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A Reporter at Large

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By [Ian Parker](#)

One morning in June, before dawn, cyclists began gathering at an intersection in Emporia, Kansas, to remember the victim of a recent murder. These were professional athletes as well as serious amateurs, on high-end bikes that click-clicked loudly while coming to a stop. The riders hugged; their bike lights blinked. By five-thirty, a few dozen women and men had collected in the dark.

These cyclists had travelled to Emporia to compete in races the following day, in which most of them would ride for two hundred miles, on rolling unpaved roads, for at least nine and a half hours. The event is the biggest in the new niche sport of gravel-bike racing—a form of slog that presents itself as both a solo endurance test and a party in the mud. “Gravel” became a cycling term only about a decade ago, to describe machines that are a compromise, in weight and handling, between road bikes and mountain bikes. Gravel bikes, and gravel racing, have since proliferated—at a time when American participation in racing of the [Lance Armstrong](#) kind (skinnier tires, lighter frames) has been in decline. Indeed, the Kansas event, Unbound Gravel, can now fairly describe itself as the most important in all of American competitive cycling—even if many of the hundreds who pay to ride in it each year have little competitive ambition beyond not giving up. Like a big-city marathon, a typical gravel race is both an élite contest and, at the rear, something less pressing. Gravel evangelists sometimes like to compare this mix to a mullet haircut: “Business at the front, party at the back.” Emporia, a low-rise college town, had been filling with video crews and podcasters. Banners printed with the muddy faces of past winners hung from street lamps. The manufacturers of rival anti-chafing creams had set up stands.

The early-morning cyclists were about to begin a memorial ride for Moriah Wilson, one of the sport’s leading athletes. She had died three weeks earlier, in what Amy Charity, who was riding that morning, described to me as “the most tragic and shocking thing that’s ever happened in this small community.” Wilson grew up in Vermont, the skiing daughter of a champion skier; she graduated from Dartmouth in 2019, then moved to California. This spring—a year after her first gravel race—she seemed poised to dominate the women’s field. In California in April, she won a major

competition by twenty-five minutes. She was predicted to prevail at Unbound. In May, *VeloNews* [described Wilson](#) as “the winningest woman in the American off-road scene.”

Hours after that article appeared online, Wilson was fatally shot, in an apartment in Austin, Texas. The crime was soon understood to be connected to her friendship with Colin Strickland, the biggest star that gravel racing has yet produced. Strickland, a thirty-six-year-old Texan, won in Emporia in 2019. He’s lean and good-looking, and has the deliberate enunciation of someone who’s a little more stoned than he’d planned to be. Another racer has observed that his cool, earnest self-assurance evokes both the cowboy and the hippie. Strickland has strongly appealed to fans and to commercial sponsors; these include Red Bull, which spends hundreds of millions each year associating itself with sports that have an air of risk. Gravel racing, as an upstart discipline, has endeavored to be taken seriously; so has Strickland. Great weight has been given to his pronouncements about what is called, with varying degrees of irony, “the spirit of gravel.” Last year, he wrote [an article](#) warning newcomers not to spoil the sport’s “authentic and relatable” reputation by introducing the sneaky team tactics of road racing—a sport that he defined as “non-inclusive.” Gravel racing was at its best, he wrote, when it fostered narratives of heroic solo achievement. (He was referring to achievements like his own.) A cyclist friend, posting on Instagram last year, teasingly called Strickland “Gravel Jesus.”

On May 11th, Wilson was staying with a friend of hers in Austin, ahead of an upcoming race in Texas. Strickland picked her up on his BMW motorcycle; they went swimming at a local outdoor pool, and he dropped her back at the friend’s apartment mid-evening.



Colin Strickland, the biggest star that gravel racing has yet produced. Last year, he wrote an article warning newcomers not to spoil the sport's "authentic and relatable" reputation by introducing the sneaky team tactics of road racing—a sport that he defined as "non-inclusive." Photograph by Brandon McKinney

At this time, Strickland had a long-term romantic partner, Kaitlin Armstrong, a real-estate agent and sometime yoga teacher who had become a keen weekend cyclist. (Kaitlin is not related to Lance Armstrong.) She and Strickland lived together, and had just started a business renovating vintage trailers. The day after Wilson's death, the Austin police questioned Armstrong and released her. Then she disappeared. By the time of the memorial ride in Emporia, a warrant had been issued for her arrest, on suspicion of murder. The affidavit securing the warrant noted that, last winter, Strickland had bought Armstrong a gun.

The dawn ride began; the cyclists headed east as the sun rose. After half an hour, they stopped by a pond. A woman read aloud from a blog that Wilson, writing in a likable, guileless voice, had begun in March. The cyclists heard Wilson's thoughts about a recent race in Oklahoma, which she had lost after hesitating at a key juncture. "There will be more opportunities to take what I learned" and "apply it to other moments, both in cycling and in life," she had written. "Next time I won't risk taking the safer option. Next time, I will go."

The Meteor is a bike shop, café, and wine store in Austin which, until May, was one of Strickland's sponsors. Its range of offerings mirrors gravel biking's sense of itself: marketing for the sport encourages thoughts of

personal discovery, miles from traffic, and also of post-ride camaraderie involving iced drinks and characterful mustaches. This past March, the Meteor added Moriah Wilson to its roster of sponsored riders. She marked the occasion on Instagram, [writing](#), “Many of my favorite moments spent cycling are not on the bike—they’re the slow moments before or after long, hard rides or races; moments spent anticipating or reminiscing with friends, coffee or spirit in hand; moments reminding me that the process is more important than the outcome.” The Meteor, she wrote, was “inclusive and welcoming.”

One morning in late June, Chris Tolley, a friend of Strickland’s and Armstrong’s, was at a table outside the Meteor. Tolley, thirty-three, isn’t a full-time cyclist: he has a day job in tech, which has helped fund an appetite for avant-garde menswear. (A bike-world Web site [described him](#) as being “typically draped in silk or mesh.”) But he has raced at an élite level for about five years, usually in hour-long races, on city loops of a mile or two, called criteriums, and he’s known for the panache with which he presents this career on social media. When Tolley uploads GoPro race footage to YouTube, he’ll add commentary filled with dry mockery of his opponents, along with deadpan narcissism: “Look at my calves, glistening in the sun.” Such material suggests a measure of actual narcissism, but it registers primarily as satire, a riff on the absurdities of athlete-influencers, whose value to sponsors is measured as much by their shtick, and the size of their following, as by their race results. In Tolley’s hands, the usual subtext of self-promotional content becomes the text. (He recently joked, in a video, “Give me money and attention, that’s all I want.”) Tolley has sometimes disparaged gravel racing; he defined it to me as “a marketing circle jerk” and questioned how Unbound’s entry fee—two hundred and seventy dollars, for the main race—sat with the sport’s vague talk of inclusivity. It amused him that the gravel community had recently announced a hall of fame: “Y’all really going to have a red carpet for a discipline that’s been around for three years?”

Tolley has known Strickland since 2015. They often trained together on rides through Texas farmland. According to Tolley, Strickland generally kept his romantic life out of view—both from friends and from people who knew him only through Instagram and media coverage. But, Tolley noted, “the Austin dating scene and cycling scene are pretty small,” and he recognized

that Strickland had sometimes been an imperfect boyfriend. “I think a lot of girls felt burned by him,” he said. “They think it’s going to be something, and then it’s not. Dating one girl after another, not necessarily giving them all the information.” (Tolley added that he had recently reassessed some of his own romantic behavior.)

Strickland’s reticence endured during his relationship with Armstrong: since 2019, he had given dozens of interviews, including at his house, in which it wasn’t apparent that he had a partner. (Strickland declined to be interviewed for this article.) But, according to Tolley, Armstrong did become a part of Strickland’s social life in Austin. Tolley sometimes hung out with the couple at their house. He liked Armstrong; he described her as beautiful, a little intense, and—as he came to realize—competent with money in a way that Strickland didn’t care to be.

Armstrong, who is thirty-four, grew up in suburban Detroit and has lived in Austin, on and off, for a decade. She’s worked at banks as a mortgage consultant and has taken extended trips overseas, to Bali and elsewhere, sometimes teaching yoga. After meeting Strickland, she made some well-judged moves in Austin’s overheated real-estate market, and last year the couple bought an investment property in Lockhart—a town, south of Austin, that has begun to attract what Tolley calls “artist-esque” people. “Owning property together—I was, like, Whoa, that’s a big step for Colin,” Tolley told me. When Tolley and Armstrong talked, he said, she seemed happy with her relationship. “She was in love with Colin. She wanted him to be—you know—the *one*.”

Armstrong sometimes joined Strickland at the Driveway Series, a popular weekly program of bike races, beer, and food trucks held at an Austin auto-racing track. Andrew Willis, who has long co-produced the series, told me that, in the past few years, “a lot of people in the cycling community had become friends with both Colin and Kaitlin.” Armstrong, who had a history of competitive running, started racing bikes at the Driveway and elsewhere. She also took long bike-camping trips, sometimes alone.

The day after Wilson’s murder, Austin detectives interviewed Strickland. According to the May affidavit, he explained that Armstrong was “a ‘participant’ at bicycle races while he is a ‘racer.’” The document went on,

“Strickland stated he told Armstrong in the past she does not need to ride with him because she ‘holds him back.’ ”

This spring and summer, a group of Austin cyclists met on Wednesday evenings to race in a subdivision that was abandoned years ago, after repeated flooding. The houses have been demolished and the yards have merged to become fields, but a grid of roads remains. The riders didn’t have a permit to race; they turned up after work, wearing tight-fitting gear, and put out cones to mark a loop of about a mile.

On an evening in June, I had arranged to meet one of the cyclists. When I arrived, he was already racing, so I waited near the finish line. The scene was appealing: low sunlight cutting through trees, Nine Inch Nails playing from a speaker mounted on an old school bus, a few non-riders with beers. Every few minutes, a pack of cyclists came by at about twenty-five miles an hour, sounding like a wave rolling over a pebbled beach.

Then a rider waiting for the next race walked up, confirmed that I was a reporter, and angrily told me to leave. When I asked him who he was, he said, “My name is Fuck You, Bro.” Later, it was easy to identify him—a real-estate agent who is a friend of Strickland’s. The man asked me why sexual infidelity was newsworthy. His ill humor was understandable enough, but it was striking that a woman’s murder had registered to him primarily as a challenge to Strickland’s well-being—a story about being *caught out*. Minutes later, as I was talking with the cyclist I’d arranged to meet, the real-estate guy shouted that I was a narc. The other cyclist apologized and rolled his eyes. Someone on a loudspeaker proudly declared that the evening’s event was “sponsored by nobody, presented by nobody!”

The first bike race that Strickland entered, in 2010, was similarly improvised. Riders wove through forty miles of Austin traffic on the kind of pared-down, fixed-gear machines popularized by bike messengers. He won. Strickland, then twenty-three—and, that day, shirtless—had been biking around town since he was a student at the Austin Waldorf School, a K-12 institution in the west of the city. (As Strickland has affectionately put it, his parents were “long-hairs” who had once run an organic farm outside Austin.) After graduating from the University of Texas at Austin, he’d taken a job at a local environmental consultancy.

He began racing at the Driveway. Willis remembers him as a strong, “unbelievably talented” rider who initially lacked tactical skill. In a Driveway race, as in most cycling competitions, bursts of extreme effort are often followed by slight reprieves when a rider can tuck in directly behind another biker, benefitting from draft. Cyclists working in a team can manage drafting most efficiently. Willis recalls an evening, early in Strickland’s career, when he dominated the Driveway field, lap after lap, but then lost to riders working together. Afterward, Strickland was close to tears. “I don’t understand what I’m doing wrong,” he said. Willis, a cyclist himself, remembers telling Strickland, “Sometimes being strong means saving your strength.”

Strickland also began to compete at the amateur end of cycling’s core discipline: road racing. At this sport’s highest professional level, teams participate in a series of contests, most of them in Europe, known as the U.C.I. WorldTour; the [Tour de France](#) is the central spectacle. By the time Strickland was competing, American interest in road racing had entered a decline that was caused, in part, by the slow, fractious dismantling of Lance Armstrong’s legend. Armstrong, who had long used performance-enhancing drugs, was finally banned from the sport, and stripped of his past victories, in 2012. Strickland rarely won his races, and when he did nobody cared. Speaking on a podcast earlier this year, he said that he had experienced road racing as a “desperate and angry” place that seemed dedicated to the “esoteric pursuit of suffering.”

Tolley told me, “Colin will be the first to admit—he’s not a *real* pro. He’s a very strong rider, but if you’re talking about the WorldTour—it’s a whole different world over there.” But Strickland had come into the sport at a time of new opportunities. “Cycling is changing, and an individual can guide it,” he said, in 2020. For racers, this was an era in which you could “assert your influence.” As the main game had declined, American cycling, impatient for American victories—and bike sales—was embracing new variants not yet sanctioned by the sport’s governing bodies. These niches created a path to a career (and to a simulacrum of sporting dominance) for a rider who could never hope to succeed in the obsessive, shaved-leg environment of the WorldTour.

This was a sports oddity. It was as if a top player of Frisbee golf could, with a little public-relations polish, become as big a deal as Tiger Woods. Strickland seems to have understood the chance before him with a clarity that could sound cynical; his quiet cockiness, as he jumped from one new cycling niche to another, seemed to spring from a sense of how adept he was at *playing the part* of a sports star. A few years ago, speaking to a fellow-cyclist on a podcast, he said, “Let’s not forget, guys—this is all show business and marketing.”

He first targeted the Red Hook Criterium, a fixed-gear-race series, with roots in Brooklyn, that had recently expanded into Europe. These races, known for nighttime starts and crashes at sharp turns, had garnered sponsors and media attention, but they still had an informality—a dirtbag swagger—about them. Strickland has described the Red Hook experience as “seventy-five per cent party, twenty-five per cent race.” (A gravel contest, in contrast, was “seventy-five per cent race, twenty-five per cent party.”) Tolley, who rode in Red Hook races a few times, recalls “insane parties where people are taking Ecstasy and climbing on rafters and getting fucking hammered and getting naked and jumping into fountains.” He told me, “It was the most fun time. I was getting flown to Europe, and I’m not even a pro cyclist! Like, what the fuck?”



Moriah (Mo) Wilson was poised to become the dominant female gravel racer. She once said, “Particularly in cycling, women like to sell themselves short.” Photograph by Linda Guerrette

In 2015 and 2016, Strickland won four consecutive Red Hook events, and experienced his first flush of fame. He gave interviews for documentaries and sprayed champagne from a winner's podium. Then, at the start of 2017, he was suddenly out of his league: Red Hook was now attracting professional riders based in Europe. Speaking earlier this year, Strickland said, "There's a sweet spot. I hit the discipline when it's, like, winnable, and just peaking, right? Work smart and not hard. Like, shit, I hit Red Hook, and then it got really hard to win. And I couldn't win it anymore. So I went over to gravel."

Strickland entered his first gravel race, the Texas Chainring Massacre, in January, 2017. He finished third, just behind Lance Armstrong—whose ban didn't extend to adolescent disciplines without any anti-doping protocols. Strickland has said that he immediately "realized that this was the future": such events created a market for new equipment—"Shit, there's a whole other bike to sell"—and they were financially sustainable. Traditionally, bike racing is funded largely by sponsors. It's hard to sell tickets to an outdoor event on public roads. But gravel racing, an American innovation, allowed an élite contest to be underwritten by the people who lose. Hundreds of paying riders, of varying abilities, can start together, in a seemingly democratic moment of whooping and amplified music. (Any subsequent pain, and pride, is likely to be experienced alone, in the middle of nowhere.) Although a long gravel race is a severe endurance challenge, and there's a chance of crashing, at lowish speeds, into a hedge, a dirt-road route can be designed to mitigate risk of injury and forgive inexperience in a way that's much harder on a faster surface. Bare-bones customer service—bring your own snacks, do your own repairs—can be woven into a gravel-race philosophy of personal responsibility. The Web site of one race declares, "Have a plan. You've been warned." Strickland, seeing that gravel racing was about to experience what he called its "spotlight" moment, was determined to get himself "positioned to be in the show."

Amity Rockwell met Strickland in 2018, when he offered her a spot on a three-member team, sponsored in part by the Meteor, that would compete in gravel races and criteriums. She was twenty-two and living in San Francisco, her home town. Having discovered an aptitude for long-distance riding, she had begun to enter local races, winning them and attracting a little sponsorship. But she was still working as a barista.

Today, gravel racing's biggest names, including Rockwell, usually aren't part of a team: they act as their own sponsorship agents and social-media managers. In 2018, this "privateer" model wasn't yet standard. Rockwell accepted Strickland's offer: she'd get free equipment, and a few thousand dollars a year for travel.

She came to regret her decision. Rockwell told me that Strickland, impatient to advance, was "intensely manipulative." His instinct was "to aggrandize himself and belittle other people." She thought of herself as someone adept at racing up hills—a climber—but he told her that she was "nowhere near skinny enough" to think of herself that way.

Her memory of a brief affair with him, that year, is an unhappy one. "I don't want to present it as if I had zero interest in him—he was an attractive, successful man in the sport," she said. "But, looking back, there was this massive power imbalance and dependency—these things that you can't really see at the time, when you're just chasing this one goal, blindly, doing whatever you feel is going to get you closer."

When, at the end of the 2018 season, she told him that she wasn't renewing her contract, he responded with what she called a tirade, telling her that she'd never find success. "His reaction wasn't to try to coax me, or offer me more, win me over," she said. "It was to try to bring me low enough—to a point of maintaining my dependency on him."

In June, 2019, Strickland and Rockwell independently entered the race that's now called Unbound Gravel. That year, Peter Stetina, an American WorldTour rider, secured grudging permission from his team, Trek-Segafredo, to ride in three gravel races. The European cycling establishment tended to view gravel as a mere hobby for crunchy Americans. Stetina's race director said, of his jaunt, "You'd better win—this is stupid."

Stetina did win his first race, in California. When it was announced that he and a few other current WorldTour riders were racing in Emporia—an event that had never had such competitors before—Stetina knew that many people in the gravel community saw this as ominous. If WorldTour athletes cleaned up at gravel's preëminent contest, it would encourage the thought that a

typical gravel event was just a race on a lousy surface to which the world's best cyclists had not shown up.



"Do you mind if I sit here and ruin the one time of day you have to yourself?"
Cartoon by P. C. Vey

At a hundred and five miles—halfway through the race—Strickland and Stetina were among a leading group of ten men. Strickland slowly pulled away. They let him go. He'd had some good gravel results, in the previous two years, but it was hard to imagine that, in this field, he could stay ahead, alone, for nearly a hundred miles.

He did. Stetina finished second. The group had “underestimated Colin,” Stetina said, adding, “Colin is a very determined person.” He also noted that the pack behind him that day had “no organization—so it does play very much into his strong suit.” As Andrew Willis put it to me, Strickland’s success was always in events that reward “displays of brute strength.” Stetina described Strickland’s victory as a David-and-Goliath moment that boosted gravel racing’s credibility. Stetina is now a full-time gravel racer himself.

Rockwell won the women’s race. She and Strickland were photographed together, smiling, for the benefit of a sponsor that supported them both. Rockwell’s friends knew her views about Strickland, but she had no appetite for public conflict. “When you’re in a scene where everyone follows his

every move, and loves him, I'm not going to start a war against him," she told me. "I have to see him every other weekend."

Within a week, Strickland received an e-mail from Jonathan Vaughters, a former teammate of Lance Armstrong's who now runs EF Education-EasyPost, a team that rides in the WorldTour. According to Strickland, the message's subject line was "Paris-Roubaix 2020." In other words, Strickland was being offered a chance to compete in the Paris-Roubaix, a legendary, gruelling road race ridden partly over cobbles. This was an extraordinary suggestion. Strickland had no high-level road-race experience, and he was already in his thirties. As Payson McElveen, a gravel cyclist and a friend of Strickland's, who is also sponsored by Red Bull, put it to me, "The *child* in you would want to say yes."



A mug shot of Kaitlin Armstrong, who is accused of murdering Wilson. She lived with Strickland, and, according to a friend, "she wanted him to be—you know—the one."Photograph courtesy of U.S. Department of Justice / Austin Police Department

Strickland has described how, during discussions with EF, he cooled on the proposal. To join the team, he'd have to drop his sponsors, including Red Bull. In McElveen's estimation, there are now a handful of gravel racers "doing pretty deep six figures," and Strickland would have had "to take a significant pay cut" to ride in the WorldTour at an entry level. This pay difference, McElveen suggested, was something that "no one outside of this small world ever would have guessed."

Moreover, the prospect of a good race result in France was, as Strickland later put it, a daunting “numbers game.” Winning, or even making a good showing, would be nearly impossible. It would be easy for EF to promote the story of a Texan gravel dude riding into a famous French race never won by an American. (“These narratives, my friends, are how we grow our great sport of cycling,” Strickland [wrote](#), in 2021.) But, afterward, Strickland would presumably have had only his defeat—and a possible reputation for hubris.

The better story was about the gravel rider who turned down Paris-Roubaix. Strickland chose the better story. He later said that riding in the WorldTour “was not my dream.”

In gravel racing, Chris Tolley told me, “if you’re a boring person, you’re not going to go very far.” Privateers must constantly think about branding. “You have to find and sway the companies you partner with,” Strickland has said. “You have to design your own badass kit each year. It can’t suck. If it sucks, you suck.” Peripheral forms of self-marketing are also important: Payson McElveen, who has a big mustache, hosts a podcast called “The Adventure Stache.” Stetina highlights a fondness for craft beers. Another rider films himself training with a miniature dachshund on his back.

“You’re selling yourself to all these brands,” Amity Rockwell said. “You *have* to believe in yourself.” A few male gravel riders, Strickland in particular, have taken that belief “to a very extreme level,” she went on. “They can be so obsessed with themselves.” Gravel racing seems almost designed to create cults of personality, and to feed tendencies that Rockwell views as narcissistic.



Cartoon by Seth Fleishman

Soon after Strickland gave up his chance at the WorldTour—and articles had begun calling him “the king of gravel”—[the pandemic](#) shut down competition. Gravel cycling’s popularity, meanwhile, kept rising. Between 2019 and 2021, the increase in revenue from gravel-bike sales far outpaced a general boom in bike sales.

Racers had to continue their storytelling hustle, in what was now an often airless loop of sponsor name-dropping. In December, 2020, Strickland appeared on a podcast hosted by Ian Boswell, a former road professional who’d switched to gravel. The occasion: an ad launch. Wahoo, a bike-equipment company that funded them both, had filmed a [nineteen-minute portrait](#) of Strickland, in which he described himself as a “bicycle racer and general entertainer.” It showed him hanging out at home, playing a Fender guitar and making pour-over coffee, and sitting alone at a make-out spot with a view over Austin. “If you’re gonna get it done, you come here,” Strickland advised. There was no sign of Kaitlin Armstrong. Boswell proposed that the film captured “who you are as a person, *beyond* the bike.” Strickland agreed.

In 2019, Moriah Wilson moved from Vermont to San Francisco, where her college boyfriend was living. By then, she’d given up competitive skiing, because of injuries, and had begun thinking of cycling as her sport. She

started training, and took a job at Specialized, the bike manufacturer. In 2021, she met Rockwell, and they quickly became close. Rockwell said that by the time gravel races re-started in earnest, that year, it had become clear that “Mo was *far* better than me.” Perhaps, in a very long race, such as Unbound, Rockwell stood a chance, but “at anything shorter nobody was holding a candle to her.”

Several times that season, Wilson rode in the same race as Colin Strickland. [Speaking to a reporter](#) just before Unbound, Wilson proposed, without bluster, that she was a contender. She added, “Particularly in cycling, women like to sell themselves short.” Strickland, meanwhile, had begun his season without a big win. And he had published his spirit-of-gravel article, in which he admonished any riders switching to gravel from road racing—a culture of “needles and nefarious behavior”—to respect his discipline’s traditions of “rugged individualism and honor.” At Unbound, Wilson finished ninth in the women’s race (after stopping three times with tire trouble); Rockwell came in second. Strickland was fifth in his race, which was won by Ian Boswell.

It was beginning to look as if Strickland’s gravel dominance had peaked before the pandemic. In the summer of 2021, he had no victories in the discipline. He blamed a knee injury and incomplete training. “It’s starting to show,” he [told a reporter](#) that August. “It’s depressing, because it’s your job and your identity.” In an Instagram post, his frustration—about losing, and perhaps about losing control of a fledgling sport that he’d helped define—sounded even more raw. “I have been less than impressed with the level of sportsmanship shown by many in the gravel field of late,” he wrote. Addressing competitors who tried “to eke out sleazy time advantages on other riders,” he declared, “You are a shit, and you probably don’t have what it takes to win anyway.”

Strickland and Armstrong took a trip to Iceland that July. Soon afterward, Rockwell spent a few days in Boulder, Colorado, in a house where Strickland was also a guest. “He aggressively pursued me,” Rockwell recalled. She rebuffed him, while wrongly assuming that he was single. I first spoke to Rockwell a few weeks after Wilson’s murder, and she was then wary of mentioning Strickland’s overture. “That got my best friend killed,” she said. (Armstrong has not been convicted of a crime; Strickland has not been charged with any crime.) Rockwell recalled that, whenever Strickland

had to explain his relationship with Armstrong to people who didn't know them well, he gave the impression that Armstrong was a difficult, volatile ex from whom he couldn't quite disentangle himself. "It was, 'We're stuck in this business relationship,'" she said. Sammi Runnels, a professional cyclist who has known Strickland for many years, has described him as someone inclined to "play games" with a romantic partner until "it explodes into drama."

In September, 2021, Red Bull announced its first sponsored gravel race, touting it as the "brainchild" of Strickland and Payson McElveen, the "Adventure Stache" guy. It was scheduled for that November at the Cibolo Creek Ranch, a resort in West Texas. (This is where Supreme Court Justice [Antonin Scalia](#) died, in his bed, during a hunting weekend, in 2016.) The event, called Red Bull Rio Grande Gravel, was being run by Andrew Willis, the Driveway Series producer. Willis had known Strickland for a decade, and he told me that he had "always thought Colin was a good dude." So he was puzzled when Strickland became a sour, capricious race-planning partner. He seemed unhappy. He had pressed for a route that included a mining ghost town—in Willis's mind, a tourist trap—then objected to the Cibolo Creek Ranch as not being "authentic." He had argued for a very hard race, over Willis's objections, then protested that the route was too hard.

In late September, after riders had already paid for the Rio Grande, Strickland abruptly withdrew his support. As Willis put it, "He threw a temper tantrum." Red Bull called off the race, citing "operational issues." The event was later rescheduled for the spring, but Red Bull now refrained from using Strickland's face in its marketing. One promotional photo shows his back; in another, his head is sharply turned from the camera.

On October 23rd, Strickland, Wilson, and Rockwell rode in a race called Big Sugar, in Arkansas. Wilson won the women's field. At a party that night, she and Rockwell ran into Kaitlin Armstrong and Strickland, who had come ninth in his race, barely ahead of Wilson. Armstrong was pointedly unfriendly, in a way that Rockwell now reads as a reflection of "the position that Colin was continually putting her in" through his dealings with other women. By then, Wilson and Strickland had certainly met each other, at one race or another, although Rockwell is confident that their relationship had so far been platonic.



"Is it really flattering that little children treat you like their equal?"
Cartoon by William Haefeli

At some point that weekend, Wilson, who had just broken up with her boyfriend, told Rockwell that she had decided to take a short vacation in Austin, where she had friends. "That's when this whole saga began," Rockwell told me.

On October 26th, Strickland and Armstrong's trailer-renovation company, Wheelhouse Mobile, was incorporated. Two days later, Andrew Willis hosted the last Driveway event of the 2021 season. Strickland and Wilson "rolled up together," Tolley recalled. "Colin and an attractive female cyclist —a girl who is not Kaitlin." Strickland couldn't expect to be inconspicuous: photographs from the evening show him wearing a Red Bull helmet. Wilson was in cutoff jeans and a pink tie-dyed sweatshirt. As Tolley observed, "Kaitlin knew all the other female cyclists. She was good friends with them. So it's a very public thing to bring another girl." He added, "It just kind of sucks."

According to Rockwell, Wilson's phone rang that evening, when she and Strickland were at the racetrack. It was an unknown number, but she took the call. A woman told her, "Stay away from Colin."

In one of Strickland's interviews with the police, he reported the fact of a phone call, but not this setting. In his memory, Wilson reacted by saying,

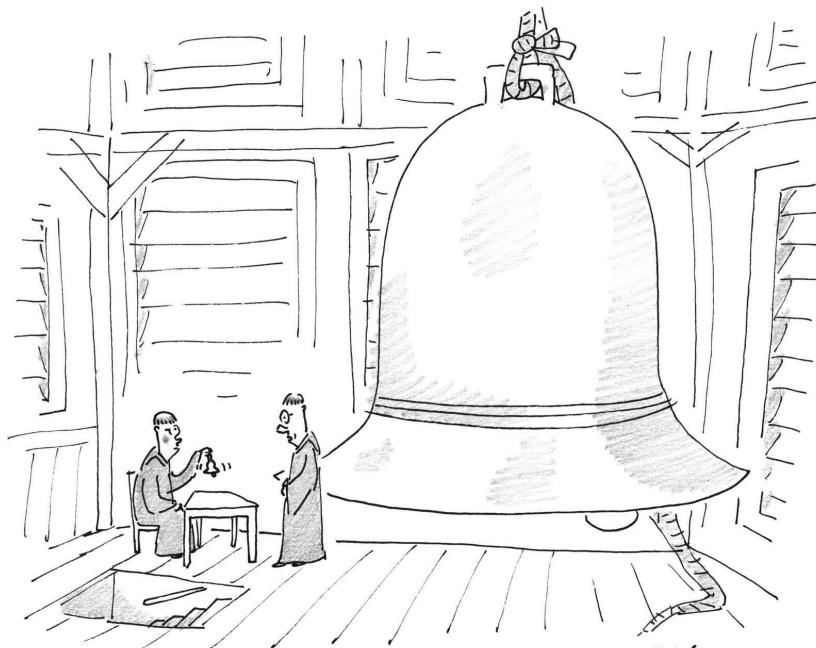
“That was really weird. Somebody called—some random person called me.” Strickland described the caller as his ex-girlfriend. “I felt so ashamed,” he told police.

At a Halloween party that weekend, Strickland, wearing overalls and no shirt, played guitar in a two-piece band called Dirt Daddy. Strickland and Wilson also took a trip together, to West Texas.

In a [statement](#) that Strickland released this past May, he said that he and Wilson had “a brief romantic relationship” lasting a week or so. He emphasized that both of them had recently broken up with their partners. After the fling, his dealings with Wilson became “platonic and professional.”

According to Strickland’s account to the police, during this period he and Armstrong lived under the same roof but were separated. (He noted that she used Bumble, the dating app.) They soon reunited.

When Wilson returned to San Francisco, she told Rockwell a little of what had happened. “I think she saw a lot of potential there,” Rockwell told me. “I tried to steer her away. I told her everything I knew about the situation.” Rockwell said that Wilson listened to her. “But I didn’t get a clear ‘I want nothing more to do with that.’ ”



"Enough practice. I think you're ready for the big bell."
Cartoon by Michael Maslin

Toward the end of 2021, Strickland bought two handguns: a Springfield Armory for himself and a *sig* Sauer for Armstrong. He told investigators that Kaitlin and her sister, Christine, visited a gun range together. In conversations I had with bike people, including those who'd felt good will toward Strickland, the gun purchases are confounding. Partly owing to Strickland's influence, gravel-bike manufacturers and race organizers were overly fond of language about ungoverned men with weapons—for example, the Renegade Rambler, a Texan event, grants "cowboy" status to sponsors providing a certain level of funding—but all that was understood to be just storytelling. Amy Charity, who runs a popular gravel race in Colorado, and who rode in the memorial ride in Emporia, observed, "You don't have an unhinged girlfriend and buy her a gun." She added, "It looks like he made some really poor decisions."

Chris Tolley, defending Strickland, was impatient with what he called "woke" assumptions about gun ownership. "I talked with Colin right when he bought them," he told me. The trailer-renovation business often required Strickland to trade in cash in rural areas: "He was wheeling and dealing in the backcountry with, you know, rednecks and shit." Tolley said that Armstrong's gun was for protection on her camping trips; Strickland has connected the purchase to her involvement in a road-rage incident in Austin.

A few days after Wilson's death, Strickland told police that he would have extracted himself from a relationship with anyone who seemed capable of violence. Strickland praised Armstrong for her kindness and noted that she had "amazing stuff going on." (She had recently become a real-estate agent at Kuper Sotheby's in Austin, and Wheelhouse had just made its first sale: the actor John C. Reilly bought a renovated 1956 Spartan.) Strickland also referred to their relationship almost as something to which he'd acceded. He said that he'd had to see past "stupid things, like, you know, the kind of clothes she wears." In an aside to his lawyer, he said that there were a lot of people he "could've been spending my last three years with."

Most of Strickland's relationship with Armstrong remains hidden from public view. But Tolley, describing her position, said, "You're dating someone for coming up on three years, and you're in your mid-thirties, and

you're at a point where, like, you don't want to get fucked around anymore. Especially when there's something that, you know, feels real." Armstrong, in a conversation with Tolley, once described herself as being too jealous to ever have agreed to be in an open relationship.

The last weekend in January, Strickland and Wilson were both guests, but not competitors, at an international bike event in Arkansas. Strickland was there with Armstrong. At the end of the weekend, Wilson messaged Strickland, in a way that suggests that, up to this point, he had kept open the idea of a relationship that was not purely platonic and professional. "Hey! Sooo . . . This weekend was strange for me and I just want to know what's going on," she wrote. "If you just want to be friends (seems to be the case) then that's cool, but I'd like to talk about it cause honestly my mind has been going circles and I don't know what to think." Strickland's response was apologetic but not clarifying: "Hey Mo—I feel very shitty for putting you in a position where you don't feel comfortable."

He explained that Armstrong had joined him in order to attend a meeting about their trailer business. "In hindsight, this was not a good idea," he wrote.

Strickland told the police that he had changed Wilson's name in his phone contacts, to disguise the fact that he was communicating with her.

On May 7th, Chris Tolley attended the rescheduled Red Bull Rio Grande event. Strickland and Armstrong arrived together. They had just met up again after Strickland had completed a road trip, during which he'd lived out of a Dodge truck that he'd modified himself, adding a platform with a tent on top. He'd seen family; he and Wilson had ridden in a race in Monterey, California, then taken a training ride together in Santa Cruz.

An ad described the Rio Grande event as a "duel among gravel's best." In Tolley's description, the day was a "shit show." Willis, the organizer, is barely more upbeat about it. Registration for the competition's three races—which started together but ended at different distances—fell far short of the limit of five hundred riders. Conditions were brutally hot and hard. Armstrong completed the fifty-mile race; Strickland and Tolley rode the longest race, which was eighty miles. A high proportion of racers didn't

finish, and many who'd committed to camping overnight went looking for a hotel instead. An after-party with d.j.s, hosted by Red Bull, fizzled in the heat. It didn't help, Willis said, that Strickland barely participated: he spent most of his evening a quarter of a mile away, at an alternative tailgate event, jamming on a guitar.

A day and a half later, Strickland and Armstrong met Tolley for breakfast at a deli an hour north of the ranch, where they were joined by a video crew. Tolley had arranged to interview Strickland for a YouTube series, "Riding Fixed, Up Mountains, with Pros," produced by a bike company that sponsors Tolley. The crew began shooting at breakfast, then followed the two men as they rode uphill, talking. At the top, they engaged in a bit of comic business. Tolley told me that he had stowed some "runway clothes" in the crew's vehicle, and had invited Strickland to help him pick out an outfit for "cycling's Met Gala"—the upcoming inauguration of gravel's hall of fame. In Tolley's memory, Strickland said that he'd lost the will to train for competitions: "It was, like, Why the fuck am I still doing this?" Strickland hadn't done well in a big race for a long time. The event that he'd just helped promote, half-heartedly, had attracted few big names; nevertheless, he had come in third. He seemed tired. An interview with Strickland published online the previous week had referred to retirement; it was accompanied by a dozen photographs of Strickland and his trailers, along with an uncaptioned photograph of Armstrong, who's not mentioned in the text. She's sitting in a trailer kitchen, looking uneasy.



Cartoon by Harry Bliss and Steve Martin

Tolley's video with Strickland has not been released, but Tolley showed me a brief clip. Strickland, responding to a question from Tolley about the oddest thing he'd been asked to endorse, recalls being approached by the manufacturer of a masturbatory aid. Tolley and Strickland talk over each other for a moment before Strickland says, in mock affront, "I could have a girlfriend if I wanted!" It was a jokey remark, but Tolley was taken aback. In an exchange that would be seen by tens of thousands, Strickland seemed to be muddling the status of the woman with whom they'd both just been filmed having breakfast.

Strickland and Armstrong returned to Austin that evening, May 9th. Two days later, Strickland picked Moriah Wilson up at her friend's apartment, which was off an alley; they rode across town to the outdoor pool, then had burgers and rum drinks at the restaurant next door. Wilson had just decided to leave her job at Specialized and commit to a professional racing career. She had launched her blog, and planned to sublet her apartment. She was courting sponsors. (Strickland had already introduced her to the Meteor.) Strickland dropped her off at her friend's place just before dusk; at 8:36 p.m., she entered an electronic code to unlock the door. At about the same time, Strickland texted Armstrong: "Hey! Are you out? I went to drop some flowers for Alison at her son's house up north and my phone died. Heading home."

Soon afterward, a security camera recorded a dark S.U.V. with a bike rack at the back—just like the one Armstrong had on her Jeep Cherokee—coming to a stop in the alley. Another camera picked up Strickland’s short ride home. He got to his house at about 8:45 p.m., and Armstrong joined him there about forty-five minutes later. A little before ten, Wilson’s host returned to her apartment and found Wilson on the floor. She had been shot three times.

Wilson’s friend knew that Strickland and Wilson had planned to meet earlier that evening. Strickland spent much of the next day talking to detectives. That morning, thanks to the S.U.V. footage, the police began to take an interest in Armstrong. She was arrested on an outstanding warrant: a few years earlier, she’d allegedly walked out on a bill of several hundred dollars for a Botox treatment, leaving a credit card behind. She was questioned for less than an hour and then released when detectives decided—incorrectly—that the warrant was invalid.

When the police talked to Strickland again, a few days later, he described the strangeness of the hours after those first interviews. He’d returned home, to Armstrong, and that night they’d barely slept. In the morning, they’d gone to get coffee, “in just a daze, in a stupor.” He recalled her saying, “I don’t know what to do. I don’t know what’s going on.” He’d said, “I just can’t believe I — you’re in this—I dragged you into this situation.” The police had seized their phones, and after getting coffee she went to buy a new one. He hadn’t seen her since.

According to the authorities, Armstrong sold her Jeep that day, May 13th. The next day, she flew to New York, with a rolled-up yoga mat on her back. Strickland texted her on her old number to ask her a money question—she’d put a hundred thousand dollars of his in an investment account. He didn’t hear back. On Tuesday, police received a report that noted possibly significant similarities between spent cartridge casings found at the apartment where Wilson died and those produced by a test firing of Armstrong’s *sig* Sauer. An arrest warrant was issued.

Strickland’s statement, a few days later, described the “regret and torture I feel about my proximity to this horrible crime.” He outlined the history of his relationship with Wilson, and added, in language that echoed his usual

tone on social media, that “Moriah and I were both leaders in this lonely, niche sport of Cycling.” Soon afterward, Strickland was dropped by all his sponsors except Red Bull. (That month, a company representative wrote, in a statement, “Colin Strickland has been a friend of Red Bull for more than 4 years.”) Recently, the company declined to answer my questions about Strickland or the Red Bull Rio Grande, saying, “This is a matter for the authorities.”)

Amity Rockwell skipped this year’s Unbound; for a period of time, now ended, she felt detached from the gravel community, which seemed too ready to see the murder as a “random act” quite unconnected to an image-obsessed sport that empowers self-involved men. “They don’t really want to dive into everything *behind* it,” she said. Rockwell had been unnerved by the thought that Wilson, while launching herself as a professional racer, had perhaps felt obliged to keep in touch with Strickland because of his “access to brands and sponsorships and connections.”

Just before Tolley and I met at the Meteor café, in June, he sent me several brief texts, including “Plastic surgery” and “This is a movie.” He was reacting to an announcement, made that morning, that Armstrong had been detained in Costa Rica. Local authorities had found her at Don Jon’s Surf and Yoga Lodge, in Santa Teresa. (According to a [Times travel article](#), the town has “an edge-of-the-world vibe that . . . inspires dreams of relocation.”)

The U.S. Marshals reported that Armstrong had reached Costa Rica six weeks earlier, departing from Newark and using the passport of someone “closely associated with her.” Once there, Armstrong had used various aliases, including Ari Martin. Her hair, formerly long and fair, was now shoulder-length and dark. When she was apprehended, she had a bandage on her nose; she’d told people that she’d been in a surfing accident. A photograph provided by Texan authorities suggested that her nose might now be narrower. A locker at Don Jon’s contained the passport of Armstrong’s sister and a receipt for sixty-three hundred dollars’ worth of cosmetic surgery.

The Austin *American-Statesman* later posted [a video interview](#) with Teal Akerson, an American surf instructor who’d gone on a few dates with “Ari” in Santa Teresa. “She said that she had just been through a real traumatizing

breakup, and she hadn't healed from it yet," he said. "So we were just being friends." He added, "Most of the time she wanted to kind of be at a secluded spot, not a lot of people."

On July 2nd, Armstrong was deported, and flown to Texas. A couple of weeks later, she pleaded not guilty to first-degree murder. Bail was set at three and a half million dollars. (Armstrong, through her lawyer, declined to comment for this article; the judge in the case has instructed those involved, including Strickland, not to speak to the media.)

Tolley last saw Strickland a few days after Wilson's death, when he dropped by Wheelhouse Mobile's lot. Strickland was working on an old engine, and looked despondent.

It hadn't been easy to become famous through a niche sport that was new and unformed—and, perhaps, not quite a real thing. "Colin's been very calculated," Tolley said. "He thinks a lot about strategy, in a life that's very planned out. So this whole event flipped him on his head."

At the time of Tolley's visit, the police account of Wilson's final hours was not yet public. Strickland did not mention the pool or the rum drinks. Rather, he said something about having dropped off a mountain bike at the apartment where Wilson was staying. He seemed detached, Tolley said—zombie-like.

"He's good at reinventing himself," Tolley told me. "The trailers are super cool. They'll sell whether he's famous or not. He can do that, or engine-swap stuff, for these redneck people. They don't know about this shit. He will not make a living in cycling, though. He's not riding a bike anymore." ♦

By Janet Malcolm

By Robert A. Caro

By Patrick Radden Keefe

By Philip Gourevitch

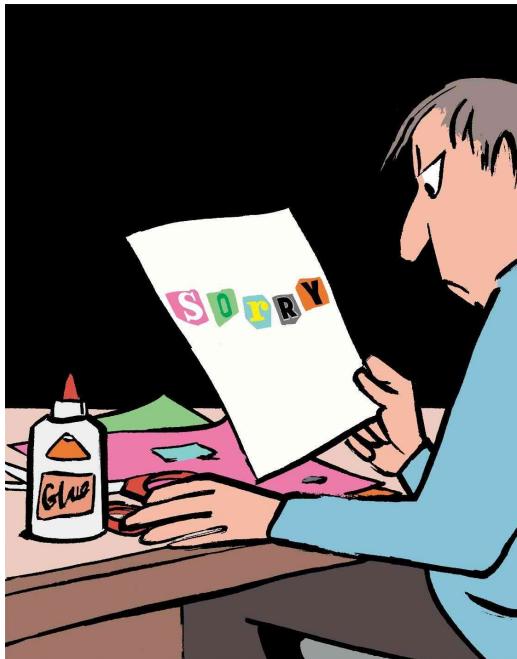
American Chronicles

- [The Case Against the Twitter Apology](#)

The Case Against the Twitter Apology

Our twenty-first-century culture of performed remorse has become a sorry spectacle.

By [Jill Lepore](#)



Whose P.R.-purposed apology was worse? Al Franken's or Louis C.K.'s? The Equifax C.E.O.'s (for a cybersecurity breach) or Papa John's (for a racial slur)? Awkwafina's (for cultural appropriation) or Lena Dunham's (for Lord knows what)? At [SorryWatch.com](#) and @SorryWatch, Susan McCarthy and Marjorie Ingall have been judging the adequacy of apologies and welcoming "suggestions for shaming" since 2012. "There are a lot of awful apologies out there," the SorryWatchers write. "Apologies that make things worse, not better. Apologies that miss the point. Apologies that are really self-defense dressed up as an apology. Apologies that add insult to injury. Apologies that are worse than the original offense. Apologies so bad people should apologize for them." McCarthy and Ingall are releasing a new book next year, "[Sorry, Sorry, Sorry: The Case for Good Apologies](#)." Meanwhile, on their Web site they've got rules—"Six steps to a good apology"—and categories for classifying defective ones: "Be *VEEERY CAAAREFUL* if you want to provide explanation; don't let it shade into excuse." Heaven forfend.

“Least said, soonest mended” is advice from another century, candle and quill, ox and cart. This past March, the day after Will Smith smacked Chris Rock at the Oscars and failed to apologize to him during his acceptance speech, he apologized on his Instagram account: “I was out of line and I was wrong.” Twitter blew its top! “This is bullshit,” one guy tweeted. “Any normal person is in jail.” Plainly, the Instapology was insufficient. In July, Smith apologized again, in a nearly six-minute video in which he looked as harried and trapped as Steve Carell in “The Patient,” a prisoner in a basement rec room. “Disappointing people is my central trauma,” Smith said into the camera or, actually, multiple cameras. “I am trying to be remorseful without being ashamed of myself, right?” Twitter blew its top! It was either not enough or, oh, my God, please stop. One online viewer sympathized: “Literally me when my mom forces me to apologize to my siblings.” As for Chris Rock, he reportedly said, onstage, “Fuck your hostage video.” By then, Twitter was blowing its top about something else.

It’s easy to blow your top, God knows. If you’re being treated like crap, and nothing you’ve tried has put a stop to it, or if the former President of the United States keeps on saying horrible, wretched things, and you notice that some rich nitwit is getting slammed on Twitter for doing the same thing that’s been done to you, or for saying what the ex-President just said, it can feel good to watch that nitwit burn. But that feeling won’t last. And when that nitwit apologizes it won’t be enough. And the world will have become just a little bit rrottener.

Rating apologies and listing their shortcomings started out as a BuzzFeed kind of thing, and then it pretty quickly became a corporate kind of thing: human resources, leadership institutes, political consulting. In 2013, the *Harvard Business Review* published an essay on the Power Apology. Knowing how to apologize on Twitter became crucial to brand management. “It’s easy to say sorry, but knowing how to say it effectively on Twitter is an essential skill that both brands and celebrities should learn,” a communications manager advised not long afterward, offering nine lessons “on the art of the Twitter apology.” You could do it well, or you could do it badly. Likely, this could be quantified: you’d see it in the price of your stock, the number of your Twitter followers, or the percentage change in your Netflix viewership. As of 2022, even *Forbes* rates apologies. It seldom helps

your vote count, though: politicians who apologize tend to suffer the consequences, which is why they generally brazen these things out.

It's a good idea to say you're sorry when you screw up, and to say it well, and to mean it, and to try to make amends. But are people getting worse at that? Or are celebrity publicists, political advisers, corporate lawyers, higher-ed administrators, and media-relations departments just avoiding lawsuits, clearing profits, heading off student protests, and directing news stories by advising people to (a) demand apologies and (b) make them? "Examples of failed apologies are everywhere," the psychiatrist Aaron Lazare wrote in "[On Apology](#)," a book published not last week but nearly two decades ago. Distressed at a seeming explosion of cheap, showy, and insincere apologies, Lazare got curious about where they'd all come from, like the day you find ants swarming your kitchen counter and yank open all the cupboards, exasperated. He dated what he called the "apology phenomenon" to the nineteen-nineties, but he struggled to understand what had driven this change. He suspected that it may have been due, in part, to "the increasing power and influence of women in society," because women apologize a lot, he explained, and like to be apologized to. As far as I know, no one asked him to apologize for that comment. But if he'd made it today he'd be in the soup.

Rituals of atonement and forgiveness lie at the heart of most religions, a testament to the human capacity for grace. On Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, Jews fast and pray and repent. Jesus brought this spirit to Christianity and taught his followers to pray to God to "forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." The early Christian church developed what became the Sacrament of Reconciliation: confession, and penance. There are many steps to atonement in Islam, from admitting a wrong to making restitution and asking for God's forgiveness. Jews, Christians, and Muslims make themselves right with God. Buddhists, who worship no god, make themselves right with other people. Hindus practice *Prayaschitta*, rituals of absolution. Mainly, it's the forgiveness and the atonement that matter.

Apology, though, has a different history. You can confess without apologizing and you can apologize without confessing, and this might be because, historically, an apology is a justification—a defense, not a

confession. As the philosopher Nick Smith pointed out in “[I Was Wrong](#)” (2008), the word “apology,” in English, didn’t suggest a statement of regret until around the sixteenth century, when, in Shakespeare’s “Richard III,” Buckingham begs Richard’s pardon, for interrupting his prayers, and Richard says, “There needs no such apology.” Medieval Christians practiced what the historian Thomas N. Tentler called “a theology of consolation,” consisting of four elements—sorrow, confession, penitence, and absolution—whose purpose was reconciliation with God and with the body of the faithful. In “[Forgiveness: An Alternative Account](#),” Matthew Ichihashi Potts, a professor of Christian morals at Harvard Divinity School, offers what he calls “a modest theological defense of forgiveness.” His argument follows that of the philosopher Martha Nussbaum, who, in “[Anger and Forgiveness](#)” (2016), argued that forgiveness isn’t salutary for either party if, in order to give it, you insist on an apology. Potts calls this “the economy of apology.” It’s not better than vengeance, since to demand an apology and to delight in the offender’s grovelling is vengeance by another name. His evidence doesn’t come from Twitter; it comes mainly from novels, including Marilynne Robinson’s “[Gilead](#)” and Toni Morrison’s “[Beloved](#).” Forgiveness, for Potts, is not an exchange—forgiveness granted in return for the opportunity to witness a spectacle of abasement and self-loathing—but a promise not to retaliate. Demanding an apology in exchange for forgiveness can never constitute healing, or deliver justice; it is, instead, a pleasure taken by people who delight in witnessing the suffering of those in their power (if only briefly). There is no such thing as a failed apology, then, only an abuse of power, because all forgiveness, Potts writes, “begins and ends in failure”: it does not, and cannot, redeem or undo pain and loss; it can only demand the necessary attention to pain and loss, as a reckoning, as an act of grief. Forgiveness is, therefore, a species of mourning, a form of sorrow.

Within the early Christian West, acts of public supplication—begging pardon—required confession and might require restitution, but not the scripted public apology in the sense the SorryWatchers want. The same distinction can be made within the history of Judaism. In the twelfth century, the Spanish-born Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon, known as Maimonides, wrote a commentary on the Torah and the Talmud that included a section on *teshuva*, or “repentance,” an extended reflection on the commandment that “the sinner should repent of his sin before God and confess.” But, as the Jewish historian Henry Abramson remarked in a recent study, “The Ways of

Repentance,” Maimonides warned against public confession that “can also be an expression of personal arrogance: ‘Look how good I am at doing *teshuvah!*’” Watch my apology video on YouTube!

In “[On Repentance and Repair: Making Amends in an Unapologetic World](#),” the rabbi Danya Ruttenberg translates Maimonides into a step-by-step guide for our world, for which she provides modern-day examples. The first step is “naming and owning harm” (one of her examples: “I finally understand how my decision to hold a writer’s retreat at a plantation sanitizes the horrors of slavery”); the second is “starting to change.” Step three: restitution. Step four: apology. Step five: making different choices. These are kindhearted ideas, and Ruttenberg’s book is full of hope and counsel about repair through restitution. But her prescriptions also come close to insisting on the suppression of dissent. She says that “starting to change,” for Maimonides, might have involved “tearful supplication,” but that “these days this process of change might also involve therapy, or rehab, or educating oneself rigorously on an issue about which one had been ignorant or held toxic opinions.”

“This book started on Twitter,” Ruttenberg writes, which is something of a tip-off. “Twitter gamifies communication,” the philosopher C. Thi Nguyen has argued; it’s custom-built to do things like score apologies, to drag users into a rating system that has nothing to do with morality. An unforgiving god rules Twitter, where the modern economy of apology runs something like this: If you express what I believe to be a toxic or ignorant opinion, you must apologize according to my rules for apology. If you do, I may forgive you. If you don’t, I will punish you, and damn you unto eternity.

The practice of establishing and enforcing strict requirements for public apology is not a human universal. It happens only here and there, and now and again. You see it in fiercely sectarian times and places—like twenty-first-century social media, or seventeenth-century New England.

Consider a case from October, 1665, when the Massachusetts legislature assembled in Boston to attend to a docket of ordinary affairs, a day in the life of a puritanical theocracy. It set the price of grain: wheat, five shillings a bushel; barley, four shillings sixpence; corn, three shillings. It addressed a petition filed by three Native men, including the Pennacook sachem

Wanalancet, regarding an Englishman's claim to an island on the Merrimack River. It warned one unhappy, estranged couple, Mr. and Mrs. William Tilley, that he must "provide for hir as his wife, & that shee submit hirselfe to him as she ought," or else he would be fined and she would be imprisoned. In honor of God's having graced the colony with abundant rain during the summer and mercifully diverted a fleet of Dutch ships from an invasion, the legislature appointed November 8th "to be kept in solemn thanksgiving," but, because a plague was still raging in London, a sign of God's wrath, it declared November 22nd "a solem day of humilliation." And it condemned five men who had dared to practice a heretical religion, Baptism, at which announcement one colonist, Zeckaryah Roads, blurted out "that the Court had not to doe wth matters of religion." He was detained as a result.



"Are You Ready To Weeeave?"
Cartoon by Benjamin Schwartz

For the things they said—words whispered, grumbles muttered, prayers offered, curses shouted—dissenters, blasphemers, and nonconformists in seventeenth-century New England faced censure, arrest, flogging, the pillory, disenfranchisement, exile, and even execution. Quakers might have their ears cut off. For holding toxic opinions, one blasphemer was sentenced to have the letter B "cutt out of ridd cloth & sowed to her vper garment on her right arme." Those who wished to avoid or mitigate these consequences

might apologize in public. Mostly, apologies followed a script. The Six Steps to a Good Apology! Disappointing People Is My Central Trauma: How to Avoid the Eight Worst Apologies of 1665! Earlier that year, just months before Zeckaryah Roads dared to voice dissent, Major William Hathorne, of Salem—an ancestor of Nathaniel Hawthorne's—issued a public apology for his own (now lost to history) error: "I freely confesse, that I spake many words rashly, foolishly, & unadvisedly, of wch I am ashamed, & repent me of them, & desire all that tooke offence to forgive me." That did the trick. You went off script at your peril, as the historian Jane Kamensky demonstrated in her masterly book "Governing the Tongue" (1997). In the sixteen-forties, observers deemed Ann Hibbins's apology—essentially, for being abrasive, and a woman—"very Leane, & thin, & poore, & sparinge." It saved her neck, but not for long: in 1656, Hibbins was hanged to death as a witch. Still, there was one other option: after John Farnham refused to apologize for countenancing heresy, and was therefore banished, he said the day he was kicked out of the church "was the best day that ever dawned upon him." I mean, fuck it, there was always Rhode Island.

Lately, online, you can find modern apologies ranked by the same standards once so punctiliously applied by Puritan divines. "I doe now in the presence of god & this reverand assemblage freely acknowledg my evell," Henry Sewall confessed in a church near Ipswich in 1651, although, as he pointed out, he'd been forced to make that apology "as part of ye sentence" he'd been given by the Ipswich court. He squeaked by with that one, but just barely. Modern SorryWatchers might rate it Garrison Keillorian.

In 1665, for intimating that the government ought not to banish people for being Baptists, or kill them for being Quakers, Zeckaryah Roads did what he had to do, as chronicled in the meeting records, "acknowledging his fault, & declaring he was sorry he had given them any offence, &c." Easy to say from here, of course, but I wish to hell he hadn't.

The twenty-first-century culture of public apology has its origins in the best of intentions and the noblest of actions: people seeking collective justice without violence for terrible, unimaginable acts of brutality, monstrous wickedness, crimes against humanity itself. In the aftermath of the Second World War, churches and nation-states began issuing apologies for wartime atrocities and historical injustices. Some of the abiding principles that lie

behind this postwar wave of collective apologies also found expression in “restorative justice”—individuals making amends to their victims, sometimes as an alternative to incarceration or other kinds of force and violence. The idea gained influence in the nineteen-seventies, when it intersected with the victims-rights movement, and its particular demands for apology as remedy. And you can easily see why. Prosecutors—for years, decades, centuries—had failed to act on allegations of sexual misconduct, had ignored or suppressed evidence of police brutality and predatory policing; in a thousand ways, the criminal-justice system had failed women and children, had failed the poor and people of color. For some, “restorative justice” held out the prospect of a better path. By the nineteen-nineties, schools and juvenile-justice systems had begun using restorative-justice methods, often requiring, of public-school students, public apologies. Meanwhile, in the United States, church membership was falling from around seventy-five per cent in 1945 to less than fifty per cent by 2020. In many quarters, public acts began taking the place of religious ritual, political ideologies replacing religious faith. The national public apology took on the gravity and solemnity of a secular sacrament: Ronald Reagan apologizing, in 1988, for the imprisonment of more than a hundred thousand Japanese Americans during the Second World War (and providing limited reparations); David Cameron apologizing, in 2010, for Bloody Sunday; or the Prime Ministers of Canada apologizing, in 2008 and 2017, for the practice of taking Indigenous children from their homes and confining them to schools where, maltreated, neglected, and abused, they suffered and died.

Apology came to play a role, too, in therapy, including family therapy, in twelve-step recovery programs, and in H.R. dispute-resolution procedures. Conventions that were established for heads of states and churches making public apologies to entire peoples against whom they had committed atrocities came to be applied to apologies from one individual to another, for everything from violent crime to petty insult. The person became the collective. Eve Ensler’s 2019 book, “[The Apology](#),” in which she imagines the apology her father never offered for sexually abusing her, is dedicated to “every woman still waiting for an apology.” The particular injury became the universal harm. “We all cause harm,” Danya Ruttenberg writes in her book on repentance. “We have all been harmed.”

But the origins of the Twitter apology orgy lie elsewhere, too, and especially in the idea that many kinds of speech can be harm, a conviction central to the brand of feminism founded in the nineteen-nineties by the legal theorist Catharine MacKinnon. (Her book “[Only Words](#)” was published in 1993.) In 2004, in “On Apology,” Aaron Lazare tried to figure out when the number of public apologies began to explode. He counted and identified a rise in the number of newspaper articles about apologizing, beginning his analysis in the early nineteen-nineties and identifying a peak in 1997-98. He found this puzzling. But, historically, it makes sense: his chronology nicely lines up with Anita Hill’s testimony at the Clarence Thomas hearings, in 1991, and with the breaking of the Monica Lewinsky scandal, in 1998. Thomas maintained his innocence, and although Clinton went on television later that year and admitted to the relationship, many viewers found his apology inadequate. And neither man seemed sorry, either, except insofar as they both quite plainly felt very, very sorry for themselves.

The refusal of Thomas and Clinton to apologize for the ways in which they had harmed women took place on television. And the whole spectacle, with its scripted expectation of apology and contrition, drew its sensibility from television. In the nineteen-eighties and nineties, the stock soap-opera plotline—betrayal, hurt feelings, and misunderstanding followed by tearful apology, reconciliation, and reunion—became a hallmark of the daytime talk-show circuit. Oprah and Phil Donahue staged churchy apologies in front of studio audiences, choreographed for maximum emotional intensity, and advancing the idea that every possible political, economic, or social injustice, from child abuse to police brutality and employment discrimination, could be addressed by a two-shot, a few closeups, and Kleenex. Donahue mounted an especially perverse sorrywatching spectacle in 1993. The year before, after a jury acquitted four Los Angeles policemen who beat Rodney King and riots broke out in angry, anguished protest, a group of Black men pulled Reginald O. Denny, a white man, out of his truck and beat him nearly to death. Henry Keith Watson, charged with attempted murder, was found not guilty, and was convicted only of misdemeanor assault. After Watson got out of jail, Donahue brought Denny and Watson together in front of an almost entirely white audience for a two-part apology special. “Are you sorry?” Donahue asked Watson, again and again, as the audience grew tense and even tenser. “I apologize for my participation in the

injuries you suffered,” Watson said to Denny. Then Watson eyed the audience: “Is everybody happy now?” Everybody was not.

Demanding public apologies on daytime television and deeming those apologies insufficient was an occasional thumb-wrestling match between two seven-year-olds sitting on a green vinyl school-bus seat on the ride to second grade compared with the daily, Roman Colosseum-style slaughtering that takes place online. It’s not that people don’t do and say terrible things for which they ought to atone. They do. Some of those things are crimes. Many are slights. Very many are utterly trivial. A few are almost unspeakably evil. But, on Twitter at its worst, all harm is equal, all apologies are spectacles, and hardly anyone is ever forgiven.

In 2017, at the height of the #MeToo movement, Matt Damon tried to rate harm. “You know, there’s a difference between, you know, patting someone on the butt and rape or child molestation, right?” he said in an interview on ABC News. “They shouldn’t be conflated, right?” At that, Minnie Driver tweeted her ire, and later told the *Guardian*, “How about: it’s all fucking wrong and it’s all bad, and until you start seeing it under one umbrella it’s not your job to compartmentalise or judge what is worse and what is not.” Damon apologized, and said that he’d learned to “close my mouth.”

In 1993, Phil Donahue seemed to think that, by asking Henry Keith Watson to apologize to Reginald Denny in that studio, he was bravely addressing the problem of racism in America. Twenty years from now, what’s been happening on Twitter will likely look exactly as grotesque and cruel and ineffective as that two-part, syndicated apology special. Will Donald Trump or anyone in his inner circle ever apologize for anything—for tearing toddlers from their parents’ arms, for inciting neo-Nazis, for graft, fraud, sedition? Never. Will responding to the gaffe of the day by demanding a six-step apology usher in an age of justice for all, or an end to iniquity? No. There’s a reason Puritanism did not prevail in America; it tends to backfire. In 2018, during an exchange on Twitter, the television writer Dan Harmon apologized for sexually harassing the writer Megan Ganz, and then made a heartfelt video, elaborating. “We’re living in a good time right now, because we’re not going to get away with it anymore,” he said, referring to sexual misconduct. And I hope that’s true. But very little evidence suggests that calling people out on Twitter, self-righteous indignation followed by cynical

apology, is making the world a better place, and much suggests that the opposite is true, that Twitter's pious mercilessness is generating nothing so much as a new and bitter remorselessness.

"I don't give a fuck, 'cause Twitter's not a real place," Dave Chappelle said last fall, in his Netflix special "The Closer." In June, on the Amazon Prime series "The Boys," a made-for-television Captain America-style superhero named Homelander, who is secretly a villain, recited a rehearsed apology on television, only to unsay it later, in an unscripted outburst. "I'm not some weak-kneed fucking crybaby that goes around fucking apologizing all the time," he said, seething. "I'm done. I am done apologizing." Around the time the episode appeared, the actor who plays Homelander, Antony Starr, who was found guilty of assault and released on probation, told the *Times*, unabjectly, "You mess up. You own it. You learn from it." No "I am listening," no "I am going to rehab." None of it. It was as if he got away with going off-script because his character already had. And Homelander won't be the last to make that "I'm done" speech. "I'm done saying I'm sorry," Alex Jones yelled in a courtroom in September during a trial to assess the money he'll be required to pay the parents of very young children who were killed in a mass shooting, a shooting that Jones has for years insisted never happened, because those children, he told his audience, never existed. Jones has been found liable for defamation. Even the hundreds of millions of dollars in damages he was ordered to pay to the families whose despair he worsened, and on whose affliction he feasted, goes nowhere near far enough. And neither does any apology.

Twitter is blowing its top, some very angry people very loudly demanding apologies while other very angry people demand the denunciation of the people who are demanding apologies. Dangerously, but predictably, the split seems to have become partisan, as if to apologize were progressive, to forget conservative. The fracture widens and hardens—fanatic, schismatic, idiotic. But another way of thinking about what a culture of forced, performed remorse has wrought is not, or not only, that it has elevated wrath and loathing but that it has demeaned sorrow, grief, and consolation. No apology can cover that crime, nor mend that loss. ♦

By Kyle Chayka

By John Cassidy

By Kyle Chayka

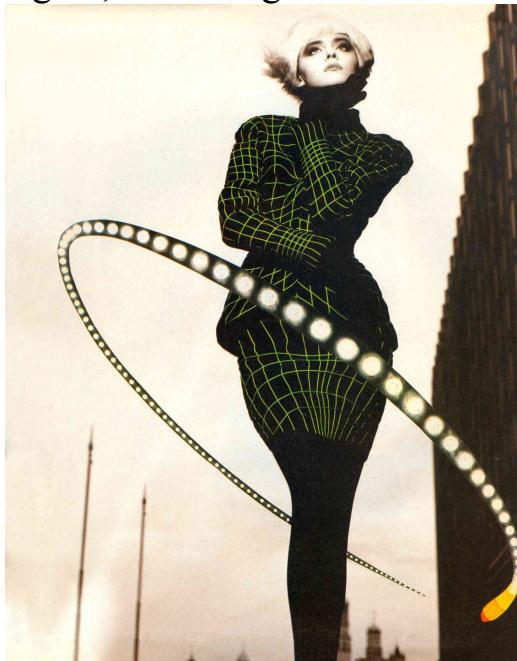
By John Cassidy

Art

- [Thierry Mugler's Provocative Œuvre](#)
- [Winter Art Preview](#)

Thierry Mugler's Provocative Œuvre

The Brooklyn Museum celebrates the career of the avant-garde French designer, exhibiting some hundred and thirty outfits.



“Thierry Mugler: Couturissime,” opening at the Brooklyn Museum on Nov. 18, celebrates the career of the provocative French designer, who counted Grace Jones, Tippi Hedren, Lysinka, Ivana Trump, and Cardi B among his muses. (Mugler died in January, at the age of seventy-three.) Some hundred and thirty outfits are accompanied by accessories, sketches, a hologram, photos—including this shot of an embroidered velvet suit from the Fall/Winter 1990-91 collection, “Music-Hall”—and a room devoted to fragrance.

By Lauren Collins

By The New Yorker

By Evan Osnos

By Patricia Marx

By [Andrea K. Scott](#)

The Chicago-based phenom Nick Cave is best known for his “Soundsuits,” elaborate wearable assemblages that dazzle whether they’re presented as sculptures or seen in motion during performances. As jubilant as these intricate costume-objects are, they also suggest protective gear for vulnerable bodies. For Cave, fashion design and art are united by activism: he made the first “Soundsuit” in 1991, in response to the beating of Rodney King by the L.A.P.D. The Guggenheim shows a selection of the artist’s polyphonic sculptures, videos, and installations in the retrospective **“Nick Cave: Forothermore.”** (Opens Nov. 18.)

According to Mayan mythology, the world was created in 3114 B.C. and overseen by a vast pantheon of deities, from jaguar protectors of the night to the eternally young god of maize, worshipped in lands known today as Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico. The Met’s blockbuster **“Lives of the Gods: Divinity in Maya Art”** features a hundred treasures—in limestone, ceramic, jadeite, obsidian—dating from 250 to 900 A.D. (Opens Nov. 21.)

In the exhibition **“no existe un mundo poshuracán: Puerto Rican Art in the Wake of Hurricane Maria,”** the Whitney gathers fifty works made since 2017 by some twenty contemporary artists. The show is the first at a major U.S. museum to take a serious look at the Caribbean island and its diaspora in almost five decades, and it’s more timely than ever: in September, on the eve of the fifth anniversary of Hurricane Maria, Hurricane Fiona hit Puerto Rico, depriving millions of power. (Opens Nov. 23.)

In 1979, *moma* acquired its first photograph by a Black woman, **Ming Smith**, then in her late twenties. Smith arrived in New York City after attending Howard University and supported her art—she was the first female member of the legendary Kamoinge photo collective, in Harlem—by working as a fashion model. Whether portraits (of Alvin Ailey, Sun Ra, Nina Simone) or series rooted in literary sources (Ralph Ellison’s novel “Invisible Man,” the plays of August Wilson), her pictures are rhythmic tone poems of light and shadow. **“Ming Smith: Projects,”** at *moma*, is presented in partnership with the Studio Museum in Harlem. (Opens Feb. 4.)

The American Museum of Natural History cuts the ribbon on its new **Gilder Center for Science, Education, and Innovation**, designed by the

architecture firm Studio Gang. The two-hundred-and-thirty-thousand-square-foot building is constructed from glass, steel, pink granite, and, most dramatically, a castable material called shotcrete, which lends the soaring four-story-high atrium the undulating curves of a canyon (and a hint of Antoni Gaudí). Four million scientific specimens will be on view, alongside an insectarium, a butterfly vivarium, and a sense-surrounding digital diorama, “Invisible Worlds.” (Opens Feb. 17.)

The category-defying genius of the influential American artist, performer, and poet **Senga Nengudi**—whose body-aware abstract sculptures, made of stretched nylon weighted down by sand, convey both stress and resilience—is the subject of a long-term (and long overdue) exhibition at Dia Beacon, in Hudson, New York. (Opens Feb. 17.) ♦

By The New Yorker

By Rebecca Mead

By Lauren Collins

By Evan Osnos

Books

- [What the Suzuki Method Really Taught](#)
- [Briefly Noted](#)
- [Do We Have the History of Native Americans Backward?](#)
- [Should Ovid's Metamorphoses Have a Trigger Warning?](#)

By [Adam Gopnik](#)

It is a scene by now observed by countless parents and many nonparents, from Tokyo to Paris and beyond. In a classroom or on a stage, a platoon, or sometimes a small army, of very young children are sawing away in unison at Vivaldi's Concerto in A Minor, with maximum aplomb and some surprising musical skill. "Little geniuses!" the observers mutter, either admiringly or—universally, among the nonparents—sarcastically. The Suzuki method of musical training has had another outing, and with it the passionate belief that little children can be activated as artists—alongside the companion quarrel about whether they are modelling or merely mimicking mature music-making. Are they musicians in a meaningful sense or just the human equivalent of those trained seals who used to play horns in the circus? Though the Suzuki method was originally specific to the violin and to classical music, it raises a larger question: Is the kind of mastery we associate with historic "prodigies" actually available to every child, with the right encouragement?

In "[Suzuki: The Man and His Dream to Teach the Children of the World](#)" (Harvard), the Tokyo-born historian Eri Hotta takes on the life story of the man who made the mini-masters. But, as often happens with books pointing to big questions, the most interesting stuff points back at smaller or, anyway, more particular ones. The Suzuki story turns out to be a fascinating study in the hybrid nature of human culture, tracing a remarkable cross-century triple play—European music to Japanese discipline, ending with a putout at a first base manned by mad American parental ambition.

Shinichi Suzuki was born in 1898 in the Japanese city of Nagoya, a landscape featured in the exquisite Hiroshige print series "The Fifty-three Stations of the Tōkaidō." Western classical music was not only part of the culture he grew up with but part of the business he grew up within. His father was among the first expert violin-makers in Japan. Because violins were too rare and too expensive to disassemble, he studied and traced one cautiously from the outside, and, through sometimes comic trial and error, figured out how the damn thing made its sound. Then he began to produce violins on something approaching a mass scale. The gift for imitation first and innovation second, which we think of as a postwar practice in Japan, was deeply rooted in the nation's modernity. (The elder Suzuki struck an

informal deal with his friend Torakusu Yamaha, who had made a similar advance with Japanese pianos—he would stay out of the keyboard business if Yamaha kept away from the violins. The arrangement lasted until the year 2000.)

The Best Books of 2022

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



Although the Suzuki fortune rested on Western strings, the Suzukis weren't, strictly speaking, a musical family. The father didn't really play the violins he made. Young Suzuki's true epiphany arrived only at the age of seventeen, when he brought home, for the family phonograph, a recording of Schubert's "Ave Maria" by the violinist Mischa Elman. Suzuki recalled that the melody conveyed a "soul-shaking sweetness." Elman was a wetly romantic violinist (playing with a wide, emotive vibrato and gliding between notes), and the performance set off in Suzuki an almost mystical reverence for the Schubertian "sentimental" vein.

Apparently, the emotional content of Western concert or "classical" music—its ability to summon up feelings that literally surpass words, and give us that uniquely musical experience of being overwhelmed—could be as immediately manifest to non-Westerners as it was to those raised in the

tradition. The Japanese appetite for the emotional intensity of much so-called classical music coincided with a Western appetite for Eastern art, the *japonisme* that, through the prints of Hiroshige in particular, swept European painting in the second half of the nineteenth century, wresting it from a blind faith in Renaissance one-point perspective. Van Gogh and Manet, Whistler and Degas—they were as much enthralled by Japanese art as Suzuki's generation was by European music. And, generally speaking, both sides “got it” just about as well, in each case mastering and repurposing the beautiful surface of the form without necessarily grasping all the local purposes beneath. Suzuki knew Bach but not, it seems, his religious points or passions, in the same way that Whistler knew Hiroshige but not *his* religious points or passions.

Dissatisfied with Japanese music instruction, which seemed unable to teach the kind of swooning tone he loved in Elman and his contemporaries, Suzuki persuaded his father to send him off to Berlin, where he spent most of the nineteen-twenties. Although it is pious to say that Suzuki's later humanist-internationalist impulses were related to his experience of the rise of Fascism in Germany and Japan alike, the truth seems to be that his years in the Weimar Republic, spent among the thriving concert culture, were almost blissfully happy. (He did feel guilty about buying a Guarneri violin at a cut-rate price, produced by the very weak mark.) Suzuki fell in love with and married a German musician named Waltraud Prange, a liaison that struck many as strange—each spoke the other's language imperfectly—but that endured to the end of his life. (At some point, he also became friendly with Einstein, who was known as an enthusiastic amateur violinist.)

Suzuki's return to Japan, in 1929, occurred amid the country's long run-up to war, which seems to have been less internally noxious than Germany's; not being racially coded against an internal group, it allowed you to keep your head if you kept it down. As Hotta shows, the eventual militarist takeover was not the result of some inexorable wave of Japanese authoritarianism set off by a reaction to Western imperialism. Nor was it a one-way vector within Japanese ideology. When Suzuki returned from Berlin, Japan was a plausibly liberal democracy, with a popular center-left Prime Minister, Osachi Hamaguchi. Japan's democracy did not wither away; it was killed. Hamaguchi was assassinated by a right-wing nationalist, as part of a campaign of terror against the liberal democrats which ultimately took the

lives of five Prime Ministers. The worldwide depression didn't help, of course, and Japanese nationalism was a deep-seated force, rooted in the death of the old samurai class and spurred by the victories of empire, but just as important was the universal inability of decent people to respond to violence when subjected to it.

It was in the midst of all this political pain that Suzuki made his first tentative approaches to teaching music to very young children. He mentored two soon-famous violin prodigies (a boy and a girl) and became convinced that the kind of singing string tone he had fallen in love with as a teen-ager was not, as the Europeans still insisted, an inborn gift of the great players or, for that matter, a peculiar cultural inheritance of the German tradition. Rather, it was a specific, learnable skill. Great violinists had learned to optimize the friction between the bow and the string, Suzuki insisted; the magic of music could be analyzed just as magic tricks are. As his father had equalled Western violins through patient trial and error, so the son would teach Heifetz's tone to a generation of Japanese players simply by breaking it down into teachable parts.

There was a built-in ambiguity in Suzuki's approach, which persists to this day. On the one hand, he didn't think that musical prodigies were a special class of children, with some special innate gift. On the other hand, he believed that kids learned music not by drill and repetition but by exposure and instinct. All you had to do to activate the music instinct was expose them early to the right input. This ambiguity proved fruitful as a public-relations tool—he could point to this or that wunderkind who had been trained by his method as proof that it worked. But he could also insist, in the face of all the kids who would never play at the concert-hall level, that the point was not to make wunderkinder but to make kids wonder, to allow the power of music to expand their emotional repertory. No bad result was possible.

When the war came, the liberals made themselves invisible, and the Suzuki violin factories were turned over to military production, with orders to manufacture seaplane floats instead of fiddles. Yet by then Western music had become so much a part of the Japanese fabric that, for all the cultural chauvinism of the ultranationalists who had taken over the government, Japanese war movies were still accompanied by European-style orchestral

scores, written by Japanese composers in a bombastic Wagnerian manner—the equivalent of Richard Rodgers’s “Victory at Sea” compositions, which Richard Nixon delighted in. (Hotta points out that the special effects of at least one of the big Japanese war movies were created by the master who did the special effects for “Godzilla.”)

It was only after the war, however, that Suzuki and his method became part of an extraordinary pas de deux of hostility and servility. In the nineteen-forties, Japan was the recipient of the most horrific bombardment one country had ever received from another. Yet surprisingly little hate endured, on either side. Within ten short years, Japan was a U.S. ally and sometimes a joke—“Made in Japan,” as no one can any longer recall, meant “made shoddily”—and soon after that it became a model of spiritual resources, with California Zendos (and Salinger’s stories) filling with aspirants to Japanese culture. Then, in the nineteen-seventies and eighties, Japan became a global commercial power. We think of Hollywood moguls embarking on piratelike looting expeditions, persuading the owners of earnest electronics firms to invest in American entertainment swindles, but they also paid homage to a culture, economic and spiritual, that had come to be seen as superior to our own in its mutuality and long-termism. No other relationship between two nations can have had so many different faces, or masks, in so short a period.

After the war, Suzuki grew ever more convinced that children could learn music the way that children learn language, becoming fluent with maximal exposure and minimal overt instruction—an idea that vibrated with American dreams of instant, just-add-water accomplishment. “When adults guide their infant children toward language fluency, they bring to the task not just knowledge but also a spirit of love, patience, and self-reflection,” Hotta writes. “If that same spirit were brought to all education, Suzuki thought, then every child would know the delight of learning throughout their formative years and beyond.”

This dream of the ready-made musical child is to pedagogy what the perpetual-motion machine is to physics: always wished for, endlessly proposed, and never demonstrated. What was new in the Suzuki method was the insistence that musical children could be nurtured en masse, and the belief that doing so was the key to a broader revolution in human understanding. If children all over the globe were sawing away at Vivaldi,

they would not make war with each other when they grew up. This belief is not obviously supported by history, murderous rivalry among musicians being rather the rule, but it spoke to an understandable pacifism and wishful universalism that had swept Japan.

The mature phase of the Suzuki method, which has remained largely unchanged in the countless Suzuki studios around the world, was inspired by the “mother tongue” model. Kids start to speak by listening to grownups talking, and, in the same way, they should be exposed to a lot of music at home as, or even before, they begin to play. They learn language, usually, in the presence of siblings or other children, and this family situation should be reproduced in their training, instead of being replaced by schoolroom discipline. They learn language (or so Suzuki thought) through repetition of words and phrases, and so they should be encouraged to repeat the same musical phrases. The kids play the Gossec gavotte over and over and over.

Above all, kids learn language early, and so they should be taught their instruments early—at two or three or four, not later. The program has many other curlicues: the kids are handed substitute cardboard violins before they play the real thing, on the theory that getting the wrist action right and gaining a sense of the attack is more foundational to music-making than producing sounds is. And there is often a far more “Japanese” ethic to it than its Japanese inventor may quite have realized, involving elaborate bowing—the kind you do from the waist, not from the wrist—before and after class.

Most linguists and psychologists these days are inclined to think that the direct connection Suzuki saw between learning language and learning music is not much more than an appealing metaphor. We are all Mozarts in our native languages—fluent, endlessly inventive, able to produce new sentences effortlessly and without conscious premeditation—but, Mozart aside, even the most dedicated of music students progress in fits and starts. Kids don’t learn to talk by being assembled in groups, and they certainly don’t learn language by repeating the same phrases over and over. Still, it’s a mainstream view in cognitive psychology that music and language share certain mental processes. Some psychologists even believe that music effectively piggybacks on the same mental capacities that enable us to learn language—musical pitch, for instance, may evolve in parallel with the varying tones we employ when we talk. The argument is not that we learn

music in the same way that we learn language; it's that we can learn music *because* we can learn language, "exapting" the software for a different purpose. Indeed, a humanist might argue that music is not an epiphenomenon of language but a better phenomenon, not a free rider on our capacity for language but, as Walter Pater maintained, the higher state all words aspire to.

Yet it's hard to quarrel with Suzuki's practical idea that small children are surprisingly capable of learning difficult things if they're motivated by their own curiosity and someone else's enthusiasm. Kids, unimpeded by too much interference, will learn through constant exposure, getting good at an instrument the way they get good at Minecraft. Not a few parents know the moment when a kid, bored by piano lessons and having to be coaxed into practicing at all, suddenly gets turned on by music—whether by wanting to play a Strokes song or "Für Elise"—and then the hours fly by on the keyboard and the sounds come pouring out, astonishing no one more than the child. Wanting to do something and doing it seem like consecutive bases touched on the same trip home. Suzuki's real purpose was to make the wanting-to stronger in order to get to the doing-it sooner.

It took some years before Suzuki's method passed from a Japanese curiosity into the American mainstream. When, in the late nineteen-fifties, Westerners began seeing footage of those massed tiny violinists, it seemed proof both of Japanese self-discipline—a Cold War desideratum—and of potential worldwide harmony through kids and music, an ideal not very different from the one expressed by the Disney "Small World" pavilion at the 1964-65 New York World's Fair, with its crowd of miniature animatronic singers from around the globe.

Something significant happened to the idea of the musical prodigy, derived in no small part from Suzuki's example. In 1998, the year of Suzuki's death, at the age of ninety-nine, a teen-age Hilary Hahn—one of innumerable violinists exposed to the mother-tongue method—was taking the stage at the Kennedy Center, while a recording made by another Suzuki-abetted performer, Joshua Bell, received a Gramophone Award. We no longer treat such performers as freaks of nature but as examples of what kids are capable of, given the right encouragement and environment. That is largely Suzuki's

doing. Even today, Hotta reports, some four hundred thousand students are learning to play in the Suzuki way.

Still, she regrets that the broader transformative ambition of the method got lost in the spectacle of what [Charles Dickens](#) termed “the infant phenomenon,” and she regrets especially that “Suzuki’s social mission largely disappeared from American applications of his ideas,” leaving the method reduced to a system of music instruction, and missing its real point, which is about human potential. In this way, the Suzuki method appears to be one of those contrarian systems that litter the history of twentieth-century education, in which a school isn’t always consistent with its founder’s purpose—as with the Steiner method of teaching concepts through movement and shape (I *think* that’s it; even Steiner students seem unsure) or the [Montessori method](#) of teaching through experience. The true lesson, in all these cases, is that the dedication of the teachers matters more than the virtues of the program. (You could say the same about Jesuit education, and many Catholics do.)

Just as Steiner and Montessori schools persist, with the tenets of their theories dialled down in volume until they resemble the secularized prayers in a Unitarian nursery school, so the Suzuki method persists as a system with the utopian values scarcely audible. At the same time, there was always a tension within Suzuki’s method. On the one hand, it celebrated spontaneous effusions of sensibility; on the other, it rigorously enforced discipline. One finds the same tension in the American cult of Zen. There was the wild charm of the koans and tales, which were celebrated for their gaiety and refusal of normal hierarchies, but there was also the lifetime of discipline—including regular beatings from the boss—that gave point to the parables. Many American meditation students, arriving at the Zendo, seemed surprised by how much hard labor it took to get enlightened.

What matters most is not making music but finding meaning in music. A crucial clue to Suzuki’s story here is seeded by his biographer, even if it is easy to miss. Hotta tells us that Suzuki credited his eureka moment, listening to the Elman recording of Schubert, to his having been exposed, not long before, to Tolstoy’s diaries. One form of emotional growth activated another. The range with which we extend our experience of music horizontally may help explain its extraordinary vertical depth. The more connections we make

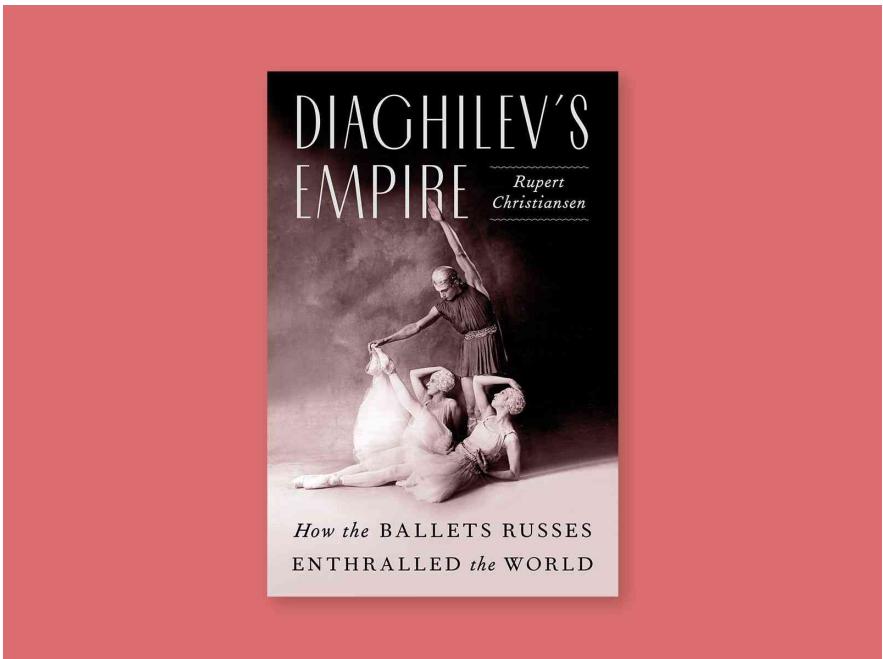
to music, the more significance music has. What we do know is that early exposure to art and music gives kids a longer familiarity with art and music. The sooner you start, the more you sense. It's a self-evident truth, but self-evident truths can be, for children and countries alike, essential to independence. The parents and nonparents may worry loudly about what the kids sawing away up on the platform are doing and where it will get them, but the kids don't hear them. They're making music. ♦

By Keith Gessen

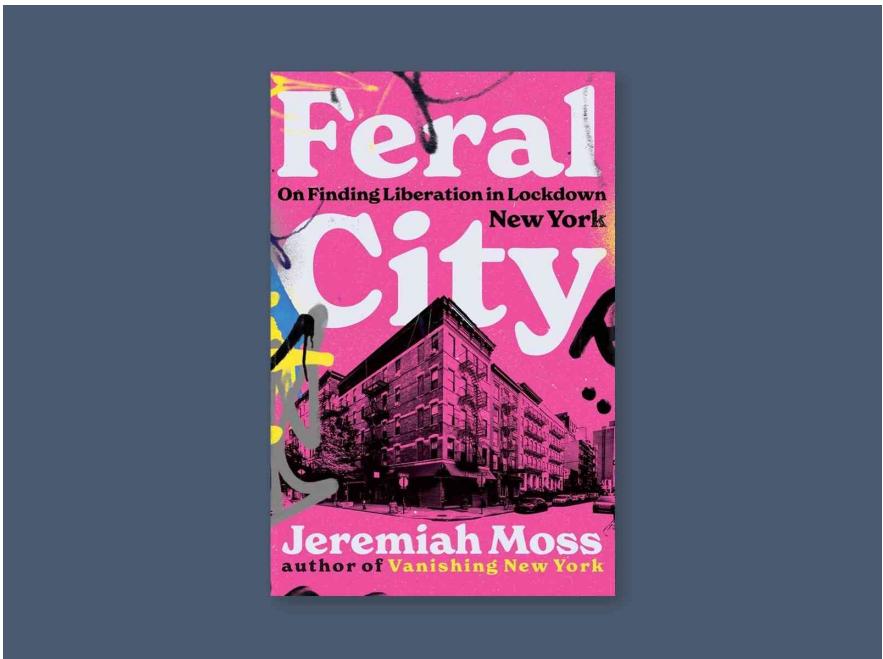
By David Remnick

By Rebecca Mead

By Joshua Rothman



[**Diaghilev's Empire**](#), by Rupert Christiansen (Farrar, Straus & Giroux). In the early twentieth century, Sergei Diaghilev's Ballets Russes revitalized ballet, and the company remained at the forefront of the international avant-garde for decades. In this rich account, Christiansen, a critic and a self-described “incurable balletomane,” narrates its rise and fall under Diaghilev, a charismatic impresario whose creative orbit encompassed not only dancers, choreographers, and composers—among them Nijinsky, Balanchine, and Stravinsky—but also painters and writers, including Picasso and Cocteau. The professional achievements of these artists are evoked vividly, as are the personalities, romances, and rivalries whose tempestuous ebbs and flows shaped their work. Though little of the Ballets Russes repertoire survives today, Christiansen makes a convincing case for its indelible influence.

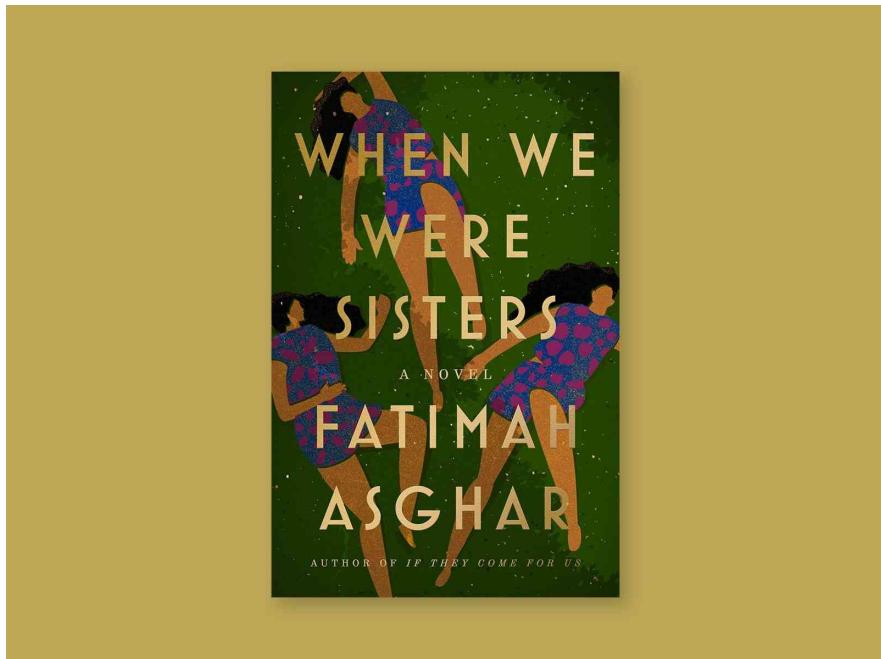


[**Feral City**](#), by *Jeremiah Moss* (Norton). This diary of the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic in New York City is ruminative, provocative, and moving. Moss, a transsexual man who calls himself a “queer refugee,” moved to the East Village in the early nineteen-nineties. A psychoanalyst and an anti-gentrification activist, he rails against the moneyed residents who have flocked to the city in recent years. His account centers on the “wild possibilities”—such as the Black Lives Matter demonstrations that took place in the wake of the killing of George Floyd—that emerged when the pandemic drove away those newcomers. Moss laments New York’s return to normalcy with the delivery of vaccines: “It’s the city being put back to sleep.”

[**The Best Books of 2022**](#)

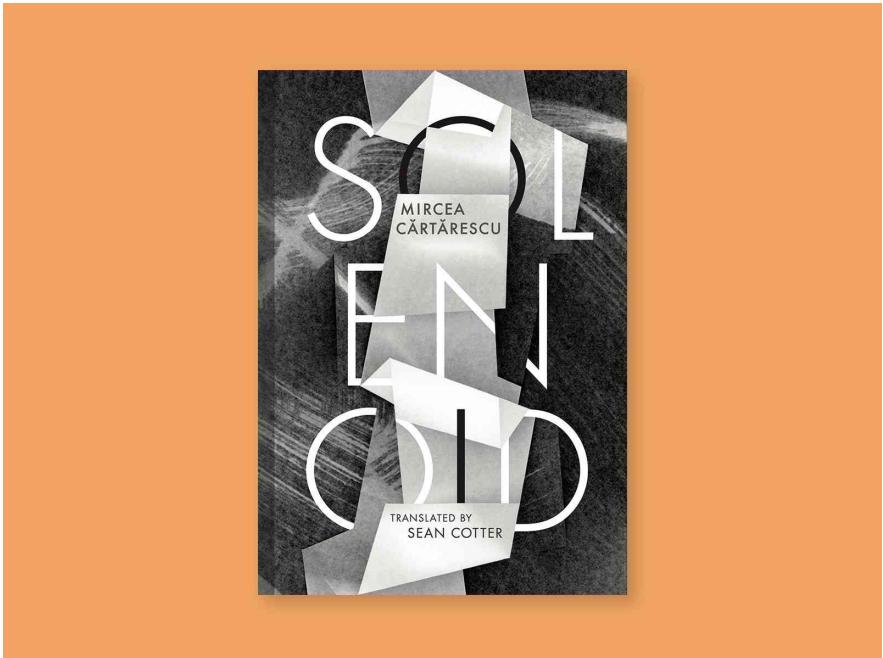


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[When We Were Sisters](#), by *Fatimah Asghar* (*One World*). A young Muslim American woman named Kausar narrates this hard-bitten but glimmering début novel, which chronicles her negotiation of the thorny path from

childhood to adulthood. The story begins in Philadelphia, with the murder of Kausar's widowed father, after which she and her sisters are relocated to New Jersey to live with an uncle who meets their practical needs, and nothing more. Asghar parses the confusion and hysteria surrounding female sexuality—especially calamitous for Kausar, whose body is “pretending to be a girl, even though I’m not.” The narrative is most affecting when Kausar turns to her faith, as when she prays, “Allah, forgive me for being janky.”



Solenoid, by Mircea Cărtărescu, translated from the Romanian by Sean Cotter (Deep Vellum). This book, by one of Romania’s leading avant-garde writers, presents itself as the diary of an unnamed failed poet who has become a schoolteacher. He relates memories of his sickly childhood and of his walks around Bucharest (“a museum of melancholy and the ruin of all things”), where, in front of a morgue, he encounters so-called anti-death protesters holding signs that read “NO to Being Buried Alive!” The novel’s title refers to a mysterious object on top of which his home is built, which causes levitation and rearranges rooms. As in the work of Kafka, whose diaries the narrator adores, the book’s horror and humor are born from examining “the tragic anomaly of the spirit dressed in flesh.”

By Ed Caesar

By Craig Thomas

By Nell Stevens

By Roz Chast

Do We Have the History of Native Americans Backward?

They dominated far longer than they were dominated, and, a new book contends, shaped the United States in profound ways.

By [David Treuer](#)



I remember when I first encountered what must be the best-selling book of Native American history ever published, "[Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee](#)," by Dee Brown. I was twenty years old, and had made my way from the Leech Lake Reservation, in northern Minnesota, where I grew up, to Princeton, in a part of New Jersey that seemed to have no Indians at all. Since "Bury My Heart" appeared, in 1970, it has been translated into seventeen languages, and sold millions of copies. In the opening pages, Brown wrote, "The greatest concentration of recorded experience and observation came out of the thirty-year span between 1860 and 1890—the period covered by this book. It was an incredible era of violence, greed, audacity, sentimentality, undirected exuberance, and an almost reverential attitude toward the ideal of personal freedom for those who already had it. During that time the culture and civilization of the American Indian was destroyed."

I read this on the hundredth anniversary of the 1890 massacre at Wounded Knee Creek, in South Dakota. It was the last major armed conflict between an Indian tribe and the U.S. government, and more than two hundred and fifty Lakota men, women, and children were murdered there. Far from my Ojibwe homeland—marooned, I sometimes felt, on the distant shore of a self-satisfied republic—I readily accepted the version of history promoted by Brown’s book: that Native American history was a litany of abuses (disease, slavery, warfare, dispossession, forced removal, the near-extinction of the American bison, land grabs, forced assimilation) that had erased our way of life. And yet my culture and civilization didn’t *feel* gone. When I looked westward and back in time, I couldn’t help think that Brown’s historical record was incomplete—that the announcement of our collective death was rather premature.

Pekka Hämäläinen’s “[Indigenous Continent](#)” (Liveright) boldly sets out a counternarrative. In its opening pages, Hämäläinen—a Helsinki-born scholar at Oxford who specializes in early and Indigenous American history—maintains that the America we know was, in its borders, shape, and culture, far from inevitable. Even after the so-called colonial era, tribal nations often played a determining role in American history. In his view, we should speak not of “colonial America” but of “an *Indigenous* America that was only slowly and unevenly becoming colonial,” and recognize that the central reality of the period was ongoing Indigenous resistance. By 1776, he notes, European powers had claimed most of the continent, but Indigenous people continued to control it. Instead of a foreordained story of decline and victimization, Hämäläinen wants us to see a parade of contingencies, with Native nations regularly giving as good as they got, or even better. The result, he promises, will be a North American history recentered on Native people and their own “overwhelming and persisting” power. Like treaties, though, scholarly promises have often been broken. Is Hämäläinen true to his word?

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Throughout the roughly chronological work, Hämäläinen stresses movement. Tribal travellers crossed the Bering land bridge during the last Ice Age, and then, around 11,000 B.C.E., traversed an ice-free corridor along the flank of the Rocky Mountains, following game and evolving, culturally, as they went. Hämäläinen notes that other migration waves may have moved, in skin boats, through a maritime route, a seafood-rich “kelp highway,” that traced the Pacific Coast from Alaska to Patagonia. However settlement occurred, it happened quickly.

Hämäläinen spends the opening pages of the book detailing the rise and fall of early empires, in the Southwest and the Midwest in particular. “A distinctive pattern of simultaneous centralization and decentralization,” he says, characterized Indigenous history in the early second millennium C.E. Regional centers of power emerged; subordinate groups would rebel or break off and sometimes create their own centers of power. Some of these societies were highly stratified and hierarchical, with élites and, in certain cases, a kinglike single ruler. Such societies led to the development of Mogollon, Hohokam, and Ancestral Puebloan cultures in the Southwest. An ecological warm period, combined with new food technologies (the breeding and cultivation of corn, beans, and squash), helped give rise to the city of Cahokia, where the Mississippi and the Missouri Rivers joined—the site of present-day St. Louis. Cahokia grew in population and size and had

hundreds of ceremonial structures in the form of earthen mounds and plazas. At its peak, in the tenth and eleventh centuries, about forty thousand people lived in the vicinity. (It took seven centuries before North America saw a more populous city: Philadelphia, in 1790.)

But political culture was affected by climate. As temperatures dropped during the Little Ice Age, in the fourteenth century, Hämäläinen writes, “everything had to be smaller.” Cahokia’s society fractured into more mobile, less hierarchical groups, with hunting replacing farming as the dominant mode of living, and something similar happened in other dense Mississippian settlements. “Across the eastern half of the continent, people seem to have rejected the domineering priestly class for more collective and egalitarian social arrangements,” he concludes.

Hämäläinen’s broader point is that, long before the Europeans arrived, the peoples of the New World didn’t inhabit the stasis of an ethnographer’s account; they experienced a tumultuous process of continual change, which is to say, they were social and political actors. By the sixteenth century, around five million Native people had inhabited or made use of almost every part of North America. The usual story depicts them as dwelling in harmony with one another and the natural world in some cultural and ecological Eden that was then torn apart by Europeans. In fact, as Hämäläinen shows, they manipulated nature—rerouting water to create gardens in the desert, domesticating cultivars through seed selection—and they projected power, sometimes in violent ways, subordinating or being subordinated to their neighbors. They didn’t live in harmony; they lived in history.

Just as the initial settlement of the New World was marked by movement, so, too, were Indigenous forms of domination. It’s a thesis that Hämäläinen elaborated in an influential previous book, “[The Comanche Empire](#)” (2008): where European empires tended to be sedentary, marking power through permanent structures, dominant Native ones were “kinetic empires,” with everything—markets, missions, political assemblies—kept fluid and in motion. From the perspective of their neighbors, who were subject to their opportunistic, long-distance raids, the Comanches were, he noted, “everywhere and nowhere.”

The same kinetic strategy often characterized the Native response to European invasion and settlement—the early Spanish attempts to colonize Florida and the American Southwest, the English efforts to gain a foothold on the East Coast, followed by the French in the north and mid-continent, and the Dutch efforts around New York and the Hudson Valley. Hämäläinen wants us to see these colonial forays from a Native perspective, and to focus on how tribal nations retained their ascendancy.

When Hernando de Soto explored Florida and regions to the north, Hämäläinen recounts, he ventured into the territory of the Cofitachequi Nation, where he met its leader, known as the Lady of Cofitachequi, who was brought to the meeting on a litter. Perhaps sensing a chance to trade, she gave de Soto a pearl necklace; in response, he took her captive. The expedition moved on, in pursuit of even greater wealth. All this could sound like a story of colonial triumph, but Hämäläinen argues that we have it backward: “Soto and other conquistadors believed they were conquering new lands for the Spanish Empire, but in reality, Indians were carefully steering the Europeans’ course, sending them away with fantastical stories of treasures farther ahead.” And that’s a pattern that he regularly lays out: often, when European conquerors thought that they were subjugating tribal nations, the Europeans were actually being manipulated and controlled by them.

And what looked like bold military successes frequently involved a misunderstanding of Indigenous political structures. In the American Southwest, conquistadors such as Juan de Oñate and Vicente de Zaldívar thought they were controlling the so-called Pueblo Empire by decapitating it, as had been done among the Incas and the Maya. Yet the Pueblo communities in the Southwest were a loosely allied network of autonomous towns, rather than a centrally organized kingdom. Massacres at places like Acoma—where, in 1599, the Spanish killed around eight hundred Pueblo in retaliation for the deaths of a dozen Spanish soldiers—didn’t change the balance of power; they merely taught Indigenous people that the Spaniards were to be resisted. By the end of the sixteenth century, after nearly a hundred years of attempted conquests, Spain had failed to establish any serious settlements in North America.

Hämäläinen shows how the persistent power of Indigenous people similarly caused the early collapse of Jamestown. During the “starving time” of 1609-10, the English colonists—unable to hunt and unwilling to farm—ate dogs, cats, rats, horses, and, occasionally, one another. They failed to take the measure of the Powhatans, who had already subjugated a number of rival tribal nations. Now it was the ravaged colonists, Hämäläinen tells us, who were incorporated into Powhatan power structures. Of course, that wasn’t the end of the story. In 1611, three English ships, bearing hundreds of soldiers, showed up; as Jamestown was reoccupied, the English burned Powhatan cornfields and slaughtered entire Native settlements. It sounds like a familiar story of colonial cruelty, and yet Hämäläinen offers a different emphasis: such massacres, he says, were the actions of terrified, isolated, weak, and ultimately unstable communities. In Hämäläinen’s view, the colonial violence “exposed a deep-rooted European anxiety over enduring Indigenous power: the attacks were so vicious because the colonists feared the Indians who refused to submit to their rule.” He notes that into the mid-seventeenth century—a century and a half after Columbus—the coastal settlements established by the English, French, and Dutch colonists remained fragile and hemmed in; most of the continent was effectively off limits to them. The struggle was for survival more than for territorial expansion.

Only in the late seventeenth century did the French and the English begin to push into the heartland, engaging complex configurations of Indigenous power in contending for control of the Great Lakes and the Ohio River Valley. Yet even then colonial gains were precarious and provisional. By the mid-eighteenth century, Indian rebellions had rolled back European incursions; the Spanish, the French, and the English clung mainly to the coasts and rivers. The vast interior of the continent was largely unknown to them, and the tidy lines of the thirteen colonies were more aspirational than actual.

As the Europeans sought to entrench an imperial presence on the continent, many tribes conglomerated into lasting yet plastic empires of their own. The Iroquois Confederacy (made up of the Cayuga, the Seneca, the Mohawk, the Onondaga, the Oneida, and the Tuscarora) was the most significant power in the Northeast; the Three Fires Confederacy (Ojibwe, Odawa, and Potawatomi) was largely in control of the western Great Lakes; and, later,

the Comanche on the southern Plains and the Lakota (along with the Nakota and the Dakota, who spoke distinct dialects of the same language) had military control of larger sections of the continent than any single European power did. Hämäläinen encourages us to see this time not as a period of colonial conquest but as a clash of empires, some European and some Indigenous.

Indigenous foreign policy among the Iroquois and the Three Fires confederacies had evolved into a kind of kinetic détente. My ancestors kept the French and the British off balance by making and breaking alliances as necessary, preventing both from getting the upper hand and keeping both dependent on Native nations. One of the side effects of this policy was the Seven Years' War, which can plausibly be regarded as the first world war. The conflict began in what's now Ohio, where an Odawa-French war chief named Charles Langlade led a coalition of Odawa, Potawatomi, and Ojibwe soldiers against a British fort near Pickawillany. They killed thirteen Miami soldiers and took the British hostage. The attackers executed an English blacksmith, who had been wounded in the attack, and then boiled and ate his heart in front of the horrified garrison. Vignettes such as these make the point that tribal nations, including my own, were shoving Europeans around (and eating their hearts) for quite a long time, and help dislodge the idea that tribes were either passively doomed or ineffectually violent.

In time, the reasons for the clash of Indigenous and European empires began to change: the contest wasn't simply for resources and the ability to transport them but for land itself. As the colonies expanded, accordingly, the elimination of tribal nations became a goal. By the time of the American Revolution, the French had been almost entirely expelled from what is now the United States, and the British pushed into what is now Canada; the Spanish, meanwhile, had divested themselves of most of their holdings north of the Rio Grande through war, treaties, and trade. Yet many tribal nations remained, too strong to ignore or subdue. Thayendanegea, an Iroquois leader, warned President Washington's Secretary of War, "You consider yourselves as independent people; we, as the original inhabitants of this country, and sovereigns of the soil, look upon ourselves as equally independent, and free as any other nation or nations."

Meanwhile, the new American nation found itself crushed under war debt; individual former colonies had different needs and pursued different foreign policies. The government couldn't sustain multiple wars against multiple Indigenous groups. Instead, it deployed treaties and settlements as a means of subjugation. In the Ohio Country, Congress sold millions of acres of land it didn't own to coastal speculators, who in turn enticed settlers with large tracts for little money. "The strategy was obvious: once the land was sold, colonists would eradicate Native Americans on their own," Hämäläinen writes.

All in all, between 1783 and 1803, fighting with tribes drained the U.S. Treasury and absorbed roughly eighty per cent of all federal spending. As a result, the government was forced to expand its authority over regional entities; new powers granted by the Indian Trade and Intercourse Act, in 1790, elbowed aside individual states when it came to the making of treaties and to the control of trade with tribal nations. It was in reaction to Native power and resistance that the augmented role of the federal government—the "United" part of the United States—arose.

As the U.S. grew through the nineteenth century, the balances of power once again shifted; spasms of violence ranged across the West and pitted the Comanche, the Apache, the Cheyenne, and the Lakota against one another and against the federal government. The United States drew on its increasing supply of bodies and of wealth to destroy, bypass, or enfold Native nations on its march to the Pacific. In the last few chapters of "Indigenous Continent," Hämäläinen, whose book on the Comanche was followed by one on the Lakota, spends a fair amount of time on these two highly kinetic nations.

"Indigenous Continent" itself has a kinetic quality; the account is magisterial but also frenzied, bringing in a plethora of instances in its effort to complicate the standard account. Hämäläinen is fond of the long-distance scholarly raid, and the book often proceeds at a gallop. Still, the pace and the scope of the book have a force of their own: Hämäläinen makes it clear that America's past is crazily, energetically, tumultuously crowded with incident; that Indigenous power has affected everything about America.

Has he delivered on the idea of an “Indigenous continent”? That’s a harder question. The great value of Hämäläinen’s work is as a corrective polemic. In restoring historical agency to Native peoples, he joins a number of accomplished historians who over the past generation have advanced Native scholarship, including Richard White, Patricia Limerick, Ned Blackhawk, Michael McDonnell, Elizabeth Fenn, and others. The Native historian Joshua Reid has startlingly challenged the very “bifurcation of Indian versus non-Indian colonists.” Because we know how things turned out, the argument goes, we’re tempted to fixate on the power struggles between European and Native groups while overlooking power struggles among Native peoples. The Lakota, for example, are intelligible only in relation to the Dakota and the Mandan and the Arikara and the Hidatsa as well as to the Ojibwe, the French, the English, and, later, the Americans. Similarly, the Iroquois come into focus only by way of their relationships with the Dutch, the English, the Wyandot, the Shawnee, the French, the English, and the Choctaw. Hämäläinen shows us, again and again, how various European and tribal nations ebbed and flowed not in isolation but in constant tension.

And yet the limitations of Hämäläinen’s approach are striking, too. Despite his avowed aim to tell the story of North America from an Indigenous perspective, the main history he relates largely follows the white settlers in their movements. We get conflict zones in the Appalachians, south of the Great Lakes, in the Ohio River Valley, and, later, on the Great Plains, but in each instance Hämäläinen replicates the very thing he has said he was writing against: a fundamentally east-to-west story of European colonial expansion. Nor is the purview of “Indigenous Continent” exactly continental. Hämäläinen spends hardly any time in the Pacific Northwest or along the California coast. We learn little about the alliances and conflicts between tribal nations and the Spanish which flowed from north to south along the Rio Grande, from what is now Colorado to Mexico City. We learn little, for that matter, about the alliances and conflicts that the Iroquois and the Three Fires confederacies had with the British and the French in what is now Canada, extending all the way north to Hudson Bay. What we get is less an “Indigenous continent” than a Native United States.

The book is, at times, breathless in its exposition, and nuance is sometimes lost in the shuffle. So, too, are the attempts to include Indigenous concepts—linguistic, spiritual, cultural. Scholars will debate whether the formation and

expansion of certain tribal nations are best understood in reference to European models of empire. And Hämäläinen's eagerness to characterize the colonial slaughter of Indigenous people as evidence of fear and weakness wears thin as the tide turns, and the story of pitched battle gives way to one of systematic subjugation.

There is, of course, only so much that one book can do. As it is, the tremendous scope of "Indigenous Continent" exacts a narrative cost: often it reads like a monkish chronicle—a quick succession of names, dates, harvests, tragedies, schisms, rejoicings, subsequent sunderings, wins, losses. But, if Hämäläinen's achievements are more circumscribed than his ambitions, it's impossible not to honor both. I can only wish that, when I was that lonely college junior and was finishing "Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee," I'd had Hämäläinen's book at hand. It would have helped me see that there was indeed a larger story: that my civilization hadn't been destroyed; that my tribe's contribution to the past wasn't merely to fade away in the face of history; that Native peoples—for better or for worse—made this country what it was, and have a role to play in what it now struggles to be. ♦

An earlier version of this article misstated the time period when tribal travellers traversed an ice-free corridor along the flank of the Rocky Mountains.

By Keith Gessen

By Joshua Rothman

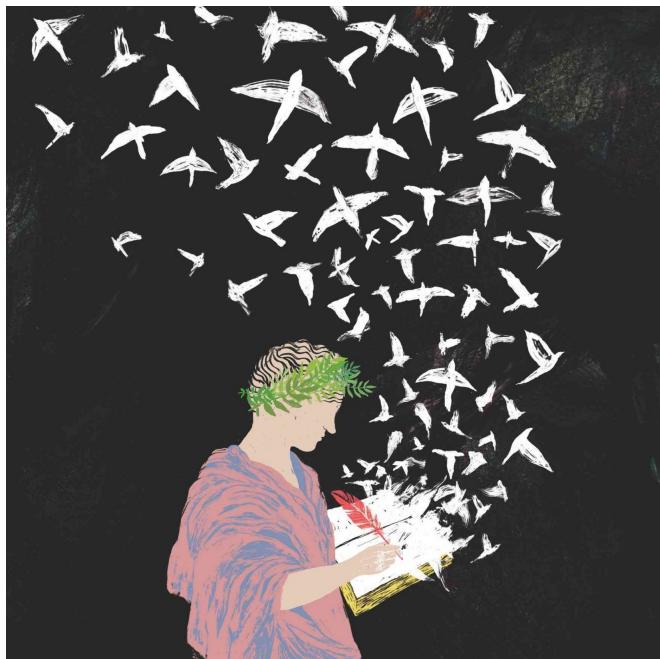
By John Cassidy

By Adam Entous

Should Ovid's Metamorphoses Have a Trigger Warning?

Stephanie McCarter's new translation grapples intelligently with issues of sexual violence that have often been obscured by euphemism.

By [Daniel Mendelsohn](#)



One day in the thirteenth century, James I of Aragon, not only a great conqueror but a king famous for his powers of memory, made a revealing slip. Having convened an assembly of lords and clerics, he tried to think of an appropriately authoritative quote with which to begin his address. What happened next is recorded in his “Book of Deeds,” the autobiographical chronicle that he later dictated to his scribes:

And we ordered the bishops and the nobles to our Court and we had them assembled in the church of the Preachers. . . . We got to our feet and we began with an authority from the Sacred Scripture that says: *Non minor est virtus quam querere parta tueri.*

“It takes no less talent to keep what you’ve got than to acquire it”: for a crusading medieval monarch, what more convenient justification for

territorial consolidation could there be than “Sacred Scripture”?

The problem is that that line of Latin doesn’t appear anywhere in the Bible. It comes, rather, from a notoriously risqué book of poems, published during the reign of the Emperor Augustus, whose narrator doles out advice on how to seduce women—preferably married ones. (The first part is about where to find them; the second, about how to get them into bed; the third—the part that James quoted—about how to hold on to them.) The Spanish king was hardly alone in conflating this poet with a Higher Authority. The eleventh-century theologian and philosopher Abelard once cautioned against excessive harshness in monastic rule by observing that “we always chafe at restrictions and want what is forbidden”—sensible enough advice, except that the sentence in question was actually meant as a warning to married men that keeping too close an eye on their wives would only make them more eager to stray.

That these lines of Roman erotic verse had become indistinguishable from Scripture by the Middle Ages isn’t really all that surprising. More than those of any other poet of ancient Rome, the works of Publius Ovidius Naso—we know him as Ovid—have insinuated themselves into the mind of Europe, influencing its literature, art, and music. Already during his lifetime, dance versions of his work were being staged, and the adaptations and borrowings have continued to the present day. Julie Taymor’s notorious Broadway flop, “Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark,” was an awkward riff on Ovid’s tale of Arachne, the artistically talented young woman who foolishly challenged the goddess Minerva to a weaving contest and, as punishment, was turned into a spider. The poet Jericho Brown opens his 2019 collection, “The Tradition,” with a poem called “Ganymede,” in which Jove’s abduction of the beautiful Trojan prince becomes a metaphor for the agonized dynamics of American slavery.

The Best Books of 2022

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If the stories of Arachne and Ganymede are familiar to the casual reader, it's because of Ovid's greatest work, the *Metamorphoses*, an epic poem of fifteen books. These contain nearly two hundred and fifty mythic tales of corporeal transformation, many of which have become the canonical versions of those stories. The nymph Daphne, desperately fleeing the god Apollo, calls on her river-god father for help and is turned into a laurel tree; the lovelorn artist Pygmalion's ivory statue becomes a flesh-and-blood woman, Galatea; the nymph Echo, pining for the self-absorbed Narcissus, fades away until all that remains of her is her voice. The poet's acute insights into human psychology have given these tales a parable-like power—narcissism, anyone?—while the tortured physicality at the heart of his narratives has made them irresistible to artists across the centuries. “Leda and the Swan” alone has tempted everyone from Leonardo to Cézanne to Cy Twombly.

The art, like the poem itself, is not without controversy. Bernini's “Apollo and Daphne,” a technically superb rendering of an ugly act, has raised troubling questions about the aestheticization of violence which increasingly haunt the reception of Ovid's epic. In 2015, a group of Columbia University students demanded that trigger warnings be attached to passages from the *Metamorphoses*—long a required text—that depict rape. In so doing, they

themselves triggered a national debate about “snowflake” students and the place of “great books” in the curriculum.

But, then, Ovid was controversial from the start. Immensely successful during his lifetime, he nonetheless drew jabs from contemporary literati who found his verbal polish and glittering wit a cover for a lack of substance—a criticism that persisted well into the twentieth century. Ironically, the most famous controversy about the poet is historical rather than literary: at the height of his fame and prestige, he was suddenly exiled by Augustus to a backwater where he spent the rest of his life. The precise nature of his offense is still the subject of debate.

These controversies are now squarely addressed in a brisk new translation of the *Metamorphoses* from Penguin Classics, by Stephanie McCarter, a scholar of classical languages at the University of the South. McCarter confronts the tricky issues associated with both the poet and his epic not only in her forthright introduction but in the translation itself, where, like an art restorer removing decades of browned varnish from an Old Master, she strips away a number of inaccuracies and embellishments that have accreted in translations over the decades and centuries, obscuring the sense of certain passages, particularly those portraying women and sexual violence. The addition of McCarter’s revisionist translation to an already crowded field—half a dozen into English alone since the nineteen-eighties—reminds us that Ovid and the issues that preoccupied him have never been far from the center of our culture.

The youngest, by nearly a generation, of the three greatest poets of Rome’s “golden” literary age, Ovid was the only one who grew up under the Empire. Both Virgil and Horace were already adults by the time the Roman Republic finally disintegrated, in the forties B.C.E., during a bloody civil war; Ovid, the second son of a wealthy landowner in Sulmo, about a hundred miles east of Rome, was born in March, 43 B.C.E., almost exactly a year after the assassination of Julius Caesar set in motion the war’s final chapters. The collapse of the old order paved the way for the ascendancy of Caesar’s great-nephew and adopted son, Octavian, who in 27 B.C.E., having defeated Antony and Cleopatra, his last remaining rivals for power, assumed the name Augustus and established the Empire.

Like many intelligent Romans exhausted by years of civil war, Virgil and Horace could be grateful for the political and economic stability brought about by Augustus' iron grip on the state, while discreetly looking away when it came to his sometimes draconian tactics for reinforcing solid old Roman virtues. (He passed laws encouraging fertility and imposing heavy financial penalties on adulterers.) But to the next generation, especially well-off youngsters like Ovid who, in an earlier era, might have happily pursued meaningful careers in politics, the autocrat's attempts to legislate private morality no doubt seemed as risible as George H. W. Bush's "family values" campaign did to urbane twentysomethings in the nineties.

This background is crucial to understanding Ovid's literary manner and the great successes—and, perhaps, the ultimate disaster—it brought him. Though educated with an eye to a career in the law, the young Ovid faced his father's disapproval ("Even Homer died penniless!" Ovid, Sr., protested) to pursue what he felt was his natural inclination to poetry: whenever he tried to write prose, he later recalled, it came out as verse. In the mid-twenties B.C.E., while still in his late teens—"my beard had only been trimmed once or twice"—he burst onto the literary scene with a daring collection of erotically themed poems called the *Amores*. The work, whose title can mean anything from "love affairs" to "girlfriend" to "sex play," recounts the ups and downs of the narrator's affair with a woman he calls Corinna. Typically, Roman poems of this sort took the form of anguished erotic autobiography—frustrated suitors brooding over their emotional upheavals at the hands of cruel or indifferent mistresses. In the *Amores*, Ovid comes close to parodying that earnest genre, toying with its conventions and expanding its boundaries to cover a range of outré subjects—two of the poems are about abortion, one about impotence—in an arch style that would have raised eyebrows coming from a mature poet, let alone a teen-ager.

Roman society was titillated, and wanted more. After the *Amores* came the *Heroides* ("Mythic Heroines"), a series of verse letters by famous women of myth to the lovers who had abandoned them (Dido to Aeneas, Medea to Jason). These revealed a deep sympathy for women's suffering and a keen interest in female perspectives unusual for the time, qualities that were doubtless on display in his tragedy "Medea," now lost, which the historian

Tacitus described as one of the two most popular Roman dramas ever produced.

When Ovid was in his early forties and the toast of Rome, he published his most audacious poems to date—a collection that the Encyclopædia Britannica once called “perhaps the most immoral work ever written by a man of genius.” In the *Ars Amatoria*, or “The Art of Love”—the book that would later make such an impression on James I of Aragon—the poet repurposed the dignified old genre of didactic poetry in a scandalous way. Earlier poems of this type offered instruction in matters both philosophical (Lucretius’ “On the Nature of Things”) and practical (Virgil’s *Georgics* gives advice about farming and beekeeping). Ovid, assuming a brittle, Noël Coward-ish pose of erotic sophistication, used the form to gleefully dispense his wisdom on seduction, complete with hints about where men could hunt for women (porticoes, theatres, the tail end of parades). Two volumes of this were soon followed by a third, in which he gives women advice on how to seduce men. Then he published “Remedies for Love,” in which he does an about-face and offers tips on how to fall *out* of love. The ability to work all sides of an argument reminds you that he’d been trained as a lawyer.

The timing of these books’ publication was problematic, to say the least. At around the same time, Augustus’ only child, Julia, was caught up in a sex scandal involving a number of high-ranking citizens. The “family values” emperor couldn’t very well be seen as a hypocrite: one of Julia’s lovers was forced to commit suicide and the others were exiled, as was Julia. Ovid himself believed that “The Art of Love” was what got him into trouble with Augustus: he later wrote that he had been exiled because of a “poem and a mistake”—the poem being “The Art of Love.” And yet that book was published a full ten years before the day in 8 C.E. on which the poet, now in his early fifties, was summoned to the palace, castigated by Augustus, and given twenty-four hours to leave Rome. He left behind his third wife, who seems to have worked tirelessly for his recall. (After two brief marriages, one of which produced a daughter, the erotic cynic seems finally to have found true love with a worthy partner.) Also left behind was the manuscript of the *Metamorphoses*, still awaiting its finishing touches, which the distraught poet apparently attempted to burn. Luckily, copies were already circulating.

It remains a mystery why, if Augustus was so offended by “The Art of Love,” he waited a decade to act. Some scholars believe that the “mistake” Ovid referred to later was not literary but political: he may have got too close to a conspiratorial faction at court that opposed Tiberius, Augustus’ chosen heir, and official outrage over the poem was merely a smoke screen to prevent news of the conspiracy from leaking out. Whatever the case may be, within months Ovid was in the tiny frontier settlement of Tomis, on the northwest coast of the Black Sea, where few people spoke Latin: a particularly cruel punishment for a poet. He died about ten years later, aged sixty, his endless pleas for a recall ignored by Tiberius, as they had been by Augustus. The exact date and circumstances of his death remain unknown.

What is not controversial about Ovid is that the poem he was laboring over before his fall from grace was a masterpiece: his only epic and a work unique in the literature of Rome, if not of the world.

Like some of the anomalous beings it takes such delight in describing, the *Metamorphoses* is a hybrid. Ovid and his contemporaries were deeply influenced by the aesthetic theories of the Greek writer Callimachus, who, rejecting the sprawling narrative arcs of epics such as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, is said to have declared that “a big book is a big evil.” Callimachean aesthetics endorsed, by contrast, exquisiteness, brevity, and allusiveness. In the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid attempted something that no one had ever tried before: to compose a work whose reach recalled Homer and Virgil but that was simultaneously a Callimachean collection of artfully fashioned episodes.

Ovid announces the nature of his epic in its opening lines, where he asks the gods to “delicately spin out” a song so vast as to be “unceasing,” starting with the beginning of the world and ending in the poet’s own time. He opens with an evocation of the primal chaos from which all creation arose, shifting, as the poem progresses, to the establishment of Jove’s rule in heaven and the creation of the human race (which, as in the Bible, has to repopulate itself after a devastating flood). There follows a panoply of myths about the interactions of gods and humans, including the many instances of divine violence against mortals which lead to all those baroque mutations.

Amid this busy sequence, the poem's chronology moves from the mythic age to human history, and the scene of its action gradually moves from Greece and the East to Italy and Rome. We get capsule retellings of the Trojan War and its aftermath—material from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, of course, but also from the *Aeneid*, Virgil's epic about the founding of Rome, which by Ovid's time was already a classic. Finally, the mythic history segues into current events. Toward the end of the final book, the murdered Julius Caesar is transformed into a twinkling star that looks down on the even greater achievements of his adopted son—Augustus.



The *Aeneid*, too, found space to celebrate Augustus and his family. But in the *Metamorphoses* what looks like an optimistic trajectory from chaos to empire is constantly undercut by tartly revisionist treatments of epic tropes. When Ovid rehashes Homer and Virgil, there's something of "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead" about his approach—he finds odd, sometimes even comic angles from which to view the famous heroics of the past. In the *Metamorphoses*, much of the Trojan War is reduced to a long and frankly rather boring debate between two warriors over who will get the dead Achilles' armor. Other great myths and their heroes—Perseus, Theseus, Jason, even Hercules—come in for similarly irreverent treatment.

Above all, Ovid's presentation of Jove—the king of the gods and the obvious counterpart of Augustus himself—is almost uniformly disparaging in its contempt for the god's use of his power. The Metamorphoses often reads like a catalogue of Jove's violent offenses: Jove transforming himself into a bull in order to abduct Europa, Jove becoming a swan to get at Leda, Jove taking the form of an eagle in order to snatch up Ganymede. Homer's Zeus, fallible though he sometimes is, is always august, awesome; not so Ovid's Jove. You're more than a little uneasy when, in the poem's final vignette, Augustus is explicitly compared to that most powerful of gods: "Jove rules the heavens / and the tripartite world. Augustus holds / the earth. Each is a ruler and a father." By the time he wrote these lines, of course, Ovid knew exactly what the Emperor had done to his daughter.

If there are any heroes in this violent and kaleidoscopic work, they are artists. The Metamorphoses returns again and again to the ingenuity of artists and musicians and poets, from sculptors like Pygmalion to the musician Marsyas, from inventors like Daedalus, who both creates and then must escape from the Labyrinth, to the semi-divine poet Orpheus, the preëminent representative in the Western tradition of poetic genius in both its positive and negative aspects. (He can charm trees and rocks, but famously fails to bring his wife, Eurydice, back from the dead.) The long Orpheus sequence in Book 10—a mini-epic all its own—is characterized by a dizzying, almost Calvino-esque series of nested narratives. At one point, you realize you're reading Ovid telling a story about Orpheus telling a story about Venus telling her lover Adonis a story about another pair of lovers.

As if eerily anticipating his own fate, the poet lingers on the tales of artists—and critics!—who suffer dreadful punishments for speaking uncomfortable truths to power. Marsyas is flayed alive for challenging Apollo to a musical contest; when the mortal Midas questions a decision in another contest, Apollo gives him an ass's ears. Art and literature, Ovid seems to say, are powerful if dangerous means of confronting arbitrary authority. In the Arachne episode, Minerva weaves a tapestry that celebrates her victory over Neptune, her uncle, in a long-ago contest for possession of Athens—an egotistical bit of divine P.R. Arachne's weaving, by contrast, depicts nine rapes committed by Jove, six by Neptune, a few by Apollo and Bacchus, and one by Saturn, Jove's father. The writer Jia Tolentino has described Arachne's work as #MeToo journalism.

And so it's only fitting that the apotheosis the epic actually ends with is not that of Caesar but that of Ovid himself. The final ten lines of the twelve thousand that make up the poem constitute a ringing affirmation of the power of artists to survive anything that "Jove" can do to them, culminating in the epic's final word, *vivam*, "I shall live":

I've made a masterpiece Jove's wrath cannot
destroy, nor flame, nor steel, nor gnawing time. . . .
I will be read on people's lips. My fame
will last across the centuries. If poets'
prophecies can hold any truth, I'll live.

Ovid begins a poem he wrote from exile by addressing the verses themselves: "even if you didn't have a title your style itself would reveal you; / even if you wanted to hide, it's clear that you are mine." His confidence was not misplaced. Few poets have as instantly recognizable a style—in particular, a quality of elegant fleetness that gives his verses a quicksilver shimmer. This is no easy thing to achieve in Latin, a rather heavy language. Yet Ovid managed to lighten his lines. In Latin, one way to say "and" is to add a short syllable, *-que*, to the end of the second of the two words being joined (*arma virumque*, "arms and a man"); Ovid notoriously liked to pile up his *-ques*, a device that gives his lines a bobbing, cork-on-a-wave quality.

McCarter's translation reproduces Ovid's speed and clarity. She adopts a five-beat iambic-pentameter line—the "blank verse" natural to English and, by now, the standard meter for English translations of classical epics—while sensibly allowing herself a degree of flexibility. Even better, she is alert to many of the sparkling verbal effects for which the poet was famous in his own time. One favorite device was alliteration. In the story of the doomed lovers Pyramus and Thisbe (lifted by Shakespeare for "A Midsummer Night's Dream"), the distraught Pyramus, thinking his beloved has died, stabs himself in the groin. Ovid compares the gush of blood to a rush of water spurting from a broken lead pipe, loading his lines with "s" sounds that replicate the sound of the spraying. This McCarter nicely conveys: "His blood shot high, / as when a pipe bursts due to faulty lead, / and through the hissing hole squirt slender streams / of water as the spray bursts through the air."

She is less successful with some of the poet's more sophisticated effects. If Ovid's brio is reflected in his meter, and his wit in his sound-play, his important thematic interests—the passions that divide us, the relationship of bodies to identities, of form to content—often express themselves in the elaborate symmetries to which Latin, whose density can allow for extreme pithiness, lends itself. In Book 8, a queen named Althaea, on learning that her son has killed her brothers, finds herself torn between her maternal instinct and her sibling allegiances. Ultimately, her feeling for the ghosts of the brothers who shared her blood (*consanguineas umbras*) outweighs any sense of responsibility to be dutiful (*pia*) to her family by marriage and her child; and so she sheds his blood (*sanguine*), an act of appalling impiety (*impietate*). Ovid brilliantly compresses this complex thought into a powerful line and a half:

*et, consanguineas ut sanguine leniat umbras,
impietate pia est*

Literally, this means “And in order to appease her blood-kin with blood / She is pious / dutiful through an act of impiety” (although *pius* has emotional resonances far more profound than anything we associate with “pious”). In the 1986 Oxford World’s Classics translation by A. D. Melville —to my mind, still the version that best renders the original’s poetic finesse —the crucial tension created by the two pairs of juxtaposed, etymologically related words is retained: “determined to appease with blood the shades / Whose blood was hers, for love’s sake crushing love.” McCarter, by contrast, drops the first pair altogether (“To pacify her brothers’ shades with blood”), while her diction in the second (“she’s loyal through disloyalty”) fails to convey the power of *pia* / *impietate*. In a translator’s note, she acknowledges the difficulty of reproducing some of the meaningful symmetries characteristic of Latin verse; but the elegancies on which Ovid prided himself are intrinsic to his style, and other translators have shown that it’s possible to put them across.

McCarter is on more comfortable ground when it comes to other elements in the text which, as she points out, many previous translators have mishandled, distorting not only the meaning of certain lines but the entire point of certain tales. In the tale of Apollo and Daphne, for instance, we learn that the nymph, who emulates the virgin goddess of the hunt, Diana,

“did not want a man and never had”; when Apollo first glimpses the tomboyish girl, the first thing that crosses his mind is how she might look after a trip to the beauty parlor:

Seeing the loose hair down her neck, he says,
“Suppose that it were styled!” He sees her eyes,
gleaming like stars, her lips—but those it’s not
enough to see. He marvels at her fingers,
her hands, her arms, her shoulders (nearly bare).

McCarter hews closely to the Latin here—in stark contrast, as she points out, to earlier translators’ rather prurient expansions on Ovid’s simple description of the girl. One gives her a “fair” neck, another a “darling little mouth,” yet another “tempting” lips, “shapely arms,” and delicate fingers. (These enhancements are all the more regrettable since in the following line Ovid, ever the master of erotic insight, adds that, for Apollo, “the parts he cannot see he thinks are better.”) McCarter notes that such overtranslations, consciously or no, end up “effectively feminizing and sexualizing Daphne into something of a coquette”—that is, the opposite of what she is in Ovid, a girl who has no interest in the attentions of men.

This translator is equally clear-eyed about how to describe just what it is that Apollo is trying to do to Daphne. In a 1978 volume of a classics journal dedicated to the then novel topic of women in the ancient world, the University of Buffalo scholar Leo Curran argued that “rape is the dirty little secret of Ovidian scholarship.” At first glance, “secret” might seem odd: after all, about fifty of the *Metamorphoses*’ tales—one out of five—center on rapes or attempted rapes. But McCarter argues persuasively that the nature of the violence that takes place in so many of these tales has often been dulled by evasive or euphemistic translations—“ravish,” “plunder.”

McCarter, by contrast, is not afraid to use the R-word. “*JOVE RAPES GANYMEDE*,” announces the title of one of the dozens and dozens of sections into which McCarter has divided Ovid’s text, many of those titles taking the form of “*X RAPES Y*.” This may strike some readers as tendentious, but it is surely no more offensive than failing to describe the nature of the violence with which, in a typically Ovidian paradox, this dazzling and engrossing work is so unsettlingly replete. It is only

unfortunate that these titles, each starting a new page, all in jarringly large type, as if they were newspaper headlines, shatter the continuity of the narrative, scissoring through the ingeniously stitched transitions from tale to tale which are the hallmark of this poet's artful manner and an expression of his fascination with the endless mutability of human experience.

“Human experience.” There has been a good deal of debate in recent years about the Greek and Roman classics and their claims to universality; about the discipline’s long association with “élites” and the comfort that some aspects of Greco-Roman culture have given to racists; about the problematic way in which these “great books” remain central to our cultural self-understanding even when scholarship has long made it clear that the civilizations that produced them were founded on values and institutions a number of which we find repellent—patriarchy, misogyny, economies based on the labor of enslaved people. These debates have produced spasms of self-examination and self-critique both inside and outside the academy—debates like the one at Columbia about the *Metamorphoses* and trigger warnings.

The fact is that such crises have always been good for the field. Half a century has passed since the advent of feminist criticism—the last great upheaval—transformed the way we read ancient texts, thanks to a generation of groundbreaking women classicists. Scholars such as Nancy Felson, Helene Foley, Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz, and Froma Zeitlin, now in their seventies and eighties, paved the way for articles such as Leo Curran’s piece on rape as the dirty little secret of the *Metamorphoses*. Their work is a reminder that if the classics are “great” it is less because they model some simplistic nobility of thought and beauty of form than because the texts themselves, as a result of their dark complexities, keep speaking to us in new ways, insisting that we reconsider them even as we reëxamine our reactions to them.

Few works from antiquity remind us as powerfully as Ovid’s does that a wrenching engagement with these ancient authors cannot be separated from admiration for them. “The inclusion of so many stories of rape in the epic,” McCarter writes in the final section of her introduction, called “Reading Ovid Today,”

suggests, in fact, that Ovid felt such violence was worthy of critical interrogation. . . . To read Ovid with an eye toward his full complexity —his beauty *and* his brutality—allows us to scrutinize our own thorny relationship with the past and with the ambivalent inheritance we have received from it. To wrestle with the unsavory aspects of ancient literature is to do the hard work of self-examination.

McCarter ends her introduction with a list of her poet's themes: the fragility of the human body; the way power works; the traumatic effects of loss of agency; the dark force of the objectifying gaze; the sometimes surprising interplay among desire, gender, and the body; gender fluidity and asexuality; the human will to self-expression. If you didn't know she was writing about the concerns of someone who died twenty centuries ago, you'd think her subject was still alive. As indeed he knew he would be. *Vivam.* ♦

By The New Yorker

By Rebecca Mead

By Keith Gessen

By Margaret Talbot

Classical Music

- [Winter Classical-Music Preview](#)

By [Oussama Zahr](#)

If the **Metropolitan Opera** is going to produce a new work based on Michael Cunningham’s novel “The Hours” twenty years after Hollywood took a star-studded crack at it, then it has no choice but to line up its own trio of luminous leading ladies—Renée Fleming, Joyce DiDonato, and Kelli O’Hara—for the New York première of Kevin Puts’s opera (Nov. 22-Dec. 15).

The **Prototype Festival**, the pacesetter for contemporary music theatre in New York, postponed its tenth-anniversary season in January, a casualty of the Omicron surge. It returns with a mix of new and rescheduled works. “Undine,” an operatic animated film about a mermaid who’s battling addiction and living in somebody’s aquarium, streams on demand, and Emma O’Halloran’s “Trade,” about a male prostitute and a closeted client, plays at Abrons Arts Center (Jan. 5-15).

Two new works profile American courage. At the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Shawn Okpebholo’s cycle “**Songs in Flight**,” featuring the confident storytellers Rhiannon Giddens and Will Liverman, looks at fugitive-slave ads as documents of bravery (Jan. 12). Paul Moravec’s “**A Nation of Others**,” with the Oratorio Society of New York, at Carnegie Hall, reveals a day in the life of immigrants on Ellis Island, in 1921 (Nov. 15).

Also at Carnegie, past masters stick to what they know: the sparkly-voiced tenor **Juan Diego Flórez** offers a recital of works by bel-canto composers (Jan. 29); **Mitsuko Uchida** delves into Beethoven sonatas (Feb. 24); and Christian Thielemann, an authority in Austro-German fare, leads the **Vienna Philharmonic** in Strauss, Brahms, and Bruckner (March 3-5).

The **New York Philharmonic**, which is committed to commissioning works from female composers, elevates women on the podium, too. Ruth Reinhardt makes her Philharmonic conducting début with the pianist Kirill Gerstein, in Thomas Adès’s multimedia retelling of Genesis, “In Seven Days” (Feb. 16-18), and Nathalie Stutzmann does so with the cellist Alisa Weilerstein, in Prokofiev’s sinewy Sinfonia Concertante (Feb. 22-24). The spectacular **Yuja Wang** plays a volatile piano concerto written for her by Magnus Lindberg (Jan. 5-10).

The **Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center**'s six-concert winter festival, the Magic of Schubert, considers the legacy of a melodist both gracious and sublime, all culminating in the unrushed pleasures of Schubert's hour-long Octet in F Major (Jan. 22-Feb. 10). ♦

By The New Yorker

By David Remnick

By Ken Auletta

By Margaret Talbot

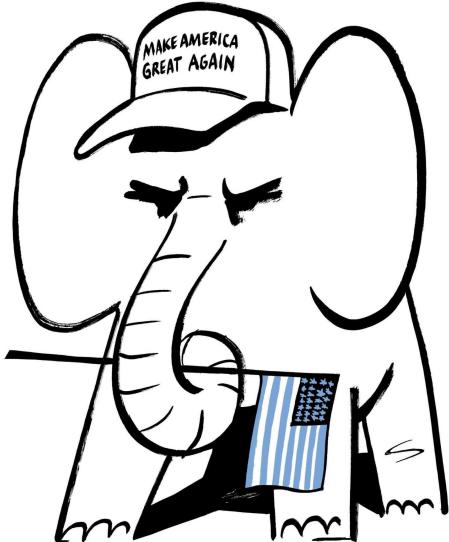
Comment

- [The Rise of Political Violence](#)

The Rise of Political Violence

It would be irresponsible to draw too direct a line between the rhetorical climate and any individual's actions. But, obviously, none of it bodes well.

By [Andrew Marantz](#)



As a rule, political candidates are not reliable historians of the present. In 2012, while in Minnesota campaigning for reelection, President Barack Obama recounted his “tussles” with obstructionist Republicans in Congress before indulging in a bit of wishful thinking. “I believe that if we’re successful in this election,” he said, “the fever may break, because there’s a tradition in the Republican Party of more common sense than that.” Not to spoil it for anyone who hasn’t been following along at home, but the fever did not break. Still, Joe Biden struck the same note in 2019, while campaigning in New Hampshire. “With Donald Trump out of the White House—not a joke—you will see an epiphany occur among many of my Republican friends,” he said. But, as President, Biden started to see the light—or the dying of it. In September, he gave a speech, in Philadelphia, asserting that “equality and democracy are under assault.” Last Wednesday, he spoke again, a few blocks from the Capitol. “As I stand here today, there are candidates running for every level of office in America—for governor, Congress, attorney general, secretary of state—who won’t commit, they will

not commit, to accepting the results of elections that they are running in,” he said. “This is a path to chaos in America.”

The sitting President’s party has lost congressional seats in nearly every midterm election of the past century. When it first happened to Obama, in 2010, he referred to it as a “shellacking.” This shellacking season, the Republicans have no shortage of issues to run on (inflation, Biden’s abject approval ratings), and an expanding array of systemic advantages (the anti-democratic structure of the Senate, the widening asymmetry of gerrymandering, the suppressive spirit of several states’ post-2020 voting laws). But there’s at least a chance that, with enough Democratic turnout, all of this can be overcome. So some Trumpist Republicans have been flirting with another anti-democratic tactic: tacitly exploiting, or even encouraging, an atmosphere of political violence.

Trump, of course, has long revelled in threats of brute force, both veiled and explicit. After each new incitement, G.O.P. leaders have gone through the familiar cycle: consternation, equivocation, whataboutism, and, finally, full capitulation. The result has been a normalization of political violence: “January 6th was a normal tourist visit” is the new Lost Cause dogma, and Republicans who dissent are reeducated or excommunicated. It’s impossible to predict how all this will end, and it would be irresponsible to draw too direct a line between the rhetorical climate and any individual’s actions. But, obviously, none of it bodes well.

Late last month, in the middle of the night, a forty-two-year-old man entered the San Francisco home of Nancy Pelosi, the Speaker of the House, by shattering a glass door with a hammer. She wasn’t there, but her eighty-two-year-old husband was; in the moments before the intruder was arrested, he used the hammer to bash Paul Pelosi’s skull. The next day, Hillary Clinton tweeted a link to a Los Angeles *Times* article reporting that the assailant had spread “far-right, bigoted conspiracies.” Elon Musk—the new owner of Twitter, the world’s richest man, and, these days, a folk hero of the far right—replied to Clinton’s tweet, linking to a piece from the Santa Monica Observer, a gossip site filled with salacious clickbait, which speculated that the assault was not a political attack but a hookup gone wrong. The Observer later took down the story; Musk deleted his tweet, but he didn’t apologize or issue a correction. “Twitter obviously cannot become a free-for-all hellscape,

where anything can be said with no consequences,” he had tweeted on the day he took over the company, shortly before amplifying defamatory misinformation with no consequences. Trump, days later, mused that “the glass, it seems, was broken from the inside to the out, so it wasn’t a break-in, it was a breakout.” According to the police, this is flatly false, but what difference does that make?

The right doesn’t have a monopoly on political violence, of course. Perhaps the most analogous incident in recent memory is the 2017 shooting, by a disturbed gunman who identified with the left, of the Republican congressman Steve Scalise and several others. After that attack, prominent Democrats expressed unqualified condemnation, and sympathy for the victims. After the attack on Paul Pelosi, some Republican officials issued thoughts and prayers; others, such as Ronna McDaniel, the chair of the Republican National Committee, found a way to blame both sides (“This is what Democrat policies are bringing, but of course we wish Paul Pelosi a recovery”). Still others (Senator Ted Cruz, of Texas; Representative Clay Higgins, of Louisiana) treated the incident as fodder for fatuous conspiracy theories, or as a gruesome punch line.

It’s a journalistic cliché, but a useful exercise: imagine that all this were happening in another country. A political leader, the object of years of menacing rhetoric, is targeted; the opposition party vacillates between downplaying the incident and playing it for cheap laughs. This is also a country with more guns than people, and more than ten mass shootings in an average week. And one where, year after year, voting gets harder, especially for poor people and racial minorities. How would you rate that country’s long-term democratic prospects?

Last week, Brazil held a runoff Presidential election between Jair Bolsonaro, the proto-authoritarian incumbent, and Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, the leftist former President. Gun ownership had spiked under Bolsonaro, and the months leading up to the election were extraordinarily tense. The journalism nonprofit Agência Pública [recorded](#) more than three hundred incidents of election-related violence, including at least fifteen murders and twenty-three assassination attempts. Lula won, by less than two percentage points, and supporters of Bolsonaro, who has insisted for years that the voting system is rigged, took to the streets, demanding that the military overturn the result.

Bolsonaro stayed silent for two days, and even then did not formally concede; he distanced himself from “the destruction of property” and other forms of protest, but did not tell his supporters to stand down. Once he is stripped of Presidential immunity, he could face charges of mishandling public funds and recklessly endangering his citizens during the pandemic, accusations he dismisses. But he may be calculating that he can benefit from mass unrest, and from the perception that there is no way to hold him accountable without tearing the country apart.

If this sounds like the kind of thing that can happen only in a relatively young democracy, consider that nearly every move Bolsonaro has made is one first used by Trump. “This is a path to chaos in America,” Biden said. “It’s unprecedented, it’s unlawful, and it’s un-American.” Chaos? Absolutely. Un-American? Maybe. ♦

By Janet Malcolm

By Robert A. Caro

By Patrick Radden Keefe

By Philip Gourevitch

Contemporary Music

- [Winter Contemporary-Music Preview](#)

By [Jay Ruttenberg](#)

Barring an intrusion from you-know-what, the imminent cold-weather concert season should recover much of its pre-pandemic fastball, as musicians fan out across stages big and small. Recently hatched traditions come to light: the reignited **LCD Soundsystem** settles into Brooklyn Steel, as it did last year, for a residency that runs the length of some apartment sublets (Nov. 18-Dec. 17). Meanwhile, staples return from streaming purgatory to the flesh-and-blood realm. Carnegie Hall hosts the **Tibet House U.S. Benefit Concert**, which has long provided a meeting ground for wrinkled icons and young comedians (March 1). **GlobalFEST**, a platform for acts from far-reaching pockets, reemerges for its twentieth anniversary (David Geffen Hall, Jan. 15).

Beyond globalFEST, concertgoers with classical-music allergies who are itching to see Lincoln Center's newly renovated David Geffen Hall have several opportunities. Dec. 4 brings an encore presentation of "**An Orchestral Tribute to the Notorious B.I.G.**," a string-fuelled celebration of the rap titan's music, from the composer Miguel Atwood-Ferguson. (Beats are supplied by the sound of Biggie Smalls rolling in his grave.) Two nights later, the folk artists Watchhouse, Sarah Jarosz, and the Punch Brothers perform as part of the "**65th Street Session**" series. **Afropunk**, usually a summertime treat, features a multidisciplinary celebration of Black women, at Geffen and at the neighboring Alice Tully Hall (Feb. 24-25).

Less storied institutions are also well stocked. The Red Hook arts space Pioneer Works houses adventurous noises from the avant-garde lifer **Laurie Anderson** (Nov. 18), the sonorous experimental-metal duo **Sunn O)))** (Dec. 17), and London's post-punk quartet **Dry Cleaning** (Feb. 2). Knockdown Center features **Perfume Genius** and **Grace Ives** in a Pitchfork showcase (Dec. 9).

Protagonists of different genres drop in throughout the season, including the Radiohead spinoff **the Smile** (Kings Theatre, Nov. 18-19, and Hammerstein Ballroom, Nov. 20), the versatile jazz pianist **Jason Moran** (Village Vanguard, Nov. 22-27), the Chicano roots-rock warhorses **Los Lobos** (City Winery, Dec. 19-21), and the Atlanta rapper Future (Barclays Center, Dec. 30). Some artists come bearing hot new works, as with the forward-thinking country singer **Margo Price**, who plays Webster Hall on March 4, soon after

releasing an album and a memoir. Other musicians wrap up a banner year with a victory lap. The droll English band **Wet Leg**, whose fast-track career seems plucked from a previous era's rock ecosystem, headlines four separate clubs (Dec. 13-16). And **Ikue Mori**, a longtime underground habitant recently tapped for a MacArthur grant, showers genius upon the Stone at the New School (Dec. 14-17).

As always, many acts scheduled for modest stages are destined for grander ones. Chief among these is the New Orleans quartet **Special Interest**, which melds a dance pulse with a punk attitude, at Bowery Ballroom, and **Pierre Kwenders**, an arresting Congolese Canadian musician whose scramble of genres, languages, and worlds sounds like the future, at Nublu 151. The bad news? Both shows fall on the same night, Dec. 8. ♦

By Marina Harss

By Oussama Zahr

By Alex Ross

By Michael Schulman

Crossword

- [The Crossword: Wednesday, November 2, 2022](#)

By [Patrick Berry](#)

Dance

- [Winter Dance Preview](#)

By [Marina Harss](#)

The emo, electronics-heavy music of the nineteen-eighties British New Wave band Tears for Fears is the unlikely—but oddly compelling—basis for “*LOVETRAIN2020*,” a cathartic evening of dance by the Israeli choreographer **Emanuel Gat** (*BAM*'s Howard Gilman Opera House, Dec. 1-3). I'm not sure what I love more—the opulently deconstructed costumes, the moody vocals, or the jagged way the dancers move through space, like glamorous but dishevelled creatures of the night.

The recurrence of **Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre's** annual season, at New York City Center (Nov. 30-Dec. 24), is a reliable source of joy, with its comforting mix of Ailey classics—the soul-stirring “Revelations”; the 1962 solo “Reflections in D,” a meditation on Duke Ellington—and new works. This year, the company unveils a dance by Kyle Abraham, whose silken, shape-shifting choreography feels particularly of the moment: “Are You in Your Feelings?,” set to a medley of soul, hip-hop, and R. & B., premières on Dec. 2.

The Joyce's upcoming season showcases the variety that exists within American dance, and illustrates its indebtedness to African American dance forms. **Dorrance Dance** (Dec. 7-18), led by the tap wiz Michelle Dorrance, brings two new creations, one of which features body percussion by an ensemble of women, all veterans of the long-running show “*STOMP*.**Ronald K. Brown/EVIDENCE** (Jan. 17-22), a company that fuses the groove of African American vernacular dance with the through-the-body impulse of African dance, presents one of Brown's most political works yet, “The Equality of Night and Day,” set to music by Jason Moran and words by Angela Davis. The hip-hop innovator **Rennie Harris** (Feb. 7-12) revives his 2000 work “Rome and Jewels,” a retelling of Shakespeare's tale of “star-crossed homeys,” set in Philadelphia in the nineteen-seventies.

Meanwhile, at **New York City Ballet** (David H. Koch, Jan. 17-Feb. 26), the choreographer Justin Peck tries his hand at an evening-length ballet (his first, as yet untitled), set to a montage of pieces by Aaron Copland. The designs are by Jeffrey Gibson, a visual artist of Choctaw and Cherokee descent, whose intricate and richly colored art incorporates Native American themes and techniques such as beadwork. The company also revisits one of Alexei Ratmansky's most unusual ballets, “Voices,” in which five female

dancers perform solos that are like miniature portraits, each echoing the timbre and intonation of a different woman's voice. ♦

By Jennifer Homans

By Julian Lucas

By Julian Lucas

By Sarah Chihaya

Fiction

- “Returns”

Returns

By [Annie Ernaux](#)



The last time I saw my mother at her home, it was July, a Sunday. I travelled there by train. At Motteville, we sat in the station for a long time. It was hot. It was quiet, both in the compartment and outside. I looked out the open window; the platform was empty. On the other side of the S.N.C.F. railroad barriers, the tall grass almost touched the lowest branches of the apple trees. It was then that I could really feel that I was approaching C. and that I was going to see my mother. The train continued on to C. at a reduced speed.

Leaving the station, I thought I recognized various faces, without being able to put a name to any of them. Perhaps I had never known the names. It was less hot, thanks to the wind. It's always windy in C. Everyone, including my mother, believes that it's colder in C. than in other places, even those just five kilometres away.

I didn't take the taxi that was parked in front of the railway hotel, as I would have anywhere else. As soon as I'm in C., I go back to my old ways: a taxi is for communions, weddings, and burials. There's no reason to spend money like that. I headed up Rue Carnot, to the town center. At the first pâtisserie, I bought cakes, éclairs, and apple tarts—the kind she used to tell me to bring

home after midday Mass. I bought some flowers, too, gladioli, which last a long time. Until I got to the housing complex where she lives, I didn't think anything besides, I'm going to see her again and She's waiting for me.

I knocked on the narrow door of her ground-floor studio apartment. She called out, "Yes. Come in!"

"You should lock the door!"

"I knew it was you. There's no one else it could have been."

She was apronless, with lipstick on, laughing, standing by the table. She put her hand on my shoulder, tilting her face up for me to kiss. At the same time, she was firing off questions about my trip, the children, the dog. She didn't answer mine. Afraid of being boring, always, when speaking of herself. Later, she repeated, as usual, "I'm fine here. Couldn't be better" and "I have no complaints." The TV was on without sound, just the test pattern on the screen.

She took the gladioli, a little uneasy, and thanked me with an artificial tone to her voice. I had forgotten: my giving her flowers from a florist had always seemed like an affectation to her, too formal; it hurt her feelings. It was as if I were fussing over her as I would over a stranger, not family. The cakes pleased her, but she had already bought some for us on her way back from Mass.

We sat opposite each other at the table that, along with the buffet, almost filled her apartment. I remembered what she'd said the first time I'd come here after she moved in: "I bought it big—it can seat at least ten people!" Not once, in six years. . . . Nevertheless, she had covered it with an oilcloth, so as not to damage it.

She was breathless, as though she had no idea where to start among all the things we had to talk about. It was dark in her studio, and there was a slight odor; she didn't air it out enough. When I was a child, she'd take me with her to visit some old ladies on Sundays. Leaving their houses, she'd sniff the air: "It always smells so musty in old people's homes—they never open the

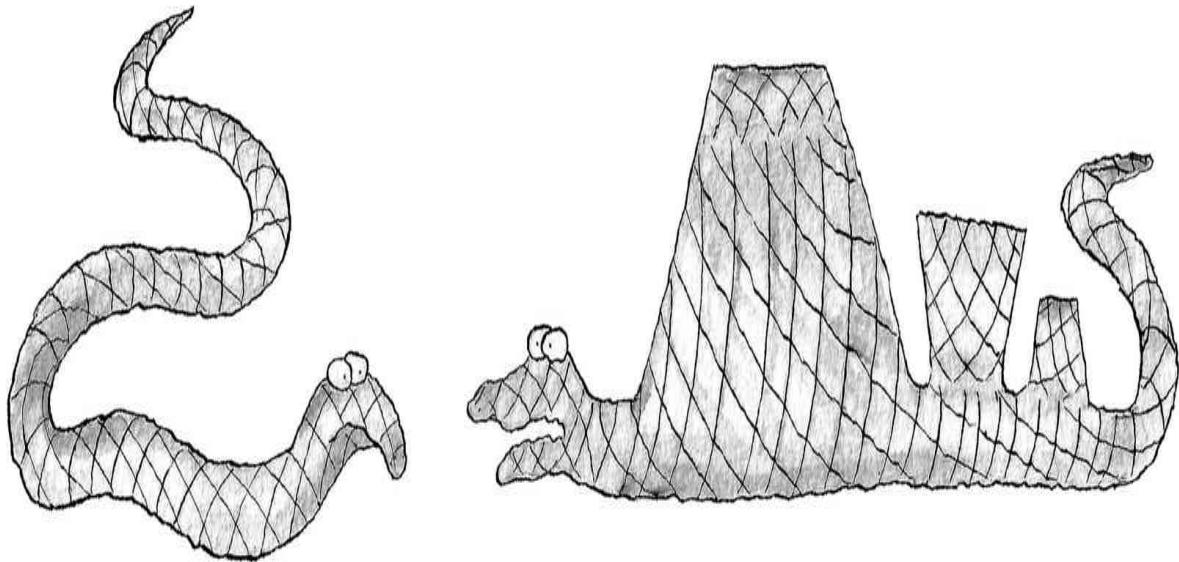
windows.” Because she used to say this, I hadn’t expected her to become one of those people.

She talked about the weather in C. in the spring and the people who had died since my last visit, getting irritated with my failure to remember them, which she felt was intentional—“It’s that you don’t *want* to remember.” Giving me detail after detail, until I could figure out whom she meant: the person lived there, her daughter went to school with me, and so on.

We set the table at quarter to twelve. The last time, she’d waited until twelve-thirty. She was accelerating everything. At one point, she said that the days of beautiful weather would soon be over.

While looking for napkins, I found a stack of romance magazines at the back of the buffet. I didn’t say anything about them, but she guessed that I’d seen them. “Those little magazines—Paulette gives them to me, otherwise you know I wouldn’t read them. That’s all she reads, these little stories about nothing.” Still afraid that I’d criticize her reading habits. I almost said that it didn’t matter if she preferred *Nous Deux* to the Malraux she’d just borrowed from the public library. She would have been unhappy if I’d seemed to think her incapable of reading the kind of thing I read.

The meal passed in silence. Her eyes on her plate, her slightly sloppy movements those of someone used to eating alone. She refused to let me do the dishes. “What will there be for me to do once you leave?”



Victoria Roberts

"Takeout."
Cartoon by Victoria Roberts

She was sitting up straight in her chair, her arms crossed. I'd never seen her move her body in a natural, relaxed way; she never ran her fingers gently through her hair, never slipped a hand inside the neckline of her blouse while deep in a book. Her only gestures of abandon were expressions of fatigue: stretching with her arms above her head, slumping in a chair, her legs out in front of her. Less hardness in her face than there had been, less of that tension you need to make your way through life. Her gray eyes, which had always suspected the worst of me, were fixed on me with a hungry softness. She had been counting the days, had told herself in the morning that this was the day I was coming, and there we were, the two of us, and half our time had already passed. The tone of our visit was playful and kind. The other tone, the violence from when I was fifteen, would not return. "Cow, bitch, I'm killing myself for her." "I'm going to get the fuck out of here." "You're going to jail first, you useless idiot."

She tried to come up with more subjects of conversation, so that I wouldn't go too soon, leaving her alone with her desire for me, her longing to live with me, her daughter, forever. "Paulette brought me some gooseberries. You wouldn't believe how good they are. It makes sense, since they're in season. Remind me to give you some before you go." Paulette—a former

neighbor who was my age—came to see her every week; she had never left C.

I could hear cars in the distance on the trunk road, a radio in the apartment next door, broadcasting the Tour de France, perhaps.

“It’s peaceful.”

“It’s always peaceful here. Sundays are the quietest.”

Many times she had advised me to get some rest during my vacation. The sentence that used to horrify me the most when I was complaining that I didn’t know what to do: “Just have a little rest.” Again, I felt the onset of annoyance, but her words had no power over me anymore. They only reawakened memories, the way sports radio on Sunday or an apple tart can. I could feel the boredom of summers in C.: reading from morning to night; Sunday movies, restricted or for adults only, in the three-quarters-empty theatre of the Mondial, while she thought I was out for a “nice walk” with an older cousin; the children’s games at the street fair for local businesses; the public dance hall, which I didn’t dare enter.

In the middle of the afternoon, a cat appeared on the windowsill of the kitchenette. She jumped up from her armchair to let it in, an “adopted” cat that she fed, that slept on her bed in the daytime. She was the happiest she’d been since I got there. The cat kept us busy for a long time—watching it, taking turns holding it. She recounted all its tricks; “the little pig” clawed the curtains, and even her wrists, which were striped with red in two places. As she used to, she said, “Every living thing is beautiful.” She seemed to have forgotten that I was going to leave.

At the last minute, she pulled out a form that urgently needed to be filled out for her Social Security. “I don’t have time. Just give it to me and I’ll send it to you.” “It’ll take no time. You’re five minutes from the station.” “I’ll miss my train.” “You’ve never missed it. You can take the next one.” She was on the verge of tears. She concluded with her habitual “This is very upsetting for me.”

After kissing me at the door, she tried to keep talking. Last image of her: in the doorway, rounded arms framing her heavy silhouette in a yellow dress—her prettiest one, tight around the chest and the belly—a wide, fixed smile. This time, once again, I felt that I was leaving badly, in a cowardly way.

I took the shortest route to the train, the one that goes past the Shell station. There, in the old days, I'd stop to prepare myself for her interrogating look when I returned from the cinema, bracing myself, wiping off what was left of my lipstick. *What will people think of you?*

On the train, I couldn't help imagining her, washing the dishes in a solitary silence, all sign of my presence soon erased. I watched C. disappear—the Sernam buildings, the railway workers' housing beside the tracks.

A month later, I came back to see my mother. She had suffered sunstroke after Mass and had been admitted to the hospital in C. I aired out her apartment, retrieved paperwork from her buffet, threw out the perishables in her fridge. In the vegetable drawer, in a plastic bag that was knotted at the top, were the gooseberries I had forgotten to take the previous time, now just a brown, liquid heap.

—1985

(Translated, from the French, by Deborah Treisman.)

By Stephania Taladriz

By Rachel Aviv

By Joshua Rothman

By Rebecca Mead

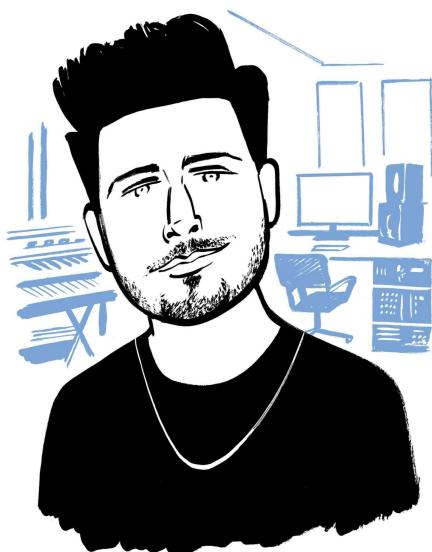
Hitmaking

- [Blake Slatkin Moved Out of His Mom's House](#)

Blake Slatkin Moved Out of His Mom's House

The man-child who has produced lots of hits by Lizzo, Bieber, and Lil Nas X knows that you're listening on crappy speakers.

By [Antonia Hitchens](#)



The other day, in West Hollywood, the twenty-five-year-old music producer Blake Slatkin stuck his hand into a doll house on his mantelpiece. “This is an exact miniature replica of my old recording studio,” he said, gesturing at a row of lamb-chop-size guitars and a shrunken photo grid of musicians he’d worked with. The former studio was at his mother’s house in Westwood, where he’d lived until January. Now he was on his own. “I’m very slowly learning how to be an adult,” he said. “It was super emotional. I was actually super nervous to move out of my mom’s, because I had so much good luck there.” It’s where he’d co-produced a large chunk of the songs on the *Billboard* Hot 100—by Lil Nas X, The Kid LAROI, 24kGoldn, Omar Apollo, and Lizzo.

Still, living alone has its advantages. “I mean, the morning I got my first No. 1, I woke up and I told my mom that I got my first No. 1,” he said. “And she

was, like, ‘That’s awesome.’ And then she was, like, ‘You have a bunch of dishes to do from last night.’”

Slatkin traipsed past a swimming pool to his new home studio. He flopped down in a beanbag chair next to a line of guitars and keyboards. He wore a black T-shirt with the word “*FOOLISH*” and a silk screen of Ashanti on it, black sweatpants, and untied black Converse. “I’ve lived within a twenty-minute radius of here my entire life,” he said. As a teen-ager, he’d performed live. “I’d sell tickets to my shows at Whiskey a Go Go to my teachers.” He left only for two years of college in Manhattan, where he’d lived on St. Marks Place. “I shared a wall with the show ‘Stomp’—the percussion musical.” He went on, “For thirty years, they’ve been doing this fucking show. And they don’t even say words—they just hit shit as loud as they possibly fucking can.”

Being a hitmaker is taxing. “Every time I get in the studio now, I feel like the label’s just, like, ‘O.K., give us another one of these.’ It’s, like, ‘Dance, monkey, dance.’”

Next to an elaborate sound system was a lo-fi boom box. “A lot of people listen on shitty speakers, so I need to know how that sounds,” he said. “I care how it sounds on the AirPods, you know? I mix records on my phone all the time.”

He sat down at a monitor to show how he’d devised a section in a song by PinkPantheress. He held a note on a keyboard, then duplicated it electronically on the screen. “You can take the reverb out and in,” he said. “It’s all these little subconscious things that make you be, like, Oh, something’s a little bit more exciting now.”

How does he develop a rapport with a new artist? “I definitely don’t get in a room with someone for the first time, like, ‘All right, so talk to me about your childhood trauma.’” When he was preparing to record Lizzo’s “About Damn Time,” he said, “we had a day where all of Lizzo’s friends came in, and we all screamed and danced and sang the chorus as loud as we could, and we put that in the record.”

Sometimes it's off the cuff. "That song 'Stay' that I made, the Bieber song, we were all just chilling at my studio at my mom's. LAROI was in the area and he was, like, 'I'm coming over.' We were with Charlie Puth, and the first thing he played on the keyboard was that riff. We never changed it, even a little bit." He went on, "And basically, in just one take, the whole song was done in thirty minutes. And then we were, like, O.K., cool, let's go get hibachi."

Back in the house, candles shaped like busts of Julius Caesar sat beneath a framed vintage menu from the Beverly Hills Hotel and a painting of a bottle of Aunt Jemima syrup by Awol Erizku. The Nobu cookbook sat next to a volume called "Salad Freak" and two kinds of olive oil—"One for sizzling, one for drizzling," Slatkin said. He recently had an ice bath installed, to help with his anxiety.

He gestured to a photo of Picasso on his inspiration wall and said, "I love his quote, saying it took him four years to learn how to paint like Raphael, but a lifetime to paint like a kid." He went on, "The gatekeepers have really faded—now the gatekeepers are just the world, and the kids of the world. Those are the people who are on TikTok, on Instagram, on Spotify. That's who's deciding if your shit is hot." He pulled out his phone to show a TikTok of young children in Uganda dancing to the song "Mood," by 24kGoldn, which he produced. "They're kids in Africa," he said. "And I have no idea what they love about the song." ♦

By Bruce Handy

By Michael Schulman

By Naomi Fry

By T. Coraghessan Boyle

Midterm Watch

- [Meet the New Nates: Two Day Students at Andover](#)

Meet the New Nates: Two Day Students at Andover

The prep-school pollsters Alex Shieh and Patrick Chen take a break from the Math Club and Latin to survey the midterm Senate races.

By [Zach Helfand](#)



“Yes, the Polling Warning Signs Are Flashing Again,” the *Times*, which has devoted a lot of resources to projecting election results, declared recently. The pronouncement was, depending on your party affiliation, the severity of your polling obsession, and your Nate allegiance (Cohn, of the *Times*, or Silver, of FiveThirtyEight), either an overdue corrective or a clever hedge. Polls were a liberal coping device in the early days of American democratic collapse, but we now live in a post-nine-point-error-in-Wisconsin world. Are we really ready to be hurt again?

“Pollsters have gotten things wildly wrong,” Alex Shieh said the other day. He would know. He’s a pollster himself, although he can be excused for the sins of his profession; in 2016, he was eleven. After witnessing the statistical whiffs of recent cycles, Shieh and his friend Patrick Chen, a fellow-senior at Phillips Academy Andover, in Massachusetts, thought they couldn’t do any

worse. Earlier this year, they launched the Andover Poll, which they call “the nation’s first high-school-run public opinion poll.” They’ve been cranking out surveys regularly. Some get picked up by the national media.

Shieh and Chen were sitting in a side room of the school’s art museum. They’re both townies—commuters, not boarders. Why start a poll? “Part of our goal is to regain trust in polling,” Shieh said. Talk turned from the pursuit of quantitative fact to the slipperiness of objective truth.

“I like to think the poll was my idea,” Shieh said.

“I also like to think it was my idea,” Chen said.

“I texted Patrick, ‘We should start a poll,’ ” Shieh said.

“I called up Alex and asked if *he* wanted to start a poll,” Chen said.

Shieh had scruffy black hair and wore a Phillips Academy quarter-zip. He’s the natural talker. Chen, in a black polo and cargo shorts, is quieter and smiley. He’s a little taller. When the pair posed for photos, Shieh stood on tiptoe. Both have impressive résumés. Shieh: campaign intern for Michelle Wu, the mayor of Boston; pole vault (varsity); Math Club (member); G.P.A., 4.0; certified therapy-dog handler (“Trained the family pet, Shelby, to pass the necessary requirements”). Chen: tennis (“J.V.!” Shieh noted); Math Club (co-president); startup C.O.O.; summa cum laude, National Latin Exam; inventor of a drone that cleans windows.

During the past year, the two have taught themselves the ins and outs of robocalling and iterative proportional fitting. Weighting results wasn’t very difficult. “There’s a Wikipedia article,” Chen said. In April, they launched their first poll, dealing with New Hampshire’s races. “My grandparents live up there,” Shieh explained.

“On the first day, we were in the library, in the room we call the Comfy Chair Room,” Chen said. “We were so excited. We kept refreshing the page. We saw our first response come in—”

“And then the computer crashed,” Shieh said. They moved servers a few times. “At one point it was actually in my basement.”

Other polls followed. Their Georgia Senate poll flipped FiveThirtyEight's projected winner from Raphael Warnock to Herschel Walker. Though they have some good news for Democrats (Nevada), they're often more bullish than the consensus on the Republicans' outlook. They expected a close race for Pennsylvania's governor and a G.O.P. rout for Arizona's. "Part of the thing about being, in our opinion, one of the more accurate pollsters is sometimes you get things that are surprising," Shieh said.

When the results are gloomy, some poll addicts seem bothered by the fact that their level of existential dread is dictated by guys young enough to, plausibly, receive an atomic wedgie. The pair get hostile tweets. ("Ain't nobody care rich kids"; "gonna need to see the Harvard-Westlake numbers.") Shieh shrugged. "Adolescence doesn't make phone lines, like, break down," he said. "A lot of people just don't get it. They thought we were polling *kids*."

"There's always some Exeter kids who are, like, Look at these trash Andover kids," Chen added.

Shieh and Chen offered a tour of campus. They pointed out landmarks: lawn, chapel, Comfy Chair Room. They noted some successes ("Jeb follows us on Twitter"; he later unfollowed them) and offered theories for the recent polling failures. "I think Trump ruined everything," Shieh said. They suggested several possible causes: the shy-Trump-voter phenomenon, nonresponse bias, failure to weight for education. They believe they've found corrections. Would they approach Nate Silver levels of trustworthiness? "Well, I'm not sure exactly how trustworthy Nate Silver is," Shieh said.

After the midterms, the Andover Poll might turn to student-specific polling, though it has on-campus competition. "The school newspaper runs a poll," Shieh said. It's impressive in breadth—family income (a plurality was more than five hundred thousand), religious affiliation (atheism, by a hair), sexual activity (modest), nightly hours of sleep (6.65). "We offered to help, and they turned it down," Shieh said. "I disagree with the methodology."

Chen explained, "They overestimated the actual G.P.A." ♦

By Robert A. Caro

By Patrick Radden Keefe

By Philip Gourevitch

Movies

- [Winter Movies Preview](#)

By [Richard Brody](#)

Filmmakers' real-life stories are fictionalized in some noteworthy new movies, including "**The Inspection**" (Nov. 18), written and directed by Elegance Bratton. It's the drama of a homeless gay man (Jeremy Pope) who, facing rejection from his devoutly religious mother (Gabrielle Union), joins the Marines and confronts violent persecution during basic training. Steven Spielberg considers his own childhood in "**The Fabelmans**" (Nov. 11); Gabriel LaBelle plays young Sammy Fabelman, a budding filmmaker, with Paul Dano as the boy's father and Michelle Williams as his mother. In "**The Eternal Daughter**" (Dec. 2), Joanna Hogg returns to characters from her two "Souvenir" movies, a filmmaker named Julia and her mother, Rosalind; in the new film Tilda Swinton plays both women, whose relationship is tested by Julia's plan to film Rosalind—and by a visitation from a ghost.

Musicals appear in many forms, starting with Kasi Lemmons's "**I Wanna Dance with Somebody**" (Dec. 21), a bio-pic about Whitney Houston, starring Naomi Ackie; Stanley Tucci plays the record producer Clive Davis. Damien Chazelle's new film, "**Babylon**" (Dec. 23), is a cinema-centric fantasy, set in nineteen-twenties Hollywood, in the early days of talking pictures. It stars Diego Calva and Margot Robbie as aspiring actors and Brad Pitt as a famous one. Steven Soderbergh returns to direct "**Magic Mike's Last Dance**" (Feb. 10), the third film in the series, again starring Channing Tatum.

It's good news that there are documentaries featured prominently amid the season's high-profile releases. In Laura Poitras's "**All the Beauty and the Bloodshed**" (Nov. 23), the photographer Nan Goldin details her addiction to OxyContin and her quest to hold the Sackler family—owners of the drug's manufacturer, Purdue Pharma—accountable for the opioid crisis. In "**Framing Agnes**" (Dec. 2), the director Chase Joynt brings to light U.C.L.A.'s previously unpublished archive of interviews with trans people, incorporating dramatic reenactments of some discussions.

Literary adaptations are inevitable during awards season. This year's batch includes Noah Baumbach's "**White Noise**" (Nov. 25), based on Don DeLillo's 1985 satire about academia, family life, consumerism, and industrial catastrophe; Adam Driver and Greta Gerwig star. "**Women Talking**" (Dec. 2), Sarah Polley's adaptation of Miriam Toews's 2018 novel,

is set in a religious community where women who are victims of abuse organize in resistance; the cast includes Rooney Mara, Jessie Buckley, and Frances McDormand.

As ever, fantasies abound, whether freely imaginary, tethered to history, or set in playlands in between. “**Glass Onion**” (Nov. 23), Rian Johnson’s sequel to “Knives Out,” features the earlier film’s chewily accented detective, Benoit Blanc (Daniel Craig), on the trace of a killer on the private island of a billionaire (Edward Norton). “**Avatar: The Way of Water**” (Dec. 16), James Cameron’s long-anticipated sequel, is centered on the futuristic family life of the American soldier Jake Sully (Sam Worthington) and the Na’vi huntress Neytiri (Zoe Saldaña) on the planet Pandora. ♦

By Lucas Kavner

By Richard Brody

By Ali Solomon

By Michael Schulman

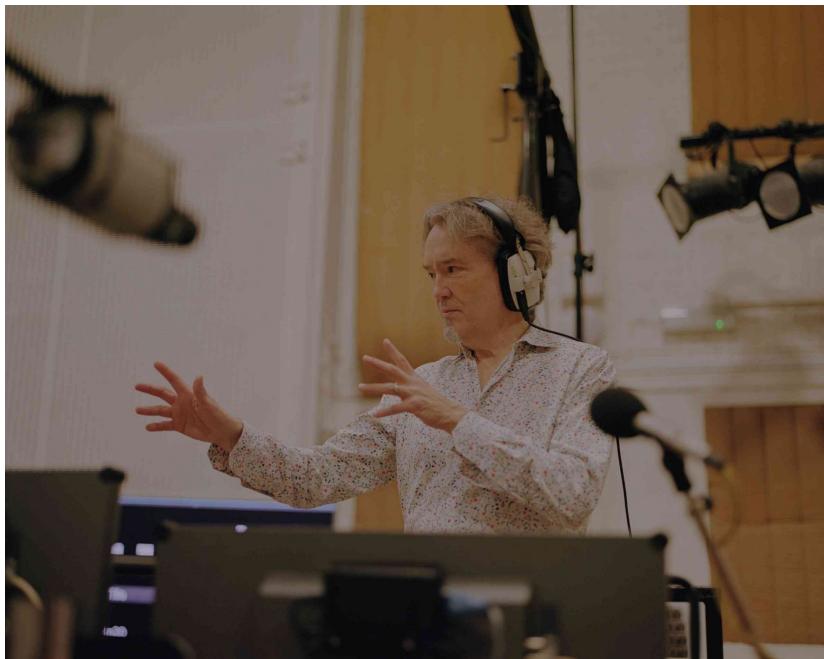
Onward and Upward with the Arts

- The Polymath Film Composer Known as “the Third Coen Brother”

The Polymath Film Composer Known as “the Third Coen Brother”

Carter Burwell’s spare, haunting scores make audiences uncomfortable.

By [David Owen](#)



In May, the composer Carter Burwell flew to London to record his score for Martin McDonagh’s new movie, “The Banshees of Inisherin.” The sessions took place in Studio Two at Abbey Road—the Beatles’ old studio. The ensemble consisted of six violins, four violas, three cellos, two double-basses, a flute, a clarinet, and a harp. Burwell, who is sixty-seven, stood on a low platform and opened an annotated copy of the music on a large stand in front of him. He has wavy gray hair and a soul patch the size of a blob of shaving cream, and he was wearing jeans and an untucked collared shirt with a flower print. “For some reason, there’s a magnet and a nail on my music stand,” he told the group. “I hope I don’t have to use them.”

“Banshees” is set on a small island off the Irish mainland in 1923. Early in the film, Colm Doherty, a fiddler, played by Brendan Gleeson, tells his longtime best friend, Pádraic Súilleabháin, played by Colin Farrell, that he no longer wants anything to do with him, because he’s so boring.

“The other night, two hours you spent talking to me about the things you found in your little donkey’s shite that day,” Colm says.

“It was me pony’s shite, which shows how much you were listening,” Pádraic replies.

Colm threatens to cut off one of his own fingers if Pádraic ever speaks to him again. (Colm owns an ominously large pair of sheep shears, which, just lying on a table, could nearly account for the film’s R rating.) When Burwell read the script, he worried that the violent moments might overshadow other elements of the story, which explores the escalating stubbornness of two aging men. Their conflict gradually takes on an almost supernatural dimension—an effect enhanced by the seeming omniscience of an ancient neighbor, and by an unexplained drowning. “Martin doesn’t do anything that isn’t harrowing,” Burwell told me. “My daughter and I had been reading the Grimms’ ‘Cinderella,’ in which the stepmother tells her daughters to cut off pieces of their feet so that they’ll fit into the slipper. And I thought, What if I treat it as a fairy tale? What if I make it seem a little less *real*? ”

Burwell is best known for his work with Joel and Ethan Coen, beginning with their first film, “Blood Simple,” from 1984. (He has been called “the third Coen brother.”) Aside from childhood piano lessons, he has no formal musical training, and he got the job writing the score for “Blood Simple” almost by accident. In the past four decades, he has composed music for many other directors, too, among them Catherine Hardwicke, Sidney Lumet, David Mamet, Mike Nichols, and Spike Jonze. A characteristic Burwell score is spare and haunting, although he has written in many styles. He adapted parts of the main theme of “Raising Arizona,” the Coens’ second feature film, from an old cowboy song that Joel Coen first heard on a Pete Seeger record. Burwell’s score for Todd Haynes’s “Carol,” about a romantic relationship between two women, set in the early nineteen-fifties, features soaring strings, woodwinds, and piano. His score for McDonagh’s previous movie, “Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri,” contains hints of gospel music and military marches. (The “Carol” and “Three Billboards” scores were each nominated for an Oscar.)

On the first day in Studio Two, McDonagh, who had just returned from a holiday in the Lake District, told Burwell, “I’ve been humming all the

tunes.” His only instruction to Burwell, he said, had been not to write anything that sounded like Irish pub music—“the easy go-to for a film like this.” Burwell’s score features the harp, an instrument so closely associated with Ireland that its image appears on the country’s coins, but there’s nothing publike about the melodies he came up with for it, which often float on a current of strings, in a way that the harpist himself called “dreamy.” The score also features a synthesized celeste, which Burwell played and recorded himself. A real celeste looks like a shrunken upright piano and sounds like tinkling bells, or a child’s xylophone; it’s the most conspicuous instrument in Tchaikovsky’s “Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy,” and in John Williams’s “Harry Potter” scores. What Burwell described to me as the “picky-plucky sounds” of the harp and the celeste created the fairy-tale effect that he was aiming for.

Studio Two’s control room is at the top of a long flight of stairs, behind a glass panel that overlooks a large, open space, where the musicians play. McDonagh sat on a gray couch in the back, watching two monitors. One showed Burwell conducting, and the other showed the corresponding movie scenes. After most takes, Burwell, over the P.A., asked for comments. Occasionally, McDonagh wanted to tone down a passage that seemed too dramatic, but mostly they agreed. (Earlier, McDonagh had told me, “Carter and I have the same kind of outlook on life. Not a movie-studio kind.”)

Toward the end of the morning, Burwell recorded the music for a scene in which Pádraic’s sister, Siobhán, played by Kerry Condon, is riding to the mainland in an open boat. Pádraic watches from the top of a cliff, and they wave to each other. After the musicians had played the passage once, McDonagh asked Burwell to come up to the control room.



Burwell worried that the violent moments in “Banshees” would overshadow other elements of the story, so he crafted a score that would make the movie seem like a fairy tale—“a little less real,” he said.

“This is a tricky one, Carter,” he said. “We’ve been working with a version where the music ends on the first wave.” In the version Burwell had just conducted, the music stopped ten seconds later. The difference was small, but it affected the emotional tone of the departure, adding emphasis to a moment that McDonagh preferred dissipate in silence. Starting the music earlier solved that problem but created a synchronization issue—a chord now arrived right before a small group of birds took flight from a pier, prematurely signalling their movement.

“It looks like it’s early by a few frames,” Burwell said. “The music can sometimes happen after the picture, but you can’t have it before.” He said that he would adjust the tempos in his hotel room that night but leave the “ink” unchanged—meaning that new scores wouldn’t have to be printed.

At lunch in the Abbey Road commissary, McDonagh asked Burwell whether he was easier to work with than the Coens.

“Honestly, with Joel and Ethan it’s all I can do to get them to pay attention,” Burwell said. “They’re in the back, reading the newspaper, and they just say, ‘Yeah.’ ”

Silent films were usually accompanied by live music, which was improvised by a pianist or an organist. (The first American movie with a dedicated orchestral score was “The Birth of a Nation,” released in 1915, but most early audiences never heard it, because it, too, had to be performed live.) Synchronized recorded sound was made possible, in the mid-twenties, by systems that mechanically connected projectors to turntables playing sixteen-inch disks, each of which ran for about eleven minutes. The first movies for which the soundtrack was printed on the film itself—in a narrow strip of spectral lines, next to the sprocket holes, which an optical reader converted to an audio signal—came a few years later.

One function of music in movies has always been to guide the audience. A clear impression you get from many movies, especially older ones, is that directors don’t always trust viewers to follow emotional cues on their own. On an airplane recently, I re-watched “The Treasure of the Sierra Madre,” which was released in 1948. The score is all exclamation marks, fluorescent highlighting, and boldfaced italicizations, and it has the effect of making Humphrey Bogart’s portrayal of a gold-maddened prospector seem even more overwrought than it would anyway. (I decompressed by watching a few “Simpsons” episodes.)

In a lecture at the Scottish Academy of Music and Drama, in Glasgow, in 2001, Burwell said that he usually urges directors to use as little music as possible, because movies, like life, are most interesting “when you don’t know what’s going on, and you’re uncomfortable about it.” Ron Sadoff, the director and founder of the screen-scoring program at N.Y.U., told me, “Carter doesn’t do what’s called Mickey Mousing, where you try to touch every little element of the film with music. His approach is much more conceptual.” In the score for “Fargo,” the Coens’ sixth film, Burwell used a Hardanger fiddle, a Norwegian instrument that has two sets of strings, one of which isn’t bowed but resonates with the other. (That choice was inspired by the Scandinavian names of some of the characters.) His goal was to help make a darkly improbable comedy seem as straightforward as a news bulletin, an effect established with the title sequence, in which a car is being towed across a white-out winter landscape, accompanied by a fiddle-and-percussion passage that swells into something like a funeral march. Ethan Coen told me, “People don’t realize how much of what they’re getting from

a movie is from the score, delivered by the composer. It's powerful, but, for the life of you, you can't say what it means."

Music is almost always one of the last elements added to a movie, and, as a consequence, the composer is often called on to address issues that the director no longer can. In 2015, Burwell wrote the score for "The Finest Hours," about an oil tanker that broke up off the coast of New England during a winter storm. In one scene, a young woman has an angry confrontation with a Coast Guard officer, who she believes has doomed her fiancé and three other sailors by sending them, in a small motorboat, to rescue the tanker's crew. "Please call them back," she begs, repeatedly. Finally, with tears in her eyes, she returns to her car, in a gathering blizzard, without putting on her coat.

Burwell said, "In preview audiences, women would raise their hands and say, 'Why does she leave the station without her coat on? I would never do that!'" That single moment caused them to unsuspend their disbelief—the character's level of anguish wasn't extreme enough to justify her oversight. It was too late to reshoot the scene, so the director turned to Burwell. "The last—and, certainly, cheapest—way to solve a problem is to have the composer adjust the emotion," Burwell told me. He was able to resolve the issue by slightly altering the score. "I added a minor seventh chord," he explained. "I had to create this extra angst, kind of juice it up, so that you could feel her blood boiling. It wasn't in the performance, but sometimes you can sell these things with the music. It sneaks into the audience through the sides of their head."

In 2008, Burwell was hired to write the music for "Twilight," based on the novel of the same name, about a romance between a teen-age girl and her high-school classmate, who turns out to be a vampire. When filming was nearly complete, it became clear from posts on social media that the book's fans, most of whom were young girls, were eager to find out what the movie would make of "Bella's Lullaby," a song that the vampire composes, on a piano, for his mortal girlfriend.

That moment hadn't made it into the script. It was added, and the task of writing "Bella's Lullaby" fell to Burwell. After several false starts, he remembered a piece he had written, a decade earlier, for his girlfriend, the

video-installation artist Christine Sciulli, who had just broken up with him. (They're married now.) He repurposed the song and wove elements of it into his score.

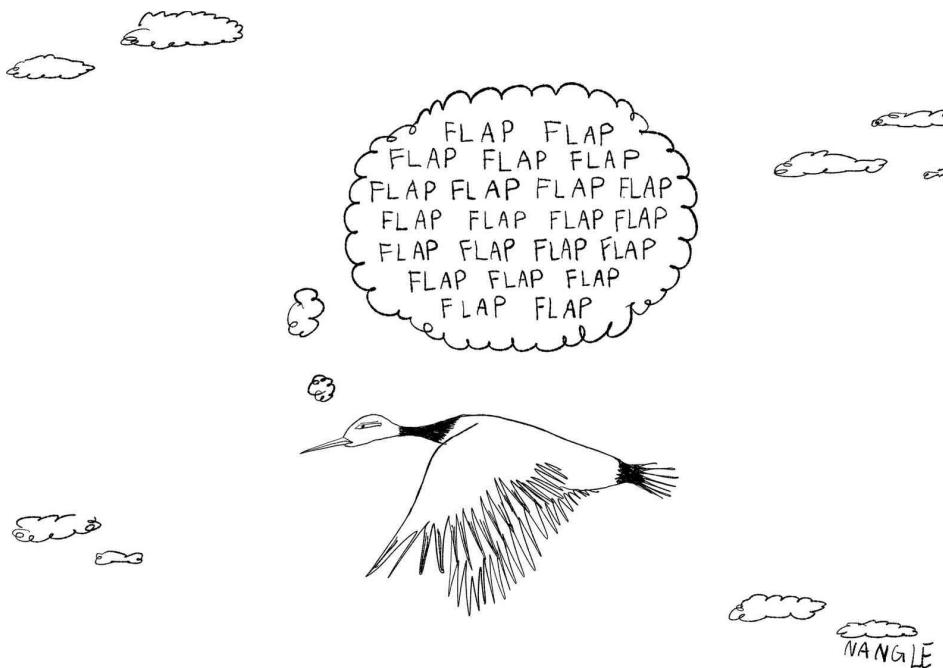
"One of the executives objected to the opening note of the melody," Burwell said. "He correctly identified it as dissonant, so he must have had a little musical training." The high note was B-flat, over A and B-natural, in a three-tone chromatic cluster—a jarring sound that evokes the pang of a tormented love affair. "It resolves immediately, but the executive thought it was too complex for twelve-year-old girls. He said, 'I don't think our audience is going to go for that.'" In response, Burwell nodded, wrote something in a notebook, and did nothing. "I had written the song for Christine, so I wasn't going to change it for this guy," he said. When the executive persisted, he thought about withdrawing from the project, or asking that his name be removed from the credits. During a brief family vacation in Maine, though, he softened. He bought a synthesizer at a music store, and, working at night, wrote half a dozen non-dissonant variations and e-mailed them to the director. He got no response. When he flew to London to record the score, the executive wasn't there, so he restored his original phrase.

"Twilight" was a surprise hit, and established an immensely profitable five-film franchise. The soundtrack went multiplatinum, and for years Burwell received e-mails from young girls who were learning to play "Bella's Lullaby" on the piano. A decade after the movie came out, the studio executive wrote Burwell to apologize, explaining that his daughter had been very young when they were making the film, and, now that she was older, he had a better understanding of the musical sophistication of vampire-curious American tweens.

Royalties from the soundtrack enabled Burwell and Sciulli to buy a house on the beach in Amagansett, near the eastern end of Long Island: weathered wood, wraparound porch, huge windows, ocean views, his-and-hers car-charging stations in the driveway. Amagansett is mainly a summer community for wealthy New Yorkers, but Burwell and Sciulli live there most of the year, and Burwell is a member of the town's volunteer fire department. They have two college-age sons and an eleven-year-old daughter.

Burwell's office, which he designed himself, is a few steps from the living room. "If I had to leave the house to work—and I know many composers who do—I would never see my family, and Christine and I would be divorced," he said. "Many of the composers I know are divorced." The location of the house is professionally advantageous, too. Directors don't hire him unless they trust him to work remotely. Studio executives don't drop by on a whim, to see how things are coming along. "I'm as far from the industry as you can be without living in the ocean," he said.

Burwell's ancestors were wealthy landowners in northern Virginia, where his surname is pronounced as though it were almost a full syllable shorter: *Burl*. In 1713, the governor of the Virginia Colony complained that, because so many members of the family served as magistrates, "there will be no less than seven so near related that they will go off the Bench whenever a Cause of the Burwells come to be tried." Carter's father, Charles, graduated from Harvard in 1939, and enrolled at the Sorbonne. When the Second World War began, he drove an ambulance in France, travelled to Shanghai by way of the Suez Canal, worked in Haiphong, then returned to the United States and joined the Navy. Early on the morning of D Day, he was on a ship four miles from Utah Beach, using a rubber relief map to brief the amphibious force that was about to go ashore. After the war, he lived in China and in Thailand, and exported brightly colored silks and other fabrics to the U.S. He eventually moved his company to New York, and, in 1953, he married Natalie Benedict, a member of the editorial staff of *Mademoiselle*.



Cartoon by Jared Nangle

“My mother’s job was tracking down writers like Truman Capote and Tennessee Williams, and getting them to deliver whatever they’d agreed to deliver,” Burwell told me. Doing that often entailed following them into Greenwich Village bars. “She loved the whole jazz scene,” Burwell went on. “She would close the bars, then go back to an apartment with all the musicians from the band, and they would just keep playing. It made a real impression on her that their work was the same thing as their fun.”

The Burwells moved to Connecticut when Carter was a year old, and both parents eventually became teachers. Carter attended a private boys’ school in Stamford, where his best friend was a boy named Steve Kraemer. “He had greasy, long hair, and when my parents first saw him they thought, Oh, no—Carter must be doing drugs,” Burwell told me. It was Kraemer who introduced him to music. “Steve played blues guitar, harmonica, piano—you name it,” he said. “But he couldn’t play them all at the same time.” Kraemer taught Burwell simple blues improvisation, turning him into a sideman.

Kraemer earned his undergraduate degree at M.I.T. and is now an astrophysicist at Catholic University. He told me that, when Burwell was in tenth grade, the father of another student gave the school a *DEC* computer terminal. “Carter announced that he was going to teach himself to use it,” he said. And he did, in part by writing a program that solved algebraic

equations. “I didn’t see a *DECwriter* again until my second year of graduate school,” Kraemer said.

The summer after high school, Burwell drove his car, at high speed, into a tree. “I owe my life to the doctor who was in the emergency room when I was brought in,” he told me. “He was an ear, nose, and throat guy, but his hobby was plastic surgery, which he was sort of teaching himself.” The doctor moved Burwell’s nose from his left cheek back to its normal position. “Another doctor told me later that my forehead, on an X-ray, looked like a box of Chiclets,” Burwell said. He remained unconscious for several days, and had to be tied down in his hospital bed, to prevent him from rolling over onto what was left of his face. “The doctors told my parents that, when the swelling went down, I probably wasn’t going to look too good unless they rebuilt everything. So my mom brought in some pictures of my old nose—and also some pictures of friends of mine whose noses she liked.”

Burwell had been admitted to Harvard several months earlier. His mother wanted him to defer for a year, but her concern about his recovery inflamed his determination to leave home. When he arrived at school, his scars were still healing, his left cheekbone had been replaced by a plastic prosthesis, and the whites of his eyes were blackish red. He had lost his sense of smell and was having trouble reading.

“I don’t remember the accident as an awful experience at all, because I was unconscious for the awful part,” he told me. “And the only reason I know I look different is that a friend of mine from high school, who was at Tufts, came to visit me—like, six months after I’d seen him last—and when I answered the door he said, ‘Is Carter here?’ ”

Chip Johannessen, who was Burwell’s college roommate for four years, told me, “Freshman year, Carter stayed in our room and listened to blues records, and catalogued them and copied them onto cassette tapes.” Burwell had thought about majoring in math but ended up in fine arts, mainly because it had few requirements. He took an animation course and used the school’s Oxberry machine to make a short film called “Help, I’m Being Crushed to Death by a Black Rectangle”—a loop in which a good guy and a bad guy shoot at each other while a train, represented by a black rectangle, repeatedly runs over a woman tied to the tracks. Another fine-arts student told me,

“This was back when student animations were little balls of yarn rolling around on a table. Carter’s films were always funny, and usually a little dirty.”

I was a year behind Burwell at Harvard, and met him on the staff of the *Lampoon*, the school’s humor magazine, to which he mainly contributed drawings. He was handsome and cool, and he never seemed to raise his voice or say cruel things about other people—traits that I found alarming at the time. (“Preternaturally serene” is how another classmate described him to me recently.) He had an older girlfriend, an art student in Boston, and he ate only peanut-butter sandwiches, butter sandwiches, and ice cream.

Eventually, he decided that he wanted to be an architect; Johannessen was admitted to Harvard Law School. But, in the spring of 1977, a few months before graduation, they saw Iggy Pop, David Bowie, and Blondie in concert, and resolved to become rock musicians instead. They rented a house on Long Island and got jobs they hated, doing diagnostics on the assembly line of a factory that made alarm equipment. One day, Burwell saw a help-wanted ad in the *Times* for a computer programmer at Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory, a nonprofit research institution whose director, James D. Watson, had shared the Nobel Prize in 1962 for discovering the structure of DNA. Burwell wrote a jokey letter in which he said that, although he had none of the required skills, he would cost less to employ than someone with a Ph.D. would. Surprisingly, the letter got him the job, and he spent two years as the chief computer scientist on a protein-cataloguing project funded by a grant from the Muscular Dystrophy Association. “Watson let me live at the lab, and he would invite me to his house for breakfast with all these amazing people,” he said. When that job ended, Burwell worked on 3-D modelling and digital audio in the New York Institute of Technology’s Computer Graphics Lab, several of whose principal researchers had just left to start Pixar.

Johannessen found work designing computer databases for Avis, Bristol Myers, and Fidelity. (Like Burwell, he had no training but was able to figure things out.) They spent many late nights at CBGB, Danceteria, the Mudd Club, and other punk-rock venues in New York. Among the people they met was Clodagh Simonds, a singer and songwriter from Ireland, who heard Burwell play a synthesizer in a rehearsal space in the Music Building, on

Eighth Avenue, which he and Johannessen were renting—and living in, illegally. “I thought, My God, he’s brilliant,” Simonds told me. “He was also absolutely the antithesis of a prima-donna type. I would read something in *Scientific American* and ask him, ‘What are fractals, exactly?’ He would take such trouble to explain.” They formed a band, and called it the Same. Johannessen, who played lead guitar, told me, “We were known as the teenage millionaires, because our consulting gigs paid us a lot of money, which we would then spend on microphones, digital delays, and other equipment.”

The Same became regular performers at CBGB; their music was described in the *Village Voice* as “minimalist trance-dance synth-pop.” Johannessen told me, “Carter had a way of playing that was very percussive, a totally different way of generating sound. One night, I heard someone call him Mr. Music—this, in a place where everyone thinks they’re a musician.” The scientists at Cold Spring Harbor allowed the band to rehearse in one of the lab’s room-size Faraday cages, which eliminated electromagnetic interference with their instruments. Burwell and Johannessen invited the scientists to parties in New York.

One of Burwell’s acquaintances in the city was Skip Lievsay, a young sound editor. Lievsay knew two brothers, Joel and Ethan Coen, who were trying to raise money to finish a film they’d written. The Coens had never made a feature-length movie, and they needed a composer who was willing to work for what might turn out to be nothing. Lievsay introduced them to Burwell, and they showed him a partial rough cut of what would eventually become “Blood Simple.”

That weekend, Burwell watched Hitchcock’s “The Birds” on TV and noticed that some of its most emotionally intense scenes had no music at all. “It was either bird sounds, edited bird sounds, or electronic creations of bird sounds—and that was a fantastic first lesson in what a film score can be,” he said. No one involved with the Coens’ project knew much about filmmaking. The brothers had rented a recording space with a piano, and, to synchronize the music to the footage, they would tell Burwell how much they needed for a particular scene, and he would start a stopwatch and begin to play. He performed the entire score himself.

Burwell viewed his involvement in “Blood Simple” as an interesting, one-off adventure; afterward, he moved to Japan to work as a computer animator. But the movie won several awards, and, when the Coens got funding for another film, they hired him again. He has described that film, “Raising Arizona,” as a Zane Grey Western set in a trailer. His score, like the script, has a sense of humor: during a scene in which Nicolas Cage’s character steals a package of diapers from a convenience store, the song playing over the speakers is a Muzak-like version of the movie’s main theme. Burwell also incorporated whistling, humming, yodelling, and a banjo. (The Coens had credibility, but their budget was still small. The banjo player was their optometrist.)

Much of Burwell’s music for the Coens provides a counterpoint to their world view. “Their writing is ironic, even cynical, and a lot of their stories are structured to torture their characters,” he told me. “So one of the roles of music in their films is to augment the humanity of those characters, and when that works it makes the humor—and the torture—more effective and consequential.” When “Raising Arizona” came out, a reviewer praised Burwell’s “yearning strings,” and that phrase became the Coens’ shorthand for injections of musical warmth. “This usually happens when the characters realize how fucked they are,” Burwell said.

Their next film, “Miller’s Crossing,” which was released in 1990, makes striking use of what’s known as diegetic music—music that can be heard by a movie’s characters as well as by its audience. There’s an extended sequence in which an Irish Mob boss, played by Albert Finney, is lying in bed in his bathrobe, smoking a cigar and listening to a 78-r.p.m. record of the sappy classic “Danny Boy.” Two hit men come looking for him, but he manages to kill them, then uses one of their submachine guns to fire at their fleeing accomplices. The sequence is horrifying and also surreally funny—an emotional juxtaposition that is accentuated by the music, which plays throughout.



"Sorry, I never know what to do with my hands."
Cartoon by Will McPhail

The Coens showed the scene to Frank Patterson, at the time the world's most celebrated Irish tenor, and he agreed to record "Danny Boy" specifically for the film. "There were places where the action deviated from the structure of the music," Burwell said. "So we'd say things like 'It would be great if you were on this vowel during that shot, and then, when the car hits the tree, if you could hit your high note and hold it until the car explodes.' " They hired an orchestra and, to conduct it, Larry Wilcox, a veteran arranger and orchestrator. "It was all done backward, by comparison with the way movie music is done nowadays," Burwell said. "Frank watched the scene on a monitor and sang along with it, using the cues we'd given him, and Larry conducted the orchestra by watching Frank, and the orchestra watched Larry. It seemed like something they would never be able to get in sync, but they did it perfectly, in two takes. Joel and Ethan and I were in awe."

When Burwell composes, he typically starts on a grand piano in his living room. "There's a keyboard in my office, but, if I have to turn something on, it feels like work," he said. The piano is a 1947 Steinway D; it was originally bought for a Columbia Records studio in New York, known familiarly as the Church. "You can hear that piano in countless recordings," he said. "By the time I bought it, from another studio, it needed some repair.

I still fret about having replaced the hammers, but they were worn almost to the wood—some say by Dave Brubeck.”

His office is equipped with modular synthesizers, computers, mixers, routers, and a Guerrini accordion. The main work area is encircled by Genelec speakers, including a subwoofer that he described to me as “painted matte black, to resemble a small nuclear bomb.” As is the case with most musicians of his generation, he has lost some hearing, mainly in the higher frequencies; he has adjusted his sound system to compensate, like a whole-room hearing aid.

Burwell’s first ideas about a score are often suggested by the script, but he seldom begins writing until there’s at least a rough cut of the film, by which point the timing of the scenes is set. “Joel and Ethan will occasionally offer me an extra second, if I need it,” he said. (Burwell told me that famous composers—Stravinsky, Schoenberg—who signed Hollywood contracts in the forties and fifties were surprised to learn that their music was supposed to fit the film, rather than the other way around.) After working with the director to determine where the music will go, he creates a complete electronic sketch, on a synthesizer.

On a video monitor in his office, Burwell played me a scene from “Banshees” in which Farrell’s character is driving milk to town in a wagon. There’s music but no dialogue. The melody, consisting mainly of flute, harp, and strings, is slow and understated. “My job is to bring you into this world,” he said. “But, if it starts to seem like it’s about the music, that’s another thing.” He showed me the scene again, with a slightly different score: “This was my first version. It’s very similar, but the chords are more definitively major.” McDonagh had found it “too warm” and “too resolved,” he said. “Martin felt—and I agreed with him—that, at this point in the film, it would be better to keep the over-all tone a little gloomier.”

Studios usually hold test screenings before the composer has finished, so the director will add a placeholder score, called “temp music.” Burwell dislikes the practice, because, he said, once directors have watched a scene with temp music it’s hard for them to imagine it any other way—a phenomenon that’s known in the business as “temp love.” Temp music can also leave traces in finished scores. “I’ll go to the theatre and think, Hmm, I’ll bet they

temped this movie with the score to ‘Gladiator,’ because that’s what it sounds like,” Burwell said. “I’ve also seen films in which I could tell that the temp music had been a piece of mine.”

For previews of “Banshees,” McDonagh used early versions of Burwell’s own melodies. The temp track included passages that didn’t make it into the final score, but Burwell said that the discarded elements had probably influenced the film—in a good way. “It’s like a classic story of how creation works,” he said. “You begin with an idea, then you throw the idea away, but the aroma of it is still in the room.”

Very little about Studio Two has changed since the late sixties. People who work at Abbey Road are reluctant to modify anything that might contain what someone described to me as “Beatle dust.” Also unchanged is the scene outside. Beatles fans still show up every day, all day long, to stride across the famous crosswalk, and to add graffiti to the wall and the gateposts, which are repainted every three months.

During part of Burwell’s recording session, I sat in a folding chair behind Everton Nelson, the first violinist and concertmaster. Burwell told me, “I say things like ‘I want it to be thrilling, and yet subdued, and then bloodcurdling’—and Everton translates it for the musicians into musician language.” Isobel Griffiths, who hired the musicians, and whom Burwell calls his fixer, said, “Carter is a god in my eyes. When I met him, in the nineties, I was terrified of him, because he was so different from other composers—from L.A., from here. He respects the musicians, he’s open to their contributions. And he’s funny.”

At the height of the pandemic, Burwell recorded the score for “The Tragedy of Macbeth,” directed by Joel Coen, in New York. He told me that he had tried to write the score exclusively for strings, to reduce the threat of virus-laden breath in the studio, but in the end it had needed some brass. “That was a challenge,” he said. The brass players sat twenty feet apart, and were divided from one another by screens. After they played, the room was kept empty for four hours while the air was circulated and filtered. For “Banshees,” no such precautions were taken.

One of the pieces that the musicians recorded in Studio Two was new even to McDonagh. Burwell said that, on the flight over, he had decided that a theme they were using in certain scenes—"for nature and mystery"—had never been fully developed. "I had nothing else to do last night, so I extended it to two minutes," he said. (Sciulli told me, "There's not a second when he's not working, even when there's no project.") Once, when he was taking time off between movies, he relaxed by enrolling in Columbia University's master's program in biotechnology.) Burwell suggested that McDonagh play the new version over the closing credits, "unless you have a big Bruce Springsteen song that you're planning to use there."

Among the musicians in Studio Two was Karen Jones, who plays first flute in the City of London Sinfonia and the London Chamber Orchestra. At one point, she asked Burwell whether a particular passage might not sound better on an alto flute, rather than on the bass flute he had written it for. ("A bass flute is like a real piece of plumbing," Burwell told me. "Some people play it vertically, because it's so heavy.") He invited Jones up to the control room to hear what they'd just recorded. "I like the bass flute up there, at the top of its range," he told her. She put on headphones. After listening, with her eyes closed, she agreed. ♦

By Janet Malcolm

By Robert A. Caro

By Patrick Radden Keefe

By Philip Gourevitch

Poems

- “Your Card Is the King of Rats”
- “Hush”

By [Martín Espada](#)

Audio: Read by the author.

We were the lawyers from Legal Aid, ready to state our case at the luncheon of the Bar Association, the white-shoe law firms, the last of the Boston Brahmins. I would peek in the windows of their townhouses in Louisburg Square to glimpse the paintings on the walls, their ancestors stiff in oils. Back at the office, refugees from the land of death squads waited for us and apologized in Spanish, fingering eviction notices in hieroglyphics. I looped my pre-looped tie around my neck and walked into lunch with Jay Rose, the street lawyer I wanted to be, who bewildered landlords like a chess grandmaster, stoic behind spectacles at the city-park games of boyhood. We were there to ask for donations, phones, fax machines, reams of paper, desks and chairs, to speak the tongue of *please* and *thank you*.

A man stood up to introduce me. He wore a pocket handkerchief. He spoke the tongue of Quincy Adams the ancestor, Roosevelt the distant cousin, grinning when he said, *I would like to introduce Mar-teen. When I say Mar-teen, I think Martini. That makes it easier for me to remember.* I waited for the inebriated chuckles to fade. I spoke of rats sniffing the milk on an infant's mouth, roaches camouflaged in the Raisin Bran like raisins with legs, ancient plumbing flooding the floors with the wrath of an ancient god. Dessert circled the table, pastry swans gliding on plates around the white tablecloth, an homage to their cousins on the pond at the Public Garden. I saw the spoons dig into the crust of swans, scooping out the cherry filling. I saw the lawyers floating away from me in a reverie of decapitated swans.

I had a law degree. I passed the bar on my first try. Now I was a magician hired for a birthday party, boys and girls infatuated with the red innards of dessert jiggling on their spoons. I dealt my magician's deck of cards: Polaroids of rats in glue traps, roaches fatter and juicier than any raisin in the cereal box, the fountain of a toilet brimming a brown soup, snapshots we passed out to judges for injunctions to bless the landlords. How I wanted to call out and amaze all the lawyers at lunch: *Is your card the king of rats? Is your card the queen of roaches? Is your card the ace of excrement?*

Spoons hung

in the air. I saw the muscles in their jaws grind to a stop, like the wheels of trains pulling into the station. Some scrutinized their hand of Polaroids, aristocrats anticipating recitation of the details at a revolutionary tribunal. Some turned their hand face down, blackjack players praying for better cards.

Some passed, never looking at the king of rats or the queen of roaches, as if to say, *I left no red fingerprints on the white door of those who fled that place.*

Amid the swans half-eaten, hearts open like valentines on the tablecloth, Jay Rose, the street lawyer I wanted to be, hypnotist of landlords, stood up before the lawyers at the luncheon and said, *We need donations, phones, fax machines, reams of paper, desks and chairs. Please and thank you.* He got it all.

By Glenn Eichler

By Eliza Griswold

By Charlie Dektar

By Helen Shaw

By [Timothy Donnelly](#)

Audio: Read by the author.

At night the sea's surface is the penetrable onyx of deep sleep.

I enter it without fear, as if to lower the input of the eye
reduces risk, and whatever I can't presently see
exists only in memory, which has been calmed by the water's

cold hypnosis, and to be here is impersonal. Only the moonlight
interrupts this near-nothingness, the play of it on the glossy swell
like a music you can feel, or like the mapping of something happening to me
on another level, something that can be understood so long

as it never finishes—and, when it finishes, there is nothing
left to understand. In the distance, other lights appear now
on the far side of the harbor, and, closer, the dull-white gull-like hulls
of a band of anchored boats rock softly, without intelligence.

Later, elsewhere, I remember it vaguely, and it feels like the most
meaningful way to go about it, as if the value of it grew
by resisting precision, and that, in coaxing particularity to glide from it,
the sea retained a unity unlike anything other than the sky

with which it had come to merge, but likewise it set itself outside
the reach of grammar, whose designs on it were not kind, and yet
what I mean by “it” isn’t even the sea anymore, but an experience
of the sea, which syllable by syllable I make the mistake of displacing.

This is drawn from “[Chariot](#).”

By Joshua Rothman

By Evan Osnos

By Andrew Marantz

By Rebecca Mead

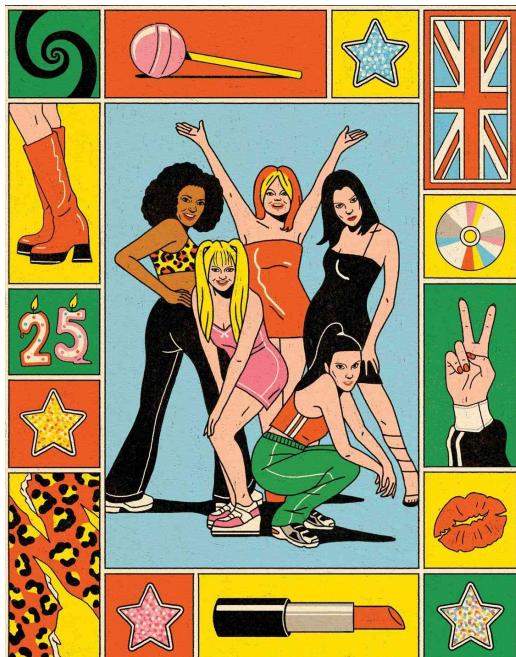
Pop Music

- [The Boundless Optimism of the Spice Girls](#)

The Boundless Optimism of the Spice Girls

A twenty-fifth-anniversary reissue of “Spiceworld” reminds us how the band encapsulated—possibly even dictated—the grinning innocence of the late nineties.

By [Amanda Petrusich](#)



In 1994, Heart Management—the father-son team of Bob and Chris Herbert, with the financier Chic Murphy—placed a classified ad in the *Stage*, a British trade rag founded in 1880 and still devoured, more than a century later, by aspiring performers looking for a shortcut to fame. The producers were hoping to assemble an all-female pop group as a counterpoint to the windswept boy bands (Take That, Boyzone) then topping the U.K. charts. The scheme was not novel, or even particularly nuanced: a gang of cute, vivacious girls, some choreography, a few rousing choruses. “R.U. 18-23 with the ability to sing/dance? R.U. streetwise, outgoing, ambitious, & dedicated?” the ad asked. The trio auditioned some four hundred women, chose five, and soon decreed them the Spice Girls. The new group moved into a three-bedroom house in Maidenhead and began the sort of rigorous yet artless performance training that’s now a hallmark of the pop-band origin

story. Each member (Melanie Brown, Melanie Chisholm, Emma Bunton, Geri Halliwell, and Victoria Adams, later Beckham) assumed a descriptive moniker (Scary Spice, Sporty Spice, Baby Spice, Ginger Spice, and Posh Spice). Chris Herbert, who was then just twenty-three, later spoke about the process as though he were creating a children's cartoon. "The main thing was to get really good, sassy, colorful, bubbly characters," he explained in the 2001 documentary "Raw Spice."

In the summer of 1996, the Spice Girls released a début album, "Spice." The dominant vibe of the boy bands of the time was a kind of grandiose romance: lovelorn bangers, sung by handsome men in loose-fitting blouses, making dramatic gestures with their hands. The Spice Girls' first single, "Wannabe," is a difficult track to describe, as it does not hew to any songwriting conventions, or to the laws of gravity. "They made all these different bits up, not thinking in terms of verse, chorus, bridge," Matt Rowe, one of their co-writers, said later. "Just coming up with all these sections of chanting, rapping, and singing, which we recorded all higgledy-piggledy." I was sixteen when "Wannabe" was released, and I recall being agog at the song's lunatic pre-chorus, which contains a nearly Joycean meditation on desire:

Yo, I'll tell you what I want, what I really, really want
So tell me what you want, what you really, really want
I wanna (hey!), I wanna (hey!), I wanna (hey!), I wanna (hey!)
I wanna really, really, really wanna zig-a-zig-ah.

There was no guise of seriousness, no pretense of circumspection, and certainly no saying what "zig-a-zig-ah" might entail. "Wannabe" is loud, pure, and giddy. In 2014, a team of Dutch research scientists suggested that it might be the catchiest song ever recorded. The track appears to include instruments, but whatever is happening musically is rendered irrelevant by the Girls' bursts of jaunty rapping and hype-man whoops. The Spice Girls were not the most exacting performers, but they were brassy and buoyant. In the video for "Wannabe," even Posh Spice—forever bedecked in a tiny Gucci dress and strappy heels, rarely smiling in photos—bounds around like a toddler who has got hold of some chocolate doughnuts.

In 1996, there was plenty of room on the pop charts for whimsy; the most popular song of the year was a bouncy remix of “Macarena.” In a few years, the Zeitgeist would bend back toward wounded male earnestness—Creed’s “With Arms Wide Open,” 3 Doors Down’s “Kryptonite”—but, for a brief moment, every time “Wannabe” came on the radio, life resembled a teen-age slumber party, where some intrepid attendee had pinched a bottle of peach schnapps, and there was a very long list of lame adults to prank call.

Though “Wannabe” had all the markings of a one-off hit, “Spice” generated three Top Five singles in the U.S., and the Spice Girls became a global phenomenon, preaching girl power—a vague marketing notion, even then—and a boundless, unquestioning jocularity. In 1997, the group released a second album, “Spiceworld.” It set a record for the fastest-selling album by a girl group, with seven million copies shipped in the first two weeks. The band travelled to South Africa to perform a charity concert, and met with Nelson Mandela. “You know, these are my heroes,” Mandela told a scrum of reporters. “It’s one of the greatest moments in my life.”

“Spiceworld” is now twenty-five years old. On the occasion of its anniversary, the album is being reissued with bonus tracks, B-sides, and live recordings from the band’s 1997-98 tour, all culled from the Virgin Records archive. The record includes both a demo and a remix of “Step to Me,” which was originally obtainable only by twisting twenty pink soda tabs off promotional cans of Pepsi and trading them in for a CD single, and something called “Spice Girls Party Mix,” a fifteen-minute medley of the group’s up-tempo hits, somehow made even more up-tempo. (I found it difficult to listen to without wanting to submerge my head in ice water, simply for the quiet.) The live material is more vibrant, though it might leave a listener craving lights, costumes, and dancing; the Spice Girls still work best as a multisensory presentation.

“Spiceworld” does not attempt to transcend “Spice” but, rather, to expand upon it in a lateral way. As recording technology has evolved, pop production has become more impermeable, and fingerprints tend to be erased or smoothed over. “Spiceworld” is the sort of pop record that doesn’t really get made anymore: sentimental, infinitely palatable, but also plainly imperfect, with wobbly vocals and canned backing tracks. None of these songs are especially adventurous. (The most stylistically ambitious moment

on “Spiceworld” is the weepy breakup ballad “Viva Forever,” which includes a bit of flamenco-esque guitar.) The Girls’ limitations are still central to the record’s appeal.

From the start, the Spice Girls’ mission was to spread a kind of anodyne, generalized positivity; in 1997, this may have seemed like a timeless goal, but, twenty-five years later, it’s probably what makes “Spiceworld” feel the most dated. Naïveté of this sort is almost impossible to access now, in an era in which we are constantly reminded of suffering, both planetary and human. In the music video for “Spice Up Your Life,” the album’s first single, the Spice Girls steer a spacecraft through a post-apocalyptic cityscape. An icy gray rain is falling. Faces are wan, despairing. Prisoners nod off against the bars of their cells. The Girls sing:

When you’re feelin’ sad and low
We will take you where you gotta go
Smilin’, dancin’, everything is free
All you need is positivity.

The idea that optimism can undo despair is sweet, and maybe sometimes true, but it no longer feels like a very helpful message. Perhaps the group knew this then. As you watch the video, it’s easy to presume that the Girls are about to transform the streets with their upbeat attitudes, but the ship keeps simply drifting overhead. (It’s tempting to read this as a metaphor for futility, but to search too deeply for meaning is, of course, antithetical to the Spice Girls project.)

In 1998, Halliwell (Ginger Spice) departed the group, announcing, through her lawyer, “Sadly I would like to confirm that I have left the Spice Girls. This is because of differences between us.” The remaining members got to work on solo records. The band—without Halliwell—released a third and final album, “Forever,” in 2000. Since then, artists such as Adele and Haim have cited the Spice Girls as influential, and there are echoes of the group’s music in K-pop acts such as Girls Generation and Blackpink, and in so-called girl-boss feminism, in which the pursuit of power is reconfigured as righteous. But the band’s greatest legacy may be the way in which it encapsulated—possibly even dictated—the grinning innocence of the late nineties. Empowerment anthems, once omnipresent on the pop charts, have

slowly given way to admissions of helplessness or self-incrimination; even Taylor Swift's most recent single, "Anti-Hero," contains a moment of radical self-doubt. ("It's me, hi, I'm the problem, it's me," Swift sings.) In this way, "Spiceworld" is a comforting evocation of a bygone era, in which we could still declare ourselves magnificent without rolling our eyes. ♦

By David Remnick

By Helen Shaw

By Glenn Eichler

By Sarah Larson

Postscript

- [George Booth Took In Life and Laughed](#)

George Booth Took In Life and Laughed

The cartoonist—who depicted dogs, porch-sitters, mechanics, cave-dwellers, bath-takers, military men, yokels, and churchgoers—worked and lived with uncontrollable self-amusement.

By [Emma Allen](#)



“Life is hard and damned unfair!” the cartoonist George Booth liked to recite, in a booming voice, and then—*guffaw!*—crack up. It was a line he’d first heard from his former boss at the consortium of trade publications—*Rubber World*, *Modern Tire Dealer*, *Fast Food*—where Booth served as art director before setting up camp in the pages of *The New Yorker*, in 1969. Editors would come skulking into the boss’s office, begging for deadline extensions, only to be bawled out. Booth, meanwhile, was in there because he liked to take naps on the boss’s couch, and to enjoy the show.

Booth, who died this week, at ninety-six (one year younger than this magazine), was a man who took in life, drew it up, and then laughed and laughed. A brief biography: He was born in the boonies of Missouri, a Depression-era kid with teachers for parents, who passed on to him their

cheeky sense of humor. Ma called Pa Billy, Pa called her Bill, the boys called her Maw Maw; we know her best as her cartoon avatar, Mrs. Ritterhouse, who contractually could appear only in the pages of *The New Yorker* (rights the magazine did not negotiate for, say, the Addams Family). After high school, Booth was drafted into the Marines, and apparently hoped that service would lead to a career in cartooning. As many of his fellow-troops headed home from Pearl Harbor, he reënlisted; he'd been offered a position drawing for *Leatherneck*, the Marine Corps magazine.

He married Dione Babcock—who died just a few days before Booth—after seeing her in an all-women stage production of “Twelve Angry Men.” (You’ll never guess what they retitled it.) The couple lived in Stony Brook, on Long Island, until they resettled in Brooklyn, in the apartment of their daughter, Sarah. There, Sarah magnanimously coexisted with Booth’s “studio”—towers of sketches and doodles and marked-up newspapers which slowly encroached on her living room.

I met Booth about five years ago, when I became *The New Yorker*’s cartoon editor, the fourth that Booth had worked with at the magazine. He entered my office on his first day of submitting cartoons to his new, deeply intimidated boss and brandished his cane, looming (inevitable, at six feet three) over my desk. I quaked. “You are a ray of sunshine!” he hollered, and then let out that characteristic *guffaw!* I’ve always imagined that the lines of Booth’s drawings ended up so wobbly because of the uncontrollable self-amusement of their maker.



Booth had come in from the anteroom where cartoonists waited, and in which he would meticulously rework his submissions—move a dog here, add a car tire there—by Scotch Taping bits of cut-up drawings over the cartoons he'd presumably been happy with when he left the house. But, despite this frenzy of adhesion, he always had time for a cartoonist seeking encouragement or advice. He was a Pied Piper to many—not only to aspiring artists but also to neighborhood kids, who'd trail him at block parties, begging him to draw something with sidewalk chalk. He was boundlessly generous to those in his wake; after one visit I made to him and Sarah, he chivalrously insisted on walking me to the door, then had to be Socratically persuaded not to walk me to the subway, as he was in his pajamas.

For *New Yorker* readers, the name George Booth immediately conjures a world of insanely named (Reverend Dr. Clapsattle? Judy Klemesrud? Youbetcha?) porch-sitters, mechanics, cave-dwellers, bath-takers, military men, yokels, and churchgoers. The Booth universe is a detritus- and cat- and bull-terrier-packed place that his admirers have gleefully revisited over the years. The reams of fan letters he received during his long tenure included at least one proposal of marriage.

In the days after 9/11, when a return to normal life felt unimaginably hard, Booth supplied the sole “cartoon” in the issue following the attacks: a drawing of Mrs. Ritterhouse, her fiddle on the floor, her eyes closed in prayer, a cat nearby covering its face with its paws. Booth was only nine when he joined the real Maw Maw for his first “chalk talk” on the stage of a Methodist church in Missouri, scribbling amusing pictures while she monologued to a crowd of pious biddies. Her advice: “You stand there and act like you know something, whether you do or not!” The day I met Booth, I copied that maxim onto a Post-it and stuck it to my office wall, where it remains, suddenly inert without the accompanying *guffaw!* ♦



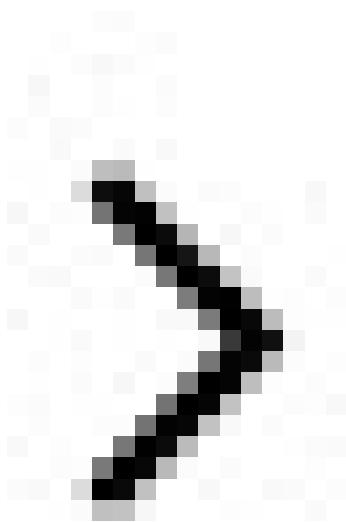
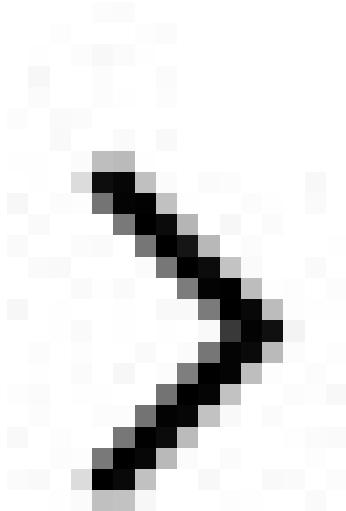
“Write about dogs!”
Cartoon by George Booth



"If I die first, you should remarry. If you die first, I'll get a dog."
Cartoon by George Booth



"At this point, there is a lot of pent-up demand for new cars."
Cartoon by George Booth



By Janet Malcolm

By Robert A. Caro

By Patrick Radden Keefe

By Philip Gourevitch

Profiles

- [Emma Thompson's Third Act](#)

Emma Thompson's Third Act

The actress and screenwriter takes on a musical.

By [John Lahr](#)



Emma Thompson has what she calls “the habit of continuity,” an impulse hardwired into her by her parents, Phyllida Law and Eric Thompson, who were both actors and children from broken families. Thompson, who has been dubbed a Presbyterian in the high church of celebrity, still lives on the West Hampstead street where she grew up. She shuttles between London and a lush remote glen above Loch Long, in Scotland—where, in 1959, her parents paid three hundred pounds for a cottage—which was the rural idyll of her childhood. Those two places provide her with an “unassailable context” that protects her, she said, from her “capacity for self-deception.” She added, “I’m surrounded by people I’ve known since I was a child. They’re not going to put up with me being grand.”

Her road in London is a sloping quarter mile of comfortable semidetached houses, a football field away from the swankier dwellings across noisy Finchley Road. Among those currently residing there are Thompson’s extended family: her now ninety-year-old mother; her informally adopted son, Tindyebwa Agaba, and his wife, He Zhang; and a collection of A-team

actors, most of whom she's worked with through the years—Imelda Staunton, Jim Carter, Derek Jacobi, Jim Broadbent. “We’re terrible gossips, but ‘gossip’ in the sense that Phyllis Rose described it, the first step on the ladder to self-knowledge,” Thompson said, adding, “Gossip is discussion about life’s detail. And in life’s details are all the little bits of stitching that you need to hold it to-fucking-gether.”

The somnolent street has no distinguishing architectural features until you come to a house whose overgrown front garden is dominated by an eye-catching pink-and-white bathtub full of plants, with a mannequin’s shower-capped head protruding at one end and a pair of shapely wooden legs dangling over the edge at the other. This gesture of caprice—a whimsical raspberry blown at the sedateness of the surroundings—sits among an equally droll collection of miniature stone animals: frogs, turtles, cats, dogs, and a lone bird affixed to the garden wall. The tableau, which is Phyllida Law’s playful creation, offers a clue to her daughter’s blithe spirit. Asked once what was the most important thing her parents had taught her, Thompson replied, “To laugh in the face of disaster.”

The first of fourteen axioms in “Thompson’s Theatrical Laws,” a typed memo composed by Thompson’s father, which hangs in his daughter’s guest bathroom, is “It is better to have a hit than a flop.” On the overcast October day, in 2021, when Thompson welcomed me into her living room for the first time, she was hard at work concocting a commercial stage extravaganza, a musical version of “Nanny McPhee,” which is scheduled to open in the West End in 2023. Thompson wrote and starred in the two film iterations—“Nanny McPhee” (2005) and “Nanny McPhee and the Big Bang” (2010)—which were based on the [Nurse Matilda](#) book series, by Christianna Brand, and grossed two hundred and sixteen million dollars at the box office. She had now spent five years developing the musical with the composer Gary Clark (of “Sing Street”), who had provided a kind of Victorian punk sound, which she described as a “cross between the Tiger Lillies and Tom Waits’s ‘Swordfishtrombones.’”

Thompson was writing the book and co-writing the lyrics with Clark. As she handed me a mug of tea featuring a photograph of the Queen and the motto “I eat swans,” she said that she was considering whether to direct the production herself. It would be a herculean task, made even more daunting

by the fact that Thompson had never directed a musical, or anything else. She'd been seeking advice from an array of theatrical high rollers, including [Stephen Sondheim](#), or "the Old Man of the Mountain," as he referred to himself in their correspondence. "Whatever you decide, good luck," Sondheim e-mailed her a few weeks before he died, that November. "And remember what Larry Gelbart said: 'What I would wish Hitler is that he be out of town with a musical.' "

Why did Thompson want to climb this particularly forbidding theatrical mountain? She didn't need the money or the acclaim. Her obsession seemed to be personal. The idiom of Thompson's storytelling in the musical, which involves puppets and possibly ventriloquism, as well as winking outlandishness, was directly linked to her father's work, decades earlier, on the successful BBC children's program "The Magic Roundabout." Eric Thompson, who began working as a butcher's apprentice at thirteen before finding his calling as an actor and a director, was an autodidact. He reimagined a French stop-motion series featuring a collection of animal characters, creating new narratives for them and injecting his dry wit into daily five-minute installments that aired from 1965 to 1977. The show attained cult status in Britain, at its peak reaching eight million viewers a night. "Eric believed that children were adults who just hadn't lived as long," Thompson told me. "He didn't talk down to them. He'd use phrases like 'hoist on your own petard' and would get letters from irate parents going, 'You shouldn't use this sort of language with children.' He would say, 'I'm not writing for children. I'm writing for people.' " With "Nanny McPhee," Thompson had the same mission.

While her daughter's cat napped on the window seat, she played me a snatch of one song, which asked a question surely not raised before on the musical stage: "Is it wrong to eat a baby?" The song continued, "'Cause they're pointless little creatures / And they just get in the way / Their doughy little features / Will depress you every day." Thompson let the rollicking number play, then closed her computer. "I'm telling my agent I'm not doing any filming," she said. "I'm just gonna focus on this."

Nanny McPhee is a nanny with mystical powers, an angel of repair, who takes on a family with seven children who have scared off all other babysitters and makes order out of domestic anarchy, and whose own

blemishes—a snaggle tooth and facial warts—disappear in the process. She is a sort of dowdy Lone Ranger whose silver bullet is the harmony that she leaves behind her. Her runic mantra is “When you need me / But do not want me / Then I must stay. / When you want me / But no longer need me / Then I have to go.” Although Thompson claims not to recognize herself in Nanny McPhee (“She’s the opposite of me—a Zen mistress, a wholly balanced individual,” she told me), the character is, in many ways, her avatar.



“He locked himself in his room, boss, and he won’t come out.”
Cartoon by Frank Cotham

McPhee’s adventures playfully confront not only Thompson’s social concerns—justice, civic responsibility, community, female agency—but the core of her personality. Like McPhee, Thompson is a shape-shifter. Most recently, she inhabited two radically different personae. Beefed up in a fat suit and Storm Trooper drag, she is almost unrecognizable as the virago Miss Trunchbull, the commandant-slash-headmistress of Crunchem Hall, in a rumbustious movie version of the musical of Roald Dahl’s “[Matilda](#)” (which will begin streaming on December 25th). (Trunchbull is the latest in a line of Thompson’s bravura grotesques which includes the hard-shouldering Baroness von Hellman, in “Cruella,” and the four-eyed Professor of Divination Sybill Trelawney, in the “Harry Potter” franchise.) And, in “Good Luck to You, Leo Grande,” a performance that ranks among her best, Thompson plays an inhibited widow whose stifled life has left her a

stranger to her own body and to herself, and who hires a sex worker to help her live out her sexual desires. In the film's final beat, Thompson stands naked before a hotel mirror, contemplating the lines and folds of her then sixty-two-year-old body. (She is now sixty-three.) Offscreen, Thompson joked about herself as a "Lucian Freud pinup," and confessed to a "lifelong shame and non-acceptance of my own body, which grieves me deeply, but there it is." Onscreen, however, the scene plays as a poignant flash of revelation. "It's a neutral gaze. It's not approval—'Oh my God, I look great.' And it's not, 'Oh my God, I look horrible.' It's, 'That's my body. And I know that it can bring me joy,'" she told the *Washington Post*.

Joy is a choice, and a subject that came up when Thompson took me across the street to meet her mother. Law has had Parkinson's since 2015, but her charisma is still palpable behind her halting speech. Like the bathtub in her garden, everything in her home broadcasts jollity. Running diagonally across the inside panels of the front door is packing tape marked "Fragile" in bold red lettering. Above the bath is a sign that Law designed when someone stole a figurine from her garden: an image of herself with a witch's hat and a putty nose and the caption "*Please Return the Children's Statue Otherwise Curses Will Occur.*"

Thompson told me that, when she was in her twenties, "I was domestically unbound, so I spent a lot of time with my mother, and our relationship moved sideways, away from the typical mother-daughter thing." That collegial bond was apparent in their forthright banter. Asked if she'd ever worried about anything relating to Thompson when she was a child, Law paused, and said, "Probably boys. You have to have a boyfriend that fits."

"But I did lose my virginity at fifteen and didn't tell you," Thompson replied.

"You wouldn't tell your mother that," Law said, sipping a glass of the wine that Thompson had brought.

"I told Eleanor"—a cousin of Law's—"who was more available for comment than my, as I thought, deeply upright mother," Thompson said. "And then you took me to the most extraordinary gynecologist, who was in her nineties, and who sat in front of me in this office and said, 'What do you

think the birth-control pill was invented for?’ And I said, ‘To stop people from having babies.’ ‘No, that’s not the answer I’m looking for. Try again.’ I said, ‘I don’t know. Does it do something else?’ And she said, ‘Yes, it allows people to have sex for joy and pleasure.’ That is a ninety-year-old woman speaking to a fifteen-year-old girl. That’s incredible.”

On the way out, Thompson guided me through her mother’s bathroom, which was festooned with photographs. She pointed to one of herself at Cambridge in a black academic gown. “This is me at graduation,” she said. “You were supposed to have black shoes, and I didn’t have any. My shoes were tap shoes. The hall floor was made of marble, so I made quite a lot of noise.”

“We were always looking for occasions to laugh,” Thompson said of herself and her younger sister, Sophie. But amid the comedy there were also tragedies, the gravest and most character-shaping of which involved her father’s health. When Thompson was eight, Eric, then thirty-eight, had a serious heart attack. Ten years later, he suffered a severe stroke that left him half-paralyzed. “I felt a tremendous amount of anxiety,” Thompson recalled. She and her sister were “not allowed to have rows or misbehave. We were not allowed to be angry,” she said. Sophie retreated into acting and art-making, Emma into books. “I read literally all the time. I was all words. All words,” Thompson said.

Eric himself “wasn’t morose, but he was silent,” she said. “When he was in the house, he’d either have his back to us or be watching football. When he engaged with us, it was heavenly.” She went on, “He was very gifted, so desired. Our need for him was intense, and we didn’t get much of him, really.” (When asked what Eric liked doing with his daughters, Law said, “Not enough.”) And, as loving and attentive a mother as Law was, according to Thompson, she “could never say the P-word.” Pride, for her, was hubris. As a result, for the best part of her coming of age Thompson felt, she said, only “partially seen.” To get her father’s attention, she tried “to be witty, to return his wit. The love of words was a real connection.” Another strategy was to excel at school. When she received excellent O-level results, she called her father in Los Angeles, where he was directing a play. In response, he wrote her a letter:

Darling Em— . . . You don't need me to tell you that you have a very good brain and are highly intelligent . . . but you also know how to use it, and that's vital to a really lively intellect. I'm sure all of your exam papers had originality of one sort or another and you know how I go on about the importance of that. I think you also know that Ma and I are very proud of you but to fuss about that or go on about it is a bit fulsome, if you know what I mean, and I think it is enough for you to know that you are quietly understood.

After his stroke, Eric lost language. When he came home from the hospital, the only words he could say were "fuck" and "shit." Using flash cards, Thompson worked with her father all day, every day, for an entire summer. "I was fierce with him," she said. "Once, I must have pushed him a bit too hard. He was weeping slightly. He said—this struck me to the core—'I can't do it, Emma.' I said, 'You can, you can, you *can*.' That's when I thought, Everything is upside down." Eric's death, in 1982, when Thompson was twenty-three, was a "cataclysmic loss," she said, adding, "He left no money. We all had to earn our livings from then on."

Thompson doesn't remember having wanted to be in show business as a girl. At fifteen, she contemplated signing up with the International Voluntary Service. When she was seventeen, her parents sent her to the Vocational Guidance Association for aptitude tests. The V.G.A.'s suggested careers, in order of preference, were: social services ("e.g., Probation Service"), teaching ("After some experience you could well aim for an appointment as Housemistress or Headmistress, etc."), and dramatic art ("This could lead to your exploring opportunities on the Production side of such an association as the BBC"). The report went on, "You should certainly cultivate your writing in your spare time, for this could become a profitable hobby."

During the sisters' years at the prestigious Camden School for Girls, Sophie was the actress—she dropped out at fifteen to begin her professional career, starring in the TV miniseries "A Traveller in Time"—and Emma was the academic highflier, who appeared in only one school production. Her final exam results made her "one of the top students in the country" in English literature, according to the school's current administrator. By then, Thompson had already tried her hand at sketch-writing, producing material for a charity show with the boys at the nearby University College School.

Her writing partner was Martin Bergman, who, when Thompson went to Cambridge, in 1978, was the president of Footlights, the university's renowned theatre club. "He just got me straight in and said, 'This girl's funny. She can do funny,'" she recalled.

Thompson's parents attended the Footlights Christmas pantomime, "Aladdin," and were stunned. "You just looked at her and thought, My God, where did she hide that?" Law said. At one point, Eric Thompson left his seat and walked to the stage. "He wanted to confirm that it was her," Law said. "He had no idea she could do anything of that sort." Even to her contemporaries, Thompson seemed to emerge fully formed as a performer. "She stood out like a good deed in a naughty world," the comedian and actor Stephen Fry wrote in his memoir. (Thompson coaxed Fry to join the Footlights; she also introduced him to his future comedy partner Hugh Laurie, with whom she was stepping out.) "There was no doubt that Emma was going to go the distance," Fry told me. "In fact, we used to write sketches for her to be in, and we always had a private joke because the surname of whoever she was playing would be Talented." By the end of her second year at Cambridge, Thompson had acquired a London agent.

In 1981, the year she graduated, a Cambridge Footlights Revue production called "The Cellar Tapes" won the first Perrier Comedy Award, at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. "Wears baggy trousers . . . refuses to be stereotyped," Thompson's program note read. Onstage, she capered as a Sondheim chanteuse, lampooning "Send in the Clowns" ("Just as you think / I'm stuck in G / I suddenly speed up the lyric / and end up in C"), and spouted clipped vowels from a chaise longue, as the invalid Victorian poet Elizabeth Barrett beside her suitor, Robert Browning (Fry), in a spoof of "The Barretts of Wimpole Street." "Emma was the secret sauce. She brought it together," Fry said. The revue subsequently toured England and Australia. "We weren't alternative," Thompson said. "We were posh cunts, basically, who didn't know anything. I use the word because we took the Footlights up to Bradford and played the university. We came on, and they just shouted, 'Cunt! Cunt!', all the way through the performance." She added, "They threw cans of beer. We were shell-shocked."

Nonetheless, Thompson and her cohorts were picked up almost immediately for "Alfresco," a short-lived TV comedy series, which brought Thompson

into contact with a more eclectic crew of talented funnymen, including Robbie Coltrane and Ben Elton. At the time, her ambition was to become a sort of British Lily Tomlin, writing and performing her own characters, but the siren song of alternative comedy, which was just emerging in Britain, lured her briefly into standup. “Middle-class people didn’t do standup,” Elton said. “It was very much seen as a working-class art form. It took place, traditionally, in workingmen’s clubs. It was almost exclusively male-dominated.” He added, “We found ourselves together in Croydon, appearing on the same bill. I think it was her début. She did a routine about thrush, talking about the various flavors you might choose to apply to your vaginal areas. She was big and bold.” Thompson recalled of the performance, “It was my twenty-fifth birthday. I did the first forty-five minutes. Then Ben, a far more seasoned comedian, did the second half. We took our bows together at the end, and I felt accepted. Someone from the audience came up afterward and said it wasn’t often he heard a woman being funny. Then, on the train home, we divided the cash. I got sixty pounds in a brown envelope, and I cannot stress how much it meant. I was economically independent. I could live on words.”

Thompson’s standup routine was one of the first to bring women’s issues into Britain’s comic arena. “Women haven’t been allowed to make jokes about themselves,” she told the press. “It’s been the men who have made the jokes about us, jokes we haven’t liked. And I’m fed up with it.” She had her own theories about gender-based storytelling. “The joke is a patriarchal form of humor, which basically requires you to pay attention, prepare to laugh, then laugh, whether you are amused or not,” she said, during a talk at Cambridge. “It’s quite a tough form. There is no spontaneity.” Whereas the joke was like the male orgasm, she argued, female humor was a simulacrum of the female orgasm, “with no need to go to all this ejaculation. . . . You simply don’t know when it is going to happen and it can go on and on and on or be over terribly quickly.”

Standup, however, required a kind of self-exposure that played against Thompson’s strengths: her humor was observational, not confrontational or confessional. “If she’s going to try and get laughs, she’s an actress. It will be in character,” said Humphrey Barclay, who directed Thompson’s first solo show, “Short Vehicle,” at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, in 1983. In 1984, at a Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament rally that she was helping to

coördinate, Thompson stood at the base of Nelson's Column, in Trafalgar Square, in front of more than a hundred and fifty thousand protesters, and did a five-minute comedy monologue. "Absolutely the worst moment I ever had," she said, recalling a woman who came up afterward and hissed, "If you can't say something sensible, *shut up!*" "I just *died*. I would have been quite happy for a bomb to drop on me immediately."

The failure taught her that she was "just not cut out for standup." But, as it happened, she didn't have to fight for another space at the entertainment table. When Barclay produced a half-hour sketch-comedy TV special based on her Edinburgh show, it caught the attention of the controller of BBC 1, Michael Grade. "He rang and said, 'I assume you've got a series,'" Barclay recalled. "I said, 'No, nobody's interested.' And he said, 'I'll have it for the BBC.'" By the time Thompson took up that project, in 1987, she had sung and danced in the West End, in the musical "Me and My Girl," and starred in the BBC miniseries "Tutti Frutti" and "Fortunes of War," two performances for which she later won a *bafta* award. She was Britain's golden girl, short-listed among the "Women of the Year," and one of the first sightings in British entertainment of a new kind of woman: thinking, sparky, unapologetic, secure in herself and her desires. "I deeply admired her combination of intelligence and silliness," Lucy Prebble, a playwright and currently an executive producer and a co-writer of HBO's "Succession," said. "She's a literary polymath, but without taking herself too seriously. That's a cultural role we rarely allow women." No matter how parlous or hilarious the circumstances of her characters, Thompson radiated a subliminal solidity, "a sort of 'fuck it' that is the opposite of neurosis," as Prebble put it.

As a teen-ager, Caitlin Moran, the London *Times* columnist and author, was captivated by Thompson's daring. "If you were a woman and trying to succeed in the eighties, you had to pretend you were one of the guys," she said. "You've got to come in with a cigarette and go, 'Fuck you, Dexter.' Super-bitch, super-powerful, out-boy the boys. Somewhere deep inside, Emma was so confident in who she was that she didn't have to present as an eighties business bitch." Moran tore out of the *Radio Times* a photograph of Thompson pulling "a slightly silly face" and pasted it at the center of the "god wall," in the room she shared with her sisters. When she was fifteen, and about to make a life-changing trip from Wolverhampton to interview for

a “young reporter” position at the London *Observer*, she stared at the picture until she reached what “seemed like the only logical and correct conclusion.” Moran took Thompson’s photo off the wall and ate it. “It’s, like, I’ll have her in me. I will be *that* girl. I went down to London and slammed the interview,” she said.

The BBC gave the twenty-eight-year-old Thompson her own series—carte blanche over six half hours of comedy. Thompson dubbed what followed her “Hedgehog Summer.” She put in ten-hour days, trying to come up with three hours of material. The schedule was gruelling and unmooring. “I locked her in a small office in my scruffy offices near Regent’s Park,” Barclay said. “She says she would emerge crying. She was pretty vulnerable.” Her working title for the project was “A Big Mistake,” and she charted it in her diary:

June 20: I can’t do this. Why am I doing it? . . .

July 20: Dreadful day. Worked until 10 p.m. Nothing. Beyond belief awful.

August 20: Somebody help me. . . .

September 20: None of it’s funny. None of it. I want to die.

The completed series was a variety show, whose musical numbers, sketches, and monologues ventured into the then comic terra incognita of sexual harassment, auto-cannibalism, madness, and droit du seigneur, edited together with no laugh track and no narration. “Thompson,” which was one of the first independent productions on the BBC, aired in prime time, opening in the wake of Thompson’s extraordinary double *bafta* win. There was a lot of heat around the show, which, as Barclay said, was expected by some to “change the face of light entertainment.” Instead, it changed Thompson. The show was a flop. She called it “one of the most seminal experiences of my life.” She had expected controversy but not savagery. “In the world of broadcast comedy, there’s nothing angrier than an audience which doesn’t think you’re funny,” Barclay said. “*that will teach you thompson*,” “*curtains for thompson*,” and “*comedy of errors from thompson*” were some of the headlines that greeted her. “It’s like having your skin

pulled off,” she said, citing the “intense misogyny” that the show seemed to elicit from its critics. “Some male reviewers referred to it as ‘man-hating,’ I guess because so many of the sketches were from a female P.O.V. and not always flattering about male behavior,” she went on. “It felt like a monumental failure, but, of course, it was just what it was—something by a young writer that was good in parts and largely experimental. I learned to shut up and get on with the next thing.” Nonetheless, she never wrote another comedy sketch or monologue. “It’s not really her forte,” the director Richard Eyre said. “She’s not a sprinter. She’s a long-distance runner.”

“I never thought ahead about work as a career—how can you do that?” Thompson said. “It’s just one job after another, and luck.” Kenneth Branagh, with whom she co-starred in “Fortunes of War,” turned out to be her luck. Thompson remembers the moment on the set of “Fortunes” when she first fell for him. On a break between takes during a night shoot, Branagh tried to amuse her by singing in his slightly falsetto voice. “I burst into tears because he sounded exactly like my father singing on ‘The Magic Roundabout,’ ” she said. Branagh was reminiscent of Eric Thompson in other ways, too. He created the same seclusive climate around himself, wore a carapace of privacy, which Thompson compared to a walnut: “hard to pry open.” His work-driven absences were also a reiteration of her father’s comings and goings. Branagh had to be fetched—a frustration and an excitement that were familiar to Thompson.



"Would you recommend this to read on the subway so someone hot and interesting sees me reading it and thinks I'm hot and interesting and two to five years later we name our kids after the main characters? Or more of a beach read?"
Cartoon by Emily Bernstein

"He was incandescent with ambition and performance energy," she said. His dynamism made him both alluring and hard to wrangle. "Like two mating lobsters, we clashed claws," Thompson said of their volatile two-year courtship. In "Thompson," they tapped and sang "Have a Little Faith in Me," but, offscreen, Branagh's infidelities made it difficult for Thompson to keep the faith. "The Ken stuff put her through the wringer," Barclay recalled. "She had a three-hour cry on my shoulder about what a brute Ken was. And then, six weeks later, she said, 'And we're getting married. Isn't it lovely?'"

In the race for fame, no British theatrical since Noël Coward had got off the blocks as fast as Branagh. At twenty-one, he was a hit in the West End; at twenty-three, he was the youngest actor ever to play Henry V with the Royal Shakespeare Company, drawing comparisons to Laurence Olivier; at twenty-six, he co-founded the star-studded Renaissance Theatre Company with David Parfitt; at twenty-eight, he published his autobiography. In 1989, the year he and Thompson married, Branagh was nominated for Academy Awards as both actor and director for his screen version of "Henry V." The marriage elevated the couple to the pinnacle of the British talentocracy. "I was embarrassed largely by the press version of our marriage," Thompson said. "We didn't present as glamorous in any way. I don't think we wanted to

be some power couple, and we certainly didn't feel like it. We were lampooned and ridiculed, too—fair enough if you're famous and overpaid—but it's no fun." In one particularly hurtful low blow, "Spitting Image," the satirical British TV puppet show, had Thompson calling out, "Where are you, darling?" "I'm in the kitchen," Branagh said. "Oh, can I be in it, too?" Thompson replied.

Their first Hollywood movie together, the neo-noir "Dead Again" (1991), fades out with a shot of them embracing—a nod to the legendary forties romantic film partnerships and to their own. Lindsay Doran, who produced "Dead Again," said that, when she approached Branagh about directing the film, he agreed only on the condition that he and Thompson, who was then an unknown commodity in Hollywood, would co-star. At the end of the "Dead Again" shoot, Doran met with Branagh to discuss the possibility of his directing what had been her pet project for more than a decade: a film of Jane Austen's "Sense and Sensibility." She was also looking for a writer for the screenplay, someone "equally strong in the areas of satire and romance." "Not an easy combination, I admit, since satirists are often too bitter to be romantic, and romantics are often too sentimental to be satiric," she said. Doran felt that Thompson had both those qualities, and would bring to the enterprise another unexpected ingredient: "She believes in virtue," Doran said.

Prior to her discussions with Branagh, Doran had watched "Thompson." "I was sort of prepared not to like it," she said. "Instead, I loved it." In the high-pitched innocence of a sketch in which a Victorian newlywed mistakes her husband's penis for a mouse—"What an interesting little object it was! I bent over to examine it. Whereupon, on my life, Mama, it shrank into itself like a telescope before my very eyes. I confess I shrieked aloud"—Doran recognized someone who could be funny in period language and who could also "*think* in that language almost as easily as in the language of the twentieth century." Branagh ultimately bowed out of "Sense and Sensibility," which was brilliantly directed by Ang Lee, but Thompson accepted the challenge. "I have one little movie I have to do first, and then I'll get to work," Doran recalled Thompson saying. She added, "And that was 'Howards End.' "

In February, 1991, Thompson had learned that James Ivory was planning to film E. M. Forster's novel "[Howards End](#)." For the first and only time in her life, she wrote to a director to ask for a part—that of Margaret Schlegel, the well-intentioned intellectual and moral core of the turn-of-the-century tragedy about inherited wealth among the Edwardian middle class. "I just knew who she was—absolutely knew," Thompson said. "I knew her because I sort of *was* her. A bluestocking in Cambridge, just discovering the massive chasm between what men were allowed and what women were permitted, furious. . . . Schlegel was so clear to me—an idealist turned realist, the older sister with what she perceives as vulnerable siblings, her outsized sense of personal responsibility. No character has ever made as much sense to me or felt as near." Thompson's letter crossed with one that Ivory had already written, offering her the part.

It was Thompson's first major role in a serious film. She gave Margaret Schlegel a remarkable, palpable immediacy. "Her previous work has been marked chiefly by a wicked adeptness at caricature, but here her acting is unmannered, daringly straightforward," Terrence Rafferty wrote in this magazine. "She seems to be making up her character with every breath," Stuart Klawans wrote in *The Nation*. "She's so smooth you can't get your grips into what she's doing: you just accept her and marvel." Thompson's performance earned her her first Academy Award, for Best Actress.

Except for a six-week course with the gruff French clown Philippe Gaulier when she was twenty-four—"a good sort of entry into silliness"—Thompson never took an acting class. Her gift resides in her empathy, or what she calls a "strange and continual porous state," which allows her to imagine the other. Since childhood, Thompson said, she has been "a gibbering empath, which is not always helpful." "It happened in primary school, everywhere," she said. "If someone was hurt, I couldn't bear it. I would have to help, have to try and put it right." She added, "My father once said to me—I was sixteen or something—'Em, you're a taker like me. Your mother's a giver. We're takers.' I never forgot that. I made it my life's work to become someone who gave all the time. I just thought, Well, I'm gonna disprove that, baby."

Thompson calls her method of inhabiting her characters "incredibly releasing": "For a moment, the 'I' that I recognize doesn't really exist. I'm

taking a holiday from myself.” Richard Eyre, who directed her in “The Children Act” (2017), noted, “I thought she was extraordinary in being able to be hugely intelligent but, at the same time, not do that thing that often very intelligent actors do, showing in parallel what they think about the character. Emma was just subsumed in the character,” he said. Thompson agreed: “When I do those scenes, I am only feeling what the person is feeling. I know that sounds simplistic, but it’s the only way I can do it, and the only way I can describe it. Being there completely—without any parts of you left out—makes the body do what it does. It’s entirely somatic.” That immersion, she explained, is all-consuming: “You’re like a piece of blotting paper that has been put into a bowl of water. You cannot absorb anything else. If you’re really having to create a different person, you’re tricking your subconscious. It’s a big, fat magic trick. The hat you’re pulling the rabbit out of is your own psyche. That’s extremely demanding and weird, because you are in a sense no longer yourself.”

If it’s true that the show of emotion is the greatest show on earth, then Thompson is a Barnum & Bailey of both pain and joy. Her portrayal of grief in “Love Actually” (2003), for instance, has become iconic in British popular culture. In the scene, Thompson, as Karen, a dutiful mother of two, sits with her family around a Christmas tree, expecting as a present the necklace she found in her husband’s pocket, only to receive from him a similar-looking box containing a Joni Mitchell CD. As Mitchell’s bittersweet song “Both Sides Now” plays in the background, Karen struggles in vain to stave off the anguish of knowing that her husband, played by Alan Rickman, has been unfaithful. “She’s still trying to say bright things and tidy up and keep on top of it,” Caitlin Moran said. “And then when she finally cries, for the British, that’s the equivalent of a cum shot in a porn film. That’s, like, Oh, my God, we finally got there.”

For an exhibition of Thompson’s emotional derring-do, nothing surpasses the finale of “Sense and Sensibility,” where, as the buttoned-up, responsible, and lovelorn Elinor, the eldest of the Dashwood sisters, Thompson comes face to face with the secret object of her desire, Edward Ferrars (Hugh Grant), who is engaged to someone else. Elinor sits downcast as Edward arrives, but the news he brings is that his fiancée has experienced “the transfer of her affections to my brother.” “Then you’re not married,” Elinor says, the idea flooding her like a tidal surge. Gasping and choking back sobs,

she turns away from Edward in a hyperventilating collapse. She can't stop herself. "She was not aware of what was inside her, and it suddenly emerges," Thompson explained. Edward haltingly admits that "my heart is and always will be yours." She holds up her hand, stopping him in mid-romantic flow. Words can wait; in the moment, she is crying tears of anger and joy. Thompson's emotional explosion is at once a great piece of acting and a great piece of comedy. ("I was trying to make it as involuntary as possible. A case of the diaphragm taking over," she wrote in her diary.) "Hugh Grant was so cross," Thompson recalled. "He said, 'You're gonna cry all the way through my speech?' I said, 'Hugh, I've got to. That's the gag. It's funny.' And he says, 'Yeah, but I'm speaking.' I said, 'I know.' "

Of the many liberties that Thompson's adaptation took with the book, the most significant was to change the trajectory of Elinor and Edward's romance. Whereas the novel announces their attraction at the beginning, the film allows them to fall in love in the course of the story, with Elinor claiming her heart's desire in that final bravura burst of weepy elation. For the comic payoff to work, Elinor has to be a master of repression, bottling up all emotion until that point. (Thompson won her second Academy Award for the screenplay of "Sense and Sensibility.")

Offscreen, in 1995, while the film was being shot, Thompson had to exert a steely control over her own pain. Her marriage to Branagh had collapsed, but they had not gone public with the news. Branagh had started a relationship with one of the stars of his film "Mary Shelley's Frankenstein," Helena Bonham Carter. Thompson was humiliated, in part by her own stupidity. "I was utterly, utterly blind to the fact that he had relationships with other women on set," she said. "What I learned was how easy it is to be blinded by your own desire to deceive yourself."

Thompson compared her emotional mess to shattered dishes. "I was half alive. Any sense of being a lovable or worthy person had gone completely," she said. The person "who picked up the pieces and put them back together" was the actor Greg Wise, who played John Willoughby, the doe-eyed heartthrob who sweeps Marianne Dashwood (Kate Winslet) off her feet in "Sense and Sensibility." ("Full of beans and looking gorgeous. Ruffled our feathers a bit," Thompson noted of Wise in her production diary.) Thompson has now been with Wise for twenty-seven years, married for nineteen. "I've

learned more from my second marriage just by being married,” she said. “As my mother says, ‘the first twenty years are the hardest.’ ”

Early in her marriage to Branagh, before her critical successes in “Howards End” and “The Remains of the Day” (1993), Thompson was often perceived as an extra in Branagh’s epic. In 1990, she started a women’s group “to shore up feelings of low self-esteem.” The group was composed of about fifteen actors and writers, plus occasional guests like Germaine Greer and Glenda Jackson. Thompson’s original question to the members was: “Who is the female hero and what does she do?” She was, she said, “looking for the hero. How could I be heroic? I felt viciously angry, viscerally enraged by the belittling of women.” Even George Eliot, one of her literary heroes, she’d argued in her Cambridge dissertation, was “unable to commit herself to a heroic heroine or even a realistic mature one. She creates ‘deep-souled womanhood’ only to deny the test of its worth.”

At first, comedy had offered Thompson a sword and a shield; now, with an actor’s bona fides, she turned her attention to screen storytelling. She was looking for ways to dramatize female heroes as more than just a support team for men. “It’s not enough that my little acts of heroism are going to count,” she said. “It’s always the woman saying, ‘No, don’t go out and be the hero. Stay here.’ I want to go and be the hero.”

Thompson embodies the poet May Sarton’s observation that “one must think like a hero to behave like a merely decent human being.” Part of female heroism, Thompson says, is decency and taking care of others: “Women will look around and often be aware of what others need. They have to be like that because no one else will fucking do it. Women look after everyone endlessly—and without them there’d be nothing.” Her urge to take care of others has led her from the soundstage to the world stage. For Action Aid, she has travelled to South Africa, Uganda, Liberia, Ethiopia, Mozambique, and Myanmar. She has also toured the Canadian and the Norwegian Arctic for Greenpeace and chipped in to help the charity buy land around Heathrow Airport to prevent a proposed third runway and limit London’s carbon emissions. Her environmental videos have promoted the work of Greenpeace and Extinction Rebellion, at whose anti-fracking demonstration in 2016 Thompson took even more shit (from a local farmer, who, outraged that the protesters were on his land, sprayed her with liquid manure) than she

gets in the tabloid press, where she has been slagged off as “an eco-luvvie” and “the grandmother of woke.” When Thompson flew from L.A. to London in 2019 to attend an Extinction Rebellion rally, the tabloids found a new way to hate her. She has a framed miniature of a *Private Eye* spoof of the *Mail on Sunday*’s front page, with the headline “yes, it’s *dame emma hypocrite*” propped up in her guest bathroom, a totem of her struggle and her resolve.

About twenty years ago, she began throwing an annual Christmas party at the Refugee Council, a charity to support refugees and asylum seekers for which she is a patron. In 2003, Thompson was dishing out food when she was approached by a slight young man with a warm smile who wanted to thank her. His name was Tindyebwa Agaba, and he was a sixteen-year-old Rwandan refugee. He had a few words of English and French; they spoke mostly in semaphore. “His spirit was there to be seen—so clearly—in his eyes. He was alive to everything, though at the same time silent,” Thompson recalled, adding, “He saw something in me he wanted to talk to.”

Agaba’s story was one of devastating loss. When he was nine, his father died of *aids*; when he was twelve, rebel soldiers stormed his village and kidnapped him and his three sisters. (His mother and his sisters were listed as presumed dead in 1999, following the 1994 Rwandan genocide.) He was trained in the bush as a child soldier. At sixteen, with the help of a Care International worker, he ended up in England. Because of a bureaucratic glitch—he didn’t claim asylum within twenty-four hours of arrival—he received no governmental provision and spent his first five nights sleeping rough around Trafalgar Square. “I didn’t have any friendships. I didn’t know how to navigate the city. It was cold. Every white person looked the same to me,” he said. He’d gone to the Refugee Council for a hot meal and stayed on for the Christmas party.

“He was very traumatized, clearly, and very lonely,” Thompson said. She offered him a ride back to North London, where he was staying with a Nigerian family, and invited him to her home for Christmas Eve dinner. “I was quite suspicious of someone giving me courtesy and good will,” Agaba said. Nonetheless, he took up the offer and found himself in the hubbub of Thompson’s family and friends. To Agaba, everything seemed strange: the high spirits, the drinking, the sight of Greg Wise handing around platters of food (“I couldn’t understand a man doing it”). “I was scared to ask for

things,” he told me. “I didn’t know what would make people laugh. My village time and my bush time had made me not really expect anything.”

In the next six months, he and Thompson took frequent long walks on Hampstead Heath, where she learned his story and worked with him on his pronunciation and vocabulary. Soon, Agaba became part of the family, referring to Thompson and Wise as “Mum” and “Dad,” travelling to Scotland with them, and spending weekends at Law’s house in a flat he called “the Palace.” Thompson also paid for him to take speech lessons with the acclaimed dialect coach Joan Washington. “For someone who had been in the country eight months, those lessons were a game changer, a godsend, really,” Agaba said. In the spring of 2004, in a Shakespeare class at City and Islington College, where he was studying for his G.C.S.E.s, his teacher showed the class Kenneth Branagh’s film of “Much Ado About Nothing.” Agaba was flabbergasted to watch a movie populated by familiar faces: Law, Imelda Staunton, and Thompson herself. “I was absolutely shocked,” he said. “I went to my teacher and said, ‘How was this film made? Because I know these people.’ She laughed her head off. ‘Don’t be ridiculous. These are famous actors.’ She couldn’t believe a word I was saying.” The next week, his teacher brought in the *Daily Mirror* with a photograph of Agaba leaving Thompson’s house on his bike. “Is this you?” she said. “That was how I got to know that my mother was somehow well known. I had no idea,” he said. Since then, he has earned a master’s degree in human-rights law, spent a decade in human-rights activism, and become a detective in London’s Criminal Investigation Division.

In 1999, Thompson had given birth to her daughter, Gaia Wise, who is now an actress. “We tried for another child, but it didn’t work,” she told me. “I often think if it had worked there wouldn’t have been space. So I’m very grateful the I.V.F. didn’t work, because every day I’m grateful for Tindy.” Agaba recalled feeling that he “didn’t have anything to give,” when he met Thompson and Wise. “What *hasn’t* he given!” Thompson said. “So much joy, so much insight to share in his empathy and his understanding of the world. We laugh—and he helps me to laugh—at the weirdness of people, at the strangeness of life, at its cruelties and absurdities. It’s such a comfort.”



"Sorry to cancel last minute—I was waiting it out, hoping you would."
Cartoon by Asher Perlman

Thompson's kindness to others seems to have helped her become kinder to herself. For years, she struggled to see herself in a generous light. "My capacity for self-punishment is horrible," she said. "Being successful, earning money, being famous—guilt, guilt, guilt, guilt." In 2010, she told the BBC, "That punitive conscience is part of my psychiatric problem. My mum's Scottish, so the Presbyterian thing is strong within me." That same year, Thompson presented the American Film Institute's Life Achievement Award to [Mike Nichols](#), whom she referred to as "my second father." (Nichols cast her as the Hilary Clinton character in his film adaptation of "Primary Colors" (1998); as the eponymous divine messenger in his HBO production of Tony Kushner's "Angels in America" (2003); and—in one of the most extraordinary of her nuanced characterizations—as the sardonic English professor dying of ovarian cancer in his HBO film "Wit" (2001), for which Thompson and Nichols co-wrote the script, based on Margaret Edson's play.) Addressing Nichols directly, she said, "You and I share the same kind of conscience that both longs for and deplores approval." Then, from beside the lectern, she produced a hand-painted wooden box, which she called the "Post-Tribute Punishment Kit." On one side, in large black lettering, was written "Portable Chastisement at Last." She dug around inside the box, pulled out a flail, and began whipping her back. "Ow! Ow! That works," she said. The burlesque was an oblique nod to the big

challenge of her own artistic life: to navigate between the desire to be great and the desire to be good.

Thompson's approach to her acclaim has always been to tease it, a way of preempting both envy and egotism. In 2018, when she was made a Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire—she turned up at Buckingham Palace in white Adidas sneakers and a Fawcett Society Equal Pay badge—Thompson referred to the pinning of the large medal and insignia to her teal-blue suit as “a bit of a nipple moment.” Even Thompson’s Academy Awards—she is the only person in the history of the Oscars to win in both writing and acting categories—are displayed in her bathroom, above the toilet, with a can of Brasso metal polish between them.

“I’ve been told I was a fierce and restless octopus,” she said. “But they have three hearts and only live for two years. So now I’m in search of a more peaceful existence where I’m not so angry and my one heart will last a bit longer.” Agaba, she said, “has been part of the healing.” The musical “Nanny McPhee” will, she hopes, also be “part of that metamorphosis from boiling to a nice simmer.” She told me, “Whatever I do now, it has to serve the happiness of people. It has to uplift. I think that’s my job.”

On a bright July morning, nearly a year and a half after she’d first played me the song “Is It Wrong to Eat a Baby,” Thompson clambered out of a black cab in front of the stately offices of Working Title—the production company that was funding the musical’s first table read. She was followed by the director Katy Rudd (Thompson had, in the end, decided against directing it herself), Rudd’s four-month-old baby, and her mother, whose job it was to keep the infant occupied while eleven actors worked through the script during the next four days. Thompson, in sky-blue overalls and a red gingham shirt, spotted me and rushed over. “I’m so excited,” she said, then whispered, “I’m so scared.”

The unusually capacious rehearsal room, on the third floor, had a large patio looking out on plane trees, whose lustrous green leaves lent a sense of exuberance to the minimalist space. Thompson and Rudd took their seats at the end of a long table, flanked by members of the cast, who sat like attentive students, with their blue script binders open in front of them. “What we’re really looking to explore is the emotional journey,” Thompson told

them. “So I’m expecting you to go, ‘No, that doesn’t work,’ or ‘It doesn’t matter.’ Be really honest and bold.”

After their first pass at the material, the cast ate lunch on the patio. Thompson sat away from the glare in a corner of the room and considered the morning’s work. “I’m just thinking about making the stakes very much realer,” she said. She spoke about Nanny McPhee’s mission to bring order, by unorthodox means, to a grief-stricken household full of anarchic children acting out their fury at losing their mother and, in a way, losing their father, who seems preoccupied and unable to cope. There were clear parallels with her own childhood. “That happened to us when our dad died,” she said. “Our mum couldn’t—absolutely couldn’t—cope with our grief, couldn’t cope with us, couldn’t cope at all. Nanny McPhee is a great heroic presence. She knows exactly what to do, loves without reservation, then must go. So she sacrifices. She always has to leave those that she loves. She’s about non-attachment. Perhaps that’s why she’s such a powerful figure to me, because I’m far too attached to pretty much everything.”

In the afternoon session, Thompson and the cast got down to the meat and potatoes of interrogating the script and the songs. She filled up her notepad with ideas for the opening, line adjustments, ways to expand the characters and differentiate the personalities of the children. Then, toward the end of the session, as she and the cast were discussing the number “Evil Breed,” a rowdy rant against stepmothers, Samuel Blenkin, who was playing the most *terrible* of the *enfants*, observed that none of the songs made mention of the mother. It was a eureka moment. “From the point of view of that lyric, what would you add?” Thompson asked him. A reference to the mother “might be too painful,” she worried. “Stepmothers can’t do this,” Blenkin suggested, as a strategy for defining the absent maternal presence. Thompson riffed on the notion. “They can’t wipe away your tears / They can’t cuddle you when you fear . . .”

“It’s moving toward that but not quite,” he said.

“Maybe I’ll try and add what stepmothers can’t do. Yeah, it could be a little sort of moment, each one has a little line. That would certainly work better. It changes it completely,” she said.

By the last day of the reading, to which the creative team was invited, the actors had thoroughly massaged the script. As they went over it for a final time, Thompson leaned forward at the table, mouthing Nanny McPhee's lines and laughing at her sister, Sophie, who was reading Mrs. Quickly, the foolish widow with eyes for Mr. Brown, and whose fluting hysteria got applause from the table. "It's just so clear where it works and where it doesn't work. All the little bald patches that you can't see when you're looking at the words on the page," Thompson said afterward.

The next day, she and the creative team reconnoitred in a plush library adjacent to the rehearsal room to trade "headlines" about what they felt needed to be woven into the script before the next workshop, in October. The designer Rob Howell talked to Thompson about the artist Louise Bourgeois and a recent London exhibition of her sewn sculptures. "Bourgeois came from a family of tapestry menders. She's a repairer," Howell said. He saw Bourgeois's notion of stitching as emotional reparation as akin to Nanny McPhee's attempts "to keep things together and make things whole." And he showed Thompson some related preliminary ideas in his sketchbook. She took to them like a bass to a top-water lure.

As Thompson sat barefoot in the middle of the group, it became clear from the team's talk—"the fabric of a scene," a "tear," "stitched into the family DNA"—that the meeting itself was a kind of sewing circle. They were repairing a musical about repair. Thompson seemed to enjoy the give-and-take, explaining the adjustments she was already planning for the next draft and collating new ones that came out of the conversation: Mr. Brown needed more romantic complication; the children needed more shading; the virago, Great Aunt Adelaide, the show's comic tyrant, needed a backstory so that her cruelty could be understood and somehow redeemed at the finale. And what about Nanny McPhee herself? "If we're moving toward this sense of her stitching up these torn lives, each one has to have a moment with her, some sort of magic, healing touch. Little threads that draw them in," Thompson said. By the end of the afternoon, she knew that she had her work cut out for her. Could she do it? "It remains to be seen, doesn't it?" she said.

On my way out, I ran into Greg Wise, who was there to take Thompson to dinner for their wedding anniversary. I asked him how the week had gone at

home. “She came in, three days into the workshop, clutched me, and said, ‘Thank fuck I’m not directing it,’ ” he said.

I didn’t see Thompson again, but I heard from her. She e-mailed me Nanny McPhee’s envoi, which she had rewritten, with this explanation: “Sometimes when I am travelling I write well—a feeling of being free to think of only one thing, perhaps. I wrote the whole new end in a kind of frenzy on the plane—longhand—paper everywhere, the attendants were most amused.” The lyric was now more specific, more poignant, and, perhaps, even more personal:

When the cloth
In life’s patchwork
Starts to fray and tear
Then I shall be there
To sew
And when I finish
With mending
Every tattered shred
Then I have to go
But I will always
Leave you
With needle and thread. ♦

By Sam Knight

By Rachel Aviv

By Sheelah Kolhatkar

By David Remnick

Shouts & Murmurs

- [Who's Afraid of Going to the Theatre?](#)

By [Jesse Eisenberg](#)

This production contains strobe lights, loud noises, and haze.

This production contains a rain effect, which impacts only the sides of the audience. Luckily, this production has not sold a single ticket on the sides of the auditorium, as this production can barely sell out the middle section.

This production contains strong language. But not in the literary sense. There are no memorable lines, witty jokes, or pithy observations whereby characters muse in a way that allows the playwright to make a larger point about the human experience.

This production contains a scene in which the actors will be smoking. It may appear that one of the actors, the young man playing Cousin Jude, has never actually smoked a cigarette in his life, even though his character explicitly says, “I’ve been smokin’ my whole life.” You’d think the actor might have done the bare minimum of preparation for the role—it’s his first job, he’s straight out of Fordham—but he apparently thought he could wing it. This is just par for the course in this production.

This production uses dry ice to indicate that a scene is either a happy dream, a scary dream, a flashback, a passage of time, or that it takes place in Europe.

This production contains two characters who appear nude. That’s actually a bit misleading. It’s the same character, but at different ages. The first time we see the character nude, he is played by the lithe young man who plays the cop on that TV show. Presumably, most of you are here to see this actor in this nude scene. If you are sitting in the orchestra, you will get the fullest view. If you are sitting in the balcony, it’s not a complete washout, but I recommend moving down to the orchestra. There will be many available seats. In the second act, the same character is nude, but he is now played by Peter Jablowski. Peter is a member of our repertory company, and this is his forty-third year with us. If you make it to the second act, you’re going to want to head back up to those balcony seats.

This production contains confusing double casting.

This production contains an uncalled-for musical number.

This production contains unconvincing stage combat, a poor depiction of what it's like to have diabetes, and a didactic speech about Lenin.

This production contains a vast misunderstanding of addiction.

This production contains a shocking ending. Although, to be clear, it's not a good shock. It's not the kind of shock where you're invested in a character or a story and then, when things take an unexpected turn, you're left with a greater understanding because you realize that the characters had no other choice. This is not Miss Julie walking offstage with a razor or Willy Loman crashing his car or Oedipus gouging out his own eyes (although doing that yourself might cross your mind during this production). It's the kind of shock that makes you think, Have I been watching a different play for the past two hours? Wasn't the grandmother supposed to be dead? How did they all wind up in Las Vegas, and why does the doctor keep mentioning bowler hats? It's the kind of shock that tells you that the director got the job only because his dad runs the theatre company, and apparently nothing matters in this life except having a powerful father who runs a theatre company or being the third lead on a cop drama. It's the kind of shock that indicates that the playwright's mother was right and she should just go back to law school, and that having a career in the arts is both unstable and incredibly selfish.

This production will run four and a half hours, with one five-minute intermission. ♦

By Richard Brody

By Michael Schulman

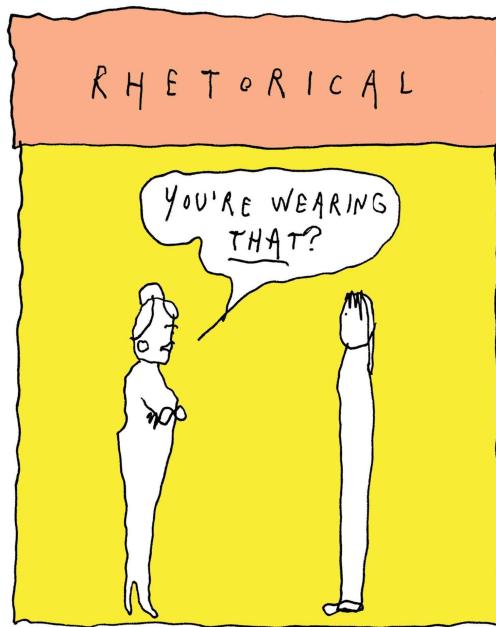
By Ali Solomon

By Lucas Kavner

Sketchbook

- [Types of Veiled Criticism](#)

By [Liana Finck](#)



INSTRUCTIVE



POWER-MAD



COMPARATIVE

TINA HERE IS A REALLY
ACCOMPLISHED CARTOONIST.



UNDERMINING

AH, WELL, WE CAN'T ALL
BE "INTELLECTUALS."



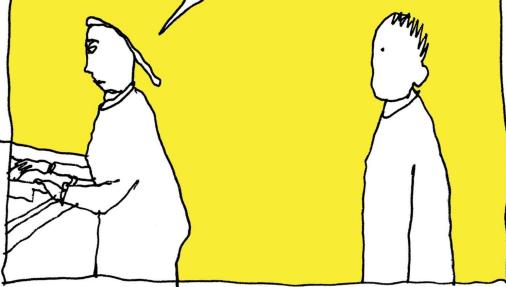
CONDESCENDING

AWW, YOUR HAIRCUT!



WITHHOLDING

MMM.





By Janet Malcolm

By Robert A. Caro

By Patrick Radden Keefe

By Philip Gourevitch

Tables for Two

- Ju Qi Captures the Culture of Beijing

By [Hannah Goldfield](#)

The other night, as some friends and I left dinner at Ju Qi, in a new luxury mall called Tangram, in Flushing, we passed a group of patrons in the foyer behaving like kids in a candy store, literally, raiding bowls of complimentary treats with glee. They proffered handfuls for us to try, too: foil-wrapped disks of haw flakes, ruddy-pink wafers made from the red berries of the Chinese hawthorn; miniature twists of brown-sugar-glazed fried dough known as *ma hua*.

One member of the group, a native of Beijing, wore a hazy glow of nostalgia that I imagine would please Ju Qi's founder, Tong Han. In 2014, Han, a Beijinger, opened the first Ju Qi—which has twenty locations in China and one in Sydney—to showcase the culture of his home town. In Flushing, the dining room's décor, which incorporates bricks shipped from Beijing, is inspired by that city's *hutong*, charming residential alleyways dating from the Yuan dynasty.

Birds are a big theme here, reflecting the Beijing custom, popularized during the Qing dynasty, of keeping them as pets. Light fixtures resemble birdhouses, and a table for large groups sits inside an enormous gilded cage. The most obvious thing to eat is a bird—a whole Peking duck, carved tableside. First, a chef with the precision of a surgeon removes a long strip of lacquered, golden skin, which gets razored into segments the size of postage stamps; each is placed atop a square of steamed bread and finished with a delicate pile of sturgeon caviar. From what looks like a royal jewel chest, a server pulls tiny drawers housing accoutrements—hoisin, scallions, matchsticks of cucumber, pickles, honeydew melon—then demonstrates the optimal technique for wrapping slices of meat and garnishes into bing pancakes, plucked from a bamboo steamer.



Ju Qi showcases the cultural history of Beijing with dishes both traditional and theatrical.

It's a thrillingly theatrical experience, with a grand finale: Do you want the carcass hacked into bite-size pieces and crisp-fried, or submerged in a fragrant and savory cloudy soup, with silken tofu and tender greens? I preferred the latter, but both preparations do justice to the precious bits of meat and fat which cling to the bones.

As you scroll through the handsomely photographed digital menu, on an oversized tablet, dense with offal and intriguing sea creatures, some items may stop you in your tracks. Chief among them is the mashed potato in the shape of Lord Rabbit (a.k.a. Mr. Rabbit), a totem of Beijing traditionally used for worship and often seen in decoration, as a symbol of happiness. Intricately hand-painted with food-safe inks, this edible doll stands in a pool of what is essentially honey mustard, making up for what it lacks in flavor with what it inspires by way of good cheer. Other dishes are all the more astonishing for how unassuming they appear. Amid threads of shredded potato, as supple as noodles, hide cubes of fried potato, clusters of millet, scallion greens, garlic, and melty bits of fried pork fat. My chopsticks returned again and again to a bowl of actual noodles: chewy, wavy, hand-pulled *zhajiangmian*, a Beijing signature, slick with a sauce of minced pork and fermented soybean paste, and jumbled with boiled soybeans, peanuts, pine nuts, cucumber, and green radish.

For dessert, there's a gorgeous mah-jongg board with trompe-l'oeil pieces made from yellow-pea paste. It's as much of a stunt as Ju Qi's late-night shift to a limited menu of much spicier dishes—available until 5 a.m. seven days a week—and as the restaurant's custom of marking birthdays with parchment scrolls foretelling good fortune, quill-written and presented to celebrants by a staffer wearing Qing-dynasty garb. In flavor, the mah-jongg confection pales in comparison with a simple bowl of Beijing-style yogurt: custardy and tangy, capped with a thick gloss of honey and a dusting of pollen, honoring the bees along with the birds, and the best of Beijing. (*Dishes \$6-\$109.*) ♦

By Patricia Marx

By Patricia Marx

By Evan Osnos

By Nicole Rose Whitaker

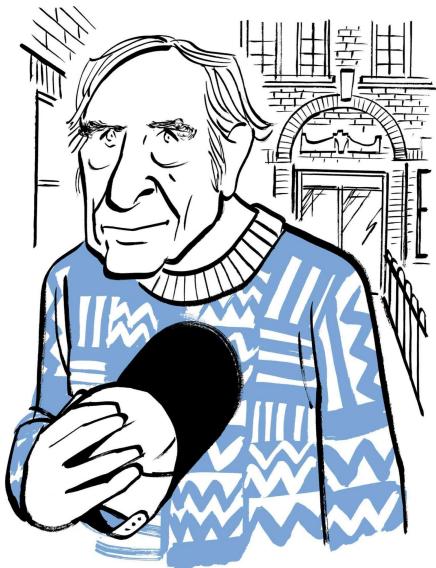
The Pictures

- Judd Hirsch, in Medias Res

Judd Hirsch, in *Medias Res*

The eighty-seven-year-old actor, who plays Steven Spielberg's great-uncle Boris in "The Fabelmans," traipses around his old Bronx stomping grounds and recounts stories (Colin Powell! Robert Moses!) without beginnings or endings.

By [Michael Schulman](#)



Judd Hirsch climbed into an Escalade on the Upper East Side and directed the driver to the Bronx, where he spent most of his childhood. "I haven't been to any of these places in years," he rasped, dressed in a bright zigzaggy sweater. He asked the driver his name, which was Bernard. "I'm Judd," he said. "We will probably have the same names by the end of the day, unless there's a transformation of some sort."

Hirsch is eighty-seven but has the propulsive energy of an eight-year-old. He tends to start stories in the middle and end in the middle. Where was he? Oh, right: the time he met Colin Powell and informed him that they'd both lived on Kelly Street, in the South Bronx. "He could not believe I was older than him. Two years!" In "The Fabelmans," Steven Spielberg's new autobiographical movie, Hirsch plays the director's great-uncle Boris, who tells the teen-age protagonist that he will be an artist and that it will tear him

apart: part benediction, part curse. The real Boris was a former lion tamer and silent-movie actor, and Hirsch plays him like a Yiddishkeit cannonball. There's talk of a nomination for Best Supporting Actor, four decades after Hirsch was nominated for "Ordinary People."

"I got this call from my agent: 'You're going to get a call from S.S.'—S.S. wants to speak with J.H.," Hirsch recalled. Spielberg sent him the script. "I said, 'Who is this guy?' He said, 'He's the guy that made me become a director.'" The car pulled onto Kelly Street, where Hirsch lived as a baby. His mother had emigrated from Russia as a teen-ager, a fact that Hirsch didn't discover until he was an adult. "She never told anybody. She was a large, walking Russian secret," he said. "A massive mystery to me, my mother. My father left when I was two. He came back five years later. God only knows why. Another mystery: What happened? Never mind."

Unlike Spielberg, he had no inspiring older relatives. "My mother's side was rabbinical," he said. "When I went over to their houses, I didn't like the way it smelled." His father's side: "Blowhards." On Findlay Avenue, where he moved in second grade, he said, "All I knew is it was a dangerous, dangerous neighborhood. It was dark. There was a railroad right down the street. I was a kid who was not living in a real place. It was fiction!" He got out at his old building, where he shared superintendent duties with his father, collecting garbage by dumbwaiter. It's now supportive housing. "Hi," he said to a security guy in the lobby. "I was here a long time ago. I was the superintendent. This was—wow!—in the nineteen-forties. I was a kid. They had a dumbwaiter. You know what a dumbwaiter looks like?"

The baffled man called over a social-services coördinator, and Hirsch asked if she knew how old the building was; she guessed eighty. "No, it's older," he said. "*I'm* older, and I lived here when I was already old. So it's ancient." The woman gave him a where-have-I-seen-you look. "'Taxi,'" he said.

Next stop: Walton and 171st, where Hirsch lived from third grade on. He passed the cinema where he saw "A Streetcar Named Desire," now a supermarket, and stood across from his old place. "We used to play stoopball—you throw a ball against the stoop. This would be the outfield," he recalled. Nearby, they'd play stickball. "If you broke a window, you ran." En route to his junior high school, he passed the spot where he would eat lunch,

until Robert Moses tore it down to build the Cross Bronx Expressway, “the worst hunk of crap in the world.” Junior high was where “I developed a personality,” he said. He and his friend Stanley Rieger used to do funny announcements on the loudspeaker. Years later, when Hirsch was cast in “Taxi,” the writers named his character Alex Taylor. He didn’t like the last name, so he changed it to Rieger.

Last stop: DeWitt Clinton High School. “One of these places would burn every other week,” Hirsch said, passing a string of auto shops on Jerome Avenue. His father, an electrician, wanted him to get a good union job, so Hirsch studied math to become an engineer. He didn’t discover acting until he took a speech class at City College, taught by a man in a bow tie. “He said, ‘What’s the color of a nude in moonlight?’ And he’d go around. He said, ‘Gray-green.’ ” The instructor would have everyone recite Robert Frost: “He will not see me stopping here / To watch his woods fill up with snow.” “He kept saying, ‘Fill up with snow. Fill up with snow.’ I went, You know something? You can take language and make it more than the words. It excited me like crazy.” The driver dropped him off in Manhattan. “Thank you, Bernard, for this wonderful ride,” Hirsch said. “I never felt a thing.” ♦

By Janet Malcolm

By Robert A. Caro

By Patrick Radden Keefe

By Philip Gourevitch

The Theatre

- [Winter Theatre Preview](#)

By [Michael Schulman](#)

It's been a year since Stephen Sondheim died and, not surprisingly, his œuvre is getting a hefty workout. On the heels of a crowd-pleasing revival of "Into the Woods," Sondheim's 1979 musical thriller, "**Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street**," slashes its way back to Broadway. Thomas Kail's production, beginning previews on Feb. 26, at the Lunt-Fontanne, features Josh Groban as the murderous barber, the incandescent Annaleigh Ashford as his pie-making accomplice, and a twenty-six-piece orchestra. Downtown, New York Theatre Workshop revives "**Merrily We Roll Along**" (starting Nov. 21), Sondheim's beloved problem child from 1981, which follows the disintegration of a three-way friendship in reverse chronology, from jaded middle age back to hopeful youth. Daniel Radcliffe, Jonathan Groff, and Lindsay Mendez star in Maria Friedman's production.

Sondheim, oddly enough, shared a birthday with his aesthetic antipode, Andrew Lloyd Webber, whose juggernaut "The Phantom of the Opera" ends its decades-spanning run on Feb. 18. But Broadway won't be left Webberless: on Feb. 17, at the Imperial, previews begin for his new musical, "**Bad Cinderella**," a contemporary take on the fairy tale, with lyrics by David Zippel and a book by Emerald Fennell (the writer-director of "Promising Young Woman"); Linedy Genao plays Cinderella—but she's bad!

Lincoln Center Theatre, known for Bartlett Sher's lush revivals of mid-century musicals, stages "**Camelot**" (March 9, Vivian Beaumont), Lerner and Loewe's sprightly retelling of Arthurian legend, from 1960. Sher's production has a revised book by Aaron Sorkin, so expect walk-and-talks with King Arthur (Andrew Burnap), Queen Guenevere (Phillipa Soo), and Sir Lancelot (Jordan Donica).

Speaking of mythic figures, what do you get when you put Andy Warhol and Jean-Michel Basquiat together onstage? Art, egos, and Anthony McCarten's play "**The Collaboration**" (Nov. 29, Samuel J. Friedman), about the exhibition that brought the art-world titans together. Manhattan Theatre Club's production, directed by Kwame Kwei-Armah, stars Paul Bettany and Jeremy Pope. Stephen Adly Guirgis's dark comedy "**Between Riverside and Crazy**" (Nov. 30, Hayes), which won the Pulitzer Prize in 2015, finally makes it to Broadway, courtesy of Second Stage and the director Austin

Pendleton; Stephen McKinley Henderson and Common play a father and son trying to hold on to a rent-stabilized apartment. And the Broadway stalwarts Nathan Lane, Zoë Wanamaker, and Danny Burstein return in “**Pictures from Home**” (Jan. 10, Studio 54), Sharr White’s adaptation of Larry Sultan’s 1992 photo memoir, which interrogated and immortalized Sultan’s parents.

Off Broadway highlights include “**The Sign in Sidney Brustein’s Window**” (Feb. 4, BAM Harvey Theatre), a 1964 play by Lorraine Hansberry, set in bohemian Greenwich Village and starring Oscar Isaac and Rachel Brosnahan. Oliver Butler directs “**A Bright New Boise**” (Jan. 31, Pershing Square Signature Center), a 2010 drama by Samuel D. Hunter (“The Whale”), about a lapsed evangelical who returns to his home town and works at a Hobby Lobby. And in the Roundabout’s “**The Wanderers**” (Jan. 26, Laura Pels), a new drama by Anna Ziegler, Katie Holmes plays a movie star who enters the life—and complicates the marriage—of a famous novelist. ♦

By The New Yorker

By David Remnick

By Ken Auletta

By Rebecca Mead

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