

THE NEW  
PROPAGANDA WAR

ANNE APPLEBAUM

The Atlantic

# The Atlantic

[Sun, 02 Jun 2024]

- [Features](#)
- [Dispatches](#)
- [Culture & Critics](#)
- [Departments](#)
- [Poetry](#)

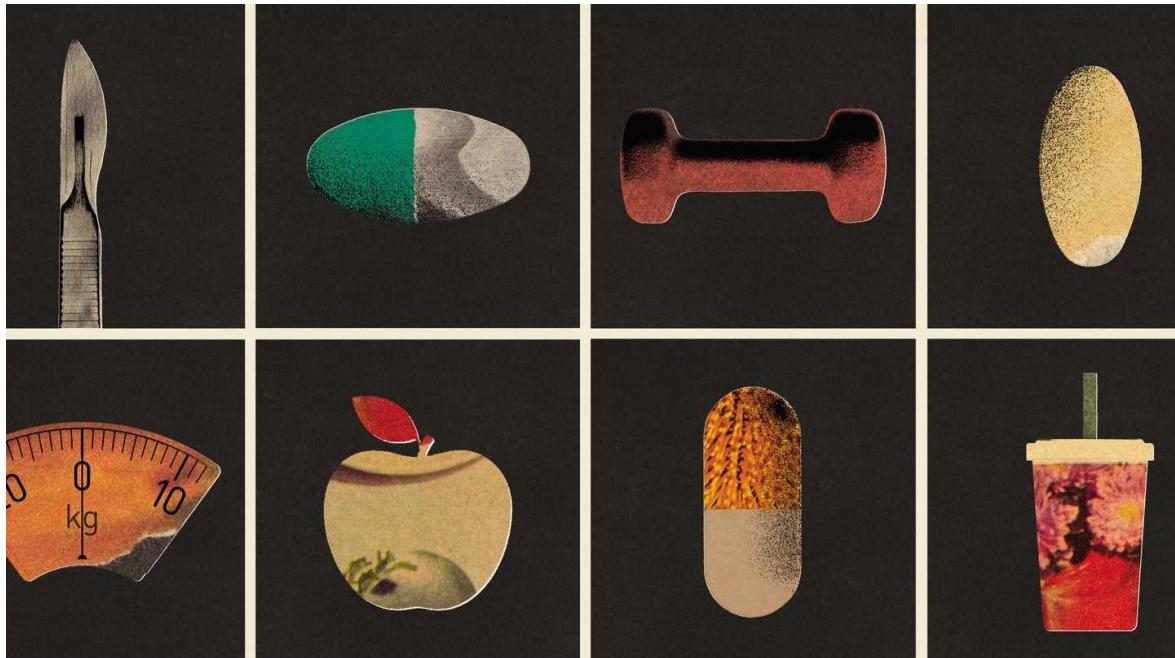
# Features

- [\*\*Ozempic or Bust\*\*](#)
- [\*\*The Lynching That Sent My Family North\*\*](#)
- [\*\*The Godfather of American Comedy\*\*](#)
- [\*\*How Daniel Radcliffe Outran Harry Potter\*\*](#)

# Ozempic or Bust

**America has been trying to address the obesity epidemic for four decades now. So far, each new “solution” has failed to live up to its early promise.**

by Daniel Engber



In the early spring of 2020, Barb Herrera taped a signed note to a wall of her bedroom in Orlando, Florida, just above her pillow. NOTICE TO EMS! it said. No Vent! No Intubation! She'd heard that hospitals were overflowing, and that doctors were being forced to choose which COVID patients they would try to save and which to abandon. She wanted to spare them the trouble.

Barb was nearly 60 years old, and weighed about 400 pounds. She has type 2 diabetes, chronic kidney disease, and a host of other health concerns. At the start of the pandemic, she figured she was doomed. When she sent her list of passwords to her kids, who all live far away, they couldn't help but think the same. "I was in an incredibly dark place," she told me. "*I would have died.*"

Until recently, Barb could barely walk—at least not without putting herself at risk of getting yet another fracture in her feet. Moving around the house exhausted her; she showered only every other week. She couldn't make it to the mailbox on her own. Barb had spent a lifetime dealing with the inconveniences of being, as she puts it, "huge." But what really scared her—and what embarrassed her, because dread and shame have a way of getting tangled up—were the moments when her little room, about 10 feet wide and not much longer, was less a hideout than a trap. At one point in 2021, she says, she tripped and fell on the way to the toilet. Her housemate and landlord—a high-school friend—was not at home to help, so Barb had to call the paramedics. "It took four guys to get me up," she said.

Later that year, when Barb finally did get COVID, her case was fairly mild. But she didn't feel quite right after she recovered: She was having trouble breathing, and there was something off about her heart. Finally, in April 2022, she went to the hospital and her vital signs were taken.

The average body mass index for American adults is 30. Barb's BMI was around 75. A blood-sugar test showed that her diabetes was not under control—her blood sugar was in the range where she might be at risk of blindness or stroke. And an EKG confirmed that her heart was skipping beats. A cardiac electrophysiologist, Shravan Ambati, came in for a consultation. He said the missed beats could be treated with medication, but he made a mental note of her severe obesity—he'd seen only one or two

patients of Barb's size in his 14-year career. Before he left, he paused to give her some advice. If she didn't lose weight, he said, "the Barb of five years from now is not going to like you very much at all." As she remembers it, he crossed his arms and added: "You will either change your life, or you'll end up in a nursing home."

"That was it. That was it," Barb told me. Imagining herself getting old inside a home, "in a row of old people who are fat as hell, just sitting there waiting to die," she vowed to do everything she could to get well. She would try to change her life. Eventually, like millions of Americans, she would try the new miracle cure. Again.

2

In a way, Barb has never stopped trying to change her life. At 10 years old, she was prescribed amphetamines; at 12, she went to WeightWatchers. Later she would go on liquid diets, and nearly every form of solid diet. She's been vegan and gluten-free, avoided fat, cut back on carbs, and sworn off processed foods. She's taken drugs that changed her neurochemistry and gotten surgery to shrink her stomach to the size of a shot glass. She's gone to food-addiction groups. She's eaten Lean Cuisines. She's been an avid swimmer at the Y.



Barb Herrera weighed about 300 pounds by the time she was 30. (Courtesy of Barb Herrera)

Through it all, she's lost a lot of weight. Really an extraordinary quantity—well more than a quarter ton, if you add it up across her life. But every miracle so far has come with hidden costs: anemia, drug-induced depression, damage to her heart. Always, in the end, the weight has come back. Always, in the end, “success” has left her feeling worse.

In the United States, an estimated 189 million adults are classified as having obesity or being overweight; certainly many millions have, like Barb, spent decades running on a treadmill of solutions, never getting anywhere. The ordinary fixes—the kind that draw on people’s will, and require eating less and moving more—rarely have a large or lasting effect. Indeed, America itself has suffered through a long, maddening history of failed attempts to change its habits on a national scale: a yo-yo diet of well-intentioned treatments, policies, and other social interventions that only ever lead us back to where we started. New rules for eating have been rolled out and then rolled back. Pills have been invented and abandoned. Laws have been rewritten to improve the quality of people’s diets and curb caloric intake—to make society less “obesogenic” on the whole. Efforts have been made to

reduce discrimination over body size in employment settings and in health care. Through it all, obesity rates keep going up; the diabetes epidemic keeps worsening.

The most recent miracle, for Barb as well as for the nation, has come in the form of injectable drugs. In early 2021, the Danish pharmaceutical company Novo Nordisk [published a clinical trial showing remarkable results](#) for semaglutide, now sold under the trade names Wegovy and Ozempic.

Thomas Wadden, a clinical psychologist and obesity researcher at the University of Pennsylvania who has studied weight-loss interventions for more than 40 years (and who has received both research grants and fees from Novo Nordisk), remembers when he first learned about those findings, at an internal meeting at the company the year before. “My jaw just dropped,” he told me. “I really could not believe what we were seeing.” Patients in the study who’d had injections of the drug lost, on average, close to 15 percent of their body weight—more than had ever been achieved with any other drug in a study of that size. Wadden knew immediately that this would be “an incredible revolution in the treatment of obesity.”

#### [Radio Atlantic: Could Ozempic derail the body-positivity movement?](#)

Semaglutide is in the class of GLP-1 receptor agonists, chemicals derived from lizard venom that mimic gut hormones and appear to reshape our metabolism and eating behavior for as long as the drugs are taken. Earlier versions were already being used to treat diabetes; then, in 2022, a newer one from Eli Lilly—tirzepatide, sold as Zepbound or Mounjaro—produced an average weight loss of 20 percent in a clinical trial. Many more drugs are now racing through development: survotutide, pemvidutide, retatrutide. (Among specialists, that last one has produced the most excitement: An early trial found an average weight loss of 24 percent in one group of participants.)

The past four decades of American history underline just how much is riding on these drugs—and serve as a sobering reminder that it is impossible to know, in the first few years of any novel intervention, whether its success will last.

The drugs [don't work for everyone](#). Their major side effects—nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea—can be too intense for many patients. Others don't end up losing any weight. That's not to mention all the people who might benefit from treatment but don't have access to it: For the time being, just 25 percent of private insurers offer the relevant coverage, and the cost of treatment—about \$1,000 a month—has been prohibitive for many Americans.

But there's growing pressure for GLP-1 drugs to be covered without restrictions by Medicare, and subject to price negotiation. Eventually they will start to come off patent. When that happens, usage is likely to explode. The drugs have already been approved not just for people with diabetes or obesity, but for anyone who has a BMI of more than 27 and an associated health condition, such as high blood pressure or cholesterol. By those criteria, more than 140 million American adults already qualify—and if this story goes the way it's gone for other "risk factor" drugs such as statins and antihypertensives, then the threshold for prescriptions will be lowered over time, inching further toward the weight range we now describe as "normal."

How you view that prospect will depend on your attitudes about obesity, and your tolerance for risk. The first GLP-1 drug to receive FDA approval, exenatide, has been used as a diabetes treatment for more than 20 years. No long-term harms have been identified—but then again, that drug's long-term effects have been studied carefully only across a span of seven years. Today, adolescents are injecting newer versions of these drugs, and may continue to do so every week for 50 years or more. What might happen over all that time? Could the drugs produce lasting damage, or end up losing some of their benefit?

Athena Philis-Tsimikas, an endocrinologist who works at Scripps Health in San Diego and whose research has received ample funding from Novo Nordisk and Eli Lilly, says the data so far look very good. "These are now being used, literally, in hundreds of thousands of people across the world," she told me, and although some studies have suggested that GLP-1 drugs may cause inflammation of the pancreas, or even tumor growth, these concerns have not borne out. Exenatide, at least, keeps working over many years, and its side effects don't appear to worsen. Still, we have less to go on with the newer drugs, Philis-Tsimikas said. "All of us, in the back of our

minds, always wonder, *Will something show up?*” Although no serious problems have yet emerged, she said, “you wonder, and you worry.”

The GLP-1 drugs may well represent a shocking breakthrough for the field of public health, on the order of vaccines and sanitation. They could also fizzle out, or end in a surge of tragic, unforeseen results. But in light of what we’ve been through, it’s hard to see what other choices still remain. For 40 years, we’ve tried to curb the spread of obesity and its related ailments, and for 40 years, we’ve failed. We don’t know how to fix the problem. We don’t even understand what’s really causing it. Now, again, we have a new approach. This time around, the fix had better work.

### 3

Barb’s first weight-loss miracle, and America’s, came during a moment of profound despair. In 1995, while working in a birthing center, she’d tripped on a scale—“the irony of all ironies,” she told me—and cracked her ankle. When she showed up for the surgery that followed, Barb, then 34 and weighing 330 pounds, learned that she had type 2 diabetes. In a way, this felt like her inheritance: Both grandparents on Barb’s father’s side had obesity and diabetes, as did her dad, his brother, and two sisters. Her mother, too, had obesity. Now, despite Barb’s own years of efforts to maintain her health, that legacy had her in its grip.

The doctors threatened Barb (as doctors often have): If she didn’t find a way to eat in moderation, she might not make it through the end of 1997. Then she got some new advice: Yes, Barb should eat better food and exercise, but also maybe she should try a pair of drugs, dexfenfluramine and phentermine, together known as “fen-phen.” The former had just received approval from the FDA, and research showed that a combination of the two, taken several times a day, was highly effective at reducing weight.

[Read: The weight-loss-drug revolution is a miracle—and a menace](#)

The treatment was a revelation. Even when she talks about it now, Barb begins to cry. She’d tried so many diets in the past, and made so little progress, but as soon as she started on the weight-loss medication, something changed. A low and steady hum that she’d experienced ever since

she was a kid—*Where can I eat? How can I eat? When can I eat?*—disappeared, leaving her in a strange new state of quiet. “The fen-phen turned that off just within a day. It was gone,” she told me, struggling to get out the words. “What it did was tell me that I’m not crazy, that it really wasn’t me.”

At the time, Wadden, the obesity researcher and clinician, was hearing similar reports from his patients, who started telling him that their relationship with food had been transformed, that suddenly they were free of constant cravings. Over the course of a small, year-long study of the drugs that Wadden ran with a colleague at Penn, Robert Berkowitz, participants lost about 14 percent of their body weight on average. That’s the same level of success that would be seen for semaglutide several decades later. “Bob and I really were high-fiving each other,” Wadden told me. “We were feeling like, *God, we’ve got a cure for obesity.*”

The fen-phen revolution arrived at a crucial turning point for Wadden’s field, and indeed for his career. By then he’d spent almost 15 years at the leading edge of research into dietary interventions, seeing how much weight a person might lose through careful cutting of their calories. But that sort of diet science—and the diet culture that it helped support—had lately come into a state of ruin. Americans were fatter than they’d ever been, and they were giving up on losing weight. According to one industry group, the total number of dieters in the country declined by more than 25 percent from 1986 to 1991.



In 1988, Oprah Winfrey brought a wagon of fat on air to represent the 67 pounds she'd lost using a liquid diet. (Associated Press)

"I'll never diet again," Oprah Winfrey had announced on her TV show at the end of 1990. Not long before, she'd kicked off a major trend by talking up her own success with a brand of weight-loss shakes called Optifast. But Winfrey's slimmer figure had been fleeting, and now the \$33 billion diet industry was under scrutiny for making bogus scientific claims.

Rejecting diet culture became something of a feminist cause. "A growing number of women are joining in an anti-diet movement," *The New York Times* reported in 1992. "They are forming support groups and ceasing to

diet with a resolve similar to that of secretaries who 20 years ago stopped getting coffee for their bosses. Others have smashed their bathroom scales with the abandon that some women in the 1960's burned their bras."

That same *Times* story included a quote from Wadden, who cautioned that these changing attitudes might end up being "dangerous." But Wadden's own views of dieting were also changing. His prior research showed that patients could lose up to one-fifth of their body weight by going on very strict diets that allowed for no more than 800 calories a day. But he'd found that it was difficult for his patients to maintain that loss for long, once the formal program was over. Now Wadden and other obesity researchers were reaching a consensus that behavioral interventions might produce in the very best scenario an average lasting weight loss of just 5 to 10 percent.

National surveys completed in 1994 showed that the adult obesity rate had surged by more than half since 1980, while the proportion of children classified as overweight had doubled. The need for weight control in America had never seemed so great, even as the chances of achieving it were never perceived to be so small.

Then a bolt of science landed in this muddle and despair. In December 1994, the *Times* [ran an editorial on what was understood to be a pivotal discovery](#): A genetic basis for obesity had finally been found. Researchers at Rockefeller University were investigating a molecule, later named leptin, that gets secreted from fat cells and travels to the brain, and that causes feelings of satiety. Lab mice with mutations in the leptin gene—importantly, a gene also found in humans—overeat until they're three times the size of other mice. "The finding holds out the dazzling hope," the editorial explained, "that scientists may, eventually, come up with a drug treatment to help overweight Americans shed unwanted, unhealthy pounds."

Leptin-based treatments for obesity were in the works, according to the researchers, and might be ready for the public in five years, maybe 10. In the meantime, the suggestion that obesity was a biochemical disease, more a function of a person's genes than of their faulty habits or lack of will, dovetailed with the nation's shift away from dieting. If there was any hope of solving the problem of obesity, maybe this was it.

Wadden was ready to switch gears. “I realized that we had sort of reached our limits on what we could do with diet and physical activity,” he said. Now, instead, he started looking into pharmaceuticals. He’d already run one weight-loss study using sertraline, better known as Zoloft, and found that it had no effect. In 1995, he turned to fen-phen.

Fen-phen wasn’t new, exactly—versions of its component drugs had been prescribed for decades. But when those pills were taken separately, their side effects were difficult to handle: “Fen” would make you drowsy and might give you diarrhea; “phen” could be agitating and lead to constipation. By the 1990s, though, doctors had begun to give the two together, such that their side effects would cancel each other out. And then a new and better version of “fen”—not fenfluramine but *dexfenfluramine*—came under FDA review.

Some regulators worried that this better “fen” posed a risk of brain damage. And there were signs that “fen” in any form might lead to pulmonary hypertension, a heart-related ailment. But Americans had been prescribed regular fenfluramine since 1973, and the newer drug, dexfenfluramine, had been available in France since 1985. Experts took comfort in this history. Using language that is familiar from today’s assurances regarding semaglutide and other GLP-1 drugs, they pointed out that millions were already on the medication. “It is highly unlikely that there is anything significant in toxicity to the drug that hasn’t been picked up with this kind of experience,” an FDA official named James Bilstad would later say in a *Time* cover story headlined “[The Hot New Diet Pill](#). ” To prevent Americans with obesity from getting dexfenfluramine, supporters said, would be to surrender to a deadly epidemic. Judith Stern, an obesity expert and nutritionist at UC Davis, was clear about the stakes: “If they recommend no,” she said of the FDA-committee members, “these doctors ought to be shot.”

In April 1996, the doctors recommended yes: Dexfenfluramine was approved—and became an instant blockbuster. Patients received prescriptions by the hundreds of thousands every month. Sketchy wellness clinics—call toll-free, 1-888-4FEN-FEN—helped meet demand. Then, as now, experts voiced concerns about access. Then, as now, they worried that people who didn’t really need the drugs were lining up to take them. By the end of the year, sales of “fen” alone had surpassed \$300 million. “What we

have here is probably the fastest launch of any drug in the history of the pharmaceutical industry,” one financial analyst told reporters.

This wasn’t just a drug launch. It was nothing less than an awakening, for doctors and their patients alike. Now a patient could be treated for excess weight in the same way they might be treated for diabetes or hypertension—with a drug they’d have to take for the rest of their life. That paradigm, *Time* explained, reflected a deeper shift in medicine. In a formulation that prefigures the nearly identical claims being made about Ozempic and its ilk today, the article heralded a “new understanding of obesity as a chronic disease rather than a failure of willpower.”

Barb started on fen-phen two weeks after it was approved. “I had never in my life felt normal until after about a week or two on the medications,” she’d later say. “My life before was hell.” She was losing weight, her blood sugar was improving, and she was getting to the pool, swimming 100 lengths five or six days a week. A few months later, when she read in her local newspaper that the Florida Board of Medicine was considering putting limits on the use of fen-phen, she was disturbed enough to send a letter to the editor. “I thank the creators of fen/phen for helping to save my life,” she wrote. “I don’t want to see the medications regulated so intensely that people like me are left out.”

#### 4

For another year, Barb kept taking fen-phen, and for another year she kept losing weight. By July of 1997, she’d lost 111 pounds.

Thomas Wadden and his colleague’s fen-phen study had by then completed its second year. The data showed that their patients’ shocking weight loss had mostly been maintained, as long as they stayed on the drugs. But before Wadden had the chance to write up the results, he got a call from Susan Yanovski, then a program officer at the National Institutes of Health and now a co-director of the NIH’s Office of Obesity Research. We’ve got a problem, Yanovski told him.

News had just come out that, at the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota, two dozen women taking fen-phen—including six who were, like Barb, in their 30s—

had developed cardiac conditions. A few had needed surgery, and on the operating table, doctors discovered that their heart valves were covered with a waxy plaque. They had “a glistening white appearance,” the doctors said, suggestive of disease. Now Yanovski wanted Wadden to look more closely at the women in his study.

Wadden wasn’t terribly concerned, because no one in his study had reported any heart symptoms. But ultrasounds revealed that nearly one-third of them had some degree of leakage in their heart valves. His “cure for obesity” was in fact a source of harm. “That just felt like a crushing blow,” he told me. Several weeks later, a larger data set from the FDA confirmed the issue. Wadden worried to reporters that the whole fiasco would end up setting back obesity treatment by many years.

### Read: The Ozempic revolution is stuck

The news put Barb in a panic. Not about her heart: The drug hadn’t caused her any problems, as far as she could tell; it had only solved them. But now they were taking it away. What then? She’d already spoken out about her new and better life to local outlets; now she did so again, on national TV. On September 16, the day after fenfluramine in both of its forms was pulled from the market, Barb appeared on *CBS This Morning*. She explained then, as she later would to me, that fen-phen had flipped a switch inside her brain. There was desperation in her voice.

A few days later, she was in a limousine in New York City, invited to be on *The Montel Williams Show*. She wore a crisp floral dress; a chyron would identify her as “BARBARA: Will continue taking diet drug despite FDA recall.” “I know I can’t get any more,” she told Williams. “I have to use up what I have. And then I don’t know what I’m going to do after that. That’s the problem—and that is what scares me to death.” Telling people to lose weight the “natural way,” she told another guest, who was suggesting that people with obesity need only go on low-carb diets, is like “asking a person with a thyroid condition to just stop their medication.”

“I did all this stuff to shout it from the rooftops that I was doing so well on fen-phen,” Barb told me. Still, all the warnings she’d been hearing on the news, and from her fellow *Montel* guests, started building up inside her

head. When she got back to Orlando, she went to see her doctor, just in case. His testing showed that she did indeed have damage to her mitral valve, and that fen-phen seemed to be the cause.



Barb swimming in 2003 (Courtesy of Barb Herrera)

Five months later, she was back on CBS to talk about her tragic turnabout. The newscast showed Doppler footage of the backwards flow of blood into her heart. She'd gone off the fen-phen and had rapidly regained weight. "The voices returned and came back in a furor I'd never heard before," Barb later wrote on her blog. "It was as if they were so angry at being silenced for so long, they were going to tell me 19 months' worth of what they wanted me to hear. I was forced to listen. And I ate. And I ate. And ate."

The Publix supermarket chain has, since its founding more than 90 years ago in central Florida, offered “people weighers,” free for use by all. They’re big, old-fashioned things, shaped like lollipops, with a dial readout at the top and handlebars of stainless steel. By the time I visited Barb last fall, in a subdivision of Orlando, she was determined to go and use one.

She’d taken heed of what Ambati, the cardiologist, had told her when she went into the hospital in April 2022. She cut back on salt and stopped ordering from Uber Eats. That alone was enough to bring her weight down 40 pounds. Then she started on Trulicity, the brand name for a GLP-1 drug called dulaglutide that is prescribed to people with diabetes. (The drug was covered for her use by Medicaid.) In clinical trials, patients on dulaglutide tend to lose about 10 pounds, on average, in a year. For Barb, the effects were far more dramatic. When we first met in person, she’d been on Trulicity for 14 months—and had lost more than one-third of her body weight. “It’s not even like I’m skinny, but compared to 405, I feel like an Olympic runner,” she told me.

We arrived at the supermarket in tandem with another middle-aged woman who was also there to check her weight. “Okay, you first, jump on!” Barb said. “My dream weight. I love it!” she said, when the pointer tipped to 230 pounds. “Not mine,” the other woman grumbled. Then Barb got on the scale and watched it spin to a little past 250. She was very pleased. The last number of the dial was 300. Even registering within its bounds was new.

Some people with obesity describe a sense of being trapped inside another person’s body, such that their outward shape doesn’t really match their inner one. For Barb, rapid weight loss has brought on a different metaphysical confusion. When she looks in the mirror, she sometimes sees her shape as it was two years ago. In certain corners of the internet, this is known as “phantom fat syndrome,” but Barb dislikes that term. She thinks it should be called “body integration syndrome,” stemming from a disconnect between your “larger-body memory” and “smaller-body reality.”

She has experienced this phenomenon before. After learning that she had heart-valve damage from fen-phen, Barb joined a class-action lawsuit against the maker of dexfenfluramine, and eventually received a substantial payout. In 2001, she put that money toward what would be her second

weight-loss miracle—bariatric surgery. The effects were jarring, she remembers. Within just three months, she'd lost 100 pounds; within a year, she'd lost 190. She could ride a bike now, and do a cartwheel. "It was freakin' wild," she told me. "I didn't have an idea of my body size." She found herself still worried over whether chairs would break when she sat down. Turnstiles were confusing. For most of her adult life, she'd had to rotate sideways to go through them if she couldn't find a gate, so that's what she continued doing. Then one day her partner said, "No, just walk through straight," and that's what she did.

Weight-loss surgery was somewhat unusual at the time, despite its record of success. About 60,000 such procedures were performed in 2001, by one estimate; compare that with the millions of Americans who had been taking fen-phen just a few years earlier. Bariatric surgeons and obesity physicians have debated why this treatment has been so grossly "underutilized." (Even now, fewer than 1 percent of eligible patients with obesity have the procedure.) Surely some are dissuaded by the scalpel: As with any surgery, this one carries risks. It's also clear that many doctors have refrained from recommending it. But the fen-phen fiasco of the late 1990s cast its shadow on the field as well. The very idea of "treating" excess weight, whether with a pill or with a knife, had been discredited. It seemed ill-advised, if not old-fashioned.

### [Read: The science behind Ozempic was wrong](#)

By the turn of the millennium, a newer way to think about America's rising rates of obesity was starting to take hold. The push was led by Thomas Wadden's close friend and colleague Kelly Brownell. In the 1970s, the two had played together in a bluegrass band—Wadden on upright bass, Brownell on guitar—and they later worked together at the University of Pennsylvania. But when their field lost faith in low-calorie diets as a source of lasting weight loss, the two friends went in opposite directions. Wadden looked for ways to fix a person's chemistry, so he turned to pharmaceuticals. Brownell had come to see obesity as a product of our toxic food environment: He meant to fix the world to which a person's chemistry responded, so he started getting into policy.

Inspired by successful efforts to reduce tobacco use, Brownell laid out a raft of new proposals in the '90s to counter the effects of junk-food culture: a tax on non-nutritious snacks; a crackdown on deceptive health claims; regulation of what gets sold to kids inside school buildings. Those ideas didn't find much traction while the nation was obsessed with fen-phen, but they caught on quickly in the years that followed, amid new and scary claims that obesity was indirectly hurting *all* Americans, not just the people with a lot of excess weight.

In 2003, the U.S. surgeon general declared obesity "[the terror within](#), a threat that is every bit as real to America as the weapons of mass destruction"; a few months later, Eric Finkelstein, an economist who studies the social costs of obesity, put out an influential paper finding that excess weight was associated with up to \$79 billion in health-care spending in 1998, of which roughly half was paid by Medicare and Medicaid. (Later he'd conclude that the number had nearly doubled in a decade.) In 2004, Finkelstein attended an Action on Obesity summit hosted by the Mayo Clinic, at which numerous social interventions were proposed, including calorie labeling in workplace cafeterias and mandatory gym class for children of all grades.

As the environmental theory gained currency, public-health officials took notice. In 2006, for example, the New York City Board of Health moved to require that calorie counts be posted on many chain restaurants' menus, so customers would know how much they were eating. The city also banned trans fats.



While first lady, Michelle Obama planted an organic garden at the White House as part of her effort to promote healthy eating. (Aude Guerrucci / Getty)

Soon, the federal government took up many of the ideas that Brownell had helped popularize. Barack Obama had promised while campaigning for president that if America's obesity trends could be reversed, the Medicare system alone would save "a trillion dollars." By fighting fat, he implied, his ambitious plan for health-care reform would pay for itself. Once he was in office, his administration pulled every policy lever it could. The nation's school-lunch program was overhauled. Nutrition labels got an update from the FDA, with more prominent displays of calories and a line for "added sugars." Food benefits for families in poverty were adjusted to allow the purchase of more fruits and vegetables. The Affordable Care Act brought

calorie labeling to chain restaurants nationwide and pushed for weight-loss programs through employer-based insurance plans.

Michelle Obama helped guide these efforts, working with marketing experts to develop ways of nudging kids toward better diets and pledging to eliminate “food deserts,” or neighborhoods that lacked convenient access to healthy, affordable food. She was relentless in her public messaging; she planted an organic garden at the White House and promoted her signature “Let’s Move!” campaign around the country. The first lady also led a separate, private-sector push for change within Big Food. In 2010, the beverage giants agreed to add calorie labels to the front of their bottles and cans; PepsiCo pledged major cuts in fat, sodium, and added sugars across its entire product line within a decade.

An all-out war on soda would come to stand in for these broad efforts. Nutrition studies found that [half of all Americans were drinking sugar-sweetened beverages every day](#), and that consumption of these accounted for one-third of the added sugar in adults’ diets. Studies turned up links between people’s soft-drink consumption and their risks for type 2 diabetes and obesity. A new strand of research hinted that “liquid calories” in particular were dangerous to health.

Brownell led the growing calls for an excise tax on soft drinks, like the one in place for cigarettes, as a way of limiting their sales. Few such measures were passed—the beverage industry did everything it could to shut them down—but the message at their core, that soda was a form of poison like tobacco, spread. In San Francisco and New York, public-service campaigns showed images of soda bottles pouring out a stream of glistening, blood-streaked fat. Michelle Obama led an effort to depict water—plain old water—as something “cool” to drink.

The social engineering worked. Slowly but surely, Americans’ lamented lifestyle began to shift. From 2001 to 2018, added-sugar intake dropped by about one-fifth among children, teens, and young adults. From the late 1970s through the early 2000s, [the obesity rate among American children had roughly tripled; then, suddenly, it flattened out](#). And although the obesity rate among adults was still increasing, its climb seemed slower than before.

Americans' long-standing tendency to eat ever-bigger portions also seemed to be abating.

But sugary drinks—liquid candy, pretty much—were always going to be a soft target for the nanny state. Fixing the food environment in deeper ways proved much harder. “The tobacco playbook pretty much only works for soda, because that’s the closest analogy we have as a food item,” Dariush Mozaffarian, a cardiologist and the director of the Food Is Medicine Institute at Tufts University, told me. But that tobacco playbook doesn’t work to increase consumption of fruits and vegetables, he said. It doesn’t work to increase consumption of beans. It doesn’t work to make people eat more nuts or seeds or extra-virgin olive oil.

[Read: What happens when you've been on Ozempic for 20 years?](#)

Careful research in the past decade has shown that many of the Obama-era social fixes did little to alter behavior or improve our health. Putting calorie labels on menus seemed to prompt at most a small decline in the amount of food people ate. Employer-based wellness programs (which are still offered by 80 percent of large companies) were shown to have zero tangible effects. Health-care spending, in general, kept going up.

And obesity rates resumed their ascent. Today, 20 percent of American children have obesity. For all the policy nudges and the sensible revisions to nutrition standards, food companies remain as unfettered as they were in the 1990s, Kelly Brownell told me. “Is there anything the industry can’t do now that it was doing then?” he asked. “The answer really is no. And so we have a very predictable set of outcomes.”

“Our public-health efforts to address obesity have failed,” Eric Finkelstein, the economist, told me.

6

The success of Barb’s gastric-bypass surgery was also limited. “Most people reach their lowest weight about a year post-surgery,” Gretchen White, an epidemiologist at the University of Pittsburgh, told me. “We call it their weight nadir.”

Barb's weight nadir came 14 months after surgery; she remembers exactly when things began to turn around. She was in a store buying jeans, and realized she could fit into a size 8. By then she'd lost 210 pounds; her BMI was down to 27—lower than the average for a woman her age. Her body had changed so much that she was scared. "It was just too freaky to be that small," she told me. "I wasn't me. I wasn't substantial." She was used to feeling unseen, but now, in this new state, she felt like she was disappearing in a different way. "It's really weird when you're really, really fat," she said. "People look at you, but they also look through you. You're just, like, invisible. And then when you're really small you're invisible too, because you're one of the herd. You're one of everybody."

At that point, she started to rebound. The openings into her gastric pouch—the section of her stomach that wasn't bypassed—stretched back to something like their former size. And Barb found ways to "eat around" the surgery, as doctors say, by taking food throughout the day in smaller portions. Her experience was not unusual. Bariatric surgeries can be highly effective for some people and nearly useless for others. Long-term studies have found that 30 percent of those who receive the same procedure Barb did regain at least one-quarter of what they lost within two years of reaching their weight nadir; more than half regain that much within five years.



New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg tried to implement a ban on oversize sugary drinks. (Allison Joyce / Getty)

But if the effects of Barb's surgery were quickly wearing off, its side effects were not: She now had iron, calcium, and B12 deficiencies resulting from the changes to her gut. She looked into getting a revision of the surgery—a redo, more or less—but insurance wouldn't cover it, and by then the money from her fen-phen settlement had run out. The pounds kept coming back.

Barb's relationship to medicine had long been complicated by her size. She found the health-care system ill-equipped—or just unwilling—to give her even basic care. During one hospital visit in 1993, she remembers, a nurse struggled to wrap a blood-pressure cuff around her upper arm. When it didn't fit, he tried to strap it on with tape, but even then, the cuff kept splitting open. "It just grabs your skin and gives you bruises. It's really painful," she said. Later she'd find out that the measurement can also be taken by putting the cuff around a person's forearm. But at the time, she could only cry.

“That was the moment that I was like, *This is fucked up. This is just wrong, that I have to sit here and cry in the emergency room because someone is incompetent with my body.*” She found that every health concern she brought to doctors might be taken as a referendum, in some way, on her body size. “If I stubbed my toe or whatever, they’d just say ‘Lose weight.’” She began to notice all the times she’d be in a waiting room and find that every chair had arms. She realized that if she was having a surgical procedure, she’d need to buy herself a plus-size gown—or else submit to being covered with a bedsheet when the nurses realized that nothing else would fit. At one appointment, for the removal of a cancerous skin lesion on her back, Barb’s health-care team tried rolling her onto her side while she was under anesthesia, and accidentally let her slip. When she woke, she found a laceration to her breast and bruises on her arm.

Barb grew angrier and more direct about her needs—*You’ll have to find me a different chair*, she started saying to receptionists. Many others shared her rage. Activists had long decried the cruel treatment of people with obesity: The National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance had existed, for example, in one form or another, since 1969; the Council on Size & Weight Discrimination had been incorporated in 1991. But in the early 2000s, the ideas behind this movement began to wend their way deeper into academia, and they soon gained some purchase with the public.

In 1999, when Rebecca Puhl arrived at Yale to work with Kelly Brownell toward her Ph.D. in clinical psychology, she’d given little thought to weight-based discrimination. But Brownell had received a grant to research the topic, and he put Puhl on the project. “She basically created a field,” Brownell said. While he focused on the dark seductions of our food environment, Puhl studied size discrimination, and how it could be treated as a health condition of its own. From the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s, the proportion of adults who said they’d experienced discrimination on account of their height or weight increased by two-thirds, going up to 12 percent. Puhl and others started citing evidence that this form of discrimination wasn’t merely a source of psychic harm, but also of obesity itself. Studies found that the experience of weight discrimination is associated with overeating, and with the risk of weight gain over time.

Puhl's approach took for granted that being very fat could make you sick. Others attacked the very premise of a "healthy weight": People do not have any fundamental need, they argued, morally or medically, to strive for smaller bodies as an end in itself. They called for resistance to the ideology of anti-fatness, with its profit-making arms in health care and consumer goods. The Association for Size Diversity and Health formed in 2003; a year later, dozens of scholars working on weight-related topics joined together to create the academic field of fat studies.

[Read: Why scientists can't agree on whether it's unhealthy to be overweight](#)

Some experts were rethinking their advice on food and diet. At UC Davis, a physiologist named Lindo Bacon who had struggled to overcome an eating disorder had been studying the effects of "intuitive eating," which aims to promote healthy, sustainable behavior without fixating on what you weigh or how you look. Bacon's mentor at the time was Judith Stern—the obesity expert who in 1995 proposed that any FDA adviser who voted against approving dexfenfluramine "ought to be shot." By 2001, Bacon, who uses they/them pronouns, had received their Ph.D. and finished a rough draft of a book, *Health at Every Size*, which drew inspiration from a broader movement by that name among health-care practitioners. Bacon struggled to find a publisher. "I have a stack of well over 100 rejections," they told me.

But something shifted in the ensuing years. In 2007, Bacon got a different response, and the book was published. *Health at Every Size* became a point of entry for a generation of young activists and, for a time, helped shape Americans' understanding of obesity.

As the size-diversity movement grew, its values were taken up—or co-opted—by Big Business. Dove had recently launched its "Campaign for Real Beauty," which included plus-size women. (*Ad Age* later named it the best ad campaign of the 21st century.) People started talking about "fat shaming" as something to avoid. The heightened sensitivity started showing up in survey data, too. In 2010, fewer than half of U.S. adults expressed support for giving people with obesity the same legal protections from discrimination offered to people with disabilities. In 2015, that rate had risen to three-quarters.

In Bacon's view, the 2000s and 2010s were glory years. "People came together and they realized that they're not alone, and they can start to be critical of the ideas that they've been taught," Bacon told me. "We were on this marvelous path of gaining more credibility for the whole Health at Every Size movement, and more awareness."

But that sense of unity proved short-lived; the movement soon began to splinter. Black women have the highest rates of obesity, and disproportionately high rates of associated health conditions. Yet according to Fatima Cody Stanford, an obesity-medicine physician at Harvard Medical School, Black patients with obesity get lower-quality care than white patients with obesity. "Even amongst Medicaid beneficiaries, we see differences in who is getting access to therapies," she told me. "I think this is built into the system."

That system was exactly what Bacon and the Health at Every Size movement had set out to reform. The problem, as they saw it, was not so much that Black people lacked access to obesity medicine, but that, as Bacon and the Black sociologist Sabrina Strings argued in a 2020 article, Black women have been "specifically targeted" for weight loss, which Bacon and Strings saw as a form of racism. But members of the fat-acceptance movement pointed out that their own most visible leaders, including Bacon, were overwhelmingly white. "White female dietitians have helped steal and monetize the body positive movement," Marquisele Mercedes, a Black activist and public-health Ph.D. student, wrote in September 2020. "And I'm sick of it."

Tensions over who had the standing to speak, and on which topics, boiled over. In 2022, following allegations that Bacon had been exploitative and condescending toward Black colleagues, the Association for Size Diversity and Health expelled them from its ranks and barred them from attending its events. ("They were accusing me of taking center stage and not appropriately deferring to marginalized people," Bacon told me. "That's never been true.")

As the movement succumbed to in-fighting, its momentum with the public stalled. If attitudes about fatness among the general public had changed during the 2000s and 2010s, it was only to a point. The idea that some

people can indeed be “fit but fat,” though backed up by research, has always been a tough sell. Although Americans had become less inclined to *say* they valued thinness, measures of their implicit attitudes seemed fairly stable. Outside of a few cities such as San Francisco and Madison, Wisconsin, new body-size-discrimination laws were never passed. (Puhl has been testifying regularly in support of the same proposed bill in Massachusetts since 2007, to no avail.) And, as always, obesity rates themselves kept going up.

In the meantime, thinness was coming back into fashion. In the spring of 2022, Kim Kardashian—whose “curvy” physique has been a media and popular obsession—[boasted about crash-dieting in advance of the Met Gala](#). A year later, the model and influencer Felicity Hayward [warned Vogue Business](#) that “plus-size representation has gone backwards.” In March of this year, the singer Lizzo, whose body pride has long been central to her public persona, [told The New York Times that she’s been trying to lose weight](#). “I’m not going to lie and say I love my body every day,” she said.

Among the many other dramatic effects of the GLP-1 drugs, they may well have released a store of pent-up social pressure to lose weight. If ever there was a time to debate that impulse, and to question its origins and effects, it would be now. But Puhl told me that no one can even agree on which words are inoffensive. The medical field still uses *obesity*, as a description of a diagnosable disease. But many activists despise that phrase—some spell it with an asterisk in place of the *e*—and propose instead to reclaim *fat*. Everyone seems to agree on the most important, central fact: that we should be doing everything we can to limit weight stigma. But that hasn’t been enough to stop the arguing.

7

Not long before my visit to Orlando in October, Barb had asked her endocrinologist to switch her from Trulicity to Mounjaro, because she’d heard it was more effective. (This, too, was covered under Medicaid.) A few weeks later, Barb blogged about the feeling of being stuck—physically stuck—inside her body. “Anyone who has been immobilized by fat and then freed, understands my sense of amazement that I can walk without a walker and not ride the scooter in the store,” she wrote. “Two years ago, all I could

do was wait to die. I never thought I would be released from my prison of fat.”



Barb has been a frequent visitor to Disney World, but until recently she needed an electric scooter to navigate the park. (Courtesy of Barb Herrera)

In all that time when she could barely move, of all the places that she couldn't really go, Disney World stood out. Barb is the sort of person who holds many fascinations—meditation, 1980s lesbian politics, the rock band Queen—but Disney may be chief among them. She has a Tinker Bell tattoo on her calf, and a trio of Mickey Mouse balloons on her shoulder. Her wallet shows the plus-size villain Ursula, from *The Little Mermaid*. “It’s just a place where you can go and be treated beautifully,” she said. “No matter who you are, no matter what country you’re from, no matter what language you speak. It’s just wonderful and beautiful.”

She'd been raised in the theme park, more or less: Her mother got a job there in the 1970s, and that meant Barb could go for free—which she did as often as she could, almost from the time that it first opened, and for decades after. She was at Disney when Epcot opened in 1982, just weeks before she gave

birth to her first child. Later on she helped produce a book about where to eat at Disney if you're vegetarian, and published tips for how to get around the parks—and navigate the seating for their rides—whether you're "Pooh-size" or "Baloo-size." She worked at Disney, too, first as an independent tour guide and photographer, then as a phone operator for the resorts. "They used to pull me off of the telephones to go test new rides to see how large people could do on them," she told me.

But lately she'd only watched the park's events on livestream. The last time she'd gone in person, in 2021, she was using a scooter for mobility. "I dream of one day walking at Disney World once again," she'd written on her blog. So we called a car and headed over.

Barb was exhilarated—so was I—when we strolled into the multistory lobby of the Animal Kingdom Lodge, with its shiny floors, vaulted ceilings, indoor suspension bridge, and 16-foot, multicolored Igbo Ijele mask. Barb bought a pair of Minnie Mouse ears at the gift shop, and kibitzed for a while with the cashier. Before, she would have had to ask me to go and get the ears on her behalf, she said, so she wouldn't have to maneuver through the store on wheels. We walked down the stairs—we *walked down the stairs*, Barb observed with wonderment—to get breakfast at a restaurant called Boma. "Welcome, welcome, welcome! Have a Boma-tastic breakfast!" the host said.

Barb relished being in the lodge again, and had lots to say, to me and everyone. "My mom was a cast member for 42 years," she informed our server at one point. Even just that fact was a reminder of how much Disney World, and the people in it, had evolved during her lifetime. When her mom started to gain weight, Barb remembered, her manager demanded that she go on a diet. "They didn't even make a costume bigger than a 16," Barb said. As Americans got bigger, that policy had to be abandoned. "They needed people to work," she said, with a glance around the restaurant, where kids and parents alike were squeezing into seats, not all of which looked entirely sufficient. It was easy to imagine what the crowd at Boma might have looked like 20 years ago, when the restaurant first opened, and when the adult obesity rate was just half of what it is today.

“I feel smaller than a lot of these people, which is really interesting,” Barb said. “I don’t even know if I am, but I feel like it. And that is surreal.”

Things feel surreal these days to just about anyone who has spent years thinking about obesity. At 71, after more than four decades in the field, Thomas Wadden now works part-time, seeing patients just a few days a week. But the arrival of the GLP-1 drugs has kept him hanging on for a few more years, he said. “It’s too much of an exciting period to leave obesity research right now.”

### [Read: How obesity became a disease](#)

His bluegrass buddy, Kelly Brownell, stepped down from his teaching and administrative responsibilities last July. “I see the drugs as having great benefit,” Brownell told me, even as he quickly cited the unknowns: whether the drugs’ cost will be overwhelming, or if they’ll be unsafe or ineffective after long-term use. “There’s also the risk that attention will be drawn away from certain changes that need to be made to address the problem,” he said. When everyone is on semaglutide or tirzepatide, will the soft-drink companies—Brownell’s nemeses for so many years—feel as if a burden has been lifted? “My guess is the food industry is probably really happy to see these drugs come along,” he said. They’ll find a way to reach the people who are taking GLP-1s, with foods and beverages in smaller portions, maybe. At the same time, the pressures to cut back on where and how they sell their products will abate.

For Dariush Mozaffarian, the nutritionist and cardiologist at Tufts, the triumph in obesity treatment only highlights the abiding mystery of why Americans are still getting fatter, even now. Perhaps one can lay the blame on “ultraprocessed” foods, he said. Maybe it’s a related problem with our microbiomes. Or it could be that obesity, once it takes hold within a population, tends to reproduce itself through interactions between a mother and a fetus. Others have pointed to increasing screen time, how much sleep we get, which chemicals are in the products that we use, and which pills we happen to take for our many other maladies. “The GLP-1s are just a perfect example of how poorly we understand obesity,” Mozaffarian told me. “Any explanation of why they cause weight loss is all post-hoc hand-waving now,

because we have no idea. We have no idea why they really work and people are losing weight.”

The new drugs—and the “new understanding of obesity” that they have supposedly occasioned—could end up changing people’s attitudes toward body size. But in what ways? When the American Medical Association declared obesity a disease in 2013, Rebecca Puhl told me, some thought “it might reduce stigma, because it was putting more emphasis on the uncontrollable factors that contribute to obesity.” Others guessed that it would do the opposite, because no one likes to be “diseased.” Already people on these drugs are getting stigmatized twice over: first for the weight at which they started, and then again for how they chose to lose it.

Barb herself has been evangelizing for her current medications with as much fervor as she showed for fen-phen. She has a blog devoted to her experience with GLP-1 drugs, called Health at Any Cost. As we stood up from our breakfast in the Animal Kingdom Lodge, Barb checked her phone and saw a text from her daughter Meghann, who had started on tirzepatide a couple of months before Barb did. “‘Thirty-five pounds down,’ ” Barb read aloud. “‘Medium top. Extra-large leggings, down from 4X’ … She looks like the child I knew. When she was so big, she looked so different.’ ”

In November, Barb’s son, Tristan, started on tirzepatide too. She attributes his and Meghann’s struggles to their genes. Later that month, when she was out at Meghann’s house in San Antonio for Thanksgiving, she sent me a photo of the three of them together—“the Tirzepatide triplets.”

She’d always worried that her kids might be doomed to experience the same chronic conditions that she has. All she could do before was tell them to “stay active.” Now she imagines that this chain might finally be broken. “Is the future for my progeny filled with light and the joy of not being fat?” she wrote in a blog post last fall.



Barb at home in Orlando in April. Since starting on GLP-1 drugs two years ago, she has lost more than 200 pounds. (Stacy Kranitz for *The Atlantic*)

Barb's energy was still limited, and on the day we visited Disney World, she didn't yet feel ready to venture out much past the lodge. Before we went back to her house, I pressed her on the limits of this fantasy about her kids' and grandkids' lives. How could she muster so much optimism, given all the false miracles that she'd experienced before? She'd gone on fen-phen and ended up with heart damage. She'd had a gastric bypass and ended up anemic. And we hadn't even had the chance to talk about her brief affair with topiramate, another drug prescribed for weight loss that had quieted the voices in her head for a stretch in 2007—until it made her feel depressed. (Topiramate is “the new fen/phen and I am blessed to have it in my life/head/mind,” she'd written on her blog back then. Ten years later she would pledge, in boldface: “I will never diet or take diet drugs again. Ever.”)

After all of these disappointments, why wasn't there another kind of nagging voice that wouldn't stop—a sense of worry over what the future holds? And if she wasn't worried for herself, then what about for Meghann or for Tristan, who are barely in their 40s? Wouldn't they be on these drugs for another 40 years, or even longer? But Barb said she wasn't worried—not at all. “The technology is so much better now.” If any problems come up, the scientists will find solutions.

Still, she'd been a bit more circumspect just a few months earlier, the first time that we spoke by phone. “There's a part of me that thinks I should be worried,” she told me then. “But I don't even care. What I care about is today, how do I feel today.” She was making travel plans to see her grandkids over Labor Day, after not having been on an airplane for 15 years because of her size. “I'm so excited, I can hardly stand it,” she said. Since then she's gone to see them twice, including Thanksgiving; the last time she went, she didn't even need to buy two seats on the plane. She's also been back to Disney since our visit. This time, she had more energy. “When I walked out the back door of the Beach Club and headed towards EPCOT,” she wrote on her blog, “I felt like I was flying.”

---

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from  
<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2024/06/ozempic-obesity-epidemic-weight-loss-debate/678211/>

| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

# The Lynching That Sent My Family North

## How we rediscovered the tragedy in Mississippi that ushered us into the Great Migration

by Ko Bragg



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

Last fall, on an overcast Sunday morning, I took a train from New York to Montclair, New Jersey, to see Auntie, my mother's older sister. Auntie is our family archivist, the woman we turn to when we want to understand where

we came from. She's taken to genealogy, tending our family tree, keeping up with distant cousins I've never met. But she has also spent the past decade unearthing a different sort of history, a kind that many Black families like mine leave buried, or never discover at all. It was this history I'd come to talk with her about.

Auntie picked me up at the train station and drove me to her house. When she unlocked the door, I felt like I was walking into my childhood. Everything in her home seemed exactly as it had been when I spent Christmases there with my grandmother—the burgundy carpets; the piano that Auntie plays masterfully; the dining-room table where we all used to sit, talk, and eat. That day, Auntie had prepared us a lunch to share: tender pieces of beef, sweet potatoes, kale, and the baked rice my grandma Victoria used to make.

When Auntie went to the kitchen to gather the food, I scanned the table. At the center was a map of Mississippi, unfurled, the top weighted down with an apple-shaped trivet. Auntie told me that the map had belonged to Victoria. She had kept it in her bedroom, mounted above the wood paneling that lined her room in Princeton, New Jersey, where she and my grandfather raised my mother, Auntie, and my two uncles. I'd never noticed my grandmother's map, but a framed outline of Mississippi now hangs from a wall in my own bedroom, the major cities marked with blooming magnolias, the state flower. My grandmother had left markings on her map—X's over Meridian, Vicksburg, and Jackson, and a shaded dot over a town in Hinds County, between Jackson and Vicksburg, called Edwards.

I wondered whether the X's indicated havens or sites of tragedy. As for Edwards, I knew the dot represented the start of Auntie's story. Following an act of brutality in 1888, my ancestors began the process of uprooting themselves from the town, ushering themselves into a defining era of Black life in America: the Great Migration.

I first learned about the lynching of Bob Broome in 2015, when Auntie emailed my mother a PDF of news clippings describing the events leading up to his murder. She'd come across the clippings on Ancestry.com, on the profile page of a distant family member. Bob was Victoria's great-uncle.

“Another piece of family history from Mississippi we never knew about,” Auntie wrote. “I’M SURE there is more to this story.”

I knew that her discovery was important, but I didn’t feel capable then of trying to make sense of what it meant to me. As I embarked on a career telling other people’s stories, however, I eventually realized that the lynching was a hole in my own, something I needed to investigate if I was to understand who I am and where I came from. A few years ago, I began reading every newspaper account of Bob Broome’s life and death that Auntie and I could find. I learned more about him and about the aftermath of his killing. But in the maddeningly threadbare historical record, I also found accounts and sources that contradicted one another.

Bob Broome was 19 or 20 when he was killed. On August 12, 1888, a Sunday, he walked to church with a group of several “colored girls,” according to multiple accounts, as he probably did every week. All versions of the story agree that on this walk, Bob and his company came across a white man escorting a woman to church. Back then in Mississippi, the proper thing for a Black man to do in that situation would have been to yield the sidewalk and walk in the street. But my uncle decided not to.

Martyrdom would mean that my uncle put his life on the line for something greater than himself—that his death inspired others to defend themselves.

A report out of nearby Jackson alleges that Bob pushed the white man, E. B. Robertson, who responded with a promise that Bob “would see him again.” According to the *Sacramento Daily Union* (the story was syndicated across the country), my uncle’s group pushed the woman in a rude manner and told Robertson they would “get him.” After church, Robertson was with three or four friends, explaining the sidewalk interaction, when “six negroes” rushed them.

All of these stories appeared in the white press. According to these accounts, Bob and his companions, including his brother Ike, my great-great-grandfather, approached Robertson’s group outside a store. The papers say my uncle Bob and a man named Curtis Shortney opened fire. One of the white men, Dr. L. W. Holliday, was shot in the head and ultimately died; two other white men were injured. Several newspaper stories claim my uncle

shot Holliday, with a couple calling him the “ring leader.” It is unclear exactly whom reporters interviewed for these articles, but if the reporting went as it usually did for lynchings, these were white journalists talking to white sources. Every article claims that the white men were either unarmed or had weapons but never fired them.

Bob, his brother Ike, and a third Black man were arrested that day; their companions, including Shortney, fled the scene. While Bob was being held in a jail in nearby Utica, a mob of hundreds of white men entered and abducted him. Bob, “before being hanged, vehemently protested his innocence,” *The New York Times* reported. But just a few beats later, the *Times* all but calls my uncle a liar, insisting that his proclamation was “known to be a contradiction on its face.” Members of the mob threw a rope over an oak-tree branch at the local cemetery and hauled my ancestor upward, hanging him until he choked to death. A lynch mob killed Shortney a month later.

### From the May 2022 issue: Burying a burning

In the white press, these lynchings are described as ordinary facts of life, the stories sandwiched between reports about Treasury bonds and an upcoming eclipse. The *Times* article about Bob noted that days after his lynching, all was quiet again in Utica, “as if nothing had occurred.” The headlines from across the country focus on the allegations against my uncle, treating his extralegal murder simply as a matter of course. *The Boston Globe*’s headline read “Fired on the White Men” and, a few lines later, “A Negro Insults a White Man and His Lady Companion.” The subtitle of *The Daily Commercial Herald*, a white newspaper in nearby Vicksburg, Mississippi, read: “Murderous and Insolent Negro Hanged by Indignant Citizens of Utica.”

The summary executions of Bob Broome and Curtis Shortney had the convenient effect of leaving these stories in white-owned newspapers largely unexamined and unchallenged in the public record. But the Black press was incredulous. In the pages of *The Richmond Planet*, a Black newspaper in Virginia’s capital, Auntie had found a column dismissing the widespread characterization of Bob as a menace. This report was skeptical of the white newspapers’ coverage, arguing that it was more likely that the white men

had attacked the Black group, who shot back. “Of course it is claimed that the attack was sudden and no resistance was made by the whites,” the article reads.



The author and her aunt at her aunt's home in New Jersey (Olivia Joan Galli for *The Atlantic*)

The newspapers we found don't say much more about the lynching, but Auntie did find one additional account of Bob Broome's final moments—and about what happened to my great-great-grandfather Ike. A few days after the lynching, a reader wrote to the editor of *The Daily Commercial Herald* claiming to have been a witness to key events. “Knowing you always want to give your readers the correct views on all subjects,” the letter opens, the witness offers to provide more of “the particulars” of my uncle’s lynching. According to the letter writer, when the lynch mob arrived the morning after the shooting, the white deputy sheriff, John Broome, assisted by two white men, E. H. Broome and D. T. Yates, told the crowd that they could not take the prisoners away until the case was investigated. Bob, Ike, and the third Black man were moved to the mayor’s office in the meantime. But more men from neighboring counties joined the mob and showed up at

the mayor's office, where they "badly hurt" Deputy Sheriff Broome with the butt of a gun. The white men seized Bob and hanged him, while Ike and the other Black man were relocated to another jail. The witness's account said the white Broomes "did all that was in the power of man to do to save the lives of the prisoners."

I don't know whether or how these white Broomes were related to each other or to the Black Broomes, but unspoken kinship between the formerly enslaved and their white enslavers was the rule, rather than the exception, in places like Edwards. I believe that whoever wrote to the paper's editor wanted to document all those Broome surnames across the color line, maybe to explain Ike's survival as a magnanimous gesture, even a family favor. If the witness is to be believed, the intervention of these white Broomes is the only reason my branch of the family tree ever grew. As Auntie put it to me, "We almost didn't make it into the world."

Each time I pick up my research, the newspaper coverage reads differently to me. Did my uncle really unload a .38-caliber British bulldog pistol in broad daylight, as one paper had it, or do such details merit only greater skepticism? We know too much about Mississippi to trust indiscriminately the accounts in the white press. Perhaps the story offered in *The Richmond Planet* is the most likely: He was set upon by attackers and fired back in self-defense. But I also think about the possibility that his story unfolded more or less the way it appears in the white newspapers. Maybe my uncle Bob had had enough of being forced into second-class citizenship, and he reacted with all the rage he could muster. From the moment he refused to step off the sidewalk, he must have known that his young life could soon end—Black folk had been lynched for less. He might have sat through the church service planning his revenge for a lifetime of humiliation, calculating how quickly he could retrieve his gun.

In the Black press, Bob's willingness to defend himself was seen as righteous. *The Richmond Planet* described him in heroic terms. "It is this kind of dealing with southern Bourbons that will bring about a change," the unnamed author wrote. "We must have martyrs and we place the name of the fearless Broom [sic] on that list." Bob's actions were viewed as necessary self-protection in a regime of targeted violence: "May our people awaken to the necessity of protecting themselves when the law fails to protect them."

My mother has become particularly interested in reclaiming her ancestor as a martyr—someone who, in her words, took a stand. Martyrdom would mean that he put his life on the line for something greater than himself—that his death inspired others to defend themselves.

### From the September 2021 issue: His name was Emmett Till

In 1892, four years after my uncle’s murder, Ida B. Wells published the pamphlet “[Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases](#),” in which she wrote that “the more the Afro-American yields and cringes and begs, the more he has to do so, the more he is insulted, outraged and lynched.” In that pamphlet, an oft-repeated quote of hers first appeared in print: “A Winchester rifle should have a place of honor in every black home.” After the Civil War, southern states had passed laws banning Black gun ownership. For Wells, the gun wasn’t just a means of self-defense against individual acts of violence, but a collective symbol that we were taking our destiny into our own hands.

The gun never lost its place of honor in our family. My great-grandmother DeElla was known in the family as a good shot. “She always had a gun—she had a rifle at the farm,” my mother told me. “And she could use that rifle and kill a squirrel some yards away. We know that must have come from Mississippi time.” My mother’s eldest brother, also named Bob, laughed as he told me about DeElla’s security measures. “I always remember her alarm system, which was all the empty cans that she had, inside the door,” he told me. “I always thought if someone had been foolish enough to break into her house, the last thing he would have remembered in life was a bunch of clanging metal and then a bright flash about three feet in front of his face.”

The lynching more than a decade before her birth shaped DeElla and her vigilance. But as the years passed, and our direct connection to Mississippi dwindled, so did the necessity of the gun. For us, migration was a new kind of self-protection. It required us to leave behind the familiar in order to forge lives as free from the fetter of white supremacy as possible. My northbound family endeavored to protect themselves in new ways, hoping to use education, homeownership, and educational attainment as a shield.

After we studied my grandmother's map of Mississippi, Auntie brought out another artifact: a collection of typewritten pages titled "Till Death Do Us Join." It's a document my grandmother composed to memorialize our family's Mississippi history sometime after her mother died, in 1978. I imagine that she sat and poured her heart out on the typewriter she kept next to a window just outside her bedroom.

According to "Till Death Do Us Join," my family remained in Edwards for another generation after Bob Broome's death. Ike Broome stayed near the place where he'd almost been killed, and where his brother's murderers walked around freely. Raising a family in a place where their lives were so plainly not worth much must have been terrifying, but this was far from a unique terror. Across the South, many Black people facing racial violence lacked the capital to escape, or faced further retribution for trying to leave the plantations where they labored. Every available option carried the risk of disaster.

[\*The Experiment Podcast: Ko Bragg on fighting to remember Mississippi burning\*](#)

A little more than a decade after his brother was murdered, Ike Broome had a daughter—DeElla. She grew up on a farm in Edwards near that of Charles Toms, a man who'd been born to an enslaved Black woman and a white man. As the story goes, DeElla was promised to Charles's son Walter, after fetching the Toms family a pail of water. Charles's white father had provided for his education—though not as generously as he did for Charles's Harvard-educated white half brothers—and he taught math in and served as principal of a one-room schoolhouse in town.

**E  
A!  
CK.**

**ews See**

**RUINS.**

**Worth  
ne.**

**le Library**

**destruc-**

## **FIRED ON THE WHITE MEN**

**Fatal Shooting Affray at  
Utica, Miss.**

**A Negro Insults a White Man and  
His Lady Companion,**

**And Afterwards Kills a Prominent  
Physician—A Lynching Party.**

JACKSON, MISS., Aug. 14.—A fatal shooting affray, closely followed by a lynching, is reported from Utica, Miss. On Sunday evening, E. H. Robertson, a young white man, was conducting a young lady to church when they were met on the sidewalk by Bob Broom, colored, with several colored girls. Broom refused to yield any portion of the sidewalk, and rudely pushed Robertson to one side. The latter told the negro that he would see him again. After church Robertson was standing in front of a store explaining the occurrence to several friends when Broom, with four companions, came up and commenced firing upon the white men, who were armed. Dr. J. W. Holliday, a prominent

A newspaper clipping from 1888 that mentions Bob Broome's killing (*The Boston Globe*)

Charles left his teaching job around 1913, as one of his sons later recalled, to go work as a statistician for the federal government in Washington, D.C. He may have made the trek before the rest of the family because he was light enough to pass for white—and white people often assumed he was. He was demoted when his employer found out he was Black.

Still, Charles's sons, Walter and his namesake, Charles Jr., followed him to Washington. But leaving Mississippi behind was a drawn-out process.

"Edwards was still home and D.C. their place of business," my grandmother wrote. The women of the family remained at home in Edwards. World War I sent the men even farther away, as the Toms brothers both joined segregated units, and had the relatively rare distinction, as Black soldiers, of seeing combat in Europe. When the men finally came back to the States, both wounded in action according to "Till Death Do Us Join," DeElla made her way from Mississippi to Washington to start a life with Walter, her husband.

Grandma Victoria's letter says that DeElla and Walter raised her and four other children, the first generation of our family born outside the Deep South, in a growing community of Edwards transplants. Her grandfather Charles Sr. anchored the family in the historic Black community of Shaw, where Duke Ellington learned rag and Charles Jr. would build a life with Florence Letcher Toms, a founding member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc.

Occasionally, aunts would come up to visit, sleeping in their car along the route because they had nowhere else to stay. The people mostly flowed in one direction: Victoria's parents took her to Mississippi only two times. According to my mother, Victoria recalled seeing her own father, whom she regarded as the greatest man in the world, shrink as they drove farther and farther into the Jim Crow South.

Later, after receiving her undergraduate degree from Howard University and a Ph.D. from Northwestern University, Victoria joined the faculty at Tennessee State University, a historically Black institution in Nashville. During her time there, [efforts to desegregate city schools](#) began a years-long crisis marked by white-supremacist violence. Between her own experiences and the stories passed down to her from her Mississippi-born parents, Victoria knew enough about the brutality of the South to want to spare her own children from it. As a grown woman, she had a firm mantra: "Don't ever go below the Mason-Dixon Line." Her warning applied to the entire "hostile South," as she called it, though she made exceptions for Maryland and D.C. And it was especially true for Mississippi.

I envied the Mississippians who'd been born and raised there, who had parents and grandparents who'd been raised there. I'd always longed to be from a place in that way.

Keeping this distance meant severing the remaining ties between my grandmother and her people, but it was a price she seemed willing to pay. My mother recalls that when she was in college, one of her professors thought that reestablishing a connection to Mississippi might be an interesting assignment for her. She wrote letters to relatives in Edwards whom she'd found while paging through my grandmother's address book. But Victoria intercepted the responses; she relayed that the relatives were happy to hear from my mom, but that there would be no Mississippi visit. "It was almost like that curtain, that veil, was down," Mom told me. "It just wasn't the time."

Yet, reading "Till Death Do Us Join," I realized that maintaining that curtain may have hurt my grandmother more than she'd ever let on. She seemed sad that she only saw her road-tripping aunts on special occasions. "Our daily lives did not overlap," my grandmother wrote. "Sickness or funeral became occasions for contacting the family. Death had its hold upon the living. Why could we not have reached into their daily happiness."

I sense that she valued this closeness, and longed for more of it, for a Mississippi that would have let us all remain. But once Victoria had decided that the North was her home, she worked hard to make it so. While teaching at Tennessee State, my grandmother had met and married a fellow professor named Robert Ellis. He was a plasma physicist, and they decided to raise their four children in New Jersey, where my grandfather's career had taken him. My grandparents instilled in their children, who instilled it in my cousins and me, that you go where you need to go for schooling, career opportunities, partnership—even if that means you're far from home.

My grandfather was one of the preeminent physicists of his generation, joining the top-secret Cold War program to harness the power of nuclear fusion, and then running the experimental projects of its successor program, the Princeton Plasma Physics Laboratory, after declassification. His work has become part of our family lore as well. My mother has her own mantra: "Same moon, same stars." It appears on all of the handwritten cards she

sends to family and friends; I have it tattooed on my right arm. It signifies that no matter how far apart we are, we look up at the same night sky, and our lives are governed by the same universal constants. The laws of physics —of gravity, inertia, momentum, action, and reaction—apply to us all.

In 2011, when I was 17, Victoria died. She'd suffered from Alzheimer's, which meant that many things she knew about Mississippi were forgotten twice: once by the world, and then in her mind. Auntie and I shared our regrets about missing the opportunity to ask our grandmothers about their lives, their stories, their perspective on Mississippi.

But Victoria's prohibition on traveling south also passed on with her. The year Victoria died, my mother took a job in Philadelphia, Mississippi, as one of two pediatricians in the county. Two summers later, she started dating the man who became my stepfather, [Obbie Riley](#), who'd been born there before a career in the Coast Guard took him all over the country.

Mom and I had moved quite a few times throughout my childhood, but this relocation felt different. I was surprised by how quickly Mississippi felt like home. Yet the longer we stayed, and the more I fell in love with the place, the more resentment I felt. I envied the Mississippians who'd been born and raised there, who had parents and grandparents who'd been raised there. I'd always longed to be from a place in that way.

My stepfather has that. With a rifle in his white pickup truck, he spends his Sundays making the rounds, checking in on friends and relatives. He'll crisscross the county for hours, slurping a stew in one house, slicing pie in another, sitting porchside with generations of loved ones.

This is what we missed out on, Auntie told me in her dining room. If our family hadn't scattered, we would better know our elders. To keep all my ancestors straight, I refer to a handwritten family tree that my grandmother left behind; I took a picture of it when I was at Auntie's house. Every time I zoom in and scan a different branch, I'm embarrassed by how little I know. "The distance pushed people apart," Auntie said. "I think there is some strength from knowing your people, some security."

[Read: They called her 'Black Jet'](#)

The traditional historical understanding of the Great Migration emphasizes the “pull” of economic opportunity in the North and West for Black people, especially during the industrial mobilizations of the two world wars. Certainly such pulls acted on my family, too: The lure of better jobs elsewhere, as my grandmother put it, gave Ike Broome’s son-in-law the chance to make a life for himself and his family in Washington. But this understanding fails to explain the yearning that we still have for Mississippi, and the ambivalence my grandmother had about shunning the South.

Mississippi had its own pull, even as violence of the kind visited on Bob Broome made life there grim for Black families. [A 1992 study](#) by Stewart E. Tolnay and E. M. Beck indicated that a main predictor of migration by Black people from southern counties before 1930 was the cumulative number of lynchings in those counties. The collective memory of those lynchings was a force that compounded over time. Hope and despair commingled for my family, as it did for so many others. As the physicists in my family might describe it, these forces worked in tandem to push my ancestors north, and tear them from the South.

Only after I learned the details of Bob’s death did I feel that I truly comprehended my family’s path. In returning to Mississippi, my mother and I were part of a new movement of Black Americans, one in which hundreds of thousands of people are now returning to the states where they’d once been enslaved. I think of this “[Reverse Great Migration](#)” as a continuation of the original one, a reaction, a system finally finding equilibrium. I feel like we moved home to Mississippi to even the score for the tragedy of the lynching in 1888, and for all that my family lost in our wanderings after that. We returned to the land where DeElla Broome hurried between farmhouses fetching water, where Charles Toms ran the schoolhouse.

It took well over a century for my family to excavate what happened in Edwards, buried under generations of silence. Now we possess an uncommon consolation. Even our partial, imperfect knowledge of our Mississippi history—gleaned from my grandmother’s writing and from newspaper coverage, however ambiguous it may be—is more documentation than many Black Americans have about their ancestors.

## From the November 2017 issue: The building of the National Memorial for Peace and Justice

The National Memorial for Peace and Justice, in Montgomery, Alabama, commemorates lynching victims; it is the nation's only site dedicated specifically to reckoning with lynching as racial terror. Bob Broome is one of more than 4,000 people memorialized there. I've visited the memorial, and the steel marker dedicated to those who were lynched in Hinds County, Mississippi—22 reported deaths, standing in for untold others that were not documented. Although those beautiful steel slabs do more for memory than they do for repair, at least we know. With that knowledge, we move forward, with Mississippi as ours again.

---

*This article appears in the [June 2024](#) print edition with the headline “The History My Family Left Behind.”*

---

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from  
<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2024/06/lynching-great-migration-mississippi-south/678212/>

| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

# The Godfather of American Comedy

**The funniest people on the planet  
think there's no funnier person  
than Albert Brooks.**

by Adrienne LaFrance



Somewhere in the hills above Malibu, drenched in California sunshine and sitting side by side in a used white Volkswagen bug, two teenage boys realized they were lost. They'd been looping their way along an open road, past shady groves and canyons, and in doing so they'd gotten turned around.

This was the early 1960s, and the boy driving the car was Albert Einstein—yes, this really was his given name, years before he changed it to Albert Brooks. Riding shotgun was his best friend and classmate from Beverly Hills High School, Rob Reiner.

Brooks had inherited the car from one of his older brothers, and he'd made it his own by removing the handle of the stick shift and replacing it with a smooth brass doorknob. After several failed attempts to find the Pacific Coast Highway, which would take them home, Brooks and Reiner came upon a long fence surrounding a field where a single cow was grazing. Albert “stopped the car and he leaned out the window and he said, ‘Excuse me, sir! Sir?’ and the cow just looked up,” Reiner told me. “And he said, ‘How do you get back to the PCH?’ And the cow just did a little flick of his head, like he was flicking a fly away, and went back to eating.” Without missing a beat, Albert called out, “Thank you!” and confidently zoomed away. “I said, ‘Albert, you just took directions from a cow!’ And he said, ‘Yeah, but he lives around here. He knows the area.’”

Reiner is telling me this story, dissolving into laughter as he does, to make two points. The first point is that Albert Brooks has impeccable comic timing, a quality that, among other talents, has made him a hero to multiple generations of comedians, actors, and directors who are themselves legends. The second point is that Brooks has always been this way.

Reiner remembers exactly his first impression of Brooks (*Wow, this guy is arrogant*) and also his immediate second impression (*This arrogant guy is mortified*). They both did high-school theater, and got to talking after their first class together. Brooks began to casually brag about the famous people he had met—they were Beverly Hills kids, after all. “He comes up to me, and in his cocky kind of way he says, ‘I know Carl Reiner,’” Rob Reiner told me. “And I said, ‘Yeah, I know him too. He’s my father.’ Oh my God, he was so embarrassed.” They instantly became friends, and have been close ever since—even living together for a stretch. One acquaintance described them to me as more like twins than brothers.

[Read: Adrienne LaFrance interviews Albert Brooks](#)

But although Brooks and Reiner pursued careers in the same industry, and both found great success, they didn't choose the same path—personally or professionally. Brooks's decisions over the years occasionally confounded his oldest friend, and worried him. Looking back now, however, something has become startlingly clear. If it is the case that by high school a person is already on some fundamental level the person they are destined to become—and Reiner believes this to be “totally true” of Brooks—then Brooks was fated to be not just the godfather of American comedy but also a man who would prove that humor in the face of catastrophe can sometimes save your life.

One thing you notice if you [spend any amount of time with Brooks](#) is that his manner of speaking—in musical swells that rise and fall—is not just something that his characters do, but something that he does. Think of Brooks in *Broadcast News*, the pitch of his voice going higher for emphasis as his character tries to persuade the woman he's crazy about not to go out with another man: “I've never seen you like this with ANYbody. And so DON'T get me wrong when I tell you that TOM, while being a very NICE guy, is”—here he shifts into a whisper-shout—“THE DEVIL.” Off camera, this way of speaking, depending on the topic at hand, comes off as relieved, annoyed, insistent, or pleading. When you agree with him, he will often respond, “This is what I'm SAYing.” And when he disagrees with you, it's “no NO,” always *no* twice, always with the emphasis on the second *no*.

The director and *Simpsons* co-creator James L. Brooks (no relation) spent part of this past winter directing Albert in the forthcoming [Ella McCay](#), a political comedy set in the recent past. James told me that he knew he had to cast Albert based on just two words in the script: *Sit, sit*. “Which to me is very Albert,” James said. “It's just the most Albert line.” The scene involves a classically Brooksian mode of imploring condescension—a quality deployed perfectly, for example, in the opening scene of [Modern Romance](#), when Brooks's character is dumping his girlfriend: “You've heard of a no-win situation, haven't you? ... Vietnam? *This?*”

Brooks is tall, and often dresses monochromatically. A go-to outfit is black pants and a dark button-up shirt over a black tee, with a black fedora. He talks with his hands, and when he's not gesturing with them, he fidgets. This comes off less as nervousness than as a kind of perpetual motion. When

Brooks wants something, he is relentless. And he is impatient. He has a reputation for being extremely difficult to say no to. “Because he’s persuasive,” Reiner told me. “And he’s right 90 percent of the time.”

### Watch: Rob Reiner on the burden of his name

But Brooks himself has no trouble saying no. He has [repeatedly turned down the various Hollywood luminaries](#) who asked him to star in their films—parts that ultimately went to Tom Hanks, Billy Crystal, Robin Williams, and Steve Martin, and in several cases altered the trajectory of *their* careers. He was offered the role Hanks played in *Big* (1988), the role Crystal played in *When Harry Met Sally* (1989), and the role Williams played in *Dead Poets Society* (1989), to name only a few. (Brooks was somewhat reluctant to discuss this with me, as he didn’t want to sound “stuck up, because there are so many of them.”)

Instead, he went his own way, and has single-handedly shaped modern American entertainment to an astonishing degree. Pick a random moment in film or television from the past half century, and Brooks is often nearby. He was a repeat guest on Johnny Carson’s *Tonight Show* in the golden era of late-night television. Lorne Michaels asked him to be the permanent host of *Saturday Night Live* before it launched. (In declining the offer, Brooks suggested the rotating-guest-host format that has defined the program ever since.) Brooks wrote a satirical short called *The Three of Us* for *SNL* that seemed to predict the premise of *Three’s Company*, two years before *Three’s Company* existed. His [first role in a big film](#) was in Martin Scorsese’s *Taxi Driver* (1976). His [mockumentary \(\*Real Life\*, 1979\)](#) came out five years before Reiner’s *This Is Spinal Tap*. And for *The Associates*, the sitcom that gave Martin Short one of his first breaks, Brooks composed the theme music.



Brooks in 1977 during an interview with Rob Reiner, who was guest-hosting *The Tonight Show* (Tom Ron / NBCU Photo Bank / NBCUniversal / Getty)

Then there is the string of critical hits that he wrote, directed, and starred in, including *Modern Romance* (1981), about a man who breaks up with his beautiful girlfriend, then spends the rest of the film trying to get her back; *Lost in America* (1985), about a yuppie couple who quit their jobs to travel across the country in a Winnebago; and *Defending Your Life* (1991), a comedy about what happens when you die, which also starred Meryl Streep. Plus his role in *Broadcast News* (1987), which earned him an Oscar nomination for Best Supporting Actor. He was considered a lock for another Oscar nomination after he played a vicious L.A. gangster alongside Ryan Gosling in the gorgeously shot film noir *Drive* (2011), but it didn't happen. ("I got ROBBED," Brooks tweeted the morning the nominations were announced. "I don't mean the Oscars, I mean literally. My pants and shoes have been stolen." What he's actually pissed off about, he told me, is that he can't get more roles as villains. He loves playing the bad guy.) He was the voice of the father clown fish in *Finding Nemo* (2003) and did the voices for Hank Scorpio and Jacques (among many others) in *The Simpsons*. Petey, the decapitated parakeet from *Dumb and Dumber* (1994), was inspired by Petey the cockatiel in *Modern Romance*.

#### [Read: James L. Brooks on journalism, the Oscars, and \*Broadcast News\*](#)

Although he'd wanted to be an actor since he was a child, Brooks didn't want to be *just* an actor. He was and is a writer first, and tends to prefer seeing his stories to completion by acting in and directing them. Brooks is beloved, in part, for the big-eyed, wrinkled-brow, heart-on-his-sleeve quality he brings to many of his characters—part puppy dog, part ... what, exactly? "You know, you're talking about the secret sauce, so it's hard," James L. Brooks told me. "There's an intrinsic vulnerability to him." In real life, however, Brooks is far more confident—if still highly methodical. "He's cautious about *everything*," Reiner told me. "He can get obsessed about every little thing."

Civilization-destroying earthquakes, for one, are never far from Brooks's mind. ("Only because it's going to happen, and I don't know if it'll happen in my lifetime," he told me.) He is something of a hypochondriac. ("If I

lived with a physician, they would have left me.”) He worries about an uprising of the nation’s youth against the Baby Boomers. (The plot of his 2011 novel, [\*2030: The Real Story of What Happens to America\*](#), hinges on all three of these fears: A 9.1-magnitude earthquake nearly destroys Los Angeles; the superrich are the only ones who can afford decent health care; young people plot a violent revolt against “the olds.”) There are more mundane worries: He is fastidious about avoiding saying or doing things that could make him seem cocky, or stupid, or bougie. He also fears nuclear war. (“You know, I’m old-fashioned.”)

On film, death comes quickly, and hilariously, for Brooks. In *Defending Your Life*, which he wrote and directed, his character buys himself a new BMW on his birthday and is hit head-on by a bus almost immediately upon taking it out for a spin. He is, at the time, singing along to the *West Side Story* soundtrack, belting out Barbra Streisand’s rendition of “Something’s Coming.” In [\*Private Benjamin\*](#) (1980), the story begins with Brooks’s character marrying a woman played by Goldie Hawn, then dying while in the act of consummation on their wedding night, less than 11 minutes into the film (the consummation itself takes seconds). In a [2021 cameo on \*Curb Your Enthusiasm\*](#), Brooks throws his own funeral, so that he can watch a livestream of his friends eulogizing him while he is still alive.

While reporting this story, I talked with Brooks numerous times over many months. We met in person in L.A., we talked on the phone, we texted. For the conversations we’d planned ahead of time, he was never once late, not even by a minute. He’s the kind of person who will text you back instantly, no matter the hour or time zone. This is a quality I gather he expects from others in return. “Albert loves hyper-preparedness,” the actor Sharon Stone told me.

### [Read: The brutal cynicism of \*Lost in America\* still resonates](#)

Stone co-starred with Brooks in [\*The Muse\*](#), the 1999 film—which Brooks also wrote and directed—about a director who finds out that Hollywood’s best ideas all come from one woman. (Brooks’s co-writer was Monica Johnson, a close friend and collaborator who died in 2010.) Stone described Brooks to me as an “intellectual giant” who has no time for people who don’t work hard, but who never lost his temper on set. She also described

him as peerless, basically. I had asked her where she would situate him among other movie stars roughly of his generation—say, Bill Murray or Steve Martin—and she told me none of them even comes close. (Murray doesn’t have the focus and Martin can’t keep his head out of the clouds, she said. Plus, neither can direct.) The only person she could think of who approached Brooks’s brilliance, she said, was Garry Shandling, who died in 2016. “There are people who have great talent,” Stone told me, “but there aren’t many people who can take that talent and have the discipline and the huge ability to be the general, and put a huge project together and then push it all the way through.”

Stone loved working with Brooks, and she particularly appreciated his bias toward action. If somebody wasn’t prepared, he would decisively and calmly move on without them—not exactly Zen about it, but sanguine. “He doesn’t have any patience if you’re not ready, if you don’t know your lines, if you don’t have your shit together,” Stone said. Later, she put it to me this way: “Albert’s a winner. And if you were running a relay race with Albert and you handed him the torch and the person next to him fell on the ground, Albert could jump over that person and run to the finish line … Someone would say, ‘You know, you jumped over that person,’ and he would say, ‘People who lay on the ground don’t win races.’”

I asked her if others found this quality off-putting. “People who lay on the ground would think Albert is mean,” she said. Also, she said, “he’s super bored by people who aren’t smart.” Despite his improvisational skills (see: his many voice appearances on *The Simpsons*, where he is a legend in the writers’ room for his riffing), Brooks is not one for winging it. Or, as he once put it to me: “Come anally prepared and let’s do the silliness on purpose when we want to.”

Another time, when I asked Brooks if it irritated him to be around people who aren’t as quick or clever as he is, he demurred, unconvincingly. A low tolerance for people who cannot keep up would be understandable. His mind gallops through conversations—there is never a missed opportunity for a joke, yet his joke-telling doesn’t come off as striving, only calibrated to the moment. One friend of his likened this quality to watching a professional athlete in a flow state. Consider this exchange, from when Brooks appeared on Larry King’s radio show in 1990, which left King gasping with laughter:

**King:** Do you ever order from 800 numbers late at night from on television? I get the feeling you do.

**Brooks:** Do you?

**King:** I don't, but I think you do.

**Brooks:** I bought a wok and a vibrator. Actually, it was the same thing. A vibrating wok.

The people who know Brooks best still marvel at how naturally humor comes to him. James L. Brooks told me the story of a party he attended sometime in the late 1970s, where he'd noticed a small crowd gathering around a table to watch some guy doing card tricks. The guy was oozing charisma, and had charmed the people around him out of their wits. But it took him a minute to realize what was actually happening. "This guy doing card tricks had *no idea how to do card tricks*. He was just talking about 45 miles an hour. It was Albert Brooks. And he was just being hilarious."

Rob Reiner told me about another party, where Brooks was so funny that people almost felt they were witnessing the birth of a new art form. "People were screaming laughing," Reiner said. "And when he finished, it was like he'd been on a stage. He left the party, and a half hour later, the hostess of the party comes up to me and says, 'Albert's on the phone. He wants to talk to you.' And so I get on the phone and I said, 'Albert, what's up?' And he said, 'Listen, Rob, you gotta do me a big favor.' I said, 'What is it?' He said, 'I left my keys in the house there and I can't come back to get them.' Because he'd finished his performance. He didn't want to come back. So he had been wandering around for, like, 20 minutes trying to figure out what to do ... That's the way his mind works." Reiner grabbed Brooks's keys and went outside to find his friend.

Last year, Reiner released a documentary about Brooks's career called *Defending My Life*, a project Reiner had wanted to pursue for years, inspired by *My Dinner With Andre*, Louis Malle's famous 1981 film featuring the theater director André Gregory and the actor and playwright Wallace Shawn having a sprawling conversation at Café des Artistes, in Manhattan. For years, Brooks said no to the idea before finally relenting. "I've always felt he is the most brilliant comedian I've ever met," Reiner said. The two have sometimes drifted apart, but they always drifted back together, Reiner told me. One argument in particular stands out in Reiner's memory.

“I remember this distinctly,” Reiner said. “He would always ask me, ‘How does my hair look?’ And, you know, when he was young he had that Jew fro. And it looked the same every time. Every time he asked me, ‘How’s my hair look?’ And I would say, ‘Albert, it looks *fine*.’ And then one time we’re in the car and he kept asking me, ‘How does my hair look?’ And I said, ‘Albert, it looks the same! It looks the same every single time I look at it! It’s always the same!’ And he got so mad at me, he threw me out of the car. He said, ‘Get out of this car!’ He got mad at me because I wouldn’t tell him how his hair looked.”

Brooks remembers a different argument they had, decades ago, about the enduring star power of classic film actors—“the Cary Grants, the Clark Gables.” Reiner had remarked on how stars like that were immortal, the kind of leading men who “will never go away,” Brooks recalled. “And I said, ‘Everyone’s going away.’ And, you know, my kids don’t know who Cary Grant is unless I force them and say, ‘That’s Cary Grant.’ Every generation has their own people. And it’s remarkable how fast everything else goes away.”

The term *comic’s comic* is overused. But with Brooks, it fits. Judd Apatow, Conan O’Brien, Sarah Silverman, Chris Rock, and too many others to name have all cited him as a formative influence. James L. Brooks told me the story of standing in the living room at some gathering with Steve Martin when Martin spotted Brooks and got starstruck—“nervous, like a kid at Christmas,” he said.

While the critics who love Brooks often lament that his films have not enjoyed more commercial success—“Albert almost *intentionally* makes noncommercial movies,” Sharon Stone told me—what they miss is that he has, over the course of his career, repeatedly chosen fealty to his own artistic vision over anyone else’s desires, for him or for themselves. And he has done so with the clarity of a man racing against time, someone who knows that we only get one go-round, and tomorrow is never promised.

He poses the most profound questions possible—What does it mean to live a good life? Where do we go when we die?

*Big*, *When Harry Met Sally*, *Dead Poets Society*—all became generational cinematic hits, as close to timeless as they come. But to Brooks, the decision to turn down these roles was obvious. With *Big*, he just couldn't see himself playing a little boy. And anyway, he'd been actively trying to avoid New York City since at least the 1970s, back when Lorne Michaels had come calling. "What I really was not going to do was go to New York and stay up until 11:30 to be funny, and risk getting addicted to coke," he told me. Later, as he read the script for *When Harry Met Sally*, which Reiner was directing, he knew right away that he shouldn't do it. "I was being called 'the West Coast Woody Allen,'" Brooks told me. "And I read this lovely script that felt like a Woody Allen movie—the music and everything. And I thought, *If I do this, I'm Woody Allen forever.*"

The Woody Allen comparisons make only a superficial kind of sense. It's true that both Allen and Brooks write, direct, and star in their own films. Both are self-deprecating leading men. Both write unforgettably funny dialogue on a line-to-line level. (They're also both frequently described as neurotic—an adjective that, as Brooks once acidly complained to me, is simply the lazy film critic's code for "Jew.")

But where Allen's films are oriented inward—self-deprecating, yes, but also self-obsessed bordering on narcissistic—Brooks's films radiate outward, almost galactically, an expanding universe all unto themselves. Again and again, he poses the most profound questions possible—What does it mean to live a good life? Where do we go when we die? What if we weren't afraid?—then filters them through his sense of humor, and explodes them into a meditation on the human condition.

So New York was out of the question. And anyway, why bother starring in a film you didn't write? Why let somebody else direct something you *did* write? And why direct something you can't star in? More than that, *Why wait?* Wasn't that the lesson he learned the hard way when he was only 11 and a half?



The movie posters for *Real Life* (1979), *Modern Romance* (1981), *Lost in America* (1985), *Broadcast News* (1987), and *Defending Your Life* (1991) (Paramount Pictures / Everett Collection; Columbia Pictures / Everett Collection; Geffen Pictures / Everett Collection; 20th Century Fox Film Corp. / Everett Collection; Warner Brothers / Everett Collection)

Not many people can pinpoint the exact moment when they became who they are, the formative experience from which the rest of their life unspools. But Brooks can: November 23, 1958. The Sunday before Thanksgiving. His mother, Thelma; father, Harry; and one older brother, Cliff, left home for the Beverly Hilton to attend a roast put on by the local Friars Club, which his father helped run. The event was in honor of Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz, Hollywood royalty whom Harry Einstein introduced—in a perfect deadpan that made the audience roar—as his very close personal friends “Danny” and “Miss Louise Balls.” (In a recording of the roast, you can distinctly hear Arnaz’s honking laugh rise above the hysterics of the crowd.)

Einstein was a superstar comedian himself, known for his dialect humor and for his popular radio alter ego Parkyakarkus (say it aloud to get the joke). Over the next 10 minutes, he had the audience members in tears. When Einstein finished, he made his way back to the dais, where he was seated next to Milton Berle. With the audience still clapping for him, the color suddenly drained from Einstein’s face, and he slumped over onto Berle. Frantic attempts to resuscitate him began right away, and in the panic, the singer Tony Martin took the microphone in an attempt to distract people with one of his hit songs. Meanwhile, a doctor in the audience made an incision in Einstein’s chest with somebody’s pocketknife, and another doctor fashioned a makeshift defibrillator by peeling the insulation off a nearby lamp cord. None of it worked. Einstein, at 54 years old, was dying of a heart

attack while Martin sang a song that took on dark—and to Brooks, in retrospect, darkly funny—meaning: “There’s No Tomorrow.” Arnaz eventually grabbed the microphone: “They say the show must go on,” he said. “But why must it?” With that, the evening was over.

Although Einstein’s death was shocking—[it made national headlines](#)—it was not unexpected. He had suffered from a serious spinal issue and a related heart condition, and was by then using a wheelchair. When he did walk, Brooks remembers, he lumbered “like Frankenstein.” He looked terrible. And life in the Einstein household was largely oriented around accommodating his ill health. Brooks’s earliest memories of his father, though, are happier ones. They would take long drives out to Santa Paula, past orchards where the tree branches were heavy with oranges and lemons. Back at home, they would goof off. “Sometimes at the dinner table, he would be more like a kid and play with a fork,” Brooks recalled. “And my mother would get angry like she would with a kid. And we would all laugh.”

The Einstein household seems to have been genetically predisposed for humor. One of Brooks’s brothers, Bob Einstein, grew up to have a successful comedy career. You may remember him as his stuntman character, Super Dave Osborne, or as Marty Funkhouser on *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. (He died in 2019.) Their mother, Thelma Leeds, was also in show business—she and Harry met in 1937 on the set of a film they were starring in. After Brooks’s film *Mother* came out in 1996, *Entertainment Weekly* [asked her to write a review](#), including a grade of the film. Brooks was convinced that she’d give it a middling review just to be funny. “I said, ‘Listen to me’—and this is not a joke—‘you have to give it an A,’” Brooks recalled. (She ended up giving it an A++.) Despite his parents’ comedic gifts, he insists that they didn’t name him Albert Einstein as a joke. “I swear to God, it was like, ‘You know, he’s a wonderful man. Let’s give him that name.’”

For Brooks, the death of his father was not just a tragedy but the inevitable realization of a long-held premonition. He had been bracing for it for as long as he could remember. “From the moment I could conceive anything, this is what I was expecting. So, you know, then you start trying to fool God,” he told me. “You tell yourself, *Well, I’m just not going to get close. And You’re not going to take anyone from me. I’m just not going to love him.* You know,

you do whatever you have to do, to make it okay. It forced early thoughts of the end before the beginning.”

“I never felt he didn’t love me,” Brooks told me later. “I just felt it was going to be quick. That, I think, colors a part of your life.”



Brooks as a child, with his father watching him from a lounge chair  
(Courtesy of Albert Brooks)

The actor and director Jon Favreau, who is close friends with Brooks, can relate to what he went through. Favreau’s mother died of cancer when he was a child. “The idea that catastrophe could be just around the corner is something that is baked into your psyche when you experience something that grave that early,” Favreau told me. That attitude, expressed artistically, can take many forms. “It can go different places with different people, but with Albert it definitely went to *This has to be funny. I want to bring the house down.* And that’s where I think somebody like Albert finds that he has a superpower. Through his intellect and through his humor and through whatever experiences made him who he is, what comes out of that

machinery is laughter and amusement and human insight that allows you to deal with subjects—mortality—that are presented within the framework of something that is hilarious.” That, Favreau told me, is Brooks’s “magic trick.”

After his father died, Brooks settled into a new kind of normal. He and his friends would spend hours recording mock interviews on giant tape recorders, pretending to be radio stars like his dad was. “I was really sort of doing these shows for no one for a long time,” he told me. He played football and sometimes hitchhiked to school. He watched television—as many hours a day as he could get away with. He was also music-obsessed, and amassed a prized collection of records, building his own stereo with quadraphonic surround sound. This was in the early days of stereophonic recording, and Brooks still remembers the first stereo album he bought to show off the new technology: Stan Kenton’s version of *West Side Story*. “They were really doing the right-left thing,” he said. “You know, *DA-dah, BA-dah, DA, dah!* Right speaker! Left speaker! Right speaker! *Ba-dah-dah-dah-dahhhh, ba-dah-bah-dah-ba-dah-daaaah ba-doo ba-doo.* Your head would be moving like a tennis match.”

Brooks is prone to spontaneously breaking out into song, or more accurately, breaking out into *sound*, without the lyrics, perhaps an artifact of his theater roots. After high-school graduation, in 1965, Brooks and Reiner did summer theater in Los Angeles. After that, Brooks went to L.A. City College before winning a scholarship to attend the drama program at Carnegie Mellon (then called Carnegie Tech), in Pittsburgh. A shoulder injury from his football days kept him out of the Vietnam War, an injury he now sees as his life’s blessing. After a year in Pittsburgh, he dropped out and returned to Los Angeles.

“When he came back from Carnegie Tech, he wasn’t thinking about comedy, and I couldn’t believe it,” Reiner told me. “He wanted to change his name to Albert Lawrence—his middle name is Lawrence. And I said, ‘Albert, what are you doing? You’re the funniest guy I know. You’re going to tell me that now all you want to do is be a serious actor?’ The fact is, he is a great serious actor. But I said, ‘You can’t throw away that gift you have. You make people laugh better than anybody.’”

Then, in 1973, something frightening happened that left Brooks forever changed. He had just come out with a comedy album, *Comedy Minus One*, and was on the road promoting it—something he hated doing—with endless performances in dingy clubs and interviews with local journalists. One of these conversations, with a radio DJ, left Brooks feeling deeply unnerved. “A morning man in Boston said to me, ‘Albert Brooks, let me ask you a question,’” Brooks recalled. “‘Jonathan Winters went crazy. Do you think that’s going to happen to you?’” Winters, the superstar comedian and television actor, had been hospitalized years earlier after scrambling up the rigging of an old three-masted sailing ship docked in San Francisco Bay and refusing to come down, insisting that he was “a man from outer space.” Brooks remembers stumbling through an answer: “I don’t know. I hope not. I don’t—I don’t know.”

Later that night, he had his first performance at a jazz club in the Back Bay, where he was supposed to do two shows a night for a week, with an opening act by the singer-songwriter Leo Sayer, who dressed up for his performances as a 17th-century Pierrot clown, complete with heavy makeup. Sayer’s whole record company showed up, and in a surreal demonstration of devotion, “everybody in the audience was dressed as a clown,” Brooks told me. (This may sound like some sort of chemically induced hallucination, but Brooks assured me it was not. “No drugs. None,” he said.)

He did his first show and went back to his hotel across the street to get ready for the next one. But when he got there, “I had, like, a brain explosion,” Brooks told me. “I mean, something happened. All of a sudden, you know, my life was different. I don’t know how to describe it. I was standing in the bathroom. I was holding a toothbrush. And all I could think about is *who invented this and why are there bristles on this end? And why are there bristles at all? And isn’t there a better way to brush your teeth? And how come there are sinks?* I was starting to unravel, questioning everything. And that in turn made me really scared that I had gone nuts.”

He begged his manager, and the club owner—who by then had come across the street to see what was wrong—to let him skip the second show. The club owner told him he could cancel every other show that week, but he had to go through with the show that night. People had bought tickets! They were already sitting there, waiting in their seats. So Brooks agreed to get back

onstage. “I was so detached from my body,” he told me. “Every single word was an effort and was not connected to anything. I was just standing there saying what sounded like English words.” Years later, on a trip to New York, he ran into someone who told him he’d been at the show that night in Boston, and wondered in passing if something had been off. “Did you have the flu?” the person asked. *Yeah, something like that.*

What actually happened, Brooks told me, is that after he somehow kept his body upright and made his mouth say words until he could get offstage again, he cracked open. After the death of his father—and, frankly, probably before that—he’d built a mental wall so sturdy that he was emotionally untouchable. This wasn’t all bad. “It was very advantageous for the beginning of my career,” Brooks said. He remembers his earliest live television appearances, when friends would be floored by his coolheadedness, his total absence of nerves. “*Ed Sullivan*, 50 million people live, waiting to go on,” Brooks recalled. “My heart didn’t race. I never thought of it. And I loved that. But the reason for that is I wasn’t open, and I was forced open in that one moment. It was like all the stuff you hadn’t dealt with is here. And, you know, that stuff’s not meant to be dealt with all at once.”

Confronting the great tragedy of your life this way is suboptimal, especially if it hits you when you’re standing onstage staring at a bunch of clowns. “But it opened up my mind,” Brooks told me. “It made me question everything. It made me much more worried about everything. But it also made me deal with it. And it took a long time to, you know, *deal with it.*” Looking back now, he said, that night in Boston is what led to everything else. Without that experience, “I don’t think I could have written anything” that came after—at least not anything of real depth and complexity. “I think I would have been a non-nervous, pretty surface person.” Brooks never saw it coming. And there’s a lesson in that, too. “You get humbled by life in one second,” he said. If you’re lucky, the terrible thing that surprises you is something you can survive. His father didn’t get that chance. But Brooks did, and he knew exactly what he wanted to do with it.

Albert Brooks, for the record, is not interested in contemplating what might have been. He doesn’t believe in do-overs. He’s not into time-travel movies (though he appreciates the elegance of the original *Twilight Zone*, which he

sometimes watches on YouTube), or imagined alternative histories, or dwelling on the past. “‘What if?’ is terrible,” he told me, “because what are you going to DO with it, you know?” He swears he isn’t a grudge holder—I asked him specifically about this because I had a hard time believing otherwise. People as meticulous as Brooks sometimes struggle to let things go. “No,” he insisted, “because there’s nothing I can DO.” Worrying about the past is “the biggest waste of time,” he said. “I mean, over the years, the best thing I’ve done for myself is learn to worry about what I can fix.”

This is partly his pragmatism but also his attitude as a writer—writing, he once said, is just a series of solving one problem after the next. He doesn’t believe in writer’s block, not really. “Writing is like building a house,” he told me. “Once you start, you have to finish. It’s a funny concept that there’d be a block in other professions. If you hired an architect and a year later you said, ‘What happened?’ And he said, ‘I don’t know, I was blocked.’ You’d say, ‘What?!’” Also, when you write, you’re fully in control. “It’s one of the last things, except maybe painting, that you can do without permission,” he said.

Thirty years ago, if you’d have asked Brooks what he was most focused on fixing, it may have been his love life. He worried, “Oh, I’ll never meet anybody,” he told me. This may seem strange—movie stars don’t typically have a hard time attracting partners—but many of his friends envisioned Brooks staying single, too. “I thought, *This guy will never get married*,” Reiner told me. “I find it hard to even imagine Albert married,” Sharon Stone told me, not because of how intense he can be but because he is so particular. “It’s that he can’t have this, and he doesn’t like that, and it has to be like this, and he can’t be around this, and it can’t be like that,” she said.

Brooks is a person who is comfortable alone. In the early days of his career, he would workshop jokes by just performing them to himself, in a mirror. He went through a phase when he bought one of those radios that picks up people’s phone conversations, and put it by his bed so he could listen to other people’s problems as he drifted off to sleep. (“It was the greatest soap opera,” he recalled. And also a great way to train your ear for writing realistic dialogue. “That was heaven,” he said with a laugh.) He’s gone through long stretches of solitude over the years.

Brooks likes to joke that he knew he didn't want to get married until he met someone he could stand getting divorced from. Reiner put it another way: "I don't know if it applies to Albert, but my mother and father were celebrating their 60th wedding anniversary, and I asked my mother, 'What's the secret?'" Reiner told me. "And she said, 'Finding someone who can stand you.'"

The painter [Kimberly Shlain](#), it turned out, could stand Brooks. She already knew and loved his films when they began dating. They were married in March 1997 at a synagogue in San Francisco. Their reception was filled with calla lilies and white tulips, and their guests ate lemon cake. For their first dance, a live band played "Someone to Watch Over Me." (He was 49; she was 31.) The couple have two children, Jacob and Claire, both now in their 20s.

In *Defending Your Life*, Brooks finds the perfect woman—played flawlessly by Meryl Streep—only once he's already dead. "We're opening the door, God forbid, to Albert's brain," she said in a 1991 interview about the film. *Defending Your Life* tells the story of a man who dies young and finds himself among the other recently deceased in Judgment City, a version of purgatory that resembles a New Jersey office park, where you can eat whatever you want without gaining weight and see who you were in various past lives as you await a decision from a supernatural judiciary about whether you lived a good-enough life to move forward in the universe. (If not, you're sent back to Earth to do better next time.) For Brooks's character, the key question of his life's trial is whether he wasted his time letting his fears dominate him. Streep said in the same 1991 interview that when Brooks had come over to persuade her to take the part—they'd first met through Carrie Fisher, a mutual friend—he paced for two hours while explaining the concept of the film to her, but wouldn't let her read the script.

Brooks doesn't believe in immortality, whether in life or on film.

Stone told me about how after *The Muse* wrapped and Brooks sent her a copy to watch, she sent him some notes, as she generally did with other directors. "Albert wasn't interested in my notes," she said. "In fact, I don't think he liked that I sent him my notes. I think he was a little bit offended by my notes. And I think it's because he makes all of his decisions about his

films in a quite solitary way. He's the only director that ever sent me a film to preview that didn't want notes ... He didn't understand. Like, what did I think I was doing, right? *Why would I need notes from you, cupcake?* ”

Another time, he'd gotten advice from Stanley Kubrick about how to navigate the business side of Hollywood, and the frustration that comes from having to work with people who care more about money than art. Kubrick had reached out to Brooks to say how much he loved *Modern Romance*, and asked to see the draft of the script Brooks was writing at the time. So Brooks sent it along, and Kubrick sent it back with notes. “He said, ‘Here, I read the script,’” Brooks told me. “You know what? I think he had the WORST comment in the world. And I said, ‘Gee, I don’t think I could do that.’”

As I reported this story, legendary comedians kept dying. First there was [Norman Lear](#), who died within hours of a conversation Brooks and I had about how wonderful it was that Lear, at 101, was still alive. Then [Richard Lewis died](#). (“Terrible,” Brooks texted me.) Occasionally, when Brooks experiences some unusual bodily pain, an unwelcome thought will materialize: “I worry, *Is this the end?* I mean, *something*’s going to take me down,” he said. For a while, he was just trying to reach the age his father was when he died. Turning 55 was, as a result, “very weird,” he said. When the first of his older brothers died, it was like the loss of a “genetic touchstone,” he said. He’d sometimes try to reassure himself by imagining that he got all of his genes from his mother, who lived into her 90s. He turns 77 in July. “Then you’re in no-man’s-land, you know. My father didn’t come near this age.”

[Read: Norman Lear’s many American families](#)

Brooks doesn’t believe in immortality, whether in life or on film. Plenty of writers and directors fool themselves into believing that what they make will last forever. Most works of art, even extraordinary ones, do not. Creatively, Brooks was never motivated by wanting to make something lasting, but instead by seeing art generally—and film specifically—as the ultimate form of human connection. Plus, there was always something beautiful to him about how making a movie and watching a movie required deliberateness on both sides of the screen. “People got in their cars, which meant there was an

effort made,” he said. “The lights went down. People were there because they wanted to be there.”

Sometimes Brooks thinks back to one of the original endings he wrote for *Defending Your Life*. This was before Streep was cast in the film. Before he had conceived of the actual ending, which, as it turns out, is one of the great climaxes in all of film history, complete with a sweeping cinematic score, that feels both enormous and also perfectly earned. “The one I liked the best that I didn’t use was that the movie ended in a pasture, and in the distance was a cow,” Brooks told me. In this version, Brooks’s character didn’t get redemption. He didn’t fall in love. He didn’t get the girl. He didn’t overcome his fears. He didn’t move on in the universe. Instead, he lived his life, then came back to Earth … as a cow. It would have been absurd to end things that way. And funny. Because, really, who knows? But that’s not how the story went.

---

*This article appears in the [June 2024](#) print edition with the headline “The Godfather of American Comedy.” When you buy a book using a link on this page, we receive a commission. Thank you for supporting The Atlantic.*

---

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from  
<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2024/06/albert-brooks-movies-defending-my-life/678213/>

| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

# How Daniel Radcliffe Outran Harry Potter

**He was the world's most famous child star. Then he had to figure out what came next.**

by Chris Heath



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

On August 23, 2000, after an extensive search and a months-long rumble of media speculation, a press conference was held in London. There, the actor who'd been chosen to play Harry Potter in the first movie adaptation of J. K.

Rowling's best-selling novels was unveiled, alongside the film's other two child leads. According to the on-screen caption in the BBC's coverage of the event, this 11-year-old's name was "Daniel Radford."

Until the previous year, Daniel Radcliffe, as he was actually known, hadn't had any acting experience whatsoever, aside from briefly playing a monkey in a school play when he was about 6. When he'd auditioned for a British TV adaptation of *David Copperfield*, it was less out of great hope or ambition than because he'd been having a rough time at school and his parents (his father was a literary agent; his mother, a casting agent) thought that the experience of auditioning might boost his confidence. For an hour or two, the idea went, he'd get to see a world that none of his classmates had seen. Instead, he found himself cast as the young Copperfield, acting opposite Maggie Smith and Bob Hoskins. And now this.

At the press conference, wearing the round glasses that his character needed but he did not, Radcliffe explained with evident nerves how he had cried when he'd heard the news. ([He had been in the bath at the time.](#)) The answer that seemed to charm everyone was when he allowed, hesitantly, "I think I'm a tiny, tiny bit like Harry because I'd like to have an owl." Asked how he felt about becoming famous, he replied, "It'll be cool."

If those words channeled the innocence of youth, a boy blessedly oblivious to all that would soon be projected upon him, such obliviousness wouldn't last very long. Less than a day, in fact. The following morning, an article appeared in the *Daily Mail*: "Harry Potter Beware!" Its notional author was Jack Wild, a former child star who had played the teenage lead in the 1968 movie-musical *Oliver* before his life and career were derailed by alcoholism and financial mishaps. The article's closing lines, addressed to Radcliffe, were: "And, above all, enjoy fame and fortune while they last, for they can be fickle. I know, I learned the hard way."

There would be plenty more like this. Radcliffe's other professional role, between *David Copperfield* and the first *Harry Potter* film, had been a smallish part in a John Boorman movie, *The Tailor of Panama*. When Boorman was asked about what the young actor was now doing, his answer was at best unguarded. "I think it's a terrible fate for a ten-year-old child," he said. "He's a very nice kid, I'm very fond of him ... I was astonished that

he was going to spend the next four years or so doing Harry Potter, it's really saying farewell to your childhood isn't it?" Boorman's conclusion: "He's always going to be Harry Potter, I mean what a prospect."

"I remember being a little upset about that," Radcliffe says now. "Just the phrase *terrible fate* ..." As his time playing Harry Potter progressed—as one film turned into two, then ultimately eight, and as four years stretched into 10—Radcliffe became accustomed to endless iterations of this narrative. "There was a constant kind of drumbeat," he recalls, "of 'Are you all going to be screwed up by this?'"

From early on, Radcliffe was aware of two competing drumbeats—two inevitable destinies, usually somehow intertwined, that were being predicted for him: "'You're going to be fucked up' and 'You're not going to have a career.'" He decided that he would do everything he possibly could to defy both.

"Looking back," Radcliffe says—and he is offering these words at the age of 34, backstage at the Broadway theater where he is co-starring in the Stephen Sondheim musical *Merrily We Roll Along*—"I'm quite impressed with 13-, 14-year-old me's reaction to those things. To really, actually use them. To internally be going: *Fuck you, I'm going to prove that wrong.*"

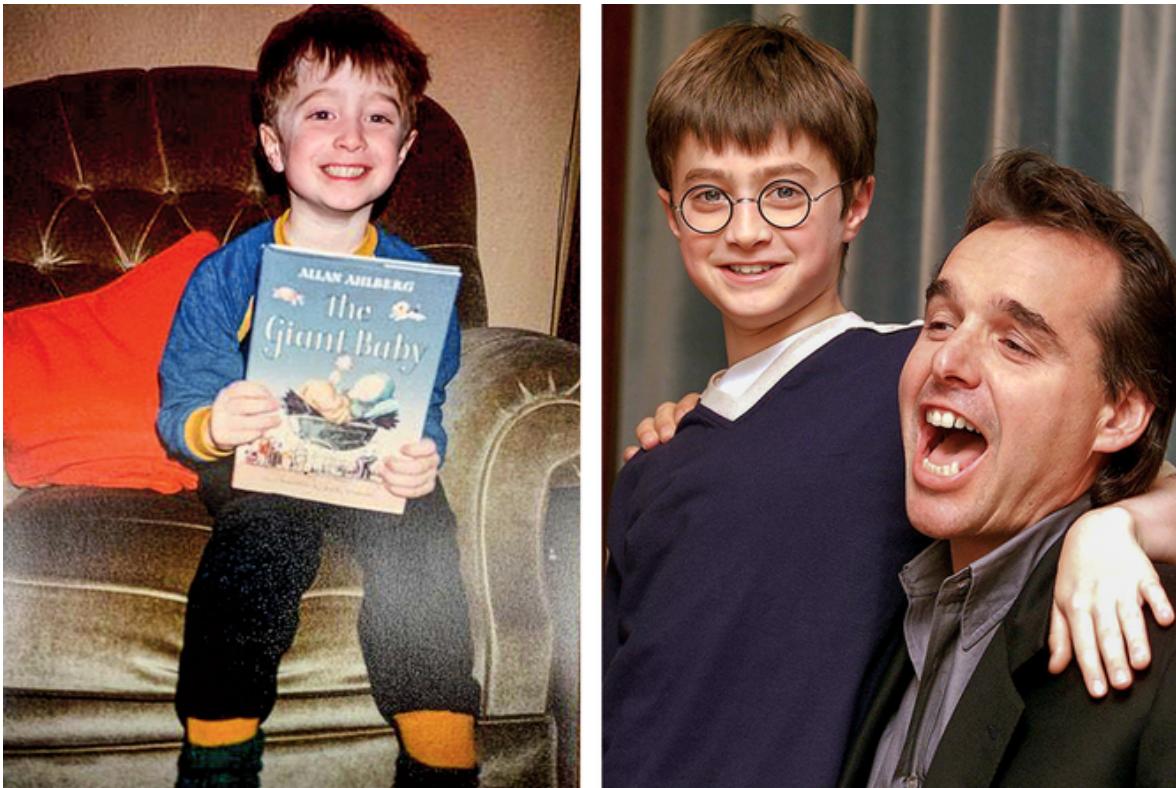
When success comes so young, even the person at its center can wonder exactly what it is that they have for all this to happen. Radcliffe says he's fascinated that, among the first four roles he played, three of them are orphans: David Copperfield, Harry Potter, and a boy called Maps, who lives in an orphanage in a 2007 Australian coming-of-age story called *December Boys*. Even now, Radcliffe is not sure why this might have been. "I've had, in many ways, the most stable home life a person can imagine," he says. His actual parents are "an incredibly loving couple." But no matter—when people looked at him through a camera lens, they apparently saw something. Something he wasn't aware was there.

Chris Columbus is the director who cast Radcliffe as Harry Potter. "I remember having long discussions with Jo Rowling," Columbus told me, "and one of the words that continuously came up about who Harry should be was *haunted*. Harry had to have a haunted quality." Columbus described

how, quite by chance, he turned on the TV in his hotel room at the end of a long day's preproduction and stumbled across *David Copperfield*. He saw Radcliffe for the first time, and there it was: "that haunted quality on-screen." Columbus wanted to meet him.

Radcliffe knows that this is the story. He says that he always had a good imagination, and that, as an only child, he spent plenty of time within it. "But the idea of me having this sort of haunted quality or this darkness inside, I definitely don't think I did when I was a kid," he says. He's grateful, of course, that this is what people perceived, but he hypothesizes that it might all have been an auspicious quirk of biology. "I've always said, 'I've just got big eyes,'" he tells me. "I think that's a ton of the reason for my success."

Columbus insists otherwise. He points out that he saw 800 to 1,000 boys, in person or on video. After watching Radcliffe's screen test—"This was a complex kid, even back then"—Columbus, Rowling, and the producer David Heyman believed they'd finally found the actor they needed. Problem was, the studio disagreed. "They were pushing for this other kid who I felt just was a typical sort of Hollywood kid, even though he was from the U.K.," Columbus said. "And his acting wasn't naturalistic or believable. We just fought and fought for Dan." When I mentioned Radcliffe's theory about his eyes, Columbus dismissed it out of hand. "Ironically, the kid with the bigger eyes was the one the studio was fighting for at the time," he said. "This kid had big eyes, but he had absolutely zero complexity."



*Left:* Radcliffe as a child. *Right:* Radcliffe and the director Chris Columbus, who cast him as Harry Potter, in 2000. (Courtesy of Marcia Gresham; Hugo Philpott / AFP / Getty)

Radcliffe's original screen test is now online, and it [makes for fascinating viewing](#). First he banters convincingly with Columbus, who is off camera, about dragon eggs, and then they transition to a much darker, heavier scene, in which Radcliffe must say things like "If you heard your mum screaming like that, just about to be killed, you wouldn't forget in a hurry." He manages all of it with a remarkable, unshowy, charming intensity. Radcliffe himself watched the audition for the first time a couple of years back, and even he noticed something in it. "I cringe whenever I watch any of my early acting," he says. "But the thing I did see when I watched that was, *Oh, I'm very good at being still.*"

In the early days of his new *Harry Potter* life, Radcliffe was largely sequestered from the public. The films would shoot through most of the year, and even before falling in love with acting, Radcliffe fell in love with being on a film set, and with the people he was surrounded by, particularly the crew. He's often noted that one thing he's grateful for, which he thinks

may be specific to British film culture, is that, however central the young actors' roles may have been, they were treated as kids, rather than as child stars.

David Holmes, who was Radcliffe's stunt double for nine years, became one of his closest friends and the accessory to all kinds of tomfoolery. "Just two kids having fun," Holmes, who is five years older than Radcliffe, told me. "I'd let him do all the things an insurance company wouldn't let him do: jumping on trampolines, swinging around swords, jumping off of the top of a Portakabin roof onto a crash mat."

Radcliffe lived at home with his parents and attended school as much as he could, though more and more of his education came from tutors between breaks in filming. Only intermittently would he find himself face-to-face with what all of this was coming to mean in the outside world, and how strange and uncomfortable it could be.

"I remember really well the physical feeling of the first film's premiere," he says. "You can tell a kid as much as you like, 'There's going to be tons of people there,' and they did tell us, but getting out and feeling it, and feeling that noise hit you, and the kind of knowledge of, *Oh, something is expected of me now*. I remember looking at my hands and they were very still, but inside my body, it was like I could feel my whole body vibrating. I don't know if you've ever hyperventilated, but it's a similar feeling. When you're just about to pass out, but don't."

The apogee of this sensation came when he flew to Japan in December 2002, to promote the second film. "I think there was something with privacy laws at that point," he says, "where you could just phone up the airline and say, 'Is Daniel Radcliffe on this flight?' And they'd say yes." Before he and his parents got off the plane, a flight attendant let them know that 100 security people were ready at the airport. That seemed a bit much. It wasn't. "It was 100 security barely managing to hold back 5,000 people," he says. Fans, and press too. "I remember there was a woman cleaning the floor, and she just got mowed down by this pack of photographers and journalists," he says. Radcliffe mentions that he has long wanted to find footage of this melee. I wonder aloud how much the TV cameras would have been filming the

surrounding chaos, and how much just him. “At a certain point,” he responds, “me and the chaos became inseparable.”

Two snapshots from that day are stuck in Radcliffe’s mind. First, the moment, going through the crowd, when a toggle of his mother’s duffle coat got caught on the button loop of another woman’s jacket. “And they just stood there,” he says, “having to free themselves from one another for a second.” Next, when they finally got in the car, the way his parents reacted: how they started laughing and said, “Wasn’t that crazy?” Looking back, he thinks that it was how his parents, and the other adults around him, set a tone at times like that—“That was weird; let’s go to the hotel”—that helped make what might have been overwhelming into something that, for all its otherworldly strangeness, he could deal with.

It was around the third *Harry Potter* film when Radcliffe realized that acting was what he wanted to do as a career. With that came more self-consciousness about his performances, and even though the films became more and more successful (cumulatively they would gross close to \$8 billion), his satisfaction did not always grow in proportion.

One period that stands out to him in particular was around the sixth film, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*. He had some ideas about how his character might be shut down from the trauma he’d suffered—near the end of the fifth film, Harry witnesses the death of his godfather, Sirius Black, the closest figure in his life to a parent—but looking back, Radcliffe finds that what he did as a result is stiff and wooden. This was compounded by standard teenage awkwardness: “I didn’t want my face to do anything weird. Like, I used to hate smiling on camera, because I hated my smile.”

At the end of January 2009, just before the seventh film was to begin shooting, his real world was shaken in a most brutal way. His stunt double, Holmes, and another friend had just visited Radcliffe in New York. Upon his return to England, Holmes started prepping for the forthcoming shoot. While rehearsing what is known as a “jerk back” stunt, in which Harry would be seen flying backwards after being attacked by a giant snake, something went wrong. Holmes’s body, propelled on pulley-rigged wires, rotated unexpectedly in midair, and when he hit a padded vertical wall as intended, he broke his neck. He was paralyzed from the waist down.

To begin with, Radcliffe struggled to process what had happened. “Even when you see him in bed in the hospital with all the tubes and stuff coming out of him, looking like he looks, your brain still goes, *Well, you’re going to get better—they can do anything nowadays.*” “It’s coming to the understanding,” he adds, “that some things cannot be helped.”

He and Holmes remain close—at one point Radcliffe tells me, “Dave’s story is kind of the biggest thing from *Potter* that has gone on having an effect in my life”—and a few years ago, Holmes finally agreed to Radcliffe’s suggestion that his story be told in a documentary. Radcliffe began shooting interviews with Holmes and others. Then he looked at what he had.

“I don’t know why I thought that I would be able to direct a documentary,” he says. The biggest issue, he says, “was how shit I was at being the interviewer.” He realized that when it came to speaking with Holmes or anyone else he was close to, “I found asking the really hard questions virtually impossible.” He stepped back, and their filmmaker friend Dan Hartley, who’d worked as a video operator for the *Harry Potter* movies, took over. (The powerful result, *David Holmes: The Boy Who Lived*, came out last fall.)

When I mentioned to Holmes what Radcliffe told me—about Radcliffe’s difficulties in discussing the hardest stuff—Holmes at first seemed to agree. But then he corrected himself.

“Actually, no,” he said. “In the lockdown, we had a Zoom call once or twice a week. At the time, I was losing neurological function on this arm”—Holmes indicated his right side—“and my pain levels were going through the roof.” Because of COVID, Holmes said, the usual hospital resources weren’t available to him. He realized that Radcliffe “was one of the only people where I was like, ‘How does a quadriplegic without arms or legs kill himself without putting another person in some sort of trauma?’ That’s a hard conversation to have. It’s not an easy thing to hear a human being say, but it’s a reality.” Radcliffe was someone he could discuss this with: “Logical, emotionally intelligent enough, and also had enough of a sense of ‘I get it, Dave.’”



Radcliffe at the Hudson Theatre, in New York (Lila Barth for *The Atlantic*)

“Me and Dave go to very heavy places,” Radcliffe says. “Also, and there’s no way of reading this and not some people getting the wrong impression, but also there’s a huge amount of humor in those conversations where he’s devising essentially some kind of Rube Goldberg machine so that he can still be the person who does it.”

Radcliffe offers another example. “I remember one of the funniest voice messages I ever received was from him on safari in Africa, talking about what a brilliant time he was having. And also, how wonderful would it be to die at the horn of a rhinoceros. He went into very graphic detail. So yeah, it’s dark, it’s weird, but these are the conversations you have with friends in really specific situations. Knowing Dave, it forces you to think about a lot of stuff.”

When Radcliffe emerged from the *Harry Potter* chrysalis, he did not want to stop working. He knew that some things were immutable—“*Harry Potter* is going to be the first line of my obituary”—but if that was the context in which his life would now continue, it needn’t limit it. “I wanted to try as many different things under my belt,” he says, “knowing that it was going to be the accumulation of all of those things, rather than one thing, that would actually sort of transition me in people’s minds.”

A key moment he identifies in his evolution was *Kill Your Darlings*, a movie he made in 2012, the year after the final *Harry Potter* film was released, in which he plays a young Allen Ginsberg. It was directed by John Krokidas, who gave him an education in ways to think about a script and his performance—one that Radcliffe, in his former life as a cog in a relentlessly focused franchise, had never had before. “I’d always just been: *I learn my lines and I come to set and I follow my instincts.*”

Radcliffe wasn’t trying to shock; he was just trying to stretch the boundaries of who he might become.

When Krokidas asked him, “What’s your process?,” Radcliffe had to explain that he didn’t have one. So the director taught him. “Incredibly basic stuff,” Radcliffe says. These were techniques that most actors would consider “Acting 101,” but it was all new to him: “It was just, like, breaking down a script by wants. So rather than thinking, *I am going to try and effect this emotion*, thinking, *What am I trying to do to the other person in the scene?*” In the film they made together, Radcliffe portrays the young poet in a persuasively natural way. If this was a product of what he had just learned, the lessons stuck quickly and well.

There were also other, more specific ways in which Krokidas’s direction was different from what Radcliffe was used to. During a scene where Ginsberg is picked up in a bar and sleeps with a man for the first time—just a passing moment in the movie, although predictably it would later become a disproportionate part of the film’s public profile in a “*Harry Potter has gay sex*” kind of way—Radcliffe has [recalled that Krokidas shouted at one point:](#) “No! Kiss him! Fucking sex kissing!” As Radcliffe explained in an interview ahead of the film’s release, “The things that directors have shouted

to me in the past usually involve which way I have to look to see the dragon.”

That film holds additional significance for Radcliffe. In an earlier scene, Ginsberg meets a librarian at Columbia—they disappear into the stacks, where she kneels down and fellates him. When Radcliffe’s infant son is older, Radcliffe acknowledges, “he’s going to find that film an awkward watch”; this scene is from the first few days when Radcliffe was getting to know his future partner, Erin Darke. Krokidas made Radcliffe and Darke do an acting exercise in which they stood “a foot from each other, and made eye contact and said things that we found attractive about each other or said things that we liked about each other. And I was so immediately aware that I was going red because I was like, *Oh God, there’s no way for this girl not to find out that I really like her in this moment.*”

For a decade, he and Darke have kept a low profile. They have appeared on red carpets together only a handful of times. “I have learned so much from her about my own boundaries,” he says. “Very occasionally, people will come up to me in the street and be very weird or rude or something like that. And she has given me a sense over the years of: *You don’t have to just be nice to everyone when they’re weird with you.* She’s given me some sense of my own autonomy, I guess.”

I mention to him that I heard his and Darke’s [rare joint appearance in 2021](#) on *Love to See It With Emma and Claire*, a podcast about reality dating shows. The couple keenly engage in a 100-minute discussion of the most recent *Bachelor in Paradise* episodes.

Radcliffe has a long-held affection for various strands of reality TV. He proceeds to explain the strange impromptu role he has occasionally played on the edges of that world. His friend Emma Gray, who co-hosts the podcast, has an annual Christmas party, where Radcliffe sometimes runs into cast members from the *Bachelor* universe: “I always find them fascinating to talk to. I say I always want to do fame counseling with them, because I’m just like, ‘I’ve had a lot of practice at this now—you guys have just been shot out of a fucking cannon.’” He repeatedly finds himself wanting to ask them, “How are you? Are you okay?”

Backstage at New York's Hudson Theatre, Radcliffe leads me into his small dressing room just up a metal gangway, stage left. As he does so, he politely offers a preemptive apology. "I might conduct a little of this interview with my trousers around my ankles, I'm afraid," he says.

For the past four months, Radcliffe has been playing one of the three leads in *Merrily We Roll Along*, the famous Stephen Sondheim flop that is belatedly enjoying its first successful Broadway run. (In April, the role will earn him his first Tony nomination.) As he takes a seat, he lets his trousers fall. This afternoon, when he stood up to leave the home he shares with Darke and their son, he realized that he'd somehow tweaked his knee. That's why he is now in his underwear, pressing an ice pack to it.



Radcliffe at New York's Hudson Theatre (Lila Barth for *The Atlantic*)

Radcliffe has been doing theater for half his life now, and onstage was where he made his first bold break from expectations. When he was 17, between

the release of the fourth and fifth *Harry Potter* movies, it was announced that he would be appearing in London's West End as the lead in a revival of the 1970s play *Equus*, playing a disturbed teenager with a predilection for mutilating horses by blinding them—a role that, among its many other tests, required him to be fully naked onstage for several minutes.

He wasn't trying to shock; he was just trying to stretch the boundaries of who he might become. He'd been taking voice lessons for 18 months in preparation for the challenge of appearing onstage. When the reviews came in, their surprise showed. "Daniel Radcliffe brilliantly succeeds in throwing off the mantle of Harry Potter, announcing himself as a thrilling stage actor of unexpected range and depth," *The Daily Telegraph* [assessed](#).

Since then, other theater roles have followed, including in Martin McDonagh's *The Cripple of Inishmaan* and Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*, along with 10 months as the lead in a Broadway revival of the musical *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*. And now *Merrily*, Sondheim's told-backwards tale of three friends.

For Radcliffe, the role seems a natural fit. Although interviews he gave in his *Harry Potter* years tended to be punctuated with overexuberant declarations about '70s punk albums and his latest indie-rock discoveries, another world of song has always run through him. His parents, who met doing musical theater, used to play Sondheim productions while they were driving. It took Radcliffe years to understand that not all childhoods were like his in this respect. "I thought everyone listened to show tunes in the car," he recently [said](#). "I thought that was road-trip music."

As he performs, you can see two kinds of delight—in sinking into the unshowy togetherness of an ensemble, and, now and again, in stepping forward and commanding all eyes in the theater to follow his every move and breath.

Two days a week, Radcliffe has both a matinee and an evening show. One afternoon, following a matinee, I find him in his dressing room chewing some beef jerky. He says that somebody asked him the other day what he does between shows: "I said, 'I eat jerky and I sleep.'"

Even outside the demands of a two-show day, his diet is somewhat unconventional. He mostly doesn't eat during the day and has one huge meal at night. "I find there's, like, a switch in my brain that if I start doing something, I can't turn it off." If he starts eating anything, he says, he'll keep craving more. He is, he acknowledges, prone to such habitual behaviors. "I've got a very addictive personality."

Emerging from his teens, Radcliffe did quietly skate a little too close to one part of the prophesized tragic-child-star narrative he'd been hell-bent on avoiding. He started to drink, because it was something he thought he should become good at. "I had a really romanticized idea of all these old actors who were always on the piss, and there were all these stories about them and they were really funny," he explains. Committed intoxication was also part of the British-movie-set world he loved. "*I was like, I've got to be able to keep up with all these hardened film crews,*" he says.

He took to it well enough, but that's not to say he was good at it. He would black out all the time. "There's so much dread that comes with that," he says, "because life is a constant sense of *What have I done? Who am I about to hear from?* I'd say it's in the last few years that I've stopped getting some sense of internal panic whenever my phone rings."

I ask him about something that had belatedly struck me: The sixth *Harry Potter* movie, the one in which he'd said he doesn't like his acting, was filmed around this period. (It was released when he was 19.) Is that a coincidence? Not entirely, he says. "I can't watch that film without being like, to myself, *I look a bit, like, dead behind the eyes,*" he says. "And I'm sure that's a consequence of drinking."

After a time, he realized that he needed to stop. Partly, he didn't like the sense that he was fulfilling a trope expected of him—"I was like, *Oh God, I've become a real cliché of something here*"—but mostly he wanted "to stop getting in trouble and feeling fear."

He also received some stern encouragement. "As a friend, I realized that he wasn't really taking care of himself," David Holmes told me. "One day when he came and visited the hospital, he just looked tired—bags under his eyes, skin wasn't too good. And I'm lying there in a bed with a neck brace

on with a feeding tube up my nose. Of course, Harry Potter's on the ward, so we've got loads of attention, but we put the bed curtain around and I just said to him, 'Look, mate, you've got to look after yourself with this. I'm not lying here the way I am watching you piss this away. So please know, if I could get up right now and give you a hiding, I fucking would.'”



Radcliffe with Jonathan Groff and Lindsay Mendez, his co-stars in *Merrily We Roll Along* on Broadway, 2023 (Matthew Murphy)

Somehow, Radcliffe’s drinking had slipped under the radar of the British press, but after he first cleaned up—he later wobbled for a while, though he’s now been sober for more than a decade—he decided to share in an interview a little of what had been going on. Part of his rationale was inoculation—“something might come out about it anyway, so I wanted to try and get ahead of that”—but he also had a notion that closing the gap between reality and the perception of his life “would make me happier or feel less ill at ease in the world.” That didn’t work as he’d hoped. “I learned that the more information you give,” he says, “it just raises more questions for people.” In the celebrity universe, the truth doesn’t always set you free. Sometimes it just feeds a relentless hunger for even more truth.

Radcliffe moves through many of our conversations like a whirlwind—"I know I talk at a million miles an hour and go off on weird tangents or whatever," he'll note while doing exactly that—but on one particular subject, everything slows down. There are long pauses and pained sighs. He sees the sense in the questions, but it feels as though, deep down, he has little faith in the worth of answering them.

First, some context. Radcliffe has long been a public advocate for the Trevor Project, an LGBTQ suicide-prevention hotline and crisis-intervention resource he was introduced to back in 2009, while performing in *Equus*. He explains that, having grown up in his parents' world, surrounded by their gay friends, it was baffling to discover the wider world's prejudice; here, he saw a specific opportunity to help. "If there was any value in a famous straight young actor who was from this film series that could be useful in the fight against people killing themselves, then I was just very keen to be a part of that," he says. Along the way, he became aware of a particular symbiosis that he hadn't anticipated: "I did have a realization of a connection to *Harry Potter* and this stuff. A lot of people found some solace in those books and films who were dealing with feeling closeted or rejected by their family or living with a secret."

Then, in June 2020, J. K. Rowling wrote a series of tweets that set off a media hullabaloo. She began by [sarcastically commenting on an article](#) that used the term *people who menstruate*, before [doubling down in ways that many criticized as anti-trans](#).

A few days later, Radcliffe [issued a personal statement through the Trevor Project](#). "I realize that certain press outlets will probably want to paint this as in-fighting between J. K. Rowling and myself, but that is really not what this is about, nor is it what's important right now," he began, before moving on to say: "Transgender women are women. Any statement to the contrary erases the identity and dignity of transgender people and goes against all advice given by professional health care associations who have far more expertise on this subject matter than either Jo or I."

He expressed hope that readers' experiences with the *Harry Potter* books needn't be tarnished by this, and argued that what people may have found within those books—for instance, "if they taught you that strength is found

in diversity, and that dogmatic ideas of pureness lead to the oppression of vulnerable groups”—remains between readers and the books, “and it is sacred.”

“I’d worked with the Trevor Project for 12 years and it would have seemed like, I don’t know, immense cowardice to me to not say something,” Radcliffe says when I raise this subject. “I wanted to try and help people that had been negatively affected by the comments,” he tells me. “And to say that if those are Jo’s views, then they are not the views of everybody associated with the *Potter* franchise.”

Since those June 2020 tweets, Rowling has proclaimed, again and again, her belief in the importance of biological sex, and that the trans-rights movement seeks to undermine women as a protected class. Radcliffe says he had no direct contact with Rowling throughout any of this. “It makes me really sad, ultimately,” he says, “because I do look at the person that I met, the times that we met, and the books that she wrote, and the world that she created, and all of that is to me so deeply empathic.”

During the blowback, he was often thrown in together with his *Harry Potter* co-stars Emma Watson and Rupert Grint, who both also [expressed their support](#) for the trans community in response to Rowling’s comments. In the British press particularly, he says, “There’s a version of ‘Are these three kids ungrateful brats?’ that people have always wanted to write, and they were finally able to. So, good for them, I guess.” Never mind that he found the premise simply wrongheaded. “Jo, obviously *Harry Potter* would not have happened without her, so nothing in my life would have probably happened the way it is without that person. But that doesn’t mean that you owe the things you truly believe to someone else for your entire life.”

Radcliffe offered these carefully weighted reflections in the early months of this year, before Rowling (who declined to comment for this article) newly personalized their disagreements. In the second week of April, [Rowling wrote a series of posts on X](#) in response to the publication of a [British-government-funded report](#) that notes, as just one of a wide-ranging series of findings, that “for the majority of young people, a medical pathway may not be the best way” to help young people “presenting with gender incongruence or distress”; Rowling touted this as vindication of her views. When one of

her supporters [replied on X](#) that they were “just waiting for Dan and Emma to give you a very public apology,” further suggesting that Radcliffe and Watson would be safe in the knowledge that Rowling would forgive them, [she leaped in](#): “Not safe, I’m afraid,” she wrote, and characterized them as “celebs who cosied up to a movement intent on eroding women’s hard-won rights.” In response, Radcliffe told me: “I will continue to support the rights of all LGBTQ people, and have no further comment than that.”

Radcliffe has long had a passion for word-crammed, tongue-twisting songs. Sometimes these have been rap songs—he says that he has mastered four or five Eminem songs (“when ‘Rap God’ came out I was like, *This is my Everest*”), and in 2014, he improbably appeared on Jimmy Fallon’s *Tonight Show* to [perform Blackalicious’s “Alphabet Aerobics” with the Roots](#). But at a young age, through his parents’ influence, he also picked up a sustained, much less fashionable passion for the works of Tom Lehrer. In 2010, on the British talk show *The Graham Norton Show*, sitting on a sofa next to Colin Farrell and Rihanna, Radcliffe [performed Lehrer’s “The Elements,”](#) in which the periodic table is rhythmically recited at great speed, for no obvious reason other than that he wanted to, and could.

A while afterward, a fellow Lehrer aficionado came across the clip on YouTube. “I just thought at the time that was the nerdiest possible thing a person could do,” Al Yankovic told me. “That’s such an alpha-nerd thing to do. I thought we would get along very well.” Later, when Yankovic was looking for someone to play him in the 2022 movie *Weird: The Al Yankovic Story*, his thoughts returned to Radcliffe. “We needed to cast somebody that really understood comedy and appreciated comedy, but also who could pull off the part without winking. We wanted somebody that would treat this like it was a very serious Oscar-bait drama.”



Radcliffe as “Weird Al” Yankovic in *Weird*, 2022 (The Roku Channel / Everett Collection)

That is one part of the backstory to *Weird*, Radcliffe’s most recent movie, which masquerades as a Yankovic biopic but is actually a savagely pinpoint parody of every other musical biopic, particularly in the ways it unscrupulously and ludicrously reshapes history into a series of vainglorious fables about our hero. It was also an unlikely triumph, and Radcliffe, who committed to a sincerity unruffled by all that surrounds it, was nominated for an Emmy.

Although Radcliffe makes clear that, post-*Harry Potter*, he’s not averse to big, mass-market movies—he recently played the villain in the [action-adventure movie \*The Lost City\*](#), with Sandra Bullock and Channing Tatum, which made nearly \$200 million—his filmography is scattered with fascinatingly eclectic choices.

Some of them are the kind of challenges you might expect an ambitious actor to take on—an FBI agent as an undercover white supremacist

(*Imperium*), a South African political prisoner (*Escape From Pretoria*)—and some of them are ... stranger. In *Horns*, he [plays a man with a murdered girlfriend who grows real horns](#). In *Guns Akimbo*, he wakes up to find that he has had guns surgically attached to both hands. By now, word has clearly spread that if you have a good role of compelling oddity, Daniel Radcliffe might consider it.

The finest example of this is the 2016 movie *Swiss Army Man*, written and directed by Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert, better known as the Daniels. When the Daniels approached Radcliffe, long before the success of their 2022 movie, *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, they were [two pop-music-video makers who had never done a full-length film](#), and the movie they proposed was a surreal, absurdist story about a suicidally lonely man who befriends a flatulent corpse. They wanted Radcliffe to play the corpse.

Scheinert took me through the thought process that led to their approach: “We wanted someone who could sing, because it’s a little bit of a musical; someone with a weird sense of humor, because it’s a weird movie; and someone who didn’t feel like they needed to look beautiful all the time. Weirdly, there’s a lot of actors who are concerned with their image.”

Much later, when Radcliffe was promoting the film—a movie he would himself refer to, perhaps both in acknowledgment and parody of some people’s reactions, as “the Daniel Radcliffe farting boner corpse movie”—he would be routinely asked how on earth the Daniels had persuaded him to get involved. But that was never an issue. From the moment he turned the script’s first few pages—in which Hank, played by Paul Dano, is distracted from killing himself by the sight of a corpse washing up onto his desert island, expelling air from its rear, and soon is riding the corpse across the ocean like a Jet Ski, propelled by the corpse’s farts—he was in. (The “boner” part, by the way, comes later, when Hank learns that the corpse’s erections function as a compass.)

For a movie with such a high-wire premise, *Swiss Army Man* [does an impressive job of finding, within its absurdities and grotesqueness, something more](#). The film plays out in a zone somewhere between reality and the hallucinations of broken, lonely people with good hearts. “I’ve realized over the years,” Radcliffe says, “that if there’s a sweet spot to be

found between deeply fucking weird and strange and almost unsettling, and kind of wholesome and earnest and very sincere, then that's the stuff I really love doing." Anything, he tells me, "that says something kind of lovely about human beings in spite of ourselves, in spite of how bad the world is."



*Left:* Radcliffe and Paul Dano in *Swiss Army Man*, 2016. *Right:* Radcliffe in *The Lost City*, 2022. (A24 / Everett Collection; Paramount Pictures / Everett Collection)

Radcliffe recognizes that, in making career decisions, he now faces an unusual predicament. From the *Harry Potter* films, he has banked more money than most actors will ever see in their lifetime, and there are no signs that he has been frittering it away.

"I'm in a weird position where I don't have to work," he tells me. "Not to sound like an asshole about it—I'm sure people reading this will be like, 'For fuck's sake.'" His point is just that it's difficult to explain how he decides what he does and doesn't do without acknowledging that one of the usual impetuses is absent. "I go to work," he says, "because I love what I do."

"I think he's one of those special cases where he started as a child and it actually is what he wanted to do and it's how he's wanted to spend his life," Jonathan Groff, his *Merrily* co-star, told me.

*Merrily We Roll Along* runs until July. After that, Radcliffe initially tells me, he is looking forward to appearing alongside Ethan Hawke in a film called *Batso*, about a true-life mountain-climbing feat in Yosemite in the 1970s:

“Any acting job where there’s some physical thing that goes alongside it, I tend to really enjoy, just because I think it takes away self-consciousness.”

But then in April, several weeks after *Batso* is publicly announced, the project is put on hold. Radcliffe seems to take this, too, in his stride. He’d been planning a long break anyway, and now the chance will come sooner. “We’re just going to be a family for a bit,” he says, “and I’m very, very excited about that, to be honest.”

When the *Potter* movies ended, Radcliffe says, “I got to feeling like people were watching to see if we just flamed out or actually managed to go on to do something. And I didn’t know the answer at that moment, and not knowing the answer to that question made me feel like a bit of a fraud, I guess. I think I just carried that all around with me in a way that was just very present in my day-to-day life and thinking. In a way that it’s thankfully not as much now.”

---

*This article appears in the [June 2024](#) print edition with the headline “After Potter.”*

---

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from  
<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2024/06/daniel-radcliffe-merrily-we-roll-along-jk-rowling/678219/>

# Dispatches

- [Against Sunscreen Absolutism](#)
- [The One Place in Airports People Actually Want to Be](#)
- [The Mysteries of Plant ‘Intelligence’](#)
- [American Beauty](#)

# Against Sunscreen Absolutism

## Moderate sun exposure can be good for you. Why won't American experts acknowledge that?

by Rowan Jacobsen



*Updated at 10:40 a.m. ET on May 29, 2024*

Australia is a country of abundant sunshine, but the skin of most Australians is better adapted to gloomy England than the beaches of Brisbane. The country's predominantly white population has by far [the world's highest rate of skin cancer](#), and for years the public-health establishment has warned residents about the dangers of ultraviolet light. A 1980s ad campaign

advised Australians to “Slip, Slop, Slap”—if you had to go out in the sun, slip on a shirt, slop on some sunscreen, and slap on a hat. The only safe amount of sun was none at all.

Then, in 2023, a consortium of Australian public-health groups did something surprising: It issued new advice that takes careful account, for the first time, of the sun’s positive contributions. The advice itself may not seem revolutionary—experts now say that people at the lowest risk of skin cancer should spend ample time outdoors—but the idea at its core marked a radical departure from decades of public-health messaging. “Completely avoiding sun exposure is not optimal for health,” read [the groups’ position statement](#), which extensively cites a growing body of research. Yes, UV rays cause skin cancer, but for some, too much shade can be just as harmful as too much sun.

It’s long been known that sun exposure triggers vitamin D production in the skin, and that low levels of vitamin D are associated with increased rates of stroke, heart attack, diabetes, cancer, Alzheimer’s, depression, osteoporosis, and many other diseases. It was natural to assume that vitamin D was responsible for these outcomes. “Imagine a treatment that could build bones, strengthen the immune system and lower the risks of illnesses like diabetes, heart and kidney disease, high blood pressure and cancer,” [The New York Times wrote in 2010](#). “Some research suggests that such a wonder treatment already exists. It’s vitamin D.” By 2020, [more than one in six adults](#) were on that wonder treatment in the form of daily supplements, which promise to deliver the sun’s benefits without its dangers.

But sunlight in a pill has turned out to be a spectacular failure. In a large clinical trial that began in 2011, some 26,000 older adults were randomly assigned to receive either daily vitamin D pills or placebos, and were then followed for an average of five years. The study’s main findings were published in The New England Journal of Medicine in 2018, and additional results were released in the same publication two years ago. An accompanying editorial, with the headline “A Decisive Verdict on Vitamin D Supplementation,” noted that [no benefits whatsoever had been found for any of the health conditions that the study tracked](#). “Vitamin D supplementation did not prevent cancer or cardiovascular disease, prevent falls, improve cognitive function, reduce atrial fibrillation, change body composition,

reduce migraine frequency, improve stroke outcomes, decrease age-related macular degeneration, or reduce knee pain,” the journal said. “People should stop taking vitamin D supplements to prevent major diseases or extend life.”

### Read: You’re not allowed to have the best sunscreens in the world

Australia’s new guidance is in part a recognition of this reality. It’s also the result of our improved understanding of the disparate mechanisms through which sunlight affects health. Some of them are intuitive: Bright morning light, filtered through the eyes, helps regulate our circadian rhythms, improving energy, mood, and sleep. But the systemic effects of UV light operate through entirely different pathways that have been less well understood by the public, and even many health professionals. In recent years, that science has received more attention, strengthening conviction in sunlight’s possibly irreplaceable benefits. In 2019, an international collection of researchers issued a call to arms with the headline “[Insufficient Sun Exposure Has Become a Real Public Health Problem.](#)”

Sunlight in a pill has turned out to be a spectacular failure: Vitamin D supplements have shown no benefits.

Health authorities in some countries have begun to follow Australia’s lead, or at least to explore doing so. In the United Kingdom, for example, the National Health Service is reviewing the evidence on sun exposure, with a report due this summer. Dermatology conferences in Europe have begun to schedule sessions on the benefits of sun exposure after not engaging with the topic for years.

In the United States, however, there is no sign of any such reconsideration. Both the CDC and the American Academy of Dermatology still counsel strict avoidance, recommending that everyone but infants wear sunscreen every day, regardless of the weather. When I asked the AAD about Australia’s new guidelines, a spokesperson offered only that, “because ultraviolet rays from the sun can cause skin cancer, the Academy does not recommend getting vitamin D from sun exposure.”

Such a stance surely reflects understandable concerns about mixed messaging. But it also seems more and more outdated, and suggests a

broader problem within American public-health institutions.

More than a century ago, scientists began to notice a mysterious pattern across the globe, which they came to call the “latitude effect.” Once you adjust for confounding variables—such as income, exercise, and smoking rates—people living at high latitudes suffer from higher rates of many diseases than people living at low or middle latitudes. The pattern plays out in many conditions, but it’s most pronounced in autoimmune disorders, especially multiple sclerosis. Throughout Europe, Australia, New Zealand, and the U.S., populations at higher latitudes are [much more likely to develop MS](#) than those closer to the equator. Over the years, scientists have offered many theories to explain this phenomenon: differences in diet, something in the water. But MS research pointed to a perhaps more obvious answer: sunlight. The higher the latitude, the lower the angle of the sun and the more its rays are filtered by the atmosphere. A number of studies have found links between sun exposure and the disease. Kids who spend less than 30 minutes a day outside on weekends and holidays are much more likely to develop MS than kids who are outside for more than one hour on these same days. Relapse rates for the disease are higher in early spring, after months of sun scarcity. People who were born in the spring (whose mothers received little sun exposure during their third trimester of pregnancy) are more likely to develop MS than people born in the fall.

Here, too, scientists first assumed that vitamin D was the key. But vitamin D supplementation proved useless for MS. Could something else about sun exposure protect against the condition?

A hint came from another disease, psoriasis, a disorder in which the immune system mistakes the patient’s own skin cells for pathogens and attacks them, producing inflammation and red, scaly skin. Since ancient times, it had been observed that sunlight seems to alleviate the condition, and doctors have long recommended “phototherapy” as a treatment. But only in the late 20th century, with the recognition that psoriasis was an autoimmune disease, did they start to understand why it worked.

It turns out that UV light essentially induces the immune system to stop attacking the skin, reducing inflammation. This is unfortunate when it comes to skin cancer—UV rays not only damage DNA, spurring the formation of

cancerous cells; they also retard the immune system's attack on those cells. But in the case of psoriasis, the tamping-down of a hyperactive response is exactly what's needed. Moreover, to the initial surprise of researchers, this effect isn't limited to the site of exposure. From the skin, the immune system's regulatory cells migrate throughout the body, soothing inflammation elsewhere as well.

### [Read: AI-driven dermatology could leave dark-skinned patients behind](#)

This effect is now believed to be the reason sun exposure helps prevent or ameliorate many autoimmune diseases, including MS, type 1 diabetes, and rheumatoid arthritis. It also explains why other conditions that involve a hyperinflammatory response, such as asthma and allergies, seem to be alleviated by sun exposure. It may even explain why some other diseases now believed to be connected to chronic inflammation, including cardiovascular disease and Alzheimer's, are often less prevalent in regions with more sun exposure.

The consortium of Australian public-health groups had those potential benefits in mind when it drafted its new guidelines. "There's no doubt at all that UV hitting the skin has immune effects," Rachel Neale, a cancer researcher and the lead author of the guidelines, told me. "There's absolutely no doubt." But as to what to do with that knowledge, Neale isn't certain. "This is likely to be both harmful and beneficial. We need to know more about that balance."

What does one do with that uncertainty? The original "Slip, Slop, Slap" campaign was easy to implement because of its simplicity: *Stay out of the sun; that's all you need to know*. It was, in a sense, the equivalent of the "[Just Say No" campaign against drugs](#), launched in the U.S. around the same time. But the simplicity also sometimes runs afoul of common sense. Dermatologists who tell their patients to wear sunscreen even indoors on cloudy winter days seem out of touch.

Australia's new advice is, by comparison, more scientific, yet also more complicated. It divides its recommendations into three groups, according to people's skin color and susceptibility to skin cancer. Those with pale skin, or olive skin plus other risk factors, are advised to practice extreme caution:

Keep slip-slop-slapping. Those with “olive or pale-brown skin” can take a balanced approach to sun exposure, using sunscreen whenever the UV index is at least a 3 (which is most days of the year in Australia). Those with dark skin need sunscreen only for extended outings in the bright sun.

[Read: The problem sunscreen poses for dark skin](#)

In designing the new guidelines, Neale and her colleagues tried to be faithful to the science while also realizing that whatever line is set on sun exposure, many people will cross it, intentionally or not. Even though skin cancer is rarely fatal when promptly diagnosed, it weighs heavily on the nation’s health-care system and on people’s well-being. “We spend \$2 billion a year treating skin cancer in Australia,” Neale said. “It’s bonkers how much we spend, apart from the fact that people end up with bits of themselves chopped out. So at a whole-population level, the messaging will continue to be very much about sun protection.”

That said, we now know that many individuals at low risk of skin cancer could benefit from more sun exposure—and that doctors are not yet prepared to prescribe it. A survey Neale conducted in 2020 showed that the majority of patients in Australia with vitamin D deficiencies were prescribed supplements by their doctors, despite the lack of efficacy, while only a minority were prescribed sun exposure. “We definitely need to be doing some education for doctors,” she told me. In support of the new position statement, Neale’s team has been working on a website where doctors can enter information about their patients’ location, skin color, and risk factors and receive a document with targeted advice. In most cases, people can meet their needs with just a few minutes of exposure a day.

This is not the 1950s. When public authorities spin or simplify science in an attempt to elicit a desired behavior, they are going to get called on it.

That sort of customized approach is sorely needed in the United States, Adewole Adamson, a dermatologist who directs the Melanoma and Pigmented Lesion Clinic at the University of Texas, told me. “A one-size-fits-all approach isn’t productive when it comes to sun-exposure recommendations,” he said. “It can cause harm to some populations.” For years, Adamson has called for more rational guidelines for people of color,

who have the lowest risk of skin cancer and also higher rates of many of the diseases that sunlight seems to ameliorate. Adamson finds it disheartening that mostly white Australia now has “a better official position” than organizations in the U.S., “where nonwhite Americans will outnumber white Americans in the next 20 years.”

To some degree, one can sympathize with the desire to keep things simple. People have limited bandwidth, and some may misunderstand or tune out overly complicated health messages. Others will inevitably turn a little information into a dangerous thing. A fringe segment of the alt-health crowd is already [suggesting that skin-cancer dangers have been exaggerated](#) as a way to get us all to buy more sunblock. But knowing that some people will draw strange conclusions from the facts is not a good-enough reason to withhold those facts, as we saw during the pandemic, when experts looking to provide simple guidance sometimes implied that the science was more settled than it was. This is not the 1950s. When public authorities spin or simplify science in an attempt to elicit a desired behavior, they are going to get called on it. Conspiracy-minded conclusions, among other bad ones, are likely to gain more credence, not less. And the public is going to have less faith in national institutions and the positions they espouse the next time.

Besides, in this case, the news being withheld is incredibly good. It’s not every day that science discovers a free and readily accessible intervention that might improve the health of so many people. That’s the real story here, and it’s most compelling when conveyed honestly: Science feels its way forward, one hesitant step at a time, and backtracks almost as often. Eventually, that awkward but beautiful two-step leads us to better ground.

---

*This article originally stated that The New England Journal of Medicine published the results of a vitamin D-supplementation study in 2022. In fact, it published the study’s main findings in 2018 and additional findings in 2022. This article appears in the [June 2024](#) print edition with the headline “Against Sunscreen Absolutism.”*

---

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from  
<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2024/06/sun-exposure-health-benefits/678205/>

# The One Place in Airports People Actually Want to Be

## Inside the competition to lure affluent travelers with luxurious lounges

by Amanda Mull



On a bright, chilly Thursday in February, most of the people inside the Chase Sapphire Lounge at LaGuardia Airport appeared to be doing something largely absent from modern air travel: They were having fun. I arrived at Terminal B before 9:30 a.m., but the lounge had already been in

full swing for hours. Most of the velvet-upholstered stools surrounding the circular, marble-topped bar were filled. Travelers who looked like they were heading to couples' getaways or girls' weekends clustered in twos or threes, waiting for their mimosas or Bloody Marys or the bar's signature cocktail—a gin concoction turned a vibrant shade of violet by macerated blueberries, served in a champagne coupe.

Other loungers in the golden-lit, plant-lined, 21,800-square-foot space chatted over their breakfast, boozy or otherwise. At the elaborate main drink station that formed one wall of the lounge's dining room, I chose the tap that promised cold brew, though spa water and a mysterious third spigot labeled only as "seasonal" beckoned. When I reached for what I thought was a straw, I pulled back a glistening tube of individually portioned honey, ready to be snapped into a hot cup of tea.

While I ate my breakfast—a brussels-sprout-and-potato hash with bacon and a poached egg ordered using a QR code, which also offered me the opportunity to book a gratis half-hour mini-facial in the lounge's wellness area—I listened to the 30-somethings at the next table marveling about how nice this whole thing was. That's not a sentiment you'd necessarily expect to hear about the contrived luxury of an airport lounge. In the context of air travel, *nice* has usually meant nice relative to the experience outside the lounge's confines, where most of your choices for a meal are marked-up fast food eaten at a crowded gate, or the undignified menu truncation of a Chili's Too.

With the new mega-lounges, airlines and credit cards talk a big game about their culinary acumen, cocktail programs, and spa amenities.

American Airlines opened the world's first airport lounge, then an invite-only affair for VIPs, in 1939. By the end of the 20th century, lounges had cemented their reputation as the domain of road warriors—mostly solo travelers headed to, say, medical-device sales conventions or engineering-job-site visits. The experience was less brussels-sprout hash and champagne and more "cheese and crackers and \$5 beers," Brian Kelly, the titular guy behind the Points Guy website (and [arguably the most influential person in the travel-status game](#)), told me. But behind those generously staffed check-in desks, things have been changing. Private-lounge networks have rapidly

expanded over the past decade, as scores of new travelers have begun demanding entry. What awaits inside is changing, too.

Perhaps the most salient characteristic of the modern airport lounge is that it is busy. According to one estimate, the number of fliers visiting lounges hit an all-time high in the summer of 2023, and this year's vacation season appears likely to top it. As Americans have rushed back into travel after a pandemic lull, they've also rushed to apply for new credit cards, the fanciest of which promise bounties of travel-related perks, including lounge access. Now a broader cohort of fliers is squeezing in alongside the usual business travelers. This new group might be described as work-from-home travelers: people tapping away on laptops, trying to wedge in a few more emails or Zoom meetings around pleasure travel.

In the past year, for reasons both journalistic and personal, I've visited seven lounges across five cities. These rooms held the expected corporate types in company-issued quarter-zips, but also 20-something women in Taylor Swift tour merch, bros with tennis rackets protruding from their carry-on, and lots of young people with one AirPod in and their Zoom camera turned off.

The lounge's booming popularity complicates its premise. This expanding group of high-spending customers is valuable to airlines, which operate most lounges, and to credit-card issuers, who have joined the lounge market with their own club networks. (High-fee credit cards, Kelly told me, have become the most common way for airline-perk neophytes to access lounges, no matter whether they're run by airlines or banks.) But to attract these customers, lounge operators need to uphold the impression that lounges are exclusive—a special place far from the airport cattle call, not one crammed with too many other valued customers. The operators' solution to this dilemma has been to build fast and build big, putting up huge, extravagant new clubs as quickly as the vagaries of airport construction will allow. Globally, more than 3,000 airport lounges are now open, with most major operators promising to add at least a few new locations this year.

Most of the existing lounges max out somewhere around the ambience of a Panera, with booze instead of lemonade. The food and drinks are free, and that's usually their main selling point. With the new mega-lounges, though, airlines and credit cards alike talk a big game about their culinary acumen,

cocktail programs, and spa amenities, which include massages, private showers, and manicures. In United Airlines' new 35,000-square-foot, three-story lounge in Denver, [one of its two bars evokes a brewery](#), complete with tasting flights from Colorado brewers. Delta is opening the first in a series of [ultra-premium clubs in June](#): a 38,000-square-foot mega-lounge at New York's JFK airport containing, among other things, a full-service French bistro. American Express's largest-ever lounge, which opened recently in Atlanta, has a backroom whiskey bar, a menu designed by a celebrated local chef, and 4,000 square feet of outdoor space from which loungers can watch planes roll by.

You could dismiss the amenities arms race as an absurd exercise in flattering wealth's vanity—it is. But that flattery is so effective because lounges offer a solution to a real set of problems. In the past few decades, [air travel in the United States has become notably worse](#). Airlines have shrunk seats, increased fees, and pushed a larger proportion of passengers toward expensive tickets that offer more room and better service. At the same time, tickets at the back of the plane have become much less expensive, which has increased overall demand. Americans took 665 million flights in 2000, and by 2019, that number had increased to more than 925 million. On top of this, American airports are pretty old, and many need serious upgrades to handle the passenger volume more comfortably.

Airlines profit from these conditions, but they still have to keep their most profitable customers happy. Lounges go a long way toward placating frequent fliers. They are, on some level, a decent deal for all involved: Private companies shoulder the cost of building them. They cater to people who endure the indignities of air travel most often. For many of those people, the pricey fees probably do save money over time, relative to how often they'd otherwise buy astronomically marked-up food from airport vendors. And the clubs tend to get put in inconvenient spots, which should theoretically help ease overcrowding at the gate, or at least move some of the fussiest passengers to their own containment area.

### [Read: Flying is weird right now](#)

More curious is the fact that credit-card companies are making the effort to launch entire lounges themselves, competing against airlines when they

already partner with airlines to get cardholders into existing lounges. A lounge is, by all accounts, a huge money sink—even besides the cost and red tape of building within an airport, making people feel special requires an army of workers available 18 to 20 hours a day, seven days a week. Everyone I spoke with at companies that run lounge networks said some version of *We do not view the lounges as revenue opportunities.*



Illustration by Max Guther

Lounges are, however, a great incentive to sign up for credit cards. As people's day-to-day financial lives become more cashless, credit-card issuers are battling one another to win over customers and encourage them to swipe as much as possible, Joseph Nunes, a marketing professor at the University of Southern California, told me. One big reason: interchange fees. Card issuers take a cut of the purchase price from sellers every time a card is used, and that cut tends to be larger for more premium cards. Frequent pleasure travelers are a creditor's dream: They are wealthier than the average American, they do a lot of discretionary spending, and they pay their bills on time. Lounges have already succeeded at enticing this group to sign up for airline-specific credit cards, so card issuers have taken the next logical step: lounges for people who aren't quite road warriors and who may not be devoted to any particular airline, but who want perks all the same.

Controlling an entire lounge, stamped with an enormous company logo, is a play for what marketers call brand affinity. "It solidifies our relationship with our customers," Audrey Hendley, the president of American Express Travel, told me. Those customers might visit a lounge only a few times a year. But if everything goes according to plan, those visits are one of the reasons they love their Amex Platinum or Chase Sapphire card and use it for everything, even though they've got three or four others they could pull out of their wallet.

Of course, the genuinely wealthy still need to be convinced that they're more special than the rest of us. Credit-card companies have been ready to oblige with even more layers of exclusivity. Chase's LaGuardia lounge is [open to anyone who pays a \\$550 annual fee for the right credit card](#), but the private suites inside, which include a palatial bathroom and all the seafood towers you can eat, cost up to \$3,000 for a three-hour visit. This is part of what Nunes called the further tiering of society, fueled by the incredibly granular financial-data profiles that companies can now make of their customers. "We really say, 'Where are consumers spending, who are the consumers that are the most profitable for me, and how should I treat them?'" Nunes told me. "We're going to see further and further discrimination by firms, I think, in treating their most profitable customers the best."

Credit-card perks have proved such an effective way to lure high-income customers that the airport lounge has begun to make its way outside the airport. Card issuers now commonly sponsor VIP areas at concerts and sporting events, especially those that appeal to high spenders. American Express and Chase offer members-only lounges at the U.S. Open tennis tournament in New York. The Sundance Film Festival has had a Chase Sapphire lounge for years. And although it can seem silly to get excited about entry to a VIP area, few people are immune to the charms of more places to sit down, shorter lines for cleaner bathrooms, and a couple of free drinks.

#### [From the April 2020 issue: It's all so ... premiocre](#)

Even if you never have entered or never will enter an airport lounge, the perks arms race affects your daily life. More premium-card use means higher fees for retailers, and those fees then get baked into the prices everyone pays—an easier task for large sellers, who usually pay less for their goods than mom-and-pop stores. (A recent settlement in a class-action suit against Visa and Mastercard could lower and cap these fees while allowing retailers to charge customers with premium cards extra.)

Meanwhile, many card issuers have also begun to experiment with opening places that target other tiers of customers too. Capital One now operates more than 50 cafés that are open to the public, which seem aimed at the kind of young, laptop-lugging workers who might someday be high earners but for now just need a coffee shop with free Wi-Fi. In addition to baristas, these spaces have “ambassadors” and “mentors” available to guide patrons through the bank’s range of services while they sip their lattes. These cafés, like the airport lounges, are money sinks. But Kelly told me that it’s a mistake to think about banks the way we think about other consumer-facing businesses. “Look at the earnings reports of any of the credit-card companies,” he said. “This is a drop in the bucket.”

In February, I visited American Express’s Centurion New York club in Midtown Manhattan. The space, which uses the entire 55th floor (and one dedicated express elevator) of the new One Vanderbilt skyscraper on 42nd Street, is the first of its kind for the company. It is, in some sense, a Capital One café for people already very comfortable with the services offered by their preferred financial institutions. A few tables in some of its spaces can

be reserved by the general public, but no one there will sell you a new credit card or recommend a loan for your small business. The club's best nooks and crannies, including a large corner table with clear views of much of the city's skyline, are reserved for those who carry the company's invite-only Centurion Card, which is rumored to require at least \$500,000 in annual charges for membership. One Centurion-exclusive bar gives you a view from heaven down onto the Art Deco curves of the Chrysler Building below, as though you are a god yourself.

---

*This article appears in the [June 2024](#) print edition with the headline “The Airport-Lounge Arms Race.”*

---

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from  
<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2024/06/airport-lounges-access-chase-amex/678206/>

| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

# The Mysteries of Plant ‘Intelligence’

**Scientists are debating whether concepts such as memory, consciousness, and communication can be applied beyond the animal kingdom.**

by Zoë Schlanger



On a freezing day in December 2021, I arrived in Madison, Wisconsin, to visit [Simon Gilroy's lab](#). In one room of the lab sat a flat of young tobacco and *Arabidopsis* plants, each imbued with fluorescent proteins derived from jellyfish.

Researchers led me into a small microscope room. One of them turned off the lights, and another handed me a pair of tweezers that had been dipped in a solution of glutamate—one of the most important neurotransmitters in our brains and, research has recently found, one that boosts plants' signals too. "Be sure to cross the midrib," Jessica Cisneros Fernandez, then a molecular biologist on Gilroy's team, told me. She pointed to the thick vein running down the middle of a tiny leaf. This vein is the plant's information superhighway. Injure the vein, and the pulse will move all over the plant in a wave. I pinched hard.

On a screen attached to the microscope, I watched the plant light up, its veins blazing like a neon sign. As the green glow moved from the wound site outward in a fluorescent ripple, I was reminded of the branching pattern of human nerves. The plant was becoming aware, in its own way, of my touch.

But what exactly does it mean for a plant to be *aware*? Consciousness was once seen as belonging solely to humans and a short list of nonhuman animals that clearly act with intention. Yet seemingly everywhere researchers look, they are finding that there is more to the inner lives of animals than we ever thought possible. Scientists now talk regularly about animal cognition; they study the behaviors of individual animals, and occasionally ascribe personalities to them.

Some scientists now posit that plants should likewise be considered intelligent. Plants have been found to show sensitivity to sound, store information to be accessed later, and communicate among their kind—and even, in a sense, with particular animals. We determine intelligence in ourselves and certain other species through inference—by observing how an organism behaves, not by looking for a psychological sign. If plants can do things that we consider indications of intelligence in animals, this camp of botanists argues, then why shouldn't we use the language of intelligence to describe them too?

#### From the July/August 2021 issue: A better way to look at trees

It's a daring question, currently being debated in labs and academic journals. Not so long ago, treading even lightly in this domain could upend a

scientist's career. And plenty of botanists still think that applying concepts such as consciousness to plants does a disservice to their essential plantness. Yet even many of these scientists are awed by what we are learning about plants' capabilities.

A single book nearly snuffed out the field of plant-behavior research for good. *The Secret Life of Plants*, published in 1973, was as popular as it was irresponsible; though it included real science, it also featured wildly unscientific projection. One chapter suggested that plants could feel and hear—and that they preferred Beethoven to rock and roll. Another suggested that a plant could respond to malevolent thoughts.

Many scientists tried to reproduce the most tantalizing "research" presented in *The Secret Life of Plants*, to no avail. According to several researchers I spoke with, this caused the twin gatekeepers of science-funding boards and peer-review boards to become skittish about plant-behavior studies. Proposals with so much as a whiff of inquiry into the subject were turned down. Pioneers in the field changed course or left the sciences altogether.

A decade after the book's publication, [a paper by David Rhoades](#), a zoologist and chemist at the University of Washington, reopened questions of plant communication. Rhoades had watched a nearby forest be decimated by an invasion of caterpillars. But then something suddenly changed; the caterpillars began to die. Why? The answer, Rhoades discovered, was that the trees were communicating with one another. Trees that the caterpillars hadn't yet reached were ready: They'd changed the composition of their leaves, turning them into weapons that would poison, and eventually kill, the caterpillars.

Scientists were beginning to understand that trees communicate through their roots, but this was different. The trees, too far apart to be connected by a root system, were signaling to one another through the air. Plants are tremendous at chemical synthesis, Rhoades knew. And certain plant chemicals drift through the air. Everyone already understood that ripening fruit produces airborne ethylene, for example, which prompts nearby fruit to ripen too. It wasn't unreasonable to imagine that plant chemicals containing other information—say, that the forest was under attack—might also drift through the air.

## Read: A glowing petunia could radicalize your view of plants

Still, the idea that a plant would defend itself in this way was heretical to the whole premise of how scientists thought plants worked. Plants were not supposed to be that active, or have such dramatic and strategic reactions. Rhoades presented his hypothesis at conferences, but mainstream scientific journals were reluctant to take the risk of publishing something so outlandish. The discovery ended up buried in an obscure volume, and Rhoades was ridiculed by peers in journals and at conferences.

But Rhoades's communication experiments, and others that came immediately after, helped establish new lines of inquiry. We now know that plants' chemical signals are decipherable not just by other plants but in some cases by insects. Still, four decades on, the idea that plants might communicate *intentionally* with one another remains a controversial concept in botany.

One key problem is that there is no agreed-upon definition of *communication, not even in animals*. Does a signal need to be sent purposefully? Does it need to provoke a response in the receiver? Much as *consciousness* and *intelligence* have no settled definition, *communication* slip-slides between the realms of philosophy and science, finding secure footing in neither. Intention poses the hardest of problems, because it cannot be directly determined.

## From the March 2019 issue: A journey into the animal mind

The likely impossibility of establishing intentionality in plants, though, is no deterrent to Simon Gilroy's sense of wonder at their liveliness. In the '80s, Gilroy, who is British, studied at Edinburgh University under Anthony Trewavas, a renowned plant physiologist. Since then, Trewavas has begun using provocative language to talk about plants, aligning himself with a group of botanists and biologists who call themselves plant neurobiologists, and publishing papers and a book laying out scientific arguments in favor of plant intelligence and consciousness. Gilroy himself is more circumspect, unwilling to talk about either of those things, but he still works with Trewavas. Recently, the two have been developing a theory of agency for plants.

Gilroy is quick to remind me that he is talking strictly about *biological* agency, not implying intention in a thoughts-and-feelings sense. But there's no question that plants are engaged in the active pursuit of their own goals and, in the process, shape the very environment they find themselves rooted in. That, for him, is proof of plants' agency. Still, the proof is found through inferring the meaning behind plants' actions rather than understanding their mechanics.

"When you get down to the machinery that allows those calculations to occur, we don't have the luxury of going, *Ah, it's neurons in the brain,*" Gilroy told me. His work is beginning to allow us to watch the information processing happen, "but at the moment, we don't know *how* it works."

That is the essential question of plant intelligence: How does something without a brain coordinate a response to stimuli? How does information about the world get translated into action that benefits the plant? How can the plant sense its world without a centralized place to parse that information?

A few years back, Gilroy and his colleague Masatsugu Toyota thought they'd have a go at those questions, which led them to the experiment I participated in at the lab. Their work has shown that those glowing-green signals move much faster than would be expected from simple diffusion. They move at the speed of some electrical signals, which they may be. Or, as new research suggests, they may be surprisingly fast chemical signals.

Given what we know about the dynamics of sensing in creatures that have a brain, the lack of one should mean that any information generated from sensing ought to ripple meaninglessly through the plant body without producing more than a highly localized response. But it doesn't. A tobacco plant touched in one place will experience that stimulus throughout its whole body.

No brains, the dissenting papers claim, means no intelligence.

The system overall works a bit like an animal nervous system, and might even employ similar molecular players. Gilroy, for his part, does not want to call it a nervous system, but others have written that he and Toyota have

found “[nervous system–like signaling](#)” in plants. The issue has even leaked out of plant science: Researchers from other disciplines are weighing in. Rodolfo Llinás, a neuroscientist at NYU, and Sergio Miguel Tomé, a colleague at the University of Salamanca, in Spain, have [argued that it makes no sense](#) to define a nervous system as something only animals can have rather than defining it as a physiological system that could be present in other organisms, if in a different form.

Convergent evolution, they argue, wherein organisms separately evolve similar systems to deal with similar challenges, happens all the time; a classic example is wings. Flight evolved separately in birds, bats, and insects, but to comparable effect. Eyes are another example; the eye lens has evolved separately several times.

The nervous system can reasonably be imagined as another case of convergent evolution, Llinás and Miguel Tomé say. If a variety of nervous systems exist in nature, then what plants have is clearly one. Why not call it a nervous system already?

“What do you mean, the flower remembers?” I ask.

It’s 2019, and I’m walking through the Berlin Botanic Garden with Tilo Henning, a plant researcher. Henning shakes his head and laughs. He doesn’t know. No one does. But yes, he says, he and his colleague Maximilian Weigend, the director of a botanical garden in Bonn, have observed the ability of *Nasa poissoniana*—a plant in the flowering Loasaceae family that grows in the Peruvian Andes—to store and recall information.

The pair noticed that the multicolor starburst-shaped flowers were raising their stamen, or fertilizing organs, shortly *before* a pollinator arrived, as if they could predict the future. The researchers set up an experiment and found that the plant in fact seemed to be learning from experience. These flowers, Henning and Weigend found, could “remember” the time intervals between bee visits, and anticipate the time their next pollinator was likely to arrive. If the interval between bee visits changed, the plant might actually adjust the timing of its stamen display to line up with the new schedule.

In a 2019 paper, Henning and Weigend call *Nasa poissoniana*'s behavior "intelligent," the word still appearing in quotation marks. I want to know what Henning really thinks. *Are* plants intelligent? Does he see the flower's apparent ability to remember as a hallmark of consciousness? Or does he think of the plant as an unconscious robot with a preprogrammed suite of responses?

Henning shakes off my question the first two times I ask it. But the third time, he stops walking and turns to answer. The dissenting papers, he says, are all focused on the lack of brains—no brains, they claim, means no intelligence.

"Plants don't have these structures, obviously," Henning says. "But look at what they do. I mean, they take information from the outside world. They process. They make decisions. And they perform. They take everything into account, and they transform it into a reaction. And this, to me, is the basic definition of *intelligence*. That's not just automatism. There might be some automatic things, like going toward light. But this is not the case here. It's not automatic."

Where *Nasa poissoniana*'s "memories" could possibly be stored is still a mystery. "Maybe we are just not able to see these structures," Henning tells me. "Maybe they are so spread all over the body of the plant that there isn't a single structure. Maybe that's their trick. Maybe it's the whole organism."

It's humbling to remember that plants are a kingdom of life entirely their own, the product of riotous evolutionary innovation that took a turn away from our branch of life when we were both barely motile, single-celled creatures floating in the prehistoric ocean. We couldn't be more biologically different. And yet plants' patterns and rhythms have resonances with ours—just look at the information moving through Gilroy's glowing specimens.

Mysteries abide, of course. We are far from understanding the extent of "memory" in plants. We have a few clues and fewer answers, and so many more experiments still to try.

*edition with the headline “The Mysteries of Plant ‘Intelligence.’”*

---

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from  
<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2024/06/plant-consciousness-intelligence-light-eaters/678207/>

| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

# American Beauty

## Scenes from our national parks

by Tiya Miles



Old Faithful Geyser, Yellowstone National Park

By the time Jennifer Emerling was 12, she had been to 22 national parks. In an interview with her local newspaper that year, the California middle schooler said that in addition to collecting shirts and stuffed animals from the parks, “I take lots of pictures.” Asked what she would do when she’d exhausted the list of parks to visit, Emerling answered, “Go see them again.”



*Top:* Norris Geyser Basin, in Yellowstone National Park. *Bottom:* A bear-safety demonstration at Yellowstone. (Jennifer Emerling)

Emerling, now a professional photographer, never stopped taking pictures of national parks. For her series “[See America First!](#)” she retraced her family’s summer road trips. The resulting images convey a spirit of adventure and childlike wonder. Emerling’s compositions juxtapose the ordinariness of smartphones and sun hats with the majesty of the natural landscape. In one photo, visitors pause on the Old Faithful boardwalk, in [Yellowstone](#), to capture the geyser’s eruption; in another, a woman holds a camera, but her gaze is fixed on the view across a crystal lake in Grand Teton National Park.





*Top:* Jenny Lake, in Grand Teton National Park. *Bottom:* Glacier Point, in Yosemite National Park. (Jennifer Emerling)

For all their whimsy and nostalgia, the photographs also invite serious reflection on the complexities of American tourism and its fantasies of an unspoiled West. The series takes its title from an [early-20th-century marketing campaign](#) to promote domestic travel among the wealthy via the railroads (the original, longer slogan was “See Europe if you will, but see America first”). “See America First!” can be read straight, as intended by the railroad boosters—or with an ironic twist, through the hindsight of history. To acknowledge the many contradictions of our national parks—areas that were touted as examples of “[undisturbed creation](#)” at the [expense of Native American territorial sovereignty](#); places that cultivate an [appreciation of nature](#) even though they have long been commercialized—is not to negate their beauty or power.

---

*This article appears in the [June 2024](#) print edition with the headline “American Beauty.” When you buy a book using a link on this page, we receive a commission. Thank you for supporting The Atlantic.*

---

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from  
<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2024/06/jennifer-emerling-see-america-first/678208/>

| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

## Culture & Critics

- [\*\*Can a '90s Cult Classic Save the Comic-Book Movie?\*\*](#)
- [\*\*The Wild Blood Dynasty\*\*](#)
- [\*\*The Female-Midlife-Crisis Novel\*\*](#)
- [\*\*Hypochondria Never Dies\*\*](#)

| [Next](#) | [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

---

# Can a '90s Cult Classic Save the Comic-Book Movie?

The engrossing darkness of  
<em>The Crow</em>

by Shirley Li



The superhuman protagonist of *The Crow*, the comic-book movie that went on to become a cult hit after its release 30 years ago, doesn't relish being undead and invincible. When he first shows his face on-screen, Eric Draven, played by Brandon Lee, is crawling out of his own grave in near-feral agony. His fingers claw at the mud around his tomb. His clothes, drenched by rain, cling to his skin. He never gets to his feet; instead, he writhes on his back, screaming in pain.

To say this isn't a standard superhero's welcome is an understatement—but then, *The Crow* didn't care to obey the genre's conventions. Grim, stylish, and brazenly violent, the film is a gothic fable about a young rock musician and his girlfriend who, on the eve of their wedding, are murdered. When Draven, the former heavy-metal guitarist, is resurrected from the dead a year later by a mystical crow—just go with it—he's not a noble crime fighter, but a wounded predator hunting the killers. "They're all dead," he snarls. "They just don't know it yet."

*The Crow* premiered in 1994, at a moment [when superhero films themselves appeared to be in dire shape](#). Gone were the shiny *Superman* movies of the 1970s and '80s. In *Batman Returns*, released in 1992, Tim Burton refined his approach to the genre's aesthetic—less spandex, more noir—and delivered a much grittier story, but his *Batman* sequel fell far short of the box-office bar set by its predecessor in 1989. [Films based on Marvel comics were forgettable](#), and although the 1990 *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* movie was successful, it was intended for children. Producing mainstream comic-book-based entertainment posed a challenge for the studios. Could a hero be fresh but familiar enough to spawn the next great franchise?

The movie's narrative is not about good prevailing over evil—or about the indestructible hero using his great power responsibly.

Before it began production, *The Crow* may have looked like an ideal solution. Based on [an acclaimed if niche series of comics by James O'Barr](#), the adaptation had secured a handsome rising star in the 28-year-old Lee. The story seemed straightforward enough; it had a sentimental core, and incorporated a handful of lighter, more accessible supporting characters to balance the darker themes. But the finished film, steeped in the director Alex Proyas's grungy vision and clouded by Lee's tragic death after an accident on set, turned out to be a singular, and strange, phenomenon. Its melancholic mood and theme are worth remembering as a remake arrives in theaters this August, at a time of dwindling box-office returns for Marvel and DC Comics. For fans who have tired of tidy morals, formulaic action, and flashy effects, *The Crow* of three decades ago offers an antidote, proof that the comic-book genre can be a vehicle for a wrenching evocation of human suffering.

In retrospect, Lee's fate—a prop gun loaded with blanks malfunctioned, causing a projectile to hit him in the abdomen—has largely eclipsed his remarkable performance in *The Crow*, which is crucial to the film's jarring power. He delivers hokey one-liners with hard-edged gusto. He moves ballerically across the screen, imbuing Draven with an unexpected softness. He shed 20 pounds before filming began, and his gauntness signaled his character's difference, not just in appearance but in ethos, from hunkier comic-book heroes. Caught in an abyss of grief, Draven is menacing but vulnerable, delirious enough to paint himself in black-and-white harlequin makeup for his murderous missions, but too stricken to reconnect fully with who he had been before his death. Even in lighter scenes, Lee quietly conveys that Draven is so consumed by sadness, he can't see beyond revenge.

The film's prevailing visual and sonic grammar foregrounds bleakness, motion, noise. Drawing from the story's ink-and-paper origins, *The Crow* presents a Detroit that seems permanently covered in grime and shrouded in mist, with kinetic camerawork exaggerating the city's angular alleyways. Burton's *Batman* had already begun challenging the superhero genre's gaudier impulses, but *The Crow* takes the shadowy tableaus to another level. Proyas spent his early career directing moody music videos for artists such as Sting and Crowded House; here, he assembles a film that looks like a mid-'90s rock video. It sounds like one, too: [The soundtrack includes](#) Nine Inch Nails, the Cure, and Violent Femmes. Every "serious" comic-book movie since has likely borrowed something from *The Crow*, whether it's the smoky aesthetics or the abrupt needle drops.

O'Barr wrote the original comics after a drunk driver killed his fiancée; he tried to purge his anger on the page, only to discover that his suffering grew as he worked. That pain carries over into the film: *The Crow* contains enough moments to suggest the shape of a traditional comic-book tale, including energetically staged fight scenes, antagonists with absurd code names, and even a catchphrase for Draven: "It can't rain all the time." But the overarching, and arresting, effect is to leave the audience shaken, rather than to offer resolution.

Unlike other superhero projects, the movie's narrative is not about good prevailing over evil—or about the indestructible Draven using his great

power responsibly. By the end of the film, he has left a bloody trail in his ultimately triumphant pursuit of the criminals who attacked him and his fiancée, Shelly (Sofia Shinas), and he has nowhere to go but back to his grave. There he's embraced by Shelly in a vision, which may seem like a happy conclusion—the couple reunited, justice served. But Draven's crusade never restores them to life together. If anything, his recurrent hazy, half-formed flashbacks suggest that Shelly has become nothing more than a memory that hounds him, fueling his fury and angst.

Perhaps it's wrong even to call *The Crow* a superhero film. It's a reconfiguration of the form, an assertion that such movies don't have to be mere vessels for quippy dialogue and eye-popping effects. They can invite viewers to examine human nature as its own wildly unpredictable force. Our feelings underscore our humanity, but they can be overpowering too, imprisoning rather than liberating us.

Made for roughly \$23 million, *The Crow* [went on to net more than \\$50 million](#) in the United States. It yielded several unremarkable sequels, each a reminder of just what a rare asset the original had in Lee's fierce yet nuanced performance. None achieved the first film's unsettling blend of corrosive emotion and concussive action.

But Hollywood hasn't been able to resist the allure of remaking the original. Efforts to introduce a new Eric Draven to audiences have been under way since the late 2000s, and [the parade of actors rumored to have almost played him over the years](#) is impressive: It includes Oscar nominees (Bradley Cooper, Ryan Gosling), men cast as other superheroes (Jason Momoa, Nicholas Hoult), and Alexander Skarsgård, whose younger brother Bill—best known for his work as the murderous clown Pennywise in the latest *It* films—will soon actually make it to the screen in the role.

The comic-book film genre's garish-to-grim cycles have become familiar, but *The Crow* endures because it upended expectations and ignored conventional boundaries. A legacy like that is inviting—and daunting. In an interview conducted during the film's production, Lee explained why he wanted to play Draven, and bequeathed some useful wisdom, or perhaps a warning, to successors. "[There are no rules,](#)" he said, "about how a person who has come back from the dead is going to behave."

---

*This article appears in the [June 2024](#) print edition with the headline “The Engrossing Darkness of The Crow.”*

---

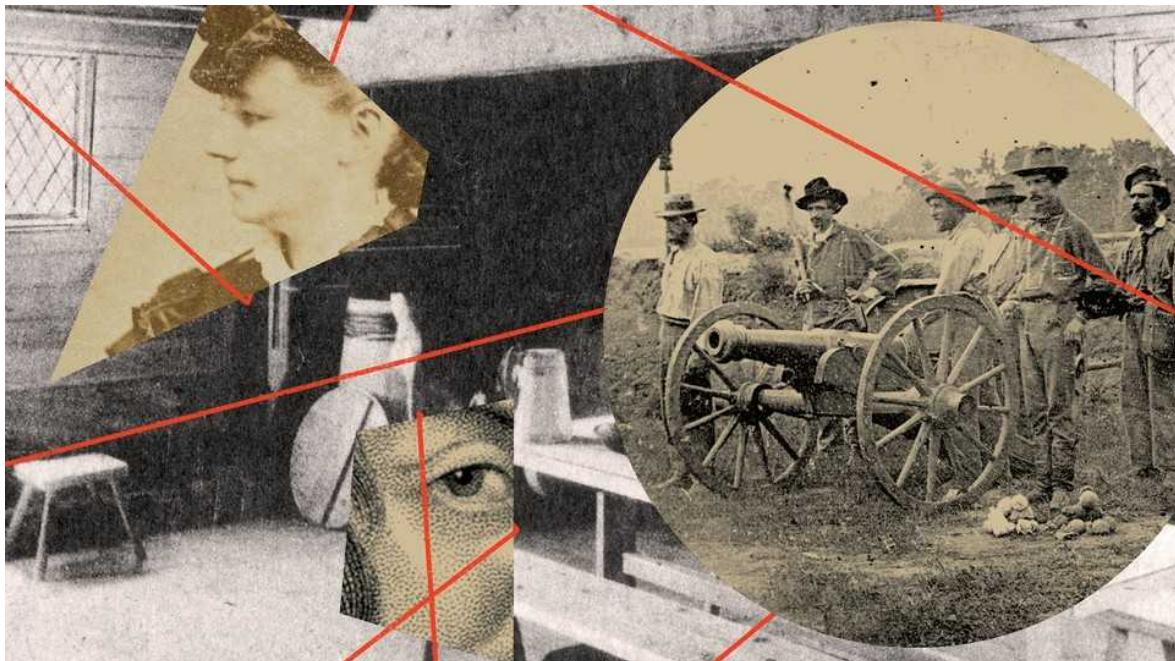
This article was downloaded by **calibre** from  
<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2024/06/the-crow-2024-remake-bill-skarsgard/678214/>

| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

# The Wild Blood Dynasty

## What a little-known family reveals about the nation's untamed spirit

by Adam Begley



*American Bloods*—what a title! Hammering out agreement on the meaning of *American* is hard enough, but factor in *blood*—our precious bodily fluid, susceptible to poisoning in the fevered fascist imagination—and a brawl might just be brewing. If you've figured out that *Blood* is a surname, the subtitle of [John Kaag's new book](#) (*The Untamed Dynasty That Shaped a Nation*) could possibly defuse the situation, but it too is provocative: If the Blood dynasty shaped the nation, why have we never heard of it?

Kaag, a philosophy professor at the University of Massachusetts at Lowell, lives in a house on the banks of the Concord River that was built in 1745 by a colonial named Josiah Blood. A decade later, in that same house, Thaddeus Blood was born. He was at the scene with a musket on April 19, 1775, when the “shot heard round the world” was fired; as an old man, he was interviewed about the experience by Ralph Waldo Emerson. Kaag saw that the Blood clan would offer him a chance to explore big ideas in relation to individual lives, to start close to home and expand outward, weaving together personalities, cultural history, and philosophy in an attempt to ask not just where we came from but where we’re going.

He has made a habit of combining philosophy with first-person narratives of a confessional cast. In *American Philosophy: A Love Story* (2016), he tells us about his first two marriages while communing with his “intellectual heroes,” the New England thinkers Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and William James. In *Hiking With Nietzsche: On Becoming Who You Are* (2018), he treks up and down an alp or two with the German iconoclast. The new project is much more ambitious. Working with a bigger cast on an expansive stage, he’s hoping to unlock secrets of Americanness. No wonder the strain shows.

Kaag sets out to trace the nation’s growth (and “excruciating growing pains”) as refracted through “one of America’s first and most expansive pioneer families,” whose lineage happens to run straight through his family home. Listed in the index of a privately published genealogy he finds in his house are thousands of Bloods, from Aaron to Zebulon. In addition to Josiah and Thaddeus, Kaag plucks out a handful of others, curious characters born between 1618 and 1838, who found themselves in the thick of roiling history or crossed paths with famous American thinkers.

[From the April 2023 issue: Adam Begley on why you should be reading Sebastian Barry](#)

Kaag makes the case that, “unlike many other more visible or iconic American dynasties” (he mentions the Cabots, Lowells, Astors, Roosevelts), the Bloods

consistently, and with remarkable regularity, reveal a particular frontier ethos: their genealogy tracks what Henry David Thoreau called “wildness,” an original untamed spirit that would recede in the making of America but never be extinguished entirely. The United States may have been founded on “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” but it was always shot through with something unbalanced, heedless, undomesticated, fearful.

The making of America meant pushing back the frontier, establishing civilization where before, [as the Puritan William Bradford testified](#), there had been “a hideous and desolate wilderness, full of wild beasts & wild men.” Kaag asserts that New England colonials drew a clear, unwavering line between the civilized and the wild, but he believes that the Blood dynasty shared a more complicated ethos: Its members “continually explored life and its extremes,” absorbing the lesson that “human existence was not cleanly demarcated but unshakably wild.”

Hardly alone in wanting, just now, to weigh the risk of mayhem in America, he asks, “What untamed stories lie beneath the skin of our more or less well-functioning society? How persistent is the wildness that once defined our country?” The answers, he warns, won’t be tidy, though he can’t resist assigning conveniently emblematic roles to his small sample of Zelig-like Bloods.

Naked opportunism guided the first figure in Kaag’s book: Thomas Blood, who was not American but is the most notorious individual to bear the name. In 1671, he tried to steal the Crown Jewels from the Tower of London. A rogue as well as a thief, Thomas sets the tone for the American branch of the family, which was started by his nephews, who were among the early New England settlers, arriving sometime in the 1630s. By mid-century, Robert Blood had established a farm on a 3,000-acre tract just north of Concord, then very much the frayed edge of civilization. A “troublesome” man, Robert was a good citizen when it suited him and a renegade when taxes fell due. He nonetheless understood that the best defense against external threats was neighborly cooperation. The wary dance he did with local authority, in Kaag’s telling, “presages in miniature the political dynamics” as the colonies began to rebel against the British Crown.

The old favorites Emerson and Thoreau, Transcendentalists who championed American cultural independence and the primacy of the individual soul, take the stage as Kaag fast-forwards roughly a century to focus on Bloods intersecting with homegrown ferment. Robert's great-great-grandson Thaddeus made an enduring impression on Emerson, who admired the rare courage that the veteran of the skirmish at the Old North Bridge had displayed as a young minuteman. Kaag suggests (though certainly doesn't prove) that Emerson's conversation with Thaddeus in 1835 was the catalyst for what he calls Emerson's own "acts of insurrection": two speeches delivered in the next several years, "[The American Scholar](#)" and the bombshell "[Divinity School Address](#)," in which he renounced all organized religion (and in particular what he elsewhere derided as "corpse-cold Unitarianism").

Heredity cannot plausibly account for the persistence of an ideology or a spirit over a span of centuries.

"The American Scholar" [called for a new type of educated American](#), an active, engaged intellectual boldly embracing the rough-and-tumble of a new nation—what a pleasure to see the 34-year-old Emerson roll up his sleeves and resolve to "run eagerly into this resounding tumult," to take his place "in the ring to suffer and to work"! And yet Kaag's next Blood, Perez, son of Thaddeus, shrank from the tumult. A recluse and an amateur astronomer, Perez spent his time in his woodshed, seated on a swivel chair, peering at the heavens through a telescope. Undeterred, Kaag finds a way to fit him into his exploration of wildness by claiming that Perez had a "lasting and profound" friendship with Thoreau and helped him "define his conception of human freedom." In the first sentence of "Walking" ([an essay published in this magazine, posthumously, in 1862](#)), Thoreau associates wildness with "absolute freedom"—as distinct from "a freedom and culture merely civil." According to Kaag, both Perez and Thoreau freed themselves from "the tawdry distractions of modern life," and the eccentric old stargazer inspired Thoreau "to see the inner, noble form of a seemingly common man."

#### [From the June 1862 issue: Henry David Thoreau's "Walking"](#)

The resounding tumult returns with James Clinton Blood, a co-founder and the first mayor of Lawrence, Kansas, and a passing acquaintance of John

Brown, [whose gory attacks on militant pro-slavery settlers helped give “Bloody Kansas” its name](#). James had gone west as part of an abolitionist scheme to keep the territory from becoming a slave state, and acted as an agent and a scout, buying up land from Native tribes. He survived the Lawrence Massacre of 1863 (when Confederate guerrillas killed some 150 unarmed men and boys), and in the postwar decades “happily watched the frontier town civilize itself.”

James is meant to be representative of the many Bloods who participated in the settlement of the American West and who “came to understand the border as a paradoxical space, where the most vicious of beings could also be the most vulnerable.” I don’t know whom Kaag is referring to in that last clause or what he means. He’s keenly aware that we can’t contemplate “the bleeding of Kansas” unless we reckon with the calamitous war fought over the moral abomination of slavery and also the genocidal persecution of the Native population. In earlier chapters, he mentions a few of the enslaved people bought and sold by various 18th-century Bloods, and here he describes the dismal fate of the Plains tribes who were cheated out of their land or driven off or simply exterminated. We never learn, though, whether James’s land deals were made in good faith or how other untamed Bloods fared on the new frontier. This seems the wrong moment to fudge: The stories we tell about how, exactly, the Wild West civilized itself color our ideas about who we are as a nation.

*American Bloods* is not a panoramic intellectual history or even a conjoined narrative. Nor does Kaag substantiate the claim that the Bloods “circulated through each era, an animating force of American history, just below the surface.” Don’t let the fancy blood metaphor distract you: Heredity cannot plausibly account for the persistence of an ideology or a spirit over a span of centuries. Instead of telling an unbroken story, Kaag has assembled a series of portraits, some more engaging than others, the degree of interest determined by which great men are adjacent to the male Blood in question. At one point, he alludes to what he calls “a largely forgotten counternarrative: the Blood women.” But his only substantive contribution to that counternarrative is to present us with the charismatic women’s-rights advocate Victoria Woodhull, who married Colonel James Harvey Blood, a veteran of the Union Army and a committed spiritualist. Kaag calls Woodhull “arguably the most famous and scandalous of the American

Bloods,” and it’s perfectly obvious why he would want to adopt her: Extreme and mercurial, she’s an ideal embodiment of many divergent, unconventional responses to the trauma of the Civil War.

Victoria met James in St. Louis in the mid-1860s. Twenty-six years old and strikingly beautiful, she was working as a medium and a “spiritual physician” when James consulted her, seeking treatment for wounds suffered in battle. She fell into a trance and announced that their destinies were linked. James liked the idea: Obeying the spirits, they left St. Louis and their spouses behind. The new marriage lasted barely a decade—but it was some decade.

In New York, the soothsaying of this Blood-by-marriage morphed into investment advice (lapped up by an aged Cornelius Vanderbilt), and Victoria made “an utter fortune from her wildness,” as Kaag puts it. She founded a brokerage house and a crusading weekly newspaper, and waged energetic campaigns for free love and equal rights. Kaag concedes that Victoria’s “methods” as a healer and fortune teller “were fraudulent—which is to say too wild for belief.” He doesn’t try to make sense of her dishonesty, or condemn the blatant hypocrisy of her final incarnation: Having ditched James, she married a rich English banker, renouncing radicalism to secure for herself “the standing and success that women of previous generations could not have envisioned.” Kaag leaves it to the reader to connect her successive self-reinventions with the larger Blood narrative.

Having toured this gallery of “untamed beasts” exhibiting so many different shades of American wildness, we might ask what *wild* means to Kaag himself. I’m not sure. But it’s clear that one important step in his quest to make space for the “contradictions and tensions and paradoxes” of daily life has been coming to terms with Benjamin Blood, a promiscuously talented poet-philosopher. Benjamin’s rhapsodic mysticism, eccentricity, and primal vigor were particularly appealing to William James. This Blood taught Kaag’s hero that “the secret of Being,” in James’s words, “is not the dark immensity beyond knowledge, but at home, this side, beneath the feet, and overlooked by knowledge.”

A practical idealist, high-minded yet of the people (he’s been called “a mystic of the commonplace”), Benjamin was born in 1832 in upstate New

York. Over the course of his 86 years, he was an inventor, a gambler, a gymnast, and a boxer, as well as a poet, metaphysician, and compulsive writer of letters to the editor—in short, the antithesis of a library-bound thinker. Dissatisfied with philosophizing, he told James that he “felt compelled to go into more active life,” to work 10 hours a day in a local mill. “I have worn out many styles,” he boasted, “and am cosmopolitan, liberal to others, and contented with myself.” His intellectual pursuits, Kaag writes, should be regarded “as an afterthought to action, the trace of a life lived as fully as possible.”

Deeply impressed by a self-published pamphlet, *The Anaesthetic Revelation and the Gist of Philosophy* (1874), James struck up a correspondence with the author and eventually volunteered to try to make him famous. He kept his word: The last essay he ever wrote, “A Pluralistic Mystic” (1910), is a hymn to Benjamin’s uncommon merit.

James directs our attention to a remarkable passage in which Benjamin explains that “the universe is wild—game flavored as a hawk’s wing.” Celebrating the contingent and the unfinished, Benjamin declares that “nature is miracle all. She knows no laws; the same returns not, save to bring the different.” We can never fully grasp reality; our understanding, in Benjamin’s words, is “ever not quite.” Or as James himself insisted, uneasy about what seemed an oppressively bureaucratic and professionalized 20th century, “There is no complete generalization, no total point of view.”

Kaag warmly welcomes the idea of the incomplete, of a cobbled-together and eternally unfinished worldview; he finds it frustrating but also encouraging. At the same time, he can’t resist imposing an overarching unity. Eager to wrap things up neatly, he claims that Benjamin Blood’s philosophy of open-ended, open-hearted pluralism—and of active engagement in the wider world—somehow “silently guided the Blood family from its very inception.” And yet the thought of the whole crew, from Thomas to Perez to Victoria, all wedded to a single ethos hardly sits well with Benjamin’s belief that “the genius of being is whimsical rather than consistent.”

What does this have to do with America? Kaag is telling us that wildness is with us always, yesterday and today, even the dangerous, corrupt, fraudulent

varieties, but that beneficent wildness makes room for exploration, new ideas, new ways of being. A more perfect union is always possible—though ever not quite.

---

*This article appears in the [June 2024](#) print edition with the headline “The Wild Blood Dynasty.”*

---

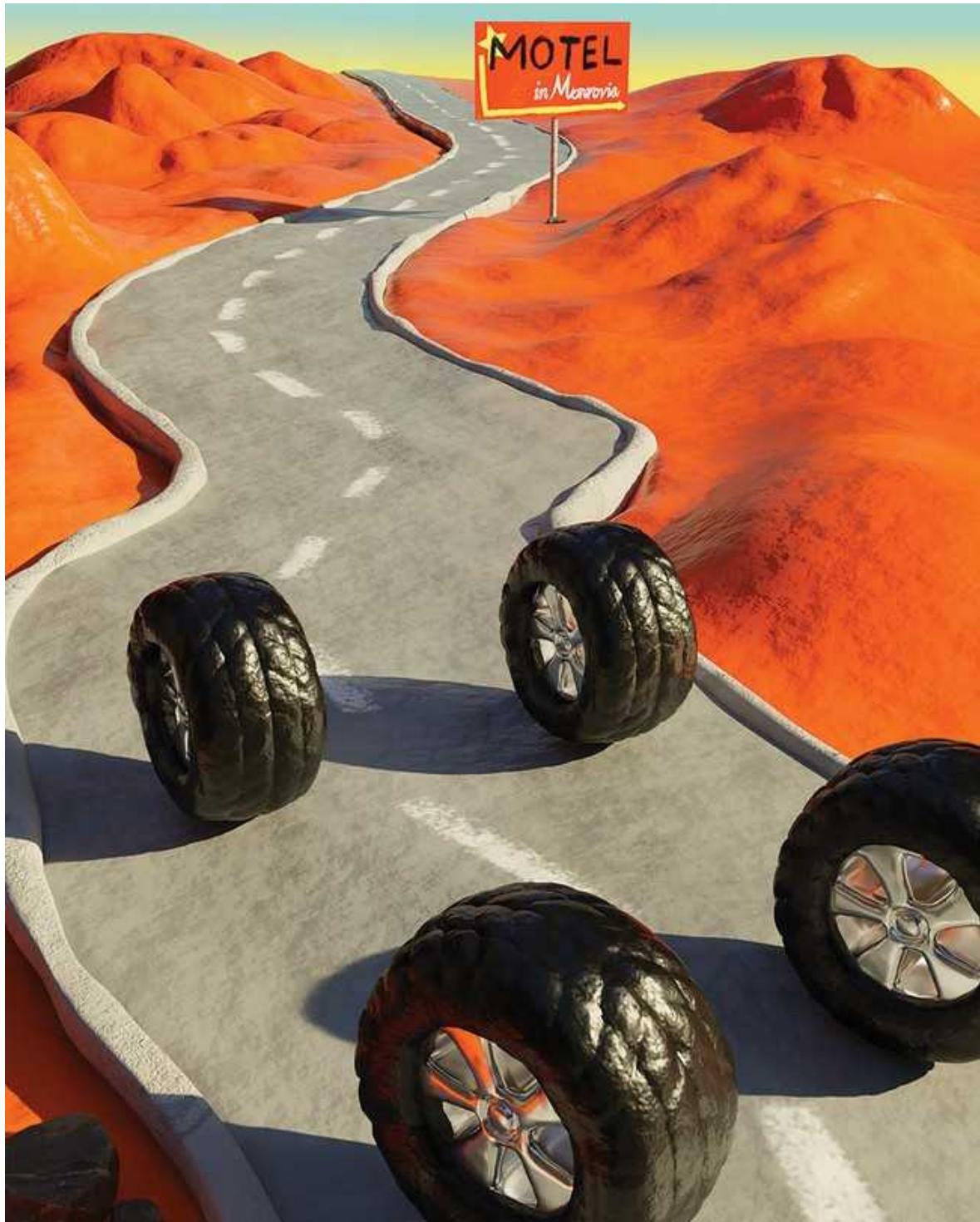
This article was downloaded by **calibre** from  
<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2024/06/american-bloods-book-review-john-kaag/678215/>

| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

# The Female-Midlife-Crisis Novel

# **Miranda July's new book is full of estrangement, eroticism, and whimsy.**

by Jordan Kisner



Back when the word *weird* (or, in the spelling of the day, *wyrd*) was first commonly used in English, it was not an adjective but a noun, and it functioned as a synonym for *fate*. A person wasn't weird; instead a person had a weird, which was theirs alone, determined by forces beyond control.

and understanding. [Shakespeare's "Weird Sisters" in \*Macbeth\*](#) helped transform the word, linking its supernatural connotations with an aesthetic quality. Those three crones know the future—they seem to know everything, standing astride the temporal and the miraculous as they do. In them, the old and the new *weirds* meet: They are creatures in touch with the workings of fate, but they are also inexplicable, creepy, queer, spooky, deviant from the norm.

I have been thinking about this word and its overtones since reading [All Fours](#), the second novel by the idiosyncratic interdisciplinary artist Miranda July, probably [best known for her work as a filmmaker](#). As I made my way through the book, I kept remarking to myself, and writing in the margins, “This is so weird.” That’s not a bad thing, in my personal lexicon, though in this instance I was registering a persistent feeling of bafflement. July’s middle-aged protagonist—a “semi-famous” artist known for her early multi-genre success (who, like July, has worked across film, writing, and performance)—consistently acted on instincts I didn’t understand and made choices I couldn’t imagine anyone making. As a narrator, she was not just unreliable but unpredictable, unsettling, shimmeringly strange.

### [Read: Miranda July on ‘Kajillionaire’ and nice people in Hollywood](#)

This unnamed narrator—who, being a wry Los Angeles creative type, enjoys half-mockingly noting that she is a minor celebrity—is perplexing even to herself. Stalled out in her art practice and dissatisfied in her marriage (stable, loving, stale) to a music producer, she decides to drive to New York, leaving him and their young child behind for three weeks. She conceives the trip ostensibly to prove a point. At a party, her husband offhandedly suggests that people fall into two personality types: Drivers and Parkers. Drivers can immerse themselves in the ongoingness of life; they enjoy time with their children and pets; they’re good on road trips because they’re present and steady. Parkers “need a discrete task that seems impossible, something that takes every bit of focus and for which they might receive applause,” or they lapse into boredom and disappointment. The artist feels that she is being pegged as a Parker, and undertakes this road trip, she tells herself, to “finally become the sort of chill, grounded woman I’d always wanted to be.” That this is overly literal and somewhat illogical—leaving your family for three

weeks doesn't suggest a willingness to be present in daily ongoingness and child-rearing—doesn't occur to her.

Is July presenting this as an earnest hero's journey or as a self-skewering satire of a free spirit in her mid-40s who does erratic things?

But even the artist is aware that this classic plot—a combination of [the American road trip](#) and [the midlife crisis](#), both clichéd subgenres of the quest narrative—is the kind of trope that she typically wouldn't bother with. Naturally, the road trip, and by extension the novel, goes sideways immediately. July herself has never been given to making chill, grounded art.

The narrator hasn't gotten an hour away from her house before she makes eye contact with a young man at a gas station in Monrovia. A few minutes later, they run into each other at a nearby restaurant, and as they talk, he mentions that he works at Hertz and that he and his interior-decorator wife are trying to save \$20,000 as a "nest egg." For no discernible reason, the narrator proceeds to drive first to one of his Hertz locations and then to a dingy motel, where she rents a room. Soon after, she commissions the wife (without mentioning her encounter with the husband) to redecorate the motel room to look like a room at Le Bristol hotel, in Paris, for a fee of \$20,000.

Is she stalking the Hertz guy, nearly 15 years her junior? Is this an art project? Whether July is presenting this as an earnest hero's journey or as a self-skewering satire of the free spirit who does erratic things upon hitting her mid-40s and calls it art isn't clear. That may sound like a huge flaw in the novel, and it does sometimes feel like a glitch, yet the ambiguity about what July and her narrator are up to makes the novel as intriguing as it is frustrating. July thwarts the reader's instinct to decipher whether this is a narrative about miraculous fate or one about an odd character's mundane sexual and hormonal odyssey. Instead, she writes as though there's no difference.

I'm not the first to be cheerfully confounded by July's oeuvre, which amounts to a multipronged investigation of alienation from what the world sees as "normal." Critics have often dismissively described her enterprise as "twee," likely because she is fashionable and somewhat affectless, and her

work features West Coast oddballs who blend quirkiness and borderline erotic perversity. Stylistically, she rides the line between deadpan humor and earnest absurdity. To take a representative example, in the first of her three feature-length films, *Me and You and Everyone We Know* (2005), a young video artist (played by July) fixates on a man whose wife has left him, and who recently set one of his hands on fire in an ill-conceived stunt to impress their children; secondary plotlines involve a middle-aged man leaving sexually explicit messages for two teen girls, and a woman planning to meet an internet stranger in the park after being titillated by his suggestion that they “poop back and forth” forever.

All of her projects, which revolve around a sort of randomness and mystery, probe shame and estrangement, but with a tonal lightness. “Who really knows why anyone does anything?” the narrator of *All Fours* remarks before she embarks on her zany motel-redecoration project. “Nobody knows what’s going on. We are thrown across our lives by winds that started blowing millions of years ago.” This aimlessness, her attunement to randomness, is entwined with her creativity. Yet as she keeps riffing, the narrator drifts toward a formulation of her experiment that’s more specific and ennobled, borrowing from feminist politics.

What kind of monster makes a big show of going away and then hides out right nearby?

But this was no good, this line of thought. This was the thinking that had kept every woman from her greatness. There did not have to be an answer to the question why; everything important started out mysterious and this mystery was like a great sea you had to be brave enough to cross. How many times had I turned back at the first ripple of self-doubt? You had to withstand a profound sense of wrongness if you ever wanted to get somewhere new. So far each thing I had done in Monrovia was guided by a version of me that had never been in charge before. A nitwit? A madwoman? Probably. But my more seasoned parts just had to be patient, hold their tongues—their many and sharp tongues—and give this new girl a chance.

The appearance of the word *monster* comes as no surprise here. The female artist who does battle with what Virginia Woolf called “the Angel in the

House” and leaves home to accomplish something inscrutable to her family and society at large still seems obligated to reckon with whether this act is horrific. As the critic Lauren Elkin observes in her recent book, [Art Monsters](#), the impulse to demonize women who refuse domesticity in favor of creative exploration goes back hundreds of years (at least). So does [the female artist’s own willingness to wonder whether her impulses are reprehensible.](#)

July’s artist is consciously pushing back against this legacy here—she will not be kept from her greatness!—while July herself seems also to be lightly ridiculing the way her character’s politically enlightened logic is leading her into a foolish, perhaps unjustifiable set of actions. Her ghost self travels onward—she keeps track of where she should be, dutifully reporting home about the sights she isn’t seeing—while she remains installed in a Louis XIV–style motel room, where she is not busy making great art. Instead, she is masturbating furiously, overwhelmed with desire for a married stranger. This behavior is not monstrous, but it is wayward—*weyward* being an early spelling of *weird*.

Except that in a sense, it isn’t *weyward* at all: The narrator’s behavior (her erraticism, even her eroticism) is right on schedule. [She has entered perimenopause](#), when estrogen levels begin to zigzag. This Rumspringa of hers is less about artistic evolution than the bewilderments of hormonal flux and (in her case) the problem of fitting wild, outsize desire into a life of monogamy, heterosexuality, and parenthood. Her yearnings converge: She wants to become more embodied, more honest and self-accepting, and creatively free—a state that she doesn’t entirely believe is possible. Her sexual awakening, experienced just as she’s learning that she’s likely nearing the end of her high-libido years, is baffling, transcendent, and abject. “This kind of desire made a wound you just had to carry with you for the rest of your life. But this was still better than never knowing.”

[From the December 2014 issue: The real roots of midlife crisis](#)

Continuing her old life now seems unbearable; leaving it behind is unthinkable. Whether as a woman, a wife, or an artist, July’s narrator has never, as yet, been an integrated person, believing instead in selectively presenting others with different selves, “each real, each with different

needs.” For her, “the only dangerous lie was one that asked me to compress myself down into a single convenient entity that one person could understand.” And yet she still dreams of intimacy, of having a self that can be wholly expressed and held by another. “One fine day I would tell him all about me,” she fantasizes, thinking of her husband, “and this trip would be one of my stories. We would be holding each other in bed, saying everything, laughing and crying and being amazed at all the things we didn’t know about each other, the Great Reveal.”

The perimenopausal plotline—easily dismissed as niche and sentimental, unlike its cousin, the plotline of male midlife crisis—may in fact be the perfect form for July, who turns it into something appropriately whimsical and stark. She writes this hormonal crucible so well in part because she seems already positioned to capture precisely how heightened, bizarre, off-putting, confusing, absurd it is; these elements are the hallmarks of her style. In this context, the tone that might have been dismissed as irony or caprice in earlier work takes on a kind of embodied, material plausibility: “I was a throbbing, amorphous ball of light trying to get my head around a motherly, wifely human form,” the narrator reports with true desperation after returning home. What she has found in Monrovia may be weird, but it is also *her* weird—transgressiveness in search of honest intimacy, performative selfhood in search of authentic freedom. If this truest, weirdest self cannot be contained in the family structure or the social world that she occupies, perhaps breaking that structure counts as creative liberation.

Perimenopause, as the narrator experiences it, is a profound betrayal in that it begins transporting her into crone-hood without her consent, before she is ready. At the same time, the crone, the weird sister, is afforded proximity to the transporting, the repugnant, the queer, the prophetic. This is good for art, or it can be. In one climactic scene of the book—a sort of symbolic consummation with her future self—the artist has sex with an older woman with a connection to the Hertz attendant. “Her skin was beginning to thin with age, like a banana’s, but instead of being gross it felt incredible, velvety warm water. *Well, knock me over with a feather*, I thought.” After the encounter, in an epiphanic haze, she feels certain that promiscuity is the secret to life. This mania, as July renders it, is both completely earnest and totally laughable—a trademark tension in July’s work since her 20s.

Later, her narrator mulls:

I felt untethered from my age and femininity and thus swimming in great new swaths of freedom and time. One might shift again and again like this, through intimacies, and not outpace oldness exactly, but match its weirdness, its flagrant specificity, with one's own.

Here, finally, she arrives at something that looks like a viable future, though after her return home from Monrovia, the book loses the fevered outlandishness that July achieves at its apex. The back half of the novel depends largely on an experiment with polyamory, presented as edgy, but an angst-filled middle-aged artist curing her ennui with an escapist lesbian affair is hardly radical. This delivers its share of tragicomic setbacks—and a banal, if true, realization that “the point was to keep going without a comprehensible end in sight.”

In *Art Monsters*, Elkin quotes an essay in which Woolf characterizes the two primary obstacles in her writing life: “The first—killing the Angel in the House—I think I solved. She died. But the second, telling the truth about my own experiences as a body, I do not think I solved. I doubt that any woman has solved it yet.” July frantically disassembles Woolf’s Angel in *All Fours*, without quite solving Woolf’s second challenge. (Has anyone?) Yet her entry into the canon of attempts to capture that truth, in all its flagrant specificity, is one only she could have produced: fascinating, jarringly funny, sometimes repellent, and strangely powerful.

---

*This article appears in the [June 2024](#) print edition with the headline “Miranda July’s Weird Road Trip.”*

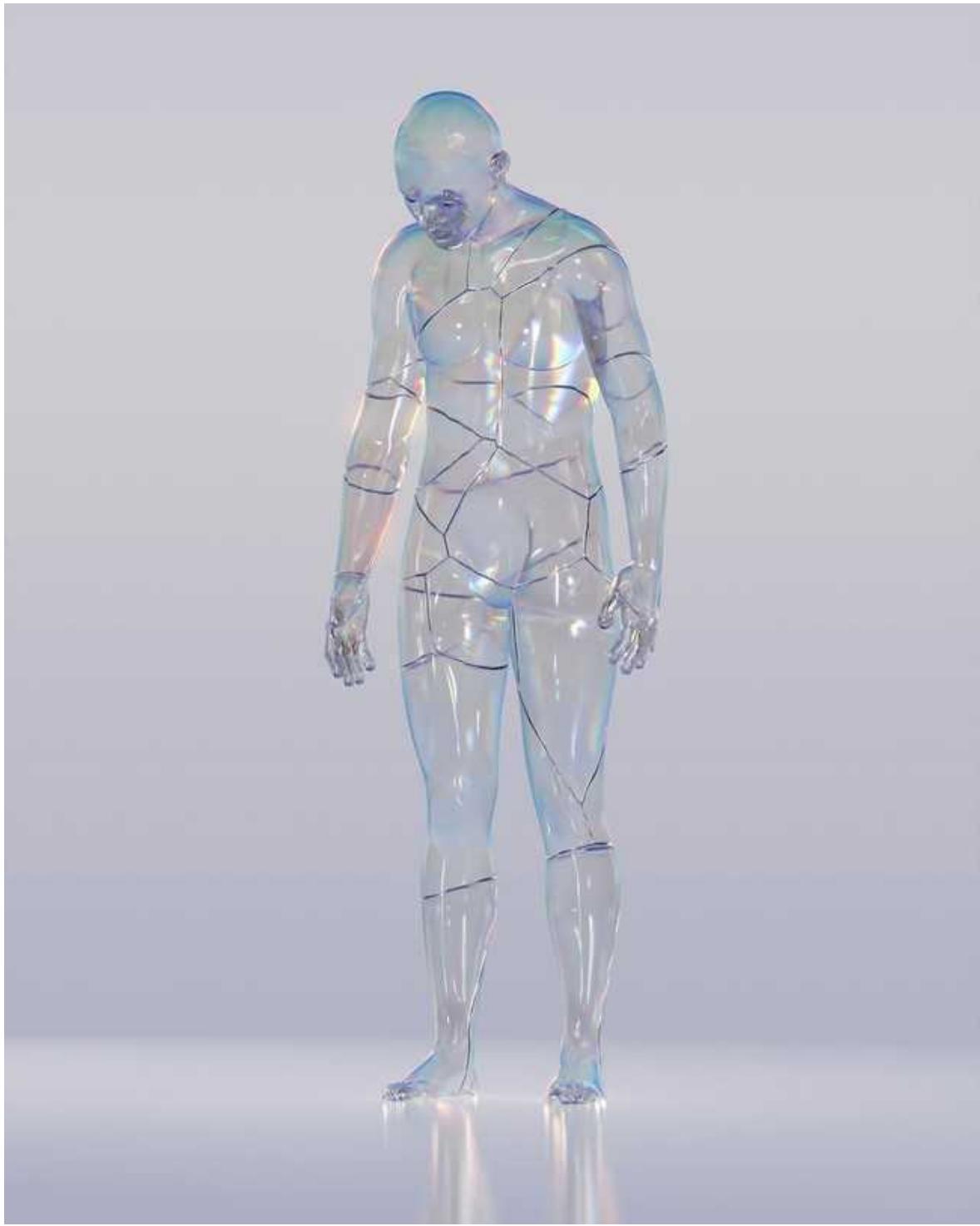
---

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from  
<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2024/06/all-fours-miranda-july-book-review/678217/>

# Hypochondria Never Dies

**The diagnosis is officially gone, but  
health anxiety is everywhere.**

by Meghan O'Rourke



At breakfast the other week, I noticed a bulging lump on my son's neck. Within minutes of anxious Googling, I'd convinced myself that he had a serious undiagnosed medical condition—and the more I looked, the more apprehensive I got. Was it internal jugular phlebectasia, which might require

surgery? Or a sign of lymphoma, which my father had been diagnosed with before he died? A few hours and a visit to the pediatrician later, I returned home with my tired child in tow, embarrassed but also relieved: The “problem” was just a benignly protuberant jugular vein.

My experience was hardly unique. We live in an era of mounting health worries. The ease of online medical self-diagnosis has given rise to what’s called [cyberchondria](#): concern, fueled by consulting “Dr. Google,” that escalates into full-blown anxiety. Our medical system features ever more powerful technologies and proliferating routine preventive exams—scans that peer inside us, promising to help prolong our lives; blood tests that spot destructive inflammation; genetic screenings that assess our chances of developing disease. Intensive vigilance about our health has become the norm, simultaneously unsettling and reassuring. Many of us have experienced periods of worry before or after a mammogram or colonoscopy, or bouts of panic like mine about my son’s neck. For some, such interludes become consuming and destabilizing. Today, at least 4 percent of Americans are known to be [affected by what is now labeled “health anxiety,”](#) and some estimates suggest that the prevalence is more like 12 percent.

And yet hypochondria, you may be surprised to learn, officially no longer exists. In 2013, the [fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders](#), the so-called bible of psychiatric conditions, eliminated hypochondriasis. The change reflected an overdue need to reconceive a diagnosis that people found stigmatizing because it implied that hypochondriacs are neurotic malingeringers whose symptoms aren’t “real.” The DSM introduced two distinct new diagnoses, [illness anxiety disorder](#) and [somatic symptom disorder](#), both of which aim to be neutrally clinical descriptions of people with “extensive worries about health.” What differentiates them is the presence or absence of physical symptoms accompanying those fears.

The symptoms and meanings of hypochondria have shifted continually, always in step with changing conceptions of wellness and disease.

But the efforts to delineate the spectrum of health anxiety, however, fall short of clarifying the murky nature of hypochondria. The ostensibly helpful terms are actually anything but that. Although we know more than ever

before about the diseases and mental illnesses that afflict us, the body's most obdurate mysteries remain. Doctors and patients must navigate them together. The only way to do so is by setting aside any impulse to moralize and by embracing uncertainty—the very thing that modern medicine is least equipped to do. The abyss between patients' subjective experience of symptoms and medicine's desire for objectivity is hard to bridge, as the scholar Catherine Belling notes in [\*A Condition of Doubt\*](#). This is the space where hypochondria still lives.

The timing of the writer Caroline Crampton's new book, [\*A Body Made of Glass: A Cultural History of Hypochondria\*](#), couldn't be better. What her belletristic account of hypochondria's long and twisting lineage sometimes lacks in authoritative rigor, it makes up for in vivid evocations of being a patient. Her youthful experience with cancer and the anxiety she has suffered ever since propel her undertaking: a tour that includes a sampling of evolving medical science about the condition, as well as literary reflections (from, among others, John Donne, Molière, Marcel Proust, Virginia Woolf, and Philip Larkin) on the doubt and fear that are inseparable from life in a body that gets sick.

### [Read: The psychology of irrational fear](#)

Hypochondria, as Crampton highlights, is not just a lay term for a tendency to worry about illness that isn't there. It's a diagnosis that has existed for hundreds of years. The attendant symptoms and meanings have shifted continually, always in step with changing conceptions of wellness and disease. In that sense, the history of hypochondria reflects one constant: Each era's ideas track its limited understanding of health, and demonstrate a desire for clarity about the body and illness that again and again proves elusive. Knowing this doesn't stop Crampton from dreaming of a "definitive test for everything, including health anxiety itself."

Hippocrates, known as [the father of medicine](#), used the term *hypochondrium* in the fifth century B.C.E. to identify a physical location—the area beneath the ribs, where the spleen was known to lie. Hippocratic medicine held that health depended on a balance among four humors—blood, black bile, yellow bile, and phlegm—that affected both body and mind. An excess of black bile, thought to collect in the organs of the hypochondrium, where many

people experienced unpleasant digestive symptoms, could also cause responses such as moodiness and sadness. The term *hypochondria* thus came to be associated, as the humoral theory persisted into the Renaissance, not only with symptoms like an upset stomach but also with sluggishness, anxiety, and melancholy—a convergence of “two seemingly unrelated processes within the body: digestive function and emotional disorder,” as Crampton notes.

By the 17th century, the notion of hypochondria as a fundamentally physical condition that also had mental symptoms had been firmly established. In [The Anatomy of Melancholy](#) (1621), the English writer and scholar Robert Burton described it as a subset of melancholia, noting a “splenetic hypochondriacal wind” accompanied by “sharp belchings” and “rumbling in the guts,” along with feeling “fearful, sad, suspicious”—an illness that, as he put it, “crucifies the body and mind.” Physicians in the 18th century began to investigate hypochondria as a disorder of the recently discovered nervous system, accounting for symptoms not just in the gut but in other parts of the body as well. According to this view, the cause wasn’t imbalanced humors but fatigue and debility of the nerves themselves.

The story of Charles Darwin, which Crampton tells in her book, illustrates the transition between the period when hypochondria was still seen primarily as a physical disease and the period when it began to look like a primarily psychological condition. Darwin, who was born in 1809, suffered from intense headaches, nausea, and gastric distress, as well as fatigue and anxiety, all of which he chronicled in a journal he called “[The Diary of Health](#).” Although various posthumous diagnoses of organic diseases have been proposed—including systemic lactose intolerance—Crampton observes that Darwin’s need to follow strict health regimens and work routines could be interpreted as a manifestation of undue worry. This blurred line between intense (and possibly useful) self-scrutiny and mental disorder became a challenge for doctors and patients to address.

A fundamental shift had taken place by the late 19th century, thanks to the emergence of views that went on to shape modern psychology, including the idea that, as Crampton puts it, “the mind … controlled the body’s experiences and sensations, not the other way around.” Distinguished by what the neurologist [George Beard](#), in the 1880s, called “delusions,”

hypochondria was reconceived as a mental illness: It was a psychological state of unwarranted concern with one's health.

In the 20th century, the prototypical hypochondriac became the kind of neurotic whom Woody Allen plays in *Hannah and Her Sisters*: someone who obsessively thinks they are sick when they're not. Freud's view that unexplained physical symptoms can be the body's expression of inner conflict—meaning that those symptoms could be entirely psychological in origin—played an influential role. The idea that stress or anguish could manifest as bodily distress, in a process that came to be called “[somatization](#),” spread. So did 20th-century medicine's new capacity to test for and rule out specific conditions. Consider Allen's character in that film, fretting about a brain tumor, only to have his worries assuaged by a brain scan. This newly psychologized anxiety, juxtaposed with medical science's objective findings, helped solidify the modern image of the hypochondriac as a comedic figure, easily caricatured as a neurotic who could, and should, just “snap out of it.”

Unlike some other forms of anxiety, health worries are a problem that neither better labels nor improved treatments can hope to completely banish. Hypochondria, the writer Brian Dillon pointedly notes in his [\*The Hypochondriacs: Nine Tormented Lives\*](#), ultimately “makes dupes of us all, because life, or rather death, will have the last laugh.” In the meantime, we doubt, wait, anticipate, and try to identify: Is that stabbing headache a passing discomfort, or a sign of disease? Our bodies are subject to fluctuations, as the medical science of different eras has understood—and as today's doctors underscore. The trick is to pay enough attention to those changes to catch problems without being devoured by the anxiety born of paying too much attention.

In retrospect, Crampton, as a high-school student in England, wasn't anxious enough, overlooking for months a tennis-ball-size lump above her collarbone that turned out to be the result of Hodgkin's lymphoma, a blood cancer. Her doctor told her she had a significant chance that treatment would leave her cancer-free. After chemo, radiation, one relapse, and a stem-cell transplant, she got better. But the experience left her hypervigilant about her body, anxious that she might miss a recurrence. As she reflects, “it took being cured of a life-threatening illness for me to become fixated on the idea

that I might be sick.” Her conscientious self-monitoring gave way to panicked visits to urgent care and doctors’ offices, seeking relief from the thought that she was experiencing a telltale symptom—a behavior that she feels guilty about as a user of England’s overstretched National Health Service. “At some point,” she writes, “my responsible cancer survivor behavior had morphed into something else.”

[From the January/February 2014 issue: Scott Stossel on surviving anxiety.](#)

What Crampton was suffering from—the “something else”—seems to be what the *DSM* now labels “illness anxiety disorder,” an “excessive” preoccupation with health that is not marked by intense physical symptoms. It applies both to people who are anxious without apparent cause or symptoms and to people like Crampton, who have survived a serious disease that might recur and are understandably, but debilitatingly, apprehensive.

It can be hard to distinguish this term, Crampton finds, from the *DSM*’s other one, somatic symptom disorder, which describes a disproportionate preoccupation that is accompanied by persistent physical symptoms. It applies to people who catastrophize—the person with heartburn who grows convinced that she has heart disease—as well as those with a serious disease who fixate, to their detriment, on their condition. The definition makes a point of endorsing the validity of a patient’s symptoms, whatever the cause may be; in this, it embodies a 21st-century spirit of nonjudgmental acceptance. Yet because it is a diagnosis of a mental “disorder,” it inevitably involves assessments—of, among other things, what counts as “excessive” anxiety; evaluations like these can be anything but clear-cut. Medicine’s distant and not so distant past—when multiple sclerosis was often misdiagnosed as hysteria, and [cases of long COVID](#) were [dismissed](#) as instances of pandemic anxiety—offers a caution against confidently differentiating between psychological pathology and poorly understood illness.

In Crampton’s view, the *DSM*’s revision has turned out to be “an extensive exercise in obfuscation.” Some physicians and researchers agree that the categories neither lump nor split groups of patients reliably or helpfully. A [2013 critique argued](#) that somatic symptom disorder would pick up patients with “chronic pain conditions [and] patients worrying about the prognosis of

a serious medical condition (e.g., diabetes, cancer)," not to mention people with undiagnosed diseases. A [2016 study failed to provide](#) "empirical evidence for the validity of the new diagnoses," concluding that the use of the labels won't improve the clinical care of patients suffering from "high levels of health anxiety."

"Hypochondria only has questions, never answers, and that makes us perpetually uneasy," Crampton writes. Still, she finds that she almost mourns the old term. Its imperfections fit her messy experience of anxiety—and help her describe it to herself and doctors, giving "edges to a feeling of uncertainty" that she finds overwhelming. But her position, she acknowledges, is a privileged one: As a former adolescent cancer patient, she gets care when she seeks it, and doesn't really have to worry about being stigmatized by doctors or friends.

Crampton's concerns and her experience, that is, are legible to the medical system—to all of us. But that is not true for the millions of patients (many of them young women) suffering from fatigue or brain fog who struggle to get doctors to take their symptoms seriously, and turn out to have a condition such as myalgic encephalomyelitis/chronic fatigue syndrome or an autoimmune disease. They, too, are pulled into the story of hypochondria—yet the *DSM*'s labels largely fail to solve the problem these patients encounter: In the long shadow of Freud, we are still given to assuming that what clinicians call "medically unexplained symptoms" are psychological in origin. Fifteen-minute appointments in which doctors often reflexively dismiss such symptoms as indicators of anxiety don't help. How can doctors usefully listen without time—or medical training that emphasizes the bounds of their own knowledge?

This omission is the real problem with the *DSM*'s revision: It pretends to have clarity we still don't have, decisively categorizing patients rather than scrutinizing medicine's limitations. The challenge remains: Even as evidence-based medicine laudably strives to nail down definitions and make ever-finer classifications, patients and practitioners alike need to recognize the existential uncertainty at the core of health anxiety. Only then will everyone who suffers from it be taken seriously. After all, in an era of pandemics and Dr. Google, what used to be called hypochondria is more understandable than ever.

Someday we might have the longed-for “definitive test” or a better set of labels, but right now we must acknowledge all that we still don’t know—a condition that literature, rather than medicine, diagnoses best. As John Donne memorably wrote, in the throes of an unknown illness, now suspected to have been typhus, “Variable, and therefore miserable condition of man! This minute I was well, and am ill, this minute.”

---

*This article appears in the [June 2024](#) print edition with the headline “Hypochondria Never Dies.”*

---

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from  
<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2024/06/body-made-of-glass-book-review-hypochondria/678218/>

| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

# Departments

- [\*\*The Commons: The 248th Anniversary of America's Jewish Golden Age\*\*](#)
  - [\*\*Caleb's Inferno: June 2024\*\*](#)
-

# The 248th Anniversary of America's Jewish Golden Age

## Readers respond to our April 2024 cover story and more.



The End of the Golden Age

*Anti-Semitism on the right and the left threatens to end an unprecedented period of safety and prosperity for Jewish Americans—and demolish the liberal order they helped establish, [Franklin Foer wrote](#) in the April 2024 issue.*

---

Franklin Foer's article on the end of the Golden Age for American Jews makes an excellent and painful connection between the rise of anti-Semitism and the decline of democratic institutions throughout history. I was a child in Communist Romania in 1973 at the outbreak of the Yom Kippur War. Some of my teachers made my life miserable in school simply because I was Jewish. My parents had to bribe them with American cigarettes to stop them from tormenting me. Three years later, my family and I defected to the United States. The U.S. was known around the world for its democratic institutions, and we wanted to get away from a country where anti-Semitism ran rampant.

No one born here can imagine what it was like to be free, to be Jewish and dare to admit it. But that was America in the 1970s and '80s. Today's America frightens me: I've lived in an authoritarian state before; I understand viscerally what's at stake in this year's election. For the first time in 48 years, I think twice before telling people I'm Jewish.

**Monica Friedlander**

*Cambria, Calif.*

---

I am a 96-year-old Holocaust survivor. I was born in Berlin in 1928 and observed the rise of anti-Semitism in Germany. There is a world of difference between those days and the United States today. In Germany, anti-Semitism was sanctioned, even encouraged, by the authorities. Police officers stood by laughing when boys beat us on our way to school. The government passed laws forbidding us from owning radios, newspapers, telephones, even pets. The world knows how that ended: I was liberated from Bergen-Belsen on April 15, 1945. I think Franklin Foer's article is a bit over the top.

**Walter L. Lachman**

*Laguna Niguel, Calif.*

---

Although an interesting review of 20th-century Jewish entertainers and intellectuals, Franklin Foer's assessment ignores the street reality.

I was born and raised during the Franklin D. Roosevelt years. Growing up, I was given a bloody nose by other kids more than once on my way home from school. They shouted anti-Semitic slurs and attacked me for “killing their God.” When I served in the military, my roommate asked whether I had horns, and if it “had hurt when they took them off.” When I applied for a job at a prestigious law firm, I was told, “We do not hire your kind.”

I went on to enjoy a successful career. But the underlying prejudice has always been present. The fact that we Jews have been entertaining and creative does nothing to eliminate the basic prejudice against us as “the other.”

**Benjamin Levine**  
*Roseland, N.J.*

---

The night before I read Franklin Foer’s article, a stranger tore my mezuzah off my doorframe. I was upset—but so was my non-Jewish roommate. In that, he was part of a broader American tradition: At the founding of our country, George Washington promised the Jews of Rhode Island, “To bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance.”

The Jewish American Golden Age predates the 20th century, and has outlasted it. Not only has America been the best place in the diaspora to be a Jew, but the scale of Jewish participation and inclusion is larger than many realize. The highest-ranking American armor officer to die in combat was the legendary Maurice Rose—a Jewish major general who died fighting the Nazis in Germany. Foer quotes Thomas Friedman saying that the Six-Day War made American Jews realize they could be tank commanders—but Jews have been tank commanders as long as America has had tanks.

In Columbus, Georgia, where I live, shortly after the October 7 attacks, the mayor and city-council members attended my synagogue. People from all over the country reached out to express their sympathy and support. A friend stationed in Syria checked in after Iran launched missiles toward Israel, concerned about my Israeli family and how I was dealing with American anti-Semitism. America’s continuing warm welcome isn’t just anecdotal:

The Pew Research Center recently found that Jews are viewed more positively than any other U.S. religious group.

Anti-Semitism may be on the rise, but it is and remains un-American. My great-great-grandfather, a Jewish refugee, arrived in New York on the Fourth of July. According to family lore, he saw the fireworks and thought they were for him. In a way, they were. This July, I look forward to celebrating the Golden Age's 248th anniversary.

**Jacob Foster**  
*Columbus, Ga.*

---

I was disappointed reading “The End of the Golden Age.” I think the Golden Age is now, as so many American Jews rise up to say “Not in our name.” We are recognizing the difference between anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism. It’s time for everyone to recognize it too. Criticism of Israel’s actions in Gaza is not anti-Semitism. American Jews and Israeli Jews will be safe when we can recognize the resilience and survival of both Palestinians and Jews and see how our struggles are interconnected.

**R. Toran Ailisheva**  
*Oakland, Calif.*

---

Franklin Foer interprets a survey—“nearly one in five non-Jewish students said they ‘wouldn’t want to be friends with someone who supports the existence of Israel as a Jewish state’”—to mean that they were saying they wouldn’t be friends with most Jews. I would challenge this interpretation.

As a Columbia graduate, and as someone who can actually read the Yiddish on *The Atlantic*’s cover, I do not question the Zionist dream of a haven for Jews. But I question the need for a predominantly *religious* state, which I fear will inevitably lead to a theocracy, intolerant even of Jews deemed insufficiently Orthodox. Israel is headed in that direction.

**Elliott B. Urdang**  
*Providence, R.I.*

---

We were surprised and dismayed that *The Atlantic* would publish Franklin Foer's article about the rise of anti-Semitism without any accompanying articles discussing the concurrent rise in anti-Palestinian racism. Students who protest the brutal war crimes committed in Gaza or advocate for the freedom and dignity of the Palestinian people are being silenced and persecuted. We hope *The Atlantic* will publish stories that highlight efforts seeking peace and justice for all. Right now, we need solutions. We need voices supportive of our shared humanity, not inflammatory rhetoric that will lead to further polarization and alienation.

**Samar Salman**

*Ann Arbor, Mich.*

**Christina Kappaz**

*Evanston, Ill.*

---

***Franklin Foer replies:***

*A writer's deeply ingrained instinct is to want their stories to prove prophetic. In this instance, I desperately hope that I will be proved wrong. Sadly, in the aftermath of publishing this article, I have heard too many stories like Jacob Foster's, of mezuzahs ripped from doors in the night. One of the most ubiquitous critiques of my story, echoed in R. Toran Ailisheva's letter, is that my argument equates anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism. Many mainstream Jewish groups take that stance, but it is not my contention. I explicitly stated that there are strains of anti-Zionism that paint a vision of life in a binational state, where Palestinians and Jews peacefully coexist. That vision strikes me as hopelessly quixotic, but it isn't anti-Semitic. Unfortunately, criticisms of Zionism are rarely so idealistic. They are usually cast in ugly terms, depicting a dangerous Jewish cabal guilty of dual loyalties, betraying the hallmarks of classical anti-Semitism.*

---

Behind the Cover

In this month's cover story, “[Democracy Is Losing the Propaganda War](#),” Anne Applebaum examines how autocrats in China, Russia, and other places have sought to discredit liberal democracy—and how they've found unlikely allies on the American far right. Our cover draws inspiration from constructivist propaganda artists such as Alexander Rodchenko and Gustav Klutsis. The angled imagery and ascending lines evoke the style of a Soviet propaganda poster, updated with liberalism's new rivals.

— **Paul Spella**, *Senior Art Director*

---

*This article appears in the [June 2024](#) print edition with the headline “The Commons.”*

---

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from  
<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2024/06/the-commons/678204/>

| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

| [Next](#) | [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) | [Previous](#) |

---

---

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theatlantic.com/calebs-inferno-crossword-puzzle/>

| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

# Poetry

- **[When Nan Goldin Danced in Low-Life Go-Go Bars in Paterson, N.J.](#)**
-

# When Nan Goldin Danced in Low-Life Go-Go Bars in Paterson, N.J.

by Rosa Alcalá



When Nan Goldin danced in low-life go-go bars in Paterson, N.J., I was a girl in Paterson, N.J., living next to a low-life go-go bar.

While men fed her tips and she tucked them into her bikini, a fist hit an eye in a house in Paterson, like a flash going off

in a dark kitchen. And in the corner, a girl stood watching. In the go-go dance of memory, the woman who was the girl

cannot recall the fist reach the eye, but sees an arm blocking a door. Nan Goldin took the bus back to New York, and the girl

sat next to her, not knowing she was an artist. The girl looked out the window and said, in each house a family, in each kitchen a fist and an eye. Nan Goldin counted the tips to see how much film she could buy. A friend dragged Nan Goldin from the apartment that night. The self-portrait of her bloodied eye saved her. The girl's brother told her years later: What you don't remember is that he gave her a black eye. She watches from a corner of her life the eye turn red, black, purple, green, yellow. Nan Goldin is the artist who made art that saved the girl, and the girl will make an art of her life. She takes the bus from Paterson, N.J., to Nan Goldin's loft, and inserts a slide of the black eye into Nan Goldin's projector. The girl wishes her mother could be there, to see herself larger than life on the screen. Nan Goldin danced go-go in Paterson so she wouldn't have to take off her top. The memory is not a striptease that ends with a blackened eye. The girl slips it like a slide into the part memory won't reveal, to complete the scene in which she is small and cannot help her mother leave. Nan Goldin photographed herself to force the door open. She pushed through it. I pushed through it.

---

*This poem appears in the [June 2024](#) print edition.*

---

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from  
<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2024/06/when-nan-goldin-danced-in-low-life-go-go-bars/678216/>

---