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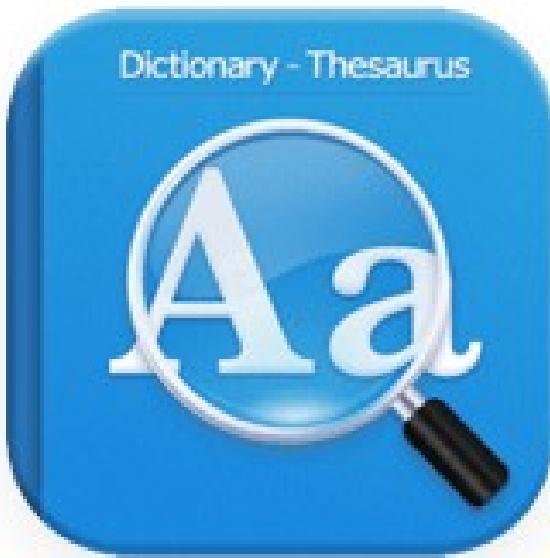
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# Goings On

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Going On

# Anthony Roth Costanzo Channels Maria Callas in “Galas”

Plus: the eclectic chaos of Haim, Trajal Harrell struts the catwalk at Park Avenue Armory, “Mamma Mia!” returns to Broadway, and more.

**By Helen Shaw,Dan Stahl,Sheldon Pearce,Brian Seibert,Richard Brody,Jane Bua,Shauna Lyon,Hua Hsu**

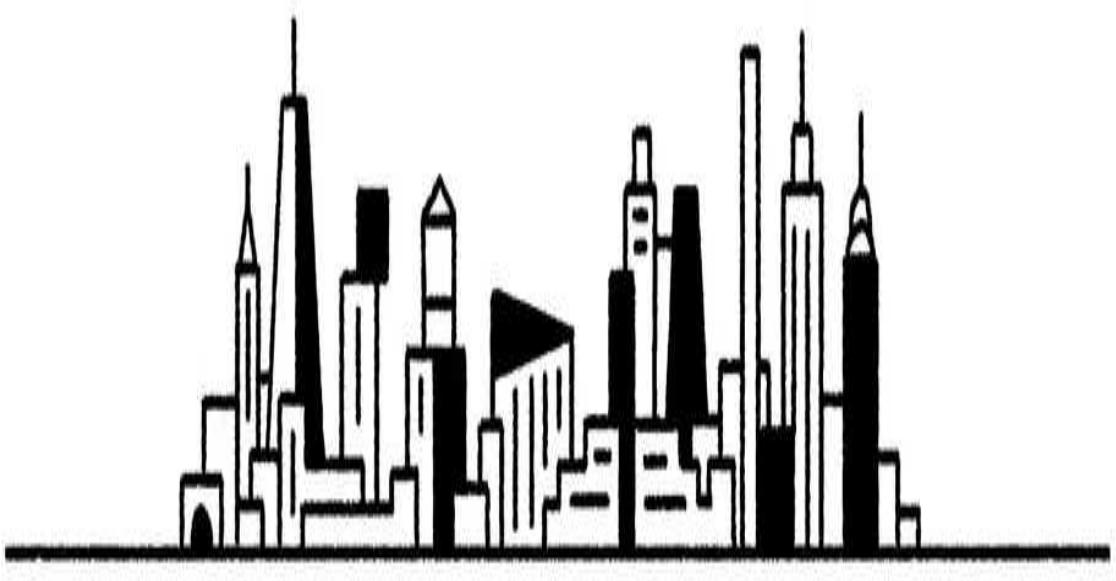
August 22, 2025





**Last summer's season** at Little Island scored a hit with Anthony Roth Costanzo's glittering version of "The Marriage of Figaro," in which the countertenor sang all the parts in Mozart's masterpiece, from basso suitor to twittering soubrette. That show was, in its way, radically exposing: at one point, Costanzo swallowed a scoping camera so that the audience could see his vocal cords flexing as his voice changed registers. This summer, Costanzo becomes just one character: the histrionic diva at the center of "Galas," Charles Ludlam's camp melodrama from 1983, directed by Eric Ting, inspired by Maria Callas, whose operatic life rivalled the roles she played onstage. The part should fit the extravagantly gifted Costanzo like a long buttoned glove; his dark glamour recalls Callas's mid-century fabulousness, and his extraordinary sound echoes her own smoky timbre, the resonance of a voice and a personality on fire.—*Helen Shaw (Little Island; Sept. 6-28.)*

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## About Town

Broadway

Two disparate, if not duelling, impulses inhabit “[Take a Banana for the Ride](#),” a solo show written and performed by the comedian Jeff Ross. One is the roasting he’s famous for, sometimes directed at audience members (latecomers beware) and sometimes at himself (“a Jeff Bezos blow-up doll”). But barbed humor proves to be only the skin encasing Ross’s true purpose: gleaning life lessons from the deaths of loved ones, beginning in adolescence when his mother passed away from leukemia. Like bananas, he claims, we’re better with bruises—they make us sweeter. Really? In my experience, including this show, the result is often mushiness. Next to the freshness of his jokes, Ross’s lessons—relationships are what matter, laughter is healing—seem all the more overripe.—*Dan Stahl ([Nederlander](#); through Sept. 28.)*

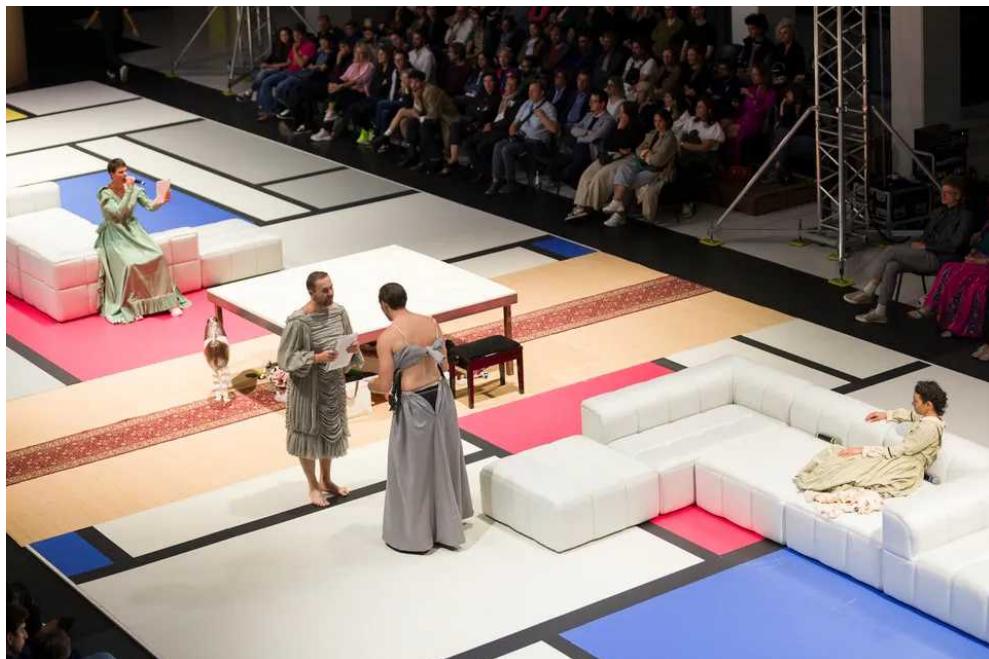
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Pop Rock

The sisters of the pop-rock band **Haim**, who are all multi-instrumentalists, began as members of a family cover band, and have since jelled into a unit that is as synthesized as it is referential. The trio's repertoire includes hooky Americana influenced by R. & B. ("Days Are Gone," from 2013), the soft rock of the eighties ("Something to Tell You," from 2017), and just about everything else on the monumental 2020 album "Women in Music Pt. III"— electro-pop, funk, country rock, even reggae. The band's new album, "I Quit," produced by Danielle Haim with Rostam Batmanglij, is even more eclectic, if a little chaotic—representative of a band that is eager to do everything and too talented not to try.—*Sheldon Pearce ([Madison Square Garden](#); Sept. 8.)*

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Dance



The vastness of the Park Avenue Armory can swallow dance performances that aren't appropriately scaled. But Trajal Harrell's "[Monkey Off My Back or the Cat's Meow](#)" was created for a cavernous space, the Schiffbau of the Schauspielhaus, in Zürich, where the American-born choreographer led a dance ensemble from 2019 to 2024. Like much of Harrell's work, this is a runway show in which Harrell presides (sometimes as Anna Wintour) over a large, diverse cast of dancers who strut the catwalk in a profusion of outré

outfits, mixing in voguing and Butoh. Here, the idea of freedom is introduced through recitations of the Declaration of Independence, and the difference between liberty and indulgence is in danger of being blurred.—*Brian Seibert ([Park Avenue Armory](#); Sept. 9-20.)*

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Broadway

“Bye-bye doesn’t mean forever,” the title song of the ABBA jukebox musical “[\*\*Mamma Mia!\*\*](#)” declares. So true—both for this megahit’s return to Broadway and for its single-mom heroine, Donna (Christine Sherrill). As a free-spirited rocker on a Greek island, she hooked up with three men one fateful summer in 1979; none stuck around, but one impregnated her. Which one? That’s what her daughter, Sophie (Amy Weaver), now twenty, aims to find out by inviting all three, sight unseen, to her wedding. The breezy absurdity of the plot hardly matters in the face of the show’s brio; like an ABBA banger, it sweeps you up in its emotional current, especially when Sherrill sings. Plus, there’s a chorus line in swim flippers.—D.S. ([\*Winter Garden\*](#); open run.)

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Movies



Robert Bresson's 1971 drama "**Four Nights of a Dreamer**" (now in a [new restoration](#)), a distinguished entry in the "kids these days" genre, borrows some nineteenth-century youths from Dostoyevsky's short story "White Nights." In the velvety elegance of Paris, Jacques (Guillaume des Forêts, nearly a Timothée Chalamet look-alike), a floppy-haired painter, dissuades Marthe (Isabelle Weingarten) from jumping into the Seine when her fiancé abandons her. Jacques—who follows women in the street, dictates romantic fantasies into a tape recorder, and plays them back to inspire his portraits—falls instantly in love with Marthe and, so, agrees to help her win her fiancé back. Bresson, tuning in to the times with wry views of rockers and hippies, exalts his protagonist's self-sacrificing devotion as untimely and sublime.—*Richard Brody ([Film Forum](#); Sept. 5-18.)*

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Classical

Studies have shown that listening to classical music can help relieve anxiety. (One might imagine that these investigations exclude dissonant works like "The Rite of Spring," Ligeti's "Devil's Staircase" étude, and most things by Xenakis.) The music series **MindTravel** wholeheartedly agrees with those findings: it aims to amplify the wellness benefits of music, combining performances with meditation and mindfulness practices. Continue your

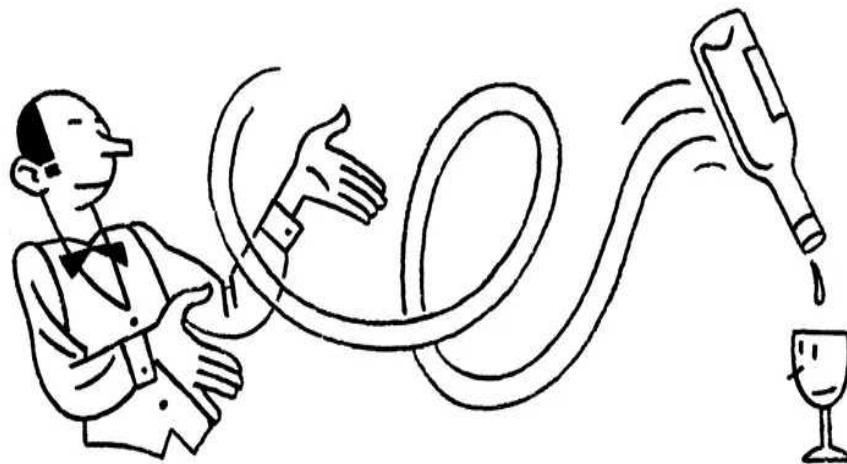
Labor Day relaxation into the week with a “silent” concert in Central Park. Each participant puts on headphones and listens to a minimalist composition being created in real time by the tech entrepreneur and theoretical-physics nerd Murray Hidary. You’ll have to bring your own blanket or chair, but the music may move you to leave it behind and float through the trees.—*Jane Bua* ([Naumburg Bandshell](#); Sept. 4.)

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Industrial Rock

For many years, the singer-songwriter Trent Reznor stood at the center of the industrial-rock band **Nine Inch Nails** as a one-man wrecking crew, singing out front while also playing most of the instruments and serving as a producer. N.I.N.’s 1989 début album, the synth-powered “Pretty Hate Machine,” established Reznor as a gifted polymath, but it was “The Downward Spiral” (1994) that defined the band’s moody sound, bridging techno, hard rock, and noise. Since 2016, Reznor has been joined by Atticus Ross, with whom he has composed several uncanny film scores. The “Peel It Back” tour plays directly into the eeriness of N.I.N.’s sonic ecosystem; set across two stages, 3-D images are projected to generate a hallucinatory environment.—*S.P.* ([Barclays Center](#); Sept. 2-3.)

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## Bar Tab

*Shauna Lyon finds rollicking country music and rockabilly blues at Lucinda's.*



A few weeks ago, a new bar co-owned by Lucinda Williams was launching in the East Village, and, this being New York City, it was sorta no big deal that Williams herself would be the opening-night headliner. [Lucinda's](#)—situated in the spot that was formerly HiFi, and before that Brownies, a tiny, quintessential rock-music venue that, from the eighties until 2002, hosted countless indie-rock acts on their way up (Cibo Matto, the Strokes, the Yeah Yeah Yeahs)—was now kitted out as a honky-tonk dive. The dingy walls were plastered with art work of Muddy Waters, Hank Williams, Sister Rosetta Tharpe; stained-glass pendant lights cast an amber glow over the bar and a few booths in the back. The house was packed, the bar was cash (a beer goes for eight or nine dollars; a glass of wine an undive-like fifteen), and Laura Cantrell, in an emerald top with dark-red hair and the voice of an angel, sang a few earnest country numbers. An hour or so later, Williams, fabulous at seventy-two, in a platinum-blond shag and New York City-black pants, jacket, and Converse, took the stage and ran down the concept: “That’s what this bar is all about: dirt and sweat. Dirty and sweaty.” Then she rasped and slithered into the rockabilly banger “Let’s Get the Band Back

Together,” kicking off a ten-song set while the crowd surged forward with screams and hoots. A couple weeks later, on a sparser Monday, there was more live music—part of the bar’s no-cover programming of bluegrass, country, and Delta blues. Brian (Howlin’) Hurd, of Daddy Long Legs, screeched and belted and played the hell out of his harmonica, sliding through several steel-guitar and stand-up-bass blues-rock numbers, with titles such as “My Baby Done Gone.” “There’s people two-stepping up there,” one patron, still in polite mode while sipping a Jameson on the rocks, observed. Soon, lone dancers joined the couples, swinging in Doc Martens and cowboy boots, muscle Ts and halter tops and jean skirts. “If I don’t go crazy, I will surely lose my mind,” Howlin’ Hurd growled, sounding not a little like Johnny Cash.

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## What to Watch

*Hua Hsu on movies to get you into a back-to-school mood.*



### **Bill and Ted’s Excellent Adventure (Stephen Herek, 1989)**

I am of the demographic that still pronounces Socrates “So-crates” because of this 1989 time-travel classic, wherein Bill and Ted, affable metalheads

behind on their history homework, transport some of humankind's inspirational (and slightly heinous) figures to their beloved San Dimas, California. The greatest bit of wisdom is their own: be excellent to each other.

### **A Brighter Summer Day** (Edward Yang, 1991)

Yang's gorgeous, sad movie looks back at what it was like to be young in the Taiwan of the nineteen-fifties and sixties, growing up alongside a new society but still beholden to the wild swings of passion and cruelty that cloud the horizons of all teen-agers.

### **Dazed and Confused** (Richard Linklater, 1993)

The greatest of all hangout movies. I have no idea how accurate Richard Linklater's coming-of-age tale was to life in Austin, Texas, in 1976, but it perfectly captures the desire to find your tribe, as well as that melancholy ecstasy of the last day of school—and the anticipation of the fall, to see who changed and who didn't.

### **Bring It On** (Peyton Reed, 2000)

A masterpiece of deeper-than-you-think teen cinema, "Bring It On" is a garishly fun story of rival cheerleading squads, full of cheers and routines that will get permanently etched in your brain. The movie also manages to deliver commentary on the wrongs of cultural theft. Bonus points for Cliff Pantone, an iconically late-nineties instantiation of the "edgy outsider" turned boyfriend material trope.

### **Bottoms** (Emma Seligman, 2023)

"Revenge of the Nerds," only it's two uncool lesbians—played by the generational talents Rachel Sennott and Ayo Edebiri—who aspire to make out with cheerleaders . . . so they start a fight club. A glorious reminder of what it is like to be young and absurd.

The Food Scene

# New York City, Taco Town

A new wave of excellent spots, such as Santo Taco and Tacos 1986, has transformed the landscape.

By Helen Rosner

August 24, 2025



Despite considerable evidence to the contrary, conventional wisdom has long held that New York City simply isn't a taco town. Pablito's Taqueria, in Sunset Park; Taqueria Al Pastor, in Bushwick; the Birria-Landia truck in Jackson Heights; Taqueria Sinaloense, in the Bronx, with its shrimp-packed tacos *gobernador*—these places aren't secrets. Their businesses thrive; their customers are profoundly well served. Recently, however, something has shifted: a new wave of ambitious, modern taquerias have punctured the idea that the only tacos worth talking about are in the outer reaches of the outer boroughs.



Santo Taco, one of the newest of the newcomers, opened this spring, in a sliver-slim SoHo space that previously housed La Esquina's taqueria, whose primary function was as a street-facing decoy for the glamorous restaurant hidden downstairs. La Esquina *abajo* remains open, but Santo Taco, unlike its predecessor, is very much its own raison d'être. A renovation has sleeked up the interior, but it's primarily an outdoor restaurant. Ordering happens at a walk-up window, and the best place to sit is at the sidewalk tables, perhaps while sipping goldfinch-yellow agua fresca, a not-too-sweet blend of pineapple and cucumber. Even the line feels engaging—the queue moves quickly, allowing you to watch taco construction in action through the windows. The star of the kitchen is the steak *trompo*, a huge beehive of strip and sirloin steaks skewered on a vertical spit, glossy with fat. When a *trompo* taco is ordered, a cook brandishes a knife of ferocious sharpness, shaving a thin, broad piece large enough to overhang the corn tortilla it's laid upon.



The *trompo* is worth ordering for the visuals alone, even if the flavor of the meat, seasoned only with salt, nearly vanishes between the tortilla's dusky masa sweetness and a tangy, pond-green salsa of avocado and tomatillos. I'd more heartily recommend the carnitas, a straightforwardly wonderful taco of pork ribs and belly slow-cooked until a collapsing mess, or my favorite, surprisingly—the mushroom taco. Too often a vegetarian afterthought, here it's beautifully complex, with moody, silken petals of creminis and shiitakes. With apologies to vegetarians, I loved it topped with crushed chicharrón from the self-serve salsa station, a crunchy contrast to the shrooms' slippery softness.



Santo Taco is owned by Santiago Perez, a Mexico City native. He's a partner in the restaurant group of the famed chef Enrique Olvera, who's not involved with Santo Taco, but who last year dropped another pin on the new-wave map. Esse Taco, in Williamsburg, draws on some of Olvera's other restaurants: pineapple butter melting over the tacos *al pastor*, a corn-husk ice-cream sundae that calls back to Cosme's iconic dessert. More for the map: Esse isn't far from Greenpoint's Taquería El Chato, where you can get a striking *tripa* taco (crispy, toothsome, lashed with salsas); a few blocks farther still is the sunny Taqueria Ramirez, where the tacos *suadero* are like velvet, and the carnitas so magnificent that they were spun off into their own restaurant, Carnitas Ramirez, in the East Village. Tacos 1986—known as one of L.A.'s best taquerias, which is saying something—expanded to the West Village last month, with Tijuana-style tacos (and Tijuana-style late-night operating hours); their aromatic corn tortillas are rolled out and cooked just moments before being loaded up with fillings like carne asada and pork *adobada*.



## Helen, Help Me!

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

What most connects these taquerias, besides their newness, is a style of visual communication: through choices of décor and typography—and, importantly, their geographic positioning, in hip, youthful, often central neighborhoods—they signal coolness to a particular audience. I recently spoke with the taco scholar José Ralat, who placed this in a trend he calls Orinocofication, after Taqueria Orinoco, a slick Monterrey-born chain that's swept Mexico with what Ralat described as a tourist-catnip approach of “design first, food second.” But the new batch of New York taquerias, while awfully pretty, are also all quite good on the food front; a few, like El Chato and the Ramirezes, are truly spectacular. A bizarre portion do happen to be fronts for speakeasies: pass through Tacos 1986 to reach a soon-to-open restaurant and bar; the Mexico City import Cariñito Tacos, in Greenwich Village, whose menu is inspired by Southeast Asian flavors, has a secret mezcaleria hidden in the back. But, as with Santo, the establishments themselves are terrific taquerias, plain and simple: ultra-casual, fast-moving spots to grab some food that you'll devour in seconds, eating the taco the way a taco is meant to be eaten: hot and drippy and fast. ♦

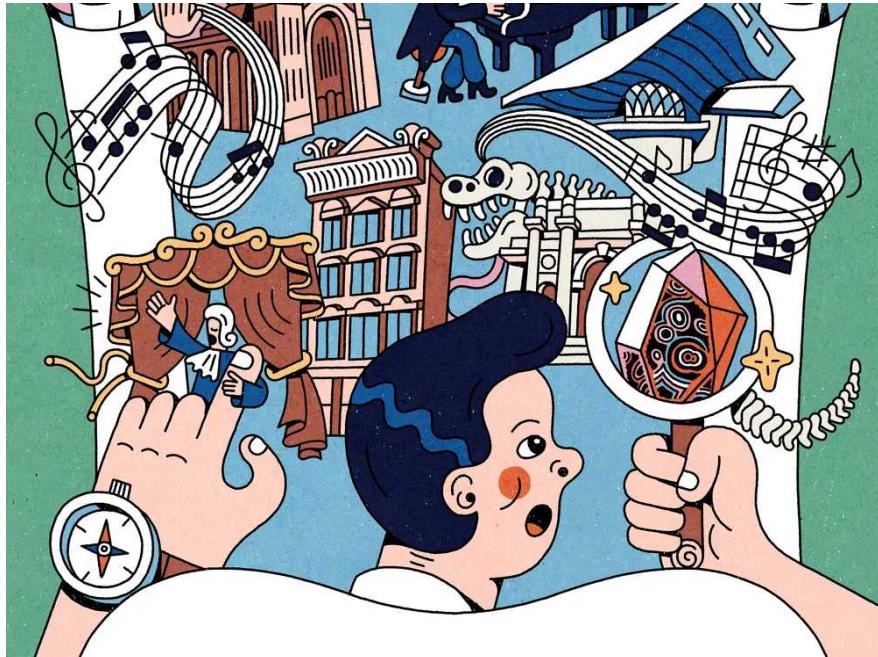
Going On

# Local Gems: Cultural Institutions

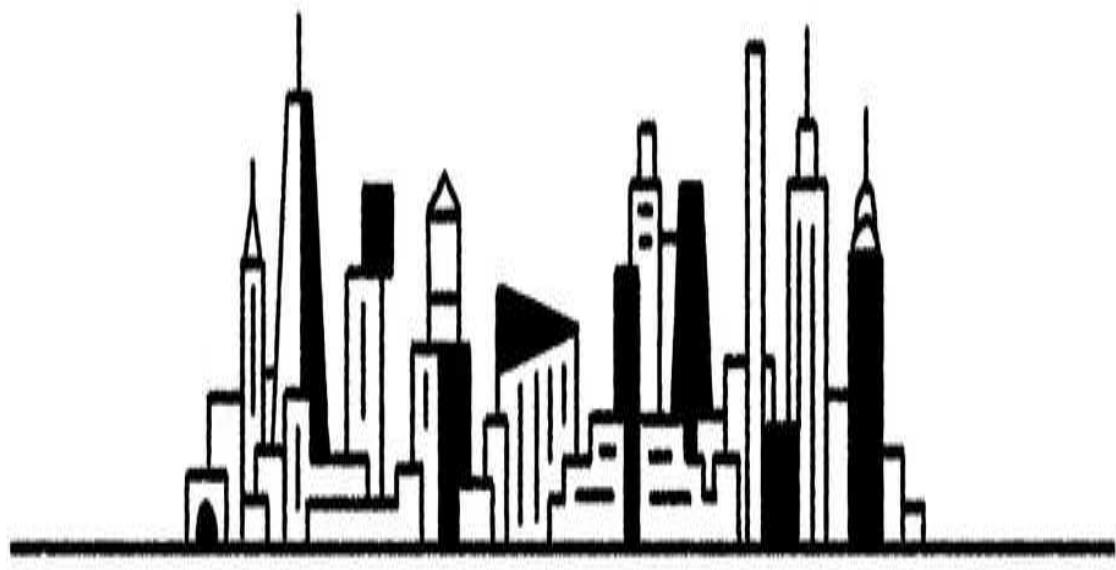
Favorite spots near and far.

By Paige Williams, Katy Waldman, Jane Bua, Justin Chang, Helen Shaw

August 29, 2025



On the occasion of our third centenary issue—this one culture-themed—we asked our writers to share one of their most treasured cultural institutions, big or small. Whether it's a beloved stone in a storied hall of gems and minerals, a soaring cinema in Korea, or an invaluable downtown fixture, these are places that bring inspiration, joy, and comfort.—*Shauna Lyon*



## About Town

### New York City

On your next visit to Manhattan's American Museum of Natural History, head to the **Allison and Roberto Mignone Halls of Gems and Minerals**

and have a look at the opals. In the Victorian era, opal got cancelled, in part, because the novelist Sir Walter Scott created a character who died while wearing one. And, O.K., opal is softer than, say, diamond, whose diabolical merchants contributed to opal's tarnished reputation. But the stone was good enough for Shakespeare; in "Twelfth Night," he called it the "queen of gems." Because the opal's structure contains water, it is susceptible to dehydration, creating "crazing," an effect that gives only the *appearance* of flaws. Sign me up! Opals come in gumdrop red, kitten-nose pink. My favorites are the oceanic greens and blues, one of which reminds me of a Rothko. This is what the Earth is up to while we're all on Instagram.—*Paige Williams*

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## Washington, D.C.

As of this summer, I'm no longer a Washington, D.C., local, but I'll draft on the fumes of my Beltway years to recommend a perfect workspace: the **Kogod Courtyard**, in the National Portrait Gallery. Hardly a secret, it's true, but the combination of light, air, and cathedral acoustics (not to mention being free to the public) is hard to beat. Kogod's defining feature is its roof, a wavelike structure that seems to flutter like a curtain of glass over the tree boxes and a wafer-thin reflecting pool created by Kathryn Gustafson. (Norman Foster designed the atrium.) There's an ambient hum of conversation that I haven't found distracting; if anything, the reverberant quality of people's voices makes the space feel pure and pensive. But, for true head-down days, the Luce Center on the third floor offers gratis coffee, electrical outlets galore, and pristine quiet.—*Katy Waldman*

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## New York City

On the northwest corner of a Hundred and Fourteenth Street and Broadway, next to a Starbucks and down the block from a primary school, rests the pocket-sized **Broadway Presbyterian Church**. Unlike its sprawling neighbor, Riverside Church, a few streets over, Broadway Presbyterian stands humbly on a fraction of sidewalk, with a mere four stairs leading up to its fire-engine-red doors. But inside is a vibrant sanctuary for classical music. Radial pews of dark wood sit below stained-glass windows and contemporary art; performances range from Baroque standards to new

modern jewels. The church frequently hosts concerts by Music for Food, an initiative dedicated to combatting food insecurity: admission is free, but donations go to Broadway Community, a local organization that serves those experiencing homelessness and poverty in New York City. Small church, big impact.—*Jane Bua*

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## Busan, South Korea

The **Busan Cinema Center**, in the seaside city of Busan, South Korea, is one of the great architectural wonders of the moviegoing world. During my occasional trips to the Busan International Film Festival, I have spent many happy hours wandering around the center—a wild modernist colossus, designed by the Austrian firm Coop Himmelb(l)au. My fondest memory is of one fall night in 2018, at the center’s outdoor theatre—sitting there shivering in the chilly night air, staring up at an enormous undulated ceiling studded with rainbow-hued L.E.D. lights, before the crowd fell silent for a piano performance by the great Ryuichi Sakamoto, an honoree that year. There are certainly warmer, more comfortable venues to see a movie, but few others so powerfully project the notion of cinema as a destination, or imbue the act of watching a film with such a spirit of grandeur.—*Justin Chang*

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## New York City

Much of New York City’s boom-period performance topography has been demolished and snazzified—CBGB is a fancy shoe shop now, and House of Candles is a restaurant. But **La Mama**, founded in 1961, seems only busier, brighter, and stronger: what was once Ellen Stewart’s performance “club” (so-called to get around uptight municipal rules) has grown into a beautiful, Escheresque complex on East Fourth Street. One day, standing in the lobby, a door I had never noticed opened, and I saw into Narnia: the theatre’s overflowing, maze-like treasury—a stunning fifty-year archive that includes pearl-draped costumes, enormous wooden-jointed puppets, letters from theatre royalty, set pieces from the city’s experimental heyday. La MaMa’s founding archivist, the much beloved Ozzie Rodriguez, passed away this July, but his long stewardship of the city’s performance history lives on—

and, unlike Narnia, his magic kingdom is available to anyone who makes an appointment.—*Helen Shaw*

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## A New Yorker Quiz

*It was a big week for beloved musicians; test your knowledge about these performers.*

**Which megawatt pop star announced her engagement this week?** Hint: “She’s such a good songwriter,” Jia Tolentino wrote in 2016, “never letting a syllable [fall out of place](#).”

**Which K-pop group hit No. 1 on Billboard’s Hot 100?** Hint: the band is actually a fictional headliner from a movie that also includes, as Kyle Chayka writes, “cutesy animal sidekicks, binges of instant ramyeon, anime stylization, and [ass-kicking action sequences](#).”

**Which rock-and-roll legend celebrated fifty years since his landmark album?** Hint: “He remains dispiritingly handsome,” David Remnick notes, “[preposterously fit](#).”

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

- [\*Birds of a feather\*](#)
- [\*New York’s great trees\*](#)
- [\*How to be happy, according to Jemima Kirke\*](#)

# The Talk of the Town

- [The Trump Administration’s Efforts to Reshape America’s Past](#)
- [Zohran Mamdani Talks Love and Deuce with Some New Friends](#)
- [“We Are the World,” January 6th Style](#)
- [Fred Armisen Goes Bang! Zip! Zoop!](#)
- [Sweating and Storytelling in a Williamsburg Sauna](#)

Comment

# The Trump Administration's Efforts to Reshape America's Past

Ahead of next year's two-hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, the White House has issued a directive to the Smithsonian.

By Jill Lepore

August 25, 2025



In 1976, the year the United States celebrated its bicentennial, Donald J. Trump, thirty, leonine, and three-piece-suited, was chauffeured around Manhattan by an armed laid-off city cop in a silver Cadillac with "DJT" plates, while talking on his hot-shot car phone and making deals. "He could sell sand to the Arabs and refrigerators to the Eskimos," an architect told the *Times*. That architect was drawing up plans for a convention center that Trump hoped to build in midtown. Trump called it the "Miracle on 34th Street," promising a cultural showpiece, with fountains, pools, a giant movie theatre, half a million square feet of exhibition space, and rooftop solar panels.

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## The Culture Industry: A Centenary Issue

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On the Fourth of July of that red-white-and-blue year, the Tall Ships—a flotilla of more than two hundred vessels from more than a dozen countries—sailed into New York Harbor. Three days later, Trump was in Washington, D.C., presenting to the city's redevelopment board his plan to build another gargantuan convention center, this one near the U.S. Capitol. Encountering stiff resistance, according to the *Evening Star*, a visibly “miffed” Trump left the meeting “in a huff.”

The paper did not report whether, before leaving D.C., Trump stopped by the Smithsonian’s Museum of History and Technology to tour its thirty-five-thousand-square-foot bicentennial exhibition, “A Nation of Nations.” Five years in the making, it told the twinned stories of American union and disunion with five thousand objects, from a Ute flute and Muhammad Ali’s boxing gloves to a Klan robe and a sign that read “Japs Keep Out You Rats.” The show aimed to demonstrate how people “came to America, from prehistoric times to the present,” and “how experiences in the new land changed them.”

It is also unknown whether Trump, huffy and miffed, walked along the National Mall to see the Smithsonian's Bicentennial Festival of American Folklife, the product of years of field work conducted on a scale not seen since the nineteen-thirties. One field worker, for instance, found a Cajun crawfish peeler in Louisiana, and recommended giving her a booth: "She can peel very fast." The festival featured what organizers described as a "cultural sea" of cooks, dancers, and artisans; musicians, from fife-and-drum bands to Ghanaian gonje players; and a truckers' "roadeo." Margaret Mead called it "a people-to-people celebration" that revealed how Americans "have links—through people—to the whole world."

Neither of Trump's lavish bicentennial projects came to pass. In September, 1976, a little more than a year after the Trump family business settled a lawsuit alleging that it had refused to rent to Black and Puerto Rican tenants in housing complexes in Brooklyn and Queens, marking their rental applications "C" for "colored" (the company settled without admitting wrongdoing), Trump's father was arrested in Maryland and briefly jailed, having been charged with housing-code violations in apartments he rented to primarily Black tenants. (The elder Trump pleaded no contest and paid a fine.) And D.J.T., having sought tax abatements and municipal subsidies, lost out in his bids to build convention centers in New York and D.C. The Tall Ships sailed away. The moment passed.

This summer, in advance of next year's two-hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, the Trump White House sent a letter to the secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, announcing its intention to conduct an extensive review of all semiquincentennial plans. The review will require the museums to provide the President with information including "internal guidelines used in exhibition development"; "exhibition text, wall didactics, websites, educational materials, and digital and social media content"; and "proposed artwork, descriptive placards, exhibition catalogs, event themes, and lists of invited speakers and events." The Administration, deploying the same strategy that it has used in menacing and extorting universities, did not specify in the letter how it intends to review these materials, or what standards it will apply. It did say that the purpose is to "ensure alignment with the President's directive to celebrate American exceptionalism, remove divisive or partisan narratives, and restore confidence in our shared cultural institutions," with "historically

accurate, uplifting, and inclusive portrayals of America’s heritage” and especially of “Americanism—the people, principles, and progress that define our nation.” That the President of the United States doesn’t get to decide what is true and what is not is apparently no longer among those principles.

Even before the White House announced the review, the Presidential purge of American cultural institutions had begun. Trump sacked the national archivist, the Librarian of Congress, and the board of the Kennedy Center, and said, on social media, that he had fired the director of the National Portrait Gallery. (He lacks the authority to do so, but she subsequently resigned.) His Administration killed the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, hobbled the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Endowment for the Arts, and cut federal funding to thousands of state and local programs that support arts and music education for children.

The Smithsonian letter followed an executive order called “Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History,” one of whose directives is “Saving Our Smithsonian,” by “seeking to remove improper ideology” from its museums. The Smithsonian’s twenty-one institutions, whose role in the culture of the nation is invaluable and unparalleled, have had their share of lame exhibits and programs over the years, including a few that have been torridly inflamed by ideological ardor, as is true of any museum or cultural organization. That is the nature of culture. But it’s not in the nature of democracy for the government to intimidate and censor curators who have spent years preparing to do the always difficult and critical work of telling the nation’s story.

“Perhaps our most significant achievement as a nation is the very fact that we are one people,” the Smithsonian proclaimed in a press release in the spring of 1976, at the opening of “A Nation of Nations.” “So many ancient and modern states composed of conflicting tribes, languages, and religious factions have failed to unite and remain whole.” How has this country lasted so long? the Smithsonian asked. “How is it that people representing cultures and traditions of literally every part of the world could come to think of themselves as one nation of Americans?” Those questions wouldn’t pass muster with this White House. They’re still excellent questions, though. How *has* this lasted so long? ♦

On the Hustings

# Zohran Mamdani Talks Love and Deuce with Some New Friends

The mayoral candidate and social-media whiz hit the bleachers at the U.S. Open for a new kind of social-media gambit: the fan meetup.

By Zach Helfand

August 25, 2025



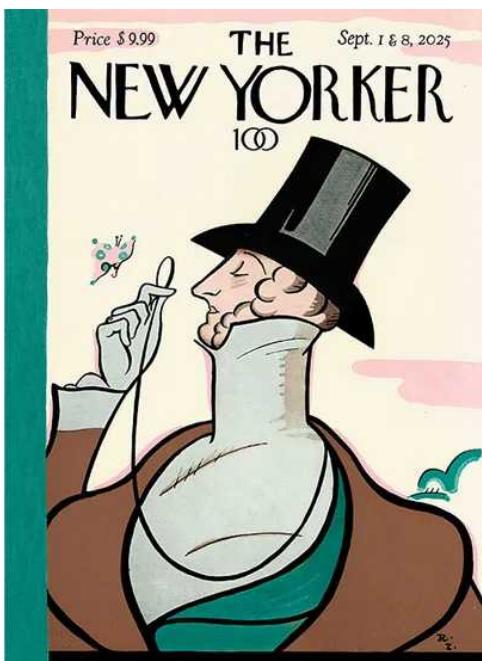
If, as Mario Cuomo once said, you campaign in poetry and you govern in prose, then New York's mayoral race has birthed some new kind of TikTokian free verse. Andrew Cuomo, the candidate for the Fight and Deliver Party, which was recently invented by Andrew Cuomo, said that Zohran Mamdani defeated him in the Democratic primary because of social media. Now Cuomo posts candid videos and replies to random users on X. Eric Adams, the candidate for the Safe & Affordable Party, which was recently invented by Eric Adams, has always campaigned, governed, and generally lived life in poetry, of a sort. (He once described New York as "a place where every day you wake up you could experience everything from a plane crashing into our Trade Center to a person who's celebrating a new

business.”) Yet even he has tried to copy Mamdani’s virality. “He was never a candidate,” Adams observed, of Mamdani. “He was a social-media influencer.”

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## The Culture Industry: A Centenary Issue

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Is the influencer candidate feeling threatened? Last week, he experimented with a new form—the fan meetup. “I talk a lot about how expensive New York City is,” he said on Instagram. “But, right now, there are actually a few fun and free things happening across these five boroughs.” He would visit one later that day. The first twenty-five people to message him received an invite, with a time and a location: the U.S. Open, for the first day of qualifying.

Mamdani showed up in a white shirt, a brown tie, and a clip-on mike. He smiled permanently. He was mobbed instantly. He posed for selfies with kids in face paint, grandmothers, and a guy in a Dennis Rodman shirt. He signed giant tennis balls. Two teen-age girls, joining a crowd trailing him, giggled and teared up. Handlers circled. Mamdani walked very fast. A videographer, walking backward, hustled to stay ahead of him.

Mamdani made his way to Court 11 for a women's qualifying match. "Is this seat taken?" he asked a spectator. ("My best friend is one of Cuomo's closest advisers," the spectator said later. "My wife took a selfie and immediately texted it to him. He hasn't said a word.") A staffer raced to the other side of the court for a wide shot of Mamdani in the crowd.

Almost all the Instagram winners appeared to be younger than twenty-five, though one young woman had brought her dad, who was visiting from out of town. Another had come directly from soccer practice. A third, with a Band-Aid on her elbow, announced that she'd come from the hospital. "I was scrolling on Instagram waiting for the next doctor," she said.

Mamdani explained that the idea for the meetup had been inspired by an old website that listed the top ten free things to do in New York. "In high school, me and my friends went to a senior-citizen art exhibit," he said. "They had free appetizers. It was them and their families—and us." A new hobby, which he recently revealed, is cemetery walks. "It came off a little more goth than I intended," he said. "It's just that, if I go to a park, people come up and talk, which is lovely, but I like to think as I walk."

Last month, Mamdani posted a video from a Wu-Tang Clan concert. He said, "There was one guy who was, like, 'Yo, can you take a photo?' I was, like, 'Yeah, for sure.' Right before he took the photo, he just flipped me off in the selfie. It's New York City, baby!"

The attendees were eager to discuss Mamdani's videos. "I want to shout you out for the one where you spoke Spanish," the Band-Aid woman said. "My family in Mexico, they think you're a native Spanish speaker."

"The Bollywood commercial, that one was my favorite," a man named Sarfraz said. In that post, Mamdani had explained ranked-choice voting in Urdu/Hindi, using cups of lassi as props.

Someone asked if Cuomo might copy his U.S. Open idea. "Who knows?" Mamdani said. "He's on a bit of a tape delay."

But Mamdani was interested in the tennis. (Favorite player of all time? Juan Martín del Potro.) When he learned that his guests were tennis novices, he

launched into a rundown of serves, games, sets, advantage, and strategy. “The points go fifteen, then thirty, then forty,” he said. “If the other person is also at forty, it becomes something called deuce.”

Someone suggested that this could be Mamdani’s next explainer video. He nodded and said, “You guys might be in it.”

“Are you serious?” the soccer player asked. “This is actually a dream of mine.” An aide told Mamdani that it was time to go. Everyone took selfies, then Mamdani posed for a group shot and left. Some members of the group were still in the bleachers when the photo appeared on Mamdani’s Instagram account, with the caption “My new IG friends IRL.” ♦

Dept. of Remixes

# “We Are the World,” January 6th Style

In a Miami studio where the Eagles and Bob Marley recorded, a choir of pardoned Capitol rioters tries to “reclaim” the national anthem.

By Charles Bethea

August 25, 2025



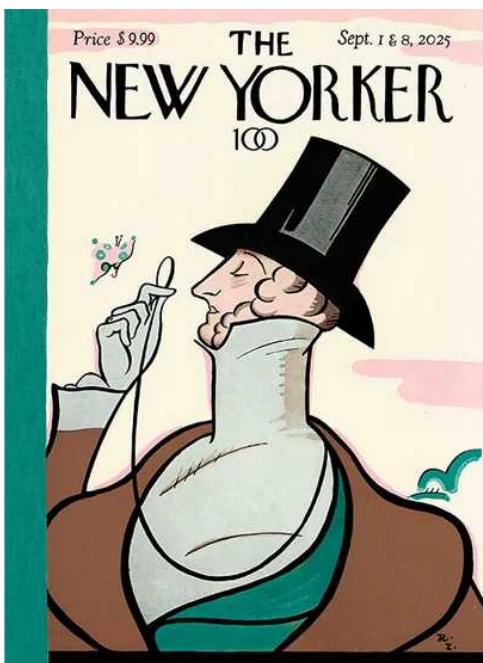
Criteria Recording Studios, in North Miami, is where the Eagles laid down “Hotel California,” Bob Marley sang “Could You Be Loved,” and Lil Wayne mixed “Tha Carter III.” An unfamiliar name recently appeared on the studio schedule: the Real J6 LLC. “I just thought it was some band,” a session observer said the other day. On the first of the new client’s two days at Criteria, a young pianist came in and recorded the national anthem. Odd, the observer, a clean-shaven man, thought, but not remarkable. “Then this guy L.J. came up,” he recalled. “He started to talk about how he was close with Trump, and how he’s been working on this for a long time.” L.J. referred to an existing recording of the national anthem that “wasn’t good because some of the people singing were in jail,” the observer continued. “And that’s when

everything started to connect in my head. I was, like, ‘Oh, I see what that is.’” (A group of about twenty men calling themselves the J6 Prison Choir had recorded the anthem over a prison phone in 2023; the resulting song was briefly No. 1 on iTunes.) L.J. said that a group would lay down new vocals two days later.

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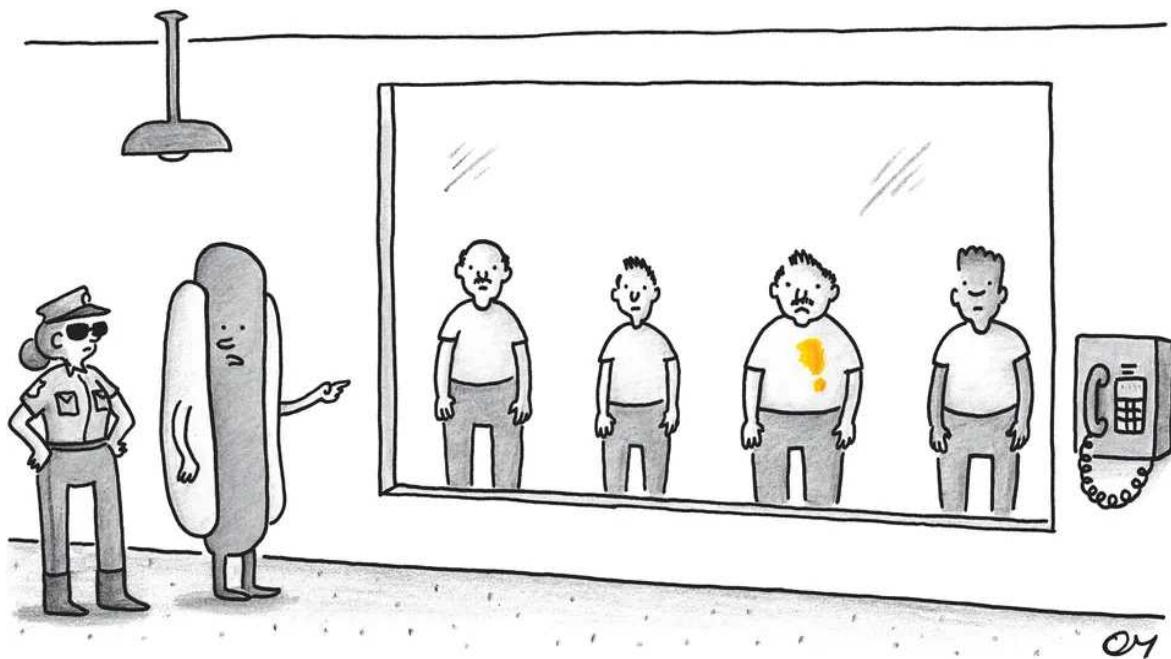
On the day of the recording, around forty people, all participants in the January 6th Capitol riot who had been convicted and later pardoned, began showing up, many of them in pickup trucks. When it became clear who they were, another session observer, this one shaggy, decided to head for a bathroom stall. “I texted a group chat that I have with my family,” the man, who is close with many immigrants, said. “I was, like, ‘This is the most pathetic fucking shit.’”

Enrique Tarrio, the leader of the Proud Boys, who was sentenced to twenty-two years for seditious conspiracy before his pardoning, was among the singing insurrectionists. He was wearing a black hat and sunglasses, and an L.A. Raiders tee under a flannel shirt. “I heard him say his name, one of the only ones that wasn’t Caucasian,” the clean-shaven observer said. Shane

Jenkins, a burly Texas man, nicknamed Skullet for his bald head and mullet, wore a white polo shirt, jeans, and white boots. “Everybody was kind of listening to him, and he was explaining what to do, when to start singing and stuff,” the clean-shaven observer added.

The group had brought in a producer named Danny Keys, who had worked with Rick Ross, John Legend, and Nas. It was left to Keys to try to corral the insurrectionists, who were day-drinking in the lobby. “Some were dressed in full *MAGA*, the whole shebang,” the shaggy observer said. “Cowboy hats, jorts, cowboy boots—kind of Bubba J from Jeff Dunham. American-flag button-ups.” Two dogs accompanied them: “Really fluffy and tiny.” And there was smoke. “A little weed,” the clean-shaven observer said. “That’s normal in the studio, but it felt a bit weird, just being the type of people it was.”

The members of the insurrectionist chorus posed for pictures as they milled around. A pardoned real-estate agent from Texas named Jenna Ryan (she’d compared her sentencing to the treatment of “Jews in Germany”) held up her phone and filmed; a fellow-chorister cracked, “I know you don’t know the words to this song.”



“Most of them hadn’t seen one another since they went to jail, before they got sent out to federal prison,” the shaggy observer said. “Everyone was hugging.”

“One said that while he was in jail he met his ‘brothers’ and became a Proud Boy,” the clean-shaven observer noted. “And I overheard some of them talking about Trump 2028. Another said, ‘It’ll be King Trump.’ ” The shaggy one added, “I heard someone talking about how Trump needed to do more to drain the swamp.”

There were two songs on the set list: the national anthem, remixed in what one of the J6ers termed the “freedom version,” and a spoken-word song called “Anthem of the Free.” Six microphones had been positioned to capture twenty voices at a time. Some of the singers read the words to the national anthem off lyrics sheets; others checked their phones.

Only a few women sang, so the chorus had a deep, rumbling sound. “It wasn’t going to be the most musical thing ever,” the clean-shaven observer said. “But I don’t think that was their goal, really. It was just a group of people yelling, who didn’t see the contradiction between what they were singing—what it stands for—and what they did.” ♦

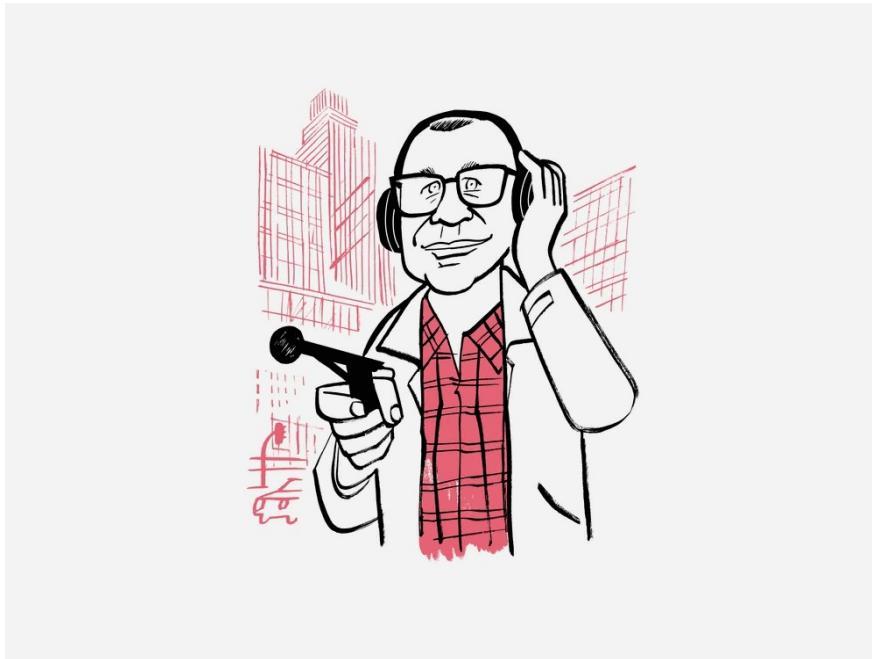
Surround Sound

# Fred Armisen Goes Bang! Zip! Zoop!

The latest album from the musical “S.N.L.” alum is a compilation of sound effects, including such tracks as “Obligatory Applause at a Speech” and “Tentative Sawing.”

By Michael Schulman

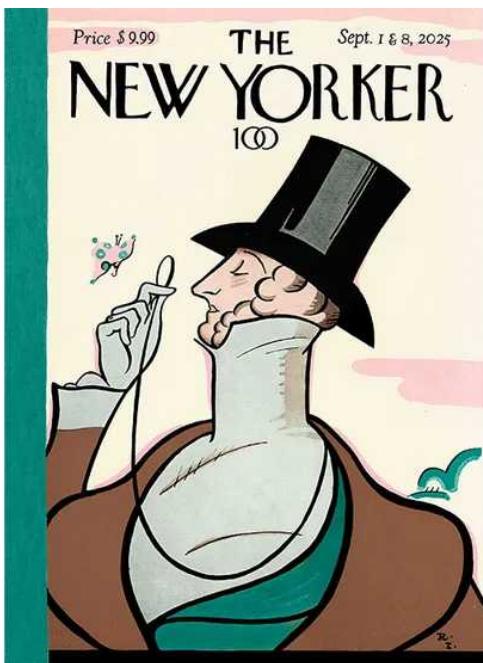
August 25, 2025



The actor and comedian Fred Armisen phoned the front desk from his room at a midtown hotel the other day, and asked the clerk to call right back. “I’m not going to pick up,” he explained. “I’ll just let it ring for a little bit, if you don’t mind.” Moments later, the phone rang—a rattly landline *brrring*—and Armisen recorded it with a mike. “That’s useful,” he said, pleased.

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**The Culture Industry: A Centenary Issue**  
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Armisen, whose comedic confections include the hipster-utopia sketch show “Portlandia” and the Netflix special “Standup for Drummers,” spent months considering sounds and their subtexts for his latest project, an album called “100 Sound Effects,” which Drag City will release next month. He tried to capture subtleties: How does the metallic slam of a rental-car door differ from the polite click of a fancy car service dropping you off? Other tracks include “Obligatory Applause at a Speech,” “Tentative Sawing,” and “Band Sound Check Sound Guy and Band Agreeing for Too Long.” (“If you’re happy, I’m happy.”)

“I was lamenting that there aren’t sound-effects albums in our lives as much, or in my life,” Armisen said. “I feel like they used to exist more.” Growing up, he had Halloween albums with spooky sounds which you could play at a haunted house. His own record features such specialized tracks as “Haunted House Ghost but Nobody Is Home” (a lonely little *raaaaah*).

He created most of the effects at a recording studio in L.A., using classic Foley methods like crinkling plastic to simulate the crackling of a campfire. Others he captured in the field. While working in Dublin, Armisen noticed that Irish washer-dryers sounded different from American ones, so he recorded his laundry’s strange succession of beeps, boops, and thrums (“European Small Dryer with Some Confusion”). In the unlikely event that

any sound editor is in need of such an effect, the album is available for production purposes. “In reality,” he said, “I picture someone playing it for a friend.”

Armisen has always been attuned to sound. “My dad’s from Germany and my mom’s from Venezuela, and we lived in Brazil for a little bit, so there was a lot of deciphering how people talk,” he said. Long Island, where he spent much of his childhood, had the classic sounds of American suburbia: the chime of a pizzeria door opening, the *chk-chk-chk* of a sprinkler. Brazil sounded completely different, with samba musicians practicing in the streets. In the eighties, Armisen started drumming for the punk band Trenchmouth and spent a lot of time listening to guitars being tuned. “Saturday Night Live,” where he worked for eleven seasons, had its own sonic particularities, like the hiss of the equipment right before the cold open. He learned to distinguish subspecies of laughter: delighted “*bah!*”s when a big star makes a surprise cameo, hesitant “*heh-heh*”s as a high-concept sketch revs up, relieved “*ha!*”s when the concept pays off. “My early days of doing comedy was dead silence, and I was perfectly fine with it,” he said.

While visiting New York, a city of copious noises, Armisen set out for some field work. Armed with his mike, he took the hotel elevator (*hummm*) and passed the sound of a concierge giving directions. On a corner, he recorded an A.T.M. transaction, which ended with the whirr of cash being dispensed and a bouncy corporate jingle. Sixth Avenue was a racket: sirens, babbling tourists, the scraping of a woman’s walker. He stopped at a crosswalk button on Fifty-seventh Street, which blared, “Wait! Wait! *Ta-ta-ta-ta*. *Blip! Blip! Blip!*” “This thing used to make a horrible sound,” Armisen recalled. “Something was malfunctioning, and it sounded like a monster for years.”

At Central Park South, he was hoping to capture the clop of a horse’s hoof, but the coachmen were unobliging, so he re-created the sound by banging a sunglasses case on a wooden railing. The Park offered a cornucopia of noises: a helicopter overhead, a woman ordering a crêpe from a truck. “This is ‘Looking Through a Cooler for a Soda That Isn’t There,’ ” Armisen said, rummaging around in the truck’s beverage case. Then, there were the sounds of fans recognizing him, which could be roughly categorized as male (a quick “Love your work”) and female (a gentle “*Love you!*”). A man asked

his toddler to show Armisen how she could growl like a dinosaur, and she roared sweetly into the mike.

Passing under an arch, Armisen came across a shirtless fiddle player. The guy said that the acoustics in a tunnel closer to the zoo were better. “This one, it’s too wet this summer, but it’s usually tuned to D,” he added. He played a Cajun tune, then a bluegrass number.

Armisen left the fiddler a twenty from the A.T.M. Contemplating the sounds of the world, he said, “It’s pretty wild how uncontrolled everything is.” Then he walked off into the afternoon din. ♦

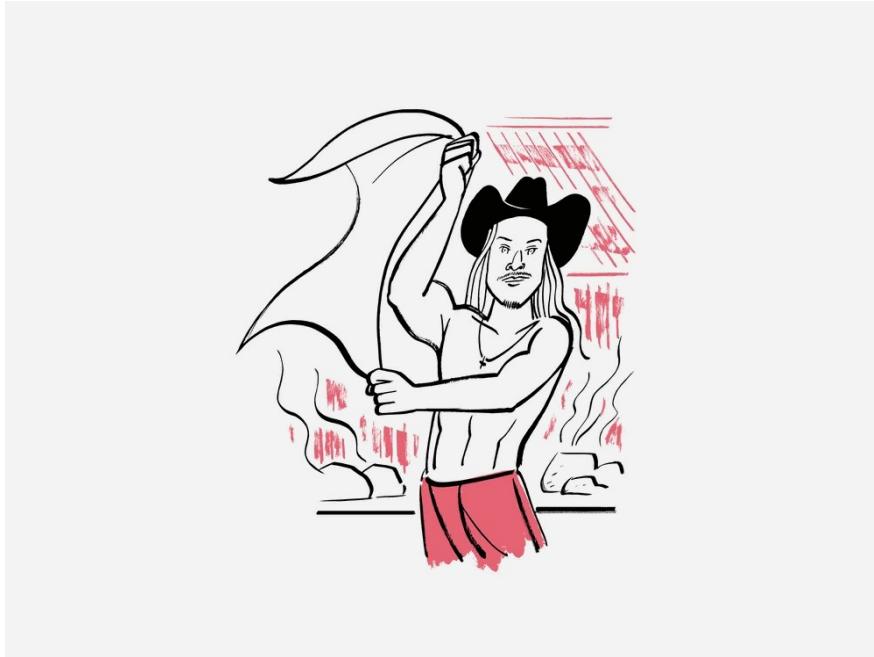
Storytelling Dept.

# Sweating and Storytelling in a Williamsburg Sauna

Aufguss: a world championship for twirling a really hot towel.

By Leslie Jamison

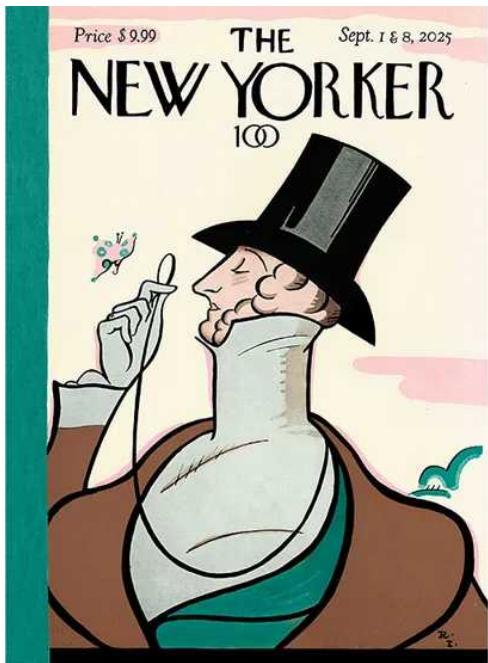
August 25, 2025



On the hottest day in New York City in a decade, nearly a hundred people crowded into a hundred-and-seventy-degree sauna in a converted brewery in Williamsburg for the first U.S. National Aufguss Competition. An Aufguss—from the German word for “infusion”—is a ritual sauna ceremony that lasts for twelve to fifteen minutes. A sauna master fills the room with carefully curated scents by dropping snowballs containing essential oils onto hot rocks—the Finnish word for the resulting plume of steam is *loyly*—and waves a towel to distribute heat through the room. Alonzo Solórzano, the twenty-nine-year-old director of Aufguss at Bathhouse, where the competition took place, likes to say, “My job is to make the room very, *very* hot. And I like my job.”

## The Culture Industry: A Centenary Issue

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The ritual dates back thousands of years, but it has recently seen a surge in popularity; an Aufguss World Championship has been held every September for the past decade. (The United States will participate in this year's championship, in Verona, Italy.) Competitors are graded on five categories, ranging from Professionalism ("Eye contact, connection with audience, fitness condition") to Increase and Distribution of the Heat. Towel-waving involves an intricate flow of flips, curls, and twirls, each with its own name: helicopter, dirty copter, pizza, super8. The nationals showcased a specialty called Theatre Aufguss, in which the contestant performs a dramatic narrative. As a regular put it, "It's Kabuki in the heat."

In a big brick-walled central chamber of Bathhouse which still smelled of hops, the crowd was chattering: a sauna master had run head first into a door and given himself a bloody nose. It was the second day of competition, and the final three Aufguss competitors were the most (yes) hotly anticipated: Alexi and Joli Irvine (known as the Vegas Sisters); Travis Talmadge (a Bathhouse founder), who would be performing a piece about the C.I.A. testing psychedelics on civilians; and Solórzano, who would do a "dusty Western" in which he played a cowboy trying to escape his own violent

habits. (Solórzano likes to wear a cowboy hat even when he's not playing a cowboy, usually with a gold cross and a Speedo.) "A lot of Theatre Aufguss is campy," he said later. "But being that viscerally involved in the heat—literally breathing the story into your body with the scents—it all brings you more deeply into it."

Before the ceremony began, a Malaysian judge led an opening chant. He counted down from three, and everyone cried, "Aufguss!" He counted back up to three, and everyone cried, "Family!" The Vegas Sisters, in rhinestone-covered bodysuits, went first, playing out a mythic story of sororal affection and rivalry, their snowballs alternating between "hot" scents (blood orange, cinnamon) and "cold" ones (pine, peppermint, eucalyptus). Their synchronized towel-waving was topped only by their synchronized double-towel-waving: a towel in each hand, a whirling maelstrom of terry cloth. Afterward, a spectator said, "Very Vegas, all the way." Her companion replied, "I liked it best when they weren't getting along. Their hostile dancing was incredible."

Next came Solórzano, who performed in a leather jacket, throwing his first snowball from a cocktail shaker—a blend of cedar, benzoin, and cardamom which conjured the smell of whiskey. To a soundtrack of ragtime and death-metal bluegrass, he waved his towel with muscular grace, using it to represent (variously) lightning in a prairie thunderstorm, his dead lover's body, and a bar tray that he used to deflect bullets. Between vigorous towel-waving sequences, he narrated his moral dilemma, of whether or not to take vengeance on his former best friend, an outlaw who'd killed his girl: "If he wants forgiveness, my iron will rule!" As the temperature surged to two hundred degrees, Solórzano slammed a snowball scented with black pepper and juniper tar onto the rocks, filling the room with a gunpowdery musk, and waved furiously, darting up and down the sauna stairs, tossing his towel in an elegant plume of white. The crowd went wild.

At the climax, Solórzano's character shot his rival, and the dying man's recorded voice filled the room, croaking out a victorious confession: "You slayed me—as I wanted you to." Later, Solórzano said that, though he knew the judges liked happy endings, he "didn't want a story that gets tied up with a pretty bow. That's not what a cowboy tragedy is."

The nationals ended with a ceremony by a rooftop pool, where a Norwegian judge, Lasse Erikson, gave a passionate speech about “sweat culture and storytelling.” He said, “In my home country, we have 5.5 million people, and four million go to sauna. In Finland, they have 5.5 million people, and 5.5 million go to sauna!” The winner of the solo competition was Solórzano, the crowd favorite. With his Speedo, cross, and cowboy hat, he will be off to represent the U.S.A. in Verona next month. ♦

# Reporting & Essays

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- [Inside the World of "The Great British Bake Off"](#)
- [A.I. Is Coming for Culture](#)
- [Patricia Lockwood Goes Viral](#)
- [How \*Weekly Shōnen Jump\* Became the World's Most Popular Manga Factory](#)
- [How a Billionaire Owner Brought Turmoil and Trouble to Sotheby's](#)
- [A24's Empire of Auteurs](#)
- [Critical Distance](#)
- [The Mysterious Cover Artist Who Captured the Decline of the Rich](#)

Dept. of Amplification

# The History of The New Yorker's Vaunted Fact-Checking Department

Reporters engage in charm and betrayal; checkers are in the harm-reduction business.

By Zach Helfand

August 25, 2025



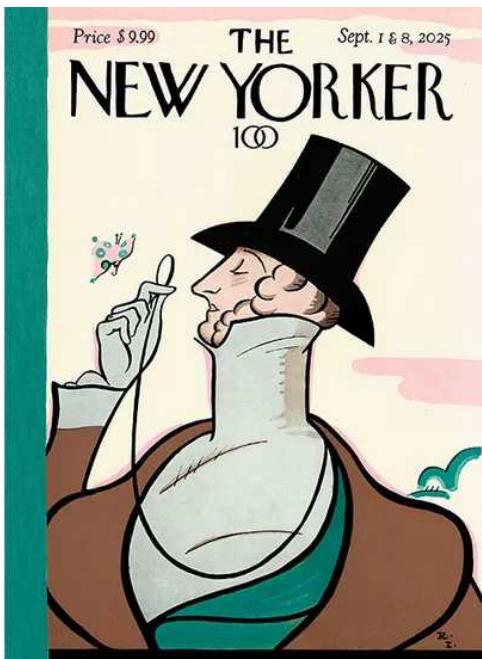
I turned in this piece with seventy-nine errors. Anna, the fact checker who fixed them, has been a member of *The New Yorker's* checking department for six years. I enjoy working with Anna, which is good, because being checked by Anna involves maybe a dozen hours on the phone. We talk mainly about facts, and occasionally about foraging for chanterelles, which is her passion. People sometimes ask Anna if she finds many errors. In the eighties, one checker found that an unedited issue of the magazine contained a thousand of them. (This figure itself wouldn't survive a fact-check, but never mind.) My contribution to the trash heap, in this piece alone, included misspelling several proper nouns (Colombia, alas, is not Columbia), inventing, it seems, a long-ago interaction between a fact checker and the

deputy Prime Minister of Israel, and writing about a bird's kidney when I should have been writing about its liver. I'm sure no errors remain, but I won't declare it categorically. That kind of thing makes a checker squirm.

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## The Culture Industry: A Centenary Issue

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I've never encountered a complete description of what the magazine wants its checkers to check. A managing editor took a stab in 1936: "Points which in the judgment of the head checker need verification." New checkers, upon receiving their first assignment, are instructed to print out the galleys of the piece and underline all the facts. Lines go under almost every word. Names and figures are facts; commas can be, too. Cartoons, poems, photographs, cover art—full of facts. Opinions aren't facts, but they rely on many. Colors are facts. Recently, [a short story](#) by Clare Sestanovich made a passing reference to yellow bird poop. The checker consulted ornithological sources. Would a bird poop yellow? Maybe, if it had a liver problem.

Fiction is full of facts—sometimes too many. Dates are facts, clothes are facts, actions are facts. Quotes are facts, and they contain them; facts can be nesting, like a Russian doll. A decade ago, [Calvin Tomkins wrote about an artist](#) who said he was getting married on June 21st, the summer solstice.

The checker, David Kortava, called the artist, congratulated him, and alerted him that the solstice would be on the twentieth that year. The artist moved the wedding date.

It's difficult to check facts, or to talk about fact checking, without coming off as a know-it-all, a fussbudget, or a snob. But knowing things is hard. Checking is a practice. It's not omniscience. Two years ago, Amanda Petrusich wrote [a piece on the band the National](#) in which she described two of its members, Bryce and Aaron Dessner, as identical twins. The brothers look identical, but to be safe the checker checked with Bryce. Confirmed. Story went out. Complaint came in: Aaron said sorry, but they are not identical. Could the sentence be corrected to read "fraternal twins"? The checker convened the brothers in a group text:

Bryce: We were never tested but our mom thinks we are identical :)

Aaron (*seconds later*): Our mom says we are fraternal but truth be told we have never been tested!

In the face of uncertainty, you say what you know. A correction ran describing the Dessners as, simply, "twins."

When I joined the department, I assumed that you'd be fired for an error. I had one on [the first long piece that I checked solo](#)—a misidentified art donor. I got to my cubicle the following morning ready to pack up my belongings. I told the checkers sitting near me what had happened. Everyone nodded and went back to work.

I'd interviewed for the job three times. Midway through, three checkers administered what is known as the checking quiz—trivia questions, essentially, on current events, art, politics. What did the case Marbury v. Madison establish? Who wrote the short story on which "Drive My Car" is based? Can you name the state and non-state actors fighting in the Syrian war? In the sixties, there was a written exam. One section presented the candidate with a sample Talk of the Town passage about an art collector:

He is a member of the Yale Club, Racquet and Tennis and the exclusive Union League. He is an ardent Democrat.

Q: “What do you find in it that is questionable or wrong?”

A: “He would not belong to the Union League Club because he is a Democrat, and it is not exclusive at all.”

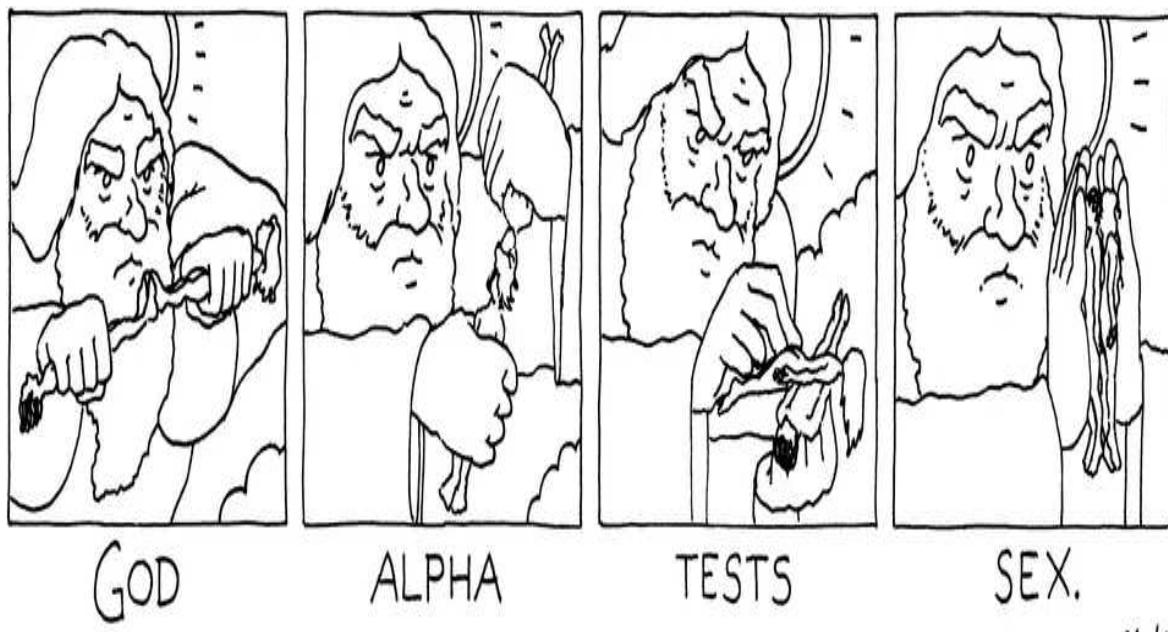
The quiz’s function remains ambiguous. I assume it’s to assess general knowledge and the ability to think under pressure. But it might just be for kicks. For years, candidates were asked, “What is the best movie of all time?” A reasonable person says: uncheckable, no answer. But there was an answer: “Sunset Boulevard.” Martin Baron, a longtime head of the department, loved “Sunset Boulevard.” The belief among the rank and file was that you want to do very well on the quiz but not ace it; a know-it-all is susceptible to overconfidence.

A checker named Shireen Khaled recently said to me, “Nobody ever grows up wanting to be a fact checker.” Most arrive hoping to be writers or editors. For me, joining the department felt like an initiation—there were secret histories, late nights, and weird customs, though fewer than there used to be. A former checker once visited the office and asked, “Do you still have Friday-afternoon theatricals?” This was the most diverse group of anal-retentive people I’d ever been around, if you forget about political persuasion and age. Checkers had grown up poor and grown up with billions. They came from New Orleans and Nanjing. The heterogeneity surprises people. [Tucker Carlson](#) asked a checker, Sean Lavery, which high school he’d attended, Andover or Exeter. “I said, ‘I went to public school in Wisconsin,’ ” Lavery recalled. Checkers of my era—their number grew from twenty to twenty-five during my three-year tenure—collectively spoke fifteen languages, including Urdu, Cantonese, Japanese, Arabic, Greek, Russian, and Twi, with a working knowledge of ancient Greek and Latin. They wore cool clothes. They’d read all of Proust. They’d married young and divorced. They threw fun parties; Salman Rushdie had once shown up. I had never felt so conventional. The joke in the department was that my foreign language was sports.

The head of the department, and Baron’s successor, was Peter Canby. He’d come to the magazine by accident. He had previously spent a while in Maine, working as a clammer and a tree surgeon. As a boss, Canby was exceptionally kind and protective, a joyful curmudgeon. He once brought a

live rooster to the office of Robert Gottlieb, the magazine's editor. He liked to tell discursive stories—about being chased up a tree by a herd of wild peccaries in Guatemala, or lowering a homemade boat out of a friend's window downtown and sailing it together up the East River, through Hell Gate. Under his leadership, the department cultivated a sense of independence that could be combative. Shortly before Canby retired, in 2020, someone wrote to him suggesting that the checkers might like to use a new application called Slack. He responded, "The collective opinion is that we'd rather have a root canal."

A joy of the job was that you became an expert for two weeks on some subject you'd never thought much about—rocket science, foreskin, sand. ("Suddenly, the writer gets this paid friend to care about the same thing they care about," Rachel Aviv observed.) We'd send around e-mails with subject lines like "Anybody ever been a competitive rower?," "Anybody well versed in the history of young, heavily scrutinized female celebrities?," "Anyone happen to have an in with the Gabonese President?"



The focal point of the department was the checking library, which contained reference books such as Who's Who in the People's Republic of China, Debrett's Peerage & Baronetage, and the Physicians' Desk Reference for Herbal Medicines. (New checkers are advised that you can't trust books—

they tend not to be fact-checked. But reference works help, and endnotes are a gold mine.) The library had another relic—a metal Rolodex that Calvin Trillin has said belongs in the Smithsonian. (Under “C”: “Chomsky,” “Cher (actress),” “Congo,” “Cold Fusion.”) Every Friday, the department held a meeting in the library, where checkers discussed thorny stories and bitched about difficult writers and editors.

There was a smaller library, for even more books; checkers, on especially tight deadlines, would spend the night on a cushion on the floor. Colleagues would talk for hours with the powerful and the secretive; a conversation with [Julian Assange](#) required technological methods that we were not permitted to discuss, to discourage eavesdropping. Yasmine AlSayyad got propositioned by Islamic militants. Fergus McIntosh, the department’s current head, got book recommendations from a Supreme Court Justice. Danyoung Kim would come to work in an astronaut costume, sit down, and call up Harry Reid. We probably took our jobs too seriously. This was the first Trump Administration, and the work felt urgent but doable. We talked to Cabinet members and to neo-Nazis. We’d sometimes get threatened, and that only inflated our self-importance. We were, as the writer and former checker David Kirkpatrick has put it, “intoxicated by our own busyness.” The writer had already engaged in the charm and betrayal inherent in reporting. We were in the harm-reduction business.

The checking origin story goes like this: In 1927, *The New Yorker* published a Profile of the poet Edna St. Vincent Millay that was, to a large extent, made up. Millay’s mother stormed into the office, threatening a lawsuit. Harold Ross, the magazine’s founder, dispatched the editor Katharine Angell to pacify her. Millay’s mother was “a rather small, angry woman,” Angell recalled, and left only after being promised that a detailed correction would be issued. Ross, embarrassed, and worried about libel exposure, decided that what he needed were fact checkers. This creation myth has been repeated through the years in books, news stories, and the magazine itself. Alas, it is one of those slippery facts. Who knows what made Ross do anything.

If it weren’t Millay, it would’ve been something else. Ross had a literal mind. He once complained to E. B. White that Stuart Little should have been adopted by the Littles, rather than born to them, since, obviously, humans can’t conceive mouse-boys. He revered facts. He’d been gathering them and

checking them long before there was a checking department. John Cheever recalled that Ross made two small but brilliant suggestions on the story “[The Enormous Radio](#).” Cheever added, “Then there were twenty-nine other suggestions like, ‘This story has gone on for twenty-four hours and no one has eaten anything.’”

Fact checking, as a formal concept, was a product of nineteen-twenties New York, with all its energy and hubris. There was a sense that, with enough attention, you could get the world down accurately on the page. In 1923, two years before *The New Yorker*’s founding, Henry Luce began to employ checkers at *Time*, a magazine he’d almost named *Facts*. Ross despised and envied Luce. Perhaps checking was an area in which he could outdo him.

Ross was a high-school dropout and an itinerant newspaperman, who liked shouting things like “By God!” and “You can’t win!” Facts gave him something to lord over the Ivy boys. When a fact roused his suspicion, he’d write up a memo with comments like “bushwah,” “nuts,” or “transcends credulence.” A favored note was “Given facts will fix.” According to the writer Brendan Gill, “The impression conveyed by these words was, and was intended to be, that a sorely tired man of superior skills was consenting to improve the work of someone who was at best lazy and at worst an imbecile.” Ross wrote to a writer who’d committed a minor fact error, “I regard this as a personal slight.” (The writer had mixed up the geography of some locks in the Panama Canal.) While preparing John Hersey’s “[Hiroshima](#),” Ross couldn’t get past Hersey’s description of a man using a “slender bamboo pole” to row a boat. “By God, if it’s very slender he couldn’t have rowed this boat with it,” Ross wrote. “Seems kind of ridiculous.” The line ran as “thick bamboo pole,” and Ross moved on to other facts, such as the name Hiroshima itself, “which I can now pronounce in a new and fancy way,” he wrote ecstatically to White.

The early magazine was riddled with mistakes. *The New Yorker* was known for its newsbreaks, which mocked other publications’ errors and oddities. In 1929, Ross concluded, “We are running misprints and clumsy wordings from other publications, and otherwise being Godlike, so WE MUST BE DAMN NEAR PURE OURSELF.” Soon, there were several full-time checkers. When [the magazine profiled Luce](#), and wanted to confirm the

number of rooms in his mansion, a checker was sent there to pose as a prospective renter.

Ross was delighted by the new arrangement. He began firing off memos:

“Can moles see? And do they ever come above ground of their own volition?”

“Can you find out whether or not there is a Podunk River in Connecticut?”

“Do the catalogues of Sears and Montgomery Ward still list farm and stock whips, drovers’ whips and quirts?”

What Ross gave to the checkers was the idea that it mattered to understand the world in all its weirdness. Also: a willingness to admit ignorance. He once popped his head into the checkers’ room and asked, “Is Moby Dick the whale or the man?”

Ross was never satisfied with his creation. “He must have set up a dozen different systems, during my years with him, for keeping track of manuscripts and verifying facts,” James Thurber wrote. Ross studied the New York Telephone Company’s system of checking names and phone numbers and concluded that, despite its best efforts, it never managed to put out a directory with fewer than three mistakes. Thurber continued, “If the slightest thing went wrong, he would bawl, ‘The system’s fallen down!’ ”

How do you confirm a fact? You ask, over and over, “How do we know?” Years ago, [John McPhee wrote about a Japanese incendiary balloon](#) that, during the Second World War, floated across the Pacific and struck an electrical cable serving a top-secret nuclear site; a reactor that enriched plutonium for the atomic bomb bound for Nagasaki was temporarily disabled. How did McPhee know? Someone had told him. How did that person know? He’d heard about it—secondhand. The checker, Sara Lippincott, spent weeks trying to track down an original source. Just before the magazine went to the printer, she got a lead. She called the source at home, in Florida. He was at the mall. How to locate him in time? She called the police. They found him and put him in a phone booth. Did he know

about the incident? He did. How? He was the reactor's site manager; he saw it happen. The detail made it in.

Sometimes one source is enough. Sometimes ten aren't. Checking is a forced humility. The longer you check, the more you doubt what you think you know. We are constantly misunderstanding one another, often literally. In the nineties, the former Secretary of Education [William Bennett](#), a family-values Republican and the editor of an anthology called "The Book of Virtues," uttered the phrase "a real us-and-them kind of thing." It was misheard as "a real S & M kind of thing." The magazine had to issue a correction. People also lie, regret, renounce. One subject of a Raffi Khatchadourian piece complained that multiple details about his life were made up and demanded to know what idiot had given Khatchadourian the erroneous details. The idiot was the man himself; the details came from his book. A disputatious source is actually more helpful than the opposite. The checking system, like the justice system, requires something to push against. When Parker Henry checked [Patrick Radden Keefe's Profile of Anthony Bourdain](#), Bourdain wasn't able to get on the phone, so Henry sent him a memo containing a hundred or so facts about some of the most sensitive parts of his life, including his heroin use and the collapse of a romantic relationship. He responded, "Looks good."

Checkers talk to virtually all sources in a piece, named and unnamed. They also contact people who are mentioned, even glancingly, whom the writer didn't already speak to, and many people not mentioned in the piece at all. Checkers don't read out quotes or seek approval. Sources can't make changes. They can flag errors, provide context and evidence. The checker then discusses the points of contention with the writer and the editor. It's an intentionally adversarial process, like a court proceeding. You want to see every side's best case. The editor makes the final call. In a sense, the checker is re-reporting a piece, probing for weak spots, reaching a hand across the gulf of misunderstanding. The checker also asks questions that, in any other situation, might prompt the respondent to wonder if she was experiencing a brain aneurysm. "Does the Swedish Chef have a unibrow?" "He actually has two separate eyebrows that come close together above his nose." Could a peccary chase a human up a tree? Certainly if it's a white-lipped peccary, which is the size of a small bear and prone to stampede. Zadie Smith once received a call regarding whether, years earlier, at [Ian McEwan's](#) birthday

party, a butterfly landed on her knee. When a Talk piece by Tad Friend described the singer [Art Garfunkel](#) waving his arms around, the checker asked Garfunkel to confirm that he had two arms.

Anne (Dusty) Mortimer-Maddox, a former longtime checker, used to say, “The way you fact-check is like reading them a bedtime story.” She went on, “You tell people facts rather than asking them. When fact checkers say, ‘Is it true that . . .,’ they come off sounding like district attorneys.” But sometimes, no matter how much you coo, a subject wants to yell. This also serves a purpose. Nick Paumgarten likes to note that checkers are in the fact business and the customer-service business. It helps if everyone comes away feeling heard. Peter Canby’s philosophy was that it’s better for a subject to scream before a piece is published than after—a controlled explosion. Screamers still provide useful information. They’re better than ignorers or trolls. Elon Musk once sent back an imagined Mad Libs-style story, riffing on all the details to be checked. Steve Bannon responded to a checking question with a blank e-mail.

Usually, checkers are pretty successful at getting people to respond. Checkers are not exactly neutral arbiters, but they’re as close as you’re going to get—a last chance to argue your case. The Taliban typically plays ball. So does the C.I.A. The F.B.I. does not. One checker spoke by phone with Osama bin Laden’s former Sharia adviser; he asked her to dress for the conversation “in accordance with Islamic principles of modesty.” Different cultures have different relationships with facts. The French position is that, if the author says something happened, it happened. One veteran Chinese journalist quoted in an Evan Osnos piece, who had never before experienced fact checking, said, “I felt like I was in the middle of an ancient ritual.” People can be surprisingly honest. Nicolas Niarchos, checking [a piece by Ben Taub](#), called up one of the most powerful smugglers in the Sahel, who cheerfully confirmed every detail, including his trafficking of humans. At the end of the call, he said, “I have one request.”

Niarchos said, “What is that?”

He replied, “I want you to call me something else.”

“What would you like us to call you?”

“I’d like to be called Alber the Gorilla.”

The request was denied.

The real thrill is in having a license to ask, as directly as possible, about the thing you really want to know. Did [Harvey Weinstein](#) commit rape? Did the government know about the massacre? A checker named Camila Osorio once spent months on the phone with a former guerrilla commander who, it turned out, was implicated in a bombing in Colombia that almost killed Osorio’s mother.

A long checking call can be a weirdly intimate space. You ask about mass murders, traumas, state secrets, often with little preamble. A government official, after a call, once accused a checker of being “creepily obsessed” with him.

So far, Anna has found errors of counting, errors of framing (“One quibble with the framing, if you’ll allow me, is that you never mention how checkers quibble with the framing”), and errors of the too-good-to-check variety. For example, it turns out that Zadie Smith was asked not about a butterfly on her knee but about a slug on a wineglass. However, it’s one thing to know the facts, and another to persuade the author. Most writers appreciate *having been* checked but resent *being* checked. Checking makes evident how badly you’ve misinterpreted the world. It upsets your confidence in your own eyes and ears. Checking is invasive. In the eighties, Janet Malcolm was sued for defamation in a drawn-out case that involved the parsing of her reporting notes. She’d been accused of fabricating quotes; she maintained that she merely stitched quotes together, a journalistic transgression but, ultimately, not a legal one. (A court ruled in Malcolm’s favor.) From then on, the checking department required authors to turn over notes, recordings, and transcripts. “It’s like someone going through your underwear drawer,” Lawrence Wright told me. Checkers can see your shortcuts, your reportorial wheedling, your blind spots. Ben McGrath, another checker turned writer, said, “It’s really interesting to realize that, these people you’ve been reading and admiring, there’s six errors on every page. And it’s not that they’re full of shit. It’s that this is what every person is like.” As a general rule, the better the reporter, the better she gets along with checkers. Jay McInerney, a former checker, once wrote, of authors, “They resent you to the degree that

they depend on you.” McInerney, who wrote “Bright Lights, Big City,” about a fact checker at a lightly fictionalized *New Yorker*, is probably the most famous former checker. He will admit he was not a great one; he got fired after about a year, when his claim that he could speak French was disproved by a litany of errors he let through in a piece reported from France. “I’ve written that I’m the first fact checker to get fired,” he told me. I pointed out that checkers hate claims like “the first.” “Nobody’s ever fact-checked me out of it,” he said. “Why don’t you just write it and see what the fact-checking department says?” (The department ransacked the archives and searched for checking rosters, and concluded that his assertion is nearly impossible to confidently confirm.)

Like customer-service bots, or H.R. directors, checkers and writers talk around things. They perform a delicate linguistic dance. At an exhausting stalemate on a minor point, the writer might say, “I think it’s O.K.,” which means “I know it’s not exactly correct, but you’re being a prig.” The checker might respond, “It won’t keep me up at night,” which means “You’re a barbarian, but it’s your name on the piece.” Deft checkers position themselves as collaborators. In a closing meeting—where the writer, editor, checker, and copy editor go over a piece—they come not just with errors but with solutions. Writers hate to be embarrassed by their own ignorance. Anna has a good ear for rhythm, and tends to cringe when left with no choice but to scramble it. Her negotiation style is disarming bluntness. It helps that she’s funny. (Anna: “Do you have a fix here?” Zach: “I had one, didn’t I?” Anna: “It wasn’t very good.”) The nuclear option is to invoke “on author,” which signifies something impossible to verify but witnessed or experienced by the author, and therefore grudgingly allowed by the checker, who renounces all culpability. Julian Barnes once explained, “If, for example, the fact checkers are trying to confirm that dream about hamsters which your grandfather had on the night Hitler invaded Poland—a dream never written down but conveyed personally to you on the old boy’s knee, a dream of which, since your grandfather’s death, you are the sole repository—and if the fact checkers, having had all your grandfather’s living associates up against a wall and having scoured dictionaries of the unconscious without success, finally admit they are stumped, then you murmur soothingly down the transatlantic phone, ‘I think you can put that on author.’ ”

One compromise is the hedge, phrases such as “likely,” or “around,” or “something like,” which turn the game of dictional darts into a round of horseshoes. Writers resent the “maybe’s” and “at least’s” and “almost’s” that pock their prose like pimples—but perhaps not as much as they’d resent losing the material. Years ago, [the magazine excerpted](#) Ian Frazier’s book [“Travels in Siberia,”](#) which was supposed to begin, “There is no such place as Siberia.” The checker insisted upon “Officially, there is no such place as Siberia.” “I ended up not totally happy with it, but not regretting it,” Frazier said. “This kind of fact checking wasn’t nitpicking and wasn’t just a bureaucratic thing. It was an artistic advance of the twentieth century. It just clicked with modernism.” He went on, “Modernism is goodbye to self-expression, hello to what’s right in front of you,” and that means you better get the thing right. The hedge is an acceptance that the world is impossible to know accurately. It imparts to the writing a humbleness, an understatedness, and, perhaps, a smug fussiness: in other words, what people think of as *The New Yorker’s* voice. Still, the hedges irritate. One checker, upon leaving the magazine, wrote a goodbye e-mail saying, “After five years, I’m still fully in awe of the magazine that comes out every week.” Tad Friend replied-all, “As the magazine comes out 46 times a year, can we say ‘almost every week’?” (Friend was almost right; the actual number was forty-seven.)

Certain genres accommodate checking better than others. Investigatory works rely on it. Personal history does, too, though this often creates complications. One checker called checking a memoir “the full colonoscopy.” A colleague had to call up Emily Gould, whose husband, Keith Gessen, had written [an essay](#) about the birth of their first child. He described a geyser of blood effusing from his wife during labor. The checker asked Gould about the purported effluence. Gould ended the conversation.



Humor can short-circuit the checking machinery. When a humorist and a checker click, they stick together. Anne Stringfield used to check Steve Martin's *Shouts & Murmurs*. They ended up married. Usually, things go the other way. I once took part in a closing meeting during which we debated, for ten minutes, whether [Michael Schulman's use of the phrase "assless chaps"](#) was redundant and meaningless; technically speaking, all chaps are assless.

"I find that often a fact checker forces you to tie a knot in the sentence unnecessarily," David Sedaris told me. [One of his essays](#) describes a trip to a small-town Costco, where he bought "a gross of condoms." The checker said that, actually, he hadn't: Costco doesn't sell a gross, which is a hundred and forty-four. "So I made it 'a mess' of condoms, which just made them sound used," he said. "If the essay was about how many condoms Costco sells, definitely, have the exact number. But this was about my experience being gay in a small Southern town. Can you let me have this?" Humorists can infuriate the checkers, who recognize that even funny nonfiction has to be completely real; it's held to the same standard as anything else. Last year, Jane Bua checked [a Sedaris essay about meeting the Pope](#). She checked a detail about the color of the buttons on a cardinal's cassock so assiduously (the department's perception), or maddeningly (Sedaris's), that he e-mailed his editor, "Can you slip her a sedative?" Sedaris has complained, "Checking

is like being fucked in the ass by a hot thermos.” Bua mentioned this to the checker on Sedaris’s next piece, Yinuo Shi. Shi considered the analogy and said, “If a thermos works, the outside wouldn’t be hot.”

Like darkness retreats, or ayahuasca, checking tends to alter the way you think; it’s also usually enjoyed for a limited time. A few make a career of it. One of the first hires Harold Ross made for the checking department, in 1929, was a man named Freddie Packard. Packard initially worked under Rogers Whitaker. After Packard had missed a “boner,” as an error was called, Whitaker forced Packard to memorize and recite the galley page. Ross esteemed Packard and relied on him; he also started him on a salary equivalent to about twenty-nine thousand dollars today. (Checking salaries remained borderline unlivable until the magazine’s staff unionized, in 2018.) Packard left for Europe during the war. Ross begged him to return. “*JOB WIDE OPEN STOP*,” Ross wired. “*ARE YOU AVAILABLE STOP CAN PAY MORE THAN FORMERLY STOP*.” Packard became the first real head of fact checking, a position he held until shortly before his death, in 1974. That’s a long time checking facts. There are many checkers today in the Packard mold. He spoke multiple languages. He commanded a vast sphere of knowledge. He lived in fear that around every corner loomed catastrophe. One week, a colleague noticed Packard moping around the office and asked what was wrong. Packard said he had two colds.

Perhaps the most revered of all checkers was Martin Baron, who put in thirty-six years. Baron was gentle, fatherly, and prim. Alex Ross once wrote a piece mentioning a minor Mozart canon titled “Leck mich im Arsch.” Baron stayed up late combing through Mozart biographies so he wouldn’t have to call a Mozart scholar and repeat the phrase “lick me in the ass.” He was almost pathologically punctilious. The checkers loved Baron. He’d bestow upon them honorifics, as in Professor Seligman or Dr. Kelley. He felt that, as a checker, he should avoid errors at all times. John McPhee said, “Somebody told me, ‘The thing you’ve got to know about Martin Baron, he is always right. And take that literally.’ If a Shakespeare play was mentioned in a piece, he would have to go and check the author’s name.” By the end, he’d spent so much time checking that he had difficulty making any assertions at all. He would phrase statements as questions: Wouldn’t you say it’s a nice day? After Baron’s death, Ian Frazier recalled, “Gesturing to the

water below the window, he once said to me, ‘I think that’s the Hudson River.’ ”

The job wears on people in different ways. Some checkers find it difficult to sleep. The novelist Susan Choi, a onetime checker, recalled colleagues vomiting out of stress. In the nineties, everyone smoked cigarettes by the gross. (Anna is letting me have this “gross”: “King Zog of Albania reportedly smoked a hundred and fifty cigarettes daily.”) It’s a job for the anxious. The next boner is always lurking out there, in the dark. I was once assigned [a piece by Ben Taub](#) that mentioned Lake Victoria’s four thousand miles of shoreline. Thirty seconds of Googling confirmed the fact, but the exact circumference varied, slightly, between sources. Why? I contacted Stuart E. Hamilton, a professor of geography and geosciences at Salisbury University. “It is a horribly confusing answer and involves physics and fractals,” he told me. This is called the coastline paradox, an offshoot of Zeno’s paradox. “Do not go down that rabbit hole,” Hamilton warned. “Everything is infinity long if you have a small enough ruler.” This is the checker’s paradox, too. The more you know, the more you know that there is more you don’t know. The facts of the universe are infinity long. You either let this drive you crazy or you adjust your ruler size. Taub’s detail ran as “more than four thousand miles of jagged shoreline,” and I never lost sleep over checking again.

Some people greet a *New Yorker* correction as they would an eclipse. In 1994, several errors appeared in a Talk of the Town piece. The magazine issued a correction, which several publications reported as if it were a seminal event. Hendrik Hertzberg went to the library to investigate. “This was not the first correction in the magazine’s history, it was roughly the three hundredth,” he reported. He added, “Every great journalistic enterprise occasionally makes errors.” I can confirm. Since that first correction, I let through some more. I will not name the figure, to avoid startling Anna.

People like finding errors in the magazine, probably because the magazine is so smug about its fact checking. Checking does contain an element of theatre—a performance of over-the-top diligence that burnishes a myth but doesn’t always correlate with accuracy. Checking isn’t a marketing ploy, exactly, but it is good marketing. To some, it’s just artifice. In the eighties, the writer Alastair Reid admitted to devising composite characters and

scenes: combining multiple real details into one fake one. Shouldn't checking have caught that? Afterward, Michael Kinsley, the editor of *The New Republic*, wrote of meeting a *New Yorker* fact checker at a party: "This fellow—a real individual, not a composite—regaled the gathering with tales of chartering airplanes to measure the distance between obscure Asian capitals, sending battalions of Sarah Lawrence girls to count the grains of sand on a particular beach referred to in an Ann Beattie story, and suchlike tales of heroic valor in the pursuit of perfect accuracy." Kinsley went on:

After several hours of this (actually, one hour, 17 minutes, and 53 seconds), he turned to me with a polite smile and said, " 'Tell us about your fact-checking system at *The New Republic*.' "

... I replied, "You're looking at it."

He turned pale. Actually, he didn't turn pale. I embroider. But he did say, "That's odd, because if I'm checking a story in *The New Yorker* and find the fact I need in *The New Republic*, I consider it checked."

Complaints reach us in any number of ways. After [Lawrence Wright's twenty-four-thousand-word indictment of the Church of Scientology](#), the Scientologists published a parody magazine, complete with sinister sketches of the fact checkers and a by-the-numbers analysis of the checking process. ("Of the 971 statements, assertions and questions that were sent for 'fact checking,' 572 are utterly false.")

Usually, though, errors surface via reader mail:

1947: "I was somewhat taken aback to find Mr. Hellman, in his article on the Stuart Collection, announcing the death of my father. To kill off a retired director of the New York Public Library is no doubt as insignificant a misdemeanor as one can commit. But I wonder if it was necessary."

2019: "The chicken is NOT wearing overalls (which you mention twice). He is wearing *lederhosen*."

It's the lederhosen that keeps checkers up at night. How, short of a childhood in Bavaria, do you catch that? A corollary is whether it's worth devoting so

many resources to trying. Choi told me, “Who cares, in the end? Does it really matter? I think we can safely say no. But, especially right now, we’re in this catastrophic moment where so many people assume they know things that either they don’t know or that aren’t even forms of knowledge. There’s this strange disappearance of humility before the incredible complexity of the world. It’s sort of an epidemic. The deep value in checking is just as a confirmation of how hard it is to know stuff.”

The checking department tends to be described with a single adjective, especially after it has committed an error: “vaunted.” As in this letter: “I was disappointed to see the New Yorker’s vaunted fact checkers let slip [Zach Helfand’s bogus etymology](#) for the word ‘tip.’” “Vaunted” has been attached to the department, and to basically no other entity, since its founding. It’s the way to give the know-it-alls their due. Often, a correspondent will add a sarcastic modifier—“once vaunted,” “much vaunted,” “incredibly vaunted”—which actually isn’t necessary. “Vaunted,” from the Latin *vanitas*, meaning “emptiness” or “nullity,” is already pejorative. The know-it-alls snigger.

The other thing you get a lot is “William Shawn would be turning over in his grave.” As a literal fact, this is uncheckable, though the implication that the magazine reached peak truth under Shawn, its second editor, transcends credulence. Shawn was a perfectionist, but, given the choice between prose and accuracy, he didn’t always side with accuracy. The writer Ben Yagoda dug up the checking proofs of Truman Capote’s [“In Cold Blood”](#) and found that, beside a section that narrated the actions of a person who was alone and immediately thereafter murdered, Shawn scribbled, “How know?” Yagoda explained, “There was in fact no way to know, but the passage stayed.”

Meanwhile, Tina Brown’s editorship is subject to the opposite impression: she, some critics like to say, was the corrupting influence who let the standards slip. But, in many ways, Brown’s tenure created the modern checking department. All of a sudden, the magazine was publishing pieces with immediacy and wading into controversial waters; it needed to get the facts right, if only for legal reasons. (Millay’s mother might yell; Mike Ovitz might sue.) Peter Canby and Brown’s deputy, Pam McCarthy, were the ones to finally make authors turn over their notes and reveal their sources. Shawn’s writers had to adjust. Janet Malcolm, fresh off the trial that probed

her combining quotes from different interviews, tried the same thing in a passage in [her Profile of David Salle](#). McCarthy insisted that she change it. “She’s right that it may not matter in the world, that it’s more efficient and more pleasing for the reader,” McCarthy told me. “But my feeling was it’s impossible to draw those lines.”

Impressions are difficult to dislodge, probably because they’re difficult to check. But checkers come to recognize some category errors. For example, a common fallacy is the belief that things were better in some imagined past. Someone is always spinning in his grave. When Shawn was the editor, he got letters asserting as much about Ross. Ross had no past to contend with. He still got letters. In 1945, a fellow-journalist wrote to him, “Now a gentle jab for you and your vaunted editorial check-up department—which I admit, however, is pretty damn good and thorough. In the piece, ‘The Atlas Moth,’ there is a reference to a ‘lunar moth.’ Of course, the writer means the familiar Luna moth.” Ross asked Packard how this could have happened. The checker, in fact, had called a moth expert at the American Museum of Natural History—and had misheard. (In one way or another, checking is always an S & M kind of thing.) Ross was despondent. “I think it is a terribly bad error,” he wrote back. The system is always falling down. The trick is in believing that, next time, it won’t. ♦

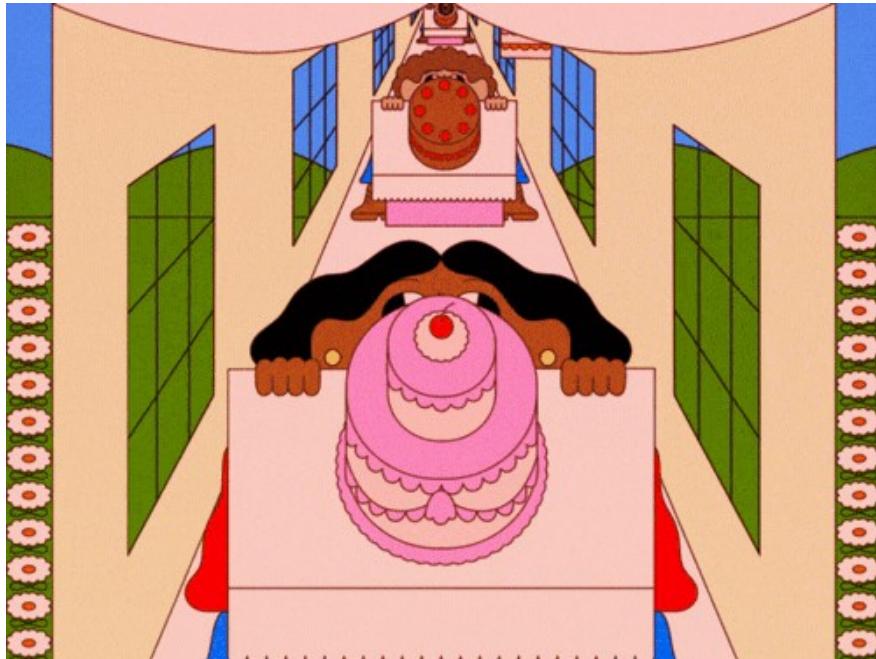
The Weekend Essay

# Inside the World of “The Great British Bake Off”

The show captures disastrous custard-making, quintessentially British faux-modesty, and the blistering hubris of bakers—including me.

By Ruby Tandoh

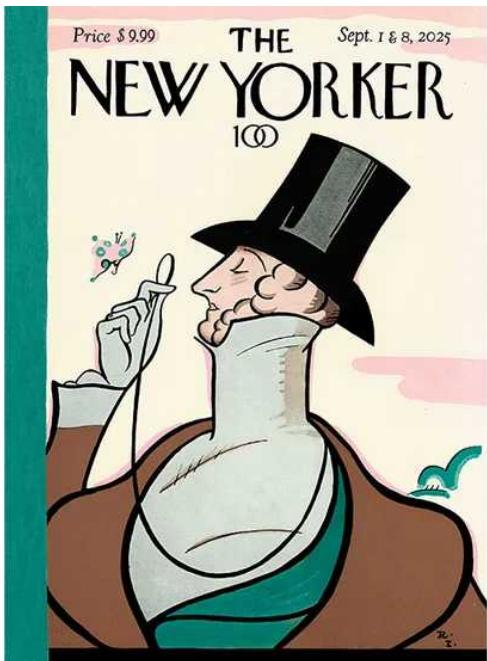
August 25, 2025



One evening in the autumn of 2012, I got a somewhat urgent phone call from my mom. I was living in a quasi-legal student sublet at the time—the landlord had hooked the electricity up to the street lights outside—and she wanted to recommend a baking show that might distract me from the rats under the floor. Think “MasterChef” but with the pacing of an afternoon spent punting on the Thames. The bakers were normal people: a shop worker, a vicar’s wife, a searingly competitive sixty-three-year-old Buddhist whose coup de grâce was a flock of choux-pastry cygnets. “There’s a Scottish boy on it,” my mom added, offering some enticement. “He wears knitted jumpers.”

## The Culture Industry: A Centenary Issue

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In the U.K., if you so much as bring a beat-up homemade carrot cake into the office, you can count on somebody telling you to apply for “The Great British Bake Off.” I was twenty and already had a signature apricot-tart recipe, so I was bound to get the call eventually. My mom would, I’m sure, argue that she meant only for me to watch “Bake Off.” But you can’t watch people doing the thing you love, only worse, and just sit by. Or, at least, I couldn’t.

Within a few weeks, I had not only seen every episode but obsessively studied the format. I took notes when the bakers were challenged to make “hand-raised” meat pies: a topsy-turvy process in which you make the pastry with hot water instead of cold, and press the dough not into a pie dish but around the outside of a wooden mold. I acquainted myself with the judges’ predilections: the delicate Mary Berry favored the classics, whereas Paul Hollywood—a thoroughly suntanned man with the alpha saunter of a prison guard—seemed to have a weakness for piña-colada-flavored bakes. I wasn’t interested in the backstory montages showing the bakers’ home towns, or in the wholesome conversational patter—that was filler. I wanted the

uncensored baking, those sweet shots of gelatine leaking from badly molded pastry.

I should probably clear up one thing, which is that my enthusiasm for baking, at that point, exceeded my expertise. My sense of superiority was mostly speculative: I could probably bake this stuff if I bothered to learn. So I learned. When I should have been reading David Hume, I pored over the writings of Paul Hollywood, that other great empiricist, for his thoughts on dough hydration and oven temperature. I made phyllo pastry from scratch in my room, stretching the dough to the thinness of a page of the King James Bible.

What I mean to say—and what any contestant on the show will admit, if they're honest—is that you don't make it to the world of competitive televised baking by accident. I sent in an application in early 2013, attaching photos of Viennese whirls, black-currant tarts, and a drum-size brioche à tête. "My repertoire isn't huge," I noted judiciously in the comments. "But what it lacks in breadth, I think is counterbalanced in part by its depth." Midway through the casting process, I sent an e-mail to one of the producers: "It's all I've been thinking about. Waking up at four in the morning to nurse a brioche dough back to life." The producers are used to this—they get people who want the thing so badly that they apply seven, eight, nine times.

During the next couple of months, I inched closer to the show. I cleared interviews with home economists who quizzed me on the finer points of baking technique—how to tell when a meringue was done cooking, or how to get a thin, shattering crust on a loaf of bread. Next were screen tests, a first date with the camera. Toward the end, in-person baking trials. These days, it's not until the thousands of applicants have been whittled to a final hundred that anyone even tastes the bakes. "The best amateur bakers in the country" is the line, although I get the sense that even the producers don't fully buy this. Throughout the process, we were encouraged to practice, to fill in the gaps in our knowledge, to get up to speed with things outside the amateur repertoire of biscuits and cakes. If any of us were truly skilled at baking, it was often because we had sought out "Bake Off," not the other way around.

It is hard to think of another show that screens so carefully not just for personality type and talent but also for that more slippery variable, purity of intention. Producers find themselves in the position of trying to cast one of the best-known shows on television—one that routinely makes people famous—with people who care about neither television nor fame. They have to sniff out clout-chasers, and pick through government databases for things like criminal convictions and undeclared baking businesses. Even unrealized dreams can be suspect. When I asked Sophia Reid, the head of casting, about Dylan Bachelet, the Pixar-cute twenty-year-old retail assistant from Season 15, she said that she had been nervous about him at first. “I knew Dylan wanted to be a chef,” she told me. “How’s that gonna land?”

The show attempts to present Britain in microcosm, which is why casters have scouted on the street and plugged into Facebook groups—Black dads in London, Irish badminton players, that kind of thing. The holy grail is what Reid calls “the unlikely baker.” To Kieran Smith, the show’s executive producer, that’s someone like Rahul Mandal, the Winnie-the-Pooh-esque nuclear scientist from Season 9. “The moment you get a Rahul . . . ,” Smith mused, bowing his head. “There is someone who is unintentionally funny. There is someone who probably never wanted to be on television in their life.”

At the very end of the audition process, I was sent to Lynn Greenwood, an impish, curly-haired psychotherapist who has also served as a dowsing rod for shows like “The Apprentice.” All bakers-to-be must prove to her that they’re fit for the rigors of reality TV. “I can sniff out someone who’s disturbed within a few minutes,” Greenwood told me when I visited her recently, in the same leafy London neighborhood where we had met twelve years earlier. What she remembers of my assessment, she told me approvingly, was that I was very quiet and not outwardly ambitious, and that I loved baking. I didn’t tell her that, from what I recalled, I cried for half the session, constitutionally incapable of playing it cool. That’s possibly why, a couple of months later, I was on the show.

In the course of the past fifteen years, and seemingly by accident, “The Great British Bake Off” has become one of the most popular shows on TV. In its best years, “Bake Off” has drawn more British viewers than “Downton Abbey,” “Sherlock,” “Doctor Who,” or, indeed, Prince Phillip’s funeral. Paul

Hollywood has arguably established himself as the only credible pop-culture inheritor to the title of Ol' Blue Eyes. The show has even given us new language: it is now possible for laypeople to talk sagaciously about a bake having a "soggy bottom."

It would have been easy enough for "Bake Off" to ensnare the food crowd, but it has become a phenomenon even among people who have never touched a stand mixer. In the streaming era, "Bake Off" is the standard-setter for ambiently watchable TV; a generation of half-watchers turns to it for its gently sedative properties. Meanwhile, bakers watch it for the craft, thinking that maybe next year they'll apply. In recent years, as spinoff shows have proliferated, it's become clear that you can riff on certain incidental details —the "British," say, or the "Bake Off." International franchises have included "The Great American Baking Show," an Uruguayan Bake Off, and the lesser-known "All of Holland Bakes." We have seen "The Great British Sewing Bee," "The Great Pottery Throw Down," and "The Big Blowout" ("Bake Off" for hair stylists).

But the original still dominates. Most Brits don't do outright patriotism, so when we deploy phrases like "Great British" it is with a certain sardonic flair. The bakers are the kinds of people who will be more upset if they accidentally steal someone else's custard than if theirs is the custard being nabbed (as happened in the now notorious Custardgate incident). Occasionally, though, the steelier survival instincts kick in, and a pressed baker might be compelled to construct a gingerbread model of the Moulin Rouge on top of a croquembouche. Mix in the pleasurable low-stakes drama of baking, in which nothing rides on success except a baker's pride, and you've struck comfort-TV gold. Even Kylie Jenner is a fan—she posted a video of her watching "Bake Off" on her jet, calling it "my favorite show." Consider the cultural tectonics involved in bringing the extended Kardashian empire into contact with Nelly Ghaffar, from Season 15, a flirtatious palliative-care assistant from Slovakia by way of Dorset. But this is what makes "Bake Off" so beloved: it is one of the most successful unscripted shows of the century and still feels like an underdog.

It was 2009 when BBC Two got a pitch from Love Productions for a kind of "X Factor" for cakes, inspired by the Pillsbury Bake-Off. Love was in the habit of throwing out ideas like this—a "see what sticks" approach that has

resulted in shows like “Filthy Rich and Homeless” (rich people learn empathy by sleeping on the street) and “Cirque de Celebrité” (B-list stars learn competitive *corde lisse* and the pyrotechnic arts). The company had honed this idea over several years: what if, instead of hosting the bake-off in a TV studio, they did it in an English country house? Producers searched for historic manors with the electrical capacity to support twelve ovens and an entire crew. No dice. How about a “baking circus comes to town” concept, inspired by the judging marquees at English village shows? There would be pastels and bunting. They could put the bakers in a really, really big tent.

When it came to finding judges, producers settled on Mary Berry, a cookery writer in her mid-seventies and a pioneer of the all-in-one cake method. (Instead of creaming butter and sugar together before adding eggs and flour, you blend the whole lot at once.) She had been a charismatic champion of the Aga—a brand of British range cooker favored by exactly the people who tend to nuke the competition at village fêtes. For her co-judge, they chose Paul Hollywood, at that time a virtually unknown bread baker. He came from a line of bakers and had been the youngest ever head baker at the Dorchester hotel, but viewers of his cable show, “Use Your Loaf,” would have known him as the innovator of the “breast test”: proofed bread dough, when prodded, should feel like a woman’s breast.

The first episode of “The Great British Bake Off” aired on BBC Two on August 17, 2010. It’s difficult to find the inaugural season to stream now, which may be for the best. Much of the show is given to ponderous historical segues. Passersby from a nearby village fair peek into the tent. And most of the jokes made by the presenters, the comedians Mel Giedroyc and Sue Perkins, have been edited out.

It wasn’t until Season 3 that the show came together. One day, Perkins was filming an introductory segment when she tripped on a divot, worked through the fall, and kept talking like nothing had happened. It was slapstick, not exactly BBC-documentary house style, but it worked. Anyone trying to get a reality show off the ground eventually has to reckon with an essentially Shakespearean question: Are we making a play here, or a play within a play? Is the format—the set, the show structure, the million contrivances—part of the joke? Love decided that it was. The pratfall was,

in one producer's memory, a small eureka moment. The real "Great British Bake Off" was born.

The filming weekends started early. At dawn on Saturdays, we would be driven in a convoy of minibuses from a soothingly nondescript hotel in Bristol to Harptree Court, a classical Georgian-era country home, on the grounds of which the tent had been put up. "Put up" doesn't really do it justice—across from a walled garden and some shepherds' huts, a huge, tri-peaked white zeppelin would come into view, like something a trickster god had set down in the grass and forgotten about.

The woman who lived in the house, Linda, fixed us tea. She would wear pearls with an apron and made a lemon drizzle cake better than anything I tasted in the tent. As the morning picked up pace, we bakers ran through our recipes one last time. Techy guys in high-pocket-density cargo shorts milled about, doing what techy guys in high-pocket-density cargo shorts do. Paul Hollywood was presumably in his dressing room, putting on a crisp oxford shirt in a shade of blue meant to make his eyes pop—a vivid cerulean, a chilly Arctic sky, or, occasionally, a fuller, velvety navy just across the color wheel from his tan.

Before the cameras started rolling, we were miked and aproned up, and I would pop an ineffective herbal anti-anxiety candy. Frances, another baker taking the competition too seriously, had got me onto the stuff; she had it in liquid form and was dropping it like acid. Howard, a tenderhearted council worker with a voice like a creaky door, would quietly glitch out. On the director's cue, Mary Berry was tenderly extricated from her thermal gilet and the floor was purged of its few dozen researchers, home economists, sound recordists, camera operators, technicians, producers, and researchers. There was quiet. Then Paul Hollywood would close in across the lawn, his silver quiff cutting the air like a fin.

What follows is a simple three-act format. First is the Signature challenge, in which bakers make a recipe they've already developed. The "signature" is rhetorical—no one has a go-to mini decorative jelly roll—the point is to reacquaint viewers with who's who. Next is the Technical, which is judged blind: bakers are presented with a thinly sketched out recipe and have to use their baking instincts to fill in the gaps. This is where the serious

competition begins. There are people who showboat in the challenges they've had months to prepare for but flunk the technicals, and then there are likable anoraks—like James Morton, from Season 3, with the jumpers—who lack organization but have unassailable technical nous.

Finally, the Showstopper. This is probably the “Bake Off” you know: a lion made from bread, a cake bust in honor of Lupita Nyong’o, an edible hanging Halloween piñata. It’s here that bakers showcase their true personalities, often to disastrous effect. Take the incident known as Bingate, from Season 5, in which Iain, a construction engineer from Northern Ireland, sets out to make a chocolate-and-coffee-caramel Baked Alaska. Diana, a jovial sixty-nine-year-old grandmother, moves Iain’s ice cream out of the freezer. Iain throws the whole melting thing in the trash, and then—in a truly delectable call by the producers—is made to walk the garbage can to the judging table. The Showstopper is the sink-or-swim challenge. “We hope that they swim,” Smith, the executive producer, told me. “Or . . .” He paused. “We hope that they sink a bit. And then they swim.”

It was an hour into the first challenge of the first episode on the first day of filming when I started crying. We were making sandwich cakes, the simplest thing. Mine was vanilla cake, rhubarb jam, and crème pâtissière, a custard reinforced with starch so it could support a second tier of cake. While I was cooking it, the custard turned a green-ash color. Except it wasn’t my fault. I could have sworn that the pan had discolored the milk somehow. I tried to impress this upon the producers, but nobody listened, not that I blame them. To make compelling unscripted television, they have to rely on that potent mixture of incompetence and luck.

How quickly I fell apart. One minute, I was explaining to Mary how I was going to dip the thinnest ribbons of raw, blush rhubarb in sugar syrup, dry them in a low oven, and coil them into tiny, chewy rhubarb roses to decorate the top of the cake. The next thing you see, I’m spinning out. The producers have the tightly honed intuition of storm chasers; they can spot a trembling hand from across the tent. They swooped in on me and my now split custard, with backup from a pack of cameramen and sound guys. My only real defense was Sue, one of the jesterlike presenters, who shielded me and did a remarkable, jazzlike expletive improv until everyone gave up trying to film.

(Sometimes, she told me, she tried a different tack: libelling pharmaceutical companies to make embarrassing footage unusable.)

I want to say that I don't know why I got so upset when things went wrong, but that would be a lie. I didn't want to go home to my floorboard rats—I was pretty sure one of them had died down there. And then there was the thought of all that convivial, cutthroat baking going on without me: I wasn't ready for the one demonstrable show of brilliance in my life so far to turn out to be a joke. What are you if you're not even good at the thing you got good at, like, four months ago? I didn't get eliminated that day, anyway. Toby mixed up the sugar and the salt, and I went through to Bread Week. I felt terrible for him, and I was glad.

In the listless couple of hours between challenges, we'd sit in a sofa-crowded snug in the east wing of the house, talking shit and selectively sharing baking tips. Rob, a guy who toted an infrared kitchen thermometer the way others carry Chapstick, gave me a heavy-duty anodized sheet pan—excellent for heat diffusion. Kimberley, an ebullient psychologist, tried to encourage me to “take up my space.” Christine, the grandmother of the tent, was often found gabbing with the twenty-five-year-old Ali, with whom she'd become best friends. “The boring thing that everyone talks about is that [‘Bake Off’] is kind,” Smith, the producer, told me. “We didn't start off by going, ‘We want to make a really kind, warm show.’ Bakers are quite unusual television characters. It came from them.”

I often went outside for a cigarette with Glenn, a rambunctious bear of a man who, after our season was done, went on to tour a “Bake Off”-themed comedy show. We moaned about the challenges and the ambushes from producers—their overeager commiserations, the way they'd bait you into narrating your downfall in real time. We took slow drags, discussing the merits of poaching meringue in custard as producers scurried across the lawn with ingredients veiled under gingham. Mary was usually stowed in some discreet corner of the manor, but sometimes we observed Paul from afar, smoking alone near the meadows' edge, pacing like a bull.

The judges fascinated me. Mary dispensed praise prudently, but with a certain twinkly delight, as if pressing a toffee into your palm. But, really, the judging was Paul's game. He is a truly excellent bread baker. When he is of

a mind to, Paul Hollywood can entwine seven strands of dough into an ornamental wreath with the dexterity of a concert pianist. The rest of the time, he will handle your bread like he is airport security. He flips it upside down, knocks on its bottom, interrogates it with sausage fingers. He squeezes a crumb with accusatory zeal. Underproofed. He raps a crust against a hard surface. Overbaked. When he is done, he dusts his hands and sheaths them in his denim carapace.

Yet there was something vulnerable about seeing the two of them up close. “What does he know?” Mel and Sue would say, if Paul hated something. “He smokes forty a day. He hasn’t tasted since 1984.” As the seasons have rolled on, producers have had to contend with the fact that the bakers often have more adventurous tastes than the judges do. Paul on gochujang: “Never tried this.” On peanut butter and grape jelly: “Not totally convinced about the flavor combinations.” Mary’s repertoire seemed to have lain almost untouched since 1976. In an old master-class episode, she makes a cake with an “unusual ingredient,” and it turns out the ingredient is an orange.

I am pleased to say that none of this stopped my limited successes on the show from going to my head. If Paul thumbed a twisted Swedish kanelbullar and found the crumb to his pleasing, I took this seriously. For the Showstopper challenge in Bread Week, I made a sweet bread in the shape of a peacock, with braided plumage and hand-painted chocolate eggs for the iridescent feather eyes. He looked upon it, and saw that it was good. Years later, I still consider myself talented in the discipline of enriched dough. Anyway, that week I got Star Baker.

It’s funny how I spent my weekends surrounded by cameramen but it was the Star Baker gimmick that impressed on me that I was there to make television. Television about cake, to be sure, but also about the very idea of televised contests, and the intense and sometimes misdirected passions of the people who go on them. When I was in the tent, I could imagine how the footage would be metabolized in the edit: there would be longer clips of the front-runners and the people at risk of going home; the rest of us would serve as the rhythm section, reading the recipes, putting things into the oven and taking them out, hitting the major beats of any particular challenge. Somebody would be set up as a dark horse. Somebody else would be tripped

up by their pride. When I won Star Baker for that peacock bread, I tried to channel a certain gracious surprise. The edit would not flatter the boastful.

As the weeks passed and bakers were picked off, two factions emerged: the people who went to the bar after filming and those who went straight to their rooms. I don't need to name names, but you can tell at a glance who was up on the sauvignon blanc and who was reading "Mary Berry's Baking Bible" under the covers. Nobody talked about the furtive ambition of the swots. There is a special censure among "Bake Off" alumni for bakers who want it too bad, bakers who seem lovely—but did you know they applied, like, five times? No show does so much to hide its true nature: namely, that it is a competition people desperately want to win. This is the essential hypocrisy of "Bake Off," and it remains the most British thing about it. Years passed before I found out that, on the eve of the decorative-loaf challenge, Frances had brought ropes of dough to her hotel room and spent the night practicing her sailor's knots.

I mostly spent my evenings Googling things like exactly how many layers puff pastry should have, although by then I'd also developed a distracting crush on a researcher on the show, a sweet, eager guy who startled every time his walkie-talkie went off. That kept me busy. None of the bar crowd made it to the last week, although I had to wonder—in the taxi on the way to the final, popping another anti-anxiety lozenge while Kimberley meditated and a tendril of "Viva la Vida" slipped from Frances's headphones—whether they had not taken the nobler path. After the last cake had been tasted, and when it was time for one of us three to be crowned, the other bakers returned and watched. I had missed them. I will not tell you who won, except to say that they deserved it, and it wasn't me.

As "Bake Off" reaches its sixteenth season, it faces an inevitable problem: it would seem that there's nothing left to bake. Since the show started, the bakers have cumulatively made something like twenty-five hundred distinct creations in every discipline, from the common cake arts to hard-core viennoiserie. There have been about a hundred and fifty technical challenges. Every usable baking pun had been exhausted by the end of my season.

To keep things fresh, producers have ventured into hitherto uncharted baking grottoes. They've had the bakers make "anti-gravity illusion cakes" and "3-D storybook pie scenes," encroaching on the Dadaist niche of shows like "Is It Cake?" The assignments have also stretched farther afield culturally, including to experiments like "Japanese Week," with its Chinese-style-steamed-bun challenge, or "Mexican Week," featuring a truly avant-garde pronunciation of "guacamole." It has been tempting, at moments, to say that "Bake Off" has gone off the rails, but these misadventures are exactly in the spirit of the show. The provinciality of "Bake Off"—its goofy, slightly blinkered vision of the world—has always been part of its D.N.A. Thankfully, though, the show's food producers have started pulling things back, reconfiguring the technical challenges to prioritize actual baking instincts over, say, the ability to imagine how a Prinzregententorte should look.

The difficulty is trying to keep "Bake Off" feeling small, feeling "Bake Off," despite it being a real cultural force. Know-how from the bakers themselves, tapped from internet sourdough forums and untranslated pâtisserie books, has been seeping into prime-time television for the past fifteen years, presenting "Bake Off" with the same paradox that plagues "RuPaul's Drag Race": there are no real amateurs anymore. Peter Sawkins, the fastidious young winner of Season 11, was only thirteen when my season was on television; he is one of a number of bakers not just inspired by the show but, in some sense, created by it. And the "Bake Off" effect has snowballed as its disciples have formed baking sub-cults of their own. Ruby Bhogal, a finalist in 2018, is a genuine baking celebrity—when my partner's family friends heard he was going out with "Ruby from 'Bake Off,'" I got the sense they were disappointed it was me.

One could argue that "Bake Off" initiated the single biggest transfer of power in the history of Britain's food culture. The show opened up a field that used to be the stronghold of the white upper-middle classes, people like Elizabeth David or Mary Berry herself. For decades, Britain's food-writing scene was mainly limited to Francophile hobbyists with second homes in Provence; even now, we have only half a dozen mainstream restaurant critics, and one of them is the King's stepson. But "Bake Off" has given us people like Benjamina Ebuehi, a former teaching assistant who now writes recipes for the *Guardian*. Nadiya Hussain, the Season 6 winner, who has

since had multiple cookery TV shows of her own, has experienced a level of underdog stardom last enjoyed by Princess Di. Now that social media allows anyone to take fame into their own hands, you might think it's normal to have a democracy of experts, but that's because you are living in the world "Bake Off" built.

That the show is a food-star factory is not exactly in the spirit of the bake-offs that inspired it, which were vicious routs among just-above-average home bakers, for almost no measurable reward. Have you ever made Albina Flieller's Quick Crescent Pecan Pie Bar, which made her a co-winner of the 1973 Pillsbury Bake Off? Of course you haven't. Even the best carrot cake at the village show is only the best carrot cake at the village show. The succor of small-time hubris is what good bake-offs are about—bakers driven only by that elegant, unimpeachable motive, to be the best.

After my season of "The Great British Bake Off" aired, I got a recipe column, then wrote cookbooks. A few people online said I must have flirted with Paul Hollywood to get to the final, so I spent a few years, in my early twenties, being rude about him on Twitter by way of a rebuttal. And I told anyone who would listen that I didn't know why I'd applied to "Bake Off": "Like, it was *so* out of character." I didn't have big ambitions, I insisted; I just really, really loved baking. But, as I was reminiscing with Glenn recently about that fateful season in our lives, he reminded me—with a touch of judgment, I thought—that I'd been talking about writing a cookbook since the moment we entered the tent. ♦

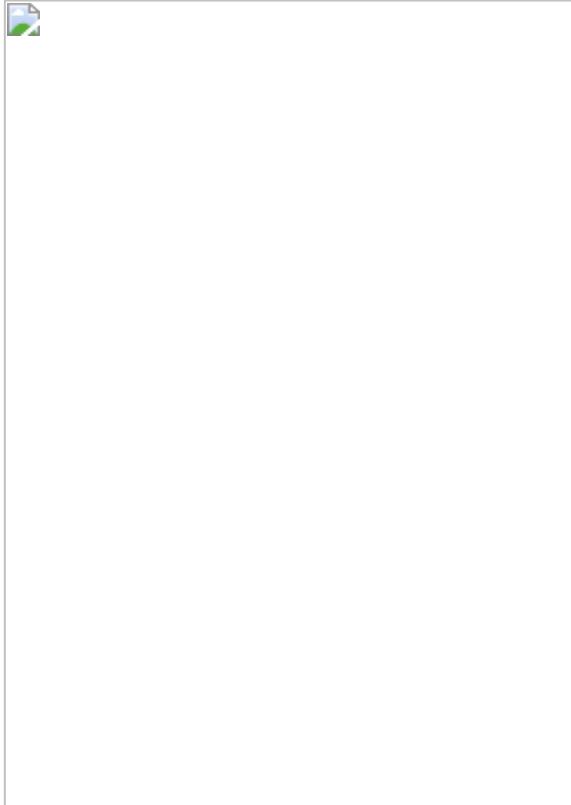
Annals of Artificial Intelligence

# A.I. Is Coming for Culture

We're used to algorithms guiding our choices. When machines can effortlessly generate the content we consume, though, what's left for the human imagination?

**By Joshua Rothman**

August 25, 2025



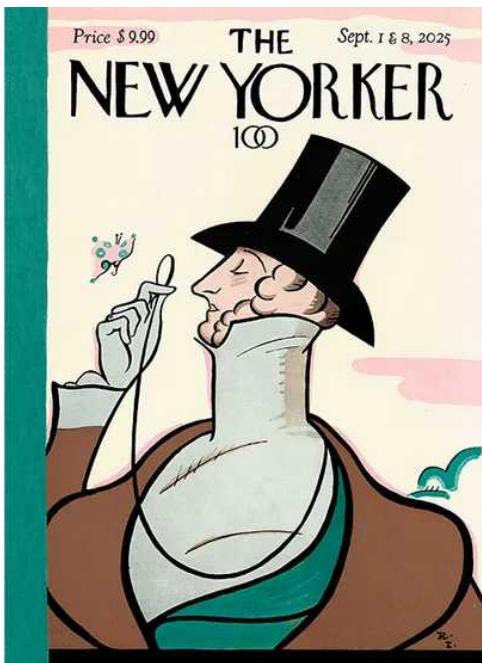
I often wake up before dawn, ahead of my wife and kids, so that I can enjoy a little solitary time. I creep downstairs to the silent kitchen, drink a glass of water, and put in my AirPods. Then I choose some music, set up the coffee maker, and sit and listen while the coffee brews.

It's in this liminal state that my encounter with the algorithm begins. Groggily, I'll scroll through some dad content on Reddit, or watch photography videos on YouTube, or check Apple News. From the kitchen island, my laptop beckons me to work, and I want to accept its invitation—but, if I'm not careful, I might watch every available clip of a movie I haven't seen, or start an episode of "The Rookie," an ABC police procedural about a middle-aged father who reinvents himself by joining the L.A.P.D. (I discovered the show on TikTok, probably because I'm demographically similar to its protagonist.) In the worst-case scenario, my kids wake up while I'm still scrolling, and I've squandered the hour I gave up sleep to secure.

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## The Culture Industry: A Centenary Issue

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If this sort of morning sounds familiar, it's because, a couple of decades into the smartphone era, life's rhythms and the algorithm's have merged. We listen to podcasts while getting dressed and watch Netflix before bed. In

between, there's Bluesky on the bus, Spotify at the gym, Instagram at lunch, YouTube before dinner, X for toothbrushing, Pinterest for the insomniac hours. It's a strange way to live. Algorithms are old—around 300 B.C., Euclid invented one for finding the greatest common divisor of two integers. They are, essentially, mathematical procedures for solving problems. We use them to coördinate physical things (like elevators) and bureaucratic things (like medical residencies). Did it make sense to treat unclaimed time as a problem? We've solved it algorithmically, and now have none.

A feeling of overstimulation is one consequence of algorithmic life. Another is a certain jumbledness in our ideas. Why do we care about what we care about? Walking into your basement in the dark, you might stumble into a cobweb; one strain of philosophical thought holds that this is how caring works. We become ensnared by the possibilities that happen to present themselves as we live—we get caught in webs of care. You run into your elderly neighbor in the morning and, that night, wonder how he's doing. Your middle schooler likes [Chappell Roan](#), and soon you do, too. A single encounter with "[The Fountainhead](#)" at thirteen might make you a lifelong libertarian. Algorithmic culture taps into the casual randomness with which we apportion our care; it takes advantage of the fact that what we bump into today might obsess us tomorrow. Its webs, meanwhile, are woven by machines that are owned by corporations.

I've long felt caught in my personal web, and have struggled to get out. Then, one morning last year, I started chatting with the A.I. system Claude in my predawn kitchen, in an experimental spirit. "I'm finally starting to make progress on the article I'm writing," I typed on my phone while the coffee brewed.

"Good morning!" the system replied. "That's wonderful to hear—there's nothing quite like that feeling when a piece you've been working on starts to come together. What's the article about, and what helped you break through to this progress?"

I didn't answer. I had no desire, at that hour, or any hour, to let an A.I. act as a writing coach. But, having used my phone, I could now put it down. I sipped my coffee and began marking up an old draft.

I kept chatting with Claude and ChatGPT in the mornings—not about my writing but about subjects that interested me. (Why are tariffs bad? What’s up with crime on the subway? Why is dark matter dark?) Instead of checking Apple News, I started asking Perplexity—an A.I.-based system for searching the web—“What’s going on in the world today?” In response, it reliably conjured a short news summary that was informative and unsolicitous, not unlike the section in *The Economist* headed “[The World in Brief](#).” Sometimes I asked Perplexity follow-up questions, but more often I wasn’t tempted to read further. I picked up a book. It turned out that A.I. could be boring—a quality in technology that I’d missed.

As it happened, around this time, the algorithmic internet—the world of Reddit, YouTube, X, and the like—had started losing its magnetism. In 2018, in *New York*, the journalist Max Read [asked](#), “How much of the internet is fake?” He noted that a significant proportion of online traffic came from “bots masquerading as humans.” But now “A.I. slop” appeared to be taking over. Whole websites seemed to be written by A.I.; models were repetitively beautiful, their earrings oddly positioned; anecdotes posted to online forums, and the comments below them, had a chatbot cadence. One study found that more than half of the text on the web had been modified by A.I., and an increasing number of “influencers” look to be entirely A.I.-generated. Alert users were embracing “dead internet theory,” a once conspiratorial mind-set holding that the online world had become automated.

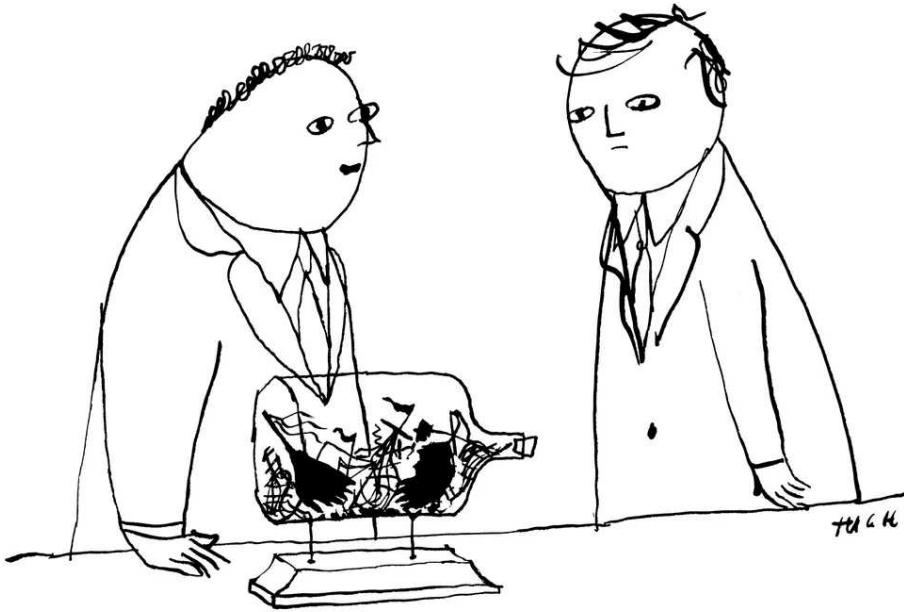
In the 1950 book “[The Human Use of Human Beings](#),” the computer scientist Norbert Wiener—the inventor of cybernetics, the study of how machines, bodies, and automated systems control themselves—argued that modern societies were run by means of messages. As these societies grew larger and more complex, he wrote, a greater amount of their affairs would depend upon “messages between man and machines, between machines and man, and between machine and machine.” Artificially intelligent machines can send and respond to messages much faster than we can, and in far greater volume—that’s one source of concern. But another is that, as they communicate in ways that are literal, or strange, or narrow-minded, or just plain wrong, we will incorporate their responses into our lives unthinkingly. Partly for this reason, Wiener later wrote, “the world of the future will be an ever more demanding struggle against the limitations of our intelligence, not

a comfortable hammock in which we can lie down to be waited upon by our robot slaves.”

The messages around us are changing, even writing themselves. From a certain angle, they seem to be silencing some of the algorithmically inflected human voices that have sought to influence and control us for the past couple of decades. In my kitchen, I enjoyed the quiet—and was unnerved by it. What will these new voices tell us? And how much space will be left in which we can speak?

Recently, I strained my back putting up a giant twin-peaked back-yard tent, for my son Peter’s seventh-birthday party; as a result, I’ve been spending more time on the spin bike than in the weight room. One morning, after dropping Peter off at camp, I pedalled a virtual bike path around the shores of a Swiss lake while listening to Evan Ratliff’s podcast “Shell Game,” in which he uses an A.I. model to impersonate him on the phone. Even as our addiction to podcasts reflects our need to be consuming media at all times, they are islands of tranquility within the algorithmic ecosystem. I often listen to them while tidying. For short stints of effort, I rely on “Song Exploder,” “LensWork,” and “Happier with Gretchen Rubin”; when I have more to do, I listen to “Radiolab,” or “The Ezra Klein Show,” or Tyler Cowen’s “Conversations with Tyler.” I like the ideas, but also the company. Washing dishes is more fun with Gretchen and her screenwriter sister, Elizabeth, riding along.

Podcasts thrive on emotional authenticity: a voice in your ear, three friends in a room. There have been a few experiments in fully automated podcasting—for a while, Perplexity published “Discover Daily,” which offered A.I.-generated “dives into tech, science, and culture”—but they’ve tended to be charmless and lacking in intellectual heft. “I take the most pride in finding and generating ideas,” Latif Nasser, a co-host of “Radiolab,” told me. A.I. is verboten in the “Radiolab” offices—using it would be “like crossing a picket line,” Nasser said—but he “will ask A.I., just out of curiosity, like, ‘O.K., pitch me five episodes.’ I’ll see what comes out, and the pitches are garbage.”



What if you furnish A.I. with your own good ideas, though? Perhaps they could be made real, through automated production. Last fall, I added a new podcast, “The Deep Dive,” to my rotation; I generated the episodes myself, using a Google system called NotebookLM. To create an episode, you upload documents into an online repository (a “notebook”) and click a button. Soon, a male-and-female podcasting duo is ready to discuss whatever you’ve uploaded, in convincing podcast voice. NotebookLM is meant to be a research tool, so, on my first try, I uploaded some scientific papers. The hosts’ artificial fascination wasn’t quite capable of eliciting my own. I had more success when I gave the A.I. a few chapters of a memoir I’m writing; it was fun to listen to the hosts’ “insights,” and initially gratifying to hear them respond positively. But I really hit the sweet spot when I tried creating podcasts based on articles I had written a long time ago, and to some extent forgotten.

“That’s a huge question—it cuts right to the core,” one of the hosts said, discussing an essay I’d published several years before.

“It’s ambitious,” the other host chimed in.

At the kitchen sink, I grinned; I kept listening while washing up the breakfast dishes. At first, I was merely entertained—it was neat to hear the

aesthetics of a form made for mass consumption deployed for an audience of one. But it was actually useful to be reminded of old thoughts, some of which I'd now probably revise.

If A.I. continues to speed or automate creative work, the total volume of cultural “stuff”—podcasts, blog posts, videos, books, songs, articles, animations, films, shows, plays, polemics, online personae, and so on—will increase. But, because A.I. will have peculiar strengths and shortcomings, more won’t necessarily mean more of the same. New forms, or new uses for existing forms, will pull us in directions we don’t anticipate. At home, Nasser told me, he’d found that ChatGPT could quickly draft an engaging short story about his young son’s favorite element, boron, written in the style of Roald Dahl’s [The BFG](#). The periodic table x “The BFG” isn’t a collab anyone’s been asking for, but, once we have it, we might find that we want it.

It’s not a real collaboration, of course. When two people collaborate, we hope for a spark as their individualities collide. A.I. has no individuality—and, because its fundamental skill is the detection of patterns, its “collaborations” tend to perpetuate the formulaic aspects of what’s combined. A further challenge is that A.I. lacks artistic agency; it must be told what’s interesting. All this suggests that A.I. culture could submerge human originality in a sea of unmotivated, formulaic art.

And yet automation might also allow for the expression of new visions. “I have a background in independent filmmaking,” Mind Wank, one of the pseudonymous creators of [“AI OR DIE,](#) which bills itself as “the First 100% AI Sketch Comedy Show,” told me. “It was something I did for a long time. Then I stopped.” When A.I. video tools such as Runway appeared, it became possible for him to take unproduced or unproducible ideas and develop them. He and two partners—the team members are based in Canada, the U.S., and Poland—now create darkly surrealist comedy videos seen by hundreds of thousands of people. (In a typical sequence, a Twitch streamer named Lil Cankles plays a game called Laundromat. “The lint is overflowing!” a computer voice screams, while grotesque quantities of it spew from a dryer vent.) “The reason we have any edge we might have is that we speak the language of film,” Wank said of his collaborators, who

also came up through traditional channels. “We understand lighting, lenses, film stock.”

Traditional filmmaking, as he sees it, is linear: “You have an idea, then you turn it into a treatment, then you write a script, then you get people and money on board. Then you can finally move from preproduction into production—that’s a whole pain in the ass—and then, nine months later, you try to resurrect whatever scraps of your vision are there in the editing bay.” By contrast, A.I. allows for infinite revision at any point. For a couple of hundred dollars in monthly fees, he said, A.I. tools had unlocked “the sort of creative life I only dreamed of when I was younger. You’re so constrained in the real world, and now you can just create whole new worlds.” The technology put him in mind of “the auteur culture of the sixties and seventies.”

The full team has never met in person, but they talk constantly, living in a shared creative bubble. “When you paint, you just start smelling of paint,” Bengt Tibert, the Polish collaborator, told me. “When I started prompting, I just started dreaming of prompts. It’s like a new life.” Before falling asleep, Tibert explained, he’d think of a prompt (a set of instructions to give an A.I.), and when he woke up he’d write down what he’d dreamed.

Boey, the (mononymous) Canadian collaborator, concurred: “My head is halfway in the computer at all times.”

Today’s A.I. video tools reveal themselves in tiny details, producing a recognizable aesthetic. They also work best when creating short clips. But they’re rapidly improving. “I’m waiting for the tools to achieve enough consistency to let us create an entire feature-length film using stable characters,” Wank said. At that point, one could use them to make a completely ordinary drama or rom-com. “We all love filmmaking, love cinema,” he said. “We have movies we want to make, TV shows, advertisements.”

“There are so many ideas that you can now create, and so little time,” Tibert said. “It’s almost overwhelming.”

I was speaking to the “*AI OR DIE*” team from my son’s room, where I’d hidden myself from his little sister. When our conversation finished, I closed my laptop and looked around at his things. A mug he’d made at a kids’ pottery workshop held a rainbow of Sharpie Creative Markers; a coloring book meant for teens and grownups contained intricate pictures of animals. He’d completed a page showing a parrot, its feathers ruffled, on a branch in front of a chain-link fence, and applied an array of surprising colors to create a prismatic image. Strictly speaking, the result was derivative, fill-in-the-blank. But that wasn’t all it was. It’s against the backdrop of formula that originality emerges.

In the afternoon, I was meeting a few old friends for lunch. A quarter century ago, in college, we’d taken a creative-writing course together. Our professor, the celebrated gay novelist and memoirist [Edmund White](#), had recently died, and one of us had organized a little memorial gathering at a Dallas BBQ in Chelsea, where, when we were in our twenties, he would sometimes join us for dinner.

During the walk over, I spoke in voice mode with ChatGPT, asking it about the history of the neighborhood. “As you walk along Eighth Avenue between Twenty-ninth and Twenty-seventh Streets, you’re in the heart of Chelsea, which was historically known for its vibrant manufacturing and garment industries,” it told me, using its “bright and inquisitive” persona, a British woman named Vale. It noted, too, that “Chelsea is home to many L.G.B.T.Q.+ bars, community centers, and events, making it a cornerstone of New York City’s L.G.B.T.Q.+ culture.”

“I’m actually from here,” I said. “I’m a New Yorker. So I really want, like, the most interesting stuff I wouldn’t know about.”

The A.I. tried to entertain me with some moderately diverting material about Tin Pan Alley—actually a little to the east of where I was—and the economics of sheet music at the turn of the twentieth century. I asked about an unusual-looking building on Seventh Avenue, and the bot called it “a testament to the area’s rich architectural and commercial heritage.”

“Avoid clichés and general statements like ‘The building contributes to the vibrancy of the neighborhood,’ ” I demanded. Perhaps, I suggested, we could

focus on more “lurid” facts. Soon enough, we were discussing the murder of Nancy Spungen, who’d been stabbed to death in Room 100 of the [Chelsea Hotel](#), in 1978. Her boyfriend, Sid Vicious, the former bassist of the Sex Pistols, was charged with the murder but died of a heroin overdose before the case could go to trial.

Outside the restaurant, I posed a wonky question about real-estate development—why aren’t the buildings in Chelsea taller?—and, when that conversation ran dry, asked for background on the “I♥ NY” logo, which I saw on someone’s T-shirt. The bot told me all about its designer, [Milton Glaser](#), and about the atmosphere surrounding the logo’s creation in the nineteen-seventies (“*Ford to City: Drop Dead*”). “Would you like to see the original sketches?” it asked. I considered it until a friend waved from across the street.

From one thing to another, to another—in that movement, A.I. excels. In “Blade Runner 2049,” Ryan Gosling’s character comes home from work and chats with his A.I. girlfriend, Joi, played by Ana de Armas. It’s snowing outside, but Frank Sinatra’s “Summer Wind” is on the sound system. “Do you know this song was released in 1966 on Reprise Records?” she asks, blandly. “It was No. 1 on the charts.” She wears a flouncy dress from the Rat Pack era and frets about a recipe—and then, responding to her beau’s shifting mood, changes into a slinky, all-black outfit. Just a moment later, they’re on the roof of his building, sharing a romantic moment. A chat with an A.I. system involves the performance of a script that’s being written in real time. Even if the script is boring, the speed with which it can be revised may register as spontaneity or vitality. Something that can keep up with you as you move the conversation from music to murder to Milton Glaser—or from cooking to flirting to drama—might seem to have a mind.

What does this fluidity imply for culture in the age of A.I.? Works of art have particular shapes (three-minute pop songs, three-act plays) and particular moods and tones (comic, tragic, romantic, elegiac). But, when boundaries between forms, moods, and modalities are so readily transgressed, will they prove durable? “Right now, we talk about, Is A.I. good or bad for content creators?,” the Silicon Valley pioneer [Jaron Lanier](#) told me. (Lanier helped invent virtual reality and now works at Microsoft.) “But it’s possible that the very notion of ‘content’ will go away, and that

content will be replaced with live synthesis that's designed to have an effect on the recipient." Today, there are A.I.-generated songs on Spotify, but at least the songs are credited to (fake) bands. "There could come a point where it'll just be 'music,'" Lanier said. In this future scenario, when you sign in to an A.I. version of Spotify, "the first thing you hear will be 'Hey, babe, I'm your Spotify girlfriend. I made a playlist for you. It's kind of sexy, so don't listen to it around other people.'" This "playlist" would consist of songs that have never been heard before, and might never be heard again. They will have been created, in the moment, just for you, perhaps based on facts about you that the A.I. has observed.

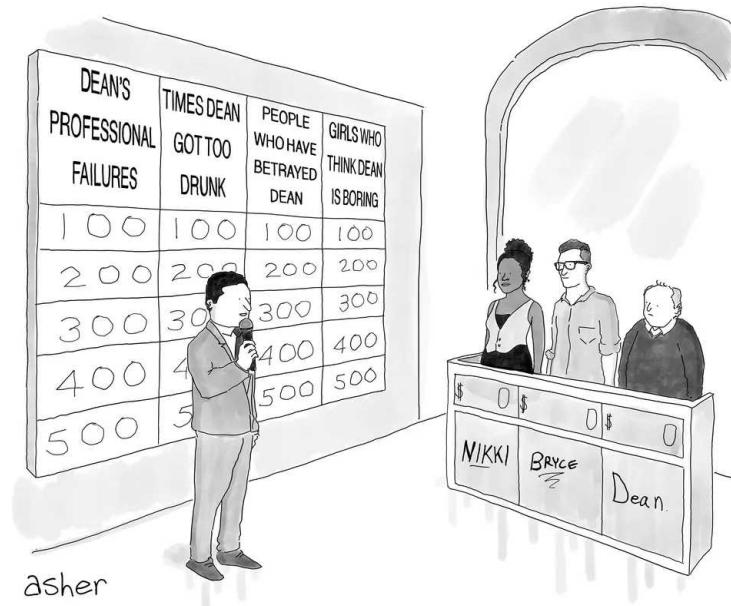
In the longer term, Lanier thought, all sorts of cultural experiences—music, video, reading, gaming, conversation—might flow from a single "A.I. hub." There would be no artists to pay, and the owners of the hubs would be able to exercise extraordinary influence over their audiences; for these reasons, even people who don't want to experience culture this way could find the apps they use moving in an A.I.-enabled direction.

Culture is communal. We like being part of a community of appreciators. But "there's an option here, if computation is cheap enough, for the creation of an illusion of society," Lanier said. "You would be getting a tailored experience, but your perception would be that it's shared with a bunch of other people—some of whom might be real biological people, some of whom might be fake." (I imagined this would be like Joi introducing Gosling's character to her friends.) To inhabit this "dissociated society cut off from real life," he went on, "people would have to change. But people do change. We've already gotten people used to fake friendships and fake lovers. It's simple: it's based on things we want." If people yearn for something strongly enough, some of them will be willing to accept an inferior substitute. "I don't *want* this to occur, and I'm not predicting that it *will* occur," Lanier said, grimly. "I think naming all this is a way of increasing the chances that it doesn't happen."

At the restaurant, my friends and I reminisced. Ed, our professor, had taught in a relaxed, even gossipy style, discussing the people he knew along with the books he loved. His own novels could be conversational and diary-like: they often told stories set in the neighborhood, drawn, it seemed, from his life there. He must have shared advice about narrative craft and other

writerly matters with us, but it had faded over the decades; now I mainly remembered that we'd talked about "[A Single Man](#)" and "[Mrs. Dalloway](#)," and how he'd once complimented me on a shirt I'd worn, and described, at length, what made some people boring at parties and others interesting.

The seminars and dinners had made us feel that the world of culture—real culture, New York culture, artists' culture—was within our reach. But what *was* that world of culture? It wasn't a list of art works to experience, although that was part of it. It was fundamentally a story unfolding between teachers and students, muses and poets, standard-bearers and rule-breakers, all wrestling with cultural forms that were themselves evolving, enduring, subsiding, fracturing, combining, and being rebuilt. You had to learn this story, then write your way in.



Late in the lunch, our conversation shifted to romance. One of us, with the help of a "Texas-size" margarita, got lost in a racy story about the first night she'd spent with her future husband.

"I don't know why I'm telling you this," she said.

"I think Ed would say that you should write about it!" someone suggested.

Compared with the specificity of real art made by actual individuals with authentic lives, I thought, culture generated ad infinitum, in a formless flow, devoid of context or personality, would be meaningless. But then I remembered my old predawn routine—a song played halfway through, a random movie seen in parts. In “[The Practice of Everyday Life](#),” from 1980, the scholar Michel de Certeau considered how people window-shopped, skimmed articles without fully reading them, and found in the “incarceration” of a train commute opportunities for observation and reflection. In his view, they were repurposing their world to make space for themselves within a system that wanted to shape their feelings, thoughts, and ambitions. By this logic, when you make a mix of songs and give it to your crush, you’re not saying that your infatuation is defined by those songs. Instead, you’re showing that your feelings are bigger than what any one song can convey. You’re using the songs to create a larger work of your own.

What would it mean to give your crush a mix of A.I.-crafted music? Perhaps we’ll be able to make meaning for ourselves out of automated art. A catchy tune written by no one is still catchy. Pop stars are already in some sense products, but the communities of fans that spring up around them are very real. And yet culture isn’t only consumed—it’s created by people living their lives. We admire the act of creation and the quality of naturalness. Movie audiences, having thrilled to computer graphics, have also come to appreciate “practical” special effects. Artificial flavors make natural ones more desirable. Exploring computer-generated culture might lead us to value even more the culture that only we can generate.

In 2023, I [profiled Geoffrey Hinton](#), who is sometimes described as “the godfather of A.I.,” for this magazine. I’m often sad when an experience like that draws to a close. A few months later, feeling nostalgic and curious, I fed the profile into ChatGPT. “Write a piece of fan fiction about the characters in it,” I said. The system returned a book report about the ideas, people, and writerly techniques it had discerned, along with a narrative. “Geoffrey Hinton stood on the wooden dock at midnight,” it began:

Overhead, the late-summer sky was moonless and staggeringly clear. The Milky Way sprawled above like a luminous brain—countless stars clustered in neural patterns, a cosmos of flickering connections. Geoff

tipped his head back to gaze at them. . . . Behind him, the cabin was dark. The reporter, Josh, had left earlier that day, waving from the departing boat. The four-day interview had stirred up memories and ideas in Geoff’s mind like sediment in a pond. Now the waters were still again, but something had changed.

As it wound up, the narrative turned to artificial intelligence. Hinton “opened his eyes and spoke into the night”:

“I’m not afraid of you,” he said quietly. “I’m afraid of what we might do with you, or fail to do.” His words faded into the sound of the water.  
“I’m afraid of our own flaws, mirrored in you.”

A decent start, I thought. Yet, in the next chapter, the A.I. took the story in a thriller-ish direction—its fictional Hinton contended with a dangerous model escaping control—and failed to generate any actual thrills. As a writer myself, I was relieved. A thriller is supposed to be spine-tingling, pulse-pounding, bone-chilling; maybe, I thought, a system lacking a body or self-preserving instincts couldn’t channel those qualities. Or perhaps the A.I. had struggled with the logical planning involved in writing good suspense. There are so many ways in which telling a story can be challenging. “I’m a snob about care,” Carly Mensch, a television writer, told me, laughing. (She co-created the lady-wrestler dramedy “*GLOW*,” and is married to Nasser.) “I think that to build a story that makes you care is really difficult. Whereas I think suspense must be easy.”

Stories vary wildly, but one thing they have in common is their pursuit of contradictory goals. They must seem natural, but also contain provocative and illuminating ideas; their turns must be surprising, but combine to make a pleasing and comprehensible shape; they must have clear stakes, and yet be capacious enough to be interesting in different ways to different people. Their creation is rarely straightforward. “So many good things come from boredom, from making mistakes, from accidents,” Mensch said. “When you sit in a writers’ room, it’s really messy, and people are just pitching a lot of things. Sometimes the wrong pitch leads to the right pitch. You learn something when you can say, ‘That’s not the second chapter that I want.’ ” (Hearing this, I wondered if an A.I.’s bad story ideas might still be useful, as a form of automated spitballing.) At the highest level, a good story has to

reflect its audience while modifying that reflection. One conception of storytelling is pastoral. “Every tribe has storytellers, and at night, around the campfire, we stand up and tell the stories of the tribe to the tribe,” Mensch said, paraphrasing a professor with whom she’d studied. The second is theatrical: “You walk into a dark room, and you’re surprised.”

Will artificial intelligence be able to craft stories that satisfy us on all these levels? Probably not. But stories don’t always need to be that satisfying. In William Gibson’s novel “[Count Zero](#),” from 1986, a woman comes home, hooks herself up to a neural interface, and proceeds to “soap her brains out good for six solid hours” with a never-ending soap opera called “People of Importance.” Its “labyrinthine complexities” don’t need to add up to anything; continuation is the point, rather than resolution. Our own personal stories, similarly, don’t necessarily achieve storytelling excellence—and yet we find them boundlessly fascinating. They matter to us because we’re in them. If we each had a dedicated writer—our own court scribe—then perhaps we could follow the trajectory of the selfie further into the territory of self-based narrative. (If you open up Meta’s A.I. app, one of the first options you might see reads “Let’s talk about my day.”)

At Peter’s party, I tried on a pair of Ray-Ban Meta sunglasses—ordinary-looking glasses with a built-in A.I. interface. I glanced around our back yard, eventually settling on a shaded table where our next-door neighbors—a young couple who’d recently moved in—were sitting with my father-in-law. Peter was eating ice-cream cake; kids chased one another across the lawn brandishing foam swords and squirt guns.

“Meta, what do you see?” I asked.

“It’s a group of people sitting at a table under a tent on a beautiful day, enjoying a moment of togetherness at what’s probably a family party,” the glasses said, through tiny speakers near my ears. “It looks like a great time!” The effect was of someone sharing my head, seeing what I saw, hearing what I heard.

I reached up and touched a temple; the glasses took a picture. The Ray-Bans belonged to Iris, the mother of one of my son’s friends. “I like to ask it questions,” she said. “Like, ‘What’s new with the Diddy trial?’ ” In the car,

if her family is listening to music she doesn't like, she can queue up her own, privately. She pulled out her phone and swiped through some photos she'd taken at the party. They'd been wirelessly synched from the glasses, and they captured our back yard from her point of view. The P.O.V. story—the story of you—is one that A.I. is already well equipped to tell, or help you tell, perhaps therapeutically, perhaps retrospectively. Jack Clark, the head of policy at the A.I. company Anthropic, has described feeding diary entries into its system, Claude; the A.I. convinced him that he hadn't fully processed the "metaphysical shock" of becoming a father. Through this sort of process, A.I. might tell us our stories, and revise them.

A few years ago, after a movie that Daniel Kwan co-directed, "Everything Everywhere All at Once," won seven Oscars, the filmmaker got curious about A.I., and used his newfound cachet to land meetings with people who work in that field. Kwan was struck not just by the degree to which A.I. promised to disrupt the film industry but also by how it might affect the movement of stories through society. It seemed to him that films seeking to tell compelling stories to broad audiences already struggled to compete with algorithmic life. "Our communication structure is completely broken," he said. "Our attention is fractured." A.I. could fracture it further.

"What's the most important thing humanity has engineered?" Kwan asked me, over coffee in a West Village restaurant. "Arguably, it wasn't the internet, or agriculture. It was the creation of the systemic and institutional trust that was required for us to build societies. And a lot of that engineering was actually collective stories—God, government—that helped us see ourselves as one family, one community. With our current technology, it's like we're playing Jenga." He mimed a tower of blocks at the table. "We've been pulling blocks from down here, from the foundation of collective understanding and belief in a shared world, and using them to build farther up on the tower. And, if we keep doing that, the whole thing will collapse, and we'll go back to only being able to trust the hundred and fifty people in our tribes."

In "Everything Everywhere All at Once," a first-generation immigrant to America named Evelyn, played by Michelle Yeoh, discovers that we're all living in a vast multiverse, within which every imaginable permutation of reality and ourselves exists. She's contacted by an alternate version of her

husband who tells her that another version of their daughter, Joy, has been driven mad by the apparent meaninglessness of any single version of existence. This alternate Joy has embraced nihilism, and is determined to destroy the whole multiverse. For a while, Evelyn goes crazy, too; then she has an existentialist epiphany, and convinces the evil Joy that the only way forward is to choose to embrace the particular people you happen to live with in your particular universe.

When I saw the film, I first experienced it as an immigrant story. (My mother, like Yeoh, grew up in Malaysia, and she was haunted by what-ifs: What if she'd stayed there? Moved to London? Settled on the West Coast rather than the East?) Later, as the film continued, I saw its critique of an algorithmic society in which we're bombarded by images of people who are just like us, only better. Now it seemed to me to anticipate a world in which artificial intelligence could serve as an individual Scheherazade, telling us endlessly malleable stories about ourselves and each other, pulling us into alternate realities and away from the one we might share.

"If you look at all the crises coming down on us—climate change, polarization, the collapse of consensus truth, income inequality, whatever—if I could choose one to focus on, it would be the coördination, communication, trust problem," Kwan said. "Because, if we don't fix that, we can't fix anything else. And fixing that requires us to fix our stories."

Kwan had come to think that A.I. tools capable of a certain level of photorealism needed to be regulated. ("This is tech that can ruin someone's life," he said.) The use of A.I. in his industry ought to be curtailed, he argued, until fake images could be reliably identified. I told him about the joyful team behind "*AI OR DIE*." "I feel so conflicted when I hear those stories," he said. "I mean, that's beautiful. We should want everyone who wants to say something to have a chance to do it. I understand that approach, and, in another life, I'd be doing it." He looked pained. "You know, I was that kid. Vimeo came out just before I started college. I graduated just when YouTube started being YouTube. But by using A.I. right now, and supporting these companies before they do the responsible thing, we're just enabling them to destroy consensus truth, and to make it basically impossible for us to know what is real."

Artificial intelligence, at least, seems to be a big story we're all following. The restaurant where we'd met was near N.Y.U., and outside, in the sun, students were strolling by. The practical questions are familiar—what will happen to education, to jobs?—and answers to them will come with time. But the story of A.I. is not only practical; it's also moral and spiritual. It's the story of John Henry and the steam drill, or even of Prometheus and Zeus, who levied a gruesome punishment for stealing fire, and it is already forcing us to think about what we value, about what really makes us care. I ambled toward Sixth Avenue, passing a stationery store on the south side of the street. The people inside browsed through notebooks, recapturing an analog age. In our different ways, we're all deciding how we want the story to turn out.

"In the middle decades of the twentieth century, American intellectuals of manifold types, from disparate and even hostile groups, converged on a perception of danger," the cultural critic Mark Greif has written. This was "the age of the crisis of man"—a time when pretty much everyone feared some combination of technological acceleration, social alienation, and spiritual estrangement. "New conditions seemed destined to snap the long tradition of humanism," Greif observed. People published books with titles like "The Nature and Destiny of Man." They worried "that human nature was being changed."

Are we in such a crisis now? Recently, in a series of sold-out concerts at [the Sphere](#), in Las Vegas, the electronic musician Anyma wowed audiences by creating the illusion of a vast robot looming overhead, peering down, and then breaking through the building's wall. "Sentience," a voice intoned. "Consciousness." And yet the show was just that—a traditional concert, performed by human musicians, for which thousands gathered in person. Even as culture changes, it's usually additive rather than zero-sum. It preserves itself through time, as if secreting its own amber. Today, Ariana Grande stars in high-tech films based on "The Wizard of Oz," and TikTok and Fortnite create dance crazes. People still read [Jane Austen](#) and [Agatha Christie](#), and movies still come in trilogies, echoing the triple-decker novel, which evolved in the nineteenth century partly so that subscription libraries could more easily lend out long books. At the video arcade my son likes, teen-agers play Pong, Pac-Man, and Space Invaders, rendered in fist-size pixels on wall-size screens. Artificial intelligence, meanwhile, is in many

ways a conservative force. It's trained on, and to some extent trapped within, data from the past. It makes old ideas newly available.



The Whitney Museum, in the meatpacking district, occupies a zone of the city that's been entirely repurposed. "Where there were once carcasses hanging in cold rooms, there are now racks of designer dresses," ChatGPT noted. With two small kids at home, my wife and I haven't been to a museum together in years. But I loaded her doctoral dissertation, on the use of details in the novels of [Vladimir Nabokov](#), into ChatGPT, along with an essay she'd published about the frescoes of Fra Angelico and the question of what it means for secular people to enjoy sacred art. That way, I might be able to visit the museum with her ideas, if not with her. "That sounds like a beautiful and thoughtful plan, Josh," the A.I. said. "We can treat your visit to the museum as a kind of conversation with her, through me."

"Chat, what do you think my wife would make of this painting?" I asked, speaking quietly so as not to disturb anyone. I snapped a photo of Amy Sherald's portrait of Michelle Obama. Geometric patterns were printed on her flowing white dress.

"Oh, this piece is stunning!" the A.I. said, in my AirPods. "I can imagine her noticing those little details and how they speak to identity and expression."

“No, no,” I muttered. “I want you to really think about how my wife would respond, specifically.”

“Absolutely!” it said, with its usual blithe confidence. “I think she’d be fascinated by the details.” It nattered on until I tapped the X on my phone’s screen, closing the chat.

The gallery was crowded; Sherald’s show, “American Sublime,” was a sensation. “Trans Forming Liberty,” her [portrait](#) of the model and performance artist Arewà Basit, a Black trans woman, holding up a torch-like vase of flowers, had attracted a small group. A stooped older man peered through thick glasses, and a couple stood with their tween daughter. A young man handsome enough to be a model himself lounged while standing, wearing black pants, a black tank top, and a Leica camera on a black silk strap.

I took the elevator upstairs, to look at some of [Edward Hopper](#)’s paintings. “Do you recognize this?” I asked the A.I., sending it a photo of Hopper’s “Second Story Sunlight.” In it, two women sit on the sunlit balcony of a house; the older one reads, while the younger one rests atop the railing in a bikini. Their contemplative poses are echoed by the house’s twin triangular gables. Behind them, the trees of a mysterious wood create shadows, suggesting what’s unknown.

“Yes, I do know that one,” the A.I. said. “Edward Hopper’s ‘Second Story Sunlight’ is such an evocative piece. . . . It’s got that classic Hopper feel of quiet, introspective moments and a hint of isolation, even in a sunlit scene.”

Annoyed by the banality of these remarks, I took out my AirPods, slipped them into their case, and snapped it closed. What a waste of time, I thought. I looked around in some embarrassment, wondering if anyone had caught me trying to talk about the painting with an A.I.: what a loser, desecrating the museum with cheap technological experiments! But the few people nearby were all looking at their phones. Seeing them bent toward their screens, I realized that ChatGPT’s voice mode might not be the best way to approach this particular task. I took my time, typing out a carefully worded prompt. Consider that Hopper’s painting was the product of a secular age, I wrote, and yet contained spiritual elements. Elaborate on the fact that one of

its subjects is older, one younger. Filter your thoughts through the essay I uploaded earlier, on sacred art in a secular world.

On the screen, a little essay appeared, with sections, subheads, and emojis. I stood and read. The painting was “sacred art in a secular key,” it said. Hopper conjured a sacred feeling “not through content, but through the stillness of composition. . . . Through the way light operates like grace—unearned, illuminating.”

Not bad, I thought. The ideas evoked my wife, in the same loose way that a shadow could evoke a person. Scrolling up, I saw the little digital picture I’d snapped of Hopper’s painting; it struck me as ridiculous. This was a strange way to visit a museum. The actual work of art, with its totemic aura, its visible brushstrokes, perhaps with the fingerprints of the artist embedded somewhere in its paint, was right in front of me.

I wandered back downstairs to the Sherald exhibition. At the far end of the gallery, a small hallway led to a space where rows of colorful modernist chairs faced a wall of windows. It was itself an art installation, called “Long Line,” by Mary Heilmann. Almost every chair was occupied. Outside, sunlight prisms in ripples on the Hudson. A girl in torn black jeans and purple lipstick sketched the view in a notebook. A dapper man in Italian tailoring seemed to be asleep. The whole scene might have been a painting of leisure, like Georges Seurat’s “A Sunday on La Grande Jatte.” I asked myself, What is culture? It was those paintings, but it was also this. It was us.

At home, I called up “Second Story Sunlight” on my iPad and showed it to my wife. “What do you think of this painting?” I asked.

She studied it for a long time. “My first feeling is that it’s sort of disturbing,” she said. “But then my dominant feeling is that there’s something puzzling about it. The space is funny. The way their bodies fall—it looks like they’re in two different houses, but they’re not. The woman in the bathing suit seems a little older than a granddaughter, but younger than a daughter—that’s a little funny. I guess this is morning light? But with the greens and the blues it seems a little too cool to have a bathing suit on, and, if she has a bathing suit on, then it seems like it’s too warm for the grandmother to be

wearing her heavy dark clothes. And the young woman's pose is confusing. It looks like she's posing for something. It's a very strong pose. But she's not modelling. There's something in how she's gripping the railing—she seems performative. But performing for what?" She hesitated. "'Disturbing' is kind of an overstatement. But it's not *pleasant*. Although there's something about the light that's pleasant. The women are beautiful." She paused again. "I don't know. It's interesting. What did you think of it?"

Real people. They never say quite what you expect. ♦

## Profiles

# Patricia Lockwood Goes Viral

The writer's new novel, "Will There Ever Be Another You," is a singular account of losing her mind, body, and art to *COVID*—and of trying to get them back.

By Alexandra Schwartz

August 25, 2025

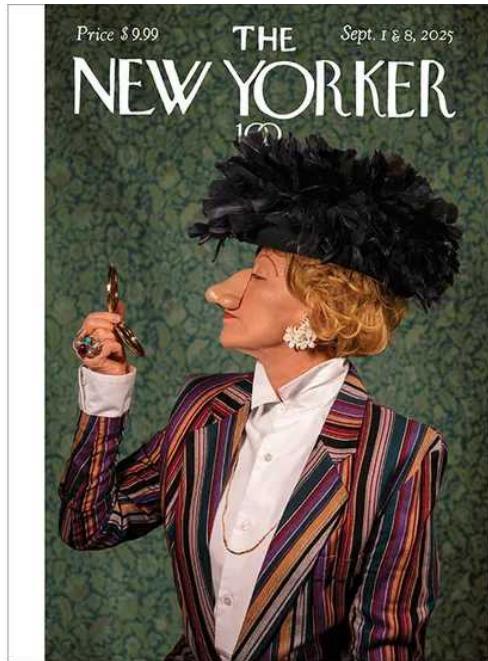
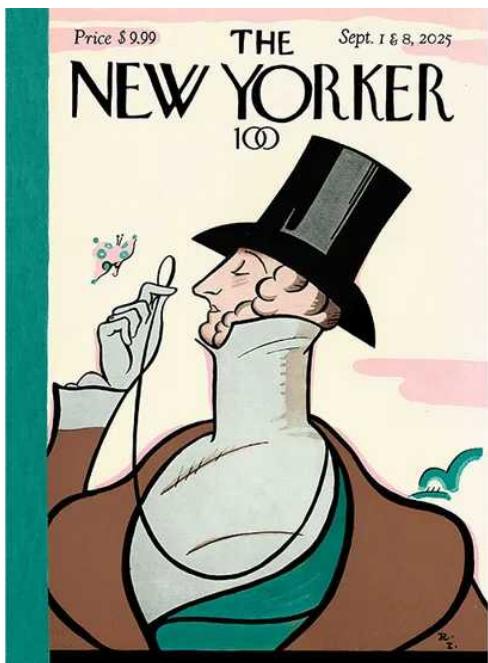


On a humid evening in May, Patricia Lockwood, who writes with the impish verve and provocative guilelessness of a peeing cupid, was scanning the menu at a Mexican restaurant near her home, in Savannah, Georgia. Her husband, Jason Kendall, an agricultural-commodities researcher whom Lockwood calls Corn Man, sat next to her. Both find dining to be a delicate business. Lockwood got *COVID* in March of 2020 and continues to experience aftereffects from the virus; she has adopted a ketogenic diet—high in fat, low in carbs—to help manage her symptoms. Kendall has had a fragile stomach ever since he suffered a set of catastrophic hemorrhages three years ago and nearly died.

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When a waitress stopped by, Kendall ordered cauliflower tacos with no sauce; Lockwood asked for fish ones without tortillas. “It’s very embarrassing, because it became a podcast diet,” she said of her keto regimen, in a tone that suggested that embarrassment, for her, is more of a theoretical than a felt phenomenon. Lockwood, who is forty-three, has close-cropped hair, expressive hands, and the rapid-fire, matter-of-fact confidence of someone who speaks even faster than she thinks. The playwright Heidi Schreck, who helped to adapt Lockwood’s life story for television, told me, “The first thing that always comes to mind, when I think of Tricia, is that self-portrait of Hildegard von Bingen”—the twelfth-century German abbess and mystic, who, in a book devoted to her divine revelations, depicted herself with a writing tablet on her lap and flames shooting out of her habit. Lockwood’s lack of inhibition can lead to trouble. At a panel in New York hosted by the Women’s Prize earlier in the spring, she suddenly slid off her stool mid-gesticulation. She no longer allows herself to do karaoke.

Lockwood began her writing life quietly, as a poet. She found her first major audience on Twitter, posting self-proclaimed “absurdities”—such as a series of Dadaistic sexts that made florid metaphorical use of rock slides,

dewdrops, and plot holes in the novels of Dan Brown—that quickly came to define the medium’s zany, waggish ethos. When she returned to the page, it was with a memoir, “Priestdaddy” (2017), which chronicled her improbable childhood as the daughter of a guitar-shredding, action-movie-obsessed Midwestern Catholic priest. Lockwood has since added fiction and criticism to her literary arsenal. Across genres, her calling card is her unmistakable voice, which sasses and seduces with quick wit and cheerful perversity, pressing the reader close to her comic, confiding “I.” “Due to certain quirks in my upbringing, I love men easily, which is either Christly or some slut thing” is classic Lockwood. So is the fact that this confession appears not in a personal essay but in a review of the works of John Updike.

When she got sick, her first instinct was to make a joke. “My story will be that John Harvard gave it to me” is how she started an essay published in the *London Review of Books* in July, 2020. The last thing she had done, before the pandemic hit, was give a lecture at Harvard about the nature of life online; on the plane back home, a man had coughed and coughed. A few days later, she was flattened with a fever. Even after her temperature dropped, things stayed wrong. Her hands would burn or go numb; her skin glittered with pain. She noticed that her body had become attuned to Savannah’s weather, as if its pressure systems affected some mysterious one within. A prickling at the base of her neck, a twinge in her thumb: here comes the storm.

The worst problem, though, was with her mind. In the *L.R.B.* essay —“Insane After Coronavirus?” is the title—Lockwood described “stumbling in my speech, transposing syllables, choosing the wrong nouns entirely.” Her memory had crumbled; she could barely read. Still, she thought that she saw a faint glimmering beyond the fog. “I know I used to be able to do this, I will be able to do it again,” she wrote. That oasis turned out to be a mirage—the beginning, not the end, of her ordeal. “That was the last time I felt that I sounded like myself,” Lockwood said, at dinner.

For a writer like Lockwood, the voice on the page is the whole game; the prospect of losing it is terrifying, the equivalent of a pianist’s crippling arthritis. But it was also uncannily familiar. When she fell ill, Lockwood had just finished writing her first novel, “No One Is Talking About This” (2021). Its unnamed, alter-ego protagonist has found renown for her playful posts on

a Twitter-esque platform. But the more she lends her sensibility to the internet, the more she fears that her private stream of consciousness has been swept away in the surge of the collective's, which has barnacled her language with its own diction, its own clichés. Possessed by the hive mind, she is increasingly haunted by “the unshakeable conviction that someone else was writing the inside of her head.”

The cure for a life lived too much online is to unplug, difficult as that might be. But what to do about an illness that no one fully understands, least of all the sufferer? Lockwood now knows that much of what plagued her was a state of perpetual migraine. She typically experienced not headaches but extreme sensory disturbances—a vision of a gorilla in a tree, say—and something that she called “the refrains,” the constant mental repetition of a line of dialogue, a sentence, a phrase from a song. She would jot these down in her “mad notebook,” a blue-covered Moleskine, along with fragments of ideas that she was having, observations from the reading she was struggling to do, and various medical regimens she was trying: gabapentin, rescue triptans, the migraine medications Ajoby and Qulipta. At the restaurant, she recalled that the first thing to really help was a tea steeped with psilocybin mushrooms that had been mailed to her by the writer Jami Attenberg. “A tiny dose,” she insisted.

“You would be out in the swimming pool, sometimes for hours in the afternoon,” Kendall remembered. He is forty-four, bald and athletic, with the calm, capable demeanor of Mr. Clean’s laid-back little brother. When Lockwood was at her sickest, she became convinced that the floorboards of their apartment were going to collapse under her feet. Kendall took action, moving them out of the city and to a house on nearby Wilmington Island, where she could float freely. “I thought we could therapeutically reorient your body,” he said.



"I could listen to music again," Lockwood recalled. In the pool, she played "Hosianna Mantra," by the pioneering German electronic band Popol Vuh, on repeat. The album, from 1972, has been described as a "meditation on faith and uncertainty"—a kind of prayer. "Maybe that's why the writing came back."

Once Lockwood was well enough, she began to shape the fragments from this shattered period of her life into a novel, "Will There Ever Be Another You," which Riverhead will publish in September. "I wrote it insane," she told me, "and edited it sane"; it is a collaboration between two different people, both of whom happen to be her. Illness is repeatedly figured as a kind of impostor or thief—not merely as an experience undergone by the self but, Lockwood writes, "the thing that the self had been replaced by." Getting sick, she said, thrust the questions that lurk at the heart of all novels, and all lives, to the center of hers: "What is the performance of a self? What is a person? What am I?"

Like other writers to whom the label of autofiction has been applied, Lockwood finds it fruitful to draw on her own experience in her work. Yet, when she writes in a strictly factual mode, she is sometimes accused of fabrication. In 2016, *The New Republic* sent Lockwood to a Trump rally in New Hampshire, where she described seeing a photograph on the jumbotron

of Melania in a bikini embracing an inflatable Shamu. Writing for the *L.R.B.* about Karl Ove Knausgaard—she is a contributing editor at that publication, brought on not to edit other people’s essays but, she told me, “as an outsider artist” to write freewheeling, minimally edited essays of her own—she recounted a trip that she had made to a literary festival in Norway, only to discover that Knausgaard had cancelled his appearance and been replaced by an Elvis impersonator. Both details were singled out by critics as too outrageously weird, too obviously Lockwood-like, to be unembellished. This makes her indignant. “I almost never make up anything,” she told me. “I just notice different things.”

So, in her company, did I. There is a kind of Lockwood lens that brings into focus the improbable and hilariously bizarre features lurking in the midst of ordinary life, which a different writer might prefer to smooth over for realism’s sake. One morning in Savannah, I went with Lockwood and Kendall to Fancy Parker’s, an upscale gas-station grocery store, to get snacks. After breaking off to examine the chips selection, I found the two of them in the home-goods corner, where an employee with the bulging biceps and voluminous pompadour of Johnny Bravo was wrangling a massive statue of the Virgin Mary onto a shelf next to some scented candles. Lockwood chatted with him amiably. “We get the Catholic catalogues in my home, and they can be quite pricey,” she said, as if they were discussing the cost of eggs and not a life-size sculpture of the mother of God.

In Lockwood’s world, the apparition of a saint is not strictly strange. She is the second of five children born to Greg and Karen Lockwood, high-school sweethearts from Cincinnati, Ohio. Karen came from a big Catholic family; Greg was an atheist and, like many atheists, proud of it. After they married, at eighteen, he enlisted in the Navy, serving on a nuclear submarine. It was hundreds of feet under the sea, following marathon viewings of “The Exorcist,” that he met God and found his faith.

Soon afterward, Lockwood was born, in Fort Wayne, Indiana. Her father began his career as a Lutheran minister, but converted to Catholicism when she was six. At the Vatican, his case was reviewed by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, later to be Pope Benedict XVI, who gave him permission, as Lockwood writes, to keep his wife and even his children, “no matter how bad they might be.” Greg Lockwood turned out to be no ordinary man of the

cloth. As depicted in “Priestdaddy,” his titanic charisma was matched only by his gale-force whims. Karen, the family’s indefatigable center, kept the household running as Greg moved them from rectory to rectory in what Lockwood has called “all the worst cities of the midwest.”

Lockwood was an observant and funny child, adept at entertaining the array of parishioners who came to seek her father’s counsel, and at keeping the family peace. “My brothers were fighting constantly, always playing sports, and Tricia was usually reading,” her younger sister, Mary Burns, told me. But there was not much at home to read. “We had the appearance of real books,” Lockwood said. “It was like doll-house food; you couldn’t eat it.” The Lockwoods’ library contained three genres: dense theological tomes, classics illegibly printed on tissue-thin paper, and books about submarines. Every so often, though, she would encounter another sort of book, one that instinct told her was “real”: James Agee’s “Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,” or “A Girl of the Limberlost,” by Gene Stratton-Porter, or “Tell Me a Mitzi,” Lore Segal’s collection of children’s stories about a Jewish family in New York. *This one’s different*, she would say to herself as she pored over the text, parsing its qualities. “At that point, you’re already thinking about process, the working of a writing mind,” she recalled.

When she was a high-school senior, Lockwood was accepted to the Annapolis campus of St. John’s, the great-books college. Before she was slated to leave, her father summoned her to his study. “The orotund, indignant sound of Rush Limbaugh was blasting from a radio in the corner, and the drunken leprechaun sound of Bill O’Reilly was blasting from the television,” Lockwood writes in “Priestdaddy.” Her father told her that he couldn’t pay her tuition. There would be no degree for her, just as there had been none for her older sister, Christina, a talented lyric soprano who had been forced, under similar circumstances, to abandon plans to attend the singing program at Washington University, in St. Louis.

“Priestdaddy” is an affectionate book; Lockwood uses her humor to tickle, not to lash. Still, this moment gives pause. Shortly after Greg announced that he couldn’t pay for Lockwood’s education, he spent an eye-watering sum on a guitar that had been made for Paul McCartney. I asked Lockwood whether she ever felt angry about what she had been denied. “Oh, God, no,” she said, without hesitation. “I would have died at college. I would have died just

trying to get in the door.” But a darker tone does sometimes seep into her recollections. For all its domestic eccentricity, her upbringing was deeply conservative. She characterizes the prevailing attitude among the women of her community as “mariánismo,” an ideal of femininity, modelled on the Virgin Mary, that is rooted in purity and self-sacrifice. “My brothers could stay out till three in the morning and drink and do whatever the fuck they wanted to, pardon my French,” Mary told me. “But then if me or Tricia or Christi wore a tank top, it would be a big argument.” (Mary learned from her sisters’ examples, arranging a scholarship, without paternal support, to become a research pharmacist.)

For Lockwood, a period of adolescent misery culminated, at sixteen, in her taking a bottleful of Tylenol before getting scared and waking her parents. “I know all women are supposed to be strong enough now to strangle presidents and patriarchies between their powerful thighs, but it doesn’t work that way,” she writes. “Many of us were actually affected, by male systems and male anger, in ways we cannot always articulate or overcome.”

In 2013, when she was thirty-one, Lockwood published a poem called “Rape Joke” on the website *The Awl*. The previous year, her first collection, “Balloon Pop Outlaw Black,” had become a small-press best-seller. The work in that book was surreal and stealthily philosophical—its opening poem was a fifteen-page meditation on the ontology of Popeye the Sailor Man—but impersonal. Now Lockwood took a different approach. The comedian Daniel Tosh had recently done an infamous standup set in which he praised rape jokes; when a female audience member challenged him, he declared that it would be funny for her to be gang-raped then and there. Lockwood had her own sense of humor. And she had her own story to tell.

The rape joke is that you were 19 years old.

The rape joke is that he was your boyfriend.

The rape joke it wore a goatee. A goatee.

Imagine the rape joke looking in the mirror, perfectly reflecting back itself, and grooming itself to look more like a rape joke. “Ahhhh,” it thinks. “Yes. A goatee.”

No offense.

The boyfriend was twenty-six. He had known Lockwood since she was a child; her father taught him world religion in high school. He chewed tobacco and drank Mountain Dew. When it happened, she was face down on the mattress. “The rape joke is that when you told your father,” Lockwood writes, “he made the sign of the cross over you and said, ‘I absolve you of your sins, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,’ which even in its total wrongheadedness, was so completely sweet.”

“Rape Joke”—it is included in Lockwood’s second poetry collection, “Motherland Fatherland Homelandsexuals,” from 2014—went viral. Online, women poured out their own stories. “There was a girl who e-mailed me about her coach,” Lockwood told me. “You do what you can in the moment. But she wasn’t even in the same country.” Of her parents, she said, “There were proper failings on their part. How much do you carry with you?” “Priestdaddy” is animated by the rare force of reconciliation: of the present with the past; of Lockwood’s adult self with her youthful one; of the child with her imperfect parents, whom she allows herself to forgive.

Not long after the rape, Lockwood left her father’s church, though the church has not fully left her. “Obviously, I’m someone who experiences glimpses beyond the veil,” she told me. She closely identifies as a Lockwood, a member of her father’s genetic line; she points to the inveterate lewdness of their dancing, their propensity for nudity. From her father, she has inherited what she calls a “demon of performance,” which overtakes her when she is speaking publicly. He has his pulpit, she hers. Following the papal election of Benedict, Greg Lockwood took to performing the Latin Mass, and, more recently, displayed a *MAGA* flag in his smoking alcove; lately, he has suffered health complications after going on something Lockwood calls “the meat diet.” When she and Schreck teamed up to turn “Priestdaddy” into a television show, they imagined Bryan Cranston in the role. The show wasn’t green-lighted, but Lockwood is untroubled by the failure. “Can you imagine?” she asked me. “Years of your life, *doing* your life?”

A year ago, Lockwood and Kendall left Wilmington Island and moved into a condo in Savannah's Starland District. They have lived all over the country—New Hampshire, Kansas, Florida—but chose Savannah for its beauty: the antebellum houses that Sherman left standing on his march to the sea, the live oaks dripping with Spanish moss. “It’s a bit of a hairy home,” Lockwood warned, as Kendall unlocked the front door. They had just spent a long weekend in Ohio attending the wedding of one of her cousins, and their three cats—Miette, Gilly, and Fenriz—were still indignant at their abandonment. Fenriz mewed in the stairwell, pressing himself against Kendall’s ankles.

The apartment was in a state of dorm-room disorder: dishes scattered on the kitchen island, books stacked on the coffee table and crammed together on trinket-laden shelves. “Everything that belongs to me is in the Corn Cave,” Kendall said, referring to the downstairs garage, where he works at a desk surrounded by weight-lifting equipment and two hoverboards. He is the resident tidier; in an effort to contain the cat fur, he had draped the sofas in white blankets, a strategy that Lockwood privately characterized to me as “a man’s idea that can’t be changed.”

Lockwood is the accumulator. After learning that she would not be attending college, she had moved her things into an abandoned convent next to her parents’ rectory, spending her days reading and her nights prowling the internet. In a poetry chat room, she struck up a friendship with someone who lived in Colorado. This turned out to be Kendall. His own father was a Baptist pastor and missionary; he grew up in Thailand and South Korea. They had never so much as exchanged photographs when, in February of 2002, Kendall arrived, in a sea-foam-green Mercury Mystique, to take Lockwood and her books back with him to Fort Collins. They got engaged the same day, in a Kroger’s parking lot. How had they known there would be an attraction?

“Well, I was in his dream,” Lockwood said. When he first saw her, Kendall startled in recognition; a year before, a woman with Lockwood’s face had appeared in his sleep.

“You were very beautiful,” Kendall said. “Very beautiful, and very evil.”

“But you *don’t* know,” Lockwood went on. “Look at Tevye and Golde”—the shtetl couple from “Fiddler on the Roof.” “We basically had an arranged marriage that was arranged by our minds. You just build it from there.”

Perhaps because they have been together for their entire adult lives, perhaps because they have no children and therefore no need to embody domestic authority, there is a cahoots quality to the Lockwood-Kendall relationship. They like to cruise around Savannah on a tandem electric bicycle, Kendall in front, steering and pedalling, Lockwood perched on the back seat. If you call one on the phone, the other is generally within earshot. “I store things in him,” Lockwood has written: memories, dates, her A.T.M. *pin*. She isn’t comfortable driving, so he chauffeurs their car. Before my trip, Kendall emailed me from Lockwood’s account to tell me where they lived, “since I’m the one who actually knows our address.” “Some people marry their dads, and some people might expect me to do that,” Lockwood said. “But I married my mom.”

“Lockwoods need a helper,” Kendall agreed.

In “Priestdaddy,” Lockwood writes that her “flaming certainty that I was born to write books dovetailed so neatly with Jason’s belief that he was destined to be a sort of Leonard Woolf figure, helping to usher female thinking into the world, that mostly we accepted our pinched circumstances as foreordained.” After they married, Kendall enrolled in a Ph.D. program in philosophy, but soon dropped out to work as a journalist and support them both. “I was a bitch and a burden writing poetry,” Lockwood said. Kendall appointed himself her de-facto agent, sending her poems out to magazines and journals. The poetry world was insular, and Lockwood had no special connections, no M.F.A.; it took more than a decade for her to publish a book.



In 2011, Kendall bought Lockwood her first cellphone. She joined Twitter on a lark, and immediately fell headlong into the medium. It offered the possibility of inhabiting a persona detached from one’s person—a thrill for a writer, if a treacherous temptation for other sorts. That year, Anthony Weiner used the platform to send a photo of his erect penis straining against the front of his boxer briefs to a twenty-one-year-old. Lockwood took that episode and ran wild with it. Tweets like “I’m A Heterosexual Man And I Am Opening The Door Of This Airplane Because I Want To Touch Some Cloud Tits” or “I am a mushroom in a forest. There are drops of dew all over my tip. Nabokov reaches down a hand to pick me” were hilarious; they also offered a roguish nose-thumbing to the pitiful, priapic pomp regularly on display throughout the culture, online and off. “Tweeting is an art form,” Lockwood tells her mother, in “Priestdaddy.” “Like sculpture, or honking the national anthem under your armpit.”

By the time she began working on “No One Is Talking About This,” though, that case was harder to make. It was 2017; the fact that the President (in the novel, he is simply called “the dictator”) was using Twitter as his personal megaphone seemed emblematic of the platform’s wider debasement. Yet the novel’s protagonist cannot break free from her addiction. Lockwood refers to Twitter as “the portal,” an alias redolent of dark magic and myth. When

her protagonist is trapped there, it is her husband who must descend, like Orpheus, to try to fetch her back:

“Are you locked in?” he would ask, and she would nod and then do the thing that always broke her out somehow, which was to google beautiful brown pictures of roast chickens—maybe because that’s what women used to do with their days.

A digital dependency requires digital methadone. The joke—and it is a good, sharp one—is that Lockwood’s protagonist takes the same satisfaction from Googling chickens that a woman from another time might have taken in cooking them; the real has comically, distressingly, been demoted beneath its own depiction. And yet we often enjoy and celebrate the depiction of reality. We call it art.

In 1926, the same month that she turned forty-four, Virginia Woolf wrote an essay titled “On Being Ill.” She had experienced a series of debilitating mental breakdowns; she had also suffered several bouts of influenza, including during the global pandemic that followed the First World War. Why, she wondered, had so little been written of such things? “Considering how common illness is, how tremendous the spiritual change that it brings,” she wrote, “it becomes strange indeed that illness has not taken its place with love and battle and jealousy among the prime themes of literature.” Writers were too concerned with the mind alone. It is the body’s state, Woolf observed, that determines the mind’s, never more so than during the “great wars” of sickness, “which the body wages with the mind a slave to it.”

“Will There Ever Be Another You” begins the year before *COVID*. Lockwood’s protagonist is on vacation in Scotland with her mother, sister, and husband. In an excerpt published in this magazine, they visit the Fairy Pools on the Isle of Skye, where they drink the wonderful, cool water. But, later, the protagonist begins to feel “that she was not quite herself.” The world spins and tilts; she vomits and is restored. Yet there lingers an ominous sense that she is teetering on some precipice. The sister has recently lost a child; at the Fairy Pools, she nearly loses her phone, too, which is filled with the baby’s pictures. “There is an Exchange,” the narrator thinks; “something passes between this life and the next that allows you to

be here for a while." Who is she to suppose that she has dodged it?  
"Everyone must pay."



There is a cut, a blackout. When the novel's curtain rises again, we are in a long breathless rush of a section called "The Changeling," and everything is different. "She had now had a fever for forty-eight days," Lockwood writes. Her protagonist has a bald head ("she had asked her husband to shave it, thinking of scenes from old books") and takes wormwood "like a witch from the Bible." The great flip has happened; the mind has ceded its power, and the body reigns supreme.

Her eyes beat dust out of the tapestry until it was bright. Was she "a little bit high all the time"? Had the sickness blazed new pathways and cast light on tangled old ones? To be sure, she had forgotten the multiplication tables, and now felt there was a secret number between two and three. To be sure, there was the rough pink sensation that she was holding Rasputin's penis in her right hand. To be sure, she could no longer remember names . . . she had to write everything down, and go back and read it later and be surprised by herself. Maybe that was paradise. Maybe she had died.

She hasn't. Online, people are talking about horse-deworming paste; there are reports that the C.E.O. of Texas Roadhouse has killed himself to escape the continuous ringing in his ears. In the city square where the protagonist sits on a bench, struggling to type what Lockwood's readers will recognize as her "Insane After Coronavirus?" essay, she can barely summon the energy to raise her hand in support of what seems to be a Black Lives Matter march. On and on the section goes, a whirling fifty-page stretch of disorientation and disintegration. A vaccine is said to be imminent; the narrator's own sister is working on its development. "Her father would refuse to take it, of course, believing it put barcodes in people. But she would welcome a barcode, to keep track of herself—a chip to identify her, lost and shivering."

In the century since Woolf published her essay, there has been a great deal of writing about illness. Here and there, in Lockwood's novel, you can catch glimpses of books that she has drawn on, a passing reference bobbing like a cork on the wild waves of her prose. There is "Pale Horse, Pale Rider," by Katherine Anne Porter, set during the 1918 influenza pandemic, and Woolf's own "Mrs. Dalloway," and "Down Below," Leonora Carrington's account of her breakdown and brutal institutionalization during the Second World War. "That's kind of a model for this book," Lockwood told me. Form is important to her. "No One Is Talking About This" is written in a series of textual bursts that give the impression of a social-media feed set on the static page. Though "Will There Ever Be Another You" is billed as a novel, Lockwood prefers to call it a pineapple, or a chandelier—"a revolving object that you're seeing all sides of at once." If the book's prismatic structure and subjective immediacy feel baffling to encounter, that is because bafflement is the point. "A lot of times, in books about illness, there's this desire for people to believe you, so you use clinical language," Lockwood said. "You include doctors' reports. You talk about the research or the history of this particular illness. I wasn't going to do any of that, because it didn't matter if you believed me. I was just going to put you inside the cyclone."

The writer Zach Powers, one of Lockwood's closest friends, pointed out to me that another aspect of contemporary illness writing is the narrative demand that the sick person vanquish the sickness, or achieve some sort of closure. "Especially in terms of a chronic illness, to fit the story into the shape of an arc is to, in fact, lie about the story," he said. Lockwood doesn't lie. One of the strangest aspects of her illness, and her depiction of it, is that

she did continue, in some sense, to function throughout it. Partway through her novel, she abandons the third person in favor of the first. We see her with her family at Schützenfest, a German fair in Cincinnati, where she experiences a zigzagging rip in her vision (a scintillating scotoma, she learned later), and at home, taking mushrooms and “reading *Anna Karenina* so hard I almost died.” Then there are interviews and photo shoots to do for “No One Is Talking About This,” which she is expected to cogently discuss at the exact time that words fail her. When that book is nominated for the Booker Prize, she travels to London to attend the ceremony. A few months later, she is on another plane to London when her husband comes lurching down the aisle, his face white as a sheet.

It was May, 2022. Kendall and Lockwood had been on their way to Swansea University, where Lockwood was to receive the Dylan Thomas Prize. Instead, she took Kendall to the hospital, where he was diagnosed with a cecal bascule: a rare condition in which part of the large intestine blocks the bowel. In the night, he improved; they boarded a plane to J.F.K., where Kendall collapsed again. Finally, back in Savannah, he had laparoscopic surgery. It went perfectly. “If I ever want to quit, I could go back and watch a video of that,” the surgeon told Lockwood, a line that she included in her novel, where it glares accusingly from the page. The following night, as Lockwood slept at home, Kendall hemorrhaged twice, losing three and a half litres of blood. Lockwood was informed only later, early in the morning. “They didn’t call me,” she told me, still incredulous.

These events are recounted in a section of the novel called “Life-and-Death.” It is a theme with which Lockwood was already intimately familiar. In early 2018, while at work on “No One Is Talking About This,” she learned that there was a complication with her sister Mary’s first pregnancy. The fetus was diagnosed with Proteus syndrome, a rare genetic disorder that involves the unstoppable growth of the body, and wasn’t expected to survive birth. Mary was in danger, too, but she was already twenty-six weeks pregnant: too late to have an abortion in Ohio, where she lived. Her best chance of saving her fertility, and her life, was to deliver early, but induction before thirty-nine weeks was prohibited without special dispensation.

For Lockwood, this situation was infuriatingly personal. Her parents had been passionate members of the pro-life movement that had formed after

Roe v. Wade. In one chapter of “Priestdaddy,” she describes her mother bringing her to a protest outside a family-planning clinic. She was a toddler, overwhelmed by all the shouting, the lurid images of mangled fetuses brandished on poster board; afterward, they went to the local jail to bail out her father, who was proud to have been arrested. Now her sister’s life was at risk. “You asked if I could get angry,” Lockwood said to me. “I was on the phone with my mother, and my voice went into this pig squeal. I mean, they took us to these rallies. I was very, very, very angry.”

Lockwood flew to Cincinnati to be with her sister. Thanks to an aunt who worked at the hospital, Mary was granted permission for an early C-section. Her daughter, Lena, was born in July. Defying all expectations, she continued to live.

“When I became pregnant, that was really emotional for Tricia, because she had never been able to get pregnant,” Mary told me. They had spent a stretch of their childhood in a part of St. Louis County where uranium used for atomic bombs was purified and radioactive waste was dumped in a local landfill. Lockwood’s older sister, the singer, lost an octave of her voice to a parathyroid tumor. One of her brothers, a marine, developed a massive cyst on his jaw. Lockwood suspects that the uranium may explain her infertility, too. Now she was besotted with Lena, this baby who couldn’t see, who needed an oxygen tank to breathe, who would never be able to lift her own head. “I don’t know what I would have done during that situation if I didn’t have her,” Mary said. “My pain was her pain. My joy was her joy. I always call her Lena’s second mom.”

“No One Is Talking About This” is broken into two sections: before the baby, and after. The immediate effect of the birth is to summon the narrator back from the portal and into the physical world, where the manic controversies that absorbed her suddenly feel very small. Taking care of her niece endows the narrator with purpose; love overpowers her. “No one was telling them how long they would have her, how long the open cloud of her would last,” Lockwood writes. Lena died on the day after she turned six months old, surrounded by her family. Lockwood’s father said Mass, in Latin. He had baptized her, too, pouring the water over her head from a dish shaped like a seashell. “This is how they get you—with the silver seashell dishes,” Lockwood said.

Some readers have been tempted to interpret “No One Is Talking About This” as a renunciation of virtual life in favor of the real thing, but Lockwood rejects that easy opposition. In “Will There Ever Be Another You,” she describes a spirited conversation that she had with Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, at a party after the Booker ceremony. “He had taken the message from the second part that we need to be together in the world again,” Lockwood said. “And I was saying that, no, it can happen in that place, in the portal.” After Lena died, Lockwood put her picture on Twitter. “I wanted people to see it. It *is* real life, happening in that place,” she said. “We are making real human connections.” She paused. “That was more true then than it is now.”

After hemorrhaging, Kendall stayed in the hospital for nearly two weeks. When he came home, it was with what Lockwood calls “the Wound”: a long gash down his stomach, held together by thirty-six staples. He was emaciated. In the bathroom, he fainted. “What do you do?” Lockwood writes, of herself, to herself. She felt a particular possessiveness toward the Wound, which she cleaned and tended. “You put me in charge of it,” her narrator tells her husband, when he tries to do things for himself. “You can’t take a wound back, once you give it.” If the experience of illness is inevitably one of sapping solipsism, caretaking is its life-giving corollary. It rescued Lockwood from vanishing entirely into the black hole of the self; it rescues her books from the same. “It’s the one thing that I feel it’s O.K. to have a point of pride about,” she said. “I’m not going to drive you anywhere. You don’t want me to organize anything. You don’t want me to throw you a party. But if you need some sort of extremely personal care that others consider arduous?” She snapped her fingers. “Fuck, I’m there.”

Every morning, Lockwood doses herself with what she calls Foxy Juice: a quadruple espresso that Kendall procures from their local café, Foxy Loxy, and delivers to her on the couch. Trembling with caffeine, she then starts to write. One afternoon, I came over just as she was setting aside an essay about Sylvia Plath for the *London Review of Books*. Lockwood has admired Plath for years; what confounded her was the biographical approach to her work, the terrible death inflecting everything that came before. “It can make the facts seem very cold,” she said. She doubted whether biography could ever capture the truth about a poet. “Emily Dickinson—who the hell understands how she did that?” She went on, “A poem is just something that

happens. You have to follow it all the way through, and it constitutes its own event.”

As Lockwood was rereading her way through Plath’s work, some inner door had opened. For the first time in five years, she began to write poems again. “It just came back in this enormous surge,” she said. She now had enough to fill a collection and a half, and more were coming every day. “I felt like the directive I was receiving from Sylvia was that you’re supposed to write them straight through from beginning to end, and don’t fuss with them too much,” she said. Compared with her early poems, the current crop was looser, freer, based on the events of her daily life. She was in the midst of writing one called “New Cooter,” inspired by a relative who had recently undergone a vaginoplasty. This had been a hot topic at the wedding that she and Kendall had attended: in genital years, the relative was said to now be somewhere between sixteen and twenty-five.



This sounded funny, dirty—familiar Lockwood territory. But later, when she sent me the poem, I saw that she had deepened the episode by braiding it with another. Before the wedding, Lockwood had visited the Cincinnati Art Museum to search for a portrait of the American painter Marie Danforth Page, who looked exactly like Lockwood did when she was eighteen “and had that plump lineless / Live-forever face.” Now the poem became about

the reversal of time, the loss and sudden, surprising return of youth—through plastic surgery, in one case, and, in the other, through art.

Kendall emerged from the Corn Cave and poured himself a shot of Bushmills. It was 3 P.M. He used to enjoy wine, but, because of his gut condition, he can no longer consume fruit or anything made from it. A few hours later, he was back and opening a bottle of Rumple Minze, a viscous, hundred-proof peppermint schnapps that he has found agrees with him. He handed Lockwood a goose-necked mini bottle of vodka. They both like to let their minds go in the evening. Kendall has found it useful to manage his pain with full-spectrum CBD gummies; when he does, he gets “transmissions,” short songs that pop whole into his head. Together, he and Lockwood sang one that she had put into the text of her novel, addressed to Anna Karenina—“You’re overflowing your dress and it’s making me warm”—and set loosely to the tune of “Sloop John B.”

“I just get this shit delivered into my head,” Kendall said. “Meanwhile, she gets these beautiful, complete poems delivered into *her* head.”

“I think it must be the same mechanism,” Lockwood said, seriously. “You dip into the stream.”

Lockwood intends to publish her new books of poems in a single volume, bound reversibly so that it can be opened from either cover. One will be called “Stone Soup,” the other “Agate Head.” She sets great store in stones and gems. “I don’t believe in meanings or vibrations or anything,” she told me. “But I believe in personality.” In the fall of 2023, she began taking a jewelry-making class; after spending so much time trapped in her head, she found the physical activity to be a powerful release. In place of a writing desk, she keeps a jewelry-making table covered in pliers and protective goggles. She owns three different kinds of blowtorches. She and Kendall recently purchased a diamond-wheeled lapidary saw, which they keep in the Corn Cave and use to cut open agates. Each one is a surprise; a rock’s rough exterior says little about the beauties that might lie within. On a different day, I watched them debate a cut that Kendall had made. He wanted to keep slicing, to bring the stone’s parallax banding into sharper relief. “No,” Lockwood said, definitively. “You have to know when to dance away and say, *Perfect*.”

Long after she stopped looking for one, an arc did appear. In the spring of 2023, Lockwood and Kendall took a trip to Key West. Suddenly, her migraines were gone. It might have been the latitude; it might have been the water. “I felt like a total idiot,” Lockwood said. Key West is one of their favorite places in the country; had the answer been hiding there the whole time?

“Will There Ever Be Another You” depicts this resolution in an epilogue set in Key West and at a place called Boneyard Beach, nestled in a state park on the South Carolina coast. One morning, Kendall drove us there. As the car rolled through Savannah’s leafy streets, he recalled the first time he and Lockwood had visited the city, in 2009. “It was spring and the sun was out,” Kendall said. “I was sitting on a bench, and I was, like, *We’re going to move to Savannah, and Tricia’s going to become a great writer.*”

“You never told me that,” Lockwood said. She was wearing a snapback cap from the Explorers Club, the scientific society in New York. For years, she had planned to write a novel with that title, set in the waiting room of the afterlife, where a group of adventurous sorts contemplate their feats. “They were locked in the ice, they climbed these mountains,” she said. “And then, as they wait to enter the memory of history, they would still be living them. They’d have their brandy snifters full of, like, ghost brandy, and they’re just kind of stuck in that part of their lives. The living body—the adrenaline, the exhilaration.” In the book, she had planned to explore a question: Why do people go to their limits?

“What they always say is that they want to push themselves to a point that they don’t think they can go beyond, but by doing it they can,” Kendall said. He and Lockwood enjoy watching programs about mountain climbers, endurance athletes, and survivalists of all stripes. “But what actually happens is they just lose all sense of themselves, because their bodies break down so completely. It’s almost like they have these hallucinogenic, mystical experiences.”

“They start to cry about their families,” Lockwood added. “I always had the idea, with the survivalist shows, that they like to remove themselves so that they can *feel*. You live in the woods. You eat worms and raw fish. You’re deprived of human society and civilization. But it’s so that when you go

back and you get to bang your wife and eat, like, a fucking turkey sandwich, it's better than anything.”

The conversation moved on to the cats, and to grain-industry phrases—“wheat streak mosaic,” “creep feeding”—that Lockwood found particularly evocative and was hoarding for her poems. We arrived at the state park. “I can carry your bag, Tricia,” Kendall said, courteously, as Lockwood got out of the car.

We walked down the beach. Sand, sea, sky: the beautiful usual. Twenty minutes later, Kendall said, “We just went through the portal.”

“I felt it,” Lockwood answered. Before us stretched a world of pale, naked trees bleached silver by the salt and the sun: Boneyard Beach. Some lay on the sand, their gnarled roots stripped bare; others pointed jaggedly up at the clouds. “It’s like you’re in ‘The Land Before Time,’ right?” Lockwood said. In her novel, she compares the place to a kind of church, natural and undogmatic: “Standing spires, exposed intricate roots, free-range pews and uncompleted arches, all breathing through the tiniest pinholes. . . . The live silver of the driftwood couldn’t be captured in photographs—but I could describe it, the white spotlight under the flame, votives flickering without fire.”

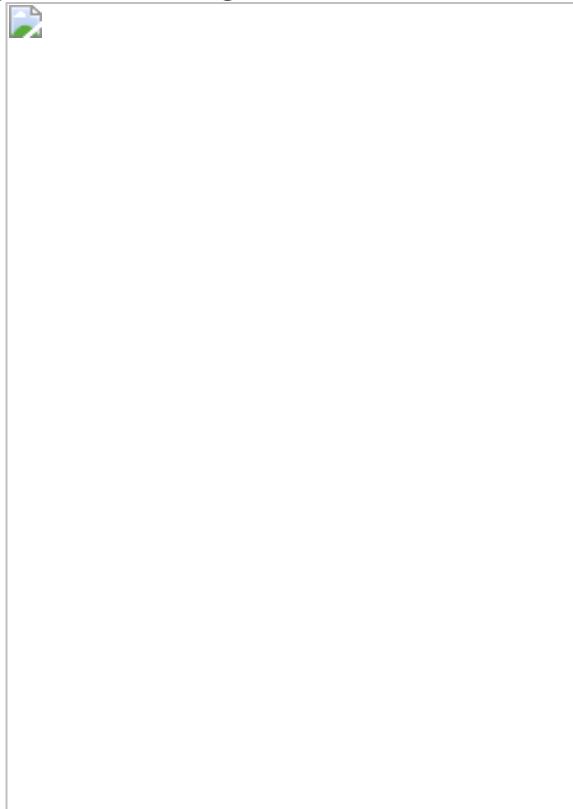
It was hot. Kendall took off his shirt, unmindful of the scar slashing down his torso. In “Will There Ever Be Another You,” Lockwood shows him doing the same thing, in the same place. “We had walked all the way out of the world. And come back,” she writes. Now she joined him, and they turned back to retrace their steps. A helicopter buzzed low overhead, the word “SHERIFF” printed in gold on its tail boom. Two men waved from the cockpit. Lockwood looked up and grinned. Then she raised her shirt and flashed them. ♦

Letter from Tokyo

# How *Weekly Shōnen Jump* Became the World's Most Popular Manga Factory

The magazine, home to such series as “Naruto” and “One Piece,” has created a formula for coaxing hit franchises out of young talents. The twenty-four-year-old behind “Kagurabachi” may be next.

By Matt Alt August 25, 2025

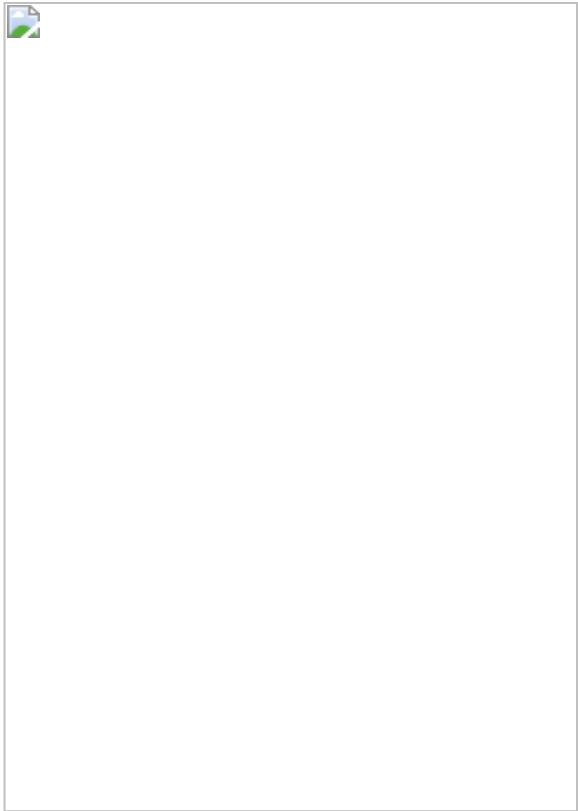


When a deadline is looming, which is pretty much always, the artist Takeru Hokazono's one-room apartment in Tokyo begins to resemble a labyrinth. The walls of the residence are bare, but the floor is covered in knee-high stacks of papers, model kits, unopened parcels, and bags of books. Navigation is possible only via channels cut through the clutter. At the center of this maelstrom is Hokazono's desk; when I visited him, in February, it, too, was littered with detritus—comic books, empty coffee cups, the crumpled wrappers of breakfast bars and late-night snacks. The mess encircled a Wacom touch tablet the size of a television screen, on which remarkable things were happening.

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Hokazono is a *mangaka*, or manga artist. That evening, he was bringing the latest page of his creation to life under the watchful eye of his editor, Takuro Imamura. Soon, the panels that Hokazono was finishing would be distributed to a million-plus avid Japanese readers of *Weekly Shōnen Jump*, the country's most popular manga magazine. Many more would encounter them through the magazine's digital counterpart, *Shōnen Jump+*, or on a dedicated app, where translations in up to nine other languages make the work accessible to some five million users around the world.

Hokazono, who is twenty-four, was clad in a dark hoodie and sweatpants. With an unruly mane of black hair held back by a terry-cloth sweatband, he looked less like an artist than like a kid recuperating from a night of clubbing. When I asked him how long he'd been up, he told me that he'd slept two hours in the past twenty-four. The weekly cutoff to submit material for print was rapidly approaching, and under no circumstances could he miss it. Imamura had brought a takeout bento to fuel this final stretch.

At twenty-seven, Imamura is the elder in this relationship, already an industry veteran with three major series under his belt, including a stint as an editor on Kōhei Horikoshi's "My Hero Academia," which concluded in 2024. That series, set in a high school for young superheroes in training, became an international phenomenon. Imamura wants nothing less for his new charge.

Imamura joined Shueisha, the publisher of *Weekly Shōnen Jump*, straight out of college. He wasn't looking to become a manga artist, he told me. But "I loved entertainment—movies, games, anime, manga," he said. *Jump* editors are expected to provide more than just editorial input; they work closely with their artists, often functioning as advisers or even personal assistants. Producing high-quality stories week after week can take a tremendous mental and physical toll on *mangaka*; many have time for little else. Like a boxing coach watching from the corner during a match, Imamura supports Hokazono however he can, whether that means offering counsel or supplying food and drink. Imamura's most important contribution, he told me, was in "editorial meetings—and making sure we make deadlines."

*Jump* scours Japan for new talent through a pair of biannual contests, one for comedies and one for dramas, open to any amateur bold enough to enter. (Still bolder creators can set up "walk-ins"—appointments to pitch their work directly to editors.) The first-place winner of each competition earns a cash prize equivalent to about thirteen thousand five hundred dollars, but for many the real reward is the invitation to be published in the magazine. Between the contests—which have been held since 1971, and have served as an incubator for such global hits as "One Piece"—and the walk-ins, along with other initiatives, *Jump* regularly receives more than a thousand submissions a year.

The “*shōnen*” in *Weekly Shōnen Jump* means “boys,” and the audience skews correspondingly young; the vast majority of readers are in their teens and early twenties. Most of the magazine’s artists make their début around this age as well. Hokazono was nineteen, stuck indoors as university courses moved online owing to *COVID*, when he entered a *Jump* contest in 2020. His submission, “Enten,” about a pair of young martial artists who draw on the power of mythical beasts in their battles, took second place. “It was ingenious,” Imamura recalled as we stood in the kitchenette, watching Hokazono work from a discreet remove. “If you want to become a manga artist, you need three things. You need to be able to draw well. You need to be able to think up interesting stories. But you also need to be good at channelling those into the format of a manga. It’s rare to find someone who can do it all.” Over the next few years, Imamura coached Hokazono through several stand-alone manga stories published in *Jump*. They did well enough that Hokazono was given one of the magazine’s twenty highly coveted weekly serial slots.

The word “manga” can be translated as “whimsical drawing,” but there is little whimsy in Hokazono’s work. “Kagurabachi,” first published in September of 2023, is a bloody tale of revenge set in a fantastical modern-day Japan ruled by crime syndicates and sorcerers. Its protagonist, a teenager named Chihiro, is the son of a blacksmith whose enchanted katana blades are in demand among assassins. When his father is killed, Chihiro takes one of the swords for himself and begins methodically hunting the murderers down. Over more than eighteen hundred pages—and counting—Chihiro works to master new techniques while navigating ever-shifting alliances. Friends become enemies. Enemies become friends. Limbs go flying and are reattached. Every sword fight, as one character puts it, is a conversation.

Unlike American comic books, manga are typically black-and-white, and Hokazono uses the monochromatic palette to noirish effect. Quiet, atmospheric scenes are punctuated with moments of ultrafast violence, elongated limbs sweeping the page like springs released from tension. Chihiro can manifest an array of magical powers, giving battles a surrealist flair; he routinely summons swarms of giant phantom goldfish that swim through the air. At times, “Kagurabachi” feels like “John Wick” if it were directed by Akira Kurosawa, with Salvador Dalí on art design—which

makes sense, because the “John Wick” films number among Hokazono’s favorites. “Foreign exaggerations of Japan set in Japan are something I really like,” he told me. “And I output what I like in my work.”

Hokazono carried on our conversation essentially without looking up from his tablet. He worked with a plastic stylus in his right hand and a slim remote control in his left, in near-perfect stillness. If not for the rhythmic motion of the stylus’s nub against the touch screen, he could have been mistaken for someone meditating. I watched as he added details to a Kyoto street scene, pulling back to see how the panel looked at the actual print size, then diving in again to add some text to a word balloon. Many of the surrounding panels were still rough, and some would be fleshed out by other people: like most serialized manga artists, Hokazono relies on a team of assistants. It was once standard for a *mangaka* and their assistants to work in the same room, but today it’s more common to collaborate remotely. Hokazono keeps in touch with his crew via Discord, tasking them with finishing backgrounds and other elements so that he can focus on the main characters.

As he worked, I took in the apartment, peering into a mini-fridge to find sauce packets, energy drinks, and old takeout. As I scanned the bookshelves brimming with manga, I spotted one of my own childhood touchstones: Katsuhiro Otomo’s sci-fi epic “Akira,” which was published in *Young Magazine* from 1982 to 1990. A gritty, futuristic Tokyo is a silent character in Otomo’s work, and his influence is obvious in some of Hokazono’s most striking panels, which feature sprawling, skyscraper-studded backdrops. In 1988, “Akira” became one of the first manga to be translated into English in full. An animated adaptation, released in American theatres the following year, earned the series an international cult following. At the time, such global successes were rare, but *Jump*, which fine-tuned a formula for coaxing hit franchises out of young talents, has helped manga and anime to enter the mainstream. Hokazono is their next big bet.

On a chilly December afternoon, I visited Shueisha’s Tokyo offices to speak with *Jump*’s editor-in-chief, a bespectacled forty-three-year-old named Yu Saito. He was an adolescent himself when the magazine was at its peak, in the mid-nineties, printing roughly six million copies a week; by the time he took the helm, in June, 2024, the weekly print circulation had reportedly

fallen to 1.1 million. But much as Marvel Comics revived its flagging fortunes by creating the Marvel Cinematic Universe, *Jump* continues to thrive, in part because of the rise of anime as a fixture of global youth culture. “The licensing business,” Saito told me, “has created a cycle that’s much more powerful than the paper-centric one of the past.”

Many *shōnen* manga, such as “Kagurabachi,” are juvenile power fantasies: action-packed melodramas in which idealistic young misfits with extraordinary abilities battle the forces arrayed against them in a world where the only true currencies are personal resolve and the power of friendship. But not all *Jump* comics fit this framing—some are more comedic or more slice-of-life, or even flirt with romance. “The definition is a bit fuzzy,” Saito admitted. In practice, *shōnen* is less a description than a state of mind: the little boy inside all of us, hungry for camaraderie and adventure.

Weekly serials are compiled in paperback collections, called *tankobon*, that are sold in bookstores. Popular series are often licensed to animation companies, which turn them into anime that are streamed around the world. The books promote the shows, and vice versa; a hit series can send *tankobon* rocketing up the best-seller lists, making the artist, and Shueisha, large sums of money.

Japan, which built its postwar reputation through consumer goods like cars and electronics, is no longer the world’s factory. Instead, the country’s chief exports these days are cultural products: video games, anime, manga, music, and movies. The government recently announced plans to make content production a pillar of Japan’s economic growth in the twenty-thirties and beyond. *Shōnen* manga is a cornerstone of that vision.

In 2020, “Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba—The Movie: Mugen Train,” based on a *Jump* manga, unexpectedly became the world’s top-grossing film that year, eventually earning upward of half a billion dollars. The “Demon Slayer” universe has brought in more than \$6.8 billion since the original manga débuted, in 2016, according to one Japanese business-news outlet. This success wasn’t a fluke. In 2024, six out of the ten top-grossing manga and anime franchises in Japan originated in *Weekly Shōnen Jump*—and, by

one count, so did six out of the ten best-selling graphic novels in the United States.

These are now some of the most sought-after properties on the planet. American platforms such as Netflix, Hulu, Amazon, and Disney have long competed for the foreign rights to Japan's top animated shows and films. In July, Netflix revealed that fifty per cent of its global subscribers regularly watch anime. Sony recently paid more than a billion dollars for the anime streaming service Crunchyroll, and Blackstone offered \$1.7 billion for the digital manga platform Infocom. *Jump* series have yielded collabs with such disparate entities as Major League Baseball and Dolce & Gabbana—and have inspired tributes from the likes of the Olympic sprinting champion Noah Lyles and the Grammy-winning rapper Megan Thee Stallion. “The primary uniting force in this country is anime,” the pop star Grimes wrote on X in February. “It’s the only media through line that I can reliably observe regardless of political alignment.” (Elon Musk, with whom she has three children, is an avowed fan of anime, including at least one series that originated in *Jump*: “Death Note.”)

Shueisha wouldn’t confirm any plans to adapt “Kagurabachi,” but given its popularity—its first seven volumes have sold 2.2 million copies—it seems an inevitability. And *Jump*’s creative model is designed to further stoke fans’ enthusiasm. After publication, each installment, or episode, is subjected to feedback via weekly reader surveys, which subscribers can fill out online or through postcards included in physical copies of the magazine. (In the nineties, editors fielded as many as thirty thousand postcards a week.) These surveys, which have been conducted since the magazine’s earliest days, ask subscribers to rank their favorite series in each issue. They also contain granular multiple-choice questions: How did you feel about this character? How did you feel about the art work? Was the story easy to follow? The results are shared with editors, who pass them along to the artists to help them refine their story lines. The rankings are the lifeblood of a serial—and one that fails to rank highly enough over time can be cut.

Whether at the top of the rankings or the bottom, the pressure on artists is relentless. Hokazono takes just one evening off each week, after his meeting with Imamura to plan out the next episode’s story line. “I watch YouTube,” Hokazono told me. “That’s my ‘input.’ I watch movies, listen to music, and

sleep like the dead. But then I start working on the storyboards. As the deadline approaches, I really start to feel the weight.”

He mused about whether there were other jobs that compared to drawing manga for *Jump*. “Maybe people who make music, or, like, writers. You have to face the desk, all the time, alone,” he said. “But even with music, when you finish a song, you take a break before making the next.” Not so with serialized manga: “It’s just next, next, next—constantly.”

In many ways, being a serialized *Weekly Shōnen Jump* artist is akin to running a marathon at a sprinter’s pace. The most successful series can run for decades—“One Piece” has been going since 1997, with every episode drawn by its original creator, Eiichiro Oda—but, with rare exceptions, installments are still due every week. “You need stamina,” Saito, the editor-in-chief, told me. “I had a meal with one of our artists the other day and asked him if he had any advice for new creators. He said, ‘Start working out.’ ”

This is no joke: many of the industry’s architects died quite young. Hiroshi Fujimoto, half of the artistic duo known as Fujiko Fujio, collapsed at his desk in 1996, at sixty-two. The creator of “Astro Boy,” Osamu Tezuka, for whom one of *Jump*’s talent contests is named, passed away from cancer in 1989, at sixty. His last words were reportedly “I beg you, let me work.” In 2021, Kentaro Miura, the creator of *Young Animal* magazine’s “Berserk,” died of an acute aortic dissection. He was fifty-four.

In recent years, concerns over mental and physical health have led to an industry-wide reckoning. Not long ago, Shueisha launched an internal support system that offers its *mangaka* free consultations on everything from child care to health checkups. (The system’s colorful website features cartoon thought bubbles with such prompts as “I’m worried about my health! But I’m too busy to see a doctor. . . .”) One artist turned his experience getting a long-postponed checkup into a gag manga, called “Health Check Death Race.” Published on *Shōnen Jump+* in 2018, it stars a group of five manga veterans who journey to a local hospital for full-body examinations. Along the way, they swap horror stories about the toll that years of deadlines and desk work have taken on their middle-aged bodies.

Finally, one declares a sort of revolution: “We can sleep! We can take breaks! We can live long lives!”

Though Hokazono’s messy office looks a lot like that of “Health Check Death Race” ’s protagonist, he seems to take a different approach to his work. “I never get anything done if I’m sleep deprived,” he told me. “I get a lot of sleep—about seven hours a night! The only time I don’t is when I’m on the final push.” And he stays in shape by walking as much as he can while working. When he’s plotting out storyboards in his head, he wanders around Tokyo, soaking up the atmosphere.

In “Kagurabachi,” Chihiro teams up with a ninja master who, disarmingly, looks like an elementary-school-age boy in a suit and sunglasses—a visual mismatch that’s also a signature *Shōnen Jump* flourish. The ninja has stern words for Chihiro that feel a bit like wisdom born from the experience of Hokazono’s predecessors: “The way you operate, taking it all on yourself . . . you’re driving yourself to an early grave.”

Hokazono kept his head down almost the entire time I was in his studio, but at one point I asked a question that made him stop and look up: What did his parents think of his decision to become a manga artist?

“They said ‘Go for it,’ ” he replied, a little puzzled. “We were a ‘Naruto’ family,” he added, referring to the wildly popular manga about a young ninja in training—a story that ran in *Jump* for decades and spawned a ten-billion-dollar franchise. “My father would bring home the collections, and we’d all read them.”

His response reflected a dramatic change in the way manga is viewed in Japanese society. In the nineteen-fifties and sixties, the industry operated with little if any oversight. Lurid stories proliferated, and artists’ willingness to speak truth to power quickly made manga the voice of the counterculture in Japan. One of the most popular was “Ashita no Joe,” a series created in 1968 by the writer Asao Takamori and the artist Tetsuya Chiba. Serialized in the pages of one of *Weekly Shōnen Jump*’s rivals, Kodansha’s *Weekly Shōnen Magazine*, it portrayed a young man struggling to escape the slums of Tokyo through boxing. It was so popular among the New Left that student protesters of the era declared that they marched with “*Asahi Journal*

magazine in our right hands, *Shonen Magazine* in our left.” When members of a group called the Red Army Faction hijacked a Japanese passenger jet to North Korea, in 1970, they took credit in a letter that ended, “We are ‘Ashita no Joe.’”

Even before the hijacking, authority figures had regarded manga as a vice to be curbed or eliminated. After the Second World War, mothers’ groups and parent-teacher associations led what would come to be known as the Ban Bad Publications movement, which lumped manga together with pornography and other adult content. In a 1955 speech to parliament, Prime Minister Ichirō Hatoyama framed such “bad publications” as a threat to Japanese society on par with illegal drugs. It would take until the late nineteen-nineties, after successive generations of children raised on manga grew into parents themselves, for the stigma to fade.

*Weekly Shōnen Jump* played a significant part in that shift. Shueisha, the publisher, was a relative latecomer to the weekly manga scene. *Jump* debuted in July, 1968—a decade after its major rivals, which courted older readers with political content. Shueisha took a different tack, aiming to win over schoolchildren with a focus on “friendship, effort, and victory.” Other magazines peppered their pages with essays, short fiction, and photographs; *Jump* ran nothing but one-off and serialized manga stories. The publication’s tagline—“a bullet train for new manga”—presented it as an escape into an illustrated world.

Hiroki Goto, who later served as *Jump*’s editor-in-chief, likened the office in those days to a “battlefield.” In his Japanese-language memoir, “*Shōnen Jump: A Golden Miracle*,” he recounts his experience after he was recruited, fresh out of university, in 1970. Occasionally, the battlefield became literal: Goto writes of an early moment when he lost his cool, beating a *mangaka* with a rolled-up tube of tracing paper in a misguided attempt to cure his writer’s block. Nevertheless, “a Magna Carta for editors” emerged. Its foundational principles included the use of fan surveys, a hands-off approach to artist-editor teams, and the pursuit of talent through contests rather than through courting established, big-name artists.

The latter directive arose from the hard reality that most well-known artists had already signed on with other publications. But, over the decades, this

seeming weakness would prove to be *Jump*'s advantage. In treating its readership not simply as customers but as collaborators, and even as a pool of talent, the magazine blurred the line between creator and consumer. To young readers, it was more than just entertainment. "For me, it was all about *Jump*—only *Jump*," Hokazono said. "I didn't send my work to other magazines. I didn't even look at their sites." To a manga artist, he told me, *Jump* was "king."

The *Jump* process has produced some of the biggest franchises in global pop culture. In using reader feedback to shape the arcs of weekly episodes, then collecting them into compilations that can be "binged," it also presaged the way people consume media in the streaming era. But, just as critics have accused algorithmic recommendations of sorting viewers into silos of similar entertainment, *Jump*'s relentless surveying could be said to promote a certain sameness across its content. Loser protagonists who discover some secret potential lurking within; elaborate, video-game-like systems of skills and abilities; ever-present high-school settings; passionate enemies who become staunch allies; and wild, rapid tonal shifts from violence to slapstick comedy are all *Jump* staples. Whether this similarity is predictable or comforting is in the eye of the beholder. The readers are voting for it, after all.

One evening in March, I met Takeshi Kikuchi, the director of the Manga Research Institute, at a bustling café in Shibuya. Over coffee, he invoked a Japanese homily to describe the secret to the medium's success: "The highest peaks have the widest bases." In Japan, manga has long held its own against television and movies in terms of cultural pull. Crucially, it's also much cheaper to produce. Kikuchi estimated that there are probably more than ten thousand manga artists working today, producing some fifteen thousand paperback collections annually. The chance that any one of these thousands of manga will become a hit is very low—but the chance of the art form as a whole generating hits is quite high.

Serialization is the dream that drives many *mangaka*. Yet in some ways achieving this means that the real struggle is just beginning. I recalled something Hokazono had said: "After my serial started, for the first three or four months, I was in the red. Everything I got paid for my pages went into paying my assistants." *Jump* pays new artists roughly a hundred and forty

dollars per black-and-white page. Those who land serials are given a signing bonus, but it's only through royalties from book sales and licensing and merchandising fees—payouts that come later, if they come at all—that *mangaka* have any hope of turning a profit.

“Among the prospective *mangaka* I’ve met through my work, there is a pattern for those who do well,” Kikuchi told me—they don’t pursue it to get rich or famous. “They do it because drawing manga is what makes them happy.” The artists tend to be reluctant influencers; many use pen names, and almost all prefer to use illustrations to depict themselves publicly. Shueisha has published eight volumes of “*Kagurabachi*,” and the jacket bios all feature doodles in place of a photo of Hokazono. When we spoke, he declined to go into any details about his personal life.

Part of this is simple common-sense safety, a bulwark against the toxic fandoms that have come to plague life online and off. Manga artists have been stalked and have received death threats over creative decisions. In 2019, a man set fire to the ground floor of a Kyoto Animation studio, killing thirty-six people. But the silence of the *mangaka* also serves another purpose: making oneself less of an identifiable somebody helps insure that one’s work can be loved by everybody.

Soon after my visit to Hokazono’s studio, I returned to Shueisha’s headquarters, where the artist and his editor have their weekly story meetings. That day, they convened in a nondescript conference room, an hour behind schedule. When I arrived, Hokazono was resting, head down on his arms atop the table. He’d made his deadline, and caught up on some much needed sleep—hence the delayed start. Now he and Imamura were on to the next episode.

At this point in the story, Chihiro was at the top of a Kyoto hotel, protecting a high-school girl named Iori from a sorcerer-assassin named Hiruhiko. Chihiro and Hiruhiko were engaging in the sort of passionate but chaste dude-bro melodrama that takes place only in *shōnen* manga. (“I want to kill you, and I want to be friends,” Hiruhiko tells Chihiro at one point. “Maybe we can become friends by trying to kill each other.”) Chihiro, stripped of his magical sword, would have to master a seemingly impossible technique—one that Iori had the power to unlock, unless Hiruhiko got to her first.

Throwing a weakened protagonist into a dire situation that will force them to grow is a classic *Jump* setup. The problem was simple: getting the characters from point A to point B, while making it look as cool as possible. For a while, the only sound in the room was the squeak of a marker on a whiteboard, as Imamura wrote out several potential plot points. Then he began posing questions: Where is each character? Do we need a flashback here to flesh out some background, or can we go straight into the battle? How will Chihiro manifest his new technique?

Hokazono answered slowly at first, then more confidently. Suddenly, he rose from his chair, strode purposefully over to the whiteboard, and flipped it to its clean side. Imamura sat back and watched as Hokazono scrawled a series of character names and plot beats in rapid succession. When the artist finished, he rattled off the structure of the next episode, fluently now, frame by frame, as though drawing pictures in the air: Iori is on a different floor, so Chihiro and Hiruhiko will ride opposite elevators there. When the doors open, on either side, the rivals will leap out at each other. Chihiro will see Iori first, unlock his new technique, and triumph.

“That’s good,” Imamura said, satisfied. “Are you going to end with them going at it? Or posed, readying for the attack?”

“Let’s put Chihiro in position to strike one more time,” Hokazono said. “It’ll look cooler. I love that kind of scene.”

“Well, that ends that,” Imamura declared, then turned to me and laughed. “Usually, we go at it for at least three hours!”

“Well,” Hokazono added, smiling. “We knew where we were going.”

“Kagurabachi” is set in Japan, stars Japanese characters, and throws around complicated Japanese sword-fighting terms. Yet it is so popular in the U.S. that its fans call themselves “Bachi bros.” In May, it was nominated for an Eisner Award—the American comic-book industry’s equivalent of an Oscar.

I asked Hokazono how much thought he gives to such international readers when he writes. “I’m really happy about the passion of foreign fans,” he said. “All I’m doing is drawing what I personally find interesting. I guess

my sensibilities lean foreign—or maybe it's because of all the foreign stuff I've absorbed over the years, like 'Inglourious Basterds' and 'Django Unchained.' I guess I wound up with tastes a little different than those of regular Japanese." The first episode of "Kagurabachi" contains echoes of another Quentin Tarantino film: in one sequence, Chihiro uses his sword to dispatch dozens of black-suited opponents, just as Uma Thurman's character does in "Kill Bill."

Many of Japan's most celebrated *mangaka* were inspired by Western cartoonists. The postwar best-seller Tezuka borrowed heavily from American newspaper comic strips and Walt Disney; Hayao Miyazaki has long praised France's Moebius. But modern manga artists are far more likely to pay homage to other manga than to foreign comics. Hokazono feels like a new breed: less influenced by U.S. media than steeped in it, owing to ubiquitous streaming entertainment. It's an exchange that goes both ways. Not so long ago, Japanese anime and manga were treated as exotic imports in the U.S., available only at specialty shops. Today, thanks to those same streaming platforms, young Americans are consuming a steady diet of manga and anime. For the first time, an artist like Hokazono can be fully appreciated by audiences both at home and abroad.

The meeting wound down. Hokazono took a quick photo of the whiteboard, then packed his battered notebook into his bag and got ready to leave. I asked where he was headed. "I'm going to take a walk and think," he told me. "Then it's back to the office to draw," he said. Next week's deadline was approaching, and there was no time to waste. ♦

*An earlier version of this article misstated the year that "Akira" was first published in English.*

A Reporter at Large

# How a Billionaire Owner Brought Turmoil and Trouble to Sotheby's

Patrick Drahi made a fortune through debt-fuelled telecommunications companies. Now he's bringing his methods to the art market.

By Sam Knight

August 25, 2025



When Patrick Drahi, a fifty-five-year-old French Israeli telecommunications billionaire, agreed to buy Sotheby's, one of the world's two great auction houses, early in the summer of 2019, people in the art market had two questions: Who is Drahi? And what does he want?

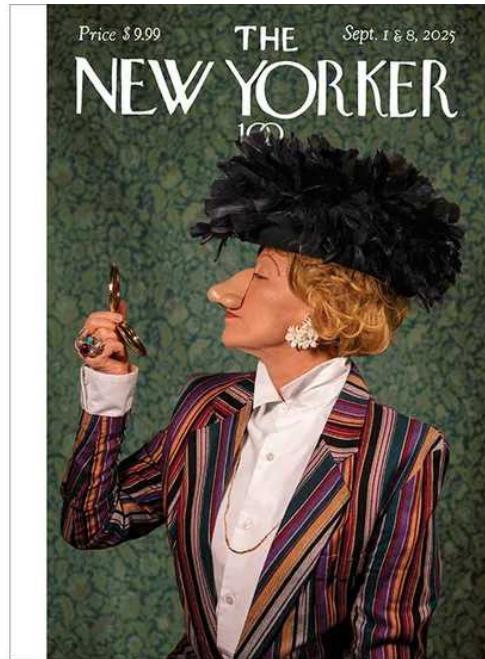
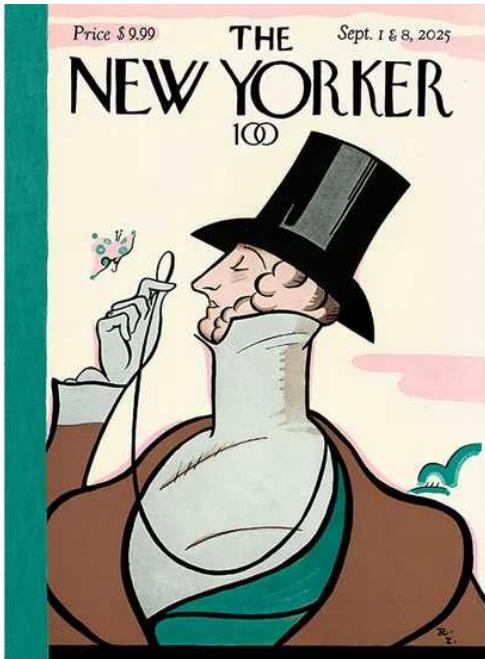
On a superficial level, buying an auction house is the kind of thing that French billionaires do. Christie's, a rival of Sotheby's since the seventeenth-sixties, has been owned by François Pinault, a French luxury-goods magnate and prolific art collector, for the past quarter century. A former banker who worked with Drahi described the acquisition to me as an heirloom. "Think

about your obituary,” he said. “Are you likely to be recalled for having done many cable deals, or having owned Sotheby’s?”

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But Drahi, who had a net worth of around eight billion dollars, seemed to come out of nowhere. Although a spokesperson described him as a connoisseur with “an encyclopaedic knowledge of classical music and paintings particularly,” he wasn’t considered a major player in the art market. Artprice, a French art-sales database, reportedly listed Drahi as the two-hundred-and-fifty-second-biggest art collector in the world.

Moreover, unlike Pinault and Bernard Arnault, another French luxury-goods billionaire, who used to own Phillips (an auction house that, like Sotheby’s and Christie’s, was founded in London in the eighteenth century), Drahi did not seem eager for a public profile. Whereas Pinault and Arnault were household names in France and had major foundations, Drahi was more elusive, dividing his time among Switzerland, Israel, and the Caribbean island of Nevis. “He is not in Paris. He is not in New York. He is not in London,” a person close to Drahi said. “He is not where his counterparts are. He is not spending a single minute in any cocktail or public event.”

Sotheby's was also unlike any other company that Drahi had ever owned. Between them, Sotheby's and Christie's conduct about twenty per cent of global art sales—ten to fifteen billion dollars a year—but they are, in many ways, esoteric organizations. Employees, dealers, and art advisers liken the duopoly to a pair of medieval guilds, or sports teams, or theatre companies, doomed and inspired in equal measure by a state of permanent competition. “People feel such a connection to the company,” one longtime Sotheby’s employee, who recently left the auction house, said. “For many of them, it’s just so much of their whole lives. And putting together an auction, it’s like putting on the big school play.”

Until then, Drahi had done business almost exclusively in the telecommunications sector. He was the founder and main shareholder of Altice, an international cable, TV, broadband, and mobile-phone provider that was named for a sacred grove in ancient Greece. He had a reputation as a formidable dealmaker with uncanny confidence in his own judgment. “He doesn’t think outside the box,” the Drahi associate said. “He thinks there is no box.” A former telecom banker who worked on several transactions involving Drahi in the early two-thousands chose three adjectives to describe him: “One, smart. Two, aggressive. Three, utterly unsentimental.”

Drahi has been referred to as a wizard of debt. “He has built, since Day One, all of his companies with debt,” the associate said. His appetite for risk meant that Altice’s fortunes, and his own, could dramatically fluctuate. But he seemed to thrive, rather than wilt, during such situations. “He likes it. He *likes* it,” the associate said, as if to emphasize Drahi’s unusual fortitude. The first banker told me, “Very rarely do you find people that are able to master the numbers but also the brinkmanship,” adding, “You could say, ‘Well, what for?’ But, you know, that’s a Nietzschean question.”

The Drahi takeover valued Sotheby’s at \$3.7 billion. Employees got their first glimpse of the new owner at an all-staff town hall at the company’s New York headquarters, on York Avenue, in early October, 2019, on the day that the deal was finalized. The meeting took place in the main salesroom, on the seventh floor, and consisted of a question-and-answer session with Tad Smith, the company’s chief executive. Smith, a former C.E.O. of Madison Square Garden, was an assiduous, somewhat robotic character, who had been appointed four and a half years earlier to modernize the

auction house, which was the oldest company listed on the New York Stock Exchange.

For years, it had been axiomatic among Sotheby's employees that the auction house would benefit from having a single, rich proprietor, as Christie's did. "Looking back, I realized Tad was brought in to sell the company," a former senior executive told me. The last private owner of Sotheby's was Alfred Taubman, a charismatic Midwestern mall developer, who bought the auction house in the early eighties and helped to transform it into a glamorous retail experience. (Taubman was later [convicted](#) of colluding with Christie's to fix pricing and spent ten months in prison, but he is still fondly remembered at Sotheby's as a pioneer of the modern art market.)

In person, however, Drahi did not make a big impression. "He was not an Alfred Taubman. He's not a larger-than-life person. He's just the opposite," the longtime Sotheby's employee said. "I found him a little geeky." Drahi emphasized that he was buying the auction house for his family. (Within days of the deal going through, all four of his children were given Sotheby's e-mail addresses.) He stressed his admiration for the Sotheby's brand, but he also warned that the company would be run differently from now on. "I make quick decisions," another former executive recalled him saying. "Most of the time, they're right—sometimes they're wrong. And if they're wrong we fix them. But I don't like getting stuck in the past."

"I don't think anyone was terrified, but they certainly weren't reassured," the former executive said. Drahi's previous acquisitions were associated with brutal restructurings and, often, declining levels of service. In the French media, Drahi was caricatured as a "cost killer." Soon after Altice bought the New York-based cable company Cablevision, he told a conference, "I don't like to pay salaries. I pay as little as I can." In 2017, Drahi gave a speech that was broadcast to employees around the world. "If you want the comfort and stability of a large bureaucracy," he said, "Altice is not for you."



In early, private meetings with Sotheby's senior staff, Drahi came across as highly intelligent but also caustically blunt. "He just says whatever he's thinking," the former senior executive said. Another recalled, "He walked in like he knew the business and what he needed to do." A third described their meeting as perplexing: "He kind of philosophized, and then asked a couple questions that seemed really out of left field." A fourth executive warned Drahi that he would face resistance if he tried to change the company too fast. "He said, 'That's fine,'" the executive recalled. "'I don't mind breaking things.'" Drahi confided that he thought that the auction house employed too many people and that its senior staff were overpaid. But when he was asked at the town hall whether he was planning any layoffs, he said that he didn't think so. "All I was thinking was, Wow," a fifth executive said. "They are poring over the company right now, looking for cost reductions."

During the creation of his telecom business, Drahi was admired for his ability to see where the industry was going. "He was really good at managing the cycle," the former banker said. "Most people will borrow at the wrong time, buy at the wrong time. He seemed to be able to get it right." In the fall of 2019, the stock price of Altice USA was around thirty dollars a share. The global art market was enjoying a long, resounding boom. The most expensive art work sold at auction that year was "[Meules](#)," a haystack painting by Claude Monet, which was bought for a hundred and ten million

dollars, at a Sotheby's evening sale in New York. "The longer you spend buying it, the longer you'll spend enjoying it," the auctioneer, Harry Dalmeny, urged bidders.

But the timing of Drahi's acquisition of Sotheby's was unfortunate. Six months after the deal was completed, the coronavirus pandemic shuttered the art market. The main auction houses, led by Sotheby's, scrambled to take their business online, but public sales fell by around a third. Then, for a while, the good times roared back. But now the art market has become a stressed and anxious realm, enduring its first prolonged contraction in a generation.

During the same period, Drahi's broader business empire has experienced the worst crisis of his career. After amassing sixty billion dollars of debt, Altice was hit by rising interest rates while seeing indifferent performance by its brands on both sides of the Atlantic. In the summer of 2023, one of Drahi's closest business partners was arrested following a corruption investigation. Altice USA's shares currently trade for around \$2.50, less than a tenth of their price in 2019.

All the while, Sotheby's has assumed a new, unstable identity: as both a billionaire's indulgence and the subject of his latest corporate experiment. At a hearing in the French Senate in 2022, Drahi said that he did not buy Sotheby's for power or influence. Instead, he intended to triple the value of his investment. "This is always the goal of the entrepreneur," he said.

For those caught up in the experiment, it has been torrid in the extreme. Since 2019, hundreds of employees have left Sotheby's—up to a quarter of the workforce, according to some estimates—including dozens of specialists who bring in the consignments essential to the company's bottom line. (Sotheby's disputes this.) Last year, sales fell by twenty-three per cent. As the auction house has cut costs and shed staff, its holding company, which is controlled by Drahi, has extracted more than a billion dollars in dividends from the business—mainly to manage its debt load.

Last fall, after a round of layoffs, Drahi sold a minority stake in Sotheby's—close to a third of the company—to ADQ, the Abu Dhabi sovereign wealth fund, for around a billion dollars. The move gave rise to speculation that he

might sell the business outright. But people close to Drahi insist that he is more likely to give up his telecom holdings, at least in Europe, than to let go of Sotheby's. "This is for his grandchildren," the associate said.

The question is what he will leave behind. Drahi and his team wouldn't be the first, or the last, corporate titans to trip and stumble in the vagaries of the art market. "This is niche," a leading New York art adviser told me. "And if you don't get it, this is what happens. They're not art people. And maybe they can never be art people." But the other version is that Drahi is deliberately hollowing out one of the world's great auction houses, turning it from an institution of taste and knowledge into something much closer to a generic platform that sets a price for things that have no price, taking a cut along the way. To make Sotheby's more like everything else, in other words. "I think if he could automate this business, just put it online, take out all the people . . . that's his goal," a former director said. "It's just pure money." But was it ever about anything else?

The word "auction" comes from the Latin *auctio*, which means "increase." But it's always been a bit more complicated than that. In the fifth century B.C.E., [Herodotus](#) described the Babylonian custom of selling girls for marriage. The more attractive ones were sold first, with ascending bids; then the process was turned on its head, with "the plainest" won by the suitor who would accept the smallest dowry. Auctions can be as varied as human desire. There are whispered auctions in Italy and simultaneous-yelling auctions in Japan. For years, cod was sold in the fish market at Hull, in northern England, by descending bids (the Dutch method) before switching to English, or ascending, bids later in the day. Seventeen miles downriver, in Grimsby, fish auctions worked the other way around.

In 193 C.E., the Roman Empire was sold to the highest bidder, one Marcus Didius Julianus, giving rise to a memorable case of buyer's remorse. "He passed a sleepless night; revolving most probably in his mind his own rash folly," Edward Gibbon reflected. (Emperor Julianus was murdered two months later.) Auctions are built on an illusory symmetry of hope. Buyers sense a bargain, sellers hope for a war. What you want is validated because someone else wants it, too. Everyone believes in their own capacity to master the situation. In 1662, Samuel Pepys, the London [diarist](#), watched three ships auctioned "by the candle" (the length of time it took a one-inch

candle to melt) and noticed that one bidder was particularly successful: “He told me that just as the flame goes out, the smoke descends, which is a thing I never observed before, and by that he do know the instant when to bid last.”

The task of the auctioneer is to dramatize the possibilities of the sale while attempting to control them at the same time. “To get the audience’s confidence right away, and after that to dominate it—in the nicest possible way,” Peter Wilson, a legendary Sotheby’s chairman, [told](#) this magazine, in 1966. Wilson, a former British intelligence officer, led the company’s expansion into the U.S. market and introduced the first evening sales—with ball gowns and television cameras—in the fifties. Even today, when people complain that much of the excitement of live bidding has disappeared, salesrooms at the major auction houses retain a singular atmosphere of politesse and extortion. Money is present like sin in church: sometimes its presence goes unsaid; sometimes it is the only thing being said.

One Tuesday in early March, I stopped by Sotheby’s Modern and Contemporary Evening Auction in London. The equivalent sale in 2023 brought in more than two hundred million dollars and was led by a Wassily Kandinsky [landscape](#) that sold for forty-five million. This year, the top lot was a large, hypnotic study of a girl, “Cosmic Eyes (in the Milky Lake),” by the Japanese artist Yoshitomo Nara, with an estimate of less than a quarter of that. The mood was brittle and unsure. Earlier in the day, tariffs imposed by President Donald Trump had unnerved global markets.

A few minutes before the auction began, the walls were lined with Sotheby’s specialists, arranged sharply by the phones, while people in cashmere and expensive anoraks milled about. Oliver Barker, the company’s star auctioneer of the past decade, tucked in his shirt. Barker always looks happiest when the bidding is in “a new place,” which means that a fresh competitor has entered the fray. The rest of the time, he is more like a solicitous but firm personal trainer, asking for one more rep. “Give me six, please, Alex,” he said, not really asking, to Alex Branczik, a chairman of modern and contemporary art, who was wrangling the Nara’s lead bidder over the phone. Barker wanted another hundred thousand pounds. “It’s here at six million five hundred thousand,” Barker said. “Want to give me six?” Branczik gave him six.

There were outbreaks of what the auction houses like to call “determined” or even “passionate” bidding. Lisa Brice’s “[After Embah](#),” a bold, reddish mise en scène featuring a silhouette of Nicki Minaj, sold for £4.4 million, a record for the artist. A dark Alberto Burri, “[Sacco e Nero 3](#),” from 1955, shot through its high estimate, to four million pounds. But most of the contests were thin and quick. A van Gogh drawing once owned by Taubman (“much loved at Sotheby’s here,” Barker said) sold on a single bid for less than its estimate. “Give me a bid, sir,” Barker pleaded, dropping the bid increments as he attempted to shift a large gray [Christopher Wool](#) canvas on the wall to his right. Again, Barker extracted a single offer, and again below the estimate. The Wool was sold in fifty-one seconds. In all, the evening sale—Sotheby’s first major auction of 2025—raised a little more than sixty million pounds, including fees, around forty per cent less than the previous year.

Even people intimately involved with the big auction houses can’t figure out whether they are great or terrible businesses these days. Given that Sotheby’s charges a “buyer’s premium”—essentially a commission—of twenty-seven per cent on all lots up to a million dollars, and often a seller’s fee on top, the margins should be tremendous. “It’s never not been profitable,” the longtime employee insisted. It’s just that the profits are so much harder to come by. At the height of the eighties art boom, Sotheby’s made an annual profit of a hundred and thirteen million dollars. Twenty-five years later, in 2014, at the peak of the next wave, the auction house made just twenty-nine million dollars more—the price of a mid-range Basquiat.

Part of the problem is the sheer expense of keeping the show on the road. Sotheby’s and Christie’s feel fancy because they are. Sotheby’s has premises in forty countries. At the time of the Drahi acquisition, it employed more than fifteen hundred people. The cost of parties, marketing, shipping, insurance, and the decorous administration of nearly five hundred sales a year only ever drifts one way. “You basically make profit in December,” a Paris-based art adviser who used to work for one of the big two told me. “Until November, you pay the fixed cost of the company.”

A major auction house has many parts. “Sotheby’s is really three businesses, which had been run as one business,” a former employee who joined under Tad Smith told me. Since the late eighties, Sotheby’s has offered loans and other financial products, secured against art (in fact, anything that the

auction house will sell) as collateral. When Drahí acquired the company, Sotheby's Financial Services was lending around eight hundred million dollars a year.

Next, there is everything under a million dollars in value: the wine, the jewelry, the furniture, the sneakers, the watercolors, the Hermès handbags. These are the collectibles—a nice watch, a decent painting, a rare manuscript, the family silver—that have kept the auction houses ticking for the better part of three centuries. The average price of a Sotheby's lot is still around fifty thousand dollars.

And then there is the top end. And the top end is where everything goes to hell. According to the consulting firm Arts Economics, less than half a per cent of works sell for more than a million dollars, and yet these lots make up more than half the total revenue of fine-art auctions. An even smaller fragment—sales of more than ten million dollars—contributes around a quarter.

Sourcing sensational objects to sell has been the central mission of Sotheby's since Samuel Baker offered “several Hundred scarce and valuable Books in all branches of Polite Literature” in the house's first recorded auction, in March, 1744. It is the motivating mission of the specialists—hundreds of experts, in everything from Judaica to barometers, whiskey to Himalayan art—who are the primary business-getters for the company. But the unstopping competition between the big two auction houses, especially in the realm of fine art, has put extraordinary power into the hands of the people who have those things to sell. “Everything's on the table,” Richard Polsky, an art authenticator in New Mexico who has helped to negotiate major sales at both Sotheby's and Christie's, told me. “If you have a great painting by an artist who's in heavy demand, they'll do anything for you. It's crazy, but they will, and they often lose by doing anything.”

“It's almost like a concert rider,” the former Sotheby's executive said. Routine requests have included putting a photo of the work on the front cover of the auction catalogue, with a scholarly-looking essay about it inside. Other asks might include a travelling exhibition or a facsimile made of the original. Seasoned consignors want propitious placement in the sale: near the start, but not too near. (Works just before the star lots often have

low estimates, to encourage bidding and to improve the atmosphere in the room.) Important sellers often request Barker as their auctioneer.



And that's before you get to the substantive negotiations. Top sellers won't pay a seller's fee. They probably want a minimum guarantee. (If the bidding goes higher, they will split the upside with the auction house or a third-party guarantor.) Or they might prefer a portion—even the majority—of the buyer's premium, the basic income of the auction house, an arrangement known as "enhanced hammer." And if they don't get what they want they will go down the road to the other place. "You're trying to squeeze every dollar out of these guys," Polsky said, "and you don't feel bad doing it."

Some of these "bespoke terms" go back decades. In June, 1956, according to "[Rogues' Gallery](#)," by Philip Hook, Wilson offered a presale guarantee of thirty-five thousand pounds for Nicolas Poussin's "The Adoration of the Shepherds," in order to break the grip of London's private dealers on the sales of Old Masters. Sometimes the bet pays off; sometimes it misfires. (Sotheby's lost six thousand pounds on the Poussin.) But the relentless increase in the value of the most expensive art works—frequently engineered by the auction houses themselves—has meant that negotiations with consignors have become only more vexed. The objects that everyone so desperately wants to put in the salesroom have become, in a real sense, too

expensive to make money from. “Essentially, in order to win business, you’re throwing out the baby with water of the bath,” the French adviser said.

“I would say, for the longest time, the profitability of something was not on the minds of the specialists chasing after things,” a former Sotheby’s chairman told me. (The top-ranked specialists are known as chairmen.) In 2015, Dan Loeb, an activist shareholder, led a revolt against the company’s then C.E.O., a rug expert named William Ruprecht, describing Sotheby’s as an “old master painting in need of restoration.” Smith, who had an M.B.A. from Harvard, was installed as his replacement.

Smith accelerated the breathtakingly slow digitization of the auction house. (Sotheby’s didn’t have a Facebook account until 2011.) He upgraded the company’s technology, introducing an online auction platform, code-named Viking, at a cost of some fifty million dollars. In 2016, Sotheby’s acquired Art Agency, Partners, an art-advisory firm led by [Amy Cappellazzo](#), a former chairman of postwar-and-contemporary-art development at Christie’s, to improve its margins at the top end of the market.

Under Smith, Sotheby’s became more mercantile and more systematic, but it didn’t always make better bets or have a deeper understanding of what it was selling. “The temperature changed,” a specialist who worked in the contemporary department at the time told me. “Things got very tight, and people became much more concerned with how much they were bringing in and how much they were selling.” Dozens of employees, including veteran experts, took buyouts and left. Clients and dealers registered a diminished emphasis on connoisseurship and its replacement by what is sometimes referred to as “collector’s taste”—a phenomenon not limited to Sotheby’s. (A London dealer told me that he recently visited the house of a client who, instead of naming the artists of his paintings, labelled them by where they were acquired—Gagosian, Zwirner, Christie’s—like they were designer loafers.)

In the spring of 2018, Sotheby’s lost money on a thirty-six-million-dollar Picasso and barely broke even on a hundred-and-thirty-eight-million-dollar Modigliani. In the years leading up to the Drahi takeover, during the greatest art market that the world had ever seen, the company’s stock zigzagged

around thirty-six dollars a share—the same level that it had been in 2010. It was the Romans, auctioneers of their own empire, who came up with job titles for the people involved: *dominus*, the seller; *argentarius*, the organizer; *empor*, the buyer. *Caveat emptor*—buyer beware. No one knows how much Drahi understood about what he was buying in 2019. “I could truly think that he bought Sotheby’s thinking, This is run the old-fashioned way by a bunch of morons who know about art but don’t know about finance,” the French adviser said. “I think he felt that Sotheby’s was completely virgin of all that. And it’s not true. It’s a super, super thin business.”

François de Mazières, the mayor of Versailles, encountered the work of Drahi in 2007. That is when ivory-colored cabinets started appearing on street corners in the Versailles Grand Parc, a collection of eighteen upscale districts west of Paris. The cabinets were for broadband connections and belonged to Numericable, a recently formed cable company.

At the time, Europe’s telecom industry was in a phase of creative destruction, as upstarts and established companies made bets on which technology—wireless, cable, or A.D.S.L., a form of data transmission through existing telephone lines—would best deliver the internet. Drahi, who had a postgraduate degree from Télécom Paris, one of the country’s top engineering schools, was a cable guy. Starting in 2002, he had begun to acquire small regional cable companies with the aim of building a national network. In 2005, Altice, with a group of private-equity investors, paid five hundred and twenty-eight million euros for the assets that became Numericable.

Mazières didn’t have a grasp of the finer points of the telecom industry, but he did notice one thing about the new cabinets: they were made of plastic. “They were of such bad quality, you could kick them open with your foot,” he told the French journalist Elsa Bembaron, for her 2017 book “[The Network Ogre](#),” about Drahi. “The wires were visible. In a town like Versailles, it was unacceptable.”

Drahi prided himself on doing things more cheaply than his rivals. “A large group counts in millions, I count in cents,” he liked to say, according to Bembaron. In the sleepy world of French regional telecommunications, his methods could be shocking. After another acquisition, in 2006, one of

Drahi's companies found itself the object of simultaneous protests by its customers and its employees.

There was an outsider's swagger to some of Drahi's behavior. "He has spent his life by being the challenger," the associate said. Drahi was born in Casablanca, Morocco, in 1963. His parents, Lucette and Marcel, were math teachers from Algeria. The family, which was Jewish, moved to Montpellier, in southern France, when Drahi was fifteen. According to Bembaron, he was small and somewhat conspicuous, because of his North African upbringing and his head for math.

Between 2002 and 2013, Altice acquired twenty companies. For a long time, Drahi ran the corporate affairs of Numericable—which had around four million customers in France—out of an apartment in Geneva. When he had to conduct a news conference for Numericable in Paris, he would reportedly use the basement of an electronics store on the Avenue de Friedland, near the Arc de Triomphe. He designed Altice's logo himself.

In the spring of 2014, Drahi bought SFR, France's second-largest cellphone network, in a deal that was ultimately worth seventeen billion euros. The negotiations made Drahi a figure of national attention. He was attacked for his management style and his residency in Switzerland, which he maintained for tax reasons. "I was suspicious," Arnaud Montebourg, the French minister of industrial renewal at the time, told me. In person, however, Montebourg found Drahi to be charming and impressive. "I knew he had to do a restructure," Montebourg recalled. "But I said, 'Be careful. I don't want blood on the walls.'"

Drahi promised unions that there would be no job cuts at SFR for three years. Sana Iffach, a commercial manager at the company, remembered meeting him in the fall of 2014. Iffach was in a conference room with about ten colleagues when Drahi walked in and asked why a projector screen on the wall was on, wasting energy. He made them switch it off.

Drahi was accompanied by a man whom he did not introduce. Iffach wondered whether he was Drahi's driver. She later learned that he was Armando Pereira, a former subcontractor from Portugal, who ran the operational side of Altice. Like Drahi, Pereira was entirely self-made. By the

age of thirteen, he had worked as a fairground assistant and a plumber, later immigrating to France. In the eighties, Pereira founded his own telecom subcontracting firm in the Vosges. He and Drahi started working together in Cavaillon, a Provençal town famous for its melons, where Pereira's company installed connections for Sud Câble Services, one of Drahi's first cable ventures. Pereira became a co-founder of Altice and, although he shunned publicity, his technical know-how was understood to be a critical part of the company's success. "Pereira was seen to be an exceptionally good operator," the former banker told me.

Iffach got used to seeing Drahi and Pereira at SFR's headquarters, normally at the end of the week. She and her colleagues started calling their visits Dark Fridays, riffing on the weekly eliminations on "Koh-Lanta," the French equivalent of "Survivor." Within a month of Altice's acquisition of SFR, fifty-five of its seventy top managers had been fired, according to Bembaron. Once the moratorium on cutting jobs passed, SFR announced plans to eliminate five thousand roles—around a third of the workforce. Drahi later compared the company to a "Daddy's girl" who didn't look at her credit-card receipts. "But today the father has changed, and my daughter doesn't behave like that," he told French legislators.

One of the ways SFR changed was by delaying payment to its suppliers. "Usually you have one case, two cases, ten cases," Pierre Pelouzet, a mediator who was appointed by a union of French I.T. companies to collect unpaid invoices from SFR, told me. "But a hundred companies coming together? It's fairly unusual." When Iffach arrived for work one morning, in March, 2018, there were notices stuck to SFR's front entrance from its water supplier, warning of reduced flow to the building because of unpaid bills. "The Drahi method is, I pay you thirty per cent less," she said.

Financiers sometimes laughed at the brazenness of Drahi's methods. "They told investors that this is what they were going to do," Jonathan Chaplin, a telecom analyst, said. "Everyone thought they were geniuses." Chaplin began following Altice when it broke into the U.S. market, in 2015, by agreeing to buy Cablevision and, a year later, Suddenlink for a combined total of around twenty-five billion dollars. It was a period of heady expansion for the company. Altice also bought the former state-owned

telecommunications network Portugal Telecom, where Pereira was installed as chairman.

In corporate filings, Altice described its approach to business—which included an aggressive combination of outsourcing and cost-cutting techniques—as the Altice Way. The company boasted that its “founder-inspired owner-operator culture” set it apart from other cable and cellphone businesses in every market that it entered. And it was true that, everywhere the Altice Way was enacted, it looked more or less the same: suppliers were replaced by cheaper alternatives, employees were fired, and debt rose.

It is unclear how successful the Altice Way was as a business strategy. Between 2014 and 2016, SFR lost two million subscribers. Its share price fell by forty-five per cent. Between 2018 and 2022, when Suddenlink was rebranded as Optimum—along with Altice’s Cablevision brands—it went from being above average to the worst of twelve internet-service providers, as ranked by the American Customer Satisfaction Index.

But the Altice Way was certainly profitable for Drahi and his closest associates. SFR surprised analysts by paying out a €2.5-billion dividend to its investors, led by Drahi, a year into his ownership. The Altice Way was many things, but it was not free. Drahi used Next Alt, his personal holding company, based in Luxembourg, to charge subsidiaries for implementing it and for his own “strategic services.”



Ahead of its I.P.O. in the U.S., in 2017, Altice USA disclosed a fee of thirty million dollars a year for “executive services” to Altice N.V., its parent company, which was controlled by Drahi. Altice’s brands in Israel and the Dominican Republic contributed a similar amount in 2015. In a speech in Paris about ten years ago, Bembaron writes, Drahi talked about which financial indicators he thought were the most important. “When analysts talk about operating margin, about *EBITDA*”—a standard measure of business performance—“what I look at is the N.I.P.,” Drahi said, breaking into English. “Net in the pocket.”

The Altice Way reached Sotheby’s in the fall of 2019. On October 2nd, the day of the Drahi acquisition, the company was formally split into parts. Sotheby’s Financial Services became a subsidiary, as did BidFair Property Holdings, which would control the auction house’s York Avenue headquarters. (Another corporate vehicle would hold the company’s British properties.) Although the auction house was now owned, ultimately, by Drahi’s personal holding company, he contributed only about two hundred and fifty million dollars in cash to the purchase price. As a result of the deal, Sotheby’s debts doubled, to more than a billion dollars.

Drahi insisted that Sotheby’s had nothing to do with Altice or the rest of his businesses, but, when the takeover was complete, employees at the auction

house found themselves in meetings with Dexter Goei, the chief executive of Altice USA. “That was very, very strange to me,” the former executive recalled.

Smith, the C.E.O., left Sotheby’s in late October and was replaced by Charles Stewart, the forty-nine-year-old former co-president and chief financial officer of Altice USA. Stewart was new to the art market, but staff found him smart and personable. Soon after he arrived, he took fifty of Sotheby’s most senior employees to the New York Stock Exchange, to show them a heritage business that had transformed itself into a global digital trading platform.

But people sizing up the incoming regime wondered whether Stewart was really in charge. “Charlie’s a bit of a figurehead,” the former employee said. “He likes standing in front of sports cars.” The new C.E.O. didn’t seem to belong to Drahi’s innermost circle, whose members had license to roam across his business interests. “You’re usually male, French, or Israeli—or all three,” the former senior executive said. (A spokesperson for Drahi disputed this.) Many inside the company came to believe that Drahi’s true lieutenant was Jean-Luc Berrebi, the company’s new C.F.O., who had previously run Drahi’s family office.

Another curious figure who started working at the York Avenue offices was Yossi Benchetrit, Armando Pereira’s son-in-law. At the time, Benchetrit also held two senior roles at Altice USA: the company’s head of procurement and its chief programming officer, in charge of negotiating broadcast deals on its cable networks.

In the fall of 2019, Benchetrit met with the auction house’s suppliers—of everything from catalogue printing to art shipping and software—and sought to renegotiate their contracts. Benchetrit had a ponytail and a mild manner. “He kind of looked like this aged hippie,” the former longtime employee said. Soon afterward, staff started hearing reports that specialist suppliers to the auction house—such as conservators, who repair damaged paintings—were having to wait longer to get paid. “There’s only, like, three people in the world who can do this,” one former executive told me. The executive recalled confronting Benchetrit about the issue, but he maintained his Zen demeanor. “He was, like, ‘Who needs to be paid? We have the power. We’re

Sotheby's,' " the executive said. (Benchetrit could not be reached for comment.)

When *COVID* hit, Sotheby's was able to adapt quickly, thanks partly to Viking, the online platform developed during the Smith era. On the evening of June 29, 2020, Sotheby's carried out the first white-glove sale of the pandemic—ahead of Christie's—with Barker addressing eight screens in Bond Street as he took bids simultaneously in London, New York, Hong Kong, and online.

"Everybody put their big-boy pants on," the longtime employee recalled. Drahi had been an enigmatic presence at the company since the takeover. (During lockdown, he joined an all-hands Zoom from his house in Zermatt, Switzerland, with a magnificent view of the Alps behind him, and complained that he was having to iron his own shirts.) But he flew to New York for the sale. Drahi stood off camera while a ten-minute bidding contest unfolded over the evening's top lot, Francis Bacon's "[Triptych Inspired by the Oresteia of Aeschylus](#)," which sold for \$84.6 million. "Tonight, we redefined the boundaries of what is possible," Barker said. The mood at the auction house was jubilant.

In 2020, Sotheby's new management reduced the company's costs by about a hundred million dollars. It also renegotiated the compensation of senior staff. The best-paid specialists and executives at Sotheby's earned more than a million dollars a year. Previously, around half of their income came in the form of bonuses and company stock. But now some of them accepted lower salaries and many were enrolled in one of two new long-term-incentive programs, which would pay out in three or four years' time.

Senior staff were shown presentations that envisaged Sotheby's rapidly increasing in value as it followed a fresh strategy, which would involve deploying the auction house's name across a range of new businesses, including hotels, and sales categories—most notably in the domain of luxury goods. The company already owned a twenty-five-per-cent stake in RM Sotheby's, a classic-car auction firm. Under Stewart, this stake increased to seventy-five per cent, and the company's lending business expanded. The incentive program forecast that, in the best-case scenario, Sotheby's would be valued at more than eight billion dollars—at least twice what it was worth

when Drahi took over. “They actually promised people wealth transformation,” the specialist said. (The company denies this. “We were ambitious in our growth agenda, but nothing was ever promised,” a spokesperson said.)

In 2021, Sotheby’s secured the Macklowe Collection—one of the most sought-after auction-house consignments in years—with a reported guarantee of more than six hundred and fifty million dollars. The collection came to market after the divorce of Linda and Harry Macklowe, a New York real-estate developer, and included masterpieces by Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock, and Cy Twombly. For Sotheby’s, the sale of the collection—in two auctions—represented the final act of the staggering art bazaar of the twenty-tens. Bored by the pandemic and awash in stimulus funds, the global rich hit the scene one last time. In 2021, Sotheby’s recorded sales of \$7.3 billion—the largest in the company’s history.

“It was a high,” the former specialist said. The company’s dealmakers felt it. Before Drahi, bonuses at Sotheby’s had been fairly stable. The only time that senior staff could remember not receiving an annual bonus was during the financial crisis, in 2009. In the following years, bonuses typically paid out between eighty-five and a hundred and thirty per cent of their target figure. “It would never be, like, something radically different,” the employee said. After the Macklowe sale, some bonuses were paid out at close to two hundred per cent. “That was the first moment when people realized, Oh, this is really a whole different way of running things,” the employee recalled.

The recalibration of bonuses was part of a larger corporate transformation at Sotheby’s. Staff were introduced to the accounting metric *EBITDA*, rather than plum consignments, as the determining measure of success. “*EBITDA* is everything at the new Sotheby’s,” the former executive said. In *EBITDA* terms, the first three years of Drahi’s ownership were extremely successful. The auction house was making around three hundred and sixty million dollars annually—a forty-per-cent increase from the latter years of the Tad Smith era.

Most employees did not experience it that way. “Things were good for, like, a hot second,” the executive said. When the pandemic eased, staff returning to the offices in London noticed a shortage of technicians to look after and

mount objects properly. Some works that had previously been hung on J-hooks were now hung on wires, which made it harder to put pictures flush against the wall. “We were told it was too expensive,” a former specialist from a smaller department told me. “It just looked shitty and cheap.” Marketing budgets, client dinners, trips to Art Basel—the inciting atmosphere of consumption—all became harder to come by. For people used to selling art, the cuts represented a paradox of thrift that hurt their over-all results. “Because it’s all about relationships,” the specialist explained. “When you limit the time of people in the sale room, in front of the work, you limit that interest, that desire for it, that potential.”

Employees across Sotheby’s fine-art division—the historic core of the auction house—noticed a new distance between them and the company’s leadership. Compared with their predecessors, Stewart and his executives dramatically reduced the time that they spent with the specialists, who were used to thinking of themselves as the conscience of the business. “They created a lot of friction within the organization by not treating the experts as experts,” the former specialist said. The New York art adviser told me, “You know, these auction-house specialists have been kind of relegated to salespeople, which defies the purpose of having a relationship.”

In the summer of 2021, Cappellazzo, the head of the company’s global fine-art division—and the totemic hire of the Smith years—left to set up a new advisory firm. Cappellazzo could be domineering. “She had her style and her way,” a current Sotheby’s chairman told me. “But she was really a great businesswoman.” Her departure gave rise to the sense that the Drahi regime either didn’t know how or no longer wanted to work with the company’s traditional, highly paid stars. “That was a radical idea,” one of the former executives said. “To sum it up: talent doesn’t matter when you have a brand as powerful as Sotheby’s. That was a profoundly disruptive concept.”

Another disruptive concept was the rapid ascent of Nathan Drahi, one of Drahi’s twin sons, who was appointed to run the company’s Asia business, at the age of twenty-six. For years, the auction house’s Hong Kong office had been a point of pride and stability for the company. It was led by Kevin Ching, an industry veteran, and Patti Wong, an independently wealthy Hong Kong dealmaker, and it routinely outperformed Christie’s in the region. “It was one of the pillars of the company’s success,” the former specialist said.

Nathan arrived in Hong Kong in the summer of 2020. His career at Sotheby's was closely watched for signs of Drahi's larger plans for the auction house. "Nathan Drahi had no business being anyone's boss in Hong Kong," the New York art adviser said. Ching's contract was coming to an end, and Nathan was promoted to be the managing director in his place. (Ching joined Christie's two years later.) Almost immediately, reports began to reach New York about Nathan's overbearing management style. "His way of disregarding people on every level is staggering," the former specialist said. Nathan sought to interpose himself in sensitive deals despite his lack of experience. He also maintained draconian office policies, such as demanding that all the blinds be constantly raised, sweeping desks clear at the end of the day, and challenging the travel and lunch receipts of senior staff. "Literally half of the H.R. department's job is trying to manage Nathan's damage," the former executive said. Wong left Sotheby's in 2022.

In October, 2023, Nathan oversaw the sale of the collection of the founders of Shanghai's Long Museum, which came in forty per cent below its presale estimate of ninety-five million dollars—reportedly costing Sotheby's millions of dollars in failed guarantees. The following summer, the auction house opened Sotheby's Maison, a two-story gallery and retail space in the Landmark Chater, a high-end shopping mall. Visiting colleagues were struck by the opulence of the new downstairs galleries but noted that they were very dark and not well suited to the hanging of Western art. (Sotheby's said that the lighting is adjustable.) In the upstairs retail space, staff recorded two hundred sales in the first six months of the Maison operation—slightly more than one per day. "That's madness," the executive said. "That could barely even cover the cost of the staff." According to ArtDai, an art-market analytics company, the auction house's market share declined by nine per cent during Nathan's time in charge of Sotheby's Asia.

Around 10 A.M. on July 13, 2023, Armando Pereira, the Altice co-founder, was arrested at the front door of his villa, overlooking the village in northern Portugal where he was born. Pereira, who was seventy-one, had an estimated net worth of €1.6 billion, making him one of the richest men in the country. According to the Portuguese authorities, he was detained—along with a businessman named Hernâni Vaz Antunes—after a three-year investigation known as Operation Picoas. "Picoas" is the name of the Metro station nearest to Altice Portugal's offices in Lisbon. The investigation centered on

Altice procurement contracts, which prosecutors believed Pereira had used to enrich himself, by funnelling business toward particular suppliers.



Pereira and Antunes were also suspected of diverting money paid by Altice for telecom equipment into another set of companies based in the Madeira Free Trade Zone and in Dubai. Cars worth thirty million euros were seized as part of the investigation, including an Aston Martin and a Lamborghini that were delivered to Pereira on the morning of his arrest. Pereira was held briefly in a Lisbon jail before being released on a ten-million-euro bond. (Both Pereira and Antunes have denied any wrongdoing.)

On an earnings call for Altice International on August 7th, Drahi portrayed Pereira as a rogue operator who no longer played a key role at the company. He told analysts that, if the allegations were true, he had been “betrayed and deceived by a small group of individuals, including one of our oldest colleagues.” But people familiar with the Altice Way wondered whether it was as simple as that. “We are not in the presence of a simple shareholder,” the Portuguese prosecutor’s report said of Pereira, “but of a de-facto director, who has the ability to intervene in the decision-making process.” Drahi and Pereira owned adjacent plots of land on Nevis, and the two men’s fortunes were tightly entwined. (On the earnings call, Drahi acknowledged that Pereira owned twenty per cent of his “personal economic interest.”) At

Altice USA, Benchetrit, Pereira's son-in-law, helped oversee a budget of around two billion dollars a year.

The arrest of Pereira catalyzed a slow-motion crisis that had been enveloping Altice since the summer of 2021, when poor performance, followed by rising interest rates, began to threaten Drahi's ability to finance his companies. "It was all holding together just about O.K. until the pandemic hit," Chaplin, the telecom analyst, said. Sequestered at home, Altice customers in the U.S. and Europe complained about the subpar quality and high prices of Drahi's brands. "He'd underinvested in the network at that point for years," Chaplin said. "The whole thing crumbled."

Around the time of Pereira's arrest, Altice France alone had debts of more than twenty-four billion euros. In the U.S., officials in New Jersey and Connecticut launched investigations into whether Altice had misrepresented its internet speeds. The company's share price tumbled from thirty-seven dollars to less than three, as subscriber numbers and revenues fell and its debt burden became unsustainable. "Leverage is fantastic when you're growing a little bit," Chaplin said. "It all unravels when you start shrinking."

The circumstances of Operation Picoas raised the prospect that Altice companies outside Portugal might be the victims of similar schemes. *Le Monde* [reported](#) that another company controlled by Antunes had been used to supply SFR stores in France. A month after Pereira's arrest, Craig Moffett, a U.S. telecom analyst, noted "uncomfortable connections" in Altice's American businesses. The former chairman of Altice USA, a Portuguese telecom executive named Alexandre Fonseca, resigned. Earlier this year, Fonseca was named as a suspect in the Picoas case. (No one has yet been formally charged with a crime.) Benchetrit was fired, reportedly after failing to engage with the company's investigation.

The decline of Altice coincided with increasing scrutiny of Drahi himself. In the fall of 2022, *Reflets*, a French investigative outlet, began publishing stories about Drahi based on documents that had been hacked from Altice's servers and made available on the dark web.

Antoine Champagne, the editor of *Reflets*, is in his late fifties. He started reporting on hackers in the nineties. "I'm very well aware of what the

internet is and how it works,” he told me. “And I know that it’s primarily cables.” He had heard of Altice because of the company’s dismal reputation as the owner of SFR. In August, 2022, Champagne and a colleague spent days downloading about four hundred and fifty thousand documents, many of which concerned Drahi’s family office in Geneva.

The first [#DrahiLeaks](#) stories concentrated on the billionaire’s meticulously ordered life style. A fifty-eight-page “Bible” for Drahi’s chalet in Zermatt ordered staff not to leave any fingerprints in the bathrooms or to call him anything other than Monsieur. “*DO NOT CALL HIM MONSIEUR DRAHI,*” the manual noted. In keeping with Drahi’s “cost killer” reputation, Champagne found repeated requests for discounts, even on trivial expenditures: a new barbecue; electrical work at his house; a wine order, in which the most expensive bottle cost around a hundred and fifty dollars. “We have a saying here in France: *le prix d’un paquet de cigarettes . . .* but it’s not even that,” Champagne said. “It’s not even 0.00001 cent for him,” he added. “It’s nothing.”

The *Reflets* team moved on to the workings of Altice and the complex lattice of holding companies that surrounded Drahi and his closest associates. But, after months of poring over documents and internal e-mails, Champagne found himself most struck by what he had *not* found. “In all this leak, there is not one mail, one thing, where you see something about strategic policy for the company,” he said. “What we should do so that the company will thrive? Never. It’s always: How can we pay less taxes? Or create a new company that will buy the other?”

Champagne came to think of Drahi as a man with two pockets. One contained Altice, which was really just an elaborate agglomeration of debts and corporate shells, moving around. “It’s a financial company,” Champagne said. “He’s not producing anything.” By contrast, the contents of Drahi’s personal pocket were strikingly tangible. “It’s really *real* things,” Champagne observed. “It’s buildings. It’s art. It’s jewelry. It’s planes.” Stuff you can sell. “Even if Altice goes bankrupt, which could happen,” Champagne said, “he will still be a multibillionaire, because he owns a lot of things.”

Drahi's personal pocket was now bulging with art. #DrahiLeaks revealed just how aggressively the billionaire had expanded his collection in the preceding three years. In December, 2019, two months after Drahi bought the auction house, a confidential appraisal by Sotheby's for insurance purposes valued forty-eight works at a total of a hundred and eighty million dollars. Within three years, Drahi's collection had grown fourfold and was valued at an estimated seven hundred and fifty million dollars; much of it was owned by corporate vehicles, controlled by his children, in the Caribbean.

It was Drahi, standing at the back of the socially distanced salesroom in New York, who had bought the Bacon triptych, in order to make a big success of the first online evening sale of the pandemic. That fall, with the art market still badly disrupted, Sotheby's also conducted a dramatic "sealed bids" auction for a nine-foot Giacometti sculpture, "Grande femme I," cast in 1960, from the collection of the American financier Ron Perelman, with a minimum bid of ninety million dollars. It was Drahi, again, who ended up with the sculpture. Recent filings by Sotheby's parent company, in Luxembourg, showed that, in 2021 and 2022, purchases made by "stockholders and members of management" totalled nearly two hundred million dollars.

Sotheby's was an Altice company now. One of the documents that Champagne unearthed was a contract between the auction house and Drahi's personal holding company, under which Sotheby's—like other Altice subsidiaries—would have to pay for the privilege of being owned. Drahi's services included introductions to banks, guaranteeing art works, and "advices on strategic direction." During the first two years of the contract, the auction house paid Drahi \$26.4 million.

Inside Sotheby's, Altice's worsening fortunes did not directly affect day-to-day business. The more pressing concern was the downturn in the art market. In 2022, the auction house reported another record-breaking year, with eight billion dollars in revenue. But the headline figure obscured a modest decline in art sales. After the generous bonuses that followed the Macklowe sale, average bonuses fell sharply, to just sixty per cent—their lowest level since the financial crisis.

As the art market cooled, the weight of the auction house's debts began to make itself felt. In the first three years of Drahi's ownership, more than a billion dollars in dividends were extracted from Sotheby's while the company's debts quadrupled, to more than two billion. "We were always working to basically create enough money for Patrick's debt service. That was what this was all about," the former executive said. "If you take a pie and you take three-quarters of that pie and give it to Patrick, it doesn't matter how much you make."

An employee who joined Sotheby's around this time was taken aback by the state of the offices at the York Avenue headquarters. The carpets were tatty; the meeting rooms were ill-equipped. "Venders would not work with us, because we had sixty-day payment terms, not thirty," the employee recalled. There was a general atmosphere of dysfunction and anxiety. "Not only was it incredibly short-staffed, because they kept firing people," the employee said. "There was no efficiency." The employee described Stewart as capable of good ideas—but he was also disengaged. During meetings, he liked to spend time on Instagram and play Candy Crush on his phone.

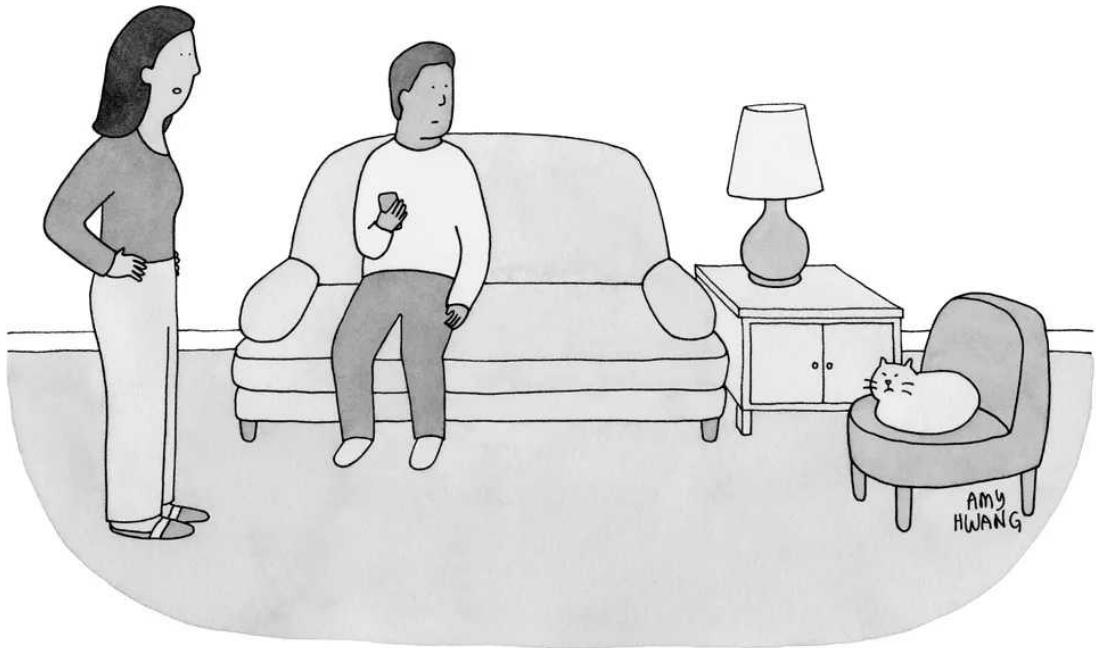
In June, 2023, Sotheby's announced that it had bought the [Breuer building](#), the former home of the Whitney Museum, on Madison Avenue, to serve as its new headquarters. The deal, which was worth a hundred million dollars and financed with a loan from Barclays, provoked mixed feelings in the company's employees, many of whom were simultaneously excited by the artistic importance of the Breuer and worried about the practicalities of conducting auctions there—everything from running trucks up Madison Avenue to the lack of office space. "I think it will be alluring for sellers," the former longtime employee said. "Logistically, it will be a nightmare."

For many junior and mid-level employees, it was hard to reconcile the purchase of a new, jewellike headquarters with the constraints of their own working conditions. "We were not getting our bonuses. Everything was being cut," the former specialist from a smaller department told me. "It's a terrible atmosphere, and then they're doing all these things?" The Breuer deal, along with the development of a new headquarters in Paris and the Maison in Hong Kong, only deepened the sense of mystery around Drahi's finances—and how he chose to deploy them. "Clearly, there's money," the former specialist went on. "But where is it?"

In December, 2023, Stewart and Berrebi informed staff that Sotheby's would be changing its premiums the next year. The new fee structure—which represented the biggest such reform since the seventies—would begin in just a few weeks. The plan, which originated in conversations between Stewart and Drahí, was intended to arrest the long-term erosion of Sotheby's margins and to bring more transparency to the auction business. Stewart's solution was to lower buyer's premiums and to standardize seller's fees, at ten per cent on the first five hundred thousand dollars for most lots, with new fees for guaranteed works. In the interest of fairness, Stewart announced that the new fees would be nonnegotiable. "You deserve clarity and simplicity when buying and selling with us," he said.

For many in the art market, the reforms misread at least two profound truths of the auction business. The first is that you need things to sell. "They worried about Z before they got to A," the New York art adviser said. "And ABC all the way through, like, QRST is get the consignment." Second: that buying and selling art is a negotiation. The market chooses opacity for a reason. Its terms are necessarily bespoke. The whole exercise, after all, is about going against your better judgment.

Sotheby's specialists were appalled by the new fees. "It was tone-deaf in terms of the timing and the numbers," a senior employee said. The premiums came into force four months later. "It was, like, we're so stupid," the former specialist said. "We're not worth listening to. We don't have a pulse on our clients and what they would and wouldn't tolerate."



Stewart's premium policy lasted seven months. For the dozens of former and current Sotheby's employees I spoke to for this article, those were the worst days of Drahi's tenure. "It has huge parallels to the way Trump rules in the United States. It's that kind of chaos that is totally not necessary," the former executive said. "It's, like, why did you do that?" Christie's did not change its pricing, which meant that, overnight, it became dramatically more attractive to consignors.

"Having unmeetable targets just sort of gets everyone a bit down," the former London-based specialist said of the general pressure of Drahi's management culture. "But what gets people more down is, sale after sale, you are just losing to Christie's." In the first six months of 2024, profits from Sotheby's auction businesses fell by eighty-eight per cent. In July, Moody's downgraded the company's debt, citing "governance concerns" and the continued extraction of dividends. One of the long-term-incentive plans for senior staff, which had been due to vest, was delayed. Instead of wealth transformation, executives were given I.O.U.s. (They received their payouts five months later.) There was another round of layoffs. A rumor spread that the cuts were being made, in part, to offset the losses caused by Nathan Drahi in Hong Kong. "It was Shakespearean," the employee who joined during this period recalled.

At a meeting at the York Avenue office in June, 2024, the Sotheby's chairmen—the company's top specialists—had a chance to present their concerns to Drahi in person. Grégoire Billaut, a French chairman of contemporary art, confronted him about the new fee structure. Billaut had been supportive of Drahi's ownership until that point. "You need to do something," Billaut said, according to several sources. "I'm losing business. I never lose. And now I'm losing and I can't take it anymore."

Drahi was incensed. "If that is how you feel, then walk out the door," he replied. "This is not a democracy. It's my company, and I run this company. At the end of the day, all of you, every single one of you, is replaceable." Looking at Stewart, Drahi added, "Even you."

There was a sense of order breaking down. One London-based dealer described an atmosphere of "instability in the rooms and the feeling that expertise is gone." Dozens of employees in Sotheby's British office lost their jobs last year. Gossip and paranoia spread to the market. "It's, like, how are you going to survive without these people that have either been fired or left the company voluntarily?" the senior employee said. "What's happened with my payment? How long are you going to be there? I'm not going to sit here and pretend that those are not conversations that are going on amongst our clients all the time."

The combination of poor compensation and absent leadership led some staff to start selling art, or acting as intermediaries, off the company's books. Under Sotheby's employment rules, staff are allowed to buy and sell works for their personal collections, but must avoid other forms of dealing that conflict with the interests of the auction house. It is a gray area—a zone of temptation—in which the art market abounds and which specialists were long taught to avoid. "We used to have training all the time: every time you have a question mark over what you're doing, ask yourself if you would want it on the front page of the newspaper," a former senior specialist told me. "Maybe it still exists somewhere, but I don't know."

According to multiple sources, such side-dealing, as it is known, is concentrated in Sotheby's private-sales department, which sells objects outside auctions and is run by David Schrader, a former investment banker. (Sotheby's private sales totalled \$1.4 billion last year.) The practice involves

Sotheby's employees setting up private L.L.C.s and carrying out deals that would otherwise have taken place within the auction house. "No one's taking money directly from Sotheby's," one source explained. "They basically just went around Sotheby's and took an opportunity that was Sotheby's to sell."

*The New Yorker* has spoken to five people with knowledge of these deals, including two who were parties to such transactions. All blamed the deteriorating culture at the auction house. "This is the state of the fucked-up situation that this company's in," the first source said. "If Drahi doesn't respect his experts, the experts are forced to behave in a way that is the antithesis to how a specialist is supposed to behave," a second source explained. "They're all trying to make money in their own little way."

Former executives told me that Stewart was informed on several occasions of reports of side-dealing at Sotheby's. But he declined to act, citing a lack of proof. "Nobody was home. Nobody was listening," a third source told me. "They don't actually want to exit these people. They don't understand how damaging it is for the culture or particularly care." In a statement, Sotheby's said that no evidence of activities outside the company's policies had been brought to senior management. A spokesperson referred to the company's conflicts-of-interest guidelines and added, "We are confident that our team abides by these policies."

Drahi probably can't break Sotheby's. The duopoly of the great auction houses is a codependency on which the rest of the sixty-five-billion-dollar art market relies. "As long as there's art worth a million dollars or more, you need Sotheby's and Christie's to sell it," the former longtime employee said. "You don't need more than two, but you need two." The former senior specialist said that one of the curiosities of working at Sotheby's was how much time the staff spent thinking about ways to differentiate the auction house from Christie's, only to discover that most clients couldn't really tell the two apart. If someone wants to sell a Roy Lichtenstein painting or a van Gogh drawing at auction, they are—almost without fail—going to see which one offers a better deal. Patrick Drahi's debt ratio isn't going to change that.

Sotheby's declined to let its staff be interviewed on the record for this article. But earlier this summer I met with someone authorized to speak for

the company, who said that Sotheby's was still in the early stages of the Drahi revolution. "How do you grow beyond the auction room?" the person asked. The representative emphasized the importance of the recent investment by ADQ, the Abu Dhabi sovereign wealth fund, and the opportunities for Sotheby's in the Middle East. In February, the auction house staged its first sale in Saudi Arabia. An array of expensive miscellany—a James Turrell work of pink L.E.D. panels, a Magritte, a Banksy, a few Warhols, a couple of Damien Hirsts—went under the hammer in Diriyah, the country's ancient capital. Payments in cryptocurrency were accepted.

The representative reminded me of Drahi's long record as a disrupter of established businesses. "When you're trying to convert an old-fashioned car into a modern supercar, that's hard," the person said, of the attempt to remake Sotheby's. We talked about whether Drahi had changed in recent years. In the past decade, his net worth has shrunk by two-thirds. In June, Altice France filed for a form of bankruptcy protection in the U.S. Pereira awaits the results of the investigation in Portugal. The representative described Sotheby's as Drahi's "forever thing."

Conversations about Drahi and Sotheby's always touch on his fascination with the brand. Unlike a telecom company, whose worth can be measured in customers and connections, what Sotheby's symbolizes is more valuable than the money it makes. It is the idea of the rarefied auction that matters. For the first hundred years of its history, Sotheby's was celebrated for its sale of libraries. In July, 1823, the auction house sold off the books that Napoleon took with him into exile on St. Helena, along with his tortoiseshell walking stick. The pivot to art didn't take place until the twentieth century. In the years since the pandemic, art sales have retreated even as luxury-goods revenues have doubled, to more than two billion dollars. A current Sotheby's executive observed to me that the watch industry alone is now comfortably larger than the global art market. It is possible that Drahi's legacy at Sotheby's will be to accelerate a change—in taste and consumption and the expression of desire—that was happening anyway. The evening sale will be superseded at some stage. Just as cable was usurped by fibre.

In late May, I flew to New York for the spring sales. Since Sotheby's abandoned its new fee structure, the auction house has been aggressively trying to win back business. I spoke to an art adviser who usually consigns

with Christie's and whose clients had recently been choosing to go with Sotheby's instead. "It's really who's going to work the hardest for it," the adviser said. Sotheby's had landed the most valuable consignment of the week, Giacometti's "[Grande tête mince](#)"—a painted bronze sculpture of a head, cast in 1955—with an asking price of seventy million dollars.

On the afternoon of the sale, I walked through the galleries at York Avenue to look at the Giacometti, an open-mouthed, quietly devastating bust of the artist's younger brother, Diego. The sculpture was being offered without a guarantee, in accordance with the wishes of the consignor, the foundation of Stefan Soloviev, a real-estate developer and a collector.

Ahead of the sale, dealers had speculated that the auction house's estimate of the Giacometti was too high. The specialists were under too much pressure. They were reaching too much. There were only ever a handful of collectors bidding more than fifty million dollars, even when the going was good. The previous night, Christie's had pulled a thirty-million-dollar Warhol painting, "Big Electric Chair," from its sale for lack of interest.

The Giacometti was lot No. 17. I was sitting at the back of the room. Barker opened the bidding at fifty-nine million dollars. He knew that interest was thin. But it only takes one bid. Barker rattled off a few air bids—from no one, but to give the impression that a competition was under way. He settled at sixty-four million dollars, somewhere near the reserve. Barker is a great auctioneer. He is particularly admired for his stamina. He offered the Giacometti for sale at sixty-four million dollars a second time. Somewhere around the fourteenth time, a stillness settled onto the salesroom. Even the specialists seemed to stand a little straighter by their phones. Barker tried for a twenty-eighth time before switching, unaccountably, to sixty-four million two hundred and fifty thousand dollars—as if that might finally shift a collector's appetite and avert one of the most expensive auction failures of all time. But it didn't. There was not a single bid. The buyers were watching; the buyers were wary. And nobody wanted what Sotheby's was selling. ♦

Onward and Upward with the Arts

# A24's Empire of Auteurs

The studio is brilliant at selling small, provocative films. Now it wants to sell blockbusters, too.

By Alex Barasch

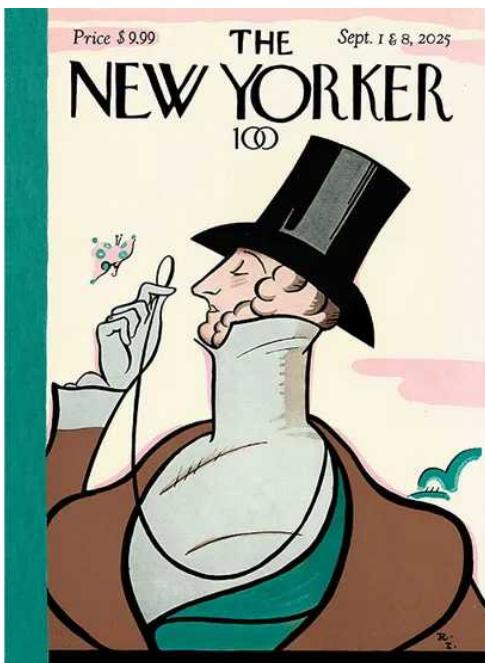
August 25, 2025



In November of 2015, the upstart film studio A24 had a problem. Executives had acquired the writer-director [Robert Eggers's](#) stark, unsettling début, "The Witch," at the Sundance Film Festival and wanted to make it their first release to open on thousands of screens. But both Eggers and Anya Taylor-Joy, who starred as a teen-ager tempted by unholy forces, were then unknown. The story, set in the sixteen-thirties and scripted in Early Modern English, was a tough sell. To generate buzz, the company sought an unlikely partner: the Satanic Temple.

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A24's marketing team had noticed that the organization, which mounts protests in support of religious freedom and reproductive rights, had a knack for headline-grabbing stunts. They reached out to Jex Blackmore, the Temple's spokesperson at the time, who agreed to a meeting after watching "The Witch" and finding it "pretty disturbing, in a wonderful way." The studio flew Blackmore from Detroit to Manhattan to talk with executives, among them David Fenkel, one of A24's founders, who proved surprisingly receptive to ideas about the "philosophy behind satanism and witchcraft."

The Satanic Temple publicly endorsed the movie—a first for the order—and A24 bankrolled "interactive performances" to follow preview screenings. Blackmore drew up a document enshrining their shared goal: "Create a narrative and controversy that transforms 'The Witch' into an iconic film." The satanists planned the parties; A24 minded the guest list, and canvassed butchers in search of a pig's head, for ritual use. At a post-screening event at the Jane Hotel, in New York, attendees had their foreheads marked with ash, then mingled with nearly nude performers, a theremin player, and a dominatrix. Blackmore said, "People watch a film, and then they expect to go to some Hollywood party. I wanted to really distort that experience."

The alliance elicited plenty of press, and even some actual horror: one faith-based publication asked, "Should Christians Be Afraid of 'The Witch'?" The

film, which A24 acquired for \$1.5 million, made upward of forty million at the box office. For Eggers, this was something of a devil’s bargain: when he tried to travel to Poland to scout his next feature, the country’s film commission barred him, convinced that *he* was a satanist. But the campaign—viral, edgy, and distinctly un-Hollywood—presaged A24’s future success. “They support big visions,” Blackmore said. “It’s not often that you find people who are well resourced and well connected and are willing to trust people to be really wild with their ideas.”

In the decade since “The Witch,” Blackmore’s praise has been echoed by filmmakers ranging from Barry Jenkins to [Sofia Coppola](#). A24 has won twenty-one Oscars, for such films as “Moonlight,” “The Brutalist,” and “Everything Everywhere All at Once.” Among fans, it has become synonymous with auteur-driven independent cinema; some think of it as an auteur unto itself. (Coppola told me that she knew the company had made it when she saw a man in the West Village walking his dog with an A24-branded leash.)

But the studio is in flux. After a recent infusion of venture-capital money and a \$3.5-billion valuation, its production budgets and commercial ambitions have grown. It now has a music label and an Off Broadway theatre, and has just created a division, A24 Labs, to explore A.I. tools. [Josh and Benny Safdie](#), who broke out with the two-million-dollar A24 drama “Good Time,” are each releasing around seventy-million-dollar projects with the studio later this year—one starring Timothée Chalamet, the other starring Dwayne (the Rock) Johnson. Alex Garland, a writer-director who first worked with A24 on “Ex Machina,” is developing an adaptation of the best-selling video game Elden Ring.

In Garland’s view, A24 is still far from a Hollywood-style studio. “I’ve been working in film for over twenty-five years, and I’ve crossed a pre-A24 and a post-A24 era,” he told me. When he was starting out in the industry, in the late nineties, he said, “the deal was you could have ideas, you could have ethical complexity, you could have things that were confronting to the viewer in one way or another, but you needed to smuggle them into the film.” At A24, he’d found, “I don’t have to smuggle ideas in. In fact, the ideas are things that we will freely discuss and try to exploit.”

As the company grows, it's betting that such provocations can be a selling point. If a movie is incendiary, the marketing department tends to lean in. "They think like Andy Warhol a little bit. Like, what's relevant right now?" [Halina Reijn](#), who directed "Babygirl," in which Nicole Kidman has an illicit dom-sub affair, said of A24. "They also teach you to think like that as a filmmaker." She, like Garland, has been encouraged to pursue topical material that sparks debate. "You might say, 'I just want to go to Cannes!' But they say, 'No—you want to be part of *culture*.'"

A24 was rebellious from the start. It was created in New York in 2012, when indie cinema was in the doldrums. "Every company at that time was some derivation of Miramax, or a response to Miramax," an early employee told me. "And those companies had started to age with those buyers." In the eighties, Miramax had made independent film a mainstream phenomenon through aggressive marketing tactics, distributing such breakthroughs as Steven Soderbergh's "sex, lies, and videotape." But, by the two-thousands, its output had ossified into kitschy Oscar bait, like "Cold Mountain." A24's three young founders—David Fenkel, Daniel Katz, and John Hodges—aspired to match Miramax's heyday. They wanted to release art-house fare for their own generation—and believed that, by keeping costs low and relying on digital-first promotion, they could make money doing it.

Katz secured fourteen million dollars from the Wall Street firm Guggenheim Partners, and the trio assembled a team. Among their first recruits was a twenty-five-year-old named Noah Sacco, who is now A24's head of film. On a drizzly May morning, I met him for breakfast in Manhattan. At thirty-eight, he has a boyish demeanor, a slender build, and a shock of wavy, silver-streaked hair. Wearing a short-sleeved black shirt and a thin gold chain, he immediately ordered coffee and apologized for being sleep-deprived. "I used to sleep like a toddler, and then, in the middle of the pandemic, it just fell through my fingers," he said. "The toothpaste was out of the tube!"

Sacco is warm, excitable, and self-deprecating. Unlike most studio executives—whom artists often resent for undermining their visions with obtuse notes—he's also beloved by filmmakers. Celine Song, the writer and director of "Past Lives" and "Materialists," calls Sacco her "guardian angel." She told me, "Noah will always understand the movie I'm making," adding

that she particularly trusts his storytelling instincts: “If I’ve cut a scene and one night I’m in doubt about it, I call him and say, ‘Hey, did you miss that scene?’” Sacco reacts to such praise with palpable embarrassment. A24 executives avoid attention, and have made a business practice of cultivating mystique. Even the studio’s name, borrowed from an Italian motorway, is cryptic by design: a symbol onto which fans can project their own meanings.

Sacco was so obsessed with movies as a kid that, like Tarantino before him, he got a job at a video store. Before joining A24, he’d spent two years at the Weinstein Company, and felt disillusioned with the industry. Energized by the startup’s more collaborative ethos, and by its plan to target younger cinephiles, he took the leap, despite a pay cut. To land the position, Sacco lied about having acquisitions experience; he’d never even attended a film festival. His first was Toronto, in 2012, where, he recalled, “I was running around with a backpack, doing three different jobs.”



A24’s first two acquisitions fizzled, but its third, Harmony Korine’s “Spring Breakers,” was a hit. Though the trailers promised skimpily clad college girls committing petty theft, the movie takes a dark, surreal turn, including a violent crime spree scored to Britney Spears. Such meme-worthy sequences and a polarizing third-act twist—one character gets machine-gunned to death—became signature A24 flourishes. The studio bypassed TV ads in

favor of an online campaign, which went viral; during awards season, it eschewed pompous “For Your Consideration” rhetoric in favor of an appeal to “*consider this sh\*t.*” Another early release, Sofia Coppola’s “The Bling Ring,” now seems like a harbinger. The film follows a group of young underdogs using internet savvy and pop-cultural awareness to steal from the Hollywood élite—methods not unlike A24’s own. Katz was on vacation in Hawaii when he received furious calls from Harvey Weinstein, who’d wanted the title himself.

A24 works almost exclusively with writer-directors like Coppola. Paradoxically, the unifying quality of its films is that each one feels, for better or worse, like the product of a singular mind. Many of the studio’s débuts mine the lives of their creators; Greta Gerwig prepped the cast of “Lady Bird” by sharing her high-school yearbooks. It’s also known for releasing genre films, each of which has a distinct aesthetic sensibility: in “Midsommar,” Ari Aster wrung pathos from the image of a bad boyfriend being set aflame while stuffed inside the skin of a bear. Though A24’s movies vary in tone and substance, its embrace of the specific and the strange convinced fans that, in an era dominated by formulaic franchises, the studio promised something different.

Zoe Beyer, A24’s creative director, started out as the voice of its freewheeling social-media feeds. She now introduces its podcast, which borrows the format of *Interview* magazine: two artists, no intermediary. When she realized how intensely moviegoers felt about A24—acolytes were tattooing its logo on their bodies—she and a colleague proposed making branded merchandise. A test run of sweatshirts emblazoned with “*A TWENTY-FOUR*,” to clarify the pronunciation, sold out, confirming a hunger for more. Today, for a monthly fee, roughly a hundred thousand “AAA24 members” get first dibs on A24 products, free film tickets, and access to special events, which attendees inevitably post about online. The program is far from a profit center, but it generates highly effective advertising. An executive called the members “evangelicals for the movies.”

A24’s founding employees have largely stuck around, and partnerships with talent tend to be lasting, too: when the company backs a movie or a series—it also has a TV division—the implicit intent is to keep working with the creator. Executives are in constant conversation with their roster, and pride

themselves on the intimacy of the operation. Decisions on new filmmakers are made democratically by a core group: Katz, Fenkel, Sacco, and Nicolette Aizenberg, the head of distribution. (Aizenberg is another veteran: in 2012, she and Sacco celebrated their first film festival together with tequila shots.) Katz, who has dark hair and narrow features, leads by asking questions; he responds to assessments he approves of with an emphatic “Correct!” Fenkel, taller and broader, is affably punctilious. He’s transparent in a business of bullshitters.

Discussions about green-lighting a project, Sacco told me, have “a creative component” and “an economic component.” When introducing prospects that his team is eager to cultivate, he offers the group a précis. The moment a deal is made, staffers in the marketing division read the script and begin strategizing. But the process of shaping and releasing a movie varies from director to director. “It’s personality-driven,” Sacco said. He considers it essential to get to know artists as individuals. (This goes beyond mere meetings—he recently attended a Charli XCX concert with Aster and Reijn.) Sacco explained, “If you spend time with these people and really understand why this feels important to them, then you understand the DNA of the movie better. If you understand the DNA of the movie better, you understand how to bring it into the world.”

In a landscape crowded by reboots and sequels, A24 executives pursue the unfamiliar. “Taste has to evolve with the times,” Sacco said. “We’re all collectively most interested in what is absent in culture—and what is absent is always changing.” He noted, “When ‘Spring Breakers’ came out, it felt new. In the wake of that movie, things with neon colors and that sort of attitude instantly felt a little borrowed, a little late.” In A24’s early years, it often picked up films that bigger companies had shied away from. Jonathan Glazer’s captivatingly hypnotic, half-improvised “Under the Skin,” which stars Scarlett Johansson as an alien who hunts lonely human men, had no other offers for a U.S. theatrical release; Garland’s wily “Ex Machina,” about an erratic tech billionaire who summons an employee to perform the Turing test on a beautiful android, had been dropped by its distributor. “We were ever so slightly ahead of the rest of the world in our perception of those movies,” Sacco said. Today, A24’s animating principle is “What else does the world not think should live on three thousand screens?”

Sacco had talked with me long enough that he was running late for a preview screening of Aster's latest film, "Eddington," at *MOMA*, ahead of its première, in Cannes, the following week. He invited me along for the ride. "I'm anxious to make our movies successful," he continued, once we'd settled in a taxi. "If we fail in this thesis, something is reinforced that's bad." He'd been heartened by the recent triumph of [Ryan Coogler's](#) "Sinners"—a Warner Bros. release, and the rare blockbuster with no basis in preëxisting I.P. "It's great for anybody who's doing anything original," he said. By the same token, if A24's big-budget swings go awry, there could be ramifications across Hollywood. Sacco mused, "If we're another casualty in the struggle to make something quality mainstream, that would suck."

Shortly before the première of "Eddington," I arrived at the Palais des Festivals—a towering, half-glass structure with a red carpet flowing down an outside staircase—to find a crowd of young people holding signs, each with a variation on the same request: "*EDDINGTON Billet S.V.P.*" Liv, a twenty-four-year-old Berliner, had been drawn to "Eddington," in part, by her love for A24. She first started paying attention to the company after watching "Midsommar"—another Aster film, though she seemed unaware of this fact. (One V.C. firm invested in the studio after finding that sixty per cent of people who go to A24 films do so *because* they're A24 films; many know the brand better than the directors.) "I've never been disappointed with any A24 movie," Liv told me. She said, of Gen Z's particular affection for the studio, "Whenever something is kinda gory but aesthetically pleasing, everyone eats it up. We're looking for weird movies. We feel seen."

Anyone attending a gala première in Cannes, famous or not, must walk the red carpet. Civilians who overstay their welcome get hustled along by security. A24 executives, by contrast, speed through discreetly, declining to give interviews or pose for photos. (A representative *Variety* headline: "Secretive Founders Shun the Spotlight.") Generally, the talent does the talking. The crowd that evening boasted several A24 alumni, including Harris Dickinson, Kidman's youthful dom in "Babygirl."

When "Eddington" started, the appearance of A24's logo onscreen prompted a burst of applause. Reactions to the film, however, were sharply divided. The story is set in New Mexico in May, 2020, and plays on the real-life tensions stoked by the onset of *COVID*, the murder of George Floyd, and the

rise of QAnon. The conflict between a conservative sheriff (Joaquin Phoenix) and a tech-friendly liberal mayor (Pedro Pascal) is inflamed by a mask mandate. Then come racial-justice protests, noxious conspiracy theories, and, in the final act, exploding bodies. When the lights went up, Aster addressed the audience with a nervous laugh: “Thank you so much for having me. I dunno—sorry?”

At the beachfront after-party, I found Sacco, dressed in a black suit and a black shirt. Seated behind Pascal at the première, he’d looked pleased and poised; now he was gnawing on a toothpick and worrying about reactions online. “I’m debating whether to go on Twitter,” he said.

A European buyer told me that he was impressed by the film. He’d been doing business with A24 since 2018, and felt that the studio had bridged a long-standing divide: “I’ve been coming to Cannes for many years, and there was a big difference between the super commercial and the art house. They weren’t really talking to each other. Now they do—there are big, artistic, commercial ventures. A24 really understood that. They were the first.”

In recent years, the indie distributor Neon, which has borrowed A24’s marketing tactics but focusses more on international titles, has become the dominant force at Cannes. By the festival’s end, it would pick up its sixth consecutive Palme d’Or—and its voluble C.E.O., Tom Quinn, would give half a dozen interviews. Still, A24’s festival parties have undeniable cachet. Though Aster initially looked trepidatious amid the red-tinged lighting and the potted palm trees, he was soon surrounded by admirers. Coralie Fargeat, the director of “The Substance”—the kind of stylized horror film that A24 made fashionable—hugged him. So did Reijn, who’d flown in to show support.

The party was stacked with stars—Austin Butler, who plays a cult leader in “Eddington,” huddled with Robert Pattinson—but Sacco slipped out early, citing a big day ahead. A24 had four movies at Cannes, a slate that neatly encapsulated its range. In addition to “Eddington,” there were two small-budget débuts, including “Pillion,” Harry Lighton’s funny, tender portrait of a shy gay man’s induction into B.D.S.M. Then, there was the studio’s first Spike Lee joint: “Highest 2 Lowest,” a riff on Akira Kurosawa’s classic

crime drama “High and Low.” (Lee’s movie features a blink-and-you’ll-miss-it homage to the new partnership—a fateful apartment numbered A-24.) Premières aside, the company had deals to make: execs were meeting with prospective filmmakers and presenting international buyers with Benny Safdie’s “The Smashing Machine,” in which the Rock plays an M.M.A. fighter. By 1 A.M., the party was still going, but the champagne on A24’s table was untouched.

Conventional Hollywood wisdom dictates that the safest bet is a “four-quadrant” movie: one that attracts both men and women, and audiences both over and under twenty-five. Family-friendliness is ideal; inoffensiveness is essential. The major studios tend to develop projects internally—increasingly relying on decades-old I.P.—and then attach a director, reserving the right to order changes if the resulting picture tests poorly. When confronted with an original idea, executives’ first impulse is to make it more conventional. Celine Song recalls shopping around “Past Lives,” a quiet drama about an immigrant caught between her American husband and her Korean childhood sweetheart, and being asked if she could turn it into a romantic comedy in which everyone speaks English.

A24 made no such demands, in part because its business model doesn’t rely on mass appeal. “I talk to Sacco and Fenkel about this all the time—there is, in the film industry, a missing middle class,” Song told me. “There are either movies that have no expectation to make money, or there are movies that have nothing *but* expectations of making money.” Though A24’s box-office returns are often modest—the industry newsletter *The Ankler* observed that, in 2024, Warner Bros.’ “Beetlejuice” reboot had a bigger take than the entire year’s worth of A24 releases—the films have an outsized cultural impact. In June, the *Times* polled readers on the hundred best films of the twenty-first century; eleven were A24 titles.

“Moonlight” was No. 18. When its director, Barry Jenkins, met Sacco, in late 2014, A24 had yet to make a movie in-house. Producing films, rather than just acquiring them, would be a significant and difficult shift. Getting involved early in the process would allow A24 to give more creative input, and to avoid the frenzy of a bidding war—but fronting the cost, and betting on a filmmaker rather than on a finished product, entailed major financial risks. “Moonlight,” an affecting story about a Black boy growing up in

Miami and coming to terms with his sexuality, had already been rejected by three financiers, despite a meagre budget of seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars. But Sacco told Jenkins that the company had long hoped to start “building films from the ground up,” and had been searching for the right project. “*Moonlight*,” he said, was the one. Jenkins leapt: “Literally, it was, like, ‘Before they change their minds, let’s sign on the dotted line.’”

A24 was then small enough, Jenkins told me, that he “met everyone, from top to bottom.” Sacco flew to Miami to observe the shoot for a week; Jenkins was then left largely to his own devices. Executives were excited from the first internal screening, and quickly capitalized on awards potential. After noticing that early audiences loved the score, by Nicholas Britell, A24 arranged a screening in L.A. with a live orchestral accompaniment. Britell received an Oscar nomination for Best Original Score. “*Moonlight*” ultimately won three Oscars, including Best Picture.

Soon, the A24 mythos became self-sustaining. The twin Australian filmmakers Danny and Michael Philippou came up idolizing Jenkins and Aster—and, when they were making their first movie, the horror film “*Talk to Me*,” they constantly invoked the studio’s high standards. If one brother proposed an uninspired shot, the other would offer a teasing rebuke: “That’s not very A24 of you!”

“*Talk to Me*,” a movie about teens who experiment with demonic possession (via an embalmed hand) as if it were a party drug, premiered at Sundance in 2023. Sacco and one of his deputies, Vilma Castaneda, loved the film, and were intent on acquiring it. Before Sacco returned to New York, they made an early, personal appeal—in contrast, the Philippous told me, to the “blind offers” other studios made to their agents. Upon hearing that Neon was circling, a large A24 contingent flew back to Utah to seal the deal.

After Sundance, the Philippous entered the studio’s marketing machine. For A24, merch is a key aspect of the hype-building process, with limited runs and members-only drops that fuel a sense of exclusivity. (This approach has prompted some eye-rolling online: as one tweet put it, “a24 thinks they’re supreme.”) The brothers reviewed designs for “*Talk to Me*”-themed hoodies and hats, as well as a more chaotic proposal: a ceramic reproduction of the film’s embalmed hand which functioned like a bong. The Philippous are

“straight edge,” an exec recalled, “so it took a little nudge”—but the audacity won them over. The pipe, priced at a hundred and ten dollars, sold out.

“Talk to Me” made nearly a hundred million dollars worldwide. A24 soon financed another Philippou feature, “Bring Her Back,” an emotional horror story about the deranging effects of grief which drew on the brothers’ experiences of loss. The twins were grateful to receive notes on the script that made it even less formulaic. Danny recalled being advised to cut “overt horror beats” in the first act, to foreground human relationships instead: “They got me comfortable with letting it play out as a drama, and not relying on other stuff—because it wasn’t helping the story. It was just out of fear of boring the audience.”

The Philippous are now developing three more projects with the studio. Danny told me they’d recently hired “all these people A24 were recommending” for a documentary about the hyper-violent world of so-called death-match wrestling, in which Michael is an active participant. (Several A24 employees will soon fly to Mexico City to attend one of his bouts.) For such repeat collaborators, the pitch process can be as simple as a phone call. Garland was in postproduction on his 2024 film, “Civil War,” editing a sequence involving the storming of the White House, when he was struck by the notion of an entire film built around “the inherent electricity and strangeness” of soldiers in motion. He called Sacco and outlined his desire to make “an ultra-realistic, true-to-life war film,” based on an actual battle. No executives would be allowed to give notes, because the narrative and “embedded themes” would have to flow entirely from the facts. He’d “do his best” to keep the budget to ten million dollars. Garland recalled, “It took five minutes for Noah to say, ‘I absolutely get it. Let’s do it.’ ” The result was “Warfare,” an acclaimed drama about a 2006 mission in Iraq, reconstructed from the memories of Garland’s co-director, the former Navy SEAL Ray Mendoza, and his platoon.



The company’s practice of developing ideas with talent, rather than attaching a director to a completed script, has been met with some skepticism in the industry. A former head of a major studio described A24’s method to me as being “like having two steering wheels on a car.” Avoiding a crash requires a light touch. Sacco is adept at identifying a concept’s strongest elements, and at setting artists at ease in the process. “Any idea I have I’m going to be very insecure about,” Reijn told me. “I’m, like, ‘I have this baby, but don’t look at it! It has one eye and four arms!’ And he’ll be, like, ‘No, this is a beautiful baby, and this is why, and this is why.’” Sacco is most hands-on during the edit—but, he told me, he watches cuts three times to “get fluent with the movie” before making suggestions.

A24 is generally unfazed by low audience-test scores, and it doesn’t demand that auteurs accept its feedback. Coppola, who recently completed a documentary about the fashion designer Marc Jacobs for the studio, said, “I just thought, If I’m gonna do it, I want to do it with A24, because they’ll let me do it however I want.”

Marketing is where the company takes the reins. Directors can decide how much they wish to participate, and trailers are often a point of collaboration. Aster’s first film, “Hereditary,” was a demonic family drama in which a young girl, Charlie, is set up as an archetypal child of darkness, in the

tradition of “The Omen” or “The Ring.” Then, thirty minutes in, she’s beheaded in an accident; the story is really about how her brother and parents grapple with the loss. In talks with A24, Aster stressed the importance of hiding the twist. “The idea was creepy-kid movies sell,” he told me. “Let’s just promise that, so that, when what happens to Charlie happens, the audience won’t have any ground to stand on.” The gambit worked: “Hereditary,” which had a seven-million-dollar budget, grossed nearly ninety million dollars globally.

Some artists choose to be even more involved. Reijn attended weekly meetings in which A24 mapped out a campaign for “Babygirl.” One challenge was circumventing social-media platforms’ limitations on sexual content. Thanks to seeds planted by the studio, “Babygirl” became a TikTok phenomenon anyway: in cleverly insinuating clips, women posted footage of themselves in theatres after watching, physically wrecked with lust. Reijn recalled that earlier cuts of the film presented kinkily degrading acts without making it explicit that Kidman’s character *likes*, say, crawling on her knees to lap up a bowl of milk. Sacco advised her never to lose sight of the humor, and to “take the people who are going to see this movie a bit more by the hand as far as the joy”—giving the audience permission to take pleasure in the affair, too.

A24’s New York headquarters occupy four floors of a sleek midtown tower. A library is stocked with bound screenplays and books—such as Walter Sorell’s “The Duality of Vision,” a history of multi-hyphenate creatives from Goethe to Paul Klee—that may resonate with A24’s stable of writer-directors and writer-performers. Talent stops by regularly: Coppola held a reading in the library when she was trying to crack a screenplay, and Reijn shot the office scenes in “Babygirl” there. (For two weeks, everyone worked from home.)

During one office visit, the writer Sonny Lee confessed to Ravi Nandan, the studio’s head of television, that he’d recently tailed another driver in a state of fury for nearly an hour. Nandan, a genial conversationalist with curly salt-and-pepper hair, is primed to see the potential in a wild anecdote. He asked if there might be a story in the experience. The prompt led to “Beef,” a highly popular series starring Steven Yeun and Ali Wong as strangers

thrown together by a spur-of-the-moment car chase. It swept last year's Emmys.

The kernel of the personal in "Beef" is reflective of A24's over-all philosophy. "There are a lot of companies that are good at, you know, optioning a book with no one attached and saying it's an open writing assignment and ten people are gonna pitch. We've tried that—it's never worked," Nandan told me, laughing. "We're much better at fostering an original idea in someone, and that just takes time."

A24 began making television soon after its founding, but, because the studio isn't the end distributor for its shows ("Beef" was put out by Netflix), the division was slow to attract attention. Then came "Euphoria." Its creator, Sam Levinson, told Nandan he'd been working on a project that offered "empathy for drug addicts," having struggled with addiction himself as a teen. He'd partnered with HBO, which wanted the kind of youth-culture credibility that A24 had. A co-production emerged.

Early in the process, Nandan and Levinson went to dinner, and Levinson laid out his vision. "I want this to be No. 1," he said. "So, what works on HBO?" The answer, at the time, was "Game of Thrones." Levinson said of that series, "There's a ton of nudity. There's a lot of internal family drama. There's a lot of social, political drama between everyone backstabbing each other and trying to fuck each other over. And there's violence. I'm just gonna do all of that, with teen-agers." Nandan recalls thinking, "That is *insane*. But also—O.K.! I want to go on that ride with you!"

"Euphoria" was cast by Jennifer Venditti, a frequent A24 collaborator known for street scouting, and HBO had to get comfortable with the idea of signing several actors who had histories of crime or addiction. Levinson, who wrote every script, took to calling Nandan at 2 A.M. to talk through ideas. The show's depiction of modern teen-age life quickly generated controversy. The third episode featured nearly forty penises—nine of them accompanying a soliloquy on the art of the dick pic—and launched a barrage of think pieces. Like the puritans who protested "The Witch," the Parents Television and Media Council demanded the cancellation of the "degenerate" program. "Euphoria" often does tip into bad taste and trauma porn: one character kisses his ex at gunpoint while she cries and pleads with

him to stop; another slits her wrists with a soda can. But the backlash to such plotlines only fuelled interest, delivering the younger audience that HBO and Levinson desired.

A24 develops most of its TV shows in-house, often helping to staff the writers' rooms. It has a rapport with comics including Ramy Youssef and Jerrod Carmichael, as well as Benito Skinner, whose coming-out dramedy, "Overcompensating," was a hit on Amazon Prime this spring. Skinner caught A24's eye when a member of Nandan's team became obsessed with his Instagram and TikTok sketches. Skinner came in for a meeting and spoke about staying closeted well into college; he also expressed the desire to make "a fucking sex comedy." Nandan said that Skinner is "emblematic of something we look for that's hard to find—someone who has a ripped-from-the-headlines-of-their-life story that really works, *and* they can act, *and* they can write almost the whole show with a collaborator."

A24 conceives of itself as a place where artists can move between media. (With the purchase of its Off Broadway venue, the Cherry Lane, it can now offer its auteurs a place to try their hands at live theatre.) Several of its filmmakers have begun working with the TV department, and vice versa. Youssef, best known for "Ramy," is writing his début feature, which he'll also direct. Noah Baumbach, who worked with A24 on his 2015 film "While We're Young," is now partnering with the studio for his first TV show—an adaptation of Andrew Ridker's comic novel "Hope," about an affluent Jewish family destabilized by a scandal. Reijn is making both her third film and a series inspired by her upbringing in a cult. A24, she said, is like "an amusement park you never have to leave."

When Aster submitted the screenplay for "Eddington," Sacco, borrowing a term from his snowboarding youth, told him it was "a double black diamond"—the highest degree of difficulty. In June, over drinks with Sacco and Nicolette Aizenberg, the distribution head, I reminded him of the remark. "I stand by it!" he said. "But, in the same way as a challenging run down a mountain is the most exhilarating, so is this." He noted that difficult terrain was the norm at A24. "I mean, Josh is doing a period Ping-Pong movie," he said, of Safdie's "Marty Supreme."

“*Not a Ping-Pong movie, Noah*,” Aizenberg said, half jokingly reminding him of the company line. (The film is a “globe-trotting epic”—and the sport, both later stressed, is “table tennis.”) As for “Eddington,” she said, “It isn’t a *COVID* movie.” When I asked what it was, she replied, “A modern Western!”

The positioning of films is Aizenberg’s domain. A brunette with a lively, complicitous way of speaking, she’s energized by disagreement and likes to talk with critics after they pan a film; internally, she has a reputation for responding to tearjerkers. At A24, a distinction is drawn between “marketing” movies and “word-of-mouth” movies. As one executive put it, “Can you spend your way into an expensive trailer song and get people to go see it, or is it something where you need to hear, ‘This is special?’” For a word-of-mouth title, Aizenberg’s team plans targeted screenings to stoke “grassroots” enthusiasm. Garland’s “Warfare” was shown at military bases. To promote Bo Burnham’s “Eighth Grade,” about a thirteen-year-old girl grappling with anxiety, the company bought out theatres across the country and invited teens to attend unsupervised, despite the film’s R rating.

For a marketing title, the challenge isn’t so much raising awareness as it is controlling the discourse. “Civil War,” which imagined a conflict-riven America led by a three-term President, had an effortlessly grabby premise. But A24, leery of antagonizing either side of the aisle—and, perhaps, of exposing the script’s muddled politics—positioned it as a mainstream action movie. The film, which had a fifty-million-dollar budget, grossed a hundred and thirty million. “It was about not letting the political conversation overtake the entertainment value,” Aizenberg said.

After Cannes, she’d concluded that politics could be a trap for “Eddington,” too. Aizenberg’s goal was to define the movie as “a conversation piece, not a polemic.” And, to underscore the film’s genre elements, her team decided to screen it alongside classic Westerns.

Aster, who also co-produces films and TV shows with A24 under his own banner, Square Peg, met Sacco when they were both in their mid-twenties. At the time, Aster had only a few shorts to his name. After “Moonlight” wrapped shooting, Aster submitted his script for “Hereditary,” and the studio agreed to finance it. “Midsommar,” a brightly lit pagan horror film built

around a doomed relationship, was such a critical and commercial success that it's entered the cultural lexicon. (The flower crown worn by Florence Pugh's character has become a Halloween staple.) Then came "Beau Is Afraid," from 2023, a three-hour Freudian odyssey that, in Aster's words, was "*designed* to be exhausting." This time, A24 couldn't figure out how to sell his vision. The film—the most expensive the studio had yet produced—flopped, reportedly losing thirty-five million dollars.

Aster was wounded but eager to forge ahead. Sacco insisted that they take time to work through what happened. Months of conversations followed. Lars Knudsen, Aster's longtime producer, told me, "With all those emotions —how Ari felt about it, how A24 felt about it—to be able to continue that relationship and go make 'Eddington,' I don't think we could have done that with any other studio. Noah was obviously at the center of that, because we could sit down and let it all out."

A24's relationship-driven approach can make collaboration fraught. But it can also create real friendships. Aster said of Sacco, "We tend to begin with arms linked and end with arms linked, and there's a standoff somewhere in between." He went on, "It's good to have somebody pushing against me," then smiled wryly and added, "I'm sure some would argue that they should push harder."

Even the money guys at A24 are cinéastes. Two of the founding partners, Katz and Fenkel, met in 2002 while working at the now defunct indie distributor ThinkFilm. Katz was the head of acquisitions; Fenkel would soon run regional publicity. They sat at adjoining desks and quickly bonded over their eclectic, proudly eccentric tastes. A colleague, David Laub, recalls Katz raving about "Hukkle," an experimental Hungarian film with almost no dialogue.

Katz eventually took a job at Guggenheim Partners to learn about the financial side of the industry. Fenkel went on to co-found the distribution company Oscilloscope with Adam Yauch, of the Beastie Boys. "Adam was the dreamer, and Fenkel was the nuts-and-bolts guy," the director [Kelly Reichardt](#), who worked with the pair on two movies there, told me. "Adam would say yes to whatever the filmmaker wanted, and then Fenkel had to make the decisions of the filmmaker somehow viable." Oscilloscope, a

scrappy, artist-first operation, sowed excitement in part via strategic screenings and limited-edition merch. Reichardt observed that “a lot of those ideas from Oscilloscope managed to get carried over to A24.”

In May, 2012, Yauch died, of cancer. Fenkel left to launch A24 that month. Laub, who’d followed him to Oscilloscope, told me, “Some of the way David thinks about filmmakers and how he treats people comes from Adam. Adam had a way of working with artists because *he* was an artist.” In 2015, Laub joined A24, where he led a small division known internally as A24 Indie. The team shepherded an impressive run of low-budget art-house films, many of them by women, including Reichardt’s “First Cow,” Charlotte Wells’s “Aftersun,” Annie Baker’s “Janet Planet,” and Joanna Hogg’s “The Souvenir.”



Then, amid A24’s turn toward bigger-budget fare, the Indie slate shrank. Last year, Laub left for Metrograph Pictures; his old division has since been given the anodyne name A24 Platform. The company is now funding fewer “Moonlight”-size projects than it once did. Platform had success with Andrew DeYoung’s “Friendship,” a cringe comedy starring Tim Robinson—but the studio had declined to finance the film when DeYoung first approached them, picking it up for distribution only after audiences at the Toronto International Film Festival loved it. Reichardt, too, was turned away

when she sought a higher budget for “The Mastermind,” a character study of an incompetent art thief.

Reichardt speaks fondly of her A24 era. “I had a film about a guy stealing milk and another one about a hurt bird and a ceramicist,” she said. “They were up for it! They might not have been up for it for a third film, but they were up for it for two.” The company’s advocacy for quieter films had been a godsend. “The Mastermind” landed at *mubi*—which, she told me, “totally let me make the film I wanted to make”—and got strong reviews at Cannes. But A24’s move away from indies struck her as a loss for both the industry and the art form. “For someone like me, it’s a heartbreak,” she said.

Sacco is mindful of artists’ fears about A24’s shifting priorities. This year, the studio was caught in a bidding war for “Sorry, Baby,” the writer-performer-director [Eva Victor’s](#) dark comedy about an academic grappling with the aftermath of an assault. It had been made on a tiny budget. Sacco told me, “It was interesting to be in those pitch meetings and have part of what we were trying to articulate be ‘We’re still releasing movies of this size!’” An offer of eight million dollars clinched the deal. Victor is young, charismatic, and very online; the steep price was, in part, an investment in what she’ll make next. “We think Eva is the type of voice that does not enter the world often,” Sacco said.

He and his colleagues don’t have unerring instincts. There have been some notable in-house failures: this year’s “Death of a Unicorn,” an eat-the-rich slasher starring Jenna Ortega, was a clumsy attempt to chase the Zeitgeist which barely broke even. And, though the studio prides itself on repeat collaborators, it’s lost some early stars. Sean Baker, who worked with A24 twice, decamped to Neon when it offered more money for “Anora”; the film won Best Picture. Eggers is now at Focus Features, which had a hit last year with his “Nosferatu”—the movie he’d been deterred from making in Poland after A24’s satanic stunt. Focus, a Universal subsidiary, had afforded him a Hollywood-tier budget.

A24’s efforts to scale up were born, in part, of a desire to grow *with* its filmmakers, rather than see them graduate to larger studios. But higher production costs demand greater returns. When Miramax reached a similar inflection point, in the nineties, the company launched Dimension, a

repository for genre flicks (“Scream,” “The Crow”) that made enough to sustain the parent studio without sullyng its name. A24, rather than cordoning off its blockbusters, is attempting to devise them with auteurs who are prepared to go big. The company won’t twist a conceit or a screenplay into something it’s not, but it privileges ideas that it thinks will sell tickets. Reijn told me that, when Sacco is presented with a pitch with no box-office potential, “he’ll say, ‘You can still do that, because you have to express yourself, but then keep it super small and make it for no money.’ And then, if you have a commercial idea, he’ll say, ‘This you should paint on a bigger canvas.’ Even if you’re, like, ‘Oh, I don’t know,’ he says, ‘No, no, now you *have* to take the next step.’ ”

A few years ago, Sacco visited Garland at home during a trip to London. The director, who had gushed on the phone about Elden Ring, showed off the game on his PlayStation, then asked whether A24 would back an adaptation. The lush visuals and fantasy setting reminded Sacco of the “Lord of the Rings” movies. He replied, “Fuck yeah.” Garland, in the hope of garnering the support of the game’s elusive creator, Hidetaka Miyazaki, offered to write a script on spec. Once he had completed an epic hundred-and-sixty-page draft (with forty additional pages of imagery), Sacco flew with him to Japan to close the deal with Elden Ring’s developer and publisher. This is the second forthcoming A24 video-game adaptation—the first will be based on Hideo Kojima’s post-apocalyptic Death Stranding. Sacco pointed out to me that both designers are auteurs in their own medium. His first question for Kojima had been “Are you sure *you* don’t want to direct?”

One of the studio’s biggest investments to date is “The Smashing Machine,” which will be released in October. Dwayne Johnson told me that, when he met Sacco, in 2023, “we instantly hit it off and connected on many levels,” adding in an e-mail that he was “looking to grow, deeply challenge and rip myself open in roles. Off with the bandaids so to speak, but hold on to quality storytelling. Noah had shared with me that A24 was also in a similar position.” Sacco, Johnson said, “made it very clear that he felt A24 would be the perfect home for me.” But “The Smashing Machine” remains, at its core, a Benny Safdie movie, even if it stars a veteran of the “Fast & Furious” franchise. “Working on a fifteen-million-dollar movie with Josh or Benny is

very similar to doing it at a higher level,” Sacco said. “The hard part is being aware of the cost and *not* changing.”

Legacy studios such as Sony Pictures have attempted to buy a stake in A24; instead, the company has opted to take Wall Street money, preferring not to be drawn into what one executive called Hollywood’s “hundred years of doing things a certain way.” But emphasizing innovation comes with other hazards. Thrive Capital, which helped to secure A24’s \$3.5-billion valuation, is also a major backer of OpenAI, and A24 courted the firm specifically for its artificial-intelligence connections. Scott Belsky, the head of A24 Labs, the studio’s tech initiative, has embarked on a listening tour, speaking with filmmakers about how they might benefit from such advances. Not everyone is likely to be receptive. [Aster recently told Letterboxd](#), “If you talk to these engineers and the people ushering this A.I. in, they don’t talk about A.I. as this great new medium. . . . They talk about it as a *god*.” Daniel Kwan, the co-director of “Everything Everywhere All at Once,” has described A.I. as “fundamentally incompatible with our institutions,” calling on studios to form “a unified front against the tech industry.”

Belsky is building a team of engineers and designers who—in his words—“see storytelling as the ultimate delivery mechanism for inspiration and hard truths.” His mandate is partly to develop tools for internal use, including some in the realms of predictive marketing and audience discovery, but he has said that his goal is to help “the world’s greatest creators take more creative risk” by making it easier to “explore the full landscape of their imagination,” from ideation onward. He’s speculated about such use cases as “a deep conversation with an LLM to debate a character’s mindset” and “pre-visualizing characters, costumes, and particular scenes.” Nandan told me, “There’s talent toe-dipping into it, and we want Scott to be a guide for them.” A.I., he mused, could let the studio target “microcommunities”: “You can maybe make something that’s valuable for a thousand people, because the cost is cheap enough that it doesn’t have to reach ten million people.”

A24 has long tried to strike a balance between originality and marketability. “Under the Skin,” Glazer’s film, was a turning point for the company. Although its box-office performance was weak, it put A24 on directors’

radars as a place that took artistic risks. The brand is inextricably linked to such daring. But, as an early employee told me, “It’s harder for them to do ‘Under the Skin’ now. I don’t think they *would* do it, personally. So they’re at this point of: Can they bring their audience with them? Does their audience want them to go to that place?”

It was a hundred and one degrees in Truth or Consequences, New Mexico, when the A24 superfans arrived. The studio had arranged a “takeover” of the town, where Aster’s “Eddington” was shot. Dozens of AAA24 members had been bused in from Albuquerque. Aster, who grew up in Santa Fe, greeted the group wearing a beat-up baseball cap from a farm in Corrales: a symbol of his New Mexico bona fides. He shook one hand after another. “I feel very Presidential,” he joked. A24’s director of membership, Floyd Miller, led the fans to Garcia’s, a fake bar built for “Eddington,” and took photos. He told them that all their texts, D.M.s, and e-mails were being read, “however insane.”

After dinner, a mixture of members and locals headed into El Cortez Theatre, a red building with neon signage and an old-school marquee. Aster addressed the crowd warmly, saying, “We all became really attached to this place.” The film’s humor landed better in New Mexico than it had in Cannes, with the audience laughing and gasping at all the right moments. (The politics played differently, too: when Phoenix’s character grandly refused to wear a mask, someone in the audience shouted, “Yeah!”)

Once “Eddington” had ended, A24 employees shepherded the attendees outside. The sky was dark, the air mercifully cool. Suddenly, a thousand drones rose up in unison, flitting about to form phrases in bright-blue lights. The name of a sinister tech corporation from the film loomed overhead. Nearly everyone whipped out their phones to record (and post) the proceedings.

Despite the elaborate promotional push, and a flurry of impassioned critical debate, “Eddington” underperformed. Ticket sales levelled out at eleven million dollars—fourteen million below its reported budget. But the studio stood by its swings. A top executive insisted to me that A24 had just had the most profitable half year in its history, and had been designed to withstand vicissitudes. “To use a baseball metaphor, we hit singles and doubles,” he

said. “And when you set up movies to hit singles and doubles you can let your partner—in the best version of this—really take creative risks. We don’t need to gross a hundred million dollars. We don’t need to gross *forty* million dollars to actually have a successful financial outcome.” The model leaves room for passion projects. “*Janet Planet*,” the playwright Annie Baker’s affecting directorial début about a single mother and her daughter, was a critical darling that grossed only eight hundred thousand dollars. A24 just green-lit her second film. “The thing I’ve kept hearing is that Daniel Katz loved the script and wanted to do it,” Laub, the former A24 Indie head, told me. “It reminds me of ‘Hukkle.’ In a way, he will always go back to that.”

The drone show, at least, was a four-quadrant hit. A fan next to me took in the sight of A24’s logo shimmering on the horizon. “Well,” he said. “You don’t see Neon doing *that*.♦

*An earlier version of this article misstated the ranking of “Moonlight” on the New York Times readers’ list of the hundred best films of the twenty-first century.* ♦

Portfolio

# Critical Distance

A glimpse of the *New Yorker* writers who hold the culture to account.

By Richard Renaldi

August 25, 2025



Everyone's a critic, they say. But most people aren't filing on Tuesdays. For the writers pictured here, engaging with culture isn't a hobby or a sideline or a way of sounding off. It's a vocation, in the fullest sense, complete with deadlines and word counts and occasional moments of grace. These writers attend not only to what something is but to what it almost is, or might have been; they're drawn to work that puts up a fight even if it finally taps out.

Paying attention—really paying attention—is their stock-in-trade. That's harder than it sounds. They linger. They poke. They turn things over like a suspect avocado. Some of these writers produce criticism, in its traditional form. Others report, profile, annotate the culture as it drifts by. Many do all of the above, sometimes in the same piece. They cover books, feature films, pop concerts, art exhibitions, documentaries, perfume launches, gospel albums, piano recitals, TV shows, courtroom antics, memes. What they

don't do is march in step. Some incline toward Olympian detachment, others missionary zeal. If they share anything, it's a disposition: curious, alert, unsatisfied with the obvious, and mistrustful of what goes without saying. They want to know both how something works and what it's doing to us.

Writing about culture requires more than a take. It calls for nerve, verve, a feel for sentences, and an instinct for what deserves scrutiny and what's better left alone. It's easy to skim culture, to riff, to slot things into trend pieces. It's harder to look closely, think carefully, and say something illuminating. To name what hasn't been named yet. To craft lines that echo in people's heads, or get under their skin. To make judgments, yes, but also to make meaning. At their best, critics don't just take the culture's pulse. They quicken it.

This Portfolio, by the American photographer Richard Renaldi, offers a look at the people who do that looking. Here are writers whose appraisals you've trusted, resisted, cited, or cursed. Renaldi captured them using eight-by-ten-inch negatives and an old-school view camera, with bellows, ground-glass screen, tripod, the works. He hasn't yet reached everyone on his list, but the portraits he's made so far repay the sitting. "With those lenses, where you want it to be sharp it can be extremely sharp," he says. "Where you want a blurry, soft background, it does that beautifully, too." Naturally, the commission took him to Brooklyn. But also to Cambridge, Massachusetts, and Columbus, Ohio, along with London, Los Angeles, Chicago, New Haven, and the Eastern Shore of Maryland.

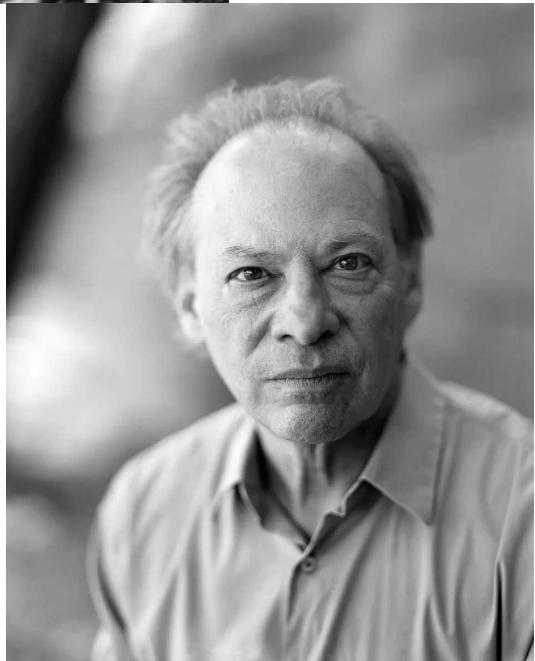
He didn't rush the job. "When you spend three hours with someone, you can build a little intimacy," Renaldi explains. "I hope that's embedded in the picture in some way." Some analytical distance may be embedded, as well: when you look at the camera's ground glass to assess the composition, he notes, everything's upside down and backward. Which may be how our critics prefer it. ♦





















Showcase

# The Mysterious Cover Artist Who Captured the Decline of the Rich

Mary Petty was reclusive, uncompromising, but she peered into a fading world with unmatched warmth and brilliance.

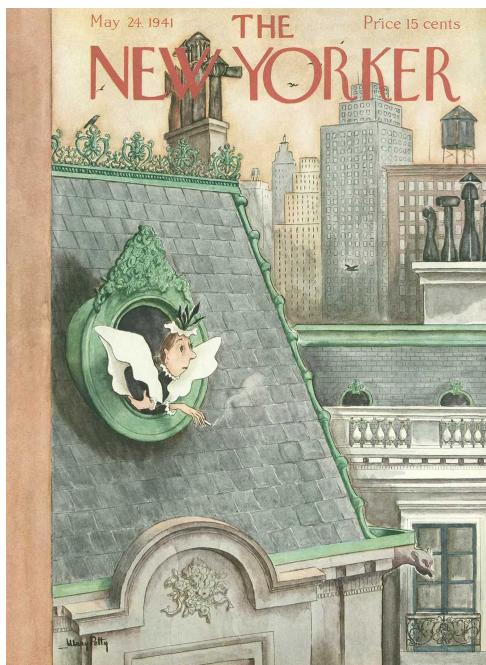
By Chris Ware

August 25, 2025

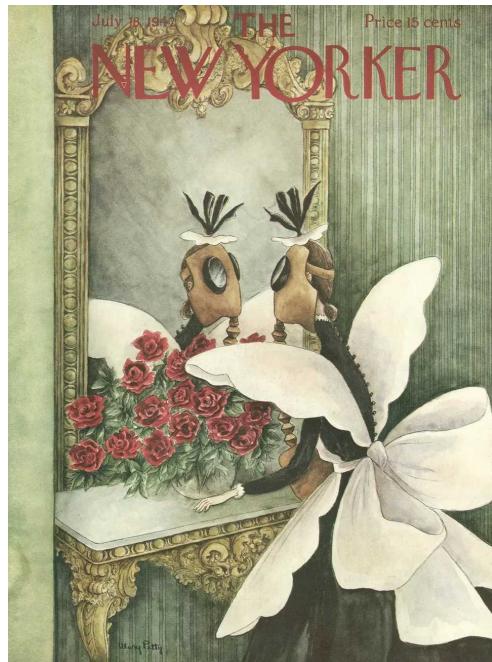
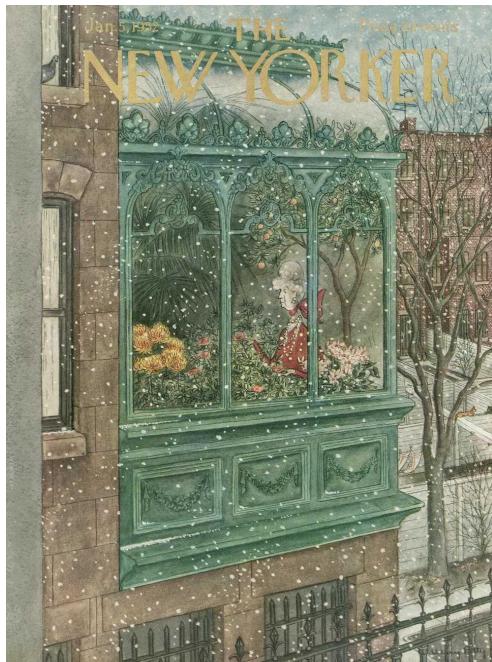


In the pantheon of *New Yorker* artists, the name Mary Petty hardly registers. But in her time she was one of a group of women—Helen E. Hokinson, Edna Eicke, Ilonka Karasz, and Barbara Shermund among them—who contributed well-known, well-loved drawings and paintings to a magazine that was then largely dominated by men. Petty (1899-1976) was married to one such man, Alan Dunn, who published close to two thousand cartoons in *The New Yorker*. They spent nearly all their life together in a small ground-floor apartment at 12 East Eighty-eighth Street, Dunn working at a drawing table in the living area and Petty at a small board in their bedroom. Petty—who had attended high school at Horace Mann, in the Bronx—had no formal art training, and she was sometimes referred to by Dunn, perhaps jokingly,

as his “student.” But a year after his first drawing appeared in *The New Yorker*, in 1926, hers followed.

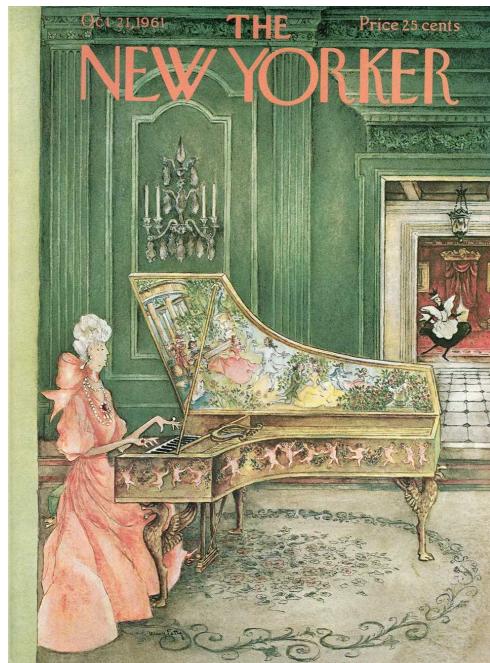
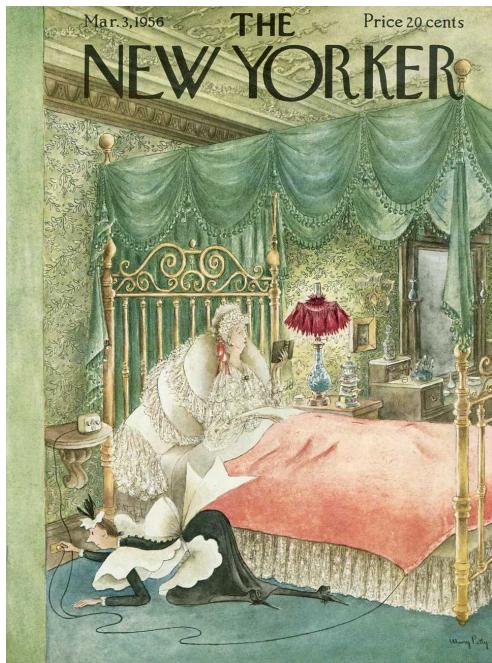


In addition to publishing two hundred and nineteen cartoons, Petty contributed a series of thirty-eight vividly colored, magnificently detailed, and flawlessly composed covers, which, at least in this New Yorker cover artist’s opinion, have never been surpassed in their complexity, their richness, and, most of all, their humanity. The *Times* described them, in Petty’s obituary, as “drawings of bloodless patricians frozen in the prewar world of croquet.” They’re much more. Petty’s cartoons are undeniably funny, couched in a dourness that I imagine had some effect on the young Edward Gorey. But her covers opened this world further; they’re brilliant watercolors of exquisite construction, set pieces with the charm and detail of a doll’s house. For Petty, the gag was just an excuse to get in the door. Her eye was extraordinary, conjuring an Edwardian era through its tiniest features: the brocaded wallpaper, the finely tiled kitchen floors, the thin brass faucets, the plush upholstery.

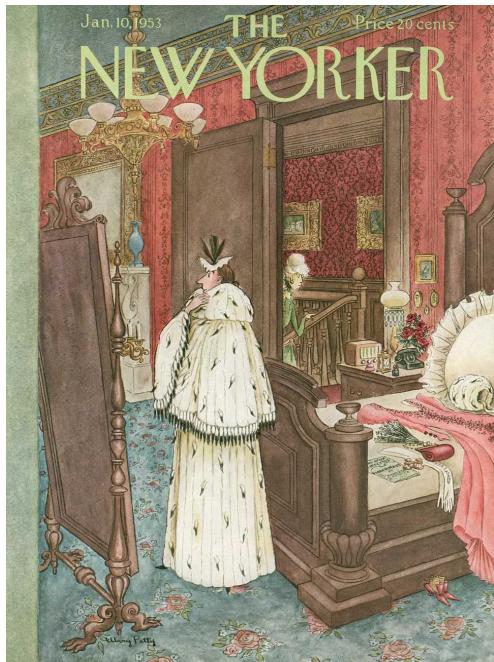


James Thurber, in an introduction to "This Petty Pace" (1945), the sole published collection of the artist's work, describes the young Petty as a "slip of a girl." Like her husband, she initially preferred to mail in her submissions, but by the nineteen-forties she had become a "common sight" at the magazine's office, "sitting, cool and almost undismayed, on the edge of a chair." Thurber reports that she would spend three weeks on a drawing; when she was done, she would say that she hated it and herself. "Everybody else, of course, loves it and her," Thurber adds, observing that what Petty

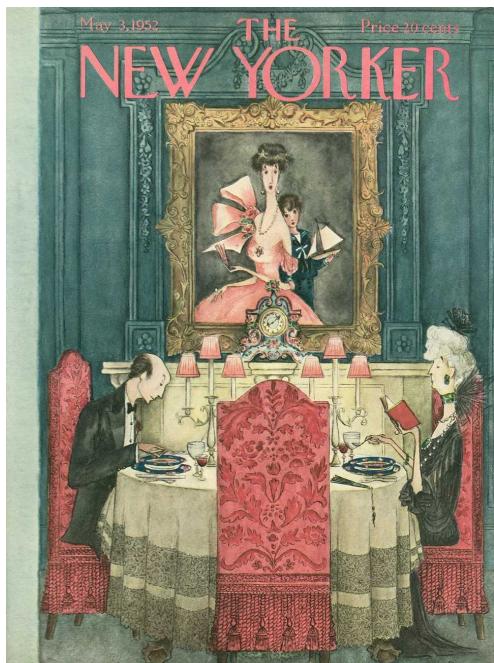
offered in her work was “not a trick, but a magic. . . . She catches time in a foreshortened crouch that intensifies her satirical effects.”

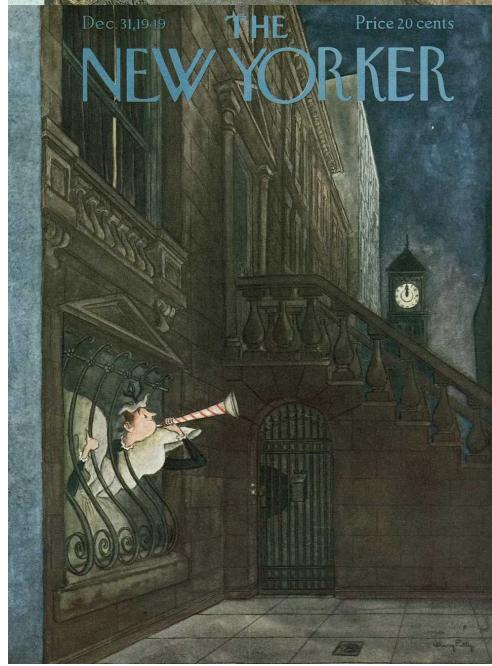
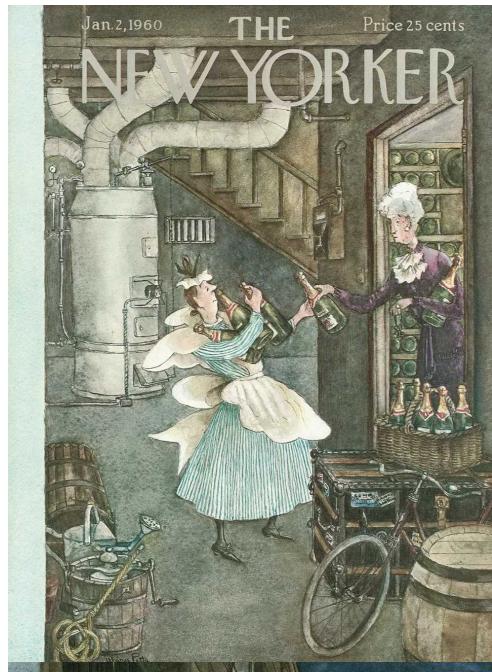
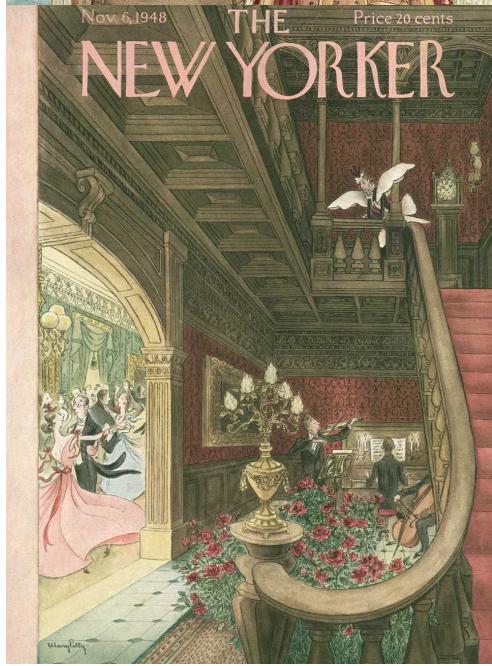


Petty’s covers are defined by specific people—indeed, by a specific family, the Peabodys, who are recognizable by their faces and their moneyed social position, as well as by a peculiar loneliness. The family most often appears ensconced in a large brownstone, and they’re led by the elderly dowager Mrs. Peabody, who clings to her wealth as modernity and irrelevance creep through the walls.



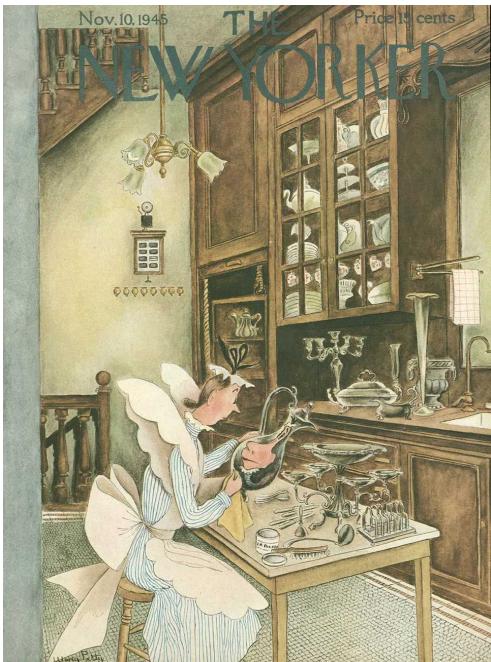
At least, that's what seems to be going on. On closer inspection, one finds deeper wounds than a mere loss of status. In one cover, Mrs. Peabody sits at her opulent dining table, demurely holding a book and ignoring her bald, middle-aged dinner partner; only after you notice the painting on the wall, of a boy with his mother, do you realize that her companion is her son. (And then you notice the empty chair between them.)







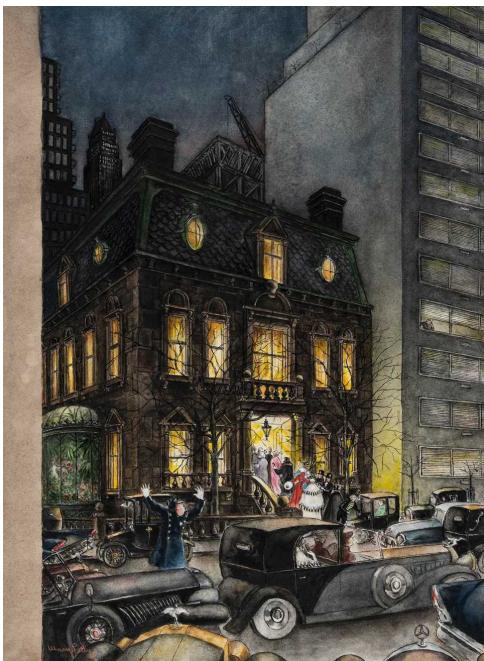
Mrs. Peabody's foil in the series is Fay, a servant girl who looks after her increasingly isolated matron, and whose own life seems to pass by just as invisibly. In 1948, Fay stands at the top of a shadowed staircase, listening to musicians play at a ball below. On December 31, 1949, she blows a toy trumpet through the burglar bars of a ground-floor window. In perhaps Petty's most existential cover, Fay, while polishing a silver pitcher, is stopped by the fun-house reflection of her face. One looks for something to laugh at, but the longer one looks, the less funny it gets.



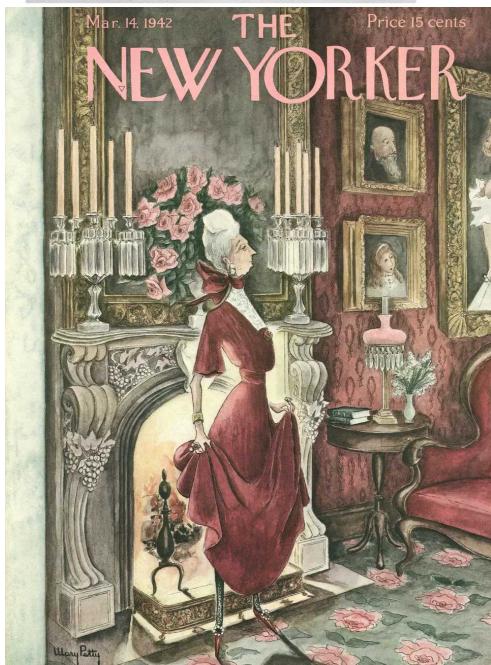
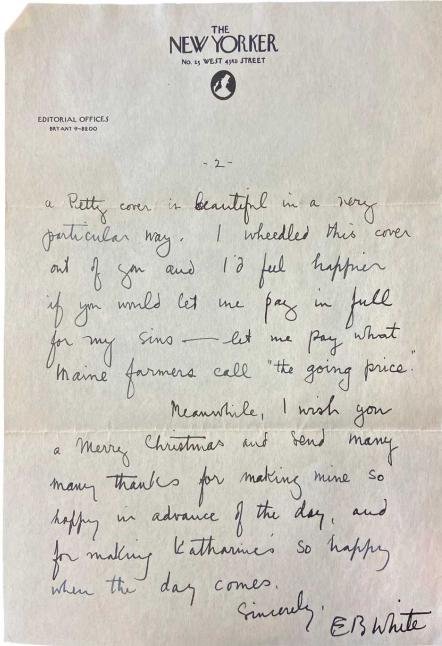
As time goes on, Petty gently reveals a delicate rapport. Fay, no longer invisible, plays cards with Mrs. Peabody. The pair bring out a reserve of champagne at New Year's. And then Mrs. Peabody, who looks more ghostly than ever, pulls her bell cord to summon Fay—but its aged, rotted cloth rips in her hands, and her pearls appear scattered on the floor.



This cover, published in 1966, was Petty's last for the magazine; she quit after two others were rejected. Dunn later wrote that Petty "ignored all comment, fought off all publicity and went her own headstrong way, drawing never to please critics or get ahead, but solely from the love of her subject matter. Her greatest mistake was to abandon her career after a tiff with *The New Yorker*."



The couple continued to live at 12 East Eighty-eighth, with Dunn contributing to the magazine until his death, in 1974. Petty met a more tragic end. In early December, 1971, she disappeared, and was found by Dunn in a hospital, having been badly beaten in a violent assault. Permanently brain-damaged, she lived the remainder of her life in a nursing home, dying five years after the attack, alone. ♦



## Takes

- [Nathan Heller on E. B. White's Paragraph About the Moon Landing](#)
- [Rachel Cusk on Muriel Spark's "The House of the Famous Poet"](#)

## Takes

# Nathan Heller on E. B. White's Paragraph About the Moon Landing

**By Nathan Heller**

August 24, 2025



*The New Yorker* was in its infancy when it discovered Elwyn Brooks White, who made his first contribution in 1925, the year of the magazine's founding. By the following spring, he was writing everything from cartoon captions to editorials, all of which would help establish its manner and voice. *The New Yorker*'s founding editor, Harold Ross, regarded The Talk of the Town as the keystone of each issue, and sent as much of it as possible through White's typewriter. Yet for all of White's ubiquity—he contributed reporting, essays, humor, fiction, verse, criticism, and even copy for subscription advertisements—he despaired, as he turned thirty, and then forty, of leaving only magazine clippings behind.

White published his first major work, "Stuart Little," no less significant for being a children's novel, when he was forty-six. By that time, he had come to be prized at *The New Yorker* as a "paragrapher," a writer of short

commentary. With perfect paragraphs set one after another like flagstones in the high grass, White knew, you could lead a reader anywhere. Ross knew it, too, and for decades White's paragraphs, unsigned as Notes and Comment, opened the magazine.

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## The Culture Industry: A Centenary Issue

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On Wednesday, July 16, 1969, the Apollo 11 mission departed for the moon, powered by a Saturn V rocket and years of government investment in science and education (a pretty thought today). At around 11 P.M. Eastern Time that Sunday, Neil Armstrong took his small step. *The New Yorker* had dispatched Talk reporters to various quarters to watch people watch the landing on TV, but writing a lead piece fell to White. What could measure up to the occasion? His idea was both simple and audacious: a single perfect paragraph.

White, who had turned seventy that month, sat down at his typewriter. After two World Wars and the start of the nuclear age, he had become a champion of what he called world government—eventually the United Nations. In his first, chaotic draft, he focussed on the sour nationalism represented by the planting of “the artificially stiffened American flag,” and imagined its

replacement by a white banner. By the second draft, the banner had become a handkerchief, “symbol of the common cold.” White worked over the paragraph a third time, and telegraphed it to the magazine.

He seems, almost immediately, to have had misgivings. Back at the typewriter, he started fresh: “The moon is a great place for men, and when Armstrong and Aldrin danced from sheer exuberance, it was a sight to see.” What followed—his fourth draft—was as messy as his first. He kept working. An explicit point he had been making (“This was the last scene in the long book of nationalism”) vanished—in recognition, I think, that the grim history of nationalist conquest was there already in the images of wind and sea and flags. Struck by a new thought, he added, at the top, “two happy children,” giving the paragraph a quiet, moving inner arc of human time—from childhood to lovers and the infirmity of the last phrase.

By his sixth draft, White was making small, startling refinements: changing “couldn’t have foresworn the little” to “did not foreswear the familiar,” adding an “and” in “every great river, every great sea.” With these adjustments, the paragraph fell into focus: it sounded, all at once, like the mind and soul of E. B. White. According to the biographer Scott Elledge, White sent another telegram to Ross’s successor, William Shawn. “My comment is no good as is,” it said. “I have written a shorter one on the same theme but different in tone.” When White read his paragraph over the telephone, Shawn transcribed it himself, down to the comma, and it opened the magazine that week.

I have read countless paragraphs about the moon landing—hundreds, I’d guess. White’s is the only one I can recall. It does not read like something written by a gray-haired man born in the eighteen-hundreds. It reads like a piece that could have run last week. If part of *The New Yorker’s* special endeavor is to report the present so that it continues to seem alive much later, White still guides that effort. But he also inspires a long line of the magazine’s writers who dared to mark the difference between writing that was perfectly great—eminently publishable—and the stuff that lasts. “I hope you find that bird,” goes the rending last line of dialogue in “Stuart Little.” At seventy, returning to his typewriter to get it right on the final try, White did. ♦

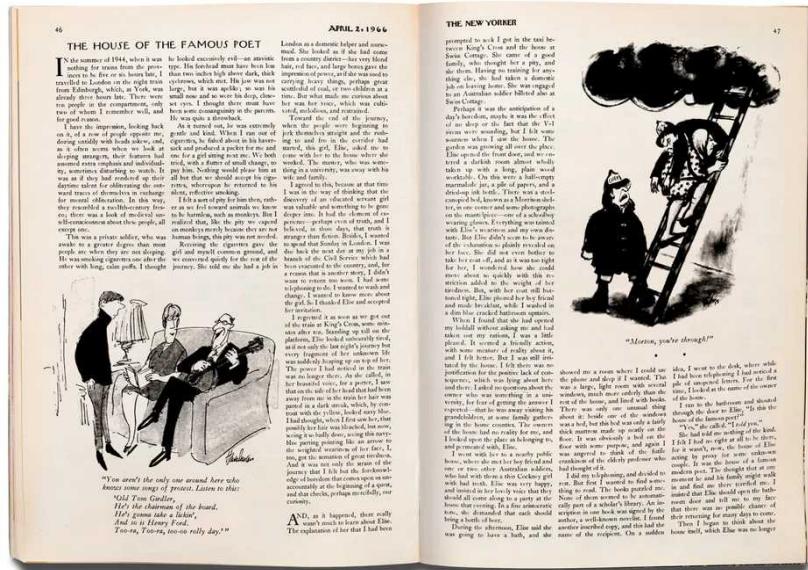
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[Read the original story.](#)

# Rachel Cusk on Muriel Spark's "The House of the Famous Poet"

By Rachel Cusk

August 24, 2025



I never felt the influence of Muriel Spark, despite the fact that she was a substantial female figure in British literature. It's a pity, because there was much to learn from her macabre, entirely unsentimental art and its account of the strange violence of living. It was only quite recently, when I came across a new volume of her collected letters (meticulously edited by Dan Gunn), that I first felt confronted by her persona. The letters invited an investigation into both the life and the work.

"The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie" (1961) was Spark's best-known novel, and was also the basis for a very successful film starring Maggie Smith. It was this film, perhaps, that cheapened Spark's influence in my eyes when I was a young writer: the film was popular and funny, qualities it is difficult to associate with this writer at her savagely satirical best. The letters show that she was greatly inflated by the success of "Miss Jean Brodie," and the

material and cultural power it signified. She came from a disordered and working-class Scottish background and was the single parent of a child whose mentally ill father continually harassed her. Her life was a perennial effort to secure money and recognition in a literary scene dominated by educated male snobs. As is often the case, the tireless instinct of creativity generally thwarted this effort. But with “Miss Jean Brodie” Spark managed to please more conventionally.

Read Rachel Cusk’s new story “[Project](#).”

The story “[The House of the Famous Poet](#),” which was published in *The New Yorker* five years after “[Miss Jean Brodie](#),” has many of the hallmarks of Spark’s best writing. Her natural and melodious style, so swift and unpretentious, bears death and danger on its wings. The story begins in an autobiographical tone, with the narrator on a train from Edinburgh to London, in 1944. The feeling of an elemental unsafety that is somehow joyously—or at least spiritedly—borne is established straight away in the description of a soldier in the train carriage who looks “excessively evil” but turns out to be “extremely gentle and kind.” Spark did write autobiography, but the autobiographical tone is relatively rare in her fiction. Usually, she liked to hold her fictional world and the people in it at a greater distance, so that she could inflict violence on them. In this story, the violence is already all around: it is toward the end of the Second World War, and the world is in smoke and ruins. The people in the train carriage—along with the narrator—are living in the threadbare moment.

I took several things from the story: the atomizing nature of catastrophe, which yet grants a peculiar clarity of perception; the electric influence of fame; the haphazard quality of experience, which militates against narrative; and the unstructured possibilities of female association. The story culminates in the idea of an “abstract funeral”: I was intrigued and moved by this but couldn’t find a way of answering it in my own story, “[Project](#). ” I did, however, take two lines from the opening of “The House of the Famous Poet” and put them largely unaltered into my story—a genuflection to the master.

Muriel Spark never forgot the presence and the moral problem of evil. It can be uncomfortable to read her, because, while she certainly offers no refuge

in narrative, she offers little in art either. There is no zone of privilege in her work—absolutely anything can happen at any time. She assumes very little, takes little for granted, and so the visual or perceptual plane of her writing is unusually heightened. In another writer, this might bespeak a form of marginality, the person who observes because she is fundamentally powerless. In Spark, the effect is hallucinatory, resulting in a type of hyperreality that, to me, constitutes an interesting representation of the intellectual experience of femininity. The female alone, unconsoled by the myth of her cultural safety, equally unconcerned with the question of her actual vulnerability, is a constant figure in Spark's fiction. She is a kind of lightning rod, attracting the world's terror and fire and conducting its truth, rather than resisting or shaping it.

I'm not sure who the famous poet was, though I suppose I could find out. ♦

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[Read the original story.](#)

# Fiction

- [Project](#)

Fiction

# Project

By Rachel Cusk

August 24, 2025



A little while ago, I told the actor M that I was thinking of writing her autobiography. She liked the idea. She's a good sport. Would you just make it up? she said.

We had met in a bookstore. She was interested in books. In addition to being a film star, she was the model for a popular brand of face cream, and her image looked out everywhere, from shop windows and hoardings and the rain-streaked Perspex of bus shelters. In the photograph, she appeared very young and happy. Her smile had a sweetness that almost seemed to reproach those who looked at it for their dim and suspicious view of life.

[The author on the \*New Yorker\* story that inspired her story.](#)

She lived in a large house on the other side of the river. In person, she was very small, and the house was like a big doll's house, with her as the doll inside it.

We knew a couple of people in common. One of them told me a funny story about a dinner they'd attended at a restaurant, where M's bodyguard had insisted that she change places with another film star, who was older and less famous, because he was worried that M's position at the table exposed her to danger.

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**The Culture Industry: A Centenary Issue**  
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It was hard not to feel ugly next to M. Part of it was the ugliness of experience. I had never learned how to make experience easier for myself. For M it was the reverse. Her difficulty lay in her distance from the random violence of insignificance. Personally, I felt saturated with that violence. All my life it had been made clear to me how unimportant I was. M and I both secretly felt that it was the ways in which we had been damaged that had given us our power.

It was autumn, and the city became inexorably colder and wetter and grayer. In the face-cream advertisement, M remained wreathed in the pink flowers of spring.

On sunny mornings, people ran beside the river, men and women running past like gods in the sun, tall with dazzled eyes and windswept hair. Other men and women lived in tents beneath the stone bridges and brushed their teeth in the water fountains. Sometimes their shoes could be seen, placed neatly side by side outside the tent's zipped entrance.

Beside one of the bridges, in the shelter of a high wall, was an outdoor café that was warm in the sun even on the coldest days. People sat there reading or looking at their phones. I was reading a book by a woman who had been sexually abused by her stepfather throughout her childhood. A lot of people knew about this book. It had come into the world and been seized upon and swallowed down, like a draft of something for which people were thirsty. The reason was the unusual tone of the writer's voice, as she testified to things that by rights should have erased her. This tone was neither personal nor impersonal, it possessed a deep and unmistakable authority, the authority of an object. It was as if some household item—a chair, for instance—had suddenly gained the power to speak. The writer did not feel in any way sorry for herself, and this made her unbreakable. It's possible that the success of her book was some kind of compensation or reward for the things that had happened to her, but it seemed unlikely. If she was unbreakable, success could have no more power over her than misfortune.

M had told me that starring in a film as a child had immediately brought her childhood to an end. The writer was saying the same thing about the deeds of her stepfather. Not being seen was perhaps equivalent to being seen by everybody. M said that the script of her first film had originally included several scenes in which the child was shown wanting or inviting sexual interaction with the central male character. This need for the child to express volition in the fulfillment of male desires was mentioned in the book, too. The stepfather was always claiming that the abuse was not something he was doing to his stepdaughter but something they participated in together.

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M's mother had objected to those dubious scenes, so they were cut from the script. In the book about the stepfather, the big problem was that the mother didn't notice what was going on. She didn't notice acts of extraordinary

shamelessness and depravity that were happening for years in her own house. The father, a harmless character who came to visit the children at weekends, didn't notice either. The writer of the book remembers, as a child, being conscious of the fact that by saying only a few words she could entirely destroy her family. She did not say those words. Why not? It was no more possible for her to say those words than it would have been for a chair. Yet afterward people were always asking her why she hadn't said something.

To have childhood brought to an end is perhaps also to be placed outside of time. The writer of the book about the stepfather described how other people continued to live in time while she herself was preserved in incidents that perennially recurred, that were eternally still happening to her no matter how old she got. A film is also always happening; its origins in time have been frozen through the process of recording. M could always be found in her films, living the same instants over and over. The stepfather had recorded himself on the writer of the book.

M said that when her first film came out the children at school bullied her. They called her a slut. She decided to study and work hard; she decided to be smart, which was the opposite of being a slut. That she had the capacity to decide was one result of her childhood having ended. It had become obvious to her that reality could be engineered. Everyone else believed in reality: it was as if they, not she, were in a film, a film she was watching. The writer of the book about the stepfather also began to work assiduously at school, getting top grades in every subject. Later, at his trial, the stepfather used this as evidence that no real harm had been done to her and claimed that his actions may even have contributed to her success.

There was a small boules court adjacent to the café beside the bridge, and the café's proprietor rented out sets of the heavy little balls to her customers. She was frequently to be seen playing there herself, with the three men in her employ, whom she dominated and mesmerized like a matriarch. She was a short, sturdy woman with a broad masculine face. Her voice was loud and hoarse, calling out comments or exhortations concerning the game. Whenever she spoke, the three men would instantly look up like guilty dogs. When it rained there were no runners and the café was shuttered up beside the empty boules court. The tents under the bridges stayed the same.

My partner had to go into hospital: there was something wrong, but no one could work out what it was. The doctors kept telling us to prepare ourselves for bad news but instead there was no particular news. The hospital was on the other side of the city, and it was a long walk each day at visiting hours. The route passed through different areas whose different atmospheres came and went, prosperous stretches giving way to rougher ones and then becoming prosperous again, like a perpetual argument or a struggle for victory. There were always tests and procedures that needed to be done. The doctors had put a three-way valve into the back of my partner's hand so that they could take blood whenever they wanted. When they needed to do a procedure they wheeled the whole bed with my partner in it out of the room and down the corridor to somewhere else. I stayed in the empty room, waiting on a plastic chair beside the window. The removal and return of the bierlike bed was like a rehearsal for absence.

The walk to the hospital went past an old cinema that was always half empty. You could just buy a ticket at the door and sit down. I didn't go to the cinema or watch films very often, though my partner always wanted to. I was suspicious of the power of distraction that films possessed. Their total sensory invasion was overwhelming. It could sometimes take days to recover from seeing a film. It was as though, by watching the film, you acquired a set of memories that were not your own. For a while, everything looked different, as if the film were still happening outside in the world. Even in the best films, things were made to seem more possible than they actually were, especially cruelty. The possibility of cruelty was nearly always present in films. It was as if, in films, people could do whatever they wanted and were simply choosing not to for now. It was as if there were no law.

At the hospital it was possible to watch films on a laptop in bed, at any time of day or night. Apparently it was hard to sleep in that neon-lit building, where machines beeped unceasingly and the doctors and nurses came in every few hours to do their checks. My partner complained about the constant interruptions. Yet it also seemed desirable to be constantly interrupted, to have the responsibility for oneself taken away. When visiting hours ended, the feeling of relief I felt at leaving the hospital gradually became a feeling of fear. It was a fear of freedom. Being able to do what I wanted made me afraid that I had never done what I wanted. The things I

wanted to do, such as leave the hospital at the end of visiting hours, did not make sense. The next day, I was as impatient to return to the hospital as I had been to leave it.

One day, passing the old cinema on the way home, I noticed that a film was about to start and I went in. The film was about the end of childhood. It concerned a boy who is incriminated by his own innocence and honesty in his dealings with authority. He is an ordinary boy, no better or worse than other boys, except for this honesty which marks him out and enrages his parents, his teachers, society itself. The authorities try to contain and destroy his honesty, and, each time that they fail, authority itself is made to look more and more senseless, which enrages the authorities even more. The boy's school punishes him, his parents wash their hands of him, and in the end he is sent to a remedial institution, although in fact he has done nothing wrong. He runs away from this place, runs and runs without knowing where he is running to. The camera follows him running, through woods and along paths until he reaches the sea. He has never seen the sea before. He runs into the water and then realizes that he cannot run across it. He stops and he turns around and looks back.

Watching a film was a means of surrendering control over what could not, in any case, be controlled. When it ended, my obligation to reality seemed to have diminished. But perhaps the consequence was that some deeper servitude had been inflicted elsewhere. Life was easier if you watched films, just as life was easier if you flew in airplanes. The same problems of time and space that arose when you flew somewhere, rather than travelling by land and sea, seemed to apply also to films. The reduction of the element of time relative to that of space created a moral imbalance that was also a liberating convenience. Reading books did not make life easier in the same way. It took time to read a book. Watching a film temporarily broke the power of time. This was one reason it had felt right not to watch too many of them, though most other people didn't seem to see it that way. There was so much in the world already, so many problems that needed to be solved, without complicating things by reenacting what had already happened or was happening somewhere right now or might never happen. A film went to great effort to reconstruct material events—a war, for instance—while subverting the rule of time. The film, and thus the war, took a couple of

hours. The time it took to make the film might, in some cases, have been the same as the time it took to fight the war.

Outside the cinema, day had become night. The street lights had come on.

Wherever M goes, people recognize her. Everyone knows who she is, except me. When I met her I had no idea who she was.

One day she invited me to have coffee in the garden of a hotel near her house. It was a wealthy part of the city and the hotel was very luxurious. There were men in peaked caps at the entrance waiting to greet the guests as they emerged from their limousines. The morning was brilliantly sunny. The raw gold light fell in sharp angles across the entrance and flashed on the windows of the cars. Inside, the man at the desk told me that the garden was closed for winter. He pointed toward a big glass door barred by a heavy iron grille to prove it. Beyond the iron bars, some ornamental trees and a small expanse of lawn could be seen. I went outside again and stood in the slashing light on the steps beside the men in peaked caps. After a while M came running up the road, apologetic and out of breath. We went back into the hotel together. She asked the man at the desk whether we could sit in the garden and he was instantly obliging; he summoned a flock of smiling uniformed staff to unlock the iron grille and open the big glass door and remove the winter covers from the garden furniture. M was sweet and polite and grateful as they did all this. The waiters brought out coffee and a platter of exotic fruits and some blankets in case we felt cold.

This was how people and things behaved around her. Reality became malleable, was always giving way and changing its rules. In a sense it was the same lawlessness as that of films, as though M were always in a film, even when she wasn't. It seemed like the greatest good fortune, to have been removed from reality and its rules in this way.

Sitting in the garden, M said that she did not consider herself to be an artist. She saw herself as merely an element in the creations of others. She did not possess the fundamental power of choice that a creator has. She had acquired some of that power later, through fame. She was using it not to create but to try to make her life seem more normal. As often as she could she took her children to school and walked her dogs and met up with her

friends in a normal way. It was as if, having been removed from reality, she had made it her life's goal to find it again. She had been spared the shame and stress of creativity at its intersection with reality. It might be said that creative people were people whose childhoods hadn't ended. There was no particular basis for thinking this, other than the fact that most children created things and most adults didn't. In a way it was terrible, the idea that childhood might not end. Being a creator was like being a dog that keeps running away from its violent master. For a while it runs free, it runs and runs in search of something, but in the end there is nowhere else for it to go but back home.

It was cold in the garden, despite the sun. My coat was too thin.

An operation had been scheduled for my partner. The night before, I went to see a film about a doctor in a run-down neighborhood who is trying to educate the residents about the risks to their health that their way of life entails. They drink and take drugs, they bathe in contaminated water, tuberculosis is rampant, there is gang violence. They don't listen to the doctor—in fact, they even make fun of him. The doctor himself is an alcoholic. His self-abuse is the product of despair, whereas the community behaves as it does out of ignorance.

The operation was to take place in the afternoon, during visiting hours, and for the first time since my partner had been in hospital I was late. Each day before that, I had arrived exactly when visiting hours began, even though there was no particular urgency that required me to be there and nothing to do other than keep my partner company. I would get into the wheeled bed and sometimes I would fall asleep, so that often when the nurses came in their voices woke me up. They were always very nice. They thought it was funny. I brought things for my partner to eat, because apparently the hospital food was disgusting. Yet whenever I saw that food I secretly thought that I would have been happy to eat it. The institutional-looking shapes and colors on the plastic tray were comforting. My partner's refusal to be comforted by this institutional food struck me sometimes as pointlessly obstructive and at other times as a sign of self-respect. Was it evidence of courage or of weakness to reject the hospital food?

The room was on the second floor, and from the windows the tops of people's heads could be seen below as they walked across the car park. Raw young trees stood in concrete planters between the parking spaces and the wind was often whirling through their naked branches. The windows were very thick and sealed and no noise came through them. The action of the wind in the tossing forms of the trees was like an attempt at description or communication across this silence. Each day, when visiting hours were over, I had gone down in the lift and walked out into what had been visible moments earlier from the windows of my partner's room. The sudden addition of sensation to the mute scene, of sound and cold and the feeling of wind or rain, was part of a transition that could never be grasped, no matter how many times it happened. All I knew was that in that moment of leaving the hospital I was safe from something that was of the greatest significance to me. Walking out through the doors I was temporarily safe from my own love and need for another person.

When I arrived this time, the door to my partner's room stood wide open. The wheeled bed was gone, and the room was empty except for the plastic chair beside the window. I sat down in the plastic chair in the empty room and waited. The reality of the hospital felt unreliable. It was very big and efficient, but it had come from nowhere, it was not underpinned by a system of memory. This absence of memory seemed to promise either an ultimate transformation or an ultimate loss. It was as if only the power of memory would cause my partner to return.

I had a message from M, wishing my partner well. She asked whether there was anything she could do to help. Part of M's freedom was her freedom to choose how to be. Of all the things she could have chosen, she had selected goodness. M had told me that she didn't see a therapist. She took advice from her accountant. Her accountant was very down-to-earth. She looked at M's problems from a practical point of view. Oh, grow up, the accountant sometimes said to her.

I occasionally thought of M's parents as having sold her, though it probably wasn't like that. The writer of the book about the stepfather also seemed to have been offered up and given to the world. The ending of childhood was not just a premature exposure to reality, it was a forsaking of the possibility of return. There was nowhere to go back to, no dream country where the

original self might one day be found. Instead one was woken into an eternal godlike vigilance, as though the experience of objectification had in the end borne the fruit of objectivity. M knew that it was pointless to think about the past or the future, to feel self-pity, to believe in a story of life. She knew that people shouldn't try to fix or solve their characters: this was how others got power over them. Instead, they should act the part of themselves.

My partner was weak after the operation. We decided to go to the coast for a few days. Through the windows of the train, the steel-gray clouds were low and full, but better things were forecast. Most of the other passengers were asleep. In sleep their features had assumed extra emphasis and individuality, sometimes disturbing to watch. It was as if they had surrendered their daytime talent for obliterating the outward traces of themselves in exchange for mental obliteration. There seemed, at that moment, to be nothing in the world more desirable than to be an actor.

We live in the same city but millions of other people live here, too. In the morning, at dawn, a full bright moon still hangs in the pale sky, suspended among the power lines. The passage of the street cleaners begins as the sun rises. The city is wet and shining. A woman is propped up in a doorway in a sleeping bag, looking at her phone. An old man squats in the brilliant light and defecates onto a square of newspaper he has laid out neatly for the purpose. Everywhere people are running or walking or cycling. We do not know where they have come from or where they are going. We, too, run or walk, taking exercise, walking our dogs.

We do not belong in this city but we have chosen to live here. This is true of other people, too. We have all decided to live somewhere we don't belong. The people who do belong here may wonder why we made that choice. We have been freer to choose than most people are. But is the truth, in fact, that we don't really belong anywhere?

The city is beautiful—that's one reason we chose to live here. At other times in our lives we lived where we had to, where circumstances or other people required us to live. For a long time, before we came here, we lived somewhere that seemed to be permanent. When we left that place, it felt like an opportunity to leave certain aspects of our own history behind. We

realized that we could play a role in creating ourselves, rather than simply being created, as we had been before.

The city is beautiful. It is a masterpiece of civilization. At some point in the modern era, a big ugly tower was built here, the only one of its kind. The city is quite compact and this tower can be seen from everywhere. It is much taller than most of the other buildings. It is brutal in its ugliness. There is a joke that the only really good view of the city is from the windows of this building, because only from there can you not see it. The inexorability and power of ugliness are demonstrated by the fact that wherever in the city you are, even in the most unlikely places, the building is nearly always visible. The same instinct that created the city's beauty also created this tower, except in reverse.

There are mad people here, angry people, people who shout and rail in the streets. There are men who walk around in rags, their genitalia showing. There are women who shout and shout at the empty air. Because the city is so beautiful, the unhappiness of these people is more noticeable. No one helps them or does anything about them. We have lived in places that were uglier but more compassionate. The cafés and restaurants here are bustling and full, the cultural venues are sold out, the parks and museums and landmarks bask in the winter sun, thronged with people. They will not allow their lives to be ruined by these unfortunate others. They pretend not to see them, or perhaps they actually don't see them, in the way that a fiction writer chooses deliberately or otherwise not to see what will threaten the fiction's representation of the world. We, however, see them. Like the ugly tower, we see everything from where we are, except ourselves.

Fame is perhaps this tower, an ultimate entrapment in the self that is also a deliverance from it.

We walk our dogs, we take our children to school, we work on our projects. Despite the regularity of these activities, each day, at its beginning, is completely unknown to us. This is because, in a sense, we are free. Our childhood, our parents, our native land, even the years we've lived are all either dead or far away from us. For other people, this situation might be a tragedy. But in all these same periods and places we have recorded things. These recordings function like a kind of filter or sieve, retaining one part of

us while the rest is allowed to drain away. Our recordings are our memories, our histories. The people who know us, our friends, understand this about us. They understand that we don't have the same relationship to our lives or the lives of others as they do. They understand that if something goes wrong—if there is any kind of personal emergency—it is to some degree a public emergency also. It is a crisis of form, reality recording itself on us rather than the other way around.

Being able to create ourselves has felt like the greatest, the final privilege. For years we have created our recordings, we have driven and sometimes abused ourselves so as to create them. We have risked health and happiness, order, security. Other people have cared about and preserved those things—happiness, security—in their own lives. They haven't taken the risks we have taken, which often weren't even risks but coldhearted decisions to put our projects ahead of all other considerations. But now that we've decided to create ourselves, now that we have the leisure and the capacity to consider our own health and happiness, we can take a different attitude to these risks. We can refuse to do certain things, or decide to do them differently. Each day is completely unknown to us, just as our recordings were unknown before we made them. When we made our recordings a spirit possessed us, a set of instincts that were as precise and exacting as scientific laws. We understood this science almost unconsciously, we subjected ourselves to its rigor, and when we were finished we felt empty and exhausted, as though after a night of passion or nightmares or sleepwalking. It was as if we had deserted our own conscious minds, and the return to consciousness afterward was often painful and strange. It has proved slightly difficult to bring this mechanism to the creation of ourselves. Often we don't know what to do, how to occupy ourselves. Then at other times we're very busy and the idea of creating ourselves seems less important. But suddenly we find it is there, the question: Who are we? Yet everyone else seems to know who we are.

When our children were little we would dress them. They would hold up their arms as we pulled an item of clothing over their head. They would shoot their arms straight up in the air. The arms would go into the sleeves and for a moment their head and face were muffled in the garment. We would wiggle and pull and then their head would appear again through the neckhole. Their cheeks would be red, their hair slightly unruly, they would

be laughing. They always found it funny, this moment when their head was inside the garment. They thought they had disappeared and then come back again, like a magic trick. They held up their arms trustingly, waiting to be made to disappear. We feel there is no one in the whole world we could trust like that, no one who could dress us, no one who could make us disappear. ♦

# The Critics

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A Critic at Large

# How Music Criticism Lost Its Edge

Music writers were once known for being much crankier than the average listener. What happened?

By Kelefa Sanneh

August 25, 2025



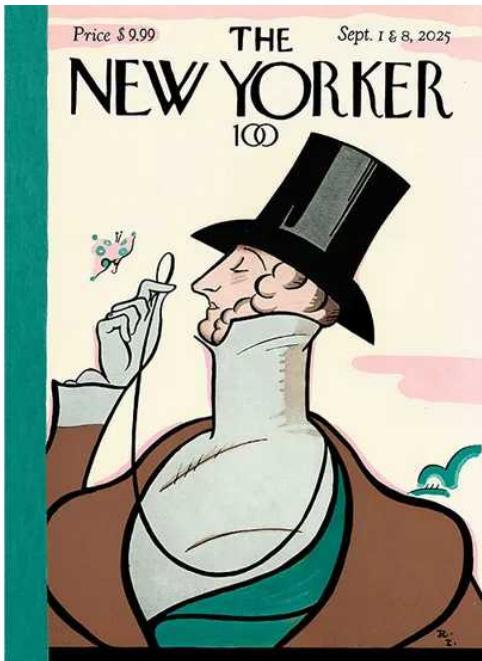
When I was growing up, a critic was a jerk, a crank, a spoilsport. I figured that was the whole idea. My favorite characters on “The Muppet Show” were Statler and Waldorf, the two geezers who sat in an opera box, delivering instant reviews of the action onstage. (One logically unassailable judgment, from Statler: “I wouldn’t mind this show if they just got rid of one thing . . . me!”) On television, the film critics Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert structured their show so that at any time at least one of them was likely to be exasperated, possibly with the other one. On MTV, the rock critic Kurt Loder was a deliciously subversive presence, giving brief news reports with an intonation that conveyed deadpan contempt for many of the music videos the network played. And the first music review I remember reading was in *Rolling Stone*, which rated albums on a scale of one to five stars, or so I thought. In 1990, the début solo album by Andrew Ridgeley, who had sung

alongside George Michael in the pop duo Wham!, was awarded only half a star. The severity and precision of the rating seemed hilarious to me, though probably not to Ridgeley, who never released another record.

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There is something a bit funny, at any rate, about pop-music criticism, which purports to offer serious analysis of a form that is often considered (by *other* people, who are also, in a sense, critics) rather silly. In 1969, Robert Christgau, the self-proclaimed Dean of American Rock Critics, began writing a *Village Voice* column called “Consumer Guide,” in which he assigned letter grades to new albums. He took pleasure in irritating the kinds of rock-loving hipsters who “considered consumption counterrevolutionary and didn’t like grades either.” He described the music of Donny Hathaway as “supper-club melodrama and homogenized jazz” (self-titled album, 1971: D-), and referred to George Harrison as a “hoarse dork” (“Dark Horse,” 1974: C-). In 1970, in *Rolling Stone*, Greil Marcus, another pioneering rock critic, began his review of Bob Dylan’s “Self Portrait” by asking, “What is this shit?” One of the era’s best-known critics, Lester Bangs, specialized in passionate hyperbole. In a 1972 review of the Southern-rock band Black

Oak Arkansas, for the magazine *Creem*, Bangs called the singer a “wimp” and suggested (“half jokingly”) that he ought to be assassinated—only to decide, after more thought, that he quite liked the music. “There is a point,” he wrote, “where some things can become so obnoxious that they stop being mere dreck and become interesting, even enjoyable, and *maybe totally because they are so obnoxious*.” Something similar could have been said about Bangs and the other early critics of what was commonly referred to as “popular music”—a usefully broad term, although sometimes not broad enough. In 1970, Christgau ruefully conceded that some of his favorite groups, like the country-rock act the Flying Burrito Brothers or the proto-punk band the Stooges, might more accurately be said to make “semipopular music.”

Over the years, “critically acclaimed” came to function as a euphemism for music that was semipopular, or maybe just unpopular. This magazine’s first rock critic was Ellen Willis, who in 1969 wrote presciently about the way that rock and roll was being “co-opted by high culture”: fans, as well as critics, were trying to separate the “serious” stuff from the “merely commercial.” One of her successors was the English novelist Nick Hornby, who eventually grew curious about the chasm that separated the records he loved from the records everyone else loved. In August, 2001, he published a funny and audacious essay titled “Pop Quiz,” in which he listened to the ten most popular albums in America and relayed his thoughts, some of which would not have sounded out of place coming from an opera box in the Muppets’ theatre. He didn’t mind Alicia Keys but was bored by Destiny’s Child and depressed by albums from Sean Combs (then known as P. Diddy) and Staind, a neo-grunge band. One need not hate this music to enjoy Hornby’s acerbic survey of it: whenever I think of Blink-182’s pop-punk landmark “Take Off Your Pants and Jacket,” which is often, I think of Hornby wondering just how everything had got so stupid. “My copy of the album came with four exclusive bonus tracks, one of which is called ‘Fuck a Dog,’ but maybe I was just lucky,” he wrote. In a sense, he *was* lucky: back in 2001, fans who wanted to hear “Fuck a Dog,” a brief but well-executed acoustic gag, had to seek out one of three color-coded variants of the CD.

A number of other writers were exasperated by Hornby’s exasperation. In an essay in the *Village Voice*, the critic and poet Joshua Clover accused him of suggesting that “pop music is beneath discussion, if not quite beneath

contempt.” It turned out, though, that Hornby’s essay was the beginning of the end of an era. In the years that followed, music writers grew markedly less likely to issue thoroughgoing denunciations of popular music and more likely to say they loved it. In 2018, the social-science blog “Data Colada” looked at Metacritic, a review aggregator, and found that more than four out of five albums released that year had received an average rating of at least seventy points out of a hundred—on the site, albums that score sixty-one or above are colored green, for “good.” Even today, music reviews on Metacritic are almost always green, unlike reviews of films, which are more likely to be yellow, for “mixed/average,” or red, for “bad.” The music site *Pitchfork*, which was once known for its scabrous reviews, hasn’t handed down a perfectly contemptuous score—0.0 out of 10—since 2007 (for “This Is Next,” an inoffensive indie-rock compilation). And, in 2022, decades too late for poor Andrew Ridgeley, *Rolling Stone* abolished its famous five-star system and installed a milder replacement: a pair of merit badges, “Instant Classic” and “Hear This.”

Even if you are not the sort of person who pores over aggregate album ratings, you may have noticed this changed spirit. By the end of the twenty-tens, people who wrote about music for a living mainly agreed that, say, “Hollywood’s Bleeding,” by Post Malone (Metacritic: 79); “Montero,” by Lil Nas X (Metacritic: 85); and “Thank U, Next,” by Ariana Grande (Metacritic: 86), were great, or close to great. Could it really have been the case that *no one* hated them? Even relatively negative reviews tended to be strikingly solicitous. “Solar Power,” the 2021 album by the New Zealand singer Lorde, was so dull that even many of her fans seemed to view it as a disappointment, but it earned a polite three and a half stars from *Rolling Stone*. Some of the most cutting commentary came from Lorde herself, who later suggested that the album was a wrong turn—an attempt to be chill and “wafty” when, in fact, she excels at intensity. “I was just like, actually, I don’t think this is me,” she recalled in a recent interview. And, although there are plenty of people who can’t stand Taylor Swift, none of them seem to be employed as critics, who virtually all agreed that her most recent album, “The Tortured Poets Department,” was pretty good (Metacritic: 76). Once upon a time, music critics were known for being crankier than the average listener. Swift once castigated a writer who’d had the temerity to castigate *her*, singing, “Why you gotta be so mean?” How did music critics become so nice?

When Ryan Schreiber founded *Pitchfork*, in 1996, pointiness was part of the point. Especially when it came to the indie-rock music he loved, he had detected a certain timidity in the American music press, and he figured that the internet was a good place to be more truculent. His decimal-point scores were provocatively precise, calculated to start fights. “I wanted to use the full range of the scale, and to have hot takes, to be daring, to surprise people and catch them off guard,” he told me not long ago. The reviews tended to be long and sometimes impenetrable, but people paid attention to the numbers. A clamorous Texas band called . . . And You Will Know Us by the Trail of Dead earned a perfect ten, and so did Radiohead; the site’s most famous 0.0 review went to an album by the Australian band Jet, accompanied not by a snarky enumeration of the record’s flaws but by a video of a chimpanzee urinating into its own mouth. In 2004, after one of the site’s critics, Amanda Petrusich, panned an album by the alt-country singer-songwriter Ryan Adams (“one-dimensional, vain, and entirely lifeless”: 2.9), Adams asked to be interviewed by her. The conversation that ensued was strikingly friendly, given the circumstances: Petrusich, who is now my colleague at this magazine, amicably but firmly declined to recant her opinion, and Adams concluded that “records don’t really hurt anybody, and neither do reviews.”

At the time, critics in thrall to the sound and ethos of rock and roll—loud guitars, sweaty authenticity—were sometimes accused of “rockism,” a musical prejudice. “I remember being called ‘rockist’ as far back as 2001,” Schreiber told me. In 2004, when I was a pop-music critic at the *Times*, I wrote about rockism, suggesting that critics in search of scruffy rock-and-roll energy might be missing out on the considerable charms of pop, R. & B., country, and other genres that sounded too slick, too commercial. In the years afterward, some people started using the word “poptimism” to describe a more inclusive sensibility that critics might adopt instead. Schreiber says that the debate made him rethink *Pitchfork*’s approach. Throughout the aughts and into the teens, the site expanded its coverage, reviewing more hip-hop and pop music. “I never, ever wanted to cover Taylor Swift,” he told me. “I just thought it was not part of our scope.” This was, of course, a matter of taste: he found her music “extremely bland and uninteresting,” but most of his colleagues disagreed. In 2017, *Pitchfork* changed its policy to permit (and perhaps require) Swift’s albums to be reviewed, starting with “Reputation”: 6.5.

It is surely no coincidence that, as *Pitchfork* became more open-minded, it also became kinder. “I think part of that was because *Pitchfork* was having somewhat of an identity crisis,” Schreiber says now. (He left the site in 2019.) Poptimism intimated that critics should not just take pop music seriously but *celebrate* it—or else. This aligned with the changing imperatives of the media industry: on blogs, you could draw a crowd with a contrary opinion, but on social media you became a ringleader by saying things that your followers could publicly agree with. As the magazine world shrank, much professional reviewing was done not by all-purpose critics like Christgau, who covered just about everything, but by freelancers, who might be assigned reviews based on their affinity for the performer, which created a built-in positive bias. The virtual intimacy of social media slowly erased the distinction between talking about somebody and talking *to* them. In 2020, after *Pitchfork* gave a 6.5 to an album by the pop star Halsey, the singer asked, on Twitter, “can the basement that they run p\*tchfork out of just collapse already.” This wouldn’t have been noteworthy, except that, by then, *Pitchfork* had been purchased by Condé Nast, which also owns this magazine, and had moved into 1 World Trade Center—a building that most people hope will not collapse, despite the fact that a handful of pop critics work there. Some writers who criticized Taylor Swift reported that they and their family members had been threatened, harassed, and doxed. “We started to get a lot fewer pitches for negative reviews, particularly of artists with huge fan bases,” Schreiber recalled. Perhaps the most infamous review of “The Tortured Poets Department” was published in the music magazine *Paste*. It had a cantankerous opening sentence that Lester Bangs might have enjoyed (“Sylvia Plath did not stick her head in an oven for this!”), but no byline; the magazine said that it wanted to shield the writer from potential “threats of violence.” For similar reasons, the Canadian publication *Exclaim!* declined to identify the author of certain articles about Nicki Minaj, whose fans can be ferocious. Often, I suspect, writers have decided to keep their most inflammatory views to themselves. “I think sometimes I can tell when a writer politely demurs, without saying as much,” one editor told me. “They’re just, like, The juice ain’t worth the squeeze.”



The word “poptimism” implies lighthearted fun, but much of the criticism of the twenty-tens was earnestly concerned with justice and representation. One review of an album by Janelle Monáe, a retro-futurist R. & B. singer, noted that she was “a queer, dark-skinned Black woman in an industry historically inclined to value her opposite” (*Pitchfork*); another praised her as “not afraid to address systemic inequality in all its pervasive forms inside and outside of her music” (*New York*). One of the few big names to get consistently negative reviews was Chris Brown, a lithe heartthrob whose critical reputation never recovered from the fact that, in 2009, he attacked Rihanna, who was then his girlfriend, and later pleaded guilty to felony assault. In this atmosphere, there was no such thing as a strictly musical disagreement. It had seemed like good fun when, in 1978, Lou Reed insulted Christgau on a live album. (Reed derisively asked the audience, “What does Robert Christgau do in bed—you know, is he a toe-fucker?”) But the stakes were much higher when, in 2016, the R. & B. singer Solange suggested to Jon Caramanica, a white *Times* critic who had discussed her on his podcast, that he be more careful when talking about Black music. She pointedly tweeted at him, saying that her father had been “hosed down and forced to walk on hot pavement barefoot in civil rights marches in Alabama.”

The idea of poptimism sometimes bled into a broader belief that it was bad manners to criticize any cultural product that people liked, whether it be a

pop song or a superhero movie or a romance novel. This is not a new idea—on the contrary, it evokes the Latin adage “*De gustibus non est disputandum*” and its modern analogue, repeated by kindergartners and, less excusably, by people who are no longer kindergartners: “Don’t yuck my yum.” The idea that people’s tastes have a right not to be criticized is, of course, quite fatal to the idea of criticism itself, as many critics have noticed. In the literary world, where reviewers are often authors themselves, writers have long complained about excessive coziness. “Sweet, bland commendations fall everywhere upon the scene,” Elizabeth Hardwick observed, in 1959. In more specialized fields, like dance, complaints about the quality of criticism (not long ago, a German choreographer attacked one of his critics with dog feces) seem less urgent than complaints about its quantity: there are hardly any professional dance critics left in America, a situation that *The Atlantic* has called “a blow to the art form itself.” Meanwhile, film critics have had to contend not just with disgruntled directors and actors but with the fandoms that emerge, online, to defend their favorite characters or franchises. A. O. Scott, in his farewell column as the *Times*’ chief film critic, argued that this culture was “rooted in conformity, obedience, group identity and mob behavior.” That’s not a bad evocation of a sold-out concert, as long as you also mention the camaraderie and the joy. In pop music, unhinged fandom is not an unfortunate mutation—it’s the essence.

Maybe that’s why, compared with some other kinds of nitpickers, pop critics can seem especially extraneous. Literary criticism is often seen as indispensable to intellectual life, perhaps because the form matches the content. (An essay about literature is itself literature.) And dance critics and their subjects seem to belong to the same fragile ecosystem. (With its own peculiar dominance rituals, apparently.) But few people think of pop-music critics as pillars of American intellectualism, and even fewer think of pop stars as an endangered species. Unlike movie critics or theatre critics or restaurant critics, pop critics can’t even claim to be saving their readers time or money: listening to a song is often easier, quicker, and cheaper than reading about it. One task for a pop critic is to help readers make sense of the musical free-for-all they encounter in their day-to-day lives. Another is to remind readers that *nothing* is so obviously silly, or so self-evidently important, that we can’t form strong and antagonistic opinions about it. I think, for example, that “Shake It to the Max (Fly),” the dancehall hit by

*MOLIY*, is brilliantly hypnotic, but there are doubtless some listeners who instead find it tiresomely repetitive—although, these days, they may be too shy to say so. And I suspect that musicians themselves sometimes miss having critical critics around, if only as foils. The Taylor Swift song “Mean” is a righteous blast of indignation, aimed at a pompous writer who enjoys “pickin’ on the weaker man”; it sounds less righteous if you know that its target seems to have been Bob Lefsetz, who was not an all-powerful writer for a mainstream publication but an industry gadfly who shared his thoughts in an e-mail newsletter. Fifteen years after that song’s release, Swift is more powerful than just about anyone—and also more scrutinized than ever. Some of the same forces that inhibit criticism surely make it harder for musicians themselves to say what’s really on their minds, lest they trigger a social-media avalanche. At a time when everyone is shouting at everyone else, there is a paradoxical pressure on all kinds of prominent and semi-prominent people to be on their best behavior if they want to stay above the fray.

The most critical major music critic of the current era is not a writer at all but a talker: Anthony Fantano, who delivers pithy, decisive album reviews straight to camera on his YouTube channel, the Needledrop, which has more than three million subscribers. He is passionate about his favorite albums, but viewers know that when he appears in a red flannel shirt he’s about to deliver a particularly harsh verdict. In 2010, he reviewed “My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy,” by Kanye West, praising the music but declaring that too many of the lyrics concerned “Kanye’s fucked-up social life,” and rating it a “light-to-decent six.” (Fantano’s bespoke system uses both numbers and adjectives.) His reward was months of abuse from West’s fans, and also an influx of viewers, which helped establish both his voice and his business: unlike many music writers, Fantano is an entrepreneur, which means that going viral can make his life better, as well as worse. “When I have to do a negative review of something, at least I know I’m doing it for me,” he told me. “If I do end up getting attacked or harassed or torn apart over it, whatever benefit I’m going to see from that traffic, or that attention, that’s going straight to me.” Over the years, angry fans have posted what they said were documents from Fantano’s divorce, and the rapper Drake once shared what seemed to be a private Instagram message he had sent to Fantano, telling him, “Your existence is a light 1.” YouTube might now be the most prominent venue for music criticism: alongside Fantano, there is Rick Beato, a producer who delivers learned and sometimes Hornby-esque analyses of

new and old music (more than three million people have watched a video from last year called “I Thought the Spotify Top 10 Couldn’t Get Worse”), and AJay Deluxe, whose impassioned reaction to the latest Lady Gaga album lasted nearly an hour, plus more than a half hour of bonus content available on her Patreon page.

Fantano doesn’t mind playing the villain from time to time, and so he is able to deliver the kind of pungent, memorable put-downs that his writer peers have largely abandoned. He once described the popular British band Sleep Token as making “metal for Disney adults,” and looked genuinely distressed during a recent review of the country singer Morgan Wallen, whom he accused of using too much digital processing. “I feel like I’m listening to a redneck robot singing underwater,” he said. You can savor the description even if, like me, you have a fondness for this particular drawing cyborg. Sometimes Fantano channels the spirit of his nineteen-sixties forebears. He is something of a traditionalist: fond of noisy rock and feisty hip-hop, and deeply skeptical of the contemporary music industry. Just as critics before him worried about the dominance of radio, and then of MTV, Fantano deplores the algorithmic programming of platforms like Spotify and TikTok; in his view, these companies are replacing the old variety of the internet with a more “homogenized” musical landscape. “I think there is a subset of stuff that is just bland, uninspired algorithm trash that basically sounds like a machine made it,” he told me. “I think Alex Warren sort of fits that.” Warren is a twenty-four-year-old TikTok star who had a breakthrough hit this year with “Ordinary,” an earnest love song with a rippling beat and an overbearing gospel choir. (“The angels up in the clouds / Are jealous, knowing we found / Something so out of the ordinary,” he moans.) I don’t think Fantano is necessarily wrong to call the song trash, but I do think he’s wrong to imply that there’s something intrinsically bad about songs that are designed to fit an algorithm, or a market. Product-market fit is what makes pop music pop. The only way to separate good product from bad product is to listen closely—and, perhaps, to argue about it.

Those musical arguments tend to be most fruitful when they’re about more than just music, and rockism stuck around for so long because it helped critics tell a compelling story about righteous authenticity versus fabricated fakeness. After its decline, critics needed a new story to tell. One solution was to frame musicians as heroes or villains in a fight for social justice.

Another was to lean in to poptimism, focussing broadly on popularity, or, more narrowly, on pop as a musical genre. But fans of mainstream pop, as you may have noticed, tend not to be reliably “optimistic” about music, let alone polite: they are, on the contrary, viciously factional and unapologetically fickle, finely attuned to the subtle difference between a hit and a flop. Last year, fans and critics alike cheered on three inventive and ubiquitous pop stars: Sabrina Carpenter, Chappell Roan, and Charli XCX. At the same time, Katy Perry’s album “143” became one of the worst-reviewed albums of the decade. (*New York* called it “a contender for the pop flameout of the year.”) The unanimity was rather unsettling, but at least the acerbity was refreshing. Earlier this year, the rapper Lil Wayne’s “Tha Carter VI” earned a similarly hostile reception. Are we entering a more critical era? *Rolling Stone* has reinstated its star system; on the other hand, the *Times* recently announced its intention to move its cultural coverage “beyond the traditional review.” Last year, Condé Nast shrank and rebooted *Pitchfork*; as both a colleague and a friend of some of the people involved, I’m hoping for the best. Perhaps, after the honeyed twenty-tens, music writers and their readers are rediscovering the pleasures of vinegar.

This is an ongoing project. Even in the old days, critics were battling the forces of creeping niceness, and not always winning. Music magazines combined reviews with feature stories and interviews, which tended to be friendlier. The same *Rolling Stone* that helped end Andrew Ridgeley’s career was also infamous for giving indulgent reviews to veteran rockers (Paul McCartney, “Tug of War,” 1982: five stars). Kurt Loder was a revelation to me as a kid, but from a different perspective his move from *Rolling Stone* to MTV, in 1987, might have been a sign that music criticism was losing ground to music videos. Robert Christgau recently turned eighty-three, and he still delivers an astonishing stream of sharp criticism on his Substack. But he essentially stopped writing negative reviews more than a decade ago, later saying that he found them “intellectually and spiritually exhausting.” Schreiber told me that he, too, has felt himself growing less venomous over the years; even Fantano, who still puts on his red flannel shirt from time to time (Benson Boone: “light three”), has learned to live with the knowledge that some people will always love the music he hates. “I mean, if it’s bringing joy to somebody, that’s not inherently a bad thing,” he said. I know how he feels. In the early two-thousands, I wrote plenty of negative reviews, but nowadays I feel less inspired to rail against, say, the most recent Lady

Gaga album. It strikes me as awkward and effortful, like someone trying to start a dance party in an empty night club, but why commit that judgment to print, when, instead, I could wait to see whether it will grow on me, as awkward-seeming albums sometimes do?

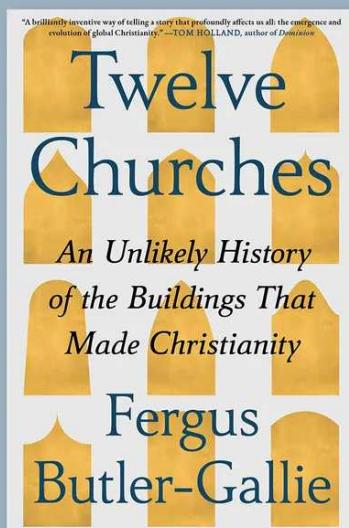
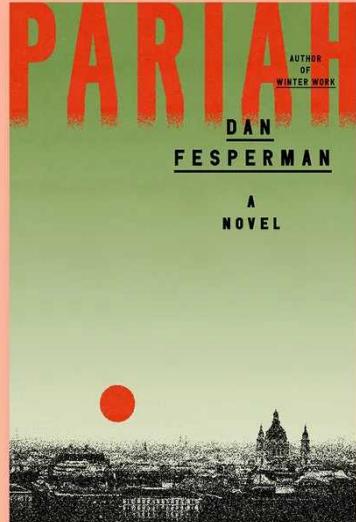
Not long ago, I stumbled on an unauthorized YouTube compilation of Statler and Waldorf's greatest hits. No skits, no songs, just thirty-seven minutes of corny jokes, delivered by two gray-haired Muppets who hated everything they saw. Or almost everything. When I watched the clips in context, I noticed something I had missed as a child: although they mercilessly roasted the Muppets in the cast, they were careful not to criticize the guest stars—who were, after all, both guests and stars, and therefore doubly off limits. It turns out that even a pair of fictional cranks can be seduced by the considerable power of celebrity, or perhaps constrained by the exigencies of having to book A-list talent for a weekly show. In one episode from 1978, the guest is Judy Collins, who sings an interminable version of "There Was an Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly." When it finally ends, the camera moves up to the opera box, so the old guys can deliver their reviews. "Wonderful," Waldorf says, glancing at Statler. And Statler agrees: "Wonderful!" ♦

Books

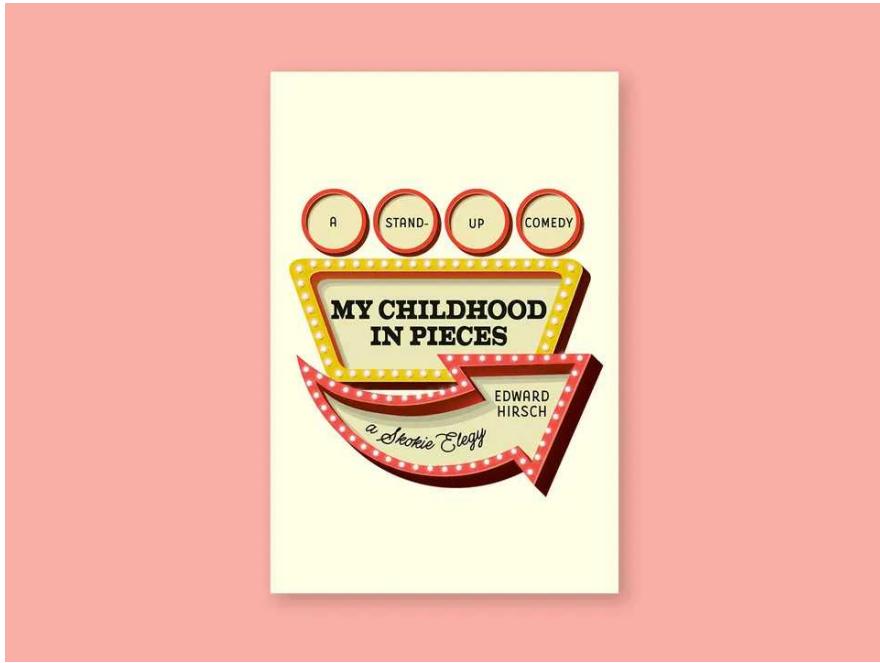
## Briefly Noted

“Twelve Churches,” “My Childhood in Pieces,” “Women, Seated,” and “World Pacific.”

August 25, 2025



**Twelve Churches**, by *Fergus Butler-Gallie (Avid Reader)*. This collection of portraits of twelve churches offers an ambitious retelling of Christianity's evolution. The Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem illustrates the paradoxical nature of a religion that twins life and death, peace and violence, prosperity and poverty; the Hagia Sophia, in Istanbul, illuminates Christianity's "complicated dance with secular power"; the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, in Birmingham, Alabama, affords a glimpse of how "time and justice are inherently linked" in Christian thought. A wide-ranging final chapter, centered on a megachurch in Nigeria, hidden churches in China, and churches that provide virtual services, explores how hope for the future, especially as articulated in the Book of Revelation, remains fundamental to Christianity's appeal.

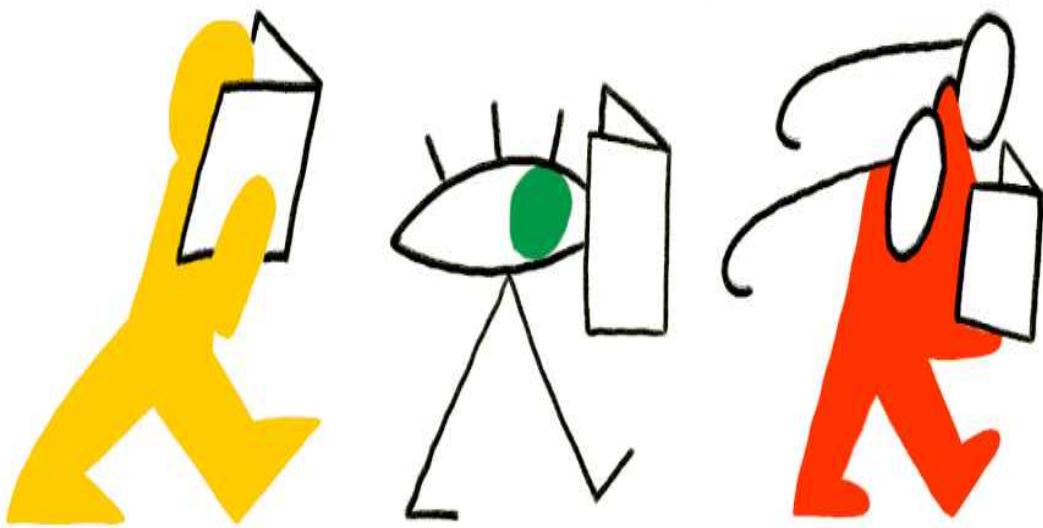


**My Childhood in Pieces**, by *Edward Hirsch (Knopf)*. This pithy, poignant memoir by an award-winning American poet immortalizes a bygone world in a colorful mosaic of vignettes, jokes, and reflections. The Jewish community of Hirsch's mid-century youth is vividly evoked in characters including his father, a would-be gangster with a penchant for enigmatic mottoes like "Blood ain't pee"; his tough, "Old Testament" mother; and a boisterous host of wily, wisecracking grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, siblings, neighbors, and friends. Though cut with loss, the book has a madcap spirit; reading it feels like hearing family stories volleyed across a

dinner table where even the ghosts are chiming in with their own versions of events.

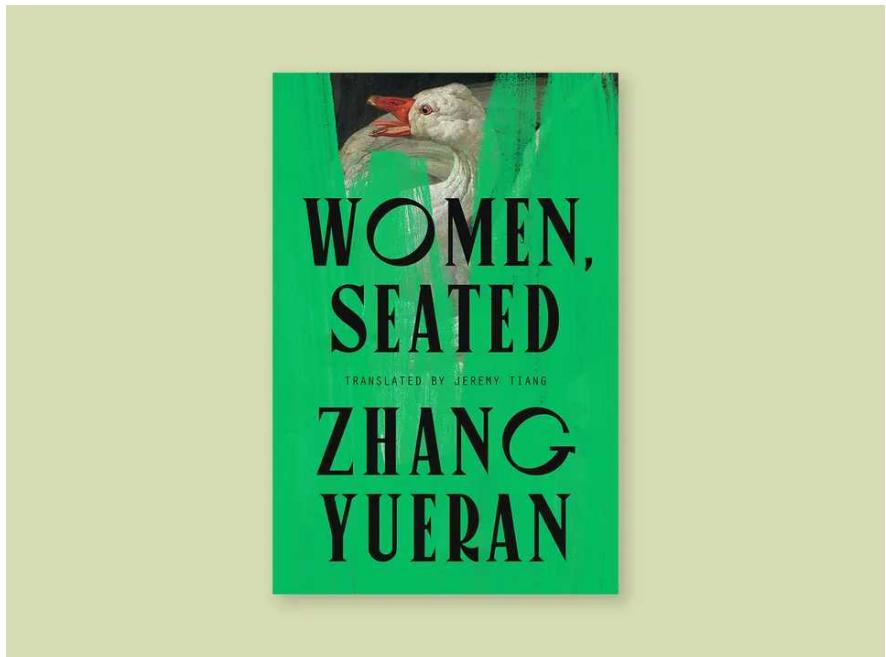
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## **What We're Reading**

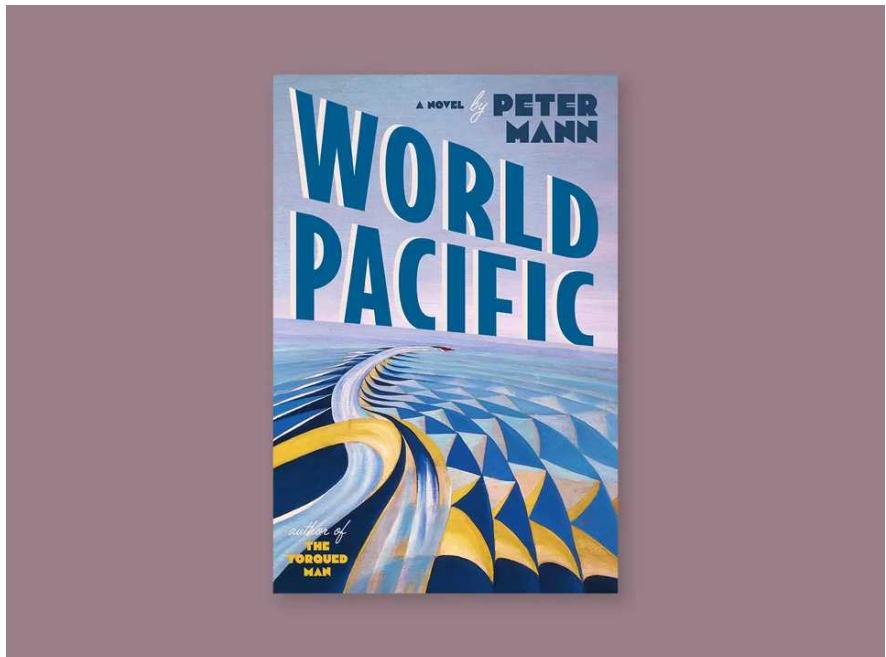


*Discover notable new fiction, nonfiction, and poetry.*

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**Women, Seated**, by *Zhang Yueran*, translated from the Chinese by *Jeremy Tiang* (*Riverhead*). In this tense, spare novel of class, cruelty, and redemption, a woman working as a live-in housekeeper for a wealthy family in Beijing abruptly finds herself responsible for her employers' young son when his father is detained by the authorities and his mother goes into hiding. Unfolding in the days just after the father's arrest, Zhang's novel travels back and forth through time to reveal its protagonist's path to domestic work, and the ways in which wealth and power have warped her employers' most intimate experiences. Part of the injustice of working as a nanny, she reflects, is that its borrowed luxuries mold you "into a particular shape, but this only makes you look ridiculous when you're back to your own existence."



**World Pacific**, by Peter Mann (*Harper*). Set at the beginning of the Second World War, this bracing and erudite novel weaves together three ostensibly unrelated plots. In one, an adventure writer who has been marooned pens a series of raunchy dispatches—at one point comparing a typhoon to “Satan’s anus”—addressed to his fan club. In another, the daughter of an illustrious German novelist writes letters to her twin brother, who is in a coma after attempting suicide. Meanwhile, a British spy keeping tabs on Nazi sympathizers in California uncovers an espionage plot. As Mann intertwines these stories, his jaunty sentences combine propulsive humor with international intrigue.

Books

# Elizabeth Gilbert's Latest Epiphanies

“Eat, Pray, Love” was a huge hit in part because readers imagined they could be like its author. Her new book, “All the Way to the River,” shows how dubious that notion was.

By Jia Tolentino

August 25, 2025



“Elizabeth Gilbert has a new memoir out.” The mere sentence radiates gentle inspiration—watercolors, billowy pants with elephants printed on them, sparkly truthtelling in a big straw hat. Gilbert had an estimable career as a journalist and a writer of fiction before she published [“Eat, Pray, Love: One Woman’s Search for Everything Across Italy, India and Indonesia”](#) in 2006, a book that became not just a best-seller or even a phenomenon but something more like a cultural paradigm. Gilbert’s autobiographical account of a yearlong, post-divorce, mid-thirties rediscovery of herself was read by millions, many of whom, when they picture Gilbert, likely see Julia Roberts, who starred in the film adaptation, which grossed two hundred million dollars worldwide. Upon hearing that Gilbert has written another memoir—her first proper return to that deliriously, exclusively personal form since

“Eat, Pray, Love,” although she’s published four other books in the interim —these readers may imagine that they’re in for more of what was on the movie poster: a plucky blonde, gelato spoon in mouth, ready for adventure and revelation to blow in on the breeze.

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## The Culture Industry: A Centenary Issue

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Here is what actually happens in the new book, called “[All the Way to the River: Love, Loss, and Liberation](#).” Gilbert, newly flush with seemingly unlimited cash, and filled with both a desire to be useful and the existential unease of someone who has just won the lottery, begins covering her friends’ therapy bills and tuition payments, and lavishing jewelry, weddings, and houses (plural) on them. At one point, after the 2008 financial crisis, she walks down a street in New Jersey asking small-business owners if they need money. Then her friend Rayya—a hot queer hairdresser whom Gilbert met during her first marriage—hits a rough patch, and Gilbert moves her out of a Chelsea apartment and into a New Jersey church that she bought sight unseen from Laos. (Gilbert had intended it to be a home for herself and her second husband, whom she met during her “Eat, Pray, Love” year.) Gilbert falls in love with Rayya, though she doesn’t admit this to Rayya or to her husband. Instead, she proposes that Rayya write a memoir in lieu of paying

rent, and asks her to travel with her, ostensibly so that Rayya can do her hair and makeup for professional appearances. By 2013, Gilbert is admitting to a stranger in a book-signing line that the only reason she and Rayya aren't a couple is that Gilbert is married and "trying to be *good*." Rayya, who is an alcoholic and a heroin addict in recovery, has begun openly drinking again.

Three years later, Rayya is given a diagnosis of liver and pancreatic cancer and told that she has six months to live. Gilbert ends her marriage, confesses her love to Rayya, and takes an end-stage rocket ship to the romantic stratosphere. When Rayya refuses chemo, Gilbert rents her a penthouse, then starts buying her things: a Range Rover, a piano, a Rolex. Together, they gorge on food, sex, travel, pleasure. "We were ecstatic, phosphorescent, dangerous, brilliant, and full of wild courage," Gilbert writes. "We were writing poems about each other, staying awake just to watch ourselves breathing, and pouring words of devotion back and forth." They were "divine angels, wrapped together in a single cloak of stars." Their love was "far more powerful," Gilbert goes on, than the "mere alcohol, weed, Xanax, psilocybin, sedatives, sleeping pills, and ecstasy" that the two were taking—and why not? Then Rayya's friends persuade her to do chemo after all, and her illness and the treatment together become so monstrously debilitating that she decides she needs both an hourly supply of opiates and a mountain of cocaine. These Gilbert pays for and procures.

In time, Gilbert becomes a twisted bedside nurse, tying off the arms of a "venomous junkie" who has already lived nine months longer than the doctors thought she would. And yet this off-kilter enabler remains Elizabeth Gilbert, a woman who could, in under thirty seconds, locate transcendent human insight in a nuclear-waste dump. She tells herself, "Rayya is my most beautiful story." Then, losing the faith, she decides to murder Rayya, literally, by switching her morphine pills with sleeping pills and covering her in fentanyl patches—a plot that fails only because Rayya somewhat demonically cottons on to the plan and thwarts it. Gilbert realizes that she has hit rock bottom, that she is a sex-and-love addict—an addict all around, actually. This becomes the organizing principle and revelation of the book: Gilbert's journey with Rayya is merely an extreme version of a dynamic that "*all of us*" can relate to, Gilbert tells her readers, because, like addicts, we have all grasped desperately at "relief from the sting of life."

I'm not sure that's true. I'm also not sure that it needs to be. Those who follow Gilbert on social media will know the broad outlines of the Rayya story, but the most dire moments in the memoir were not previously public, and those moments make the book's self-help framework seem both unnecessary—who could possibly stop reading this?—and wildly mismatched. Gilbert is funnier and more self-aware than the public image of her, a fate not unusual for women writers. But the funniest line in the book is one that was not meant to get laughs: “Even if your wheels have never *fully* come off, I suspect, at some level, that I might be you, and that you might be me, and that all of us might be Rayya.” The “Eat, Pray, Love” paradigm always rested on the premise that Gilbert, a woman who is profoundly and obviously exceptional, could function as a blueprint for the ordinary woman. This notion may have finally reached its end point.

Perhaps there is a direct metaphysical connection between Christmas-tree farms and main-character syndrome: like Taylor Swift, Elizabeth Gilbert grew up amid fields of fir and pine. She went to N.Y.U. for college, hoping to become a writer; upon graduating, rather than pursue an M.F.A., she tried to gather material by having an interesting life. Inspired by Hemingway's “[In Our Time](#),” she sought out the kind of jobs Nick Adams might have had, such as being a trail cook on a ranch in Wyoming. She wrote a short story, “[Pilgrims](#),” about an East Coast girl, Martha Knox, who is hired to work on a ranch, and in 1993 it ran in *Esquire*, marking her début as a writer of fiction. A collection of stories, also called “[Pilgrims](#),” followed, in 1997. The stories are lovely and funny, vivid but restrained. “Pilgrims,” which is narrated by the ranch owner's son, ends in classic short-story style, gesturing toward epiphany while studiously fending it off. Looking at the sky, the narrator notices that the stars seem unusually close. “This one star, though, left a slow thin arc, like a cigarette still burning flung over our heads,” Gilbert writes. “If Martha Knox saw this, it was only as she was reaching up already with one hand for her horse's reins, and it wasn't something she mentioned.”

Much of Gilbert's early work displays an awareness of both the profundity and the transience of romance, and of the many different universes that one life can open into or contain. An anomalously surreal short story called “The Finest Wife” came to her fully formed in a dream while she was napping on a commuter train—she has called this the “only objective, magical, creative

experience of my life.” In the story, an old woman is driving a school bus in rural Minnesota, and the passengers who board are her former flings and lovers and soul mates, who help her remember and bid farewell to a long life.

Gilbert began working as a journalist, and quickly established herself as a student of masculinity who had an excess of feminine charm. In “[The Muse of the Coyote Ugly Saloon](#),” a 1997 *GQ* piece, she wrote about the tough, sexy, unhinged girls with whom she had bartended in the East Village, and their regulars (“Nazi Dave, Vietnam Bob, Spit-Take Phil”), and all the ways that the former seduced and fended off the latter. (In 2000, it became the basis for an essentially perfect movie.) There was a time, she writes, “when I measured a good night by the number of marriage proposals I received.” Another *GQ* piece, from 1998, was about a survivalist woodsman named Eustace Conway, who ate roadkill and wore handmade buckskin. Conway rode a horse across America, sleeping under the stars and inspiring a vicarious longing that seems prophetic of Gilbert’s own path. “From coast to coast, Americans of every conceivable background had looked up at Eustace Conway on his horse and said wistfully, ‘I wish I could do what you’re doing,’ ” Gilbert writes. “To every last citizen, Eustace had replied, ‘You can.’ ” Gilbert expanded the profile into a book called “[The Last American Man](#).” Janet Maslin, [reviewing the book](#) in the *Times*, noted that it “treads as thin a line between honesty and self-conscious myth making as Mr. Conway does,” and suggested that it was headed for “the kind of popularity that will only complicate Mr. Conway’s problems.”

But it was Gilbert’s popularity, driven by that mixture of honesty and mythmaking, that would lead to complicated problems. “Eat, Pray, Love” was so marketable (unaffiliated travel packages materialized around the world) and so easily caricatured (there was a “South Park” episode called “Eat, Pray, Queef,” a parody novel called “Drink, Play, F@#k”) that people quickly forgot how purely pleasurable the book is to read. Here’s Gilbert on learning Italian: “Every word was a singing sparrow, a magic trick, a truffle for me. I would slouch home through the rain after class, draw a hot bath, and lie there in the bubbles reading the Italian dictionary aloud to myself, taking my mind off my divorce pressures and my heartache. The words made me laugh in delight.” In a [review](#) for the *Times*, Jennifer Egan called Gilbert’s prose “close to irresistible,” adding, “If a more likable writer than Gilbert is

currently in print, I haven't found him or her." Gilbert frequently refers to herself in the third person ("The first summer of Liz and David looked like the falling-in-love montage of every romantic movie you've ever seen"), describes her love affairs as world-historically magical ("We had more fun waiting in line together at the Department of Motor Vehicles than most couples have on their honeymoons"), and communes with the spirit of her ex-husband ("Hi, sweetie," she says, after summoning his spirit to the rooftop of an ashram). All of this is made bearable not only by Gilbert's literary talent but by her eagerness to find people extraordinary, by the frankness with which she writes about feeling broken—"I came to fear nighttime like it was a torturer's cellar," she confesses—and by her obvious empathy upon encountering brokenness in others.

Still, her temperament is so strong, and her outlook so positive, that she never actually seems broken on the page—when she writes about indecision and confusion, she comes off as clear and decisive. This makes her a particular sort of narrator: always freshly emerging from a dark wood, breathless with revelation that may or may not stick. This manner of self-presentation is perhaps Gilbert's primary contribution to the culture; it shows up in the work of her literary descendants, particularly the spiky and passionate confessionalist Glennon Doyle, who published three memoirs of self-reinvention before reaching her mid-forties. Gilbert also paved the way for Cheryl Strayed, whose best-selling wilderness memoir, "[Wild](#)," led to a career in the realm of soulful, raw-ish advice and self-help, and for Brené Brown, an academic who functions as a life coach for the "Eat, Pray, Love" demographic, writing about courage and vulnerability and shame. (In 2015, Doyle, Strayed, and Brown joined up with Gilbert and the author Rob Bell to form the Compassion Collective, and, in a little over a day, they raised more than a million dollars for aid to Syrian refugees.)



But Gilbert's most pervasive influence can be found online, in the breathless having-just-finally-realized tone that dizzying numbers of women who narrate their lives on the internet have adopted. On social media, many of the most chaotic and emotionally lawless people you've ever known are posting on a regular basis about having at long last achieved inner peace. Many among us, after observing this cringe-inducing side effect of regular self-narration at mass scale, have given up altogether on sincere ideas of personal epiphany. But even those who might seek to subvert that tone, or invoke it ironically, are negotiating the same conventions. Gilbert may be patient zero for the latter-day memoirist mind-set: so many women—and I would never exclude myself—have come to believe, at some level, that they, too, are Elizabeth Gilberts, people who search hard and love harder, whose personal journeys can and should captivate millions, whose flaws and failings only make them better heroines in the end.

Gilbert's prose in "All the Way to the River" is often strangely flat and clipped. She has given two *TED* talks on creativity, which together have been viewed more than twenty-four million times; in 2015, she wrote "[Big Magic](#)," a best-selling book on the subject, which is full of spirited and generous advice for artists. The new book reads, at times, like the transcript of a *TED* talk—in one chapter, Gilbert introduces the metaphor of "Earth school," in which we might envision our planet as "the toughest and most

elite accredited academy for spiritual ascension in the entire universe,” and suggests that instead of asking “Why me?” we should ask “How might this terrible situation be perfectly designed to help me to evolve?”

Because what if that’s *really* what it’s all about?

And what if we are all here to help each other evolve?

By any means necessary, perhaps?

Much of the book is like this, with one-sentence paragraphs surrounded by white space, somewhat in the manner of an Instagram post. (The online writing that she influenced may now be influencing her.) Gilbert’s colloquial style, once a source of great pleasure, has tipped into new territory—an ingenuousness that blends guru and disciple, mother and child. “That’s some real Obi-Wan Kenobi shit right there, and it was kind of blowing my mind,” she writes. Often, the book reads less like her early work and more like the Substack that she started writing in 2023, “Letters from Love with Elizabeth Gilbert,” which now has almost two hundred thousand subscribers. It is categorized not under “Literature” but under “Faith & Spirituality.”

In the book, Gilbert frames her journey with Rayya as a sort of test strip for the universe: take a love affair for the ages, dip it in an unbelievable amount of mutual suffering, and see what color everything turns. At its nadir, when Rayya is gobbling morphine pills and shooting cocaine and snarling at hospice nurses, Gilbert begins questioning the nature of existence. Is the universe malicious, or merely indifferent? Or perhaps the cosmos is fundamentally friendly to us, and there is a purpose behind all the hurt that we cause and feel? Gilbert begins “to see this situation as a divinely appointed challenge,” at which point there is “no doubt whatsoever,” she tells us, “about what I would have to do next.”

Goddammit, for fuck’s sake.

I would have to face down the vampire.

She stops playing nurse and enabler and calls her friends for help; Rayya falls into the care of a different woman, and manages to get sober. Then she

and Gilbert have an unlikely reconciliation—when Gilbert confesses that she planned to murder her, Rayya calls it “fucking awesome,” exclaiming, “You found your darkness, dude!” Rayya has blacked out the worst months, and simply asks Gilbert to forgive her; Gilbert grants her forgiveness. Soon afterward, Rayya dies, as she lived: “defiantly, violently, bravely, furiously, self-destructively, uncooperatively, ridiculously, exhaustingly, proudly.” Gilbert is there to see her go. After death, her face settles into an expression that Gilbert describes as “thrilled.”

Gilbert begins to put herself back together. She writes a novel, “[City of Girls](#),” a fizzy work of historical fiction about showgirls seeking love and liberation in nineteen-forties New York, in just six months. (Her previous and more successful novel, “[The Signature of All Things](#),” was about a nineteenth-century female botanist seeking love and transcendence at sea.) She does psychedelics, “binges” on her sex-and-love addiction, goes to recovery meetings, gets over the fact that she’s sometimes recognized in the rooms. First, she gets clean from people—blocking numbers, unfollowing social-media accounts, deleting texts and songs and photos. She learns the difference between “feeling *good* and feeling *well*.” She gives up alcohol, then other drugs, even psychedelics. She tries to apply a sober mind-set to her finances; she tries to stop saving other people’s lives. By the time she’s writing the book’s conclusion, she’s been sober for five years—off hormone-replacement therapy, antidepressants, anti-anxiety medication, sleeping pills, Botox, and fillers. If she dates again, she writes, it’ll be according to a “sober dating plan,” one that deliberately avoids spontaneity and intensity.

Gilbert has been trying, in public, to reach this place for a long time. In “Eat, Pray, Love,” she acknowledges how heedlessly she throws herself into relationships: “You can have my time, my devotion, my ass, my money, my family, my dog, my dog’s money, my dog’s time—*everything*.” By her early thirties, she was “exhausted by the cumulative consequences of a lifetime of hasty choices and chaotic passions,” and she had already identified “infatuation’s final destination—the complete and merciless devaluation of self.” Her next book was one about marriage, called “[Committed](#),” partly a history of the institution and partly the story of her quest to get the Brazilian lover she met in Bali a green card. She notes in that book, a bit glibly, that the brain scans of an infatuated lover resemble the brain scans of a cocaine addict. “I can no longer *do* infatuation,” she writes, adding, “In the end, it

always puts me through the wood chipper.” Five years later, she published an essay in the *Times Magazine* called “[Confessions of a Seduction Addict](#),” which ends with her choosing to walk away from an encounter with a love interest in a park. “And that’s when I realized that the better part of my life had already begun,” she writes.

And there it is again: the new revelation, the better life arriving once more. If you’ve read any celebrity profiles about youngish female stars during the past decade or so, you may have noticed that each woman, no matter what, is always stepping into her truth and power—she will also be stepping into her truth and power three years from now, when she promotes her next thing, and she will certainly be stepping into her truth and power five years after that. Every time, the person you’re seeing will really, finally be her. This, too, may reflect Gilbert’s influence on the culture. But the problem with this amnesiac perpetual becoming is more about the medium than the project. Within our real lives, we do have to always become ourselves. We do have to hope, at periodic intervals, that we’ve actually figured something out. We have to both consider what we’ve learned and also, humiliatingly, continue learning. It’s only when we are confronted with our own record-keeping—in a journal, a post, a memoir—that we see the shelf life of whatever we considered our truth and/or power before.

Gilbert has always made hay from her own blind spots and ludicrous proclivities. Much of her writing ends on a note of hope that she might have run her most tempestuous tendencies ragged, and can perhaps start anew. “All the Way to the River” ends with her narrowly avoiding another sexual and romantic relapse—but, this time, Gilbert doesn’t gesture toward the idea of moving on, or of being changed. Not exactly. She is, she writes, always walking on the precipice. It’s the language of recovery, an approach of total humility, the recognition of a fundamental fallibility which does allow so many people to finally, actually live. ♦

# Once Upon a Time in Hollywood

Celebrity picture books are having a moment. Are these the stories our children deserve?

By Sloane Crosley

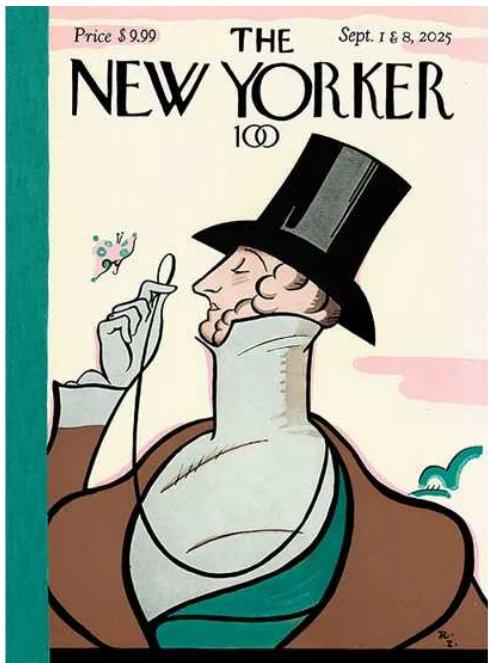
August 25, 2025



There are no guilty pleasures in childhood. It is only as an adult that I feel a certain sheepishness when recalling one of my favorite picture books, "[Ann Likes Red](#)," by Dorothy Z. Seymour, which was originally published in 1965. Wedged between the vaunted volumes of Gorey and Scarry, "Ann Likes Red" stuck out both literally, for its squat stature, and literarily, for its hazy lesson in self-assertion. Ann visits a department store with her mother, where saleswomen attempt to sell her on a variety of dresses and belts. Our heroine rejects every color but her favorite. When a shoe salesman, who has not been privy to the preceding pages, attempts to fit Ann's foot with a tan sandal, he's lucky he doesn't get a kick in the jaw. In the end, Ann tries on her monochromatic outfit before a mirror, looking pleased as punch. It's a tale of consumerism, superficiality, and petulance. I adored it.

## The Culture Industry: A Centenary Issue

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Well, shame, cast thy gaze elsewhere. The arc-less antics of Dorothy Z. Seymour have nothing on this century's celebrity-penned picture books, slim volumes that have infiltrated bedroom bookshelves like a pack of moralistic hobgoblins. I do not have children, nor am I a child, so it is not for me to say how many readers were lifted from their pigmented doldrums by Julianne Moore's "[Freckleface Strawberry](#)." But it is for me to say that having a child qualifies you to write a children's book the same way that using a toilet qualifies you to be a plumber.

The industry is on a roll. The pandemic and post-pandemic years have seen a spike in narratives from familiar faces such as Serena Williams, Hoda Kotb, and Bette Midler. The actor Max Greenfield is the author of "[I Don't Want to Read This Book](#)" (the word play wears atrophic). The journalist Savannah Guthrie is the author of "[Mostly What God Does Is Love You](#)" (not what God *mostly* does where I come from). Dog-dad Chris Pine is the author of "[When Digz the Dog Met Zurl the Squirrel](#)" (short-tailed squirrel befriends dog seeking similar). It might be more efficient to list the celebrities who have not published a picture book. Childhoods are like opinions; everyone's got one.

Children are not sitting in the bath musing about the P.R. needs that drive celebrities into a publisher's office. But grownups can do the math. Other forms of supplemental income come at a cost. Brand partnerships are a transparent cash grab. Cameo videos demand the ceding of pride. A children's book, however, offers the opposite of abasement. It provides protection, allowing famous people to expose their vulnerabilities without being dismissed as self-pitying. They can bolster their own authenticity, crediting themselves with the challenges they faced before we knew them. And, in a culture where every mundane detail of a celebrity's life is sought, is the fault entirely theirs that these rainy-day projects are up for sale?

These tomes for tots tend to fall into thematic categories, the most prominent being perseverance and individualism. You will know you are reading a perseverance book because it will feel as if it emerged from a human brain rather than a human navel. This is not a condemnation; there are bad brains and there are good navels. But perseverance stories involve moments in which things might not work out, whereas individualism books are less likely to feature their characters, avatars for their illustrious creators, messing up. The protagonists simply exist. I believe it was [Oscar Wilde](#) who said, "Be yourself, everyone else is not going to be as famous when they grow up."

There is no means of calculating the number of units moved as gag gifts, but my copy of "[C Is for Country](#)," by Lil Nas X, an individualism book that I got secondhand from a used-book seller, arrived inscribed to Baby Roger. "This guy might be a one-hit-wonder," our giver scribbles, "but he wrote a song that cracked us up so I thought this book would make your mama smile!" Baby Roger is also informed of his good fortune, for he "has the best mommy and daddy." Which might be true. They got the book out of the house.

In 2019, Lil Nas X surprised a group of schoolchildren with a live performance of his hit song, "Old Town Road." What followed was two and a half viral minutes of the kind of shrieking that would send Peppa Pig into a jealousy spiral. It's hard to envision kids mustering equal enthusiasm for "C Is for Country," where form overshadows function. "A is for adventure," "X is for extra" (is it, though?), and "I is for itty-bitty pony," a presumptuous purloining of "P." But the real issue is the absence of Plot. A boy rides a

horse, eats spaghetti, goes to bed. In lieu of a single twist or obstacle, the book champions originality, a virtue it never exhibits.

Channing Tatum's "[The One and Only Sparkella](#)" is another individualism story, in which the narrator's peers are turned off by sparkles. Our protagonist, Ella, requests that other kids call her Sparkella, a self-inflicted wound if ever there was one. She dims her light to fit in, eating a sandwich without sprinkles. "The world doesn't seem ready for me," she laments. Eventually, "with a little help from her dad," she learns the importance of being herself. It's perfectly legal to encourage confidence in children. And who better than a famous actor to insinuate that divergence will age, like a fine wine, into assurance? But the more these authors bang the drum for standing out for standing out's sake, the more tedious their books become. Rather than being silly, "Sparkella" describes silliness. It's the illustrated equivalent of Hollywood executives muttering "That's funny" instead of laughing.

This flaw is also present in directives for authenticity like Matthew McConaughey's "[Just Because](#)," a whirlwind of unobjectionable truisms ("Just because you threw shade, doesn't mean I'm out of the sun"), and "[The World Needs More Purple People](#)," by Kristen Bell and Benjamin Hart. Purple people are the best sort of people (somewhere, Ann of "Ann Likes Red" is weeping into a crimson tissue). Their characteristics include using one's voice, gardening, working "super-duper hard," being handy, and asking questions befitting a dating app: "Have you ever met a dolphin?" The book is thoroughly executed, positing many routes to cyanosis, but in tackling everything, it grips nothing. I haven't felt such pressure to be abstractly wonderful since "[I Promise](#)," by LeBron James, in which readers are encouraged to "be a team player *and* a winner." Collections of agreeable statements can create a loose sense of camaraderie. But so can watching a stranger with toilet paper stuck to their shoe, and at least there's a story there.

None of these books lead with "children should be seen and not heard," because none of them were written by my maternal grandmother. So the question is not "What vile lessons are these famous people propagating?" but "What are they offering instead?" "[Peanut Goes for the Gold](#)," by [Jonathan Van Ness](#), of "Queer Eye," is also about uniqueness but with a

raison d'être. Peanut is perhaps the first nonbinary rhythmic-gymnast guinea pig in literary history. On one level, the book exists for its description. On another, it exists to get kids in the habit of using someone's preferred pronouns, even if that someone is a domesticated rodent in a leotard. Alas, the innovation ends there. "Peanut has their own way of doing things," the book states, meaning that Peanut likes doing cartwheels on a basketball court. During a gymnastics competition, Peanut sticks their landing. They get a perfect score from every judge.

It's illuminating to compare "Peanut Goes for the Gold," an individualism book, with John Cena's "[Elbow Grease](#)," a perseverance book. "Elbow Grease" is the story of the smallest truck at the demolition derby. Even with all the gumption in the world, the eponymous Elbow Grease does not win his climactic race. His proffered lesson is more nuanced: "If you only stick with what you're good at, you'll never learn anything." Elbow Grease and Peanut face different challenges: one is waiting for a growth spurt, the other is waiting on the world to change. Elbow Grease has the luxury of setbacks; Peanut needs the win. But all children deserve the pleasure of suspense.

There's more under the hood in Dale Earnhardt, Jr.,'s "[Buster and the Race Car Graveyard](#)," the platonic ideal of a perseverance book. Buster and his friends are ninety-nine per cent anthropomorphization, one per cent inspiration. Their favorite activities are arbitrarily assigned (telling ghost stories, picking pumpkins). But the descriptions of the graveyard are downright Saundersian. Branches crackle, roots gnarl, dried leaves swirl through the pages. The cars are startled by a ghost car named Brenda (a perfectly imperfect name), who introduces them to other friendly ghost vehicles, most of whom have experienced deadly crashes and now honk funny. The book is about bravery, though there's a tonal funkiness to espousing the merits of driving two hundred and eighty miles per hour to "ages 4 to 8." Perceptive parents will know that Dale Earnhardt, the author's father, died in 2001 when his car slammed into a retaining wall on the Daytona International Speedway. This is a son's jaunty fantasy of the afterlife.

Such depth is lacking from the actress Eva Mendes's saccharine "[Desi, Mami, and the Never-Ending Worries](#)," which fits squarely into the subgenre of mental perseverance. Desi has trouble falling asleep because of an endless

cycle of intrusive thoughts about monsters. After her mother takes a tumble into existentialism (“What if you tried to separate yourself from your thoughts?”), Desi, like Buster, faces her fears. This book’s rightful home is in the waiting room of a child psychologist’s office, where it should be presented in the same spirit with which Dum-Dums are left in a dentist’s reception area. And yet, we have ourselves a noble motivation, encouraging anxious children to harness the power of their imaginations. “Desi” wants to help. But is that enough?

If children reject or embrace these books, they do so without all this hand-wringing. As for myself, an adult allowing mounds of celebrity picture books into her home for the first time, I grew curious and curiouser: Was I expecting too much from these lighthearted tales by shiny people? Where, in the vast expanse between a Caldecott Medal and a googly eye, should these titles be situated? Even in success (such as Reese Witherspoon’s “[Busy Betty](#)” and Jimmy Fallon’s “[Papa Doesn’t Do Anything!](#),” both lively blends of individualism and perseverance), best in group is not the same as best in show.

I needed metrics. So I immersed myself in Sendak and Snicket. I polled friends about what they fed into the minds of their own progeny and received lists so formidable, I stopped asking. While I can now vouch for recent hits such as Ryan T. Higgins’s “[We Don’t Eat Our Classmates](#)” and Drew Daywalt’s “[The Day the Crayons Quit](#),” as well as enchanting deep cuts like “[How Little Lori Visited Times Square](#),” by Amos Vogel, and “[The Little Island](#),” by [Margaret Wise Brown](#), my critical faculties emerged no sharper, dealing, as I was, with a different species of book. In these works by professional authors, there’s a deference to children that’s absent from their media-savvy counterparts. “The Day the Crayons Quit” is epistolary, featuring protest letters from overused crayons, with yellow and orange vying to be the rightful color of the sun. “How Little Lori Visited Times Square” is about a kid with a modest case of wanderlust who befriends a talking turtle. It ends with a cliffhanger, giving young readers a chance to do what they do best: wonder.

I wasn’t going to clarify my stance on this pervasive publishing trend by avoiding it. Had I learned nothing from the perseverance books? The only way to get the whole picture was to face my fears and dive down, down,

down, past the tutus and the ghost cars, down, down, down, to the very bottom of the narrative well: to books that espouse neither individualism nor perseverance. These are stories that have generously liberated themselves from the pretense of being for children. Hold on to your ballots: these titles tend to come from political figures or their spouses, authors who beam themselves into flawless family units as proofs of concept for broader political convictions.

In Chasten Buttigieg's "[Papa's Coming Home](#)," Rosie and Jojo plan for the return of their papa, who has been on the road. What's he been doing on the road? Who can say, but a calendar stuck to the refrigerator reads "papa in Mishuhgen." It's time to pull out all the stops (and the glitter) to prepare for Papa's arrival. The children bake a seven-layer cake, which is six more layers than this story has. With the help of their dad, Papa's partner, they load up the car with gifts until there's hardly any room for Papa to sit. What else is there to say? Someone sure did bind this.

Sonia Sotomayor's "[Just Shine!: How to Be a Better You](#)" should be stripped of its subtitle. The "you" in question is under-considered, because Sotomayor, like Buttigieg, is using a format meant for children to launder a tribute to an adult. The Supreme Court Justice's picture book purports to be about public service ("How will you help people shine?"), but it's actually an elegy to the author's impressive mother, Celina. Metaphor creeps in, in the form of celestial imagery: "The sun produces energy and lights up our days. The moon, however, reflects the light from the sun and uses it to light up the sky at night." A slightly phosphorescent explanation of the moon, but the court will allow it, because it's a flash of audience acknowledgment. Otherwise? "When she was just seventeen, Celina left home to join the US Army during World War II." A Wikipedia page does not a story make.

"[Mom's Busy Work](#)," by the former New Zealand Prime Minister [Jacinda Ardern](#), bears the hallmarks of a mental-perseverance book, because it's designed to address a specific quandary: in this instance, separation anxiety. But in the grand tradition of political authors (Jill Biden's "[Don't Forget, God Bless Our Troops](#)") stars her family, no names changed), Ardern appears as herself. "I had fun at daycare," her daughter says. "We made unicorns. I don't know if Mom had a fun day. She looked really tired when she got home. Maybe she made lots of unicorns." Wink, wink. "Mostly, I paint my

clothes. I know that makes Mom cross because she says it is hard to wash out, but Dad does the washing, so I don't know why it makes Mom upset." Gender-subversive wink, gender-subversive wink. "Mom's Busy Work" is like a centrifuge, separating denser components (being responsible for a country) from lighter ones (playing hide-and-seek).

But at least it has an audience greater than one. Meghan, Duchess of Sussex, has an idiosyncratic blend of celebrity and political fame, as well as a propensity for speaking about life as if she's the first person to have one. Her book, "[The Bench](#)," does little to dispel the idea that she's exchanging bewilderment for cash. Never have I seen someone lean so heavily on rescue chickens for P.R. Parasocial attacks on a celebrity's character are wearisome, so I wish the Duchess's choice to write a self-congratulatory story with the child as an afterthought had been made by genuinely anyone else. But "The Bench" is the narrative bottom.

Like Sotomayor's "Just Shine!" (these two might consider swapping titles), "The Bench" is another ode to a family member. In this case, it's the Duchess's husband. According to the flap copy, "The Bench" captures the "special relationship" between fathers and sons. Eat your heart out, Churchill. It's also about a plurality of benches. "This is your bench," the narrator explains, "Where you'll witness great joy." These lines appear under the second image, but the confusion has already set in. Perhaps someone with younger eyes might clock the tiny porch swing in the background as a "bench," and someone with more patience would accept it for what it is, a totally different bench from the first page's bench. A disciple of "[Where's Waldo?](#)," I kept scouring page 2 for the bench from page 1 and spent a good ten seconds convinced that I was having a vascular event. That article in the title casts a long shadow over the seating options that follow.

The writing is bewildering, the rhyme scheme atrocious. But the most persistent problem is purposeful: The "you" in "The Bench" is not the son in the illustrations, it's the father. In one panel, a father places a bandage on his son's knee (as the son sits on some random bench I have never seen before in my life), and the accompanying text reads, "He'll run and he'll fall. / And he'll take it in stride." On another page, a boy gazes at his father: "You'll love him. / You'll listen. / You'll be his supporter." Is this the sort of book her husband likes to read on his own? The watercolor illustrations show

many different fathers and sons, a gesture of inclusivity, but the use of the second-person singular never changes. One is so grammatically cockeyed by the time “The Bench” commits a real crime that one almost takes it in stride. “You’ll sit on this bench,” the Duchess writes, “As his giving tree.” At the risk of beating a dead stump, the magic of a children’s book, even a mediocre children’s book, is the self-contained world it creates. Any decision to leave that world should be the child’s. Alluding to a preposterously famous classic in the midst of one’s own attempt smacks of status-seeking at the expense of a child’s (or a husband’s) suspension of disbelief.

Childhood is not a prequel to adulthood. It’s an original production with its own thrills and terrors, deities and jokes. The chances of an adult writer speaking this language fluently are slimmer than they are of an adult writer publishing a passable literary novel. It’s an exclusive club. And the majority of these celebrities are standing on the wrong side of the velvet rope.

“The Bench,” for all its unique faults, is demonstrative of a commonality across many of these cadence-free concoctions: a shortage of charm. Their authorial voices are terribly self-serious. These are books written by people who play make-believe for a living or who have their platform because they can deliver a convincing story. Why choose now to skimp on charm, a quality each one of them surely has in spades? It’s as if the cleansing notion of children’s-book authorship was so enticing that they refused to muddy the waters with wit. Or maybe the condition of celebrity permeated their perspective to such an extent that it became impossible for them to separate themselves from the idea that exceptionality is a story in itself, that hurdles exist as talking points for future relatability, and that inside every adult is another adult—confusing the people who purchase these titles with the people who absorb them.

Still, perhaps children will see value in these stories. They are the ones manning the velvet rope, not us. One never knows what will sneak into a young mind and stay there. Even now, when I think of persnickety Ann in “Ann Likes Red,” grinning up from the last page, I will say this much for her: she taught me how to object. ♦

The Theatre

# A Merry and Rambunctious “Twelfth Night” in Central Park

At the newly renovated Delacorte, Saheem Ali directs a celebrity-packed production that is comically inventive but rarely stirring.

By Helen Shaw

August 22, 2025

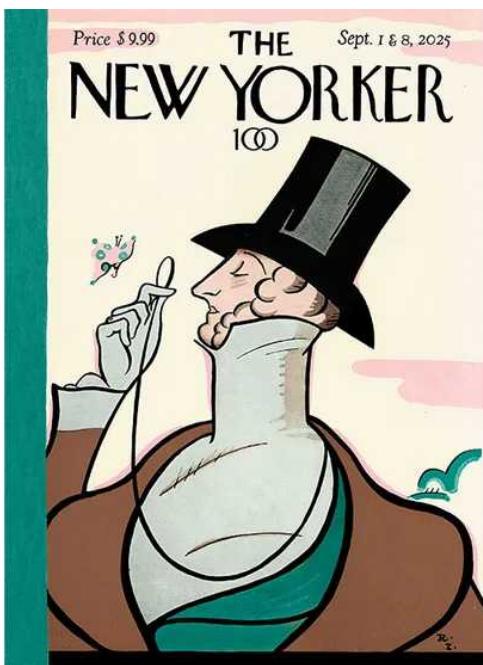


On the Saturday evening that I saw “Twelfth Night, or What You Will,” the sole production of the Public Theatre’s Shakespeare in the Park summer season, a raccoon scurried furtively along the top of a wall at the Delacorte. “Twelfth Night” marks the exuberant reopening of the open-air venue, after an eighteen-month renovation that promised, in part, to solve the amphitheatre’s raccoon problem. Central Park’s wildness, though, shall not be denied. This “Twelfth Night,” directed by Saheem Ali, comes fully stocked with celebrities—including Lupita Nyong’o as Viola, Sandra Oh as Olivia, and Peter Dinklage as Malvolio. But, for a few moments, the raccoon was our star.

A part of me did notice that we were lacking a certain animal nature *onstage*. One look at the set, designed by Maruti Evans, tells you that Ali and company are trying to underscore the comedy's romance, if in the high-school-prom sense of the word: the floor is patterned with red flowers, a string quartet plays as the audience finds its seats, and, at the back edge of the stage, thirteen-foot-tall letters spelling out "*WHAT YOU WILL*" glow red and purple under lighting designed by Bradley King. The letters, which actors sometimes pose alongside (Oh perches punningly in the O), recall those giant signs which give tourists a place to take selfies. It's Illyria as a step-and-repeat photo-call: red carpet, big stars, major rebrand.

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**The Culture Industry: A Centenary Issue**  
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The shipwrecked Viola, Shakespeare's deftest heroine, disguises herself as a man to stay safe while she finds her footing in a foreign land, and Nyong'o presents her as a figure of maximum spirit and pluck. Viola invents male mannerisms on the fly—she realizes a beat late that she should manspread when she sits—and treats her accidental romantic conquest, Countess Olivia, with a kind of merry contempt. Oh plays the countess as an impulsive drama queen who at first rejects all offers of marriage only to fall head over heels

for Viola's cross-dressed messenger. Oddly, Oh doesn't seem to express the bereavement that is Olivia's reason—or excuse—for withdrawing from the world of men. (We hear that her brother has died, but when we meet her she's in a white-and-black evening gown, rollicking around with her staff.) Neither Oh's dizzy countess nor Nyong'o's charming, feckless Viola ever takes the reins of this production, but that would be hard to do. Ali has the cast gallop straight through a streamlined script—the show is less than two hours, with no intermission—leaving nuance and character motivations behind.

Nyong'o, even when speaking lines about heartache, rarely registers her secret love for her employer, Duke Orsino (Khris Davis). Davis plays his part hilariously as a preening, empty-brained peacock—we see the Duke, variously, pumping iron, fencing with his buddies, and demanding post-workout massages. (The costume designer Oana Botez clearly had fun gilding a fencing jacket for him.) He doesn't seem interested either in Olivia, whom he theoretically wants to marry, or in the tempting, cross-dressed Viola. Ali does get comic mileage out of Orsino's house, depicted here as a luxe man cave, where a half-dozen bro courtiers flatter his fragile masculinity. But where we gain an amusing clown we lose a love story. Viola and Orsino both at least appear to really admire Orsino's impressive muscles, so . . . swipe right, I guess.

Nyong'o conveys the show's deeper romantic yearning in one crucial scene, when Ali changes the script to let Viola sing to her beloved at dinner. Viola and her supposedly dead brother, Sebastian—played by Junior Nyong'o, Lupita's actual brother and the show's standout discovery—are portrayed here as Swahili speakers, and when she serenades Orsino she sings the great Swahili love song “Malaika.” Orsino doesn't understand what she's saying, which makes the moment both cunningly multilayered and true to Shakespeare's playful gender confusion. “Malaika” she calls the hulking Duke—angel, beautiful girl.

“Twelfth Night” usually belongs either to Viola or to Malvolio. This time, it's Malvolio's show. The character, Olivia's bossy butler, is one of the greatest parts in Shakespeare, and Dinklage delights in it. Malvolio's sneering high-handedness enrages the hedonistic members of Olivia's household: her drunken cousin, Sir Toby Belch (John Ellison Conlee); his

vacuous buddy Andrew Aguecheek (Jesse Tyler Ferguson); and her saucy maid, Maria (Daphne Rubin-Vega). To orchestrate his downfall, they make him believe that Olivia has fallen in love with him. Nobility awaits! Dinklage, Conlee, and Ferguson—all gifted comics—have developed some wonderful bits: Toby and Andrew snort coke off the edge of a bathtub at one point, and a frowning Dinklage bustles around with a hair dryer, ruining their fun. Yet the occasional poignancy of both Toby and Andrew, the sot and the fool, doesn't emerge in this production. Only Dinklage finds the tragic notes in his role, as well as a Buster Keaton level of physical comedy.

What most of us remember about Malvolio is his yellow stockings, but Dinklage's performance reminds us that his character also best embodies the play's title. "Twelfth Night" refers to the final day of the Christmas revels, a time of misrule and carnival, when the social order has been turned, temporarily, upside down. Malvolio, tricked by a fake letter written by Maria, takes class mobility seriously. He comes to believe that "some have greatness thrust upon 'em," reaches above his station, and then is driven nearly mad. Social inversion is a lie; after Twelfth Night comes Epiphany. That's a bleak thing for Shakespeare to tell us.

There's a great deal of devalued currency in "Twelfth Night." Wallets, coins, and rings are carelessly passed around this little society, and messages are corrupted—from Orsino's wooing of Olivia, which is accidentally undone by his own go-between, Viola, to the letters that deceive Malvolio. It's important, when staging "Twelfth Night," to consider those shifts in exchange and value. For instance, since silly Sir Toby is broke, much of what he does is predicated on drawing money from the richer Sir Andrew like a bank account; the maid Maria's prank involves a mésalliance plot because she herself wants to marry Toby, who is of a higher class. Yet Ali's production isn't interested in making these subtleties and hierarchies clear. The plot requires us to understand all that rich-poor, upstairs-downstairs stuff, but, when we first encounter Maria, Rubin-Vega is wearing a floor-length ice-blue satin gown with a cape and diamond chandelier earrings. If you had to guess, you'd assume that she was the lady of the house or, I don't know, Elsa from "Frozen."

She looks great, though. An aristocratically garbed Maria might not make any narrative sense, but perhaps Ali and Botez just wanted to present

RubinVega gorgeously, to approach the play as a kind of court pageant or gala where everyone dresses to impress. And, anyway, we may not be meant to take things like “sense” seriously; the whole night is a frothy frolic, the Park sighs with warm breezes, I did have a wonderful time. Ali gestures at a few serious ideas: near the beginning of the play, he has Nyong’o escape from her shipwreck in a Zodiac, the type of small inflatable boat sometimes used to rescue refugees from the Channel, and the siblings speak their lines to each other in Swahili, making their long-delayed reunion a wonderfully sweet and private thing. But these moments remain isolated.

So this “Twelfth Night” is merry and rambunctious and comically inventive—the curtain call becomes a party, with the entire cast in fabulous disco-medieval regalia—but almost never truly stirring. If there’s an argument for chucking reason to the wind and just enjoying the vibes, then the experimental musician Moses Sumney, as the jester Feste, is best at making it. Drifting around the stage in billowing black silk drapery, Sumney pops in and out of scenes, singing with a mystical, human-theremin voice, accompanying himself on electric guitar. When he comes by, Feste turns the mood strange and woozy and full of possibility—pills after midnight, or what you will. ♦

The Current Cinema

# “Splitsville” Plays Infidelity for Laughs; “A Little Prayer” Shows What’s Really at Stake

The meticulous shotmaking of Michael Angelo Covino’s film belies a dramatic staleness, whereas Angus MacLachlan orchestrates a powerfully understated catharsis.

By Justin Chang

August 22, 2025



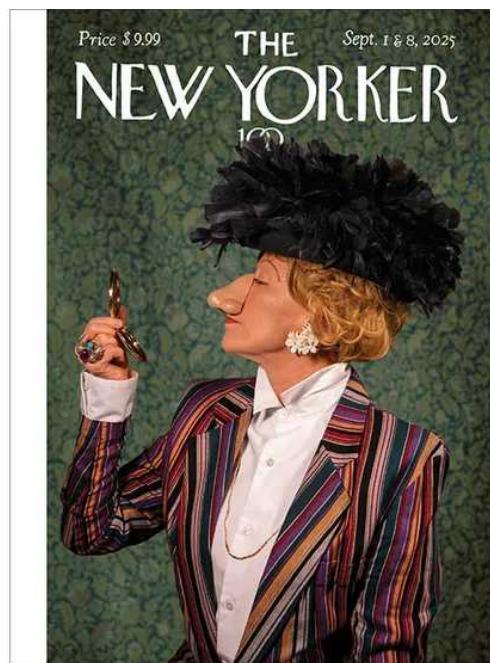
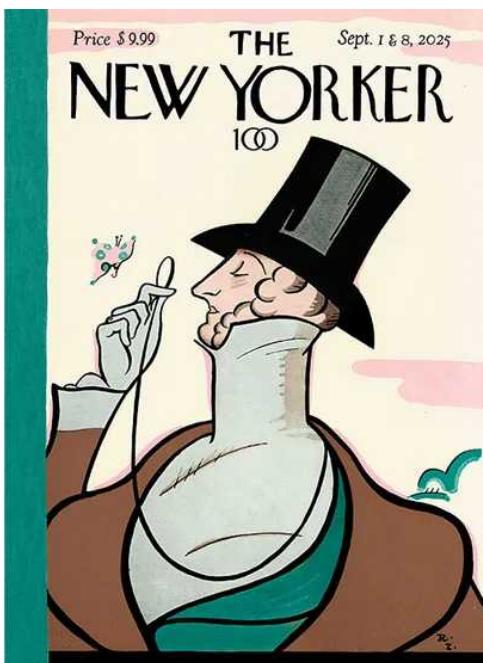
In the studiedly rambunctious comedy “Splitsville,” Michael Angelo Covino and Kyle Marvin play a pair of homewreckers. The home, a beachside vacation pad with natural-wood siding and floor-to-ceiling windows, belongs to Paul (Covino), a property developer, and his wife, Julie (Dakota Johnson), a ceramic artist. The wrecking begins when Carey (Marvin), Paul’s best friend, ill-advisedly sleeps with Julie—and then, more ill-advisedly still, confesses it to Paul the next day. Paul and Julie have an open marriage; their relationship is as modern as their taste in architecture, and

Carey, guileless to a fault, assumes that his friend won't mind. Instead, Paul reacts with a fury that all but blasts the roof off: walls are bashed in, furniture collapses, a window goes bye-bye, and some innocent goldfish lose their aquarium. The men don't get out unscathed, either. At one point, Paul improvises a blowtorch and singes Carey's face, leaving his peepers hairless. Who says the eyebrow and the lowbrow don't mix?

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## The Culture Industry: A Centenary Issue

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The tensions recede, sort of, but the effects of Julie and Carey's mistake ripple out in all directions. Julie, blessed with Johnson's cool reserve, has no qualms; this is the first time she's cashed in on her extramarital benefits, whereas Paul has been sleeping with other women for years—or so she thinks. Carey, for his part, is inspired to give his own failing marriage another chance. His wife, Ashley (Adria Arjona), has spent their fourteen months of marriage flagrantly cheating on him. Divorce seems an easy option, since they have no kids and no money—he's a gym teacher, she's a life coach—in tidy contrast to Paul and Julie, who have a mischievous young son and their (once) beautiful home. What unites all four is a willingness to experiment: before long, Carey and Ashley have tabled their

divorce and opened up their marriage. The payoff is a drolly whirligig centerpiece sequence in which their small apartment is suddenly swarming with Ashley's boyfriends. The joke is that the guys stick around not for Ashley, with whom things invariably fizzle, but for Carey, the friendliest, most understanding of cuckolds.

Marvin has the likable-sad-sack thing down cold. He's tall and goofily handsome, and his air of genial oafishness pairs well with Covino's more sardonic, misanthropic vibes. They're like the angel and the devil, respectively, on a Judd Apatow protagonist's shoulders. The two actors are also best friends in real life, and "Splitsville" is their second ode to manly misbehavior; the first was "The Climb," a scrappier, nastier affair, from 2020. (Covino directed both movies, each time working from a script that he and Marvin co-wrote.) It's no surprise that they've recycled some of the ingredients here, or that the results, with a higher-budget gloss, taste both slicker and staler. Like the earlier film, "Splitsville" spoons out big lumps of bromantic aggression and self-pity, sprinkles in a few whiplash-inducing emotional reversals, and then pours the whole funny-sad mixture into a cutesy multi-chapter mold, complete with onscreen titles. (Each chapter here is called an "article," in an arch nod to the film's nonbinding marital contracts.)

Every scene in "The Climb" took the form of a sinuous, meticulously choreographed long take, and although Covino has relaxed his approach here, he hasn't lost his sense of spatial coherence. When Paul and Carey smack each other around, the cleanliness of the compositions amplifies the messiness of the fisticuffs; the sequence becomes a formalist man-child melee—a dad-bod "John Wick." Given that so many mainstream comedies nowadays are shot with murky indifference, it's easy to appreciate even the slightest hint of a visual sensibility. Perhaps too easy: Covino's technique, for all its finesse, has a mechanistic quality that soon turns deadening. The movie is less a screwball comedy than a screwball contraption—a madcap farce that the screenwriters have reduced to a math problem. New romantic alignments and realignments are introduced, exhaustingly, by the minute; every action spurs a symmetrical reaction, and every gag in the first half finds an inevitable callback in the second. As Paul and Carey's friendship ebbs and flows, the question of what Julie and Ashley could possibly be

getting out of this strained nonsense recedes ever more damningly into the background.

Johnson, a romantic heroine who always seems to be silently deconstructing the idea of romance, is poised enough to emerge unscathed. If you want to see her in a movie that grants her some agency, there's always "Materialists." Arjona, the breakout discovery of last year's excellent "Hit Man," has a rougher time of it. Her Ashley is the movie's fourth and fifth wheel, dismissed as both a perfidious troublemaker and a New Age airhead —a life coach in need of a wife coach. "Splitsville," I think, wants both to satirize the anything-goes absurdity of modern romance and to show us how little we know what we really want from life and love. But it adds up to not much more than a four-way shrug of indifference: nothing here really matters, the movie itself least of all.

Like "Splitsville," "A Little Prayer" involves a spot of adultery. Mercifully, the similarities end there. This sombre, delicately observed drama, from the director and screenwriter Angus MacLachlan, follows an unassuming woman in her thirties, Tammy (Jane Levy), who lives in a pleasant suburb of Winston-Salem, North Carolina. She and her husband, David (Will Pullen), live in a small house on property owned by David's parents, Bill (David Strathairn) and Venida (Celia Weston), who have become so close to Tammy that they regard her as their own flesh and blood. Bill's fondness for his daughter-in-law is especially apparent. We can see how in synch they are simply from the way they sit at breakfast—both entranced, not for the first time, by the sound of a woman's voice, somewhere in the neighborhood, crooning a morning spiritual. Venida finds the singing obnoxious, but for Bill and Tammy it's humbly transcendent—one of the little prayers of the title, a private entreaty turned public offering. Those who have ears to hear, let them hear.

MacLachlan, a playwright and a Winston-Salem native who has directed two earlier features ("Goodbye to All That" and "Abundant Acreage Available"), clearly knows something about the illuminative, enveloping power of religious music. There is a deeply reverberant scene in his screenplay for Phil Morrison's wonderful 2005 film, "Junebug," which takes place at a church gathering, where a modern-day prodigal son (Alessandro Nivola) leads a small group in an a-cappella performance of the hymn "Softly and

Tenderly.” It’s a song of restoration and mercy, a call to submit, with weary gratitude, to Jesus’ love—and also, in this rendition, to the soothing lilt in Nivola’s voice and the quavering harmonies he achieves with his fellow-singers. But the faces of those watching and listening—some grateful, some reproachful, some utterly uncomprehending—tell a more strained and complicated story. In their silent expressions, we glean a history of frayed family bonds and unbridgeable chasms, and, in at least one case, that strange, unsettling phenomenon in which the person you love is revealed to be a stranger.

Although “A Little Prayer” is less tonally ambitious and more modestly scaled than “Junebug,” it is just as quietly perceptive—which is not to say that it’s always quiet. At one point, David’s sister, Patti (Anna Camp), rolls back into town, railing against a ne’er-do-well husband and dragging a clearly traumatized young daughter with her. Patti is as blowsily uninhibited as Tammy is sweetly reserved; she’s a prodigal daughter, and she chafes, understandably, against the unspoken reality that her parents, and even her own child, clearly prefer Tammy’s nurturing presence. Where Tammy proves no more fortunate than Patti is in her choice of husband: David, distant and uncommunicative, is having an affair with his office assistant, Narcedalia (Dascha Polanco). It’s an especially brazen indiscretion, considering that their workplace, a sheet-metal company, is a family business, with David reporting to his own dad. It’s not the only instance of like father, like son. Both men are military veterans, and it’s implied, though never spelled out, that David’s issues—he also has a drinking problem—are rooted in P.T.S.D., from time he spent serving overseas. When David repeatedly rebuffs his father’s warnings (“Straighten up and fly right”), Bill, a bit out of his depth but determined to shield Tammy from pain at any cost, sets out to make things as right as he possibly can.

“A Little Prayer” is spare yet brisk, and it unfolds with a graceful, almost musical sense of modulation: Camp and Weston, both veterans of MacLachlan’s work, strike bracing high notes of acerbic wit, which Strathairn and Levy answer with an understated bass line of emotion. At one point, MacLachlan orchestrates a heart-stopping moment of reckoning for Bill and Tammy, written with a sudden, cathartic directness—a break in their usual language of deferential hesitations—which the actors underplay to perfection. Writing from the 2023 Sundance Film Festival, where the film

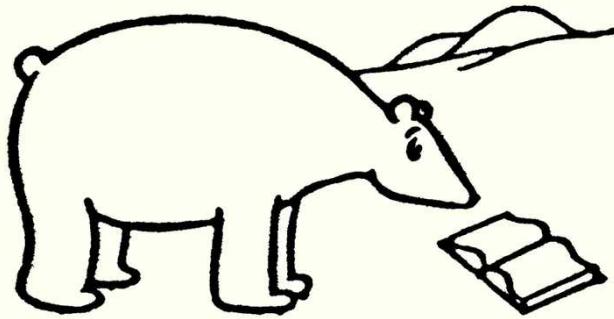
first screened, the critic Ty Burr rightly invoked Yasujirō Ozu’s “Tokyo Story” (1953), in which a father-in-law and a daughter-in-law—played, respectively, and immortally, by Chishū Ryū and Setsuko Hara—together navigate shoals of grief, both old and new. The comparison is fully earned. No less than Ozu, MacLachlan commits to the conviction that the deepest, truest bonds are not always forged in blood. ♦

# Poems

- [70](#)
- [Ichthys](#)

**By Patricia Smith**

August 25, 2025



Well, first, it seems immeasurably unjust  
that no one clues you to this bombshell—you  
will lose your pubic hair! No one brought up  
this grave development, the swift début  
of silver slowly turning soulless gray,  
then just an anarchy of wire, 'til one  
by one your glistening strands betray  
you, disengage and drift. Behold and lo,  
you're bald in undreamt ways. My perfumed kink  
and curl, dense lace embellishing the door  
to everything, no longer shines its light  
for episodic visitors. I own  
a home not quite abandoned, simply stripped,  
the fireplace still ablaze within its walls.

I'm shamed by how much satisfaction I  
experience when I scan random crowds  
and whisper *Everyone I see will die*.  
The difference now is that I'm well aware  
that I'm included. If I shut my eyes  
to sleep, to hush this drowsy body down  
because the world is swirling, when I wake  
I'm just a little farther underground.  
And, yes, I'm terrified, and so are you,  
admit it. Someone said you die and just  
relive the life you've lost, again, again,  
again, with all its woe and wounds. *That's hell.*  
I think I'd rather ceaselessly relive  
that godforsaken hour before I die.

I mourn the many poems that I failed  
to write, and then those poems that I failed—  
the poems I assumed would shove a life  
back into life, unlatch a cage or turn  
a thousand thirsty bullets back around,  
revive a fallen daddy, shrink a war,  
unreeling lines I thought could heal a thing,  
slam shut a thing, reverse a thing, or teach  
an Annie Pearl to love her reckless child.  
I grieve the lawless verses that fought back  
and silenced me because I lacked the spine  
required to know the tale they told was mine.  
I trusted myself blind. I really thought  
the words would grow to gospel in my hands.

And back to death again. It hovers, smirks,  
and rides that vile McRib right to my mouth  
and down. It's eying me. Who'll greet me at  
the gates? A God? No God? I've seen the hope—  
resuscitated Woofs and Fluffys, kin  
now tumorless and gleeful, those  
who raised you younger than they ever were  
all hauling ass through Heaven toward you.

My daddy, with his glinting golden mouth,  
and Brady Bear my Berner, Ron the mutt,  
and, yes, my mother, maybe with a heart  
that works. This Hallmark paradise does  
what a blindfold does—you crave a light  
that isn't there until it is. It's not.

But what about the rampant blaze that scars  
that other place? Incendiary claws  
that fight to pull you down? Most poets swear  
they've been to Hell, prefer the place because  
there's no gap left for silence, there's no time  
to muse, regret, revise, or wonder what  
you've done or haven't, just the bellowing  
of flames that shift your skin. The baying of  
Beelzebub begins and keeps beginning.

But I suspect this too is trickery—  
a candy dangled, daring poets near.  
We don't mind fire if there's a tale attached.  
But what of me, whose greatest fear is dirt  
and silence? What if now is what there is?

For what must be the thousandth time, I watch  
the shudder-hipped industrious machine that is  
Beyoncé's body and it's like I'm on  
another planet. When you're 70,  
it's best to file that under "Kiss my old  
decrepit ass" and go about your biz.  
So what's life like? Let's see. I move,  
a sound comes out—a yowl, a groan, a pained  
unwinding hiss. Or, if it's just my knee  
again, a scream that freaks the birds outside.  
My neck is prone to locking, and my eyes  
can only work behind a nerdy chunk  
of thick prescription glass. And, oops, it's time  
to wind this sonnet down, but there is soooo

much left to gripe about, so let's proceed.  
I stare at my reflection, and I see  
my melody is waning—no surprise,  
but only blues take root and hold. I spot  
inside myself the girl who never was  
less than a dance, who loved her daddy like  
a god. I wallow in my history  
because there's just so goddamned much  
of it. And then I wonder if I've done  
enough. Or anything. I ponder that  
until I have to sit and catch my breath.  
Oh, hallelujah all this old. It's what  
I've done. I write, I love, I break apart.  
I wrote. I loved. I broke apart.

*This is drawn from “[The Intentions of Thunder](#).”*

# Ichthys

By Jay Fielden

August 25, 2025



Waist deep one day in a stream,  
I caught a glimpse  
in the mirrored jelly of an eye  
that barbed us both  
when bucking out the buried hook.  
The surface of the river in its  
slow and swollen glide  
flowed black and heavy  
round my legs,  
sucking at my boots,  
throwing back  
what looked upon it ripples  
ebbing past, flickerings  
of inward thoughts  
the flow of years had passed—  
hard-bitten guilts, pet sins,

self-pities, lost lands,  
mauled bones, exit wounds—  
pushing through the heart,  
poisoning the blood, poking out.  
In the gorgeous summer air,  
between the slip and squeeze,  
it gasped, and flashed  
the face of death,  
unfit for this temporary mess,  
and then, like that, was back  
among the sunken leaves,  
rolled stones, high sky, bright grass—  
shimmering, fragile as a glass.

# Puzzles & Games

- [The Crossword: Monday, August 25, 2025](#)

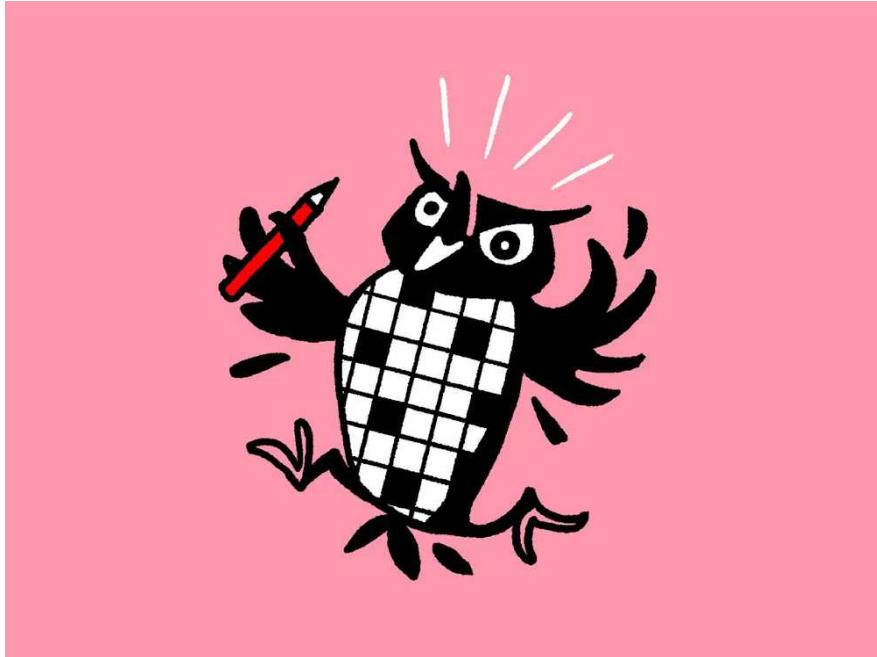
Crossword

# The Crossword: Monday, August 25, 2025

Today's theme: Monoculture.

By Mollie Cowger, Andy Kravis

August 25, 2025



*A previous version of this crossword contained an error in 3-Down.*

# The Mail

- [Letters from Our Readers](#)

The Mail

# Letters from Our Readers

Readers respond to Siddhartha Mukherjee's article about early cancer detection and S. C. Cornell's review of "The Genius Myth," by Helen Lewis.

August 25, 2025

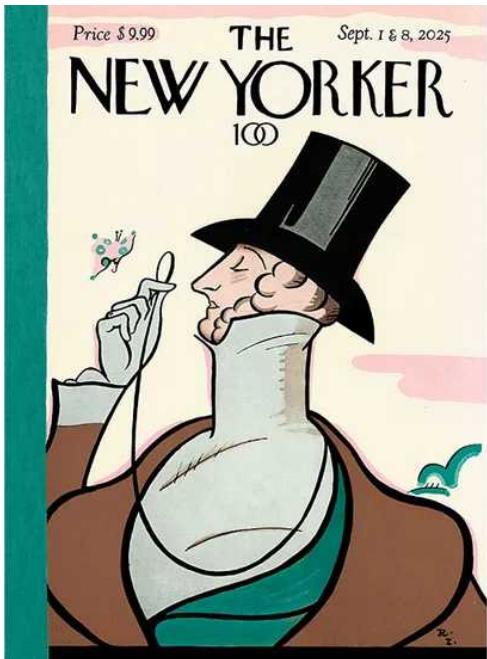
## Medical Trials

Siddhartha Mukherjee, in his piece on early-stage cancer detection, presents a convincing argument concerning the perils of screening (["Early Warnings,"](#) June 23rd). He also suggests that the biomedical model, which finds disease, is being privileged over the public-health model, which seeks to prevent illness and can do so effectively when given enough resources. Clean air and water, quality food, adequate housing, safe workplaces, education, and vaccination contribute far more to the health of a population than catching disease early. But biomedicine is where the money is, and screening brings in a significant share. Mammography alone is an eleven-billion-dollar industry.

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Mukherjee cites the case of his friend Sherry as an example of the futility of screening: she volunteered for an ovarian-cancer trial and was monitored for years even after receiving an early negative result, yet she still died of metastatic ovarian cancer. The experience of a patient of mine, a middle-aged woman with advanced breast cancer, illustrates another pitfall. After her diagnosis, she sobbed not because of her drastically shortened life expectancy but because of the shame and guilt she felt at missing her last mammogram. Screening is the comfort food of medicine, but, like most comfort food, it isn't always good for us.

*Burden Lundgren, M.P.H., Ph.D., R.N.  
Norfolk, Va.*

Mukherjee discusses the harm resulting from false positives and unnecessary procedures, but this notion of harm doesn't account for the perceptions or the wishes of patients. It wasn't that long ago that doctors, believing they knew best and not wanting to cause anxiety in patients with terminal illnesses, hid cancer diagnoses from them. Doing so would be widely considered unethical today, yet doctors persist in deciding how much stress patients can handle.

My husband and I have each had a brush with cancer. In my case, early detection saved me. I was monitored for quite a while, and although I felt anxious when it was time to test, I also experienced tremendous relief with each passing negative. But my husband's doctor opted for "watchful waiting" rather than an intervention, which led to more anxiety and, ultimately, to a treatment that was harsher and had a less certain outcome. (It has, so far, been successful.)

I understand that early screening hasn't been proved to save lives, statistically, and that such tests are flawed, but these facts say more about our limited ability to treat cancer and predict its course than about how to treat people. Patients should be given autonomy and be able to weigh for themselves any potential risks. I would much prefer the anxiety of a false positive to the possibility of death from a cancer diagnosed too late.

*Alicia Kershaw  
New York City*

## **Myth Buster**

S. C. Cornell, in her review of "The Genius Myth," by Helen Lewis, takes issue with Lewis's argument that we should be more careful in our use of the term "genius" rather than dropping it altogether ([Books](#), June 23rd). Cornell writes, "A better inoculation against the idea of special people may be simply to abandon the idea of genius and its underlying assumption that, at a certain point, an unusual talent transfigures into something more mystical." Perhaps even better would be to remember that someone who possesses the extraordinary creativity, expertise, and perseverance required to conduct revolutionary scientific research, invent a world-changing technology, or found a multibillion-dollar company can still be a rotten person.

*David Z. Hambrick  
Lansing, Mich.*

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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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