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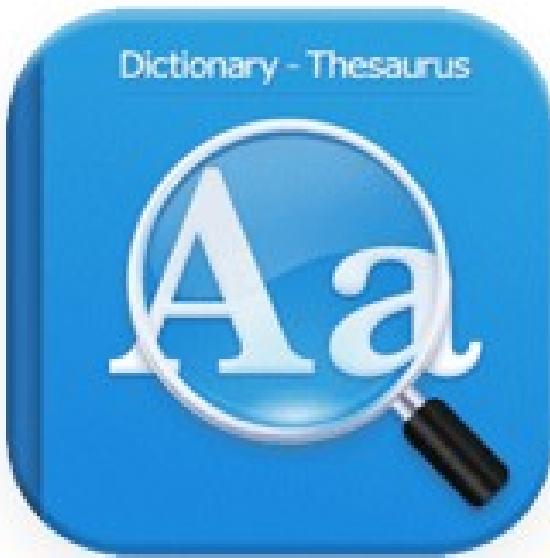
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Goings On

- [Usher, the King of R. & B.](#)
- [Le Veau d'Or Makes a Thrillingly Old-Fashioned Comeback](#)

Goings On

Usher, the King of R. & B.

Also: The wrenching documentary “Daughters,” the Fourth Wall Ensemble in Green-Wood Cemetery, Lauren Collins on truth and deception.

August 30, 2024



Sheldon Pearce

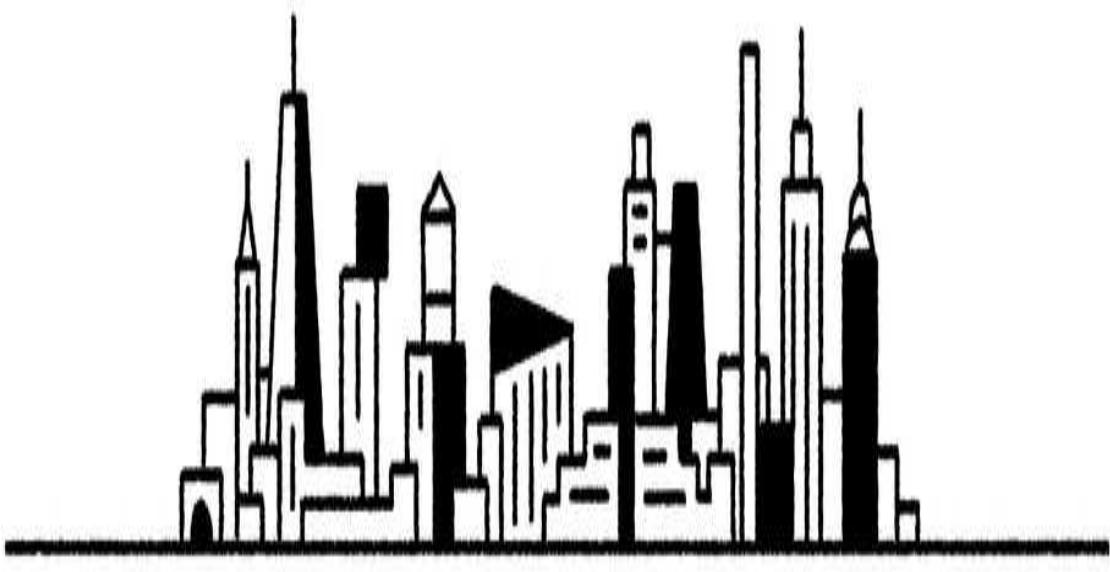
A contributor to Goings On since 2020.

The king of R. & B. is a loaded, often disputed title, but if there is one artist who sits upon the sweaty horndog throne, it's **Usher**. After débuting in 1994, with a self-titled album that channelled the emergent hip-hop soul of the producers Chucky Thompson and Devante Swing with a juvenile naïveté, the singer and dancer rose from boy wonder to diamond sensation; in the late nineties and early two-thousands, a trio of albums both defined and refined his persona of a pleading playboy. On “My Way,” from 1997, Usher exuded a newfound confidence, as he grew into his chest-out heartthrob image. He unveiled ruminative songs of missed connection on his more polished follow-up, “8701” (2001), for which he assembled an R. & B. superteam of Babyface, Jimmy Jam & Terry Lewis, the Neptunes, and

Jermaine Dupri. His 2004 opus, “Confessions,” set a new benchmark for R. & B. that turns gossip into melodrama. On all three albums, you can hear an attentive student of the genre—in all its pomp and tragedy—growing more masterly as he becomes more accomplished; his vision for his music was in complete alignment with its theatrical execution.



In the two decades that followed, Usher built a reputation as a showman, making gyration and circus-like spectacle integral to his act. The years have made him only more practiced and animated as a performer, chops he put on full display during Las Vegas residencies, in 2021 and 2022, that were fit for “Magic Mike,” and in a massive Super Bowl halftime production, in February. Both were filled with costume changes, intense choreography, and special guests, the pageantry built to service his sultry catalogue of hits, which range from such bleeding-heart ballads as “U Got It Bad” to energized dance-floor rattlers like “Yeah!” He can evoke both the cabaret and the gentlemen’s club, and he brings that energy to three shows at Barclays Center, on his “Past Present Future” tour (Sept. 6-7 and Sept. 10), as he seems to revel in his decades of work honing his steaming act for the stage.



About Town

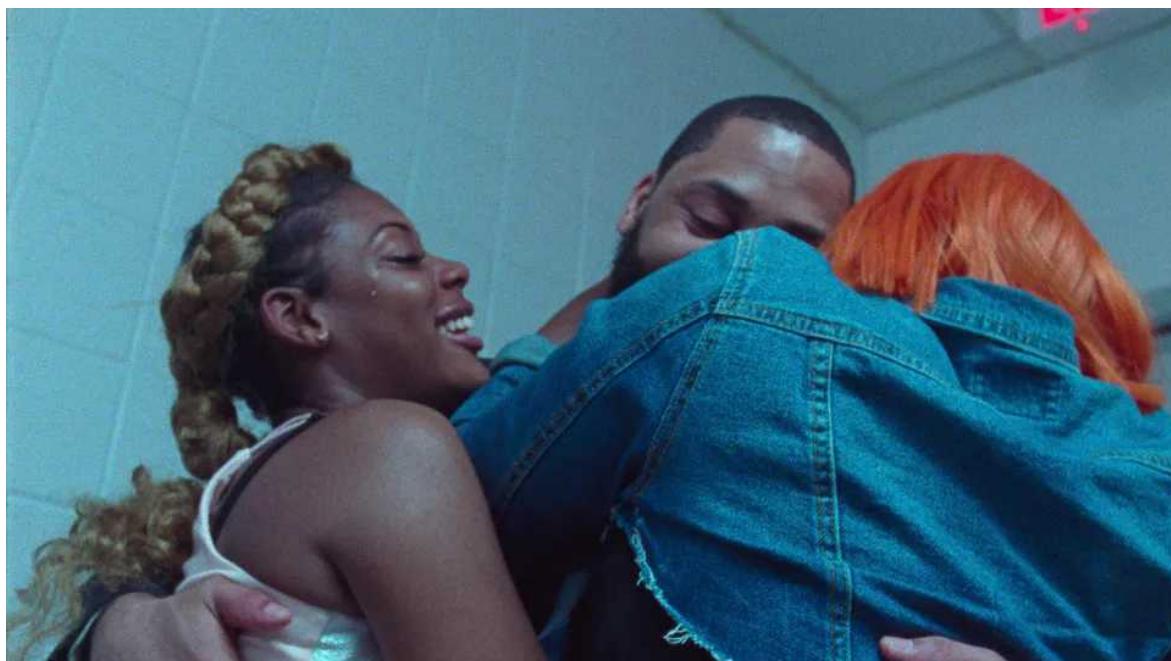
Off Off Broadway

Diana Ly's "**Sex and the Abbey**," directed by Emily Lyon, is a medieval miniature: four canonesses sing hymns, structuring their day with prayer, as projections of illustrated manuscripts suffuse them in red or azurite blue. We're in Gandersheim Abbey, where Hrotsvit (Jen Anaya), the (real) tenth-century authoress and playwright, rehearses her fretful young charges for a command performance. You can't swing a censer these days without hitting a romantic take on ecclesiastical seclusion; fans of such Off Broadway jewels as "Usus" and "Mary Gets Hers" will recognize Ly's collision of the cloister and a comic, modern vernacular. It's mostly persuasive here, as a plea for refuge—after the peace of the show's sixty-five minutes, the world outside feels too rough for our flourishing.—*Helen Shaw (The Brick; through Sept. 7.)*

Indie Rock

Doug Martsch has never quite cut the figure of an indie-rock icon. With a mountaineer's beard and fatherly tufts of hair, the **Built to Spill** front man wouldn't look amiss at a chess tournament. Martsch doesn't have the steez of a Julian Casablancas or even a Stephen Malkmus, but his growling guitar work and his formidable sneer—he sounds a bit like Oasis's Liam Gallagher, but American—are unquestionably rock and roll. Built to Spill is taking its sophomore album on tour for the record's thirtieth birthday: "There's Nothing Wrong with Love" is a wild bildungsroman that sees Martsch stargazing, beefing with his stepfather, and reminiscing about his Idaho salad days. The songs are youthfully intense, but the lyricism is always tempered and thoughtful, never overwrought.—*Leo Lasdun (Webster Hall; Sept. 7-8.)*

Movies



The emotionally shattering documentary "**Daughters**," directed by Natalie Rae and Angela Patton, is about many things, including the limiting effects of poverty and our country's troubling history of race and incarceration. But the frame is a program called Date with Dad, which Patton founded and has run for sixteen years. Through it, a number of young girls are brought to prisons where their fathers are serving time. Dressed in their finest—the fathers are loaned suits—the small families are given the gift of time: to

spend it talking, dancing, in physical touch. (Increasingly, prisons are putting an end to in-person visits.) In the end, the political and emotional density of this supreme work of empathy shows us the deep damage our penal system inflicts on innocence—and the effects of interrupted intimacy.—*Hilton Als* (*Netflix.*)

Classical

Caroline Shaw’s “Partita for 8 Voices” can sound like a convocation of spirits in any venue, but a catacomb may just be the perfect spot. The piece’s eerie sentence fragments, winding melodies, and ethereal harmonies create the sense that ghosts have popped in from across the veil to converse together (and pick up a Pulitzer along the way). For an early kickoff to spooky season, the **Fourth Wall Ensemble** performs the work at the historic Green-Wood Cemetery. The program also includes pieces by Monteverdi and Byrd, along with improvised medieval chanting. One starry guest: the spirit of Leonard Bernstein is expected to tune in from his plot.—*Jane Bua* (*Sept. 5-7.*)

Dance

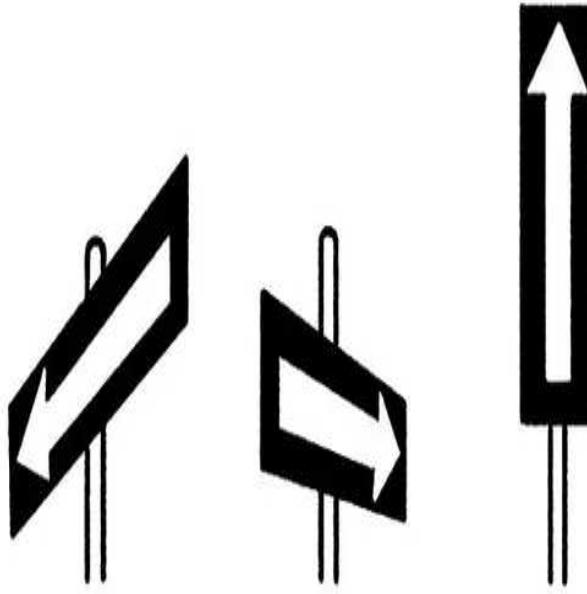


Sharon Eyal—as a star dancer, and later the house choreographer, of the Batsheva Dance Company—exemplified the hyper-pliant, expressively awkward side of Batsheva’s guru, Ohad Naharin. Teaming up with Gai Behar, a producer of raves, Eyal created an aesthetic that crossed Naharin’s Gaga technique with rave culture: packs of androgynous dancers mincing on tiptoe and bending their bodies ad nauseam. The North American première of her “R.O.S.E.” takes place in the vastness of the Park Avenue Armory, where audience members join performers on the dance floor, as the d.j. Ben UFO spins. If you’ve ever wanted to know what it feels like to party with aliens, this might be your big chance.—*[Brian Seibert](#)* (Sept. 5-12.)

Movies

For the extraordinary 2019 performance piece “My First Film,” the filmmaker Zia Anger told the story of her unreleased first feature, by way of live commentary and real-time manipulations of her footage. Now Anger doubles down on her metafictional inspirations with an equally remarkable movie, also called “**My First Film**,” which tells the same story—and also the story of the performance piece—by way of a collagelike narrative that daringly blends documentary and fiction. Anger dramatizes the unreleased film’s stressful on-location shoot with actors playing versions of her cast and

crew, of herself, and of her friends and family. She also appears, and reflects unsparingly on her missteps during the original shoot and on the real-life experiences that she struggled to capture there; the result is an instant classic of artistic process.—[*Richard Brody*](#) (*MUBI*; starting Sept. 6.)



Pick Three

The staff writer [*Lauren Collins*](#) on truth and deception.

1. I've been thinking a lot about deception. The show "[**Killer Lies: Chasing a True Crime Con Man**](#)"—based on [an article](#) I wrote in 2022, about the treacherous career of a self-proclaimed expert on serial killers—premiered this week, on Nat Geo TV and Hulu. Kiese Laymon's memoir, "**Heavy**" (2018), is, to my mind, the most incisive book ever written about lies, the "dishonesty, cowardice, and misplaced self-righteousness" that smother honesty in America—so much so that truth is the dare and not its opposite.
2. Supposedly, the whistle blows and the secrecy stops—except that's not the way things work in the modern surveillance state, as Kerry Howley demonstrates in the book "**Bottoms Up and the Devil Laughs**" (2023). Howley warns that "with endless information comes the ability to take

information from its context, to tell stories perfectly matched to the intentions of the teller, freed from the complex texture of reality,” illuminating the government’s ability to pick the most distorting cherries from the bottomless fruit bowl of personal data which is being harvested from each one of us at every moment.



3. The French director Jacques Audiard’s demented new film, “**Emilia Pérez**” (out in the U.S. in November), deserves credit for creating a genre—the queer narco musical—but the movie is, more traditionally, about a person tired of living a lie. A Mexican cartel boss undergoes gender-confirmation surgery and emerges as a philanthropist-empath named Emilia Pérez. Her embrace of her true self is a risk. So is Audiard’s choice to tell the story—in song, no less, in a country not his own—of a trans woman tracing the disappeared.

P.S. Good stuff on the Internet:

- [An Ode to L.L. Bean](#)
- [“Spit,” by Ruby Opalka](#)
- [Chocolate-chipless cookies](#)

The Food Scene

Le Veau d'Or Makes a Thrillingly Old-Fashioned Comeback

The restaurateurs behind Frenchette and Le Rock have face-lifted and spit-shined the city's oldest surviving French restaurant while remaining obsessed with its history.

By Helen Rosner

August 25, 2024



Le Veau d'Or first opened, in 1937, on a tony stretch of East Sixtieth Street. A small, wood-panelled room a few steps below street level, with lipstick-red booths and a teensy bar, it was one of a slew of puckish little French bistro in the neighborhood. Nearly ninety years later, it is the city's oldest surviving French restaurant, and the only one of its original cohort that remains. Over its near-century of operation, Le Veau d'Or has changed little, even as the societal tastes around it have churned. Once a white-hot ticket, packed with celebrities and the beau monde, over the decades it declined into a fusty throwback—a dreary haunt for old-timers. Five years ago, after a long professional courtship, the chef-restaurateurs Lee Hanson and Riad

Nasr, the duo behind the polished, high-production-value brasseries [Frenchette](#) and [Le Rock](#), bought the restaurant from the Tréboux family, its longtime owners, and closed it for an extended rejuvenation period. It finally reopened last month. Despite being facelifted and spit-shined, it remains anachronistic, backward-looking, obsessed with its own history. It's one of the coolest restaurants I've been to in ages.



You certainly don't need to know anything about the backstory of Le Veau d'Or before stepping inside for dinner, though plenty will reveal itself in the course of the evening. Even the format of the meal is proudly archaic: as in the past, it's an obligatory prix fixe that, for a relatively reasonable hundred and twenty-five dollars, encompasses your choice of an appetizer, an entrée, and a dessert, with a salad course of lettuces vinaigrette that arrives, *très* Frenchily, after the main course. An old menu, likely from the nineteen-forties or fifties, hangs in a frame on one wall, not far from the windowed table that Orson Welles is said to have preferred back in the day. The list of dishes, handwritten in a swooping, Gallic cursive, is surrounded by a printed illustration of jolly cherubs dressed in tutus and chefs' toques leading a reluctant calf to its somewhat brutal culinary fate. The same half-naked Kewpies adorn the present-day menu, though the cleaver has been swapped out for a smaller, less ominous dinner knife. The present-day bill of fare, too, is only lightly modernized: *les escargots provençale* (snails broiled under a

blanket of butter, garlic, and tomato concasse), *tête de veau ravigote* (crispy cubes of veal headcheese), chilled lobster macédoine, a delightfully wobbly *oeuf en gelée*—a whole boiled egg suspended like a specimen in an amber aspic of consommé—that calls back to what the *Times*, in [a scathing 1977 review](#), highlighted as one of the restaurant's very few dishes worth recommending.



Thank goodness that the hit rate, these days, is considerably higher. The starters range from the straightforward—a plateau of oysters with pinky-size chipolata sausages; a chilled arrangement of ham, oeufs mayonnaise, and celery rémoulade—to the fussily extravagant, such as artichokes à la grecque, the tender hearts meticulously plated with a rainbow of vegetables, including flower-shaped carrots and tweezer-placed individual leaves of herbs. You can hardly go wrong, though it would be the height of tragedy if not one person at the table ordered the frogs' legs persillade, a cancan line of amphibian gams in an audibly sizzling bath of butter and garlic that a server oomphs up, upon presentation, with a squeeze of lemon. You could try to be elegant with a knife and fork, but the correct move is to eat them with your hands, like chicken wings. (The old cliché is true: they do taste just like chicken.)



There are no add-ons at Le Veau d'Or, no sneaky little ways the restaurant tries to boost the price of your meal. There's something perversely democratic about this, in a town full of restaurants smearing supplemental caviar on ice cream willy-nilly. On my first visit, I was fascinated to notice myself trying to somehow game the menu, strategically selecting the dishes that might get me the most bang for my buck. Why would a person choose to begin their evening with a petite omelette or a tomato salad when she could have the much ritzier pâté *en croûte*, or *pommes soufflées* with crème fraîche and trout roe? The answer, I realized, within the oddly liberating confines of the fixed-price format, is simply because she wants to: pleasure is its own (not insignificant) form of value. The omelette is silken and exquisite, a showpiece of technical precision, though the pâté is, too: savory and well-spiced in its pastry frame, shot through with golden veins of jellied consommé. The *pommes*, like three-dimensional potato chips, paper-thin and hollow inside, are awfully fun to snap open and pile with the cream and ruddy fish eggs.

This feeling of having entered a perfectionist time machine carries through to the next course. Crisp-skinned, pepper-crusted, perfectly tender *magret de canard*—the breast of a duck whose liver has gone for foie gras—is presented atop a pile of sweet and tangy stewed cherries, pink on pink. The chicken *en cocotte*, braised with cream and savory *vin jaune* from the Jura

region, is one of those swoony classics that are both rustic and opulent at once; it comes alongside a dish of buttered Carolina Gold rice pilaf, a pairing so unexpectedly antiquated, so self-confidently out of style, that it circles around to fresh and silly and brilliant, straight out of an Alice B. Toklas dinner party. A one-and-a-half-pound lobster is poached to a satin texture and served chilled, in its shell; its accompanying macédoine, a salad of finely diced vegetables, gives it the air of something you might be offered at the most elegant possible luncheon (not lunch, *luncheon*). There's a nice little steak, your choice of au poivre or with bearnaise, with nicely golden fries, but I would advise exploring the gigot of lamb instead: thick, ruby-rare slices with the tenderness and intensity of prime rib, next to a pile of pearlescent white beans fragrant with rosemary and tarragon.

Helen, Help Me!

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

This sort of old-fashioned food, in this sort of old-fashioned room, inevitably brings a certain air of pomp to the proceedings. But the most marvellous thing about Le Veau d'Or is how human and welcoming it feels. Despite the dapper pink jackets worn by the staff, there's little starch to be found. Service is attentive, but in the way that friends are attentive. Jorge Riera, the restaurant's wine director and, to my mind, a true oenophilic genius, wanders the puzzle-piece dining room dispensing splashes of this and that from his all-French list and offering tips for how best to get the caviar rouge to stay on a shattered *pomme soufflé*. The drinks menu includes a strikingly inventive Martini "our way" (it's a two-in-one: a desert-dry gin cocktail, and a Sidecar spritzer of vermouth and Vichy Catalan), a take on the Marie Antoinette that's titillatingly garnished with an inverted raspberry, and an unimpeachably genteel list of shots. When it's time for dessert (overseen by the pastry chef Michelle Palazzo), trays emerge bearing grand old *classiques* like strawberries sabayon and a *soupe de melon* that features orbs of the fresh fruit in an airy blancmange, with a quenelle of sorbet. But nearly every table seems to understand the necessity of ordering the *île flottante* (floating island), a laborious confection of ancient pedigree, and one of Le Veau d'Or's longtime signatures. It's a swirlly whip of meringue drizzled with caramel and studded with slivered almonds, adrift on a puddle of sweet, smooth crème anglaise. It's been around for ages, it's few people's

idea of a good time, it was nearly forgotten—but, in the right hands, a stodgy classic becomes a giddy delight. ♦

The Talk of the Town

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- [Is a Stay at Francis Ford Coppola's Hotel an Offer You Can't Refuse?](#)
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Comment

Do Celebrity Endorsements Matter? Presidential

It's hard to empirically determine whether they drive voters to the polls. But they might have less measurable effects.

By Tyler Foggatt

September 01, 2024



Republicans and Democrats have long fought over the Black vote, the evangelical vote, and the middle-class vote. But recently they've been warring over the Swiftie vote. A few weeks ago, on Truth Social, Donald Trump shared a series of images: a crowd of young women wearing "Swifties for Trump" T-shirts, and Taylor Swift dressed up as Uncle Sam, with the slogan "Taylor Wants You to Vote for Donald Trump." These pictures were generated by A.I., but Trump captioned the post as if they were an official endorsement: "I accept!" Then, last week, more than thirty-four thousand people joined a "Swifties for Kamala" organizing call. Senator Ed Markey said that his favorite Swift song is "Snow on the Beach,"

because it emphasizes the threat of climate change. (In fact, the lyrics describe such snow as “fuckin’ beautiful.”)

Swift has not endorsed either Trump or Kamala Harris, but the question of whether she will has become a subplot in an election seemingly so tight that something as small as the right endorsement—or the wrong meme—threatens to shift the balance. Speculation only intensified after the Democratic National Convention, which featured stars such as Oprah Winfrey and Lil Jon. It was rumored that Beyoncé would appear as a surprise guest; online betting odds shot up after the White House political director tweeted a bee emoji. Ultimately, she showed up only over the loudspeakers—Harris’s campaign anthem is the Beyoncé song “Freedom.” Some viewers felt misled: had the rumors been stoked to increase ratings? Still, their believability was itself a kind of endorsement.

Celebrities can generate enthusiasm for a candidate, but, generally speaking, it’s hard to quantify their effect on the final vote. The exception is Oprah. In the lead-up to the 2008 Democratic primaries, she endorsed Barack Obama. It was the first time she endorsed a candidate; she was a registered Independent, and had always maintained a nonpartisan air. Later, economists at Northwestern and at the University of Maryland estimated that she was responsible for more than a million of Obama’s votes. After Obama won the nomination, Beyoncé, too, came out in support of him, as did LeBron James, who had stayed quiet about politics up until that point. (As Michael Jordan once said, “Republicans buy sneakers, too.”) John McCain, the Republican candidate, ran a commercial that showed thousands of people cheering Obama’s name, intercut with pictures of Paris Hilton and Britney Spears. “He’s the biggest celebrity in the world,” a voice-over said. “But is he ready to lead?” Apparently, it was an attack ad.

Many of Obama’s celebrity backers endorsed Hillary Clinton in 2016, but election analysts later argued that this may have been counterproductive, contributing to a sense that the candidate was élitist. Donald Trump, a celebrity himself, seemed to be running a kind of anti-celebrity campaign, goading celebrities into speaking out against him. (After he declared that the supermodel Heidi Klum was “no longer a ten,” she shared her thoughts on the election: “May the best woman win.”) The Rolling Stones told Trump not to play their songs at his rallies. But, during the balloon drop at the

R.N.C., he played “You Can’t Always Get What You Want,” turning what would normally be a unifying moment into a troll.

Swift did not endorse anyone in 2016, and later told *Vogue* that Trump “was weaponizing the idea of the celebrity endorsement.” As a result, she said, “I just knew I wasn’t going to help.” Ironically, Swift may have been in a better position to help Clinton than Beyoncé or Oprah or James, all of whom endorsed her. While the others had come to be seen as cultural avatars for the Democrats, Swift’s political views were largely unknown; some speculated that she was a Republican. Alyssa Cass, the chief strategist for Blueprint, a Democratic public-opinion research firm, said that, particularly in the case of younger undecided voters, “someone who feels apolitical feels like a more trusted authority.”

Now that apolitical celebrities are a rarity, it’s possible that celebrity endorsements are losing their potency as they lose their power to surprise. Swift endorsed Biden and Harris in 2020, and later accused Trump of “stoking the fires of white supremacy.” Harris should already have clinched the Swiftie vote. What Swift has to offer, at this point, is an aura of cool. This, Cass said, is the real function of celebrity endorsements: “It’s like a coolness permission structure.”

Coolness has long been relevant to Presidential elections. Ronald Reagan, a former actor, easily bested Jimmy Carter, who couldn’t even go fishing without being attacked by a swamp rabbit. Was it the Willie Horton ad that sealed George H. W. Bush’s victory over Michael Dukakis, in 1988, or was it that ridiculous photo of Dukakis in a tank? Bill Clinton played the sax. Obama was good at basketball. Trump’s 2016 victory might have been largely a rebuttal of a *Salon* article from that year: “It’s hip to be square: Hillary Clinton isn’t cool—and she shouldn’t have to be.”

If coolness is the goal, then the most effective celebrity endorsements are arguably the ones that speak to a candidate’s vibes. When Johnny Rotten, of the Sex Pistols, was photographed wearing a *MAGA* T-shirt, the message—which may have resonated more than any policy proposal—was that supporting Trump was punk. The most important celebrity endorsement that Harris has received was not a real endorsement at all: it was the pop star Charli XCX tweeting, apparently on a whim, that “kamala IS brat.”

Trump has been struggling to make *MAGA* punk again. He has tried cultivating relationships with streamers and comedians such as Adin Ross and Theo Von, and with rappers who, like him, face criminal charges. He regained some cultural capital in July, when a would-be assassin shot him at a rally, and he pumped his fist and shouted “Fight!” At the R.N.C., two days later, it was rumored that 50 Cent was going to perform his track “Many Men (Wish Death).” The actual surprise guest was Kid Rock, singing “American Bad Ass.” (Later, Trump assured the crowd of Kid Rock’s clout: “I didn’t even know how big he was. . . . Thirty-five, forty thousand people he gets, every time he goes out.”)

It’s doubtful that Kid Rock has much power to sway. This past spring, Cass’s firm conducted a poll, asking young voters which celebrities were most likely to influence their vote. Swift and Beyoncé were relatively high on the list, though they were beat out by stars such as Kevin Hart and Timothée Chalamet. The celebrity with the most influence? Zendaya, at twenty-four per cent. She has not yet endorsed a candidate—but she’s known to be a big Beyoncé fan. ♦

Georgia Postcard

Is a Stay at Francis Ford Coppola's Hotel an Offer You Can't Refuse?

A guest checks in to the All-Movie Hotel, in Georgia, where "Mr. F." plays "Godfather"-themed pinball and finished postproduction on "Megalopolis."

By Charles Bethea

September 02, 2024



In June of 2022, Luvia Martinez-Luna received a phone call from Francis Ford Coppola. For years, Martinez-Luna had helped manage two of the director's Family Coppola Hideaways hotels, in Belize, where she grew up. Mr. F., as Martinez-Luna calls Coppola, owned five hotels in total, and was looking into buying a sixth, south of Atlanta. He wanted her to run it. Two weeks later, Martinez-Luna pulled up to an old Days Inn, between a cold-storage facility and a McDonald's, in Peachtree City. Coppola met her there. "It didn't look like our other properties," Martinez-Luna recalled. "But Mr. F. had a vision."

A few weeks before the première of Coppola's latest film, "Megalopolis," a guest and a companion visited the property, which opened in July as the All-Movie Hotel. The footprint of the Days Inn remained, but the exterior now had Coppolian flare: succulent-filled flowerpots imported from Italy, golden columns. Foam-core statues of the characters played by Jon Voight and Dustin Hoffman in "Megalopolis" were perched by the parking lot—a storm had recently detached Hoffman's hand. A golden eagle with a twenty-foot wingspan guarded a pool. The guests wiped their feet on an "Apocalypse Now" rug, which led into a spacious entry room. There were two "Godfather"-themed pinball machines against a wall, a mural from "The Godfather, Part II" above a plush couch, a communal dining table, and an eight-thousand-dollar Nuova Simonelli espresso machine anchoring a breakfast nook. "Mr. F. loves his espresso," Martinez-Luna said, after checking in the guests. The hotel also has working film equipment. Martinez-Luna led the guests to a vaulted-ceilinged suite featuring a projector screen and photos of Old Hollywood stars. It occupied roughly two Days Inn rooms' worth of space, not counting new his-and-hers bathrooms.

The guests were hungry, so Martinez-Luna suggested a strip mall a few miles away, which Mr. F. liked to visit via Peachtree City's golf-cart paths. "Mr. F. loves riding around and waving to the locals," Martinez-Luna said.

It happened to be the forty-fifth anniversary of the "Apocalypse Now" opening. The guests blasted the film's harrowing soundtrack as they golf-carted through woodsy neighborhoods where deer grazed in the fading light. They arrived at a pizza place. Their waiter couldn't recall meeting Mr. F., but said that he'd once served a gin-and-tonic to Danny DeVito. "Classy guy," he said.

The next morning, after espresso, the guests met Akshay Bhatia and Jordan Holifield, a pair of Georgia Film Academy grads in their twenties, in the lobby, for a tour. Both work on the hotel's film-operations team; Bhatia had previously worked as one of Coppola's assistants. Each wore black. "Francis comes from the lineage of film as a dream factory," Bhatia began. "You'll notice little things that are very unique." He pointed to an antique Moviola editing machine in a corner: "Francis had it painted hot-rod red." He went on, "The taste of this place is his taste. The chairs in the garden. The potted plants. The movie-ticket doormats."

“The pinball machines,” Holifield added. “Francis loves pinball.”

On to the guest rooms, inside of which Coppola and his crew had finished shooting and editing “Megalopolis,” before the hotel opened. (Movie-making guests can rent the technical facilities, too.) Room 104: two fancy speakers, a close-throw projector, and a couch. “We did a lot of visual effects in here,” Bhatia said. “We also watched the Super Bowl.” Room 106: bunk beds. “Jordan and I crashed here a few times.” Room 107: junior suite. “We did some time-lapse photography in there,” he said, pointing. “Before it became a closet.”

Where had the Days Inn furniture gone? “Parking-lot sale,” Holifield said. “People loved the framed pictures of docks. The ones we didn’t sell, we converted to sound panels. They’re the perfect size.”

Outdoors again, Bhatia pointed to a poolside grill. “One time, Francis made Martin Scorsese’s mother’s lemon chicken,” he said.

“He also does a zucchini soup,” Holifield said. “It’s actually fricking amazing.”

“I spent a lot of time buying him zucchinis,” Bhatia added.

Past the giant golden eagle (“You’ll see it in ‘Megalopolis’ ”), a tiny gym, and a kids’ playroom with a repurposed Days Inn entertainment center, they arrived at Mr. F.’s personal suite (about five hundred dollars a night). There were Coppola family photos; books by Wharton, Bellow, Rumi; a small table for meetings and rewrites; an espresso bar; and another projector screen. “Every single night, for two years, he’d watch ‘Megalopolis’ here,” Bhatia said. “You’d get notes from him at two in the morning.” Bhatia recalled a memorable moment with Spike Lee in this room. “Francis said, ‘Spike, ask Akshay anything.’ So Spike asked me this very elaborate question about ‘On the Waterfront’ that I completely whiffed. But I got the second question right.”

Finally, the group came to Room 202: a mini theatre with a ticket window salvaged from the Days Inn registration area. “We do movie club here,” Bhatia said. “I actually introduced Francis to ‘Ali: Fear Eats the Soul’ here.

New German Cinema. But I think we'll just show Francis's films to guests.”♦

The Wayward Press

The Magazine for Mercenaries Enters Polite Society

Susan Katz Keating, the editor and publisher of *Soldier of Fortune*, discusses how she's changing the publication and assesses the threat of political violence.

By Mark Yarm

September 02, 2024



In the early nineteen-eighties, Susan Katz Keating was living in California, working as a freelance journalist with a side gig waiting tables. On a newsstand, she came across *Soldier of Fortune*, a monthly magazine infamous for its gonzo war reporting and its gun-for-hire classified ads. “I wanted to write about mercenaries,” she recalled recently. So she placed an advertisement in the publication. “You paid by the word, and I was quite young and didn’t have any money. The ad said, ‘Are you a mercenary? Contact S. Katz.’ And then I gave my home address.”

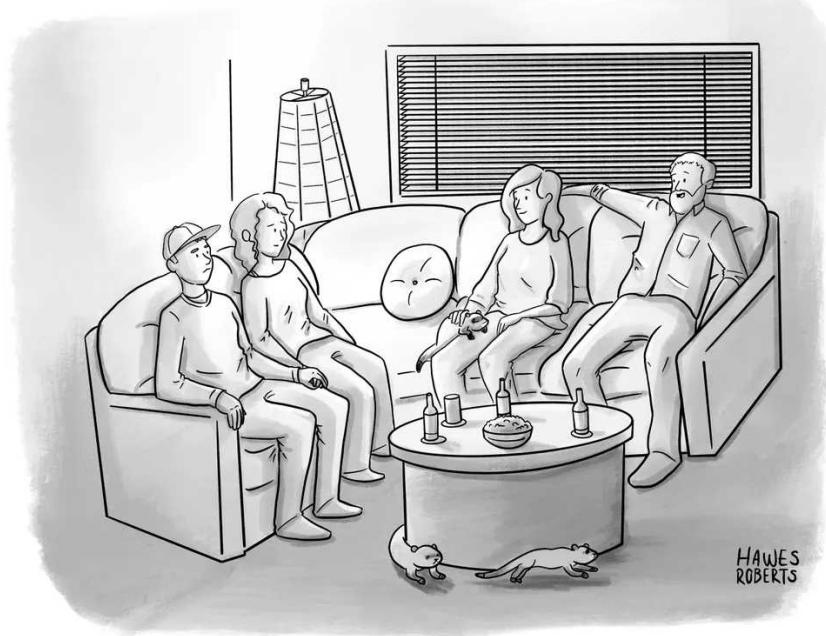
Keating was flooded with letters. A handful of seemingly professional warrior types arrived at her door unannounced. “I also got some government agents showing up, because they thought that I was trying to raise a mercenary army,” Keating said.

In 1986, Keating began contributing to *Soldier of Fortune*, the rare woman to do so. Two years ago, she achieved a longtime dream by purchasing the magazine from its founder, the retired lieutenant colonel Robert K. Brown, for an undisclosed sum. She now operates as its publisher and editor-in-chief.

Earlier this summer, Keating, who lives in Tampa, was sitting with a coffee at a hotel restaurant in downtown Brooklyn, dressed in a casual black-skirt-and-vest combo. She was there to meet with a friend and adviser to discuss the likelihood of political violence during the Presidential election.

While she waited, Keating explained that her fascination with mercenaries began as a child. She grew up in California but moved with her mother to Ireland in the seventies, after Keating’s dad died in what was ruled a suicide. (She still has her doubts—she said she learned that his fatal wounds came from two different guns.) “We got there right when Bloody Sunday happened,” Keating said. “So I was exposed to a whole lot of real violence with political intent.” On a family trip, a teen-age Keating befriended Sir Eric de Burgh, an elderly British Army officer (and the grandfather of the singer Chris de Burgh). He had served in the Boer War and told her tales of soldiers for hire. “That sparked my interest,” she said.

Keating is in the process of revitalizing *Soldier of Fortune*, which experienced a significant circulation decline after the end of the Cold War and shifted to a fully online platform in 2016. (In the late eighties, the magazine was sued several times by families of people targeted or killed by hit men recruited through its pages. The gun-for-hire ads were discontinued in 1986.) The readership today is about ninety per cent male. “I love the bro culture,” Keating said. She added that the audience leans right of center. She described her own politics as “anti-communist,” but stressed that she tries to remain as neutral as possible in her journalism.



Keating writes about a third of the magazine's articles herself. The rest are written by freelancers. "I had one in Africa, and he just disappeared," she said. "It turns out he was bitten by a black mamba, and he got really sick." Her splashiest article followed up on reports that a packet of cocaine was found in the White House in July, 2023. She wrote that it was brought by "someone within the Biden-family orbit." (She didn't disclose who it was, but she said it was not, as conservatives had speculated, the President's son Hunter.) Her account wasn't picked up by most major news outlets, and the White House hasn't commented, though Keating said that "an intermediary" had communicated the Administration's reaction. "They're pissed," she said.

After a while, her friend, Chad Longell, arrived. He had a modest beard and wore a black baseball hat. Longell, an amiable thirty-seven-year-old Army veteran and a former national director of military and veteran engagement for the Republican National Committee, described himself as an "intel guy" for a number of government agencies he wasn't at liberty to name. His advisory role with *Soldier of Fortune* is an informal one. "We talk strategy on different things," he explained.

He and Keating dived into a discussion of the election. "I hope I'm wrong, but I'm expecting unrest," Keating said.

“It’s just a question of who,” Longell agreed. Neither thought that there would be another event on the scale of January 6th, which they both deemed to have been blown out of proportion anyway. “A lot of people call it an insurrection,” Keating said. “But it wasn’t.” “It was stupid people,” Longell added. “My brother”—a uniformed Secret Service officer—“was one of the ones who responded to get Pence out of the Capitol. I think that building is a sacred, sacred place. To see it trashed like that? Good thing I wasn’t down there. I would have been a lot more aggressive.”

Not long after their meeting, Donald Trump was wounded on the ear in an assassination attempt. Keating provided an update on her violence forecast: she had become surprisingly sanguine.

“There have not been any follow-on attacks or counterattacks, which I think would have happened by now if this had been an Archduke Ferdinand moment,” she said. “I see the hit on Trump as another iteration of the school-shooter, mall-shooter phenomenon, and not as a political flash point. We are not headed for a civil war.” She added, “Of course, I could be wrong.” ♦

First-Timer Dept.

Will Packer's Year of Firsts

The Hollywood producer visits Martha's Vineyard for the première of his new Peacock series, "Fight Night," and runs across Michelle Obama.

By André Wheeler

September 02, 2024



As the remnants of Hurricane Debby passed over Martha's Vineyard on a recent weekend, the Hollywood producer Will Packer, whose credits include "Girls Trip," "Stomp the Yard," and the 2022 Academy Awards ceremony (when Will Smith slapped Chris Rock), stood on the front porch of the Harbor View Hotel, where he was staying, and watched the rain. He was planning to visit Inkwell Beach, historically frequented by Black bathers, and to see some friends. But he wasn't optimistic about the weather. "It's rough out there," he said.

Not too far away, a muscly man was working out in the rain. Packer, who'd adopted the Vineyard aesthetic—cap, polo, and chinos, all in soft, greenish hues—said that he'd been training for a marathon himself, even while on vacation. "I tell you, that was me," he said, comparing himself to the jock. "I

was sweating all up and down these streets.” He left his running shoes at home, though, so he had to pick up a pair of Hokas from a local shop.

Packer’s trip had been memorable so far. “Michelle O.,” as he called the former First Lady, had “swung by” a book panel he attended a couple of days earlier. He’d also spent time with the actor Sanaa Lathan and the former U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder. “Because it’s my first time at the Vineyard, I overbooked everything,” Packer said. “Because, you know, there’s so many invites. ‘Oh, come to this, come to that.’ Yeah, sure!” The past few days had included brunches, parties, film events, and R. and R. “Now that I’m here, I get the appeal,” he said. “I love the fact that the Vineyard is so brown right now. There’s so many of us.”

Packer continued, “This year, I’m doing a lot of things that I’ve never done before.” Recently, he has been celebrating turning fifty with a newfound “Why not?” approach. He recounted his growing list of firsts, ticking them off on his fingers: “I came to Martha’s Vineyard, I came to the Olympics, I’m running my first marathon, I bought into the Atlanta Falcons.” How does one decide to purchase part of an N.F.L. team? “Well, first of all, you don’t just decide,” he said. “You have to be *invited*.”

Another first—producing a limited series, “Fight Night: The Million Dollar Heist,” for Peacock. The show dramatizes the lead-up to a little-known historical event: a robbery in Atlanta in 1970 after a Muhammad Ali fight. Packer was premiering the show’s first episode at the Martha’s Vineyard African American Film Festival later that day. “It’s a project that was in the works for a very long time,” he said. “And the thing that people don’t understand about our industry is that, *man*, these things take so long to get going. ‘Ride Along’—ten years in the making. ‘Straight Outta Compton’—ten years. Ten-plus years! Nobody cares if it comes out and it’s good. If the doughnut tastes good, you don’t care how it was made.”

Packer originally conceived of the “Fight Night” doughnut as a movie. “I went through the process, set it up as a feature film, had a script written, everything,” he said. “Did all the things. It just was not meant to be. And it sat for a while.” He sighed. He turned the story into a podcast for iHeartRadio. Afterward, he sent it to Kevin Hart, a frequent collaborator. “A very good friend of mine,” Packer said. “But I also say that he is the spawn

of Satan. An evil man.” Hart appears prominently in an upcoming motivational book written by Packer. “A story I tell in the book is about how Kevin almost single-handedly ruined the biggest movie of both of our careers at the time”—“Ride Along”—with a scheduling conflict, he said, laughing. He asked Hart to listen to just twenty minutes of the podcast, but Hart devoured the whole thing. The actor stars as the protagonist of the series, a hustler named Chicken Man. The cast also includes Taraji P. Henson, Samuel L. Jackson, Don Cheadle, and Chloe Bailey.

Packer sat back in a wicker chair, cradling a cup of tea. The rain was easing, and he figured he still had enough time to hit the beach. He had a marathon of work planned for afterward: a speech at the Martha’s Vineyard Black Book Festival, some press interviews for “Fight Night,” a talk following the première, with Henson, Bailey, and Cheadle, and then an after-party. “My track coach in high school used to tell me, ‘Packer!’ ” He clapped. “ ‘Don’t focus on that finish line. You focus on that finish line, you’re not going to make it.’ ” ♦

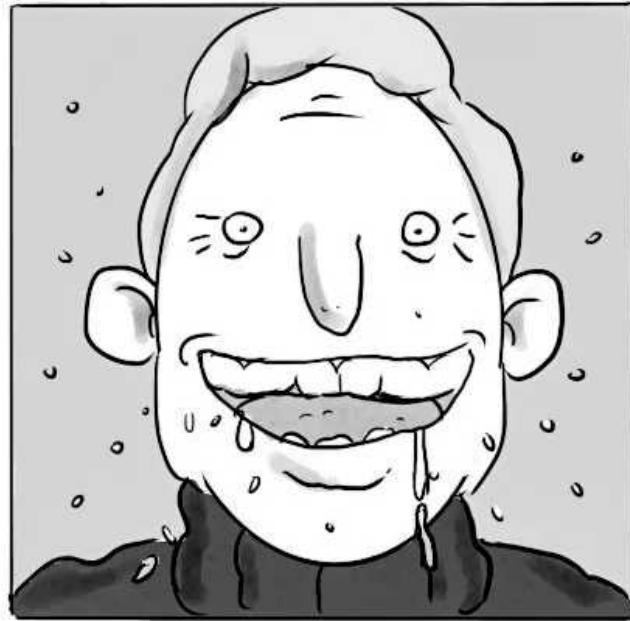
Sketchpad

Your Lingering Fear of Germs

Sketchpad by Colin Tom: Zooming with a friend and a glass of wine? Freaked out in an elevator? You may have *COVID* déjà vu.

By Colin Tom

September 02, 2024



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Personal History

The Hem of His Garment

I thought that the e-mailed invitation was spam. “Nice try, Russia,” I said to my laptop screen. But the Pope really did want to meet with comics and humorists.

By David Sedaris

September 02, 2024



If you were to say to me, “You can be in a room with either Chris Rock or the Pope,” I’d say, “Chris Rock, please.” Nothing against the Pope, but he’s never made me laugh. Neither has he come up with a viable solution to America’s gun problem the way Chris Rock has, saying that the firearms themselves can be unregulated but that every bullet should cost five thousand dollars.

“O.K.,” you’d continue. “Julia Louis-Dreyfus or the Pope?”

“Oh, no question,” I’d tell you. “The cursing on ‘Veep’ amounted to poetry, so Julia Louis-Dreyfus.”

“Stephen Merchant or—”

“Stephen Merchant.”

The same goes for Stephen Colbert, Mike Birbiglia, Tig Notaro, Conan O’Brien, Whoopi Goldberg, Jimmy Fallon, Ramy Youssef, and Jim Gaffigan—most of whom I know or have met at one time or another.

The crazy thing is that I didn’t *have* to choose between any of the above and the Pope. For reasons I will never quite understand, I got to be in a room with all of them—plus a hundred or so others who had also been summoned, without much advance notice, to the Vatican on a late-spring morning in June, when Rome was hot but not so hot that all you could talk about was how hot it was.

Like everyone I spoke to the night before our papal audience, when, minus Jimmy Fallon, the American contingent gathered for dinner, I’d initially thought that my invitation—which was sent by e-mail—was spam. “Right,” I said to the screen of my laptop. “Nice try, Russia.” I didn’t click on the attachment until Stephen Colbert assured me that it was legitimate, and that the Pope really did want to meet with comics and humorists from around the world in three days’ time, and at six-forty-five in the morning. The invitation made it sound like there’d be a dialogue, as if the Pope had questions or needed to ask us a favor, something along the lines of “Do you think you could maybe give the pedophilia stuff a rest?”

Everyone’s got a Catholic-clergy joke up their sleeve, perhaps one they heard at a party. Mine is: A cop stops a car two priests are riding in. “I’m looking for a couple of child molesters,” he tells them.

The priests look at each other. “We’ll do it!” they say.

Substitute rabbis or Baptist ministers for priests, and you’ll get nothing. I mean, the Catholic Church *earned* those laughs, and every time its senior clerics look away, or quietly send an offending clergyman to the back bench, it’s making this scandal larger than its ministry, at least to an outsider such as myself.

“Can you help me turn this around?” I imagined the Pope asking. “How can we get back to the sex-starved-nun jokes we all so enjoyed in the past?”

This is a man who had just been caught using an Italian word that translated to “faggotry” for the second time in three weeks. After our visit, which was covered by seemingly every news organization on Earth, the gaffe would be brought up again and again, especially in comment sections, by people convinced that, had they been invited to the Vatican, they’d have stayed home in protest, or perhaps would have attended and then caused a scene, most likely one involving paint.

It didn’t bother me, though. When I heard that the Pope had said “faggotry,” I laughed, in large part because it’s a funny word. Then, too, it’s not something you’d call a person—it’s not like “Shut up, fag.” Rather, it connotes behavior: “Take your faggotry outside, please.”

Pope Francis can’t preside over same-sex marriages, but he created a firestorm within his Church by blessing gay people about to be married. “If they accept the Lord and have good will, who am I to judge them?” he asked, in 2013.

Then, yes, he said “faggotry,” but he apologized for it. Both times. I don’t think that he’s a homophobe so much as an eighty-seven-year-old. (“I said what again? Really?”)

My feeling is that if you want a church that is a hundred per cent gay-friendly, go join one—there are plenty to be had—or start your own. “Yes, but I want Our Lady of Sorrows to celebrate Pride Month,” I can hear someone whining.

It’s like going to Burger King and demanding a Big Mac. If you want a Big Mac, go across the street to McDonald’s. Jesus.

Also, I wasn’t bothered by the Pope’s use of “faggotry” because I’m not queer; I’m gay. The difference is that queer people are offended by just about everything. Gay people just wonder what they’ll wear to the Vatican at the crack of dawn, and what the proper etiquette is.

“If he holds out his hand, you can opt to kiss his ring!” my friend Leslie, who was brought up Catholic, wrote when I told her I was going.

I was raised in the Greek Orthodox Church. There, we kissed the priest’s hand when receiving Communion, though twice I moved up a few inches and kissed his watch instead, just to see how he’d react.

“Actually, no,” another friend wrote. “This Pope *hates* having his ring kissed, so if he holds out his hand, just shake it.”

I was in Sussex when my invitation arrived. It was eight-thirty in the morning, and by lunchtime I had my plane ticket and had booked a hotel within walking distance of the Vatican, which, like the city-states of San Marino and Monaco, is its own separate country, and could thus be added to a list I have on my computer titled “Countries I Have Been To.” The Vatican would be my sixtieth.

There’s another list on my computer titled “Stars I Have Seen.” People don’t count if they are onstage in a concert or a play. They have to be at large, or at an occasion we were both invited to. According to an online article my travel agent sent, one that referred to my fellow Vatican invitees as “yucksters,” I’d soon be adding two American comedians, a British one, and an actress, also American, to my list.

“Plus the Pope,” Hugh reminded me when I told him that I was definitely going.

“Oh, right,” I said, the way I might have had he said, “Plus Sully Sullenberger.” I guess I’d been limiting my list to entertainers and people who aren’t in show business but dazzle nevertheless, like Ann Richards, the late governor of Texas. If I don’t see the Pope as dazzling, I suppose it’s because I’m not religious in any way. On my deathbed, I’ll likely cover my bases and beg for forgiveness, but not until I’m coughing up blood, or see Hugh reaching for the plug of my respirator.

Does that make me an agnostic or a flat-out atheist? I do believe there was someone named Jesus who was a revolutionary, but I don’t think he was God’s son, or that he was resurrected. It was a shame that I was invited to

the Vatican, actually—like sending me to the U.S. Open when I've never watched a football game in my life. I thought of the millions of people in the world who'd give anything to meet the Pope and realized that I knew only two of them: my friend Ewan's cleaning lady and Stephen Colbert, who's so Catholic he taught Sunday school.

The dress code on the invitation was daytime formal, which I was told amounted to shined shoes and a suit. The only one I had at my fingertips was bought nine years earlier, when I was invited to Buckingham Palace. The late Queen hosted tea parties every summer for do-gooders of one stripe or another, and I was included on account of all the rubbish I'd collected by the sides of British roads. She and I didn't meet, but I saw her—she was standing within hearing range, close enough for me to comprehend how truly tiny she was. Her feet were the size of hot-dog buns. We'd been told to leave our phones and cameras at home, but everyone around me had snuck one in, and they were all going bananas.

Me, I'm just not a picture person. Am I glad *other people* have cameras? Sometimes. Like at the dinner Stephen Colbert arranged the night before our papal audience. I look at the photos of the assembled guests and wonder, What was I doing there? Why not Garrison Keillor, Tina Fey, or Donald Glover, to name just three of a thousand more qualified people? It was like a reproduction of "The Last Supper" with one of the disciples replaced by Snoopy.

"Does anyone have a favorite God joke?" Colbert asked as our final course was served. "It doesn't have to be your own."



For most of the evening, I'd sat across from Whoopi Goldberg, who had no appetite and passed me all her plates after just a bite or two. That meant double servings of four separate pasta dishes, two steaks served on rafts of eggplant, four rich smothered dumplings, two tomato salads, and two cherry-and-goat-cheese pavlovas, plus all the food I snatched from the plate of Jim Gaffigan's youngest son, who was seated to my right. Now my pants no longer fit, and my watchband was cutting off the circulation in my left hand. Even my throat was swollen. I cleared it before taking the floor.

"So God tells Adam, 'I'm going to make you a wife, a helpmate, the most beautiful woman who ever lived. She'll be terrific in bed, enthusiastic, and uncomplaining. But it'll cost you.'

"Adam asks, 'How much?'

"An eye, an elbow, a collarbone, and your left ball.'

"Adam thinks for a minute, then asks, 'What can I get for a rib?'"

The polite but underwhelming response I got from people who tell jokes for a living—who fill stadiums—should have taught me a lesson. Instead, I told another one.

“What’s the worst part of having sex with Jesus?

“He’s always wanting to come into your heart.”

Thank God Colbert told a joke as well. It was, he warned us, decades old, and one of the first he ever wrote. But at least he wrote it. Mine were ones people had told me at book signings. I don’t belong here, I thought, embarrassed, for the umpteenth time that evening.

Usually, I comfort myself by remembering that everyone secretly feels out of place. Here, though, I’m pretty sure it was just me. That said, my fellow-guests were welcoming and, it goes without saying, terribly, terribly funny, just as they were at six-forty-five the following morning, when we met at an entrance gate near the Pope’s living quarters and were led to a magnificently frescoed room in the Apostolic Palace. There, we joined the hundred other people who’d been invited: more international writers and comics, most of them from Italy. I knew only one, a woman named Luciana Littizzetto, whom I’d met years earlier, in Turin. She was the only non-Vatican representative to address the crowd that morning. Her remarks lasted a minute or two and were in Italian, as were the Pope’s.

The assembled group stood and applauded as he entered the room and took his thronelike seat before us. It speaks to the man’s humility that he allows every rank-and-file clergy member to outdress him. The cardinals were resplendent in their black cassocks, which had bright-scarlet buttons and a matching sash called a fascia. Better still were the Papal Gentlemen, who wore morning coats and white bow ties coupled with elaborate bibs, often with medals hanging off them. The Swiss Guard looked like Renaissance-era toy soldiers in their multicolored striped outfits, standing just so with feathers in their helmets, their halberds held before them. Even the friars in their dung-colored robes and sandals were more strikingly dressed than the Pope, who looked a bit mother-of-the-bride in a white cassock with a shawl-type thing over his shoulders. He wore a skullcap and, around his neck, a cross on which you could have crucified the late Queen of England.

The Pope read a prepared statement of which we were each given a copy. It amounted to: laughter makes the world go round. His voice was soft and passionless. At one point, he got a reaction by sticking a thumb above his ear

and wagging his fingers, but, as one member of the American delegation said afterward, “we really just laughed out of politeness.”

The part that moved me took place after his address, when, row by row, we were led up the aisle and personally greeted. The Pope remained seated and shook each of our hands. Some people brought him gifts; others leaned in to tell him something. I think I said, “Thanks for having me.” Standing before him, I felt the same pity I’d felt for the Queen and would feel for anyone who has to meet people for a living. Nothing stirred inside me the way that it did in 2015, when, rounding a corner at the White House, where I’d been invited to talk with some speechwriters, I happened upon President Obama. For a moment, standing there with my mouth hanging open, I feared that I might spontaneously combust—with respect, with pride and awe. The encounter with the Pope, though, was like meeting the Dalai Lama: not an inconvenience by any stretch, not uninteresting, just “Oh, hi.”

Many people, after the handshake, walked a few steps, pulled out their phones, and then took a selfie with the Pope in the background. It was so tacky. I said to the Italian seated to my right, “You’d think he was Santa!”

As at any good fashion show, the majority of our time was spent waiting, but the clothes we saw made it all worthwhile. The difference, I thought, was that these outfits weren’t for sale. Then my friend Austin wrote from the States and told me that while in Rome I had to go to Gammarelli, a bespoke tailoring business, founded in 1798, that’s been dressing the Pope and his associates for generations. It wasn’t too far from my hotel, so late in the afternoon I went with Julia Louis-Dreyfus, who wore great clothes and was seemingly up for anything. I’d worried on the walk over that Gammarelli wouldn’t sell to laymen. “I’m going to tell them that my brother is a priest,” I said to her, “that he’s my same size, and I thought this might make for a good Christmas present.”

I figured they must hear that a lot, though, so when the time came I told the salesman, who was young and slender and spoke very good English, that I collect religious garments from around the world.

“He’s actually a noted historian,” Julia said.

I looked at her, like, *Fuck*. If I wanted to be put on the spot like this, I'd have come with my sister Amy.

"I also study history," the young man said. "What is your area of concentration?"

I panicked. "Sometimes I write for magazines," I told him.

What I wanted was a black cassock. That's the ankle-length robe Catholic priests wear. I wanted one because they're slimming, they're classic, and they're beautifully made, at least at Gammarelli.

"We start by choosing the wool," the young man said, handing me a book of fabric samples. "Then we select the buttons and take your measurements."

A Gammarelli cassock generally takes months to make and involves several fittings. The price, which is steep, reflects the high quality of work that goes into it. That said, it's not as involved as a bespoke suit—there are no pants to worry about, no zippers in this case—but it is intricately pleated and lined. I was still willing to go ahead with it and was being measured when the young man left the dressing room and returned with a cassock that was already finished but had never been collected. Perhaps the priest who ordered it had died, or had been sent to prison. Whatever the case, it fit me very well except for the length, which could easily be adjusted.

Next came the Roman collar. The outfit's fine without it, I thought, until I added it and realized, Whoa, you *really* need the collar. Then came the fascia, and I got two—the classic black one and a scarlet model that a cardinal would wear.

"Is it against the law to dress like a priest?" I whispered to Julia as I did up the last of the thirty-three buttons, each of which symbolizes a year of Jesus' life and leaves you wishing he'd been crucified at twelve, especially if, like me, you're developing arthritis in your fingers.

I loved the idea of wearing my cassock on the street. Then I imagined myself walking along and being approached by a person in distress or, worse yet, by another priest asking me if I'd heard the news about Father O'Shea

or Archbishop DiMaggio. “A cardiac arrest, not two minutes into the Eucharist!” What does one say in that situation?

“Oh, sorry, I honestly just liked the robe. It takes ten pounds off!”

The next day at the airport, awaiting my flight back to London, I saw a priest wearing the very outfit I had beside me in my suitcase. He was heavyset and bearded, his black hair gathered in a short ponytail. What’s it like to know that you can never marry or even date someone?, I wondered. More than that, what’s it like to have faith? To look at a solid argument against your God and say with absolute conviction, “I think I prefer it my way, thank you.”

My Greek grandmother was like that—kept a crucifix the size of a hand mirror in her bedroom and kissed it until her lips wore the plating off Jesus’ stomach. Cried when she saw Billy Graham on TV, even though she didn’t understand what he was saying. “Jesus blessie,” she’d whisper, crossing herself whenever we passed a church, any church. Tie two sticks together and her eyes would water. My father had maybe a third of her faith, and his children, for whatever reason, none.

I wanted to tell the priest at the airport that I had just met his boss, the Pope, that I’d shaken his hand and been given a rosary in a leather pouch. Without seeming creepy, I then wanted to ask what he was wearing beneath his cassock—underwear and a T-shirt? Cutoff shorts? Dress slacks? Jeans? Is it every man for himself, or are there rules?

I hated to think I was missing something. ♦

Letter from Austria

How to Give Away a Fortune

An Austrian heiress recruited fifty people from all walks of life to redistribute twenty-five million euros—if they could agree on how to spend it.

By Joshua Yaffa

September 02, 2024



In January, Erna was having a coffee in her living room in Vienna when she opened a letter from something called the Guter Rat für Rückverteilung, or the Good Council for Redistribution. “Guten Tag Ernestine!” the letter began. “How wealth is distributed across the country shapes how we live together and influences how well a democratic society functions.”

The Good Council, the text went on, would comprise fifty Austrians selected by lottery—Erna was among ten thousand who made the first cut—and meet for six weekends to come up with proposals for how to address inequality in Austria, where the richest one per cent controls half of the country’s wealth. Additionally, the council would have twenty-five million euros to distribute as it saw fit, money provided by Marlène Engelhorn, who was described in

the letter only as the council's "*Auftraggeberin*," or principal client. The letter emphasized that the council would make decisions "freely and without influence." Those selected as members would also receive twelve hundred euros per weekend as compensation for their time and labor.

Erna, who is eighty and long retired from her job as a waitress in a corporate cafeteria, ripped up the letter and threw it in the trash. She lives on a state pension of four hundred and fifty euros a month. What do I know about distributing millions? she thought. The next morning, however, she came across a newspaper article on the Good Council. Engelhorn, an activist and an heir to a pharmaceutical fortune, had announced its creation at a press conference in Vienna. She told journalists, "If politicians don't do their job and redistribute, then I have to redistribute my wealth myself."

Erna recalled the handful of euros she often gave a homeless man she passed in town, and the neighbor she'd accompanied to a shelter for victims of domestic abuse. She fished the scraps of paper from the trash, ironed them flat, and dialled the number included in the letter. Two days later, she received a call from a Good Council representative who asked her a series of questions about her income and education. By the end of the month, she had been selected as one of the council's fifty members.

The council was convening in Salzburg, near the German border, and not far from where Erna's daughter lives. "Mom, no, it's a scam," her daughter said. Nonetheless, in March, her daughter met Erna at Salzburg's train station and drove her to the hotel where the council was scheduled to hold its first meeting. She wanted to know what her mother had got herself into. In the lobby, her daughter saw Engelhorn, whom she recognized from television. "Mom," she said, "This is legit."

Salzburg, a handsome storybook city at the foot of the Alps, is best known as the birthplace of Mozart. The Good Council's hotel was on the outskirts of town. The first afternoon of the proceedings, I took a seat near the back of a bright, wood-panelled conference room and watched as Erna and the other council members—who referred to one another using only given names—introduced themselves. The group included college students, schoolteachers, accountants, immigrants, and retirees—a "mini-Austria," as the statistical

firm that compiled the final list of participants called it. The mood was eager and friendly, more summer camp than corporate retreat.

The concept of a citizen council—a democratic forum with roots in ancient Greece—is straightforward: a selected group of people come together to discuss a matter of public policy, with the goal of making proposals or clarifying public attitudes. Hélène Landemore, a professor at Yale and the author of “Open Democracy,” which argues for a more inclusive system of participatory governance, told me, “Parliaments are now largely defined by partisanship and the logic of power. You’re there to win, not to learn or change your mind.” The members of a citizen council, on the other hand, come without partisan allegiances and are typically more familiar with the realities of daily life. “It’s a very small subset of the population that enters traditional politics, and, once they do, they tend to stay there too long,” Landemore said. “They don’t know the price of a *pain au chocolat* or a metro ticket. They’re disconnected.”

In recent years, citizen councils in Ireland, France, and Austria have considered such issues as abortion, end-of-life care, and climate change. For the most part, the conclusions of these efforts have been nonbinding. The Austrian Citizens’ Climate Assembly, for instance, which convened in 2022 as a result of a nationwide referendum, produced a hundred-page report with dozens of recommendations, including the introduction of tariffs on greenhouse-gas-intensive food imports and mandatory charges for returning online orders. But no government agency was required to pursue them. The Good Council was different: Engelhorn’s millions were held in a trust and would be distributed in strict accordance with the council members’ instructions.

At a little after 2 P.M., Engelhorn walked into the room, wearing a navy vest, a white collarless shirt, and round metal glasses. She is thirty-two, with a voluminous wave of short brown hair. Her left arm is covered in a sleeve of tattoos. “Redistribution means recognizing that wealth comes from society and should return to society,” she told the council members. She spoke of wealth as power—a power she didn’t earn and doesn’t want. “I’m not a ministry to whom you make a recommendation that immediately disappears into a drawer somewhere,” she said. “You can really achieve something. My part is giving you access to my assets.”

She stepped forward and began speaking in sign language. Hildegund, a member of the council who is deaf and had been following Engelhorn's speech through an interpreter, started to sign back. Later, I spoke with Hildegund, a retired seamstress in her seventies, who used to work in an Adidas factory. "People don't pay attention to deaf people, let alone speak sign language—and definitely not the rich and powerful," she said. "I was impressed—emotional, even."

Engelhorn invited questions from the council members. Someone asked whether the twenty-five million was the entirety of her fortune—though a sizable sum, it's not all that much for many of the world's ultra-wealthy. Engelhorn laughed and made a chef's-kiss motion. Another three million was being spent on the council itself, she said, which together made up more than ninety per cent of her wealth. "I'll keep a small amount for living costs and the transition into working for a living," she added. Next someone asked, How do you know sign language? Engelhorn recalled that, when she was twenty years old, she was riding the subway and saw some people communicating in sign language. "In that moment, I decided this is important," she said. "I want to learn it."

Then Engelhorn prepared to catch a train home to Vienna. She would have no more involvement in the council. "I'm a rich person," she told me. "I have an effect on people. What I say can influence their ideas, but I want to limit that influence as much as possible." The only rules she stipulated were that the money could not go to for-profit entities, political parties, or groups whose activities are "unconstitutional, hostile, or inhumane." The small group of experts and facilitators who helped organize the council had added another rule: no private recipients. Engelhorn initially objected. She didn't want to take away the members' right to give the money, or a portion of it, to themselves. "I wanted to be able to prove that they wouldn't pocket it," she said. But ultimately she accepted the team's decision. "Democracy is never perfect," she told me. "It will always be messy."

The story of Engelhorn's wealth begins in 1865, in southwest Germany, where her great-great-grandfather, Friedrich Engelhorn, was one of the founders of a chemical company named Badische Anilin- & Sodaefabrik, or B.A.S.F. In 1883, he sold his shares and invested the money in a pharmaceutical company now known as Boehringer Mannheim. A decade

later, his son, Friedrich, Jr., became its sole owner. During the Second World War, Boehringer Mannheim moved its research facilities to the Bavarian countryside, to escape Allied bombing, but little else is known of its activities under the Third Reich. “I don’t know all the details, but there was collaboration, no doubt,” Engelhorn said. B.A.S.F. has a far less ambiguous wartime record: it was part of a conglomerate that produced Zyklon B, the lethal chemical used by the Nazis to kill Jews and other victims in the gas chambers.

After the war, Curt Engelhorn, Marlene’s great-uncle, took over the company, which was then a medium-sized family business, and turned it into a global empire. Along the way, he availed himself of several tax-avoidance tricks, moving to a private island in Bermuda and creating a shell company there for his and his family’s shares. (A German magazine described the Engelhorns as “mortal enemies among themselves, united only when it came to saving taxes.”) In 1997, Curt sold Boehringer Mannheim for eleven billion dollars to Roche, a Swiss holding company, in what was then the largest corporate acquisition in European history. Since the shares were technically held in Bermuda, the profits flowed to Curt and the other Engelhorns entirely tax-free. (Curt boasted of successfully avoiding the “tax trap,” but German authorities later investigated him and his two daughters for evading more than four hundred million euros in taxes; the daughters settled and agreed to pay back a hundred and forty-five million.) Marlene’s grandmother Gertraud, or Traudl, as she was known, who was then living on the shores of Lake Geneva, became a billionaire.

Marlene grew up in a villa outside of Vienna and attended the Lycée Français de Vienne. “Our mansion was surrounded by other mansions,” she told me. “I thought that’s what a house is, that’s how people live.” Still, she learned not to share too widely at school what gifts she received for her birthday or Christmas, or where the family had vacationed during summer break. (When an interviewer at *Der Spiegel* recently asked Engelhorn if she grew up with “limousines, chauffeurs, and servants,” she replied, “The joke is that it’s irrelevant. My unpleasant answer is that it’s none of your business.”) As she got older, she became careful about inviting friends over to her family’s home. “When you grow up wealthy, it’s not that one day you realize how much money you have,” she told me. “But, rather, that there is such a thing as people who don’t.”

She enrolled at the University of Vienna, where she studied German language and literature, and expanded her circle of friends, meeting people on every point of the class spectrum. Conversations about rent (“I had never thought about what you can afford with a certain amount of money,” Engelhorn said) and the time a friend needed help with a legal problem (“Why don’t you ask the family lawyer?” she replied) awakened her further to her own privilege. She began reading philosophy, political theory, and economics. When I asked for a list of influences, she sent me more than forty works, ranging from Albert Camus and Susan Sontag to more contemporary books on inequality, including “Limitarianism: The Case Against Extreme Wealth,” by the Belgian-Dutch philosopher and economist Ingrid Robeyns, and “Having and Being Had,” a meditation on accumulation and consumption in a capitalist society, by the American author Eula Biss. “It became clear to me that being wealthy in an unequal world means you’re doing so at the cost of other people’s lives,” Engelhorn said.

In 2019, when she was twenty-seven, she received an e-mail from her family’s financial adviser: she had been named a primary beneficiary in her grandmother’s will, which meant that, when Traudl died, Engelhorn would inherit tens of millions of euros. “For a long while, I had convinced myself that it wasn’t really my money but my family’s,” she told me. “I couldn’t touch it. I didn’t decide what to do with it—that was their problem.” But, from the moment she got the e-mail, “I understood, O.K., this is becoming my problem.”

Engelhorn shared her unease about the inheritance with a cousin, who put her in touch with Romy Krämer, the managing director of the Guerrilla Foundation, based in Berlin, which distributes funds to nonprofits and grassroots organizations through a participatory model. Representatives from communities that receive grants in turn makes decisions about which other causes to support. Engelhorn became an intern, sifting through the e-mail in-box and taking notes at team meetings. “It was deliberate,” Krämer told me. “We thought it would be educational and fun, a great way to flip the power dynamic, to have a wealthy person doing tasks that were sometimes, well, shitty.” Engelhorn was up for it. “She dispelled all the notions of rich people as lazy or flaky,” Krämer said. “She was organized, on top of things, very much willing and eager to be put to work.”

The Guerrilla Foundation's approach appealed to Engelhorn more than traditional philanthropy, which, in her view, seemed only to reinforce power imbalances. The wealthy pick their pet causes without democratic input or oversight. What's more, they park their assets in foundations, where the money grows tax-free, with only the capital gains parcelled out as grants or donations. The core wealth remains intact, often in perpetuity. "So you take part in the exploitation of people and the planet and then use the profits to sprinkle a little money over the fire you created," Engelhorn said. "Shouldn't the goal be to not be so rich anymore?"

Compared with much of the world, Austria is in the seemingly paradoxical situation of having relatively low income inequality and high wealth inequality. One reason for this is the country's extensive social-welfare system. "If you need medical treatment, you get it," Gabriel Felbermayr, the director of the Austrian Institute of Economic Research, told me. "When you retire, you have a guaranteed income, and a rather high one, at that." The level of public support, combined with high taxes on income—as much as fifty-five per cent for those earning more than a million euros a year—means that not many Austrians get rich off of money that they make themselves. "The incentive to build wealth is reduced," Felbermayr said.

Instead, wealth in Austria is often an intergenerational matter, as the great fortunes of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are at once preserved and divided among the members of an ever-expanding family tree. Austria was one of the few countries in Europe that didn't seize or otherwise dismantle aristocratic holdings after the fall of the monarchy. In 1919, when the last Habsburg king was dethroned, noble families were allowed to retain their wealth so long as they recognized the authority of the new Austrian Republic. The Esterházy estate, the holdings of a once prominent family in the aristocracy, for example, is today the country's largest private landowner, with more than a billion euros' worth of forests, farmland, lakes, and vineyards.

Austria has had no inheritance tax since 2008, the result of a dispute among members of a wealthy family which worked its way up to the country's constitutional court. Under the previous tax rules, assets such as cash and company shares were taxed at market rates when passing between generations, but real-estate holdings were taxed according to government

land valuations. Family members who received cash, rather than property, found that unfair. The court agreed and did away with inheritance tax entirely. Austrian politicians were aware that the ruling would make the country an attractive destination for Europe's rich, especially those in neighboring Germany. Alfred Gusenbauer, then the Austrian Chancellor, told German journalists "to publicize this as widely as possible!"

In 2021, Engelhorn and a dozen other heirs and young entrepreneurs in Germany and Austria founded Taxmenow, which advocates for wealth and inheritance taxes. The German press had taken to calling demands for such reforms "*eine Neiddebatte*," or "an envy debate." "We heard time and again from activists who have been working on inequality for years that they are simply not listened to," Stefanie Bremer, a scion of a wealthy German family, said. "But they told us, If those of you with privilege were to make the same points, people would pay attention in a different way."

Engelhorn is far more public than many Taxmenow members, most of whom prefer to keep their faces and family names out of the press. "Stefanie Bremer," for example, is an alias; she is a shareholder in a family business whose governance rules restrict public-advocacy work. "In my case, it's the only compromise available," she told me. Other Taxmenow members declined to speak with me on the record. "It's not like the U.S. here," Yannick Haan, a Taxmenow member who wrote a book, "Disinherit Us Already!," said. "It's very much a quiet, private, secretive, no-pictures kind of culture."

In 2022, at the age of ninety-five, Traudl died in Switzerland. "I knew I couldn't hide anymore," Engelhorn told me. "If I don't act, then everything I've said that I believe in won't be worth much of anything." She had followed the councils in Ireland and Austria—the climate assembly had concluded a few months earlier—and had read Landemore's book on participatory democracy. "I wanted to get as close as possible to being taxed," Engelhorn said. She also wanted to stir things up, to get people talking: "I wanted a public discourse."

Last fall, she hired Alexandra Wang, a fund-raiser at a progressive think tank in Vienna to which Engelhorn was a major donor, as the director and first employee of what would become the Good Council. A small team came

together in secret, with the hope of avoiding an influx of requests for money before the effort took shape. (That happened anyway; after a story spread in Brazil claiming that Engelhorn was giving away her fortune, she was inundated with appeals in Portuguese.) Engelhorn was more interested in process than outcome. The Good Council was meant to be a living experiment, one that others could learn from, just as she had drawn on the precedent of citizen assemblies in Europe. None of this made her noble or virtuous, she insisted. “I’m not a ‘good’ rich person,” she told me. “I’m just a rich person.”

At the council’s opening session, Karin Heitzmann, a professor from the Vienna University of Economics and Business, led an exercise to illustrate the distribution of wealth in Austria. Heitzmann asked half the group to move to the back of the room, where each of them was given a tiny scrap of toilet paper, representing the wealth held by fifty per cent of the Austrian population. Another group, almost as large—the middle class—was handed a slightly larger scrap. Five people in the room, as the upper class, were each handed a single square of toilet paper, the equivalent of a million euros. Erna was the only person left. She was brought to the center of the room and handed a dozen sheets of toilet paper—she was Austria’s one per cent. “I guess I’m the millionaire here,” she said, laughing.



R. Crumb

Afterward, I asked Erna what it felt like to be the richest person in the room. “A little overwhelming,” she told me. One quickly gets used to wealth, however, even when it’s measured in toilet paper. Later that evening, after dinner, Erna called out, with a wide smile, “The rich lady is going to bed!”

In any citizen council, the moderators guide discussions and help keep the proceedings on schedule. “They try and be neutral and non-manipulative, but of course they wield huge power,” Landemore, the author of “Open Democracy,” said. “An emphasis on getting things done, producing proposals, leading to a concrete outcome—it can all mean that, in the moment, you take away the possibility for improvisation or dissent.”

In Salzburg, a hand-drawn road map for achieving the final redistribution of the twenty-five million euros was projected onto a screen at the front of the room. Hanna Posch, the Good Council’s head moderator, who previously worked with the climate assembly in Vienna, told me that a legible process was necessary given the range of experience that the participants brought to the council. “The group is so diverse,” she said. The youngest member was sixteen, the oldest eighty-five. Toward the back of the room, a row of translators sat in glass booths, as if at the U.N., and relayed the proceedings for participants who spoke Croatian, Dari, and Turkish. “Our job is to make sure that no one gets left behind,” Posch said. “For that, you need some rules—a structure—which gives a feeling of safety to the participants.”

Engelhorn had told me that she was prepared for all manner of outcomes, but the presentations from experts had left a clear impression: wealth is distributed across society unfairly, and policies of redistribution are required to fix this injustice. Julia Friedrichs, a journalist for the German newspaper *Die Zeit*, asked the moderators why the proceedings didn’t reflect more ideological diversity. “That would not have been in the spirit of Marlene,” a moderator replied. Wang, the council’s director, gave me a slightly different answer: “If you look for experts who specialize in inequality, you’ll often end up with those who are more progressive.”

As a result, the council did not hear from experts who might have argued that a wealth tax can come with burdensome administrative costs—Who will regularly update a register of yacht owners or reassess the contents of a vault filled with Dutch Old Masters?—and runs the risk of persuading the wealthy

to take their assets elsewhere, leaving governments with less tax revenue than before. When Norway increased its wealth tax to slightly more than one per cent in 2022, for example, dozens of ultra-wealthy Norwegians fled the country, depriving the state budget of the equivalent of some fifty billion dollars.

Among the council members, opinions varied on the question of inequality. “I feel like the idea here is that making money is bad, that rich people are the bad guys,” Florian, who grew up in Salzburg and now studies engineering at a university in Vienna, said. “I don’t look at someone who has more than me and think to take it away from him.”

Franz, who used to run a dairy farm in Upper Austria and now works as a repairman in a retirement home, said that Perg, the city where he lives, has plenty of jobs and a low cost of living. “My friends have cars, go to the cinema, take holidays,” he said. He recently discussed the idea of inheritance taxes with his eighteen-year-old daughter, who took over the family farm last year. Franz thought it would have been fair if she had paid, say, a ten-per-cent estate tax on the land transfer. But, he went on, “she tells me I don’t understand the real cost of running a farm.”

Anna-Lena, who teaches biology and geography at a school in Volders, a village in the foothills of the Alps, said that she was lucky—she lives with her boyfriend in an apartment that he owns. But she remembered what it was like to be out with friends and wonder if she could afford a second drink. “It often felt like you were surviving, rather than enjoying, life,” she said.

Sara, who immigrated to Austria from Tanzania a decade ago, has four children—she brought the youngest, Malik, who was four months old, to Salzburg—and works as a cashier at a supermarket in Vienna; in February, she launched a side business selling hair oil. “If you really need something in life,” she said, “you find out the price, and figure out how to get it.” But the council had also revealed the full extent of wealth disparity in her adopted country. “I had no idea that so few people in Austria had so much,” she told me. “And I didn’t know there are rich people like Marlene.”

During the council’s third session, in mid-April, the members were split up into six groups: education, housing, environment, health, rights, and

economic policy. Each group would be allocated a maximum of four million euros to fund projects and organizations, using a democratic mechanism known as consensus decision-making: a thumbs-up expressed support for a proposal; one raised hand meant that a participant had a slight objection; two hands up was a sign of serious opposition, in which case the group tried to address the concerns. Consensus didn't require unanimous approval, only that no one strongly disagreed.

I paid a visit to the education group, where members were talking through the implications of overcrowded classrooms. "I don't see myself in a kindergarten in ten years," Selin, a teacher in Vienna, said. "You can't engage in real education when you have one teacher for twenty-five children." Someone suggested that higher salaries might attract more people to the profession. Benedict, in his mid-twenties, who works in quality control at an industrial manufacturer in Pottendorf, noted that the state already directs billions of euros to the education sector each year. "The money here is just a drop in the bucket," he said.

Many of the ideas under discussion were based on the lived experiences of the council members. Selin favored Kids-in-Motion, an initiative that leads schoolchildren in physical exercises to build fitness and motor skills. Erna, in the housing group, wanted to give money to Frauenhäuser, a network of shelters for women and children fleeing domestic violence. Hildegund, the deaf council member, who joined the health group, proposed directing money toward training more sign-language interpreters, and building more accommodations for children with physical disabilities in schools. "We're here to help the weakest," she said.

At the start of the council, I was expecting to witness weeks of passionate debate, with members fighting over the fate of millions of euros like loose poker chips. But there were few unmoderated moments in which the unexpected could emerge. At one point, several people in the housing group discussed the prospect of a Guter Rat Haus, a building bought—or perhaps even built from scratch—with the council's money which would live on after the twenty-five million had been distributed. "We could realize all our ideas right there," Wilfried, a retired corporate manager for a shoe company, said. "Study cafés for teen-agers, a safe space for women, a meeting point for the elderly." Franz thought one Guter Rat Haus could inspire others.

“Imagine, there could be a whole network of them,” he said. The experts standing by subtly talked the group out of it: the startup costs would be too high, and there were already plenty of organizations pursuing such work. Later, when council members raised the idea of funding an accountability body to study the results of the council—“A long-term thing,” Wilfried said—one of the moderators replied, “But this is not part of your assignment.”

In the end, the only real conflict arose in the education group, where a debate erupted among the eleven members over whether to send funds to Wikipedia. The idea came from a Vienna resident in his mid-thirties, who, out of a fastidious concern for privacy, asked that I call him Peter. He saw Wikipedia as addressing many of the council’s core values: democracy, accessibility, transparency. The idea was immediately opposed by Kyrillos, a high-school student and the council’s youngest member. “We have a lot of other, more important issues to address here,” he said. Anyway, he went on, his teachers wouldn’t allow him to use Wikipedia as a source in his papers—why give it money?

Factions emerged. Some saw Wikipedia, a nonprofit based in the U.S., as an inefficient use of the council’s resources. Others viewed the effort to nix it as a violation of the council’s ground rules. The voting process became messy and convoluted. Things got tense. Kyrilos put up two hands. Peter was upset that the veto of one person could kill an idea just like that—could he put up two hands for every project and bring the work of the group to a standstill?

Dorothee Vogt, an outside expert who was observing the session, recommended that the group take a break. “People were tired,” she told me later.

To Vogt, whose experience is in participatory philanthropy, the process in Salzburg seemed rushed. “The questions put to the Guter Rat are vast, almost unimaginably huge,” she told me. “Its members are asked to draw up a solution to the problem of high wealth concentration while also distributing twenty-five million euros for, as they were told at the outset, nearly anything at all—and for that they have six weekends.” Still, Vogt didn’t want her critiques to overshadow what she viewed as an inspiring

prototype for civic engagement. “You want to give people space but also get to a result,” she said. “It’s not easy.”

The Wikipedia debate was ultimately settled with a compromise. The members of the education group agreed to give the organization fifty thousand euros, a small portion of their total. No one seemed entirely satisfied. Kyrillos said that he only agreed because Peter “got so deeply absorbed by this.” Peter, for his part, looked unhappy. “I feel like shit,” he said.

The group moved on to its other projects, which were far less contentious, including Teach for Austria, a program that recruits university graduates to work in disadvantaged schools, and the Integrationshaus, a center in Vienna with language courses, tutoring, and counselling for young migrants and refugees. The housing group, meanwhile, had settled on a dozen organizations working on homelessness, rental protections, and providing shelter for those in crisis, including the Frauenhäuser. Anna-Lena, the biology teacher, was in the environment group. “We made good choices,” she said. Among other projects, they funded Arche Noah, a foundation devoted to crop diversity, and Klimashboard, which tracks emissions and calculates various scenarios for reducing them.

The members of the economic-policy group spent much of their time drafting “*Botschaften*,” a kind of statement of basic principles for addressing inequality. They debated, for example, whether a primary family residence should be carved out of a proposed inheritance tax. They also considered a wealth tax of as high as ten per cent. Initially, Sara seemed uncomfortable with the idea.

“Do you feel bad for the rich?” another member of the group asked.

“I fight for what I want in life,” Sara said. “How do you think the rich get up there? They must have done something.”

In the end, the group decided to leave exact numbers out of their proposal for taxes on wealth and inheritance. “We don’t want to sound like we’re attacking anyone, including the rich,” Florian said. He suggested another swap: instead of calling for a “more fair” distribution of wealth, he proposed

advocating for one that was “less extreme.” Martin, an accountant in his thirties, asked if they wanted to address the matter of capital-gains taxes or “scratch it.” The rest of the group, eager to finish, answered unanimously: “Scratch it!”

A few days before the council wrapped up, I travelled to Vienna, where I joined Engelhorn for a walk around the Augarten, a stately park with tree-lined promenades. Engelhorn didn’t know much about what had been happening in Salzburg. “I want to avoid founder’s syndrome,” she said—that is, when an organization’s creator stifles the creativity of the rank and file. At one point, she said that she would have been perfectly happy if the deliberations had become so wrapped up in matters of democratic process that the council never managed to distribute any money at all. When I told her that the council seemed designed to prevent such a non-result result, she sounded deflated. “If I wanted to redistribute twenty-five million perfectly, like a re-granter”—a type of philanthropy in which one large grant is used to finance lots of smaller ones—“I would have just chosen a re-granter,” she said. “But I didn’t. I wanted discussion.”

The next morning, in Salzburg, the groups assembled in the conference room to learn how the council had, in sum, distributed Engelhorn’s inheritance. The largest amount, more than €1.6 million, went to the Nature Conservation Union, which buys untouched land in order to preserve it. More than two hundred thousand euros went to the children’s programs of the Salzburg Philharmonic. Tens of thousands more were directed to efforts such as a counselling center for L.G.B.T.Q. youth, a children’s soccer league, a newspaper distributed by the homeless in Vienna, and a coalition of civic-minded scientists which tries to inject scientific findings into the mainstream discourse. Over all, nearly eighty organizations received a slice of Engelhorn’s inheritance. Florian, the engineering student, said that it felt like a list of “social projects” more than something addressing the fundamental issue of inequality. “It’s not bad,” he told me. “Maybe just a missed opportunity.”

More than three and a half million euros remained undistributed. That amount, the moderators explained, would be divvied up among pairs of participants, each of which would get seventy-three green stickers worth two thousand euros each. The funded projects would be displayed on stands in

the conference room, and council members could walk around fixing their stickers to initiatives they wanted to receive additional money. After dinner, I took a seat at the side of the hall and watched what felt like a rare moment of unscripted drama: a room of ordinary people, sheets of stickers in hand, parcelling out euros as they liked—redistribution in action, I thought.

The next day, the Guter Rat members met for a party. The ballroom was decorated with white tablecloths and glittery streamers. There was cake and sparkling wine. A stack of toilet-paper rolls, marked “€1.000.000” in thick black marker, was arranged on a buffet table like a wedding-reception centerpiece. Wang, the council’s head, took the microphone. “Democracy begins here,” she said. Engelhorn had joined the celebration via video call, her face projected at enormous scale onto a screen. Wang turned to her. “Thank you for choosing a completely different path,” she said. Some cheered; others rubbed wet eyes. Engelhorn seemed on the verge of crying herself. “I am so proud of you, and have the deepest respect for your work,” she said.

In Vienna, Engelhorn had told me that, by the end of the year, she could find herself needing to earn money for the first time. “I don’t want a job that I only have because I’m riding on my privilege,” she told me. “But, at the same time, I want a job that takes advantage of my privileges.” The Engelhorn family, of course, remains phenomenally wealthy—there will be other relatives who die, including Marlene’s parents, all with their own inheritances to pass along. She hopes that, by then, there will be other solutions in place, like proper wealth and inheritance taxes, or a spirit of redistribution so embedded within her own family that there won’t be much left to inherit. Barring that, she said, “I guess I’ll have to do it all over again.” ♦

Profiles

Ina Garten and the Age of Abundance

The Barefoot Contessa looks back at a career built on fantasies of comfort and plenty.

By Molly Fischer

September 02, 2024



On a June evening that was pleasantly warm in East Hampton and too hot almost everywhere else, Ina Garten and her husband, Jeffrey, picked me up for dinner in a Mini Cooper convertible. It was one of many on the roads of Long Island's East End. ("There was a Mini showroom in Southampton," Garten, who has lived in East Hampton since 1985, later told me. "If it was a nice day, you went over and bought one.") Garten's is cream-colored, which suits her role as America's reigning queen of tastefully deployed butterfat. For almost twenty years, Garten ran a food store in the Hamptons called the Barefoot Contessa, which catered to vacationing New York and Hollywood élites; then, starting in 1999, she published a series of best-selling cookbooks and starred in a show on the Food Network which turned her into the beloved national figure she has comfortably remained. From the beginning, her style was indulgent and inviting rather than polished and

showy. “She’s the aunt that everybody wishes they had,” Kerry Diamond, the founder of the food magazine *Cherry Bombe*, told me. “She’s funny. She’s rich. She’ll let you eat the chocolate cake your mother said you couldn’t have.”

I had come to East Hampton to spend a few days with Garten in her domain, in anticipation of “Be Ready When the Luck Happens,” a memoir she co-wrote with Deborah Davis, which Crown will publish in October. “We are VERY casual so don’t pack any evening gowns!” Garten had advised in an e-mail. “xxxx Ina.” She offered to lend me the Mini during my stay, and, when I declined, to pick me up from the Jitney, which is what a bus is called in the Hamptons.

Her current TV show, “Be My Guest,” which premiered on the Food Network in 2022, makes literal her place as Everyone’s Favorite Hostess: she invites such well-known personalities as Jennifer Garner, Danny Meyer, and Stanley Tucci—many of whom are or have become friends—to her home to cook, drink, eat, and be interviewed. (David Remnick, the editor of this magazine, once joined her to make chicken cutlets.) At the beginning of each episode, we see her celebrity guest in their car, heading to East Hampton, often expressing giddy enthusiasm at the prospect of a day with Garten. These visitors, needless to say, do not take the bus. Still, Garten was determined to host me as thoroughly as she could, and had arranged for a montage of entertainments during my stay: dinners out, dinner in, a charity tour of her garden. “As Alfred Hitchcock said, movies are like life with the boring parts cut out,” she told me, explaining her approach to my visit. In person, her voice is throatier than it sounds on TV—the ideal register for a dinner party.

On that first night, Garten was behind the wheel and Jeffrey was tucked, gamely if a bit creakily, in the back seat. The two have been married for more than fifty years. She calls him Babe; he calls her Ine. He is short, but she is shorter. The early evening was bright as we drove east on Route 27 toward Mostrador, a restaurant at a beach hotel in Montauk where diners can sit on chairs in the sand. Garten, who is recognized everywhere she goes in the Hamptons, wore a straw hat that she kept pulled low. Jeffrey wore a Barefoot Contessa baseball cap.

We had spent the morning in the “barn” on Garten’s property, where she tests recipes and films her TV shows in a vast, open kitchen that is essentially two kitchens side by side—two refrigerators, two stand mixers, two ranges—with a continent-size island beneath a vaulted ceiling. This arrangement allows Garten and one of her assistants, Mica Bahn or Rose Brown, to cook simultaneously without getting in each other’s way. That morning, Garten had been trying to decide which of two old cake recipes to spruce up with a new topping and include in her next cookbook. While Bahn prepared a ricotta breakfast cake, Garten delivered a brief discourse on why over-mixing flour makes batter tough. (“Have I told you this?” Garten asked Bahn. “I don’t think you have,” Bahn replied politely.) Now, on the way to Montauk, Garten reported without particular disappointment that the cakes had been underwhelming—perhaps she’d try chocolate instead. She went to reach for her phone in the back seat to show me a photo, but Jeffrey suggested that this could wait until she was no longer driving.

The two of them had been to Mostrador the previous summer and liked it, and they had recently gone back to confirm that it was still good. The idea of proposing dinner at a place she’s been “meaning to try” appalls Garten. It’s the dining-out analogue to one of her rules of hosting: don’t serve anything that you haven’t made before. When Garten entertains, she cooks almost exclusively from her own recipes, which she has tested thoroughly. Her culinary style has been guided by the principle that people tend to want to eat things they know, but better—lavishly executed comfort food. “I love to take a familiar flavor and then push it over the top!” she wrote in her first cookbook, alongside a recipe for bread pudding prepared with croissants instead of “boring white bread.” People also want effortlessness, or, at least, the appearance of effortlessness; Garten believes that nothing ruins a party like palpable stress on the part of the person throwing it. She feels for both guests and hosts. “I think she’s very empathetic,” Jeffrey told me. “But lots of people are empathetic. She uses that empathy in a practical way.”

Driving toward the beach, Garten described the plans for her appearances on the “Today” show during NBC’s Olympics coverage—she would be showing viewers her favorite food destinations in Paris, where she and Jeffrey have had an apartment since 2000. “Today,” on which she first appeared in 1999, is one of Garten’s constants, like her uniform of button-down shirts (denim in summer, corduroy in winter, usually from Talbots)

and her bob (first given to her, in the seventies, by a stylist at the Watergate Hotel named Sylvan Melloul, who later cut Hillary Clinton's hair as First Lady). Once Garten finds something she likes, she sticks with it.

Garten parked, and we walked toward the restaurant, expecting to see the dinner rush, but the chairs on the sand were empty. Mostrador was closed. She proceeded to problem-solve. "We can have fun in a closet," Garten said. "It doesn't matter." ("Fun" is a watchword with Garten. "If it's not fun, it's not done," she told me.) As it happened, she and Bahn had been discussing Fini, a pizzeria in Amagansett, just that morning. "Their white pizza's just stunning," Garten had said. We got back in the Mini and set out for Fini.

At the pizzeria, we ordered slices and plastic cups of rosé. I insisted, as a journalist, on paying for my part of the meal, to Garten's chagrin. Jeffrey, an expert in emerging market economies who now teaches as a dean emeritus at Yale, assured me that he knew how these things went—back when he was in the Clinton Administration (as Under-Secretary of Commerce for International Trade), the rules were "really strict." Once, a C.E.O. offered him a flight home to East Hampton on a private jet; Jeffrey accepted it, but felt honor-bound to write him a check for the price of a first-class ticket.



In some fields, the line between business and pleasure is supposed to be obvious. The soft power of the hostess can make it more fuzzy. Abundance—forget the calories, forget the dishes, forget the cost—is Garten’s métier, and expense reports are no fun. “It just feels so ungracious!” she said, as she watched me pick up the check.

Deborah Davis, the co-author of “Be Ready When the Luck Happens,” met Garten after sending a fan letter praising her coconut cupcakes and requesting a blurb for a book she’d written about Truman Capote’s Black-and-White Ball. Their writing process for the memoir involved recording long interviews over several years. “I gave her all the bricks, and she built the house,” Garten said.

The title reflects the evolution of Garten’s understanding of her own success. She long believed herself lucky; lately, she says, she has begun to recognize the roles that talent and hard work played. Still, it is striking, reading the book, just how much luck does happen. Sellers of houses lower prices at just the right moment; Jeffrey gets offered a loan from his bosses at Lehman Brothers when Garten’s scrambling to cover payroll. Rain threatens an outdoor wedding she’s catering, but, at the last minute, she finds a tent. “Whew!” she writes, and “Phew!” and “PHEW!” (Garten requested that copy editors preserve the book’s colloquial flavor, and they mostly obliged. “If there were three exclamation marks, they pared it down to one,” she said.)

Garten’s home in East Hampton is a near-exact replica of a house that she and Jeffrey previously owned down the street. When they decided that they needed more space, they bought an empty lot nearby and re-created it, adding an office for him. (“I could walk through the rooms blindfolded and know where everything was,” she writes.) Then, in 2006, Garten persuaded a neighbor to sell her an adjoining empty field, which is now the site of the barn, a quasi-public workplace on the grounds of her private life. The view from the barn kitchen is of her house, and the view from her desk in the house is of the barn.

It is a life she has constructed to her exact specifications, and it represents an emphatic response to an upbringing in which she felt that few of her wishes or tastes were satisfied. “I think I was starving my whole childhood,” Garten

told me. We were sitting in the barn's library, where the tops of the bookshelves are lined with white cake stands; she had her back to the floor-to-ceiling windows and her feet up on a large ottoman. This was one of our first conversations, and she had brought it swiftly to the subject of her early life, which she has tended to avoid in the past. Davis hadn't been sure whether Garten would be comfortable discussing her childhood publicly, but, in time, she said, "the door opened."

The future Barefoot Contessa was born in Brooklyn in 1948, the younger child of parents from immigrant Russian Jewish families who had met as counsellors at a summer camp. (She has an older brother named Ken.) Garten's father, Charles Rosenberg, was a surgeon. Her mother, Florence, was trained as a dietitian, and her attitude toward food shadowed Garten's childhood. Florence was "obsessed with what she ate," Garten recalled. "It was all about nutrition rather than pleasure. My mother didn't understand pleasure." Florence did not, as a rule, serve carbohydrates or dessert, and, after Charles had a heart attack in his forties, cholesterol was forbidden, including cream for coffee. "Skim milk," Garten told me. "You might as well pour water in your coffee."

The family moved to Connecticut when Garten was five, and, though their life appeared to be a model of mid-century suburban prosperity, Garten experienced it differently. "I remember being terrified of my father," she said. Florence maintained a rigid sense of order to avoid what Garten, in the memoir, calls her father's "temper tantrums"—when he'd scream and hit his children. "He would just have a rage, where he would drag me around the house by my hair," she said. "He never sexually abused me, but he had this love-hate relationship with me. I think he loved me, but he wanted me to be who he wanted me to be, without any consciousness of who I am." At home, Garten holed up in her room, but at school she was vivacious and popular. As a teen-ager, she resolved never to date any boy who raised his voice to her.

Davis's original draft of Garten's memoir began with her childhood, but Garten said that this was wrong: her life began with Jeffrey. They met in 1964, when he spotted her through a library window at Dartmouth, where he was a freshman and she was visiting Ken, a sophomore. She was sixteen, wearing blue Pappagallo flats bought with her own money and a blue ribbon

in her hair. “I could tell by looking at her that she was really smart,” Jeffrey told me. “She was talking to two people, and I could see the expression on her face, which was so incredibly alert, even as she was laughing.” Their relationship developed in letters and on weekend trips; they married when Garten was twenty and a junior at Syracuse University. In the course of the decade that followed, Garten transferred to North Carolina State University and worked a series of short-term jobs; Jeffrey proceeded to the military, to graduate school in international studies, and then to the State Department, where he worked for Henry Kissinger.

Garten’s fans know Jeffrey as an uxorious husband who delights in roasted chicken and literally everything else his wife prepares. Their romance has become part of Garten’s persona. But, of course, no actual relationship is so easy: the book’s account of a brief separation in the late seventies might surprise some readers. Garten explained to me that their early dynamic—with Jeffrey as the designated adult—made sense at first, but over time their roles began to chafe, especially amid the broader reconsideration of marriage taking place in the nineteen-seventies. (“It started to piss me off that I was the only one who made dinner,” Garten said.) Their reconciliation involved recognizing that they’d both be happier with more independence. In the mid-eighties, just as Garten opened her store in East Hampton and moved there full time, Jeffrey spent two years in Tokyo, overseeing Lehman Brothers’ investment banking in Asia, followed by a year in Hong Kong. By the nineties, “navigating unusual situations was ‘normal’ ” for them, she writes. In an episode of “30 Rock,” Liz Lemon heralds Garten as “that woman on the Food Network whose husband only comes home on the weekends and she spends the rest of the time eating and drinking with her gay friends.” But it is also true that the marriage Garten credits with saving her from a chilly, remote upbringing has been remote in a different sense.

She and Jeffrey did not quite make an explicit choice against parenthood; it was more that parenthood always seemed out of the question to her. “I remember thinking very clearly, I don’t know why people have children. I just thought, Why would you re-create that?” Garten said. “I would be terrified.” In the early years, Jeffrey would periodically ask whether they should talk about having kids, and she’d demur. “And then, at some point, we just didn’t talk about it anymore,” she said.

Jeffrey told me that it took him years to realize how troubled Garten's relationship with Charles had been. "After we got married, I noticed great similarities between her and her father," Jeffrey told me. Like Charles, who wore cashmere sports coats and had his office professionally decorated, Garten cared about style and was gregarious. And, also like him, she had an eye for real estate.



Throughout Garten's childhood, Charles invested in property in Stamford, Connecticut, including an apartment complex that he rented out. He also bought a glassy modernist house built from blueprints by the firm Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, where Gordon Bunshaft was a star architect. (Garten told me that, years later, she got to visit Bunshaft's own East Hampton residence, which had been purchased, in 1995, by Martha Stewart: "She said, 'It's the only house ever designed by Gordon Bunshaft,' and I said, 'This is so bizarre, because I know the only other house. . . .' ") She and Jeffrey now own the apartment in Paris, an apartment on the Upper East Side, and, in East Hampton, their home, two commercial buildings, and a three-bedroom house where her assistant Bahn pays a nominal rent. "I saw part of my job as investing Jeffrey's money in real estate," Garten said.

The property next door to Bahn's recently came up for sale, and Garten bought that, too, because she didn't want construction noise bothering Bahn.

“I just want my guys to be happy,” Garten, who joked that her young employees are “substitute children,” told me. “And then send them out into the world to do what they want to do for themselves.” She paused briefly. “Sending them out in the world is hard.”

In Nancy Meyers’s 2003 movie, “Something’s Gotta Give,” Diane Keaton plays Erica Barry, a divorced fiftysomething playwright who possesses charm, beachfront East End real estate, and a great many turtlenecks. To convey her heroine’s sophisticated gestalt, Meyers sends her to the Barefoot Contessa. There, between piles of produce and an overflowing bakery case, Erica orders charcuterie in French. “Impressive,” her daughter’s much older boyfriend (Jack Nicholson) says, between slurps of an ice-cream cone.

Meyers and Garten met several years after the film came out, when the director spotted Garten having lunch at ABC Cocina, in Manhattan. Meyers recalls having “blabbed nervously,” but she and Garten soon struck up a rapport. Meyers would text her about recipes. They share an aesthetic kinship, and offer their audiences a similar fantasy of Boomer affluence—a world of spacious interiors furnished in unassuming good taste, with high-thread-count sheets and fully stocked refrigerators. So aligned are their styles that, when Garten visited the director’s house, Meyers told me, she complimented the kitchen-counter barstools. “Ina,” Meyers remembers telling her, “*I copied yours.*”

Garten’s version of that Boomer fantasy is anchored in the Hamptons—which she herself helped fix in the popular imagination. It was a different place when Garten first arrived, in the late seventies. For one thing, “no one called it ‘the Hamptons,’ ” the real-estate broker Frank Newbold, a friend of Garten’s and, for a time, her business partner on a line of baking mixes, told me. “It was like calling San Francisco ‘Frisco.’ It marked you as an outsider.” Newbold got into real estate in East Hampton in 1980. Wall Street was churning out corporate raiders and bond traders, and the second-home market was taking off.

The potted history of the Barefoot Contessa usually begins in 1978, with Garten seeing a *Times* classified ad for a “catering, gourmet foods & cheese shoppe” for sale in Westhampton Beach. The town was empty when she and Jeffrey drove up from their home in D.C., and so was the small store, save

for a teen-age girl baking chocolate-chip cookies. “The scent triggered a rush of good feelings, like endorphins on steroids,” Garten recalls in the memoir. She made a lowball offer, which, to her surprise, was accepted, and set about rearranging her life.

Garten was thirty years old, and she’d only worked in jobs she didn’t particularly care about, most recently at the Office of Management and Budget. She’d developed an interest in cooking after a camping trip she and Jeffrey had taken in Europe, where she marvelled at the goods for sale in French markets, from seasonal produce to jarred pot-au-feu. When they got back, she began cooking her way through Julia Child. She remembers going to a dinner party on Park Avenue where guests talked about Lutèce and Craig Claiborne; meanwhile, at the dinner parties she threw in D.C., people talked only about work. “To me, it felt very narrow,” she said.

Garten soon found that running a store was something like throwing a daily party. Her first guests were, in effect, her young employees, a crowd of local high schoolers, college students, and kids whose parents had summer houses nearby. She organized themed costume blowouts (“*M*A*S*H*”; “Barefoot Olympics”) and accompanied her staff on after-hours skinny-dipping expeditions. “We thought we were rock stars working there,” Hunt MacWilliams, who was sixteen at the time, told me. “My brother was painting houses, and he was, like, ‘I want to go work for Ina.’ ” The role Garten played was about more than high jinks—MacWilliams came out to her before coming out to his family. “She brought me under her wing,” he said.

Customers were Garten’s guests, too, but they were also the subjects of ongoing research. What inspired them to spend? Sarah Esterling, who was fifteen when she began working for Garten, remembers her boss teaching her the power of abundance: “If you put out ten lemons, you’ll sell two,” Garten told her. “If you put out eighty lemons, you’ll sell sixty-two.” The trick was to both inspire and satisfy customers’ cravings. After three years, Garten moved the Barefoot Contessa into a space ten times larger across the street. The new location had white wainscoting and screen doors, like a summer house. Big sacks of coffee beans propped up baskets of fruit; these looked nice, but they weren’t really the point. Coconut cupcakes were the point—along with barbecued ribs, baguettes, and bagels with lox and cream

cheese. “If it’s calories you’re after,” a 1981 writeup in the *Southampton Press* began, “this is the place.”

Garten sometimes talks about her early retail inexperience in terms of brownies. “I had made brownies for six friends, but I’d never baked a *hundred* brownies,” she writes in the memoir. The Barefoot Contessa’s brownies cost two dollars and twenty-five cents—three times what a brownie might have cost elsewhere—but they sold out every time. Esterling remembers a Fourth of July weekend when she had trouble closing the store’s safe because it was so full of money. On Monday, she and Garten went to the bank and dumped shopping bags of bills onto the counting table. “And Ina looks at it, looks at me,” Esterling recalled. “And she picks up bundles of cash with both hands, throws it up in the air, and goes, ‘*Wheeeee!*’”

Garten had decided to expand at the right moment. The late seventies and eighties saw a boom in specialty-food stores: the postwar allure of European culinary culture and, later, women’s growing presence in the workforce had created the conditions for a customer who cared about eating well but didn’t have much time to spend in the kitchen. These stores sold prepared dishes that shoppers could pass off as their own, plus such rarefied delights as sundried tomatoes and raspberry vinegar. The Silver Palate, a hole-in-the-wall shop on the Upper West Side founded by Julee Rosso and Sheila Lukins, became a generational icon with the publication, in 1982, of “The Silver Palate Cookbook.” Dean & DeLuca, which opened downtown in 1977, was an anchor of SoHo’s gentrification. It also had an outpost in East Hampton, and, in 1984, Garten got a call from its landlord. Dean & DeLuca was giving up its lease—would the Barefoot Contessa want to move in?

Westhampton (which, as its name suggests, lies on the west side of the East End) was casual, hard-partying, and a largely summertime scene. About an hour closer to the tip of Long Island, East Hampton, the location of the potential new space, was a long-standing blue-blooded summer colony, with the population to support a year-round business. Garten decided to head east, a choice that would prove as consequential as responding to that 1978 ad.

Early on, Garten had considered renaming her store: Barefoot Contessa had been the previous owner’s childhood nickname, and Garten had never seen

the 1954 Ava Gardner movie it evoked. In the end, Garten decided that the name suited her style perfectly. “The Barefoot Contessa,” she often says, is about being “elegant and earthy”—like Gardner’s character, a Spanish dancer turned Hollywood actress. But the movie is also about becoming famous, and, with her 1985 move to East Hampton, that is what Garten proceeded to do.

The eighties had brought residents with star power to East Hampton. “All of a sudden, it wasn’t nameless Vanderbilts and Whitneys and whatever,” Newbold told me. “These were interesting people that got covered in the media . . . and Ina—her timing was just perfect.” Steven Spielberg, one of East Hampton’s recent arrivals, became a Barefoot Contessa regular, along with Kelly Klein, Lauren Bacall, Lee Radziwill, and Ron Perelman. (“I’m drawn in as much by its personality as I am by what they have to offer,” Spielberg would later write, in a blurb for Garten’s first cookbook.) On New Year’s Eve, which became one of Garten’s biggest days of the year, employees dressed in bow ties and bowler hats to look like Fosse dancers and poured champagne for celebrity clientele.

I asked Garten to take me to 46 Newtown Lane, the building on East Hampton’s main commercial strip which was once home to the Barefoot Contessa. In 1996, Garten, ready to move on, decided to sell the store to two employees, Parker Hodges and Amy Forst. Garten told me that she hadn’t been back inside for more than twenty years, which surprised me, especially because she and Jeffrey have owned the building since 1987. (“Walking into a tenant’s space just felt odd,” she explained. “It felt like I was snooping.”) At the time of the sale, she said, she had warned Hodges and Forst that she’d eventually need to raise the rent to meet the market. But in 2003, when their lease was up, the Barefoot Contessa shut down. These are the realities of retail, Garten told me: “If you don’t own the building, you have no guarantee you can stay there.” In the end, she says, she gave them twice what they’d paid for the store to buy back its name. (Hodges and Forst did not respond to requests for comment.) The space now houses a Rag & Bone.

When we arrived, I turned to examine a street sign on the corner. “Don’t even look,” Garten said, with theatrical horror. “It’s so embarrassing!” Beneath a sign labelled “Barns Lane” was a second placard, which read “Ina Garten Way.” This was the handiwork of Drew Barrymore, who got the

street renamed as a stunt when Garten appeared on a 2022 episode of her talk show.

Inside the store, Garten considered a straw bag, and pointed out the former kitchen, which had become dressing rooms. I asked her how it felt to be back. “It feels much smaller,” she said.

From the world of nineteen-nineties home entertaining, Martha Stewart and Ina Garten emerged—like Betty and Veronica or Jackie and Marilyn—as a pair of contrasting archetypes. “People would ask me, Are you an Ina or are you a Martha?” Alison Roman, the best-selling millennial cookbook author, told me. Martha was the regal blond domestic virtuoso. (Later, she became the businesswoman who would be brought low by overweening ambition and, more recently, the eighty-one-year-old who made the cover of a *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue.) Ina, on the other hand, was the approachable brunette, the cozy sensualist, the relatable second-act success story—she was the celebrity chef fans imagined greeting them with a hug and an open bottle of wine. But, without Stewart, Garten might never have become a household name.



In 1990, Stewart bought a house south of Montauk Highway on East Hampton’s storied Lily Pond Lane. (“South of the highway” is often used as

shorthand for property close to the beach; Garten's East Hampton home is just slightly north of it.) Later that year, Stewart published the first issue of *Martha Stewart Living*, which included a writeup on the notable local business owner Ina Garten.

Chip Gibson, then the head of Crown Publishing, remembers a weekend drive in the nineties during which Stewart was "overcome" by the need to stop at the Barefoot Contessa. "We were in a gigantic black Suburban," he told me. "And suddenly she veered almost crashingly to the curb and said, 'I've got to get lemon squares.'" Personally and professionally, Garten became a part of the Martha Stewart universe. Garten told me about a New Year's Eve when Stewart invited her and Jeffrey over for dinner and, beckoning Garten into the kitchen, proceeded to snip the loops of a whisk with a wire cutter, prop a broom handle over two chairs, and, using the snipped whisk, drizzle caramelized sugar over the broom in fine golden strands. "She had made spun sugar!" Garten said. "She's stunning." ("Stunning," like "fabulous," is one of Garten's favorite adjectives, but it can suggest a double edge. She writes in her memoir: "No one needs to know how to make spun sugar.")

Gibson remembered the lemon squares when, in 1997, an editor brought him Garten's proposal for "The Barefoot Contessa Cookbook." Her association with Stewart was promising, as was the title. "Who doesn't want to see themselves as a barefoot contessa, particularly in affluent suburbs?" Gibson said.

Crown acquired the book on the condition that Garten spend eighty-five thousand dollars on five thousand copies (half of the initial print run) for her store. She also decided to hire her own publicist, food stylist, and photographer, at a cost of some two hundred thousand dollars. "Let's invest in it as though we were starting a business," she remembers telling Jeffrey—and, thanks to his time as an investment banker, they could. "I mean, the store made some money," she said. "But certainly nobody was getting rich running a food store."

With her cookbook, Garten hoped to translate the experience of shopping at her longtime store to the page. The recipes would be for customer favorites, and the design would convey the same sense of beachside bounty, with lots

of sun-soaked photographs of farm-stand tomatoes and artfully mussed cake. Garten had a keen sense of her book as merchandise, and the first layout she saw dismayed her. “I wanted it to be a story about me, about the store, and the prepared foods,” she said. “Literally, and I’m not exaggerating, the first forty pages didn’t have a picture of me, the store, or the prepared foods.” When she went to Gibson with her concerns, he told the editor to get out of her way.

Her bet paid off. “The Barefoot Contessa Cookbook,” published in 1999, sold so quickly that Crown had to reclaim Garten’s copies to meet demand. (It will be reissued in a twenty-fifth-anniversary edition this fall.) Concise and lushly illustrated, it marked an industry shift away from text-heavy, encyclopedic volumes, and became a best-seller. She and Jeffrey threw a book party in the garden of their East Hampton house, where media personalities drank rosé alongside the town’s business owners. “Walter Isaacson was hanging out, talking to Mr. Iacono,” Garten recalled, referring to a local chicken farmer. These were people who knew one another from across shop counters, and she had now switched sides.

In 2000, Stewart’s production company created a show starring Garten for the Food Network, with the working title “Someone’s in the Kitchen with Ina.” “Now you say ‘Martha Stewart,’ but then it was ‘*Martha*,’ ” Garten said. “I remember telling my mother about it, and she said, ‘Why does she want you?’ ” (“She has a broad appeal,” Stewart told me. “I did like the coconut cupcakes,” she added, though she said she has never cooked one of Garten’s recipes.) During the live-to-tape shooting, Garten found herself overwhelmed by the TV crew taking over her house, and worried that she was expected to fit Stewart’s mold. One day, Garten took a messy bite of a tea sandwich on camera and—still chewing—exclaimed over its tastiness. The director, she remembers, called cut and told her not to talk with her mouth full. To Garten, the whole experience was proof that TV wasn’t for her. In the end, the Food Network decided that the show didn’t work and shelved it, and Garten swore off television.

When Garten published her second cookbook—“Barefoot Contessa Parties!”—in 2001, her parents hosted a celebration at their Connecticut country club. They’d doubted her career path at first, but now they wanted to show her off. “My father and I were sitting in a corner. He said, ‘I don’t

know what I was thinking,’ ” Garten told me, tearing up. “I realized he was torturing himself—he tortured us, but he was torturing himself that he’d done it.” (He died in 2004; Garten’s mother died in 2006.)

Garten went on to publish twelve more successful cookbooks, all with Crown’s Clarkson Potter imprint. (She originally sold her memoir to Celadon, but, early this year, she decided to take the project to her team at Crown.) David Drake, the president of Crown since 2021, told me that he couldn’t think of another American cookbook author with a similar track record. The books’ contents, too, have charted a steady course: endless elaborations on ease, plenty, nostalgia, and butter. Pam Krauss has edited all of Garten’s cookbooks since the third. “Over the years I’ve had a lot of other cookbook authors come up to me, and they’re, like, ‘I don’t get it,’ ” Krauss told me, of Garten’s enduring success. “I think it’s the fact that her recipes always work. That may sound incredibly simplistic, or like the lowest bar on the planet when it comes to a cookbook. But I have never had anyone come up to me and say, ‘I made one of Ina’s recipes and it didn’t come out.’ It just hasn’t happened.”

Garten tests her recipes rigorously, and she also likes to collaborate with people she trusts. For almost twenty years, Sarah Leah Chase, the onetime proprietor of a prepared-food shop called Que Sera Sarah, on Nantucket, and a co-author of “The Silver Palate Good Times Cookbook,” has helped with Garten’s recipe development. As a fellow-veteran of vacation-town takeout, Chase shares Garten’s sense of what people in beach houses want to eat. They met when Garten came into her shop in the eighties, and reconnected around the time Garten signed a multi-book, multimillion-dollar deal that her agent described at the time as the biggest ever for a cookbook author. “She pays me well,” Chase said.

The cooking show “Barefoot Contessa” premiered on the Food Network in 2002, and, like “Sex and the City,” it is a small-screen ode to turn-of-the-twenty-first-century female hedonism which opens with snazzy piano music. Episodes depict Garten at home in East Hampton, where, with chatty good humor, she prepares to host brunches and card nights and dinners on the patio.

TV made Garten an instantly recognizable pop-culture figure, fodder for memes, drag impersonations, and costumes. (Many people rely on “How to Cook Everything,” but, come Halloween, they don’t dress up as Mark Bittman.) Once again, she had good timing. The Food Network, which had once targeted a niche audience, was beginning to pursue a larger viewership, and Eileen Opatut, an executive brought on to assist in the endeavor, had witnessed Garten’s unhappy first foray into TV.

Opatut introduced Garten to Pacific Television, the production company behind Nigella Lawson’s show “Nigella Bites,” which promised a small crew and a less stressful shooting process. They seemed to understand Garten’s appeal and drew out story lines from her life—for example, Jeffrey’s weekly return from New Haven, where he was then the dean of the Yale School of Management—to create a sense of bustling, albeit very gentle, activity. The title of the first season’s finale is “Soup Lunch.”

“We wanted it to feel like, as a viewer, you literally had a place at the counter,” Olivia Grove, Garten’s longtime producer, told me. “We’d call it ‘best-friend TV.’” A repertoire of catchphrases soon emerged. “How easy is that?” Garten asked viewers. “Store-bought is fine,” she assured them. She counselled the use of “good” ingredients. In one early episode, she explains how to make a perfect cup of coffee: “It starts with, really, one thing: good coffee. If you buy inexpensive, bitter coffee beans, you’re going to end up with bitter coffee—*hello!*” From a woman whose budget for good coffee seemed unlimited, this could have been alienating, but, somehow, it wasn’t. Garten’s great gift may be an ability to make audiences feel welcomed into the plush ambience of her good fortune.

“I don’t really understand the show,” Garten said. She has tried to quit on several occasions, but each time Grove and Rachel Purnell, Pacific’s executive producer, have talked her out of it. “It’s really hard for me, just to continually come up with something other than ‘Jeffrey’s going to love this!’” Garten told me. “It’s, like, ‘Oh, my God, if I say that one more time I’m going to kill myself.’” Yet the monotony that can make the show stultifying to its star is soothing to its viewers. Opatut thinks that “Barefoot Contessa” originally spoke to a post-9/11 desire for comfort and domesticity, and over the years Garten’s kitchen became a refuge from wider cultural vicissitudes. “In a bad economy, it’s more important to make yourself feel

good,” she told the *Washington Post* in the fall of 2008. Purnell said that people will often tell her that they turn to Garten’s show in times of crisis. One afternoon during my visit, Garten was scheduled to lead a group of women on a tour of her garden—the woman who’d purchased the excursion at a charity auction had wanted it as a present for her mother after her cancer treatment.



Garten had just begun telling me a long story about a spur-of-the-moment trip to Paris when Brown, her assistant, interrupted us with news that the tour group had arrived at her gate. Garten was determined to finish the anecdote. “I’ll talk fast,” she told Brown. “Walk slow.”

She and Jeffrey had been on vacation in London when he was called to Paris for a meeting. Garten occupied herself with a shopping spree on Avenue Montaigne, purchasing a cashmere scarf, earrings, a suède purse, and opera-length suède gloves, while Jeffrey spoke to the arms dealer Adnan Khashoggi about whether Lehman Brothers would restructure his debt. Jeffrey was against it. “He said to the guys at Lehman Brothers, ‘Just think about what this is going to look like on the front page of the *New York Times*’—which is the test I always use,” Garten said. Her acute consciousness of public perception amounts to a guiding principle.

In Garten's telling, she and Martha Stewart lost touch after Stewart began spending more time at a new property in Bedford, New York. Stewart recalled a sharper break, after her conviction related to an insider-trading scandal. "When I was sent off to Alderson Prison, she stopped talking to me," Stewart told me. "I found that extremely distressing and extremely unfriendly." (Garten firmly denies this.) Shortly after I got off the phone with Stewart, I received a call from Susan Magrino, her longtime publicist and friend. Magrino wanted to clarify that Stewart was "not bitter at all and there's no feud."

The barn library has a number of framed keepsakes on display, including a photograph of Jeffrey as a child, a photograph of Jeffrey as an adult, two photographs of Garten with Michelle Obama, and Garten's Proust Questionnaire, from the October, 2016, issue of *Vanity Fair*:

What is your current state of mind? It simply doesn't get any better than this! . . .

Where would you like to live? Right here in East Hampton.

What is your favorite occupation? Mine.

Garten's career enticingly suggests that the exact right amount of money and fame can, in fact, make you happy. "We live in this era of 'How much more can I do? How much more famous can I be? How much more money can I make?'" Diamond, the *Cherry Bombe* editor, said. "She seems very satisfied with what she has."

Garten feels no need to say yes to things that don't suit her. When the beauty brand Glossier, for example, proposed naming a fig lip balm in her honor, she took a meeting but decided against it: she didn't think her audience would believe that she used the product. She also avoids public activities that might be construed as political. As a model, she points to her warm and respectful relationship with her former longtime assistant Barbara Libath. "The way we operated is the way I think the world should operate," Garten told me. "We had very different views on religion and politics, and we never discussed them."

The fashion designer Daniel Roseberry, another fan turned friend, compared Garten to Dolly Parton in her ability to transcend cultural divides. Now the creative director of Maison Schiaparelli, Roseberry discovered the Barefoot Contessa in fashion school, when a classmate informed him that Garten was a gay icon; later, he introduced her work to his Christian family in Texas. “She’s someone that we can all agree on,” he said.

Garten’s commitment to smoothing over social friction has held firm even in the face of prejudice. Early on, she told me, she was asked to cater a party at a Hamptons golf club that excluded Jews: “I just said to them, ‘I’m really sorry, but I can’t cater a party for a club that wouldn’t have me as a member.’ And the woman was perfectly lovely. She said, ‘I totally understand,’ and that was that.” After Garten filmed an episode of “Barefoot” with Michelle Obama, in 2016, that attracted racist vitriol on Facebook, she decided that even seemingly anodyne political engagement wasn’t worth the trouble. “I don’t think I would change people’s minds,” she said. Taylor Swift, with whom Garten has enjoyed a public mutual fandom, was studiously apolitical for a long time, and Garten took the singer’s decision to speak out against the hard-right politician Marsha Blackburn’s (ultimately successful) 2018 Senate campaign in Tennessee as evidence in favor of her own approach. “I admire that she got involved,” Garten told me, but noted that Blackburn “did get elected anyway.”

During my visit, Garten’s morning agenda included invitations to answer and Instagram stats to discuss. She’d recently posted a photograph, for Father’s Day, of herself on her father’s arm at her wedding, with a caption about their “complicated” relationship. “We got a great response for the picture,” Garten said, referring to the comments. “Didn’t change the numbers at all. Why, do you think?” Bahn wasn’t sure. Garten laughed at her own preoccupation with her follower count. “If it goes down for an hour, I’m, like, ‘What happened?’ ” she said. “I’m like a teen-ager!”

Justin Timberlake had been arrested that week in Sag Harbor on a charge of driving under the influence, and, during a morning meeting, Garten pulled up a TikTok sent by a friend. It cut from news coverage of Timberlake’s claim to have had “one Martini” to a viral video that Garten had posted in April, 2020, in which she mixes herself a Cosmopolitan the size of a

birdbath. “I can’t believe they put together the Cosmo with poor Justin Timberlake,” she said. “I feel so badly for him!”

That night, she and Jeffrey had invited the filmmakers Rob Marshall and John DeLuca over for dinner. The couples had become friends some years back, after being introduced by their mutual florist; Garten and Jeffrey were fans of Marshall and DeLuca’s work. (“You were obsessed with ‘Chicago,’ ” Garten had said to Jeffrey over pizza at Fini. “Loved ‘Chicago,’ ” he’d replied.) Marshall is the source of her memoir’s title—it was paraphrased from advice Liza Minnelli gave him when he was a twenty-three-year-old Broadway dance captain.



Marshall and DeLuca appeared on the first season of “Be My Guest.” “They’re partners in life—and in work,” Garten explains, in her voice-over. They join her for dinner and watermelon Cosmopolitans. “Any day with Ina’s a great day,” Marshall and DeLuca observe, on the drive to her house. “Fun to be had,” she says, awaiting her guests. “So much fun,” she says, taking a sip of her cocktail once they arrive. They toast in front of a large desert landscape by the painter April Gornik, inspired by the opening scene of “The English Patient.” “How fun is this?” Garten says, and escorts her guests to a table to chat. She discusses their career bullet points, then leads them back to the kitchen, where the bright spines of *Barefoot Contessa*

cookbooks are recognizable in the background. “One of the great days,” Marshall and DeLuca agree, driving home. “What a world-class fun day,” Garten says, in her closing reflection.

It was eerie to watch the episode, as I did later, after attending roughly the same party. Our Cosmopolitans were classic rather than watermelon; Marshall and DeLuca arrived in a Mini convertible rather than in a Porsche. And, of course, we had to watch the Justin Timberlake TikTok—Marshall and DeLuca had encouraged Garten to post the Cosmo video in the first place. But in both the filmed and the live versions I heard the story of how they came to make “Chicago” (pitching Harvey Weinstein in a meeting about “Rent”), and about the time Renée Zellweger had their house in the Hamptons decorated for Christmas as a surprise. Between the Miramax talk, the Cosmos, and the general sense of Justin Timberlake as a sympathetic figure, it felt a bit like we’d slipped through time to the early two-thousands, the moment when Garten first ascended to celebrity. Spending time in her orbit can be not unpleasantly like entering a period piece.

But the pleasures on offer existed in the present. The coral peonies that Garten had placed in a vase on the small, round dinner table were among the last of the season; since she had bought them that afternoon, they’d opened to expose a sunset burst of pollen. The filet of beef was so tender it barely required teeth. As we ate, night fell, and, in a window above Jeffrey’s head, the moon was ringed in mist. “Look at that moon, holy shit,” Garten said. “I organized this for you.” By now she had relaxed into the evening, and she was speaking almost to herself. ♦

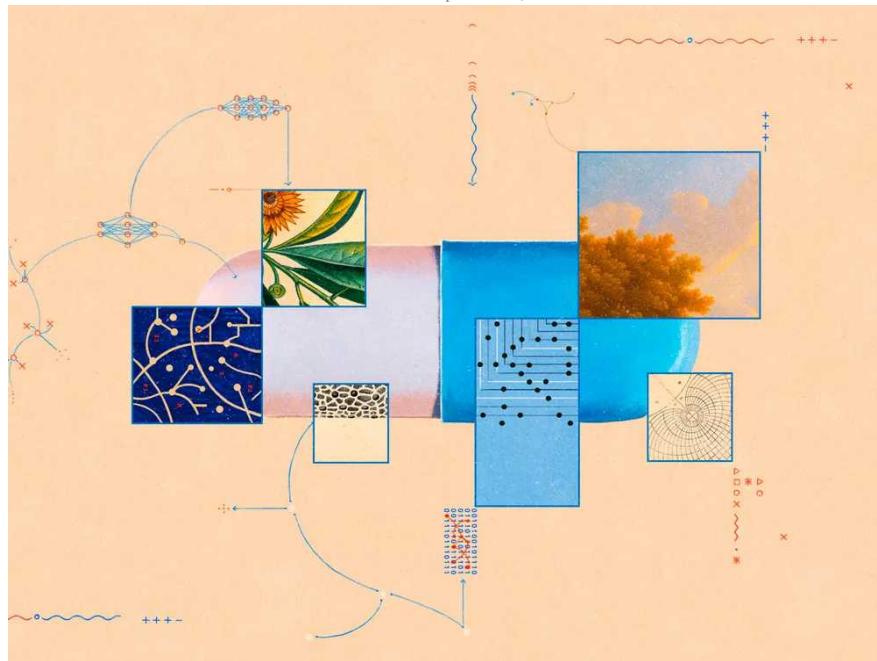
Brave New World Dept.

How Machines Learned to Discover Drugs

The A.I. revolution is coming to a pharmacy near you.

By Dhruv Khullar

September 02, 2024



When I first became a doctor, I cared for an older man whom I'll call Ted. He was so sick with pneumonia that he was struggling to breathe. His primary-care physician had prescribed one antibiotic after another, but his symptoms had only worsened; by the time I saw him in the hospital, he had a high fever and was coughing up blood. His lungs seemed to be infected with methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (*MRSA*), a bacterium so hardy that few drugs can kill it. I placed an oxygen tube in his nostrils, and one of my colleagues inserted an I.V. into his arm. We decided to give him vancomycin, a last line of defense against otherwise untreatable infections.

Ted recovered with astonishing speed. When I stopped by the next morning, he smiled and removed the oxygen tube, letting it dangle near his neck like a

pendant. Then he pointed to the I.V. pole near his bed, where a clear liquid was dripping from a bag and into his veins.

“Where did that stuff come from?” Ted asked.

“The pharmacy,” I said.

“No, I mean, where did it *come* from?”

At the time, I could barely pronounce the names of medications, let alone hold forth on their provenance. “I’ll have to get back to you,” I told Ted. He was discharged before I could. But, in the years that followed, I often thought about his question. Every day, I administer medicines whose origins are a mystery to me. I occasionally meet a patient for whom I have no effective treatment to offer, and Ted’s inquiry starts to seem existential. Where do drugs come from, and how can we get more of them?

On a wet morning in May, I walked to the stately gates of the Rockefeller University, on the Upper East Side, and met Sean Brady, a bearded and bespectacled chemical biologist who discovers medicines for a living. Wearing jeans, a button-down shirt, and chunky sneakers, Brady looked like a nerdy hiker. He had promised to take me prospecting for antibiotics. “Ready?” he asked, his glasses spattered with rain.

Brady oversees a program called Drugs from Dirt, which sifts through soil samples from around the world in search of antibiotics. On our way into his lab, we passed a bench piled with bags of dirt—one from the Chihuahuan Desert, another from the Sonoran Desert. “My parents sent me those during the pandemic,” Brady told me. He has been given soil from Saudi Arabia and the Serengeti; his collaborators have gathered samples in Mexican sinkholes and Australian grasslands. Inside the lab, we found shovels and black buckets amid flasks and mass-spectrometry machines. I took off my blazer and picked up a bucket, and Brady grabbed a shovel. We set off into the drizzle.

Many of the world’s leading drugs originated in the natural world. Ancient Egyptians soothed their wounds with aloe-vera gel; morphine and codeine came from the opium poppy; Ozempic was inspired by a peptide in lizard

venom. Dirt is one of the richest sources of medicine, because its microbes have been waging a war with one another for millions of years. Vancomycin—essentially a biochemical weapon that one bacterium uses to kill others—was discovered in soil samples from India and Indonesia in 1953. Around the same time, researchers reported that a bacterium in “heavily manured” New Jersey soil produced streptomycin, an antibiotic that became the first effective treatment for tuberculosis. (The bacterium is now New Jersey’s official state microbe.)

Different microbes thrive at different latitudes, and Brady once dreamed of collecting dirt from Alaska to Argentina. Lately, however, he has been content to stay on campus. “There’s an endless number of local bacterial products we haven’t studied yet,” he told me. “There’s plenty of good stuff right beneath our feet.” He stomped the ground playfully.

We walked down a cobblestone path until we came to an open lawn. Pigeons congregated near a fountain; a duck waddled by. Brady cleared some leaves and plunged his shovel into the earth. After dropping a few scoops into the bucket, he handed me the shovel. “Your turn,” he said.

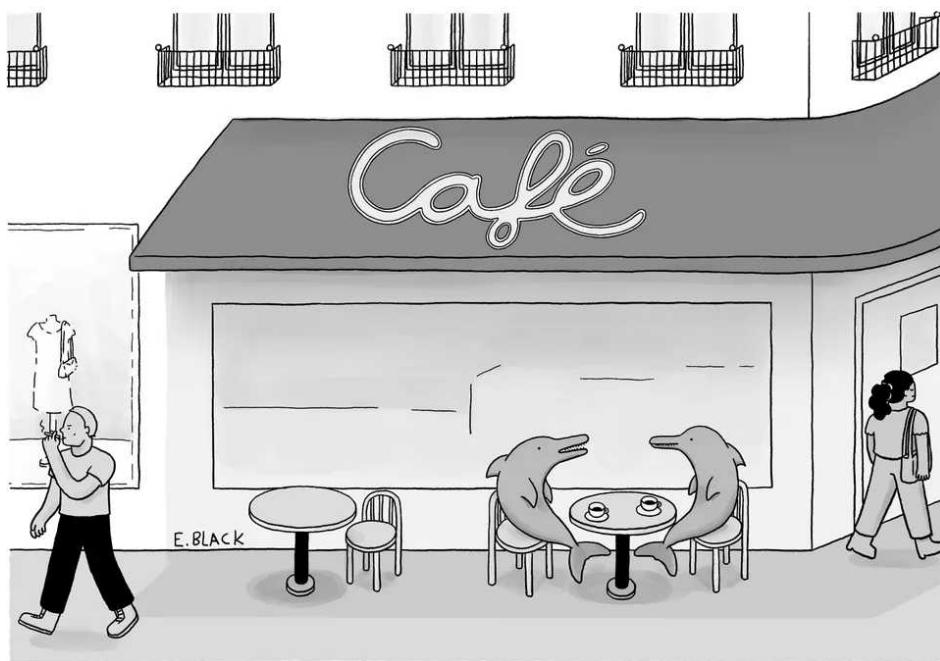
I looked around, wondering, absurdly, where I might hide if I were the next cure for cancer. When the bucket was half full, I wiped some raindrops from my face. “That should be more than enough,” Brady said. “One gram of soil has up to ten thousand different types of bacteria. You don’t need a lot. You just need to know what you’re looking for.”

Back in the lab, I scooped some soil into a tube and added a detergent that destroys bacteria’s cell walls and membranes, causing their DNA to spill out. Then Jan Burian, a researcher in Brady’s lab, showed me how to load the DNA onto a glass plate, which slid into a sequencer like a credit card into a payment terminal. “If we were sitting here ten or fifteen years ago, sequencing all this DNA might take weeks,” Burian told me. “Now it pretty much happens in real time.” He pulled up the machine’s output on a computer: an endless string of “G”s, “T”s, “C”s, and “A”s.

Bacteria produce numerous molecules that could become medicines, but most of them aren’t easily identified or synthesized with the technology that exists today. A small percentage of them, however, can be constructed by

following instructions in the bacteria's DNA. Burian helped me search the sequence for genes that looked familiar enough to be understandable but unfamiliar enough to produce novel compounds. We settled on a string of DNA that coded for seven linked amino acids, the same number found in vancomycin. Then Burian introduced me to Robert Boer, a synthetic chemist who would help me conjure our drug candidate.

What came next was intricately choreographed. You can't just throw amino acids into a soup and hope that they bubble into a medicine, Boer said. Building them into a potential drug—in this case, a peptide—is like assembling *IKEA* furniture. There's a specific sequence in which the parts need to be connected, with specific nuts and bolts. Before the amino acids could be fastened together, they had to be dissolved into a solution that would expose their chemical hardware.



We mixed one amino-acid solution, which contained tyrosine, with another, which contained serine. After waiting half an hour for the first linkage to form, we repeated the process one amino acid at a time, until all seven were connected in the correct order. Finally, the liquid was evaporated until just a few milligrams of snowy-white powder remained. I dubbed our drug candidate "NY1," for *The New Yorker*, and helped Boer pipette it onto a well

plate. It would now spend a night with *MRSA*. I imagined the start of a microscopic cage match between our molecule and the bacteria.

When I returned the next day, the liquid in the plate was thick and cloudy. NY1 had been powerless against *MRSA*—the plate looked so grimy that I wondered if I'd accidentally created a bacterial superfood. Brady gave me a pep talk. “If you found one on your first try, we’d probably hire you,” he joked. “You’d be our lucky charm. And, when it comes to finding a drug, a little luck never hurts.” His team, he said, sometimes tests more than a hundred molecules per month. A tiny fraction might show antibiotic activity, and a tiny fraction of those perform well enough—and are nontoxic enough—to advance to animal testing and clinical trials. The reasons that one molecule succeeds while another fails are hard to predict. Near my failed drug candidate was another contender, which had come from a neighboring patch of dirt; its well was as clear as water. Whatever was in there, it had killed *MRSA*—and we had no idea how.

Tori Kinamon was a freshman gymnast at Brown University when her leg started to ache. The team’s athletic trainers suspected a muscle strain, but the pain sharpened even after ice and a massage. A few days later, Kinamon awoke feverish and sweating; her leg was swelling and felt like it was on fire. Finally, an MRI revealed an abscess along a muscle. She was started on antibiotics and rushed to the operating room, where surgeons scraped out pus and necrotic tissue—the consequence of a raging *MRSA* infection. The surgeons operated eight times in two weeks, filleting open the back of her leg with a two-foot incision from her glute to her calf. “I was so happy the days I would have to go under for surgery, because that meant that I didn’t have to deal with what was going on around me,” she told me. The surgeons narrowly managed to save her leg, but the infection did not clear for weeks. Vancomycin harmed her kidneys, so she had to be switched to daptomycin, another antibiotic that comes from a bacterium in soil. “I am a direct beneficiary of the fact that we had an extra antibiotic in the stockpile when vancomycin was too toxic for my body to handle,” Kinamon, who is now a surgery resident in Texas, said. “Some patients are left without options.”

The number of chemicals that theoretically could prove useful as drugs has been estimated at ten to the sixtieth power—a quantity greater than the number of atoms in the solar system. Some of these potential medicines can

be found in nature. Others have already been discovered but we haven't yet found their uses. Still others have never been imagined. In "The Drug Hunters: The Improbable Quest to Discover New Medicines," Donald R. Kirsch and Ogi Ogas compare the pursuit of novel medicines to the search for meaning in "The Library of Babel," a short story by Jorge Luis Borges in which the author envisions the universe as an infinite library. Each book contains random letters and punctuation marks, so most of the texts are nonsensical. But, because the library is unfathomably large, it also contains every conceivable story. "Every possible drug is contained somewhere in the vast theoretical library of chemical compounds," Kirsch and Ogas write. Drug discovery is an effort to catalogue some small part of it.

In the mid-two-thousands, Stuart Schreiber, a chemist at the Broad Institute of M.I.T. and Harvard, set out to assemble an expansive library of chemicals that might have medical applications. Schreiber was frustrated that drug discovery was so tedious and unsystematic; his colleagues could study only the chemicals that they could make from scratch or buy from a commercial vender. He started by stocking up on simple chemicals from pharmaceutical companies and research organizations—"cheap stuff based on twentieth-century chemistry," he told me. Next, he collected a large number of "natural products," like the ones microbes make in dirt, that had a higher likelihood of proving useful as a drug. "Any chemist could take one look at the structures and tell you which molecule belonged to which group," he said—synthetic or natural. "It was like telling a cat from a dog." Then Schreiber gathered a group of chemists and had them invent molecules with the features of natural products—a process that they dubbed "diversity-oriented synthesis." Some compounds dissolved in water; others clumped. Some reacted promiscuously with one another; others kept to themselves. "The new synthetic molecules were much more sophisticated," Schreiber told me. "They were structurally quite similar to what's found in nature."

In the end, the chemists concocted a hundred thousand new molecules. The library, which is housed at the Center for the Development of Therapeutics (CDoT), grew to encompass nearly a million chemicals, including existing medications, drug candidates, and strange compounds with no known use. Many research labs and universities have compiled similar libraries. Since the late twentieth century, labs have increasingly used robots and automation to comb through the libraries, reasoning that, as scientists screened more

chemicals for medical applications, the number of newly found drugs would inevitably increase. But this technique, which is known as high-throughput screening, has turned out to be less revolutionary than many once hoped. If a chemical library isn't large and diverse enough, or if the selection process is largely random, the method tends to have low hit rates and produce many false positives. So far, no useful antibiotics have been found this way; in many screens, only about one per cent of molecules show activity against a bacterium. Many are similar to existing antibiotics or toxic to humans.

In 2012, a group of drug researchers warned that the number of new drugs approved in the U.S., per dollar invested in drug discovery, was falling by half every nine years, an eightyfold reduction in efficiency since 1950. They called their observation Eroom's Law—an inversion of Moore's Law, which says that the number of transistors per computer chip doubles every two years or so, driving down the cost of computers. Many drug developers, the researchers wrote, had fallen victim to "basic research–brute force bias." They were powering through as many molecules as possible, more or less at random, on the off chance that something might work. The universe of potential drugs desperately needed a filing system.

In 2017, Jon Stokes, a Canadian postdoc in microbiology, joined the lab of James J. Collins, an M.I.T. professor of biological engineering. Stokes, who has long hair and glasses, giving him the look of a scientific David Foster Wallace, decorated his office with a poster of a skull and crossbones. "I think of myself as a professional poison discoverer," he told me. "I want to kill things that kill patients." (He added wryly, "I don't support piracy.") Stokes soon ordered two sets of chemicals from a commercial vendor for twenty-five thousand dollars, with the aim of scouring them for antibiotic potential. One contained eight hundred natural products; the other was made up of around seventeen hundred drugs that the F.D.A. had already approved but that might have additional uses. They arrived in a Styrofoam box the size of a microwave, packed in dry ice. Stokes was preparing to screen each compound manually—pitting them against microbes on glass plates, much as I had done—when he sat in on a meeting about biological applications of artificial intelligence. "I had no idea what was going on," Stokes recalled. "I wasn't an A.I. guy."

Afterward, Collins asked Stokes if he'd try a new and provocative approach: working with computer scientists to see if A.I. could help sort his compounds. "Let's just see what happens," Collins said. Stokes agreed, warily. "I thought, This is going to be a complete shit show," he told me. "For about six months, it was pretty much me trying to teach them what a gene was and them trying to teach me what a neural network was." Neural networks, which are computer systems modelled on the brain, usually require vast amounts of information to learn; the most famous example, ChatGPT, digested the entire Internet and still struggles with basic arithmetic. But the team planned to train its model on the relatively small data set that Stokes had amassed: twenty-five hundred molecules. "We had very low expectations of this working," he said. "Why invest a bunch of energy?"

Over a couple of days, Stokes put each of the molecules into plates with *E. coli* and recorded whether they killed the bacteria. In a world without A.I., he would have subjected the winners—a hundred and twenty chemicals, or about five per cent—to more tests, hoping that one might become a drug. But, in this case, he had more ambitious goals. He and his colleagues fed the results into a neural network, along with each molecule's chemical structure. Then they asked their drug-finding model to search through a bigger data set for more hits.

CDoT includes a collection called the Drug Repurposing Hub, which contains six thousand compounds that are either in clinical trials or already approved by the F.D.A. It's not uncommon for a molecule that's effective at treating one condition to prove useful for another; aspirin was developed as a painkiller but also prevents heart attacks, and Viagra was originally intended to treat high blood pressure. Stokes and Collins instructed their model to rank each molecule by its likelihood of inhibiting *E. coli*, based on what it had learned from the compounds in Stokes's Styrofoam box. Then they conducted real-world tests on the top ninety-nine. More than fifty per cent stopped the bacteria from growing—a nearly unprecedented hit rate. One of the molecules, which was originally investigated as a diabetes medication, also seemed to differ in structure from any antibiotic on the market. Stokes tested it on other microbes, and it eradicated several of the most pathogenic bacteria on Earth, including a strain of a bacterium called *Acinetobacter baumannii* which is resistant to all existing antibiotics.

Artificial intelligence had discovered a novel antibiotic that was promising enough to advance into preclinical trials. Stokes and Collins had invented a new way to catalogue the Broad Institute's million-molecule library—a kind of deep-learning Dewey decimal system. One scientist called their breakthrough “a paradigm shift in antibiotic discovery and indeed in drug discovery more generally.” A few days later, Stokes was trying to come up with a name for his compound. He asked his office mate, Felix Wong, if he'd heard of *HAL*, the powerful A.I. in “2001: A Space Odyssey.”

“Yeah,” Wong said. “Why?”

“Hal-icin,” Stokes said. “We’ll call it Halicin.”

James Collins works in a book-filled office that overlooks the M.I.T. campus. He has the lean build of a runner—in college, he ran close to a four-minute mile—and his sharp nose, blue eyes, and salt-and-pepper hair make him look like Clint Eastwood in the eighties. When he was young, one of his grandfathers had a series of strokes, and the other lost his vision owing to glaucoma. Collins was troubled that science could launch men into space yet had so little to offer either grandfather. He decided to study biomedical engineering at Oxford, as a Rhodes Scholar, and went on to conduct foundational research into genes that make bacteria drug-resistant.

Collins developed an interest in A.I. around 2018, when he attended a launch event for an M.I.T. initiative called the Quest for Intelligence. The speakers included Eric Schmidt, a founder of Google, and David Siegel, the billionaire co-chairman of the quant hedge fund Two Sigma, but Collins was most taken by Regina Barzilay, a computer scientist who had once built algorithms to decode lost languages. After a breast-cancer diagnosis, Barzilay had started training algorithms to inspect mammograms. At the event, she showed the audience a world map covered with red marks, which represented cancer deaths. “With all of our strengths in machine learning, we really have a chance to wipe the red from this map,” she said. As Barzilay returned to her seat, Collins asked her if she'd also like to wipe the world of bacterial infections. A few months later, they created the Jameel Clinic for Machine Learning in Health.

Collins ushered me inside his office on an idyllic spring day. “Think of all the existential threats that humankind faces,” he instructed, before I had even sat down. “Climate change, nuclear war, asteroids—you name it. Antibiotic resistance is the one we can solve most cheaply.” The World Health Organization has warned that we are on the brink of a “post-antibiotic era,” in which drugs that humans have long depended on become less and less effective. Antibiotic-resistant infections already contribute to 1.5 million deaths annually, and by the middle of the century they could kill ten million people a year.

“How cheaply?” I asked.

“For twenty billion dollars, you could have it solved,” Collins told me. “For twenty billion, you get ten or fifteen new antibiotics. That would get you a lot of the way there.” (This year, the U.S. will spend more than that on the Space Force.)

Antibiotics face a kind of Sisyphean challenge: the more they’re used, the more bacteria become resistant to them, and so the more new drugs we need to develop. Over time, bacteria have found ways to stop drugs from entering their cells, or to pump them out if they do; some have evolved to produce enzymes that disable drugs. Yet pharmaceutical companies rarely invest in new antibiotics, in part because these drugs often make little money. (Most antibiotics are taken for only a week or two at a time.) Between 1962 and 2000, no new major classes of antibiotics came to market. In 2002, scientists isolated a strain of *MRSA* that had become resistant to vancomycin, the drug of choice for *MRSA* infections, by modifying part of its cell wall so that the drug could no longer latch on. *VRSA*, as the strain is known, has been spreading ever since. “With A.I., we’re getting that much more efficient at finding molecules—and in some cases creating them,” Collins said. “The cost of the search is going down. Now we really don’t have an excuse.”

Building an arsenal of new medicines is something like building a championship baseball team. Just as the Yankees scout for young players and try them out in the minor leagues, drug developers hire scientists to find promising candidates and push them through clinical trials toward F.D.A. approval. Only ten per cent of prospects ever play in a major-league game; only ten per cent of potential drugs survive clinical trials. For a long time,

predicting the success of a ballplayer was largely a matter of intuition and guesswork. Brien Taylor, an élite high-school pitcher and the first over-all draft pick in 1991, injured his shoulder in a bar fight and never reached the M.L.B.; Mike Piazza, the sixth-to-last draft pick out of almost fourteen hundred players in 1988, shot through the minor leagues and became the 1993 National League Rookie of the Year. But, over time, baseball has become a data-driven game in which professional analysts study obscure metrics to estimate a player's potential. Collins is betting that the same will be true of drug discovery.

By 2021, Collins had secured funding to expand his lab's A.I. research, and Wong, the postdoc who shared an office with Stokes, was wondering whether an A.I. model could assemble an entire roster of drugs. Wong, who has piercing eyes and a mop of tousled hair, wanted to find a family of antibiotics that use the same biological weaponry to kill bacteria. But to do that he would need to solve the black-box problem that often hinders A.I. research. "A very obvious elephant in the room was that nobody knew what the hell was going on in these models," he told me. Stokes had found Halicin without really knowing what made the molecule antibacterial; to find a family of antibiotics, Wong would need to figure out which parts of molecules—which atoms, in which configurations—were most lethal.

A majority of the antibiotics that we use today can be grouped into just a handful of classes. Scientists can "decorate," or modify, drugs within a class to change their effect, like video gamers customizing their characters to gain an edge. The penicillin family contains ampicillin, which is usually injected, and amoxicillin, which is often administered as a pill. The only difference between them is that amoxicillin is decorated with an extra hydroxyl group. Both drugs, however, are powerless against *MRSA*. "*MRSA* is literally the poster child of resistance," Wong told me. "I knew that's where I wanted to start."

Just as image-recognition software needs labelled images of cats and dogs to tell them apart, Wong needed data to train his A.I. to recognize anti-*MRSA* molecules. He and a graduate student, Erica Zheng, curated a group of thirty-nine thousand compounds: existing antibiotics, other drugs, random molecules, and natural products. In the course of a few weeks, with the help of a robot, they pitted each one against *MRSA*, in a more expansive version

of what Stokes had done a few years earlier. Wong then instructed his model to evaluate the nearly one million molecules housed at CDOT and millions more from a commercial library. This produced a list of several thousand promising molecules. Wong visually inspected their structures for similarities—carbon rings, nitrogen groups, chlorine atoms—like an astronomer comparing constellations. When he developed an algorithm to do the same, it was able to identify what looked like a new drug class. He and his colleagues tested some of the compounds in the lab, then submitted the results to a prestigious journal.

The reviewers were not impressed. Wong’s drug class would probably kill *MRSA*, the reviewers said, but it might kill patients, too. (Bleach will kill bacteria, but that doesn’t mean you should inject it into your body.) Scientists look for drugs that are at least ten times as likely to harm bacteria as to harm human cells; some of Wong’s molecules had a ratio of four to one. “That’s a very dangerous compound,” he admitted. Some of his molecules also appeared to overlap with existing antibiotics. “It’s not much of an innovation if you discover what’s already been discovered,” he said. And just because a structure is shared across molecules, the reviewers went on, doesn’t mean that the structure is responsible for their activity. Almost all cars have radios, but it’s the engine that makes cars move.

Wong went back to training neural networks on his original thirty-nine thousand compounds. To teach his models about toxicity, he tested each molecule on human liver, lung, and muscle cells; he also applied a “novelty filter” to remove chemicals that were similar to known drugs. This time, his search of the chemical libraries yielded about two hundred candidates. Now he just needed to find their engines.

When computer scientists want to simplify an extremely complicated system, they often try an algorithm called a Monte Carlo tree search. The method was created by Stanisław Ulam, a Manhattan Project physicist who took up solitaire while recovering from brain surgery. Ulam realized that it’s nearly impossible to calculate one’s chances of winning solitaire, because there are too many possible moves. But he reasoned that he could estimate his odds by randomly sampling a subset of moves and then studying the outcomes of those. (Google used a Monte Carlo algorithm to design

AlphaGo, an A.I. model that plays the board game Go. It beat Lee Sedol, a leading Go player, in 2016.)

Wong thought that a similar algorithm could identify the antibacterial components of his molecules, by randomly pruning atoms and bonds and predicting how that changed the molecules' impact. This method would attempt to pry open the black box of the drug-discovery model. Wong's first four tries crashed his computer. "Oh, shit," he remembers thinking. "I'm going to need a lot more compute." He dramatically upgraded his cloud storage and ran the program again. Then he spent a week playing tennis and waiting for the results.

The model ultimately rated five chemical structures as especially promising. One of them, dubbed G2, was found in multiple molecules that could kill *MRSA* in a petri dish. These molecules seemed to fight the bacteria in a new way, by disrupting the pH around the bacterial membrane; even after thirty days of continuous exposure, the bacteria didn't develop meaningful resistance. When mice with *MRSA* in their blood were treated with the molecules, their infections essentially vanished. If the G2 family of chemicals succeeds in clinical trials and reaches the market, it could be the first new class of anti-*MRSA* drugs in nearly a quarter century.

The Broad Institute's chemical library, CDoT, occupies a cavernous room in a futuristic-looking building in Cambridge, Massachusetts, near the intersection of Main Street and Galileo Galilei Way. When I stepped inside, I felt like I was boarding a spacecraft. Computer monitors flashed. Robot arms pivoted and swung in a coördinated dance. The whole place seemed to vibrate with a mechanical thrum, punctuated by clicks and beeps.



Anita Vrcic, a lab manager with blue eyes and short blond hair, led me to a meticulously organized freezer the size of a semi truck. “If we didn’t have this freezer, finding a molecule would be like playing Battleship,” Vrcic told me. “You would say, ‘A4,’ ‘B6,’ or whatever. You could do it with a couple thousand compounds, but then it becomes insane.” The substances inside are stored at negative twenty degrees Celsius—so cold that, if you tossed a bucket of boiling water inside, it would freeze before hitting the floor. I peered through a window and could see dense stacks of gray trays, which were packed with vials of chemicals. There were nearly a million compounds in all.

Inside the freezer, a shiny metal robot, which looked a bit like the rolling ladders that librarians use to reach high shelves, zipped away from me, then back again. It had two little arms; one reached up while the other grabbed a tray below. Suddenly, what looked like a drive-through window on the side of the freezer, lit up by a blue light, opened and offered up a tray of vials.

Each tray is transported from the freezer to a platform at the far end of the room, where two cranelike arms—slightly longer and significantly brawnier than my own—handle the compounds. Jaime Cheah, a cell biologist in a crisp lab coat, stood in front of a computer monitor, looking like a conductor in front of a robot orchestra. One of the arms, equipped with forceps,

grasped a tray of defrosted vials in the way that a crab would latch onto a mussel with its pincers. The contents were transferred to a well plate, which looked like a tiny, transparent muffin tin. Another machine generated ultrasonic sound waves to push 2.5-nanolitre droplets into a separate plate for biological testing.

Now that the plates were full of potential drugs, the robot passed them to a green-tinted room, where each chemical would be examined for toxicity to human cells. (Tinted windows help protect sensitive reagents from light.) A large robotic arm helped to mix a slurry of human cells into each little well, along with a chemical that determined whether the cells died. I watched, mesmerized. Suddenly, an arm swung toward me, and I flinched. “Don’t worry,” Cheah said, with a smile. “They won’t hurt you.”

I was astounded by the speed and scale of research in the chemical library. I also sensed its limits. A truly comprehensive library of potential drugs would require labs like this on every floor of every building in the world—and then some. A repository of that size would be unfathomable and practically unsearchable. But A.I. assistance may be able to weed out the least interesting chemicals, helping to steer scientists toward the most promising parts of the collection. “Now you don’t have to physically screen everything to find out what you’re looking for,” David McKinney, a medicinal chemist at the Broad Institute, told me. “It’s getting much easier to get to the right room, even the right shelf.”

In the years to come, A.I. may not just scour the shelves of chemical libraries but also stock them. Stokes, who is now an assistant professor at McMaster University, in Ontario, who specializes in A.I. drug discovery, has started to train a model that dreams up never-before-seen compounds. Existing models have a bad habit of hallucinating chemical structures that are bizarre or unworkable, much as ChatGPT hallucinates facts. “These models are really good at drawing beautiful molecules on paper,” Stokes said. “Then you show them to a chemist and they say, ‘Yeah, I can’t make that.’” To overcome this problem, Stokes constrained his model, which he calls SyntheMol, to thirteen straightforward chemical reactions and a hundred and thirty thousand familiar building blocks—enough to generate thirty billion theoretical molecules, instead of ten to the sixtieth power. SyntheMol ultimately conjured several thousand molecular structures with

high antibacterial potential. Stokes's colleagues synthesized fifty-eight that seemed especially novel and unlikely to be toxic.

When Stokes received vials of the new chemicals, he realized that he was about to test compounds that had never been studied before, and that might not exist anywhere in nature. ("We always assume that every A.I.-generated molecule that we synthesize and bring into the lab is dangerous," he told me. "We treat them carefully and with a lot of technical precision.") Six of them proved strikingly lethal against *MRSA* and other resistant bacteria. "Well, shit," he thought. "It worked." These molecules had not been discovered so much as imagined into existence.

There is a great distance between showing that a molecule can clear microbes from a little glass plate and proving that it can safely cure an infection in the body. "Techies often get overexcited about what it means when A.I. can identify a molecule," Peter Lee, the head of Microsoft Research and a co-author of a book about A.I. in medicine, told me. Is the molecule potent, or do you need impractically high doses to see an effect? Is it selective, or does it attach to off-target cells and inflict collateral damage? Is it stable, or does it degrade in the body? Is it soluble, or will it clump up in your bloodstream? Sometimes medicinal chemists can tinker with a molecule to improve its performance. Often they cannot. "The techies are just waking up to the sheer magnificent complexity of human biology," Lee said.

Lee is impressed by how much A.I. has improved drug-screening efforts, and he's convinced that it will accelerate the scouting phase of drug discovery. Last year, scientists at Carnegie Mellon asked a large language model called Coscientist to make some compounds. It was able to search the Internet for chemical reactions, select experimental protocols, read the instruction manuals of laboratory robots, and program them to mix the right chemicals in the right order—a version of what I'd done in Sean Brady's lab, but led by what one observer called "a non-organic intelligent system."

One day, scientists might develop accurate A.I. models of the human body, enabling a prospective drug to be tested on a model long before it's given to people. For the foreseeable future, however, prospects will need to keep playing minor-league games; there is no A.I. replacement for expensive and

painstaking clinical trials, in which many medicines fail. Recently, a research team studied the fate of several dozen molecules that were discovered by A.I. between 2015 and 2023. The molecules performed unusually well in Phase I trials, when a drug is tested for safety in a small number of healthy people, but in Phase II trials, which measure the effectiveness of the drug, they failed at roughly the same rate as other candidates. “You always have to cross your fingers the first time you put a drug in people,” Derek Lowe, a pharmaceutical researcher and a blogger for *Science*, told me. “All kinds of crazy shit can happen.”

Lowe said that A.I. “could prove transformational” for drug researchers. “I’d also bet that we’re going to have some whopping failures,” he added. “We can’t just turn it loose on any problem in medicine.” A.I. has been startlingly effective in areas where lots of high-quality data are available; AlphaFold, an A.I. system developed by Google DeepMind, learned to predict the structures of proteins from an enormous catalogue called the Protein Data Bank, which took fifty years to assemble. In other areas, no such database exists—and biotech companies are still making aggressive A.I. investments. “People are throwing a ton of money at A.I.,” Lowe said. “There are waves of *FOMO* coursing through the industry.”

Before I left Collins’s lab at M.I.T., Andreas Luttens, a Belgian Swedish computational biologist who was wearing Converse sneakers and round glasses, beckoned me to his computer. Luttens told me that the lab has focussed more on the effect of a molecule than on the question of how it brings about that effect. He was trying the opposite tack: locating a precise target and then discovering, or designing, a molecule to interfere with it. His aim is currently fixed on beta-lactamase, an enzyme produced by some bacteria which effectively chops up and disables penicillin—a classic example of drug resistance. If A.I. helps scientists attack a target like this, drugs that have lost their potency against bacteria could be resurrected.

On a screen, Luttens pulled up an image of a tangle of purple ribbons, which reminded me of an explosion of confetti streamers. They represented beta-lactamase. “Here’s the binding site,” Luttens said, pointing to an area in the center where a weapon could strike. He clicked his mouse, and a small green rod, with a few angular branches and a hexagon at one end, appeared inside it. “That’s one of the candidate molecules,” he explained. “By occupying the

binding site, it basically shuts down the ability to degrade specific antibiotics.” Luttens had surveyed eighteen million molecules to find the thousand that would best fit in the binding site. He would use these real molecules to train generative A.I. models, which could imagine new and better molecules to target beta-lactamase.

Luttens clicked again, and the angular green structure changed into a straighter one with two hexagonal rings—another candidate. Then came a boxy configuration with a few spikes. He kept clicking, as though he were swiping through Tinder for a match.

“A thousand is still too many to make and test,” he said. “I’m aiming for fifty or a hundred.”

“So now you use an algorithm to short-list the best of the best?” I asked.

“Actually, from here we use human intuition,” Luttens said. “I’m looking for the most promising fit, based on what I’ve seen and what I know.” I watched him inspect molecules in a kind of trance. Then he turned to me. “There’s still a role for us humans,” he said, smiling. “For now, anyway.” ♦

Shouts & Murmurs

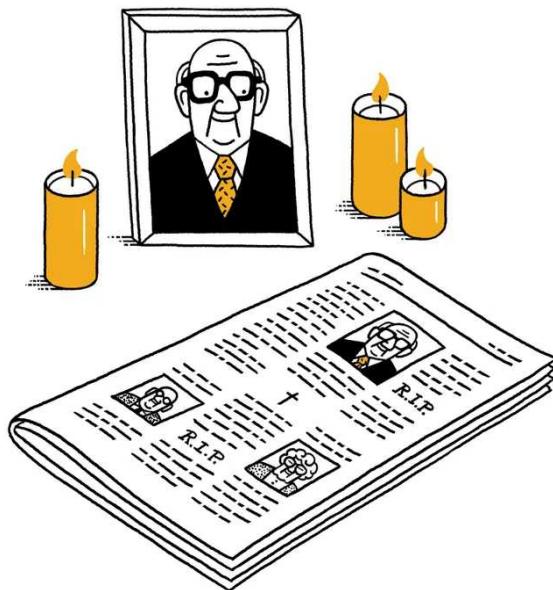
- [Every Newspaper Obituary's First Paragraph](#)

Shouts & Murmurs

Every Newspaper Obituary's First Paragraph

By Emily Zauzmer

September 02, 2024



Alfred T. Alfred, whose invention of the plastic fastener that affixes tags to clothing upended the tag industry and made him one of America's youngest multimillionaires—until he lost his plastic-fastener fortune in a 1993 game of badminton, as depicted in the Lifetime original movie “Bad Minton”—died on Saturday. He was eighty-one.

Jacques P. Jacques, a marine biologist who set out to photograph every sea urchin in the Aegean Sea—an effort that took seventeen years and culminated in the 1978 coffee-table book “Take Me to Urch,” which our reviewer called “disturbingly erotic”—died on Thursday. He was ninety-two.

Doris E. Doris, an entrepreneurial drum majorette who shot to fame for her distinctive baton work in the 1968 Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade—but

whose subsequent attempt to launch the Ross Dress for Less Arbor Day Parade met an ignominious end when a Snoopy balloon collided with a stoplight, cementing Macy's monopoly on department-store holiday pageantry—died on Wednesday. She was seventy-nine.

Melvin F. Melvin, a soft-spoken product designer whose impact on the American household spanned tissues, towels, and paper cups—but whose most lasting contribution was his notoriously ineffective “Do Not Insert Swab Into Ear Canal” warning on Q-tips packaging—died on Friday. He was ninety-eight.

Clara V. Clara, the widow of plastic-fastener magnate Alfred T. Alfred, whose triumphant resurrection of her late husband’s plastic-fastener empire made her the toast of Seattle society—but who never shook allegations that she had rigged his fateful badminton game to enrich her lover (a theory popularized in the film “Bad Minton”)—died on Wednesday. She was eighty-nine.

Stanley P. Stanley, the Olympic bronze medallist who abandoned a burgeoning speed-skating career to pursue his pop-music ambitions—but whose only song to reach the *Billboard* Hot 100, “No More Mr. Ice Guy,” focussed on the very sport from which he had sought to distance himself—died on Tuesday. He was ninety-one.

Phyllis C. Phyllis, whose discovery, in 2007, of a mysterious message in a bottle at the Santa Monica Pier set off a brief nationwide effort to decode the missive—until an M.I.T. chemistry professor concluded that it was a waterlogged Pizza Hut menu—died on Monday. She was seventy-eight.

Edna A. Edna, the enigmatic oil heiress whose expressive butter sculptures reenergized the medium and tantalized the Indianapolis art scene in the eighties—but whose signature work, “Dairy Todd Lincoln,” melted while on view at London’s Tate Gallery, inspiring a wave of regulations on space heaters in museums—died on Sunday. She was eighty-six.

Rutherford M. Rutherford, the Washington health-insurance executive who won plastic-fastener tycoon Alfred T. Alfred’s riches in a high-stakes game of badminton—but who lost in esteem what he had gained in wealth when

he played himself (opposite Susan Lucci, as Clara V. Clara) in “Bad Minton,” a role for which he received the Razzie Award for Worst Actor and a lifetime ban from the Seattle Badminton Club—died on Wednesday. He was ninety-four. ♦

Fiction

- [Greensleeves](#)

Fiction

Greensleeves

By Sigrid Nunez

September 01, 2024



“What I want to know,” the woman said to the therapist, “is why the voices always say mean, terrible things. Why don’t they ever say things like ‘You’re a good person. You’re a great, smart, wonderful guy, your life matters, and you deserve to be happy’? I mean, instead of saying, ‘You’re no good, your life is worthless, everyone hates you, you should hurt yourself, you deserve to be hurt, you deserve to die.’”

“Even worse,” the woman went on, “why do the voices always say things like ‘Go shove some innocent stranger in front of an oncoming train’? Instead of, like, ‘How about helping that little old lady with her bags?’ ”

He wanted to laugh, but the woman was being earnest. She was young—early thirties, he guessed—with an unremarkable face except for her eyes, so dark you could barely distinguish iris from pupil. She stared at him from under thick bangs, the only part of her black hair that had been streaked blond. Kiss Me Deadly red lipstick, and a long-sleeved forest-green dress of

some suède-like fabric that looked vintage. His gaze kept being drawn to her gleaming manicure, each copper-colored nail like a Japanese beetle.

He could have told her that what she was saying wasn't true. The voices didn't always bully or suggest evil acts. Sometimes their words were impersonal, and might even be kind. Sometimes they didn't speak at all but only breathed heavily—which could, he supposed, be as sinister as threats or curses. Some hummed, or chanted, or sang. "I hear lullabies," one patient had told him.

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

If he'd wanted to get into a conversation with Lady Greensleeves, he might have said all this. He might have added the obvious: non-negative voices were not necessarily a positive thing. The problem with the lullabies was that they drove a woman of fifty to rock back and forth and suck her thumb. And, of course, there was a certain kind of person, one of the worst kinds of person, who seemed to live with a voice continually telling them how great they were, and who felt victimized because their perfection was not universally acknowledged.

He's bored, the woman thought. He isn't listening. He's just being polite. No, he wasn't even bothering to pretend. Not polite!

In fact, he was interested in one aspect of what she said: the way she imagined that it was all *arranged*. Somebody had *arranged* for the voices to be hateful, when they could just as easily have been loving. Her frustration with the way things *are*. Interesting, but hardly new. It was something he dealt with every day. He made a living off it. God could have created whatever kind of world He wished to create—so why had He chosen this fucked-up one?

If the therapist had wanted to get into a conversation with the woman, and if he hadn't been afraid of sounding pretentious, or as if he were mansplaining, he might have brought up the Gnostic belief that the Supreme Being had not made this world and did not rule it; the one responsible was another, lesser spirit, not a benevolent or all-knowing one. She probably would not have heard of Gnosticism, though. This was not patriarchal condescension (raised

by his mother, who had been eulogized as one of the finest historians of her generation, and whose own mother had been renowned for her work in biochemistry, he would not have made that mistake) but a nod to her youth. His sister, who taught English to undergrads, had told him about how a discussion of the idiom “to wash one’s hands of something” had revealed that her students had no idea who Pontius Pilate was.

The woman was sitting too close to him. He was reminded of the old joke, from his residency days: “Will you kiss me, Doctor?” “Kiss you! I shouldn’t even be on this couch with you!”

People curious about illness, seeking advice about symptoms, maybe rolling up a sleeve to expose a mole—what doctor didn’t get some of that outside the office? Like the surgeon he knew who’d once been asked by a woman at a party if he’d slip into a bathroom with her and check out a breast lump. Many of the questions put to him began with “Is it normal/abnormal . . .” Is it normal for a person to want to stay single forever? Abnormal for someone to love their partner and yet be turned off by them in bed?

Podcast: The Writer’s Voice

[Listen to Sigrid Nunez read “Greensleeves.”](#)

But he didn’t have to get into a conversation with Greensleaves. He didn’t have to say what he knew about psychosis and auditory hallucinations. He didn’t have to stay on the couch where she was sitting too close to him. He could excuse himself and—

“Is it my imagination, or are there more crazy people out there these days, especially in the subway?”

A man was passing behind them, in the narrow space between the couch and a wall of books. He was carrying an empty wineglass, which he’d been on his way to refill when he overheard the woman. Earlier, this man and his wife and the therapist had all arrived at the party at the same moment and had been introduced to one another by the host when she greeted them. Maybe because he didn’t expect to see any of these people again, the therapist had immediately forgotten the names of everyone he’d met that evening. Really, he didn’t know what he was doing there. Though he and the

host had been neighbors for decades, with apartments at opposite ends of the same floor, they hardly knew each other. She lived alone, an elderly widow, a minor socialite who entertained often but had never before invited him to one of her soirées. Tonight's occasion was the publication of a book by a journalist she knew (as did he, though only by name). She was dressed theatrically in a flowing black-and-orange wrap and the black snood turban she preferred to a wig. (The hair lost during her treatment for cancer some years ago had grown back only in sparse wisps.)

The therapist had a feeling he knew why he'd been invited, which had happened at the last minute. The day before, he and the host had run into each other by the elevator. In the bit of small talk they'd shared going down —about what, he couldn't remember—he'd noted something in her attitude toward him, something subdued, searching. An air of sympathy, it seemed. He thought at first it was for the loss of his mother, but that had happened half a year ago, and how, in any case, would this woman have known about that? Then, as they were about to go their separate ways, she said, "You know, if you're free tomorrow night, I'm having a little party."

Nothing about his wife.

He guessed that it had been the building gossip, the landlord's mother, who watched the world from her ground-floor window or an armchair in the lobby: she must have passed on to the widow in 14-F that the wife in 14-A —the tall one with the nice clothes and her nose in the air—had moved out.

Taken by surprise, he hadn't known how to decline. An act of neighborly kindness, after all, of sympathy. But immediately he regretted it. He'd never been one for parties, especially not when they were full of strangers. He'd promised himself that he would not stay long; it was enough just to put in an appearance. These were not people he needed to get to know. And he, too, was moving out of the building soon, though he hadn't mentioned this to the host.

She sailed about the living room like a giant monarch butterfly, briefly landing on this or that knot of guests. From time to time, she exchanged a look with the young woman sitting beside the therapist on the couch. Once the host's personal assistant, the young woman had then attended film school

and was now working on her first docufiction. The two women were close—May-December besties, they called themselves. They had the kind of bond that enabled them to communicate telepathically.

Very attractive, yes, but too old for you.

It's not like that. We're not flirting. We're just talking.

Well, maybe you should change the subject. He doesn't look like he's having a very good time.

He's not really listening. His head is off somewhere in the clouds.

And those are probably dark clouds. As I told you, his wife just walked out on him. But he's not your responsibility. If he's being a bore, why don't you get up and mingle?

I will soon. You look great, by the way.

Thanks, my dear. So do you. Love the nail color!

“You’re not supposed to say ‘crazy’ anymore,” a woman sitting in an armchair on the other side of the coffee table admonished. She was holding a canvas tote bag out of which peeked the pert snout of a miniature Yorkie. Every few minutes, the dog had a fit of shuddering, as if some ghastly thought had occurred to it.



Dad

“Why’s that?” the man behind the couch asked.

“Because it’s offensive. It’s what they call ableist.” At this, everyone listening did something with their eyes—rolled them or scrunched them or looked down at the floor. “You’re supposed to say ‘mentally ill.’ ”

“But what if you *mean* to be offensive?” the man said. “As in ‘What are you, fucking crazy?’ ”

Ignoring this, the woman went on, “It’s not just in the subways. I don’t know about you, but I find that people are behaving like they’re mentally ill everywhere I go. I was in the supermarket the other day, and a security guard pointed out that I’d dropped a glove. I picked it up and thanked him, and, what do you know, he lit into me! ‘I don’t need your thanks, lady,’ he said. ‘I am doing my job. I see everything. That is my job. I don’t do it for your thanks.’ I was stunned. I would have been afraid if we’d been alone—he was that hostile. And all because I said ‘Thank you’!”

“I had something like that happen to me, too,” another woman said. “An Uber driver yelled at me because I said, ‘It’s right there,’ as we were driving up to the restaurant. He said, ‘I know where it is! I have the G.P.S.! I don’t need you to tell me!’ I never got out of a car so fast.”

A convergence of people at the center of the room now hemmed the therapist in, making it awkward for him to try to escape. There was a copy of the journalist's new book on the coffee table. The journalist himself was standing nearby, talking with a woman who bore a strong resemblance to the therapist's wife. Same chin-length brown hair, similar elfin profile, and what looked like an identical navy-blue tailored suit.

This was just an observation, not cause for pain. He did not miss his wife. He did not want her back. Although they had never been enemies, they had not been friends for a long time. Their love story had followed a familiar trajectory: hot, warm, cool, cold. By the end, they had often felt invisible to each other. Yet they might have gone on like that for years, as spouses do, had she not, in the course of her travels as an art curator, met someone else. Once she'd moved into her artist lover's loft, the therapist was eager to downsize. He was about to close on a place that was both smaller and less elegant than where he lived now but also conveniently situated in the building where he had his office.

He picked up the book and started flipping through it. He already knew what it was about. The author was part of that league of current pundits who were trying to master the trick of candidly laying out the existential perils facing humanity without totally devastating the reader. The book was "a brilliant balance of fear and hope," according to the publisher. And its subject matter was increasingly relevant to psychotherapy. The last conference the therapist had attended was on the effects of climate anxiety on mental health. For years now, he'd been seeing patients with symptoms of pre-traumatic stress disorder, emotional problems associated with uncertainty—if not outright dread—about the future. And recently this had also hit close to home.

If his head was lost in dark clouds, it was not because of his wife but because of his daughter. Their only child, a girl with an ebullient, affectionate personality whose behavior had never given her parents a day's grief, she had been the marriage's perpetual blessing. Astonished that their flawed selves could have got this one thing so right, they attributed it to her own essential goodness. Because she had grown to be both self-accepting and self-reliant, genuinely contented with life, they hadn't been dismayed that, unlike the two of them, she had not been an outstanding student, or that, once out of school, she had shown no compelling desire to pursue any

particular career. But, though she lacked ambition and focus, she was an avid reader, she was intellectually curious, and she seemed incapable of laziness or boredom. She was also undeniably happier than most of her striving, perfectionist peers, and she did not envy them. She did not appear to envy anyone. She was good at making and keeping friends. She was diligent at the various part-time jobs she took on to patch together a living. Neither of them minded when she couldn't make the rent and was forced to move back home for a time. Husband and wife always got along better when their daughter was around. They gave thanks when they compared themselves with other parents, many of whom struggled in their relationships with their children or had even become alienated from them. And so much for the old canard about how children of shrinks grow up to be emotional wrecks.

It was at a friend's wedding that their daughter met the man with whom she herself hoped to one day be joined in marriage, and to have at least one child. Motherhood was something she had always wanted and assumed would be part—surely the most wonderful part—of her life. She and her boyfriend moved in together a few weeks before the emergence of *COVID*. Months of lockdown deepened their attachment, but now the therapist's daughter had begun questioning the morality of bringing children into such a broken world. What mother today could be assured that her child would have a good life? Its birth would occur in the midst of numerous ongoing global crises, and the therapist's daughter was haunted by her vision of the damage that a child might have to endure after she was gone.

Her boyfriend respected her feelings, though he did not share her pessimism. He reminded her that some of the smartest, best-informed people—scientists and environmental and political activists among them—had not forgone having kids. There were steps that could be taken to prevent the worst effects of climate change, to save democracy, to force the arc of the moral universe toward justice.

But the only way for any of that to happen, and for disaster to be averted, she said, was for people around the world to come together, to work together. And what did she see? Everywhere, escalating division and strife and a hardening of the belief that the way forward lay not in communal problem-solving but in selfishness, demagoguery, and violence. Enraged

mobs of people who hated one another so much that they would sooner die than work together.

If she came to regret not having a child, she could live with that. What she never wanted to face was regret for having had one.

Her father had been very careful not to say anything that might influence her decision—as he was very careful not to influence the decisions of several of his patients who were wrestling with the same issue. Her mother, on the other hand, was having none of it. She accused her daughter of being “defeatist.” She did not want to be cheated of grandchildren. “I’ll never forgive you,” she said, unforgivably.

The therapist did not see the situation as hopeless. First of all, his daughter could change her mind again (there was still some time for that), and, if she did not, perhaps she’d consider adoption. What concerned him more was the dramatic alteration in her temperament. She who had never before suffered from depression now went spiralling into the abyss. Dutifully, she carried on, uncomplaining, but in a wan, robotic version of herself, indifferent to pleasure, looking forward to nothing. She dismissed the idea of going into therapy or taking any type of medication. “I’ll be all right,” she kept saying. But a year passed, and she was the same.

When the therapist learned that she had given a cousin some of her clothes, including a brown leather jacket that he knew she loved, he was alarmed. Giving away possessions was something people contemplating suicide were known to do.

His daughter laughed in exasperation. “For God’s sake, Daddy. You’ve never heard of decluttering? I was just tired of those old things.”

Then, suddenly, she decided to take a trip. She wanted to go somewhere beautiful. And she wanted to go alone. She and her boyfriend needed some time apart. That the relationship had been undergoing strain was hardly surprising. Though her boyfriend insisted that he wished to spend his life with her, with or without children, she was torn and could not help feeling guilty.

Again, the therapist saw this as a warning sign. People who took their lives often went away from home to do so. Hotel suicides were not uncommon. And again his daughter scoffed. “Seriously? You really think I’d go halfway around the world, and put you through all the trouble of shipping my corpse?”

It was one of those moments which sometimes happen at a gathering: in the midst of a lively conversation comes a lull, when for no apparent reason everyone falls silent.

The woman who’d been talking with the journalist spoke first. “Someone once told me that in Turkey, I believe it was, when a room goes quiet all at once, people say, ‘Somewhere a girl child is born.’ Meaning, when a son is born it’s an occasion for cheers and celebration, but when it’s a daughter no one knows what to say. Thus the awkward silence.”

Everyone groaned, the Yorkie shuddered, and in a loud, displeased-sounding voice the young woman on the couch said, “My family is Turkish, and I’ve never heard that.”

Just then the therapist’s phone, which was resting on the coffee table, pinged. He glanced at the message: “I’m still depressed, but now I’m depressed with a view.”

A laugh escaped him, and, feeling the need to explain, he said simply, “My girl child.”

Everyone else laughed then, too, and the host raised her glass in the air.

“To daughters!” she said.

“To daughters!”

Was he surprised that she followed him? Probably not. For the hour or so more that he’d stayed at the party, she had either sat beside or shadowed him, and when, at last, he found a suitable moment to leave, there she was, apparently ready to leave, too. Instead of stopping at the elevator and pressing the button, she kept right on walking with him to his door.

He thought better of offering her any alcohol, even though that meant that he couldn't have any, either. They'd both had enough. He made them each a cup of ginger tea instead, which they drank sitting in his kitchen.

She had a brother who'd heard voices for years, she said, and for years he'd hidden it, even from her, his big sister, with whom he had always been close. Until recently, he'd been in law school, where, according to the voices—which had gone from speaking only occasionally to almost never shutting up, from speaking softly to shouting—he was being programmed to fight in an imminent battle for planetary control. His professors were all in on it, a Latin-speaking cabal with secret but decidedly malign intent. To escape them, he had quit school and holed up at his parents', where, despite its being the house he'd grown up in, he now felt like too much of a stranger to stay. He'd settled into a tree trunk in the town park, though he didn't entirely trust the pigeons there: some might be carrying the enemy's messages.

After a fistfight with another vagrant, he'd sought shelter in a private garden, where he frightened the owners by refusing to leave. An empty soda can he'd been holding had flown through the air, and, though it missed its mark, he was arrested for trespassing and attempted assault. He had landed not in jail but in a hospital, where he was diagnosed with schizophrenia.

"I've been trying to learn as much as I can," she said. "Everyone says it's incurable, but to me that feels like giving up. It's like the doctors have just written him off. Pump him full of drugs, and they're done. They definitely calmed him down, but they haven't brought him back to anything like his true self."

And what if the diagnosis was wrong? According to her research, misdiagnoses of mental illness happened all the time. She'd also learned that other diseases—of the body, not of the mind—could trigger psychosis.

This was the subject of the film she had started working on, a docufiction about her brother and his illness. More docu than fiction, she said. An investigation.

"He could have something metabolic," she said. "It could be a reaction to some kind of toxin he was exposed to." Or what if he was afflicted by some

mental illness other than schizophrenia, one that *was* curable, or at least less severe?

He couldn't tell her what she wanted to hear. He could only follow the rule for discussing catastrophic diagnoses with loved ones: Be honest, but not brutally so. Do not encourage false hope.

"Anything can happen," she said staunchly. "Like those people trapped for years in a coma who suddenly one day wake up."

There was an intensity, almost a radiance, about her that the therapist had not observed earlier, and which he took as a sign of love. Her fierce love for her poor brother, against whose demons she was girded to fight.

He hadn't eaten at the party, and when his stomach growled, immediately, as if in response, hers growled back. For the first time, he saw her smile, a generous smile that showed her fine teeth and beautified her face.

In the fridge was some leftover chicken and broccoli he'd ordered from a Chinese restaurant the previous night, which he now heated in the microwave. Small though the portions were, she did not finish hers.

He had admired her eyes before, but not until now her long eyelashes, which his heart kept catching on.

He could not offer an opinion about a patient he'd never seen, he explained, and he apologized for not being able to be of more help. But not only was he not an expert in the treatment of schizophrenia; he wasn't taking on any new patients. (This was true, though he didn't add that he'd been thinking of retiring from practice altogether and limiting himself to teaching.)

He had assumed that she lived somewhere in town, but in fact her home was in another state; she had taken a train to come to the party. Were it not so late, she would have stayed over in 14-F, as she had often done before. But she thought that her friend had probably gone to bed by now.

There were two spare bedrooms in the therapist's apartment. She chose his daughter's.

After they'd said good night, he lay awake in bed, waiting for her to come to him.

He watched her tiny figure far below, getting into the taxi the doorman had hailed for her. It had rained in the night, and now a weak light cast a pearlescent sheen over all, softening the city's sharp edges. A world deceptively at peace.

He wandered through the apartment with his coffee mug. To think that in another month he'd be gone, never again to see these rooms that once brimmed with family life. The happy first years with his wife and a baby girl whose birth could not have been celebrated more. Yet it had come to this: his wife estranged, his precious only child in anguish.

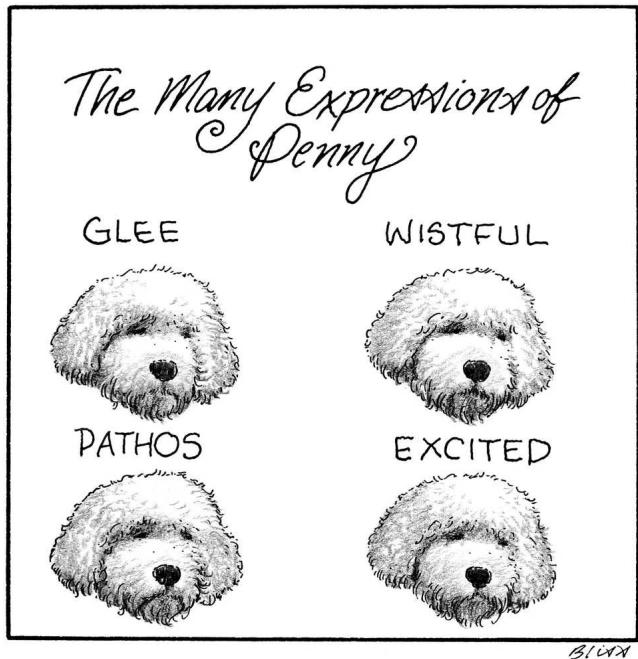
In his daughter's room, the bed was still made, but there was an indentation in the duvet, where he pictured his lover sitting, head in hands, debating.

Down the hall, his neighbor had woken up early, too, as was her habit. The night before, after she'd closed the door on the last guest, she had sat down in the living room and started to cry. It was what she always did after a party. Whether she judged the party to have been a success or a failure, it always ended in tears. She had a good cry, and then she had a cigarette—one of the three a day that she permitted herself—and when she had finished smoking she took a pill and went to bed. The next day, as always the morning after a party, she woke up feeling blue, a mood that could be expected to persist till nightfall.

Her P.P.D., she called it. Post-party depression.

Whenever she had trouble getting out of bed, she remembered what an analyst from many years ago had told her: Put your feet on the floor.

Her feet were still dangling when the phone rang: her young friend, calling from the train.



They chatted about the party (definitely a success, this one) before turning to what had happened later, in 14-A, upon which she became aware of a disagreeable sensation, like a bout of reflux.

"So you really think he can help?"

"I don't know how much he can do, but it would be great to have someone with his expertise as an ally. He could be so useful—not just for my brother but for the film. Maybe I could even get him to do an onscreen interview."

"Speaking of the film, be sure to let me know if you need more money." (She had already agreed to finance the whole project.)

"I will, thanks."

"You want to see him again, but does he want to see you?"

A spurt of completely inappropriate jealousy was what it was. And apparently not to be tamped down.

"He didn't say anything about a next time. To be honest, he seemed hesitant. Which is understandable, I guess, given that he and his wife just separated.

But I do think he likes me. Not to be graphic, but he was super passionate. And he obviously wanted to please me.”

An image of the two of them, unnerving in its obscene splendor, flickered on the bedroom wall.

“So, what are you going to do? Ask him on a date?”

“I’d rather not be the one to get in touch first. I mean, I’ve already come on pretty strong. I don’t want him to think I’m desperate, you know, or looking to catch a rich husband, or whatever.”

“Ah, yes. That hasn’t changed, has it? The woman always has to play it cool.”

“I don’t suppose you’re thinking of throwing another party anytime soon?”

“No. But what I could do is invite you both to dinner.”

This was what made them besties.

He decided to walk the two miles to his office that day. He needed the exercise, and he was a firm believer in the usefulness of walking for reflection, for generating good ideas or clearing the head of bad ones. He’d still get there in time to call his daughter before he had to see his first patient. He’d made her promise that they’d text or talk every day while she was abroad.

It was not an idea but a tune that came to him as he walked: an old English folk song that, in college, he’d learned to play on the guitar.

When he got to his office, he turned on his computer and typed “Greensleeves” in the Google search bar. He’d always thought of it as a romantic song, a poignant expression of yearning love—how had it ever become a popular carol about the birth of Christ?

Now he learned that it was only a legend that it had been written by Henry VIII for Anne Boleyn, during the time he was courting her. In fact, the true composer remained unknown.

There were numerous versions online. Guitar, piano, flute, lute, violin, sax, orchestra, rock band, a cappella. Even a solo whistler.

James Taylor. James Galway. The King's Singers. Olivia Newton-John. Lynyrd Skynyrd. Vaughan Williams. John Coltrane. Everybody loved that song.

He chose a recording by Marianne Faithfull that had been made in 1964.

At one point in the four centuries of her existence, Lady Greensleeves was thought to have been a prostitute, or at least a woman of loose morals. A reference to the color green was said to have been code for sex when the song was written. A green gown, for example, was suggestive of hanky-panky in the grass.

Quite a stretch, if you asked him.

It was named by many the world's most beautiful love song.

He played it again.

And again. ♦

The Critics

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Pop Music

MJ Lenderman Keeps It Raw

The artist discusses resisting the neutering effects of technology, his breakup with a bandmate, and his new album, “Manning Fireworks.”

By Amanda Petrusich

August 29, 2024



On a steamy afternoon in the middle of June, I met the twenty-five-year-old singer and guitarist MJ Lenderman for beers at Old Town Bar, a dim and unfussy Manhattan tavern that’s been in more or less continuous operation since 1892. Though Old Town is revered for its turn-of-the-century atmosphere—the fifty-foot mahogany bar, the rickety dumbwaiter ferrying hot frankfurters from kitchen to dining room, the majestic bank of porcelain urinals that Pete Wells, a longtime restaurant critic for the *Times*, once described as “so grand they turn the act of urinating into something sacramental”—it has largely escaped the type of broad canonization that attracts throngs of tourists. Instead, it remains the sort of joint where a person can stagger in, swig a whiskey, grouse to the barkeep, and reëmerge onto the street thirty minutes later, dizzy but cleansed. (The bar’s most public-facing moment was in 1992, when the rap trio House of Pain filmed

the video for its single “Jump Around” in the dining room—the d.j. scratched from the men’s toilet.) Lenderman and I grabbed a high-backed wooden booth.

This month, Lenderman will release “Manning Fireworks,” his fifth album in five years. He is often described—accurately—as the next great hope for indie rock, or however one might now refer to scrappy, dissonant, guitar-based music that’s unconcerned, both sonically and spiritually, with whatever is steering the Zeitgeist. “Manning Fireworks” could have been released in 1975, or 1994, or 2003, but that is not to say it’s deliberately nostalgic; Lenderman is simply making the kind of warm and astringent rock and roll that has felt untethered from time since 1968, when Neil Young released his self-titled début.

In conversation, Lenderman is low-key, affable, and bright. He’s tall and lanky, with a halo of messy brown hair, and often dresses in a T-shirt and jeans. We ordered a round and began discussing the unsung art of assembling a tour rider, the list of faintly desperate culinary requests submitted to a venue in advance of a show. “There’s gonna be a hummus plate on there—that’ll happen,” Lenderman said, laughing. “I don’t think you even have to ask for that. We usually get a box of leafy greens—I’ll do fistfuls. We had this idea recently that we were gonna start asking for a rotisserie chicken.” An inspired choice, I offered—high-protein, cheap, easy to cram into a mini-fridge. He shook his head. A mistake. “Apparently, they shop for the rider the night before, so we’re looking at day-old.”

Lenderman was born in Asheville, North Carolina, an arty and historic town in the Blue Ridge Mountains, and he’s lived there for most of his life. (“Manning Fireworks” was recorded in Asheville, at Drop of Sun Studios.) He started learning the guitar when he was about seven or eight, but music has always been omnipresent in his life: his father played the guitar, his mother the clarinet, and his three sisters sang. Lenderman’s paternal grandfather was the jazz musician and bandleader Charlie Ventura, whom *DownBeat* magazine declared the best tenor saxophonist of 1945. “He played with Gene Krupa, Buddy Rich. He was decently famous in the bebop world,” Lenderman said. In 1949, Ventura briefly hired a young Charlie Parker to play alto sax in his band. A concert listing in this magazine attempted to capture the fury of their sound, at the jazz club Royal Roost:

“Here you’ll find lovers of bebop trembling like aspen leaves as they listen to Billy Eckstine and the bands of Charlie Ventura and Charlie Parker, who perform in a milieu that suggests the sprint hour at the six-day bike races.” Lenderman isn’t much of a bebop guy (“I don’t really listen to it—I haven’t tried,” he said), and his guitar playing suggests more of a long, downhill coast, no hands. But there’s a through line of wildness in both discographies. I told Lenderman that I responded in an instinctive way to the laxness of his work, so anomalous in an era in which technology makes it easy to defang, neuter, smooth. “I definitely think about that,” Lenderman said. “A lot of the stuff that has really resonated with me throughout my life is that way. I’ve just always liked that sound. It feels real to me.”

Lenderman self-released his first album, in 2019, when he was twenty years old and scooping ice cream at a shop in Asheville. “I quit, expecting to probably have to figure something else out, but then I just kept touring, and for the most part I haven’t had to work since,” he said. In 2022, Lenderman released the rowdy and sardonic album “Boat Songs.” On “You Have Bought Yourself a Boat,” he skewers upward mobility, briefly affecting a kind of seething Gen X disdain:

It’s plain to me to see
You have bought yourself a boat
Since the last time you and me spoke
Your laundry looks so pretty.

On “Hangover Game,” another highlight from “Boat Songs,” Lenderman sings about Michael Jordan’s performance with the Chicago Bulls in Game Five of the 1997 N.B.A. Finals, during which Jordan was reportedly suffering from food poisoning brought on by a gnarly late-night pizza. (“This was a heroic effort, one to add to the collection of efforts that make up his legend,” Phil Jackson, the Bulls’ coach, later said of the incident.) Through the years, rumors have circulated regarding Jordan’s behavior the night before the game: Was he, in fact, partying at Robert Redford’s chalet in the mountains of Utah? Had he flown on a private jet to Las Vegas to gamble? Over squealing guitar, Lenderman offers his take (“Remember that I am no detective,” he said at the time):

He looked so sick
It was all over the news
But it wasn't the pizza
And it wasn't the flu
Yeah, I love drinking, too.

“Boat Songs” brought Lenderman renown, landing on best-of-the-year lists at Pitchfork and *Rolling Stone*. In 2023, Lenderman signed to ANTI-Records and put out a live album, “And the Wind (Live and Loose!),” culled from two club shows he’d played that summer. Live albums are not as common as they once were (about fifty were released in 2023, compared with something like a hundred and forty-five in 1989), and they’re even more unusual to see from younger, non-legacy artists. Yet it felt right to capture the squall. “When ‘Boat Songs’ was made, I was, like, ‘I’m really buttoned up here!’ ” he said. Spontaneity—a lighthearted kind of recklessness—feels crucial to Lenderman’s vision. I asked him if it is possible to write that looseness into his work, or if it simply has to emerge in the performance. “Every time I sit down to write, it’s like starting from scratch again,” he said. “I have journals full of all sorts of disconnected stuff. I’ll fall out of phase with it sometimes, but I try to write every day. The hardest part is revisiting it and having to interact with my own bullshit.” He paused. “Sometimes I surprise myself.”

Many of the songs on “Manning Fireworks” feature a narrator in the throes of a dire existential or emotional crisis—a series of rock bottoms. I wondered if Lenderman was especially drawn to the rhetorical potential (or at least the grim humor) of moments in which it appears as though things simply cannot get worse. When the stakes are that low, everything is possible. (“Freedom’s just another word for nothing left to lose,” as Janis Joplin famously sang.) Lenderman’s antiheroes are bored, dissatisfied, self-aware, and down bad. “I think it’s funny when people are put in a real situation, exposing them to who they really are,” he said. “A lot of the books I like to read—Harry Crews, Larry Brown—deal with the same stuff.” On the song “Joker Lips,” over guitar and mellotron, he sings,

Please don’t ask how I’m doing
Draining cum from hotel showers

Hoping for the hours
To pass a little faster.

Lenderman's wry lyrics and arch delivery recall both the Kentucky musician Will Oldham and the poet and songwriter David Berman, two titans of nineties indie rock—each signed to the label Drag City—who perfected a deadpan tenderness. “Will Oldham’s music blew open some doors for me. Certain things he’d sing shocked me,” Lenderman said. “I was, like, ‘You can do that? It doesn’t have to be so serious?’ Those two, in particular, really opened me up to how important words can be in songs.”

In Lenderman’s lyrics, humor and pathos are inextricably linked: “We sat under a half-mast McDonald’s flag,” he recalls on “You Don’t Know the Shape I’m In,” a breakup song that’s equal parts devastating and droll. The line always kills me. Lenderman is hyperaware of the ways in which the modern American landscape can feel absurd, especially to a person whose heart is open. Still, the album is not without moments of earnestness and sorrow, and several songs on “Manning Fireworks” suggest the excruciating dissolution of a relationship. On “Bark at the Moon,” a ten-minute, droning lament that closes the album, Lenderman’s nasal, crackling voice sounds especially yearning: “SOS / I took off on a bender / You took off on a jet.” He lets out an “Awooo!” that suggests Warren Zevon’s “Werewolves of London,” a canny reference in a song that already shares a title with an Ozzy Osbourne track about werewolves. (“That was a little joke,” Lenderman said.)



Recently, Lenderman and his then girlfriend, the musician Karly Hartzman, moved together to Greensboro, a couple of hours northeast of Asheville. “I guess I should mention me and Karly broke up,” Lenderman said. “We moved to Greensboro together, still, after that happened. We already had the plan,” he said, shrugging. “I’m gonna move out pretty soon, but I’ll probably stay close to that area, maybe more toward Durham.” Lenderman and Hartzman are both members of Wednesday, a burly and vulnerable ensemble that Pitchfork once called “one of the best indie-rock bands around.” The group’s most recent album, “Rat Saw God,” is both feral and perceptive. Hartzman’s lyrics remind me of the Mississippi novelist Barry Hannah’s writing; Hartzman’s, too, is granular and true, awake to the goriness of life in a small Southern town. (Musically, Wednesday falls somewhere between the country rumbling of the Drive-By Truckers and the melodic squeal of early Dinosaur Jr.) Hartzman started the group, but Lenderman has been a member since 2019. The breakup was amicable, as far as these things go. “I’m still in the band,” Lenderman said. When I asked if working together had been a sizable stress on their relationship, he thought about it for a moment. “We experienced a lot of stuff together that nobody else can understand. My bandmates have partners at home, and that causes its own tensions.”

Earlier this year, Lenderman was featured prominently on Waxahatchee's "Right Back to It," a song about feeling skittish and flickery in a relationship but trying to hold steady. It's a gorgeous, complicated tune—my favorite of 2024 so far. When listening to Lenderman and Katie Crutchfield, the musician behind Waxahatchee, harmonize on the chorus ("I let my mind run wild / I don't know why I do it"), I often feel as if my feet have briefly lifted off the ground. Though Lenderman never belts, his voice can carry a surprising amount of feeling. On "Wristwatch," one of the best songs from "Manning Fireworks," he imbues clever lyrics with real, modern heartache:

I've got a beach home up in Buffalo
And a wristwatch that's a compass and a cell phone. . . .
I've got a houseboat docked at the Himbo Dome
And a wristwatch that's a pocketknife and a megaphone
And a wristwatch that tells me I'm on my own.

He spent a lot of time getting the vocals right. "That was one of the benefits of doing it over a bunch of short sessions, over the span of a year. I could listen to mixes and be intentional about that kind of thing. Enunciation, tonal stuff, singing through my head instead of somewhere else. A few songs are more acoustic-based, and those were done pretty live," he said. "'You Don't Know the Shape I'm In' was guitar, vocals, drums, and upright bass, all in the room together. I'd never gotten to do vocals as part of the live recording before."

I asked Lenderman if he ever found all the attention of the last couple of years—the sudden but fervent acclaim for both "Boat Songs" and "Rat Saw God"—paralyzing. "Yeah, for sure," he said. "But I think I've grown a lot." He recently abandoned all social media. "Now I don't see what people say about my music. Part of it was that if someone says something bad that obviously doesn't feel great. But if someone says something good about me then it's, like, 'O.K., well, they're dumb,'" he said. "That's not a great way to be thinking about it." He occasionally still lurks on X, but Instagram was easy to quit. "I would waste six hours a day watching Reels. No joke. I was hate-watching stuff, so my algorithm was so twisted," he said, laughing. "Bad music, bad everything. I was in a lot of group chats with friends who were sending pretty cursed job-site footage. Disgusting stuff." He added, "Most people that I need to talk to have my number."

As we closed out our tab, I asked Lenderman what he wanted from the future. “That’s a good question,” he said. “I don’t really know. I’m not interested in growing so much. I want to be financially stable as a musician but also have a second to chill and collect my thoughts.” He considered it a little more. “I guess I want to keep getting better.” The idea reminded me of a line from “She’s Leaving You,” in which Lenderman, his voice burlier than usual, sings of moving forward. It’s one of the new album’s most memorable refrains: “It falls apart / We all got work to do.” ♦

The Power of Thinking Like a Poker Player

Nate Silver’s “On the Edge” applies the lessons of modern gambling to the arenas of tech startups, artificial intelligence, and ethics.

By Idrees Kahloon

September 02, 2024



Keeping a poker face had never struck me as much of a feat—until I had to keep one. My pulse quickened, my cheeks felt flushed, and my eyes were desperate to dart and size up the pot. What had been a mediocre hand was transformed, after the flop came down, into something spectacular: every card from seven to jack—a straight. All that remained was to play it cool and build up my cash prize. The bets started small, and then grew. The next two cards looked innocuous enough. My beautiful straight was intact, and the pot had expanded rather nicely.

Truthfully, I’ve never been much of a gambling man. My previous experience was limited to a few college poker nights during which my

friends would hastily explain the difference between a straight and a full house and then rake in my charitable contributions to their respective beer funds. You could safely call me risk-averse. In fact, the only really reckless financial bet I can recall making was deciding to become a professional journalist.

Nate Silver, America's most famous elections prognosticator, got me to cut loose. His new book, ["On the Edge: The Art of Risking Everything"](#) (Penguin), uses poker as a model for responding to uncertainty. Having drawn the lot of reviewing it, I realized that I couldn't do it justice without learning more about poker—specifically Texas hold 'em. "On the Edge," like his previous book, ["The Signal and the Noise,"](#) is a hefty set of meditations on probabilistic thinking, only this time the author is taking in broader horizons. Silver left FiveThirtyEight, the statistics-based news site that he founded and sold to Disney, but is still in the business of predicting election results. Yet his first love is poker—he once played it professionally—and "On the Edge" sees him return to that passion.

"I still feel more at home in a casino than at a political convention," Silver writes in the new book, a treatise that extends the lessons of poker and modern gambling to arenas like artificial intelligence and ethics. He has spent time interviewing such notables as William MacAskill, the philosopher-evangelist of effective altruism; [Sam Bankman-Fried](#), the now disgraced cryptocurrency billionaire; and [Sam Altman](#), the C.E.O. of OpenAI. The people changing the world are doing it by thinking like poker players, Silver contends. If we want to keep up, we'll have to learn the mind-set of the successful gambler.

My chronic risk aversion aside, I figured I had the right foundations to do so. Chess had always been my game of choice; I squandered many afternoons of my adolescence playing, move by move, through Alexander Alekhine's best games and ["Dvoretsky's Endgame Manual."](#) My college years contained less chess, but lots of problem sets in math, economics, and statistics—many of them involving probability theory. I graduated knowing my martingales from my Markov chains. Among my first assignments as a journalist was to build forecast models for British and French elections. If I applied myself to poker, I thought, I'd probably be decent: I could multiply fractions fast

enough in my head to calculate the probability of, say, drawing a flush on the river. (I was also picking up the lingo.)

After giving myself a crash course, I decided that I was ready for some real action. I set up a family game, recruiting my wife and my teen-age brother. That may have been my first mistake. Somehow, I'd forgotten that my wife had once been a foreign-exchange trader, and I later learned that my brother, fresh from a summer camp for academically talented students (a.k.a. nerd camp), had spent the season card-sharking his camp mates. I'd also forgotten to get poker chips; we played with pie weights for puny stakes. Things started badly. Baby brother, barely old enough to hold a driver's license, bluffed me out of a decent hand, and then he smugly called my audacious revenge bluff. (Brat summer, indeed.) Finally, my straight arrived, a chance at redemption. In a spousal showdown, I confidently displayed my hand—only to find that my wife had a straight of her own, and that hers ranked higher. My once proud pile of pie weights was reduced to a pittance.

Probability and gambling have always been intimately intertwined. The mathematics of probability can be traced to a well-known stumper about how best to divide a pot, which a seventeenth-century gambling enthusiast posed to two leading mathematical luminaries of the time, Blaise Pascal and Pierre de Fermat. Their inquiry would spawn the powerful idea of “expected value”—the average outcome of an uncertain event, calculated by multiplying the outcome in every possible state of the world by the chance of it happening. How powerful? The once alien notion that humans could be precise about uncertainty gave rise to the discipline of statistics. A model in which people were treated as rational actors trying to maximize the expected value of their utility became the cornerstone of modern economics. And systems based on feeding statistical prediction models with gargantuan helpings of data and computing power have already started to roil this century.

Silver's book falls into a long tradition of using games to model real-world decisions. John von Neumann, whom some consider the greatest genius of the twentieth century, was working at the Manhattan Project when he published, together with his frequent collaborator Oskar Morgenstern, a book titled [“Theory of Games and Economic Behavior”](#) (1944). The work, which included a detailed chapter on “Poker and Bluffing,” essentially gave

birth to game theory, a field that, neatly enough, would provide the basis for contemporary doctrines of nuclear deterrence. Decades before artificial neural networks could generate personalized poems and wacky images, computer scientists were using them to build backgammon programs.

What Silver offers is a tour of what he calls “The River”—the community of people (often based in Silicon Valley, on Wall Street, and in Las Vegas) who think about the world in terms of expected value and comfortably use words like “Bayesian prior”—and its face-off with “The Village,” basically the political and media establishments. The River’s name is an homage to the river card, the fifth and final card revealed in a game of Texas hold ’em. Where the Village gets its name is left unexplained, though it’s presumably meant to convey a sense of conformity. The dichotomy is not a particularly illuminating one, but this detracts little from the stimulation of each individual subject. Silver’s meandering itinerary through the River and all its oxbows makes for an enjoyable ride.

He begins with the world of gambling, where being “degen,” or degenerate, is something of a badge of honor. My homemade humbling helped me grasp the grand scale of Silver’s own poker achievements. At one point, he was in the top three hundred of the Global Poker Index rankings; he has also won eight hundred and fifty-six thousand dollars in high-profile tournaments (and presumably further significant sums in private games). It’s understandable that he sees poker as a model for the game of life. Poker calls for properly calibrating risk in the face of very imperfect information—and recalibrating it as you gain more information about your companions. In that respect, it is a decidedly human undertaking.

Even so, the computer—having already established its dominance in other classic games (chess, Go, StarCraft II)—has come to surpass the best human players in poker. Just as chess grand masters rehearse their opening lines with superstrong programs, the best poker players, Silver reports, now spend hundreds of hours honing their skills with computer-based “solvers.” Unlike chess—in which the solution is deterministic and there’s always a best move—the solution to poker is stochastic and requires you to play identical hands differently, because once you’re predictable you’re beatable.

In recent years, the game has been swept up by what's known as the "game-theory optimal," or G.T.O., approach. It has been accepted that the best way to play—to maximize expected value—is to randomize between calling, folding, and raising according to a computer-calculated list of probabilities, which serious players memorize. As for randomizing? "The player wasn't just staring out into space—she was probably looking at the tournament clock," Silver writes about one G.T.O. adept. "She could randomize by taking an aggressive action if the last digit was an odd number or a passive action if it was even."

When you read about the lengths to which poker sharks, shrewd sports bettors, and savvy slot-machine players (they do exist) must go in order to scrape together a narrow edge—to get "positive expected value," or "+EV," against the house or their fellow-gamblers—you realize what a slog big-time gambling actually is. Even if you're exceptionally talented, you will find it hard to make serious money, and you may have to spend seventy or eighty hours a week to achieve it. There are reasons that the house always wins: identifying a real edge is hard to do, that edge tends to be thin (as in less than one per cent thin), and the house is constantly trying to shove you off the precipice. Casinos will politely but firmly ask you to leave if they notice you counting cards. The major sports-betting sites will sharply curtail your wagering privileges once they figure out that you are playing to win. Big edges are fleeting, and usually exist only for gigantic events like the Super Bowl, or Presidential elections, in which the sheer volume of dumb money resists correction by the sharks.



So Silver is justifiably proud that, in 2016, his statistical model gave Donald Trump a twenty-nine-per-cent chance of winning, when the betting markets put his odds at seventeen per cent. His results made it rational to bet on a Trump victory: assuming that Silver's model was accurate, the expected value of the bet was high. Because the markets were giving odds of roughly five to one, if you risked a hundred dollars betting that Trump would win, and he did, you'd earn five hundred dollars of profit. The value of a twenty-nine-per-cent chance of getting five hundred dollars outweighed the seventy-one-per-cent chance of losing a hundred. The expected value of your bet was a seventy-four-dollar gain on what you'd wagered. How often would you find such a sizable edge? By Silver's calculations, even an outstanding poker player, one in the top two hundred in the tournament play, has even odds of finishing in the red in any given year.

As an experiment for the book, Silver, a basketball fanatic who developed his highly regarded statistical model for player performance, took up betting on N.B.A. games. Despite being limited by many major sports books, he managed to place \$1.8 million in bets a year. His profit: \$5,242, a return of about one-third of a percentage point. That wasn't for lack of trying. "Sports betting took more mental bandwidth than I expected, even when I wasn't on the clock," Silver writes. "Checking betting lines was often the first thing I did when I woke up and the last thing I did before going to bed."

The effort to improve one's rationality as a gambler easily approaches the irrational. Even my own study of poker became moderately obsessive. I watched hours of poker-strategy videos and long montages of televised poker tournaments with commentary; I went through the lecture notes of a class taught at M.I.T. called Poker Theory and Analytics. Learning about pot odds—it turns out that you can confidently meet an opponent's call with positive expected value (that is, money-making on average) if your chance of winning is greater than the share of the pot you'd be contributing—made me understand where I'd erred. The concept of "fold equity" could help me decide how big my bluff ought to be. The concept of "blockers," or cards one possesses that limit the winning combinations available to one's opponent, further refined the rudimentary calculations I had been trying to make. I spent a few hours playing against a G.T.O. poker program and analyzing my play with a solver. All this because of losing forty ceramic balls and some of my dignity.

Silver acknowledges the paradox here. Although poker is an arena that prizes decision-making, most pros would, he writes, be better served financially doing something else for a living. Clearly, its rewards aren't fully reflected in the +EV models. The dopamine rush that follows a successful bet will trump the slow-burning satisfaction of contributing to your Roth I.R.A. The first time Silver played a poker game with two-hundred-dollar stakes, he recalls, "I literally felt like I was on the sort of narcotics that I used to do a lot of in my twenties." Our understanding of the *mathematics* of gambling has never been greater, but no one captured the psychology of gambling quite like the great Russian writers of the nineteenth century. Alexander Pushkin's short story "[The Queen of Spades](#)" tells of a Russian officer who is obsessed with gambling but able to contain himself until he hears about an unbeatable card trick. He scares an old woman to death in order to learn it, but she has the last laugh: the officer ends his career in an asylum. Fyodor Dostoyevsky was himself a roulette addict. ("I pawned both my ring and my winter coat and I lost everything," he wrote in a letter to his wife, begging her for fifty francs to settle his hotel bill.) His novella "[The Gambler](#)," one of the finest studies of the compulsion to gamble, was written in less than thirty days to pay off his own debts. He had wagered a prominent publisher to whom he owed money that he would complete a novel and an edition of writings by a specific date, or else he would

surrender the rights to all his works—past and future. He finished the manuscript with only hours to spare.

What about the games of chance that Silicon Valley venture capitalists play when they stake millions of dollars on tech startups that have a roughly one-in-ten chance of making it? Success comes when the returns on a breakthrough firm more than make up for their losses elsewhere, so venture capitalists have to be thoughtful about their bet sizes. Being good at this game is different from being good at founding a company, Silver argues. He sees it as the difference between the fox, who, proverbially, knows many things, and the hedgehog, who knows one big thing. The venture capitalist is a fox: risk-tolerant, probabilistic, adaptable, and comfortable with complexity. The founder in whom the V.C. invests is a hedgehog: risk-ignorant, stubborn, drawn to order. V.C.s, spreading their bets, will acquaint themselves with multiple markets and try to adjust their exposure on the basis of the latest information. Founders, committed to their company, will persevere through setbacks and fight for their singular vision. The genius of Silicon Valley, Silver maintains, is in creating a symbiotic relationship between the two: the founders get to take their shots, and the venture capitalists get their positive expected value in returns.

In Silver's account, large language models like [OpenAI's ChatGPT](#) or Anthropic's Claude are like poker players, too. The job of a large language model is to maximize the chance that the next word it outputs makes sense given its previous output and the user's query. (For the latest version of ChatGPT, this has involved training on a vast Internet corpus and fine-tuning a trillion or so parameters.) The linguist [Noam Chomsky](#) described these models as “a kind of super-autocomplete,” and, though he meant it dismissively, it’s a fair description of the mechanics. Super-autocomplete can do more than just solve high-school homework problems. It has already revolutionized computer programming, in which co-piloting with A.I. is now routine, and you can imagine lots of white-collar tasks getting more efficient with its use—up to the point where they are automated away.

Silver finds a cautionary tech-industry parable in Sam Bankman-Fried, who granted him several interviews after FTX, his cryptocurrency exchange, went bust but before he was sentenced to twenty-five years in prison. Although Silver thinks the stodgy Village types are too risk-averse,

Bankman-Fried shows what happens when you're a compulsive gambler without limits. He had "hacked the VC algorithm and catered to some of its worst biases," Silver writes. Because Bankman-Fried looked the part, had the right pedigree, and had placed himself in the right networks, nobody cared to examine the financial details of FTX too closely. Silver's take on his rise amounts to a mini-book within the book, and an enlightening one.

Still, Silver might have spent more time exploring domains where expected-value thinking may be even more consequential. One involves the government's role in funding and fostering scientific innovation, which requires balancing the reality of repeated failure with the huge potential of success. It could do with a serious reboot. That probably means taking more chances rather than rewarding scientists for their ability to fill out labyrinthine grant applications and channelling money toward the gerontocrat who coasts on a discovery made decades ago while the next generation languishes unfunded.

Another domain that Silver scants is Wall Street. Hedge funds are named for their ability to mitigate risk; quantitative-trading firms hired hundreds of math and physics Ph.D.s to craft ultrasophisticated probability models. The late Jim Simons, a mathematician who got his start breaking codes for the N.S.A., founded a "quant" hedge fund called Renaissance Technologies that was essentially a money-printing machine for decades—a forty-per-cent return per year on average. And what gambler alive could hold a candle to [George Soros](#), who so heavily shorted the British pound, in 1992, that he "broke the Bank of England," forcing a devaluation while he netted at least a billion pounds?

If the concept of expected value can be applied to the task of earning billions, or of rivalling the cognitive function of a human being, can it also be fashioned into a system of ethics and social planning? Utilitarianism—which was formulated around two centuries ago, and holds that what is morally right can be determined by whatever maximizes the greatest good (or utility)—is a natural fit. It's little surprise that many of the people Silver terms Riverians—Will MacAskill chief among them—embrace a kind of ultra-utilitarianism that seeks to apply rigorous cost-benefit analysis on the scale of all of human society, not just today but centuries into the future. These "longtermist" expected-value calculations can lead you to unexpected

places: reducing the probability of human extinction, whether by nuclear war, unchecked climate change, or rogue A.I., becomes all-important. When you consider the sum total of possible human life in the future, this existential peril—cutely called x-risk, and sometimes [p\(doom\)](#)—swamps the other, happier states of the world, implying that you should do everything you can to avoid it. Surveying the field, Silver finds that “the domain experts give a trimmed mean forecast of an 8.8 percent chance of p(doom) from AI —defined in this case as all but five thousand humans ceasing to exist by 2100.” But this isn’t something he’s taking bets on. “I think AI x-risk is a question on which we ought to have a lot of epistemic humility. It’s not as simple as a poker hand.”

I have my doubts, too. It’s absurd to think that you can realistically model the sum total of human flourishing in all the possible states of the world a century hence. Our statistical tools can be powerful predictors when it comes to the here and now—the next best action to take in a poker match, the likeliest next word in a line of code, the next best trade to make, the likeliest location of the next amino acid in a protein sequence. But the magnitude of uncertainty when we’re projecting far into the past or far into the future is, well, incalculable. There is a reason that religion specializes in matters of cosmogony and eschatology. The Abrahamic faiths conceive of God as an omniscient creator and generally abjure gambling as a result; one of the first laws passed by the Puritans in the Massachusetts Bay Colony banned the possession of cards, dice, or gaming tables. Hinduism is more accommodating: the events of the Mahabharata are set off when the eldest Pandava brother loses his kingdom to his cousin in a rigged gambling match, eventually triggering a colossal civil war. Each of the four ages in Hindu cosmology, in fact, is thought to be named for a throw of the dice.

The metaphysical debates will rage on, but the immediate material benefits of the study of chance remain inarguable. After concluding my laptop-based training, I reconvened the family match—this time with real chips. I called a bluff of my brother’s, having diagnosed him as playing too loosely, and confiscated his chips with some satisfaction. My wife and I found ourselves battling for a big pot yet again. My bets were just large enough to keep the action going; my chance of winning didn’t just feel vaguely right—it felt like positive expected value. It all came down to the river. Against her respectable two pairs, I had made both a flush and a straight. I took down the

pot and took back my dignity. It was a fitting moment, I decided, to retire from my gambling career. For all that I'd learned about pot odds and fold equity, I recognized the wisdom in the old adage: quit while you're ahead. ♦

Books

The Supreme Contradictions of Simone Weil

It's a conundrum of the philosopher's biography that most basic human needs were alien to her.

By Judith Thurman

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The French philosopher Simone Weil was a soul at odds with herself and with a world of affliction. The causes she espoused as a social activist and the faith she professed as a mystic were urgent to her and, as she saw it, to humanity. Little of her work was published in her lifetime, but since her death, at thirty-four, in 1943, it has inspired an almost cultlike following among readers who share her hunger for grace, and for what she called “decreation”—deliverance from enthrallment to the self.

Eminent theologians have revered Weil (Paul Tillich, Thomas Merton, Pope Paul VI), and so have writers of the first rank, especially women (Hannah Arendt, Ingeborg Bachmann, Anne Carson, Flannery O’Connor, Susan

Sontag). Albert Camus hailed her as “the only great spirit of our time.” T. S. Eliot credited her with a “genius akin to that of the saints.” But Weil herself might have objected to these consecrations as a form of “idolatry,” which she defined as a misguided thirst for “absolute good.” Nothing is so absolute about her as the difficulty of parsing her contradictions. Her writing radiates a cosmic empathy that coexists, sometimes on the same page, with a strain of intolerance blind to life’s tragicomedy. She resists any system that enslaves the individual to a collective, but her own vision of an enlightened society—the subject of her most famous work, “The Need for Roots”—is an autocracy modelled on Plato’s Republic. Weil would gladly have died fighting the Nazis. Yet even as her Jewish family fled the Final Solution, she condemned Judaism with what her biographer Francine du Plessix Gray justly calls “hysterical repugnance.”

It’s a conundrum of Weil’s biography that most basic human needs were alien to her. She shrank from the touch of another body, and considered her own “disgusting.” She slept on the floor in an unheated room. For most of her life, she subsisted on a starvation diet—in solidarity, she said, with the world’s victims of war and famine. Extreme fasting has a long history among female saints, though it was chastened by the Church as a sin of pride. Weil’s biographers have debated whether to call her “anorexic”; the psychiatrist Robert Coles prefers to see her as a “famished seeker.” In seeking transcendence from her mortal hungers, her extremity exerts a magnetic force: it has the power both to captivate and to repel us.

Weil formulated her extremity succinctly in “Gravity and Grace,” an anthology of numinous aphorisms that is widely considered her masterpiece: “Do not allow yourself to be imprisoned by any affection.” She insisted that her solitude was “ordained,” and that she had to be “a stranger and an exile in relation to every human circle.” But a friend who published “Gravity and Grace,” Gustave Thibon, suggested that she was fooling herself. She “was not detached from her detachment,” he said.

A new collection of family correspondence, “Simone Weil: A Life in Letters,” edited and annotated by Robert Chenavier and André A. Devaux, gives perspective to Thibon’s koan. Weil’s nicknames for her parents, Bernard and Selma, are Biri and Mime, and she signs one message “Your little girl who loves you with all her strength but pays no attention to

spelling misstakes.” She mostly addresses her mother. Many of these missives are dashed-off notes from camp—a daughter assuaging a mother’s anxiety about her welfare, or scolding her for it, or asking for cigarettes and coffee filters, or reporting cheerfully on a tour of Italy (“Very beautiful, La Scala”), or threatening that she “won’t eat for two weeks” if Mime sends her a care package she hasn’t asked for. Yet they humanize Weil the icon by the very fact of their banality, and by their poignant testimony to her umbilical dependence as a child who never really left home.

Weil’s intellect navigated time and space with supreme self-sovereignty, but her body lacked a steering wheel. She had abnormally small and clumsy hands. She suffered from crippling migraines and severe myopia. She bumped into furniture as she crossed a room. She was devoid of common sense. Knowing how rash she was, and how unfit for the hardships that she would court—factory labor and frontline combat, risks that endangered the very people in whose name she took them—the Weils became helicopter parents, ever poised to swoop down and rescue her.

Like many saints and revolutionaries, Weil was a child of privilege. She and her brother André, one of the twentieth century’s preëminent mathematicians, grew up in luxury. Bernard was a successful internist; Selma was an heiress. One is startled to learn from the letters that Simone enjoyed tennis and skiing. Despite her preference for hovels, she wasn’t a stranger to posh hotels. She loved the sea, so the family often summered at the beach. They were together in Portugal when she had her first mystical experience and in Nice when Hitler invaded Poland.

The plump, vivacious Madame Weil was the kind of formidable homemaker whom my own Jewish grandmother would have called “a real *balabusta*” (followed by the explanation that “you could eat off her floor”). Her germ phobia may have infected Simone with her lifelong revulsion at bodily contact. The breath of strangers was fraught with peril, so Selma’s children had to ride the bus on its open upper deck even in winter and to dodge kisses from anyone but close kin. Weil’s school friend and first biographer, Simone Pétrement, makes a point of praising Selma’s warmth and her tireless efforts to mother everyone in her orbit, with an “ability to organize . . . so overpowering that one was tempted to submit to her.” But perhaps her

competence was so daunting that it discouraged Weil from cultivating any. In one of her letters, she asks Mime how to boil rice.

Simone had been such a sickly infant that she wasn't expected to survive. As a toddler, she refused solid food. At five, she was a holy terror, "with an indescribable stubbornness neither her father nor I can make a dent in," Selma told a friend. That year, perhaps not by coincidence, André, who was eight, discovered mathematics and disappeared into them. Simone worshipped him. He had taught her to read as a surprise for their father. They recited Racine together. Ancient Greek became their secret language. (They used it to argue about Nietzsche.) When they lost their tempers, as siblings do, they mauled each other silently in a bedroom, since raised voices upset their mother.

Selma had been forbidden to study medicine by an old-fashioned father, and she channelled her frustrated ambitions into educating her wunderkinds, hiring the best private tutors and enrolling her children in the top lycées. By twelve, André was working at a graduate level and reading Homer in the original. At fourteen, he passed his baccalaureate, then sailed through the gruelling entrance exam for France's most prestigious university, the École Normale Supérieure. Simone was one of only two women in her class at the Normale, and finished first on the exam in general philosophy and logic, with another famous Simone—de Beauvoir, a similarly prodigious grind—right behind her. But André was a certified genius, and she never felt equal to him. At the onset of puberty, and of the migraines and depressions that subsequently plagued her, she "seriously thought of dying," she wrote, because "the extraordinary gifts of my brother, who had a childhood and a youth comparable to Pascal's, brought my own inferiority home to me."

It wasn't only her brother's mind that Simone envied. She chafed at her assignment to the second sex, and wanted nothing to do with femininity. Selma was admirably sympathetic. "I do my best," she told a friend, "to encourage in Simone not the simpering graces of a little girl, but the forthrightness of a boy even if it must seem rude." Both parents referred to their younger child, at "his" request, as "our son number two," and she used the masculine form of French participles in her student letters to them, which she signed "Simon."

Beyond the sanctuary of home, however, Weil was perceived as a freak, especially by male contemporaries, who took her indifference to charming them as an affront to their masculinity. Her manners were brusque to the point of surliness, and her tactlessness was legendary. In an era when public cross-dressing was illegal for women, she sometimes wore what looks like a mechanic's jumpsuit, though her standard uniform was a grubby military-style greatcoat and a workman's beret. The principal of the Normale called her the Red Virgin. Georges Bataille caricatured her in his novel "Le Bleu du Ciel": "A girl of twenty-five, ugly and visibly dirty. . . . The short, brittle, uncombed hair under her hat gave her crow's wings on either side of her face. She had the big nose of a skinny Jewess with sallow skin between the two wings and under her wire-rimmed glasses." Yet the poet Jean Tortel, who met Weil years later in Marseilles, would capture a charisma that Bataille had missed:

A kind of bodyless bird . . . extremely ugly at first sight, thin, ravaged face under her large black beret, thick ragged hair, only heavy black shoes to be seen under her ankle-length cloak. . . . In her presence, all "lies" were out of question. . . . Her denuding, tearing and torn gaze . . . would grasp and render helpless the person she was looking at.

Weil came of age during the Depression, and her twenties were a decade of militant engagements—first as a Marxist, then as a radical trade unionist who taught Latin and French literature to workers, then as a pacifist so uncompromising that, until Hitler invaded France, she favored appeasing him. But she couldn't resist the chance to fight Fascism with a gun, so she enlisted in the Spanish Civil War, whose atrocities on both sides so disillusioned her that she would call revolution, not religion, the "opium of the people." (Her brief misadventure fighting Franco with the anarchist Durruti Column ended when she stumbled into a pot of cooking oil and suffered third-degree burns. Had her parents not been hovering nearby to evacuate her, she might have died of gangrene.)

But the defining chapter of Weil's life on the barricades was her stint as a blue-collar worker. In 1934, she talked a sympathetic factory owner into hiring her incognito for his assembly line. It was the first of three jobs as a cog in the machine which left her "broken" mentally and physically. (In between them, Biri and Mime took her to recuperate at a Swiss sanitarium.)

As a gratuitous ordeal, this episode has an aura of performance art, and Weil knew, of course, that she was only “a professor gone slumming.” But it was also a profound conversion experience. From then on, as Gray notes, there was a shift in her language. The Marxist catchword “oppression” was replaced by “affliction,” a word from the Book of Job. “Affliction is not a psychological state,” Weil wrote. “It is a pulverization of the soul.” It “compels us to recognize as real what we do not think possible.”

Weil’s latest biographer, Robert Zaretsky, reminds us that she, like Orwell, was the rare “voice on the left” to denounce Fascism and Communism “with the same vehemence.” One of the Weils’ Paris apartments was a duplex on the Left Bank whose upper floor Simone once loaned to Trotsky for a clandestine meeting—a pretext for confronting him with Soviet ruthlessness. In the next room, her mother listened with alarm to the shouting. Trotsky was berating Weil for her “reactionary” individualism. (His wife chuckled at the audacity of “this child” who was “holding her own” with the great man.)

The ability to see what others couldn’t was a gift of Weil’s supreme intelligence, and also probably of what Elizabeth Hardwick calls her “spectacular and in many ways exemplary abnormality.” Her piety was as idiosyncratic as her politics, and many creeds attracted her: Buddhism, Stoicism, Spinoza’s notion that God is nature. She was especially drawn to the Cathars, a medieval sect whose ascetic practices spoke to her own quest for disembodiment, as did their martyrdom. (They were annihilated in the fourteenth century.)

Catholicism was ultimately the persuasion most congenial to Weil, but she never formally converted, in part because she believed, heretically, in free access to divine truth. Her excuse for refusing baptism was that she couldn’t join a church that used the promise of paradise “to blackmail and to damn anyone who rejects her infallibility.” In fact, eternal life didn’t tempt her any more than earthly pleasures did. Her ultimate hunger was for “the void”—an inner vacuum of need, desire, and even thought which grace could fill if she waited for it with “extreme attention.” Attention, as she conceives it, isn’t the willed contraction of mental muscles needed to grapple with a problem but the state of being present with a mystery and resisting the urge to solve it.

There was one mystery that Weil never thought worthy of attention: her callousness toward the Jewish people's persecution. It is more incomprehensible considering her version of the Golden Rule: "The love of our neighbor . . . simply means being able to say to him, 'What are you going through?' It is a recognition that the sufferer exists . . . as a man exactly like us."

Weil's parents came from observant families on both sides. Bernard was an agnostic who apparently harbored some distaste for his Orthodox upbringing. (He told Gustave Thibon "vaguely antisemitic" jokes.) But his pious mother often came to visit. Selma, whose mother shared their home, had escaped from Russia as a toddler with her parents, fleeing the pogroms. Her father wrote poetry in Hebrew, though she herself, according to Simone's niece, Sylvie, was "frightfully liberated." The assimilated couple decided to spare their children any knowledge of their heritage until they were "mature" enough to process the bad news.

If André had strong feelings about being Jewish, he never seems to have aired them, though he married a divorced Catholic and baptized his children at Simone's urging. The new collection includes her letters to him on the subject, along with an oblique reference, from 1941, to their predicament as refugees: "One could define art's object as leading the soul to feel at home in the place of its exile." The ambivalence of André and his parents was culturally unexceptional, but Simone's abhorrence wasn't.

A rabid hatred can be a fetish, and it is often a horror of contamination. (Fetishes, according to Freud, are associated with a child's traumatic discovery of gender differences.) Weil shocked Thibon, he wrote, with an "anti-Semitism" he calls "violent. . . . She was fond of saying that Hitler hunted on the same ground as the Jews and only persecuted them to resuscitate under another name and to his own advantage their tribal god, terrestrial, cruel, and exclusive." Judaism was "linked to a concept of race," in her view, so it was not an "authentic" religion. Her biographer Thomas Nevin suggests that she saw being Jewish "as a condition or disease from which one might be relieved." In policy notes that she drafted for the French government-in-exile, she defended legal discrimination against Jews, and her measures to insure their "disappearance" included an obligatory

“Christian” education for their children. Only the “fanatical racists” would hold out, and they could be deprived of their nationality.

The Weils fled Paris in June, 1940, taking the last train heading south before the Germans closed in. After the partition of France into an occupied zone and a so-called free zone, governed from Vichy by Nazi collaborators, they spent the next two years in and around Marseille. Simone studied Sanskrit, did social outreach with Indo-Chinese factory workers barracked in a prison, and joined a Resistance network. Informants, however, had already infiltrated the group. (Biri and Mime waited for hours in a café opposite the gendarmerie while their daughter was interrogated.) When the police threatened to jail her “with the whores” if she didn’t talk, she welcomed the invitation.

Expecting and perhaps hoping to be imprisoned, Weil had packed a go bag of essential items. One of the most indispensable was a tattered copy of the Iliad. In December, 1940, her most famous essay, “The Iliad, or The Poem of Force,” appeared in the illustrious literary journal *Cahiers du Sud*. Its prose thrums with a lofty, tragic resonance that many of Homer’s translators have strived for. She reads the Iliad as the paradigm for all narratives of carnage since time immemorial, and she arrives at a startling insight that probably would have floored the Greeks—that the epic’s “true hero” is force itself. Humanity’s delusion—its Achilles’ heel, as Weil sees it—is to believe that war results in victory for one side and defeat for the other. “Force,” she writes, “makes a thing of anyone who comes under its sway”—both those who wield it and those who suffer it. “And as pitilessly as force crushes, so pitilessly it maddens whoever possesses, or believes he possesses it.”

Fifteen months later, the Vichy police began coöperating with the Nazis in deporting French Jews, some seventy thousand of whom died in the camps. Weil couldn’t have been unaware of their affliction, and she must have known that *Cahiers* had risked reprisal for publishing one of them. Yet she denied being Jewish in a sardonic letter to the Vichy authorities after they rejected her application for a teaching job on the basis of newly enacted race laws.

It may not have been by chance that Weil now felt “as close to Catholicism” as she could come. She began reciting the Lord’s Prayer daily. She also

sought the community of fellow-believers. At a Dominican monastery, she met Father Joseph-Marie Perrin, a nearly blind priest who played a crucial role in her life—not as the confessor he hoped to be but as a sounding board who made Weil “see intellectual honesty in a new light.” In an extraordinary letter that she called her “spiritual autobiography,” and in which hubris alternates with obedience to fate, Weil tells Perrin that she loves him as a “father and brother” (he was about her age) but that she doesn’t need his guidance because “God himself has taken it in hand.”

Before Perrin left Marseille on a mission to Africa, he made a last attempt to save Weil’s prestigious soul—by entrusting it to a better-read shepherd. She had asked him to find her a job as a “servant on a farm,” and he introduced her to Thibon, a Catholic writer and lay theologian. He and his wife had a farm in the Ardèche, a department north of Avignon with some of France’s most majestic scenery. They agreed to host her, although they were initially wary of this “left-wing Jewess” who was eager to shovel their manure but refused their guest room, insisting on sleeping in a hut. “We disagreed on practically everything,” Thibon said (he wrote speeches for Philippe Pétain, the Vichy chief of state), and she exhausted him by “arguing *ad infinitum* in an inexorably monotonous voice.” But as he came to know her “deep nature,” it revealed “a limpid mysticism” that he had encountered “in no other human being.” Before Weil left France, she entrusted her journals to him, from which he distilled the thirty-nine short chapters of “Gravity and Grace.” Her meditations on the “meaning of the universe” restate life’s common contradictions as sublime paradoxes. They have an alabaster beauty that the light shines through, and which won’t expire.

Weil’s days with the Thibons were perhaps the happiest she ever knew. If she couldn’t accept the Eucharist, she experienced a beatitude in communion with *la France profonde*. She urged her parents to buy a farm in the Ardèche, where they could grow their own vegetables, her father could practice medicine, and she could teach. Bernard and Selma thought that a safer plan was to apply for American visas. On May 14, 1942, the family left Marseille for Casablanca, where they were interned for almost three weeks with other Jewish refugees before boarding a freighter for New York. Simone monopolized one of the camp’s few chairs, where she wrote about Pythagoras all day long. If she had to vacate this parking spot for any reason, her parents took turns holding it.

Weil had agreed to emigrate only because her parents wouldn't leave without her. After a few months in New York, she managed, through the intercession of a well-connected classmate from the Normale, to land a desk job at the London headquarters of de Gaulle's government-in-exile. She was obsessed with playing a role in liberating France—specifically by carrying out an underground mission whose danger would "release" her from an "annihilating" despair. Recrossing the ocean was the first step in her audacious plan to see action, which had two components, both involving parachutes. One was to be dropped behind enemy lines to conduct sabotage. The other was to organize a company of volunteer nurses who would bring succor to the Maquis. They would all be unmarried women with some basic training in first aid but otherwise unqualified as medics. She envisaged them dressed in white as their chutes opened and they floated earthward—grace surrendering to gravity—unarmed except for their courage. It is said that, when word of her "nurses plan" reached de Gaulle, he exclaimed, "She's crazy."

Weil was so bitter at this rejection that she couldn't get over it. As a consolation, she was given a small private office, and an assignment better suited to her talents than sabotage: reviewing and commenting on plans to reorganize France after the war. The sheer frenzy and volume of what she wrote in a few months, Pétrement marvels, "is almost beyond belief. She must have written day and night."

Her critiques coalesced into "The Need for Roots"—Weil's constitution for a Fourth Republic. It analyzes misgovernment not only in France since the Revolution but through millennia of world history. It indicts materialist ideologies. A just society, in her view, should be based not on the "rights" of its citizens but on their sacred "obligations" to one another. Many of her fixes for the rotten state of late-capitalist democracy are radically egalitarian and humane, and she was prophetic about the evils of the present century—the malign influence of biased media that foster groupthink and hate; cynical parties scrabbling for power; the anguish of displaced migrants and laborers; the cultural genocide of Indigenous communities. ("White people have been destroying the past everywhere.")

Other aspects of "The Need for Roots" are singularly authoritarian. She imagines a utopian nanny state where civic virtue is inseparable from

religious indoctrination. Hierarchs possessed of impartial wisdom (how they are chosen she doesn't say) insure that justice is served and that "everyone morally accepts their place." Punishment is an "honor" here. "Surgical methods" may be required to treat "social disease." Freedom of expression is "unlimited" in principle, except for newspapers, magazines, radio, interest groups, and fiction or art that corrupts young people. "The need for truth is more sacred than any other," so "jail or prison camp" wouldn't be "too harsh" a sentence for failing to fact-check an article.

The greatest moralists aren't the didacts. They are writers like Euripides and Chekhov, who know that most of us can't be saved from ourselves. Weil believed that God had sent his son for that purpose. At the same time, perhaps, her hunger for hardship was the search for an experience of shared reality from which she felt excluded. She wasn't real to herself as a woman or a Jew. The body that she couldn't love was a stranger to the appetites that doom utopias. Yet a wounded human heart beats fiercely in everything she writes, and its enigmas speak to us intimately, since no one's contradictions can be reconciled.

In uprooting herself from France to save Biri and Mime, Weil had severed a primal bond that defined her identity. By leaving them in New York, she had severed a primal bond that had kept her alive. On April 15, 1943, a friend found her barely conscious on the floor of her room in a boarding house and, despite her protestations, took her to a hospital, where doctors discovered that she had tuberculosis. The disease wasn't far advanced, and there was no reason to believe that an active young woman couldn't recover with sufficient bed rest and nutrition. But the patient refused to eat more than minute quantities of food—an egg yolk, a peach, a spoonful of soup—and in her final days, by which time she had been transferred to a sanitarium in Kent, she took nothing at all. On August 24th, she died in the extremis that had always been her soul's discomfort zone. "Salvation," she wrote, "is consenting to die." The coroner ruled her death a suicide.

Life wasn't precious to Weil; she was never precious to herself. Yet she knew that she was precious to her parents, and the white lies in her last letters to them, all of which have her boarding-house return address, are what moves one most in the new collection. "I had a nice surprise here in terms of the food," she writes from the hospital, where she is fighting with

doctors who are trying to save her life by force-feeding her. “Roast pork with apple sauce . . . the pure flavor of an apple constitutes a contact with the beauty of the universe in the same way as does contemplation of a painting by Cézanne.” Three weeks later, in a letter from the Kent sanitarium (“I’m still living nice and quietly in my room, with my books scattered between it and my office”), she describes the London summer: “The hot days are back. . . . In the evenings, people dance in the open air in parks.”

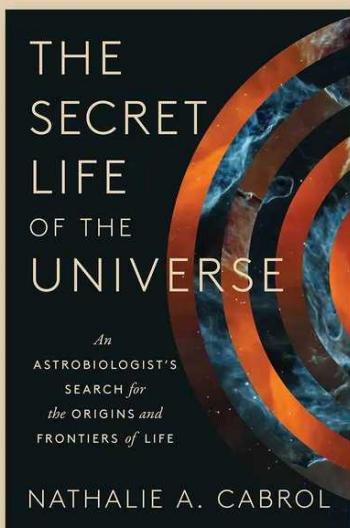
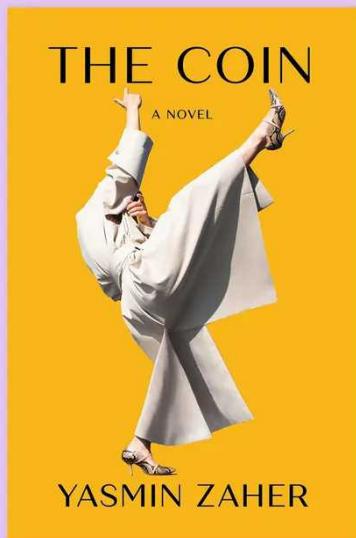
Then she corrects a piece of “false information” that she had previously conveyed about an ersatz sweet called a “fruit fool”: “But these fools are not like the ones in Shakespeare. They’re lying by making people believe they’re fruit, while in Sh. the fools are the only characters who tell the truth.” In “this world,” she continues, that privilege is given only to the lowest and most afflicted—those without the “dignity of reason” in the eyes of people who call them mad. Didn’t her “Darling Mime” see the resemblance “between these fools and me”? ♦

Books

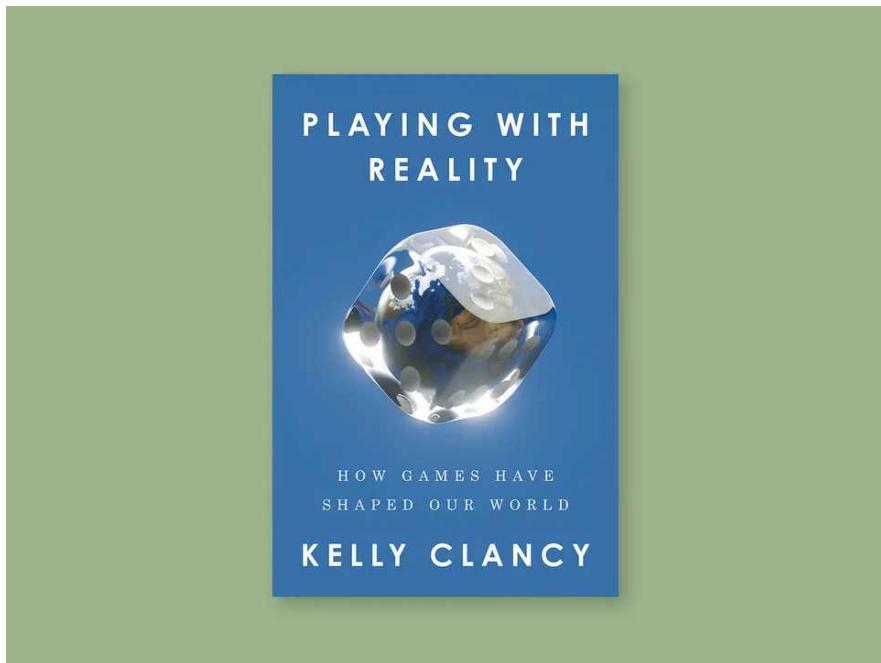
Briefly Noted

“The Secret Life of the Universe,” “Playing with Reality,” “The Coin,” and “The Divorce.”

September 02, 2024



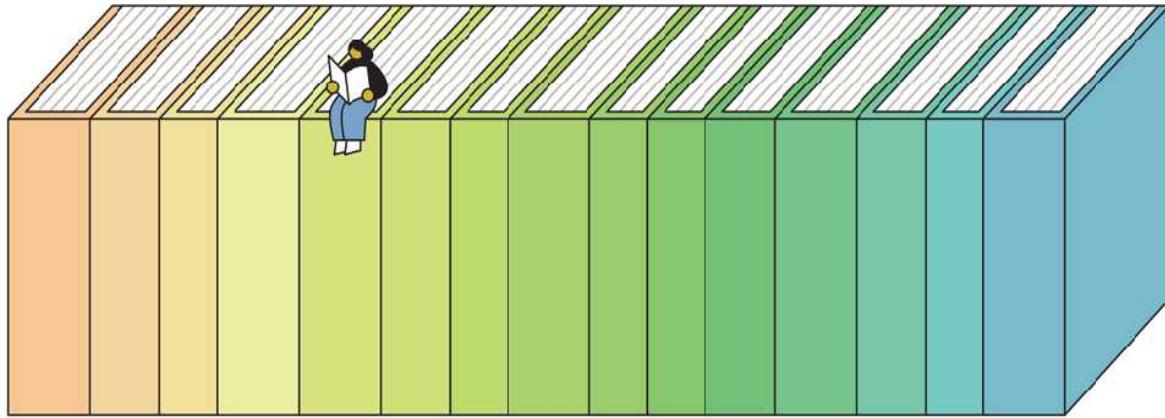
The Secret Life of the Universe, by Nathalie A. Cabrol (Scribner). This compact and often astonishing overview of the current state of astrobiology, by a director at the *SETI* Institute, explores the scientific advances of the past few decades, many of which have radically altered our understanding of the universe and, Cabrol argues, brought us close to finding extraterrestrial life. Space telescopes—most notably the Kepler, launched in 2009—have revealed a cosmos “populated by more planets than stars,” and infrared surveys of those planets’ atmospheres will yield vast amounts of data in the coming years. Cabrol, an assured and accessible guide, notes that interpreting that data poses a great challenge: because we still lack a consensus on the definition of life, we may not know it when we see it.



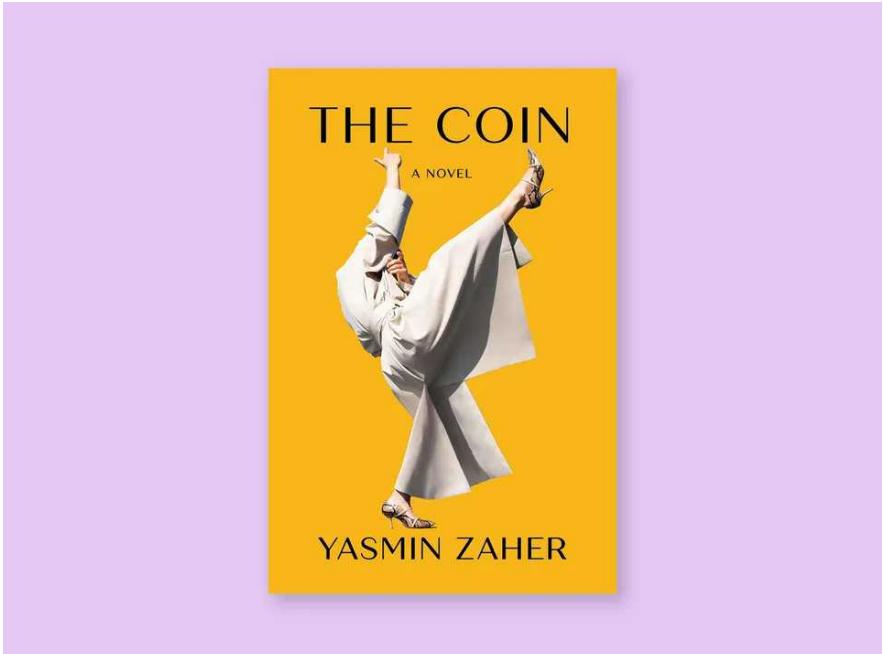
Playing with Reality, by Kelly Clancy (Riverhead). Games may be a diversion, but, as Clancy, a neuroscientist, writes, they also can provide useful models of the real world. In this comprehensive study, which fuses science, world history, and politics, she documents the role that games have played in medicine, economic thought, moral philosophy, A.I., and more. Although knowledge acquired from gaming has had worthwhile practical applications, from text translation to advances in cancer treatment, games don’t necessarily reflect reality, and players don’t always act rationally. In detailed chapters on topics like modern war-game simulations and the misapplication of game theory in justifying mass privatization, Clancy warns

of the societal risks of allowing mathematical models to govern political decisions.

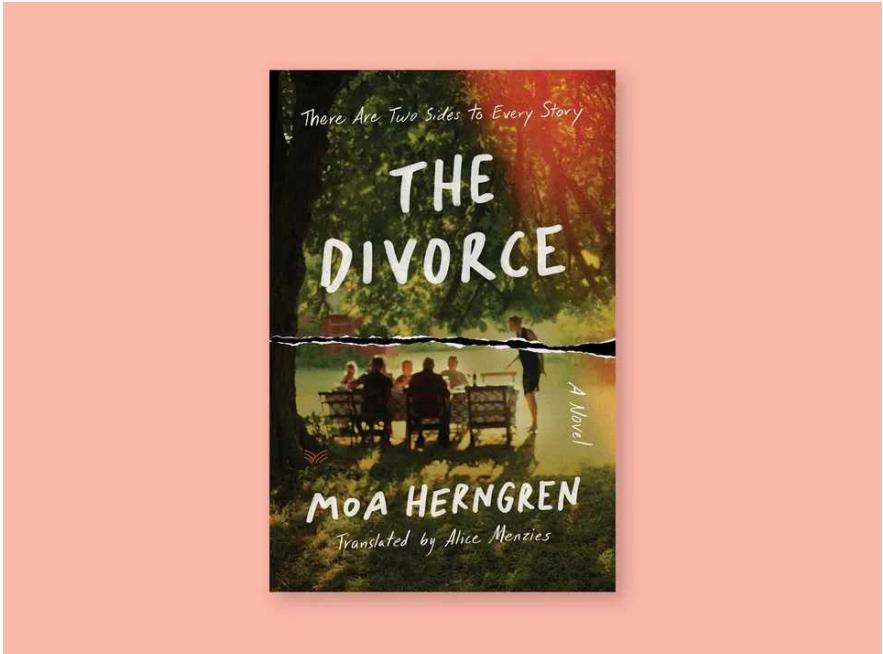
What We're Reading



Discover notable new fiction and nonfiction.



[**The Coin**](#), by Yasmin Zaher (*Catapult*). In this début novel, a wealthy, fashionable Palestinian middle-school teacher living in Brooklyn wrestles with feelings of alienation. Seeing dirt everywhere, she begins to wash herself compulsively. Her lessons become strange and her relationships with her students blurry. After a dalliance with a man, she gets swept up in a scheme involving reselling luxury handbags. In a moment of winking symbolism, she comes to believe that a coin she swallowed as a child is living in her body, altering her personality. Somewhat surreal, and willing to risk a little provocation, Zaher’s book plays with overlapping ideas of privilege, asking complex questions about what past suffering means in the face of a desire for today’s luxuries.



The Divorce, by Moa Herngren, translated from the Swedish by Alice Menzies (HarperVia). The collapse of a thirty-two-year marriage is depicted with an even hand in this book, which amounts to two parallel novels: one about a woman “feverish with confusion,” who feels that she was abandoned without warning, and another about a man who has been grappling with the end of his relationship for months. The two-sided account starts at the beginning of the end, when the husband hasn’t come home and isn’t answering his wife’s texts. As Herngren stitches together the couple’s perspectives, she writes with a sharp neutrality, never overplaying the book’s many tense moments of discovery or languishing in the wife’s despair.

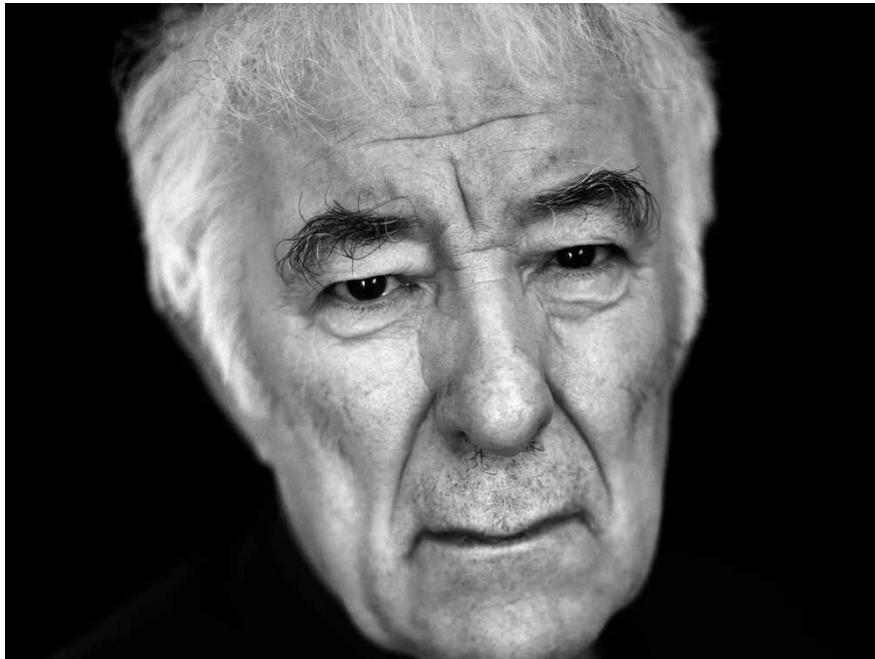
Books

How Seamus Heaney Wrote His Way Through a War

As his country's most prominent poet, Heaney struggled to reconcile his vision of poetry with the Troubles tearing the Irish apart.

By Maggie Doherty

September 02, 2024



When people asked the poet Seamus Heaney what it was like to be living in Belfast, Northern Ireland, at the start of the Troubles, he tended to downplay the violence: “Things aren’t too bad in our part of the town.” But things were, in fact, quite bad. A kind of martial law obtained. British soldiers, brought in to suppress a Catholic civil-rights movement, ran checkpoints, frisked young men, and stopped drivers for the smallest infractions. Aggressive slogans adorned buildings: “Keep Ulster Protestant,” “Keep Blacks and Fenians Out of Ulster.” Worst of all were the bombs, which exploded everywhere and seemingly at random: in department stores, in transit centers, in pubs, in banks. Some were planted by the Provisional Irish Republican Army, others by Protestant vigilantes.

These developments alarmed Heaney the citizen—a lifelong Northerner, an Irish Catholic—and they challenged Heaney the poet. Should he, in his art, respond to the conflict—and, if so, how? To write his first two, well-received collections, he had started in what he called “the ground of memory and sensation,” often with scenes drawn from domestic life. Poems typically appeared to him spontaneously, like figures emerging from a mist. “It would wrench the rhythms of my writing procedures to start squaring up to contemporary events with more will than ways to deal with them,” he wrote in the *Guardian* in 1972, as the violence in the North was escalating.

But Heaney also recognized that to be the kind of poet he wanted to be—what he called a “public poet,” like Robert Lowell or W. B. Yeats—he would have to respond to the circumstances in which he found himself. The public poet concerned himself with the polis and its problems. He didn’t ignore incidents of violence and injustice but, rather, grappled with them, shaping reality into an image of a better world. “On the one hand, poetry is secret and natural, on the other hand it must make its way in a world that is public and brutal,” Heaney wrote in the *Guardian*. A good poet—a responsible poet—would hold both truths in mind.

To speak to the private and the public, the beautiful and the brutal, became Heaney’s great project. Starting in earnest with “North,” his haunting and controversial collection from 1975, he charted a course between overt partisanship and irresponsible aestheticism. To Heaney, a good poem was “a site of energy and tension and possibility, a truth-telling arena but not a killing field.” The poet should be tolerant, disinterested, clear-eyed about long-standing animosities but not constrained by them. Allergic to propaganda, and loath to let anyone tell him what to write, he worked to carve out a space of creative freedom—then used this freedom to meditate on what he owed to others.

In ways large and small, Heaney aimed to do right by other people. “The Letters of Seamus Heaney” (Farrar, Straus & Giroux), an eight-hundred-page collection edited by the poet Christopher Reid, shows the man to be both responsive and responsible, generous with praise for his fellow-writers, grateful for feedback from trusted readers, and open to the dissenting opinions of his colleagues and countrymen, even as he maintains his own beliefs. (By request of the family, no letters to living immediate relatives are

included; most of the correspondence concerns literary and professional matters.) Many a letter begins with an apology for its belatedness; many others detail the innumerable obligations—the classes taught, the lectures delivered, the reviews drafted, the prizes judged, and, too rarely, the poems composed—that made prior correspondence impossible. As early as 1985, Heaney felt like “a frazzled, frizzled item, a worn-out Triton, a punctured Michelin man, a posthumous Paddy, a waft of aftermath.” By the time he won the Nobel Prize in Literature, in 1995—an event that he compared to “being caught in a mostly benign avalanche”—he was overwhelmed. “I feel like Gulliver, pinned down by single liens of obligation,” he wrote in 2000.

Heaney’s sense of duty was both a help and a hindrance to him: it propelled him to the center of Anglo-American literature, but it also placed certain limits on his writing. The conflict he felt for most of his life—between his duties as an artist and his commitments as a Northern Irish Catholic—plays out in some of his letters. “‘Being responsible’ and what it means, what it demands, has indeed preoccupied me—maybe too much,” he wrote to the critic Adam Kirsch in 2006. But that conflict is most apparent, and most satisfactorily resolved, in his poems, which allow Heaney to entertain multiple points of view. At his best, he did what great artists do: he made the ambivalence he felt about his work the subject of the work itself.

Heaney liked to joke that he’d read about his own origins so often that he hardly believed they were true. But he had indeed been born just as the publishers said, on a farm in County Derry in 1939. His father was a taciturn cattle trader and, according to Heaney, “a creature of the archaic world.” His mother was both more modern and more mannered, with a sense of social justice and a compulsion to lay out china for Christmas dinner. Heaney lived with his parents, eight younger siblings, and a paternal aunt in a single-story, thatched-roof structure that was set back about thirty yards from the main road. Life in the country was peaceful: Catholics and Protestants lived and worked side by side. The family did business with a travelling grocer, used a horse to seed their fields, and churned butter by hand.

At twelve, Heaney was sent to board at St. Columb’s College, in Derry, a transition that he later described as a move from “the earth of farm labour to the heaven of education.” There, he devoted himself to English literature. Gerard Manley Hopkins was a particular favorite; he thrilled to the sound of

the nineteenth-century poet's work, its sprung rhythms and highly alliterative lines. After graduating from Queen's University Belfast, in 1961, Heaney accepted a teaching appointment at a local high school, writing poems in his spare time. Belfast in the sixties was an ideal place for an aspiring writer. An attempt to establish a regional literature was in overdrive; there were myriad literary magazines, writing workshops, festivals. Heaney soon fell in with a group of local writers who convened a workshop with the British poet and teacher Philip Hobsbaum. The atmosphere was rivalrous, but not unhealthily so; it produced, in Heaney's words, "the sheer aspiration to best yourself."



Even as he participated in what scholars call the Ulster Renaissance, editing an anthology and publishing his own essays and poems, Heaney saw himself as a man apart. He was, in his own words, “a slightly stick-in-the-mud (or in the frogspawn) figure, rural and un-racy,” not nearly as slick and politically savvy as his more urban friends. He also saw poetry differently than some of his peers did—not only as a way into a collective movement but as a fundamentally personal project. In an early lecture, he describes poetry, with reference to Wordsworth, as a “revelation of the self to the self,” a way to put one’s feelings into words.

By his own account, this is what he achieved in “Digging,” the lead poem of his first collection, “Death of a Naturalist.” The speaker watches, through a window, his father digging with a spade. It’s a familiar sight—for decades, his father has planted potatoes on land not far from where his grandfather cut turf—and he describes the labor with both accuracy and admiration:

The coarse boot nestled on the lug, the shaft
Against the inside knee was levered firmly.
He rooted out tall tops, buried the bright edge deep
To scatter new potatoes that we picked,
Loving their cool hardness in our hands.
By God, the old man could handle a spade.
Just like his old man.

But the speaker has “no spade to follow men like them.” What he possesses instead is a pen, tucked “snug as a gun” between finger and thumb. As the simile suggests, the pen could be used as a weapon, producing militant verses that would advance the nationalist cause. But the poet instead chooses to follow in his father’s footsteps, using the tools at his disposal to generate new growth. “The squat pen rests. / I’ll dig with it,” he declares in the poem’s final lines.

Many of the poems in “Naturalist” extoll the activities and rhythms of agrarian life. In “Blackberry-Picking,” the speaker recalls the taste of the season’s first ripe berry—“Like thickened wine: summer’s blood was in it”—and the sense of injustice that gripped him when the berries he’d picked turned to rot. “Churning Day,” the loveliest poem in the collection, offers an intimate portrait of household work, dwelling on the moment when butter forms, like a miracle, from cream:

Where finally gold flecks
began to dance. They poured hot water then,
sterilized a birchwood-bowl
and little corrugated butter-spades.
Their short stroke quickened, suddenly
a yellow curd was weighting the churned-up white,
heavy and rich, coagulated sunlight

that they fished, dripping, in a wide tin strainer,
heaped up like gilded gravel in the bowl.

Have lumps of butter ever been described more beautifully? (“Coagulated sunlight” always makes me catch my breath.) Like a good anthropologist, young Heaney had a knack for thick description, but, as with Hopkins, the great pleasure of his early poems is their sound. Combining the hard consonants of Old English, which he’d studied in college, with the Latinate style favored by many lyric poets, he developed a voice that was by turns ruthless and refined. Consider the first lines of “Churning Day”: “A thick crust, coarse-grained as limestone rough-cast, / hardened gradually on top of the four crocks.” Each consonant cracks like a peppercorn between the teeth. These are poems you taste.

“Naturalist” was published by Faber & Faber in 1966, the year after Heaney married Marie Devlin, a schoolteacher he’d met at a university dinner. Two children and two poetry collections—“Door Into the Dark” (1969) and “Wintering Out” (1972)—soon followed. “Door” closely resembled “Naturalist” in both form and theme, but “Wintering,” which Heaney worked on while teaching at U.C. Berkeley, was something of a departure. For a young Catholic from the provinces, the Bay Area was a revelation. In a letter, he described California as a “lotus land for the moment”; walking to campus, he passed “hippies, drop-outs, freak-outs, addicts, Black Panthers, Hare Krishna American kids with shaved heads.” The poems in “Wintering” seem informed by Heaney’s encounters with radical individualism, and, as the critic Helen Vendler has noted, they regard traditional Irish culture with skepticism. “Wedding Day,” which one would expect to be celebratory, is instead a sad, anxious poem about the speaker’s trepidation, his father-in-law’s “wild grief,” and his bride’s “demented” determination to see the ritual through. Two poems about abandoned babies—“Limbo” and “Bye-Child”—critique a culture of sexual propriety that forced young women to do the unthinkable. Throughout, Heaney’s line is shorter, his tone colder, his diction simpler, as if the spell under which he’d written his first two books had now broken.

Critics on both sides of the Atlantic praised Heaney’s early books and recognized him as a generational talent. But there were a few naysayers, who suspected that Heaney’s acclaim had less to do with his craft than with

where he came from. Anthony Thwaite, reviewing “Door Into the Dark,” suggested that “the appeal of Heaney’s work is of an exotic sort, to people who can’t tell wheat from barley or a gudgeon from a pike.” Others grumbled that Heaney’s poems amounted to little more than Paddy theatre, guaranteed to please the colonizer. But Heaney hadn’t set out to explain rural folkways to a cosmopolitan crowd. Like many a lyric poet, he worked out of a sense of personal—or perhaps filial—duty, guided by a preservationist impulse to record a world he loved and had lost. “It was more a case of personal securing,” he later told an interviewer, “an entirely intuitive move to restore something to yourself.”

In August, 1972, mere weeks after Bloody Friday, when twenty-two bombs exploded across Belfast, killing nine people, Heaney, his pregnant wife, and their children left Northern Ireland for good, moving to a rented cottage in County Wicklow. (Years later, after moving to Dublin, Heaney would buy the cottage and use it as a writing retreat.) Heaney always insisted that the move had little to do with the violence in the North: he had begun to feel hemmed in by the Belfast literary crowd, and he and Marie wanted a simpler life. But his letters suggest that the violence was a factor—and why shouldn’t it have been? “It is good to be out of Belfast,” he wrote to an editor that November, after a brief trip back to the city. “For the first time I was literally afraid to drive in the streets. I think the atmosphere is darkening.”

In rural Wicklow, Heaney found a freedom that was both familiar and new. For the first time in his adult life, he had no teaching responsibilities; he lived much like he had as a child, away from urban life and its upheavals. With distance from the North, he could now write about it. In a way, he felt he ought to.

Heaney once described “North” as a book “fused at a very high pressure.” That pressure can be felt in its form. Most of the poems unfold in tight, jagged quatrains. The poem “Funeral Rites” begins:

I shouldered a kind of manhood
stepping in to lift the coffins
of dead relations.
They had been laid out

in tainted rooms,
their eyelids glistening,
their dough-white hands
shackled in rosary beads.

There's a sense of constriction here, conveyed through the short, enjambed lines and the image of hands "shackled." The slant rhymes ("coffins" and "relations") and irregular meter make the poem difficult to read aloud; if one savors Heaney's early work, one practically spits out the lines above.

Like the speaker of "Funeral Rites," Heaney felt it his duty to look death in its face. But as a poet he found it more productive to confront ancient corpses than recent ones. He was inspired by "The Bog People," a book, by the Danish archeologist P. V. Glob, about the bodies of preserved Scandinavians from the Iron Age, some of whom had died violently. (The book was translated into English in 1969.) The first of Heaney's bog poems, "The Tollund Man," appeared in "Wintering"; more appear in "North." The corpses are described with careful, almost loving attention. "The grain of his wrists / is like bog oak, / the ball of his heel / like a basalt egg," Heaney writes in "The Grauballe Man." Another bog poem, "Strange Fruit," begins, "Here is the girl's head like an exhumed gourd. / Oval-faced, prune-skinned, prune-stones for teeth." Such sensitive description serves as its own funeral rite, a way to express "reverence"—the poet's word—for lives that were not valued in their time.

The connection between the violence suffered by the bog bodies and the violence in Northern Ireland is clear enough. In some poems, Heaney links the two explicitly: "Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces" includes a speech by one Jimmy Farrell, a character in a play by J. M. Synge, who describes old skulls found in Dublin. The stronger poems leave the connection implicit, and the strongest of these implicate the poet himself. "Punishment," which links ritual violence in the Iron Age to the tarring and feathering of young Catholic women who fraternized with British soldiers during the Troubles, ends with these striking lines:

I almost love you
but would have cast, I know,

the stones of silence.
I am the artful voyeur . . .

I who have stood dumb
when your betraying sisters,
cauled in tar,
wept by the railings,

who would connive
in civilized outrage
yet understand the exact
and tribal, intimate revenge.

Even if the speaker hasn't taken part in acts of vengeance, he recognizes why others do. "Punishment" presents the poet as yet another culpable observer, speaking but not speaking out.



With "North," Heaney broke what some saw as his silence on the political situation, though not everyone liked what he had to say. The English press praised the book, but a few Irish writers objected to the ways the bog poems seemed to naturalize the Troubles, attributing the conflict to an ancient curse rather than to real and ongoing political oppression. "It is as if he is saying that suffering like this is natural; these things have always happened; they

happened then, they happen now, and that is sufficient ground for understanding and absolution,” the poet Ciaran Carson wrote in *The Honest Ulsterman*.

In letters to friends, Heaney claimed to be untroubled by such critiques. “I am curious—nothing more—about what else is to come in the reviewing line,” he wrote to his friend Michael Longley, whose wife, the critic Edna Longley, would soon publish her own skeptical review of “North.” He’d anticipated a certain amount of hostility. In “Exposure,” the final poem in “North,” the speaker, an “inner émigré” walking in the woods of Wicklow, contemplates “the anvil brains of some who hate me” and wonders whether he’s missed his chance to write something with “once-in-a-lifetime portent.” It’s hard not to read the poem as a kind of preëmptive strike: the poet knows he’s inadequate to the moment, but he’s responded as best he could.

To Heaney, finishing “North” felt like discharging a duty; he was now free to write whatever he liked. “As far as I’m concerned, publication of [the collection] is one way of exorcising this pressure to ‘say something about the north,’ ” he wrote to the novelist John McGahern in 1975. “It has cleared my head already.”

But in the years that followed Heaney found himself saying more things about the North, and also questioning the things he’d said before. His next book, “Field Work” (1979), is an altogether more cheerful collection, yet it contains its share of political poems and elegies, including “The Strand at Lough Beg,” written for a murdered cousin. The speaker imagines coming upon his cousin’s body, covered “with blood and roadside muck,” and washing it clean with moss and dew.

Several years later, Heaney resurrected this same cousin in “Station Island,” a long poem in twelve parts that amounts to the poet’s most sustained self-examination. On a pilgrimage to an old religious site in Donegal, the poem’s speaker encounters a series of ghosts, including a tinker he remembers from his childhood, an archeologist friend who died young of heart disease, and a hunger striker willing to die for a political cause. Each of them pushes him toward self-inquiry: Why has he lived the way he has? Why did he write what he wrote? At times, the ghosts accuse him: Colum McCartney, the murdered cousin, says that the speaker has “confused evasion and artistic

tact,” “whitewashed ugliness,” and “saccharined my death with morning dew.” At other moments, the speaker accuses himself: “I hate how quick I was to know my place. / I hate where I was born, hate everything / That made me biddable and unforthcoming.” In the poem’s last movement, the ghost of James Joyce appears, like Dante’s Virgil, to guide the speaker through this period of self-doubt. “Your obligation / is not discharged by any common rite,” Joyce declares. “What you do you must do on your own. / The main thing is to write / for the joy of it.” The speaker already believed as much—Joyce’s words are “nothing I had not known / already”—but he’s relieved to have his instincts confirmed.

Heaney once wrote that poetry emerges “out of the quarrel with ourselves and the quarrel with others is rhetoric.” With “Station Island,” published in a book of the same name in 1984, he transformed a quarrel with others into a quarrel with himself. The poem doesn’t so much renounce earlier work as acknowledge, even validate, critiques of it. Rather than respond directly to debates about the duties of the artist, Heaney subsumed them in his art. He was not a political poet, like Allen Ginsberg or Adrienne Rich; he did not believe that a poem could stop a tank. But he was, at heart, a pluralist. He wrote the poems he wanted to write, and he hoped others would do the same.

“Field Work” solidified Heaney’s reputation in the States. Soon enough, he was spending much of his time abroad. He started teaching at Harvard and held various positions there until 2006. In 1989, he became the Professor of Poetry at Oxford—a notable post for an Irish writer—and delivered lectures on what he called “the redress of poetry,” the ways that poetry can improve the world. He attended literary festivals in London and Moscow, socialized with friends in Poland and St. Lucia, and accepted honorary degrees in Atlanta, Cardiff, Philadelphia, and Urbino, to name only a few locations. From 1980 onward, he was rarely in his writing cottage. He coined a term for his chaotic life style: “duty-dancing.”

The best poems he wrote during these busy years, like the best poems he wrote during his twenties, were about family life. “Clearances,” a sonnet sequence for his mother, who died in 1984, is an exquisite poem, far superior to “The Strand.” The poem oscillates between scenes from the mother’s life—she peels potatoes, prepares tea—and scenes from her deathbed and from an imagined afterlife. In the fifth movement, the speaker

recalls folding bed linens with his mother—“So we’d stretch and fold and end up hand to hand / For a split second as if nothing had happened / For nothing had that had not always happened”—a ritual of collaboration that binds them together. There’s a lightness to much of Heaney’s late poetry. Rather than burrowing underground, he turned his gaze upward, fixating on things that could hardly be seen: not just the afterlife but sunlight, smoke, cloud formations, the wind. Critics have connected this quality to the loss of both parents (Heaney’s father died soon after his mother), but it might also be attributed to the untold hours he spent on airplanes. He took to putting his flight number at the head of his letters, as if the sky were the place he called home.

In 2009, four years before his death, Heaney turned seventy. He joked in letters that the festivities required more planning than the Easter Rising. He was touched by the attention but also unnerved. “My having agreed to the public celebration left me feeling I had sold/lost a private part—the last bit of unpublic smiling man,” he wrote to a friend the following year. At times, it seemed that he’d freed himself from one set of expectations only to be weighed down by others. When he could, he escaped to Wicklow, where he could recapture the freedom of earlier years. There, he once again resembled the speaker of “Exposure,” that “inner émigré,” a man who guards his solitude but who still senses the forces that shape the world. He became, as the poem says, “a wood-kerne,”

Escaped from the massacre,
Taking protective colouring
From bole and bark, feeling
Every wind that blows. ♦

On Television

The State of the Netflix Standup Special

Joe Rogan’s “Burn the Boats,” Matt Rife’s “Lucid,” and Langston Kerman’s “Bad Poetry” showcase vastly different approaches to connecting with the audience.

By Vinson Cunningham

August 28, 2024



It can be hard to tell, these days, what some people mean by “comedy.” By the evidence of the work that comedians are doing, jokes may have dropped out of the definition. Like other performers in our Balkanized, make-your-own-prime-time-entertainment landscape, many comedians act less like artists or court jesters than like notionally humorous leaders of affinity groups or of minor, mostly harmless cults. They tend to say just what their viewers want to hear, but with the rhythm, if not the cathartic finality, of a joke.

This rather new phenomenon has to do with the fact that comedians are springing up from more corners of our media purview than ever. Increasingly, you don't first become aware of them as comedians. One might be a podcaster you like, or make Instagram posts that show up on your "explore" page. Maybe another is a scene-stealing guest star on one of your favorite shows. Only later do you realize that they also happen to have a special on the way. There's no Johnny Carson to introduce us to comics qua comics. They've got to sneak into your field of attention, often by way of some algorithmic back door, in order to grasp your affection.

Take Joe Rogan, for instance. He's come to prominence—and to infamy—by way of his podcast, "The Joe Rogan Experience," a hotbed of dorm-room conversation that sometimes plays as a mildly endearing bull session but just as often takes a turn toward conspiracy thinking and florid misinformation, with a formlessly reactionary bent. Rogan is a longtime standup, but it's hard to find somebody who knew him first for his jokes. He was a bit ahead of the curve in at least one way: he built a career by other means. For decades, he's been a fixture as a commentator of U.F.C.'s mixed-martial-arts matches. Well before he started his podcast, he was the host of an equally enriching program, "Fear Factor." You know, the one where desperate Americans do nasty shit—eat a spider, suck a goat's udder or a leech—for a little bit of cash.

In his new Netflix special, "Burn the Boats," Rogan tells a story about a "Fear Factor" challenge that was so much more deranged than usual (the highest bar!) that the network, NBC, decided not to air it. It involved donkeys and their . . . reproductive emissions. I'm sorry to report that bit of news, but Rogan is not. He luxuriates in the scenario, rhapsodizing about the stuff—buckets of it—not for any revelation but to milk his crowd for gross-out reactions, not laughs but groans. In the special—which aired live in early August, an experiment that Netflix started with Chris Rock's successful post-slap routine, "Selective Outrage"—Rogan wears jeans and an untucked mustard-yellow button-up shirt: business casual for guys who work for themselves. He shouts a lot, his way of creating emphasis when the logical gist of a joke won't do the trick.

He starts the special—shot at the Majestic Theatre in San Antonio and directed by Anthony Giordano—with some local patter about Texas, where

he now lives. He's moved his podcast operation there, and has opened a club, called Comedy Mothership, in Austin. Sounding annoyed, he notes that some media outlets have called it an "anti-woke" comedy club. "You mean . . . a comedy club?" he says, with an exasperated tone. It's a clunky bit of group-reinforcing business, aimed directly at the erogenous zones of his fans. It's not us who share some special ideology, he seems to be saying. We just like to laugh. Everybody used to be like this! It's *them*—our detractors—who are weirdly fixated.

Indeed, a large part of Rogan's ethos is this kind of misdirection about what constitutes an unthinking group. The sort of trans joke he tells is quite old now. Forget about being offensive—whatever happened to trying not to be a hack? This one is about the way that like-minded lemmings come together and create a latticework of ideas:

I understand why people want to be on a team, so you just find a team that aligns with your values, right? Like, what does your team believe? "We believe that health care is a basic human right." I agree! "We think that education should be free." Me, too! "And men can get pregnant." Fuck! Is that a package deal? How did that one slip through?

Rogan is very worried about pregnant men. I guess he thinks they're "funny," but he also, with his shouted incredulity, wants you to think, like he does, that the mere idea of them is a universally applicable symbol of sociopolitical mania. He's got a joke about bathrooms, too. Heard that one? In this case, anyway, the joke is about how a complex understanding of gender and the self is incompatible, somehow, with the tenets of social democracy. If you disagree, you're a dope, an unthinking weenie, and with your scolding you're making life less fun for Rogan and his followers. Sorry, I mean *fans*. This is the function of Rogan's type of work: to reverse reality, to make members of a faction feel like freethinkers. There's a living in it.

Disoriented by my encounter with Rogan, I went looking for other specials, hopeful that they'd revive my enthusiasm for a form of entertainment that I go to for surprises, not for assurances of my own correctness. Matt Rife is a twenty-eight-year-old comic who was delivered to me by the inscrutable whims of Instagram. He started standup comedy at fifteen years old, and worked at small clubs for years. He's known for clips he shares online of his

crowd work—improvising by giving audience members a hard time—and for the increasingly combative stance he’s taken against “snowflakes.”

You wouldn’t know that last bit from watching his latest Netflix special, “Lucid,” directed by Erik Griffin. All we see is Rife’s interaction with an audience of modest size, loosely organized around the theme of dreams. He asks soft questions about people’s aspirations. “What’s your dream that came true?” he inquires moonily. Rife has a dudey energy and looks like a member of a forgotten boy band—he often seems to be flirting, his way of showing that he’s interested in people’s stories. He’s not really trying to crack you up. Either you’re with him already—I wasn’t—or you’ll struggle to figure out the point of his act.

Speaking of dreams, the comedian Langston Kerman—you may have seen him on HBO’s “Insecure,” or on the brilliant satire “South Side,” for which he was a writer as well as a performer—once wanted to be a poet. In his exciting new Netflix special, a saving grace, called “Bad Poetry,” directed by the comedian John Mulaney, he talks about how he lost that aspiration. “I was gonna write silky metaphors,” he says mournfully. But he made the mistake of sharing his fledgling work with some high-school kids he taught. One girl shot his poetry down, and the dream wasn’t just deferred—it was dead.

What’s interesting about Kerman is that he isn’t a persona. All we really learn about him from the special is that he’s married, that he and his wife are both biracial—the “same mix,” he says: white dad, Black mom—and that they recently had a child. You’ll earn his enmity if you don’t coo over the photos he shares. But he’s not out to build a set of tenets or attitudes to which you can hitch your wagon. His style of comedy refreshingly repels that kind of watching. He’s all about jokes that start out absurd and get crazier as they proceed. The bit about mean schoolkids ends up being a way to justify a story about a teacher who fed a puppy to a snapping turtle in front of his class. Kerman once saw Forest Whitaker try to use the bathroom at *IHOP*—the “International House,” he says grandly—without being a customer. No dice. He imagines an uptight race man, perhaps a member of the Nation of Islam, who makes an exception for Kerman’s white dad. The stuff’s just zany. Remember fun?

We think of this kind of comedy—zing, zing, zing, with little breath between—as old-fashioned, something we left back on the Catskills circuit, where it belongs. But, in an age where so many people on our screens have some irritating point to prove, maybe work like Kerman’s is the way back to comedy on its own terms, as an art to be enjoyed in its purest form. Get up there and tell some jokes. I don’t want to join a club. ♦

Poems

- [A Sunset](#)
- [The Dahlias](#)

A Sunset

By Robert Hass

September 02, 2024



The sky tonight on the top of the ridge
Was bruise-colored, a yellow-brown
That is one definition of the word “sordid,”
Which, I think, used to describe
That color, carries neither a moral
Nor an aesthetic judgment. The sky
At dusk was sordid and then brightened
And softened to a glowing peach
Of brief but astonishing beauty,
If you happened to be paying attention.
I could take a hard right here
To the angry adolescent boy in Texas
Who shot and killed nineteen children
With a high-powered weapon my culture
Put into his hands. How to enter
The hive of that mind and undo what

The imagination had done there?
He wore a flak jacket, bought two rifles
At a local store, one of which fires forty rounds
A minute. He had it specifically in mind
To kill children of that age, the lithe-
Bodied young in their end-of-term clothing.
The connective tissue in this veering
Is the idea that it is the experience of beauty,
Not rules, not fear of consequences
Or reverence for authority, that informs
Our moral sense. This may be where
John Ashbery would introduce a non sequitur,
Not from aversion to responsibility
But from a sense he no doubt had
That there was a kind of self-importance
In the introduction of morality to poetry
And that one might, therefore, be better off
Practicing one's art in more or less
The spirit of the poor juggler in the story
Of Christmas who, having no gift to bring
To the infant god, crept into the church
In the night and faced the crèche and juggled.

Play, beauty, the impulse to reproduce it,
The impulse to evoke and bring to rage
And then to stillness the violence
In our natures. One does not,
The argument is, watch "Lear" and then
Go out and kill someone. The next veering,
Undertaken without cynicism but
In a spirit of frankness (leaving aside
Plato's originary arguments), would be
To introduce the collection of records
They found in Adolf Hitler's bunker.
There were more than a hundred
Of them: Wagner, of course, the operas
Especially, but also Mussorgsky,
Rachmaninoff. He must have turned,

To rest his mind, from reports on the success
Of Zyklon B to the concertos of Rachmaninoff.
Monet might be the counter-argument.
I've read that, in his distress at hearing
Descriptions of the violence of the earlier war,
The mud and excrement and rotting bodies
And barbed wire, poison gas, the rows
On rows of young men hurled by their officers
At one another's cannons and machine guns,
He rose one morning, walked down to his studio
By the pond at Giverny, and began
To paint the water lilies and kept painting them
As long as his hand could hold a brush.

It's late. I need to return to the subject
Of that boy's mind and the art we practice.
And the sunset—peach to dull gold which faded
To what felt, for just a second, for less
Than a second, a blessed and arriving silence,
And then a pale green at the skyline,
And then dark. And it was Monday night.

Plato's idea, I think, was that beauty
Was an ordering of elements the world offered
And that the harmonies in that order
Taught the soul the good. A later culture
Would say that boy was taken by a demon
And study ways to exorcise it. The devil
Had a name: it was the love of evil.
And us? Is there a practice of the arts
That would install, inform, would
Deeply root a culture that would form
A mind or heart in which those young bodies
On the classroom floor had become
Unimaginable, from a love of the good
As ordinary as the children's tennis shoes?
Probably not. Do we need to be able
To touch that mind? At that age?

It could have come from being laughed at.
Once. Or perhaps there was a sexual thrill
In putting on the costume, carrying
The rifle, saying I Am Doom as he strode
Across the parking lot. Is there a way
To undo the stew of computer games
And horror films and superhero fantasies
That gave a language to the moral injury
He wanted to inflict? Or the culture
Of resentment and fear that put the weapon
In his hands? Those people run governments.
Here's another hard right turn. Think
Of how Walt Whitman loved this country,
Loved the President who died. Imagined
Himself as a hand brushing a fly from the brow
Of a sleeping child. In the dark
I thought of a radiant ordinariness
That burned, that burned and burned.

Poems

The Dahlias

By Didi Jackson

September 02, 2024



By now the fields are overgrown,
most ironweed and parsnip have turned black,
even the closed cabinet doors of milkweed pods
have burst open, spilling their shucked silk
into the day. I wear a coat
and remember August, those nights
filled with moths that like fireworks
put on a show at our window,
circled the lights like monks in meditation.
At every new cycle, I miss the one
now gone. I am never happy and have
no excuse not to love the dying
season, the growing season, the season of sleep.
That is to say, to love it while it is
happening. But what of the fall dahlias

that like bodiced planets float above
their roots and leaves? Surely they contain all
the colors of our universe. They must love
the cooler days, the beginning
of a time for rest, less forced display.
Take it easy I will say. But the wind
has something else in mind.

They might perform a roundelay
or the danse macabre. In time
we all will be bones, our eyeholes hallowed
and our skeletons clattering like chimes.

Puzzles & Games

- [The Crossword: Tuesday, August 27, 2024](#)

Crossword

The Crossword: Tuesday, August 27, 2024

A moderately challenging puzzle.

By Wynna Liu

August 27, 2024



The Mail

- [Letters from Our Readers](#)

The Mail

Letters from Our Readers

Readers respond to Sloane Crosley's essay about the loss of her cat, Clare Malone's Profile of Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., Parul Sehgal's review of Sarah Manguso's "Liars," and Jackson Arn's piece about Surrealism.

September 02, 2024

Caring for Cats

Still reeling from the recent loss of two beloved cats, I wondered if I had the stomach to read Sloane Crosley's piece about the death of her own cat ("[The Tail End](#)," August 12th). To my relief, I was buoyed by her words, which radiated a love instantly recognizable to other ailurophiles. Both of my twenty-year-old companions left swiftly, with help from magnificent vets, while I rocked them in my arms and felt the sickening lurch of our power imbalance. Since then, I have gained some comfort from the knowledge that, from the moment they entered my home, my cats knew adoration, care, and delicious snacks. In their last hours, they had no notion of regret, for the past or for a stolen future. We just curled up, like normal, until the purring stopped. Would that we were all afforded an end with such grace. Condolences to Crosley, and thank you for expressing so well the nuanced grief that accompanies the loss of an animal.

*Anna Caswell
Austin, Texas*

Nothing but the Truth

I was surprised to see, in Clare Malone's Profile of Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., that the magazine published without challenge a quotation from a former managing editor of *Rolling Stone* which stated that Kennedy's writing was full of factual errors "because he's not a journalist. He's a lawyer. He's more about making arguments than about trying to communicate the truth" ("[The Inheritor](#)," August 12th). Contrary to popular opinion, lawyers have a

professional obligation not to lie or to misrepresent. That Kennedy wrote, and that *Rolling Stone* published, an article “riddled with errors,” which “falsely reported” and “misrepresented” a number of facts and which “required a number of major corrections,” cannot and should not be attributed to his status as a lawyer.

*Margaret Raymond
Warren P. Knowles Chair and Professor of Law
University of Wisconsin Law School
Madison, Wis.*

Writing About Infidelity

As the journalist who runs chumplady.com, the infidelity-support blog that Parul Sehgal derides in her review of Sarah Manguso’s book “Liars,” I was surprised to find myself characterized in *The New Yorker* as some sort of snarky Svengali who warped Manguso’s views on infidelity ([Books](#), August 12th). I can tell you with authority that scores of women will see themselves in the toxically lopsided marriage described in Manguso’s novel and will applaud her truthtelling. But I was even more surprised that Sehgal would attack an author’s former online support group. Does she always probe the acknowledgments to make sense of her authors? I don’t fault Sehgal for being tone-deaf about the pain of betrayal—I would never wish that kind of understanding on her. But I do fault her apparent lack of empathy and curiosity.

*Tracy Schorn
Waterford, Va.*

Art in Print

It’s interesting that the print version of Jackson Arn’s thoughtful description of the Surrealists should unintentionally present a Surrealist touch (“[The Art World](#),” August 12th). The much discussed self-portrait by Leonora Carrington is so severely cropped that it no longer includes a section of the painting which Arn focusses on. Unfamiliar with the work, I looked in vain for the details described. I cleaned my glasses. Luckily, I decided to Google

the painting. Imagine my surprise. In full, Carrington's work is much richer. And Arn's point was finally revealed.

*Bob Alley
Barrington, R.I.*

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



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