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NEW YORKER



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Goings On

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By [Helen Shaw](#), [Richard Brody](#), [Dan Stahl](#), [Jane Bua](#), [Brian Seibert](#), [Sheldon Pearce](#), and [Taran Dugal](#)

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

It wouldn't be a New York theatre season without a hefty crop of recent London productions, and this spring is no different. Among the many transfers opening soon: uptown, Sarah Snook is dandyism personified in "[The Picture of Dorian Gray](#)"; downtown, you've got Andrew Scott playing all the parts in "[Vanya](#)"; and farther downtown (O.K., in Brooklyn) Paul Mescal flexes his acting muscles in "[A Streetcar Named Desire](#)," at BAM, and the Donmar Warehouse's touring version of Chekhov's "[The Cherry Orchard](#)" arrives at St. Ann's Warehouse. It's worth noting that "Dorian Gray" and "Orchard" are the creative products of Australian talents—Snook and the director-adaptor Kip Williams in the former, and the director Benedict Andrews for the latter—and Scott and Mescal are Irish. So we're not talking about a *British* invasion, per se, but the season does offer a chance to see what's been a hit in Merry Olde England.



SpitLip's "Operation Mincemeat" opens at the Golden Theatre on March 20.

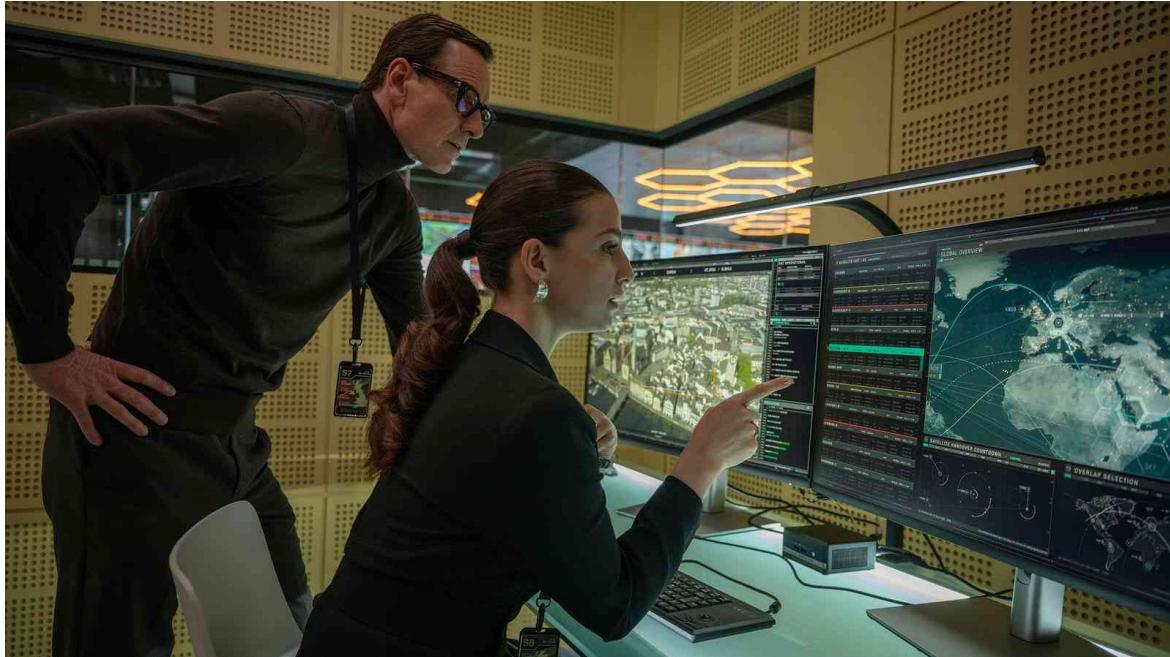
Illustration by Marco Quadri

If you do want roast-beef, bulldog, pip-pip British jollity—half amateur theatrical, half M.I.5 romp—you can go to the Broadway transfer "[Operation Mincemeat](#)," a piece by the collective SpitLip, which

underwent a hero's journey from London's jolly experimental fringe to a serious business at the Fortune Theatre on the West End. The musical's title refers to an actual intelligence caper, in 1943, which employed an anonymous corpse as a decoy Royal Marine; the story has been told, variously, in books and in a 2021 film. The SpitLip production takes a deconstructionist view, and not just by giving the Nazis a naughty boy-band song in the second act. There's a thoughtful unpacking here of *all* the plan's secret baggage, such as, for instance, the way militaries use our bodies, not just against our will but even after our will is gone. I was [caught totally unawares](#) by "Mincemeat" on a trip to London, and it became the show I recommended to the most folks, the most often. Having it here saves New Yorkers a flight to Heathrow, but maybe you could drop by [Myers of Keswick](#) first, for a sausage roll, to get your arteries into the proper spirit.—

Helen Shaw

Spotlight

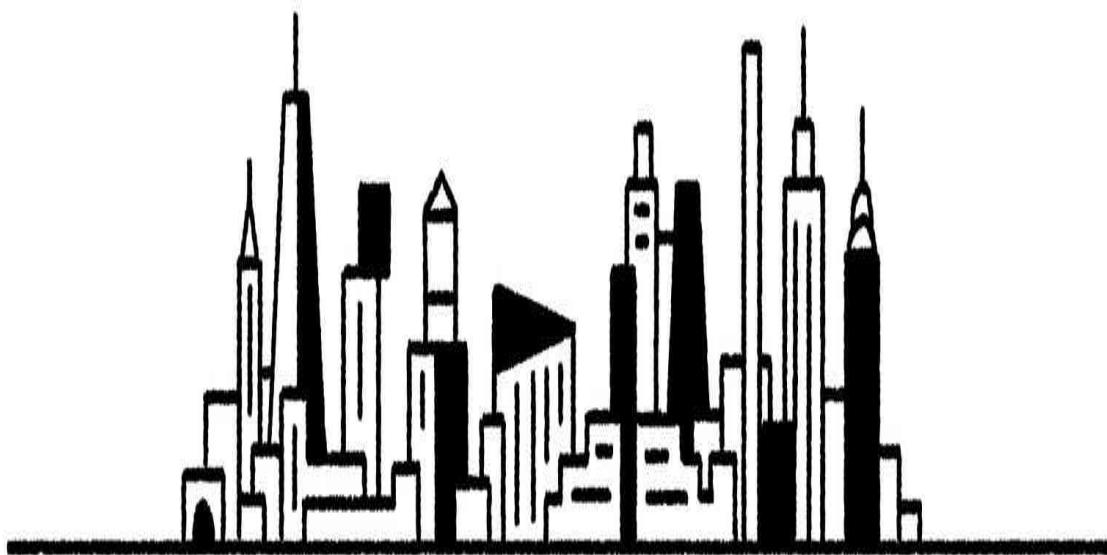


Michael Fassbender and Marisa Abela, in "Black Bag."

Photograph courtesy Claudette Barius / Focus Features

Movies

Steven Soderbergh's new spy thriller, "**Black Bag**," written by David Koepp, has a stark setup: George Woodhouse (Michael Fassbender) and Kathryn St. Jean (Cate Blanchett) are a married pair of British secret agents. When George is informed that Kathryn may have gone rogue, he conducts the investigation. Much of the drama involves intimate confrontations filled with high-stakes talk, and Soderbergh, doing his own cinematography and editing, exerts himself mightily to make it feel like action. The cast of luminaries (including Regé-Jean Page and Marisa Abela) lend the thinly sketched characters distinctive personalities, but the real star is the technology of spycraft: Soderbergh grimly delights in exposing its eerie powers and potentially devastating uses.—*Richard Brody (In wide release.)*



About Town

Off Broadway

Jonathan Larson's death at age thirty-five, in 1996, is a real-life tragedy of American theatre. He never saw his musical "Rent" make it to Broadway, let alone win multiple Tony Awards and a Pulitzer Prize. "**The Jonathan Larson Project**" brings a bit of him back, showcasing eighteen of his songs, some written for cabarets, some cut from longer works, some never

performed. A cast of five delivers them revue style: there's no narrative and little context aside from the program notes. That's a missed opportunity, but the best numbers are dramas in themselves, including "Valentine's Day," about a formative S & M encounter, and "Hosing the Furniture," in which a housewife cleans maniacally. Their singers—Andy Mientus and Lauren Marcus, respectively—drill deep into the fiery, convention-busting core of Larson's legacy.—*Dan Stahl (Orpheum; through June 1.)*

Classical

Fanny Hensel, née Mendelssohn, is at the top of a scarily long list of women whose accomplishments have been outshone by titanic men close to them. Fanny was a wunderkind pianist and composer but, unlike her brother Felix, wasn't able to pursue anything at a professional level, owing to pesky societal expectations. Her own father told her that music could be only "an ornament" in her life. In alignment with Women's History Month, the Morgan Library & Museum offers a screening of the illuminating documentary "**Fanny: The Other Mendelssohn**," from 2023, directed by her great-great-granddaughter. The film is preceded by a live performance of the "Easter Sonata"—a formful and sensitive piece signed "F. Mendelssohn," in 1828, and mistakenly attributed to Felix until 2010, when handwriting analysis proved it to be Fanny's.—*Jane Bua (March 21.)*

Dance



Sally Silvers's "Pandora's New Cake Stain" at Roulette, in 2022.

Photograph by Julie Lemberger

For more than forty years, the choreographer **Sally Silvers** has been offering audiences her cockeyed, defamiliarizing ideas of what dance can be. Often this comes in the form of smart, scrappy theatrical collages that juxtapose historical sources nobody else would put together, performed by highly trained dancers trying to forget their training, in a manner that's slapdash and awkward but intentionally, meticulously, wittily so. Now, with "You Better," she turns her attention to a figure from more than four thousand years ago, the Sumerian priestess Enheduanna, whom some scholars call the first named author in history. What might Silvers's mind do with that?—*Brian Seibert (Roulette; March 20-22.)*

Off Broadway

Abe Koogler's piercing, allegorical comedy "**Deep Blue Sound**," exquisitely directed by Arin Arbus, introduces us to the eccentrics in a tiny Pacific Northwest island community: the tetchy, dying Ella (Maryann Plunkett); Annie (Crystal Finn), the town's power-mad, powerless mayor; Ella's estranged longtime friends John (Arnie Burton) and Mary (Miriam Silverman). Everyone seems to be trying to forge a shiny new relationship; everyone foolishly risks fumbling the love they have at hand. A pod of orcas

has also disappeared from local waters, and a hilarious town meeting on the subject dissolves into farce. We and they know what's happened—there's no mystery. The earth loved us, but we got distracted, and forgot to keep our friends close when we could.—*Helen Shaw (Public Theatre; through April 5.)*

Electronic Music

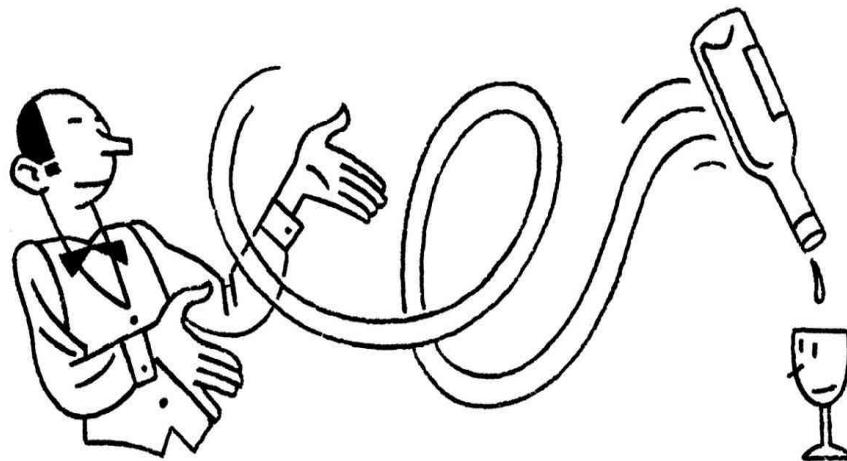


Photograph by Samuel Bradley

Since the mid-twenty-tens, the Welsh electronic musician **Kelly Lee Owens** has continually delved deeper into an ethereal sound. Her self-titled début, from 2017, is a euphoric and euphonic blend of dream-pop and techno, throbbing yet heavenly. It's music that blurs the lines between being lucid and in a trance. The follow-up, "Inner Song" (2020), was tenser, focussing more on voice, both literally and figuratively; in addition to a greater emphasis on vocals, Owens sharpened her perspective, wrestling with climate anxiety. An album released last year, "Dreamstate," returns to reverie as an immersive experience, again with voice at the fore. There is a dazzling, almost celestial quality to Owens's singing, which she deploys gracefully, even as beats chug directly into frame; the strobing floor-filling tracks defy gravity, so buoyant and effortless as to feel suspended.—*Sheldon Pearce (Warsaw; March 25.)*

Movies

For sheer suspense, few recent thrillers match Alain Guiraudie's low-key but high-anxiety mystery "**Misericordia.**" It's set in a small town in the South of France, where a young man named Jérémie (Félix Kysyl) returns after a long absence, for the funeral of his former employer—a baker named Jean-Pierre, on whom he had a crush. Jérémie stays on as a guest of the baker's widow (Catherine Frot), but her son (Jean-Baptiste Durand) resents the prodigal's return. The conflict turns violent, and the police get involved. Guiraudie sketches the resulting inquiries and evasions in sharp, brisk strokes; above all, he reveals the commonness of queer sexuality in the tradition-bound locale. The religious aspect of the title is embodied by a local priest (Jacques Develay) and involves an extraordinary scene of confession.—*Richard Brody (In limited release.)*



Bar Tab

Taran Dugal listens in at a chic Greenpoint lounge.



Illustration by Patricia Bolaños

New York, as the best gossips know, is a snoop's paradise—a nirvana for nosiness, an intermeddler's Eden. The city that never sleeps is perpetually prattling on. This past weekend, two amateur observers stopped by **Eavesdrop**, a chic lounge in Greenpoint, to see if it would live up to its name. It didn't take long: at a high-top table in a back room, the pair quickly picked up on a conversation featuring the trademark peacocking of a first date. "I simply loved the volcano hikes in the Azores," a man with a salt-and-pepper beard said. "But that place was almost *too* rural for me." "When I was in Norway," the woman across from him countered, "I went on a sauna date with a Norwegian." She faltered, then regained her footing. "But it wasn't, like, a weird, sexual thing." Thankfully for our Sherlocks, the bar's arsenal of cocktails—including the sweet, aptly named Kaleidoscope No. 4 (rum, mezcal, rice wine, strawberry, passion-fruit liqueur, egg white) and the smooth, aromatic Mrs. Plum (gin, amontillado, lemon, rye, demerara, tonic)—was nearly enough to dispel the awkwardness in the air. A state-of-the-art sound system bumped "Scirocco," a jazzy nu-disco LP by the Dutch trio Kraak & Smaak, its gentle vinyl crackles a balm for the psyche, as was a delectable plate of white beans, anchovies, rosemary, and potato chips that a waitress graciously suggested. Inquiring minds assuaged, the newcomers reached for the check—but, as Earth, Wind & Fire's "Energy" began to play, the bill tray slipped out of their hands, hitting the floor with the softest of thumps. Almost immediately, a waiter swooped in. "I've got an ear for these

kinds of things," he said. The rookies, outsnooped and further inspired, took their leave.

P.S. Good stuff on the internet:

- [Doggie dance party](#)
- ["Dear Ms. Lonely Arts"](#)
- [Who is Mark Carney?](#)

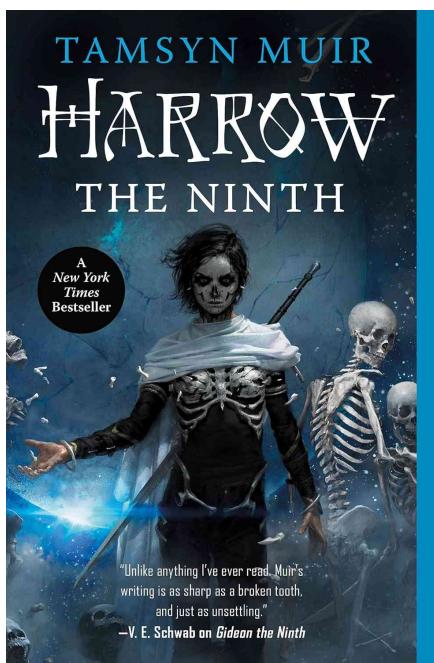
By Shauna Lyon
By Alex Ross
By Helen Shaw
By Sheldon Pearce
By Amanda Petrusich
By Anthony Lane
By Namwali Serpell
By Richard Brody
By Hanif Abdurraqib
By Anna Russell

You're reading Book Currents, a weekly column in which notable figures share what they're reading. Sign up for the Goings On newsletter to receive their selections, and other cultural recommendations, in your inbox.

The best-selling novelist and two-time National Book Award winner Jesmyn Ward tries not to think about her audience until the end of the writing process. Doing so, she explained, can be anxiety-inducing and stifling. “It’s always difficult to navigate between being too plain—because you don’t want to insult your reader—and being too obtuse,” she said. “Not every reader will find my work enjoyable,” Ward added, but she writes in the faith that those who are at least receptive to her writing will be able to follow it and find meaning in it. She extends this type of trust not only to her readers but to her fellow-writers: “Sometimes being bewildered is just part of reading,” she said. “Anytime that a story asks you to do a lot of work to understand the world and the characters being constructed, there’s something to be learned.” Ward recently joined us to discuss a selection of laborious novels that she enjoyed, not despite their bewildering qualities but because of them. Her comments have been edited and condensed.

Harrow the Ninth

by Tamsyn Muir



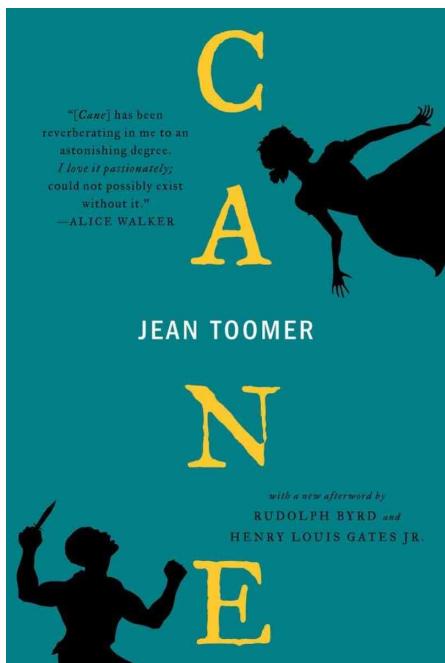
[Amazon](#) | [Bookshop](#)

This is the second in a series about necromancers who live in a faraway galaxy. The political and social structure of their society is related in the first book, “[Gideon the Ninth](#).” Essentially, there are different houses that serve a single emperor. It’s all pretty straightforward, and readers are closely aligned with one character, a knight from one of the houses. But that all changes in this next installment, which is told from the perspective of the heiress whom the knight served. The heiress gives a nonlinear and contradictory account of the events that took place in the previous book, and readers aren’t given clues as to why.

I found the first two-thirds of the book almost entirely incomprehensible, but I went at it doggedly. Frustrated, I kept asking myself, “What makes me want to continue even though I’m being asked to work so hard to figure out what’s going on?” It was because the story was so clever and inventive—from the character development to the dialogue—that it inspired trust. I sensed that there’d be a payoff at the end, and there was.

Cane

by Jean Toomer

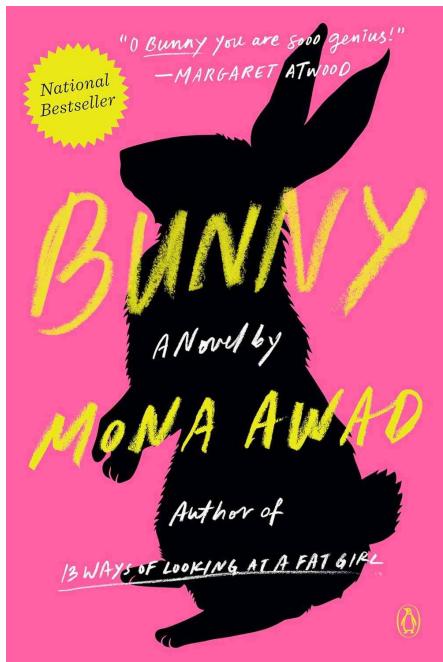


[Amazon](#) | [Bookshop](#)

There's no definable main protagonist in this novel, or a specific question that's being asked, or even a clear narrative engine driving the story. The book is very short and impressionistic, just a series of encounters with different characters. I had to read it as an undergraduate, but the real reason I was committed to finishing it was because it made me feel something. I'm motivated to write by the love I have for the place I come from, and for the people who are here, and I recognized this in Toomer. He pays such careful attention to the experiences of his characters, to their smallest utterances and movements, and there seems to be a kind of love underpinning his work.

Bunny

by *Mona Awad*



[Amazon](#) | [Bookshop](#)

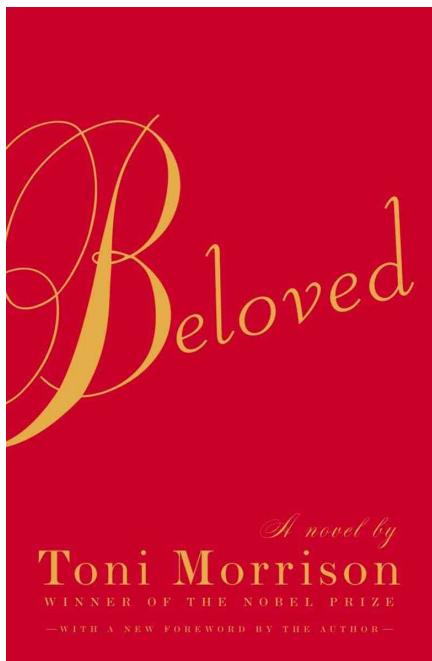
Unlike in “Harrow the Ninth,” the mechanics of the plot in this book are clear: The main character, Samantha, is an M.F.A. student on the East Coast. She’s a bit of an outsider at first, but she gradually becomes friends with other women in the program. They are, at least on the surface, sort of caricatures of femininity—poofy dress, lots of pink. Samantha eventually

discovers that these women turn rabbits into men, party with them, then discard them. Although it's totally illogical, I went with it because the book is humorous and highly entertaining. It also makes observations so sharp that it's as if Awad were winking at me.

The end did leave me feeling a little cheated, though, like the empathy and trust I invested in the text was misplaced. I won't spoil it, but everything I thought I knew—about Samantha, the program, her friends—was wrong. Still, the book made me feel comfortable in the presence of the surreal and the strange, and that's something that I seek out in stories.

Beloved

by Toni Morrison



[Amazon](#) | [Bookshop](#)

Morrison demands that her readers work from the very beginning, which is powerful and assured. At the same time, she signals to you that she knows exactly what she's doing—she knows the world she has built and the people in it—so it's easy to trust her. You have the sense that if you put in the work the book's mysteries will get solved, and there are so many.

There's the initial mystery of what happened to Sethe, the book's central character, when she was enslaved. The arrival of her daughter's spirit brings with it two more: Is it actually the ghost of her child, and, if so, what does she want? That's all bewildering plot-wise, but Morrison also bewilders readers through language. Her prose is very complicated and layered. It's like poetry, with its attention to rhythm and detail. Surprises are woven in at the sentence level, so readers have to be present in every line in order to understand all that's unfolding. I try to emulate this sort of intricacy and texture in my own work.

By Audrey Wollen
By Maggie Doherty
By Alice Gregory
By Adam Kirsch
By Graciela Mochkovsky

The Talk of the Town

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The Case of Mahmoud Khalil

If the Trump Administration comes out on the wrong side of this fight, it will be because defending free speech remains a politically lucid and powerful principle.

By [Benjamin Wallace-Wells](#)



Photo illustration by Cristiana Couceiro; Source photographs (left to right) by David Dee Delgado / Getty; Selcuk Acar / Anadolu / Getty

Last Saturday evening, a recent Columbia University graduate student named [Mahmoud Khalil](#) was greeted in the lobby of his apartment building, in Morningside Heights, by four plainclothes agents from the [Department of Homeland Security](#). They said that his student visa had been revoked and that he was being arrested, with a plan to deport him. Khalil, a Syrian-born Algerian citizen of Palestinian descent, had been a leader of the [pro-Palestine protests](#) that consumed Columbia's campus life last year. He called his lawyer Amy Greer, and she spoke with one of the agents. When Greer told him that Khalil did not have or need a student visa, because he is a permanent U.S. resident with a green card, the agent said that D.H.S. had revoked his green card, too. When Greer asked to see the warrant, the agent hung up.

Khalil is thirty years old, has earned a master's degree in public administration, and once interned at the United Nations. (His wife, an American citizen of Syrian descent, is about to give birth.) Within the protests that he was associated with, a university task force found a "serious and pervasive" atmosphere of antisemitism, in which Jewish students were targeted and harassed. But Khalil had served as an interlocutor with the university administration, and in public statements he disavowed antisemitism and insisted that a change in the government of Israel would represent liberation for Palestinians and Jews alike. Was this really the fight the [Trump](#) Administration wanted to pick?

As it turned out, once the Administration explained what it was up to, this was exactly the fight it wanted. "The allegation here is not that he was breaking the law," a White House official told the *Free Press*. A statement from D.H.S. said, vaguely, that Khalil had "led activities aligned to [Hamas](#)," wording that smudges the crucial distinction between antisemitism and opposition to Israeli policy. The government's deportation order relied on an obscure 1952 immigration statute that allows the Secretary of State to revoke permanent residency from anyone he judges to be undermining U.S. foreign policy. The Administration seemed prepared to argue that Khalil's "continued presence in this country," as the *Times* put it, made the American goal of combatting antisemitism more difficult. No specific actions were even alleged; Khalil was evidently being deported simply because the Administration did not like what he had to say.

Trump's most radical actions tend to emerge at once from political strength and weakness. At the moment, his strength derives from the absence of any effective political opposition in Washington, which has allowed him to make deep cuts to many popular federal programs (pending court rulings, in some cases). But the relentlessness of those acts, and his never-ending tariff threats, have spooked the markets and, in an astonishingly short time, turned a bullish economic outlook into one marked by the possibility of a downturn. After Trump refused to rule out a recession, even Fox News' Peter Doocy asked sarcastically, at a press briefing, if anyone at the White House was shorting the Dow. So it makes sense that the President would seize on a familiar campaign issue—campus protests, especially at Columbia—where he believes that public opinion is on his side.

The trouble for Trump is that Columbia, despite its history of student activism, does not really fit the right-wing image of a revolutionary institution bent on D.E.I. indoctrination. The university has reacted to the protests in part by establishing a committee whose work may include disciplining students who have, in the words of the Associated Press, “expressed criticism of Israel.” And so the political hits have been indirect. First, the Administration announced that it would rescind at least four hundred million dollars in funding—punishment, Trump said, for the university’s failure to protect Jewish students, though it has had the effect of gutting federal support for a groundbreaking system that provides world-class health care to poor New Yorkers. Then the government moved against Khalil. “We’re not doing this for the polling,” a White House adviser told Axios, explaining a new A.I.-enabled program that would search social media for antisemitic or anti-Israel statements made by international students, whose visas would then be revoked. “But it never hurts to be on the right side of an issue.”

If the Trump Administration comes out on the wrong side of this fight, it will be because defending free speech remains a politically lucid and powerful principle. During the [Biden](#) Administration, Republicans repeatedly claimed that conservatives were the victims of censorship. Now they seem especially eager to influence the flow of speech and ideas. Early this winter, Trump prevailed upon ABC to settle a lawsuit in which he accused the network of defaming him, and his aides rotated reporters from mainstream outlets (A.P., CNN) out of White House press-pool seats in favor of ideologically aligned organizations. Even the ostensibly anti-waste *DOGE*, as Veronique de Rugy noted in the libertarian magazine *Reason*, “seems mostly animated by rooting out leftist culture politics and its practitioners in Washington.”

Further, Trump and his political allies have been casually conflating speech that they don’t like with violence. House Speaker [Mike Johnson](#) called Khalil “an aspiring young terrorist.” Then, during a White House event seemingly designed to promote [Elon Musk](#)’s Tesla, whose sales and stock have plummeted, Trump was asked whether sporadic incidents of vandalism at Tesla dealerships should be treated as acts of domestic terrorism. “I will do that,” he said. “We gotta stop them.”

When it comes to the President's impingements on free speech, liberals should be equally steadfast. A group of progressive members of Congress who circulated a letter condemning Khalil's deportation could get only fourteen signatures—a sign, perhaps, of how leery Democrats are of being associated with the protests. But defending Khalil's right to speak doesn't require defending his views. Even Ann Coulter, the firebrand conservative commentator, can see that. "There's almost no one I don't want to deport," she wrote of the protesters, "but, unless they've committed a crime, isn't this a violation of the first amendment?" It is.

On Monday, Trump said that Khalil's arrest would be "the first of many." By the time of his initial hearing in federal court in New York City, two days later, Khalil was being held far from the proceedings, at an *ICE* detention center in rural Jena, Louisiana. Outside the Manhattan courthouse, hundreds of protesters gathered. Maybe they, like Trump, understood that Khalil's case isn't the end of a defining constitutional fight but the beginning. ♦

By Jay Caspian Kang
By Sue Halpern
By Nathan Heller
By Antonia Hitchens
By Geraldo Cadava
By Susan B. Glasser
By E. Tammy Kim
By E. Tammy Kim
By Susan B. Glasser
By Jon Lee Anderson
By Louise Bokkenheuser
By Susan B. Glasser

[Off the Wall Dept.](#)

The Case of the Met's Missing Banksy

The street artist snuck a “brilliant” art work into the Met, in 2005. Then it disappeared. Does a former head of security know where the painting is?

By [Alex Scordelis](#)



Illustration by João Fazenda

John Barelli worked in the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s security department for thirty-eight years and served as its chief from 2001 until 2016. These days, he drops in every now and then from his home, on the Lower East Side. On one such visit, he cut the figure of a retired financier—striped button-down, navy slacks, loafers. He sat at a table in the Petrie Court café and talked about an incident that he recounts in his 2019 book, “Stealing the Show: A History of Art and Crime in Six Thefts.”

The caper in question was more Monty Python than “Thomas Crown Affair.” And—until now—its outcome has been a mystery. On March 13, 2005, three accomplices entered the museum’s American Wing. Two of them began arguing, distracting the guards, thereby allowing the third, who wore a trenchcoat, a fake beard, and a tweed hat, to covertly affix a painting to the wall using double-sided tape. The art work, a ten-by-thirteen-inch neoclassical portrait in a cheap gilt frame, depicted a woman in a gas mask.

The intruder then placed a placard next to the painting; it read “Banksy, 1975. ‘Last breath.’ Oil on board. Donated by the artist.”

That same year, Banksy, the anonymous British street artist, also left works in *MOMA*, the American Museum of Natural History, and the Brooklyn Museum. At the Met, security staff noticed the contraband painting and removed it within ten minutes—faster than at the other institutions. (A painting of a soup can stayed on the wall at *MOMA* for three days.) “We took a picture of the scene, made a report out,” Barelli said. “The next day, it hit the papers.”

At the time of the stunt, Elyse Topalian, a Met spokeswoman, said, “I think it’s fair to say that it would take more than a piece of Scotch tape to get a work of art into the Met.”

Barelli often used the incident as a teaching tool when training security personnel. “We not only have to look for things being taken off the wall but things being put on it,” he said. Banksy wasn’t the only artist to hang his own work in the Met. “We usually would give these things away or throw them out,” Barelli said, of the errant pictures.

In his book, Barelli does not reveal what happened to “Last breath.” “Usually something like this is not ‘lost and found,’ ” he said. “If it was lost, it would go to our lost-and-found department.” If it were a pair of sunglasses, say, the museum would wait fifteen days and then give them to Goodwill. “With anything of value—like jewelry, money,” he said, “we would wait thirty days, and, if no one claimed it, it would go back to the person who discovered it. I had a five-hundred-thousand-dollar Cartier bracelet turned in by a waiter at the Met Gala.” Within two days, the bracelet was claimed by its owner, who gave the waiter a reward.

In 2005, Barelli said, most of his staff had never heard of Banksy. Now “Last breath” is likely worth a fortune. In 2021, “Sunflowers from Petrol Station,” a Banksy oil-on-canvas also from 2005, sold at auction for \$14.5 million.

“It’s brilliant,” the gallerist Jeffrey Deitch said, after looking at an image of “Last breath.” He included Banksy’s work in “Art in the Streets,” a 2011

show he curated at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. Of “Last breath,” he went on, “It’s a very strong painting, a very meaningful painting. I admire how Banksy can make a profound political statement in this very direct, compact way.”

In the Met café, Barelli said that he knew the painting’s location, but he was cagey. “Well, we didn’t return it to a guard,” he said. “My first inclination was throwing it out, like we do with all this stuff.” Banksy, like the owner of the Cartier bracelet, did try to reclaim his property. “About a month later, I got a call from our legal department, telling me that he wants it back,” Barelli said. “And I said, ‘Well, he can’t have it back. We threw it out.’ ”

But he did not throw it out.

Legally, the picture’s ownership is fuzzy. Raymond Dowd, a Manhattan attorney specializing in art law, said, “A museum director could’ve said, ‘Throw it in the dumpster,’ and some entrepreneurial security guard goes, ‘Well, I got a spot on the wall. I’ll take it out of the dumpster.’ Nothing illegal about that, necessarily. But, when values go up, attitudes change.”

The American Museum of Natural History accessioned its Banksy and put it on display in its Center for Science, Education, and Innovation. A spokesperson for the Met confirmed that “Last breath” is not in the museum’s collection.

In a follow-up phone call, Barelli revealed the full story. “I brought it back to my office, and I talked to my assistant, Ed Devlin,” he said. Devlin, a Second World War veteran, worked for the Met’s security department from 1988 to 2013, after retiring from the N.Y.P.D. He died in 2014. “I said, ‘Ed, get rid of this painting.’ And he said, ‘O.K.’ ” But Devlin didn’t follow orders. “He brought it back and left it in my office,” Barelli said.

Barelli has offered conflicting accounts about what happened to the Banksy next. He’s said that he doesn’t know where it is. He’s also said that, when he retired, “I took it with me.” He added, “If I need some money, maybe I’ll do something with it.” ♦

By T. M. Brown
By Michael Schulman
By Michael Schulman
By Françoise Mouly
By Joshua Yaffa
By Antonia Hitchens
By Jon Lee Anderson
By Diego Lasarte

[The Boards](#)

Spy Games with “Operation Mincemeat”

The stars of a British spy-caper musical, now on Broadway, hit up an espionage museum to see whether they can actually crack codes and dodge lasers.

By [Michael Schulman](#)



Illustration by João Fazenda

Early on the morning of April 30, 1943, a floating body was discovered off the southern coast of Spain. Retrieved by a fisherman, it was brought to the city of Huelva and identified as Captain William Martin, of the British Royal Marines. A briefcase chained to the corpse contained documents indicating that the Allies planned to advance on Greece and Sardinia—intel that the Nazi-sympathizing Spanish authorities passed on to the Germans. Surprise, Nazis! It was all a British-intelligence ruse, known as Operation Mincemeat. Back in London, operatives had obtained the cadaver of a homeless man who'd died from eating rat poison, concocted a fake identity for him, lined his body with phony love letters from a made-up fiancée (plus a receipt for a diamond engagement ring), and dumped him from a submarine. The aim was to distract the Axis forces from a planned invasion of Sicily, which the

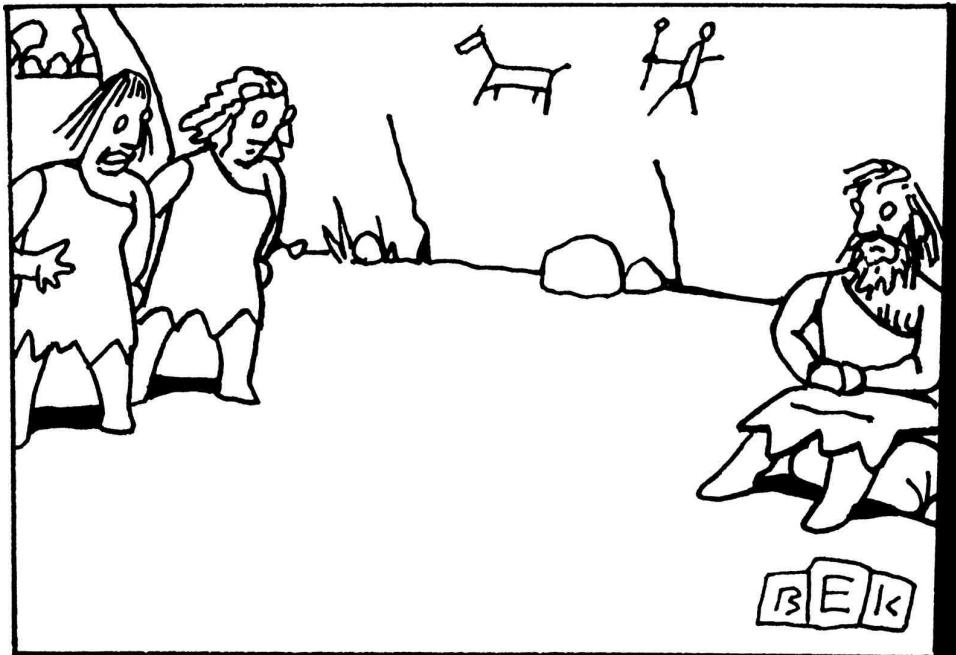
Allies handily took that summer. A message sent to Winston Churchill gloated, “Mincemeat swallowed rod, line and sinker.”

This unlikely tale has been told and retold, including, a few years back, in a handsome period film starring Colin Firth. But New York audiences can now see it reimagined as a rollicking musical farce, complete with silly mustaches, in the Broadway show “Operation Mincemeat,” which opens this week, at the Golden. The production originated in 2019, at an eighty-one-seat theatre in London, and became a West End hit. The cast of five, all thirtysomething goofballs, play close to ninety characters (they’ve lost count), among them Ian Fleming, who worked in the department of naval intelligence, pre-James Bond, and may have come up with the scheme.

“We were very enamored with the idea of winning wars using cleverness,” Natasha Hodgson, one of the actor-writers, said last week. “For a bunch of nerds, it’s nice to know that you can make a difference without using violence.” The troupe could relate; like the spooks they play, they were used to being scrappy and inventive. “Our style of theatre-making was born out of necessity, out of having no money,” one of her collaborators, Zoë Roberts, explained. “In a similar way, the desperation of the situation birthed huge creativity.” Three of the actors—Hodgson, Roberts, and David Cumming—wrote the show with Felix Hagan, with whom they formed the theatre company SpitLip, and they perform it with Jak Malone and Claire-Marie Hall. The trio met at the University of Warwick; their previous shows include a werewolf murder mystery and a horror-comedy about a tentacled beast devouring a residential complex (it was a metaphor for the housing crisis). “Critical successes, commercial failures,” Cumming said.

They had been looking for a real-life story to spin into a musical when Hodgson was on a family holiday in Norway and her brother urged her to listen to a podcast about Operation Mincemeat. “I couldn’t get it to these guys fast enough,” she recalled. “And we were, like, World War Two? Absolutely not,” Cumming added. “The grayest, most boring time on earth. She’s been kidnapped by a yeti! It’s a cry for help!” But they quickly realized the story’s potential, both for pathos and for tomfoolery. While in previews on Broadway, they were still making changes, in part to clarify things for American audiences. (There’s now an announcement up top that it’s a true story.) “Mustaches are still going in,” Hodgson said.

The quintet was mostly new to New York, and Malone had been cataloguing his city eats on Instagram: pizza from Joe's, banana pudding from Magnolia Bakery. That morning, before a rehearsal, the actors took a field trip to Spyscape, an espionage museum on Eighth Avenue, featuring interactive challenges and developed with help from a former M.I.6 trainer. (It's popular for corporate team building.) "This is so up our street," Hodgson said, as they put on green wristbands. They chose spy names—CrystalShroud, EnigmaStrand—from mounted iPads while a voice announced, "Welcome to Spygames, where wellness and fun meet." ("They get you a green tea at the end?" Malone wondered.) Then they entered Zone 04, a small gray room, for their first challenge: Code Shield. Basically, you punch glowy dots on the walls as suspenseful music blares. "It's like playing whack-a-mole," Cumming said.



"First, he invented fire. Then he invented the grizzled look."
Cartoon by Bruce Eric Kaplan

In Zone 08, they tried a code-breaking game called Cipher Sequence, involving colored lights on the floor—and flunked. More exciting was Zone 09, in which they had to dart through a room of lasers. Vaulting and wriggling, they were reduced to shrieks. "I'm never going to rob a bank," Malone said, panting. "Lasers did not help my wellness."

"If I pull something and can't do the show tonight, that's not my fault," Roberts warned.

After trying Cipher Sequence again, with little improvement, Hodgson said, “Let’s end on a low.” They exited through the gift shop, where they found a game called Danger in the Deep, an escape room set on a submarine. “We can dress up as characters!” Hall said.

Roberts countered, “We’re doing that every night of our lives.” ♦

By Helen Shaw
By Helen Shaw
By Alex Scordelis
By Anna Russell
By Helen Shaw
By Michael Schulman
By Alex Ross
By Anthony Lane
By Sarah Lustbader
By Diego Lasarte
By Helen Shaw
By Hanif Abdurraqib

[Infrastructure Dept.](#)

The Brooklyn Bridge Gets a Glow-Up

When the bridge went L.E.D., an entrepreneurial stuff-flipper bought a bunch of the old lights, for thirty-five dollars a pop.

By [Diego Lasarte](#)



Illustration by João Fazenda

Not long ago, President Trump let loose on Truth Social about his frustration with new environmental consumer-product standards—lousy water pressure in showers, weakly flushing toilets. He ordered his new E.P.A. administrator, Lee Zeldin, to tackle the problem, including overturning President Biden’s ban on most non-L.E.D. light bulbs. Earlier, he’d complained, “The bulb that we’re being forced to use, number one, to me, most importantly, the light’s no good, I always look orange.”

Might light bulbs be the rare topic on which New Yorkers and Trump agree? Maybe when it comes to the Brooklyn Bridge, which recently emerged from a multiyear effort to modernize its lighting. (The city is calling it a “glow-up.”) The result, as some unhappy neighbors and bridge-crossers will tell you: a blindingly bright bridge, its color washed out. The warm brown of John Roebling’s sooty limestone-and-granite blocks is now a millennial

gray. “It’s like my 19th century Brooklyn Bridge is under interrogation by a belligerent cop,” one local posted on Instagram.

Strolling across the modified bridge just after dark recently, a Queens resident named Joe Pilato didn’t have strong opinions about the new lighting. His interest was more mercantile. The bridge’s makeover began in 2021, just before Biden’s bulb ban, when the necklace of lights dotting its swooping cables—mercury-vapor bulbs—was replaced with L.E.D.s. The city’s Department of Transportation then decided to auction off the old lighting fixtures to the public. Pilato, a professional stuff-flipper, jumped at the opportunity.

“I was regularly on a number of government-surplus websites, and on one of them I saw this post come up advertising lights from the Brooklyn Bridge,” he said. At thirty-nine, he has a scruffy beard and nearly shoulder-length hair, and he is the founder of the subreddit r/Flipping. A mechanical engineer by trade, he has spent more than a decade flipping items that people are looking to offload. As part of that process, he spends lots of time scoping out estate sales and auction houses, as well as Craigslist and Facebook Marketplace. Once, he flipped some nineteenth-century harpoons that he’d found online. “I cut myself on one,” he said. “I was, like, ‘Holy shit, am I going to catch bubonic plague or something?’ ”

As he walked, Pilato passed a girl filming a TikTok dance, a bright L.E.D. ring light illuminating her face. He explained how, using a site called Public Surplus, he’d bid around thirty-five dollars each on a hundred and fifty of the hundred and seventy-six available lamps, sight unseen. He landed a hundred and twenty-three. Pilato rented a moving truck to collect his haul at a D.O.T. facility under the Williamsburg Bridge. Each fixture looks like a big gray Lego block, with a round socket holding a bulb the size of an ostrich egg encased in a thick glass globe, like a gumball machine. “When I picked them up, I was trying to get more information from the guy there about the lights, but he was very eager to show me the new L.E.D. lights,” he said. “He’s, like, ‘They’re more efficient.’ He was pretty pumped about it.”

Pilato stowed the lights in a storage facility in Sunnyside, then spent the next few days testing them, one by one, in a parking lot, plugging them into a

power inverter connected to his Honda Civic. “I don’t remember the setup I used, but I was wearing safety equipment and covering my balls,” he said. “Every time I plugged one in, I was, like, ‘Is this gonna blow up?’ ” None did.

Pilato said that it took him more than a year to sell all the lights. He marketed them to history buffs and to New York-themed businesses. Once he stood at the entrance to the bridge’s pedestrian walkway for three hours, holding a sign reading “Bridge Lights for Sale.” That effort yielded nothing, but he did sell a lamp to an expatriate couple in Paris, and seventeen to the owner of a billiards parlor. Russ & Daughters, the smoked-fish store, bought a pair. One negotiation with a Long Island City bowling alley ended with him throwing in an extra light in exchange for two lanes on a Saturday night. In total, he made between twelve and thirteen thousand dollars.

Pilato dodged a cyclist and looked up to take in the new illumination. Last year, the city added fifty-six L.E.D. floodlights to the bases of the bridge’s two towers, making the effect even harsher and brighter. “I don’t think that the people in charge of the D.O.T. are, like, ‘How is this going to look aesthetically? Is this going to make people miss the way the old bridge looked?’ ” he said. “I think they were just, like, ‘L.E.D.s. Cheapest. Great. Slap them up there. Is it good visibility? Can planes still see it? Great.’ ”

“The white lights are certainly more clinical,” he went on. “I can see people being, like, ‘Bleh! ’ They were warmer and cozier before.” ♦

By Zach Helfand
By Peter Slevin
By Zach Helfand
By E. Tammy Kim
By Julian Lucas
By Jon Lee Anderson
By Carrie Battan
By Benjamin Wallace-Wells
By Antonia Hitchens
By Louise Bokkenheuser
By Sue Halpern
By Alex Scordelis

By [Emily Flake](#)

INCREASINGLY
FORCEFUL LANGUAGE
ON PROTEST PADDLES



DROPPING SICK BURNS
IN THE PRIVATE SLACK

SURE HOPE

NOBODY
SCREEN-
SHOTS
THIS
ONE!



LEAVING SECRET NOTES
IN CONGRESSIONAL
BATHROOMS

ELON...

IS...

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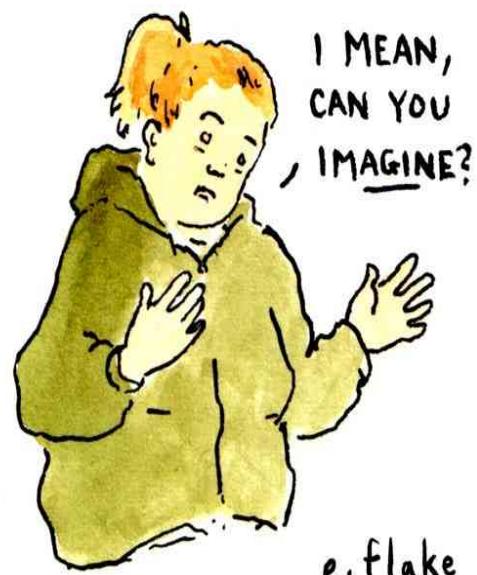


WHISPERING MESSAGES
INTO A HOLE IN THE
GROUND AND LETTING
THE REEDS DO THEIR THING

SARAVVE
~~~ U.S.A.-I.D....



DEVELOPING A CLEAR,  
DYNAMIC AGENDA, BUILDING  
COALITIONS TO ADVANCE  
THAT AGENDA, IDENTIFYING  
TALENTED POLITICIANS  
WHO CAN - HA HA HA,  
SORRY, I CAN'T KEEP THIS UP



e.flake

By Barry Blitt  
By Ivan Ehlers  
By Bryn Durgin  
By Felipe Torres Medina  
By Ian Frazier  
By Danielle Legros Georges  
By Barry Blitt  
By Claire Friedman

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- [How an American Radical Reinvented Back-Yard Gardening](#)
- [What Will Jonathan Anderson Transform Next?](#)
- [The Battle for the Bros](#)

[Onward and Upward with the Arts](#)

# The Subversive Love Songs of Lucy Dacus

The singer-songwriter talks about boygenius, the perils of love, and “Forever Is a Feeling,” her new album.

By [Amanda Petrusich](#)



*“Every idea that I had is happening, and kind of how I thought it would,” Dacus said. Photographs by Lenne Chai for The New Yorker*

One morning in January, I met the musician Lucy Dacus at the Cloisters, the medieval-art museum at the northwestern tip of Manhattan, overlooking the Hudson River. Dacus is a formidable solo artist—since 2016, she has released three albums of searching, intimate folk rock—but she’s perhaps best known as one-third of the indie supergroup boygenius, alongside Phoebe Bridgers and Julien Baker. Although boygenius formed in 2018, and put out an eponymous EP that year, the release of its début full-length, “The Record,” in 2023, was a seismic event: it garnered seven Grammy nominations and three wins, and earned the band a slot on a Timothée Chalamet-hosted episode of “Saturday Night Live,” a sold-out show at Madison Square Garden, and a *Rolling Stone* cover mimicking a portrait of Nirvana, in which the boys, as they are known, appear wearing Gucci power suits and wide ties, arms defensively crossed. For Americans exhausted by

the long tail of the first Trump Presidency, with its suffocating ideas about identity (all three members of boygenius are queer), the band became a kind of generational loadstone, a flash of hope in an era defined by catastrophic backsliding. The boys made out onstage, ripped their shirts open, covered Shania Twain, soloed, dressed as the Holy Trinity, free-bled, and leaped into one another's arms. The band offered a new and liberating portrayal of female friendship, along with a lesson in liberation more generally.

This spring, Dacus, who is twenty-nine, will release “Forever Is a Feeling,” her fourth solo record. It’s a gorgeous and tender album about falling in love—Dacus is now in a committed relationship with Baker—and how the tumult of that experience has forced her to reckon with the unknown. “This is bliss / This is Hell / Forever is a feeling / and I know it well,” Dacus sings on the title track. Her voice sounds pure and soft over a tangle of synthesizers, gamelan, harp, and drum machine. Dacus described the album as being partly about the idea of “coming to terms with change—of knowing that things aren’t forever,” and of finding freedom in the various ways we are asked, relentlessly and repeatedly, to reimagine ourselves and our lives.

Dacus and I met near the museum’s front entrance. The sky was gray and sagging; the Hudson was chunky with ice. When I arrived, Dacus was reading a copy of Vladimir Nabokov’s “Pale Fire,” from 1962, a novel that takes the form of a nine-hundred-and-ninety-nine-line poem, written by a fictional author named John Shade, with commentary by Charles Kinbote, a deranged and largely unbearable academic. (Kinbote could probably be thought of as a punisher, to borrow the title of Bridgers’s second record—a person who simply does not know when to zip it.) Dacus was into it. “He knows how to write insufferable people,” she said. Dacus is frequently described as statuesque—she is five feet ten inches, with icy blue-green eyes, and she exudes a kind of quiet, serene elegance that feels of another century. The cover of “Forever Is a Feeling” features an oil painting of her, done by the artist Will St. John, who is known for his portraits of drag queens and antique porcelain dolls. Dacus is pictured mostly nude, draped in gold cloth and glowing. Toward the bottom, there’s a strange and tiny figure in a dark cloak, walking. “That was left over from some other painting,” Dacus said. “I think he was planning to get rid of it. But I like him. He reminds me of the Fool in the tarot deck. He’s just starting out on a journey.”

The museum is made up of four cloisters—covered walkways flanked on one side by a colonnade—which were acquired in the early nineteen-hundreds by the sculptor George Grey Barnard, who collected architectural fragments from abbeys and churches built by monastic orders in the twelfth century. Barnard was famously unskilled when it came to managing his money, and, in 1925, he had to sell the cloisters to John D. Rockefeller, Jr. They were eventually donated, along with a large collection of medieval art works, to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The buildings are beautiful and tranquil but fundamentally incongruous (modern architecture mixed with bits of decaying monasteries, gathered from meadows in Catalonia and France). This makes the Cloisters feel both unmoored from and tethered to time.

Dacus had suggested the spot; it was her second visit in less than a year. “I came here this summer with Phoebe, for the first time, and we took a tour,” she said. “As you go through different eras, you notice so many of the same themes.” That idea—of a grand continuum, in which the circumstances change but all of our big human feelings (heartache, joy, unease, panic, contentment) remain the same, across time and vast distances—felt germane to her new songs. “All love feels new and one of a kind, and it is,” she said. “But also it’s the most ancient feeling.” When I pointed out to Dacus that “Forever Is a Feeling” is essentially a concept record about the agony and ecstasy of romance, she let out a groan. “It makes my stomach hurt,” she said. “It felt amazing to write. But now, on the brink of sharing it—I could throw up. Every single day, I’m just, like, ‘I can’t believe this is the job. Just plumb the depths and give it away!’ ”

We wandered along one cloister, stopping to admire a potted oleander with a sign that read “*POISON*.” “That was my great-uncle’s last name,” Dacus said, briefly assuming a thick Southern accent. “Ohhhh-lander,” she drawled. (Her father’s family is from Mississippi.) We settled on a stone bench in the chapter house, once a central part of Notre-Dame-de-Pontaut, a Benedictine monastery established in 1115, in Aquitaine. Every morning, the monks gathered there, arranging themselves on the long stone benches, to discuss the matters of the day. Now tourists and school groups inched past, whispering. Though no one approached Dacus directly, I couldn’t help but notice how often passersby—especially twentysomethings with cool haircuts and hand tattoos—silently angled their phones toward her.

Dacus and Baker have mostly kept their relationship private. Dacus didn't want to hide it, exactly, and anyone who pays attention to her new lyrics could probably piece it together, but she was still working out just how much she wanted to disclose into my little recording machine. Boygenius has an unusually fervent and engaged fan base—perhaps because the band became very popular during the pandemic, when parasocial relationships were all we had, or perhaps because they make confessional music about intimate entanglements among various genders, which can be rare to find in popular music. In recent years, the scrutiny has become intense. There are long and detailed discussion threads online, speculating about the romance between Dacus and Baker. Dacus said that her followers have been respectful of her boundaries, but “it only takes a handful to make your life feel like a really easily threatened thing.” Then she added, “I’ve been practicing not reinforcing that narrative to myself.”

I told Dacus that I might not have asked about her love life if it weren’t so plainly central to the songs. “It’s been interesting, because I want to protect what is precious in my life, but also to be honest, and make art that’s true,” she said. “I think maybe a part of it is just trusting that it’s not at risk.” She paused. “Maybe a healthier way to think about it is that it’s not actually fragile. These songs are about different people. But, you know, ‘Most Wanted Man in West Tennessee’—what are you gonna do?” (Baker was born and brought up outside Memphis.)

That song is jangly and rich, featuring electric guitar, pump organ, and synthesizers. Tonally, it reminds me a little of Big Star’s “Thirteen,” in part because it captures something about the tenuousness of new love:

Now I feel your hand under the table, at the fancy restaurant  
Gripping on my inner thigh, like if you don’t I’m gonna run  
But I’m not going anywhere, least not anywhere you’re not

Dacus said that she has only ever found romantic love with friends or collaborators. “How are you doing romance without friendship?” she said, laughing. “I can’t imagine. That feels so hollow. It makes me feel ill! Someone that’s not my friend? Are you serious? Almost every relationship I have been in, we’ve had some business or creative dealings. I don’t mean this just sexually, but it turns me on.” She went on, “To have your minds

meet on something, and be, like, ‘Oh, my gosh, you said what I couldn’t say. I love your mind.’”

## JOKE PIONEERS



*Cartoon by Ellis Rosen*

One of my favorite tracks on the new record is “For Keeps,” a gentle, cottony wisp of a song, barely more than two minutes long, just Dacus and an acoustic guitar. “For Keeps” is about falling in love with someone who is fundamentally unavailable to you, or maybe you’re unavailable to each other, who knows—something doesn’t align.

The song begins with a sharp intake of breath. Dacus’s vocals are close and unhurried. There’s a hint of a tremble in her tone. I explained to her that I’d been listening to the song in my car earlier that morning, when a flock of Canada geese flew low and heavy over the highway, and I found myself weeping, suddenly, inelegantly, because the whole thing just felt so unlikely—the meaty old Canada goose is not the most probable flier, and we don’t know how migratory birds find their way south, instinctively navigating between two poles. Yet there they went, perfectly aligned, hungry for warmth. The song ends with a sigh of resignation:

But I still miss you  
When I’m with you

'Cause I know we're not  
Playing for keeps

That final (and devastating) “for keeps” might refer to the impossibility of the situation, to the star-crossed-ness of it all—something big is keeping them apart—or to just how formidably difficult it is to sustain love over time. I found it instructive: love anyway. Take off.

“Hearing that—thank God,” Dacus said. She continued, “I want there to be different conversations about love than the ones that are happening. I worry that when I talk about this I get really abstract or rote—that it’s impossible to talk about because it’s been made into a corny, commodified thing. Love is such a money-maker, it’s just not always pleasant,” she said. “Whenever you love anything a lot, you’re booked for grief.” On “Best Guess,” a sweet, hazy new song, Dacus sings about embracing the chanciness of it all:

I love your body  
I love your mind  
They will change  
So will mine  
But you are my best  
Guess at the future  
You are my best guess  
If I were a gambling man, and I am  
You’d be my best bet

Dacus and I eventually left the chapter house, walking around until we found the Unicorn Tapestries, a series of seven pieces, woven from wool, silk, and metallic thread, likely designed in France and produced in Brussels toward the end of the fifteenth century. No one knows exactly who made them, or how to definitively interpret their narrative, but there’s something instantly striking about the iconography: a white unicorn is pursued, retaliates, is lured by a maiden, and then is caught, encircled by a fence, and chained to a tree trunk. Scholars have suggested that the tapestries might be an allegory of Christ, or, more likely, of marriage—all the ways in which love and monogamy require subjugation, submission, capture. I’d told Dacus earlier that I wanted to get a picture of them for my three-year-old daughter,

who enjoys unicorns, though the more I looked at the series the less inclined I felt to take a photo.

We wandered out onto the West Terrace, which overlooks the Hudson. To the left was the George Washington Bridge, and across the river stood the sheer cliffs of the Palisades. We leaned against a low rock wall, buttoning our coats against the wind. “I’ve been asking people how they define love,” Dacus said. “Everybody’s answers are so interesting. My therapist had my favorite definition so far—that love is the connective tissue between all of us that’s easy to forget. I like that. Because it means it’s just there.”



*“Whenever you love anything a lot, you’re booked for grief.” Dacus said*

Dacus was born in the spring of 1995 and adopted by parents who brought her up in Mechanicsville, Virginia, a suburb of Richmond. “My mom was adopted, too,” Dacus told me. “My parents always said, ‘All of the universe had to align for you to be in our family. What are the chances, and how perfect is this?’ I had friends who would say, ‘Oh, you’re like Little Orphan Annie. I’m so sorry your parents didn’t want you.’ I was, like, ‘No, my parents really did want me. You’re probably a mistake.’” She went on, “As a second grader, I was just a little bitch about it.” Dacus has considered adopting a child herself, or perhaps becoming a foster parent one day. She is less inclined to have biological children. “I don’t think I would have the speed to change in the necessary ways,” she said.

Growing up, she had limited information about her birth mother. “On my birthday every year, my mom was, like, ‘I’ll tell you anything, but only ask if you really want to know.’ It felt like I really had to be choosy,” she said. When Dacus turned eighteen, she received a large file of photographs and documents. “It was overwhelming, but also—wow. These are just strangers, out in the world,” she said, of her biological parents. At nineteen, Dacus met her birth mother, and they quickly forged a relationship. “We’re very similar, more similar in personality than the family that raised me,” she said. “I have a brother who is biological to my parents. I think they saw themselves in him, and saw aspects of each other that frustrated them. I think he had a harder time growing up because he was related to them. Whereas they gave me the respect early on that I was an individual, and they were just finding out who I was.”

By the age of eight, Dacus was writing songs. Her earliest musical proclivities ran from classic (Led Zeppelin and the Cure) to fleeting and contemporary (“Fergalicious” and the pop-punk band All Time Low). Her family is Baptist (though their church eventually transitioned to a nondenominational Protestant sect), and she grew up singing religious music. She described herself as “very, very dedicated” to God as a child, but, by the time she was nineteen and studying film at Virginia Commonwealth University, “it just kind of sublimated. It’s not that I’m not the same person. It’s that my idea of God actually got so big that it didn’t have boundaries anymore. I just felt like I had insane hubris for even trying to understand it.” On “Most Wanted Man,” Dacus sings:

I still believe in God sometimes  
It always takes me by surprise  
To catch myself in the middle of praying

“That happens,” Dacus said. “I’ll be, like—what is this? I don’t even understand it. I don’t think there’s any work to be done to stop it.” At the Cloisters, we had briefly discussed the work of Thomas Merton, the poet and Trappist monk who wrote often about the containment or rechannelling of desire, although, as I’d told Dacus, scholars assume that he broke his vow of celibacy. “O.K. Cool. Respect,” Dacus had said, laughing. Her own relationship to religion forced her to contend with an inclination toward stifling (or at least judging) normal feelings of yearning and lust. “I was

raised, generally, to think wanting things was bad—it was of the body, of the flesh. You should just be content with the life you’re given,” she said. “That’s a good practice, because it helps you look around and realize that most of the time you have everything you need. But becoming O.K. with wanting things is big. That’s not evil, that’s not bad—that’s actually life.”

Later, I asked Dacus if growing up in the church had affected the way she thought about her sexuality. She replied that it had delayed the development of her entire sense of self. “Thinking of myself at all felt selfish and vain,” she wrote in a text message. “Maybe I was subconsciously protecting myself from becoming a pariah, my whole community was rooted in the church, pretty much everyone I loved was there, so it’s not something I could jeopardize.” She went on, “I have journal entries from when I was seven wishing I could just marry my girl friends and bemoaning that it could never happen because I wasn’t, and would never be, a lesbian.” She officially came out, she said, when she was nineteen, during an interview with NPR. “I said, ‘I’m kinda queer,’ ” she remembered, laughing. She described the realization as “a slow fade. Friends of mine were just, like, ‘You’re gay,’ repeatedly, for a long time.”

Dacus eventually dropped out of V.C.U. There had been an administrative issue with her scholarship, but she also felt stalled out and understimulated. She got a day job at a store called Richmond Camera, where she edited and prepared school photos to be printed on mugs and key chains. She was writing songs every day, and described the process as a way of talking to herself; the precise mechanics of the work remain mysterious to her. “I don’t want to think about it too hard, because it just happens,” she said. “If I knew the source, I would go, and I would probably tap it out. Someone once spoke about it as seeing a wild animal in your back yard, and then being as still as possible so that it’ll stay around.”

In 2016, Dacus released “No Burden,” her first LP, on Egghunt Records, a local label; a few months later, the album was rereleased by Matador Records. Dacus’s early songs are spare and haunting, but it was evident, even then, that she had a knack for writing the sorts of hooks and choruses that land like a gut punch. “What I like most about her is the intention she puts behind everything. No decision is made without meaning,” the singer

and songwriter Claire Cottrill, who records as Clairo, told me recently. “She’s someone who really listens, which is what makes her a great artist.”

The record appeared on several year-end lists. Dacus played a Tiny Desk concert, performed at Lollapalooza, and booked a series of gigs opening for Baker, who had just released “Sprained Ankle,” her début album. Bridgers, whose first record, “Stranger in the Alps,” came out in 2017, also ended up as an opener on that tour. The three of them—all in their early twenties and playing the sort of moody, rickety guitar rock typically made by lanky white men—became fast friends. Eventually, they decided to record together. In March, 2018, Dacus released “Historian,” her second album, and, seven months later, boygenius released its self-titled EP.

In 2019, Dacus moved from Richmond to Philadelphia, where she shared a five-bedroom house with seven roommates; in 2021, she released “Home Video,” her third album. It’s a gutsy, thoughtful meditation on coming of age and the often excruciating ways that teen-agers grasp at identity, desperate to discover who they are. “Her work has the gift of being able to fall upon the inanimate or the mundane, and pull from it the startlingly intimate,” the singer Hozier, who provides guest vocals on “Bullseye,” a new song, told me. “I’ve always loved the eye through which her lyrical voice finds the world.” That April, Dacus performed the single “Hot & Heavy” on “The Late Show with Stephen Colbert,” which was still filming remotely. She stood onstage in an empty theatre with her band, looking regal and plaintive, wearing a long black dress and crimson lipstick. It’s a song about a teen-age love affair—“Hot and heavy in the basement of your parents’ place,” Dacus sings on the chorus—that goes sour: “The most that I could give to you is nothing at all / The best that I could offer was to miss your calls.” Dacus is an understated performer, verging on laconic, but her stillness is transfixing, and feels true to the way that desire itself is often a paralyzing force. All three members of boygenius are good at capturing the awkwardness and intensity of sex, but, whereas Bridgers and Baker tend to deploy dissonance and tension, Dacus’s delivery is softer, quieter, more peaceful.

Dacus had not anticipated the wild success of “The Record,” and, for a while, boygenius took priority over her solo career. “We had these big goals of playing sick shows. But it immediately outpaced our expectations. We just had to adjust. I’m still shocked,” Dacus said. “That’s something all of us

talk about and work on. I feel dissociated. I also feel like it could go away in a second. Because, if it can show up in a second, it can go away in a second.”

In the summer of 2023, Barack Obama posted a playlist of his favorite songs, which included boygenius’s “Not Strong Enough,” a track about not being tough or steady or sane enough to sustain a relationship. (“Not Strong Enough” is emblematic of a slight but recurring theme in the boygenius catalogue: “I’m sorry, I can’t, don’t hate me.”) Obama’s playlists are always suspiciously well calibrated—John Coltrane and Ice Spice and Leonard Cohen and Rosalía . . . sure. But most artists still find it a funny thrill to be included. Dacus retweeted the playlist, adding the phrase “war criminal :( .” The words immediately became a meme. At one point, the journalist Taylor Lorenz posted an Instagram story with a photo of Joe Biden accompanied by the phrase, an event that likely contributed to her departure from the *Washington Post*. “My issue was being used in a personality campaign without my consent,” Dacus told me one evening. “I was actually really surprised that people don’t already know that every President is a war criminal, and, also, war itself is criminal.” She went on, “I would say the same about Biden, I would say the same about Trump.”

In the fall of 2024, as boygenius was finishing its first world tour, Dacus and Baker moved together to Los Angeles. “It’s so interesting how home just moves,” she said. “I was once debating with a therapist whether I should move or not. She was, like, ‘Your sense of home might move before you do.’ L.A. just felt like the strongest magnet. I’m expecting that to change.” She added, “I anticipate wanting to be back in more rural areas, like maybe back to the South at some point.” She had been missing aspects of the East Coast lately—the rolling farms of rural Virginia, “the outlying areas, the apple orchards. I miss dense foliage. I miss shade,” Dacus said. It was hard to tell how urgent any of this was. “Life is long, or short. . . . We don’t know.”

Dacus was travelling during the L.A. fires, in January, and a friend had asked if she wanted anything from her house removed for safekeeping. It seemed as though, at any moment, the winds might shift, threatening her neighborhood. “I care about everything,” Dacus said. “I’m very sentimental—I could mourn each individual sweater for its own reason. But the one

thing where I was, like, ‘Please grab this’ was my journals.” I thought of the first verse from “Trust,” a single from “No Burden.” It evokes the gulf between what we think and what we say, what we want and what we do:

I set a fire on the stove  
And fed it every word I wrote  
I watched my journals turn to smoke  
Now all there is is what I spoke

A few weeks later, I met Dacus at the Huntington, an art museum, library, and botanical garden in San Marino, just northeast of L.A. The fires had largely subsided, but the city felt strange: hushed and stricken in some corners, business as usual in others. “Today, before I came here, I had on my shitty clothes and my mask and I was cleaning my back porch,” Dacus said. “I was just looking at that ash, thinking, *I can’t believe this is somebody’s house.*”

The Huntington estate was purchased in 1903 by Henry Edward Huntington, a railroad tycoon; he established a library and a museum in 1919, and they opened to the public in 1928, after his death. Huntington started collecting fine art in his sixties, guided by his second wife, Arabella. (A 1938 article in *Life* described Huntington’s collection of eighteenth-century British portraits as “far and away the greatest group . . . ever assembled by any one man.”) He also oversaw the cultivation of nearly a hundred and twenty acres of gardens. Some of the plants are rare, and theft has become a problem. The museum had begun placing “*THIS PLANT WAS STOLEN*” signs in gardens where specimens had been pilfered.

“I really, really like it here,” Dacus said, as we made our way toward the Chinese Garden, fifteen acres winding around a koi pond. We stopped to admire narcissi, flowering quinces, and some freaky chunks of limestone, described by the Huntington as “unusual rocks with energy.” “Julien and I are members. Last time, we brought a blanket and snacks and our books, and lay in the garden for, like, two hours, just napping and reading,” she said. “We have memberships because Phoebe gave them to us for my birthday.” (On “Garden Song,” a smoky, aching number from “Punisher,” Bridgers, an L.A. native, sings, “I don’t know when you got taller / See our reflection in the water / Off a bridge at the Huntington / I hopped the fence when I was

seventeen.”) It was hard not to think of the gardens themselves as a study of change. “That’s the thing about nature,” Dacus said. “Every single day, the air is different, the light’s different. Things are growing.”

Boygenius is currently inactive. “The decision to take time off came even before the record came out. We always said, ‘One year,’ ” Dacus said. It’s not easy to say no to more money, more attention. Yet the band had predetermined the time frame on the basis of ideas of self-preservation. “Let’s protect our friendship, let’s protect our energy, let’s not have each other feel pressure to keep it going for the others,” she said. “It was so much fun, and I think we ended at the perfect time.”

We left the Huntington at dusk, and headed to Houston’s, a steak house in Pasadena. It’s the type of restaurant—dark-wood panelling, red leather, a flickering neon sign out front—where people clink Martinis, celebrate anniversaries, close deals. We sat in a booth and began disassembling a fried artichoke. Our conversation wound back, perhaps inevitably, toward relationships—how easy it is to talk about romantic love as an exquisite and transformative experience, a thing that buoys and saves you. Of course, it often sucks. Maybe it even mostly sucks. “It’s painful to get to a beautiful place sometimes,” is how Dacus put it.

The next morning, Dacus was directing a music video for “Best Guess.” I arrived on set—a cavernous soundstage near LAX—just before lunchtime. A few weeks earlier, she had posted an entreaty on social media, calling for anyone identifying as a “hot masc” to audition for the video. “I was, like, ‘Hope you like the snippet. Send to the hot masc in your life,’ ” she said. Dacus received more than five thousand replies. In recent months, some online queer communities have been opining about what they say is a lack of hot mascs. “So I wanted to highlight some cool masc people,” she said. “I thought that TikTok would be the perfect place for it, because I needed people who are comfortable looking into a camera, which is truly a skill set that some people have and some people don’t.” She added, laughing, “Everybody here has it. I’m the least suave person at this shoot, for sure.”

Now here they were—the artist and dancer Janae Holster; the TikTok star Mattie Westbrouck; Naomi McPherson, of MUNA; and the singer and guitarist Towa Bird, among others, including the actor and model Cara

Delevingne—wearing suits, posing, grinning, cheering. The pop star Chappell Roan, who has advocated aggressively for L.G.B.T.Q.+ rights, told me that Dacus “cares deeply for her community. She shows up for them in every way she can. She is an artist who gives a fuck.”

At lunch, Dacus and I brought our plates into a dressing room. “One of my favorite videos of all time is the ‘Queen’ video by Janelle Monáe,” Dacus said. “It has Erykah Badu in it. Her whole thing is black and white and a little red. They shot in front of a flat wall. I’ve never made a music video like that. I’m always interested in doing a thing that a lot of people have done, in a way that I don’t think anyone has yet, in a way that I wish I’d seen at a young age.”

For the video, Dacus and her hot mascs had been playing poker and darts, arm-wrestling, boxing, puffing cigars, lifting weights. There was a loosely choreographed group dance. Dacus seemed happy, self-assured, and at ease. “Every idea that I had is happening, and kind of how I thought it would, too,” she said. “I feel really good doing this.” ♦

*An earlier version of this story misrepresented Dacus’s audition call for the “Best Guess” music video.*

By Alex Ross  
By Alex Ross  
By Hanif Abdurraqib  
By Amanda Petrusich  
By David Owen  
By Andrew Marantz  
By Carrie Battan  
By Zach Helfand  
By Benjamin Wallace-Wells  
By Joshua Yaffa  
By Jennifer Wilson  
By Nathan Heller

By [Jill Lepore](#)

If you haven't heard of Ruth Stout, you haven't spent much time in the Home and Garden section of a bookstore lately, and you haven't been listening to gardening or homesteading podcasts, either. Stout, who died nearly half a century ago, lived most of her life in the shadow of her far more famous brother, the writer Rex Stout, the creator of the fictional detective Nero Wolfe. Alexander Woolcott, who for years wrote this magazine's *Shouts & Murmurs* column, was convinced that he was the inspiration for Wolfe—like Wolfe, he was famously fat—and even took to calling himself Nero. "It was useless for Stout to protest," *The New Yorker* reported in a Profile of Stout in 1949. "Nothing could convince Woolcott that he had not been plagiarized bodily." Nero Wolfe, who is loath to set foot outside his brownstone on West Thirty-fifth Street, is obsessed with orchids and dedicates four hours a day to tending to them in his plant rooms on the roof. (Too big to climb stairs, he rides an elevator.) Aside from that, he has nothing to do with gardening. These days, most Nero Wolfe books are out of print and Rex Stout is largely forgotten—if not by his loyal fan club, the Wolfe Pack—but a whole lot of people are talking about his sister.

Ruth Stout's three biggest books, "[How to Have a Green Thumb Without an Aching Back](#)" (1955), "[Gardening Without Work](#)" (1961), and "[The Ruth Stout No-Work Garden Book](#)" (1971), have all been reissued in the past few years. What's known as the Ruth Stout Method—"I never plow or spade or cultivate or weed or hoe or use a fertilizer or use a poison spray or use a compost pile, or water"—is an inevitable subject on podcasts like "The Beet," "Farmish Kind of Life," "The Daily Farmer," "Maritime Gardening," and "She Said Homestead." Stout is the bee's knees, the goddess of soil, the doyenne of dirt. She's all over YouTube and X (#RuthStoutMethod) and Instagram (#legend). There are millions of posts about her on TikTok alone, from weekend gardeners and [trad wives](#), organic farmers and Carhartted homesteaders. In selfie videos of straw-hatted gardeners harvesting blue-ribbon pumpkins and the plumpest of potatoes, the Ruth Stout Method has been put to the music of everyone from Iggy Pop to Mama Cass. There are, of course, haters—"MY RUTH STOUT GARDEN FAILED" and "No More Ruth Stout"—but there are many more lovers: "How to Use the Ruth Stout Method to Get Amazing Results" and "Ruth Stout is the best!" There are even *tribute* videos. She is the Beyoncé of the back yard.

Rex Stout, who was the head of the Authors Guild, wrote fifty-two novels. (“I don’t know how many times I have reread the Nero Wolfe stories, but plenty,” [P. G. Wodehouse](#) once confessed. Me, too.) His books were translated into twenty-six languages. They sold more than a hundred million copies. Between 1965 and 1975, according to his biographer, “he had more books in print than any other living American writer had.”

His sister was proud of him, but her spirit of sibling rivalry was something fierce. Not only because of his fame but also because of his name, he was known as the “detective-story king”; she became the “mulch queen.” When it was hinted that Rex, a noted child prodigy, had read the Bible by the age of two or the Iliad in the original Greek before he was born, Ruth would point out that she’d read everything Rex had, only she had read it first. “I don’t want to be remembered as Rex Stout’s sister,” she said. “I want him to be remembered as Ruth Stout’s brother.” She’s gotten her wish. At long last, she’s having her day in the sun. She didn’t plow and she didn’t dig. She didn’t use fertilizers or pesticides. She never watered or weeded. Not for nothing did she call her method “no-work gardening.” She didn’t really believe in work. No tilling, no hoeing. No buying, no selling. What’s wild is how little about her truly radical life is generally known. She was, for a very long time, a Communist. Gardeners of the world, unite! You have nothing to lose but your shovels!

Much of what I know about Ruth Stout I know from reading her seven-hundred-page unpublished autobiography, which she seems to have written sometime in the nineteen-sixties. I found it in the files of an English professor named John McAleer, who published a biography of Rex Stout in 1977; Ruth was his chief informant. He sent her questionnaire after questionnaire.

“Was Rex the family pet?” he asked her.

“No,” she wrote back.

“How did your mother react to Rex’s success as a writer?”

“I think she would have preferred it if he hadn’t written about murder.”

But she also bridled at McAleer's endless questions. She once wrote a book called "It's a Woman's World," but she knew it wasn't. She decided to use the occasion of her correspondence with her brother's biographer to tell him a great deal about *her* life. And then: she sent him the manuscript of her autobiography. "I'm mailing the ms. today & forget that promise to return it in 48 hours," she wrote him. "I'm in no hurry for it. I sort of ran thro it & was a little surprised at how dull it is." He never sent it back. It wasn't dull.

Ruth Imogen Stout was born in Girard, Kansas, on June 14, 1884, the fifth of nine children. Rex, who arrived two years later, was the sixth. They grew up on a farm, though they didn't so much help out on the farm as just live on it. They picked strawberries. They were intense competitors, especially in croquet. She once told this story: "When I was a girl, I took out a book, the title of which was 'Will Power,' from the library. When my mother saw me reading it, she said, 'Oh, Ruth! Do you really think you need more will power?'" The family moved to the city—Topeka—when Ruth was twelve and Rex was ten. Ruth left Topeka around 1903. In 1909, the year she turned twenty-five, she followed Rex to New York. She tried her hand at fiction. During the war, she lost her job (she'd been working as a bookkeeper), and, "with \$117.00 in my pocket-book, without a job and with Rex's typewriter sitting idle," she writes, "I decided this was probably as good a time as any to find out if I was a writer." She had success in the pulps, with O. Henry-style stories like "Just Hungry," from 1917, about a girl from Kentucky who, out of work in New York, sells her virginity in exchange for twelve dollars and a dinner. ("She hadn't the faintest idea how to go about this professionally.") Stout complained that her editor was "difficult to please." He called her into his office, she recounted, and "he said he would probably buy everything I wrote if I didn't have such a peculiar point of view about a lot of things."



"Step aside, Larry: I have some unfinished business to take care of."  
Cartoon by Lonnies Millsap

Rex Stout began writing short stories in the nineteen-tens, too, and published his first detective story in 1914. Finding that there wasn't much money in it, he became a businessman. Ruth also gave up writing, but became more of a bohemian—and more of a Bolshevik. She moved to Greenwich Village and, with a friend named Kitty Morton, opened up a tearoom called the Wisp, where regulars included the pioneering photojournalist Jessie Tarbox Beals. She became a political radical and a sex radical. She bobbed her hair. She organized strikes. She and Rex both became Socialists. On a trip to California, she stopped in Colorado to visit two of her mother's sisters. "I could hardly wait to shock them with the news that I was a Socialist," she later wrote. But, when she made her announcement, one of them said, more or less, "Well, naturally," and the other said that she herself had been all but raised on [Eugene V. Debs](#)'s knee.

She and Kitty had a falling out, and so she opened her own tearoom—one with a dance floor, "on 4th Street, just off 6th Avenue." She called it the Kicket. She had by now fallen in love with an eccentric named Fred Rossiter (a Jew who had been born in Frankfurt as Alfred Rosenblatt). The hitch was that he was already married. In "[The League of Frightened Men](#)" (1935), Rex Stout has Nero Wolfe reading a book by an "Alfred Rossiter" called "Outline of Human Nature." This was a joke. There is no such book.

Rossiter's sole published book, from 1915, is "[A Pocket Manual for Character Analysts and Employment Managers Based on the Blackford System](#)," which offers a method for classifying workers by various physical and mental features. It's an employment manual, but it is also, in its own way, a study of human nature.

In 1918, Ruth had to give up the tearoom. It had lost too much money. Her life began to collapse. In 1919, Rossiter broke things off with Ruth. After she learned that Rossiter and his wife had a baby, her hair turned white.

She published a poem called "The Wedding Contract":

Of course, the whole thing's wrong;  
What they should say is this:  
"I take this man and live with him  
Until we both get on each other's nerves  
To such a point  
That we can't stand it any longer."  
But, if it must be binding,  
Till death do them part,  
'Twould be honester to say:  
"I take this man  
And live with him  
If it kills me."

"If you want a new enthusiasm," Rex told her, "you ought to go hear Scott Nearing." Nearing was an Ivy League economist, a charismatic social reformer, and a political dissident, and she quickly fell under his spell. She became first his student, then his secretary, and finally his mistress. Nearing had lost his job as a professor at the University of Pennsylvania for his political views. The provost had urged him to modify his teaching about subjects like poverty and child labor; Nearing refused. The university trustees then effectively fired him, citing his "public utterances." A furor ensued—the Nearing case, which the *Literary Digest* described as the "biggest fight for academic freedom yet launched in an American university," led to the creation of the American Association of University Professors. "The future of the Democracy hangs on the guarantee of free speech," Nearing said in 1916. A year later, opposed to America's entry into

the war in Europe, he published an antiwar book called “The Great Madness,” and was indicted for sedition. “Scott Nearing! You have heard of Scott Nearing. He is the greatest teacher in the United States,” Eugene Debs said, in a speech in Ohio in 1918, just before he himself was arrested and jailed for sedition.

“He seemed to represent everything towards which my thoughts and ideals were groping,” Ruth Stout wrote, describing her first encounters with Nearing. While working as his secretary, she began writing for socialist and radical papers and magazines, including the *Call* and *The Nation*. Working at a socialist summer camp, Camp Tamiment, in Bushkill, Pennsylvania, she was exposed to a new set of ideas about farming. She came across Knut Hamsun’s 1917 book, “[Growth of the Soil](#),” translated from the Norwegian, a novel about the conflict between agrarianism and modernity. Concerns about what plowing was doing to soil were growing in the U.S. well before the Dust Bowl of the thirties. In 1928, the U.S. Department of Agriculture would publish a circular called “Soil Erosion: A National Menace,” warning that “removal of forest growth, grass and shrubs and breaking the ground surface by cultivation, the trampling of livestock, etc., accentuate erosion to a degree far beyond that taking place under average natural conditions, especially on those soils that are peculiarly susceptible to rainwash.” The very dirt was dying.

During the twenties, Stout studied the soil, and she studied Russian, eventually becoming fluent. She was very likely exposed to the ideas of the Polish-born Jan Owsinski—a figure something like Levin in “[Anna Karenina](#)”—who introduced the notion of no-till farming in Russia in 1899 with “The New System of Farming,” which was published again in 1902, 1905, and 1909 and was the subject of discussion in more than seventy progressive publications between 1899 and 1912. She could also have learned about what was called the Ovsinsky System on a trip to the Soviet Union during which, in 1924, she attended Lenin’s funeral and toured the Kremlin. When she returned, she was asked, by everyone, to report on the Revolution; instead, she reported on rural life. “I talked incessantly,” she wrote, “about the beauty of the Russian steppe, the valuable amber that the Russian peasant women wore around their necks, the steam bath, the long, beautiful sleigh-rides.” She also talked about the “millions of lilacs” in

Buzuluk. In New York, she wondered whether she was “homesick for Russia.”

She spent much time in the twenties with Nearing on his farm, in Ridgewood, New Jersey, where they restored the soil and grew their own food. Nearing prepared to travel to Russia and China. “We worked on the book he was writing, answered his mail, worked in the garden, went swimming,” she wrote. They sifted dirt through sieves. (Nearing’s wife appeared indifferent to his infidelity. “You should see the huge pile of dirt Ruth screened this morning,” Nearing told her over breakfast one day.) Inspired by Nearing, Stout had become a vegetarian. Meanwhile, she served as secretary and business manager for *The New Masses*, a socialist magazine that Rex had helped found. But she did a great deal more than manage the office, as her correspondence with the editor Joseph Freeman reveals. “What am I? On what terms am I engaged?” she complained to Freeman. She gave both Nearing and Freeman lessons in Russian. Freeman called her Ruth Ivanovna. She signed her letters to him, in Russian, “All the best, Ruthinka.”

Rex, too, was caught up in a circle of American radicals that very much involved Nearing, who appears to have feared that Ruth was having an affair with Freeman. “Scott wants you to have dinner with him—with us,” she wrote Freeman. “He wants to talk about style and *The New Masses*. . . . And it’s your chance to talk to him about China.” She also told Freeman she would happily divide her time equally between him and Nearing “for dictation, typing, or anything.” In 1927, Nearing joined the Communist Party. Rex separated from *The New Masses*, realizing that “it was Communist and intended to stay Communist.” But Ruth’s dedication to the cause was far deeper. She wrote Freeman:

God made S.N. and gave him charm and genius and a certain smile and put him in the radical world. He made J.F. and gave him charm and genius and a certain tone of voice and uncertain eyes and put him in the world of art. And God looked on his handiwork and saw that it was good. . . . R.S. looked around the radical world and found a certain smile, and she looked around the world of art and heard a certain tone of voice and looked into an uncertain pair of eyes,—and God watched her work and saw that it was not so bad!

Nevertheless, she eventually left *The New Masses*, telling Freeman that if she believed in nervous breakdowns she'd have had one by then. She didn't so much denounce Communism as drift away from it. Her affair with Scott Nearing faltered. "Our romance seemed to me a little anemic," she wrote. McAleer wrote, of Ruth, "She did not want to be Mrs. Nearing." In any event, in 1929, Nearing left his wife and children not for Ruth but for another woman, Helen Knothe, whom he eventually married. The couple moved to Vermont, where they became a part of the back-to-the-land movement of the thirties. By then, Ruth had made a similar move, with a different man. In 1927, Fred Rossiter left his wife and he and Ruth moved in together in New York. She began working for *The Nation*. She and Rossiter were married in 1929. She was forty-four. She did not take his name. They moved to a fifty-five-acre farm in Redding Ridge, Connecticut, that they called Poverty Hollow. Two years before, her brother had bought a plot of eighteen acres a dozen miles away. He called it High Meadow. She ran her farm like a Communist summer camp.

Nearly as soon as Ruth Stout moved into the old farmhouse at Poverty Hollow, she built a kitchen and a washroom in the barn. Her brother helped her plant a garden. It was the Depression. Her friends never had any money, and now they had less. She told all the people she knew that they were welcome to come stay. That first year, she and Rossiter had hundreds of guests. It got to be so much that she printed a flyer, titled "Cash & Carry Farm," explaining terms to visitors. "We supply only: Beds, Blankets, Light, Fuel for cooking, Cooking utensils," it read. "We expect you to furnish: Bedlinen (if you want it), Towels, Dish Towels and Food." The barn was hardly ever empty. "Come any time and stay as long as you like." Around then, she decided to expand her garden. Meanwhile, she kept a hand in politics, serving on the board of the National Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners ("We defend militant labor and the victims of racial oppression"). She remained close to Nearing, and when he lectured before the committee in 1935 she threw him a party.

Having made a fortune in business, Rex Stout built—himself—a house at High Meadow, and, in its woodshop, he built its furniture. He also grew his own vegetables, though he was much more interested in flowers: he cultivated a renowned iris garden. Above all, and at long last, he returned to writing. Beginning in 1929, he published a series of fairly scandalous and

highly sexed novels, with mixed success. Anonymously, he published a political thriller called “The President Vanishes,” a warning about the rise of American fascism. In 1933, he decided to try writing crime fiction. The first Nero Wolfe novel, “[Fer-de-Lance](#),” appeared the following year.

It’s unclear whether Rex intended Wolfe to be a recurring character. His publisher urged him to alternate his Nero Wolfe mysteries with novels featuring a new detective. In 1936, at a time when he was regularly visiting and sharing seeds and gardening tips with Ruth, Rex created Theodolinda (Dol) Bonner, one of the earliest female detectives in American fiction, in a novel called “[The Hand in the Glove](#). ”

Bonner is eccentric and fierce and, jilted by a fiancé, something of a man-hater. “I dislike all men,” she announces, exuding much the same authority and coldheartedness with which Wolfe so frequently tells his Watson, Archie Goodwin, not to let any woman into the house. Rex is a king, Nero is an emperor, and “Theodolinda” is a reference to a sixth-century Germanic queen. Dol Bonner is, more or less, Nero Wolfe’s sister: a fictional Ruth Stout.

“God expects me to stand up fearless for what I believe, to speak up against what I think is wrong, but not to worry, either in small personal matters or in world affairs, for fear,” Ruth once wrote. Bonner abides by Ruth’s rule for living. In “The Hand in the Glove,” Bonner solves the murder of P. L. Storrs, committed in a country garden: “She knew Storrs took especial pride in the vegetable garden, and she turned aside and went through a gap in a yew hedge to give it a look, but saw only tomatoes and pole beans and tiled celery and late corn and fat pumpkins impatient for the frost.” During an inspection of the vegetable garden, she considered the nature of soil, and of mulch, as she walked past “low brick-walled compartments for compost heaps, and stood looking at the conglomerate mass ready for decay on the heap most recently begun: corn husks, spoiled tomatoes, cabbage leaves and roots, celery tops, carrot tops, a little pile of watermelon meat, faint and pink and unripe. . . . She thought, ‘So recently living and growing, and now no good for anything until it rots.’ ” The key to the mystery comes when she finds gloves worn by the murderer, hidden inside a “large fine melon.”

In 1938, the year after “The Hand in the Glove” was published, Whittaker Chambers, a Communist who had known Ruth Stout when he worked at the *Daily Worker* (to which she contributed, and in which her political protests were chronicled), stole some important papers from the federal government. In 1948, when Chambers testified before the House Un-American Activities Committee, he revealed the existence of the papers; it was later found that he had hidden them inside a pumpkin at his farm, in Maryland (a method of concealment not unlike hiding gloves in a watermelon). Representative Richard Nixon, a crusading anti-Communist, then made a famous speech about the so-called Pumpkin Papers, and the papers featured prominently in the trial of Alger Hiss. These events marked the beginning of the era of [McCarthyism](#).

Ruth Stout, noted ex-Communist, was never hauled before McCarthy’s committee. This may have been owing to the influence of her brother, now not only a celebrated writer but also a celebrated patriot. During the Second World War, Rex, as the “lie detective,” had led the Writers’ War Board and delivered a series of radio addresses, debunking German and Soviet propaganda. (“Like Nero Wolfe, Stout is a fallacy detector,” *The New Yorker* wrote.) Still, he had that dodgy background. His F.B.I. file runs to hundreds of pages, documenting everything from his earliest political activities to his death. [J. Edgar Hoover](#) hated him, especially after Rex published a Nero Wolfe novel in 1965 that was, in essence, an extended indictment of the F.B.I. Ruth’s scant notices in the files of the F.B.I. cover only the years 1927-38. After that, the Bureau apparently lost interest in her. No longer a Red, by the fifties she had reinvented herself as America’s favorite green thumb.

“Organic gardening,” by that name, came to the United States during the Second World War, alongside the Victory Garden movement. In 1942, J. I. Rodale, the founder of the Soil Health Foundation, began publishing a magazine called *Organic Farming and Gardening*. Rodale endorsed, for instance, compost heaps. “The introduction of the organic method into the United States may be likened to a war,” Rodale said in 1949. Ruth Stout, who had been pioneering her own kind of gardening for more than a decade before Rodale came along, became a regular contributor to the magazine. She popularized no-till gardening, though when asked if she’d invented deep

mulching she said, “Well, naturally, I don’t think so; God invented it simply by deciding to have the leaves fall off the trees once a year.”

But Stout likely learned about what she called no-work gardening from her reading or while working on socialist farms or during her travels in Russia, in the twenties. (The Soviet Union itself, so far from adopting the Ovsinskyi System, introduced the aggressive use of mechanized plowing that, together with forced collectivization, contributed to widespread famine.) By the forties, Stout was growing nearly everything she and Rossiter ate, and feeding their freeloaders, too. She did all this by undertaking very little work. Free the worker! She had no use for Rodale’s compost piles: “I’m against them. They are so unnecessary. Why pile everything somewhere and then haul it to where you need it?” Hay, old mail, newspapers, ashes, food waste, whatever: she threw it all in her garden, which looked a right mess. Despite appearances, her method yielded impressive results. She once grew a fifty-one-pound blue Hubbard squash—during a four-month drought. About her only expense was paying a neighboring farmer to cut down the hay she grew in a meadow.



*“The deepest cut was when Brutus said that no one likes my trademark bangs.”*  
Cartoon by Asher Perlman

In 1953, Nearing and his wife published a book called “Living the Good Life: How to Live Sanely and Simply in a Troubled World,” touting their methods of homesteading. A year later, Stout, seventy-one, published her

first book, “How to Have a Green Thumb Without an Aching Back: A New Method of Mulch Gardening.” She burst into print that year, also publishing a magazine article titled “Throw Away Your Spade and Hoe.”

The next year, she published an article in *Popular Gardening* called “Let’s Plant Iris,” a somewhat begrudging profile of her brother. At High Meadow, Rex Stout grew a hundred and eighty-six varieties of iris on three acres. “At the height of the season the jungle of color is overwhelming,” she wrote. “It runs all the way from the tall, cool elegance of Lady Mohr to the blazing braggadocio of Fire Dance. The pure proud white of Snow King; the incredibly deep rich yellow of Ola Kala; the lovely full blue of Chivalry; the velvety deep darkness, almost black, of Sable; the gay flippant medley of Argus Pheasant; the dual personality of Pinnacle, with milkmaids for standards and duchesses for falls; the delicate virginity of Pink Cameo and Cherie; the misty shimmer of Blue Rhythm; the spectacular virtuosity of good old Ranger.” Her brother, she reported, kept a record of his irises, a loose-leaf notebook with a page for every variety. He told her, “Each year, as buds start to open, I begin to make entries.” VW for “verdict: wonderful.” VG for “verdict: good.” He grew marvellous flowers; she knew she grew better vegetables.

Here’s the Ruth Stout Method. Start with a patch of grass. Don’t even bother to turn over the turf. Cover the grass with eight inches of hay or straw. Don’t skimp, and, ideally, don’t pay for it: you can get spoiled hay from a local farmer, or you can barter for it. Then, year-round, throw everything organic on top of it. Food waste, cardboard, newspapers, grass clippings, dead leaves, sticks, stumps. Anything. All of it. Always. When the time comes for planting, push the hay aside, toss some seeds on the soil underneath, and cover it up again. You’ll need to thin your plants and pick your vegetables when they’re ready. But that’s all. Your garden will be very ugly. You may hear from your neighbors. (Stout’s neighbors didn’t mind that her garden was not pleasing to look at, but she preferred to garden fully naked, so they kept their distance, anyway.)

The Ruth Stout Method isn’t really Ruth Stout’s. It’s just that, in the fifties, it was necessary to call it something other than Russian. In the McCarthy era, no one wanted to garden like a Communist.

During a second back-to-the-land movement, in the sixties and early seventies, Ruth Stout's books gained a cult following. She and Nearing became the figurative grandmother and grandfather of a generation of hippies and lovers of communes. In 1964, Stout appeared as a contestant on the TV quiz show "I've Got a Secret." Her secret was that she'd smashed a saloon with Carrie Nation in 1901. Except that wasn't really her secret. Her secret was that she'd been a Socialist and a Communist and a sex radical. (For Nearing, the political part of his life was never a secret; in 1981, at ninety-eight, he appeared, as himself, in the film "Reds.")

In the seventies, she became something of an inspiration to the women's-liberation movement. In 1972, *Ms.* magazine wanted to profile her. "Women's libbers, they bore me," she once said. No profile appeared.

As they aged, Ruth and Rex Stout found it harder to travel to see each other, to make it across those scant dozen miles that separated Poverty Hollow from High Meadow. They still swapped seeds.

January 26, 1972

Dear Ruth:

Someone sent me two packets of cucumber seeds from Holland and here is one of them—if you want to find out what a Dutch cucumber is like.

Love, Rex

"Reading bores me," Ruth wrote Rex in 1972, when she was eighty-eight and he was eighty-six. But there was an exception: "Nero and Archie never bore me." Mainly, she was writing to talk gardening, signing off, "That lovely manure I promised you is here waiting." In the end, it always came back to cow shit. But she remained, as ever, a freethinker. When she was almost ninety, she sent a postcard to CBS that read, "I'm planning to kill President Nixon. I'm willing to spend the rest of my life in prison for doing it. My question is: After I kill Nixon and go to prison, who's going to take care of Agnew?" It prompted the F.B.I. to send two agents to her house; they

quickly realized “that a woman almost ninety years old had no immediate plans to kill the president.”

Rex Stout died in 1975. The next year, his sister was the subject of a documentary, “Ruth Stout’s Garden.” In the voice-over, she says that she lived in New York until she was forty-five, “never once wishing that I could have a garden.” But she wasn’t at Poverty Hollow for more than ten minutes before she looked at the lilacs and the apple tree and decided she wanted to start gardening. She did not mention Moscow.

Ruth Stout, Ruthinka, Theodolinda Bonner, died at Poverty Hollow in 1980, at the age of ninety-six. She donated her body to Yale Medical School. Aside from the papers and letters she sent to Joseph Freeman and John McAleer, her brother’s biographer, her unpublished writings have all disappeared: she threw them on the garden.

A neighbor of mine gave me a copy of “Gardening Without Work” a few years back. He’d found it in his attic. It’s from 1961. I reread it every year. “It is October, and I trust your garden looks terrible, with dead vines, corn stalks, clumsy cabbage roots—refuse—all over it,” Stout writes. “And I do hope you will leave everything there, and add the kitchen garbage to it through the winter.” Winter comes, then January, February. My garden looks like a trash heap. March arrives. “A crocus opens its eyes. A redwing calls. You love winter, you really do, but this is something quite different.” Does anyone know a farmer willing to part with a few bales of spoiled hay? ♦

By Benjamin Wallace-Wells  
By Alexandra Schwartz  
By Adam Gopnik  
By Fintan O’Toole  
By Anthony Lane  
By Rebecca Mead  
By Gideon Lewis-Kraus  
By Joshua Rothman  
By Jennifer Wilson  
By Anahid Nersessian  
By Alice Gregory  
By Nathan Heller

[Profiles](#)

# What Will Jonathan Anderson Transform Next?

The Irish designer turned Loewe into fashion's most coveted brand by radically reinterpreting classic garments. Now he seems poised to make over Dior.

By [Rebecca Mead](#)



*At Loewe, Anderson has made garments of surreal potency, contrived to go viral. This dress features 3-D-printed "balloons." Photographs by Nwaka Okparaeko for The New Yorker*

In one of the grandest galleries of the Museo del Prado, in Madrid, two large canvases are displayed alongside each other—an “Adam and Eve” painted by Titian, around 1550, and another rendering of the subject by Peter Paul Rubens, made eight decades later. In both, a shaggy-haired Adam, seated on the left, extends an arm in a futile attempt to prevent an intoxicated-looking Eve from plucking a shiny apple from the Tree of Knowledge, in which a serpentlike creature lurks. The sizes of the images, the placement of the figures, and even the color palettes are close enough to make the works initially indistinguishable. But more careful scrutiny reveals that Rubens made deft alterations to Titian’s composition. Titian’s Adam leans backward on his right arm; his left hand, which rests limply on Eve’s upper breast, appears hardly capable of stopping her. In Rubens’s version, Adam leans

strenuously forward, his midsection torqued in a desperate effort to divert Eve's glazed eyes from temptation. Rubens reproduced many of Titian's paintings, but Miguel Falomir Faus, the director of the Prado, has written that "Adam and Eve" is the only one that improves on the original.

"It's ultimately about admiration, I think," the fashion designer Jonathan Anderson said last December, stopping before the paired scenes during a visit to the museum. "You're seeing someone learning from the master. In fashion, we always look at the idea of reinterpreting something as being sometimes negative, but we have been doing it in art since time immemorial. Ultimately, it is about the passing on of information or learning from depiction. So, actually, there's something really contemporary in the idea of these two paintings sitting side by side in one of the greatest collections of art in the world." Last year, Anderson received an honorary doctorate from University for the Creative Arts, in London, and in an address to the students he offered a similar message: "Authenticity is invaluable. Originality is nonexistent. Steal, adapt, borrow. It doesn't matter where one takes things from. It's where one takes them to. Devour old films, new films, history books, paintings, photographs, poems, dreams, whatever. Only steal from things that speak directly to you. If you do this, your work will be authentic." He also noted, "This speech contains a lot of theft"—a sly way of acknowledging that his "steal, adapt, borrow" riff was on loan from the director [Jim Jarmusch](#).

Anderson, who was born in 1984 in Northern Ireland, had never visited the Prado until 2013, when he was appointed the creative director of Loewe, a Spanish company established more than a century ago as a leather-goods concern. Under his stewardship, Loewe, which is owned by the behemoth fashion conglomerate L.V.M.H., has become both a darling among critics and a commercial dynamo: filings submitted to the government in Madrid indicated that the brand had posted a profit of more than two hundred million euros in 2023, a sixty-per-cent increase over the previous year. When my initial meeting in Madrid with Anderson, scheduled for several days earlier, was suddenly but apologetically postponed—his team informed me that he needed to be in London on a day that, I knew, coincided with the glitzy Fashion Awards—I should have run straight to the bookies. Anderson was named Designer of the Year for the second time in a row, for his work both at Loewe and at JW Anderson, his eponymous London-based brand.

With his multifarious commitments, Anderson has a schedule that is constantly subject to revision, and meetings with him are liable to be converted from one thing into another with next to no notice. This was why we were conducting our conversation not over coffee in a hotel lobby, as originally planned, but at the Prado, which I'd intended to visit alone before being told by his P.R. people that he would be joining me. Arriving a few minutes before Anderson, I watched him be escorted to the head of a security queue, with half a dozen harried-looking associates trailing behind. It was ten in the morning, and he had precisely ninety minutes to spend at the museum before he needed to head to the airport for a flight to Lisbon, where a Loewe ad campaign was to be shot.

Meeting him at the Prado made good sense, though. Anderson is a serious collector of ceramics and paintings, and he is also a patron of the arts: he inaugurated the now annual Loewe Craft Prize and is on the board of the Victoria & Albert Museum, in London. I welcomed the opportunity to see the Spanish monarchy's art collection through his eyes, even if it meant scurrying at his elbow through crowded galleries filled with Madrileños at the outset of a holiday weekend; Spanish museumgoers regarded with half recognition the tall, boyishly handsome Irishman striding swiftly through their midst, discoursing intensely and confidently about art history. A docent provided by the Prado hovered discreetly behind us, to steer us efficiently in the direction of works Anderson asked to look at ("Let's do Van Dyck," "Do you have any Canalettes?"), like a personal shopper handling a very important client at a high-end boutique.

The paintings by Titian and Rubens had arrested Anderson's attention the very first time that he'd seen them, he explained. In realizing one's own vision, he continued, an artist is in the position of Rubens: taking in the œuvre of an accomplished precursor, studying and emulating another's technique before daring to create something new himself. "If you are learning from a master or from a great work, ultimately your job is to find a new narrative in it," Anderson said. "It's, like, the jean will always be the jean. You have to find a new way to represent the jean." In recent Loewe collections, Anderson has repeatedly accomplished this feat. He has swagged the fabric around the front pockets of a pair of bluejeans so that the pants billow across the thigh almost the way the skirt of an heiress painted by Gainsborough does. Anderson has also wrapped denim into an

asymmetrical form so that the fabric drapes diagonally from one jutting hip, falling as fluidly as an elegant gown painted by John Singer Sargent.

Contemporary society, Anderson said, now often fails to see the value of connoisseurship, and it fails to sufficiently appreciate the past. “It’s about *learning* from it,” he told me. “As much as Titian and Rubens were superstars of painting, ultimately, in this period, this would have been seen as a craft. You were not Francis Bacon—you were employed as a craftsman for Philip II.”



*"I said, 'Your approval means nothing to me,' not 'Stop giving me your approval'!"*  
Cartoon by Emily Bernstein

The patronage of monarchs is evident everywhere on the walls of the Prado. “It’s about power and regalia,” Anderson said, as we walked among halls displaying the works of Diego Velázquez and [Francisco Goya](#), along with other court painters such as Juan Bautista Martínez del Mazo, who, in 1665, portrayed the fourteen-year-old Infanta Margarita Teresa, of Austria, in a silver-and-peach silk dress with a pannier skirt almost as wide as she was tall. “I’m obsessed with the structures underneath clothing—the understructure of these garments is *insane*,” Anderson said. “You’re going to find boning”—most frequently, whalebone. “You’re going to find layers and layers of fabric and wadding. It was incredibly heavy. You’re not going very far in *this*.” In Loewe’s latest runway show, presented in September, in Paris, he featured his own series of structured, wide-hipped dresses, though his

versions had drastically abbreviated, buttocks-skimming skirts, permitting considerably more movement. In lieu of whalebone, he'd layered long, floaty floral-print gowns over stiffened petticoats, combining volume with a summery translucence.

In a gallery of medieval religious art, we stopped in front of "The Descent from the Cross," painted in the mid-fourteen-hundreds by the Dutch master Rogier van der Weyden. The complex composition shows the anguished Mary collapsing in folded blue robes before the deposed body of Christ. "I think this is one of the most amazing depictions of fabric," Anderson said, noting the narrow gray trim on Mary's sleeves, from beneath which poked what looked like a fitted, long-sleeved undershirt in a matching ultramarine. It was tempting, if possibly sacrilegious, to compare the effect to that of an illusory double cuff, created through inventive stitching, on a merino-alpaca sweater in one of JW Anderson's recent collections. Anderson said, of the painting, "It's the beginning of the depiction of humanity. You get this idea of clothing and the power of clothing. And you see, as you go through history, clothing ultimately dictates how we see ourselves."

In the context of hundreds of paintings rendering sumptuous fabrics, the paired canvases by Titian and Rubens of the Garden of Eden were especially suggestive: each artist had captured the very last moment when clothing was unnecessary. Before Eve bit into the forbidden fruit, nobody had ever felt obliged to fuss about fashion. "It is, ultimately, the dream," Anderson said, as we regarded Adam and Eve, their genitals obscured by a few strategically placed leaves. "It's before any form of consumerism. Somehow, it's, like, this is where we did not need it, until we decided we were *not* going to do what we were told. Maybe deep down there is an odd fantasy—would it just be better to be naked somehow?"

My trip to Madrid, with its whistle-stop tour of the Prado, was the first, but far from the last, time that I was asked by a professionally regretful member of Anderson's team to accommodate the demands of his ever-evolving calendar. There was also the fitting I was supposed to observe in Madrid, eliminated just after I'd flown into the capital, because Anderson had to attend an L.V.M.H. corporate event. (A gorgeous bouquet from Loewe, sent to my hotel room, was at least some consolation.) A last-minute invitation to a promotional event in Paris, where Anderson lives part of the time, for the

publication of a book celebrating his decade-long tenure at Loewe, came with a warning that, though I was of course welcome to attend, Anderson would be far too busy signing books to speak to me. (More lovely flowers were sent to my hotel room.) At the party, which took place at Loewe's Avenue Montaigne store, I received a complimentary copy of the limited-edition book, large enough to fill my roller suitcase on its own. When I reached the head of the book-signing queue, Anderson inscribed the lavish volume with "Lots of love, Jonathan." There was the meeting in London, where Anderson lives the rest of the time, that was confidently scheduled and then indefinitely postponed but never definitively cancelled. The prospect of it hovered tantalizingly out of reach for weeks, in a way that somehow made me think of Anderson's Fall/Winter 2023 collection for Loewe, in which he offered A-line silk dresses printed with blurred trompe-l'oeil images of other, vintage dresses, one gown superimposed on another in a clever but slippery gesture. In the course of several months, it began to feel almost as if Anderson himself were a grand monarch of the Hapsburg Court—like one of Velázquez's aristocrats, whose supercilious visage sneers down from the walls of the Prado—while I was a humble supplicant at the palace gates.

There was some explanation for his elusiveness, quite apart from the everyday hauteur of the fashion industry. For much of last year, it was rumored that Anderson was heading for the exit at Loewe, and that he was soon to be appointed the creative director at Dior, another house owned by L.V.M.H. This was the topic of gossip at the Spring/Summer 2025 runway shows in Paris in September, when Loewe lured throngs of fashion followers to the Château de Vincennes, a medieval fortress on the outskirts of the city, for a collection in which Anderson displayed his gowns with the voluminous petticoats. (Another witty creation was a khaki trenchcoat that, thanks to hidden wires in the hem, splayed open at the bottom, as if a strong wind were blowing.) The Paris collection was not just a show but a scene: outside, hundreds of live-streaming onlookers, many dressed in the previous season's Loewe, bayed at the arrival of V.I.P. guests. These included Jeff Goldblum, deeply tanned and grinning in a leather jacket and taupe pants; he prowled around with slow-motion, photograph-me movements before sitting next to Anna Wintour inside a vast all-white structure that had been erected in a courtyard. Daniel Craig and Rachel Weisz received similar adulation as they emerged from a town car and entered the fortress gates, both dressed in

fuzzy Loewe sweaters. Craig had met Anderson while filming “Queer,” [Luca Guadagnino’s](#) recent adaptation of the William S. Burroughs novella, for which the designer created the costumes; afterward, the actor modelled for a Loewe campaign, posing gamely in patterned sweaters and belted but unbuckled jeans. (Craig told me later, “Jonathan loves the creative world, and the fingers of what he does in his own world go everywhere. He’s not just one thing, Jonathan—he’s many, many things.”)

During our tour around the Prado, Anderson had declined to address the rumors of his departure. “At the moment, I’m very happy—next week, I may not be,” he said, adding that he intended to stay at Loewe “as long as they want me there,” an evasive formulation that did not exclude the possibility that L.V.M.H. might soon want him elsewhere. As the weeks rolled by, talk of Anderson’s future continued: “There are rumors flying, and we wait with bated breath to see,” Caroline Rush, the departing head of the British Fashion Council, the organization that gives out the annual Fashion Awards, told me in December. As the year drew to a close, it emerged that neither JW Anderson nor Loewe would be taking part in the men’s shows during January’s fashion weeks in Milan and Paris—which could indicate that Anderson simply wanted a creative break but could also indicate that a move was imminent. The pieces seemed to be falling into place when, in late January, it was announced that Kim Jones, the artistic director of Dior Men, was stepping down—with the snag being that Maria Grazia Chiuri, the creative director of women’s clothes at Dior, was still in place, with shows scheduled through May. Nonetheless, Lauren Sherman, the fashion reporter at *Puck*, characterized it as an “open secret” that Anderson would be confirmed as the over-all designer for Dior. In early March, when the anticipated appointment had still not been announced, Sherman published a story saying that Anderson’s brief would be to increase Dior’s annual revenues from an estimated ten billion euros to fourteen. Other publications have reported that Anderson has been at the company’s headquarters, on Avenue Montaigne, in Paris, and has already started developing collections. (“We do not comment on speculation,” a publicist for Loewe maintained.)

Last week, while other designers were showing their latest collections on runways in Paris, Loewe staged a static exhibition at the Pozzo di Borgo—a grand mansion, in the Seventh Arrondissement, formerly owned by Karl Lagerfeld—with clothes displayed on dressmakers’ dummies and with bags

atop plinths. The collection, which included gowns crafted from massed loops of beaded organza that resembled spaghetti and oversized leather waders paired with tailored suits, was described in accompanying notes as “*a scrapbook of ideas . . . to be preserved as memories or to serve as an inspiration.*” Anderson, who was not in evidence at the show, had the previous day posted to his personal Instagram a short video that looked very much like a highlight reel of his tenure at Loewe; many commenters interpreted this as the designer’s public farewell to the brand. On March 17th, he released a statement, on Instagram, announcing his departure from Loewe. The Dior situation remained unconfirmed.

A long line of designers, including Raf Simons and John Galliano, have sought to put their own stamp on the illustrious house, which was founded, in 1946, by [Christian Dior](#). His début collection of full-skirted, sculptural dresses—designated the New Look—has become so canonical that it’s easy to forget that the gowns’ material extravagance initially generated outrage from a public accustomed to wartime parsimony. Dior, like Anderson, admired visual artists: in the twenties, he was the co-owner of a gallery that showed work by [Picasso](#), Man Ray, and [Salvador Dalí](#). He was also a canny businessman, establishing outposts in dozens of countries and selling neckties and jewelry in addition to women’s wear.



“Cheer up. Burglary is the highest form of flattery.”  
Cartoon by Sofia Warren

Similarly, Anderson leans toward the intellectual while also being fiendishly commercial. His Fall/Winter 2024 Loewe collection offered a cashmere sweater that exploded just below the rib cage into a flurry of pilling, as if exposing a furry underside to the flat knit. It also included what Sarah Mower, of *Vogue*, characterized as his “never forgetting of the über-ordinary wearable item,” such as a shearling aviator jacket with overlong sleeves, fastened with a zipper and a row of white buttons with perfect white buttonholes. (The jacket’s price, it should be noted, wasn’t über-ordinary: just under seven thousand dollars.) Loewe’s Puzzle bag, which Anderson introduced in his first collection, and which is made from soft leather cut into patchwork pieces and then stitched back together at rakish angles, is a choice non-blingy brag. His emphasis on bridging fashion and craft, and bringing them both under the umbrella of art, makes the wearers of his creations feel as if they were doing something more cerebral and aesthetically elevated than merely consuming luxury goods.

From his earliest collections at JW Anderson, which started as a menswear line, in 2008, up to and including his most recent styles for Loewe, Anderson’s designs have appealed to consumers with a taste for the teasingly comical. In his first womenswear collections for JW Anderson, in 2011, he presented a paisley pajama suit fitted with a white latex clerical collar as daywear, as well as hefty hiking boots festooned with wisps of fur, like Muppet mustaches. Not long afterward, he produced a menswear collection that featured “ruffle shorts,” which were embellished around the thigh with flounces, in a transgression of normative gender boundaries that, a dozen years ago, gave people a genuine jolt. His early creations were “very honest and crafty and fun and exciting and impulsive,” Harry Lambert, a well-known London stylist, told me. Recently, Anderson collaborated with Pleasing—a brand, launched by Harry Styles, for which Lambert is a creative director. Styles is frequently captured by paparazzi wearing Anderson’s designs, such as a navy bomber jacket filled with enough puffer insulation to create an inflated silhouette. In early 2020, the singer was photographed wearing a JW Anderson patchwork cardigan in Lego colors. Replicating the chunky wool garment became a lockdown fad among home knitters, to the point that Anderson released the design as a not-for-the-fainthearted pattern.



A JW Anderson hoodie and shorts made with Plasticine, a kind of modelling clay.

Instead of sketching on paper, Anderson designs by draping on the body, and his innovations regularly concern form—experimenting with the structure of a pair of pants or a jacket, giving disconcerting new uses to familiar fabrics. On the runway, he sometimes shows garments whose wearability is beside the point. In 2023, JW Anderson released a series of hoodies and shorts molded from Plasticine, a British modelling clay common to children’s crafts and to stop-motion animation. The results were suggestive but silly—streetwear for [Wallace and Gromit](#). As Anderson explained at the time, he was inspired by how every generation of teens puts its own inventive spin on the classic high-school wardrobe—literally remodelling the basic look.

Although Anderson’s creations tend to be sculptural, he has a particular genius for understanding how three dimensions will translate into two—as an image on the printed page of a high-end culture magazine, or blown up on a billboard, or, most important of all, on the infinite scroll of social media. “Weirdly, I adore the flat thing,” Anderson told me. “I adore the final image. Fashion is ultimately about trying to sell something through the image, and through desire.” His fascination with the still image, and with the way digital technology mediates desire, can translate into garments of surreal potency, contrived to go viral. For Spring/Summer 2023, he showcased a capsule collection of “pixel” garments in which hoodies, jackets, and pants were ingeniously fabricated to resemble a glitched 8-bit

image from a video game: seen online, the joke became a meta-joke. Among those who actually wore a pixel hoodie was Marc Jacobs, the veteran designer, who dressed in one for his sixtieth-birthday party—a tribute from one master marketer to another.

Anderson prefers to characterize Loewe as a cultural brand rather than a luxury one, finding the latter term despoiled. “The luxury brand became as mass as the mass brand,” he told me. Instead, he argues, a fashion house like Loewe should offer its followers a form of aesthetic aspiration, and also a form of education, in part by introducing them to living and historical artists and to designers whose work they otherwise might not encounter. “Yes, luxury is élitist, and, yes, luxury is at arm’s length,” he said, at the Prado. “At the same time, I think you can look at luxury the same way as we look at *that* painting. We can still get enjoyment from it and have an emotional reaction to it, even though I cannot buy it.” Loewe boutiques now display works of art from the Loewe Foundation, in accordance with Anderson’s taste and with the guidance of Andrew Bonacina, an independent curator whom Anderson has been close to for years. In Loewe’s flagship store, in Madrid, a colorful abstract aquatint by Howard Hodgkin, more than twenty feet in length, hangs opposite the main entrance. Elsewhere in the store, a selection of fragile white ceramics by Edmund de Waal, which are not for sale, sit in cases above a shelf of the brand’s signature bags—the Puzzle, the Squeeze, the Flamenco—which most certainly are. For admirers of Anderson’s taste who cannot afford a pair of baggy leather pants that flow with otherworldly softness, like parachute silk, and cost about five thousand dollars, there is JW Anderson’s collaboration during the past eight years with Uniqlo—his own preferred brand for day-to-day dressing, along with Levi’s jeans. This fall, the Japanese company sold JW Anderson-branded “curved” pants for about fifty dollars, featuring a silhouette that, at first glance, has only a Titian/Rubens difference to that of JW Anderson’s “twisted” jeans, which, with their cunningly skewed seams, bestow on even the most perfectly proportioned body fashionably bandy legs.

Anderson is the second son of a celebrated athlete: his father, Willie Anderson, played rugby for the All-Ireland team in the eighties and served as a coach to the national team after his retirement from the field. In Ireland, Willie is legendary not only for his prowess with the ball but for an occasion, in 1989, when he captained the team in a match against the All

Blacks, from New Zealand. Before the starting whistle, the New Zealand players performed a traditional pre-game haka, a Māori dance. Willie linked arms with his fellow-players and faced down the opposing captain, glowering at the antipodeans in headbands and teeny-tiny shorts. I asked Anderson whether he thought that his father's profession had influenced his own understanding of masculinity. He replied, "In a weird way, rugby is *so* masculine that it becomes camp. It's *so* exaggerated." Of the recurring presence of shorts on his runways, he explained, "I love legs on people—there's an interesting type of elongation or physicality. Length can mean so many different things in clothing. And shorts on a man is a way you can have something that is incredibly masculine and incredibly feminine at the same time. It just depends on what context you build."

The context in which Anderson grew up was provincial and conservative. His home town, Magherafelt, lies more or less in the middle of Northern Ireland, surrounded by farmland. His paternal grandfather was a farmer, and as a boy Anderson spent much of his time among sheep and chickens. "I am glad I was brought up in Ireland, because I don't think I would be who I am today without the idea of being on an island," he told me. "The window is small, so everything outside looks big. The big world looks bigger." During Anderson's childhood, the region was still riven with sectarian hostility and violence. His family was Protestant, and as a sportsman Willie participated in one of the few areas of cultural life where the distinction between the North and the South was officially erased. (Even at the height of the Troubles, Ireland's professional sports teams included players from both sides of the border.) Nevertheless, the civil strife was impossible to ignore. "In several moments of my life, the conflict came close," Anderson said. "I went to school one day and the entire street was blown away. There were people being kneecapped. Someone would come in and have their head blown off in a bar." In 1998, Anderson's mother, Heather, a schoolteacher, was on a shopping trip in the town of Omagh and only narrowly avoided being caught up in a devastating explosion from a car bomb. It was the worst single attack of the decades-long conflict. Twenty-nine people, Catholic and Protestant alike, were killed, and more than two hundred were wounded.



"We have too few treasure maps and far too many org charts."  
Cartoon by Paul Noth

Anderson's family was more unconventional than many of their neighbors'; during his teen-age years his parents bought a holiday home on the Spanish island of Ibiza, where Anderson was introduced to a southern European culture of late nights and physical freedom, along with abundant sunshine. (Anderson told me that the typically cloudy skies of Ireland—"a country which has a lower horizon of light"—still shape how he puts colors together. He also noted that the mid-gray tones of his native climate look great in photographs.) His interest in the visual arts was cultivated especially by his maternal grandfather, who was an executive at a textile company and was, Anderson said, "obsessed by art." His grandfather took him to museums in Belfast and Dublin; he also collected antique clocks. "The best he could afford," Anderson explained. "He would also try to get the best one and then upgrade it to the next best one." Anderson's grandfather lived long enough to attend Loewe's Spring/Summer 2020 show, in Paris, at which Anderson presented a series of transparent, structured lace dresses that evoked the crinolines worn by seventeenth-century Spanish nobility. "He found it completely mesmerizing and *very* confusing," Anderson told me.

Anderson has inherited not only his grandfather's appreciation for art but also his connoisseurship and targeted acquisitiveness. Visits to auction-house websites have become a "very dangerous" habit, he acknowledged. Thomas

Dane, a contemporary gallerist in London, from whom Anderson has bought a number of works, said, of Anderson, “He’s one of the most interesting collectors today—his range of interest is extraordinary.” Among the artists Anderson collects are Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, the French Vorticist sculptor and painter, who died in combat during the First World War, at the age of twenty-three; [Lynda Benglis](#), the contemporary American artist celebrated for her sculptures of poured latex and wax; and Anthea Hamilton, the British sculptor known for surreal installations containing giant versions of ordinary objects, such as butterflies. Anderson is adept at merging his enthusiasm for contemporary art with his creative production. Benglis has made a jewelry line for Loewe, and the cover of Anderson’s ten-year Loewe retrospective highlights not one of his own designs but a work of Hamilton’s—a vastly oversized pumpkin fashioned from leather and shot for the Loewe Fall/Winter 2022 campaign.

In 2017, Anderson tried his hand as a curator, putting together a show, “Disobedient Bodies,” at the Hepworth Wakefield, in West Yorkshire. He has since overseen several other museum and gallery shows. At the Hepworth, he juxtaposed sculptures by Louise Bourgeois and Sarah Lucas, among others, with fashion pieces by [Jean Paul Gaultier](#) and Comme des Garçons’ [Rei Kawakubo](#), as well as a handful of his own designs. Andrew Bonacina, who was then the head curator at the Hepworth, had invited Anderson to do the show. Bonacina recalled to me, “Jonathan came to the exhibition with such a reverence and excitement for the artists he wanted to include that, at the very start of the process, I sensed he had a resistance to bringing in fashion. Maybe it was that working in the industry meant it didn’t hold for him any of the mystery or magic he admires in what artists make.” In the course of developing the show, Bonacina went on, Anderson began to understand anew how a garment can be a form of sculptural expression: “I think he discovered some form of kinship with how artists think and make and was able to appreciate how equally radical fashion can be.”



A translucent Loewe dress in which silk has been layered over a stiffened petticoat.

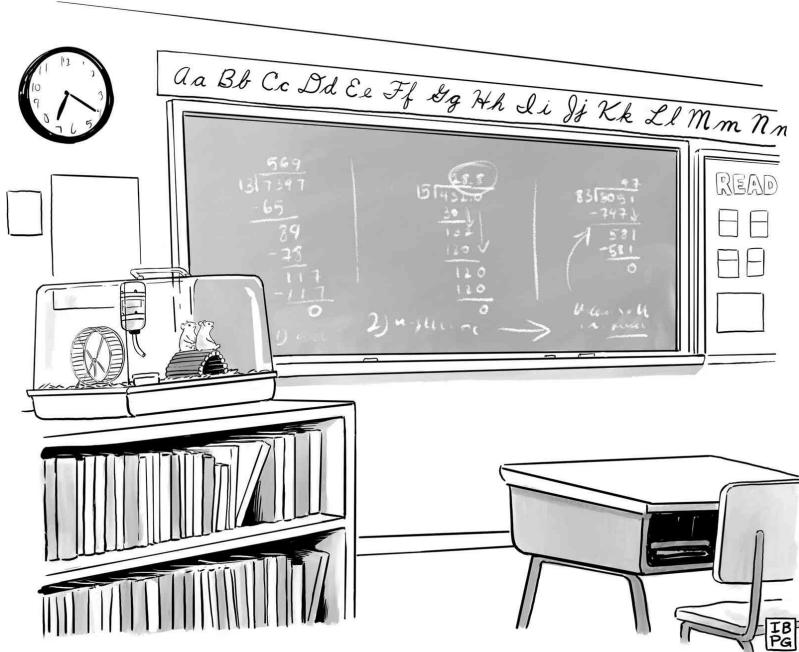
Anderson, who is dyslexic, did not have the patience or the attention span for traditional academics, and his earliest arena for artistic expression was in drama. As a teen-ager, he joined the National Youth Music Theatre, which staged musical adaptations of such works as “*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.” “I was Additional Fairy Number Whatever,” he told me. At nineteen, he enrolled at the Studio Theatre Acting Conservatory, in Washington, D.C., where, for the first time, he lived away from home, in the basement of friends of his parents. The experience of being in a fresh environment was thrilling. “You are an Irish person in America, where everyone loves Irish people,” he said. “I didn’t have any landmarks. I didn’t know anyone. I didn’t know who *I* was. You’re meeting people at face value, and you don’t know what school they went to, and you don’t know the neighbor next door.” At home, Anderson had been an assertive teetotaller, a nonsmoker, and in the closet about his sexuality. “I was probably not the most fun person as a child, and I think that was all to contain everything,” he said. “When I went to Washington, I understood my attraction to men.” (These days, Anderson’s boyfriend is Pol Anglada, a Catalan artist whose queer imagery sometimes ends up on JW Anderson designs.) Anderson took up drinking and smoking, too: “‘*Boogie Nights*’ was on in the cinema, and I chain-smoked a pack of cigarettes through it.”

It also didn't take long for Anderson to grasp that acting was not his métier. "I started not to enjoy it," he said. "I realized that I could not escape my own self." He returned to Ireland and worked for a department store in Dublin for a while, immersing himself in menswear merchandising and, eventually, applying to art school to study fashion. He was disappointed to be turned down by Central Saint Martins—the alma mater of Stella McCartney, [Alexander McQueen](#), and other ambitious British designers. Instead, he enrolled in a menswear course at London College of Fashion, graduating in 2005. Essential to Anderson's professional development were lessons he learned beyond the classroom—not only how to design clothes but also how to attract consumers. While a student, he got a part-time job as a visual merchandiser at Prada, working under Manuela Pavesi, a brilliant stylist who had been a friend and a colleague of Miuccia Prada's for years. Pavesi, who died of cancer in 2015, encouraged the young Anderson to start his own brand, which he did before the age of thirty. Anderson said, of Pavesi, "She had a precision of how to put looks together that I had never witnessed. In the beginning, you emulate, and as you gain confidence from that you start to become your own thing. Doing the windows for Prada was probably the best decision I ever made, because you are learning from something that you find as important as Rubens did Titian."

The demands on Anderson's time and creativity grant him little opportunity for hesitation. "He rarely second-guesses his gut instinct," Bonacina told me. Anderson certainly does not lack for confidence. When he arrived at Loewe, in 2013, he was so intent on trusting his instincts that he didn't even want to consult the house's archive, which contained objects and garments that had been saved and collected from more than a century of production. "But then I did look, and I thought, *Well, we'd better capitalize on it before someone else does,*" he said in 2015.

Loewe traces its roots to the mid-nineteenth century in Madrid; in 1872 the business, then a small workshop, was joined by Enrique Loewe Roessberg, a skilled German leather craftsman who eventually gave his name to the brand. (The company's name is pronounced "low-eh-veh," a verbal challenge to non-Spanish speakers which Anderson has turned to the brand's advantage; a viral short film, written by Dan Levy, spoofed a competitive spelling bee, with [Aubrey Plaza](#) starring as a number of contestants through the years, none of whom could get the order of the vowels right.) By the end

of the nineteenth century, the company had established a store on the Calle del Príncipe, and soon Loewe had become a supplier of leather goods to the royal house of Spain. Some of the oldest items in the Loewe archive, which occupies a climate-controlled warehouse outside Madrid, date to the nineteen-twenties: a box, shaped like an oversized clamshell, designed to contain several starched collars; a palm-size case containing three glass bottles that would not accord with contemporary carry-on regulations. Marta González de la Rubia, an archivist at Loewe who gave me a tour of the facility, told me that in the company's early decades the retention of samples had been haphazard, and that this was especially true with the company's packaging. One treasure, on display on a metal shelf, was a cream-colored box marked with the Loewe name, accidentally preserved from the early twenties. On the shelf above, a contemporary shopping bag from a Loewe store was being kept for posterity. "For us, it's technically an historical object, even if it's just a paper bag," González de la Rubia said. (Even if it's just a paper bag, it is hardly worthless; I saw a similar one being offered on the website Vinted with a price tag of ten dollars.)



*"I still don't know how to open this cage, but I think I finally understand long division."*  
Cartoon by Pia Guerra and Ian Boothby

Loewe first started offering garments, in addition to bags and other objects, in the forties, under José Pérez de Rozas, the artistic director who steered the company's image for about three decades, until the seventies. The archive

indicates that there was a collaboration with Dior in 1975 and that, in 1977, a young Giorgio Armani made some designs for the label. But there was little excitement about ready-to-wear, even after Narciso Rodriguez was appointed a design director, in 1997, a year after making Carolyn Bessette-Kennedy's wedding dress. If Loewe was not an entirely blank slate when Anderson arrived, there was plenty of scope for him to make it his own. His first collection, shown in Paris, in 2014, included shapes that would become signatures, such as slouchy pants with low-tied waists, and an abundant use of lightweight cotton and linen alongside the leather for which the house is best known. He explained that his plans for Loewe had been inspired by, among other sources, a 1997 photo shoot for *Vogue Italia* by Steven Meisel. It showed a handful of languid models on a beach—two of them, quaintly enough, reading books. (Here was another Titian-Rubens moment: the Meisel photographs are homages to paintings by Alex Katz.) “When I think of Spain, I think of being on a beach,” Anderson told *Women’s Wear Daily* at the time—an observation that the landlocked Madrileños working in the Loewe factory might have had some questions about, but which appealed to the young international consumer whom the brand would now target.

Although the company’s ready-to-wear operation moved to Paris under Anderson’s stewardship, the manufacturing of leather goods remains based in Madrid. The factory, which is on a light-industrial estate half an hour from the city center, employs hundreds of locals who are trained in specialized skills, including evaluating and cutting hides. (When a hide is draped over a trolley, for transport within the factory, the result looks like a donkey on wheels.) On a recent visit, I saw the complexity of a Puzzle bag’s manufacturing process. After the pieces of leather are cut into the correct shapes, they are sliced in half horizontally, glued with a layer of reinforcement on all but their outer edges, and then lined with suède, a process that allows the pieces to be thin enough along the edges to be stitched together without bulk but strong enough to withstand day-in, day-out use. A number of artisans were finishing up a batch of Flamenco bags, tying licorice-like tubes of black leather into paired knots. It was Anderson’s vaunted craftsmanship in action, but the work of the artisans was not entirely romantic. These employees, I was informed, can be stationed at this particular task for only two hours at a time before being rotated to another. Otherwise, they would develop repetitive strain injuries. The covetable object, and the desirable image, has its own hidden price.

Seven years through Anderson's tenure, Loewe, like every other fashion brand, was faced with the challenge of selling clothing and accessories during the pandemic, with stay-at-home mandates denting consumer spending. "It made me realize I could lose everything," Anderson told me. "If you were going to be in good shape after the pandemic, you had to be *very* good." For his first, much praised post-lockdown collection, Anderson drew inspiration from the Mannerist artist Jacopo da Pontormo, in particular his monumental, pastel-hued painting "Deposition from the Cross," from 1528. The collection included columnar dresses in dreamy, fuzzy shades of pale pink and blue and leggings with billowing openings at the knee, recalling the exposed legs of the bereft figures in the Pontormo. At the time, Anderson told *Vogue*, "If you're going to reset after this period, you need to allow a moment to birth a new aesthetic. Start again."

When we met in December at the Prado, starting again *again* was clearly on Anderson's mind, however little he was inclined, or at liberty, to speak about it. "I think I need to find a new way to break something," he said, as he walked restlessly from gallery to gallery. "I've built something—either I re-break it and rebuild it or someone else re-breaks and rebuilds it. I think I need to get outside of my comfort zone again and be challenged by aesthetics I'm not used to." He went on, "I'm at that point where I need re-stimulation or new things. I want to be into new paintings or to find something new. Because the one thing I do know is I will never turn off until I'm done." In the next year, he mused, he might change JW Anderson into a more conceptual enterprise. "When I started JW Anderson, I was kind of a bratty child who was, like, 'I'm going to be a fashion designer, and I'm going to do these things to get my name out,' which was the right thing to do," he said. "I am now forty, so now I am trying to work out what is a radical act with my own brand. In a weird way, I am trying to make it harder again." At a storied house such as Loewe, he told me, he sees himself as a guest, and so he might find some pleasure in allowing two fashion lines to "rebel against each other"—to present an idea at one brand's show, then "contradict it two weeks later at another show."

We entered the galleries devoted to Goya, who was both a court painter and a fierce social critic who used his art to document war and attack injustice. Anderson said, "I think what is interesting is that, in any creative form, if you're really good, you have to have multiple stages of a career. We live in a

society that gets bored with things within a week, so you have to be able to force yourself to reinvent yourself.” We soon found ourselves standing before Goya’s so-called Black Paintings, murals that the artist made late in life on the walls of a farmhouse outside Madrid that he retreated to in his seventies. The works are famously horrific. One depicts Saturn devouring his son—a wild-eyed, bedraggled figure gnawing on a raw, bloody arm of his offspring—and another, “Witches’ Sabbath,” shows a coven of hags congregating around the looming figure of a billy goat, their mouths agape. The darkness of these paintings has been attributed to Goya’s disillusionment after two decades of war, famine, and political upheaval in Spain. “You realize that sometimes the radical act—or the political or social act—can trigger something new,” Anderson said. “Francis Bacon would not exist without this. You cannot get [Lucian Freud](#) without this. Because you realize, through very limited brushstrokes in the faces, how someone is feeling.”

Anderson spoke with passion and urgency—with the investment of a fellow-artist, not merely the appreciation of a consumer. His identification with Goya’s aesthetic evolution was so apparent that I asked him if he ever painted. It was the only time during our walk through the museum that he seemed anything other than entirely sure of himself. “Do I? Do I paint? Not really,” he said, with a sigh. “I *have* painted.” He appeared suddenly self-conscious, as if he had been caught naked, like Adam after the Fall. “I think I would prefer to rearrange a room and paint the room than to paint a landscape—that doesn’t excite me,” he said, quickly trying to reframe the question. “I’d change the color of the walls in my house every couple of weeks if I could. When I am at home, I like to change things around a lot, because I get bored.”

I suggested that Anderson sounded reluctant to consider his own art in parallel with that of the fine artists he so admires. “I would love to be able to paint,” he allowed. “I would love to be known as a great painter. You can focus yourself on doing twelve masterpieces, and that will define your career. Fashion is a little harder than that. It’s a continual act. You have to make, in a weird way, so much output to kind of get the really good output, because we live in a consumer heaven, ultimately, or Hell.”

He went on, “At the moment, what I’ve done at Loewe—what I try to do with my brand, and what I would want to continue in my career doing—is try to understand: Why do we make things, and why do we have the desire to want them, even if we don’t buy them?” No longer the student, Anderson had become the master. “You realize you’re no longer eighteen designing something—you’re an adult. You’re not looking up to people anymore. You have to go off, in a weird way, like Rubens and make your own language,” he said. “You have to be at one with the idea that you are replaceable, and that is good. The great thing about fashion is that we all go out of fashion.” ♦



A 2015 Loewe half-cape silk dress with red airbrush squares. Harry Lambert, a London stylist, describes Anderson’s early designs as “crafty,” “fun,” and “impulsive.” Styling by Judit Melis; Set design by Jade Adeyemi; Hair by Yummy Chan; Makeup by Yulya Zalesskaya; Production by Day International; Retouching by INK Studio

*This article has been updated with Jonathan Anderson’s announcement of his departure from Loewe.*

By Nathan Heller  
By Amanda Petrusich  
By Rebecca Mead  
By Jennifer Wilson  
By Julian Lucas  
By Carrie Battan  
By Nathan Heller  
By Stephanía Taladrí  
By Alex Scordelis  
By Zach Helfand  
By Namwali Serpell

## The Political Scene

# The Battle for the Bros

Young men have gone *MAGA*. Can the left win them back?

By [Andrew Marantz](#)



"The Democrats are smug and condescending, and everything they say sounds fake as shit," Hasan Piker, a leftist streamer, said. Illustration by Nick Little

By the time I landed at LAX and switched my phone out of airplane mode, Hasan Piker had been streaming for three hours. I put in an earbud and watched as I filed off the plane. Visible behind him were walls of framed fan art, a cardboard cutout of [Bernie Sanders](#) sitting in the cold, and Piker's huge puppy, Kaya, taking a nap. Piker had already shown off his "cozy-ass 'fit" (sweatpants with kitschy bald eagles, a custom pair of platform Crocs), and recounted his experience the previous night at the Streamer Awards, a red-carpet event honoring A-listers on [Twitch](#)—the popular live-streaming site where he is one of the biggest stars, and the only prominent leftist. He'd begun the day's broadcast by rattling off a standard opening monologue: "Folks, we're live and alive, and I hope all the boys, girls, and enbies"—nonbinary people—"are having a fantastic one." To anyone listening for shibboleths, this would have pigeonholed him as a progressive. Also within view, though, were three towers of [Zyn](#) cannisters, and a "Make America Great Again" hat, which he sometimes wears ironically. He has the patter of a Rutgers frat bro and the laid-back charisma of a Miami club promoter,

both of which he was, briefly, in his early twenties. Now he's thirty-three—so old, in streamer years, that his fans call him “unc.”

I ordered a [Lyft](#), then flipped back to Piker’s stream. By then, he was talking about the overthrow of the [Assad regime](#) in [Syria](#), which had happened overnight. I watched as he cycled from [BBC](#) footage to Wikipedia, pausing every few seconds to add a diatribe or a joke. The angle he was developing was that Western journalists seemed too eager to portray the leader of the Syrian rebel forces in a heroic light. “I’m very skeptical of the fucking former [Al Qaeda](#) guy,” Piker said. A little while later, his doorbell rang, and he leaned over to buzz in a guest—me. I looked up from my phone to see him standing in his doorway. He doesn’t run ad breaks, so whenever he needs to do something off-camera, like answer the door or use the bathroom, he plays a video and attends to his business quickly, before his viewers can get bored. “I’m live right now, but we can talk when I’m done,” he told me, already walking away. “Try and stay out of the shot.”

In [last year’s Presidential election](#), Democrats lost support with nearly every kind of voter: rich, poor, white, Black, Asian American, Hispanic. But the defection that alarmed Party strategists the most was that of young voters, especially young men, a group that [Donald Trump](#) lost by fifteen points in 2020 and won by fourteen points in 2024—a nearly thirty-point swing. “The only cohort of men that Biden won in 2020 was eighteen-to-twenty-nine-year-olds,” John Della Volpe, the polling director at Harvard’s Institute of Politics and a former adviser to [Biden’s Presidential campaign](#), told me. “That was the one cohort they had to hold on to, and they let it go.”

Candidates matter; so does the national mood, and the price of groceries. Yet some Monday-morning quarterbacks also noted that, just as 1960 was the first TV election and 2016 was the first social-media election, the 2024 Presidential campaign was the first to be conducted largely on live streams and long-form podcasts, media that happen to be thoroughly dominated by *MAGA* bros. The biggest of them all, Joe Rogan, spent the final weeks of the campaign giving many hours of fawning airtime to Trump—and to his running mate, [J. D. Vance](#), and his key allies, such as [Elon Musk](#)—before endorsing Trump on the eve of the election. “At no point was I, like, ‘Only I, a dickhead on the internet, am qualified to teach these kids why we need a functioning welfare state,’ ” Piker told me. “I just felt like no one else was

really in these spaces trying to explain these things. Certainly not the Democrats.”

Piker has almost three million Twitch followers, and, as with most guys who talk into microphones on the internet, his audience skews young, male, and disaffected. At the peak of his Election Night stream in November, he had more than three hundred thousand viewers. He broadcasts seven days a week, eight to ten hours a day, usually from his house in West Hollywood, and he doesn’t use visual pyrotechnics to hold his viewers’ attention. Most of the time, what you see on his stream is an overlay of three things: a fixed shot of Piker sitting at his desk; a screen share of whatever he’s looking at on his computer; and his chat, where fans supply pertinent links, caps-lock shit talk, and puppy emojis, all surging in real time up the right side of the screen.

Although Piker hates Trump, he’s hardly a loyal Democrat. At bottom, he’s an old-school hard leftist, not a liberal. (On his bedside table he has some protein Pop-Tart knock-offs and a copy of “[The Communist Manifesto](#).”) Many of his opinions—for example, that the “American empire” has been a destructive force, on the whole—would surely be off-putting to the median voter. But he is just one of many independent media creators with an anti-Trump message—in recent weeks, the political-podcast charts have included “The Bulwark,” “This Is Gavin Newsom,” and even a show called “Raging Moderates.” For a couple of weeks last month, a liberal show called “The MeidasTouch Podcast” beat out “The Joe Rogan Experience” for the No. 1 spot. “Corporate media, too often, has a both-sides perspective,” Ben Meiselas, one of the “MeidasTouch” co-hosts, told me. “We do not mince words about the threat to workers, the threat to democracy.”

One piece of fan art on Piker’s wall is a cartoon of him operating a day-care center, shielding a roomful of lost boys from the malign chaos of the open internet. “You gravitate to him because he’s just a voice you find relatable,” Piker’s producer, who goes by Marche, told me. “A lot of people don’t even put a political label on it, at least at first.” Piker gets up early every morning to work out, posting his daily stats so that his fans—his “community”—can follow along from home. He gives dating advice and motivational speeches. At a moment when there seems to be an ever-shortening algorithmic pipeline from bench-pressing tips to misogynist rage, Piker tries to model a more

capacious form of masculinity: a straight guy, six feet four and movie-star handsome, who's as comfortable wearing camo to a gun range as he is walking a red carpet in split-toe Margiela boots. Once viewers have come to trust him, they may be more open to his riffs on the rights of the poor or of trans people—delivered not as a primer on [Judith Butler](#) but in the register of “Bro, don’t be a dick.”

I pulled up a chair, just out of frame. Kaya ambled toward me, vetting my scent. Piker talked, almost without interruption, for four more hours, holding forth about recent internet drama, a documentary about the history of [NATO](#), and the UnitedHealthcare C.E.O.’s assassin, who had not yet been identified. Within reach of his rolling desk chair was a mini-fridge full of cold brew and Diet Mountain Dew. Some of his takes were too unpolished for prime time. (“Bro, these guys are so cucked,” he said, critiquing a clip from a rival podcast on the right.) Then again, a live stream isn’t supposed to be a tight, scripted lecture. It’s supposed to be a good hang.

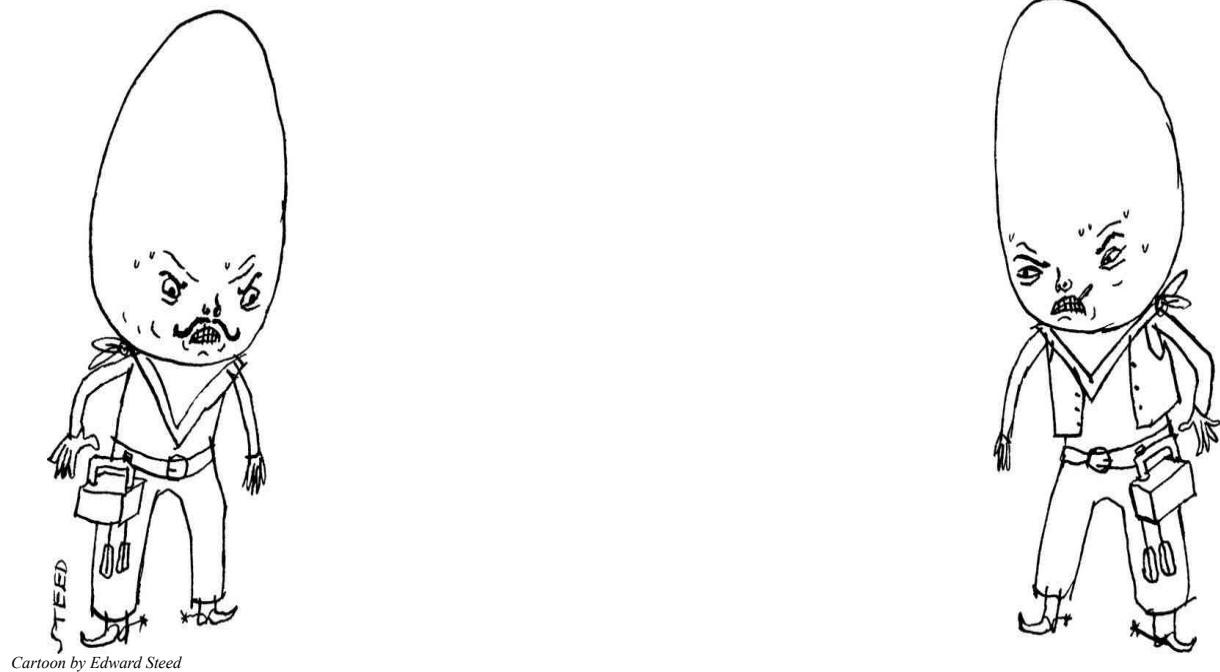
“I gotta end the broadcast here,” he said, shortly after 8 P.M. “I’ll see you tomorrow.” After turning the camera off, he seemed to deflate a bit. Comments were still floating up one of his monitors—the thousands of fans in the chat had dwindled to a few hundred, the inner circle who were devoted enough, or lonely enough, to keep one another company after the feed had gone dark. “The Democrats are smug and condescending, and everything they say sounds fake as shit,” Piker said. “Trump lies constantly, yes, but at least people get the sense that he’s authentically saying what he’s thinking.”

He put his feet up and reached for a fresh Zyn pouch. “Young men, like a lot of Americans, feel increasingly alienated,” he continued. They can’t afford college or rent, they can’t get a date, they can’t imagine a stable future. “The right is always there to tell them, ‘Yes, you should be angry, and the reason your life sucks is because of immigrants, or because a trans kid played a sport.’ And all the Democrats are telling them is ‘No, shut up, your life is fine, be joyful.’” No one has ever accused Piker of being a moderate, but in this case he is trying to forge a compromise. “My way is to go, ‘Look, be angry if you want. But your undocumented neighbor is not the problem here. You’re looking in the wrong direction.’”

In 2015, the economists Anne Case and Angus Deaton wrote that “white non-Hispanics without college degrees” were experiencing an anomalous spike in mortality from [opioids](#), alcohol, and suicide. They later called these “deaths of despair.” In 2016, J. D. Vance, then an anti-Trump conservative, published a memoir, “[Hillbilly Elegy](#),” about the struggles of white rural families like his own. Promoting the book on PBS, he explained (but did not yet excuse) why such voters were drawn to Trump: “I think that the sense of cultural alienation breeds a sense of mistrust.” The first Trump Administration didn’t deliver many material gains to the rural poor—deaths of despair continued to rise, and wages continued to stagnate—but at least Trump spoke to their anguish and seemed outraged on their behalf. In retrospect, the question may not be why so many non-urban non-élites became Trump Republicans but what took them so long.

Around the same time, social scientists started to notice an overlapping crisis. The statistics were grim—twenty-first-century males were, relative to their forefathers and their female contemporaries, much more likely to fall behind in school, drop out of college, languish in the workforce, or die by overdose or suicide. The title of a 2012 book by the journalist Hanna Rosin declared “[The End of Men](#).” The following year, the economists Marianne Bertrand and Jessica Pan published a paper called “The Trouble with Boys.” In one survey, more than a quarter of men in their teens and twenties reported having no close friends. When *Covid* hit, men were significantly more likely to die from it.

“In the fifteen years I’ve been looking at the statistics, the outcomes for men have not changed,” Rosin told me. “What did change, tremendously, is the culture.” The last Democratic Presidential candidate to win the male vote was [Barack Obama](#). When Bernie Sanders ran for President, he had a zealous male following, but many top Democrats treated the “Bernie bros” less like a force to be harnessed than like a threat to be vanquished. A “White Dudes for Harris” Zoom call raised millions for [Kamala Harris](#)’s campaign, but it would have been anathema to her base if she’d given a speech about what she planned to do for white dudes. This was, meanwhile, a key part of Trump’s appeal.



Cartoon by Edward Steed

In a 2022 book, “[Of Boys and Men](#),” Richard Reeves, a social scientist and a fellow at the Brookings Institution, blasts Republicans for exploiting “male dislocation” and misogynist fury at the expense of women’s rights. But he also lambastes Democrats for “pathologizing masculinity.” He gives an example from his sons’ high school in Bethesda, Maryland, where boys passed around a spreadsheet ranking their female classmates by attractiveness—behavior that Reeves describes as “immature,” even “harmful,” but not worthy of an international incident, which is what it became. He writes that “indiscriminately slapping the label of ‘toxic masculinity’ onto this kind of behavior is a mistake,” likely to propel young men “to the online manosphere where they will be reassured that they did nothing wrong, and that liberals are out to get them.”

At some point between [Bill Clinton](#) playing the saxophone on “The Arsenio Hall Show” and [Hillary Clinton](#) describing potential voters as “deplorables,” the Democrats came to be perceived as the party of scolds and snobs. Liberals used to be the counterculture; today, they’re the defenders of traditional norms and institutions. This may not have been the best political strategy at any time; it certainly isn’t now, when trust in institutions has never been lower. It’s impossible to know how many young men fit into this category, but there is clearly a kind of guy—the contemporary don’t-tread-on-me type who demands both the freedom to have gay friends and the

freedom to use “gay” as an insult—who resents the idea of his morality being dictated by the family-values right or his speech being curtailed by the hall-monitor left. When pressed, many of these young men seem to have bought the pitch that, of the two parties, the Republicans were the less censorious. This may have been a miscalculation—the current Trump Administration has already banished dozens of words from government websites and, just last week, arrested a [former Columbia student](#) for what seems to be protected speech—but you can’t convince voters that they’ve been misinformed simply by lecturing them. The lecturing is part of the issue.

“Democrats got used to speaking about men as the problem, not as people with problems,” Reeves told me. “But of course men do have problems, and problems become grievances when you ignore them.” He knows a lot of well-connected Democrats in Washington, and for years he has urged them to campaign on men’s issues—“not in a zero-sum way, certainly not taking anything away from women, but just to show boys and men, ‘Hey, you’re also having a tough go of it, we see you.’ And the response I always got was ‘Now is not the time.’”

Rosin told me about a husband and wife she’d met in Alabama, in 2010. The husband lost his job, and the wife became the breadwinner, an arrangement he experienced as deeply shameful. “She would put the check down on the kitchen table, she would sign it over to him, and he would cash it, and nobody would speak about it,” Rosin said. “But then ‘man-victim’ became a viable identity.” As Rosin stayed in touch with the man, he started exhibiting a more “mischievous” expression of men’s-rights sensibilities, wearing a T-shirt that read “My Cave, My Rules.” This coincided with the rise of Trump, the man-victim’s patron saint. He didn’t offer detailed policy solutions to any of the underlying sociological problems, but, again, he addressed them directly. (“It is a very scary time for young men in America,” Trump said in 2018.)

Like most internet terms, “mansphere” is vague and protean; it has been applied to Ben Shapiro, a father of four who delivers conservative talking points in a yarmulke, and to Andrew Tate, a Bugatti-driving hustler who has been charged with human trafficking. In 2016, after a reedy Canadian professor named Jordan Peterson refused to use gender-neutral pronouns, he

was taken up as a folk hero, like [Galileo](#) standing firm against the Inquisition. Peterson has almost nothing in common with, say, Dave Portnoy, another mascot of the bro-sphere, who mostly just wants to be left alone to eat pizza and drink beer by the pool. Yet they all seem to be meeting a demand in the cultural marketplace, one that could be as simple, at its root, as a dorm-room poster of [Marlon Brando](#) on a motorcycle or [Johnny Cash](#) flipping off the camera.

Last month, Richard Reeves was a guest on a popular podcast hosted by Theo Von, a formerly apolitical comedian who recently went to Trump's Inauguration. Von, an infectiously affable guy with a mullet, presents himself as a curious goofball with essentially no prior knowledge on any topic. At one point he spoke—without much nuance, but also without apparent malice—about the plight of the white man. "I'm not speaking against any other group," he said. "I'm just saying . . . you can't make white males feel like they don't exist." Von grew up poor in a small town in Louisiana. "Yes, I know there's privilege, but if you grew up with nothing you didn't fucking feel any privilege sometimes."

If Von had made this observation at a Trump rally, or on X, he might have been led from just-asking-questions guilelessness to more overt white aggrievement. If he'd made the same point in a liberal-arts seminar, or on [Bluesky](#), he might have been shouted down. (When I got to this part of the podcast, I have to admit, my own inner hall monitor was on high alert.) But Reeves, looking a bit trepidatious, tried to thread the needle, introducing some academic caveats without coming across as a scold. "The U.S. has a uniquely terrible history when it comes to slavery," he said. But he also noted that low-income white men were at particularly high risk of suicide. "Two things can be true at once," he said.

The hallmark of social media is disinhibition born of anonymity. On the internet, no one knows whether you're a dog, a Macedonian teen-ager, or the Pope wearing a puffer jacket. Podcasts, on the other hand, are built on parasociality: [Michael Barbaro](#) isn't your friend, but, after making coffee with him in your ear a hundred times, you start to feel as if he were. And then there's the world of always-on streaming, in which the temptations of parasociality are even more acute. The inputs are both aural and visual. The hosts respond to your comments in real time, at all hours. You can remind

yourself not to bond with the pixels on the screen, but you may fall for the illusion all the same, like a baby chick imprinting on a robot. Piker treats fans in a way that can be confusingly intimate, giving them avuncular life advice one minute and thirst-trap photos the next. His Twitch handle is Hasanabi, “*abi*” being Turkish for “big brother”; his fans are called “Hasanabi heads,” or “parasocialists.”

Even as most of his fellow-streamers have drifted to the right, Piker has remained a staunch leftist. His explanation for this is that he is from Turkey, where “the idea that American economic and military power runs the world—that was, like, ‘Yeah, duh.’” He was born in New Jersey and grew up mostly in Ankara and Istanbul, in an upper-middle-class family, spending summers with relatives in the U.S. and watching a lot of American TV. (He speaks English with an American accent.) His father, an economist, is “more of a neolib, World Bank-loving type,” Piker told me. “We argue about it all the time, but it’s not heated.” His mother, an art-and-architecture historian, is more aligned with his politics. “The inequality is just so blatant,” she told me. “It was never fair, but now we have the internet—everyone can see it.”

Despite Piker’s brand as a brash outsider, he is, in an almost literal sense, a nepo baby. After graduating from Rutgers, in 2013, he moved to Los Angeles and got a job with his maternal uncle, Cenk Uygur, who happened to be the founder and host of “The Young Turks,” one of the biggest left-populist talk shows on the internet. The show had a considerable footprint on YouTube, but Piker helped it adapt to punchier formats that were better suited to Facebook and Instagram. “You’ve got to understand, I remember when this was a pudgy kid and I was changing his diapers,” Uygur told me. “Now, suddenly, he’s this handsome man, he’s dynamic, he’s killing it in front of the camera.” Piker hosted a recurring video segment called “Agitprop,” and picked fights with the right-wing influencers of the day, such as Tomi Lahren and Representative Dan Crenshaw. He got himself in trouble—“America deserved 9/11” was not a particularly good take, even in context—but he also expanded his name recognition. In 2017, *BuzzFeed* dubbed him “woke bae.”

Although he made some of the outlet’s most popular videos, he didn’t own the I.P. (Even when the boss is your uncle, you can still be alienated from the means of production.) So, in 2020, he decided to go solo, on Twitch. His

mother joined him in Los Angeles, and they formed a pandemic pod in a two-bedroom apartment. “He was on there non-stop, shouting about video games or sex advice or whatever,” she told me. “His fans would see me in the background, cringing, and they would send me earplugs in the mail.” That year, he spent forty-two per cent of his time live on camera. (Not forty-two per cent of his waking hours—forty-two per cent of all the hours in the year.) In a call-in segment called “Chadvice,” Piker coached men through the small terrors and triumphs of daily life. One twenty-eight-year-old from Finland described himself as having an Asperger’s diagnosis and an “abject fear of rejection”; Piker, with solicitude and just enough amiable ribbing, spent half an hour talking him through the social mechanics of a first date.

When Twitch first launched, it was a niche platform where bored adolescents could watch other adolescents play video games. In 2014, Amazon bought it for nearly a billion dollars—an eye-popping amount, at least back then—even as mainstream analysts knew almost nothing about it. “My demographic hem is showing,” the columnist David Carr admitted in the *Times*; still, he concluded, “there is clear value in owning so much screen time of a hard-to-reach demographic of young men.” One article referred to Twitch as “talk radio for the extremely online.”

I first met Piker in February of 2020, on Boston Common, while covering a rally during Bernie Sanders’s Presidential campaign. Most of us travelling correspondents were youngish reporters from oldish outlets, wearing blue button-downs and carrying notebooks in the back pockets of our Bonobos. Piker wasn’t much younger, but he dressed as if he were from another planet, in black nail polish and cargo pants that, at the time, struck me as incomprehensibly wide. He carried an “I.R.L. backpack,” a portable camera setup that streamers use (I learned) when they venture out into the world. Admirers in the crowd kept interrupting him and asking for photos, a nuisance that, for whatever reason, didn’t afflict the rest of us. I still didn’t get why viewers would hang around on his stream all day when they could get an unimpeded view of Sanders’s speech on YouTube. Obviously, my demographic hem was showing. You might as well ask why a fan would watch a football game at a bar when he could concentrate better alone, or read a summary of the game in tomorrow’s paper. Piker’s followers wanted to watch the rally through his eyes because they wanted to be his friend.

In October, 2020, Piker spent a couple of hours playing the group video game Among Us with some special guests, including the congresswomen [Ilhan Omar](#) and [Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez](#). They occasionally mentioned the ostensible purpose of the event—getting out the vote—but mostly they made easygoing small talk. On Election Day, Piker streamed for sixteen hours straight, chugging energy drinks. His mother made several onscreen cameos, delivering him plates of home-cooked food. “I wouldn’t do it for this long if it wasn’t for you,” he told his viewers at the end of the night. “Love you bro!” a commenter typed. “See you tomorrow.”

After the 2024 election, Democratic strategists argued that what the anti-Trump coalition needed was a “Joe Rogan of the left.” There once was such a person. His name was Joe Rogan. “I’m socially about as liberal as it gets,” Rogan said earlier this month. He has a live-and-let-live attitude about sex, drugs, and abortion. (He is also extremely open to conspiracy theories about 9/11, [JFK](#), and [Jeffrey Epstein](#), an inclination that was left-coded until very recently.) In 2014, when Rogan was a fan of “The Young Turks,” Piker met him at the Hollywood Improv, and they sat and talked for two hours. (The topics included “weed, psychedelics, the state of media and girls,” Piker wrote at the time. “Top ten coolest moments of my life.”) During the 2020 Democratic primary, Rogan interviewed three Presidential candidates—Tulsi Gabbard, Andrew Yang, and Bernie Sanders—and concluded that Sanders was his favorite. “I believe in him,” Rogan said. “He’s been insanely consistent his entire life.”

It’s hard to fathom now, but Rogan’s support was then considered a liability. “The Sanders campaign must reconsider this endorsement,” the Human Rights Campaign wrote, citing transphobic and racist remarks from Rogan’s past. In retrospect, this was the height (or perhaps the nadir) of a kind of purity-test politics that was making some swing voters, including Rogan, feel less at home in the Democratic coalition. In 2022, [Neil Young](#) removed his music from Spotify to protest Rogan’s vaccine skepticism; Rogan took ivermectin, which [CNN](#) mocked as a horse dewormer. “I can afford *people* medicine, motherfucker,” Rogan told CNN’s chief medical correspondent, adding that the medication had been prescribed by his doctor. “This is ridiculous.”

In 2016, every one of Trump’s baby steps toward normalization—doing a goofy dance on “[Saturday Night Live](#),” getting his hair ruffled by Jimmy Fallon—was treated as a scandal. But by 2024 anyone with access to Spotify or YouTube could find hours of flattering footage of Trump looking like a chill, approachable grandpa. While interviewing Trump at one of his golf clubs, Theo Von used his free-associative style to great effect, prompting as much introspection in Trump as any interviewer has. (Von: “Cocaine will turn you into a damn owl, homie.” Trump: “And is that a good feeling?”) Trump invited the Nelk Boys, prank-video influencers with their own brand of hard seltzer, to eat Chick-fil-A on his private plane. He sat in a Cybertruck with the baby-faced, fascist-curious streamer Adin Ross, testing the stereo. “Who’s, like, your top three artists?” Ross asked. “Well, we love [Frank Sinatra](#), right?” Trump said. Ross invited him to pick a song, and Trump, “thinking that it’s gonna come back under proper management,” picked “California Dreamin’.”

Collectively, these shows reached tens of millions of potential voters. Most were presumably young men, many of them the kind of American who is both the hardest and the most crucial for a campaign to reach: the kind who is not seeking out political news. Trump ended his parasocial-media tour by sitting in Joe Rogan’s studio, in Austin, for three hours. That’s too long for anyone, even a champion of rhetorical rope-a-dope, to go without gaffes—which was part of the point. While repeating his timeworn case that the 2020 election was rigged, Trump let out a shocking Freudian slip—“I lost by . . .”—before quickly trying to recover: “I didn’t lose.” Rogan laughed in his face. No one cared. On YouTube alone, the episode got more than fifty million views, and the reaction was overwhelmingly positive. “Unedited/uncensored interviews should be required of all candidates,” one of the top comments read.

Harris tried. She appeared on a few big podcasts—“Club Shay Shay,” whose audience is primarily Black, and “Call Her Daddy,” whose audience is mostly female—but she never made inroads with the comedy bros. (The closest she got was an interview with Howard Stern, a former shock jock who now seems wholesome, like Little Richard in the era of Lil Baby.) Harris’s staffers tried to get her booked on “Hot Ones,” the YouTube show on which celebrities answer innocuous questions while eating sadistically spicy chicken wings, but even “Hot Ones” turned her down. Her campaign

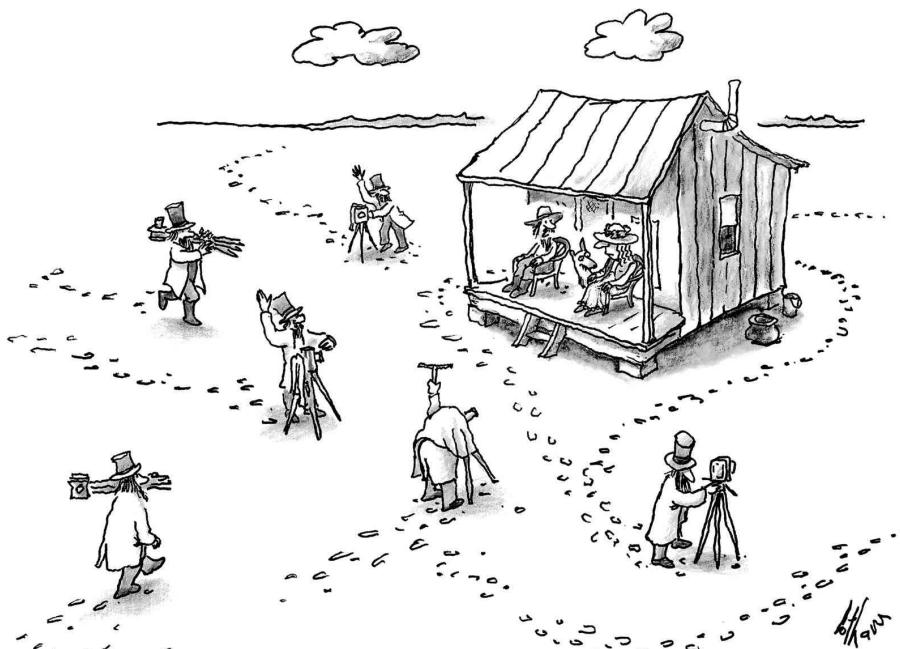
staffers insisted that she wanted to do Rogan's show, but that it fell through for scheduling reasons. Rogan claimed that he was eager to interview her, and that he was even willing to keep certain topics off-limits. "I said, 'I don't give a fuck,'" he told Theo Von. "I feel like, if you give someone a couple of hours, and you start talking about anything, I'm going to see the pattern of the way you think . . . whether you're calculated or whether you're just free."

Imagine the set of a prototypical man-cave podcast, and "Flagrant," co-founded by the comedian Andrew Schulz, wouldn't be far off: four dudes lounging around, with a few plastic plants and a shelf of brown liquor behind them. Trump sat with them in October, and Schulz and the other hosts buttered him up, asking him about his kids. "Barron is eighteen," Schulz said. "He's unleashed in New York City. Are you sure you want to reverse Roe v. Wade *now*?" An hour in, they cut to an ad break. "Hard-dick season is upon us, and you gotta make sure that you're stiffed up," Schulz said. "BlueChew has got your back."

"Flagrant" is taped weekly at a studio in SoHo. I visited one Wednesday in February. Schulz arrived just after noon, opened a fridge stocked with cans of tequila- and THC-infused seltzer, and grabbed a bottle of water. He sports a mustache and a chain necklace, and his hair is tight on the sides and slicked back on top. (During a show at Madison Square Garden, a fellow-comedian described Schulz's look as "the Tubi version of Adolf Hitler.") He's a throwback to an old New York archetype: the melting-pot white guy who tells hyper-specific ethnic jokes with a sly smile and, for the most part, gets away with it. He did a crowd-work special that included sections called "Mexican," "Colombian," and "Black Women." His newest special, about his wife's experience with [I.V.F.](#), includes moments of real tenderness, but he still insists on his right to do old-fashioned bits about the battle between the sexes. "We all have feelings that are a little bit wrong," Schulz said. "'Take my wife, please'—that's a fucked-up premise, but there's a seed of a feeling there that's real. It's the comedian's job to make you comfortable enough to laugh at it."

Schulz grew up in lower Manhattan, where his parents owned a dance studio and he went to public school. "My family was super liberal," he told me. "This was in the nineties, when being a liberal, to me, just meant 'I don't

hate gay people or Black people'—normal shit." He now thinks of himself as apolitical, and he acknowledged all the reasons to distrust Trump, but the word he kept using, whenever Trump came up, was "enticing." "I still appreciate a lot of the policies Bernie talked about, universal health care and all that," he said. "But culture-wise? Vibe-wise? When all you hear from one side is 'That's not funny, that's over the line'—realistically, where are people gonna feel more comfortable?"



"I think street photography has arrived in the territory."  
Cartoon by Frank Cotham

Trump is known for his bloviating, but Schulz suggested that his greater talent may be a kind of listening. "Democrats are tuned in to what people *should* feel," he said. "Trump is tuned in to what people *actually* fucking feel." Schulz noted that, as a boundary-pushing performer, this was also one of his own key skills: gauging micro-fluctuations in an audience's reaction. When Trump appeared on "Flagrant," he talked about being taken to a hospital in rural Pennsylvania after he was shot, and how impressed he was with the "country doctors" who'd treated him. "I laughed at that, 'cause I just thought 'country doctors' was a funny phrase," Schulz told me. "He clocks me laughing at it, and in the next sentence he immediately says it again, and he watches me to make sure I laugh again."

"Flagrant" bills itself as "*THE GREATEST HANG IN THE UNIVERSE!*" I spent the rest of the day watching Schulz and his co-hosts tape an episode

(and then an extra segment sponsored by an online betting platform, and then an extra extra segment for Patreon), and I could imagine some places in the universe that would have been greater. One of the running gags in the episode was that the hosts kept pronouncing the word “prerecorded” as “pre-retarded.” At one point, a host volunteered how many times he’d masturbated in a single day, and his record was so formidable that the others looked worried for him. In fairness, though, even a solid hang can’t be scintillating all the time. One function of a long-standing friendship, including a parasocial one, is simply to while away the hours, even when there isn’t much to say.

When it comes to parasocial media, *MAGA* has had a long head start. Before [Dan Bongino](#) was Trump’s deputy F.B.I. director, he was a popular, blustery podcaster; after Matt Gaetz withdrew from consideration as Attorney General, he announced that he would host a TV show and a podcast (his third). During the Biden Administration, about a dozen Republicans were both active podcast hosts and sitting members of Congress, while most Democrats hardly seemed interested in trying. Before the “Flagrant” taping, Schulz and I had been discussing which qualities the Democrats should look for in their next crop of leaders, and afterward he returned to the question. “They need someone who can really hang,” he said. “Obama could hang. Clinton, for sure—Bill, not Hillary. Trump can hang.” I ran through the shortlist: [Pete Buttigieg](#)? Schulz wrinkled his nose—too polished. A.O.C.? “When she’s being the working-class chick from the Bronx, I could see it,” he said. “But when she starts going on MSNBC and doing ‘We have an orange rapist in the White House’—then you start to lose people.”

Schulz said that he’d invited Kamala Harris and [Tim Walz](#) to appear on the show “numerous times,” to no avail. (The Harris campaign says that Schulz never sent a formal invitation.) He couldn’t be sure why Walz had stayed away from podcasts like his, but he had guesses. “If we’ve got on a guy who was in the military for twenty years, at some point I’m gonna go, ‘Cut the shit, Tim, you know how guys really talk,’ ” Schulz said. “And then let’s say we start busting balls, making gay jokes, whatever—does he laugh? If he does, he pisses off his people. If he doesn’t, he loses our people.” Walz was added to the Presidential ticket because he was able to talk like a regular person who could make the opposition seem “weird” by contrast. But, things

being as they are, Schulz said, “the Democrats can’t let a guy like that loose.”

When Trump was on “Flagrant,” Akaash Singh, a co-host who refers to himself as a “moderate,” encouraged him to consider practicing self-restraint. “What we love about you as comedians is you shoot from the hip,” Singh said. “If you get elected, would you be a little more mindful of how powerful your words are?”

“I will,” Trump said. “And I’m gonna think of you every time.”

“Let’s go!” Singh said, jumping up and pumping his fist. “I might actually vote.”

Piker starts streaming at eleven every morning, so everything else has to happen before then, or at night. At 7 a.m. one day, he drove Kaya to a nearby park, to take her for a walk, then played basketball for half an hour. He saw me eying his car, a Porsche Taycan. “It’s not the flashiest model I could afford,” he protested, before I could say anything. “But yes, admittedly, it is a fucking Porsche.” When Piker is criticized by the right, it’s usually for soft-pedalling the brutality of [Hamas](#), or the [Houthis](#), or the [Chinese Communist Party](#). (Piker is such a relentless critic of Israel that, last year, the advocacy group StopAntisemitism nominated him for “Antisemite of the Year”; when asked his opinion of [Hezbollah](#), he once shrugged and replied, “I don’t have an issue with them.”) By the left, he is more likely to be dismissed as a limousine socialist who lives in a \$2.7-million house. He has his own clothing brand, called Ideologie.

While driving home, he took a call from his manager. A major production company wanted to discuss a potential TV show, hosted by Piker, in the vein of “Borat” or “Nathan for You.” His manager asked if he wanted to be interviewed by Megyn Kelly on her radio show. “No.” A daytime show on [Fox News](#)? “No.” Buttigieg’s people had asked if Piker would interview Buttigieg on his stream. “Probably not, but I’ll think about it,” Piker said—too centrist. “If he’s thinking about running for President, I don’t really wanna be giving him clout.” In his kitchen, he took a few fistfuls of supplements: creatine, fish oil, Ashwagandha. Still on the phone with his manager, he sat at his desktop, skimming stories he might cover. Then, a few

minutes before he went live, he started seeing news alerts: [Luigi Mangione](#), the suspect in the [UnitedHealthcare assassination](#), had just been arrested. Whatever else he'd been planning to talk about was now irrelevant. "Holy shit, they got him," Piker told his manager. "I gotta go."



"Let's make a pact. If we're still married to each other in ten years, let's get divorced."  
Cartoon by Jeremy Nguyen

"Mamma mia!" he said, on air. "This is the first day where there will be no Italiophobia on this broadcast." Already, his chat was full of spaghetti emojis and "*FREE LUIGI!*" Piker walked a fine line—celebrating Mangione as "hotter than me" and speaking in generally exalted terms about "the propaganda of the deed," but trying to stop short of overtly glorifying murder, which is against Twitch's terms of service. "We, of course, do not condone," he said repeatedly. "We condemn." (Recently, he was suspended from Twitch for twenty-four hours after musing that someone may want to "kill Rick Scott," the Florida senator.)

In fact, he reserved his condemnation for the finger-wagging from the "corporate media," as exhibited everywhere from Fox News to CNN. "Bro, they can't let anybody have anything," he said later. For six hours straight, his chatters sent him links to new information as it emerged—Mangione's Goodreads account, his Twitter history, his high-school valedictorian speech. On my own, I would have been tempted to spend the day following the same bread crumbs, struggling to retrace Mangione's path to radicalization. But it

was easier to let Piker and the forty thousand internet sleuths in his chat make sense of it for me.

Many of Piker's viewers come to him with inchoate opinions. He aims to mold them. But, he told me, of the stream, "at the end of the day, it still has to be relatable and entertaining." One of his maxims is "Read the room." In his case, this means posting many hours of content about nothing in particular. Stavros Halkias, a comedian and a friend of Piker's, told me, "He's built up enough trust with his audience that, if he's being boring and academic for forty minutes, they'll stick with it until he starts doing something more interesting, playing a Japanese dating simulator or whatever." Some days, he puts on a Trump hat and streams as Hank Pecker, a "Colbert Report"-style satirical character updated for the *MAGA* era. In another room of his house, Piker records a weekly podcast with three buddies, an apolitical chat show on which one of the most heated topics of recent debate was proper manscaping technique, and another was whether one of them farted. Marche, the producer, was proud to tell me that the podcast's audience is about sixty per cent male—"which sounds like a lot, but actually most shows in this space are eighty-twenty male, or eighty-five-fifteen." One theory for this lopsidedness is that, given all the "End of Men" statistics, women have better things to do with their time, such as holding down meaningful jobs and cultivating lasting relationships, while men are stuck playing video games with their imaginary friends.

Recently, on a *MAGA*-bro podcast, Piker reached across the aisle, adapting "eight hours for what you will" to the current decadent moment. "Deep down inside, most people just wanna be comfortable," he said. "They wanna have a roof over their heads, they want a fuckin' nice meal, get some pussy . . . play Marvel Rivals." In recent years, Piker has stopped using the word "retarded," but he still uses the word "pussy," even though it may sound misogynist, and "lame," despite fans who consider the term ableist. "I don't give a shit," Piker said. "If you can't handle it, then I guess I'm not for you." When his commenters try to tone-police him, Piker will often single one of them out and say, "Congratulations, chatter, you've won Woke of the Day." It's not a compliment.

The day after Mangione's arrest, Piker had back-to-back interviews with Lina Khan, then the chair of the Federal Trade Commission, whom Piker

called “the LeBron James of regulators,” and with the writer [Ta-Nehisi Coates](#), promoting his new book. In the chat, a user named PapiJohn36 wrote, “Not to be parasocial, but I love this man.” Piker’s mother stopped by during the Coates interview. “Hasan, check your messages!” she shouted from the kitchen. Piker, grudgingly but dutifully, read his mother’s message aloud: “I got his book for the content and fell in love with his writing.”

“Thank you, Hasan’s mom,” Coates said. In the living room, Piker’s father was sprawled on the couch watching “Love Actually.”

Halkias, the comedian, showed up later that afternoon, with a bag of dirty laundry and a calendar featuring photos of himself posing in the nude. While many of Halkias’s comedian friends have taken a reactionary turn, he has stuck to his progressive principles, but he has never been a hall monitor. (He got his start on a podcast called “Cum Town.”) “Ladies and gentlemen, boys, girls, and enbies,” Piker said, “we’ve got the left’s Joe Rogan here in the building!” In the “Rogan of the left” discourse, both Piker and Halkias are frequently mentioned as top prospects. Even if they were secretly flattered by the designation, the least alpha thing they could do—the least Roganesque thing they could do—would be to thirst for it. “Free Luigi,” Halkias said, taking a seat. “He’s too sexy to be behind bars.”

As a model for the future of progressive media, Piker checks only some of the requisite boxes. A while back, he was a guest on “Flagrant”; when I asked one of the show’s staffers about Piker’s performance, he gave it a middling review. “Good guy, clearly knows his shit, but he sort of comes off like he thinks he’s the smartest guy in the room.” Piker sometimes succumbs to the socialist bro’s cardinal sin of pedantry, and he can seem like a jejune know-it-all trying to reduce any societal problem to a one-word culprit, usually “capitalism” or “imperialism.” Some segments of the Democratic coalition would find Piker to be edgy, or crass, or even despicable. But, if “Rogan of the left” is to mean anything, it would surely mean a higher tolerance for controversy, even at the risk of alienating parts of the base.

On the scale of “whether you’re calculated or whether you’re just free,” Piker is freer than most Democratic surrogates, Ivy League overachievers who sound like chatbots trained on stacks of campaign brochures. But he is less free than the average *MAGA* bro, who is unconstrained by the need for

any consistent ideology. “He’s funny, but not *that* funny,” Halkias told me. “You can tell him I said that.” Halkias has his own podcast, on which he gives advice to callers. On the normier part of the spectrum are liberal influencers like Dean Withers and Harry Sisson, who have transferred the “debate me, bro” spirit of early YouTube to TikTok Live.

One afternoon, in L.A., I visited the office of Crooked Media, which was decorated with some Yes We Can iconography and had glass-walled conference rooms with cheeky names such as “Sedition” and “Conspiracy.” When the company began, in 2017, its three founders, former Obama staffers named Jon Lovett, Tommy Vietor, and Jon Favreau, were treated as audacious upstarts challenging the media hierarchy. Now they are middle-aged bosses in Henleys and tapered jeans. We sat in “Legitimate Political Discourse.” A long table had been laid with LaCroix and PopCorners. “We have become the out-of-touch lib establishment,” Vietor said. Lovett added, “My, how time flies.”

Crooked now has more than a dozen podcasts, including its flagship show, “Pod Save America.” Vietor recounted a time, a few years back, when a friend invited him to appear on a show put out by Barstool Sports, a bro-y podcast network that leans right. Vietor, worried about guilt by association, turned it down. “Looking back, that was so stupid,” he said. “The ‘how dare you platform someone you disagree with’ era is over. Fuck that.” (He has since appeared on the show.) In 2018, Favreau was hosting a show called “The Wilderness,” about how the Democratic Party lost its way, and wanted to include a clip of Obama reaching out to the white working class. “A younger producer listened and went, ‘I’m not sure this plays well today,’ ” Favreau said. “And I went, ‘That’s part of the problem!’ ” After the 2024 election, Piker appeared on “Pod Save America.” Lovett got pushback from moderate fans, who objected to Piker’s anti-Zionism, and from progressive fans, who objected to Lovett’s next interview, with a Democrat who wants restrictions on trans women in sports—but he shrugged it off. “It’s a big tent,” Lovett said. “It’s got Dick Cheney in it. It’s got Hasan Piker in it.”

The “Rogan of the left” formulation isn’t entirely vacuous, but it’s easy to misinterpret. Rogan-like figures can’t be engineered; they have to develop organically. Their value lies in their idiosyncrasies—their passionate insistence on talking about chimps and ancient pyramids, say, rather than the

budget ceiling—and in their authenticity, which entails an aversion to memorizing talking points. Many Democrats assume that what they have is a messaging problem—that voters don’t have a clear enough sense of what the Democrats are really like. But it’s possible that the problem is the opposite: that many swing voters, including Joe Rogan, got a sense of what the Democrats were like, then ran in the opposite direction.

The good news for Democrats is that the right does not have a monopoly on relatability. A week before his interview with Trump, Theo Von conducted an interview with Bernie Sanders while wearing a Grateful Dead shirt. “You ever see the [Grateful Dead](#)?” Von said, as an icebreaker. Sanders, apparently unfamiliar with the concept, frowned and said, “Um, no.” From any other politician, this would have been malpractice, but with Sanders the crankiness is part of the crossover charm. (“He literally just talks common sense,” one of the top YouTube comments read.) A few months later, Rogan interviewed Senator [John Fetterman](#). “Trump is not polished, but you get a sense of who he is as a human being,” Rogan said. Fetterman agreed, alluding to a line from “Scarface”: “All I have in this world is my balls and my word.”

Reeves, the social scientist, told me, “There is a strong correlation between which Democratic lawmakers are in my inbox and which ones have the year 2028 circled on their calendar.” Senator [Chris Murphy](#), of Connecticut, read Reeves’s book in 2023 and praised it on X; many of Murphy’s constituents, including his fourteen-year-old son, took issue with his post. Nevertheless, he persisted, writing a follow-up on Substack: “We should try to do two things at once—fight for the equality of women and gay people, while also trying hard to figure out why so many boys are struggling and why so many men are feeling shitty.” Sanders and Fetterman share what could be described as populist instincts, but ideologically they are leagues apart. On the level of pure affect, though, they may represent elements of a style that other politicians could crib from. “Personally, I find the performance of masculinity to be totally boring,” Hanna Rosin told me. “But if that’s what fifty-one per cent of Americans need—someone who reads as some version of ‘gruff, manly dude,’ but whose heart is still in the right place—then I’m willing to go along with it.”

Twitch stars often appear on one another’s streams, hoping to pick up some new fans. One afternoon, Piker headed to Zoo Culture, a gym in Encino

owned by a streamer and fitness influencer named Bradley Martyn, to do a “collab.” It would also feature Jason Nguyen, a twenty-year-old Twitch star from Texas who goes by JasonTheW een. “Bradley’s a big Trump guy, and we talk politics sometimes, but mostly we just talk about gym-bro shit,” Piker told me. “Jason probably leans Trump, if I had to guess, but his content isn’t really political at all.” (“I dont lean towards anyone,” Nguyen wrote when reached for comment. “I dont want anything to do with politics .”)

By the time we got to the gym, Nguyen was already there, performing for the camera by flirting with a woman on a weight bench. “Is Jason rizzing right now?” Piker asked Martyn, who nodded. “Is it working?” Piker asked the woman. She replied, “A little bit.” Before she left, she gave Nguyen her Discord handle.

“Bradley, I’ve got something for you,” Piker said, removing his long-sleeved shirt. Underneath, he was wearing a tank top with a Rambo-style cartoon of Trump and the words “*LET’S GO BRANDON*. ” “I was coming into hostile territory, so I had to fit in,” Piker said.

“It’s perfect,” Martyn said.

Martyn, who is six feet three and two hundred and sixty pounds, looks vaguely like Bradley Cooper on steroids. (Martyn has taken testosterone supplements, which Piker once brought up in a jocular debate about trans rights: You do hormone-replacement therapy, so why can’t they?) Nguyen is much smaller. “My chat just said, ‘There’s three muscleheads in the gym right now,’ ” Nguyen joked, not even pretending to look at his phone. Piker roasted Nguyen with a fake comment from his own chat: “Jason looks like a twink.” They wandered from station to station—first bench-pressing, then deadlifting—as their cameramen followed. “We’re just here to have fun,” Piker said. Then, dropping into a mock P.S.A. voice: “And also reach out to the young men out there who are lost—who feel anchorless, rudderless—by lifting some heavy weights.”

One flat-screen TV showed Joe Rogan interviewing Elon Musk, on mute, with no captions. Two shirtless guys, between reps, compared crypto wallets. “During *Covid*, they let liquor stores and strip clubs open, but they

shut us down,” Martyn told me. “And then all the inflation, all the wars—it’s not like I trust any politician, Trump or Kamala or anyone, to be a perfect person. It’s just—if we never try anything new, how can we get a different result?” Last fall, when Martyn interviewed Trump, he brought up “the deep state” and asked, “How would you actually make an effective change there?” It wasn’t a specific question, and Trump didn’t have a specific answer. “We’re changing that whole thing around,” he said. Apparently, this was good enough for Martyn.

The day after the 2024 election, Martyn appeared on Piker’s stream to explain his support for Trump. They started with small talk. “Why do you have so many Zyn containers behind you?” Martyn said.

“I fucking slam those bad boys daily,” Piker said.

“Look at us relating, bro,” Martyn said.

When they got around to politics, Piker said, “One side at least acknowledges that people are angry—the Republicans.” The Democrats’ proposed solutions were inadequate, he said, but Trump would only make things worse. Martyn smiled and replied, “You’re gonna have to say sorry when he does what he says he’s gonna do.”

They ended the gym session by daring each other to take turns sitting in Martyn’s cold plunge. Piker resisted at first—“I didn’t bring a towel, a bathing suit, nothing”—but he went in anyway, in his gym shorts, and his commenters went wild. “Hey, Hasan’s chat, I hope y’all are happy he took his shirt off,” Nguyen said, facing Piker’s camera. Then he checked his phone: the woman from the weight bench had already sent him a message.

“Wait, she did?” Piker said, with a grin. “You’re about to lose your virginity, I think.” ♦

By Nathan Heller  
By Rebecca Mead  
By Jon Allsop  
By Zach Helfand  
By Antonia Hitchens  
By Gideon Lewis-Kraus  
By Amanda Petrusich  
By Charlie Tyson  
By Jon Lee Anderson  
By Ruth Marcus  
By E. Tammy Kim  
By Jay Caspian Kang

## Takes

- [Naomi Fry on Jay McInerney's “Chloe's Scene”](#)

By [Naomi Fry](#)

**New Takes on the classics.** Throughout our centennial year, we're revisiting notable works from the archive. Sign up to receive them directly in your inbox.

As a teen-ager, long before I lived in New York, I felt the city urging me toward it. N.Y.C., with its art and money, its drugs and fashion, its misery and elation—how tough, how grimy, how scary, how glamorous! For me, one of its most potent siren calls was “[Chloe’s Scene](#),” a piece written for this magazine, in 1994, by the novelist [Jay McInerney](#), about the then nineteen-year-old sometime actress, sometime model, and all-around It Girl Chloë Sevigny. Despite not having done much at that point besides be young, hang out downtown, and have an innate sense of style, Sevigny seemed to be the font from which absolute cool flowed. The kind of culture-making that she represented was “secret, alternative, not commercial—everything one wants to be,” McInerney wrote. She *was* New York. When the piece came out, I was living with my parents in Haifa, in northern Israel, and, though I was only a couple of years younger than Sevigny, I was not the font of much of anything. I was a sideline observer, a meek fan, a wary fantasist, biding my time until my real life began.

Even though I grew up in Haifa, my father’s job as a scientist meant that our family had spent some time in Seattle, and my parents were longtime *New Yorker* subscribers. I had leafed through the magazine in the past, but hadn’t paid it much attention until I came across the Sevigny profile. I had already read and reread McInerney’s 1984 novel, “[Bright Lights, Big City](#),” which was about New York but also about cocaine and, marginally, *The New Yorker* itself, where McInerney had once been a fact checker—a job that sounded stressful and sophisticated. I had also already heard of Sevigny from *Sassy*, a teen magazine I subscribed to. She had been an intern there, and everyone at the office was so obsessed with her that they featured her in the publication, wearing outfits whose ingeniously jumbled argot (handmade hats, baggy corduroys) borrowed from skaters and prepsters. (“Our intern Chloe has more style in her little finger,” the headline read.) I didn’t know it then, but McInerney’s article—flashier and more youth-oriented than what might have run in *The New Yorker* in decades prior—was published under the magazine’s newish editor, [Tina Brown](#), who was fresh from her sexy remaking of *Vanity Fair*. (In a television segment about Brown that I’d

watched on the couch with my parents but can no longer find, I seem to recall her tossing her blond head back and laughing uproariously into a phone receiver while announcing a plan to secure an interview with the Pope for *Vanity Fair*'s Christmas issue.)

Though some people in 1994 were using dial-up internet, I wasn't yet, and whatever cultural knowledge I was able to accrue was mined at the altar of the printed word. In "Chloe's Scene," I read along as Sevigny went uptown to West Fifty-seventh Street to model in a Martin Margiela show at the clothing emporium Charivari; as she listened to Pavement's "Slanted and Enchanted" in her Second Avenue walkup; as she shot a scene for Larry Clark's "Kids" at the Chelsea club Tunnel; as she ran into the "slouchy poet laureate of the downtown lowlife" Jim Carroll, famous for writing the memoir "[The Basketball Diaries](#)"; as she wore a fake Chanel bracelet that she got on Canal Street. "Chloe's Scene" offered not only a certain New York topography with which I could familiarize myself but a bonanza of references I could pore over, puzzle out, learn by heart. I had never heard of Pavement before, or of Margiela, or of "The Basketball Diaries," but now I had the tail ends of these strings firmly in my hand. This was an education.

It was also an education to realize that here was the type of thing you could do when writing for a magazine: you could paint a picture of a world so vividly that the reader might feel as if she were in it. Sometimes this reader would follow the words so closely, study them so intently, that she'd even manage to scrabble her way into that world herself. And although it wouldn't be exactly what she had imagined—it never is—it would nonetheless be something that she, too, could write about one day. ♦

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[\*\*Read the original story.\*\*](#)



## [Chloe's Scene](#)

If you don't find your fashion on Seventh Avenue, Chloe is the It Girl with a street-smart style and a down-low attitude.

By Ian Frazier  
By Louisa Thomas  
By Adam Kirsch  
By Anthony Lane  
By Alice Gregory  
By David S. Wallace  
By Audrey Wollen  
By Francoise Mouly  
By Graciela Mochkovsky  
By Joshua Rothman

## **Shouts & Murmurs**

- [Updated Kennedy Center 2025 Schedule](#)

By [Eddie Feldmann](#) and [Bill Scheft](#)

*April 1* — A. R. Gurney’s “Love Letters,” with Lauren Boebert and Kid Rock

*April 3* — Vocal group Up with Goebbels

*April 4-5* — 3-D Ghost-Gun Show

*April 6-7* — (Musical workshop) Sing! Sing! Sing! On Your Federal Co-Workers!

*April 12-13* — Crypto, Change-O: A Magical Illusion Spectacular

*April 15-16* — Clarence Thomas R.V./Camper Show

*April 17* — An Evening with Stephen Miller (formerly “Stephen Miller and Friends”)

*April 18-19* — CPAC Celebrity Pickleball Tourney

*April 21* — Big Balls: The *TED* Talk

*April 22* — Game-Show Night! (“Alt-Fact Jeopardy!” / “Win Jill Stein’s Money” / “Kennedy Family Feud”)

*April 24-25* — Joey Critters Reptile Revue

*April 26-May 3* — Con Con

*May 4* — Free and Fair Audience-Votes Talent-Show Night (Dancing with the Tsars)

*May 5-10* — Pete Hegseth’s Five-Day Advanced Mixology Seminar (*SOLD OUT*)

*May 11-13* — Gay-Conversion Band Camp

*May 15* — (One night only!) Ted Nugent reunites with himself

*May 16-17* — Lock, Bump Stock & Barrel (conservative improv group)

*May 18-22* — All-Nordic adaptation of “The Wiz”

(Summer Mondays Are Fun Days at the K Center!)

*1st Monday of the month* — Woke, woke-related, and woke-adjacent tattoo removal

*2nd Monday* — Vax Populi! Exchange your clean syringe for clean urine

*3rd Monday* — FEMA yard sale

*Last Monday* — Book BBQ

*June 3-7* — ICE Capades: An evening of hilarious bodycam bloopers of bungled busts and deportation hiccups

*June 10* — Joe Rogan Stunt-Double/Human-Shield Contest (all entrants must be over 54 and under 5'4")

*June 11* — Joe Rogan “Bum Fights” (over \$35 in prize money!)

*June 13*—Night of 100 Caving Journalists!

*June 14* — (Flag Day) Official reopening! Two Oath Keepers (T.B.A.) with reverse drill bits take name off front of building

*June 17-July 3* — “Shen Yun” (ticket tariff lifted)

*July 4* — All-American Fourth of July Musical Salute to the Kremlin

*July 5* — Roseanne Sings Sondheim (*TENTATIVE*)

*July 8-11* — (Exclusive opening) Exhibit of Brass Calf made from returned Kennedy Center Honors medals

*July 14-16* — “Honey, Where Are My Pants?”: The Bruce Jenner Anti-Trans Musical (*TENTATiVE*)

*July 18-19* — “Come F.A.A. Away” (a new play) (*TENTATIVE*)

*July 23-24* — H. R. Frackenstuff (fossil-fuel-based marionettes)

*August 5-9, 12-16* — Red Man Group

*August 19-24* — Sylvester Stallone, Jon Voight in “Doomsday Clock Cowboy” (a new play)

*August 29-30* — Earth, Wind, Fire, Drought & Mudslides

*Labor Day Weekend* — Hotel workers’ trade union sponsors the musical reboot “Visa Las Vegas”

*September 2* — First Annual Day After Labor Day Polio Telethon (scheduled to appear: Dr. Ronnie Jackson, heavy-metal cover band Iron Lung)

*September 3* — Roundtable (King Lear, King Midas, Pol Pot, Don King)

*September 4* — Forbidden Branson (warning: cabaret-ish)

*September 8-10* — Three Days of the Shakespeare!

*September 8* — Mel Gibson’s all-Aramaic, Shylock-free “Merchant of Venice” (*TENTATIVE*)

*September 9-10* — Kevin Sorbo Is Othello (will add matinée)

*September 12* — Gynecologists with Borders fund-raiser

*September 20* — MAGA Donor Dinner (no vegetarian option)

*September 24* — Jim Jordan stars in his one-man show (matinée only!) “Jacket Off . . . for Freedom!”

*October 6-8* — Mark Russell via Hologram

*October 15* — The Mark Twain/Greg Gutfeld Prize for American Humor

*November 7-8* — Starlink Presents “It’s Not What You Think: Salute to 1930s Germany”

*November 22* — Roast of J.F.K. (hosted by Rob Schneider)

*December 19-20* — Kanye Raps Wagner

*Christmas Week* — The Rapture II: Once More with Feeling (time-share symposium, site T.B.D.)

#### *CANCELLED EVENTS*

*May 1* — Monster Cybertruck event (chance of rain)

*October 16* — Red Hat Society

*November 13* — “Zelenskyy with a Z . . . and Two Ys!” (cabaret)

Weekly Sunday 10 a.m. basement meeting of Q-Anon Anon. ♦

By Felipe Torres Medina  
By Alyssa Brandt  
By Ian Frazier  
By Patricia Marx  
By Charlie Dektar  
By Claire Friedman  
By Seth Reiss  
By Madeline Goetz  
By Lauren Bridges  
By Ivan Ehlers  
By Mary Norris  
By Eddie Small

# Fiction

- “The Frenzy”

Fiction

# The Frenzy

By [Joyce Carol Oates](#)



*Photograph by Noah Wall for The New Yorker*

Early afternoon, driving south on the Garden State Parkway with the girl beside him. Passing exits for Point Pleasant, New Jersey, for Toms River. Something haphazard in his driving today, which is unlike him.

Wind from the Atlantic is rocking the Subaru Forester, and he feels a thrill of, what is it, a tug, like a tug-of-war, invisible hands on the wheel, which is *his* wheel, so his reaction is to resist the intrusion, the way he resists the subterranean pull of sleep when he wakes before dawn, stunned and exhausted by dreams.

Cassidy is feeling reckless. *Young*.

“Is something wrong?” the girl asks sharply.

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

How like this girl to register the nuance of a moment, a half moment when he (almost) lost control of the car.

Affably, he tells her no, not a thing is wrong. It's just wind.

Resenting the question—not that he will indicate resentment. His manner with the girl is more bemused, placating.

Next exit, Barnegat Light. Cassidy feels a pang of nostalgia. No children in this vehicle, no plans to exit, climb the winding steps to the top of the old lighthouse, peer at the ocean through mounted binoculars while gulls and terns circle the balcony as if expecting to be fed.

Does Cassidy miss being a daddy—a daddy to small children? The overseer of so much emotion, a puppet master with weary arms?

**Podcast: The Writer's Voice**

[Listen to Joyce Carol Oates read "The Frenzy."](#)

Cassidy half expects the girl to suggest that they go to the lighthouse. It's the sort of tourist attraction that might appeal to her, an occasion for girlish enthusiasm, photos to take on her iPhone.

When they leave the Garden State Parkway for Ocean Drive, she asks if they could *please not talk* for just a while. The view is so special—she doesn't want to be distracted.

The coastal view *is* special. The wintry Atlantic roiling, frothing, glittering like a gigantic skin shaking itself, great galleon-clouds passing overhead, torn and tattered by the wind.

But he still feels rebuffed. Rebuked. Please don't spoil things by talking.

He wants to protest: *she* was the one who set things back in motion. Calling him the night before, a clandestine call at 12:20 A.M., when she knew that he'd be awake and his wife would be asleep—this is something he has shared with the girl, an example of how admirably she differs from the wife.

When she called, he was, in fact, lying in bed. Beside his sleeping, oblivious wife. Lying in bed and thinking of her, the girl, the *teen-aged mistress*, what he would do with this girl or to this girl if they were alone together in some neutral space, an impersonal and unnamed space, a very private place, a high-ceilinged luxury hotel room without windows or even a door, a floating kind of place, an offshore kind of place, soundproof.

He made his way barefoot through the familiar dark of the bedroom to an adjacent room, where his cellphone was charging, like a heart detached from its body.

Hand shaking? No, his hand was *not* shaking.

In the bedroom, his wife slept unknowing.

In their rooms, his teen-aged children slept unknowing.

On the phone, that giddy sensation of giving in, sinking, as if boneless, will-less, to which he had become addicted.

And now, the next day, the next afternoon, he is driving south on Ocean Drive, along the Jersey coast, with the girl beside him. Through swaths of bright, blinding sunshine, punctuated by the flitting shadows of clouds. It seems a kind of miracle. One he'd never have predicted, for each time they've said goodbye it has seemed to him the final time, the sensible, final time.

Yet here he is, and Brianna is beside him, in this fraught period before Christmas, after which, he has decided, his life will shatter and reorganize itself.

In his elated state, he drives at just above the speed limit. No hurry about the drive—they will arrive at Cape May well before dusk. With the girl beside him, he has all that he requires. So long as they are alone together, and she is in his custody, so to speak.

Brianna has been sitting forward in the passenger's seat, taking pictures with her phone. Marvelling at the view: the wind-buffeted ocean waves, the light shivering and rippling to the horizon, where it dissolves in mist.

Brianna's concentration appears to be genuine, unforced. He envies her this childlike enthusiasm, so different from her frequently sulky, peevish moods.

A teen-aged mistress! What else could he expect?

In fact, Brianna is nearly twenty years old. Her birthday is next month, January. A Capricorn, she told Cassidy.

Does a year make a difference? If/when his wife discovers the liaison, if/when he decides to reveal it to her, will an affair with a twenty-year-old seem slightly less reprehensible than an affair with a teen-ager?

A teen-ager who is, in fact, known to his wife, the daughter of friends in Fair Hills, New Jersey.

Waves glittering to the horizon, pewter-colored, hypnotic. Cassidy is reminded of how he once purchased a ticket on a chartered boat out of Provincetown, taking passengers on a five-hour excursion out into the Atlantic.

Open ocean, immense sky, rocking boat, no sight of land. A mild sensation of panic.

After two hours, the guide summoned passengers to the railing. The Provincetown Princess was cutting through a plankton path: a wide swath of ocean where fish were feeding, thousands of fish, even millions of fish, writhing silvery bodies in the dark water, savagely frenzied activity of a kind that Cassidy had never seen before. It left him appalled and shaken.

It was explained to the passengers that a concentration of plankton had drawn swarms of small fish to the area; the concentration of small fish had attracted larger fish, which devoured the smaller fish; these predators attracted larger predators, to devour them. The popular term for this was "feeding frenzy."

Cassidy stared, transfixed by the horror of it, repelled, yet unable to look away. Feeling the first twinges of nausea. Spread out before him was a region of unfathomable appetite: foaming, churning, flashing, quicksilver with the eel-like bodies of fishes, a sheer boundless, thrashing energy. The

guide prattled on, reciting prepared words. “Are there sharks?” children kept asking.

An abrupt loathing of the ocean itself swept over Cassidy, the very sight, smell. What beauty there was in it was a matter of distance, fairy lights twinkling on heavy, heaving water, not seeing the feeding frenzy beneath the surface.

The ceaselessly rolling, jolting boat was sickening to him, too. That the movement was unstoppable, and that of his own volition he’d condemned himself to five hours of this misery, further disgusted him.

He was alone on the chartered boat. Not yet with Charlotte, whom he would marry two years later. No woman at his side to lay a hand on his arm, to comfort and distract.

Cassidy has an impulse to tell the girl beside him about the horror of the feeding frenzy. He likes to tell her about incidents from his past, accounts that he has embellished over a period of years, but that are new to her and, if new to her, new to Cassidy as well.

But she’d pleaded with him: *Please let’s not talk for a while, O.K.?*

Also, the feeding frenzy had happened long ago, before Brianna was even born. It could be embarrassing to bring it up.

When Cassidy looks over at her, she is, to his surprise, no longer absorbed by the view but peering at the phone in her hand. She has turned away, as a child might, hiding the little screen from adult scrutiny.

Scrolling through e-mails. Or Instagram, TikTok.

“Have you been taking some beautiful pictures?” he can’t resist innocently inquiring.

“Yeah! Yes. I have.”

Smiling at Cassidy sidelong, a quick flash of her very dark eyes, almost shy.

“Great. You can show me later.”

His own cellphone he switched off that morning before Varick Street. Wanting to be, for the next forty-eight hours or so, *off the grid*.

Is it cruel to refer to Brianna Rinzler as his teen-aged mistress when she is nearly twenty years old and mature for her age? And she is Cassidy’s mistress only intermittently and unreliably.

Also, “mistress” is a comical word. Outdated, quaint.

Ten days before Christmas feels, to him, like an ultimatum. He’s not sure why.



*"As a designer, I prize perfect functionality in everything."*  
Cartoon by Liana Finck

Each time they’ve been together—five, six times, seven?—has seemed to be some sort of test. Whatever is to be proved remains unproved.

He isn’t desperate, yet. He doesn’t intend to push the girl. He has leased a condo overlooking the East River, but she has been aware of this for a week at least, no need to dwell upon it. He knows from experience that that is exactly what you don’t do with them—dwell upon a subject, push.

His own daughters. Other men's daughters.

He's not sure what they will end up doing today. Brianna doesn't like to make plans, shrinks from premeditation. Planning to have sex, for instance: *gross*. Planning an outing together, slipping away on a weekday, spontaneous, brazen: *cool*.

A child of upper-middle-class suburban privilege, accustomed to others taking charge, protecting her. Looking out for her as you'd look out for a blind person crossing a street. He has made a reservation at the most highly rated inn in Cape May, just in case.

Passing signs for Ocean City, the toll bridge at Corson's Inlet, Seven Mile Beach. Coastal marshes, shore birds. Warbler migration in spring and fall, monarch-butterfly migration in the fall. . . . It has been years since Cassidy has driven this far south in New Jersey, years since he hiked along the shore at Cape May Point.

Amazing to think that he picked Brianna up in the late morning at a loft on Varick, where, she says, she is staying with friends, having moved out of her parents' house in Fair Hills. When he pulled up at the curb, she ran out to him, uncombed streaked-blond hair, jacket unzipped, tossed her neon-pink backpack (an eyesore) into the rear and climbed into the Subaru, half-falling beside him, startling in her beauty, in her trust, trust of *him*. Turning her face to be kissed, confident that she would be kissed, and kissed hard, until she laughed in mild protest.

"Hey. I've been missing you."

"I've missed you."

He wasn't angry with her then, isn't angry with her now.

That's the surprise of it, every time: how you forgive them.

He liked it, liked the intimacy. The girl's breath smelled of sleep, just slightly stale—no time for mouthwash, toothpaste, in her haste to see him.

Always a jolt when he sees the girl. For the fact is he's crazy about her.

He just has to accept it, his occasional distrust of her. Her obfuscation. Squid ink released in the water to blind, confound predators.

Finally: Cape May. One of the first hotels they pass on Beach Avenue is the Cape May Heritage House, where Cassidy has reserved a room. He tells Brianna that he'd like to check in now. She can wait in the Subaru while he runs inside, he'll be just five minutes, but Brianna is impatient to get to the ocean, to the beach, as soon as possible. It's 3:20 P.M., the sun will start setting in an hour, and she wants to get out of the damn car and *walk, run*.

Her skin is luminous, pale with indignation. Her dark eyes are all pupil. Pointless to argue with Brianna when she's in this mood. Cassidy doesn't dare touch her as he'd like to: grip her shoulders and shake that petulant look off her face.

He says in his most reasonable voice that they'll have time in the morning to walk on the beach, yes? All day tomorrow?

All day *tomorrow*? Brianna regards Cassidy as a child might regard an adult suggesting something so ridiculous, so hurtfully stupid, that she cannot find words to oppose him but is struck dumb.

Brianna zips up her bulky quilted jacket, pulls a crimson angora cap down over her forehead. She tells Cassidy to just please let her out. If he doesn't want to walk right now, he can check into the inn by himself; she'll meet up with him later.

Jesus, *no*.

Cassidy is panicked. What the hell is Brianna thinking? All this way, to fucking Cape May in December, and she's suggesting getting out of the vehicle *without him*?

She *is* a teen-ager. Impulsive, not thinking of anyone except herself.

Silent on most of the drive, as if she'd forgotten Cassidy's very existence, totally immersed in her damned phone—Cassidy suspects her of texting with unknown parties constantly, compulsively—Brianna surprises him now with her sudden animation, as if a switch has been pulled.

Haphazardly, Cassidy has continued to drive though the near-deserted historic district of Cape May. Desperate to interest the *teen-aged mistress* in stately old Victorian-era architecture. Hotels, inns, charmingly quaint bed-and-breakfasts. A former gambling casino refashioned as an arcade.

Intrigued, Brianna is taking pictures again through the window.

Cassidy remarks, “It’s off-season here, but also *off-century*.”

“Like a time warp!” Brianna says. She loves these old-fashioned places!

But not all the specialty shops and boutiques are open. Some hotels are obviously closed, not just for the season but permanently. Against the moldering stucco wall of the grand old Atlantic Hotel, folded-up café umbrellas stand like upright corpses.

Folly to have come here, Cassidy thinks.

Over the water the sky is glazed now with an Arctic pallor. Massive snow clouds like battalions have smothered the sunlight. The last thing Cassidy wants to do is hike along the edge of the ocean—he’s dying for a drink in a cozy bar. Still, it’s a relief at least to have stirred some emotion, some *feeling*, in Brianna.

Easily bored: adolescents. Notoriously.

“Come *on*,” Brianna says, poking Cassidy. Suddenly playful, forgiving. “Trapped in this car for *hours*. Jesus!”

The sulky mouth is beautiful again, smiling. Eyes glistening. She’s all elbows, knees, uncoiling legs. Cassidy recalls his daughters, his son, when they were small children, their sudden explosive energy. When they still adored their daddy, never doubted him.

Before Cassidy can properly park the Subaru beside one of the sand-swept walkways, Brianna scrambles out. Winding a long crimson scarf around her neck. Tugging on matching mittens. In her knee-high Italian leather boots, she resembles a springy colt yearning to run wild. Cassidy is left behind to lock up the vehicle.

He will punish her, he thinks calmly. That will be his reward, once they are alone in the room he reserved at the Cape May Heritage House.

But now he is laughing and waving at the long-legged girl, hurrying to catch up with her.

*I n love! This is how we behave when we are in love.*

Hiking at the water's edge. The wind is colder than Cassidy anticipated, razor-sharp, making his eyes water. Beside him, the girl is exclaiming in excitement about the beauty of the ocean, the "unspoiled" beach, the funny little birds—sandpipers?—pecking in the hard-packed sand. She seizes Cassidy's gloved hand in her mittenened one and tugs him along, swinging their arms, forcing an antic mood in a way that Charlotte would never have done even in her youth. . . . *Heedless in love, crazy for love. Look at us!*

Except for an elderly gentleman walking his dog some distance away, both taking mincing steps, the beach and the boardwalk are deserted. No one to observe the lovers, no one to envy the middle-aged man with the much younger girl taking a romantic (if windy) walk along the beach at Cape May in December.

Folly, Cassidy thinks, slightly out of breath, gripping her hand hard. *Fate.*

He would like to ask Brianna why she didn't answer his calls for five days. Why she shrinks from acknowledging that, since he has rented a condo in Manhattan, there is no reason for her to continue to stay with friends in a drafty loft.

But Cassidy knows that, at the first sound of reproach, at the first demand, Brianna will flee. Can't risk it.

In their most intimate moments, Cassidy has felt the tension in the girl's slender body, nerves strung tight as wires. Brianna seems to swing between two moods: intense enthusiasm, intense repugnance. It's Cassidy's fancy that she thinks with her entire body, strained, finely trembling. Her skin is always slightly feverish, unlike his own, which feels lukewarm to him, only half alive. Or maybe it's the effect of pills, the little white pills that Brianna

carries loose in her pockets—amphetamines, opioids, antidepressants, traded and bartered among her friends as casually as children in another era shared sticks of spearmint gum.

Brianna has dropped his hand, pulled away. Venturing so close to the splattering surf that her tight-fitting jeans are dappled with wet.

Despite his discomfort, Cassidy likes it that Brianna Rinzler has led him to a place, a specific place, to which he'd never have gone except in response to a whim of hers. He likes it that he is doing something out of character, something that would astonish his wife, his children, his friends, his business associates, if they knew.

Also, Cassidy likes it that Brianna is nearly as tall as he, in the Italian boots he purchased for her. Though when they are both sitting or lying down together, and the girl is naked, soft-skinned as a mollusk out of its shell, Cassidy looms over her.

Trotting along the beach at Cape May in December! Forty-six years old. In an L. L. Bean fleece-lined suède jacket, corduroy trousers. His male vanity is such that he is hatless. Freezing yet uncomplaining. Short of breath yet invigorated. His pulse rings with an animal excitement indistinguishable from dread, panic: a flood of adrenaline, as if his life were at risk.

Brianna would be furious to know that Cassidy thinks of her, even half seriously, as his *teen-aged mistress*. Sexist-asshole thing to say, stupid. She'd slap his face. Tell him to *fuck off, go to hell*.

As it is, Brianna sometimes jokes uneasily about the age difference between them. Yet she was the one who pursued *him*. That has to be acknowledged.

Cassidy catches up with her, slides an arm around her shoulders to rein her in. His prancing little horsey! Kisses her mouth, but the gesture is awkward, clumsy; their teeth strike together, and Brianna winces. Her lips are luxuriantly cold, a pleasurable shock against Cassidy's skin.

"Hey—I love you," he says, as she turns away, but the surf is too noisy. Brianna seems not to hear.

Last time they were together, Brianna asked him not to talk *like that*. But he isn't discouraged. He will wear the impetuous girl down, he is sure.

At this moment, the cloud bank shifts and the waning sun glares, broken on the waves, eerily beautiful, blinding.

When had he fallen in love with his friends' daughter?

Four years before, at a school Christmas concert in Fair Hills, which Cassidy and his wife attended, with the Rinzlers, in fact. Their daughters were both in the girls' chorus.

Did she remember the Palestrina she sang? Cassidy has asked Brianna. The Vivaldi Psalm?

Brianna frowned, trying to remember. So long ago, she was, like, *sixteen*.

Maybe it hadn't been *in love*, exactly. Though certainly a sensation of falling.

During the chorus's slow-paced candlelight procession down the center aisle of the auditorium and onto the stage, Cassidy found himself staring at a girl he didn't quite recognize as Brianna Rinzler at first, her heartbreakingly lovely. He couldn't look away even when he belatedly realized who the girl was. A clutching sensation in his chest, a wave of vertigo, of a kind he hadn't felt in memory.

The candlelight procession was one of the features of the annual winter concert. For weeks, his daughter Veronica and her friends had excitedly discussed it. Two by two, the choruses filed in from the rear of the auditorium to the stage, girls in high-necked white silk blouses and long wine-colored velvet skirts, boys in dark suits, ties. Slow, solemn Christmas music accompanied them, as if in church. Cassidy and Charlotte sat with the Rinzlers, who were longtime acquaintances, if not close friends; the couples made it a point to see one another several times a year.

Cassidy craned his neck, waiting for Veronica to appear: his daughter was a plump-cheeked, earnest girl with close-set brown eyes, limp brown hair, a manner that was shyly appealing, like Charlotte's. Cassidy loved his

daughter, fourteen at the time, and feared for her, for all that was to come, as *almost pretty* could be a harsh fate. There was something hypnotic in the way the candlelight procession continued, girl after girl and boy after boy; only a few of the candlelit faces, such as that of Brianna Rinzler, warranted a second glance, attention beyond the obligatory pride of parents for their children. Cassidy had almost forgotten Veronica by the time she appeared: she passed nearly unnoticed, as he stared at the Rinzlers' daughter, whom he could have sworn he'd never seen before.

Brianna seems scarcely to recall the winter concert. Girls' chorus wasn't an activity to which she devoted much serious time. Vaguely she recalls the ceremonial procession, the fluttering candle flames, the white silk blouse, and the senior boy with whom she was paired. Of the blurred sea of rapt adult faces, her parents' and Cassidy's and Charlotte's among them, Brianna remembers nothing at all.

Three years after the winter concert, Cassidy had more or less forgotten the Rinzlers' oldest daughter. Hadn't seen her in the interim, never thought of her; she wasn't a friend of Veronica's. His wife had mentioned that their friends were having difficulties with their daughter: she'd dropped out of the expensive liberal-arts school they'd sent her to; possibly drugs were involved; she was living in New York City and estranged from her family. Then, in Penn Station, where Cassidy was about to board a train to New Jersey one evening, Brianna Rinzler had approached him, boldly, flirtatiously. In retrospect, Cassidy would understand that Brianna was high, radiantly high, her skin luminous with heat and her glassy eyes glistening. She was with a tall pasty-skinned boy with features as striking as hers—might've been a male model, photographed for Calvin Klein. In the congested area where passengers were waiting they stood basking in the glamour of youth.

"Hiiiiya! Do you remember me? It's Brianna, Brianna Rinzler. I was, like, two years ahead of your daughter in school—I've forgotten her name—at Fair Hills High. You and your wife know my parents, I guess—do you remember?"

After the first shock had passed, yes. He did remember.

Brianna had been in a giddy mood, pushing up against Cassidy, laughing, stumbling, holding out her iPhone to take a selfie of the two of them, dishevelled and flush-faced.

Just for us, she'd assured him. Just private.

Sometimes Brianna confides in Cassidy a frequent complaint of hers: people won't leave her alone, are constantly trying to manipulate her.

When Brianna speaks of manipulative people, she is referring to her parents, or to her professors at Bard, or to mysterious figures who remain unnamed, unknown to Cassidy. These are people who are trying to blackmail her emotionally, put pressure on her. *Fuck with her head.* Sometimes she slips, says *you people*. As if Cassidy were one of them.

There is a therapist, or there was a therapist, who'd seriously *fucked with her head*. Friends she'd thought were trustworthy, who'd betrayed her.

It's titillating to Cassidy when Brianna speaks of her parents. As if, in complaining of them, Brianna is acknowledging that he, her lover, is not in the stifling category—parent, middle-aged—to which the Rinzlers belong.

"It scares me, how people disappear," she says.

Turns out, there are friends of Brianna's who have *disappeared*.

A boy named Colin from her high school in Fair Hills. Six weeks after he started classes at Stanford, he went hiking in the Santa Cruz Mountains and never returned. His parents flew out to Palo Alto, stayed for months, police looked for him, there were posters everywhere, search teams, but he'd just *disappeared*. And a girl in Brianna's residence hall at Bard, she'd taken the train into the city for some purpose unknown to her suitemates and never returned. One of Brianna's own relatives, when she was a little girl, a male cousin of her mother's was said to have *disappeared* in Tangier.

How serious Brianna is, pressing into Cassidy's arms! So fascinated by her, Cassidy scarcely hears what she is saying.

One night, in a small, hushed voice, she told him how there was this boy she knew—in fact, she'd been staying with him earlier in the semester, after she'd dropped out of Bard and come to New York, where (it turned out) he was dealing drugs, mainly pot but coke, too, when he could get hold of it. He'd been at Bard but transferred to N.Y.U., then dropped out of N.Y.U., too, and was living over on Avenue A. He'd evidently made some enemies, and that was a serious mistake. Whoever they were, they broke into his place when no one was there and trashed it, and next time (this was after Brianna had moved out, to Varick Street) they killed him.

Stabbed him to death, like, fifteen or twenty stab wounds. Torso, neck, groin.

The body was in the apartment for three days. Only because someone in the building noticed the smell were police called. *It was, like, an actual murder. Like something on TV.*

In a tentative, wondering voice, Brianna spoke as if she doubted the authenticity or even the plausibility of what she herself was presenting to Cassidy as an adult with the power to interpret.

What she couldn't forgive was what she'd done, she said—left her friend without telling him, didn't leave a note, didn't text, no explanation. She'd just *fled*.

Shivering in Cassidy's arms, tears wetting her cheeks, naked, so vulnerable. He kissed her and assured her that she'd had no choice, had had to save her own life. She'd done the right thing by leaving: otherwise, she herself might have been killed. Comforting her, rocking her to sleep like a young child.

Happiest hour of Cassidy's adult life.

What Cassidy recalls of his Fair Hills life is its routine. The comfort of routine.

How many years, decades. His wife, children. His friends, acquaintances, neighbors, who'd formed a circle of sorts, a net, to secure him—define and confine him. Endless rounds of dinner parties, cocktail parties, receptions.

Holiday season beginning after Thanksgiving and not ending until the last open house on New Year's Day. How *boring* it all now seemed.

His wife's family, his family. Relatives—none of them chosen.

The entire texture of that life, its willed imposture. Not that it died quickly—it did not. Like the carefully tended grass of a suburban lawn that gradually thins with time, is invaded by crabgrass, it experienced a slow, diminishing death.

"Are you in love with someone else?" Charlotte had calmly asked Cassidy, her eyes grave and wounded, her voice steady. "We can talk about it, if you are. If you think you are."

He'd avoided answering her. Unprepared, hadn't the words just yet. Easier to suggest that she was imagining things.

Soon afterward, Charlotte had a minor accident with her car. Pavement slick with freezing rain, she'd skidded into the rear of another vehicle. Terribly shaken, bursting into tears, but not injured. Thank God, Cassidy thought. If Charlotte had been injured, if she'd *died*. He could not have borne it, the burden of guilt.

But the incident awakened in Cassidy the understanding that his marriage was vulnerable, expendable. A marriage can melt like wedding cake in the rain, of course.

He has made the decision to move out of the house in Fair Hills, in which he's lived (happily enough, in fact—that's the baffling truth) for nearly twenty years. He hasn't yet told Charlotte; that will come in time. The ideal situation would be for Charlotte to put the onus on *him*. Ask him to move out.

Still, he is grateful for his wife's restraint and dignity. Those very qualities in Charlotte that make her so reasonable, reliable, dully predictable, he values now, as he makes plans to leave. She is so fair-minded; she can be relied upon not to rouse the children against him. For he could not bear being considered selfish, cruel, a bad daddy. He has simply lost his ability to

impersonate himself, the way over time you can lose a skill like piano playing or speaking a language.

The condo has been leased, though he is still officially living in Fair Hills. Just last night, sleeping beside the wife. Explaining or not-explaining to her, carefully chosen words, spoken in Cassidy's normal voice, which is affable, consoling, circuitous, nonconfrontational. He couldn't trust himself to speak otherwise. He didn't have the script. No way to confess to his wife of so many years that his secret sorrow has been gathering like phlegm in his throat—he wants only to spit it out.

All this while, Brianna has been collecting things on the hard-packed sand of the beach at Cape May.

What sorts of things? Anything that seems to catch her eye, anything droll or strange: for instance, a piece of driftwood resembling a human arm; a child's sneaker washed clean and pale by the surf; a mollusk shell marked with hundreds of tiny stipples like spines. Brianna takes a picture of the shell on the beach, then holds it in her hand, staring as if at a talisman.

Cassidy, who would like nothing better than to hike back to the Subaru, drive to the hotel, and have a drink, asks Brianna if she'd like him to carry these things for her. They should be heading back to town.

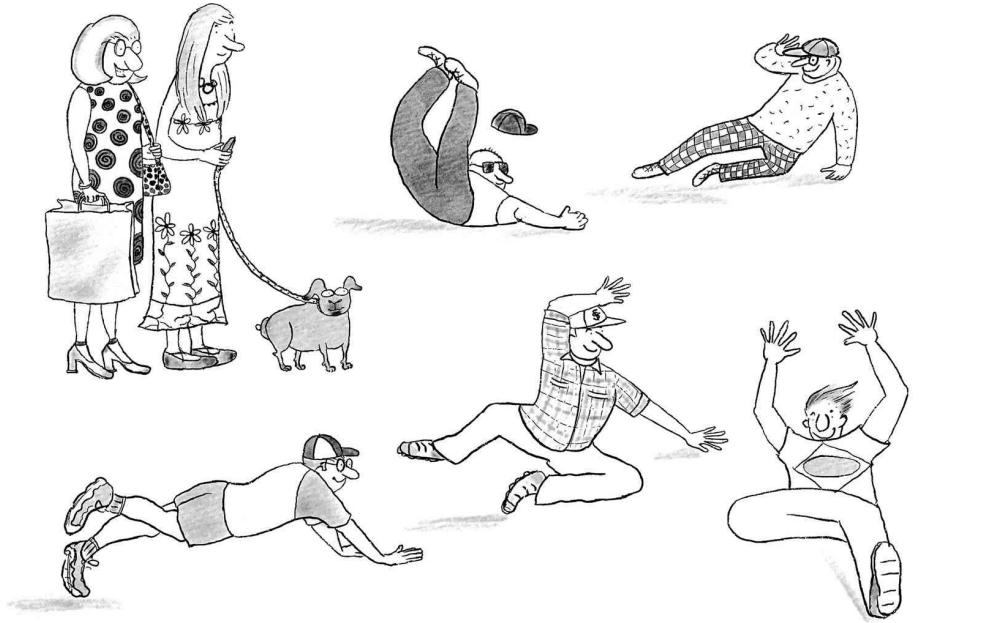
It is nearing 4:30 *P.M.*, and the sun is slanting toward the horizon in the west. The Atlantic wind has become increasingly cold, but Brianna seems scarcely to notice. She hands her worthless little treasures to Cassidy, then turns away to find more. There is something antic, willful in her behavior, but Cassidy supposes it's genuine.

They have hiked a mile or more from the historic district of Cape May. The beach has become rougher, shabbier. The sand is eroded into curious little ditches, and there's litter underfoot, the mummified remains of dead fish. They are beyond the boardwalk, but a flight of wooden steps leads to the crest of a weedy hill, about twelve feet in height.

A wet, pungent odor of rot reminds Cassidy of the plankton field off Provincetown. That frenzied feeding in the churning water, the savagery and

pointlessness of appetite.

“Brianna? Shall we head back?”



*“How do I know it’s baseball season? When a bunch of grown men start pretending they’re sliding into ‘home.’ ”*  
Cartoon by Victoria Roberts

But Brianna is trotting off in search of new treasure, taking pictures with her phone, continuously and compulsively recording whatever strikes her eye, whatever distraction, waves, surf, her own wet boots, twisted clots of seaweed, broken glass, Cassidy. (He knows she has been taking pictures of him, mischievously, since he doesn’t want her to; it has become a kind of joke between them, but not one that Cassidy finds funny.) He is thinking ahead to their evening, to the night in a room in the Cape May Heritage House furnished with “period antiques”—utter privacy, secrecy. Brianna has a way of semi-collapsing on a bed, giddy-drunk, giddy-high, laughing at whatever her middle-aged lover does to her, of which she’s (sort of) aware, unprotesting—thinks it’s funny, no big deal.

Brianna’s slender twisty eel-like body, the thrust of pelvic bones, shiny eyes rolling back in her head in passion or a simulacrum of it. . . . Once, he grabbed her hard around her narrow hips and she snorted in surprised laughter, kicking him, as a child might kick, tugging at his hair, clawing his cheeks, playing rough, puppy-rough, unexpectedly strong for a girl so underweight, saliva glistening on her chin like a tusk. She’d been

incandescently high, her skin dry and burning to the touch, an artery pulsing in her throat which he had to kiss, hard.

Cassidy tells Brianna not to climb those steps: the wood looks rotted.

Brianna ignores him because she has glimpsed something in the weeds at the top of the hill. Monkey-quick, she climbs the wobbly steps, snatches up what looks like a broken doll as Cassidy stares after her. Jesus! If she should fall, if she should injure herself . . . Is he responsible? Would such an accident be reported, find its way into a newspaper?

Brianna waves the raggedy doll in the air.

As she climbs back down, one of the steps collapses under her, and she falls heavily, grunting, to the ground. Cassidy, vexed with himself and with her, isn't strong enough to catch her in his arms. God damn! She can't have hurt herself, Cassidy thinks, stooping to help her up. She's whimpering, tears glistening on her cheeks, dead weight at first, uncooperative. Has she twisted her ankle? Sprained something? Why the hell didn't she listen to him? Cassidy demands. Worried that, if he stoops to lift her, he might throw out his goddam back and suffer for days, weeks.

Brianna is petulantly groping about for her cellphone, which is somewhere beneath the rotted steps, and she pushes Cassidy's hand away. Suddenly furious with her, he snatches up the phone and tosses it into the ocean, cursing in a way that he has never done in front of her before.

In that instant she is stunned into silence: eyes wide, mouth dropping open. She cannot believe what Cassidy has done.

Her iPhone, lost in the slovenly slapping waves. Freezing-stinging waves, spray wetting their faces.

Cassidy yanks the stricken girl to her feet. Gives her a hard shake to stop her whimpering. Tells her he will buy her another goddam phone in the morning, but they are going back to town now, to the hotel. For the night.

Brianna paws at Cassidy, desperate to retrieve her phone. "The fucking phone is *gone*," he says. The water is too cold for her to wade into, too cold

for him—*fuck it*, by now the phone is ruined, soaked, just *fuck it*.

Brianna is sobbing, limping as Cassidy walks her roughly back to the Subaru. His blood is up, he feels no remorse for what he has done as he promises he will buy a new iPhone for her in the morning, an updated model, the newest model, not to worry, the information on her phone is saved somewhere, in the cloud, whatever the cloud is. He's sure. Brianna continues to sob in shock, defeated.

*He* has triumphed, as he'd hoped.

Driving to the hotel on Beach Avenue, he demands to know why she didn't answer his calls—twenty or more calls, over five days. What the hell was she thinking? *Was* she thinking? And then calling him late last night, when his wife might have overheard, what was that about?

In the passenger's seat of the Subaru, Brianna is stiff with something like fear, guilt. Cassidy is fully in control now. The headstrong girl has become docile, unresisting. She has seen what Cassidy did with her phone; she has felt the strong impress of his hands on her; her resistance has melted away like a tissue dropped in water.

Just murmuring in response to his questions, *Don't know*, and, later, in the hotel room, shrinking from his angry face, pleading, *Sorry, so sorry*.

In the morning, Cassidy heaves himself from the king-size bed. He is naked, prickly-skinned, smelling of his body. Bodies.

Shaky on his feet. A mild thrill of disgust. He regards the still sleeping girl in the rumpled bedclothes on the far side of the absurdly vast bed, her sickly pale face not very attractive now, her hair matted. Her eyelids quiver as if she is trying to wake up but cannot. Her soft mouth is agape. On one of her bare shoulders, a thumb-size bruise, which Cassidy sees with something like satisfaction, though also tenderness.

Recalling how the girl stared at him the night before, in fear of him, once they were alone together. Fear that was a kind of awe, reverence.

Knowing, accepting that she deserved whatever Cassidy would do to her. This submissiveness in the teen-aged mistress Cassidy has found addictive, like a narcotic. Brianna's eyes glassy in surrender, pupils dilated. His quick, hard hands. The authority in such hands. For all this, he will forgive her. He will reward her. He will purchase for her the very newest iPhone model; the cost is nothing to him.

In the beautifully white gleaming bathroom, a luxury bathroom, he's eager to shower off the body odor. For it *is* disgusting to him, in a way.

She didn't resist, stumbling into the room the night before. This, the Monarch Suite. He helped her to the bed, where, feebly, she pushed his hands away, even as she continued to apologize. *Sorry, I am so sorry, don't hurt me.*

Maybe she'd sprained the ankle. Or torn a tendon. She'd been desperate searching through the neon-pink backpack for pills wrapped in a Kleenex—"painkillers," she called them—which she needed badly, swallowed dry. Neither of them was in a mood for the historic dining room, where you were expected to dress formally, *fuck it*. He'd ended up practically feeding her the pricey room-service dinner—she'd kept falling asleep. She hadn't resisted Cassidy, she never resisted Cassidy, like a Raggedy Ann doll, obliging and, to a degree, even coöperating, if only she could keep her eyes open, which she could not. He'd tugged off the tight-fitting Italian leather boots. Tugged off the tight-fitting jeans. As she tried to wriggle away like a large baby, he'd adored her, declaring that he would love her, would take care of her. When they returned to the city, he'd help her move her things out of the loft on Varick, move in with him. *You know you love me. You know that.*

Later this morning, he will purchase a new iPhone for her. He's sure there's a mall somewhere near Cape May. Maybe then lunch, a visit to the lighthouse, the museum. Back to the Cape May Heritage House—he reserved for two nights.

So simple. You make a decision, you act. Why hadn't he realized earlier in his life?

Love is a decision you make.

If only Brianna would remain the way she is now, has been since the accident on the beach. Docile, meek, grateful for him. If only this, permanently. The two of them. Like this.

Taking his time, in no hurry in the white-tiled bathroom, Cassidy shampoos his thinning hair below the chrome showerhead, spreads soapy lather over his body, going to fat at the waist, his belly hairy, legs spread for balance. Taking care, he shaves his jaws with his safety razor—now is not the time to rush, risk cutting himself. He rubs body lotion onto his hands, chest. Prides himself on the grizzled chest hair, genitals drooping between his legs, just visible over the swell of his belly. His beard is so heavy, he should shave twice a day. *Testosterone*.

He regards himself sidelong in the large steamy mirror, squinting, head cocked. Half-consciously, Cassidy has learned how best to observe himself. *You do not want to look too directly.*

Leaving the bathroom, white terry-cloth bath towel wrapped around his thick waist, he calls to the girl in the bed, “Good morning!” He is in an elevated mood, taking note that it’s 8:41 A.M. by the digital clock on the bedside table nearest him, but there’s no answer. He stands flat-footed, astonished to see that the vast bed appears to be empty, holding only the soiled sheets, like entangled white snakes.

“Brianna? Where—”

On the floor there’s a pillow, one of the large ornamental pillows he kicked off the bed the night before.

Brianna is *gone*. Unless she’s in the closet . . .

Not in the closet—he checks, foolishly. And nothing on the wooden hangers, nothing on the shelves in the closet or on the floor.

His clothes, his things—not in the closet, and not on the chair where he tossed them. Nor are the girl’s clothes here—no quilted jacket, no Italian leather boots. The neon-pink backpack is gone. Even the mirror against the far wall appears vacant as Cassidy stares, trying to comprehend.

“Brianna? Hey, Jesus!—c’mon . . .”

His breath is quick. He is feeling light-headed, weak. Telling himself, This is not happening! Of course Brianna is in the room somewhere, playing a prank. She must have slipped into the bathroom without his noticing. So Cassidy reenters the bathroom, which smells of fragrant steam, inspects the shower stall with its soap-spattered glass doors—no one here, nothing. On the bathroom floor, sodden towels he kicked to the side for the housekeeper.

Returning to the room, glancing quickly about: the things he left on the bedside table, on his side of the bed, where are they? Wallet, cellphone, keys.

Not on the floor, nothing on the floor except the pillow.

Not even his socks, underwear. The girl’s jeans he’d tugged off her limp lower body, her underwear he’d let fall to the floor—no sign.

Her cashmere sweater with the soiled neck, his L. L. Bean suède jacket, corduroy trousers, water-stained shoes—where?

On the table, the filth-stiffened raggedy doll Brianna found on the beach. This she’d left for Cassidy.

He has only the white towel that is wrapped around his waist. He’s shivering now, his teeth chattering, and a sudden hard throbbing in his head.

Numbly, he checks the closet again. Pulls out bureau drawers: nothing even to rattle in the drawers, no cellphone, no key to the Subaru. The girl has dared to take the Subaru key, she has taken his wallet, his phone, his clothes, his shoes. She has stolen his Subaru Forester and left him alone in the Cape May Heritage House, *naked*.

Thoughts rush at Cassidy like missiles. It is not possible that Brianna Rinzler has abandoned him in Cape May, New Jersey. It is not possible that Brianna can drive the Subaru back to the city. Has the girl that capacity, that sense of purpose? Will she ditch his vehicle on a deserted street on the West Side and hike back to the Varick Street loft? What will he do, stranded in New Jersey? *What can he do?*

How did the girl deceive him? She was so deeply asleep, as if comatose, drugged. Oblivious of him, he'd thought, as he stood over her gloating and protective, tenderhearted.

She'd waited until he was in the shower, then slipped from the bed and thrown on her clothes, pushed his clothes, even his shoes, his wallet, keys, phone into the neon-pink backpack and zipped it up, thrusting her arms into the sleeves of the quilted jacket, breathless and charged with adrenaline, as if fleeing for her life, leaving the room and shutting the door behind her—within how many minutes, seconds?

In the bathroom, he'd heard nothing.

Cassidy checks the bathroom again: nothing. Drops to his knees to peer beneath the bed, but the bed is mounted on a solid wooden platform, no space below it.

Exhausted now, his blood pressure mounting, Cassidy sits heavily, leaden, on the edge of the bed. Trying to think. Stares at the digital clock for several seconds without registering the time: *8:48 A.M.*

At last, there comes a sharp-knuckled rapping at the door. In this instant, Cassidy is flooded with relief. Brianna has returned, of course Brianna has returned, she has taken mercy on him. He is halfway on his feet to open the door, except the voice is unfamiliar, a woman's voice, expedient and charmless. "Housekeeping." ♦

By Deborah Treisman  
By Colm Tóibín  
By Joseph O'Neill  
By Yiyun Li  
By Gideon Lewis-Kraus  
By Jill Lepore  
By S. C. Cornell  
By Zach Helfand  
By Alexandra Schwartz  
By Anahid Nersessian  
By Anthony Lane  
By Rebecca Mead

## The Critics

- Graydon Carter's Wild Ride Through a Golden Age of Magazines
- Briefly Noted
- Is Gossip Good for Us?
- "Perfection" Is the Perfect Novel for an Age of Aimless Aspiration
- Uneven Revivals of "A Streetcar Named Desire" and "Ghosts"

## Books

# Graydon Carter's Wild Ride Through a Golden Age of Magazines

The former *Vanity Fair* editor recalls a time when the expense accounts were limitless, the photo shoots were lavish, and the stakes seemed high. What else has been lost?

By [Nathan Heller](#)



Carter (pictured with Fran Lebowitz) has been held up as a force of style, both in his personal taste and in his expansive vision of a creative life. Photograph by Jonathan Becker

Style is said to be singular, which makes it difficult to define. It is personal, though its appreciation can be broad, and it is not the same as fashion—many people hold the terms to be opposed. Generally speaking, it rises from confidence in being one thing and not another, and in knowing when to join and when to pull back from the pack. The great promulgator of style, through much of the previous century, was the editor of magazines.

Graydon Carter, a former editor of *Spy*, the *New York Observer*, and *Vanity Fair*, has been held up over the years as a force of style, both in his personal life (he dresses well) and in his expansive vision of creative work. At *Vanity Fair*, Carter gave the movie industry a layer of polish and championed a particular idea of the good life—affluent and lush, yet seriously engaged in

the world. As a New York restaurateur, he helped to promote a certain kind of refined dining: intimate, convivial, and bound to specific neighborhoods. And, as a power player, he remains a background impresario, helping to launch movies, shape events, and assemble people. All these activities are exercises in style, and all, in his telling, grew from his editorial work during an especially prosperous and thrilling era in American magazines. That era is the subject of the memoir “[When the Going Was Good: An Editor’s Adventures During the Last Golden Age of Magazines](#)” (Penguin Press), which Carter has written with the ghostwriter James Fox.

## What We’re Reading

*Discover notable new fiction, nonfiction, and poetry.*



It is not for us to wonder how Carter, who came up as a writer and editor, feels about the double byline on his life, but the choice of Fox, the writer behind Keith Richards’s excellent “[Life](#),” from 2010, reflects both Carter’s good taste and his instinct for cachet. If you must collaborate, why not with the ghost of the grooviest Stone? Fox, known to be a great ordering force, has helped turn Carter’s extremely un-Richardsian life into a winsome book —brisk, bright, and full of well-told anecdotes about bold- and semi-boldface names—without straying from Carter’s aloof and sometimes chilly

sybaritism. “Somehow, in my case, with a lot of mishaps and a dollop of good luck along the way, things just worked out,” Carter writes: the voice of a man who tasted the best of the American century and still left the party early, with his dignity intact. Anything lost through the co-writing is mostly in the realm of portraiture. No existing reputations are broken here, and many are burnished. The book trades in a familiar New York style of information-sharing by which outsiders are allowed to feel like insiders, and sometimes—because Carter’s career has been one of turning tables endlessly—the other way around.

The truism has it that most great New York magazine editors come from away—from the West or the Midwest or across the Atlantic—and arrive with an ability to see what natives don’t. Carter’s home town was Ottawa, a place where, as he puts it, “everyone had a frostbite story.” There was a lot of skiing and hockey, and Carter’s mother, “a gifted Sunday painter,” encouraged his sketching. Carter’s father is likened to David Niven (“other men adored him and women were tickled by his attention”) and, almost in the same breath, described as an exuberantly flatulent man who claimed an ability to pass wind to the theme from “The Bridge on the River Kwai.” His father was intensely parsimonious as well, and once tried to build a front fence by hammering bookshelves together. This cheap, farting, charismatic man was also a career pilot with the Royal Canadian Air Force. One wants to know more than Carter’s brief portrait perhaps allows.

Carter’s own superpower seems to have been ordinariness. He was passable at most things, notable in none. After high school, he did railroad maintenance in western Canada—by his account, a military-like experience of barracks life, labor, and diverse camaraderie, common among sheltered middle-class Canadians. He attended two universities in Ottawa and left both. To pass the time during these desultory days, he began working at a new publication called *The Canadian Review*. A masthead shakeup swiftly tossed the editorship into his lap. The appointment was less grand than it sounded—*The Canadian Review* was a literary magazine with campus funding—and the role was not a perfect fit. A lot of what the *Review* printed was poetry, but Carter’s appreciation of the form ended somewhere around “So We’ll Go No More a Roving,” and he took to putting all the poetry in the trash. The magazine’s financial bottom fell out, but not before he’d tasted real success: under his tenure, the *Review* reached a circulation of fifty

thousand, a high number in Canada. (As a population share, that would be, in today's United States, about as many people as now take Sunday delivery of the *New York Times*.) He glimpsed an upward path.

Across the twentieth century, New York magazines were powerful convening spaces—not just for readers but for journalists, artists, photographers, and literary writers. At the largest of them, a few small assignments a year, or a major one every couple of years, could pay the rent. For young staffers, the magazines were life-making, paternalistic institutions, providing support both in and out of the office. The editor of *The New Yorker* set up a “drawing account” system to help writers with their cash flows while they worked. A “*Vogue* doctor” advised young staffers on reproductive health. In the late seventies, when Carter arrived at *Time*, in a mid-level writing job, he was pleased to find that he never had to use his oven. Staffers charged restaurant dinners and even some family vacations to the magazine, often at their superiors’ urging. *Time* had a reputation as an apiary for buzzing young Ivy League types. “The general feeling was that everybody else could be making more elsewhere—a theory I did not subscribe to—but the expense account life made up for some of the shortage,” Carter writes. Every Friday, as the upcoming issue was put to bed, carts rolled through the hallways with hot dinner and wine, after which company cars took staffers home—or, in the summer, out to Long Island, where they rented houses in Sag Harbor. For Carter, who had his first Savile Row suit made during those years, *Time* was where the good going began.

He was at first a “floater,” like the character in Calvin Trillin’s [novel](#) of the same name, writing pieces across a range of desks. On Monday, stories were assigned. On Tuesday, correspondents corresponded, researchers researched, and Carter went to the movies. Wednesday was when he began writing, drawing from a file that landed on his desk; then his efforts went to editors, who rewrote almost everything. (“My heart would skip a beat when I’d read a published piece and recognize a phrase I’d written.”) If this process dampened the anxieties of authorship, it also dampened its pleasures; a week at *Time* was like bowling with bumpers, and many people, in the end, want a real game. When Carter realized that he wouldn’t be among the bright lights elevated—his cohort included Walter Isaacson and Michiko Kakutani—he foresaw an aimless future. *Time* had been a paradise for him, but it was not enough.

If “style” is one of the nebulous terms of modern urban life, another is “glamour.” Glamour is about carriage and perception, and in this way is humor’s improbable sibling. The broad-shouldered man in the Brioni suit, his Jaeger-LeCoultre flashing beneath a crisp cuff, is all effortless glamour —until a banana peel sends him sprawling. In the course of the nineteen-eighties, New York transformed from a flaming wasteland of muggings, languid professionalism, and underground parties into a despoiled wilderness of muggings, careerism, and public glitz. Some saw a new age of glamour. It took a cockeyed gaze to notice that the city was a newly funny place as well.

*Spy*, which Carter launched, in 1986, with his former *Time* colleague Kurt Andersen, strove for a tone he calls “bemused detachment, but witheringly judgmental,” and was almost instantly a hit. Comic magazines like *Mad* and *National Lampoon* were zany, gag-filled, world-inside-your-head parodies, but *Spy* was a reported fact-and-trend magazine—closer, in some ways, to *Time* or *Life*. It had columns, features, sidebars, spreads, and crosswords, but in mischievously ironized forms. A fine-print sidebar, called “Fine Print,” might list prominent New Yorkers who had been found guilty of ethical and other violations. A service feature, called “Service Feature,” offered a breakdown of, for instance, who was who in the decade’s notorious romans à clef. Borrowing *Private Eye*’s penchant for reusable epithets (“small but perfectly formed”) and *Time*’s tic of front-loading descriptors (“beaver-toothed Joe DiMaggio”), *Spy* gave its subjects recurring and unflattering titles. There was “too-rich-and-too-fleshy [Bill Blass](#),” the designer. A former Secretary of State was “socialite war criminal [Henry Kissinger](#).” And there was “short-fingered vulgarian [Donald Trump](#),” *Spy*’s perpetual embodiment of everything inept, corrupt, tacky, buffoonish, and cruel in eighties New York.

The best satirical projects are mapping exercises that bring comfort and community to readers: by poking fun, they name and locate people in a knowable comic landscape. (*The New Yorker*’s [Talk of the Town](#), which its founding editor held to be the heart of the magazine, was conceived as one such endeavor, meant to turn the daunting city into a familiar “village of New York.”) To be lampooned in *Spy* was, if not at all an honor, something like a backward, upside-down mark of distinction. Nora Ephron, Carter says, described being relieved when she opened an issue and didn’t find her name,

then feeling annoyed at being left out. (Of Ephron's novel "Heartburn," *Spy* had succinctly pronounced, "Everybody fares poorly, including the reader.")

Carter co-edited the magazine for five years and oversaw what ended up being an ill-starred sale to Charles Saatchi and Johnny Pigozzi. (*Spy* would cease publication in 1994 and, after a brief resurrection, die a second death in 1998.) He was growing restless, and, in the summer of 1991, to the surprise of his colleagues, he moved to a job running the *New York Observer*, an East Side weekly. The paper's readership picked up. He started sending sample copies to editors abroad. The chairman of Condé Nast, S. I. Newhouse, toured his European publications in the late winter and, noticing the *Observer* in everybody's inboxes, assumed that Carter had created an international success.

That spring, Newhouse invited Carter to his apartment and offered him the editorship of either of two magazines he owned: *Vanity Fair* or *The New Yorker*. Carter chose the latter, where his starting salary was set at six hundred thousand dollars, or about \$1.4 million today. In the weeks that followed, he drew up an eighteen-month plan to turn the magazine onto a fresh course. *The New Yorker* was known in his apartment as "the Pencil": a kind of code that enabled Carter, who has a reasonable fear of eavesdroppers in Manhattan restaurants, to talk about the future over dinner with his children and his wife.

No *New Yorker* succession has been without last-minute drama, except for, possibly, the first, in 1951, when the magazine's founding editor died while having one of his lungs removed, and the ship glided on under his longtime deputy. On the morning when press releases were to announce Carter's appointment, he received a call. Accounts differ about who insisted what to whom, but Newhouse and [Tina Brown](#), then the editor of *Vanity Fair*, had decided between themselves that Brown should take over *The New Yorker*, leaving *Vanity Fair* to Carter, who was less than thrilled. As he puts it: "I thought, *Oh, fuck.*"

At *Spy*, Carter had mocked *Vanity Fair*, which he had found breathy and incestuous. ("In *Vanity Fair*, it's sometimes difficult to tell who is slurping whom," *Spy* pronounced in 1988.) Now, with no warning or plan, he had to fill at least a hundred and twenty editorial pages a month while attracting

advertising at around a hundred thousand dollars a page. He got to the office every day by 5:30 a.m. “I was constantly worried that I was going to lose my job,” he writes. The magazine’s backlog (material bought but not run) contained nothing that he considered publishable, and the work in progress brought him little joy. That summer, [Norman Mailer](#) had been assigned to cover the Democratic and Republican National Conventions, but the piece that Mailer submitted on the first Convention was so weak—a tedious recap of what everybody had seen on TV, with no insight or reporting—that Carter killed both assignments and paid Mailer in full (a sum well into the six figures in today’s money). He delivered the news to Mailer, who stormed out of the room. Later that day, in a laying on of misfortune, one of Carter’s sons had an alarming riding accident: his head was stomped on by a horse.

“The first two years at *Vanity Fair* were pretty dreadful,” Carter allows. The magazine’s luxury advertisers seemed to hate him for his lèse-majestés at *Spy*, and some stepped back. So did the staff, who crept around giving him, he felt, the evil eye. “The atmosphere was so poisonous that I wouldn’t even bring my family into the office,” he writes. The press reported rumors of his firing before his first issue appeared.

That was then. In the years that followed, Carter became a great fullness of man with a great fullness of hair, and the magazine into whose arena he was tossed among lions became synonymous with his feathered nest and rising name. He and Brown were different editors: his muse sang in a lower key than hers—more skeptical, more reserved, perhaps a touch more male. But there were attributes they shared. She had come to *Vanity Fair* from *Tatler*, an impish British magazine not wholly unlike *Spy*. And, as Newhouse surely reasoned in assuring himself about Carter, it was her antennae for buzz and power there that had helped her turn around the fortunes of *Vanity Fair*.

If the golden rule for a writer is to try to avoid situations where you find yourself writing something you wouldn’t read, a similar calculus probably applies to assigning and editing stories. Magazines, unlike newspapers, aren’t engaged in comprehensive coverage. Pieces that are gratuitous or dutiful, undertaken in the “we should probably” mode, usually stink like dead fish from a mile away. The defining experience of good magazine reading is “I didn’t think I was interested, but”: the medium is made not in its choice of subjects but in its qualities of execution. Magic happens when

at least one person—a writer, a photographer, or an editor—has been allowed to fall in love.

“My philosophy has always been that if you take care of the talent,” Carter explains, “you’ll get better work.” *Vanity Fair* had no budget—that is, no ceiling—and came with perks that might make even a *Time* editor blush. Condé Nast offered its editors-in-chief interest-free home loans, set up every senior editor with an assistant, and sent employees home in town cars when work ran late. (Three words only: no longer so.) Expense policies amounted to free cash for breakfasts and lunches—Carter had a horror of indoor-cat editors who ate at their desks. Photo shoots had craft service on the scale of movie sets’, and reporting coffers ran deep. When the O. J. Simpson trial began, Carter flew *Vanity Fair*’s courtroom correspondent, Dominick Dunne, to Los Angeles and installed him in the Chateau Marmont for the length of the eight-month proceedings. When Dunne struggled to file, as he often did, Carter periodically flew out his editor and installed him there, too—presumably to sit nearby and spirit out copy to New York. There is, it must be said, no such thing as an overpaid writer, and Carter, to his credit, recognized the value of singular work. What wouldn’t you pay to get something extraordinary and lasting on the page?



*I want to take a vacation, but the last time I left you in charge your face appeared on a grilled cheese sandwich.*  
Cartoon by Tom Toro

As an editor, Carter describes himself as nonconfrontational, and is not what one might call a big technician. “I believe that all great magazine stories must have a combination of the following elements,” he declares: narrative, access, conflict, and disclosure—a bit like saying that baseball must have pitches, outs, hits, and runs. But he knows a good game. The first writer he hired was Christopher Hitchens, who, until his death, in 2011, brought in columns on a great range of subjects: politics, literature, drinking, and how it felt to be waterboarded (bad). Carter was proud of the magazine’s literary reporting—and of beating Woodward and Bernstein to the public identification of Deep Throat, in 2005. When that story was released, Carter was honeymooning in the Bahamas in service to his third marriage, and was petrified that they’d got it wrong. But he enjoyed getting in ahead of the giants.

It is tempting to describe Carter’s *Vanity Fair* as *Spy* without the irony, but it also offered him a way to stretch his point of view. The writing had a curious expansiveness—even short columns now read as long—and, in stories about affluent perversity and cursed dynasties, an eye for glamour with a darkened edge. Though he and his team worked from New York, his *Vanity Fair* became, in many ways, the essential magazine of L.A.

In the early nineteen-eighties, while reporting for *Time*, Carter had been deflected from Irving (Swift) Lazar’s famous Oscars party. After Lazar died, in 1993, Carter saw a vacuum in the Oscar-party scene, and created his own, setting it up as a dinner at Morton’s, a good Hollywood restaurant with banquettes, to keep it small. There were cameras waiting at the entrance, but the party was less an extravaganza than a social occasion. (“If you’re a successful movie actor, you don’t really get to meet other movie actors unless you’ve been in a movie with them, because you’re working all the time,” Carter writes.) It became an institution.

One comes away from Carter’s memoir with a sense that his natural art form, even more than making magazines, might be dinner. He has astute things to say about the restaurants where he has eaten, and, in the mid-two-thousands, he went into the business himself, rejuvenating the Waverly Inn and the Monkey Bar. There was a period when he regularly gave thirty-person dinner parties at his home. His editing style, with its big budgets and nonconfrontational leadership, feels akin to hosting. Carter has keen ideas

about the correct practice of dinner: the guest list (lunch is for people who might stress you out; dinner is for those who delight you), the table settings (place cards should be double-sided, to help people find their seats and remember whom they're talking to), and, most of all, the time to leave: "the minute dessert hit the table." He cannot abide the after-dinner drift or those who linger. Once, for reasons never satisfactorily explained, he found himself obliged to host Princess Margaret for dinner in his apartment. She stayed past midnight. Carter recalls it as one of the great traumas of his life.

Even visionary editors-in-chief have crass responsibilities—having to do with subscriptions, newsstand sales, and so on—and, like late-night TV hosts, they're always hunting for recurring bits to build a following and a legacy. For Carter, there was the Oscar party and a yearly roundup that he called the New Establishment List—a set of power rankings and a way of bringing fresh faces and readers to a magazine otherwise much enamored of Old Hollywood, the Kennedys, and the alleged crimes of aging moguls. His real interest, he has said, was not celebrities but scoops and exposés. Carter helped create the hum around the high-profile true-crime and psycho-grift stories that now saturate long-form journalism, and many of the anecdotes he relays with the greatest relish relate to his efforts to pin those stories down. Once, when *Vanity Fair* was preparing an investigation of Mohamed al-Fayed, the magnate and hotelier, whom it believed to have sexually harassed and mistreated women (among other misdeeds), Carter made the mistake of booking a room at the Paris Ritz, a Fayed property. When one of Carter's deputies brought him a bug-detection device procured "at a 'spy' shop," he got readings from the phone, the television, and a tapestry over the bed.

By the new millennium, Carter himself had become someone about whom untrue (or true!) claims of all kinds circulated. He had ventured onto Hollywood's creative side, producing documentaries and taking small acting roles. He had become the sort of powerful, well-connected, public person his magazine wrote about. This was the backdrop for an accusation that the writer Vicky Ward made in 2015: that, in preparing her 2003 *Vanity Fair* profile of Jeffrey Epstein, Carter had suppressed information about Epstein's ghastly sex abuse out of insider loyalty.

Carter has nothing kind to say about Ward in his book; he says more than two pages of unkind things. In his telling, she was a loose cannon at the magazine, self-aggrandizing and mistrusted, and brought in allegations against Epstein at the last minute, as the piece was going to press, seeking to force them into print with insufficient support. (He notes that one source subsequently sent her a cease-and-desist letter.) Carter's eleventh-hour time line seems to be wrong, but the matter won't be settled by these quarrels. It lingered for years, and by the time of Epstein's final arrest Carter had left *Vanity Fair*.

The first change in weather, he suggests, came in 2008, during the recession, which hammered publishers. By the mid-twenty-tens, he saw more fundamental changes under way; media companies were streamlining their operations. "I could see the shape of things to come," he writes. Dessert was hitting the table. In 2017, after twenty-five years at *Vanity Fair*, Carter decided to resign. When an alert announcing the news popped up on his friends' phones, some later told him, they assumed that he had died.

Carter went off with his wife and the youngest of his five children to live in the hills above Cap d'Antibes, on the French Riviera—a place where, one would like to think, the going never stops being good. He had asked his chief assistant from *Vanity Fair* to come with him and, in a wonderful vestige of golden-age practice, assigned this talented and carefully selected young person the task of travelling with his dog. Carter gave up smoking and took up swimming and—a basis for a musical, perhaps—entertained Bette Midler and her husband.

Then he got bored, and started thinking up ideas. The result was Air Mail, an e-mail publication he created with the journalist Alessandra Stanley which launched in 2019. E-mail, at that point, seemed retrograde and uncool—Substack was still in its youth—but, like many of Carter's circumspect ideas, the plan had a surprising canniness. An e-mail publication was invulnerable to the caprices of social-media platforms and their algorithms. And, at last tally, Air Mail had in excess of four hundred thousand paid subscribers, which is more (but who now is counting?) than *Harper's* or *Fast Company*.

The question with memoirs is always what they're straining toward. In Carter's case, the answer appears to be eccentricity. He is constantly trying to suggest that he is just a little odd—in his interests, in his family's conversation habits, in the way he built his career—when the evidence is that he carries normal bourgeois ideas of the good life: steady high-paying work, nice suits, fine dining, cars, art, a brood of children, and a dog named Charley. A list of “rules for living” in the back of the book contains sensible advice on minor matters, such as buying two Lacoste shirts if you like them and not monogramming your clothes. Carter at times puts one in mind of a male character in a Mary McCarthy novel whose great, embarrassing secret is that he's really just a normal sort of chap.

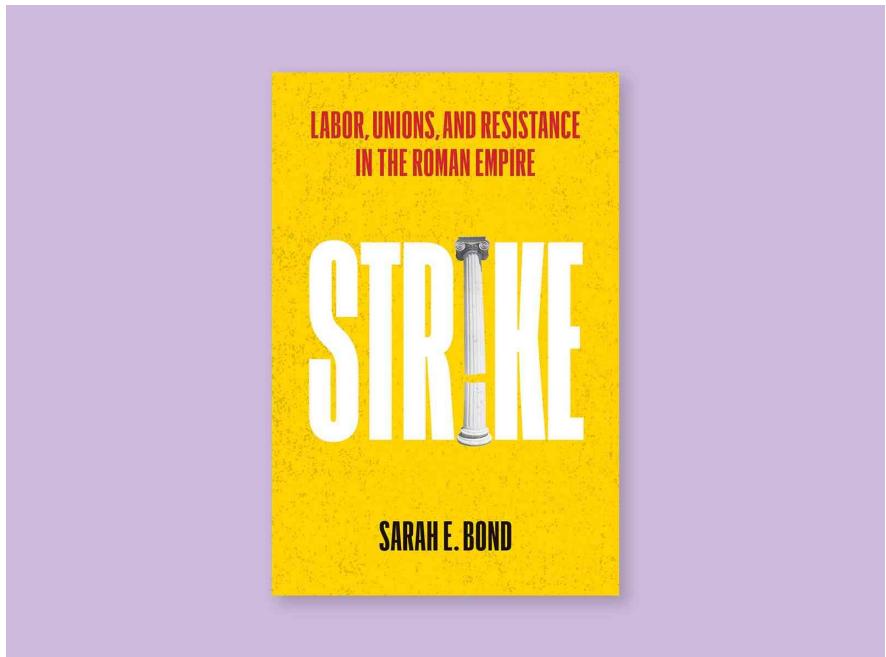
When people fret about the fate of magazines, digital or print, they look today at balance sheets and growth, and it's true that many publications are in peril. The greater long-term challenge, though, will be keeping talent in the field. If the craft to which Carter devoted his career has a future, it will be because creative people—people who could easily do something else—still want to do this. If it vanishes, the reason will be that the best new arrivals face a course that appears too rough, too lean, and, in a fundamental way, too unfun. One can easily look askance at the excesses of Carter's magazine era, but the indulgent assignments were invitations to a full, interesting life. Banish plump Jack, and you banish all the world.

Commercial culture and electoral politics share a basic truth: people want to feel a little rich, a little powerful. They want to brush against magic and mystery—rooms within rooms—and to move through a surprising, expansive world. Over the years, so many creative enterprises have been stripped of these qualities, leaving them lustreless and diminished. The paths of people like Carter are a measure of the golden age lost. But their memories are proof of the promise that remains. ♦

By Ruth Marcus  
By Alexandra Schwartz  
By Benjamin Wallace-Wells  
By Jennifer Wilson  
By Adam Gopnik  
By Beverly Gage  
By Namwali Serpell  
By Jill Lepore  
By Rebecca Mead  
By E. Tammy Kim  
By Charlie Tyson  
By Anthony Lane



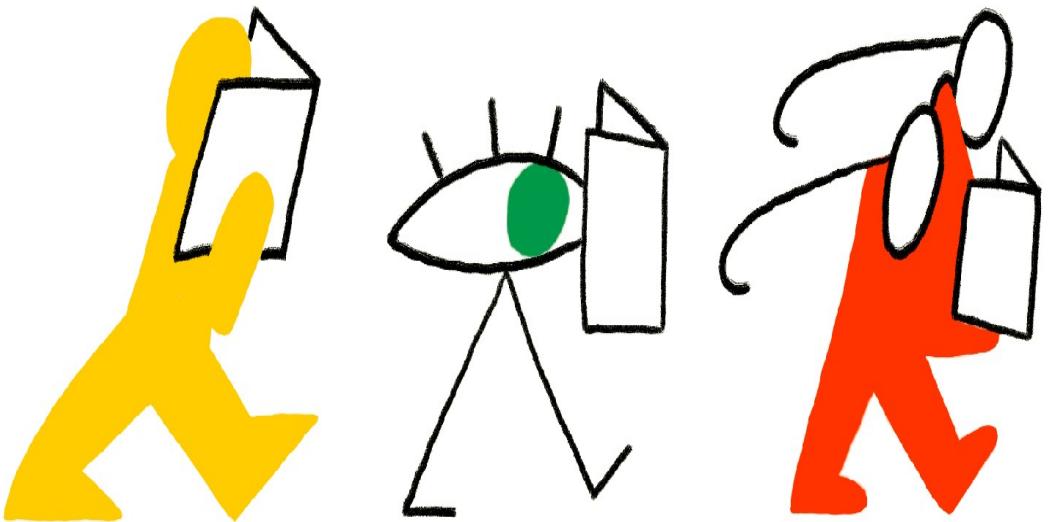
**Original Sins**, by *Eve L. Ewing* (*One World*). This stark critique of America’s schools anchors our current educational system in eighteenth-century ideas about race and intelligence. Tracing a line from Thomas Jefferson’s “Notes on the State of Virginia” through Jim Crow to present-day policies on housing, zoning, and standardized testing, Ewing argues that this system was always intended to operate differently for different people. It aimed to make good citizens out of whites and “a class of subservient laborers” out of Blacks, and to culturally erase Native Americans altogether. For Ewing, the varying life outcomes of these groups indicate that our schools not only reflect society’s racial hierarchies but “play an active role in constructing, normalizing, and upholding them.”



[\*\*Strike\*\*](#), by Sarah E. Bond (Yale). Rebellion in ancient Rome is commonly associated with a single man: Spartacus, the leader of the Third Servile War. But this incisive history contends that it's a mistake to attribute the uprising to a single individual's ingenuity, or to imagine that any act of collective defiance in the Empire was an isolated occurrence. Bond shows how professional and trade associations empowered bakers, gladiators, charioteers, and the like to wield their leverage—for example, by withholding their labor—in pursuit of improved conditions. Employing “strategic anachronism,” she connects their struggles to contemporary union efforts, emphasizing the ways in which, from antiquity to the present, solidarity among workers has persisted despite backlash from the ruling classes.

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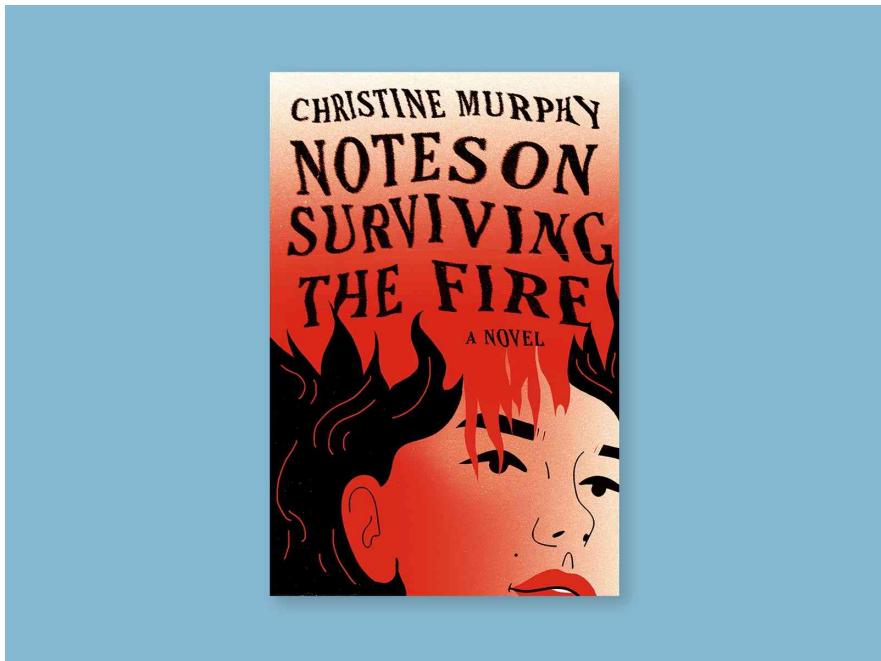
## [\*\*What We're Reading\*\*](#)



*Illustration by Ben Hickey*

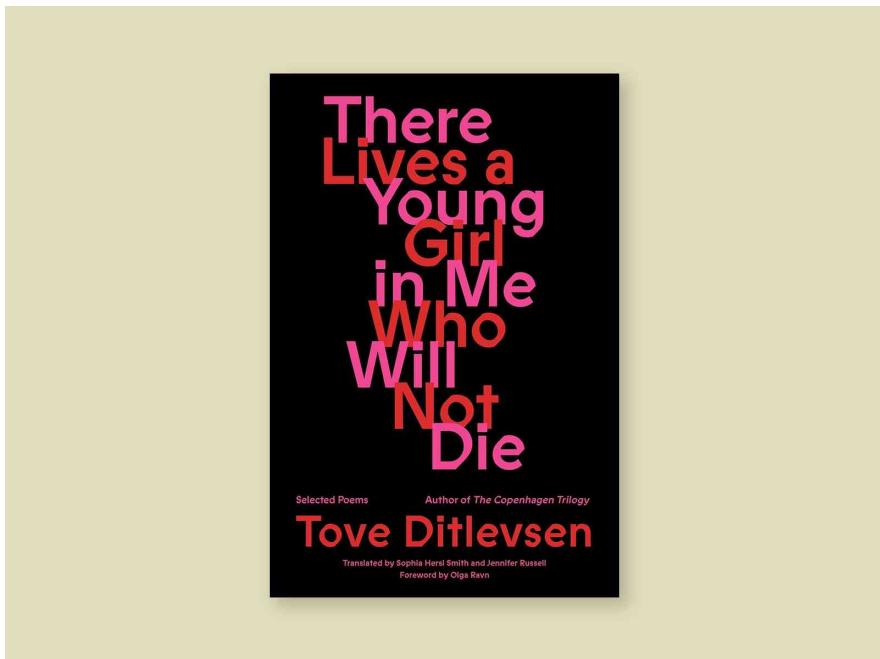
*Discover notable new fiction, nonfiction, and poetry.*

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**Notes on Surviving the Fire**, by Christine Murphy (*Knopf*). Sarah, the narrator of this début novel, is a graduate student who studies the kinds of violence that Buddhism considers justifiable. She's also the recent survivor of a sexual assault, and her attacker, whom she calls Rapist, is in her

department—where he has remained despite her report of the incident. After Sarah discovers her best friend dead, she senses foul play and decides to pursue justice, this time on her own terms. The novel's strength lies in Sarah's duality: having grown up hunting, she is “as comfortable with Tibetan hagiographies as with the beating hearts of bloody things.” The narrative is equally layered, with a thriller’s bones, a satire’s glare, and a comeuppance story’s anarchic spirit.



[There Lives a Young Girl in Me Who Will Not Die](#), by Tove Ditlevsen, translated from the Danish by Sophia Hersi Smith and Jennifer Russell (Farrar, Straus & Giroux). These poems—drawn from several of the revered Danish writer’s collections and published together in English for the first time—are tinged with the longing of Ditlevsen’s inner child. The poet, who died in 1976, injects mournful omniscience into explorations of heartache. The young girl living inside Ditlevsen stares at a reflection of her adult self, “searching for something she hopes to recover.” What is recovered through the writer’s deceptively plain language, confined in her earlier work by rhymed verse but free from form in later years, is her yearning for “Protection / against every kind / of desire.”

By Maggie Doherty  
By Adam Kirsch  
By Alice Gregory  
By Anahid Nersessian  
By Audrey Wollen  
By Graciela Mochkovsky  
By The New Yorker

**By S. C. Cornell**

## Books

# Is Gossip Good for Us?

Kelsey McKinney, a podcast host and a champion of gossip, is out to change the practice's bad reputation.

By [Alexandra Schwartz](#)



*When we gossip, we start with real people, then embellish and decorate until they become characters.* Illustration by Derek Abella

In August, 1918, Virginia Woolf spent a quiet stretch at Asheham, the country house that she and her husband, Leonard, rented in rural Sussex. “We’ve been practically alone, which has a very spiritual effect upon the mind,” Woolf wrote to a friend, the socialite Lady Ottoline Morrell. “No gossip, no malevolence, no support from one’s fellow creatures.” After six months spent in such isolation, Woolf quipped, “I should be a kind of Saint, and Leonard an undoubted prophet. We should shed virtue on people as we walked along the roads.” Alas, any pretensions to holiness had been dispelled by the arrival of house guests the previous evening: “I had such a bath of the flesh that I am far from unspotted this morning. We gossiped for 5 hours.”

To be human, as Woolf knew, is to talk about other humans. We all gossip, and those who don’t are either lying or dead. It’s true that few people would be proud to be thought of as *a* gossip—the label is too definitive, too

judgmental, singed with implications of sluttish secret-hawking and moral incontinence. Yet, at the ring of the phone or the ping of the group chat, our hearts leap at the hope of some enticing morsel, delivered hot. Gossip entertains, and it also sustains. In Jane Austen's novel "[Persuasion](#)," the sober heroine, Anne Elliot, pays a visit to Mrs. Smith, a former classmate who is now a penniless widow, confined to her home by illness. In spite of these misfortunes, Mrs. Smith is remarkably sunny, owing, in part, to a nurse who supplements her medical ministrations with news of the outside world. "Call it gossip, if you will, but when Nurse Rooke has half an hour's leisure to bestow on me, she is sure to have something to relate that is entertaining and profitable: something that makes one know one's species better," Mrs. Smith says. Anne looks for a moral; this Rooke must be bolstering her friend with examples of "heroism, fortitude, patience, resignation," and so on. But Mrs. Smith wants to hear about "the latest modes of being trifling and silly." She doesn't like gossip because it improves her. She likes it because it is fun.

"We gossip not only because we can but because we have to," Kelsey McKinney writes in her new book, "[You Didn't Hear This from Me: \(Mostly\) True Notes on Gossip](#)" (Grand Central). Where Woolf comically cast the propensity to gossip as a sin, and Austen slyly rendered it as a foible, McKinney, a journalist, sincerely declares it to be a virtue. "Without the self-awareness gained by gossiping, we would become husks of ourselves, so uninterested in the world around us that we become separated from it entirely," she warns.

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McKinney is no husk. She is the co-creator and, until recently, the host of “Normal Gossip,” a popular podcast devoted to sharing mildly outré stories about strangers. (“Normal” means that the show is concerned with the business of regular people.) McKinney’s audience is large, but gossip thrives best in intimacy; it wants a cupped ear, not an arena. To bridge the gap, each episode features a guest who serves as a stand-in for the rest of us AirPodded eavesdroppers, gasping in dread and delight as McKinney recounts anecdotes of varying degrees of intrigue and scandal from the perspective of an unwitting protagonist: the grad student who suspects an affair between two members of her cohort, say, or the woman who worries that her father, an amateur cultivator of orchids, is falling victim to a scammer. The pleasure is in McKinney’s elaborately drawn-out telling, laced with humor and digression. She has a rich laugh and an easy complicity with her guests. “How are you *feeling?*” she asks, with a sympathetic wince, as she brings a story to its crescendo.

McKinney likes to prompt her guests to characterize their “relationship” with gossip. Most express ready enthusiasm. Occasionally, though, someone admits to squeamishness at the prospect of dissecting the doings of another person’s life, and it is those people—the skeptical, the hesitant, the embarrassed—whom McKinney sets out to win over in her book. Gossip is amusing, even salacious, yes, but she wants to show that it is serious, too.

Alongside discussions of TMZ, “Mean Girls,” and the “Real Housewives” franchise, we get sprinklings of science: citations of philosophers, anthropologists, neuroscientists, ethicists, and one senior lecturer in “the propagation of narratives and cognitive bias” at the University of Winchester. Studies are described, the neocortex invoked. McKinney’s big point is that gossip is a fundamentally human behavior, and she does not tire of making it. “While other species can communicate with one another, none can weave tales the way we can,” she tells us, lest we credit dolphins as nature’s true raconteurs. That distinction may not last long. McKinney reports that she asked ChatGPT to dish dirt, only to be turned down. “I understand your curiosity, but I must reiterate that I’m here to provide respectful and informative assistance,” the program primly informed her. When I recently tried the same trick, ChatGPT was over its qualms. “I love a little bit of gossip!” it announced. Artificial intelligence is gaining on us. At least we’ll go down talking shit.

If McKinney is at pains to stress the universality of her subject, she has cause. Gossip has been considered the province of half of humanity—the female one—for such a long time that it is surprising to learn that it wasn’t always so. At its root, the word means “god-sibling” and once signified any person, man or woman, connected by baptism rather than blood: a close friend, someone with whom you’d happily trade secrets. In Renaissance England, the noun “gossip” came to refer to a woman’s female friends who were invited to be present at a birth. McKinney supplies a ditty (“At Child-bed when the Gossips meet / Fine Stories we are told; And if they get a cup too much, / Their Tongues they cannot hold”) that makes giving birth in the age before antibiotics and epidurals—or, at least, attending one—sound improbably great. Not to men, however. Exclusion bred suspicion. In his dictionary, Dr. Johnson defined a gossip as “one who runs about tattling like women at a lying-in.” From there, it was a skip and a hop to the 1811 definition, in the Oxford English Dictionary, of gossip as “idle talk, trifling or groundless rumour, tittle-tattle,” which more or less stands to this day.

If women were uniquely susceptible to idle talk, explanations must be supplied. One was biological. In “[Gossip](#),” her 1985 study of the subject, the literary critic Patricia Meyer Spacks quotes an eighteenth-century manual that maintained that women’s brains are “of a soft Consistence,” thus producing “the Weakness of their Minds.” Another was religious. To

Christians, the original gossip was Eve, who, Spacks says, “brought sin into the world by unwise speaking and unwise listening.” Everything was fine until a woman passed on a story told to her by a snake.

The soft-brain theory has been pretty thoroughly debunked, but scriptural notions have proved harder to dismiss. McKinney grew up attending an evangelical church in Texas where she was taught that her tendency to gossip would keep her from holiness. On her bedroom mirror, she inscribed Ephesians 4:29: “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building up others according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.” But her compulsion would not be suppressed. No matter that she wasn’t out to cause harm; any talk about a person not present was verboten. From the pulpit, pastors fulminated against the “woman’s sin” for spreading lies and discord.

McKinney left the Church long ago. Looking back, she concludes that its leaders did not merely despise gossip; in fact, they feared it. She points to cases like those of Bill Hybels, a founder of Willow Creek Community Church, based in Illinois, who was forced to resign in 2018 after being credibly accused of sexual misconduct, and Paige Patterson, the former president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, in Texas, who was ousted from his position the same year after more than two thousand female congregants signed a petition denouncing him for counselling abused wives to pray for their husbands. (Hybels denies the allegations.) Convincing women that God will punish them if they don’t hold their tongues is one way to try to prevent such dark truths from getting out.



Cartoon by Justin Sheen

Certainly, Christianity has no monopoly on the prohibition of gossip. In Islam, McKinney tells us, there is a difference in degree between *buhtan* (slander), *ghibah* (backbiting), and *nanimah* (malicious gossip); none is advised. Jewish law holds that a person who hears gossip—*lashon hara*, literally “the evil tongue”—is as much at fault as one who tells it. A few months before the #MeToo movement began, in the summer of 2017, the Jewish feminist magazine *Lilith* published a blog post called “[In Defense of Lashon Hara: Why Gossip Is a Feminist Imperative](#). ” Like McKinney, the post’s writer, Rachel Sandalow-Ash, concluded that women’s speech had been unfairly maligned by powerful men who would prefer that their doings not be discussed. By encouraging women to share information that might protect them, be it about a community leader or a college classmate known to play fast and loose with sexual consent, she argued, gossip actually fulfilled the Jewish imperative “to create a more just world.”

So gossip, in the service of truthtelling, can act as a check on power, and as a source of solidarity and irreverence for those who lack it. “Tea,” that now ubiquitous term, originated in the Black drag-ball scene. McKinney writes of contemporary whisper networks; Spacks cites an account of women in a harem whose chat is flavored with “satire, ridicule, and disrespect for males and the ideals of the male world.” That could double as a description of

Chaucer's Wife of Bath, who delights in the company of the woman she calls (in a modern English translation) "my gossip":

For had my husband pissed against a wall,  
Or done a thing that might have cost his life,  
To her and to another worthy wife,  
And to my niece whom I loved always well,  
I would have told it—every bit I'd tell,  
And did so, many and many a time, knows God,  
Which made his face full often red and hot  
For utter shame; he blamed himself that he  
Had told me of so deep a privity.

Poor husband, to be so humiliated! But the Wife of Bath is unrepentant. She enjoys gossiping—and it is not her only enjoyment. Gossip, like sex, is an intimate, sensuous pleasure, most satisfying when the giver is attentive to the receiver. "I didn't just want to hear gossip," McKinney writes, of her younger, churchgoing self. "I wanted to take it in my hands and mold it, rearrange the punch lines and the reveals until I could get the timing right enough that my friends in the cafeteria would gasp." The molding, the gasping—no wonder the pastors weren't thrilled.

But what of the gossiped-about? They can't all be tyrants, criminals, and creeps. If gossip can subvert norms, it can also enforce them; remember high school? To be discussed by others can confer status, make you part of the club. "I heard they got pinned!" the teen-agers of "Bye Bye Birdie" sing on the phone to one another as—hallelujah!—another boy-girl couple is minted in their midst. And it can just as easily strip status away. Women, vilified as gossip's venomous purveyors, are also its frequent victims. Think of Hester Prynne, with her [scarlet letter](#), or Lily Bart, the heroine of Edith Wharton's novel "[The House of Mirth](#)," whose hope of securing her future among New York's upper crust is dashed by a rumor that she is having an affair with the husband of the wealthy socialite Bertha Dorset, planted by Bertha herself. By the time Lily shows up in the gossip rag "Town Talk," she's as good as dead.

McKinney knows that gossip can be weaponized as "an extralegal solution to enforce the community's ideals and powers," and the legality is not

always so extra. East Germany, Soviet Russia—these are places where whisperings found their way into police files. And what was the House Un-American Activities Committee but one big, malevolent exercise in gossip-mongering? McKinney notes that the actress Jean Seberg’s career was derailed when the Los Angeles *Times* ran a blind item suggesting that she was pregnant by a Black Panther; *Newsweek* subsequently published her name. The story turned out to be an invention of the F.B.I.’s *COINTELPRO* program. Her baby was born premature, and died. So, eventually, did Seberg, at forty, in what was ruled a probable suicide.

Some might claim that even casual gossip can be harmful. “Gossip reduces the other to *he/she*, and this reduction is intolerable to me,” Roland Barthes writes in “[A Lover’s Discourse](#).” Gossip, Barthes says, is by nature akin to murder. To refer to someone in the third person—“a wicked pronoun,” he calls it—is to render the person absent. When he hears his beloved spoken of by others, “it is as if I saw my other dead, reduced, shelved in an urn upon the wall of the great mausoleum of language.” You might think that Barthes is concerned with slander, but no. What he feels is pure keep-my-wife’s-name-out-of-your-mouth possessiveness: “I do not want the Other to speak of you.” He has a point. There is an estranging, witness-to-your-funeral quality to being talked about by others, as if you were no longer the subject of your own life but merely an object to be ogled in someone else’s.

Consider one notorious debacle in the long annals of New York City gossip: the fallout from the 1975 publication of Truman Capote’s story “[La Côte Basque, 1965](#).” Capote had served as a kind of confidant and jester to the city’s high-society women, “swans” like Slim Keith and Babe Paley. Then he turned around and spilled their barely veiled secrets, in *Esquire*, in the guise of fiction. This was humiliating: now the world could read not just about the affair that Paley’s husband had carried on but about how the mistress’s menstrual blood had stained Paley’s sheets. The ensuing isolation and social censure, as dramatized in last year’s lavishly gossipy limited series “Feud: Capote vs. the Swans,” sent Capote into a lethal tailspin of alcoholism and drug abuse. Paley cut him out of her life. You can recover from humiliation; treachery is harder. Capote had convinced her that she was his private, cherished “you” while secretly offering her up to the masses as just another “she.”

These days, of course, you don't have to be famous to see your name gleefully bandied about by an audience of millions. McKinney notes the phenomenon of digital public shaming, and has harsh words for people who do it. Her case in point is West Elm Caleb, a twenty-five-year-old New York City man who, a few years ago, found himself at the center of a TikTok maelstrom when women began posting videos claiming that he had love-bombed and then ghosted them. Overnight, one mustachioed furniture-company employee was made into the symbol for all the sins of heterosexual men. "The mob that trails West Elm Caleb knows neither morality nor mercy," McKinney declares. The man may not have behaved well, but did he deserve to become a meme?

On the other hand, one person's poison may be another's tonic. Eight years after "The House of Mirth," Wharton published another novel, "[The Custom of the Country](#)," about another social climber, Undine Spragg, who has a modern quality that Lily Bart lacks: shamelessness. Undine, a nobody from the Midwest, plans to make it big in New York. She wants status, and she wants fame. She has her own press agent; the gossip pages of "Town Talk" are her Bible. She is her era's Kim Kardashian, an ordinary person bent on making herself extraordinary by notoriety, inescapability, or both, and Wharton's jaundiced depiction of her inverts Barthes's point about the alienating third-person pronoun. For Undine, it is "I" that is extraneous. What matters to her is existing as a "she" in the minds and on the tongues of others: envied, satirized, despised, but above all discussed.

Gossip is a big topic, and McKinney is not afraid to go broad with it. She tosses off sweeping claims; she casually contradicts herself. Gossip is "always about a friend of a friend"—unless it's about a celebrity. McKinney characterizes "the Tattle"—a strategy used by dating-show contestants to impress their potential beloved by smearing fellow-suitors—as a maneuver that "rarely works." In the next paragraph, we are told that gossip "can always be played to your advantage." McKinney, a champion of gossip as a personal and social good, is out to change its bad reputation; when she encounters gossipers who challenge her thesis, she finds that they are doing it wrong. "The goal of gossip about strangers is not to try people according to their secondhand deeds; it is to increase our own understanding of the world, to allow us to find enchantment and discovery in places we didn't expect it," she writes, in a chapter dedicated to the artist Françoise Gilot's

memoir of her relationship with Picasso. This seems nice, until you think about it. How could we increase our understanding of the world if we limited ourselves to its enchanting aspects? (Picasso could be charming. He also held a lit cigarette to Gilot's face.) McKinney sounds like the kind of person who plagued her as a young gossiper: a scold.

How, anyway, can gossip be said to have a goal? The thing is mutable, anarchic, endlessly paradoxical, and that is another challenge for McKinney. Should ancient epics that originated in the oral tradition be considered gossip? She thinks so. (We get a bit on Gilgamesh.) Urban legends and conspiracy theories? There is a chapter devoted to them. “A doctor conferring with a colleague over an X-ray is gossiping about their patient just like two friends sending each other Taylor Swift’s posts on IG are gossiping,” McKinney tells us. Here you want to throw up your hands, or at least cover your ears. Certainly, McKinney is trying to provoke; she may also be muddled. “The path is windy, and the years are passing, and I am still unable to determine exactly what is real,” she says, of her investigation into her subject. This is a little alarming.

Though McKinney excludes celebrity gossip from her podcast, she does spend a chunk of her book on it, and for good reason. Gossip is oxygen to fame, and as fame has burned hotter so has our talk about it. McKinney uses the term “entitlement gossip” to refer to the notion that the public has a right to personal information about famous people, a belief that has taken on increasingly vampiric manifestations in our age of social-media madness. She is talking about something darker, too: the illusion that ardent fandom constitutes a mutual relationship with its object. Fans mistake hearsay for news; they think that they know what is really going on with their idols, and sometimes they are right. The #FreeBritney movement, an instance of fan sleuthing that resulted in Britney Spears being sprung from the conservatorship established by her father, remains an astonishing example of rumor revealed to be reality. More often, however, they are wrong. McKinney is tough on the Gaylors, the subset of Swifties who brandish a cryptological analysis of lyrics, body language, and so on as proof that Taylor Swift is secretly a lesbian. Wishing doesn’t make it so; have we learned nothing from the phantom pee tape? That is another confusing thing about gossip. We like to think that it leads us closer to hidden truths, just to find ourselves pointed exactly the wrong way.

Even if we wanted to stop gossiping for good, we couldn't. In a peer-reviewed paper published last year in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, researchers at Stanford and the University of Maryland concluded that gossip itself has an evolutionary advantage. They designed a study in which agents had to decide whether to coöperate, and whether to gossip, with one another. Agents turned out to be more likely to coöperate with those known to gossip, in case they should be gossiped about themselves: gossips flourished. The study's agents were virtual, not human. "People are very complicated and we can't come up with a simulation that does everything people do," one of the researchers said, "nor would we want to."

Those simulations do exist, though. They are called literature. The practice of poring over the doings and desires of others is not just a pastime but an art. We need to think and feel through other people, to test ourselves against the conditions of the world. What would I have said? What would I have done? What would happen if?

The paradox of fiction is that we come to feel real things for fake people. When we gossip, we start at the other end, with real people, then embellish and decorate until they become characters. To gossip well—ethically, and aesthetically, too—a person needs sympathy alongside judgment: not merely information but imagination. Nothing is more alienating than gossip that is used for bragging rights, or in support of its teller's smugness. That is why Capote's story about his swans reads so sourly now. There is a touting tone, a noxious bragging. Capote is mounting his subjects on the wall of his prose like so many heads of stag. *Look what I caught!* But why should we care? Good gossip, like good literature, wants to catch its subjects moving, alive.

Spacks has a phrase, "serious gossip," which she says can be practiced only by two people, three at most. This is gossip as intimacy's glue—the best, richest kind. I thought of it recently while reading Laurie Colwin's wonderful comic novel "[Happy All the Time](#)." Late in the book, two women, Holly and Misty, are sitting together, getting to know each other better. They are married to cousins, awkwardly thrown together as family by the lifelong closeness of their husbands. Each has worried that the other didn't quite like her, but it turns out there was nothing to fear. Holly, a stylish housewife, proposes that they have breakfast and go shopping. "Then

we can spend a few hours gossiping, or don't you approve?" she asks. "I don't call it gossip," Misty tells her. "I call it 'emotional speculation.' " This is funny; Misty, a serious-minded statistician, can't admit to frivolity. And it is touching, because it is true. Off they go, beyond our earshot, leaving us to wonder what they might say. ♦

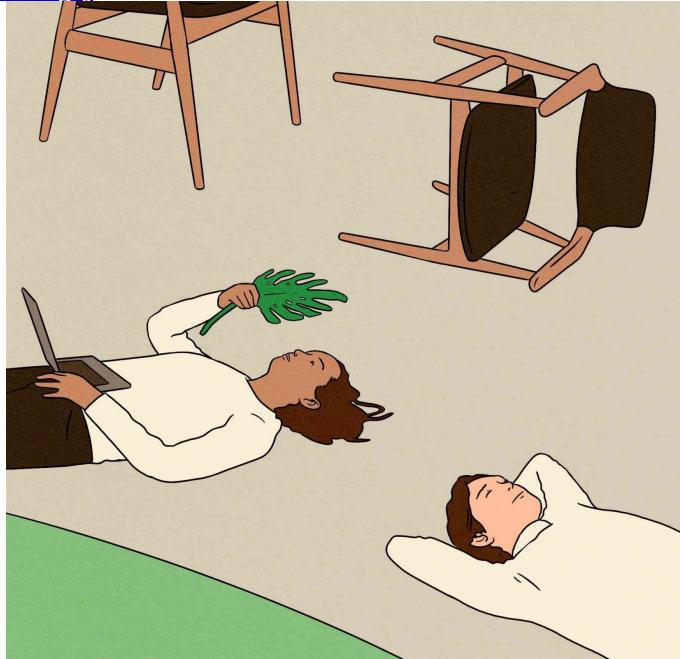
By Joshua Rothman  
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By Nathan Heller  
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## Books

# “Perfection” Is the Perfect Novel for an Age of Aimless Aspiration

Vincenzo Latronico’s slender volume captures a culture of exquisite taste, tender sensitivities, and gnawing discontent.

By [Alice Gregory](#)



*Latronico's characters travel through a world littered with cultural signifiers of intellectualized upward mobility. But their existence is enabled by a history that remains in their peripheral vision. Illustration by Simon Bailly*

In the fall of 1965, a twenty-nine-year-old Georges Perec published his débüt novel. Short and strange, “Things: A Story of the Sixties” follows Sylvie and Jérôme, a young Parisian couple who work in the burgeoning field of market research, and exist in a permanent frenzy of hyper-specific material desires. They want to furnish their apartment with fitted carpets, a black leather sofa, tartan-upholstered benches, “allegedly rustic tables.” They favor apparel that seems posh and British. Throughout the novel, the two characters are fused into a single entity—we never hear them speak—and they move through a world spangled with commercial temptations, insistently and precisely identified.

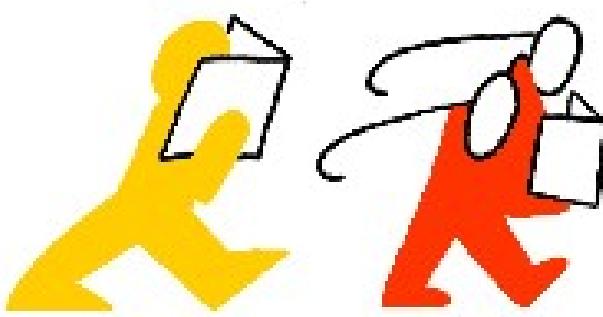
Like many before them, Sylvie and Jérôme mistake their pursuit of taste for a pursuit of knowledge, and believe themselves to be acquiring a kind of

legibility—to others and to themselves. Theirs is, in effect, “the most idiotic, the most ordinary predicament in the world.” By the novel’s penultimate page, the couple’s notion of happiness—a permanent equilibrium between means and desires—has proved impossible to maintain, and they are en route to Bordeaux, where they have taken executive-level jobs at a second-tier advertising agency. The book ends with a kind of defeated sigh: they are but “tame pets, faithfully reflecting a world which taunted them.”

Still, Sylvie and Jérôme would be envied by Anna and Tom, a pair of similarly obedient animals at the center of the svelte new novel “Perfection” (New York Review Books). In the acknowledgment, its author, the Italian writer Vincenzo Latronico, calls “Perfection” a tribute to “Things,” and his protagonists are naïvely wistful for the past. “Previous generations,” Anna and Tom are convinced, “had had a much easier time working out who they were and what they stood for.”

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Like Sylvie and Jérôme, Anna and Tom move as one: they talk neither to each other nor to anyone else, and travel through a world littered with the supposedly-quiet-but-actually-quite-loud cultural signifiers of

intellectualized upward mobility (houseplants, hardwood floors, unread back issues of this magazine). Latronico documents their decisions and demurrs with an elegant proportion of sly commentary to detached reportage, a ratio that Perec once described as “passionate coldness” and credited to Flaubert.

Latronico’s conceit is clever and will delight anyone familiar with his source material, but his execution is ingenious. In lieu of the Left Bank in the nineteen-sixties, we have Berlin in the twenty-tens, where Anna and Tom have moved from an unnamed country in southern Europe to pursue an art-adjacent life style and careers in graphic design. Like the laptops on which they work and play, Anna and Tom’s aesthetic preferences are always on the brink of obsolescence, and checking for updates is a full-time, if passive, occupation. Just as Sylvie and Jérôme’s work in mid-century advertising was a job that “history had chosen for them,” Anna and Tom’s status as creatives (“a term even they found vague and jarring”) is “a natural consequence of the context in which they had grown up.” As teen-agers who came of age with the internet, they doinked around on the computer and had fun doing so; as adults, they do for money what they once did out of passion. “This was a fact,” Latronico writes. “From this fact they concluded that they had turned their passion into a job. This was a deduction.” (Also a deduction: that his novel’s agility in English owes much to its talented translator, Sophie Hughes.)

Anna and Tom are not happy, even though nothing bad ever happens to them. Their worst misfortune is the cancellation of a freelance contract, which sets them back a few weeks financially. Nobody gets sick. Nobody dies. They have no dependents. They are so insulated from catastrophe and discomfort that they have to seek these things out. For a brief spell, they join the creative class of Berlin in mobilizing on behalf of a recent influx of migrants, whose arrival, in the summer of 2015, they first register not on the streets of the city where they live but as a chromatic shift on their computer screens, the familiar beige of Middle Eastern wars replaced by the silver of capsized dinghies amid Mediterranean azure. Anna and Tom find it hard to be useful, and although they are driven to help by a sense of civic obligation —“of course”—they are also motivated by “the feeling that something was taking place around them they didn’t want to miss, an outstanding rendezvous with history.”

But their entire life is organized around and enabled by a history that largely remains in their peripheral vision. They work at a job with no set hours in a country whose language they do not speak. They live in a light-flooded, plant-filled apartment whose location was determined decades before by the Allied bombings, though “it never occurred to them.” They travel frequently, and, when they do, the costs are partially offset by the fact that they can rent out their enviable apartment for a hundred and eighteen euros a night, “plus the fee to cover the Ukrainian cleaner, paid through a French gig economy company that files its taxes in Ireland; plus the commission for the online hosting platform, with offices in California but tax-registered in the Netherlands; plus another cut for the online payments system, which has its headquarters in Seattle but runs its European subsidiary out of Luxembourg; plus the city tax imposed by Berlin.”

Like “Things,” “Perfection” contains no dialogue, the characters existing almost post-verbally, as though the images they create and curate and consume on social media might speak for them. But do they?

An egg became more famous than the pope. A highly contagious virus raged through West Africa. A billionaire poured a bucket of ice on his head. A fashion brand exploited East Asian sweatshop workers. A young woman recorded all the times she was catcalled. Two African Americans were killed by the police. A man went around filming first kisses. A plane vanished en route to Beijing. A woman was beautiful. An apartment full of plants was beautiful. A vegan quiche was beautiful. A child needed money for chemo. Time disappeared.

In “Things,” this barrage of stimuli takes the form of page-filling questions that Sylvie and Jérôme pose to prospective customers:

Why are pure-suction vacuum cleaners selling so poorly? What do people of modest origin think of chicory? Do you like ready-made mashed potato, and if so, why? . . . Do people like cheese in squeezy tubes? Are you for or against public transport? . . . Would you, Madam, like to rent your room to a Black? . . . Describe a man who likes pasta.

It is easy to imagine that “Perfection” began as a sort of parlor game among friends: What if we renovated “Things” for the twenty-first century? The

cane-seated chairs that Sylvie and Jérôme covet and the Gauloises cigarettes they smoke get traded for the hanging houseplants that Anna and Tom collect and the natural wine they drink. A misguided stint in a newly liberated Tunisia (“the queerest eight months of their lives”) gets swapped for an extended live-work situation in newly-besieged-by-digital-nomads Portugal (“It was all different, which was what they had wanted; and yet it was also somehow all the same”). Literary fiction lacks the right verb for what, exactly, Latronico is doing, which, in his granular allegiance to “Things,” is not unlike a musician covering a song or a showrunner adapting a foreign series. “Perfection” is “citational,” to quote Perec talking about his own work and that of his post-Surrealist peers, but Latronico achieves more than the word suggests, and his novel is greater than the sum of its cunning substitution of signifiers.

For all their naïveté, Anna and Tom are not despicable. They are normal, and Latronico is kind to them. It’s true that human beings did not always spend their lives constantly alert to the opinions of people they’d never meet, or able to buy anything they wanted from wherever they happened to be standing when they thought to want it. We know this, despite forgetting it all the time. But by presenting “Perfection” (which was long-listed for the Booker Prize last month) as a self-conscious descendant of a sixty-year-old novel, Latronico invites us to wonder whether the very structure of our moods—which Anna and Tom believe are “new”—might not actually be more enduring than we imagine. Latronico was clearly drawn both to Perec’s unorthodox narrative techniques and to what he used them to capture: the recognition—a relatively traditional one—that no new labor-saving devices or previously inconceivable technologies or counterintuitive whims of fashion can ever fundamentally alter what it feels like to be alive.

“Not only had Anna and Tom not had the chance to fight for a radically different world,” we learn, “but they couldn’t even imagine it.” Neither could Sylvie and Jérôme, who “would have liked, perhaps, to have been twenty during the Spanish Civil War.” To live in any society at any time—whether a pre-industrial tribe or a highly urbanized cohort of knowledge workers—is to feel constrained by forces beyond one’s control and for alternatives to seem impossible. Suffering is a symptom of consciousness, not just social conditions, and one’s frustrations and thwarted fantasies are,

in the end, proof of private agency, however outwardly constricted it may seem.

I read “Perfection” in a single hypnotized sitting. Time disappeared, as it does for Anna and Tom. In the following days, I described the book to myself with words like “flat” and “clinical” and “affectless.” I thought of it as a “case study” or a “kind of ethnography.” Reading it again a week later, I had the impression of meeting a beautiful, well-dressed person for the second time and realizing only then, with some embarrassment, that they were smart and funny and sensitive. “Perfection” is dense with ideas, feelings, political insights, beautiful turns of phrase, unexpected observations about ordinary occurrences—all the qualities I look for (and appreciate in real time) when reading fiction but which had, in this case, been obscured by proper nouns and mimetic precision. This is intentional, of course. The magic trick of “Perfection,” like “Things” before it, is to reveal readers to themselves—gently, in the way a therapist might encourage a patient to arrive at an unflattering truth. This original misapprehension might not be your fault, but it is your responsibility, Latronico suggests. You, contemporary reader, are the victim of poor training. You have been duped into turning any text into a catalogue of fleeting images. You have been distracted from what is right there on the page, waiting to make you actually happy. ♦

By Adam Kirsch  
By Anahid Nersessian  
By Audrey Wollen  
By Anthony Lane  
By Adam Gopnik  
By Graciela Mochkovsky  
By Alexandra Schwartz  
By Joshua Rothman  
By Maggie Doherty  
By David S. Wallace  
By Naomi Fry

## The Theatre

# Uneven Revivals of “A Streetcar Named Desire” and “Ghosts”

Paul Mescal and Patsy Ferran star in a heavy-handed production of Tennessee Williams’s masterpiece, and a mismatched cast stumbles around Henrik Ibsen’s haunted classic.

By [Helen Shaw](#)



Anjana Vasan, Paul Mescal, and Patsy Ferran star in the English director Rebecca Frecknall’s highly physical, modern-dress “Streetcar.” Illustration by Tianqi Chen

In early 1947, the playwright Tennessee Williams wrote to the producer Irene Selznick because Elia Kazan, who had been tapped to direct the Broadway première of “A Streetcar Named Desire,” was balking. *Who else could direct “Streetcar”?* Williams rejected the suggestion of Tyrone Guthrie out of hand. “He is English,” he wrote. “This is an American play with a peculiarly local or provincial color.”

Nearly eighty years later, the English director Rebecca Frecknall’s highly physical, modern-dress “Streetcar,” which has arrived at BAM from the West End, is not the British production that would put Williams’s mind at ease. Ease is in itself a particularly Southern quality, but it’s nowhere to be found in the show’s stripped-down set, nor in the director’s expressionist

interventions. As Frecknall did in last year’s “Cabaret at the Kit Kat Club,” she externalizes subtext and mental states. In this “Streetcar,” which nominally takes place in New Orleans, an onstage drummer (Tom Penn) plays an ear-shattering score by Angus MacRae, making the audience as jumpy as poor, neurasthenic Blanche (Patsy Ferran), a spinster who moves in with her sister, Stella (Anjana Vasan), and her brutish brother-in-law, Stanley (Paul Mescal). Blanche is the play’s frail liar, its soiled dove, but the tidal boundary between her dreams and her delusions can be hard to—  
BANG BANGITY BANG CRASH!

Dramatically, the piece pits dependent fragility against rude strength, so the set designer, Madeleine Girling, has built an elevated boxing-ring-shaped stage, an abstract, empty space for psychodrama. In *this* corner is Paul Mescal (the reason the show is selling out); in *that* corner, you sense, is the original Stanley, Marlon Brando. Mescal’s shadow opponent may explain the Irish actor’s bizarrely inflected American accent and doggedly repetitive phrasing. The show certainly emphasizes his beauty and youth: in a tomato-red muscle shirt and rolled-up pants, designed by Merle Hensel, he looks like one of the rumbustious teens in “The Outsiders.” Mescal’s finest screen roles—“All of Us Strangers,” “Normal People”—have honed his gift for shy longing, and despite his intensity he’s only intermittently forceful here. In the scene in which Stanley attacks Blanche, Frecknall needs to send the ensemble in to help him via a dream-dance slo-mo scrum. (There *is* a great part in “Streetcar” for Mescal, but it’s Stanley’s hapless poker buddy, Mitch.)

The weight of the play’s tragedy falls therefore to Blanche. The gamine Ferran has an extraordinary feral, changeling quality. Her voice drifts in and out of a Southern accent, but she understands Williams’s cadences, and she excels at demonstrating quickness of thought, though this skill does her intelligent, anxious character no appreciable good. I wish that the production had allowed her bewitching performance more dignity, rather than relying on corny dance-fights, or letting Vasan’s showily emotive Stella cry racking sobs over Blanche, in a moment when silence might have been more devastating. But my sense of the tragic and Frecknall’s are clearly far apart.

Williams showed such compassion for lovely, weak, wounded creatures—Blanche, Alma in “Summer and Smoke,” Brick in “Cat on a Hot Tin

Roof”—that many of us have built protective barricades around even the *idea* of them. (When an interpretive dancer personifying Blanche’s madness came in, throwing her long hair around, I practically hissed.) I admit, I cannot understand why Frecknall treats this most lyrical and atmospheric of playwrights like an obscurantist whose feelings must be exposed through mood ballets. Williams’s œuvre is a hothouse; strange flowers often bloom there. The last “Streetcar” to make the transatlantic journey was the similarly heavy-handed Benedict Andrews version with Gillian Anderson, which also used adrenalizing rock-music cues. But there are a few things to be thrilled by in this “Streetcar”—Ferran’s elfin Blanche, for one, and a superabundant vitality for another, a sense that the company is flinging itself headlong into the play, like Stanley throwing down a poker hand without bothering to look at his cards.

All this ruminating on national tastes made me wonder what a Norwegian would think of the Lincoln Center production of Henrik Ibsen’s “Ghosts,” from 1881, in a translation by Mark O’Rowe, directed by Jack O’Brien. I thought it was pretty bad, but then I wouldn’t know a deep inlet from a fjord.

“Ghosts” was a scandal from its inception. When it was performed in London, in the eighteen-nineties, the censor intervened, sure that “so loathsome an enterprise,” as one critic wrote, would corrupt everyone who saw it. The issue? Ibsen was exploding bourgeois hypocrisy by cramming his plot with taboos, then asserting that the greatest sin was the propriety that kept people from speaking frankly and living freely.

A widow, Mrs. Alving (Lily Rabe), running her late husband’s estate and setting up an orphanage in his name, has long hidden his moral debasement to preserve her family’s reputation. Secrets, though, will out: her young maid, Regina (Ella Beatty), is, unknowingly, the dead man’s illegitimate child, and her adult son, the frail Oswald (Levon Hawke), has been told by a doctor that he’s “*vermoulu*” (“worm-eaten”)—a squirming allusion to inherited syphilis. (Billy Crudup plays a moralizing pastor, who exists mostly to be appalled.) Lest we misunderstand, the set designer, John Lee Beatty, places an ostentatious bowl of apples on Mrs. Alving’s table to remind us of Oswald’s increasingly spirochete-ridden brain, and of the house’s mirror-identity as an awful Eden, where the only available Adam and Eve are siblings.

O'Brien's production begins as a "rehearsal." We see an exchange between the local reprobate Engstrand (Hamish Linklater) and Regina repeated several times: first, they mumble over their scripts and wear street clothes; then, restarting the dialogue, they shift toward period realism. As Engstrand continues to badger Regina, Linklater tosses his modern messenger bag offstage, and Beatty starts to emote—and shazam, we are in Norway, in a quasi-nineteenth century, in which one woman might wear a leg-of-mutton sleeve, and another a short skirt. (The rehearsal conceit doesn't return until the curtain call, when all the actors appear with their scripts, only to fling them angrily into a pile. Nuts to you, Ibsen!)

What the critic James Huneker thought might be "the strongest play of the nineteenth century" fights on different ground in the twenty-first. Despite its lugubrious atmosphere, the characters' problems could now be cleared up with some penicillin and, say, a book club. Keeping the play in the realm of crawling horror—and not having it tip into comedy—requires a touch for the gothic. (Richard Eyre achieved the requisite ambience in 2015, at *BAM*, with Lesley Manville as Mrs. Alving.) Here, only Rabe manages to establish any eeriness: her burred, throaty voice rasps intriguingly in contrast with her cool, untroubled expression.

The elephant in O'Brien's rehearsal room is the presence of Beatty and Hawke, two young actors with storied names and few credits. Beatty, the Juilliard-trained daughter of Warren Beatty and Annette Bening, displays flashes of spirit and mischief, if also a tendency to screw up her face to indicate effort, but Hawke, the son of Ethan Hawke and Uma Thurman, seems completely out of his depth—his program bio lists no other theatre experience—in an exposed, central role. Acting can come down through generations; Rabe's mother, for instance, was the actress Jill Clayburgh, a lineage you can glimpse sometimes in the way that Rabe sets her chin. But finding faint genetic shadows in younger actors doesn't make the time fly.

Speaking of inheritance, Ibsen established the standard form of contemporary drama: you present a juicy, melodramatic family breakdown and use it to deliver a stern polemic on the rights of the individual. That is the armature girding "Streetcar," too, though Williams came to a different conclusion. Ibsen saw an individual's self-determination as a remedy for

bourgeois hypocrisy, the first salvo of liberation. Williams knew the self was something else—the basic, lonesome unit of tragedy. ♦

By Helen Shaw  
By Helen Shaw  
By Michael Schulman  
By Helen Shaw  
By Anna Russell  
By Alex Ross  
By Michael Schulman  
By Anthony Lane  
By Helen Shaw  
By Jennifer Homans  
By Sarah Larson  
By Naomi Fry

# Poems

- “[Mushroom Hunting at the Ski Basin](#)”
- “[Against the Encroaching Grays](#)”

By [Arthur Sze](#)

Driving up the ski-basin road, I spot purple asters  
and know it is time; near a blood-red, white-flecked amanita, I dig two red-capped boletes  
out of the earth; green-stained *Lactarius*

and yellow-capped *Cortinarius* vanished decades ago,  
but, hunting mushrooms, I deepen through repetition.  
A dancer repeats steps until she no longer knows  
any steps; a violinist plays notes until he is living

in the marrow of silences. When clouds gather  
and gather, I cannot predict lightning and rain;  
I step on dry topsoil but sense moisture beneath.  
In this life, if you do not know what you are looking for,

how can you find it? A great horned owlet  
perched on a branch sees into a world at dusk;  
a bee hovers over a saguaro blossom  
in noon heat. Foraging among spruce and fir,

I wander over an unseen web of mycelium  
connecting all roots and branches;  
a thrumming in my bones marks  
an underworld beginning to burst into sight.

By Lauren Bridges  
By The New Yorker  
By The New Yorker  
By Barry Blitt  
By Lance Hansen  
By The New Yorker  
By Charles Bethea  
By Emily Flake  
By Sarah Kempa  
By Brendan Loper  
By Emily Flake  
By Juliana Castro Varón

By [C. D. Wright](#)

I held up the femur  
of a grasshopper

some blue air fell over me  
what I want is less clear to me  
now than it was then

to be loved to the end  
without ruth or recrimination  
to forgive myself as others

have forgiven me  
to enjoy the birds  
with little bones

at the farmers' market  
I still see his truck  
from time to time

notices on utility poles  
for a lost dog answering  
to Scout sometimes I sit

in a café pretending  
to read but knowing

I want to be the one  
to find Scout  
instead

I do what I have done  
I wake up and join  
the struggle

of the trees  
to find a way  
through and then

a dark clot  
of poetry breaks off

—C. D. Wright (1949-2016)

*This is drawn from “[The Essential C. D. Wright.](#)”*

By Sasha Debevec-McKenney  
By Patrycja Humienik  
By Robert Pinsky  
By Ian Frazier  
By Felipe Torres Medina  
By Yiyun Li  
By Joyce Carol Oates  
By Arthur Sze  
By Maggie Doherty  
By Mary Norris

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- [Cartoons from the Issue](#)

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By Mollie Cowger  
By Robyn Weintraub  
By Kameron Austin Collins  
By Caitlin Reid  
By Caitlin Reid  
By Will Nediger  
By Patrick Berry  
By Andy Kravis  
By Elizabeth C. Gorski  
By Kate Chin Park

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