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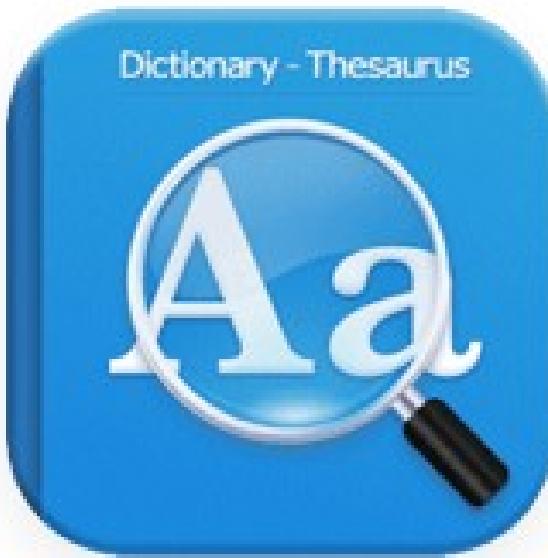
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# Goings On

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Goings On

# Rema and the Evolution of the Afrobeats Sound

Also: reviews of Broadway's "Smash" and "John Proctor Is the Villain"; New York's financial crisis of 1975 in "Drop Dead City"; and more.

By Sheldon Pearce, Michael Schulman, Marina Harss, Leo Lasdun, Helen Shaw, Richard Brody

April 25, 2025



For many years, the term **Afrobeats**, referring to a West African pop style that integrates dancehall, rap, and R. & B. with traditional African rhythms, was controversial, rejected by some artists for being overly broad. Afrobeats—distinct from the sixties and seventies genre Afrobeat, pioneered by Fela Kuti, which blended Yoruba music and Ghanaian highlife with American funk and jazz—had been defined primarily by an assimilating nature, drawing sounds from across the African diaspora into a composite with a contemporary feel. The shape-shifting singer and rapper **Rema** was one of the first to not only bask in Afrobeats' influence and self-identify as a practitioner but to dedicate his work to pushing the idea of the style forward.

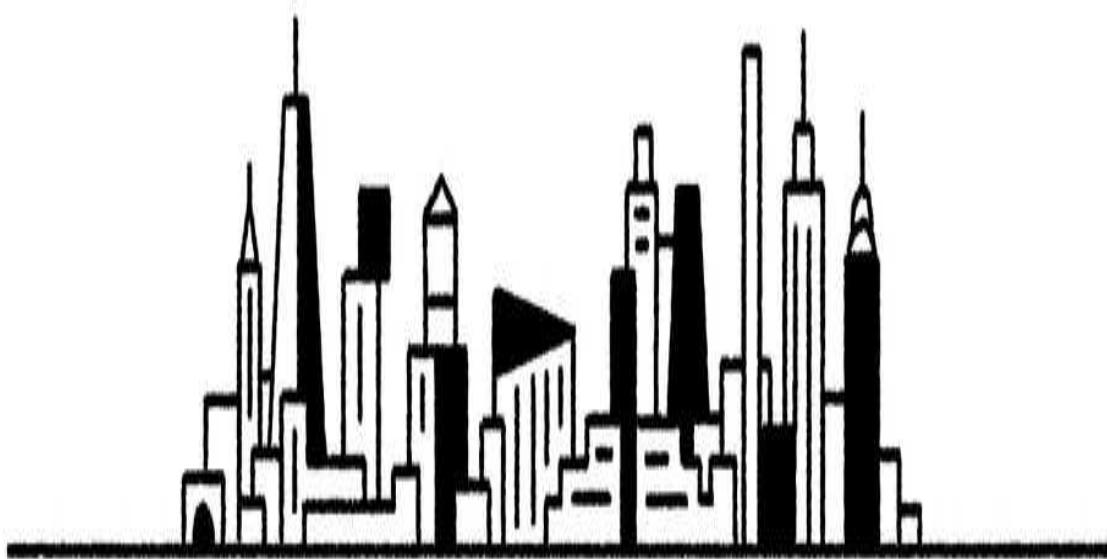


The musician, born in Benin City, grew up in the shadow of Nigeria's fledgling pop industry, which rose from the foundation laid, in the early two-thousands, by the label Mo' Hits Records, founded by the trailblazing pop figures Don Jazzy and D'banj. In 2019, Rema, at the age of nineteen, signed with Jazzy's follow-up venture, Mavin Records, and has since followed the Mo' Hits ethos to its logical conclusion; there are no seams in his sound, which takes a holistic approach to pop songcraft, smooth vocals, rap cadences, subtle yet dynamic drums, and warm production, all in service of a product that isn't so much "genreless" as it is cross-cultural, informed by a long view of musical history. Rema's singular style furthered the efforts of fusionists such as Wizkid and Burna Boy, and he came to represent the appeal of the genre's syntheses. This paid off accordingly—a remix, with Selena Gomez, of his single "Calm Down," from 2022, is the biggest African pop song of all time. The hit was the cornerstone of the deluxe edition of Rema's début album, "Rave & Roses," and installed him as Afro-pop's crown prince.

Rema, not satisfied by simply entering the pantheon his predecessors built, has since made it his mission to redraw the boundaries of his chosen form. His 2024 album, "*HEIS*," is another Afrobeats landmark. It bears a unique signature: dark and propulsive, it's full of squelching tones and zippy vocal performances, mixing orchestral splendor, spooky synth progressions, and

high-powered rhythms. The record feels like the next evolution of the Afrobeats sound, delivered by someone deeply invested in its present and its future. On May 2, Rema celebrates the form at [Madison Square Garden](#).—*Sheldon Pearce*

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## About Town

Broadway

Twelve years after the making-of-a-musical series “**Smash**” sputtered on NBC, it’s been reborn as a silly, slap-happy [Broadway show](#), directed by Susan Stroman. Devotees of the original (we exist!) will find familiar elements, including tuneful songs by Marc Shaiman and Scott Wittman (“Hairspray”)—always “Smash” ’s chief asset. The story still concerns “Bombshell,” a troubled bio-musical about Marilyn Monroe, with Ivy (Robyn Hurder) and Karen (Caroline Bowman) competing for the star role. Much else has been revamped. Rick Elice and Bob Martin’s book could use more acid in its zingers, and the plot barely hangs together. The laughs come mostly from Brooks Ashmanskas, as a swishy gay director, and Kristine Nielsen, as a Svengali acting coach. (Yes, these are types beamed in from the

sixties.) If it weren't a glorious mess, though, would it still be "Smash"?—*Michael Schulman (Imperial; open run.)*

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**For more:** read Emily Nussbaum on her [love](#) and then [hate](#) for the NBC series.

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Digicore

The hyperpop microgenre digicore—a chaotic, internet-forward mashup of music styles born on Discord servers for use in the video game Minecraft—might have vanished into the ether if not for the explosive artist **Jane Remover**. Inspired primarily by E.D.M. producers such as Skrillex and Porter Robinson and the rappers Tyler, the Creator and Trippie Redd, the Newark-born musician débuted at seventeen, as dltzk, with the EP "Teen Week" (2021), helping to define an obscure anti-pop scene moving at warp speed. Their music's wide bandwidth now spans the pitched-up sampling of the album "dariacore" (under the alias Leroy) and the emo-leaning work of the side project Venturing. This all-devouring approach culminates in the ecstatic thrasher album "Revengeseekerz," a maximalist tour de force that makes ephemerality feel urgent.—*Sheldon Pearce ([Music Hall of Williamsburg](#); May 3.)*

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Dance



The late choreographer Trisha Brown often worked in cycles, in which she explored a compositional approach, or a performance setting, or a style of movement. This week, her **Trisha Brown Dance Company** stages pieces from one such period, the “Unstable Molecular Structures” cycle, characterized by a cool, slippery, loose-limbed style undergirded by complex compositional systems. In “Son of Gone Fishin’,” from 1981, for example, the dancers’ constantly fluid patterns, which look as random and natural as ripples on water, are built upon blocks of movement reordered in numerous intricate ways. The effect is otherworldly. The group also presents a new work, “Time again,” by the Brown protégé Lee Serle.—*Marina Harss* ([Joyce Theatre](#); April 29-May 4.)

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Ambient

It’s no surprise that the musician **Tim Hecker**, a producer of thoughtful and meticulous compositions, was once an aspiring academic. Nor is it surprising that the subject of [his Ph.D.](#) was megaphonics, a.k.a. loud sound, specifically its ability to “paralyze the body, empty the mind and even threaten life.” Hecker’s soundscapes—which evoke bathing in a Jacuzzi filled with TV static—routinely accomplish at least two of these items. His work is often abstract: even in his (relatively) more melodic tracks, like

those on the 2013 album “Virgins,” there’s a noisy steam shrouding the tonal core. But if the tunes are lacking in, well, tune, they’re enriched by a layering and sense of rhythm unparalleled in contemporary electronic music.  
—*Leo Lasdun* (*Public Records*; April 29-May 1.)

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Broadway



One thing from Arthur Miller’s much debated “The Crucible” proves true in **“John Proctor Is the Villain,”** an electric high-school drama from Kimberly Belflower: girls are a galvanizing force, as long as they stick together. Gabriel Ebert plays a beloved English teacher, whose charm both attracts and upsets his young students, including striving Beth (Fina Strazza), furious Shelby (Sadie Sink), and the minister’s daughter Raelynn (Amalia Yoo). Belflower places Miller’s same elements—infidelity, accusation, outraged male honor—in slightly different order here, exploring the ways that girls negotiate their first, faint power. We think that we’re watching laughter and dance breaks, but really it’s an arsenal these girls will need all their lives: sororial solidarity and a willingness to tell the truth and shame the devil.—*Helen Shaw* (*Booth*; through July 6.)

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The documentary “**Drop Dead City**,” directed by Peter Yost and Michael Rohatyn, unfolds, in fascinating detail, the economic and political intricacies of the financial crisis that brought New York City to the brink of bankruptcy, in 1975—and the complexity of the last-minute rescue. The title alludes to a surprisingly consequential headline, in the New York *Daily News*, after then President Gerald Ford refused a federal bailout. The film is a symphony of voices, featuring recent interviews with many of the original participants—businesspeople, union leaders, political officials—along with archival clips documenting key events and conveying the tone of the times. Rohatyn’s late father, Felix Rohatyn, an investment banker, was perhaps the city’s prime rescuer, and the connection energizes the film with personal fervor.—*Richard Brody (IFC Center.)*

**For more:** read Jeff Nussbaum’s investigation, from 2015, of what happened [the night New York City saved itself from bankruptcy.](#)

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#### P.S. Good stuff on the internet:

- [Keith McNally’s early years](#)
- [The problem with “pick-me girls”](#)
- [An ode to impermanence](#)

The Daily

# Three Actually Fun Podcasts About Money

By Sarah Larson

April 24, 2025



**Grab your headphones.** Today's newsletter is a list of fun podcasts about the matter on everyone's mind: money. Plus:

- [Mark Zuckerberg says social media is over](#)
- [The eyeglasses with built-in, real-time speech transcription](#)
- [“Drop Dead City” spotlights a lost era of liberal government](#)



**Sarah Larson**

*Larson is a podcast critic and staff writer.*

The recent churn of tariffs, trade wars, and high-stakes financial bullying has forced many of us to think about economics more than usual—and has, perhaps, revealed how little we understand about any of it. Three excellent new documentary-style podcasts focussed on money offer some perspective. Hearing the wild stories they tell, which span decades and continents, you may be inspired to make rational financial decisions—in part because they showcase people who didn’t.

To my delight, “[\*\*The History Podcast: Invisible Hands\*\*](#),” a BBC series about capitalism and the “free-market revolution,” turns out to be one of the zestiest podcasts I’ve heard this year. It’s narrated by the eighty-six-year-old British broadcaster David Dimbleby, who makes for a shrewd guide through a surprising narrative that includes a Sussex chicken farmer, a wartime parachuting tragedy, a vomiting conservative M.P., turmoil for nationalized industries, and, inevitably, some maddening audio of Margaret Thatcher. Dimbleby’s age, far from a liability, feels like a magic trick—rare is the podcast host in 2025 who can casually weave socioeconomic together with personal memories of the Second World War.

Hosted by the lawyer turned podcaster Nicolo Majnoni, “[Shadow Kingdom: God’s Banker](#),” a hair-raising true-crime series from Crooked Media and Campside Media, is almost *too* interesting, like a finance version of “The Da Vinci Code.” It tells the story of Roberto Calvi, a banker who worked closely with the Vatican and who, in 1982, was found dead, hanging from Blackfriars Bridge, in London. Majnoni, who grew up in Italy and the United States, also narrates an Italian-language version of the podcast, and he’s a refreshingly skeptical guide to a tale aswirl with conspiracies involving the Vatican, the Mafia, a far-right branch of Freemasons, a mysterious letter to the Pope, and a dead man with bricks in his pockets. Within all that—and of more interest to me—is fascinating context about the interplay between democracy, fascism, communism, and religion in twentieth-century Europe, exemplified by one incredible sequence about Pope John Paul II’s 1979 visit to Communist Poland.

The expertly produced and sound-designed “[Sea of Lies](#),” from the CBC’s excellent “[Uncover](#)” series, begins several miles off the coast of Brixham, Devon, in 1996, when two British fishermen—a father and son—make a grisly discovery in the net of their trawler. From there, the host, Sam Mullins, patiently unspools a head-spinning mystery of keen detective work, false identities, embezzlement schemes, and murder, and he does so with an almost amusing level of barely restrained “This story will blow your mind.” But it will—and it makes for a vivid parable about the creative treachery of some financial crime and the importance of guarding against it.

*For more culture recommendations like these, [sign up for our Goings On newsletter](#).*

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## ***Editor’s Pick***



## Subtitling Your Life

Hearing aids and cochlear implants have been getting better for years, but a new type of device—eyeglasses that display real-time speech transcription on their lenses—is a game-changing breakthrough. [David Owen reports »](#)

### More Top Stories

- [Mark Zuckerberg Says Social Media Is Over](#)
- [“Drop Dead City” Spotlights a Lost Era of Liberal Government](#)
- [The Show Can’t Go On](#)

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### *Daily Cartoon*



## More Fun & Games

- [Play today's smallish puzzle.](#) A clue: Mathematician Paul known as a prolific collaborator. Five letters.
  - [Shouts & Murmurs: Thinking of You](#)
  - [Laugh Lines No. 16: The Office, Part 2](#). Can you guess when these *New Yorker* cartoons were originally published?
- 

**P.S.** The final season of Netflix's "You" premières today. The actor Penn Badgley, who plays the murderous Joe, [told our writer in 2020](#) that it's "the same role" as the one he played on "Gossip Girl"—"but now he has blood dripping down his face." □

The Food Scene

# Bradley Cooper Makes an Awfully Good Cheesesteak

At Danny & Coop's, the actor and director partners with a Philadelphia restaurateur to bring that city's beloved sandwich to New Yorkers.

By Helen Rosner

April 20, 2025



The important thing to know about Danny & Coop's, the new Philly-cheesesteak restaurant in the East Village co-owned by Bradley Cooper, of the piercing blue eyes and the considerable acting-directing chops, is this: the cheesesteak is good. It's *very* good. It's a hefty twelve-incher, the roll split lengthwise and filled with a glorious glop of cheese (smooth and saucy Cooper Sharp, no relation to Bradley) and sliced rib-eye steak (tender, velvet-soft, paper-thin) run through with sweet ribbons of griddled onion. It's the best cheesesteak I've had in New York, which isn't saying much; it's just as good as the best one I've had in Philadelphia, which is saying plenty.

## Helen, Help Me!

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

Cooper's partner at Danny & Coop's is the chef-cum-baker turned restaurateur Danny DiGiampietro, of Angelo's Pizzeria, which makes the best cheesesteak I've had in Philadelphia. Opened in 2019, Angelo's is a bold, baldly ambitious newcomer in a city that (like all cities) can at times be self-defeatingly in love with its own traditions. The restaurant serves terrific pizza and even better cheesesteaks that draw long lines running down the street or, some days, up the street the other way, just to keep life interesting. DiGiampietro's focus on quality ("He just makes perfect food," [a fan once raved](#) in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*) upended a cheesesteak field stultified by the sodium-laden clichés of "Whiz wit" and gummy industrial steak. His high standards for the insides of the sandwich are a fair part of Angelo's magic, but the real miracle is his bread: graceful torpedoes of flour and yeast and dough, the crust baked to a crisp, autumnal golden-brown and dusted with sesame seeds, the interior both soft and dense, sour and salty. Most bread used for cheesesteaks tastes like nothing; it serves as a container and a handhold. DiGiampietro's bread tastes like *bread*, like sun on a wheat field, like the mysteries of fermentation, like salt and steam and the hot, mysterious darkness of the oven.



Bradley Cooper, upon whom I, a sandwich obsessive, wish only blessings—may he receive every Oscar his heart has ever desired; I even forgive him for serving a runny egg yolk on a perforated plate in the movie “Burnt”—grew up just outside Philadelphia. Perhaps unsurprisingly, he seems to approach cheesesteaks with the same intensity that he brings to his directorial endeavors and his awards-season campaigns. Danny & Coop’s originated in 2023, as a pop-up food truck in New York, with Cooper manning the flattop. At the brick-and-mortar spot, as with the truck, much of the hype (and, I assume, much of the considerable line) was related to his celebrity. Especially in the restaurant’s early weeks, Cooper was regularly in the kitchen, working the grill with vigor, occasionally breaking to pose for selfies. He’s there less often now, but the wait’s grown no shorter—forty-five minutes on one of my visits, a little over an hour on another. Increasingly, the sandwich itself is the draw. Down to the tiniest sesame seed, it is almost identical to the one served at Angelo’s. There’s that heavenly bread—baked in-house, to DiGiampietro’s exacting specifications—stuffed with that creamy colloidal dispersion of meat and cheese; it’s even slightly under-seasoned, just as it is at Angelo’s, with a paleness of flavor that can result from too many rich ingredients in too great a quantity. But the lack of salt is easily remedied with the application of pickled peppers, your choice of hot or sweet. (I prefer hot, which are sharper and more vinegary.) The only real difference, between the one here and the one there, is that the onions at Danny & Coop’s are mixed in with the beef on the griddle, while in Philly they’re cooked and added separately.



It's actually pretty easy to hop down from New York to Philadelphia—it can take me longer to get from Park Slope to Greenpoint, depending on the emotional state of the subway—but the East Village is a simpler proposition. Still, for all the raptures this cheesesteak sent me into, I feel a strange unease about New York City being home to one of the finest examples of Philadelphia's most iconic food. (This is the same disquietude I feel about the Chicago-style pizza at Emmett's, which I prefer to most Chicago-style pizza in actual Chicago—the soft imperialism of New York City!) The sandwich may be the Angelo's sandwich, but the experience isn't the Angelo's experience: the line is a very East Village line, gray-toned where South Philly is in warm browns and reds, litter-strewn, harder-edged. The narrow shop is bare bones, with a corrugated-metal ceiling, brick walls left mostly empty, and no seating. The interior is half taken up by the kitchen, plus an ordering counter and brief, shallow ledges for eating-in. There's a bit of a provisional feeling to it all: the restaurant is a restaurant, but it's also sort of still a pop-up, with all the scrappiness that entails. It's open three days a week; friendly reminders of dates and times are issued via a Danny & Coop's Instagram account, which doesn't otherwise seem to be too meticulously maintained. The sandwich, I should have mentioned, is the only thing on the menu. It's the only thing that gets lavished with attention. It's the only thing that really matters. ♦

# The Talk of the Town

- [One Hundred Days of Ineptitude](#)
- [Meet the City's New Compost Cops](#)
- [Creating a New Fire Island from Scratch](#)
- [Cinema Was Claude Lelouch's Nanny](#)
- [Military Decorations, Pete Hegseth-Style](#)

Comment

# One Hundred Days of Ineptitude

Now we know that Donald Trump's first term, his initial attempt at authoritarian primacy, was amateur hour, a fitful rehearsal.

By David Remnick

April 27, 2025



Eight years ago, in this space, a survey of the first hundred days of the initial [Trump](#) Presidency described just how “demoralizing” the Administration had already proved for any citizen concerned with the fate of liberal democracy. In both rhetoric and action, Donald Trump had undermined the rule of law, global security, civil rights, science, and the distinction between fact and its opposite. As we noted,

The hundred-day marker is never an entirely reliable indicator of a four-year term, but it’s worth remembering that Franklin Roosevelt and Barack Obama were among those who came to office at a moment of national crisis and had the discipline, the preparation, and the rigor to set an entirely new course. Impulsive, egocentric, and mendacious, Trump has, in the same span, set fire to the integrity of his office.

Trump never concealed his motives or his character. He came to office in 2017 celebrating the illiberalism of [Andrew Jackson](#) and [William McKinley](#) and waving [Charles Lindbergh's](#) banner of “America First.” At the Inauguration, he took in the spotty attendance on the Mall and instructed his press secretary to declare the crowd the “largest audience to ever witness an Inauguration—period.” Trump went on from there, demagogue and fantasist, striving to ban travellers from predominantly Muslim countries and to “repeal and replace” the [Affordable Care Act](#). Media-drunk, he tweeted at [Kim Jong Un](#), [Hillary Clinton](#), and [Arnold Schwarzenegger](#), while hate-toggling between CNN and MSNBC. He appointed [Michael Flynn](#), a [QAnon](#) favorite, as his national-security adviser—until he regretfully had to fire him three weeks into the term. He amused himself by antagonizing close European allies and declaring *nato* “obsolete.”

There were many more moments of chaos and cruelty to come, but now we know that Trump’s first term, his initial attempt at authoritarian primacy, was amateur hour, a fitful rehearsal. The reflexes and ambitions were all there; he just didn’t know yet what he was doing. His victory over Clinton had been a shock, so when he frantically prepared for office he threw together a motley staff of bug-eyed ideologues, silver-haired establishmentarians (who “looked the part”), and family members and retainers who hoped to profit from the job while getting off on all the super-cool trappings of power. As a result, his first term was characterized by an ambient contempt for him inside his own Administration. His first Secretary of State, [Rex Tillerson](#), was reportedly convinced that Trump was a “moron,” and both the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, [Mark Milley](#), and the chief of staff, [John Kelly](#), eventually concluded that the Commander-in-Chief was, in a word, a fascist.

Trump still managed to exact plenty of damage, yet the feuding in his midst, along with the episodic flashes of congressional opposition, popular protest, and resistance in the courts, forestalled some of his fondest ambitions from being realized. Time ran out. He lost reëlection. His [insurrection](#) failed.

But he was not done. During his four-year interregnum at Mar-a-Lago, Trump gazed down the fairways and concluded that [Joe Biden](#) was too diminished to win again. On this, he was right and the Democratic leadership deluded. What’s more, Trump resolved to be himself, only more

so: Trump Unbound. While the commentariat saw his increasingly bizarre improvisations at the lectern as no less disqualifying than Biden's confusion during the fatal debate, Trump kept faith with his dominant source of inspiration—retribution. With a wink, he denied any knowledge of [Project 2025](#), the Heritage Foundation's vision for the exercise of executive power, but few doubted that he would enact its plans. For would-be advisers and Cabinet officers, obedience was the sole qualification. The Administration is now stocked with the greasily obsequious. Rank incompetence also seems no impediment to employment. How else to explain [Pete Hegseth's](#) move from the weekend desk at Fox News to the big office at the Pentagon? And in what other Administration would bulbs as dim as Howard Lutnick or Peter Navarro be called upon to craft the future of the world's largest economy?

The record of failure after a hundred days is, at once, astonishing and predictable. With no evident purpose, Trump has alienated Europe, Japan, Mexico, and Canada, further undermined *NATO*, and made even more plain his affection for [Vladimir Putin](#). He has sanctioned his benefactor [Elon Musk](#) to hoist a chainsaw and commit mayhem against government agencies that save countless human lives. With evident pleasure, Trump has deported more than two hundred people (nearly all of whom have no criminal record) to a Salvadoran gulag. With his [tariff](#) proposals, he managed to destabilize the global economy in a flash, perhaps the worst own goal in history. As part of his revenge campaign, he has waged a war of intimidation against dozens of scholarly, commercial, and legal institutions. Some, like Columbia University, Amazon, and Paul, Weiss, have caved, choosing the path of obedience over principle. Shari Redstone, of Paramount, would rather trash the independence of "60 Minutes," the most respected investigative outlet on television, than resist the absurd attacks of Trump and his lawyers.

The enduring emblem of this Administration and its duplicity is undoubtedly *STRUMP*, a meme-coin scheme that has brought many millions of dollars in profits to the President and his fellow-investors. Few seem to mind. Trump has normalized Presidential corruption. If one were forced to choose two representative events in the life of this Administration so far, they would surely be the White House meetings with the Ukrainian President, [Volodymyr Zelensky](#), and, six weeks later, with the Salvadoran President, [Nayib Bukele](#). In the first, Trump treated a moral hero as an ungrateful

scoundrel. In the second, he treated a sadistic dictator as a soulmate. It is hard to recall a scene in the Oval Office more revolting than that of Trump's smiling request to Bukele to build five more prisons, because "the homegrowns are next."

In recent weeks, there have been encouraging signs of opposition to Trump, on the streets and in the courts. [Cory Booker](#), [Chris Murphy](#), [Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez](#), and [Bernie Sanders](#) are among the clearest voices of dissent on Capitol Hill. But accommodation and cowardice remain the norm. "We are all afraid," the Republican senator Lisa Murkowski, of Alaska, said to a gathering in Anchorage. No doubt. The threat of retaliation is no joke, but the Senator's plaintive cry does not exactly meet the demands of the moment. This is not primarily a matter of competence or a clash over policy. The Trump Administration is carrying out a coördinated assault on first principles. "The limits of tyrants," [Frederick Douglass](#) said, "are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress." The President will persist in his assault until he feels the resistance of a people who will tolerate it no longer. ♦

Dept. of Disposal

# Meet the City's New Compost Cops

Chicken bones? Nope! Greasy pizza boxes? Uh-uh. For two weeks in April, the Department of Sanitation sent inspectors to rifle through your trash and fine landlords for failure to compost.

By Diego Lasarte

April 28, 2025



As any freegan, gleaner, or dumpster diver knows, there is an art to picking through trash. On a recent rainy morning in Bushwick, Thomas Crespo, a second-generation sanitation worker, was elbow-deep in a residential trash bin, searching for coffee grounds, eggshells, dead houseplants, orange peels—any organic material that might fall under the purview of New York City's new composting law.

"As soon as you open the lid, you get hit with the smell," Crespo said, describing one giveaway. He wore a yellow safety vest over a green Department of Sanitation uniform. One thing he was not wearing was gloves. "I'm so used to it," he said. "Soap and water will do."

On every shift, Crespo, who is forty, with broad shoulders and slicked-back hair, inspects the trash cans outside more than fifty apartment buildings, to make sure that they're complying with the new law. New Yorkers are now required to deposit any compostable household waste—food scraps, yard debris, and greasy paper products, such as pizza boxes—in bins marked for compost. (The city sells special brown ones for forty-three dollars.)

The law has been around since October, but enforcement began April 1st. Landlords are fined for infractions: as little as twenty-five dollars for a first offense, and up to three hundred dollars for subsequent offenses. In the first few weeks of enforcement, sanitation supervisors like Crespo issued more than four thousand tickets. The penalties seemed to work—a resulting uptick in compliance yielded almost four million pounds of compost, or, as the *Post* put it, the weight of eight and a half Statues of Liberty.

“We’re allowed to start writing up violations after 6 A.M.,” Crespo said. “But I wouldn’t want to be woken up at six in the morning, so I wait until after at least seven.” He pulled a takeout bag full of leftover Mexican food from a trash bin. It was seven-fifteen, so he printed out a ticket and pressed the buzzer of a ground-floor apartment.

“Hello?” a woman’s voice said sleepily, through the intercom.

“Good morning, I’m from the Department of Sanitation,” Crespo said. “I’m here to issue a summons for the building for not separating the organic material from the garbage.”

The woman’s reply gave her away as the culprit. “It’s just a bag of rice,” she said.

“That’s compost,” Crespo said, and stuck the ticket on the front door, along with a composting brochure.

Joshua Goodman, a deputy commissioner at the Sanitation Department, had joined Crespo on his rounds that day, to monitor public reaction. He doesn’t see why it’s so hard for people to remember the composting rules. “It’s simple,” Goodman said. “You cook it, you grow it, you can throw it.” Sipping from a paper cup of diner coffee and wearing a green D.S.N.Y

windbreaker, he railed against “the haters and the cynics and the doubters” who said that the law would never happen. (In mid-April, after a flood of complaints from landlords—some alleging that compost attracts vermin—the mayor’s office temporarily paused composting fines for most buildings, promising “additional outreach and education.”)

Goodman takes a philosophical approach to trash. “The fact that sanitation is this free, unlimited service, sort of untouched by neoliberalism, is very appealing to me,” he said. “It’s us and the public library.”

Crespo approached another trash can and lifted out the bag, jiggling it a bit. A few passersby slowed to see what he was up to. He explained his method of predicting a bag’s contents: besides smell, the distribution of weight is often a tell. (Food, usually the heaviest form of waste, sinks to the bottom.) Opening the bulgy sack, he found that he’d guessed correctly—chicken bones and pizza crust.

He honed this skill during his twenty years as a collecting specialist. That work, he said, also taught him a garbageman truism: “If you put bags full of food straight into a truck’s compactor, you’ll get a face full of hopper juice.”

Goodman listened, a reflective look on his face. “The job sanitation workers do is literally Sisyphean,” he said. “I mean, people say that something is a Sisyphean task—they just mean it’s hard. This is *actually* a Sisyphean task.”

Crespo printed a ticket for the chicken bones and rang the bell at a nearby row house. An older woman, wearing pajamas and a tan beret, answered the door, then fetched the landlord and his wife. Soon, the four of them were crowded around the trash bin, picking through the refuse and arguing.

“I’m a senior citizen—can’t you give me a break?” the landlord, a balding, hunched-over man, asked.

“It’s your tenants,” Crespo said. “You’ve got to be on top of your tenants.” He turned his attention to the next building, where a neighbor, wearing a fuzzy pink bathrobe, was waiting on her porch, craning her neck to see the commotion.

“And the boulder rolls right back down the hill,” Goodman said. ♦

Speedo Dept.

# Creating a New Fire Island from Scratch

Plotting the next gay utopia—less expensive than Long Island, with fewer children—an architect scours Europe for a site, and searches for Speedo-friendly investors.

By Michael Schulman

April 28, 2025

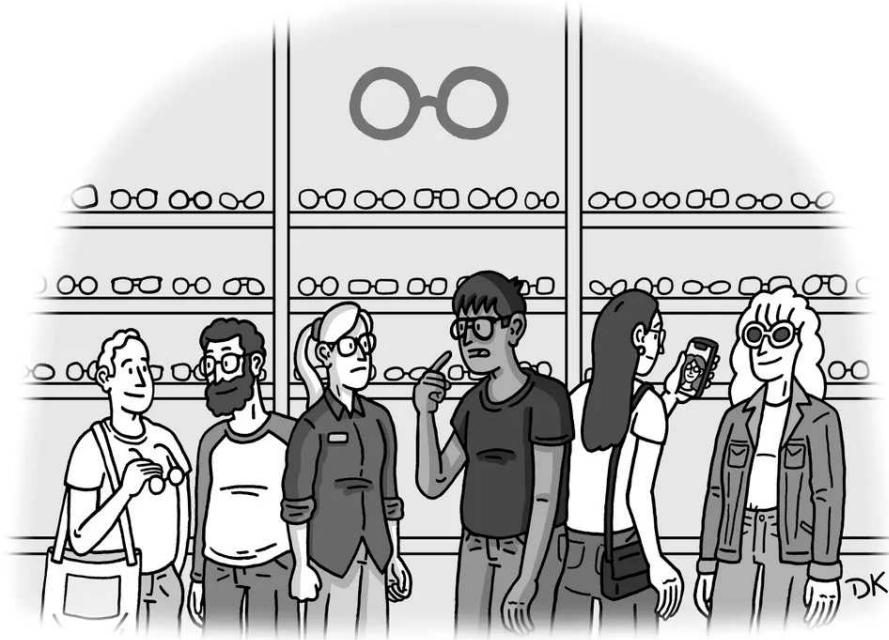


Nigel Smith, an Australian architect, first went to Fire Island Pines in 2004, when he was twenty-eight and newly out of the closet. “It was heaven,” he said, not long ago. He spent days in a Speedo and met people at “tea,” the roving party where gaggles of gay men dance, drink, and flirt. He started visiting every summer. One time, a friend took him to see the drag queen Porsche in Cherry Grove, and along the way Smith got so drunk (screwdrivers) that he lay down in the ocean and his friend had to yank him out. “I remember Porsche singing, and she’s, like, ‘Who’s that hot guy in the back?’ ” he said. “As everyone turned around and looked at me, I just started quietly vomiting.”

More recently, Smith and some friends considered buying their own property in the Pines, but they were priced out. “One of my friends was moving to London, and he was, like, ‘Why don’t we just make a new place?’” Smith said. The friend, a venture capitalist named Aron D’Souza, joined Smith and Brett Fraser, a real-estate entrepreneur, to devise New Fire Island, a “new gay paradise” that will materialize somewhere in the Mediterranean. (D’Souza, who spearheaded the Hulk Hogan lawsuit that killed *Gawker*, has since left the project to work with the gay billionaire Peter Thiel on the Enhanced Games, a doping-friendly Olympics.)

Last year, the group released a launch video featuring Smith frolicking on a beach with shirtless hunks and inviting viewers to “join us as we find an island and create our paradise.” The response was brutal. The Provincetown Business Guild sneered, “If you want to invest in a place devoid of culture, diversity, history that celebrates gentrification—by all means invest in New Fire Island.” Commenters mocked the concept (“Sounds sticky”) and the video’s lack of diversity (“Girl . . . who does this appeal to besides white gays?!?”). Smith, who filmed it in Melbourne, said, “I had two other friends who I wanted to come down, one Asian guy and one Black South African guy, but they couldn’t, because of their work.” There were questions about affordability (the cheapest villas cost more than half a million dollars, plus airfare to Europe) and the fact that—oh, right—there was no location yet. Nevertheless, twenty-three hundred people have joined the wait list.

Smith, who has salt-and-pepper hair and silver stubble, has spent much of the past year raising capital and traipsing around the Mediterranean, looking for a square kilometre of coastal land that could fit a thousand houses and offer optimum beach access and airport proximity. (Despite being called a “gay settler colonialist,” Smith says that the project won’t be displacing anyone but goats.) He’s narrowed the potential sites down to four, all in Greece, and hopes to have news in the next few months. He insisted that despite the backlash—which he said had come mostly from the Northeast (“Americans live in a bubble”)—interest had poured in from Europe, where gay men long for a Fire Island closer to home. “Already, we have people going, ‘Oh, I want to run the pizza shop’ or ‘My husband’s a barber.’”



Earlier this month, New Fire Island hosted its first meet and greet, at a restaurant at the South Street Seaport. Smith, standing below a disco ball, said that he'd been tweaking the branding to be more "restrained and gentlemanly—less screaming in your face and more Aperol spritz at three o'clock." He may even change the name New Fire Island to something less appropriative. "The land might have a good name already. It might be Patroclus or Achilles," he said, citing the gayest characters in the Iliad.

Attendees, who'd been invited to meet their "future neighbors," included financiers, designers, and one equestrian show jumper slash tequila entrepreneur. "My husband and I both joined the wait list," Kartik Desai, a developer, said. "The bubble has inflated so much in Pines real estate that it's so difficult to go now." He added, "The way things are going here, if they start rounding up gays, I need a place to go."

One suave older man with a Colombian accent said that he was looking for "a little bit of *gla-moor*." A management consultant with a handlebar mustache and a floral shirt, who owns property on "the old Fire Island," said that the Pines is now overrun by straight people and children. "Part of the vibe is: we're gay men together, it's sexual. When women come into that space, it kills the vibe. Give me the community where we can just be us." He

asked Smith if New Fire Island could have “vagina-sniffing dogs at the ferry.” (No.)

Others were more skeptical. “I need foam-core boards with renderings,” a guy in advertising said. Another partygoer called it “essentially a gated community for rich gays.” Smith, standing by a table of unclaimed nametags (Brad, Brock, Craig, Frank, John, Justin, Orlando, Stan), conceded that the path to paradise had been rocky. “Building the future is hard,” he said. ♦

The Pictures

# Cinema Was Claude Lelouch’s Nanny

The eighty-seven-year-old French director, in town for a rerelease of “A Man and a Woman,” his swinging-sixties “make-out movie,” ponders what he believes will be his final film.

By Bruce Handy

April 28, 2025



On a visit to the Lower East Side Tenement Museum the other day, the eighty-seven-year-old French director Claude Lelouch used the occasion to demonstrate his filmmaking technique. Moving through the small rooms of an apartment that looked much the same as it did in 1902, when it was occupied by a Jewish immigrant family, Lelouch put his iPhone on video mode and panned the interiors, zooming in on details that intrigued him—a wall calendar, a worktable covered with cutout dress pieces, battered linoleum on the kitchen floor. The tour had given him an idea for a new movie, he said later; the phone video was a visual note to self. But the footage *could* have been the real thing: Lelouch shot bits of his most recent picture, last year’s “*Finalement*,” on an iPhone. That’s a far easier lift than

the 35-mm. film camera he shouldered sixty-some years ago as a young director who long served as his own cinematographer.

Lelouch was in town for the release of a restored version of “A Man and a Woman,” his most famous movie, which had just opened at Film Forum. Dressed for the day’s raw weather in a zippered wool jacket and a gray tweed cap, his look was less Oscar and Palme d’Or winner than outer-arrondissement working stiff. As the son of an Algerian Jew who settled in Paris in 1933, he was curious about the Jewish immigrant experience in the U.S. He continued his Lower East Side immersion at Russ & Daughters, where, over a plain bagel and smoked fish (and through a translator), he explained that he was literally born to cinema: his father, an early home-movie adopter, filmed his son’s birth, a ritual that wasn’t as much of a thing in 1937 as it is today. During the Nazi Occupation, when Lelouch and his mother were in the South of France and were hunted by the Gestapo (wartime circumstances had separated his parents), she would stash him in movie theatres during the day while she looked for new places to stay. “I was a rather turbulent child,” he recalled. “The only thing that would calm me down was cinema. So cinema became my nanny.” It also became his teacher. He made his first movie shortly after the Liberation, at the age of seven, when he filmed some classmates fighting. His dad’s camera was now his. He was hooked.

“A Man and a Woman,” starring Anouk Aimée and Jean-Louis Trintignant, was Lelouch’s seventh film. The year was 1966, and because he’d previously directed six “clumsy” movies that “hadn’t done very well,” his career was on the ropes. “It was our good luck not to have money” for a flashy wardrobe and elaborate sets, he said. “That allowed me to focus on the actors’ eyes. It’s the only part of the body that doesn’t lie.” The result was a love story told more through gazes than through dialogue—and a huge international hit that Pauline Kael memorably dubbed (not in these pages) “probably the most efficacious make-out movie of the swinging sixties.”

Fortune might have swung differently had Lelouch not decided, at the last minute, to change the final shot of the film. His screenplay had ended with Aimée’s widowed script girl returning to Paris from Deauville after a tryst gone sour with Trintignant’s widowed racecar driver. The last shot was meant to be Aimée getting off a train at the Gare Saint-Lazare and setting

forth on her own—"a woman alone," as Lelouch described what he hoped would be a resonant ending. Because of budget limitations, he had put Aimée on a train fifty kilometres outside Paris and then sped back to the city by car to film her stepping onto the platform, vérité style. Unbeknownst to Aimée, he had decided to bring Trintignant to greet her at the station, in character. Would the lovers make up? "I filmed everything like a journalist," Lelouch said. "I told Jean, 'Let's see what happens. Maybe she'll walk right by you. Maybe she'll come to you. We're going for the truth.'" The director's luck held: Aimée leaped into her co-star's arms, a swoony finale that surely boosted the movie's box-office more than, say, a slap across Trintignant's face.

Back to 2025: Lelouch said that he's preparing "what will surely be my last film. I'm going to make it in a very different way. I'm going to shoot the first ten minutes, then I'm going to edit them, do the sound work. And if I like those ten minutes I'll write and shoot the next ten minutes, twenty, thirty, and I'll stop when I don't like it anymore." He has a notion of the film's arc, "but maybe the story will take me elsewhere," he said. "I want to give myself every possibility." He expects to be ninety by the time he finishes—if he chooses to finish, that is. He added, "It's a film about luck." ♦

Sketchpad

# Military Decorations, Pete Hegseth-Style

A new lineup of distinguished-service medals, rewarding Martial Lawlessness, Laughing at All of Elon Musk's Jokes, and Outstanding Bone Spurs.

By Ivan Ehlers

April 28, 2025











## Reporting & Essays

- [A Hundred Classics to Get Me Through a Hundred Days of Trump](#)
- [A Lawyer Freed Young Thug, Now He's Defending Diddy.](#)
- [Is It Happening Here?](#)
- [Ryan Coogler's Road to "Sinners"](#)

American Chronicles

# A Hundred Classics to Get Me Through a Hundred Days of Trump

Each morning, before the day's decree, I turned to a slim book, hoping for sense, or solace.

By Jill Lepore

April 28, 2025



On the twentieth of January, the year of our Lord 2025, [Donald Trump's one hundred days](#) began.

Thank you. Thank you very much, everybody. (Applause.) Wow. Thank you very, very much.

I read his [second Inaugural Address](#) early the next morning in bed, curled, bent to the glow of an iPhone in dark mode, a morning ritual that always feels like sin.

From this day forward, our country will flourish and be respected again all over the world.

Then, dutifully, I scrolled through the Day One executive orders:

A full, complete and unconditional pardon . . . offenses related to events that occurred at or near the United States Capitol on January 6, 2021 . . .

. . . the privilege of United States citizenship does not automatically extend to persons born in the United States . . .

. . . establishes the Department of Government Efficiency . . .

. . . eliminate the “electric vehicle (EV) mandate” . . .

. . . directing that it officially be renamed the Gulf of America.

The Day One executive orders included—and depended on—the President’s formal, executive declarations of not one, not two, but three national emergencies: an immigration emergency, an energy emergency, and a terrorism emergency. There was also the Donald-Trump-is-President-again emergency.

I buried my phone under my pillow and closed my eyes. Blindly, I reached over to my nightstand and groped for a book. I pulled off the stack the first of the Penguin Little Black Classics, a collection of slender paperbacks that I’d been meaning to read, each as thin and sleek as my phone, bound in black, with white type on a plain cover. Dark mode.

No. 1, Giovanni Boccaccio, “Mrs Rosie and the Priest,” is described on the back cover as “bawdy tales of pimps, cuckolds, lovers and clever women from the fourteenth-century Florentine masterpiece *The Decameron*.” The book opened like a flower, like a hinge, like a butterfly, like a pair of hands in blessing. I turned to the first page:

I was told some time ago about a young man from Perugia called Andreuccio, the son of a certain Pietro and a horse-dealer by trade.

My heart leapt. I had found my doomscrolling methadone. With five hundred gold florins in his bag, Andreuccio set off for Naples. And I made a vow to read one volume of the Penguin Little Black Classics each morning in bed, matins, for a hundred days. Two and a half times Lent. *In case of emergency, break open a book.*

Little editions that fit in the palm of your hand and can be rubbed like rosaries are close relatives of prayer books. They are meant for the masses and often intended to be read, and reread, in difficult times. The Penguin Little Black Classics are descended from the hundred and one titles published by the Little Leather Library Corporation, founded in New York around 1915. This was during the Great War, a terrible emergency, and before the invention of modern paperbacks. The Little Leather Library—"handy little classics"—consisted of miniature editions of works by the likes of [Shakespeare](#), [Longfellow](#), Tennyson, and [Poe](#), about three and a quarter by four inches, bound, at first, in real leather, and then mostly in imitation green leather. It was, in effect, a small-scale, American version of the Everyman Library, which had been started in 1906 by a London bookbinder who, not nearly so rich as Andreuccio, had left home at the age of thirteen with only a half crown in his pocket and who, having made his fortune, decided, at the age of fifty-six, to publish a library of fifty titles "to appeal to every kind of reader: the worker, the student, the cultured man, the child, the man and the woman," and sell them for one shilling each so that "for a few shillings the reader may have a whole bookshelf of the immortals; for five pounds (which will procure him with a hundred volumes) a man may be intellectually rich for life." Every volume, six and eleven-sixteenths by four and a quarter inches, contained this motto, from "Everyman," the medieval morality play: "Everyman, I will go with thee, and be thy guide, / In thy most need to go by thy side." Because what you need, in dire times, is wisdom.



The four New Yorkers who started the Little Leather Library wanted people who rarely read books and owned few to own and read more books, so they made them even tinier and even cheaper, ten cents, twenty-five cents. (One of those four men went on to start the Modern Library; two others helped create the Book-of-the-Month Club.) They printed titles in the public domain, so they didn't need to pay authors for rights. They stuffed their tiny books in chocolate boxes (an idea they got from cigarettes that came with Lilliputian editions of Shakespeare's plays), they sold them at Woolworth's, and they seem to have even put them in cereal boxes. But once the U.S. entered the war in Europe they began to sell them by mail order to the families of soldiers to send to the boys at the front, because men in trenches, and men who'd once been in trenches, battered by shelling and up to their waists in mud and blood, "read, eagerly, cravingly, everything they can lay their hands on," as a Little Leather Library ad explained in October, 1917. "They have gone through such frightful experiences that they require something to put them in touch again with a sane world." This was, after all, the war about which Wilfred Owen wrote, in a poem included in Penguin Little Black Classics No. 50, "1914":

. . . Rent or furled  
Are all Art's ensigns. Verse wails. Now begin

Famines of thought and feeling. Love's wine's thin.  
The grain of human Autumn rots, down-hurled.

I am not a soldier and this is not wartime, only a national emergency, or, I guess, a whole slew of them. *Now begin / Famines of thought and feeling.* But my Penguin Little Black Classics smell like a stationery store, and they have a small flat-footed, big-bellied penguin on the front cover, with his head cocked, and the words inside make sense, none of which can be said for the daily news about the state of the nation.

Donald Trump's one hundred days, from January 20 to April 30, 2025, will stand as a monument to the bloated, twisted power of the American Presidency and to the impotence of the U.S. Congress. In 1933, after a bank run that lasted a month, [Franklin D. Roosevelt](#) declared a national emergency and ordered a weeklong bank holiday. He subsequently coined the "Hundred Days" to describe the beginning of his first term in office, during which he issued a total of ninety-nine executive orders. F.D.R.'s enemies accused him of using the Great Depression as a pretext for assuming dictatorial powers, but F.D.R., unlike Trump, worked with Congress, which passed nearly eighty laws in those hundred days in 1933. During Trump's one hundred days in 2025, he issued a hundred and thirty executive orders (and counting), while Congress passed exactly five laws, including two to roll back environmental protections, one directing the arrest of aliens charged with certain crimes, and one to keep the federal government running.

Even more notably, Trump declared eight national emergencies in his first hundred days, declarations that allowed him to wield more than a hundred and thirty emergency powers. In 1973, after [Richard Nixon](#) was re-elected even as the Watergate scandal was unfolding, the historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., offered an account of what he called the "imperial presidency," in a book of that title: the gradual expansion of the office from the earliest days of the Republic, especially by the appropriation of the war power from Congress, in violation of the Constitution's separation of powers. Trump's second Administration marks the high noon of the emergency Presidency.

Many of the emergency powers that Trump exercised in his first hundred days became available only through legislation passed after Schlesinger wrote “[The Imperial Presidency](#)”: the 1976 National Emergencies Act and the International Emergency Economic Powers Act of 1977. Still, these measures did not immediately produce an increase in the number of announced crises. Nixon, in his one and a half terms, declared two national emergencies, [Jimmy Carter](#) one, and [Ronald Reagan](#) six in eight years. Democrats were the first to abuse the emergency power: in two-term Presidencies, [Bill Clinton](#) declared seventeen national emergencies, and [Barack Obama](#) twelve. [Joe Biden](#) declared nine in four years. The emergency Presidency, in short, did not begin with Trump. (Nor did the feckless Congress: the last Congress of Biden’s Presidency passed the fewest laws of any since the nineteen-eighties.) But Trump’s declaration of eight national emergencies in his first hundred days turned an abuse of power into a feature of the office.

The emergency Presidency is a function, too, of emergency politics. Sirens have been blaring for years, if not decades. [The 2024 Presidential campaign](#) itself involved deafening, five-alarm rhetorical fires. (There would be real conflagrations, too, as [wildfires](#) ravaged swaths of Southern California.) Biden and then [Kamala Harris](#) claimed that the election was an emergency for democracy. [Elon Musk](#) insisted that the future of humanity was at stake. “They’ll soon have us losing World War Three,” Trump warned of the Biden Administration. “We won’t even be in World War Three—we’ll be losing World War Three with weapons the likes of which nobody has ever seen before. These are the stakes of this election. Our country is being destroyed. And the only thing standing between you and its obliteration is me.”

Trump won the Presidency in a free and fair election with a mandate to curb inflation, restrict immigration, cut taxes, support small businesses, and reverse progressive overreach, especially in employment and education. From his first day in office, he set about dismantling much of both the federal government and the Constitution’s system of checks and balances. By declarations of national emergency, by executive order, and by executive action—and frequently in plain violation of the Constitution—Trump gutted [entire departments of the federal government](#). He defied the [federal judiciary](#). He rescinded funds lawfully appropriated by Congress. He lifted regulations across industries. He fired, forced the resignations of, or

eliminated the jobs of tens of thousands of federal employees. He hobbled scientific research. He all but criminalized immigration. He denounced the arts. He abandoned the federal government's commitment to public education. He revoked civil rights and shuttered civil-rights programs, deriding the goals of racial equality, gender equality, and L.G.B.T.Q. equality. He made enemies of American allies, and prostituted the United States to the passions of tyrants. He punished his adversaries and delighted in their suffering. He tried to bring universities to heel. He bent law firms to his will. He instituted tariffs and toppled markets; he lifted tariffs and toppled markets. He debased the very idea of America. He created chaos, emergency after emergency.

Trump felled so much timber not because of the mightiness of his axe but because of the rot within the trees and the weakness of the wood. Many of the institutions Trump attacked, from the immigration system to higher education, were those whose leaders and votaries knew them to be broken and yet whose problems they had failed to fix, or even, publicly, to acknowledge. *Now is not the time to admit to these problems*, leaders—from Democratic Party officials to C.E.O.s, intellectuals, university presidents, and newspaper editors—had advised, for years, *because this is an emergency*. They refused to denounce the illiberalism of speech codes, the lack of due process in the #MeToo movement and Title IX cases, mandatory D.E.I. affirmations as a condition of employment, and the remorseless political intolerance of much of the left. Even after Trump won reëlection on a promise to destroy those institutions, they refused to admit to their problems, presumably because his victory made the emergency even emergencier.

Under these circumstances, Trump for weeks encountered very little opposition. (“Find everyone’s weak spot,” the seventeenth-century Spanish priest Baltasar Gracián advises in Penguin Little Black Classics No. 12, “How to Use Your Enemies.” “This is the art of moving people’s wills.”) He also enjoyed very little coöperation, relying instead on complicity, cowardice, and complaisance. Silicon Valley licked his boots. (Memo to billionaires, from No. 74, Sappho: “Wealth without real worthiness / Is no good for the neighbourhood.”) Nine of the nation’s biggest law firms chose to do Trump’s bidding, pro bono, rather than fight him in court. Columbia University, an institution that had once complied with all manner of

progressive directives, also elected to comply with the Administration's directives rather than to defy them.

Democrats, unable either to diagnose or to admit to their own failings, measured their victories in the meekest of triumphs, and seemed to have lost all sense of purpose, direction, and proportion. [Kash Patel](#), at his Senate confirmation hearing as F.B.I. director, was asked about a far-right conspiracy theorist:

*Senator Dick Durbin*: Are you familiar with Mr. Stew Peters?

*Patel (after a long pause)*: Not off the top of my head.

*Durbin*: You've made eight separate appearances on his podcast.

On X, a post recounting this exchange got 1.7 million views, as if catching Patel in this dumb lie constituted a meaningful win. The same day that Patel appeared before the Senate, a meeting of the Democratic National Committee began in Maryland, where officials squabbled over rules, were flattered by MSNBC hosts, and did not dare suggest that Biden ought not to have remained in the race for so long. The Senate subsequently confirmed Patel, on a 51–49 party-line vote. Meanwhile, I read Penguin Little Black Classics No. 4, “[On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts](#),” from 1827, by Thomas De Quincey, who observed that crime is often done badly but what an achievement when done well!

Did I feel guilty for taking refuge in my books? I did. Was it refuge? It was. “It is a most wonderful comfort to sit alone beneath a lamp, book spread before you, and commune with someone from the past whom you have never met.”—[No. 11](#), Yoshida Kenkō. Was seeking that comfort cowardly? It was. Was it also idiotic? Possibly. “The sun threatened to set before long, but he went on reading book spines with undiminished intensity. Lined up before him was not so much an array of books as the *fin de siècle* itself. Nietzsche, Verlaine, the Goncourt brothers, Dostoevsky, Hauptmann, Flaubert. . . .” No. 56, Ryūnosuke Akutagawa, “[The Life of a Stupid Man](#). ”

No matter the emergency, I eventually gave up on reading the Little Black Classics in numerical order, chiefly because I kept misplacing them. Did I

leave No. 13 on a train? What if I wanted to skip to No. 57? I started keeping a commonplace book, notes of my favorite lines. Also, certain events began to suggest certain books. After Trump declared that a first-of-its-kind multiyear report known as the National Nature Assessment had to be halted and could never be published, the report's director, an environmental scientist named Phil Levin, e-mailed the hundred and fifty scientists on the project, "This work is too important to die." I underlined two lines from No. 9, "[Three Tang Dynasty Poets](#)": "Can I bear to leave these blue hills? / And the green stream—what of that?" On X, Musk called U.S.A.I.D. "evil" and a "viper's nest of radical-left marxists who hate America," part of a wider [withdrawal from global public-health commitments](#). A stop-work order for an H.I.V./AIDS treatment-and-prevention program was expected to lead to the deaths of half a million children in sub-Saharan Africa by 2030; another 2.8 million were projected to be orphaned. I picked up [No. 88](#), a volume of stories by Mark Twain, including "The Story of the Bad Little Boy Who Didn't Come to Grief," the tale of a very nasty little boy who, unlike those in all the storybooks, never pays the cost for all the terrible things he does: "And he grew up, and married, and raised a large family, and brained them all with an axe one night, and got wealthy by all manner of cheating and rascality, and now he is the infernalest wickedest scoundrel in his native village, and is universally respected, and belongs to the Legislature." I passed an old woman standing on the side of the road in a snowstorm, alone, carrying a poster that read "*I DID NOT ELECT ELON MUSK.*"

By February, Trump's meme coin had earned him a hundred million dollars. I scribbled down a line from No. 6, John Ruskin's "[Traffic](#)," from 1864: "Because you are king of a nation, it does not follow that you are to gather for yourself all the wealth of that nation." Trump said during a news conference that "[the U.S. will take over the Gaza Strip](#)." In "[Caligula](#)," No. 17, the Roman historian Suetonius reported that Caligula once said, "Bear in mind that I can do anything I want to anyone I want!" Trump [banned the Associated Press from the White House press pool](#) because it refused to call the Gulf of Mexico the Gulf of America. Trump tweeted, "He who saves his Country does not violate any Law." Suetonius recounted that Caligula, "in his dealings with the Senate . . . made some of the highest officials run for miles beside his chariot, dressed in their togas, or wait in short linen tunics at

the head or foot of his dining couch.” I pictured John Thune running at a trot in a *MAGA* hat, the requisite red tie flapping in the wind like a tiny kite.

Penguin invented the modern paperback in 1935, in the middle of the Great Depression. Soon afterward, cheap paperback classics could be found everywhere from newsstands to dime stores. In 1941, when [W. H. Auden](#) taught a course at the University of Michigan called Fate and the Individual in European Literature, with six thousand pages of reading, he assigned mostly Everyman and Modern Library editions. In March, 1942, three months after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, a group of publishers, booksellers, and librarians led by William Warder Norton, of W. W. Norton, formed the Council on Books in Wartime. The next year, the council began printing Armed Services Editions of more than a thousand titles, snug enough to fit in a soldier’s hip pocket: [Dickens](#), [Voltaire](#), [Melville](#). The council sold them to the U.S. military at cost, six cents a copy. (They were printed on presses designed for magazines—either *Reader’s Digest* size or pulp-magazine size—and so were printed “two up,” in pairs, one on top of the other, and then sliced in half. ) Over the next four years, the council distributed more than a hundred and twenty million copies to soldiers across the world. Infantrymen: one foot in front of the other, one day at a time, turn the page. Penguin started printing the Penguin Classics in 1946. It launched the Little Black Classics in 2015, offering [an eighty-volume boxed set](#), not because of any emergency but to mark the occasion of Penguin’s eightieth birthday. Only a decade later did they become my Trump Administration Editions.

On March 4th, Trump delivered a joint address to Congress. He took stock:

Six weeks ago, I stood beneath the dome of this Capitol and proclaimed the dawn of the golden age of America. From that moment on, it has been nothing but swift and unrelenting action to usher in the greatest and most successful era in the history of our country. We have accomplished more in forty-three days than most Administrations accomplished in four years or eight years, and we are just getting started. . . . Over the past six weeks, I have signed nearly one hundred executive orders and taken more than four hundred executive actions—a record—to restore common sense, safety, optimism, and wealth all across our wonderful land.

Some Democrats in Congress apparently quite seriously considered carrying empty egg cartons to the address as a form of protest. I took the occasion to reread No. 25, Dante, “[Circles of Hell](#)”:

They raged, blaspheming God and their own kin,  
the human race, the place and time, the seed  
from which they’d sprung, the day that they’d been born.

Meanwhile, Trump kept talking about making Canada [the fifty-first state](#) and refused to disavow the possibility of taking the Panama Canal by force. No. 82, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “[The Body Politic](#)”: “You will say that the despot guarantees civil peace to his subjects. Very well. But what do they gain thereby, if the wars into which his ambition draws them, his insatiable greed, and the humiliations of his rule inflict more desolation upon them than would their own disputes? What do they gain thereby, if that very peace is one of their miseries? One may live at peace even in a dungeon—is that enough to feel at ease there?”

But there was no civil peace, either. Musk started waving a chainsaw onstage, screeching with glee at cutting jobs. Students with visas were being hauled away, apprehended on sidewalks. I watched a video of a Tufts graduate student on a visa from Turkey being handcuffed by immigration officers, and reread No. 27, “[The Nightingales Are Drunk](#),” by the fourteenth-century Persian poet Hafez:

And when did kindness end? What brought The sweetness of our town  
to naught?

The U.S. opposed a U.N. resolution condemning Russia for the war in Ukraine. Jeff Bezos, the owner of the *Washington Post*, announced a [new editorial mandate](#): the newspaper would no longer print opinion pieces that questioned the free market. I read No. 46, Nikolai Gogol, “[The Nose](#)”:

The clerk’s tightly pressed lips showed he was deep in thought. “I can’t print an advertisement like that in our paper,” he said after a long silence.

“What? Why not?”

"I'll tell you. A paper can get a bad name. If everyone started announcing his nose had run away, I don't know how it would all end."

J. D. Vance smirked at Volodymyr Zelensky: "Have you said thank you?" I thought of sending the Vice-President a postcard with one of Friedrich Nietzsche's "[Aphorisms on Love and Hate](#)," from Penguin Little Black Classics No. 5: "Crude men who feel themselves insulted tend to assess the degree of insult as high as possible, and talk about the offense in greatly exaggerated language, only so they can revel to the heart's content in the aroused feelings of hatred and revenge."

On March 10th, Trump's press office marked "50 wins in 50 days." I spent the day pondering "The Frogs Who Demanded a King" in No. 61, a collection of Aesop's fables:

The frogs, annoyed with the anarchy in which they lived, sent a deputation to Zeus to ask him to give them a king. Zeus, seeing that they were but very simple creatures, threw a piece of wood into their marsh. The frogs were so alarmed by the sudden noise that they plunged into the depths of the bog. But when the piece of wood did not move, they clambered out again. They developed such a contempt for this new king that they jumped on his back and crouched there.

The frogs were deeply ashamed at having such a king, so they sent a second deputation to Zeus asking him to change their monarch. For the first was too passive and did nothing.

Zeus now became impatient with them and sent down a water-serpent which seized them and ate them all up.

There were still fifty days to go. Even though I knew it was no good, I missed the piece of wood.

The emergency Presidency is exhausting. On March 11th, the Department of Education announced that it was laying off about half its employees, as part of the Administration's Workforce Optimization Initiative. I picked up No. 29, Michel de Montaigne, "[How We Weep and Laugh at the Same Thing](#)": "One day equals all days. There is no other light, no other night. The Sun,

Moon and Stars, disposed just as they are now, were enjoyed by your grandsires and will entertain your great-grandchildren.” Ten days later, Columbia decided to allow Trump to dictate what college students will learn about the Middle East, and the White House announced an end to legal aid for migrant children. I consulted No. 8, Jonathan Swift, “[A Modest Proposal](#)”: “I have been assured by a very knowing *American* of my Acquaintance in *London*; that a young healthy Child, well nursed, is, at a Year old, a most delicious, nourishing, and wholesome Food.”

On March 24th, Jeffrey Goldberg, *The Atlantic*’s editor-in-chief, reported the [bombshell story](#) about the national-security group chat on Signal. I read a fairy tale in [No. 68](#), by the Brothers Grimm: “After a while they found another man lying on the ground with one ear pressed against the grass. ‘What are you doing there?’ asked the prince. ‘I’m listening,’ answered the man. ‘What are you listening for so attentively?’ ‘I’m listening to what’s going on in the world at this moment, for nothing escapes my ears, I can even hear the grass growing.’ ” It sounds like Pete Hegseth, tapping at his phone, “Just *CONFIRMED* w/CENTCOM we are a *GO* for mission launch.”



Two days later, learning belatedly that one of Musk’s young *DOGE* employees went by the name Big Balls while another said that he was “racist before it was cool,” I went straight to No. 36, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe,

“[Sketchy, Doubtful, Incomplete Jottings](#)”: “Tell me with whom you consort and I will tell you who you are.” The next day, Trump issued an executive order titled “Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History,” in which he required the Smithsonian museums “to remove improper ideology” from any account of the American past. As D. H. Lawrence put it in an essay in [No. 71](#), “It would perhaps be easier to go to the Archaeological Museum in Florence, to look at the etruscan collection, if we decided once and for all that there never were any Etruscans.”

On March 28th, driving on a highway, I saw a homemade sign hanging on a banner made of sheets stitched together and draped over the railings of an overpass. It read:

SAVE OUR DEMOCRACY  
UPHOLD OUR CONSTITUTION

I had to pull over on the soft shoulder, not soft enough, and weep, thinking of [No. 76](#), Virgil:

Look where strife  
has led  
Rome's wretched citizens.

If ever there came a day when there wasn’t an emergency, or when the palpable, heart-racing sense of daily chaos seemed to diminish, the President of the United States made sure to create an emergency. He had to. He was exercising emergency powers; his powers required sustaining that sense of urgency. Without it, little remained but his malice, his pettiness, and his insatiable appetite for revenge. I sought solace in a poem written by Samuel Taylor Coleridge in 1798 and reproduced in [No. 35](#):

. . . may the vaunts  
And menace of the vengeful enemy  
Pass like the gust.

On April 2nd, Liberation Day, Trump announced his new “reciprocal tariffs.” The stock market and even the bond market plummeted. I read [No. 62](#), the haikus of Matsuo Bashō, a seventeenth-century Japanese poet:

Spring's exodus—  
birds shriek,  
fish eyes blink tears.

Democrats tried to seize the moment. [Cory Booker](#) spoke for twenty-five hours to little effect. (“I had thought him placid, and he was placid enough; such a surface was the hard polished glass that encased the bauble of his vanity.” No. 49, Henry James, “[The Figure in the Carpet](#).”) Democrats celebrated an electoral victory in Wisconsin on April 1st. (“Did not a magnolia open its hard white flowers against the watery blue of April?” No. 48, Edith Wharton, “[The Reckoning](#).”) Protesters rallied around the country on April 5th. And then, on April 7th, day seventy-eight, the D.N.C., having still failed to determine why the Party had lost the election, why it had become so unpopular, and what policies the state of the nation demanded, announced the formation of a war room for “rapid response” and “aggressive daily messaging,” to include hiring “influencers” and committing to “regular message briefings, daily talking points, and the dissemination of actionable polling and message testing,” as if the problem were not that the Democrats utterly lacked a compelling program but that they weren’t getting their message out. It seemed like a good time to read the last lines of Sophocles’ “[Antigone](#),” No. 55:

The mighty words of the proud are paid in full  
with mighty blows of fate, and at long last  
those blows will teach us wisdom.

Though, of course, things didn’t end well for Antigone.

On April 11th, the Trump Administration wrote to Harvard, demanding to control the university’s core functions. “When young Dawn with her rose-red fingers shone once more / the monster relit his fire.” In [No. 70](#), Odysseus and his men are trapped in the cave of the bloodthirsty Cyclops, a “giant, lawless brute.” On April 14th, Harvard declared that it was [refusing to comply](#) with the Trump Administration’s demands. Odysseus blinds the Cyclops and makes his escape. But he’s still a long way from home. The White House announced that it would freeze \$2.2 billion in grants to the university, and seek to overturn its tax-exempt status.

The Trump Administration revoked visas from students, including some with green cards who were permanent residents, and initiated [deportation proceedings](#). It deported—owing to what was admitted to be an “administrative error”—a Maryland man who had protected legal status, flying him to El Salvador, where he was confined in that country’s infamous prison complex. Trump shrugged this off and made it clear that he would defy court orders to bring the man back and return him to his family. He told the President of El Salvador that he’d soon begin deporting U.S. citizens and asked him to build more prisons for Americans. “Homegrowns are next,” he said at a meeting in the White House, beneath a portrait of Thomas Jefferson. “The homegrowns. You gotta build about five more places. It’s not big enough.”

Birds shriek. “Are you still a patriot?” a law-school colleague asked, stopping me in a hallway. Fish eyes blink tears.

I kept [Walt Whitman](#) for last. Whitman wanted to be the Homer of America, the Herodotus of democracy. He, too, toted around little copies of the classics. “Every now and then,” he once wrote, “I carried a book in my pocket—or perhaps tore out from some broken or cheap edition a bunch of loose leaves.” He loved the Iliad. He pored over Virgil and Sophocles, Shakespeare and Dante. And yet he insisted, “I stand in my place with my own day here.”

On the morning of the hundredth day of Donald Trump’s second Presidency, in this America, I plan to read Penguin Little Black Classics [No. 10](#), a collection of Whitman’s poems. I love best “With Antecedents,” written in 1860, on the eve of the Civil War:

I assert that all past days were what they must have been,  
And what they could no-how have been better than they were,  
And that to-day is what it must be, and that America is,  
And that to-day and America could no-how be better than they are.

There is no emergency, nor any day, that does not require poetry. ♦

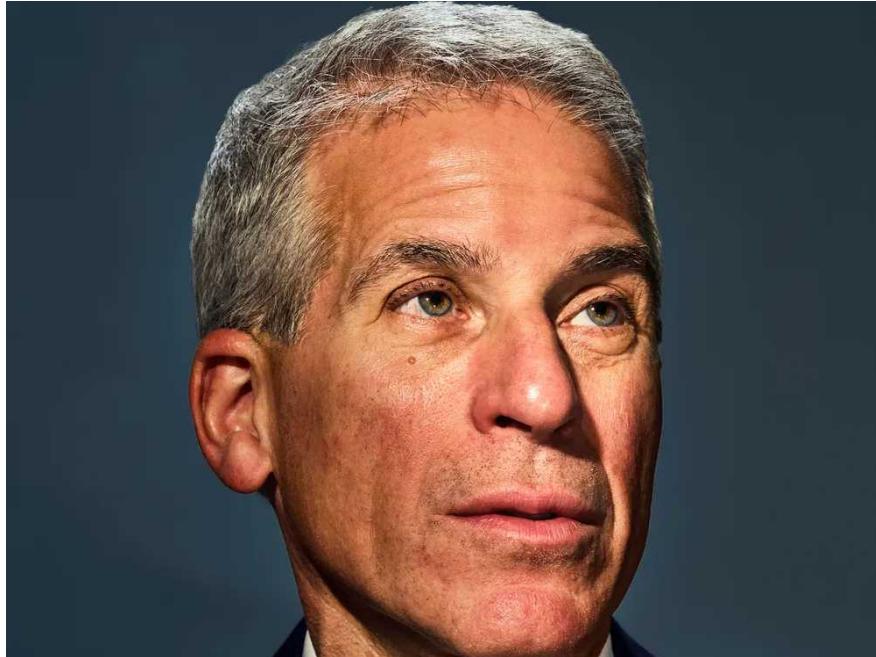
Annals of Law

# A Lawyer Freed Young Thug. Now He's Defending Diddy

Since the Young Thug trial, Brian Steel has modelled for the rapper's fashion brand and had a Drake song named after him. Sean Combs took note.

By Charles Bethea

April 28, 2025



On the afternoon of May 9, 2022, Atlanta police surrounded a mansion owned by Jeffery Williams, the rapper better known as [Young Thug](#). More than a dozen friends were with Williams at his home, on a quiet street in Buckhead, an area of Atlanta where new money mixes awkwardly with old. A neighbor saw three armored *SWAT* trucks and “a lot of cops on foot, and they came in fast with lights and megaphones.” By the look of the scene inside—red Solo cups arrayed on a table in a large kitchen area—the authorities had broken up a game of beer pong. There were also some THC-infused drinks. “It was like the parents had left town for the weekend,” Doug Weinstein, a lawyer for one of the men at the house, told me. The mansion

contained an Icee machine, paintings of musical icons ([Prince](#), [Kurt Cobain](#), [Janelle Monáe](#)), and a large glass wall that allowed Williams to, as he put it on social media, “just look at clouds and, you know, trees.” He was wearing a white Harley-Davidson tank top and an unfazed expression as he was taken away in cuffs. He left behind a pink Lamborghini, among other exotic cars, and a large quantity of jewelry, including a \$1.7 million Richard Mille watch, which some would claim later appeared on the wrist of a cop who testified for the prosecution at Williams’s trial. (The Atlanta police denied stealing anything from the home.)

Williams grew up twelve miles to the south, in an Atlanta housing project that has since been razed. He had ten siblings, one of whom was shot and killed in front of the family home when Williams was nine years old; another has since been incarcerated. Williams, the second youngest, broke a teacher’s arm in eighth grade during an argument. He was sent to juvenile detention, where he experimented with music and, as he later put it to *Rolling Stone*, liked to “gamble, smoke and fuck.” He released his first mixtape, “I Came from Nothing,” in 2011, when he was nineteen. The rapper [Gucci Mane](#) signed him, and he was soon collaborating with [Justin Bieber](#) and [Kanye West](#). By his late twenties, Williams had become a chart-topping and Grammy-winning artist whom the [BBC](#) breathlessly described as “the 21st Century’s most influential rapper.” He helped pioneer “mumble rap,” a slurred and melodic type of trap music, and styled himself androgynously. He sometimes wore little girl’s clothing, painted his nails, and called male friends “babe.” On the cover of an album from 2016, he donned a billowing periwinkle dress from the Italian designer Alessandro Trincone which, he said, reminded him of a character from Mortal Kombat. He later rapped, “Had to wear the dress ’cause I had a stick,” by which he presumably meant a gun. Before 2022, Williams had never been convicted of a crime as an adult, but his songs often referenced illegal acts, along with guns and drugs, both of which were found in his Buckhead home.

At the time of Williams’s arrest, [Fani Willis](#), the district attorney of Fulton County, was less than two years into her first term, and swinging big. She was also targeting [Donald Trump](#) in a case on election interference, employing a strategy originally used to curtail Mafia activity: the [Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act](#), which holds each member of an alleged conspiracy responsible for the crimes of the rest. Georgia’s *RICO*

statute, created in 1980, is unusually broad. In 2013, Willis had used it to charge more than a hundred and seventy Atlanta public-school educators whom she accused of systematically altering answers on their students' standardized tests. Some had taken part in what they called "changing parties." Eleven were ultimately convicted. "I'm very comfortable with using *RICO*," Willis later said.

In 2016, Williams had founded a record label called Y.S.L., an acronym for Young Stoner Life that was also a play on Yves Saint Laurent. (Williams had worn such fashion labels in his youth, and was called "the king of white-boy swaggin'.") Willis said that Y.S.L. was actually a violent gang known as Young Slime Life, headed by Williams, a.k.a. King Slime, and affiliated with the Bloods. Her office put together a slide show that described an escalating gang war between Y.S.L. and another local Bloods faction. It contained dozens of pictures, many taken from Instagram, of young Black men, including Williams (whose first name is misspelled on numerous slides). The men pose with stacks of money, flipping the bird; they hold machine guns and peer through window blinds; they lean against cars; they show off jewelry and tattoos.



The prosecution argued that Williams was running a Mafia-like crew in which underlings did his criminal bidding. Twenty-eight people were

indicted on fifty-six charges, including armed robbery and carjacking. One man had apparently shot at the tour bus of the rapper [Lil Wayne](#), Williams's idol turned rival. Another was accused of "seriously disfiguring the buttocks" of a woman with a rifle. Williams himself allegedly made "terroristic threats" to a mall cop. Among these incidents, an unsolved murder stood out. In January, 2015, Donovan (Peanut) Thomas, a twenty-six-year-old man, was killed in a drive-by shooting outside a barbershop in downtown Atlanta. During subsequent questioning, Kenneth (Lil Woody) Copeland, a Y.S.L. associate with a criminal record, suggested that Williams was involved. Rumors spread that Thomas's last words were "Thug had me killed."

Williams denied the charges, and awaited trial in the Cobb County jail. He was held alone in a cement room with a bed, a toilet, and an overhead light that never turned off. At one point, from jail, Williams rapped to a nephew by phone. "I tried to cry, but ain't nothing left—yeah," he said. "I contemplated doing myself in—yeah. . . . But let's not forget that this ain't Hell." His only visits came from his longtime attorney, Brian Steel, a fifty-nine-year-old from Queens. The two men did pushups and prepared for what would become the longest criminal trial in the state's history.

Until recently, the legend of Brian Steel was a provincial story, known mainly by his Georgia peers. That began to change with Williams's case. This month, it takes on a new chapter: Steel will defend Sean Combs, the music mogul and former billionaire known as Diddy, who has been charged with sex trafficking, racketeering, and various violent crimes. The allegations have inspired comparisons to [Bill Cosby](#), [R. Kelly](#), and [Jeffrey Epstein](#). Combs awaits trial in a Brooklyn detention center, where he has access to TV, Ping-Pong, yoga mats, and, until a few weeks ago, the company of [Sam Bankman-Fried](#). ("He's been kind," Bankman-Fried told [Tucker Carlson](#).) Whatever the outcome, the trial will further raise Steel's profile. Williams, who is now thirty-three, has six children. "One of them sing, one of them rap," he told me recently. "I tell every one of them to be a lawyer."

You're charged with a crime in Georgia, and you can afford the best defense. Whom do you hire? Well, there's [Drew Findling](#), the so-called "billion-dollar lawyer" with a quarter of a million Instagram followers, who has

represented the rappers Gucci Mane and Offset, and has been likened to “Robin Hood with Jesus swag.” Or you could try Bruce Harvey, the *High Times*-reading, memorably profane barrister once described as “Atlanta’s preeminent long-haired, left-handed, anti-establishment liberal lawyer.” (His business cards shout: “*STOP TALKING.*”) There’s also Steve Sadow, a combative, cowboy-booted attorney who is representing Trump in his Georgia election-interference case. And then there’s Brian Steel, whose sole flashy trait is his surname. Steel does not have an Instagram account, or a ponytail, or a Porsche with a license plate that reads “*ACQUIT*,” as Harvey once did. He looks like a tax guy, which he nearly was, and he drives an electric car painted off-white, inside of which he keeps fruit and water for whoever may need it.

“Brian doesn’t drink, doesn’t smoke, and can’t believe anybody would,” David Botts, an Atlanta defense attorney who has known Steel for thirty years, told me. “He won’t curse, even in court—even if he’s reading from a transcript. So when he’s cross-examining he’ll say, ‘So-and-so *F-word*.’ The court will say, ‘Mr. Steel, you can read that word.’ But Brian still won’t do it.” Botts went on, “Brian *only* drinks water. His lunch is tofu or salmon, maybe, and a salad. No bread. I’ve never seen him eat out. And he’ll bring a toothbrush to court. A *toothbrush!* He exercises daily, before or after court. Running. Swimming. Weights. And he’s got a great family—three kids, a wonderful wife, Colette, who is also his law partner. They kind of idolize each other.”

When reading alphabetized documents in court, Steel will arrive at the third letter: “C,” he’ll say, “as in ‘Colette.’” Steel has other quirks: he superstitiously kisses a finger or taps a table any time death is mentioned. He peppers tragic sentences with “God forbid.” He prefacing the names of everyone in court with “the Honorable.” Reporters are “Mr. Journalist.” A prominent judge said that Steel’s formality is “bordering on unctuousness,” but he was inclined to believe that Steel, whom he’d once seen cry in court, really means it.

Steel’s children described a man of almost unbelievable purity. “I get a text every single morning,” Jake, his adult son, told me. “He’ll say: Place a smile upon your face. Look forward to the opportunities. Laugh. Be compassionate, prepared, focussed, determined, organized, energized, well

rested. I believe in you. Enjoy every day. I love you so much.” Young Thug’s mother now gets a text, too. Jake’s sister Alisa compared her dad to Morrie Schwartz, the titular Morrie in the book “[Tuesdays with Morrie](#).” Morrie, however, probably couldn’t have bench-pressed three hundred and twenty-five pounds, as Steel, who is five feet nine, once did. These days, he runs marathons. “We gave him a marathon-medal holder that says ‘Man of Steel,’ ” Bari, his other daughter, told me.

[Scott McAfee](#), the superior-court judge who is presiding over the election-interference case, recalled a slide show that was shown at a recent meeting with two hundred of his colleagues. The first slide was about avoiding the kinds of errors that lead to an appeal. “The next one was: What happens if you don’t do this?” McAfee told me. “And it just had a picture of Brian Steel’s smiling face.” Javaris Crittenton, a former N.B.A. player whom Steel defended against a murder charge, told me, “It’s almost like an angelic sound when he speaks. It’s all eyes focussed on him. He has a halo over his head.” By the time I reached Danny Corsun, one of Steel’s childhood friends, his canonization seemed nearly complete. “Brian would call my mother every year to thank her for giving me to him,” he said. “My mother lived for those phone calls.”

Steel was born in 1965; he described his childhood as “utopia,” and then mentioned getting beat up. (He eventually ended the hostilities by landing a blow with a heavy textbook.) His sunny outlook was rooted in perspective. When he was a teen-ager, his father, an accountant, took him to a Lower East Side tenement similar to the one where his great-grandparents had lived after fleeing Eastern Europe. “It was a room with no water, no kitchen, no bathroom,” Steel told me. “My great-grandmother couldn’t read or write. They worked at seltzer factories where people lost fingers.” His father told him, “You may sweep the streets of Manhattan, but your streets will be the most talked about.”

Steel went to Fordham Law, then became a tax attorney with Price Waterhouse. The job paid well, but he was distracted. A Fordham professor had allowed him to assist in the retrial of a young man who had been convicted, at thirteen, of choking another boy to death. “He was found guilty again, and I couldn’t believe it,” Steel told me. “I’ll go to my grave believing he was innocent.” Corporate-restructuring deals, by comparison, felt

pointless. In 1991, he took an internship with the Fulton County Public Defender Office. Shandor Badaruddin, who started there around the same time, said, of Steel's approach to clients, "He was pretty sure they were all innocent."

In 1992, Steel was assigned the case of Greg Shephard, an illiterate man charged with the attempted murder of an Atlanta railway officer. "It's a dead-bang loser," Steel recalled a colleague telling him. "You need to understand what losing is about." Steel met with Shephard, but the man wouldn't talk. So Steel slept in the jail with him, and Shephard slowly opened up. He was innocent, he eventually said. After his arrest, police brought witnesses by, and the witnesses said, "It's not him." Shephard recalled that one of them had worn a fast-food uniform. "I subpoenaed everybody working at fast-food restaurants within five miles," Steel told me. He remembers eventually reaching a woman who had seen the attempted killing, and she said that Shephard was not the shooter. Other witnesses backed up her assertion. "Our agreement was: if we get him home, he has to learn to read and write," Steel told me. Shephard eventually landed a job with the Atlanta *Journal-Constitution*'s distribution department. "He used to come to my office every Thursday," Steel told me. "And he'd read to me."

While arguing a case in court, Steel sometimes feels a kind of moral ecstasy. "A fair trial is better than sex," he told me. ("I wouldn't go *that* far," Keith Adams, a lawyer who works with Steel, said.) Steel added, "And then you see witnesses told to lie. Evidence hidden. People unprepared, misquoting law, violating rights. That's when it's outrageous." Steel's attitude can buoy his clients. Crittenton, the former N.B.A. player, was released from prison in 2023, after serving eight years for accidentally killing a woman with a bullet aimed at a man who, he said, had robbed him. Steel had got the murder charge reduced to manslaughter. "When I took the plea deal, Brian said, 'I'll never leave you,'" Crittenton told me. "He kept his word." At one point, Crittenton said that he was being mistreated in prison. Steel, who was no longer being paid, sent letters and contacted the warden. During one prison visit, a corrections officer told Crittenton to put his face against the wall of an elevator. Steel turned around and did the same. "That meant so much to me," Crittenton said.

In December of 2022, Sergio Kitchens, one of Williams's co-defendants in the Y.S.L. case, saw a way out. Kitchens, who raps under the name Gunna, entered what's called an Alford plea, which allowed him to plead guilty to a single *RICO* charge while maintaining his innocence. In the process, he agreed to a series of statements, including "Y.S.L. is a music label and a gang and you have personal knowledge that members or associates of Y.S.L. have committed crimes in furtherance of the gang." Later, though, Kitchens released a more nuanced statement of his own. "When I became affiliated with YSL in 2016, I did not consider it a 'gang'; more like a group of people from metro Atlanta who had common interests and artistic aspirations," Kitchens wrote. "My focus of YSL was entertainment—rap artists who wrote and performed music that exaggerated and 'glorified' urban life in the Black community."

There is no single definition of what constitutes a gang. Alex Alonso, a gang researcher in Los Angeles, told me that, although Black street gangs are often associated with criminality, estimates suggest that only around fifteen per cent of gang members are actually involved in violent crime. Most join, instead, for a sense of community and protection. In the seventies and eighties, the Gangster Disciples, a large Black gang that originated on Chicago's South Side, had a hierarchical structure, national reach, and strict operational procedures. But in the nineties, at the height of the crack epidemic, federal authorities jailed many of its leaders. Lance Williams, a professor at Northeastern Illinois University, said that there are now hundreds of local groups that go by acronyms—Only My Family (O.M.F.), Four Pockets Full (4.P.F.)—and may claim association with national gangs. But the associations are largely superficial. They wear specific colors, or release songs with lyrics using certain slang, to "fit the narrative and the culture," he told me. Some members may indeed commit crimes. But these crimes are generally interpersonal, rather than orchestrated by the group.

The *RICO* Act was used to target the Mob, which coördinated its crimes. But holding members of loosely connected local gangs responsible for one another's actions can feel like overreach. Alonso put me in touch with Ronald Chatman, a onetime member of a Bloods subset in L.A. who subsequently worked in the Mayor's Office of Gang Reduction and Youth Development. "You've got a lot of dead fathers, a lot of fathers in prison," he told me. "The kids is being raised in the streets." Chatman has a podcast

that sometimes touches on gang life, and had offered advice, “as an O.G.,” to young gang members in Georgia who had found him on social media. In 2020, Chatman was charged in a *RICO* conspiracy in the state, and accused of “making organizational decisions regarding the expansion” of the Georgia gang. (The indictment notes a YouTube video in which Chatman “did discuss rivalries and territory.”) Chatman took a plea deal to avoid a trial in a rural white county. “He was not a mastermind of any gang in Georgia,” Alonso insisted. “He was a generous former gang member with a podcast.”

This kind of ambiguity lay at the heart of the Y.S.L. trial. Prosecutors pointed out that, on social media, Y.S.L. affiliates often wore red, a Bloods’ color. Some used the expression “*BLATT*”—as prosecutors defined it, “Blood Love All the Time.” In one post, they argued, Williams appears to flash a gang sign. In another, he seems to threaten a witness of some crime who is planning on testifying: “So a nigga lie to they momma, lie to they kids, lie to they brothers and sisters, then get right into the courtroom and tell the God’s honest truth, don’t get it, y’all niggas need to get fucking killed, bro, from me and Y.S.L.”

Thomas, the man killed outside the barbershop in 2015, had helped to manage an Atlanta rapper named Rayshawn Bennett, a.k.a. YFN Lucci. Bennett and Williams had traded barbs online. After Williams posted that he was the “#NewPac,” a reference to the rapper Tupac Shakur, Bennett responded with a clown emoji and the comment, “Pac would’ve never wore a dress.” Williams later said, “My teeth cost more than your broke ass life, boy.” In late 2014, Copeland, the Y.S.L. associate, allegedly stole some jewelry from Thomas’s car. Soon after, a friend of Thomas’s, Kelvin Watts, had an altercation with Copeland at a club. On January 7, 2015, Copeland asked Williams to borrow a vehicle. Williams offered him a Corvette, but Copeland wanted something bigger, so Williams rented an Infiniti for him. Copeland later said that he then loaned the car to someone else affiliated with Y.S.L. That Saturday, Thomas stepped out of the barbershop a little past 7 P.M., after reportedly paying for the haircuts of everyone inside. The Infiniti drove by—caught on video—and someone shot Thomas from its sunroof.

In 2021, six years into the investigation of the shooting, Copeland was arrested on an unrelated weapons charge. In an interrogation, he intimated to

the cops that he knew some things. “What can I tell you that can help me out?” he asked, sitting in a small room with his ankle shackled to the floor. They discussed the feuds involving members of Y.S.L. and Bennett’s crew. Copeland suggested that Williams wanted more people killed. “He’s not going to stop until Kel’s dead,” Copeland said, referring to Watts, who has been in and out of prison, on gang and weapons charges, since 2015. “I said, ‘The police are going to get you.’” The cop asked, “And what did he say?” Copeland laughed. “He like, ‘I know,’ ” he said. “He ready.” The taped interview later leaked. It’s unclear what deal, if any, Copeland ultimately struck. But in April, 2022, just before Williams and the others were indicted, the weapons charges against Copeland were dropped.

The prosecution leaned on Williams’s lyrics. In the song “Halftime,” released a few months after the murder, Williams seems to refer to Lil Woody Copeland shooting someone: “I swear to God, lil whoadie pull up and pop at his noggin.” In “Anybody,” a collaboration with [Nicki Minaj](#) released in 2018, Williams raps, “I never killed anybody / But I got somethin’ to do with that body / I got the streets on my back / Carry it like I’m movin’ a body / I told them to shoot a hundred rounds / Like he tryna movie the body.” He adds, “I’m gettin’ all type of cash / I’m a general, true.” These lyrics, to prosecutors, constituted an “overt act in furtherance of the conspiracy”—actions, often not themselves illegal, that demonstrate involvement with a gang’s criminal pursuits.

## COUPLES MASSAGE



These lyrics are graphic. But free-speech advocates worry about the use of music as evidence. In 2018, five members of a London group called 1011 were convicted of “conspiracy to commit violent disorder,” partly through their lyrics. (“Micah come get your grandma,” one track goes. “You’re lucky I don’t rock her face.”) They were required to notify the police in advance of new song releases. In 2019, a Los Angeles rapper named Drakeo the Ruler was charged with a murder partially on the basis of his lyrics. (He was ultimately acquitted.) Steel denied that Williams’s lyrics were proof of crimes. In court, he mentioned a favorite musician. “You will learn that Bruce Springsteen sings about going out West, driving with a gun on his passenger’s lap,” he said. “They’re going to kill everything in sight. Nobody prosecutes that.”

Steel explained his client’s sobriquet to the jury, too. “Most people think about a ‘thug’ as a criminal,” Steel began. “But, to Jeffery, ‘thug’ had a different meaning.” Steel referenced Tupac Shakur, who had the words “Thug Life” tattooed across his torso. “Some of you have read books about Tupac and what it meant to be ‘Thug Life,’ ” he said. “‘The Hate U Give Little Infants Fs Everyone.’ Meaning: discrimination and racism hurts all of us.” For Williams, Steel said, the word “thug” was more personal: “It was his path.” He offered Williams’s own acronym for the word—one that, to some, strained credulity. “If he could ever make it as a musical artist and

help his family, himself, and his many others out of this endless cycle of hopelessness,” Steel said, “he would be ‘Truly Humble Under God.’ ”

Recently, Steel and I went jogging. There were few sidewalks, and he positioned himself between me and oncoming traffic. He was planning to run his twenty-eighth marathon three days later. As we plodded along, he picked up trash and greeted bemused strangers: “Have a great day!” Steel told me that he thinks a lot about death, which focusses his energies. “I like Buddhism,” he said. “It’s not even a religion. It’s a way of life.” He paused. “I once asked my dad if he believed in life after death. He said, ‘I believe that you live on in your children.’ ”

While watching the Y.S.L. trial, which dragged on for nearly two years, one could be forgiven for having some concerns about the kids. A videographer with the Law and Crime network, who has also filmed the high-profile trials of Derek Chauvin and Kyle Rittenhouse, told me, “It was like nothing I’d ever seen.” Ultimately, three different judges presided; one recused herself because her former deputy was accused of romantically “colluding” with a defendant. One witness proclaimed, under oath, that he was high. Another fired his lawyer from the stand. One defendant was stabbed by another inmate while in custody. A defense attorney was arrested on gang charges. Another attorney married a defendant—though not the one she represented. According to prosecutors, a defendant handed Williams a Percocet pill in court, under surveillance cameras. During a Zoom hearing, a nude man appeared alongside the message “*FREE YOUNG THUG.*”

Thug stans pored over his lyrics and lore, seizing upon the prosecution’s seeming ignorance. The indictment had, for instance, referred to an Instagram message that Williams had written about the rapper Lil Uzi Vert: “Ysl rule the world kid. 24m on a nigga head.” This, the state suggested, could refer to a murder bounty. Steel argued that it was a reference to a pink diamond that Lil Uzi Vert had had surgically implanted in his forehead, as anyone could see online. (Uzi later said that fans ripped it out during a performance. He has put its value at around twenty-four million dollars.)

Steel didn’t have to prove that Y.S.L. wasn’t a gang. Some of Williams’s associates ultimately said that it could be seen that way. Steel instead emphasized the ambiguity of the term, describing Williams as a “studio

“gangster” surrounded by young men interested in music, money, and fame. One Y.S.L. associate named Miles Farley sold clothes bearing the words “Make America Slime Again.” He posed on social media with other alleged Y.S.L. members, and displayed a tattoo that reads “ESPN” (“Every Slime Plays Nasty,” prosecutors claimed). He took an Alford plea on a single *RICO* charge.

Nor did Steel need to prove that Williams’s orbit was full of angels. “People that Jeffery knew did commit some crimes,” Steel told me. “But Jeffery didn’t order them.” Williams and Shannon Stillwell, who had been rumored to be involved in the drive-by shooting, had known each other for a little while. Max Schardt, Stillwell’s lawyer, told me, “He and others seemed to see something in Jeffery, this skinny, malnourished, young man walking around with such confidence, conviction, and belief in himself.” In 2019, Stillwell had appeared in an Instagram video wearing a Y.S.L. necklace and bragging about legal drama: “I just beat a murder rap. . . . Me and my slimes above the law.” He had previously been convicted of drug possession and burglary. But these crimes, the defense claimed, were not done at Williams’s command. (A jury ultimately found Stillwell guilty of possession of a firearm by a felon, but not guilty of murder.)

Steel said that Williams had rented the Infiniti for Copeland under the impression that he needed a vehicle large enough to accommodate a car seat. Williams often did this kind of thing. “People need to take someone to a doctor,” Steel said. “People want to go out of the state.” On the day of the murder, Steel continued, Williams was negotiating a contract with his record label and working on a music video; he had no idea that the car would be used in a killing. After Thomas was shot, Williams and others in his crew fled to Miami, fearing retaliation.

Copeland had been granted immunity in exchange for his testimony. But, at the last minute, he said that he didn’t want to testify. He took the stand, but wouldn’t state even basic facts, like his age. (“Grown,” he said.) Judge Ural Glanville held Copeland in contempt of court and jailed him for the weekend. The following Monday, he took the stand again. But Steel soon learned that the judge and prosecutors had met with Copeland that morning, without defense lawyers present, in what Steel saw as an attempt to coerce Copeland to testify. “Absolutely shocking,” Weinstein, one of the other

defense attorneys, told me. In court, Steel argued that the judge and the prosecution had violated the rules. “This Honorable Court,” Steel began, “— or, excuse me, let me rephrase that. This *Court* supposedly said . . .” (This was a borderline insult from Steel, his colleagues told me.) Steel refused to disclose how he learned of the meeting, saying that it was privileged information. “You’ve got five minutes,” Glanville told him. Steel responded, “Well, I don’t need it.” Glanville held Steel in contempt of court, ordering him to serve up to twenty days in jail. Steel began to remove his jacket and tie, so that he could be taken into custody. His only request was to be held with Williams.

Word of the standoff spread. Two dozen attorneys soon arrived outside the courtroom, offering to defend Steel. He appealed the charge to the Georgia Supreme Court, which eventually ruled in his favor. Glanville was removed from the case, and a group of Georgia defense attorneys printed celebratory T-shirts that read “*I DON’T NEED FIVE MINUTES.*”

When Copeland resumed his testimony, he answered most questions by saying, “I don’t recall.” (He later released a rap track titled “I Don’t Recall” and amassed a following on TikTok, where he posted videos of himself counting money.) But on the subject of Y.S.L. he was firm. “Y.S.L. is not a gang,” he said. “Y’all keep trying to attach that to things that’s going on.” He noted that he’d belonged to a different subset of the Bloods. “You can’t say I was a Y.S.L. gang member,” he went on. “Y.S.L. was never considered a gang.” Copeland said that he’d been untruthful during previous interrogations. “Whenever they was questioning me, I was lying,” he insisted. “I told the police, ‘I’ll tell y’all whatever y’all wanna hear, just let me go.’”

Fani Willis’s case against Trump was also foundering. That January, it emerged that she was romantically involved with her co-counsel Nathan Wade, whom her office had paid more than six hundred thousand dollars for his work. Judges were considering claims of corruption. (She and Wade both denied any wrongdoing, but a court disqualified her from the case. She is appealing the ruling.) Steel still wanted to wait for a jury verdict in the Williams case. But, last October, Williams saw a quicker exit. He pleaded no contest to *RICO* and gang charges, and guilty to another gang count, and to gun and drug charges, but not to attempted murder. He got time served, plus

probation and community service. He agreed not to set foot in Atlanta for ten years, except on special occasions. Otherwise, he was free, and in demand. “The worldwide tours and money that’s being thrown at him now,” Steel told me. “It was good before. Now it’s next level. People realize what he did—in my opinion, he unmasked the truth that the criminal-justice system is broken.”

In March, Steel and I met Williams at a recording studio in Miami, where he was working on his upcoming studio album; its first single was released in late April. Steel wore a white turtleneck and carried a small knapsack filled with court filings: pleasure reading. He and Williams hadn’t seen each other in person since the trial, though they communicate daily. “I’ve never seen him get so close to a client before,” Steel’s daughter Bari, who recently graduated from law school in Miami, had told me.

Bari picked us up from the airport, where two employees recognized Steel and, with tears in their eyes, thanked him for his work. Outside, Bari handed her father a bowl of tofu. Steel hadn’t taken any time off since the Y.S.L. trial ended, though he did indulge in a photo shoot for one of Williams’s clothing labels, *SP5DER*, a streetwear brand that sells denim jackets and tracksuits with spider-web motifs. Steel posed on sidewalks and in a parking garage wearing sweatpants and hoodies. (This was, Williams told me, “the coolest photo shoot,” adding, “It was just, like, a day in the life of Brian.”) [Drake](#) had just released a song titled “Brian Steel.” Steel’s children had been intrigued by the song’s name, but seemed ambivalent about its lyrics, which mostly concern partying. (“I took some PolkaDot, girl, now I’m seeing designs.”) The connection to Steel was unclear—something to do with being an instrument of freedom. “Yeah, shout Brian Steel, take off the cuffs,” Drake raps. “We leavin’ now.”

Williams arrived at the studio with his manager, a cameraman, and what looked like a French bulldog with poodle fur. “You can name it,” Williams told Bari and Alisa, who had also met us there. “Schneebly,” Bari said. Williams called out, “Shneebles!” The dog bounded away from him. Williams wore faded jeans, a gleaming diamond cross around his neck, a diamond wallet chain, and throwback Air Jordans. One of the shoes was tied; the other was completely, and intentionally, unlaced. He tried, and failed, to engage the dog with the trailing lace.

Sitting down in the mixing room, Williams reflected on Steel's manner ("I almost used to think he too nice sometimes"); his sartorial style ("spiffy"); his hobbies ("He do nothing but read"); his meals ("water and half-cooked salmon"). He showed me that Steel was entered in his phone as "My Brother Brian." "I can give him a *name*," he said, meaning a street handle. "But they'll think he in a gang." He wondered aloud if he should have waited for a verdict. "I shoulda listened to you," he told Steel.

"Just enjoy *every* day," Steel replied.

Talk turned to the new Drake song. "If you didn't know you was lit, now you know," Williams told Steel. "I had nothing to do with that neither. I saw that and I was, like, 'Oh, wow, he has a song called 'Brian Steel.' The biggest artist in the world making songs about you."

"He's a nice man," Steel said.

I mentioned Steel's airport admirers.

"You got *fans*," Williams told him.

Steel shook his head. "I'm just a conduit for you."



“See, Brian is truly humble under God,” Williams said. (His website is now selling T-shirts that read “WWBD”—What Would Brian Do.)

Williams mentioned an upcoming *SP5DER* fashion show, which he was planning to hold during Paris Fashion Week. (In 2016, he stopped a model mid-runway, while smoking a blunt, to fix the model’s “neck ruff.”) He wanted Steel to walk the runway. “You should come, Brian, and bring them,” Williams said, referring to Steel’s daughters. “It’s gonna have you fucking *lit*.” Steel said that he did not want to be lit.

“Who the biggest lawyer *ever*?” Williams went on.

“Clarence Darrow,” Steel said, referring to the attorney best known for defending a teacher who taught evolution in the Scopes “monkey trial,” during the nineteen-twenties.

“That’ll have you bigger than him,” Williams said.

“He’s pretty big,” Steel replied.

What might a jury have decided in the case of Jeffery Williams? The foreman later gave a reporter a likely unanimous opinion: the trial was “extremely long.” It was only partially argued, though, and many details, including who killed Donovan Thomas, remain unresolved. The foreman noted that the prosecution’s use of songs had troubled him. “I think that we go into a slippery slope when we start to analyze lyrics and music,” he said.

Steel won his next couple cases, including that of Jackie Johnson, a former D.A. in south Georgia who was accused of hindering the investigation into the murder of Ahmaud Arbery, a Black man killed by three white men while jogging through a predominantly white neighborhood. I noted that she seemed like a less sympathetic client than Williams, but Steel didn’t see it that way. “The system turned on her, just like it did on Jeffery,” he said.

In April, Steel pivoted even further from likable clients: he joined the high-profile legal team of Sean Combs, one of the most successful music moguls of his generation, and perhaps the most despised producer since Phil Spector. Combs, who’s now fifty-five, is accused of crimes ranging from

coercing employees to work with little sleep to sex-trafficking women and forcing them to participate in elaborate “freak-off” sex parties, which Combs is said to have both observed and participated in. In addition to guns and drugs, federal agents apparently found more than a thousand bottles of baby oil and lubricant during raids at Combs’s various homes, prompting one of his lawyers to claim that Combs “buys in bulk,” and could have purchased the bottles at Costco. (The retailer denied it, noting that none of its American stores carry baby oil.) Then six more anonymous accusers came forward; some claimed that the oils, along with drinks they were served, contained date-rape drugs.

An indictment alleges that Combs used “the employees, resources, and influence” of his music empire to create a criminal racket that prosecutors call “the Combs Enterprise.” Security guards, household staff, personal aides, and “high-ranking supervisors,” as yet unnamed, allegedly conspired in kidnapping, arson, bribery, and the administration of drugs and I.V. fluids to freak-off victims. Additional allegations include that Combs once “dangled a victim over an apartment balcony,” and that he and others tossed a “Molotov cocktail” into the convertible of the musician Kid Cudi after slicing open the vehicle’s roof. Combs denies the charges. But he did issue an apology, last year, after a leaked 2016 surveillance video showed him chasing a former longtime girlfriend, Casandra Ventura, down a hotel hallway, knocking her to the ground, and kicking her as she lay motionless. Ventura accused Combs of years of physical violence, which he’d denied until the video surfaced. She is among dozens of people who have accused him of sexual misconduct, in allegations that span multiple cases, both civil and criminal, in state and federal court. Combs’s federal trial, in a lower-Manhattan court, is expected to begin in May. It could rival the retrial of Harvey Weinstein, which is taking place nearby, in the revulsion it inspires.

Steel insisted that he defended Williams because he really believes he’s innocent and, he said, “my kind of guy.” He told me that he had declined to defend Rudolph Giuliani in Trump’s election-interference trial, and that he’d turned down one of the men who killed Arbery. Still, he has come to accept that his clients aren’t perfect. “I’ve defended people who cut out eyes and ate them. The system only works when the accused have real representation.” The work has netted him millions. (In a 2019 song, Williams put the figure he’d then paid “the lawyer” at around two million

dollars.) It has also brought him into the world of celebrities: “nice men,” like Drake, and those who seem less nice, like Diddy. His Boy Scout-ish manner is sometimes a jarring contrast with the alleged crimes of some of his clients. But perhaps this is part of the appeal: his courteous approach may help juries see things his way.

A gag order prevents Steel from saying anything about the Combs case. His challenges might include showing that Combs wasn’t running a criminal racket and, perhaps, sympathetically cross-examining his accusers. If this leads to an acquittal, and to unfavorable comparisons to O. J. Simpson’s lawyers, Steel is unlikely to care. “The more challenging the case is, the more likely I’ll take it,” he told me recently. “Do I like the person I’m defending? That’s the main thing.” I asked if he would have represented Jeffrey Epstein, the most infamous pedophile in recent American history. “I’d have to understand better all the facts and circumstances,” he responded. He paused for a moment. “See, I don’t believe allegations,” he said. “I go into it believing the person is innocent.” ♦

The Political Scene

# Is It Happening Here?

Other countries have watched their democracies slip away gradually, without tanks in the streets. That may be where we're headed—or where we already are.

By Andrew Marantz

April 28, 2018



The nonfiction best-seller list in early 2018 included “[Trumpocracy: The Corruption of the American Republic](#)” and “[It’s Even Worse Than You Think: What the Trump Administration Is Doing to America](#).” The cover of the former was emergency-alert red; on the latter, a map of the United States was bursting into flames. By comparison, the cover of another book, “[How Democracies Die](#),” was somewhat muted—white capital letters on a black background. The word “DIE,” though, did loom large.

The anti-Trump books were received the way most information about [Donald Trump](#) is received. Those who hated him felt apoplectic, or vindicated; those who liked him mostly tuned it out. But “How Democracies Die,” by two political scientists at [Harvard](#), was about a global phenomenon

that was bigger than Trump, and it became a touchstone, the sort of book whose title (“[Manufacturing Consent](#),” “[Bowling Alone](#)”) is often invoked as a shorthand for an important but nebulous set of issues. When a book attains this status, the upside is that it can have a wide impact. (In 2018, according to the *Washington Post*, [Joe Biden](#) “became obsessed” with “How Democracies Die” and started carrying it around with him wherever he went.) The downside is that many people—including those who are aware of the book but haven’t quite got around to reading it—may hear a game-of-telephone version of the argument, not the argument itself.

Trump’s first term lasted four years—no more, no less. The sun rose every morning and set every evening. The President made some wildly unsettling statements; he allowed his relatives to exploit their power for profit; he badly mishandled a [pandemic](#); he threatened to nuke North Korea, or (reportedly) a hurricane, but in the end he didn’t do either of those things. Nor did he declare martial law, barricade himself inside the White House, and refuse to leave. In his final days, he did gin up a fleeting attempt at a “self-coup,” but he never had the judges or the [generals](#) on his side. By the time he left, many casual observers found it absurd to imagine that American democracy was dying. What would that even mean?

When Trump ran again, in 2024, his autocratic rhetoric was more pitched. He promised retribution, a purge of ideological enemies, and [mass deportations](#) on flimsy legal pretexts. His opponents [called him a fascist](#), but this only seemed to backfire. “Look, we can disagree with one another, we can debate one another, but we cannot tell the American people that one candidate is a fascist, and if he is elected it is going to be the end of American democracy,” his running mate, [J. D. Vance](#), said at the time. Vance had previously compared Trump to Hitler and to heroin, but his views, along with those of most Americans, had softened over time. This vibe shift was enough to get Trump reelected, but it didn’t change the underlying threat.

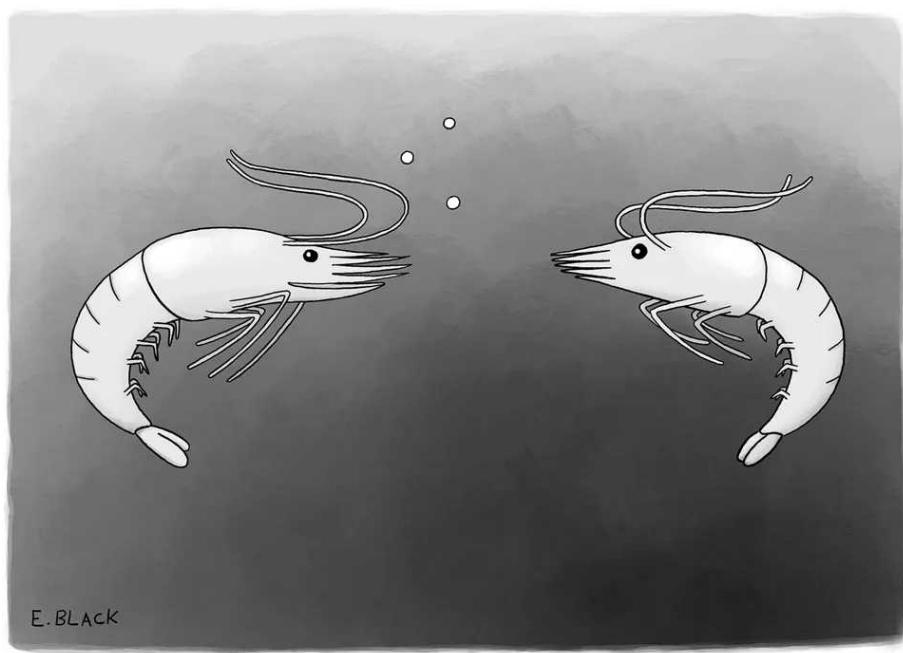
For decades, scientists argued that rising carbon levels would cause an increasingly unstable ecosystem, but most people got only the game-of-telephone version. “We keep hearing that 2014 has been the warmest year on record,” Senator James Inhofe said, holding up a snowball on the Senate floor. “It’s very, very cold out.” The climate Cassandras hadn’t actually predicted the immediate end of winter. The slow-motion emergency they had

predicted—melting permafrost, once-in-a-century storms appearing once every few months—was in fact happening, right on schedule. Still, no matter how dire the situation got, it was possible to normalize the damage. “No one’s denying it is unpleasant,” Laura Ingraham, the Fox News anchor, said in 2023. “My eyes are pretty itchy and watery.” That day, the air in midtown Manhattan was choked with acrid wildfire smoke from Canada, and the sky was a macabre shade of orange. “There’s no health risk,” her guest, a former coal lobbyist, replied. “We have this kind of air in India and China all the time.”

In a Hollywood disaster movie, when [the big one](#) arrives, the characters don’t have to waste time debating whether it’s happening. There is an abrupt, cataclysmic tremor, a deafening roar; the survivors, suddenly transformed, stagger through a charred, unrecognizable landscape. In the real world, though, the cataclysm can come in on little cat feet. The tremors can be so muffled and distant that people continually adapt, explaining away the anomalies. You can live through the big one, it turns out, and still go on acting as if—still go on *feeling* as if—the big one is not yet here.

The authors of “How Democracies Die,” Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, were describing what political scientists call “democratic backsliding”—a potential descent into “competitive authoritarianism.” This is not what happened in nineteen-thirties Europe, when pluralistic republics suddenly collapsed into genocidal war machines. Nor is it what happened in late-twentieth-century Russia and China, which transitioned so quickly from totalitarian communism to autocratic capitalism that there was never much democracy to slide back from. It’s what happened [in Turkey after 2013](#), [in India after 2014](#), [in Poland after 2015](#), [in Brazil after 2019](#)—countries that had gone through the long and difficult process of achieving a consolidated liberal democracy, then started unachieving it. “Blatant dictatorship—in the form of fascism, communism, or military rule—has disappeared across much of the world,” Levitsky and Ziblatt write. “Democracies still die, but by different means.” Some of this may happen under cover of darkness, but much of it happens in the open, under cover of arcane technocracy or boring bureaucracy. “Many government efforts to subvert democracy are ‘legal,’ in the sense that they are approved by the legislature or accepted by the courts,” the authors write. “They may even be portrayed as efforts to *improve* democracy.”

The first hundred days of Donald Trump's second term have been enervating, bewildering, almost impossible to parse in real time. The Administration has used some degree of brute force to accomplish its aims, but it has relied more often on ambiguity, misdirection, and plausible deniability. Some of its actions have seemed comically paltry: coercing a government attorney to restore Mel Gibson's right to a gun license; making the [Kennedy Center](#) "hot" again. Others may be haphazard power grabs, or may amount to something more. The [Department of Government Efficiency](#), which is not a government department, declares that it will not allow condoms to be sent to Gaza, which actually means that it has cut off funding for health services in Mozambique. An eight-billion-dollar budget cut turns out to be an eight-million-dollar budget cut. [Jeff Bezos](#) smothers the editorial mission of the *Washington Post*, and Amazon commissions a forty-million-dollar documentary about the First Lady. Undercover agents arrest people for thought crimes. "We've had two perfect months," the President says, moments after signing an executive order that reverses some of the signal achievements of the civil-rights movement. "Like, in the history of our country, no one's ever seen anything like it."



In their book, Levitsky and Ziblatt return many times to the example of [Hungary](#). The first time [Viktor Orbán](#) was Prime Minister, from 1998 to 2002, he governed democratically. But by the time he won again, in 2010, he

had recast himself as a hard-right skeptic of liberal democracy. Within a few months, mostly through legal means, his party, Fidesz, locked in its power and began reshaping the courts, the universities, and the private sector in its favor. Orbán is now the longest-serving Prime Minister in the European Union. Since 2011 or so, Hungary has been what is known as a “hybrid regime”—not a totalitarian dictatorship, but not a real democracy, either. There are no tanks in the streets; there are elections, and public protests, and judges in robes. But, the more closely you look at its core civic institutions, the more you see how they’ve been hollowed out from within. “The way they do it here, and the way they are starting to do it in your country as well, they don’t need to use too much open violence against us,” Péter Krekó, a Hungarian social scientist, told me in January, over lunch in central Budapest. “The new way is cheaper, easier, looks nicer on TV.”

We were in an Italian restaurant with white tablecloths, at a window overlooking a bustling side street—as picturesque as in any European capital. Krekó glanced over his shoulder once or twice, but only to make sure he wouldn’t be overheard gossiping about professional peers, not because he was afraid of being hauled off by secret police. “Before it starts, you say to yourself, ‘I will leave this country immediately if they ever do this or that horrible thing,’ ” he went on. “And then they do that thing, and you stay. Things that would have seemed impossible ten years ago, five years ago, you may not even notice.” He finished his gnocchi, considered a glass of wine, then opted for an espresso instead. “It’s embarrassing, almost, how comfortable you can be,” he said. “There are things you could do or say—as a person in academia, or in the media, or an N.G.O.—that would get them to come after you. But if you know where the lines are, and you don’t cross them, you can have a good life.”

Krekó has an office at the Budapest campus of Central European University, a couple of blocks away from the restaurant. It is a complex of multi-story buildings, sleek and strikingly modern. We passed through an angled glass foyer into a sunlit atrium full of blond wood and exposed brick. You didn’t have to be an architecture expert to get the message: openness and transparency. But, for a weekday afternoon, it was eerily quiet. “It’s sort of a ghost building,” Krekó said.

Soon after C.E.U. opened, in 1991, it became one of the most prestigious and well-funded liberal-arts universities in the post-Soviet world. The man who funded it, the Hungarian expat [George Soros](#), was an ally of many young members of Hungary's newly elected parliament, including a former pro-democracy activist named Viktor Orbán. The campus in Budapest was refurbished in 2016, in time for the university's twenty-fifth anniversary. By then, though, Orbán was governing as a pugnacious ultranationalist. He had refashioned Soros as his archenemy, the personification of everything real Hungarians should reject: decadent globalism, open borders, “gender ideology,” a rootless cosmopolitan élite.

That same year, István Hegedűs, a former politician who had served in parliament alongside Orbán, read an article in a pro-Fidesz newspaper which implied that only the Party's generosity enabled C.E.U. to stay in Budapest. A few days later, he attended a reception at the university, where, he recalled, he told an administrator, “‘You must interpret this to mean that you are in danger.’ But he said, ‘Who cares what they write in an article?’” C.E.U. was a private institution, accredited both in Hungary and in the U.S.; even if Orbán had wanted to meddle with it, he had no legal authority to do so. Still, Hegedűs told the administrator, “You are underestimating him.” Orbán's populist rhetoric didn't always line up with reality—while promising to uplift the working class, he and some of his closest friends seemed to have rapidly grown rich—and it was inconvenient when intellectuals pointed this out. Win or lose, a public spat with C.E.U. seemed to redound to his political benefit. An élite institution, full of foreigners and strange ideas, had taken root in his country's biggest city, and he would not stand for it.

Like all semi-autocrats, Orbán picks more fights than he wins. For a few months, it seemed as though his broadsides against C.E.U. might be mere rhetoric. But, in 2017, Fidesz quietly passed an amendment to a law, placing new restrictions on international universities within Hungary. The amendment didn't mention Soros or C.E.U. by name, but the school was widely perceived to be its sole target. The European Court of Justice ruled that this was a violation of E.U. law—three years later. But by then it was too late. C.E.U.'s academic operations had been transferred to Vienna, leaving a large number of students in limbo, and causing many of Hungary's top scholars to leave the country. In the ensuing years, many of Hungary's

public universities came under the control of a set of private foundations—ostensibly a step toward modernization, but in practice a way for the foundations, which are said to be run by Orbán loyalists, to exert more influence over the country’s next generation of leaders. Beyond higher education, Fidesz used similar tactics in attempts to restrict international donations to N.G.O.s, and to force independent judges into early retirement. This year, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the competitive-authoritarian President of Turkey, took the unprecedented step of having his main political rival, the [mayor of Istanbul](#), arrested. So far, Orbán has not resorted to such a move, but, then again, most of his reëlection campaigns haven’t been close.

Even now, there is still some plausible deniability. I had read about C.E.U. being banished from Budapest, and yet here I was, standing inside the building. A few American college students were passing through on a study-abroad tour. A display case was filled with recently published books; a polished-stone plaque was engraved with a quote (“Thinking can never quite catch up with reality”) attributed to C.E.U.’s founder and honorary chairman, George Soros.

The more I poked around, though, the more I saw indications that the institution had, in fact, been hollowed out—a Potemkin university with a sleek façade. A laminated sign, dated months prior, was taped to a locked door: “The PhD labs at the Budapest site will be closed.” An inviting rooftop terrace stood empty, except for some newly planted trees bending in a stiff wind. Inside, though there were still department markers on the walls (Gender Studies, Historical Studies, International Relations), many of the offices were either empty or littered with debris. I passed an office with a light on, and a young man at a computer looked up, clearly startled to see anyone. He politely explained that he worked for a video-editing startup, which was renting the office by the month.

At a café on the ground floor, where “Hotel California” was playing in the background, I sat with Zoltan Miklósi, a political philosopher who now commutes to C.E.U.’s campus in Vienna. “In the social sciences, they talk about the ‘just-world bias,’ ” he told me. “People want to believe that the world they live in, the system they live under, is mostly fair.” In 2015, one of his colleagues “made the case, very meticulously, that we no longer live in a democracy. I felt, ‘I cannot go there’—it seemed too extreme. But I had to

admit that I couldn't think of good counter-arguments." This sort of discrepancy—the lag between intellectual acknowledgment and emotional acceptance—relates to one of Miklósi's areas of research. "If I admit that I live in an autocracy, especially a 'hybrid autocracy' that functions by unpredictable rules, this raises a lot of other inconvenient questions," he said. Many of a citizen's fundamental decisions—whether to vote, whether to follow the law—presuppose a democratically legitimate state. "If that's gone, then how am I supposed to live?"

I agreed that the hybridity was confusing. I could hardly make sense of the building I was in. If Orbán was so single-minded in his opposition to C.E.U. Budapest, then why not raid the building and put a "For Sale" sign on the door? If Hungary was an autocracy, then why were its critics still allowed to sit in the middle of the capital and say so? Miklósi suggested that this ambiguity was part of the point. Maybe, he said, if government ministers started to fear that his peer-reviewed articles were about to spark a revolution, "they would find a way to make my life unpleasant." They probably wouldn't jail him, but in theory they could subject him to smears in the state-aligned media, or make it difficult for anyone in his family to get a government job. He added, "For now, I guess, they don't think I'm worth the effort."

You hear the word "playbook" a lot these days. (*The Guardian*: "Trump's weird obsession with the arts is part of the authoritarian playbook." MSNBC: "Is the chaos that we have seen since Inauguration Day part of the playbook?") Trump has never made a secret of his admiration for tyrants, and he frequently mentions Orbán as a model statesman. "These guys do seem to learn from one another," Julia Sonnevend, a communications scholar at the New School who grew up in Hungary, told me. Trump's son Don, Jr., went to El Salvador last June to attend the inauguration of that country's despot, [Nayib Bukele](#). Eduardo Bolsonaro, the son of the Brazilian semi-autocrat [Jair Bolsonaro](#), was in Washington for Trump's Inauguration in January (and was also there four years before, on [January 6th](#)).

If you're looking for one master playbook, though, you may end up overemphasizing resemblances and downplaying distinctions. "One difference between Orbán and Trump is between suborning the state and blowing it up," Anna Grzymala-Busse, a political scientist at Stanford, told

me. Moreover, some parts of Trump's program are escalations of [preexisting trends, not fundamental discontinuities](#). The corruption, the xenophobic nationalism, the ambient threat of decentralized violence—these may be more glaring now, but, whether we like to admit it or not, they have been present throughout American history. [George W. Bush](#) stretched Presidential powers well beyond their previous limits; [Barack Obama](#) expanded them even further. In the first hundred days of this term, Trump has issued the most executive orders of any modern President. There's nothing inherently illegitimate about that. Some of these orders—declassifying documents related to the [J.F.K. assassination](#), declaring English the country's official language—have been divisive but have not obviously exceeded the President's legal authority. Others, such as a ban on paper straws, have been mostly for show.

In other respects, though, this term already represents a sharp and menacing break. Executive orders such as the ones titled “Addressing Risks from Paul Weiss” and “Addressing Risks from Jenner & Block” are self-evidently cudgels for Trump to wield against his enemies—in this case white-shoe lawyers who have worked for his political opposition. (The orders could be read as prohibiting employees at these firms from entering federal buildings, including courthouses.) When the Bush Administration gave [no-bid military contracts to Halliburton](#), of which Vice-President [Dick Cheney](#) had recently been the C.E.O.—or when the current Administration awarded contracts to SpaceX, whose current C.E.O., [Elon Musk](#), is one of Trump's top advisers—it certainly seemed like favoritism, but it was impossible to prove that any strings had been pulled. In Trump's orders against the law firms, though, he is explicit that he is punishing them because of his antipathy to their employees (“the unethical Andrew Weissmann”) or their clients (“failed Presidential candidate [Hillary Clinton](#)”—which appears to be a textbook violation of the First and Sixth Amendments. Turkuler Isiksel, a political theorist at [Columbia](#), told me, “The sovereign openly picking winners and losers in the market—forget Orbán or Erdogan. That's something a seventeenth-century king would do.”

The Biden Administration, and even the first Trump Administration, justified deportations with arguments that had a chance of holding up in court. But this Administration has swept up putative gang members, some reportedly for nothing more than having a tattoo, and disappeared them to

foreign prisons. Instead of bringing prosecutions, it has simply sent undercover officers to snatch legal residents—accused of nothing but disfavored political speech—off the street. “Dear marxist judges,” Trump’s homeland-security adviser, [Stephen Miller](#), wrote. “If an illegal alien criminal breaks into our country,” the only due process “he is entitled to is deportation.” But this isn’t how the law works, even for non-citizens. As one expert put it, in 2014, “Anybody who’s present in the United States has protections under the United States Constitution.” The Marxist judge who said that was [Justice Antonin Scalia](#).

Previous American Presidents signed orders knowing that they would be challenged in court. But some of Trump’s orders—one radically curtailing birthright citizenship, one banning transgender people from the military, and several more—seem facially unconstitutional. In the early days of this term, there was a lot of speculation about whether the executive branch might defy a direct order from a federal judge, and, if so, whether this would comprise a constitutional crisis. Then it happened, several times. In February, a federal judge ordered immigration officials to [turn planes around](#), but the officials preferred not to. (“I don’t care what the judges think,” Trump’s border czar said. Trump agreed, posting, “This judge, like many of the Crooked Judges’ I am forced to appear before, should be *IMPEACHED!!!*”) In March, one district judge ordered the release of emergency-management funds that were being withheld from nearly two dozen states run by Democrats; in April, another judge ordered the government to halt its plan to decimate the staff of the [Consumer Financial Protection Bureau](#). In written rulings, both judges expressed concern that the government was not complying with their orders. (“There is reason to believe,” one judge wrote, that Administration officials were “thumping their nose at . . . this Court.”) Last week, the F.B.I. arrested a judge in Wisconsin and charged her with two felonies. Still, no matter how dire the situation got, some commentators kept saying that we were on the brink of a constitutional crisis, not already in one. Once you admit that you are in a constitutional crisis, it raises a lot of other inconvenient questions.

One morning in January, I took a car high into the Buda Hills to meet with David Pressman, who was then serving out his final days as the U.S. Ambassador to Hungary. We sat on settees in his official residence, next to a grand piano and a painting called “Sisyphus Smiling,” while the staff served us coffee in fine china. Pressman, previously a human-rights lawyer and the

director of George Clooney's Foundation for Justice, had done stints in Mogadishu and Khartoum before he was sent to Budapest. "I wanted to go somewhere, candidly, where democracy was in crisis," he said. What he couldn't anticipate was that he would be subject to unrelenting attacks in the state-aligned media, turning him into a nationally famous pariah. Before he arrived, in 2022, with his husband and their two children, someone rolled out a welcome banner on the Danube: a skull and crossbones, with the message "Mr. Pressman, don't colonize Hungary with your cult of death"; during his stay, the pro-regime media mocked him constantly as an "L.G.B.T. activist" and a "full-time provocateur."

"When you're dealing with a state that has clearly dispensed with the traditional norms, it doesn't work to just stick to the old ways," Pressman told me. He was trying to break from the staid habits of diplomacy, but the impact remained unclear. The previous night, he'd announced that the U.S. Treasury had sanctioned one of Orbán's top ministers, freezing his American assets. This was an unprecedented step—similar sanctions had been issued against government ministers in Russia, but not against officials in countries that are putative U.S. allies, such as Hungary—yet it was hardly a death blow to Orbán's kleptocracy. The government treated it as more evidence of American animus, and the minister in question denied wrongdoing and shrugged it off. When I Googled his name, Antal Rogán, there were a few stories about the sanctions in the international press, but many more about "The Joe Rogan Experience." (A few weeks after Trump was inaugurated, the sanctions were repealed.)



In an armored S.U.V. with a tiny American flag on the hood, we were driven to the American Embassy. Pressman met with civil-society leaders, saying his goodbyes. The Hungarian government had unveiled a mysterious new department called the Sovereignty Protection Office. “We don’t know yet if it’s just a publicity tactic, or if they are being given new surveillance powers,” Miklós Ligeti, from a nonprofit called Transparency International Hungary, said. “But our organization is under investigation by this office, so maybe we will find out.”

“I heard one of the ministers on TV this morning, stating, ‘After Ambassador Pressman leaves, he should avoid Hungary in the future,’ ” a representative from Human Rights Watch said.

“I won’t be following that recommendation,” Pressman said, with a wry smile.

“Well, bring a burner phone,” Szabolcs Panyi, an investigative journalist, said. It was gallows humor, but also good advice.

Each June in Budapest, Pressman hosted a Pride celebration on his lawn. The Hungarian government seemed to hate this, but there didn’t appear to be much it could do—there had been a large Pride parade in the streets of Budapest every year since 1997. Yet nothing in politics is static. Last month,

the Hungarian parliament passed a law banning all Pride celebrations. Anyone disobeying the ban this June could be identified by the police with facial-recognition software.

Pressman recently moved back to New York and resumed his work as a partner at Jenner & Block, one of the [law firms Trump has targeted](#) with an executive order. (Unlike other firms, which cut deals with the Administration, Jenner & Block is fighting the order in court.) “Most Americans haven’t lived through a situation like this, so they have no idea what it means for powerful institutions to be captured by the state,” Pressman told me earlier this month. “They may assume they can keep their heads down for four years, make concessions, and then regain their independence on the back end. But history shows—and the Hungarian experience shows—that they would be mistaken.”

Castle Hill, on the west bank of the Danube River, is full of fortresses built during the Middle Ages. Tucked among them is a slender building constructed to include a five-hundred-year-old stone fortification. It houses the Danube Institute, a right-wing think tank funded indirectly by the Orbán government. In January, István Kiss, the director, invited me into his office, which was tastefully crammed with Impressionist-style paintings and leather-bound books. It was a busy time for him: he had been in Palm Beach for one of Trump’s Election Night victory parties, and he was invited back to Washington for the Inauguration, but he probably wouldn’t be able to go, because his wife was about to give birth. The government offers generous tax breaks to families with more than two children, a policy aimed at increasing the Hungarian birth rate, and this would be Kiss’s third. “Honestly, we might have stopped at two otherwise,” he told me. “But the incentives were quite appealing.” When he was a university student, he spent a week at the Mises Institute, a libertarian think tank in Alabama. “I discovered that I have some libertarian leanings, but my social conservatism is stronger,” he said. “The left is using the state for its purposes, so why shouldn’t we?”

In April, 2023, in a dungeon-like theatre space in the building’s basement, Kiss introduced an onstage Q. & A. with [Christopher Rufo](#), a right-wing American activist who was in Hungary for a six-week Danube Institute fellowship. For years, Rufo had been pushing for an ideological overhaul of

the entire American education system—a proposal that had once struck most politicians, even most *MAGA* Republicans, as a non-starter. But Rufo said that a version of this program was taking shape in Florida, where he was an adviser to Governor [Ron DeSantis](#). It could be accomplished most directly at state-run institutions such as New College, where DeSantis had installed Rufo as a trustee. (Within months, the trustees had dismantled the gender-studies program and replaced the school’s president, a feminist English professor, with a former Republican politician.) Even when it came to private institutions, where DeSantis had less formal power, he still found ways to gain leverage—for example, by announcing that he would rescind tax breaks from Disney and, by extension, perhaps other “woke” corporations. “It’s essential to have someone that understands how to change institutions,” Rufo said, onstage in Budapest. He added that, during Trump’s first term, “the reality is that the institutions submerged Trump more than Trump reformed the institutions.”

When Trump returned to office, in 2025, he seemed determined to prove such skeptics wrong. Rufo, whose posts on X had caught Musk’s attention, went to Washington in early February, posting a photo from the Department of Education headquarters with the caption “Entering the inner sanctum.” (Rufo recently told me that he was an informal adviser to the Department of Education. A spokesperson for the department, when reached for comment, replied, “He does not advise DOE in any official capacity and should not be referred to as an advisor.”) Rufo told the *Times* that he hoped the government would withhold money from universities “in a way that puts them in an existential terror.” He didn’t have to wait long. On March 7th, shortly after Linda McMahon, the former C.E.O. of World Wrestling Entertainment, was confirmed as Trump’s new Secretary of Education, the Administration threatened to cut off four hundred million dollars in federal funds to Columbia University, citing campus demonstrations against [Israel’s war in Gaza](#). Trump may have been eager to pick a fight with Columbia because it was the only Ivy League school in his home town, or because it was the school he most associated with anti-Israel protests, perhaps having seen so many of them on TV. In any case, if there is one thing the President understands, it’s how to seed a compelling media narrative: an élite institution, full of foreigners and strange ideas, had taken root in his country’s biggest city, and he would not stand for it.

On March 13th, the Trump Administration sent Columbia a letter that might as well have been a ransom note. Before the university could even discuss getting its money back, it had to implement nine new policies, including banning face masks and empowering campus security guards to make arrests. On March 21st, it acceded to nearly all the government's demands. "Columbia is folding—and the other universities will follow suit," Rufo wrote on X. He told me recently, "It has been happening, honestly, way more quickly than I anticipated. It's beautiful to see."

Previous Presidents have used incentives to goad private institutions, but no modern President has so openly used executive spending as an extortion racket. Eighteen of the country's top constitutional-law scholars, both liberals and conservatives, wrote an open letter: "The government may not threaten funding cuts as a tool to pressure recipients into suppressing First Amendment-protected speech." Yet the government has continued to do exactly that. ("President Trump is working to Make Higher Education Great Again," a White House spokesperson told *The New Yorker*, in part. "Any institution that wishes to violate Title VI is, by law, not eligible for federal funding.") Given how quickly some universities have capitulated, why wouldn't the Administration use similar tactics to bully state governments, or Hollywood studios, or other entities that rely on federal money? Last year, Vance gave an interview to the *European Conservative*, a glossy print journal published in Budapest, in which he praised Orbán's dominance of cultural institutions. By altering "incentives" and "funding decisions," Vance added, "you really can use politics to influence culture."

It will take a lot more than this to turn Columbia into a Potemkin university, or to drive it out of the country. C.E.U. was founded in the nineteen-nineties; Columbia was founded before the Declaration of Independence was written, and still has an endowment of more than fourteen billion dollars. In the coming months, though, smaller universities will surely be targeted, and some will presumably go bankrupt. (In February, with the stroke of a pen, Trump slashed the staff at two colleges run by the Bureau of Indian Education, and it barely made the news.) I visited Columbia earlier this month. Instead of passing through the main gate as usual, I had to stop at a checkpoint, where, between a couple of classical sculptures representing Science and Letters, some uniformed security guards waited to check my I.D. Two professors met me on campus. "They keep adding more of this

Orwellian shit,” one told me, gesturing at a bulbous security camera above our heads. The other added, “After a while, unfortunately, you stop noticing.” One of them had studied democratic collapse in Europe and Latin America; the other was from India, where, under the competitive authoritarian [Narendra Modi](#), academic freedom was under constant assault. Neither would say more, even off the record, until we walked away from campus to the edge of the Hudson River, where they would be less likely to be overheard or recorded. “It may seem paranoid,” one of them said. “But not if you’ve seen this movie before.”

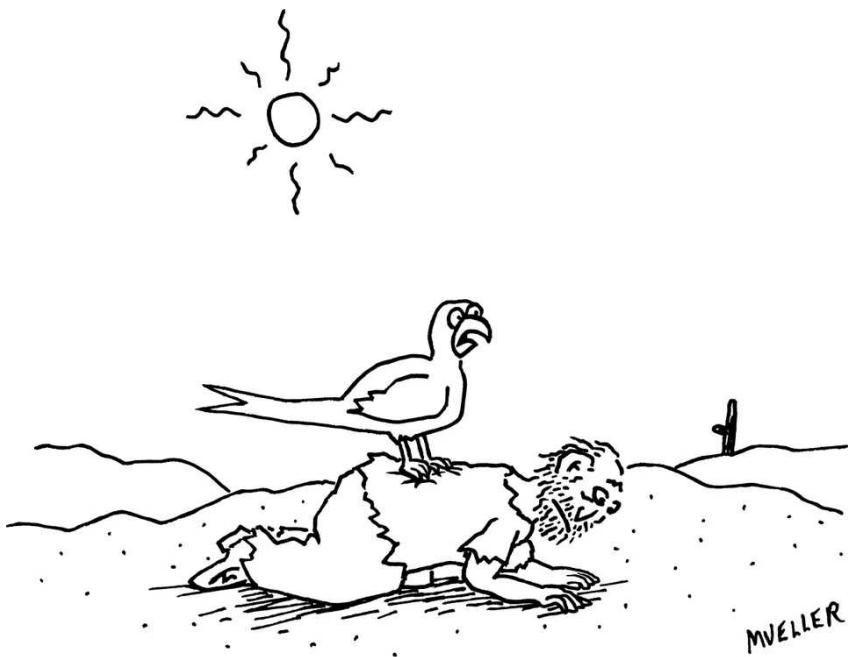
The most influential independent media outlet in Hungary is a YouTube channel called Partizán, a name that evokes both advocacy journalism and anti-authoritarian resistance. It does its work not in the pine forests of Belarus but on the outskirts of Budapest, where it broadcasts from a soundstage in an unmarked warehouse. To get there one night, I walked past dilapidated brick buildings in an industrial area without sidewalks or street lights. My American street sense told me that I was about to get mugged, but in Central Europe it can be hard to tell the difference between imminent danger and shabby chic. Márton Gulyás emerged from the shadows and smiled, shaking my hand. “They filmed part of ‘The Brutalist’ in this parking lot,” he said, and led me upstairs.

In the studio, the mood was much warmer. Gulyás, Partizán’s founder and main anchor, took his place on set, wearing a hoodie, in front of a bank of vintage TVs. He had just finished moderating the channel’s flagship daily show—a two-hour live roundtable, analyzing the day’s news from a leftist perspective—and he was about to tape an interview with Ben Rhodes, who had been one of Barack Obama’s top foreign-policy advisers. I sat in a control room, where a few long-haired, effortlessly well-dressed employees made instant coffee. Partizán receives small donations from all over Hungary, and the control room was stocked with high-end equipment (a five-thousand-dollar video router, a cabinet labelled “*HUMÁN-ROBOT INTERFÉSZ*”).

Since 2010, the Hungarian media has been thoroughly compromised. There are a few news sites in Budapest that still do valiant investigative work, but most TV channels and newspapers with national reach essentially function as privately owned state propaganda. Again, though, the regime is careful to

preserve plausible deniability. Unlike in Mexico or the Philippines, government agents in Hungary don't kill or arrest hostile journalists. "They don't walk into a newsroom and announce, 'We are shutting you down because you published tough stories about us,'" Gábor Miklósi, a veteran investigative journalist (and the brother of Zoltan, the C.E.U. academic), told me. "They say, 'This is the new owner, and the new owner has some ideas about how to improve the business.' And the part they don't have to say, but everybody knows, is that this new owner is an oligarch who happens to be very close to the Prime Minister." For a decade, Gábor worked at *Index*, which used to be one of Hungary's most reliable news outlets. After Orbán came to power, Gábor started to worry about editorial independence. But there wasn't much meddling at first, he said, "so I convinced myself I should stay." When he did start to notice some editorial interference, "it was mostly minor things"—a headline softened at the last minute, a story spiked for ambiguous reasons—"so you can never be sure. Maybe this particular case was a misunderstanding. Maybe I'm imagining things." Around 2018, a company affiliated with *Index* was acquired by new owners, "lesser-known businesspeople tied to Fidesz oligarchs." After this, the editor-in-chief was fired, and most of the editorial staff, including Gábor, resigned in protest. Now he works at Partizán.

Gulyás started Partizán in 2015, when he was an avant-garde theatre director in his mid-twenties. He spoke directly to the camera, aiming for "satire mixed with activism—'People, wake up! They're taking our rights away, can't you see that?'" He now considers this style cringeworthy and ineffective. "You can't just raise awareness, every day, every hour, about some new fucking emergency," he continued. "Maybe it *is* an emergency, but if you keep saying only that then people stop listening." The director of the Hungarian National Theatre, an outspoken critic of the government, was replaced, which became front-page news. (In Hungary, the director of the national theatre is a celebrity.) Gulyás led a series of protests. In 2017, he went to Castle Hill with a bucket of paint, prepared to throw it on the Presidential palace, and was arrested. But, when the government put him on trial as a threat to national security, Gulyás became a cause célèbre on social media. "They did not make that mistake again," he said. "Now, when they want to put pressure on us, they do not do it so publicly."



Tax officials have inspected Partizán’s financial records more than once, ostensibly for routine reasons. “We just tell them, ‘Here are our books, we have kept them very carefully for you,’ ” Gulyás said. He is gay, and government-aligned tabloids often spread baseless rumors attempting to associate gay people with such things as pedophilia. “I am a boring person, actually,” he told me. “But they could use anything—a picture of me sitting in a restaurant near someone who later turns out to be a bad guy—and make it look like a conspiracy.”

The fact that Partizán broadcasts online limits its reach, but also limits the government’s leverage over it. Its videos often get hundreds of thousands of views—a big deal in a country of some ten million people. In the last election, when Orbán’s main challenger couldn’t get airtime on TV, he put his message out on Partizán; the current opposition candidate gained widespread attention through an interview with Gulyás. The anchor now occupies a unique status—something like Hungary’s [Rachel Maddow](#), Amy Goodman, and John Oliver rolled into one. The American media is far more robust than the Hungarian press, but there have been early signs of trouble. The *Washington Post* and the *Los Angeles Times* pulled their Presidential endorsements last year; Trump filed frivolous lawsuits against ABC News, which quickly settled, and CBS News, which initially vowed to fight but now seems poised to settle. The First Amendment still offers broad

protections, but, even if you have the law on your side, there are plenty of incentives to avoid a confrontation with the President. This is especially true when the President seems willing to engage in extralegal tactics, such as selective audits, retributive regulation, and harassment campaigns carried out in the parts of the media that are already loyal to him.

Gulyás lives in an upscale bohemian neighborhood of Budapest, and one night he had me over for a long dinner. His boyfriend made osso buco and [risotto](#); Gulyás put on a John Coltrane record and poured red wine, then made Negronis. Gulyás is considering a move to the countryside, where most Orbán supporters live; he can't really understand his country, he feels, without spending time outside Budapest. But, for now, he is living the urban dream. "They say that Hungary is the poster child for the failure of the Enlightenment project," Gulyás said. "But I will stay in this country until the last possible moment."

Some people, of course, see Trumpism not as a democratic emergency but as a triumph of democracy. Recently, when Vance told a *Politico* reporter that the President may end up defying the Supreme Court, he portrayed this as an effort not to subvert democracy but to improve it: "If the elected President says, 'I get to control the staff of my own government,' and the Supreme Court steps in and says, 'You're not allowed to do that'—like, that is the constitutional crisis." David Reaboi, a right-wing operative who has been an adviser to American and Hungarian politicians, told me, "The Venn diagram of the people who think Orbán is Hitler and Trump is Hitler is a circle, and it's made up entirely of people who are out of their minds. Saying 'Hungary is for Hungarians' or 'America is for Americans' is a tautology. Who else would it be for? I don't understand why anyone would have a mental breakdown over it."

Some constitutional scholars still maintain that hair-on-fire rhetoric about the demise of the republic is counterproductive. "Look, Trump was elected democratically, and I don't see anything that suggests that future elections will not be as democratic as previous ones," Michael McConnell, a professor of constitutional law at Stanford, told me. "Some of what he's attempting to do is unlawful, and he exaggerates it to make it sound even scarier than it is, but the likely end result is that he will be checked by the courts." [Andrew Jackson](#), McConnell went on, also had "authoritarian instincts." [Franklin](#)

[Delano Roosevelt](#) fired civil servants for ideological reasons, attempted to pack the Supreme Court, and—violating precedent, though not the Constitution—won a third term, and then a fourth. The Biden Administration also overreached, McConnell told me; it just did so more quietly. One thought experiment McConnell likes to float: if a President were bending the rules on behalf of policies you liked instead of policies you deplored, how much would it bother you? “It’s just a talking point of the left,” Tom Fitton, the head of a right-wing group called Judicial Watch, told me. “If they’re not getting their way, democracy’s at risk.”

The exact steps from the Hungarian playbook cannot be replicated here. They started with Orbán’s party winning a legislative super-majority, which it used to rewrite the Hungarian constitution. In our sclerotic two-party system, it’s become nearly impossible for either party to sustain a long-standing majority; and, even if Trumpists held super-majorities in both houses of Congress, this wouldn’t be enough to amend the Constitution. “All those veto points in our system, by making it so hard to get anything done, may have helped bring about this autocratic moment,” Jake Grumbach, a public-policy professor at U.C. Berkeley, told me. “Now that there is an autocratic threat in the executive branch, though, I have to say, I’m glad those checks exist.” For years, Samuel Moyn, a historian at Yale, argued that liberals should stop inflating Trump into an all-powerful cartoon villain—that he was a weak President, not an imminent fascist threat. But in March, after the disappearance of the Columbia student activist [Mahmoud Khalil](#), Moyn applied the F-word to Trump for the first time. Still, he insisted, “Even at the most alarming and dangerous moments, politics is still politics.” All talk of playbooks aside, an autocratic breakthrough is not something that any leader can order up at will, by following the same ten easy steps.

In 2002, Levitsky and another co-author, the political scientist Lucan Way, wrote a paper called “Elections Without Democracy: The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism.” Way recently told me, “When people would predict, ‘America will turn into Hungary,’ I would roll my eyes. But, boy, have I been humbled.” This February, Way and Levitsky published a piece in *Foreign Affairs*. “Democracy survived Trump’s first term because he had no experience, plan, or team,” they wrote. “U.S. democracy will likely break down during the second Trump administration, in the sense that it will cease

to meet standard criteria for liberal democracy.” What Americans are living through now may feel basically normal, Levitsky told me—“Trump hasn’t brought out the tanks. Schumer’s not in prison”—but, he said, this is the way it often feels, even after things have already spun out of control. When I spoke to Way, he mentioned the capitulation of top law firms (“disastrous”), and the shambolic response from Democratic Party leaders (“utterly depressing”). Trump recently told NBC News that he was considering staying in office for more than four years, then clarified that he was “not joking.” Way wouldn’t even rule out the possibility that he might succeed. “Right now,” he said, “I think the U.S. is no longer a democracy.” He meant that we were seeing democratic backsliding, not a totalitarian dystopia. Still, when he said those words, I felt the way Zoltan Miklósi must have felt a decade ago. The conclusion sounded extreme, even if I couldn’t entirely refute it.

One paradox of strongmen like Bukele and Modi is that their anti-democratic maneuvers have made them genuinely popular. Break enough bureaucratic logjams, through either ingenuity or thuggish intimidation, and people may celebrate you as a man of action. It’s too early to tell whether Trump’s frenetic approach will be good or bad for his approval rating, but it is impossible to deny that he has been a man of action. The central tenet of competitive authoritarianism, though, is that an autocrat, even one who has already stacked the deck, can still lose. In Poland, the Law and Justice party entrenched its power, following the Hungarian model—but it pushed too far, notably with a series of unpopular anti-abortion measures, and, in 2023, lost its majority. In Brazil, in 2022, Jair Bolsonaro, the “Trump of the tropics,” tried to rig his own reëlection, but all his efforts failed, and he will soon stand trial for conspiracy to overthrow the government. Rodrigo Duterte, of the Philippines, who once seemed invincible, was arrested in March and brought to The Hague. There will be elections in Hungary next year, and Orbán, for the first time in decades, is facing a formidable challenger. Right now, the polls are tied.

Nothing in politics is permanent, and nothing is inevitable. The scholar [Timothy Snyder](#) warns against “anticipatory obedience” to tyranny, and fatalism can be its own form of capitulation. Even a gutted democracy can always come back from the dead. “In that sense, ‘How Democracies Die’ is actually a terrible metaphor,” Levitsky told me. “Everything is reversible.”

In these frantic days, he sounds like both a Cassandra and a Pollyanna, sometimes simultaneously. “We are not El Salvador, and we are not Hungary,” he said. “We spent centuries, as a society, building up democratic muscle, and we still have a lot of that muscle left. I just keep waiting for someone to use it.”

When a graduate student whom I’ll call Noémi moved to the U.S., in 2018, she thought it would be a refuge from what was happening in her native Hungary. She had read enough history to understand that America wasn’t perfect. “I knew about the [McCarthy era](#), and the tensions after 9/11,” she said. “But all the things you hear about the First Amendment and the legal protections for speech—somehow I still thought that meant something.” She is a Ph.D. student living in New York. Although she has a green card, she asked me not to use her name; if the State Department tries to kick students out, university officials may not be able to protect them. Her grandfather has late-stage cancer, and she isn’t sure she’ll be able to visit him in Hungary before he dies. “I told my partner, ‘I’m not a criminal, I’m not even an activist—why shouldn’t I go?’” But her partner sent her news article after news article: a German green-card holder arrested at Logan Airport and sent to a detention facility; a French scientist denied entry after anti-Trump messages were discovered on his phone. For now, Noémi is “frozen in place. Scared here, but also scared to leave.” She’s already considering where she will go next, if she has to go.

Last month, when a newspaper published a photo of a campus protest, an international student appeared in the background. She wasn’t there as a protester—she was just walking by—but knowing that her face was visible in the photo caused her to go into hiding for two weeks. I heard about another student, a Palestinian with a green card, who hadn’t left his apartment since March 8th, the night Mahmoud Khalil was taken; his friends were bringing him food, and he was using light-therapy lamps to regulate his sleep. A Ph.D. student whom I’ll call Divya told me that she left India in part because of academic repression under the Modi government, and she now lives in New York on an F-1 visa. Some of her friends, she said, “won’t use credit cards, in case they’re being tracked.” Among her friends who teach undergraduates, she added, “the new fear is that if you have a student who’s a citizen, and they don’t like what you say in class, maybe they’ll report you and get you deported.” Meanwhile, her neighbors go about their

lives—shopping at Whole Foods, picking up the dry cleaning, then going home to catch up on the news and curse the latest Trump outrage, as if it were all happening somewhere else. For most of us, the sun still rises in the morning and sets in the evening, even as some of us now have to use L.E.D. lamps to substitute for natural light.

Turkuler Isiksel, the political theorist at Columbia, met me in her office, where the Declaration of the Rights of Man was framed on a wall. On her desk was a plush dog adapted from a meme (the one where the dog sits in a burning room saying, “This is fine”). Isiksel grew up in Turkey, then left to study in the U.K., the U.S., and Italy before becoming a tenured professor and a naturalized American citizen. She told me, “I really thought, as a constitutional theorist, that no place has fully solved the problem of checking power and letting the people rule, but at least America has it figured out better than anywhere else. But maybe Madison was right—maybe constitutions really are just parchment barriers.” She considered saying something more pointed, but held her tongue—she had an upcoming flight to Istanbul, and she didn’t want to cause unnecessary trouble for herself or her family. I asked whether she meant trouble in Turkey, or trouble back in the U.S. “I don’t even know at this point,” she said. ♦

## Profiles

# Ryan Coogler’s Road to “Sinners”

The film represents a departure for the “Black Panther” director, and a creative risk; it grapples with ideas about music, race, family, religion—and vampires.

By Jelani Cobb

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The decade-long dominance of Marvel Studios in American popular cinema has insured that, among other things, we all recognize an origin story when we see one. To the extent that such neat inception points exist in real life, an afternoon at an aging movie palace on the corner of Lake Park and Grand Avenues, in central Oakland, California, provided one for the filmmaker Ryan Coogler. The Grand Lake Theatre, which opened in 1926, to showcase vaudeville acts and silent films, still retains a neoclassical majesty—a crystal chandelier, frescoes, a Wurlitzer organ that is played on Friday and Saturday nights—that’s a holdover from the era when theatres were meant to project the grandeur of Hollywood itself.

Coogler's formative moment at the Grand Lake came at a different time for the movies, in the summer of 1991, when "Boyz n the Hood," John Singleton's landmark coming-of-age story, set in South Central Los Angeles, opened there. Ira Coogler, a youth guidance counsellor who had grown up in Oakland, went to see the film, and he took along his son Ryan, who was then five years old. The boy watched the entire movie cradled in his father's lap. The subject matter—gang violence, emerging sexuality, the persistent salience of race in American life—is not typically considered appropriate for the kindergarten set, but Ira had his reasons. "He was in his twenties," Coogler told me. "He'd lost his father and his father-in-law right after he got married." Those losses weighed on Ira as he began his own journey as a parent. "Any movie he heard was about Black fatherhood he would take me to see. So he took me to see 'Boyz n the Hood,' even though I was five," Coogler said. Were this story a screenplay, it would now cut years ahead to a scene in which Coogler enrolls in the prestigious graduate film program at the University of Southern California, Singleton's alma mater, and eventually meets and befriends the older director, who becomes a mentor to him. This is, in fact, what happened.

Coogler is now thirty-eight and occupies a rarefied niche among contemporary filmmakers. He has directed five features, all of which he has written or co-written. His début, the widely praised independent film "Fruitvale Station" (2013), was followed by three genre studio films—"Creed" (2015), "Black Panther" (2018), and the "Black Panther" sequel, "Wakanda Forever" (2022)—that were heralded for their artistic sensibility as well as for their commercial success. His latest, "Sinners," was released earlier this month. His work has consistently explored themes of race, but from vantage points that are not easily anticipated. He has likened his role as a Black filmmaker to membership in a subset of artists freighted with knowledge of a fundamental social fault line.

When discussing the path of his career, Coogler tends to emphasize the interplay between his foundational experiences with popular cinema and the aesthetic values that he cultivated at U.S.C. When I first met him, two years ago, in Oakland, he told me that his favorite film was "A Prophet" (2009), by the French director Jacques Audiard, an art-house crime drama about a young man of Algerian descent who rises through the ranks of a Corsican prison gang. "Every time I roll the camera, I'm trying to make something

that affects people as much as ‘A Prophet’ affected me,” Coogler said. “But the reason why I love the medium is multiplex movies: ‘The Fugitive,’ ‘Do the Right Thing,’ ‘Dark Knight.’”

Coogler was still reflecting on that interplay when we met in February, at a postproduction studio on the Warner Bros. lot, in Burbank, where he was poring over scenes from “Sinners.” He was dressed casually, in gray trousers, a burgundy button-down, and a blue baseball cap with the words “Grilled Cheese”—the production code name for the film—stitched on the side. Coogler is compact and muscular. He played football in college and still looks as if he could scramble past a defender for a first down if the need arose. He normally projects an East Bay equanimity, but an occasionally furrowed brow showed the stress that the project was generating. Among the aftereffects of the devastating Los Angeles fires in January was widespread disruption across the entertainment industry. The planned March release date for “Sinners” had been pushed back a month, but Coogler and his team were still hustling to complete the editing.

There was a persistent rain that day, and I made a feeble joke about the Raphael Saadiq song “It Never Rains (in Southern California).” Coogler’s eyes lit up, and he told me that Saadiq, a fellow Oakland native, had written a blues song for “Sinners,” titled “I Lied to You.” Even given the heterogeneity of Coogler’s previous ventures, “Sinners” represents a departure for him, and, to an equal extent, a creative risk; it grapples simultaneously with ideas about music, race, family, religion—and vampires. The plot revolves around the experiences of Sammie, an aspiring blues musician, played by Miles Caton. The movie opens in 1932, in Jim Crow-era Mississippi. Sammie is the son of a preacher named Jedidiah (Saul Williams), who disapproves of his music, warning him that the Devil is near at hand. The return from Chicago of Sammie’s gangster twin cousins, Smoke and Stack (both played by Michael B. Jordan), and their plan to open a juke joint force the tensions between father and son into the open, with both mortal and supernatural consequences.

Coogler says that he has always loved horror movies, but Carpathian mythology is novel territory for him as a director. Yet, in setting a historical American horror story in a classic American horror-movie format, he manages to bring fresh meaning to a character with which the public is

exceedingly familiar. The first vampire we encounter is a white itinerant musician named Remmick (played by Jack O'Connell). His attempts to drain the blood of Black sharecroppers suggest a simple racial metaphor for Mississippi's undead past, but the film pursues a set of deeper complexities, in which the vampires and the righteous path of Christianity offer duelling versions of eternal life.

Religion is another new theme in Coogler's work, though he sees its influence in all his films. He was raised Baptist but attended Catholic schools. Three of his grandparents died before he was born, and growing up he was fascinated by the way his parents talked about an ongoing connection to them. "This concept of my relationship with the afterlife, with my own mortality and how that looks through a Catholic lens or a Baptist lens, it's something that I've been reckoning with forever," he told me. "I'm looking back on my work, and I'm, like, Oh, yeah, I'm still reckoning with that. And for me this film is about a lot of things, man. But it is also about the act of coping."

The idea for "Sinners" came to Coogler one day as he was washing dishes in the home in Oakland that he shares with his wife, Zinzi, and their two young children. He was listening to "Wang Dang Doodle," a classic of upbeat blues about a juke-joint party, featuring Howlin' Wolf. Coogler put down the dishrag and began framing an idea for a story rooted in the centrality of music to the Black experience. He quickly realized that he also wanted to explore the interplay of Black, white, and Native American elements which had produced the distinctive culture of Mississippi.



In all his work, beginning with “Fruitvale Station”—which tells the story of Oscar Grant III, a young Black Oakland native, born the same year as Coogler, who was fatally shot by a white police officer in 2009—Coogler has tended to pair urgent social issues with chapters from his own family’s story. Zinzi, who is her husband’s production partner, is more reticent than he is, but she speaks with a keen intensity when discussing their shared undertakings in film. She told me that with “Black Panther” Coogler was trying to understand his relationship to his distant ancestors on the African continent. “Sinners,” she said, is his way of addressing the history of his more recent ancestors in the American South. He was particularly close to a great-uncle on his mother’s side, who, like his grandfather, had migrated to California from Mississippi, as part of the generation who left the South after the Second World War to escape the strictures of Jim Crow. Coogler never knew his grandfather; his great-uncle is now also deceased, but as a youth Coogler spent a lot of time with him. He told me, “All he would want to do was watch baseball and listen to the blues. My relationship with blues music was through him. And whenever I would think about blues music I would think about him.”

“In a lot of ways, Africa explained Mississippi to me,” Coogler said. The notorious brutality of slavery and segregation there was not unrelated to the fact that, through the early twentieth century, Mississippi and South Carolina

were the only states with majority-Black populations. Anxious slaveholders constructed a rigid hierarchy intended to prevent their numerical superiors from launching large-scale revolts. At the same time, the sheer size of the state's Black population made it easier for those who were enslaved and for subsequent generations to hold on to African traditions that might have perished under other circumstances. Their misery and their vitality sprang from the same source.

To prepare for "Black Panther," Coogler made his first trip to Africa, and spent several weeks travelling there. He told me, "I realized, All right, African Americans are extremely African. We may be more African than we know." That discovery shaped the way he understood Mississippi's complicated past for "Sinners." "With this film it was, like, Oh, we affected this place," he told me. "We brought Africa here." Listening to Coogler, it began to make a kind of sense that, if a superhero movie could be a vehicle to understand the African diaspora, a vampire flick could address Jim Crow and the so-called Devil's music.

Early in the shoot, Coogler visited the Mississippi Delta with the Swedish musician and composer Ludwig Göransson, who has worked on all five of his films, and Göransson's father, Tomas, who is a music teacher. The circuitous route that the blues took to recognition as an American art form seemed profound to Coogler. He said, "I'm there with Ludwig and his father, a man in his seventies, who was inspired to become a blues guitarist because he went to a concert and saw either Howlin' Wolf or Albert King. He heard Delta-blues music in Sweden, because these Black musicians couldn't tour in the United States." That exposure, Ludwig told me, proved transformative for his father: "He just connected with that music in a way that allowed him to express himself." Coogler was struck by the fact that Tomas had taught his son to play blues guitar and that Ludwig had then come to the United States and was now working on a film about that music with a descendant of the people whose experiences are at the heart of it. This confluence, Coogler suggested, represents the closing of a particular historical and spiritual loop. "That's how dynamic this music was," he said. "I'm standing there with a seventy-year-old Swedish guitarist who's in tears on a plantation. You know what I mean?"

Coogler spent the bulk of the day on the Warner Bros. lot combing through the film's audio with a team of sound engineers. Hunched over a console table, he flagged a line from the actor Delroy Lindo, who plays a musician named Delta Slim, which was lost to the sound of a train rumbling into a station. Coogler told me that Zinzi, who co-produced the film, is usually present for this part of the process, but the weather had delayed her flight from Oakland. The two met as teen-agers and were married in 2016, and they have worked together in some fashion for as long as Coogler has been making films. He typically starts a new project by discussing it with her. "I'm talking to my wife, right?" he said. "It's just, like, cool. 'Will people like this? Will the hood feel this?' I ask her that a lot. That's code for the people we grew up with." The key revelation, he told me, was that in crafting films for his home-town audience he'd found a way to appeal to audiences far beyond it.

"*Sinners*" comes at a crucial moment for Warner Bros., which has seen a number of box-office disappointments in the past year. Coogler represents Warner's investment in young, bankable directors whose films the studio hopes will broaden its appeal. The commercial success of his previous films certainly factored into that expectation: "*Fruitvale Station*" had a production budget of less than a million dollars and grossed seventeen million at the box office. "*Black Panther*" brought in \$1.3 billion globally, and domestically it was the highest-grossing film of 2018, as well as the highest-grossing film ever by a Black director. But the structure of the "*Sinners*" deal raised questions of how profitable the film will ultimately be for the studio. "*Sinners*" received overwhelmingly positive reviews and was the top box-office draw on its opening weekend. According to the *Times*, though, analysts estimate that expenses for the film could reach a hundred and fifty million dollars—and the deal allows for the rights to the film to revert to Coogler in twenty-five years. This arrangement has led industry insiders to hypertensively wonder if deals like this portend the end of the century-old Hollywood studio system. Coogler has countered the criticism by noting, "This is my fifth film, and I've never lost anybody money."

"*Sinners*" had favorable harbingers. Spike Lee watched an early cut, with the Cooglers, and took to Instagram to proclaim, "I Just Had The Greatest Experience Of Watching A Film In Years." When I spoke to him a few weeks later, his enthusiasm was undiminished. It was, he said, "like being at

the Garden on a night when the Knicks are beating the Celtics”—a rare superlative in Lee’s evaluation of cinema. The praise was meaningful to Coogler, who includes Lee among his most enduring influences. (When Coogler was six, his father took him back to the Grand Lake, to see “Malcolm X.”) It was not lost on anyone, least of all on Lee, that, at a moment when theatres are awash in franchises and sequels, “Sinners” is something increasingly unusual—a big-budget studio movie with an original story line. Such a project represents a significant commitment to any director’s vision, but one that is especially rare for a Black director.

Given Coogler’s age, legacy is an unusually prominent concept for him. He told me that he’d assumed a level of fatalism early on, having witnessed lives lost to violence and to poor health care. Growing up in Oakland, “I did not see a whole lot of old Black men,” he said. That fact shaped his presumptions about what was possible. He took inspiration from Tupac Shakur, a virtual patron saint of the Bay Area, who was killed at the age of twenty-five, in 1996, but left behind a stunning volume of work. John Singleton died, of complications from a stroke, six years ago, when he was just fifty-one. Coogler’s voice still catches when he speaks of him. It was not until relatively recently, Coogler admitted, that he’d dared to imagine a career for himself that paired longevity with productivity. “You realize that Mick Jagger is still going to do a fucking show in Australia, you know what I’m saying? And *dance* across the stage,” he said. Martin Scorsese, he noted, almost incredulously, is still making films at eighty-two. For Black artists, that kind of tenure, both mortal and artistic, “is not presented as an option,” he told me. “But it should be.” He added, “Longevity has been something that is not associated with Blackness.”

Oakland is a central reference point for Coogler, much as Brooklyn has been for Spike Lee and South Central was for John Singleton. But whereas Lee and Singleton set a number of films in their home towns, Oakland appears as more of a sensibility than a place in Coogler’s work. When I met him there, in the summer of 2023, we visited his maternal grandmother, Charlene Thomas, at her home, on a quiet block in a gentrifying stretch of the city, where she raised her five children. Thomas is a kinetic, diminutive woman whose energy belies her years. She is close to her grandson—she even let him shoot some scenes for “Fruitvale Station” in her house. Coogler, like

many people, learned to make bread during the pandemic, and that day he was taking Thomas a sourdough loaf.

Thomas's home is a shrine to the family's multigenerational history in the city. The opening scene of "Black Panther" takes place in a high-rise apartment complex in Oakland, which serves as both a shout-out to the city and a cinematic pun linking the comic-book character, who was introduced in the nineteen-sixties, and the radical Oakland-based political party of the same name. A municipal marker near Thomas's house identifies the site of the Panthers' first public action—serving as traffic guards at a dangerous corner. Three of Thomas's children were among the Party's early members; Ryan's mother, Joselyn, the youngest, became a community organizer. Coogler credits his artistic world view to his family's intertwined history of migration and activism. The utopia he constructed for the "Black Panther" films was, on some level, the product of the freedom dreams of groups such as the Panthers, and their imagining of what a better Black world might look like. Later, as we drove around Coogler's neighborhood, a few miles east, the markers of the area's history took on a more comedic edge. At an intersection, someone had posted stickers on the stop signs so that they read "*stop* Hammer Time"—a reference to "U Can't Touch This," by MC Hammer, another Oakland native.

Joselyn and Ira grew up together in the East Bay, and they both still live there. They started dating when they were students at Cal State Hayward. After Ryan was born they had two more sons—Noah, who is a now a musician, and Keenan, a screenwriter. Watching movies was a favorite pastime in the household, and it was Joselyn who programmed the family's cinematic viewing. In 2022, Coogler was invited to deliver *bafta*'s annual David Lean Lecture, in London, and he described his mother as "one of those rare cinephiles whose taste doesn't determine her attitude toward things. She'll watch everything . . . from the works of Marty Scorsese to Lifetime movies."

When Ryan was in his early teens, Ira began occasionally taking him along to San Francisco's Juvenile Justice Center, where he worked—an experience that Coogler later drew on when writing "Fruitvale Station." (Oscar Grant spent some time in prison.) In high school, Ryan and Zinzi were both athletic: she ran track and he played football, and they supported each other

at their respective competitions. Coogler's team, at St. Mary's College High School—which was called the Panthers—had a rivalry with the Oakland Technical High School Bulldogs, and Coogler, a wide receiver, sometimes played against the future Seattle Seahawks running back Marshawn Lynch. Coogler performed well enough that he earned a football scholarship to St. Mary's College, where he took a creative-writing course and developed an interest in the craft, then transferred to Sacramento State. He and Zinzi started dating when they were undergraduates—she attended Cal State Fresno—and he confided to her that he wanted to make movies. She gave him Final Draft screenwriting software—a pivotal vote of confidence. He was accepted to the film program at U.S.C. in 2008. Zinzi visited him often and sat in on some of his classes. “On one of his early student films, someone didn’t show up, and I had to hold the camera,” she told me.

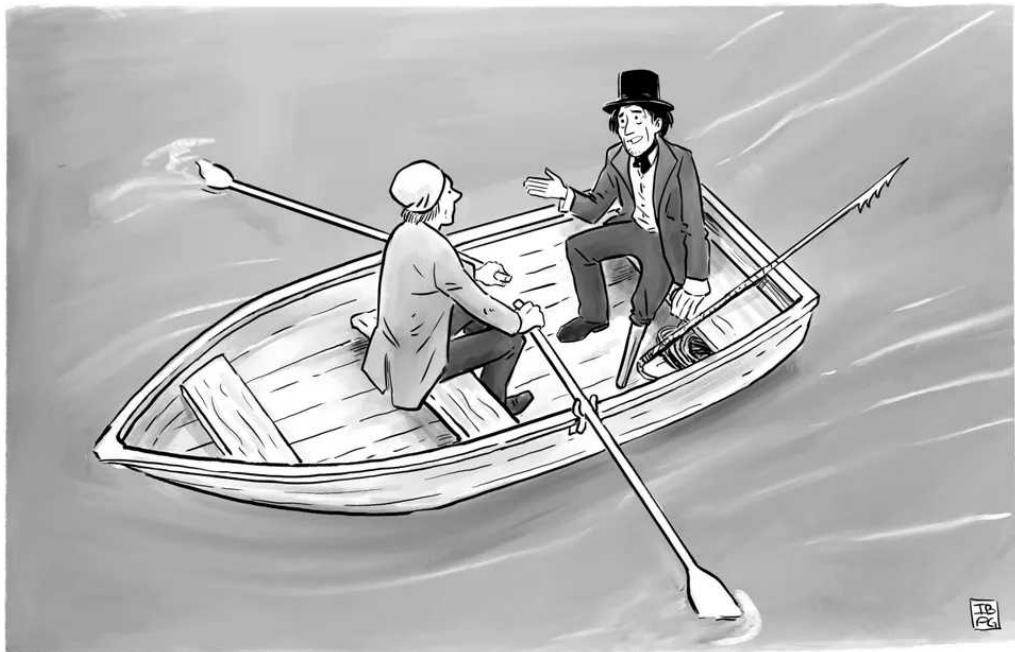
At U.S.C., Coogler began to build the creative team he has worked with ever since. He met Sev Ohanian, an M.F.A. student from Los Angeles, early on, and after graduation Ohanian became a producer on “Fruitvale Station.” He also has production credits on, among other films, “Judas and the Black Messiah,” directed by Shaka King, and “Sinners.” He remembers Coogler as a singular figure on campus. “I knew then that Ryan was going to be a once-in-a-generation filmmaker,” Ohanian said. “I don’t think I was unique for thinking that.” He added that Coogler has maintained a collaborative ethic. “Sinners” is “a really challenging, ambitious film,” he told me. “Ryan would be, like, ‘Come look at the monitor. What do you guys think?’ He’s the auteur, of course. It’s his vision. He wrote this thing from beginning to end, on the page and on the screen, but he seeks that collaboration. And it’s not about him seeking validation. It’s only about ‘Is this connecting with you?’ ”

Ludwig Göransson was in the screen-scoring program at U.S.C., and Coogler met him while visiting a friend who lived in the same building. Coogler asked Göransson how many instruments he played and Göransson demurred, saying that he excelled only at guitar. “Turns out, he could play a *lot* of shit,” Coogler said. Göransson told me, “I was surprised that he wasn’t in the music program, because he wanted to talk so much about music.” Their collaboration began when Coogler asked him to write the score for a short film called “Locks,” about the social politics of Black hair; a decade later, Göransson won an Oscar for Best Original Score for “Black Panther.” (He also won one last year, for Christopher Nolan’s “Oppenheimer.”)

It was during Coogler's first year at U.S.C. that Oscar Grant, then twenty-two, was shot by a white transit officer on a platform of the Fruitvale *BART* station, in the early hours of New Year's Day, 2009. Grant was unarmed, and that incident, which a number of people recorded on their cellphones, became a political flash point. It's relevant that "Boyz n the Hood" involves the death of a Black teen-ager nicknamed Doughboy: Coogler's introduction to cinema was an exploration of the terms under which Black life in America exists (and ends), and he chose to explore Grant's story for his first feature film.

Before graduating, Coogler met the actor and producer Forest Whitaker. He and Nina Yang Bongiovi, his partner in a company called Significant Productions, signed on to the project, and some time later she arranged a meeting in her office for Coogler and the actor Michael B. Jordan. Jordan was then best known for playing the role of Wallace, a wayward but sympathetic adolescent drug hustler, on the HBO series "The Wire." Coogler had him in mind to play Grant when he was writing "Fruitvale Station." The two men walked to a nearby Starbucks and discussed cinema, creativity, and what they were trying to achieve in their careers. Jordan had his own motivation for doing the film. On February, 26, 2012, Trayvon Martin, then seventeen years old, had been shot and killed by George Zimmerman, a self-appointed neighborhood-watch captain, as the boy was walking near his father's home, in Sanford, Florida. Jordan had been growing increasingly concerned with questions of social justice and was looking for ways to translate that concern into his work. Coogler's film seemed like a solution.

Jordan had one hesitation, as he confessed recently in a podcast conversation with Coogler: "I didn't know if I was a leading man." But Coogler told him, "I know you're a star. Let's go show the world." Jordan has now been in all of Coogler's features, and in the course of that work they have built an artistic rapport. "There's times," Jordan told me, "where he's trying to get to an emotion or he is trying to get to a place. And sometimes I kind of know where we're going already, and I'll say that place, or I'll say that emotion, and it'll be, like, 'Exactly—boom.'"



“Fruitvale Station” won both the Grand Jury Prize and the Audience Award at Sundance. Kenneth Turan of the Los Angeles *Times* praised it as a “demonstration of how effective understated, naturalistic filmmaking is at conveying even the most incendiary reality.” Public interest in the film intensified after a stroke of terrible happenstance. The movie opened on July 12, 2013, and the next day a Florida jury acquitted George Zimmerman. In the context of that moment, the film became a part of the conversation about the deaths of young Black men and the lack of accountability that so often attended them.

The film’s success left many people anticipating an indie purism from Coogler, and they were surprised when he next chose to direct “Creed,” a studio film that introduced a new generation of characters to Sylvester Stallone’s fading “Rocky” franchise. Coogler, in explaining his decision, said that his family had often watched sports films together, and that his father was particularly a fan of the “Rocky” movies. Coogler cast Jordan as Adonis Johnson, an aspiring fighter who is the illegitimate (and unacknowledged) son of Rocky Balboa’s nemesis turned friend, Apollo Creed. The film was an unexpected hit, bringing in a hundred and seventy-four million dollars worldwide against a budget of less than forty million, and it positioned Coogler to make the leap into big-budget studio films.

In 2018, Ryan, Zinzi, and Ohanian founded Proximity Media, a company that develops and produces podcasts, soundtracks, documentaries, and features. (Göransson later joined them.) Coogler had always imagined having such a company. “I think it was really because Spike Lee had one, his 40 Acres and a Mule Filmworks,” he said. Proximity Media’s name reflects its mission. “We want to bring people in closer proximity to people and stories often overlooked,” Zinzi told me. Starting the company was also a way to insure that its principals would have opportunities to work in proximity to one another. Among their first undertakings was King’s “Judas and the Black Messiah” (2021), a drama about the Black Panther Party leader Fred Hampton and his betrayal and murder in 1969, at the age of twenty-one. The film earned six Oscar nominations and two wins: Best Original Song, for H.E.R.’s “Fight for You,” and Best Supporting Actor, for Daniel Kaluuya, who played Hampton. “Sinners” is the company’s first project directed by Coogler.

The launch of Proximity Media coincided with the opening of “Black Panther.” Marvel had touched on political themes before—government surveillance and unchecked military authority feature in the “Iron Man” and “Captain America” films—but never as overtly or as centrally as in “Black Panther,” which Coogler co-wrote with Joe Robert Cole. The story is set in Wakanda, a prosperous, futuristic country led by King T’Challa, played by Chadwick Boseman. The primary conflict involves Erik Killmonger (Jordan), an upstart challenger to the throne, who is revealed to be T’Challa’s neglected American cousin—from Oakland. Coogler is prone to giving his main characters a single line in the third act which summarizes the entirety of their being. In “Creed,” Adonis, bloodied and exhausted in a fight he has no chance of winning, is asked what he has left to prove. Speaking to the pain of paternal rejection and illegitimacy, he says, “That I wasn’t a mistake.” In “Black Panther,” a badly wounded Killmonger rejects an offer of medical attention, knowing that survival will mean imprisonment. Instead, he instructs T’Challa to drop him into the ocean, so that he can join his ancestors who jumped from slave ships “because they knew death was better than bondage.” The story exploded the parameters of what a superhero film could be; Kevin Feige, the president of Marvel Studios, watched an early cut and declared it the best film Marvel had ever done.

The success of “Black Panther” raised anticipation for a sequel, but tragedy struck in the interim. Boseman, who had been privately battling colon cancer, died in August of 2020. “I didn’t know that his life was hanging in the balance the whole time I knew him,” Coogler told me. Typically, the first film in a Marvel franchise establishes the protagonist’s origins, and the sequels present that character with challenges from increasingly formidable opponents. In this case, the sequel, “Wakanda Forever,” had to introduce a new protagonist and also maintain continuity with the first film. The movie opens with T’Challa dying off camera of an unknown ailment for which his sister, Shuri, played by Letitia Wright, desperately tries to find a lifesaving treatment. Her character’s grief mirrors the anguish of the cast and the director as they worked in Boseman’s absence. “There were long stretches on that movie where I didn’t know if we would finish,” Coogler told me.

The filming also coincided with another milestone in Coogler’s life, and with another incident that blurred the line between life and art. Zinzi gave birth to their second child just a month after production started. Coogler told me that, before he began working on “Fruitvale Station,” he hadn’t seriously thought about having children. But Oscar Grant had a four-year-old child, Tatiana; before he died, he told the officer who shot him, “I have a daughter.” Coogler was deeply moved by the clear primacy of Tatiana in Grant’s short life.

“Wakanda” was shot in several locations around the world, but a good deal of it was filmed in Atlanta. One afternoon, Coogler stopped by a Bank of America to make a sizable cash withdrawal from his account to cover some family expenses. The teller thought that he was attempting to rob the bank and called the police. When the officers arrived, they drew their guns and handcuffed him. The situation was resolved, and the bank issued an apology. But, in the moment, Coogler thought immediately of his children, as Grant had thought of his daughter. “That’s the first place your mind goes when a gun is drawn,” he said. The film was a success at the box office but, more important for Coogler, the travails of making it became a defining point of reference for him. When I talked with him about the challenges of finishing “Sinners” in the wake of the Los Angeles fires, he seemed keen on keeping difficulties in their proper perspective. “I know what we went through on ‘Wakanda’ and what that film did,” he told me.

The day after Coogler and I met on the Warner Bros. lot, he and about thirty members of the “*Sinners*” production crew gathered at the Los Angeles headquarters of *imax* for a screening of a few sample scenes from the film. It was the first time that they had seen it displayed in such grand dimensions, and a charge of nervous energy bounced among them. David Keighley, a chief quality officer for *imax*, who told me that he’d been working in the film industry for fifty-three years, walked the group through some technical aspects of the projection process, and then ran a three-minute series of excerpts. Both “*Black Panther*” films were shown on *imax*, but it was notable to Coogler that this film, which is not part of a franchise but his own stand-alone vision, would be conveyed at this scale. “That type of technology is kind of reserved for epic storytelling,” he told me. The audience gasped at the first snippet, a soundless rendering of the moment when the vampire Remmick first appears. A little later, Coogler pointed out the clarity with which a small spiderweb fracture on a car windshield was visible.

He listened enrapt as Keighley explained that the three minutes of film he’d just shown weighed eleven pounds. The final cut could be expected to weigh roughly five hundred pounds, and would require a hydraulic lift to be placed on the spool from which it would be projected. The exchange between them reminded me of a point that Ohanian made about “*Fruitvale Station*. ” Despite the project’s meagre budget, Coogler insisted on shooting on film rather than use the less expensive digital options that were then just gaining traction. Coogler told me that he had wanted the warmth of film, a distinction that he felt was important because Grant’s death had been captured and widely disseminated on grainy, early-generation cellphone video. “Mediums do make a difference,” he said.

When we spoke again, a few weeks after the *imax* screening, he was both more upbeat and more reflective. He’d locked the final cut of “*Sinners*,” and early screenings were yielding favorable reviews. He’d just arrived in Mexico City to begin a promotional tour, and our conversation was interrupted by joyous yelps from his children, now five and three, playing in his hotel room. He seemed ready to take a deep breath at the end of an arduous effort. Proximity Media had been created to facilitate collaboration among its founders, but pulling the team together to work on “*Sinners*” had been a task in itself, he told me. The demands on everyone’s time had

increased exponentially, and unlike in the early days they were now integrating creative work with family life. “Running the company is a full-time job,” he told me. But it had all come together. For a moment, Coogler seemed to reflect on his own narrative. All this had happened, he said, “and I’m not forty yet.” He was planning for the long haul. ♦

## Takes

- [Dhruv Khullar on Oliver Sacks's "The Case of Anna H."](#)

Takes

# Dhruv Khullar on Oliver Sacks's "The Case of Anna H."

Wonder and observation propelled not only Sacks's writing but also his doctoring. He wanted to chronicle even when he couldn't cure.

By Dhruv Khullar

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In 1999, Oliver Sacks, the eclectic neurologist who was dubbed the “poet laureate of medicine,” received a letter from a pianist, Anna H. “My (very unusual) problem, in one sentence, and in non-medical terms, is . . . I cannot read words, and music gives me the same problem.” Sacks was known for handwritten correspondence, but he called Anna—“this seemed to be the thing to do”—and invited her to his clinic. Her vision was fine, yet her condition, “visual agnosia,” was worsening. She soon struggled to recognize objects and even faces.

Like many of Sacks’s other stories, “[The Case of Anna H.](#),” published in *The New Yorker* in 2002, explored a cognitive anomaly. (He also wrote about the

near-photographic memory of an artist with autism and a middle-aged sailor who thought that he was a teen-ager.) Sacks often grew so close to his patients that he blurred the lines between doctor, friend, and biographer. Increasingly, he seems like a practitioner of a lost art that's distinct from, even antithetical to, the dispassionate practice of modern medicine. Today, risk calculators guide cancer screenings, and A.I. helps to triage medical care; academic journals would rather aggregate millions of electronic medical records than print "anecdota." The editor of a psychiatry journal boasted that he'd "hastened the demise of the case report, to exclude what I see as psychiatric trivia." This is an implicit critique of the Sacksian method. A disability-rights activist once voiced an explicit one, calling Sacks "the man who mistook his patients for a literary career."

Sacks, who resembled a bearded Robin Williams (the actor played him in a 1990 film) and died in 2015, understood that the particularity of a case—its texture, its humanity, its *narrative*—could illuminate how the mind works. His writings decouple seeing and understanding; they identify latent perceptive powers beneath our awareness. Anna could categorize words—those denoting living things as opposed to inanimate objects, for example—even when she had "no conscious idea of their meaning." Because Anna couldn't distinguish knives from plates, she organized kitchen items "by color, by size and shape, by position . . . somewhat as an illiterate person might arrange the books in a library." (Curiously, another talented musician with agnosia, Dr. P.—"the man who mistook his wife for a hat"—seemed oblivious to his condition, even when he tried to shake hands with a grandfather clock.) Once, Anna carried off Sacks's medical bag and then realized her mistake. "I am the woman who mistook the doctor's bag for her handbag," she told him, with characteristic self-awareness. During a visit to the supermarket, Sacks dressed in all red so that Anna could recognize him in case they were separated.

Sacks had been ruthlessly bullied at boarding school—"an awful place" in which he was "left to rot"—and his brother developed a frightening form of schizophrenia. A few years later, Sacks came out as gay; his mother called him an "abomination." "Her words haunted me for much of my life," he recalled. But his traumas may have made him alive to the travails of others who felt isolated or alienated. Sacks struggled with addiction, was celibate for decades, and suffered from his own neurological issues, all of which

pulled him closer to his patients. As he wrote, “Anna stood by her door to welcome me, knowing, as she does, my own (congenital) defects of visual and topographic memory, my confusion of left and right, and my inability to find my way around in buildings.”

Wonder and observation propelled not only Sacks’s writing but also his doctoring. He studied how people adapted to their circumstances; he wanted to chronicle even when he couldn’t cure. He understood that writing about patients could be seen as exploitative. “I would hope that a reading of what I write shows respect and appreciation, not any wish to expose or exhibit for the thrill,” he reflected. “But it’s a delicate business.”

In the story’s final scene, Sacks visits Anna, who now depends on her husband’s assistance for basic tasks. Sacks asks her to play a Haydn quartet. Anna needs help finding the piano, and Sacks writes that, at first, she “blundered, hitting wrong notes, and seemed anxious and confused.” But then “she found her place and began to play beautifully, the sound soaring up, melting, twisting into itself.” Even her husband, who is intimately acquainted with her symptoms, seems surprised. Sacks couldn’t have known that the music would return to Anna, but he knew enough to encourage her to try. ♦

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[Read the original story.](#)

## **Shouts & Murmurs**

- [Updated U.S. Customs and Border Protection Questionnaire](#)

Shouts & Murmurs

# Updated U.S. Customs and Border Protection Questionnaire

By Jena Friedman

April 28, 2025



Welcome to the United States of America. As part of our continuing efforts to insure public safety, protect national security, and suppress the free flow of ideas, which are now pretty much illegal (even though ICE deleted its April 10, 2025, social-media infographic explicitly stating so), we at U.S. Customs and Border Protection kindly ask that you fill out the following survey upon reëntry into the Fatherland. (We're assuming you live here, otherwise why on earth would you be visiting the U.S. right now?)

Are you a U.S. citizen?

- A. Yes.
- B. Good, because there's no other option.

What was the purpose of your trip?

- A. Business.

- B.** Pleasure.
- C.** I am one of those insufferable people who always say “Both.”
- D.** I binge-watched all six seasons of “The Handmaid’s Tale” and wanted to get a vibe check before officially seeking asylum.

What is the purpose of your return?

- A.** I live here.
- B.** I’m asking myself this question, too.
- C.** I have a toddler at home, and my partner will leave me if I extend my trip another day.
- D.** All of the above.

While abroad, did you participate in any activities that might be considered seditious, such as:

- A.** A bike ride in a dynamic city with clean air and a functioning infrastructure.
- B.** A meal at a restaurant where the server has health care.
- C.** A concert or other large public gathering, without the palpable fear of getting shot.
- D.** All of the above.

Has your skin cleared up?

- A.** Yes.
- B.** How can you tell?
- C.** Is it because of the water?
- D.** Or is it because not living in a proto-fascist techno-oligarchy does wonders for one’s complexion?

Have you brought back any of the following now banned substances?

- A.** Toothpaste containing fluoride.
- B.** The measles vaccine.
- C.** Any other scientific development from the past seventy years.
- D.** Books, not limited to but including Michelle Obama’s memoir, “*Becoming*.”

Did you really post that photograph of you running with the bulls in Pamplona on Instagram, even though you didn’t technically run with them, since you took off way before the gate was opened?

- A.** Yes.
- B.** How'd you know?
- C.** Oh, I forgot, you don't need a search warrant to go through my phone.
- D.** I would do it again!

Have you ever made fun of politicians?

- A.** Is that a real question?
- B.** Is making fun of politicians illegal now?
- C.** If I say yes, will being detained at the border help my career or just make me late for my spot at the Comedy Cellar?
- D.** Do dick jokes count?

Lastly, we at U.S. Customs and Border Protection value your feedback (until we don't, and then we will arbitrarily disappear you to a prison in El Salvador). If you have any suggestions for how we can improve—aside from not violating the First, Fourth, Fifth, Sixth, and Seventh Amendments, and pretty much the rest of the Constitution—please keep them to yourself. ♦

# Fiction

- [Nocturnal Creatures](#)

Fiction

# Nocturnal Creatures

By Saïd Sayrafiezadeh

April 27, 2025



It's the spring after the bedbug scare has finally abated for good when I pull up in front of the bakery, which I won't name, but it's the one right off Exit 17. This is my last stop of the day and the owner is waiting for me outside, standing in the early-morning darkness, hands on his hips, flour on his apron, white breath coming out of his mouth, saying I was supposed to have been here an hour ago. "Dispatcher told you wrong," I tell him. In situations like these, I always blame it on the dispatcher. But the owner is right, I'm way behind schedule, because I've been crisscrossing the city all night, trying to cover as much territory as I can before dawn, since commercial properties can't be done during business hours—for obvious reasons. Things were better during the bedbug scare, when I was earning a premium for same-day service, and getting nothing but respect from nonprofessionals caught up in a mass panic over the possibility of their property being overrun by vermin.

Now it's going to be daylight soon and the owner is telling me to park down the street. He doesn't care that it's cold outside. He doesn't care how much equipment I have to carry. He cares that customers are going to see me in front of his establishment—and who can blame him? I'm persona non grata. I'm the Grim Reaper. I drive around with the logo of a cartoon rat painted on the side of my truck. "I wish I could," I tell him, "but the dispatcher doesn't let me re-park." The owner understands the implication. He hands me five dollars. It's not enough, but I take it anyway. Ten minutes later, I come walking back to his bakery, weighed down by my tool belt and three-gallon tank filled with state-of-the-art poison.

If I were a different type of person, I would skimp on the service just to prove a point and go home early. But I'm nothing if not thorough. I give him the full treatment: baiting, spraying, plugging. I try my best not to get in his way while he makes his cakes and cookies for the day: stirring, sifting, mixing. The place smells like warm sugar and rising dough. When I open up a bottom cabinet, I see a blueberry pie and half a dozen cockroaches scattering in different directions, as if they know they are doing something wrong. The bedbugs may have finally been eliminated, thanks to Cryonite freezing and high-heat treatment, but cockroaches are here forever. Based on my calculations, for every one that's visible to the naked eye there are ten more hiding somewhere. That's not from science, that's from experience. Sure enough, I find more sitting in an unwashed muffin tin, apparently settling for crumbs in the same way that I settled for five dollars. It's clear to me that they are living freely and without fear of reprisal from the owner, travelling at will up and down the pipes and walls. Without seeing anything more, I'm sure I would be able to map their daily migrations with pinpoint accuracy.

[Read an interview with the author for the story behind the story.](#)

The owner wants to know my assessment. "Your professional opinion," he says. My professional opinion is that he has a major problem, and that he's waited too long to address the situation and is now in over his head. This is the way infestations work: first gradually and then all at once. He will never be able to eradicate. He can only hope to contain. The other option is to demolish the entire bakery and start over from the ground up. But I don't tell

him any of this. Instead, I provide hope by way of a treatment plan, where he keeps paying me and I keep coming back every two weeks.

“Sign here,” I tell him.

It’s light out when I get back to my truck, which I parked five blocks away, in front of an unsuspecting deli. I’m sitting in the front seat, filling out paperwork as fast as I can so that I can get home and go to sleep, when the dispatcher calls, saying that he has one more job for me today, that “it just came through,” that “it won’t take long,” that “it’s a residential.” “I’m done for the day,” I tell him. “It’s a request from the supervisor,” he says. In situations like these, he always blames it on the supervisor. To make matters worse, it’s all the way on the south side of the city, where I haven’t had to go since the bedbug scare, and by the time I slog through rush-hour traffic it’s past eight o’clock and sunshine is streaming through my windshield, never mind that it’s supposed to be my bedtime. *A.M.* is the new *P.M.*

Unlike at the bakery, I’m able to pull right up to the curb, no questions asked, ten feet from the apartment building, with its manicured hedges and its freshly painted purple trim. But I can tell right away that this is street-level artifice, courtesy of a lazy landlord. The foyer inside is a more accurate indicator of the building’s upkeep, namely dereliction of duty, beginning with broken buzzers, scattered restaurant menus, and mailboxes with the names of current tenants written over the names of former tenants. I press buzzer 4—if buzzer 4 even works—Armstrong/Abernathy. No doubt a married couple in crisis at eight o’clock on a weekday morning. But I’m wrong about the buzzer being broken, and the front door immediately clicks open for me. I can see a woman standing at the far end of the hallway, half in shadow because the light bulb needs to be replaced. She looks old, and then she looks young, and then she looks about my age, thirty or so, with long dark hair that has a few streaks of gray. She’s in her bare feet and I’m in my work boots, my footsteps echoing down the hallway, making me feel self-conscious and foreboding.

“Thank you for coming,” she says. She sounds stressed. She sounds like we’re about to walk inside her apartment and see a family of mice eating breakfast off the kitchen table. Instead, there’s a little boy sitting there, with

a bowl of cereal, his legs crossed under him. He has his mom's cheekbones and the blond hair of his dad, who isn't home.

"What am I here for today?" I ask. "Unicorns? Werewolves?" This is my way of easing tension with civilians.

The boy looks up at me with his spoon in his hand. "This isn't 'Harry Potter,'" he says.

He's somewhere between five and ten. If he's five, he's big for his age. If he's ten, he's underdeveloped. Either way, he's already jaded.

### **Podcast: The Writer's Voice**

[Listen to Saïd Sayrafiezadeh read "Nocturnal Creatures."](#)

Springtime sunshine is coming through the double exposure of the living room, casting big blocks of natural light across the walls and over a couch that's piled with blankets and sheets, because today must be laundry day. Other than the sunlight, there's not much to recommend this apartment, with its fake-wood panelling and its worn-out carpeting—but I could have predicted that from the mailboxes. According to the boy's mom, they moved into the apartment about two weeks ago, coming from the west side of the city, and she's trying to take precautionary measures before things get too out of hand. In other words, she's doing what the owner of the bakery should have done five years ago.

But, despite the condition of the apartment, I can't find anything. I can't even find any sign of anything. I look everywhere—under the sink, along the baseboards, behind the outdated appliances from G.E.

"What about there?" the mom says. She points to a crack in the ceiling.

"That's concrete substrate," I say.

She's relieved to hear this. "Thank you," she says, as if I'd chosen the material.

I'm aware that I'm showing off a little bit in lieu of the absent husband, being extra attentive, extra informative. I find no trace of anything in the

bathroom, either. There's mascara for the mom, and bubble-gum-flavored toothpaste for the boy, and a shampoo bottle sitting on top of the bathtub drain like a manhole cover.

"What's that for?" I ask her.

"So they can't get in," she says.

"That's a closed system," I say.

She's relieved to hear this, too.

She follows me into the boy's bedroom, which is covered with posters from the N.F.L., past and present stars. Lamar Jackson. Patrick Mahomes. Terry Bradshaw from forty years ago. Her son might not care about "Harry Potter," but he cares about football. I spray around the perimeter, even though there's no need. I'm giving her peace of mind. Besides, the landlord is paying for everything.

Back in the living room, the sunlight is already fading—the double exposure losing its potency, the apartment looking more like the foyer. The boy is still sitting at the table with the bowl of cereal that he hasn't finished eating. He's staring at me and my three-gallon tank filled with poison.

"What's in there?" he asks me.

"Pyrethrins and pyrethroids," I say.

He shrugs. He sticks his spoon in his cereal and comes up empty.

"Eat your breakfast," his mom tells him.

I realize I've been mistaken about a number of things. I see now that she's a single mother, that this is a one-bedroom apartment, and that the couch in the living room doubles as her bed at night, which explains why it's piled with folded sheets and blankets.

In any case, all I can find is a dozen gnats flying around a bowl of fruit.

“If you wash your fruit you won’t have gnats,” I tell her.

“Is that so?” she says. She sounds impressed. She hands me five dollars that she can’t afford.

“No, thank you,” I say.

“Take it,” she says. She presses it into my hand. Her nails are painted blue.

“Dispatcher doesn’t let me accept gratuities,” I tell her.

Two weeks later, I have to drive back across town to treat the apartment again, which surprises me. What did I overlook the first time? What did I not understand? It’s overcast and the gray sky is making me sleepy, making me feel like it’s already dusk when it’s barely morning, and I have to pull over at a coffee shop that I won’t name but which I know for a fact has rats in the basement. The caffeine kicks in right away, and I’m energized and ready to go, ready to rescue a single mother and her son, to do for them what was never done for me and my single mother all those years ago, when the two of us were living together in a sequence of apartments that were not so dissimilar to the apartment on the south side with its fake-wood panelling and its worn-out carpeting and its constant threat of invasion.

Where my deadbeat dad was I never knew. He was so completely out of my life that I hardly ever thought about him except when he called me on my birthday, trying to catch up on the past twelve months in fifteen minutes or less, both of us affecting a forced bonhomie, as if we were buddies from way back. “Take care of your mother,” he would tell me, before hanging up. I remember being in a moving van one night, eight years old probably, crossing a bridge over some railroad tracks, all our possessions in the back, including a potted plant that my mother hadn’t wanted to leave behind. We were coming from the east side of the city, heading to the west side. It was raining and it was dark and my mother couldn’t figure out how to turn on the windshield wipers. She was driving slowly, below the speed limit, leaning forward in her seat, trying to peer through the window. She looked old and confused, when really she was young and confused. People were honking with rage and trying to pass her on the left and the right. “Bitch!” they yelled. We pretended we didn’t hear. We pretended everything was normal.

Finally, I reached across the dashboard, and whether through luck or innate knowledge I flicked a lever and the windshield wipers came on full blast.

I could see the lights of our new neighborhood from the bridge, specifically a sign for Costco glowing red in the rain.

“Look,” I said. “They even have a Costco here.”

“Yes,” she cooed. “They have everything.”

When I pull up in front of the apartment building, I’m still flying high from the cup of coffee, but on the outside I look ragged from the overnight shift, with my hair matted and my eyes encircled with dark rings. Plus I have a hole in my pants from crawling around on the floor a week ago at a fast-casual with an infestation, trying to locate where the enemy was coming from. I’ve been hoping to get reimbursed from my annual clothing allowance, but the dispatcher is giving me a hard time, making me fill out paperwork in triplicate, document where, when, why. “It’s company policy,” he tells me. Whenever he wants to get out of having to live up to his end of the bargain, he blames it on company policy. In the meantime, I drove downtown to the Bass Pro Shop on my day off so that I could buy a pair of Carhartt utility work pants, with the hammer loops and knee-pad slots, which have been sitting in my truck ever since, and which I decide to change into now, right now, boots off, boxers on, three minutes of contorting myself in the front seat so that I can look halfway decent for a single mother.

But only the boy is home today. He’s sitting at the kitchen table again. He’s smaller than I remember and his eyes seem bigger. He looks like he’s been waiting for me.

“What am I here for today?” I ask him.

“Unicorns,” he says. I appreciate the humor.

“The ones with crystal horns?”

He has no answer for this. He hasn’t thought it through.

I take my time getting my equipment ready, checking and double-checking, because I'm trying to stall until his mom gets home. He follows me into the bedroom with the football posters on the walls. I still can't find any trace of anything.

"Are you going to play in the N.F.L. when you grow up?" I ask him.

He nods.

"Quarterback?" I say.

"Right tackle," he says.

I can't tell if this is another joke. Who dreams about growing up to be a right tackle? That's the consolation prize for not having what it takes to be a star.

"Where's your mother?" I ask him point-blank.

"Why?" he says.

"The dispatcher needs her to sign the forms," I say. He's staring at me. I think he knows that I'm lying.

I go into the kitchen and the boy stands in the doorway, watching me work. "No unicorns here," I tell him, but the coffee is beginning to wear off and I'm having a hard time keeping up the banter. I have the sense that I've been summoned to the apartment under false pretenses. Perhaps the boy just wanted me to come back. Basically, I'm babysitting at ten in the morning. Ten in the morning is the new midnight.

There's a loaf of bread sitting on the countertop and he asks me if I can hand it to him. He wants the peanut butter, too. He wants a glass of milk. He's hungry, but he's too nervous to come into the kitchen. I assume he's haunted by bad memories of apartments past. So I put down my three-gallon tank and I make him a peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich, extra peanut butter, because if he wants to have any chance of making it to the N.F.L. he's going to need to start gaining weight today.

"Who dreams about growing up to be an offensive lineman?" I ask him.

He shrugs. “Who dreams about growing up to be an exterminator?”

He has a point, I suppose. “Natural aptitude,” I tell him. He doesn’t know what those words mean. He has grape jelly all over his mouth. The truth is I got an eighty-nine on the written exam and the dispatcher told me I could start the following Monday, working nights and weekends. This was long before the bedbug scare.

I can see that his mom has taken my advice and washed the bowl of fruit. There aren’t any gnats flying around. I hand the boy a banana.

“Keep eating,” I tell him.

Two weeks later, I happen to be driving through the south side of town on my day off and I decide to stop by the apartment again to make sure I didn’t overlook anything on my second visit, because I’m nothing if not thorough. This time the mom is home and her son is in his bedroom playing Madden NFL on his Xbox. From the apartment’s doorway, I can hear the low roar of a simulated crowd and him yelling at the television when things don’t go his way.

“I appreciate you following up,” she says.

“Company policy,” I tell her.



It's six o'clock and she's just got home from work. She's wearing a blue skirt to match her blue nails, and her brown hair is pulled back, accentuating her cheekbones. She can probably tell that the reason for my visit is complete bullshit, considering I'm dressed in slacks and a sweater and I didn't bring any equipment with me, except for a dozen glue traps in my back pocket. I'm in the hallway, half in shadow, because the light bulb still hasn't been replaced, the smell of dinner wafting over from the neighboring apartments. She's listening as I explain moisture control and garbage disposal, going on about things that are fairly straightforward, trying to make them sound more complicated than they are, while her son shouts at the football players. By the way, I tell her, I wanted to drop these off, these glue traps, I forgot to bring them the first time, and also the second time, and she should put them in the corners of the apartment and leave them there for a month. By the way, I say again, I was planning on getting some dinner and does she happen to know a good restaurant nearby. No, she only knows the grocery store and the 7-Eleven. In that case, there's a TGI Fridays that's right off Exit 4, and right when I have finally worked up the nerve to ask her out the landlord appears at the end of the hallway, suit, no tie, his leather shoes barely making any sound on the floor as he walks toward us.

"What are you doing here?" he asks me. He's put off. He's looking me up and down.

“I’m the exterminator,” I tell him.

“He’s my friend,” the mom says.

“The *exterminator* is your friend?” the landlord says.

“What’s it to you?” she says. She’s staring at him hard and he’s staring at me hard. He isn’t sure what he’s supposed to believe. I show him my I.D., from nine years ago, after I passed the exam. That was when I still had a full head of hair.

“How many more times are you going to be coming here?” he wants to know.

“Until the problem is solved,” she says. I get the sense that she has a history of bickering with landlords and that her time renting this apartment might be brief.

“I’ve already paid for this twice,” the landlord says. He doesn’t want to see my truck parked in front of his building again. He’s the kind of landlord who micromanages his tenants but can’t be bothered to pick up the junk mail in the foyer.

“Worry about fixing the concrete substrate,” she says.

“Fix the *what*?” he says.

The boy has lost the football game and we can hear him screaming in anguish in his bedroom. “No!” comes a cry of despair. “No, no, no . . .”

“Your son makes too much noise,” the landlord says.

It’s dark when the three of us get into my truck: me, her, her son. We have to sit together in the front seat because there is no back seat, her son in the middle, his feet dangling and his knee pressed against mine. He’s excited about riding in a truck that has a logo of a cartoon rat painted on the side, as if we’re driving in Disneyland. It’s free advertising for the company and free transportation for me; plus I get a gas allowance of up to three hundred miles per week if I fill out the paperwork correctly.

The son is also excited about investigating my tool belt on the dashboard. “Be careful,” his mom tells him. “That’s poisonous.”

He doesn’t care. “What’s this?” he wants to know.

“Bait tip,” I tell him.

What’s this? What’s that? We go down the list.

“Snap trap.”

“Probing tool.”

Ooh, he’s engrossed.

He’s wearing a pair of my latex gloves, five times too big for his hands. They come up to his elbows. He looks as if he works in a nuclear power plant.

“Can I keep these?” he asks me.

“You can keep the snap traps, too,” I tell him. I can smell his mom’s perfume mixing with the faint scent of pesticides.

When we get to TGI Fridays, I do what I always do: I park in front of Applebee’s. Then we walk through the shopping center, the boy holding his mom’s hand with his latex glove, his mom’s shoulder brushing against mine, but I think that might be inadvertent. It’s spring and it’s getting warm. It’s night and it feels like morning. It’s dinnertime and I’m ready for breakfast.

The hostess seats us in a booth in the back, underneath a sign that reads “Where it’s always Friday.” Friday I go back to work.

“I could do that job,” the mom says. She’s talking about the hostess.

I tell them that I know for a fact that the TGI Fridays is clean, no trace of anything. That’s the reason I come here to eat. “They only have flies,” I say.

We study the menu. The mom can't decide between the chicken and the other chicken. Her son has already chosen the baby back ribs.

"Don't be presumptuous," she tells him. She points him to the children's menu—hot dogs, mac and cheese, French fries.

"Order whatever you want," I tell him. I still have money left over from the bedbug scare, back when I was working seven days a week, inspecting movie theatres and hotel rooms and college dorms, you name it. "Get while the getting's good," my dispatcher would counsel. I did my part to help fan the flames of fear during the reign of terror by casually mentioning a few choice details about the biology of a bedbug, disturbing but true. How they live for as long as a year. How they lay more than two hundred eggs. How they feed on blood. It was this last one—"They drink blood"—that always got proprietors to sign on the dotted line.

While we're waiting, the mom wonders if TGI Fridays might be hiring. "I could do that job," she says. She's talking about our waitress. She wants a job that will give her time for painting. I assume she means house-painting. She thinks I'm being funny. "You're silly," she says. She means fine art, which she studied in college, but that was a long time ago.

"Things happen," she says. She's referring to her son. She's referring to divorce.

In the meantime, she keeps her paintings in a storage unit on the north side of the city. Watercolors, she says, also pastels. I pretend I know the difference.

"Be careful about silverfish," I tell her. That's my area of expertise, of course.

She appreciates this. "Maybe you can see my paintings one day," she says. I'm wondering how far in the future that might be. I'm not used to planning beyond biweekly.

Her son wants to know what silverfish are and if they come from the ocean.

“No,” I say. “But they do have scales.” That’s a fun fact. He likes this. I give him the bullet points of the silverfish life cycle, which includes eating paint and canvas.

“Are you afraid of them?” he asks me.

“I’m a professional,” I say.

“What about rats?” he says.

“We’re in a restaurant,” his mom says.

“What about scorpions?” He has vermin on his mind. He’s trying to find my weak spot. Snakes, spiders, mosquitoes.

“What about bees?” his mom wants to know. She’s caught up in the spirit now. She tells a story about having been chased by bees at a picnic. Three bees, then five, then ten. She ran screaming into a porta-potty. That was when she lived on the east side of town, which was before she lived on the west side of town. I can’t keep the chronology straight.

“Do you remember that?” she asks her son. He doesn’t remember that. I wonder if his deadbeat dad was at this picnic.

Naturally the conversation moves to the bedbug scare and how long ago it seems and how she was lucky to never have had them—even though she thought she had them, but she didn’t. I tell them about the Cryonite freezing and the high-heat treatment and the bedbug-sniffing dog that belongs to the dispatcher.

“Maybe you can meet him one day,” I say to the boy, meaning the dog. I wonder how far in the future that day might be and if it will come before or after I see his mom’s paintings.

“Do you mean it?” the boy says.

I think I mean it.

Two weeks later, I drive downtown to Dick's Sporting Goods to buy a football, genuine leather with rubber laces, and then the three of us walk over to the neighborhood park, where her son has never been because he hasn't made friends yet. It's early afternoon and I should be asleep. When the boy throws me the football, it wobbles and falls ten feet in front of me. It's clear that he has never thrown a football before. I show him how to do it. "Your fingers go here," I tell him. "Your thumb goes there." His hand can barely fit around the ball. "Try again," I say. I give him a wide target. He can't aim straight. He can't generate velocity. He's getting frustrated and he's only thrown the ball twice. "This is how you get better," his mom says. "This is how you make the N.F.L.," I say. He doesn't want instruction. He doesn't want life lessons. He wants to be great *right now*. I wonder if the time when his natural aptitude could have been recognized and nurtured has passed. It takes fifteen minutes for him to finally get the football to me, and then I toss it over to his mom, and she tosses it to him, and we go back and forth like that for a while, standing in a triangle, spaced evenly apart, amid the springtime flowers and trees and hedges of the neighborhood park. But I know there's a rat problem here. I can tell by the three-inch holes in the ground, which no one else would notice. If we came back at dusk, we might think that the place was being overrun by squirrels.

It turns out I'm wrong and her son is a surprisingly fast learner. We're standing even farther apart now, and he's beginning to throw the football with some zip, making me think that maybe there is hope for him after all, that maybe he won't have to settle for offensive lineman. As for me, I'm cramping up and breathing hard, which is what happens when you carry around low-level fatigue from working nights.

"Catch it!" he shouts, but it's getting late. Plus my shift starts soon.

And it's when we're heading back to the apartment that he suddenly, and without any warning, puts his hand in mine. It's such an unexpected gesture that I don't have time to prepare. His hand feels even smaller than it looks, like the hand of a doll. The impulse to pull away flits through my mind, but pulling away feels indefensible. In the distance, I can see my truck parked across the street from his apartment building.

Two weeks later, I'm sitting on the edge of the boy's bed, playing Madden NFL on his Xbox. It's the time of day when the apartment looks the least run-down. Sunlight is coming through the window and there's a long shadow being cast across the wall on Lamar Jackson and Patrick Mahomes and all the other football greats staring down at us. When it comes to video games, the boy is already a professional. He doesn't need athletic ability, he just needs exceptional hand-eye coördination with a controller. "Push this," he tells me. "Push that." I can't keep the buttons straight. Now it's my turn to be frustrated. The graphics are high end, the players look like they're alive, the announcers announce as if it were a real game—but I can barely run or throw. I might as well be having one of those dreams where I have lost control of my body. Within a few minutes, he's beating me by three touchdowns. But he's not just winning, he's winning with finesse and style. He spins, he leaps, he stiff-arms me. When he scores, he dances in the end zone. "What buttons do you push to do that?" I ask him. According to him, this isn't even the best version of Madden NFL. "The best version is the latest version," he says. I tell myself that I'll drive back down to GameStop and buy the latest version. If the boy doesn't end up making it to the N.F.L., he'll at least make it to e-sports.

It's not until some point in the third quarter that—through luck or skill—I happen to press the right sequence of buttons and finally score a touchdown. I'm screaming and shouting. "What's the matter?" his mom calls. "What's happened?" I'm jumping up and down on the boy's bed. The boy is jumping with me. If I jump any higher, I'll bang my head on the ceiling. I'm sweating more from playing the video game than I was from playing catch in the park. I can hear his mother calling again, "What happened? What's the matter?"

No, it's not his mother calling; it's the landlord, who's come back. He's had enough of her. He's had enough of the noise. He's standing in the hallway, in the dim light, dressed in his suit, no tie.

"Why don't you move your truck?" He's staring at me.

"Why don't you change the light bulb?" she asks him.

He's already had the papers drawn up. But she's not going to go down without a fight.

“You’ll be hearing from my lawyer,” she says.

“Is your friend a lawyer, too?” he says.

I knew she wasn’t going to be renting this apartment for long. Where she’s going to go next she doesn’t know. “I’ll figure it out,” she says. I’m not so sure. She’s already lived on every side of the city, east, west, north, south. She says maybe the next stop is for her to pack up and leave for good. She doesn’t *want* to, but she might have to. “I’m not getting any younger,” she says. She’s speaking rhetorically, of course.

I have a house that’s almost paid off, thanks to the bedbugs. I have a basement for her paintings. I have a back yard for her son. But I don’t say any of this out loud, I only think it. I’m still thinking it when we’re in bed that night, the bed that doubles as a couch during the daylight hours, and isn’t built for two. I have a king-size bed that could fit us both. I have a living room where her son could play Madden NFL. I’m staring into the darkness that’s so familiar to me from working nights all these years, making my rounds in two-week increments. Everything’s silent, everything’s still. My arm’s around her and her hair is in my face and the scent of her shampoo is mixing with the scent of pesticides that I can’t ever seem to wash off. The summer is coming. The termites are coming, too. The termites are going to be worse than the bedbugs. Just the other day, the dispatcher told me there had been an uptick in complaints. “Get while the getting’s good,” he said. Soon I’ll be working overtime again, charging a premium for same-day service, using Termidor liquid and Sentricon bait, and helping to fan the flames of fear. I’ll probably come back to this apartment building one day, long after she and her son are gone, the landlord terrified of what the termite-ridden future holds for him, treating me with nothing but respect, letting bygones be bygones, tipping me five dollars so that I’ll park my truck down the street.

And that’s when I hear it—a faint scratching from somewhere behind one of the walls. She must have heard it, too. She’s suddenly upright in bed. “What is that?” she says. Her eyes wide, her hair wild, her nightgown tangled. She’s looking around in a panic, following the sound of the claws up and down. I guess she was right to have been suspicious all along. I guess she was right to have taken precautions. Her son has come into the living room,

in his underwear, his thin frame in the dark light. No, he's never going to make the N.F.L. "What is it?" he wants to know. "A dragon," I tell him. But they're past fun and games. This is the real world. This is the here and now. What they want to know is what's going to happen next. They're looking at me and I'm looking at the wall. The clawing is soft, but growing louder. It's not a mouse. It's worse than a mouse. It's not one, but *many*. I know where they're coming from and I know which way they will go. The secret to being an exterminator is to think like they do. That's what makes me so good at my job. Whenever I show up at a new location, I take everything into account, the walls, the floors, the ceilings. I always say to myself, What would I do if I were one of them? Where would I run? Where would I hide? ♦

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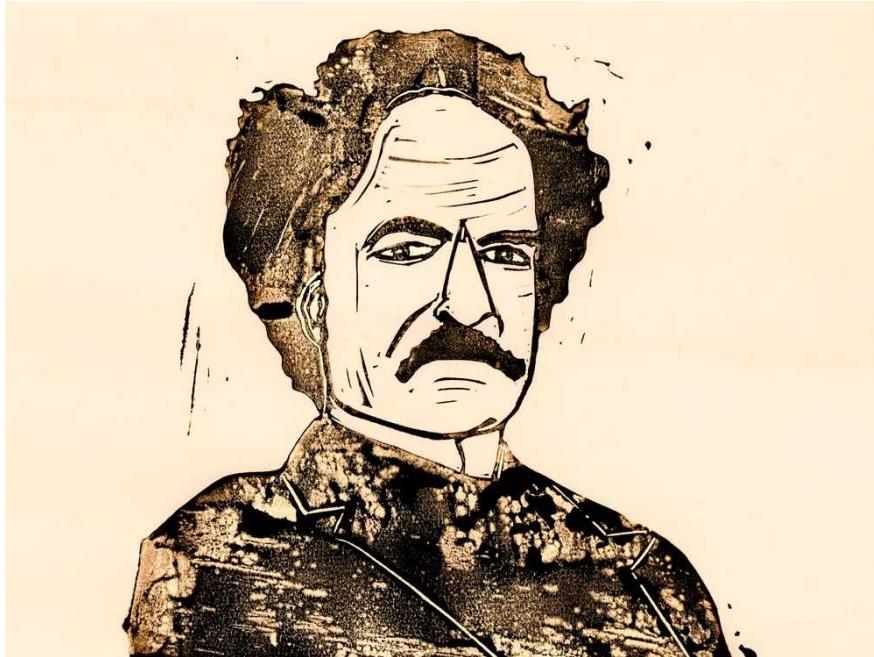
Books

# The Impossible Contradictions of Mark Twain

Populist and patrician, hustler and moralist, salesman and satirist, he embodied the tensions within his America, and ours.

**By Lauren Michele Jackson**

April 28, 2025



America sees itself in a young boy who learns—but not too much—and whose story ends with his eyes on an open horizon, a stretch of land claimed by the nation but not yet bound to it. That's where, in the collective imagination, he remains. Even his creator believed that following the boy into adulthood would ruin the image. And yet he once imagined doing just that, laying [Huckleberry Finn](#) to rest alongside his companion:

Huck comes back, 60 years old, from nobody knows where—& crazy. Thinks he is a boy again, & scans always every face for Tom & Becky &c. Tom comes, at last, 60 from wandering the world & tends Huck, & together they talk the old times; both are desolate, life has been a

failure, all that was lovable, all that was beautiful is under the mould.  
They die together.

Mark Twain scribbled this fragment in a journal around 1891, just a few years shy of sixty himself. The contemplated sequel was never written. But much of what Twain did publish around this time is no less dispiriting. “I have started Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer (still 15 years old) & their friend the freed slave Jim around the world in a stray *balloon*, with Huck as narrator,” he told a publisher, saying he’d written twelve thousand words and promising “additional parts without delay” if “numbers” proved favorable. The work, “[Tom Sawyer Abroad](#)” (1894), begins, “Do you reckon Tom Sawyer was satisfied after all them adventures? . . . No, he wasn’t. It only just p’isoned him for more.”

The “why” behind that book—and such kindred endeavors as “[Tom Sawyer, Detective](#)” (1896)—speaks to the “who” of Samuel Clemens. By then, he had fashioned himself into an avatar of the age: Mark Twain, world-famous and wildly prolific. Just as “[Uncle Tom’s Cabin](#)” and “[Little Women](#)” turned fiction into franchise, Twain turned [authorship into celebrity](#), and celebrity into product. He hawked his name as tirelessly as he did his prose, feeding the same ravenous machine that makes and breaks men in equal measure—though with returns that dwindled over time.

Even when he was at the height of his literary powers, the title “businessman” might have suited Twain better than “author.” Not that avidity bred success. His cigars weren’t as nasty as his habit of chasing bad money with worse—high living and foolish investments, with second-rate writing meant to plug the gap. The speculator fell into debt; the author bailed him out. So the cycle went. That restlessness was the most American thing about him. Success came in flashes, each one poisoning him for more.

He left behind not just a mountain of material but a life already mythologized. Books, aborted manuscripts, letters, interviews, journals, thousands of magazine and newspaper pieces—it would be a biographer’s dream, if only the subject hadn’t got there first. Twain understood himself as an archive in progress, shaping his persona through constant revisions of his past. “Somebody may be reading *this* letter 80 years hence,” he wrote to Joseph Twichell in 1880. “And so, my friend (you pitying snob, I mean, who

are holding this yellow paper in your hand in 1960,) save yourself the trouble of looking further. . . . No, I keep my news; you keep your compassion.”

Nevertheless, pitying snobs abound. Scholars of all stripes have catalogued, republished, fact-checked, and reconstructed Twain for more than a century. “Perhaps no other American author can boast such a richly documented record,” Ron Chernow writes in “[Mark Twain](#)” (Penguin Press), turning his distinguished attention to the subject in a mighty tome—some twelve hundred pages, with notes. No justification is needed for retracing a figure we never stopped talking about, although, for all its heft, this latest treatment adds little that’s substantively new. “Mark Twain’s foremost creation—his richest and most complex gift to posterity—may well have been his own inimitable personality, the largest literary personality that America has produced,” Chernow writes. Fair enough. The boy drifted downstream; the man stayed behind, waving from the shore in impeccable linen.

Samuel Langhorne Clemens arrived with Halley’s Comet—that dirty snowball which flares up when it nears the sun—on November 30, 1835. An older brother had already been named Orion; the cosmos was apparently a family fixation. Sam, the sixth of the Clemens children, was premature, and, according to his mother, a “poor looking object”—an inauspicious début, especially for someone born into a family that specialized in delusions of grandeur.

Sam’s parents were the discount-rack version of Southern aristocracy. Both came from slaveholding families with money, though his father, John Marshall Clemens, had the business instincts of a turnip. He compensated with constant reminders of some dubious tie to the “First Families of Virginia.” By the time Sam was born—in Florida, Missouri—the family’s enslaved property had dwindled to a single nursemaid, Jennie. When he was four, the family settled in Hannibal, Missouri, a river town on the west bank of the Mississippi.

In the recollections of its most famous son, the sleepy white hamlet of Hannibal—roused twice daily by a Black voice calling “S-t-e-a-m-boat a-comin’!”—becomes an idyll inseparable from the mystique of boyhood. “Everybody was poor, but didn’t know it; and everybody was comfortable,

and did know it," Twain wrote in his autobiography. Hannibal, he claimed, "was a little democracy which was full of liberty, equality, and Fourth of July," combined with an "aristocratic taint." He added, "I suppose that this state of things was mainly due to the circumstance that the town's population had come from slave states and still had the institution of slavery with them in their new home." Still, he reassures us, it was "the mild domestic slavery, not that brutal plantation article."



In fact, the Clemens family knew exactly how poor they were. John Clemens, having once assumed a county judgeship, invariably styled himself Judge Clemens, but his commercial failures kept piling up. Nor was domestic slavery of an altogether different order. When Jennie resisted her mistress's abuse, Judge Clemens responded by whipping her with a bridle. According to Twain, Jennie then begged to be sold downriver, having been sweet-talked into it by a local slave trader, William Beebe. Needing the money, the Clemens family complied, though it was "a sore trial," Twain wrote, "for the woman was almost like one of the family." That "almost" does heavy lifting. Today, if you find yourself in the vicinity of Hannibal, you can pay around two hundred dollars a night to sleep in "Jenny's Room" at the Belvedere Inn. The inn's website describes her as "the dear slave that Mark Twain's family 'lost' to William Beebe in 1840." Not to worry: "today, this room is an oasis of serenity with a huge king-sized black metal bed."

Young Sam Clemens—Little Sam, to neighbors and family—didn’t just grow up around slavery; he grew up steeped in Black culture. Summers spent at the homestead of his uncle John Quarles gave him full access to the “negro quarter,” with its songs, superstitions, and lore. These experiences left their mark—especially the tales of an older enslaved man he called Uncle Dan’l, whose hearthsider ghost stories stirred in Sam a “creepy joy.”

Knowing what he created from this enchantment, one may be tempted to credit Little Sam with a racial enlightenment, a notion that Twain disavowed. (“In my schoolboy days I had no aversion to slavery,” he recalled.) Chernow himself succumbs to the temptation. “Due to prolonged exposure to slavery at the Quarleses’ farm,” he writes, “Twain had a fondness for Black people that didn’t stem from polite tolerance or enforced familiarity.” That’s a misreading of Southern racial dynamics, where intimacy and domination were bound together like strands of rope. Twain, looking back with sharper eyes, acknowledged the unbridgeable distance: “We were comrades, and yet not comrades; color and condition interposed a subtle line which both parties were conscious of.”

The earliest known photograph of Samuel Clemens, taken in 1850, around his fifteenth birthday, shows a boy in a shirt and tie, holding a printer’s composing stick set with the letters “SAM.” It’s a modest image, marking his shift from printer’s devil to typesetter. Chernow, with a fortune-teller’s fondness for physiognomy, detects “a turbulent gaze,” evidence of “a tough, hardheaded practicality” destined for success. Or maybe it’s just a teen-ager trying not to blink.

Orion merged two papers into the Hannibal *Journal*; Sam soon joined him, typesetting and contributing the occasional piece, which led to scattered publications in larger outlets. Early columns hold a faint charge of the voice that would become Mark Twain’s. In one piece, he took a swipe at coastal condescension: “Your Eastern people seem to think this country is a barren, uncultivated region, with a population consisting of heathens.” He wasn’t yet Mark Twain, but the borders of American literary geography were already beginning to shift. By 1853, the seventeen-year-old Sam had bolted East, ending up in New York, then Philadelphia. In a letter home, Sam complained that the East was too ethnic, too abolitionist, and too dark for his taste. He still had one foot in Hannibal.

In 1857, Sam stumbled into the job that would shape his identity. Aboard a southbound steamboat—part of some half-baked scheme involving the Amazon River and coca—he met a pilot who offered to teach him, for a fee, the “wonderful science” of river navigation. Sam signed on, and between steering and spinning yarns with his fellow-rivermen he expanded his reading far beyond the boyhood canon of “Robin Hood,” “Robinson Crusoe,” and “The Arabian Nights.” Now it was [John Milton](#), [Thomas Paine](#), Sir Walter Scott, and [Shakespeare](#). His journals show him collecting material like a magpie—speech, scenes, characters. During this time, he also picked up his pen name: “mark twain,” riverboat slang for a depth of twelve feet, meaning safe, navigable water.

Then came the Civil War, which sank the steamboat trade and split the Clemens family down the middle. Twain’s war record was brief enough to fit on a cocktail napkin: he joined the Missouri State Guard for two weeks, then bailed. (“I knew more about retreating than the man who invented retreating,” he wrote later.) Rather than fight over slavery, he headed West, to a different kind of chaos—a raw frontier full of men who, like him, were “smitten with the silver fever.”

In Virginia City, Nevada, Sam Clemens found his groove as a newspaperman; calling him a “journalist,” though, might be a stretch. The papers typically had a casual relationship with facts, and Sam delighted in testing how far he could push things. One of his first pieces for the *Territorial Enterprise*, dated October 1, 1862, included a complete fabrication: a wagon put “through an Indian fight that to this day has no parallel in history,” as he later recalled in “[Roughing It](#)” (1872). Reading it in print the next morning, he had an epiphany: “I felt that I had found my legitimate occupation at last.”

By twenty-six, Sam was fully formed—auburn hair, a mustache, and a wardrobe permanently under siege from smoke, whiskey, and the grime of vagabond living. He covered everything, including crime, theatre (“got the merest passing glimpse of play and opera, and with that for a text we ‘wrote up’ those plays and operas,” he later recounted), politicians (“dust-licking pimps and slaves of the scum”), and the mistreatment of Chinese immigrants. His restlessness, his distaste for corrupt and abusive authorities, and his knack for provoking rival journalists had eventually made Virginia

City too hot to hold him. In 1864, he relocated to San Francisco, where he placed work in the *Golden Era* and the *Californian*—high-toned publications that raised him beyond the category of newspaper hack and toward something recognizably literary.

The West gave him what he needed, but staying longer might have killed him—if not by any of the countless ways the frontier could, then perhaps by his own hand, during one of the depressive spells that sometimes took hold. When Sam set sail for New York from San Francisco, on December 15, 1866, he'd been Mark Twain for more than three years—on the page and, increasingly, in person. He was already angling for a place in New York's literary scene, aided by friendships with established humorists like [Bret Harte](#) and Artemus Ward, who helped shop his work to Eastern editors.

But Twain was outgrowing his mentors. That fall, he'd barnstormed through gold-rush towns, delivering what were loosely called lectures—essentially, standup sets about his travels. Twain was a careful writer posing as a casual talker. The boy who had once listened to enslaved storytellers had become a virtuoso yarn-spinner. Comic monologues paid better than journalism, “and there was less work connected with it,” he later observed. Besides, laughter “was a heavenly sound to me,” he wrote.

The East promised that trifecta writers crave but rarely name outright: money, renown, and prestige, in shifting proportion. New York was no cultural capital when Twain arrived in 1867, and that suited his hustle. As a lecturer, he found a place in the city’s public life; as a correspondent he filed dispatches for various high-profile newspapers. A book was the next step. That year, he published a collection anchored by his story “The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County,” and although the book was politely received, its sales were modest—a success he found vaguely humiliating. The breakthrough came soon after, with a roving assignment aboard the Quaker City, a steamship bound for Palestine. Twain chronicled excursions inland from the Mediterranean to Paris and Rome. Gimlet-eyed about the world’s supposed wonders—Parisians and sacred sites alike—his letters found their form in a second book, which appeared in 1869, titled “[The Innocents Abroad, or, The New Pilgrim’s Progress](#).” It was a best-seller, a sensation, and the moment Twain’s voice became not just recognizable but indispensable.

A best-seller wasn't the only thing that came of the Quaker City cruise. When a fellow-passenger, Charles Langdon, showed Twain a miniature portrait of his twenty-one-year-old sister, Olivia, he was smitten. "To labor to secure the world's praise, or its blame either," he later wrote, "seems stale, flat, & unprofitable compared with the happiness of achieving the praise or the abuse of so dear a friend as a wife." Livy, as he called her, came from a prominent East Coast abolitionist family—cultured, affluent, religious, and wary of the brash humorist now vying for their daughter. Twain pressed his case and finally won their approval. The pair were married in February, 1870.

Within two years, Hartford, Connecticut—where Livy had connections—was his home and his base of operations. The marriage offered Twain not just intimacy but infrastructure: Livy became his editor, his conscience, and his entrée into circles he once mocked. Their thirty-four-year marriage would produce three daughters and a son, who died in infancy. Even as Twain's home life stabilized, his literary ambitions grew. In 1875, *The Atlantic* ran the first installment of what became "[Life on the Mississippi](#)" (1883). The piece impressed John Hay, Lincoln's former secretary and a future Secretary of State, who was reared just upriver from Hannibal. "I knew all that, every word of it," Hay wrote to Twain. "But I could not have remembered one word of it all. You have the two greatest gifts of the writer, memory and imagination."

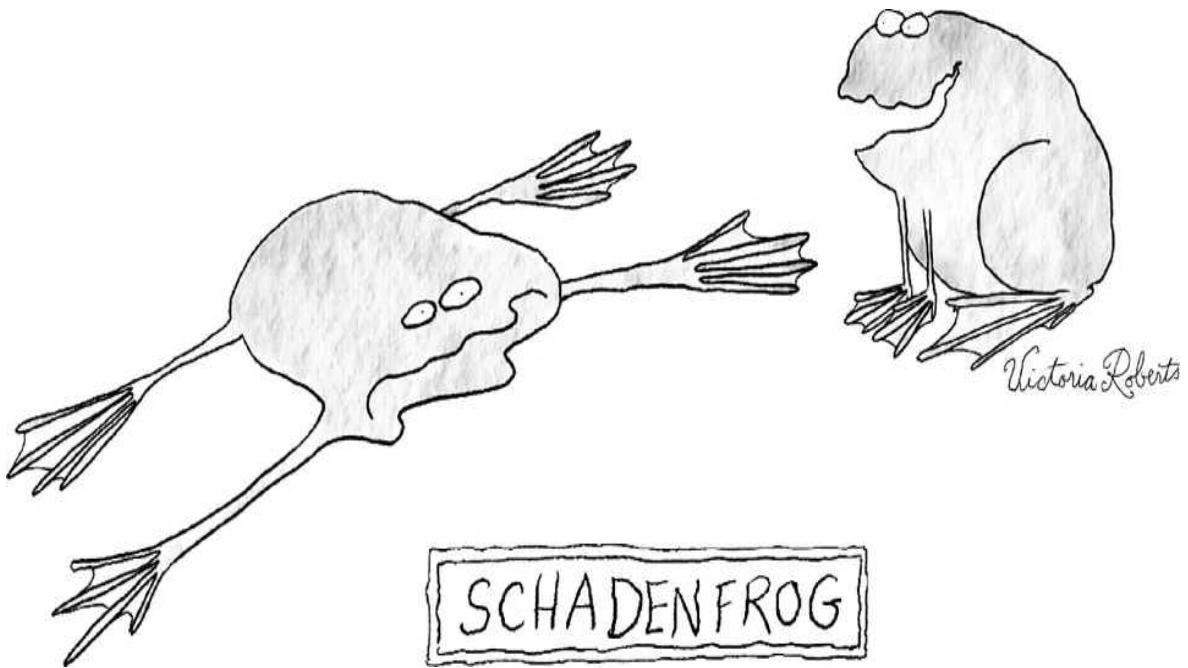
When the words were flowing, he hardly noticed the effort—a sure sign they'd dry up eventually. "As long as a book would write itself," he admitted, "I was a faithful and interested amanuensis, and my industry did not flag; but the minute that the book tried to shift to my head the labor of contriving its situations, inventing its adventures and conducting its conversations, I put it away and dropped it out of my mind."

What Twain sought was something like automation. He wanted to work without working, a desire hard to square with other writerly particularities of his: he was obsessive about word choice, especially when rendering dialect. And yet he often deferred to others—most often the women in his life—when it came to editing, allowing them to strike what they would.

His writing style was inseparable from the shape his books took, and his fictional instincts were more episodic than architectural. “A man who is not born with the novel-writing gift has a troublesome time of it when he tries to build a novel,” he once observed. “[The Adventures of Tom Sawyer](#)” was an illustration. Twain wrote much of it in the summer of 1874, as he and his wife prepared to move into a flamboyant Gothic mansion in Hartford, along with two young daughters and a household staff. But the life style came with costs, and one way to raise money was to advertise a book to prospective subscribers, who would pay for it in advance. Then you just had to write it.

At one point, work on the manuscript stalled completely. His tank, he wrote, “was empty; the stock of materials in it was exhausted; the story could not go on without materials; it could not be wrought out of nothing.” The freeze came around page 400—a reminder of the economics shaping Twain’s method. With subscription publishing, bulk helped justify the price. As his biographer Justin Kaplan put it, “It forced the author to write to fit and to fill . . . and it conditioned him to think of his writing as a measurable commodity, like eggs and corn.”

Published in 1876, “Tom Sawyer” was printed and distributed in the U.S. by a venture Twain partly owned. It sold respectably but not at the level he’d hoped. *The Atlantic* called it “a wonderful study of the boy-mind”; others dismissed it as a series of sketches rather than a true novel. Sardonic in tone —its moralists are hypocrites, the church oppressive, and only the rebels are appealing—the book still plays it safe: slavery is all but absent from this version of Hannibal.



Twain worked on “[Huckleberry Finn](#)” that summer, at a retreat in upstate New York. But the writing, again, proved fitful. He wrote a few hundred pages before pausing the project around 1880, unsure how to proceed. He was also busy chasing fortune: steam pulleys, marine telegraphs, and the Paige Compositor—a typesetting machine that promised riches and delivered bankruptcy. As Chernow notes, Twain “raged against plutocrats even as he strove to become one.”

It wasn’t until 1882, during a trip back to the Mississippi River to gather material for completing “Life on the Mississippi,” that Twain reconnected with the rhythms and the voices of his youth. In a letter to his friend William Dean Howells the following August, he wrote, “I have written eight or nine hundred manuscript pages in such a brief space of time that I mustn’t name the number of days; I shouldn’t believe it myself.”

The American edition of the novel appeared in 1885 and sold briskly. Still, the halting, fractured writing process helps explain its troubled final section, in which Jim is recaptured and we’re made to endure pages of overworked boyish schemes to rescue him. The commercial pressures to pad may have played a part; so, too, might Twain’s own conflicted relationship with America’s unresolved promises. Either way, it’s a famous misfire. Ernest Hemingway told readers to skip it. Toni Morrison told them not to. Jim’s

continued captivity, she argued, manacles the narrative itself. “In its structure,” she wrote, “it simulates and describes the parasitical nature of white freedom.”

Meanwhile, Twain kept throwing his energy, and his money, into entrepreneurial ventures he was temperamentally unfit to manage. His most lucrative title at one point was a blank book—a patented scrapbook of his own invention. He published Ulysses S. Grant’s memoirs, in 1885, to great acclaim. But most ventures failed, none more ruinously than the Paige typesetter. He kept afloat with magazine work, lecture tours, and long stints abroad—partly to save money, partly in search of material. Amid the swirl, he produced “[A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court](#)” (1889), a dark satire of technological progress and democratic illusion.

Why did a talent like Twain waste so much time on extraliterary pursuits? The question assumes a distinction he scarcely countenanced between writing and other forms of commercial activity. If there is a constant in his life, it’s his labored obsession with labor-saving. He poured his earnings into [schemes meant to spin off money](#) like a perpetual-motion machine. In 1891, amid mounting debts, Twain and his family went into self-imposed exile in Europe, where they remained until the century turned and he found himself able to repay his creditors in full.

These were also the years when Twain’s contradictions began to harden into gleaming marble. He had become, by the turn of the century, not only a household name but a household presence: the white suit, the clipped wit, the aura of rueful American wisdom. When his wife died, in 1904, his private writings grew full of grief, rage, and disillusionment, but he maintained his public persona on the high-paying hustings. The man who once mocked piety had become a moral touchstone; the scold of American pretensions now dined with tycoons.

Chernow, ever scrupulous, does not ignore the complexities, but his caution becomes its own kind of evasion. Apologies accumulate like packing peanuts. Twain said some unfortunate things about Jews, but he also admired them. He didn’t always get race right, but he possessed “enormous goodwill toward the Black community.” It is hard not to read such

formulations—careful, cushioning, oddly managerial—as symptoms of a deeper unease.

Nowhere is that unease more apparent than in the book’s handling of Twain’s “angelfish.” Late in life, Twain came, as he wrote, to “collect pets: young girls—girls from ten to sixteen years old; girls who are pretty and sweet and naive and innocent.” He gave these “angelfish” nicknames, pins from Tiffany’s, affectionate letters, elaborate instructions. His daughters looked on in quiet dismay. One tried to erase the angelfish from the record. Chernow reports all this; he makes it clear that Twain was never accused of touching them, that the girls came from proper families and never lodged complaints. He also reports the disquiet of contemporaries, the “unhealthy interest” of the correspondence, the sheer volume of it—hundreds of letters, many of them to girls Twain hardly knew. Then Chernow declines to speculate.

That’s something Twain would never have done; he would rather guess than flinch. The psychological reading is obvious: they were innocent and he was damaged. They were bright, giggling tokens of romance, frozen in time. “Romance dies with youth,” he once wrote. “After that, life is a drudge, & indeed a sham.” The angelfish were girls but also projections; an audience but also an idealized self. “The longing of my heart is a fairy portrait of myself,” he once confessed. “I want to be pretty; I want to eliminate facts and fill up the gap with charms.” The wish is revealing—strange and sad, and haunting in ways the biography cannot quite accommodate.

Twain died in 1910, aged seventy-four, with Halley’s Comet in the sky, a happenstance that he’d predicted. He had outlived not only a wife but two grown daughters, and several endings that would have been tidier. By that point, American literature was beginning to regard itself as a tradition. Yet Twain didn’t think in terms of lineages or pantheons; he thought in terms of schemes and side hustles. He lived to be the most quoted man in America—and possibly the most beloved—but what he was by then, and what we want him to be now, is not so easily reconciled.

The heat in Twain’s work comes from the risk it took in imagining freedom through entanglement. Jim, in “Huckleberry Finn,” is both a character and a problem: a caricature who refuses to stay flat, a man rendered with dignity

and deepening care, but also within the limits of white fantasy. That Twain knew this—that he played with it and then against it—is part of what makes the novel live. Two recent books lift Jim out of Twain’s frame as a nimble intellect in disguise: “[James](#),” by the novelist [Percival Everett](#), and “[Jim](#),” by the literary scholar Shelley Fisher Fishkin. These authors don’t send Twain up; they send him soaring.

That creative arena—the one Twain opened up by writing a book that hasn’t finished becoming itself—is one of the few things in American culture that remain usefully unsettled. We’re not done with Jim because Twain wasn’t. Perhaps this is what we want from him still—not sanctity or scandal but a space of comic disorder where the rules of the novel, and the Republic, could be stretched, tested, and maybe gamed. If Twain belongs to anyone now, it’s the writers making mischief in the structures he left behind—not revering him but inhabiting him. He gave us a raft. It’s up to us where we take it. ♦

Books

# When Jews Sought the Promised Land in Texas

At the turn of the twentieth century, some Jewish exiles dreamed of a homeland in Palestine. The Jewish Territorial Organization fixed its hopes on Galveston instead.

By Kathryn Schulz

April 28, 2025



Ezekiel was an exile. Born in the kingdom of Judah, he survived the siege of Jerusalem, in 597 B.C.E., but afterward was banished with his fellow-Jews to Babylon. While there, he had an arresting vision: He saw himself in a valley filled with human remains, as if a terrible battle had taken place there long ago and the vanquished still lay where they were slain. Then God spoke to him, and the bones reconfigured into skeletons, the skeletons filled out with flesh, and the wind began to blow toward them from all directions. All at once, the Book of Ezekiel records, “the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.”

To restore the dead to life: that is the prerogative of gods, but also the purview of historians. The past, too, is a valley of dry bones, its inhabitants permanently silent, its artifacts scattered and bleached to barenness. Those who manage to make it vivid again are praised in the language of miracles: they “bring history to life,” they “resurrect” a bygone era. On the page, such revivification generally takes familiar forms—meticulously researched nonfiction, doorstopper biographies, the occasional stellar work of historical fiction.

But now comes the British writer Rachel Cockerell, raising up a vast multitude of the dead in her dazzling début work, “[Melting Point](#)” (Farrar, Straus & Giroux), a book unlike any of those, and unlike anything I’ve ever read. At the heart of her tale lies an early-twentieth-century initiative that was undertaken with absolute earnestness at the time but seems almost farcical today: a multicountry effort to redirect America’s enormous influx of Jewish immigrants from Ellis Island to Galveston, Texas. So overlooked and enticing is this historical episode that even a workaday writer could make hay with it, but Cockerell is not a workaday writer. In fact, on the evidence of “Melting Point,” it’s not clear whether to call her a writer at all, although her book does boast a lucid and compelling preface and afterward. In between, however, it is composed entirely of primary sources, which talk to, argue with, and jostle against one another without authorial interruption for three hundred and forty-five pages.

This experiment could have gone wrong in any number of ways—by seeming contrived, by seeming disjointed, by imposing on its readers the irksome requirement of tracking which voice is saying what across two continents and the better part of a century. Instead, improbably, it goes exactly right. That is partly because of the thrill of eavesdropping directly on the past; stripped of any post-facto commentary, the characters and events in these pages feel startlingly present, in both senses of the word. But the book also works because only so vast a chorus of voices could do justice to the larger story that “Melting Point” is telling, one that has always been morally complicated and seldom more so than today: the history of an imperilled and exiled people and their courageous, visionary, blinkered, desperate, desperately catastrophic effort to find a place to call home.

The book Rachel Cockerell set out to write was nothing like this. What she had in mind, she tells us in that preface, was a straightforward family history—an account of her grandmother and great-aunt, two sisters who together raised seven children in a grand old Edwardian house in North London during and after the Second World War. Mindful that she should establish how the sisters wound up so far from their birthplace in the Russian Empire, she planned to include a brief mention of their father—her great-grandfather—a man by the name of David Jochelman, who had moved his family to London at the outbreak of the Great War. She figured that she would dispense with him in “a sentence or two, a paragraph at most.”

One inescapable lesson of “Melting Point” is that the past is always infinitely stranger and more interesting than we imagine; another is that, paradoxically, most of it is consigned with stunning rapidity to oblivion. Although there was just one generation between them, none of the children who grew up in that North London house could remember much about their grandfather, beyond blandly characterizing him as a businessman, so Cockerell dutifully sat down to learn about him. In short order, she discovered that Jochelman was not a man to be contained in a paragraph. One of the preëminent Jewish leaders of his time, he helped establish and run the Jewish Territorial Organization, which split off from mainline Zionism to look beyond Palestine for a viable Jewish homeland. In that capacity, he helped implement something Cockerell had never heard of: the Galveston Plan.

That plan soon derailed her own. As Cockerell dug deeper into Jochelman’s past, a whole world began to emerge, largely unknown to her despite her own family history. There was Theodor Herzl, whom she had vaguely pictured as a gray-haired elder statesman of Zionism, when in fact he was an impossibly handsome, irresistibly charismatic Austrian journalist who prophesied the devastation of European Jewry and promulgated the idea of a Jewish state, then died, at forty-four, before either one became a reality. There was Israel Zangwill, a name that I, like Cockerell, had never heard before, even though he was once the most famous Jew in the Anglophone world—a novelist whose popularity was frequently compared with that of Dickens, until the craft of fiction became less important to him than the cause of Zionism.

Captivated by these and other voices, Cockerell decided to dramatically widen the scope of her project. But, when she finished a draft of the book, something felt wrong. She had written it as conventional nonfiction, using primary sources for facts and quotations and her own authorial presence to guide readers through the tale; on rereading it, though, she found herself annoyed by the sound of her voice. “Everything I said,” she writes, “fell into three categories: a twenty-first-century-tinged observation, a paraphrase of a primary source, or a description of a character’s feelings.” All three, she concluded, were unnecessary: “The first took the reader out of the story, the second could be substituted with the original quotation, and the third could be shown, not told.” And so she started over, this time removing herself from the text and relying exclusively on the voices—as captured in letters, memoirs, diaries, transcripts, and contemporaneous newspaper accounts—of those who had lived through the history she was exploring.

The resulting work looks like a traditional book, except that it has slightly wider interior margins, in which, with maximum brevity, Cockerell indicates the source of the text that appears beside it: “Chaim Weizmann” or “*Wichita Daily Eagle*” or “Thomas Edison” or “*Jewish Chronicle*, 7 July 1904.” For approximately three pages, I wondered whether I would find this in-situ citation distracting or annoying. Then my mind adjusted and the technique turned translucent, leaving me staring directly into the story.

And “story” is the right word. Peculiarly, for a text constructed solely from historical documents, “Melting Point” reads like a work of fiction. The only books it even faintly reminded me of were all novels: the “[U.S.A.](#)” trilogy, by John Dos Passos (who has a cameo in it); George Saunders’s “[Lincoln in the Bardo](#),” which Cockerell herself cites as an inspiration; and, above all, “[A Place of Greater Safety](#),” the long, unruly, utterly gripping novel about the French Revolution that Hilary Mantel wrote before making her name with the “[Wolf Hall](#)” trilogy.

All three of those books likewise incorporate primary sources directly into their pages, but none of them do so exclusively, as Cockerell does. Some of her sources show up once, for a few lines; others get their say without interruption for a half-dozen pages; others become recurring characters. Plenty are famous ([Theodore Roosevelt](#), [Dorothy Day](#), [D. H. Lawrence](#), David Ben-Gurion), though some of the most memorable lines belong to

everyday people. (“She never really was a Zionist,” one woman remarks of her mother. “She only went for the weather.”) Another observes, “In the South, there’s a great deal of holding your head high in spite of everything.”) Collectively, these voices are coaxed by Cockerell, who has a keen ear and fine sense of timing, into becoming some of recent literature’s most compelling narrators.

“A year ago, while I was drinking afternoon tea in a London drawing room, there entered a tall, lithe man, with coal black hair, beard and mustaches, restless visionary eyes, and a nervous mouth, twitching with half-sad humour”: so “Melting Point” begins, sounding for all the world like a [Graham Greene](#) novel. The tall man is Theodor Herzl—a man, we soon learn, who makes other men want to dress better; a man who, when heading north through Vienna, inspires those heading south to abandon their itinerary and turn around just so they can walk with him. He is elegant, eloquent, the darling of the Austrian aristocracy—until 1896, when he produces a slim pamphlet, “The Jewish State,” which rekindled the dream, at the time moribund for the better part of two millennia, of establishing a permanent Jewish homeland in Palestine.

All around him, people scoffed. Other Jewish members of the Viennese upper crust spoke German, felt Austrian, and could not fathom why they should move to a hostile scrap of desert two thousand miles away. The editors of the London-based *Jewish Chronicle* accurately articulated Herzl’s prescient position but did not endorse it: “He foresees coming storms all over the civilised world. From these catastrophes there is, in his view, no possible escape, unless the Jews deliberately determine to remove themselves from the storm-laden atmosphere before the irresistible doom breaks over them.” Like Herzl’s high-society friends, those editors found it “hard to accept these gloomy prognostications.” But outside those rarefied circles it was not hard at all. As the Austrian writer [Stefan Zweig](#) put it, Herzl’s manifesto was received with overwhelming enthusiasm not “from the well-situated, comfortable bourgeois Jews of the West but from the gigantic masses of the East, from the Galicians, the Polish, the Russians of the ghetto.”

And it had another champion, too. Before publishing his pamphlet, Herzl had gone to London to seek the support of the brilliant young novelist whose

reputation had already spread to Continental Europe. On the face of it, Herzl and Israel Zangwill were almost comically mismatched; while the former was handsome and polished, the latter looked, according to one source, like “one of those sculptured gargoyle[s] in a mediaeval cathedral” and was, according to another, “one of the worst-dressed men in London.” (“You have seen his pictures,” one wag quipped. “He looks like them.”) But Zangwill was also both charming and so famous that contemporaneous pundits confidently declared that “everyone” knew his novels, and Herzl recognized that he would be an invaluable asset to the cause of Zionism.

Together with an ever-expanding group of supporters, this odd couple began holding annual congresses to build momentum for the Zionist movement among global Jewry. Meanwhile, they were also negotiating behind closed doors with the British, who, being near the peak of their imperial power, held the keys to plenty of kingdoms—including, eventually, Palestine. Then, in 1903, news broke of a shocking massacre in the town of Kishinev, in the southwestern reaches of the Russian Empire. Upon leaving Easter Sunday services, a group of townspeople began roaming the streets and menacing their Jewish neighbors; by the following day, the mob had murdered forty-nine of them, including babies and children, injured some six hundred more, raped hundreds of women, and destroyed fifteen hundred homes. It was Kishinev that first taught much of the non-Jewish world about pogroms, thanks in part to the rise of photojournalism; images of the slaughter appeared in newspapers around the globe. But even among Jews, who were already far too familiar with antisemitic violence, Kishinev was a wake-up call, and vast numbers of them, especially those in Russia, soon began seeking new homelands.

It was largely because of Kishinev that Herzl felt compelled to present to the next Zionist Congress an alternative Zion: although a homeland in Palestine was as yet unattainable, the British government was prepared to donate five thousand square miles of territory in East Africa to the Jewish people. This was known as the Uganda Plan, even though the land was actually in Kenya, and it created a furor at the Congress. “When the map of Palestine was covered by a map of Uganda,” one attendee wrote, “the delegates felt as though they were watching a total eclipse of the sun.” Nonetheless, when put to a vote following days of impassioned debate, the proposal passed, and a

fact-finding team was dispatched to the Mau Escarpment to look into the feasibility of establishing a Jewish nation there.

By the time that delegation had readied its report, Herzl was dead, felled by a heart condition. As tragic as that was, [Martin Buber](#) wrote, for a hero of his people, it was “the best possible time to die, before all the unavoidable events, disappointments, and decline.” When the Congress next convened, it voted to abandon the Uganda Plan, on account of “extremely formidable difficulties in the way of successful colonization,” among them “difficult routes through dense forests infested by wild beasts and dangerous native tribes.”

Still, the plan marked a turning point in the history of Zionism. Shocked into pragmatism by the massacre at Kishinev, Zangwill excoriated the attendees for turning down any potential homeland, declaring, in words that today are haunted by six million ghosts, “I appeal to the bar of history that you have committed treason against the Jewish people.” Disgusted, he split off from the Congress and, with the encouragement of an equally alarmed Russian Jew—David Jochelman, Cockerell’s great-grandfather—formed the Jewish Territorial Organization, known as the I.T.O. This new group, Zangwill declared, would not set its sights on any particular country. Instead, “It says with Archimedes, *dos pou sto*—give me a place where I may stand.”

What followed was a series of impossible dreams. There was Cyrenaica, in eastern Libya, which was pitched as woodsy and lovely with an excellent climate, but turned out to suffer from perpetual drought. There was Mesopotamia, which was comparatively close to Jerusalem and had at least some historical connection to Judaism (it was home to Babylon, where Ezekiel had lived in exile), but was also fiendishly hot and already inhabited by people who were not enthusiastic about a huge influx of Jews. There was Western Australia, which, aside from being “a barren tract, almost destitute of fresh water,” prompted a hard no from the Australian government. An effort in Canada met the same fate. For a while, Mexico and Paraguay came under consideration, but both proved too politically volatile. The Portuguese colony of Angola looked more promising, until Portugal announced that it would not give away a single square foot of its terrain: “Whether Jews, gypsies, negroes, or other peoples settle there is all the same to us. But we demand that the colonists shall live as Portuguese.”

When all these other aspirations withered, the I.T.O. directed its attention to the United States, which seemed to the average turn-of-the-century European to have ridiculous amounts of spare land. Moreover, plenty of Jewish immigrants already lived there; the difficulty was that nearly all of them were on the Eastern Seaboard and most of them—a million by 1910—were in New York City, which was no more likely to be given to the Jews than returned to the Lenape. But if the East Coast was heavily developed, Zangwill wrote, “the West is only half out of its shell, while the South is still in the egg.” So why not establish a homeland somewhere in those vast hinterlands?

Unfortunately for the territorialist movement, the United States had lately fought a civil war in order to keep itself one nation under God; there was no chance it would permit the establishment of a separate Jewish state within its borders. Mindful that the most exigent need was to secure safe haven for the hundreds of thousands of Jews fleeing organized violence in Europe, and convinced that “you could not for ever go pouring emigrants into New York,” the I.T.O. decided to try to redirect some of that great stream of refugees to other parts of America. It considered and rejected many possible ports of entry—Baltimore was too close to New York; San Francisco was too far from Europe; Savannah had no industry to speak of; New Orleans was so alluring that new arrivals would surely decline to migrate inland, instead settling there in ever greater numbers until it became another, more southerly Brooklyn—before landing, improbably, on Galveston. This was to be a way station, not a terminus; after disembarking there, immigrants would be encouraged to fan out, helping to establish Jewish communities throughout the southwestern half of the nation.

This was a hard sell, and the I.T.O. knew it. “Many an emigrant,” Zangwill wrote, “when invited to go to Galveston instead of New York, replies wistfully, ‘But I want to go to America.’” Yet Jochelman, the person tasked with doing the selling, made an admirable go of it. In Galveston, he got in touch with a remarkable rabbi, Henry Cohen, who was universally beloved, passionately committed to humanitarian work of all kinds, and, crucially, proficient in more than ten languages, a gift of nearly infinite psychological and practical value when ships full of immigrants began arriving. Meanwhile, Jochelman was also hard at work overseas, helping to set up some hundred and fifty information centers in Russia alone, so that soon

Zangwill could boast, “Galveston is now a household word and word of hope throughout the Pale.”

Perhaps this was true—but, if so, that hope, like Herzl, died young. The Galveston project was shut down in 1914, seven years after it began, partly because the voyage to Texas took nearly four times as long as the one to New York, and partly because the start of the First World War put an end to virtually all transatlantic civilian travel. All told, the program ushered roughly ten thousand Jews into America through Galveston—a mere trickle in a great tide, although to this day countless American Jews can trace their roots to Texas.

In the end, perhaps the most interesting thing about the Galveston Plan was how antithetical it was to the spirit of Zionism. Rabbi Cohen, who helped implement it, appreciated that Jews in America were “not cramped and crushed physically or mentally” and inferred from this a political theology: “We may learn from our status in this country that it was never intended by God that we should dwell only in one portion of the globe.” The banker and philanthropist Jacob Schiff, who helped finance the plan, believed that the United States was the real promised land, and he envisioned Jews here becoming “proud of their American citizenship, thoroughly imbued with its spirit, with its obligations, with its high privileges, but just as proud of their religion—almost a new type—true Americans of the Jewish faith . . . an integral part of a race of Americans yet in the making.” And Zangwill, despite frequently worrying that displaced European Jews would lose much of what was specific and beautiful about their culture, ultimately gave our nation its defining metaphor for assimilation, writing a popular play called “The Melting Pot,” in which a traumatized Jewish immigrant from Kishinev finds a new life in America by turning his back on history and tradition.

That kind of sentiment put all three men at odds with the vision, articulated by Herzl and embraced by so many others, of an independent Jewish state in Palestine. But, then, practically everyone in this book is at odds with someone when it comes to the question of Zionism. These days, especially in the aftermath of [October 7th](#), the moral status of Israel is such an inflammatory issue that, no matter where you stand, even contemplating the other side can seem like a betrayal. But Cockerell, with her vast cast of characters, shows us Zionism from every possible angle, and from its

earliest days. We see Herzl's alarm and sincerity. We see the nineteenth-century statesman Joseph Chamberlain cast his eyes over the British Empire, "like a big junk shop whose manager isn't quite sure whether some unusual article is in the stock-room," then offer up the Mau Escarpment with no concern whatsoever for its native population. We see Englishmen already living in Kenya protest "the introduction of alien Jews" and plead instead for more "colonialists of our own race." We see Zionism embraced by stateless Jews who have suffered horribly in foreign nations; we see it embraced by people who would like for Jews to live anywhere but in their own communities. So it carries on through the years, an endless rock-paper-scissors of bigotry, politicking, and desperation, each bad idea an echo of an earlier bad idea, each good intention already smoldering from the flames of Hell. The need to find a haven for persecuted Jews is never not urgent; the process of trying to find one is never not disgraceful.

In the second half of her book, Cockerell reprises these questions of homeland on a smaller scale, tracing the descendants of her great-grandfather as they participate, knowingly and otherwise, in a long-standing argument: whether the virtues of acculturation, pluralism, and cosmopolitanism outweigh the virtues of tradition, community, and common identity. One of these descendants is a son by an early and unhappy marriage who was born in the Russian Empire as Emmanuel Joseph Jochelman but transformed himself in America into Emjo Basshe, a New York-based playwright of some renown. Together with four other writers, including John Dos Passos, Basshe started the radical, pro-proletariat New Playwrights Theater, which made waves in its time but had an even shorter life span than the Galveston Plan. It folded in 1929, the same year Basshe married a Southern belle turned actress, after getting her pregnant. The baby, a girl who inherited the name Emjo but was known mostly as Jo, grew up half Jewish and half Southern, which is to say absolutely, uniquely American.

Jo's voice—comic, caustic, keenly observant—is by far the best thing about the latter half of this book, handily upstaging Cockerell's grandmother Fanny, who married a British Gentile and afterward lived out her days in London, and her great-aunt, Sonia, who married a Russian Jew and moved to Jerusalem at the beginning of the nineteen-fifties. Those were the sisters Cockerell originally planned to write about, and, when the otherwise magnificent "Melting Point" finally flags, it is because she never quite

shakes free of that shadow book. The problem is not that the Jochelmans aren't interesting; it's that, as her focus narrows to a single family, the stakes of her story inevitably dwindle.

I wish that some wise friend or editor, on reading the first half of "Melting Point," had told Cockerell to just keep following her ambitious beginning: a story that starts with Theodor Herzl wants to track the fate of his ideas clear through to the establishment of the State of Israel. That event does transpire within the course of this book, but by then she has turned her attention to her own relatives, consigning the main tide of history, like Bruegel's Icarus, to the background. Even the Holocaust is glimpsed only peripherally, albeit devastatingly—as when, on a crowded bus moving through the streets of Jerusalem, every arm hanging on to a strap bears a tattooed number.

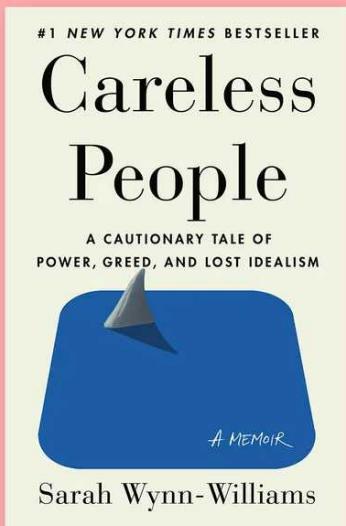
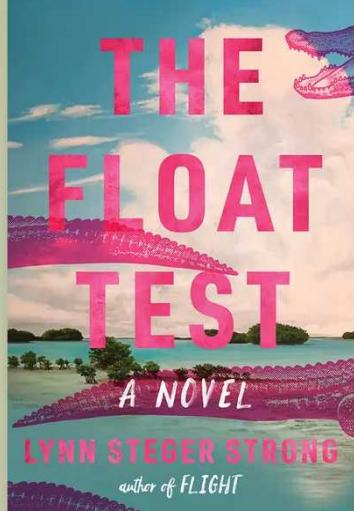
This diminished scope is a pity, because Cockerell's *sui-generis* genre perfectly suits the sweeping narrative she starts off telling. Stripped of any foreshadowing or explaining, her characters act and react out of impulse and exigency, turning the past back into the present day, even as we cannot unknow the future that bears down on them. The effect is chilling and exhilarating, like wading into the river of time to stand beside them. One can forgive almost any flaw in a book so doubly successful: its contents a resurrection, its form a revelation. ♦

Books

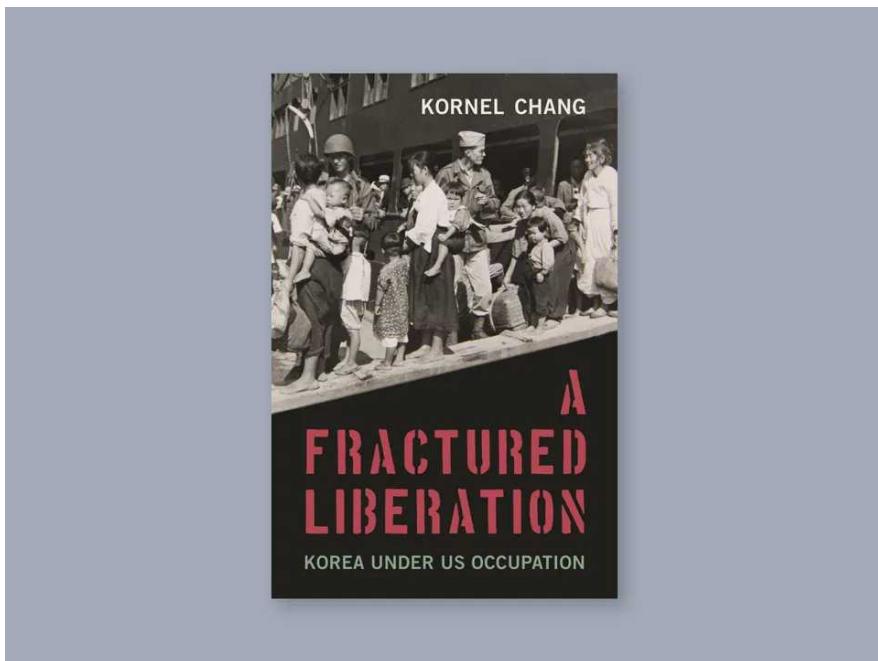
## Briefly Noted

“Careless People,” “A Fractured Liberation,” “The Float Test,” and “Your Steps on the Stairs.”

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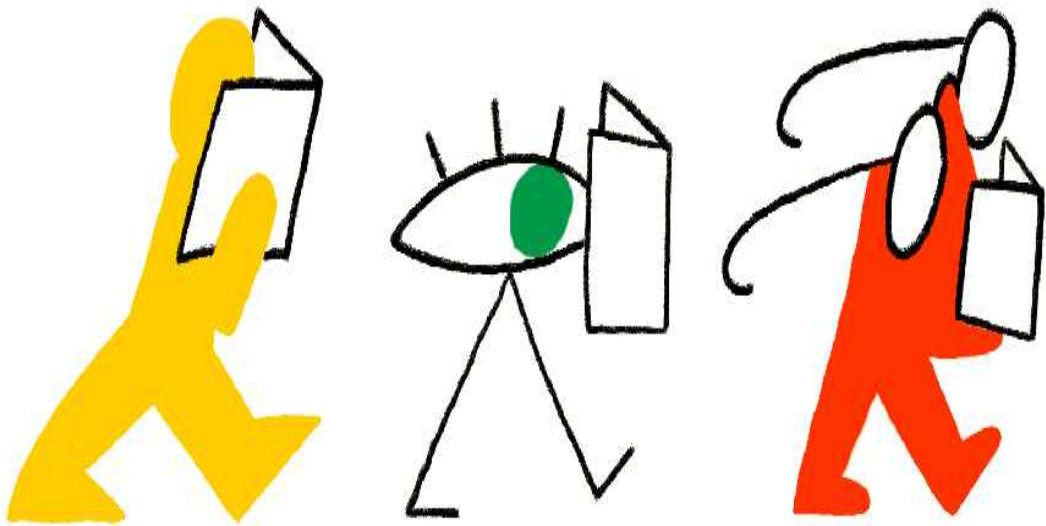


Careless People, by Sarah Wynn-Williams (Flatiron). In 2011, Wynn-Williams convinced Facebook to hire her as a “diplomat,” and her incisive memoir tracks the evolution of the company’s political dealings. Wynn-Williams—whose job involved orchestrating “pull-asides” between Mark Zuckerberg and heads of state—documents the platform’s profound disregard for the well-being of users, including an indifference to the hate speech that fuelled genocidal riots in Myanmar, and efforts to court the Chinese government by censoring political activists and sharing user data. “At every juncture, there was an opportunity to make different choices,” Wynn-Williams writes. Instead, Facebook pursued a “lethal carelessness.”

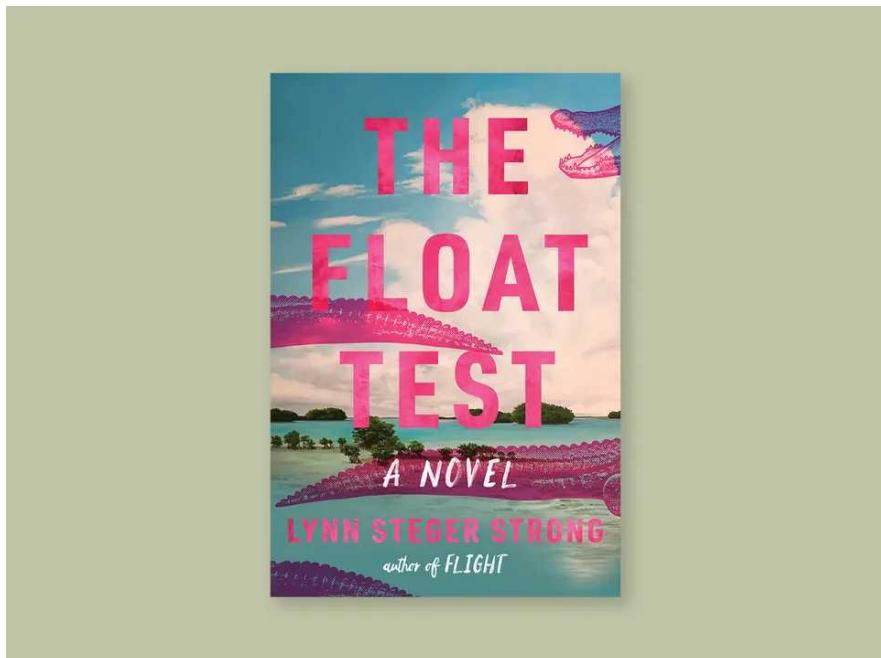


A Fractured Liberation, by Kornel Chang (Belknap). The surrender of the Japanese brought an end to the Second World War, and it also emancipated Tokyo’s colonies across Asia. This history focusses on the Korean Peninsula’s liberation, after which “peasants occupied Japanese-owned farmlands, workers seized control of the factory floor, villagers chased the former colonial police out of town, and women demanded political and economic equality.” But, as Chang writes, the many social movements and political factions that sprouted had only a brief interval to jockey for power before the Soviet Union and the U.S. swooped in. Drawing from diaries, military records, literary works, and his own family’s history, Chang ponders what could have become of “Korea’s Asian Spring.”

## What We're Reading

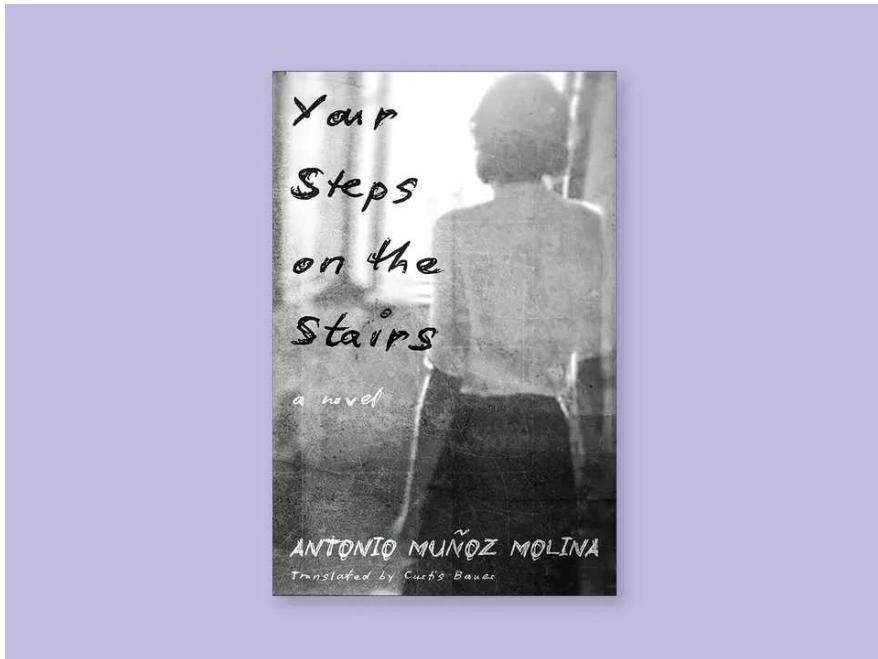


*Discover notable new fiction, nonfiction, and poetry.*



**The Float Test**, by Lynn Steger Strong (Mariner). Four adult siblings are the central characters in this novel; after the sudden death of their mother they

return to their childhood home to sort through her effects. Jude, the second youngest and the narrator, recounts everything from childhood escapades to recent disappointments, including her sister Fred's estrangement from the family. Jenn, the oldest, takes on their father's care, while George, the baby, mopes about his failing marriage. Tensions rise after Fred finds a gun in their mother's underwear drawer, a discovery that hangs over the novel like a threat. Strong explores the dynamics of siblinghood—alliances and grudges—and interrogates what it means to claim family stories as your own.



[\*\*Your Steps on the Stairs\*\*](#), by Antonio Muñoz Molina, translated from the Spanish by Curtis Bauer (Other Press). In this harrowing drama of subtleties, a recently retired man moves from New York to Lisbon after Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 Presidential election. Awaiting his wife's arrival, he prepares their new apartment and tries to keep himself busy, but he is pestered by a creeping sense of disaster, both past and future. Again and again, he replays the events of September 11th in his head, noting the reverberations that it had in his life and marriage in the years that followed. Molina writes in pulse-like scenes, and each vignette thickens the novel's uneasy atmosphere, obscuring our conception of place and, eventually, our conception of what's real.

Pop Music

# The Rise of Megan Moroney, Emo Cowgirl

The country singer, on her first headlining tour, plays achy-breaky songs about love and its failure to be respectfully reciprocated by various dudes.

By Kelefa Sanneh

April 28, 2025



“I don’t write a whole lot of love songs,” Megan Moroney said last month, onstage at Radio City Music Hall. Fortunately, that’s not exactly true. Almost all her songs are about love, although she sings mostly about coping with its absence, or its failure to be respectfully reciprocated by various dudes, including one who had a Chevrolet and a sneaky smoking habit, and who is now known, to millions of Moroney fans, as Noah. Moroney is a country singer, though not one who is unduly burdened by the genre’s venerable history, and she has honed her approach on a pair of delectable albums: “Lucky,” from 2023, and “Am I Okay?,” which arrived last summer, and which includes “Noah,” a song that builds to a plaintive

confession. “Noah, you should know at night I think of you and me,” she sings. Not a depiction of romantic bliss, but a kind of love song all the same.

When Moroney arrived at Radio City, she was a week into her first big headlining tour, and things were going even better than she might have hoped. She had sold out back-to-back shows, and the venue’s velvety seats were packed with fans—many of them women with their friends, or girls with their guardians—who expressed their devotion to Moroney by drowning her out. Moroney’s songs, often written with collaborators, are full of artful and sometimes acidic depictions of heartache. She uses pithy phrases that evoke melancholy scenes: “Here you come again, who could it be? / It’s 3 A.M., no caller I.D.” But the atmosphere at the show was unremittingly jubilant—and so, in a way, was Moroney herself. She asked, “Is anybody ready to have the best night of their lives?” For some of the younger fans who hollered their agreement, this was probably no exaggeration.

Moroney gets great mileage out of the contrast between the achy-breaky songs she sings and the bright smile she loves to flash. At Radio City, nearly everything onstage seemed to have been bedazzled, including Moroney’s outfit, her microphone stand, and one of her guitars. “Third Time’s the Charm,” from her most recent album, captures the tentative joy of rekindling a love affair: “Tonight I’m layin’ in your arms / Prayin’ that the third time’s the charm.” After the first chorus, Moroney added a spoken update, telling the crowd, “The third time is *not* the charm, but that’s O.K.” In fact, Moroney has already written a sequel, “I’ll Be Fine,” which she included on a rereleased version of “Am I Okay?,” and which she performed later that night. On Instagram, she has explained that recording the song was difficult. She wrote, “I remember being in the studio, holding back tears, thinking, ‘How am I gonna sing this every night?’ ”

In 2023, when Moroney played a much smaller show at the downtown club Bowery Ballroom, she covered the [Taylor Swift](#) song “We Are Never Ever Getting Back Together.” Doubtless this was a way of acknowledging a debt: Moroney is one of countless singers who have evidently profited from studying Swift’s talky, detail-oriented approach to songwriting. (Where Swift once sang, “She’s cheer captain, and I’m on the bleachers,” Moroney makes basically the same romantic comparison, only grownup and

countrified, singing, “He found a beauty queen / I’m in a dive bar, drinkin’, while she’s in a magazine.”) But it was also a sign of Moroney’s ambition; her candidacy for stardom seemed plausible at Bowery Ballroom, and much more than plausible at Radio City. She has found some success on country radio: the title track on “Am I Okay?” recently entered the Top 10 on the *Billboard* Country Airplay chart. And the clubby country-music industry seems to like her. In November, she was named best new artist at the Country Music Association Awards, not to be confused with the Academy of Country Music Awards, which last month nominated her for female artist of the year and nominated “Am I Okay?” for album of the year. Of course, another lesson that Moroney might have learned from Swift is that, if your fans truly love you, you can leave country music and take them with you.

Before she was a rising star, Moroney had a modern sort of day job: she was an online influencer, scratching out a living from promotional videos. Her breakthrough hit, “Tennessee Orange,” was a masterpiece of viral marketing. The lyrics are about a woman who, like Moroney, comes from Georgia, but who is now wearing the colors of the University of Tennessee, because of a guy she recently met. Listeners were allowed, or, indeed, encouraged, to think that the guy in question was country’s leading man, Morgan Wallen, a native Tennessean. (Later, on the podcast “Call Her Daddy,” Moroney said, of Wallen, “We were friends for a long time. We were not *just* friends. And now we’re friends.”) The speculation gave Moroney two kinds of credibility at once: it linked her to an established star and also suggested that her lyrics reflected her real life.

One of Moroney’s guitar straps reads “*EMO COWGIRL*,” a self-description that has become something of a rallying cry—she sells T-shirts, sweatshirts, koozies, and Christmas ornaments emblazoned with the term. For Moroney, “emo” describes her lovesick sensibility rather than any commitment to the punk-inspired subgenre. But, in recent years, country and emo have in fact been drawing closer. One of Moroney’s guitarists, Riley Lowery, used to play with Dylan Marlowe, an emerging country singer whose great début album, “Mid-Twenties Crisis,” from 2024, opens with a song called “Heaven’s Sake,” which finds common ground between the sound of contemporary country radio and the sound of the Warped Tour in the two-thousands. The album’s lead single, “Boys Back Home,” recently hit No. 2 on the country chart. Far from country radio, Marlowe can also be heard on

“*EMPTYHANDED*,” a riotous collaboration with Johnny Franck, a singer and guitarist who performs as Bilmuri (pronounced like the actor). Franck once played with the punkish band Attack Attack!, but he has since perfected a kind of delirious, all-American riff-rock. In the “*EMPTYHANDED*” music video, Marlowe and Bilmuri take turns riding a lawnmower while lip-synching lyrics that, as it happens, don’t sound much different from something you might hear in a Megan Moroney song: “I hate being on your terms / It starts on and off again / Old flame with a slow burn.” At a recent concert in New York, Marlowe interrupted the country music for a mini-set of punk and emo covers, including a version of “Sugar, We’re Goin Down,” by Fall Out Boy. This was the music he grew up listening to, and he figured that the twenty-somethings in the audience had probably grown up listening to it, too.

No doubt Moroney’s fans, like Marlowe’s, listen to all types of music; on platforms such as Spotify skipping from genre to genre may actually be easier than stubbornly staying put. But Moroney is canny enough to understand that country identity can be a selling point, even or especially to fans with other interests. A number of the women and girls in the crowd at Radio City were wearing white cowboy boots, many of which were suspiciously unscuffed. Instead of covering a Swift song, Moroney sang a version of “Ain’t Nothing ’Bout You,” the enduring Brooks & Dunn country hit from 2001, secure in the knowledge that many of her fans were lucky enough to be savoring it for the first time. By the end of the night, she seemed slightly stunned by the level of enthusiasm—or perhaps she, like Swift, is merely good at looking stunned. Re-creating the pose from the cover of her recent album, she placed two fingers on her neck, as if checking her pulse. The album’s title suggests a question, but in the song, which is uncharacteristically upbeat, it’s more of an affirmation: “Oh! My! God! Am! I! O! Kay!” On the album, this is the opening track, and the prelude to nearly an hour of misery. But onstage it was her closing argument—a question that answered itself. ♦

The Theatre

# Jeremy Jordan Mines “Floyd Collins” for Its Sonic Gems

Adam Guettel and Tina Landau’s 1996 musical about a trapped caver resurfaces on Broadway, and Shayok Misha Chowdhury and Mona Pirnot play metaphysical games.

By Helen Shaw

April 28, 2025



“The future of writing is the universe within,” the composer and lyricist Adam Guettel told an interviewer, in 2001. It had been five years since the Off Broadway première of “Floyd Collins,” his folk-inflected musical, which recounts the true story of the eponymous Kentucky cave explorer, and Guettel was ready to turn further inward for inspiration. But in “Floyd Collins” he and the show’s director, Tina Landau (who came up with the idea and wrote the book for the musical), had already taken that notion of inwardness to an extreme. In 1925, the real Collins got trapped underground, and the whole country, kept on tenterhooks by an avid press, waited for more than a week to see if he would make it out. Nearly the entire musical,

which is now being revived at Lincoln Center, therefore unfolds with our hero stuck fast inside one of the earth's narrow pockets, his dwindling awareness reaching out toward the glittering, subterranean volumes all around him.

The boyish Broadway darling Jeremy Jordan plays Floyd, a devil-may-care young adventurer who slithers into an almost inaccessible crack, at which point various people—including his brother Homer (Jason Gotay), a courageous journalist (Taylor Trensch), and a pompous engineering executive named Carmichael (Sean Allan Krill)—start trying to get him out. Aboveground, no one can settle on a rescue strategy, though everyone does agree to cash in on the ensuing media circus; even Floyd fantasizes about the tickets he could sell to a cave he may never escape. (Usefully, Jordan just played the lead in “Gatsby,” another American striver pushing into spaces that don’t necessarily welcome him.) Floyd’s strange, dreamy sister Nellie (Lizzy McAlpine) imagines escorting him majestically through mountain halls “as we follow ’long the diamonds / to the outside,” as if the poor of Appalachia were the heirs of deep-buried palaces.

This allusion to cavernous splendor works both for and against the production, which is being directed, once again, by Landau. Despite the efforts of the design collective called dots, the Vivian Beaumont, a vast, curved, audience-on-three-sides arena, constrains the show’s ability to be either intimate or spectacular. The orchestra sounds wonderful in the huge openness, but sight lines here are notoriously difficult: any onstage structure might cut off somebody’s ability to see. Landau does not always draw strong performances from actors, and a few major players, McAlpine among them, seem lost on the wide, mostly empty stage. When Floyd, after taking a twisting path through a kind of obstacle course of hydraulic platforms that represent rock passages, gets pinned in place by a boulder, the actor actually lands on a black, blocky, Cybertruckesque chaise longue. Jordan must then recline there for hours, like a sunbather in a deck chair, trying to project the feeling that a whole hillside is crushing him.

“Floyd Collins” is the second of Landau’s shows this season to focus on an epic encounter with nature. She also wrote and directed the Broadway musical “Redwood,” with the composer Kate Diaz, in which Idina Menzel climbs a big tree and refuses to come down until her character has had an

epiphany. “Floyd Collins,” however, stands head and shoulders (and torso and pickaxe) above the dippy “Redwood.” Landau treats the Kentucky caves with more dignity than she does California’s conveniently therapeutic forests, and although the older musical does wander into digressions and raise plot ideas only to abandon them, its occasional sense of awed horror and spiritual ambivalence are far preferable to the nature-equals-healing pabulum of “Redwood.”

It helps that, in “Collins,” Guettel has given us one of musical theatre’s most frankly gorgeous scores. There are those who might prefer his Tony Award-winning work in “The Light in the Piazza,” from 2005, for its shimmering loveliness, and “Light” certainly forms a more integrated whole. But I love Guettel’s innovation here: stomp-and-holler Appalachian plaintiveness married to elegant chromatic orchestral harmonies. Jordan—physically static, but vocally free—flourishes when performing this kind of soaring music, and, in Nellie’s numbers, McAlpine’s haunting, Joni Mitchell timbre drifts beautifully down around him, the only warmth in a landscape growing increasingly wet and cold. The creators’ storytelling control is slack to the point that I genuinely could not tell you how many people die. Yet, sonically, the experience is rich with jewels, just as a good cave ought to be.

In 1915, the actor William Gillette described the “illusion of the first time”—the way that performers can fool an audience into believing it’s seeing a spontaneous event, even if there have been hundreds of identical performances before it. Jordan, for instance, would like us to believe that he got stuck in that crevice today, right in front of us. Sometimes, though, a show actually *wants* us to be aware of its repetitions.

In “Rheology,” at the Bushwick Starr, in Brooklyn, the playwright Shayok Misha Chowdhury collaborates with his non-actor mother, Bulbul Chakraborty, on a work (co-produced by Ma-Yi Theatre Company and *HERE* Arts Center) that reveals its iterative process, to devastating emotional effect. Chakraborty is a physicist, and she begins “Rheology” standing at a chalkboard. She’s delivering an introductory lecture on the fluid properties of sand, describing the forces that act on individual grains inside a dune, when she chokes on a drink of water. She’s interrupted by her son, who gives her direction from a seat in the audience. (He’s hoping for a little more melodrama.) Chowdhury explains that he has decided to prepare

for his mother's eventual death by building a show around it. There are shades of Nathan Fielder's "The Rehearsal" here as he jumps up onstage to talk her through a deathbed scene. She improvises, and they laugh at the results; then they sing together in Bangla as she drifts off.

So far, so postmodern and playful. But Chowdhury wrote "Public Obscenities," the complex, multilingual family drama that was a finalist for a Pulitzer in 2024, and we know he has more to say about the interplay of generations than "I will miss my mother someday." Later, Chakraborty enumerates the many forces that act on her, like her grief at being unable to get to India in time for her own mother's cremation. She shows us a film of her mother, bedridden in her nineties, who, by that time, could not recognize her but could remember a Rabindranath Tagore poem she'd learned by heart decades earlier. As Chakraborty and her son speak or sing their lines, we realize that we are watching them offer each other the solace of repetition. Perhaps someday, when the rest of thinking is gone, these memorized speeches will remain, talismans against every abrading element but the end.

A similar gift, if offered in a lighter spirit, sits at the center of Mona Pirnot's meta-theatrical puzzle box "I'm Assuming You Know David Greenspan," at the Atlantic Stage Two. Pirnot has written a play that's basically a drawing-room confessional for strapped playwrights, a work so insistently insider-y that I found myself laughing at the idea that there are enough of us to get its jokes. It features a playwright named Mona who scolds a friend who wants to quit the theatre, while a third friend admonishes Mona for not disclosing the financial arrangements that make her artistic life possible.

The gimmick is that Pirnot, who is obsessed with the downtown theatre icon David Greenspan, has written the play for him to perform as a solo piece, in the same way that he has played all the parts in other shows, including his own hit, "The Patsy." Thus the actual Greenspan glides to and fro between characters, often becoming Mona, telling her friends how absolutely wonderful David Greenspan is. We get a lot of financial detail here, about Greenspan's budget as well as Pirnot's, and it's clear that a life in the experimental theatre promises nearly zero monetary reward. In eight shows a week, though, Greenspan has to say again and again how much he is loved. By the end of the run, I think, he'll believe it. ♦

# Poems

- [Henry's Ode](#)
- [Fugue](#)

Poems

# Henry's Ode

By John Berryman

April 28, 2025



Ladderless. Here it is again.  
The plateau's sun makes a continent's strongest shadows.  
What's 42 to 43?  
Into a black place of great blows  
from the little mountains from the sea  
came. Everything is the same.

Out? Many things are over.  
The master from Aragon thought better of the world.  
I find somebody as ignorant & crazy as ever,  
but old? middle aged? 'young'?  
Answer suddenly, at a loss, soiled,  
my mortal enemies: 'Try to make a song.'

I find I can't do that. Bears  
down friend scythe. 'Manzo!' We've got to mend.

I seem to have had a lousy thousand years,  
two thousand, and I don't see the end.

I can't think what to do, or be,  
or what will happen to Henry.

—John Berryman (1914-1972)

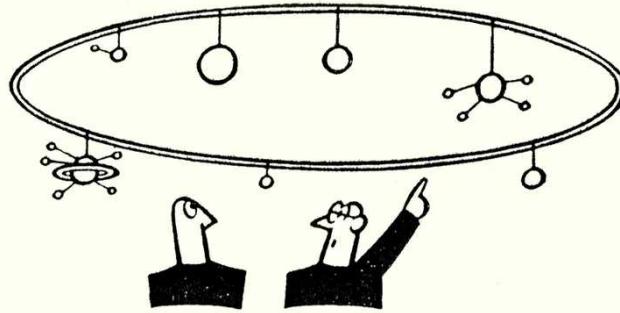
*This is drawn from “[Only Sing: 152 Uncollected Dream Songs](#).”*

Poems

# Fugue

By Ishmael Reed

April 28, 2025



He woke up  
When Professor Slatin  
Covered Irish writers  
In his U. B. poetry class  
Their verses read like  
Sheet music  
James Joyce, a tenor, likened  
His short story to a Fugue  
But it was those Yeats lines  
That roamed his mind  
For decades: “An  
aged man . . . ,” “fastened to a dying  
animal”  
At eighteen, given the mortality rates  
Of his kind, he never thought

He'd be that aged man  
But now he's there

And even dying animals have needs  
They can cost you an arm and a leg  
Pills at breakfast, lunch, and dinner  
Test strips, lancets, CT scans  
Home blood-pressure kits  
Biopsies, X-rays, MRIs  
He's found that new aches and pains  
Don't make appointments;  
They wake you up  
They're rude, like the  
People who have forgotten his name  
Instead, he's called a curmudgeon, a crank a  
Grouch and a grinch even  
Grandpa by passersby

On TV, young people drink Corona  
Before testing the waves  
On TV, people his age are unpaid  
Babysitters  
Their grandchildren ride them  
As though they were horses

He has enough in his I.R.A. to fly first class to  
Byzantium on an airline whose chef  
Serves the passengers  
*Adana kebab, sesame pita bread and  
Turkish coffee*  
But that travel money could be used  
For long-term-care premiums and  
A subscription to AARP  
Besides, he's had his fill of ikons  
And thinks of gold as gaudy  
He visited Lois, an ex  
Nun  
In West Hills, California

She might have been  
Bedridden, but she was not  
Mindridden  
She said that growing old  
Is for the birds  
Was she referring to those  
Vultures that arrive in the mail?  
“Have you considered cremation?”

# Puzzles & Games

- [The Crossword: Monday, April 28, 2025](#)

Crossword

# The Crossword: Monday, April 28, 2025

A challenging puzzle.

**By Anna Shechtman**

April 28, 2025



# The Mail

- [Letters from Our Readers](#)

The Mail

# Letters from Our Readers

Readers respond to Jennifer Wilson's piece about housing insecurity, Jill Lepore's essay on Ruth Stout, and Helen Shaw's review of "Ghosts."

April 28, 2025

## In This House

Jennifer Wilson's eloquent piece on housing insecurity resonates deeply with anyone navigating the U.S.'s broken system ("House Call," March 17th). In this regard, her mention of Vienna's social-housing policy deserves greater attention; similar approaches are gaining traction across the U.S., where more publicly owned, nonmarket homes are being envisioned for people with widely varying incomes.

Montgomery County, Maryland, exemplifies this trend. The local Housing Opportunities Commission has developed mixed-income communities where residents across economic strata live alongside one another in quality housing. The model preserves long-term affordability while avoiding the stigma often associated with means-tested public housing. It also recognizes housing as infrastructure, not investment, incorporating structural protections against the pressure to privatize.

The tenants' union that Wilson discovered represents just one facet of a growing movement that's reimagining our current system of homeownership. As more municipalities adopt social-housing models, perhaps we can finally move beyond the rent-own dichotomy.

*James Carras  
Fort Lauderdale, Fla.*

Wilson's piece brought back fun memories of my younger years, when my wife and I were on a seemingly endless hunt for a one-bedroom apartment. These days, there seems to be a sense of shame associated with opting to rent; renting versus buying is often compared to lacking motivation versus

being responsible, immaturity versus adulthood. Affected by such thoughts, my wife and I bought a co-op in Bay Ridge. Yet as time went on we had to confront the fact that our aspirations were, to some degree, a fantasy. Our “dream apartment” is beset with the same types of problems we had in our rental unit—but at twice the cost.

*Vasilios Vasilounis  
Brooklyn, N.Y.*

## Ain’t Hay

Jill Lepore’s article about Ruth Stout was both highly entertaining and edifying (“[The Book of Ruth](#),” March 24th). I just want to warn those tempted to try the Stout Method that it might not work as well today. Hay and straw are now often contaminated with herbicides. Some, like glyphosate, degrade relatively quickly; others can remain in soil for several years, killing many garden plants, including tomatoes, peas, and peppers. Unless your hay comes from an organic farm that never treats its fields with persistent herbicides, steer clear. I’ve otherwise had luck with Stout’s approach, but gardeners should beware that, where dead and decaying matter piles up, slugs often do, too!

*Shannon Stoney  
Cookeville, Tenn.*

## Ibsen Clapped Back

A salient point regarding “Ghosts,” a staging of which Helen Shaw recently reviewed, is that it can be read as Henrik Ibsen’s rebuttal to the overwhelming criticism generated by “A Doll’s House,” which premiered three years prior ([The Theatre](#), March 24th). The earlier work ends with the protagonist, Nora, leaving not just her husband but her children. The public reaction was seismic; her exit was referred to as “the door slam heard around the world.”

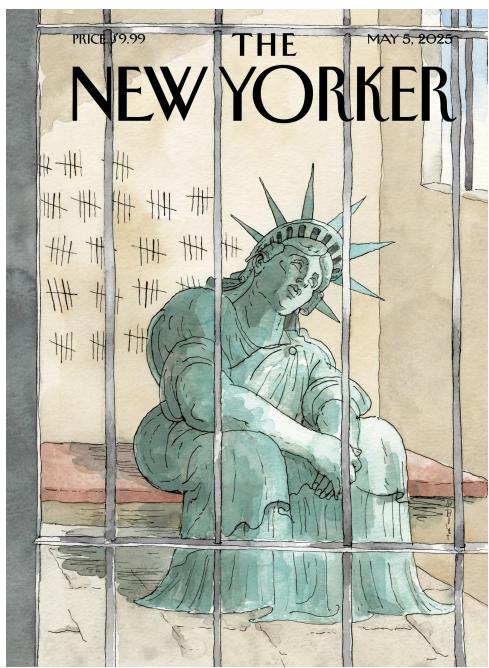
With “Ghosts,” Ibsen answered the criticism surrounding Nora’s pursuit of self-realization with Mrs. Alving’s resolve to stay with her husband, an

immoral seaman, even after he gives her syphilis, an infection she then transmits to their son, Oswald. By the end, Oswald, suffering from blindness, laments that he cannot see the light: "Mother, give me the sun."

*Rick Sylvester  
Olympic Valley, Calif.*

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



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