

PRICE \$8.99

THE

OCT. 9, 2023

THE NEW YORKER



- Reporting
- The Critics
- The Talk of the Town
- Shouts & Murmurs
- Fiction
- Puzzles & Games Dept.
- Poems
- Goings On About Town
- Mail

Reporting

- [Kwame Onwuachi's Cuisine of the Self](#)
- [Among the Cabin Fanatics of Mississippi's Giant Houseparty](#)
- [The Next Targets for the Group That Overturned Roe](#)
- [They Studied Dishonesty. Was Their Work a Lie?](#)

[Profiles](#)

Kwame Onwuachi's Cuisine of the Self

How the chef at Tatiana brought Afro-Caribbean cooking—and his life story—to the center of New York City's fine-dining scene.

By [Hannah Goldfield](#)



Onwuachi (right) in the kitchen at Tatiana, his first restaurant in New York. Photographs by Evan Angelastro for *The New Yorker*

It was only 10:30 A.M. on a Tuesday in July, but the staff at Tatiana, the restaurant in Lincoln Center's David Geffen Hall, seemed exhausted. "Kerry Washington was in last night," a publicist told me. Someone else mentioned that there had been a private event on Sunday—the one day of the week when the restaurant is usually closed. The last guests had trickled out at 4 A.M. on Monday, and the managers hadn't left until six. The party was for Beyoncé, who had just played a sold-out show at MetLife Stadium, and Jay-Z. ("I buried the lede," the publicist said.)

Kwame Onwuachi, Tatiana's chef and proprietor, wouldn't normally be at the restaurant so early, but he was there to record a television segment for WNBC—his second of the day, after the "Today" show, at half past eight.

“You’ve had a busy morning!” the camera operator said. “It’s not really morning if you don’t sleep,” Onwuachi replied.

For the segment, Onwuachi and a reporter named Lauren Scala were going to sample dishes that he’d be cooking for an event at the U.S. Open: pepper steak, hamachi escovitch, black-bean hummus topped with berbere lamb. A bottle of spring water was produced. Someone asked if there shouldn’t be wine, too. “Are you gonna turn this water into wine?” Scala quipped. Onwuachi laughed and said, “It is my Jesus year, though! Thirty-three.”

“Do I remember when I was thirty-three?” Scala wondered aloud.



“My goodness, Keith! You look like you’ve seen a goat.”
Cartoon by Tom Chitty

“It must have been a good year if you don’t remember it,” Onwuachi said.

For Onwuachi, it’s been a very good year indeed. Last November, he opened Tatiana, his first restaurant in New York City, his home town. Tatiana is named for Onwuachi’s older sister, who helped raise him (an enormous portrait of her with her two daughters hangs in the private dining room), and its menu is inspired by his personal history. He grew up steeped in the cuisines of his elders—his roots are in Creole Louisiana, Nigeria, and the Caribbean—as well as in food from the city’s corner stores, street carts, and Chinese restaurants.

At Tatiana, he fills dumplings with crab and egusi, a traditional Nigerian soup made with pungent ground melon seeds. He deep-fries pods of okra until their ridges blister and split—slightly puffed, crisp, and salted, they’re finished with honey and mustard powder, and served with a Trinidadian-style pepper sauce. For a dessert called Bodega Special, he makes a “cosmic brownie” (an homage to a Little Debbie product), which is dotted with rainbow-hued chocolate chips and paired with ice cream both flavored and shaped to look like a powdered doughnut.

The first time I ate at the restaurant, shortly after it opened, Onwuachi made the rounds, checking in with every table. One of my dinner companions told him that her name was Tatiana, and he insisted that she stand up for a long embrace. He was dressed in street clothes, including a do-rag. If this made it seem as if he wasn’t actually working in the kitchen, the truth is that he doesn’t usually wear chef’s whites. Onwuachi, who is small and a bit boyish (“Booyakasha!,” he hollered, as he bounded down the steps to the basement prep kitchen), favors baseball caps and vividly patterned button-downs. He wears thick-framed glasses, which give him a slightly nerdy, erudite air, and he’s heavily tattooed. For a while, he had the word “patience” inked on his right forearm, but he had it removed and replaced with an elaborate depiction of the ingredients for gumbo. A jumble of text on his left arm includes the words “New York City Kid,” in script; a large “X,” as in Malcolm; and the name of his ten-year-old niece, Madisyn, in her own handwriting.

His look is fitting for a restaurant that feels more like a night club than like a stuffy house of fine dining. The space has floor-to-ceiling windows that are hung with curtains of slinky gold chains. Music—hip-hop and R. & B., much of it from the late nineties and early two-thousands—is played at a volume that can make conversation challenging, or at least athletic. In the first few weeks after Tatiana opened, when the staff was still getting its footing and tables weren’t turning over fast enough to keep up with reservations, Onwuachi poured free tequila shots for waiting guests.

“You’ll see some people walk in, and you see the surprise on their face,” Mouhamadou Diop, one of the restaurant’s managers, said. He recounted an evening when an older white woman had wandered in after a Mostly Mozart

concert. She asked what music was playing—it was Cardi B. “She said, ‘I like this song,’ ” Diop told me. “And I said, ‘Let’s dance, then.’ ”

Last March, Pete Wells, the *Times* restaurant critic, awarded Tatiana three stars, extraordinary for a rookie restaurant. Then came an even bigger shock: in April, when Wells published a list of the hundred best restaurants in New York, Tatiana held the No. 1 spot, ahead of Atomix, Le Bernardin, Via Carota, and other redoubtables. “We needed Tatiana. We needed a kitchen that puts Caribbean and African and Black American cooking, too often kept in the city’s margins, right at center stage,” he wrote. “And after quarantines and masks and distancing and sundry social traumas, we needed a party.”



“I think we should break up.”
Cartoon by Sofia Warren

When I asked Onwuachi if he was surprised to have topped the list, he smirked. He knew the restaurant was a hit; it had been packed since pretty much the week it opened. But, he said, when a friend had sent him the link to the list on the day it was published, with a text that said, “Boom,” he’d instinctively started scrolling to the bottom: “When I got to one hundred, I thought, Oh, I must have skipped it. And then I got back up to ten, and I was, like, ‘No fucking way. No fucking way. No fucking way!’ ”

Onwuachi had learned to temper his expectations when it came to establishment recognition. He’d attended the prestigious Culinary Institute

of America, in Hyde Park, New York, and worked as a kitchen stage, or intern, at Per Se. His first job out of school was at Eleven Madison Park. But he became disillusioned by the racism he experienced in fine-dining kitchens. At Eleven Madison Park, he and the few other Black cooks on staff were overlooked and even stymied by their white supervisor, he wrote in his 2019 memoir, “Notes from a Young Black Chef,” which he co-authored with the food writer Joshua David Stein. One day, Onwuachi raised concerns about alienating Black patrons. His boss laughed and said, “No Black people eat here anyway.” Onwuachi left the job not long afterward.

From there, his career proceeded in fits and starts. In 2015, when he was twenty-five, he competed on “Top Chef,” placing sixth. (His downfall was serving store-bought frozen waffles with his fried chicken.) The following year, he opened his first restaurant, the Shaw Bijou, in Washington, D.C. In some ways, it was a prototype for Tatiana, with an autobiographical tasting menu and an opulent dining room. It closed after just two and a half months, thwarted by flighty investors and harsh judgment from the press. The food critic for the *Washington Post*, Tom Sietsema, wrote that he had left feeling unimpressed and underfed. His review ended, “Pizza, anyone?”

It seemed that Onwuachi had finally found his footing with Kith/Kin, a restaurant in D.C.’s InterContinental Hotel, which earned him the James Beard Foundation’s Rising Star Chef of the Year award in 2019. (Previous honorees included Grant Achatz and David Chang.) But Onwuachi walked away from the restaurant in 2020, in the midst of the pandemic, after the hotel refused his request for a share of ownership. He relocated to Los Angeles, unsure if he’d ever return to the kitchen, thinking he might become an actor instead. In L.A., he took classes, went to auditions, and eventually landed a small part in “Sugar,” a movie about social-media influencers who become drug smugglers.

Onwuachi got a call from Lincoln Center in early 2022. In recent years, the institution had declared its commitment to expanding its programming, including food, beyond predictable Eurocentric fare. It was looking for someone to helm a new restaurant in the complex. Leah Johnson, a Lincoln Center executive, whose paternal grandparents were from Barbados, was delighted by the Caribbean elements of the dinner that Onwuachi prepared for the search committee, but she was also struck by his rainbow-cookie

panna cotta, which, she told me, “tasted exactly like the cookies I grew up eating at Veniero’s”—the hundred-and-thirty-year-old Italian bakery on East Eleventh Street. The committee offered Onwuachi the space, and accepted his terms: he would be not a chef for hire but, instead, an equity partner in the business.

Onwuachi was born on Long Island and raised in the Bronx. His parents, Jewel Robinson and Patrick Onwuachi, split up when he was three years old. Robinson, the daughter of a chef, was an avid home cook, and, after losing her job as an accountant, she opened a catering business, serving the Creole staples of her childhood. Five-year-old Kwame and ten-year-old Tatiana were often enlisted to help in the kitchen. In his memoir, Onwuachi recalled that his mother struggled with money, but that the business, whose clients came to include Queen Latifah and the hip-hop trio Naughty by Nature, satisfied her appetite for “glamorous adventure.” He wrote, “She’d bring a change of clothes to a gala she was catering and, after her shift was done, slip in as a guest.”

Onwuachi lived with Robinson in a cramped apartment, and saw his father mostly on weekends. Patrick, who worked as a construction project manager, took his son to the batting cages and on vacations, but he could be abusive. (“My job as his dad was to prepare him for the world,” Patrick said.) Around the age of ten, Onwuachi began to act out. “I was a *bad* kid,” he told me. Robinson sent him to Nigeria to stay with his grandfather P. Chike Onwuachi, an Igbo chief and a luminary of the Pan-African movement who taught for many years at Howard University, so that he might “learn respect.”



Onwuachi finishes a dish of curried snow crab with a drizzle of Calabrian chili oil.

What Robinson had billed as a single summer stretched to two years, during which Onwuachi lived without municipal electricity or water, and learned to raise livestock and grow vegetables. It's an experience that he references frequently, not only because it acquainted him so thoroughly with his heritage but also because it taught him at an early age how to adapt. "I was speaking pidgin within a couple months," he recalled. But when he returned to the Bronx his rebellious streak flared up again. He was kicked out of Catholic school for antagonizing teachers and classmates, and he joined a gang at the Webster Houses, where his best friend lived. He worked at McDonald's, for \$7.25 an hour, until he realized that he could make more money selling weed, an enterprise he continued in college, at the University of Bridgeport.

There, Onwuachi's hustle caught up with him: before his first year was through, he was expelled for failing a drug test. He went to live with his mother, who had moved to Louisiana, and embarked on a "sad-ass parade" of menial jobs: as a prep cook for Robinson, who was an executive chef at a catering company; as a dishwasher; and as a server at a barbecue restaurant. Things began to look up when he got a gig cooking on a cleanup ship for the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. Onwuachi seemed to have little in common with the ship's mostly white "back-country Louisiana boys"—until he

started to make the food that they had all grown up eating. Before long, he was put in charge of the kitchen.

In 2011, he enrolled at the C.I.A., where he dutifully learned the foundations of classical French cooking. He scraped together tuition money by running a catering company in the city, making burritos at a local Mexican restaurant, and selling ramen, boba tea, and pork buns behind the student rec center. (Not technically allowed, but the administration looked the other way.) The C.I.A. offered no classes on Afro-Caribbean cuisine, but for a work-study program—a sort of free-choice elective that tasked him with preparing lunch for fellow-students—he made dishes from various countries in Africa, fermenting his own Ethiopian injera and blending his own spices.

Onwuachi's formal training inspired him to exalt Afro-Caribbean ingredients and techniques, rather than to simply plug Afro-Caribbean flavors into European formulas. The building blocks of his cooking, as laid out in his cookbook "My America," include browning—a caramel made with canola oil and sugar, used in the Caribbean as a coloring agent and a sweetener—and Southern-style "house spice," a customizable mixture that goes in everything from eggs to the flour for fried chicken. He treats these with the same uncompromising rigor that Paul Bocuse, patron saint of the C.I.A., might apply to mirepoix and hollandaise.

When I visited Tatiana, Onwuachi returned again and again to the basement prep kitchen to inspect the minutest of activities, giving cooks exacting instructions on how thick to cut the short ribs for his pastrami suya, a recipe that combines Jewish deli meat and Nigerian barbecue. My favorite dish on the menu was a big bowl of Jamaican-style braised oxtail, served with a smaller bowl of rice and peas. The carrots on top of the rich, sticky segments of bone-in meat were Thumbelina, an adorable heirloom variety, and they were expertly "turned"—kitchen-speak for peeled and cut. The dish also incorporated perfect orbs of firm but tender chayote squash, lily-pad-like nasturtium leaves, and carefully sliced chives. It was beautiful, but it still managed to look, and, more important, to taste, like something you'd eat at home, or at a family restaurant in the Bronx.

Onwuachi's work has been lauded for its specificity, for its fidelity to the places he comes from. In some ways, his success has uprooted him. He has

the blinkered air of someone who is overscheduled; in the time I spent with him, he was never quite able to remember what he'd done the day before, and was constantly checking the calendar on his phone. He travels frequently, keeping places in midtown Manhattan and West Hollywood. But he's long had a nuanced understanding of what gatekeepers in the food world like about his story. Of his admissions interview at the C.I.A., he wrote, "I cast myself partly as a lost wretch who had been saved (glossing over the exact nature of my transgressions at Bridgeport), partly as a one-man show of the black diasporic experience, and totally as a hustler."

Still, he bristles at being stereotyped. Before "Top Chef," Onwuachi worked briefly for Dinner Lab, a startup that operated a members-only supper club in cities across the U.S. When the founder, who was white, asked him to cook Senegalese food for a fund-raiser, Onwuachi politely declined. (He had no particular connection to Senegal.) In their initial pitch, the investors behind the Shaw Bijou suggested that he offer "upscale riffs" on Southern cooking. Again, he declined, for fear of "becoming an actor in the long and ugly play of degrading black culture for the benefit of white people," he wrote.



On a typical night at the restaurant, Onwuachi makes rounds in the dining room, greeting guests.

His project, instead, is to develop a varied, idiosyncratic Black culinary idiom—and to bring it into the mainstream. Onwuachi seems to revel in the

contradictions of his position—blaring “music with the curse words” at the home of the New York Philharmonic—but he’s savvy about operating within the system. When I asked if he ever wanted to take a more radical approach, he was unequivocal. “I’m a businessman,” he said. “I’m an artist, sure, but I employ fifty people. I’m playing my fucking music that I wanna play, we’re putting oxtails on the menu, I’m putting a Black woman’s name on the side of Lincoln Center. I feel like I’m being as radical as I want to be.”

In late August, Onwuachi flew to D.C., and then drove to a small town called Middleburg, at the foot of the Blue Ridge Mountains in Virginia’s hunt country, an area that has long drawn élite weekenders from Washington. He was there for the third annual Family Reunion, a food festival that he started with Sheila Johnson, a co-founder of Black Entertainment Television and the first Black American woman to become a billionaire. In the late nineties, Johnson bought a horse farm in Middleburg. (Her young daughter was an aspiring equestrian.) One day, she noticed that a gun shop in the village center had a Confederate flag hanging in the window, so she bought the building that housed it. Later, she bought hundreds of acres of land nearby and placed most of it under conservation. In 2013, she opened a luxury resort, called the Salamander, on a small remaining parcel.

Johnson and Onwuachi met in 2019, at a conference in the Bahamas. “I was so intrigued by him,” Johnson said. “He was kind of introverted, so I got him out on the dance floor. He couldn’t put two feet together. I said, ‘I’m gonna teach you how to dance.’” After Onwuachi left Kith/Kin, Johnson proposed that they work together. He conceived of the Family Reunion, a four-day gathering of Black chefs and food-industry professionals, plus enthusiasts who wanted to mingle with them, at the Salamander. The partnership has proved fruitful: since its inception, the Family Reunion has more than tripled in size, and next year Onwuachi and Johnson will open a restaurant together in the former Mandarin Oriental hotel in D.C., which Johnson recently added to her portfolio.

This year’s Family Reunion was a *Who’s Who* of the Black American culinary world. The legendary pitmasters Bryan Furman and Rodney Scott, who had driven their rigs from Georgia and South Carolina, respectively, gave master classes on barbecue. A group of Caribbean American chefs from all over the U.S. retrieved crackly-skinned whole pigs and

spatchcocked chickens from a ditch that had been dug into the Salamander's lawn in order to illustrate the history of jerk, which originated, in Jamaica, with Indigenous people and Maroons—Africans who had escaped slavery—stealthily roasting wild game in pits. Virginia Ali, the eighty-nine-year-old co-founder of Ben's Chili Bowl, a D.C. restaurant famous for feeding civil-rights activists during the 1968 riots, provided half-smoke sausages and hot dogs for a cookout-themed buffet.

"You look wonderful," Ali told Onwuachi on the first day of the festival, straining to be heard over a band rehearsing at top volume. "Hard work agrees with you."

"It does, right?" he said. "I think I'm addicted to it."



The menu at Tatiana draws inspiration from Nigerian, Caribbean, and Creole cuisine, as well as from New York's street carts and corner stores.

Onwuachi spent the weekend in a state of perpetual motion. He roamed the Salamander's grounds, sometimes in a golf cart, with a demeanor that was part summer-camp director, part pastor, part door-to-door salesman. He greeted guests with a cheerful, if slightly canned, "Welcome home!" and doled out hugs and collegial shoulder squeezes. In many ways, the event was an advertisement for him: its full title—"Kwame Onwuachi Presents the Family Reunion"—was even printed on the tags of the T-shirts and hoodies

for sale at the merch table, which was staffed by his mother, his sister, a former babysitter, and two childhood friends.

Much of the time, he was trailed by a documentary film crew from Bronxville, a production company that he co-founded with the filmmaker Randy McKinnon, who adapted “Notes from a Young Black Chef” into a screenplay. (It was acquired by A24.) Hovering close behind, carrying a tote bag full of bottled water, was a strikingly tall young man with his hair in twists, whose name was Destined One Leverette. The Family Reunion arranges room and board for volunteers, and Leverette insisted that he had applied for a position—yet the organizers had no record of it. He’d come, on his own dime, from Birmingham, Alabama, where he worked in the kitchen of a chain restaurant called Pappadeaux Seafood Kitchen. He was nineteen. Onwuachi said that he’d taken pity on Leverette: “He’s, like, ‘I’m ready to work.’ I’m, like, ‘Where’s your chef coat?’ He’s, like, ‘I don’t have it.’ I was, like, ‘Well, then, you’re going to just do whatever is needed.’ ”

Onwuachi had learned at the first Family Reunion that he couldn’t host the event and cook for it at the same time. (His eyes widened when I asked if he’d be doing both.) The task of schmoozing with guests suited him, but he kept a close eye on the food and the service. He became noticeably irked when he saw a snaking, slow-moving queue for Scott and Furman’s barbecue. In an instant, he switched modes, suddenly chillier and more mercenary as he summoned an assembly line for pre-portioning plates. Servers tensed and hustled as Onwuachi shouted directions and called for extra hands. By the start of the evening’s late-night R. & B. karaoke party (dress code: all white), he was once again the gregarious m.c., wearing silk pajamas and revving up the crowd.

The festival’s corporate underwriters included Coca-Cola, United Airlines, and Wells Fargo, the last of which hosted a talk on “elevating Black wealth.” But what might have felt like a cynical commercial exercise was infused with a sense of purpose and an unmanufactured joy. During a surprise performance by the R. & B. singer Joe, Onwuachi wrapped his arms around Johnson as they swayed to the music. At lunch on the final day, Onwuachi invited Leverette onstage and introduced him to the crowd as “a young man who showed up on the doorstep of the Family Reunion.” Afterward, Leverette was rushed by well-wishers offering jobs and, in one case, cash: a

generous stranger wired him five hundred dollars. (Leverette later admitted that he'd fibbed about applying to volunteer at the festival; he had, in fact, just shown up.)

That evening, after the première of a Lexus commercial that featured Onwuachi driving around Los Angeles, he and Johnson presented a lifetime-achievement award to Jessica B. Harris, the renowned culinary historian. In her acceptance speech, Harris called Onwuachi "the linchpin, a pivot point"—a connector of people and traditions. A few weeks later, when I spoke to Harris by phone, she noted the "dynastic" way that Onwuachi came into the food world, through his mother's career. "His food embodies his stories, and his stories are really personal," she said. "There are a lot of places that tell stories that are researched."

Onwuachi's staff at Tatiana see themselves reflected in his food. The majority of the restaurant's cooks and servers are people of color. "It's like the Family Reunion—Black people just come," he told me, laughing. The back-of-house environment is one of camaraderie and friendly competition. As I watched line cooks set up their stations, an intern pulled something out of a cabinet. "Why is there a bag of . . . Lay's?", she asked, holding up an industrial-sized bag of potato chips and looking genuinely befuddled. "Oh, that was for Jay-Z, but he didn't eat them," Onwuachi explained. "We'll have them after service."

The chips had been intended for osetra caviar, two tins of which had also gone uneaten. Onwuachi doesn't usually offer specials at Tatiana, but that morning he'd started to think about how he could sell what was left. For a jerk-cod entrée, the pastry team was making corn bread; maybe he'd serve squares of it topped with the caviar and crème fraîche. By the time the front-of-house staff arrived, the idea had evolved. "Corn-bread pudding," he announced. "With a quenelle of caviar. That's more interesting to me."

He bloomed curry powder in butter in a pot on the stove, then crumbled in the corn bread and added heavy cream and oat milk. When it had cooked down into a smooth, thick paste, he tasted it. "Fucking great!" he declared. "That's fun." Instead of crème fraîche, he decided to top it with the white sauce that he makes for his halal-cart-inspired shawarma chicken. In the finished dish, the gentle heat of the curry and the sweetness of the warm

pudding were offset by the cool, tangy white sauce and a salty plink of caviar at the end of each bite.

“No! Chef, no way!” Chase Ford, one of the line cooks, said as he tried the pudding. “I got chills.” It tasted, he said, exactly like a cornmeal porridge that his mother, who is Jamaican, had made when he was a kid. He remembered eating it sitting in her lap. ♦

An earlier version of this article misidentified an influential chef at the Culinary Institute of America.

[U.S. Journal](#)

Among the Cabin Fanatics of Mississippi's Giant Houseparty

For more than a hundred years, the Neshoba County Fair has drawn revellers from all over the country. Why do they keep coming back?

By [Paige Williams](#)



"In a divorce, people fight harder over the cabin than the children," Sid Salter, a Neshoba native, said. Photographs by Carolyn Drake / Magnum for The New Yorker

[Listen to this article.](#)

The Neshoba County Fair calls itself Mississippi's Giant Houseparty, because every year the same families return, antlike, to five hundred and ninety-seven individually owned, festively painted cabins there. For a week at the end of July, even many who live nearby move to the fairgrounds, creating an instant community of twenty thousand people, three times larger than the population of the county seat, Philadelphia. The fair, founded in the late eighteen-hundreds in the remote east-central part of the state, has survived two World Wars, the Great Depression, and the coronavirus pandemic because the cabin owners could not bear to give it up. After spraying for bugs, touching up the paint, hanging porch swings, washing

linens, changing light bulbs, making beds, and stocking refrigerators (some cabins have four), the families hold the equivalent of Thanksgiving—seven times. There are food hangovers, and hangover hangovers, and children everywhere, only nobody goes home.

A lightly occupied fair cabin sleeps twenty-six; some sleep sixty. Upper floors resemble bunkhouses: bed after bed after bed. The fair is not the place for introverts, neat freaks, sensitives, or anyone who cannot tolerate unrelenting, bone-deep heat. Central air-conditioning is heresy, as is television. Did the fair's founders watch "American Ninja Warrior"? They did not. Indoor plumbing and electricity are acceptable—fans and window units blow wide open. This year, during the hottest month in human history, I stepped into a frigid, empty-looking bedroom and was startled when a teen-ager rose from an upper bunk in a ghillie suit of blankets.

Cabin dwellers, like Burning Man fanatics, plan their lives around the fair. Cabin 185 is called Mump's Place because its late matriarch reportedly "thought about the fair for fifty weeks out of the year," then kept detailed notes on what everybody ate and where they slept. Casseroles are cooked and frozen weeks in advance. The Minshews, of Cabin 1, are so eager for caramel cake, a family fair specialty, that they start eating it before they've finished unloading their cars. Diehards have not missed a fair since Franklin D. Roosevelt was President. Carrie Stokes Atkinson, of Cabin 351, was six weeks old when she attended her first fair, in 1988; she was seventeen when she was crowned Miss Neshoba County at the fair; she was thirty-four when, last year, her water broke at the fair, on the kitchen floor. She pointed out the exact spot to me while a meal was in progress, as one always seems to be. Someone said, "People have gotten married at the fair," and someone else said, "Marriages have ended out here, too."

The fair started as a one-day picnic in 1889, when some families met to compare and share their livestock, field crops, garden vegetables, and crafts. As the event grew, fairgoers debated advances in farming and delivered discourses: "How I Beat the Boll Weevil." They competed in home-economics contests—best axe handle, best sponge cake, best "homespun dress made during the Great Civil War"—for prize overalls or ten dollars in gold. Exhibits showcased fertilizer and a mechanical cotton chopper. "All

these things that promote agriculture and horticulture help build up the country,” the Neshoba *Democrat* noted.

The first cabins were raw-plank shanties, often made with repurposed materials. Sixty-five of them ultimately faced and surrounded a pavilion, which became known as Founders Square. The governor spoke there in 1896, and every governor is said to have spoken there since. In 1898, the square was seeded with oaks, whose roots spread and surfaced, like keloid scars.

Most cabins are narrow and deep, set, at most, several feet apart. The founders added second floors as their families grew, then built more and taller cabins around the square. The cabins radiated out, forming “streets” and “neighborhoods”: Happy Hollow, Sunset Strip. Seventy-four cabins front the red clay horse-racing track; when the starting bugle sounds, quarter and dollar bettors crowd the balconies and porches.

In keeping with the founders, many cabin owners pride themselves on building and decorating with salvaged or scavenged materials. A tire store became a cabin; the tin roof of a teardown became a kitchen ceiling. Newer cabins are frequently built with concrete blocks and aluminum siding, substances less susceptible to fire and rot. Owners distinguish themselves through color—there are cabins painted orange, turquoise, fuchsia, canary yellow with pink polka dots—and no two are alike. Robert Craycroft, a former architecture professor at Mississippi State University, has called the mishmash “Fairhouse vernacular.” The cabins are festooned with string lights and paper lanterns; in the blue hour, when the moon rises and the crickets start up, they twinkle like an extension of the midway. At Cabin 203, white bulbs spell out “*BIG DADDY*,” Broadway style. Across the track, there’s “*POPS*.”

The fair starts on a Friday and ends the next Friday at midnight. Ten days later, the electricity and water are cut. For the fifty-one-week off-season, the fairgrounds “resemble nothing so much as an abandoned Colorado mining town,” Craycroft wrote. “A civilized place absent its civilization.”

Every cabin is required to have a porch. Families loll there, play music there, eat there, entertain there, gossip there, lose at cards there, sleep there. For

some, the porch *is* the fair. In 1986, Ellen Johnson Spendrup, who attended her first fair in 1900, at age two, said that she liked “sitting on my porch with my feet up, in my rocking chair, watching the idiots pass.”

On Fair Saturday, Don DeWeese was on his porch at Cabin 32, a powder-blue two-story with white trim and patriotic bunting. He comes from a prosperous old Neshoba County family and now lives in Memphis. Relatives had travelled from as far away as Texas and North Carolina—they spilled off the porch and into Founders Square. Decades ago, Stanley Dearman, a former editor of the *Democrat*, wrote that fair people “take seriously” the art of “eating and talking.” DeWeese, who is seventy-eight, got started on the latter, volunteering that he has “the largest one-owner, one-location doughnut shop in the United States,” and that his forebears “invented plywood out of pine”; he’s had homes in Colorado and the Caymans; he stays at the Baccarat when in New York; one of his “closest friends” is Wynonna Judd, and his “closest friend,” the professional wrestler Jerry Lawler, was, that very day, receiving a lifetime-achievement award from the Tennessee Sports Hall of Fame. DeWeese was missing the ceremony to be at the fair.



“We’re not laughing at you, sweetie. We’re laughing at something you don’t understand.”
Cartoon by Maddie Dai

As he spoke, DeWeese was hailing people, and people were hailing him. The fair is “a reunion—of your life,” he explained. “I see all my old high-school

classmates. I see my old girlfriends. I already hugged one today. I see people I went to kindergarten through college with.” When he found out that I was born and raised two hours north—Oxford; Tupelo—he said, “Girl, I *married* Miss Tupelo! And her sister was Miss Mississippi!” He hollered over a shoulder, “Rita! Where’s Rita?”

DeWeese wanted to show me his cabin. On the way inside, he pointed out an original watercolor by the Mississippi artist Wyatt Waters. It hangs above all the people sitting on his porch at the fair—and depicts a bunch of people sitting on a porch at the fair. Downstairs consisted largely of an open kitchen and an eating area, with a picnic table and a concrete floor. After introducing me to a granddaughter from Asheville who performs “Hamilton” numbers “amazin’” and to a man who had competed in that morning’s Heart o’ Dixie triathlon, he climbed steep, narrow stairs and pushed open a battered plywood door, revealing a room of wall-to-wall beds.

Daylight knifed through gaps in the plank walls. Suitcases and a monogrammed tote lay open on the floor. Someone said, “Sh-h-h!” Several adults and children were in there, trying to nap before the evening’s events. The fair’s daytime population swells at night, when a live band plays the grandstand, at the racetrack. The fair hosts entertainers who are said to be on their way up, or down. Loretta Lynn, George Strait, Lester Flatt, Patsy Cline, Tammy Wynette, Ronnie Milsap, Lee Ann Womack, Molly Hatchet, the Charlie Daniels Band, and Trace Adkins all performed at the fair. Jerry Lee Lewis appeared there in 1957, just before releasing “Great Balls of Fire.” June Carter performed before she married Johnny Cash. Dolly Parton never played the fair, but her sister Stella did. The fair can’t afford Morgan Wallen, though it was able to book one of his collaborators, the singer-songwriter Niko Moon.

DeWeese declared Fair Saturday “the No. 1 night of the year, to a teen-ager in central Mississippi.” Girls planned their outfits for months: “I expect ‘em to come in here in short shorts and cowboy boots, and titties showin’.” The previous night, a visitor from Los Angeles had stumbled, drunk, into a cabin at the north end of the racetrack and commented on all the “pretty bitches” he had seen. One of the men in residence informed him, “Down here, we refer to them as ‘ladies.’ ”

Cabin 220, the color of a ripe banana, sits just beyond Founders Square, at the entrance to Happy Hollow, the fair's first "suburb," a short stretch of cabins separated by a sawdust-covered footpath. When I came across it, the owners, William and Barbie Bassett, and their daughter, Gracie, were sitting, where else, on the porch. Barbie, a former television meteorologist, had written "92" on a whiteboard—the daily Faircast.

Not long ago, cabins were known to sell for as little as a few thousand dollars. "This is a camp house, not a condo," William said. Lately, some families have been spending more than it would cost to buy an actual Neshoba County home. Fairgoers love gossiping about it. The Bassetts had heard that a two-story cabin recently sold for a hundred and eighty-nine thousand dollars; they told me that the new owners gutted it and painted it Pepto Bismol pink with green racing stripes. Another went for three hundred and ninety thousand dollars; the buyers planned to raze it and rebuild, higher. "She's an interior designer, and her husband's in real estate," Barbie said. "It's gonna be the Taj Mahal of the fair."



Fair Saturday is "the No. 1 night of the year, to a teen-ager in central Mississippi," a longtime fairgoer said.

On Founders Square, everyone was talking about a cabin that had recently sold for around the same amount, to a family with no apparent connection to the fair or to Neshoba County. Neighbors disdained the newcomers'

“massive” television; worse, they kept their door closed. “Not to have your cabin open is kind of tacky,” one neighbor told me.

Cabin people, traditionally, are hospitality extremists. At the fair, I was offered water, lemonade, iced tea, beer, Gatorade, a souvenir apron, boiled shrimp, homemade ice cream, a pork chop, a taco, a bed, a toilet, the remains of a funnel cake, a book about doughnuts, an introduction to “some really obnoxious cousins,” two ibuprofens, two more ibuprofens, help “fixing” a traffic ticket (offer declined), and numerous iterations of chicken. Gail Long, who is eighty and has been a fair person since girlhood, told me about the time her mother invited a visitor to help herself to supper at Cabin 271, and then to dessert. After the woman left, Gail and her sisters asked, “Who was that lady?” Their mother said, “I thought *y'all* knew her.” A late-night reveller once happened into Cabin 19 and obviously ate raw meat loaf out of the refrigerator; the fridge is now divided into sections marked “PREP” and “DRUNK.”

This year, Cabin 19’s twice-daily buffet stretched from its single stove all the way to the front porch. Roxanna McCarty, who runs the culinary operation with a rotating staff of eight, prepared “fried green tomatoes, fried okra, fried squash, fresh tomatoes, cream corn, fruit—we come in here and deseed everything—and pasta salad. We do black-eyed peas, green beans, lady peas, and butter beans every day. Devilled eggs at every shift. We did five pork loins, six turkey breasts. We had brisket. We had racks of ribs. We had Boston butts and ham. We had chicken and dumplings, chicken and dressing, lasagna.” McCarty cuts her okra lengthwise, instead of in rounds; it tastes “more okra-y” that way. The weather was so hot her green tomatoes turned red.

Cabin 19 served more than six hundred plates this year. McCarty told me, “Just here today, we’ve seen kids whose mother is in jail, they’re on welfare, they’re living in foster care. We have a president of a big company, we have single mothers, we have people that run their own house-cleaning business, we have people that flew in here on a private plane. Every walk of life is here.”

The fair has a board that functions almost like a municipal government, overseeing the budget and making policy: parking, garbage. Gate and cabin

fees generate the operating revenue; the Neshoba County Fair Association, the nonprofit that runs the fair, took in eight million dollars between 2017 and 2022. Cabin owners pay the association up to five hundred dollars annually per cabin, and fifty dollars per air-conditioner. During the fair, the utility bill alone totals half a million dollars.



"Squirrel!"
Cartoon by Liam Francis Walsh

Individuals build and own the cabins, and pay the property taxes, but the association owns the land. The cabins tend to pass down through families, making the fair largely a self-perpetuating, closed system. "The old saw here is that, in a divorce, people fight harder over the cabin than the children," Sid Salter, a well-known columnist and Neshoba native, who co-owns Cabin 16, told me. Most sales happen privately, by word of mouth. An owner may not sell, rent, raze, rebuild, or renovate a cabin without the association's permission. C. Scott Bounds, a state legislator and the fair's president, recalled a former colleague who discouraged change by saying, "We ain't never done it like 'at before." Kevin Cheatham, the fair's manager, said, "We try to keep things as simple as possible."

In 1980, the National Register of Historic Places added the fairgrounds to its list, describing the institution's contributions to "this very rural region of Mississippi" as "immeasurable." By then, the fair was approaching sewer capacity, and there were concerns about inauthenticity: the newer sections

contained too many modern amenities for some people's taste. "They're putting *Sheetrock* in there," DeWeese told me. The fair stopped adding cabins in 1982.

The fair has a daily newspaper, the *Fair Times*, which is published by the *Democrat*. An annual profusion of advertising makes it thicker than some actual newspapers. The *Fair Times* overwhelmingly consists of photographs of fairgoers in situ. How else is everyone supposed to know that Cabin 612 hosts a "Golden Girls"-themed bunco night; Cabin 755 won a giant stuffed banana; Cabin 163 ("The Plaza on the Fairgrounds") puts on an "Eloise"-themed tea party with antique dishes; Caleb Mayfield lost a tooth; and Kenny (Slick) Hillman fixed a weed-eater? Kids beg to have their picture taken. It is on record that this year's fair was attended by Azlee, Bensley, Payzlee, Rhettley, Easton, Creeth, Halen, Tuff, Collyns, Kollyns, Jacks, Jax, Kelby, Karsten, Karter, Jagger, Bayleigh, Everleigh, Hadleigh, Jayleigh, Mosleigh, Ryleigh, Maverick, Banks, Anistyn, Gracyn, Hudsyn, Hollyn, Lakelyn, Rylen, Aspen, Aspin, and multiple Bayers.



The fair has been called "the Carnegie Hall of stump speaking."

Outsiders have never been quite sure what to make of the fair. "It's a deal where, if you're not born to it, it doesn't make a lot of sense," Salter told me. "Sometimes when you *are* born into it, it doesn't make a lot of sense." Joyce Ellis, of Cabin 351, sees her busy teen-age granddaughters here and there

throughout the year, but “the week of the fair? I’m with my grandkids for *eight days*.” People who might otherwise reject the density of a city are piled on top of one another, each neighbor reliant on the next. Children are often unaware that they are being watched by other people’s parents. Atkinson, also of Cabin 351, still doesn’t know who ratted her out, as a teen-ager, for kissing a boy and drinking Zima. Cabin owners accept that if their place catches fire the fair will bulldoze it without hesitation, at their expense, to prevent flames from reaching their neighbors. “The idea of subordinating individual liberties for the common good is a theme that many would view as suspiciously unpatriotic,” Craycroft, one of the few scholars who have studied the fair, observed. “But, these fierce defenders of individual property rights have, in effect, established a commune.”

In 1980, *National Geographic* published “Mississippi’s Grand Reunion,” a thirteen-page feature on the fair. At the time, the U.S. was emerging from a gasoline shortage, and around twenty-four per cent of Mississippians lived in poverty, the highest rate in the nation, but the article depicted unmitigated bliss. The fair displayed an enlarged copy at Exhibit Hall, alongside award-winning fruits. The state legislature passed a resolution congratulating the author, a native of Kosciusko, Mississippi, for her exceedingly positive portrayal of the fair’s “good will and gracious fellowship.”

Several weeks after the *National Geographic* piece appeared, Ronald Reagan, in the midst of his Presidential campaign, showed up at the fair. Mississippi’s politicians had long recognized that the fair provided an opportunity to address thousands of voters in one place—and just before the August primaries—but Reagan was the first national candidate to visit. More than thirty thousand spectators piled into the fairgrounds to watch. Reagan, who wore an open-collared dress shirt, charmed the audience by talking about Ole Miss football and John Wayne. He then moved on to inflation and a critique of public welfare, invoking his support of “states’ rights,” a euphemism for white supremacy which had been adopted to justify slavery and Jim Crow laws, and which political operatives had used to exploit racial tension in the South. After Reagan won, John Bell Williams, a segregationist former governor of Mississippi and a five-term U.S. congressman, declared, “I’m happy to say we have a President now who talks our language.”

The fair has been called “the Carnegie Hall of stump speaking” and “Republican Woodstock.” Candidates address fairgoers in short bursts, three mornings in a row. In November, Mississippi will hold a gubernatorial election; Brandon Presley, a Democrat and Elvis’s second cousin, who is a state public-service commissioner, has mounted a surprisingly strong campaign against the Republican incumbent, Tate Reeves. At the fair, the more urgent race was the Republican primary for lieutenant governor. The leading challenger to the popular incumbent, Delbert Hosemann, was a *MAGA* state senator, Chris McDaniel.

On the morning of Hosemann’s and McDaniel’s speeches, I found a seat on a long wooden pew toward the front of the pavilion. McDaniel’s small, noisy scrum of backers sat nearby. McDaniel characterized Hosemann as a liberal, and falsely accused him of having been the vice-president of an abortion clinic. (Hosemann is a devout Catholic.) McDaniel said that Democrats “seek the end of this country as we know it,” adding, “Why would you ever reach across the aisle to those people?” He urged voters to “establish sovereignty again in this state” and described himself as a “proud disciple of Ronald Reagan—and, yes, Donald Trump!”

Hosemann, he went on, had “never endorsed Donald Trump for a single thing.” In 2017, when Trump’s Presidential Advisory Commission on Election Integrity sought information on Mississippi’s registered voters, Hosemann famously told the commission that it could “go jump in the Gulf of Mexico.” Onstage, Hosemann called McDaniel “despicable.”

After the speeches, I strolled over to Salter’s cabin, which faces the pavilion. Salter, a respected conservative who has watched the stumping since he was a boy, said, “When I was about fifteen, it occurred to me that all the things that were challenging about the state of Mississippi sort of stemmed from the fact that we were a monolithic, one-party state. At that time, the monolith was the Democratic Party—it controlled everything from the capitol to city hall to the courthouse. Every board, every commission, every facet of the legislature.” (Historically, Mississippi Democrats were Democrats in the sense that Lincoln was a Republican.) “If there was going to be reform, or change,” Salter said, “we needed a viable two-party system.”



A harness racer, near the stables, one of the few places at the fair with a sizable Black presence.

After Reagan's appearance, the designations began to shift; in 1992, Mississippi elected its first Republican governor in more than a hundred years, and the G.O.P. became the monolith. The Party has since fractured into virulent strains. In 2014, McDaniel tried to unseat the U.S. senator Thad Cochran; several of McDaniel's supporters were criminally charged in a plot to sneak into Cochran's wife's room at a nursing home, where she was bedridden with dementia. The plan was to film her and then accuse Cochran of having an extramarital affair while his wife was dying. A blogger, Clayton Kelly, was later sentenced to more than two years in prison for recording her in bed and posting the footage online.

Cochran prevailed, but McDaniel got uncomfortably close. Hosemann later noted that toward the end of the primary for lieutenant governor the McDaniel campaign pulled in nearly a million dollars in dark money. Salter told me, "The division in the country makes a guy like McDaniel dangerous, if he's got cash."

Later on the day of his speech, McDaniel somehow wound up in Cabin 22, on Founders Square, perhaps unaware that one of the families that own it, the Molpuses, are prominent Democrats. (Dick Molpus served as secretary of state from 1984 to 1996.) A Molpus relative delivered this news politely; McDaniel left. In 2016, when Donald Trump, Jr., appeared at the fair as a

surrogate for his father, a woman goose-stepped in Founders Square. Democrats, vastly outnumbered, are relegated to such small acts of resistance. Standing on a supporter’s porch, Trump assured voters that his father was a “blue-collar billionaire,” then gushed about fairgoers being able to “hang out with the Mannings.” Olivia Williams Manning, who, with Archie Manning, spawned an N.F.L. dynasty, is from an old Neshoba County family—Cabins 14, 56, 82, 202, and 631.

The fair’s inaugural picnic took place twenty-four years after the end of the Civil War. One of the founders was a Confederate veteran. In 1928, the second-place winner in one of the races was a horse named Ku Klux Klan. The pavilion has hosted a succession of segregationist governors and congressmen, and open support for the “Lost Cause” more or less continues to this day. On backstreets at this year’s fair, at least six cabins flew the Confederate flag. The fair allows it.

Whenever I asked fairgoers about race, even some of the liberals appeared stumped, as if it should be obvious that an institution that started as a family affair among white people would remain just that. All eleven of this year’s Miss Neshoba County contestants were white. All but a few of the thousand-plus faces in the *Fair Times* snapshots were white. At the late-night sing-along, “Dixie” is still in the lineup.

One afternoon, I came across a Black woman standing behind a cabin, staring at the midway. She was the only person of color I had seen that day. Her name was Larhonda Boswell, and she worked as a home health aide for one of the cabin owners. She in no way feared her employers, but her mother had warned her about wandering around the fair alone at night, even dressed in scrubs. Boswell had thought little of it until that morning, when, as she walked in from the parking lot, a couple of men had given her such a hard look that she prayed to Jesus for protection. She told me, “Baby, times ain’t changed.”

After the U.S. Supreme Court ordered school integration, in 1954, Mississippi, where almost half the population was Black, refused to comply. The following year, white supremacists in the Delta, a couple of hours northwest of Neshoba County, abducted Emmett Till, a Black fourteen-year-old from Chicago who was visiting family; he had supposedly whistled at a

white woman after walking into her store to buy candy. The kidnappers tortured and murdered Till, then threw his body, weighted with an industrial fan, into the Tallahatchie River. In an act that galvanized the civil-rights movement, Till's mother held an open-casket funeral and allowed the magazine *Jet* to photograph her child's crushed skull, broken wrists, and gouged-out eye.

The Klan recruited in Neshoba County to such a degree that its opponents quietly warned newcomers not to accept any fish-fry invitations without first asking around. One cabin owner told me, "That was the recruitment tactic of the K.K.K.—you feed 'em and then you scare 'em." In early 1964, as civil-rights groups prepared for Freedom Summer, the drive to register Mississippi's Black voters, the Klan burned twelve crosses in Neshoba County in a single night, one at the courthouse. On June 21st, James Chaney, a Black Mississippian, and his fellow civil-rights workers Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman, white Jews from New York, went to Neshoba County anyway, to investigate the torching of a church. When they failed to return to their home base, in Meridian, F.B.I. agents descended on Neshoba and found their burned-out station wagon in a swamp.



Seventy-four cabins front the red clay horse track. During the races, quarter and dollar bettors crowd the balconies and porches.

For the next forty-two days, federal agents and four hundred sailors from Meridian's naval base searched for the three men. Some white people in

Neshoba County decided that the missing-persons case was a hoax, even after the F.B.I. found the men's bodies buried in a red-dirt dam. The sheriff and his chief deputy, a Klan member, were ultimately arrested, along with a K.K.K. grand wizard and sixteen others.

The fair opened five days after the bodies were discovered, on August 9th. A small plane, its tail number obscured, dropped Klan leaflets that "attempted to portray the civil rights workers as Communist Revolutionaries, un-godly atheists and traitors," Steven H. Stubbs wrote in "Mississippi's Giant Houseparty," an eight-hundred-and-eighteen-page chronology of the fair. The next day, at the pavilion, a local leader of the John Birch Society received a standing ovation after delivering a "ranting attack on the Federal government." Another speaker referred viciously to the N.A.A.C.P. Molpus, fourteen at the time, was there. "I looked around and thought, I'm on another planet," he told me. The reaction was part of the reason he got into politics. It wasn't until 1989 that any of Mississippi's elected officials apologized publicly to the families of Chaney, Schwerner, and Goodman. The acknowledgment came from Molpus.

Trent Brown, a professor of American studies at the Missouri University of Science and Technology, has noted, "The fair represents a paradox that most white Mississippians have yet to grasp: their cherished celebrations of family and community cannot be separated from the state's racialist past." Molpus told me, "Those paradoxes are everywhere, not just at the fair. There are both noble calls to the angels of our better nature and far-right racist demagogues who speak to the dark and evil side. Such is life in the real world."

One afternoon, I stopped by the fair's stables to see Walter Miller, a racing champion who had just come off the track and was cooling down two of his horses, American Sportsman and Fusion Five. Miller, who is in his sixties, had owned a trail-riding business in coastal Mississippi until a friend advised him to upgrade to harness racing, a sport that makes use of what are essentially chariots. Miller learned that a winning horse can potentially earn a hundred thousand dollars or more in its lifetime. About twenty years ago, he began racing at the Neshoba County Fair.

In Mississippi, unlike in Northern states, almost all harness-racing owners and drivers, including Miller, are Black. Their relatives and fans unfold lawn chairs near the stables just before two in the afternoon, when the first race starts, and stay until the last team crosses the finish line, hours later. This is the only time when there is a sizable number of Black people at the fair. They rarely visit the cabins or walk through Founders Square, or stroll around looking at porches. After the races, they pack up and leave, and come back again the next day.

In Miller's view, racism at the fair had improved. He told me, "There's progress. All the Black guys used to be up at the top of the hill, in the corner." He meant the racing teams. His crew is assigned to the stables closest to the racetrack. Of the organizers, he said, "The way they look at it is, this is their building, their land. They control it the way they want." Miller's business partner, Trenlon Harris, was standing at Fusion Five's sweaty right flank, listening. "It's a slow process," he said. "This is still Mississippi. Count your victories, however small they are."

Later that day, I sat on the porch of Cabin 8, on Founders Square, with Brittany and Derrick Reed, newlyweds in their thirties who live in Birmingham. Brittany, who is white, teaches special education; Derrick, who is Black, is a personal banker at Wells Fargo. The cabin first belonged to Brittany's paternal grandfather. She said, "This is, I would say, *the* most important place to me. It holds more memories than anyplace else. There's just a peace and a slowness about it." A young relative was showing the grownups a moth in her palm; another was running around with a cluster of yellow balloons.

This was Derrick's second fair, and his first as Brittany's husband. Before the first visit, he was "a little nervous," he told me. "And his family was nervous," Brittany said. "Yes, super nervous," Derrick said. His mother, an Alabamian, was primarily worried about her son's acceptance within Brittany's family, which had included some older members who, as Brittany carefully put it, never "stepped out of their bubble."

In Alabama, Derrick attended predominantly white schools, and most of his friends are white; Brittany briefly worked as a missionary in Niger before teaching in Birmingham's city schools. Individually, and as a couple, they

were accustomed to spending time in various bubbles. At their first fair together, they told me, the only awkwardness had involved premarital sleeping arrangements.

Because cabins pass down within large, branching families, they inevitably accumulate numerous owners. The descendants of founders (Foxes, Johnsons) still occupy Founders Square. At Cabin 90, the names of some of the hundred and twenty or so stakeholders are etched into the front steps. Cabin 8 passed down to Brittany's father. When she inherits her share, Derrick will own it with her, becoming the first owner of color in the cabin's history. ♦

By Lore Segal

By Shauna Lyon

By Anthony Lane

By Dhruv Khullar

[A Reporter at Large](#)

The Next Targets for the Group That Overturned Roe

Alliance Defending Freedom has won fifteen Supreme Court cases. Now it wants religious exemptions to anti-discrimination laws—and is going after trans rights.

By [David D. Kirkpatrick](#)



A.D.F. has won a Supreme Court case in which a baker refused to make a cake celebrating a gay wedding. It also won a similar case involving a Web designer. Photo illustration by Joan Wong; Source photographs from Getty

On March 15, 2023, two conservative Christian lawyers asked a federal judge in Amarillo, Texas, for a ruling that they privately considered an almost impossible long shot. They demanded a nationwide ban on mifepristone, a pill used in half the abortions in America. The drug had been approved by the Food and Drug Administration for more than twenty years, under both Republican and Democratic administrations. During the pandemic, the agency began allowing prescriptions to be filled by mail, to accommodate social distancing.

But the lawyers, from a group called Alliance Defending Freedom, were on a winning streak. Founded three decades ago as a legal-defense fund for conservative Christian causes, A.D.F. had become that movement's most influential arm. In the past dozen years, its lawyers had won fourteen Supreme Court victories, including overturning *Roe v. Wade*; allowing employer-sponsored health insurance to exclude birth control; rolling back limits on government support for religious organizations; protecting the anonymity of donors to advocacy groups; blocking pandemic-related public-health rules; and establishing the right of a baker to refuse to make a cake for a same-sex wedding. Capitalizing on its success, A.D.F. had tripled its revenue over that period, to more than a hundred million dollars a year. It now had seventy or so in-house lawyers, including the former solicitors general of Michigan and Nebraska and the former United States Attorney for Missouri. The lawyers sent to Amarillo were Erik Baptist, a former top lawyer for the Environmental Protection Agency under President Donald Trump, and Erin Hawley, a Yale Law graduate who had clerked for Chief Justice John Roberts, advised the Attorney General under President George W. Bush, and worked on the team that overturned *Roe*. (She is married to Senator Josh Hawley, of Missouri.)

Thanks to the rightward shift of the courts under Trump, A.D.F. lawyers now often find a sympathetic audience on the federal bench. Filing the mifepristone case in Amarillo enabled A.D.F. to argue before Judge Matthew Kacsmaryk, a Trump appointee who had previously worked as the deputy general counsel of First Liberty Institute—a conservative Christian advocacy organization that has received grants from A.D.F. The summer before, Kacsmaryk's chambers had chosen an intern from an A.D.F. program for law students; an alumnus of the program is clerking for him this fall. (Other alumni clerked last term for Justice Samuel Alito and Justice Amy Coney Barrett.)

Many of the sixty-odd members of A.D.F.'s fund-raising department gathered during the hearing to pray for a win, and, in a video conference the next day, Lance Bauslaugh, A.D.F.'s senior vice-president of development, told the staff that Erin Hawley was "super grateful." Even though the Amarillo judge was "very friendly," Bauslaugh said, upending a decades-old F.D.A. approval was "a tough thing to do." He said of the judge, "Maybe he gives us half of what we are seeking"—say, restoring limits on mail-order

delivery. That alone would be “huge.” (A left-leaning investigative organization called Documented provided me with leaked recordings of the video conference and other events, along with hundreds of pages of internal documents.)

The hearing itself, Bauslaugh noted, offered “fund-raising opportunities.” Donations had been flat lately; Bauslaugh blamed the economy, but surely the reversal of Roe had sapped some donors’ motivation. The mifepristone case was plunging A.D.F. back into a galvanizing battle. One of Bauslaugh’s lieutenants offered a potential fund-raising pitch: “If I told you five years ago that you could have invested in Roe being overturned, how much would you have invested in that? If I can tell you now that we are going to protect life even more, how much do you want to invest in *that*? ”

Bauslaugh framed the case yet more broadly, beyond abortion or even Christianity. Calling it “a massive pushback on the F.D.A. and the Biden Administration from a regulatory standpoint,” he noted that there was “a ton of corruption in the bureaucratic state.”

In fact, he explained, A.D.F. was quietly revising its mission altogether, to reflect both the changing times and the group’s growing ambitions. Until now, A.D.F. had cast itself as primarily defensive. In the words of one of its founders, its purpose was “to keep the door open for the Gospel”: to prevent the American Civil Liberties Union and the courts from interfering with Christian ministry, to stop them from removing abortion from the jurisdiction of legislatures, and to keep religion in public life. But A.D.F. leaders often said that the Bible wasn’t just for the faithful; it was a universal guide to “human flourishing.” Accordingly, Bauslaugh told the fund-raisers, A.D.F. was taking on less explicitly religious concerns, perhaps including “corruption in the bureaucratic state.”

As though to reassure the staff that A.D.F. wasn’t abandoning its roots, Bauslaugh kept inserting Biblical references into his explanation. “Why do we exist as an organization?” he asked. “A.D.F. exists to advance our God-given rights to live and speak the truth.” He paused to let that sink in before adding, “The truth—the Gospel.”

For more than half a century, conservative Christians have decried the left's ever-expanding demands for personal rights. The right to free speech allowed pornography to permeate the culture. The right to freedom of conscience for atheists and religious minorities silenced school prayer. And the right to privacy was stretched to protect birth control, abortion, gay sex, and, eventually, same-sex marriage. In an influential book from 1991, "[Rights Talk](#)," Mary Ann Glendon, a Harvard law professor and a conservative Catholic, argued that letting debates over values become all-or-nothing contests about fundamental rights was undermining democracy, by "turning American political discourse into a parody of itself and challenging the very notion that politics can be conducted through reasoned discussion and compromise." Rights talk had become dangerously polarizing.

Yet A.D.F. now gushes "rights talk." In fact, Kristen Waggoner, its chief executive and general counsel, sometimes sounds as if she worked for her organization's nemesis, the A.C.L.U. Arguing before the Supreme Court last winter, she told the Justices that she'd come to defend a bedrock First Amendment principle: the right to resist government attempts to coerce a citizen into publicly denying her deepest convictions. She said that she was standing up for a Black sculptor's right to refuse to fabricate a cross for an "Aryan church rally," and for an L.G.B.T. Web designer's right not to promote "a view of marriage that they don't hold." Otherwise, she avoided bringing up sexual orientation or marriage—aside from acknowledging, almost in passing, that her client, Lorie Smith, the owner of 303 Creative, a design studio in Littleton, Colorado, had preëmptively declared that she'd never design a Web site for a same-sex wedding, because such a union "contradicts" Scripture.

The A.D.F. lawyers who filed the mifepristone suit had likewise said that they were arguing for the right to freedom of conscience: their clients were "pro-life" doctors in Texas who felt "complicit" in a patient's "elective chemical abortion." Emphasizing those rights, the judge surprised the A.D.F. lawyers by granting all their demands, including the unprecedented judicial suspension of a long-standing F.D.A. approval. The Justice Department has asked the Supreme Court to hear an appeal, and A.D.F. lawyers will likely appear there soon to defend the ruling.



Cartoon by Navied Mahdavian

Weeks after A.D.F.’s stunning victory in Texas, the Supreme Court found that the Web-site designer’s right to free speech overrode a Colorado law barring discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. The majority opinion, by Justice Neil Gorsuch, quoted George Orwell’s axiom that liberty entails “the right to tell people what they do not want to hear”—in this case, to tell a couple that their marriage is sinful.

Though it was A.D.F.’s fifteenth Court victory, Waggoner told me that, aside from overturning Roe, Gorsuch’s opinion was “bigger than anything” her group had yet achieved. She teared up as she praised the Court’s commitment to protecting unpopular speech “even right now, even in *this* moment”—the era of cancel culture.

A.D.F.’s liberal critics invoke Orwell, too. They say that the group’s “rights talk” is doublespeak for bigotry, patriarchy, and discrimination. Erwin Chemerinsky, the dean of the law school at U.C. Berkeley, told me that A.D.F. “puts freedom to discriminate over freedom *from* discrimination.” Sarah Warbelow, the head of legal advocacy for the Human Rights Campaign, a leading gay-rights group, told me that A.D.F. was “hellbent on eradicating L.G.B.T.Q. people from public life.” A.D.F. is currently asking the Supreme Court to hear its defense of a Christian psychotherapist’s right to counsel children and adolescents about how to overcome same-sex

attraction—a practice, which L.G.B.T. advocates call “conversion therapy,” that many states have outlawed. In 2003, A.D.F. filed an unsuccessful brief to the Court defending the criminalization of gay sodomy, and since then its international affiliates have defended similar laws outside the U.S. (An A.D.F. spokesperson said that, as a matter of policy, its affiliates do not litigate to criminalize gay sex; they argue only against the authority of international organizations to impose moral norms on sovereign states.)

Others accuse A.D.F. of inventing grievances to blow up into causes. Smith, of 303 Creative, told me that her pastor had directed her to speak with A.D.F. before she even entered the business of making Web sites for weddings. And A.D.F. routinely sends out bulletins urging churches and ministries to be on the lookout for “*SOGIs*”—prohibitions of discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity. An A.D.F. legal guide warns churches that such prohibitions “are not designed for the innocent purpose of ensuring all people receive basic services”; rather, “their practical effect is to legally compel Christians to accept, endorse, and even promote messages, ideas, and events that violate their faith.” A.D.F. sometimes resembles a culture-war personal-injury firm; it even solicits clients with a catchy toll-free number, 1-800-*TELL-ADF*.

The group has also led the charge against school policies and medical treatments meant to support children or adolescents identifying as transgender. Waggoner told me that, in 2019, A.D.F. initiated the first significant suit opposing the participation of trans athletes in girls’ sporting competitions; the case, still ongoing, has helped spark a wider backlash. A.D.F.—which in 2016 established an influence operation aimed at state lawmakers and last year added one focussed on Congress—has helped at least twenty-three states pass legislation barring trans athletes from girls’ and women’s events. Several states have introduced A.D.F. model legislation requiring schools to get parental consent for any lessons about gender identity; a lawyer affiliated with A.D.F. helped draft a Florida measure that L.G.B.T. advocates call the “Don’t Say Gay” law. Other states have adopted A.D.F.-drafted legislation restricting gender-transition medical treatment for minors. The organization’s lawyers are now representing West Virginia in defending a law, written by A.D.F., that bans trans athletes. (In an internal briefing, the head of its legislative effort said that A.D.F. had “authored” at least a hundred and thirty bills in thirty-four states last year; more than thirty

were passed into law. In 2018, the organization’s lawyers drafted a Mississippi law banning most abortions after fifteen weeks of pregnancy; last year, A.D.F. successfully defended that law in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization*, the case that overturned *Roe*.)

With only 1.4 per cent of adolescents in the U.S. identifying as transgender, L.G.B.T.-rights groups accuse A.D.F. of whipping up a panic over questions better left to doctors, teachers, and parents. Waggoner, though, told me that A.D.F. was merely reacting to an ominous turn in American life. Her group, she said, had been inundated by complaints from parents about liberal policies regarding trans issues, many of them asking, “I just learned from the school district that they’re calling my daughter by a different name—what can I do?”

Through pronoun policies, anti-discrimination statutes, abortion laws, and other impositions of “sexual ethics,” Waggoner said, liberal government officials were threatening to set up a new kind of police state—one in which dissenters who believe that marriage can involve only a man and a woman are forced to salute the rainbow flags flying outside every town hall, in which teachers are required to indoctrinate children into the belief that gender is not binary, and in which shelters for battered women must make room for trans females. No wonder that her “rights talk” evokes the civil libertarians who once defended the free speech of Communists or neo-Nazis. As Waggoner sees it, traditionalist Christians are now the besieged minority in need of protection. Waggoner told me that the fundamental question was “Are we going to be a majoritarian-authoritarian system of government? Or are we going to stick with our commitment that the power of persuasion is better than the power of government force?” She added, “I would say every single team at A.D.F.—every single litigation team that we have—is working against government censorship.”

Alliance Defending Freedom was born out of frustration. In 1992, Republicans had held the White House for the previous twelve years. For the first time, Christian conservatives had played a significant role in electing those Presidents, who had installed five of the nine Supreme Court Justices. Nonetheless, the Court that year reaffirmed the right to abortion, in *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, and redoubled the separation of church and state, in *Lee v. Weisman*, which forbade prayer at school-sponsored events. No

matter how many elections conservatives won, liberals always seemed to come out ahead in the courts. So the next year a group of prominent evangelicals—led by James C. Dobson, the founder of Focus on the Family—decided to create an endowment to pay for lawyers who could take on the A.C.L.U. and its ilk. They called it Alliance Defense Fund.

To run it, Dobson and the others turned to Alan Sears, a former federal prosecutor from Kentucky who had risen to prominence as the executive director of a commission on pornography set up during the Reagan Administration. Sears, then in his thirties, had used his platform to urge citizens to help fight the culture wars. With a soft Southern voice, he emphasized in interviews that a chapter of the commission's report laid out how “citizen action”—boycotts, picket lines, zoning-board changes—could limit distribution of offensive material, even if it was protected by the First Amendment. “It’s a manual that explains First Amendment rights for both sides,” Sears explained.

A handful of legal organizations specialized in either religious freedom or Christian cases, but most were run by a single lawyer without enough financial resources for a long-term strategy. A.D.F. would be different: it would begin by raising money and *then* enlist lawyers. Sears dedicated his life to fund-raising so completely, he told me, that he came to empathize with panhandlers: “I had a suit, not a sign, but I learned to beg.”

He told donors that A.D.F. would follow the litigation strategy of the Black civil-rights movement. Where Thurgood Marshall and the N.A.A.C.P. had set out to overturn the precedents underpinning racial segregation, A.D.F. aimed to undo *Roe v. Wade* and *Lemon v. Kurtzman*, the 1971 precedent barring “excessive entanglement” of government with religion. Like the N.A.A.C.P., A.D.F. would find sympathetic and strategically placed plaintiffs, then seek conflicting rulings from different circuits in order to push the Supreme Court to take up a question. Along the way, A.D.F. would try to erode precedents that it opposed—for example, by supporting parental-notification requirements for minors seeking abortions.

A.D.F. officials declined to tell me who its donors are, but others in conservative Christian circles told me that one of the group’s mainstays is the family of David Green, which founded the Hobby Lobby crafts chain

and the Museum of the Bible, in Washington, D.C. The museum often hosts events for A.D.F., sometimes with speeches by Green family members, and A.D.F. lawyers argued on Hobby Lobby's side of [a 2014 Supreme Court case](#) that ended the contraception mandate for employer-sponsored insurance. (Representatives of Hobby Lobby and the museum didn't return calls seeking comment.) Foundations set up by the conservative DeVos and Prince families have also reportedly donated.

Compared with other legal outfits, A.D.F. immediately stood out for the breadth of its aspirations. In 1997, years before Sears could afford in-house litigators, he began sponsoring weeklong conferences around the country to teach lawyers about the group's issues. The attendees formed an expanding network that A.D.F. could call on to provide pro-bono counsel or to help identify promising plaintiffs.

In 2001, A.D.F. started hiring in-house lawyers and representing its own clients. But Sears continued to give grants to other organizations and firms—even those competing for the same cases. This largesse helped the organization become a hub for conservative Christian donors—they could give to A.D.F. and trust that their money would be spread across the legal battlefield. Sears, who retired in 2017, told me, “The concept of enabling our allies—we did not do it to raise money, but it really worked.”

Any interest group raises money more easily when there's a looming threat, and Sears found a perfect villain in the emboldened gay-rights movement. In 2000, Vermont recognized same-sex civil unions, and three years later the Supreme Court found a right to engage in gay sodomy. Sears made fighting gay rights A.D.F.'s third priority, alongside opposing abortion rights and church-state separation. Its lawyers contested the recognition of same-sex marriage in state after state. A.D.F. defended the military's so-called Don't Ask, Don't Tell rule, opposed school speech codes aimed at protecting gay people, helped defend a state-funded Baptist youth center in Kentucky that fired a lesbian therapist, and represented chaplains at a Minnesota women's prison who condemned lesbianism.

In 2003, when Christian conservatives were pushing state ballot measures and a constitutional amendment to block same-sex marriage, Sears published an anti-gay polemic, “[The Homosexual Agenda](#). ” Writing with Craig Osten,

an A.D.F. communications staffer, Sears professed “compassion and sensitivity for those ensnared in homosexual behavior,” but characterized such behavior as a “disordered,” pitiable “condition.” Sears repeatedly linked homosexuality both to sexually transmitted disease and to the sexual abuse of children. The book relied heavily on a handful of men and women who testified that Christian faith had helped them “escape” same-sex attraction. Almost all of those “ex-gay” exemplars have since resumed gay or lesbian lives, denouncing conversion therapy and apologizing for promoting it.

If Sears were writing “The Homosexual Agenda” now, he told me, he’d have to make some updates. But he stood by the book’s portrait of a plot, hatched by gay-rights activists, to use Hollywood, schools, and the courts to transform American culture. He had sent a lawyer to attend a major L.G.B.T.-activist conference in London, and he had studied gay-rights manifestos like “[After the Ball: How America Will Conquer Its Fear and Hatred of Gays in the 90's](#),” by Marshall Kirk and Hunter Madsen. Sears said that such activists “told us what they wanted to do—they said, ‘Let’s adopt the strategy of the civil-rights movement, let’s call ourselves a minority, let’s call ourselves oppressed, blah blah blah.’ ” In hindsight, he said, his book still “stands pretty well,” especially the claim of its subtitle—that L.G.B.T. rights are “the principal threat to religious freedom today.”

Sears was determined to prevent A.D.F. from capitulating to the language of the gay-rights movement. In 2000, he created a summer program, the Blackstone Legal Fellowship, which taught first-year law students conservative Christian thought. The organization sent visiting Blackstone lecturers a “lexicon,” which all participants at A.D.F. events were expected to follow. A seven-page version sent out in 2013 included the following:

instead of “bigotry, anti-tolerance,” say “defending biblical, religious principles”

instead of “homophobia,” say “convictions against homosexual behavior”

instead of “hate crimes,” say “so-called ‘hate’ crimes”

instead of “sex education,” say “sexual indoctrination”

instead of “gay marriage” and its “advocates,” say “marriage imitation” and “opponents of marriage”

instead of “transgender,” say “cross-dressing” or “sexually confused”

instead of “gay and lesbian civil rights movement,” say “homosexual agenda.”

One Blackstone lecturer that summer was Josh Hawley, a law professor from the University of Missouri and the future senator. He received a twenty-five-hundred-dollar stipend. The *Riverfront Times*, an alternative weekly, used freedom-of-information laws to obtain e-mail correspondence between Hawley and A.D.F., including the lexicon. A spokesperson for the Senator told the publication that he and his wife “aren’t going to apologize for their faith.”

Another lecturer that year was Amy Coney Barrett, then a law professor at Notre Dame. She lectured at the program for five summers and received the same lexicon. Yet, during Senate hearings for her 2017 confirmation to an appeals court, she testified that she “actually wasn’t aware” that A.D.F. had run the program “until I received the honorarium and saw the A.D.F. on the check, or maybe when I saw an e-mail and saw the signature line.” She added, implausibly, “I don’t know what all of A.D.F.’s policy positions are. And it has never been my practice to investigate all of the policy positions of a group that invites me to speak.”

Sears’s organization, which was renamed the Alliance Defending Freedom in 2012, now has forty-nine hundred lawyers in its network of allies. A.D.F. recruits graduates of Harvard, Yale, and Stanford, and more than half its staff lawyers have done federal clerkships. The Blackstone program, which began with about two dozen students, included nearly two hundred this past summer.

A growing number of Blackstone alumni have clerked for federal judges, and, inevitably, their terms as clerks sometimes have included A.D.F. cases. More than sixty Blackstone alumni are currently clerking on federal courts,

including eighteen on appeals courts. The alumnus who is now clerking for the federal district court in Amarillo will next year clerk for the circuit court based in Atlanta, where A.D.F. is defending an Alabama ban on gender-transition treatment for minors. And the two alumni who clerked for Barrett and Alito last session helped them weigh both the 303 Creative case and a Justice Department request to stay the mifepristone ban. (The Court granted the stay—mifepristone remains available for now—but Alito wrote a memorably vituperative dissent.)



"Sure, I can run around and chase a ball outside, but who wants to be that guy?"
Cartoon by Lonnie Millsap

Barrett's arrival on the Court has locked in a 6–3 conservative majority, and both of Sears's original targets are dead: *Roe v. Wade* and *Lemon v. Kurtzman*, the case about enforcing church-state separation. A.D.F. hollowed out *Lemon* with a series of Supreme Court victories, including one allowing a town council in upstate New York to pray before meetings (2014) and another requiring the State of Missouri to pay to upgrade a Lutheran church's playground (2017). Last year, the Court cited those precedents when it ruled that a public-school football coach in Washington State could lead prayers from the fifty-yard line.

The group has become so mainstream that last fall, on Capitol Hill, Waggoner teamed up with two prominent Republican congressmen—Jim Jordan, of Ohio, and Steve Scalise, of Louisiana—to host an A.D.F.

reception for newly elected lawmakers. The head of A.D.F.’s state-legislative division, J. D. Mesnard, is a state senator in Arizona. And, earlier this year, two federal judges resolved lawsuits in part by ordering litigants to submit to A.D.F. training in the First Amendment—in one case, an hour-long lecture by two A.D.F. lawyers about freedom of expression, from John Stuart Mill through the Red Scare. Three art-therapy professors at Southern Illinois University in Edwardsville underwent the training to settle a suit charging that they had discriminated against a conservative Christian student by telling her to stop sharing her beliefs. And a judge in Texas ordered lawyers for Southwest Airlines to receive A.D.F. training as part of the settlement of a suit by a flight attendant who claimed she’d been fired for her opposition to abortion. (Southwest is appealing.)

Still, despite A.D.F.’s many successes, same-sex couples now have a constitutional right to marry. I wondered whether Sears thought A.D.F. was winning or losing. “We are on a winning trajectory,” he told me, adding wishfully, “It may be that the day will come when people say the birth-control pill was a mistake.”

The headquarters of A.D.F. is in a leafy campus in Lansdowne, Virginia, about an hour’s drive from the Supreme Court. Security is tight. Whenever I arrived for meetings with Waggoner, an armed guard looked me over before letting me in. Once, when I asked to use a men’s room, the guard waited outside, apparently to insure that I did not wander off unattended. A.D.F. officials told me that, nearly every day, the group receives at least one threat.

Five feet tall, fifty-one, and blond, Waggoner favors platform heels, skirt suits, and thick silver necklaces. Her office has a view of the Blue Ridge Mountains, and until recently she had always filled her workspace with Disney memorabilia. “Just Mickey and Minnie—sort of the classics,” she told me. A mother of three, she has often visited Disney parks, and even run marathons through them, but she told me that the Walt Disney Company’s recent defense of L.G.B.T. rights has “ruined the beauty.” The Disney tchotchkes are gone, and on a credenza is a stack of copies of an illustrated children’s book, “[She Is She](#).” Its authors describe it as a celebration of femininity and motherhood to counter the promotion of nontraditional gender identities. It features a colorful drawing of Waggoner, “a justice-seeking lawyer.”

Waggoner is what psychologists call an active listener. She gives empathetic nods and smiles even when she disagrees vehemently with what she is hearing. As I laid out a liberal critique of her cases, she kept smiling while calling what I'd just said "absolute garbage." Lawyers who have faced her in the courtroom say that the corners of her lips seemingly never turn down. Keith Kemper, her former partner in a Seattle law firm, told me that, "because she has a sweet disposition and a small stature, it is easy to say, 'Oh, here is this nice little girl.' But she is the sweetest killer you ever met." A former adversary likened Waggoner's countenance to that of Dolores Umbridge, the cheerfully authoritarian bureaucrat in the "Harry Potter" series.

Waggoner grew up in Longview, Washington, near the Oregon border, and belongs to the Assemblies of God, the largest Pentecostal denomination—part of a movement defined by speaking in tongues. Her father was the principal of an Assemblies of God school that Waggoner attended, and he later became an associate pastor of the church that ran the school. Waggoner told me that, around the age of thirteen, she felt a sudden calling to become a lawyer and "defend religious freedom and Christian ministries in schools." The culture war of the day was over the teaching of creationism at church schools like her father's, and Waggoner said that, as a girl, she'd been vaguely aware of "controversies over religious autonomy." But she also said that no earthly influence could account for her choice of vocation, given that no conservative Christian legal movement existed at the time. "I don't know why I felt so strongly, but I am thankful for it," she told me. (Waggoner says that she wrote down her calling on a scrap of paper, which she keeps in her bedroom today.) She attended a regional college run by the Assemblies of God and then moved to Virginia Beach to attend Regent University School of Law, a pioneering evangelical law program founded, in 1986, by the Christian broadcaster Pat Robertson. After a clerkship at the Washington State Supreme Court, she practiced for sixteen years at the Seattle firm, which often represented churches.

During Sears's tenure, A.D.F. was almost unknown outside conservative Christian circles. Its lawyers viewed mainstream news organizations as hostile, and, like most attorneys, they worried that clients who spoke publicly might undermine their cases. But, during the electoral contests over same-sex marriage, L.G.B.T. activists had won support by presenting the

media with sympathetic images of gay and lesbian couples—ordinary-looking people asking for things like hospital-visitation rights. Waggoner, avoiding the forbidden words “gay marriage” or “gay rights,” told me that A.D.F.’s opponents “are very good at bringing to bear who’s affected if *their* viewpoint isn’t adopted.” When she took over A.D.F.’s legal strategy, she decided to borrow that playbook and show that conservative Christians could be victims, too—that liberal laws and precedents “create real harm, that real people are affected, and these people don’t have horns. They aren’t hateful people.”

Her test case was Jack Phillips, the owner of a Colorado business called Masterpiece Cakeshop. A ruggedly handsome and ambitiously artful baker, Phillips, who is now sixty-seven, claimed a First Amendment right to refuse to bake a gay couple’s wedding cake. In 2017, Waggoner joined him on “The View,” ABC’s rowdy daytime talk show. Most of the show’s five female hosts were noisily liberal, and it was impossible to imagine Sears, the anti-porn crusader, at their table. Waggoner fit right in. Phillips’s case was not just about a gay couple, she insisted. “Jack’s dignity is at issue as well,” she said. One could support same-sex marriage while still supporting “artists like Jack,” Waggoner told the hosts, adding, “If the state can crush Jack, it can crush every single one of us.”

The “View” hosts grilled them on the Biblical basis for the baker’s objection. Didn’t the Good Book tell us not to judge? Didn’t Jesus “hang out” with the lowest of the low? The co-host Joy Behar exclaimed, “Jesus would have made the cake!” She then immediately mocked herself for “speaking for Jesus.”

Waggoner laughed as deeply as anyone. She must have known that her gambit was working. Chatting with five women citing Scripture and speaking for God, she sounded downright pluralistic. Sunny Hostin, a “View” co-host who is also a lawyer and a legal-affairs correspondent, conceded that she now could see “both sides of this argument,” adding, “It is a closer call than I think we are giving credit for.”

Phillips and Waggoner went on to give six hundred media interviews. A.D.F. launched a team that produced polished videos about its plaintiffs. (Perhaps too polished. The *Washington Post* [recently reported](#) that A.D.F. employees

posed as brides in videos promoting three clients who object to filming or photographing gay weddings.) Mainstream-media campaigns became a core part of its repertoire. Waggoner told me, “Some of the lawyers were having an absolute heart attack. But I said, ‘No, you will prep your client, and your client *will* talk about the case!’”

In oral arguments, Waggoner mounted an innovative theory: it might be unlawful discrimination if a baker declined to sell a premade cake to a gay customer, but forcing the baker to design a cake celebrating a gay wedding would constitute constitutionally impermissible “compelled speech,” like requiring a St. Patrick’s Day parade to allow a gay-pride banner. She told me, “I have tried to bring to A.D.F. a spirit of offense rather than defense. I’d rather have the A.C.L.U. and Planned Parenthood worried about what we are doing—not the other way around.”

Humanizing A.D.F.’s clients serves another important purpose—motivating donors—and the organization’s revenue has doubled in the five years since Waggoner stepped up its media outreach. According to the leaked video call, donors who give a hundred thousand dollars a year or more were expected to account for more than half A.D.F.’s fund-raising in the past fiscal year—upward of fifty million dollars.

Direct fund-raising—such as telemarketing and TV commercials—was expected to bring in about twenty-seven million dollars. I signed up for A.D.F. e-mails, and they were alarming: “Government told school to choose between faith and food”; “School silences 7th grader.” But on the video call a staff member told the fund-raisers that A.D.F. wasn’t “trying to provoke fear.” The goal was to “communicate what the problem is, and the solution—which is A.D.F.”

The fund-raising department’s motto is “We dig ditches.” On the video call, Keaton Sauncy, a senior fund-raiser, explained that the phrase referred to an Old Testament passage. During a battle with the Moabites, God told the Israelites to catch floodwater in ditches. The Moabites “see the reflection of the sun in them, and they think it is blood, and they are scared, and they kill themselves, and we win!,” Sauncy said, somewhat garbling the story. The moral, he said, was that if the fund-raisers do their work “God is going to bring that rain.”

Lance Bauslaugh, the fund-raising head, told the staff to keep “that Holy Spirit swagger” and to think about “cultivating the remnant”—a term used in end-time prophecies to describe the few who resist the descent into sin before the apocalypse. He reported that, according to an A.D.F. study, twenty million Americans could be donors. “Is that part of the remnant?” he asked.

Talk of ditches full of blood seemed out of step with Waggoner’s sunny persona, at first. But, the more we talked, the more I realized that her assessment of what she calls “the current cultural moment” is also quite bleak. She repeatedly invoked the case of Päivi Räsänen, a Finnish legislator who is represented by A.D.F.’s international division, which was launched in 2008. Räsänen is fighting hate-crime charges over a social-media post in which she cited a Bible verse and called homosexuality “dysfunctional,” a “disorder,” and sinful. Waggoner described the case as “the tip of the spear in the Western world,” and said that, more and more, U.S. government officials were “gaining power in order to create or impose a new orthodoxy in human sexuality and sexual ethics.” With a smile, she added, “I see a lot of darkness.”

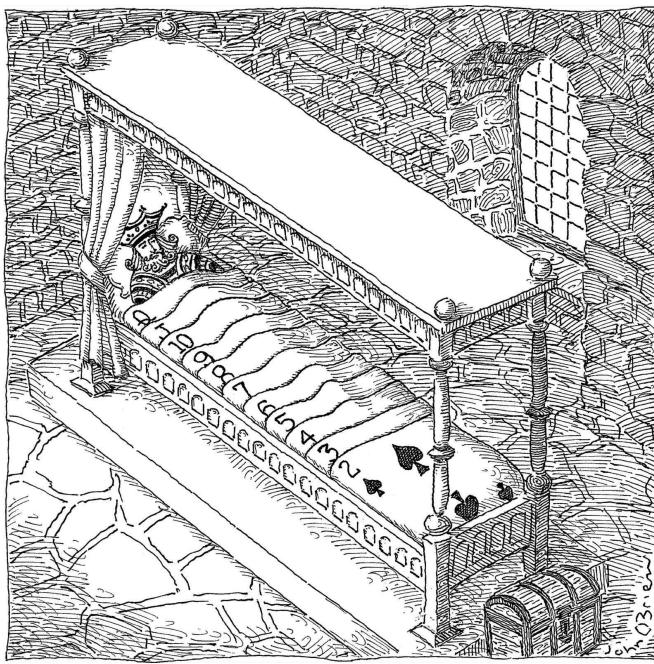
What Waggoner calls a “new orthodoxy,” of course, is what liberals call freedom and equality: the right to choose a partner of any sex, to take pride in a nontraditional gender identity, to make decisions about your own body. But A.D.F. sees the story of the past sixty years as a historic aberration. For centuries, nearly every major civilization had held similar beliefs: sex was for married heterosexuals; making babies was the point. But, beginning in the nineteen-sixties, the Supreme Court began abetting a radical transformation in sexual ethics by citing a novel “right to privacy,” initially in a case about married couples purchasing condoms. By expanding that right to cover abortion, gay sex, and same-sex marriage, the Court had effectively redefined sex as a form of individual self-expression. The only meaning or purpose of sex was in the minds of the adults having it. (In *Casey*, the majority held that sex was part of “the right to define one’s own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life.”) In this new era of “plastic sex”—a phrase that a Blackstone lecturer borrowed from the British sociologist Anthony Giddens—children all but vanished from the picture.

Next, the A.D.F. story goes, advocates of plastic sex began redescribing sexual urges as group identities. Same-sex attraction, once a kink, now *defined* a person. And sex without fear of pregnancy was no longer merely a desire; the Court found that it was a necessary component of a free, full life, which meant that the right to abortion was essential to women. And the traditional view of sexuality—common to Christianity, Judaism, and Islam—was recast as bigotry.

Waggoner referred me repeatedly to a dissent by Justice Alito in *Obergefell v. Hodges*, the 2015 case that found a constitutional right to same-sex marriage. A.D.F. bulletins often quote Alito's words, which she deems prophetic. "I assume that those who cling to old beliefs will be able to whisper their thoughts in the recesses of their homes," Alito warned. "But if they repeat those views in public, they will risk being labeled as bigots and treated as such by governments, employers, and schools."

Depending on whom you ask, the *Obergefell* ruling either shaped or reflected a stunning transformation of American public opinion. Twice as many people now support same-sex marriage as oppose it—roughly the inverse of the ratio of only twenty years ago. Yet Waggoner contended to me that the agenda behind *Obergefell* was more sinister: "The intent was to vilify those who believed in marriage between a man and a woman, and to use the law against them so that they would become enemies of the law. And that is exactly what we saw happen."

Waggoner said that A.D.F. was "not looking to polarize." She made a point of noting that members of her extended family are gay, and that she is friendly toward them. She even asserted that A.D.F. had represented openly gay clients—although, citing confidentiality, she wouldn't name any. "Scripture says that homosexuality is wrong," she said. "But it also says that lying is wrong. And Scripture teaches that you're entitled to be treated with dignity and respect regardless of what life-style choices you're making."



Cartoon by John O'Brien

Yet: “life-style choices.” Would A.D.F. hire an L.G.B.T. person? Waggoner said, “If someone were to say, ‘I struggle with same-sex attraction,’ that is different than saying, ‘I am gay.’ ” But “we also believe that same-sex *behavior* is wrong, that it’s a sin.” Although people who identify as L.G.B.T. are entitled to respect, she noted, “I should *also* be able to suggest that I think there’s a different path that can be taken, and not be put in jail for that or censored by my government.” (An A.D.F. spokesperson acknowledged that no American has ever been jailed or censored for homophobia. But he noted that anti-discrimination laws in New York and Minnesota allow jail time as a potential penalty.)

To L.G.B.T. people, “life style” and “path” are the code words of bigots. Still, Waggoner said that A.D.F. is consistent about its sexual ethics: divorce may lead to termination, depending on an assessment of the “Biblical” grounds for the breakup.

Liberals, and some conservatives, say that A.D.F.’s fear of plastic-sex authoritarianism is wildly paranoid. Half the fifty states have not passed any law against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. The Supreme Court has never held that sexual orientation is a “suspect class,” like race, that warrants special scrutiny when it is used as a basis for laws, employment, housing, or other distinctions. Most important, the current

Supreme Court appears to lean toward A.D.F.'s views. Andrew Koppelman, a professor of law and philosophy at Northwestern University who has studied A.D.F.'s cases, told me that ten years ago the group was considered so extreme that its claims "bordered on the frivolous." Now "A.D.F. needs to be taken seriously, because any claim they make has a shot at five votes on the Supreme Court." Even the majority opinion in Obergefell, by Justice Anthony Kennedy, included an unusual concession: "Many who deem same-sex marriage to be wrong reach that conclusion based on decent and honorable religious or philosophical premises, and neither they nor their beliefs are disparaged here."

Indeed, secular-liberal tyranny has been a running theme of some Justices. In a 2018 case, A.D.F. successfully opposed California's requirement that "pro-life" pregnancy-counselling centers post notices about the availability of public funding for abortion; the majority opinion, by Justice Clarence Thomas, likened the state's measure to Stalinism, Nazism, the Cultural Revolution in China, and Romania under Nicolae Ceaușescu. ("As they should!" Waggoner told me. "It was shocking!") The next year, in a majority opinion that supported keeping a giant cross on public property, Alito warned of "militantly secular regimes," such as a government that "roams the land, tearing down monuments with religious symbolism and scrubbing away any reference to the divine." In the Masterpiece Cakeshop decision, the Court ruled for the baker on the ground that the Colorado civil-rights commission had displayed an impermissible animus against his faith. (At a hearing, a commissioner had said that "freedom of religion and religion has been used to justify all kinds of discrimination throughout history, whether it be slavery, whether it be the Holocaust," calling it "despicable" when people "use their religion to hurt others.")

In oral arguments for 303 Creative, the case about the Web designer, Justice Barrett made A.D.F.'s case more effectively than Waggoner did. The crux of A.D.F.'s reasoning was that Lorie Smith, the designer, objected only to a message of support for same-sex marriage but had no bias against L.G.B.T. people. Barrett asked Waggoner if her client would create a Web site for people who were "cisgender and heterosexual" but wanted their "wedding story" to convey that their sexes were "irrelevant to our relationship, which transcends such categories"?

Waggoner later described to me her befuddled reaction: “I was, like, ‘cisgender’?” When she began to say that her client *would* design such a Web site, Barrett cut her off and unspooled a fresh hypothetical: What about adulterous co-workers who wanted a wedding site celebrating their divorces? Wouldn’t those messages violate the designer’s Biblical views, regardless of the newlyweds’ sexual orientation? Waggoner—now getting it—hastened to agree.

A former A.D.F. lawyer told me that it was “destructive” of the organization to keep warning Christians “that the Church is facing mortal peril, that it is on the brink of real persecution and destruction.” In fact, the lawyer said, Christian legal rights are “more secure than they have ever been,” and A.D.F. itself “is incredibly successful.” But Waggoner told me that the issues A.D.F. was contesting “would have been unimaginable to most Americans just fifteen years ago” and that “the staggering number of people requesting our help tells you this moment is an assault on our freedom.” She added, “Just because we have prevailed in some cases, that doesn’t mean that the threat in our generation is not more significant than ever before.”

The next priority for A.D.F., Waggoner told me, is fighting “the radical gender-identity ideology infiltrating the law”—that is, transgender rights. Waggoner said that she doesn’t believe in transgender identity, only in “gender dysphoria,” adding, “I believe there are people who are uncomfortable in their bodies.” She cited growing numbers—the 1.4 per cent of American teen-agers now identifying as trans may be roughly double the percentage in 2017, according to a U.C.L.A. study of government data—as evidence that forces in culture, education, and the law have fuelled a “social contagion.” Schools were pushing minors too young to give meaningful consent toward irreversible “sterilization and chemical castration,” all to treat adolescent feelings of awkwardness that could be addressed by psychological counselling. It was all “absurd,” she insisted.

A.D.F. began a pushback against “gender identity” in 2014, shortly after Waggoner joined the organization, as the head of its allied-attorney program. Its first effort centered on public bathrooms and school locker rooms, implicitly portraying transgender girls as a menace to others. A.D.F. mailed out a draft policy to school districts recommending sex segregation for any spaces “where persons may be in a state of undress” and defining sex as

“either male or female, as objectively determined by anatomy and/or genetics at the time of birth.” The next year, the organization sent lawmakers model legislation that effectively offered a bounty to any student who found “a person of the opposite sex” in a bathroom or locker room. A student could sue a school for a payment of twenty-five hundred dollars, in addition to psychological damages and legal fees. Republican lawmakers introduced similar bills in at least ten states, and in 2016 North Carolina passed a version that applied to all public agencies.

The outcry was earthshaking: why were North Carolina Republicans so obsessed with bathroom encounters? Trade associations pulled conventions; PayPal and other companies withdrew plans to expand in the state; the N.B.A. relocated events; Bruce Springsteen cancelled a concert. The Republican governor who signed the legislation went down to defeat in the next election, and his Democratic successor signed a repeal. A.D.F. had inadvertently delivered a victory for L.G.B.T. rights.

A.D.F. overshot in court, too. It was defending a Detroit funeral parlor against claims of discrimination from an employee fired for announcing a gender transition and requesting a woman’s uniform. The proprietor was Christian, and A.D.F.’s lawyers initially argued that the state could not force him to violate his religious beliefs. But, when the case reached the Supreme Court, A.D.F. sought a broader ruling, asking the Court to find that *any* employer could fire someone solely for identifying as transgender, because federal laws against sex discrimination didn’t protect people who identify as L.G.B.T. John J. Bursch, the A.D.F. lawyer arguing the case, told the Court, “Treating women and men equally does not mean employers have to treat men as women.” The Court disagreed. L.G.B.T.-rights groups hailed the ruling, issued in 2020 as *Bostock v. Clayton County*. But Gorsuch, writing the majority opinion, practically invited Waggoner to return to the Court with A.D.F.’s original argument about religious freedom. The Court remained “deeply concerned” about such matters, Gorsuch wrote, emphasizing that these were “questions for future cases.” Waggoner, taking the hint, told me that she expected to bring cases “at the edges” of Bostock.

In internal lectures, A.D.F. lawyers describe a change in strategy when Waggoner took over, six years ago: a drive to pick smarter battles, including in the court of public opinion. A Connecticut case against transgender rights

exemplified the shift. In 2017, Andraya Yearwood and Terry Miller, transgender girls at a Connecticut high school, began setting sprinting records at statewide track meets. At the time, the National Collegiate Athletic Association required a year of hormone therapy before a transgender woman could compete in a female event, but Connecticut qualified girls on the basis of identity alone. Neither student had yet undergone any medical treatment, and in finish-line photographs they looked conspicuously bigger than other racers. Hulu later made a documentary hailing Yearwood as a pathbreaker. She told the filmmakers, “On the girls’ team, I just feel amazing, just knowing that I get to be who I am.”

Waggoner, who played basketball and volleyball in high school, told me, “I felt like you knew, as a woman, that this is wrong.” Seemingly aligning herself with nineteen-seventies feminism, she added, “Underlying all of this is whether women have any rights at all, and it’s shocking to me that we’re even debating this, especially after fifty years of trying to advance those rights.”

Bianca Stanescu, whose daughter Selina Soule lost medals to the trans girls, had started a petition opposing the state’s rules. A.D.F. lawyers sought out the family and persuaded the Soules to file a lawsuit claiming that Connecticut’s policy violated the Title IX guarantee of an equal chance for female athletes to compete and win. Selina was a far more sympathetic protagonist than a hypothetical student confronting someone in a bathroom. Tucker Carlson, then at Fox News, interviewed her, and she said, “We missed out on winning the State Open Championship because of the team that the transgender athlete was on.”

Waggoner told me that conservative organizations and Republican politicians across the country have followed A.D.F.’s lead. “We were the first,” she said proudly. “And, because we were willing to file suit, state legislators were coming to us and saying, ‘What can we do in our state?’ Now twenty-three states have passed laws to protect women’s sports.” The appeals court in New York is expected to issue a ruling in the Soule case soon; among many other transgender cases, A.D.F. has filed a suit in Alaska to protect the right of a shelter for battered women to turn away transgender clients.

A.D.F. has now taken on suits across the country opposing liberal policies concerning children and adolescents who identify as transgender—relatively favorable terrain for its side of the fight. Waggoner told me that an A.D.F. goal is to persuade the Supreme Court to establish “parental rights” as a constitutional principle: “It’s not that the Court is going to say, ‘Gender ideology is bad.’ But I do think the Court could say, ‘Parental rights are fundamental rights.’ ”

Precedents from the nineteen-twenties protect the rights of parents to teach their children a foreign language or send them to Catholic schools, but the Court has said little else on the subject. The late Justice Antonin Scalia, an icon of conservative jurisprudence, declared in a 2015 speech that the Constitution guaranteed parents no such rights: “My right to raise my children the way I want, to teach them what I want them taught, not what Big Brother says—that is not there.” Following Scalia’s logic, a Justice who finds a constitutional guarantee of parental rights would be as fanciful as the liberals who once detected a right to privacy in “penumbras” around the Bill of Rights. (Waggoner told me that Scalia was “not perfect.”)

A.D.F. staff in Washington are pushing for legislation that would make it easier to sue school districts for alleged violations of parental rights. Its lawyers have brought “parental-rights” cases both in appellate circuits that lean left and in others that lean right, increasing the chance that a split will compel the Supreme Court to take up the issue. In Waukesha, Wisconsin, part of the conservative circuit based in Chicago, A.D.F. is representing parents suing their school district for ignoring their request to treat their twelve-year-old as a girl (the child, for a time, had requested to be treated as a boy). And in Loudoun County, Virginia, part of the liberal circuit based in Richmond, A.D.F. is representing Christian teachers who oppose the district’s policy of letting students choose their pronouns without telling their parents. (In 2021, A.D.F. won an appeals-court decision that a public college couldn’t make a professor use a student’s preferred pronouns.)

A.D.F.’s campaign against L.G.B.T. rights can have an intimidating effect. Last November, in Asheville, North Carolina, the Reverend Ronald Gates, who volunteers as an A.D.F. community “ambassador,” appeared before the city’s school board and repeatedly addressed a transgender woman on the board as “Mr.” When the board member, Peyton O’Connor, asked the pastor

to “refrain from bigotry and hate speech,” Gates shouted, “I will say ‘Mr.’—if the blood was drawn, it would be XY, which is a *male!*” (Gates didn’t return my phone calls.)

O’Connor subsequently resigned. She told me she’d been afraid that A.D.F. would turn the incident into yet another culture-war flash point. “A.D.F. is really good at drawing people into these fights that are really of little consequence,” she told me. “It becomes a way to mobilize their base, and to draw more attention to these right-wing causes. If you look at their Web site, they use these things for the fund-raising drumbeat—like, ‘We have got queers in the public-school systems! Everybody, give us money so we can fight this evil!’ That is their business model.” (An A.D.F. spokesperson said that, as a matter of policy, it doesn’t confront individuals or elected officials, and that its ambassadors aren’t authorized to speak for the organization.)

Pitting conservative Christian parents, employers, and creative professionals against L.G.B.T. rights reminded me of the incremental approach that A.D.F. and its allies had adopted during the long struggle to overturn Roe: undermining the precedent bit by bit, by defending parental-notification laws, waiting periods, and so on. With Roe gone, the surviving precedent most objectionable to conservative Christians is undoubtedly Obergefell—the same-sex marriage decision. In some ways, Obergefell is also fragile. Two of the five Justices in its majority, Ruth Bader Ginsberg and Anthony Kennedy, have been replaced by conservatives, Brett Kavanaugh and Amy Coney Barrett. And some lawyers argue that the Obergefell majority fatally contradicted itself by calling the opposition to same-sex marriage “decent and honorable.” (Robert George, a Princeton legal scholar and another occasional lecturer at A.D.F.’s Blackstone program, told me, “If that line is right, then the outcome is wrong.”) The majority concluded that the right to same-sex marriage was embedded in the Constitution’s guarantees of due process, but in a vigorous dissent Alito quoted a precedent that “due process” includes only rights “deeply rooted in this Nation’s history and tradition.” He argued that “it is beyond dispute that the right to same-sex marriage is not among those rights.” Alito’s argument about “deeply rooted” rights is the exact argument that six Justices endorsed in overturning Roe.

By reinforcing Kennedy’s “decent and honorable” caveat, A.D.F.’s victories have also undermined the idea that a right to same-sex marriage was ever

“deeply rooted.” Shortly after the 303 Creative decision, a Christian justice of the peace in Waco, Texas, filed a lawsuit claiming that her religious conviction exempted her from performing same-sex marriages. She argued that the 303 Creative precedent “rejects the idea of a ‘compelling interest’ ” in the equal treatment of same-sex couples.

Waggoner did not want to discuss Obergefell. “I’m worried you’re gonna just use a choice little quote, and anybody that reads the article is going to think I’m abandoning Obergefell, and I am not,” she said. “I think it is wrong and it should be reversed, but I don’t wake up in the morning thinking about how to do that.”



“All this time, no one told me I was drivin’ a five-hundred-block herd of tofu.”
Cartoon by Meredith Southard

Changing the subject, she mentioned the recent Grammy Awards broadcast. Sam Smith, who identifies as nonbinary, had dressed as Satan for a raunchy S & M stage show with the trans singer Kim Petras. Waggoner said, “What I wake up thinking about is what Obergefell has *caused* the current cultural moment.”

Recently, A.D.F. opened a new front in its “parental-rights” fight: a lawsuit over teaching about racism. The school district that includes Charlottesville, Virginia, began devising an anti-racist curriculum after white supremacists gathered there in 2017 for the Unite the Right rally. Two years ago, a

middle-school pilot program was launched with a slide presentation that quoted the author and activist [Ibram X. Kendi](#): “Children are either going to learn racist or antiracist ideas. In other words, if we don’t actively protect them from this dangerous racist society, what do you think they will be taught?”

At school-board meetings, some parents objected that the curriculum’s discussions of “white privilege” and a “dominant culture” taught racial stereotypes or stigmatized white people. One such parent, Carlos Ibañez, an oral surgeon who’d emigrated from Panama, alerted A.D.F., and became the lead plaintiff in a lawsuit charging that the district had violated civil-rights laws by treating students differently on the basis of race.

Waggoner told me that the case extended A.D.F.’s defense of parental rights; schools were treating children as “the property of the state.” She argued that the content of Charlottesville’s curriculum was “way outside the bounds” of the Constitution’s limits.

I was surprised she’d plunged A.D.F. into debates about race. The suit does little “to keep the door open for the Gospel.” Instead of arguing for freedom of religion or expression, A.D.F. appeared to be *policing* the speech of Charlottesville teachers, seeking a ruling that certain lessons were off limits. What’s more, A.D.F.’s arguments against anti-discrimination protections for L.G.B.T. people had already raised awkward questions about its stance toward other forms of bigotry.

In 2021, A.D.F. sued the Biden Administration for requiring that federally funded adoption agencies work with same-sex couples. A.D.F. argued that the policy violated the religious freedom of its client, Holston United Methodist Home for Children, in Tennessee. The Administration quickly folded; the Supreme Court had tipped the scales for Holston by ruling that a similar policy in the city of Philadelphia had violated the religious freedom of Catholic Social Services. But the next year Holston leveraged the same religious-freedom argument to reject a couple because they were Jewish. Gabriel Rutan-Ram, the would-be father, told me that Holston’s decision was “blatant antisemitism.” With help from the liberal group Americans United for Separation of Church and State, he and his wife are now suing the Tennessee agency that partially funds Holston. (Waggoner told me that

excluding Jews is “not something we would advocate for,” but argued that, under certain circumstances, a religious agency could have that right.)

During oral arguments in 303 Creative, Justice Sonia Sotomayor accused Waggoner of justifying all kinds of bigotry. If a designer could turn away a wedding commission because the partners were gay, what *other* couples could be rebuffed? Sotomayor asked, “How about people who don’t believe in interracial marriage, or about people who don’t believe that disabled people should get married?” Where would Waggoner draw “a limiting line”?

Waggoner, struggling to deflect, first proposed that a true bigot would refuse to serve a whole category of people—Blacks, the disabled, people who identify as L.G.B.T. But 303 Creative welcomed gay clients and objected only to gay weddings.

Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson invoked a hypothetical photographer selling pictures of children with Santa. Although he takes portraits of Black children in other contexts, he wants these shots to evoke a nostalgic, “It’s a Wonderful Life” feeling. Can he turn away Black children in the name of his art? Waggoner was forced to concede that her free-speech argument might indeed protect racists. The Court, she noted, had “protected vile, awful, reprehensible, violent speech in the past.”

When I asked Waggoner about the exchange, she grew almost heated. She said that I’d “pushed a button,” and complained that invoking the spectre of racism was a tactic “designed to malign, shame, and bully people.”

Like the Charlottesville race case, many of A.D.F.’s recent battles turn on a similar question: Who’s bullying whom? *Have* conservative Christians, as Alito claims, become an imperilled minority, whispering in the recesses of their homes that marriage is between a man and a woman?

Waggoner’s critics say that she ignores history. Conservative Christians may be a minority now, but civil-rights laws don’t protect Black or L.G.B.T. people simply because they’re outnumbered. Sarah Warbelow, of the Human Rights Campaign, told me, “‘Minorities’ is the wrong word. The argument is for protections for *vulnerable* people—individuals and classes of people who have historically, and ongoingly, experienced discrimination in the

public sphere, in public accommodation, housing, employment, credit, and education. The vast majority of Christians are not being discriminated against in these areas of life. A baker is not refusing to make a baptismal or First Communion cake for their child.”

In Waggoner’s conversations with me, she made an argument that she got cut off trying to make during the 303 Creative case. The difference between turning down a same-sex couple and turning down an interracial couple, she told me, was in the historic roots of the motivation. In *Loving v. Virginia*, the Court had concluded that banning interracial marriage was “part of a whole system of laws that were designed to subjugate a whole class of people, out of group bigotry.” But the belief that marriage was between a man and a woman had a more dignified pedigree: “the teachings of all the Abrahamic faiths.” She said, “So to suggest that those two things are in any way similar is either misinformed or it is designed to shut down the conversation.”

Slavery, of course, was also a centuries-old tradition whose defenders cited deep roots in the Abrahamic faiths. And Abraham himself was polygamous. But, for now, most of the Justices appear to share Waggoner’s perspective. In 303 Creative, as the liberal Justices kept hammering her, Alito threw her a lifeline. In *Obergefell*, he prodded, “did the Court say religious objections to same-sex marriage are the same thing as religious or other objections to people of color?”

No, Waggoner answered, back on firm footing and playing along. With a smile, she repeated the words the Supreme Court had used to describe opposition to gay marriage: people like her were “decent and honorable.” ♦

By Dan Kaufman

By Margaret Talbot

By Paul Elie

By Ziwe

[Annals of Inquiry](#)

They Studied Dishonesty. Was Their Work a Lie?

Dan Ariely and Francesca Gino became famous for their research into why we bend the truth. Now they've both been accused of fabricating data.

By [Gideon Lewis-Kraus](#)



An observer said, "We were, like, Holy shit, there are two different people independently faking data on the same paper." Illustration by Bryce Wymer

Listen to this article.

The half-bearded behavioral economist Dan Ariely tends to preface discussions of his work—which has inquired into the mechanisms of pain, manipulation, and lies—with a reminder that he comes by both his eccentric facial hair and his academic interests honestly. He tells a version of the story in the introduction to his breezy first book, “Predictably Irrational,” a patchwork of marketing advice and cerebral self-help. One afternoon in Israel, Ariely—an “18-year-old military trainee,” according to the *Times*—was nearly incinerated. “An explosion of a large magnesium flare, the kind used to illuminate battlefields at night, left 70 percent of my body covered with third-degree burns,” he writes. He spent three years in the hospital, a

period that estranged him from the routine practices of everyday life. The nurses, for example, stripped his bandages all at once, as per the cliché. Ariely suspected that he might prefer a gradual removal, even if the result was a greater sum of agony. In an early psychological experiment he later conducted, he submitted this instinct to empirical review. He subsequently found that certain manipulations of an unpleasant experience might make it seem milder in hindsight. In onstage patter, he referred to a famous study in which researchers gave colonoscopy patients either a painful half-hour procedure or a painful half-hour procedure that concluded with a few additional minutes of lesser misery. The patients preferred the latter, and this provided a reliable punch line for Ariely, who liked to say that the secret was to “leave the probe in.” This was not, strictly speaking, optimal—why should we prefer the scenario with bonus pain? But all around Ariely people seemed trapped by a narrow understanding of human behavior. “If the nurses, with all their experience, misunderstood what constituted reality for the patients they cared so much about, perhaps other people similarly misunderstand the consequences of their behaviors,” he writes. “Predictably Irrational,” which was published in 2008, was an instant airport-book classic, and augured an extraordinarily successful career for Ariely as an enigmatic swami of the but-actually circuit.

Ariely was born in New York City in 1967 and grew up north of Tel Aviv; his father ran an import-export business. He studied psychology at Tel Aviv University, then returned to the United States for doctoral degrees in cognitive psychology at the University of North Carolina and in business administration at Duke. He liked to say that Daniel Kahneman, the Nobel Prize-winning Israeli American psychologist, had pointed him in this direction. In the previous twenty years, Kahneman and his partner, Amos Tversky, had pioneered the field of “judgment and decision-making,” which revealed the rational-actor model of neoclassical economics to be a convenient fiction. (The colonoscopy study that Ariely loved, for example, was Kahneman’s.) Ariely, a wily character with a vivid origin story, presented himself as the natural heir to this new science of human folly. In 1998, with his pick of choice appointments, he accepted a position at M.I.T. Despite having little training in economics, he seemed poised to help renovate the profession. “In Dan’s early days, he was *the* most celebrated young intellectual academic,” a senior figure in the discipline told me. “I

wouldn't say he was known for being super careful, but he had a reputation as a serious scientist, and was considered the future of the field."

The new discipline might have lent itself to a tragic view of life. Our preferences were arbitrary and incoherent; no narrator was reliable. What differentiated Ariely was his faith that we could be managed. "It is very sad that we are fallible, myopic, vindictive, and emotional," he told me by e-mail. "But in my view this perspective also means, and this is the optimistic side, that we can do much better." Take, for example, cheating. If people are utility-maximizing agents, they will fleece as much as they can get away with. Ariely believed, to the contrary, that a potential cheater has to balance two conflicting desires: the urge to max out his gains and the need to see himself as a good person. In experiments, Ariely found that most people cheat when given the opportunity—but just a little. Ariely, who does not shy from cutesiness, called this the "fudge factor." In turn, he proposed, people might just need to be reminded that they aspire to be decent. In one of his most famous experiments, he asked students to score their own math tests. Half the students had first been asked to list the Ten Commandments. Although most could recall only a few, Ariely found that, in this group, "nobody cheated." The insight was simple, the intervention subtle, and the consequences enormous.

Ariely came to owe his reputation to his work on dishonesty. He offered commentary in documentaries on Elizabeth Holmes and pontificated about Enron. As Remy Levin, an economics professor at the University of Connecticut, told me, "People often go into this field to study their own inner demons. If you feel bad about time management, you study time inconsistency and procrastination. If you've had issues with fear or trauma, you study risk-taking." Pain was an obvious place for Ariely to start. But his burn scars heightened his sensitivity to truthfulness. Shane Frederick, a professor at Yale's business school, told me, "One of the first things Dan said to me when we met was 'Would you ever date someone who looked like me?' And I said, 'No fucking way,' which was a really offensive thing to say to someone—but it weirdly seemed to charm Dan." From that moment, Frederick felt, Ariely was staunchly supportive of his career. At the same time, Ariely seemed to struggle with procedural norms, especially when they seemed pointless. Once, during a large conference, John Lynch, one of Ariely's mentors, was rushed to the hospital. Ariely told me that only

family members were allowed to visit. He pretended that his scarring was an allergic reaction and, once he was admitted, spent the night by Lynch's side. In his telling, the nurse was in on the charade. "We were just going through the motions so that she could let me in," he told me. But a business-school professor saw it differently. "Dan was seen as a hero because he had this creative solution," she said. "But the hospital staff, even though they knew this wasn't a real allergic reaction, weren't allowed to not admit him. He was just wasting their time because he felt like he shouldn't have to follow their rules."



"Well, technically, I have an abrasive personality and a tendency to alienate everyone around me, but, sure, let's go with 'lone wolf.'"

Cartoon by Jake Thompson

A decade or so into his career, Ariely's focus shifted to applied research. A former affiliate told me that Ariely once said, "Some behavioral economist is going to win the Nobel Prize—what do I have to do to be in contention?" (Ariely denies wondering whether he would get the Nobel Prize.) In the spring of 2007, he asked an insurance company if he could replace its ordinary automobile-policy review form with experimental versions of his own. Customers had an incentive to underreport their annual mileage, in order to pay lower premiums. Half the participants were to receive a form that asked them to sign an honesty declaration at the end. The other half were to receive an alternate version, which instructed them to sign a pledge at the beginning. The following year, on his first book tour, Ariely addressed

a crowd at Google, where he was later contracted to advise on a behavioral-science project, and referred in passing to the experiment's results. Those who signed at the beginning, he said, had been more candid than those who signed at the end. "This was all about decreasing the fudge factor," he said. In 2009, Ariely noted in the *Harvard Business Review* that the insurance company had updated its own forms to exploit his finding. He hadn't yet published the study, which, given its obvious importance, might have seemed peculiar. But, at the time, nothing appeared to indicate that the results weren't trustworthy. "People who go through a tragedy like Dan, with his burn—they have an insight into what's important in life," the filmmaker Yael Melamede, who collaborated with Ariely on a documentary about dishonesty, told me. "He was very aware of the dangerous desire to make experiments go your way, to bend reality to your benefit."

Despite a good deal of readily available evidence to the contrary, neoclassical economics took it for granted that humans were rational. Kahneman and Tversky found flaws in this assumption, and built a compendium of our cognitive biases. We rely disproportionately on information that is easily retrieved: a recent news article about a shark attack seems much more relevant than statistics about how rarely such attacks actually occur. Our desires are in flux—we might prefer pizza to hamburgers, and hamburgers to nachos, but nachos to pizza. We are easily led astray by irrelevant details. In one experiment, Kahneman and Tversky described a young woman who had studied philosophy and participated in anti-nuclear demonstrations, then asked a group of participants which inference was more probable: either "Linda is a bank teller" or "Linda is a bank teller and is active in the feminist movement." More than eighty per cent chose the latter, even though it is a subset of the former. We weren't *Homo economicus*; we were giddy and impatient, our thoughts hasty, our actions improvised. Economics tottered.

Behavioral economics emerged for public consumption a generation later, around the time of Ariely's first book. Where Kahneman and Tversky held that we unconsciously trick ourselves into doing the wrong thing, behavioral economists argued that we might, by the same token, be tricked into doing the right thing. In 2008, Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein published "*Nudge*," which argued for what they called "libertarian paternalism"—the idea that small, benign alterations of our environment might lead to better

outcomes. When employees were automatically enrolled in 401(k) programs, twice as many saved for retirement. This simple bureaucratic rearrangement improved a great many lives.

Thaler and Sunstein hoped that libertarian paternalism might offer “a real Third Way—one that can break through some of the least tractable debates in contemporary democracies.” Barack Obama, who hovered above base partisanship, found much to admire in the promise of technocratic tinkering. He restricted his outfit choices mostly to gray or navy suits, based on research into “ego depletion,” or the concept that one might exhaust a given day’s reservoir of decision-making energy. When, in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, Obama was told that money “framed” as income was more likely to be spent than money framed as wealth, he enacted monthly tax deductions instead of sending out lump-sum stimulus checks. He eventually created a behavioral-sciences team in the White House. (Ariely had once found that our decisions in a restaurant are influenced by whoever orders first; it’s possible that Obama was driven by the fact that David Cameron, in the U.K., was already leaning on a “nudge unit.”)

The nudge, at its best, was modest—even a minor potential benefit at no cost pencilled out. In the Obama years, a pop-up on computers at the Department of Agriculture reminded employees that single-sided printing was a waste, and that advice reduced paper use by six per cent. But as these ideas began to intermingle with those in the adjacent field of social psychology, the reasonable notion that some small changes could have large effects at scale gave way to a vision of individual human beings as almost boundlessly pliable. Even Kahneman was convinced. He told me, “People invented things that shouldn’t have worked, and they were working, and I was enormously impressed by it.” Some of these interventions could be implemented from above. Brian Wansink, a researcher at Cornell, reported that an attractive wire rack and a lamp increased fruit sales at a school by fifty-four per cent, and that buffet diners likely consumed fewer calories when “cheesy eggs” weren’t immediately at hand. Other techniques were akin to personal mind cures. In 2010, the Harvard Business School professor Amy Cuddy purported to show that subjects who held an assertive “power pose” could measurably improve their confidence and “instantly become more powerful.” In advance of job interviews, prospective employees retreated to corporate bathrooms to extend their arms in victorious V’s.

In 2017, Thaler won the Nobel Prize for his analysis of “economic decision-making with the aid of insights from psychology.” Some policy nudges did not ultimately survive empirical scrutiny (though early studies showed that making organ donation opt-out rather than opt-in would cause the practice to become more widespread, long-term evaluations suggested that it had little effect), but the bulk of them held up. By that point, however, a maximalist version of the principle—easily absorbed by viral life-hack culture—had become commonplace. Ariely, for his part, predicted that nudges were just the beginning, and held out for more ambitious social engineering. He told me, “I thought that in many cases paternalism is going to be necessary.” At the end of “Predictably Irrational,” he writes, “If I were to distill one main lesson from the research described in this book, it is that we are pawns in a game whose forces we largely fail to comprehend.”

Haaretz once called Ariely “the busiest Israeli in the world.” I met him several times in the past year, although he agreed to speak on the record mostly in writing. A stimulating and slightly unnerving interlocutor, he has coarse black bangs, tented eyebrows, and the frank but hooded aspect of an off-duty mentalist or a veteran card-counter. “Predictably Irrational” considerably expanded his sphere of influence. He started a lab at Duke called the Center for Advanced Hindsight, which was funded by BlackRock and MetLife. He had a wife and two young children in Durham, but spent only a handful of days a month in town. In a given week, he might fly from São Paulo to Berlin to Tel Aviv. At talks, he wore rumpled polos and looked as though he’d trimmed his hair with a nail clipper in an airport-lounge rest room. He has said that he worked with multiple governments and Apple. He had ideas for how to negotiate with the Palestinians. When an interviewer asked him to list the famous names in his phone contacts, he affected humility: “Jeff Bezos, the C.E.O. of Amazon—is that good?” He went on: the C.E.O.s of Procter & Gamble and American Express, the founder of Wikipedia. In 2012, he said, he got an e-mail from Prince Andrew, who invited him to the palace for tea. Ariely’s assistant had to send him a jacket and tie via FedEx. He couldn’t bring himself, as an Israeli, to say “Your Royal Highness,” so he addressed the Prince by saying “Hey.”

Ariely seemed to know everything and everyone. “What an amazing life to lead,” a former doctoral student in his lab said. “It was like ‘The Grand Budapest Hotel.’ ” He told people that he’d climbed Annapurna and rafted

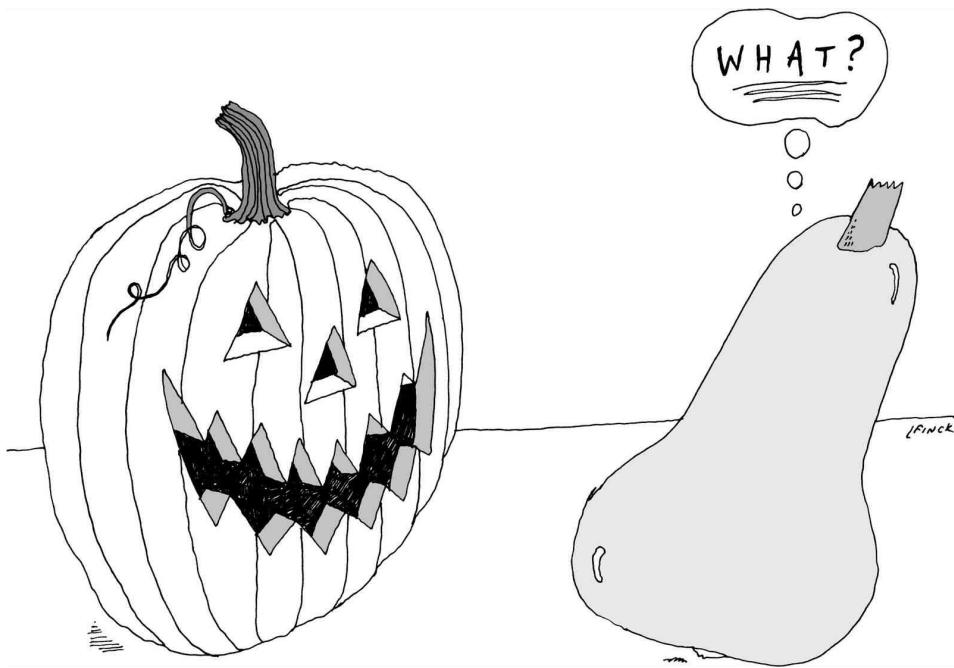
down the Mekong River. But he was also attentive. “Every single time I went into the room and interacted with Dan, it was unbelievably enjoyable,” the student said. At one talk, he auctioned off a hundred-dollar bill, with the stipulation that the second-highest bidder would also have to pay. The winner owed a hundred and fifty dollars; the loser owed a hundred and forty-five dollars for nothing. Both might have felt like idiots, but Ariely wasn’t scornful; he sympathized. His knowledge of human behavior could be burdensome. “It makes daily interactions a little difficult,” he said. “I know all kinds of methods to convince people to do things I want them to do.” He told me, “Just imagine that you could separate the people who are your real friends from the people who want something from you. . . . And now ask yourself if you really want to know this about them.”

One of his frequent collaborators was Francesca Gino, a rising star in the field. Gino is in her mid-forties, with dark curly hair and a frazzled aspect. She grew up in Italy, where she pursued a doctorate in economics and management. Members of her cohort remember her dedication, industry, and commitment. She first came to Harvard Business School as a visiting fellow, and, once she completed her Ph.D., in 2004, she stayed on as a postdoc. She later said that she went to Harvard for a nine-month stint and never left. This story elides a few detours. By the end of her postdoc, in 2006, she had yet to publish an academic paper, and Harvard did not extend an offer. One of her mentors at Harvard, a professor named Max Bazerman, helped make introductions; she eventually landed a postdoc at Carnegie Mellon. A senior colleague who knew her at the time told me, “That entire experience could plausibly have left her with a keen sense of the fragility and precariousness of academic careers.” At last, she seemed to find her footing, and it soon looked as though she could get almost any study to produce results. She secured a job at U.N.C., where she entered a phase of elevated productivity. According to her C.V., she published seven journal papers in 2009; in 2011, an astonishing eleven.

Ariely and Gino frequently collaborated on dishonesty. In the paper “The Dark Side of Creativity,” they showed that “original thinkers,” who can dream up convincing justifications, tend to lie more easily. For “The Counterfeit Self,” she and Ariely had a group of women wear what they were told were fake Chloé sunglasses—the designer accessories, in an amusing control, were actually real—and then take a test. They found that

participants who believed they were wearing counterfeit sunglasses cheated more than *twice* as much as the control group. In “*Sidetracked*,” Gino’s first pop-science book, she seems to note that such people were not necessarily corrupt: “Being human makes all of us vulnerable to subtle influences.” In 2010, she returned to Harvard Business School, where she was awarded an endowed professorship and later became the editor of a leading journal. She dispensed page-a-day-calendar advice on LinkedIn: “Life is an unpredictable journey. . . . The challenge isn’t just setting our path, but staying on it amidst chaos.” She was a research consultant for Disney, and a speakers bureau quoted clients between fifty and a hundred thousand dollars to book her for gigs. In 2020, she was the fifth-highest-paid employee at Harvard, earning about a million dollars that year—slightly less than the university’s president.

Gino drew admiring notice from those who could not believe her productivity. The business-school professor said, “She’s not just brilliant and successful and wealthy—she has been a kind, fun person to know. She was well liked even by researchers who were skeptical of her work.” But she drew less admiring notice, too—also from people who could not believe her productivity. As one management scholar told me, “You just cannot trust someone who is publishing ten papers a year in top journals.” Other co-authors, as collateral beneficiaries, weren’t sure what to think. One former graduate student thought that she caught Gino plagiarizing portions of a literature review, but tried to convince herself that it was an honest error. Later, in a study for a different paper, “Gino was, like, ‘I had an idea for an additional experiment that would tie everything together, and I already collected the data and wrote it up—here are the results.’ ” The former graduate student added, “My adviser was, like, ‘Did you design the study together? No. Did you know it was going to happen? No. Has she sent you the data? No. Something off is happening here.’ ” (Gino declined to address these allegations on the record.)



Cartoon by Liana Finck

In late 2010, Gino was helping to coördinate a symposium for an Academy of Management conference, on “behavioral ethics,” which listed Ariely as a contributor. At the time, Gino and Bazerman were researching moral identity. Ariely’s findings with the car-insurance company remained unpublished, but his talks had made the rounds, and his field study seemed like the perfect companion piece for joint publication. “I suggest we add them as co-authors and write up the paper for a top tier journal,” Gino later wrote, by e-mail.

The paper, which was published in 2012, became an event. Signing the honesty pledge at the beginning, Ariely found, reduced cheating by about ten per cent. The Obama Administration included the paper’s findings in an annual White House report. Government bodies in the U.K., Canada, and Guatemala initiated studies to determine whether they should revise their tax forms, and estimated that they might recoup billions of dollars a year. Kahneman told me that he saw no reason to disbelieve the results, which were clearly compatible with the orientation of the field. “But many things that might work don’t,” he told me. “And it’s not necessarily clear *a priori*.”

Near the end of Obama’s first term, vast swaths of overly clever behavioral science began to come unstrung. In 2011, the Cornell psychologist Daryl Bem published a journal article that ostensibly proved the existence of

clairvoyance. His study participants were able to predict, with reasonable accuracy, which curtain on a computer screen hid an erotic image. The idea seemed parodic, but Bem was serious, and had arrived at his results using methodologies entirely in line with the field's standard practices. This was troubling. The same year, three young behavioral-science professors—Joe Simmons, Leif Nelson, and Uri Simonsohn—published an actual parody: in a paper called “False-Positive Psychology,” they “proved” that listening to the Beatles song “When I’m Sixty-Four” rendered study participants literally a year and a half younger. “It was hard to think of something that was so crazy that no one would believe it, because compared to what was actually being published in our journals nothing was that crazy,” Nelson, who teaches at U.C. Berkeley, said. Researchers could measure dozens of variables and perform reams of analyses, then publish only the correlations that happened to appear “significant.” If you tortured the data long enough, as one grim joke went, it would confess to anything. They called such techniques “p-hacking.” As they later put it, “Everyone knew it was wrong, but they thought it was wrong the way it’s wrong to jaywalk.” In fact, they wrote, “it was wrong the way it’s wrong to rob a bank.”

The three men—who came to be called Data Colada, the name of their pun-friendly blog—had bonded over the false, ridiculous, and flashy findings that the field was capable of producing. The discipline of judgment and decision-making had made crucial, enduring contributions—the foundation laid by Kahneman and Tversky, for example—but the broader credibility of the behavioral sciences had been compromised by a perpetual-motion machine of one-weird-trick gimmickry. Their paper helped kick off what came to be known as the “replication crisis.” Soon, entire branches of supposedly reliable findings—on social priming (the idea that, say, just thinking about an old person makes you walk more slowly), power posing, and ego depletion—started to seem like castles in the air. (Cuddy, the H.B.S. professor, defended her work, later publishing a study that showed power posing had an effect on relevant “feelings.”) Some senior figures in the field were forced to consider the possibility that their contributions amounted to nothing.

In the course of its campaign to eradicate p-hacking, which was generally well intended, Data Colada also uncovered manipulations that were not. The psychologist Lawrence Sanna had conducted studies that literalized the

metaphor of a “moral high ground,” determining that participants at higher altitudes were “more prosocial.” When Simonsohn looked into the data, he found that the numbers were not “compatible” with random sampling; they had clearly been subject to tampering. (Sanna, at the time, acknowledged “research errors.”) Simonsohn exposed similar curiosities in the work of the Flemish psychologist Dirk Smeesters. (Smeesters claimed that he engaged only in “massaging” data.) The two men’s careers came to an unceremonious end. Occasionally, these probes were simple: one of the first papers that Data Colada formally examined included reports of “-0.3” on a scale of zero to ten. Other efforts required more recondite statistical analysis. Behind these techniques, however, was a basic willingness to call bullshit. Some of the papers in social psychology and adjacent fields demonstrated effects that seemed, to anyone roughly familiar with the behavior of people, preposterous: when maids are prompted to think of their duties as exercise, do they really lose weight?

Kahneman graciously conceded that he had been wrong to endorse some of this research, and told me, of Data Colada, “They’re heroes of mine.” But not everyone was supportive. Data Colada’s harshest critics saw the young men as jealous upstarts who didn’t understand the soft artistry of the social sciences. Norbert Schwarz, an éminence grise of psychology, interrupted a presentation about questionable research practices at a conference, and later called the burgeoning reform movement a “witch hunt.” A former president of the Association for Psychological Science, in a leaked editorial, referred to such efforts as “methodological terrorism.” When Data Colada posted about Amy Cuddy, it was taken as evidence of borderline misogyny. The Harvard psychologist Daniel Gilbert referred to the “replication police” as “shameless little bullies”; others compared Data Colada to the Stasi. Simonsohn found this analogy hurtful and offensive. “We’re like data journalists,” he said. “All we can do is inform people with power. The only power you have is being right.”

Simmons, Nelson, and Simonsohn maintain a standing Zoom date once a week. Recently, they invited me to join. They’ve been working together long enough to finish one another’s sentences—the only real pleasure in what they do. Their work can be demoralizing, and after each successive fraud investigation they swear off the practice. “It’s pleasant for maybe an hour,” Simonsohn, who teaches at the Esade Business School, in Barcelona, told

me. “You notice how they did it, and it feels great, like you wrote a mystery novel. But then everything feels bad.” Simmons, a professor at Wharton, added, “We have this unfortunate fraud detector in our brain. Obviously, it’s just an internal alarm and you have to then check, but you see results sections that stand out as ‘No no no, that’s not a thing.’” He remarked that Nelson had sent him a screenshot of a figure from a journal; with only a glance, Simmons would have bet his house that the data were fake, but the men didn’t plan to pursue the case. “At this point, it’s like an affliction,” Simmons said. “But if you see it you see it, and then it’s hard to look the other way.”

There is a propensity to write off such misconduct as a victimless crime. In the spring of 2021, Data Colada was contacted by Zoé Ziani, a recent Ph.D. recipient whose professional trajectory offered an example of the practice’s collateral damage. Ziani is slight and angular, but she projects considerable tensile strength. She grew up in a working-class neighborhood of Paris; her parents had not graduated from college, but she was enchanted by academia. “People were paid just to think and talk about how things work,” she told me. Assessing the fallout of the financial crisis, she found herself wondering how an entire industry could have developed a culture of malfeasance. “Nobody reacted before the worst happened,” she said. “Nobody raised their hands to say, ‘This is really risky, and we should stop.’”

In graduate school, Ziani took up the question of how individuals form and exploit professional networks—such as the ones she had to assemble from nothing. One recent high-profile contribution to the networking literature was a paper by Gino. Some participants had been asked to think of a time they had networked in an “instrumental” way, and then to fill in the blanks for prompts such as “W __ H,” “SH __ ER,” and “S __ P.” These people were more likely to complete the prompts with such cleaning-related words as “WASH,” “SHOWER,” and “SOAP”—in other words, networking made them feel literally unclean.

Ziani found Gino’s results implausible, and assumed that they had been heavily p-hacked. She told me, “This crowd is used to living in a world where you have enough degrees of freedom to do whatever you want and all that matters is that it works beautifully.” But an adviser strongly suggested that Ziani “build on” the paper, which had appeared in a top journal. When

she expressed her doubts, the adviser snapped at her, “Don’t ever say that!” Members of Ziani’s dissertation committee couldn’t understand why this nobody of a student was being so truculent. In the end, two of them refused to sign off on her degree if she did not remove criticisms of Gino’s paper from her dissertation. One warned Ziani not to second-guess a professor of Gino’s stature in this way. In an e-mail, the adviser wrote, “Academic research is like a conversation at a cocktail party. You are storming in, shouting ‘You suck!’”



“You know what I like about them? You’d never guess they have kids!”
Cartoon by Carolita Johnson

Ziani complied, but her professional relationships had deteriorated, and she soon left the cocktail party for good. When she told me these stories, in a wood-panelled bar at a historic hotel in Boulder, Colorado, she covered her face to cry. Simmons told me that he could name countless people who had similar experiences. “Some people are hurt by this stuff and they don’t even know. They think they’re not good enough—‘It must be me’—so they leave the field,” he said. “That’s where I started to get angry. How many Zoés are there?”

Ziani had moved to Colorado, in 2020, for her husband’s job. In the spring of 2021, she set out to replicate Gino’s study. She asked for the data, and, after some delay, received it. That April, she used an online survey platform to re-create the experiment. It took a few days, and she found none of the

reported effects. She also determined, more worrisomely, that there was almost no way the paper's effect size could have been naturally generated. "I knew there was something fishy there," Ziani said. "More than fishy."

She and a collaborator (who wished to remain anonymous, for fear of professional retribution) approached Data Colada. The team had had its own doubts about Gino since 2014, but had concluded that a full investigation was more trouble than it was worth. Now, however, they scrutinized her previous work, and found multiple instances of data that seemed to be misbehaving. Ziani said, "The magnitude of the fraud was potentially so gigantic that they didn't want to be merely one hundred per cent sure but one thousand per cent sure."

One day, Ziani came across the field study from the car-insurance paper. This data was the fishiest of all, and she sent the file to Data Colada in triumph. On a Zoom call, Simonsohn looked more closely and realized, "Hey, wait a minute. This wasn't Francesca?" The study had been conducted by Ariely. Later, they opened the file for Gino's contribution to the same paper, and that, too, seemed incommensurable with real data. It was difficult not to read this as a sign of the field's blight. Simmons told me, "We were, like, Holy shit, there are two different people independently faking data on the same paper. And it's a paper about *dishonesty*."

In 2021, the Data Colada team sent a dossier to Harvard that outlined an array of anomalies in four of Gino's papers. In her lab study for the car-insurance paper, for example, several observations seemed to be out of order, in a way that suggested someone had moved them around by hand. Those data points, they found, were disproportionately responsible for the result. The team was unable to conceive of a benign explanation for this pattern. They had examined only four papers but noted "strong suspicions" about some of her published data going as far back as 2008. On October 27, 2021, Harvard notified Gino that she was under investigation, and asked her to turn over all "HBS-issued devices" by 5 P.M. that day. According to Gino, the police were called to oversee the process.

There had always been some bewilderment about Gino. Multiple people told me they found it abnormal that Gino so closely guarded her data at every step of the process. One former co-author said, "H.B.S. is so hierarchical,

it's like the military, and it was unheard of for the more senior person to do the bitch work and let the junior person have the lofty thoughts. But, then again, if I had done the grunt work, we would not have found significant results." The networking paper that had originally drawn Ziani's scrutiny had also seemed dubious to the former graduate student. "There were all kinds of red flags about her sample size, significance, and effect size, and I was, like, 'No way, I'm done with this person,' " she said. Another professor I spoke to didn't buy one of Gino's early papers. "When you look at it, it just makes no sense," he said. But, he added, "even in safe spaces in my world, to bring up that someone is a data fabricator—it's, like, 'Our friend John, do you think he might be a cannibal?'"

Concerns, however, had been raised. In 2012, Lakshmi Balachandra, now a professor at Babson, told Bazerman, Gino's mentor, that her work seemed too good to be true. Balachandra said, "He basically said to me, 'Oh, she's such a hard worker, you could learn a lot from her.' " (Bazerman declined to comment about this on the record.) In 2015, a graduate student lodged a complaint against Gino and one of her colleagues, alleging, primarily, that Gino and the colleague created a tense and belittling environment. The more unsettling charge, though, was that Gino had repeatedly refused to share the raw data from their experiments. Once, after the student didn't hand over an analysis during a long weekend, Gino ran the study herself and produced much stronger results. On multiple occasions, the student voiced concerns to a faculty review board that Gino was playing games with data, but the board was unresponsive. A three-month investigation concluded, in a confidential report, that none of the people involved had acquitted themselves particularly well, but that no action was warranted. "What incredibly low standards Harvard Business School must have to not take concerns about data manipulation seriously," she wrote. (Harvard declined to comment on personnel matters.)

Gino has maintained that she never falsified or fabricated data. In a statement, her lawyer said, "Harvard's complete and utter disregard for evidence, due process, confidentiality and gender equity should frighten all academic researchers. And Data Colada's vicious take-down is baseless." (She declined to comment on other matters on the record.) Lawrence Lessig, a law professor at Harvard, told me he is certain that Gino is innocent. "I'm

convinced about her because I know her,” he said. “That’s the strongest reason why I can’t believe this has happened.”

This spring, Harvard finalized a twelve-hundred-page report that found Gino culpable. As part of its investigation, Harvard obtained the original data file for one of Gino’s studies from a former research assistant. An outside firm compared that to the published data and concluded that it had been altered not only in the ways Data Colada had predicted but in other ways as well. Gino’s defense, in that case, seems to be that the published data are in fact the real data, and that the “original” data are somehow not. Data Colada titled a blog post about her alleged misdeeds “Clusterfake.”

According to Gino, she was summoned to the office of the dean, who explained that she would be placed on administrative leave, and that he was instituting perhaps unprecedented proceedings to revoke her tenure. She wept. The dean told her, “You are a capable, smart woman. I am sure you’ll find other opportunities.” That day, journal editors were advised to begin the retraction process.



If we see any of my bear friends, pretend I'm mauling you.
Cartoon by Paul Noth

In September, NBC premiered a prime-time procedural called “The Irrational,” starring the “Law & Order” veteran Jesse L. Martin as a behavioral scientist, inspired by Ariely, who helps solve crimes.

“Understanding human nature can be a superpower, which is why the F.B.I. ends up calling me,” Martin’s character says. A trade-publication article about the show accidentally described Ariely’s first book as a work of fiction, which inspired Richard Thaler to joke on Twitter, “I have known for years that Dan Ariely made stuff up but now it turns out that it is ok because his book was a novel!” Ariely has also just published a new book, “*Misbelief*.” In 2020, he writes, the Israeli government sought his help with pandemic-lockdown strategy. “*Covid* in many ways was the highlight of my career,” he told me. He says that he suggested prompting people to wear masks through the altruistic message of “protect others.” He proposed an app-based solution to the rise in domestic violence: children, invited to imagine themselves as superheroes, were encouraged to report disturbances at home. That summer—in an anecdote left out of his book—he told the Israeli press he had suggested that the Army infect soldiers on a base with the coronavirus as an experiment. (Ariely said that his comments were taken out of context and that this was initially someone else’s idea. The former head of the Israel Defense Forces’ personnel directorate confirmed that he had a “very short” conversation with Ariely and “denied his request immediately.”)

He writes that he soon became the subject of Israeli *covid*-denialist conspiracy theories: in a “parallel universe,” he and his “Illuminati friends” were “in cahoots with Bill Gates” to collaborate “with multiple governments to control and manipulate their citizens.” He was called the “chief consciousness engineer” of the “*Covid-19* fraud.” One conspiracist posted a photo of Ariely’s burns, he wrote in a draft of the book, and said that his suffering had made him “want to take revenge on the world and kill as many people as possible.” Ariely describes late-night hours spent engaging with trolls online, offering, in one case, to provide his tax returns as proof that his government services were pro bono. The book thrums with a newfound pessimism; Ariely seems to have lost faith in his old parlor tricks. “It’s been a very, very tough few years being exposed to the darkest corners of the Internet and the darkest aspects of human nature,” he told me. It never seems to have occurred to him that the vanity and disdain behind a certain kind of social engineering—keeping the buffet treats just out of reach—might exacerbate ambient resentments.

It remained unclear, however, how potent those interventions had ever been. As the Data Colada team members learned more about the insurance paper, they found that it had long had an asterisk attached to it. In February, 2011, at the beginning of the collaboration, Ariely had sent an Excel file with the insurance company’s data to Nina Mazar, a frequent co-author, for analysis. She found that the results pointed in the wrong direction—people who had signed at the beginning were *less* honest. Ariely responded that, in making “the dataset nicer” for her, he had relabelled the condition names, accidentally switching them in the process. He instructed her to switch them back. (When asked recently, Ariely reiterated this account, though he added that someone in his lab might have retyped the condition names for him.)

Later, when Bazerman reviewed a draft, he was struck by something else. The over-all numbers suggested that people drove an average of twenty-four thousand miles a year, about twice what he would have expected. When asked about this, Ariely was vague: “We used an older population mostly in Florida—but we can’t tell how we got the data, who was the population (they were all AARP members)—and we also can’t show the forms.” This still seemed odd—why would retirees drive more than commuters? Work on the paper halted. Mazar eventually relayed that the mileage data might have reflected not one but multiple years of driving. Bazerman told me, “It was only then that I kept my name on the paper.”

Four years after publication, Bazerman received an e-mail from a guy named Stuart Baserman, who worked at an Internet insurance company, and had noticed the similar surname on the paper. (Bazerman’s wife suggested that he and Baserman take a DNA test. “Cousin Stu” is now Bazerman’s favorite cousin.) Baserman asked if the paper’s results would hold in an online setting. But several experimental attempts failed, as did a subsequent high-powered lab replication of Gino’s initial lab study. The effect just wasn’t there. (The Guatemalan government, with help from the “nudge unit” in the U.K., had also tried to replicate a version of Ariely’s field study with the insurance company, using tax forms, and found no results.)

Writing up the failed replication, one of the authors noticed something strange in Ariely’s field-study data: there was a large difference between the baseline mileage—the odometer readings taken prior to the study—of the two cohorts. This seemed like a fatal randomization error. The journal’s

editors asked if the authors wanted to retract the original publication. Ariely and Gino were against the idea at the time. Ariely predicted that, if anything, it was the second paper that might have to be retracted. “My strong preference is to keep both papers out and let the science process do its job,” he wrote. He and Mazar were continuing to explore the value of honesty pledges. A former senior researcher at the lab told me, “He assured us that the effect was there, that this was a true thing, and I was convinced he completely believed it.”

It didn’t take long for Ziani and Data Colada to determine that the odometer readings were inauthentic. In real life, the distribution of how much people drive looks more or less like a bell curve. This data, however, formed a uniform distribution—the same number of people drove about a thousand miles as did twelve thousand miles as did fifty thousand. Most people, when asked to fill out a form, round off unwieldy numbers to the nearest hundred or thousand. But there were few round numbers in the data set. In a small additional kink, the data were written in two different fonts: Calibri and Cambria. In August, 2021, Data Colada detailed these issues in a blog post. The evidence was overwhelming, and all the paper’s authors agreed immediately that the data were bogus. In statements, each disowned any responsibility. Gino, unaware that she was also being investigated by Data Colada, praised the team for its determination and skill: “The work they do takes talent and courage and vastly improves our research field.” Ariely, apparently taken aback, underscored that he had been the only author who handled the data. He then seemed to imply that the findings could have been falsified only by someone at the insurance company.

The insurance company in question, which was revealed to be the Hartford, was surprised to find that it had anything to do with the now infamous study. According to an agreement that Ariely signed in 2007, he was not allowed to refer to any of the company’s data without permission—permission that, according to the company, he had neither sought nor received. (Ariely said that he would never share something without approval.) In the paper, the data had been attributed to a company in the “southeastern United States,” which now smacked of deliberate misdirection. “We have been based in Connecticut, and not the Southeast, for more than two hundred years,” a company spokesperson told me. The Hartford had, in fact, completed a small pilot study at Ariely’s request, but it hadn’t been fruitful: there was no

discernible difference between those who signed at the top and those who signed at the end. The company never updated its forms, as Ariely had claimed. In May of 2008, about two months before Ariely discussed the results at Google, the Hartford sent him a single data set. During the next ten months, the company said, Ariely wrote at least five times to request additional odometer data, but it provided nothing. In February of 2009, all contact with Ariely ceased. (Ariely says that he has limited recollection of this time, and no paper trail.)

Recently, I obtained the original file of the insurance company's data. It contains odometer readings for about six thousand cars. These readings are assigned to three different conditions. About half the people were given the company's "original," standard form, as a control. (This form couldn't be tracked down.) On the experimental forms, which have the perfunctory look of a social scientist's survey materials, a quarter of the participants were instructed to sign a prominent "Pledge of Honesty" at the end, and the remainder to sign one at the beginning. By the time Ariely sent the file to Mazar, three years later, the contents had been transformed. Now the file included about twenty thousand cars, in only two conditions. A comparison of the two files confirms that the data were put through the wringer. About half the cars in the "original" cohort were reassigned to the other conditions, but many appear to have been simply dropped. Among the remaining cars, many never made it to the new file at all, and around half of those that did had their conditions changed. Observations for at least fourteen thousand made-up cars were manufactured, presumably, as Data Colada conjectured, with the help of Excel's random-number generator—the bulk of which appeared in a different font. According to an unpublished Data Colada analysis, six hundred and fifty of the odometer readings were manually swapped between conditions, which generated the study's effect. But something went awry along the way, and it wasn't until Mazar switched the condition labels that the experiment appeared to succeed. Although Ariely told Mazar that he had renamed the conditions, their names are unchanged between the two files. What, then, had he been doing when he was making "the dataset nicer" for her?

Ariely has consistently denied any role in the data manipulation. "I care about understanding what makes us tick, and I would never falsify any data on any experiment," he told me. He disavowed any involvement in the

“history” of the data, saying that he merely served as a conduit for the file; he claimed that his co-authors and the members of his lab also had access to it. Investigators of data fraud rarely have recourse to the equivalent of surveillance-camera footage, so the culprit’s identity may never be known with certainty. In September, 2021, the Hartford sent Ariely a cease-and-desist letter, warning him that, if he continued to suggest that “The Hartford had any role in the erroneous research published in the study,” it would pursue legal action. In the past two years, Ariely has nevertheless continued, privately in English and publicly in Hebrew, to implicate a nameless figure at the Hartford. As the former senior researcher told me, “What Dan says is that he thinks it was just some low-level employee who was doing someone a favor at the insurance company, but they don’t know who it was, and they can’t find out.” This theory is possible; a crooked or inept employee might have taken the file, wangled it to serve Ariely’s hypothesis, and then re-sent it using a non-Hartford e-mail address. It would then have had to escape Ariely’s notice that six thousand observations across three conditions had become twenty thousand observations across only two. (Ariely said that this was the first time he had heard of the third condition, though it was mentioned in the Hartford’s cease-and-desist letter.) Recently, since Gino was put on leave, Ariely has privately speculated that she could have been responsible. He has also mused to colleagues that a lab member could have made the changes. He told Data Colada, however, that he had been the only one to handle the data, and it would have been an enormous risk for a junior researcher to take. (Ariely said that he would never accuse anyone without evidence.) The metadata for the Excel file that he sent to Mazar note that it was created, and last edited, by a user named Dan Ariely.



"You can just leave it on that crag, thanks."
Cartoon by Lila Ash

Ariely, with his vaudevillian flair and commitment to provocation, had never been a perfect fit for the academy. Throughout his career, he performed studies that no one else would have had the courage, or the recklessness, to pursue. One study put survey questions to subjects who were actively masturbating. (Ariely found that men, in a state of excitement, could imagine being aroused by a twelve-year-old girl, animals, and shoes.) Another looked into people's attitudes about dildos and other sex toys. He once proposed outfitting service workers with protuberant fake nipples to see how the devices would affect tips.

In 2005, Ariely ran an experiment at M.I.T. in which electric shocks were administered to Craigslist volunteers, who had been told that they were testing the efficacy of a painkiller. One of the participants was subjected to more than forty shocks of increasing strength, and broke down in tears. She claims that an assistant in a lab coat told her that she would forfeit payment if she backed out. (The assistant doesn't recall saying this.) The worst part was the final dehoaxing: in notes from the time, she wrote, "I was informed that there was no pain killer; that they were testing placebos and that all the information that I had been given was fabricated."

If you sympathized with Ariely, this represented a return to the glory days of dashing mid-century social psychology. A less charitable interpretation was

that the rules were in place for good reason. “I think he didn’t think very highly of his subjects. And I was young, but I wasn’t that gullible,” the participant told me. She complained, and the university found that Ariely’s assistant lacked human-subjects training, which an administrator called a “very serious violation.” Ariely says that he was suspended from data collection for a year. According to the participant’s e-mails from the time, Ariely called her three or four times a day in the hope that they might come to a private resolution, and eventually offered a two-thousand-dollar payment to make the whole thing go away. (Ariely says that he offered only to buy her “a book on the placebo effect.”) He soon agreed—for his own reasons, he said—to leave M.I.T. (A spokesperson for the university declined to comment on personnel matters.) In an e-mail to some of his collaborators, he wrote, “Attached is the most painful paper in the world. Not so much for the subjects but for me.”

The car-insurance study was not the only example of iffy data in Ariely’s work. A few years ago, a team of researchers in Hong Kong looked into a well-known 2004 paper about the differences between social and monetary norms, and found that some numbers didn’t make sense. Ariely could not locate the original data, and conceded that he had used a “strange” statistical approach. The journal appended a formal “Expression of Concern” to the original paper.

In 2018, two researchers in the Netherlands coördinated an extensive international effort to replicate Ariely’s Ten Commandments study, enlisting twenty-five labs. Their results found that asking participants to recall the Ten Commandments led, if anything, to a slight *increase* in dishonesty. (Ariely holds that this replication was imperfect.) The researchers also encountered a medley of inconsistencies in the way that Ariely had described the study over the years. It was an embellishment to claim, even given the data he initially published, that the intervention had eliminated cheating *entirely*. Ariely maintained that the study had been conducted at U.C.L.A., by a professor named Aimee Drolet Rossi. When I spoke to Rossi, she told me that she had never participated in the study: “I thought, well, first, what a joke! I don’t believe that study, and I certainly didn’t run it.” U.C.L.A. issued a statement saying that the study hadn’t taken place there. Last year, Ariely, having learned that an Israeli television program was investigating the case, wrote to Rossi, “Do you remember who was the RA that was

running the data collection sessions in 2004 and 2005?” Rossi replied, “There was none. That’s the point.” Ariely says that the study took place, and it’s possible that it did, in some form. He told me he now remembers that the surveys were collected at U.C.L.A. but processed by an assistant at M.I.T., which might explain the mixup. He could not provide the assistant’s identity.

Ariely purported to have learned, from a dental-insurance company, that dentists agree on the presence of a cavity only about half the time. But the insurance company said that it didn’t even collect such data. The Israeli TV documentary, reported by the journalist Itay Rom, dwelled on this allegation, among many others. Ariely was left feeling unfairly persecuted. Yet he has remained almost lackadaisical in his own defense. Ariely has described the use of a modified paper shredder, which allowed him to track when individuals cheated, even when they thought that the evidence had been destroyed. In 2021, researchers expressed doubt that it was even possible to modify a paper shredder in such a way. Ariely’s response was maddeningly fuzzy. On the other hand, a version of the shredder appears to function in a documentary from 2015.

Ariely often claims poor recall. In some instances, though, he remains alert to context. In the American press, he has consistently said that he was burned at the age of eighteen, when he presumably would have been in the Israeli Army, by a magnesium flare. In 2008, around the time of the press tour for “Predictably Irrational,” the *Times*, CNN, and NPR reported that he had been injured in a military exercise, and he never corrected the record. (Ariely said that he has never given inaccurate information about his injury.) But in the Israeli media, which could more easily verify military service, he has said that he was burned in an accident as part of the activities of a youth group. Documents from a court ruling in Israel confirm that the accident occurred in an apartment, where kids were mixing chemicals for a nighttime fire ceremony. In more recent years, he has reconciled these two accounts by saying that he was injured, at seventeen, in a youth-group activity during which a magnesium flare exploded. The former senior researcher said, “How do you swim through that murky area of where is he lying? Where is he stretching the truth? What is he forgetting or misremembering? Because he does all three of those things very consistently. So when it really matters—like with the auto insurance—which of these three things is it?”

One of the confounding things about the social sciences is that observational evidence can produce only correlations. To what extent is dishonesty a matter of character, and to what extent a matter of situation? Research misconduct is sometimes explained away by incentives—the publishing requirements for the job market, or the acclaim that can lead to consulting fees and Davos appearances. As one senior faculty member told me, of bridging the academic and corporate worlds, “You see what the money can buy you, you fly business class on work trips. It tickles you in that little place, and you need to have more of it.” The difference between p-hacking and fraud is one of degree. And once it becomes customary within a field to inflate results, the field selects for researchers inclined to do so. The business-school professor told me that this temptation might be more acute among researchers studying the subject: “You’re thinking about it day in and day out and looking at the prevalence of it, and what you’re finding out is normal people cheat on their taxes and cheat on their spouses, so it feels like people are cheating everywhere.

“I know this because I fell into the temptation,” she went on. Late one evening, years ago, she was working on a paper in her office. She had run so many studies that had worked, and she had no doubt that the effect she was investigating was real. The paper was key to her career, and she was doubled over with stress. One final study was so close to coming together, but the effect wasn’t quite there. She remembers the moment with absolute clarity. “I thought, Do I tamper with the data?” she said. “We were studying *deceit*. I finally said to myself, ‘O.K., you can do this bad thing, and then you can put that away in a lockbox in your mind where it never gets opened, and you will never do this again.’ And that is exactly what I did, and I am so mortified.” The paper was a collaboration with Gino. The professor had a breakdown in Gino’s office, and recalled that Gino forgave her instantly, telling her that she was not a bad person. They pulled the paper before publication. “She may well have been doing exactly the same thing,” the professor said.

The senior colleague told me he could imagine that Gino, early in a career that felt highly contingent, had been similarly led astray. “Having a job at Harvard is really wonderful, and everybody in the world thinking you’re a genius is pretty darn fun,” he said. “I don’t know when she may have started engaging in fraud, but once she learned to sing to the evidence that way, and

get it to play her song, I can imagine that it's impossible to stop." As part of one survey, she gave participants gift cards to purchase her book on Amazon and tell her what they thought. (As a former participant wrote on Reddit, "Good pay. Shit book. Sorry to see her go.") Academic psychologists are generally resistant to clinical interpretations, but it's difficult not to read a lot of Gino's later work as the return of the repressed. There's the title of her 2018 book, "Rebel Talent: Why It Pays to Break the Rules at Work and in Life," or her 2014 paper, now retracted, called "Evil Genius? How Dishonesty Can Lead to Greater Creativity." The former graduate student told me, "On the one hand, she was this meek Italian woman who used to make polenta for guests—you would never have suspected her. On the other, some of the things she wrote . . . it's like she's trying to tell us something."



"Don't make me change the color temperature from soft white to harsh cool, 'cause things will get ugly."
Cartoon by Lynn Hsu

An enduring mystery is that, if Gino faked the data, she seems to have done so on top of a staggering amount of actual work. Sam Swift, a New York City tech executive who worked alongside her at Carnegie Mellon, told me, "It seems way easier to fake research than to do research, so you might want to set yourself up with a relaxed life style—just make up your results and go to the beach." He continued, "There is a work ethic that intersects with this ethical disorientation that I think is maybe not obvious."

Some observers have complained that Ariely, a charismatic man, has received gentler treatment than Gino. This phenomenon may also reflect the affection of his colleagues. Ariely is unfailingly generous: he gave holiday gifts and paid for extravagant ski trips and beach retreats; he provided a BMW and a twenty-thousand-dollar coffee machine for his lab members to use. When a prospective student told him that Harvard was willing to provide a better financial package, he offered a personal loan for the difference. He created what was, by all accounts, a compelling and fun work environment—foosball and office Segways—where people felt free to indulge their wildest experimental notions. He was, both literally and figuratively, an electrifying presence. Another former postdoc said, “On days he came into the lab, people would be, like, ‘He’s here!’ and go line up at his door, and his door was always open.” John Lynch, one of Ariely’s mentors, said, “My experiences with Dan have been completely positive, and I have never seen anything remotely questionable in his scientific conduct.” A lot of Ariely’s work—on helping people save money, for example—still seems to be valid, and perhaps meaningful. The former doctoral student told me, “The thing that I love about Dan was his ability, whenever you were talking with him, to so quickly distill something into an idea. It’s like you’re talking about the fabric of the universe every time.”

Yet some believed that Ariely had always had a tortuous relationship with the truth. When Ariely gained public renown, it seemed as though empirical results became a mere prelude to lively storytelling. The former senior researcher told me that she once heard him talking on the radio about a study his lab had conducted. “His numbers were wrong,” she said. Beyond this, she continued, “he misstates entire findings, he talks about research that doesn’t replicate—he just doesn’t really care that much about the facts. It was, like, ‘No, you can’t make these outrageous claims—you’re a scientist!’” (Ariely said that his papers adhere to academic standards, but that he sometimes simplifies how he communicates about his work for a general audience.)

Ariely and Gino found that creative people cheat more. And people will cheat and lie more when they see people on their own “team” cheating and lying around them. A month after he sent the modified file to Mazar, Ariely applied for, and later won, an N.I.H. grant to look into dynamics that “may compromise the ethicality of scientific reporting.” Gino co-authored a

resulting paper, which focussed on dishonesty more generally, and flagged that people cheat as a misguided act of altruism, to help others who could benefit. Honesty researchers have found that fewer people lie about a coin flip—a binary outcome—than exaggerate the number on a die roll, reporting that they rolled a four when they actually rolled a three, especially if a four had come up on a test roll. Ariely has long used conclusions like these to maintain that most people lie a bit. Other researchers argue that the averages are misleading: most people don't really lie much, but some people are prone to lie a lot. It now seems as though the “fudge factor” was less of an explanation of a phenomenon than a license for it—yet another just-so story about why a little deceit isn’t so bad after all. “I’ll tell you what the research on dishonesty says, but all that came from Dan and Francesca!” the former senior researcher said. “It’s like everything we know about this situation comes from the data that might have been fabricated.”

Ariely has told me that, “because of my injury and pain in my hands,” it has been decades since he processed data himself. It’s true that those who have worked with Ariely in the years since the car-insurance paper have had a hard time reconciling the fraud allegations with the fact that none of them ever saw him get anywhere close to data. In a 2013 interview, Ariely talked about how much he had enjoyed drinking a glass of wine while analyzing data for a study published in 2008. But by the time he arrived at Duke, a former lab employee told me, “Dan was way too famous to worry about the publication process. There were papers I could barely get him to read.” And, according to several people I spoke to, the work completed by his lab in the past decade or more has been thorough and robust. He hired people who were serious about upstanding research practices; guidelines were instituted to, for example, keep raw data and edited data separate.

Ariely sometimes spoke about a “Ulysses contract,” a way to feel a temptation without giving in to it. “Maybe this was his version of binding himself to the mast,” the former senior researcher said. “I don’t know if it’s true, but it’s consistent. There are people who are the lifetime fraudsters, and then maybe there are people who had a fraud phase and then recovered and never did it again.” The former senior researcher explained that Ariely was well aware that he lacked an inclination to tell the truth at all costs. Perhaps, she continued, he had accepted safeguards to protect himself from his own worst impulses—an example, in other words, of taking his own scholarship

seriously. “He encourages good data practices in other people and really cares about the right things. If Dan met another Dan, he wouldn’t trust that Dan.”

In August, Gino filed a twenty-five-million-dollar lawsuit, claiming that she had been defamed by Data Colada and wrongly terminated by Harvard. (A Harvard spokesperson said, “Professor Gino has raised allegations in her lawsuit that Harvard vigorously and vehemently denies. We believe that Harvard ultimately will be vindicated.”) Even if the defamation counts are dismissed soon, Gino’s suit will cost Data Colada tens of thousands of dollars in legal fees. The research community has rallied behind the members of Data Colada; a group of colleagues set up a GoFundMe on their behalf, which raised almost two hundred thousand dollars in twenty-four hours. Ariely’s lab has lost two of its biggest funders, and morale is low. Although he remains brash and witty in conversation, he also has an aspect of melancholic self-pity. He wrote to me, in reference to the confusion around the Ten Commandments experiment, “When I was thinking of how to promote Misbelief, I had the idea of creating a misbelief and exposing it on the day of the book’s publication, but maybe this is the way of karma to give me this anyway.” In May of 2022, according to a confidential document, Duke completed an initial inquiry. Investigators concluded that there was “sufficient evidence of the alleged misconduct to warrant a full investigation.” (Ariely and a Duke spokesperson declined to comment on the existence of an investigation.)

Joe Simmons has been working on a blog post, which Data Colada will probably never publish, called “The Fraud Is Not the Story.” He notes, at the outset, that there is “a very large body of behavioral research that is true and important.” But, he says, there is also a lot of work that is “completely divorced from reality, populated with findings about human beings that cannot be true.” In the past few years, some eminent behavioral scientists have come to regret their participation in the fantasy that kitschy modifications of individual behavior will repair the world. George Loewenstein, a titan of behavioral science and a co-author of Ariely’s masturbation paper, has refashioned his research program, conceding that his own work might have contributed to an emphasis on the individual at the expense of the systemic. “This is the stuff that C.E.O.s love, right?” Luigi

Zingales, an economist at the University of Chicago, told me. “It’s cutesy, it’s not really touching their power, and pretends to do the right thing.”

At the end of Simmons’s unpublished post, he writes, “An influential portion of our literature is effectively a made-up story of human-like creatures who are so malleable that virtually any intervention administered at one point in time can drastically change their behavior.” He adds that a “field cannot reward truth if it does not or cannot decipher it, so it rewards other things instead. Interestingness. Novelty. Speed. Impact. Fantasy. And it effectively punishes the opposite. Intuitive Findings. Incremental Progress. Care. Curiosity. Reality.”

The Data Colada guys have always believed that the replication crisis might be better understood as a “credibility revolution” in which their colleagues would ultimately choose rigor. The end result might be a field that’s at once more boring and more reputable. That sanguine attitude has been tested by a cascade of corruption. In the weeks after the Gino revelations, some of her co-authors have audited their work, although Gino did not provide original data files for comparison. They wanted to figure out who had collected and analyzed which data, and to exonerate the innocent—especially young people, whose work for the job market or tenure might have been fatally tainted. In one paper, which had several co-authors, data of the apparently unnatural variety were newly uncovered. Although the details aren’t fully clear, Gino seems to have had nothing to do with it. The data may have been altered by another professor. The suspicions have been reported to the university. ♦

By Janet Malcolm

By Robert A. Caro

By Nathan Heller

By Margaret Talbot

The Critics

- [How Queer Is “Frankenstein”?](#)
- [What Really Started the Great Chicago Fire?](#)
- [Briefly Noted Book Reviews](#)
- [The Musical Legacy of a Mississippi Prison Farm](#)
- [Ed Ruscha’s Calmly Collapsing America](#)
- [“Purlie Victorious” Hustles for Social Justice](#)

Books

How Queer Is “Frankenstein”?

Three novelists reimagine Mary Shelley’s life and loves and her most famous creation.

By [Ruth Franklin](#)



Shelley had a profound influence not just on science fiction but also on the literature of women's experience. Illustration by Nicole Natri; Source photograph from Getty

“Chloe liked Olivia.” When Virginia Woolf wrote this innocuous sentence in [“A Room of One’s Own,”](#) her foundational work of feminist criticism, she opened the door to another field, still decades in the future—that of queer literary criticism. “Do not start. Do not blush,” Woolf cautioned her audience. (The published text of “A Room of One’s Own” is framed as a lecture and based on a pair of talks that she gave at two Cambridge women’s colleges in October, 1928.) “Let us admit in the privacy of our own society that these things sometimes happen. Sometimes women do like women.”

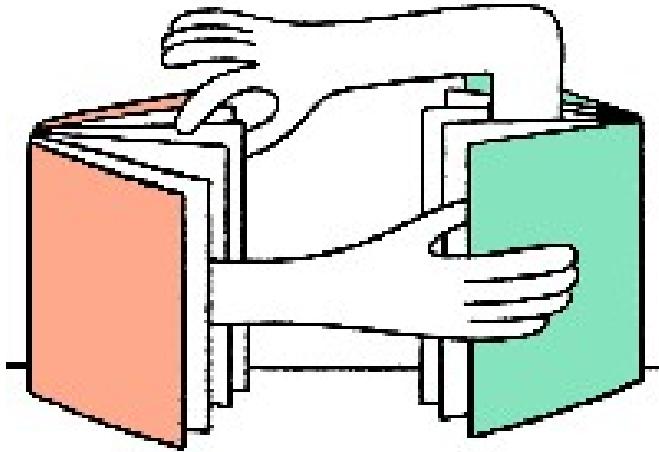
Chloe and Olivia are characters in a book that Woolf has invented, a mediocre novel by a writer she names Mary Carmichael. Ostensibly, the women are friends and colleagues, not lovers, but Woolf drops clues for attentive readers. At one point, she interrupts her train of thought to ask for

reassurance that Sir Chartres Biron is not lurking somewhere in the room. When she gave her original talks, Biron had recently been appointed the chief magistrate in an obscenity case that had been brought against the publisher of Radclyffe Hall's "[The Well of Loneliness](#)," a novel about a girl named Stephen who wants to be a boy and has romantic feelings for women. The novel had been published earlier that year, and the trial, which Woolf would attend, took place a couple of weeks after the Cambridge lectures. What's more, Woolf had just published her novel "[Orlando](#)," a fictional biography of a man who transforms into a woman. The inspiration for the book was her lover Vita Sackville-West, who accompanied Woolf on at least one of her trips to Cambridge. The implications of Biron's crusade would not have been lost on either of them.

A typical reader may skim over the reference to Biron, which is no more than an aside. But, as is often the case in queer history, words unspoken or muttered under the breath can be more significant than words said aloud. Woolf laments the paucity of models for relationships between women in novels by male writers: "If Chloe likes Olivia and Mary Carmichael knows how to express it she will light a torch in that vast chamber where nobody has yet been." "[A Room of One's Own](#)" argues for the importance of literary forebears. "We think back through our mothers if we are women," Woolf writes. If conventional literary history passes over these figures, we may need to create them.

The Best Books We Read This Week

Read our reviews of notable new fiction and nonfiction, updated every Wednesday.



Feminist readers have long acknowledged Mary Shelley as one of the most influential of those literary mothers. In the past few decades, her novel “[Frankenstein](#)”—which she began writing, extraordinarily, at the age of eighteen—has been credited as a primary text not only in science fiction, a genre that the book is said to have originated, but also in fiction about women’s experience. Critics have drawn attention to the circumstances under which Shelley wrote the novel: her first child, born prematurely, had died at less than two weeks old the previous year, and she had recently given birth to another; she then became pregnant again during the year she worked on “Frankenstein.” Her journal hints at another haunting analogue for the work of Victor Frankenstein, a student of science who creates a figure out of dead matter, stitches it together, and animates it: “Dream that my little baby came to life again—that it had only been cold & that we rubbed it by the fire & it lived.”

At the same time, the novel can be read as a fantasy of reproduction without women, giving rise to queer-oriented interpretations. Critics have noticed that the horror and revulsion with which Victor reacts to his creation, which is male, resemble the “homosexual panic” sometimes manifested by men confronted with homosexuality in nineteenth-century England, where sexual relations between men had been criminalized for at least five hundred years. The creature initially appears at Victor’s bedside as he awakens from a

nightmare about kissing Elizabeth, his cousin and intended bride, who turns into a corpse in his arms. Victor, whose closest relationship is with his boyhood friend Henry Clerval, refers to his creation as a “dreadful secret” that he can reveal to Elizabeth only after their wedding night. Even the namelessness of the creature—Victor calls it “the being” or “the fiend”—might be seen as anticipating Lord Alfred Douglas’s famous reference to homosexuality as “the love that dare not speak its name.” The Age of Frankenstein, as the critic [Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick](#) called this period in England, was one in which gay men suffered constant fear of exposure and arrest, which could result in a sentence of death or, as in Oscar Wilde’s 1895 conviction, of forced labor. The poet Lord Byron—whom Mary and Percy Bysshe Shelley, her eventual husband, met and befriended while visiting Lake Geneva in the summer of 1816—sought refuge in Switzerland after rumors spread in London about his penchant for young men.

Though sexual relationships between women were not criminalized, women whose romantic inclinations defied the heterosexual standard generally faced a choice between repressing their desires and living as outcasts. Was Mary Shelley herself such a woman? The Dutch novelist Anne Eekhout suggests as much in [“Mary and the Birth of Frankenstein”](#) (HarperVia), a reimagining of both Mary’s early life and the period during which she wrote her famous novel. Regardless of whether her biography confirms that designation—and at least one late relationship suggests that it does—Eekhout’s book, together with two other recent novels that expand the contours of Shelley’s life, offers a bold new framing for questions about where we draw lines: between queerness and heterosexuality, the natural and the unnatural, and the imaginary and the real.

The origin story of “Frankenstein” is nearly as famous as the novel itself. During the summer of 1816, the Shelleys, visiting Lake Geneva along with Mary’s stepsister, Claire Clairmont, spent time with Byron and his friend John Polidori, who were staying at a nearby villa. One evening, the group read aloud from a book of ghost stories, and then Byron challenged each of them to write one. Everyone except for Mary abandoned the effort. As she wrote in her preface to the third edition of “Frankenstein,” the premise had come to her in a vision: “I saw the pale student of unhallowed arts kneeling beside the thing he had put together. . . . I saw the hideous phantasm of a

man stretched out, and then, on the working of some powerful engine, show signs of life, and stir with an uneasy, half vital motion.”

Eekhout’s novel proposes a different origin story. Four years before the trip to Lake Geneva, as biographers have chronicled, Mary, then a young teenager, paid an extended visit to the home of William Baxter, a Scottish friend of her father’s. She became close to Baxter’s daughter Isabella, a vivacious girl of sixteen, with whom she rambled in the countryside during the day and shared a room at night. Near the house was a hill where the spirits of women who had been burned as witches were said to walk. It was in this landscape, Shelley later wrote, that “the airy flights of my imagination” first took shape.

In Eekhout’s novel, Mary discovers her powers of invention during one of the Baxter family’s regular storytelling sessions, when she takes an episode from her life and elaborates on it “until it was more than the truth.” This is an apt description of Eekhout’s own method, which picks up the seeds dropped by Shelley’s biographers about Isabella and allows them to bloom into an intense romantic and sexual attachment. The narrative unfolds in hypnotic language steeped in fantasy and allusion, poetically translated from the Dutch by Laura Watkinson. The girls examine a book about mythological gender-bending sea creatures, “half male, half female, with breasts and beards, elegant, long hair, tough, muscular arms, and a fish’s tail.” At once seductive and dangerous, the beings exert a fascination on the girls, who may unconsciously recognize in them something of themselves.

In her preface to “Frankenstein,” Shelley writes of hearing Percy and Byron discuss the experiments of Erasmus Darwin (grandfather of [Charles](#)), who is said to have observed a microbe spontaneously coming to life. Eekhout represents the potentially sinister powers of science in the figure of David Booth, a mysterious older man married to Isabella’s sister, Margaret. Booth speaks about seeing a physicist use electricity to reanimate the corpse of a criminal. Soon afterward, while walking in the countryside near the Baxters’ home, Mary and Isabella glimpse a creature similar to a man but larger, with dark skin and hair on its body—the result, perhaps, of a deranged experiment by Booth, whose odd behavior disconcerts them.

The idea that “Frankenstein” could have been inspired by the work of an actual mad scientist may seem to diminish the genius of Shelley’s

imagination. But Eekhout suggests throughout the novel that the beast, which Mary continues to see, could be the offspring of her own fantasies. The monster—if that is what it is—appears only at moments of sexual tension between Mary and Isabella. That first glimpse takes place after the girls have decided to remove their corsets and expose their skin to the air. Mary sees it again after an intensely erotic episode (which she may or may not have imagined) while she and Isabella are swimming nude in a lake, and again as she stands outside the window of their bedroom after a similar encounter, or a dream of one. “Our monster was here,” Mary says—a phrase that could refer to either the physical creature or the frightening power of their sexuality.

The monster reappears four years later, as Mary struggles to come up with a ghost story. She is tormented by Percy’s attention to Claire Clairmont, with whom he may be having an affair, and even more so by dreams of their dead child. With unusual deftness, Eekhout blurs the lines between the facts of Mary Shelley’s life and the world of the novel. The fictional Mary blames herself for not having watched over the baby more carefully: Did her feelings for Isabella mark her as an unnatural woman who shouldn’t be a mother? (Four years earlier, sick and delirious in the Booths’ house, she had a dream about giving birth in which a midwife tore her newborn daughter limb from limb, saying, “Girls like that cannot exist.”) She is also distressed by Percy’s insistence that they should both have sex with others—a demand that she experiences as an affront to her nature. After Polidori kisses her, at Percy’s instigation, she becomes enraged: “There is a beast inside her, a monster . . . it howls. It is awake.”

“Mary and the Birth of Frankenstein” is punctuated by appearances of a mythical creature called the Draulameth, which can be seen as personifying the perils of any chosen path for a queer person in nineteenth-century England. The Draulameth insinuates itself into people’s minds and lures them to the sea: “As you stand there on the water’s edge, it shows you how your life could be: all your fears become reality, your dreams dissolve in the foam of the waves. Every moment of your life will be filled with horror, bitterness, sadness, and loss, or: you go with the Draulameth.” The creature is first invoked by Booth, apparently as an attempt to frighten Mary into agreeing to marry him after Margaret dies under suspicious circumstances. But it might also be read as another monstrous embodiment of Mary’s

desires—or her fear of them. Beyond the novel, the legend takes on the qualities of a grim prophecy, in light of what would happen to the historical Mary Shelley. Within a few years, she would experience the early deaths of three of her and Percy’s four children, as well as the death of Allegra, Claire’s daughter by Byron, at age five; the suicides of her half sister Fanny Imlay and of Percy’s first wife, Harriet; and, finally, Percy’s death, in a shipwreck, in 1822.

After these tragedies, Shelley developed an intense friendship with Jane Williams, the widow of a friend who had drowned with Percy. Recalling these years in a letter to a friend in 1835, Shelley confessed that, after Percy died, she was “ready to give myself away—and being afraid of men, I was apt to get tousy-mousy for women” (a reference to sex). In the travel book “*Rambles in Germany and Italy*” (1844), Shelley’s final published work, she wrote of the art she had encountered and argued that artists should not be condemned for depicting homosexual love—“a bold stance that was anathema to most Victorians,” Charlotte Gordon argues in “*Romantic Outlaws*,” her dual biography of Shelley and her mother, the writer and political activist Mary Wollstonecraft. Gordon describes the real-life Isabella Baxter and Mary Shelley as sharing a mutual admiration for Booth—feared by neighbors for his “prodigious store of arcane knowledge,” but also for his radical politics—and writes that Shelley encouraged Baxter to marry him after her sister’s death. In Eekhout’s novel, these events play out differently. But, in its philosophy, this fictional excavation of a lesser-known episode in Shelley’s life feels true to her memory.

Victor Frankenstein’s anxiety about the birth of his creature has lately been understood as a reflection of Shelley’s tragic pregnancies. But we can also hear in it the reverberations of her own birth: Wollstonecraft died of an infection shortly afterward. The aftermath—common in those days—was a household uncomfortably stitched together. Shelley’s father, William Godwin, was already responsible for Fanny Imlay, Wollstonecraft’s daughter from an earlier relationship; he soon wed Mary Jane Clairmont, a widow who brought her own two children into the home and didn’t get along with her stepdaughters.



"This salad is going to take forever, isn't it."
Cartoon by Avi Steinberg

Though Godwin and Wollstonecraft had disparaged marriage as a patriarchal institution, they had decided to marry when Wollstonecraft became pregnant, in order to spare their daughter the uncertain fate of an illegitimate child. The narrator of C. E. McGill's "Our Hideous Progeny" (Harper) is not as lucky. Her mother became pregnant by the son of the family for whom she was a servant, was banished from their home, and died in childbirth. The baby's father, who brought her back to the family home, died of consumption shortly thereafter, leaving the child to be raised by his mother, a forbidding woman who never hesitates to remind her granddaughter of the disgrace of her birth. "An ill-gotten child is a faulty cog; living testament to the fact that rules are not always followed, that sons and daughters cannot always be controlled, that men and women do not always couple as we might think they should," the narrator muses.

"[Our Hideous Progeny](#)" might be called historical science fiction: it takes place in the aftermath of "Frankenstein," treating that text as if it were a true family history rather than a novel. Blood runs strong in this family, of whom all the child narrator initially knows is their surname—"long and sharp and foreign"—which she, being illegitimate, does not share. She grows up hearing stories of her grandfather, a businessman who left Geneva for London, and of a mysterious tragedy. One of her grandfather's brothers was

murdered, as was a sister-in-law; another brother went insane and disappeared, leaving behind only a trunk full of old papers entrusted to a British sea captain. In these papers, as she eventually discovers, her great-uncle, one Victor Frankenstein, chronicles an experiment gone grotesquely awry.

The narrator, whose name is Mary, inherits her ancestor's scientific proclivities, as well as his boldness. Growing up on the Isle of Wight, she is fascinated by fossils that wash up on the shore. As a teen-ager, she follows debates among scientists trying to puzzle out what dinosaurs looked like and how they moved. Eventually, she undertakes an experiment worthy of Victor Frankenstein, had he been a paleontologist.

And what if Frankenstein had also been a woman? In "A Room of One's Own," Woolf posits the existence of a Judith Shakespeare, sister to the playwright, and imagines the fate of a female genius in Elizabethan England: insanity, suicide, or isolation "in some lonely cottage outside the village, half witch, half wizard, feared and mocked at." The narrator of "Our Hideous Progeny" is, in effect, a Victoria Frankenstein. Unlike her infamous progenitor, who runs from the creature he animates, she acts as mother to hers: caring for it, educating it, and ultimately giving it what it needs most. Did Victor Frankenstein's crime lie not in creating a new being but in deserting it? If he had reared it properly, it might not have sought recourse in rage and violence.

Like Eekhout, McGill is concerned with questions about what is natural or normal and what is not—and the conservatism and arbitrariness with which such distinctions are made. The novel's protagonist is motivated by her sense of herself as an unnatural creature. Her world has no language for a female scientist: as McGill points out in a postscript, the term at the time was "man of science." And her interest in fossils is linked from the start to her passionate attachment to another girl her own age who identifies an ammonite that the narrator finds on the beach. Like Mary and Isabella, in Eekhout's novel, they pore over a book filled with illustrations of monsters, but this one is a paleontology text called "Book of the Great Sea-Dragons." Perhaps this is a nod to Woolf: her Chloe and Olivia are scientists who share a laboratory.

Later, in a marriage that resembles a business partnership, McGill's Mary becomes close to her husband's sister, whose status as a spinster and an invalid, in the social strictures of the time, renders her an outsider. Mary is drawn, too, to others who inhabit the outskirts, such as an Indian scientist who points out that British innovation relies on imperialism. "West Indian cotton in the looms, Amazonian rubber in the hydraulics," he says. "What wonders the British have made, with their own wit and gumption."

Evocatively and compassionately, "Our Hideous Progeny" seeks a way to tell the stories of those "whose tales cannot fit in one book, those poor creatures who remain lost or forgotten," as one character notes. Here, too, there are real-life analogues. The teen-age Mary Wollstonecraft imagined setting up a household with her friend Fanny Blood, an artist who supported her family at the age of eighteen by making botanical illustrations. Wollstonecraft was saddened when Blood chose to marry a man who Wollstonecraft thought was unworthy of her, and was devastated when she died in childbirth soon afterward.

But happier endings were also possible. Half a century later, Mary Shelley became close to a woman named Isabel Robinson, who had recently given birth to an illegitimate child. Together with another friend, Mary Diana Dods, known as Doddy, Shelley concocted a plan: Doddy, whose looks were masculine, would disguise herself as a man and move with Isabel to France, where the two would pretend to be husband and wife. McGill's narrator, too, ultimately finds a way to escape from patriarchy with her respectability intact and live a life true to her desires.

In 2011, a BBC article suggested ten ways to read the novel "Frankenstein"; a follow-up a few weeks later offered at least a dozen more, derived from readers' comments. Most fundamentally, the book has been seen as an analogue to God's creation of Adam, and as a perversion of it. If humans are created in the image of our Maker, then what Victor Frankenstein does is a crime against God as well as nature. "Supremely frightful would be the effect of any human endeavor to mock the stupendous mechanism of the Creator," Shelley wrote in her preface.

Some of the novel's earliest readers reacted violently to its implicit atheism: one called it "the foulest Toadstool that has yet sprung up from the reeking

dunghill of the present times.” But, as others have pointed out, Frankenstein’s intention is not to compete with the divine but to be useful to humanity: he hopes to ultimately eliminate diseases such as those which killed Shelley’s mother and children. And he creates only a single being. “If this is a blasphemous crime, then all parents stand condemned for it too,” one “Frankenstein” scholar has written.

Pregnancy and birth, if not as deadly today as they were in Mary Shelley’s time, can still be gruesome. Louisa Hall’s “[Reproduction](#)” (Ecco) is a work of autofiction that juxtaposes a failed attempt to write a novel about Shelley with harrowing stories of pregnancy: debilitating nausea, a late-stage miscarriage, an experience of labor that makes the narrator feel as if she had “departed from Earth,” a hemorrhage in which blood clots the size of her organs emerge from her body. Recalling that Shelley was pregnant when she wrote “Frankenstein,” Hall vividly imagines pregnancy’s effect on the novelist’s body and mind. “What am I? she must have wondered. What kind of creature is this?” The female body is mad scientist and creation in one.

In Hall’s hands, “Frankenstein” evolves yet again, this time becoming a parable for a contemporary American dystopia of climate change, abortion restrictions, family separation, white supremacy, and, finally, *COVID*—all of which give the narrator a sense that “the world had tilted ever so slightly toward the science-fictional.” The last section, a novella in itself, tells the story of a female scientist who “edits” her own defective embryos, altering their genes to make them viable. She sees this process as returning them to a “natural” condition, “the state they’d have been in if they’d been conceived in a world without pollution and global warming.”

The parallels that Hall draws with “Frankenstein” sometimes feel too direct, as when the narrator imagines a miscarried fetus as her own “creature of imperfect animation.” But her ultimate insight is resonant: “We are all monsters, stitched together loosely, composed of remnants from other lives, pieces that often don’t seem as though they could plausibly belong to us.” McGill, similarly, urges the contemporary reader to reclaim the idea of monstrousness as something empowering, especially for “women who love women, women who didn’t know they were women at first but know better now, those who thought they were women at first but know better now. *We shall be monsters, you and I.*”

Perhaps this is why the “Frankenstein” story continues to haunt us. If, as parents, we are Victor Frankenstein, then as children we are all his creature. Or, perhaps better, the creature is us: the expression of our most forbidden desires, for sex or violence or revenge, as well as of our deepest fears—abandonment, isolation, unlovability. We may dress in clothes and abide by social compacts, but our bodies know that we are still animals. Even today, as we move ever closer to the boundary between person and machine, sharpening our vision with plastic in our eyes or replacing our joints with steel hardware, the creature lurks, threatening to expose us for what we truly are: imperfect, human, real. ♦

By Parul Sehgal

By Jennifer Wilson

By Haruki Murakami

[Books](#)

What Really Started the Great Chicago Fire?

The famous disaster razed a metropolis and spread a pack of colorful lies. To sift through the ashes today is to encounter some uncomfortable truths.

By [Margaret Talbot](#)



The 1871 inferno was a case study in the politics and sociology of catastrophe. Photograph courtesy Chicago History Museum

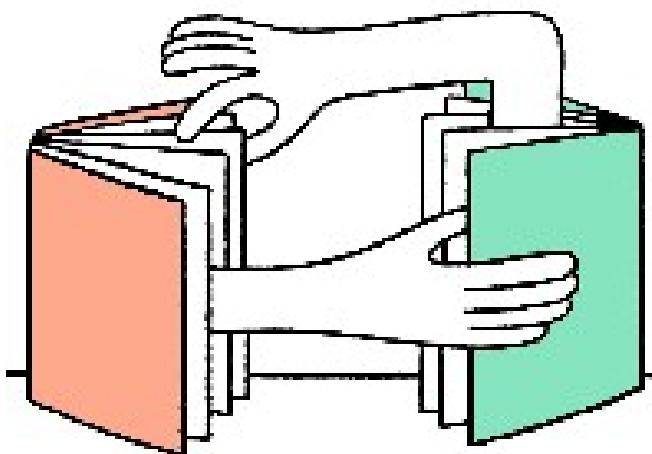
In the age of climate change, “natural disaster” is more of a misnomer than ever. We can absolve ourselves of responsibility for volcanic eruptions and earthquakes (except the ones caused by fracking). But the lengthening hurricane season, the [floods](#), and the [droughts](#)? They’ve got our fingerprints all over them. Higher average temperatures and drier vegetation are making wildfires burn hotter and break out more frequently—a development that was hard to ignore this past summer. Smoke from Canadian wildfires in June turned the skies over New York and Washington, D.C., [a lurid, choking orange](#). A [fire on Maui](#) incinerated the town of Lahaina and killed nearly a hundred people. “We can’t really call them wildfires anymore,” a climate scientist named Jennifer Francis told the A.P. in July. “They’re not wild.”

They're not natural anymore." Who or what we blame for such calamities helps determine how we respond to them. Call them acts of God or artifacts of nature's inevitable cycles, and we might just do nothing.

Big cities don't tend to burn on the scale they did in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, when conflagrations levelled vast swaths of London (1666), Moscow (1812), New York (1835), and Edo, now Tokyo (repeatedly), to name a few significant instances. Fire has become a different kind of menace, owing to modern extinguishing technology, professional firefighting forces, and, crucially, the fact that, in wealthier countries, we no longer light our homes and cook our food with open flames in neighborhoods constructed largely of wood. Wildfire smoke drifts into far-flung cities and pollutes our lungs, raising the risk of long-term health damage. Smaller towns in landscapes rendered combustible by extreme heat —the grasslands on Maui, the Sierra Nevada foothills in California—may be consumed almost entirely.

The Best Books We Read This Week

Read our reviews of notable new fiction and nonfiction, updated every Wednesday.



That's not to say that the big-city fires of the past were strictly natural phenomena. They were the products of human interaction with an ecosystem—determined by how people settled and lived within a given topography. Still, these were sudden, cataclysmic events—sheets of flame, boiling rivers, melting buildings—and thus easily mythologized; their origins were occluded by fear, wonder, and the conviction that fire was God's cleansing punishment. The rebuilding of great cities was itself a source of awe: the phoenix rising again and again from the ashes. All that imagery of destruction, retribution, and rebirth could obscure circumstances that were often deeply, grubbily—and fascinatingly—political, as Scott W. Berg shows in his illuminating new book, "[The Burning of the World: The Great Chicago Fire and the War for a City's Soul](#)" (Pantheon). The Chicago fire turns out to be a rich case study not only in urban history and the sociology of catastrophe but in how people choose to remember their collective past. For starters, if you know anything about the fire, you probably have a vague recollection that there was a cow involved. Didn't it kick something over? A lantern, maybe? And wasn't it somehow Mrs. O'Leary's fault, whoever she was? But none of that is true.

At the time Chicago burned down, in 1871, it was the fastest-growing city in the country. In 1840, three years after it was incorporated, it was still a scrubby frontier town, with a population of 4,470. In the ensuing three decades, owing in part to the completion of transportation links such as the Illinois & Michigan Canal, it burgeoned into a commercial entrepôt of some three hundred thousand people, a mercantile behemoth. Its railroads, lumberyards, and stockyards were booming, its businessmen prospering. Chicago, Berg writes, had become the "most important link in a never-ending chain of goods and materials that bound the Eastern Seaboard to the western farms and fields, and the United States to Europe and Asia." It was taken as an embodiment of American values and vices—brash, hurried, voracious, money-mad. Witness, for example, the driving appetite with which the city tore into the pine forests of Wisconsin and Michigan for the lumber it required. The seemingly endless supply of pine sent down rivers and canals and across Lake Michigan, along with the abundant land available to build the city upon, meant that "wooden sheds, barns, and town houses proliferated like wildflowers." For the working classes, homeownership was more accessible in Chicago than in most American

cities, partly because of the many houses built cheaply and quickly from northern pine.

Chicago was a pioneer in another way as well: it was a city of immigrants and of ethnic enclaves, even more so than New York. By 1871, a hundred and fifty thousand foreign-born people—from Germany and Ireland, but also from Norway, Poland, Bohemia, and other parts of Europe—lived in the city. The West Side neighborhood where the Great Fire broke out on the night of October 8th was working class and mostly Irish—“*a terra incognita* to respectable Chicagoans,” as one local reporter described it, “thickly studded with one-story frame dwellings, cow-stables, pig-sties, corn-cribs, sheds innumerable; every wretched building within four feet of its neighbor and everything of wood.” Among the inhabitants was the Leary family, on DeKoven Street. Patrick Leary, a laborer who had served in the Union Army after emigrating from County Kerry, Ireland, and his wife, Catherine, who kept a dairy barn and cows and peddled the milk, had five children, between the ages of one and fifteen. (Sources often render the family’s name as O’Leary, but Berg suggests that Catherine usually went by Leary, without the “O.”) The couple owned a simple two-room house that the family lived in, and a similar one next to it, which they rented to a family called the McLaughlins.

That fateful night, the McLaughlins were hosting a welcome party, complete with music, for a newly arrived Irish relative. Catherine Leary was in bed, falling asleep to the last strains of Patrick McLaughlin’s fiddle playing, when her husband burst in shouting that their barn was on fire. Despite the widely recounted story about a cow kicking over a lantern while she was milking it, there is no evidence that the cows had been doing anything other than chewing their cud, or perhaps sleeping. In any case, Catherine later testified that she never milked the cows at night. An alternative scenario that some historians, including Berg, find plausible is that Daniel Sullivan, a neighbor who liked to smoke his pipe in the Learys’ barn, accidentally started the fire, and was too ashamed to admit it.

Whatever the spark, there was fuel aplenty in the city at large. The weather was an accelerant, but so were social conditions and political decisions. That Sunday evening was warm and windy, following a dry summer. Fires were persistent occurrences in Chicago, and every year, Berg tells us, the city’s

police and fire commissioners recommended a slew of reforms to combat them—banning tar roofs, fireproofing doors and shutters, expanding the ban on new wooden construction in the inner core of the city, purchasing the kind of floating fire engine that New York and Philadelphia had, which would “draw water from the river and throw it fifteen hundred feet in any direction,” and so on. Every year, a complacent, tightfisted city council turned down the recommendations.

Chicago did have a professional fire department, and its new steam-powered pumping engines had eliminated the need to hand-pump water. The engines may have looked like samovars on wheels, but they were up to date for the time. The problem was that, for a city of Chicago’s size and flammability, the department didn’t have enough of these engines or any other equipment, or nearly enough firefighters. (According to Berg, there was one firefighting brigade for every forty-five hundred buildings.) Moreover, the department depended on a system of watchmen perched in high places to spot the first glints of an inferno. This was no easy task in the jumble of a vast nineteenth-century conurbation. On the night of October 8th, the watchmen on duty did not spot the flames on DeKoven Street for nearly half an hour, delaying the initial response.

Before a fire brigade arrived, people on DeKoven Street rushed out of their houses with washtubs full of water. But they were no match for the relentless physics of the fire. Neither, in the end, were the firefighters. “The wind blew every way,” Catherine Leary said later. “The fire went just the same as you would clap your two hands together.” The wind lofted small pieces of burning wood here and there, spreading fire to the east and north. Even more efficient were the whirlwinds of flame—so-called fire devils—caused by intense heat rising from the fire and encountering turbulent air above. They flung sparks higher and farther, allowing the blaze to jump the Chicago River. One fragment of burning wood set St. Paul’s Church aflame, another the Cook County Courthouse, whose bell kept clanging, ominously, as fire destroyed the cupola that held it.

For a while, it looked as if the fire would spare Chicago’s water tower and pumping station—solid, castellated limestone structures, on Michigan Avenue, that supplied the water for all the city’s hydrants. The tower did survive, but, in the early hours of October 9th, the pumping station

succumbed to the flames. With that, the battle was lost. The proximity of Lake Michigan was a taunt. One newspaperman noted, “Though we had at our feet a basin sixty miles wide by three hundred and sixty long, and seven hundred feet deep, all full of clear green water, we could not lift enough to quench a cooking-stove.” All night long, the streets teemed with desperate, fleeing people, their faces mottled with soot and sweat or scorched by flame. Many were “harnessed to trucks filled with their household goods,” an observer said, and “sometimes the trucks were on fire.”

The chaos of a great city buckling under isn’t easy to convey, and at times Berg’s storytelling left me confused about the order or the significance of events. For a clearer overarching narrative, a reader might do better with the historian Carl Smith’s brisk, gracefully written book “[Chicago’s Great Fire](#),” from 2020. Still, Berg—whose previous book was about Pierre Charles L’Enfant and the design of Washington, D.C.—does offer some vivid set pieces. I won’t soon forget his description of the doomed effort to put out an edition of the Chicago *Tribune* when the city was in flames. As the tar roof of the *Tribune* building melted and windows cracked, the paper’s publisher, Joseph Medill, and its staff kept working to produce a news-packed edition. Then, at 7 a.m. on Monday, “an ashen-faced man ran upstairs from the basement presses” to report that the paper’s iron rollers had “melted into a mass.”

Medill told his employees to evacuate, shouting to some of the men to grab the bound volumes that contained every past issue of the paper. As they reached the sidewalk with their stashes of history, the brittle old newspapers began to smoke. When the binders got too hot to hold, their would-be rescuers dropped them on the sidewalk, and ran from a fire that was now less than a block away. (Most issues from the first few years of the paper’s publication were lost.) “Less than half an hour after Medill and his charges escaped with their lives and little else, the Tribune building’s roof and floors gave way,” Berg reports. It was one of many Chicago institutions—the elegant Palmer House hotel, the famous department store co-founded by Marshall Field, the offices of nearly all the city’s other newspapers—reduced to rubble.



Cartoon by Emily Bernstein

At last, as the fire moved into the North Side, where houses were farther apart, it began to run out of fuel. Then, in the early hours of October 10th, rain started to fall. By the time the fire was spent, it had destroyed three and a half square miles of the city, wrecked seventeen thousand five hundred buildings, and left some hundred thousand people homeless. The county coroner eventually tallied the number of dead at three hundred, a figure that is still cited but is, as Berg argues, surely far too low: "Counting bodies was an exercise in gross overconfidence in the wake of a fire that had melted steel, marble, and glass" and was certainly hot enough to have disintegrated human bones. What's more, Chicago's population, especially the poor, included many residents who were nonliterate or spoke no English, moved often, or had no fixed address. The estimates have ranged widely, just as the count did for months in the wake of 9/11. By locking down the figure of three hundred, the county coroner and his staff perpetuated a lie. But, Berg writes, it was a lie that many Chicagoans were eager to believe because, in light of all that destruction, it was surprisingly small. It seemed to say that Chicago was not cursed but lucky.

In the century and a half since the fire, though, the lie about it that has proved most impervious—fireproof, you might say—is the one blaming Mrs. O'Leary and her cow. Songs have been written about it—"A Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight" accuses "Old Lady Leary" of leaving a lantern in

the shed. [Norman Rockwell](#) painted “Catherine O’Leary” milking a cow he named Daisy. Popular lore keeps the story alive even today. It doesn’t seem to matter that historians contradict this version of events, or that the Chicago City Council officially exonerated Catherine Leary back in 1997. Nowadays, the reasons for its persistence might be more or less harmless—the fire did, after all, start in the barn; cows are pleasing to draw or paint or even think about; the tale has a memorable, nursery-rhyme-like logic. But, as Berg and other historians have shown, the scapegoating of Leary was harmful. The accusations against her drew on and helped propagate noxious stereotypes of Irish immigrants. They served up class snobbery with a side of misogyny.

The story originated in rumor-filled and—in the style of the day—source-free newspaper accounts that soon appeared. These often portrayed Leary, who was in her early forties at the time, as “an old hag.” In some versions, she’s slatternly, or her husband insufficiently commanding. If she hadn’t been late with her milking, she wouldn’t have needed a lantern, a pair of reporters, Elias Colbert and Everett Chamberlin, wrote in one of the instabooks that cropped up after the fire, and if she’d “plied the dugs of the animal with proper skill” the cow wouldn’t have kicked over the lantern: “The blame of setting the fire rests on the woman who milked or else upon the lazy man who allowed her to milk.” In other versions, she’s outright nefarious, setting the fire on purpose. The *Chicago Times* fantasized that she did so to avenge the city’s having dropped her from its relief rolls.

Owing to the new telegraph network in the United States—and the completion of a transatlantic cable, in 1866, extending that network to Europe—the Chicago fire was, as Carl Smith writes, “the first instantaneously reported international news event, details of which reached an audience in the tens of millions while it was happening.” Such coverage brought donations pouring into Chicago from around the country. It also seeded false information, like the story about Mrs. Leary, far and wide. In reality, the Learys seem to have been hardworking, neighborly, and well liked. Their tenant Mrs. McLaughlin would later say of Catherine that “an honest woman I would never ask to live with.” Yet lookie-loos were soon thronging the neighborhood, hoping for a glimpse of a woman who might as well have been riding a broomstick. Catherine testified before the city commission investigating the fire, which concluded that she had not started it. Then she spent the rest of her life—she died in 1895—trying to trade in

her pariah status for her former obscurity. According to her youngest son, James Patrick O’Leary, who grew up to be a Chicago gambling and entertainment kingpin known as Big Jim, his parents told him that the story about the cow and the lantern was a “monumental fake.” Berg wonders if Big Jim fostered his own outsized Chicago legend to try to eclipse that of his long-suffering mother and her innocent cow.

Like the stickiness of Mrs. Leary’s bad rap, the political ramifications of the fire were both unpredictable and long-lasting. Berg is particularly sharp on this theme. The fire came at a time when Chicago’s Yankee business élites had begun to worry about the electoral clout of immigrant neighborhoods, and their susceptibility to the kind of Tammany Hall machine politics that lately had taken over New York City. In the November municipal election after the fire, with Chicago newspapers stoking false rumors of urban lawlessness, Joseph Medill, of the *Tribune*, managed to get himself elected mayor. Medill was one of history’s classic mixed bags. He had been a fervent abolitionist and an influential early backer of Abraham Lincoln’s bid for the Presidency. His dedication to his newspaper was immense. He was also a bit of a dry stick—gaunt and prematurely aged in appearance, highly suspicious of Irish Catholic immigrants and of the working class. Besides the *Trib*, his great passions, if they may be called that, were civil-service reform, temperance, and habits of personal economy. He was not, in other words, destined to be a bigger-than-life Chicago pol.

Even before Medill was elected, the city had tried out versions of high-handed, business-backed, we-know-what’s-best-for-you governance. In October, the maintenance of “good order and peace” in the city had been handed over to Philip Sheridan, a former Union general and a veteran of the brutal Indian Wars. That experiment in martial law lasted all of two weeks, until a Sheridan militiaman shot and killed an attorney who didn’t respond to his who-goes-there signal. Meanwhile, the city entrusted its vast relief effort to a private agency, the Chicago Relief and Aid Society; it was run by one of Chicago’s most illustrious lawyers, Wirt Dexter, and its accounts were overseen by one of its wealthiest businessmen, George Pullman, of train-car fame. The Society did provide thousands of displaced Chicagoans with food, clothing, and lumber to build houses. But its Gradgrindian dedication to red tape, data collection, and the sorting of the deserving from the undeserving inspired resentment. (Applicants seeking donated materials to rebuild their

homes had, for example, to produce testimonials to their character, from a “reliable and well-known” citizen. Well known to whom? And how to track down such a person when you’d lost everything and might not read or write, or speak English?) It made for a striking contrast with an aid group from Cincinnati, which arrived in town and ladled out soup to anyone who wanted it, no questions asked.

Medill’s attempt to clean up the joint and persuade Chicago’s working class to obey its betters would soon go awry. A move to close saloons on Sundays got German and Irish citizens marching in the streets. Still more provoking was Medill’s vow to ban all wooden buildings within the city limits. That was all well and good if you were rich enough to build with stone or brick, but most working-class voters weren’t. Wages had been frozen since the fire; rents had not. Disgruntled Chicagoans protested what they had begun calling the “relief, temperance, and fire-limits swindle.” The city council refused to go along with Medill’s strict proposal—the council expanded the zone at the core of the city where wooden buildings could not be erected, but did not ban them beyond that. Defeated by this and other frustrations of office, Medill resigned before the end of his term.

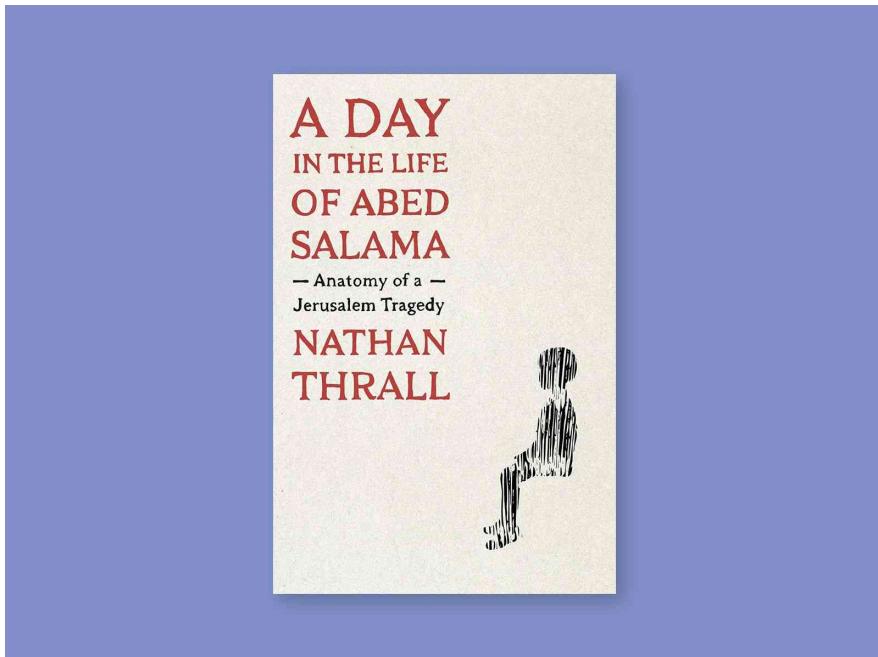
“If Medill’s tenure produced a single political legacy,” Berg writes, it was a “surge of power and cohesion displayed by Chicago’s working class.” By the eighteen-eighties, Chicago had become the center of labor politics and the demand for the eight-hour day, of socialism and anarchism. As the city rebuilt, developing in the early twentieth century into a showcase of ambitious skyscraper architecture and modern capitalism, it was also, Berg observes, becoming a town of “politically powerful working men and women.”

Remarkably, the fire barely interrupted Chicago’s explosive growth—indeed, the scope of its rebuilding project attracted trainloads of workers and schemers and deep-pocketed entrepreneurs. By the turn of the century, Chicago’s population had hit a million, making it the nation’s second-largest city. The fact that the fire of 1871 (and another, smaller one in 1874) destroyed so much housing stock, Berg notes, helped to “make downtown a hothouse garden for all kinds of entrepreneurial and architectural innovations”—everything from mercantile enterprises like the Montgomery Ward warehouse and the splendidly reconstructed Marshall Field department

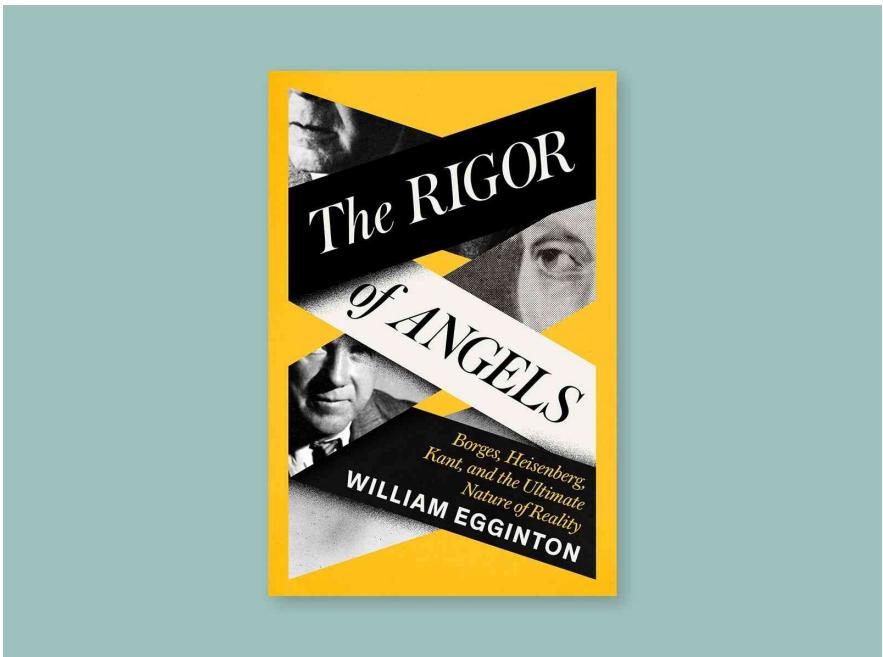
store to the country's first skyscraper, the Home Insurance Building, completed in 1885. Metal and glass became a new way to build, and Chicago reëmerged with a spectacular, pinnacled skyline, and a permanent pride in it. (The arrival in the city of a young architect named Louis Sullivan just two years after the fire was serendipitous.)

Still, historical memory works in curious ways. On October 8, 1871, the same night that the Great Fire broke out, a wildfire destroyed the town of Peshtigo, Wisconsin. As many as fifteen hundred people died. Even if the figure of three hundred dead for the Chicago fire is low, we can assume that many more were killed in Peshtigo. By some accounts, it remains the deadliest fire in American history. Yet the coverage of it was dwarfed by that of the Chicago conflagration, and few people today have heard of the Peshtigo calamity. The spectacle of a great city, a capital of pleasure-seeking and ceaseless striving, laid low—and its determination to come back bigger and more modern—made for a better story, then and now, than the levelling of some town in the middle of nowhere. But the two fires were intimately entwined. Peshtigo was a town of lumber mills, where the white pines from northern forests were turned into wood for Chicago's use. The Peshtigo blaze and a handful of other wildfires in Wisconsin and Michigan that summer were, Berg writes, in large part the consequence of “the clear-cutting and grading associated with thousands of miles of new woodland rail lines,” which eliminated natural windbreaks and land rises, and created wind tunnels in the arboreal gaps. The Peshtigo fire presaged the fires that now pose a larger threat than urban ones like Chicago's do, and in that respect, anyway, it has a claim to greater significance.

Late this summer, I visited the Chicago History Museum, where you can learn a lot about the Great Fire from its thoughtful exhibits. Downstairs is a room of dioramas, constructed in the nineteen-thirties, representing various Chicago scenes. I stood staring for a while at one showing the fire—clusters of neat, small buildings menaced by a wall of orange flames like a tidal wave. I could almost imagine myself in the scene—the heat rising up through the soles of my feet as I ran. Behind me, a man walked by with a young teen-ager, maybe his son. “Hey, what caused that fire, anyway?” the boy asked. “Some lady,” the older man said. “Some lady did it.” ♦



[**A Day in the Life of Abed Salama**](#), by *Nathan Thrall* (*Metropolitan*). In 2012, a catastrophic traffic collision in Jerusalem left a school bus filled with Palestinian children on fire for more than thirty minutes before emergency workers arrived. In this chronicle of the disaster, Thrall, a Jerusalem-based journalist, follows the father of one of the victims, and examines the response to the crash within the context of modern Palestinian dispossession. He depicts Israel’s “architecture of segregation”—encompassing checkpoints and byzantine transit rules—which needlessly complicated the rescue, leading to a delay that left “small, scorched backpacks” on the asphalt. Thrall’s account is a powerful evocation of a two-tiered society that treats children as potential combatants.

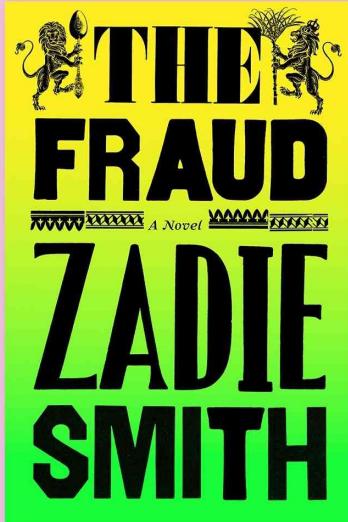


[**The Rigor of Angels**](#), by William Egginton (Pantheon). In this sprightly intellectual history, Egginton explores the lives of the philosopher Immanuel Kant, the writer Jorge Luis Borges, and the physicist Werner Heisenberg in order to plumb some of the most profound questions of physics and philosophy: the limits of knowledge, the structure of space and time, free will. These thinkers' battles against “metaphysical prejudices” resulted in complementary, if counterintuitive, insights into the nature of reality; though working in different realms, all three concluded that “we are, and ever will be, active participants in the universe we discover.” While detailing his subjects’ theories, Egginton also foregrounds their relationships, suggesting that world-shaping ideas can be inspired by the vagaries of emotional life.

[**The Best Books of 2023**](#)

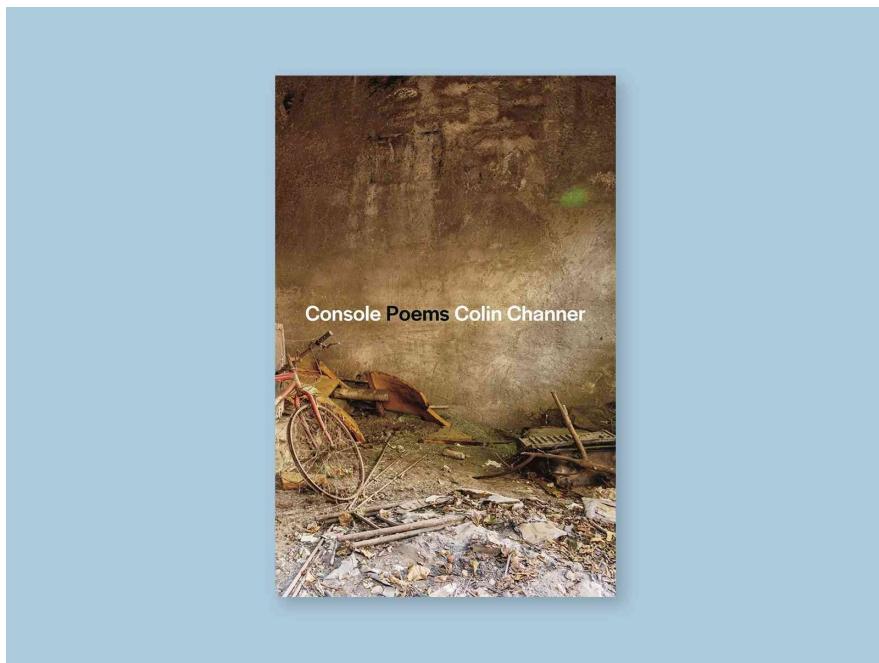


Read our reviews of the year's notable new fiction and nonfiction.



[The Fraud](#), by Zadie Smith (Penguin Press). This kaleidoscopic novel revolves around the real-life trial of a man who, in late-nineteenth-century London, claimed to be the heir to a fortune. Smith relates the impressions of a housekeeper as she observes others' opinions of the case, which transfixed

—and split—the public, and was complicated by the testimony of a formerly enslaved man from Jamaica. The sprawling story is filled with jabs at the hypocrisy of the upper class, characters who doubt institutions, and corollaries of the pugilistic rhetoric of contemporary populism; with characteristic brilliance, Smith makes the many parts of the tale cohere. “Human error and venality are everywhere, churches are imperfect, cruelty is common, power corrupt, the weak go to the wall,” the housekeeper reflects.



Console, by *Colin Channer* (*Farrar, Straus & Giroux*). Music is a vital force in this eclectic poetry collection, which travels between the author’s native Jamaica, his adopted home of New England, and other locales. Dub and reggae inspire and inform Channer’s dense, lushly textured compositions. Contemplating place and displacement, the poems emphasize the palimpsestic, remix-like effect produced by emigration and exile: the memory of a left-behind landscape merging with its current reality, as well as with environments more foreign to the transplant. Elegiac underpinnings give way to lyrical exuberance: as Channer writes in “Redoubt,” a poem set against the ruins of Lee (Scratch) Perry’s famed recording studio, “Suffer was a genre, / keening took into his console / then put out.”

[Pop Music](#)

The Musical Legacy of a Mississippi Prison Farm

The new album “Some Mississippi Sunday Morning” collects gospel songs recorded inside a notorious penitentiary.

By [Hanif Abdurraqib](#)



Parchman Farm has a special connection to the Delta blues, because several of the best Mississippi bluesmen did stints there. Illustration by Diego Mallo

The best-known version of the gospel song “I Give Myself Away,” by Pastor William McDowell, is an opulent display of religious praise. For more than nine minutes, backed by swelling instrumentation and a full choir, McDowell sings of surrendering himself in lines such as “Lord, my life is in your hands.” A stripped-down but equally powerful version of the song opens the new album “Some Mississippi Sunday Morning,” which was recorded inside the Mississippi State Penitentiary, a maximum-security prison also known as Parchman Farm. Around three minutes long, with piano as the lone accompaniment, the song begins with a single vocalist repeating the line “I give myself away / so you can use me.” Midway through, another singer joins in, and then another; the language doesn’t

change, but the vocals accumulate, stunning and imperfect. If you feel uncertain about the existence of God—and therefore about the meaning of words of surrender echoing through the halls of a place like Parchman—you may find the performance only heartbreaking.

“S.M.S.M.” was recorded by Ian Brennan, a California-based producer who has collaborated with artists around the world, from the northern-Mali collective Tinariwen to a group of Cambodian musicians who survived the Khmer Rouge. Brennan worked for three years to get clearance to record at Parchman. He was finally granted a date this past February, with less than a week’s notice. He took a red-eye to Mississippi, arriving early on a Sunday morning, in time for church services. The prison chaplains had assembled a group of singers, who are credited on “S.M.S.M.” as Parchman Prison Prayer. The performers make the most of the limited resources at their disposal. Parts of the body become percussive instruments; two singers have the impact of an entire choir. The most captivating songs on the album rely almost entirely on the human voice, and some are tunes that you may recognize even if you’ve never set foot in a church.

The gruesome history of Parchman dates back to 1901, when the State of Mississippi bought up former plantation land in the heart of the Delta. Work on Parchman’s eighteen thousand acres took place from sunup to sundown. For years, the head driver would mete out punishment with a leather strap known as Black Annie. Lately, the brutalities at Parchman have taken more insidious forms—inoperable showers and toilets, cells that lack mattresses and are overrun with rats. In 2022, a U.S. Department of Justice report found reasonable cause that the facility violated the constitutional rights of the people incarcerated there, nearly seventy per cent of whom are Black.

Within this container of cruelty, amid atrocities born of the mother of all atrocities, there was always music. There were work songs, through which incarcerated people could occupy their voices and their minds while their bodies toiled. There were field hollers, rising above the repetitive sounds of sharecropping—upbeat if the work was moving quickly, slower when it had begun to take its toll. There were songs that were also pleas: for food, for water, for rest, for a lover left behind, for someone beyond the walls who might still have an ear to the wind. There were songs of devotion, asking for

mercy and forgiveness, and also preaching the gospel of giving oneself over to God.

Parchman Farm is not the only such institution with a rich musical legacy. In 1959, the folklorist Harry Oster recorded an album at the Louisiana State Penitentiary, a.k.a. Angola Farm. But Parchman has a special connection to the Delta blues, because several of the best Mississippi bluesmen—among them Booker (Bukka) White, R. L. Burnside, and Big Bad Smitty—did stints there. The blues is a mythological genre, smuggling wisdom inside tales of evils and exploits which sometimes strain credulity. But the blues songs that came out of Parchman functioned as a form of testimonial. Musicians would get out of prison and, through song, bring word of what it was like on the inside. White, on “Parchman Farm Blues,” recorded in 1940, shortly after his release from the farm, sings of starting work “just at break of day” and issues a warning: “Oh, listen, you men, I don’t mean no harm / if you wanna do good, you better stay off ol’ Parchman farm.”

The music of Parchman was preserved from the inside, too, thanks to the work of Alan and John Lomax, a father-son musicologist duo specializing in field recordings. The Lomaxes visited various prisons across the Southern United States, but they returned most often to Parchman, recognizing that work songs were the ones least likely to survive beyond the horrors of the prison fields. They were not as salacious or as narratively captivating as other blues tales; they wouldn’t translate to the radio or the stage. The Lomaxes’ early recordings at Parchman, from the nineteen-thirties, were recreations of the sounds of the work line. Technology wouldn’t allow them to capture many voices at once, so they held small-group sessions and then attempted to piece together the songs as they might sound in the middle of a workday, under a high and vicious sun. Back then, Parchman Farm had a women’s camp. One of my favorite Lomax recordings is of a group of women singing the Reconstruction-era spiritual “Oh, Freedom!” in clean unison over the harsh static of the tape. The words are at times drowned out, but the sharpness of the harmonies is not. The voices ascend achingly on the words “And before I’d be a slave / I’d be buried in my grave.”

In the late forties, Alan Lomax went back to Parchman to record both songs and interviews, which were later compiled on an album. During one interview, Lomax asks a man named Bama what makes a good work-song

leader. It doesn't matter if a person can "sing just like Peter could preach," Bama replies. If "he didn't know what to sing about, well, he wouldn't do no good." By contrast, he continues, "here's a fella, maybe he ain't got no voice for singing, but he's been coöperatin' with the people so long, and been on the job so long . . . he knows just exactly how it should go." I thought of Bama's words while listening to "S.M.S.M." Unlike the Lomaxes' recordings, it is focussed entirely on gospel, but both projects feature people seeking salvation, hoping to be released, through song, either from their earthly woes or from eternal ones. Bama's point, I think, was that a leader's singing voice mattered less than whether he knew what to say to help men on the line achieve deliverance.

It must be said, though, that there is nothing lacking about the voices featured on "S.M.S.M." A solo version of "Hosanna" features a singer with a soothing, sweet tenor accompanied only by what sounds like some faint tapping on a chair or a table. "Locked Down, Mama Prays for Me," one of two original pieces on the album, is a spoken-word number performed over a background of fingers snapping and a vocalist singing the Canton Spirituals song "Ride This Train," which serves as both a joyful invitation and a gentle word of caution. ("The Lord God says he's coming back / but he didn't say when.") "Running for My Life," by Lee Williams and the Spiritual QC's, becomes, "I Gotta Run," a fifty-second free-form repetition of the titular lyrics. Only at the very end of the track is the thought completed, by a group singing, hauntingly, in the background, ". . . while the blood keeps running warm in my veins."

Many of the small miracles of Parchman Prison Prayer hinge on the power of voices working in unison. A gospel choir melds singers into a single sonic entity. Incarceration collapses individuality in a different way. I've spent time in a county jail more than once. On the first occasion, when I was twenty, the guards would slap the cell doors with their nightsticks, metal against metal, to scare folks into staying awake. It worked on me, as I lay on the top bunk of a cell. My cellmate, who had been in for significantly longer, clocked my quickened breathing and chuckled. "Don't stress that shit," he said. "If they do something to you, they gonna do it to all of us." At the time, I read this as a way of saying, "We've got your back." But now I think he meant that suffering there took place collectively: even if it was doled out unevenly at any given moment, no one remained untouched.

I approached “S.M.S.M.” with some skepticism, not because I doubted Brennan’s impulse to record the sounds at Parchman but because of how such recordings inevitably interact with the outside world. There are people who have never set foot in a prison, have never written to anyone inside or put money on their books. Surely, many of those individuals nonetheless understand that prison is hell. But I worry that the incarcerated life as a trope in entertainment encourages the average person on the outside to consume the horrors inflicted inside while remaining at a safe remove. A show or a story or even a song from prison might have the paradoxical effect of estranging people from what makes “S.M.S.M.” what it is—a document of the work that it takes to survive in a place not made for survival.

I ultimately let go of my reservations, both because the songs themselves are so beautifully rendered and because, in the end, “S.M.S.M.” seems made less for the public than for the men singing. They are simply doing what they do on Sundays, waking up and praising the Lord; they’d do the same whether or not the tapes were rolling. I’ve never been clear on what’s supposed to happen to those people who are granted entry to the promised land—if it’s deemed that you have suffered more than others have, does your corner of Heaven come with more robust comforts, or do the saved all get the same eternal life? I do, however, believe in the power of men gathering, in an inhumane place, to wrestle back some slice of their humanity by saying, “Whatever they haven’t already taken from me, I will surrender to You.” It’s enough to make me imagine a promised elsewhere, though hardly for my own sake. ♦

By Elizabeth Nelson

By Helen Rosner

By Jay Caspian Kang

By Teresa Burns Parkhurst

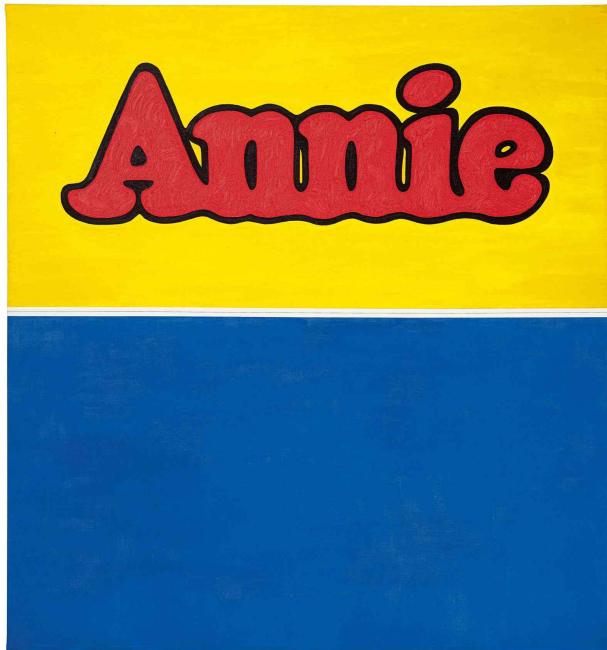
By [Jackson Arn](#)

In a past life, he was an arsonist. A bold accusation, I realize, but nobody makes *that* many paintings, drawings, and photographs of fire without some buried lust for the real deal. By the time I left “Ed Ruscha / Now Then,” an XXL retrospective at *MOMA* comprising some two hundred works produced between the Eisenhower years and the present, I had lost count of the burning things, which are as lowbrow as a diner and as la-di-da as the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. The title of Ruscha’s 1964 photo series, “Various Small Fires and Milk,” could have been, minus the milk, a reasonable title for the exhibition itself, if he hadn’t painted various large ones, too.

The strangest thing about these fires, other than their quantity, is their calm. There are no people running out of *LACMA*, and if there were you get the feeling they’d be fine. Tranquillity, often simple but rarely simpleminded, may be Ruscha’s essential quality as an artist. His work—preoccupied with mass media, the mother tongue of the twentieth century—is universal yet cozily regional, a trick he pulls off because the region in question is Los Angeles, where much of the world’s mass media is born. Other postwar artists spoke a similar dialect, but Ruscha’s best work has a coiled concision that makes Andy Warhol, Jasper Johns, and Robert Rauschenberg seem heavy-handed. “Large Trademark with Eight Spotlights” (1962), a half painting, half drawing of the Twentieth Century Fox logo, is as flashy as the film industry but as devil-may-care as a shrug; everything flows from (and back to) the half-assed pencil scrawls in the lower right corner. You’re charmed by something you see straight through.

Like many notable Angelenos, Ruscha (pronounced “rew-shay”) comes from somewhere else: Omaha, in this case, though he spent most of his childhood in Oklahoma City. An acceptance letter from the Chouinard Art Institute brought him West in 1956, when he was a teen-ager. By the sixties, he had assembled the tool kit he still uses today: bright colors, logos recognizable even when fragmented, language that could mean any number of things but is also a thing itself. For a while, he had a job as a sign painter, and it shows: sometimes his early work contains familiar pop-culture artifacts and sometimes it doesn’t, but it always speaks in the booming voice of the billboard. Communication—usually represented by a single, titular

word in a monochrome field—is a physical act. Whether the word is bluntly English (“Boss,” 1961) or fancily French (“Metropolitain,” from the same year) or slyly allusive (“Annie,” from 1962, featuring the typeface of the “Little Orphan Annie” comic), the paint is slopped or scratched across the picture plane. Words signify the wrong thing, or nothing in particular. “Annie” is orphaned from the rest of its title. “Boss” presides over an office of zero.



“Annie” (1962). Art work © 2023 Ed Ruscha; Photograph by Robert McKeever / Courtesy Gagosian

Language, for Ruscha, isn’t sacred; it’s just another glitchy technology. This might explain his tranquillity—if something as simple as the alphabet is prone to error, why expect perfection from anything? What many artists claim, with a big to-do, to “interrogate”—namely, the fact that American consumer culture is a flimsy lie, forever breaking down in big and little ways—Ruscha accepts with a wave of his hand. In “Norm’s, La Cienega, on Fire” (1964), the orange-on-white letters of the famous roadside chain smile their endless smile, oblivious of the rather abnormal flames below. Language and, indeed, the entire national order seem perpetually on the verge of collapse, yet never actually collapse. We might as well enjoy them, glitches and all.

If you think you hate conceptual art, see this show. Chances are you hate bad conceptual art. Ruscha made drawings using gunpowder and paintings of maple syrup and beans, but few image-makers have so rarely lapsed into

gimmickry, and even fewer have got such consistent laughs. My favorite Ruscha, “America’s Future” (1979), looks like a cheesy, State of the Union-ready metaphor: a painting of a molten sunrise over a sleepy landscape. It’s actually seven or eight cheesy metaphors, with a sprinkling of puns on top. The sunrise might be a sunset, or, California being California and Ruscha being Ruscha, a forest fire. The fire might advertise purity, or excitement (“America’s on *fire!*”), or vulgar spectacle—this was the seventies, the golden age of disaster movies. At the center of the picture, the small white letters of “*AMERICA’S FUTURE*” stare down at the world like the Hollywood sign, or a shining city on a hill. The line isn’t a caption, exactly, nor is it at one with the scenery; it’s awkwardly in-between, a phrase without a country.

I could gnaw on this image, and at least a dozen others on display, all day. Like Magritte, Ruscha delights in posing riddles using the most unpretentious material, daring you to solve them and teasing you for trying. (His opposite in this sense is Johns, whose reputation as a Very Intellectual Artist is partly due to a willingness to make critic-pandering homages to Duchamp, Leonardo, and Picasso.) Ruscha’s photographs—deliberately graceless taxonomies of parking lots, swimming pools, palm trees, and the like—seem thin by comparison, lacking the paintings’ dialectic of innocence and wit. “Royal Road Test” (1967), arguably his most famous photo series, is a kind of forensic investigation into the murder of a typewriter thrown from a car on Interstate 15. Instead of staring out to the mountains or up at the big, glorious sky, Ruscha and his friends look down, searching for fragments of the ruined machine. The great novelist Tom McCarthy would have you believe that the series represents “a ‘primal scene’ of modern writing,” but it strikes me as a dated and largely negative achievement, more interesting for what it rejects—the romance of the West and the shiny new highway—than for what it represents. “On the Road” isn’t the succulent prey that it once was.

Conceptual art has a bad habit of bloating with fame. You can see it in Warhol, Rauschenberg, and Dan Flavin: the showmanship soars but the ideas stagnate. Whatever the flaws in his later work, Ruscha refused to let this happen. He looked like a movie star and dated a few, including Diane Keaton, but he never clouded the viewer’s gaze with charisma. With the obvious exception of “Chocolate Room” (1970)—a candy-coated

installation that is the biggest, and worst, piece in this show—he never uses scale as a proxy for importance, either. Language remains a bottomless well of inspiration, keeping the work impressively lean. In recent years, his wordplay has become more enigmatic and less overtly tied to mass media. Still, in the small acrylic painting “Metro, Petro, Neuro, Psycho” (2022), featuring those words superimposed on a grassy view near Ruscha’s studio, you can detect the same sphinxlike intelligence that brought you “Annie” sixty years earlier.

And yet “Now Then” does fall off in its second half—it doesn’t bloat, but entire rooms stall. Sentimentality, usually pleasantly repressed in Ruscha’s work, is always threatening to burst through. Sometimes (as in “America’s Future”) he cancels out one cloying feeling with an equal but opposite one; elsewhere, he fights feeling with form (photographing big, sunny California in banal black-and-white). When he loses, it can be good news: in the exhibition’s most moving work, the tersely bleak words “Wen out for cigrets n never came back” float over a glowing nighttime city. But for every image like this there’s a wall of gloom or schlock. Beginning in the Reagan years, Ruscha made a series of airbrushed, mostly black-and-white paintings of dour subjects: a clock, a pair of ships rolling in the ocean, a silhouetted elephant, the words “the end.” I’d trade them all for a giant neon sign that reads “*MEMENTO MORI*.” And there’s simply nothing good to say about “Our Flag,” Ruscha’s 2017 painting of a tattered Stars and Stripes fluttering in the breeze. (For once, his pyromania deserts him.) Sometimes a cheesy metaphor is just a cheesy metaphor.

What happened? Part of the problem is that almost no one made good political art the year Trump was inaugurated. As for the rest, I yield the floor to Ruscha’s sharpest critic, the late Dave Hickey: “Ruscha is not really ‘behind’ his work at all. In a rhetorical sense he’s standing right beside us, gazing at his findings as quizzically as we are, occasionally glancing over and raising an eyebrow, going, ‘Huh? Whadda ya think?’ So to participate we need only feel that he is playing fair with us, that the language which informs the work is presented and not asserted, not fashioned but found.”

When Hickey wrote those words, in 1988, both he and Ruscha could take for granted the existence of a rich American mass culture: comic books and blockbusters and jingles that everyone knew by heart because they couldn’t

skip the commercials. Even when Ruscha didn't explicitly acknowledge this stuff, he knew how to mimic its voice and trusted his audience to follow along. In the past thirty-five years, America's monoculture has shattered into a thousand subcultures, putting Ruscha in a bind. When he tries to respond to the shattering ("Our Flag"), his art smacks of meek desperation; when he doesn't ("Metro, Petro, Neuro, Psycho"), his art feels too fashioned, a private murmur instead of the roar of the billboard. He turns eighty-six this December. The talent hasn't gone anywhere, but the monoculture—his theme, his muse, and his one true medium—played a nasty trick on us all. First it got us hooked, then it wen out for cigrets n never came back. ♦

The Theatre

“Purlie Victorious” Hustles for Social Justice

Sophisticated comedic turns from Leslie Odom, Jr., and Kara Young guide Kenny Leon’s Broadway revival of Ossie Davis’s 1961 play.

By [Vinson Cunningham](#)



Odom plays each of Purlie's notes with a musician's tonal perfection. Illustration by Amrita Marino

The Reverend Purlie Victorious Judson (Leslie Odom, Jr.), the hero of Ossie Davis’s 1961 comedy, “Purlie Victorious: A Non-Confederate Romp Through the Cotton Patch”—revived on Broadway at the Music Box Theatre, directed by Kenny Leon—is, above all else, a hustler. You might know somebody like this: He blusters onto the stage of your life, pouring out plans before he’s properly introduced himself, energized toward some vista that only he can see. He puts an arm over your shoulder and tries to convince you that you’re on your way there together, as partners, but in his mind’s eye, you can tell, he’s up in the pulpit and you’re down in the seats. Half of what he says sounds cockamamie, but something about him—his personal

history, perhaps, or a kind of animal endurance in his bearing—persuades you that, somehow, he'll get what he wants.

In the case of this show, most of what Purlie wants is a fair shake for Black people. He's an itinerant minister who has come back to the postbellum Georgia plantation where he grew up. He wants to rally the people there—who now work as sharecroppers for Ol' Cap'n Cotchipee (the intensely funny Jay O. Sanders)—to take back their local church, Big Bethel. He cooks up a scheme that will, with one stroke, get them the deed to the church and free his family from their impossible debts to Ol' Cap'n.

Purlie's a benign enough con man whose con is social justice. He talks sonorously, in a nearly constant preacher's cadence; he always seems to be skiing downhill, with great skill and heedless abandon, toward some grand, irrefutable point. When he gets really wound up, he adopts a half-sung, high-flown, heavily syncopated tone whose aim is less to emphasize an argument than to stoke a frenzy in a row of invisible congregants. At a peak moment, he rattles off this rhyming confection: "Let us, therefore, stifle the rifle of conflict, shatter the scatter of discord, smuggle the struggle, tickle the pickle, and grapple the apple of peace!"

It's clear that the clergy isn't his first racket, and it might not be his last. "Last time you was a professor of Negro philosophy," his sister-in-law, Missy (Heather Alicia Simms), says, with a hint of acid in her voice. "You got yourself a license?" As the play unfolds, we watch Purlie oscillate between courage and cowardice, brilliance and haplessness, forthrightness and a penchant for telling tall tales. His plan is to pass off a girl whom he captivated via one of his sermons, Lutiebelle Gussie Mae Jenkins (Kara Young), as his long-lost cousin, Bee, and trick Ol' Cap'n into handing over a five-hundred-dollar inheritance that he owes the family.

Purlie's brother, Gitlow (the always impressive Billy Eugene Jones), works for Ol' Cap'n and plays his role as the Good Negro, singing and shuffling, to a T. He's been given the farcical title Deputy-for-the-Colored. Another Black member of Ol' Cap'n's household is Idella (Vanessa Bell Calloway), who has raised Ol' Cap'n's son, Charlie (Noah Robbins), as if he were her own. Purlie's got to corral all these co-racialists—and their divergent loyalties—and lead them all toward reclaiming Big Bethel.

In creating Purlie, Davis took two long-lasting tropes of communal Black life and twinned them in a single body. On the one hand, Purlie is reminiscent of Father Divine, or, later, the Reverend Ike—a flashy, overconfident preacher who makes lofty promises of prosperity and wins wild, irrational allegiance from Black masses grown tired of living like the lowly Jesus. On the other hand, he's decided on a career as a self-appointed, semi-professional spokesman for the race. He's T. D. Jakes and Al Sharpton all at once, a study in the uses and abuses of oratory in Black life.

A creature like Purlie, made up of cultural memory and social satire, is often hard to play. Cliché and niche obscurity, the Scylla and Charybdis of in-group commentary, lie to either side of the role. But Odom guides his performance cannily, playing each of Purlie's notes with a musician's tonal perfection. Sometimes he's an overbearing tuba, sometimes he's an earnest flute. Odom makes plain at every impasse that, sure, Purlie cares about his image, about collecting disciples—but that he also wakes up each morning with his mind on real freedom for his people.

“Purlie Victorious” is also an investigation of the allure of text in American life. There’s lots of to-do about documents. Purlie’s preaching draws richly from the American past instead of from the Bible. “I preached the New Baptism of Freedom for all mankind, according to the Declaration,” he tells Missy, describing the sermon that drew Lutiebelle to his flock, “taking as my text the Constitution of the United States of America, Amendments First through Fifteenth, which readeth as follows: ‘Congress shall make no law _____,’ ”

Charlie, Ol’ Cap’n Cotchipee’s egalitarian, integrationist son, constantly refers to statutes. Integration is “the law of the land,” he says to his father, “and I intend to obey it!” The rightful inheritance that Purlie means to purloin by madcap deception is another promissory note whose power drives the action of the play. This obsession with text alienates Purlie and Charlie, and anybody who’d follow them, from the more sensual, instinctual culture of the formerly slaveholding South. Guys like Ol’ Cap’n Cotchipee and, in a different way, Gitlow Judson can’t be bothered with the nuances of the law or the declamations of the Declaration: their rules, long held, are unwritten. You know where you fit in by following patterns deeply rooted in the past.

Between Blacks and whites there's something "no Supreme Court in the world can understand," Ol' Cap'n says.

It's funny, then, that this production's greatest asset, by far, is its emphasis on physical comedy. Odom finds a lyricism in Purlie's body that's not always evident in his rhetoric. Jones pairs Gitlow's nostalgic singing of Negro work songs with a dancer's precision, allowing his body to convey an ironic subversion: even the most archetypal Uncle Tom might have wordless designs on a brighter future. The whole company moves in choreographed tandem—one bit, at a particularly melodramatic moment, has them running up and downstage like relay racers, skidding with cartoonish exaggeration.

Then there's Kara Young, whose turn as Lutiebelle is a pinnacle of her burgeoning career. Young's performances in recent plays such as C. A. Johnson's "All the Natalie Portmans," Lynn Nottage's "Clyde's," and last year's revival of Martyna Majok's "Cost of Living" showed off her otherworldly comic chops, which she grounds in what feels like a small, true place of personal pain. Here, though, in Lutiebelle, Young has found a perfect vehicle to transmit all the aspects of her talent.

Lutiebelle is a poor, sweet young woman who feels unequal to the task of impersonating Purlie's cousin Bee—Bee was a beautiful college girl, and Lutiebelle doesn't consider herself pretty, or smart—but she's been waiting for a long time, it seems, for a chance at adventure. She was abandoned by her parents at an early age, and it takes almost nothing for her to fall in love with Purlie and his talk. She worries and pines and pouts and puts on airs and tries to learn—in this way, she's almost a metaphor for an entire race trying to squirm itself, by hook or by crook, toward higher ground.

Young plays Lutiebelle with a physical and emotional energy reminiscent of Lucille Ball's or Carol Burnett's. She acts big and broad, then pulls the string of her imagination right back, showing how small, everyday hurt, the kind we all carry around, can fuel a great fire of productive delusion. Young's approach to acting is like the sophisticated engine of a sleek sports car—she floors the pedal around perilous curves and somehow stops on a dime. There's nobody quite like her in the theatre, or anywhere else, these days.

Kenny Leon, with his flair for showmanship and sizzle, is the ideal director to match Young's indomitable energy. His frenetic pacing and elaborate physical setups create a framework in which her intricate riffs can add up to a meaning that stretches beyond the text. Young's hilarious, heartening Lutiebelle fulfills a hope shared by lovers of performance and workers for social peace—that freedom might be found not only on a page but written in a body, and on the heart. ♦

By Emily Nussbaum

By Benjamin Flores

By Sunita Puri

By David Owen

The Talk of the Town

- [Biden, Trump, and What's at Stake in the U.A.W. Strike](#)
- [Flotsam, Jetsam, and a Soprano Amid the Black Mayonnaise](#)
- [Josh Gad and Andrew Rannells Channel Two Pals from Junior High](#)
- [A Drummer's-Eye View of the Arctic Monkeys](#)
- [The Best Thirst Traps Money Can Buy](#)

[Comment](#)

Biden, Trump, and What's at Stake in the U.A.W. Strike

Both men went to Michigan last week, each trying, in his own way, to take advantage of something rare in Presidential politics—a genuinely radical point of view.

By [Benjamin Wallace-Wells](#)



Illustration by João Fazenda

An old Washington principle holds that, at any given moment, only two people in American politics really matter: the President, and whomever the President is arguing with. But last week President Joe Biden and his eternal partner in argument, Donald Trump, found themselves sharing the spotlight with a third party. Enter a fifty-four-year-old former electrician from Kokomo, Indiana, named Shawn Fain, who won the presidency of the United Auto Workers in March, on a reform ticket—“The machine will churn no more,” an account of Fain’s victory in the left-wing magazine *Jacobin* began—and by September had launched a strike against all three major U.S. automakers. Fain, who quotes Malcolm X and whose

membership is now one-fifth graduate-student workers, made clear that he would go big.

In negotiations, the U.A.W. is demanding across-the-board raises of forty per cent—to match the steep trajectory of C.E.O. compensation—and the institution of a four-day work week. The reporting from Detroit has suggested that, with this strike, Fain hopes to show workers around the country what unions can do for them. Both Biden and Trump pride themselves on having managed the populist politics that emerged from the decline of manufacturing in the Upper Midwest, and last week the two men were in Michigan, each trying, in his own way, to take advantage of something rare in U.S. Presidential politics—a genuinely radical point of view.

Behind the familiar positioning and chaos of the 2024 Presidential race, the economy is beginning a slow but profound transition, from being based on oil and gas to relying on renewable energy. The Biden Administration's work to make this change happen, in the face of the climate crisis, is its most forward-thinking undertaking, and the Inflation Reduction Act, which worked to enroll automakers in the transition, has been its chief legislative accomplishment. The U.A.W. strike is about tangible labor issues—pay and benefits. But it is also about the emerging electric-vehicle industry, which insiders have publicly suggested may need many fewer workers—Ford's C.E.O. estimated perhaps forty per cent fewer—though some studies have found that the new plants won't be less labor intensive. E.V. production does depend on battery plants, and, according to CNN, there are currently six operating in the country, only one of which is unionized. (Workers at Tesla, suddenly an important competitor, are not unionized, either.) In May, Fain said that the U.A.W. was withholding an endorsement of President Biden over the issue. In a memo, the union declared, "The EV transition is at serious risk of becoming a race to the bottom."

From Mar-a-Lago, Trump, despite the preoccupations of facing ninety-one criminal charges, recognized that two things Biden wants—to achieve the green transition and to be the most "pro-worker" President in U.S. history—were in tension, and ripe for some political entrepreneurship. So his campaign confirmed that he would skip the second Republican debate and, instead, address autoworkers in Michigan. Certain Republicans, sensing a

shift—one poll suggested that forty-one per cent of Republican voters now view unions as a “positive force”—had already begun to speak more sympathetically about the plight of union labor. This has not translated into policy, though, and the U.A.W. is skeptical of some of its new admirers. Senator Josh Hawley, of Missouri, who visited a U.A.W. picket line in his home state, previously enjoyed a rating of zero per cent from the union. And, ahead of Trump’s visit, Fain said, “Every fibre of our union is being poured into fighting the billionaire class and an economy that enriches people like Donald Trump at the expense of workers.”

That was enough to draw Biden to join the striking workers in Michigan last Tuesday. No sitting President had ever before stood on a picket line—not Obama, not Clinton, not F.D.R.—which itself suggests just how rapidly the Washington consensus on labor is changing. (Steve Rattner, Obama’s auto czar, denounced Biden’s trip as “outrageous.”) Biden, wearing a union ball cap and carrying a bullhorn, stood with Fain at the picket line. He told the crowd that they had earned “a hell of a lot more” than their current pay, and backed the call for a forty-per-cent raise, which surely troubled even the pro-E.V. executives at Ford and G.M., who have already committed to spending heavily on the electric transition, with no guarantee that the new cars will sell.

Biden’s appearance also served as a bit of general-election positioning; he looks vulnerable to attacks on the economy, where a generally strong rebound from the pandemic has been complicated by high consumer prices. A mid-September *USA Today* poll found that, by a margin of eleven points, voters trust Trump over Biden to improve the economy, and an ABC poll, conducted a few days later, gave Biden his lowest ever scores on the economy. Biden means to run on the economy (“Bidenomics”), but he tends to frame it in confusing metaphors—he often talks about remaking the economy not just from the bottom up but from the “middle out”—that can obscure how much is changing.

Trump’s pro-labor appearance, a day later, turned out to be an invitation-only event at a non-union truck-parts manufacturing plant in Macomb County, hosted by the company’s president, which had the effect of bypassing its supposed audience—union workers. A U.A.W. vice-president sent an e-mail to a reporter at the Detroit *Free Press*, which delicately

redacted it for publication: “Let me be blunt. Donald Trump is coming off as a pompous [expletive].” Nevertheless, Trump found a way to make his point. “You can be loyal to American labor, or you can be loyal to the environmental lunatics,” he said. “But you can’t really be loyal to both. It’s one or the other.”

Of course, it really has to be both, even if Trump’s party doesn’t yet admit that. At the second Republican debate, on Wednesday night, candidates rushed to champion fossil-fuel extraction, with Mike Pence calling for the U.S. to “unleash” its oil and gas resources. This is already happening, to some extent, since Biden, even as he calls climate change an “existential threat,” has helped foster a gas boom. Still, drive across the Midwest, and you can see the first landmarks of the new economy: huge battery plants going up in small-town Michigan, wind-turbine blades spinning along ridgelines in Iowa, solar arrays wedged into highway cloverleafs. And yet, as a political cause, this transformation remains curiously under-heralded, hidden beneath the banner of the Inflation Reduction Act and enacted through a dense set of tax credits. In Michigan, Biden sought to demonstrate that he is on the side of the workers, but the U.A.W. has yet to endorse him. In the general election, he might need to convince its members, and the rest of the country, that the new economy can still come with a forty-per-cent raise. ♦

On the Waterfront

Flotsam, Jetsam, and a Soprano Amid the Black Mayonnaise

Newtown Creek is not just a Superfund site but the site of a floating opera, with a libretto by Dana Spiotta.

By [Ben McGrath](#)



Illustration by João Fazenda

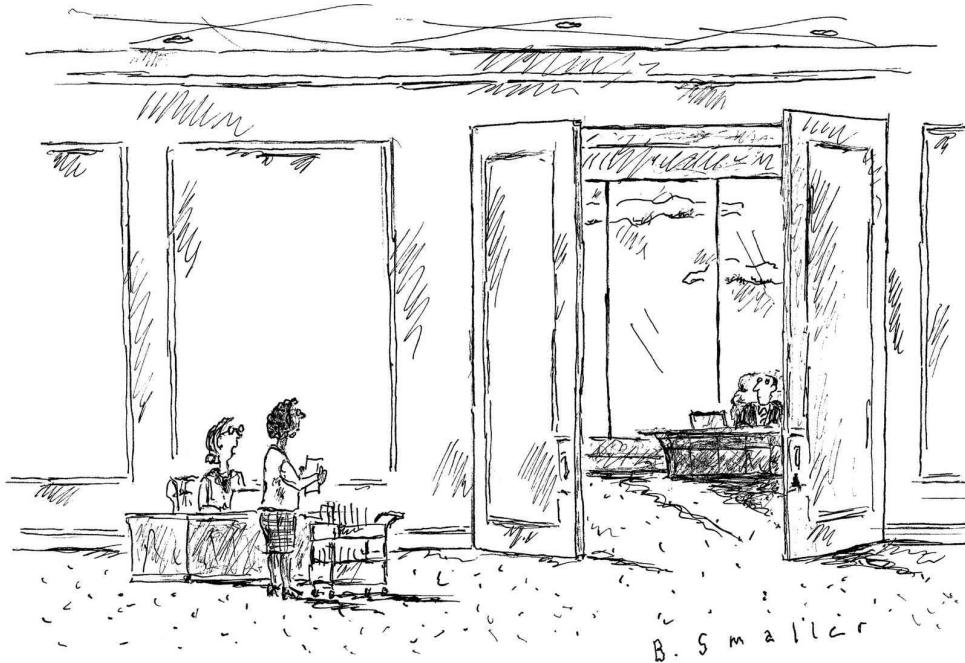
Afloat in a plastic canoe on Newtown Creek, in remotest Maspeth at dusk, an art professor named Jane Beckwith stroked her paddle and conjured a scene at odds with the industrial setting. “This used to be, like, an oyster bed,” she said. “And there are fish! The fish come in from the ocean. If it hasn’t stormed lately—it just depends on what the state of the water is, but people do fish, and they do eat the fish. They shouldn’t! But people claim that this fish is pretty clean because it’s just come from the ocean.”

Newtown Creek, to be clear, is a Superfund site, owing to leaky Greenpoint refineries that have added some thirty million gallons of oil to the untreated sewage that streams in whenever it rains with any force. Black mayonnaise is the connoisseur’s name for its sedimentary ooze. Pity the blue crabs.

Beckwith was in the bow. Her friend Amy Gartrell was in the stern. A man who had just met them both sat amidships and pointed at a plastic bottle drifting northwest in the current, headed back to the East River, perhaps, and its ebbing tide. "There's a Gatorade fish right there," he said.

"Yeah, if we're lucky, it'll be chock-full of its caviar—urine," Gartrell said.

More boats were gathering: a center console with dual Yamahas, other canoes of varying sizes (including one painted to resemble a scaly serpent), some kayaks, a rowing dory, a couple of Hobie cats. "I mean, dolphins come up occasionally, and people have seen seals," Gartrell went on. "It's really sad when one of them goes the wrong way, but they don't stay long." Beckwith observed that their canoe was sliding toward the middle of the creek, which was frothing like a Jacuzzi. "Amy, are we staying clear of the bubbles or are we going into them?" she asked.



"They say he's a great decision-maker, but I happen to know he goes, 'Eeny, meeny, miny, moe.' "
Cartoon by Barbara Smaller

The man in the middle, perplexed at the sight but intrigued, imagined a kind of maelstrom-surfing joyride for the benefit of several dozen onlookers standing on the eastern bank, but Gartrell knew better and steered the vessel away. The bubbles, she explained, were produced by an aeration pipe laid atop the mayonnaise by the Department of Environmental Protection:

supplemental oxygen for the aforementioned fish. Alas, studies have shown that it also perfumes the air with bacteria from below.

Pop! went the cork on a bottle in a neighboring canoe, and the man's thoughts floated briefly to a different sort of fizzy toxin. A small wooden barge arrived at the center of this motley flotilla, tugged there by a nautically inclined artist named Marie Lorenz driving an aluminum johnboat. The barge carried acoustic equipment and was festooned with fluorescent light sticks and suspended jetsam that clinked and chimed. A woman on board held a flute. Another turned out to be a soprano, who sang, "Welcome to the most polluted waterway in America!" The show—"Newtown Odyssey: A Floating Opera"—had begun.

Boating spectators gripped one another's gunwales to hold position against the southerly breeze. A skein of geese passed overhead in eerie synchronicity with the end of a scene, like fighter pilots after "The Star-Spangled Banner." The libretto, written by the novelist Dana Spiotta, featured tour guides ("Don't touch the water!"), citizen scientists ("Help us heal it"), and real-estate developers, who promised five thousand luxury units ("All sustainable, of course") and a floating, glass-bottomed gastropub. Satire, sure, but to the man in the middle of the canoe, envious of the nearby champagne and succumbing to a maritime trance as darkness fell, it sounded nice. A stray horn, a searchlight upwind, a marine radio hissing intermittently about bridge traffic: sometimes, amid this dystopian sublime, it was difficult to distinguish the choreography from the merely urban. A performer on the barge lay down with an illuminated stick and wanded it over the water's surface, revealing clumps of migrating foam but no prospective dinner.

Applause, at the end, came in the form of paddles thumped against hulls. The rower in the dory seemed to celebrate by circling the Jacuzzi bubbles with pent-up vigor. "Hopefully it won't take as long as Burning Man," Beckwith said, alluding to the recent mud-soaked traffic jam in the Nevada desert, as the canoes all converged on the lone dock at once. While they waited, the man in the middle couldn't resist dipping his paddle in search of mayonnaise, but found rock instead. Did he touch the water? Yes, inadvertently, here and there. Did he wash his hands? Nope, forgot. Slightly

delirious, he soon regained his balance on dry land and drove off in search of crab cakes. ♦

By Amanda Gefter

By Ben Taub

By Ted Geltner

By Leslie Jamison

The Boards

Josh Gad and Andrew Rannells Channel Two Pals from Junior High

The duo behind “Beetlejuice” on Broadway began their latest show, “Gutenberg! The Musical!,” as a goof.

By [Emma Allen](#)



Illustration by João Fazenda

History, as Florida has taught us, is constantly being rewritten. Just ask Anthony King and Scott Brown, whose “Gutenberg! The Musical!”—a hilariously apocryphal two-man show about the invention of the printing press—started previews on Broadway this month. (Their musical “Beetlejuice,” meanwhile, has cropped up in recent stranger-than-fiction headlines.) The other morning, they stood outside the Morgan Library & Museum, waiting to see two of the Morgan’s three Gutenberg Bibles, and tried to reconstruct their friendship origin story.

“We met in junior high,” King said.

“Eighth grade, Carrington Junior High, Durham, North Carolina. Working on ‘Oliver!’” Brown recalled.

“That wasn’t how we *met*,” King said.

The “truth” emerged. Their school had acquired a cougar mascot outfit and announced a contest to name the cougar, with a prize of twenty-five dollars, plus a chance to wear the costume.

King: “I put in the name C.J., for Carrington Junior High School.”

Brown: “It’s family-friendly—it’s a four-quadrant name!”

King: “*Everyone* else in the school submitted Freddy, for Freddy Cougar.” (“A Nightmare on Elm Street” was big at the time.)

C.J. won, and the student body turned on King, who then bonded with Brown on the school bus (where bullies had previously stolen Brown’s saxophone). One detail they agreed upon: when King wore the C.J. costume to a pep rally, he ran smack into a cheerleader. “We fell, and I rode her across the floor,” King said.

“Like a mat,” Brown noted.

They entered J. Pierpont Morgan’s luxe library and were greeted by two dapper curators of books and bindings, Jesse Erickson and John McQuillen. The group peered into a display case, in which a Gutenberg Bible lay open.

“What book are we turned to?” King asked.

McQuillen: “One of the Latin ones, I forget what it is. Not all of it made it into the King James Bible.”

Brown: “Cut for time.”

McQuillen: “So this is our good copy, on paper. You can see—very shiny, pretty. Not a lot of bad things have happened to it in five hundred years. We can’t say the same for our other two copies.”

Brown: “The other one someone had in a backpack for a long time.”

The foursome turned to a leather-bound Gutenberg Bible printed on vellum, and the curators asked about the musical.

Brown: “It’s about two guys who don’t know anything about Johannes Gutenberg except, like, one line.”

King: “They Google ‘Johannes Gutenberg.’ ”

Brown: “And they’ve made a whole epic, sort of ‘Les Mis’-style mega-musical about the life of Gutenberg, but it’s completely made up.” Onstage, the pair perform their show for potential backers, playing all the roles themselves. Josh Gad and Andrew Rannells will co-star on Broadway.

King and Brown began writing “Gutenberg” after college, as roommates. King was interning at the Manhattan Theatre Club, reading the slush pile, and they planned to submit their fake musical, as a goof. But they grew attached to their work, and soon they were performing it at the Upright Citizens Brigade. Next it went to London, and Off Broadway, and then to Spain (“Gutenberg, El Musical”), and France (“Gutenberg! Le Musical”), and Korea (“한국어 버전”), and other countries.

Much of what is known about Gutenberg comes from a legal document from his financier, to whom he owed money. In King and Brown’s telling, Gutenberg is a winemaker, a detail they thought they’d made up, but he apparently was inspired by vinification. Sample lyric: “When I got out of bed today / History was a lot more boring / But then I thought in a different way / Now the bird of inspiration’s soaring.”

King: “In the musical, no one in the town can read, and he’s frustrated by that, and he realizes as he’s making wine one night that he could take the grapes out and—”

Brown: “‘Put letters where them grapes have been!’ ”

King: “And the antagonist is a monk who wants no one to read because, as long as no one can read, the Bible says what he says it says.”

“I think the premise of your play is actually, in a very subtle way, extremely important,” Erickson said, and brought up a lecture he’d recently given. He explained, “Biography and literary historical scholarship is often framed in a way that the epistemological premise is based on empirical data, so that it’s making fact claims about historical figures. However, a lot of the empirical evidence that people draw from, whether it’s something personal, like diary entries, or what’s put out in the press, there’s a lot of speculative activity involved in the enterprise of reconstructing a person’s biography.” In short, future historians may never know what Kim Kardashian was thinking.

“It’s like every magazine profile of a person goes back to their childhood and pretends there are things that happened when they were eight that are portents,” King said. He added, “It may diminish your opinion of us to know that the love interest in the show is a character named Helvetica.” ♦

By D. T. Max

By Sarah Larson

By Vinson Cunningham

By Ben McGrath

[On Tour](#)

A Drummer's-Eye View of the Arctic Monkeys

Matt Helders, the band's drummer—and now its album-cover photographer—explains why a life at the rear of the stage has made him captivated by people's backs.

By [John Seabrook](#)



Illustration by João Fazenda

If architecture is frozen music, what's the tune embedded in the cover of the Arctic Monkeys' latest album, "The Car"? The image, a photograph taken by Matt Helders, the band's drummer and documentarian, shows a rooftop parking lot from high above, surrounded by modern office buildings in downtown Los Angeles. A single car, a white sedan, is parked in the lot, which is bleached by the midday Southern California sun.

The four-piece British rock band was in town recently for two sold-out shows at Forest Hills Stadium. On the morning between gigs, Helders went to Fotografiska New York, the U.S. branch of the Swedish photography museum. He wanted to check out an exhibition of the work of Terry O'Neill,

the British lensman who assisted in the birth of rock photography, in the early sixties. Holders carried his digital Leica.

Over an Americano in the museum's lobby, he explained that he'd shot the cover photo with a long lens from the window of his former apartment, and had sent it to Alex Turner, the band's main songwriter and front man. "This was in 2019, before we'd started any music for the album," he said. Holders, thirty-seven, is a sometime boxer; his drumming has a pugilistic quality. "Alex was, like, 'Oh, wow.' He thought it told a story and that he might write something about it." There's a mystery in the image—Is that a getaway car? Is there a body in the trunk?—that resonates in the album's enigmatic songs and atmospheric strings, a new sound for the Monkeys.

"Me and Alex have known each other since we were five," Holders went on. All four bandmates grew up within fifty yards of one another in Sheffield, an industrial city where "everything we did was in cars." The fact that they were friends long before they became musical partners explains why they get along so well as a band, Holders figures. That's also why, in his photos of them, Holders favors domestic scenes over the iconic style of photographers like O'Neill. In his pictures of the guys together, he observed, "it's not clear they're a band. They're not doing anything that's rock, but you can tell there's something about them."

Holders, who has a soft-spoken demeanor, strives to be "a drummer in life," he said. That is a person others can rely on, he explained, who doesn't need or want to be a star. On the road, Holders prefers Ramadas and DoubleTrees to luxury hotels: "I get overwhelmed by having to use all the amenities."

As a photographer, he said, "I try to make the mundane interesting." When he took his Leica to Big Bear City, in Southern California, the most striking image he got was not of the scenery but of an overflowing trash can in the sun, which Holders labelled on his Instagram with a quote from William Eggleston, a favorite photographer: "There is no particular reason to search for meaning."

Holders's pictures give you the drummer in life's point of view: the world as seen from the rear of the stage. He has many photos of Alex Turner's back, of course, taken at sound checks, but also lots of other backs, of both people

and buildings, snapped during tour stops. “I have a folder on my phone called ‘The Backs,’ ” he said. “If I’m walking around the street and someone looks interesting from the back, that’s fine with me. I don’t need to ask them to turn around.”

At the exhibition upstairs, Holders browsed foundational glamour images in the visual vocabulary of pop stardom. David Bowie visiting Elizabeth Taylor on a movie set; the Rolling Stones carrying their luggage through a busy London street, off to a gig; Tom Jones man-spreading astride a go-cart in his driveway. Cigarettes, bottles of alcohol, and guns are present in many of O’Neill’s photos—a reminder that rock and roll is not a wholesome activity. But, Holders observed, “now you’re likely to see the band doing a yoga class.”

Gazing at an image of Elton John inside his private plane, Holders said, “I do have one like that.” He scrolled through his Leica until he got to some pictures of the Monkeys boarding a private jet, at an earlier stop on the American tour. Then he scrolled to another photo: a row of orange safety cones lined up on the runway.

“That’s more me,” the drummer said. ♦

By Sheila Yasmin Marikar

By Jackson Arn

By Carrie Battan

By Crispin Long

[L.A. Postcard](#)

The Best Thirst Traps Money Can Buy

David Suh's high-end photo shoots are like a modern-day Sears Portrait Studio, except a session costs eight thousand dollars.

By [Sheila Yasmin Marikar](#)



Illustration by João Fazenda

The photographer David Suh offers solutions to some of contemporary life's conundrums. "Do you ever want to post a thirst trap but don't want it to be *too* thirst trappy?" he asked a few months ago on Instagram, where he has nearly two million followers. Reveal a shoulder. Posing with a man who's shorter than you? "Have your short king wear heels," he said on TikTok. "If he doesn't want to, leave him." What if you're a *man* who wants to post a casual thirst trap? "Pose with B.D.E.," he said—"bold, dynamic, effortless" energy—by, say, wearing a blazer without a shirt and pretending to read a magazine by candlelight. "Less is more."

The other day, Suh, who is twenty-nine, was standing in the reception area of his atelier, on the east side of Los Angeles—natural light, nude-hued pampas—where he does high-end photo shoots for regular people. Hopeful

subjects can schedule a free thirty-minute consultation before booking a session that yields up to two dozen finished photographs. It's like Sears Portrait Studio, except that a session costs eight thousand dollars. (Prints are extra.) "It's five to six hours," Suh said. "And it includes professional hair and makeup." Not everybody makes the cut. "We consider people we can actually serve, people who say, 'I want to navigate through my identity because there are parts of me that I haven't explored,' versus 'I just want a pretty picture to post.'"

Often, the latter "happen to be celebrities and influencers," Suh said. "What they're looking for is so public-facing. There are so many better photographers to do that." (Exceptions occur: last year, he said, he had an hour to shoot "personal branding photos" for Instagram's C.E.O., Adam Mosseri, who arrived with a security detail. "It was terrifying," Suh said.)

His latest subject, Lily TranCat, a twenty-four-year-old financial analyst from Chicago, was waiting in a back room. Suh strode in wearing a beige polo shirt, black pleated pants, and patent-leather shoes. He asked if TranCat had found him on social media.

"Well, I don't have social media," TranCat said.

"You *don't* have social media," Suh said. Mind blown. What would become of the day's output?

"They're just for me," she said. "I want to look at them at my coffee table whenever I'm feeling down, or if I need inspiration."

TranCat walked Suh through the clothes she'd brought: denim jumpsuit ("casual, comfortable," she said), purple suit, white eyelet dress ("relaxed, twirlable").

"If this is twirlable, what is *this*?" Suh said. He picked up the hem of a pale-pink taffeta gown.

"Extremely twirlable," TranCat said.

Suh excused himself to plan the shoot with his studio manager, Maria Kristina Lander. They made notes, then Googled "suit badass portraits."

They decided to start with the denim jumpsuit. “Sometimes a client will be, like, ‘I want to do that blazer look without anything underneath,’ ” Suh said. “That’s really cool. That’s a look we do a lot. But we need to warm up first.”

Backdrops were unfurled; TranCat emerged from the makeup chair pink-cheeked and long-lashed. “We’re going to interpretive-dance,” Suh announced. “I’m going to be like a mirror.” He reached out his right arm; TranCat followed. He reached out his left arm; she followed. He flipped up his palms. They were doing the Macarena. She grinned. “There we go,” Suh said. “Perfect!”

Hands were placed in pockets, feet were angled, hips and shoulders were jutted out. Suh’s shutter clicked. “You’re going to do what I call basking in the sun,” Suh said, as TranCat draped herself across an Adirondack chair and tilted her head back. “Close your eyes because the sun is so bright. Yes, queen!”

Denim jumpsuit off, extremely twirlable gown on. Suh directed TranCat to swish. A hair-and-makeup artist named Jasmine Min waved a piece of cardboard (a minor breeze), then rustled the hem of the gown as if a subway-grate gust had puffed it up. “Throw that hem,” Suh said. “Throw more! O.K., arm workout!” He continued, “Yes, queen! Can you actually jump this time?” TranCat laughed. “Basking in the sun, *big bask*,” Suh said. “And, scene!”

Another costume change. Min and Suh moved a backdrop, revealing a wall hung with a framed portrait: Suh, bare-chested, white cape billowing, head tilted against the sun, eyes closed. A big bask, indeed.

“This is my 2023 vision board,” Suh explained. “At the end of 2022, I said, ‘Who do I want to be at the end of next year?’ ”

Asked how the process was going, he said, “Right now, I’m in the trenches.” ♦

By Ben Taub

By John Seabrook

By Daniel Brook

By Hannah Zeavin

Shouts & Murmurs

- [Other Detectors](#)

By [Bob Odenkirk](#) and [Nate Odenkirk](#)

ALERT! ALERT! ALERT! Have we got your attention? Wonderful. Here at BleepCo, we're dedicated to providing you and your family with tremendously sensitive smoke detectors. If your neighbor is having, say, a barbecue, or a house fire, our devices will sense it and you'll be the first to know.

With advances in A.I., we're now able to make appliances that can detect more than just smoke. Soon, you will be able to install the following new highly perceptive ceiling-mounted detectors.

IRONY Detector: Whether you're having a party or just an intimate meet-up with a few friends, failing to catch even a shade of irony in conversation can leave you looking for the nearest fire exit. When you hear the subtle whine of the alarm, simply nod your head and emit a brief knowing chuckle. There—you're “getting” irony! As a bonus, the Irony Detector is never wrong. If this detector goes off when nothing ironic has been said, well, then, that's—ironic!

DISHEVELMENT Detector: Picture this: You're about to step out the door to go complain about noise problems at your homeowners'-association meeting, when you hear a foghorn from above. You look up and see a detector flashing red, which can mean only one thing: you look awful. Sure enough, you're wearing pajama bottoms, flip-flops, a stained sweatshirt, and a hat that your four-year-old put on your head to make her laugh. Hey, it happens to all of us.

JUST LISTEN Alarm: This alarm clangs when your partner is rattling on about the day's annoyances and frustrations. Heed this alarm and bite your tongue! Your partner does not want advice; he or she wants you to Just Listen™. Disaster averted. The device has only one setting, Sensitive, like you should be. This is the most important alarm we manufacture, and—fun fact!—it is our worst selling by a stretch.

FRESH PODCAST Alert: There is a new podcast, somewhere, anywhere, in the world, and now you know it. This damn thing won't shut up. We also sell heavy-duty, sound-muffling blankets to cover the device, because—come on—this thing's going to be going off all day and night. But, thanks to

A.I.'s superhuman ability to tolerate and catalogue billions of podcasts, you won't miss a thing.

BATTERY LOW Detector: Using advanced "best guess" technology, this amazing earworm has a sensor that detects when a battery anywhere in your home could be on the "low" side. Hear the piercing alarm and be assured that something somewhere needs a battery replaced or recharged. Could it be a flashlight? A garage-door remote? Sure. It could even be the Battery Low Detector itself. The only way to find out is to replace all the batteries you own and exhale. The one thing it cannot do is tell you where the fresh AAA batteries are in your house.

TEN MINUTES AWAY Detector: How often have you received a text saying that your friend, or the person bringing the food you ordered, is "ten minutes away"? They're not. Until now, there has been no way to tell when someone is actually almost there, specifically, ten minutes away. Most people are more like twenty or twenty-two minutes away, so don't worry, this detector doesn't go off very much.

A-O.K. Detector: It seems like so much is going wrong all the time—global warming, inflation, traffic, not to mention the crazy alarms in your home. Wouldn't it be nice to have one siren that tells you when everything is copacetic? When the weight of the world seems a little too heavy, this detector can analyze billions of inputs and alert you that, in the grand scheme of things, you're going to be O.K. You can't miss it, it's unnervingly loud. Oops! Sorry about that. ♦

By Benjamin Flores

By Joshua Rothman

By Sunita Puri

Fiction

- “Heart”

Fiction

“Heart”

By [Shuang Xuetao](#)



Illustration by Sally Deng

Before 2015, I'd never been to Beijing, which is quite odd—an adult who's been working a few years ought to have visited the capital for a meeting or a classmate's wedding or simply to view the corpses of great men. For some reason, anyway. But I never did—a training session in Shenzhen, a business trip to Sichuan, but never Beijing. I never even got as far as Hebei.

In 2013, I left my job at an advertising firm and started writing fiction. I wrote more than thirty short stories, a few of which were published in the local city journal, which was perpetually on the verge of folding. Then, on the sixth of November, 2015, my dad had a sudden heart attack, the result of a hereditary disease that had already claimed five or six people in my family, the first of them at the end of the Qing dynasty, my great-great-great-uncle, a superb woodworker who could make anything from a coffin to a comb. When he was fifty-five, his heart exploded and he died on a pile of lumber. It happened so abruptly, leaving him bleeding from every orifice, that his

family thought he'd been poisoned. They cut him open, and discovered that his heart was full of tiny wood shavings, enough to build a foot-high pagoda.

Ever since then, my family has suffered from heart disease, about three in every ten of us, men and women, though it's not as serious now that times have changed—none of us are woodworkers anymore, and surgery can save us. The procedure in question involves fitting a tiny engine into one of the heart's chambers, to make up for the weakness caused by the organ's abnormal fissures, and placing something like the filter of a water dispenser into the aorta, to prevent impurities from entering the heart. This operation wasn't available in my city, L-----, at least not anywhere I trusted, mainly because of the difficulty of fitting the filter membrane, which in L----- would be placed by hand, with something like the muscle memory of a carpenter, unlike in Beijing or America, where robots were used. Our health insurance wouldn't be accepted in America, so when my father had his attack I arranged for an ambulance to take us from the local hospital to Beijing.

Shuang Xuetao on labor and the heart.

We were due to set off around seven in the evening. By that time, my father's face was purplish green and he could no longer speak, what with the oxygen mask on his face, and he lay on a gurney that was covered in some sort of blue plastic. A doctor from the E.R., a woman of about thirty, slightly plump, with dark-brown hair and rimless glasses, would accompany us. She said, I should warn you that it'll take us eight hours to drive there, and it's possible that your father will not make it. I said, I understand. She said, My name is Xu, and I've just graduated—this is my first time on the night ambulance to Beijing, and it's such a serious case I'm a bit worried, so I hope we can work well together. Of course, I said. Definitely. She said, When I say work together, what I mean is that you do whatever I say—don't get clever, don't do anything unless I tell you to, don't ask stupid questions. Sure, I said, I don't have any questions anyway. She asked, Are you the only family member coming along? Yes, I said, is that O.K.? She said, There really ought to be one more person here. As a doctor I can push the gurney, but if the patient needs to be lifted one person will have to take his head and another his legs, and I'm not supposed to move him. I said, I can handle it myself. She said, I need to let you know, no pressure, but there was an

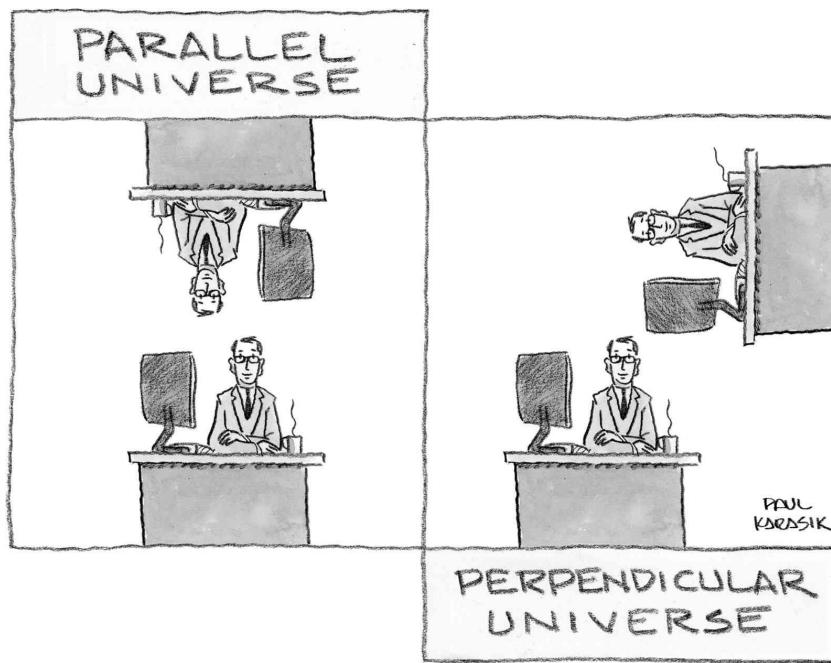
incident where the family member dropped the patient and he died. I know you don't want to hear this, but I'm obliged to tell you. I said, Understood. So you're saying if we don't work well together my father might fall and die. Cigarette? I don't smoke, she said. Have your cigarette and then get on board—hopefully we'll be able to drive through the night without stopping.

As we left the crowded E.R., some people scurried by, while others sat perfectly still, face in hands. A young woman ran in from the cold wearing pajamas, blood seeping from a gash between her eyes. A construction worker in a hard hat was carried past us by two of his colleagues. One of his legs was bent to the side like a faucet, and he was hopping along on the other. Outside, it was already completely dark. I was halfway through my cigarette when I noticed a cleaner eying the smoldering butt, so I stubbed it out and dropped it into his dustpan. As soon as I clambered aboard the ambulance, Dr. Xu said to the driver, Let's go. We drove past the row of shops selling fruit and funeral goods by the hospital's main entrance, then turned onto the highway. There wasn't much traffic, and the driver kept up a steady pace. He was in green scrubs, with an extra-wide collar for his thick neck. All of a sudden, it came to me that I should slip him and the doctor a little money. This hadn't occurred to me before, partly because this was such an urgent trip—I'd taken too long deciding whether to go ahead with it—and partly because I'd been spending so much time at home that I wasn't used to being around other people. I scrabbled hopelessly through my rucksack, but, as I'd expected, I didn't have much on me. Thinking about the deposit I'd have to put down when we got to Beijing, not to mention all the other expenses I'd need cash for, I felt a wave of despair.

As this was a hereditary disease, every member of my family had their own way of dealing with it: some were always popping pills, some kept getting themselves examined, some just did whatever the hell they wanted and were fine anyway, or fine until they kicked the bucket at forty or so, usually from alcohol poisoning rather than heart issues. My grandfather's coping mechanism was boxing, a hobby he passed on to his three sons. Of the three, my father, the youngest, showed the least talent—he was born uncoördinated, with a long torso and short legs, unsuited to any sport. He moved slowly, too. Yet he was the one who persisted the longest, continuing to train without a break even when he was sent down to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution and then after he returned to the city. His

trick was to train in secret—very few people outside the family knew that he could box. He woke up early to get in a couple of hours before work every day, and then did another round before bed. I couldn't remember him ever skipping a session. He didn't like talking and wasn't close to anyone. When my grandfather was still around, he'd often say to my father, Hey, No. 3, you keep to yourself too much. That's going to bite you in the ass when you get older. My father never answered him. Then my grandfather died and there was no one left to scold him. That's the virtue of patience.

When I was a kid, I was always pestering my father to teach me a move or two. He said, What do you want to learn? I said, How to hit people, whack them so hard they fall right over. He said, I don't know how to do that. I said, Then teach me how not to feel any pain when people hit me, and instead make their hands hurt. He said, I don't know how to do that, either. It seems we have very different understandings of what boxing is, I don't think we should talk about it anymore. That's how he was, mostly silent, and when he did break his silence to say something he'd be very serious about it. I was only ten at the time, and even so he weighed every word, as if it had to be finely ground, worn down to a flavorless pulp.



Cartoon by Paul Karasik

Just before my university entrance exam I said to him, You practice boxing three hours a day, and I spend the same amount of time studying, probably

more—do you think you’re better at boxing than I am at studying? He said, Do you think about studying when you’re not doing it? I said, No way, work is work and play is play, there has to be a line between them. He said, There you go. Even when I’m not boxing, I’m boxing in my heart, not just my heart, my flesh and bones, too. Sometimes I box in my sleep and wake up feeling exhausted, do you know what I mean? I said, So how can you prove you’re good at boxing? He thought about it and said, I can’t, but let me try a metaphor: Let’s say a cat falls from the fifth floor and doesn’t die—does the cat have anything to prove? I said, How do you know I’m not going to fall from the fifth floor one of these days? If boxing’s so great, why not teach me how to do it? He said, I can see I’d better not give you any more metaphors, you can’t cope with them. Why should I teach you? I said, Because I’m your son. He said, What kind of reason is that? Don’t think this or that has to happen just because you’re my son. I didn’t know who you were going to be before you were born. Losing my temper, I snapped, So go ahead and punch me. He said, You think you can get hit whenever you want, just like that? My fists aren’t for punching people. Go to bed.

My grandfather was eighty-five when he died in his sleep. One of my uncles died in the violence of the Cultural Revolution; the other was retired and living an unruffled life at home, though I hadn’t been in touch with him for a while. In the ambulance, my father’s foot twitched, and only now did it occur to me that I ought to remove his shoes. His feet were hideously swollen. He lay perfectly still, like a piece of driftwood, his heart rate and blood pressure gleaming on a monitor. Dr. Xu looked at his feet and prodded them one at a time with her index finger. I said, Is there a problem? She said, Why are your dad’s feet so small? I said, What? She said, Some people say that the size of your heart is proportional to the size of your feet, and though that’s nonsense, your dad really does have tiny feet. And there’s something else I don’t understand. Judging by my initial examination of your dad, his heart really shouldn’t still be working. Just look at his stats—they’re unimaginable. Heart rate twenty-five, blood pressure eighty over forty. To put it bluntly, he ought to be dead. I haven’t been doing this for very long, but even a thirty-year veteran wouldn’t have seen many cases like this. What kind of work do you do?

I said, Me? I don’t have a job. She said, Why don’t you have a job? I said, Because I don’t want to work. I’m really lazy—is that a kind of illness? She

said, You don't seem lazy—lazy people don't usually get so anxious, nothing about you feels lazy to me. If you don't have a job, what do you do? I said, I sit around at home. She said, What are you, a Buddhist? I said, No, sometimes I get bored and do some typing. She said, What kind of typing? Are you an author? I said, Yes, fiction, it's childish but I like to write short stories. She said, If you're sleepy, go ahead and have a nap. Your dad seems stable and I can keep an eye on him. I said, That's really dutiful of you. I feel bad. After a pause, I said, in a small voice, I forgot to get money before we left. I'm sorry about that. She said, I'm not dutiful, it's just that I'm new to the job and don't get much say in anything. For the last half year they've stuck me with way too many overnight shifts. I couldn't go to sleep now if I tried, and if I were tired I wouldn't be able to stay awake no matter how much money you gave me. How come an author like you has such strange ideas?

Besides, she added, your dad has such an unusual condition, anyone working in medicine would want to observe him. Did you say it was hereditary? I said, Yes, a hereditary heart disease. She said, Who else in your family has it? I said, It basically skips a generation. My grandfather was fine, but my great-grandfather died of it. She said, Your great-grandfather must have been born around 1900. When did he die? I said, I think he was in his twenties, not long after my grandfather was born. She said, Was it a Chinese or a Western doctor who diagnosed him? I said, I don't know, but he definitely died of heart disease. She said, How can you be so sure? I said, I'm his descendant, of course I know—this is our history. She didn't respond, and I knew I'd taken the conversation in the wrong direction. I turned to the driver, but all I could see was the back of his neck and his collar. It didn't seem like he'd heard any of our conversation. The ambulance kept going at a steady pace, with almost no braking or sudden turns, yet we'd overtaken a number of speeding vehicles. It was completely dark outside, nothing to see but the looming outlines of the surrounding hills. No honking, no radio. We were flowing through the night like the drip hanging above my father's head, silently infiltrating his unfamiliar veins.

Over the next hour, I began to feel sleepy. If I'd been at home, I'd still have been wide awake—I often stayed up as late as two in the morning even when I had nothing particular to do, flipping through a book or writing a couple of paragraphs or shuffling through music. My father went to bed

early and got up early, and never snored, though he did sometimes cough during the night. He was a paint sprayer at a factory and had chronic pharyngitis. He never woke himself up with his coughing. It was part of his sleep, like rolling over. He'd told me that he dreamed about boxing, but I didn't know how true that was—he slept curled up, hugging his shoulders, taking up as little space as possible, as if the bed were full of other people hemming him in. In the summer, his blanket ended up between his legs, and he always wore a yellowing tank top rather than going shirtless. In the winter, he kept the covers pulled up to his neck, but even then I could see from the outline of his body that he was in the same shrunken posture.

I drifted off for what must have been ten minutes or so before jolting awake, assaulted by guilt—what if he'd died in those ten minutes? This brief nap seemed to have lasted years, as if I'd been out so long the entire world had transformed. Dr. Xu was studying my father's hands, first from where she was sitting, opposite me, and then moving closer and squatting next to him. I said, What's wrong? She said, Does your father play the piano? I said, No, he's a laborer. She said, Look, his fingers are moving. I knelt by the gurney. His left hand was anchored in place by the drip tube and remained motionless. On his right index finger was a clip connected to the display screen, and as I watched he pushed the clip off with his thumb, then all five fingers thrummed on the edge of the mattress, over and over, never pausing in their tap-tapping, from his little finger to his thumb, maybe a dozen times before he tried unsuccessfully to replace the clip.

Dr. Xu glanced at the monitor. His heart rate is still falling at the same speed, she said. What's going on? I said, I don't know. She waited a moment, made sure his hand wasn't going to start moving again, put the clip back on, and sat back down, still mumbling *What's going on?* to herself. I said, My father's boxed ever since he was a kid. She said, What kind of boxing? I said, No idea, but it's always the same style of boxing. He'll practice for a few hours at a time, always the same moves, once in the morning and once at night. She said, In a park? I said, No, in his bedroom. She said, Martial arts in a bedroom? I said, Yes, summer and winter alike. She said, Right, so this must be a nerve spasm or muscle memory—it's not uncommon. Remember, your father is dying, his heart is weakening, and I'm not sure we'll make it to Beijing. I said, But his fingers were moving so steadily. She said, That doesn't matter, sometimes our bodies do that as camouflage, you

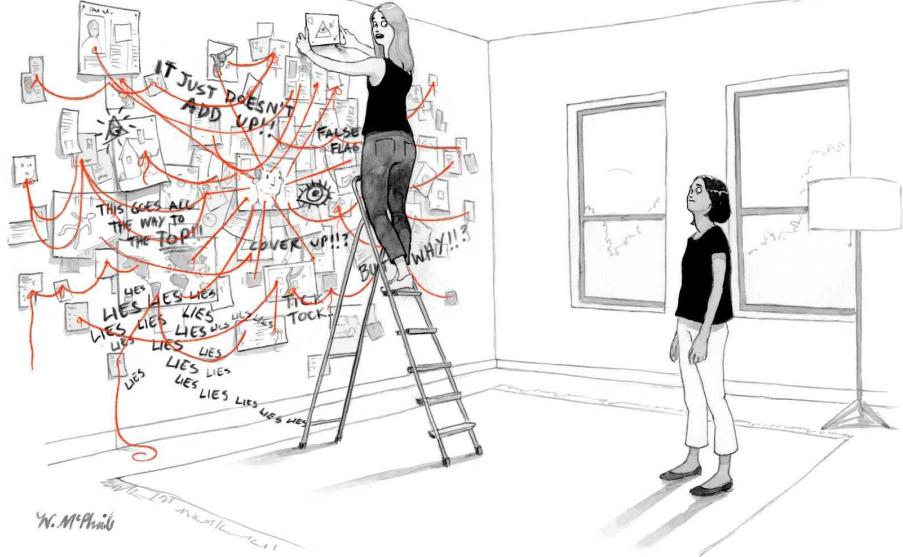
should prepare yourself. I said, If it happens like you say, what should we do? She said, Drive straight back. He's probably no longer in pain. How should I put this? It's like a balloon slowly deflating, that's about the same thing. I said, That comparison causes me pain. She said, Your pain and his pain are two different things. I said, Yes, though you can't do anything about either. I regretted the words as soon as they were out of my mouth, because why would I expect her to be able to do anything? She was only an emergency-room doctor, a stranger who was in this vehicle for god knows what reason. I said, I apologize, that's not your responsibility. She reached out to lift my father's blanket and said, No need to apologize—everything you said is true. Give me a hand, he needs a new pee pad.

We drove on awhile longer. I glanced out the window, and noticed that the traffic was growing sparser. We'd probably crossed into Hebei Province, and it must have been roughly three in the morning. For the past hour, I'd been pondering my father's funeral. They were a real headache, the countless tasks that lay ahead: contacting relatives I hadn't spoken to in ages, getting their phone numbers from a palm-size book my father kept by his bedside. He'd retired from a state-run factory only to get another job spraying paint for a private firm, which he'd done right up until he fell ill, and so I probably ought to reach out to his co-workers; they'd usually be the ones to chip in for his funeral expenses and send a few vehicles for the procession. I imagined myself sitting in an office in that struggling little factory, discussing these things with some indifferent middle-aged man, feeling even more stressed than I was at this moment. All of this I would have to navigate on my own, whereas on this night I at least had two other people with me, and my father could take on his share of the responsibility, because no matter what condition he was in he was still participating in my life, and, burdensome as this was, when he died there would only be me left in my life, totally alone. I guess that's what freedom looks like nowadays, but when that happened would I still need to write? My father had never expressed any opinions about my writing, in fact he hadn't read a single word of my stories, but, even so, had I been writing for his sake? If not, why was I so doubtful now?

I told myself that of course I had to keep writing—I wasn't doing it for him, he didn't know anything, I was writing for everyone in the world except him

—but these conclusions just rattled around inside my head, like echoes from someone shouting into a deserted valley.

Around three-thirty in the morning, Dr. Xu said, I'm starting to feel a bit sleepy. I said, Shut your eyes for a while, then. She said, I'll nap for half an hour. Keep an eye on the drip and his heart rate, and wake me if anything seems irregular. I said, All right. She lay down on her seat, using her arm as a pillow, and dropped off straightaway, her head and feet pointing in the same direction as my father's. Four o'clock came and she slept on, but I didn't wake her, because my father's vitals showed no sign of changing; they weren't plummeting as she'd predicted. I didn't feel tired at all, though my ass hurt from sitting still for so long and I had to wiggle it around. Then all of a sudden I needed to pee; the urge came out of nowhere, like someone pulling a sink plug. I said to the driver in a low voice, Hey, I need to pee, is there a rest area coming up? He didn't answer and kept facing the road. I didn't think I could hold it much longer, so I scuttled to the front and said, Sir, sorry to bother you, but I need to use the bathroom. Still, he said nothing, as if he found my request so ridiculous that merely replying would wound his dignity. I tapped his shoulder and said, Sir, I'm about to piss myself, could you stop? That was when I looked in the rearview mirror and saw that his eyes were shut. Startled, I thought, Wait, I must be mistaken—does he just have small eyes? I leaned forward and, no, he was fast asleep, breathing evenly, in through the nose and out through the mouth, even snoring lightly, every muscle in his face relaxed, a faint sheen of grease shining in the street lights, his hands still on the wheel. There was a slight bend in the road up ahead, and without hesitation he guided the vehicle around it, stepping on the accelerator and the clutch as needed. I grabbed his shoulder and shook him, but he didn't wake up. Next I pinched the back of his neck, but again, nothing. He just jolted as if a needle had pierced his bum, rising a little from his seat before settling back down. We were going about ninety miles per hour, and I couldn't stir him.



"Does that look straight to you?"
Cartoon by Will McPhail

My bladder felt like an unruly schoolchild waiting for the final bell. I walked back to my father's side, lifted his blanket, and pulled the pee pad out from under him. It was still perfectly dry, just a bit warm. I glanced at Dr. Xu, but she was sound asleep, so I pulled down my trousers and let rip. The liquid was quickly absorbed, even though I had so much to let out that by the time I was done the pad looked like a cotton-filled quilt and was much heavier than before. I stuffed it back under my father, his withered legs with a red birthmark on the right thigh. I'd known this was there when I was a kid, but I'd forgotten about it till now. After tucking myself back into my trousers, I tapped Dr. Xu and said, Hey, wake up! The driver's asleep, we need to do something. She didn't move, so I grabbed her arm and pulled it out from under her head. She fell from her seat, but remained asleep. I checked her breathing and she was still alive, only her face looked more anxious than before; her brow was furrowed, and she let out occasional sighs, her head bumping against the floor of the ambulance. I bundled her back onto the bench and she suddenly asked, How much longer? I said, I don't know. She said, Give me a bit more time, I'm almost done. Then, silence.

I sat back down. There were no other vehicles in sight, just the rising night fog, a sort of milky-white haze in all directions. We must have been approaching Beijing. Now I realized that as well as forgetting to get cash I'd

also neglected to bring any reading material. At this point I desperately needed a book to whisk me away from this place. Even an out-of-date literary journal would have done the job. I tried hard to remember something I'd read recently. A poem popped into my mind, or rather half a poem; I couldn't remember the poet, but a writer friend of mine had posted it online:

Still young, still idealistic, leftist too but wearing
A rightist's hat. He starved himself plump in Xinjiang,
Fled home to Changsha. Grandma made him
Pork-tripe radish soup, red dates floating in it.
Incense burning indoors, a rising perplexity.
On this day, he has no idea what to do.

There was more, but I'd forgotten it. Grandma and soup. Nourishing images, which was probably why it had come to me: I needed comforting thoughts at this moment to show me that human connection actually existed in this world, something that gave off heat, a scene with a little noise and bustle, anything to dispel my current sinking perplexity. Dr. Xu's face knocked against the back of her seat from time to time, until I rested my rucksack under it, nice and soft since all I'd brought was a jacket and two packets of tissues. The driver continued expertly piloting the vehicle, and I could only assume that he was keeping tabs on the road ahead and the rearview mirror with his ears.

Once, when I was little, my father and I spoke about death. I'd asked him, Today Big Fatty said he was going to beat me to death—can he do that? My father said, If he wants to, he can. He was rinsing vegetables at the time—he could cook a few simple dishes, but refused to touch potatoes or radishes, because when he got sent down to the countryside that was all he had to eat and they wrecked his stomach. Nowadays when he saw them at the vegetable market he'd walk quickly by. I said, Then what happens after I'm dead? Can I get revenge? He said, No, you'd be completely defeated. I said, Are you going to die? He said, Yes, I might die at any moment. The human body has a heart in it, about the size of your fist, and when it stops beating you die. I said, Why would it stop? It's beating now, it will beat tomorrow—why would it stop one day? He said, It's beating now, but it might not tomorrow, though your heart is very healthy—you aren't going to die because of that. I said, How would you know? He said, I listened to it when

you were born. I heard your heart and it's a healthy one. Besides, my heart has problems, so the probability is that yours doesn't—those are reasonable odds. Anyway let's leave it at that. The next time Big Fatty wants to hit you, you should run away as fast as you can, then you won't die.

Dr. Xu rolled over but nimbly avoided falling off the bench. I shut my eyes, too. Now everyone in the ambulance had their eyes shut, and we entered a common darkness. All of a sudden, I heard coughing. First I thought it must be the driver, but I quickly realized that it sounded too familiar to be him, like someone crumpling sandpaper. I opened my eyes to see my father hacking away, more and more violently. Finally, he woke himself up. I said, Dad. He looked at me and sat up. As always, now that he was awake, the coughing stopped. He said, What's all this? I said, We're almost in Beijing. He said, Beijing? What for? I said, To get you treatment, you had a heart attack. He said, Forget it, I saw my own heart a moment ago, it's been gnawed at by worms, it's all rusty now. A worm had a chat with me, it said it knew my grandfather. Are you going to Beijing, too? I said, Yes, who else would take care of you? He said, What nonsense. I don't need to be taken care of. What's the time? I said, Five-twenty in the morning. He said, I haven't boxed yet today. Help me get rid of this pee pad, it smells revolting.

With that, he crawled out from under the blanket and stood there, boxing. After twenty minutes, he sat down and said, I've forgotten what comes next. I said, How's that possible? You've been practicing this sequence for forty years. He said, It's gone, I don't remember a single bit of it. My whole life has gone past, just like that. I said, It's not over yet, you're doing perfectly well now, aren't you? He said, My whole life has gone past. I always knew it would, I knew my life would slip by, that's why I took up boxing, because what else could I do? And now that I've forgotten the boxing, too, I feel light. I've finally gotten through it, I've spent it all. I said, Would you like some water? He said, I'm not thirsty. What are your plans? I said, I don't know, I'm still not able to accept a life that doesn't have you in it, please hold on awhile longer. He said, You think too highly of my existence. The probability is that your life has more meaning, your existence devours mine. From the day you were born you've been eating my existence bit by bit with a little spoon, but that doesn't matter, you don't need to feel guilty. When do you plan to get married? I said, I haven't given it any thought. He said, Mmm, well, when you have a son, you'll eat him with a spoon, too, that's

how good your appetite is. Like I said, I listened to your heart when you weren't looking—it's sturdy as an airplane engine. You can't hear it but I can, it roars by my side every single day. That's why I'm quiet.

And then he actually did fall silent for a while, the way he often did, stopping in the middle of a conversation. Who knows what he was thinking? Maybe he'd just forgotten what he was about to say. Dr. Xu rolled over again, this time with her face toward us. Her eyes were open, but I wasn't sure if she could see us. What you're saying isn't any help to me, she said with absolute certainty, no help at all. There's nothing else I can do—it's perfectly clear in the images, and every instrument tells me the truth, so there's no point to your lying. History doesn't lie. History has proved that people like you are no help. Give me your medical records. She rapped lightly at her head, eyes half shut. Who wrote this? What kind of handwriting is this? No one could read this!

My father didn't respond. His face was full of incomprehension. He had no idea what she was getting at, or why there would be such a patient in the ambulance. Her entire body juddered, as if someone had kicked her, and her eyes drifted shut again.

Give me a hand, my father said, I'm heading back. As I lifted him onto the gurney, he wrapped his arms around me. He didn't stink, but rather had the light pleasant scent of a small child. Into my ear he said, Goodbye, this is as far as we'll go. I said, No, don't say that, you're not old yet—you have to wait till you're an old man. He said again, Goodbye. As his eyes lost focus, I said, Don't fall asleep, we're almost there. His eyes widened a little and he said, Who are you? I said, I'm your son. He nodded and said, Safe travels, take care. With that, he lay flat, reaching out to cover himself with the blanket. He fell asleep, coughed a couple of times, and stopped breathing.

The monitor began beeping, waking Dr. Xu. She groped around, realized there was nothing next to her, then woke fully. She asked who'd put a rucksack under her head, and when I said I had, she said it was very uncomfortable. I told her two things had happened: the driver had been fast asleep for quite a while, and my father had died. I could tell she wanted to comfort me, but her professionalism held her back. She nodded and removed his drip as if she were unravelling a sweater back into yarn. After a few

minutes, the driver woke, too, looking unabashed, but then nothing bad had happened, so fair enough. Besides, the nap had left him refreshed, as if his day were just beginning. He turned and spoke to Dr. Xu, and they decided we should go back the way we came. I asked Dr. Xu if we could stop, and we did at the next rest area, so I could go to the bathroom. When I got back, I made sure that the other two were still awake, then I curled up next to my father's legs. I felt light, free of burdens, free of goals, and to the accompaniment of my own heartbeat I soon fell asleep. ♦

(Translated, from the Chinese, by Jeremy Tiang.)

This is drawn from “[The Hunter](#). ”

By Graham Swift

By Sam Knight

By Liliana Colanzi

By Viet Thanh Nguyen

Puzzles & Games Dept.

- [The Crossword: Tuesday, September 26, 2023](#)

By [Erik Agard](#)

By Brooke Husic

By Ross Trudeau

By Adam Aaronson

Poems

- “[After My Father’s Cremation](#)”
- “[Hares](#)”

By [Pablo Medina](#)

Read by the author.

Outside now his ashes
are blown by the wind

through the eyes of ten needles
he was the poorest man

he was the richest man
he floats with one ear on the horizon

and listens to the siren song of the flames
too late to make excuses

his tongue tastes the skin of the sea
his lips are the waves breaking on the beach.

This is drawn from “Sea of Broken Mirrors.”

By [A. E. Stallings](#)

In thirteen years
of walking the mountain path
hares have been scarce—
I've done the math.
In all this time, I've
seen maybe four or five.

Droppings I've seen
that prove they're here—
at the crossroads, at the turn.
I picture one dished ear
swivelling left then right
as for a satellite

while the buck sits
and lifts his stone axe head,
one of his sparring mitts
tentatively folded
toward his angular chest,
alert, at rest.

Partridges (or chukars)
I often run across;
they take off in a ruckus
Greeks likened to flatulence—
like rapidly deflating
balloons. If ambulating,

a matron and her brood
bustle down the hill;
ignoring the rude
interloper, they will
pretend to putter
till spluttering aflutter.

I'm not left agog
by them—but for the hare

almost as big as a dog—
there's no way to prepare
for the huge unlikelihood.
By the time I've understood

something drastic
has happened, it bounds
into the bushy mastic
pursued by ghost hounds.
The light's about to fail
when it turns tail

and the two black tips
of its ears bob away.
To see one's to eclipse
the rest of the day.
Hares are not born blind.
They are a watchful kind:

I am seen, I bet,
more often than I see.
Right now a leveret
might be eyeing me,
wound up with alarm
to start forth from its grassy form

and add to the slim count
of hares I've seen
on the mountain. The amount
might double in thirteen
more years—who can say.
This one leaps away.

By Tiana Clark

By Dorothea Lasky

By Hua Hsu

By Melissa Ginsburg

Goings On About Town

- [Richard Brody's New York Film Festival Highlights](#)
- [Nowon and Its Legendary Cheeseburger Expand to Bushwick](#)

Richard Brody

Staff writer

You're reading the Goings On newsletter, a guide to what we're watching, listening to, and doing this week. [Sign up to receive it in your in-box.](#)

It was a scandal when, in 1969, the New York Film Festival showed Paul Mazursky's extramarital romp “Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice” in its Lincoln Center sanctuary, but these days few doubt that art can issue from Hollywood. Several industry notables will grace this year’s edition of the festival, which kicks off tonight and runs through Oct. 15, including Todd Haynes, whose drama **“May December”**—featuring Natalie Portman as an actor preparing to portray a subject of a long-ago scandal (Julianne Moore)—is the opening-night offering. But N.Y.F.F. is largely a celebration of movies that likely won’t be on hundreds of multiplex screens and yet are no less worthy of attention, such as the idiosyncratic and intimate comedy **“The Feeling That the Time for Doing Something Has Passed”**—written and directed by Joanna Arnow, who also stars as a thirtysomething Brooklyn woman whose quest for a romantic relationship conflicts with her desire to be sexually dominated—and **“In Water,”** one of a pair of films by the veteran South Korean director Hong Sangsoo, about a young independent filmmaker’s reckless effort to shoot an improvised drama. Many of Hong’s images are intentionally out of focus, to surprising emotional effect, emphasizing the force of the film’s confessional and confrontational dialogue.



Photograph courtesy Sideshow / Janus Films

But pride of place regarding long dialogue scenes of wondrous intensity goes to the Japanese drama **“Evil Does Not Exist,”** directed by Ryûsuke Hamaguchi (whose 2021 film “Drive My Car” was nominated for four Oscars and won one, for Best International Feature Film). It’s the story of a rural village of artisans and farmers whose way of life is threatened by a businessman’s plan to open a glamping lodge there. Discussions among the villagers and the developers—as at a contentious public hearing—display a depth of practical knowledge and introduce a twisty succession of subjects that seem borrowed from the institution-probing documentaries of Frederick Wiseman. Hamaguchi flaunts his quasi-documentarian sensibility in wordless scenes, too, including an extraordinary long take of a woodcutter at work which is among the cinematic thrills of the year.

Spotlight



Illustration by Rachelle Baker

Hip-Hop

Few rappers can claim to be as skilled as **Little Simz**, a British Nigerian artist who has steadily grown from phenom to bellwether. Her early albums were about transitioning into adulthood, finding her way through the uncertainty of her early twenties to realize her purpose. Even then, it was clear that her path was fated—her lyricism is fluid yet rugged, casual even at its most technical, foreshadowing a future as one of rap's most distinguished soul-searchers. In the years since she established herself as a mainstay, she has performed with brio and bravado: “Name one time where I didn’t deliver,” she raps on “Gorilla,” already knowing the answer. Not only has Simz always come through; she just keeps getting better.—*[Sheldon Pearce](#)* (*Brooklyn Steel*; Oct. 12.)



About Town

Podcast

Free association and podcasting aren't so different—both involve extracting meaning from thoughtful rambling—so it's not surprising that someone has made a podcast about psychoanalysis. “**Ordinary Unhappiness**” (produced in collaboration with *Parapraxis Magazine*) takes an approach to the subject that's more scholarly than therapeutic, providing an experience akin to listening in on a lively seminar. The hosts are Abby Kluchin and Patrick Blanchfield, a pair of academics who happen to be married. (That this fact comes out only incidentally in the course of the first episode feels appropriate.) Their interviews cover an expansive range of psychoanalytic themes in contemporary culture; a set of episodes called “The Standard Edition” proceeds methodically through Freud's work. The conversations are meandering but scattered with memorable insights and reading recommendations. Early on, Blanchfield tells listeners that the show will be “interminable, but in the best possible way”—so far, it fulfills that promise.

—[Molly Fischer](#)

Classical

Riccardo Muti, the venerable, debonair, exacting Italian conductor, opens Carnegie Hall's season with two concerts leading the **Chicago Symphony Orchestra**. The first night is gala fare—Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto, with the superlative Leonidas Kavakos, and Mussorgsky's “Pictures at an Exhibition”—and gives way to a thematic program for the second evening. Philip Glass's new composition “The Triumph of the Octagon,” inspired by a photo of a thirteenth-century Italian castle which Muti kept in his studio, introduces Mendelssohn's “Italian” Symphony and Richard Strauss's “Aus Italien,” both of which ring with uncomplicated enthusiasm for the country, where the composers took trips in their early twenties.—*Oussama Zahr* (*Carnegie Hall; Oct. 4-5.*)

Dance



Photograph by Serge Daniel Kabore

Choreographers are closely attuned to music, but hardly any are actually composers. **Olivier Tarpaga** comes from a musical family in Burkina Faso, and when he creates dance works he almost always writes the scores, too—intricate and funky ones, played live. His works often address heavy topics, such as political instability in his homeland, with impressionistic subtlety. A new piece, “Once the dust settles, flowers bloom,” presented at the Joyce as part of the Crossing the Line Festival, is about refugees fleeing from violent jihadists. It's a peregrination of grounded, supple, springy motion, and,

although it doesn't ignore suffering, the dancers carry flowers between their teeth. As they aspire to beauty and hope, Tarpaga's groove is of great assistance.—*Brian Seibert (Joyce Theatre; Oct. 3-8.)*

Theatre

In “**Mary Gets Hers,**” Emma Horwitz’s merry adaptation of Hrotsvitha of Gandersheim’s tenth-century play “Abraham,” an orphaned girl, Mary (Haley Wong), raised in monastic seclusion, runs away only to fall into sexual exploitation. In both versions, the fond Brother Abraham (Susannah Perkins) rescues his prostituted charge, but Horwitz seems ambivalent about which bodily surrender—to man or to God—is worse. The comedy is like a doodle on an illustrated manuscript, with jolly tonsured friars crushing on one another and on the Almighty. (Perkins, as chief flirter, is a miracle.) But Josiah Davis’s spoof-medieval, no-cis-males-allowed production, for the Playwrights Realm, eventually frolics so much that the capering runs out of air. The central question of Mary’s own desires remains unbroached; Horwitz hasn’t yet found a secular equivalent for Hrotsvitha’s sense of religious ecstasy.—*Helen Shaw (Robert W. Wilson MCC Theatre Space; through Oct. 14.)*

Experimental Music

The experimental artist Sean Bowie, who records as **Yves Tumor**, is continuously shape-shifting. A gender-nonconforming performer who actively subverts expectations, Tumor has a way of finding the hook in otherwise challenging music. Courtney Love, a disruptive presence in her own right, has called Tumor “disagreeable,” as a compliment. In Tumor’s past three albums—the noise-pop breakthrough “Safe in the Hands of Love,” from 2018; the twisted, voice-forward funk blast “Heaven to a Tortured Mind,” from 2020; and this year’s fusionist fever dream, “Praise a Lord Who Chews but Which Does Not Consume”—the artist has brought cohesion to chaos, and made the avant-garde feel like a guilty pleasure. Even from song to song, Tumor refuses to remain static.—*Sheldon Pearce (Terminal 5; Oct. 4.)*

Movies



Photograph courtesy Netflix

Streaming services have given short films new prominence, as with Wes Anderson's four brief adaptations of tales by Roald Dahl, now on Netflix. The longest of them, at thirty-nine minutes, is "**The Wonderful Story of Henry Sugar**," a giddy cinematic experiment in which the filmmaker takes the concept of storytelling daringly literally. The film chronicles a rich fop who studies a magic manual and teaches himself how to achieve X-ray vision and clairvoyance. The story is told, into the camera, by Dahl (played by Ralph Fiennes), the author of the manual (Dev Patel), the magician whose skills it details (Ben Kingsley), and the wealthy protagonist himself (Benedict Cumberbatch), even as they act out their adventures on elaborately crafted, stagelike sets. For all the film's whimsical style and substance, it offers a potent vision of the redemptive power of apparent frivolity.—*Richard Brody (In limited release and streaming.)*

Art

If you liked the new Tom Wolfe documentary, Richard Dewey's "Radical Wolfe," visit Matthew Marks for a textbook example of radical chic. **Wade Guyton's** latest batch of photo-based, ink-jet-printed paintings encompasses many subjects: abstract smears, a Manet still-life, a police car. But his most

revealing subject is the New York *Times* Web site, a Guyton staple since the twenty-tens. This time around, ads for “Funny Girl” or Banana Republic sit beside headlines about Trump or Ukraine. The point, if you can call it one—that news and consumerism blur together in the struggle for eyeballs—is as true as it is shallow. The paintings have been hung from repurposed metal racks, more gimmickry in a show already choked with it.—[Jackson Arn](#) (*Matthew Marks gallery; through Oct. 28.*)

Theatre

The appeal of “**Melissa Etheridge: My Window,**” on Broadway, is obvious: if you’re into Melissa Etheridge—that strong, rich voice, drenched in tough experience; those explosively emotional songs—well, then, here she is, unvarnished, singing and telling stories, under Amy Tinkham’s direction. The only other onstage presence is Kate Owens, who mutely and gamely plays opposite Etheridge when the singer is acting something out. Etheridge’s songs are as affecting as ever, and she performs them in counterpoint to the drama-dense time line of her life. Love, sex, music, and, especially, her encounters with psychoactive drugs—it all comes up. (At one point, rhapsodizing about ayahuasca, she puts on a tasselled hippie jacket.) The stories are fine; the songs are worth the ticket price.—[Vinson Cunningham](#) (*Circle in the Square; through Nov. 19.*)

P.S. Good stuff on the Internet:

- ['NSync on “Hot Ones”](#)
- [“What \\$500 Means to Zinida Moore”](#)
- [The YouTube channel “Steve’s Soft Drink Shack”](#)

By Jessica Winter

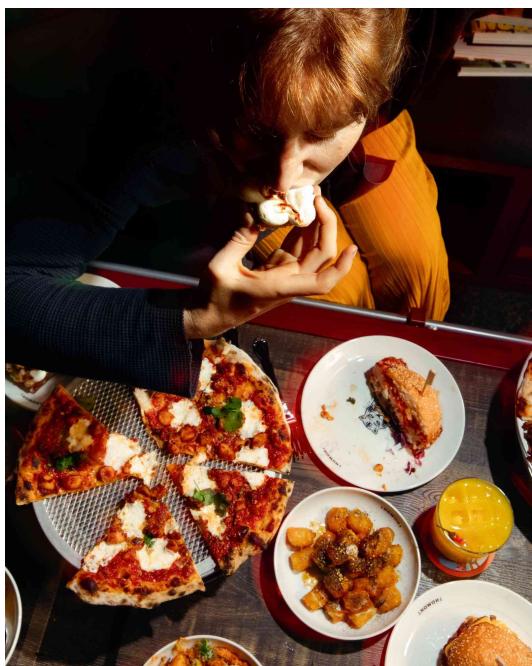
By The New Yorker

By Zadie Smith

By [Shauna Lyon](#)

One of the best burgers in the city is most certainly the smash burger at Nowon. It's called, not immodestly, the Legendary Cheeseburger, and features two expertly charred patties, doctored with a top-secret umami seasoning, American cheese, a special sauce with kimchi and Kewpie mayo, and house-made pickles, on a sesame-seed bun. It's the anchor of both locations of Nowon, a Korean American *pocha*, or gastropub, named after the district in Seoul where its chef and owner, Jae Lee, lived until he was eight.

For Lee, Nowon was hard-won, though rather meteorically. In 2017, the chef, who had cooked his way up the ladder for Floyd Cardoz, Masaharu Morimoto, and Dale Talde, landed an executive-chef position at Hotel 50 Bowery's Rice & Gold. He hadn't yet turned thirty. "I was too comfortable," he told me. "I need to be in the fire." So he quit, and, in April, 2019, started a pop-up in the East Village's Black Emperor bar, selling burgers, chopped-cheese rice cakes, fried chicken. "I was a one-man show, selling five burgers a night," Lee said. "I had to sell my prize possession, my Panerai watch, just to have rent money." Then a Gothamist article came out: "Random East Village Bar Now Serving One of NYC's Greatest Burgers." Lee's pop-up blew up: "I started selling hundreds of burgers overnight."



Ricotta toast and honey-butter tater tots are welcome accompaniments to the kimchi-laced Legendary Cheeseburger.

On the strength of that burger, Lee met with potential investors for his own restaurant, but when he couldn't cite any examples of his concept—there was no Korean American *pocha* to point to—they declined to fund it. So Lee set up shop on his own, and launched Nowon, in the East Village (507 E. 6th St.), just months after the fateful article. This summer, he opened a second location, in Bushwick. Where the East Village room is all warm wood and cozy, if high-decibel, bar vibes, the Bushwick spot reads at once sleek and gritty, in black and red hues, Destiny's Child videos projected on the wall, Tyler, the Creator blasting on the speakers.



The eclectic drink menu includes Korean rice beer, soju, and zero-proof cocktails.

Alongside an intriguingly eclectic drink menu—listing obscure Korean rice beer, lemongrass- and miso-inflected mocktails, and soju galore—Lee wisely retains his hits. Mandatory orders include a burger (a version with actual truffle rivals the Legendary); a killer gochujang-glazed fried-chicken sandwich; crisp honey-butter tater tots; and those chopped-cheese rice cakes, a variation of *tteokbokki*, swimming in a velvety beef-and-American-cheese-fortified gravy.

Lee's wonderful *japchae*, helpfully named Vegan Shroom Noods, bathes translucent sweet-potato glass noodles in a brown-sugar-soy sauce. Wood-fired pizzas, new for the Bushwick location, skew sweet, with a deliciously complex, chewy crust. Lee told me that he does think about an empire, but

not the Roman kind: “I want to build a Korean American restaurant-bar empire, throughout the nation.” (*Dishes* \$11-\$27.) ♦

By Helen Rosner

By Jiayang Fan

By Dahlia Gallin Ramirez

By The New Yorker

Mail

- [Letters from our Readers](#)

The Meat of It

Sarah Larson, in her piece about the lawyer Spencer Sheehan, who sues food companies for their deceptive marketing, relates that the descriptions of meat contaminated with rat feces in Upton Sinclair's novel "The Jungle" helped set up the passage of the Pure Food and Drug Act, which led in turn to the creation of the F.D.A. ("You've Been Served," September 11th). Larson doesn't expand on this detail, and some might assume that the problem of feces in food was solved. But that is not the case. Today, the U.S. Department of Agriculture acknowledges that bacteria indicating the presence of fecal matter are routinely found in meat and poultry products. Food labels, however, do not have to advise consumers that there may be traces of feces in meat. Like using the term "free range" (which implies that chickens can go outside, when it merely means that they are uncaged) or printing images of cows in grassy fields on the packaging of many beef and dairy products (when in fact the animals they came from were most likely confined indoors, on factory farms), this enables the meat industry to make its products seem more appealing to consumers than they might if they bore more representative labelling. As it stands, the industry's misleading marketing has a serious negative impact on human health, the environment, and animal suffering.

*Elena Cunningham
Brooklyn, N.Y.*

Church and State

As a regular reader of the *Times*, I was grateful for Isaac Chotiner's Profile of Ross Douthat ("The Believer," September 18th). As a theologian, however, I wished that the article had included a more substantial interrogation of the relationship between Douthat's thinking and his faith. For instance, Chotiner relates that Douthat "strongly opposes" Pope Francis's "liberalization" goals—in particular, those with a bearing on divorce and remarriage. One wonders whether Douthat knows that the Catholic Church did not recognize marriage as a sacrament until the twelfth century, and that the institution is more flexible in Eastern Catholic Churches than it is in the West. Here, as in many of his columns, Douthat

seems to be reading Catholicism through a lens shaped by American social and political issues, with little regard for what happens in the Church globally.

*Leo J. O'Donovan, S.J.
President Emeritus
Georgetown University
Bronx, N.Y.*

A Teacher's Tales

Last year, after teaching elementary school for more than three decades, I retired; one of the things about my job that I miss the most is reading books by the children's writer Kate DiCamillo, the subject of Casey Cep's recent piece, to my classes ("Glow in the Dark," September 18th). DiCamillo writes books that are better read out loud than in silence. "Because of Winn-Dixie" was the kids' perennial favorite, so, on the first day of school, I always started there. After several chapters, even the most difficult-to-settle students would race over to hear the story. My favorite was "The Tale of Despereaux," which I read every year for sixteen or seventeen years. The novel is written with such compassion and creativity that eight-year-olds could easily relate to its themes and characters. And, every time I read it, I noticed something important that I hadn't noticed before. DiCamillo is a gift to students, most certainly, but her gift to teachers is one that keeps on giving, year after year.

*Bridget Slevin
Healdsburg, Calif.*

•

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.

Table of Contents

[NewYorker.2023.10.09](#)

[Reporting](#)

- [Kwame Onwuachi's Cuisine of the Self](#)
- [Among the Cabin Fanatics of Mississippi's Giant Houseparty](#)
- [The Next Targets for the Group That Overturned Roe](#)
- [They Studied Dishonesty. Was Their Work a Lie?](#)

[The Critics](#)

- [How Queer Is "Frankenstein"?](#)
- [What Really Started the Great Chicago Fire?](#)
- [Briefly Noted Book Reviews](#)
- [The Musical Legacy of a Mississippi Prison Farm](#)
- [Ed Ruscha's Calmly Collapsing America](#)
- ["Purlie Victorious" Hustles for Social Justice](#)

[The Talk of the Town](#)

- [Biden, Trump, and What's at Stake in the U.A.W. Strike](#)
- [Flotsam, Jetsam, and a Soprano Amid the Black Mayonnaise](#)
- [Josh Gad and Andrew Rannells Channel Two Pals from Junior High](#)
- [A Drummer's-Eye View of the Arctic Monkeys](#)
- [The Best Thirst Traps Money Can Buy](#)

[Shouts & Murmurs](#)

- [Other Detectors](#)

[Fiction](#)

- ["Heart"](#)

[Puzzles & Games Dept.](#)

- [The Crossword: Tuesday, September 26, 2023](#)

[Poems](#)

- ["After My Father's Cremation"](#)
- ["Hares"](#)

[Goings On About Town](#)

- [Richard Brody's New York Film Festival Highlights](#)
- [Nowon and Its Legendary Cheeseburger Expand to Bushwick](#)

[Mail](#)

- [Letters from our Readers](#)