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He Was the World's Longest-Held Death-Row Inmate. He Was Also Innocent.

Each day for 50 years, the Japanese boxer Iwao Hakamada woke up unsure whether it would be his last.

by Robert F. Worth



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On a sunny morning in October 2023, a 90-year-old woman in a blue blazer walked slowly toward the main courthouse in Shizuoka, a city on the Japanese coast about a two-hour drive south of Tokyo. The woman, Hideko

Hakamada, led a procession of lawyers and supporters carrying a broad, sky-blue banner, and as they approached the courthouse, a throng of some 300 people began clapping and chanting encouragement. A cluster of TV-news crews had set up nearby, and Hideko turned to greet them.

As she told the court later the same morning, she had come to right a wrong that had been done in that very building 55 years earlier. Hideko Hakamada is the sister of Iwao Hakamada, a former professional boxer whose long struggle for justice has become one of the most celebrated legal causes in Japanese history. He was found guilty of murdering four people in 1966, in a trial so flawed that it has become a textbook example of wrongful conviction.

Hakamada was sentenced to death, and spent the next five decades in a state of debilitating fear. Prisoners in Japan are not told when they will be executed; they listen every morning for the footsteps that could precede a key turning in their cell door and then a short walk to the hanging chamber. No warning is given to their lawyers or family members. Hakamada spent longer on death row than anyone else in history, earning a spot in *Guinness World Records*. He wrote eloquently about the daily mental torture he endured, and in the end it drove him mad. His agony changed the lives of many people around him, including one of the original judges, who became convinced of his innocence and spent the rest of his own life racked with guilt.

In recent years, Hakamada, who is now 88, has become a symbol in Japan not just of wronged innocence but of what is known as *hitojichi shijo*, or “hostage justice.” Police in Japan have the power to hold suspects and interrogate them for months without giving them access to a lawyer. The goal is to extract a confession, which Japanese prosecutors see as the centerpiece of any successful criminal case. Hakamada was subjected to brutal interrogations for 23 days—lasting up to 16 hours a day—until he signed a confession (which he recanted soon afterward).

These routine practices have led to a conviction rate of 99.8 percent for cases that go to trial. They have also led to so many accusations of coercion that there is now a Japanese word for the phenomenon—*enzai*, meaning “false accusations leading to imprisonment.” The system is also heavily

weighted against granting retrials that might give convicted people a second chance. In Hakamada's case, it took more than 50 years for him to receive one.

The Japanese fixation on obtaining confessions is centuries old. As Takashi Takano, a prominent Tokyo attorney and a critic of the system, explained to me, it is rooted in a belief that the state must elicit remorse from offenders in order to rehabilitate them and bolster social harmony. One of Takano's clients was [Carlos Ghosn, the former Nissan CEO, who was smuggled from Japan](#) in a musical-equipment box in 2019 after being arrested on charges of financial misconduct and interrogated for hundreds of hours. The Ghosn case gave the outside world a rare glimpse of the power of Japanese prosecutors.

The facts of the Hakamada case were egregious enough to anger even insiders. In 2014, a judge released Hakamada from prison, granting him a retrial and delivering a stinging rebuke to the police, strongly suggesting that they had fabricated the evidence—a pile of bloodstained clothing—that had helped convict him. According to the judge, the man who supervised Hakamada's interrogation was known among lawyers as the “king of torture.” The long-delayed retrial concluded in May, and [Hakamada was finally acquitted in late September.](#)

At this point, Hakamada may be beyond understanding what his exoneration means. He has sometimes said things that suggest he believes he was never in prison. He appears to have survived only by escaping into an imaginary world where he is all-powerful—a king, an emperor, even “the almighty God.” (Hakamada embraced Catholicism while in prison.) But the prospect of a retrial helped galvanize a reform movement led by lawyers, ex-judges, other wrongly convicted people, and even some Japanese boxers, who see Hakamada as both a figure of heroic suffering and the victim of a lingering social prejudice against their sport. These advocates have been pushing Japanese officials to rewrite the laws that undergird the practice of hostage justice. Many of them have drawn inspiration from Hakamada’s own prison writings, copied and passed around in samizdat form.

“Conscience is the only voice that protects the life of an innocent man,” he wrote in a journal entry in 1981, when he was still lucid. “The voice of

conscience echoing ever louder and higher for as long as the agonizing nights last.”

When I first saw Iwao Hakamada, he was sitting at a table in the third-floor apartment he shares with Hideko, eating cooked eel and rice from a bowl. He still has the small, sturdy frame of a featherweight boxer, along with a large, sloping forehead and small eyes that give him the look of a sleep-addled bear.

Hideko, who had met me at the door, introduced me to her brother. I bowed a greeting, but Hakamada glanced up only briefly and went back to his eel and rice. The apartment was relatively large by Japanese standards, and it struck me that it must have seemed vast when Hakamada was released from his tiny cell. With Hideko’s encouragement, I said a few words about why I was there and asked my first question, about why he had become a boxer.

“Because I decided I needed to be strong,” he replied. It was a promising start for a man who was said to have lost touch with reality. But then he got up quickly and walked away, signaling that the interview was over. Hideko had warned me that her brother was no longer capable of telling a stranger his story.

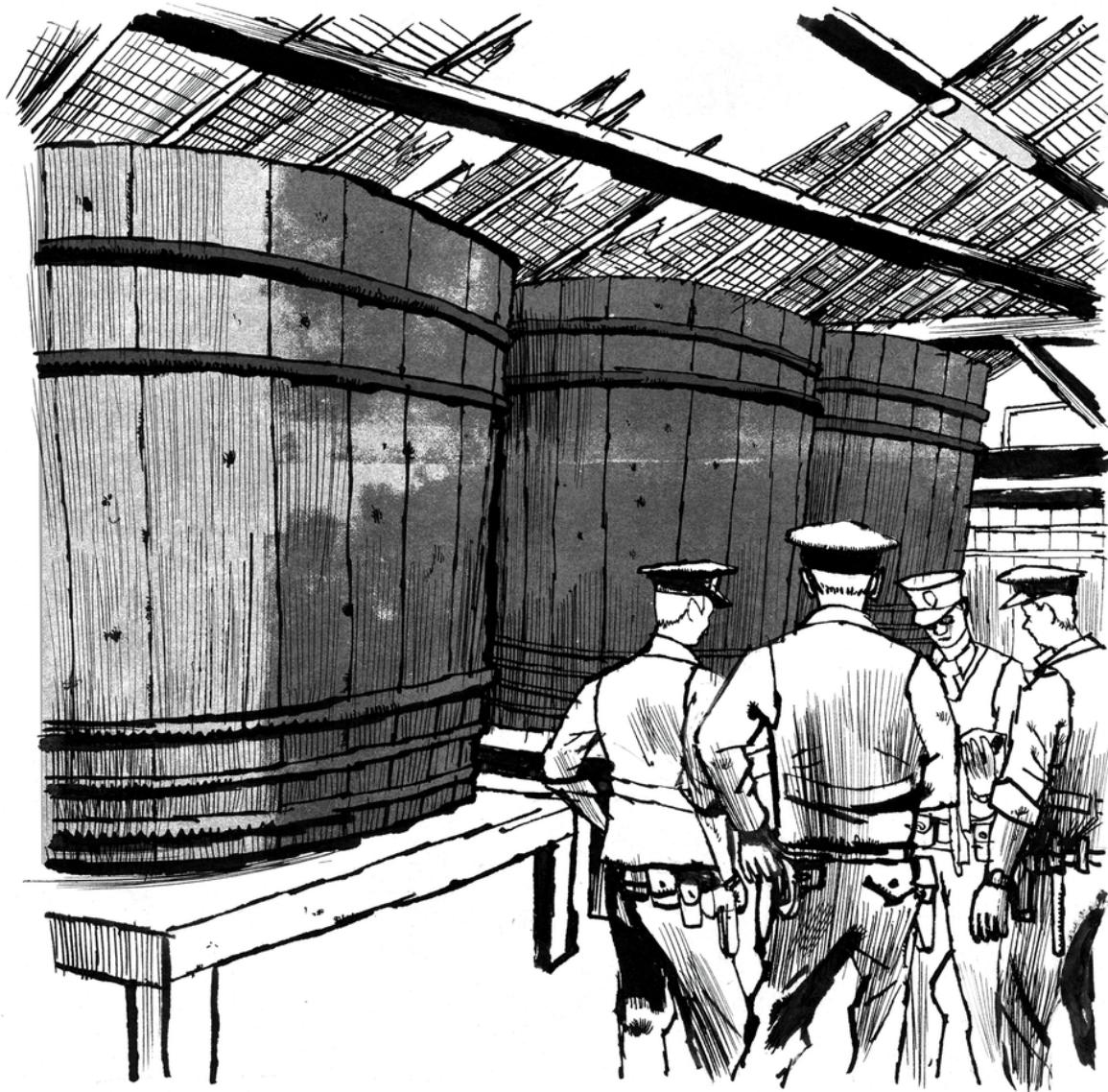
Nonetheless, the long arc of his incarceration—from passionate self-defense to deepening despair to encroaching insanity—is captured in some 5,000 [handwritten letters and journal entries that Hakamada produced in prison](#). In a sense, those pages are where his soul resides, perhaps more so than in the ghostly old man who was now sitting in a leather armchair in the next room. They were the real reason I had come.

Hideko got me a cup of tea and began carrying heavy boxes of Hakamada’s prison letters and journals to the table, brushing off my efforts to help. She is small but impressively fit for her age, with a habitual expression of resilient good humor on her face. The pages are in bound volumes, each one as thick as a bible.

She began leafing through them, showing me how Hakamada’s handwriting had changed over the years. It starts out wobbly and cartoonish; he had never been a good student, she said. He was the youngest of six siblings

born to a working-class family in a village near Shizuoka, a quiet boy who loved animals and used to bring home cats and birds and give them names. Hideko was the second-youngest, by her own account a tomboy and a loudmouth. “He would imitate what I did,” she said. He began boxing when he was 19—there was a gym nearby—and turned professional at the age of 23, boxing 19 matches in a single year (a record in Japan). But he decided to retire after an injury, and eventually got a job at a small miso factory not far from his parents’ home. He married a local woman, and the couple had a child.

Hideko paused, resting her hand on one of the binders, and then told me about the night that changed everything: June 30, 1966. A fire broke out after midnight in the home of the miso factory’s director, and after the flames had been put out, investigators discovered the burned bodies of the director, his wife, and two of their children. They had all been stabbed to death. The following morning, Hakamada went to his parents’ house, where Hideko was still living, to talk about the shocking news. Meanwhile, the police settled on Hakamada as the most likely suspect among the firm’s employees, believing the crime to have been an inside job and apparently seeing his boxing skills as proof of a capacity for violence.



During the 23 days of interrogation in a Shizuoka station house, the police used methods that were common in Japan when authorities were trying to extract a confession: sleep deprivation, threats, beatings. I spoke with two other people who had tried to maintain their innocence in similar circumstances, and both told me they had become so physically and emotionally spent that they would have said or signed almost anything to escape. The confession Hakamada ultimately signed is implausible on its face: He admitted to multiple scenarios, all of which seem to have been suggested to him by the police. Cash had been stolen from the home, but the police were never able to trace any of it to him.

“Please, God, I am not the killer,” he wrote in one of many letters to his mother during the first trial. “I am screaming it every day, and one day I hope people will hear my voice that reaches them through this Shizuoka wind.”

Hakamada could not have known it, but one of the judges who faced him as he first entered the courthouse in 1967 was a silent rebel against the Japanese way of justice. At 30, Norimichi Kumamoto was only a year younger than Hakamada, but in most ways their lives could not have been more different. Kumamoto was the eldest of four children, and had been recognized as brilliant from an early age. In pictures, he is austerely handsome, with creased brows and a firmly set mouth. He was well known at university, one of his classmates, Akira Kitani, told me, not just for his intellect but for his displays of brazen independence in a culture that fostered conformity. During the oral part of the bar exam, Kumamoto argued with his examiners—a shocking act of insubordination. “He won the argument, but they failed him” for talking back, Kitani, who later became a distinguished criminal-court judge, told me. (Kumamoto went on to earn the top score out of 10,000 students after he was allowed to retake the exam.)

Kumamoto also stood out for his interest in defendants’ rights. Seiki Ogata, a Japanese journalist who wrote a book about the judge, described him as an admirer of Chief Justice Earl Warren, who wrote the U.S. Supreme Court’s landmark 1966 *Miranda* decision requiring that suspects be read their rights before being interrogated. This was an unusual perspective in a country where law-enforcement officials have openly declared their belief that, as one of them put it, “the right to silence is a cancer.”

Kumamoto appears to have sensed that something was wrong soon after Hakamada’s trial began. The prosecutors had no plausible evidence tying Hakamada to the crime and no plausible motive for him to have been involved in the killings. Years afterward, according to Ogata’s biography, the judge recalled being moved by the boxer’s air of confidence as he asserted his innocence; unlike some other defendants, Hakamada did not seem drawn by an urge to explain himself. “I rather feel that we are being judged from now on,” Kumamoto remembered telling one of the two other judges hearing the case, according to the biography. (Some serious criminal trials are handled by three judges in Japan.)

Almost a year into the trial—the Japanese justice system tends to take its time—the police claimed to have discovered a pile of bloody clothes at the bottom of a miso tank from the factory. They declared—though they could not prove—that the clothes were Hakamada’s, and that he had hidden them there after the murders.

Judge Kumamoto thought the discovery of the new evidence was far too convenient to be real. The bloodstains were oddly fresh-looking on clothes that were said to have been stewing in a miso vat for 14 months, and at trial, the clothes would be shown not to fit Hakamada. Kumamoto wanted to acquit. But according to Ogata, the other two judges on the panel, both senior to him, could not believe that the police or prosecutors had coerced a false confession.

Such faith remains common among Japanese judges. Some spend an entire career on the bench without once delivering an acquittal. “In theory, the prosecutors monitor the police, and the judge monitors the prosecutors,” Hiroshi Ichikawa, who spent almost 13 years as a prosecutor and is now a defense lawyer, told me. “But it doesn’t work like this at all. The prosecutor basically does what the police want, and the judges follow what the prosecutor wants. So the criminal-justice system is basically controlled by the police.”

Prosecutors are afraid to cross the police, who have much larger investigative resources, and often cover up their mistakes. Ichikawa startled me by disclosing that he had once, as a prosecutor, personally threatened to kill a suspect if he didn’t confess. He said his former colleagues mostly haven’t changed their ways.

In the summer of 1968, after weeks of difficult arguments among themselves, the three judges in the Hakamada trial held a vote. Kumamoto was alone in finding Hakamada not guilty. Then came a second blow: As the presiding judge on the panel, he was obliged to write the decision justifying the verdict.

Kumamoto reluctantly agreed—to refuse might have ended his career—but he produced a 350-page document that is a poignant record of a tortured conscience. He criticized the investigators’ tactics at length and appeared to

be headed for an acquittal. But he then concluded that the defendant was guilty and must be executed.

Another judge who reviewed Kumamoto's ruling many years later told me that the document was "very unusual, to the point that it's abnormal ... If you read the verdict, you can see that there was not just disagreement but serious conflict of opinion" among the judges.

Kumamoto refused to sign his own ruling. He said he tried to visit Hakamada in jail to apologize, but was not granted permission. "Kumamoto believed the higher courts would overturn the verdict, but they didn't," Ogata, his biographer, told me. "In the end, he felt really responsible for what happened." That feeling would shape the remainder of his life.

The 1968 death sentence was a reckoning for everyone in the Hakamada family. Hakamada's mother, who had been healthy and strong, fell into despair and died two months after the sentencing. His father died not long afterward. Hakamada was so attached to his parents that his siblings kept the news from him for more than a year. He continued to write to his mother regularly, and finally the siblings decided they had to tell him. "I felt a great shock, and my whole body instantly froze," he wrote in a letter to his brother. "I could do nothing except look at my uncontrollably trembling hands. Feeling the trepidation like dark waves overtaking my body, I was taken by the urge to curse every being in this world."

Hideko showed me more of Hakamada's writings from the years that followed. He studied hard in prison, and his kanji characters become impressively neat and elegant, in perfectly ordered lines; they look like the work of a different person. His thoughts are more focused. He talks about the details of his case, and sometimes expounds on the nature of freedom and solitude. In a letter from December 1976, he describes feeling relief and inspiration after meeting with students from a human-rights group: "They believe I'm innocent. That's why they support my cause. It's clear that the verdict of the high court is nonsense ... It is extremely brutal and unfair, prejudiced, to give a sentence based on a factual error."

As the years passed with no hope of release—and with sudden execution a daily possibility—Hakamada's mind continued to unravel.

Hakamada also wrote a diary entry addressed to his son, who was 2 and a half years old when he was arrested. “Son, I want you to grow up honest and brave,” he wrote.

There is no need to be afraid. If someone asks how your father is, you should reply like this: My father is battling an unfair iron chain ... Son, as long as you try to do good and survive by learning lessons even from this society that is full of agonies and unkindness, I will be able to return to you in good health not too far in the future. I will prove to you then that your father never killed anyone and that the police know it best, and that the judge is the one who must feel most sorry.

He seems to have been referring to Judge Kumamoto, though the entry does not say so.

Hakamada’s wife had divorced him while he was in prison. It was there Hakamada learned that the boy had been placed in an orphanage and that the letters he sent to his son never reached him, Hideko told me. She said she has not seen the boy since he was a toddler, and seemed reluctant to talk about him. But her brother sometimes still calls out his son’s name: Akira. He would be 60 years old today.

Some of the letters and meditations Hakamada produced in prison are lyrical. “For some reason, moonlight gives me hope and peace,” he wrote. “When I think that many people outside prison are also looking at the moon, I feel a sense of freedom with other people who also gaze at the moonlight.”

Although he was on death row, Hakamada remained both hopeful and angry throughout the 1970s, sure that his conviction would be overturned on appeal. At times, he wrote about other cases of wrongful conviction that he became aware of through friends or lawyers. “This scream that I have continued to vocalize has not been listened to for the past 13 years,” he wrote to a boxing commentator. “The lack of responsibility of Japan’s justice system is so serious that my skin boils from anger.”

In 1980, Japan’s supreme court confirmed Hakamada’s death sentence. Six months later, the man in the cell next to him, who had become a friend, was taken out one morning without warning and hanged. This was a period of

terrible suffering, Hideko told me. She felt as if her heart would stop every time she heard about an execution on TV. Hakamada's journal entries and letters are a dark window into his state of mind. "Death-row inmates unanimously agree they fear execution very much," he wrote in a letter to his brother. "In fact, it's not the execution itself they fear: They fear so much the mind that fears execution. This agony, the pain that comes from extreme anxiety, completely differs from the pain and suffering accompanied by the concept of death."

A shadow seemed to fall over Hideko's face as she showed me some of the pages that followed, from the 1980s. "He started to talk about people sending him signals by radio waves," she said, pointing to the Japanese script. Later, there was talk of monkeys in his cell with him, and he started wearing bags on his head and arms to protect himself from harmful emanations.

Among the most striking letters are those in which Hakamada seems to be persuading himself that he can find meaning in his suffering. "My wish to win innocence is something that is purified and deepened when I accept loneliness," he wrote from his cell, a concrete box about seven feet on each side. "Loneliness is certainly very sad and painful, but it is never meaningless. When one endures and humbly accepts loneliness, one will surely realize the deep meaning of the path to victory."

But as the years passed with no hope of release—and with sudden execution a daily possibility—his mind continued to unravel. You can see it in his handwriting, which gradually loses its discipline and becomes loopy and uneven again, as if he were returning to his childhood self. At times, he seemed to hover between madness and reason within a single paragraph:

I am the king of Japan. I want to run flat out, as fast as I can. If I won my freedom, first I would make this boundless dream come true, cutting through the wind with shoulders and hips. Just thinking of it makes my body ache. Could I be champion if I just kept on running? When I was young, I used to think so. But now I have another answer ready.

All through the decades of Hakamada's imprisonment, Kumamoto was tormented by his role in the case. He resigned his judgeship in disgust less than a year after the verdict, a shocking decision for someone who had been seen as a rising star. He found work as a lawyer and university lecturer. He also became an alcoholic. Two marriages ended in divorce. He grew estranged from his two daughters, who didn't understand the source of his misery until many years later, Ogata told me.

According to Ogata, Kumamoto once turned himself in to the police, saying he'd committed a murder; he may have been drunk at the time. He seems to have carried Hakamada everywhere, like an accusing ghost. On learning that Hakamada had embraced Catholicism in prison, Kumamoto also embraced Catholicism. At one point, he went to a church and asked to confess his sins, because he "wanted to feel closer" to him, Ogata wrote in his book.

Kumamoto appears to have kept his belief in Hakamada's innocence almost entirely to himself. Japanese judges are expected to remain silent about their deliberations, and stoicism about one's suffering has long been a part of Japan's culture, perhaps especially for men. But in 2007, while living in retirement in southern Japan, Kumamoto began hearing about an emerging movement to free Hakamada, which had attracted the attention of some lawmakers. He sent a note to one of the activists, offering to help. Soon afterward, he appeared on a public panel about the death penalty, where he discussed his role in the trial and declared that he believed Hakamada was innocent. He also made an apology. "This is the moment when something that had been stuck in my throat and was suffocating me finally disappeared," Kumamoto later told his biographer.

Kumamoto's comments were reported widely in Japan, partly because he had violated the judicial code of silence. He spoke again at a session of Japan's Parliament. The story of his long-repressed guilt and grief captured the public's imagination, and gave rise to a feature film that was released in 2010, titled *Box: The Hakamada Case*, in reference to Hakamada's career as a fighter. It was not a great movie—dramatizing a man sitting alone in a cell for almost five decades is hard—but the film did help draw more attention to Hakamada's situation, both in Japan and beyond.

Hideko met Kumamoto at the time of his public apology. She told me she was deeply grateful to him for what he had done. Her brother was still locked up, but he was no longer seen as a monster. “Since the news report went out, the world has changed,” she said. “Even strangers greeted me on the street with a smile.”

Hideko has become something of a public figure in her own right. A manga-style graphic novel about her was published in 2020. She has the kind of life force that you sense the moment you walk into a room—her head cocked slightly, her eyes gleaming with amusement. She seems immune to regret, and laughs so often that it is easy to forget what she has been through.

She was 35 when Hakamada was convicted of murder, and it turned her into a pariah, along with the rest of the family. The local papers were full of stories portraying her brother as a demon. She got hate mail from strangers. She grew lonely and depressed, and drank herself to sleep every night for three years, she told me. But she pulled herself together, recognizing that she was her brother’s only hope. She visited him in prison as often as she could. She lived alone, working long hours at a government office and then at an accounting firm. I later learned—from the graphic novel about her life—that she had been briefly married as a young woman, but she’d never mentioned that to me. In a sense, she was married to her brother’s cause.

Starting in the ’90s, with Hideko’s help, a movement to exonerate Hakamada slowly coalesced. It attracted a diverse collection of people, and some pursued the cause with the kind of nerdy obsessiveness characteristic of *otaku*—a Japanese term for a person with a consuming hobby. One volunteer performed meticulous experiments with bloody clothing soaked in miso over long periods to show that the prosecution’s claims in the original trial did not hold up. These experiments were so rigorous and well documented that they were cited by the defense at Hakamada’s retrial many years later.

Among the movement’s most passionate supporters were Japanese boxers. One of them, a retired bantamweight champion named Shosei Nitta, started accompanying Hideko on her prison visits in the early 2000s. Then he began going alone, once a month. “You couldn’t converse in a normal way, except about boxing,” Nitta told me when I visited him at his Tokyo boxing gym.

Nitta cocked his arm, showing me how he and Hakamada would discuss the best technique for a hook punch. Dozens of champion boxers protested in front of the supreme court, calling for a retrial.

Among the many things the boxers did for Hakamada was reach out to Rubin “Hurricane” Carter, the American prizefighter who was catapulted to fame after Bob Dylan wrote a song about his wrongful murder conviction. (He served 19 years behind bars before his release in 1985.) Hakamada himself had written to Carter in 1989, congratulating him on his exoneration and pledging to “follow in your footsteps.” Two decades later, a fellow boxer traveled to the United States and brought back a videotape of Carter offering his support to Hakamada, who was still on death row.

“In the boxing community, we share this mysterious bond,” Nitta told me. “But in mainstream society, it’s not really approved of. We are trying to resist this prejudice, and I think that is why Hakamada means so much to us.”

Social prejudice appears to be a common thread in many wrongful-conviction cases in Japan. One of Hakamada’s death-row companions—their cells were adjoining—was a man named Kazuo Ishikawa, who belongs to the *burakumin*, the descendants of a feudal caste that was consigned to low-status jobs and still suffers from discrimination. Ishikawa was convicted of a 1963 murder on the basis of a coerced confession and a ransom note, even though he was illiterate at the time. He was paroled in 1994, but has always maintained his innocence and is still, at age 85, trying to clear his name.

Hideko and her eclectic band of boxers and *otaku* have helped elevate a broader effort to address the flaws in Japan’s criminal-justice system. More people are coming forward to contest their verdicts, and several nonprofits have sprung up to support those they believe to have been wrongly convicted. There is now an [Innocence Project Japan](#), inspired by the American group formed in 1992, that uses DNA evidence to challenge convictions. The movement has had some modest victories: Defense lawyers have gained more discovery rights and have pushed back against detention orders. Some police interrogations are now recorded. [A “lay judge” initiative](#), begun in 2009, allows a mixed panel of three professional judges

and an average of six citizens to decide guilt and sentencing in some serious criminal cases.

There have also been setbacks. A lawsuit challenging Japan's long-standing practice of notifying death-row inmates only hours before their execution—which likely played a role in driving Hakamada insane—was [dismissed by the Osaka district court](#) in April.

Change of any kind comes slowly in Japan, where those who question authority are more likely to be slapped than rewarded. Most people seem to have deep confidence in the justice system, and they are not entirely wrong: Japan incarcerates far fewer people per capita than the United States, partly because prosecutors are cautious about pressing charges for less serious crimes. Sentences tend to be relatively light, especially for those who admit their guilt and express remorse. Prosecutors believe they have a responsibility to help offenders return to a useful life.

But they bridle at the notion that justice can be arrived at through a messy legal tussle, as in American courtrooms. In Japan, the legal system behaves more like some archaic deity: kind to those who accept its judgments, and merciless to those who do not.



In 2014, after his legal team had spent more than 30 years pleading for a retrial, Hakamada was finally granted one by a district court. Hideko was then 81 years old and retired. She went to the prison to give her brother the good news, trailed by a film crew. As she was leaving, a guard offered her boxes full of her brother's belongings. Hakamada then walked into the room and sat down next to her. The judge, it turned out, had ordered Hakamada's immediate release. Hideko was totally unprepared. They had to ask for a ride from the film crew, but Hakamada, who hadn't been in a car in decades, got motion sickness. They ended up spending the night in a Tokyo hotel before heading home to Hamamatsu, the city where Hideko now lives.

Hideko struggled to get her head around the magnitude of what had just happened. The judge had not only released Hakamada and granted a retrial; he had taken a sledgehammer to the entire case. He asserted that the investigators appeared to have faked the evidence. He cited DNA evidence, not available during the first trial, showing that the blood on the clothes from the miso tank was neither Hakamada's nor the murder victims'.

It might have ended there. The judge had made clear that he believed Hakamada was innocent, and his ruling seemed unanswerable. Instead, prosecutors appealed his call for a retrial. As Hakamada moved in with his sister and began readapting to a world he had not inhabited since the mid-1960s, his case staggered from one false ending to another. Finally, in 2023, [the Tokyo High Court affirmed his right to a retrial](#). Prosecutors, who were widely expected to give up, declared that they would seek his conviction for murder all over again.

Occasionally, Hakamada refers to his time in prison as “training,” as if it had been preparation for some otherworldly combat.

There was little logic in their decision. They had no new evidence, and their chances of victory were near zero. But as Makoto Ibusuki, a professor at Tokyo’s Seijo University and an authority on wrongful convictions, explained to me, Japanese prosecutors tend to see their institution as infallible. There may have been an added spur in this instance. The prosecutors who brought the original case had been accused in the 2014 ruling of using fabricated evidence. David Johnson, an expert on the Japanese legal system who teaches at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, told me that their successors may have felt obliged to defend their reputation.

The retrial, which began in October 2023, was like a bad case of déjà vu, with the same exhibits of bloodstained clothes and miso tanks that had been used half a century earlier—though the state quietly withdrew Hakamada's discredited confession. “The prosecutors just repeat what has already been said,” Hideko told me. “The expressions on their faces said, *Why do we have to be here?*”

For all its frustrations, the retrial gave a big platform to opponents of hostage justice. The movement's buoyant mood was on display at a memorial service I attended this past April at a Tokyo meeting hall. It was held to honor a man who had been exonerated years earlier after serving nearly three decades for murder. I found myself chatting with an 80-year-old man in an ill-fitting brown blazer who said he had served 20 years in prison for a murder he didn't commit. We were standing by a big picture window, and he pointed out the headquarters of the National Police Agency across the street. He had been tortured in there for weeks on end, he said, in a basement room with no windows and no clocks. "I understand completely how an innocent man ends up writing a confession," he said.

But much of the Japanese public does not understand. The widow of the exonerated man being honored gave a brief but powerful speech, during which she said her father hadn't wanted her to marry a man who had been convicted of a crime, because he believed that "the courthouse never lies."

A nonpartisan group of some 200 Parliament members now wants to make it easier for defendants to receive a retrial and is preparing to propose amendments to the law. But getting any such measure past Japan's powerful Justice Ministry will not be easy. It is dominated by prosecutors, and has sent clear signs that it is opposed to reform.

When Hakamada got out of prison, Hideko didn't ask him about his time on the inside. "I was waiting until he spoke," she told me. But he never has. Occasionally, he refers obliquely to his time there as "training," as if it had been preparation for some otherworldly combat.

He talks about being visited by the spirits of his dead friends, the ones who were led away to the execution chamber, where a prison official stands behind a blue curtain and presses a button that ends a person's life. "When he first came here, he'd say there were spirits of the dead trapped in the closet," Hideko told me. "He'd tap on it and try to release them."

Hakamada's days revolve around a long, mostly silent, drive that he is taken on every afternoon, his eyes focused on the passing streets. He believes that evil influences lurk unseen, Hideko told me, and that he alone can fight them, like the boxer he once was. "He feels very strongly that he must

surveil,” she said. “He needs to go all over Hamamatsu city. To surveil and protect.”

The acquittal that arrived in September was a balm for Hideko and her supporters. But it came too late for one of them. Judge Kumamoto, the author of the 1968 decision, was already seriously ill with cancer when Hakamada was released. The two men’s lives had been deeply intertwined for decades, but they had never met outside the courtroom.

In early 2018, Hideko brought her brother to Kumamoto’s hospital bed; he was pale and skeletal, an oxygen tube strapped under his nose. He looked to be on the verge of death, though he would live for two more years.

The meeting was captured on film. The two visitors, dressed in heavy winter clothes, appear somber and dumbstruck as they gaze down at the stricken man. Her brother didn’t seem to understand whom he was looking at, Hideko told me. But Kumamoto clearly knew the face of the man he had condemned 50 years earlier.

“Iwao,” the judge said, in a scratchy whisper. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

This article appears in the [December 2024](#) print edition with the headline “A Boxer on Death Row.”

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How One Woman Became the Scapegoat for America's Reading Crisis

Lucy Calkins was an education superstar. Now she's cast as the reason a generation of students struggles to read. Can she reclaim her good name?

by Helen Lewis



Until a couple of years ago, Lucy Calkins was, to many American teachers and parents, a minor deity. Thousands of U.S. schools used her curriculum, called Units of Study, to teach children to read and write. Two decades ago, her guiding principles—that children learn best when they love reading, and

that teachers should try to inspire that love—became a centerpiece of the curriculum in New York City’s public schools. Her approach spread through an institute she founded at Columbia University’s Teachers College, and traveled further still via teaching materials from her publisher. Many teachers don’t refer to Units of Study by name. They simply say they are “teaching Lucy.”

But now, at the age of 72, Calkins faces the destruction of everything she has worked for. [A 2020 report by a nonprofit](#) described Units of Study as “beautifully crafted” but “unlikely to lead to literacy success for *all* of America’s public schoolchildren.” The criticism became impossible to ignore two years later, when the American Public Media podcast [Sold a Story: How Teaching Kids to Read Went So Wrong](#) accused Calkins of being one of the reasons so many American children struggle to read. (The National Assessment of Educational Progress—a test administered by the Department of Education—found in 2022 that roughly one-third of fourth and eighth graders are unable to read at the “basic” level for their age.)

In *Sold a Story*, the reporter Emily Hanford argued that teachers had fallen for a single, unscientific idea—and that its persistence was holding back American literacy. The idea was that “beginning readers don’t have to sound out words.” That meant teachers were no longer encouraging early learners to use phonics to decode a new word—to say *cuh-ah-tuh* for “cat,” and so on. Instead, children were expected to figure out the word from the first letter, context clues, or nearby illustrations. But this “cueing” system was not working for large numbers of children, leaving them floundering and frustrated. The result was a reading crisis in America.

The podcast said that “a company and four of its top authors” had sold this “wrong idea” to teachers and politicians. The company was the educational publisher Heinemann, and the authors included the New Zealander Marie Clay, the American duo Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell, and Calkins. The podcast devoted an entire episode, “[The Superstar](#),” to Calkins. In it, Hanford wondered if Calkins was wedded to a “romantic” notion of literacy, where children would fall in love with books and would then somehow, magically, learn to read. Calkins could not see that her system failed poorer children, Hanford argued, because she was “influenced by privilege”; she had written, for instance, that children might learn about the alphabet by

picking out letters from their surroundings, such as “the monogram letters on their bath towels.”

In Hanford’s view, it was no surprise if Calkins’s method worked fine for wealthier kids, many of whom arrive at school already starting to read. If they struggled, they could always turn to private tutors, who might give the phonics lessons that their schools were neglecting to provide. But kids without access to private tutors needed to be drilled in phonics, Hanford argued. She backed up her claims by referencing neurological research into how children learn to read—gesturing to a body of evidence known as “the science of reading.” That research demonstrated the importance of regular, explicit phonics instruction, she said, and ran contrary to how American reading teachers were being trained.

Since the podcast aired, “teaching Lucy” has fallen out of fashion. Calkins’s critics say that her refusal to acknowledge the importance of phonics has tainted not just Units of Study—a reading and writing program that stretches up to eighth grade—but her entire educational philosophy, known as “balanced literacy.” Forty states and the District of Columbia have passed laws or implemented policies promoting the science of reading in the past decade, according to *Education Week*, and publishers are racing to adjust their offerings to embrace that philosophy.

Somehow, the wider debate over how to teach reading has become a referendum on Calkins herself. In September 2023, [Teachers College announced](#) that it would dissolve the reading-and-writing-education center that she had founded there. Anti-Lucy sentiment has proliferated, particularly in the city that once championed her methods: Last year, David Banks, then the chancellor of New York City public schools, likened educators who used balanced literacy to lemmings: “We all march right off the side of the mountain,” he said. *The New Yorker* has described Calkins’s approach as “[literacy by vibes](#),” and in an editorial, the *New York Post* described her initiative as “[a disaster](#)” that had been “[imposed on generations of American children](#).” The headline declared that it had “Ruined Countless Lives.” When the celebrated Harvard cognitive psychologist Steven Pinker shared an article about Calkins on X, he bemoaned “the scandal of ed schools that promote reading quackery.” Queen Lucy has been dethroned.

“I mean, I can say it—it was a little bit like 9/11,” Calkins told me when we spoke at her home this summer. On that day in 2001, she had been driving into New York City, and “literally, I was on the West Side Highway and I saw the plane crash into the tower. Your mind can’t even comprehend what’s happening.” Two decades later, the suggestion that she had harmed children’s learning felt like the same kind of gut punch.

Calkins now concedes that some of the problems identified in *Sold a Story* were real. But she says that she had followed the research, and was trying to rectify issues even before the podcast debuted: She released her first dedicated phonics units in 2018, and later published a series of “decodable books”—simplified stories that students can easily sound out. Still, she has not managed to satisfy her critics, and on the third day we spent together, she admitted to feeling despondent. “What surprises me is that I feel as if I’ve done it all,” she told me. (Heinemann, Calkins’s publisher, has claimed that the *Sold a Story* podcast “[radically oversimplifies and misrepresents complex literacy issues.](#)”)

The backlash against Calkins strikes some onlookers, even those who are not paid-up Lucy partisans, as unfair. “She wouldn’t have been my choice for the picture on the ‘wanted’ poster,” James Cunningham, a professor emeritus of literacy studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, told me. Indeed, over the course of several days spent with Calkins, and many more hours talking with people on all sides of this debate, I came to see her downfall as part of a larger story about the competing currents in American education and the universal desire for an easy, off-the-shelf solution to the country’s reading problems.

The question now is whether Calkins is so much a part of the problem that she cannot be part of the solution. “I’m going to figure this out,” she remembered thinking. “And I’m going to clarify it or I’m going to write some more or speak or do something or, or—fix it.” But can she? Can anyone?

On the last day of the school year in Oceanside, a well-to-do town on Long Island, everyone was just *delighted* to see Lucy Calkins. The young Yale-educated principal of Fulton Avenue School 8, Frank Zangari, greeted her warmly, and at the end of one lesson, a teacher asked for a selfie.

The lessons I saw stressed the importance of self-expression and empathy with other viewpoints; a group of sixth graders told me about the books they had read that year, which explored being poor in India and growing up Black in 1960s America. In every class, I watched Calkins speak to children with a mixture of intense attention and straightforward challenge; she got down on the floor with a group learning about orcas and frogs and peppered them with questions about how animals breathe. “Could you talk a minute about the writer’s craft?” she asked the sixth graders studying poetry. “Be more specific. Give examples,” she told a fourth grader struggling to write a memoir.

With her slim frame, brown bob, and no-nonsense affect, she reminded me of Nancy Pelosi. “I can’t retire; I don’t have any hobbies,” I overheard her saying to someone later.

Calkins has profited handsomely from textbook sales and training fees.

School 8 showed the strengths of Calkins’s approach—which is presumably why she had suggested we visit it together. But it also hinted at the downsides. For generations in American public education, there has been a push and pull between two broad camps—one in which teachers are encouraged to directly impart skills and information, and a more progressive one in which children are thought to learn best through firsthand experience. When it comes to reading, the latter approach dominates universities’ education programs and resonates with many teachers; helping children see themselves as readers and writers feels more emotionally satisfying than drilling them on diphthongs and trigraphs.

This tension between the traditionalists and the progressives runs through decades of wrangling over standardized tests and through most of the major curricular controversies in recent memory. Longtime educators tick off the various flash points like Civil War battlefields: outcome-based education, No Child Left Behind, the Common Core. Every time, the pendulum went one way and then the other. “I started teaching elementary school in 1964,” says P. David Pearson, a former dean at the Berkeley School of Education, in California. “And then I went to grad school in, like, ’67, and there’s been a back-to-the-basics swing about every 10 years in the U.S., consistently.”

The progressives' primary insight is that lessons focused on repetitive instruction and simplified text extracts can be boring for students and teachers alike, and that many children respond more enthusiastically to discovering their own interests. "We're talking about an approach that treats kids as competent, intellectual meaning makers, versus kids who just need to learn the code," Maren Aukerman, a professor at the University of Calgary, told me. But opponents see that approach as nebulous and undirected.

My time at School 8 was clearly intended to demonstrate that Units of Study is not hippie nonsense, but a rigorous curriculum that can succeed with the right teachers. "There's no question in my mind that the philosophy works, but in order to implement it, it takes a lot of work," Phyllis Harrington, the district superintendent, told me.

School 8 is a happy school with great results. However, while the school uses Calkins's writing units for all grades, it uses her reading units only from the third grade on. For first and second grades, the school uses Fundations, which is marketed as "a proven approach to Structured Literacy that is aligned with the science of reading." In other words, it's a phonics program.

Calkins's upbringing was financially comfortable but psychologically tough. Both of her parents were doctors, and her father eventually chaired the department of medicine at the University at Buffalo. Calkins's mother was "the most important, wonderful person in my life, but really brutal," she told me. If a bed wasn't made, her mother ripped off the sheets. If a coat wasn't hung up, her mother dropped it into the basement. When the young Lucy bit her fingernails, her mother tied dancing gloves onto her hands. When she scratched the mosquito bites on her legs, her mother made her wear thick pantyhose at the height of summer.

The nine Calkins children raised sheep and chickens themselves. Her memories of childhood are of horseback riding in the cold, endless hand-me-downs, and little tolerance for bad behavior.

That is why, Calkins told me, "nothing that Emily Hanford has said grates on me more than the damn monogrammed towels." But she knows that the charge of being privileged and out of touch has stuck. Her friends had warned her about letting me into her home in Dobbs Ferry, a pretty suburb

of New York, and I could see why. Her house is idyllic—at the end of a long private drive, shaded by old trees, with a grand piano in the hallway and a Maine-coon cat patrolling the wooden floors. Calkins has profited handsomely from textbook sales and training fees, and in the eyes of some people, that is suspicious. (“Money is the last thing I ever think about,” she told me.)

She became interested in reading and writing because she babysat for the children of the literacy pioneer Donald Graves, whose philosophy can be summarized by one of his most widely cited phrases: “Children want to write.” Even at a young age, she believed in exhaustively prepared fun. “I would plan a bagful of things I would bring over there; I was the best babysitter you could ever have,” she said. “We would do crafts projects, and drama, you know, and I would keep the kids busy all day.”

When Calkins was 14, Graves sent her to be a counselor at a summer camp in rural Maine. She remembers two kids in particular, Sophie and Charlie. Sophie was “so tough and surly, and a kind of overweight, insecure, tough kid,” but she opened up when Calkins took her horseback riding and then asked her to write about it. Charlie loved airplanes, and so she asked him to write about those. The experience cemented her lifelong belief that children should read and write as a form of self-expression.

After graduating from Williams College in 1973, she enrolled in a program in Connecticut that trained teachers to work in disadvantaged districts. She read everything about teaching methods she could find, and traveled to England, where a progressive education revolution was in full swing.

Calkins returned to America determined to spread this empowering philosophy. She earned a doctorate at NYU, and, in 1986, published a book called *The Art of Teaching Writing*. Later, she expanded her purview to reading instruction.

At the time, the zeitgeist favored an approach known as “whole language.” This advocated independent reading of full books and suggested that children should identify words from context clues rather than arduously sounding them out. Progressives loved it, because it emphasized playfulness and agency. But in practice, whole language had obvious flaws: Some

children do appear to pick up reading easily, but many benefit from focused, direct instruction.

This approach influenced Calkins as she developed her teaching philosophy. “Lucy Calkins sides, in most particulars, with the proponents of ‘whole language,’” *The New York Times* reported in 1997. Her heavyweight 2001 book, *The Art of Teaching Reading*, has only a single chapter on phonics in primary grades; it does note, however, that “researchers emphasize how important it is for children to develop phonemic awareness in kindergarten.”

The author Natalie Wexler has described Calkins’s resulting approach, balanced literacy, as an attempt to create a “peace treaty” in the reading wars: Phonics, yes, if you must, but also writing workshops and independent reading with commercial children’s books, rather than the stuffier grade-level decodable texts and approved extracts. (Defenders of the former method argue that using full books is more cost-efficient, because they can be bought cheaply and used by multiple students.) “If we make our children believe that reading has more to do with matching letters and sounds than with developing relationships with characters like Babar, Madeline, Charlotte, and Ramona,” Calkins wrote, “we do more harm than good.”

Sentences like that are why critics saw balanced literacy as a branding exercise designed to rehabilitate old methods. “It was a strategic rebadging of whole language,” Pamela Snow, a cognitive-psychology professor at La Trobe University, in Australia, told me. Even many of Calkins’s defenders concede that she was too slow to embrace phonics as the evidence for its effectiveness grew. “I think she should have reacted earlier,” Pearson, the former Berkeley dean, told me, but he added: “Once she changed, they were still beating her for what she did eight years ago, not what she was doing last month.”

For the first decades of her career, Calkins was an influential thinker among progressive educators, writing books for teachers. In 2003, though, Joel Klein, then the chancellor of the New York City public schools, suddenly mandated her workshop approach in virtually all of the city’s elementary schools, alongside a separate, much smaller, phonics program. An article in the *Times* suggested that some saw Klein as “[an unwitting captive of the city’s liberal consensus](#),” but Klein brushed aside the criticisms of balanced

literacy. “I don’t believe curriculums are the key to education,” he said. “I believe teachers are.” Now everybody in the city’s public schools would be “teaching Lucy.”

As other districts followed New York’s lead, Units of Study became one of the most popular curricula in the United States. This led, inevitably, to backlash. A philosophy had become a product—an extremely popular and financially successful one. “Once upon a time there was a thoughtful educator who raised some interesting questions about how children were traditionally taught to read and write, and proposed some innovative changes,” [the author Barbara Feinberg wrote in 2007](#). “But as she became famous, critical debate largely ceased: her word became law. Over time, some of her methods became dogmatic and extreme, yet her influence continued to grow.”

You wouldn’t know it from listening to her fiercest detractors, but Calkins has, in fact, continuously updated Units of Study. Unlike Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell, who have stayed quiet during the latest furor and quietly reissued their curriculum with more emphasis on phonics last year, Calkins has even taken on her critics directly. In 2019—the year after she added the dedicated phonics texts to Units of Study—she published an eight-page document called “No One Gets to Own the Term ‘The Science of Reading,’” which referred dismissively to “phonics-centric people” and “the new hype about phonics.” This tone drove her opponents mad: Now that Calkins had been forced to adapt, she wanted to decide what the science of reading was?

“Her document is not about the science that I know; it is about Lucy Calkins,” [wrote the cognitive neuroscientist Mark Seidenberg](#), one of the critics interviewed in *Sold a Story*. “The purpose of the document is to protect her brand, her market share, and her standing among her many followers.”

Talking with Calkins herself, it was hard to nail down to what extent she felt that the criticisms of her earlier work were justified. When I asked her how she was thinking about phonics in the 2000s, she told me: “Every school has a phonics program. And I would always talk about the phonics programs.” She added that she brought phonics specialists to Columbia’s Teachers College several times a year to help train aspiring educators. (James

Cunningham, at UNC Chapel Hill, backed this up, telling me, “She was certainly not wearing a sandwich billboard around: DON’T TEACH PHONICS.”)

But still, I asked Calkins, would it be fair to say that phonics wasn’t your bag?

“I felt like phonics was something that you have the phonics experts teach.”

So where does this characterization of you being hostile toward phonics come from?

“Hopefully, you understand I’m not stupid. You would have to be stupid to not teach a 5-year-old phonics.”

But some people didn’t, did they? They were heavily into context and cueing.

“I’ve never heard of a kindergarten teacher who doesn’t teach phonics,” Calkins replied.

Because this is America, the reading debate has become a culture war. When *Sold a Story* came along in 2022, it resonated with a variety of audiences, including center-left education reformers and parents of children with learning disabilities. But it also galvanized political conservatives. Calkins’s Units of Study was already under attack from the right: In 2021, an article in the Manhattan Institute’s *City Journal* titled “[Units of Indoctrination](#)” had criticized the curriculum, alleging that the way it teaches students to analyze texts “amounts to little more than radical proselytization through literature.”

The podcast was released at an anxious time for American education. During the coronavirus pandemic, many schools—particularly in blue states—were closed for months at a time. Masking in classrooms made it harder for children to lip-read what their teachers were saying. [Test scores fell, and have only recently begun to recover.](#)

“Parents had, for a period of time, a front-row seat based on Zoom school,” Annie Ward, a recently retired assistant superintendent in Mamaroneck, New York, told me. She wondered if that fueled a desire for a “back to basics”

approach. “If I’m a parent, I want to know the teacher is teaching and my kid is sitting there soaking it up, and I don’t want this loosey-goosey” stuff.

“The science of reading” has now become a brand name, another off-the-shelf solution to America’s educational problems.

Disgruntled parents quickly gathered online. Moms for Liberty, a right-wing group that started out by opposing school closures and mask mandates, began lobbying state legislators to change school curricula as well. The reading wars began to merge with other controversies, such as how hard schools should push diversity-and-inclusion programs. (The Moms for Liberty website recommends *Sold a Story* on its resources page.) “We’re failing kids everyday, and Moms for Liberty is calling it out,” [a co-founder, Tiffany Justice, told Education Week in October of last year](#). “The idea that there’s more emphasis placed on diversity in the classroom, rather than teaching kids to read, is alarming at best. That’s criminal.”

Ward’s district was not “teaching Lucy,” but using its own bespoke balanced-literacy curriculum. In the aftermath of the pandemic, Ward told me, the district had several “contentious” meetings, including one in January 2023 where “we had ringers”—attendees who were not parents or community members, but instead seemed to be activists from outside the district. “None of us in the room recognized these people.” That had never happened before.

I had met Ward at a dinner organized by Calkins at her home, which is also the headquarters of Mossflower—the successor to the center that Calkins used to lead at Teachers College. The evening demonstrated that Calkins still has star power. On short notice, she had managed to assemble half a dozen superintendents, assistant superintendents, and principals from New York districts.

“Any kind of disruption like this has you think very carefully about what you’re doing,” Edgar McIntosh, an assistant superintendent in Scarsdale, told me. But he, like several others, was frustrated by the debate. During his time as an elementary-school teacher, he had discovered that some children could decode words—the basic skill developed by phonics—but struggled with their meaning. He worried that parents’ clamor for more phonics might

come at the expense of teachers' attention to fluency and comprehension. Raymond Sanchez, the superintendent of Tarrytown's school district, said principals should be able to explain how they were adding more phonics or decodable texts to existing programs, rather than having "to throw everything out and find a series that has a sticker that says 'science of reading' on it."

This, to me, is the key to the anti-Lucy puzzle. Hanford's reporting was thorough and necessary, but its conclusion—that whole language or balanced literacy would be replaced by a shifting, research-based movement—is hard to reconcile with how American education actually works. The science of reading started as a neutral description of a set of principles, but it has now become a brand name, another off-the-shelf solution to America's educational problems. The answer to those problems might not be to swap out one commercial curriculum package for another—but that's what the system is set up to enable.

Gail Dahling-Hench, the assistant superintendent in Madison, Connecticut, has experienced this pressure firsthand. Her district's schools don't "teach Lucy" but instead follow a bespoke local curriculum that, she says, uses classroom elements associated with balanced literacy, such as the workshop model of students studying together in small groups, while also emphasizing phonics. That didn't stop them from running afoul of the new science-of-reading laws.

In 2021, Connecticut passed a "Right to Read" law mandating that schools choose a K–3 curriculum from an approved list of options that are considered compliant with the science of reading. Afterward, Dahling-Hench's district was denied a waiver to keep using its own curriculum. (Eighty-five districts and charter schools in Connecticut applied for a waiver, but only 17 were successful.) "I think they got wrapped around the axle of thinking that programs deliver instruction, and not teachers," she told me.

Dahling-Hench said the state gave her no useful explanation for its decision—nor has it outlined the penalties for noncompliance. She has decided to stick with the bespoke curriculum, because she thinks it's working.

According to test scores released a few days after our conversation, her district is among the best-performing in the state.

Keeping the current curriculum also avoids the cost of preparing teachers and administrators to use a new one—a transition that would be expensive even for a tiny district like hers, with just five schools. “It can look like \$150,000 to \$800,000 depending on which program you’re looking at, but that’s a onetime cost,” Dahling-Hench said. Then you need to factor in annual costs, such as new workbooks.

You can’t understand this controversy without appreciating the sums involved. Refreshing a curriculum can cost a state millions of dollars. People on both sides will therefore suggest that their opponents are motivated by money—either saving their favored curriculum to keep the profits flowing, or getting rich through selling school boards an entirely new one. Talking with teachers and researchers, I heard widespread frustration with America’s commercial approach to literacy education. Politicians and bureaucrats tend to love the idea of a packaged solution—*Buy this and make all your problems go away!*—but the perfect curriculum does not exist.

“If you gave me any curriculum, I could find ways to improve it,” Aukerman, at the University of Calgary, told me. She thinks that when a teaching method falls out of fashion, its champions are often personally vilified, regardless of their good faith or expertise. In the case of Lucy Calkins and balanced literacy, Aukerman said, “If it weren’t her, it would be someone else.”



One obvious question about the science of reading is, well ... what is it? The evidence for some kind of explicit phonics instruction is compelling, and states such as Mississippi, which has adopted early screening to identify children who struggle to read—and which holds back third graders if

necessary—[appear to be improving their test scores](#). Beyond that, though, things get messy.

Dig into this subject, and you can find frontline teachers and credentialed professors who contest every part of the consensus. And I mean *every* part: Some academics don't even think there's a reading crisis at all.

American schools might be ditching Units of Study, but balanced literacy still has its defenders. A 2022 analysis in England, which mandates phonics, found that systematic reviews “do not support a synthetic phonics orientation to the teaching of reading; they suggest that a balanced-instruction approach is most likely to be successful.”

The data on the effects of specific methods can be conflicting and confusing, which is not unusual for education studies, or psychological research more generally. I feel sorry for any well-intentioned superintendent or state legislator trying to make sense of it all. One of the classrooms at Oceanside School 8 had a wall display devoted to “growth mindset,” a fashionable intervention that encourages children to believe that instead of their intelligence and ability being fixed, they can learn and evolve. Hoping to improve test scores, many schools have spent thousands of dollars each implementing “growth mindset” lessons, which proponents once argued should be a “national education priority.” (Some proponents also hoped, earnestly, that the approach could help bring peace to the Middle East.) But in the two decades since growth mindset first became ubiquitous, the lofty claims made about its promise have come down to earth.

Keeping up with all of this is more than any teacher—more than any school board, even—can reasonably be expected to do. After I got in touch with her, Emily Hanford sent me seven emails with links to studies and background reading; I left Calkins’s house loaded down with units of her curricula for younger students. More followed in the mail.

Even the most modest pronouncements about what’s happening in American schools are difficult to verify, because of the sheer number of districts, teachers, and pupils involved. In *Sold a Story*, Hanford suggested that some schools were succeeding with Units of Study only because parents hired personal tutors for their children. But corroborating this with data is

impossible. “I haven’t figured out a way to quantify it, except in a very strong anecdotal way,” Hanford told me.

Some teachers love “teaching Lucy,” and others hate it. Is one group delusional? And if so, which one? Jenna and Christina, who have both taught kindergarten in New York using Units of Study, told me that the curriculum was too invested in the idea of children as “readers” and “writers” without giving them the basic skills needed to read and write. (They asked to be identified only by their first names in case of professional reprisals.) “It’s a piece of shit,” Christina said. She added: “We’re expecting them to apply skills that we haven’t taught them and that they aren’t coming to school with. I’ve been trying to express that there’s a problem and I get called negative.” Jenna had resorted to a covert strategy, secretly teaching phonics for up to 90 minutes a day instead of the brief lessons she was instructed to provide.

But for every Jenna or Christina, there’s a Latasha Holt. After a decade as a third- and fourth-grade teacher in Arkansas, Holt is now an associate professor of elementary literacy at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, where she has watched from the sidelines as the tide turned against Calkins. “The dismantling of this thing, it got to me, because I had taught under Units of Study,” she told me. “I’ve used it, and I knew how good it was. I had lived it; I’ve seen it work; I knew it was good for kids.”

Calkins still has a “ferocious” drive, she told me, and a deep conviction in her methods, even as they evolve.

Aubrey Kinat is a third-grade teacher in Texas who recently left her position at a public school because it decided to drop Units of Study. (The school now uses another curriculum, which was deemed to align better with the science of reading.) Suddenly, she was pushed away from full novels and toward approved excerpts, and her lessons became much more heavily scripted. “I felt like I was talking so much,” she told me. “It took the joy out of it.”

For many school boards facing newly politicized parents who came out of the pandemic with strong opinions, ditching Lucy has had the happy side effect of giving adults much more control over what children read. Calkins

and some of her dinner guests had suggested that this might be the true reason for the animus around independent reading. “I do start to wonder if this really is about wanting to move everybody towards textbooks,” Calkins said.

Eighteen months after her series launched, Hanford returned in April 2024 with two follow-up episodes of *Sold a Story*, which took a less polemical tone. Unsurprisingly so: Calkins had lost, and she had won.

The science of reading is the new consensus in education, and its advocates are the new establishment. It is now on the hook for the curriculum changes that it prompted—and for America’s reading performance more generally. That is an uncomfortable position for those who care more about research than about winning political fights.

Some of the neuroscience underpinning *Sold a Story* was provided by Seidenberg, a professor emeritus at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. (He did not respond to an interview request.) Since the series aired, he has welcomed the move away from Units of Study, but he has also warned that “none of the other major commercial curricula that are currently available were based on the relevant science from the ground up.”

Because the usefulness of phonics is one of the few science-of-reading conclusions that is immediately comprehensible to laypeople, “phonics” has come to stand in for the whole philosophy. In a blog post last year, Seidenberg lamented that, on a recent Zoom call, a teacher had asked if they needed to keep teaching phonemic awareness once children were good readers. (The answer is no: Sounding out letters is what you do until the process becomes automatic.) Seidenberg now worried that the science of reading is “at risk of turning into a new pedagogical dogma.”

Hanford has also expressed ambivalence about the effects of *Sold a Story*. She compared the situation to the aftermath of No Child Left Behind, a George W. Bush-era federal education initiative that heavily promoted a literacy program called Reading First. “It became focused on products and programs,” Hanford told me, adding that the ethos turned into “get rid of whole language and buy something else.” However, she is glad that the importance of phonics—and the research backing it—is now more widely

understood, because she thinks this can break the cycle of revolution and counterrevolution. She added that whenever she talks with lawmakers, she stresses the importance of continuing to listen to teachers.

What about her portrait of Calkins as rich, privileged, oblivious? Forget the monogrammed towels, I told Hanford; there is a more benign explanation for Calkins's worldview: Everywhere she goes, she meets people, like the teachers and children in Oceanside, who are overjoyed to see her, and keen to tell her how much they love Units of Study.

But Hanford told me that she'd included the towels line because "the vast majority of teachers, especially elementary-school teachers, in America are white, middle-class women." Many of these women, she thought, had enjoyed school themselves and didn't intuitively know what it was like to struggle with learning to read and write.

Reporting this story, I was reminded again and again that education is both a mass phenomenon and a deeply personal one. People I spoke with would say things like *Well, he's never done any classroom research. She's never been a teacher. They don't understand things the way I do.* The education professors would complain that the cognitive scientists didn't understand the history of the reading wars, while the scientists would complain that the education professors didn't understand the latest peer-reviewed research. Meanwhile, a teacher must command a class that includes students with dyslexia as well as those who find reading a breeze, and kids whose parents read to them every night alongside children who don't speak English at home. At the same time, school boards and state legislators, faced with angry parents and a welter of conflicting testimony, must answer a simple question: Should we be "teaching Lucy," or not?

No matter how painful the past few years have been, though, Calkins is determined to keep fighting for her legacy. At 72, she has both the energy to start over again at Mossflower and the pragmatism to have promised her estate to further the cause once she's gone. She still has a "ferocious" drive, she told me, and a deep conviction in her methods, even as they evolve. She does not want "to pretend it's a brand-new approach," she said, "when in fact we've just been learning; we're just incorporating more things that we've learned."

But now that balanced literacy is as unfashionable as whole language, Calkins is trying to come up with a new name for her program. She thought she might try “comprehensive literacy”—or maybe “rebalancing literacy.” Whatever it takes for America to once again feel confident about “teaching Lucy.”

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

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The Exhibit That Will Change How You See Impressionism

The National Gallery’s “Paris 1874” explores the movement’s dark origins.

by Susan Tallman



“The Cradle” (1872), Berthe Morisot (© Musée d’Orsay, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Patrice Schmidt)

For museums and their public, Impressionism is the Goldilocks movement: not too old or too new, not too challenging or too sappy; just right. Renaissance art may baffle with arcane religious symbolism, contemporary art may baffle on purpose, but put people in a gallery with Claude Monet, Edgar Degas, and Camille Pissarro, and explanatory wall texts feel superfluous. Eyes roam contentedly over canvases suffused with light, vibrant with gesture, and alive with affable people doing pleasant things. What's not to love?

Famously, of course, Impressionism was not greeted with love at the outset. In 1874, the first Impressionist exhibition was derided in the press as a “vexatious mystification for the public, or the result of mental derangement.” A reviewer called Paul Cézanne “a sort of madman, painting in a state of delirium tremens,” while Berthe Morisot was privately advised by her former teacher to “go to the Louvre twice a week, stand before Correggio for three hours, and ask his forgiveness.” The very term *Impressionism* was born as a diss, a mocking allusion to Monet’s shaggy, atmospheric painting of the Le Havre waterfront, *Impression, Sunrise* (1872). Few people saw affability: In 1874, the term commonly applied to Monet and his ilk was “intransigent.”

Impressionism’s rom-com arc from spirited rejection to public rapture informs our fondness for the pictures (plucky little underdogs), and has also provided a lasting model for avant-gardism as a mechanism of cultural change. We now take it for granted that young mavericks should team up to foment new ways of seeing that offend the establishment before being vindicated by soaring auction prices and long museum queues. For most of history, however, that wasn’t the way things worked. Thus the 1874 exhibition has acquired legendary status as the origin point of self-consciously modern art.

Its 150th anniversary this year has been celebrated with numerous exhibitions, most notably “[Paris 1874: The Impressionist Moment](#),” organized by the Musée d’Orsay, in Paris, and the National Gallery of Art, in Washington, D.C. (where it is on view until January 19, 2025). Given the masterpieces that these museums could choose from, this might have been an easygoing lovefest, but the curators—Sylvie Patry and Anne Robbins in Paris, and Mary Morton and Kimberly A. Jones in Washington—have

delivered something far more intriguing and valuable: a chance to see what these artists were being intransigent about, and to survey the unexpected turns that art and politics may take in a polarized, traumatized time and place.

Nineteenth-century French history was messy—all those republics, empires, and monarchies tumbling one after the other—but it contains a crucial backstory to Impressionism, often overlooked. In the 1860s, France was the preeminent military and cultural power on the continent. Paris was feted as the most sophisticated, most modern, most beautiful of cities, and the Paris Salon was the most important art exhibition on the planet. Then, in 1870, some fatuous chest bumping between Emperor Napoleon III (nephew of the original) and Otto von Bismarck set off an unimagined catastrophe: By the spring of 1871, mighty France had been vanquished by upstart Prussia, its emperor deposed, its sublime capital bombed and besieged for months. When France sued for peace, Paris rebelled and established its own new socialist-anarchist government, the Commune. In May 1871, the French army moved in to crush the Commune, and the ensuing week of urban warfare killed tens of thousands. In the nine months between the start of the siege in September and the destruction of the Commune in May, perhaps as many as 90,000 Parisians died of starvation and violence.

These events and their impact on French painters are detailed in the art critic Sebastian Smee's absorbing new book, *Paris in Ruins: Love, War, and the Birth of Impressionism*. His main focus is on the star-crossed not-quite-lovers Morisot and Édouard Manet, but nobody in this tale escaped unscathed. Morisot was in the city through the bombardment, the famine, and the street fighting; Manet and Degas volunteered for the National Guard; Pierre-Auguste Renoir served in the cavalry. Some of their most promising peers were killed. Everyone saw ghastly things.

[From the April 1892 issue: Some notes on French Impressionism](#)

And yet nothing about Degas' ballerinas practicing their tendus or Renoir's frothy scene of sophisticates out on the town suggests recent experience with terror, starvation, or climbing over dead bodies in the street, though they were painted when those events were still fresh. The Boulevard des Capucines, where the first Impressionist show took place, had been the site

of “atrocious violence” in 1871, Smee tells us, but in 1874, Monet’s painting of the street is limpid with light and bustling with top hats and hansom cabs. If most fans of Impressionism remain unaware of its intimacy with the horrors of what Victor Hugo dubbed “*l’année terrible*,” it’s because the Impressionists did not picture them.

Like Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s unbarking dog, this suggests an absence in search of a story, and indeed, “Paris 1874” ultimately leaves one with a sense of why they chose to turn away, and how that choice helped set a new course for art. The standard version of Impressionism—the one most people will come through the door with—has, however, always emphasized a different conflict: the David-versus-Goliath contest between the young Impressionists and the illustrious Salon.

With more than 3,000 works displayed cheek by jowl, the 1874 Salon was nearly 20 times the size of the first Impressionist show, and attracted an audience of about half a million—aristocrats, members of the bourgeoisie, workers with families in tow. (Of the latter, one journalist sniffed: “If he could, he would even bring his dog or his cat.”) Presided over by the nation’s Académie des Beaux-Arts, an institution whose pedigree went back to Louis XIV, the Salon was allied with the state and had a vested interest in preserving the status quo. The Impressionists, wanting to preside over themselves, had founded their own organization—the Société Anonyme des Artistes Peintres, Sculpteurs, Graveurs, etc.—with a charter they adapted from the bakers’ union in Pissarro’s hometown.

“Paris 1874” is built from these two shows. With a handful of exceptions (mainly documentary photographs of the shattered city), the art on the walls in Washington now was on the walls in Paris then. (Identifying the relevant works to select from was no small achievement, given the 19th-century catalogs’ lack of images or measurements, and their penchant for unhelpful titles like *Portrait*.) Labels indicate which exhibition each artwork appeared in, beginning with the Salon’s medal-of-honor winner, Jean-Léon Gérôme’s *L’Éminence Grise* (1873), alongside Monet’s celebrated and pilloried *Impression, Sunrise*.



L'Éminence Grise (1873), Jean-Léon Gérôme (© 2024 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)

The two paintings might be mascots for the opposing teams. Impeccably executed, the Gérôme is an umbrous scene in which Cardinal Richelieu's right-hand monk, François Leclerc du Tremblay, descends a staircase as the high and mighty doff their caps. The fall of light is dramatic and convincing, the dispatch of color deft, the actors choreographed and costumed to carry you through the action. Every satin ribbon, every curl of Baroque metalwork seems palpable.

Beside it, the Monet looks loose and a bit jangly. The muted gray harbor flits between solidity and dissolution. The orange blob of a sun and its shredded reflection are called into being with an almost militant economy of means. And somehow, the painting glows as if light were passing through the canvas to land at our feet. The Gérôme is a perfect portal into another world. But the Monet *is* a world. More than just displaying different styles, the pictures embody divergent notions of what art could and should do.



Impression, Sunrise (1872), Claude Monet (© Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris / Studio Christian Baraja SLB)

For 200 years, the Académie had defined and defended visual art—both its manual skill set (perspective, anatomy, composition) and its intellectual status as a branch of rhetoric, conveying moral ideals and building better citizens. (*L'Éminence Grise* is, among other things, an engaging lesson in French history: When Cardinal Richelieu was the flashy power behind the throne of Louis XIII, the somber Capuchin friar was the “gray eminence” behind the cardinal.) Such content is what made “fine art” fine and separated painters and sculptors from decorators and cabinetmakers.

This value system had stylistic consequences. Narrative clarity demanded visual clarity. Figuration ranked higher than landscapes and still lifes in part because human figures instruct more lucidly than trees and grapes. Space was theatrical and coherent, bodies idealized, actions easily identified. Surfaces were smooth, brushstrokes self-effacing. This is still what we mean by “academic art.”

In place of explicit narratives valorizing order, sacrifice, and loyalty, Realist art carried implicit arguments for social equality and individual liberty.

Most visitors confronting the opening wall at the National Gallery will know which painting they're supposed to like—and it's not the one with the fawning courtiers. Impressionism is universally admired, while academic art is sometimes treated as the butt of a joke. Admittedly, Jean Jules Antoine Lecomte Du Nouÿ's huge, body-waxed Eros with surly cupids is easier to laugh at than to love, but most of the academic art on view strives, like the Gérôme, for gripping plausibility. You can see the assiduous archaeological research that went into the Egyptian bric-a-brac pictured in Lawrence Alma-Tadema's pietà [The Death of the Pharaoh's First-Born Son](#) (1872), or the armor of the sneaky Greeks descending from their giant gift horse in Henri-Paul Motte's starlit scene of Troy.

From the July 1900 issue: Impressionism and appreciation

Today these pictures look like film stills. It's easy to imagine Errol Flynn dashing up Gérôme's stairs, or Timothée Chalamet brooding in the Alma-Tadema gloom. Perhaps the reason such paintings no longer move audiences the way they once did is that we have actual movies to provide that immersive storytelling kick. What we want from painting is something different—something personal, handmade, “authentic” (even when we aren't quite clear what that means).

It's a mistake, though, to assume that this impulse was new with Impressionism. Beginning in the 1840s, concurrent with the literary “Realism” of Stendhal and Honoré de Balzac, Realist painters turned away from the studio confections of the Académie and began schlepping their easels out into the weather to paint *en plein air*—peasants toiling in fields, or fields just being fields. Visible brushstrokes and rough finish were the price (or certificate of authenticity) of a real-time response to a real world. These were aesthetic choices, and in turn they suggested political viewpoints. In place of explicit narratives valorizing order, sacrifice, and loyalty, Realist art carried implicit arguments for social equality (“These plain folk are worthy of being seen”) and individual liberty (“My personal experience counts”).

The Salon was the Académie's enforcement mechanism: In the absence of anything like today's gallery system, it represented the only practical path for a French artist to establish a reputation. Yet for decades it flip-flopped—sometimes rejecting Realist art, sometimes accepting it and even rewarding it with prizes. Manet, considered a Realist because of his contemporary subjects and ambiguous messaging, had a famously volatile history with the Salon. In 1874, Degas explained the rationale behind the Société Anonyme in these terms: “The Realist movement no longer has *to fight* with others. *It is, it exists, it needs to show itself on its own.*”

The most frequent complaint about Impressionist art concerned style—it was too “sketchy.” The preference for loose brushwork was seen as slapdash and lazy.

But nothing in 1874 was quite that simple. A room at the National Gallery is given over to art about the Franco-Prussian War, both academic and Realist. All of it appeared in the Salon. The contrast is instructive: The elegant bronze by Antonin Mercié, conceived (prematurely) as a monument to victory, was altered in the face of actual events and titled [Glory to the Vanquished](#). Although the naked soldier in the clasp of Victory has breathed his last, arms and wings still zoom ecstatically skyward and draperies flutter. He is beautiful even in death. The corpses laid out on the dirt in Auguste Lançon's *Dead in Line!* (1873), dressed in the uniforms they were wearing when they fell, are neither naked nor beautiful. Their skin is gray, and their fists are clenched in cadaveric spasm. In the background, troops march by, officers chat, and a village burns. There is no glory, just the banality of slaughter. Unlike Mercié, Lançon had been at the front.



Dead in Line! (1873), Auguste Lançon (© Département de la Moselle, MdG1870&A, Rebourg)

Here also is Manet's quiet etching of women queuing at a butcher shop in Paris as food supplies dwindled. Black lines, swift and short, capture a sea of shining umbrellas above a snaking mass of black dresses, at the back of which you can just make out the faint lightning-bolt outline of an upthrust bayonet. It's a picture with no argument, just a set of observations: patience, desperation, rain.

In "Paris 1874," a model of curatorial discretion, the art is allowed to speak for itself. Visitors are encouraged to look and guess whether a given work appeared in the Salon or the Société before checking the answer on the label. One quickly finds that applying the standard checklist of Impressionist attributes—"urban life," "French countryside," "leisure," "dappled brushwork"—is remarkably unhelpful. The dog-walking ladies in Giuseppe De Nittis's *Avenue du Bois de Boulogne* (1874, Salon) sport the same

complicated hats, fashionable bustles, and acres of ruched fabric as Renoir's *The Parisian Girl* (1874, Société). Charles-François Daubigny's [*The Fields in June*](#) (1874, Salon) and Pissarro's [*June Morning in Pontoise*](#) (1873, Société) are both sunny summer landscapes laid out with on-the-fly brushwork. Both sides did flowers.

As for the celebration of leisure, the Salon seems to have been full of moony girls lounging around and people entertaining fluffy white lapdogs, while the artists we now call Impressionists were paying much more attention to the working world. The glinting light of Pissarro's *Hoarfrost* (1873, Société) falls on an old man trudging down a road with a large bundle of wood on his back. The backlit fug of *Impression, Sunrise* was probably smog—the admirably informative exhibition catalog alerts readers to Stendhal's description of the same vista, “permeated by the sooty brown smoke of the steamboats.” Pictured at labor, not at play, Degas' dancers stand around splayfooted, bored and tired, adjusting their shoe ribbons, scratching an itch. Even the bourgeois family outing in Degas' transcendently odd *At the Races in the Countryside* (1869, Société) is focused on work: Together in a carriage, husband, wife, and dog are all transfixed by the baby's wet nurse, doing her job. As for the scenes of mothers and children, it is possible that later observers have overestimated the leisure involved.



Hoarfrost (1873), Camille Pissarro (© Musée d'Orsay, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Patrice Schmidt)

Jules-Émile Saintin's *Washerwoman* (1874, Salon) is assertively a picture of urban working life, but in an entirely academic mode. The scene is “modern” in the same way that Alma-Tadema’s pharaoh was ancient, time-stamped by an array of meticulously rendered accessories. But the Alma-Tadema at least had the gravitas of tragedy. Saintin is content with smarm: He arranges his working girl awkwardly in the street, grinning coquettishly at the viewer while twirling a pole of white linens and hoisting her skirt to give a peek of ankle—the eternal trope of the trollop.

[Read: Why absolutely everyone hates Renoir](#)

Then there is art so wonderful and so peculiarly modern, it seems unfair that it went to the Salon. In contrast to Saintin’s washerwoman, Manet’s *The Railway* (1873) is reticent to the point of truculence. Against the backdrop of an iron railing, a little girl stands with her back to us, watching the steam of a train below, while next to her, a poker-faced young woman glances up

from the book and sleeping puppy in her lap to meet our gaze. A bunch of grapes sits on the stone footing of the fence. The emotional tenor is ambiguous, the relationships between woman, child, dog, grapes, and train unclear. Everything is perfectly still and completely unsettled. Why was this at the Salon? Manet believed that appearing there was a necessary career move and declined to join in the Société event.



The Railway (1873), Édouard Manet (Courtesy of the National Gallery of Art)

He had a point. The Société chose, in its egalitarian zeal, to have no jury and to give space to anyone who paid the modest membership fee. The exhibit ended up even more of a grab bag than the Salon, so alongside some of the most adventurous and lasting art of the 1870s, you got Antoine Ferdinand Attendu's conventional still-life pile of dead birds, and Auguste Louis Marie

Ottin's marble head of Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, the great master of hard-edged Neoclassicism, made more than 30 years earlier.

One function of “Paris 1874” is to debunk the tale of the little exhibition that could. The “first Impressionist exhibition,” it turns out, wasn’t all that Impressionist (only seven of its 31 participants are commonly categorized as such). Many artists took part in both shows simultaneously, prioritizing career opportunities over stylistic allegiance. (Not only was organized avant-gardism not a thing before 1874; it appears not to have been a thing in 1874.) As for those famously annoyed reviews, the catalog explains that they came from a handful of critics who specialized in being annoyed, and that most of the modest attention the Société show received was neutral or even friendly. *Impression, Sunrise* was “barely noticed.” Just four works sold. Goliath wandered off without a scratch, and David went broke.

But debunking is a short-lived thrill. The real rewards of “Paris 1874” lie in the rising awareness one gets walking through the galleries of a new signal in the noise, a set of affinities beyond either the certainties of the Académie or the earthy truths of Realism, and even a hint of how the unpictured traumas of 1870–71 left their mark. We know about the highlights to come (Monet’s water lilies at Giverny are hanging just down the hall), but there is something much more riveting about the moment before everything shifts into focus. By contrast, later Impressionist shows (there were eight in all) knew what they were about. The standard checklist works there. In 1874, it wasn’t yet clear, but you can begin to see a kind of opening up, a sideways slip into letting light be light and paint be paint.

What this fledgling Impressionism puts on offer is a kind of gentle disruption or incompleteness—a willingness to leave things half said, an admission of ambiguity.

As the Salon-tagged items demonstrate, the battle over subject matter had abated by 1874. Myths and modernity were both admissible. The shift that followed had less to do with what was being painted than how. The most frequent complaint about Impressionist art concerned style—it was too “sketchy.” The preference for loose brushwork, the disregard for clean edges and smooth gradients, was seen as slapdash and lazy, as if the artists were

handing in early drafts in place of a finished thesis. More than one painting in the Société show was compared to “palette scrapings.”

Now we like the slap and the dash. We tend to see those independent-minded brushstrokes as evidence not of diminished attention, but of attention homing in on a new target—a fresh fascination with the transitory fall of light, at the expense, perhaps, of the stable object it falls on. Like a shape seen in the distance, sketchiness has the power to suggest multiple realities at once. Monet’s dark-gray squiggle in the Le Havre water might be a rock or a boat; certainly it is a squiggle of paint. Emphasizing the physicality of the image—the gloppiness of the paint, the visible canvas below—calls attention to the instability of the illusion. Step backwards and it’s a harbor; step forward and it’s bits of colorful dried goo.



At the Races in the Countryside (1869), Edgar Degas (© 2024 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)

Sketchiness wasn’t the only means of undermining pictorial certainty. Degas never went in for fluttering brushstrokes or elusive edges, but his *Ballet Rehearsal* (1874) is scattered with pentimenti—the ghosts of a former foot,

the trace of an altered elbow, the shadow of a male observer removed from the scene. He had sketched the dancers from life, but then used and reused those drawings for years, reconfiguring them like paper dolls, exactly the way an academic artist might go about peopling a crowd scene. The all-important difference is that Degas shows how the trick is played. In *At the Races in the Countryside*, the carriage and family are placed so far down and to the right that the nose and shoulder of one of the horses fall off the canvas, as if the painting were a snapshot whose taker was jostled just as the shutter clicked. It's a way of calling attention to the bucket of artifice and conventions on which painterly illusion depends. This is art being disarmingly honest about being dishonest.

What this fledgling Impressionism puts on offer, distinct from the works around it, is a kind of gentle disruption or incompleteness—a willingness to leave things half-said, an admission of ambiguity, not as a problem to be solved but as a truth to be treasured. Nowhere is this more compelling than in Morisot's *The Cradle* (1872). A portrait of the artist's sister Edma watching her sleeping daughter, it takes a soft subject—mother and child, linen and lace—and girds it with a tensile framework of planes, taut lines, and swooping catenaries. Look beyond the “femininity” and you can see the first steps of the dance with abstraction that would dominate 20th-century painting from Henri Matisse to Richard Diebenkorn. At least as astonishing, though, is the neutrality and distance of the expression on Edma's face. It might be exhaustion, or reverie, or (because before her marriage, she too had been a gifted professional painter) dispassionate study. Think what you will.

The Cradle is not harrowing or angst-ridden. It doesn't picture unpleasantness. But when Smee writes of Morisot's pursuit of “a new language of lightness and evanescence—a language based in close observation, devoid of rhetoric or hysteria,” he's talking about a response to 1870–71. Both the right-wing empire and the left-wing Commune had ended in pointless, bloody, self-inflicted tragedies. The survivors, at least some of them, had learned to mistrust big ideas. An art about nothing might seem a strange defense, but the act of paying attention to what is rather than what should be—to the particular and ephemeral rather than the abstract and eternal—could be a bulwark against the seductions of ideology.

Resistance, of necessity, adapts to circumstance. In China during the Cultural Revolution, when message-laden art was an instrument of the state, artists belonging to the No Name Group took to clandestine *plein air* painting in the French mode precisely because it “supported no revolutionary goals—it was hand-made, unique, intimate and personal,” [the scholar and artist Chang Yuchen has written](#). “In this context nature was less a retreat than a chosen battlefield.”

I used to think that Impressionism’s just-rightness was simply a function of time’s passage—that its inventions had seeped so deeply into our culture that they felt comfy. But although familiarity might explain our ease, it doesn’t fully explain Impressionism’s continued hold: the sense that beyond being nice to look at, it still has something to say. The more time I spent in “Paris 1874,” the more I cooled on the soft-edged moniker “impressionist” and warmed to the bristlier “intransigent.” It was a term often applied to unrepentant Communards, but the most intransigent thing of all might just be refusing to tell people what to think.

The contemporary art world, like the world at large, has reentered a period of high moral righteousness. Major institutions and scrappy start-ups share the conviction that the job (or at least a job) of art is to instruct the public in values. Educators, publicists, and artists work hard to ensure that nobody gets left behind and nobody misses the point. But what if leaving the point unfixed is the point?

Whether all of this would have developed in the same way without the violence and disillusionment of the Franco-Prussian War and the Commune is impossible to know. But there are worse lessons to derive from trauma than these: Take pleasure in your senses, question authority, look around you. Look again.

This article appears in the [December 2024](#) print edition with the headline “The Dark Origins of Impressionism.”

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My Hope for Palestine

**There's still a path to lasting peace.
But we'll need a new set of leaders.**

by Samer Sinijlawi



The conflict between Israelis and Palestinians is often assumed to be impossible to solve, a matter of two national movements with irreconcilable aspirations for one tiny piece of land. It has felt like this for nearly a century, and perhaps never more so than during the past year of anger and grief.

But as a Palestinian who was born in Jerusalem's Old City, who has lived through the occupation, who sat in an Israeli prison for five years, I see a way out. Even today, with the pain so fresh, I believe it's possible for Palestinians to get our state, and for the two peoples to coexist. But to arrive there, both sides will need to radically change their thinking—and their leadership.

The future I imagine is in some ways rooted in a past I remember from my childhood in the early '80s. In the busy streets of the Old City, you knew which community you belonged to, but everyone shared the space. As a boy, before I had any understanding of who was above whom, I knew only that everyone was bustling at the end of the week, with Jews going to synagogue, Christians heading to church, and Muslims following the sound of the muezzin to prayer. My family is Muslim, but I attended a Christian school. I never questioned how natural this layered reality was.

But then, in 1987, [the First Intifada began](#). I was 14. All at once, I felt pulled into the conflict, drawn to what I heard on the streets and saw on television, which was a more straightforward story than what I'd known in Jerusalem—the struggle of my people, armed with stones, standing up to tanks. I wanted to throw stones as well, to feel a part of it. And so I did. And like many of my teenage friends, I was eventually arrested, and sentenced by a military judge to five years' imprisonment.

This was the most painful moment of my life. My childhood was over. I wasn't able to finish high school. But my experience in prison changed me in unexpected ways. It gave me a different kind of education. I was elected as a spokesperson to negotiate with the prison authorities, whether for better food or special permits for family visits. And my understanding of my enemy grew.

Out in the street, we wore keffiyehs over our faces, and they saw us only through the scope of a rifle. But now I got to know some Israelis. I could see their eyes, and they could see mine. I learned Hebrew. I learned their names. And I saw for the first time that these people, whom I had feared as my oppressors, had their own fears. They were scared of us, the Palestinians, of the violence we might cause them, of the violence we *were* causing them. It's hard for my own people, oppressed as we feel by Israeli power, to

appreciate this, but the fears of Israelis are real, not exaggerated or invented. The images of October 7 are seared into their minds. Especially since the massacre, they desire the sort of security that any of us would want, and they will never bargain away the safety of their families. They are not a suicidal people.

I also learned how to negotiate with Israelis. Maybe because of their own history of survival, they can be stubborn. You cannot expect to get anything through pressure tactics. Believe me, Palestinians have tried: The strategy for decades has been to use violence against Israeli civilians while beseeching the world to force Israel into making concessions. But this hasn't worked. Trying to get the American president to use carrots and sticks with the Israelis is pointless. We need to deal with them directly. That's the only way. And just as we have needs—dignity, rights, independence—they have needs as well, and we must find ways to reassure them of their security, to defeat their fears.

[Read: Israel and Hamas are kidding themselves](#)

I have often thought of the conflict as having DNA. The need for security is one strand, and the other is a desire for dignity. This did not require any special education for me to learn. It comes with the reality of being a Palestinian. We live in a state of constant humiliation: at each checkpoint, every time we need to cross a border, when settlers in the West Bank attack and kill our people and burn our fields with impunity. Half of our lives seem to be spent waiting in line as an Israeli soldier stands over us with a gun. We lack freedom. We are denied basic human dignity. And this existence, to feel forever trampled on, has been ours now for at least three generations.

This is the DNA, a desire for both safety and self-determination. By acknowledging and attending to these twin desires—rather than parsing right from wrong or replaying history—people of goodwill can solve the conflict. I am part of an initiative—organized by Ehud Olmert, the former Israeli prime minister, and Nasser al-Kidwa, the former Palestinian foreign-affairs minister—to do just that. We envision a cease-fire in Gaza and a return of the hostages held by Hamas since October 7, and we have worked out the details of a two-state solution, proposing a plan for drawing borders, determining the status of Jerusalem, and rebuilding Gaza.

The contours are not hard to imagine, but many obstacles stand in the way. I see four main ones, two within our own societies and two from the outside.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his right-wing government aren't interested in making any concessions to the Palestinians. They hardly see us, and are intent on ignoring our demands indefinitely. But I don't think they represent the majority of Israelis, who dislike Netanyahu and want his rule to end. I believe that those who protest by the tens of thousands every week in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem know that the status quo is not acceptable for either people.

This is the first obstacle: Netanyahu and his reactionary, racist allies. Israelis must find a way to vote him and the extremists out. Nothing will change until Israeli leaders see the benefit of creating a Palestinian state, and do not act with such indifference to our lives and needs. But the second obstacle I see is closer to home for me, and just as crucial: the corrupt and ineffective leadership of Mahmoud Abbas, the president of the Palestinian Authority.

I first met Abbas as part of a Fatah youth delegation soon after the First Intifada ended. After being released from prison, in 1993, I became involved with the party, the largest faction in Palestinian politics at the time. My fellow delegates and I were in our 20s; Abbas was then in his 50s and Fatah's second-in-command. "You are tomorrow's leaders," he told us. Today, Abbas is nearly 90, and we are in our 50s. Over the years, he has worked to ensure that the tomorrow he promised never arrived. He was elected president in 2005 to serve for four years. He has served for almost 20, without a single reelection. Over that period, he has compromised our democracy, our security, our economy, and our dignity.

Abbas lost the 2006 legislative elections to Hamas, and then lost Gaza to Hamas control the following year. But he could have taken the past two decades to build up the West Bank, creating transparent, accountable institutions that would represent a thriving alternative to Hamas. Because he didn't, he allowed the extremists to fill the vacuum. As recently as 2021, Abbas canceled planned elections, this time after Fatah split into three factions. Younger, reformist Fatah leaders were ready to try to create that alternative, and might have offered a counterbalance to the extremism that led to October 7. But Abbas stood in their way.

Palestinians want change. Polls show that [about 90 percent of the population wants Abbas to resign](#). But removing him isn't just important for the West Bank and the possibility of negotiating with the Israelis. It's also essential to Gaza's "day after." As brutal and oppressive as the Hamas regime has been, the people of Gaza don't want to see Hamas replaced with Abbas.

Instead, Palestinian political leaders should form a unity government that includes nonpartisan national figures; Fatah reformists such as al-Kidwa, the former security czar Mohammed Dahlan, and, with any luck, the imprisoned Fatah leader Marwan Barghouti; and even members of nonextremist Islamist factions like the Ra'am party, in Israel's Parliament. This broad coalition would be responsible for reconstructing Gaza and unifying it with the West Bank. It would need the support of Arab countries and the international community—and, of course, recognition by Israel.

All of this is impossible while Netanyahu and Abbas remain in power, which is why they are the biggest internal obstacles. But there are also two external ones.

The first is obvious: Iran is the mutual enemy of both Israelis and Palestinians who want peace, as well as of all the moderate forces in the Middle East. Iran has propped up Hamas and Hezbollah, whose ideologies and actions will lead to nothing but endless war. The best way to counter Iran is for Israel to build relationships with the Emiratis and the Saudis and a reformed Palestinian Authority. But to do that, Abbas and Netanyahu need to go.

Palestinians need a strategy that prioritizes the security of Israelis—not for the Israelis' sake, but for our own national interest.

The second external obstacle might seem surprising, but it's no less important to acknowledge: the extreme sentiments in the West. I understand what has motivated the protests on American college campuses. I have grieved the death of every Gazan, and I am certainly not against peaceful demonstration. But I think that some of those who call themselves pro-Palestine and rally under the Palestinian flag are doing us real harm—and I would say the same about some of those who rally under the Israeli flag and call themselves pro-Israel.

These protests have merely hardened the positions of Hamas and Netanyahu. They apply the wrong kind of pressure: against compromise. Against seeing each other and finding ways to move closer. They alienate everyday Israelis and Palestinians. As far as I'm concerned, there is only one idea to rally behind; only one pro-Israel, pro-Palestine slogan: "Stop the war and free the hostages." Nothing else is helpful, certainly not slogans such as "From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free."

[From the April 2024 issue: Franklin Foer on the end of America's Jewish golden age](#)

I know how hard these obstacles will be to overcome; as a Palestinian, I am accustomed to endless heartbreak. It's far easier to remain self-righteous, to believe that with enough yelling or missiles, things will change for the better. But they won't, not until the two sides begin to look at each other honestly.

I have talked with many Israelis over the years, after I was elected international secretary for Fatah youth, and then as the head of Israeli relations for the party. I have become close friends with many of them, and not just with people on the left and in the center, but with those on the right as well. I've learned some lessons from all of this talking.

Primarily, I decided not to hate them. For a simple reason: We have killed them and they have killed us. Hate has never achieved anything for the Palestinians besides more misery. Additionally, I decided never to lecture Israelis on morality, on what to do and what not to do. I chose instead to focus on *my* side, on the example that I set.

That's why I [went to Kfar Aza](#), one of the kibbutzim attacked on October 7, for a condolence visit early this year. Standing in front of cameras, I condemned the acts of Hamas. I didn't want history to document that no Palestinian spoke up against this atrocity. In Kfar Aza—a mile away from the city of Beit Hanoun, over the border in Gaza—I could see smoke, and I could hear bombs, and I knew what was happening there, but I had come only to denounce what Hamas had done in the name of Palestinians, in my name. One day, an Israeli will stand in front of us and denounce what has

happened in Gaza. I don't have to lecture them. All I can do is offer my example.

I know it's controversial to say, but this is why I think Palestinians need to make the first move. There is more urgency for us than for the Israelis. They are suffering because of the conflict, but not as much as we are. They can wait another 75 years until it becomes necessary for them to share the land. We cannot wait another 75 hours. They have an air force; we don't. They have tanks; we don't. We have spent decade after decade not achieving any progress with them. As a practical person, I've concluded that we ought to try something else.

Palestinians need to put in place a strategy that prioritizes the security of Israelis—not for the Israelis' sake, but for our own national interest. We need to make sure that the Palestinian Authority properly criminalizes violence committed by Palestinians—just as Israel must end settler violence in the West Bank and respect that the lives of Palestinians are as sacred as the lives of Israelis. Both sides in this conflict need to gain control over their violent tendencies. And then our message to the Israelis will be: more for more. If we make you feel safer, if we build institutions that clamp down on violence effectively, that build a successful economy for Palestinians, that create stability and transparency, we expect from you more dignity, freedom, and trust.

The two-state solution feels impossible at this moment, so we need to build it step-by-step, offering more for more. Then we'll be ready for the tough decisions. This needs to start at the top, which is why I care so much about changing the leadership. People need to see how trust can form. If I were the prime minister of the future state of Palestine, I would want the Israeli prime minister to be my best friend. I would have him and his family over for dinner and let them get to know my wife and kids. Mutual trust between the top leaders will help facilitate trust among the people.

Even today, after tens of thousands have been killed in Gaza in the past year, I still maintain that the majority of mainstream Palestinians and mainstream Israelis want to find a way out of this.

I recently decided to pursue a master's degree in conflict resolution at Hebrew University, in Jerusalem. Every Monday, when I show up for class, I get a vivid illustration of what the future could be. When I was younger, Hebrew University seemed off-limits to Palestinians; even just walking by the campus gates felt disloyal. But these days, the student population is nearly 20 percent Arab, and there are many young women wearing hijabs.

When I look at these students, I see that many of them, Israeli and Palestinian alike, wear nearly identical pendants depicting the same territory—between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea—which each side claims in its entirety for their own people. (And I bet both pendants were made in the same factory in China.) But then they go to the same classes and listen to the same professors, and sometimes a professor will assign two Israeli students and two Palestinian students to the same research group, and those students, each with their own necklace, will work together. At this moment, their differences become irrelevant; they are just trying to get their studies done. And I promise you: They do not want to throw each other into the sea.

They wear those pendants because they are confused, because their political leaders have poisoned their minds. These young people, who know how to work so well together, who know how to give and take, already know how to be neighbors. They just need leadership that will reinforce the possibility. This leadership doesn't exist now, and that is the real enemy for both Israelis and Palestinians.

This article appears in the [December 2024](#) print edition with the headline “How to Build a Palestinian State.”

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What the Band Eats

Memories of the meals I ate growing up with the Grateful Dead

by Reya Hart



I have been staring at this silver dish of fried chicken for what feels like hours but what really, actually, has been days. Twenty-three days, to be exact, over the course of the three-month Dead Forever run at the all-new, all-American pleasure palace—[the Las Vegas Sphere](#).

I grew up on the road. First on the family bus, traveling from city to city to watch my father, Mickey Hart, play drums with the Grateful Dead and Planet Drum, and then later with the various Grateful Dead offshoots. When I was old enough, I joined the crew, working for Dead & Company, doing whatever I could be trusted to handle: stringing strands of plastic Grateful Dead–bear lights; ferrying tie-dyed tapestries, extension cords, and gaffer tape by golf cart; helping VIP-ticket holders smuggle ziplocks filled with vegan sandwiches and granola into the venue. Then, late-night, drinking whiskey from the bottle with the techs, sitting in the emptying parking lot as the semitrucks and their load-out rumble marked the end of our day.

But this summer, for the first time in the band’s history, there would be no buses; there would be no trucks. Instead we stayed in one place, trading the rhythms of a tour for the dull ache of a long, endlessly hot Las Vegas summer.

It’s a new way of doing things, one with just enough of our former existence to keep it comfortable and just enough change to keep the road forward exciting—even if the road is now an illusion, stretching out below an AI-generated sky. The Grateful Dead had been famous for [its Wall of Sound](#)—about 600 speakers painstakingly assembled by the crew at each venue, then just as painstakingly packed back up for the next stadium or concert hall. The Sphere is a wall of *light*: a 160,000-square-foot display programmed to transport the audience members, their necks craned upward, as the band plays below, a little dot against the expansive animated horizon.

Before that high-tech spectacle can begin, however, a very old, analog tradition must be observed: dinner. Sometime between sound check and the show opener, everyone sits down for a shared meal. The monitor tech and the bassist, the head of security and the lighting director, the man selling merch and the man playing drums—we all shuffle forward holding the same white dinner plates and napkins, arms outstretched, ready to receive whatever food is served, like kids in a cafeteria.

The catering options rarely differ. Almost always, there’s a salad bar with every possible variety of Newman’s Own dressing. There are sandwich fixings. There’s a soupy fish dish and a vegan pasta that congeals into the

shape of its serving tray, like Jell-O in a mold. At the end of the table, inevitably, a giant chunk of meat waits to be carved.

From the March 2010 issue: Management secrets of the Grateful Dead

Still, I always looked forward to certain venues. For the old hands on the crew, the Shoreline Amphitheatre, in Mountain View, California, was notorious for having been built on top of a landfill—methane from the decomposing trash would seep out of the earth, leading to flaming eruptions when audience members lit a joint. But for me, Shoreline meant soft serve. Old, decrepit, but functional, the machine was hidden in the far-left corner of backstage hospitality. I'd fill a bowl with ribbons of ice cream, topping them off with a downpour of chocolate sprinkles.

Here at the Sphere, dinner is fried chicken—again. Every night, chicken is prepared in the same fryer, seasoned with the same spices, and delivered by the same person. It's placed on an identical white tablecloth with serving utensils angled at matching degrees. This is life in a corporate commune.

Staring at the serving platters, I have an idea. I try the fried chicken in a new combination. I take some salsa from the empanada platter on the left, some mac and cheese from the platter on the right. It's still fried chicken, but it works—something new made from something familiar.

I have a memory of a birthday in some Midwest backstage. I think it was my 9th, but it's hard to say for sure. I had been craving cheesecake for weeks. Out of fear of sending some runner on a wild-goose chase, I told no one. I was perpetually terrified of becoming an inconvenience, a feeling I imagine is pretty common for kids who grow up on the road.

There was the glow of a birthday candle, my mother's hand cupped over an obscured slice of cake. The stagehands sang “Happy Birthday” as I shrank into the couch cushions, embarrassed by the attention. My father played a drumroll on a toaster as my mother handed me the plate. I looked down. The cake was giant and oozing rich frosting and most definitely, 100 percent ... chocolate. I smiled and blew out the candle. I made a wish—for cheesecake.

Later, both band and crew migrated to catering for dinner. I walked down the row of long plastic tables, wondering if the package of sourdough bread was the one I had opened in Milwaukee the week before, or if it was just an identical one. I imagined an old Grateful Dead road case stuffed to the brim with sandwich materials—mustard and mayonnaise in the stick drawer, a series of plastic-wrapped tomatoes where the drum pads should be, a head of lettuce stuffed inside a *cajón*. It was possible. We brought just about everything else with us, even the lights and the stage.

On one table sat a large plastic bag of Kraft shredded cheese—the Mexican blend, with little cheddar and Monterey Jack worms flattened against the clear casing. I grabbed the package and pushed it under my shirt, then walked back out toward the stage casually, like an expert jewel thief.

I collected the chocolate-cake slice and took it underneath the stage to the below-deck depths where the riggers set up hammocks for naps after sound check. I looked around to ensure I was alone, then I removed the cheese from under my shirt and poured all of it onto the cake plate. I tore off the end of the slice, stray cheese falling onto the cold cement floor, and greedily shoved it into my mouth.

I chewed my cheesecake proudly, nodding to myself like I was a judge on some fancy cooking show. “9.5!” I announced, my voice echoing in the empty space below the stage. “Half a point off—no whipped cream!”

I knew the cake was terrible. It didn’t matter. I loved it. I had made my wish come true.

From an early age, I could taste a tour route as soon as I saw it. Tracing the list of cities with my index finger, I knew the roads we’d travel and the meals we’d eat. Show nights meant dinner in catering, but even the relentless schedule of a Dead tour had the occasional off night, a chance to escape the venue and seek out old favorites.

Madison Square Garden always, without compromise, meant orange chicken and water chestnuts, the fat that falls off the edge of spare ribs, and duck-sauce stains on old merch shirts. Madison Square Garden meant New York, and New York meant Wo Hop.

Established in 1938, Wo Hop is, as far as I can tell, the most famous dive in Chinatown. My father first went there in the 1960s, when, as he remembers it, it still had sawdust on the floor. It was known for its midnight clientele—John Belushi, Patti Smith. [It's the hidden gem that everyone thinks they've discovered.](#)

For our family, Wo Hop represents the frayed tether connecting East Coast to West Coast, our past to our present. Though my parents made their home in California, my lineage, on both sides, comes from New York. My Jewish great-grandfathers lived and worked in the same city while inhabiting entirely different worlds. One opened Ohrbach's, the Manhattan department store where knockoffs of Parisian couture were sold to eager housewives. Around the same time, somewhere in Brooklyn, another great-grandfather got his cab medallion.

The first thing I do when the buses drop us off in New York is start walking. I like to think about my great-grandfathers when I do, imagining what their days looked like and what version of New York they knew.

In the summer of 2023, on what was billed as Dead & Company's final tour, I went for a very long walk, crisscrossing the city. I passed the former site of the Fillmore East, [Bill Graham's famous music hall](#), which had once been my family's second home, and where some of the greatest live albums of the '60s and '70s—notably, ones by Miles Davis and the Allman Brothers—were recorded. It was now a bank. I gave \$5 to a man sitting outside with a long gray beard and a sign that said We all get old but at least I saw Jimi Hendrix.

It's not until we're near the midpoint of the tour that we begin to resent the sushi platter, blame it for the monotony of our lives.

Eventually, as the sun began to set, I found myself at 17 Mott Street—deep in the heart of Chinatown—standing at the steps that lead down to Wo Hop. There's something about the red tiles that line the walls to its lower entrance, the light from neon signs bouncing across them. The pull of Wo Hop is so strong that I always end up there, even without intending to, like I'm following its siren song across the city. Wo Hop is like a familiar refrain: You know you must return to it a few more times before the song is over.

I sat down and gestured to the waiter that I was ready to order. He walked over, pen and pad in hand.

“Welcome to Wo Hop,” he said with a smile. “Have you been here before?”

On show days, the sushi arrives at 3 p.m., just before sound check. It’s been there all my life, a kaleidoscopic swirl of salmon pinks and opalesque creams, with a slight variance in quality depending on the distance to the ocean. It comes in shiny cellophane wrapping that sticks to the outer edge of the sashimi and twinkles under the harsh fluorescent lights overhead.

It’s pure protein, a source of energy smooshed across a six-inch tray. The sushi is in my father’s rider:

Assortment of Sashimi upon arrival at 3:00 p.m.

- (6) Ika
- (6) Salmon
- (6) Toro
- (6) Hamachi
- (6) Unagi

On tour, it’s easy to forget that you need to stop and eat, or to see eating as a mere obstacle to putting on the show. Sometimes, it’s just a question of priorities—waking up in a hotel room and knowing that if you don’t shower now, it’ll be three days on the bus before you get another chance. So you skip the continental breakfast and drink coffee from the machine in your room. You arrive at the venue before catering opens, and by the time it does, you’ve moved on to some task that requires crossing the length of the venue and back. Rider food is insurance, a contractual guarantee that there will be something to keep us going.

[Read: How I faked my way to rock stardom](#)

It’s not until week three or four, when we’re near the midpoint of the tour, that the sushi starts to morph into something else. It’s a bizarre turn—we begin to resent the sushi platter, blame it for the monotony of our lives. (“Maddening,” my father likes to say.) But we still go after it every night, tearing off the cellophane and grabbing at the raw fish like black bears at a

salmon stream. Sometimes, a funny little fishhook smile appears on my father's face after the last of the sushi is gone, an acknowledgment that, in his words, "we all got to eat."

There is a specific kind of emotion that comes with the end of a tour. All the decisions that were once in someone else's hands come raining down as normal everyday life returns. It always hits at the airport after the last show, when suddenly no one's telling you where to go. You're in charge, in control of your own schedule, and for the first time in a very long time, you have to decide what you want to eat.

After all the moaning about postshow pizza and stale pasta, all the daydreaming about things you'd eat if you were back home, the reality is that those first steps into the world of free will rarely feel anything other than lonely.

At the end of the summer, I wander around Harry Reid International Airport, surrounded by the glow of the slot machines, until I see a to-go food counter, walk over, and stare at the menu.

"What can I get you?" the person behind the cash register wants to know. My eyes scan across what feels like an endless abyss of options. "Do you have any cheesecake?"

This article appears in the [December 2024](#) print edition with the headline "One for the Road."

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Hydraulic Revolution

Photographs of Los Angeles's lowriding scene

by Alejandra Molina



Erik Rodriguez and “Smurfin Around”

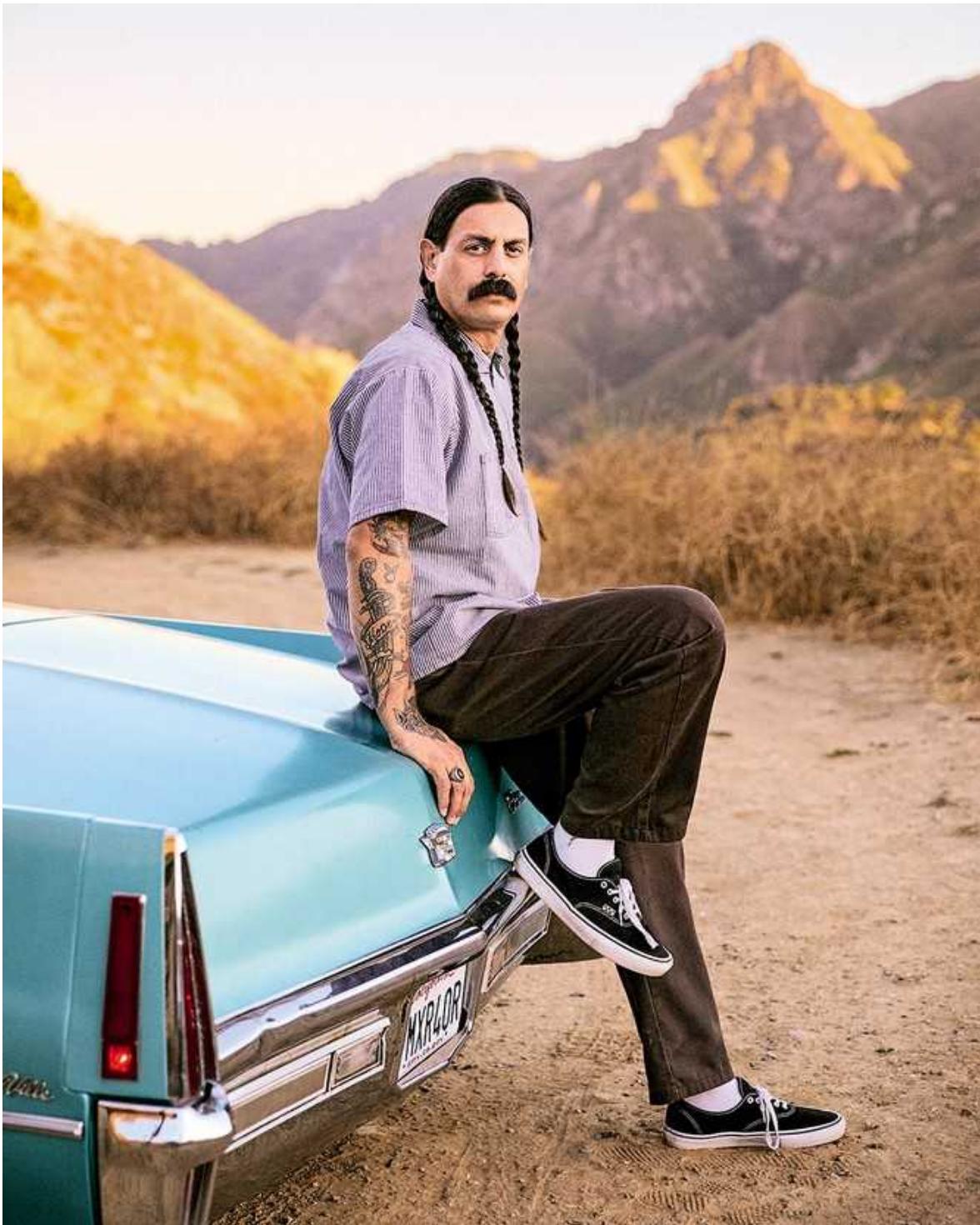
When the London-based photographer Owen Harvey visited Los Angeles in June 2023, lowriding was illegal. A hobby [popular with Mexican Americans since the 1940s](#), lowriding is the practice of modifying a car so that it can cruise just inches off the ground; Harvey had first learned of it as a teenager from hip-hop, specifically the music of Cypress Hill, [Eazy-E, and Dr. Dre](#). Today his photography focuses on subcultures, and in L.A., he turned his camera toward the city’s lowriding scene.

For years, California's vehicle code made lowriders illegal, assuming an association between their drivers and gang violence. In the face of police harassment, customizing a Chevrolet Impala or a Cadillac Fleetwood with a specialized hydraulics system was an act of rebellion, an expression of pride. Governor Gavin Newsom signed [a bill overturning the state's lowriding bans](#) in October 2023: The cars and their drivers now belonged.



The mural exterior of a lowrider in downtown L.A.

One lowrider Harvey photographed was Erik Rodriguez, a 29-year-old mechanic from Pasadena who first encountered lowriding as a child living in public housing on the city's west side. Rodriguez told me that he'd thrill when lowriders in the neighborhood would "jump" their cars, triggering the hydraulics to change how high they rode off the ground. Today, Rodriguez's blue 1982 Oldsmobile Cutlass—"Smurfin Around," he calls it—can jump more than five feet in the air.



John Butcher with his car “California Blues” in the Malibu Hills

In another portrait, Carmen Vera leans against her pink 1979 Oldsmobile, polished to a high shine. She told me that her loved ones couldn't fathom why she had poured so much energy into the car, equipping it with a

specialized engine, modifying its trunk to accommodate six batteries and three hydraulic pumps, and emblazoning its exterior with an alcatraz-flower pattern. She named her car “Miche LA Nalgona,” after her *michelada* business, which helped finance the vehicle’s custom work. “Sometimes people take you as a joke, as *Ah, you’re just a woman,*” she told me. “Some thought I’m too old for this . . . This is the first time that I stuck to my guns and I said, ‘Screw the world—I’m doing what I want to do, and what is making me happy.’”



Carmen Vera with “Miche LA Nalgona”

This article appears in the [December 2024](#) print edition with the headline “Hydraulic Revolution.”

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Nick Cave's Revised Rules for Men

On his new album, he searches out salvation in the face of insecurity and irrelevance.

by Spencer Kornhaber



Nick Cave at Royal Albert Hall in London, October 6, 2021 (Illustration by Gabriela Pesqueira. Source: Jim Dyson / Getty.)

Nick Cave, one of the most physically expressive figures in rock and roll, was looking at me with suspicion. His eyebrows climbed the considerable expanse of his forehead; his slender frame tensed defensively in his pin-striped suit. I think he thought I was trying to get him canceled.

What I was really trying to do was get him to talk about being a man. For much of his four-decade career fronting Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds, Cave has seemed a bit like a drag king, exaggerating aspects of the male id to amusing and terrifying effect. He performs in funereal formal wear, sings in a growl that evokes Elvis with rabies, and writes acclaimed songs and books brimming with lust, violence, and—in recent years, as he weathered the death of two sons—pained, fatherly gravitas. His venerated stature is more akin to a knighted icon's than a punk rocker's; he has been awarded a [badge of honor](#) by the Australian government and a fellowship in the United Kingdom's Royal Society of Literature, and was even invited to [King Charles's coronation](#), in 2023.

So when I met the 67-year-old Cave at a Manhattan hotel in August, before the release of the Bad Seeds' 18th studio album, *Wild God*, I suspected that I might not be alone in wanting to hear his thoughts about the state of masculinity. Meaning: Why are guys, according to various cultural and statistical indicators, becoming lonelier and more politically extreme? I cited some lyrics from his new album that seemed to be about the way men cope with feelings of insecurity and irrelevance, hoping he would elaborate.

Between the long pauses in Cave's reply, I could hear the crinkling leather of the oversize chair he sat in. "It may be a need that men have—maybe they're not feeling like they are valued," he told me, before cutting himself off. "I don't want to come on like Jordan Peterson or something," he said, referring to the controversial, right-leaning psychology professor and podcaster who rails against the alleged emasculating effects of modern culture.

Cave writes songs brimming with lust, violence, and—in recent years—pained, fatherly gravitas.

Cave seemed taken aback by the idea that he himself was an authority on the subject. "It feels weird to think that I might be tapping into, or somehow the voice of, what it means to be a man in this world," he told me. "I've never

really seen that.” In fact, he said, his songs—especially his recent ones—“are very feminine in their nature.”

“I’m criticized for it, actually,” he went on. Fans write to him and say, “‘What’s happened to your fucking music? Grow a pair of balls, you bastard!’”

When Cave was 12, growing up in a rural Australian village, his father sat him down and asked him what he had done for humanity. The young Cave was mystified by the question, but his father—an English teacher with novelist ambitions—clearly wanted to pass along a drive to seek greatness, preferably through literary means. Other dads read *The Hardy Boys* to their kids; Cave’s regaled him with Dostoyevsky, *Titus Andronicus*, and … *Lolita*.

Those works’ linguistic elegance and thematic savagery lodged deep in Cave, but music became the medium that spoke best to his emerging point of view—that of an outsider, a bad seed, alienated from ordinary society. When he was 13, a schoolmate’s parents accused him of attempted rape after he tried to pull down their daughter’s underwear; at the school he was transferred to, he became notorious for brawling with other boys. His father’s death in a car crash when Cave was 19, and his own heroin habit at the time, didn’t help his outlook. “I was just a nasty little guy,” [he told Stephen Colbert recently](#). His thrashing, spit-flinging band the Birthday Party earned him comparisons to Iggy Pop, but it wasn’t until he formed the Bad Seeds, in the early ’80s, that his bleak artistic vision ripened.

[Read: Nick Cave is still looking for redemption](#)

Blending blues, industrial rock, and cabaret into thunderous musical narratives, the Bad Seeds’ songs felt like retellings of primal fables, often warning about the mortal dangers posed by intimacy, vulnerability, and pretty girls. On the 1984 track “From Her to Eternity,” piano chords stabbed like emergency sirens as Cave moaned, “This desire to possess her is a wound.” Its final stanza implied that Cave’s narrator had killed the object of his fascination—a typically grisly outcome in Cave’s early songs. His defining classic, 1988’s “The Mercy Seat,” strapped the listener into the position of a man on death row. It plumbbed another of Cave’s central

themes: annihilating shame, the feeling of being judged monstrous and fearing that judgment to be true.

As Cave aged and became a father—to four sons by three different women—his vantage widened. The Bad Seeds’ 1997 album, *The Boatman’s Call*, a collection of stark love songs inspired by his breakup with the singer PJ Harvey, brought him new fans by recasting him as a romantic tragedian. More and more, the libidinal bite of his work seemed satirical. He formed a garage-rock band, Grinderman, whose 2007 single “No Pussy Blues” was a send-up of the mindset of those now called incels, construing sexual frustration as cosmic injustice. (Cave spat, “I sent her every type of flower / I played a guitar by the hour / I patted her revolting little Chihuahua / But still she just didn’t want to.”) In his sensationally filthy 2009 novel, *The Death of Bunny Munro*, he set out to illustrate the radical feminist Valerie Solanas’s appraisal that “the male is completely egocentric, trapped inside himself, incapable of empathizing or identifying with others.” (The actor Matt Smith will soon play the novel’s protagonist, an inveterate pervert, in [a TV adaptation](#).)

But the Cave of today feels far removed from the theatrical grossness of his past, owing to [personal horrors](#). In 2015, his 15-year-old son Arthur fell off a cliff while reportedly on LSD; in 2022, another son, Jethro, died at 31 after struggles with mental health and addiction. “I’ve had, personally, enough violence,” Cave told me. The murder ballads he once wrote were “an indulgence of someone that has yet to experience the ramifications of what violence actually has upon a person—if I’m looking at the death of my children as violent acts, which they are to some degree.”



Nick Cave and his early band the Birthday Party at the Peppermint Lounge in New York, March 26, 1983 (Michael Macioce / Getty)

Music beckoned as a means of healing. The Bad Seeds' 2019 album, *Ghosteen*, was a shivery, synth-driven tone poem in which Cave tried to commune with his lost son in the afterlife; by acclamation, it's his masterpiece. *Wild God* marks another sonic and temperamental reset. Its music is a luminous fusion of gospel and piano pop: more U2 than the Stooges, more New Testament than Old. Compared with his earlier work, these albums have “a more fluid, more watery sort of feel,” he said. “Which—it’s dangerous territory here—but I guess you could see as a feminine trait.”

On a level deeper than sound, Cave explained, his recent music is “feminine” because of its viewpoint. His lyrics now account not just for his own feelings, but for those of his wife, Susie, the mother of Arthur and his twin brother, Earl. In the first song on *Ghosteen*, for example, a woman is sitting in a kitchen, listening to music on the radio, which is exactly what Susie was doing when she learned what had happened to Arthur.

“After my son died, I had no understanding of what was going on with me at all,” Cave said. “But I could see Susie. I could see this sort of drama playing out in front of me. Drama—that sounds disparaging, but I don’t mean that. It felt like I was trying to understand what was happening to a mother who had lost her child.” His own subjectivity became “hopelessly and beautifully entangled” with hers. On *Ghosteen*, “it was very difficult to have a clean understanding of whose voice I actually was in some of these songs.”

That merging of perspectives reflects more than just the shared experience of suffering. It is part of what Cave sees as a transformation of his worldview—from inward-looking to outward-looking, from misanthrope to humanist. Arthur’s death made him realize that he was part of a universal experience of loss, which in turn meant that he was part of the social whole. Whereas he was once motivated to make art to impress and shock the world, he now wanted to help people, to transmute gnawing guilt into something good. “I feel that, as his father, he was my responsibility and I looked away at the wrong time, that I wasn’t sufficiently vigilant,” he said in the 2022 interview collection *Faith, Hope and Carnage*. He added, speaking of his and Susie’s creative output, “There is not a song or a word or a stitch of thread that is not asking for forgiveness, that is not saying we are just so sorry.”

On the Red Hand Files, the epistolary blog that Cave started in 2018, he replies to questions from the public concerning all manner of subjects: how he feels about religion (he doesn’t identify as Christian, yet he attends church every week), what he thinks of cancel culture (against it, “[mercy’s antithesis](#)”), whether he likes raisins (they have a “grim, scrotal horribleness, but like all things in this world—you, me and every other little thing—they have their place”).

At least a quarter of the messages he receives from readers express one idea —“The world is shit,” as he put it. “That has a sort of range: from people that just see everything is corrupt from a political point of view, to people that just see no value in themselves, in human beings, or in the world.” Cave recognizes that outlook from his “nasty little guy” days—but he fears that nihilism has moved from the punk fringe to the mainstream. The misery in his inbox reflects a culture that is “anti-sacred, secular by nature, unmysterious, unnuanced,” he said. He thinks music and faith offer much-needed medicine, helping to re-enchant reality.

From the October 2024 issue: Leonard Cohen's prophetic battle against male egoism

Cave has been heartened to see so many people evidently feeling the same way. Back when Jordan Peterson was first making his mark as a public figure, Cave devoured his lectures about the Bible, he told me. “They were seriously beautiful things. I heard reports about people in his classes; it was like being on acid or something like that. Just listening to this man speak about these sorts of things—it was so deeply complex. And putting the idea of religion back onto the table as a legitimate intellectual concern.”

But over time, he lost interest in Peterson as he watched him get swept up in the internet’s endless, polarized culture wars. Twitter in particular, he said, has “had a terrible, diminishing effect on some great minds.”

The Cave of today feels far removed from the theatrical grossness of his past, owing to personal horrors.

The artist’s job, as Cave has come to see it, is to work against this erosion of ambiguity and complication, using their creative powers to push beyond reductive binaries, whether they’re applied to politics, gender, or the soul. “I’m evangelical about the transcendent nature of music itself,” he said. “We can listen to some deeply flawed individuals create the most beautiful things imaginable. The distance from what they are as human beings to what they’re capable of producing can be extraordinary.” Music, he added, can “redeem the individual.”

This redemptive spirit hums throughout *Wild God*. One song tells of a ghostly boy sitting at the foot of the narrator’s bed, delivering a message: “We’ve all had too much sorrow / Now is the time for joy.” The album joins in that call with its surging, uplifting sound. The final track, “As the Waters Cover the Sea,” is a straightforward hymn, suitable to be sung from the pews of even the most traditional congregations.

But the album is not entirely a departure from Cave’s old work; he has not fully evolved from “living shit-post to Hallmark card,” as he once joked in a Red Hand Files entry. “Frogs” begins with a stark reference to the tale of Cain and Abel—“Ushering in the week, he knelt down / Crushed his

brother's head in with a bone"—and builds to Cave singing, in ecstatic tones, "Kill me!" His point is that "joy is not happiness—it's not a simple emotion," he told me. "Joy, in its way, is a form of suffering in itself. It's rising out of an understanding of the base nature of our lives into an explosion of something beautiful, and then a kind of retreat."

A few songs portray an old man—or, seemingly interchangeably, an "old god" or a "wild god"—on a hallucinatory journey around the globe, lifting the spirits of the downtrodden wherever he goes. At times, the man comes off like a deluded hero, or even a problematic one: "It was rape and pillage in the retirement village / But in his mind he was a man of great virtue and courage," Cave sings on the album's title track. In Cave's view, though, this figure "is a deeply sympathetic character," he told me, a person who feels "separated from the world" and is "looking for someone that will see him of some value."

As with *Ghosteen*, the album mixes Susie's perspective with Cave's. One song, "Conversion," was inspired by an experience, or maybe a vision, that she had—and that she asked her husband not to publicly disclose in detail. "There is some gentle tension between my wife, who's an extremely private person, and my own role, which is someone that pretty much speaks about pretty much everything," Cave said.

In the song, the old god shambles around a town whose inhabitants watch him "with looks on their faces worse than grief itself"—perhaps pity, perhaps judgment. Then he sees a girl with long, dark hair. They embrace—and erupt into a cleansing flame, curing the man of his pain. As Cave described this moment in the song to me, he flared his eyes and made an explosive noise with his mouth. In my mind, I could see the old god, and he looked just like Cave.

This article appears in the [December 2024](#) print edition with the headline "Nick Cave Wants to Be Good."

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Richard Price's Radical, Retrograde Novel

In *Lazarus Man*, he
rejects the tropes of contemporary
literature.

by Tyler Austin Harper



In his tenth novel, *Lazarus Man*, Richard Price is, to borrow one of his own lines, on a “hunt for moments”—snapshots in time, chance encounters, fleeting interactions that reveal someone or something in a startling new light. “I’ve got like X-ray eyes for the little gestures that go right by

everybody,” he explained in a profile timed to the publication of his 1992 novel, *Clockers*. “I don’t go for the big picture so much as a lot of *little* big pictures.” Mary Roe, a detective and one of the characters in his new book, shares that instinct. At the scene of a “larger horror,” what hits her most forcefully is not the dead bodies but a crushed USPS mail cart, “an everyday object so violently deformed.” It beckons her toward “an unasked-for comprehension of the whole.”

The currency that *Lazarus Man*—a patchwork of scenes from urban working-class life, set in the spring of 2008—trades in is the micro-epiphany. Price’s four interlaced East Harlem protagonists are big-souled people navigating narrow, “negotiated life.” What they want for themselves—someone to lie beside, a little more money, work that doesn’t involve selling something—rarely outpaces what is possible. They do not ask for much more of the world, or New York City, than it is ready to give. Each one of them is decent.

Felix Pearl is a 20-something photographer with a gig taking video footage of a playground and basketball courts for the parks department (to monitor safety protocols) and a habit of getting bamboozled by a pretty junkie. Mary, a respected member of the police department, is also the daughter of a prizefighter tormented by a mistake he made as a young man. Anthony Carter, a middle-aged divorcé, is a former salesman, former teacher, and former cokehead hoping to stumble onto a metaphysical truth that will mend the broken parts of his life. Royal Davis, a failed NBA hopeful, runs a funeral home and wishes he didn’t. When a tenement building collapses in Harlem, their paths become entangled and they reexamine their lives.

This disaster, which leaves six dead, is ostensibly the big event that sets the novel in motion, but it also feels almost beside the point. No one, including Price, shows much curiosity about what caused the collapse. In fact, *Lazarus Man* seems deeply uninterested in the idea of cause at all. The characters we encounter live a challenging existence; they are not quite on the cliff’s edge, but they are close enough to peer into the canyon without craning their neck. The novel has all the trappings of fiction as gritty urban social portraiture—the kind of enterprise that Price is associated with as the author of the drug-trade-steeped novel *Clockers* and a writer for HBO’s *The Wire*. Yet it isn’t.

[From the September 2024 issue: A satire of America's obsession with identity.](#)

Nor has Price written a gentrification novel about a changing Harlem, even as its Harlem is changing. Or a novel of proletarian discontent, though it is about discontented proletarians. *Lazarus Man* isn't about structural racism either, despite being populated with minorities down on their luck and harangued by the police. What Price has given us is a retrograde novel. It is animated by unreconstructed, unembarrassed humanism.

His pages offer no fictional repackaging of uplift or pessimism or low-wattage Marxist theory. They depict no working-class heroes or Dickensian scoundrels. The characters are not pawns in some philosophical or political or cultural proxy war for which the novel is simply a vehicle. You would be forgiven for overlooking that the story is set amid the heat of Barack Obama's historic presidential campaign, because this never comes up. Price's characters are strapped but not completely stuck, battered by social structures but not paralyzed by them.

In his 1945 lecture “Existentialism Is a Humanism,” Jean-Paul Sartre observed that European existentialism had developed an undeserved reputation for being “gloomy,” denigrated as a philosophical movement obsessed with death, absurdity, anxiety, and the like. Sartre rejected this appraisal: Existentialism turned on the conviction that people can—in the face of history’s sweep, dehumanizing societal institutions, and unrestrained economic and technological development—choose how to live. Speaking before a sizable crowd at Paris’s Club Maintenant, Sartre addressed his critics. “Their excessive protests make me suspect that what is annoying them is not so much our pessimism,” the philosopher wryly observed, “but, much more likely, our optimism. For at bottom, what is alarming in the doctrine that I am about to try to explain to you is—is it not?—that it confronts man with a possibility of choice.”

Lazarus Man’s protagonists, confronted with exceptional circumstances they had no hand in generating, must nonetheless contend with the discomfiting reality of their own agency. This leaves Price walking a tightrope. His novel at once invites and undercuts the polarized attitudes toward social crisis that have recently become familiar—either fatalistic acceptance or righteous

denunciation. *Lazarus Man* is about a traumatic event that defies a reflexive victim-culture response, as well as the lazy buck-up bromides favored by that culture's critics.

If Price's novel has a message, it is that epiphanies are a kind of theater we perform for ourselves.

Put a different way, it is a trauma novel without a trauma plot—pushing back against the formulaic storyline, so thoroughly skewered by *The New Yorker*'s Parul Sehgal, that reduces characters to predictable symptoms after some fateful event. The book's author, too, isn't readily fazed: Price, a white novelist writing yet again about Black urban life, betrays no signs of racial anxiety. "Northern white writers sometimes see black people as another species," he noted in 2006. "I think the white writer sometimes says, 'No, no, that's a hornet's nest.'" He's still poking it.

The possibility that Price might have adopted the identitarian conventions of the previous decade or so—the last novel he wrote under his own name was *Lush Life* (2008), which unfolds on New York City's Lower East Side—is swiftly ruled out by Anthony, the novel's anchoring character. A half-Black, half-Italian Irish Ivy League screwup—years ago, he lost a full ride to Columbia for dealing drugs—he has been on a downward trajectory ever since. In his sober and unemployed middle age, he has been living in his dead parents' tenement apartment and resists any attempt to frame himself as a victim. "A therapist suggested that as a Black student he might have subconsciously felt pressure to act out the role expected of him by the white students," he reflects. Then he adds, "But that was bullshit."

When Anthony is pulled out of the soot-gray rubble a third of the way through the novel—the reborn Lazarus of the book's title—he is a changed man. Or, more accurately, he is a man desperately trying to play the part of a changed man. It is never quite clear, even as *Lazarus Man* rushes toward its devastating denouement, whom exactly Anthony is trying to convince of his redemption: the audiences who eventually come to hear him speak at community events, enchanted by the wisdom he has wrung from brute survival, or the man he sees in the mirror. To the extent that Price's novel has a message, it is that epiphanies are a kind of theater we perform for ourselves. Faced with disaster or a momentous encounter, we are not gripped

by revelation or metamorphosed in the fire of circumstance. Events do not transform us against our will. We decide, always retroactively, that some unexpected joy or undeserved blow is the stuff out of which a new life is made.

This idea, that we choose our own epiphanies, appears again and again. Mary, the worn-down detective, is especially epiphany-haunted, surrounded by people who have undergone sudden shifts of self. Her father, disturbed by his capacity for cruelty after a boxing opponent ended up permanently disabled, abruptly gave up the sweet science. Her husband is a reformed violent drunk whom Mary finds boring in his new meditative sobriety. And Mary herself lives in the long shadow of a halfway epiphany, restless in marriage and motherhood after a freak elevator accident two years earlier nearly killed her, leaving her searching for—and failing to find—new moorings. Mary spends much of the novel playing the role of dutiful detective, looking for a resident of the imploded building who hasn't been seen since the day it crumbled. She tenuously connects the search to absolution for herself—guilt-ridden about being a distant mother—and for her father, convinced that discovering the missing man, dead or alive, will somehow land her on terra firma.

Lazarus Man possesses the same kind of telegenic quality that made *Clockers* an inspiration for *The Wire*. Some vignettes read like hilarious set pieces. When the tenement dissolves into a haze of white smog and rubble, Royal is dozing in one of his unsold coffins. Awoken by the noise, he pushes open the lid of his pine box and sits bolt upright, scaring witless the group of film-school students to whom he's rented out his struggling funeral home so they can shoot a bad zombie movie. This slapstick gives way to something darker as Royal, knowing that the rumbling boom means bodies—and thus business—instructions his son to put on his best black suit and go hawk their services. Other moments give way to a gentle melancholy.

And as Anthony is slowly transformed into a minor New York celebrity—first thanks to a local-news appearance, and then through a series of speeches he is coaxed into giving—his ordeal gels into an earnest if squishy doctrine, one part self-help and one part call to duty. He proclaims again and again that his only goal is to “be of service.” His lectures are full of clichés and pseudo-profundities—“The street can be a brutal sculptor”—but his

overwrought aphorisms also land, the kinds of phrases that audience members scribble down and later recite around the dinner table. Anthony's underlying theme is always that change is possible, that the worst that comes to pass will end up being "the best thing that could possibly happen to you." Personal catastrophe, Anthony preaches, is a gift. A sheep in wolf's clothing.

[From the May 1976 issue: A review of Richard Price's second novel, *Bloodbrothers*](#)

But in the end, *Lazarus Man* rejects its own Lazarus. Or at least Price subverts his post-traumatic gospel. When a woman approaches Anthony after one of his appearances, interrogating him about his mantra—"Whatever befalls you no matter how heartbreaking or onerous will turn out to be the best thing"—he finds himself, for the first time, at a loss for words. She tells him about a husband of two decades, newly dead. Three young kids at home and an ailing mother. An apartment slipping through her grasp. Plainly, no alchemy is forthcoming: The fragments of her life will not turn to gold if she just hopes hard enough. After Anthony mumbles something about God, she lets him have it.

When the novel at last gives up its final secret—who our Lazarus Man is, really—the big reveal does not hand over any certainty as to what lies in Anthony's heart. The question that haunts the second half of the book is whether he is a con artist or a genuine street prophet. The answer ends up being neither. Or both. The simple truth is that one bad decision led to worse decisions, then to better ones. The same could be said of each character. As to the question of whether that building collapse truly made a new man, no one (including Anthony) is sure.

The genius of Price's novel is that it rejects all mechanistic accounts of human existence—tragic or utopian, religious or otherwise—withouth downplaying the social forces that shape lives of labor. Price isn't peddling a bootstrap humanism. Anthony, Felix, Royal, and Mary cannot pull themselves up into a more comfortable middle-class existence through sheer will, or by the thaumaturgic power of some hoped-for epiphany. They cannot be exactly who they want to be. But Price holds them accountable for who they are, and the choices they make within the world as it is given to them.

Lazarus Man leaves us with four people still lurching toward an uncertain transformation. “I’m thinking a few things,” Royal muses. “All I know for sure is that I have to make a life that I can live with.”

This article appears in the [December 2024](#) print edition with the headline “Richard Price’s Radical, Retrograde Novel.”

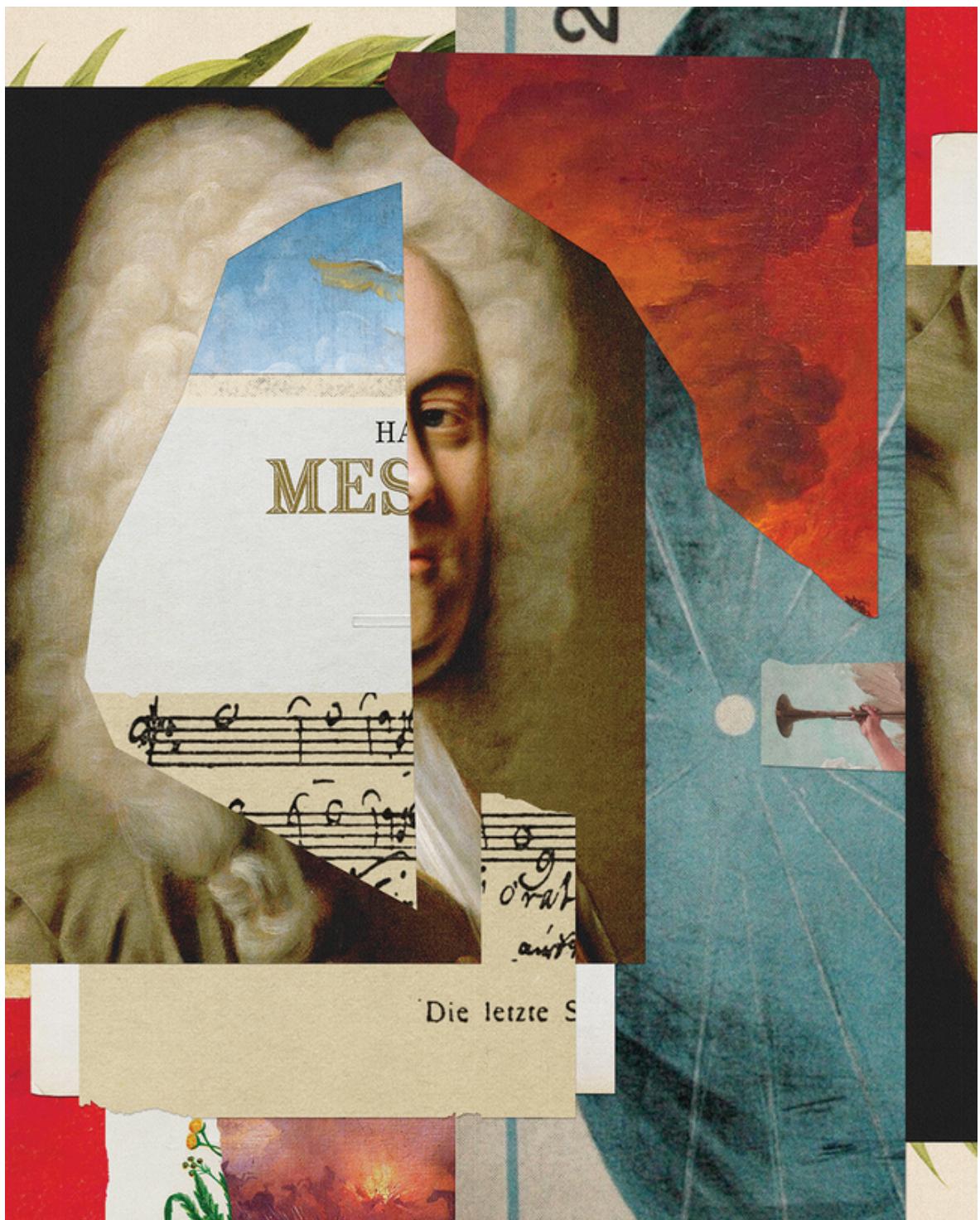
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The Genius of Handel's Messiah

The oratorio is a feat of sustained inspiration arguably unsurpassed in the canon of Western classical music.

by Jan Swafford



Among the pedestaled titans of Western music, George Frideric Handel was the first composer whose work not only quickly became celebrated in his own time but has been heralded ever since. Before Handel, no real “repertoire” of enduring music had existed. Composers were considered

craftsmen in an evanescent art, their creations regularly superseded by fresher work. Most music that got performed was relatively new. Claudio Monteverdi, the preeminent European composer of the early 17th century, was largely forgotten within decades of his death, in 1643. Johann Sebastian Bach amounted to hardly more than a cult figure after he died, in 1750, his major works unplayed well into the next century.

When Handel died, at 74 in 1759, he was already well fortified for posterity. A celebrity since his 20s, he had been the subject of grand portraits and was depicted as Orpheus in [a 1738 statue](#) in London's Vauxhall Gardens. Whereas Bach earned an unmarked grave in Leipzig and one obituary four years after he died, Handel was buried in Westminster Abbey.

Handel stands apart in another way from the musical giants who have since been rediscovered and enshrined: Each of them is renowned for an array of often-performed pieces. His stature is owed above all to a single work—the oratorio *Messiah*. Among the towering masterpieces of Western music, the *Messiah* occupies a distinctive place: It is familiar to more people than any other work of its kind. Bach's *B Minor Mass* and *St. Matthew Passion* and Monteverdi's *Vespers* are comparable among supreme choral pieces, but they aren't performed at your church or the high school down the street. The *Messiah* often is, trotted out during the Christmas season by amateur and professional choruses around the globe. A fair percentage of the world probably knows the “Hallelujah” chorus well enough to sing along.

[Arthur C. Brooks: Why music really does make you happier](#)

This skewed acclaim is unfair to Handel, who was as brilliantly prolific as any composer who ever lived. But it is also a tribute to the overwhelming effect of the *Messiah*, which is a feat of sustained inspiration arguably unsurpassed in the canon of Western classical music. “Comfort ye, comfort ye my People,” the libretto opens, pulling us in at the beginning, its flow of compelling melody and stirring choruses entralling us for the next two hours and leaving us singularly exalted.

Reasons for the *Messiah*'s enduring power are manifold, though certainly they begin with the music itself, which manages to join the lofty and the populist, as does all of Handel's work. In [Every Valley: The Desperate Lives](#)

and Troubled Times That Made Handel's Messiah, Charles King takes his cue from the oratorio's ability to convey, era after era, "a transporting sense that something cosmic and profound was at stake, even when the cares of this world happened to intrude." King, who embarked on the book during the pandemic, found renewed comfort in the *Messiah*'s arc, especially its message of hope in difficult times, starting with those first words: "Comfort ye." He also felt moved to recover "the *Messiah*'s sheer weirdness" by exploring its origins in the murkier currents of what is remembered as the age of reason.

King, a professor of international affairs and government at Georgetown University and a splendid writer, has made a specialty of popular cultural history. A meticulous researcher, he delivers surprises, and his prologue is one of them:

Some days he would wander the manor house in a blank stupor, barely able to lift a foot ... He was so afraid of the cold that he lay under six blankets in winter and four in summer. He never married, fathered no children, and made distant enemies more readily than close friends.

These fine and vivid sentences are not, as the reader expects, about Handel. They are about his exquisitely odd and obsessive acolyte, Charles Jennens, the *Messiah*'s librettist, a figure few listeners are aware of.

The *Messiah* is a collection of gnomic scriptural passages that are prophetic in import but offer no story at all.

King proceeds to relay more about Jennens's inner life and creative struggles than about Handel's, of which firsthand reports are skimpy. Jennens's story is indeed fascinating. A rich squire and crabily conservative political dissident, he was "emotionally tormented," but still managed to be a significant art collector, Shakespeare scholar, and patron of music. King's resurrection of Jennens's crucial role, laboring in private over a libretto that he hoped would inspire "the Prodigious" (as he called Handel) to new musical heights, helps illuminate how unusual Handel's oratorio was and remains.

Here is the “weirdness” that King emphasizes. An oratorio is essentially an unstaged opera, a story told in music. The *Messiah* is a collection of gnomic scriptural passages that are prophetic in import but offer no story at all. “It has nothing that could be called a plot,” King observes. “Its form is more like that of a found poem, built from Bible verses that have been rearranged and, here and there, edited” by a depressive man struggling to find his way toward hope and a return to a pre-Enlightenment vision of religion. Jennens, for whom faith and kingship were imbued with mystery, endorsed the legitimacy of the deposed Stuart monarchy and rejected the rational Deist perspective. For his part, Handel—a generally agreeable though fiercely proud man, witty and gluttonous and gouty, and given to polylingual swearing—was probably indifferent to such political and sectarian matters. But he knew a good librettist when he saw one.

The form of King’s book is like an intricate collage, gathering very different characters with the goal of concentrating on the surround, the context. Not all of the figures are directly connected to Handel, and at times King’s deep background verges on the tangential. But a similar storyline links his cast of characters: They are coping with dire predicaments (of widely varying sorts), in a time of political flux and fear, all of them managing to carry on—a spirit of perseverance that runs through the *Messiah*.

For example, King delves at length into the outlandish marital travails of the contralto Susannah Cibber, whom Handel turned to as he rounded up singers for the *Messiah* premiere, in 1742 in Dublin, a propitious convergence for both. We learn, as a scandalized public did, all about her husband’s outrageous abusiveness, her lover’s and family’s efforts to protect her, the two lawsuits her husband filed against the lover (a creditor whom he’d initially welcomed into a ménage à trois). Cibber’s well-known suffering lent her musical lamentations in the oratorio a raw power—“He was despised and rejected of Men,” she sang, “a Man of Sorrows, and acquainted with Grief”—for a stunned opening-night audience and in many of her performances after.

Other lives and issues are more peripherally entangled in King’s tale of the *Messiah*’s emergence. A distressing chapter on the British slave trade, to which Handel had a minor financial connection, features an African Muslim named Ayuba Diallo who ends up enslaved in Maryland. Against all odds,

he ultimately succeeds in returning to Bundu, in West Africa. His episodic journey includes an interlude in London, where “it would not have been unusual to see Diallo walking past Jennens’s townhouse in Queen Square”—though who knows if the two ever met. Several times in his absorbing narratives, King reaches for these sorts of indirect associations.

And what about Handel’s evolution, personal and musical? After all, he is the composer who made the *Messiah*, even if he didn’t do it alone, or have the originating idea for it. Handel sometimes gets a bit lost along the way in *Every Valley*. After a well-stocked chapter about the oratorio and its premiere, King understandably—he isn’t a musician or musicologist—doesn’t devote much space to exploring the particulars of Handel’s style and reputation, or the special place of the *Messiah* in his work as a whole.

The compositions that Handel churned out at a remarkable rate were simultaneously demand-driven and distinctive, convention-bound and transcendent. Working within the musical language of his time, he could conjure any effect: dancingly energetic, profound, aristocratic, folksy, eerie, heart-filling, comic. He could do it all, and he had an uncanny sense of how to grab an audience. (His effervescent *Water Music* is a familiar example.) Few could work faster; that Handel wrote the *Messiah* in 24 days has long stirred talk of divine inspiration, though in fact he was known to turn out a three-hour opera in three weeks. Some have speculated that he was manic-depressive and wrote when he was manic. Indisputably, his speed was abetted by liberal borrowing from his own work and generous pilfering from other composers’ (not illegal in pre-copyright times, but still regarded as a bit tacky). Four *Messiah* choruses are lifted from his earlier pieces, none of them sacred. About his plagiarisms, Handel was unapologetic, saying more or less that those people didn’t know what to do with their stuff.

He wasn’t wrong: Handel the enthusiastic copier was also a pioneer in developing the English oratorio. Born in Halle, Germany, in 1685, he settled in England in 1712 and concentrated on the genre of Italian opera seria, a London craze whose popularity later faded. Facing bankruptcy by the 1730s, Handel revived his career by turning from seria—courtly entertainment stuffed with mannered drama—to the pared-down English oratorio. Making use of his operatic skills and dramatic instincts, he transfigured this new musical genre with results that most choral composers you could name—

Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms—are manifestly indebted to. By contrast, the artificiality of his operas, the major part of his output, has kept them from becoming repertoire staples.

From the November 1946 issue: Handel

In all of his work, Handel was among the greatest, most irresistible of tunesmiths. Like Bach, he believed in a union of word, meaning, and music. To that end, Bach often pursued esoteric symbolism and numerology, with vocal lines crossing in the music when Christ is mentioned, and the like. Handel wanted his illustration to be more on the sleeve. “Their land brought forth frogs,” the soprano sings in his oratorio *Israel in Egypt*, to an accompaniment that is hopping, hopping, hopping. When the chorus proclaims, “There came all manner of flies,” the strings break out in buzzing.

In those places, Handel plays the plagues of Egypt for laughs, but he does the same kind of thing in earnest in the *Messiah*. “Every Valley shall be exalted,” the tenor sings in a robustly rising line, which sinks for “and every Mountain and Hill made low.” Then “the Crooked” (jagged line), “straight” (held note), “and the rough Places” (jagged again), “plain” (long held note). Each word and image of the text is painted like this.

Meanwhile, you hear Handel lifting the music to mighty climaxes over and over, and it never gets old.

“For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given,” the chorus sings, tossing that bit back and forth in dancing counterpoint. Momentum begins to gather, the notes climbing, the rhythm bouncing us joyously along: “And the Government shall be upon his Shoulder; and his Name shall be called.” Then we arrive at spine-tingling proclamations: “Wonderful, Counsellor, The Mighty God, The Everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace,” as strings race ecstatically above. What Beethoven, who considered Handel his only musical superior, particularly admired was his ability to get dazzling effects with simple means. As both composers knew, simple is hard.

Among the possibly apocryphal stories about Handel, one has him commenting to his servant, upon finishing the “Hallelujah” chorus, “I did

think I did see all Heaven before me, and the great God Himself seated on His throne, with His company of Angels.” In fact, nothing indicates that he considered the *Messiah* his magnum opus at the time, or expected that this piece—with its grandeur, its gravitas, its power to be emotionally moving at nearly every moment—would be his ticket to immortality. Famous though he was, Handel was still a jobbing composer, and composers had never been endowed with an immortal aura.

From the April 1885 issue: Handel 1685–1885

Yet he was eager to share an awestruck response to the Dublin premiere. As King reports, Handel wrote a letter a few months after the event, enclosing an Irish bishop’s verdict: “The whole is beyond any thing I had a notion of till I Read and heard it,” the cleric reported. “It seems to be a Species of Musick different from any other.”

The letter was to Jennens, the *Messiah*’s librettist. Handel wanted him to know “how well Your Messiah was received in that Country.” One of the most inspired composers of all time might have been aware, in some sense, that he had transcended himself, but he could not claim to understand the alchemy that had worked this wonder. In the spirit of his oratorio, the goal of his letter to Jennens seems to have been not to blow his own horn but to give comfort to his companion in the endeavor.

*Lead image credit: Illustration by Paul Spella. Sources: Heritage Images / Getty; Photo12 / UIG / Getty; Geoffrey Clements / Corbis / VCG / Getty; Print Collector / Getty; Lebrecht Music & Arts / Alamy; CBW / Alamy; Album / Alamy.

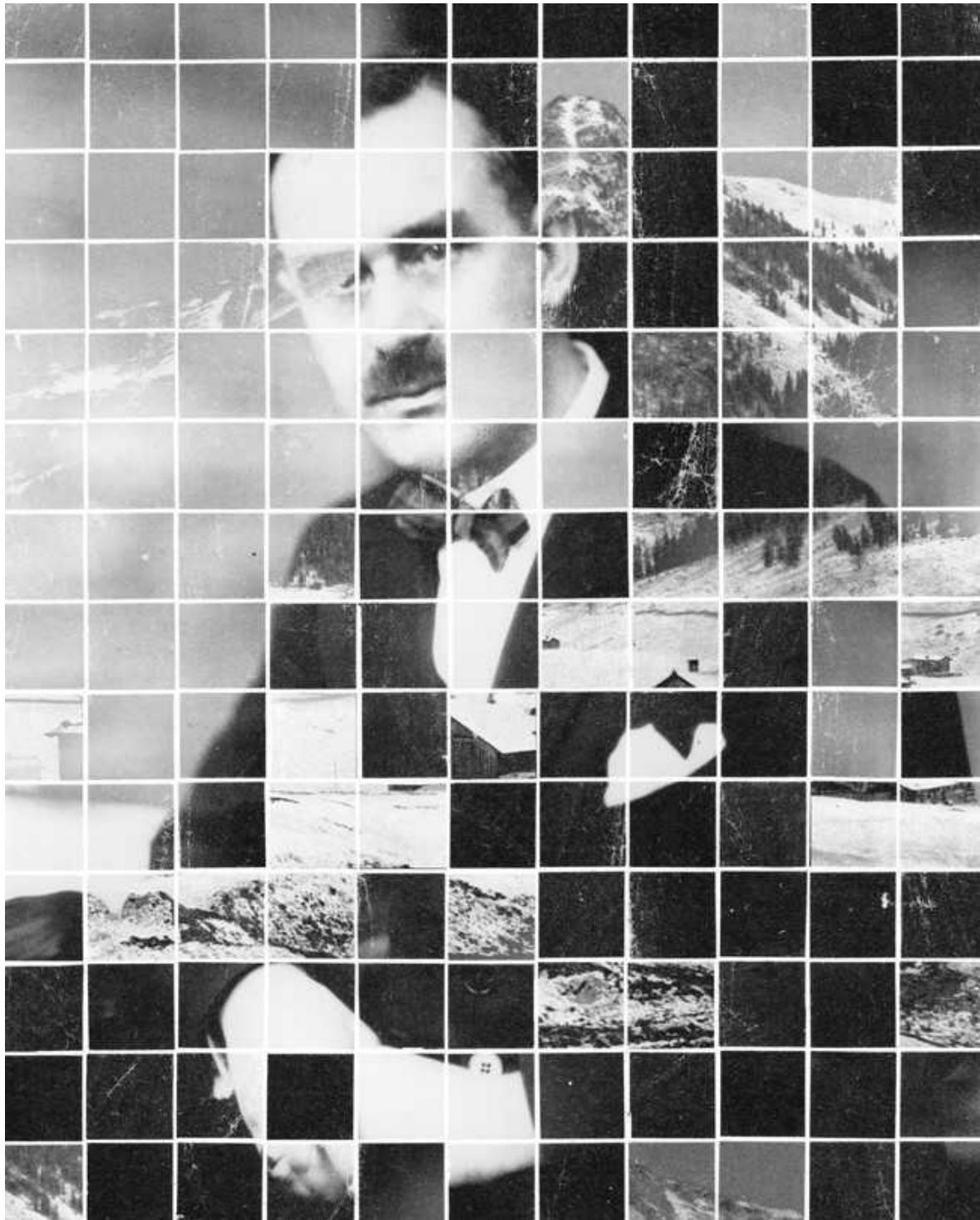
This article appears in the [December 2024](#) print edition with the headline “The Weirdest Hit in History.”

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The Magic Mountain Saved My Life

**When I was young and adrift,
Thomas Mann's novel gave me a
sense of purpose. Today, its vision is
startlingly relevant.**

by George Packer



Just after college, I went to teach English as a Peace Corps volunteer in a small village school in West Africa. To help relieve the loneliness, I packed a shortwave radio, a Sony Walkman, and, among other books, a paperback copy of Thomas Mann's very long novel [The Magic Mountain](#). As soon as I

set foot in Togo, something began to change. My pulse kept racing; my mouth went dry and prickly; dizzy spells came on. I developed a dread of the hot silence of the midday hours, and an awareness of each moment of time as a vehicle for mental pain. It might have helped if I'd known that my weekly antimalarial medicine could have disturbing effects, especially on dreams (mine were frighteningly vivid), or if someone had mentioned the words *anxiety* and *depression* to me. At 22, I was a psychological innocent. Without the comfort of a diagnosis, I experienced these changes as a terrifying void of meaning in the universe. I had never noticed the void before, because I had never been moved to ask the questions *Who am I?* *What is life for?* Now I couldn't seem to escape them, and I received no answers from an empty sky.

I might have lost my mind if not for *The Magic Mountain*. By luck or fate, the novel—which was published 100 years ago, in November 1924—seemed to tell a story a little like mine, set not in the West African rainforest but in the Swiss Alps. Hans Castorp, a 23-year-old German engineer, leaves the “flatlands” for a three-week visit to his cousin Joachim, a tuberculosis patient who is taking the cure in one of the high-altitude sanatoriums that flourished in Europe before the First World War. Hans Castorp (Mann's detached and amused, yet sympathetic, narrator always refers to the protagonist by his full name) is “a perfectly ordinary, if engaging young man,” a slightly comical young bourgeois.

Arriving on the mountain, he immediately loses his bearings. In the thin air, his face goes hot and his body cold; his heart pounds, and his favorite cigar tastes like cardboard. His sense of time becomes warped. Many of the patients spend years “up here.” No one speaks or thinks in terms of days. “‘Home in three weeks,’ that’s a notion from down below,” his ailing cousin warns. Hans Castorp’s companions at the sanatorium’s five lavish daily meals are a cosmopolitan and macabre gallery of mostly young people who fill the endless hours gossiping, flirting, quarreling, philosophizing, and waiting to recover or die. The proximity of death is unsettling; it’s also funny (when the roads are blocked by snow, corpses are sent flying down the mountain on bobsleds) and strangely alluring.

When Hans Castorp catches a cold, the sanatorium’s director examines him and finds a “moist spot” on one of his lungs. That and a slight fever suggest

tuberculosis, requiring him to remain for an indeterminate time. Both diagnosis and treatment are dubious, but they thrill Hans Castorp: This hermetic world has begun to cast a spell on him and provoke questions “about the meaning and purpose of life” that he’d never asked down in the flatlands. Answered at first with “hollow silence,” they demand extended contemplation that’s possible only on the magic mountain.

The Magic Mountain is an odyssey confined to one place, a novel of ideas like no other, and a masterpiece of literary modernism.

The director’s assistant, trained in psychoanalysis, explains in one of his biweekly lectures that sickness is “merely transformed love,” the body’s response to repressed desire. Fever is the mark of eros; the decay of a diseased body signifies life itself. Mann had ventured onto this terrain before. In his novella *Death in Venice* (1912), the famous writer Gustav von Aschenbach, infatuated with a Polish boy at his hotel, stays in the plague-ridden city while other visitors flee. Hans Castorp stays too, obsessed with his own temperature chart, and with the entrancing Clavdia Chauchat, a young tubercular Russian with “Kirghiz eyes,” bad posture, and a habit of letting the dining-room door slam behind her. Almost half the novel goes by before Hans Castorp—who has by now been on the mountain for seven months—talks with Clavdia, just as she’s about to depart. On the night before she leaves, he makes one of the most bizarre declarations of love in literature: “Let me take in the exhalation of your pores and brush the down —oh, my human image made of water and protein, destined for the contours of the grave, let me perish, my lips against yours!” Clavdia leaves Hans Castorp with a framed X-ray of her tubercular lung.

I fell under the spell of Hans Castorp’s quest story, as the Everyman hero is transformed by his explorations of time, illness, sciences and séances, politics and religion and music. The climactic chapter, “Snow,” felt as though it were addressed to me. Hans Castorp, lost in a snowstorm, falls asleep and then awakens from a mesmerizing and monstrous dream with an insight toward which the entire story has led him: “For the sake of goodness and love, man shall grant death no dominion over his thoughts.”

Hans Castorp remains on the mountain for seven years—a mystical number. *The Magic Mountain* is an odyssey confined to one place, a novel of ideas

like no other, and a masterpiece of literary modernism. Mann analyzes the nature of time philosophically and also conveys the feeling of its passage, slowing down his narrative in some spots to take in “the entire world of ideas”—a day can fill 100 pages—and elsewhere omitting years. Reading this dense yet miraculously seductive book becomes an experience like Hans Castorp’s interlude on the mountain. As I made my way through the novel by kerosene lamplight, I took Mann’s bildungsroman as a guide to my own education among the farmers, teachers, children, and market women who became my closest companions, hoping to find myself on a journey toward enlightenment as rich and meaningful as its hero’s. That was asking too much of even great literature; afraid of my own suicidal thoughts, I went home before the end of my two years. But on a few particularly dark nights, *The Magic Mountain* probably saved my life.

I recently returned to *The Magic Mountain*, without the intense identification of the first time (you have to be young for a book to inspire that), but with a larger sense that, a century later, Mann has something important to tell us as a civilization. The Mann who began writing the novel was an aristocrat of art, hostile to democracy—a reactionary aesthete. Working on *The Magic Mountain* was a transformative experience, turning him—as it turned his protagonist—into a humanist. What Hans Castorp arrives at, lost and asleep in the snow, “is the idea of the human being,” Mann later wrote, “the conception of a future humanity that has passed through and survived the profoundest knowledge of disease and death.” In our age of brutal wars, authoritarian politics, cultures of contempt, and technology that promises to replace us with machines, what is left of the idea of the human being? [What can it mean to be a humanist?](#)

[Mann conceived of *The Magic Mountain* in 1912](#), when he was 37, after a three-week visit to a sanatorium in Davos [where his wife, Katia, was a patient](#). “It was meant as a humorous companion-piece to *Death in Venice* and was to be about the same length: a sort of satire on the tragedy just finished,” he later wrote. He soon discovered that his story resisted the confines of a comic novella. But before he could realize its possibilities, World War I broke out, in August 1914. With Hans Castorp still in his first week at the sanatorium, Mann abandoned the manuscript as Europe plunged into unprecedented destruction. In a letter to a friend in the summer of 1915, he left a clue as to where things stood with his unfinished novel: “On the

whole the story inclines towards sympathy with death.” And he now saw an ending—the war itself.

Mann published no fiction for the duration of the war. Instead, he became a very public defender of imperial Germany against its adversaries. For Mann, the Great War was more than a contest among rival European powers or a patriotic cause. It was a struggle between “civilization” and “culture”—between the rational, politicized civilization of the West and Germany’s deeper culture of art, soul, and “genius,” which Mann associated with the irrational in human nature: sex, aggression, mythical belief. The kaiser’s Germany—strong in arms, rich in music and philosophy, politically authoritarian—embodied Mann’s ideal. The Western powers “want to make us happy,” he wrote in the fall of 1914—that is, to turn Germany into a liberal democracy. Mann was more drawn to death’s mystery and profundity than to reason and progress, which he considered facile values. This sympathy wasn’t simply a fascination with human evil—with a death instinct—but an attraction to a deeper freedom, a more intense form of life than parliaments and pamphleteering offered.

Mann scorned the notion of the writer as political activist. The artist should remain apart from politics and society, he believed, free to represent the deep and contradictory truths of reality rather than using art as a means to advance a particular view. In his wartime nonfiction writing, he mocked “civilization’s literary man,” a self-important poseur who takes sides on public issues and signs petitions. Mann was aiming at his brother Heinrich, a novelist and an essayist of nearly equal renown, whose liberal politics led him to support Germany’s enemies, France and Britain. [The brothers exchanged indirect but caustic volleys in print](#), and their fraternal dispute became so bitter that they didn’t speak for seven years.

Before setting aside *The Magic Mountain*, Mann had created a version of this writer figure in a character named Lodovico Settembrini, another patient at the sanatorium, who is an irascible and hyper-articulate advocate for all things progressive: reason, liberty, virtue, health, the active life, social improvement. He declares music, the most emotionally overpowering of the arts, “politically suspect.” Mann at his most satiric has Settembrini contributing an essay to a multivolume project whose purpose is to end suffering. In short, Settembrini, like Heinrich, is a “humanist”—but in

Mann's usage, the term has an ironic sound. As he wrote elsewhere, it implies "a repugnant shallowness and castration of the concept of humanity," pushed by "the politician, the humanitarian revolutionary and radical literary man, who is a demagogue in the grand style, namely a flatterer of mankind."

Settembrini becomes a philosophical tutor to Hans Castorp, who listens with respectful interest but resists the liberal catechism. He responds more powerfully to the erotic allure of Claudia Chauchat, the careless door slammer, who believes in "abandoning oneself to danger, to whatever can harm us, destroy us." Yet Settembrini also has the wisdom to warn our hero against the seductions of the sanatorium, which separates young people from the society "down there," infecting them with lassitude and rendering them incapable of ordinary life. As an artist above politics, Mann didn't want simply to criticize "civilization's literary man," but to show him as "equally right and wrong." He intended to create an intellectual opponent to Settembrini in a conservative Protestant character named Pastor Bunge—but the war intruded.

Mann spent the war years making his case for the German soul, steeped in the "passion" of Wagner and "manliness" of Nietzsche, amid a global catastrophe that remained bloodlessly abstract to him at his desk in Munich. He published his wartime writings in the genre-defying *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man* in October 1918, one month before the armistice. Katia Mann later wrote, "In the course of writing the book, Thomas Mann gradually freed himself from the ideas which had held sway over him ... He wrote *Reflections* in all sincerity and, in doing so, ended by getting over what he had advocated in the book."

When Mann unpacked the four-year-old manuscript of *The Magic Mountain* in the spring of 1919, the novel and its creator were poised to undergo a metamorphosis. The war that had just ended enlarged the novel's theme into "a worldwide festival of death"; the devastation, he would go on to write in the book's last pages, was "the thunderbolt that bursts open the magic mountain and rudely sets its entranced sleeper outside the gates," soon to become a German soldier. It also confronted Mann himself with a new world to which he had to respond.

From the January 1953 issue: Thomas Mann on the making of *The Magic Mountain*

Defeated Germany was in a state of revolution. In Munich, demobilized soldiers, right-wing paramilitaries, and Communist militants fought in the streets, while leaders of the new Weimar Republic were routinely assassinated. A local war veteran named Adolf Hitler began to electrify crowds in cramped halls with speeches denouncing the “traitors”—republican politicians, leftists, Jews—who had stabbed Germany in the back. The National Socialist German Workers’ Party was born in Munich; Hitler’s attempted coup in November 1923, known as the Beer Hall Putsch, took place less than two miles from the Mann house.

Some German conservatives, in their hatred of the Weimar Republic and the Treaty of Versailles, embraced right-wing mass politics. Mann, nearing 50, vacillated, hoping to salvage the old conservatism from the new extremism. In early 1922, he and Heinrich reconciled, and, as Mann later wrote, he began “to accept the European-democratic religion of humanity within my moral horizon, which so far had been bounded solely by late German romanticism, by Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Wagner.” In April of that year, in a review of a German translation of Walt Whitman’s selected poetry and prose, he associated the American poet’s mystical notion of democracy with “the same thing that we in our old-fashioned way call ‘humanity’ … I am convinced there is no more urgent task for Germany today than to fill out this word, which has been debased into a hollow shell.”

The key event of Mann’s conversion came in June, when ultranationalists in Berlin murdered his friend Walther Rathenau, the Weimar Republic’s Jewish foreign minister. Shocked into taking a political stand, Mann turned a birthday speech in honor of the Nobel Prize-winning author Gerhart Hauptmann into a stirring call for democracy. To the amazement of his audience and the German press, Mann ended with the cry “Long live the republic!”

Mann the novelist had meanwhile returned to *The Magic Mountain*, and his work on it took a swerve in the same crucial year of 1922. His hero would have to struggle with the political battle that had beset Mann during the war. Abandoning Pastor Bunge as outmoded, he created a new counterpart to

Settembrini who casts a sinister shadow over the second half of the novel: an ugly, charismatic, and (of course) tubercular Jesuit of Jewish origin named Leo Naphta. The intellectual combat between him and Settembrini—which ends physically, in a duel—provides some of the most dazzling passages in *The Magic Mountain*.

Just when you want to give up on their high-level dialectics, one of them, usually Naphta, says something that shocks you into a new way of thinking. Naphta is neither conservative nor liberal. Against capitalist modernity, whose godless greed and moral vacuity he hates with a sulfurous rage, Naphta offers a synthesis of medieval Catholicism and the new ideology of communism. Both place “anonymous and communal” authority over the individual, and both are intent on saving humanity from Settembrini’s soft, rational humanism. Hans Castorp calls Naphta “a revolutionary of reaction.” At times sounding like a fanatical parody of the Mann of *Reflections*, Naphta argues that love of freedom and pleasure is weaker than the desire to obey. “The mystery and precept of our age is not liberation and development of the ego,” he says. “What our age needs, what it demands, what it will create for itself, is—terror.” Mann understood the appeal of totalitarianism early on.

“We must define democracy as that form of government and of society which is inspired above every other with the feeling and consciousness of the dignity of man.”

It’s Naphta, a truly demonic figure—not Settembrini, the voice of reason—who precipitates the end of the hero’s romance with death. His jarring arrival allows Hans Castorp to loosen himself from its grip and begin a journey toward—what? Not toward Settembrini’s international republic of letters, and not back toward his simple bourgeois life down in the flatlands. The answer comes 300 pages before the novel’s end, when Hans Castorp puts on a new pair of skis and sets out for a few hours of exercise that lead him into the fateful blizzard and “a very enchanting, very dreadful dream.”

In it, he encounters a landscape of human beings in all their kindness and beauty, and all their hideous evil. “I know everything about humankind,” he thinks, still dreaming, and he resolves to reject both Settembrini and Naphta—or rather, to reject the stark choice between life and death, illness and

health, recognizing that “man is the master of contradictions, they occur through him, and so he is more noble than they.” During his years on the mountain, he’s become one of death’s intimates, and his initiation into its mysteries has immeasurably deepened his understanding of life—but he won’t let death rule his thoughts. He won’t let reason either, which seems weak and paltry before the power of destruction. “Love stands opposed to death,” he dreams; “it alone, and not reason, is stronger than death.”

The Magic Mountain makes no clear political statement. The novel remains true to Mann’s belief that art must include everything, allowing life its complexity and ambiguity. But the vision of “love” that Hans Castorp embraces just before waking up is “brotherly love”—the bond that unites all human beings. The creation of this novel, which won Mann international fame, is “a tale of two Thomas Manns,” in the words of Morten Høi Jensen, a Danish critic whose *The Master of Contradictions: Thomas Mann and the Making of “The Magic Mountain”* is due to be published next year. The Mann of wartime could not have written the sentence that awakens Hans Castorp from his dream.

From the October 1944 issue: Thomas Mann’s “In My Defense”

Mann now recognized political freedom as necessary to ensure the freedom of art, and he became [a sworn enemy of the Nazis](#). A Nobel Prize winner in exile, he emerged as the preeminent German spokesman against Hitler who, in lectures across the United States in 1938, warned Americans of the rising threat to democracy, which for him was inseparable from humanism: “We must define democracy as that form of government and of society which is inspired above every other with the feeling and consciousness of the dignity of man.”

He was speaking at a moment when the dignity of man was locked up in Nazi concentration camps, liquidated in Soviet show trials, buried under piles of corpses. Yet Mann urged his audiences to resist the temptation to deride humanity. “Despite so much ridiculous depravity, we cannot forget the great and the honorable in man,” he said, “which manifest themselves as art and science, as passion for truth, creation of beauty, and the idea of justice.”

Could anyone utter these lofty words today without courting a chorus of snickers, a social-media immolation? We live in an age of human self-contempt. We're hardly surprised when our leaders debase themselves with vile behavior and lies, when combatants desecrate the bodies of their enemies, when free people humiliate themselves under the spell of a megalomaniacal fraud. It takes a constant effort not to accept this as normal. We might even feel, without acknowledging it to ourselves, that we deserve it: After all, we're human, the lowest of the low.

In driving our democracy into hatred, chaos, and violence we, too, grant death dominion over our thoughts. We succumb to the impulse to escape our humanness. That urge, ubiquitous today, thrives in the utopian schemes of technologists who want to upload our minds into computers; in the pessimism of radical environmentalists who want us to disappear from the Earth in order to save it; in the longing of apocalyptic believers for godly retribution and cleansing; in the daily sense of inadequacy, of shame and sin, that makes us disappear into our devices.

The need for political reconstruction, in this country and around the world, is as obvious as it was in Thomas Mann's time. But Mann also knew that, to withstand our attraction to death, a decent society has to be built on a foundation deeper than politics: the belief that, somewhere between matter and divinity, we human beings, made of water, protein, and love, share a common destiny.

This article appears in the [December 2024](#) print edition with the headline “The Magic Mountain Saved My Life.”

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- [**The Commons: Falling in Love With Reading Will Change Your Life**](#)
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Falling in Love With Reading Will Change Your Life

Readers respond to our November 2024 issue and more.



The Elite College Students Who Can't Read Books

To read a book in college, it helps to have read a book in high school, [Rose Horowitch wrote](#) in the November 2024 issue.

I'm an English teacher at a private college-preparatory school, and much of "The Elite College Students Who Can't Read Books" sounded familiar. My students, too, now struggle to read long texts. Unaddressed in this apt article,

though, are changes to the broader high-school context in which reading for homework now occurs. Today, students with elite college aspirations have extracurricular schedules that demand as much—if not more—time than school itself. These commitments are necessary, in their eyes, to gain admission to selective institutions. As a result, teachers face considerable pressure from not only students but also parents and school administrators to limit homework time—no matter if the assignment is a calculus problem set or *Pride and Prejudice*. In combination with considerably slower rates of reading and diminished reading comprehension, curtailed homework time means that an English teacher might not be able to assign more than 10 to 15 pages of relatively easy prose per class meeting, a rate so excruciatingly slow, it diminishes one’s ability to actually grasp a novel’s meaning and structure. I see how anxious and drained my students are, but I think it’s important for them to experience what can grow from immersive reading and sustained written thought. If we want students to read books, we have to be willing to prioritize the time for them to do so.

Anna Clark

San Diego, Calif.

As a professor, I agree with my colleagues who have noticed the declining literacy of American students at elite universities.

However, I am not sure if the schools are entirely to blame. In American universities, selection is carried out by admissions offices with little interest in the qualities that faculty might consider desirable in a college student. If faculty members were polled—something that has never happened to me in my 20-year career—I’m sure we would rank interest and experience in reading books quite highly.

Admissions decisions in the United States are based on some qualities that, however admirable, have little or nothing to do with academic aptitude. In contrast, at Oxford and Cambridge, in the United Kingdom, undergraduate admissions are typically conducted by the same academics who will teach those students. Most personal statements primarily consist of a discussion of which books the student has read and what they learned from them. Students are then expected to discuss these books in more detail in an interview.

When considered alongside the undergraduate selection process, the decline in literacy among American undergraduates is totally understandable.

Ione Fine

Psychology Professor, University of Washington
Seattle, Wash.

Having taught English in a public school for 32 years, I am not surprised that colleges and universities are discovering that incoming students lack the skill, focus, and endurance to read novels. Throughout my career, primarily teaching ninth graders, I fostered student readership not by assigning novels for the whole class to read, but rather by allowing students to select young-adult books that they would read independently in class. Thousands of lifelong readers were created as a result.

Ten years ago, however, my district administration told me that I could no longer use class time for independent student reading. Instead, I was to focus on teaching skills and content that the district believed would improve standardized-test scores. Ironically, research showed that the students who read more books scored significantly better than their classmates on standardized reading tests.

I knew that many students were unlikely to read at home. So I doubled down: I found time for students to read during the school day and repurposed class time to allow my students to share their ideas; to question, respond, and react along with their peers. The method was so successful that the district adopted my approach for seventh through ninth grade, and I published a university-level textbook preparing teachers to create similar communities of readers in their own classrooms.

Whole-class novels just aren't working: Some students will always be uninterested in a teacher's choice, and perceive the classics as irrelevant and difficult to comprehend. But allowing students to select their books can help them fall in love with reading.

Michael Anthony

Reading, Pa.

I am an educator of 16 years living in New Hampshire. “The Elite College Students Who Can’t Read Books” reflects a lot of what I’ve seen recently. But a large piece of the puzzle is public-school budgets. A major reason novels have been removed from curricula is money: Many districts cannot afford to purchase a book for every student, especially in the upper grades. Typically, districts will buy a “class set” of novels, about 20 to 30 books—that’s it. The books must be used during the English blocks for instruction and reading time. There are not enough books for students to take home and read; if they are reading them only in their class block, a novel will take months and months to finish. I knew of one district that would have teachers make copies of entire novels to share with their students; they’d take turns on copy duty to pull it off. I wish I could teach more complete novels, because students love it. But districts need budgets large enough to buy books for everyone.

Meaghan Kelly

Rumney, N.H.

When teaching my college history courses, I have polled my students to see how many have ever read a book cover to cover. Sometimes, only a few students would raise their hand.

I inquired because I always gave them the option to read a book instead of writing a 10-page research paper. They then would have a one-on-one, hour-long discussion with me about the book they’d selected. Students who chose that option generally had a good experience. But one student shines bright in my mind. In truth, I didn’t remember him well—but he stopped me at an alumni function to say thank you. He had taken my class the second semester of his senior year to fill an elective, and he had chosen to read David McCullough’s *1776*. He’d devoured the book—and he’d loved our discussion. He told me that the assignment had changed his life: Up to that point, he had never read a whole book. Since that class, he has read two or three books a month, and now has hundreds of books in his own library. He assured me that he would be a reader for the rest of his life.

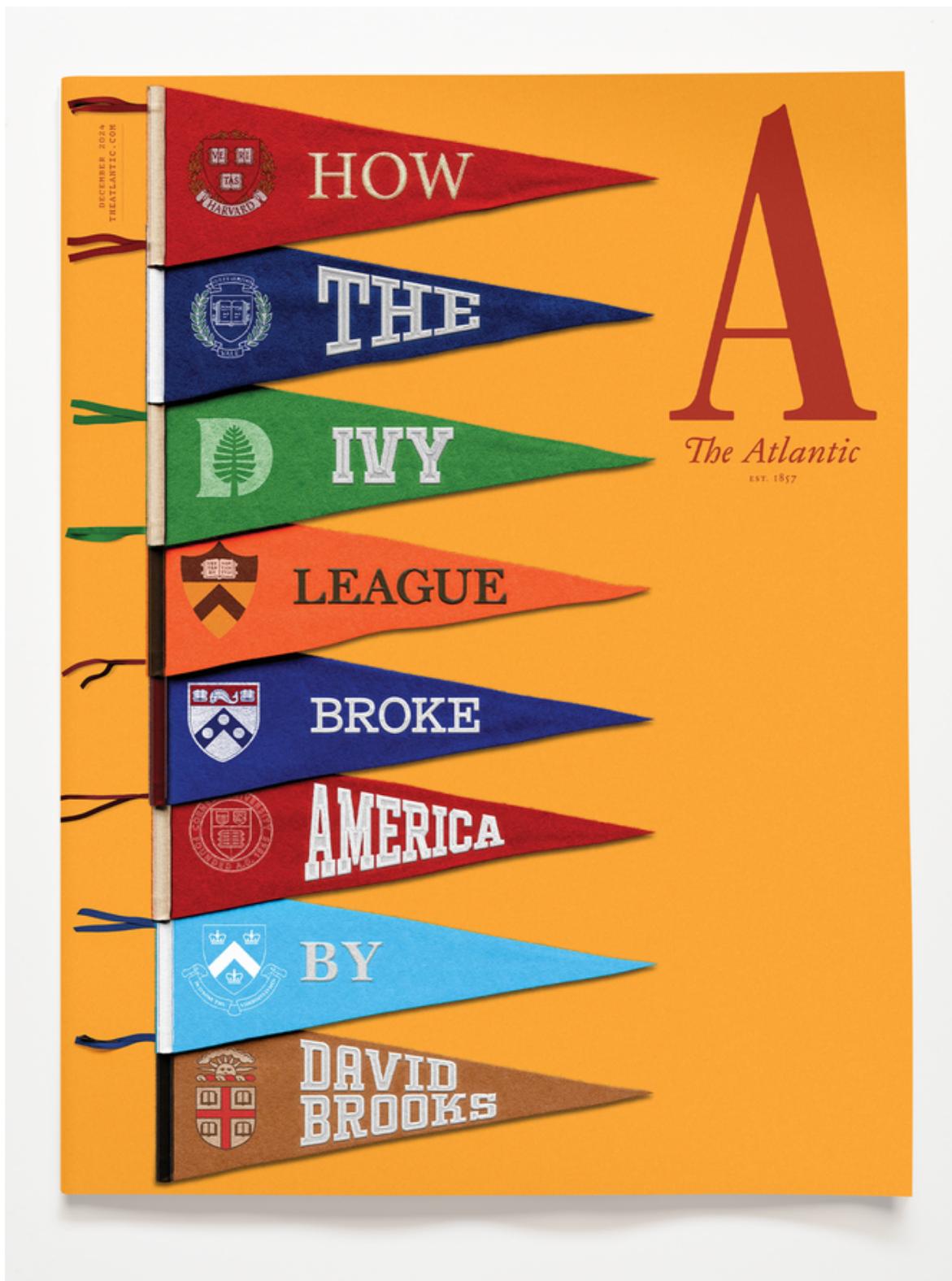
It was one of the most gratifying moments of my career. I hope more teachers, professors, and parents give their students a chance to learn what this student did—that books are one of the great joys in life.

Scott Salvato

Mooresville, N.C.

Rose Horowitch replies:

Anna Clark's letter builds on an idea that I hoped to convey in the article: that the shift away from reading full books is about more than individual students, teachers, or schools. Much of the change can be understood as the consequence of a change in values. The professors I spoke with didn't think their students were lazy; if anything, they said they were overscheduled and frazzled like never before, facing immense pressure to devote their time to activities that will further their career. Under these circumstances, it can be difficult to see how reading The Iliad in its entirety is a good use of time. Acknowledging this reality can be disheartening, because the solution will not be as simple as changing curricula at the college, high-school, or middle-school level. (And as several of these letters note, changing curricula isn't all that straightforward.) But letters like Scott Salvato's are a hopeful reminder of the power of a good—full—book to inspire a student to become a lifelong reader.



Behind the Cover

In this month's cover story, "[How the Ivy League Broke America](#)," David Brooks describes the failure of the United States' meritocracy, created in part by James Conant, the influential president of Harvard from 1933 to 1953. Conant and like-minded reformers had hoped to overturn America's "hereditary aristocracy of wealth"; instead, they helped create a new ruling class—the so-called cognitive elite, selected and credentialed by the nation's top universities. For our cover image, the artist Danielle Del Plato placed the story's headline on pennants she created for each of the eight Ivy League schools, which have been instrumental in shaping and perpetuating America's meritocracy.

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

Corrections

Due to an editing error, "The Elite College Students Who Can't Read Books" (November) misstated the year Nicholas Dames started teaching Literature Humanities. He began teaching the course in 1998, not 1988. "What Zoya Sees" (November) misstated where in Nigeria Zoya Cherkassky-Nnadi and her husband, Sunny, have a home. Their home is in Ngwo, not Igwo.

This article appears in the [December 2024](#) print edition with the headline "The Commons."

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Poetry

- [**Failed Elegy**](#)
-

Failed Elegy

by Matthew Zapruder



It seems these days
every poem is a failed elegy

for the world. Each one
asks correctly, what good

did writing this do? I cannot
deny I often feel anger

at the similarities between me
and an oil company, especially

on what is once again
the hottest day ever recorded.

It is so easy to do nothing
except lament our success

at writing useless laments.
I must confess I too

once wrote a ridiculous elegy
for a broken nail clipper.

I said it caught the light
of a distant star where beings

look down on us, disappointed
yet hopeful we will, like poets,

put things in the right order
just in time. The clipper

emitted a confusing not very
mysterious blue light. Sometimes

it seems to me the job of a poet
is mostly to rearrange the deck chairs

next to a perfect blue
swimming pool, then in those

chairs to doze. In another failed
elegy I described how all day

we walked through mist to get
to the exact spot where Dean specified

we should disperse his ashes.
It was windy, and we got a lot of him

on our hands. In the poem I wrote
he shares the name of a chef

at Infinity Hospital, which sounds
like but is not a beautiful lie.

Then I wrote, when I imagine how
he must have felt to try to write

poems with a new heart
he got from someone younger

who died, I feel mine
fill with the echo of replacement,

which was not exactly or perhaps
too true. The truth is I walked

along through the mist thinking
many boring things, not feeling

much of anything except
like stopping. We walked

through a field of wildflowers
that left some yellow powder

on our shoes. I just wanted
to be home with my wife and son,

but the mist really did seem endless.
Unlike death, it was not. We drove

slowly through the little town
until we found a place to eat

and did not speak of death.
Speaking of speaking of death,

Emily Dickinson compared herself
to the little wren because she knew

it was small and unremarkable.
It sings the most notes and sometimes
will take a ride for a little while
to eternity in the overcoat
of a passing stranger.

This poem appears in the [December 2024](#) print edition. It has been excerpted from Matthew Zapruder's collection, I Love Hearing Your Dreams.

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