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# A Critic at Large

- [Is the Multiverse Where Originality Goes to Die?](#)

# Is the Multiverse Where Originality Goes to Die?

The concept helps entertainment companies like Marvel Studios recycle old characters—but it can also unlock new kinds of storytelling.

By [Stephanie Burt](#)



In 1941, Jorge Luis Borges published “The Garden of Forking Paths,” a short story in which a spy travels to the home of an English scholar. There they discuss an odd book by the spy’s great-grandfather, Ts’ui Pêñ. Rather than follow a single plot, the book aims to explore countless story lines. “In all fictional works, each time a man is confronted with several alternatives he chooses one and eliminates the others,” the scholar says. “In the fiction of the almost inextricable Ts’ui Pêñ he chooses—simultaneously—all of them. *He creates*, in this way, diverse futures, diverse times which themselves also proliferate and fork.”

Borges devoted most of his story to explaining the complicated idea that many different realities can coexist in a mazelike web of time lines. “This network of times which approached one another, forked, broke off, or were unaware of one another for centuries, embraces *all* possibilities of time,” the

scholar goes on. “We do not exist in the majority of these times; in some you exist, and not I; in others I, and not you; in others, both of us.” The story invites the reader to imagine what else, other than the world we know, might be possible. But the spy ultimately wonders whether, if everything that can happen does happen, any choice is really worth making.

If Borges were alive today, he could call his garden a multiverse and be done with it. An idea that seemed fantastical in the forties—that our universe is one of many, and that these parallel worlds might share the same past or the same characters—now seems to be everywhere. The multiverse has spawned countless comics, empowered science-fiction writers like Charles Stross and N. K. Jemisin, and inspired television shows as divergent as “Adventure Time,” “Rick and Morty,” and “Star Trek: Discovery.” It has started to shape our language: instead of saying that the rise of the multiverse was never inevitable, I can tell you that there’s a world in which it never became popular. In our world, it’s very popular: the concept has given rise to billion-dollar movies associated with Marvel Studios, from “Avengers: Endgame” (2019) to “Spider-Man: No Way Home” (2021).

All these multiverses might add up to nothing good. If all potential endings come to pass, what are the consequences of anything? What matters? Joe Russo, the co-director of “Endgame,” has warned that multiverse movies amount to “a money printer” that studios will never turn off; the latest one from Marvel, “Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness,” a sloppily plotted heap of special effects notable for its horror tropes, cameos, and self-aware dialogue, has earned nearly a billion dollars at the box office. This year, Marvel Studios announced the launch of “The Multiverse Saga,” a tranche of movies and TV shows that features sequels and trequels, along with the fifth and sixth installments of the “Avengers” series. (“Endgame,” it turns out, was not the end of the game.) Warner Bros. has released MultiVersus, a video game in which Batman can fight Bugs Bunny, and Velma, from “Scooby-Doo,” can fight Arya Stark, from “Game of Thrones.” Even A24, a critically admired independent film studio, now counts a multiverse movie, “Everything Everywhere All at Once” (2022), as its most profitable film.

There’s a reason that studios plan to spend billions of dollars—more than the economic output of some countries—to mass-produce more of the

multiverse: tens of millions of people will spend time and money consuming it. Is the rise of the multiverse the death of originality? Did our culture take the wrong forking path? Or has the multiverse unlocked a kind of storytelling—familiar but flexible, entrancing but evolving—that we genuinely need?

The first time that the multiverse had a moment, Franklin D. Roosevelt was President and Marvel Comics did not yet exist. Science-fiction writers of the nineteen-thirties didn't have a unifying name for the many worlds they were exploring, but the concept helped them to think about why we tell stories and what we can learn from imagined worlds. In Murray Leinster's short story "Sidewise in Time" (1934), chronological anomalies transport dinosaurs, Russian colonists, and Confederate soldiers from alternate time lines into the present day. A math instructor hopes that his modern knowledge will make him all-powerful, but his students refuse to follow him, as their experience with Roman legions has put them off dictatorships. The British writer Olaf Stapledon, whom Borges admired, wrote in his novel "Star Maker" (1937) about a cosmos—one of many—with "strange forms of time": "Whenever a creature was faced with several possible courses of action, it took them all, thereby creating many distinct temporal dimensions and distinct histories." The multiverse, for Stapledon, was a mind-expanding place of grandeur and complexity.

Such storytellers could draw on the work of scholars and scientists. In the sixteenth century, the Florentine thinker Giordano Bruno posited an infinite universe populated with many worlds; he was later burned at the stake. Four hundred years on, Erwin Schrödinger (of the cat in a box which is both dead and alive) and Werner Heisenberg (of the uncertainty principle), among others, tried to explain their findings about quantum physics. Atoms and elementary particles, Heisenberg wrote, "form a world of potentialities or possibilities rather than of things or facts." And according to what is known as the many-worlds interpretation of quantum mechanics, proposed by Hugh Everett III in 1957, to observe the universe is to create multiple copies of it. In other words, everything that can happen does happen—in some reality. You may have ordered the chicken, but somewhere you ordered tofu, or grilled stegosaurus; a world exists in which Hillary, and the Mets, and your kid's softball team won.



*Cartoon by Joe Dator*

Some writers used the multiverse to explore alternate histories in which humanity took a wrong turn. Philip K. Dick's novel "The Man in the High Castle" (1962)—celebrated by sci-fi fans at the time, and more recently a TV series from Amazon Prime—begins with a time line on which the Axis has defeated the Allies. One of Dick's point-of-view characters, Juliana, travels to Wyoming to visit the reclusive author of "The Grasshopper Lies Heavy," a banned and scandalous novel in which the Allies won the war. The book, Juliana tells its author, "showed that there's a way out"—another world, and therefore "nothing to want or hate or avoid" in this one. But the author did not write the novel alone; he relied on communications received via the I Ching. Confronted with the question of who won the Second World War, he answers sadly, "I'm not sure of anything."

The term "multiverse" seems to have assumed its modern meaning in the sixties. (William James used it much earlier, but in a different way.) The hero of "The Sundered Worlds," by the British fantasy novelist and editor Michael Moorcock, describes "the theory of the 'multi-verse,' the multi-dimensional universe containing dozens of different universes." He hopes to move between them with something called the Shifter. This multiverse serves to expand the scope and the stakes of a space opera; Moorcock later used the concept as a metaphysical device and a way to unify his novels. Many of his books feature some version of an "Eternal Champion" who is

doomed to take on world-saving quests. On occasion, these Champions cross universe boundaries, hang out together, and work toward a common goal.

Moorcock's multiverse of Eternal Champions echoes Joseph Campbell's "hero with a thousand faces"—a culture-bearer, like Aeneas or Luke Skywalker, whose journey reshapes his society. But Moorcock's most famous Champion, Elric of Melniboné, created in 1961, feels like a sendup of Campbell's macho archetype. Elric, a pale, last-of-his-line aristocrat whose true love is his cousin, is weakened and hollowed out by his epochal role; he chooses heroism only reluctantly, and instead allows his murderous sword to guide him. Nor does he take the multiverse very seriously. "Certain ancient sorcerers of Melniboné proposed that an infinite number of worlds coexist with our own," he muses. "Indeed, my dreams, of late, have hinted as much! . . . But I cannot afford to believe such things." As in "The Garden of Forking Paths," multiversal thinking can result in jadedness or even cynicism. The more you see what all heroic journeys share, the less you care about each one.

Other novelists treated alternate Earths and time lines as social and political experiments. Joanna Russ's 1975 novel, "The Female Man," now a cornerstone of feminist science fiction, follows four versions of the same person: present-day Joanna; Jeannine, in a stifling, decades-long Great Depression; confident Janet, from the all-women planet Whileaway; and dangerous Jael, from a militarized Earth split into Manlanders and Womanlanders. Will Joanna adopt Jael's brand of violence in order to build the future that Janet enjoys? The book uses the multiverse to frame the dilemma. "Every choice begets at least two worlds of possibility," it explains, "or very likely many more."

Comic-book writers invoked the multiverse and its branching time streams for more practical reasons. They needed to renew old characters, and to reconcile conflicting, previously published adventures. In the forties, DC Comics portrayed the Flash (Jay Garrick, chemistry student) in a wide, shallow hat with tiny wings. But the Flash of the fifties (Barry Allen, forensic scientist) wore a red mask. "Flash of Two Worlds!" (1961), written by Gardner Fox, with art by Carmine Infantino and Joe Giella, asks, "How many Flashes are there? . . . Is Barry Allen the real Flash? Or is Jay Garrick?" Barry's superfast vibrations transport him to another Earth, where

he recognizes Jay—not as a real superhero but as “a fictional character appearing in a magazine called Flash Comics!” Earth-One and Earth-Two “vibrate differently—which keeps them apart,” but super-vibrators like the Flash can link them. (Delightfully, DC Comics’ vibration-based multiverse prefigures physicists’ superstring theory, which proposes that the universe really does comprise vibrating strings.)

Multiversal superhero comics launched new kinds of plots: heroes could now team up across worlds, like rock-and-roll supergroups, and so could bad guys. But a multiverse can get so crowded with alternate realities that each one starts to lose its significance. A 1964 Justice League comic introduced Earth-3, “where every super-being is a criminal,” and DC Comics eventually manufactured dozens of alternate Earths. Then, in 1985, editors at DC decided to simplify. “Crisis on Infinite Earths,” written and drawn by the industry-leading team of Marv Wolfman and George Pérez, visited oblivion on Earth after Earth until just one, with one Superman, remained. Overlong, with ultra-high stakes on every page, “Crisis on Infinite Earths” makes tough reading today, though the line art by Pérez (who died in 2022) holds up beautifully. In one array of parallel panels, heroes watch entire worlds fade into the emptiness of the white page. The single remaining Earth, for a while, evokes Leinster’s “Sidewise in Time”: the Empire State Building shares a city with dinosaurs, biplanes, and “*Jetsons*”-style futurism, and we witness “the past and future merging with the present, creating impossible anomalies.” Later in the story, heroes try to traverse the multiverse by running on the Flash’s “cosmic treadmill.”

Marvel Comics began to assemble its own alternate Earths in the seventies, and they have piled up over the years: Earth-616, Earth-811, Earth-1191. DC, for its part, orchestrated “Crisis” after “Crisis”—“Zero Hour: Crisis in Time!,” “Infinite Crisis,” “Final Crisis,” and so on—merging, destroying, and remaking its multiverses again and again to accommodate new slates of characters, some of them acquired from other publishers. Black Adam, an ancient Egyptian with magical powers and the antihero in the 2022 story line, “Dark Crisis on Infinite Earths,” entered DC Comics as a resident of Earth-S, along with Billy Batson, a.k.a. Captain Marvel or Shazam, who originally appeared in Fawcett comics. Shazam got his own big-budget film in 2019. In October, Black Adam got one, too, starring Dwayne (the Rock) Johnson.

The multiverse first appeared in fiction as a plot device or a philosophical notion that could power interesting stories. But in the second half of the twentieth century multiplexes multiplied, superhero films found commercial success, and franchises that returned to popular heroes, such as James Bond or Luke Skywalker, dominated the box office. Against this backdrop, the multiverse evolved from a storytelling tool to a business tactic, one of several that enable vast entertainment companies to recycle beloved characters. The multiverse may be one of the reasons that the critic and writer Elizabeth Sandifer decries “the Marvelization of all things.” Francis Ford Coppola has made a similar complaint: “A Marvel picture is one prototype movie that is made over and over and over and over again to look different.” According to Martin Scorsese, these big-budget movies displace real works of art: “In many places around this country and around the world, franchise films are now your primary choice if you want to see something on the big screen.”

It’s true that the age of corporate intellectual property has swallowed Hollywood. Just a handful of companies—Disney (which owns Marvel Entertainment and Lucasfilm), Warner Bros. Discovery (which owns DC Films), Sony Pictures, Paramount Global—now hold the rights to the fictional people who stride across our screens. Watching their pulse-pounding prequels and sequels can itself feel like running on a cosmic treadmill: because corporate owners tend to resist change, heroes often end up right where they started (and we get a “new” Spider-Man movie every few years). Multiverses seem to make it easier for big companies to create new-yet-old heroes. No wonder cinephiles have had enough.

And yet this explanation for multiverse mania—that it’s a cynical ploy to squeeze money out of moviegoers—does not fit all the facts. Marvel hits such as “Iron Man” were blockbusters well before the studio embraced the alternate time lines and multiple universes found in the comics. And superhero fans, especially diehards who have explored multiverses for decades, love to see creators riff and reimagine. Marvel Comics readers are proud, not annoyed, that “every little story is part of the big one,” as Douglas Wolk writes in “All of the Marvels,” his book-length history of the comics and their heroes. In those tales, alternate Earths and time lines often allow familiar characters to step off the metaphorical treadmill, to do big things that they could not otherwise do. Prestigious and straight-arrow

heroes die, or turn evil, or come out as gay; in a 1994 issue of Marvel's "What If?," Jean Grey, from the X-Men, burns our solar system to ash. In one 2003 issue of the universe-hopping series "Exiles," Tony Stark becomes a totalitarian technocrat until the Fantastic Four's Sue Storm takes him down; in another, Spider-Man's girlfriend Mary Jane dates the woman of her dreams. These characters aren't the "real" Jean Grey or Tony Stark or Mary Jane, so audiences and advertisers need not worry that their favorite characters will never be the same.

Some comics even seem self-aware about their own status as intellectual property. In "Secret Wars," the ambitious 2015-16 series from Marvel Comics, by Jonathan Hickman and Esad Ribić, a mysterious catastrophe obliterates the cosmos. The forward-thinking Doctor Strange and the masked tyrant Doctor Doom create, "from the shattered remnants of broken Earths," a planet to hold the surviving Marvel heroes. They then carve up the planet into genres, much as a corporate manager would carve up an entertainment company: mythic warriors inhabit Doomgard, while Howard the Duck lives in New Quack City. Doom thinks the planet belongs to him, but we know that he in turn belongs to God Disney.

To Coppola and Scorsese, multiversal blockbusters may represent the dark time line of popular culture. But, at their best, these works can still amaze and inspire. When "Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse" came out, in 2018, many film critics judged it a cinematic achievement and the best superhero movie to date. It owed its success not to any brand-new character but to how the movie helped us to see new sides of a familiar one. The film illustrated, especially for young people, that there are multiple ways to see yourself in a hero, even if you don't look much like the white male Peter Parker with whom Spidey began. "Today, there is a Spider-Man for every kid," the comics critic Zachary Jenkins wrote. "It's not just about representation," he went on, but "about giving kids options to express themselves." When so much of our culture is sequels and prequels and reboots, we might need multiverses all the more, so that we can imagine what else is possible.



"Maybe try turning the mug around so its inspirational message faces you?"  
Cartoon by Sophie Lucido Johnson and Sammi Skolmoski

Why do we live in a multiversal moment? One theory holds that the ascent of the multiverse matches our need to keep up many identities. We may feel like different people as we slide from Instagram to Slack to the family group chat; we code-switch as we move between work and home and parent-teacher conferences. Victorians might have been wowed by the two-faced Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, this theory goes, but nowadays we require something stronger—hence a TV show like “Loki,” whose titular antihero has numerous manifestations, including a man, a woman, a child, an alligator, and a President. Every time I try to answer questions from both my kids at the same time, without burning their cinnamon toast or showing up late to a Zoom call with my students, I think there must be something to this hypothesis.

But it still doesn’t explain why the English singer-songwriter Grace Petrie would invoke the multiverse in her heart-crushing song “Done Deal,” about an affair: “I know that out there somewhere in a fairer universe, we were a done deal, darling, and you met me first.” Nor does it explain why political commentators, during the Trump Presidency, tweeted longingly about Earth 2, where Hillary Clinton became President. When the poet Stella Wong writes, in her thoughtful collection “Spooks” (2022), that she was “taken as an only child / with multiverses. There’s nothing // worse than the

sense of being alone,” she does not seem to be writing about the fragmentation of our postmodern identities. Neither does the hip-hop duo Atmosphere in their new single “Sculpting with Fire,” with its melancholy refrain, “So many other realities exist simultaneously.” These everyday multiverses contemplate comforting but fragile alternatives to our one and only Earth.

Multiversal stories, told well, can reveal not only what might have been but what could still be. In “Everything Everywhere All at Once,” an exhausted Chinese laundromat owner named Evelyn, played with verve by Michelle Yeoh, discovers very suddenly that her reality is one of many. Her husband, Waymond, tells her to walk into a supply closet, then claps a Bluetooth headset onto her; he has come, we learn, from another time line. The headset lets Evelyn tap into the talents of her alternate selves—a spy, a martial artist, a chef. “Every tiny decision creates another branching universe,” Waymond—from-another-time-line later tells her.

On Evelyn’s too-real time line, her daughter, Joy, is rebellious, sullen, and—to the dismay of Evelyn’s father—gay. But somewhere else in the multiverse her daughter has become a villain determined to scramble all reality. “Nothing matters,” Joy’s alter ego says, echoing the Borgesian spy for whom choices lose their meaning. “Everything we do gets washed away in a sea of every other possibility.” The symbol of Joy’s nihilism is an everything bagel, shaped like a zero, or like the iris of an eye. Evelyn starts out quietly despising—or, at best, reluctantly resigning herself to—the laundromat, the family, and the world she knows. But in order to save the multiverse she has to accept herself and her kid.

In a different world, “Everything Everywhere,” with its many moments of absurdist comedy, might feel like a parody of Marvel movies. Yet critics praised it, rightly, for originality. The director-writers Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert fuse the psychology of multiversal fiction—its potential for despair over endless, meaningless choice, for example—with the open-ended, high-stakes storytelling of superhero tales. Marvel may own the idea of Tony Stark, or at least the right to make money from him, but the notion of the multiverse belongs to anyone who can use it to tell a good story.

Our fears about the future, and our hopes for the children who will inhabit it, may be a final reason that twenty-first-century audiences welcome tale after tale of multiple Earths, and why alternate time lines are flourishing in our time. In so many multiversal stories, from “Sidewise in Time” to “Everything Everywhere” and “Spider-Verse,” members of the rising generation take long and skeptical looks at their elders. They may wonder whether they will become their parents, or whether they can choose something else altogether: whether history must repeat, or whether it can be rewritten. We parents, meanwhile, learn from our children what is possible and what could have been. Children are bringers of change and agents of chaos; they can seem to come from another dimension. But their very presence can balance out our multiversal ennui. Shouldn’t we at least try to give them a better world than this one?

A generation ago, before the Marvel Cinematic Universe existed, Philip Pullman created a multiverse in “His Dark Materials” (1995-2000), a trilogy of novels that became a film, a play, and an HBO TV series. Though a repressive religious institution forbids research into other worlds, two children named Lyra and Will find a special knife that can cut doorways between them. But the doors create ghostly spectres that feed on human souls, and they are also open to adults, who wreak havoc all over. Lyra and Will themselves come from different worlds, and (spoiler alert) they fall in love while they try to save everything and everyone. Yet at the end of the trilogy they have little choice but to seal the doorways and give up their use of the knife. Some readers consider Pullman’s ending needlessly harsh, but, like the creators of “Everything Everywhere,” he seems to have a message for the next generation. Your imagination can introduce you to astonishing people and take you to incredible places, Pullman suggests, but you can’t just stay there. Your reality needs you.

The garden of forking paths cannot continue to fork forever, if we are to find meaning there. Multiverses speak to the part of us that wants every option to be open, that wants the journey to go on and on. Of course, no journey really does—and at the end of many multiversal stories the tangle of time lines resolves into one, or a traveller finally arrives at the right version of history and decides to stay. Such endings seem to invite us to return to our one life, on our one planet, with some added spark of hope or curiosity or resolve.

They speak to the part of us that wants, like Evelyn and Lyra and so many versions of Spider-Man, to go home. ♦

By Keith Gessen

By Joshua Rothman

By Rivka Galchen

By Andrew Marantz

# A Reporter at Large

- آیا اصغر فرهادی، برنده جایزه اسکار، ایده فیلم‌هایش را دزدید؟
- [Did the Oscar-Winning Director Asghar Farhadi Steal Ideas?](#)

**By Jia Tolentino**

**By Susan B. Glasser**

**By Lauren Collins**

**By Jessica Winter**

# Did the Oscar-Winning Director Asghar Farhadi Steal Ideas?

At a dangerous moment in Iran, the filmmaker stands accused by one of his former students.

By [Rachel Aviv](#)



*Read in Farsi | [به فارسی بخوانید](#)*

Azadeh Masihzadeh's family owned a VCR, a rare possession in their neighborhood in Shiraz, a city in the south of Iran. Using long cables, her father connected their machine to the televisions of seven other households, so they could watch, too. At night, after her father chose a movie, Masihzadeh, the eldest of three children, rode her bike down their alley to alert the neighbors. She honked her bike horn once if it was a foreign movie. If it was an Iranian film, she honked twice.

Masihzadeh learned English by watching these movies, and, when she was eighteen, she became an English instructor, teaching her students the language through dialogue from films. To practice greetings, she told them to act out the moment in "The Matrix" when Neo says, "It's an honor to

meet you,” and Morpheus replies, “No, the honor is mine.” If her students didn’t say their lines with enough feeling, she made them do it again. “They would get so angry at me,” she said. “One student told me, ‘You are a teacher, not a director, what are you doing? We are not your actors.’” She thought the student had a point, and she began saving money to make her first short film, a silent portrait of a boxing match. She completed it in 2013, when she was thirty-four, and it was accepted by more than a dozen film festivals.

The following year, she learned that Asghar Farhadi was holding a filmmaking workshop at the Karsnameh Institute of Arts and Culture, a prestigious cultural center in Tehran. Farhadi, who is fifty, is the only director in the twenty-first century to have won the Academy Award for Best International Feature Film twice. After his first Oscar, for “A Separation,” in 2012, *Time* named him one of the hundred most influential people in the world. The English director and playwright Mike Leigh has described Farhadi, whose dramas focus on lies that reverberate through middle-class families, as one of the greatest filmmakers of all time. Farhadi has an extraordinary ability to shift among different characters’ perspectives, so that each character, even when committing acts of violence or deception, seems moral and reasonable. “The drama comes from making very small mistakes,” he has said. “Very specific mistakes. Which is the core of the story for me.”

Masihzadeh was one of eighteen students admitted to the workshop, which cost the equivalent of roughly fourteen hundred dollars—the most expensive class the Karsnameh Institute had ever offered. At the first session, the institute’s director was surprised when Farhadi announced that the workshop would be about documentaries. Farhadi brought in news articles about people who had been celebrated as heroes after they found lost money or a valuable item and chose to return it, rather than to keep it for themselves. He split the class into small groups, and instructed each group to report on one of the stories. He said he wanted to explore how a person gains the status of a hero—a subject he had been thinking about since college, when he saw “Life of Galileo,” the Bertolt Brecht play, which includes the line “Unhappy is the land that needs a hero.”

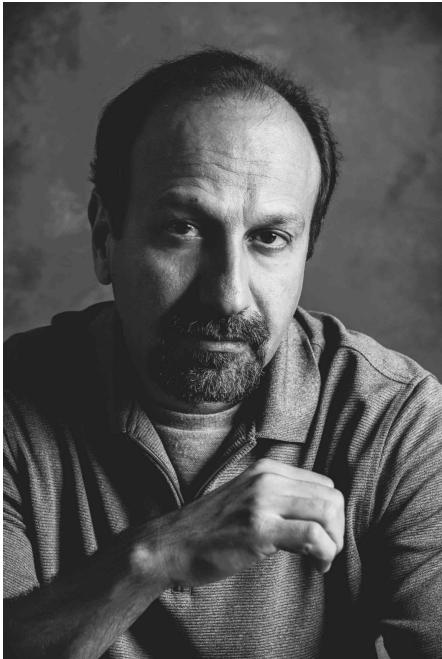
Masihzadeh, who came from Shiraz for the workshop, taking an eighteen-hour bus ride, tried to join two different groups, but she felt excluded from both. Rola Shamas, a student who video-recorded every session of the workshop, told me, “There was this unspoken competition,” because the students expected that Farhadi might pick someone from the class to work on his crew. Masihzadeh “was a bit of a black duck,” Shamas said. “She didn’t play games. She was naïve, because she was not a city girl.”

Masihzadeh received permission from Farhadi to work alone and to find her own story. To keep her expenses down, she looked for ideas in Shiraz. A friend’s aunt said she’d seen a local TV report about an inmate who, on leave from prison, had found a bag of money and returned it. His name was Mohammadreza Shokri, and he had been in prison for five years for a debt. Masihzadeh couldn’t find any information about the story online, so she went to the office of the TV station and asked a reporter there to show her the segment.

One of the class videos captures Masihzadeh presenting her idea to Farhadi. She speaks with a half smile, delighted by the details. When she explains that she has received approval from the authorities to film inside the prison, Farhadi, a small man who talks in a soft, steady voice, tells her, “So your job is to go to Shiraz.”

Nearly three months later, Masihzadeh showed part of her documentary to the class. Farhadi complimented her on her ambiguous portrayal of Shokri. But he seemed less pleased with the rest of the class. They had been told that all their documentaries would be edited into a group film, and they had expected that Farhadi’s name would appear in the credits. Farhadi told them, “My name won’t be in it at all. This is your work.”

“Can we at least thank you?” Masihzadeh asked.



*"The drama comes from making very small mistakes,"* Farhadi has said, of his films. Photograph by Filip Van Roe / eyevine / Redux

Farhadi didn't answer, except to say that he hadn't liked it when a student's film had listed "Asghar Farhadi" in the credits in larger letters than the title.

At the next class, two months later, Masihzadeh showed the final part of her film, a chronicle of her search for the woman who claimed the money that Shokri had found. Masihzadeh finally locates the woman in a rural valley, eight hours from Shiraz. But, when Masihzadeh meets her, it's unclear whether she ever lost—or claimed—the money, or if Shokri and the prison concocted the story of his good deed in order to create positive publicity for the prison, which Shokri said had executed a girl on the day that he discovered the money.

Farhadi told the class that Masihzadeh's documentary showed the importance of layering revelations until the viewer reaches a "beautiful point" where the different pieces fit together. "You let this case go," he told her. "You let it get edited."

Although the workshop was supposed to have ten classes, spread out over nearly a year, Farhadi told the students that he was ending it after five sessions. "What did you learn from this class?" he asked them.

"Your style and modus operandi," one replied.

Though Masihzadeh had been disappointed on hearing that the class would focus on documentaries, she said she had thought, “Definitely Mr. Farhadi will tell us something about writing scripts for feature movies that I will be able to use.”

“What was that?” Farhadi asked her.

“The most interesting stories are within and around us,” she said. Making her film, she’d realized that people who had seemed honest when she interviewed them had actually been concealing the truth.

“Yes!” Farhadi said. “They themselves don’t realize that they lie.”

Toward the end of class, Farhadi asked the students to raise their hand if they wanted to become feature filmmakers. Everyone put a hand in the air. “I have a suggestion for all of you,” he said. “First, make a full documentary. . . . Spend your time on it, about six months or a year. Don’t show the documentary to anyone. Write your script based on the documentary. Now you know the characters. This way, your hand is fuller.” He told them, “It is possible that I will do it myself.” He said he might dispatch a group of researchers to make a documentary, and then, after a period of time, perhaps five years, he would “write a script based on it, out of its heart.”

Four years after the workshop, a final cut of the group project had not been completed. The students had hoped that a professional editor would work on the film, but instead Farhadi had selected a student from the workshop named Vahid Sedaghat, who was given all the students’ rough footage. Negar Eskandarfar, the director of the Karsnameh Institute, told me, “The students were so disappointed with the process. They felt that Mr. Farhadi had abandoned the workshop.”

With permission from Eskandarfar and Farhadi, Masihzadeh hired her own editor and submitted her documentary to film festivals. At the Shiraz Film Festival, in 2018, her movie, which she titled “All Winners, All Losers,” won the Special Jury Prize. “I will definitely, definitely continue making documentaries, because I feel it is part of my life,” she said as she accepted the award.

Masihzadeh said that, after her documentary was nominated for the best-research award at another Iranian festival, a woman from the Bamdad Institute, an educational center in Tehran run by Farhadi's wife, called her and said that the class film would be completed after all, and that the first segment would be Masihzadeh's documentary. But, the woman added, if she continued screening her documentary at festivals, it would not be included. According to Masihzadeh, she asked if Farhadi's name would appear in the credits, and the woman said yes. Masihzadeh immediately agreed to stop showing her film. She withdrew it from a festival in Italy. Eskandarfar, who had been an executive producer of "A Separation," recalled that Masihzadeh was "very, very excited, because she felt that bigger things were going to happen."

In 2019, Masihzadeh moved to Tehran and founded a short-film distribution company. When she learned that Farhadi was holding a workshop at the Bamdad Institute, she decided to enroll, since the class would be focussed on screenwriting. On the first day of the workshop, Farhadi asked the students to introduce themselves. Mohammadreza Shirvan, a student sitting next to Masihzadeh, told me, "Farhadi paused when he saw her." Shirvan introduced himself next, but, he said, "I noticed that Mr. Farhadi was not really paying attention to what I had to say, and he went back to Azadeh and asked her, 'Are you commuting from Shiraz?'" Throughout the workshop, it seemed to Shirvan that Farhadi was more interested in Masihzadeh than in the other students.

At one of the last classes, in August, 2019, Farideh Shafiei, an administrator at the institute, told Masihzadeh that Farhadi wanted to meet with her in the institute's main office, an open room with a balcony overlooking the city. Farhadi's wife, Parisa Bakhtavar, a director, was in the room. Farhadi invited Masihzadeh to sit at a desk and then told her that he was working on a new film, called "A Hero," which was set in Shiraz.

According to Masihzadeh, Farhadi complimented her on her Shirazi accent and asked if she might want to act in his film. "I asked him, 'Me?'" Masihzadeh said. "An actress?" She said she had no acting talent; when watching her documentary, she cringed when she heard her own voice. But she said she would be thrilled to work as an assistant, perhaps scouting locations in Shiraz. She and Farhadi discussed her knowledge of the city,

and then, she said, Shafiei put a typed piece of paper on the desk. Masihzadeh assumed it would be a contract formalizing her job, but the paper said:

I \_\_\_\_\_, daughter of \_\_\_\_\_, holder of National I.D. No. \_\_\_\_\_, residing at \_\_\_\_\_, herewith, in full physical and mental health, and with utter consent, declare that the documentary film “All Winners, All Losers,” which was produced between 2013 and 2019, is based on Mr. Asghar Farhadi’s proposal and idea that he shared in his documentary-filmmaking workshop.

Shafiei gave her a new sheet of paper and told her to rewrite the statement, filling in the blanks, and then sign it.

For a moment, Masihzadeh said, she felt as if she couldn’t breathe: “I raised my hand and said, ‘Mr. Farhadi, can we perhaps speak about this?’ He said, ‘Well, sign for now and write down your National I.D. correctly so we can buy you a plane ticket to Shiraz.’ ”

She asked him, “Mr. Farhadi, is ‘A Hero’ related to my documentary?”

He told her he had written his film before she made hers, she said.

When she continued to hesitate, he said that he had been teaching all day—he was tired, and she was wasting three people’s time. “He kept repeating that it was a simple paper between us,” she said.

Masihzadeh began copying the statement, but her hand was shaking and she kept making mistakes. When she finally completed and signed it, she said that Shafiei told her, “Please leave. Mr. Farhadi is quite tired.” (Farhadi and Shafiei dispute Masihzadeh’s account of the meeting. Farhadi told me that, because there are so many rumors in the world of Iranian cinema, he’d wanted a statement clarifying the origin of the idea, so there would be no misunderstandings. Shafiei said that the conversation was so friendly that, after Masihzadeh left, Bakhtavar said, “Such a nice girl.”)

Shirvan, Masihzadeh’s classmate, was planning to drive her home that day. “I remember her crying as she entered the car,” he told me. When they were

stopped at a red light, Masihzadeh began recounting what had happened, saying that Farhadi was her idol. “I told her, ‘If I were in your position, I would have done the same thing,’ ” Shirvan said.

The next morning, Masihzadeh went to the Karmameh Institute to tell Eskandarfar, its director, what had happened. “It was as if she had been struck by trauma,” Eskandarfar told me. “Her hands were trembling.” Eskandarfar added, “It crossed my mind that Farhadi would want to use her documentary.”

The next week, Masihzadeh came to the Bamdad Institute before class. “I said, ‘Mr. Farhadi, I want to tell you that the idea and the plot of my documentary are mine,’ ” she said. “He answered, ‘O.K.’ And I asked him, ‘So you agree?’ He said, ‘O.K.’ ”

According to Masihzadeh’s account, which Farhadi says is false, she asked if they could revise the statement she’d signed, but he told her that this could serve as a lesson, and that one day she’d thank him: the next time someone put a paper in front of her to sign, she should get a lawyer, to avoid stress. He said it was clear that she was anxious and not sleeping—he saw circles under her eyes. Now he needed to think twice about whether she should work on his film.

She asked for permission to sit down. When he granted it, she sank into a chair and began crying. She said that Farhadi was smoking and didn’t look her way. When he finished his cigarette, he walked out of the room.

A year later, in September, 2020, Masihzadeh was in Germany, visiting her sister, a landscape architect, when a friend called her and told her that Farhadi was shooting a movie in Shiraz. She immediately booked a flight back to Tehran. She dropped off her luggage at her apartment, put some clothes into a backpack, and took a flight to Shiraz. She wondered if Farhadi had tried to call her but hadn’t been able to get through, because she’d been in Europe. Mostly, though, she said, “I just wanted to ask him, ‘Why did you take my signature? Did you put all these questions into my head just so you could make your film? Is that the way you are teaching me?’ It is very painful.”

The friend said that Farhadi was shooting at a school on Ghasro Dasht Street. There are several schools on the road with the same name. Masihzadeh's mother drove her to each one. When they got to the last school, the front door was partly open. Masihzadeh walked into a courtyard, where actors were dressed as teachers, and told a crew member that she wanted to speak with Farhadi. Masihzadeh said that the crew member went inside but returned saying that Farhadi didn't know anyone with Masihzadeh's name. She assumed that her name had been mispronounced and said it again, louder. Eventually, Sedaghat, the student whom Farhadi had selected to edit the class project, came outside. He was now working on Farhadi's crew. He told her that Farhadi was busy and suggested that she call his assistant to schedule an appointment.

Masihzadeh considered Sedaghat her friend, and she asked him if the movie they were filming was similar to her documentary. According to Masihzadeh, Sedaghat responded that he didn't remember her documentary, and, when she reminded him of its story, he said that he hadn't been given the script of "A Hero." (Sedaghat told me, "I don't remember having that conversation," and disagrees with Masihzadeh's account of what happened in the courtyard.) She said, "I looked around again, and I thought, O.K., this is the yard of a school, and there are actors dressed like teachers, and my documentary has no school." She felt silly for having doubted Farhadi, and she left. She never called to schedule an appointment.

Ten months later, "A Hero" had its world première, at the Cannes Film Festival. In interviews, Farhadi explained that he had tried to cast people who were not professional actors, because he wanted to go beyond realism and make the film look "*exactly* like life." He said, "I thought it should be closer to a documentary."

Masihzadeh asked a few friends who were at Cannes to call her after watching the film. They reported that it was about a prisoner in Shiraz named Rahim. When Rahim is on a leave from prison, where he's been incarcerated for a debt, his girlfriend gives him a bag of gold that she found on the street, and he returns it to the owner, a mysterious woman. A few lines in "A Hero" are nearly identical to remarks that Shokri, the subject of Masihzadeh's documentary, makes. Like Shokri, Rahim is a thin, fragile-looking man who is divorced with one child, works as a painter in the

prison, has a family member with a speech impediment, and moves through the world passively, with a hapless smile. “Even when I am so angry, I smile,” Shokri had told Masihzadeh. In interviews, Farhadi said that he instructed the actor playing Rahim to “put on that broken smile whenever possible.” Farhadi told the actor, “When the character has more problems, smile more.”



*Mohammadreza Shokri, who was featured in Masihzadeh's documentary. Photograph courtesy of Azadeh Masihzadeh*

Masihzadeh asked her friends to pay close attention to the credits of “A Hero.” She said, “If in the middle somewhere, in very small letters, he had thanked ‘a student from my workshop in 2014,’ I would be quiet forever.” But there was nothing.

On Instagram, some of Masihzadeh’s friends posted synopses of her documentary along with the hashtag #AHero and tagged her; people began reposting the messages. Masihzadeh shared about twenty of these posts. The Iranian Web site Café Cinema, which publishes movie reviews and news, ran a short article about the possibility that “A Hero” was based on Masihzadeh’s documentary. “While Farhadi was busy with press interviews and the red carpet in the South of France,” the article said, filmmaking students had “mentioned another person as a ‘hero’ and considered her the cause of these successes.”

At Cannes, when asked by BBC Persian about the origins of the movie, Farhadi said that he'd held a workshop that had "research purposes." When writing the script, he continued, he'd integrated elements from each news story that his students had investigated: "For example, from the person in Shiraz, I chose to film in Shiraz—although the character is completely different from that Shirazi character," he said. In an interview with the Hollywood news site Deadline, he reiterated that "'A Hero' was not inspired by a specific news item." In other interviews, he said that for years he had been thinking about the ways in which heroes feel trapped by societal expectations. "In Iran, someone is ready to lose everything to retain their reputation," he said. "The serenity and sense of confidence that comes from knowing you have a good reputation is such that, in order to maintain that, you end up in an ambivalence about your own life."

An Iranian film called "The Cow," about a man who mourns his dead cow so passionately that he begins to act like it, is often credited with saving Iranian cinema. After the revolution, in 1979, movie production nearly ceased—cinema was seen as a corrupting, decadent force from the West—and thirty-two movie theatres in Tehran were shuttered, many of them burned down. But, after watching "The Cow," Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran, was reportedly impressed by the educational potential of Iranian films. (It helped that "The Cow," made a decade before the revolution, dealt with poverty under the Shah.) In Khomeini's first speech after returning from exile, he said, of his regime, "We are not opposed to cinema," only to "the misuse of cinema." Movie theatres hung banners with Khomeini's picture and the words "We are not opposed to cinema." The government began working to establish a new movie industry, which would adhere to Islamic values and avoid sensitive social and political subjects that one member of the government described as "circles of perturbation."



*"We're lucky to live in a city with so much unaffordable art."*  
Cartoon by Amy Hwang

Farhadi, who grew up in central Iran, the son of a wholesale grocer, was seven years old during the revolution; two years later, he saw “The Cow.” “It changed my childhood world,” he told me, on a Zoom call in July, from his home, in Tehran. “I realized that there is nothing more beautiful for me than the medium of film.” Nearly all the older kids on Farhadi’s street fought in Iran’s war with Iraq, which began a year after the revolution and lasted eight years. One of his friends lied about his age in order to enlist. Not long afterward, the friend’s dead body was carried through town in a procession for martyrs. The revolution and the war created an “atmosphere where everything was solid and literal, the reality was in your face—there was no fantasy,” Farhadi said. “The only way that I could escape all this was cinema.”

Farhadi studied theatre at the University of Tehran, writing his thesis on the difference between a moment of silence and a pause in the work of Harold Pinter. “The main trait of his characters is that they say certain things to avoid saying what’s actually in their heart,” Farhadi told a film scholar. “And, for those of us who grew up in Iranian society, this is very tangible.”

In 1994, when Farhadi was twenty-two, he directed a play called “Car Dwellers” for a student festival. The play had been written by Ali Khodsiani, a fellow-student. Khodsiani told me that he was dismayed when he saw a

bulletin for the performance which listed Farhadi as the author. He confronted Farhadi, who said that the credit was a mistake. But he said that Farhadi also told him, “Please do not speak out now, because I got engaged to Parisa, and we are going to get married. I’ve told Parisa that I’ve written this play myself. If she finds out that I lied to her in the first days of our lives, our relationship may break down.” Several months later, Farhadi directed the play again, at a theatre in Tehran. Khodsiani was upset when he saw the poster: this time, although Khodsiani was credited as the author, Farhadi, who had made revisions to the play, was listed as the “rewriter.” (Farhadi said that he never claimed to be the author, and added, “I don’t understand why he’s telling this fake story.”) A friend of both men at the time, who witnessed them fighting, told me, “What Mr. Khodsiani said is the truth.”

Farhadi wrote for state television and radio for several years and, in his early thirties, began working on his first feature film. Abbas Jahangirian, an author and a playwright, said that at a meeting with Farhadi he told him about a story he was writing: a lovelorn young man, working as an apprentice to a snake catcher, is bitten on the finger by a poisonous snake. They decided to work on a movie version, which Jahangirian began researching. Jahangirian was waiting to receive a contract before starting a script, but he didn’t hear from Farhadi again. In 2003, Jahangirian served as a judge at an Iranian film festival where Farhadi’s first feature, “Dancing in the Dust,” was screening. “I saw that this is the same story with a little change and without my name!” Jahangirian wrote me. He gave an interview to a newspaper, saying that he was “distressed and astonished.” Afterward, Farhadi apologized to Jahangirian, and added his name to a version of the film that was broadcast on TV. (Farhadi said that he’d heard the story from one of his co-writers, and hadn’t realized the original source.) Jahangirian wrote that, despite never receiving money for the film, “I did not protest, and I will not protest, because Farhadi has mentioned the name of my country many times in prestigious international festivals. . . . For me, national interests are more valuable than personal interests.”

Farhadi’s next movie, “Beautiful City,” which came out in 2004, was about an eighteen-year-old who, after killing his girlfriend, faces execution unless his friend and his sister can persuade the victim’s family to forgive him. “It was the first time I became aware of a very important sentence, which has

affected all of my films,” Farhadi told me. “The classic tragedy is a battle between good and evil. But in ‘Beautiful City’ the story is a battle between good and good—and we don’t know which side we want to win. We have an affinity for both sides.”

Mani Haghighi, an Iranian director who had recently gained international recognition for his first feature film, told me that, when he saw “Beautiful City,” “I was just devastated. I was weeping. I was shaking. It was a shattering experience.” He invited Farhadi, whom he’d never met, to a gathering at his house. After the other guests left, Farhadi shared an idea for a new film, about a middle-class mother who suspects her husband of having an affair. Haghighi made a few structural suggestions. “At this point, it’s, like, two in the morning, and Asghar said, ‘Hang on, do you have some paper?’ ” Haghighi told me. “And he started jotting down these ideas.” Farhadi stayed until the early morning and then, after going home to sleep, came back later that day. They worked this way for eight months, until they’d finished the script. Haghighi told me, “The day we met was the day we started writing. It was like love at first sight—it really was.”



Amir Jadidi, as Rahim, in Farhadi's "A Hero." Masihzadeh alleged that Farhadi based the character on Shokri. Photograph by Entertainment Pictures / Alamy

The film, called “Fireworks Wednesday,” premiered in 2006 and won three awards at the Fajr International Film Festival, in Tehran. Farhadi directed it, and he and Haghighi shared the writing credit. The movie explores the way

that, in a marriage, lying can become normalized, as if it were the only way to maintain stasis. After “Fireworks Wednesday,” Farhadi came to Haghghi with a new idea: a group of middle-class friends go on a seaside vacation, and one of them, an enigmatic woman, disappears. Haghghi said that Farhadi proposed that they write the film together, and that Haghghi direct it. But Haghghi was underwhelmed by the plot. “What I was presented with was the nucleus of the story, a detective story, and I kept saying, ‘Asghar, what is interesting about this? I don’t get it.’ ”

Haghghi said that they developed the idea during the next two months, meeting nearly every day to talk and write. (Farhadi recalls discussing the idea for only a day or two.) In the process, the woman’s disappearance—and her companions’ frantic attempts to account for it—became a riveting portrait of a culture in which telling the truth is not always a viable option. “I think Asghar realized this was going to be a really great film, and he sort of took it back, which was fine with me,” Haghghi said. Haghghi ended up acting in the movie, called “About Elly,” and was not credited as a writer.

The lead role was played by Golshifteh Farahani, who had recently become the first actress based in Iran to act in a Hollywood film since the revolution, playing Leonardo DiCaprio’s love interest in Ridley Scott’s “Body of Lies.” Iran’s intelligence service launched an investigation into whether she had broken the law, both by participating in a Hollywood film and by letting herself be seen in public without a hijab. She was interrogated several times and faced the possibility of being banned from working in Iran. Before filming “About Elly,” she, like many actors in Iran, had to sign a contract stating that, if the government halted the shooting or the production of the film because of her participation in it, she would be liable for the costs.

After shooting was completed, the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance blocked the film from screening at festivals. But Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the head of Iran’s government at the time, reversed the ban; he later said it was “not fair that a film be condemned by the mistake of one actress.” (Javad Shamaqdari, then Iran’s deputy minister of cinema, told me that one of the movie’s producers had come to him for help.) Farahani, worried about threats to her freedom, went into exile in Paris. “I was the first actress who really left like that, and I was being battered by the people, by the government,” she told me. “There was no solidarity from anyone in the

business. It was like when you want to lapidate someone, and everyone just gets another stone to throw.”

She planned to reunite with the cast of “About Elly” at the 2009 Berlin International Film Festival, but she had to walk the red carpet alone. (She said that Farhadi wanted it this way, which Farhadi denies.) Farhadi and the other members of the cast arrived after her and took pictures together. She was humiliated, and spent the evening trying to hold back tears. She wondered if “maybe deep inside Farhadi wanted to punish me for causing the movie trouble,” she said. “Or maybe he wanted to *pretend* to punish me, in order to show that he was on the right side, according to the government—because I took the veil off, and I was the bad girl who everyone was insulting.” She added, “The irony is that my interrogators didn’t manage to make me feel guilty. But Farhadi managed to do that. He made me believe that by leaving Iran, by not wearing a head scarf, I had done something terrible.”

She said that Farhadi, after ignoring her publicly, spoke with her at a hotel in Berlin: “He asked me to write an apology to the Supreme Leader, saying that I had dreamed of the Imam Ali—and the imam told me to apologize for what I did—and then they would let me back into Iran.” She continued, “It was a complete mindfuck. First he hates me and ignores me, then he says he is concerned about me—but in this unbelievable way, that I should have a dream where my sins are washed away—so you don’t know what you are dealing with, really.” (Farhadi says that he never asked her to apologize.)

Farahani described Farhadi as a *vasat baz*, a person who plays the middle—a concept so prevalent that one popular Iranian late-night talk show names a “*Vasat Baz* of the Week.” “He is clearly not part of the dictatorship, but he is making deals with that dictatorship,” she said. “And yes, sure, all artists have to do that to be able to work and live and breathe there—but to what extent? Living in a dictatorship, we all have this instinct of lying to survive, but there is a point where you can go so far that you forget what the truth is.” Some Iranian filmmakers, like Jafar Panahi and Mohammad Rasoulof, don’t seem capable of lying, she said. Both have been charged with “propaganda against the state,” and, this summer, they were imprisoned. But, for Farhadi, she said, “everything is a move—every step, every blink, is calculated.”

Farhadi has described writing a script as “finding a suit for a button.” The starting point is often a single image. “*A Separation*” began with a memory that one of his brothers had shared, of crying as he bathed their ailing grandfather. That moment, Farhadi told me, was like “a magnet that starts attracting all the experiences from the subconscious, and I gather these things, and it begins to shape the suit.” Farhadi elaborated on the image, writing an intricate story about a man whose commitment to taking care of his sick father leads to the dissolution of his marriage. The film offered another variation on what had become for Farhadi a central theme. “According to what scales, according to what system of weights and measures, can I recognize a behavior as ethical and another as not ethical?” he has said. “This is the greatest question of my life.”

“*A Separation*” was the first Iranian movie to win an Oscar. In an interview with an Iranian news site, Iran’s deputy minister of cinema said, “We designed, and even lobbied, for this to happen.” He hoped to fulfill a mission that Ahmadinejad, a hard-liner widely accused of violating human rights, had given him, to “internationalize Iranian cinema.” In 2009, he and other ministry officials had invited a delegation from Hollywood, including four members of the Academy’s board of governors, to visit Iran for eleven days. They put up the guests at a hotel in Tehran—on their hotel pillows, they placed rosebuds and candies—and showed them “About Elly,” which, according to one of the event’s organizers, “they talked about in amazement.” (The organizer also told an Iranian news agency that the Hollywood guests were detained at the Tehran airport, and that throughout their trip he had to hide his fear that they’d be arrested.)

After “*A Separation*” premiered in Iran, Mostafa Pourmohammadi, who had taken a screenwriting workshop with Farhadi in 2009, said that some of his former classmates called him to say that the movie seemed to draw from a short film that he’d made in Farhadi’s class. Pourmohammadi’s film was about a domestic worker in a middle-class home who tries to hide her job from her husband, because she knows it will insult his honor; in the end, her secret is exposed. “*A Separation*” has a similar plotline. “I had some expectation that a professor, if he gets a good idea from a student, will also support that student and try to help him find his way into the field,” Pourmohammadi told me. He hadn’t been credited, or even informed that a similar story would appear in the movie. “It was very paradoxical,” he said.

“I still loved Farhadi, and I loved the film. It was both an honor and a betrayal.” (Farhadi had portrayed domestic work in “Fireworks Wednesday,” and he told me that, if anything, Pourmohammadi’s plot may have come from that movie.)

Not long afterward, Farhadi told Mani Haghighi that he had written a film called “The Past” and summarized the script. Haghighi was taken aback: the story was a dramatization of an episode from his own life. Years earlier, he had gone to Ontario to finalize his divorce from a woman he’d met when he was studying abroad, and the reunion had been unexpectedly tumultuous. On returning to Iran, he’d shared what had happened with Farhadi: “I told the story in minute detail—not as a narrative but as ‘I can’t believe what happened to me.’”

Farhadi told Haghighi that he was considering him for the lead role in the film, which would be set in Paris. “It’s weird when somebody listens to your life story and goes and writes a script about it, and the way he tells you is ‘Would you like to act in this film?’” Haghighi said. “That’s kind of a roundabout way of communicating something, but it wasn’t offensive to me. It was just, like, Asghar is a very strange man, extremely awkward, very defensive, and protective of his style.”

Haghighi took French classes for six months, to prepare for the role, but Farhadi decided to cast someone else. When “The Past” came out and Farhadi was interviewed by journalists, he mentioned that he’d been inspired by a friend’s anecdote, but he did not name Haghighi. “That was the moment when I just thought, Forget it,” Haghighi said. “This is just too weird. I don’t understand him. He confuses me. He’s making me uncomfortable about so many things.” Haghighi didn’t particularly care if his name was attached to the story, but he found it curious that Farhadi wasn’t saying it. “I think he has this image of himself as a solitary guy with a pack of cigarettes in an empty room writing away, like a novelist,” he said. “But, I mean, film is communal. People come together and make a film, and everyone chips in.”

Haghighi and Farhadi drifted apart. But, Haghighi said, eventually “Asghar called me out of the blue and said, ‘Mani, let’s meet.’ At this point I was, like, ‘Asghar, what do you want?’” He said that Farhadi laughed and explained that he was working on a film in Spain, his first without any

Iranian characters, and he was struggling to capture the way that Westerners respond to infidelity. Haghghi, who has written and directed eight films, invited him to his house. But he said that he told Farhadi, “You know what? I really don’t want to collaborate with you anymore, because I always feel bad about it afterward—even though I don’t really want anything from you except that you just, like, come to me and say, ‘That was really helpful. Thank you.’”

Yet, as Farhadi described his concerns with the script, Haghghi became interested. “Fine, this is what we will do,” Haghghi told him. “I don’t want a contract. I don’t want money. I just want you to acknowledge that this day occurred. So we will take a picture of us in front of the whiteboard as we start writing the script together. Then, when the film comes out, and you don’t acknowledge me, and you just forget who I was, I will show you this picture. At least you will know that there was a moment when this happened.”

They took the photograph. For four months, Farhadi came over to Haghghi’s house nearly every day to write. They finished a forty-two-page treatment for the film, the notes for which are still in a box in Haghghi’s living room. The plan was that Farhadi would send a draft of the script to Haghghi, so they could continue collaborating, but Haghghi didn’t hear from him again until after the film, called “Everybody Knows,” premiered, in 2018. (Farhadi says that the script was based on a revised treatment that he worked on without Haghghi.) The film starred Javier Bardem and Penélope Cruz. Haghghi was one of fourteen people, including Farhadi’s wife and daughter, thanked at the end of the credits, but he was not acknowledged beyond that. He joked to me that, though perhaps he had “a sort of Stockholm syndrome,” he didn’t care. “The question is: why not?” he said. “We wrote the treatment together, and I can prove it. I have all the documents in my house. My thing is: there’s absolutely no way I would have had this much joy and intensity and pleasure in making art. For me, there was never a sense of transaction. It was: here’s this fabulous guy who is brilliant and fun to talk to, and, when we write, it really is a beautiful experience.” He described it as “agape,” a Greek term for love that persists without the expectation of reciprocation. “I acknowledge how deeply painful it is for him to acknowledge me,” Haghghi said. “So I won’t ask him to. Fuck it.”

Taraneh Alidoosti, arguably Iran's most distinguished actress, who has starred in four of Farhadi's films, including "The Salesman," which won an Oscar in 2017, said that she laughed when she saw the title "Everybody Knows," because it seemed to speak to Farhadi's own fears. His films portray characters who lie to protect their social status and are terrified of what people will say about them if their secrets are uncovered. She said that, for a long time, "we always laughed about it, like, 'O.K., everything is yours, Asghar, go on with it.' " She added, "We are talking about a genius, but he is also a genius in the ways that he has to suck the people around him out of their ideas." When she learned a student had claimed that Farhadi took her idea, "I said, 'Of course. I know it. I already know it.' "

Most of Masihzadeh's former classmates accused her of lying. Sedaghat, the student who had worked on the crew of "A Hero," posted a story on Instagram saying that "the plan, idea, and process of making that documentary was completely formed by Asghar Farhadi." He wrote, referring to Masihzadeh's allegation, that he'd refrain from "analyzing why such behavior takes place, and the pathology of it." Twelve students from the class signed a letter stating, "We want to strongly deny the false claim by Mr. Farhadi's student that 'A Hero' is a copy of her documentary, which is a completely reverse account of the truth."

Masihzadeh wanted to meet with Farhadi, but her message to his public-relations team went unanswered. "My hope was that everything could be solved by a very human speech," she told me. "I just wanted him to come to me as a person and say, 'I liked your story. But you are a student, and you should be quiet. Don't tell anyone.' I would say, 'O.K., Mr. Farhadi, thank you for telling me. That's O.K.' "

"A Hero" was Farhadi's first film following Bloody November, a period of civil unrest in the fall of 2019. The government had responded to protests, sparked by rising gas prices, by killing at least fifteen hundred people. Though conservative critics have accused Farhadi of *siahnamaie*—a Farsi word for "showing things through a black lens"—he now came under increasing pressure from the other side, for failing to use his international platform to advocate against a government oppressing its people. At a press conference at Cannes, after the première of "A Hero," a journalist alluded to the fact that the movie's lead actor had previously starred in a movie

financed by the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps. “I see the actor as an actor,” Farhadi responded. “When actors go to play in a movie, they try to play the role as best they can.” The director Mohammad Rasoulof—who had been charged with creating propaganda but was not yet imprisoned—wrote on Twitter, “Dear Asghar Farhadi, according to your argument, Eichmann was just a soldier who tried to do his duty well!”



*“Make sure that both of you get there at the same time.”*  
Cartoon by Sam Gross

Masihzadeh was uncomfortable when critics of Farhadi latched on to her claims in order to further their own arguments. “I don’t like that people are insulting him,” she told me. “I will never insult Mr. Farhadi. I feel that he is a human being, like all other human beings, who made a mistake. I just want him to be honest with me, that’s all.”

Masihzadeh consulted a lawyer, a friend of a friend, who suggested that she contact Farhadi through Sana, an electronic portal in Iran that allows citizens to send legal notices to anyone in the country. In September, 2021, the lawyer sent a message to Farhadi saying that Masihzadeh’s intellectual-property rights had been violated. He requested “dialogue and negotiation in order to achieve peace and reconciliation,” adding, “If this friendly demand is not met, we reserve the right to use the courts.”

There was no response, but, a month later, Masihzadeh was invited to a meeting at the House of Cinema, a film guild whose leadership is controlled by the government. Manouchehr Shahsavari, the House's chief at the time, was there, along with Farhadi's lawyer, Kaveh Rad, and the head of the House's arbitration council, which resolves disputes between filmmakers. Rad informed Masihzadeh that, according to Iranian law, she had committed the crime of defamation: reposting false stories, even if she hadn't written them herself, was illegal. "It's so simple to file a lawsuit," he told her, according to an audio recording of the meeting. "It's very easy." To prevent a complaint from being filed against her in court, he said, she needed to delete her Instagram stories, which she had saved to her profile as highlights.

"A Hero" had not yet premiered in Iran. Masihzadeh's knowledge of the film was based on reports from her friends at Cannes and on international news coverage. She told Rad she agreed that the themes of her documentary had come from Farhadi, but said she was amazed that people were saying the actual story was his, too. "It's been four months that I've been trying hard to reach him," she said. "I keep sending messages and telling everybody who I know who maybe has some contact with Mr. Farhadi to ask him to contact me." She went on, "For me, Mr. Farhadi was the master of everything related to ethics. I don't like to say this word, but lying is very strange."

Shahsavari, the head of the House of Cinema, told Masihzadeh to beware—people could use her accusation as an opportunity to impugn the prestige of Iranian cinema. He reminded her of one of the last scenes of "Casablanca," when the hero, Rick, conceals the truth by telling the husband of a woman he still loves that their romance is over, before helping them escape the Nazis.

Masihzadeh, who knew the scene well, said, "He doesn't lie, but he doesn't tell the truth."

"This is what we've learned from cinema," Shahsavari said. He advised Masihzadeh to think carefully about the moral implications of telling the truth: Was it right to tell someone in a loud voice that she had too many freckles on her face? Or to tell a person that her nail polish was poorly done?

He said, “The difference between telling the truth and shamelessness is a very thin hair.”

The next day, it was announced that “A Hero” had been chosen as the country’s submission for the Oscars. That night, a virtual room was set up in the app Clubhouse to discuss the decision. People complained that a new generation of Iranian filmmakers was not being given the chance to rise, because, whenever Farhadi had a movie, other Iranian directors were ignored. Mehdi Asgarpour, a member of the nine-person committee that made the Oscar selection, was in the Clubhouse room, and he explained that the “people who choose the films for the Oscar in the Academy are very old, and they don’t feel like watching films.” He said that his committee’s strategy was to select whichever Iranian movie, owing to the director’s résumé, would have the best chance of being watched at all.

“Something that came up in our conversations was that there might be a complaint about Farhadi’s film,” one of the moderators of the room said.

Masihzadeh had joined the room, as had Shafiei, the Bamdad Institute administrator. Shafiei informed everyone that Masihzadeh had signed a statement saying that Farhadi had given her the idea for her film.

Masihzadeh interjected, “You were present in the room where Mr. Farhadi told me to sign this letter, do you remember?”

“Yes, I remember exactly,” Shafiei said.

“Mr. Farhadi was also in the room?”

Shafiei, avoiding the question, said, “Were you under torture when you signed the letter?”

“I just asked a question,” Masihzadeh said.

“I want to know,” Shafiei said. “Were you under torture when you signed that letter?”

Two days later, Masihzadeh was invited to a second meeting with the head of the House of Cinema, and she was relieved to learn that Farhadi would be

there. But, at the meeting, Farhadi told her that, when he'd heard her story about feeling forced to sign a statement, he had been shocked. He said that he'd given each of his students a sapling. Yes, they had planted the saplings, but he had provided them with detailed instructions on where to plant them, and on how and when to water the soil. Years later, she had seen him with a piece of fruit and accused him of taking it from her. But, he told her, "it was my tree."

Masihzadeh tried to explain why she'd felt pressured to sign the statement, but Farhadi interrupted her, saying, "This can be recorded, as you are actually accusing me, and we can legally prosecute." He asked, "How does your conscience allow you to tell such lies about a teacher who did all these good things for you?"

"It is not a lie, Mr. Farhadi. You may have forgotten—it's O.K."

When she continued recounting her memory of giving her signature, he told her, "Ma'am, it seems like you are suffering from—I'm sorry, I do not want to use the word." He said he could no longer even understand what she was saying: "You are telling a story that is so unreal." He told her he'd associate her image with ungratefulness for the rest of his life.

After the meeting, Masihzadeh called Ghazaleh Soltani, one of only a few students from the workshop who had openly taken her side. "She was crying a lot, and she couldn't talk," Soltani said. "I told her to please come over, because it was not good for her to be alone." When Masihzadeh arrived, Soltani said, "she was disintegrated. She had been waiting for months for Farhadi, whom she admired like a father, to come to her and say 'O.K., Azadeh, I'm sorry, I did a bad thing.' "

Masihzadeh struggled to sleep, and she began stuttering, something that had never happened before. "My jaw and tongue weren't in control," she said. When Negar Eskandarfar, the director of the Karsnameh Institute, heard Masihzadeh speak on the phone, she was so concerned that she invited Masihzadeh to spend the night at her house. "She wasn't even able to say my name," Eskandarfar told me. "She would say, 'N-n-n-n-negar.' "



*"If you want to turn it off, you just pull this chain until you accidentally turn it back on."*  
Cartoon by Asher Perlman

Eskandarfar related to Masihzadeh's state of mind, because, while working with Farhadi on "A Separation," as an executive producer, she, too, had felt forced to write a letter. After the film was completed, Farhadi had signed an international-distribution agreement—one that Eskandarfar says was financially favorable to him—without her knowledge. According to the original contract, Eskandarfar alone had the authority to make such a deal. When the founder of an international distributor discovered that the original contract had been breached, she sent an e-mail to Farhadi saying that "the release might be blocked." By then, "A Separation" was a favorite to win the foreign-film Oscar. Eskandarfar felt that, to resolve the crisis, she had no choice but to write a letter stating that she transferred her rights to Farhadi—and to backdate it, so it appeared as if it had been drafted before Farhadi signed the international contract. She didn't want to be responsible for preventing the film from receiving the recognition it deserved. "If the whole thing came crashing down, I would have to answer to history and to a whole generation," she told me. (Farhadi disputes Eskandarfar's account, and showed me a letter saying that she had not fully paid the investor's portion of "A Separation.") Eskandarfar said that the payment was a separate issue; owing to sanctions placed on Iranian banks, she was delayed in transferring money.)

Eskandarfar worried that Masihzadeh might break down. “I was concerned that what I went through psychologically—she would go through the same, or even worse,” she said. “When I myself was in that position, I had adopted silence.”

Masihzadeh’s mother flew to Tehran to take care of her. “I am one of those girls who is so outgoing, who likes to travel, who knows so many people,” Masihzadeh told me. But she felt abandoned by most of her friends and colleagues. Soltani said that people attacked her, too, for supporting Masihzadeh. “I think we can really study the mind and culture of Iran through this case,” Soltani told me. “We are always being humiliated throughout the world, and Farhadi gives us a sense of power and progress. I think, from the unconscious part of their mind, people just don’t want to listen to any story that might make our idol, our hero, come down.”

A few days after the second meeting with the head of the House of Cinema, Masihzadeh was asked to attend a third meeting. But, at that point, she couldn’t speak without stuttering, and she no longer believed that anything productive could come of talking to Farhadi, so she declined. A representative from the House of Cinema called her lawyer and offered the equivalent of roughly sixteen hundred dollars for Masihzadeh’s contribution to “A Hero,” which has earned more than 2.8 million dollars in theatrical releases and is now streaming on Amazon Prime, and proposed that she be listed in the credits as a member of a group of researchers. Masihzadeh turned down the offer. “When you humiliate someone by saying, ‘You are a liar, you are deluded,’ and then later say, ‘I want to credit you as a researcher,’ my response is ‘No,’ of course,” she told me. “I was not the researcher of ‘A Hero.’ I was the director of my documentary. No one came to me asking me to do research for ‘A Hero.’” She asked for a credit saying that “A Hero” had been inspired by her documentary, but Rad told me that, given the differences between the two films, “we could not accept this.” The House of Cinema’s arbitration council had already issued a formal decision concluding that Masihzadeh’s claim was false, an “anti-cultural move” that would interfere with “A Hero” becoming “a worthy ambassador and representative of Iranian cinema in the road of its global success.”

Masihzadeh continued reposting Instagram stories in which people remarked on the similarity between her documentary and “A Hero.” A few weeks after

the House of Cinema meetings, Farhadi filed a complaint with the investigative branch of the Tehran Culture and Media Court, accusing Masihzadeh of defamation and of spreading false news. She faced up to a year in prison or seventy-four lashes. Farhadi told me that he hated the idea of bringing a criminal complaint against his student, but said that his lawyer had told him, “We have no choice, because they are spreading these dishonesties on social media.”

To prepare for the trial, Masihzadeh saw “A Hero,” which had premiered in Iran four days after her meeting with Farhadi, six times in a week. One night, as she was going through her notes for court, she remembered a piece of advice that Farhadi had given the screenwriting-workshop students: they should give their characters ordinary, recognizable jobs. She sensed that Farhadi’s favorite character in “A Hero” was the man to whom Rahim is in debt. The man articulates the thematic heart of the movie, asking why a person should be celebrated as a hero for simply returning money as opposed to keeping it. “Where in the world are people celebrated for *not* doing wrong?” he asks.

She realized that the creditor owns a photocopy shop with a copy machine that whirs as he talks. “Mr. Farhadi, why?” she said to herself. “Why did you choose a job like that? Do you yourself know what you did?”

In November, 2021, the investigative branch of the Tehran Media and Culture Court held its first hearing on the defamation case. Masihzadeh told me that she made sure to shower before the hearing, knowing that “they will arrest me for two or three days, until my family brings me money.” She went on, “Because of that signature, I felt that, whatever happens to me, I deserve it.” But in her first conversation with the magistrate deciding the case, she said, he told her that the statement she had signed was legally meaningless. She was still stuttering, but, after the magistrate’s remark, “little by little, I got my voice back,” she said. “I felt released.”

That day, Farhadi made the most explicit political statement of his career. In an interview with a news agency in Tehran, a pro-government filmmaker had accused Farhadi of being “both inside and outside the government,” and of “eating at everyone’s table.” On Instagram, addressing the filmmaker, Farhadi wrote, “I have nothing to do with your regressive way of thinking,

and don't need your praise and support. If the selection of my film 'A Hero' as Iran's official Academy Awards submission has made you reach the conclusion that I'm under your banner, cancel this decision. I don't care." He went on, "Let me put it frankly: I hate you!" He said that he wished to stay in his homeland and continue making films for Iranians, but noted, "It seems that there is a great effort on all sides to discourage this love and hope, some by publishing distorted and fake memories, others by slandering and making false claims."

Masihzadeh said that, when she read the last line, she felt, "he is mentioning me, but it is hidden. And I was not the only one who had that thought. People kept sending it to me and saying, 'He's saying your memories are fake.' "

Two weeks after the first hearing, Masihzadeh flew to Shiraz to visit Mohammadreza Shokri in prison. She had decided to make a documentary about what was happening to her, but, she said, "I was looking at it not as a film but as a document to show to the court."

Shokri was in Adel-Abad prison, which has thousands of inmates, some of them political prisoners who have been sentenced to death. In 2020, there was an international outcry when the prison executed a wrestling champion who had protested Iran's regime; before he died, he said that officers had tortured him, beating his legs and hands with a baton, pouring alcohol in his nose, and pulling a plastic bag over his head. (The government denied this.)

Masihzadeh, with a cameraman and a sound technician whom she'd hired, met Shokri in the prison's visiting room, a long hall with a row of windows near the ceiling. "Hello, Ms. Masihzadeh, how are you?" Shokri said, holding his palm to his chest. It had been seven years since they'd seen each other, and during that time he'd had only one visitor, his mother. He wore an olive-green prison uniform; the stubble on his face had grayed. "I am at your service," he told her.

They sat down at a plastic table. "I want to take you out of here right now," she told him.

"How?" he asked, laughing.

“I have thought of some ways,” she said. “I want to take you to the cinema to watch a movie together.”

Shokri burst out laughing.



*“Have you seen Meredith? She just got her braces off.”*  
Cartoon by Sara Lautman

“You don’t believe me?” she asked. “We want to go to the cinema and watch a movie—will you come with us?”

“If they allow me,” he said, laughing so hard that he put his head down on the table. “I swear to God, you know better, you are just like my sister.”

She had applied for permission to take Shokri to a 10 a.m. screening of “A Hero” at a theatre in Shiraz. Shokri, whose feet were shackled, sat in a plush red seat, next to a prison guard to whom he was handcuffed. The manager of the theatre did not want customers to watch a movie alongside a prisoner, so Masihzadeh, after borrowing money from an acquaintance, had purchased every seat.

Masihzadeh hadn’t told Shokri anything about the movie in advance. When it was over, he was crying. “I’m on edge,” he told Masihzadeh in the lobby of the theatre. “The life story that happened to me . . . they came and used it with a different script.”

When Masihzadeh was making her documentary, Shokri had asked her not to film his brother, who had a disability that made it difficult for him to speak, and she had agreed. In “A Hero,” Rahim has a son with a stutter who becomes a kind of sympathy prop for a charity raising money on his behalf.

“I told you please do not show my brother’s video anywhere,” he told her, crying.

“I am truly sorry,” Masihzadeh said.

“God bless you,” he said. “My brother’s part put a lot of pressure on me.”

“Did your brother pass away, Mr. Shokri?” Masihzadeh asked.

He nodded, still crying.

“My condolences to you, Mr. Shokri,” she said. “I did not know that.”

“He has put this boy’s stuttering instead of my brother’s disability,” Shokri said. He wiped his eyes with the surgical face mask that he had worn during the movie. “Excuse me for saying this—this is really a robbery. He was not supposed to play with my dignity.”

They returned to the prison together, and, as Shokri continued to reflect on the movie, he sometimes called the prisoner Rahim, and sometimes referred to Rahim as “me.” He said, “My feeling is that Mr. Director could have at least come to visit me.” He began imagining how Farhadi might have asked his permission and then told him, “I will help you to get out of here. I will make the movie and help you to get out.” Shokri had a daughter, whom he hadn’t seen for many years. “I would have accepted,” he said.

Masihzadeh bought two textbooks about intellectual-property law. She had decided to represent herself. “Unfortunately, my life was cancelled,” she told me. “From morning to night, I was just thinking about my case and memorizing law sentences.” Often, she showed up for the hearings crying.

The case was focussed on her statements on social media, but she hoped to introduce new evidence, like video footage of the workshop. “People were telling me, ‘You have to sue Farhadi, too, so you can bring all the documents

to the judge,’ ” she said. She called the secretary of the House of Cinema. “I said, ‘Excuse me, please tell Mr. Farhadi that it does not give a good impression to society when a teacher opens a case against his student. Please ask him to take it back. Otherwise I will sue him. I don’t want to, because he is my master, but I have to defend myself.’ ” She didn’t get a response.

On November 30, 2021, nearly a month after Farhadi filed his complaint, Masihzadeh lodged a counterclaim, for plagiarism, intellectual-property theft, and “illegitimate gains by fraud or abuse of privilege.” If convicted, Farhadi could face up to three years in prison and the possibility of handing over the proceeds of “A Hero” to Masihzadeh. From prison, Shokri also filed a complaint against Farhadi, for defamation and “revealing personal information and secrets,” among other allegations. He wrote that he had “granted the exclusive permission of making my real life to Ms. Masihzadeh” and had never given Farhadi permission to depict his story. He described how “A Hero” dramatized the “laryngeal problem of my brother suffering from shortness of breath while speaking”—a subject that he had told Masihzadeh not to mention under any circumstances, because he feared it would be used for “arousing pity.”

When Masihzadeh went to the House of Cinema to pick up a document for the court, she said that Shahsavari, the head of the institution, urged her to retract her complaint. She said that she would, if Farhadi took back his. But, in January, Farhadi filed a second complaint against her, this one for defamation and spreading false news by saying that she’d been coerced into signing a statement. “Why should I force her into doing this?” Farhadi said to me. “It was a very normal letter.”



*Cartoon by Maggie Larson*

Iran has not joined the Berne Convention for the Protection of Literary and Artistic Works, signed by a hundred and eighty-one countries. The country has domestic copyright laws, but they are irregularly enforced, in part because few lawyers specialize in the field. Some Islamic legal scholars have questioned the legitimacy of a right to intellectual property, which is not clearly laid out by early Islamic jurists or by the Hadith, the corpus of sayings passed down from the Prophet Muhammad. Earlier this year, in an online cinema magazine, Behrouz Afkhami, a film director and a former member of the Iranian parliament, characterized the notion of copyright as a Western construct. "Anyone who thinks he has an idea that has not been discussed before usually has not read enough stories," he said.

Masihzadeh's documentary approaches Shokri's story with a level of rigor and curiosity that feels anthropological and almost joyful. Farhadi's film is seeking a different kind of truth; to observe how he takes small details from Shokri's narrative and knits them into intersecting strands of plot is to see the process by which a story becomes art. Even a seemingly minor detail, like Rahim's son's speech impediment, justifies its own existence, altering the film's moral and emotional atmosphere. In an interview at the Santa Barbara International Film Festival, when asked why he'd chosen to include "that heartbreakingly speech impediment, which is so instrumental to the script," Farhadi said that he'd made the choice when he began writing. "The

main character of the film is somebody who can't make decisions," he said. "But, at the end of the film, he makes a decision." Rahim refuses to make a video that might help free him from prison, because it would mean exposing his son's speech impediment to the public. "That decision makes him a hero in front of his child," Farhadi said. "That's why I put in this issue of the kid having a speech impediment—so he can make a decision."

Copyright law differentiates between ideas, which cannot be owned, and the expression of ideas, which can be. Farhadi and his lawyer presented two different arguments to the court: first, that Farhadi had given Masihzadeh the idea to work on Shokri's story, and, second, that it didn't matter who originally found the story, because Shokri's case had been reported in the media before Masihzadeh's documentary, so neither of them could claim ownership of it. The court ordered the Karmameh Institute to give Masihzadeh the roughly sixty hours of videos documenting the entire workshop. Masihzadeh compressed the footage into an hour-long compilation of the moments most relevant to the case, so that the magistrate could analyze whether Shokri's story was an established set of facts, free for anyone to interpret, or whether Masihzadeh had uncovered its contours for the first time.

In March, 2022, after numerous hearings spread over five months, the magistrate issued an eighteen-page opinion, concluding that the story had not been in the public domain. He wrote that the classroom footage showed Masihzadeh introducing the idea of Shokri's story and explaining that there were two newspaper articles about it. Neither was available online, so Masihzadeh had borrowed old copies of the papers that Shokri kept in his prison cell. The magistrate wrote that he had searched for the articles online himself, to no avail.

The magistrate dismissed the complaints filed by Farhadi and Shokri, but he found merit in Masihzadeh's claims, pointing to forty-four segments in "A Hero" that either resembled her documentary or drew from her research. He indicted Farhadi, for violating his student's intellectual-property rights, and referred the case to a criminal court, to determine if Farhadi was guilty of the charge.

Eskandarfar said that one of the twelve students who had signed the statement in support of Farhadi came to her office crying. The student was worried that she could be sued for putting her name on the letter. “She was quite scared,” Eskandarfar told me. “I asked her, ‘Why did you sign that letter?’ And she said, ‘For the same reason Azadeh signed her letter: Farhadi was my teacher, and it was expected of me.’”

After the magistrate’s decision, Masihzadeh and I met in Istanbul, because it was safer to meet there than in Iran, where many journalists have been arrested. Although Masihzadeh’s hair was black, she immediately confessed that she’d dyed it. “My hair went completely white,” she told me. “It happened in one year.” Our first conversation lasted thirteen hours. Masihzadeh was struggling to process how she had become Farhadi’s antagonist, and she seemed bewildered by her own commitment to continuing the fight. “Sometimes I think it is not a good thing,” she told me. “Until this year, I was a very simple kind of girl.” She said that, when Farhadi first filed his criminal complaint, “I thought I would go to court and accept all the consequences and show how weak I was in front of Farhadi, how he betrayed me. I would be the person who is the victim.” She guessed that Farhadi had made this calculation, too. “But suddenly I said, ‘Why? So people can cry for me? So I can close my eyes and give all the power to him? Because it is the rule that women are weak, I should be weak?’”

Although the magistrate had ruled in her favor, Masihzadeh received hundreds of messages attacking her character. She was accused of being a whore, a spy, an opportunist. “It was a good opportunity for her to show her film to many people,” Sedaghat told me. “With my knowledge of her and the lies I have heard from her, I think this is what has happened.” He said that the filmmakers who supported her were jealous of Farhadi’s success.

In a statement on Instagram after the magistrate’s decision, Rad repeated the claim that Shokri’s story had been in the public domain, and, as proof, he posted links to two articles about Shokri in Iranian newspapers. Masihzadeh searched for Shokri’s story online. “I thought, Wow, they have suddenly filled the Internet with this story,” she said. (When I asked a veteran journalist in Iran how such a thing might be possible, he said, “Give me a piece of news, and I can put it on a hundred sites—it’s easy.”)

Masihzadeh was more than thirty thousand dollars in debt, after borrowing money to pay for consultations with lawyers, among other expenses. She had gone for a year with barely an income. She'd been making a short film in the north of Iran, but she said that the producer abruptly pulled out of the project, citing her case with Farhadi. (The producer could not be reached for comment.) "I wanted to confess to you that I am not powerful at all," she told me, crying. "They are killing me in the cinema. My career is going to end."

The international film community did not seem fazed by a decision rendered by a legal system known to be unjust and corrupt. When I met Masihzadeh in Istanbul, Farhadi had just been named a juror for the 2022 Cannes Film Festival. Later, he was elected president of the Zurich Film Festival jury. "It's like the whole world is laughing at me," she said.

Iran's judicial system categorizes crimes as "forgivable" and "unforgivable." For crimes in the first category, victims can ask the state to stop the trial process if they have decided to make peace with the perpetrator. After the first hearing before the criminal court, in June, 2022, Masihzadeh said, one of Farhadi's lawyers, a human-rights advocate who had been hired for the proceedings, suggested that she and Farhadi have a joint press conference and announce that there had been a misunderstanding. Masihzadeh said that she responded, "Please ask Mr. Farhadi to go to the press conference and confess that 'a human makes mistakes, and I am a human being, and I made a mistake.' Then I will take my complaint back."

They did not reach an agreement. Farhadi gave the criminal court a nine-page chart analyzing the alleged similarities between "A Hero" and Masihzadeh's documentary. He put each similarity in one of three categories: "news" (the detail had already been published in an article), "custom" (a character is drawing on a conventional phrase or idea, like comparing a good thing to a miracle), or "idea, plan, guidance" (the films resembled each other because he had instructed his students to adopt his cinematic approach). "Ambiguity in characterization, doubts about the authenticity of conversations and situations, changing the direction of the story, etc., are all constant elements of my work," he wrote in a statement to the court. It seemed like a joke, he added, that he could be accused of stealing these very elements from a student.

The case has now been before the criminal court for five months, but it may be much longer before the judge reaches a decision. Mani Haghighi told me that, when he spoke with Farhadi about the case last summer, it was clear that Farhadi believed he had done nothing wrong: “He was just in shock. He told me, ‘This was my idea. I gave it to the students, and then they came back with the results.’” Haghighi hasn’t watched any of Farhadi’s films since “The Past,” from 2013, because he didn’t want to be asked to speak publicly about Farhadi or his work, but he said, “If you ask me—as a person who hasn’t seen either ‘A Hero’ or the documentary but just knows the guy extremely well—this is not plagiarism. Asghar is far too intelligent and interesting as an artist, as a writer, to do something like that. This is him wanting control over authorship. It’s a character flaw.”

The situation reminded Haghighi of an essay in which the American philosopher Stanley Cavell argues that King Lear’s failure is his inability to acknowledge his children, to see them for who they really are. “That’s where the tragedy takes place in ‘King Lear,’ and it’s kind of similar here,” he said. He assumed that Farhadi would win the legal case, but that the victory would not feel meaningful. He said he’d told Farhadi, “You are a successful, powerful, rich man going against a woman from Shiraz who has none of the things that you have. That’s not a victory. That’s a loss. That’s embarrassing. What you need to do is satisfy her—in the traditional, Shakespearean sense. It’s not about winning the court case. What you want is for her to feel seen and acknowledged—not that you did everything in your power not to do this one thing.”

When I spoke with Farhadi in July, he was preparing to spend several months in America, to work on a new movie. I asked him about a rumor I’d heard, that he was relocating to the U.S. permanently. The Iranian government had been punishing expressions of dissent with increasing severity, and three filmmakers had just been put in prison. “The truth is that this has placed me in a crossroads about what I should do,” Farhadi said. “On the one hand, if I make movies in Iran, my movies are so much more effective—they’re so much more powerful and more important for my people in Iran. On the other hand, if I stay and make these movies, it’s almost as if I’ve accepted the political situation and the normalization of these events, as if I’m indifferent to it.”

Farhadi had a calm, thoughtful presence, even when talking about his own anger. His eldest daughter, who was in graduate school at Pratt, in Brooklyn, was home in Tehran for the summer, and at one point she came to the computer to tell me that I'd written a book called "Getting Lost in Solitude," a collection of three stories taken from *The New Yorker* and republished in Farsi—this was news to me, and it confirmed the chaotic state of copyright norms in Iran. Farhadi said that there were widespread misunderstandings about copyright law; cases dealt with the issue every year. He also said he'd read a story in "Getting Lost in Solitude" that was based in New York, and that maybe one day, if he made a film set in the city, an element of that story would come to him subconsciously and appear in his film. "I will say, 'Yes, I read your article, and it had an effect on me,'" he said. "Every second, we are getting something from the environment, from talking to people, and we are not aware of this."



"Will you need a bag, or will you frantically oscillate between paying and jamming everything into your own tote before the next customer's items start sliding down?"  
Cartoon by Jeremy Nguyen

He told me, speaking through a translator, that when "A Hero" had screened at Cannes they were still finalizing the credits; he'd meant to include Masihzadeh's name, but there had been a mistake. He apologized for talking about his student at all. "It doesn't mean she's not a good person," he said. "I made all my films about the fight between good and good, and I understand her. When I was young, I loved my first film—it was not a very good film,

but at the time I believed, ‘This is mine.’ I can understand her feeling about her documentary.”

I repeated an observation he’d once made about the structure of his films: a small mistake sets off a series of unintended consequences, spiralling into a crisis. I asked whether this formula applied to the situation he was facing now. “Yes, I am writing notes about this issue every day, and maybe one day I will write a script about it,” he said. “On the one side, I am surprised. On the other side, I am happy, because I can say, ‘O.K., my films are realistic films.’”

He shared a piece of writing advice that he sometimes gives students, to convey how a set of facts can be interpreted in different ways: “Imagine that one day my friend calls and says, ‘I haven’t seen you for such a long time—I really miss you.’ We set up a meeting in a café, and we say normal things. The friend notices that the sun is bothering my eyes and offers to change seats. He says he is bored, and he’d like to go on a long trip. Then I pay for the coffee and say to myself, ‘This person never pays—why do I always have to pay for his coffee?’ Then we say goodbye.

“I have a question,” he went on. “Was there anything strange about the story I told you?”

I said no.

“Everything was very normal,” he said. “This can happen to anyone. Now imagine if that friend of mine were to leave, get into an accident, and die that same day. All those moments begin to take on different meanings. I might say to myself, ‘He was so kind—he was concerned with the sun hurting my eyes.’ And then I say, ‘I’m such a bad person for thinking about how he made me pay for his cup of coffee.’ Then I think, He said he wanted to go on a long trip. Maybe he was talking about death.”

Farhadi continued, “In my movies, it’s the same thing. When some tragedy takes place, we stack everything up like dominoes, and everything becomes a sign of something else.” He said that, when Masihzadeh came to the set of “A Hero” to see him, “she was insulted, but it was a very normal situation.” On the day that she signed the statement, he said, “it was a very simple

letter, not even on letterhead—just on a plain piece of paper. But now that this whole thing has come about, it has found a different meaning for her.”

In August, the director of the Cinema Organization of Iran, a branch of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, announced that soon several filmmakers in Iran would be banned from making movies. Although there has been no official ruling, Farhadi told me he has learned that he’s on the list. He believes it may be because he ignored warnings not to screen “A Hero” at the Jerusalem Film Festival. “Different parts of the government called my assistant and other people and delivered their message,” he said.

A few weeks later, a twenty-two-year-old woman, Mahsa Amini, died in the custody of Iran’s morality police; she had been arrested and taken to a “reeducation center” because her hijab did not properly cover her hair. On Instagram, Farhadi posted a picture of Amini in her hospital bed before she died and wrote, “We have put ourselves to sleep against this unending cruelty. We are partners in this crime.”

Protests broke out in more than ninety cities, where women took off their hijabs and burned them in the streets. A well-known actress dared to appear on Iranian television without her hair covered. “This is not true,” she explained, referring to the hijab. “Enough lies.” Government security forces tear-gassed and shot at protesters, killing hundreds of people, including at least twenty children. “I would sit in my car and go around the streets of Tehran,” Farhadi told me. “What I was seeing—you don’t need to be political. As a human being, what I was seeing was moving.” He posted a video on Instagram urging artists around the world to stand in solidarity with “progressive and courageous women leading protests for their human rights.” He said, “This society, especially these women, has travelled a harsh and painful path to this point, and now they have clearly reached a landmark.”

A few days later, on state television, a journalist closely allied with the government mocked Farhadi’s statement. “Mr. Farhadi calls himself a defender of women’s rights,” he said. “Now he has to answer Ms. Azadeh Masihzadeh’s accusation. . . . Why did he deprive her of her rights?” He added, “I want to give some good news to the dear audience: one of the American media outlets will talk about this case in October. It will be

published in a magazine, and there will be an answer to this story.” An Iranian journalist posted the TV clip on Twitter, writing that the program’s open criticism of Farhadi signalled the “beginning of a new era of the Islamic Republic’s approach to cultural, artistic and media production.”

One tragedy of an unjust regime is that it makes unethical acts seem relatively inconsequential: Farhadi may have abused his power over a student, but the desire to hold him accountable is complicated by the fact that he is being oppressed by a much larger force. Masihzadeh’s story, which until now the government media has largely ignored, is again being taken out of her hands. In the name of her rights, the state seems to be offering a justification for turning against the nation’s most prominent filmmaker.

Khodsiani, the author of “Car Dwellers,” the play that Farhadi directed as a student, told me that, even before Farhadi lost the government’s favor, “ninety-nine per cent of Iranian cinema blamed her.” He predicted that, if the court found Farhadi guilty, people would say that it was only because he had provoked Iran’s authorities: “They will say she is a puppet of the government,” he said.

Farhadi is now in Los Angeles, working on his next movie, but his wife and daughters are still in Tehran. “My heart is there,” he told me, in October. Even if he couldn’t make another movie under the current regime, he said, “I will go back again.” Mani Haghighi recently attempted to leave Iran, for the U.K. première of his new film, at the BFI London Film Festival, but his passport was confiscated at the airport and he was prevented from boarding the plane. He said that Iranian authorities seemed to be creating an “exile in reverse”: artists can neither work nor leave. A day after his passport was taken, a fire broke out at a prison in Tehran where hundreds of protesters and political prisoners, including the filmmaker Jafar Panahi, were incarcerated. Panahi survived, but he described the fire as “the worst hours” of his life.

Farhadi once told a Persian film journal that, in the course of making movies, his definition of morality had changed, to the point that he could no longer categorically state that lying was immoral. “It seems that today, with the conditions and complexities that humanity has to live with . . . part of these value judgments and definitions no longer have much use,” he said. Farhadi denied many of the details in this story, including comments that

were captured on video. He said that people had told me lies—a word that he later said I shouldn't use, because the Farsi word for lie, *dorough*, has a less severe meaning, and so should instead be translated as “wrong information.” He also told me that the story was unethical. I found it hard not to believe him and not to feel guilty. In eight hours of phone calls with him, I perhaps experienced something similar to what his colleagues felt when they wondered if, for the sake of art, they should suppress their own perspective. There is no clear threshold at which crediting someone, artistically or intellectually, is required. I adopt other people’s ideas, too, mining conversations with friends and colleagues for insights—sometimes even using their words. Even the themes of this article are derivative. I was influenced by Farhadi’s films, to the point that I had to resist the temptation to turn the article into a story of “good versus good,” a framework that is both revelatory and potentially dangerous, because it removes the moral valence of causing harm.

Despite feeling betrayed or diminished by Farhadi, nearly everyone I interviewed said that they wanted him to continue making films. His moral lapses seem closely related to some of his most profound insights. He approaches the ideal of truth from a kind of critical distance, as if at a slight remove—a position that may give him access to one of his most persistent themes, the ways in which good lives are maintained by various shades of selfishness and delusion. “The day I decide to retire from filmmaking, if I ask myself what I’ve done in cinema that makes me happy, and if I’m being honest,” he has said, “I’ll say that it’s all the attention I’ve paid to lying and subterfuge.”

In one of our last conversations, when I expressed discomfort with the claim that I was willfully failing to see the truth, Farhadi softened, explaining that he was going through one of the most emotionally difficult moments of his life. He didn’t know if he could return to Iran, or if he would ever see his parents again. He didn’t know when, or if, his wife and children could get out of the country to be with him. He told me, “I acknowledge that I have problems in my character,” but he said that these flaws were not related to the issues I had written about. “I’m not white,” he said. “I’m not black. I’m gray—I’m a gray person.” He also said that discussing copyright at this moment felt petty: “There are more important issues to talk about in Iran right now.”

But, for some of his female colleagues, the protests had opened up the possibility of no longer having to fulfill expectations that felt like lies. Golshifteh Farahani, the Iranian actress who went into exile in Paris, said that she had decided to speak out in part because she felt that aspects of Farhadi's behavior "reflect the ways of the Islamic Republic." He had become so powerful that he could tell people what was true and what wasn't. "When I was interrogated, and an intelligence person put a paper in front of me, I froze," she said. "I knew it wasn't true, but I signed it because of the pressure. And look at the parallel: Farhadi did the same thing to his student."

Taraneh Alidoosti, the actress who starred in four of Farhadi's films, described Farhadi as a "premier gaslighter," but she said that she, like many of his colleagues and friends, nonetheless cared for him and was in awe of his mind. "We never wanted to be the scandal that would ruin his career—we would never do that, and he knew it," she said. She described Masihzadeh as "the last one that you would have ever thought would fight back—a girl from Shiraz, an enthusiast."

Years ago, Farhadi said in an interview that he had always wanted to "make a film about somebody who makes a mistake, something he didn't mean to do, and then spends the film trying to convince the other person that he really didn't mean it, and to ask for his forgiveness." He continued, "What I really want is to put the viewers in the shoes of the character in a way where they ask themselves, 'If I were him, would I forgive the man or not?' And many people don't forgive him. Which means that many of us have this potential violence in us."

Last year, Masihzadeh would have forgiven Farhadi if he had simply told her she had given him a good idea, but in time, as she'd come to feel that he had an almost spooky capacity for control, she'd become bitter. She said that Farhadi had continued to show her: "I have the power to omit you, to clear you, to not let your voice be heard." Her view of his work was gradually souring—now the only Farhadi films she could talk about with unmarred admiration were two of his earliest ones. Her anger, though, had a limit. "I will be heartbroken if I ever hear that Mr. Farhadi has stopped making films," she told me. During the second week of protests, Masihzadeh called almost everyone she knew: "Even people who were against me"—in her fight with Farhadi—"I just wanted to forgive them, to be united for a bigger

reason.” More recently, though, she told me that she’s no longer sure that she would be upset if Farhadi stopped making films. Maybe she just wouldn’t care.

She described a central theme in “A Hero”: the idea that broken societies, in their longing for a hero, elevate some people to an untenable position, in which they can’t make any errors. “Mr. Farhadi, look at your film,” she said. “If you watch carefully, you will understand that this is very easy to solve. You can say, ‘O.K., I made a mistake.’ But he never does that.” She cried as she spoke. “I am so sorry Mr. Farhadi is like that. I’m so sorry that Mr. Farhadi doesn’t watch his movies carefully. I think he is making films for other people. He doesn’t make films for himself.” ♦

**By Hannah Goldfield**

**By Nate Odenkirk**

**By John Cassidy**

**By Katie Barsotti**

# **Annals of Education**

- [The Right-Wing Mothers Fuelling the School-Board Wars](#)

# The Right-Wing Mothers Fuelling the School-Board Wars

Moms for Liberty claims that teachers are indoctrinating students with dangerous ideologies. But is the group's aim protecting kids—or scaring parents?

By [Paige Williams](#)



In August, 2020, Williamson County Schools, which serves more than forty thousand students in suburban Nashville, started using an English and Language Arts curriculum called Wit & Wisdom. The program, which is published by Great Minds, a company based in Washington, D.C., wasn't a renegade choice: hundreds of school districts nationwide had adopted it. Both Massachusetts and Louisiana—states with sharply different political profiles—gave Wit & Wisdom high approval ratings.

The decision had followed a strict process. The Tennessee State Board of Education governs academic standards and updates them every five or six years, providing school districts with an opportunity to switch curricula. Williamson County Schools assembled a selection committee—twenty-six parents, twenty-eight elementary-school teachers of English and Language

Arts. The committee presented four options to teachers, who voted on them in February, 2020. Wit & Wisdom was the overwhelming favorite. After the selection committee ratified the teachers' choice, the school board, which has twelve members, unanimously adopted Wit & Wisdom, along with a traditional phonics program, for K-5 students.

Great Minds's promotional materials explain that Wit & Wisdom is designed to let students "read books they love while building knowledge of important topics" in literature, science, history, and art. By immersing students in "content-rich" topics that spark lively discussion, the curriculum prepares them to tackle more complicated texts. The materials are challenging by design: studies have shown that students read better sooner when confronted with complex sentences and advanced vocabulary. Wit & Wisdom's hundred and eighteen "core" texts, which range from picture books to nonfiction, emphasize diversity, but not in a strident way. They provide "mirrors and windows," allowing readers both to see themselves in the stories and to learn about other people's lives. The curriculum assigns or recommends portraits of heralded pioneers: Leonardo da Vinci, Sacagawea, Clara Barton, Duke Ellington, Ada Lovelace. The lessons revolve around readings, augmented with paintings, poetry, speeches, interviews, films, and music: in the module "A Hero's Journey," students explore an illustrated retelling of the Odyssey alongside the Ramayana, a Sanskrit epic, while also discussing "Star Wars." A section on "Wordplay" pairs "[The Phantom Tollbooth](#)" with Abbott and Costello's "Who's on First" routine.

Elsewhere in Tennessee, teachers were saying that Wit & Wisdom improved literacy. The superintendent of Lauderdale County, a rural area where nearly a quarter of the population lives below the poverty line, published an essay reporting that his district's teachers had noticed "an enormous difference in students' writing" after implementing the curriculum. Wit & Wisdom encourages students to discuss readings with their families—a father in Sumner County, northeast of Nashville, was pleased that his daughters now talked about civil rights and the American Revolution at dinner.

Then, seemingly out of nowhere, Wit & Wisdom became the target of intense criticism. At first, the campaign in Williamson County was cryptic: stray e-mails, phone calls, public-information requests. Eric Welch, who was first elected to the school board in 2010, told me that the complainers

“wouldn’t just e-mail *us*—they would copy the county commission, our state legislative delegation, and state representatives in other counties.” He said, “It was obviously an attempt to intimidate.”

The school board is an American institution whose members, until recently, enjoyed visibility on a par with that of the county tax collector. “There’s no glory in being a school-board member—and there *shouldn’t* be,” Anne McGraw, a former Williamson County Schools board member, said on a local podcast last year. Normally, the district’s public meetings were sedate affairs featuring polite exchanges among civic-minded locals. The system’s slogan was: “Be nice.”

In May, 2021, as the district finished its first academic year with Wit & Wisdom, women wearing “Moms for Liberty” T-shirts began appearing at school-board meetings. They brought large placards that contained images and text from thirty-one books that they didn’t want students to read. In public comments and in written complaints, the women claimed that Wit & Wisdom was teaching children to hate themselves, one another, their families, and America. “[Rap a Tap Tap](#),” an illustrated story about the vaudeville-era tap dancer Bill (Bojangles) Robinson, by the Caldecott medalists Leo and Diane Dillon, harped on “skin color differences.” A picture book about seahorses, which touched on everything from their ability to change color to the independent movement of their eyes, threatened to “normalize that males can get pregnant” by explaining that male seahorses give birth; the Moms suspected a covert endorsement of “gender fluidity.” Greco-Roman myths: nudity, cannibalism. (Venus emerges naked from the sea; Tantalus cooks his son.)

The Moms kept attending school-board meetings and issuing complaints. Curiously, though they positioned themselves as traditionalists, they often borrowed “woke” rhetoric about the dangers of triggering vulnerable students. Readings about Ruby Bridges—who, in 1961, became the first Black child to attend an all-white school in New Orleans—exposed students to “psychological distress” because they described an angry white mob. (Bridges, in [a memoir](#) designed for young readers, wrote, “They yelled at me to go away.”) The Moms also declared that, though they admired Martin Luther King, Jr.,’s iconic line about judging others “on the content of their character,” the book “[Martin Luther King, Jr. and the March on Washington](#)

was unacceptable, because it contained historical photographs—segregated drinking fountains, firefighters blasting Black Americans with hoses—that might make kids feel bad. The Moms considered it divisive for Wit & Wisdom to urge instructors to remind students that racial slurs are “words people use to show disrespect and hatred towards people of different races.”

At one meeting, Welch watched, stunned, as a Moms member said, “You are poisoning our children,” and “Wit & Wisdom must go!” Welch told me, “They went from zero to a hundred. Everything from them was aggressive, and threatening in nature.” He said, “It was not ‘Let’s have a dialogue.’ It was ‘Here are our demands.’”



*You're unlikely to find anyplace on the market that is truly impregnable.*  
Cartoon by Frank Cotham

When the women in T-shirts first showed up, Welch had never heard of Moms for Liberty, and he didn’t recognize its members. The group’s leader, Robin Steenman, was in her early forties, with shoulder-length blond hair; in coloring and build, she resembled [Marjorie Taylor Greene](#). Board of Education members struggled to understand why she’d inserted herself into a matter that didn’t concern her: Steenman had no children in the public schools.

Moms for Liberty members soon escalated the conflict, publicly asserting that Williamson County Schools had adopted Wit & Wisdom hurriedly, and

in violation of state rules. The school board still wasn't sure what Moms for Liberty was—who founded it, who funded it. Nevertheless, the district assembled a reassessment team to review the curriculum and the adoption process. At a public “work session” in June, 2021, the team announced that, after a preliminary review, it hadn’t found any violations of protocol. Teachers had spent a full workday familiarizing themselves with Wit & Wisdom before implementing it. As Jenny Lopez, the district’s curriculum director, explained, “Teachers actually had more time than they’ve *ever* had to look at materials.”

The superintendent, Jason Golden, urged his colleagues to take parental feedback seriously, including worries that certain Wit & Wisdom content was too mature for young kids. For example, there were gruesome details in books about shark attacks and about war. Golden told the board, “These are real concerns.” Yet Golden also recalled telling a Moms for Liberty representative how much he trusted the district’s processes for evaluating curricula.

The review committee ultimately concluded that Wit & Wisdom had been an over-all success; still, administrators decided to survey teachers quarterly about how the curriculum was working. They limited access to the gorier images in one Civil War book and imposed similar “guardrails” involving “[Hatchet](#),” a popular young-adult novel in which a character attempts suicide. “[Walk Two Moons](#),” a novel by the Newbery Medal winner Sharon Creech, about a daughter’s quest to find her missing mother, was eventually removed from the Williamson version of the program, not because its content was deemed objectionable but, rather, to adjust the pacing of one fourth-grade module. Golden, who is tall and genial, told the board members, “The overwhelming feedback that we got was: ‘Man, can’t we just read something *uplifting* in fourth grade?’ And we felt the same way!”

At the work session, Golden shared one end of a conference table with Nancy Garrett, the board’s chair. Garrett, who has rectangular glasses and a blond bob, is from a family that has attended or worked in Williamson County Schools for three generations. She had won the chairmanship, by unanimous vote, the previous August. At one point, she asked an assistant superintendent who had overseen the selection and review of Wit & Wisdom

whether “the concept of critical race theory” had come up during the process. No, the assistant superintendent said.

Moms for Liberty members were portraying Wit & Wisdom as “critical race theory” in disguise. Garrett found this baffling. C.R.T., a complex academic framework that examines the systemic ways in which racism has shaped American society, is explored at the university level or higher. As far as the board knew, Williamson County Schools had never introduced the concept. Yet there had been such a deluge of references to it that Garrett had delved into her old e-mails, in an unsuccessful attempt to identify the origins of the outrage. She told her colleagues, “I guess I’m wondering what *happened*.”

In September, 2020—four months after the murder of [George Floyd](#), two months before the Presidential election, and a month into Williamson County Schools’ use of Wit & Wisdom—[Christopher Rufo](#), a conservative activist, appeared on [Tucker Carlson](#)’s show, on Fox News, and called critical race theory “an existential threat to the United States.” Rufo capitalized on the fact that, given C.R.T.’s academic provenance, few Americans had heard of the concept. He argued that liberal educators, under the bland banner of “diversity,” were manipulating students into thinking of America not as a vibrant champion of democracy but as a shameful embodiment of white supremacy. (As he framed things, there were no in-between positions.) Rufo later called C.R.T. “the perfect villain”—a term that “connotes hostile, academic, divisive, race-obsessed, poisonous, elitist, anti-American views.”

Rufo found a receptive ear in President [Donald Trump](#), who was already ranting about “[The 1619 Project](#),” the collection of *Times Magazine* essays in which slavery is placed at the heart of the nation’s founding. On Twitter, Trump had warned that the Department of Education would defund any school whose classroom taught material from the project. Trump conferred with Rufo and banned federal agencies from conducting “un-American propaganda training sessions” involving “critical race theory” or “white privilege.” Trump said that Black Lives Matter protests were proliferating not because of anger over police abuses but because of “decades of left-wing indoctrination in our schools.” Establishing a “1776 Commission,” he urged “patriotic moms and dads” to demand that schools stop feeding children “hateful lies about this country.” (The American Historical Association

condemned the Administration’s eventual “1776 Report,” highlighting its many inaccuracies and arguing that it attempted to airbrush history and “elevate ignorance about the past to a civic virtue.”)

Nearly nine hundred school districts nationwide were soon targeted by anti-C.R.T. campaigns, many of which adopted language that closely echoed Trump’s order not to teach material that made others “feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress on account of his or her race or sex.” In some red states, the vague wording was enshrined as law. Republicans filed what became known as “anti-C.R.T.” bills; they were seemingly cut and pasted from templates, with similarly phrased references to such terms as “divisive concepts” and “indoctrination.”

Williamson County Schools was uneventfully wrapping up its first term with Wit & Wisdom when, in early December, 2020, the American Legislative Exchange Council, which generates model legislation for right-leaning lawmakers, hosted a Webinar about “reclaiming education and the American dream.” A representative of the Heritage Foundation, the conservative think tank, warned that elements of a “Black Lives Matter curriculum” were “now in our schools.” Rufo—correctly predicting that [Joe Biden](#), then the President-elect, would abolish Trump’s executive order—urged state legislators and governors to take up the fight.

Continuing the agitation wasn’t just an act of fealty to Trump; it was cunning politics. The fear that C.R.T. would cause children to become fixated on race has resonated with enough voters to help tip important elections. Last November, [Glenn Youngkin](#), a candidate for the governorship of Virginia, won an upset victory after repeatedly warning that the “curriculum has gone haywire”—and promising to sign an executive order banning C.R.T. from schools. Jatia Wrighten, a political scientist at Virginia Commonwealth University, [told the Washington Post](#) that Youngkin had “activated white women to vote in a very specific way that they feel like is protecting their children.”

Days after the *alec* Webinar on “reclaiming education,” three women in Florida filed incorporation papers for Moms for Liberty, Inc., later declaring that their “sole purpose” was to “fight for parental rights” to choose what sort of education was best for their kids. One of the organization’s founders,

Tina Descovich—who had recently lost reelection to the school board of Brevard County, Florida, after opposing pandemic safety protocols—soon appeared on [Rush Limbaugh](#)'s show. Declaring plans to “start with school boards and move on from there,” she said of like-minded parents, “It sounds a little melodramatic, but there is *evil* working against us on a daily basis.” *maga* media—“Tucker Carlson Tonight,” Breitbart—showcased Moms for Liberty. Media Matters, the liberal watchdog, [argued](#) that influential right-wing media figures were essentially “recruiting their eager audience” for the Moms’ campaign.

Moms for Liberty, which is sometimes referred to as M4L or MFL, is so new that it is hard to parse, from public documents, what its leaders are getting paid. (The founders say that the chairs of local chapters are volunteers.) The group describes itself as a “grassroots” organization, yet its instant absorption by the conservative mediasphere has led some critics to suspect it of being an Astroturf group—an operation secretly funded by moneyed interests. Moms for Liberty registered with the I.R.S. as the kind of social-welfare nonprofit that can accept unlimited dark money.

The leaders had deep G.O.P. connections. One, Marie Rogerson, was a successful Republican political strategist. The other, Bridget Ziegler, a school-board member in Sarasota County, is married to the vice-chair of the Florida G.O.P., Christian Ziegler, who [told the Washington Post](#), “I have been trying for a dozen years to get twenty- and thirty-year-old females involved with the Republican Party, and it was a heavy lift to get that demographic. . . . But now Moms for Liberty has done it for me.” Moms for Liberty worked with the office of Florida’s governor, [Ron DeSantis](#), to help craft the state’s infamous “Don’t Say Gay” legislation, which DeSantis signed into law this past March; it forbids instruction on “sexual orientation or gender identity” in “kindergarten through grade 3 or in a manner that is not age-appropriate.”

A national phalanx of interconnected organizations—including the Manhattan Institute, where Rufo is a fellow, and a group called Moms for America—supported the suite of talking points about C.R.T. [According to NBC News](#), in a single week last year Breitbart alone published seven hundred and fifty posts or articles in which the theory was mentioned. Glenn

Beck, the right-wing pundit, declared that C.R.T. is a “poison,” urging his audience, “Stand up in your community and fire the teachers. Fire them!”

On March 15, 2021, Rufo, in [a tweet thread](#), overtly described a key element of the far right’s evolving strategy: “We have successfully frozen their brand —‘critical race theory’—into the public conversation and are steadily driving up negative perceptions. We will eventually turn it toxic, as we put all of the various cultural insanities under that brand category.” He added, “The goal is to have the public read something crazy in the newspaper and immediately think ‘critical race theory.’ ”



*The line in the script was actually ‘Woof woof,’ but, when we started shooting, ‘Bow wow’ came out, and the rest is history.”*  
Cartoon by Benjamin Schwartz

Williamson County has some of Tennessee’s top-ranked schools. “That’s why people *move* here,” Eric Welch, the longtime school-board member, told me. He describes the school system as an economic “asset that pays off.” Williamson County has the state’s second-lowest unemployment rate and the highest property values: the median home value exceeds eight hundred thousand dollars.

It is not a diverse place. Eighty-eight per cent of residents are white. Ninety-five per cent of the school district’s teachers are white. Until September, all twelve school-board members and the superintendent were white. A Confederate monument anchors the town square of the county seat, Franklin.

The square was publicly marked as a former slave market only three years ago. The Confederate flag still flies prominently in some areas. When the white father of Black children recently complained about this at a school-board meeting, a man in the audience sneered, “We’re in the *South!*”

In 2018, several parents joined forces to point out that schools in Williamson County could work harder to be welcoming to children of color. The group, which became known as the Cultural Competency Council, included Black, Asian American, Jewish, and L.G.B.T.Q.+ residents. A school-district official who served as a liaison to the council created videos for teacher training and development, including one about privilege. That video’s language had clearly been calibrated to preëmpt defensive reactions: a narrator underscored that the concept of privilege was “not meant to suggest that someone has never struggled or that success is unearned.” Even so, the conservative media pounced: the *Tennessee Star* [said](#) that the video took viewers on a guilt trip about “the perks white males supposedly have that others do not, America’s supposed dysfunctional history, and how unfair it all is.” Such views have played well in a county that Trump carried twice, both times by more than twenty points. (The Cultural Competency Council has been disbanded.)

In 2020, Revida Rahman and another parent co-founded an anti-racism group, One WillCo, after Black parents chaperoning field trips to local plantations were astonished to see slavery depicted as benign. Rahman told me that some presentations suggested that “the slaves didn’t really have it that bad—they lived better than we do, they had their food provided, they had housing.” She added, “I beg to differ.” At a school that one of Rahman’s sons attended, some white classmates had mockingly linked arms as if to represent Trump’s border wall.

One WillCo especially wanted the school system to address the fact that it had a record of disproportionately punishing students of color—a recent revelation. Moreover, some teachers used racially insensitive materials in their classrooms: in an assignment about the antebellum economy, students were instructed to imagine that their family “owns slaves,” and to “create a list of expectations for your family’s slaves.”

On February 15, 2021, the school board hired a mother-and-son team of diversity consultants to gauge the depth of the district's problems with racism, bullying, and harassment, and to recommend solutions. A conservative board member, Jay Galbreath, forwarded information about the consultants to influential local Republicans, including Gregg Lawrence, a county commissioner, and Bev Burger, a longtime alderman in Franklin. In an e-mail, Lawrence complained to Galbreath that hiring the consultants was the type of thing that would lead to "the politicization of teaching in America where every subject is taught through the lens of race." He wrote, "These young people who have been protesting, looting and burning down our cities in America are doing so because they don't see anything about America worth preserving. And why is that? Because our public schools and universities taught them that America is a systemically racist nation founded by a bunch of bigoted slave owning colonizers."

This exchange was eventually made public through an open-records request, which also revealed that Burger had helped edit what has been called the foundational complaint against Wit & Wisdom: a month after the diversity consultants were hired, the parents of a biracial second grader e-mailed school officials to complain that the curriculum had caused their son to be "ashamed of his white half." Burger wrote of her edits, "See what you think." She cc'd Lawrence, who forwarded the communications to Galbreath and another school-board member, Dan Cash, a fellow-conservative who had won his seat in 2014, during a Tea Party wave. The county commissioner told the school-board members, "Here is more evidence that we are teaching critical race theory," and urged them to "get rid of" Wit & Wisdom.

A few weeks later, on March 22nd, the school board's monthly meeting took place on Zoom, because of the pandemic. Robin Steenman appeared before the board for the first time. Wearing a cream-colored sweater and dangly earrings, she presented herself simply as a concerned resident who wanted school officials to reject any diversity proposal that involved "The 1619 Project, critical race training, intersectionality." She worried aloud that a recent proposal in California to mandate a semester of ethnic studies would be "paraded as a blueprint for the rest of the country."

Steenman, who appeared to be reading from notes, asserted that parents in Virginia were being blacklisted for “speaking out.” In Pennsylvania, an elementary school had “forced fifth graders to celebrate Black communism and host a Black Power rally.” In North Carolina, a teacher had described parents as “an impediment to social justice.” In Ohio, C.R.T. “had to be removed from the curriculum, because the students were literally turning on each other.” Steenman cited no sources. She said, “If you give them an inch”—then changed course. Dropping the “them,” she declared, “If you give *one* inch to this kind of teaching, then you’re gonna subject yourself to the whole spectrum.”

Several weeks later, Steenman started the Williamson County chapter of Moms for Liberty, building on the e-mail sent by the parents of the biracial child and harnessing the furious energy of families who were already accusing the school board of “medical tyranny” for requiring students to wear masks. This vocal minority had been particularly incensed at one school-board member, Brad Fiscus, a former science teacher whose wife, Michelle, a pediatrician, was Tennessee’s chief vaccine officer. Williamson County is a Republican pipeline to state and national office: the governor, Bill Lee, is from there; Marsha Blackburn, the *maga* senator, began her political career as a county commissioner there. In July, 2021, the state fired Michelle Fiscus after conservative lawmakers objected to her “messaging” in support of [covid-19](#) vaccinations; afterward, Brad Fiscus resigned from the school board and the family moved to the East Coast. For right-wing extremists, the obvious lesson was that rage tactics worked. That August, one school-board meeting nearly ended in violence when two enraged men followed a proponent of masks to his vehicle, screaming, “We can find you!”

Moms for Liberty emphasizes the importance of being “joyful warriors”—relatable women who can rally their communities. A founder once explained, “This fight has to be fought in their own backyard.” The organization may have seen Steenman as particularly well suited to winning over Williamson County residents: she was a former B-1-bomber pilot now raising three small children. Her husband, Matt, was also ex-Air Force—fighter jets. They moved to Williamson County five years ago, from Texas.

Another member of their fraternity was John Ragan, a former Air Force fighter pilot who'd been elected as a Republican to the Tennessee General Assembly in 2010. Ragan, a former business consultant from the city of Oak Ridge, had been listed as an alternate on *alec*'s education task force. (He says that he does not recall attending any meetings.) He'd once crafted legislation to ban K-8 teachers from using materials "inconsistent with natural human reproduction" in the classroom. (It failed.)

Early last year, as Moms for Liberty was receiving its first wave of national media attention, Ragan introduced "anti-C.R.T." legislation. He wanted to ban teaching about white privilege or any other concepts that might cause students "discomfort or other psychological distress" because of their race or sex. The wording parroted talking points from Moms for Liberty, which parroted Trump, who parroted Rufo. Around the time that Moms for Liberty members began showing up at Williamson County school-board meetings, [Steve Bannon](#), the former Trump adviser, said on his video podcast that "the path to save the nation is very simple—it's going to go through the school boards." Calling mothers "patriots," he urged a "revolt."

At a committee meeting of Tennessee House members, Ragan promoted his legislation by claiming that he'd heard about a seven-year-old Williamson County girl who had had suicidal thoughts, and was now in therapy, because she was ashamed of being white. (No such family has ever publicly come forward.) Two Black Democrats sharply challenged Ragan. Harold Love, a congressman from Nashville, asked him whether the proposed legislation would make it illegal for teachers to even mention "The 1619 Project." When Ragan replied that instructors could talk about it as long as they taught "both for and against," Love said, "It's kind of hard to be 'for or against' slavery." G. A. Hardaway, a congressman from Memphis, argued on the House floor that a law limiting discussion of race, ethnicity, discrimination, and bias contradicted "the very principles that our country was formed on."

Ragan pushed ahead, arguing that "subversive factions," "seditious charlatans," and "misguided souls" were creating "artificial divisions" in a "shameless pursuit of political power." His bill passed. Senator Raumesh Akbari, who chairs the Tennessee Senate Democratic Caucus, said, "This

offensive legislation pretends skin color has never mattered in our country,” adding that “our children deserve to learn the full story.”

Once the Governor signed the bill into law, Moms for Liberty would be able to devise complaints arguing that certain elements of public instruction violated a Tennessee statute. Violators could be fined hundreds of thousands of dollars, potentially draining resources. Steenman, appearing on Blackburn’s video podcast, “Unmuted with Marsha,” let slip a tactical detail: the moment Tennessee’s new law took effect, Moms for Liberty would have a complaint against Wit & Wisdom “ready to go” to the state. Blackburn praised Steenman as “the point of the spear.”



*“It’s sheer arrogance to believe that your voice is louder than the din of crackers in my mouth.”*  
Cartoon by William Haefeli

Steenman also appeared on Glenn Beck’s show. As if speaking directly to Governor Lee, she said, “Stop serving the woke-left lobby!” Beck said, “Bill Lee, shame on you!” Lee signed the bill into law on the eve of the anniversary of George Floyd’s murder.

Steenman raised Moms for Liberty’s visibility by putting on events—rented plants, live music, charcuterie. One of them, C.R.T. 101, took place in May, 2021, before a large audience at Liberty Hall, a Franklin auditorium in a renovated stove factory filled with shops and restaurants. A clinical psychologist from Utah, Gary Thompson, came onstage and declared that

C.R.T. engenders shame, which can trigger depression, which could “be pushing your kids to suicide.” Thompson, who is Black, showed photographs of his multiracial family: he and his wife, a white pediatric neuropsychologist, have six children. Thompson joked, awkwardly, that the overwhelmingly white audience sure didn’t *look* like members of the K.K.K. He noted that he’d voted for [Barack Obama](#), and said that he approved of Williamson County Schools’ hiring of diversity consultants to assess such problems as racial bullying. He opposed C.R.T., though, because it framed people of color as “victims.” Choking up, Thompson said, “That is *not* the legacy that my parents left me.”

Moms for Liberty often advances its cause by enlisting Black conservatives, or by borrowing snippets from their public comments. The organization has posted a video clip of Condoleezza Rice saying that white kids shouldn’t have to “feel bad” in order for Black children to feel empowered. Steenman has collaborated with Carol Swain, a political scientist at Vanderbilt, who vocally opposes same-sex marriage and once described Islam as “dangerous to our society.” This past January, Moms for Liberty sponsored a conference organized by Swain, American Dream, whose branding heavily featured images of Martin Luther King, Jr. Before the event, King’s daughter Bernice [tweeted](#) an admonition about those who took her father’s “words out of context to promote ideas that oppose his teachings,” adding that Steenman’s chapter, having “sought to erase him,” was now “using him to make money.”

At the C.R.T. 101 gathering, the author of the original complaint against Wit & Wisdom revealed herself onstage to be Chara Dixon, a mom in her forties. Nervously holding a copy of her speech, she introduced herself as a naturalized citizen. (She had emigrated, decades earlier, from Thailand.) Dixon, whose husband, Brian, is white, recalled helping their seven-year-old son with a Wit & Wisdom assignment about a “lonely little yellow leaf.” The audience laughed when she declared, “It was boring.” A book about a chameleon: “Another boring story!” Her son had also read about King’s “I Have a Dream” speech, which was “beautiful and uplifting”; but the tale of Ruby Bridges and the “angry white mob” was depressing. Dixon said that in her son’s childhood world “there’s no color.” (She soon became Moms for Liberty’s treasurer.)

Dixon seemed to conflate Wit & Wisdom and C.R.T. Steenman, in an official complaint to the Tennessee Department of Education, wrote, “There does not have to be a textbook labeled ‘Critical Race Theory’ for its harmful tenets to be present in a curriculum.” At the C.R.T. 101 event, she took the stage and told the audience that the threat of “Marxist” indoctrination at school could be vanquished by opposing “activist” teachers, curricula, and diversity-driven policy. An m.c. cheerily ended the evening by reminding everyone that “today’s kids are tomorrow’s voters.”

The Williamson County chapter of M4L held its next big event, Let’s Talk Wit & Wisdom, at a Harley-Davidson franchise in Franklin. Steenman had been having trouble finding a venue when the dealership’s owner offered his showroom. Calling the man a “true patriot,” Steenman presented him with a folded and framed American flag that, she said, had accompanied her on a bombing mission in Afghanistan.

Moms for Liberty had invited the entire school board to the event, but the only members who showed up were the group’s three clear allies. One, a former kindergarten teacher who opposed masking, liked to hug people during breaks at school-board meetings. The other two were Cash and Galbreath, both of whom were up for reëlection on August 4, 2022.

Steenman, gesturing toward a large screen behind her, showed the “findings” of a Moms for Liberty “deep dive” into Wit & Wisdom. She elicited gasps from the audience by saying that the curriculum contained books that depicted “graphic murder,” “rape,” “promiscuity,” “torture,” “adultery,” “stillbirth,” and “scalping and skinning,” along with content that her organization considered to be “anti-police,” “anti-church,” and “anti-nuclear family.” Rhetoric about “empowering the students” was suddenly “everywhere,” she complained. Without presenting any evidence, she claimed that elementary-school students now needed counsellors to help them “overcome the emotional trauma” caused by Wit & Wisdom.

Steenman’s events often strayed far from the particulars of Williamson County Schools. At one of them, the proceedings were interrupted when someone walked onstage and breathlessly announced news from Virginia: Glenn Youngkin, the candidate for governor who’d crusaded against C.R.T., had won. The audience cheered as if Youngkin were one of their own.

Steenman's claims about Wit & Wisdom were so tendentious that several ardent supporters of the public schools looked her up on social media. Among other things, they discovered a Twitter account, @robin\_steenman. On August 9, 2020, Matt Walsh—a columnist for the Daily Wire, the conservative media site co-founded by the pundit Ben Shapiro—had shared a thread by a Philadelphia teacher who expressed concern that meddlesome parents might overhear classroom conversations during online learning and undermine “honest conversations about gender/sexuality.” (The Daily Wire is headquartered in Nashville, and Shapiro has propagated Moms for Liberty’s messaging.) In a retweet of Walsh, @robin\_steenman had posted, “You little brainwashing assholes will never get hold of my kids!” After Eric Welch and others publicly challenged Steenman about the tweet—and another one declaring that her children would never attend public schools—the account vanished. (Steenman agreed to an interview, but did not keep the appointment. A Moms for Liberty spokesperson, calling my questions “personal in nature,” largely declined to provide answers.)

Privately, certain defenders of Wit & Wisdom referred to Moms for Liberty members as the Antis. In a sly move, some adopted the seahorse as a symbol of what one parent described to me as “the resistance.” This summer in Williamson County, I saw seahorse stickers on cars and laptops. When I met Rahman for lunch, she was wearing seahorse earrings. At a school-board campaign event for a candidate who opposed Moms for Liberty, a volunteer wore a seahorse pendant on a necklace, alongside a gold cross. At least one person connected to Moms for Liberty had become concerned about the group’s motives and tactics, and was secretly monitoring them from the inside. This person told me, “I’m the one in the trench, and I don’t want to get caught.”

Many Moms and like-minded parents wanted both Wit & Wisdom and Superintendent Golden gone. Golden’s contract was up for annual review before the 2021-22 school year began. (One Moms for Liberty opponent recently tweeted, “The m.o. nationwide is to fire Supt’s and hire ideologues.”) At a meeting where the board planned to vote on Golden’s future, one of the superintendent’s many supporters implored the elected officials to “hold the line” against the “steady attack on our public schools.” The Antis were louder. A man wearing an American-flag-themed shirt shouted, “We, the parents, are awake, we’re organized, and we’re *extremely*

pissed off.” He declared, “We’re gonna replace every board member in here with people *just like me*. Nothing would make us happier than to surround you with a roomful of American patriots who believe in the Constitution of the United States and Jesus Christ above!”

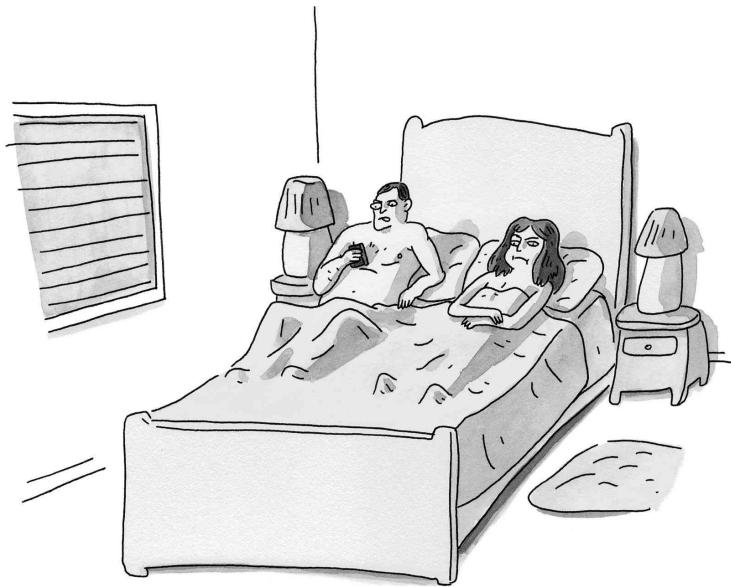
The Antis jeered at speakers who expressed support for Golden or the district’s diversity efforts. They mocked a woman whose daughters had experienced anti-Asian slurs at school. The mom told the board, “I’ve heard people say that teaching these parts of our history is ‘racist’ or ‘*traumatic*.’ What’s *traumatic* is Black, Latino, Asian, and L.G.B.T.Q. kids going to schools where they face discrimination and don’t feel safe.” A local psychologist, Alanna Truss, said, “I’m yet to see a child in my practice who’s been traumatized by our county’s curriculum choices. I have, however, seen *many* students experiencing trauma due to being discriminated against and bullied within our schools, related to race, religion, gender, and sexuality.”

Six of the school-board members, who serve four-year terms, were coming up for reelection in August of 2022. (The other six will finish their terms in 2024.) As the Wit & Wisdom furor grew, another component of the right-wing assault on schools locked into place: last fall, state lawmakers passed a bill legalizing partisan school-board elections. Moms for Liberty called the change “a *HUGE* step forward.”

Educators and policymakers have long believed that public education should operate independently of political ideology. As the magazine *Governing* put it last year, “The goal of having nonpartisan elections is not to remove all politics” but “to remove a conflict point that keeps the school board from doing its job.” For people who target school boards, conflict has become a tool. In Texas, a *PAC* linked to a cell-phone company which recently funded the *maga* takeover of several school boards paid for an inflammatory mail campaign blaming a classroom shooting on administrators who had “stopped disciplining students according to Critical Race Theory principles.” In August, during a panel at [\*cpac\*](#), the gathering of conservatives, the former Trump official Mercedes Schlapp warned that, though Republicans were focussed on federal and state elections, “school board elections are *critical*.” The panel’s title, “We Are All Domestic Terrorists,” derisively referred to recent instructions from Attorney General [Merrick Garland](#) to the F.B.I. for

devising a plan to protect school employees and board members from threats of violence.

Joining Schlapp onstage was Ryan Girdusky, the founder of the 1776 Project *pac*, which funnels money to G.O.P. candidates in partisan school-board races. Girdusky boasted that, in 2021, his *pac* “did fifty-eight elections in seven states and we won forty-two.” Girdusky said that his goal this year is to boost at least five hundred school-board candidates nationwide. He urged the audience to “vote from the bottom up—go from school board and then go all the way up to governor and senator, and we’ll have conservative majorities across the entire electorate.”



“My phone is definitely spying on me—I just got an ad for ‘bad sex.’”  
Cartoon by Zachary Kanin

Last November, mere weeks after Tennessee lawmakers voted to allow partisan school-board races, Steenman launched a *pac*, Williamson Families. Its approach was markedly similar to that of Southlake Families, a Texas *pac* whose orchestrated takeover of a school board in that state has led to attempted book bans. Both *pacs* have worked with Axiom Strategies, a political-consulting firm that has helped seat high-profile Republicans, including *maga* figures. Allen West, the chair of the Texas G.O.P., has urged Southlake Families to export its takeover blueprint to suburbs nationwide. Wealthy suburbs are some of America’s purplest districts, and winning them may be key to controlling the House, the Senate, and the Presidency. Anne

McGraw, the former Williamson County Schools board member, told me that the advent of Moms for Liberty “shows how hyperlocal the national machine is going with their tactics.” She observed, “Moms for Liberty is not in Podunk, America. They’re going into hyper-educated, wealthy counties like this, and trying to get *those* people to doubt the school system that brought us here.”

Steenman’s *pac* quickly took in about a hundred and seventy-five thousand dollars—an unusually large amount for local politics in Tennessee. The *pac* held an inaugural event featuring John Rich, a country singer who had appeared with Trump on “The Celebrity Apprentice.” Rich, who has no apparent connection to Williamson County, has contributed at least five thousand dollars to Steenman’s *pac*.

Progressives and policy experts have long suspected that right-wing attacks on school boards are less about changing curricula than about undermining the entire public-school system, in the hope of privatizing education. During the *alec* Webinar about “reclaiming education,” the Heritage Foundation representative declared that “school choice” would become “very important in the next couple of years”; controversies about curricula, he said, were “opening up opportunity for policymakers at the state level” to consider options like charter schools.

This isn’t the first time that the culture wars have taken aim at public education. But Rebecca Jacobsen, a professor of education policy at Michigan State University, believes that this era is different, because social media has made it easy for national operatives to stage “a coördinated, concrete” scare campaign designed to drive parents toward alternatives to public schools: “The message, at its core, is: ‘Beware of your public-education system. Make sure your kid’s teachers aren’t up to something.’”

The timing of “anti-C.R.T.” legislation is no coincidence. Instead of putting forth a platform, the Republican Party has tried to maintain power by demonizing its opponents and critics as sinister and un-American. In the lead-up to the midterms, the G.O.P.’s alarmism about critical race theory has accompanied fear-mongering about L.G.B.T.Q.+ teachers being “groomers.” Conservative media aggressively promote both campaigns. From Fox News

to the Twitter account Libs of TikTok, the messaging has been consistent: many public-school teachers are dangerous.

Lee, the Tennessee governor, has leveraged this discord while trying to reformulate school funding: in January, he announced plans to create fifty new charter schools in partnership with Hillsdale College, a private Christian school in Michigan, whose president, Larry Arnn, headed Trump's 1776 Commission. The plan partially collapsed after a Tennessee television station aired footage of Arnn, during a private appearance in Williamson County, comparing public education to "the plague" and arguing that teachers are educated in "the dumbest parts of the dumbest colleges in the country." J. C. Bowman, the executive director and C.E.O. of Professional Educators of Tennessee, called Arnn's comments "reprehensible and irresponsible." Even Republican politicians backed away. The speaker of the Tennessee House, Cameron Sexton, acknowledged that Arnn had "insulted generations of teachers who have made a difference for countless students."

Moms for Liberty's role in the broader war on public schools became ever clearer in July, at the group's inaugural national summit, in Tampa. DeSantis, who delivered a key address, was presented with a "liberty sword." Another headliner was Trump's former Education Secretary, [Betsy DeVos](#), whose family has connections to Hillsdale. To an enthusiastic crowd that included Steenman, DeVos declared that the U.S. Department of Education—the agency that she once oversaw—should not exist.

Early this year, Eric Welch, the school-board member, was leaning against seeking reelection. Both of his sons had graduated—he was the one who handed them their high-school diplomas when they crossed the stage. His wife, Andrea, wanted him to take it easy for a while.

School-board service, which is time-consuming and can be tedious, requires diplomacy, a breadth of knowledge, and the ability to make complex, well-informed decisions. At meetings, Welch, who considered ideologues and bullies a threat to public education, often rebutted misinformation about *covid-19* and Wit & Wisdom. At one meeting, he'd pointedly read aloud from a title that he found on a Moms for Liberty site: the book, written by a follower of the John Birch Society, referred to Black people as "pickaninnies." Rahman, the co-founder of One WillCo, the anti-racism

organization, told me, “He came with *all* the receipts.” Welch’s detractors had declared him arrogant and rude; Rahman called him “a strong advocate for what’s *right*.<sup>1</sup>”

For Welch’s seat, Steenman’s *pac* backed William (Doc) Holladay, an optometrist who, like Steenman, had no children in Williamson County Schools. Holladay had shown up at school-board meetings to denounce C.R.T. as “racist.” On Facebook, where he’d railed against pandemic protocols, his posts were routinely flagged or removed because they contained misinformation. His top “news” sources included the *Epoch Times*, which regularly promotes right-wing falsehoods.

Last year, Charlie Wilson, the president of the National School Boards Association, characterized local school-board members as fundamental guardians “of democracy, of liberty, of equality, of civility and community, and of the Constitution and the rule of law.” Holladay, a felon who believes the conspiracy theory that Trump is still the “*legitimate* President,” seemed more like an opportunist. In 2008, he’d pleaded guilty to multiple counts of prescription fraud and forgery; the Tennessee Department of Health had put him on probation for “immoral, unprofessional or dishonorable conduct,” noting that he had also worked “while impaired.” The state licensure board later added five more years of probation upon discovering that he’d made “untruthful” claims about “professional excellence or abilities.” (Holladay told me that he has turned his life around.)

When Welch heard that Holladay and other figures he considered to be unsuitable were seeking authority over the schools, he tweeted, “I’m running.” He told his wife, “I don’t know that I can walk away and let these people be in charge.” The “Tennessee School Board Candidate Guide” notes that, for the office of school board, “the best, most capable and most farsighted citizens of each community should be drafted.”

During the campaign, Holladay tried to frame Welch, a lifelong Republican, as a “liberal” for having supported masking and Wit & Wisdom. Welch publicly noted that he had interned for Senator John Warner, of Virginia, and attended the Inauguration of [George W. Bush](#). Holladay, who had no military service, bragged about being a patriot; Welch is an Army veteran.

In a Q. & A. published by One WillCo, candidates were asked to describe their involvement with Williamson County Schools. Welch explained that, in addition to serving on the executive board of the district's parent-teacher association, he had "run wrestling tournaments as a booster fundraiser, spray painted end zones, worked concessions, volunteered for holiday shows setup/breakdown, built theatre sets, cleaned bleachers, mopped floors." Holladay's answers: "Speaking out at school board meetings"; "Helping to lead activist groups in order to effect needed changes." When asked why he was running, he said that "the school board has largely been operating in a manner that runs counter to the conservative principles that most people who live here hold dear." This and other answers betrayed profound ignorance of what a school board does.

Moms for Liberty had been broadening its campaign against Wit & Wisdom and was now targeting reading materials available in school libraries, which provided access to the Epic app, a repository of nearly fifty thousand children's books. In a local news segment, Steenman read aloud, "I-is-for-intersex," from a book called "[The GayBCs](#)," which was available on Epic, and said, "What parent wants to explain 'intersex' to their child that, at this point, doesn't even understand sex?"

Holladay tried a similar maneuver. During a live-streamed candidate forum, he handed his interviewer a passage from "[Push](#)," the acclaimed novel by Sapphire, and asked him to read it aloud. (If this was the same passage that Holladay later showed me on his cell phone, it began, "Daddy sick me, disgust me, but he sex me up.") The interviewer was Tom Lawrence, a gentlemanly fixture on AM radio who has been called "the voice of Williamson County." Lawrence scanned the text and declined to share it with viewers, saying, "It has words like 'orgasm' in it." Holladay, noting that the book could be found in one of the local high schools, declared, "Whoever is responsible for putting that book in the library should be arrested." (In a tweet, Welch expressed astonishment that a school-board candidate would "call for the arrest of a WCS librarian.")

## NOVEMBER SURPRISES



Cartoon by Roz Chast

As Holladay campaigned, he repeatedly invoked the nationwide partisan divide. In an interview that appeared on YouTube, he declared that conservatives were fleeing blue states for places like Williamson County because the left was trying to “destroy the last remaining refuges of conservatism and patriotism.” If Williamson County “goes blue,” he said, the rest of the state would follow, and if Tennessee “doesn’t stay red” it will be “a huge blow to the country.”

On Election Day, Welch, a wiry ex-wrestler, erected a pole tent outside Hunters Bend Elementary School, a voting precinct. Holladay’s supporters set up nearby. I arrived to find Welch, wearing khaki shorts and a “*re-elect eric welch*” T-shirt, squaring off in the parking lot with a Holladay supporter who was saying, angrily, “I’ve laid people *out* for less than that!”

The man, Brian Russell, described Welch as the aggressor—“He shoulder-checked me”—but multiple witnesses characterized the altercation differently. Meghan Guffee, a Republican running for reelection to the county commission, told me that Russell had demanded to know why Welch had blocked him on social media. Welch, trying to walk away, had responded, “I’m ending this conversation. You’re an ass.”

In a public Facebook post, Russell had declared Welch to be “as bad as a pedophile.” Guffee said that she’d heard Russell, in the parking lot, accuse Welch of having “voted to teach third graders how to masturbate.” (Russell denies this.) Guffee was particularly appalled that her six-year-old daughter, who was with her at the voting site, had witnessed Russell’s hostility. She told me, “That is not how this community does things.”

Before leaving the school grounds, Russell, a painting contractor in his early fifties, told me that he was angry about Wit & Wisdom: “When my daughter comes home and her best friend is Black, and she’s wondering why ‘I’m bad because I’m white. . . .’” This and other comments suggested that his children attended local schools. In fact, Russell’s three children lived in his native state of Ohio.

Throughout America, *maga* types were targeting education officials. In Maine, a man plastered a school-board member’s photograph on a sign and surrounded it with rat traps, [telling NBC News](#), “This is a war with the left,” and “In war, tactics and strategy can become blurry.” A member of the Proud Boys ran for a school-board seat in California. On September 27th, the American Libraries Association sent an open letter to the F.B.I. director, Chris Wray, asking for help: in the previous two weeks alone, “bombing or shooting threats” had forced the temporary closing of libraries in five states. Tennessee was one of them.

In Williamson County, Moms for Liberty members couldn’t claim ignorance of the beliefs of some of the candidates they and Steenman’s *pac* supported. Williamson Families donated a thousand dollars to the campaign of an ex-marine who was running for county commissioner, and who had publicly warned the school board, “In the past, you dealt with sheep. Now prepare yourselves to deal with lions! I swore an oath to protect this country from all enemies—foreign and domestic. You harm my children, you become a domestic enemy.”

That guy lost. So did Holladay. Welch beat him by five hundred and fifty-nine votes. Welch was surprised that *anybody* had voted for Holladay, later telling me, “If you had to *design* a candidate who is unqualified and should not be on a board of education, that’s what he’d look like.”

Candidates backed by Moms for Liberty members won, however, in two other districts. A Republican who appeared to have no connection to the public schools beat Ken Chilton, who ran as an independent and who, the day after the election, tweeted that Tennessee lawmakers' decision to allow partisan school-board elections had "created a monster."

Jay Galbreath, the board member who had forwarded the e-mails about diversity consultants to other conservative politicians, had found himself challenged from the right flank—by a M4L-affiliated candidate whose campaign signs said "*reject crt.*" As if to prove his opposition to Wit & Wisdom, Galbreath had posted publicly, on Facebook, that progressives were "constantly looking at ways to inject and normalize things like gender identity, the black lives matter movement, and LGBTQ by weaving it into curriculum." Williamson Strong, a *pac* composed of local progressives who have long defended the public schools, called for Galbreath's resignation, noting, "This is pure hate speech, and it has *NO* place in a position of influence or power over 40,000+ children and their education. It has no place in Williamson County, period." The group, whose leaders include Anne McGraw, the former school-board member, observed, "All filters have apparently been obliterated now that he's competing for votes against an MFL-endorsed candidate." Despite the controversy, Galbreath won reëlection.

A month before the vote, a civil action was filed against Wit & Wisdom: the parents of an elementary-school student sued the school board and various administrators in the district on behalf of a conservative nonprofit that they had just launched, Parents' Choice Tennessee. The lawsuit's complaint echoed Moms for Liberty's assertions that the curriculum's "harmful, unlawful and age-inappropriate content" represented a "clear violation of Tennessee code." If the lawsuit succeeds, Williamson County Schools may have to find a new curriculum and pay fines. (Citing the litigation, Williamson County Schools officials declined to comment for this article.)

The lawsuit may have been designed, in part, to give the impression that there was more local opposition to Wit & Wisdom than actually existed. There are eighteen thousand students in the district's elementary schools, but according to a district report only thirty-seven people had complained about

the new curriculum. Fourteen of the complainants had no children in the system.

Rebecca Jacobsen, the Michigan scholar, looks for clues in such data. She said, of the vitriol toward school boards, “Is this a blip, and we’ll rebound? Or are we chipping away at our largest public institution and the system that has been at the center of our democracy since the founding of this country?” She noted that some Americans “don’t trust their *schools* and *teachers* anymore,” adding, “That’s *radical*.<sup>1</sup>”

Moms for Liberty’s campaign, meanwhile, continues to widen. The organization now claims two hundred and forty chapters in forty-two states, and more than a hundred thousand members. It has thrown a fund-raising gala, featuring [Megyn Kelly](#), in which the top ticket cost twenty thousand dollars. In late October, a spokesperson for the Moms told me that the organization—ostensibly a charity—is a “media company.”

The slick rollout of Moms for Liberty has made it seem less like a good-faith collective of informed parents and more like a well-funded operation vying to sway American voters in a pivotal election year. Steenman’s chapter recently announced a slate of upcoming talks: “Gender Ideology,” “Restorative Justice,” “Comprehensive Sex Ed,” “History of Marxism in Education.” I asked Jacobsen whether she thinks that Moms for Liberty members actually believe that a curriculum like Wit & Wisdom damages children. “I don’t know what anybody *believes* anymore,” she replied. “We seem to have lost a sense of honesty. It may just be about power and money.”♦

By Emma Green

By Jay Caspian Kang

By Jay Caspian Kang

By Louis Menand

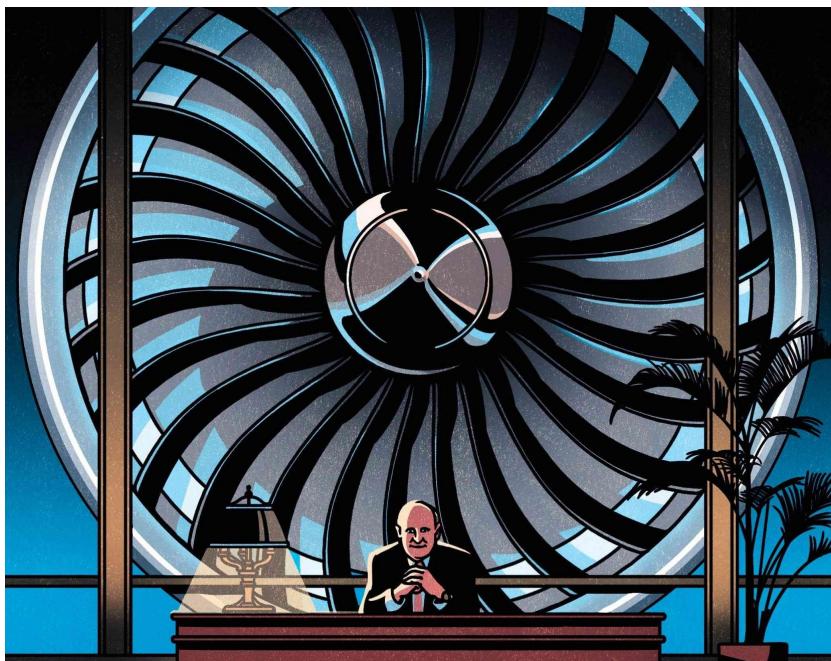
## **Books**

- Was Jack Welch the Greatest C.E.O. of His Day—or the Worst?
- Briefly Noted

# Was Jack Welch the Greatest C.E.O. of His Day—or the Worst?

As the head of General Electric, he fired people in vast numbers and turned the manufacturing behemoth into a financial house of cards. Why was he so revered?

By [Malcolm Gladwell](#)



In late April of 1995, Jack Welch suffered a crippling heart attack. He was then in full stride in his spectacular run as the C.E.O. of General Electric. He had turned the company from a sleepy conglomerate into a lean and disciplined profit machine. Wall Street loved him. The public adored him. He was called the greatest C.E.O. of the modern age. He was a plainspoken, homespun dynamo—a pugnacious gnome with a large bald head and piercing eyes that made him as instantly recognizable as Elon Musk is today.

But, that spring, his fabled energy seemed to flag. He found himself taking naps in his office. He went out to dinner one night with some friends at Spazzi, in Fairfield, Connecticut, for wine and pizza. Then, when he got home and was brushing his teeth, it happened. Boom. His wife rushed him to the hospital at 1 a.m., running a red light along the way. When they arrived,

Welch jumped out of his car and onto a gurney, shouting, “I’m dying, I’m dying!” An artery was reopened, but then it closed again. A priest wanted to give him last rites. His doctor operated a second time. “Don’t give up!” Welch shouted. “Keep trying!”

The great C.E.O.s have an instinct for where to turn in a crisis, and Welch knew whom to call. There was Henry Kissinger, who had survived a triple bypass in the nineteen-eighties, and was always willing to lend counsel to the powerful. And, crucially, the head of Disney, Michael Eisner, one of the few C.E.O.s on Welch’s level. Just a year earlier, Eisner had survived an iconic C.E.O. cardiac event: a bout of upper-arm pain and shortness of breath that began at Herb Allen’s business conference in Sun Valley, Idaho, and ended with Eisner staring God in the face from his bed at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, in Los Angeles. The first chapter of Eisner’s marvellous autobiography, “Work in Progress” (1998), is devoted to the story of his ordeal, complete with references to Clint Eastwood, Michael Ovitz, Jeffrey Katzenberg, the former Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell, Sid Bass, Barry Diller, John Malone, Michael Jordan, Bill Gates, Warren Buffett, David Geffen, “my friend” Dustin Hoffman, Tom Brokaw, Robert Redford, Annie Leibovitz, Steven Spielberg, and at least three prominent cardiologists. In one moment of raw vulnerability, he called his wife over to ask about the doctor who was slated to do his surgery: “Where was this guy trained?” he asked. He explains, “She knew I was hoping to hear Harvard or Yale.” No such luck. “‘Tijuana,’ she replied, with a straight face.”

The point is that when a corporate legend has a blocked artery, expectations are high. So after Welch published his own memoirs, the enormous best-seller “[Jack: Straight from the Gut](#)” (2001), one of the first questions that interviewers on his book tour wanted to ask was what he had learned from his brush with death.

In an interview Welch gave in 2001 for the PBS show “CEO Exchange,” hosted by Stuart Varney, Varney brought up his quintuple bypass.

*Varney:* Was that a real change in life for you? A change in perhaps your spiritual approach?

*Welch:* No.

In the Eisnerian tradition, a heart attack is an opportunity to take stock, to reassess—to perform a kind of psychic stock repurchase. Eisner was certain he'd glimpsed that kind of emotional recalibration when Welch phoned him that day from his sickbed and peppered him with questions about what he was facing. Eisner recalled years later, "As I was talking to him, I was thinking, Oh. This tough man's human."

So it's understandable that Varney tried again, asking him whether he was moved by a sense of his own mortality.

*Welch:* You know what I thought, Stuart? Larry Bossidy, my friend at AlliedSignal, asked me, he said, "Jack, what were you thinking of just before they cut you?" I said, "Damn it, I didn't spend enough money."

*Varney:* No. Now wait a minute. Wait a minute. Hold on. Hold on.

*Welch:* I did.

*Varney:* No, no.

*Welch:* I did.

Most C.E.O.s, in their public appearances, are circumspect, even guarded. Welch was the opposite, which explains why he has been the subject of so much attention and scholarly interest. There were boxcars full of books written about him during his time at the helm of G.E., still more during his long retirement (some of them written by Welch himself), and even today, in the wake of his death, in 2020, the financial writer William D. Cohan has delivered the absorbing seven-hundred-page opus "[Power Failure](#)" (Portfolio), a book so comprehensive it gives the impression that all that can be said about Jack has finally been said.

Then again, maybe not. He was kind of irresistible:

*Varney:* It never crossed your mind that this is a major event? Your life is threatened.

*Welch:* It happened so fast that I honestly didn't think that. We all are products of our background. And I didn't have two nickels to rub

together, so I'm relatively cheap. And I always bought relatively cheap wine. And I always looked at the wine price in the restaurant. And I could never, I swore to God I'd never buy a bottle of wine for less than a hundred dollars. That was absolutely one of the takeaways from that experience.

*Varney*: After the operation, you would not buy a bottle of wine for under a hundred dollars. And before the operation you wouldn't be seen dead drinking a bottle of wine over a hundred dollars.

*Welch*: Right.

*Varney*: Is that it?

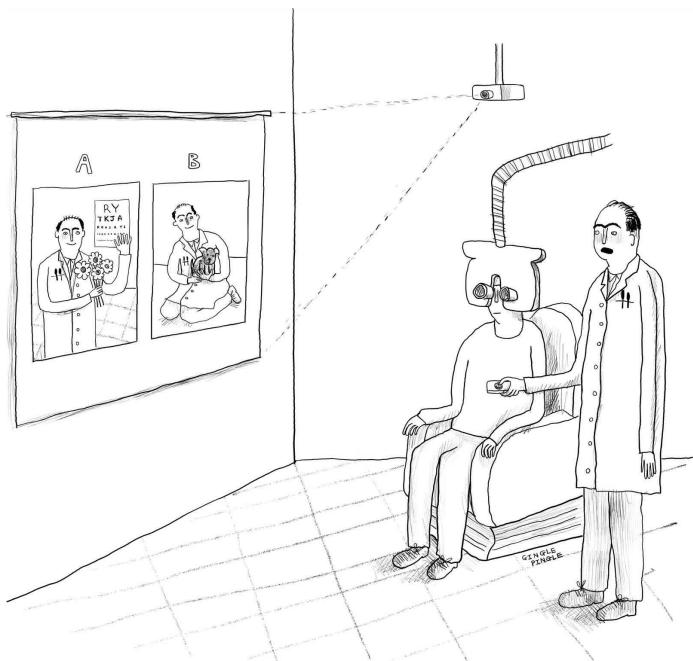
*Welch*: That's about it.

By midsummer, Welch was in the office, doing deals. In mid-August—a scant three months after his bypass—he made the finals of a tournament at the illustrious Sankaty Head Golf Club, on Nantucket.

General Electric was formed in 1892, out of the various electricity-related business interests of Thomas Edison, the most storied of all American inventors. J. P. Morgan was the banker who put the deal together; the Vanderbilt family was involved, too. From the beginning, G.E. was resolutely blue-chip. In the course of the twentieth century, it was G.E., more than, say, A.T. & T. or General Motors, that was the preëminent American corporation. It was the stock that grandmothers from Greenwich owned.

During the nineteen-seventies, the company was run by the English-born Reginald Jones, a tall, austere man who was once named the most influential businessman in the country by his peers in corporate America. “Reg Jones, who is decisive, elegant, and dignified, is also described by GE people as sensitive and human; and the affection the GE family has for him is obvious,” Robert L. Shook wrote in his book “[The Chief Executive Officers: Men Who Run Big Business in America](#),” from 1981. “He’s quick to praise and hand out credit,” one executive told Shook. “He’ll always say, ‘I don’t do it all by myself.’ ”

Jones made two hundred thousand dollars a year and lived in a modest Colonial in Greenwich. Jimmy Carter twice tried to get him to join his Cabinet. Several times a year, Jones would travel to Harvard Business School and then to Wharton, at the University of Pennsylvania, to take the pulse of the schools where the next generation of G.E.'s leadership was almost certainly incubating. The bookshelf in his office held volumes devoted to sociology, philosophy, business, and history.



*"And, with these lenses, can you tell me which image will look better on my dating profile?"*  
Cartoon by Gingle Pingle

"The General Electric culture is best exemplified by the concern we have for each other," Jones told Shook. "Let's say one of our fellows has a problem—perhaps a serious illness or a death in the family. I will usually do what I can for the family. And here we think that is quite natural."

Within two years of securing the top job, in 1972, Jones was already planning for his succession. And, from the beginning, he could not take his eyes off a young manager at G.E.'s operations in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, who ran the company's metallurgical and chemical divisions. As Jones confided to a labor historian years later:

I went to the vice president in charge of the executive manpower development and I said give me a list of the contenders for my job! And he gave me a list with 17, 18 people on it. And I looked at the list and I

said, well, you don't have Jack Welch there? Well, he said, well he's so young. He's kind of a, you know, not a typical G.E. guy. He's a bit of a wild man and so on and so forth. I said, put his name on the list.

Why was Jones so drawn to Welch? The conventional criticism of hiring at the upper echelons of corporate America is that like tends to promote like. The Dartmouth grad who summers in Kennebunkport meets the young Williams grad who summers in Bar Harbor and declares, By golly, that young man has the right stuff! But in deciding to turn G.E. over to Welch, Jones was replacing himself with his opposite. Cohan writes:

"He was regal," explained one former GE executive. "Jones just had an aura about him. I remember being in a room and when he walked in, it was like the king walked in." Where Jones was reserved, Jack was gregarious. Jones was tall—six foot four—while Jack was short—five foot eight on a good day. . . . Around GE going to see Reg Jones was like going to see the president in the Oval office. Going to see Jack was like going to see a fraternity brother at a tailgate party.

Welch did not view General Electric as one big, warm family. He thought it was bloated and senescent. Jones was known for calling people when they lost a loved one. Welch seemed to enjoy firing people. It is quite possible, in fact, that no single corporate executive in history has fired as many people as Jack Welch did. He laid off more than a hundred thousand workers in the first half of the nineteen-eighties. There are lots of sentences in Cohan's "Power Failure" like this: "Ten thousand people, or half the people who once worked there, were let go." Or: "McNerney got the job after a rather infamous annual managers' meeting in Boca Raton in January 1991, when Jack fired four division C.E.O.s. 'You could have heard a pin drop,' McNerney recalled." Or, of an air-conditioning business in Louisville that Welch did not like, and subsequently sold off:

"This was a flawed business," he continued. But the people in Louisville who made the air conditioners took pride in them and were shocked when the business was sold to Trane. "It really shook up Louisville," he said.

He did not feel their pain. Quite the contrary.

Cohan gives us a lot of alpha-male straight talk, like the time Welch cornered Ken Langone, the billionaire co-founder of Home Depot, at a party at Larry Bossidy's house in Florida, not far from Welch's own place in North Palm Beach.

"Jack, get off my fucking ass. No business tonight," Langone said. But Jack wouldn't take no for an answer.

"I need five minutes," Jack insisted. They went to Bossidy's backyard. "The party's inside," Langone said. "He puts me against the fucking wall. He said, 'I want you to go on the GE board.' I said, 'What?!?!"

Reginald Jones, one imagines, never backed anyone up against a wall. And he would never have been caught dead in *North* Palm Beach.

Did he see something in Welch that he could not find in himself? Was he so critical of his own tenure at America's flagship corporation that he felt a hundred-and-eighty-degree turn was in order? The most charitable explanation is that the transition from Jones to Welch came at the end of one of the more unsettling decades in the history of American capitalism, and Jones may have felt that the sun had set on his brand of corporate paternalism.

After Welch, at age forty-five, was named the new C.E.O. of General Electric, Jones called him into his office to bestow some final words of wisdom. Another recent book about Welch, David Gelles's "[The Man Who Broke Capitalism](#)" (Simon & Schuster), recounts the exchange:

"Jack, I give you the Queen Mary," Jones said. "This is designed not to sink."

Jack didn't miss a beat.

"I don't want the Queen Mary," he snapped back. "I plan to blow up the Queen Mary. I want speedboats."

Then Jones threw his successor a party at the Helmsley Palace Hotel, in midtown Manhattan, where Welch had a few too many cocktails and slurred his way through his remarks to the group. The next morning, Jones stormed

into Welch's office. "I've never been so humiliated in my life," he told Welch. "You embarrassed me and the company." Welch worried that he would be fired, losing his chance at glory before it had even begun. Cohan writes, "He was despondent for the next four hours." By lunch, apparently, he had put his existential crisis behind him. That's our Jack.

Welch believed that the responsibility of a corporation was to deliver predictable and generous returns to its shareholders. In pursuit of this goal, he exploited a loophole in the regulatory architecture of corporate finance. Companies that made things—companies such as G.E.—had long been permitted to lend money to their customers. They could behave like banks, in other words, but they weren't really banks. Banks were encumbered by all kinds of regulations that had the effect of limiting their profit margins. The markets considered them risky, so they paid dearly to raise capital. But blue-chip G.E. had none of those burdens, which meant that, when it came to making money, Welch's non-bank bank could put real banks to shame. He then used the proceeds from G.E. Capital to acquire hundreds of companies. In the warm glow of G.E.'s riches, Welch articulated a series of principles that captivated his peers. Fire nonperformers without regret. Shed any business that isn't first or second in its market category. Your duty is always to enrich your shareholders.

In his interview with Varney, Welch took a question from the audience about how, in enacting these principles, a C.E.O. could tell the difference between leaders who create an "edge" and those who simply create "fear." Welch explained that there were four types of manager:

One who has the values and makes the numbers: love them, hug them, take them onward and upward.

Second one doesn't have the values, doesn't make the numbers, get them out of there. That's easy, too.

The third one has the values, doesn't make the numbers, give them a second and third chance.

The fourth one's the one you're talking about. The tough one. The horse's neck that makes the numbers on the backs of people. The go-to

person in an organization. And an organization that doesn't root them out, can't talk about values, can't talk about the human equation.

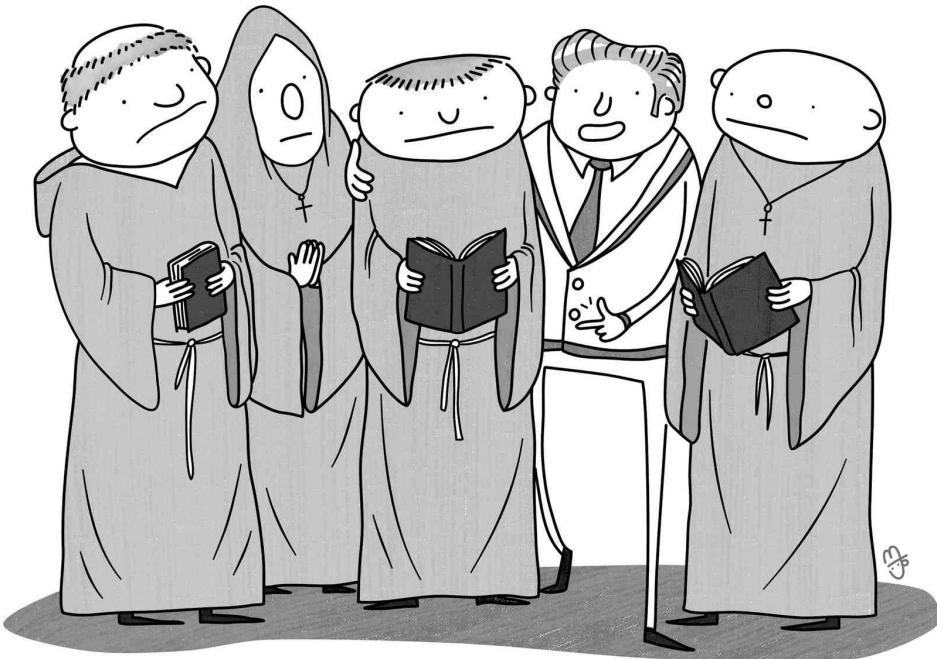
In a perfect world, the interviewer would have asked a follow-up question: What are these “values” that you’re talking about? Surely the desire to meet Wall Street’s quarterly estimates—as much as it *felt* like a value in Welch’s universe—does not amount to an actual moral belief system. And then perhaps a second follow-up: Doesn’t the fourth category—the “tough” manager who makes the numbers but does not have the values—sound a lot like you, Mr. Welch?

But few ever asked questions like that of Welch. So the man himself remains opaque, and the best we can do is try to piece together the clues scattered throughout “Power Failure.”

One time in Welch’s senior year of high school, his hockey team lost to a crosstown rival, and Jack, who had scored his team’s only two goals, threw his stick in anger. Cohan writes:

Next thing he knew, his mother was in the locker room. She bounded right up to him, oblivious to the fact that the guys around her were in various states of undress. She grabbed him by the jersey in front of everyone. “You punk,” she yelled at him. “If you don’t know how to lose, you’ll never know how to win. If you don’t know this, you don’t belong anywhere.” He paused for a moment, recalling the memory. “She was a powerhouse,” he said. “I loved her beyond comprehension.”

After college, at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, he earned a Ph.D. in chemical engineering at the University of Illinois. His thesis was on condensation in nuclear power plants. “I thought it was the most important thing in my life,” he tells Cohan. For many people, years of immersion in a complex intellectual endeavor would leave an imprint. Not for Welch. Condensation in nuclear power plants does not come up again.



"What if, instead of 'in excelsis Deo,' we all went 'shoo-bop-dip-doo-wop'?"  
Cartoon by Michael J. Johnson

Golf, by contrast, was “one of the few constants in Jack’s life,” Cohan writes. “One way or another, there was always golf.” But did he like the game for its own sake? Or was it simply, to adapt Clausewitz’s dictum, the continuation of business by other means? After Welch left G.E., the details of his retirement package were made public. It included a pension of \$7.4 million a year and a mountain of perks. He got the use of a company Boeing 737, at an estimated cost of \$3.5 million a year. He got an apartment in [Donald Trump](#)’s 1 Central Park West, plus deals at the restaurant Jean-Georges downstairs, courtside seats at Knicks games, a subsidy for a car and driver, box seats at the Metropolitan Opera, discounts on diamond and jewelry settings, and on and on—all this for someone worth an estimated nine hundred million dollars. And then, finally, G.E. agreed to pay the monthly dues at the four golf clubs where he played. It would be nice to hear from the high-priced attorney who negotiated that last line item. Would it have been a deal breaker? Did Welch believe golf had been so central to his performance as C.E.O. that it made sense for the company’s shareholders to pay those monthly dues?

A few months after he recovered from his bypass surgery, Welch went to see his heart surgeon, Cary Akins. They had become friends. “He was incredibly cordial for somebody who was that powerful,” Akins tells Cohan. Welch had

wanted the operation to be done on a Friday, so that he would have three days of recovery under his belt before the news hit the stock market—and Akins obliged. Now Welch wanted to talk.

“You’re doing great,” Akins told him.

“Well, go ahead and ask your question,” Jack said.

“What?” Akins replied.

“Go ahead and ask your question,” he said again.

“What do you mean?” Akins responded, genuinely confused.

“Well, I presume you’re gonna want me to give you some money,” Jack said.

“You didn’t pay your bill?” Akins replied.

“Come on, now,” Jack said. “You must have thought about this. Do you want me to donate something?”

“Jack, it never crossed my mind,” Akins replied.

Akins had performed a feat of skill, born of professional dedication. Welch saw a shakedown in the offing. And maybe that’s the key: Welch was most comfortable reducing anything of value to a transaction. He gave Akins a generous donation—though it came from G.E.’s charitable foundation, not from his own pocket.

It has become fashionable to deride today’s tech C.E.O.s for their grandiose ambitions: colonizing Mars, curing all human disease, digging a world-class tunnel. But shouldn’t we prefer these outsized delusions to the moral impoverishment of Welch’s era?

“In all of our many discussions, the only time he spoke about his children was when he told me that he ‘loved them to pieces’ but that he had made ‘a mistake’ when he gave each of them a bunch of G.E. stock when he first became C.E.O.,” Cohan writes. Because the stock had performed well, they

each had something like fifty million dollars in company shares. Although two of his four kids went to Harvard Business School and one went to Harvard's Graduate School of Design, they all quit their jobs, disappointing their father. "They turned out differently than I'd hoped," Welch tells Cohan. "We're close. But they got too much money. . . . If I had to do it all over again, I wouldn't have given it to them." A father reflects, after a lifetime, on his troubled relationship with his children, and concludes that he should have adjusted their compensation.

As Welch prepared for retirement from G.E., in 2001, the search for his successor became a public spectacle. He identified three plausible internal candidates. Their faults and their strengths were openly debated. The financial press was riveted. The choice was up in the air until the last minute, when Welch settled on Jeff Immelt, who was then running G.E.'s health-care unit. Welch had had his eye on Immelt for a long time. Years before, Welch had sent him to Louisville, to run G.E.'s sprawling appliance-manufacturing hub there. The job was stressful, and Immelt's weight hit two hundred and eighty pounds. "You're never going to be C.E.O. if you don't lose weight," Cohan reports Welch telling him. "You've got to get your fucking weight down. Can't have everybody fucking fat."

When Immelt took over from Welch, he addressed a gathering of top G.E. managers in Boca Raton. "Only time will tell if Jack is the best business leader ever, but I know he is one of the greatest human beings I have ever met," Immelt said. But by that point the Welch legend was so huge that such blandishments seemed obligatory.

What Immelt quickly discovered was that Welch had handed him a mess: a company built out of pieces that had no logical connection. Once the global financial crisis arrived, the elaborate game that Welch had been playing with G.E. Capital collapsed. Wall Street woke up to the fact that a non-bank was every bit as risky as a real bank, and the company never quite recovered. Immelt was eventually forced out, in disgrace. Almost two decades after Welch handed the reins to Immelt, Cohan met Welch for lunch at the Nantucket Golf Club. All Welch wanted to talk about was how terrible a job he thought his successor had done. The share price had collapsed, and Welch was disconsolate.

“He’s full of shit,” Jack said. “He’s a bullshitter.”

“But Jack,” I asked, “didn’t you choose Jeff?”

Yes, he conceded, he had. “That’s my burden that I have to live with,” he continued. “But people have been hurt. Employees. People’s pensions. Shareholders. It’s bad.” There were tears in his eyes. “I fucked up,” he said again. “I fucked up.”

As Cohan and Welch ate lunch, the golfer Phil Mickelson and the C.E.O. of Barclays came over to pay homage. Welch may have been long gone from the C-suite, but, in a certain kind of country-club dining room, he remained a rock star. Then Welch offered to drive Cohan back to his house, a few miles away. They got into Welch’s Jeep Cherokee, and Welch refused to put on his seat belt, so the warning bell chimed the whole ride back.

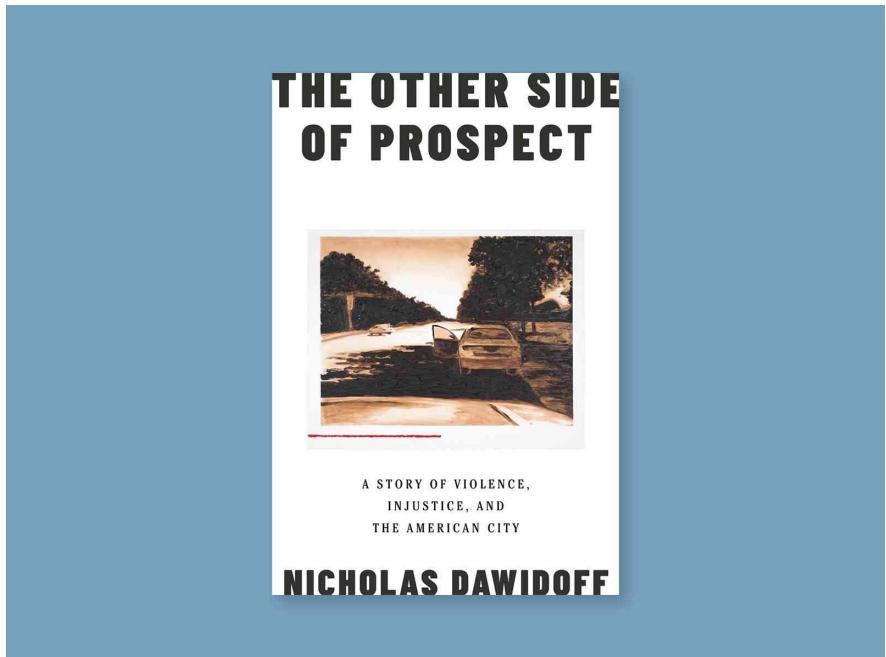
Off he drove. When he got to the left turn out of the Nantucket Golf Club, onto Milestone Road, he did something odd. Instead of keeping to the right side of Milestone Road, as other American drivers do, he decided to drive in the middle of the road, with the Cherokee straddling the yellow line. Needless to say, the drivers coming toward us on Milestone were freaking out. One after another, they all pulled off to the right onto the grassy edge of the street, giving Jack full clearance to continue driving down the middle of the road. He didn’t seem to notice. ♦

By Adam Entous

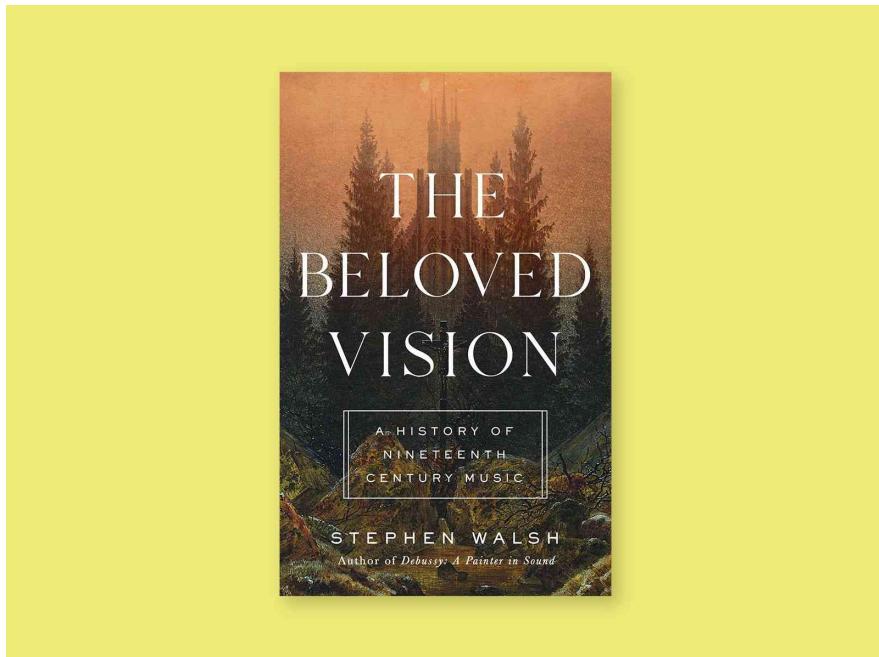
By Susan B. Glasser

By Lauren Collins

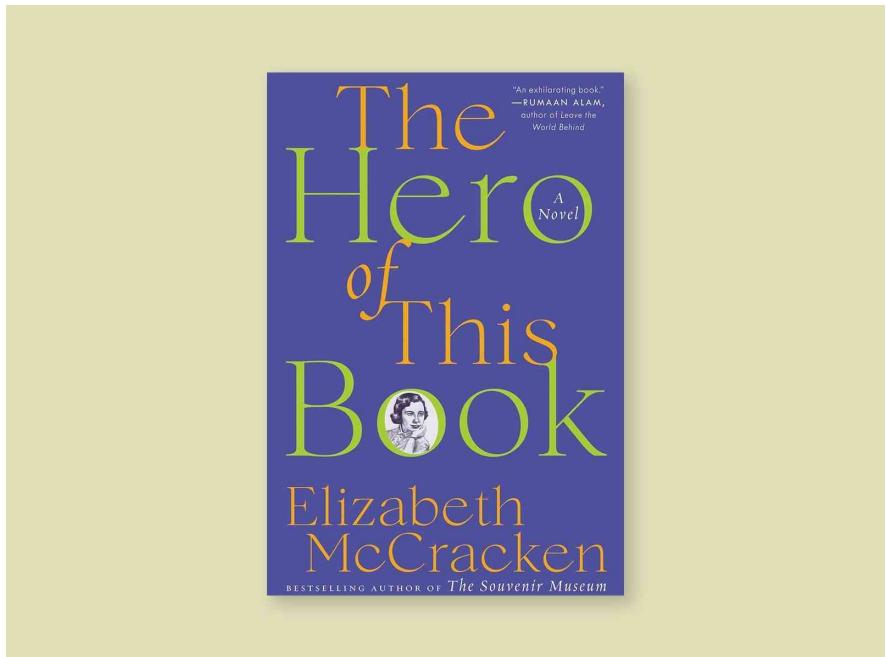
By Margaret Talbot



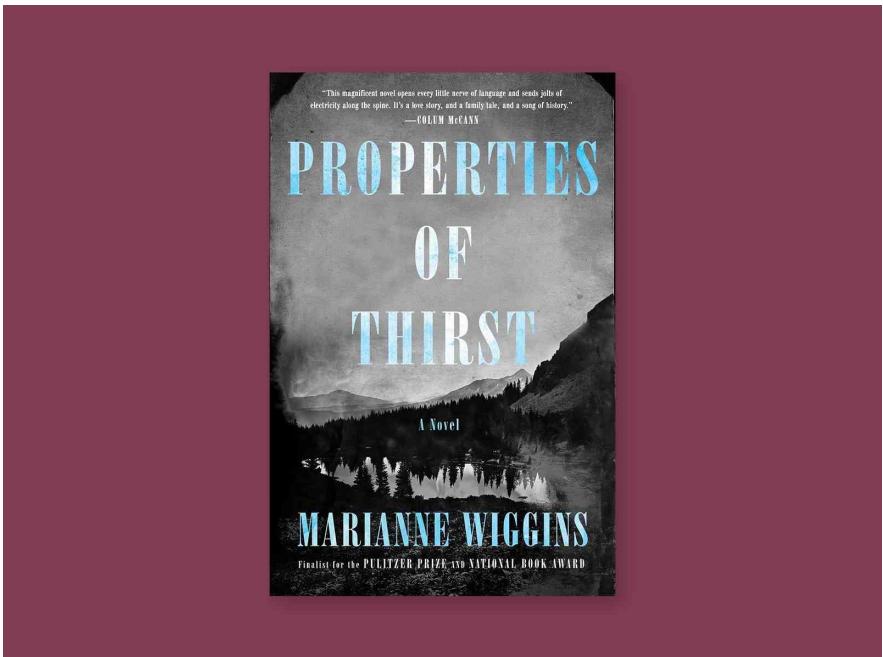
**The Other Side of Prospect**, by *Nicholas Dawidoff* (Norton). The result of eight years of reporting, this deft chronicle delves into the story of Bobby Johnson, a sixteen-year-old from New Haven, who, in 2006, was coerced into confessing to a brutal murder he didn't commit. Dawidoff presents portraits of the individuals involved, juxtaposed with research on segregation, the Great Migration, and mass incarceration. Bobby, though widely considered innocent, was convicted because he "fit a false stereotype about how things worked in poor neighborhoods." The book details his childhood, his time in prison, and—after a single-minded lawyer secures his release, in 2015—the challenges and the disorientation Bobby experiences upon reentering society.



[\*\*The Beloved Vision\*\*](#), by *Stephen Walsh* (Pegasus). This musical study charts the rise of Romanticism, in the nineteenth century, as composers came to see individual voice as the key to emotional expression, and began to assert their “existential being through a recognizable, even idiosyncratic musical language.” Walsh provides biographical sketches of composers and assessments of their work, and weaves in subplots across decades and geography—the impact of nationalism, the development of program music, the ubiquitous spectre of Beethoven. Observing that “obsolescence is always the lurking fate of music not quite of the front rank,” Walsh explores the influence of relatively obscure composers, such as Louise Farrenc and Heinrich Marschner, with generous, contagious curiosity.



**[The Hero of This Book](#)**, by Elizabeth McCracken (Ecco). McCracken's latest novel straddles the line between fiction and memoir, though she rejects the term "autofiction" as sounding "like it might be written by a robot, or a kiosk, or a European." It is August, 2019, and the unnamed narrator, sightseeing in London, is haunted by the presence of her late mother, who grew up "disabled and Jewish in small-town Iowa," was stubborn and bad with money, and was also brilliant and effervescent and a great appreciator of life. "Once somebody is dead, the world reveals all the things they might have enjoyed if they weren't," the narrator laments. McCracken delivers a searing meditation on loss and the impossibility of depicting, in art, the entirety of a person.



**Properties of Thirst**, by Marianne Wiggins (*Simon & Schuster*). Set around the time of Pearl Harbor, this poignant saga centers on the town of Lone Pine, in California's Central Valley, where Rocky Rhodes has built a beautiful home for his wife, a doctor and a cook of some renown. After she dies, of polio, he struggles to raise their son and daughter while trying to protect the area from the Los Angeles water authorities. The son, joyful and reckless, moves out at thirteen and joins the Navy at nineteen. When the government establishes a Japanese American internment camp on the land across from Rocky's, the newcomers become enmeshed in the locals' lives. The novel's resounding theme, "You can't save what you don't love," applies to people and landscapes alike.

By Janet Malcolm

By Robert A. Caro

By Patrick Radden Keefe

By Philip Gourevitch

# **Comment**

- [Education After Affirmative Action](#)

# Education After Affirmative Action

The Supreme Court hears a challenge to affirmative action this week—and will likely overrule more than four decades of precedents on college admissions.

By [Jeannie Suk Gersen](#)



When Supreme Court Justices want to justify overruling long-standing precedent, the paradigm often cited is Brown v. Board of Education, from 1954, which, in declaring segregation unconstitutional, overruled Plessy v. Ferguson and its “separate but equal” doctrine, from a half century earlier. During the last term, Justice [Samuel Alito](#) offended many people when he compared the Court’s overruling of Roe v. Wade to Brown’s overruling of Plessy. (He continued to offend people last week, when a new book by John A. Farrell revealed that, during Alito’s confirmation hearings, he had privately told Senator Ted Kennedy, in reference to Roe, “I am a believer in precedents.”)

This term, the Court will lean more pointedly into Brown’s legacy in a pair of cases about the use of race in college admissions. Eight years ago, Students for Fair Admissions, a group founded by the conservative activist Edward Blum, filed lawsuits claiming that the policies of Harvard and the

University of North Carolina are racially discriminatory. The universities successfully defended themselves in the lower courts, but the Supreme Court, which hears oral arguments in both cases on October 31st, will likely overrule more than four decades of precedents, and declare that it is unlawful to use race as a factor in admissions.

S.F.F.A. alleged in the 2014 suits that race-conscious affirmative action violates the equal-protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment and also Title VI, the statute prohibiting any “program or activity” that receives federal funds (this category includes virtually all colleges and universities) from discriminating “on the ground of race, color, or national origin.” At the time, this claim was a clear loser under Supreme Court precedents that interpreted both the Constitution and the statute to mean that schools can consider race as one factor in a holistic review of an applicant. Indeed, it was dismissed before trial. But S.F.F.A. also claimed that Harvard and U.N.C. had deviated from those precedents to achieve “racial balancing,” which the Court prohibited, and that Harvard had discriminated against Asian Americans in particular. That set of claims against Harvard made it to trial in federal district court in Boston, in 2018, and some of the evidence was troubling, suggesting at least implicit bias against Asian applicants relative to white ones. (The school denied that it discriminated; the percentage of Asians in the entering class has now risen to 27.9 per cent.) But S.F.F.A.’s purported effort to protect Asians is widely seen as a vehicle for Blum’s broader agenda, which is to rid society of all so-called racial preferences; he has already shepherded six cases to the Court, including *Shelby County v. Holder*, which sharply curtailed the Voting Rights Act.

Each university prevailed at trial by proving that it had complied with the Court’s precedents. But the Court is hearing the cases to consider whether those precedents—including *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* and *Grutter v. Bollinger*—should themselves be overruled. If it finds that they should, the ruling will also raise doubts about the permissibility of affirmative-action practices in employment, and cast a further shadow on race-conscious efforts to protect voting rights.

For decades, conservative Justices have read *Brown* as standing not for an anti-subordination idea but, rather, for a color-blindness principle that disapproves of determinations that consider race. That reading claims to find

support in Justice John Marshall Harlan's famous dissent in Plessy, in which he stated, "Our Constitution is color-blind, and neither knows nor tolerates classes among citizens." Chief Justice [John Roberts](#) has repeatedly made clear his distaste for actions that take race into account. In a 2006 case about creating majority-minority voting districts in Texas, he wrote, "It is a sordid business, this divvying us up by race." A year later, in explaining why the Court disallowed Seattle from undertaking a race-conscious measure to ameliorate de-facto segregation in public schools, he wrote the highly quotable line "The way to stop discrimination on the basis of race is to stop discriminating on the basis of race." It was a polar rejoinder to Justice Harry Blackmun in his concurrence in Bakke: "In order to get beyond racism, we must first take account of race. There is no other way."

What has been contested since Brown is what, exactly, "discrimination on the basis of race" means. For conservative Justices, it appears to mean taking account of race in any way, even to remedy the effects of prior discrimination. When Harvard went to trial, in 2018, it said that the consequences of not considering applicants' race would be dire: fewer than half the Black students and fewer than two-thirds of the Hispanic students admitted to the class of 2019 would be accepted. But, if affirmative action is ruled unlawful, Harvard and other schools will surely not abandon their commitment to diversity, which they understand as indispensable to the educational mission—in part because the Court itself has said so for decades, holding, in Bakke and in Grutter, that promoting diversity is a "compelling interest." Those schools will then need to turn to a variety of methods that are race-neutral but may still help to achieve racially diverse results.

One of the most widely discussed of those methods involves standardized tests. The pandemic gave Harvard and other top universities an urgent reason to make the submission of SAT and ACT scores optional, but more could follow the University of California system, which last year ended the consideration of all standardized-test scores in a settlement with students who alleged that the tests disadvantaged, among other groups, racial minorities (excepting Asians). Another possibility is to promote students from low-income families or neighborhoods, or from poorly funded schools, which have a high concentration of underrepresented minorities. But the coming years will undoubtedly bring an onslaught of litigation about

whether strategies designed to produce a diverse class without using applicants' race are themselves unlawful.

The Court's view, in its affirmative-action precedents, has been that educational diversity is a foundation for a multiracial democracy. Rejecting those precedents would be a key piece of a "color-blind" vision, in which race-conscious efforts to insure citizens' equal rights are seen as discriminatory. At the heart of the issue is which definitions of discrimination and equality best fit our democracy. The character of that democracy hangs in the balance. ♦

By Jay Caspian Kang

By Emma Green

By Amy Davidson Sorkin

# Crossword

- [The Crossword: Tuesday, October 25, 2022](#)

By [Erik Agard](#)

## **Dept. of Awards**

- [The Goncourt Prize Gets Americanized](#)

# The Goncourt Prize Gets Americanized

The overseers of France's biggest literary honor convene a group of American university students to vote on the first-ever U.S. version of the award, after much snorting over aesthetic differences.

By [Katy Waldman](#)



On a sunny Saturday in the spring, ten university students—two each from Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Duke, and N.Y.U.—gathered at the Fifth Avenue headquarters of the cultural institution Villa Albertine. The task: to award the first-ever U.S. Goncourt Prize, a Stateside version of the storied Prix Goncourt, France's biggest literary honor. The mood: tense and eager. The Goncourt recognizes the “best and most imaginative prose of the year” (written in French, *naturellement*). In its home country, the citation is bestowed by a board of authors each fall. (The 2022 prize will be announced this week.) The award has launched careers—the 2020 winner, Hervé Le Tellier, went on to sell more than a million copies of his novel “L’Anomalie”—despite a purse that, at ten euros, hasn’t changed much since 1903. Lounging around a table strewn with coffee, pastries, and quiche, the

student jurors chatted about the nine novels on the shortlist: a total of twenty-three hundred pages.

“It’s hard not to be too harsh,” Léa Jouannais Weiler, who is pursuing a Ph.D. in German literature at Yale, said. She wore a black turtleneck and black slacks. “The prize is for the reading public, and they’re not focussed on, like, intertextuality.” Sitting next to her was Nikhita Obeegadoo, a grad student in Romance languages. “In the French classroom, the text is more of a sacred object,” she said. “In American classrooms, we ask, What does this mean *today*? ”

Obeegadoo went on, “I like thinking about how different texts can speak to different people.” Case in point: her fellow-Harvardians—each two-person delegation was representing a larger group—had pooh-poohed her favored title. “I was so fired *up*,” she moaned. Jouannais Weiler, too, had clashed with her peers. “We have completely opposite aesthetic ideas,” she said, gesturing at the other Yale ambassador (glasses, black pants, *white* top).

Yassine Ait Ali, the student president of the committee, called the room to order. Up first: Duke. Grace Kurtz-Nelson, a freshman with straw-blond hair, endorsed “Enfant de Salaud,” by Sorj Chalandon. “The reflection on familial violence was powerful,” she said. “The representation of being a traitor was also interesting to us because the character’s allegiance was never resolved.” She paused. “Our class also got to interview Sorj Chalandon, so that factored a little bit into our choice.”

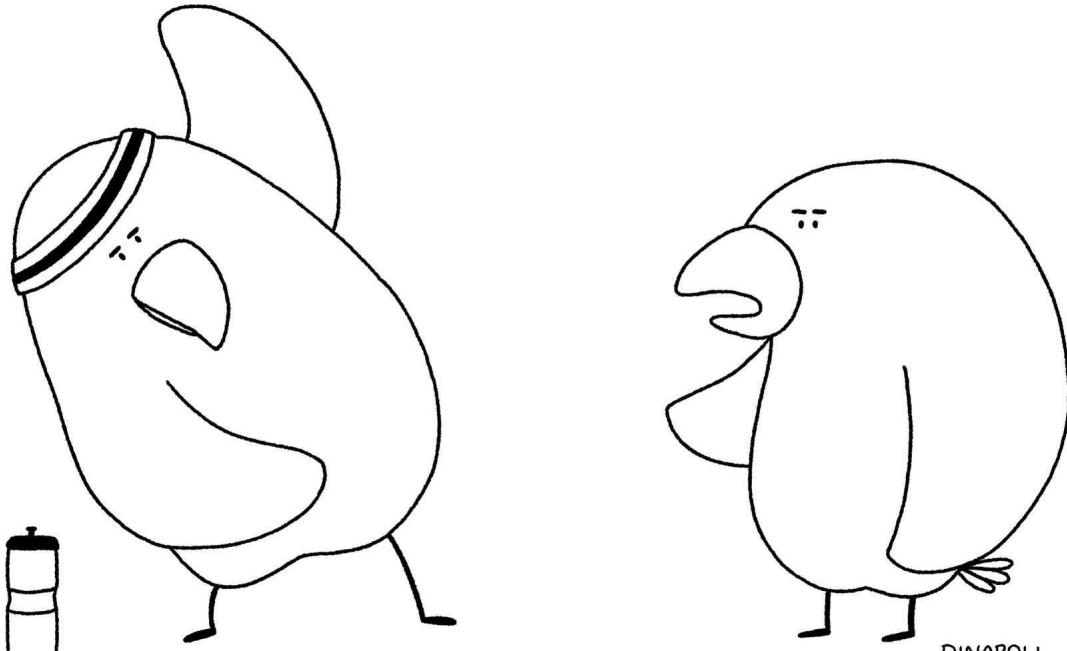
“Thank you, Duke,” Ait Ali said.

Harvard’s turn. “It’s actually funny that Émile and I are out here representing this text,” Obeegadoo began. The text was “L’Éternel Fiancé,” by Agnès Desarthe; neither Obeegadoo nor Émile Lévesque-Jalbert—a stubbled youth who, during introductions, had warned, “I have a strong theoretical lens”—particularly liked the book. Still, they conceded, the protagonists were relatable, the narrative beguilingly piecemeal. “Does the binary between serious literature and light reading exist, or is it just in our minds?” Obeegadoo said.

“Thank you, Harvard,” Ait Ali said.

A few months earlier, the primary Goncourt winner had been “La Plus Secrète Mémoire des Hommes,” a mazy mystery by the thirty-two-year-old Senegalese author Mohamed Mbougar Sarr. A tacit understanding animated the room: this book was the one to beat. It inspired intense responses.

“We felt that the prose was in constant motion,” Samuel Holmertz, a clean-cut second-year from N.Y.U., said. “We were bewitched by a magic spark.”



*“For the last time, no. I’m not jogging south for the winter.”*  
Cartoon by Johnny DiNapoli

Jouannais Weiler, the German-literature student, snorted.

Héloïse Billette, Jouannais Weiler’s partner, offered that Sarr’s style could be too lyrical. “But while he may not be for every reader, he still deserves to be considered,” she added, diplomatically.

This time, the snorts came from multiple locations.

Other options were mulled. Princeton went for “S’Adapter,” by Clara Dupont-Monod. (“It depicts the quotidian challenge of facing disability and the heroism of daily life.”) Votes were also cast for “Le Voyage dans l’Est,” by Christine Angot. (“It puts the phenomenon of incest into plain light.”) But it was clear that the race was between “La Carte Postale,” a meditation on French Jewishness by Anne Berest, and “La Plus.”

“Do we really want to highlight the same book that won the main prize?” Sophia Millman, of Princeton, said. “I mean, this one is already going to get translated into English.” There were murmurs of assent.

“I want to vouch for ‘*La Carte Postale*,’” Kurtz-Nelson said.

Lévesque-Jalbert frowned. “It was a bit long and had some flaws in its construction.”

“It’s not our first choice,” Millman said. “But I think it’s the most equitable.”

Ait Ali reminded the jury that its deadline, 3 P.M., was approaching; the students had been deliberating for nearly two hours. “‘*La Carte Postale*!’” several jurors cried. An air of finality prevailed. One by one, the delegations gave their blessing. “Cool,” Ait Ali said, adjourning the court, and a group of students sprang up, grinning like hooligans. “Let’s go see Central Park!” ♦

By Rivka Galchen

By Lauren Collins

By Ken Auletta

By Margaret Talbot

# Fiction

- “Princess”

# Princess

By [T. Coraghessan Boyle](#)



*Audio:* T. Coraghessan Boyle reads.

She tried the door. The door was unlocked. She went in.

The moment was layered and complex, almost like a fairy tale, but where were the three bears? Upstairs, barking. Did bears bark? No, but dogs did, and that was what was going on here, dogs barking and scrabbling with their black shiny toenails—pawnails?—at the closed door at the top of the stairway, the stairway that was carpeted and strewn with soft, welcoming shadows cast by various objects in the dimmed glow of the lamp behind the couch that was only ten feet from where she was standing. There were pillows on the couch, a whole flotilla of them, and there were two armchairs flanking it, a coffee table, bookshelves, the black nullity of a flat-screen TV affixed to the wall across from her. When she moved, and she moved only a foot or two into the room—edging, that was what she was doing, edging in—the screen gave back her reflection in a way that was too obscure to matter.

There may have been a voice calling from the room at the top of the stairs—"Cameron, is that you? Hello? Is somebody there?"—but it was lost in the uproar of the barking, and it wouldn't have applied to her, in any case, because her name wasn't Cameron and she wasn't there, was she? She was still back at the party, the bar-bee-cue she'd lucked into on this fine, cheery holiday afternoon that had somehow become night when she wasn't devoting her full attention to the *details*. In her right hand was a plastic sack containing spareribs lathered in a gooey red sauce, two ears of corn still wrapped in the blackened tinfoil in which they'd been roasted over the grill, a container of what looked to be potato salad, and dessert, lots of dessert: two napoleons, a wedge of cherry pie, and a fistful of chocolate-dipped strawberries she'd picked out herself, after the hostess, whose name may have been Renée—she reminded her of her mother on one of her mother's good days—had insisted that she take some food with her, because *I don't know what we're going to do with it all.*

She remembered that there had been a band at the party—bass, guitar, drums, a singer—the joyous reverberative thump of which had led her to push open the back gate off the alley and give all those wondering faces a friendly little nod and let herself in, which was O.K., fine, no problem, everybody was a friend of somebody's. And she remembered the champagne, good champagne from France and colder than winter in Poughkeepsie, which had helped moderate the buzz she'd been riding for three sleepless days and nights now—and the singer from the band, who'd come up to her at the buffet table as if he wanted something from her and made some sort of lame joke about the way she was going at the dessert display and then flapped away like a six-foot crow once she opened up her smile and he got a good look at her teeth and the sore at the corner of her mouth she couldn't stop picking at, and so fuck him, fuck everybody. But that was her right hand, weighed down with all that food she didn't really feel like eating, not at this point, when the only thing she wanted was to crash, as if that would have been understandable to any of them standing around locked into their tunnel vision that featured nobody but themselves, and what about her left hand? What was this? She saw that she had a plastic sack dangling from the bunched fingers of that hand, too, and for a minute, what with the newness of the surroundings and the barking of the dogs and the voice that had gone unanswered and had stopped expecting anything now, she momentarily blanked on what was in there. Until the dogs seemed

to run out of breath and she remembered: makeup. Blush, foundation, and eyeliner she'd borrowed from the Rite Aid somewhere down the street and around the corner, out on the boulevard that was like a stage set, same street lamps, same tired palms, same traffic lights going green and going red and going green.

### T. Coraghessan Boyle on crimes and fairy tales.

O.K., all right, fine. But she didn't need makeup now—that would be for tomorrow. The food, too. What she needed now, because her legs felt as limp and soft-boned as the barbecued ribs in their squishy plastic bag, was sleep. A bed. Sheets. A blanket. What were all these doors? Doors didn't exist for nothing. There had to be a bed behind one of them, didn't there?

Dawn's son had got home at eleven-thirty, same as the past two nights, because they'd given him an extra shift so that baggers with seniority could take the holiday off. There was the sound of his car in the driveway and then the front door slamming, right on cue. If her eyes drifted to the clock radio on the nightstand it was only a reflex, and because she was already in bed, reading and half watching some outer-space slasher movie (with the sound muted so she didn't have to hear the screams), she didn't bother to go downstairs. Cameron ate at the store, anyway, and if he was hungry there were cold cuts and a fruit salad in the refrigerator. She thought of texting him about the fruit salad, which she'd just made that night, but if he opened the refrigerator he couldn't miss it, so why bother? At some point, she drifted off with the book still propped up in her hands, as she did every night, both dogs and three of the cats stretched out in various configurations beside her and at the foot of the bed. Usually, she slept through the night, but not this night, because at 2:36 *A.M.* both dogs rose up on their haunches and started barking for all they were worth.

The first door she tried was locked, so she moved to the next one, which gave onto a bathroom—or a half bath, actually, as she saw when she flicked the light on. It was like any bathroom in anybody's house—toilet, sink, mirror, towel rack, framed cartoon on the wall—and if it could have been cleaner she wasn't complaining. The cartoon was a Gary Larson, the one with two dogs in a courtroom full of cats—cat judge, cat lawyers, cat jury. It

was funny, but she'd seen it before, and whoever used this bathroom must have seen it a thousand times now, and how funny was that?

She could have looked at herself in the mirror but she didn't, because looking at herself right then was outside the realm of possibility, but the idea of the bathroom, the fact of it and the fact that she was in it, reminded her that she had to pee and this was as good a time as any. When she was done, she flushed and put down the lid, washed her hands, and went back out into the main room, where she plopped down on the couch for a minute, just to stop things from spinning. That was when she noticed that there were two more doors to try, one giving onto what looked to be a study, with a desk and a laptop, and the other—bingo!—revealing the bedroom she'd been looking for, and if the dogs had started up again it was nothing to her. She belonged here. This was her room. Or it ought to have been, because whether she'd grown up in this house or not it was the room she would have chosen, though the clothes hanging in the closet were the wrong size and the colors and patterns weren't even close to her style. And the shoes! They made her feel sorry for whoever had actually taken the time to go to the store and pick them out and put down cash for them—or a credit card, as the case may be. She reflected briefly on the fact that she'd once had a credit card herself and how nice that was—hand it across the counter and you got whatever you wanted.

Except drugs. Drugs were cash only.

The food she left in the bathroom, but she kept the makeup with her, and maybe she even sat down at the vanity and tried the blusher and the lipstick, not that it mattered at this point. In the morning, she told herself. In the morning, everything would be different. But—and here's where the cold hard world interceded to cut her down, the way it always did—she'd barely closed her eyes before she woke to the overhead light and three faces lined up in a row, staring down at her.

“Why didn't you let the dogs out?”

“I would have, if I'd known, but I was afraid to, because it could have been anybody down there. With a knife or a gun or who knows what?”

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

[Listen to T. Coraghessan Boyle read "Princess."](#)

She was sitting on the couch in the living room, the couch where the girl had apparently stretched out and left a long red smear of something on one of the pillows, which turned out to be barbecue sauce, thankfully, and not blood. Dawn herself had taken a washcloth to it first thing in the morning—after photographing it, that is. For evidence. Not that the police needed it, since they already had the girl in custody.

She'd been on the phone pretty much the whole morning, talking her way through last night's events, as if she could somehow neutralize them, make them make sense. At the moment, she was talking to Chrissie Wagner, who lived directly across the street and, like her, was a single mother, which was part of their bond, which went beyond just being neighbors. The other part was that they were both junior-high teachers, though in different school districts.

"I hear you. I mean, it's terrifying, but Buster's so huge he'd scare off anybody, right? Even if he is a big pussycat. And Ernie's a pipsqueak, but I've seen him get riled up—like the time that woman came around canvassing for the mayor's race, remember that?"

"Ankle biter," she said, and laughed at the memory. "But you know what I'm saying. First thing I did was lock the bedroom door, and Cameron was downstairs in his room and he always locks his, because he doesn't want anybody going in there—me, that is—so I texted him not to make a sound and dialled 911. Why risk the dogs getting hurt?"

"What about Tammy?"

"Talk about small mercies—she was spending the night at Beau's house, because she'd had a couple of beers at his family's Memorial Day party and didn't want to drive. Or so she said over the phone." Her daughter—seventeen, combative, pampered, and privileged, and way too obsessed with crime shows and doom-scrolling—would have been seriously traumatized, or worse, because her door was never locked. And that was something Dawn didn't want to even begin to imagine, this girl pushing her way in while

Tammy was lying there asleep in her own bed, with her movie posters on the wall and the Minnie Mouse night-light she'd had since she was three years old pushing back the shadows.

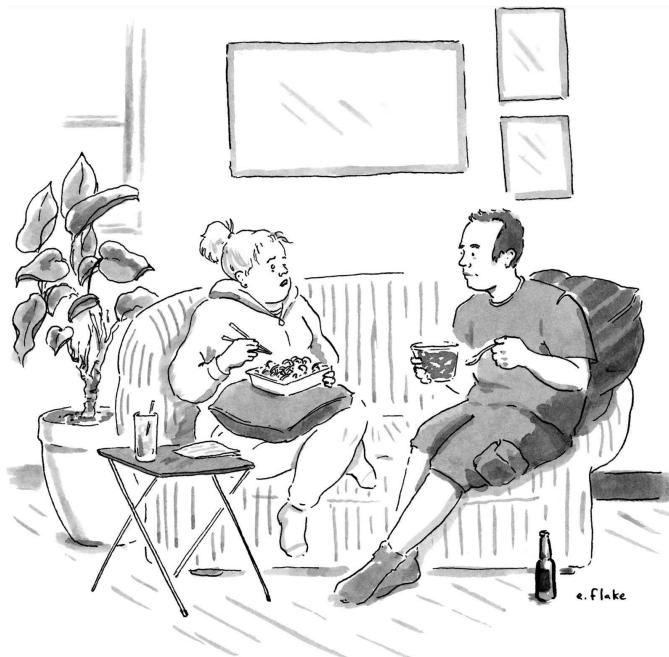
She gazed out the window at the sunstruck palms that lined the street out front, the safe and tranquil street in a decidedly safe middle-class neighborhood, where the only crimes were committed in her daughter's imagination. Or had been until now. *Home invasion*. Frightening words, chilling words, words out of the morning paper, which was always suffused with somebody else's misery but never hers, never theirs. Was she even going to tell Tammy? And, if so, how would she put it? Especially since the girl had gone into Tammy's room and had maybe even sat at the vanity, trying on makeup she'd probably stolen from Rite Aid, though she hadn't attempted to take anything from the house, not Tammy's laptop or iPad or anything else as far as she could see. Which was strange. And then the whole thing with the bed . . .

The 911 operator had instructed Dawn to stay in her room with the door locked and definitely not try to confront whoever it was who'd broken into the house and flushed the toilet and flicked the lights on and off. Just sit tight. They were on their way.

The police arrived within ten minutes, give them credit there. They didn't use their siren or the flashing lights, and they parked two doors down and came up on foot for the element of surprise. They wound up going in through the front door, which Cameron must have forgotten to lock when he got back from work (though, of course, he never forgot to lock his bedroom door—that was automatic for him, even if he was just jumping up from his console to get a soda out of the refrigerator). They found the girl in Tammy's bed, fast asleep, the comforter and sheets stripped back and thrown on the floor as if they were of no use to her. She herself didn't get a good look at her from the window at 3 a.m., the nearest street lamp a dull blur at the far end of the block, but she seemed slim and maybe even pretty, and she was wearing a rumpled yellow tunic dress that left her legs bare, and her shoes were high-top sneakers. By then the police had brought the squad car into the driveway, and one of them put a hand on the girl's head to keep her from banging it on the doorframe as they put her in the back seat, just like in the movies.

She tried to tell them she lived there—look at the evidence right before their eyes, because here she was, in her own room, in her own bed—but one of the three faces staring down at her, the one that wasn’t mushrooming out of the collar of a neat blue uniform, belonged to a kid of sixteen or seventeen, acne, arms like two strings of dangling sausages, and hair that might have been cool if somebody would only get their shit together and cut it right, and he was saying, “She’s lying. I’ve never seen her before. She broke in, she’s the one—*she broke in!*”

She was only the tiniest bit drunk at this point, and the crank buzz that had kept her going for all these glorious, blazing, mile-a-minute days had totally deserted her, to the point where her whole body felt as if it were encased in cement and all she wanted from this world and this existence was sleep, but she looked at the kid’s big, dumb dump truck of a face and couldn’t help herself, so she said, “You’re the one that broke in! Oh, my God, Officer, Officer, who is he? What’s he doing here?”



*“It’s not that I don’t want to try new places, it’s that I can’t start collecting a new format of takeout containers.”*  
Cartoon by Emily Flake

“She’s lying!” the kid repeated, and now the cops were giving him the look, and so she kept it up, repeating, “My God, my God,” till it was like a little song she was singing to put herself to sleep.

That set him off. His face clenched, and he started barking like the dogs upstairs, “Yeah, right, prove it. What’s the address, huh? The phone number? The name on the mailbox? My mom. What’s my mom’s name?”

The thing was, there was nothing they could charge the girl with besides trespassing, since she hadn’t broken in and hadn’t stolen anything, but when they asked Dawn if she wanted to press charges she said yes. As much as she’d have liked to be sympathetic, she just couldn’t get past the sense of violation, which made her feel dirty and insecure in her own home, and that was inexcusable, absolutely and categorically, and so yes, she was going to press charges. As it turned out, the girl was twenty-two, her name was Tanya Swifbein, and she had no fixed address. She’d been arrested only once before, for disturbing the peace; no details on that beyond what you could glean from the charge itself, but she’d disturbed the peace in this household, that was for sure. Tammy had wound up spending the entire weekend at Beau’s, without calling or even texting, which was beyond irritating, and when she came in late Monday night with bloodshot eyes and liquor on her breath she just said, “Mom, don’t, because I’m not going to talk about it, O.K.?” and slammed the door to her room so hard that the pictures on the wall rattled in their frames. Two minutes later, she was back out in the hallway, demanding to know who’d been in her room.

So the story came out, and before Dawn could even catch her breath her daughter had apportioned the blame—it was her fault, all her fault. And her stupid brother’s. “What, am I going to get head lice now from my own pillow? Or aids, or whatever? Some street person sleeping in my bed? Is that fair? Is that what you want?”

What was fair and what wasn’t didn’t enter the equation. She said, “I put everything in the wash—with bleach—and vacuumed the rug twice, and I know, I know, honey, because I feel violated, too.”

Tammy just glared at her, then stalked back into her room and angrily stripped the bed, bundling everything up—sheets, pillows, blankets, the bedspread her dead grandmother had crocheted for her—and tramped through the house and out the back door, where she stuffed it all into the trash can, the sentry lights snapping on to catch the hard white flash of her elbows and the suffering icon of her face.

So they booked her and let her go, back out into a night that was starting to brighten around the edges. She was cold, wrapping her arms around herself and making sleeves of both hands, but her actual sleeves were attached to her denim jacket with the butterfly patch flapping across the shoulders and her shades in the pocket, which was back at Luther's, she thought, or at least she hoped it was, but where was Luther's from here? She had no idea, and she hadn't gone a block before she had to go down on her hands and knees on somebody's front lawn and vomit up the dregs of the champagne. She would have stretched out right there on the grass and slept until the sun came up and fried her like an egg, but here was the gardener, slamming out of his truck with all his rakes and hoses and gardening paraphernalia strapped to the top of it, and so she pushed herself up and started off down the street, going nowhere. Of course, she didn't have a phone. Her phone had disappeared somewhere along the line there, so she couldn't call Luther and wouldn't have known the phone number, in any case—or even, for that matter, what his last name was. The street was Marigold, wasn't it? If she could find Marigold, she'd recognize the house for sure, but where was Marigold? She didn't have a clue. Meanwhile, her feet were like boxcars, giant boxcars strapped to her ankles, and she dragged them along with her down the block till she saw what looked to be a park up ahead, and that seemed like just the place, because there'd be a bench there, and maybe a rest room, a water fountain, and she could sleep, just sleep, and worry about the rest later.

Well, there was a bench there, as it turned out, standard issue, painted a graffiti-hatched forest green, but only one bench, a solitary bench, and a bum was curled up on it, his face turned away from her like a promise he wasn't about to keep. The rest room was locked, but she found a water fountain and drank till she could feel it coming up, then slapped water on her face and ran it through her hair and saw that there was a dirt path behind the rest room that led up into some sort of dense undergrowth, where at least she could crash for a while and let things settle. She didn't want to get high—she was no addict, not really, not like some of them—but the thought of it, of the way the first hit made her feel invincible, like a superhero supercharged with energy, made her calculate: sleep first, then figure out how to find Luther, then see what the day would bring.

Birds spoke to her, saying what they were going to say in their own language, and then the sun jumped over the ridge to explode in her face like a supernova, bushes to the right of her, bushes to the left, nature just an endless repetition of the obvious—but here, what was this? Somebody had dug out a little nest under one of the bushes and lined it with flattened strips of cardboard that weren’t even that dirty—a bed, a bed made just for her. But then, as she brushed back the fringe of dried-out vegetation that hung over the cardboard like a canopy, she saw the rest, and it was so sudden and inadmissible it was like being attacked by all the snarling bears and wolves in the deepest, darkest forests of the earth: there was another human being there, a girl, a little girl, but she wasn’t breathing and she wasn’t moving and if her eyes were open she wasn’t seeing anything.

To get this straight, to get it precisely right: she’d never seen a corpse before, because that wasn’t who she was. Even her grandfather, when he died, did it elsewhere and came back to them in a glazed ceramic jar the color of olive oil, and if there were pictures on TV of the dead bodies lying sprawled in the streets of Ukraine she wasn’t there, was she? But she was here now, and here was this little girl stuffed half in and half out of a black plastic trash bag somebody had stashed under a bush in a public park in the Golden State of California.

Of course, and Dawn could have predicted it, the girl—Tanya—never showed up for her court date and there was nothing anybody could do about that, not until the next time she got arrested, anyway. The Memorial Day weekend gave way to a non-holiday weekend and then another one after that, and the whole incident began to fade away. The school year was winding down, which meant tests and grades and the usual madhouse rush. She and Tammy went shopping for a dress for commencement, Cameron picked up an extra day a week at the market, the weather turned hot. Both dogs got tapeworm—which was disgusting—and had to stay out in the yard till the pills went to work. Her car didn’t seem to want to start in the mornings, and, when it did, it spewed a black cloud of exhaust as she wheeled out onto the street, which meant that she was going to have to take it to the garage, whatever that was going to cost. The lawn needed cutting. There were more weeds in the flower bed than flowers.

It was her daughter who told her about the little girl in the trash bag, who'd been found in the park not ten blocks from here, and how nobody knew who she was or what had happened to her, more evidence of the corruption of the world. As if she needed it. As if any of them needed it.

The girl was estimated to be between eight and ten years old. She was thin, skinny, as if she hadn't had enough to eat, as if she'd been abused, and the police were asking for the public's help in identifying her. She was wearing pink Crocs, pajamas in a blue-and-white polar-bear print, and a yellow visor bearing the logo "Princess" in a bold black looping cursive. She didn't have any I.D. on her—what eight-year-old did?—and no distinguishing marks, as far as the police could see.

When Dawn did an online search, the picture that came up—a police sketch of the girl's face and torso—jumped out at her. She'd seen her someplace, she was sure of it, but where? It couldn't have been at school—the girl was too young, a child, just a child. Her face was narrow and serious, but the eyes were all wrong and the mouth, too, slack and lifeless and like no mouth she'd ever seen. But then she had to remind herself that this was only a sketch, not a photo—a photo would have been more than anybody could bear.

She should have flagged somebody down, but once she was back out on the street the words just couldn't seem to get past the barrier of her brain: *There's this dead girl, this dead body? Like, back there in the bushes?* She was trembling, that was what she was doing, lifting her big boxcar feet one step at a time and trembling all over, even though it wasn't cold, or not especially, the sun tracking her everywhere she went. There were people sitting on a bench at the bus stop, and she almost leaned in over their bowed heads and slumped shoulders and told them, but then they would have called the police and the police would automatically assume she was the guilty party. She'd already been photographed and fingerprinted and all the rest of it, and wasn't that enough for one night? So she just kept walking, like a zombie, and everything was sorrowful now, everything.

Luther said he'd been looking for her and that was why he happened to be driving by and also just happened to have a box of Dunkin' Donuts on the front seat, including two of the Bavarian Kremes that were her favorite, and

so she was rescued by her knight in shining leather and all that started up again.

She didn't tell him about the girl, didn't tell anybody, but she was tempted to borrow his phone to call her mother back in New York and just sob over the line, because her mother didn't want to hear from her anymore and was not now or ever again going to send her money only to have it go up a glass tube. *Was that clear? Yes, Mom, clear as Smirnoff* (which was what her mother drank, in a tall glass, all day long). She stayed away from partying for a couple of days, just to get her strength back, and once she was oriented she went to her storage locker and picked up a few things to wear and two twenties from the stash she kept there in the inside pocket of the black puffer jacket she was going to wear on the airplane back to New York when her mother finally relented and sent her a ticket. She slept for most of two days straight, and made sure to brush her teeth when she was conscious, though the damage was already done and if she ever got to a dentist it was going to cost more than she'd ever make in this lifetime, and then it was Friday and she and Luther scored and she became the single most powerful woman alive on the planet and everything was under control.

She could see what Tammy was doing, pushing the limits and using the break-in as an excuse, but when she stayed out all night on a school night Dawn took away her car keys and grounded her. Which led to the usual fights and tantrums and threats, with the added anxiety of graduation hanging over it all.

"I'm not even going to go, O.K.? Is that what you want?"

"Suit yourself," she said, sounding just like her own mother.

But, of course, that was all nonsense, and when the day approached Tammy relented, as they both knew she would, and they wound up holding a reception at the house for her and Beau and a few of her friends, catered by Hana Sushi and floated on a raft of carnations and white roses and baby's breath. There was dancing and a computer collage of the kids at all ages and fruit punch and sodas but no alcohol, not till they were of age—she was sorry, but that was the way it was going to have to be—and if a couple of the kids who kept slipping in and out were glassy-eyed by the end of the night,

she understood that there were times when you just had to let the boundaries drift. As long as nobody got hurt. That was the worry, always the worry, but beyond a certain point there was nothing you could do about it.

As for the little girl, the child stuffed into the trash bag and abandoned like a dead animal, she realized she'd been right—she had seen her before. A week after the discovery of the body, the newspaper identified the girl as a local resident, Evena Clarkson, and they ran a photo of her, with a plea for anyone who might have seen anything unusual to come forward. In the photo, the girl was smiling into the lens, her eyes as wide as the world, her shoulders arched and her head cocked as if she'd been dancing for the camera, and that was when it clicked.

Back in February, she'd gone with Chrissie to talent night at the elementary school because Chrissie's son, Robert, who was something of a piano prodigy, was one of the performers. It was the usual sort of thing, kids singing along to prerecorded tracks or even, for the minimally talented, lip-synching, but then this girl had stepped out of the wings alone, leaned into the microphone, and delivered an a-capella ballad that hushed the whole auditorium. Dawn recognized the song—it was from an animated feature Tammy had been obsessed with at that age—and maybe that had something to do with it, with the rush of her feelings from back then, when everything was so much simpler, but she'd found herself on the verge of tears. The girl had presence. She had talent. And when her voice rose up you forgot the echoey sound system and the imperfect lighting that made all the performers look as if they were carved out of stone, because you were soaring right along with her.

This time the party was all in her head. It had been days now and she was getting delusional, which always happened to her at the end, because her body was trying to tell her something. (And she wasn't listening.) After the fight with Luther—and with Bob, his friend Bob, a king shit if there ever was one—she'd gone outside for a breath of air, not depleted, not fully, not yet, and found herself going off down the street in whatever direction her feet seemed to want to take her. It was a neighborhood, and it was beginning to look familiar to her, palm trees with fronds like heaps of dirty clothes, cars parked bumper to bumper, hardly any lights on anywhere and everybody in bed, because it was 2 *a.m.* or 3 *a.m.*, or something like that.

She might as well have been following a trail of bread crumbs, because she went straight to the house, which she couldn't have found on any rational basis, even if you'd given her a map.

The dogs didn't bark. They were out back in the fenced-in yard, having committed some sort of crime, and that made them unsure of themselves. Timid, they were timid, and when she held out her hand the big one came up to the fence and licked it, his tongue working at her fingers like a warm washcloth. This time the front door was locked. But she climbed over the fence and got into the yard with the dogs, and they were just fine with that and so was she. Was the kitchen window open? Or maybe just cracked an inch to let in a seep of the cool night air flowing off the ocean that was however many blocks away? It was. And she didn't really think beyond appreciating that it had to be lifted as silently as possible. Of course, the dogs were right there, just watching her, cheering her on in a silent, steadfast way and thinking, no doubt, that she was going to let them in. Which she wasn't.

She stood in the kitchen a moment, just feeling things, listening, taking in the strange mélange of odors—of cooking, of dog, of dust and mold and the ancient grease worked into the burners of the stove—till they felt familiar. Then she went on through the living room with its dimmered light and heaped-up pillows, eased open the bedroom door, and got into bed, and so what if there was somebody already in it? This was her tale, and nobody else's. ♦

By [Deborah Treisman](#)

By Marisa Silver

By David Gilbert

By Nell Stevens

## **Hard Yards Dept.**

- [Into the Gizzverse with Shrimp and Juicy](#)

# Into the Gizzverse with Shrimp and Juicy

Two members of the Australian rock band King Gizzard & the Lizard Wizard—which just released its sixth album in the past year—spend a rare day off at a skate park in Brooklyn.

By [Nick Paumgarten](#)



King Gizzard & the Lizard Wizard, the pretty-much-every-genre rock band from Australia, boarded a tour bus in Montreal at 2 A.M. one night this month and arrived in Brooklyn nine hours later. No gig until the following night, in Queens: a rare day off. “I passed out for an hour at the hotel, grabbed a chicken burrito, and here we are,” Ambrose Kenny-Smith, one of the band’s singers and multi-instrumentalists, said that afternoon. “Here” was a skate park under the Kosciuszko Bridge, on the Brooklyn side of Newtown Creek. “On off days, we try to go for a skate,” he said. “It keeps the mental health in check.”

The “we” encompassed himself and Jason Galea, the artist and designer responsible for King Gizzard’s vast iconography—the posters, videos, and some two dozen album covers that supply a visual incarnation of the song-o-

sphere that the band's fans call the Gizzverse. The six musicians in the band consider Galea to be an honorary seventh. They call him Juicy. Their name for Kenny-Smith, the band's youngest member, is Shrimp. His recording booth in the band's studio in Melbourne is the Shrimp Dungeon. (Add Aussie accent, to taste.)

Galea and Kenny-Smith met at a skate park in a Melbourne suburb, when Galea was nineteen and Kenny-Smith, embarking on a teen career as a sponsored skater, was twelve. (They are now thirty-six and thirty.) Galea, graying hair spilling out from beneath a ball cap, had on baggy corduroys, an oversized thrift-shop Kid Rock tee, and burgundy Vans. Kenny-Smith, tall and lanky, with a dark mustache and shaggy longish hair, wore all black: hoodie, dacks, socks, and sneakers.

They'd brought skateboards and a Super 8 camera, which Galea was using to film Kenny-Smith doing tricks. Juicy, riding goofy, swooped in on his board to get quick shots of Shrimp attempting ollies, pole jams, kick flips, and slappy grinds. "With the Super 8, you get three minutes, and it costs, like, a hundred dollars," Galea said. "It's not good for skating, but it looks awesome." In the background, a heavily graffitied scrap-yard wall bore the inscription "*2 EVERYBODY IN BROOKLYN, THE WORLD IS YOURS.*"

Stu Mackenzie, the band's leader, was back at the hotel, in Williamsburg. He suffers from Crohn's disease and needs to conserve his energies while on tour. He certainly doesn't seem to conserve them onstage—or at home. King Gizzard plays a fierce set and was about to release its sixth (!) studio album of the year. The band has more than a hundred songs in rotation in its live show, and the members decide which to play each night shortly before they go on.

"I don't know at what point we're going to start having to have music stands," Kenny-Smith said. "It's pretty wild to see how much your mind can contain."

They made their first trip to the U.S. eight years ago. The Australian brewer Carlton Dry had awarded them a grant of fifty thousand dollars, which they used to finance a tour ("Played to no one the whole time. It was sick," Mackenzie recently told Stereogum) and then to rent a house for the summer

near Hunter Mountain, in the Catskills, woodshedding their fifth album, “I’m in Your Mind Fuzz.” “We had that Big Pink romantic dream,” Kenny-Smith said. On weekends, they vanned down to the city, to perform and record. For a while, they had a residency at the Brooklyn club Baby’s All Right. Now they were headlining the old tennis stadium in Forest Hills.

It had been a breakthrough tour so far. In some cities, the audiences have been six times larger than they were the last time the band came through. They’d just played two sold-out nights at Red Rocks. In Williamsburg, everyone got a hotel room of his own. “We slogged it for ten years—we’ve done the hard yards,” Kenny-Smith said. “We’ve never been a big buzz band. No one knew where to put us. We’re too weird.”

Shrimp and Juicy, their faces flushed from their skate-park exertions, wandered across the street to check out the activity at a vast industrial transfer station. They used up the last few feet of film shooting a crane claw chomping clumps of construction debris.

What was their plan for their night off?

“We’re going to the hockey,” Galea said.

“Never been to the hockey,” Kenny-Smith said.

The hockey: someone had got the Gizz a box at Madison Square Garden, for a Rangers-Sharks game. That night, about twenty of them—band, crew, assorted friends—came in hot. In the second period, the jumbotron caught them mugging for the camera, a melee of mustaches. Later, back in Brooklyn, the festivities went deep. A cry from the stage in Queens the following eve: “New York City, you fucked us up last night!” The band’s set felt like a retaliation. ♦

By Kashana Cauley

By Richard Brody

By Jay Ruttenberg

By Hannah Goldfield

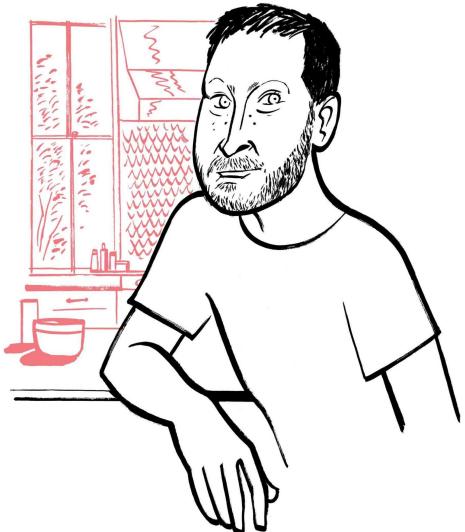
# **Hot Kitchen**

- [Ebon Moss-Bachrach Gets Behind the Stove](#)

# Ebon Moss-Bachrach Gets Behind the Stove

Even being a (clumsy) cater waiter didn't prepare the actor for the high-stress hell of the restaurant kitchen in FX's show "The Bear."

By [Naomi Fry](#)



"It's really easy to romanticize working at a restaurant," the actor Ebon Moss-Bachrach, who stars in the FX show "The Bear," said the other day. "But, from the little window I got into it through the show, it's the least romantic thing ever." Moss-Bachrach, who is forty-five, was until recently known for his role as Desi, Marnie's guitar-strumming husband on "Girls." Now he's getting acclaim for playing Richie, the tough-talking manager of an Italian-beef joint in Chicago. As the guy who runs his dead friend's restaurant, Richie skirmishes with the friend's brother (Jeremy Allen White), a chef who wants to give the place more fine-dining cachet. Moss-Bachrach said, "The high when you're going into service mode must feel really good, a kind of adrenal thing. But then you end up completely depleted at the end of a shift. It's like drugs."

With soulful eyes and the regulation close-cropped beard of the hot Brooklyn dad, Moss-Bachrach is gentler and more thoughtful than the fuckup he plays on “The Bear.” He likes to cook, but the atmosphere in the kitchen of the airy Brooklyn Heights apartment that he shares with his wife, the artist and photographer Yelena Yemchuk, and their two daughters has no trace of the show’s stressful brutality. His culinary explorations began fifteen years ago, when Sasha, the couple’s older daughter, was born. “You know how it is: you have a baby, and it’s like you’re the first person to have a baby in the history of the world,” he said, passing spoons to Yemchuk, at the kitchen counter. “And the world is full of poison, and you’re trying not to screw up. So I started making her baby food.” Adult cuisine followed.

“I used to cook, before I met Ebon,” Yemchuk said, her speech slightly accented. (She emigrated from Ukraine when she was eleven, and she has an upcoming show at the Ukrainian Museum.) “I’m just not as good. He has a real gift.”

Wearing black jeans and woollen slippers, Moss-Bachrach puttered in the kitchen as the family’s new kitten, a Nermal-esque long-haired tabby, scampered by. He pulled out a loaf of rye bread he’d baked that morning and began ladling vegetable soup into bowls. (“Kabocha squash, mustard greens, some barley.”) Moss-Bachrach grew up in Amherst, Massachusetts, where his father ran a music school and his mother owned a children’s-clothing thrift store, and moved to New York in the mid-nineties to attend Columbia, where he began to act, supporting himself with odd jobs. A gig as a cater waiter began promisingly enough. “They called me Speedy,” he said. “Everyone else was a seasoned veteran, over it, but I was, like, ‘I have my clip-on bow tie, my shiny shoes—’” Yemchuk laughed. “But then one day we were in Greenwich, and I had to serve this, like, cannoli tube stuffed with salad, and it was really hard to balance, and it smashed on the plate, and all the dressing exploded all over this lady’s nice dress. That was the end of it.”

“I can’t see you as a waiter,” Yemchuk said, shaking her head.

“Why not? I like to please,” Moss-Bachrach protested. “I like to take care of people.”

The two met at a friend's dinner party; neither was single. "When I saw Ebon, I was, like, 'Oh, my God, he's cute. Who is this guy?'" Yemchuk said. "My friend was, like, 'Forget it, he has a girlfriend *and* he's an actor.' And I was, like, 'Ugh!' When you think of an actor as a boyfriend, that's not where you want to go. They just seem like such a pain in the ass."

"I'm not sure that's fair," Moss-Bachrach said with a smile.

"That's just how I felt at the moment!" Yemchuk explained.

A year and a half later, they started dating. "Ebon is the least actor-y actor I've ever met," Yemchuk said. She looked at him appraisingly. "You're just not obsessed with yourself."

Ego or no ego, Moss-Bachrach is having a moment. He's been in New Mexico, shooting opposite Sarah Paulson in a period movie set during the Dust Bowl ("I play a mysterious stranger"), and he has appeared on "Andor," a "Star Wars"-franchise TV show on Disney+.

"People respond to nuance and complication," he said, of the enthusiastic reception to "The Bear."

"For Ebon, it's so exciting to play these characters who are so different from himself," Yemchuk said, buttering bread. "Richie reminds me of guys I grew up with in Bay Ridge. When you're in your twenties, dating these jerks." She went on, "I knew these guys! One date, that's it. That's all you get!" ♦

By Sarah Larson

By Hannah Goldfield

By Michael Schulman

By Helen Rosner

## Night Life

- The Experimental Pop of Let's Eat Grandma

# The Experimental Pop of Let's Eat Grandma

The twenty-three-year-old British musicians Rosa Walton and Jenny Hollingworth have reconnected after drifting apart, for a new album and a show at Webster Hall.



Rosa Walton and Jenny Hollingworth, the twenty-three-year-old British musicians behind the experimental pop band **Let's Eat Grandma**, have been playing songs together since they were thirteen. After two stunning albums, the pair experienced turmoil—Hollingworth's boyfriend died of cancer, their collaborator SOPHIE died in an accident, and the friends drifted apart for the first time. They slowly reconciled, working through grief to make their latest album, “Two Ribbons.” On Nov. 4, they continue to reconnect at Webster Hall.

By Janet Malcolm

By Robert A. Caro

By Patrick Radden Keefe

By Philip Gourevitch

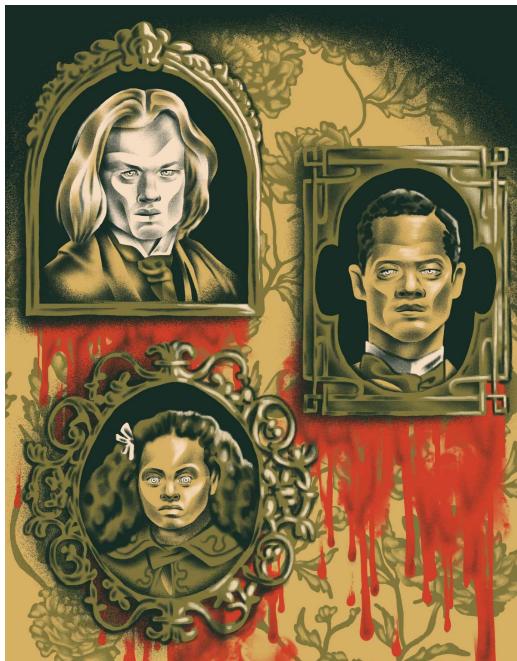
## On Television

- A Lusty, Soul-Searching Adaptation of “Interview with the Vampire”

# A Lusty, Soul-Searching Adaptation of “Interview with the Vampire”

In its most compelling moments, AMC’s reimagining of Anne Rice’s novel explores which powers a Black vampire can and cannot wield in a segregated America.

By [Inkoo Kang](#)



To be a vampire is to be free. That’s the irresistible promise made to Louis de Pointe du Lac, a Black business owner and a closeted gay man living in the Jim Crow South, in “Anne Rice’s Interview with the Vampire,” on AMC. A lustily unfaithful adaptation of Rice’s 1976 novel of the same name, the historical fantasy drama is the first television series based on the author’s work. (AMC plans to develop several more, including “Anne Rice’s Mayfair Witches,” set to début in January.) “Interview” marks an auspicious start to this I.P. venture; by taking lavish and clever liberties with the source text, the series may well surpass Rice’s vision in resonance and complexity.

In the novel, which begins in the eighteenth century, Louis is a white Louisiana plantation owner who is turned into a vampire by Lestat de Lioncourt, a manipulative opportunist to whom the “fledgling” nonetheless

feels a draw that he cannot explain. The series, set in a gleamingly re-created New Orleans in the nineteen-tens and in the mid-pandemic present, makes the mysterious, mesmeric relationship between Louis and Lestat overtly queer. (The director Neil Jordan's shoddy 1994 film adaptation, which starred Brad Pitt and Tom Cruise as Louis and Lestat, respectively, has been accused of blanching the story of its homoerotic subtext. Its greater sin, perhaps, is its near-incoherent plot—ironically, owing to the screenplay written by Rice.) The show's reimagined Louis (Jacob Anderson) is an urban striver, surrounded by possibility yet stifled at every turn. Lestat (Sam Reid), a relatively enlightened émigré from France, fumes at Louis's social condition: "This primitive country has picked you clean!" In a swoon of infatuation and white saviorism, he turns Louis into a vampire, believing that this will empower his companion. But it takes the Frenchman a long while to realize what his lover understands intuitively: not even immortality supersedes race.

In its most compelling moments, "Interview" explores which powers a Black vampire can or cannot wield in a segregated America. Louis can slaughter a man for making a racist comment, but he can't overthrow an old boys' club with the means and the connections to systematically bankrupt Black entrepreneurs like himself. This crushing reality creates a rift between him and Lestat, who presumes that he's given Louis the ultimate gift: a way to opt out of racism and homophobia by checking out of society altogether. But, after Louis joins the undead, he only clings more firmly to the tatters of his humanity. ("You chase after phantoms of your former self," Lestat scolds, in the series' gracefully curlicued dialogue.) Of course, Louis wants to stay close to his mother (Rae Dawn Chong) and his sister (Kalyne Coleman). His partner either does not understand what it is to be Black or is too detached from earthly concerns to care. Blood and fangs aside, "Interview" would be compulsively watchable were it merely a study of a toxic interracial relationship.

At its proudly overripe heart, the series is a gothic domestic soap—Lifetime themes gussied up in Southern finery. The early episodes, somewhat unevenly paced, are largely devoted to the curdling of Louis and Lestat's romance, an ecstatic honeymoon followed by the drip-drip of erosive disappointment. It's not always fun to behold, but who can't relate? The midseason introduction of Claudia (Bailey Bass), a fourteen-year-old whom

Louis and Lestat kill, resurrect, and adopt as their daughter, tilts the show into dark comedy. When Claudia temporarily takes command of the voice-over narration, the insatiable baby vamp gleefully positions herself as a humming horror-movie villain, luring a police officer to his death dressed in a sailor blouse with ribbons in her hair. Claudia can be a mopey irritant, and the confusion she experiences between her sexual appetites and her bloodthirst leads to predictably disastrous consequences. But it's also she who, watching her fathers with an adolescent's unsparing gaze, finally alerts Louis to the slow-boiling pot that's become his "marriage."

The present-day scenes take us to Dubai, where Louis recounts his story to a journalist. It's easy to imagine this Louis—or any version of him—spending much of the twentieth century searching for someone who can hear the woe in his cross-Continental adventures. Rice's journalist was mostly a function of the novel's framing device: a "boy" too callow to understand Louis's many regrets. (The character was played by Christian Slater in the movie, in what was arguably the production's most egregious casting failure. Somehow, the onetime heartthrob with the fiendish grin and the Mephistophelian eyebrows ends up playing a harmless weirdo instead of a seductive villain.) Here the journalist is Daniel Molloy (Eric Bogosian), a snappish, once prominent reporter whom Louis encountered half a century ago in San Francisco. (Their last meeting didn't go well; Daniel's attempts to interview Louis ended with puncture wounds in the writer's neck.) The resumed sessions take place at Louis's home: a penthouse apartment that admits limited sunlight in the daytime. Louis hasn't murdered in decades. And he intends to expose the existence of vampires, a mission that's sure to get him killed by members of his own kind.

It's a credit to the scripts that the testy conversations between journalist and subject are as engaging as the scenes of Louis's transformation from mortal to (self-loathing) monster. Daniel, suffering from Parkinson's, bristles at Louis's youth and health. But "Interview" belongs to a new, melancholy era of vampire entertainment that's finally caught up with Rice's most poignant insight: that the isolation intrinsic to a life outside society and time renders vampiricism, for all its miracles, rather pitiable. In FX's "What We Do in the Shadows," the bloodsuckers are latter-day Norma Desmonds: self-important has-beens so out of touch with the modern world that they would have perished long ago if not for the interventions of their self-effacing familiar.

And in Showtime's garishly unsubtle remake of "Let the Right One In," a father's all-consuming dedication to his vampire child sucks the life out of him—and still doesn't guarantee anything beyond her immediate survival.

Vampirism spurs an identity crisis in Louis, who goes from being trapped in the closet to being trapped in Lestat's coffin. In today's direct-to-reader mediascape, in which the mediation that journalism offers is often bypassed, Louis's desire for a writer to narrate his experiences initially seems like an obligatory throwback. But one soon gets the sense that Louis is in need of an interlocutor—or, really, just a therapist—to help him make sense of his life, particularly the choice of passion that ultimately stripped him of whatever freedom he had in the first place. His plight is a wonderfully capacious metaphor, especially for those in marginalized groups, for whom liberation is often a more fraught endeavor.

This is the second time that Anderson, who came to prominence playing Daenerys Targaryen's eunuch general Grey Worm, in "Game of Thrones," has embodied romanticism repressed by sombre principles. Watching him onscreen, this time with the benefit of actual characterization, feels like witnessing a star rising in real time. "Interview" flits through many modes—tragic, erotic, comic, melodramatic—and Anderson, as Louis, inspires unshakable confidence as the series' through line, especially in serio-camp scenes like the one in which he explodes while recalling an encounter with his sister's baby: "I almost ate my nephew, Lestat!" Anderson manages to make Louis's ever-heavier guilt engaging, rather than an endurance test. But even the actor's wounded charisma can't make up for the series' most glaring flaw: the sense of intimacy we lose when the action in this decades-spanning saga constantly jumps ahead to the "important stuff," instead of offering a sense of its characters' daily lives. "Interview" strives to be the burgundy velvet chaise longue of TV shows: an artful and inviting kitsch object that might reawaken our senses if we allow ourselves to get lost in it. It's only fair that we'd want to luxuriate a little longer. ♦

By Inkoo Kang

By Richard Brody

By Michael Schulman

By Richard Brody

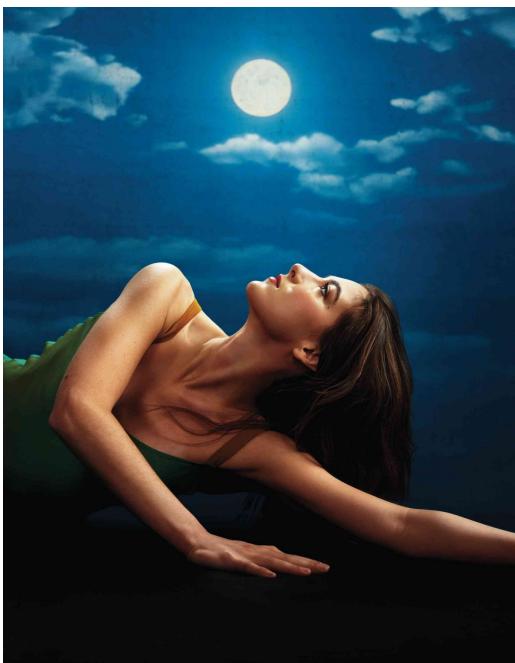
## **Onward and Upward with the Arts**

- [Weyes Blood Gives Soft Rock an Apocalyptic Edge](#)

# Weyes Blood Gives Soft Rock an Apocalyptic Edge

In the studio, the singer turns sonic nostalgia into something eerie and ironic.

By [Margaret Talbot](#)



One afternoon in June of last year, Natalie Mering, the indie musician who performs as Weyes Blood, was working on a new album at EastWest, a storied recording studio in Hollywood. The album, “And in the Darkness, Hearts Aglow,” which comes out on November 18th, is her first since “Titanic Rising,” in 2019. For the cover of “Titanic Rising,” Mering had an elaborate re-creation of her teen-age bedroom submerged in a back-yard pool, and was photographed underwater, wearing jeans and a T-shirt. It was a nostalgic image rendered deeply eerie. The album, her fourth, was her breakthrough, critically acclaimed for the imaginative way Mering had recast the Laurel Canyon folk-pop of the nineteen-seventies for a new era of existential unease. Mering half-jokingly described the record to me as “a doomer classic.”

EastWest, which is on Sunset Boulevard, was the fanciest place Mering had ever recorded. The building, from 1933, had once been a burlesque joint

called Madame Zucca's Hollywood Casino and had been taken over in the early sixties by Bill Putnam, the pioneering audio engineer known for inventing many modern recording techniques. The Beach Boys made "Pet Sounds" there; EastWest is where the Mamas and the Papas recorded "California Dreamin'" and "Monday, Monday." The ceilings were high, the equipment sumptuous. Inside, it was as cool and dim as a bank vault. A string quartet would not be out of place there, and that day Mering had brought one in.

Her previously recorded vocals for a new song, "[Grapevine](#)," filled the control room. Mering has a warm, pure alto voice that has often been compared with Karen Carpenter's—though it's less sugary than Carpenter's sometimes sounded. I'd never heard "Grapevine" before, but it exerted a curious effect that I'd noticed with other Weyes Blood songs, all of which Mering writes. The first time you hear them, you feel the swell of bittersweet emotion that usually comes from songs that you already know and have overlaid with memories and associations. "If a man can't see his shadow / he can block your sun all day," went the opening lines of "Grapevine." Mering told me later that the song was about breaking up with a "narcissistic" musician she'd been "madly in love with" during the pandemic. She had been sick with long *covid*, though she hadn't known at the time what was afflicting her, and he kept telling her that she was depressed, or just had to get outdoors or exercise more. "I basically needed to leave him to go be sick on my own with my mysterious illness that nobody understood yet," she said. "And it was heartbreaking." (She has now recovered, and the ex has apologized.)

The song's title refers to a stretch of California highway known as the Grapevine—the steep grade on I-5 that takes you out of the farmland of the San Joaquin Valley, over the Tehachapi and San Gabriel Mountains, and into the vast, glittering bowl of Los Angeles County. If you are coming home to the city, where Mering lives, from the north, it's the final stretch of road-trip driving, and there's a romance to it. In the winter, the pass can become so shrouded in dense fog that big-rig trucks get stranded. Mering used to drive on the highway often to see her ex. "Grapevine" is a breakup song, but in typical Weyes Blood fashion it also evokes more apocalyptic sorrows. "California's my body," she sings. "And your fire runs over me."

Mering's played-back voice had a melancholy grandeur when set against the live strings, which were lush and cinematic. She sounded like an embodiment of womanly wisdom—a cool hand on a fevered brow. The actual Mering in the studio exuded a game, tomboyish energy. She was cheerfully in charge. She sat on a black leather couch listening to the track, her chin resting on a tented knee, with her dog, a rescued Pomeranian named Luigi, nestled next to her. Periodically, she sprang to her feet and headed over to the console to talk to the engineer, Andrew Sarlo, or to the album's co-producer, Jonathan Rado, or to the musicians on the other side of the glass. At one point, she requested "more arpeggiation"; at other moments, she asked for sounds that were "less classical" or "more jammy."

"That first entrance to the cello?" she told the musicians. "You can totally swell that. Because it's such a pretty note, I'd love to hear it come out a little more."

Mering, who is thirty-four, has long, straight brown hair worn parted in the middle; her ears peek out from the glossy curtains, Galadriel style. She was wearing the same outfit that I'd seen her in earlier that week at the studio: slim, high-waisted brown tweed trousers with a tucked-in white T-shirt, orange socks, and Nikes. "That sounds wrong," she declared at one point. "Can we try a pass where the violin is quieter?" Mering has the good posture of a choir kid, which she was in high school, in Doylestown, Pennsylvania. She stood up tall behind Sarlo, who said, "It's a C-natural at bar eight."

Mering, bouncing on the balls of her feet, said, "Can we try C-sharp? Is that crazy?"

When she heard it, she grinned and swayed to the music. "Now *that* sounds right."

Earlier, Mering had described another new song as having the "vibe" of "Whiter Shade of Pale"—a song that, in turn, had a "Bach vibe." That reminded her of how Jim Morrison and the Doors, whom she loves, had come up with "Riders on the Storm" while jamming on a 1948 cowboy song, "Ghost Riders in the Sky." Learning about such inspired pastiches, she said, made her feel better "about all the influences that come out in my music." She noted, "People have been doing that since the dawn of time."



*"It was very large. It lived millions of years ago. And it went thataway!"*  
Cartoon by Liana Finck

Mering's collaborators describe her as having an uncommonly confident artistic vision, but one that she pursues through a lot of improvisation and open-ended experimentation. In addition to singing and writing songs, she plays guitar, piano, bass, and drums. "I can make noise out of anything," she said. "But mainly guitar." Rado, an acclaimed indie producer who is also a member of the band Foxygen, told me that Mering was "deliberate and freewheeling at the same time," adding, "She's not necessarily looking for the perfect take, but she's looking for the perfect vibe—always trying to get at something with the right feeling and emotion. And she's down to take as long as it needs to get there."

Like many artists of her generation, Mering has a complicated relationship to nostalgia. At a time when pop and indie music of all eras—including the deep cuts once accessible only in musty record stores—can be instantly found online, it can be tempting to escape our twitchily demoralized present and lose yourself in a romantic version of the musical past. At the rented house in Pasadena that Mering shares with a roommate, the living room is dominated by a used grand piano; when I visited, [Joni Mitchell](#) and [Elton John](#) songbooks were open on its music shelf. On a nearby wall, Mering has hung, in a frame, the lyrics of a song by the Los Angeles singer-songwriter Judee Sill, who died of an overdose in 1979, at the age of thirty-five.

Sometimes, Mering told me, she thought of her own music as “atemporal” and felt a little bad about it, wondering if she wasn’t attuned enough to her own times.

In conversation, though, she often expressed a jaundiced view of contemporary trends. She had “a short fuse” for online dating. She preferred “fate” to “algorithms,” and “meeting people and falling in love in real life” to working the apps. She’d never made a checklist of what she was looking for in a partner. “I don’t think you know your soul’s mate,” she said. “You probably know your ego’s match. You can meet your *ego* mate, but how much fun is that going to be?” As an artist, she remained committed to an ethos that she associated with Gen X: she believed that it was possible, and desirable, for an ambitious musician to remain in “rebellion against mainstream music,” and not to default to pop as the aspirational category. Mering’s cohort is perhaps the last to harbor tactile memories of a world before omnipresent smartphones and a tentacular Internet, but not everybody her age is as wistfully pissed off about technology as she is. In 2019, she [told the magazine \*The Believer\*](#) that she was “a very nostalgic person,” adding, “I miss so much. I miss going to the video store and renting a video. I miss calling a friend on the landline. I miss when people couldn’t break a plan because they had no way to get in touch with you, so they couldn’t leave you hanging and just send you a bullshit text.”

Still, if Mering has often looked to the past, she has also expressed frustration with her elders—baby boomers, in particular. She especially resents the grip that boomer-era classic rock has held on everything from radio formats to song purchases. “Now that we’re all on streaming, you’re competing with every other music that’s ever been made at any time,” she told me. It was harder for new music to break through and define a generational identity. She’s not the only person to say this: the cultural critic Ted Gioia [recently pointed out](#) in *The Atlantic* that the streaming market is heavily skewed toward old songs, and radio stations are reducing the number of songs in their rotations. “I really do appreciate the greats,” Mering said. “But I would love to see new music and culture get a little more limelight. It’s already so disposable and so fragile, because we don’t have the same kind of ecosystem that these people had”—a captive radio audience and generous budgets for studio time and album promotion.

At first listen, Mering's music might remind you uncannily of some long-lost track from the seventies that's recently been rediscovered through TikTok or Spotify. Yet much of what makes her music feel contemporary is its relationship to the past—her capacity to conjure, with longing and irony, a period that was more bright-eyed about the future. Her lyrics combine a yearning for sincerity and conviction with a serene fatalism. “Give me something I can see / Something bigger and louder than the voices in me / Something to believe,” she sings on a track from “Titanic Rising,” the word “believe” quavering like a falling leaf. In the shimmering song “[It's Not Just Me, It's Everybody](#),” from the new album, Mering channels the disorientation caused by the pandemic: “Living in the wake of overwhelming changes / We've all become strangers / Even to ourselves.”

She doesn't want her music to sound *exactly* like an artifact. In time, she and Rado decided that finessing the line between a too-on-the-nose retro sound and something more current required the delicate introduction of sonic effects—echo, delay, and what Rado likes to call “primitive sampling.” They wanted to layer in weird noises such that, as Rado said, “the average listener is not going to be, like, This is *too* weird for me.” To accomplish this artfully, they needed to take their time. They ended up leaving the costly EastWest and decamping to Rado's own studio, Dreamstar II, a converted three-car garage in North Hollywood with a lot of instruments stacked everywhere and string lights looped haphazardly on the walls. Several weeks later, Mering and I met for tacos at HomeState—a Tex-Mex place in Pasadena whose menu includes a vegan item named after the singer [Phoebe Bridgers](#)'s pug—and she told me why the change in atmosphere had been important. At EastWest, she said, “you could really feel that *room sound*. It's a really historical room, but also the chambers for the reverbs—we'd be, like, That's the Beach Boys. It was so fun to record a band in there live, but after a while we need to go be primitive elsewhere. We can't be, like, standing on the shoulders of these giants.” She laughed. “I'm not trying to make a tribute album.”

Mering is a movie lover, a big reader, and something of an autodidact. In conversation, she generates cultural references as abundantly as an air popper generates popcorn. She spoke to me with equal confidence of [Ingrid Bergman](#)'s “Method-y” performance in “Gaslight” and of Christopher Lasch's despairing social critique “[The Culture of Narcissism](#).” She dilated

breezily on the career of the avant-garde composer, instrument inventor, and Depression-era hobo Harry Partch. She brought up [Stanley Kubrick](#)'s philosophy of, as she described it, "appealing to the subconscious more by saying less." (Kubrick once said, of the minimal dialogue in "2001," that he had tried "to create a visual experience, one that bypasses verbalized pigeonholing and directly penetrates the subconscious with an emotional and philosophic content.") Mering told me that she takes a similar approach to writing music: "I love lyrics, I love folk music, but I do think there's a lot of emotion in instrumental, melodic themes, and you can use them as your own canvas to paint feelings on."

Mering's family background and upbringing set her up nicely for the kind of cultural time travel she likes to engage in. Her mother's mother was a vaudeville singer who once played the role of Indian Child in a lost silent movie called "The Gateway of the Moon." Mering's mother, Pamela, also sings; she had a florist's shop in Santa Monica for a while, and when Natalie was little Pamela would sometimes take her along on deliveries and entertain her by crooning standards. Natalie's father, Sumner Mering, was the good-looking front man of a New Wave band, called Sumner, which put out a record on Elektra/Asylum in 1980. Her parents got together after a mutual friend arranged a blind date; Pamela Mering told me that she agreed to it after hearing that Sumner had gone on a few dates with one of her musical idols—Joni Mitchell.

In the early eighties, Sumner became a born-again Christian. He eventually abandoned rock music and began a career in medical publishing. In 1999, when Mering was ten, she and her brother Zak moved with their parents to Pennsylvania. (Another brother, Ean, who is eleven years older than Mering, stayed in California.) Pamela told me, "We were a Christian family," but added, "We came from an angle of nothing was impossible. 'Look at God's creation—how intricate, how wild and bizarre. You can do anything you put your mind to, don't limit yourself, there's freedom in Christ and God.' We weren't a religious household in the sense of having a lot of rules and regulations. We were kind of a different breed."

Mering, who identifies more with Buddhism now, is close to her family. Her rental in Pasadena is a modestly sized ranch house, but Mering initially didn't have a roommate, and found it too big to rattle around in alone, so her

mother and Zak stayed with her for extended periods. “I’ve come to terms with their Christianity,” she told me as we talked in her dusty back yard, which had a badminton set, many succulents, ornamental trees, a birdbath, and mismatched patio furniture. The yard is visited regularly by a flock of feral peacocks, and they screeched as we sipped herbal tea, to which she had added, for tingly effect, the buds of a flowering plant called spilanthes. (When Mering was in her twenties, she briefly apprenticed with an herbalist on a farm in Kentucky.) She said of her parents, “I’m just very grateful that they were spiritual at all. I really appreciate their faith, even if it’s not the same kind that I have now. We can talk about God together. We’ve healed a lot. But obviously it can be hard growing up religious.” One upside was that she watched a lot of classic Hollywood movies at a young age, in part because they lacked explicit content.

As a little girl, Mering told me, “I was moody and weird, and I had a lot of extra emotional software that I didn’t know what to do with.” She said of herself, “I am a really high-functioning depressive. I definitely feel all the feels.” In middle school, Mering discovered the D.I.Y. music scene and began taking the train to Philadelphia to see punk and experimental music shows in run-down row houses and dank church basements. She particularly loved noise music that churned up discordant waves of feedback and fuzz, pounding her chest like rough surf. By the time she was fifteen, Mering had adopted the name Weyes Blood—inspired by the Flannery O’Connor novel [“Wise Blood”](#) and pronounced the same way—and was performing noise-music shows herself.

Jim Strong, an artist and a musician who dated Mering in high school and who remains a close friend, remembers meeting her for the first time, at a show at the First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia. “We were introduced by a mutual friend, who said, ‘This is Natalie. She just built an eight-foot guitar.’” Mering, after coming across a book about experimental-instrument building, had learned how to put two guitars together with their necks touching—a contraption that produced, as she remembered, “a ghostly sound where you could only hear the harmonics of the strings.” (Mering lugged the chimerical guitar to gigs in a ski bag—the only case big enough for it.) Strong and his friends, who were a little older, were starting to make their own instruments out of found materials. “She was just immediately a weird little leader in this scene we were creating,” he recalled. He said that

the young Mering “had an incredible depth of knowledge about avant-garde music.”

Mering, Strong, and their friends became interested in sixties “happenings” and the Fluxus art movement. In retrospect, their projects had something in common with the more political idea of “temporary autonomous zones”—uncommodifiable experiences that, as Strong put it, would only “last for a moment, and in story and memory.” They once staged an “upside-down-forest show”—taking “truckloads of branches and painstakingly tying them to the ceiling in this South Philly basement.”

Some fans of the dreamy chamber pop that Weyes Blood makes today might be surprised to know that she was once the lead screamer for a grindcore band called Satanized, whose performances sometimes involved exploding packets of fake blood. Around this time, Mering and Strong also had a performance-art act, the League of the Divine Wind. Their shows often featured the odd spectacle of the duo biting into fruit embedded with microphones, which amplified the sounds of their chewing and swallowing. “There was a *lot* of citrus,” Strong said. “It was very juicy. I think we may have overplayed our hands, in terms of the citrus factor.”

For a while, Mering found this scene very heady and inspiring. She told me that, at the time, she was convinced she was hearing the sound of the future: “It’s going to be *noise*—it’s going to move past the structure of music as we know it to something ecstatic and improvisational and on the cutting edge of sound design and expression.” Mering observed, “Instead of feeling like a regular singer-songwriter, I felt more like an explorer—exploring realms of sound for my generation.”

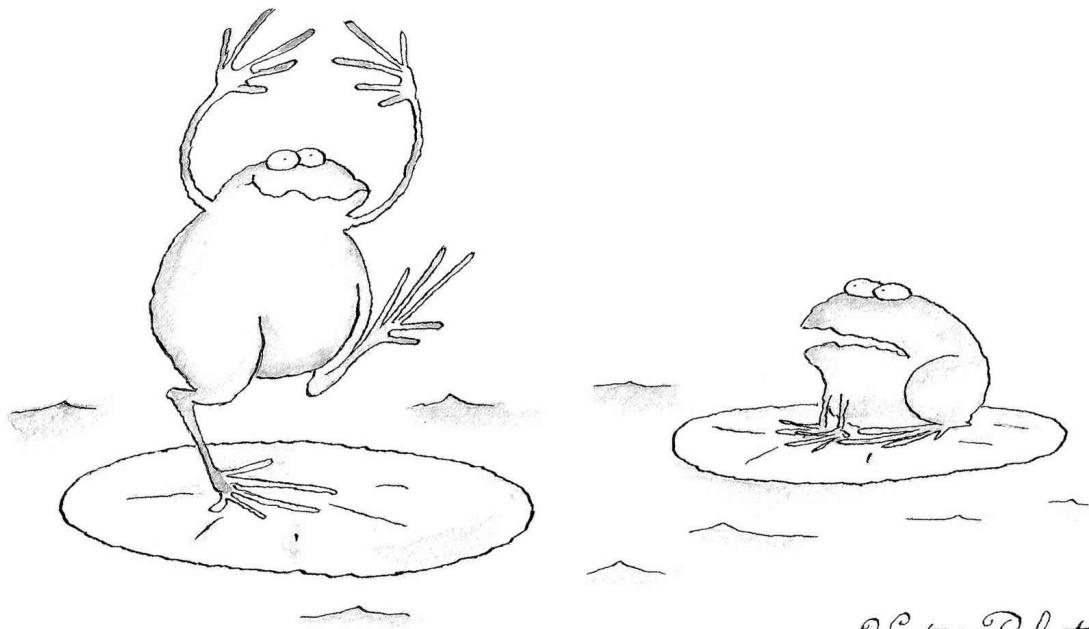
Mering went to study music at Lewis & Clark College, in Portland, Oregon, but she left after a year to make songs on her own, and to play with an experimental noise band called Jackie-O Motherfucker. She soon ended up back on the East Coast, bouncing between Baltimore and Philadelphia. In Baltimore, she lived for a time in a three-story abandoned warehouse that had been converted into a communal art-and-living space called Tarantula Hill. Twig Harper, the musician who ran it, let artists live there for next to nothing. It had a library, screen-printing equipment, a music studio, and a sensory-deprivation tank, but no central heating. Mering loved it there. She

had started to write songs that anchored experimental noises with more traditional melodic structures. The results sounded a bit like Gregorian chants produced by [Brian Eno](#). She said of the warehouse, “I made my first album there, and I could be loud and use the space and run around. Warehouses are to me so expansive—it’s kind of unlimited what you can do there. It’s, like, this alternative, liminal creative space.” In the winter, Mering sewed hot-water bottles into her sweaters; on the coldest days, everybody huddled around a wood-burning stove on the second floor. Mering said, “It was actually very cool, because we had a roommate community based on ‘We’ve got to build the fire and sit next to it.’ And we’d talk about things—talk about ideas.”

In 2011, Weyes Blood released her first album, “The Outside Room,” on a tiny label, Not Not Fun Records, playing all the instruments herself. It sounded lo-fi, spooky, and out-there—there was no call to release a single. Around this time, she used the entire modest advance that she received from a record label to get her wisdom teeth taken out. She recalled bursting into tears when she found a parking ticket on her car, wondering how she could possibly pay it. Before the success of her next two albums, she was admired by other musicians, but she “didn’t have a leg up or a patron,” and she got by with a string of day jobs, from census-taker to “dog-hiker,” which involved bringing packs of dogs into the woods to let them run around.

These impecunious years, she says, shaped her artistic outlook. “I felt like it was my responsibility to be excited about things that might not have the most capitalistic value but might have value for our psychology and be valuable in terms of expression,” she said. “It’s almost like that replaced the faith I grew up with as a kid in some ways. It didn’t replace God, but there was this idea of How do I *help* people? I’ve got to believe in the frontiers of art and music.” She went on, “It was always really important to me to make sure my generation didn’t get completely swallowed up by capitalism. Because it seemed to me that this was what was happening to millennials—and our music was really boring.” She recalls being a teen-ager and “asking my dad, because he was a musician, ‘When are we going to have the next wave? When is someone going to come and reinvent music again?’ Because we were getting ’NSync and [Britney Spears](#) and Hanson and the Spice Girls, and it was bad.” (She has lately grown more admiring of Spears.)

Men dominated the indie-music scene Mering was in, though she was a more technically proficient musician than most of them. Elaine Kahn, a poet who first met her in Philadelphia in 2007 and has stayed friends with her since, recalls getting emotional when she saw Mering perform the songs from “Titanic Rising” at a record-release party: “Though there were definitely people in that noise scene who fostered her talent, I was also thinking about all the dudes over the years who had tried to steal her light a little bit. Here she was, this beautiful young woman, who could play way better than most of them could. And they would try to make her their girlfriend, or their muse.”



*Victoria Roberts*

*You're not thinking frog thoughts, Maurice, I can tell.*  
Cartoon by Victoria Roberts

I asked Mering about those gender politics. “Oh, I’ve been on tour with people where they’re, like, ‘If you don’t sleep with me on this tour, it’s gonna be the tour from living hell,’ ” she said. “Threatening me. Or somebody wants to work with you creatively but *also* wants to sleep with you a little bit.” We were driving to her house after a fitting for a music-video shoot—she had tried on white sailor pants, a jaunty sailor’s beret, and a striped T-shirt, for a scenario in which she would dance with a cartoon, like [Gene Kelly](#) in “Anchors Aweigh.” Instead of being paired up with a cartoon mouse, Mering would dance with a malevolent animated cell phone. (She talks often about how drained and exploited we are by self-obsolescing

modern technology.) In the car, she had put on a nineteen-forties playlist—the Ink Spots, Frank Sinatra singing “I’ll Never Smile Again.” Perhaps the velvety vocals helped, but Mering turned out to be one of the calmest drivers I’ve ever shared a car with in L.A. traffic.

“I think I used to mute my sexuality and my femininity so that I could be considered a peer and a bro,” Mering observed. “And that has its own pitfalls. Learning how to basically turn my pheromones off in a situation and make it really, explicitly, subconsciously clear that nothing was going to happen. It’s a good skill to have, but it’s also a strange skill.”

In early 2016, Mering moved to Los Angeles, where she gravitated more strongly toward the singer-songwriter mode burnished by such seventies forbears as Harry Nilsson and Laura Nyro. Though she was still incorporating “weird sounds and tape loops,” she said, her music had been “morphing toward what I do now.” She noted, “As the songs got better, the noises got quieter, because they didn’t need the atmospheric support anymore.” It struck her that the truly “nonconformist thing to do” was to make music that was “as beautiful as possible.” Guys in noise music had liked it when she got loud and dissonant and crazy onstage. “They’d be, like”—she assumed a gruff dude voice—“ ‘You looked *really good* doing that.’ ” But Mering wanted to hone her songcraft, creating music replete with grace.

She recalled a distinct turning point. “I went to this international noise conference,” she said. “And I was playing in a basement and the amps caught on fire—I was playing so crazy and loud. I honestly felt like the Devil had showed up to my gig and said, ‘Don’t do this anymore.’ I mean, this was a basement full of people and the amps were on fire. And this was before the Ghost Ship fire.” (In December, 2016, a conflagration broke out during a show at the Ghost Ship, an alternative art-and-living space in Oakland that didn’t meet building codes; it killed thirty-six people, casting a shadow over the D.I.Y. scene.)

Mering decided that her new music would emphasize more accessible sounds—most notably her voice, which was honeyed and languid, but with a kind of dignified force that made her lyrics sound composed and oracular. The resulting album, “The Innocents,” which she released in 2014, had a

cover reminiscent of a vintage folk LP: a simple black-and-white photograph of a ponytailed Mering in profile. Tracks such as “Land of Broken Dreams” and “Summer” harkened back to the mystical medievalism of sixties folk revivalists like Fairport Convention. In 2016 came “Front Row Seat to Earth,” an album that showcased a lyrical turn toward generational angst and pushed Mering’s vocals into a more ethereal register. But 2019’s “Titanic Rising,” which came out on the prominent indie label Sub Pop, represented a big musical leap, and it turned up on many album-of-the-year lists. There was less gloomy grandiosity and more hummable swing—a more knowing incorporation of soft-rock charm. The *Guardian* [described it](#) as “beauty deep enough to drown in” and “gorgeously smart.” Pitchfork [noted](#) that the “songs are more stoic and elegant even when Mering sings of apocalyptic imagery like a ‘million people burnin’.’”

As Mering’s career has taken off, she has participated in buzzy collaborations that highlight her limpid vocals and “[Licorice Pizza](#)” style. She turned up on [Lana Del Rey](#)’s 2021 album, “Chemtrails Over the Country Club,” where she and the singer Zella Day harmonized with Del Rey on a gauzy cover of Joni Mitchell’s “For Free.” For the soundtrack to the recent “Minions” prequel, a compilation of seventies covers produced by the hitmaker [Jack Antonoff](#), Mering channelled Linda Ronstadt with a crisp version of “[You’re No Good](#).” She conjured Carole King on “[Suddenly](#),” a groovy, psychedelic homage written by one of her friends from Baltimore, Michael Collins, who has also found indie success in L.A., recording as Drugdealer. That track has become one of Mering’s biggest hits on Spotify, with thirty-two million plays. (Her top song as Weyes Blood, the country-tinged “[Andromeda](#),” from “Titanic Rising,” has received nearly forty million plays.) Collins, remembering their youthful immersion in Baltimore’s experimental milieu, said of Mering, “You know, she could have gone out and tried to have the career she has now from a younger age. But she’s so much more of an odd bird. She was interested in gravitating toward the freak zones.”

Some of the confrontational, theatrical verve of her youth is visible in her more recent videos and album-cover concepts. The drowned-bedroom image on the cover of “Titanic Rising,” for example, could easily have been realized with Photoshop. Instead, she [worked with an underwater photographer](#), holding her breath in the back-yard pool for longer and longer

as night fell and the particleboard furniture began to dissolve. In the video for “It’s Not Just Me, It’s Everybody”—a title for our times, if ever there was one—Mering scampers around a bombed-out cityscape constructed on the stage of the Ace Theatre, a concert space in downtown L.A. that still looks like the Spanish Gothic movie palace it originally was.

Mering told me she is grateful that she started her career on the margins. It allowed her to try strange stuff and to practice among like-minded friends—not, say, on [TikTok](#) or in some other contemporary platform where she would have felt immediate pressure to brand her music and her style. When she made the move toward less transgressive music, she said, “it wasn’t about money—I just wanted to reach people.” With the kind of noise music she had initially been creating, “you could maybe go the art-museum route, or get real academic. I liked *people*. I wanted to play big shows with people.” She feels that her years spent “doing something that was very ecstatic and free” organically led her to consider other approaches—“to do something that was very orchestrated and planned.”

Mering’s two styles of music-making continue to “feed into each other,” she added. “I now know that, as much as I bang my head against the wall sometimes—it’s gotta be perfect, or it’s gotta be like *this*, or this melody has to feel like this—at the end of the day the rawest form of emotion is more of an impulse, an improvisatory thing. I learned a lot about improvisation from noise music, and I default to that if I’m overthinking it. You can’t be too self-aware and calculating.”

One of the rewards of a Weyes Blood album is the sense that, beneath the transistor-radio prettiness, something stranger lurks. On the new record, the song “Children of the Empire” pairs a bouncy and captivating melodic line with almost comically grim lyrics: “So much blood on our hands”; “We’re all lost.” Originally, the song had finished on a bright musical note—a fun, vamping outro recorded at EastWest. But Rado told me that, at his studio, he and Mering decided instead to fade out the song with a moody swirl of strings, and to make the finger snaps that punctuate the song sound “colder, louder, more metallic.” These touches, he said, were “so much more Weyes Blood.” So was Mering’s decision to include, on both “Titanic Rising” and “And in the Darkness, Hearts Aglow,” an ambient instrumental track that deconstructs an earlier song on the album. On the new record, the

instrumental piece is “[In Holy Flux](#),” which takes the vocal loop from “It’s Not Just Me, It’s Everybody,” and, in Rado’s words, “runs it through a lot of effects to morph it into something sonically different.”

“And in the Darkness, Hearts Aglow” contains an especially striking track called “God Turn Me Into a Flower,” which features heavy synths played by the experimental electronic musician Daniel Lopatin, who performs as Oneohtrix Point Never. Mering’s album notes describe the track as an “other-worldly dirge” that “serves as an allegory for our collective hubris.” Dua Lipa will probably not be coming out with a remix. In a short essay about the album, Mering writes that “the pliable softness of a flower has become my mantra as we barrel towards an uncertain fate.” The song comes off as a twenty-first-century version of sacred music, with a wash of Disneyesque bird sounds that suggest a tripped-out sublime—or, as Mering puts it, “a musical sob.” In its capacity to both haunt and soothe, the song feels like the album’s definitive moment.

One afternoon last fall, I asked Mering where we should meet for an interview, and she picked Huntington Gardens, in Pasadena. It was a clear-skied day, and we walked among glowing Japanese maples and dying roses. Mering spotted a woman and her young daughter eating ice cream and looked at them longingly. We got in line for some cones. We’d been talking again about her relationship to the past, and she said that she was maybe becoming less nostalgic. “I’ve been using the word ‘sentimental’ more,” she said. “I think I’m sentimental.” She paused. “Because it leaves you open to experiencing the future as something that’s *worth* remembering. In our culture, it’s so easy to just assume the future is going to keep getting worse.” ♦

By Amanda Petrusich

By Peter C. Baker

By Craig Thomas

By Helen Shaw

# Poems

- “[Piano](#)”
- “[The Wishbone](#)”

By [Edgar Kunz](#)

*Audio:* Read by the author.

I held him together  
as long as I could, she says.

He stopped working,  
stopped coming upstairs.

He was like tissue paper  
coming apart in water.

Like smoke in my hands.  
It had nothing to do

with you, baby. You left  
when you had to.

I met a woman once  
who worked on pianos.

Said it was a hard job.  
The tools, the leverage.

The required ear. I love it,  
she said, but it's brutal.

The second I step away  
it's already falling out of tune.

*This is drawn from “Fixer.”*

By Helen Shaw

By David Gilbert

By [Joyce Carol Oates](#)

In the still of night  
old fears emerge.

Those closest relatives  
you'd found barely  
bearable, cornucopias  
of family dystopia  
spilling into  
“amusing anecdotes”  
decades later  
like a much-thumbed  
rosary, or litany  
of the dead.

Old vexations,  
tics and mannerisms,  
wincing at the pinch  
of the drunk uncle  
(so handsome!—but  
died young),  
stooping to avoid  
the hacking cough  
soon to propel  
your Hungarian grandfather  
to his grave.

Those years!  
Pride redacts the grave  
long heartbreak of loving  
the one more than  
he'd loved you,  
who'd favored your  
sister, and not you  
who at twelve rolled  
your eyes, such  
boredom!—jaws  
wrenched in yawns

at Thanksgiving  
twinge of nausea  
clammy-white turkey  
carcass and skin, stink  
of eviscerated gut  
and in the “gravy boat”  
coarse curdles of  
grease. Pope’s nose,  
giblets and innards,  
“wishbone” carefully  
removed from the ravaged  
skeleton and perched atop  
the fridge to dry,  
forgotten and forlorn  
until rediscovered  
in December, brittle  
and easily broken—  
*Make a wish, Joyce!*—but  
what could you have  
possibly wished, so young?  
To be *older*?  
To be *out of there*?  
To be—*where*?

Stunned now to recall  
how all at that table  
are gone now, mere  
ectoplasm in a dim  
region of the brain.  
How heedless you’d loved  
them after all, as  
they’d loved who-  
ever it was, was you.

By David Gilbert

By Diane Seuss

By Craig Thomas

By Michael Schulman

## **Second Acts**

- [In the Studio with Andrew Cuomo, Podcaster](#)

# In the Studio with Andrew Cuomo, Podcaster

Channelling Joe Rogan, the ex-governor host kvetches with Anthony Scaramucci about wokeness (“Some of us never fell asleep!”) and searches in vain for his rescinded Emmy statue.

By [Hunter Walker](#)



The other day, Andrew Cuomo visited a recording studio in the garment district to tape the first episode of his new podcast, “As a Matter of Fact.” His first guest, beamed in on a video monitor, was Anthony Scaramucci, the former communications director in the Trump White House who was fired after ten days for declaring, among other things, “I’m not Steve Bannon, I’m not trying to suck my own cock.” Cuomo, who resigned as New York’s governor four hundred and thirty-four days (or 43.4 Scaramuccis) ago, amid allegations of sexual harassment, sat at a newscaster’s desk in front of a backdrop of the skyline wearing a dark suit and a purple tie. He began the conversation by outlining the “operating premise” of his show. “Our political dialogue is dominated in many ways by the extremes,” he said. “I believe it’s actually worse on the Republican side.”

Scaramucci, wearing a zip-up fleece, disagreed. He identified the real problem. “The radical left of the Democratic Party, the wokeness, whatever you want to call it,” he said. (He cited his alma mater, Tufts: “They have a white-cleansing instructional thing where you have to, like, disavow your whiteness.”) “I would say you, Governor Cuomo, are actually victim of the woke radical *left*.”

Cuomo nodded. “You’re right about the cancel culture,” he said, laying out another premise of the show. “There’s an arrogance to the woke movement. Because some of us never fell asleep!”

Cuomo is using the podcast, which premiered two weeks ago, to dip a toe back into the public arena. His crusade against wokeness has required some strange alliances. The show is produced by Quake Media, a subscription service dedicated to “premium podcast content,” whose other offerings include “The Laura Ingraham Show,” “The People’s Podcast with Mike Huckabee,” and “Pete Rose’s Daily Picks.” Cuomo noted that he’s not just a podcaster—“I’m a *vodcaster*,” he said. “Like the Joe Rogan show.”

The interview continued with discussions about McCarthyism, Mar-a-Lago, and family. (Scaramucci: “I have cousins that are clamdiggers, I have cousins in the auto-glass space.”) Afterward, Scaramucci asked how he’d done.

“It was great!” Cuomo said.

“God bless, man,” Scaramucci said. “Please tell Chris I say hi.”

The studio manager, Eric Pearce, a bearded veteran of multiple right-wing outlets (Newsmax, the Blaze), entered the studio and played a promo video for Cuomo to review. The ad presented the podcast as a unifying political force. The former governor’s voice played over photos of him in office as well as of the January 6th attack and protest signs bearing the slogan “*DEFUND THE POLICE*.” Cuomo promised not to “toe the party line.” He gave Pearce a high five. “Great job,” he said.

“Is it too much glitz?” Pearce asked.

Cuomo had another worry: “Why does my nose look big in those pictures?”

“I could put the nose filter on,” Pearce suggested.

“I love it,” Cuomo said.

Cuomo stepped out of the studio, humming to himself. He wanted a coffee, so he headed for a shop a few blocks away. He noted that he has lost roughly twenty pounds since leaving office. Another perk: he now has more time to devote to fixing up classic cars. Has he taken up therapy or meditation? “No, no, no,” he said. He explained that he has found peace in other ways: “I did more for this state than any governor in modern history.”

He did have one regret—he may have worked too hard. “Relationships have to be nurtured,” he said. “I never vacationed. I wouldn’t leave the state.” He went on, “I go to my sister’s house in Martha’s Vineyard, I said, ‘How long have you had it?’ Her answer? ‘Twenty years.’ ”

Cuomo doesn’t listen to many podcasts, but he felt that his experience leading New York’s daily televised coronavirus briefings was good practice. “It did win an Emmy,” he said. He turned to an aide. “Didn’t we win an Emmy? Where is that Emmy? I remember seeing the statue!”

The aide said that she’d look into it.

“Who took the Emmy?” he said. “You took the Emmy?” (The Emmy was rescinded the day after he resigned.)

Walking down a drizzly Twenty-ninth Street, Cuomo passed a woman who was sitting in a doorway smoking what appeared to be a crack pipe. She recognized him and said hello. Another woman dropped her umbrella in shock. “I couldn’t believe my eyes,” she said. “How are you, Governor?”

“I’m doing O.K.,” Cuomo said. “How are you?”

“I’m fine. Not really happy with what’s happening,” she replied. “I loved when you were there.”

“We’ll be O.K.,” Cuomo said. The pair hugged, and the woman kissed the air by his cheek.

After they parted, Cuomo said, “She hugs me, she kisses me. That was sexual harassment? No, it’s not.” ♦

By Janet Malcolm

By Robert A. Caro

By Patrick Radden Keefe

By Philip Gourevitch

## **Shouts & Murmurs**

- [Night of the Living Career Dead, Brill Building Edition](#)

By [Glenn Eichler](#)

First of all, thank you both for making the trip. I know it's not a simple one, especially for you, Gil, with your mobility issues. Thank you also for being so understanding about not dragging your walker on the sandalwood floor.

Second, I realize a seaside compound in Amagansett probably isn't the sort of working environment you're used to. My team says you actually had an office in the Brill Building. Incredible. What that must have been like back then, rubbing elbows with Goffin and King, Leiber and Stoller. I wish I'd been there the day you two dreamed up "Connie, Don't Comb My Crewcut." That one slant rhyme? "I got a buzzing / 'Cause I don't like fussing"? Genius.

Third, believe me, I know what a big deal it is to even consider coming out of retirement. I don't mean that literally, of course. I'm not, nor have I ever been, retired—despite what the *Billboard* Hot 100 might have you believe. I still mean a lot to a lot of people. I can fill a midsize suburban venue like the best of them, especially right after a PBS pledge week when they've aired my 2006 special. I probably get a hundred D.M.s a day from people swearing that "My Tears Won't Stop" is their life story, and twice that many during ragweed season. I get sampled all the time by artists whose names I can't quite parse but know I'm supposed to find threatening. I'm part of the fabric of American music. I just can't seem to make a hit record.

Which brings me to my point, and not a moment too soon, based on the way Marty has begun arranging his pocket change into stacks. You're probably wondering why the singer-songwriter responsible for "I Waited All Night" and "Wracked," an artist who's received a Kennedy Center Honor for "capturing the angst Zeitgeist of his generation," wants to meet with the composers of "My Cross-Eyed Baby Loves Both of Me" and "No More Fondué." It's simple. Not to be crass, but I need a hit. A track that does what I've always done best—touch the deepest, most fragile places in my listeners' hearts—but in a way that wraps the dog pill in bacon, as it were. I'm saying I want you to write me a novelty song.

You're shaking your head, Gil, and forgive me if I say I hope that's just a reaction to medication. But, if it is in fact skepticism, I understand. You're thinking that all my best work has had one overriding theme: that the only

constant in our lives is pain. But, in a sense, isn't that also the theme of your greatest songs? If "I, the Hollow" is about the futility of trying to control our destiny, isn't that equally true of "This Dog's A-Walkin' Me"?

We'll bring out the latent profundity in your music by filtering it through my interpretive lens. I still smile when I think about "In the Nuthouse Over You." But take away the maniacal laughter and the xylophone and add a verse about psychiatric-medication abuse and you're left with a pretty chilling record. The kind of record I could chart with.

I do have a few rough guidelines. First, as obvious as it sounds, the song has to have lyrics. I only mention it because you had such a monster hit with the instrumental "Bicycle Horn Für Elise."

And those lyrics have to be ones I can sing. Just my voice, sans gimmicks. While I love the basso-falsetto back-and-forth you wrote for Screamin' Eamon in "Ro-Meow and Julie Cat," I don't think I could pull it off.

Second, no cheap ripoffs. I'm not here to judge what anyone wrote when the music business was the Wild West, but I don't want to record a song that's trying to cash in on someone else's hit. And I won't do name-checks. So no "Blue Shade Shoes" or "Rock Around the Cork" or "Ferry 'Cross to Jersey." And definitely nothing along the lines of "The Baby Looks Like Ringo (But He's Yours)."

Also, I think we need to acknowledge that tastes have changed, to my mind for the better. There's a new level of sensitivity out there, so let's steer clear of the Ellis Island stuff, like "Oy! This Ham's Not Kosher" and "Dialect Lullaby."

You're shaking your head again, Gil, and that reminds me: we don't want to make fun of anyone's personal challenges, no matter how whimsical the approach. I'm saying that, in today's market, "E.T.'s Got the D.T.s" wouldn't fly. And I don't mean on a bicycle.

Otherwise, guys, have fun. Go as wacky as you want. Just remember that people do expect a certain amount of gravitas from me, but that won't be a problem. Just take those infallible commercial instincts of yours and give

them a little tweak. There's no way I could have recorded "The P-Terodactyl P-Twist." But change it to something like "Dancing Toward Extinction" and it wouldn't surprise me if it drew comparisons to Dylan.

You're shaking your head again, Gil. But, filtered through my interpretive lens, I see a nod. ♦

By Janet Malcolm

By Robert A. Caro

By Patrick Radden Keefe

By Philip Gourevitch

# **Sketchbook**

- [The N.Y.C. Marathon's River of Runners](#)

By [John P. Dessereau](#)



By The New Yorker

By Jill Lepore

By Amy Davidson Sorkin

By John Cassidy

## **Tables for Two**

- [A Dominican Celebration at Jalao NYC](#)

By [Hannah Goldfield](#)

The heat was set higher than I might have preferred at Jalao the other night, but a tropical temperature felt fitting. The restaurant, in the new Radio Hotel, in Washington Heights, is an outpost of a popular place of the same name in Santo Domingo, in the Dominican Republic. The slightly steamy clime was a good excuse to order from a menu of refreshing cocktails. A margarita with tequila, agave, and passion-fruit juice is topped with a frothy, fuchsia layer of hibiscus-rosemary foam, and garnished with a sprig of rosemary that's been gently singed, to release its fragrant oils. A syrup made from *zapote*—also known as mamey, a soft, creamy fruit that grows in the Caribbean and tastes a bit like sweet potato—goes into a mojito, mixed with rum and lime juice before it's poured over crushed ice flecked with fresh mint and finished with a sugarcane stirrer.



Cocktails include a Manhattan (center) in which rye is replaced by mamajuana, a Dominican spiced beverage made from rum, red wine, honey, and herbs.

The cocktails whetted my appetite for *bocaditos*, or snacks: *bombones de yuca*, deep-fried golden orbs of stretchy cassava dough, filled with orange Cheddar and daubed in a sauce made with pineapple and chipotle; crisp, fat-capped hunks of pork-belly chicharrón, served with sticky-sweet caramelized segments of plantain and batons of *casabe*, a traditional bread also made from cassava; ahi-tuna ceviche with passion fruit and pomegranate seeds, with crunchy, salty plantain and cassava chips for dipping.



Jalao's mofongo, pounded cassava mounded with shrimp and pork.

Washington Heights is an unlikely neighborhood for a hotel that describes itself as “boutique,” and, indeed, the enormous tower that houses it—the first major mixed-use development to be built there in almost fifty years, with a façade of color-blocked bricks that has earned it the nickname the Lego hotel—looms jarringly over its surroundings. And yet Jalao seems to cater to the local community, which includes one of the largest populations of Dominicans outside of the D.R. The colorful chandeliers in the hotel lobby are made from riotous arrangements of the type of perforated plastic hair rollers used at Dominican salons. Three-quarters of the restaurant’s staff live in the area, and most of them are Dominican; on two recent visits, the place was packed with multigenerational Dominican families.



The *pecao frito*, a whole fried red snapper with tostones and rice and peas, is meant to serve at least two.

The décor—including striking cane-back benches with plush cushions—and the plating evoke a high-end resort, but the food is homey nonetheless, with Dominican classics such as *sancocho*, a hearty stew made here with chicken, beef, pork, corn on the cob, and root vegetables, and *mofongo*, pounded cassava molded with pork and shrimp into an elegant dome. Nary a table was without the *pecao frito* (*pecao* is a Caribbean Spanish shortening of *pescado*, or fish), featuring a deep-fried red-snapper skeleton fashioned into a basket, from which spills a bounty of fried morsels of the fish's fillet, strewn with cherry tomatoes and red onion. Much less dramatic, but even more delicious, was the rich braised goat, served with *chenchén*, a savory cracked-corn pudding made with coconut milk, coarse but creamy, which originated in the southwest provinces of the D.R. and is thought to illustrate the culinary influence of Haiti, where a similar dish, *mais moulin*, is common.



Ribs are painted in a passion-fruit barbecue sauce and served with fried yuca and corn.

At the original Jalao, in Santo Domingo, there is an enormous stage, and live music is a major draw. During my visits to Washington Heights, there was no band, although the restaurant plans to use an enormous courtyard to host performers. Still, a manager could not help dancing among the tables as he made his rounds one night; on another evening, two women stood up for an impromptu merengue. The women were celebrating: later, servers brought their large group desserts with candles—the menu includes a *cinco leches* cake, and a corn custard called *majarete*, topped with cinnamon and ice cream—and sang a round of birthday songs, including the D.R. standard “El Regalo Mejor” (“The Best Gift”), as a bouquet of heart-shaped balloons bobbed overhead. (*Entrées \$22-\$49.*) ♦

By Hannah Goldfield

By Hannah Goldfield

By Ed Caesar

By Helen Rosner

# The Current Cinema

- [The Curious Gravity of “Armageddon Time”](#)

By [Anthony Lane](#)

The title of the new James Gray film, “Armageddon Time,” is taken in part from a remark made by Ronald Reagan, on cable TV, in November, 1979. Talking to Jim Bakker—who appeared both eschatologically fearful and, frankly, stoned—Reagan said, “We might be the generation that sees Armageddon.” He was not referring to the paltry prospect of global nuclear war. He was musing on what might come to pass “if we let this be another Sodom and Gomorrah.” *Much* worse.

We glimpse this sobering exchange on a television set in the Graff household, in Queens. It’s now 1980, and the Graffs have just enjoyed one of their own apocalypses at the dinner table. Our hero, Paul (Banks Repeta), who has recently started sixth grade at a public school, scorns the food cooked by his mother, Esther (Anne Hathaway), and, to her great vexation, orders Chinese dumplings over the phone. His grandfather, Aaron (Anthony Hopkins), whom he adores, doesn’t really help by describing Esther’s spaghetti as “bloody worms.” Paul’s father, the technically practical but emotionally useless Irving ([Jeremy Strong](#)), discusses, with a hint of empathy, the problem of load-bearing bridges under stress. There is laughter at the expense of the Nazis, with indignation to match. Soon enough, the chaos dies down, and it’s time for bed.

That is only one of the social scenes, unrushed and finely modulated, that punctuate the film. Each of them feels like a small drama unto itself. Look at what we learn, for instance, from an initial sequence at Paul’s school. First, he and his classmates meet their new teacher, Mr. Turkeltaub (Andrew Polk), known as Turkey. Second, it’s swiftly established that Paul is the kind of kid who draws caricatures (“I just want to make people laugh”) and pulls disco moves when Turkey’s back is turned. Third, Paul befriends Johnny Davis (Jaylin Webb), who is Black. Obliged to repeat the year, he looks and sounds a little older than Paul, and wiser, as if already clued in to the injustice that’s coming down the track. Since it *is* coming, why not make some mischief to fill the days?

Despite such density of detail—Gray furnishes his settings with the diligence of a novelist—no one could accuse “Armageddon Time” of being heavy on plot. Paul performs poorly in his studies, gets busted for smoking weed in the toilets, and, despite the fact that Esther is the head of the PTA,

winds up going to private school. Johnny also quits, though the two of them stay in touch and get into various scrapes. Meanwhile, Paul's grandfather grows sick. Reagan is elected President. Irving blows a fuse. Shit happens.

Although much of the action unfolds in a minor key, its impact on Paul is all too major; the adolescent mind, as Gray understands, can be a tool of magnification. He himself was born in 1969 and grew up in Queens, so the movie can be read as a riff, I guess, on themes from his childhood, including an early interest in painting (hence the copy of a Kandinsky that Paul produces for his art class). From Gray to Graff is not the longest journey, and the trip will be hailed as a homecoming by fans of the director, especially those flummoxed by his last two ventures—“[The Lost City of Z](#)” (2016), which packed its principal characters off to the Amazon, and “*Ad Astra*” (2019), which sent Brad Pitt into space. I would trade the latter, in its entirety, for the sight of Paul and his grandfather launching a toy rocket in Flushing Meadows, with the World’s Fair towers in the background. After a delicious delay, we see the rocket falling gently, on a parachute, far away. The thrill of the moment has burned out; now begins the process of retrieval, before the memory cools.

Yet this is not an exercise in nostalgia—nothing like, say, the honeyed remembrances of Barry Levinson’s “Liberty Heights” (1999), which is set in Baltimore, in 1954. In that alluring film, a Jewish teen-ager pines for a Black girl at his school. (When he says he finds the girl attractive, his mother replies, “Just kill me now.” Bebe Neuwirth at her most bitingly sublime.) There is no disguising the racial divide, yet the serenity of Levinson’s storytelling somehow closes and heals the rift, whereas the fractiousness in “Armageddon Time” is of an altogether deeper strain. “The Blacks are coming in,” Paul’s grandmother says, bemused by changes in the neighborhood; fortunately, she never discovers that Johnny, with nowhere to sleep, has sought refuge in the Graffs’ back yard. Unlike the youthful romance in “Liberty Heights,” which bore the gleam of a better society, the alliance of Paul and Johnny looks doomed from the start, and the movie, gazing forward, sees no cause for harmony or hope.

Matters come to a fateful head when, with Johnny’s assistance, Paul breaks into his new school, after dark, and steals a hefty computer. (Shades of Antoine, played by Jean-Pierre Léaud, in Truffaut’s “The 400 Blows,” from

1959, who pinches a typewriter from his father's deserted office, again with a pal in tow.) When the culprits are caught, we are led into the last and the baldest of the movie's lengthy scenes, deliberately unredeemed by charm or humor, as Gray discloses the fork in the road—the path that awaits the white kid, whose family has the luck of good connections, versus the rocky route that faces his Black companion, whose boyhood is about to be left behind in the dust. As Irving admits to Paul, "It's unfair. But life is unfair."

There is plenty that doesn't work in "Armageddon Time." It is studded with strange elisions: when Paul and Johnny play hooky from a visit to the Guggenheim and cut loose in Manhattan, we brace ourselves for the consequences. Zilch. There are snatches of fantasy (Paul imagines being lavished with public applause for his art), which seem to have dropped in from another movie. And it must be said that the central role is too much for any young actor to be laden with. Paul is meant to be a class clown *and* a troublemaker *and* a dreamer; to play all those instruments at once, so to speak, would require the impulsive genius of a Léaud.

Support is on hand, however, from the surrounding cast. Hathaway is very touching as Paul's mother, continually skirting despair, and, as viewers of "Succession" can attest, Strong is just the guy for showing weakness under siege. And the villain of the piece? Please welcome Maryanne Trump (Jessica Chastain), royally arrayed in purple, who addresses the pupils at the private school, telling them, "You can be anything you want to be." (That would be news to Johnny, who wanted to be an astronaut.) If they arrive at success, she adds, it's because "you earned your way there." No doubt her brother Donald would agree.

What is a Netflix movie? On the evidence of new releases, we can risk a tentative equation. If  $x$  is the amount of money that should reasonably be doled out for a given production, and  $y$  is the ideal length for the story, and  $z$  is how close the project lies, in inches, to the director's heart, then the finished film equals  $(3_x/2 + 7_y/4)^z$  to the power of  $z$ . That would explain not only "Blonde" and the forthcoming "White Noise" but also the latest extravaganza from Alejandro G. Iñárritu, "Bardo, False Chronicle of a Handful of Truths." Even the title is puffed up.

The running times are a particular giveaway. The folks at Netflix have streaming in their blood, and their fondest wish is that, with a murmur of “just one more” and a sustaining bowl of Cap’n Crunch, we submit to another episode of “Stranger Things” at ten to two in the morning. That yen for a marathon lingers in middle-distance movies; when “Bardo” had its première, at the Venice Film Festival, it lumbered onward for six minutes shy of three hours. Since then, fifteen minutes have been shed. Will that be enough?

The tale revolves around Silverio (Daniel Giménez Cacho), a journalist, a director of documentary films, and an unmistakable proxy for Iñárritu, right down to his beard. A longtime resident of Los Angeles, and shortly to receive an award for his general fabulosity, Silverio returns to his native Mexico. This mission, though scarcely arduous, sucks him into phantasmagoric reveries on his life, his obsessions, and his looming mortality. As with Fellini’s “8 1/2” (1963), you can’t help asking, Why is it only the people with the most cushioned existences who get to have existential crises? Everyone else is too busy, I suppose.

Like “Armageddon Time,” “Bardo” is shot by the cinematographer Darius Khondji, and the result brims with beauty, beyond dispute. From the opening image, of Silverio’s shadow hastening over a scrubby wilderness and lifting off, to a pullulating party where he gyrates alone, mid-throng, listening to Bowie’s “Let’s Dance” inside his head (it should be called “Let *Me* Dance”), scene after scene is calculated to colonize the senses. Yet Iñárritu’s grand designs, even at their most morally fervent, leave you ill at ease. When Silverio climbs a hill of bodies—Indigenous Mexicans, unmoving and unclad—and finds none other than Hernán Cortés at the peak, what is honestly more striking: the movie’s rage at past atrocities, committed by invading oppressors, or the care with which Iñárritu, the master craftsman, has made a sculpture from the naked and the dead? ♦

By Richard Brody

By Richard Brody

By Richard Brody

By Adam Nayman

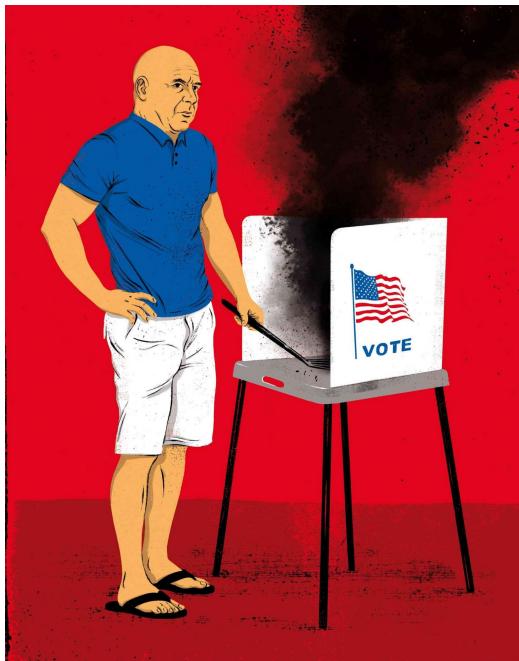
# The Political Scene

- How Election Subversion Went Mainstream in Pennsylvania

# How Election Subversion Went Mainstream in Pennsylvania

In the state's midterms—which could determine the balance of the Senate and the integrity of the Presidential race in 2024—Democrats are fighting for the vote. Republicans are fighting to undermine it.

By [Eliza Griswold](#)



On a recent evening at the Keystone Horse Center, in Columbia County, Pennsylvania, [Doug Mastriano](#), the fifty-eight-year-old Republican candidate for governor and a onetime insurrectionist, climbed onto a dais in the soft dirt of the show ring, surrounded by chrysanthemums. Columbia County occupies an edge of the state's northeastern coal region. Mastriano, who is tall and bald, wore a black baseball hat. His wife, Debbie, a chaplain, stood at his right hand, her jean jacket unzipped. Mastriano reminded the audience that he was running only because, a year earlier, in this very barn, a small group of followers had begged him to. “You urged us, even with tears in your eyes, ‘Please run for governor,’ ” he said. He had also received instructions from Heaven, Debbie added: “God said go!” Mastriano was down in the polls, but his supporters shouldn’t be fooled by phony numbers; he’d proved the polls wrong before.

Mastriano is, by almost any measure, one of the most extreme candidates currently running for office. Since 2019, when he was elected to the State Senate, he has supported prayer in schools, the abolition of gay marriage, and conversion therapy, a medically discredited practice to “reverse” homosexuality. Pennsylvania’s Republican legislature has tried to ban abortion, but it has been blocked by the Democratic governor, Tom Wolf. Mastriano has promised to outlaw the procedure without exception, and to prosecute women who get abortions and doctors who perform them for murder. Perhaps most notably, in 2020, Mastriano was one of the architects of the attempt to overturn the results of the Presidential election and award Pennsylvania’s electoral votes to Donald Trump. On January 6, 2021, he attended the insurrection at the Capitol. (Mastriano did not respond to repeated requests for comment for this article, but he has said that he left the Capitol when it “was no longer a peaceful protest.”) J. J. Abbott, a political strategist with Commonwealth Communications, told me, “He engaged in a conspiracy to overturn Pennsylvania’s election. And there’s little dispute about that.”

In the barn, the story of the stolen election dominated the evening. Webb Kline, who runs Missiontrux, a program that recruits truckers to work as missionaries, took the lectern and compared the Democrats to Nazis. “This is Auschwitz!” he said. “They are coming for you.” The reign of the G.O.P. establishment also needed to end: “Tell them we’ve got our own candidates, and those guys are taking your place.” Kline praised a canny and influential organizer in the state named Sam Faddis, a career C.I.A. operations officer, who had led a team to destabilize Saddam Hussein in Iraq. After Faddis retired, he began writing and editing *And Magazine*, which is now a newsletter that publishes a mix of news and elaborate conspiracy theories. (Faddis told me that the newsletter “tells the truth.”) Kline said that Faddis had found “definitive evidence” that the election was rigged.

Mastriano has pledged to radically transform voting in the state. Last May, Faddis invited sixty-nine right-wing groups—including We the People, Ballot Security Now, and Unite PA—to the rotunda of the state capitol, in Harrisburg, to sign an “Election Integrity Declaration.” The oath, which begins with the words “We the People,” calls for the abolition of most voting that is not done in-person “with photo identification, proof of U.S. citizenship, state residency and hard copy paper ballots.” These measures

could restrict voting among poor people, people of color, and other likely Democrats; they would also force poll workers to count ballots by hand, a process that could make tampering easier. And even the notion of widespread fraud lays the groundwork for future denials of election results. Toni Shuppe, Mastriano's presumptive nominee for Pennsylvania's secretary of state, who will certify elections if Mastriano wins, led a prayer at the U.S. Capitol during the insurrection. In Harrisburg, she sanctified the voting declaration by praying for a "spirit of unity" in the burgeoning movement.

When the slushy-and-hot-dog stand closed and the barn rally began to break up, I walked among the crowd. Adele Stevens, a sixty-four-year-old who owns the horse center, milled around, yanked by a border collie. Stevens, who is Puerto Rican, told me that she was tired of hearing Republicans cast as "racist." She also told me that, unlike Mastriano, she supports "a woman's right to choose." But in 2021, amid resentment over [Covid](#) lockdowns, she and a dozen neighbors, including Kline, had started a chapter of We the People to combat "abusive" government overreach; they read the Constitution aloud and researched the deep state. "If you were a Democrat trying to figure out the truth about something, it would be hard to find because you're not part of these groups," she said. "We're on Telegram, we read things, we look at alternative news." She told me that, for example, she had recently learned that George Soros secretly owned Fox News, and that this explained why the network had turned against Trump. (Soros does not own Fox News.) She liked Mastriano's commitment to taking on voter fraud: "Anyone can just walk in and give someone else's name."

Election denialism is now so mainstream that it has become a kind of Republican purity test. According to an analysis by the *Washington Post*, the majority of G.O.P. midterm candidates have publicly claimed that the 2020 election was stolen. Dan Cox, the Republican candidate for governor in Maryland, has called Mike Pence a "traitor," and bragged about serving as one of the "volunteer lawyers" who helped Trump fight the results in Pennsylvania. Eric Schmitt, a Senate candidate in Missouri, was among the attorneys general who sued to overturn Pennsylvania's vote. [Kari Lake](#), who is running for governor of Arizona, has said that she would not have certified Biden's victory in her state. At the same time, Steve Bannon has called on his supporters to volunteer as precinct captains. "We're taking this back village by village, precinct by precinct, and they can't stop it," he said,

on his podcast. Some of these candidates will lose, but some will win, and they will influence how future elections are run. “Hopefully most of these deniers won’t make it into office,” Charlie Dent, who served as a Republican congressman from Pennsylvania until 2018, told me. “But elected officials are planting seeds of doubt. And that’s a concern.”

During the primary, Mastriano faced a field of moderate Republican candidates. Josh Shapiro, the Democratic candidate, spent eight hundred thousand dollars on ads highlighting Mastriano’s campaign. Observers have argued that the effort reflected a common strategy in which candidates boost their most extreme potential opponents in the hope that they will also be the easiest to beat. When I spoke to Shapiro recently, he emphasized that the ads were critical of Mastriano, and that they probably hadn’t affected the outcome, because Mastriano was already the front-runner: “I didn’t have a primary, so we were ready for the contrast.” But Democrats used this strategy in at least five states this year; in Michigan, they funded John Gibbs, an election denier who has opposed women’s right to vote, and he won his primary by a narrow margin. The tactic, however, was risky. This July, Mastriano was polling within three points of Shapiro. “The idea that Shapiro put money toward getting Mastriano elected is a little unnerving,” Christopher Borick, a political scientist at Muhlenberg College, told me. “If you do the math, from the health-of-a-democracy point of view, this loss would be epic.” He added, “It’s Russian roulette.”

In this year’s midterm elections, much hangs on how Pennsylvanians vote. “What’s at stake is faith in the legitimacy of democracy,” Ari Mittelman, who runs the bipartisan nonprofit Keep Our Republic, told me. The race between John Fetterman and Mehmet Oz could determine the balance of the U.S. Senate, and is currently a tossup. The shape of the Pennsylvania legislature could decide the future of reproductive access and voting rights in the state. And one of the gubernatorial candidates—who, if he wins, will oversee future elections—is an election denier. “This is my fear,” Malcolm Kenyatta, a Democratic state representative, told me. “Republicans are going to a place of only accepting elections when they win, and that’s dangerous as hell.”

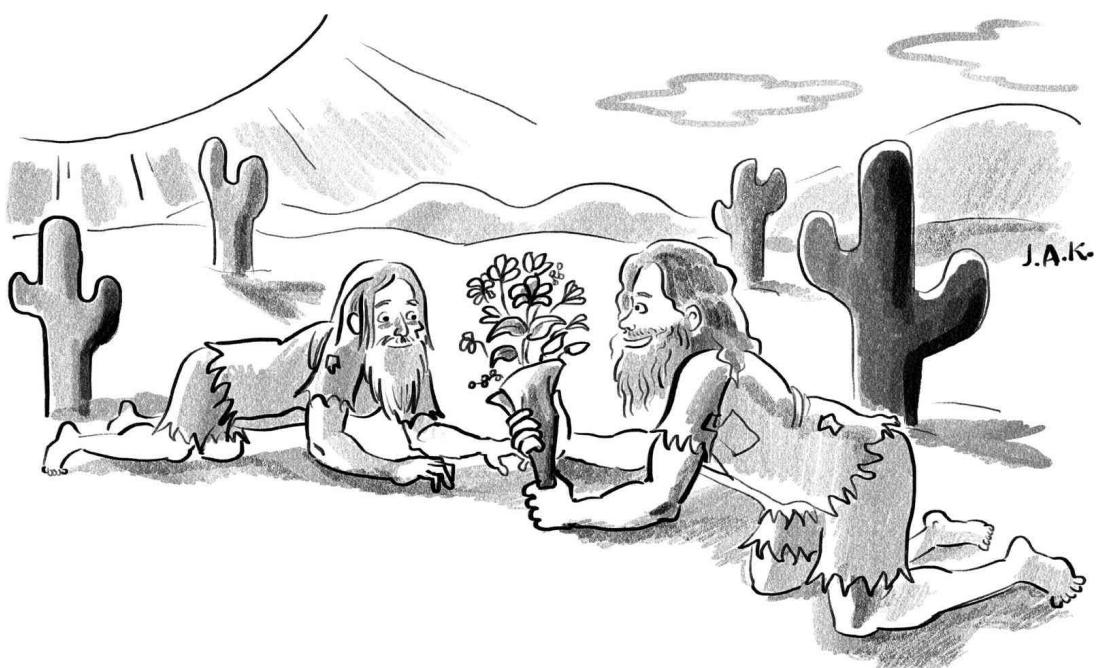
To outside observers, Pennsylvania once appeared reliably blue: the state voted for every Democratic President from 1992 until 2016. “Those

victories masked the reality that Pennsylvania was, by most other measures, deeply purple,” Borick said. The legislature has been under G.O.P. control for nearly twenty-five years. This is, in part, a result of the fact that Republican voters historically turn out for midterm elections at higher rates than Democrats. “If you scrape together five to ten thousand dollars from acquaintances at your church or rod-and-gun club, you can knock on one thousand doors and win,” Mittleman said. The oil-and-gas and insurance industries pumped money into Republican campaigns to swing the legislature. In 2011, Republican lawmakers carved some of the most misshapen districts in the nation. For the next seven years, until the state Supreme Court ruled them unconstitutional, the districts pushed state politics further to the right.

Trump played on working-class grievances to turn formerly blue swaths of the state red. Pennsylvania’s No. 1 industry is still agriculture, and many farmers came to believe that regulation was driving them out of business; steel workers and coal miners resented that jobs were being moved offshore and that unions were disintegrating. Trump also stoked distrust of the government. Pennsylvanians’ level of trust in state and federal politicians is among the lowest in the country. Katie Muth, a Democratic state senator, told me, “I don’t trust the government, and I’m in it.” In 2020, pandemic lockdowns intensified the anger of those who felt squeezed. “That’s when the bitterness began,” Stevens, of We the People, told me. Jeffrey Yass, a libertarian billionaire who started the investment group Susquehanna with earnings from poker games and horse racing, funded candidates who took part in anti-masking and anti-vax rallies. And, after the 2020 vote, government distrust focussed on the notion that Democrats had stolen the election.

In the past year, grassroots groups, led by Faddis and others, have come to describe themselves as part of a statewide “patriot movement,” which Borick characterized as a “broadly defined populist and xenophobic movement.” Faddis, who has built a network of these groups called the Pennsylvania Patriot Coalition—which includes We the People; Ballot Security Now, which pushes for changes to voting laws; and Firearms Owners Against Crime, which focusses on the Second Amendment—told me, “The patriot movement is the Tea Party, *MAGA*, and America First all rolled into one.” He added, of his network, “Sometimes, at meetings, it’s

hundreds of people, sometimes it's eight guys in a barn." Members of these groups think of themselves as part of a kind of conservative civil-rights movement: an alliance with a variety of aims but a shared fight for individual rights. Some groups, like the Three Percenters, are armed militias. A 2020 analysis by *ACLED* and *MilitiaWatch*, groups that monitor political violence, ranked Pennsylvania among the states at highest risk of election-related militia activity. A recently leaked membership list of the Oath Keepers militia included four elected officials from Pennsylvania.



"Let me find some water for these."  
Cartoon by Jason Adam Katzenstein

The movement is fuelled in some quarters by what scholars call Christian Nationalism, which is centered on the notion that America is and should be a Christian country. Few people self-identify as Christian Nationalists; in 2021, Mastriano asked me, "Is this a term you fabricated?" But social scientists describe it as a belief system characterized by Dominionism: the idea that God has ordained Christians to exercise control over political institutions in order to prepare for the Second Coming of Christ. "They don't believe in one person, one vote," Philip Gorski, a sociologist at Yale, told me. "They think they're involved in a battle between good and evil."

In 2020, this ideology helped drive the moral call to overturn the election. "Some of their most fanatical supernatural beliefs have been mainstreamed into the *MAGA* movement, such as the notions that Democrats are demonic

or engaged in witchcraft,” Jennifer Cohn, an election-security advocate, told me. In November, 2020, Abby Abildness, the state director of Pennsylvania’s Prayer Caucus and an “apostle” with the New Apostolic Reformation, a network of pastors, hosted a series of “Jericho marches”—religious precursors to the insurrection. Followers gathered in Harrisburg, likening it to the Biblical city of Jericho, where, according to Scripture, God knocked down the walls. At similar marches in some states, people wore animal skins and blew rams’ horns, as they imagined the ancient Israelites did on their way into battle. Abildness declared her intent that, with God’s help, Pennsylvania’s electors would “go to the President” rather than to Biden. (Abildness told me, “Our Jericho march was a peaceable, worshipful prayer march allowing God to move and bring forth His purposes and election integrity in our nation.”) Earlier this year, Vote Common Good, a progressive evangelical group, sponsored a tongue-in-cheek billboard along Pennsylvania’s Route 19 that featured Mastriano and the line “Blessed are the insurrectionists.”

In 2019, Mastriano starred in an independent film, which he also helped fund, called “Operation Resist,” set during the Second World War. In a bit of historical revisionism, the film casts evangelical Christians as members of a religious minority in Germany who were persecuted along with Jews. Mastriano plays an American military spy helping to evacuate them from the country. In one bizarre moment, Mastriano is jumped by a Nazi played by his son, Josiah, whom Mastriano chokes until he is unconscious. “Tell Hitler he’s next!” Mastriano says. The film occasionally skips to the present, where, at a school-board meeting, “politically correct editors” try to erase the Holocaust from school curricula. Mastriano shared a similar message in a recent ad: “Radical leftists are using the schools, the media, and Hollywood to indoctrinate your kids with woke ideology.”

Mastriano grew up in a Catholic, Democratic family in Hightstown, New Jersey. His father, Richard, spent twenty years in the Navy. His mother, Janice, served as a Democratic member of the school board, until, according to the local news organization PennLive, she said that “most homosexuals are pedophiles,” and lost her bid for reelection. In high school, Mastriano joined an evangelical group called the Way. In 1986, he began a career in military intelligence, serving in Germany; he was later deployed to Iraq, during Operation Desert Storm. At one point, Mastriano has said, his

battalion was facing a squadron of Saddam Hussein's élite forces. At home, Debbie began a prayer circle to engage in "spiritual warfare," leading God to send down a sandstorm to vanquish Saddam's troops. "Prayer changed the course of nature and perhaps the outcome of the war," Mastriano wrote on his Web site. During the war in Afghanistan, he was deployed there three times. In 2017, Mastriano became a professor at the U.S. Army War College, in Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

Two years later, Mastriano won a special election for the State Senate. He pushed bills that would mandate prayer in schools and allow adoption agencies to turn away same-sex couples. "'Separation of church and state'—anyone who says that, show me in the Constitution where it says it," Mastriano has said. "It's never been there." In the spring of 2020, when Governor Wolf called for places of worship to suspend in-person services, Mastriano appeared at protests alongside armed men who wore fatigues and Hawaiian shirts, a look associated with a militia called the Boogaloo Bois.

In November, 2020, Mastriano agreed—reluctantly, according to leaked e-mails exchanged with associates of the Trump campaign—to be the "point person" for the effort to overturn Pennsylvania's election. ("I am after truth," he wrote to me in 2021. "Is it not appropriate to ask questions and seek answers to ensure each person has a legal vote?") Several counties were delaying certification in an attempt to undermine Joe Biden's victory. Mastriano convened a mock tribunal at a Gettysburg hotel, with Rudy Giuliani playing the role of faux prosecutor. Via speakerphone, Trump called in to outline his frustrations. "This election was rigged," he said. Mastriano, who claims that he spoke to Trump "at least fifteen times," travelled with his son to the White House, but tested positive for *COVID* and was ushered out of the building. Trump said, "There is no one in Pennsylvania who has done more, or fought harder, for election integrity than State Senator Doug Mastriano."

Mastriano is a proponent of the so-called independent-state-legislature theory, a fringe idea that holds that, among other things, legislatures have the power to allot electoral votes as they please, regardless of the vote. In 2020, Republican legislators in Pennsylvania selected an alternative slate of electors, who signed certificates claiming that Trump had won. These certificates, along with those of alternative electors from six other

battleground states, were submitted to the National Archives for congressional deliberation. Mastriano and several of these electors have since been subpoenaed by the House committee investigating the insurrection. (Mastriano has sued the committee to block the subpoena.) This fall, in the state capitol, I watched as two of the fake electors made the rounds in the rotunda, shaking the hands of Republican lawmakers.

In December, 2020, Mastriano took part in two Jericho marches. Later, on a conference call, he prayed that God would help protesters “seize the power” on January 6th. He continued, “Bless these letters that President Trump asked me this morning to send to Mitch McConnell and Kevin McCarthy outlining the fraud in Pennsylvania, and this will embolden them to stand firm and disregard what has happened in Pennsylvania until we have an investigation.” Mastriano was scheduled to address the crowd from the Capitol steps on January 6th, and he used campaign funds to pay for six buses of supporters to travel to Washington. Weeks later, when I spoke to him by e-mail for a previous piece, he told me, “Everyone that I know of left early, returned to their buses and was not involved in any nefarious or illegal activities.” But videos and time-stamped photographs indicate that he was present after the rioting began, at the back of a crowd that tore down police barricades. (Mastriano has denied crossing police lines.) Several of Mastriano’s supporters have been accused of felonies. Sandra Weyer, a woman from Mechanicsburg, was charged with conspiracy to obstruct Congress. Samuel Lazar, a man from Lebanon County who was nicknamed “Face Paint Blowhard” on the Internet, was charged with assaulting an officer with a deadly weapon and disorderly conduct. (The cases are still pending, and both have denied wrongdoing.)

Since securing the G.O.P. nomination, Mastriano has led a highly unconventional campaign. He has blocked reporters from covering his rallies and installed a “security team” of Oath Keepers to guard his events. He has organized much of his campaign on Gab, a fringe social-media platform. Luis Rueda, who led the C.I.A.’s efforts in Iraq, where he was Faddis’s boss, told me that the campaign’s use of election misinformation reminded him of intelligence officers’ deployment of propaganda to press for regime change abroad. “Mastriano is waging a classic PsyOps campaign,” he said. The idea that Mastriano could be in charge of future elections in Pennsylvania has alarmed some observers. “Officials are legally bound to follow the mandate

of the secretary of state,” Abbott, the political strategist, said. “There’d be almost no way to reverse their directives in regard to voting.”

The upcoming election has thus become a fight not just to win the vote but to safeguard the integrity of the electoral system. Shapiro, the Democratic candidate, said that he hopes his record has earned him the electorate’s trust. His politics are moderate. As the state’s attorney general, he launched an investigation into Catholic-clergy sex abuse, won a settlement from opioid distributors, and found frackers responsible for environmental crimes. “Shapiro is running on the idea of competency,” Borick told me. “He just looks competent and sane.”

Recently, I met Shapiro on a campaign stop at Super Natural Produce, a grocery store in a Latino neighborhood in Berks County. Shapiro, who is forty-nine, inspected a pile of pork shoulders; their price had doubled since the start of the pandemic. He attempted polite banter with a woman behind a counter, in a mix of English and Spanish, but she didn’t understand, so he smiled and moved on. There were few voters around to court, but Shapiro told me that he believes in “showing up” in person. The strategy has worked in the past; in 2020, he outperformed every other Democrat on the ticket, including Biden. Berks County also has a particular electoral significance. In May, local officials refused to count mail-in ballots with undated envelopes, until a judge intervened. “It actually gives me chills,” Mittleman, of Keep Our Republic, told me.

If Shapiro is trying to woo technocratic Republicans spooked by Trump’s extremism, John Fetterman, the Democratic candidate for the U.S. Senate, has taken a left-populist approach, in an attempt to win back working-class defectors. On a recent Sunday afternoon, the gym at Montgomery County Community College was packed with women who had come to see him. Hundreds more waited to enter. Inside, the crowd was a sea of T-shirts in Planned Parenthood pink that read “*FETTERWOMAN*.” Fetterman was late, and people started calling out “John!,” as if coaxing a rock star onstage. “He’s a no-show!” a woman shouted. Then a campaign volunteer began herding a flock of photographers toward the stage, and John Fetterman, wearing boots and a Carhartt hoodie, appeared. “I am John Fetterwoman!” he announced amid a roar.

Fetterman's opponent, Mehmet Oz, is a doctor who grew to prominence as a health expert offering dieting advice on "Oprah." He has suggested that zodiac signs can indicate health information and has touted raspberry and coffee-bean extracts as miracle weight-loss cures. His Republican-primary opponent was David McCormick, a financier whose wife had ties to Trump, but Trump endorsed Oz. Oz's campaign has focussed on pandemic-era government overreach and election denial.

Fetterman grew up in York, Pennsylvania; his father owned an insurance business. After graduating from the Harvard Kennedy School, he returned to Pennsylvania and served as the mayor of Braddock, and then as the state's lieutenant governor. Borick told me, "He's found that spot between higher-educated Democrats, who are the real burgeoning movement, and paired it with an image and experience on the ground—a little Harvard, a little Braddock—rolled into a six-foot-eight-inch package." He added, "If you're thinking of long-term remedies that can combat this grassroots, far-right patriot movement, it could be burly Democrats."

Fetterman gained ground early by taking aim at Oz's élitism, a tactic that Republicans often employ against Democrats. In August, Fetterman retweeted a video of Oz complaining about the price of "crudités." Fetterman wrote, "In PA we call this a . . . veggie tray." He has asserted that Oz lives primarily in New Jersey, not in Pennsylvania. (Oz has responded that he has a house in the suburbs of Philadelphia.) He enlisted Snooki, from "Jersey Shore," to tell Oz in a video that he'd be "back home in Jersey soon." He started a petition to induct Oz into the New Jersey Hall of Fame.

The strategy seemed to be succeeding. One former Trump voter told me, of Oz, "I don't know why he needs, like, thirteen houses when most Pennsylvanians only have one." At a gun-rights rally, I met a bisexual woman carrying a rifle and waving a "Don't Tread on Me" flag in rainbow colors. She told me that she became a gun-rights activist in college, after a carful of people drove past her one night calling out homophobic slurs. "They circled me three times and I was sure I was going to be attacked," she said. "I was eighteen and it wasn't legal for me to have a gun, and yet I could've been killed." She would never vote for Shapiro. "He tried to bypass the Constitution and ban a gun-parts kit," she said. But she was also turned

off by Oz, and his “ridiculous high-end organic” vegetables: “He is so out of touch.”

Recently, however, Fetterman’s lead has begun to shrink. In May, Fetterman suffered a stroke. There was little effort to pull him from the race. “It’s really difficult to replace a candidate,” Abbott said. “Fetterman had won the primary with such an overwhelming margin.” When he returned to the campaign trail, supporters noticed that he sometimes garbled his words. Republicans posted memes of his flubs.

This summer, I texted Fetterman asking to sit down with him, and he texted back that day. But, when I tracked down his press person, Joe Calvello, at a reproductive-rights rally this fall, he apologized. “John hasn’t granted an in-person interview since his stroke,” Calvello said. Fetterman was still suffering from speech and auditory-processing delays, which affected his ability to understand what was being said and to answer clearly. With the use of closed-captioning, though, he could participate in a conversation. Calvello sent along tweets that he said Fetterman had written, including a response to a photo Oz posted of himself feigning a touchdown at the Dallas Cowboys’ stadium. “The Cowboys blow!” Fetterman wrote. But last week’s live debate did little to assuage voters’ concerns. A team of stenographers transcribed Oz’s comments so that Fetterman could follow along, but he frequently misspoke, and struggled to explain a controversial policy shift. “I do support fracking,” he said, at one point. “I don’t, I don’t—I support fracking. And I stand and—I do support fracking.” A prominent Democrat in Pennsylvania described the event to me as a “total shit show.”

Oz has weaponized Fetterman’s condition in a way that can seem ugly. Fetterman has asked audience members at rallies to raise their hands if they, or a parent or child, have suffered a health crisis. “I certainly hope that you did not have a doctor in your life making fun of it,” he said recently. Some supporters have implied that questioning Fetterman’s fitness is a form of ableist discrimination. In October, an NBC reporter stated that Fetterman had trouble comprehending their small talk, which occurred without captions. The journalist Kara Swisher, who suffered a similar stroke, defended Fetterman: “Maybe this reporter is just bad at small talk.” Others, pointing out that we often ask Presidential candidates to release their medical records, have argued that Fetterman’s health is relevant to how he

will serve as a senator, and will likely influence voters. “This is an audition for a job and people have questions,” Dent, the former congressman, who is supporting Oz, told me.

Eventually, Fetterman agreed to speak to me by video chat, which features automatically generated captions. In the early twenty-tens, I worked in Braddock, and Fetterman’s home was around the block from my office. We sometimes spoke, or shared a takeout order. Back then, at ease on his couch, he seemed brash and self-assured. But onscreen this fall, sitting before a backdrop of yellowed hotel-room curtains, Fetterman looked nervous and gaunt. I asked him about his campaign, and he stumbled, catching himself immediately. “The martyr—excuse me—the margins coming out of red counties are critical,” he said. It was humanizing, in a way, to see him less swaggering. “I have a really much kind of deeper kind of connection now with people that have all those kinds of challenges,” he said. It remained unclear, though, whether this sort of empathy would win at the ballot box. “I’m grateful that I survived,” he told me. “I’m grateful that I’m able to bounce back in a way that allows me to be in the race.”

The U.S. Senate campaign in Pennsylvania has garnered tremendous national attention, and for good reason. But Democrats often focus disproportionately on national races, and neglect races for state legislatures, where much of the country’s rightward lurch is taking place. “Other than something crazy-bananas happening, very little information makes it out of Harrisburg,” Muth, the state senator, told me. “At the top of the ballot, politicians want it to seem like they’re the ones holding the line on abortion or voting. But the truth is, the fate of those decisions really begins at the state level, where no one is paying any attention.”



*Cartoon by Bruce Eric Kaplan*

If Republicans win the Pennsylvania legislature, even a Democratic governor might not be able to block their efforts. In 2020, at the height of *COVID*, the legislature, led by Mastriano, put forward a referendum to limit the governor's power to impose lockdowns. It passed with fifty-four per cent of the vote, and has become a blueprint for getting around the governor's veto. An omnibus referendum, planned for the spring, would ban abortion, roll back voting rights, and mandate election audits. Others could amend the state constitution to, say, change how Presidential electors are appointed. In September, at Trump Tower in New York, Donald Trump met with Faddis, from the Pennsylvania Patriot Coalition; Doug McLinko, a Bradford County commissioner who sued over the state's voting procedures after the 2020 election; and the political strategist Michael Caputo. The trio said that they sat in Trump's personal office, overlooking a rainy Central Park, and pressed him to lend his support to a proposed bill or referendum that would ban mail-in voting in the state, except in cases where voters are unable to vote in person. Faddis told me that, with the law as it is, there was a danger that no Republican, including Trump, could win the Presidency in Pennsylvania in 2024. "We wanted Trump to put his finger on the scale," Faddis said. According to Faddis, Trump was enthusiastic: "He was one hundred per cent in support of it." (Trump did not respond to a request for comment.)

Muth told me, “If we flip two seats in the State Senate, we can block these kinds of bills.” Rage over the Supreme Court’s reversal of Roe v. Wade, in June, may make this possible. Andrea Koplove, from Turn PA Blue, told me, “What I’m hearing at the doors and what we’re seeing with voter registration and volunteers is unprecedented. Women are showing up in droves.” In 2018, only three per cent of voters said abortion was their top issue; in 2022, twenty per cent did. La’Tasha D. Mayes, a reproductive-justice activist from Pittsburgh campaigning for the State House of Representatives, told me that the reversal of Roe has bolstered support for her candidacy: “The general election in Pennsylvania will tell the tale of the future of abortion in our commonwealth.”

On a recent evening at Love City Brewing, in Philadelphia, a group of young women gathered to raise money for progressive legislature candidates. Suburban white women compose a major swing demographic. At the edge of the crowd, Sarah Shelton, a twenty-four-year-old social worker, stood awkwardly by the open bar. “I’ve never gone to anything like this before,” she said. Shelton had recently moved to Philadelphia from Virginia. “I grew up in the white evangelical world,” she told me. “I thought abortion was wrong.” Her grandfather, a Pennsylvania politician, had served in Ronald Reagan’s Cabinet, and her brother worked at a conservative organization that had filed an amicus brief to reverse Roe. But in 2016 Shelton told her dad that she was reconsidering her position on abortion. He sent her an article that described the procedure in graphic terms, and she read it sobbing, but stood firm. “I knew that I had to be able to look my dad in the eye and defend it,” she said. At the brewery, she decided to go door to door in support of progressive candidates fighting for reproductive rights.

The spectre of abortion bans is threatening to fracture the loyalty of Republican women, more than a third of whom favor keeping abortion legal in most or all cases. At Local Tap, a bar in Lansdale, Carrie DelRosso, a forty-seven-year-old state representative who is running for lieutenant governor alongside Mastriano, attended a meet and greet with a group of middle-aged women. “I’ve been fighting school boards since I was eleven years old!” she announced. DelRosso, who wore a red business suit, began to recite her stump speech, but the crowd grew restless. “When a lot of people are going door-knocking and talking to family, friends, neighbors, we’re all hearing that a lot of women are concerned about Doug with the

women's-rights issues," an occupational therapist said. "I feel like it's really hurting him." Another woman in the audience called out, "They're really concerned about abortion!"

DelRosso attempted to answer with a personal anecdote: "My daughter was born at thirty-three weeks. She wasn't breathing. Josh Shapiro might have killed her!" The audience shifted uneasily. "There's got to be exceptions!" a woman shouted. DelRosso attempted to change the subject, but the room was lost to her. A woman sitting on a barstool said, of Mastriano, "He seems too much like a colonel," and stiffened her arms and legs to imitate a wooden soldier. Afterward, I asked DelRosso to clarify her position on abortion. "I support exceptions," she told me. "Very much." This was a departure from Mastriano's platform. Mastriano himself has backpedalled recently, saying that the matter won't really be up to him but "up to the people."

This fall, Mastriano began to sink in the polls. He had refused, on a number of issues, to move to the center after the Republican primary. Shapiro has raised more than fifty million dollars for this race, and Mastriano has raised less than four million, leaving him unable to pay for television advertisements. Increasingly, Republicans were speaking out against his candidacy. The Commonwealth Leaders Fund, an organization funded largely by Jeffrey Yass, donated fifteen thousand dollars to Mastriano when he first became a state senator, and the Commonwealth Children's Choice Fund, another group funded in part by Yass, gave him ten thousand dollars the following year, but those relationships have since ended. Matt Brouillette, the treasurer of the Commonwealth Leaders Fund, told me, "We spent millions of dollars trying to beat Doug in the primary. Our problems with him weren't about policy—we didn't think he could win critical swing voters, or that he could govern." It's possible, of course, that Mastriano's supporters are not responding to polls; a recent article on the Bulwark, a center-right news Web site, raised the fear that Mastriano's base could resemble a fifty-foot shark—invisible to observers, but no less real. Mastriano, certainly, has remained steadfast. In September, he announced that, to win God's favor, he would undertake a forty-day fast, to end on Election Day.

In September, I joined Shapiro at the Gettysburg battlefield, where, in 1863, the Union Army drove back the Confederates, turning the tide of the Civil War. Mastriano has often used the battlefield as a backdrop for his campaign. Lance Wallnau, a [QAnon](#) celebrity, cited Abraham Lincoln's remarks at the battlefield while speaking at a Mastriano rally: "Pennsylvania will be like Little Round Top, and America will have a new birth of liberty." In 2020, after a hoaxster posted on social media that Antifa was coming to Gettysburg to pull down Confederate statues, Mastriano showed up, alongside white nationalists, to defend them. This past April, at Gettysburg, Julie Green, a self-styled prophet, told Mastriano that God had this message for him: "Doug, I am here for you and I have not forsaken you. The time has come for their great fall—for the great steal to be overturned."

Shapiro was filming a video for social media there, in Mastriano's symbolic back yard. Before he shot it, we climbed the ridge of Culp's Hill, where Confederate soldiers had battled Union troops to claim the high ground. Shapiro noted that Mastriano had chosen to wear a Confederate uniform for his faculty photograph at the U.S. Army War College in the 2013-14 academic year, and until recently it had hung in the institution's hall. "He opted to wear the uniform of a traitor," Shapiro said, "those who literally fought to defend slavery." After we descended Culp's Hill, and Shapiro wandered off toward the camera, I spied three Civil War reenactors wilting in wool uniforms. Two were wearing Union blue; the third was clad in green—the uniform of a Union sniper called a Berdan Sharpshooter, he explained. I asked them how the upcoming election, and the political tenor in Pennsylvania, had become so polarized. "Look down at where you're standing," the man in green said.

Two hours later, I accompanied Shapiro to his campaign office in Chambersburg. Gathered there was a group of young men who'd formed a Students for Shapiro organization at Shippensburg College, in a traditionally red part of the state. "We're like a blueberry in a bowl of tomato soup," one told me. I also spoke to a mother and daughter, both registered Republicans, who were voting for Shapiro. The daughter, who was in her late forties, asked to remain anonymous, for fear that speaking against Mastriano might cost her her job. She found Mastriano's mix of militarism and Scripture alarming. "He's a Hitler wannabe," she said. She wasn't voting for Oz, either: "His signs look best when you turn your head. They read 'NO.' "

Sheri Morgan, the chairwoman of the county Democratic committee, wearing a pair of aviators, noted that there was real rage around this election. She told me that recently, near a polling place, “a Mastriano supporter claimed that I was intimidating him by standing outside. He screamed at me, ‘I’m going to fucking run you over!’ ” She added, “I’ve never seen anything like this.”

Mastriano will, in all likelihood, lose the election. “Women may win this round, but one electoral loss will do little to defeat the movement,” Borick, the political scientist, said. And whether or not the results of the election will be honored remains a question. “The biggest threat to the election isn’t voter suppression, it’s subversion,” Kenyatta, the state representative, told me. Around the country, Republican candidates are refusing to commit to honoring the results. “I’m going to win the election, and I will accept that result,” Kari Lake, the gubernatorial candidate in Arizona, has said. An aide to Tudor Dixon, the Republican nominee for governor of Michigan, told the *Times* that there was “no reason to believe” that state officials “are very serious about secure elections.” DelRosso has dodged the issue, saying, “We’re not going to lose. I’m a winner.” Mastriano has ignored multiple requests from media outlets for comment on the subject. But he has already raised doubts about the election, claiming, in a now deleted Facebook video, that it would take a large turnout “to overcome the fraud.”

Battles over results are looming. Courts have issued contradictory rulings on whether undated ballots should be counted, setting up a future contest. After meeting with Toni Shuppe’s organization Audit the Vote, York County commissioners have decided to count ballots by hand. Since 2020, election workers across the state have received numerous threats. A spokesperson for Pennsylvania’s secretary of state told me, “It’s disturbing that these workers are still experiencing these issues.” Some of Mastriano’s supporters have announced that a motorcycle rally called Governor Douglas Mastriano’s Ride to Victory!!! will take place on Election Night in the state capital, which observers worry may be a harbinger of violence. “This is the warmup act for 2024,” Mittleman, of Keep Our Republic, told me.

At Gettysburg, just below Culp’s Hill, there is a creek called Spangler’s Spring, where both Union and Confederate boys collected water; the place became a symbol of common ground. Today, the spring is barred by a grate

and a padlock. “There is no common ground,” Shapiro told me. The most frightening aspect of Mastriano’s candidacy, he said, was his repeated refusal to respect the electoral process. “I’ve run against seven or eight Republicans and wanted to win every race, but I’ve never felt they posed a threat to the underlying system,” Shapiro said. “Never.” He added, “This guy is a clear and present danger to our democracy.” ♦

*An earlier version of this article misdated a dispute related to mail-in ballots in Berks County and misspelled Snooki’s name.*

By Benjamin Wallace-Wells

By Susan B. Glasser

By Bernard Avishai

By John Cassidy

# The Theatre

- [David Hare Repaves the Story of Robert Moses](#)

# David Hare Repaves the Story of Robert Moses

“Straight Line Crazy,” the British playwright’s portrait of the tsarist urban planner, scrupulously declines to portray Moses as blinkered and corrupt.

By [Vinson Cunningham](#)



The biggest surprise of “Straight Line Crazy,” David Hare’s new play about the tsarist urban planner Robert Moses, is that it originated in London, where it received good reviews, earlier this year, at the Bridge Theatre. Moses is best known as the builder of a preponderance of New York City’s highways, and as the subject of Robert Caro’s masterly biography “The Power Broker.” In another life, I worked in city government; “The Power Broker” was a prerequisite for polite conversation among young technocrats. The book and its often maligned subject came up in passing chatter and in official speech, like Scripture quoted among preachers and Biblical scholars. But nobody in that scene, I can assure you, thought of Moses as a pop phenomenon worthy of international attention.

Why, then, were people in the U.K. so interested in the workings of New York state government? The play has landed at the Shed, in Hudson Yards,

under the direction of Nicholas Hytner and Jamie Armitage, much closer to its natural habitat. At the performance I attended, every time a New York City street or neighborhood was named, knowing laughter followed. Somebody near me whooped at the mere mention of Washington Square Park. I wouldn't have thought that those lines would crack as well across the pond. The whole scenario attested, perhaps, to New York's status as a truly global, endlessly fascinating city. Or it was evidence of the open-minded erudition of London audiences. Or maybe it was—and still is, in New York—simply a matter of the star power of Ralph Fiennes, who plays Moses.

Moses was, by all accounts, a brutal man and an awful hang. He mastered the art of getting highways and public works swiftly built. He exerted a subtle but expanding power over governors—especially his friend Al Smith, played by Danny Webb—and over his favored press outlet, the *Times*. Can you imagine Andrew Cuomo with even less native charm and even more sadistic control? If so, you're getting warm. Fiennes can't help but seem more sympathetic than it's reasonable to believe Moses really was.

“Straight Line Crazy”—the title is a reference to Moses's compulsive tendency to draw straight lines on maps and then, implausibly, to gather the resources and marshal the bureaucratic will to make them physical facts as roadways—plays out in two longish acts, three decades apart. The first is set in the nineteen-twenties, when Moses is just beginning to wield influence, and planning to open Jones Beach to the public, making it possible (but not really possible, for the carless riffraff) to get there by the new Southern State Parkway. The second is set in the fifties, when Moses finally meets his match: a group of activists who stymie his efforts to build a highway through Washington Square Park. Both acts take place, for the most part, in Moses's office—there are elements here of, among other genres, the office comedy.

Throughout, Fiennes ably displays Moses's faults—his stubbornness, his dishonesty, his bullying, his barely veiled prejudices against people of color and the poor—but he also makes him seem a bit like a great, perhaps slightly tortured artist surrounded by dopes. Moses is worried that people don't like him when they meet him, but we can easily imagine Fiennes's crafty version of the man winning over a crowd or two.

This is a bit of a pattern: “Straight Line Crazy” has a glossiness that cuts against the crude, blunt force of Moses’s still contested achievement. (In this way, it matches the irony of its setting at Hudson Yards, a sleek, strange airport-terminal-esque complex plopped down on the West Side like one of Moses’s roads.) It scrupulously declines to portray Moses as blinkered and corrupt—the traditional stance, more or less, since “The Power Broker” encased the man in villainous amber, back in 1974. This is Moses smoothly repaved, if not essentially rerouted. He still wants the same things—total dominance over the built environment of New York; absolute control over how its citizens move, preferably by car—but, in this lukewarm show, he has the plausible deniability of the do-gooder reformer.

The play’s fuel is Moses’s overconfident machismo, but it’s punctuated and given its structure by monologues from women. Sometimes they’re delivered in an Irish lilt, by Finnuala Connell (Judith Roddy), a longtime aide to Moses who, in the first act, is portrayed as cautiously curious, then captivated by Moses’s brilliance, but in the second act becomes disillusioned. Jane Jacobs (Helen Schlesinger) delivers speeches, too, providing a lyrical counterpoint to Moses’s coldhearted toughness. Jacobs was a hero of Greenwich Village, a bard of the kind of place with busy sidewalks and hundreds of safety-insuring “eyes on the street.” Her opus “The Death and Life of Great American Cities” spawned a generation of density-loving urbanists oriented more toward pedestrians than toward cars. When Jacobs first tramped onstage and introduced herself, the crowd gave an impromptu ovation, happy to see an urban legend—the uncomplicatedly good kind.

But Jacobs never really emerges as a flesh-and-blood character. In the second act, we see her at activist meetings, but that’s just pretext for more conveniently expository speechifying. In the fight over ramming a highway through Washington Square Park, we never get a full hearing of the ideas that inspired Jacobs’s crusades and, more pressingly for this play, helped defeat the formidable Moses, humiliatingly, and put a halt to his grand and destructive plans.

This is a very talky show—the actors’ bodies are mostly static, and the dance is in the parrying of their ideas. But, in all the talking, it would have been nice to hear Jacobs’s and Moses’s ideologies come into sustained and

meaningful contact. Car versus foot; suburban ersatz populism versus city-dwelling bourgeois comfort; careful preservation versus the logic of endless development—these are conflicts that persist, and that are now, perhaps, more intractably polarized than ever.

“Straight Line Crazy” is supposed to be a character study of Moses, but by the end—despite some glancing mentions of his alcoholic wife, Mary—he still feels underexamined. He wins a big fight and then he loses one. His racism and classism are addressed in imprecatory dialogue with Finnuala, and shown implicitly through his disdain for Mariah (Alisha Bailey), a young Black employee who deplores his “slum clearance” policy, but they are never really tested by the fire of argument. A fuller Jacobs might have made for a clearer Moses—some personalities shine brightest under the light of direct antagonism.

Moses and his acolytes toss out the idea that Jacobs and her ilk are nothing but rich provincialists, selfishly opposed to change because they like their quiet environs. These days, he’d call her a *NIMBY*. Through a clever feat of imagination, Hare even places this assessment in Jacobs’s mouth. In a coda toward the end of the play, she worries that her style of community-based protest, focussing on the history and the aesthetics of particular neighborhoods, contributed to the makeup of today’s profanely overpriced SoHo. There’s no highway there, thank God—Moses proposed one—but it’s impossible for a regular person to rent an apartment.

Many of today’s urban-policy nerds, who call themselves *YIMBYs*—Yes, in My Back Yard—might make the same indictment of Jacobs. At one point, Moses says, astutely, that fashions in urban policy “blow right back in.” He’s right about that; I sense a Moses moment coming, perhaps foreshadowed by this play’s relatively equalizing portrayal of the man. You’d think it would be difficult to dismiss a civic dynamo like Jacobs, but I bet some of these market-oriented *YIMBYs* would do just that. Well-meaning citizens seem tired of contending with political bad faith. Why not, then, look to technocratic Caesars like Moses to browbeat the opposition and get things done?

It’s a real fight, happening everywhere, spurred by lowered expectations, foreshortened horizons, and a pervasive feeling of scarcity. Let’s have it out,

onstage and everywhere else. ♦

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