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# A Critic at Large

- [A Portrait of David Bowie as an Alienated Artist](#)

# A Portrait of David Bowie as an Alienated Artist

The musician was a consummate showman, but “Moonage Daydream,” a new documentary, rarely shows him at play.

By [Hilton Als](#)



The last time I saw David Bowie—in many ways, the ultimate rock star for my generation—who died in 2016, I was cheating on him with another pop artist. We were on a rooftop in Williamsburg. Journalists, musicians, and the like had gathered on that late-spring evening in 2006 to watch [TV on the Radio](#) perform a short set from their second album, the eclectic and catchy “Return to Cookie Mountain.” I had fallen hard for the group’s co-lead vocalist, Tunde Adebimpe, with his thick spectacles, sweet demeanor, and idiosyncratic voice. Sometimes Adebimpe sounds like a stoned drill sergeant, and at other times like a kid on the brink of adolescence. Like Bowie, he is what I call a character singer—someone who sings in the imagined voice of the character in a song. That night, the group performed a strong set, and when I wasn’t watching Adebimpe I was looking at Bowie. Standing in the middle of the crowd, clutching a beer, the then fifty-nine-

year-old star was lithe, moving to the music. He was a husband and a father for the second time, but age had done nothing to dim his apparent enthusiasm for the new, especially if it was off-center and indisputably itself, like TV on the Radio.

After hearing the band's first EP, Bowie had called one of the guitarists, Dave Sitek, to say that he was a fan, and when Sitek impulsively invited Bowie to perform on the group's second album he agreed. His vocals on the song "Province," on "Return to Cookie Mountain," are among the finest of his late career—rounded, weary, alive. They work within the group's jittery trance style, but they also convey the depth of Bowie's experience as a vocalist and his willingness—his desire—to collaborate with lesser-known musicians. Popular artists are more often preoccupied with maintaining and increasing their fame than with sharing it. But, like [Prince](#) and [Linda Ronstadt](#), stars who used their tremendous appeal to promote less visible performers—generally women or people of color—Bowie often sought out artists who, for one reason or another, were outsiders like him, but who lacked his genius for reading the room (or stadium or rooftop) to see what was happening and how to capitalize on it. And he rarely shied away from criticizing an industry that didn't always give every musical artist a chance. In 1983, he called out MTV for not playing Black artists, at a time when hardly anyone gave a damn about diversity.

Bowie gave a damn. But his love of the rogue spirit in others, his collaborative urges, his paternal instincts—all of it wrapped in his own particular freak flag—aren't much in evidence in Brett Morgen's new documentary, "Moonage Daydream," which instead fills the screen with visual bombast. Morgen has a nose for many things, but moderation and subtlety are not among them. I loved his 2002 documentary about the film producer Robert Evans, "The Kid Stays in the Picture," not only because of its clever use of visual effects and archival footage but because of its understanding—drawn from Evans's 1994 [autobiography](#)—that the pre-blockbuster Hollywood it evoked was framed by sleaze, glamour, and lies. But there is little of that kind of understanding in "Moonage Daydream." How can you make a documentary about a star who dominated the rock-and-roll world for more than two decades (a hundred years or so in regular time) and not touch on the filthy dressing rooms, the record-company

hassles, the disgruntled bandmates, or the constant loneliness—that is, the reality that he had to contend with? Instead, Morgen gives us a kind of sanctified intellectual portrait: Bowie as Moses, laying down commandments about what art is and what it demands. Bowie's pronouncements about Nietzsche and Buddhism, untempered by his sly charm, come off as not just pretentious but suffocating. Like Evans, Bowie was a consummate showman, but, except in some early archival footage, Morgen barely shows him at play.

From the first, Bowie was an artist who preëmpted industry A.D.H.D. both by addressing his own disposability, in songs like "Rock 'n' Roll Suicide" and "Fame," and by aligning himself with others who, like him, had broken down the walls between "real" art and the pop world. (From Bowie's 1971 song "Andy Warhol": "Andy Warhol looks a scream / Hang him on my wall / Andy Warhol, Silver Screen / Can't tell them apart at all.") His mastery of stagecraft and personae also helped keep him alive in his fans' imaginations. And then there was his disdain for male privilege and his explorations of gender, the joy he expressed at the idea of being nonbinary in a binary world. No matter what you may have suffered because of your nonbinary feelings, songs like "Rebel Rebel" made you want to celebrate and dance to them: "You've got your mother in a whirl / 'Cause she's not sure if you're a boy or a girl / Hey, babe, your hair's alright / Hey, babe, let's stay out tonight / You like me and I like it all." Bowie did like it all, or seemed to accept it all, and wasn't that part of the ethos of his alter ego Ziggy Stardust, on his 1972 glam-rock album, "The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars"?

If Bowie could be someone else, so could you. But you had to be honest to get away with the artificiality, and Bowie's ethics were always honest, never more so than when he donned a zoot suit and began writing and performing his own version of Gamble and Huff—what he called "plastic soul"—which informed his albums "Young Americans" (1975) and "Let's Dance" (1983). Part of Bowie's allure in a pre-P.C. world was the way that, although he borrowed heavily from soul, he never tried to pass himself off as an engineer of the genre. He referred to "Young Americans" as "the squashed remains of ethnic music as it survives in the age of Muzak rock, written and sung by a white limey," and he reportedly gave Nile Rodgers,

the co-founder of Chic, a lot of credit for the success of “Let’s Dance,” one of the biggest hits of his career. Bowie’s intellectualism wasn’t exhausting—he could still make us move with albums like “Low” (1977), “Heroes” (1977), and “Lodger” (1979)—but the work grew more complex as he found new sounds to convey his thoughts. Inspired by [Brian Eno](#)’s brilliant inventions, as well as by German experimental performers such as Neu! and Tangerine Dream, Bowie started composing a lot of his music in the studio, which isn’t as easy as it seems. (Drugs help, and Bowie’s cocaine intake during the making of his 1976 album, “Station to Station,” was prodigious.)

Bowie’s career was one of constant evolution and experimentation. But, despite Morgen’s fast cuts, and Bowie’s voice going on and on, “Moonage Daydream” is strangely inert, with only occasional flashes of Bowie’s personality, his fascinating combination of British formality, eccentricity, and wit. Morgen’s daydream is that he’s the only person who truly gets Bowie, and foremost among the things he supposedly understands is how alienated Bowie was, as much by nature as by inclination. But don’t most, if not all, modern artists keep the world at a distance, the better to describe it? If Morgen had included other voices talking about Bowie—friends, colleagues—he could have introduced some critical inquiry to expand his portrait of the star. Getting *off* the subject from time to time, without losing sight of him, was what made Morgen’s 2015 film, “Kurt Cobain: Montage of Heck,” so interesting. You can’t entirely trust artists to tell their own stories; it’s always “Rashomon,” so why not reveal the lies and fabrications and misremembered moments, too?

Like Norman Mailer and Truman Capote, Morgen enjoys messing with the nonfiction form; he wants his documentaries to have the heft and the possibility of fiction. But why fashion such a limited story about a man who made it his job to invent so many characters and stories of his own? In “Moonage Daydream,” Bowie becomes a kind of disfigured presence, less the creator of dreams—and the keeper of the mysteries that go into them—than Morgen’s idea of what a rock-and-roll star is, or should be. In a [1972 piece](#) for this magazine, Ellen Willis questioned Bowie’s authenticity. “Bowie doesn’t seem quite real,” she wrote. “Real to me, that is—which in rock and roll is the only fantasy that counts.” Actually, Bowie’s reality was always there, hiding in plain sight. To my mind, it wasn’t coldness or

alienation of the kind that seems to interest Morgen but a pervasive loneliness that was at the heart of so much of his music, and perhaps the reason that he kept reaching out to, or defending, all those other artists and listeners who knew more than a little about difference. ♦

**By Hillary Kelly**

**By Jia Tolentino**

**By Richard Brody**

**By Alex Baia**

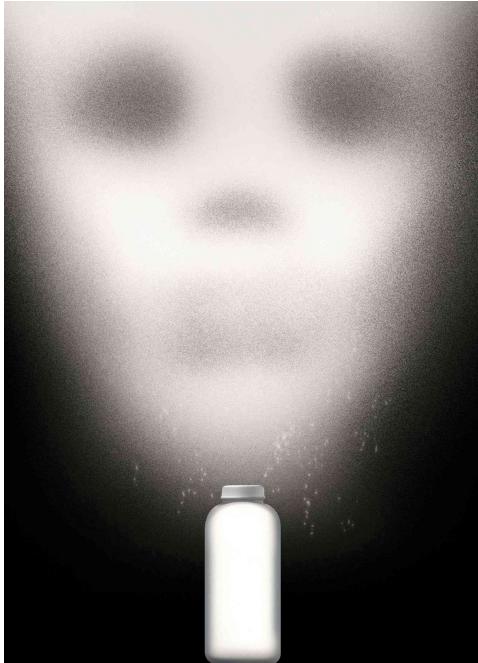
# A Reporter at Large

- [Johnson & Johnson and a New War on Consumer Protection](#)

# Johnson & Johnson and a New War on Consumer Protection

The company has spent billions on cases about one of its most popular products. As its executives try a brazen new legal strategy to stop the litigation, corporate America takes note.

By [Casey Cep](#)



God gives you only one body, Deane Berg always said, so you'd better take care of the one you've got. A physician assistant at the veterans' hospital in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, she knew that spotting between periods wasn't unusual for a forty-nine-year-old woman, but she went to the doctor anyway. Her two daughters had already lost their father to lung cancer, so Berg wanted to stick around.

Just perimenopause, the doctor concluded after a cursory examination. Probably a blood clot, the nurse practitioner told her when a subsequent ultrasound showed something on an ovary. "It's not going to be cancer," the gynecological surgeon said before removing both ovaries on the day after Christmas in 2006. But, when Berg went for her follow-up, she read the

words on the pathology report before the surgeon had a chance to break the news: serous carcinoma. She cried, and the surgeon did, too. She would now need a full hysterectomy, chemotherapy, and a great deal of luck. Every year, around twenty thousand women are given a diagnosis of ovarian cancer in the United States, and more than half that many will die of the disease.

Berg told herself that twenty-six years of caring for patients might help her get through the treatments ahead. But her experience with veterans' port-a-caths did not make it any less painful to have them implanted in her own abdomen and chest; nausea and headaches were no more manageable because she'd counselled others through them. And nothing prepares a person for losing her hair and much of her hearing or developing nerve damage in her hands and feet or having her teeth crack from chemo. Weak and immunocompromised, Berg left her job at the hospital, which meant she had more time to study the handouts about ovarian cancer that nurses had given her when she was diagnosed.

One of those pamphlets was distributed by Gilda's Club, a group founded by friends of the comedian Gilda Radner, who died of the disease in 1989, when she was only forty-two. The pamphlet included a list of risk factors, which Berg went through one by one. No, she didn't have a family history of reproductive cancer; no, she hadn't struggled with infertility and had never used fertility drugs; no, she had never had cancer before; no, she had never had an unhealthy diet or been overweight. Then she came to a section about talcum powder. After reading it, she went to look at the big container of Johnson & Johnson body powder she kept in her bathroom to use after daily showers and the little bottle of Johnson & Johnson baby powder she took with her whenever she travelled. Both listed talc as an ingredient.

Berg immediately posted a message on the forum of the Ovarian Cancer Research Alliance, asking if any other women thought their cancer might have been caused by talcum powder. Only two people replied. The first was a cancer researcher in Illinois who had been trying for more than a decade to get the U.S. Food and Drug Administration to warn American customers that talc could be a carcinogen. The second was R. Allen Smith, Jr., an

attorney in Mississippi. He was interested in talking to her about a lawsuit against Johnson & Johnson; she wasn't convinced he was a real lawyer.

Smith did in fact practice law, and, years before, his father, a doctor, had tipped him off to a contentious debate over the safety of talc—one that continues to this day. A study published in 2020 in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, which pooled data from four earlier long-term observational studies and involved a quarter of a million women, found no statistically significant link between talc and ovarian cancer. But, as its authors noted, the underlying studies did not always distinguish between powders that contained talc and those which did not, and were not consistent in asking participants how often or for how long they'd powdered themselves. Many other studies, meanwhile, found a significantly increased risk of ovarian cancer in women who used talc for feminine hygiene—in their underwear, on their sanitary napkins, for storing their diaphragms.

Determining the etiology of diseases is difficult, especially when it comes to cancers, which often have long latency periods and multifactorial causes. But the evidence against talc had grown substantial enough by the time Berg was diagnosed that many U.S. manufacturers, including the makers of crayons, condoms, and surgical gloves, had erred on the side of caution and stopped using it in their products. Why hadn't Johnson & Johnson done the same, when an alternative, cornstarch, was cheap, abundant, and safer?

Johnson & Johnson is one of America's most trusted companies, and as Berg moved through her cycles of chemotherapy she kept thinking about a slogan for its body powder: "A sprinkle a day helps keep odor away." For more than thirty years, she had taken that advice, applying the powder between her legs to prevent chafing. But that powder wasn't like her chemo drugs: their side effects were awful, but they were keeping her alive. The powder felt, instead, like an unnecessary gamble, one she thought other people should be warned about.



"When, exactly, did the balance of power shift?"  
Cartoon by Michael Maslin

All along, Berg had worried about her daughters—not only how they'd fare if she died but whether her diagnosis meant they had a greater inherited risk of cancer. In 2007, to find out, she underwent genetic testing and learned that she had neither of the two main mutations that increase the odds of developing reproductive cancers. Two years later, she had her ovarian tissue tested, and the pathologist found talc in one ovary. Shortly afterward, with her cancer in remission, she decided to sue, in what became the first baby-powder lawsuit against Johnson & Johnson to ever make it to trial.

Almost every American, from nursery to deathbed, uses Johnson & Johnson products: baby shampoo, Band-Aids, Neosporin, Rogaine, and O.B. tampons; Tylenol, Imodium, Motrin, and Zyrtec; Listerine mouthwash and Nicorette gum; Aveeno lotion and Neutrogena cleanser; catheters and stents for the heart; balloons for dilating the ear, nose, and throat; hemostats and staples; ankle, hip, shoulder, and knee replacements; breast implants; Acuvue contact lenses. But what few of those consumers grasped until a series of baby-powder cases began to go to trial was that, for decades, the company had known that its powders could contain asbestos, among the world's deadliest carcinogens.

Slippery to the touch and soft enough to flake with your fingernail, the mineral talc is found all around the world, in deposits that can be more than a billion years old. Such deposits are sometimes laced with actinolite, anthophyllite, chrysotile, and tremolite. These accessory minerals, better known in their fibrous form as asbestos, grow alongside talc like weeds in a geological garden. As early as 1971, Johnson & Johnson scientists had become aware of reports about asbestos in talc. They and others also worried about a connection between cancer and talc itself, whether or not it contained asbestos. By the time of Berg's diagnosis, the World Health Organization's International Agency for Research on Cancer had designated talc containing fibrous particles a carcinogen and the genital application of any talc powder possibly carcinogenic. The F.D.A. had safety concerns, too, but its authority over products like baby powder was and remains, in the words of Ann Witt, a former senior official at the agency, "so minimal it's laughable."

Johnson & Johnson has always insisted, including to this magazine, that its baby powder is "safe, asbestos-free, and does not cause cancer"; however, a 2016 investigation by Bloomberg and subsequent revelations by Reuters and the New York *Times*, based in part on documents that surfaced because of discovery in suits like Berg's, exposed the possible health risk related to its powders. Following those reports, tens of thousands of people filed suits against the company, alleging that its products had caused their cancers. In 2020, after juries awarded some of those plaintiffs damages that collectively exceeded billions of dollars, Johnson & Johnson announced that it would no longer supply the talc-based version of its product to American stores.

And then, quietly, the company embraced a strategy to circumvent juries entirely. Deploying a legal maneuver first used by Koch Industries, Johnson & Johnson, a company valued at nearly half a trillion dollars, with a credit rating higher than that of the United States government, declared bankruptcy. Because of that move, the fate of forty thousand current lawsuits and the possibility of future claims by cancer victims or their survivors now rests with a single bankruptcy judge in the company's home state, New Jersey. If Johnson & Johnson prevails and, as Berg puts it, "weasels its way out of everything," the case could usher in a new era in which the government has diminished power to enforce consumer-

protection laws, citizens don't get to make their case before a jury of their peers when those laws fail, and even corporations with long histories of documented harm will get to decide how much, if anything, they owe their victims.

When the Civil War ended, Robert Wood Johnson was a lowly drug clerk in Manhattan with a knack for trading on the medical bona fides of others. In his first business venture, with a prosperous pharmacist named George Seabury, Johnson appropriated the name of Joseph Lister, the British aseptic-surgery pioneer, to sell a line of sterile sutures and gauze. Later, he split from Seabury so that he and two of his brothers could incorporate as Johnson & Johnson. The company plastered the red cross of Clara Barton's humanitarian organization on its product line and refused to stop, even when Congress tried to prohibit anyone but the Red Cross from using the emblem. (Eventually, the company went so far as to sue the nonprofit for trademark infringement. The judge was not impressed.)

To further burnish its scientific image, Johnson & Johnson gave away millions of medical pamphlets that doubled as advertisements for its products. One pamphlet issued in 1902, titled "Hygiene in Maternity," marketed at-home birth kits, which included sanitary soap, abdominal binders, umbilical tape, sterile bags, and a recent innovation: baby powder, created by Johnson & Johnson's first scientific director, Frederick Barnett Kilmer. He had realized that talc could be used to soothe irritations caused by adhesive bandages and diaper rash. Kilmer's powder went to market in square cannisters that stayed put when lively infants kicked them; for a while, the packaging featured a picture of Robert Wood Johnson's granddaughter.

Despite accounting for a tiny percentage of Johnson & Johnson's annual revenue, baby powder provided entrée for the brand into households around the world and was foundational to its family-friendly reputation. According to one company estimate, between 1930 and 1990, baby powder was used on roughly half the children born in the United States. A marketing PowerPoint from 1998 described the baby division as the company's "#1 asset," critical to the "deep personal trust" that consumers had for the brand over all. So popular was the baby powder that the company had bought talc

mines to bolster and control its supply, selling off some of the talc for use in roofing and paint products and keeping the rest for use on humans. The company's mines were in Vermont, where many of the talc deposits are thought to contain asbestos. (Geologists working for the state noted the ubiquity of asbestos there as early as 1872.)

Asbestos, which is considered dangerous even in small amounts, is found throughout the world, in building materials and brake pads, and it can also exist, unknown to people, in background levels in their water and soil. It is tricky to detect in talcum products, because the fibres are small and can closely resemble talc. Since the nineteen-forties, Johnson & Johnson has tried to monitor its supply chain, regularly testing talc from its mines and from its other suppliers. Most of the tests it commissioned found no asbestos. However, according to internal documents, dozens of tests have found minerals such as tremolite, chrysotile, and actinolite—which, in certain forms, constitute asbestos—in the company's talc.

In a statement to *The New Yorker*, Johnson & Johnson denied that internal testing found “asbestos in talc that was being used by the company.” But company scientists were concerned about the diseases related to asbestos and talc. As one of them, Dr. T. M. Thompson, noted in a 1969 memo to a senior executive, pediatricians had been “expressing concern over the possibility of the adverse effects on the lungs of babies or mothers who might inhale any substantial amounts of our talc formulations.” He warned his colleagues, “It is not inconceivable that we could become involved in litigation in which pulmonary fibrosis or other changes might be rightfully or wrongfully attributed to inhalation of our powder formulations. It might be that someone in the Law Department should be consulted with regard to the defensibility of our position in the event that such a situation could ever arise.”

It wasn't only pulmonary diseases that were of interest to the company scientists. In 1971, a team of researchers in Wales analyzing the tissue of reproductive-cancer patients found that most of their cervical and ovarian tumors had talc in them. Their study, published in the *Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology*, was the first to suggest a link between talc and ovarian cancer. Within a month, Johnson & Johnson executives sent employees to

Cardiff to meet with its authors. According to company minutes of that meeting, the Welsh researchers speculated that the talc might have spread to the reproductive organs via the bloodstream after women inhaled it, or entered their reproductive tracts through their vaginas. Johnson & Johnson got some of the team's tissue samples to do further testing. Scientists hired by the company not only confirmed the presence of talc in the samples; some of them found asbestos in the tumors as well. (Johnson & Johnson maintains that the samples could have been contaminated.)

In that era, Johnson & Johnson was conducting other research on talc as well. Beginning in 1967, the company funded several experiments on prisoners, mostly Black men at Holmesburg Prison, in Philadelphia. Internal company records detail how the subjects were given blisters with a chemical-burn agent, then had their wounds dusted three times a day with talc. Four years later, other men were injected with talc and two forms of asbestos so that the company could measure the inflammation they developed after exposure. As Allen Hornblum documented in the 1998 book "Acres of Skin," those talc studies were only some of the experiments Johnson & Johnson carried out on prisoners. Others included paying inmates "five dollars per wound" for testing the absorbency and adhesiveness of the company's dressings and paying them three dollars each to have shampoo dropped in their eyes regularly for twenty-four hours to help the company perfect the formula for its signature baby shampoo, No More Tears.

Eventually, some in the company began to worry that talc posed a reputational risk. In 2008, the year before Berg filed her lawsuit, its global creative director, Todd True, sent an e-mail to colleagues with the subject line "Best for baby." He asked, "Have we done any research to determine the potential negative impact to our brand or best for baby strategy by maintaining this ingredient? Have we looked at replacing talc with cornstarch for our base powder as other brands have? What's the value in maintaining talc under baby aside from cost?" Three days later, he wrote again to suggest that the company "simply replace the talc ingredient" in its baby products. Doing so, he added, "seems like an easy fix and win."

But Johnson & Johnson did not change the central ingredient in its baby powder. It changed its marketing strategy. In the sixties, as pediatricians began worrying about the suffocation risks that talcum powder posed for babies and major studies were finding asbestos to be carcinogenic even in small doses, Johnson & Johnson was pitching its powder aggressively to adults. One advertisement featured Hammerin' Harmon Killebrew, the Minnesota Twins Hall of Famer, saying, "Mama taught me it takes more than a towel to really get dry." The company also introduced a "deodorant body powder," Shower to Shower, eventually packing it in pink bottles for women and promising "a freshness that stays with you until you wash it away." In 2007, after the International Agency for Research on Cancer issued its warning about talc powder, Johnson & Johnson had a new focus, according to internal marketing presentations, on "overweight" and "African-American" consumers, then more broadly on "ethnic consumers," which it pursued through giveaways at churches, beauty parlors, and barbershops in Black and Hispanic neighborhoods. In 2010, the company targeted "curvy Southern women 18-49 skewing African American," emphasizing that powder helps with body odor and chafing in hot climates. And even after Johnson & Johnson pulled its talc-based powder from U.S. and Canadian markets, in 2020, the company kept selling it elsewhere, including China, Indonesia, and Pakistan, as well as in India, where using the American brand has become a status symbol for women and teen-age girls. Only a few weeks ago did Johnson & Johnson finally announce that it was getting out of the talc business altogether. Not right away, though. Rather than pull its product from shelves, it will simply sell the talc-based powder overseas into next year, until it's gone.

Johnson & Johnson's baby powder is classified by the F.D.A. as a cosmetic, a type of product over which the agency has extremely limited authority. In the Federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetics Act, a document of more than eight hundred pages, only two pages address cosmetics, a category that encompasses not just lipstick, mascara, moisturizer, anti-aging serums, and everything else in the makeup aisle but also products that most Americans use every day, including toothpaste, deodorant, and shampoo.



Cartoon by Roz Chast

The responsibility for regulating the eighty-five-billion-dollar cosmetics industry falls to the F.D.A.'s Division of Cosmetics, which has just thirty employees and an annual budget of less than ten million dollars: a rounding error in the agency's six-billion-dollar budget and a twentieth of what it spends regulating food and drugs for pets. The marginal status of cosmetics at the F.D.A. stems in part from the difference between acute and chronic risk: it's easier to defer regulation for products that cause injury or death only after years of cumulative exposure. But another reason cosmetics are barely regulated is that the industry has successfully fought for more than eighty years to keep Congress from updating the rules that cosmetic companies must abide by. Today, such companies are not legally required to test their products for safety before selling them. They do not have to register with the F.D.A. or provide ingredient statements, and they do not have to produce their safety records for scrutiny or report adverse events, whether rashes or headaches or early puberty or even cancer. If a cosmetic product is life-threatening, the agency cannot recall that product or suspend production; it can only encourage a company to do so. "These are some of our most broken laws," Scott Faber, who leads government affairs at the Environmental Working Group, a nonprofit research organization, told me. By the E.W.G.'s count, more than eighty countries, from the United Kingdom to Cambodia to Myanmar, have enacted stronger cosmetics

regulations than the United States. And whereas some countries' regulators have banned more than twenty-four hundred cosmetic ingredients, from parabens to formaldehyde, the F.D.A. has banned or restricted fewer than a dozen.

"People think if there's a problem the government would address it, but cosmetics is probably the best example of weak regulatory action leaving the American people unprotected," the epidemiologist David Michaels told me. Michaels, the former head of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration and the author of "The Triumph of Doubt: Dark Money and the Science of Deception," sees talc as a case study in what he calls "working the refs," whereby an industry successfully resists oversight by interfering with the most basic terms of regulation, from definitions to measurements to methodologies. By way of illustration, he points to a powerful voice in the cosmetics industry: a trade group once called the Cosmetic, Toiletry, and Fragrance Association, and now known as the Personal Care Products Council.

The C.T.F.A. demonstrated its clout in the seventies, when advocacy groups, among them the Center for Science in the Public Interest and the Environmental Defense Fund, began urging the F.D.A. to regulate asbestos in cosmetics. In 1973, the agency proposed a rule that would require talc to be "at least 99.9 percent free of amphibole types of asbestos fibers and at least 99.99 percent free of chrysotile asbestos fibers." The C.T.F.A. had just hired a young lobbyist, E. Edward Kavanaugh, the father of the Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh, who would go on to run the organization for twenty years; according to 990 forms that the C.T.F.A. submitted to the I.R.S., he eventually earned an annual salary package of four and a half million dollars.

The trade group organized a "talc task force" to resist the new standard. Among companies that would be affected were, in addition to Johnson & Johnson, Avon, which made Unforgettable Perfumed Talc, and Colgate-Palmolive, which made Cashmere Bouquet—companies that would also go on to face lawsuits alleging that their talcum powder caused cancer.

The C.T.F.A. homed in on the F.D.A.'s proposed testing method, alleging that it "results in both false-positive and false-negative findings" and that it

was burdensomely “tedious.” As the C.T.F.A. advocated for a less sensitive testing method, an employee at one of the member companies told colleagues in a memo that they probably wouldn’t have to worry too much about a new F.D.A. limit on asbestos, as regulators “have neither the money nor the manpower to pursue matters so that they will have airtight cases in scientific matters.”

By 1976, the F.D.A. had all but given up regulating asbestos in talc, in part because Johnson & Johnson, which had the lion’s share of the powder market, had encouraged the C.T.F.A. to preempt government regulation with self-regulation. The group approved an industry-wide, voluntary standard that cosmetic talc should contain “no detectable fibrous, asbestos minerals.” Then the members chose their own detection method—one that didn’t test for chrysotile asbestos and could only show levels of amphibole asbestos when they were five times higher than what the F.D.A. had originally proposed. The epidemiologist David Egilman, who has studied asbestos and testified as a witness on behalf of plaintiffs in talc lawsuits, compared this to companies placing needles on a bathroom scale and then denying that those needles existed because they didn’t weigh enough to register. (A lawsuit brought against P.C.P.C. alleging negligence and conspiracy was dismissed by a New Jersey judge last year.)

Cosmetic companies have since used the voluntary standard to claim that talc products made after 1976 are “asbestos-free,” a claim repeated far and wide, including on a part of Johnson & Johnson’s Web site dedicated to “The Facts About Talc Safety.” The trade group and its allies also used the voluntary standard to challenge medical literature showing a correlation between talc and cancer. Any incidence of cancer that predated the standard might have come from asbestos in talc, the industry argument goes. And since talc is now thoroughly tested for asbestos, no further regulation is necessary. The only problem is that as recently as 2019 the F.D.A. found asbestos in several talc products on store shelves, including in one bottle of Johnson & Johnson baby powder. (A company statement blames testing error or contamination. The F.D.A. stands by its findings.)

Another C.T.F.A. success came in late 2000, after the National Toxicology Program, which is part of the Department of Health and Human Services,

first considered classifying talc as a carcinogen, whether or not it contained asbestos fibers. As one supplier warned his industry colleagues in a presentation, if the N.T.P. declared talc a carcinogen, “civil litigation would likely skyrocket” and there would be “a virtual immediate loss of our sales.” So the C.T.F.A. worked with some of the same product-defense firms that tobacco companies used in their fight against regulation, including the Weinberg Group and the Center for Regulatory Effectiveness, to create confusion about the definition of talc and to deploy the voluntary asbestos standard against the N.T.P. Although an overwhelming majority of the N.T.P.’s scientists had originally voted for the classification, the vote was changed after the campaign. (Talc was later withdrawn from consideration entirely. The only other instance in which the N.T.P. reviewed and then withdrew something from consideration involved a study of the carcinogenic effects of night shift work and light at night.) “We (the talc industry) dodged a bullet in December based entirely on the confusion over the definition issue,” one of Johnson & Johnson’s talc suppliers confided in a private e-mail. But a colleague of his cautioned that there was work left to do in fighting off further regulation: “Time to come up with more confusion!”

Shortly afterward, the C.T.F.A. brought on a new executive: John Bailey, who was hired after he’d served ten years as the head of the F.D.A. office overseeing the Division of Cosmetics. Bailey has since made more than two hundred dollars per hour testifying as an expert witness for Johnson & Johnson and other companies in talc litigation.

There are two levers to pull when it comes to consumer protection: one before the harm is done, and one after. In June of 2013, nearly four years after Deane Berg filed her lawsuit against Johnson & Johnson, she drove five hours to Rapid City to meet with company lawyers, who, she told me, offered her a settlement of eight hundred thousand dollars. Would the company also add a warning label to its baby powder? Berg asked. No, said the lawyers, who then increased the proposed settlement by another half million dollars. The offer was contingent on her never saying that baby powder had caused her cancer. (The company denies this version of events.)

She left the meeting with the lawyers and went for a walk with her second husband, who had come with her for moral support. “You know I didn’t go into this to make a buck,” she told him. “I wanted to get this out there for the public, so women don’t suffer like I did.” When she went back inside, she announced her decision: “If you’re not going to put a warning on the powder and you’re not going to tell women, I’ll see you in court.”

That fall, Berg’s case went before a jury in Sioux Falls. Three experts appeared on her behalf, including Daniel Cramer, an epidemiologist at the Dana-Farber/Harvard Cancer Center, who had published one of the first studies showing an increased risk of ovarian cancer from using talcum powder. Johnson & Johnson had five experts who disputed the link between talc and cancer and suggested that the talc found in Berg’s ovary was from contamination of the sample at the hospital where she was treated.

The trial lasted two weeks. Berg’s lawyers warned her that South Dakota juries often sided with defendants in product-liability cases, but, whatever the outcome, her case was already significant. Even though the company had challenged every one of her expert witnesses, they had all been accepted by the court, clearing a crucial judicial hurdle known as the Daubert standard.

During the two days that the jury spent deliberating, a blizzard descended on South Dakota. Berg, sitting at the plaintiff’s table, was struck by how silent the courtroom was when the jurors returned with a verdict: Johnson & Johnson was guilty of negligence. One of the company’s lawyers slammed a notebook shut. Then the clerk turned to the matter of compensatory and punitive damages—how much Berg would receive for her medical expenses and how much Johnson & Johnson would have to pay her for its failure to warn consumers of the risk of cancer associated with its product. The amount, in both categories, was the same: nothing.

For a jury to find a company guilty of negligence yet award no damages is rare, and to a different plaintiff that outcome might have been devastating. But Berg, who had turned down more than a million dollars in order to warn other women, found peace in the knowledge that, whatever else had happened, she had made it easier for future plaintiffs to fare better. Which they did, until they didn’t. Once juries started turning against Johnson &

Johnson, Johnson & Johnson, looking for a better way out of mass litigation, turned against juries.



"I think it might be time to text him the Talk."  
Cartoon by E. S. Glenn and Colin Nissan

It wasn't that Johnson & Johnson always lost in court; on the contrary, the company ultimately prevailed in most of the talc cases that went to trial. But, when it lost, it lost big. In 2016, juries in Missouri awarded seventy-two million dollars to the family of a woman who died of ovarian cancer, then fifty-five million and seventy million to two women living with the disease. In 2020, the company settled more than a thousand cases for around a hundred million dollars total, and, in a separate suit, twenty-two women were together awarded more than four billion dollars in damages. On appeal, some of the awards were reduced or overturned. But last year the company, in its Securities and Exchange Commission filing, disclosed that it had set aside \$3.9 billion primarily for talc-related litigation.

By then, the bulk of the talc lawsuits had been organized into what is known as multi-district litigation. M.D.L.s can involve thousands of plaintiffs and hundreds of lawyers, mostly pursuing damages from large companies accused of producing defective drugs or faulty products or compromising consumer data. In theory, M.D.L.s are economical, efficient, and more equitable than other mass torts. By combining pretrial work like

depositions and discovery, they streamline litigation, unclogging the federal courts and saving both sides time and fees. They can also produce more consistent rulings than stand-alone cases, thereby avoiding lottery-like outcomes in which some plaintiffs receive huge verdicts and others, like Deane Berg, get nothing.

In reality, however, almost everyone involved in M.D.L.s hates them. Defendants complain that plaintiffs are poorly vetted, and an estimated thirty to forty per cent of them are later found to be ineligible or even fraudulent. (Johnson & Johnson estimates that plaintiff firms have collectively spent as much as four and a half million dollars per month on advertising to recruit women with ovarian cancer as clients.) Plaintiffs, meanwhile, dislike the impersonal nature of consolidated representation and the high fees involved, which include lawyers' billable hours, meals, and travel (sometimes on private flights), and can rise to more than forty per cent of settlements. And plaintiffs and defendants alike complain about the sluggishness of the enterprise. M.D.L.s can take years to reach a conclusion, during which time the opposing sides turn into nation-states of sorts, each with its own G.D.P. and factions, to say nothing of its own press secretaries, pundits, dignitaries, emissaries, and even mercenaries, all chasing after a resolution that is technically if preposterously known as "global peace."

M.D.L. No. 2738 was formed on October 4, 2016, and assigned to the District of New Jersey, where Johnson & Johnson and many other pharmaceutical companies are headquartered. The litigation, which ultimately included more than thirty-eight thousand women with ovarian cancer, was assigned to Judge Freda Wolfson. She spent half a decade sorting through all the pretrial work and selecting what are called the bellwethers: a small sample of plaintiffs whose suits would go to trial, each verdict helping the parties gauge the likely settlement figure, and thereby moving the M.D.L. closer to a conclusion.

Alexandra Lahav, who teaches complex litigation at Cornell Law School, observes that, of the more than a hundred medical-related product-liability M.D.L.s since 2000, only four exclusively affected men. Twenty-two exclusively affected women, including the Johnson & Johnson case and

others involving contraceptives such as Yaz and medical devices such as transvaginal mesh. In addition, the women's cases over all involved far more plaintiffs per case than those affecting men. Lahav believes that these disparities reflect biases in the regulatory apparatus that tolerate greater risks for women than for men. "With women, especially women's reproductive health, history demonstrates again and again that these products aren't tested well, the side effects aren't well known, and there appear to be more adverse events," Lahav told me. "There's this sense that it's O.K. to experiment on women's bodies in real time." When such experiments go wrong, they cost companies, but not as much as they might: according to Lahav, lawyers on both sides report that women's cases are less profitable than cases involving men.

Last summer, Johnson & Johnson reportedly offered somewhere between four and five billion dollars to settle the cases in M.D.L. No. 2738. That deal fell apart, but, in any case, it would not have ended all the litigation the company was facing. Not everyone suing Johnson & Johnson is part of that M.D.L., and not all of the plaintiffs have ovarian cancer. Some are suffering from mesothelioma, a rare and lethal form of cancer, associated with asbestos exposure, that eats away at the thin layer of tissue surrounding the body's internal organs and often results in death within a year of diagnosis. One of those plaintiffs is Patricia Cook, a fifty-eight-year-old personal trainer and mother of two sons from Virginia Beach. She never lived or worked anywhere near asbestos, but her mother had been an employee of Johnson & Johnson and encouraged her daughters to use the company's products. Cook began using baby powder when she was twelve—applying it, like Deane Berg, after every shower, and later, once she had children, after every diaper change. In 2020, when those children were grown, Cook found a lump on the lower right side of her abdomen. She went in for an ultrasound, and the technician found a nodule behind her cervix. Given the choice between a biopsy and a hysterectomy, she chose the latter, but during the procedure the surgeon found that her reproductive system was riddled with tumors and decided to biopsy as many as he could. "I got the results on MyChart," she told me: malignant peritoneal mesothelioma.

Historically, mesothelioma has been associated with men who worked in mining or construction, although it sometimes affected their wives and

daughters as well. Now, though, according to Michael Becich, a professor at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine who runs the National Mesothelioma Virtual Tissue Bank, “we’re seeing a much younger population and also more women.” The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recently reported that in the past twenty years there has been a twenty-five-per-cent increase in the number of women who died of the disease: four hundred and eighty-nine in 1999 to six hundred and fourteen in 2020, with the highest number of deaths occurring among homemakers. As early as 1997, lawyers working on behalf of Johnson & Johnson to fight a Texas woman’s mesothelioma lawsuit against the company noted in an internal memo that “rare cases of mesothelioma among women with no other identifiable exposure might be related to exposure to cosmetic talc.”

“I was just in shock,” Cook said of her diagnosis. “I spent my life eating healthy and exercising.” She had just wed her second husband, and, she told me, “I hadn’t married him to be my caretaker. We had plans for a long life.” *COVID* restrictions kept him from being with her in the hospital, where she spent long stretches alone, having her uterus, omentum, gallbladder, appendix, spleen, part of her peritoneum, part of her diaphragm, and some of her intestines removed, then undergoing hyperthermic intraperitoneal chemotherapy, an intensive treatment in which drugs are poured directly into the abdomen.

Partly to cover medical bills and partly hoping to protect other women, Cook filed a lawsuit against Johnson & Johnson. Her lawyers said that her trial would likely begin in May, 2022. But, as her lawyers were preparing their case, Cook learned that it would not move forward. Nor would any of the other cases in state courts or the tens of thousands of cases that were part of the federal M.D.L. Like planes suddenly grounded at every airport in the country, those cases were all stayed when Johnson & Johnson filed for bankruptcy.

Johnson & Johnson’s lawyers would have it be known that their company—officially, Johnson & Johnson Consumer Inc.—never filed for bankruptcy. The company that did so was called LTL Management L.L.C. LTL, which stands for Legacy Talc Litigation, was created in Texas on October 11, 2021, and merged on the following day with—let’s call it Old J. & J. That

same day, LTL Management was converted to a limited-liability company based in North Carolina, and two days after that, on October 14th, it filed for Chapter 11 protection in the U.S. Bankruptcy Court in Charlotte.

The L.L.C. that Johnson & Johnson created never had an office or any employees of its own in Texas or North Carolina. It never manufactured or sold talcum powder; for that matter, it never really conducted any business at all before going belly up. Still, in between its formation in one business-friendly jurisdiction and its bankruptcy in another, the new company took on all of Old J. & J.’s talc liabilities. It was suddenly responsible for some forty thousand talc cases, while a new company, also called Johnson & Johnson Consumer Inc., emerged with all of Old J. & J.’s assets—those tens of billions of dollars—and none of its talc liabilities, leaving it free to carry on with its operations.

The bankruptcy route taken by Johnson & Johnson, formally called a divisional merger, is better known as the Texas two-step. Greg Gordon, a partner at Jones Day, the law firm that has represented every company that has attempted the move so far, has observed that although some portray it as “the greatest innovation in the history of bankruptcy,” the two-step is more than thirty years old. It came into being in 1989, when the Texas legislature amended its Business Corporation Act, permitting a single corporation to divide into two or more entities, including when facing extremely expensive litigation.

No corporation was daring enough to try the two-step until 2017, when Koch Industries used it to shield a subsidiary, Georgia-Pacific, from asbestos claims related to its paper and building products. The parent company formed a Texas corporation called, improbably, Bestwall, which declared bankruptcy in North Carolina three months later, spinning off all the asbestos-related liabilities while allowing Georgia-Pacific to continue making billions of dollars in profits through its other products, among them Brawny paper towels, Quilted Northern toilet paper, and Dixie cups.

Johnson & Johnson is the fourth company to attempt the two-step and, thus far, the most brazen, having collapsed the interval between formation and bankruptcy from three months to seventy-two hours. According to a recent Reuters investigation, the two-step plan at Johnson & Johnson was known

internally as Project Plato. As one of the lawyers involved wrote in a memo, “It is critical that any activities related to Project Plato, including the mere fact the project exists, be kept in strict confidence.”



*“Some say soup needs to be placed in the bowl right side up. I disagree.”*  
Cartoon by Liana Finck

Project Plato has succeeded in pausing Patricia Cook’s lawsuit, and the company will be protected from her case and all others in perpetuity if it is granted a non-debtor release, which extends the shield of bankruptcy to non-bankrupt parties. Non-debtor releases were a lightning rod in the Purdue Pharma bankruptcy, when members of the Sackler family sought to be spared future liability by contributing to the company’s opioid settlement fund. These releases were also part of the bankruptcies that followed sexual-abuse cases against USA Gymnastics, the Boy Scouts of America, and Catholic dioceses around the country. In all these cases, the bankruptcy of one entity was used by others—family members, training facilities, insurance companies, individual parishes—to try to minimize financial liability.

In the Texas two-step, such releases are particularly audacious, since they shield not only ancillary parties but also the party with the greatest liability, to say nothing of the greatest assets—in this case, Johnson & Johnson, which is seeking protection from both current suits and future talc litigation.

(The company disputes this characterization, and said in a statement, “LTL’s Chapter 11 filing is intended to resolve all claims related to cosmetic talc in a manner that is equitable to all parties.”) Lindsey Simon, a professor at the University of Georgia School of Law, calls such corporate actors “bankruptcy grifters,” since they enjoy the benefits of bankruptcy but don’t suffer any of its burdens, such as transparency requirements, and they do so without, in any meaningful sense, going bankrupt. “They want the good parts of bankruptcy,” she told me, “without any of the bad parts.”

Michael Kaplan, a bankruptcy judge in New Jersey, inherited Johnson & Johnson’s Chapter 11 filing when, in the first sign of how unusual the case was, a bankruptcy judge in the Western District of North Carolina refused to hear it. In February, in response to plaintiffs’ objections, Kaplan ruled that there was “no impropriety” in the use of the Texas two-step. Allowing the bankruptcy to proceed, he appointed Kenneth Feinberg, who administered the September 11th Victim Compensation Fund and the BP Deepwater Horizon Disaster Victim Compensation Fund, to estimate the value of the talc litigation before the end of the year.

That estimate might not matter, though. Critics say that the point of Project Plato was to try to create an entity with limited assets: specifically, two billion dollars so far to settle current and future claims. That figure is less than half of what Johnson & Johnson reportedly offered the ovarian-cancer plaintiffs in the M.D.L. just last summer, to say nothing of what they could owe all the mesothelioma plaintiffs. And, needless to say, it is also far less than the company’s assets. Johnson & Johnson has already spent nearly a billion dollars—half the value of the settlement fund—on its own legal defense. The company’s bankrupt subsidiary, meanwhile, has its own legal costs, including fees paid to Neal Katyal, the former Solicitor General and a current partner at the law firm Hogan Lovells, who charged \$2,465 per hour.

“Shameful,” “indefensible,” “complicated trickery that ordinary people don’t have access to”: thus have members of the Senate Judiciary Committee decried Johnson & Johnson’s bankruptcy maneuver. Earlier this year, the committee held a bipartisan hearing on the two-step loophole and whether it could become corporate America’s default way of avoiding

consumer liability, letting companies with problem products squeeze through it with billions of dollars in assets intact. Among those who testified at the hearing was a single mother named Kimberly Naranjo.

Naranjo, who had been abused as a young girl, moved in and out of the foster-care system and struggled with addiction until an aunt helped her turn her life around. In 2021, fifteen years sober, she had bought her first house and was starting a new job as an addiction counsellor at the Salt Lake County Sheriff's Office when she felt a pain in her side. A week later, she learned that the pain was caused by mesothelioma. Naranjo had no known exposure to asbestos, but at twenty, when she had her first child and was trying to be a better mother than her own had been, she began using Johnson & Johnson's powder at every diaper change. She did the same for six more children, and all along she used baby powder in her underwear and in her shoes, to combat sweat and body odor in the Utah heat.

Her disease forced her to leave her job, and, unable to pay her mortgage, she soon lost the house. When she learned that she could file a lawsuit, she thought that a settlement might help with her medical expenses or provide for her children after her death. Then came the bankruptcy, which stalled cases like hers and kept other women from even filing.

"I am so grateful that you have listened to me," Naranjo said to those who attended the congressional hearing. "I wish that Johnson & Johnson would listen, too, but they took away that right from me and thousands of other people who have their own stories, families, and lives that also deserve a right to be heard by a jury."

Judge Kaplan's ruling allowing the Johnson & Johnson bankruptcy to proceed has been appealed by the Official Committee of Talc Claimants, which was organized by the U.S. Department of Justice to represent the mesothelioma and ovarian-cancer victims in the Chapter 11 case. Lawyers for those plaintiffs called the bankruptcy a "shell game" designed to "slough off [the company's] responsibility," and the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit is holding an expedited hearing this month to consider these plaintiffs' challenge.

Elizabeth Chamblee Burch, a professor at the University of Georgia School of Law who studies mass litigation, told me that corporate America is watching the Third Circuit closely. “We’re clearly seeing a strategy here to get the closure every company wants: ending all the state and federal lawsuits at once, reassuring their shareholders everything’s fine,” she said. Burch noted that many companies are exploring strategic bankruptcy as a cheaper, faster way out of mass torts. 3M recently tried to move tens of thousands of lawsuits filed by veterans over its allegedly defective Combat Arms Earplugs into bankruptcy after three years of litigating the cases in an M.D.L. Bayer could decide that bankruptcy court is a better way out of the long-tail liability it faces from its product Roundup, which contains glyphosate, a chemical that plaintiffs claim has been linked to non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma.

Plaintiffs are watching the Third Circuit closely as well. In the summer of 2021, the National Council of Negro Women filed a lawsuit against Johnson & Johnson for false and predatory advertising to communities of color. Because of the two-step, that suit is stayed. And, in July, Johnson & Johnson took the two-step one step further by asking the bankruptcy court for an injunction against the states of Mississippi and New Mexico. Some forty other states are negotiating with Johnson & Johnson’s bankrupt subsidiary to settle their own consumer-protection cases against the company, but those two states were planning to go to trial. If Kaplan stays their cases as well, “principles of federalism [could] vanish,” they allege in their opposition to the injunction, “while a multi-billion-dollar entity contorts the bankruptcy code to shield itself from the states’ constitutional and statutory exercise of their police and regulatory powers.”

If companies can use the two-step to protect themselves from any and all consumer liability, even from states themselves, what’s left to hold them accountable? The Department of Justice has been investigating Johnson & Johnson since 2019, but little is known about the status or the aims of that investigation. The D.O.J. may or may not bring criminal charges. The Third Circuit may or may not toss the bankruptcy case. Congress may or may not curtail the Texas two-step or empower the F.D.A. to regulate cosmetics more effectively. Anything is possible.

But, for now, the only people who have ever held Johnson & Johnson responsible for its actions are those who have served on juries. Deane Berg went to court rather than accept a settlement in the belief that, upon hearing her story, a jury would agree that Johnson & Johnson should have warned consumers about the potential dangers of talc.

Patricia Cook may never get that chance. She knows how deadly mesothelioma is but could not bear to ask her doctors for a prognosis, choosing instead to appreciate every additional day. Kimberly Naranjo, though, is already in hospice care and unlikely to reach what she had taken to calling her “expiration date,” a month before her fiftieth birthday. She knows she won’t live long enough to see justice done. She isn’t even sure what justice would look like.

Yet all of us know what justice doesn’t look like. Johnson & Johnson’s most recent quarterly report shows twenty-four billion dollars in sales, and, in the eleven months since it filed for bankruptcy, an average of one woman a day has died waiting to find out if her case against the company would ever be heard. ♦

**By Jia Tolentino**

**By Jane Mayer**

**By Rachel Aviv**

**By Jessica Winter**

# **Annals of Gastronomy**

- [How Owamni Became the Best New Restaurant in the United States](#)

# How Owamni Became the Best New Restaurant in the United States

In Sean Sherman's modern Indigenous kitchen, every dish is made without wheat flour, dairy, cane sugar, black pepper, or any other ingredient introduced to the continent after Europeans arrived.

By [Carolyn Kormann](#)



In the summer of 2021, Sean Sherman, a forty-eight-year-old Oglala Lakota chef, opened a restaurant called Owamni, in Minneapolis. Nearly overnight, it became the most prominent example of Indigenous American cuisine in the United States. Every dish is made without wheat flour, dairy, cane sugar, black pepper, or any other ingredient introduced to this continent after Europeans arrived. Sherman describes the food as “decolonized”; his business partner and Owamni’s co-owner, Dana Thompson, calls it “ironically foreign.” In June, the James Beard Foundation named Owamni the best new restaurant in the United States.

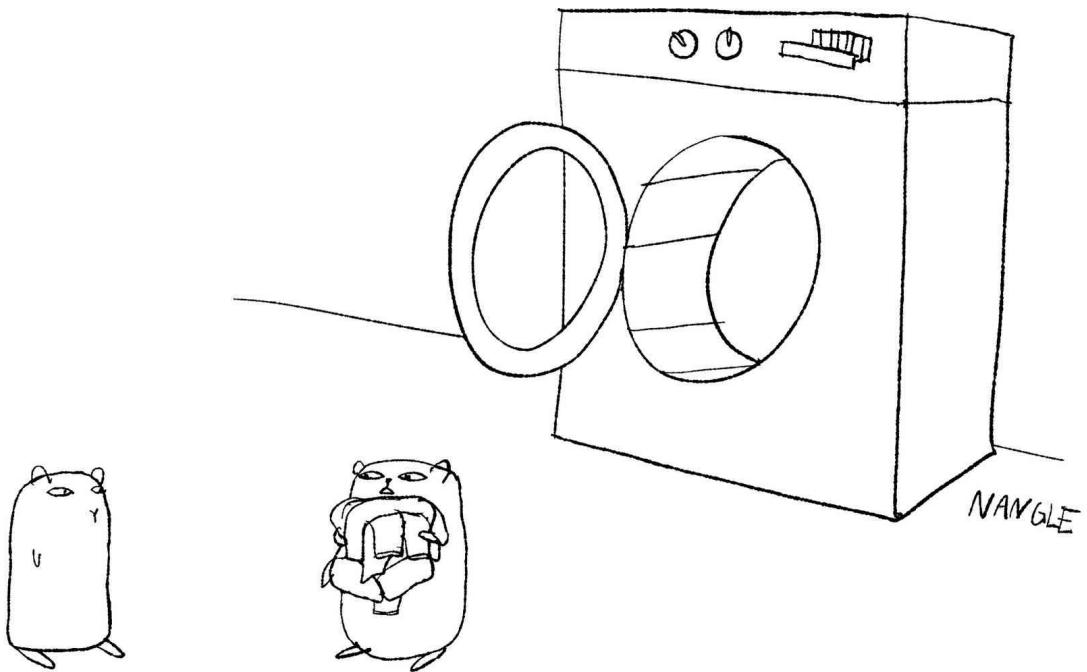
One evening in May, I met Sherman outside Owamni, which is situated in a park on the Mississippi River. Across the street, water plummeted fifty feet

down St. Anthony Falls. The area was once the site of a Dakota village known as Owamniyomni—the place of falling, swirling water. Sherman pulled out his phone and showed me an eighteenth-century drawing depicting tepees on the shore of the falls. “There was clearly a village here. People everywhere,” he said. “But the Europeans were, like, ‘You are now called St. Anthony!’ ”

Inside, the dining room was flooded with light from a wall of windows. A bartender named Thor Beartail delivered glasses of red wine. (Owamni breaks its decolonized rule with beverages, serving coffee, beer, and wine.) Beartail, like the rest of the staff, wore a black T-shirt that read “#86colonialism” on the back. Eighty-six, in kitchen slang, indicates that a dish is sold out. A month earlier, Beartail, who is a member of the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara Nation, in North Dakota, had moved from Fargo to Minneapolis to work at Owamni. His previous job was at a Red Lobster. “Sometimes I have to pinch myself,” he said.

American carnivores tend to think in terms of beef, pork, and chicken. Owamni reminds them that picture-book farm animals are not native to this continent. My first plate was raw deer, or “game tartare,” listed under a menu section titled “Wamakhaskan,” the Dakota word for animal. The dish was a study in circles: the meat pressed flat and dotted with pickled carrots, moons of sumac-dusted duck-egg aioli, microgreens, and blueberries. A blue-corn tostada served as a utensil. One bite was a disco ball in the forest.

Other wamakhaskan dishes were served: a puck of duck sausage, with watercress purée and roasted turnips; ground elk, served on a pillow-y corn arepa; and a maple-chili cricket-and-seed mix. “We go through fifteen pounds of crickets a week,” Sherman said. He is solidly built, with big, dark eyes, and he wore a black chef’s jacket, an Apple watch, and a bear-tooth necklace; his hair hung in a braid to his waist. “It’s a lot,” he said. “Crickets don’t weigh that much.”



*"I'm going to go do some laundry, exercise, and shower."*  
Cartoon by Jared Nangle

The gastronomy touted by auteur chefs during the past two decades is, Sherman often says, how Indigenous people ate for millennia. Ingredients are local, seasonal, organic. The traditional preservation methods that Owamni features—smoking, fermenting, drying—are au courant. But the restaurant does not provide a museum meal; the food is simultaneously pre-Colonial and modern. There are maple-baked beans, and cedar-braised bison with maple vinegar. Wojape, a Lakota berry sauce, is served with a tepary-bean spread and smoked Lake Superior trout. A bowl of char-striped sweet potatoes, doused in chili oil, is Sherman's favorite dish. "It's so homey," he said. "I was eating mostly plant-based last year, so that was my go-to."

I ordered a bowl of manoomin, a hand-harvested wild rice. The only place in the world where manoomin grows is around the Great Lakes. It forms part of the origin story of the Ojibwe people, who migrated inland from the East Coast centuries ago, following a prophecy to travel west until they found "the food that grows on the water." Manoomin is harvested from a canoe, its grains knocked from the heads of rice stalks that grow in shallow waters. Winona LaDuke, an Ojibwe activist, wrote that manoomin is the "first food for a child when they can eat solid; the last food eaten before you pass into the spirit world."

At Owamni, it was fluffy and a tad chewy, with a sweet, earthy aroma. I could almost smell the lake. Sherman sources as much of Owamni's food as he can from Indigenous producers. The rice comes from a young Ojibwe couple who own a small farm in northern Minnesota. "I had them drop off seven hundred pounds of rice the other day," he said. "Just stuffed in their car."

Around 7 p.m., two men and a woman, all with little wires behind their ears, filed across the dining room. Behind them was a familiar face: Deb Haaland, the U.S. Secretary of the Interior, and the first Native American Cabinet member in U.S. history. She was dining with Minnesota's lieutenant governor, Peggy Flanagan, a member of the White Earth band of Ojibwe and an Owamni regular. ("I want to think it's like my Cheers," Flanagan told me.) Sherman said hello to the Secretary, then stopped back by my table. "It's wild," he said. "She's eighth in line for the Presidency."

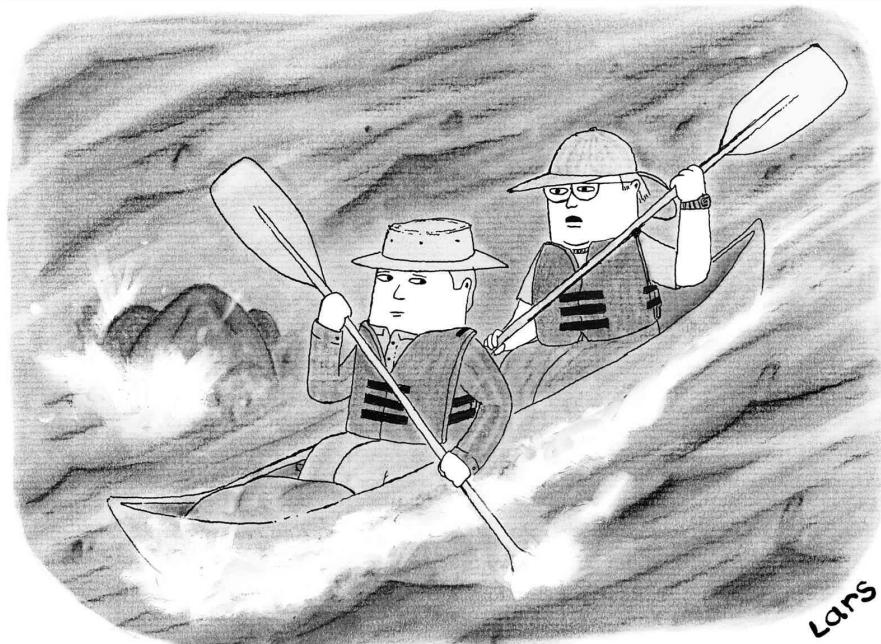
Some two-thirds of Owamni's staff identifies as Native, as do many of its guests. The novelist Louise Erdrich, who owns a bookstore in Minneapolis, is a repeat visitor. Several cast members from the FX series "Reservation Dogs" ate at Owamni this past summer, including D'Pharaoh Woon-A-Tai, the show's star, who was accompanied by the model Quannah Chasinghorse. Leaving, I passed colorful bouquets of wildflowers placed on the long bar facing the open kitchen. A neon sign at the entrance reads "You Are on Native Land." Outside, Sherman demonstrated a set of switch-on fire pits and noted that the surrounding park harvested rainwater. Next door, the ruins of the Columbia flour mill were lit in amber light. When I remarked on it all, Sherman shrugged, and said, "Different than the church basement, right?"

I first met Sherman on a freezing night in 2017, when he and Thompson hosted a dinner at the First Universalist Church of Minneapolis. Back then, they were business partners and romantic partners. They ran the Sioux Chef, a food truck and catering operation, which now owns Owamni. When I arrived, Thompson, a tall, animated woman, greeted me with cedar-maple tea. "It's full of flavonoids!" she said.

The purpose of the dinner—a five-course meal prepared by M. Karlos Baca, an Indigenous food activist from the Southern Ute Nation—was to

announce the launch of a nonprofit called *NATIFS*, or North American Traditional Indigenous Food Systems, which promotes culinary solutions to economic and health crises. Roughly a hundred people sat at folding tables. Between courses, Sherman delivered a slide presentation. “Food is a language,” he said. “To understand Indigenous food today, you need to know how we got here.”

For millennia, Indigenous people across what became North America cultivated high-yield, climate-specific varieties of plants, including sunchokes, lamb’s-quarter, gourds, knotweed, and goosefoot. By the thirteenth century, domesticated maize and sunflowers had spread in a green-and-yellow blaze from Mexico to Maine. “We still have Hidatsa shield beans and Arikara yellow beans,” Sherman told the diners. “There’s a Lakota squash—the awesome one with the orange flame—and gete okosomin,” a squash that looks like a lifeguard buoy, which Baca used for the soup course.



*“After these rapids comes the really hard part—a bunch of guys we don’t know talking about crypto at the same time.”*  
Cartoon by Lars Kenseth

Native Americans hunted game like bison, which roamed as far east as Buffalo, New York. They harvested fish and shellfish. Tribes in the Pacific Northwest and elsewhere employed controlled burns, creating meadows among redwood groves where desirable plants would thrive and animals

would graze. Everywhere, the people told stories and sang songs about their food; in many Indigenous languages, plants and animals are referred to as persons. “The diet of our ancestors, it was almost a perfect diet,” Sherman went on. “It’s what the paleo diet wants to be: gluten-free, dairy-free, sugar-free.”

Raiding Europeans were in awe of the abundance. In 1687, after the Marquis de Denonville, the governor of New France, attacked Seneca villages, he wrote that his army “destroyed a vast quantity of fine large corn, beans, and other vegetables.” In 1779, George Washington ordered an offensive against the Iroquois Confederacy, writing, “It will be essential to ruin their crops now in the ground and prevent their planting more.” Afterward, one officer wrote of beans, cucumbers, watermelons, and pumpkins “in such quantities” that “would be almost incredible to a civilized people.”

In the first half of the nineteenth century, Andrew Jackson forced more than a hundred and twenty-five thousand people—from the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, and Seminole Nations—to walk to present-day Oklahoma, along the Trail of Tears. Thousands died of starvation. Not long afterward, when the U.S. failed to beat back the Great Sioux Nation, it tried a different tactic: a government-funded campaign to kill buffalo herds. Before 1800, more than sixty million buffalo roamed the country; by 1900, only a few hundred were left. As the White Mountain Apache chef Nephi Craig has said, “You want to attack a people and wipe them out? Attack their food.”

In 1883, the U.S. Department of the Interior established the Code of Indian Offenses, banning all Native traditions. Cooking a ceremonial feast could land you in prison. Four years later, the government passed the General Allotment Act, which forced private ownership on tribal land, allowing white settlers to steal vast acreage. Tribes, now sequestered on reservations, relied on treaty-provisioned rations, then on government-issued commodities: bags of flour, powdered milk and eggs, blocks of lard and orange American cheese, and, as Sherman recalled from his childhood, cans of beef and salmon “with juices.” “This was not a nutritional program—this was a farm-supplement program,” he told the attendees. “This food was

never, ever designed to be healthy. It's high in fat, in sodium, in sugars—just over-processed food made by the lowest bidder for the government to hand out en masse.”

Sherman clicked to a slide depicting fry bread, also known as Indian tacos, which is like unsweetened funnel cake, served with toppings such as cheese and ground beef. Fry bread, a powwow staple, may be the best-known Native American food today. It was invented in the mid-nineteenth century, when the U.S. military forced the Navajo from Arizona to arid, infertile land in New Mexico. To prevent starvation, the military supplied people with sugar, salt, lard, and sacks of white flour—the makings of fry bread. Today, the food is a symbol of resilience and Native pride. In “Reservation Dogs,” one character pays homage to it with a music video titled “Greasy Fry Bread.”

Native Americans have now lacked access to their ancestral foods for many generations, leading, in part, to what Elizabeth Hoover, an environmental-studies professor at U.C. Berkeley, calls the “grim statistics.” Native Americans have the highest rate of diabetes in this country. Compared with white adults, they are sixty per cent more likely to be obese; compared with all other ethnic groups, they die much earlier from heart disease.

But, among the country’s five hundred and seventy-four federally recognized tribes, knowledge has survived. Women sewed seeds into the hems of their skirts before being forced to walk hundreds of miles from their homes. Recipes were scattered across reservations, then tucked away in grandparents’ kitchens. They contained methods for brewing sofke, making pemmican, and nixtamalizing corn—an ancient cooking technique in which the grain is simmered in an alkaline solution, making it, among other things, rich in protein. “There wasn’t even tooth decay back then,” Sherman said to the church audience as we spooned up poached quail eggs, preserved cholla buds, and huatlacoche—a funky corn fungus.

Before the penultimate course was served, Baca told the crowd about its ingredients, which included blue corn and grits made from bear root, the first thing his grandfather taught him how to forage. Hunting parties used to travel with sun-dried cakes made from blue-corn mush and from bear root, which was valued for its antimicrobial properties. “But people don’t eat

these things anymore,” Baca said. He later told me, “With traditional dishes, people don’t always like it—it’s not what they grew up with. They grew up eating shit like every American. And the Colonial mind frame has captured their taste buds.”



*Sean Sherman, a co-owner of Owamni. “The diet of our ancestors, it was almost a perfect diet,” he says.*

The plate of grits, with smoked trout, smoked ramps, and pine-needle syrup, was dainty and delicious. Seated across from me was a man named Daniel Cornelius, a member of the Oneida Nation of Wisconsin. Cornelius worked for the Intertribal Agriculture Council, which promotes Native farming. He expressed admiration for Sherman and Baca, and for their effort to reclaim Native cuisine: “The culinary approach has such a role to play, to get people excited about these foods, to show they can taste good.” Still, he said, “there’s this idea, like, ‘Oh, people have healthier food and a bunch of vegetables, they’re gonna be healthier and really happy,’ but that’s bullshit. The issues go a lot deeper. There’s a lot of intergenerational trauma.”

Sherman lives a few miles from Owamni, in a modest, pale-yellow Colonial, with a fire pit in the back yard and a black Ford F150 in the driveway. When I visited in the spring, the kitchen table was covered in seedlings, and the dining-room table was covered in vinyl LPs—mainly jazz, blues, and rock and roll—which he was in the process of sorting. Sherman told me that, when he was a kid, growing up on the Pine Ridge

Reservation, in South Dakota, “TV wasn’t really a thing. So my mom would just put on a record and I’d lie on the floor listening.”

The Pine Ridge Reservation, where forty-three per cent of the population lives below the poverty line, is a small fraction of the land that once belonged to the Great Sioux Nation, an alliance of seven tribes from across the Upper Midwest and the Plains who spoke Siouan-language dialects—specifically, Dakota, Nakota, and Lakota. Sherman has deep roots in the area. His great-great-great grandparents helped raise Crazy Horse, who was an Oglala Lakota warrior. His mother and father were born on Pine Ridge, and Sherman spent his childhood on his grandparents’ cattle ranch, surrounded by sandhills and prairies. Although there was just one grocery store on the reservation, and government commodities were the family’s main source of food staples, they had fresh garden vegetables and their own beef. They hunted pheasants, antelope, and deer. Sherman’s grandfather showed him how to dig for *timpila*, or wild turnip; his grandmother gathered chokecherries to make *wojape*. By the age of seven, Sherman had his own .410-gauge shotgun, and he spent his days roaming the hills with his cousins. The dog was their nanny, Sherman’s mother, Joan Conroy, told me. “If they ventured too far, the dog would come home to let me know.”

Sherman’s father, Gerald, was barely around. He had been a U.S. Army gunner in Vietnam. “It’s amazing he survived,” Sherman told me. Back in the States, he’d reënlisted, gone *AWOL*, and eventually turned himself in. He did time in the Presidio stockade, in San Francisco, and returned to Pine Ridge with a drinking problem. “So then my mom was, like, ‘Well, here’s a good catch,’ ” Sherman said. (Gerald told me, “I was a mess back then.”)

We were seated in Sherman’s living room. He had taught himself to paint in oils during lockdown, and three of his canvasses—evocative Western landscapes—hung on the wall; along the bottom edge of one, depicting a ceremonial dancer, he had written, “Be the answer to your ancestors’ prayers.” Sherman picked up a Rubik’s Cube and started turning the squares. He told me that his parents divorced when he was twelve, and his mom took him and his younger sister to Spearfish, South Dakota. They lived in a trailer park. Sherman was a minority for the first time in his life,

in a white, conservative, “Bible-thumping” town, he said. “I still had a fairly thick rez accent.”

After school, he would spend hours in a library at Black Hills State University—where his mom was taking classes—reading history, sci-fi, and fantasy. “Lord of the Rings” was a favorite. “I didn’t have any girlfriends, because I was shy,” he said. He listened obsessively to rock and punk—the Smiths, Dead Kennedys, the Replacements—and skied and drank in the hills above the nearby city of Deadwood. He did well academically, accruing all the required high-school credits by the end of his junior year. Conroy modelled a good work ethic. In three years, she got a college degree in political science while working multiple jobs—a cashier in a Deadwood casino, the proprietor of an art-framing shop. She even ran for a county seat. Off and on, she worked as a staffer for Tom Daschle, the South Dakota senator. When Sherman was eighteen, on a trip to Rapid City, he met Bill Clinton.

Sherman’s cooking career started because of his mom’s hectic schedule. “We were obviously super latchkey,” he said. As the older sibling, he was responsible for putting meals on the table. “I was playing with flavor, but we didn’t have any spices, so I was learning how to make, like, sloppy joes with just ketchup and mustard.” He got his first restaurant job when he was thirteen, prepping salads at a tourist spot called the Sluice. The next summer, he worked at a resort, where he was promoted to the grill. The cooking staff lived in a dorm in Custer State Park and experimented with recipes for rattlesnake and beaver, which Sherman found thrilling. “I also remember becoming more aware of racist things,” he said. Ku Klux Klan propaganda was displayed in a Spearfish gas station.



Cedar, squash, and beets at NATIFS' Indigenous Food Lab.

Throughout high school, he continued working in restaurants—Burger King, Pizza Hut, a golf club—but it wasn’t until his senior year that he found something he loved. For a school project, he interviewed a member of the town’s volunteer fire department, who also worked for the U.S. Forest Service. She invited him to apply to be a field surveyor. “It was a dream job,” Sherman said. He learned to identify plants in the Black Hills, then document their size and location. He kept a journal, in which he drew the plants he saw. He started making block prints, too, and decided that he wanted to attend art school. He moved to Minneapolis, and got a job at the California Café, in the Mall of America. “I was thrown on sauté,” he said. “It was in public, in front of everybody. I learned really fast.”

In 2000, he took time off to travel around Europe, eating and drinking his way through England, France, and Italy. He dressed in black, wore small, rectangular sunglasses, and smoked cigarettes. (It was around this time that he made “Sioux chef” his AOL e-mail address.) He had decided to shelve art school; instead, he procured a copy of the Culinary Institute of America’s “The Professional Chef.” “I still did some art here and there,” he said. “But then I found art through food.”

He admired the Italian cookbook author Marcella Hazan for her devotion to simplicity, precision, and balance. He read about Ferran Adrià, the Spanish

chef who is considered the godfather of molecular gastronomy. “And, obviously, everybody then was super into ‘Kitchen Confidential,’ ” Sherman said. “All the line cooks suddenly wanted to be drunken pirates.”

In his living room, Sherman, lounging comfortably on a beige sofa, leaned forward and set down the Rubik’s Cube on the coffee table, solved.

One day, in December, 2017, Sherman told me that, the night before, he’d dreamed that he was on a pirate ship. “We’re out at sea, with a troupe of circus performers aboard,” he recalled. “We’re all Native.”

We were at a beach bar in San Pancho, a small town in Mexico. Sherman was barefoot, seated facing the Pacific Ocean. The following night, he would be co-hosting a dinner at Cielo Rojo, a local boutique hotel, where he had worked a decade earlier. The event was a fund-raiser to help the Huichol—the people indigenous to the region—stop the development of a resort, Punta Paraíso, on the beach’s turtle-nesting ground. Sherman ate a spoonful of ceviche and finished describing the dream: “We’re on a voyage. We didn’t know where, but we were going to take back what was ours.”

By then, Sherman’s career had taken a number of unexpected turns. He landed his first head-chef job, in 2001, at a Spanish-Italian restaurant called La Bodega. The following year, he had a son, Phoenix, and soon married the child’s mother, a lead server he’d once worked with, named Melissa. To devote more time to his family, he sought a job with better hours. Nothing stuck. He managed a gelato shop. He tried to open an Irish café, inspired by Darina Allen and her Ballymaloe Cookery School, but the deal fell through. His marriage started to falter, and he took a summer gig at a resort in Ely, near the Canadian border, leaving his wife and young son behind. “As soon as I left, I started finding out about infidelities that kind of broke me emotionally,” he said.

He returned to Minneapolis and, in the interest of good benefits, took a job at a nutrition-and-wellness corporation called Life Time Fitness. At one point, Sherman was writing recipes for dozens of the company’s cafés across the country and helping run three restaurants, including a sushi spot called Martini Blu. “That’s when I hit the burnout,” he said.

In 2007, Sherman quit and headed south, to San Pancho. Melissa and Phoenix soon joined him. Although Sherman doesn't like to swim, he spent a lot of time on the beach, contemplating the ocean. He befriended some fishermen, and started "hustling sushi" for tourists, turning one fresh, twelve-dollar mahi-mahi into five hundred dollars' worth of sashimi. San Pancho is a hippie town, with tourists searching for authentic experiences. Sherman relished the local Huichol food: the nixtamalized-blue-corn masa and handmade tortillas, the salsas and seasonings—chilis, hoja santa, achiote—and the fresh produce. "I had this bolt, an epiphany," he told me. Why wasn't there any Indigenous food up north? "In Minneapolis, I could find food from all over the world," he went on. "But nothing that represented the food or the people that were there before, which is completely insane."



Owamni's maple-chili cricket-and-seed mix. "We go through fifteen pounds of crickets a week," Sherman said.

After lunch in San Pancho, we went to a gallery featuring Huichol art. "This could be Lakota," Sherman said, pointing at beadwork depicting peyote flowers and an eagle. "I felt so comfortable among the Huichol. There are so many commonalities between tribes. They use sweat lodges, they have corn culture." We stopped in a wine-and-spirits shop; Sherman loves mezcal. On a case was a sticker that read "I Stand with Standing Rock."

Sherman told me, “I thought I could focus on Indigenous peoples across North America, look at the whole big picture. I saw the whole path.”

In 2008, Sherman moved his family to Red Lodge, Montana, on the edge of Yellowstone National Park, where his father’s wife, Jael, owned a dude ranch. Sherman cooked meals for guests, experimenting with local plants and game. Jael’s aunt, who happened to be named Julia Childs, took Sherman foraging and asked for his help with her big garden. Sherman reconnected with his father, Gerald, who had got sober, gone to business school, and started the Lakota Fund, one of the country’s first micro-loan initiatives. “It was good inspiration,” Sherman said. “Despite a rough start, he switched gears and did something that affects other people on a large scale.”

Two years later, Sherman and his wife separated, and mutually agreed that Sherman would raise Phoenix in Minneapolis. He began working at Common Roots, a farm-to-table restaurant, and hosting pop-up dinners that featured Indigenous cuisine. Around this time, he attended a gathering in Arizona of the Native American Culinary Association, founded by the chef Nephi Craig, who gave a presentation about ancestral foods. “That really helped solidify what I was doing,” Sherman told me. “That it’s not just about the cooking.” He was thirty-nine and raising a son as a single parent on less than fifty-five thousand dollars a year. But he was intent on launching something of his own. “I was just trying to figure out how and when,” he said. “I was really feeling a need to do this work. It was starting to consume me.”

In Minneapolis one evening, I went for a drink with Dana Thompson at Spoon and Stable, a French-inflected restaurant with a mostly white, male kitchen. Thompson, whose grandfather was part Dakota, is an effusive conversationalist. Her focus at both the Sioux Chef and *NATIFS*, the nonprofit, she said, apart from “just running the thing,” is mental health: “My true heart is in how these food systems are actually a healing mechanism for ancestral trauma.” Last year, she contracted a psychologist, who is available one day a week to the staff at *NATIFS*. “Suicidality, chemical dependency, dysfunctional conflict—it’s how this stuff

manifests,” she said. “We’re not going to succeed if we don’t acknowledge what’s right there in your face.”

Thompson uses herself as an example. “I had a terrible childhood,” she told me. Her father, a police officer in a small Minnesota town, was suspected of having an inappropriate relationship with the family’s babysitter, a fifteen-year-old girl. The girl ran away from home and was killed attempting to jump onto a train. Thompson’s father was later arrested on felony-theft charges—their garage was filled with stolen electronics. The family relocated to Hibbing. Thompson moved out at the age of fifteen, eventually making her way to Minneapolis, where she pursued a career as a folk musician. She had a daughter at twenty-seven and continued playing in a band throughout her thirties, while working in music management and consumer-goods marketing.

In October, 2014, she attended an event called Dinner on the Farm, where Sherman prepared the meal and spoke to the guests. “It was like I’d been struck by lightning,” Thompson recalled. Sherman had created the Sioux Chef the previous April, and had been catering his own Indigenous dinners. A week later, Thompson met him for coffee, and offered to be his manager. “I didn’t have the funds,” Sherman said. “But I hired her.” Soon, they were inseparable.

With Thompson’s help, Sherman quickly gained wider recognition. In addition to hosting dinners on reservations, he spoke at the Culinary Institute of America, the United Nations, and Oxford University. In 2017, he published “The Sioux Chef’s Indigenous Kitchen,” which won a James Beard award for best American cookbook. That same year, he was invited to participate in the Catastrophic Meal, in Denmark, an event where ten chefs presented either utopian or dystopian dishes. Sherman, who was assigned utopian, used some nixtamalized corn he had brought, and foraged the rest of his ingredients: rose hips, wild greens, and blue crabs. “It was just being aware of where we are, the seasons, using extreme local foods,” he said. “And making people feel good. That was my statement of the future.” Not long afterward, he was cast in a Hyundai commercial.

Meanwhile, Sherman and Thompson had entered into a partnership with the Minneapolis Parks and Recreation Board to open a restaurant in a new

riverfront park. Initially, it was conceived of as a small café with grab-and-go items, but, as construction proceeded, the concept began to shift to something grander. At the time, there were almost no Native American restaurants in the country, apart from Tocabe, a beloved fry-bread joint in Denver, and the Mitsitam Native Foods Café, in Washington, D.C. In the fall of 2016, Francis Ford Coppola had opened a Native-themed restaurant in Sonoma called Werowocomoco, which was widely accused of cultural appropriation and closed a year later. Loretta Barrett Oden, a Potawatomi chef who ran a pioneering Native American restaurant, in Santa Fe, in the nineties, had been brought on as a consultant. “I caught a lot of flack from Indian Country for it,” she said.



Duck sausage with watercress purée and roasted turnips.

Construction on Owamni was completed in July of 2021. The restaurant is situated on the second floor of a park pavilion built from tan bricks, white pine, reclaimed wood beams, and old stone walls—remnants of the area’s abandoned mills. A large terrace outside the entrance, which doubles Owamni’s size in warmer months, has a lawn of thick grass. “When we were first starting, the park’s developers were calling it the Columbia terrace,” Sherman said. “And we were, like, ‘We are not going to name our terrace after Columbus.’”

Thompson worked with an interior designer, ordered equipment and furniture, and arranged press coverage while simultaneously leading *NATIFS*. Sherman hadn't planned on being Owamni's executive chef, but once the restaurant opened he was in the kitchen eighty hours a week. "Dana is the glue," Dawn Drouillard, the nonprofit's culinary director, told me. "Sean is the face of the organization, but Dana plays a crucial role in everything we do."

Their romantic relationship ended soon after Owamni opened. "The breakup didn't happen in the right way," Thompson said. "It was really cruel." Within weeks, Sherman was dating Mecca Bos, a local chef and food writer. The day I met with Thompson, Sherman had posted on Facebook a series of romantic photos with Bos, writing, "This has been such an amazing and whirlwind past few months finding and being with the best adventure/cooking/romantic partner ever." Still, Thompson told me that the split had been necessary: "We had this kinetic, incredible, rare energy together. It was like a rocket ship taking off—then we ran out of fuel."

Despite the breakup, neither Thompson nor Sherman has any intention of leaving behind what they have built. Thompson, who owns forty per cent of the Sioux Chef, shares equal governance over the company with Sherman—a fact that Sherman didn't quite register when they signed their partnership agreement, in 2015. "That basically locked me from making any decision without Dana's blessing," he said. "I had no idea that that was such a serious piece." Sherman now hopes to put Owamni under the control of *NATIFS*, to use the restaurant's success to fuel the mission of the nonprofit. "That's always been my vision," he said. But Thompson sees no reason to combine the Sioux Chef, a for-profit company, with *NATIFS*. "I'm not going to change it," she said. "So there's no way it's going to happen."

Sherman told me that Thompson needs the money from the Sioux Chef to augment her livelihood. "She believes the Sioux Chef still has a lot of potential, and of course it does," he said. "She wants to get rich." When I relayed this to Thompson, she laughed. "I just want to make back our loan payments," she said. "I just want to be out of debt." She added, "I think that time is going to calm Sean down."

Despite their querulousness, Sherman and Thompson both acknowledge that they would not have reached this point if not for their relationship. “She made it so I didn’t have to negotiate for myself,” Sherman said. “She helped me grow.” Thompson told me, “I mean, he’s the visionary. He’s the rock star.”

The day after my drink with Dana, I met Sherman at *NATIFS*’ Indigenous Food Lab, the organization’s culinary-training center, in the Midtown Global Market. *NATIFS* moved into the space in January, 2020; that May, eight blocks away, a police officer murdered George Floyd. (Thompson, Sherman, and members of their staff participated in the protests.) During the pandemic, the kitchen was used to prepare ten thousand meals a week for nine of the state’s eleven reservations, which were devastated by *COVID-19*.

Sherman ducked under a construction curtain. On the other side was a half-built gleaming stainless-steel kitchen. “This is gonna be a community classroom,” he said. “We’re investing in all this camera equipment, so down the road we can do V.R. classes.” The kitchen pantry was full of items like Labrador tea, strawberry popcorn, wild mint, juniper, and homegrown tobacco. Off to the side, there was a pink-and-yellow vintage pinball machine called Totem, depicting a mashup of various tribes’ heritage: tiki totems, Iroquois-style clubs, art work from the Plains. “It’s so wrong,” Sherman said. “I had to get it.”



*Manoomin, a wild rice found around the Great Lakes, is hand-harvested from a canoe.*

Sherman went downstairs to a freezer and returned pushing a cart filled with frozen rabbits. He is no longer Owamni's head chef, but he still oversees the kitchen's operations, planning menus and sourcing ingredients. "My role is just called 'vision' now," he said. "I like to move fast and say yes to lots of things." Thompson told me, "We're being careful about where we spend our resources, and saying no a lot. But Sean is a people pleaser, so then I have to go back and be the bad guy."

On my last afternoon in Minneapolis, I sat at Owamni's bar with Sherman and ordered lunch. Sherman wasn't eating; he was planning to smoke meat at home later. He still loves to cook, but he has no intention of returning to Owamni's kitchen. "It's not the best use of my time to be chopping carrots and telling teen-agers what to do," he said. After Owamni opened, Sherman hired a chef de cuisine: "He was not Native, and he was clashing with some of the staff, and one night it hit a stress point. He said out loud, 'There's just too many chiefs in the kitchen.' Everyone's jaw dropped."

The chef wasn't Sherman and Thompson's only controversial employee. In July, the operations director for NATIFS, Shane Thin Elk, resigned, after his ex-wife posted on Facebook tribal court documents detailing incidents of domestic abuse. Thin Elk, a recovering alcoholic, maintains his innocence. But the episode caused a scandal among some members of the staff. "It is

part of our culture, shared by the *NatIFS* workplace and our Indigenous community, to hold on to a restorative spirit, a belief that any of us—no matter how lost we are—can find our way back,” Sherman wrote in an online statement. “Just as strongly, it is a part of our culture that violence is never acceptable.”

Staff turmoil and turnover have been constant issues at Owamni. Two general managers have left. Earlier this year, Sherman had promoted Joatta Siebert, a twenty-nine-year-old from North Dakota who had done an internship at Noma, in Copenhagen, to chef de cuisine. “She’s a really hard worker,” Sherman told me, in May. “She’s got creativity down. Now she’s learning how to deal with people.”

In August, Siebert left Owamni. Some employees felt that she hadn’t been the right fit—that she pushed specials featuring colonized takes on Indigenous ingredients. “I do have a European background in cooking, but so does Sean,” Siebert said. “He taught himself how to decolonize his own food, and I was still in the process of that.” Soon afterward, a bartender was fired, in part for drinking on the clock. One employee said that, though the dismissal might have made sense at another restaurant, Owamni was supposed to be different: “What are we here for if we’re not helping this person?”

None of these issues was apparent in the dining room. More often, complaints were about patrons. Servers have heard “funny things” from diners, Sherman told me. He called over a hostess named Malia Erickson, who recounted that a woman had asked her if she was Native, then if she was Sioux; Erickson had nodded and tried to finish explaining the menu. “Then she takes out her phone and asks me to pull down my mask so she can take a picture of me,” Erickson said. “I told her, ‘Not today. No, that’s not O.K.’”

A man from New Jersey, then a woman wearing a sparkly elephant pin approached Sherman to offer praise. Sherman is now co-writing a cookbook, which will showcase Indigenous cuisine from the Arctic to Belize. He is talking to television producers about a spinoff—an Indigenous-foods roadshow. His vision on the beach in Mexico had become a persona, in the form of the Sioux Chef.

The attention is not always easy to navigate. Baca, who prepared the meal in the church basement, has been critical of the ways in which Sherman appeals to the mainstream public. At a food-sovereignty summit in Madison, Wisconsin, he said, “A reporter asked me, ‘Will there ever be an Indigenous Thomas Keller?’ But that’s not how we work. It’s all about community. When you focus on one person, you already got it wrong.” Nephi Craig, who now runs Café Gozhóó, on the White Mountain Apache reservation, in Arizona, said, “The standards of the Michelin star are not the standards in traditional Native communities. It’s not our goal to get attention.”

Sherman told me he’s not concerned with whether he gets any attention. “But I get the attention, so it’s easy for me to say,” he added. He’s also quick to help other Indigenous chefs. Crystal Wahpepah, a member of the Oklahoma Kickapoo tribe, met Sherman at a cooking workshop in 2015, and appeared as a contestant on the Food Network reality show “Chopped” the following year. When her catering business dried up during the pandemic, she began to think about opening her own restaurant. Sherman flew Wahpepah and her team to Minneapolis to spend a few days at Owamni; in November, she opened Wahpepah’s Kitchen, in Oakland. “Sean is my mentor,” she said. “He’s opened many doors.”

Elena Terry, a member of the Ho-Chunk Nation who founded the nonprofit catering company Wild Bearies, and is a good friend of Sherman’s, told me that she values his role in the wider food-sovereignty movement. “I think that a lot of people appreciate the face that Sean puts out front,” she said. “He’s the epitome, right? Long braids, a powerful man who represents decolonization.”

At Owamni that afternoon, the staff was preparing for dinner. A manager named Teddy gathered everyone for a meeting. He reviewed some timing kinks from the previous night while a server lit a bundle of sage in a big clamshell. The staff smudges before every shift. Someone struggled to unstick a meat grinder. A waitress waved the sage over her face and passed the shell to a young cook. “The patio is gonna be bumping tonight,” Teddy said. “I appreciate you all. Let’s crush this.”

Sherman left, and walked up the hill to his truck. He is setting up Indigenous Food Labs in Anchorage and in Bozeman. This month, he's at an Arctic-foods summit, in Norway, then at Terra Madre, a gathering of the Slow Food community, in Italy. Between events, he wants to visit the archives at the Vatican. "They stole everything," he said. "They have to be sitting on a huge wealth of Indigenous stuff. I want to see what they have." He could feel his attention moving away from the restaurant: "I don't like being trapped in a box." His eyes darted to the waterfall. "It's hard for me to sometimes stop and be in the moment," he said. "I feel like I'm just starting." ♦

By Patricia Marx

By Michael Schulman

By Nick Paumgarten

By Michael Schulman

# Books

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# The Mysterious Case of Inspector Maigret

Georges Simenon was a high-living libertine; his greatest creation was a man of moral restraint. Yet the writer's excesses are a clue to his detective's successes.

By [Adam Gopnik](#)



The great French writers of the last century tend to evoke, in recollection, a single hue, a color tone that resonates from their work into our imaginations. Proust is all violet, the twilight mood of symbolism matched with the early-evening skies under which Swann pursues Odette. Camus is the whitened sand and unclouded blue sky of his native Algeria. Colette's writing seems golden, filled with the afternoon light of the Palais Royale. (The movie "Gigi" is not really that far off, in its M-G-M Technicolor scheme, from the palette of her writing.)

Georges Simenon, the matchless French crime novelist and the author of the Inspector Maigret series—which has been completely retranslated and issued in a paperback edition from Penguin—takes gray as his distinct and

constant color. No one has ever made more of a grisaille of ambiguity, ambivalence, and uncertainty, or positioned it more tenderly against a Paris rendered not in the (very misleading) light of Impressionist dapple but in the actuality of its dull winter days: “The neighborhood had put on its unsettling night-time face, with shadowy figures hugging the buildings, women motionless at the kerb and murky lighting in the bars that made them look like fish tanks.” Everywhere Simenon takes us is a gray-toned world. His early novel “[The Hanged Man of Saint-Pholien](#),” from 1931, begins in a Dutch train station: “It was five in the afternoon, and night was falling. The lamps had been lighted, but through the windows one could still see both German and Dutch railway and customs officials pacing along the platform, stamping their feet for warmth in the grey dusk.” Later:

It was nearly dark. Their faces were receding into the shadows, but their features seemed all the more sharply etched.

Lombard was the one who burst out, as if alarmed by the gathering dusk, “We need some light!”

Simenon was conscious of his grayness as a moral mood, something created inside modern minds, present even in an all-night Greenwich Village luncheonette, as in his “[Three Bedrooms in Manhattan](#)” (1946), a non-Maigret novel: “Why, despite the blinding brightness, did everything look gray? It was as if the painfully sharp lights were helpless to dispel all the darkness the people had brought in from the night outside.” Fluent in English, and resident for some years in Connecticut, he must have been well aware of the bilingual pun deposited in his hero’s name: Inspector May Gray.

His Maigret books, especially, make an art of half-lit evocation within a tightly circumscribed world set on the Right Bank of Paris. In fact, when I first read him, as a kid learning French—and Simenon’s novels are perfect for that purpose, being simple enough to be more or less fully grasped, and good enough to be worth the effort—I assumed that Simenon himself was, like his hero, living an enclosed existence somewhere in the Marais. I pictured him looking down, beetle-browed, from his typewriter at the Parisian scene below as he passed from black coffee to a single glass of Armagnac in the evening.

Not a bit of it. Writers often live at right angles to their fictional worlds, and no more colorful life is imaginable than Simenon's. His place in French culture is closer to P. G. Wodehouse's in English culture than it is to Agatha Christie's; like Wodehouse, he was a superior stylist who happened to favor a repetitive genre format, rotating the same set of characters again and again. And just as Wodehouse, the most ecstatic of sentence-makers, was by reputation the dullest fellow alive, so Simenon, bard of the French middle-class bureaucratic virtues—stolidity, reliability, with a sharp edge of insight running through—was the least bourgeois man you'd ever meet. Where Maigret is stodgily and permanently lodged with Madame Maigret within “a network of narrow, busy streets bounded by Boulevard Voltaire on one side and Boulevard Richard-Lenoir on the other,” his creator was a vagabond who lived in more than thirty houses during his life. A voluble and indiscreet memoirist, he boasted of having had ten thousand lovers, starting at the age of twelve: some professionals, many volunteers. “I was . . . hungry for all the women I crossed paths with,” he confessed, “whose undulating derrières were enough to give me almost painful erections. How many times have I satiated that hunger with young girls older than me on the threshold of a house, on some dark street?” Married twice, he was a lover of [Josephine Baker](#)'s, and was darkly rumored to have had an incestuous liaison with his daughter.

Ten thousand lovers—and five hundred books! Set against Simenon's rate of production, Graham Greene seems lazy, Dickens a tortured aesthete, Walter Scott sadly blocked. Simenon was unafraid to expound on his writing, but his self-accounting is, his biographers tell us, to be picked up with tongs. Then again, everything authors say about their work is a lie, or, at best, a misdirection. Simenon explained his fecundity as arising from ruthless minimalism, a stripping away of the effects of prose that left him with a supple and always applicable instrument. In a famous *Paris Review* interview, from 1955, he insisted that he excised anything “literary” from his work, including adjectives and adverbs. Yet descriptive modifiers are everywhere in his work. Pick up one of his books at random and you get sentences like “The lethargic blonde cashier stared at Maigret with mounting curiosity.” What is absent is the kind of breezy, genial belletristic running commentary on the events being narrated. He sits very much on the far side of the great break in prose that began with Flaubert and eventually

transformed all modernist styles in French and English writing after the First World War, turning the mannered simplification of fin-de-siècle prose into something tough and tensile. Before the nineteen-twenties, that sentence would have read, “The lethargic blonde cashier, of a kind you find in every bar of this sort, usually a former dancer, stared at Maigret with the mounting curiosity that his bulk and position as a police inspector always attracted.” As with Simenon’s contemporary [James M. Cain](#), in America, the events and their depiction become the same thing, and the commentary happens only in the reader’s mind, or in the inspector’s remarks. Maigret sometimes comments on the action, but we rarely go inside his head to find out what he thinks. We hear him as the world does.

In one of Simenon’s masterpieces, “[Maigret and the Headless Corpse](#)”—it’s from 1955, and he’s particularly good in the nineteen-fifties—the first forty pages are spent in a Frederick Wiseman-like documentary study of Maigret’s day. There’s no differentiation between the melodramatic and the mundane: the discovery of an arm and then a torso in the Canal Saint-Martin is interspersed with Maigret weaving in and out of bistros and brasseries as he makes guesses at the meaning of the discovered corpse, leading to a cold, blunt, and near-monosyllabic exchange with the owner of a bistro, in which she impassively volunteers that she has had many lovers in the back room. Simenon’s subject is how people who are pushed to the edge push themselves over it; the force of the sleuthing is that of psychoanalysis, not police interrogation. Maigret knows that people want to tell their stories, and, if prompted, will. Listening, not inquiring, is the detective’s gift; inner life, in these mysteries, manifests only as fragmented speech. Given that premise, the novel’s pages could be filmed without a single elision, so blankly empirical is the whole. Although the tautly minimal surface breaks from time to time into a narrator’s interjections—understandable given the speed with which he wrote—the prose is, for the most part, purely photographic: “A young girl lay on a Louis XVI bed. She was in an almost seated position, because she had lifted herself on one elbow, and in the movement she had made to look towards the door, a swollen, heavy breast had escaped from her nightdress.”

More than fifty feature films were made of his novels when he was alive (including Julien Duvivier’s celebrated 1946 noir “Panique”); Gérard

Depardieu plays the inspector in a film from this year. Simenon was a prophet of and a participant in the style of French New Wave cinema, but his writing also presaged aspects of the *nouveau roman*, of Robbe-Grillet's faith in describing only the surface of events. (It's a practice still visible in the work of the fine French writer [Annie Ernaux](#).)



Simenon's early experience with the surface-haunted, what-where-when habits of the yeoman newspaper reporter must have influenced him. Simenon was born in 1903 in the French-speaking Belgian city of Liège, where his father, an accountant, worked in an insurer's office, and where, at fifteen, Georges quit school and started working for a local newspaper, covering "fait divers." Soon, he was writing about crime, and growing acquainted with the more sordid side of city life. Yet, later in his career, when Simenon spoke of his style, he generally avoided crediting newspaper work or the shaping practice of motion pictures. Instead, he loftily gave credit to Gogol and Cézanne—Gogol for the surreal edge of dark fable and Cézanne for the weighty individual stroke, the repetitive rhythm. (Hemingway, another newspaperman reluctant to seem so, credited Cézanne with the birth of his own style.) Declaring himself not at all arty, Simenon then piled on arty antecedents as much as any avant-gardist. He was, in this

way, a trickster: when it came to the trappings of art, he feigned innocence or guilt, just as he wished.

Writing about Simenon is tricky, too, simply because the extent of his work—and the relatively small variations in tone within it—makes any one novel at once representative of the whole and too small a slice to offer as truly exemplary. The next book of the five hundred might be a halftone different. Still, he divided his own enormous œuvre into two broad kinds: the swiftly dispatched works of entertainment—a Maigret novel was typically written in two weeks—and the *romans durs*, the “hard books,” often set outside Paris and meant as works of more self-conscious art.

The Maigret books, seventy-five in all, seem the likeliest to live. The Penguin edition of the complete Maigret valiantly aims to update previously uneven translations through the skillful efforts of such worthies as David Bellos, Linda Coverdale, and Howard Curtis. Translating Simenon is thorny: as simple as his style is in certain ways, it is also delicate in tone, and can, rendered too literally, mislead as to its purpose. In Shaun Whiteside’s retranslated version of “[Maigret and the Killer](#)” (originally published in 1969), the inspector’s interview with a witness, the proprietor of a shop his wife frequents, concludes:

“No other detail occurs to you?”

“No. I’ve told you everything I know.”

“Thank you, Gino.”

“How is Madame Maigret?”

In truth, the original is more off-hand in tone and in spirit, something more like: “Nothing else?” “No, that’s it.” “Thanks, Gino.” “How’s Mrs. Maigret?” Spoken bourgeois French usually being more precise and formal than American English, it demands that the translator reproduce the dignities without giving an incorrect impression of formality, as happened when Hemingway insisted on rendering the familiar second person in Spanish as “thou.” Offering the more formal tone of French small talk

without making it sound too mannered is an art, mostly well executed in these new translations.

The Maigret we first meet, in a 1931 novel titled “[Pietr the Latvian](#),” remains essentially unchanged over the next forty years. There are some gradations. Early on, he is a more modern detective, ostentatiously using the new technologies of teletype and identification. But even in this first Maigret novel it’s clear that he views the apparatus of scientific detection as trivial:

Maigret worked like any other policeman. Like everyone else, he used the amazing tools that men like Bertillon, Reiss and Locard have given the police—anthropometry, the principle of the trace, and so forth—and that have turned detection into forensic science. But what he sought, what he waited and watched out for, was the *crack in the wall*. In other words, the instant when the human being comes out from behind the opponent.

His perpetual search for that crack in the wall anchors his character over the decades; he is ponderous, pipe-smoking, devoted to his wife, and resident in the *quartier populaire* of the Eleventh Arrondissement, on the Rue Richard Lenoir. (At one point, he lived on the Place des Vosges, in the Fourth, back when that beautiful square was still part of a run-down and largely Jewish quarter.) An inspector in the Police Judiciaire, with headquarters on the Quai des Orfèvres, he has generally polite and formal relations with his underlings, and wary relations with the complicated bureaucracy of French justice, where the judges are also the district attorneys running the investigations, so that Maigret variously works with, for, and against them.

Four iconic generations of literary detectives passed through crime fiction during those decades, from the early thirties to the early seventies, when Simenon was writing his books. There was the Sherlock Holmes type, still dominant in the thirties, with all those eccentric, brainy, slightly comic puzzle solvers: Hercule Poirot, Nero Wolfe, Peter Wimsey, and so on. (A French variant was Arsène Lupin, a gentleman thief, whose creator actually borrowed the character of Holmes on occasion, violating copyright law as he did.) Then came the hardboiled kind, with Dashiell Hammett’s Sam Spade establishing it in the nineteen-thirties and Raymond Chandler’s

Philip Marlowe giving it poetry in the forties. In the fifties and sixties, Ross Macdonald and John D. MacDonald introduced the philosophical, brooding, and discursive “therapeutic” detective, with Lew Archer in Los Angeles and Travis McGee in Florida. Finally, there’s the police-procedural detective: Evan Hunter’s Eighty-seventh Precinct is more memorable as a collective institution than is any one detective within it.

The magic of Maigret is that, in the course of the twentieth century, he superintends and effectively incorporates all these kinds. He has been called “the French Sherlock Holmes,” and Arthur Conan Doyle’s easily caricatured manner is right there, what with Maigret’s pipe and his own Watson in the ever-present Madame Maigret. In a classic detective story, the investigator’s second has to represent values that the detective both sees through and safeguards. Watson is the perfect embodiment of the Victorian soldierly virtues that Holmes defends, while Holmes himself engages in cocaine and irony. Madame Maigret, in turn, is the very type of the French bourgeoisie chatelaine, whom Maigret both protects and patronizes.

But he is also hardboiled in ways that the Holmesian heroes certainly are not. James M. Cain influenced Simenon and he influenced Cain back, favoring tales unflinching in their often grim violence, and tending toward mindless labyrinths of crime leading to existential vanishing points. At the same time, Maigret is very much a philosophical, as opposed to deductive, detective, given to meaty psychological generalizations of the kind favored by Macdonald and MacDonald: “Maigret had often tried to get other people, including men of experience, to admit that those who fall, especially those who have a morbid determination to descend ever lower and take pleasure in disgracing themselves, are almost always idealists.” Conan Doyle invents the type, Hammett hard-boils it, Macdonald and MacDonald deepen it, but it is Simenon who humanizes it.

And, then, Maigret is so French! The British playwright David Hare, who adapted a Maigret book for the stage, insists that Simenon—being Belgian-born and so an outsider—disdained the usual French prattle about gastronomy, and therefore cared little for the subject. Hare misses the point, which is that it may be de trop to talk about these things all the time but it is essential to *experience* them. So, within a handful of pages in “Maigret and

the Killer,” we are offered a *bœuf gros sel*, cognac, champagne, and Madame Maigret’s mackerel with white wine and mustard, and soon afterward we meet an andouillette. A little later, there is a poignant passage on snails. None of it is underlined or important in itself; it is part of the unconscious sensual intelligence of French life. The casual intrusion of food is a constant leitmotif of the books. In “The Headless Corpse,” an important line of inquiry is opened when Maigret realizes that the *vin de region* served at a shabby bistro is unusually good. At Maigret’s favorite brasserie, on the Place Dauphine, we learn that “among the smells still hovering in the air, there were two that dominated the others: Pernod, around the bar, and coq au vin wafting in from the kitchen.”

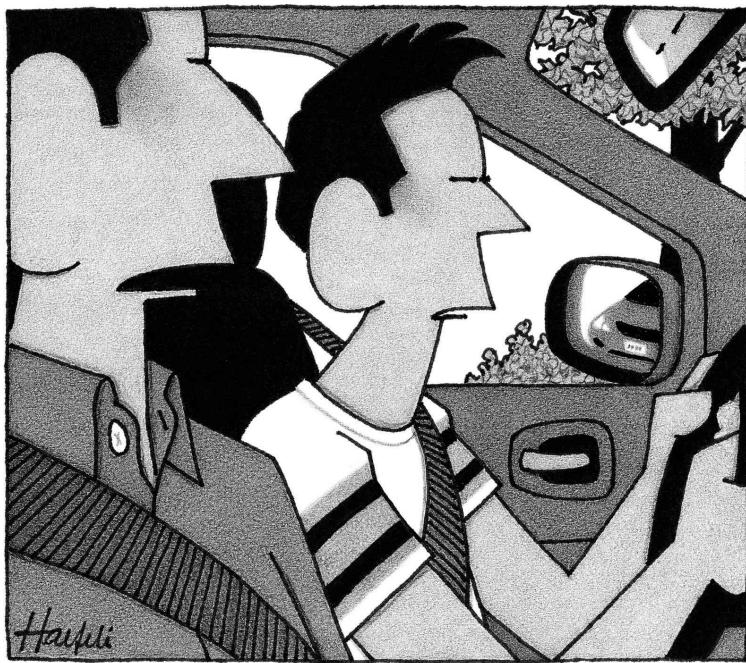
The most profoundly French thing about Maigret is that he is a salaried government employee and proud to be so. The books are filled with procedural matters—confronted with a wave of rapes, Maigret sighs primarily because he does not have enough officers to placate the press without weakening the service—but, against the usual run of the American police procedural, it is never the system itself that is annoying, only those who would undermine it. Where the amateur detective of the Sherlock Holmes kind acts as a consultant to the wealthy, and has contempt for the Scotland Yard policemen, Maigret is a pure *fonctionnaire*. And where in an American procedural the higher-ups are exasperated by the hero’s independence (“I’m telling you for the last time: clean up your act! There’s no place for cowboys in this department!”), in Simenon the underlings exasperate the Inspector with their servile inefficiency. At one point, Maigret shakes his head at the less successful policemen under his direction: “By dint of walking around Paris, they acquire the posture of butlers and café waiters who stand up all day. They almost assume the same dull colour as the impoverished areas that they patrol.”

Maigret is not openly reverential toward the French state, but he works comfortably within its envelope, like a priest within the Catholic Church in eighteenth-century Italy, where the state *is* the Church—the only credible source of order. (The investigating magistrates usually come from a higher educational caste than Maigret, but they respect his professionalism.) This difference between American and French attitudes toward the state appears on every page of the Maigret books. In a recent James Patterson procedural,

half the Chicago police force turns out to be murderously corrupt. This doesn't happen in Simenon. The heart is double; French institutions are not.

At the same time, Inspector Maigret is the anti-Inspector Javert, one of the least implacable policemen on record. In "The Hanged Man," Maigret's fourth outing, he traces a series of bizarre and seemingly random acts to a circle of philosophical nihilists. ("A few of us were off in a corner, talking about some Kantian theory or other," one explains.) But they have now become earnest bourgeoisie, with wives and children and mortgages, and Maigret pardons them by his inaction. Justice is more entangled than it may seem. In "The Headless Corpse," the inspector muses:

A suspect feels a kind of relief when he's arrested, because now he knows where he stands. He no longer has to wonder if he's being followed, if he's being watched, if he's under suspicion, if a trap is being set for him. He's accused, and he defends himself. And now he benefits from the protection of the law. In prison, he becomes an almost sacred person, and everything that's done to build up a case against him will have to be done according to a number of specific rules.



"And, if another car tries to pass you, take it as a personal insult."  
Cartoon by William Haefeli

Simenon's paradox of the prisoner parallels Camus's contemporaneous idea of the implicit collaboration of criminality and justice: the first is a private existential act, the second is a public contractual one. Murderers want to be found out as sinners want to confess; the religious function of confession and sacramental forgiveness has simply been passed to the organs of the state.

The idea that justice is often best served by being withheld is a very French one, almost designed to infuriate Americans, who wonder at the lack of indignation about this collaborator or that philandering cabinet minister. Sanctimony and self-righteousness, favored American traits, are disfavored in Simenon's world. "You're going to fry for it, doll!" the noirish detective says to the femme fatale, and we are meant to feel that justice has been served. No moment of that kind occurs in Simenon. A central theme of his novels, gaining salience in the nineteen-fifties, is that justice is sought but served only with a shrug, if at all.

Behind this French ambiguity about sin in the fifties is surely the fact of French collaboration with evil in the forties—in which Simenon participated, albeit on a low level. Under the Vichy regime, he sold the rights to some of his books to a Nazi-approved German film company, and, like many French writers during the war, he tried to carry on as though little had changed. He also managed a refugee center for displaced Belgians, and apparently did it well. But he was no resister, and the leftist French writers' union took a dim view of his generally placid war, sending the Simenon family scurrying, in 1945, to Canada and the United States. (Eventually, like Charlie Chaplin, he settled in Switzerland.) Simenon never wrote directly about France during the war; the novels of the period are set in a "timeless" Paris, but long afterward he did write a fine novel entitled "*Maigret in Vichy*" (1968), in which the town appears not as the center of the Pétain government but only as the old spa city it had been before. (*Maigret* goes there, in the watchful company of Madame *Maigret*, for a cure.) Nonetheless, a note of defeated France—the France of endless compromise—fills the book's slow-paced chronicle: *Maigret* spends the early part of the book walking round and round a music pavilion, staring at an elegant and solitary woman who later turns up dead. Beneath the standard Simenon devices, one senses an allegory of exhaustion and guilt.

The good inspector is doomed to walk a Dantean circle, right in the center of the capital of collaboration.

Starting in the early nineteen-sixties, Simenon interrupted his usual novel-writing schedule to produce a series of memoirs, including the compelling “[When I Was Old](#).” In addition to all the women, he also owned up to lifelong alcoholism and, yes, writer’s block, among other improbable sins. The question arises of how Simenon’s literary penchant for forgiveness relates to his own extravagant confessions. Now, sex with ten thousand women, whether claimed by Wilt Chamberlain or Simenon, is a proverbial expression, like the tumor as large as a grapefruit or the city rat as big as a cat—an exclamation of surprising scale rather than a measurement to be relied upon. A rough back-of-the-*cahier* calculation suggests that this would have meant something like one new liaison a day during the three decades of his prime, holidays included. (I don’t doubt the Frenchman’s appetite but do doubt his readiness to work on Christmas.) But let’s say: lots of women. Is there a connection between the mania of Simenon’s appetites, at least as they looked in his mental mirror, and his relentless productivity as a writer? Do writers who write a lot also do everything else a lot? Balzac, George Sand, William Carlos Williams, and H. G. Wells join Simenon in the much-sex / many-pages column of the ledger. In the other column are Trollope, who was far from a philanderer, and Wodehouse, who, with a single, long marriage, hardly seemed the type, either.

Still, when one reads a hyperproductive writer one can be sure one is in the presence of some kind of voluptuary. Most writers don’t actually like the act of writing, finding it tiring, depressing, or, most often, disappointing. For a few, writing is less labor than it is an exhilarating drug that can’t be taken too often. The football coach John Madden said once that being good at blocking in football is mostly just liking to block, meaning that the bruising and pain of it has to become a pleasure. Writing that much and that steadily is, similarly, mostly just *liking* to do it. Though Simenon claimed, unconvincingly, that he had difficulty in writing, in the next breath he admitted how much he loved all the appurtenances of writing: notebooks and pencils and papers, the thrill of the blank page, the feeling of being complacently superior to the rest of creation, wiser and more serene, when

you begin. For such happy, addicted writers, fertility is less a function of energy than of dissipation: they're doing what feels best.

All hyperproductive writers run the risk of repetition, of falling into a stylized world. Writers like Thornton Wilder, who come out with one book every ten years or so, rarely repeat themselves, and don't always write the same book. But then they mostly don't write any book at all. The reason Wodehouse and Simenon stand out is that their sense of style is strong enough to withstand the stylization. Still, there's something limiting about the restricted locale the Maigret books inhabit. Like a travelling theatrical troupe that can't afford more than a couple of sets, many of the novels bounce predictably from one place to another and back again.

Yet, if his settings sometimes seem scant, his characters do not. Simenon is an authentic humanist. The word in France has a slightly different meaning from what it may have here—there it is largely left-wing, and historically refers to not being allied with the Catholic Church. (The leading Communist paper is called *L'Humanité*.) But in French, too, it implies an acceptance of humanity on its own terms, and a value placed on the individuality of every individual. The weakness of humanism is the Gallic shrug that lets everything pass as too complex for judgment; its strength is its assertion of the plurality of human experience which cautions us from judging others too easily.

Judge not that ye be not judged: the Christian doctrine contains both an implicit ethos of sentencing and an explicit claim of permanent mercy. Self-forgiveness comes too soon; the accusation of others comes too quickly. Between those two truths lie the Maigret mysteries. In “The Headless Corpse,” the secret of the broken body turns out to involve a troubled rich girl who defied her father by running off with his manservant and, decades later, finds herself immured in that Paris bistro. What looks at first like a cold-blooded murder is revealed to be a hot-blooded and excusable act of protective passion on the part of a middle-aged lover, and the pathos comes from the woman’s “animal in its burrow” desire to remain in her humble place rather than accept a large inheritance and venture out into the world. The dénouement is handled in some ways too briskly and conveniently, with a well-drawn provincial lawyer who comes to Paris only to explain the

backstory. (The mechanics of Simenon's mysteries can be slipshod.) And yet the pomposity and the sybaritism of the lawyer as he leads Maigret on a walk across the darkened lamplit boulevards from one late-night dive in Paris to another lend a human note to what would otherwise be a plot device. Besides, Maigret, we're given to believe, already knows the basic story. Confronting the woman, he speaks without accusation:

"You did it deliberately, didn't you?" Maigret continued without clarifying what he meant.

He had to get there in the end. There were moments, like now, when it seemed to him that it would only take a slight effort, not only for him to understand everything, but for that invisible wall between them to disappear.

That is always the way with Simenon. There is never an "Aha!" moment, only an "Ah!" one. In a genre all about solutions and clarity, he found equivocation and doubt. He entirely understood the symbolic power of his own chiaroscuro. He once tossed off a brilliant aperçu on Rembrandt. "His chiaroscuro is already a critique of pure reason," he wrote in "When I Was Old." In Rembrandt's paintings, he noted, "man no longer has definite outlines." So it is with Simenon: reason asserts its power, then resigns its place. The reward is watching blacks turn to grays, in small developments of understanding. "More light!" Goethe called out famously as he died. Simenon's cry is sadder: We know what light we need, and we know we'll never get it. We settle for just enough light to see the streets by. ♦

**By Janet Malcolm**

**By Philip Gourevitch**

**By Patrick Radden Keefe**

**By Robert A. Caro**

# Lucy Barton's Experiments in Empathy

How Elizabeth Strout's beloved protagonist spends the pandemic.

By [Laura Miller](#)



In Elizabeth Strout's "[Lucy by the Sea](#)" (Random House), the fourth of her novels concerning a writer named Lucy Barton, the title character meets a man who tells her that he loved her memoir. His wife read the book, too, and thought it was "about mother-daughter stuff," but he disagrees. "Maybe if you didn't come from—well, from poverty," he explains, "your mind just goes over it, and you think it's about mothers and daughters, which it *is*, but it's really, or it was to me, about trying to cross class lines in this country." Lucy, who will soon consider this man her closest friend in Maine, where she has gone to ride out the pandemic, feels surpassingly gratified to hear this. "*Thank you,*" she replies, "*for getting what that book was really about.*" During the fractious year to come, Lucy will find plenty of occasions to contemplate class.

Like all of Strout's novels, "Lucy by the Sea" has an anecdotal surface that belies a firm underlying structure. It is meant to feel like life—random, surprising, occasionally lit with flashes of larger meaning—but it is art. The Shaker plainness of Strout's prose stretches to accommodate Lucy's bewilderment as she goes about her life's great project: attempting to understand the people around her. Despite powerful moments of intuition—that her son-in-law's father has contracted the coronavirus, that her daughter is contemplating an affair—Lucy, who's in her sixties, keeps telling herself that she knows nothing. It becomes an unspoken article of faith for her, and a humble spur to her curiosity.

The novel begins with William, Lucy's first husband, from whom she is long divorced, plucking her from her mournfully comfortable existence in New York City, in the apartment she once shared with her late and much loved second husband. William, a parasitologist, recognizes the impending threat of the coronavirus sooner than Lucy does, and also exhorts their two daughters, married and living in Brooklyn, to get out of the city. One of them decamps to her in-laws' house in Connecticut; the other soon departs as well, after learning that her husband has been unfaithful and had been planning to leave her. William and Lucy, companionable friends who have travelled together lately, relocate to a house perched on a cliff over the rocky shore of Crosby, Maine, the fictional home of [Olive Kitteridge](#), a character featured in two other Strout novels.

Lucy is as soft as Olive is flinty, subject to panic attacks and easily frightened by anything that reminds her of her childhood, in Amgash, Illinois. In Strout's previous novel, "[Oh, William!](#)," she accompanies her ex on a road trip through northern Maine, where the isolation triggers one of her attacks. The perpetual question of the Lucy Barton novels—three are narrated by Lucy, and one, the ironically titled "[Anything Is Possible](#)," is a collection of linked stories depicting the lives of people stuck back in Amgash—is whether escape can ever truly be achieved. Lucy got out of Amgash. She has travelled all over the world for her successful career, and she has lived in New York, a city she loves, for decades. But she doubts that she will ever shake the "fear and loneliness" of her childhood, when she and her siblings were half starved, shunned by classmates for their poverty, and physically abused by their mother.

Lucy and William, holed up together, far from their doted-upon daughters and getting on each other's nerves, revisit the tensions of their marriage. He tires of hearing her talk about the depressing plight of her brother, who still lives in the house they grew up in, without a partner or lover or even much in the way of friends. Lucy finds herself hating William every evening after dinner, because he doesn't really listen to her, or register things he ought to:

Each night William made something different. He made pasta sauce and he made pork chops, he made meatloaf and he cooked salmon. But he also made a mess in the kitchen and it was my job to clean up, which I did. He wanted a lot of praise for every meal he made—I noticed that—and so I praised him to the skies. It felt to me like I praised him to the skies, but he always asked, even after I had praised him, “So you liked it, it was good?”

“It was more than good,” I would say. “It was *wonderful*.” And then I’d get up to clean the kitchen.

Like many urban refugees during the pandemic, they attract the animus of locals. Someone puts a cardboard sign reading “*GET OUT OF HERE NEW YORKERS!*” on William’s car, and a woman yells at Lucy in the supermarket parking lot. Lucy scolds William for not being “nice” enough to her after this incident: “William, I *hated* getting yelled at!” He snaps, “Nobody likes getting yelled at, Lucy.”

Strout builds her fiction out of moments like these, little slights and kindnesses that make up the architecture of human relationships. Readers of the series will recognize that Lucy’s labile emotions must be a bit exhausting—she will “love” or “hate” someone for a fleeting gesture, or be plunged into despair by a tiny setback—and she does tend to harp on the same preferences: she hates being cold, doesn’t care about food, dislikes the smell of other people’s houses. She is an utterly believable mixture of solipsism and sympathy, just as William is both an indifferent confidant and a stalwart protector. “Lucy, yours is the life I wanted to save,” he tells her, and then he buys down quilts to keep her warm.

The intimacy of Strout’s fiction doesn’t lend itself particularly well to topicality, and as the novel careers through recent catastrophes, from the

*covid* death count in New York to the murder of George Floyd and [the January 6th insurrection](#), its voice occasionally becomes stilted. The appeal of Lucy Barton lies in the immediacy with which she experiences the people and the events around her, but here, like so many Americans during the pandemic, she engages with the world primarily through screens, reading the obituary of a friend on a Web site and watching the Black Lives Matter protests on TV. Lucy's responses to all this feel generic and a bit on the nose. "It was as though the racism in this country had suddenly exploded, hurling forth," she muses. "But people were *caring* about this! Many were."

Class, however, is a matter with which Lucy has a firsthand acquaintance. A character in "Anything Is Possible" recalls a line from Lucy's memoir: "People were always looking to feel superior to someone else." The memoir, which seems to be a book much like the first of Strout's Lucy novels, "[My Name Is Lucy Barton](#)," recounts the deprivation and violence of her childhood. Lucy's lifelong sense of being "invisible" is linked both to her status at school and to the fact that the only mirror her family owned was small and hung too high on a wall for the children to see themselves in it. At one point, the Bartons lived in a poorly heated garage, an experience that instilled in Lucy her horror of the cold. So she spent more and more of her time at school, before and after classes, where she was supported by kindly adults, including the guidance counsellor who helped her secure a college scholarship.

Lucy's sullen sister Vicky works at a nursing home, a difficult job made risky by the pandemic. She takes money from Lucy, and resents her for it. Vicky calls her to announce that she's joined a fundamentalist church where the congregation members don't wear masks, because "it's the government trying to force us to do that." Vicky gets her news not from TV, which once showed her the irksome spectacle of her fancy sister being interviewed on morning shows, but from unspecified other sources. When Vicky inevitably gets *COVID* and has to be hospitalized, Lucy texts her, "I love you," and Vicky responds, "I know you think you do." Later, she adds, "Lucy you've always thought you were better than me. And I think you have been very selfish in your life." Lucy accepts this more meekly than most of Strout's readers will. Compounding her distress is the knowledge that Vicky's

academically gifted daughter, who, like Lucy, won a scholarship, lasted only a year at college before going home to a job at the same facility where her mother works.

All tales of class mobility require severed roots, even for people whose families support the transition. Lucy can't assuage Vicky's feelings of rejection, but in "Lucy by the Sea" she befriends two working-class Mainers through friendliness and circumspection. One is a neighbor, whom she suspects put the sign on William's car when the pair first arrived in Crosby. The other, Charlene, a fellow-volunteer at a food pantry, is a widow herself and a cleaner at the retirement community where Olive Kitteridge lives. Lucy notices a bumper sticker for "the current president" on Charlene's car the day they meet but says nothing. Lucy and Charlene take walks together, commiserate about their inability to remember things, and form a pact to warn the other if she seems to be losing her mind. "I'm glad we don't talk politics," Charlene says to Lucy one day. "We never have to talk politics," Lucy replies. Many of the stories in "Anything Is Possible" illustrate the pain of Midwesterners who are unable to communicate, but here is a testimonial to the value of reticence.

The culmination of Lucy's experiments in empathy comes on January 6th. After glancing at the television coverage of the Capitol riot, Lucy can't bear to watch more. The images dredge up a memory. She was once invited to speak to a classroom of well-off college students:

I was supposed to talk to them about my memoir, which was about growing up poor. But the students would not look at me. And because they would not look at me, I became what I thought they were thinking I was: an old woman who had written about coming from poverty.

Remembering the "disdain" that the students exhibited toward her, Lucy feels her heartbeat speed up, and now she thinks she can understand the insurrectionists. What if she had felt the humiliation of her childhood for her entire life? What if, however hard she worked, she could never earn a decent living and "felt looked down upon *all the time* by the wealthier people in this country, who made fun of my religion and my guns"? She can almost imagine breaking the windows in the Capitol herself, until she snaps

out of it. The rioters are “Nazis and racists,” she tells herself, and identification stops there. (Sometimes you do have to talk politics.)

Nevertheless, Lucy can’t squelch the impulse to see the world from other vantages. After a long, pandemic-induced dry spell, during which she finds herself unable to write anything or even to read much, she produces a story inspired by a middle-aged police officer she saw sitting in a cruiser in one of Maine’s run-down former mill towns. “What is it like to be a policeman,” she thinks as she watches him, “especially now, these days? What is it like to be *you*?” This is, she observes, “the question that has made me a writer; always that deep desire to know what it feels like to be a different person.” She winds up loving the character, who is a good man. William urges her to publish the piece, but she thinks the time is not right for a story “sympathetic toward a white cop who liked the old president.” (By this point, Trump, whose name never appears in the novel, is out of office.)

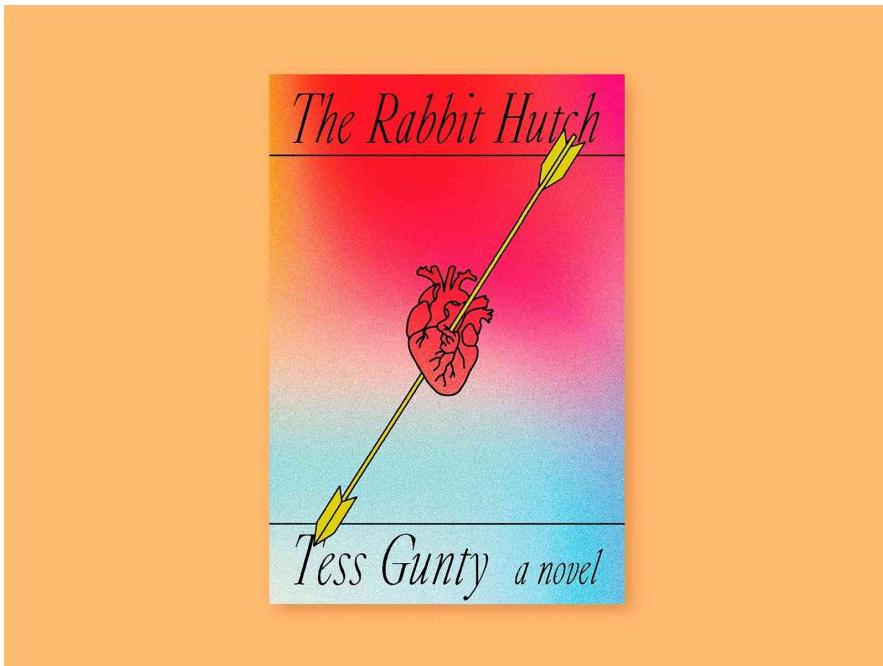
“Lucy by the Sea” runs on two tracks. One is the intensely private emotional life of Lucy Barton, which often feels detached from history. Recollections of her spartan rural upbringing in a house without television or even such fripperies as salt and pepper shakers could easily pass as memories from the Depression. Popular culture and the media occupy no space in her imagination. In this novel, though, the world and its chatter intrude in a way that they never do in the three earlier books—this is the second track. For the first time, Lucy worries about what people she can’t see and will never meet might think. “My whole childhood was a lockdown,” Lucy laments to William, but the comparison isn’t quite right. As a little girl, she wasn’t tapped into a vast and vehement conversation full of shiny distractions and outrage and misinformation. She had to leave her home to find the world, and to seek out the people in it who could perceive the value of her openheartedness. There is a naïve purity to Lucy that has made her precious to countless readers of Strout’s work, and a little of that is lost when she second-guesses her short story and sets it aside. In a novel full of losses—for Lucy and William are of an age when losses come frequently—this is a small one, but it stings all the same. ♦

By Janet Malcolm

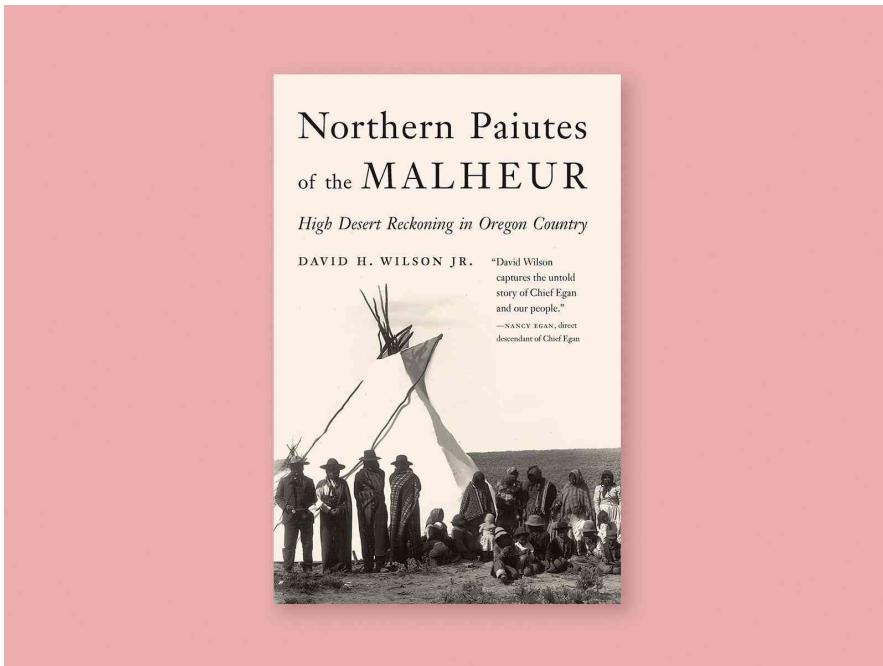
By Philip Gourevitch

By Patrick Radden Keefe

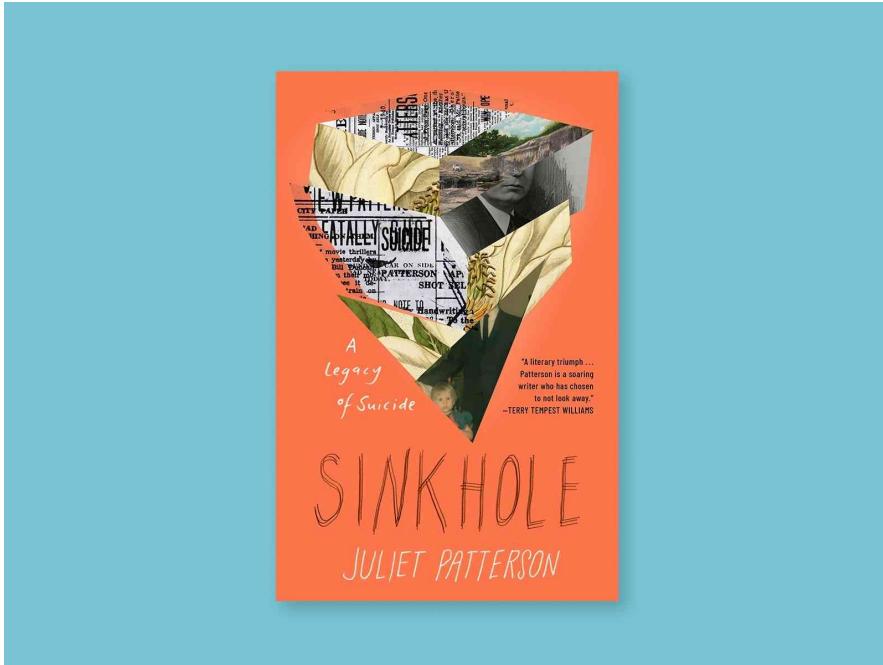
**By Robert A. Caro**



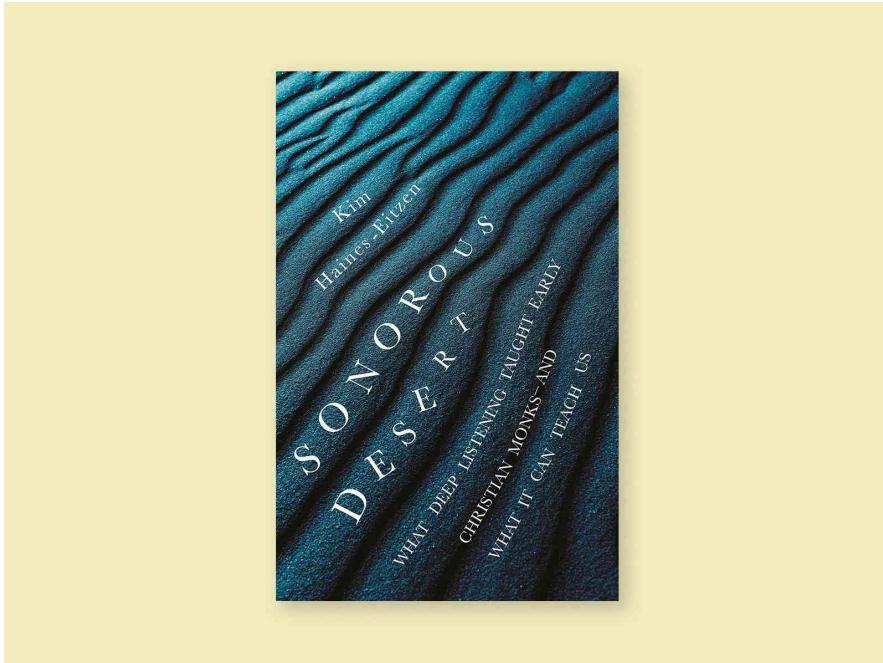
**The Rabbit Hutch**, by *Tess Guntz* (*Knopf*). Although there are actual rabbits in this ambitious novel, the “Hutch” of the title is the name given to an affordable-housing complex by its residents, in a post-industrial Indiana town. Guntz zooms in and out of the apartments, pushing the lives inside toward a forceful and violent climax; her central character is a gifted though troubled teen who grew up with foster families, has dropped out of high school, and calls herself Blandine. (Obsessed with female medieval mystics, she takes the name of a French martyr.) Despite offering a dissection of contemporary urban blight, the novel doesn’t let social concerns crowd out the individuality of its characters, and Blandine’s off-kilter brilliance is central to the achievement.



**Northern Paiutes of the Malheur**, by *David H. Wilson, Jr. (Nebraska)*. In 1879, the Northern Paiutes, a tribe living around the Malheur River, in Oregon, were forcibly removed from their reservation by the United States government. In this searing and painstakingly researched account, Wilson challenges the accepted story of their exile, which placed blame on their primary chief, Egan, for inciting hostilities against white settlers. Charting the Paiutes' history—their beginnings as a tribe of “kin-cliques” without central leadership, their first encounters with settlers, and, finally, the Bannock War of 1878—Wilson argues persuasively that they were victims not only of land theft but of a misinformation campaign whose effects have lasted more than a century.



**Sinkhole**, by Juliet Patterson (*Milkweed*). Mixing autobiography, academic psychology, and an ecological history of Kansas, Patterson, a poet, examines the suicides in her family, beginning with her father's. ("The worst had already happened, so why not face it as best as I could?" she writes.) She also investigates the suicides of her grandfathers—one a fertilizer-plant worker, the other a coal miner. Although she doesn't presume to know why these men ended their lives, her archival research points to lead exposure, alcohol dependence, and money problems as likely factors. The sinkholes she finds around Kansas, products of mining and erosion, become symbols not only of the abysses suicides leave behind but also of a hollowing out of America.



**Sonorous Desert**, by Kim Haines-Eitzen (Princeton). Seeking to understand how early monasticism was shaped by the “emptiness” of the desert, the author, a scholar of early Christianity, set out to capture the sound of silence, making field recordings in the deserts of southern Israel and North America. The result, a meditative blend of history and travelogue (complete with QR codes that link to the recordings), brings the soundscape of the desert to life. Haines-Eitzen writes that hearing the nuances of desert noises requires a “deep listening” founded on inner quietness, and she evokes this state through tales of the desert fathers, such as St. Anthony (251-356), who spent decades tormented by the clamorous voices of demons before finally learning to tune them out.

By David Remnick

By David Remnick

By Michael Schulman

By Jelani Cobb

# How “Less Is Lost” Finds Its Footing

In the sequel to Andrew Sean Greer’s Pulitzer-winning novel, a fiction writer leaves the Bay Area for a trip across America, and learns how little he knows.

By [Alexandra Schwartz](#)



Pity the plight of the gay white man. Not as notorious as his heterosexual counterpart, more socially privileged than his queer peers, he has been drained of popular sympathy by virtue of his cultural success. Take the recent film “Fire Island,” Joel Kim Booster’s adaptation of “Pride and Prejudice”: while the Bennet sisters are transformed into a gaggle of gay friends of color (mostly), the role of the villainous Mr. Wickham is given to Dex, a white seducer who deploys his Tom of Finland physique and sterling Instagram politics to prey upon his dazzled prospects. But a gay white guy as a marginalized hero, an underdog whose private tragedies we mourn? That’s a harder sell.

Or so Arthur Less, the protagonist of “[Less](#),” Andrew Sean Greer’s Pulitzer-winning 2017 novel, is forced to conclude. Less, like Greer, is a middle-aged gay white novelist; his latest manuscript, “Swift,” is a sombre

tale of—what else?—a middle-aged gay white man who wanders around San Francisco [à la Leopold Bloom](#) in Dublin, suffering various setbacks and contemplating his regrets. Less is shocked when his publisher rejects it outright. “It’s a little hard to feel sorry for a guy like that,” a lesbian friend explains. The book, as even Less comes to see, has been artistically petrified by his character’s self-pity, that “gorgon of Caucasian male ego.” It’s as good as dead.

Then Less has an idea. What if he rewrote his tragedy as a farce? Inspiration flows: “With a joy bordering on sadism, he degloves every humiliation to show its risible lining.” Laughter suddenly replaces sighs and tears, and a holy fool steps in for a puffed-up hero.

Less’s strategy is also the strategy of “Less.” The novel maintains a delicious comic buoyancy as it follows the antics of its [Buster Keatonish protagonist](#), buffeting him with one obstacle after another only to have him land, each time, on his feet. Dramatic irony usually casts readers as Cassandras: we watch with dread as unsuspecting characters meet with disaster. But what makes Less so endearing is his sincere ignorance of his good luck. Though Less himself is writing a “gay ‘Ulysses,’ ” the scope of his own journeys is more Homeric than Joycean; he leaves his home in San Francisco to travel to Mexico, then Italy, Germany, France, Morocco, India, and Japan, funding his exploits with teaching gigs, magazine assignments, and the like. The cause of all this wandering is Less’s desire to escape the impending wedding of his former lover Freddy Pelu, an English teacher some fifteen years his junior, whom Less, whether in the spirit of unpossessive generosity (as he wants to believe) or for fear of rejection (the truth), unwisely let get away. But Freddy is closer at hand than Less suspects: he’s the book’s affectionate, rueful narrator. How can he know what Less is doing, never mind thinking and feeling, from the other side of the world? He can’t, of course, and that imaginative leap is part of the book’s charm, the key to its romantic optimism. Telling Less’s story is Freddy’s way of keeping watch over him. You cheer for the couple’s reunion, though hapless Less proves such an enjoyable travelling companion that it’s bittersweet to bid him goodbye as he returns to California to find Freddy waiting for him with open arms.

Apparently, Greer felt the same way, because he has brought Less back, in “[Less Is Lost](#)” (Little, Brown), a sequel that picks up the plot nine months later. Freddy has moved into Less’s little house, called the Shack, and wants to get married. Less isn’t so sure. “This is the story of a crisis in our lives,” Freddy, enlisted again as the omniscient narrator, reports. Another one, so soon?

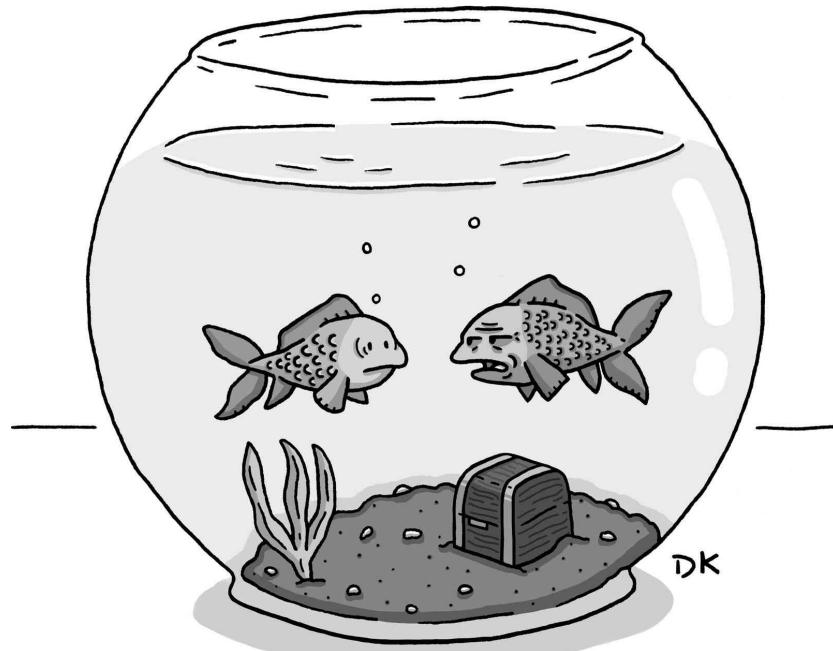
As the novel begins, it is Freddy who is far from home, on a sabbatical in Maine to study “narrative form.” On the verge of flying east to join him, Less learns that his first great love, the renowned poet Robert Brownburn, has died. The two men met on a San Francisco beach when Less was a svelte twenty-one and Robert was more than two decades older and married (to a woman—this was 1987). In fact, it is Robert’s ex-wife, Marian, who gives Less the bad news. And there’s more. The Shack belonged to Robert; when Robert left Less, after fifteen years together, he left him the house, too. Now Marian tells Less that he owes ten years of back rent. If he doesn’t come up with the money in a month, he and Freddy are out.

Less assures Freddy that he has a plan. He’s been asked to write a magazine profile of a best-selling science-fiction writer, H. H. H. Mandern, and is serving on the committee for a fancy literary prize, which entails some kind of honorarium. Also, a Louisiana-based drama troupe is offering Less an improbably fat sum to adapt one of his short stories for the stage and has invited him to tag along on its tour. Freddy manages to douse his skepticism in the name of love, but this reader had a harder time. San Francisco is among the most expensive rental markets in the country; the man needs a MacArthur grant, not a magazine assignment. In any case, the money is merely a pretext for Greer to send Less on another roving adventure, this one across the continental United States, beginning in Palm Springs, where he meets up with the gruff, shambolic Mandern—a George R. R. Martin type who enlists Less to chauffeur him and his pug across the Southwest in an old camper van—and ending in Delaware, Less’s home state. The novel advances by way of a series of road-trip encounters with characters who are mostly also “characters,” like Arathusa, who leads an off-the-grid Arizona commune and whose personal motto is “Know no *no*,” and Miss Dorothy Howe-Gorbaty, the head of the theatre troupe, a steel magnolia with a penchant for dancing the Carolina shag. Less, who gets custody of the van,

and the dog, after Mandern makes his exit, spends a great deal of time in R.V. parks—where he nervously tries to camouflage his sexuality by purchasing “a red bandanna, wraparound sunglasses, a *HOOT 'N' HOLLER* T-shirt, flip-flops, a baseball cap, a cowboy hat, a bolo tie, and six miniature American flags”—and in beer bars, including one in Alabama where a patron surprises him by asking, “thoughtfully,” what it’s like to be gay. So much for disguises.

Homophobia isn’t a serious risk in the benign world of the “Less” books. The real threat comes in the form of the accusation—lobbed, inevitably, by a fellow middle-aged white gay male writer—that Less is a “bad gay,” too conciliatory to hetero sensibilities in his prose. The charge stings because Less fears that it may be true, and not just on the page. “When he moved to New York after college, in the eighties,” Freddy tells us, “Arthur Less certainly tried his hardest to be gay”:

He joined a gym that turned out to be a sex dungeon. He joined a political party that turned out to believe a conspiracy theory about government health clinics. He joined a German-language society that turned out to be a sex dungeon. He joined a book group that turned out to be only for a political party. He joined a role-playing game club that turned out to be a sex dungeon. He joined a sex dungeon that turned out to be a government health clinic. It was all so confusing.



*"O.K., here's the deal. Old Finn died. Parents brought you in. You're New Finn. I'm Jenny. That's not my real name—my real name is Eric. That's not important. Finn and Jenny are married. When I die, you'll explain this to New Jenny. We don't have to talk to each other after this."*

Cartoon by Daniel Kanhai

This deadpan passage is typical of Greer's best comic writing, with its exquisite attention to rhythm, repetition, and timing, the bright sentences tossed up like juggling balls to be caught in dazzling rotation.

Sexuality is one kind of performance. Nationality is another. Less's countrymen often mistake him for a foreigner, a fair confusion when it comes to a member of that dreaded coastal caste, the publishing world, "which, like an orbiting space station, looks upon the rest of America without ever interacting with it." To a globe-trotting "Minor American Novelist," nowhere could be more exotic than America itself. Greer, a resident of San Francisco and Milan—the one in Italy, not to be confused with those in Georgia, Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, Ohio, New Mexico, or New York—is gamely implicating himself. His acknowledgments include a note of thanks to the Guggenheim Foundation "for the grant that allowed for all the RV rentals." He, too, has charted a course across the country's great middle, and his findings, or Less's, are often lovely. "You would think nothing would be as well oiled as the derricks pumping along the Mississippi River. And yet they squeak all night," one perfect postcard of a paragraph reads.

Where Greer runs into trouble is in his attempt to use Less's trip to gesture at the state of the Union writ large, an ambition that he signals early. At a gathering following Robert's funeral, a smug Czech editor accuses Less of provincialism. Has he seen anything of his country beyond "New York, Boston, San Francisco?" And, speaking of his country, has he ever so much as wondered "if it's wrong? The whole idea?" Less must admit that "the notion has never occurred to him." Critiquing the American experiment has become something of a trope in the current political climate, but, though Greer's novel is set in the approximate present, his America is a land curiously devoid of politics. Less manages to drive three thousand miles without coming across so much as a single *MAGA* hat; there seems to have been no major public-health crisis since *AIDS*.

"The American berserk," as [Philip Roth](#) called the nation's general resting state, has never been berserker. Other American satirists—Paul Beatty comes immediately to mind—have sparked to the country's extremity. Greer, though, has a gentler sensibility. He wants to see the best in people, and that rare instinct puts him in a bind. How to confront the madness, let alone the viciousness, the violence, the cruelty, of the moment while maintaining the kind of comic equipoise that he prizes?

One answer is to spike the humor with harsher stuff. Freddy, so genially tolerant of his lover's foibles in "Less," takes on an edge in "Less Is Lost." A self-described "pasticcio" of "Italian, Spanish, and Mexican heritages," he is now dealt the thankless task of chiding Less for his white-male myopia. When Less is left stupefied after unknowingly sampling some hallucinogenic blueberries foisted on him by a trio of German tourists, Freddy reflects, "The world is so constructed that men like you will always end up safe. Almost always." A few pages later, when Less finds himself riding a donkey down a ravine on Navajo land: "I hope Arthur Less realizes he knows nothing, nothing at all, about the people who once lived here, or those who live here now." These appliqué indictments have the awkward feel of authorial preëmption; it's as if Greer felt the need to make a show of taking his character to task for being categorically "problematic." Perhaps to compensate, he saddles Less with emotional baggage (a dead mother, a long-absent father) that hints at painful depths without really creating them.

These are “Swift”-ian touches, and they work no better in Greer’s novel than they evidently did in Less’s.

Freddy, though, isn’t just exasperated by Less. He’s jealous, too, of Less’s youthful love for Robert, and worries that he’ll never be able to take his predecessor’s place. That rawer, truer vein of feeling gives the novel back its heart. If “Less Is Lost” is, well, a lesser work than “Less,” there’s something sincerely winning in Greer’s undogmatic brand of small-c conservatism. Like Freddy, Greer is a believer: in love and, even more old-fashioned, in marriage. That ancient, flawed, astoundingly persistent institution gives Greer his strongest metaphor for the country’s predicament:

America, how’s your marriage? Your two-hundred-fifty-year-old promise to stay together in sickness and in health? First thirteen states, then more and more, until fifty of you had taken the vow. Like so many marriages, I know, it was not for love; I know it was for tax reasons, but soon you all found yourself financially entwined, with shared debts and land purchases and grandiose visions of the future, yet somehow, from the beginning, essentially at odds. Ancient grudges. That split you had—that still stings, doesn’t it? Who betrayed whom, in the end? I hear you tried getting sober. That didn’t last, did it?

What you’re hearing, mixed in with the humor, is melancholy. “If it can’t work for you, can it work for any of us?” Freddy asks. He’s looking through the wrong end of the telescope. Traditional comedy culminates in a wedding, traditional tragedy in death. We can’t presume to know how the American story, that insane and unprecedented jumble of genres, will end, but Less and Freddy’s story is another matter. No one’s private world is shielded from national storms, but often enough the sun does shine there. We need some novels to remind us of that, and this is one. ♦

# Namwali Serpell's New Novel Reinvents the Elegy

In “The Furrows,” a brother vanishes beneath the waves, and resurfaces in a hundred guises.

By [Lauren Michele Jackson](#)



Grief is a magnet for metaphor. Grief is—let’s fill in the blank—a maze you can’t exit. It’s the monster within that maze, feeding on your flesh. It’s a ghost, haunting the recesses of your mind. It’s a disease that inflames and enervates. It’s an oil spill, seeping into the spirit’s fragile ecology. It burns like fire and drowns like water.

“[The Furrows](#)” (Hogarth), the fourth book and the second novel from Namwali Serpell, batters against the fixities of language like a moth at a windowpane. “I don’t want to tell you what happened,” the novel opens. “I want to tell you how it felt.” The narrator is Cassandra, or Cee, who recounts the story of how, when she was twelve, her seven-year-old brother, Wayne, disappeared beneath the ocean’s waves, “the great grooves in the water” like furrows in a field. The two kids had been playing on a Delaware

beach when Wayne set off swimming; she saw him struggle, and swam after him, almost losing her life in a failed effort to save his.

That story is, it turns out, *a* story, one account of how Wayne went away; whether or not the going away was a death cleaves the family. “When I was twelve, my little brother drowned,” Cee begins, telling the story for the first time. Later: “When I was twelve, my little brother got hit by a car.” And so on. “Dear Wayne,” she addresses him. “As you stepped forward unaware, it came and knocked you out of your furrow and into another, plowed you up and over, put you in another place, elsewhere, where.” It’s soon apparent that Serpell isn’t delivering yet another symbol for loss. Rather, “The Furrows” enacts the physics of becoming lost.

Serpell writes in rhizomes—extended subterranean stems that send up shoots at unpredictable intervals. That’s true of her critical work, too. A [recent essay of hers](#) in *The New York Review of Books* snakes from Émile Zola to “Zola,” a 2021 film about a pair of strippers on a “ho trip” gone wrong, the playful coincidence of names routed through her subjects’ shared aversion to the pleasure principle of whoredom. A professor of English at Harvard, Serpell demonstrates how criticism can stake its own claims to artistic attention. In her previous book, a collection of essays entitled “[Stranger Faces](#),” she writes, “Stranger faces . . . ride the line of legibility, and compel us to read them even though we know we are doomed to fail. I think we compensate for that failure by taking unexpected pleasure in it.”

Serpell’s début novel, “[The Old Drift](#),” from 2019, unfolds a history of the place now known as Zambia, confounding colonial linearity by enlisting magic and chance—the resisters of the supposed rationalizers. A bright young woman named Martha falls in love with a fellow-revolutionary, who abandons her when she becomes pregnant. One night, her tears fall and do not stop, rendering her blind and mute. Her personal and political history is dissolved by these tears: “Weeping was just what she did now, who she was.” Before long, the community forgets why she weeps and loses sympathy for her. In “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” [James Baldwin](#) declared his distrust for the untruthful “wet eyes” of sentimentalists, but, as Serpell’s

tale reminds us, wet eyes can arouse our distrust for other reasons. What are we to make of the mourner who cannot produce evidence of a loss?

In “The Furrows,” a family is left without a body; the only evidence of the child’s death is a young girl’s word. It’s soon evident how much that’s worth. “Where’d you put that boy?” demands her grandmother, who doted on Wayne and never took to Cee. A policewoman asks for testimony, but after Cee tells her what she remembers the officer still prods, “Do you know where your brother is?”

Serpell discloses the dynamics of this once nuclear family by means of fission. Cee’s father, an engineer, is Black, and her mother, a dilettantish painter, is white, and the idiosyncrasies of this particular interracial casting are sharpened upon the loss of a brown son. The mother, Charlotte, had always filled their summer living room with “dignified pietàs” featuring Black women; as the search for Wayne’s body begins, she lies on the sofa, listening to Nina Simone singing “Ne Me Quitte Pas.” Cee tells us, “I felt I was seeing her truly for the first time—not only the way we all come to see our parents as fallible humans, but also the particularities of her whiteness, the way she seemed to seek expression of her feelings only through black art.”

The mother acknowledges merely that her son is missing; the father accepts that he is dead, or at least gone for good. Neither sustains an unconditional faith in their daughter’s story. Instead, Cee reflects,

There was this lore, but it split in two where Wayne had left it. It split, then circled around the empty space where he should have been, and joined back together at the point when I walked into the house without him. The lore was a loop at the end of a rope, a lasso endlessly tossed, catching nothing.

Charlotte spirals into pathological mourning: “Wayne’s absence in our lives had become the drain toward which everything ran.” Then she sets up a foundation called Vigil, for parents of missing children—enlisting Cee in its work—and its publicity materials come to include a “prophesied face,” a charcoal portrait of Wayne as he was projected to look in the present. “This hypothetical portrait,” Cee muses, “was another way his death had skewed

us all apart, the way a missing tooth grows gaps between the others. Our memories of him now conflicted in dire ways.” Her father responds to the loss of his son—and the emotional paralysis of his wife—by moving on and remarrying.

Cee will be the lone recipient of what psychotherapy has to offer. There’s a therapist who’s fixated on her brother’s drawings; another seems on the verge of crying when Cee, in the bored pose of a teen-ager, talks romantically about cutting. “I didn’t feel that fucked up,” she tells us with a shrug. And yet she keeps seeing Wayne everywhere, regenerated from memory. He’s at the mall, on the sidewalk, in her dreams, a boy made of sand, pinched into reality before reality intrudes:

A pure, absent moment, a gap in the weave, solace: He’s alive. Then loss, sharp and smooth, piercing through, pulling a thread of rage behind it: He’s dead. One second, then another, each stitching me back into time, into a before and an after and no folds.

One therapist leans on Freud. The visions, she says, will remain until Cee fully accepts her brother’s death. In the yawning gap between knowing and accepting, Cee grudgingly writes down her dreams, encouraged to work with them as a mode of self-repair: “The premise is that you make a story out of your life. You plot it to give yourself a sense of continuity.” In other words, “you design a fiction.” She scoffs: “What a metaphor! What a story! I did it, of course. I conjured as instructed. . . . I made the trauma into a drama.”

What Cee comes up with, though, defies the reparative method, in which memories are supposed to be unknotted and smoothed. Her conjurings reweave the narrative material of “The Furrows.” Increasingly, the present tense of dreams inflects the present tense of waking life. Visions of Wayne slip in alongside what seem to be chance encounters with a stranger. Cee is now an adult, and she checks out the man carefully, down to his shoes, his age, his skin, his “wide and prolific” smile, his beauty. He says his name is Wayne. They sidle and flirt, and then they spend the night together. Every other Wayne spotting ends in evanescence. This Wayne persists.

But this Wayne isn't *her* Wayne, is he? The artfully frayed fabric of the novel calls to mind a lyric from Michael R. Jackson's musical "A Strange Loop," about a queer Black writer composing a musical about a queer Black writer composing a musical about a queer Black writer: "Change is just an illusion / And 'I' is just an illusion." From Cee's perspective, "I" is "relative even to myself. You glance in the mirror each day, and some days it isn't you but a goblin glaring back. And how do you know if it's the image that's changed or your vision?"

How *do* you know? The novel's engine is epistemic as well as emotional, Serpell being one of those novelists who have metabolized the quirks and the canniness of literary theory. "The most exciting feature of the novel after theory," Serpell once observed, "is precisely how it makes one want to add to, and speak to, the dialogue it ventriloquizes." In "The Furrows," that appetite for addition insures that absences are as unstable as presences. Grandma's accusatory question—"Where'd you put that boy?"—has no answer other than the novel itself, in which narrative conventions constantly collide.

The story of our would-be Wayne, Cee's slippery sometime bedmate, emerges as one of chicanery, the man and Cee's mother both aiming to outwit their personal losses through a long con. But though the novel's story lines turn and twist, the precision of Serpell's language remains under exquisite control. There's "the blue smell of melted ice," a "lacy mess of Frosted Flakes," "an ellipsis of low blows to the earth." A friend takes in Cee's anger "like water hitting ice: it either rolled off or froze into her own armor." Bay Area traffic, viewed from the skies, resembles "a tailor's heap": "smooth gray swaths of tarmac stitched with dashed lines, buttoned with cars, the highways' looped exits like masses of ribbon somebody forgot to tie. The rush-hour headlights are red and white sequins and when the cars move, they loosen gently and fall."

The last therapist we hear from "connected sexual fetishes to unresolved mourning." (Cee begins missing appointments immediately thereafter.) Yet the work of Vigil, Charlotte's foundation, has turned Wayne himself into a fetish object. In "Stranger Faces," Serpell writes that the fetish, conceived in psychoanalytic and in Marxist terms, is an absence "across which we

fondle, flirt with, and fret over meaning. Room for error is room for play.” That room is richly inhabited by “The Furrows,” a novel that embraces fretting and fondling alike.

The maze, the monster, the fire, the water: Serpell reminds us on every page that nothing is less reliable than language—that every story is necessarily a betrayal. *I don't want to tell you what happened.* The result is a novel that reclaims and refashions the genre of the elegy, charging it with as much eros as pathos. Furrows are the tracks we make and the tracks we cover up, and the shifting ground of Serpell’s novel denies every certainty save that the furrows are where we all live. ♦

By Katy Waldman

By Cressida Leyshon

By Leslie Jamison

By Dennis Zhou

# **Comment**

- [The Secret to the Queen's Success](#)

# The Secret to the Queen's Success

You don't get through seventy years of best behavior, on the throne, without a sense of humor; indeed, it may be the one thing that keeps you going.

By [Anthony Lane](#)



Stop all the clocks. Queen Elizabeth II died at Balmoral, Scotland, on September 8th, four years short of her centenary: a surprise as well as a melancholy shock, for it often seemed that she would run forever. Trying to grasp what made her tick is no easy task, but a useful place to start would be "The Queen: Elizabeth II and the Monarchy," a judicious biography by the historian Ben Pimlott. The index has an entry devoted to the sovereign's interests. "Dogs" gets nine mentions; "Horses," seven; "Racing," six; "Shooting," five; "Art collection," four; "Reading," three; "Politics," a paltry two; and "Jigsaw puzzles, Scrabble, and television," one.

And that is how you live to be ninety-six. Stay outdoors as much as possible. Keep a few books and games for rainy days. Enjoy the company of quadrupeds. And hope that nobody from the government drops in for tea. Elizabeth II, by the Grace of God, of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and of Her other Realms and Territories Queen, Head

of the Commonwealth, Defender of the Faith—or, as *Private Eye* used to call her, Brenda—was a countrywoman at heart. That is to say, she was hale, sane, shrewd, constitutionally stoic, and schooled to believe that time spent on emotional self-perusal or intellectual fretting is time wasted. When films and TV dramas portrayed her as introspective, they got her quite wrong; her gaze was trained steadily outward, not into her soul. Despite her vast wealth and the public splendor that adorned her reign, the Queen had the instinctive prudence of a generation raised in a time of war. Finish the food on your plate. However strong your feelings, keep them safe, like money in a purse. Don’t wave them around like flags. Although she was the most famous woman in the world, on permanent show, no one could ever accuse her of being a showoff.

Amid the hosannas that have been delivered, in tribute to the Queen, a particular note has been struck. According to Barack and Michelle Obama, “She brought her considerable humor and charm to moments of great pomp and circumstance.” Presidents Biden and Bush both spoke of her wit. Unlike her great-great-grandmother Queen Victoria, Elizabeth was amused—seldom, in fact, *not* amused. The most telling photograph ever taken of her is not a formal portrait, robed in solemnity, but a shot of her cracking up beside the Duke of Edinburgh, who is in Grenadier Guards uniform, complete with bearskin hat. You don’t get through seventy years of best behavior, on the throne, without a sense of humor; indeed, it may be the one thing that keeps you going. During the Commonwealth tour that began after the coronation, in 1953, and lasted five and a half months, the Queen said to an aide, “I’ve got the kind of face that if I’m not smiling, I look cross. But I’m not cross.”

This cheerfulness could bear remarkable fruit. In 1958, the youthful Queen, instead of mixing with the usual blue-blooded gang, had the honor of being presented to a *real* aristocrat, in white tie and tails—Duke Ellington, who was performing at a festival in Yorkshire. He recalled, “She asked me when was your first time in England? Oh, I said, oh my first time in England was in 1933, way before you were born.” (Her birth was actually in 1926.) “She gave me a real American look; very cool man, which I thought was too much.” Later that night, the story goes, Ellington went back to his hotel and began composing what would wind up as “The Queen’s Suite,” in six parts.

Only one copy of the recording was pressed. It was sent to Her Majesty; the piece was not heard by the public until after Duke passed away. Talk about the good and the great.

Two days before she died, the Queen received another Elizabeth—Liz Truss, the fifteenth and last Prime Minister to have served during the second Elizabethan reign. (The first was Winston Churchill.) Cynics wondered whether that meeting might have been the final straw, but, in truth, the sense of royal timing was exact. Had the Queen expired a week earlier, it would have been Truss's predecessor, Boris Johnson, leading the nation in mourning. He is not the man you want for grief. The revelation that parties had been held at 10 Downing Street on the eve of Prince Philip's funeral, in April, 2021, was conclusive proof, if any were required, that Johnson was deaf to the prevailing mood. The Queen, needless to say, was tuned in. She sat alone at the funeral, black-masked and marooned, because she understood that, during lockdown, such sad solitude was the lot of her subjects. Simply by doing what everyone else was having to do, and by saying nothing, she shamed the laxity of her Prime Minister, and probably spelled his end.

The country that she leaves behind is scarcely at ease with itself, and whether any government, helmed by Truss or anyone else, can be expected to restore harmony is open to debate. Inflation is swelling like a pustule. Industrial unrest is afoot. So alarming is the rise in energy costs that the prospect of winter fills many families with dread. Below it all lurks a larger fear: how soon before the United Kingdom becomes a contradiction in terms? Not the least of the Queen's innumerable duties was to act as a unifier-in-chief, and, with the removal of her guiding hand, divisions can only deepen. Though she died at Balmoral, which she loved, will the campaign for Scottish independence now find fresh impetus? What of the perennial Irish question? How about Wales? Could it be that what was once an empire, and then a commonwealth, will shrink to a single country, and then at last to one quiet village in Gloucestershire, with an empty church and a thriving line in marmalade?

“Though after my death you may have many stepdames, yet shall you never have a more natural mother than I mean to be unto you all.” Thus spake the

Queen's namesake, Elizabeth I—the age-old joke being that, notwithstanding the divine right of kings, it is British queens who have stayed the course, defined their times, and earned the acclamation. If Elizabeth II was, perhaps, a more natural mother to the nation than she was to her own children, that suggests only how wide, and how convulsive, the bereavement may turn out to be. Most Britons have known no other monarch. Even the ardently loyal, asked to sing not “God save our gracious Queen” but “God save our gracious King,” will struggle to make the switch. What happens next will not merely be a matter of trading one head of state for another, or of seeing a new profile on postage stamps and coins. To get up in the morning without the Queen being around, always distant but ever present, will be like living beneath a different sky. It is all, as Duke Ellington would say, too much. ♦

By Sam Knight

By Patrick Radden Keefe

By Andrew Solomon

By David Remnick

# Crown Colony

- When the Anglophiles (and Angloskeptics) of New York Heard About the Queen's Death

# When the Anglophiles (and Angloskeptics) of New York Heard About the Queen's Death

Mourning Queen Elizabeth II, or not, with the lovers of pork-and-Stilton pies, Scotch eggs, and Batchelors Chip Shop Style Mushy peas at a British specialty store in the West Village.

By [Adam Iscoe](#)



Items and occurrences observed at Myers of Keswick, a British specialty store on Hudson Street, in the West Village, September 8, 2022:

1:30 P.M. One urgent text, sent to Fay Bottomley, from Yorkshire, displaying a tweet from Buckingham Palace: “The Queen died peacefully at Balmoral this afternoon.” One gray-haired mother who, via video call, said, “I’m gutted, absolutely gutted. I’m not a major Royalist, but she’s always been there.” Bottomley replied, “She’s a bit of a badass!” The mother paused. “I actually didn’t think I’m a Royalist, but maybe I am.”

1:38 P.M. Four dollars and eighty-seven cents, handed over the counter, in exchange for one Cadbury Crunchie bar (“honeycomb covered in chocolate”) and one pop-tab can of Heinz Beanz.

2:05 P.M. One remembrance: “I was a little boy when I saw her. She just had her coronation, and she was coming up Belsize Avenue in a big limousine with the hood down. And she was with Princess Margaret, both smiling. I couldn’t get over how lovely they looked.”

2:12 P.M. One exchange: Elena Saldana, an apron-clad woman behind the shop’s counter who has worked at the shop for twenty-five years, said, “What can I get you?” A bespectacled Brit named Harry King, who has been a hairdresser for celebrities and common people in London and New York, replied, “A tissue.” Two almostLaughs. One Scotch egg bought by King. “I haven’t had one in years,” he said. “I’ll sit and have a little cry eating it watching the telly before I go to the gym.”

2:13 P.M. On display: one memorial for the shop’s deceased black-and-white tabby cat, Archie, “a free spirited little explorer who, in his short time with us, touched the lives of many. . . . Furever in our hearts!”

2:15 P.M. More than two dozen white roses, hydrangeas, sweet peas, and orchids; lots of Union Jack bunting; a few commemorative plates; and one framed photograph of Queen Elizabeth II, all placed in the store window—pushing aside a few dozen jars of Haywards Traditional Onions (flavor: Medium & Tangy), Heinz Sandwich Spread (original), Baxters Sliced Beetroot (“suitable for vegans”), Batchelors Bigga Marrowfat peas (“No. 1 in UK”), and Marmite. Not pushed aside: one urn holding Archie’s ashes.

2:33 P.M. Two journalists from Reuters, including one cameraman who showed up to tape some B-roll. One frizzy-haired breaking-news editor from *amNewYork*, snapping a photo of four twentysomethings who live together in a West Village apartment. “Something about this feels wrong,” one said. Another asked, “Are we looking happy? Do we smile? Do we look sad?”

3:05 P.M. One nanny and one toddler, who played with Gracie, Archie’s feline next-in-line, an orange, black, and white calico.

4:10 P.M. Two Cornish pasties, two Scotch eggs, two sausage rolls, one chicken-and-leek pie, one shepherd's pie, six British bangers, and one can of Batchelors Chip Shop Style Mushy peas purchased by Shawna McCarthy, who had arrived at the store after a visit to the dentist. "I completely forgot she died," McCarthy said. "Bad news—I need a full mouth reconstruction."

4:22 P.M. Three or four stargazer lilies, left at the shop's doorstep by a woman wearing a black baseball cap, barefoot sandals, and Bose headphones, who, when approached by a *Post* reporter for a quote, shouted "No!" and sprinted down the street.

4:27 P.M. "Two steak-and-kidney, two steak-and-ale, and a whole heap of sorrow to go with it!"

4:52 P.M. Three glasses of prosecco, poured by Nino Saldana, the shop's chef—who, in the past thirty-two years, has cooked hundreds of thousands of sausage rolls, Cornish pasties, and pork pies—for his wife, Elena; his co-worker of fifteen years, Irene Donnelly; and the owner, Jennifer Myers-Pulidore.

4:58 P.M. Five dollars and ninety-five cents exchanged for one package of McVitie's Digestives (flavor: original) by Theo Payne, a Londoner. "I hate the Queen," he said. "So, yeah, I was quite glad she died. I pissed off a lot of my family. My cousin unadded me on Snapchat!" And the McVitie's? "I miss digestives. It's been so long."

5:36 P.M. One hotel concierge, sent by a guest to acquire two items scribbled on sticky notes: British flag (size: five feet by three feet), digestives (wheat).

6:03 P.M. Three bags of Walkers crisps: cheese, cheese and onion, and Monster Munch pickled onion, acquired by Manu Kakani, who is twenty-two and grew up near London, and said, "I was born in India, so I don't know. It's, like, am I supposed to pretend to be sad?"

6:18 P.M. Three pork-and-Stilton pies, the last ones of the day, purchased by a man named Lloyd Price.

*6:30 P.M.* One radio, tuned to the BBC, intoning, “This is an important moment for Britain.”

*6:55 P.M.* Scores of bills in the register, counted by Donnelly, who said, “It’s been a weird day.” One more glass of prosecco, sipped by Elena, before she stepped outside for an interview with Telemundo. Two beers drunk by Nino in the kitchen.

*9:18 P.M.* Two bags of garbage brought outside by Javier de Los Santos. Several more drinks poured by the staff in the kitchen. Many stories told. One door locked. Sixteen lights switched off. One nap, enjoyed by Gracie, the cat. ♦

**By Nick Paumgarten**

**By Sam Knight**

**By Michael Schulman**

**By Patricia Marx**

## **Dept. of Foraging**

- [Move Over, Açaí—It's the Pawpaw's Time](#)

# Move Over, Açaí—It's the Pawpaw's Time

Michael Judd visits a rooftop garden in Brooklyn to evangelize about the pawpaw, which, if he has anything to say about it, is set to become the next hot fruit.

By [Yasmine AlSayyad](#)



From mid-August to early October, Michael Judd, an edible-landscape designer from Maryland, eats almost nothing but pawpaw, a creamy mango-shaped fruit that tastes like candied banana. He loves pawpaw crème brûlée, pawpaw panna cotta, lasagna with black beans and pawpaw. When pawpaw season is at its height, as it is now, he spends so much time harvesting that he barely has any time for meals. “I’m so busy—I go out and I just keep going, but I eat pawpaw,” Judd said one warm evening not long ago. “I’ll eat two or three pawpaws, and I can completely run and fully function and work. I’m very sensitive to what I eat and my energy, so from that alone I can tell you it’s a really strong, complete food.”

Judd, who lives with his family on a twenty-five-acre permaculture homestead in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, was arranging some chairs on a rooftop garden in Red Hook. He was in town to host a group of about twenty horticulturists, urban farmers, agricultural scientists, and pawpaw devotees, who'd come for a "pawpaw-ice-cream party" and to hear some evangelizing about pawpaws. Six of the guests had never tried the fruit before. The berry, America's largest native edible tree fruit, grows wild and plenty in twenty-six states, but it's almost never in grocery stores.

The pawpaw-curious arrived and sat in a semicircle around Judd. Most wore pragmatic outfits: orthopedic sandals, waterproof ankle boots, dirty trousers. Judd, who is forty-eight, with pointed features, sipped on pawpaw mead. "I'm a modern-day pawpaw ambassador," he said. "Pawpaws for the people! It's a movement." He explained that he'd lived for twenty years in Latin America, mostly in Nicaragua, where he became interested in equatorial plants. "I grew a lot of the tropical relatives of pawpaws," he said. When he returned to Maryland, in 2010, he noticed, for the first time, pawpaws hanging from trees. "I come back to live here, and all of a sudden there's this tropical-looking fruit growing near me," he said. "There are more than two thousand species in the custard-apple family, and the pawpaw is the one that said, 'I'm going north.'" Judd invited the guests to share their own pawpaw experiences.

"First time I had a pawpaw was about an hour ago," Maya Kutz, the greenhouse manager at a rooftop farm, called out.

"The first one I tried was too ripe," a woman with big dark-brown curls said. "And I didn't like it at all."

"As a fruit, it's very perishable," Judd said. "Remember this: freeze 'em. Then peel it like a potato." He explained the stages of ripeness: rock hard on the branch, then softer, like a peach, when it's time for picking. After about five days in the fridge, he said, "it'll go a little bit richer and caramelized, almost like coffee."

A young man wearing glasses interrupted to ask for advice on germinating seeds that he was storing in his fridge. "I just want to know: Is it, like, as easy as dropping seeds in Central Park?" he said. (Not quite.)

A man wearing a metal meditation pyramid over his head asked, “Have you ever had pawpaw juice?”

“Juice?” Judd responded. He sounded indignant.

“I find it much easier to find other exotic fruits,” a bearded man, sitting cross-legged on the ground, said. “I couldn’t find pawpaws anywhere.”

“You will soon,” Judd said. He added that in the past five years small orchards along the East Coast have started growing pawpaws, and that pawpaw festivals have popped up in Ohio, Maryland, Pennsylvania, and North Carolina. Scientists in Kentucky are seeking to extend pawpaws’ shelf life to make growing them on a large scale economically viable. Judd said, “It’s hot. It’s coming up. It’s of interest.”

“A word of warning,” the man with glasses said. He has dried pawpaws into a fruit leather: “They are the tastiest laxative I’ve ever had.”

“It’s like cleansing,” Judd said. “You wanna go slow with it.”

As the talk wrapped up, Kutz, the greenhouse manager, asked if Judd would help plant some pawpaw trees. Kutz dug two holes in a wooden planter box. Judd set down two delicate trees. He gingerly clipped away some of the leaves. “That will deal with the shock of transplantation,” he said. “It’s like being born.” After making sure that the plants were steadily rooted, Kutz and Judd headed down the street toward Red Hook Channel, hoping to catch the sunset. Judd inspected the trees lining the street. Pawpaws? “Mulberries,” he said. “Mulberries everywhere.” ♦

By Carolyn Kormann

By Andrea Cohen

By Yasmin Tayag

By Ben McGrath

## **Dept. of Reading**

- [The Enduring Allure of Choose Your Own Adventure Books](#)

By [Leslie Jamison](#)

## CHOICES

You were a girl who wanted to choose your own adventures. Which is to say, you were a girl who never had adventures. You always followed the rules. But, when you ate an entire sleeve of graham crackers and sank into the couch with a Choose Your Own Adventure book, you got to imagine that you were getting into trouble in outer space, or in the future, or under the sea. You got to make choices every few pages: Do you ask the ghost about her intentions, or run away? Do you rebel against the alien overlords, or blindly obey them?

This was the late eighties in Los Angeles. You binged on these books, pulling tattered sun-bleached copies from your bookshelf: four, five, six in the course of a single afternoon. All over the country, all over the world, other kids were pulling these books from their bookshelves, too. The series has sold more than two hundred and seventy million copies since its launch, in 1979. It's the fourth-best-selling children's-book series of all time. Its popularity peaked in the eighties, but the franchise still sells about a million books a year.

In "The Cave of Time," the first book in the series, you discover a time-travelling cave whose tunnels carry you to Colonial Massachusetts, where you become a soap-maker's apprentice; or to the Titanic, where your attempts to warn the captain are futile; or even to a version of the year 2022 that does not look much like our version of 2022 (more bike trails). The stated desire of your character (to return to your own time) is at odds with the actual desire of a reader (to have as many adventures as possible). You want to die in the jaws of a T. rex, or change the course of history by eating a sandwich. The warning at the beginning of the book tells you, "Remember—you cannot go back!" But of course you *can* go back, and you will. After the first few books, the warnings stop saying "You cannot go back!" They understand that going back is the point—not the making but the *re*-making of choices, the revocability of it all. In childhood, you get to take things back. It's a small compensation for having very little power in the first place.

Choose books invited kids to exercise some agency, as they rattled around in these cages of limited possibility: millions of seven-year-olds who would someday become thirty-five-year-olds remembering with an aching nostalgia this early sense of freedom; this faith that, after every death, there would always be a do-over.

If you want to read about how these books came to be, continue to **TWO DADS**.

If you want to read more about the pleasures of dying, skip to **RISK**.

## **TWO DADS**

The story of Choose Your Own Adventure is largely the tale of two men: Edward Packard, a lawyer who came up with the concept while telling bedtime stories to his two daughters (who sometimes wanted the protagonist to do different things), and R. A. (Ray) Montgomery, an independent publisher who put out Packard's first book, in 1976, after all the big houses had rejected it. Each of them eventually went on to write nearly sixty titles in the series. During the next three decades, Packard and Montgomery (who died in 2014) weathered an evolving, sometimes fractious relationship. Each, at various points, pursued publishing ventures without the other. But together they were responsible for many of the most beloved titles in the series: Packard's "The Cave of Time," "Your Code Name Is Jonah," "Who Killed Harlowe Thrombey?," and "The Mystery of Chimney Rock"; Montgomery's "Journey Under the Sea," "The Lost Jewels of Nabooti," "Mystery of the Maya," and "Prisoner of the Ant People."

Both men went through divorces shortly before the series started gaining momentum, and ended up writing many of their books as single fathers. Their children remember helping their fathers invent and flesh out new scenarios: Packard's daughter Andrea suggested the idea of a time-travelling cave; Montgomery's sons, Anson and Ramsey, suggested cars (the Saab 900 Turbo, the Lancia Stratos) for "The Race Forever." Packard paid his children thirty-five cents an hour to read his manuscripts and offer feedback: Which parts were boring? Which choices would kids enjoy?

(Andrea, Anson, and Ramsey ended up writing for the franchise, publishing their first Choose books during college.)

Andrea recalls that time with her father felt even more precious after her parents divorced. (They split up when she was seven.) He would take her on weekend outings that emphasized experiment and tactile experience—encountering the world in concrete, physical ways—and Andrea sees the Choose books as another manifestation of this ethos: a way of encouraging kids to experience the world through exploration and curiosity. Andrea can still remember looking at her father’s diagrams for the books: the forking branches spidering across taped-together paper charts. To her, “those charts felt like houses of possibility.”

If you want to read more about how Packard arrived at the original idea, continue to [THE STORYTELLER](#).

If you want to learn how Montgomery helped turn the concept into a phenomenon, skip to [THE SCENARIO BUILDER](#).

## THE STORYTELLER

When his daughters were young, Packard told them bedtime stories about a boy named Pete, a literary alter ego of Andrea’s. (Pete was also the name of a friend she had a crush on, but she thinks the character’s creation had more to do with her suspicion that boys had more freedom in the world.) At key junctures in the story, Packard would ask his daughters what they thought Pete should do next, and when they gave different answers he’d play out both possibilities. Packard remembers this innovation as a function of necessity—“If I’d been a better storyteller, we never would have gotten the form. . . . I’d get stumped, and ask the girls what should happen next”—but Andrea recalls it as an instance of his generosity. He wanted to give each girl her own ending, just as he was always meticulously fair in his distribution of snacks, compliments, and attention.

Andrea remembers bedtime stories with her dad as sacred—this was the time the kids got to be with him, after his long days working at a law firm in Manhattan and his lengthy train commutes back to their home, in

suburban Connecticut. Eventually, Packard began using these commutes to turn his bedtime stories into his first book, “Sugarcane Island,” a story full of branching paths recounting Pete’s adventures on a remote island. Working on the manuscript offered Packard an escape from a law career he found largely unsatisfying. In 1969, Packard signed a contract with an agent, who submitted “Sugarcane Island” to various New York publishers and accumulated a stack of rejections. One editor thought it was more of a game than a book. Another said, “It’s hard enough to get children to read, and you’re just making it harder, with all these choices.”

If you want to read how Montgomery eventually gave these books a home, read **THE SCENARIO BUILDER**.

If you’re curious to meet the ninety-one-year-old Packard in person, turn to **MEETING**.

## **THE SCENARIO BUILDER**

On a Vermont ski vacation in 1975, years after getting rejected by every editor who read “Sugarcane Island,” Packard stumbled across a magazine article about a small publisher called Vermont Crossroads, run by a husband-and-wife team: Ray Montgomery and Constance Cappel. They were looking for inventive children’s literature. When he sent them “Sugarcane Island,” they were immediately excited by the concept. One of Montgomery’s jobs had been consulting as a scenario builder for the Peace Corps and for Con Edison, writing elaborate second-person roles for participants: “You are a construction worker in your mid-thirties. . . . Oil shortages worry you, but you believe a lot of it is bluff.” Packard’s book reminded him of those scenarios: their immersive perspectives, decision junctures, and forking paths.

Despite the couple’s enthusiasm, Vermont Crossroads didn’t have many resources to devote to promotion. Packard had to pitch in to help with the publishing costs. Montgomery Xeroxed sixty copies and gave them to a local teacher to pass out to her students as a kind of juvenile focus group. Asked if they found the book interesting, fifty-nine said yes—and the one who called it “boring” reported having read it nine times. When asked if

they would give the book as a gift, only four students said no (one of whom explained, “I’d keep it”). Another student said, “In other books if you’re in a jungle and a snake was next to you, you would have to go away or stay still but in this book you can do both.”



*"Sorry if there's sand back there. I went to the beach once ten years ago."*  
Cartoon by Asher Perlman

“Sugarcane Island” went on to become one of Vermont Crossroads’s most successful books, selling more than five thousand copies, but both Packard and Montgomery believed that the idea had the potential to break out on a much larger scale. That’s when things got a bit messy, both personally and professionally. Montgomery and his wife separated (as Packard tells it, “she got the house, he got ‘Choose Your Own Adventure’”); and both men tried (separately) to take the Choose Your Own Adventure concept to larger publishers. First, Packard signed a deal with J. B. Lippincott & Co., an imprint of Harper, and published two Choose books. His pitch for a third was rejected. Packard says that Montgomery, “miffed” that Packard had left Vermont Crossroads, approached Bantam, then part of Bertelsmann, with the concept on his own. Montgomery got a contract for six books. As Packard tells it, Bantam “wouldn’t sign the deal” without Packard’s involvement; as Montgomery’s widow, Shannon Gilligan, tells it, Montgomery’s sense of fairness, as well as a feeling that six books in a year

was too much for one writer, inspired him to get Packard involved. However it happened, they eventually split the deal.

Andrea helped her father come up with the idea for “The Cave of Time” during a road trip. They were in his orange Volkswagen Squareback—with a stick holding up one window, and no seat belts in the back—going to see his mother on the North Fork of Long Island. Packard told his daughters and their younger brother that he had a contract with Bantam and he needed ideas. Andrea had recently gone spelunking at summer camp, crawling into a small cave beneath the main cave, farther than anyone else, and felt torn between exploring more—had anyone ever seen these tunnels?—and returning to safety. When she suggested the idea to her father—a cave whose deepest tunnels transported you through time—he said, “Great idea! Get started!,” and handed her a yellow composition pad. “The Cave of Time” credits Andrea with “concept, title, and editorial assistance,” and she has always received a percentage of the royalties.

If you’re curious about the appeal of heading deeper into the cave, skip to RISK.

If you want to watch these books turn into a phenomenon, continue to HEYDAY.

## HEYDAY

At Bantam, Choose Your Own Adventure finally found the huge readership its creators always believed it could entice. A 1981 feature in the *Times* described a fourth-grade classroom with seven students all making different choices in “The Cave of Time.” Soon afterward, Packard was interviewed by Bryant Gumbel on the “Today” show. (He’d been hoping for Jane Pauley, whom he had a crush on.) At some point in the early eighties, Bantam decided that it wanted twelve books a year, so it got six from Packard and six from Montgomery.

The Choose franchise hit a generational sweet spot, alongside the rise of Dungeons & Dragons and other role-playing games. Back then, it was *these*

text-based experiences which could most powerfully deliver the possibilities of interactive narrative.

The form wasn't entirely new: the ancient tradition of oral storytelling often involves interaction between audience and storyteller, and (more recently) postmodern literature had begun exploring the possibilities of multiple simultaneous story lines. Robert Coover's 1969 short story "The Babysitter" imagines a single ordinary night following a series of (increasingly disturbing) paths; John Fowles's novel "The French Lieutenant's Woman," published the same year, offers three endings for the same story. Some three decades earlier, Jorge Luis Borges's short story "The Garden of Forking Paths" (1941) imagines the unfinished novel of a Chinese civil servant in which all the possible outcomes of an event occur, rather than just one. But it was a largely forgotten novel called "Consider the Consequences," published in 1930, that most closely anticipated the Choose Your Own Adventure form. Written by two middle-aged friends, Doris Webster and Mary Alden Hopkins, it invited the reader to make choices about the romantic life of a young woman and her two suitors, leading to forty-three alternative endings. The opening page offers a disclaimer: "Life is not a continuous line from the cradle to the grave. Rather, it is many short lines, each ending in a choice and branching right and left to other choices, like a bunch of seaweed."

As the Choose books grew more successful, Packard developed a spinoff series that, he says, made Montgomery want a spinoff series of his own, amplifying tensions already created by their separate overtures to larger publishers. Montgomery did persuade Bantam to create a pair of computer games for the Atari platform based on Choose books, and that's how he ended up meeting and marrying Gilligan, who was hired to develop them.

Both Montgomery and Packard found themselves in artistic disagreements with Bantam. Packard, having originally devised these stories for his daughters, wanted to make the protagonists gender-neutral, but the publisher wanted them to be boys. Montgomery agreed with Packard. Bantam believed that, while girls would gladly read stories about boys, boys didn't want to read stories about girls.

As writers, Packard and Montgomery had palpably different styles that seemed to espouse opposite philosophies about chaos and order. While Packard was invested in constructing logical cause-and-effect correlations between choices and their outcomes, aspiring to decisions that rewarded an analytic approach, Montgomery's books read more like fever dreams, absurd and off the wall, featuring a well-organized ant bureaucracy, a planet full of babies morphing rapidly into liver-spotted elders, and plenty of stoned-in-a-dorm-room epiphanies: "You are and you have been a part of everything, always. The beginning is the end." That ending, of course, is just another beginning—inviting you to flip back to the first page and start again.

If you want to read more about being a part of everything, continue to YOU.

If you want to read more about the allure of resurrection, skip to RISK.

## YOU

You didn't necessarily identify with the unnamed "you" who starred in each book. It was more that each protagonist offered you an alternative to yourself, or forty alternatives to yourself. The second person was less like a mirror and more like a costume. Reading these books wasn't about the pleasure of "relatability" but about something opposite—the pleasures of distortion, recklessness, and multiplicity. Every protagonist contained multitudes, a set of contradictory impulses that didn't have to cohere: The self who explores the haunted house and the one who stays behind. The self who confronts the ghost and the one who runs away. The self who helps the mother in trouble—or the cousin, or the hiker—and the one who mumbles some apology and moves on, to continue searching for the yeti, or the family crest. The self who burns the vampires alive and the one who accepts their decadent pastries. (Word to the wise: never accept a vampire's pastries.)

When you read these books as a child, your process was always the same: you started by following your intuitions, trying to approximate what you would *actually* do in these far-fetched situations, and—once you'd reached

that first ending, the one you probably deserved—you let yourself try anything you wanted. You let yourself make reckless choices that ran counter to your intuitions in every imaginable way. It was like wearing brave-person drag. You let yourself rummage through the rest of the book to find every single ending, the same way you'd rummage through a bag of chips (if your nutritionist mother let you eat chips) to find every single shard.

The books vary widely in the types of choices they offer. Although many of them (especially early books like “The Cave of Time”) feature the kinds of concrete choices that role-play writers call “which-way choices”—left or right, up or down—the more compelling choices are grounded in emotional priorities, or ethical commitments: Do you betray the secret of the whales, or protect them? Are you ready to spend your whole life cloistered in the paradise of Shangri-la, or do you crave the freedom of a life beyond its boundaries? Many choices map familiar childhood dilemmas—whether to trust authority figures, whether to share secrets, even whom to sit next to at lunch—onto wacky, outrageous landscapes.

In “Inside UFO 54-40,” for example, after your Concorde flight gets intercepted by aliens called the UT-Y, who are collecting specimens for their interplanetary zoo, you find yourself imprisoned in the chamber of Earth people. Do you speak to the dark-haired young woman or the wise-looking old man? And, when you finally gain the audience of the aliens, what do you tell them in order to make them set you free? Children already spend much of their lives puzzling out what to tell various authority figures—parents, teachers, babysitters—in order to get what they want in return: knowledge, attention, affection, agency. In one plotline, the UT-Y masters challenge you to say something that will surprise them: a moment that winks at you, reminding you that the books, even as they seem to offer you choices, already know all the choices you could possibly make. As the book continues, you find yourself repeatedly disappointed by the “happy” scenarios where you make it back to Earth. You want to see the interplanetary zoo!

The forking paths of a Choose book propose a conception of character that differs from that of traditional novels. If a character is defined by the

choices she makes, then perhaps these books have no true central character. This main character makes *all* the choices, effectively nullifying her own identity. If you make every choice, you are no one. But if you understand character a bit differently—as a range of possibilities, rather than as a series of inevitable decisions—then the protagonists of Choose books are truer, fuller expressions of identity than characters whose novels allow them only one plotline. Each of these protagonists contains an array of potential destinies, rather than just one. Each holds the shadow selves of other lives she could have led.

If you want to read about the pleasure of killing these shadow selves, continue to RISK.

If you'd rather hear Packard talk about his own regrettable choices, skip to IMPULSES.

## RISK

The warning at the beginning of every Choose Your Own Adventure is also a promise: “You are responsible because *you* choose! . . . Think carefully before you make a move! One mistake may be your last.” It’s not just saying, *You are in control*, but also *You will find yourself in pleasurable danger*.

You love the dangerous women in these books. You love the power-hungry vampire countess. You love the beautiful Italian secret agent with a long, sharp nose who double-crosses you on Cape Cod. You adore the villainous gem dealer with cat’s-eye glasses and a pond of pet piranhas. You love these evil women because they do the opposite of pleasing everyone. They offer another way to be a woman, another way to be alive. You don’t mind if they kill you. You love endings where you die.



"Every kid gets a laurel wreath? This is why Rome is falling."  
Cartoon by Trevor Spaulding

The deaths in these books are intoxicating because they are never final. No matter how the story ends—you are sliced in half by a portal that sends your torso to the future and your legs to the past; you are paralyzed by a pair of good-looking vampires as they waltz through the baggage car of a Transylvanian train; you learn that you exist only in the dreams of an unconscious middle-aged man, and will stop existing if he ever wakes up—you can always go back and make another set of choices. The fact of multiple endings offers a sense of freedom and safety at once, reconciling two conflicting desires of childhood: autonomy and protection.

The eighteenth-century philosopher Edmund Burke, in his theory of the sublime, observed the appeal of regarding danger from a position of safety, arguing that “whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger . . . is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.” It’s the thrill of watching a powerful waterfall from a sturdy boulder, or reading about your own death in a book that will let you resurrect yourself.

If you’re tired of meditations on selfhood and sublimity, skip to meeting Packard in MEETING.

If you want to read about what happens when books and readers break the rules, proceed to CHEATING (or maybe you already have).

## CHEATING

No Choose Your Own Adventure breaks the rules more seductively than “Inside UFO 54-40,” which opens with a special warning: “While you are on board UFO 54-40, you may hear about *Ultima*, the planet of paradise, and you may wonder if one of your adventures will lead you there. . . . No one can get there by making choices or following instructions!”

As it turns out, you can reach Ultima only by cheating, flipping through the pages until you spot an illustration, on page 102, that looks suspiciously like paradise: gleaming buildings encircled by spiral staircases, pillars, and crescents, a glowing circus tent that radiates beams of light. It’s Ultima! “You did not make a choice, or follow any directions, but now, somehow, you are descending from space—approaching a great, glistening sphere.” Your alien hosts welcome you. They tell you that no one gets here by following directions. It feels like grace, as if the book were not just forgiving but rewarding what you always considered to be cheating: flipping through the pages to find the endings you wanted, then reverse-engineering the choices that would get you there. The book seemed to be saying: *You understand the spirit of these books better than the readers who play by the rules. I will reward your cheating with paradise.*

Anson Montgomery, who still writes and publishes Choose books, sometimes gets letters from young readers confessing their cheating habits: scanning ahead for desirable endings, backtracking to redo choices. Their confessions carry top notes of guilt, he says, but he suspects that, beneath this anxiety, they actually relish their transgressions. They enjoy a reading experience that gives them something to confess. A former reader tells you about keeping one finger marking the page at every crucial choice point to which he might need to return, until all his fingers were slotted into the book—as if he were playing it like a wind instrument.

Anson believes that frustration is also part of the appeal of these books: “As a kid, you might not know it, but you also want frustration.” You don’t want

to get the most triumphant ending right away. It's most satisfying to reach Ultima after you've been frustrated, over and over, by following the rules.

The most explicitly metafictional of all the Choose books is Packard's "Hyperspace," which reads like a book that has grown tired of following the rules. Published in 1983, it begins when your mad-scientist neighbor invites you to help him explore hyperspace, a realm that makes it possible to visit alternate universes and which eventually delivers you to the fifth dimension—a barren landscape of red clay hills, where you meet an ordinary-seeming guy in jeans who "looks a bit older than your father." He turns out to be the author of the book: Packard himself. He's sick of staying on the sidelines. "Since you're the author," you tell him, "you ought to be able to tell me how to get *out* of hyperspace and back to my own universe!" He doesn't tell you. When the ground starts shaking beneath your feet, and cracks start splitting the ground open, he says there is a choice coming up: *Do you decide to jump into a big crack, or try to keep from falling in?* But, when you beg him to tell you the right decision, he falls into a huge crack before he can answer.

The author has appeared, but he's not omnipotent. He's not even omniscient. And before too long he's dead. Or else he's back in another dimension—the authorial realm outside the text, from which he came. Packard's brief entry into the story dramatizes the limits of his power more than it flexes his reach. When you finally make it to the sixth dimension, you find nothing except this disclaimer: "[Unfortunately, the author of this book, Edward Packard, never made it to the sixth dimension. For that reason he is unable to describe it.]"

If you want to meet Packard in this universe, continue to MEETING.

If you want to cheat and skip straight to Ultima, then skip to ULTIMA.

## MEETING

When you are planning a trip to meet the ninety-one-year-old creator of the Choose Your Own Adventure series, every choice starts to feel pivotal: *If you fly to Packard's home in Colorado, turn to page 62; if you meet him at*

*his summer rental in the Hamptons, turn to page 87; if you start with questions about early publishing rejections, turn to page 35; if you jump straight into questions about how divorce shaped his ideas about decision-making, get right back on the jitney and head home.*

You end up spending a humid July day with Packard near East Hampton. Packard grew up on Long Island during the Great Depression, a childhood he has recounted in a self-published memoir, “It’s a Miracle It Wasn’t Worse,” which recalls “kindly old ladies with cider mills at the end of one’s street [and] mussel shells . . . shaped like little boats . . . we set them out like a little fleet.” Now the Hamptons are the Hamptons. You take a Thursday-morning jitney into four hours of traffic—“Thursday is the new Friday,” Andrea remarks—and get off in the impossibly posh village of East Hampton. Chanel and Balenciaga sit across the street from the Monogram Shop. It’s hard to find a sandwich for less than twenty dollars.

Father and daughter drive you back to a small wooden house near the placid blue expanse of Gardiners Bay; the air is thick with salt, sweet with cut grass. Packard’s son-in-law is clearing some surprisingly large spiders out of an old kayak. Packard is here for a month with his longtime partner, Sara Compton, a former “Sesame Street” writer (she and her son Spencer co-wrote Choose Your Own Adventure No. 114, “Daredevil Park”), and shifting installments of children and grandchildren. Over Greek salad, strong coffee, and chopped pineapple, one grandson tells you that he was “a pretty risk-averse kid,” so he would always start a Choose book by making a set of conservative choices; then he’d go back and make far riskier choices, to see where they took him. He got to be a version of himself he recognized, and then a version of himself he didn’t recognize at all.

After lunch, Packard informs you that he has assembled a set of papers—plot graphs, old covers, rejection letters from publishers—that will help him tell you the story of the Choose series. He also has more to say about his enduring obsession with decision-making.

If you want to examine Packard’s papers, continue to ARCHIVES.

If you’d rather ask Packard more about his obsession with decisions, turn to IMPULSES.

# ARCHIVES

At a glass patio table overlooking the bay, Packard shows you one of his plot charts: a graph that looks like a family tree. He explains the code: At every forking choice, he writes the decision above the line, the outcome below. A straight line means that the narration continues without a choice. A big black dot signifies an ending. Arrows show choices circling back. Asterisks indicate positive endings. In a 1984 pamphlet titled “How to Write a Book Like a Choose Your Own Adventure Book,” meant for young fans who wanted to create their own, Packard wrote, “Once you’ve outlined your book, your book will practically write itself! Well, not quite. But you’ll get a real feeling that you’re going to do it.”

On a faded Xerox copy of the 1981 *Times* article that helped make the series famous, you notice a note that Packard scribbled in the margins, next to a quote from an editor at Bantam about appreciating the randomness of the outcomes. “Not so,” Packard wrote, “a weird remark.” Randomness was never part of his compositional strategy. “My philosophy was that it should be like life,” he tells you. Smart decisions were more likely to result in a better outcome but wouldn’t always guarantee it. Virtuous choices didn’t always pay off. Packard wanted to imbue the books with moral realism, rather than write hollow ethical instruction manuals that invariably rewarded the “right” choices. He never constructed choices, however, that allowed the protagonist to make cruel decisions. Stupid ones, perhaps—but never cruel. While the choices often carry an ethical charge, they land within the realm of what a decent person might do—sometimes prioritizing his own welfare, sometimes another’s.

Packard is proud of his fan letters: from someone who heard Ultima referenced in a dharma talk by a Zen Buddhist monk, and the Turkish Spinoza scholar who believes Choose books embody “the fundamental Spinozist ethos of empowering not just oneself but also others, of not just embodying but simultaneously radiating joy.” There’s a letter from a British man who painstakingly assembled a small stash of Choose books by collecting tokens from boxes of Weetabix breakfast cereal, and from a Dallas nurse who developed a set of “Branching Path Simulations” (based

on the Choose books he'd loved as a child) to help "prepare nurses for the fight they will take on in the frontlines" of the *COVID* pandemic.

Many fans who write to Packard are Gen X-ers who loved these books as kids and are starting to read them to their own children. A man with a three-year-old writes that he is "tired from life" but thinks frequently of the wonder he felt at these books, how following multiple versions of the story felt like "skating over the ice that separates us from another world."

If you're curious about Gen X's lasting obsession with choices, turn to **LEGACY**.

If you're ready to hear Packard lament his own decisions, continue to **IMPULSES**.

## **IMPULSES**

"I gave a lot of thought to decision-making, because my own decisions—for many years—were terrible," Packard says, explaining that such choices arose from what he calls "a heap of impulses" (a phrase coined by the philosopher Christine Korsgaard). From the way Packard describes these "terrible" choices, it seems that he probably means the kind of poor choices you might imagine a twice-divorced man has made. In an essay called "The View from Ninety," he describes "reviewing my worst decisions—the absolutely most momentously disastrous ones, particularly those relating to my career and my relationships with other people, particularly women." He was trying to understand what had been driving him: "I asked myself, *How could I have acted that way? What was I thinking? Why wasn't I thinking?*"

Packard laments the portions of his life that he spent "sleepwalking," a state he compares to "floating downstream on a river raft . . . not paying proper attention." In the Choose books, he always wanted to construct what the philosopher Mark Balaguer calls "torn decisions," choices that were "as balanced as possible so that readers would have to think for a minute as to which was best."

There's an interesting irony at work in the way Packard narrates his life: as he was developing a series of form-breaking narratives that actively foregrounded intentional choices, he came to feel that in his own life his choices weren't intentional enough.

If you want to hear what became of the Choose books after their heyday, turn to **LEGACY**.

If you're ready for a closing paragraph that waxes eloquent about the existential implications of this kids'-book franchise, skip to **ULTIMA**.

## **LEGACY**

In the nineteen-nineties, the Choose series began to decline, in large part because of the increasing popularity of video and computer games. In the early eighties, the Choose series offered a novel experience: a chance to control the narrative you were inside of. But by the mid-nineties this experience had become less novel, and it felt more seductive in digital media—where the worlds were more visually immersive, and the choices more constant. Nintendo released its first handheld Game Boy in 1989; the King's Quest computer games appeared in the nineteen-eighties and nineties; the iconic computer game *Myst* came out in 1993, with lush graphics and a nuanced story line, the same year as its aesthetic opposite, the popular first-person-shooter game *Doom*. Meanwhile, both Packard and Montgomery felt that the publisher was neglecting their series. It had redesigned the classic covers, alienating readers who'd loved the originals. The books were languishing, and in 1999 the series was discontinued.

In 2003, Montgomery and Gilligan took over the Choose Your Own Adventure copyright and launched their own publishing company, Chooseco, to give the books a second life. It was a family operation, run by Montgomery and Gilligan, with Anson Montgomery involved as a writer. Chooseco has published more than fifty new titles, and sells between eight hundred thousand and 1.2 million books, old titles and new, each year. Much of this market is composed of Gen X-ers hoping to get their kids hooked on the series.



*"I think you're looking for Gladys and her damn cockatoos over in 2A."*  
Cartoon by Juan Astasio

In the past decade, these Gen X-ers have also made new versions of the interactive narratives they grew up on. In 2015, the actor Neil Patrick Harris published a memoir with choices titled “Choose Your Own Autobiography.” The dead patriarch in the 2019 hit film “Knives Out” is named Harlan Thrombey, a nod to Packard’s “Who Killed Harlowe Thrombey?” An educator in Texas proposed to his wife by finding the best ending in “The Jewels of Nabooti,” highlighting all the choices that would get you there, and handwriting his proposal underneath.

In 2018, Netflix released an interactive streaming film called “Black Mirror: Bandersnatch,” which allowed viewers to make choices. (One of the characters in the film explicitly refers to a Choose Your Own Adventure story.) Chooseco sued Netflix for twenty-five million dollars, claiming that its trademark had been infringed. It argued that its “marketing strategy includes appealing to adults now in their twenties, thirties, and forties who remember the brand with pleasant nostalgia from their youth,” and that the film’s “dark and, at times, disturbing content dilutes the goodwill for and positive associations with” the franchise. The lawsuit was settled out of court.

No contemporary creation summons the magic of Choose Your Own Adventure quite as strongly as “Sleep No More,” a wildly popular interactive theatre production loosely based on Shakespeare’s “Macbeth.” Arriving in New York in 2011, it allows audience members to wander through a haunted Scottish hotel that occupies five stories of a cavernous building in downtown Manhattan. You can follow characters through dim passageways to watch their quarrels and seductions, discover live eels swimming in grimy bathtubs, eat penny candy from jars, and stumble into coveted one-on-one interactions with cast members (like the legendary “wheelchair ride” on the hidden sixth floor). Envy at other people’s experiences is practically baked into the show—*You watched a bloody orgy? You saw full-frontal nudity?*?—but after a few visits I came to feel that this sense of regret, this awareness of all the unexplored paths, was not only a clever marketing tool (why not see the show again?) but a powerful source of adrenaline during the experience, and a bittersweet form of realism: so much of living involves considering everything you missed out on.

If you’re ready for an ideal ending, skip to ULTIMA.

If you want to read more about the perils of an ideal ending, head to GOLDEN TICKET.

## GOLDEN TICKET

Montgomery wrote his last Choose Your Own Adventure book, “Gus vs. the Robot King,” in 2014, as he was dying. It kept his mind off his illness, Gilligan recalls. He couldn’t sit at a desk, so he wrote in bed, on his iPad. Eventually, Gilligan transferred the file to her laptop and read it aloud to him as he dictated changes.

Every Choose author writes his or her books differently. Poets do particularly well with the structure, Gilligan says. They are not afraid to write nonlinearly, and the demands of the form inspire them like other generative constraints: patterns of rhyme or meter, the structure of a sonnet or a ghazal. Gilligan was initially self-conscious about working on Choose books; she felt chastised by the disdain of a friend who was getting a Ph.D.

in literature from Yale, and clearly thought the books were trash. But over the years she has found herself gratified by the challenge of writing choices that genuinely entice younger readers. The beginning of every Choose book has to work like an epic poem—every line, every word, doing the work necessary to ground a reader in the story. She feels that the books are directly descended from oral storytelling, where the storyteller takes input from his listeners. Packard’s bedtime stories were nothing if not another installment in this long human history of oral narrative.

Anson has learned a lot about himself from the way he structures Choose books. “You see your own values and baggage reflected in your choices and endings,” he says, citing his own lingering preoccupations with achievement. His methodical style—precisely arranging his endings along a continuum from ideal to terrible—differed from his father’s more whimsical approach. Anson always writes one “Golden Ticket” ending where you get exactly what you want, and a few “Golden Ticket minus one” paths where you get almost everything, but not quite.

Gilligan, on the other hand, felt disappointed in herself when a friend pointed out that she’d written a Choose book that featured only one ideal ending; she worried that the book had unwittingly “reflected a monotheistic way of thinking.” Gilligan didn’t want to write a book that suggested there was only one path to the truth, only one right way to move through the world. The entire premise of these books, she felt, was an opportunity to free yourself from these constraints.

There is nowhere to go but ULTIMA.

## ULTIMA

You are swimming with Edward Packard in a bay as warm as bathwater, the underwater reeds like noodles against your thighs; the author, disappointed that you didn’t arrive in time for high tide, is writing the scene aloud as if you were in one of his books. “It’s like we’re on page 83,” he says. “Do you swim left, with the tide, and feel like an Olympic athlete, or do you swim right, against the tide, and feel like you’re getting nowhere at all? And

eventually the bottom drops out, and you find yourself in deeper waters, beyond the reach of rescue.”

Even at his age, Packard is still essentially a father worrying about his daughter, herself past fifty, getting caught in a riptide. Just as you’ll always be a mother trying to anticipate what choices your own daughter will make—whether she’s four years old, listening to the Choose books you read aloud to her, or twenty-four, figuring out whether to leave a terrible job, or a stale relationship. Right now, her favorite Choose book is “Prisoner of the Ant People.” She loves being their prisoner as much as she loves saving their queen. Whenever you read her an ending in which she dies, you feel the brutal integrity of these books—that their choices promise you absolutely nothing, except the chance to choose again.

Andrea believes that these books illuminate the value of regret. Regret doesn’t have to contaminate experience. It can inspire you to make choices that are different from the ones you made before. When Andrea tells you this, you remember an ex-boyfriend who had a tattoo—well, many tattoos—but this particular tattoo was on his wrist: *KNOW REGRETS*. As Packard tells you about his first divorce, and the ways in which it shaped his thinking about decisions, you think, of course, about your own divorce. In real life, most choices are impossible to unmake. But you keep having to make new ones. Maybe that’s where *KNOW REGRETS* comes into play. Regret can’t change the past, but it can change the future. Life isn’t a Choose Your Own Adventure, but these books prepared you to feel exhilarated and terrified by all the choices you would someday make. They gave you a way to understand that no ending is really an ending. After every ending, you have to figure out what to do next. ♦

**By Bijan Stephen**

**By Leslie Jamison**

**By Laura Miller**

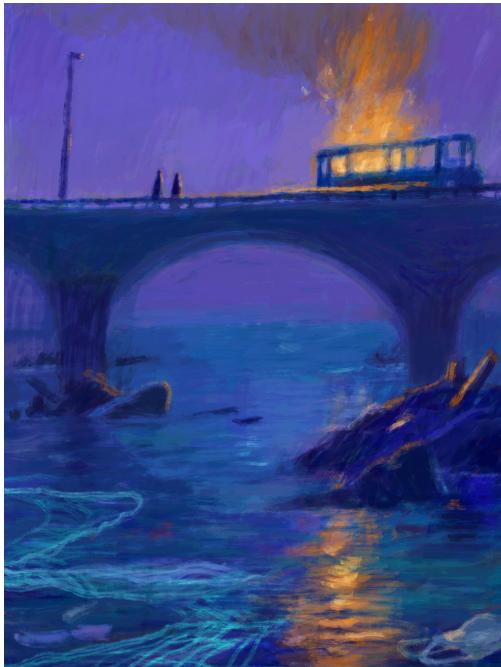
**By Danielle Dutton**

# Fiction

- “The Secret Source”

# The Secret Source

By [Ben Okri](#)



*Audio:* Ben Okri reads.

One morning, Fisher discovered that something had been done to the water. For many years, there had been people who said that something was different about the water, but no one had really believed them. Their claims were seen as just the latest wild rumors emerging from the confused state of the country.

Slowly, the city had been sinking. Its shores were overrun by mice. The foundations of churches were crowded with rats. They could be seen emerging from the graves in broad daylight. Towers had fallen. The streets were potholed and broken. Buses were parked at roadsides. Some of them had been flipped on their sides, and many of them were burnt-out shells.

During the previous few days, the voices on the radio had been fading away. A sense of exhaustion oozed through the bland tones of the announcers. The government carried on as if nothing unusual were happening, but the Prime Minister spoke in Parliament of “the enemies within.” This sinister phrase ignited a blaze among the populace. People

began to stare at one another in search of signs of this enemy within. Those who looked different naturally qualified more easily for this epithet. There were random attacks in the streets, and the homes of those who seemed to qualify as enemies within were set on fire. Then vigilante gangs rose up in neighborhoods. The police seemed powerless to do anything; poor government funding had decimated their ranks, and public trust in their role had eroded irredeemably.

### Ben Okri on the ambiguity of reality.

Workers went on strike to protest the high cost of water. It seemed to have gone up dramatically overnight. No one quite knew why this had happened. For a long time now, the nation had been dumping sewage into its waterways. People who went swimming caught strange diseases. And, because the cost of water had gone up, all the other costs went up, too. The truth was that there was a worldwide water shortage. Nations that controlled the world's rivers saw their economic potential. The oceans had become so polluted that the fish caught there poisoned those who ate them. To make things worse, there had been little rain, and even polluted water was in short supply.

What was previously an ordinary commodity, a thing that people regularly wasted in baths and in decorative fountains in the squares, was now rationed to the point where it was as expensive as gold.

Every household was allowed only fifteen minutes of water a day. The taps ran for that length of time and then stopped. Squabbles and fights over the use of water were common. People were mugged not for their mobile phones but for their bottles of water. In most households, people learned to compress their bodily needs to an extraordinary degree of efficiency. They showered in less than a minute. They cleaned their teeth with a tablespoon of water. Where previously cooking had involved much pouring out of water and juices, now every drop was reused with remarkable creativity.

But it seemed to Fisher, who shared a flat on the edge of a council estate with a group of school friends, that people were changing. Fisher lived there with Venus, his girlfriend. She was a carer. Unlike most of his flatmates, he didn't have a steady job. He did freelance graphic design and

reporting. He spent the rest of his time observing, and he'd noticed that the people around him had become docile, amenable to all suggestions from the government. Even radical journalists seemed to be unusually sympathetic to the most extreme government notions. The opposition parties did not oppose anything. The unions capitulated to conditions that the companies they worked for hadn't even demanded. Firebrand activists and comedians began spewing sentimental statements of alarming conservatism. In the midst of all this, the Prime Minister was often seen smiling. In a recent statement he had said, "It seems we are becoming a nation with a remarkable convergence of views. Dissent has all but disappeared."

No one challenged the complacency of that statement.

Fisher was in his room, thinking about the strangeness of these occurrences. He was holding his last glass of water for the day. He had been unconsciously looking into the water as he thought. In that state where the mind wanders but the eye is focussed, he noticed that there was something odd about the water in his glass. It was like water, but at the same time had a viscid quality to it. What's more, it caught the light in a faintly troubling way. He studied the water closely. Then he saw it.

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

[Listen to Ben Okri read "The Secret Source."](#)

"It's the water!" he said. "They've done something to the water."

He hurried out of his room to find Venus. She was in the kitchen, watching the last dribbles of water fall from the tap.

"It's the water!" he cried. "They've made it rare, but they've also made it strange."

Under a magnifying glass, they could see curious striations in the liquid. The surface had a quality that looked as if it could be cut. A drop of the water revealed a world. It was with some horror that they drew back from looking. It occurred to them that the water wasn't really water. It was some kind of simulacrum, virtually indistinguishable from normal water. When

they rubbed it between their fingers, the liquid had a certain slipperiness. There was something altogether too finished, too real about it.

Later that evening, Fisher and Venus gathered with their flatmates to discuss what should be done about their discovery. They agreed that they should consult an expert and have the water tested, but realized that they could not trust any such expert, who might turn them in. They racked their brains but couldn't think of anyone they knew who could carry out a thorough analysis without drawing the attention of the authorities. Their discussion made clear a number of things. They could no longer trust the water they had been drinking. They saw an immediate correlation between the change in the behavior of the populace and the change in the water. They did not know when the water had been changed. But they knew that it had been this way for some time, because when they looked back they understood that they had all become more passive and less inclined to question things.

"There are two things we need to do," Fisher said.

"Get the water analyzed," Venus said.

"And stop drinking it," one of the flatmates said.

"That means it's crucial for us to find water that hasn't been corrupted," Fisher said.

"How will we do that?"

"I don't know. We need water to live. Without it, we will surely die. The question is whether we go on drinking this water that is affecting us in some way that we don't know about, perhaps turning us into morons, or whether we can find water that's untouched, that's pure."

They talked deep into the night. At first they thought they could somehow carry on normally. Then they realized that their discovery had marked a turning point in their lives. They had to do something. They decided that they would live off the water in fruit. They would wash the fruit with tap water, but they would not drink it. They realized that they had a limited

number of days before they would begin to suffer the ill effects of not drinking enough water. Some of the friends would take on the task of getting the water analyzed. The others would try to find clean water. They drew lots. The task of finding water fell to Fisher and Venus. They went to sleep that night exhausted but clear in their minds for the first time in months.

In the morning, they dispersed. The agreement was that they would converge back at the flat in a week. If anything happened, they would abort the meeting. If one or more of them were killed, the others would have to make their own way and try to convey their findings to the rest of society, provided there was anyone left to listen.

Those who were meant to have the water analyzed set out first. They headed for the university. They kept in touch with Fisher and Venus through coded texts on their mobile phones. It all went smoothly until they met a member of the chemistry faculty who agreed to perform tests. The tests were being carried out, and findings were about to come in, when the coded messages ceased. And all went silent.

By late in the morning, Fisher and Venus understood that they had to begin their quest and that their flat might not be safe anymore. They took some essentials and travelled light. They had no idea where to go. They went to visit friends on the rich side of town. The friends found their suspicions ridiculous. From a top-floor window, Fisher spotted police approaching the house. He alerted Venus and they escaped by a back door, making their way through gardens and over fences. They left town. They visited relatives and soon realized that they were somehow expected wherever they turned up. So they avoided all the people they knew and decided instead to plunge below the surface of society. They changed their clothes and altered their appearance and disappeared.

They lived rough with drug dealers and the homeless. They felt safe with the homeless. But water was still a problem. There was a drought in the city. The great river flowed stodgily. Plastic bags and mattresses and garbage and fishing nets in which large squidlike creatures were entangled could be seen floating on the river, along with odd-looking substances of an indeterminate color. At night, in the streets, people sold water at high

prices. They had barrels and buckets and bottles of water. They wore masks because they did not want to be recognized by the many cameras that gazed at them from street lamps and the edges of buildings. People came furtively out of their houses or their cars to buy water and then ran back to anonymity again. Fisher bought a bottle of water, but one look showed that it was not fit to drink. The water was striated with wavy lines. Tiny globular dots could be seen with a magnifying glass.

Fisher and Venus drifted with the hordes of the homeless. Among them were some who had chosen to be homeless, who lived off the grid to escape the traps of modern life. They lived in tents in fields at night, or along the canals. The sanest of them drank no water, and their eyes shone with strange defiance; they spoke little and were suspicious of everyone. It was from them that Fisher learned that there were people who were making alternative water. They had their own mobile chemical operations and they distilled water from rainfall. Fisher sought out these distillers, searching through a warren of dim houses on the edge of the city. They were a cautious lot, for they had several times been infiltrated by the government and had lost many colleagues. They changed their accommodations nightly. Fisher and Venus came with recommendations and passed the lie-detector tests, but although the water they were processing appeared to be natural rainfall, it was nonetheless contaminated. This discovery was very upsetting to the secretive water distillers. They threw Fisher and Venus out, accusing them of being saboteurs.

“We’re not saboteurs,” Venus cried. “We’re just trying to find the truth, like you, that’s all. But even nature has been contaminated.”

The water distillers were no longer listening. They had spirited themselves away to another secret location. Fisher and Venus had no choice but to return to the city. On the way, Fisher noticed a small headline on a page of newspaper that had been discarded in the street. For a long time now, his generation had ceased reading the newspapers or trusting them, as they were almost all owned by corporations that had their own secret agendas. Even the papers that were independent were edited and run by people who had gone to élite schools and universities, where the education had long been corrupted by the prevailing orthodoxies. There was only so much truth

those papers could tell, and, besides, they secretly took their instructions from the government, which insisted that the nation was in a state of siege. The news that Fisher and his friends relied on came from underground sources, whispers, urban legends, things passed on by people they could trust, who were not paid and had no personal or political agendas. Nonetheless, the headline—“*the water wars*”—caught Fisher’s eye.

“Look at this!” he said.

They read it together. There was only half of the article left. The other half had been torn off and blown away by the wind.

“Now fully half the world is engaged in water wars,” it read. “The other half has no water. Cities around the world are perishing of thirst. Where has all the water g—”

There was nothing else.

“So it’s global,” Venus said.

“Maybe. I wouldn’t trust that fragment.”

They sat by the roadside. They were weary. They hadn’t drunk water in four days. After a short rest, they continued walking.

Fisher and Venus sought out healers. But the healers they found had venal eyes. One of them made insinuations to Venus. Another claimed to have the best water in the world, but when she brought it out Venus nearly fainted at its color. It was pitch-black. It gleamed like mercury, and it tasted like water. It was the strangest thing they’d ever seen.

“I think I’m beginning to hallucinate,” Venus said. “What was that?”

They were back out in the street. Venus had lost her mobile phone. She was sure the last healer they’d gone to see had stolen it. They thought, after that, that they should maybe try scientists again. They had had enough of unreason. They hitched a ride to Venus’s old university and sought out her former chemistry lecturer. They found him in his office. He had only a few

tufts of hair on his head but had copious hair in his nostrils and on the back of his neck. He looked old and a bit tired, and there was no animation in his eyes when he saw Venus.

“I remember you,” he said. “It’s Venus, isn’t it? You were the prettiest girl in the whole university, did you know that? We all considered it a special privilege to have you in our classes. What can I do for you?”

After the initial discomfiture produced by his remark, they told him why they were there. He listened to them with his eyes shut. When they finished, he sighed.

“It seems,” he said, “that I failed to convey to you the most fundamental tenet of science. And that is rationality. You must not deviate from the facts. Your emotions are not important in science. Nor are your political views. Now, why would anyone wish to tamper with the water? If it is, as you say, to create in the populace a certain uniformity of thought, how could this be achieved? I really don’t see how drinking water can alter your politics or temper your passions.”

“But there are drugs designed to tranquillize. We use them for schizophrenia, manic depression. . . .”

“Are you suggesting that the government . . . That is too absurd. It is unscientific.”

“What about the analysis of the water, the floating dots?”

“Water has never been pure. For thousands of years we have managed with impure water. It is only in the last hundred years that we have had the technology to refine it. Refining is not contaminating. Where did you get that idea?”

Venus and Fisher listened to him with controlled astonishment. It was as though he were addressing not them but their entire generation. He had some kind of grudge and they were bearing the brunt of it. As he spoke, he got up and fetched a large glass of water he kept near the tap. He drank it while watching them.

“I drink this water all the time and there has never been anything wrong with my mental processes,” he said. “In fact, they get sharper every day. This year alone, I have made five new discoveries that prove that most of the assertions of the environmental movement are claptrap. There is no global warming. The forests of the Earth are doing just fine. There is absolutely no proof of a diminishment of any of the species. I keep being nominated for the Nobel Prize, so there.” Then he drank what was left in the glass.

They thanked him for his time and hurried out. They were just leaving the campus when a police van arrived. They plunged back into the substrata of the city. In their wanderings, they met people who claimed never to have drunk tap water in their lives. Some pointed to the youthfulness of their skin as proof. One of them was a Rastafarian who said he was a hundred years old and had lived so long because he had avoided all the corruptions of the system.

“I see what dem do to the water,” he said.

Upon further questioning, it turned out that he had not really witnessed anything. He was referring to some second sight. Also, he was fuzzy about his age. Their calculations put it at about eighty. But this was still impressive, given his evident vigor.

They met people who had heard rumors of pure water. They were sent to many places, to many people. They met a seer, a wise woman, a psychic, a doctor, a philosopher. But none of them had any notion of where the pure water could be found.

“To question the water you drink,” the philosopher said, “is to question the very foundation of the society you live in. It is like questioning the air you breathe.”

“But some do exactly that,” Venus said.

“It is not wise to doubt your reality,” the philosopher said. “Because there is no other.”

“Is that true?” Fisher asked.

“I fear,” the philosopher said, not hearing him, “that you have left yourselves out on a limb. You’ve cut the ground from beneath you. It is an unsustainable philosophical position. The water is pure and has always been pure. The next thing you’ll doubt is life itself, which is a very sure way to exit it.”

With that the philosopher dismissed them and took a sip from his tall, thin glass of water.

They had now gone seven days without drinking water, surviving on only the liquid from fruit. They felt as if their brains were shrinking. Even bottled water that supposedly came from pristine streams and mountain lakes had the same peculiar striations, the same barely visible whorls. This anomalous condition of water was universal. Fisher claimed that he was now officially hallucinating. He saw pools of pristine water in the road. Venus saw fountains spouting out of concrete. They became so parched that they finally agreed that their course of action had been insane.

“You can’t go against the world,” Fisher said, hardly able to get his words out.

Almost fainting, they leaned against each other. They shut their eyes and succumbed to oblivion. As their minds faded, voices came to them from far away. Whether the voices were real or not they could not be sure. Then a child approached them.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“We were looking for good water we can drink,” Fisher said.

“But now we have given up. Such water does not exist,” Venus said.

“I know someone who has the best water in the world,” the boy said brightly.

“Who?”

“My grandfather.”

“Can you take us to him?”

“Yes, of course.”

The boy led them to an opening in the earth and down stone steps into darkness. They went down for a long time. Sometimes the steps became winding and they descended in a spiral. It was very hot. The child had no light.

“Is it safe down here?” Venus asked.

“Very.”

“Is it far to go?” Fisher asked.

“Very.”

They could not see the steps now, but they felt them. The walls were rough. They went down for what seemed like hours.

“Who is your grandfather?” Fisher asked.

“Few people know.”

“How did he come by the water?” Venus asked.

“It was always there.”

“But why didn’t he share it?”

“He did, but people didn’t want it. They wanted the one that’s killing them.”

Venus suddenly buckled. Fisher caught her. She was afraid and refused to go any farther.

“It wasn’t an accident that I found you,” the child said. “We heard that you were looking for this water. You are the only ones who have sought this

water in a long time. You would never have found it by yourselves.”

“Why not?”

“The water has to find you.”

Then the child gave Venus something to drink in the dark and she felt stronger.

“That’s the loveliest water I have tasted in my life,” she said.

They resumed their descent. It became increasingly hard for Fisher to breathe. He began to topple over, but Venus caught him and helped him to sit on a stone step. He was gasping for air, like a beached fish.

“I can’t go on,” he said. “Just leave me to die here.”

Then the child gave Fisher something to drink in the darkness, and he, too, felt stronger. The air became cool and reviving. He could vaguely make out the steps in the catacomb blackness. He noticed that Venus’s eyes were shining.

They continued to go down. They could no longer hear their footfalls or the echo of their breathing. They became aware that the boy was not with them anymore. There was only a faint white light ahead. Then they reached it.

There was a clearing. An old man was seated on a stone chair. Behind him, something shone with an unnatural light. This was what had lit up the dark.

“What is that?” they asked the old man.

“That,” he said, “is the last real water left in the world.” ♦

By Masha Gessen

By David Remnick

By Nicole Rose Whitaker

## **Here To There Dept.**

- [Around the World in Seven Years \(and One Rowboat\)](#)

# Around the World in Seven Years (and One Rowboat)

Ellen (Magellan) Falterman enjoys a farewell pig roast and sets off from the Trinity River, in East Texas, in a bid to become the first person to circumnavigate the globe in a rowboat.

By [Ben McGrath](#)



Ellen Falterman, who sometimes goes by Ellen Magellan, began rowing around the world the other day. She launched near her childhood home, underneath the Moss Hill Bridge in East Texas, on the Trinity River, which spills—slowly, this time of year—into an arm of Galveston Bay. She plans to follow the Gulf shoreline to Key West, at which point she will have to consult the authorities about the legality of a crossing to Havana. Cuba's landmass, she explained recently, would offer a helpful "windshield" from Caribbean easterlies as she departs for the Panama Canal, en route to the South Pacific. At the moment, the U.S. forbids private American vessels to enter Cuban waters. She is hoping that her journey sees not only good hurricane luck but also a change in policy by the Biden Administration. Barring that, she'll enact Plan B and head for Portugal. In any case, she

isn't counting on completing the circumnavigation—a first, by rowboat exclusively—before 2029.

Faltermann is twenty-seven, and already something of an eminence in adventure-seeking circles. She has busked near the Amazon, hitchhiked around Scotland, and ridden a tandem bike from England to Greece. She got her pilot's license before graduating from high school. In 2017, she kayaked the full length of the Missouri River, becoming, at twenty-two, the youngest person ever known to do so alone. A couple of years later, she retrofitted an old aluminum canoe with oars and a rowing sled and began descending the Mississippi, facing backward. This summer, she drove her pickup truck to a campground in South Dakota to attend what organizers called the largest gathering of thru paddlers in human history. "My people," she called them. They were nearly a hundred strong, representing twenty states, and many of them regarded Faltermann—who wears her brown hair in dreads and radiates restless energy—with slack jaws. "Rock star," one said as Faltermann bounded out of her truck and tied a hammock between one of her side mirrors and a tree. Eager to emphasize her commonality with the paddlers, Faltermann reminded them that source-to-sea voyages inevitably end in salt water. Didn't they all sometimes wonder, What if I keep going? She joined another dignitary known as Tow Head Steve in an a-cappella rendition of "Northwest Passage," the Stan Rogers folk song, and invited everyone to a farewell pig roast in Texas, to meet Evelyn Mae, her floating home for the next half decade.

An oceangoing rowboat is nothing like a scull or a canoe. It's capable of self-righting in the event of a capsize, for one thing, and looks like a space shuttle's life raft, with fore and aft cabins, for sleeping and for storing desalination equipment, and even two USB ports. Faltermann bought hers "gently used," as she puts it, from a company in England. (She named it for her maternal grandmother, who was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer while Faltermann was on the Mississippi.) Its previous owners, after a few hundred miles, apparently thought better of their attempt to cross the Atlantic. Might she end up doing the same? At her parents' home in Texas, shortly before her departure, Faltermann answered a phone call from an admirer who was stranded in New York, unable to make the pig roast. "It's easy to overthink an expedition like this," she said, stepping out from underneath a tin roof, in

search of better reception. “I’m not working with Guinness. I’m free to do whatever the fuck I want.” She added, “Human-powered circumnavigations have been done. Basically, people row across an ocean, and then when they get to a landmass they’ll get on a bicycle and have their boat shipped to the other side. So it’s boat, bike, boat, bike, etc., which just seemed like a logistical nightmare to me.”

Falterman’s father, a former Air Force pilot, approached her as she talked. “Go away,” she said, then quickly reconsidered, shouting, “Love you!” She admitted that as the launch neared she had grown “numb” from so many competing emotions. She had timed it to coincide with the anniversary of her brother Patrick’s death in a flying accident, in 2016. Patrick was her mentor in the art of vagabonding. “He hitchhiked for six years in South America,” she said. “My parents lived with that and dealt with that emotionally for years and years. So it’s not like I’m the first loose spark plug.”

She went on, “My mom said, ‘Why can’t you just row across one ocean? Why do you have to row across all of them?’ I’m, like, ‘Mom, if it’s worth doing, it’s worth overdoing.’” She has done the math—if she succeeds, and is also fortunate enough to achieve an average life span, this mission will have encompassed slightly less than ten per cent of her time on earth. No rush. “There may be times when I want to go off hiking on this mountain in Tahiti for three weeks,” she said. “Fuck yeah!” ♦

By Janet Malcolm

By Philip Gourevitch

By Patrick Radden Keefe

By Robert A. Caro

## **Letter from the U.K.**

- [Britain Wakes Up Without Queen Elizabeth II](#)

By [Rebecca Mead](#)

After a long, arid summer in Britain, during which the green expanses of London's Royal Parks became bleached and desiccated, the first week of September brought a sudden change in the season, with the onset of heavy downpours by day, and nights rent by thunderstorms. On the morning after the Queen died, the pavement of Constitution Hill, the road that leads from Hyde Park Corner to Buckingham Palace, was smeared with sodden leaf-fall, trampled to a rusty mush by the crowds who lined up to lay bouquets at the wrought-iron gates beneath the Union Jack fluttering at half-staff. The scent of autumn was newly in the air—a palpable shift of pressure, a sense of something broken open after a long season of waiting.

All the previous afternoon it had been clear what was coming, as soon as a BBC news presenter appeared onscreen shortly after lunchtime with the news that doctors tending to the Queen at Balmoral Castle, her summer home in Scotland, were concerned for her condition. In a short while, it was reported that members of the Royal Family were making their way to be at her bedside, with television cameras trained upon the misty runway of Aberdeen airport. Huw Edwards, the presenter of the BBC's flagship news program, took to the airwaves dressed in a dark suit and a black tie, a look that a responsible newsman doesn't adopt lightly. When, just after six-thirty, Edwards sombrely relayed a statement from Buckingham Palace announcing that the Queen had died peacefully that afternoon, the shock lay not so much in that long-anticipated bulletin but in the titular formulation that followed in the next breath: "The King and the Queen Consort will remain at Balmoral this evening and will return to London tomorrow." Seamlessly, the nation shifted from one reign to the next.

Thursday night, beneath black umbrellas defending against heavy showers, a steady stream of visitors had crossed the dark pathways of Green Park to the gates of the Palace, almost in silence. By Friday morning, the clouds were lighter, and the crowds of onlookers in Central London denser. The queue on Constitution Hill moved briskly. Visitors watched the passage of gleaming black horses and mounted soldiers from the Household Cavalry. Stationed outside the palace were their martial colleagues: members of what was until Thursday the Queen's Guard, and has now become the King's Guard. Overnight, the nation's nomenclature has shifted. Britons are now

paying taxes to HMRC, His Majesty's Revenue and Customs. At Westminster, His Majesty's Government is headed by a Prime Minister, Liz Truss, whom the Queen had appointed only two days before her death.



*Two mourners fend off the rain with umbrellas outside Buckingham Palace on Thursday.*

The mood outside the palace was sober but restrained. The Queen's death was a cause for sadness, but it was not a shock, nor was it a tragedy. (We should all hope for such an end to a long life well lived, surrounded by loved ones, at home and at peace and declining heroic measures.) Kathleen Murray, who waited in line with a single red rose in her hand, had come to London from Nottingham to watch a cricket match; when that was postponed, she decided to visit the Palace instead. "I've always said that I'm not a huge Royalist, but when I heard the news yesterday, I was actually really upset," she said. She explained that her eighty-seven-year-old mother, who is devoted to the Queen, has dementia; though Murray was sure her mother would understand that the Queen had died, she was not sure how long she would remember it. "She came to watch the Coronation when she was seventeen and spent the night on the street in the pouring rain," Murray said. "When the Queen's carriage passed, the Queen looked in the other direction. It wasn't the Queen's fault, but my mother was disappointed." A moment on the Mall some seventy years earlier had become a story passed down, like an inheritance, or a crown.

Some of the flowers bore messages: “There are no words strong enough to describe how loved you were. You were the consistent in all our lives.” “You were an incomparable beacon of duty, faith, steadfastness, humility, humanity, and British values.” Children who later would be far too young to remember the day the Queen died, or the day after the Queen died, were being ferried past the Palace by parents. Sleeping babies were parked for an instant by the gates and photographed under the tolerant, watchful eye of a policeman. “Where’s the tiger?” one preschooler asked, perched on the rim of his sleeping sibling’s stroller. “What tiger, my love?” his perplexed caregiver asked. “The Queen’s tiger,” he replied. Wherever it is, it’s the King’s tiger now.

John Miller, an actuary from Philadelphia who happened to be visiting London, was hovering at the guardrails before the Palace. Miller said he had planned to spend this day at the Palace watching the Changing of the Guard. Instead, he’d watched the visitors absorbing the larger change afoot. “It’s definitely interesting seeing so many people buying flowers for the Queen, to see thousands of bouquets lined up,” he said. Miller added, though, that he hadn’t seen anyone shedding tears. The exceptions—a weeping woman on bended knee, whose face was being frantically licked by a small dog with a Union Jack bandanna around its neck that yelped in poignant affection—were notable. This was a day of controlled grief, with a sense of the unsought inevitable.

Near the entrance to Green Park, a pathway was lined with an encampment of the world’s news media, stationed beneath rainproof gazebos. Between the tents and the Palace, flower beds had been planted with crimson geraniums, purple salvia, and variegated shrubs—blooming as if the summer’s drought had never happened. A team of gardeners from the Royal Parks were weeding a narrow border between the lawn and the railing. There would not be time before the funeral to plant anything new there, one tattooed, suntanned gardener explained, though if it were up to him, he would like to seed it with wildflowers. Another gardener paused from his labors to say it felt good to be doing something positive on the occasion of the Queen’s demise—that it felt like being part of history. He gestured at the strip of freshly exposed soil beneath his feet: “It’s life, isn’t it?” he said. The lawn had been raked free of dead leaves, a pile of which had been

deposited in a garden-waste bag labelled “Tudor Environmental.” In the damp, muted air, the garden was pristine, at least until the next rain came. ♦

By Rebecca Mead

By Isaac Chotiner

By The New Yorker

By

# **Personal History**

- [My Literary Education with Elizabeth Hardwick](#)

By [Darryl Pinckney](#)

It was June, 1981. Elizabeth Hardwick was in Castine, the small town in Maine where she'd spent her summers for more than twenty years, since before her daughter, Harriet, was born. Even after Robert Lowell, her husband, left her, in 1970, she kept going.

The flight from New York City to Bangor took only an hour; the rental car to Castine added another. "The drive is very nostalgia-creating," she told me. When she arrived, she'd go grocery shopping, check in on the local couple who looked after the house for her, and be settled in by the time her old friend Mary McCarthy phoned. Mary and her husband had been coming to Castine almost as long as Elizabeth had. Mary lived on Main Street, but Elizabeth had remodelled a house on a bluff overlooking the water.

She wrote a great deal when she was in Maine, and she'd call me in New York to talk about her work. Those calls, her confidence, were an honor and a joy. She always came back to the city with something. In September, 1978, a year after Lowell died, she had returned with a blue box that contained the manuscript of her novel "Sleepless Nights."

I had been Elizabeth's student several years before, and then a sort of secretary. Once a week while she was out of town, I'd let myself into her West Sixty-seventh Street apartment, sift through her mail, and send along the important items. I'd glance at her long red velvet sofa, and know that I couldn't sit there comfortably without her "holding forth," as she liked to say.

One day that summer, she was driving from Bucksport with groceries and booze when a deer appeared in the road. She swerved and lost control of the car. Apparently, she jammed her foot on the accelerator and there she was—spinning in the road. She crashed into a tree.

"I saw this tree and thought, Good, it's over," she said. "Poor Harriet will have to come get my bones."

The car flipped onto its side, but, miraculously, she came away without a scratch, just a sore arm from trying to wriggle out and hail a passing driver. It took her a while to get herself together—she told me she called Harriet in

hysterics—but in the end she even recovered her groceries. Mary and her husband took her to pick up a new car. The wreck was stored in the same shop, and she was surprised by its condition: just a few dents. She thought she had totalled it. She liked to repeat stories of other people's odd accidents, stories that ended with someone saying, "I totalled it." She drove off that day with a new Buick.

She got sick that summer—a bug she couldn't kick—but soon she was working again. She called her latest piece "Back Issues." It came from her idea that one's life, one's autobiography, is nothing other than what one has read. "The Back Issues pile up in front of and behind experience, wedging the sandwich of real life in between," she would write in that story. "Pages are existence and the eye never stops on its lookout for the worm, the seed, the fish beneath the water, the next meal."

She hadn't been in the mood for Castine social life that summer. Those days, she did little but read: "I start 'War and Peace' in the morning and I'm finished by five o'clock." She'd enjoyed one evening alone with Mary, when they had started talking about Jane Eyre. "Mary says she doesn't believe her," she told me. "Neither do I."

Then she sprained her thumb. Fortunately, it was the thumb of her left hand, but she couldn't type. The summer seemed like a cascade of bad luck. "I feel I've turned into some hideous hypochondriac," she said on the phone. "Before the thumb, it was the virus. Before the virus, it was the accident."

That deer.

In the autumn of 1973, I'd applied late to get into Professor Hardwick's creative-writing class at Barnard. She asked me what I was reading, and I, a Black student from Columbia, rattled off a couple of Sylvia Plath poems: "Blacklakeblackboattwoblackcutpaperpeople." I was in.

That afternoon, I walked with her to the subway at 116th Street and Broadway. Professor Hardwick was fresh and put together. Her soft appearance made the tough things she said even funnier. She was on the job, in a short black leather coat and a green scarf, carrying a stiff leather satchel with short handles, which was just wide enough for a small stack of

student manuscripts. She rocked gently from side to side when she walked. I hadn't yet seen her bound up from a chair and tell an astonished table of graduate students who'd just agreed among themselves that poetry was everywhere, "I'm sure you're very nice, but I can't bear that kind of talk."

She told our class that there were really only two reasons to write: desperation or revenge. She told us that if we couldn't take rejection, if we couldn't be told no, then we couldn't be writers. "I'd rather shoot myself than read that again," she often said. The fact that writing could not be taught was clear from the way she shrugged and lifted her eyes after this or that student effort. "I don't know why it is we can read Dostoyevsky and then go back and write like idiots." But a passion for reading could be shared. She said that the only way to learn to write was to read. Week after week, she read something new to us: Pasternak, Rilke, Baudelaire, Gogol.

At my first student-teacher conference with her that semester, in dingy Barnard Hall, I brought up "Writing a Novel," the opening chapter of a work in progress which she had recently published in the tenth-anniversary issue of *The New York Review of Books*. I'd committed passages of it to memory. She starts by writing about the difficulty of starting a novel. I quoted the first-person narrator, who is working on a letter, but begins by addressing the reader:

Think of yourself as if you were in Apollinaire's poem:  
*Here you are in Marseilles, surrounded by watermelons,*  
*Here you are in Coblenz at the Hotel du*  
*Géant.*  
*Here you are in Rome under a Japanese medlar tree.*  
*Here you are in Amsterdam . . .*

Dearest M: Here I am in Boston, on Marlborough Street, number 239. I am looking out on a snow storm. It fell like a great armistice, bringing all struggles to an end.

It is a beautiful moment. Professor Hardwick didn't like hearing herself quoted, but she couldn't help remembering the pleasure of solving a technical problem. "I found it and I knew it would work," she told me. "Nothing is worse than a transition."

And then, without thinking, I was talking about another letter of hers, this one quoted in a poem by Robert Lowell:

*You can't carry your talent with you like a suitcase.  
Don't you dare mail us the love your life denies.*

I stopped talking. She reached for her purse. I was saying something as I got up, and she, speaking into a tissue, was telling me to stay. I was sorry. So very sorry. To this day, I do not know how I could have done that. Her tears had appeared and then were gone. "I didn't write that," she said. "I don't think that's so good."

What I trust of my memory of that meeting stops here. She never held my impertinence against me, my blunder about Lowell's book of poems "The Dolphin," which had been published that summer to considerable controversy. I was unaware of what a trial it had been for her. Lowell had taken the letters that Hardwick wrote to him as their marriage was falling apart and revised them, reinvented them in his own sonnets. The fate of those letters would gnaw at her through the many years in which I knew her; she would never get them back, never get to see what she had really written.

I'd become Professor Hardwick's student when I got into her class, but that afternoon I signed up for the journey. I understood that I would have to learn to listen in a whole new way. It was an education of my sympathies. You cannot learn unless you fall in love with the source of learning, Alfred North Whitehead wrote. His was one of the classic volumes that I would find on the shelves in the stylish old apartment on West Sixty-seventh Street where Professor Hardwick had learned to live without Lowell.

In the early spring, I went alone to the apartment, summoned to discuss a manuscript of poems that I had given Professor Hardwick to read. She lived in a prewar building, just off Central Park, with a neo-Gothic embellishment of spires. When you stepped across the threshold of her apartment, you entered a two-story room, an atelier converted into the living room. An enormous segmented window that almost reached the ceiling took up the central wall, admitting the artist's light. There were soaring bookshelves and the red sofa. The living room was imposing, but

the other rooms were modest, the dining room dark with Lowell's mother's old furniture, the kitchen packed with cabinets and a little round table.



Cartoon by Maddie Dai

"It's like a stage set. There's nothing else," she once said of the living room. I always found her there, behind a cluttered library table with the white bust of a Greek youth, which Lowell had mysteriously brought home one day.

I was late for our appointment. Professor Hardwick wore her usual necklace of large amber pieces, which she toyed with when she talked, until her fist came down into one of the cushions. She went stanza by stanza. She scolded, winced, deplored.

She said, among other things, "You're the worst poet I've ever read. You mustn't write poetry anymore."

But she let me stay. Soon dinner on Sunday became our regular appointment, and my mother stopped phoning her to thank her for feeding me.

A year later, with commencement just weeks away, I was in love with a leftist jock who didn't know it and in denial about how far behind I was in the physics class I needed to pass in order to graduate. None of it mattered.

Saigon had fallen and I was in Professor Hardwick's living room. The woman who would show me that a life of writing was possible got up to see to something in the kitchen and said she didn't need help.

A poem I had sold to a national magazine three years earlier had finally appeared in print, an imitation of Mari Evans, a militant but reserved Black poet back in Indianapolis. My father and mother called from Indiana to congratulate me. I've always said that I was lucky, that my father and mother supported my dream of becoming a writer, but I recently found my damaged journals, their faded letters, which say that they were upset when I announced my decision not to take the L.S.A.T., as if I could have.

It was Professor Hardwick whom I could talk to. I could tell her that Alyosha's speech to the young men at the end of "The Brothers Karamazov" made me want to run through the streets as though the world had changed. I held back that kind of language around my parents. I don't know why. Maybe it was an extension of not being out to them.

"Making a living is nothing," Hardwick wrote in her essay "Grub Street: New York," in the first issue of *The New York Review of Books*. "The great difficulty is making a point, making a difference—with words."

The first time I had an issue of *The New York Review of Books* in my hands, I didn't know what it was. This was 1971, and a high-school teacher wanted me to see James Baldwin's "An Open Letter to My Sister, Miss Angela Davis," reprinted in the *Review*: "For, if they take you in the morning, they will be coming for us that night."

My education in the *Review*—much like the publication itself—began in earnest in Elizabeth's apartment. "The first issue was laid out on that table," she told me one evening, gesturing toward the dining room. The saddle-tan 1911 edition of the Encyclopædia Britannica shared a tall bottom shelf with thick red volumes, bound copies of the first ten years of the *Review*. She made me start at the beginning, in 1963, with F. W. Dupee writing on James Baldwin. "Jimmy," she called him. "Typical honky," she said of herself.

Sunday after Sunday, I promised to return back issues, progressing slowly through the years. I hadn't known that Elizabeth went to Selma in 1965, and

I felt in her piece that she was trying to tell us how alienating the hymn singing and praying at the march were for her, and how strange it was to experience distance from a movement she supported. The next year, she went to Watts, after the official McCone Commission Report on the unrest was published. She read the report as yet another ineffectual, dishonest document reflecting the distance that bureaucratic language puts between white and Black.

I read the *Review* for an interview with Stravinsky, for the wickedness of Gore Vidal, for a plea to Auden's friends not to heed his wishes and destroy his letters. Even after I got to 1967 and read Andrew Kopkind's dismissal of Dr. King for being out of touch, I kept going in order to read Elizabeth Hardwick. "There are two types of criticism," she said. "The first word and the last word. But even Edmund Wilson was dumb once."

She said Mary McCarthy advised young writers to publish reviews because it gave them the validation of seeing their names in print. But I was horrified that, in Elizabeth's view, my immediate future as a writer was as a critic. We'd had a session concerning my short stories, not unlike the evening when my poetry was on trial. She said my stories seemed to be about one thing: yearning for some abstract boy. My Black family would be a more interesting subject. She didn't think I needed to burden myself with trying to be a gay novelist.

"Sex is comic and love is tragic," she told me. "Queers know this."

She said that I didn't yet have the experience for what I was writing about, and that the writing itself was immature, because I was imitating her, which, she could assure me, was a dead end.

"Better stay away from gay lit, honey."

We'd been talking about a secondhand edition of George Sand's journal that I'd found, and I told her I couldn't imagine writing twenty pages a day, out of necessity, as Sand had. "I swear it's almost a bodily process," Elizabeth said. "You wonder how you wrote that today and why you couldn't last Monday." I remember her telling me that to be able to make a life around

reading was such good fortune it was almost criminal. She expected me to know more than I did.

When I saw her again, she was working, as usual, telling me that writing was often a matter of plodding along. She talked about the joy of revision; she talked about the pain of revision, too, and said that anyone who couldn't bring himself or herself to face it couldn't be a real writer. "My first drafts always read as if they had been written by a chicken," she said. You cannot write by committee, she would say. Writers must be free to make their own mistakes. But it was much easier to tell someone else what was wrong with what he or she was doing than it was to see these things for yourself.

She had a way of talking to young writers that assumed we understood what was involved in the production of something—anything. Part of what made us believe that the writing life was possible for us, too, was that she took our anxieties seriously. But all problems about writing had one solution: you had to, you said you would, it was the contract you made with yourself, it was your life.

It moves me to think of her sitting on the red sofa, surrounded by books on Byron. Even the grind of construction noise did not drown out her own music when she sat down at the typewriter. She said that while you're working on one thing you're so agitated by six other things that you don't feel you're getting anywhere at all. She had no dryer. We walked by her laundry, hung by the cleaning lady on a small wooden rack on the way to the kitchen. "Professor? I'm no more a professor than I am an M.D.," she laughed.

One evening, when galley proofs of a piece on Byron's and Pasternak's wives and mistresses arrived from the *Review*, she sang the fourth paragraph, including the punctuation marks, in the style of a bel-canto aria. She was pleased to be done with it, but the feeling never lasted. "The problem with finishing anything is that you then just have to do it again," she once said. And so she would return to work. Watching her disappear into her world of great books, I understood what was required: to write—the act, not just the idea of it—was the last thing you wanted to do. Before sitting down to the page, she often read Heine, just to open herself up to the possibilities of language. She didn't write a poetic prose, but she composed somewhat like

a poet; she could not move on to the next line until the one that would stand before it was O.K. She said it had to do with not knowing what she thought until she wrote it down.

The summer of 1979 was burning up, and I had a new job, as an editorial assistant at Harper & Row. My boss had a distinguished list of writers: poets, literary biographers, emerging novelists, cookbook authors who wrote about food from many cultures. I was late more often than not. I went out for long liquid lunches, and when I returned the rivulet of sweat down my spine instantly chilled in the office's air-conditioning. It was impossible to feel clean. Phoning, making appointments, listening to excuses, hassling over contracts—it all made walking through Central Park after work a chance to dream of getting lost.

I didn't know the Park well and was always at risk of getting turned around. I went down paths at top speed, as if on the lam, worried about the office, my desk at home, people I might have disappointed or offended, everything I'd not done, not read, not experienced, never would. The people on park benches who looked like they had their lives together might well have been secretly unhappy, but I couldn't really believe it. None of them, I was sure, were sinking into a hole as dark as mine. I fantasized about running downhill, letting everything get out of hand, bottoming out.

"I know," Elizabeth said. "It's very hard to like yourself."

"Sleepless Nights" had been a sensation, and she had tried to start something new right away. She called it "Ideas." "Everyone has political ideas these days," she said. She had several beginnings in progress, all in the third person. She wanted it to be as different from "Sleepless Nights" as she could make it. She often warned against not finishing things, letting fragments accumulate in a drawer. We learn from what we've done only when we finish it, she said. In the end, she decided to use the first person after all. "You can think with it," she said.

I had been lucky enough to get review assignments at newspapers and periodicals, almost always about books by Black writers. (James Baldwin described getting over his resentment about such assignments by realizing that he had been born with his subject matter.) At some point, Elizabeth

must have shown some of my work to the co-editors of the *Review*, because books began to arrive, with letters asking if I would like to take a look and see what could be done. In September, Baldwin's novel "Just Above My Head," which would turn out to be his last, came out. I remembered discovering Baldwin the essayist as an undergraduate. The memory went with autumn weather, with Salingeresque leaves blowing across the hatched brick paths of campus. On College Walk, I had stopped and leaned on a stone ledge to finish "Notes of a Native Son," in which Baldwin told of his escape from Harlem and from his father's bitterness as a journey out of Egypt. It was a moment that affirmed what reading was for and what writing could do. The campus had moved around me. The effects of that essay stayed with me. When I was assigned to write about the new novel for the *Review*, I knew that I would have far too much to say about him.

Elizabeth used to tell our class that nothing is casual, or light—everything undertaken is a challenge. She always phoned after she'd read a piece of mine, and she was always honest. My efforts in the *Review* particularly interested her, and she believed that writing about the history of Black American literature was an important education for me. She made a point of not consulting with the *Review*'s editors when she knew I'd handed in a draft to them. But, as I struggled to revise the Baldwin piece, she did what she hadn't before: she told me to let her see it.

I rewrote the draft with Elizabeth's help. We sat on the sofa, and she went line by line. She asked me again and again what I meant here, what I meant by this word, that notion. When I came up with a better way to say something or when I landed on what she considered a good line, she'd say, "Now you're writing." What Pound could do for poetry in his reading, correcting, and criticism, she could do for prose. My school days would never end.

"It's easy to admire what you can't do yourself," she once told me. "Think of yourself as the author. You must hit on the very thing that worries the author, what he thinks doesn't really work, but maybe it's all right, he can get by with it, So-and-So liked it, the thing about which he is very ambivalent but which he is unable to give up or revise." You have to learn

to do it for yourself, she said, to stay ahead of the reader, to protect yourself when you write.

I left my job in the spring of 1980, to write. When Elizabeth returned from Maine, she showed me the short story she'd written while she was there, "The Bookseller," about the owner of a small, narrow secondhand bookstore. He loves books, but he doesn't read them. Yet he takes them in somehow. He knows the first line of everything, the first page of everything. "The byways of life have captured him, even *captivated* his mind," she writes. It is a love for New York that she as a writer shares with her character, the flow of audiences after film and opera, "the palmist's street-front broom closet," "the Saturday-night rubbish." Even the deserted city was animated: "the sluggish waters at the curb stir under the tidal moon."

Some writers we know by voice, like singers. She was still hoping a novel would take shape from the ideas and characters she touched on in that story. But that autumn she felt the book wasn't moving in any convincing direction.

The coming election was a distraction. We watched the candidates' last television appearances, alternating between laughter and despair. She was trying to diet and not smoke and drink so much, forgoing bourbon and wine. She turned chicken, stirred broccoli. Reagan and Bush met in front of a fake fireplace. She noticed how much Reagan wanted to "share" with us. Carter was filmed in a Black church, with a children's choir singing "Nothing but blue skies do I see."

Angela Davis was running for Vice-President on the Communist Party ticket. Elizabeth was suspicious of Davis as an intellectual, because of the C.P., but admired her consistency through the years. She made sense, never harangued. Elizabeth was not the fan my family was of Barbara Jordan; maybe Jordan's speech patterns didn't have enough echo of plain-folk truth, by Elizabeth's standards. Jesse Jackson had been deemed an arsonist in the cellar for encouraging Black Americans to support the Republican Party in the previous midterm elections—to prove to Democrats that they couldn't count on the Black vote.

We got into it over that. Arguing about politics was always a bad idea with us. I'd whine that she wasn't listening, and she'd shriek that I was not making any sense, hitting the red cushion beside her in exasperation.

That night, she said she wouldn't want Harriet to marry a Black man, because of the problems the children would have. I said miscegenation didn't bother white America when Black women were not given a choice. She insisted that I was more of a racist than she was, because I liked only white boys. I might have let her put the dagger away, but then she said that white women with Black men were inferior Desdemona types and Black men with white women weren't serious.

No more Styron for her. In his first novel, a white girl jumps out of the window of a Harlem building. And she had never heard of Paule Marshall's huge island novel about an interracial couple's intellectual romance. What did she think Chester Himes was all about, if not interracial couples? And, by the way, Vivaldo in Baldwin's "Another Country" was the sexiest white man in Afro-American literature. At that, she waved an imaginary flag of surrender.

Reagan won. Elizabeth went to a conference in Los Angeles. I scavenged in the lining of my grandfather's time-thinned cashmere overcoat for spare change. She called me when she was back in New York, suddenly in the mood to warn me that I mustn't be too literary, that I must try to earn money. It was more than a matter of being practical; it was also about a way of looking at things and your relationship with words.

"Have a theme," she said. She cautioned me not to retreat from my point; if anything, I had to make it more strongly. "If you worry what people will think, then you can't write," she insisted. She was concerned that I was headed for deliberate obscurity and poverty.

That night, I took plates out of her dishwasher. She didn't mind loading it, but unloading it was terrible, something she just loathed to do. She made much of her physical ineptitude—a New Yorker who struggled with a trash bag in a sudden loss of common sense and awareness of the physical world. She followed me out as I turned off the lights. She said she understood why people went to graduate school.

This was a complete reversal. She'd always said graduate school was for dogs. She was still advocating as I put on my coat, which made me worry. Maybe she was saying that I was never going to grow as a writer. Maybe you either had it or you didn't. She rang for the elevator.

Broadway in the night smelled strongly of dog piss and fish. The freshness of the day had been used up. In the dark, I couldn't read the leaflets glued to the side of bus shelters, but I already knew what they said: "Liberal Upper West Side: Fight White Supremacy." Back at home, on Ninety-fifth Street, my radiators were whistling.

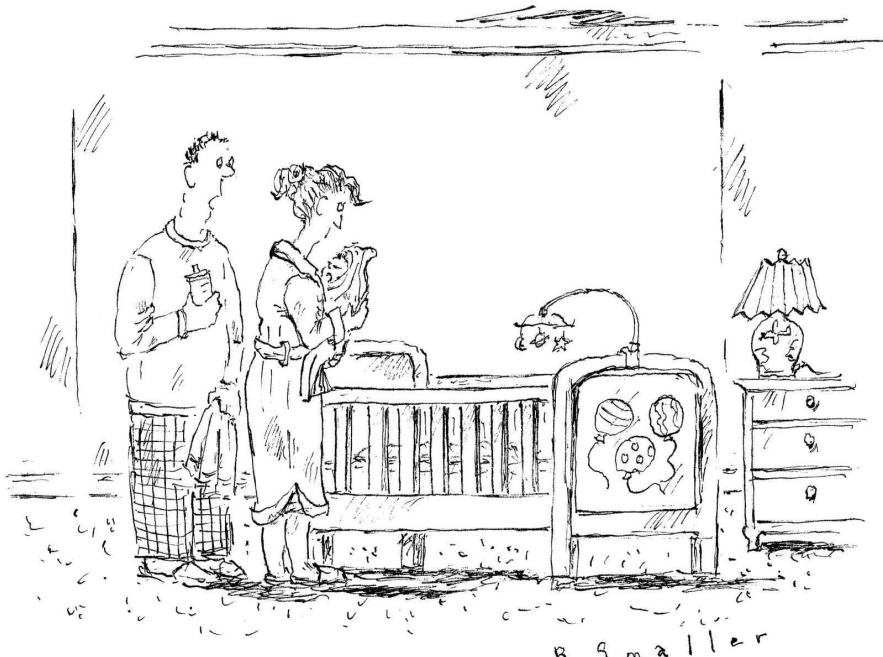
A few weeks later, Elizabeth and I went to see Balanchine's "Vienna Waltzes." There were audible gasps in the audience. The next day, I heard from a friend at Random House that an editor went into another editor's office to tell her what she had seen at the ballet: Lizzie Hardwick, this old white Southern woman, with a Black boy in his twenties. The editor had been tempted to take her aside and ask her, What did she think she was doing?

I should have kept my mouth shut, but the moral high ground, a mountain meadow of attention, beckoned. Elizabeth and I were not insulted in the same way. She threatened to make a phone call to the editor in question, but it was not difficult to get her to drop it. She confessed that she worried the doormen who didn't know us well might think we were having an affair. A white youth would have made her a predator; a Black youth announced a breakdown of identity.

She was a white woman of distinction and I the mugger on an episode of "Hill Street Blues"; she had position and I none. Yet the vulnerability was hers, not mine. What she said was Henry James's expression, "social death," had a real meaning for Elizabeth. She wasn't a radical girl anymore; she was a heroine.

"You think every old white lady is like me," she said.

No, that wasn't it. I was pretty sure there was no other writer like her.



"That's not his feed-me cry or his change-me cry—that's his existential-angst cry."  
Cartoon by Barbara Smaller

I remember a beautiful Saturday, clear, crisp, not too cold, when I walked across Central Park to return Elizabeth's books to the Society Library. The Park was crowded with families on bikes, white people on horseback, groups dancing on skates to disco, lovers embracing near the rowboats, the leaves crunching under my feet, the wind trying to run around.

When I got back to West Sixty-seventh Street, she was composing a letter to a former student whose new book was going to make a fortune: "paperback sale, Literary Guild, motion-picture sale, the works." She said that if you're writing a story, a narrative, you can write every day, book after book, a flow of scenes and dialogue and character. And, if one book is a best-seller, the others tend to be best-sellers as well.

"That's the way it goes, unless something awful happens." She reminded me that she'd put Mary McCarthy's "Ideas and the Novel" on the chair by the door for me to take home. "I think the worst thing that ever happened to you was meeting me," she said. We laughed.

"Back Issues" was published in the *Review* in December, 1981, half a year after Elizabeth's car accident. She'd been making changes to the story right up until the end, reading galleys late at night, trying to loosen the

construction, to get back a sense of freedom in the sketch. “It’s better than the way it was,” she told me one evening after a round of editing. She had looked at a draft and seen it anew. “I said, What are these prancing banalities?”

The issue arrived at my door on Ninety-fifth Street. I turned to her story right away:

It is summer now and yesterday I crashed into a tree in order to avoid a deer on a June morning so foggy the deer perhaps thought it was dusk. An unusual happening, a drama, terrible, a trauma.

I was phoning her before I’d finished it. When she said that she hoped to put it into a book, she made it sound like a collection of short stories, the deer not the last thing but a strand of something spun out.

On a Sunday soon after her story appeared, I arrived for our usual dinner. Elizabeth was in the living room. She gathered up the pages of a manuscript she was reading—a memoir by Eileen Simpson, John Berryman’s first wife. I was surprised that the publisher had sent it to her. I had heard there was a line in it that said Elizabeth laughed at Lowell when he was mad.

She said she couldn’t understand why Simpson wrote it. Four hundred pages. “What is her intention?” she wanted to know. With the whole gang—Berryman, Lowell, Jean Stafford, R. P. Blackmur, Randall Jarrell, Delmore Schwartz—it was the same thing over and over again: suicides, madness. The book wasn’t exactly mean, but she didn’t see the point of it. She was protective of those writers, and scathing about the distortions of biography. She knew what it was to be misrepresented.

The more Elizabeth thought about it, the more irritated she became. These were gifted souls, defenseless now. Simpson was sensationalizing them, exploiting them. Why not admit that Berryman was the only thing that had happened to her which she could think to write about?

“I’m on the warpath,” Elizabeth declared, seizing a cigarette. She said she was going to review it.

“Why bother?” I asked. She was already at work on a complicated piece about John Reed and Louise Bryant and the Russian Revolution.

“It’s my period, and I’m not going to let her get away with it.”

She said she would never try a portrait of those writers. She liked them too much, and felt they were better than what she had to offer them. I disagreed; I thought she could do them quite well.

“Maybe you’re right,” she said, turning aside praise in her usual way.

As I was leaving, she asked me where I was going. Not for the first time, she pulled a twenty-dollar bill from a drawer for cab fare. Not for the first time, I said, “I hate to take it. But night darkens the streets.”

“I hate to give it. For once, we’re even.”

She cracked up. I headed toward the door, thinking of how many times I had come upon her amid a pile of pages, someone’s work that hadn’t yet made it into the world. She could go through any manuscript with diagnostic wonder. I said she was like Nadia Boulanger, the French music teacher who influenced the composers and musicians of two generations.

The pause was immense. Air got sucked out of the room.

“Oh. That is such a put-down.”

She walked over to the red sofa, somewhat stooped, as if escaping a blow. I had no idea why the comparison wounded her, and I was alarmed.

“I am not a teacher,” she said. “I am a writer.”

She fixed her eyes on me. Their color deepened, like the blue gas flame on the stove being turned up. “There was no deer.” ♦

*This is drawn from “[Come Back in September: A Literary Education on West Sixty-seventh Street, Manhattan](#).”*

**By Lauren Markham**

**By David Sedaris**

**By Andrew Solomon**

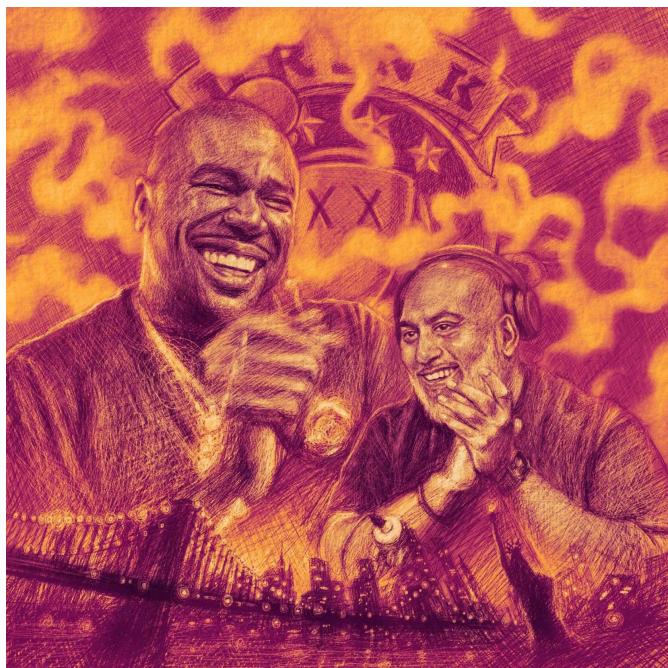
## **Podcast Dept.**

- [The Good Spirits of “Drink Champs”](#)

# The Good Spirits of “Drink Champs”

Using warmth, candor, and more than a little alcohol, the show creates some of the best interviews in hip-hop.

By [Hua Hsu](#)



In the course of a typical episode of “Drink Champs,” which can run two or three hours, a few things will happen. N.O.R.E., the bawdy Queens rapper turned podcaster, will slowly get drunk. He’ll tell his interviewees, most of them rappers and producers, how much he appreciates them—that he’s a fan as well as a peer—as he probes them about the minutiae of their careers. And his guests, who are often known for their steely, impassive façades, will break into an appreciative, almost goofy laugh. They will seem happy and free.

“Drink Champs” is one of the most popular music podcasts around, despite the episodes’ exorbitant length. Its success flows partly from its A-list guests, who are drawn from hip-hop history: Grandmaster Caz, Lil Wayne, Snoop Dogg. N.O.R.E. gets interviews that most people can’t. In November, Kanye West, amid intensifying rumors about his mental health, appeared on the show for more than three hours, talking about creativity,

the paparazzi, his family, and criminal-justice reform. N.O.R.E. pressed him on politics—his relationship with Donald Trump—but also gave him room to riff on dinosaurs, the beauty of humans (“We are God’s ultimate iPhone,” West said), and which of his twenty-four Grammys he’s peed on. N.O.R.E. has been releasing records since the nineties, and his guests tend to shed their personae in his presence. After DMX’s death, in 2021, fans turned to his buoyantly happy “Drink Champs” appearance, where he cracks jokes and reminisces about his childhood dog.

The show began in 2016, several years after N.O.R.E. and his co-host, DJ EFN, did a program on Sirius XM. EFN, a longtime Miami promoter, producer, and mixtape d.j., balances N.O.R.E.’s tipsy zeal with a calming energy and basic, context-setting questions. At its best, the show recalls the nineties and early-two-thousands heyday of radio, when hip-hop stars would head to the nearest station to air grievances or set the record straight, in the few minutes available. Today, in the era of Instagram Live and YouTube, the tendency is to go long, share secrets, and let one’s guard down—things that artists such as N.O.R.E. rarely had the chance to do.

N.O.R.E. is well suited to the meandering rhythms of a podcast. He naturally speaks in an off-kilter purr but grows more animated as an episode progresses. He senses discomfort and defuses it; the show’s tone is somewhere between “Fresh Air” and “*SMACK*,” the two-thousands DVD series that featured uncensored artist interviews. And he knows how to draw out a story, delighting as a guest wriggles and swerves through an anecdote. In one episode, the rapper Ghostface Killah leans into his words as he shares a story of transporting the Delfonics, the seventies soul group, to a studio session—and getting into a shoot-out on the way there. In another, the singer T-Pain describes the time he spilled Hennessy on Beyoncé. N.O.R.E., in disbelief, keeps repeating fragments back to him, stressing how wild the moment must have been. “I’m so fuckin’ awkward, bro,” T-Pain says, laughing.

Many of the most successful podcasts exist in a state of permanent nostalgia. The past is fun to talk about; there’s always a movie or an album turning some nice round number. But hip-hop has long had an uneasy relationship with history. It has endured as a globally vital form precisely

because it's so forward-looking, each generation rendered irrelevant by the next. Like Verzuz, the song-battle Webcast in which artists compete to see who has the best back catalogue, "Drink Champs" is the rare successful attempt to celebrate the genre's past without romanticizing it.

When N.O.R.E. began rapping under his original stage name, Noreaga, the industry was figuring out how to turn hyper-local tales of hustling and drug-dealing into the stuff of global stardom. There was a cocky sizzle to his voice, and his jagged delivery attested to the fact that he was raw, unpolished, grimy. "The War Report," the 1997 début he released as half of Capone-N-Noreaga, stands as one of the best albums of the decade. But it took him years to realize that other artists were embellishing their tales, not just narrating experience. "I didn't know how to exaggerate," he tells the imposing Philadelphia rapper Beanie Sigel in one episode. Often, the most affecting material in "Drink Champs" involves N.O.R.E. and his guests recalling long-forgotten rivalries, brushes with danger. They are veterans of conflict, thankful to have survived.

The Sigel episode is particularly moving. Sigel's voice is raspy and strained, the result of a 2014 shooting that led to lung damage. He's had a tumultuous career—multiple prison sentences, a patchy relationship with Jay-Z, who once vouched for his character in court—and N.O.R.E. asks him difficult questions with a gentle, playful curiosity. "I'm a changed man," Sigel says with a chuckle, as N.O.R.E. tries to pour him a shot of Japanese whiskey. Sigel enlists his cousin to drink on his behalf, and emanates a serenity that evaded him during his years as a bullying, street-loyal rapper. "I'm the perfect example of when keeping it real go wrong," he says.

The episode feels cautionary but never moralistic. In its most mundane, digressive moments, "Drink Champs" becomes almost journalistic—an oral history of how the industry used to work, and of how young Black artists tried to figure things out as they went along. In 2017, N.O.R.E. hosted an interview with the Atlanta producer Jermaine Dupri, who has collaborated with Usher, Mariah Carey, and Destiny's Child. At first, Dupri comes across the way he does in most interviews: cool and passive, even uninterested. But after a few hours—and one too many shots of a Chinese drink called

tiger-bone wine—he’s convulsing in laughter, telling off-color stories about a trip to the Dominican Republic that he took with one of his protégés, the rapper Bow Wow. “I’ve seen so much, since I was twelve, that nobody ain’t ever seen,” Dupri says. “It’s crazy that you have to keep all this shit in your body. You gotta give it out.” N.O.R.E., by now extremely drunk, meets this moment of candor with his own confession: “I been holdin’ my pee” for more than an hour.

As N.O.R.E.’s career evolved, and he experienced success with the production duo the Neptunes, he adopted a goofier, more fun-loving approach, less committed to the glowering affect of the past. One of my favorite moments in his career came on “Invincible,” from the 2000 album “The Reunion,” when he rapped about having made a “half-ass” record the year before. It seemed a strange confession. But it was also a moment that had to do with ambivalence and disappointment, rather than pride or pain. It’s the kind of gray-area emotion, expressed with casual frankness, that emerges organically on “Drink Champs,” where friends and enemies talk for so long that they inevitably stumble onto the truth.

In June, the show hosted an episode for the twenty-fifth anniversary of “The War Report.” Capone, N.O.R.E., and other artists who appeared on the album are there; so are members of Penalty Recordings, the then up-and-coming label that released the record. Capone and N.O.R.E. recall meeting for the first time, when they were incarcerated. Tragedy Khadafi, a veteran rapper from Queens, who first suggested that the duo make music together, speaks in long, sometimes bitter monologues. Occasionally, Neil Levine, an older white man who ran Penalty, chimes in to clarify a small detail. They all swap inside jokes and reminisce about the Sbarro downstairs from the studio, attempting to bring listeners into the tiny, meticulous, magical universe they built. They hash out old beefs, make amends, and lament that the industry is now run by “analytics” rather than by curious, passionate A. & R. scouts. At one point, Tragedy, who oversaw the album as an executive producer, addresses Levine. “I gotta say thank you, yo, for giving me a chance, man,” he says. Everyone claps. The episode clocks in at just under five hours. ♦

By Hilton Als

By Katy Waldman

**By**

**By David Cantwell**

# Poems

- [“Dusk in Drought”](#)
- [“Dad Poem X”](#)

By [Jorie Graham](#)

*Audio:* Read by the author.

Tongues in dusk  
are bats but I try  
to remember  
larks. Bushes are taken

away and replaced by

sounds & circuits of  
mind where those sounds get  
lost—pavilions,  
mazes—so clean—crumbs all

gone now—also visits to  
anyone or  
anything  
gone—though we

still feel we  
*can hear them*  
staccato frequencies  
before they finally enter us

*for good.* Then it is night.

What do we know now.  
The wind comes up.  
Grief is a form  
which can shape this

if you want a shape.  
But you can also sit here  
a long time  
without ever again

needing a shape. It  
is not easy. I  
cannot say I know  
how it's done. But

it's done. Wait & it  
will be completely  
done. And then  
there's no more cost

& you fall

neither down nor  
thru. Then—that's  
it. *Breathe the dry air*  
*in my heart tells me—*

don't make the mistake.  
Breathe. Yes  
the drought is everywhere out there  
but in the night

the stems of stars mist-up  
just enough for u to recall  
when there was  
humanity, humidity, & the stars

dangle, sting. Ah there is  
no return  
is there. I wish I could  
address you. I loved

so many  
things—sitting by the window on  
the train, thinking of death as if it were  
a sweetness, a kind of

love, saying *snow*

as snow fell fast against our hurtling  
forwardness—all of it postcard  
colored—shaggy trees flying by—  
us hoping for *pitch black night* and imagining the beauty

of a journey with  
no return. I wish I knew  
whom to address  
this time. Don't be the fool

loving the sparks of  
yr engines, yr micro-  
transformers, don't think you can put off  
that evening walk now because there's trouble to fix,

there's someone to love,  
there's a need to postpone,  
escape. Let me tell you,  
there *is* a guard. Yes he's a servant too

but he's yr guard.  
Don't let down yr guard.  
Perform yr aliveness every  
instant for him, & cheerfully,

keeping him fascinated  
so he doesn't accidentally  
fall asleep on yr  
watch, or they will bring in the papers with

the diagnosis, the temperature  
readouts, the projected  
wind speeds. And the sand  
will begin to arrive

as if out of thin air. Yes.  
Now,

what is it still lies undisturbed  
on the surface of

your mind? What is that  
attached to your hands? A moth  
stops in the air  
before u, look

closely into its book, a rule is  
applied, look closely into that manual,  
into the book of  
tools no longer

used, into the book of  
what we don't yet see  
under this applause of  
starlight for the always

finishing play unfurling  
right before our very  
eyes. Are they  
open or

shut. A brief shower coalesces but

as always  
passes. A fly is rubbing its  
head with its wings  
in the dark. The disappearing watertable

is not entirely  
silent if I am completely  
still. Listen: I am  
completely still.

By Deborah Treisman

By Susan B. Glasser

By Alex Baia

**By Jessica Winter**

By [Joshua Bennett](#)

*Audio:* Read by the author.

*You can't have apples with everything,*  
we say to our son over breakfast, but that's  
not technically true. He knows this, I suspect,  
though his face reflects a certain understanding,  
as if he's willing to negotiate. Before we moved here,  
I knew so little of apples, their untamed array  
of shapes & names: Ginger Gold, Honeycrisp, Crisp  
-in, Cortland, Cameo. Both Rome & Empire,  
somehow, which feels like it must be an inside joke  
between members of the committee. Fuji, Winesap. Ruby  
-Frost, which could be either a miracle or a plague,  
I can't decide which. Paula Red is a Soviet secret  
agent. Envy is a deadly sin. Holstein & Ambrosia  
have skin like a storm on a televised map. On the ride  
upstate to the orchard, I recount all the types to myself  
in a private game. Select my prize in advance. Bags filled  
with Liberty & Jazz will be my aims, like any good  
American. Two months earlier, it is not yet my birthday.  
I am in an office in Brighton. The doctor has never seen  
a case quite like mine. During the tests, I make every task  
a language game, even the ones with semicircles & blocks.  
This part of my mind is *hypercharged*, he says, like a quasar,  
or loving dispute. That morning, I cut a Braeburn into eighths  
and cast the pieces into a small blue bowl: a handful of rowboats  
swaying. At the orchard, we are stars set loose across the mind  
of a boy in a field on his back, dreaming with both eyes open.  
We run for hours. We gather enough apples to sate ourselves  
for weeks on nothing but their cold red wealth. What marvels:  
this most metaphorical of fruits, Newtonian, Edenic, pure  
delight. Mighty & bright. And the orchard like a coliseum  
of planets you could hold in your hand.

*This is drawn from “[The Study of Human Life](#). ”*

By Jill Lepore

**By Patrick Radden Keefe**

**By Margaret Talbot**

**By Stephanía Taladrí**

## Shouts & Murmurs

- New York City Has Changed in the Two Hours Since I Moved Here

By [Lana Schwartz](#)

The moment I moved to New York City, I knew that this was the place for me. I said that this city was my home, and I planned to stay forever. I wanted to ignore the haters, the people who told me that New York City was over, *dead*.

But I have to tell the truth: New York City has irrevocably changed in the two hours since I moved here. When I pulled up in a U-Haul outside my new apartment, it was a bright, sunny day. But, two hours later, it's colder. Different. If I can make it here, I can make it anywhere, but if the biggest star in the solar system can't make it here, well, then maybe it's time for me to move on, too.

I remember my first moments in New York as if they were a few seconds ago: my friends were all right there, laughing with me, sharing plans about all the things we were going to do in this big, crazy town. It's sad to say, but I lost touch with them faster than you can imagine. Everyone who was standing next to me has since gone elsewhere. "I've got to go to work," one said. "My boss told me to be on time today," another said. My friends and I used to have the same priority—helping me move into my new apartment—and, as hard as it is to accept, theirs changed. At least I'll always have the memories of them carrying my boxes while I sat on the floor watching an episode of "Mad Men." No one can take that from me.

I know that what I'm saying might be hard for newcomers to understand. If you moved here even fifteen New York minutes after I did, you arrived in an entirely different place. Maybe you weren't ready to make the leap yet, or maybe you were stuck in traffic on the Kosciuszko Bridge. Whatever the reason, I'm sorry to say, but you missed out.

And, listen, it's true that I haven't been here as long as some people who moved to the city four hours ago, or even six hours ago, but I don't know how they do it. Watching a place you love change is painful. The cute little coffee shop next door where I used the bathroom but didn't buy anything appears to be empty now, lights out. The staff said, "We're closed," and shut the door. The end of yet another New York City institution.

A hundred and twenty minutes ago, this neighborhood was only adults. It was cool, edgy, dirty. There was trash piled up in front of my building. A man wearing a T-shirt and smoking a cigarette sauntered by. But the neighborhood became sanitized and homogeneous so quickly. I heard a loud bell ring, and then suddenly there were children everywhere, wearing those tiny backpacks, walking hand in hand with their parents and nannies. The trash is gone. Someone came and picked it up. Despite my best efforts to follow him home, I cannot find that man who was wearing a T-shirt and smoking a cigarette.

I can't help but roll my eyes. Since when do children live in New York City? I'll tell you this much—they weren't here an episode of "Mad Men" ago. I know what you're thinking: A lot can happen in one hour of "Mad Men," but that's TV, not real life. I would blame the mayor, but I have no idea who he is or what a mayor even does. Being a New Yorker—and, yes, that is what I call myself—you learn to expect the unexpected. Yet, when I venture just one block away, it's almost as if I've entered a new city, somewhere I've never been before.

The thing that really gets me is that no one seems as upset about this as I do. Wake up, people! I met my neighbor earlier; he's been here for two whole days, and he doesn't seem bothered at all. I stood in the park, screaming, "Make it stop! Make it stop! Bring back old New York!" Everyone just looked at me like I was Pete Campbell in an episode of "Mad Men"—and I mean the earlier seasons, not the later ones.

I have to say, I've lasted a lot longer than other people who have tried their luck in New York City, but I think it's time for me to move on. Go somewhere that won't change so fast. I'm ready to try my luck in a place that I know will never change, and is famous for always staying the same: Los Angeles. ♦

By David Sedaris

By Michael Azerrad

By Masha Gessen

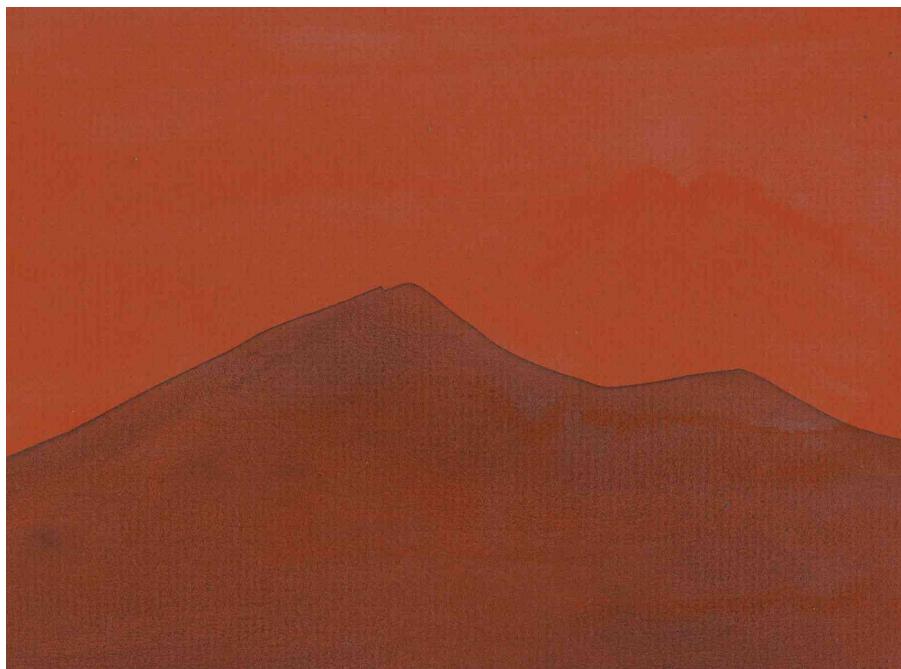
By Nick Paumgarten

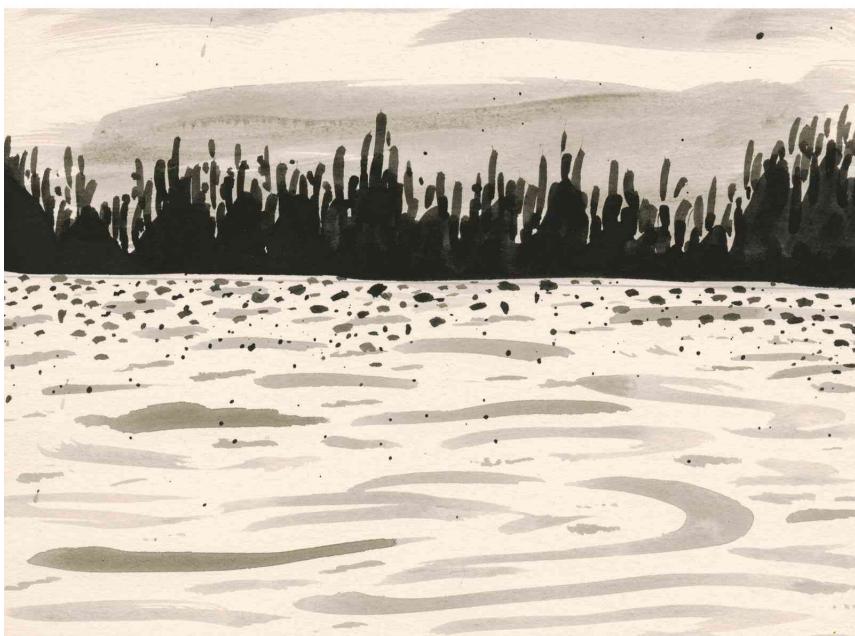
# **Sketchbook**

- [After the Caldor Wildfire](#)

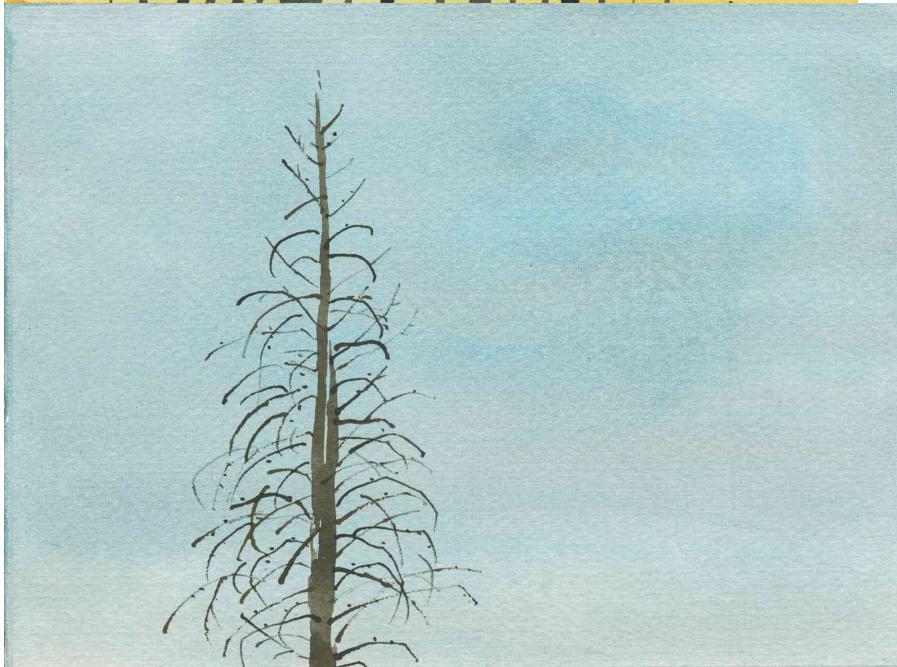
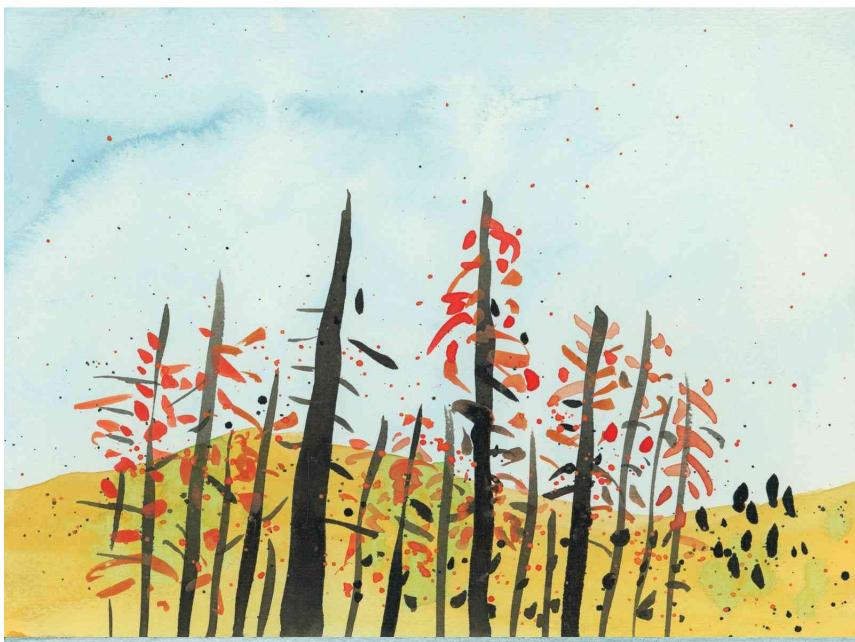
By [Tucker Nichols](#)

*Last year, the Caldor wildfire burned through a wide swath of California's Eldorado National Forest, an area in the central Sierra Nevada that I hike every summer. I returned in August, exactly one year after the fire started, and found a Pompeian landscape: charred stumps, sooty ponds, thick drifts of ash. A firefighter told me that clifftops a thousand feet high had glowed red from the light of the flames. In a meadow, I gathered pieces of burned willow to use as charcoal for drawing. A clear creek cut through fresh growth. From behind the branches of a thicket, a deer stared at me, unmoving. Birds sang from blackened trees; the wind scattered seeds. The sky was as blue as ever.*











**By Carolyn Kormann**

**By Yasmin Tayag**

**By Eliza Griswold**

**By Ingfei Chen**

## Tables for Two

- Dimes Square, Post-Shark-Jump

By [Hannah Goldfield](#)

One recent Saturday evening at Le Dive—a new wine bar on the corner of Canal and Ludlow Streets, from the people behind Brooklyn’s Le Crocodile—I watched a foursome seat themselves at a couple of unoccupied café tables outside, as one might in the Eleventh Arrondissement. (I would bet the farm that they were European.) A host approached; I heard the words “two-hour wait.” Four pairs of eyes grew wide. The group retreated in silent resignation.

Where could they have ended up? Even at Scarr’s, the slice shop on Orchard, the line stretched down the block. If the menu at Le Dive is convincingly Parisian—crisp radishes with Bretagne butter, a steamed artichoke with Dijon aioli, cold Melon de Bourgogne—this Chinatown-adjacent pocket of the Lower East Side is unmistakably, definitively New York.

Mention Dimes Square on Twitter and the media-class peanut gallery will throw virtual tomatoes at your head. The name was coined, with a big wink, to lovingly skewer a scene of creative types which grew around a slew of businesses in the twenty-tens, including Dimes, a vaguely healthy yet stylish restaurant, and a skate shop called Labor—places whose whiff of Southern California created an exciting friction with the surrounding Manhattan grit. The name stuck as the scene ate itself and the joke wore off. A Dimes Square reality show premières this month.



*The pocket of the Lower East Side known winkingly as Dimes Square has seen a recent increase in high-end businesses.*



A crucial ingredient in the alchemy of Dimes Square before it jumped the shark, I would argue, was that the bars and restaurants were just good enough. Le Dive is decidedly not a dive; Clandestino, the seventeen-year-old bar next door, is an archetype of one, and it wasn't long ago that you didn't have to elbow your way to a vodka-soda on a Wednesday. The arrival of Cervo's, a destination-worthy seafood restaurant serving crispy shrimp heads and mussels escabeche a few doors down from Dimes, in 2017, was,

perhaps, a distant death knell. In 2020, Cervo's application for an open-streets license, to weather the pandemic (two blocks of Canal are closed to traffic for eight hours every day), paved the way for the current circus, every night a festival in the piazza.

A new sushi bar called Time, which opened in June, on Canal at Forsyth, feels forged from the ethos of the original Dimes era. The appeal is less about the food—a hundred-and-fifty-dollar omakase at the bar, à-la-carte nigiri and sashimi rounded out by sake-steamed clams and yellowtail carpaccio with yuzu in the dining room—than it is about the juxtaposition of eating the food while effectively on top of a Chinatown-bus stop, of hoisting your Telfar bag onto a white tablecloth and sipping ume highballs amid the bustle of budget travellers lugging overstuffed duffels.



*Corner Bar's Baba au Rhum, a yeasted cake with whipped cream and candied figs, is finished tableside with Plantation rum.*

There's nary a hint of tension, though, at Nine Orchard, a new hotel in a magnificent 1912 Beaux-Arts building on Orchard and Canal that once housed a bank. The hotel's cocktail lounge, Swan Room; its brasserie, Corner Bar; and its forthcoming fine-dining restaurant are overseen by the chef and restaurateur Ignacio Mattos, of Estela and Altro Paradiso. At Corner Bar, from a menu of deceptively boring-sounding Continental room-service classics (plus a foie-gras terrine and a seafood platter), I ordered dishes whose execution thrilled me. The burnished exterior of a sliced

baguette, served on a doily, was so shiny it looked to be made of plaster—but it cracked open to reveal a warm, fragrant, chewy crumb. Gesturing to the accompanying pat of cultured butter, sparkling with salt, a model-handsome bartender with a curly-topped high fade said, “My nose is starting to break out from that. I brush my teeth with it.”

Shrimp cocktail, blue prawns fanned tail up in crushed ice, like synchronized swimmers; spaghetti pomodoro, slick and fruity; shaggy slices of pink-fleshed skirt steak in a pool of au poivre bearing the sheen of crème-brûlée crust—each was the apotheosis of its form. The burger’s beguiling smokiness came from a sauce made with onions that had been cooked in the kitchen’s Josper, a hybrid charcoal grill-oven hermetically sealed somewhere in the hotel’s climate-controlled depths, far from the madding crowd. ♦

By Janet Malcolm

By Philip Gourevitch

By Patrick Radden Keefe

By Robert A. Caro

# The Theatre

- [Little Amal, a Symbol of Refugees](#)

# Little Amal, a Symbol of Refugees

The twelve-foot-tall puppet of a ten-year-old Syrian girl, inspired by the 2017 play “The Jungle,” begins her walk across the five boroughs, in search of her uncle Samir, from Aleppo.



Standing twelve feet tall, **Little Amal**, a ten-year-old Syrian girl designed by South Africa’s Handspring Puppet Company, has travelled through Europe, meeting with Pope Francis, Jude Law, and Ukrainian refugees in Poland. Inspired by Joe Murphy and Joe Robertson’s play “The Jungle,” from 2017, about a migrant camp in Calais, France, the puppet has become a symbol of the struggles of refugees. She begins her New York walk this week—in search of her uncle Samir, from Aleppo—appearing at fifty-five events across the five boroughs.

By Masha Gessen

By Patrick Radden Keefe

By Sam Knight

By Sarah Larson

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