pay for Trump's tariffs](#)

Trump has never described himself as a free-market purist, and his enthusiasm for levying imports is his best-known deviation from his party's traditional economic philosophy. This impulse is often described as a protectionist instinct, aimed at helping shield key industries or American businesses generally. But in fact, Trump's tariff strategy, [if you want to call it that](#), hardly advances any coherent economic goal. He has threatened tariffs on countries for non-economic reasons, and levied tariffs on industrial inputs, such as aluminum and copper, that [make American industries less, not more, competitive](#) by raising their costs. Trump apparently believes that tariffs are borne by foreigners, and are therefore an untapped source of free money from overseas. He enjoys the idea of using them as levers to extract diplomatic concessions as well.

Trump brings together the least attractive elements of capitalism and socialism, fusing heavy-handed state control with high inequality.

But Trump has also used tariffs to gain personal and political leverage over American businesses. During his first term, Trump levied broad tariffs and then entertained a parade of executives pleading for exemptions, which his administration doled out at its whim. The Office of the United States Trade Representative fielded more than 50,000 requests from domestic businesses for exceptions to the tariffs on Chinese goods alone, while the Commerce Department sifted through almost half a million waiver requests. Trump's decisions were often arbitrary—Bibles got a tariff exception, on the apparent basis that their costs needed to stay low, but textbooks did not.

[One study of the exceptions](#), published by the *Journal of Financial and Quantitative Analysis*, found that firms that had donated to Trump or hired staff from his administration were more likely to receive tariff exceptions. The tariffs, and the ability to hand out exceptions without any oversight or method, were “a very effective spoils system allowing the administration of the day to reward its political friends and punish its enemies,” the authors concluded.

A [2019 investigation by the Commerce Department’s inspector general](#) reported “the appearance of improper influence in decision-making” in the waiver process. In his second term, Trump has managed to solve this problem—if you define *problem* as the exposure of corruption rather than its existence—by firing, to date, the inspectors general at 18 federal agencies, including Commerce.

Trump's greatest advantage in this regard is that he has never professed adherence to any standard of fairness. When he discusses his plans to regulate businesses, or reward them with tax breaks, he [does so in nakedly transactional terms](#). The business community understands that every decision the federal government makes, whether it involves antitrust enforcement or taxation or criminal justice, will be meted out on the basis of Trump's political and personal whims. Trump does not even pretend otherwise, because the pretense would undermine his power.

Presidents may not be angels. But they used to follow a general presumption of leaving the task of picking winners and losers to the private sector. They likewise observed a wall between public and private interest that we can barely recognize today.

Seventy-two years ago, President Dwight Eisenhower selected Charlie Wilson, the head of General Motors, as his defense secretary. Skeptical members of Congress quizzed Wilson as to how he would put aside residual loyalty to his former company. Wilson confessed, “For years I thought what was good for the country was good for General Motors, and vice versa.” The confession scandalized the country. Although Wilson was trying to say that General Motors benefited from national prosperity, the very possibility that he might conflate the interests of his former employer with those of the country was beyond the pale.

#### [From the April 2018 issue: Is Big Business really that bad?](#)

At the moment, large swaths of government policy are being dictated by the current CEO of a car company. And yet it is unfathomable that the Trump administration would deem Elon Musk’s dual role unethical, let alone demand that he step down from Tesla and his other companies as a condition of public service. Musk, like Trump, respects no distinction between his personal financial interests, those of his political party, and those of the country. The seamless connection between political power and personal wealth tells everybody who belongs to the upper class or aspires to it that their safest path is to join the ruling clique.

This is alarming for any number of reasons. But, not least among them, it violates the key precept of any free-enterprise system: that market competition dictates which businesses succeed or fail. Through innovation and creative destruction, this kind of competition yields national prosperity.

The nature of Trump’s economic vision—populist? nationalist? traditional conservative?—has been the subject of endless debate. The reality is that he brings together the least attractive elements of capitalism and socialism, fusing heavy-handed state control with high inequality, and entrenching a set of oligarchs who serve simultaneously as the ruling party’s victims and co-

conspirators. The more that political favor displaces market competition as the basis of corporate success, the worse things will get.

It may seem to Americans influenced by Trump's well-crafted persona as a business genius or lulled by the record of his first term (when he inherited a growing economy) that he will bring some pro-business magic to his second term. Yet favoring incumbent businesses (as long as they stay on his good side) is not the same as favoring healthy free markets. Putin is in some ways a great ally of Russian business, and the country's economic elite supports him, but Russia's economy should be seen by intelligent advocates of capitalism as a vision of hell.

The end point of Trump's vision for the economy would be unrecognizable to generations of innovators. It would sacrifice the openness and opportunity that make America the most enticing destination for entrepreneurs across the world, while locking into place and even celebrating excesses of wealth. If Americans think that by empowering Trump, they have traded away some of their equality, civic decency, and political freedom for prosperity, we may find one day that we have sacrificed them all.

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

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# The Great Salt Shake-Up

## Why has kosher salt replaced table salt in American pantries?

by Ellen Cushing



When I was a child, in the 1990s, there was only one kind of salt; we called it “salt.” It came in a blue cylindrical container—you probably know the one—and we dumped it into pasta water and decanted it into shakers. I didn’t know that any other kind existed, and the women who taught me to cook

didn't seem to, either: *Joy of Cooking*, *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*, and *Moosewood Cookbook* all call, simply, for "salt" in their recipes.

But about a decade ago, I started buying coarse kosher salt instead of the fine, uniform, iodized table salt I'd grown up with. I do not remember why. As my friends grew up and started building their own pantries, many of them also made kosher salt their default. These days, *The New York Times* calls explicitly for kosher salt in nearly all of its recipes, as does *Bon Appétit*. Two of the most influential cookbooks of the past decade, *The Food Lab*, by J. Kenji López-Alt, and *Salt, Fat, Acid, Heat*, by Samin Nosrat, both devote paragraphs to the benefits of kosher over table salt. It is now "the lingua franca of restaurant kitchens"—as Mark Bitterman, who has written four books about cooking with salt, put it—and a cheffy shibboleth in home kitchens, too. You can find Diamond Crystal, the coolest brand, in the background of the famously verisimilitudinous restaurant show *The Bear*, and on cooking influencers' beautiful countertops; in 2023, when Trader Joe's started carrying it, chef Reddit exploded in enthusiastic all caps.

Pretty much everyone eats salt, every day, and it's different now. Yet even kosher salt's most fervent converts may not entirely understand *how* it's different.

Kosher salt, like all salt, is NaCl—sodium ions electrostatically bound with chloride ions and arranged in a crystal formation. Unlike certain specialty salts, it doesn't have unique properties by virtue of its provenance; it's not collected from the coast of France or mined from a mountain in Pakistan. Kosher salt is just big salt.

It's also more expensive than table salt. You might assume that this is because it has been manufactured according to a stringent set of religious rules. But much iodized table salt is kosher—that is, prepared in adherence with Jewish dietary law—and what we call "kosher salt" isn't categorically kosher: If you're feeling pedantic, the right term would be "koshering salt," because its oversize, craggy crystals are best for drawing the blood out of animals during kosher slaughter.

America's great salt swap began in the 1980s, when farmers'-market culture and the health-food movement helped American chefs acquaint themselves

with specialty ingredients, Bitterman told me: Himalayan pink salt; “bad-ass, real good” *fleur de sel* from France.

But by and large, chefs settled on kosher as their go-to. They did this for a reason so unbelievably basic that I laughed out loud when I first heard it: Kosher salt is easier to pick up. “Table salt is too hard to pinch,” Adam Ragusea, a food YouTuber, told me. “I mean, just try it. Anyone who’s reading, just try it. Just pick it up … It’s a pain in the ass, and it’s messy.”

Kosher salt is simply better for the way chefs tend to season their food, which is frequently, and without measuring, by eye and by feel. No one wants to be fiddling with a teaspoon on the line at a busy restaurant during the dinner rush. “You can really feel it sort of touching your fingers, and leaving your fingers,” Chris Morocco, the food director at *Bon Appétit* and *Epicurious*, told me, whereas finer salt “has a tendency to want to slip away.”

Kosher salt’s migration to home kitchens started in the late ’90s, when the Food Network became a cultural force. Its big crystals suddenly had an added benefit: They look great being pinched out of a saltcellar and flung around on television, or at least better than table salt does being juddered out of a shaker. (Ina Garten, one of the network’s early celebrities, has described Diamond Crystal kosher salt as “always perfect.”) As television turned chefs into celebrities, their fans began trying to emulate them at home.

At the same time, recipes, like the rest of media, were moving online, and their tone was changing. Older cookbooks, Morocco told me, assumed a lot of knowledge on the part of their readers: “Recipe language was very terse. They were not really holding your hand too much.” Online, recipe writers had unlimited space, a broader potential audience, and a business imperative to build a relationship with their readers. So their guidance became chattier and more descriptive, designed for a home cook who was eager to learn—and who could hold recipe developers more immediately accountable, yelling about bland soup or bad bakes in the comments section.

“Salt to taste,” which had for decades been a standard instruction in most savory recipes, gave way to specific measurements. But different salts have different densities, meaning a teaspoon of one brand can be recipe-ruiningly

saltier than that of another. So recipe developers needed to be able to recommend a standard salt. Being chefs, they already liked kosher. In 2011, *Bon Appétit*, which was then becoming a major resource for Millennials teaching themselves how to cook, adopted Diamond Crystal as its house salt.

This is all a little funny. Restaurant chefs started using kosher precisely because it was easy to use *without* measuring—now home cooks are measuring it out by the teaspoon. And a movement that espoused seeking the ideal ingredients for every dish resulted in widespread adoption of a one-size-fits-all salt.

In doing so, modern cooking has inadvertently all but abandoned one of the most significant public-health advances in history. A few years ago, a 6-year-old girl showed up at a medical clinic in Providence, Rhode Island, her neck so swollen that it looked like she'd swallowed a grapefruit whole. After a series of tests, doctors figured it out: She was iodine-deficient. Her thyroid—the butterfly-shaped gland that is responsible for just about everything the body does, and which requires iodine to function—had swelled in an attempt to capture any microgram of iodine it could from her bloodstream.

For centuries, thyroid dysfunction was endemic; millions of people around the world suffered from slow heartbeats, weakness, muscle fatigue, sluggish metabolism, and brain fog. When, in 1924, American manufacturers introduced artificially iodized salts, it was a miracle, right there on the shelf in the grocery store. Within a few years, the thyroids of the developed world were working again.

Recently, however, doctors have started reporting more cases of iodine-deficient hypothyroidism—and our salt preferences may be at least partially to blame. Kosher salt, as you have probably guessed, does not contain iodine. Neither do most ultraprocessed foods, the main vehicle by which most people in this not-exactly-sodium-deficient country take in salt.

Iodine deficiency can be serious, but is eminently treatable. (Pregnant women should be particularly attentive to their iodine levels, the UCLA endocrinologist Angela Leung told me, because deficiency can result in birth defects.) The 21st-century rise in hypothyroidism might therefore be less a cause for alarm than a chance to rethink our contemporary salt orthodoxy.

Kosher's dominance, to hear Bitterman tell it, "doesn't come out of magic or merit—it's cookbook writers and chef culture, a weird confluence of circumstances brainwashing everyone at the same time." What's great for chefs may not be great for home cooks. Kosher salt isn't inherently better, and in some cases may be worse.

I've now spent hours on the phone with salt connoisseurs—at one point, Bitterman earnestly described a certain type as "luscious" and "warm"—and have come around to the view that we should all be more open to using different salts for different purposes, in the same way that well-outfitted cooks might keep different types of olive oil on hand. Flaky *fleur de sel* is great for finishing dishes; flavored salt is perfect on popcorn. And for everyday cooking, iodized table salt is just as good as kosher—preferable, even, if you're worried about your iodine levels. Sure, all the recipes now call for kosher salt, but a solution exists: Ignore the instructions and season intuitively. Like a real chef would.

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*This article appears in the [April 2025](#) print edition with the headline "Kosher Salt Is Actually Just Big Salt." When you buy a book using a link on this page, we receive a commission. Thank you for supporting The Atlantic.*

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## Culture & Critics

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# The Nicest Swamp on the Internet

**Reddit's not perfect, but it may be  
the best platform on a junky web.**

by Adrienne LaFrance



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

In the ever-expanding universe of obsolete sounds, few can compare to the confident yawp of a dial-up modem. Back in the early days, the internet was slow, but we didn't know it yet. Or at least we didn't care. And why should

we have? The stuff of the web was organic, something you had to plant and then harvest. It took time. Websites popped up like wildflowers. Far-flung enthusiasts found one another, but gradually. Nobody owned the web, and everybody did. It was open, and everything seemed possible. Everything *was* possible. Maybe it still is.

Strange things are happening online these days. Strange *bad*, clearly. But also strange *good*. One unexpected development is that Reddit, long dogged by a reputation for mischief and mayhem, has achieved a kind of mass appeal. If you ask your friends where they've been hanging out online lately, you're likely to hear some of them say *Reddit, actually*, perhaps with a tinge of surprise.

Reddit's founders didn't set out to save the web. College roommates Steve Huffman and Alexis Ohanian wanted to create a mobile food-ordering service. But their idea didn't make sense, at least not at the time. It was 2005; the iPhone didn't exist yet. So they built something else, no less ambitious: a site that promised to be "the front page of the internet." Reddit was a place to share all manner of memes, photographs, questions, embarrassing stories, and ideas. Users could upvote posts into internet virality, or sometimes infamy. Eventually, they built their own communities, known as subreddits.

The joy of Reddit comes from it being simultaneously niche and expansive —like an infinite world's fair of subcultures.

For the first decade of its existence, Reddit was not exactly a respectable place to hang out. Like its spiritual cousin 4chan, Reddit was primarily known for, among other things, creepshots, revenge porn, abject racism, anti-Semitism, and violent misogyny. Endearing corners of Reddit existed, but you couldn't get to them without stumbling over some seriously disturbing material.

Some of that disturbing material is still there if you look for it, but lately, the gross stuff has been crowded out by the good stuff, and more and more people have congregated on Reddit. Last year the company went public, saw a huge swell in audience, and became profitable for the first time in its history. And though its runaway growth slowed last quarter, [Reddit says it](#)

[now has](#) more than 100 million daily users and more than 100,000 active communities.

The joy of Reddit comes from it being simultaneously niche and expansive —like an infinite world’s fair of subcultures, fandoms, support groups, and curiosities. There seems to be a subreddit for everyone and everything. There are mainstream subreddits with popular appeal, such as [r/askscience](#) (26 million users) and [r/technology](#) (18 million users). But there are also more esoteric forums, such as [r/rentnerzeigenaufdinge](#), the German-language subreddit that’s devoted to context-free photos of retirees pointing at random things. (That group’s stated purpose: *Hier bekommen alte Menschen die Bühne, die sie verdienen.* “Here, old people get the stage they deserve.”) There’s [r/notableblueberry](#), where people share images of berries that are not blueberries, which other people often warn them not to eat. Some subreddits exist just to deliver a punch line, like [r/Lurkers](#), a community with more than 41,000 members in which no one posts anything at all.

Asking someone where they spend time on Reddit opens a window onto their personality that can be surprisingly intimate. Here, I’ll go: I love [r/whatisit](#), where users share photos of confusing objects they encounter; [r/Honolulu](#), which is a mix of island news and extremely local references; [r/tipofmytongue](#), where people ask for help finding or identifying “un-googleable” songs, movies, books, or other scraps of cultural memory; [r/metropolis](#), dedicated entirely to Fritz Lang’s 1927 film of the same name; and [r/MildlyVandalised](#), a place to share milquetoast visual pranks, such as a shelf of *World Book Encyclopedias* rearranged so their spines lined up to say WEIRD COCK. (Reddit may be less hateful these days, but it is still juvenile.)

There is a subreddit where violinists gently correct one another’s bow holds, a subreddit for rowers where people compare erg scores, and a subreddit for people who are honest-to-God allergic to the cold and trade tips about which antihistamine regimen works best. One subreddit is for people who encounter cookie cutters whose shapes they cannot decipher. The responses reliably entail a mix of sincere sleuthing to find the answer and ridiculously creative and crude joke guesses.

Not everything on Reddit is merely cute, of course. I have lost count of the number of friends who have mentioned to me that they add the word *Reddit* to their Google searches—a shortcut to the place where they know they’ll find the best information online. Google, once the unsurpassed King of Search, has become hostile to its users, surfacing hilariously unhelpful AI responses (including [telling people to eat rocks and glue](#)) and making it woefully difficult to retrieve credible information, even when you know exactly what source you’re looking for. Reddit, by contrast, offers truly specialized knowledge for every need. It provides travel tips to every conceivable destination and practical advice for every imaginable home-improvement project. One friend told me about using Reddit to find the right tension for his tennis-racket strings and the best embroiderer for a custom hockey jersey. And although the wisdom of the crowd is not fact-checked, Reddit’s culture tends to be equal parts generous and skeptical—meaning that good, or at least helpful, information often rises to the top.

Recently, on the r/creepy subreddit, [someone posted about having found a tiny skeleton](#) under the floorboards in their house. “Am I cursed for eternity now?” they wanted to know. The top reply came from someone who explained that they were a zooarchaeologist and could therefore be “95% certain this is a mouse skeleton,” and offered to send their own photo of a mouse skeleton for reference. “Hell yeah,” someone else chimed in. “Ask a random question and get an answer from someone who specializes in the exact niche. Amazing.”

How did this happen? How did Reddit go from being a disgusting fever swamp to an oasis of happiness, expertise, exuberance? Excising the most egregious subreddits was the first step, and not an uncontroversial one. Good and necessary free-speech debates followed. But the site has always given its users more control than other major social platforms. Reddit’s [moderators are almost exclusively volunteers](#), and they are power users. They set the rules for the subreddits they run, and they tend to take their job seriously. The subreddit [r/AskHistorians](#) has a reputation for being one of the most heavily moderated communities on Reddit—rather than deleting some comments, it seems to delete most of them. If you don’t like that, and there are plenty of people who don’t, you can join another subreddit for history buffs. Or start your own.

On Reddit, it's people—not the platform—who decide what any one community should be. (Reddit does still ban whole subreddits sometimes, as it did recently with a group posting violent threats.) Even the most ridiculous forums make their expectations known. In the subreddit [r/DivorcedBirds](#), which is for sharing images of birds that “look like serial monogamists,” moderators specify the following: “Please post pictures of birds who look like they are twice divorced (or more!) and an original caption about their backstory.” Also: No photos of “human women”; no art, paintings, or Photoshop; and “no dead birds.”

Giving users this much control over a major social platform is basically unheard-of anymore. It's a throwback to the early web, when people had to tend to the sites they wanted to be a part of, and it's a stark contrast to the way other social-media sites have evolved.

Reddit is surging at a time when much of the rest of the social web has curdled. The mainstream platforms are overrun with a combination of bots, bigots, and bad AI, especially because platforms such as X and Facebook have declared that the substance of what people post is of no concern to them. Which is how we got to the point that Reddit, of all places, has developed a reputation as a force for good, or at least a force for reminding people of the promise of a decentralized open web.

For now, Reddit remains wildly original and startlingly generous, which is to say, deeply and gorgeously human.

The social giants that worship at the altar of megascale—Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, X—have chosen to do so at the expense of humanity. They train their algorithms to feed people the things that make them angry and afraid and keep them scrolling. Reddit has its own ambitions for exponential growth, but so far it has managed to retain a small-group feeling while still operating at scale.

The question is whether this is a sustainable model. What if this golden moment for Reddit is not a renaissance but a last hurrah—one final reminder of what could have been, before a tsunami of AI wipes out the places that once sparkled with humanity? Reddit [recently unveiled](#) its own AI product, [Reddit Answers](#), to the disgust of many of its users. And some long-time

users worry that something essential will be lost as normies flock to the platform.

### Read: Is this how Reddit ends?

For now, though, Reddit remains wildly original and startlingly generous, which is to say, deeply and gorgeously human. It provides connection to others, stokes curiosity, and—at least in some subreddits—leaves you with a feeling of time well spent, a rarity on other social platforms. Because as different as each Reddit community is, every good subreddit is irrepressibly captivating for the same reason: the people.

Recently, someone posted a question on [r/AskReddit](#): “What have you done on this platform that you’re most proud of?” The answers ranged from earnest to irreverent. People described feeling good about having used Reddit to read more, and to challenge their understanding of the world. Others praised themselves for not posting mean comments when they had the impulse to. One person described having spent two years on a guitar subreddit learning 100 different solos. Another described how they’d posted a cookbook of reverse-engineered Panda Express recipes to the delight of other users (though not, apparently, to the delight of Panda Express). Somebody else felt proud of having taught fellow Redditors how to open a box filled with packing peanuts without making a mess. One wrote: “I’ve been helping strangers with their various math questions for over ten years!” Another: “I make people laugh from time to time.”

What Reddit does, it turns out, is give people a space that they can create and collectively control, and where they can ask one another question after question after question, in every possible permutation. The place is flooded with expertise and genuine wisdom, and it’s filthy with rabbit holes. But the only two questions that people ever really ask on Reddit, if you think about it, are these: *Am I alone? Am I okay?* And after all these years, in subreddit after subreddit, no matter what the topic at hand is, the same answers keep coming: *You aren’t alone. And you might not be okay. But we’re here.*

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*This article appears in the [April 2025](#) print edition with the headline “The Internet Can Still Be Good.”*

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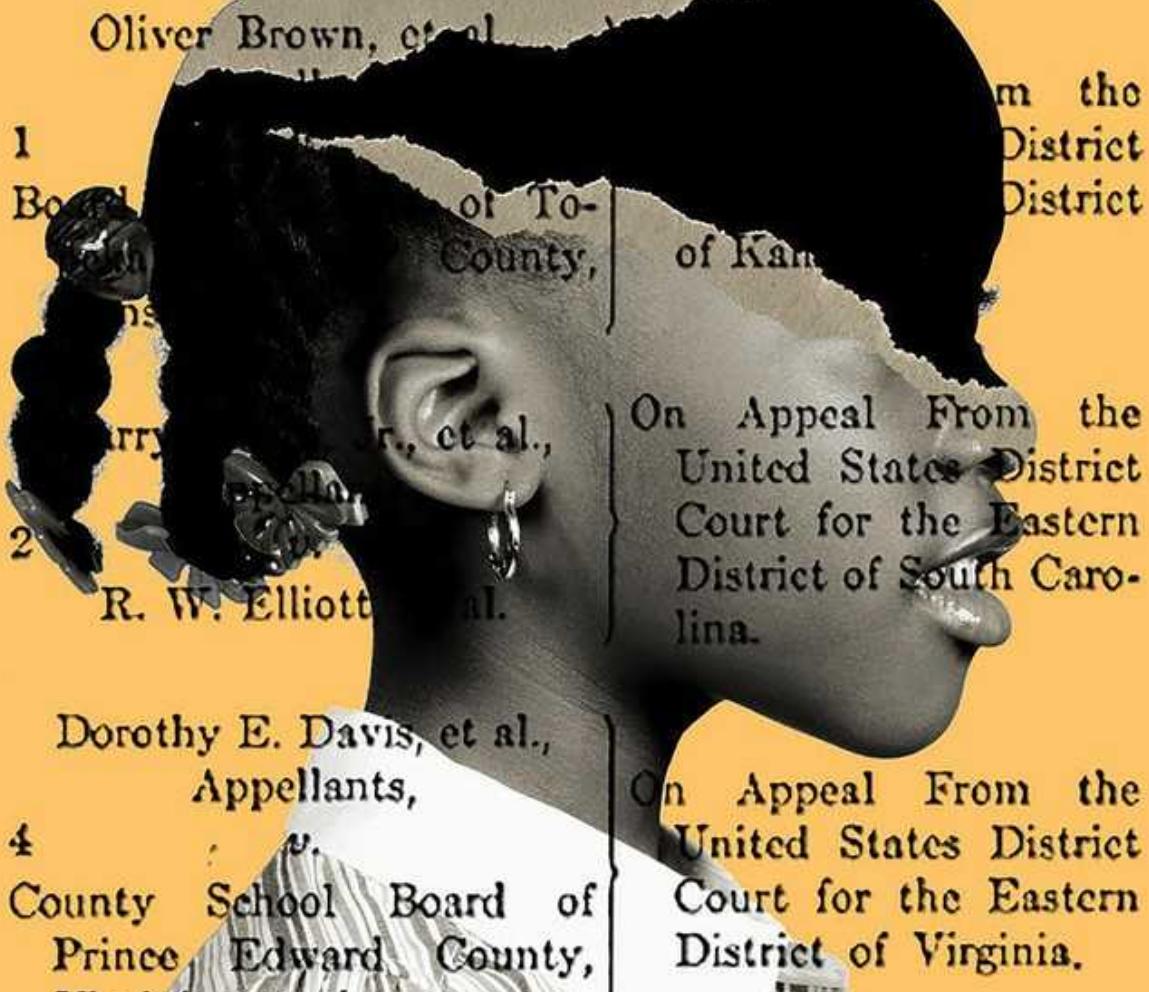
# The Rise of the *Brown v. Board of Education* Skeptics

## Why some mainstream Black intellectuals are giving up on the landmark decision

by Justin Driver

# SUPREME COURT OF THE UNITED STATES

Nos. 1, 2, 4 AND 10.—OCTOBER TERM, 1953.



Oliver Brown, et al.

1

Board of Education of To-  
County, et al.

2

R. W. Elliott, et al.

Dorothy E. Davis, et al.,  
Appellants,

4

County School Board of  
Prince Edward County,  
Virginia, et al.

On Appeal From the  
United States District  
Court for the Eastern  
District of South Caro-  
lina.

On Appeal From the  
United States District  
Court for the Eastern  
District of Virginia.

On May 17, 1954, a nervous 45-year-old lawyer named Thurgood Marshall took a seat in the Supreme Court's gallery. [The founder and director of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund](#) hoped to learn that he had prevailed in his pivotal case. When Chief Justice Earl Warren announced the

Court's opinion in *Brown v. Board of Education*, Marshall could not have known that he had also won what is still widely considered the most significant legal decision in American history. Hearing Warren declare "that in the field of public education the doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place" delivered Marshall into a state of euphoria. "I was so happy, I was numb," he said. After exiting the courtroom, he joyously swung a small boy atop his shoulders and galloped around the austere marble hall. Later, he told reporters, "It is the greatest victory we ever had."

For Marshall, the "we" who triumphed in *Brown* surely referred not only, or even primarily, to himself and his Legal Defense Fund colleagues, but to the entire Black race, on whose behalf they'd toiled. And Black Americans did indeed find *Brown* exhilarating. Harlem's *Amsterdam News*, echoing Marshall, called *Brown* "the greatest victory for the Negro people since the Emancipation Proclamation." W. E. B. Du Bois stated, "I have seen the impossible happen. It did happen on May 17, 1954." When Oliver Brown learned of the outcome in the lawsuit bearing his surname, he gathered his family near, and credited divine providence: "Thanks be to God for this." Martin Luther King Jr. encouraged Montgomery's activists in 1955 by invoking *Brown*: "If we are wrong, then the Supreme Court of this nation is wrong. If we are wrong, the Constitution of the United States is wrong. If we are wrong, God Almighty is wrong." Many Black people viewed the opinion with such awe and reverence that for years afterward, they threw parties on May 17 to celebrate *Brown*'s anniversary.

Over time, however, some began questioning what exactly made *Brown* worthy of celebration. In 1965, Malcolm X in his autobiography voiced an early criticism of *Brown*: It had yielded precious little school desegregation over the previous decade. Calling the decision "one of the greatest magical feats ever performed in America," he contended that the Court's "masters of legal phraseology" had used "trickery and magic that told Negroes they were desegregated—Hooray! Hooray!—and at the same time ... told whites 'Here are your loopholes.'"

### [Read: The children who desegregated America's schools](#)

But that criticism paled in comparison with the anti-*Brown* denunciation in Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton's [Black Power: The Politics of](#)

[Liberation](#) two years later. They condemned not *Brown*'s implementation, but its orientation. The fundamental aim of integration must be abandoned because it was driven by the “assumption that there is nothing of value in the black community,” they maintained.

To sprinkle black children among white pupils in outlying schools is at best a stop-gap measure. The goal is not to take black children out of the black community and expose them to white middle-class values; the goal is to build and strengthen the black community.

Although Black skeptics of the integration ideal originated on the far left, Black conservatives—including the economist Thomas Sowell—have more recently ventured related critiques. The most prominent example is Marshall’s successor on the Supreme Court, Justice Clarence Thomas. In 1995, four years after joining the Court, [Thomas issued a blistering opinion](#) that opened, “It never ceases to amaze me that the courts are so willing to assume that anything that is predominantly black must be inferior.”

The *Brown* decision, Rooks writes, should be viewed as “an attack on Black schools, politics, and communities.”

Desperate efforts to promote school integration, Thomas argued, stemmed from the misperception that identifiably Black schools were somehow doomed to fail because of their racial composition. “There is no reason to think that black students cannot learn as well when surrounded by members of their own race as when they are in an integrated environment,” he wrote. Taking a page from *Black Power*’s communal emphasis, Thomas argued that “black schools can function as the center and symbol of black communities, and provide examples of independent black leadership, success, and achievement.” In a 2007 opinion, he extolled Washington, D.C.’s all-Black Dunbar High School—which sent dozens of graduates to the Ivy League and its ilk during the early 20th century—as a paragon of Black excellence.

In the 2000s, as *Brown* crept toward its 50th anniversary, Derrick Bell of the NYU School of Law went so far as to [allege that the opinion had been wrongly decided](#). For Bell, who had sharpened his skills as an LDF lawyer, *Brown*’s “integration ethic centralizes whiteness. White bodies are represented as somehow exuding an intrinsic value that percolates into the

‘hearts and minds’ of black children.” Warren’s opinion in the case should have affirmed *Plessy v. Ferguson*’s “separate but equal” regime, Bell wrote, but it should have insisted on genuine equality of expenditures, rather than permitting the sham equality of yore that consigned Black students to shoddy classrooms in dilapidated buildings. He acknowledged, though, that his jaundiced account put him at odds with dominant American legal and cultural attitudes: “The *Brown* decision,” he noted, “has become so sacrosanct in law and in the beliefs of most Americans that any critic is deemed wrongheaded, even a traitor to the cause.”

In her New Book, [\*Integrated: How American Schools Failed Black Children\*](#), Noliwe Rooks adds to a growing literature that challenges the portrayal of the decision as “a significant civil rights–era win.” Rooks, the chair of the Africana-studies department at Brown University, offers an unusual blend of historical examination and family memoir that generally amplifies the concerns articulated by prior desegregation discontents. The result merits careful attention not for its innovative arguments, but as an impassioned, arresting example of how *Brown* skepticism, which initially gained traction on the fringes of Black life, has come to hold considerable appeal within the Black intellectual mainstream.

As recently as midway through the first Trump administration, Rooks would have placed herself firmly in the traditional pro-*Brown* camp, convinced that addressing racial inequality in education could best be pursued through integration. But traveling a few years ago to promote a book that criticized how private schools often thwart meaningful racial integration, she repeatedly encountered audience members who disparaged her core embrace of integration. Again and again, she heard from Black parents that “the trauma their children experienced in predominantly white schools and from white teachers was sometimes more harmful than the undereducation occurring in segregated schools.”

#### [From the May 2018 issue: The report on race that shook America](#)

The onslaught dislodged Rooks’s faith in the value of contemporary integration, and even of *Brown* itself. She now exhibits the convert’s zeal. *Brown*, she writes, should be viewed as “an attack on Black schools, politics, and communities, which meant it was an attack on the pillars of Black life.”

For some Black citizens, the decision acted as “a wrecking ball that crashed through their communities and, like a pendulum, continues to swing.”

Rooks emphasizes the plight of Black educators, who disproportionately lost their positions in *Brown*'s aftermath because of school consolidations. Before *Brown*, she argues, “Black teachers did not see themselves as just teaching music, reading, or science, but also as activists, organizers, and freedom fighters who dreamed of and fought for an equitable world for future generations”; they served as models who showed “Black children how to fight for respect and societal change.”

Endorsing one of *Black Power*'s analogies, she maintains that school integration meant that “as small a number as possible of Black children were, like pepper on popcorn, lightly sprinkled atop wealthy, white school environments, while most others were left behind.” Even for those ostensibly fortunate few flecks of pepper, Rooks insists, providing the white world’s seasoning turned out to be a highly uncertain, dangerous endeavor. She uses her father’s disastrous experiences with integration to examine what she regards as the perils of the entire enterprise. After excelling in all-Black educational environments, including as an undergraduate at Howard University, Milton Rooks became one of a very small number of Black students to enroll at the Golden Gate University School of Law in the early 1960s.

Sent by his hopeful parents “over that racial wall,” Milton encountered hostility from white professors, who doubted his intellectual capacity, Rooks recounts, and “spit him back up like a piece of meat poorly digested.” She asserts that the ordeal not only prompted him to drop out of law school but also spurred his descent into alcoholism. Rooks extrapolates further, writing:

Milton’s experience reflected the trauma Black students suffered as they desegregated public schools in states above the Mason-Dixon Line, where displays of racism were often mocking, disdainful, pitying, and sword sharp in their ability to cut the unsuspecting into tiny bits. It destroyed confidence, shook will, sowed doubt, murdered souls—quietly, sure, but still as completely as could a mob of white racists setting their cowardice, rage, and anger loose upon the defenseless.

The harms that contemporary integrated educational environments inflict upon Black students can be tantamount, in her view, to the harms imposed upon the many Black students who are forced to attend monoracial, woeful urban high schools. To make this point, Rooks recounts her own struggle to correct the misplacement of her son, Jelani, in a low-level math class in Princeton, New Jersey's public-school system during the aughts (when she taught at Princeton University). She witnessed other Black parents meet with a similar lack of support in guiding their children to the academically demanding courses that could propel them to elite colleges. In Jelani's case, she had evidence that teachers' "feelings were hardening against him." He led a life of relative safety and economic privilege, and felt at ease among his white classmates and friends, she allows, even as she also stresses that what he "experienced wasn't the violence of poverty; it was something else equally devastating":

We knew that poor, working-class, or urban communities were not the only places where Black boys are terrorized and traumatized. We knew that the unfamiliarity of his white friends with any other Black people would one day become an issue in our home. We knew that guns were not the only way to murder a soul.

Frustrated with Princeton's public schools, Rooks eventually enrolled Jelani in an elite private high school where, she notes, he also endured racial harassment—and from which he graduated before making his way to Amherst College.

seven decades have now elapsed since the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown*. Given the stubbornly persistent phenomenon of underperforming predominantly Black schools throughout the nation, arguing that *Brown*'s potential has been fully realized would be absurd. Regrettably, the Warren Court declined to advance the most powerful conception of *Brown* when it had the opportunity to do so: Its infamously vague "all deliberate speed" approach allowed state and local implementation to be delayed and opposed for far too long. In its turn, the Burger Court provided an emaciated conception of *Brown*'s meaning, one that permitted many non-southern jurisdictions to avoid pursuing desegregation programs. Rooks deftly sketches this lamentable, sobering history.

[From the May 2014 issue: Segregation now...](#)

Disenchantment with *Brown*'s educational efficacy is thus entirely understandable. Yet to suggest that the Supreme Court did not go far enough, fast enough in galvanizing racially constructive change in American schools after *Brown* is one thing. To suggest that *Brown* somehow took a wrong turn is quite another.

Rooks does not deny that integration succeeded in narrowing the racial achievement gap. But like other *Brown* critics, she nevertheless idealizes the era of racial segregation. Near *Integrated*'s conclusion, Rooks contends that "too few of us have a memory of segregated Black schools as the beating heart of vibrant Black communities, enabling students to compose lives of harmony, melody, and rhythm and sustained Black life and dignity." But this claim gets matters exactly backwards. The brave people who bore segregation's brunt believed that Jim Crow represented an assault on Black life and dignity, and that *Brown* marked a sea change in Black self-conceptions.

Desegregation's detractors routinely elevate the glory days of D.C.'s Dunbar High School, but they refuse to heed the lessons of its most distinguished graduates. Charles Hamilton Houston—Dunbar class of 1911, who went on to become valedictorian at Amherst and the *Harvard Law Review*'s first Black editor—nevertheless dedicated his life to eradicating Jim Crow as an NAACP litigator and Thurgood Marshall's mentor in his work contesting educational segregation. Sterling A. Brown—Dunbar class of 1918, who graduated from Williams College before becoming a distinguished poet and professor—nevertheless wrote the following in 1944, one decade before *Brown*:

Negroes recognize that the phrase "equal but separate accommodations" is a myth. They have known Jim Crow a long time, and they know Jim Crow means scorn and not belonging.

Much as they valued having talented, caring teachers, these men understood racial segregation intimately, and they detested it.

In the 1990s, Nelson B. Rivers III, an unheralded NAACP official from South Carolina, memorably heaved buckets of cold water on those who were beginning to wonder, “Was integration the right thing to do? Was it worth it? Was *Brown* a good decision?” Rivers dismissed such questions as “asinine,” and continued:

To this day, I can remember bus drivers pulling off and blowing smoke in my mother’s face. I can remember the back of the bus, colored water fountains … I can hear a cop telling me, “Take your black butt back to nigger town.” What I tell folk … is that there are a lot of romanticists now who want to take this trip down Memory Lane, and they want to go back, and I tell the young people that anybody who wants to take you back to segregation, make sure you get a round-trip ticket because you won’t stay.

Nostalgia for the pre-*Brown* era would not exercise nearly so powerful a grip on Black America today if its adherents focused on [its detailed, pervasive inhumanities](#) rather than relying on gauzy glimpses.

No one has pressed this point more vividly than Robert L. Carter, who worked alongside Marshall at the LDF before eventually becoming a distinguished federal judge. He understood that to search for *Brown*’s impact exclusively in the educational domain is mistaken. Instead, he emphasized that *Brown* fomented a broad-gauge racial revolution throughout American public life. Despite Chief Justice Warren formally writing the opinion to apply exclusively to education, its attack on segregation has—paradoxically—been most efficacious beyond that original context.

#### [From the October 1967 issue: Jonathan Kozol’s ‘Where Ghetto Schools Fail’](#)

“The psychological dimensions of America’s race relations problem were completely recast” by *Brown*, [Carter wrote](#). “Blacks were no longer supplicants seeking, pleading, begging to be treated as full-fledged members of the human race; no longer were they appealing to morality, to conscience, to white America’s better instincts,” he noted. “They were entitled to equal treatment as a right under the law; when such treatment was denied, they were being deprived—in fact robbed—of what was legally theirs. As a result, the Negro was propelled into a stance of insistent militancy.”

Even within the educational sphere, though, it is profoundly misguided to claim that Black students who attend solid, meaningfully integrated schools encounter environments as corrosive as, or worse than, those facing students trapped in ghetto schools. This damned-if-you-do, damned-if-you-don't analysis suggests an entire cohort stuck in the same boat, when its many members are not even in the same ocean. The Black student marooned in a poor and violent neighborhood, with reason to fear actual murder, envies the Black student attending a rigorous, integrated school who worries about metaphorical "soul murder." All struggles are not created equal.

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*This article appears in the [April 2025](#) print edition with the headline "Was Integration the Wrong Goal?"*

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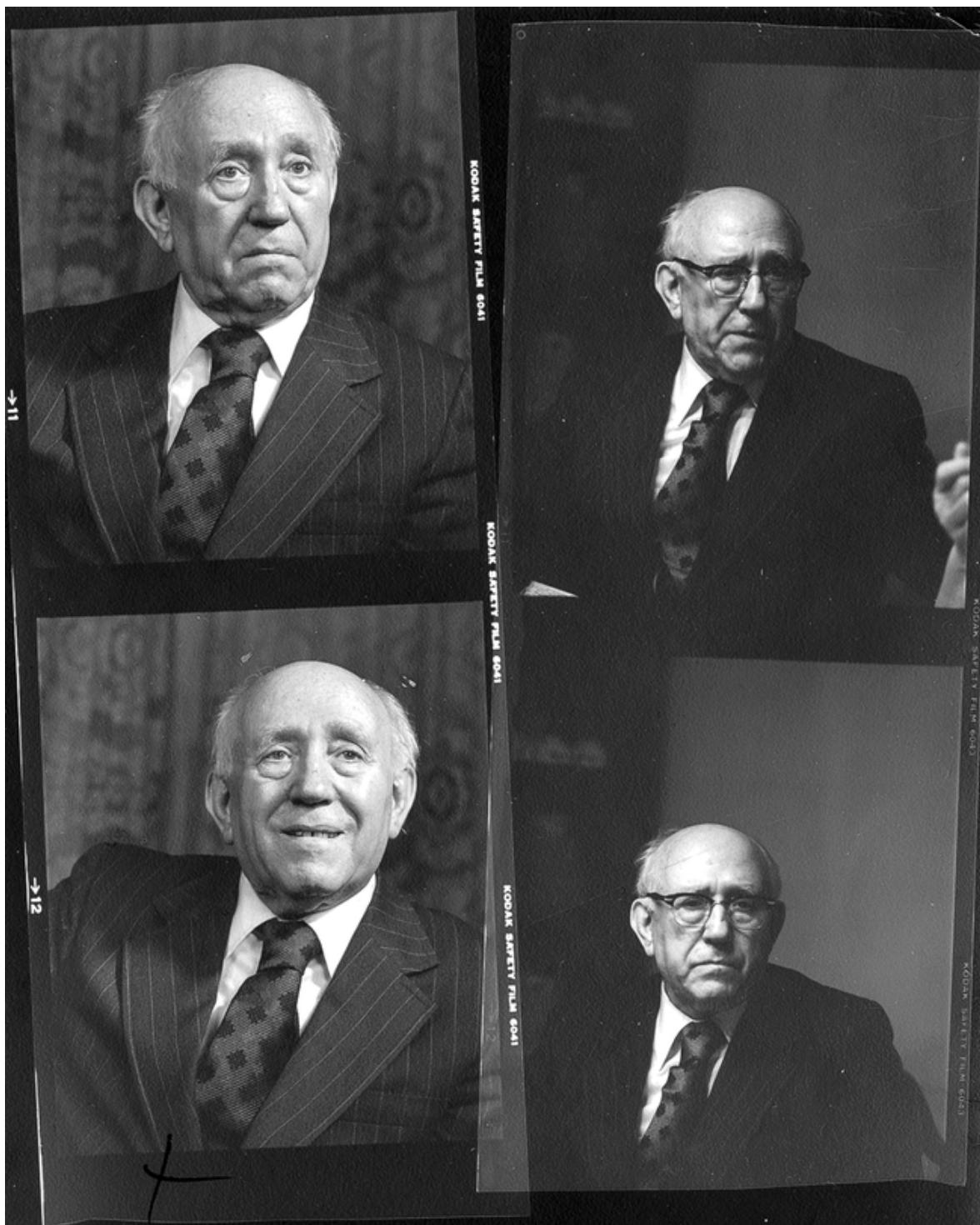
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# The Last Great Yiddish Novel

**Chaim Grade's *Sons and Daughters* rescues a destroyed world.**

by Judith Shulevitz



The Yiddish poet Chaim Grade survived World War II by fleeing his city, Vilna, now Vilnius, and wandering through the Soviet Union and its Central Asian republics. His wife and mother stayed behind and were murdered, probably in the Ponary forest outside Vilna, along with 75,000 others,

mostly Jews. After the war, Grade moved to the United States and wrote some of the best novels in the Yiddish language, all woefully little known.

Before he left for America, however, he [went back to Vilna](#), previously a center of Eastern European Jewish cultural, intellectual, and religious life —“the Jerusalem of Lithuania.” In his memoir, [\*My Mother’s Sabbath Days\*](#), he describes what he found there. The impossibility of conveying in ordinary Yiddish the experience of walking through the empty streets of one’s eradicated civilization pushes Grade into a biblical register. His mother’s home is intact, he writes, but cobwebs bar his entry “like the angels with flaming swords who barred Adam and Eve from returning to Eden.”

Later, he goes to the Synagogue Courtyard. With its impressive library, ritual bath, and houses of worship great and small, it was the Lithuanian Jerusalem’s functional equivalent of the Holy Temple. Now the courtyard lies in ruins, and in his anguish, Grade’s voice takes on the proclamatory cadences of a prophet. Not just any prophet but, I think, Ezekiel, the subject of an early poem of his. Ezekiel did his prophesying from exile before and after the destruction of the First Temple in the Babylonian conquest of 586 B.C.E., another defining cataclysm in Jewish history. In Ezekiel’s most famous vision, he sees a valley full of dried bones and, channeling the words of God, raises the bones, creating an army of the resurrected. Grade wouldn’t have encountered bones—the Nazis ordered Ponary’s corpses to be dug up and burned during the war—but from under the heaps of stones come prayers, “all the prayers that Jews have uttered for hundreds of years.” He hears them without hearing them, because what screams, he says, is the silence.

### [Chris Heath: A secret diary of mass murder](#)

Grade was born in 1910, came to the U.S. in 1948, and died in New York in 1982; he devoted the second half of his life to re-creating the universe wiped out in the first half. He turned to prose, a form better suited than poetry to inventorying the psychological and material conditions of a complex and divided society, and he developed an almost Flaubertian passion for detail. His main subjects were poor Jews—he himself grew up in a dark cellar behind a smithy—and the hermetic world of Lithuanian *Misnagdic* rabbis and their yeshivas, which relatively few Yiddish writers of the time knew or

wrote much about. Scholarly and strict about Jewish law, *Misnagdic* Jews looked down on the anti-intellectual, antinomian mysticism of Hasidic Jews. If your image of Old World Jewry comes from Grade's contemporary Isaac Bashevis Singer, with his kabbalists, dybbuks, and elaborate rabbinic courts, swap in Lithuanian Talmudists conducting self-critique and doing pilpul—close textual analysis—in spartan houses of study.

Grade's father was a maskil, an intellectual who adhered to the Haskalah, or Jewish Enlightenment, movement. But the general penury that followed World War I reduced him to working as a night watchman, and he died young, leaving Grade's mother to support herself and Grade by selling fruit. She sent him to a yeshiva mostly because she could afford it, but also because she was devout. There he was trained in musar, a particularly rigorous—you might even say puritanical—strain of *Misnagdic* Judaism.

Grade's fiction almost never acknowledges the imminent annihilation of the world it so meticulously reconstructs.

Grade studied rabbinics into his 20s, then turned secular and became a member of Young Vilna, a [now-legendary group of leftist, modernist Yiddish writers](#). Although he never became a practicing Jew again, he didn't turn against his teachers and their maximalist approach. On the contrary, Grade observes their fictional counterparts with a knowing, sometimes cynical, but always loving eye. He doesn't ridicule them, at least not unduly, nor does he apologize on their behalf, and their single-minded pursuit of Torah can be inspiring.

Grade's novels aren't oracular, the way the section on postwar Vilna in his memoir was. But his ambition is still biblical. I don't think the word overreaches. The Torah, thought to have been compiled over centuries in response to catastrophes and traumas, including that same Babylonian exile, is also a product of the impulse to preserve memories and knowledge all but lost in a calamity, lest the dispersed Jews forget who they'd been. Grade considered his undertaking a sort of holy assignment. "I've always found it strange that I have so little faith and yet believe, with complete faith, that Providence saved me and allowed me to live, in order to immortalize the *great generation* that I knew," he wrote in a letter in 1977.

Another striking feature of Grade's fiction is that it almost never acknowledges the imminent annihilation of the world it so meticulously reconstructs—as if by ignoring that obscene fact, he could annul it. “The mission of his prose after the war is to undo the Holocaust through literature, if you can imagine such a thing,” the historian David Fishman, a [friend of Grade's and lifelong champion of his work](#), said at a 2012 conference on the writer at the Yiddish Book Center.

The risk writers run when they set out to memorialize is that they'll produce memorials, not literature. Grade didn't do that. His novels jam almost too much life into their pages. That's not a criticism, because the streets of prewar Jewish Eastern Europe also jostled and overflowed; Grade's prose mimetically reproduces the way Jews thronged in their tight quarters. His major accomplishment, though, is at the level of the individual characters. They're vortices of ambivalence, anxious and raw and at odds with themselves, hypercritical yet hypersensitive, repressed but not undersexed, subject to delusions of grandeur or abasement or both in turns. On the whole, they're good people. They scheme and bicker and get on one another's nerves, and yet they have deep family feeling, and few of his protagonists wholly free themselves from a yearning for contact with the divine. The dominant emotion in a Grade novel is tortured loyalty.

[Sons and Daughters](#) is Grade's last novel, and the most recent of his fictional works to be translated and published. He wrote it in weekly installments that appeared in Yiddish newspapers, with intermittent interruptions, from 1965 to 1976. When he died a few years later, Grade had adapted some of the columns into the first volume of a novel, but hadn't finished the second. Neither the first nor the uncompleted second volume saw the light of day until they were brought out this year as a single novel in an English translation by Rose Waldman.

*Sons and Daughters* unfolds during the early 1930s, primarily in shtetls in what was then Poland and is now mostly Lithuania and Belarus. It tells the stories of two families of rabbis that are fragmenting under the pressure of modernity. The rabbis, both of high repute, belong to different generations and display differing levels of stringency—the stricter is a grandfather; the other, his son-in-law, is more lenient but by no means lax. Both expect their own sons to become rabbis too, or at least Torah scholars, and their

daughters to marry men of the same ilk. I can't emphasize enough the intensity of the obligation felt by Jewish parents of the time to make sure that they vouchsafed a life of Torah to their children.

Predictably, the children have other ideas. One daughter, loving but stubborn, leaves for Vilna to study nursing. The youngest son, the darling of both families, upsets his father and grandfather by openly aspiring to join the halutzim, or Zionist pioneers; the pious Jews of the day abhorred Zionists because they had the audacity to try to found a state in the Holy Land without the intervention of the Messiah. Even worse, Zionists cast off religious strictures, dressing immodestly and eating *treyf* (nonkosher) food. The most *treyf* of the sons is not a Zionist, though. He goes to Switzerland for a doctorate in philosophy, marries a non-Jewish Swiss woman, and doesn't circumcise their son. Whether his parents realize the extent of his apostasy isn't clear. The way the family avoids talking about it, you might think that confronting it directly would kill them.

The theme of intergenerational conflict may sound familiar to anyone who is acquainted with Sholem Aleichem's canonical "Tevye the Milkman" stories, or has seen *Fiddler on the Roof*, which is based on them—or, for that matter, has read Ivan Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*, or even D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*. The battle between parents and wayward children is the archetypal plot of modernization. But Grade has his own approach to it. Sholem Aleichem, the most important figure in the late-19th-century Yiddish renaissance, tells it from the father's—Tevye's—point of view. As Ruth Wisse points out in her study of Sholem Aleichem in *The Modern Jewish Canon*, all of his contemporaries writing on the same topic, in Yiddish or Hebrew or a non-Jewish language, more or less side with the rebels.

Grade doesn't wholeheartedly endorse the values of either generation, though he is slightly more sympathetic to the parents. That makes sense: Nothing strengthens the case for tradition more than its destruction. The parents draw us into their earnest struggle to repress their horror at their children's deviations from religious norms. The wife of the younger couple plays deaf and lets disturbing information slide by. Her husband, Sholem Shachne Katzenellenbogen, makes a valiant effort not to recriminate; he blames himself for his children's choices. Would that he were a simple Jew

in a poor village, Sholem Shachne thinks. Then he wouldn't have spoiled his children.

His father-in-law, the more severe Rabbi Eli-Leizer Epstein, is not in the habit of second-guessing himself, and he will be harshly punished for his dogmatism by a deranged son. The son is his father's fiendish double, an antic, self-loathing imp who, loudly proclaiming his adoration of Eli-Leizer, makes a mockery of him. This character may be Grade's most magnificently grotesque creation, half demon, half schlemiel. His get-rich schemes end in disgrace; his marriage to a wealthy heiress bankrupts and breaks her. They move back to his hometown, ostensibly to run a store selling fancy china bequeathed to her by her father (which no one in the poor village wants, and which will soon be smashed to pieces), but really to stalk his father and demolish his reputation. Eli-Leizer comes to understand that his son's aim is to hold up a hideously distorting mirror before him, "bringing him untold humiliation with the mimicking of his piety and his zealotry."

Eventually parents and children start to soften toward each other, but because Grade didn't finish the second volume, we don't know for sure whether or how he would have resolved the tensions. In any case, as readers know even if the characters don't, the Germans would occupy eastern Poland in a few short years, making all other concerns irrelevant. In the background, Grade tracks the whirlwind of history as it picks up speed. Jewish socialist youth groups parade through the marketplace and put on a tumbling show that highlights their muscular and shockingly exposed limbs (they wear shorts). More menacingly, anti-Semitic Polish-nationalist hooligans have mounting success enforcing a boycott against Jewish merchants in villages across the region. All of this really happened in the '30s.

When Isaac Bashevis Singer won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1978, some fellow Yiddish writers believed it should have gone to Grade instead.

Toward the end of the book, Grade unites life and fiction in the character of a lapsed yeshiva bocher (student) named Khlavneh who has become a Yiddish poet. He is the fiancé of Sholem Shachne's daughter, the one who went to Vilna to study nursing. Lest we fail to grasp that Khlavneh is a self-portrait, Grade drops hints. The daughter, for instance—an attractive,

spirited woman, perhaps the most appealing figure in the novel—is named Bluma Rivtcha, a rhyming echo of Frumme-Liebe, the name of Grade’s murdered first wife, also a nurse and also the daughter of a rabbi.

Bluma Rivtcha brings Khlavneh home to meet the family. Over Shabbos dinner, the brother who moved to Switzerland and no longer observes Jewish laws ridicules him for writing poetry in “jargon”—that is, Yiddish, the bastard language of the uneducated Jew, “a common person, an ignoramus, a boor”—rather than in Hebrew, and for thinking that he and his fellow Yiddish writers could capture the spirit and poetry of Jewish life without following Jewish law themselves. Khlavneh refutes the brother in a brilliant show of erudition, then concludes: “You hate the jargon boys and girls because they have the courage to be different from their fathers and grandfathers, even to wage battles with their fathers and grandfathers, and yet, they don’t run away from home.” The father, who everyone thinks will be offended by a guest’s outburst at the Sabbath table, laughs in delight. Grade, having fashioned a world in which the old fights mattered, now gets to win them.

In Grade’s lifetime, he was considered one of the most important living Yiddish novelists—by those who could read Yiddish. When Isaac Bashevis Singer won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1978, some fellow Yiddish writers believed it should have gone to Grade instead. (In a 1974 review, Elie Wiesel had called him “one of the great—if not the greatest—of living Yiddish novelists,” and “the most authentic.”) But he never received the wider recognition he deserved. In 1969, Cynthia Ozick published a short story in *Commentary* called “Envy; or, Yiddish in America,” which paints a comi-tragic picture of a literary universe that has room for only one famous Yiddish writer. An obscure Yiddish poet in New York named Edelshtein rages against an old friend and enemy—Ostrover, another Yiddish writer in New York—who is internationally acclaimed for his colorful tales of love and sexual perversion, dybbuks and other folkloric creatures. In a harassing late-night call, Edelshtein howls at Ostrover that the murder of Yiddish has turned him into a ghost who doesn’t even know he’s dead.

[From the January 1979 issue: Lance Morrow on the spirited world of I. B. Singer](#)

Ostrover is Singer, of course, and Edelshtein could have been Grade. Some scholars think he was; others say he was modeled on another forgotten genius, the poet Jacob Glatstein. Ozick herself once said that she'd based Edelshtein at least partially on an uncle, a Hebrew poet. Whichever writer she had in mind, it was a pitch-perfect portrayal of Grade's situation. And he suffered an additional indignity: His name was posthumously all but erased by his widow, Inna. For whatever reasons, including possible mental instability, she foiled almost every attempt to publish his work, whether in Yiddish or in translation. After his death, she signed a contract with his English-language publisher Knopf to bring out *Sons and Daughters* (under a different title, *The Rabbi's House*), but then she stopped responding to the book's editor and the project stalled. His unpublished work became available to the public only after she died, in 2010.

In the four decades since Grade's death, Yiddish has had a revival. Chairs in Yiddish have been endowed at major universities. Klezmer is cool. The number of *haredim*, or ultra-Orthodox Jews, who grow up speaking Yiddish has risen and keeps rising: The *haredi* community has the highest rate of growth in the Jewish world. To be sure, none of this guarantees that Grade will finally get his due. As a rule, *haredim* don't engage with secular texts. And many of those who learn the language in college or read it in translation are drawn to it because it's coded as politically and sexually radical. In the old days, Yiddish—especially written Yiddish—was associated with women, who were not taught Hebrew. Yiddish literature and theater had their golden age in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when a Jewish left and a Jewish avant-garde defiantly embraced the then-stigmatized dialect. Today, it appeals to some in search of an alternative Judaism: Yiddish is not Hebrew, and therefore not Israeli. In the latest twist in the singular history of Yiddish, it has become the emblematic language of Jewish diasporism, the quest to reinvent a Judaism without a Jewish homeland.

Grade's work, however, is not radical. He dabbled in socialism in Vilna, but then he encountered Soviet Communism. He wrote sympathetically about women and created formidable female characters, but his protagonists are mostly male (as is rabbinic society), and I wouldn't call him a feminist. Nor does Grade's account of life in prewar Europe support the diasporist claim that Jews would be perfectly safe without a state.

In the introduction to *Sons and Daughters*, Adam Kirsch calls it “probably the last great Yiddish novel.” In all likelihood, he’s right, but I like to think that a vibrant Yiddish literary culture just might emerge from the ranks of the religious, as it did in 19th-century Europe. Ex-haredim such as Shalom Auslander are writing remarkable memoirs and novels. Admittedly, they’re in English. Any real renaissance of the Yiddish novel would require a critical mass of native Yiddish speakers and writers, who almost certainly would have to come from ultra-Orthodox enclaves—which is not unimaginable. Hasidim are already producing historical and adventure novels in Yiddish.

In 2022, the *Forward* ran an essay by Yossi Newfield, who was raised as a Hasidic Jew, about his [discovery of Grade's novel \*The Yeshiva\*](#): “The struggles Grade so masterfully described between faith and doubt, between Torah and the world, in his words, *di kloyz un di gas*, were my own.” Intentionally or not, Newfield echoed something Grade wrote in a letter in 1973: “The writer inside me is a thoroughly ancient Jew, while the man inside me wants to be thoroughly modern. This is my calamity, plain and simple, a struggle I cannot win.” The struggle may be an affliction, but it fueled Grade’s masterpieces. Who knows? The next great Yiddish novelist may be growing up in *haredi Brooklyn* right now.

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*This article appears in the [April 2025](#) print edition with the headline “The Last Great Yiddish Novel.”*

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<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2025/04/chain-grade-sons-and-daughters/681767/>

# The Man Who Owned 181 Renoirs

**Albert Barnes believed in the liberating power of art—but you had to look at it his way.**

by Susan Tallman



The Barnes Foundation, in Philadelphia, displays its collection in symmetrical “ensembles,” guided by formal characteristics such as color, line, and space. (Caroline Gutman / The New York Times / Redux)

*Updated at 11:00 a.m. ET on March 31, 2025*

Of all the ways that today's plutocrats spend their billions, founding an art museum is one of the more benign, somewhere behind eradicating malaria but ahead of eradicating democracy. The art in these museums is almost always contemporary, reflecting the dearth of available old masters along with a global chattering-classes consensus that avant-garde art is socially, intellectually, and culturally important. Few of these tycoons, though, are likely to find the stakes as agonizingly high as Albert C. Barnes did.

From 1912 to 1951, Barnes amassed one of the world's greatest private collections of modern European artwork—more Cézannes (69) and Renoirs (an absurd 181) than any other museum; Matisse's game-changing *The Joy of Life*; Seurat's extraordinary *Models*; the list goes on and on. The [Barnes Foundation](#) was officially an educational institution, but was effectively one of America's first museums of modern art. (The New York organization that put capital letters on those words is four years younger.) But if Barnes's collection is a model to emulate, the saga of his organization is a lesson in founder's-syndrome perils.

Coinciding with the centennial of the Barnes's opening, we have Blake Gopnik's breezy new biography of the man, [The Maverick's Museum](#), and Neil L. Rudenstine's reissued history of the institution, [The House of Barnes](#), first published in 2012, when its legal struggles were above-the-fold news. The two deserve to be read together, because the slippage of identity between the man, the art, and the institution provides both the melodrama and the farce of the tale.

Born into ungenteel poverty in 1872, Barnes was smart enough to gain admission to Philadelphia's selective Central High School and the University of Pennsylvania's medical school. Realizing, perhaps, that he lacked something in the bedside-manner department, he went into chemical research, and in 1902 he and his partner commercially released the antiseptic Argyrol, which became standard in American maternity wards for the prevention of perinatal infections. As a chemist, Barnes was a one-hit wonder, but Argyrol made him a fortune.

Ezra Pound described Barnes as living in "a state of high-tension hysteria, at war with mankind."

At first he used his new money in predictable ways. He built a mansion on the Main Line and named it “Lauraston” for his wife. He bought fast cars (a passion that would be the death of him) and joined the local fox hunt. He also did less clichéd things, such as studying philosophy, reading Sigmund Freud, and supporting civil rights. A fan of the pragmatist thinkers William James and John Dewey, Barnes believed that a theory’s worth was measured not by its elegance but by its consequences in the world, and he treated his Argyrol factory as a laboratory for social experimentation. He hired Black and white workers, men and women. Contra then-flourishing notions of top-down, rigidly mandated workplace “efficiency,” Barnes boasted that in his factory, “each participant had evolved his or her own method of doing a particular job.” The “her” in that sentence alone is noteworthy.

At the same time, Barnes was a crank of operatic grandiosity—thin-skinned, bellicose, distrustful, fickle, and vindictive. Ezra Pound described him as living in “a state of high-tension hysteria, at war with mankind.” His bile could be witty, but more often traded on playground scatology, ethnic slurs, and sexual taunts. The Philadelphia Museum of Art was “a house of artistic and educational prostitution”; when a newspaper critic took offense at “the fevered passion for unclean things!” (naked people) in Barnes’s collection, he sent a letter impugning her “well-recognized sexual vagaries.”

Curious about art, he enlisted the advice of a high-school friend, the Ashcan School painter [William Glackens](#), and in 1912 sent Glackens to Paris with a wish list and \$20,000 (about \$650,000 today). Finding that the Impressionists Barnes sought were costlier than anticipated, Glackens skewed modern. In the course of two weeks, he bought 33 works, including a Picasso, a Cézanne, and the first Van Gogh to enter an American collection, his spellbinding *The Postman*. When Barnes made his own trip to Paris a few months later, he spent three times the money in half the time and lived up to every stereotype the French had about American millionaires. “He did literally wave his chequebook in the air,” Gertrude Stein wrote to a friend.

Modernism held attraction for someone who considered himself a pugnaciously original thinker. Collecting old art was posh and respectable, but in an America still scandalized by the sight of breasts, collecting modern art was outrageous. Within 10 years, Barnes had acquired some 700

paintings. But art to him was more than a proxy for cultural sophistication and a fat bank account. It made him feel things—intense and important things—and he would spend the rest of his life trying to map precisely how it did so.

If his obsession with Renoir's late, big-bottomed, pinheaded nudes seems “idiosyncratic in the extreme,” as Rudenstine writes, it was shared by Picasso and Matisse, who prized radical departures in form. Barnes was a turbulent person and Renoir was his happy place, full of pretty colors and willing flesh. Cézanne appealed for different reasons. Barnes found heroism in the artist's “social strangeness,” and saw it mirrored in the art: “His deformations of naturalistic appearances are akin to the brusque remarks … which, when sociability is the rule, project new interpretations upon conventionally accepted ideas.”

Barnes's eye wasn't perfect—he passed on Van Gogh's *Starry Night*—but his instincts were remarkably good. He began buying African sculpture in 1922 and amassed an important collection. He bought old masters whose agitation or distortions recalled the moderns he loved. He bought Egyptian and Greco-Roman antiquities. He bought Native American serapes and jewelry. He bought American folk art and—repudiating the distinction between “art” and “craft”—acquired quantities of handwrought hinges, keyhole plates, and door knockers, which he hung alongside the paintings. To Kenneth Clark, then the head of the National Gallery in London, he wrote that he saw “no essential esthetic difference between the forms of the great painters or sculptors, and those of the iron-workers.”



Pierre-Auguste Renoir's *Landscape With Figures, Near Cagnes* (circa 1910) is one of the Barnes Foundation's 181 works by the artist. (Sepia Times / Getty)

None of this was quite as extraordinary as Barnes liked to pretend. The connection among folk art, handcrafts, and modernism was made by a number of curators and collectors at the time. Concerning the avant-garde, John Quinn, the visionary behind the 1913 Armory Show, was more adventurous, leaning into Cubism and Duchamp's radical experiments where Barnes balked. (Their rivalry was such that Barnes, tiring of his usual name-calling, hired private detectives to dig up dirt on Quinn.) Others were not far behind. MoMA's 2024 book *Inventing the Modern* celebrates the museum's female founders—Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, Lillie P. Bliss, and Mary Quinn Sullivan—and the energetic idealism required to get these efforts off the ground in an often hostile culture.

Barnes exaggerated his temerity in the face of philistines partly because he longed to be recognized as more than just a world-class shopper. Applying his chemist's brain to locating the "scientific" principles behind his aesthetic experience, he concluded that what mattered in art was form—line, color, space, movement. Contextual data such as biographies and subject matter just distracted from the real act of looking. These formalist ideas had been articulated by various critics and art historians before Barnes, though, as usual, he took them to extremes. His 530-page "statement of principles," *The Art in Painting* (1925), includes no titles for works reproduced in the book, lest readers be led astray by subject matter.

Much more original was his application of this formalism to John Dewey's theories of experimental education and social reform. He could cite Dewey's 1916 book *Democracy and Education* "almost chapter and verse," Gopnik tells us. Barnes was convinced that "plain people of average intelligence" could be brought to the kind of art apotheosis he had experienced, just by knowing how to look. He derided art history as a discipline and art scholars individually, but he couldn't abandon the idea that he himself had expertise other people needed.

Like many people who get a lot out of looking, Barnes was annoyed at the casual attitudes of museum visitors. When the Barnes Foundation opened its doors in 1925—in a purpose-built neoclassical building within a 12-acre arboretum adjacent to Barnes's home—its indenture permitted no posh parties and no unvetted visitors. The art would not travel or be reproduced in color. To see it, you applied to take classes in the Barnes method. It was not a museum; it was a school.

Inside, he arranged (and regularly rearranged) the collection in "ensembles" that mixed objects of different ages, origins, and functions. Most people do this at home, but Barnes's stridently symmetrical arrangements—big artworks in the middle, smaller ones to either side, formal echoes bouncing around the room—were emphatically pedagogical. In Room 15, for example, Matisse's *Red Madras Headdress* (1907) is flanked by (among other things) a pair of watery landscapes, a pair of fans, a pair of soup ladles, and a pair of pictures, each showing *a woman and a dog* (one of them *from the hand of William Glackens's daughter*, age 9). The effect is of an art-history curriculum designed by Wes Anderson.

Admission was doled out on the basis of whim and choler. Having prior expertise or impressive connections was usually a black mark: According to Rudenstine, T. S. Eliot, Le Corbusier, Barnett Newman, and the heads of both MoMA and the Whitney were among the rejected. Student behavior was monitored. Questioning the method or viewing in the wrong way could get you bounced. Rumor was that Barnes and his second in command, Violette de Mazia, lurked incognito or listened through microphones for heretical conversation. Such ritualistic protocols can actually enhance the experience of viewing: Perceiving the specialness of the opportunity, people will give heightened attention. So while some Barnes students rebelled, others became acolytes.

Dewey, one of Barnes's very few lasting friends, wrote in his book *Art as Experience* that the educational work of the collection was of "a pioneer quality comparable to the best that has been done in any field during the present generation, that of science not excepted." Considering that the science of that generation had produced antibiotics and the theory of relativity, that's quite a claim.



Albert C. Barnes, 1872–1951 (Keystone-France / Getty)

Fifty-three and childless when the foundation opened its doors, Barnes was not oblivious to the need to arrange its future beyond his lifetime. But his vision for it was inflexible. He unsuccessfully floated prospective partnerships to the University of Pennsylvania, Haverford College, and Sarah Lawrence College, whose exasperated president finally wrote: “You can stuff your money, your pictures, your iron work, your antiques, and the whole goddamn thing right up the Schuylkill River.” Barnes then trained an affectionate eye on nearby Lincoln University—the second-oldest historically Black university in the nation, alma mater of Langston Hughes and Thurgood Marshall.

His relationship with Black culture and Black leaders was characteristically complex. He considered spirituals “America’s only great music,” and his admiration for African sculpture was deep. But this appreciation was often

tinged with condescension. The only Black painter in his collection was not one of those artists who had been to Paris and absorbed the lessons of modernism, but the self-taught “primitive” Horace Pippin. (Similarly, the women in his collection tended toward the doe-eyed and decorative. He returned the Georgia O’Keeffes he’d bought, but kept his Marie Laurencins.)

Still, he forged a relationship with Lincoln’s president, Horace Mann Bond, and in October 1950 altered the terms of succession so that Lincoln would eventually assume control of the foundation’s board. This relationship, too, might well have gone south, but in July 1951 Barnes sped through a stop sign in his Packard convertible and collided with a tractor trailer.

For the next 37 years, Violette de Mazia carried the Barnes torch and guarded the Barnes gates. Admission became harder, the dogma stricter, the students fewer but more ardent. When the state forced the tax-exempt foundation to open to the public two days a week, Barnes students picketed. In 1987, [the philosopher and art critic Arthur C. Danto described](#) the sorry state of affairs—the “stunning works” imprisoned in “the sullen museum, with its musty smells and impassive custodians.”

[Read: The controversy over moving the world’s best art collection you haven’t heard of](#)

De Mazia’s death, in 1988, snapped the foundation out of its torpor. That it had been careening toward insolvency now became clear, and the only paths to income—admission fees, loan shows, event rentals—were blocked by Barnes’s indenture. The new Lincoln-appointed board fought to break the terms; former Barnes students fought to preserve them. The state fought to increase access; neighbors fought to restrict it. Accusations of racism and corruption bounced around. Eventually the board proposed moving the whole collection to a new location near the Philadelphia Museum of Art. YouTube comments below the 2009 anti-move film [The Art of the Steal](#) convey the [ensuing outrage](#): “My soul cries for this loss,” “Shame!!!,” “I Truly hope The Philadelphia Of Art [sic] Burns to the ground … art and all.” If this fury seems disproportionate to the situation—a nonprofit institution in need of funds finds a way to preserve its core assets while increasing public access—it was certainly very Barnesian.

The Barnes Foundation has now been on Philadelphia's Museum Mile for more than a decade. The art is all there—Cézanne's great *The Card Players*, the many pink ladies in search of their clothes, the Wes Anderson ensembles. From ceiling vaults to baseboards, every room has been replicated as it appeared when Barnes died. But they sit in a different building, under a different set of rules.

Entry is no longer an achievement on par with getting past the bouncer at Berghain. All you have to do is cough up \$30. Inside, you can interrupt your viewing with a cup of coffee in the café or a visit to the gift shop, where you can buy a Van Gogh *Postman* mug or socks adorned with Horace Pippin's African American family at prayer (a strange choice for footwear, but maybe the logical outcome of pure formalist thought—the colors and shapes look fine on an ankle).

### [Read: Are fine art museums the next Starbucks?](#)

In other words, outside the re-created rooms, you get the standard, bustling, [consumer-oriented museum experience](#), not arboreal serenity, and inside the rooms, you have to put up with the presence of other people, not all of them models of rectitude. But there is nothing like it. The absence of wall texts can be a welcome relief from current museum practice. And if the ensembles depend more on visual rhyming than on ideas, they really do get you to look. If you want, you can even [take classes in the Barnes method](#), without passing some capricious test of merit.

Arthur Danto was right, though: Barnes is still remembered “for the spectacular collection of early modern art that bears his name, for the enthusiasm with which he kept people from viewing it and for the terrible temper he expended on behalf of these two projects. He was a gifted but an extremely tiresome man.” Barnes’s obvious intelligence, Gopnik observes, is “overshadowed, even eclipsed, by his real emotional and social stupidity.”

And yet, there is something gripping about his struggle, year after year, to solve the riddle of art. By all accounts, Barnes was a man with no theory of mind: Lacking any insight into the subjective worlds of other people, he found their behavior relentlessly inexplicable and infuriating. It must have been exhausting. In an essay soon after he started collecting, [he wrote](#):

“Good paintings are more satisfying companions than the best of books and infinitely more so than most very nice people.”

In art, he believed he saw the subjective experience of others—Renoir, El Greco, a Fang craftsperson—made concrete and visible, even measurable. It sat still for examination. His arguments circle endlessly (Rudenstine rightly calls them tautological), seeking the mechanism whereby this subjectivity was transferred from one person to another via form. Each work of art, he wrote, “records a discovery and that discovery can be verified, the artist’s experience can be shared, [but] only by one who has himself learned to see.”

Like mercury, however, the objective mechanism he sought for this intuitive process always wriggled away from his touch. Look at Cézanne’s *The Card Players* or Renoir’s *Henriot Family* and you see shifting edges, unstable spaces, fragmentation, dissolution, impermanence. But in life, Rudenstine observes, Barnes found “ambiguity, irresolution, incompleteness, obscurity … impossible for him to tolerate.” His need to lock things down nearly killed the foundation that was his great life’s work. The tragedy of Barnes was that the things he could understand least held the key to what he loved most.

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*This article appears in the [April 2025](#) print edition with the headline “The Cranky Visionary.” It originally stated that the Barnes Foundation was effectively America’s first museum of modern art. In fact, it was among the first.*

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# Departments

- [\*\*The Commons: ‘We Are Better Off Cultivating Relationships Offline’\*\*](#)
  - [\*\*Caleb's Inferno: April 2025\*\*](#)
-

# ‘We Are Better Off Cultivating Relationships Offline’

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



*Americans are now spending more time alone than ever, [Derek Thompson wrote](#) in the February issue. It's changing our personalities, our politics, and even our relationship to reality.*

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Derek Thompson’s article resonated with me deeply, but I think he missed one key reason people stay at home: financial necessity. As a 28-year-old raised on TV, I often succumb to the urge to binge my favorite shows at home because it feels more comfortable than going out. And as an early-

career social worker with a small salary and little disposable income, staying home also feels more responsible. With the cost of everything—dinner, drinks, concert tickets—on the rise, I have to pick and choose where to spend my money outside the house. Even hosting a gathering and providing snacks can be costly. Especially during the cold winter months, it's challenging to find cheap things to do with other people.

How should municipalities counter the anti-social century? I think offering free spaces and activities for the public would be a good place to start. And maybe I'll start talking with strangers on the train.

**Alexandra Lubbe**

*St. Louis, Mo.*

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As a Boomer who came of age in the '60s, I recall how my hometown, Nashville, closed public swimming pools to avoid giving minorities equal access. No doubt, the erosion of a broader social cohesion began as taxpayers willingly—and sometimes enthusiastically—supported the demise of the vital infrastructure that Derek Thompson highlights.

**Mark Forrester**

*Elkton, Md.*

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“The Anti-Social Century” is a much-needed update on our national alienation from one another. I’ve always thought that the foundational work on this subject was Philip Slater’s *The Pursuit of Loneliness: American Culture at the Breaking Point*, published in 1970. I read it a few years after it came out, as a college student, and I felt that no book did more to explain the cultural and economic forces that lead to our individual isolation. Slater would be appalled but perhaps not surprised to see how the trends he identified in the previous century have escalated in this one. Among other things, he noted that our obsessive devotion to rugged individualism separates us not only from one another, but from nature itself. “We feel that nature has no business claiming a connection with us,” he wrote, “and perhaps one day we will prove ourselves correct.” Some 50 years later, we seem to be well on our way to fulfilling Slater’s dark prophecy.

**Scott Sparling**  
*Lake Oswego, Ore.*

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After I retired from a career that involved regular human interaction, my wife noticed that I wasn't experiencing the relaxation usually associated with retirement; instead, I was unsettled. She suggested that I try driving for Uber, and it's made a huge difference in my life. Driving has become my personal answer to isolation, and it's a hobby I intend to pursue as long as practical.

I'm amazed by how many people of all backgrounds enjoy engaging with a stranger. As I drive, we share small slices of our lives and usually part with an elevated sense of contentment. The notable exceptions to this rule are high-school-age kids, who I've noticed struggle to have easy conversations. It's sad because, although we share a city, we have little insight into one another's daily reality, into how our lives intersect outside the Uber experience. I sense that there is a lot to learn and understand.

**Harry David Snook**  
*Madison, Wis.*

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I live in western North Carolina, in an area devastated by Hurricane Helene. A few miles down the road, the Swannanoa River rose so quickly that people I knew had to swim out of their windows to survive.

I'm not as plugged in as most people. But when the storm hit and the phone towers went down, I finally met my neighbors for the first time since I moved to my street two years ago. Without technology, everyone went outside. In that new landscape, we cared for one another, and I need you to know how beautiful that was: When emergency radio broadcasts replaced our phones, we learned our neighbors' names.

I don't mean to diminish the lives lost or the landscapes irrevocably altered, but it's hard not to mourn that post-flood camaraderie now that everyone has shut themselves away again. Helene brought about a different world. Perhaps calamities have the power to momentarily suspend the sickness of

American modernity that Derek Thompson so aptly describes. It did for us, if only briefly.

**McKinnon Brenholz**

*Black Mountain, N.C.*

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I am 27, and I fall on the cusp of Gen Z and Millennial, not quite fitting into either generational category. I spent my childhood playing outside and on the internet. When I was a teenager, social media was just beginning to become popular. I was shy in school and found myself becoming isolated in the 2010s, retreating into online spaces to find friendship. I stayed lonely and online until adulthood, when a sudden interest in and love of hiking propelled me outside and into the “real world.” Since then, I have joined a religious community and become dear friends with my neighbors; I strike up conversations with strangers on planes and in public. My life could not be more different, and when I reflect on the time I spent alone and online, I think of how wonderful my life could have been if I had dared to move outside my comfort zone sooner.

When I speak with friends my age, so many of them acknowledge that we are better off cultivating relationships offline—and yet we all still spend so much time online. My hope is that community organizing and free public spaces will become more common as we all look around and realize that none of us is happy with the status quo.

**Christina Tavella**

*Boston, Mass.*

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Derek Thompson replies:

*I think the most important point of my article is exactly what Christina Tavella notes in closing. The anti-social century is, among other things, a story of the vast gulf between our stated and revealed preferences—the lives we say we want and the lives we lead. Very few people will tell you that the way they wish to spend the scarce hours and days of their lives is to be more alone with each passing year, or to spend more time with their screens and*

*less time with their friends and families. The fact that we choose aloneness over and over again suggests that aloneness is serving us, in some way. But I strongly believe that it is serving our shallow desire for convenience rather than our deeper need for connection and meaning. We have built a culture organized around the frictionless acquisition of dopamine. Are we sure we're meant to do that?*

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### Behind the Cover

In this month's cover story, "[Growing Up Murdoch](#)," McKay Coppins reports on the bitter fight within the Murdoch family to control its media empire. For our cover image, we selected a 1987 photograph of the Murdochs. Rupert Murdoch and Anna, his second wife, pose with 16-year-old Lachlan (*left*) and 14-year-old James (*right*) at an event at Sotheby's in New York City. Today the brothers are on opposite sides of a legal battle to determine the future of the family business—and conservative media.

— Lucy Murray Willis, *Photo Editor*

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# The Murdoch Wars

Lachlan, James, and the battle for Rupert's empire

By McKay Coppins

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Corrections

“‘I Am Still Mad to Write’” (March) originally stated that, after an accident in Rome, Hanif Kureishi came to consciousness a paraplegic. In fact, he came to consciousness a tetraplegic. “Why the COVID Deniers Won” (March) misstated the U.S.’s gross public debt in 2017 and early 2025. The debt was about \$20 trillion in January 2017 and more than \$36 trillion in early 2025, not about \$20 billion and nearly \$36 billion, respectively.

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

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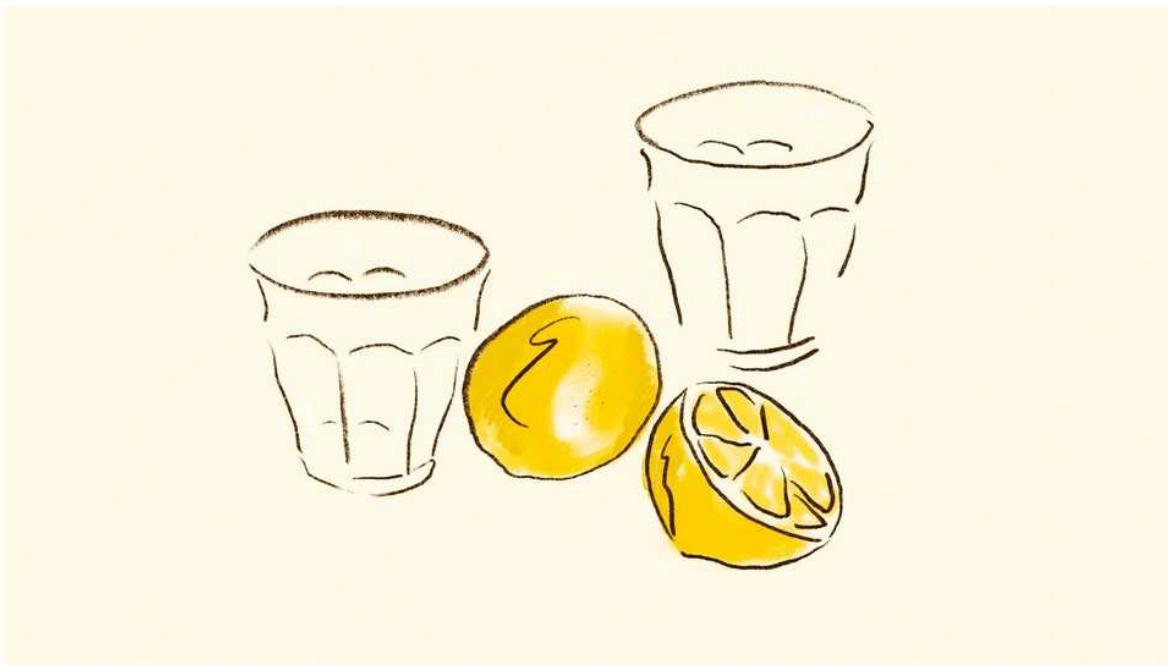
# Poetry

- [\*\*The Court Hummed With Suitors\*\*](#)

# The Court Hummed With Suitors

## A poem

by Sandra Lim



Four floors up, I'd look up from my work and cherish  
the little arc of calm I felt from time to time.

I liked a drink, and to pose myself a problem  
I could not always solve.

Now and again,  
I'd bite into a lemon, to clear my head.

The acid was like a hook in my mouth: It was so sour,  
I thought it must be good.

\*

The one with the sewn-up face, he gave me  
an electric feeling.

I got a little belly from all our drinking, and cooked meats  
tasted distressingly of animal. I felt glad

of my tidy apartment and my four gas rings.  
I came to read a little less.

I wondered what I was, or even just what I looked like,  
idling in that way.

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

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