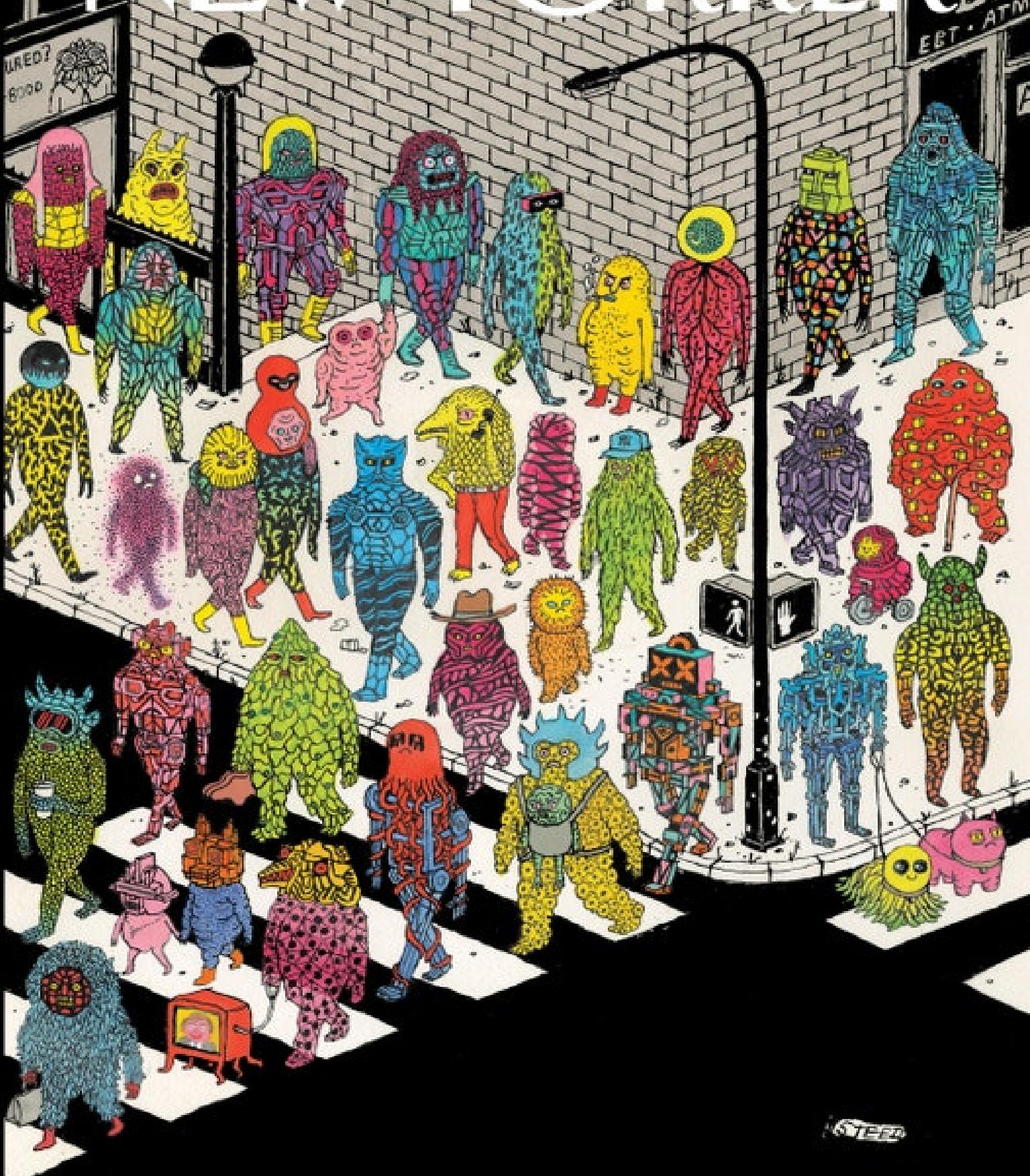


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- [A Reporter at Large](#)
- [American Chronicles](#)
- [Art](#)
- [Books](#)
- [Comment](#)
- [Crossword](#)
- [Fiction](#)
- [Good Intentions](#)
- [Letter from Moscow](#)
- [Look-Alike Dept.](#)
- [Mojave Postcard](#)
- [On Television](#)
- [Outreach Dept.](#)
- [Personal History](#)
- [Poems](#)
- [Shouts & Murmurs](#)
- [Tables for Two](#)
- [The Art World](#)
- [The Theatre](#)
- [好物推荐](#)

A Reporter at Large

- How an Adoption Broker Cashed In on Prospective Parents' Dreams

[October 25, 2021 Issue](#)

How an Adoption Broker Cashed In on Prospective Parents' Dreams

In just a few years, a Michigan woman took in millions of dollars, faking adoptions and ruining families' lives along the way.

By [Sheelah Kolhatkar](#)

October 18, 2021



Content

To Kyle Belz-Thomas, an ideal life included a noisy house full of children. “Kyle is a strong, determined, caring man who would do anything to protect and support his family,” he once wrote of himself. He grew up as the youngest of three in New Baltimore, a suburb of Detroit on the shore of Lake St. Clair. His mother, who comes from a large Italian family, sent him to an all-boys Catholic high school, where he felt out of place and was teased regularly. When Kyle was twenty, he moved into his own apartment and came out to his family; to his relief, they were accepting. In 2014, on a dating app, he met Adam, an artist with a day job as a private-client banker,

and spent the next year trying to get him to go on a date. Adam finally told him, “Come and find me, I’ll be outside mowing my lawn,” giving him only an approximate location. A week or so later, they went out for dinner and drinks. “He was nice, and he cared, and he was interested in what I did,” Adam told me recently. In 2016, they got married and moved with their three dogs into a four-bedroom house on more than two acres in a rural area outside Detroit. Kyle was thirty-five and working as an I.T. manager. He wanted to adopt a child in the next year. “We were both getting older, and, being a gay couple, we figured it would take a while to be matched with a baby,” Kyle said. “And we’d heard horror stories.”

They started researching [adoption](#) agencies. Then a friend of Kyle’s mentioned that a former middle-school classmate of theirs named Tara Lee was running her own adoption business. In January, 2017, he and Adam drove to a nearby Tim Hortons to meet her.

Lee, who was thirty-five, was waiting for them at a table with a manila file folder of paperwork. She was small, with shiny black hair, dark eyes, and a nose ring; her voice was high, like a child’s. She explained that she was a licensed social worker with a boutique adoption agency called Always Hope. She didn’t look or speak like the staff members from other agencies; she cursed and had tattoos running down both arms, which gave her a folksy air that she said made it easier to bond with young pregnant women, who were often dealing with addiction, poverty, and other challenges. During their meeting, Adam noticed an expensive-looking watch on Lee’s wrist that seemed at odds with her image.

Many adoption agencies are affiliated with churches that disapprove of gay couples; Lee said that she had never worked with a same-sex couple, but that she had no objection to it. “It felt like a comfortable fit,” Adam recalled. He and Kyle signed the paperwork that day and gave Lee a deposit of twenty-five hundred dollars. They prepared a twenty-two-page book about their family, filled with descriptions and photos of their home and of their parents, siblings, nieces, and nephews. One image showed Kyle cradling a newborn; another showed Adam in his art studio, where he makes custom figurines of people’s pets.

Lee began sending them profiles of potential birth mothers, or “first mothers,” as they’re sometimes called. In April, 2017, Lee sent an e-mail about Angel, whose due date was July 8th. After a horrific sexual assault, Lee said, Angel had become pregnant, and was now determined to give up the baby. She was twenty-one and already had a two-year-old son, whom she was raising on her own. Lee encouraged Kyle and Adam to send their book to Angel, and they were thrilled when Lee told them that Angel had chosen them as adoptive parents. The total cost of the adoption would be around twenty-five thousand dollars, which included eight thousand dollars for Angel’s living expenses. According to state regulations, those could include housing, food, and medical treatment.

They met with Angel and Lee for lunch at a Red Robin restaurant and started going to Angel’s ultrasound appointments. “It was a mad rush to get a nursery done,” Adam told me. They chose a wildlife theme for the room, and decorated the walls with trees and foxes. They had sent money to Lee to help move Angel and her son into an apartment in downtown Detroit, and to pay for furniture and a fridge, groceries and Uber rides. The couple never dealt directly with Angel; payments always went to Lee, who told them it was easier that way. “We kept handing over money constantly,” Adam said.

On June 23rd, Angel gave birth to a boy. Kyle and Adam sped to the hospital, where Tonya Corrado, an attorney Lee worked with, gave them adoption papers to sign. Angel seemed content when they named the baby Maxwell, and she remained calm when the couple took him home. Kyle and Adam were quickly thrown into a life defined by warming bottles, changing diapers, and Max’s sleep schedule.

In January, 2018, Lee called them to say that Angel was pregnant again, and that she wanted them to adopt this baby, too. Max was almost seven months old. He had recently been rushed to the hospital with breathing problems, and he had stayed on oxygen in the intensive-care unit for a week. Kyle and Adam had a mortgage and about thirty thousand dollars of additional debt. “It was crazy,” Adam said. But Lee pressured them. “What are you going to tell Max when he finds out you had the chance to adopt his sister and you didn’t do it?” they recalled her saying. This time, she asked for half of the fees and all of the birth-mother expenses up front. On January 20th, they gave Lee a check for ten thousand dollars.



"Are your hands clean?"
Cartoon by Tom Toro

They prepared a second room, decorated with mermaids and pirates, and bought bright block letters to spell the baby's name, Alexandra, on the dresser. During the next few weeks, Kyle and Adam were often unable to get updates from Lee about Angel. In February, Kyle invited his parents and siblings over for dinner. Everyone was gathered around the dining table when he handed Max to his mother and asked her to take his sweatshirt off, revealing a T-shirt that said "I'm going to be a big brother." In a video that Kyle's sister took on her iPhone, Kyle can be seen wiping tears from his eyes. They sent the video to Lee, thanking her.

In March, they gave Lee another three thousand dollars for Angel's expenses. But, about a month later, Lee told them that Angel was backing out of the adoption. "It really hurt," Adam said. The emotional pain was compounded by the fact that he and Kyle couldn't recover any of the money they had sent to cover Angel's living expenses.

Soon afterward, Lee called them again: she had found another birth mom, April, who was due at the end of the year. In a document describing April's situation, Lee wrote that April "is very close to me. We speak daily, even when she isn't pregnant. She has a heart of gold." Lee estimated that the cost of this adoption would be higher: about thirty-five thousand dollars, fifteen

thousand of which would go toward birth-mother expenses. Fifteen thousand dollars was due immediately. They wrote Lee another check.

Tara Lee grew up in Mount Clemens, Michigan, a town close to New Baltimore. She was the eldest of six children. She told me that her father ran the service department at a Cadillac dealership, and that her mother was a stay-at-home parent and, later, a supermarket manager. Lee's parents divorced when she was three but remained close. "We did eat dinner at the dinner table as a family every single night," Lee wrote in an e-mail. "We got into trouble for having our elbows on the table lol. I was raised with manners and respect."

Lee attended Anchor Bay High School, in a nearby town, where she was outgoing and popular. A former classmate, Kristy Steakley, said, "Tara was a people person. She could talk to anybody."

Lee was an average student, but she dreamed of becoming an attorney, and couldn't wait to get out of Mount Clemens. "I planned to live in a one bedroom apartment somewhere on the upper east side of New York City and work in corporate America my whole life," she wrote in an online-diary entry from 2017. "However, the lord had other plans for me." After Lee graduated, in 1999, she moved to Florida, to work at Epcot. "I wanted to explore life," she said. She and her high-school boyfriend, Jeremy, who now works for a heating-and-cooling company, got married in 2002, shortly after Lee gave birth to their first child, a daughter.

In 2005, when Lee was twenty-three, she was arrested for writing a series of bad checks, including two to local jewelry stores and one to Costco. She pleaded guilty and was ordered to repay twenty-two thousand dollars to at least seventeen different businesses. Later that year, she wrote a bad check for a Polaris snowmobile, which led to another guilty plea. Lee had another daughter that year, and then, in 2007, a son.

In 2012, Lee adopted the first of two children from a woman she had met in Michigan. According to Melanie Peterson, a mother of five in Milwaukee who tried to adopt through Always Hope, Lee told an improbable-sounding story of meeting the mother of her adopted children at a picnic one day; two weeks later, Lee claimed, the woman showed up at her door and announced

that she wanted Lee to adopt from her. Lee declined to discuss her adoptions, but she wrote in an e-mail, “I never wanted to facilitate adoptions. I wanted to help at risk pregnant women with their options.” She added, “I could not believe that many women only knew about either parenting or abortion. I wanted women to know that they had options. . . . I am pro life. I was pro life choices for those who didn’t want to have an abortion.”

In 2015, Lee registered the Always Hope Pregnancy and Education Center in Jacksonville, Florida, where, according to adoptive families who worked with her, she had been counselling pregnant women and helping to match them with families to adopt their babies. Lee travelled frequently between Jacksonville and Michigan, but soon she was conducting adoptions primarily in Michigan. State law requires that adoption agencies be licensed, a process that Lee never completed, and in 2015 Michigan investigated her for operating an unlicensed agency. The investigation initially concluded that she wasn’t violating the law, based on her insistence that she was only taking birth mothers to appointments and arranging clothing donations. After receiving further complaints, state agents told Lee that she had to get a license to continue to facilitate adoptions, but she never applied for one. That year, she took in more than a hundred and thirty thousand dollars from adoption work.

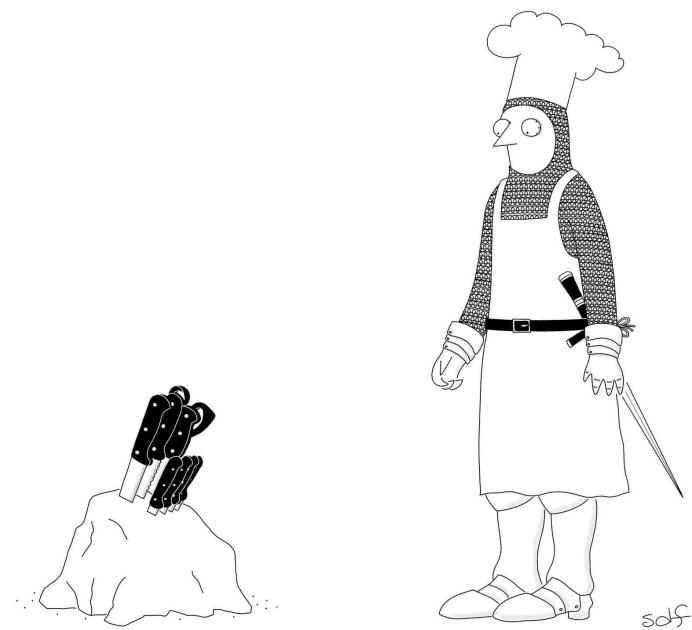
Attorneys were needed to handle the adoption paperwork, and Lee eventually fell into a collaboration with Corrado and Talia Goetting, who had their own firm. Goetting had become an adoption lawyer after a traumatic childhood. Her mother, who got pregnant with her when she was sixteen years old, was sent to a home for unwed mothers, where she was pressured to give up her baby. Goetting felt unwanted by her adoptive mother. “It was an extremely difficult experience,” she said. “But I’m still glad that I was born.” When she was seventeen, she reunited with her biological parents, who later adopted three children from an orphanage in Russia. Goetting eventually went to law school, then worked as an assistant attorney general for the state of Michigan before starting a family-law practice. Goetting said that she was inspired by her younger siblings and that, although her own experience of being adopted was “awful,” most adoptions aren’t like hers. Goetting is now married and has four children, one of whom was adopted from Guatemala.

Lee first contacted Goetting in 2016, to help a family in Florida adopt from a woman in Michigan. Goetting and Corrado's job was to gather about thirty documents that had to be submitted to the county and the state; they included birth certificates, marriage certificates, driver's licenses, an affidavit from the adoptive parents saying that they understood the adoption laws in Michigan, and proof that they had undergone a "home study" and a background check. Normally, most of this would have been done well in advance. With Lee, Goetting said, she or Corrado would be summoned to a hospital just before a baby was born, where they would meet the adoptive family for the first time and scramble to assemble the documents and other paperwork. "We'd get these phone calls, and we'd have to hustle," she said. Goetting and Corrado's fees were usually between five thousand and eight thousand dollars; they collected half of that from the family at the hospital, and the rest a few days later, when the adoption was finalized. Lee would usually present the lawyers with signed consent forms from the birth fathers, which were required. Another attorney worked with the birth mothers, and would often be called to the hospital at the last minute as well.

Lee told families that she was qualified to provide counselling services to birth mothers, and that she was trained as a doula, which enabled her to charge fees for assisting with their labor and delivery. Goetting said that she repeatedly asked Lee to provide evidence of her qualifications; eventually, Lee brought in a large, framed diploma for a master's degree in social work from Northwestern University, which she left propped up on the floor in Goetting and Corrado's office. It seemed odd, Goetting later recalled, but both attorneys continued to do business with Lee. "I wasn't necessarily suspicious," Goetting told me. "I don't view the world that way."

It is uncomfortable to think of adoptions as financial transactions, but they share many attributes. Adoptions are brokered by entrepreneurs offering a service that has life-changing consequences. Babies tend to move from the poor to the wealthier, and large sums of money change hands. Ellen Herman, a historian at the University of Oregon and the author of "Kinship by Design," a comprehensive history of adoption in the U.S., told me that the idea of matching children with suitable families is relatively new. "There is a long history of treating adoption as a market," she said. "It was considered an opportunity for commercial transactions and profits, not for families and child welfare."

The transfer of children from one family to another was once an informal process. Lack of access to birth control, severe poverty, and the shaming of unwed mothers insured a steady supply of children whose parents couldn't care for them; babies were sometimes stolen from hospitals and homes and then sold. In 1851, Massachusetts became the first state to establish laws for adoption, defining it as a practice that should be driven primarily by the needs of children rather than by the wishes of adults. Still, reform of the industry moved slowly. In 1854, the Children's Aid Society started running "orphan trains," which removed children from poor immigrant households along the Eastern Seaboard and sent them west to rural and farming communities, intending to place them in good Christian homes. The outright sale of babies also continued openly, with advertisements placed in newspapers and "baby farms" serving as warehouses for infants and children available for purchase. A 1917 study conducted for the Juvenile Protective Association quoted one Chicago baby-farm saleswoman's slogan: "It's cheaper and easier to buy a baby for \$100.00 than to have one of your own." That year, Minnesota passed the nation's first law requiring that potential adoptive parents be evaluated for fitness, including by investigating their finances and inspecting their home.



Cartoon by Seth Fleishman

Through the twentieth century, the rules governing adoption were increasingly shaped by negative perceptions of unmarried mothers. David

Smolin, the director of the Center for Children, Law and Ethics at Samford University's law school, told me that the regulations "created this legacy of secrecy and shame that we're still trying to get out from under." In 1927, the Supreme Court ruled that forced sterilization of intellectually disabled women in public institutions such as mental-health facilities and prisons did not violate their constitutional rights. The decision was interpreted broadly, fuelling a perception that single pregnant women were promiscuous and unfit to be parents. In the years after the Second World War, out-of-wedlock births increased dramatically, and so-called maternity homes proliferated. Upper- and middle-class girls and women could live there until their babies were born and given up for adoption, and then they returned to their communities as if nothing had happened. This came to be known as the Baby Scoop Era, and it lasted until the nineteen-seventies, when increased access to birth control and abortion made it easier for women to avoid unwanted pregnancies.

By that time, adoption had been embraced by some conservative Christian churches, which saw it as a means of avoiding abortion and expanding the Christian population. Pastors encouraged their congregations to adopt children from Asia, Africa, Latin America, and Eastern Europe, prompting tens of thousands of transnational adoptions. Later scandals revealed that not all of those children were lacking family members in their home countries who wanted them, and the number of international adoptions dropped by around ninety per cent from a high, in 2004, of twenty-three thousand.

The private-sector and nonprofit adoption and child-welfare-services industries in America generate an estimated nineteen billion dollars a year in revenue. Each state has its own rules about who is qualified to arrange an adoption, which families are eligible to adopt, the rights of birth mothers to change their minds, and the rights of birth fathers to be involved in the decision. This has left enormous gaps in the system. "The whole thing is so fraught with vulnerability, inequality of power, and you still have the apparatus of the old secrecy-and-shame system," Smolin said. "Big money and a veil of secrecy attracts bad actors."

Lee carefully controlled all communication between expectant mothers and adoptive families, and tried to prevent the two sides from contacting each other directly; she arranged most in-person meetings and usually came

along. This gave her tremendous influence over two sets of emotionally vulnerable people.

To grow her business, Lee needed to find women willing to give up their babies for adoption, which is not easy. Smolin told me that the largest number of adoptions in the United States occur within the foster-care system, which has approximately four hundred thousand children, many of whom have experienced some sort of trauma and may ultimately be reunited with their birth families. Some seventy thousand foster-care adoptions take place each year, and they are heavily regulated by the government. The market for newborn babies is very different—according to one estimate, up to two million families may be looking to adopt, but only about twenty thousand women a year decide to relinquish their babies. “You’ve got these private adoption intermediaries charging thirty, forty, or fifty thousand dollars a year, chasing twenty thousand women who are willing to consider it and end up doing it,” Smolin said. “The money aspect of it is very troubling.”

Smolin noted that, although the relative shortage of adoptable babies has given birth mothers more leverage to demand things such as “open” adoptions, in which they are promised the ability to maintain contact with their children, there is no adequate legal enforcement mechanism. He also pointed out that adoption intermediaries often serve as advisers to pregnant women, informing them of their options—even as they stand to gain financially if the women choose to pursue adoption.

Lee worked with many birth mothers who were in treatment for heroin addiction, in and out of prison, or homeless. According to Chelsea Coffman, who put her baby up for adoption through Lee and later worked as her personal assistant, Lee recruited women at local methadone clinics. Coffman told me that her prior drug use had led Michigan Children’s Protective Services to remove her two kids from her custody. When she found out that she was pregnant again, while in jail in 2017, another inmate introduced her to Lee. Coffman said that she felt she had to give the new child up for adoption in order to focus on her sobriety and to improve her chances of regaining custody of her other two kids. “It always hurts,” Coffman told me. “You always have that missing piece.”

Another birth mother, Moriah Day, worked for Lee as a house cleaner when she was in high school. When Day became pregnant, at the age of nineteen, she wasn't sure if she could take adequate care of a baby. She recalled Lee saying that adoption would be better for the baby, and that Day wasn't up to being a mother. She came to regret the decision and told me that she often cries when something reminds her of her daughter, who is now three years old and lives with a family in Chicago. She showed me a tattoo, on the inside of her right arm, of her daughter's name and birthday, along with the adoptive parents' names. "You love this baby so much, and you say to yourself, 'Can I really do it?'" she told me. "Even if it breaks your heart, you say, 'I'm going to put you with someone wonderful who can really take care of you.'" She said that she still struggles with anger toward Lee. "Something put her on this earth to be the best manipulator and liar you have ever seen," Day said.

In the summer of 2018, Kyle and Adam became increasingly concerned about their match with April, who was due in late December, according to Lee. All they had received was a blurry photograph from Lee that showed a rosy-cheeked, blue-eyed young woman in a trucker cap. When they asked if they could have an ultrasound photo of the baby, Lee said that she would try, but an image never arrived. Though Lee had initially told them that April took good care of herself during pregnancies, she eventually said that April was refusing prenatal care. "We became kind of skeptical of this one," Adam told me. He called Lee in frustration, demanding to know where their money was going. "Tara said, 'Are you yelling at me?'" he recalled. He immediately backed down. He didn't want to jeopardize their chances of getting another baby.

When Kyle and Adam finally suggested to Lee that they drop the match with April, she said that she would keep what remained of their fees and expenses, about fourteen thousand dollars, and apply it to a future adoption. During the next few weeks, Kyle maintained a close, chatty dialogue with Lee, exchanging text messages with her almost daily and speaking frequently with her on the phone. Kyle found her easy to talk to; he shared updates about his work and about Adam's art projects and their home renovations. Lee loved hearing about Max, who would soon turn one and was just starting to walk.

Kyle and Adam and other families Lee worked with noticed that she had a taste for luxury fashion. She owned Christian Louboutin shoes and a Balenciaga handbag—accessories that weren't seen very often in her middle-class suburb. Cortney Edmond—a mother of six from Colorado, whose two arranged adoptions with Lee fell through after, according to Lee, the birth mothers changed their minds—said, “Tara would always tell me, ‘Yes, I have a shopping problem, but I don’t want you to think the money comes from adoptions. The money all comes from my husband. He makes all the money.’” Edmond recalled accompanying Lee on a trip to an upscale mall outside Detroit. Lee walked into a jewelry store where the clerks knew her by name, pointed at something, and bought it without asking the price; then they went to the Louis Vuitton store, where Lee purchased a seventeen-hundred-dollar purse.

One evening in early October, 2018, Goetting was preparing to leave work when she overheard Corrado on the phone, sounding defensive. An adoptive mother from South Carolina named Julie Faulkenberry was shouting at her; when Goetting entered the room, Corrado placed the call on speakerphone. “You should be ashamed of yourself,” Faulkenberry said. “You’re scamming people. How can you sleep at night?”

Goetting and Corrado spent the next hour on the phone. Faulkenberry, who is a nurse, and her husband, Jake, had three biological children. They wanted a fourth, and had started working with Lee after suffering three miscarriages and a stillbirth. In May, 2017, Lee matched Faulkenberry with a Florida birth mother named Mariah, who was having a boy. The Faulkenberrys named their future son Elijah and, they said, sent about fifteen thousand dollars to Lee for Mariah’s expenses. Then, shortly before the due date, Lee told them an ultrasound had revealed that the fetus had life-threatening health defects. When he was born, he lived for only thirty-five minutes. Faulkenberry and her family were devastated by the news. Lee promised to send Elijah’s birth and death certificates and some photographs, but they never came. Faulkenberry suspected that the story of Mariah and Elijah was a lie; when she hinted as much, Lee replied, by text, “I hope you don’t think this is a scam.” By then, Faulkenberry had placed a call to the F.B.I. She also started contacting other Always Hope families through Facebook, and discovered that many of them had stories similar to her own. In one instance, Faulkenberry said, Lee had told adoptive parents that their birth mother had

been shot, and that both she and the baby she was carrying had died. Faulkenberry said that she had spoken with birth mothers who had been living in deplorable conditions because Lee had never paid their bills. Lee had also told some families that she had cancer or had had a stroke, neither of which appeared to be true.

It is hard to believe that Goetting and Corrado, who handled the legal aspects of many of Always Hope's adoptions, were unaware that so many of them had fallen through. Still, Goetting told me that, while listening to Faulkenberry, she felt a growing sense of shock. "It was stunning, it was sad, it was almost unbelievable," she said. She began to run through all the previous moments with Lee that had made her feel uneasy. "She created this circus," Goetting recalled of Lee. "There's a baby being born, there's no attorney for the birth mother, the adopting parents have no attorney. Tara has been their only source of information, and she keeps it that way. It was always chaos."



Cartoon by Roz Chast

Maria Panchenko, an attorney who had started working with Lee the previous May, was leaving the courthouse when Goetting called her and asked her to come to Goetting and Corrado's office. Panchenko was initially skeptical of her concerns: adoptions often failed, and adoptive parents could be emotional or disgruntled. "Tara would never do something like that," she

told herself. Still, she drove straight to Goetting and Corrado's office, where they called Faulkenberry back and asked her to tell her story again.

At some point while Faulkenberry was talking, Panchenko felt her stomach drop. She turned to Goetting and mouthed, "What the fuck?" After the call ended, Panchenko said, "We need to pull every file." They spent several hours looking through their own records before Goetting remembered that she had access to Lee's e-mail account. In the following days, as the lawyers scrolled through thousands of messages, they found countless instances in which Lee seemed to be promising the same baby to more than one family.

"We're in way over our heads," Panchenko said.

Through Instagram, Panchenko got in touch with a friend who had worked in the human-trafficking squad at the F.B.I. in Detroit. After they spoke, another agent, Matthew Sluss, called her. Sluss had been with the F.B.I. since 2017 and had worked on numerous fraud cases. "I just kept spewing things out," Panchenko recalled. A phrase came to her, and she started repeating it: "adoption scam."

In early October, Lee contacted Adam. "I'm calling you because you're the calmer of the two of you," she said. She told him that she had another birth mother for them. Renee had already placed one child for adoption through Lee and was pregnant again. She was "very personable, Very outgoing and very educated," Lee wrote in a description she sent. Lee told Adam that Renee had already looked at the couple's book and liked them. Kyle and Adam had lost more than twenty thousand dollars on their two failed adoptions, but, they recalled, Lee told them that she still had several thousand dollars of their payments in escrow that could be applied toward the new adoption; all she needed now was an additional five thousand dollars. That night, Lee arranged a phone call with Kyle, Adam, Renee, and herself. Afterward, Lee told the couple that Renee had chosen them as the adoptive parents. They sent over the five thousand dollars, and spent the next week texting with Renee, but soon she stopped returning their messages. They started to feel a familiar sense of dread.

Around this time, Teresa and Mike Matheny were making preparations to drive to Detroit from their home in Atlanta. Teresa, an animal technician in a

research lab at Georgia State University, and Mike, a loan officer, had been through two rounds of fertility treatments and had given up on becoming pregnant. Teresa told me that, because Mike is Jewish and she was brought up Southern Baptist, they had trouble finding adoption agencies willing to work with them. Then they had a phone call with Lee, who quickly introduced them to a birth mother.

“It was this really emotional moment for us,” Mike told me. Lee said that she would send an adoption contract right over. As soon as he hung up, Mike said, he called their credit-card company to ask for an increase in their credit limit. They sent two payments, totalling thirteen thousand dollars, to Lee that afternoon. “I’m not someone who just hands people money. I’m a fine-print guy,” Mike said. Still, he said, he wasn’t a naturally suspicious person, and “alarm bells didn’t go off.”

The birth mother was in treatment for [opioid addiction](#) and was taking methadone to address withdrawal symptoms; her newborn baby would likely experience withdrawal as well and would need to spend time in the neonatal intensive-care unit. Teresa and Mike planned to be in Detroit before the due date, October 21st. They were packed and ready to leave when Teresa received an e-mail from another adoption agency that they had signed up with, based in Michigan. The message asked whether they were working with Lee. She responded “yes,” and then followed up with a text message to the head of the agency. She got a text back that read “Don’t do *ANYTHING* —stay calm. . . . Someone will call you—don’t contact Tara.” Mike recalled that he heard a “bloodcurdling” scream from Teresa. They immediately called Goetting and Corrado, who were representing them in the adoption. The lawyers told them that Lee was under federal investigation for adoption fraud, and that it was imperative they not tell anyone. Corrado said that, since they already seemed to know, she could share a few things. “We have no reason to believe your adoption is fake,” Corrado said over the phone. “But we don’t have confirmation, either.”

Corrado, Goetting, and Panchenko spent two weeks creating a spreadsheet for the F.B.I. with information about every Always Hope adoption they knew of and any problems they had uncovered. They also started calling prospective adoptive parents to tell them that Lee had apparently defrauded them by matching them with birth mothers who didn’t exist or by telling

more than one family that they were adopting the same baby. “It was horrible,” Panchenko told me.

The F.B.I. agents met with Corrado, Goetting, and Coffman, the birth mother who had worked for several months as Lee’s assistant. A prosecutor named Sara Woodward joined them. That summer, Coffman had spent most days driving around with Lee while she took phone calls and visited pregnant women. Coffman had quit after learning that she had never received much of the expense money that her baby’s adoptive parents had sent to Lee to give to her. She described to Sluss the layout of Lee’s home, and told him where Lee kept her computer and her files. The next day, November 9th, Sluss and a team of F.B.I. agents knocked on Lee’s door, wielding a search warrant. A Detroit TV news station, WXYZ, received a tip about the raid and sent over a news crew to film it. The agents removed boxes, files, and Lee’s computer hard drive. Panchenko was in court, in the middle of a trial, when Lee texted her, “The F.B.I. is at my house.”

Although WXYZ had footage of the raid, the station didn’t know who the target was or why it had happened. A few days later, Heather Catallo, a veteran investigative reporter at the station, was at her desk when her boss handed her a sheet of paper with the address of the raid on it. “See what you can find out about this,” she told her.

Meanwhile, Kyle had started to investigate their ongoing adoption with Renee. He found her last name and her husband’s name on social media. On Facebook, he found her profile page, which included pictures of her pregnant belly, along with posts in which a woman thanked Renee for choosing her to adopt the baby and announced the details of a spaghetti fund-raiser that she was hosting at her church to raise money for the fees. Kyle wrote a message to the woman, saying that he and his spouse had also been matched with Renee’s child. Renee’s husband learned of the message and contacted Kyle. “I remember when Renee spoke to you guys a few weeks ago,” Kyle recalled him saying. “But we decided to go with this other family. Didn’t Tara tell you?”

When Kyle confronted Lee, she said that Renee must have been deceiving her, and refused to return the five thousand dollars that he had sent her the prior month. She said that Goetting and Corrado were trying to frame her

and steal her business, with the assistance of several adoptive mothers who were angry that their adoptions hadn't worked out, and that they had triggered an F.B.I. investigation of Always Hope. Lee promised that she'd find them another baby. Kyle also recalled her telling him, "I swear on my children's lives I will get your money back."

On December 4th, Catallo reported Lee's name on the air. Catallo told me that, as soon as she started covering the case, families who had worked with Lee contacted her, including a distraught father whose child, without his knowledge, had been placed with a family in another state.



"I know this sucks, but just think of how awful we'll feel tomorrow."
Cartoon by Lars Kenseth

Kyle and Adam said that Lee called them several times in distress because adoptive families and birth mothers were "abandoning her" after seeing news reports about her. She insisted that the investigation would soon be dropped, and said that she had found another birth mother for them. At one point, Kyle told me, she called him and suggested that she was thinking of killing herself. He was so concerned that he picked Max up early from day care and rushed to Lee's house.

Kyle said he believed that Lee was innocent until January 11, 2019, when she was indicted. Adam was at work when the complaint was unsealed; he printed it out and went to the parking lot to read it in his truck. The charge

accused Lee of seeking to defraud families by misrepresenting herself as a licensed adoption worker and social worker, of matching more than one set of adoptive parents with the same birth mother, and of matching parents with birth mothers who weren't pregnant or who didn't exist. Adam called Kyle, who was at home, and said, "She did this."

That weekend, Goetting contacted Kyle after piecing together the history of their dealings with Lee. She told them that April, the second birth mother Lee had matched them with, hadn't been pregnant.

In July, the government filed another indictment of Lee, in which it also charged a local woman named Enhelica Wiggins as an accomplice, after finding recordings on her phone in which she had posed as a fake birth mother to several of Lee's adoptive families. (Wiggins pleaded guilty to wire fraud and was sentenced to twenty-one months in prison.) The government found that Lee had taken in \$2.1 million from her adoption activities, more than a million of that in 2018. She had also spent almost four hundred thousand dollars on luxury purchases, including more than forty thousand dollars each at Louis Vuitton, David Yurman, and Hutch's Jewelry. Her degree from Northwestern was fake; the school doesn't offer a master's in social work. In August, Lee pleaded guilty to wire fraud. When I spoke to her by phone, Lee said that she was innocent, adding that prosecutors had threatened to charge her husband if she fought the case by going to trial. (Sara Woodward said that this was not true.) Lee was on the verge of tears as she told me that pleading guilty had been a mistake. She is now seeking to overturn her plea.

The investigation had found a hundred and sixty families and seventy birth mothers whom Lee allegedly defrauded. Some of them, including Teresa and Mike Matheny, had successfully adopted babies, but most had not. Dozens of members of adoptive families travelled from across the country to a federal courtroom in downtown Detroit to attend the sentencing, which took place about two weeks before the [COVID-19 shutdown](#). Melanie Peterson, one of the adoptive mothers, told me that the hearing was one of the most powerful experiences of her life. "There was something about being present with those other families—we walked into that courtroom literally hand in hand," she said. Watching Lee enter the room in a prison jumpsuit, hearing the sound of her ankle chains clinking, was deeply cathartic. "I just needed

to see her face, to know that she was a real person, that I wasn't making this all up in my heart and head," Peterson said.

Bernard Friedman, the judge overseeing the case, said that Lee had "ruined people's lives for generations," ordered that she pay restitution of more than a million dollars, and issued the maximum penalty permitted under the sentencing guidelines: ten years and one month in prison.

Before Friedman handed down the sentence, he told the victims in attendance who planned to address the court to take their time. The hearing lasted for nearly five hours. Fifteen people, including Adam, Peterson, and Teresa Matheny, spoke. Lee was described as a "criminal" and a "monster." Several victims made passionate calls for reform of the adoption system, and argued that the current patchwork regulation of baby brokers was inadequate. Amber Morey, a nursing student in Phoenix, described the experience of being matched with a birth mother named Stacey in 2017, sending Lee thousands of dollars for expenses, reorganizing her life around becoming a mother, and then flying to Michigan for the delivery, only to be told by Lee that Stacey had inexplicably disappeared. Morey then requested to address Lee directly. She turned toward Lee, who sat at the defendant's table, and asked, "Did Stacey even exist?" There was a pause before Lee replied, "In my heart she did."

When I visited Kyle and Adam this past May, they were getting ready to leave on a family camping trip. We sat in a bright sunroom papered with children's finger paintings and posters of the alphabet. Their year dealing with Lee had been "a mess" for them as a couple, Adam told me. "We fought. We argued. We disagreed on everything." He said he had been frustrated that Kyle had been so blind to Lee's deceptiveness, although he acknowledged that he had been fooled, too. They even contemplated divorce. Kyle told me that the worst part was that he missed so much time with Max while tracking down birth mothers on the Internet, reading news reports, and, eventually, coöperating with the F.B.I.

After Lee was charged, Kyle and Adam said, they had tried to get used to the idea that they would be a one-child family, and that Max would grow up without siblings. Kyle said he decided to make one last inquiry with the adoption agency that had conducted their home study. "We wanted to know

what a real adoption is like,” he told me. A few weeks later, he got a call from the head of the agency, who said that it had what’s known as a “stork drop”—a baby who is born at a hospital and relinquished for adoption without advance notice.

As they prepared to drive to the hospital, Kyle called his parents. “Can you come over to watch Max?” he recalled asking them. “We’re going to the hospital to pick up our daughter.” ♦

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American Chronicles

- [Can MasterClass Teach You Everything?](#)

Studies suggest that it takes at least a decade to achieve real expertise. The company promises transformation in a few hours.

By [Tad Friend](#)

Content

We turn to the Internet for answers. We want to connect, or understand, or simply appreciate *something*—even if it's only Joe Rogan. It's a fraught pursuit. As the Web keeps expanding faster and faster, it's become saturated with lies and errors and loathsome ideas. It's a Pacific Ocean that washes up skeevy wonders from its Great Garbage Patch. We long for a respite, a cove where simple rules are inscribed in the sand.

You may have seen one advertised online, among the “weird tricks” to erase your tummy fat and your student loans. It’s MasterClass, a site that promises to disclose the secrets of everything from photography to comedy to wilderness survival. The company’s recent ad, “Lessons on Greatness. Gretzky,” encapsulates the pitch: a class taught by the greatest hockey player ever, full of insights not just for aspiring players but for anyone eager to achieve extraordinary things. In the seminar, [Wayne Gretzky](#) tells us that as a kid he’d watch games and diagram the puck’s movements on a sketch of a rink, which taught him to “skate to where the puck is gonna be.” Likewise, [Martin Scorsese](#) says in his class that he used to storyboard scenes from movies he admired, such as the chariot race in “Ben-Hur.” The idea that mastery can be achieved by attentive emulation of the masters is the site’s foundational promise. [James Cameron](#), in *his* class, suggests that the path to glory consists of only one small step. “There’s a moment when you’re just a fan, and there’s a moment when you’re a filmmaker,” he assures us. “All you have to do is pick up a camera and start shooting.”

When MasterClass launched, in 2015, it offered three courses: [Dustin Hoffman](#) on acting, James Patterson on writing, and [Serena Williams](#) on tennis. Today, there are a hundred and thirty, in categories from business to wellness. During the pandemic lockdown, demand was up as much as tenfold from the previous year; last fall, when the site had a back-to-school promotion, selling an annual subscription for a dollar instead of a hundred and eighty dollars, two hundred thousand college students signed up in a day. MasterClass will double in size this year, to six hundred employees, as

it launches in the U.K., France, Germany, and Spain. It's a Silicon Valley investor's dream, a rolling juggernaut of flywheels and network effects dedicated to helping you, as the instructor [Garry Kasparov](#) puts it, "upgrade your software."

The classes are crammed with pro tips and are often highly entertaining. [Neil Gaiman](#) explains the comfort and tedium of genre fiction by noting that, in such stories, the plot exists only to prevent all the shoot-outs and cattle stampedes from happening at the same time. Serena Williams advises playing the backhands of big-chested women, because "larger boobs" hinder shoulder rotation. And the singer [St. Vincent](#) observes that the artist's job is to metabolize shame. The classes draw inspiration from the Learning Annex, *TED* talks, the great-books canon, shouty Peloton instructors, even Netflix-and-chill. Yet MasterClass's bespoke self-care embodies our time, as cigar stores and feng-shui embodied theirs. It incarnates the screen-dependent *YOLO FOMO* of those the company calls *CATS*—the curious, aspiring thirtysomethings who constitute a plurality of its audience.

Although MasterClass has 1.5 million subscribers, its adherents pride themselves on possessing secrets vouchsafed only to the élite. The halo of self-satisfaction has inspired a recurrent bit on "Saturday Night Live," and has been parodied by Kevin Bacon ("Even if you're playing a baby, or the Pope, or a woman, it's necessary to have some facial hair"). MasterClass is easy to mock, because it traffics in our lordliest tropes. The musicians wear porkpie hats; the writers wield fountain pens; [Aaron Sorkin](#) walks at length and talks at greater length. The site's vaunting ambition echoes the boast of Cyrano de Bergerac: "I'm going to take the simplest approach to life of all. . . . I've decided to excel in everything." We privately long to be ennobled, but we doubt that most people have the stuff of genius—anyone who's looked around a first-grade gym class knows that. Mastery can be measured only against a vast backdrop of bungling.

In May, eleven MasterClass managers met on Zoom for a monthly "content review" of recent classes. David Rogier, the company's founder and C.E.O., listened as the team went over subscribers' feedback on Amy Tan's class (some found it too easy) and [Questlove's](#) (some found it too hard). He tilted his head to his favorite angle: interrogative. "How can we help steer people to the right skill level of class?" he asked. "Difficulty doesn't necessarily

turn people off. It can be, like, ‘Oh, wow, I don’t understand that, but I’m seeing mastery and craft, and it’s really interesting.’ So how do we figure that out?”

Silence. Rogier chuckled and said, “I know you’ve been working on it.” An irrepressibly curious man of thirty-eight, he has a cherubic smile and a stammer that can close his eyes in struggle. “I stutter when I’m vulnerable,” he told me. “My ex-girlfriends would see it and go, ‘Ooh!’” A self-proclaimed dork (“I’d have to be better at math or engineering to be a nerd”), Rogier went so far as to take notes on [Shonda Rhimes’s](#) maxims on the set of her MasterClass on writing for television, even though she was being filmed for his own Web site. The company has a polling account with SurveyMonkey, but Rogier maintains his own account, so that he can canvass people about, say, their experiences with education (most people hate school but love learning, as he does).

Rogier’s immediate goal with MasterClass is to rebuild the Library of Alexandria in digital form. This ancient Egyptian athenaeum is a totem of the tech world—[Jeff Bezos](#) named Amazon’s Alexa after it—so it’s unsurprising that Amazon, Microsoft, Google, Apple, and Spotify offer MasterClasses to their workers. The site epitomizes Big Tech’s ethos of levelling itself up as it waits impatiently for the world to follow.

His deeper mission is to disseminate expertise. “My ultimate dream is that somebody who’d never have access to these masters takes one of the classes and becomes a master,” he told me. It depresses him that to go deeper into his latest hobby, aquascaping, in which you build underwater worlds, he must contact a specialty shop in Texas or Hungary (“Do you carry assassin snails?”), rather than just clicking on a MasterClass.

His mission is bedevilled by the traditional barriers to education—finding a subject that interests you, finding a teacher who can bring the subject alive, finding time to do the homework—but also by his company’s outsized pedagogic ambitions. It aims to convey not just good-enough-for-a-Twitter-thread adequacy but bona-fide mastery. And it plans to write code to streamline and standardize the whole process. Mark Williamson, the company’s chief operating officer, told me, “I think it’s legitimately possible

for us to create an algorithm that builds a personalized catalogue that leads you to become the best person you can be.”

Rogier called up a fresh slide and said, “Ready to go to the impact stuff? All right, I’m excited!” The company recently identified four “pillars” of impact that it wants its subscribers to experience: Think, Feel, Do, and Share or Be Seen. These are moments that change the way you think or the way you feel, that motivate you to do something, or that prompt you to share a discovery with friends. They are, Rogier hopes, the beginnings of a blueprint for how to teach.

Rena Ferrick, one of the site’s creative directors, explained that a focus group had identified numerous Do impacts in a class by the thriller writer [Dan Brown](#). She played a clip of Brown explaining how to build suspense—by, for instance, ending a chapter before its action resolves, or on a character crying, “Eureka!” Ferrick said, “He broke it down into its discrete parts so that ‘I feel like I can do that now.’ We want to deliver on this Do every time, with every new instructor.”

Ferrick then played a clip in which James Cameron explained how the actors in “Avatar” were filmed making the faces that their blue avatars would display onscreen—and how difficult it was to get his algorithm to re-create those human micro-expressions in the digital beings’ “pseudo-muscles.”

“O.K., so *that* rated high on Be Seen?” Rogier said, his face scrunched in puzzlement. Be Seen is the site’s inconvenient impact, the one least obviously conducive to mastery and most obviously conducive to mansplaining.

A department head said, “It makes you look like you know how x, y, z works.”



"One day, you'll look back on all your youthful mistakes and remember how adorable you were while making them."
Cartoon by Carolita Johnson

"It's fucking awesome," Rogier agreed, "but I'm just trying to grok it."

Ferrick suggested, "It's something you want to talk about and share regardless of whether the person you're talking with is also interested in the same topic." Rogier frowned. *Isn't that the definition of a bore?*

The group studied a class taught by [Sara Blakely](#), the founder of Spanx. In a clip from the end, Blakely gave a Feel-laden synopsis of her journey: "With five thousand dollars, I created a product that didn't exist, but I then also launched a brand that became a global brand, that women around the world love." For three days of filming, Blakely had been plucky and self-deprecating; now she began to get emotional. The crew whooped encouragement, and the director said, "Amazing!" "I'm, like, about to cry," Blakely said, blinking away tears, "because I'm, like, Holy shit, how did I do that?"

Most of the people in the meeting were dabbing their eyes. "It's the best part of the class," Rogier said. He tried to speak, then said, "Sorry, it *is* emotional."

The department head said, "Our next step is understanding how the pillars correlate with one another."

Rogier declared, “I bet you that once we finish this work there will be an optimal mix between the four pillars!” His smile began to fade. “The problem will be, how do you not make it canned?”

Just about every expert in mastery invokes Mozart, each to his own purpose. Was Mozart, who composed his first concerto at five, a born genius? Or was he the product of gruelling years of tutelage from his father? MasterClass instructors often suggest that expertise is available to all. Christina Aguilera tells us, “You are special, you are so talented”; Sheila E. declares that everyone has rhythm; Howard Schultz, the former C.E.O. of Starbucks, assures us that we all have what it takes to lead a company through a crisis.

Yet many of the instructors believe that you need some talent. Aguilera says that she can’t tell us anything about rhythm, because “it’s a gut feeling.” Aaron Sorkin says that dialogue is “the least teachable part of writing.” (Screenplays are mostly dialogue.) [Timbaland](#), who teaches producing and beat-making, told me, “Everybody can do everything—but you’re not going to be good at it. Some people are just gifted.” MasterClass is careful not to alienate viewers with inimitability. Williamson, the C.O.O., told me, “We didn’t do Shaq on basketball, because you look at Shaq and think, If you’re not seven foot one and don’t weigh three hundred pounds, you can’t do it. Steph Curry is a lanky six-three guy—he makes it clear that you *can*, but that hard work is super important.” As Curry says, in his class’s final message, “You need to get in the gym and get to work. Time’s ticking.”

St. Vincent told me, “The implicit assumption in every MasterClass is ‘Just work really hard.’ Oh, and also ‘Work really hard!’ ” Studies suggest that there is a “ten-year rule”: it takes at least a decade of apprenticeship to become world class in a discipline. You must advance from unconscious incompetence (not knowing how bad you are) to conscious incompetence (being all too aware) to conscious competence (keeping your goals firmly in mind) to unconscious competence (being in the zone, or in “flow”). In the book [“Talent Is Overrated,”](#) Geoff Colvin writes about deliberate practice, which is “designed specifically to improve performance, often with a teacher’s help; it pushes the practitioner just beyond, but not way beyond, his or her current limits; it can be repeated a lot; feedback on results is continuously available; it’s highly demanding mentally.” Also, he notes, “it isn’t much fun.”

Deliberate practice requires accepting criticism and feeling clumsy as you train for at least an hour a day, neither of which applies to someone watching a video seminar on her couch. Daniel Pink, who teaches a MasterClass on sales and persuasion, acknowledges that the site can take you only so far. To achieve mastery, he told me, “you’re talking about a totally different service, where for x amount of money Steph Curry will come to your house and summon you from bed at 5 a.m. and force you to shoot one thousand jumpers and then do suicides for an hour. You’re talking about a concierge service—MasterCoach.”

Meetings at MasterClass are festive, like classes held outdoors. Employees unmute on Zoom to applaud one another’s successes or the company’s big sales days or the “member of the month”—a subscriber who talks about, say, being inspired by Sara Blakely to start her own skin-care brand. Paul Bankhead, the chief product officer, said, “I find myself crying almost every other week at the videos of users responding to our classes, or at the marketing trailers. All companies make Kool-Aid and feed it to their employees, but ours is the best I’ve ever drunk.”

Silicon Valley entrepreneurs tend to come in two flavors of self-involvement: Mark Zuckerberg wannabes and [Mark Zuckerberg](#). Rogier is neither. He told me, “I worked with assholes before, and I vowed never to work with assholes again.” Erica Kammann, the company’s chief of staff, started doing research for Rogier as a TaskRabbiter, “and after a month or so I was spending more time with him on his business than I was on my own startup. David has a way of reeling people in.”

Rogier grew up in Los Angeles, in a house where learning was a torch against the darkness. His father’s parents met in Auschwitz. His mother’s mother, Janina, escaped the Nazis because she was on vacation when they invaded Kraków; her father wasn’t so lucky. When David was in second grade, Janina, whom everyone called Yanka, told him that she’d come to America with nothing and managed to become a pediatrician. “Education,” she declared, “is the only thing that can’t be taken away from you.” He named MasterClass’s holding company after her: Yanka Industries.

Rogier’s father was a divorce lawyer who became an abstract painter, his mother a corporate lawyer who became a textile artist. He and his younger

brother, Andrew, both stuttered, but his parents insisted that they read the Los Angeles *Times* and give a précis of one article's contents over dinner. When balked by an obstinate word, Rogier vowed never to opt for an easier synonym. He told me, "Not always being able to say what I wanted, to express myself, shaped my empathy. And it taught me that people are cruel —but don't let that get in your way."

As a kid, Rogier made Lego cities with complex social networks, chatted up visiting repairmen about their work, and idolized the basketball player Reggie Miller: "Reggie made me want to learn how to shoot from behind the three-point line." When he was fourteen, he and a friend built a search engine called Brainfind and sold it for five hundred dollars. At Washington University, in St. Louis, he hosted a show on the college TV station, where he'd interview professors; later, in business school at Stanford, he ran "Lunch and Learn" chats with Silicon Valley luminaries.

After graduating from Stanford, in 2011, Rogier worked at the venture-capital firm Harrison Metal. "I learned that I probably wasn't a great investor," he said. "I had too much of an itch to build." The firm's founder gave him four hundred thousand dollars to start a company. Rogier considered tackling the supply chain for mom-and-pop restaurants, then focussed on a device for people with allergies; he has a peanut allergy and carries an EpiPen. But his technology could detect the gluten in food only eight times out of ten.

He kept being nagged by the idea of improving adult education. In 2013, he ran an ad on Craigslist and paid a dozen responders to tell him about their experience of continuing education, and about the sort of job training they'd like. He included the results in a pitch deck that contained three "universal observations": people made career decisions using "horrible" information, skills training is a ripoff, and people "crave learning more about their dream professions."

Aaron Rasmussen, who had joined Rogier as a technical co-founder, said, "We were talking about doing either 'the crazy idea,' in which we'd get the best people in the world to film classes, or just doing better online classes. The crazy idea was much harder to model financially, because there was no

analogy to a ‘famous person teaching a class’ company. But that was the one we both wanted to do.”

Rogier was determined to have James Patterson, Serena Williams, and Dustin Hoffman as the first three instructors. The pitch wasn’t easy. One investor told me, “Whenever he’d go to C.A.A. or another talent agency, they’d say, ‘He’s not available, but what about the B team?’ ” Rogier, undeterred, would tell his A-team targets that he had looked at the polling, and people wanted to hear from *them*. He’d say that filming would require only four or five hours (a significant underestimate) and that they wouldn’t necessarily be included in promotional material (their contracts would say otherwise). He’d promise that they’d be in the company only of “legends, heroes, and world experts,” and show ersatz screenshots of classes taught by Aaron Sorkin, Phil Jackson, and Jeff Gordon. He hadn’t even approached Sorkin et al., he told me, but “you have to increase the trust factor, and I hadn’t exactly created Instagram.”

Rogier had secured an additional \$1.5 million in funding, but it still took three years to launch. “It was a dark time,” he recalled. He finally got a commitment from Dustin Hoffman by persuading Jay Roach, who’d directed Hoffman in “Meet the Fockers,” to direct the class. Then he got James Patterson to sit for a three-day shoot. “Patterson had twelve things he wanted to teach, and we were with him on all of them, except that we had to push him to do an ‘overcoming writer’s block’ chapter.” (Patterson, who has written or co-written three hundred and twenty-five books, was unfamiliar with the concept.)

In May, 2015, MasterClass went live, with the three classes available for ninety dollars each. “Our first day, we sold only about a hundred and fifty classes. I thought, How do a hundred thousand people not want this instantly?” Rogier said. “I went home and cried into my pillow, and I’m not a crier. I called my parents and said, ‘We are *fucked*.’ I was thinking, Am I a bad entrepreneur? Did I just waste the last three and a half years of my life? They said that I had to go to the office and put on a brave face. And then someone at work told me, ‘This is going to be a huge business!’ Five dollars’ worth of our ads on Facebook and YouTube was bringing in ten dollars in sales, and he could see, when people became aware of us, they

were responding at really high rates.” It helped enormously that Rogier could use Williams and Hoffman in ads.

Four months later, Rogier was on set for Christina Aguilera’s class. “All of a sudden, she breaks out singing ‘Beautiful’ to demonstrate one of her points,” he remembered. “And then I thought, This is going to work!”

In June, eight MasterClass employees gathered on Zoom to assess new instructors. Candidates are graded in twelve categories, including their appeal, their values, the breadth of the subject, and diversity considerations (forty-two per cent of the site’s instructors are minorities, and thirty-six per cent are women). The group also considers both timeliness (“How much is this person participating in culture today?”) and timelessness (“How much will this class mean to people in a hundred years?”). The process has left the new Library of Alexandria a bit lumpy, with twenty classes on writing, sixteen on cooking, and four on science and tech. Not only does no one understand string theory, no one wants to.

The meeting was run by the company’s chief marketing officer, David Schriber, a long-haired dude with a skater vibe who spent fourteen years at Nike. Schriber and Rogier admire each other but view the site differently. Rogier aims to impart singular mastery; Schriber is more interested in widespread proficiency. Two weeks after joining the company, in 2019, he proposed a class in negotiation, which led to the site’s first course from a non-famous person teaching a lunch-pail topic.

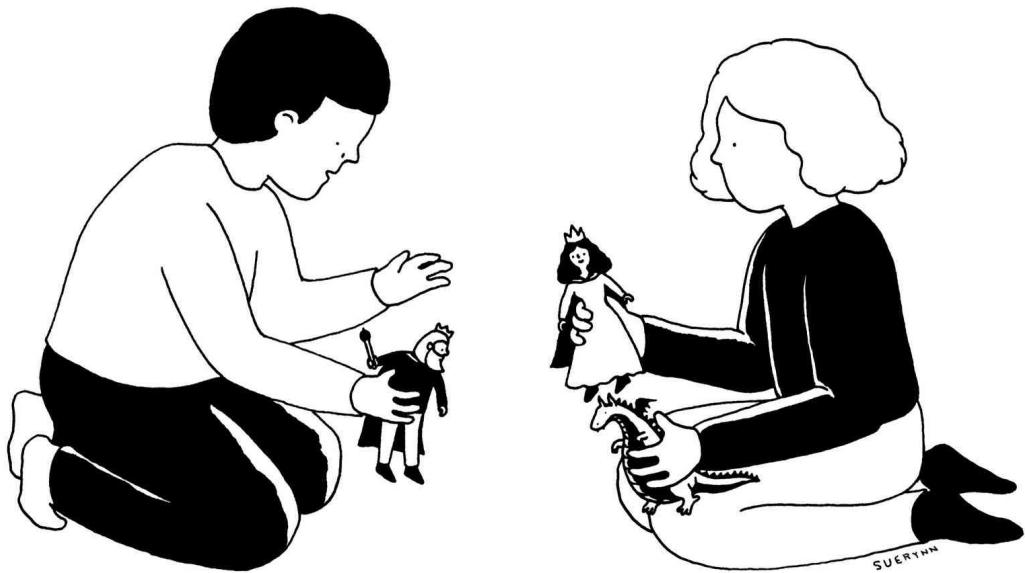
The class, led by a former F.B.I. hostage negotiator named Chris Voss, focusses on the uses of tactical empathy. Voss tells you to mirror your interlocutor’s body language, and to parrot her last few words as a question. If she says, “We can’t possibly raise the money this quarter!,” you say, “This quarter?,” prompting her to explain further. Voss suggests phrasing requests so that the other person gets to say no—“Is it crazy to think we could make this deal happen this week?”—which makes her feel powerful, even as she’s giving you the answer you want. All of this may seem manipulative, but Voss, who became a negotiator because he’d been bullied as a child and wanted to help others who felt powerless, frames it as a matter of fighting back. He told me, “We’re all battered children who’ve been hit by a Goliath.” During the pandemic, Voss’s class cracked the site’s Top Ten, a

group that averages more than four hundred thousand viewers—and it solidified the role of *CATS*' needs in shaping content.

Schriber told me that *CATS* want to learn in three specific, socially attuned ways: “They want to engage in something that makes them feel passionate. They get all choked up in these interviews about not having access to a passion, or about not being able to engage in it as much as their friends seem to be on social media—‘How do my friends know about red wine from Italy?’ Second, they want practical life skills. Because partly they feel, ‘I can’t get to my passion because I can’t sleep, or because my finances aren’t in order and I’m embarrassed to ask my boss for a raise.’ They want to learn about personal finance, real estate, nutrition, public speaking, and running for local office. Third is learning life lessons: when people see Steph Curry bounce a tennis ball and a basketball, they instantly transform the lesson to juggling work and kids while staying home during *COVID*.”

In the meeting, a producer named Erin Murphy shared a slide of potential instructors for hosting and entertaining. The first candidate, she said, “has a really good background in tablecloths and food and menu preparation, but she takes it a step further, into the anthropological aspects at the core of any gathering.” The next candidate required less explanation: [Martha Stewart](#). Murphy said, “We really felt we couldn’t have a list without Martha on it.”

One factor in any assessment is a “commercial score.” How many new subscribers will the combination of topic and instructor bring in? The site’s highest level of name recognition is “Hall of Famer.” MasterClass has standing offers out to such Hall of Famers as Stephen King, [Barack](#) and Michelle Obama, and [Elon Musk](#). (The Pope and Queen Elizabeth are also perennially on the wish list, but Schriber terms their inclusion “non-actionable.”) The more attainable levels range from diamond to bronze. Warren Buffett, whom MasterClass has courted, would be a diamond. [Metallica](#), which has a class coming out soon, was a gold. Chris Hadfield, a former astronaut, was a bronze—but Hadfield’s class is the kind that subscribers love to discover, and thus the kind that drives renewals.



"He loves her, but he's not in love with her."
Cartoon by Suerynn Lee

People sign up for the site to learn from Alicia Keys or Gordon Ramsay, but they renew their subscriptions for the lessons in adulting. Of course, staying on top of daily life can itself be a form of virtuosity. In the book "[Mastery](#)," George Leonard, an aikido master, notes how much trouble we have just vacuuming a room without banging into furniture or getting frustrated by all the unplugging and replugging. "The person who can vacuum an entire house without once losing his or her composure," he writes, "is a person who knows something about mastery."

Yet Schriber told me, "We're not necessarily trying to change a lot of what people *do*, but more how they see the world. We don't say, 'In this class, you're going to spend a lot of time outlining before you start writing'; we market the James Cameron quote." He added, "All the classes are subversive of mastery. They're not ten thousand hours, they're four. We're not asking you to give up your life, and we're not promising that you will become that professional who you're watching. We're asking if you love to learn."

In March, MasterClass filmed the spray-paint and graffiti artist Futura in Brooklyn. The site's producers seek to shoot instructors where they work or would feel at ease. For David Mamet's class, they built a set that replicated his writing cabin log for log. For Futura's class, they filmed him in his studio, as he made a painting called "Tempo Tantrum." Then they moved to

a set built to evoke one of the subway cars where he began tagging, in the nineteen-seventies. Nekisa Cooper, who oversees the content team, and who was on Zoom with me observing the live feed from the set, remarked, “Watching the instructor at work is the gold standard—it makes the other content much, much richer.”

The instructor’s experience during the two- or three-day shoots is akin to a Hollywood star’s. The content team had worked out Futura’s curriculum with him in lengthy conversations, and now a stand-in was ready to spell him when the lighting needed adjusting, and an assistant hovered to get him anything he needed. The crew was forbidden to ask for selfies, and he would have approval rights over the final cut, so he could relax into candor without fear of embarrassment. The writer Roxane Gay, who was flown to Iceland and lodged at a lake house with her wife during her class, told me, “It was the first time I’ve ever felt that my expertise was respected and valued by people who wanted something from me.”

Filming and editing a MasterClass costs a minimum of seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars, and the money is evident onscreen. The sets are elaborate: Walter Mosley is framed by six thousand books, Questlove by ten thousand records. As many as four cameras are at work, and the main one uses an EyeDirect, which facilitates the classes’ distinctive “instructor eye contact”; the instructor sees the interviewer’s face mirrored in front of the lens and responds to it, so that he seems to be talking directly to you. Daniel Pink acknowledges that many of his sales techniques can be had for free on YouTube: “You can find some of the ingredients at grocery stores all over.” But, he says, “this is the full meal, presented to you with perfect service.”

Though MasterClass screens for “teachability,” it often finds that instructors can’t readily explain their process. David Schriber said, “People at dinner parties tell me, ‘Just because you’re the best in the world doesn’t mean you’re the best teacher.’ I say, ‘That’s our superpower—our ability to help you get your message across.’” The filmmakers used motion graphics to break down [Simone Biles’s](#) tumbling runs and slow-motion cameras to capture Tony Hawk’s skateboarding tricks. And they often script not just the interviewers’ questions but also the instructor’s answers.

On set with Futura, an interviewer named Dara Kell began to ask about his youth, when he was known as Lenny McGurr. Futura kept digressing into stories about running wild as a young man. “Can we just back up?” Kell said patiently. She had a producer and a director in her ear, weighing in from Los Angeles. “How did the discipline of the Navy influence your career?” It was an invitation to expound on how rampant creativity got focussed by martial rigor. Futura smiled under his watch cap. “Did I learn anything in the military as far as discipline?” he said. “Uh, no.”

Kell began to make pointed suggestions. “We need a few specific lines, to lead off the lessons,” she explained. “Feel free to put these into your own words, but something like ‘In this class, I’m going to teach you how to use a spray can, and how to access the world of abstraction.’” The opening lesson, filmed at the end, usually lays out the class’s scope. A moment later, Kell added, “And if you could say, ‘I’m going to break down the secrets of my painting skill, and give you a tool kit for expressing yourself through abstraction and symbolism?’” Futura repeated her cue, his expression hangdog but game. “Could you add something about being willing to paint outside of the lines, to make mistakes?” He cradled his head in his hands. “You’re doing great!”

“In this class,” he said, “I’m going to teach you how to paint outside the lines, how to move freely, to let yourself go.”

“If you could say, ‘If you’re a creative person, this class is for you. If you’re a painter, a photographer’—feel free to put it into your own words.” Kell was looking for a trailer line that would arrest idle scrollers—something “thumb-stopping,” in the industry parlance.

“This class is for you”—Futura teared up, dropping his head back into his hands. “I just lost it, Dara.” Eying him empathetically, Nekisa Cooper told me, “There’s a formula and a checklist for these things, but trying to get a marketing line is a challenge, because the instructor is typically emotional as they reflect on the import of it all, the legacy, and you want a sound bite.”

In the end, Futura’s opening chapter was a shrewdly edited montage, interspersing shots of him painting with old footage of graffiti-spangled subway cars, as the artist expressed his thoughts in a stitched-together voice-

over. It concludes with him telling us, on camera, that his journey is retraceable if you just remain open to possibility: “I’m sitting here an end result of something I certainly didn’t think I could do.”

After the shoot, I talked to Futura in his studio in Red Hook. “I was so nervous,” he said. “It was weird to have to speak about what I do in a way that’s not really me. I feel like the best way I could teach anyone is to give them *physical* instruction, to be with them. And, even then, I can’t impart that knowledge of ‘It’s thirty per cent pressure on the nozzle, or sixty per cent mixing the propellant and the color.’” He had broken down, he explained, because “I wanted to express something about passion, about how it’s not about getting paid, but I think I got overwhelmed. They’re going to have just me and Jeff Koons to teach painting. . . .” His voice trembled. He was wearing the watch cap and faux-military flight suit that MasterClass had dressed him in for the shoot, and he’d brought most of the subway-car set to his studio. He was becoming MasterClass’s idea of what he should be. “Being in their archive is a Bruce Lee moment. People will say, Oh, you’re like a Jedi, you’re Yoda,” he said. “It’s the most prestigious thing I’ve ever done.”

In MasterClass’s early years, teaching was a speculative venture, a way for instructors who’d written their memoirs, or maxed out on Instagram, to connect with passionate fans. It quickly became an élite guild. Rogier told me, “I said to Steph Curry, ‘Why are you doing this? You don’t need to.’ He said, ‘I saw who you had on the shelf, and I want to be on the shelf with those people.’” (The financial incentive is a relatively small part of the appeal; instructors’ fees, which have exceeded a hundred thousand dollars, have dropped as the company’s audience has grown.)

The site is less a schoolhouse than a clubhouse, whose members lend one another prestige. Schriber said, “I always make fun of David for going after people from his youth, like Usher,” who taught an early class. “But people who are actually aware of Usher say they *do* think of him as an expert—and Usher is a class that a lot of people take.” Rogier told me, “I’m very good, apparently, at figuring out people who *other* people will think are experts.” It’s the kind of empathetic projection that can win you money on “Family Feud.” “Or it could just be that I’m an average person.”

Tan France, best known for upgrading wardrobes on “[Queer Eye](#),” told me, “People had maybe thought, Ah, he’s a joke, he’s not really doing anything except putting a suit on someone who looks terrible, so of course they look better afterward. MasterClass has been so beneficial—finally, I feel like I’ve been vindicated.” Ron Finley, an urban gardener whose class walks students through making a planter out of a dresser drawer, said that his class instantly changed his profile: “A girlfriend of mine said, ‘You know, the only thing you’re going to be remembered for, the rest of your life, is the dresser drawers.’ And I got all these proposals of marriage on social media: ‘He can plant my garden all day!’ Oh, my God . . .”

Rogier acknowledged that not all of the site’s classes will be Library of Alexandria-worthy: “Tan France’s class, or the dog-training class, I don’t think a lot of people will go back to in a hundred years.” But, he added, “it’s hard to know what will stand the test of time. When the Wright brothers were running a bike with wings off a hill, or whatever, I would not have asked them to teach a MasterClass, because it would have seemed crazy.”

Part of the appeal for teachers is that the site allows them a certain amount of argumentative latitude. Roxane Gay, who in her class torches the “electorally sanctioned white supremacy” of Donald Trump, told me, “I never once felt that I couldn’t speak my mind.” Spike Lee tells his students that “the foundation of the United States of America is the genocide of the Native people and slavery.” And [Jane Goodall](#), though exceedingly genteel, unleashes a critique of bottled Fiji water and industrial agriculture and having too many children and “the Western, greedy, materialistic world” that has destroyed our environment and given rise to, well, MasterClass.

“It’s a platform about craft,” Rogier told me, “but you’re going to miss out on understanding Spike Lee if you don’t understand what drives him. You need to be pushed—learning is uncomfortable.” This discomfort is circumscribed by liberal values: the site’s only overtly conservative instructors are David Mamet, whose class sticks to playwriting, and Karl Rove, whose class, with David Axelrod, is an essentially nonpartisan tutorial on political campaigns. Rogier withdrew Kevin Spacey’s and Dustin Hoffman’s acting classes because of allegations of sexual abuse. (Hoffman and Spacey have both responded to the allegations with a mixture of denials and apologies.) But he was vague about where the cancellation line should

fall. When I pressed him, he said, “I would never have a Nazi on the platform. We’ve never thought of having people who’ve killed people on the site.” I wondered whether that wasn’t a nuanced issue, given that Barack Obama, whom he’s pursued for some time, gave orders for drone strikes that killed thousands of people, many of them innocent civilians. Rogier gazed at me, emanating a sense of being profoundly misunderstood.

In 2017, the site switched to an annual subscription, relieving the need to sell classes individually. Schriber said, “There was a very cold business fact that we had to market each new class to a new audience.” When the subscription plan began, though, the site offered just sixteen classes. Investors were concerned that there weren’t enough offerings in any given category to encourage repeated visits. But Rogier, who is interested in business *and* gardening *and* basketball, was betting that everyone was as broadly curious as he is.

Other entrepreneurs, who view people differently, have tried to “verticalize” Rogier’s model. Startups routinely attack a successful company by selecting one of its components and building a deeper, narrower version of it. Last fall, Omer Atesmen launched The Skills, a sports-instruction site where you can learn from Megan Rapinoe and [Michael Phelps](#). The Skills shoots classes fast, sometimes in one long day, for less than two hundred thousand dollars—a fraction of MasterClass’s budget. “I feel grateful to MasterClass. They’ve really opened up people’s eyes to this area, from athletes to investors,” Atesmen said. “I jokingly tell people that they’re NBC and we’re ESPN.”

Last summer, Steve Avery launched YesChef, for people who enjoy MasterClass’s cooking classes but want even more. YesChef introduces you to Nancy Silverton, a founder of the artisanal-bread movement, with an hour-long documentary about her expeditions to markets in Umbria and Los Angeles. “MasterClass’s premise is ‘We’re going to give you people who don’t need an introduction,’ ” Avery said. “I don’t know anything more about Gordon Ramsay now than I did before I watched his MasterClass—it could have been anyone teaching. Without the context of knowing what *bagna cauda* is, or Nancy Silverton’s legacy around salads, she’s just doing a kitchen demo, and you can get that anywhere.” Immersion in the cook’s world also provides another work-around for the problem of tongue-tied

experts. “Nancy cannot stand in front of a camera and talk for five hours—it would be awful,” Avery said. “She *did* do it, on Panna Cooking, and it *was* awful.”

MasterClass seems unthreatened by the nascent competition. “Will someone do a MasterClass but only for knitting?” Sam Lessin, an investor in the company, said. “Sure, someone always goes hypervertical. We won’t own the entire world of edutainment—but maybe we’re the HBO of it.” Rogier raised two hundred and twenty-five million dollars earlier this year; the site, now valued at just over \$2.7 billion, is expected to go public soon.

Once the subscription plan started, classes got more than twenty per cent shorter. With multiple instructors in a category, each class no longer needed to be comprehensive—and, one imagines, the site no longer had to justify its fees with sheer duration. Yet almost all the newer classes are still more than two hours long. Neil Gaiman, whose class runs nearly five hours, told me, “I could probably reduce everything that’s vital to a three-minute lecture: ‘O.K., you have to write, and you have to keep going, and you have to finish.’ But for young writers that feels too *simple*. So I talk about how you build a comic, and what to do when you get stuck—useful, hard-won stuff, but it’s also there because it’s a MasterClass, and you paid your hundred and eighty dollars.” He added, “The reason people love the idea of a MasterClass is that you’re taking a shortcut—after just six hours, you’re there! Mostly, what any MasterClass is about is making as accessible as possible the idea that there is no shortcut. You have to drive the whole way.”

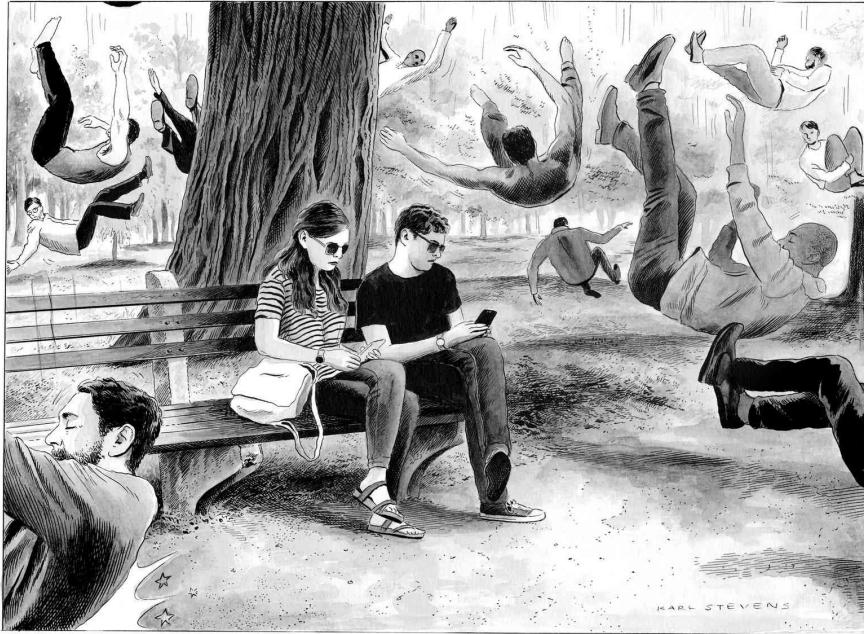
The world doesn’t lack for programming, so companies like MasterClass often focus on engagement: how do we stop you from leaving? The longer someone stays on your site, the more ads you can show her, and the more likely she is to renew her subscription. That’s why Netflix autoplays the next episode of “Money Heist” before you can even think about getting up to go to the bathroom.

Rogier expects his audience to stick around for a while. “Quibi showed that short form is not the cure for everything,” he told me, referring to the bite-size-content site that blew through \$1.4 billion and went out of business in six months. “The longer a class of ours is, the more people will watch of it.” MasterClass is for people who have some free time on their commute home,

or before bed. “It’s for medium-sized attention spans,” Jay Roach, who directed several early classes, said. “That’s the niche David figured out.”

MasterClass has an unusually high renewal rate: fifty-two per cent after the first year. But it turns out that the amount of time subscribers spend watching classes has no effect on whether they renew. What they really want remains a mystery. When you trace their pathways on the site, it becomes clear that mastery of a single topic—an ascetic devotion to ten thousand hours of squat jumps or dicing zucchini—isn’t usually it. The typical student takes ten classes and hops around. Unaccountably, those who come for Bobbi Brown’s makeup tips head next to Chris Voss’s class on negotiation, and those who watch Steph Curry proceed to Steve Martin.

MasterClass’s chief product officer, Paul Bankhead, who previously led Google’s app-and-media store, is charged with interpreting and guiding subscriber behavior. “If you’re into writing, it’s easy to show you all the writing classes,” he told me. “But it might be good for you as a human being if we show you another category, like cooking or how to be an astronaut.” He smiled wryly. “My life in building recommendation systems tells me that all humans want more of the same. But we’re in the business of changing lives. Only, it’s hard to figure out how to do that, because human beings struggle to explain their motivations. Asking them *why* they like a class doesn’t give you very reliable data.”



"Weird. My phone says that there's only a thirty-per-cent chance of it raining men at 4 P.M."
Cartoon by Karl Stevens

When I told Rogier about Bankhead's view, he nodded understandingly, then said, "My thirst is not quenched until I understand the why." He laughed. "And, right now, any hypothesis you might offer about why there's a high correlation between Bobbi Brown and Chris Voss, I'd have to say, sorry, but that doesn't make any sense."

Many subscribers are happy enough watching whatever is on the site's home page. Mark Williamson told me that he wasn't surprised by the early success of James Patterson's class: "A lot of people want to be writers. But Hans Zimmer?" Zimmer is a composer who scored such movies as "The Lion King" and "Inception." "That class also did incredibly well, even though there aren't that many people who want to score films. But people do want to learn about things they're interested in—and they're *entertained* by that."

I have zero interest in becoming a ballet dancer. But the way that Misty Copeland warms up in her MasterClass, the way her hands keep tensely regripping the barre, made me feel in my sinews how hard she's working just to do her pliés and tendus. "I'm not a master, and I don't teach ballet," Copeland told me, "but I wanted people to see the humanity of it." I could appreciate her craft—the way her airy leaps were rooted in earthbound tasks—without feeling any obligation to emulate it. MasterClass is like "This Old House," but for people.

The best classes give you a new lens on the world. James Patterson says that the bits of his advice about writing that strike you as the most wrongheaded are the ones you need to incorporate, because “those are the things that are farthest from what you’re doing now.” Matthew Walker, the site’s sleep expert, warns against caffeine, alcohol, and naps—three of my favorite things. “From a biochemical perspective,” he observes, “wakefulness is low-level brain damage.” I preferred world views that felt additive rather than subtractive, such as that of Ron Finley, the urban gardener. “Knowledge is gangsta,” Finley says. “Soil is gangsta. Air is gangsta as fuck. You can’t get no more gangsta than air.” As he told me, his class isn’t really about gardening—“it’s about freedom.” Freedom from the old you.

Last December, MasterClass’s content and insights teams met to discuss test results for a forthcoming class on meditation from Jon Kabat-Zinn, the roostery sage who leads the American mindfulness movement. Several people suggested that the class, which ran more than seven hours, and which featured stretches where Kabat-Zinn simply sat in the lotus position, might not need his recitals of poems by Rumi and Emily Dickinson.

Jess Van Garsse, a creative director, brought up the section on yoga: “He’s not a yoga teacher, and he’s kind of older, and kind of loses his balance at the beginning, and he’s awkward. He looked at that footage and said, ‘Keep it in, I love it.’ But I was really surprised by the lack of cringey comments around that.”

Nekisa Cooper was unconcerned. “We have to harken back to the original mission,” she said. “It’s not ‘How do we teach meditation?’ It’s ‘How do we capture the mastery of this instructor?’ I think we need to just go with this being part of the Jon Kabat-Zinn experience.”

When MasterClass first reached out, Kabat-Zinn told me, he ignored the e-mails for six months, because “I’d never even heard of them.” And then he was dubious: “I didn’t want to do something for the moneyed élite, the glitterati.” He insisted on having lunch with David Rogier to interrogate his values. Rogier was nervous—“Jon Kabat-Zinn can look into your soul!”—but his sincerity shone through, as did his promise that the class would be made available to the meditation community for free. “His intention is to

bring good into the world,” Kabat-Zinn said, “and he understands that that requires going beyond their business model.”

Or even undermining it: Kabat-Zinn’s class is a P.S.A. against striving. “You will never be Mother Teresa, you will never be the Dalai Lama,” he says. “The only chance you have is to be yourself.” He adds that “the entire thrust of this MasterClass . . . is that you’re already perfect.” You can’t attain, you can’t complete, you can’t master; you can only recognize who you are. When I spoke with Kabat-Zinn, I suggested that if you really absorbed his class you might not take any more MasterClasses. “You might not!” he agreed, laughing.

Rogier maintains his belief in the power of perfectibility. At the content-review meeting in June, he called up a slide showing which subject categories had provided the most impact. Wellness was out in front, with eighty-nine-per-cent efficacy. “It kinda makes sense—sleep, yoga,” he said. He seemed resigned to the fact that his subscribers weren’t aiming higher. But, as he thinks his way through the maze of Dos and Feels and Be Seens, he still hopes to eventually understand exactly how a nifty bit of technique can produce an epiphany. “It’s going to be a combination of taste and statistics, and it’s messy, but if we can combine it all and push that out into the world—holy shit, we can change the way people learn!” he said. “You’re looking for those mind-bending moments, like when Hans Zimmer says that every musical note asks or answers a question, and then he *demonstrates* it. Or Garry Kasparov, who made moves that just blew my mind. On set, he asked me to look at the chessboard as he set up some positions. I noticed one combination he planned to point out, and thought, I’m seeing the board like Garry Kasparov! He said, ‘That would be the *beginner* level.’ ” Rogier cracked up, then went on, “You have to meet expectations for what consumers expect. But my hypothesis is that the magic comes when you also give them other kinds of impacts that they *don’t* expect.”

Feelings inspire empathy, and empathy can open you to marvels. As the magician Teller explains in his class with Penn, at age five he imprinted on his Howdy Doody Magic Kit, which contained a Mystic Tray that amazed him by multiplying pennies. That made him realize, he tells us movingly, that “something could be a miracle and a trick at the same time.”

The ultimate trick—or miracle—is changing your life. Erica Kammann, Rogier’s chief of staff, told me, “Post-pandemic, David’s going to be back out in the world, and we’re going to find him a wife, and he’s going to have a family.” Yet he already seems bound to a life partner, in MasterClass. “This is the hardest thing I’ve ever done—I’ve lost friends, put on weight, faced a level of stress and anxiety and lost sleep that I didn’t know existed,” he said. “It’s also the best thing I’ve ever done—having impact on a *large* number of people is replenishing and addicting.”

At times, the enterprise seems to be escaping his grasp. Rogier watched every MasterClass until about 2018, when he began to fall behind; now, as new classes début nearly every week, he’s even further from completion. I noted, gently, that he’d nonetheless optimized himself in numerous ways. “Does optimization lead to happiness?” he wondered. “I hate the myth of the fully optimized life—if you strive to become fully optimized, you become a robot. To me, it’s just, the more I know, the more I can win against the bullies.”

The site has recently begun to attract instructors, including Amy Tan, Elaine Welteroth, Jake Shimabukuro, and [Malala Yousafzai](#), who were MasterClass subscribers before they taught their classes. “Eventually, it’ll be like the way adults now talk about ‘Sesame Street’ in their childhoods,” David Schriber said. “We’re ‘Sesame Street’ for adults.”

But Rogier told me that “the main goal is still to have somebody use the classes to become a master. We do also hope for the well-rounded person who expands their horizons. And if I had to choose between the two I guess I’d choose lots and lots of well-rounded people.” The set of subscribers on the mastery track is a shrinking minority; MasterClass has perfected the art of beguiling people with an array of delights that distract them from pursuing a single discipline. There is always going to be more money in distraction. But, Rogier said, stubbornly arguing against his own company’s business case, “A master, one master, is worth a *lot*.” How much, exactly? He focussed, his stutter subdued. “Norman Borlaug”—who won the Nobel Peace Prize for his agricultural innovations—“saved a billion lives. Or look at the people who developed the *COVID* vaccines.” He did the lonely mental arithmetic. “I’d say a master is worth ten million happy, well-rounded people. Maybe a hundred million.” ♦

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Art

- [The Conceptual and Empathetic Art of Gillian Wearing](#)

[October 25, 2021 Issue](#)

The Conceptual and Empathetic Art of Gillian Wearing

The British artist's bronze homage to Diane Arbus is unveiled in Central Park, and the Guggenheim opens the retrospective "Gillian Wearing: Wearing Masks."

October 15, 2021



Photograph by Eric Helgas for The New Yorker

The British artist **Gillian Wearing** is celebrated for her photographic and video portraits, which are at once conceptual and empathetic. Recently, Wearing began making sculptures, including the first monument to a woman—the suffragist Millicent Fawcett—ever installed in London's Parliament Square. On Oct. 20, the Public Art Fund unveils Wearing's bronze homage to Diane Arbus (pictured) in Central Park's Doris C. Freedman Plaza; on Nov. 5, the Guggenheim opens the retrospective "Gillian Wearing: Wearing Masks."

Books

- [The Miracle of Stephen Crane](#)
- [Briefly Noted](#)
- [The Many Wars of Pat Barker](#)

Born after the Civil War, he turned himself into its most powerful witness—and modernized the American novel.

By [Adam Gopnik](#)

Content

Paul Auster's "[Burning Boy: The Life and Work of Stephen Crane](#)" (Holt) is a labor of love of a kind rare in contemporary letters. A detailed, nearly eight-hundred-page account of the brief life of the author of "[The Red Badge of Courage](#)" and "The Blue Hotel," augmented by readings of his work, and a compendium of contemporary reactions to it, it seems motivated purely by a devotion to Crane's writing. Usually, when a well-established writer turns to an earlier, overlooked exemplar, there is an element of self-approval through implied genealogy: "Meet the parents!" is what the writer is really saying. And so we get [John Updike](#) on William Dean Howells, extolling the virtues of charm and middle-range realism, or Gore Vidal on H. L. Mencken, praising an inheritance of bile alleviated by humor. Indeed, Crane got this kind of homage in a brief [critical life](#) from the poet John Berryman in the nineteen-fifties, a heavily Freudian interpretation in which Berryman was obviously identifying a precedent for his own cryptic American poetic vernacular in Crane's verse collections "The Black Riders" and "War Is Kind."

But Auster, voluminous in output and long-breathed in his sentences, would seem to have little in common with the terse, hard-bitten Crane. A postmodern luxuriance of reference and a plurality of literary manners is central to Auster's own writing; in this book, the opening pages alone offer a list of some seventy-five inventions of Crane's time. The quotations from Crane's harsh, haiku-like poems spit out from Auster's gently loquacious pages in unmissable disjunction. No, Auster plainly loves Crane—and wants the reader to—for Crane's own far-from-sweet sake.

And Auster is right: Crane counts. Everything that appeared innovative in writing which came out a generation later is present in his "Maggie: A Girl of the Streets" (1893) and "The Red Badge of Courage" (1895). The tone of taciturn minimalism that Hemingway seemed to discover only after the Great War—with its roots in newspaper reporting, its deliberate amputation of overt editorializing, its belief that sensual detail is itself sufficient to make

all the moral points worth making—is fully achieved in Crane’s work. So is the embrace of an unembarrassed sexual realism in “Maggie,” which preceded Dreiser’s [Sister Carrie](#) by almost a decade.

How did he get to be so good so young? Crane was born in Newark in 1871, the fourteenth child of a Methodist minister and his politically minded, temperance-crusader wife. Early in the book, Auster provides, alongside those inventions, a roll call of American sins from the period of Crane’s youth: Wounded Knee, the demise of Reconstruction, and so on—all of which, however grievous, happened far from the Crane habitat. The book comes fully to life when it evokes the fabric of the Crane family in New Jersey. The family was intimately entangled in the great and liberating crusade for women’s suffrage, which was also tied to the notably misguided crusade for prohibition. Crane lived in a world of brutal poverty—and also one of expanded cultural possibilities that made possible his avant-garde practice, and his moral realism.

By the age of twenty, Crane was a reporter. This role explains much of the way he wrote and what he wrote. He began writing for a news bureau in Asbury Park, which was already a beach resort of the middle classes, and he immediately sprang onto the page sounding like himself. The tone of eighteen-nineties newspapering—stinging, light, a little insolent, with editorial ponderings left to the editorial page—was very much his, as was the piling on of detail, the gift for unforced scene painting, the comically memorable final image pulling an episode together. From an early dispatch:

All sorts and conditions of men are to be seen on the board walk. There is the sharp, keen-looking New-York business man, the long and lank Jersey farmer, the dark-skinned sons of India, the self-possessed Chinaman, the black-haired Southerner and the man with the big hat from “the wild and wooly plains” of the West. . . . The stock brokers gather in little groups on the broad plaza and discuss the prospective rise and fall of stocks; the pretty girl, resplendent in her finest gown, walks up and down within a few feet of the surging billows and chatters away with the college youth. . . . [They] chew gum together in time to the beating of the waves upon the sandy beach.

The passage from reporter to novelist (and poet) was in some ways the dominant trajectory of American writing then, when there was no Iowa Writers' Workshop or much in the way of publisher's advances. You wrote for a paper and hoped to sell a book. The newspaper's disdain for fancy talk or empty platitudes was every bit as effective in paring down your prose and making you care most about the elemental particulars as any course in Flaubert. It was from this background that Crane wrote "Maggie: A Girl of the Streets." It is not as good a novel as we'd like it to be, given its prescience in American literature for austere realism. The story of a decent girl forced into prostitution by poverty, it is striking for the complete absence of sentimentality about either the protagonist or her circumstances: Maggie has a heart not so much of gold as of iron. What is most memorable in the book now is the talk, and Crane's way of placing pungent, broken dialogue against a serenely descriptive background. No publisher would touch it, and, when Crane self-published it, hardly any readers would, either.

Fortunately, there was a significant exception to the wave of indifference: William Dean Howells, the good guy of American letters in his day, whose nearly infallible tuning fork for writing, which had allowed him to appreciate Emily Dickinson before almost anyone else did, also enabled him to respond to Crane. (Though only after Crane had given him a second nudge to read it. Eminent literary people *want* to read the work of the young and coming; they just need to be reminded that it was sent to them two months ago.)

Overnight, Crane had as a literary mentor someone who was both broadly acceptable to middlebrow readers and acutely attuned to the avant-garde. Howells was as much protector as mentor, though it seems entirely plausible that, as one critic maintained, he was the first to read Dickinson's poetry to Crane. The exposure helped liberate his own poems. If "Maggie" is amazing, in its way, it doesn't touch the poetry in the collection "The Black Riders," from 1895, which reads like a collaboration between Dickinson and a streetwalker—grim materials with ecstatic measures. As Berryman saw, it is hair-raising in the modernity of its diction and the death's-head grin of its attitudes:

I saw a creature, naked, bestial,
Who, squatting upon the ground,

Held his heart in his hands,
And ate of it.
I said, "Is it good, friend?"
"It is bitter—bitter," he answered;
"But I like it
"Because it is bitter,
"And because it is my heart."

Certainly nothing in "Maggie" suggested the scale of what Crane pulled off in "Red Badge" only two years later. It's the story of a teen-age boy, of his immersion and panic in battle, during the Civil War, and of his achievement of the "red badge"—a wound, though thankfully not a fatal one. "Red Badge" is one of the great American acts of originality; and if Auster is right that it has largely vanished from the high-school curriculum, its exile is hard to explain, given that it crosses no pieties, offends no taboos, and steps on no obviously inflamed corn. It is relentlessly apolitical, in a way that, as many critics have remarked, removes the reasons for the war from the war. It's a work of sheer pointillist sensuality and violence: no causes, no purposes, no justifications—just a stream of consciousness of fear and, in the end, deliverance through a kind of courage that is indistinguishable from insanity.



"But after this stage we're planning to raise him without technology."
Cartoon by Liana Finck

But that's what gives it credibility as a work of human imagination: teen-age boys set down in a universe of limitless boredom suddenly interrupted by hideous violence and omnipresent death would not, in truth, think of the cause but of their own survival, seeking only the implicit approval of their fellow-soldiers. "Red Badge" is not about war; it is about battle. Soldiers fight and die so they don't let down the other men who are in the line with them. One of the miracles of American fiction is that Crane somehow imagined all this, and then faithfully reported his imagination as though it had happened. What's astonishing is not simply that he could imagine battle but that he could so keenly imagine the details of exhaustion, tedium, and routines entirely unknown to him:

The men had begun to count the miles upon their fingers, and they grew tired. "Sore feet an' damned short rations, that's all," said the loud soldier. There was perspiration and grumblings. After a time they began to shed their knapsacks. Some tossed them unconcernedly down; others hid them carefully, asserting their plans to return for them at some convenient time. Men extricated themselves from thick shirts. Presently few carried anything but their necessary clothing, blankets, haversacks, canteens, and arms and ammunition. "You can now eat and shoot," said the tall soldier to the youth. "That's all you want to do."

There was a sudden change from the ponderous infantry of theory to the light and speedy infantry of practice. The regiment, relieved of a burden, received a new impetus. But there was much loss of valuable knapsacks, and, on the whole, very good shirts. . . . Presently the army again sat down to think. The odor of the peaceful pines was in the men's nostrils. The sound of monotonous axe blows rang through the forest, and the insects, nodding upon their perches, crooned like old women.

It was Crane, more than any other novelist, who invented the American stoical sound. Edmund Wilson, in "Patriotic Gore" (1962), saw this new tone, with its impassive gestures and tight-lipped, laconic ambiguities, as a broader effect of the Civil War on American literature. The only answer to the nihilism of war is a neutrality of diction, with rage vibrating just underneath. Hemingway wrote of the Great War, in "A Farewell to Arms," almost in homage to what Crane had written of the Civil War.

How did Crane conjure it all? Auster dutifully pulls out the memoirs and historical sources that Crane had likely read. But the novel really seems to have been a case of a first-class imagination going to work on what had become all-pervasive material. The Civil War and its warriors were everywhere; when Crane went to Cuba to cover the Spanish-American War, in 1898, many of the leaders of the American troops were Civil War officers, including some Confederates.

Auster is often sharp-eyed and revealing about the details of Crane's writing, as when he points out how much Crane's tone of serene omniscience depends on the passive construction of his sentences. But when he implies that Crane is original because he summons up interior experience in the guise of exterior experience—makes a psychology by inspecting a perceptual field—he is a little wide of the mark. This is, after all, simply a description of what good writing does: Homer and Virgil writing on war were doing it, too. (We are inside Odysseus' head, then out on the Trojan plain. We visit motive, then get blood.) What makes Crane remarkable is not that he rendered things felt as things seen but that he could report with such meticulous attention on things that were felt and seen only in his imagination. Again and again in his novel, the writing has the eerie, hyperintense credibility of remembered trauma—not just of something known but of something that, in its mundane horror, the narrator finds impossible to forget:

The men dropped here and there like bundles. The captain of the youth's company had been killed in an early part of the action. His body lay stretched out in the position of a tired man resting, but upon his face there was an astonished and sorrowful look, as if he thought some friend had done him an ill turn. The babbling man was grazed by a shot that made the blood stream widely down his face. He clapped both hands to his head. "Oh!" he said, and ran. Another grunted suddenly as if he had been struck by a club in the stomach. He sat down and gazed ruefully. In his eyes there was mute, indefinite reproach. Farther up the line, a man, standing behind a tree, had had his knee joint splintered by a ball. Immediately he had dropped his rifle and gripped the tree with both arms. And there he remained, clinging desperately and crying for assistance that he might withdraw his hold upon the tree.

The wounded man clinging desperately to the tree has the awkward, anti-dramatic quality of something known. “Red Badge” has this post-traumatic intensity throughout, but so do later stories, just as fictive, like “The Blue Hotel” and the unforgettable “The Five White Mice,” about a night of gambling in Mexico that almost turns to murder, where the sudden possibility of death hangs in the air, and on the page, in a way that isn’t just vivid but tangible. The ability not simply to imagine but to *animate* imagination is as rare a gift as the composer’s gift of melody, and, like that gift, it shows up early or it doesn’t show up at all. Among American writers, perhaps only Salinger had the same precocity, the same hard-edged clarity of apprehension, and “[The Catcher in the Rye](#),” another instantly famous novel about an adolescent imagination, shares Crane’s uncanny vividness. Rereading both, one is shocked by how small all the descriptive touches are; those ducks on the Central Park Pond are merely mentioned, not seen. Crane achieves this effect when he juxtaposes the nervous vernacular of a know-it-all soldier against his calm pastoral prose:

Many of the men engaged in a spirited debate. One outlined in a peculiarly lucid manner all the plans of the commanding general. He was opposed by men who advocated that there were other plans of campaign. They clamored at each other, numbers making futile bids for the popular attention. Meanwhile, the soldier who had fetched the rumor bustled about with much importance. He was continually assailed by questions.

“What’s up, Jim?”

“Th’ army’s goin’ t’ move.”

“Ah, what yeh talkin’ about? How yeh know it is?”

“Well, yeh kin b’lieve me er not, jest as yeh like. I don’t care a hang.”

There was much food for thought in the manner in which he replied. He came near to convincing them by disdaining to produce proofs. They grew much excited over it.

The impulse of Crane's fiction is strictly realist and reportorial: the battle scenes in "Red Badge" feel like nightmares out of a surrealist imagination, with an excision of explanation and a simultaneity of effects, because that is what battles must be like. The result is almost mythological in feeling, and mythological in the strict Greek sense that everything seems foreordained, with no one ever master of his fate. We live and die by chance and fortune. This symbolic, myth-seeking quality of Crane's writing gives it an immediacy that makes other American realists, of Dreiser's grimmer, patient kind, seem merely dusty.

Auster calls Crane's work "cinematic," though perhaps it is closer to the truth to say that feature films were derivatively novelistic, Crane and Dickens providing the best model at hand for vivid storytelling. John Huston's 1951 production of "Red Badge"—itself the subject of a masterpiece of reporting, Lillian Ross's "[Picture](#)," in this magazine—is both a good movie and faithful to the text, perhaps a good movie *because* it is faithful to the text. Intelligently cast with young veterans of the war just ended, including the Medal of Honor winner Audie Murphy, it evokes exactly the trembling confusion of non-heroic adolescents thrown into a slaughterhouse which Crane sought in his prose.

Crane's ascension to celebrity was immediate. Auster produces some hostile notices—every writer has one place that just hates him, and Crane's was the New York *Tribune*—but they are more than balanced by the effusive ones. (What damages writers is a completely hostile or uncomprehending press, like the reception that Melville got for "Pierre" and that helped clam him up.) Talked of and written up, Crane found that everyone wanted to be his employer or his friend, including William Randolph Hearst, who was just starting his reign at the New York *Journal*, and Teddy Roosevelt, then the commissioner of the New York City Police. There was even a testimonial dinner held for him in Buffalo, late in 1895, where everyone got drunk.

Then it all went wrong. Crane must have hoped that "Maggie" would be seen as a work of detached research, but he did patronize women "of the streets." He didn't patronize them in the other sense—he treated them as women marginalized by society, who nonetheless had the opportunity for a range of sexual experience, and with it a limited sort of emancipation, that respectable women were unhappily denied. He lived with one, Amy, who

was less a sex worker than a woman who worked out her sexual decisions for herself, having a lively series of attachments to men other than Crane, even as she loved him. It was an arrangement that worked until it didn't.

One night in 1896, Crane was out reporting on nightlife in the Tenderloin—then the red-light district, in the West Thirties—in the company of two “chorus girls.” They were joined by a woman known as Dora Clark, who had previously been arrested for soliciting, and, while Crane was putting one of the chorus girls onto a trolley, a corrupt cop named Charles Becker arrested the other chorus girl, along with Dora Clark, for propositioning two passing men. Crane intervened on behalf of both women, insisting to Becker that he was the husband of the chorus girl. (“If it was necessary to avow a marriage to save a girl who is not a prostitute from being arrested as a prostitute, it must be done, though the man suffer eternally,” he explained later.) The next morning, in police court, he intervened on behalf of Dora Clark as well. “If I ever had a conviction in my life, I am convinced that she did not solicit those two men,” he later wrote.

At first, Crane was admired for his gallantry. “*STEPHEN CRANE AS BRAVE AS HIS HERO. SHOWED THE ‘BADGE OF COURAGE’ IN A NEW YORK POLICE COURT. BOLDLY AVOWED HE HAD BEEN THE ESCORT OF A TENDERLOIN WOMAN*” was the headline in Hearst’s *New York Journal*. Then Becker was brought up on charges, and he brutally beat Dora Clark in retaliation. In the course of a hearing, Becker’s lawyer revealed that Crane had had a long-term, live-in affair with another “Tenderloin woman,” called Amy Huntington or Amy Leslie. To top it off, the police had raided his apartment and found an opium pipe. Crane had earlier done a remarkably fine job on a piece about opium smoking, though Auster is unsure whether Crane smoked the stuff. The vivid evocation of an opium high suggests that he did, but then he excelled at the vivid evocation of things that hadn’t happened to him. Either way, he did hang the opium pipe on the wall of his apartment, a trophy of his adventures.

The headlines altered overnight, as they will. “*JANITOR CONFESSED THAT THE NOVELIST LIVED WITH A TENDERLOIN GIRL AN OPIUM SMOKING EPISODE*” was the headline in Pulitzer’s gleeful *New York World*. The brave defender of embattled womanhood, not to mention the bright hope of American literature, suddenly became the guy who kept a fast

woman in a Chelsea residence and smoked dope. Teddy Roosevelt broke with him, and years afterward referred to him as a “man of bad character.”

The incident set the tone for much of Crane’s subsequent life: he did things that might have seemed crazily provocative with a certain kind of innocence, not expecting the world to punish him for the provocation. It is a character type not unknown among writers—the troublemaker who doesn’t know that he’s making trouble until the trouble arrives, who then wonders where all the trouble came from. Crane seems, on the surface, to have maintained his composure in the face of the scandal. In a letter to one of his brothers, he wrote, “You must always remember that your brother acted like a man of honor and a gentleman and you need not fear to hold your head up to anybody and defend his name.” But, as he noted elsewhere, “there is such a thing as a moral obligation arriving inopportunely.” Auster thinks the affair shook him badly, and doubtless it did. To further complicate things, Amy Leslie—whom Crane genuinely seems to have loved, addressing her as “My Blessed Girl” and “My own Sweetheart,” in one tender love letter after another—sued him for stealing five hundred and fifty dollars from her. (Auster supposes that much of this was money that Crane had received as royalties—it was a lot of money, and makes sense as a check from a publisher for a hit book—and promised, and then failed, to give to her.)

To add a note of grotesque comedy, which Auster addresses in an exquisitely intricate footnote, this Amy Leslie was easily confused with a more literary friend of Crane’s, also named Amy Leslie; for generations, Crane students were convinced that they were one and the same. The literary Amy, to the end of her life, was left strenuously protesting that she hadn’t been involved in the Tenderloin affair, to the smug skepticism of Crane scholars. “You can’t fight fate,” Crane’s implicit motto, ended up ensnaring her as well.

And not her alone. Auster, who is very good at picking out superb stuff from Crane’s mostly submerged journalism, includes a shiveringly cool account of the electric chair at Sing Sing, with a tour of the graveyard below, where the executed bodies were buried. “It is patient—patient as time,” Crane writes of the newly enthroned electric chair:

Even should its next stained and sallow prince be now a baby, playing with alphabet blocks near his mother’s feet, this chair will wait. It is

unknown to his eyes as are the shadows of trees at night, and yet it towers over him, monstrous, implacable, infernal, his fate—this patient, comfortable chair.

Fate having its way, Crane's nemesis, Charles Becker, was executed in that chair two decades after his run-in with Crane, for helping to arrange the murder of a gambler. He is still the only New York City policeman ever to be put to death.



"Look, kid, instead of just complaining, why don't you do something about it?"
Cartoon by Bishakh Som

The New York scandal helped propel Crane out of the city. He began a long period of wandering, most of it with his new and devoted common-law wife, Cora—a business-minded woman who once established what may have been a brothel, in Florida. Crane's journey took several strange turns that commentators have found darkly exemplary of the plight of the American writer. He went to Greece, in 1897, to report on the Hellenic battles with the Turks, and then to Cuba, to cover the Spanish-American War, which his previous employer, Hearst, had helped start, and his current employer, Pulitzer, wanted readers to enjoy. The fame he had earned so young kept him busy with journalistic and newspaper jobs. As a writer who had shown an unprecedented mastery of writing about a war that he had never seen, he kept getting jobs reporting on wars that he could see, and ended up writing about them much less well.

His final years were largely spent in a leased country house in England, where, as the author of "Red Badge," he was more celebrated by the British literary establishment than he had been by the American one, but still unable to make a steady living by his pen. Conrad became an intimate, and James referred to him as "that genius," but it was H. G. Wells who most succinctly defined Crane's contribution as a writer: "the expression in literary art of certain enormous repudiations."

Crane never stopped writing, pursuing both journalism, with spasmodically interesting results, and poetry, in bursts of demonic energy. His second volume of poems, "War Is Kind," is as good as his first and, again, eerily prescient. Crane learned in reporting what another generation of poets would learn only in the Great War:

Swift blazing flag of the regiment,
Eagle with crest of red and gold,
These men were born to drill and die.
Point for them the virtue of slaughter,
Make plain to them the excellence of killing
And a field where a thousand corpses lie.

Crane's last months have always confounded scholars. In a way, they are as piteous as Keats's last stay in Rome, with poor Crane dying of tuberculosis at a time when no one could cure it. He coughs up blood all over Auster's final fifty pages. Yet he kept up what has always seemed to his admirers a heavy tread of partying, with amateur theatricals and New Year's assemblages.

A. J. Liebling, in an acidic and entertaining commentary on Crane's final days, published six decades ago in this magazine, insisted that he died, "unwillingly, of the cause most common among American middle-class males—anxiety about money." Liebling put together the incompetence of turn-of-the-century doctors with the brutality of turn-of-the-century publishers, two of his favorite hobby-horses, and acquitted Crane of the self-destructive behavior often attributed to him.

Crane was as famous as any young writer has ever been, but it didn't make him rich. The jobs he could get, like writing for Hearst and Pulitzer, paid

well but depended on his being out there, writing. No one lived on advances. The one moneymaking scheme that Crane pursued was the one in which a writer, having written a popular thing, is asked to write something else that bears a catty-cornered relation to it. So Crane, the author of a great novel about war, accepted a lucrative commission to write a magazine series called “Great Battles of the World”—a task for which he, hardly a historian, was ill-equipped.

There is something heroic in the desperate gaiety with which Crane and Cora insisted on living well until the end. Though Crane confided to his agent in America that he was “still fuzzy with money troubles,” Auster tells us that in England “not even their closest friends had any inkling of how hard up they were, and by spending more and more money they did not have, the couple affected a magnificent pose of nonchalance and well-being.” Then, long through the night, Crane would “lock himself in his small study over the porch,” sliding finished work under his door, for Cora to type a clean copy.

Really, the bacillus was to blame. Had Crane been healthy, he would have found a way to live and write. The famous sanatoriums of the era—Crane ended his life at one in Germany—had, at least, the virtue of sealing patients off from others, but the cruelty of the disease was that there was nothing to be done. Despite our own recent immersion in plague, we still have a hard time understanding how much the certain fatality of illness affected our immediate ancestors; Hemingway suffered in the war, but it was the Spanish influenza that made him acutely aware that death and suffering could not be turned off when wars ended.

There's no fighting fate. The extreme stoicism of Crane's vision, even without the resigned epicurean sensuality that lit up Hemingway's, is what made it resonate for the “existential” generation, including Berryman. Most good writers try out many roles, put on many masks, adopt many voices, and leave it to biographers to point to the gaps between their act and their acts. A few make a fetish of not putting anything on. Crane was of that school, and, as much as he sits within the mainstream of writing, he is also among those American writers—Hunter Thompson and Ken Kesey come to mind—who deliberately sit outside it, going their own shocking way and sticking their tongue out at the pieties. (It may not be an accident that such writers tend to

strike gold young and then get brassy.) Life is out to get you, and will. It's far from the cheeriest of mottoes, but there was nothing false or showy about it. "To keep close to my honesty is my supreme ambition," Crane wrote. "There is a sublime egotism in talking of honesty. I, however, do not say that I am honest. I merely say that I am as nearly honest as weak mental machinery will allow. This aim in life struck me as being the only thing worth while. A man is sure to fail at it, but there is something in the failure."

Both the defiance and the defeatism are integral to Crane. He emerges from this book, as from his own, as the least phony great American writer who ever lived. Although he died with his talent only partly harvested, he left this life curiously unembittered, surprisingly serene. "I leave here gentle" were among his last words to Cora. He had eaten his own heart. ♦

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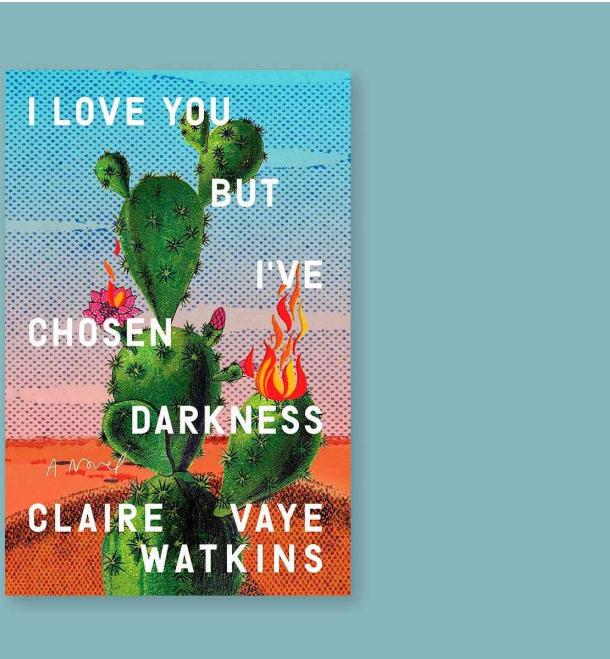
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[October 25, 2021 Issue](#)

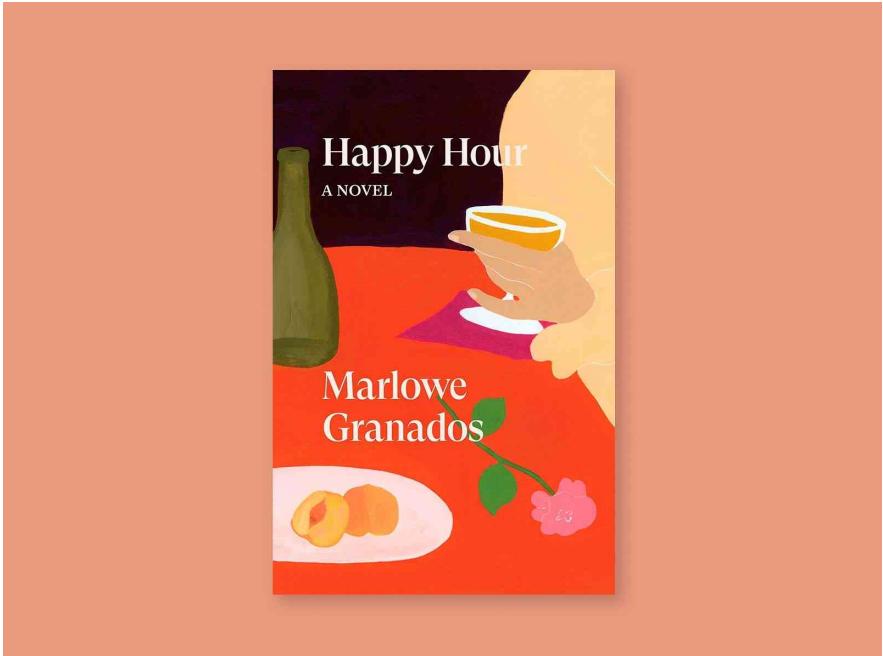
Briefly Noted

“I Love You but I’ve Chosen Darkness,” “Happy Hour,” “Walk with Me,” and “Man Ray.”

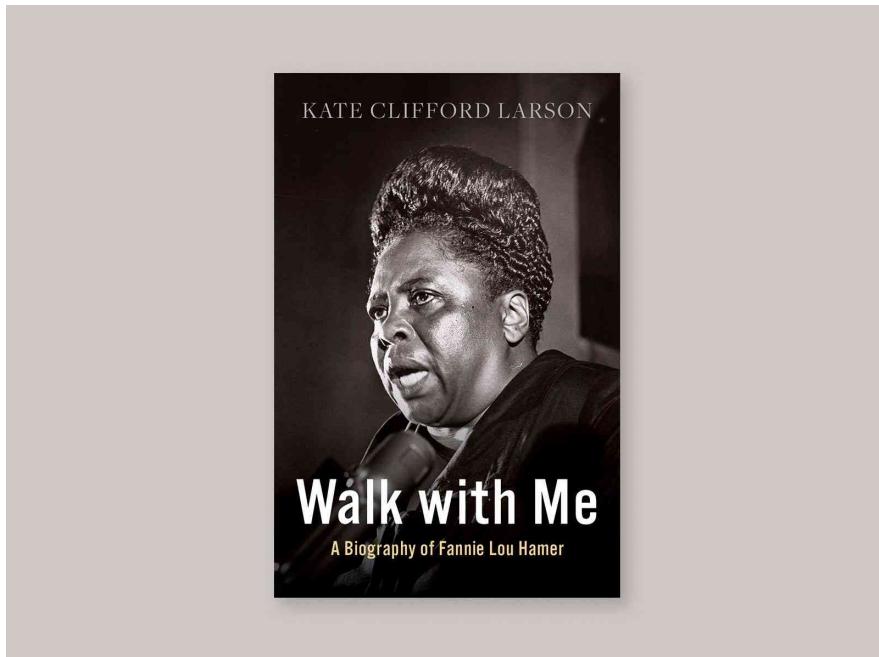
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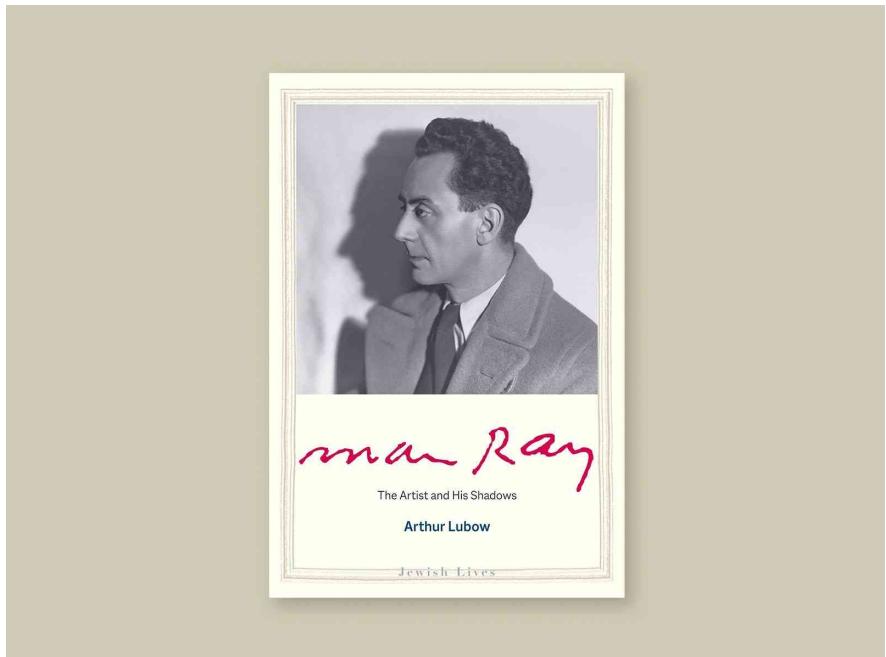
[I Love You but I've Chosen Darkness](#), by *Claire Vaye Watkins* (*Riverhead*). “I’ve tried to tell this story a bunch of times,” the protagonist of Watkins’s arresting novel writes. “This will be my last try.” Stricken with a sense of alienation after having her first child, she leaves both baby and husband in Michigan and goes to Nevada, where she grew up. She revisits her family’s ranch, which is about to be demolished; remembers a boyfriend who died; thinks about her father, who (like the author’s) was in the Manson family; and reads letters her mother wrote before retreating into opioid addiction. Her search for a sense of self culminates in a journey to a particular area of desert steeped in family lore, one she calls a “made-up place.”



Happy Hour, by *Marlowe Granados* (*Verso*). Isa, the twenty-one-year-old Canadian diarist-narrator of this effervescent début, arrives in New York with her best friend, Gala, intent on a summer of experience. They have little money and no work authorization, but they possess youth, beauty, charm, and keen grifter instincts. Granados crafts a picaresque of art galleries, SoHo lofts, and Hamptons mansions, deftly satirizing the wealthy without denying the value of what wealth can buy: gorgeous clothes, superb champagne, easy confidence. Isa's combination of naïveté, intelligence, and panache beguiles. “I always prefer the way I see things,” she says. “Because it’s all mine, and no one can convince me otherwise.”



[**Walk with Me**](#), by *Kate Clifford Larson (Oxford)*. This biography of Fannie Lou Hamer, the civil-rights advocate who challenged Mississippi segregationists with her powerful oratory and “unforgettable” singing, places grassroots organizing by women at the heart of the battle for Black enfranchisement. Born in 1917, Hamer grew up in an era of burgeoning Klan membership and eked out a living as a sharecropper. Her expected fate was, in her words, that she would “not really live,” but “exist.” Her political will was catalyzed when a white surgeon performed a hysterectomy on her without her knowledge or consent. Larson details the reprisals Hamer faced for trying to vote, including a harrowing false arrest from which she emerged battered but defiant: “If them crackers in Winona thought they’d discourage me from fighting, I guess they found out different.”



[Man Ray](#), by *Arthur Lubow* (*Yale*). By approaching its subject “sideways, through an investigation of his most important relationships,” the author of this biography ingeniously captures one of the twentieth century’s most enigmatic artists. Capsule portraits of Ray’s many friends, lovers, and acquaintances—both famous peers, such as Duchamp, and under-recognized collaborators, such as Meret Oppenheim—trace his path from Brooklyn, where he was brought up by Jewish immigrant parents, to his flourishing among the Dadaists and Surrealists in Paris and beyond. Surveying Ray’s multifaceted output, which encompassed paintings, readymades, fashion photography, and experimental films, Lubow manages nevertheless to retain the core mystique of an artist whose “masterpiece was his own public image.”

Celebrated for her First World War trilogy, Barker has been reimagining the Trojan War through the eyes of its female victims. But what happens when gritty realism meets myth?

By [Daniel Mendelsohn](#)

Content

At first glance, Pat Barker's 2018 novel, "[The Silence of the Girls](#)"—an adaptation of Homer's Iliad—looked like a radical departure. The author, after all, had never strayed very far from the twentieth century: she is best known for her "[Regeneration](#)" trilogy, about the intertwined fates of a group of Britons during the First World War, which has attained the status of a classic since its publication, in the nineteen-nineties. A decade before that, she had established herself with a trio of contemporary novels about working-class women in the North of England—the territory in which Barker grew up, and which she depicts as scarred by its own battles. These, as often as not, are between women and men. Her first novel, "[Union Street](#)" (1982), a series of portraits of down-and-out women all living on the same street, begins with the rape of an eleven-year-old; another is about a group of sex workers being preyed on by a serial killer.

After the success of "Regeneration," Barker continued to oscillate, for the most part, between the early twentieth century and the present. There were a few contemporary novels with spiky themes—one centers on a character who, as a child, was convicted of murder—and another war trilogy, "[Life Class](#)," this one starting with a group of art students who are pulled, willy-nilly, into the First World War and its horrors. (One of them, a young woman named Elinor, is repulsed by her mentor's drawings of disfigured veterans, a plot development that allows the author to ponder, not without a touch of self-reflexiveness, the relationship of art to war.) The last of this series, "[Noonday](#)," which follows these characters' lives into the Blitz, came out in 2015.

So Barker's shift to the Bronze Age may have come as a surprise. And yet there were hints all along that she'd been thinking about the Greeks. Halfway through "[The Eye in the Door](#)" (1993), the second installment of the "Regeneration" trilogy, Billy Prior, a young bisexual soldier who's been tapped to spy for military intelligence, takes a walk in London's Hyde Park

and makes his way to the Wellington Monument, an enormous bronze statue of Achilles, all but naked and brandishing his sword and shield, which was put up in the early nineteenth century to celebrate the Duke and his victories. The statue affords Billy, and Barker, an opportunity to reflect on male heroism:

This was a frequent objective on his evening walks, for no particular reason except that its heroic grandeur both attracted and repelled him. It seemed to embody the same unreflecting admiration of courage that he found in ‘The Charge of the Light Brigade,’ a poem that had meant a great deal to him as a boy, and still did, though what it meant had become considerably more complex. He stared up at the stupendous lunging figure, with its raised sword and shield, and thought, not for the first time, that he was looking at the representation of an ideal that no longer had validity.

One of the trilogy’s main characters is a psychologist who’s treating Billy and other traumatized veterans: in these books, Barker herself peers, unsentimentally but with remarkable sympathy, into the psyches of men struggling to live up to, or to replace, ideals that the war has shown to be threadbare. While the female characters in her books may dismiss the male of the species as “a useless lot” (thus one of the women in “Union Street”), her own treatment of the murky crosscurrents between the sexes, both in the early novels and throughout “Regeneration,” is, indeed, uncommonly nuanced. In the opening pages of “Union Street,” the narrator makes a striking observation about neighbors of the little girl who’s been raped: the men, Barker writes, “felt the outrage if anything more deeply” than the women did—but, overcome by awkwardness, “sidled past the subject, wincing.”

The moral implication of “sidling past the subject” was the occasion for another fraught Homeric reference, this one in the “Life Class” trilogy. There’s a moment in the first installment when Elinor, writing to a love interest who’s eager to enlist, remarks on the strange “silence” about the war that she’s noticed among the women she knows, so different from the reaction of

overexcited young men who jabber till the spit flies, though it's only stuff they've read in the papers. The women have gone very quiet. It's like the Iliad, you know, when Achilles insults Agamemnon and Agamemnon says he's got to have Achilles' girl and Achilles goes off and sulks by the long ships and the girls they're quarreling over say nothing, not a word, it's a bit like that. I don't suppose men ever hear that silence.

In this light, Barker's first foray into Homeric myth wasn't so much anomalous as inevitable: "The Silence of the Girls" gave the author an opportunity to address and correct the troubling absence of female voices on the subject of war. The legend of Troy, with its ample stock of stories of male violence against women—from the abduction of Helen to the climactic rape, during the sack of the city, of the Trojan princess Cassandra in the temple of the virgin goddess Athena—seemed to offer an ideal vehicle for Barker's long-standing concerns. Now the publication of "[The Women of Troy](#)" (Doubleday) brings the author back to the bloodied plains where the Greeks and the Trojans fought—here, once again, a staging ground for the battle between the sexes.

For Homer and his audience and a hundred generations since, the Iliad has raised searing questions about heroism, masculinity, and fate—the same questions that Billy Prior asks as he stands in front of Achilles' statue. However epic its length, the poem expands on a single episode of the many that circulated about the decade-long conflict: a dispute between the Greek hero Achilles and his commander-in-chief, Agamemnon, over a woman named Briseis, a prize of war whom Agamemnon has seized from Achilles. The hero's loss of this human trophy, meant to attest to his prowess, forces him to question the entire value system—the "heroic code"—that brought him to fight at Troy in the first place. In a horrible irony, his resentful withdrawal from the fighting ultimately results in the death of the person he values most, his beloved companion Patroclus (a figure so gentle that even the enslaved Trojan captives mourn him).

In "The Silence of the Girls," Barker presented these events from the point of view not of a male hero—or, indeed, poet—but of a female victim: Briseis herself. It's clear, from the first sentence of the novel, that Briseis is not toeing the Dead White Male party line. "Great Achilles. Brilliant

Achilles, shining Achilles, godlike Achilles,” she begins. “How the epithets pile up . . . we called him ‘the butcher.’ ” Barker’s narrative twist, foregrounding a character who is pivotal to the poem and yet not all that visible within it, was meant to point to the human costs of the masculine heroism that Homer so often celebrates—the “brutal reality of conquest and slavery.” It also challenged certain previous readings of the Iliad, exposing the implicitly masculine assumptions of some scholars and readers, who have unquestioningly embraced its values over the past three millennia.

There are moments when this device yields arresting results. One comes when Homer’s fallen warriors are commemorated not by the epithets the poet gives them but by memories no man could ever have. (“Dryops, whose mother’s labour lasted two full days.”) Another rewrites one of the Iliad’s great climaxes, a scene from its final book in which the aged Trojan king, Priam, sneaks into the Greek camp and begs Achilles to return the body of his son Hector, the leader of the Trojan forces, whom Achilles has slain on the battlefield. On his knees, Priam utters one of the most wrenching lines in the epic: “I do what no man before me has ever done, I kiss the hands of the man who killed my son.” When Barker’s Briseis hears these words, she thinks, “And I do what countless women before me have been forced to do. I spread my legs for the man who killed my husband and my brothers.”

As bracing as such revisionism can be, Barker’s rewriting of Homer had crippling defects. The characterization was disappointingly cursory; the depiction of Homer’s men, in particular, displayed little of the empathetic shadings so admirable in the earlier books—as if the narrative inversion alone were sufficient, in Barker’s eyes, to make her points about gender and violence. The handling of the story’s mythic period and milieu was equally perfunctory, showing little of the intimacy with or mastery of mood and setting that can make fiction about the past persuasive: Marguerite Yourcenar’s “[Memoirs of Hadrian](#),” say, or Mary Renault’s Alexander the Great [trilogy](#)—or, for that matter, Barker’s own novels of the First World War. Between the fuzzy grasp of detail and a telltale tendency to wear its research on its sleeve, the book never gave you the sense of being inside this vanished world. (To whom, precisely, does Briseis need to explain that “by long tradition, the laying-out of the dead is women’s work”?) And Barker never solved a notorious problem of historical fiction: how to make her characters speak. The prose yo-yoed between Academia.edu (“My brothers

had become liminal in their very nature") and a strained casualness that could inadvertently veer into the Borscht Belt ("Well, with a sea goddess for a mother, what do you expect?").

It's possible to see how all this was meant to serve Barker's anti-heroic project. These men, she wanted you to know, were just guys, after all—and not very nice guys, at that—no different from any others, whether on the killing fields of Ypres or on the streets of [Margaret Thatcher](#)'s Britain. The problem is that they *are* different. Barker's deliberately workaday tone, so effective in her contemporary novels, never meshed with the legendary elements of the tale she was telling, complete with its gods, ghosts, and miracles. However problematic some of the Iliad's attitudes may seem today, the majesty of its rhetoric and the pathos of its drama remain overwhelmingly powerful. Much of that power, it is worth remembering, derives from the utterances of its female characters. The epic ends with a trio of women's voices—those of Hector's wife, his mother, and Helen of Troy—lifted in lamentation.

"The Silence of the Girls" was one of a number of recent novels—including Margaret Atwood's "[The Penelopiad](#)" and Madeline Miller's "[Circe](#)"—to take on Homer's epics, challenging their assumptions by telling the old tales from a female perspective. A generation earlier, there was the East German writer Christa Wolf's "[Cassandra](#)" (1983), which deftly repurposed Homer's Trojan tales as a parable at once feminist and political, using the myths to explore subjects such as the police state and censorship.

Barker's "The Women of Troy" joins that tradition but faces a daunting problem: the story of the fall of Troy has already been subjected to feminist revisionism. The brutal tale that her new novel relates, about the horrific aftermath of the sack of the city, including the enslavement and degradation of its women, was re-narrated from a female point of view in 415 B.C.—the year that Euripides' "Troades" ("The Trojan Women") premiered.



Cartoon by Benjamin Schwartz

By then, the playwright was already celebrated, even notorious, for his shocking depictions of women in extremis: Medea, the discarded wife who slays her children to punish her ingrate of a husband; Phaedra, the queen whose forbidden lust for her stepson drives her to accuse him of raping her. These and other characters cemented Euripides' reputation as a kind of Tennessee Williams of his day, a master of portraying tormented female psyches. But "The Trojan Women" was radically different from those earlier, plot-driven plays. Not unlike Barker's "Union Street," each of whose seven sections is devoted to a single woman's wrenching story, Euripides' play takes the form of a pageant of female pain: a succession of tableaux, each dominated by a woman of the Trojan royal house who has suffered at the hands of the invaders.

The play is set on the day after the Greeks take Troy; the women are now just property, prizes to be handed out to this or that victorious Greek. Hecuba, the queen, goes to the wily Odysseus; her daughter-in-law Andromache, Hector's widow, to Achilles' son, Pyrrhus; and her daughter Cassandra, a prophetess doomed never to be believed, to the victorious general Agamemnon. There is not so much a plot as a progressive deepening of the misery. Hecuba learns that her youngest daughter has been sacrificed to the ghost of Achilles; Andromache learns that her infant son will be thrown from the walls of Troy. Then the play is over, its chorus of enslaved

Trojan women bewailing the fact that their once great city will be utterly erased from history—“nameless.”

Hardly. Barker’s own example is one of many that have shown how successfully a writer of one gender can inhabit characters of another; the undeniable power of Euripides’ female-dominated play resulted in a long line of adaptations by both men and women, from the Roman playwright Seneca, in the first century, to Jean-Paul Sartre, in the mid-twentieth. More recently, “Troades” has been reworked to comment on modern warfare (Christine Evans’s 2009 fantasy drama, “*Trojan Barbie*”) and the Syrian humanitarian crisis (“*Queens of Syria*,” a 2013 play in which a group of refugees tell their stories à la Euripides). This crowded tradition of adaptation is both a blessing and a curse for anyone interested in remixing those memorable female voices again, illuminating new possibilities while also making it that much harder to hew too closely to the original. How much is left for those women to say?

Like its predecessor, “The Women of Troy” is narrated by Briseis, who, we learn, was once intimate with the Trojan royals, giving her a special perspective on the characters whose stories she will now tell. (As a young girl, she was sent to live in Troy and became something of a pet of the royal family.) When the novel opens, Achilles has been dead for months, and Briseis is now married to a powerful Greek. A slave no longer, she nonetheless feels deeply for the Trojan women, who are new to the humiliations to which she had long ago become inured, from the nightly rapes to the demeaning household tasks that these former royals must now perform. The male antagonist who occupies center stage is the young Pyrrhus, who has arrived on the scene just before the Greeks’ victory, in which he plays a particularly nasty role, butchering Priam as the old man pathetically struggles to defend his family and his realm.

Pyrrhus sometimes appears in Greek literature as a callow but good-hearted youth. Barker has the excellent idea of making him a teen-age bully whose swagger barely conceals an inferiority complex; he is haunted by the father whom he never knew and whose glorious reputation he can never live up to. When “The Women of Troy” opens, Pyrrhus is sitting inside the Trojan horse, waiting for the final assault to begin, “feeling all the time like an imposter, a little boy who’d been allowed to stay up late.” The youth’s

anxieties about his masculine authority motivate his harshness toward the Trojan women, from which much of the novel's plot will flow.

There are also some fine and original touches in Barker's reimagining of the mythic women. In the *Iliad*, Helen of Troy (whom even the Trojans can't bring themselves to blame for the war, so seductive is her allure) is a rather forlorn figure: full of regret about her past, and stuck with the feckless if gorgeous Paris, she spends her time weaving a tapestry that illustrates the war she has brought about. Barker's novels paint the Greek queen as a cool customer with an eye on the main chance and few illusions about either men or women. In "The Silence of the Girls," Briseis notices that Helen has not yet placed herself in the still-unfinished tapestry: "She won't know where to put herself till she knows who's won," one of the other enslaved women snaps back. In "The Women of Troy," Helen is shopping around for mood-altering drugs in anticipation of her imminent reunion with her cuckolded husband, Menelaus.

The most fully realized of Barker's Trojan women—one you wish had a bigger role—is Hecuba. Andromache is too noble to be truly gripping; Cassandra too nutty. (Even her mother has doubts about her: "People always say it's divine frenzy. . . . I think she just makes things up to suit herself.") But the fierce Hecuba—a character who in the *Iliad* declares her wish to eat Achilles' liver raw—is catnip to Barker, whose portrayal of her has something of the humor and the vividness that distinguish "Union Street." Here, the harrowed widow of myth and drama is profane ("You always were a streak of piss," she barks at a svelte priest) and irreligious ("leaving things to the gods doesn't bloody well work"). She holds your attention whenever she appears—far more than the bland Briseis ever does.

That the selfish Helen and the crusty Hecuba, rather than the ostensibly more sympathetic victims Andromache or Briseis, are Barker's most successful creations tells you something about the dangers of writing fiction with a high-minded agenda. And here, as before, her attempt to demystify myth in order to communicate her message about male brutality and female suffering is hobbled by an awkward treatment of the story's historical and legendary elements. Too often, Briseis sounds like the voice-over from a History Channel special: "As a woman living in this camp, I was navigating a complex and dangerous world."

“The Women of Troy” really works only when Barker forgets about the ancient models for her story. Much of the novel is taken up with a plot arc that appears in none of the traditional tales about the fall of Troy: the horrible Pyrrhus issues a decree forbidding anyone to bury Priam’s body—a dreadful violation of religious proprieties. One of the enslaved Trojans, a young woman named Amina (Barker has a bizarre penchant for pinching the names of her characters from opera), disobeys the decree, risking her life in order to give the old man a proper religious burial. Eventually, Briseis is drawn into Amina’s illegal doings, with potentially dire consequences. If this seems familiar, it’s because it’s the plot of Sophocles’ “Antigone.” Barker’s characters may sound tinny compared with Sophocles’—Amina’s “You can’t just overrule the laws of god” isn’t a patch on Antigone’s great speech of defiance—but the author’s importation of the tragic plot is a clever means of infusing all the abjection and the moralizing with some genuine drama.

Paradoxically, this departure from tradition happens to be the most authentically “Greek” thing about the book. Some of what we think of as the most classic moments in the classics—Medea’s slaying of her children, for instance—were, after all, daring innovations in the preexisting mythic tradition. (There’s evidence that, before Euripides, the children were killed by a mob of townspeople.) Sometimes the best way to deal with the classics is not to look through the other end of the telescope but to throw the telescope away.

The great irony of Barker’s forays into the Trojan myths is that her novelistic grappling with war yielded much more Homeric results before she took on the Greeks. The “Regeneration” trilogy’s critique of masculine violence and its human costs, of the heroic code that Achilles both represents and agonizes over, is more incisive and far subtler than anything you find in either of the Trojan books—in large part because the trilogy engages with the Iliad on a more profound level, not only exploring its themes but adapting its structures, too. A main character in the first installment is the real-life war hero and poet Siegfried Sassoon, who, like Achilles, went into a conflict full of ideals only to find himself bitterly disillusioned by his superiors’ conduct of the war. After Sassoon went public with his dissatisfactions, the British government silenced him, sending him to a Scottish sanitarium for treatment: the moment at which “Regeneration” begins.

How to make something new out of the classics? The tension between novelty and the weight of tradition is one that many writers since Homer have felt. David Malouf, in his novel “[Ransom](#)” (2012), also based on the Iliad, ingeniously makes that struggle the subject of his story, in which Priam’s unprecedented gesture toward his mortal enemy, Achilles, becomes a canny metaphor for the possibility of “novelty” in storytelling. Like so many others, Barker wants to impose her modern concerns onto this very ancient material. But she’s not nearly comfortable enough in her Greek mode to fashion a work of real authority.

Sometimes she seems aware of this herself. Early on in “The Silence of the Girls,” Briseis reflects on the poems that she heard as a child in her father’s palace: “All the songs were about battles, about the exploits of great men.” Only much later does she come to understand that rather than retelling worn old tales—as she herself has just done in narrating this book—she should have broken away and created “a new song” altogether. “I’d been trying to escape . . . from Achilles’ story,” she admits. “And I’d failed.” ♦

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October 25, 2021 Issue

The G.O.P.'s Race to Out-Trump the Trumpists

The midterm elections are approaching, and the Republican Party is heading into them with the former President as its leader.

By [Amy Davidson Sorkin](#)

October 17, 2021

Anyone in need of a warning about what the 2022 midterm elections could bring might consider what took place last month at a candidates' forum sponsored by the Republican Women of Coffee County, Alabama. Katie Britt, a contender for the Republican nomination to replace Senator Richard Shelby, who is retiring, was asked if she had supported [Roy Moore](#) in the 2017 special Senate election. Moore is the Constitution-defying judge who was accused of sexually pursuing teen-age girls; he denied the allegations, but lost to the Democratic candidate, [Doug Jones](#). "I have never supported or voted for a Democrat in my life," Britt said, but added, "I also think it's important to stand with women." That hedged response appeared to provoke the next candidate to speak, Representative Mo Brooks, who accused her of lacking party loyalty. "We are a team," he said. "We have a belief system."

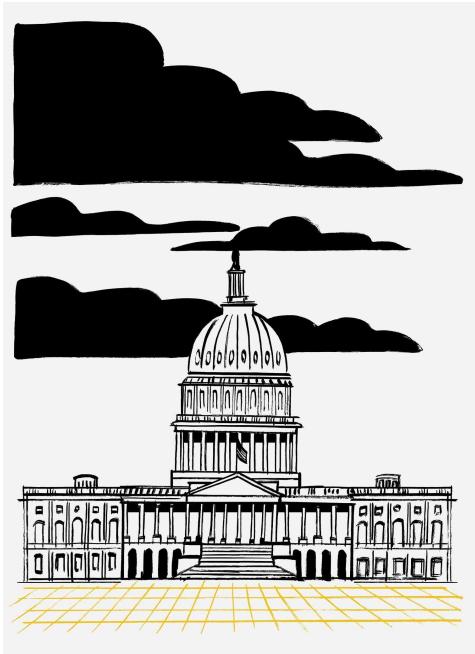


Illustration by João Fazenda

What was most notable in this exchange was Britt's reply: she accused Brooks of being the disloyal one. "Every single time, I voted for [Donald Trump](#), and stood with him," she said. "That wasn't the step you took." During the 2016 Presidential primaries, Brooks initially supported [Senator Ted Cruz](#). But the congressman is now best known for the speech he gave at Trump's [January 6th](#) Save America rally, in which he told the crowd that the time had come for "kicking ass." At a more recent Trump rally, he warned of "godless, evil, amoral socialist Democrats." Trump has enthusiastically endorsed Brooks, and has derided Britt, who once served as Shelby's chief of staff, as an unqualified "assistant" to a "RINO." Britt has the backing of Alabama's business establishment, yet she apparently thought that her best move was to try to out-Trump an unapologetic insurrectionist.

She's not the only one. Earlier this month, Senator Chuck Grassley, of Iowa, a purported establishment figure who, at eighty-eight, is running for an eighth term, came onstage at a Trump rally in Des Moines. "If I didn't accept the endorsement of a person that's got ninety-one per cent of the Republican voters in Iowa, I wouldn't be too smart," Grassley said, grinning. The number he cited came from a Des Moines *Register* poll, which also found that Trump's favorability rating was forty-eight per cent among Iowa independents. A CNN poll last month indicated that, nationally, seventy-eight per cent of Republicans believe that [Joe Biden](#) was not

legitimately elected President. Increasingly, they seem to expect their party's candidates to agree.

With the Senate divided fifty-fifty, just to maintain a status quo in which Biden's agenda depends on the whims of [Joe Manchin](#), of West Virginia, and Kyrsten Sinema, of Arizona, Democrats need to concentrate on holding on to Mark Kelly's seat, in Arizona, and to [Raphael Warnock](#)'s, in Georgia. (Both men won in special elections, and are seen as vulnerable.) Or they need to pick up seats, perhaps in North Carolina or Pennsylvania, where the incumbents are retiring, or in Florida, where Representative Val Demings is challenging Marco Rubio. In the House, the Democrats' margin is just eight seats, and midterm voters tend to turn against the party of the incumbent President. At the moment, Biden's approval rating has dropped to forty-three per cent. The task for Democrats could hardly be more crucial: so much depends on so few seats—including, possibly, another [Supreme Court](#) appointment.

The numbers aren't all that matters. Even if the Democrats hold the Senate, the dynamic there will change for the worse if their Republican counterparts are more Trumpist—more conspiracy-minded, more jingoistic, more convinced that the people on the other side of the aisle are godless, evil, amoral socialists. Such a caucus would be even more likely to engage in reckless acts of obstruction and conflict. The effect would almost certainly be more exaggerated in the House, where the [Marjorie Taylor Greene](#) contingent will likely grow. As the average level of extremism in Congress rises, it becomes harder to tell true believers from opportunists. The former President, banished from Twitter, can appear marginalized, yet the G.O.P. is heading into the midterms with Trump as its leader.

Earlier this year, when Trump began talking about handing out endorsements, [Mitch McConnell](#), the Senate Minority Leader, said that he would push back if he thought that Trump's choices would cost the G.O.P. seats. Last month, though, McConnell told Politico, "I don't believe they're troubling." (The exception appears to be in Alaska, where Trump's effort to bring down Lisa Murkowski hasn't gained traction.) McConnell was seemingly content with Brooks, and with Trump's endorsement of Herschel Walker, the former football player with a tumultuous business and personal life who has promoted election-fraud conspiracy theories and

will challenge Warnock, in Georgia. “There’s every indication he’s going to be a good candidate,” McConnell said. Whether he would be a good senator didn’t seem to matter.

In Pennsylvania, Trump has endorsed Sean Parnell, a retired Army captain who has written several military-themed books (“Outlaw Platoon,” “Left for Dead”), joined a lawsuit in his state to get mail-in ballots thrown out, and is in the middle of a contentious divorce. His main primary opponent, Carla Sands, was a Trump donor and his Ambassador to Denmark; she got into trouble for posting pro-Trump tweets on her government account, a Hatch Act violation. There are similar stories in other states. This past spring, Trump pressured Mark Brnovich, the Arizona attorney general, who is challenging Kelly, to “get on the ball” in backing an audit of the 2020 vote in Maricopa County, and he did. (The results, released last month, actually increased Biden’s margin of victory.) Nevertheless, one of his rivals, Blake Masters, who is backed by [Peter Thiel](#), the tech billionaire, is attacking him for not doing more for Trump.

Trump, meanwhile, has endorsed Mark Finchem, a state legislator at times associated with QAnon, in the race for Arizona’s secretary of state. (He pointed out Finchem in the audience at the rally in Des Moines.) Trump’s attentiveness to a race for a state election official is unsettling, given the pressure he exerted on such officials to shift results in his favor in 2020. The Republican leaders who defer to his preferences and echo his delusions now are building the scaffolding for his own next campaign. The nomination, at least, appears to be his for the taking. Ahead of 2022, G.O.P. candidates are scrambling for Trump’s endorsement. In 2024, he may be demanding theirs. ♦

Crossword

- [The Crossword: Wednesday, October 13, 2021](#)

[October 25, 2021 Issue](#)

The Crossword: Wednesday, October 13, 2021

A moderately challenging puzzle.

By [Elizabeth C. Gorski](#)

October 13, 2021

By [Wyna Liu](#)

By [Anna Shechtman](#)

Fiction

- [“The Umbrella”](#)

By [Tove Ditlevsen](#)

Helga had always—unreasonably—expected more from life than it could deliver. People like her live among us, not differing conspicuously from those who instinctively settle their affairs and figure out precisely how, given their looks, their abilities, and their environment, they can do what they need to do in the world. With respect to these three factors, Helga was only averagely equipped. When she was put on the marriage market, she was a slightly too small and slightly too drab young woman, with narrow lips, a turned-up nose, and—her only promising feature—a pair of large, questioning eyes, which an attentive observer might have called “dreamy.” But Helga would have been embarrassed if anyone had asked her what she was dreaming about.

She had never demonstrated a special talent of any kind. She had done adequately in public school and had shown good longevity at her domestic jobs. She didn’t mind working hard; in her family, that was as natural as breathing. For the most part, she was accommodating and quiet, without being withdrawn. In the evenings, she went out to dance halls with a couple of girlfriends. They each had a soda and looked for partners. If they had sat for a long time without an offer, her girlfriends grew eager to dance with anyone who asked, even a man with a hunchback. But Helga just stared absent-mindedly around the venue, and if she saw a man who appealed to her—those who did always had dark hair and brown eyes—she gazed at him so steadily, unguarded and serious, that he could not help but notice her. If someone other than her chosen one approached her (this didn’t actually happen very often), she looked down at her lap, blushed slightly, and awkwardly excused herself: “I don’t dance.” A few tables away, a pair of brown eyes would observe this unusual sight. Here was a girl who wasn’t going to fall for the first man who came along.

Over time, many small infatuations rippled the surface of her mind, like the spring breeze that makes new leaves tremble without changing their life’s course. The man would follow her home and kiss a pair of cold, closed lips, which refused to open in any kind of submission. Helga was very conventional. It wasn’t that she wouldn’t surrender before marriage, but she had it in her head that she would have a ring on and would present the chosen man to her parents before it came to that. The ones who were too

impatient, or not interested enough to wait for this ceremony, went away more or less disappointed. Sometimes she felt a little pang at those moments, but she soon forgot about it in her life's rhythm of work, sleep, and new evenings with new possibilities.

[Michael Favala Goldman on translation.](#)

That was until, at the age of twenty-three, she met Egon. He fell in love with her singularity—that indefinable quality which only a few people noticed and even fewer judged an asset.

Egon was a mechanic and was interested in soccer, playing the numbers, pool, and girls. But, since every lovestruck individual is brushed by wingbeats from a higher level of the atmosphere, it so happened that this commonplace person started reading poetry and expressing himself in ways that would have made his buddies at the shop gape in wonder if they had heard him. Later, he looked back on this time as if he had caught a severe illness which left its mark on him for the rest of his life. But, for as long as it lasted, he was proud of and delighted by Helga's carefully preserved chastity, and, when they had put on rings and the presentation to her family was over, he took ownership of his property on the prepared divan in his rented room. Everything was how it was supposed to be. She hadn't tricked him. Satisfied, he fell asleep, leaving Helga in a rather confused state. She cried a bit, because here, in particular, she had been expecting something extraordinary. Her tears were pointless, since her path had now been determined. The wedding date had been set, supplies had been gathered, and she had given notice at her job, because Egon wouldn't have her "scrubbing other people's floors" after they were married. Her friends were appropriately jealous, and her parents were content. Egon was a skilled laborer, and therefore slightly higher up in the world than her father, who had taught her never to lower herself, but not to "cook up fantasies," either.

That evening, Helga had no clear premonition that something fateful was happening to her. Even so, she lay awake for a long time, without thinking of anything in particular. When she was half asleep, a strange desire came drifting into her consciousness: If only I had an umbrella, she thought. It occurred to her suddenly that this item, which for certain people was just a natural necessity, was something she had dreamed of her whole life. As a

child, she had filled her Christmas wish lists with sensible, affordable things: a doll, a pair of red mittens, roller skates. And then, when the gifts were lying under the tree on Christmas Eve, she'd been gripped by an ecstasy of expectation. She'd looked at her boxes as if they held the meaning of life itself, and her hands had shaken as she opened them. Afterward, she'd sat crying over the doll, the mittens, and the roller skates she had asked for. "You ungrateful child," her mother had hissed. "You always ruin it for us." Which was true, because the next Christmas the scene would repeat itself. Helga never knew what she was expecting to find inside those festive-looking packages. Maybe she had once written "umbrella" on her wish list and not received one. It would have been ridiculous to give her such a trivial and superfluous thing. Her mother had never owned an umbrella. You took the wind and the weather as it came, without imagining that you could indulgently protect your precious hair and skin from the rain, which spared nothing else.

Helga eventually turned her attention to her role as a fiancée and, together with her mother, carried out the customary duties. Yet sometimes she would lie awake next to Egon, or in her bed in the maid's room in the house where she worked, nursing her peculiar dream of owning an umbrella.

A certain image started to form in her mind, which gave her secret desire a forbidden and irresponsible tinge and cast a delicate, impalpable veil over her expression throughout the day, causing her fiancé to exclaim, with jealousy and irritation, as if he suspected her of some kind of infidelity, "What are you thinking about?" Once, she answered, "I'm thinking about an umbrella." And, with convincing seriousness, he said, "You're crazy!" By then, he had stopped reading poetry, and he never mentioned her "dreamy eyes" anymore, which didn't mean that he was disappointed in any way. It was just that now she was a permanent part of his life and his routine. She sat through countless soccer matches with him, without ever grasping what it was about this particular form of entertainment that made people shout "Hurray!" or fall silent as if possessed.

The image that arose from her memory was this: she was about ten, sitting in the window of the family bedroom, looking down into the courtyard, which was illuminated with a weak glow by the light over the back stairs. She was in her nightgown, and should have been in bed, but she had developed the

habit, before going to sleep, of sitting there for a few minutes and staring out into the night without thinking about anything, while a gentle peace erased the events of the day from her mind. All at once, she saw the gate open, and across the wet cobblestones of the courtyard, onto which raindrops splashed in an excited rhythm, strolled a pretty, dreamlike creature. Her long yellow dress nearly touched the ground, and high above her profusion of silky blond curls floated an umbrella. It was not like the one Helga's grandmother used—round, black, and dome-shaped, with a solid handle—but a flat, bright, translucent thing, which seemed to complement the person who carried it like a butterfly's radiant wings. She had just a brief glimpse, and then the courtyard was deserted as before, but Helga's heart was pounding with strange excitement. She ran into the living room, where her mother and father were sitting. "A lady was walking across the courtyard," she said softly. Then she added, with awe and admiration, "She had such a nice umbrella!"

She stood there barefoot, blinking into the light. The familiar room, which lacked anything with a comparable essence, now seemed to her cramped and poor. Her mother looked surprised. "A lady?" she asked. Then the corners of her mouth turned downward, as they often did when something displeased or bothered her. "It's that girl next door," she said sharply. "It's scandalous." Then Helga's father turned to her with a flash of anger. "Why the devil are you sitting staring out the window when you should be in bed?" he yelled. "Get in there and go to sleep!"



"My fall plans were just to stay home and make variant memes anyway, so there."
Cartoon by Emily Flake

She had seen something that she wasn't allowed to see. Something had been let into her world that wasn't there before. After that, every evening—even though she was an obedient child—she crept over to the window to watch the yellow dress drift across the cobblestones, in all kinds of weather, but always with an inexpressibly sweet and secretive air, and always accompanied by that mysterious umbrella, visible or invisible, depending on if it was raining or not. This vision had nothing to do with the sleepy face that appeared in the neighbor's doorframe when Helga knocked to borrow a bit of margarine or flour for her mother, who was always short on the most important ingredients when she was making gravy. And it made no noticeable difference when, one day, this neighbor moved away. For a long time, the child still waited at the window for that yellow dress and the buoyant, translucent umbrella. When this nightly passage through the darkening courtyard stopped, she just shut her eyes and listened to the rain splashing against something taut and silky and more distant than all her childhood sounds and smells.

Helga and Egon moved into a two-room apartment that was similar to her parents', and wasn't far away, either. But it was at street level, and an old wish of Helga's was fulfilled, now that she could sit in her own house and look out at the traffic. She had what she'd never had before—time—and,

since idleness is the root of all evil (she was easy prey for sayings like that), this gave her a slightly guilty conscience. Not toward the husband who provided for her but just in general. She allowed herself to become a gentle, self-effacing individual; she exaggerated the few responsibilities she had, and emphasized her frequent visits to her parents and their visits to her. Her in-laws lived in the country, and she wrote to them often, though she had met them only at the wedding. Her letters—which contained detailed accounts of how she spent her day doing domestic duties and got the most out of Egon's salary for everyone's benefit—always ended monotonously, with these lines: "We are both well and hope the same for you. Your devoted daughter-in-law, Helga."

Every morning, she and her mother went shopping, each with a head scarf and a sturdy shopping bag. Her mother shopped for the best cuts of meat at the butcher: men who work hard need a solid meal, she explained. Helga served a "solid meal" for her husband at precisely six o'clock every evening. But, from the moment he left in the morning until that hour, she rarely thought of him. When the shopping and the cleaning were done, she sat at the window with some darning that was meant to distract her from the fact that she was sitting there idly, while the people in the street all seemed to have so much to do. From her protected, hidden spot behind the curtain, she observed them with interest and seriousness, the way she had, before Egon, observed all men with brown eyes. She was filled with vague curiosity: Where were they going? Why were they so busy? Although she didn't realize it, she was lonely. She often thought about her mother, because, in Helga's eyes, her mother was a person who, unlike everyone else, never changed. It was a kind of respite for Helga to be with her mother. Mother and child. Comfort. She loved recalling her childhood. She liked hearing her mother talk about things that had happened. Her mother talked a lot. The sentences streamed from her, forming sturdy frames around distant, blurry landscapes. Often she said, "You are doing so well. You should appreciate it more, but you have always been ungrateful." "Ungrateful how?" Helga asked. Then, every time, she got the story about all the tears she had shed when she received gifts. "In the end, we were simply afraid to buy you anything," her mother said. And there in the twilight they sat, shaking their heads at the thought of this unappreciative child who had cried over gifts that would have delighted other children. They talked about this mystery in

the same tone one might use to talk about getting over scarlet fever: Good heavens, you were so sick, we thought you might never get over it!

Most of all, Helga loved hearing about everything that was outside the parameters of her own memory: about the first words she'd spoken, when she'd been toilet trained, and so on—things that did not differentiate her at all from any other child a mother might talk about. Her mother liked to end these stories, while getting up and gathering her belongings, by making some remark like "Well, we won't be seeing those times again"—generalizations spoken without the slightest tone of complaint, but that left a small rip in the veil that lay over Helga's innermost being, like the membrane around an unborn child.

When her mother left (always soon before Egon was expected home), Helga waved to her familiar substantial figure for as long as she could see it, then she sat back down at the window without turning on the light. A sadness grew within her and around her. She thought, If only Egon would come home. But when he did come, and filled the small rooms with his noisy company, every enchantment was shattered. Could it be that it wasn't him she was longing for? She walked around quietly, carrying out her housewifely duties, picked at her food like a bird, and said "yes" and "no" when her husband's remarks required an answer. Once, he regarded her closely. "You should have a kid," he said. "I damn well don't understand why it's not happening." Then she blushed, partly at her deficiency in that department, but more because she didn't actually mind not having a child. Her togetherness with her mother allowed the child Helga to live on within her, and it was as if there weren't room for another one. Sometimes she lied to Egon when he asked if her mother had been over, because for some reason he didn't like her mother to visit so often when he wasn't home.

The days passed without much to distinguish one from the next.

One evening, Helga had the food waiting for an hour before Egon came home, and when he did arrive he was drunk. He threw himself down on the divan, from which he followed her movements through the living room with a furtive, sinister glare. "What's wrong with you?" he asked suddenly. "Your face looks all pasty." She was shocked and quickly put some rouge on her cheeks, but later she got used to his tone. She also got used to making food

that was easily reheated, because it became impossible to predict when he would come home. She told her mother: "Egon started drinking." Her mother seemed to be more uneasy about it than Helga was. "When a man drinks, it's because he's dissatisfied with his wife," she declared. And, since she was of the opinion that you could always do something about a problem, she advised her daughter to "talk it out" with Egon and figure out what was the matter. But Helga had never tried to put herself in another person's shoes; it had never been necessary. Her entire character consisted of a pile of memories without a pattern or a plan. There were a number of pairs of brown eyes, a twilight mood, an immense, undefined expectation, a yellow dress, and an umbrella. There were tears and disappointments, and so many other things, and small joys in between. And there was a man who had opened her narrow, pale lips, and for a few moments made her feel the tug of something unknown and wonderful; there was a voice that had said strange and sweet words to her; and over it all stretched the fine silk umbrella canopy of her childhood and her dreams.

This had nothing to do with the man who had started drinking. She thought she had given him as much of herself as he could reasonably expect, and her vague feeling of inadequacy with him was only because she wasn't pregnant, as a newly married wife ought to be. But it seemed to her that, as usual, she expected something more for herself, a kind of surfeit that went only to other, unknown individuals. Not that she blamed anyone for anything—she had never done that, because she knew how unreasonable she was. She had written things on her life's wish list that were achievable: time to dream, a husband with brown eyes, and a child—the last one for conventional reasons. Her outward behavior had always been dictated by tangible things, so she assumed that it was something concrete that had made Egon start drinking and speaking harshly to her. She nodded thoughtfully to her mother over her tea and promised to "talk it out" with her husband. But she had already decided that it was the lack of a child that was bothering him, and matters no one could do anything about were not proper topics of conversation. Not even with her mother.

That evening, Egon came home at midnight. He threw his dirty overalls in the middle of the living room and called for Helga, who was warming up the food.

“I’m fed up to here with it,” he said slowly, swaying on his legs like a sailor. She appeared in the kitchen door, staring at him with her sorrowful, wondering eyes.

“What are you fed up with?” she asked anxiously.

“Everything,” he said, his alcohol breath reeking in her face. “What do you think I am, an idiot?”

She didn’t answer, but pulled back from him a step. Her mind was slow, never fully able to follow a situation, especially a surprising one. Her mind quickened only with memories.

“The food is burning,” she said hesitantly.

He laughed callously.

“I don’t want any food,” he drawled. “I ate already.”

“Where did you eat?” she asked quietly, starting to untie her apron. Her hands trembled slightly. He could see that she was hurt or afraid, and he laughed loudly again.

“With a good-looking girl, if you absolutely must know,” he shouted triumphantly. Then he belched in her face, walked into the bedroom, and lay down on the bed, fully dressed.

Helga followed him. She looked at him, confused, numb to any clear thought or feeling, as she fumbled for a safe, childlike footing. She whispered, “I’m going to tell my mother.” But he was already asleep.

Actually, she didn’t feel any more hurt by the thought that he had very likely cheated on her than she knew a person *ought* to feel. A husband shouldn’t drink, but if he cheats that is much worse. Instead of having her usual fantasies, she imagined him with another woman, but it really didn’t make much difference. It was only her outer life that he was threatening. It didn’t change who she was; her body was the same as before, with one small distinction—it had lessened in value to other men. The term “other men” hadn’t occurred to her since she’d got married. Now, as she slowly

undressed, she thought only about that, because she knew that her mother would. Her mother would rationalize that, if this husband neglected his obligations, then she would have to turn to other brown-eyed men for the pursuit of her daily bread—this idea, that the men absolutely had to have brown eyes, came, by the way, from her mother. A remark that had stuck: dark men are goodness itself.

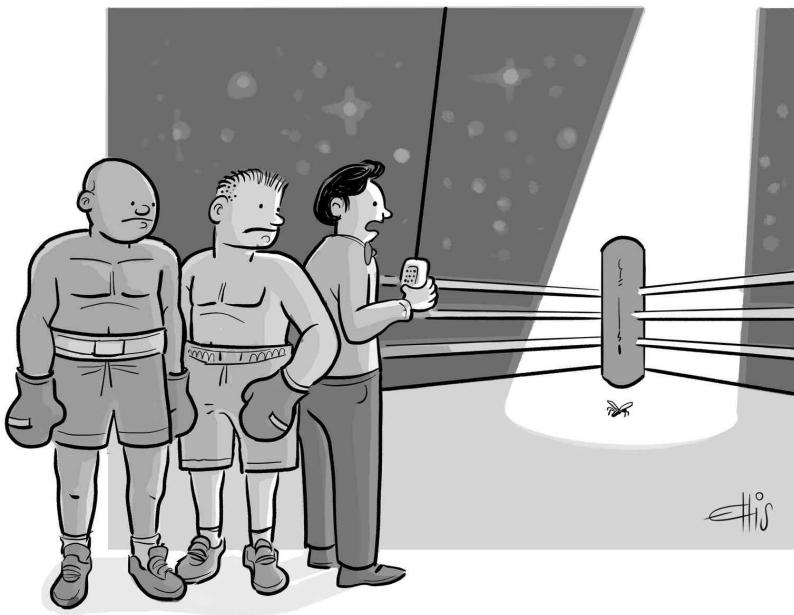
Egon slept heavily beside her, and Helga lay observing him. Despite the late hour, she wasn't sleepy. His chin was relaxed, he had a beard, and he was snoring. This was how one might think about a stranger, not one's husband. Maybe he had been a stranger to her for quite some time—ever since the day she had gone to him with such high expectations, and departed with such deep disappointment, in her own quiet way, without acknowledging it as any great calamity. What does one person mean to another anyway, except when one forces the other to act?

Helga's reaction was strange. The times that she'd stolen a small amount of the household money and hidden it in a little box, originally a jewelry box that she had been given for her confirmation, she hadn't had any particular purpose in mind. Perhaps she had tried to convince herself that it was for Christmas gifts or other things they would struggle to afford. But now she realized why she had saved this money. She smiled suddenly in the dark, and very quietly slipped out of bed and walked to the drawer where she had hidden the box. The moon lit the little room like a false dawn. With the deftness of a thief, she counted the money. There were almost forty kroner. She held them in her hands, smiling gently, redeemed and alone, like a child smiling in her sleep. All she could think of was an open, translucent umbrella with a certain shape and color. She longed for the morning, and her heart pounded fast, the way a woman's heart pounds when she is going to meet her lover. She imagined the street in the rain, and herself wandering beneath this silken canopy. Vague, bright thoughts spread like dandelion tufts across her mind: a house where she had worked, the wife in a dinner dress—*Oh, Helga, bring me my umbrella*. She had held many umbrellas in her hand without thinking about them. Things outside her world didn't really mean anything to her. Until now. Until she acted.

She got back into bed, and her husband reached for her body in his sleep, mumbling something she couldn't make out. Carefully, she laid his limp

hand back under the comforter, as a distant tenderness flowed through her. For a second, she felt as much searing emotion as she could ever feel for another person, except for her mother. Recently, Egon had often yelled about getting a divorce, said that he wasn't going to be married to a broom handle, but words slung at her that way passed right through her as if she were a sieve. Her parents had always yelled like that when they fought. It didn't mean anything, and she was used to it. All that mattered to her was that the neighbors didn't hear. She was never one to argue; she just figured that other people were like that, and she wasn't. She defended herself in another way. There was no way of knowing when it would surface. Maybe Egon had never cheated on her at all, but that didn't matter anymore.

The next morning they both acted as if nothing had happened. That was how their lives were. Helga prepared her husband's lunch, made him coffee, and kissed him on the cheek as he left. Exactly as usual. Then she went shopping, filled with light, expectant thoughts. And there was no one to tell her that she looked beautiful that morning, in the way that perfectly regular people can, once in a while, when they are feeling happy. She brightened the November day like a pale, delicate morning star, trembling gently and devotedly before it is extinguished. She wasn't the same person that she had been the day before. She was a woman walking into shops looking at umbrellas. It took a long time to find the right one. And she carried it awkwardly on the way home, like a man who isn't used to carrying a bouquet of flowers.



"And in this corner is a wasp, so we're going to stay away from it."
Cartoon by Ellis Rosen

Once she was inside, she opened the umbrella and skipped around the apartment with it. Her joy was pristine. She walked exactly like the woman in the yellow dress from her childhood. She walked past piles of dirty dishes, through large, well-lit rooms with palm trees in the corners and paintings on the walls. She entered an illuminated ballroom and remembered her first dance. She lifted the hem of her invisible dress and danced a few steps. The shaft of the umbrella was cool, thin, and strong, something to hold tightly, something to admire, to believe in, to acknowledge. Now she could say to her girlfriends, "I bought an umbrella." And it would still be all hers. She closed it, studying the way it functioned: the shiny ribs, the tiny, adorable silk buttons, and the durable yet translucent cloth, against which the rain would someday thrum its melody of forgotten and lost times.

Her ecstasy lasted most of the day. She didn't think about her mother, she didn't clean, she didn't even dust the furniture. She didn't think about Egon, either.

When he returned, unexpectedly, straight from work, she was sitting in the window at her usual spot, with the darning basket, which was empty, in front of her. She smiled at him and stood up.

"I haven't made any dinner," she said offhandedly, adding as a provocation, which was unlike her, "I thought maybe you would be eating out."

He didn't answer, and she ascertained that he was sober, and that he was trying to avoid her eyes. Why? She wanted to tell him about the umbrella and her little swindle. She needed to share her joy with someone. But he looked so terribly ceremonious as he sat himself at the table and cleared his throat. "I'm sorry about yesterday," he said awkwardly. "It wasn't true. I was just drunk."

"I see," she said flatly. All day she hadn't given one thought to what had happened the day before. Even now it was strangely difficult for her to think about anything other than the umbrella, but the situation demanded that she say something. She felt embarrassed, as he did, and she stared down at her hands.

"That's all right," she said truthfully. "I've forgotten all about it."

She didn't notice the shadow darkening his face, and she didn't register how despairingly he tensed his whole body toward her. She was a person who didn't come when she was called. She was the one who called when she needed something, in a thin voice, which was easily drowned out by the storm. Besides, it is very rare that two people call at the same time and both get responses. She was content in herself—she even had a bit extra to share—but her husband had pursued her for a long time like a big clumsy animal, while she, agile and light as a scared gazelle, had run from him into a bright, hidden clearing in the woods.

She sat down across from him, small and erect, and again seemed to him both secretive and alluring. As he had a long time ago, he asked jealously and fearfully, "What are you thinking about?" And, just like back then, her clear, dreamy eyes glided over him as she responded, "An umbrella." And then with sudden animation, "I bought it, Egon. Do you want to see it?" She was already skipping to the entryway, breathless with excitement.

But he followed behind her and abruptly, angrily, pulled the fine object from her hands and broke it in half over his strong knee.

“There’s your umbrella!” he shouted, and she stood for a second in shock, staring at the pieces, at the cleverly formed ribs and the torn silk.

Then she walked silently past him into the little living room, back to the manageable, the tolerable, the predetermined. She sat by the window as before, finally realizing that this was her place and that everything was the way it was supposed to be. The colors in her memory mixed together, forming the beginning of a kind of pattern. She realized that she could never be the owner of an umbrella. It was only natural—it made sense that the umbrella was ruined. She had set herself up against the secret law steering her inner world. Few people, even once in their lives, dare to make the inexpressible real.

Helga smiled distantly at her husband. It was as if he had suddenly caused some string inside her to vibrate slightly, maybe because he had shown her the limits of her potential before it flowed out into nothingness. She didn’t think about it like that. She just thought, This is exactly as if I had cheated on him, and he’s forgiven me. And she nodded, seriously and absently, as if to a child who wanted to take a star down from the sky and give it away, when he, intensely occupied with screwing a new bulb into the ceiling fixture, said to her over his shoulder, “You’ll get another umbrella.”♦

(Translated, from the Danish, by Michael Favala Goldman.)

By [Deborah Treisman](#)

Good Intentions

- [Stanford Takes on the Techlash](#)

[October 25, 2021 Issue](#)

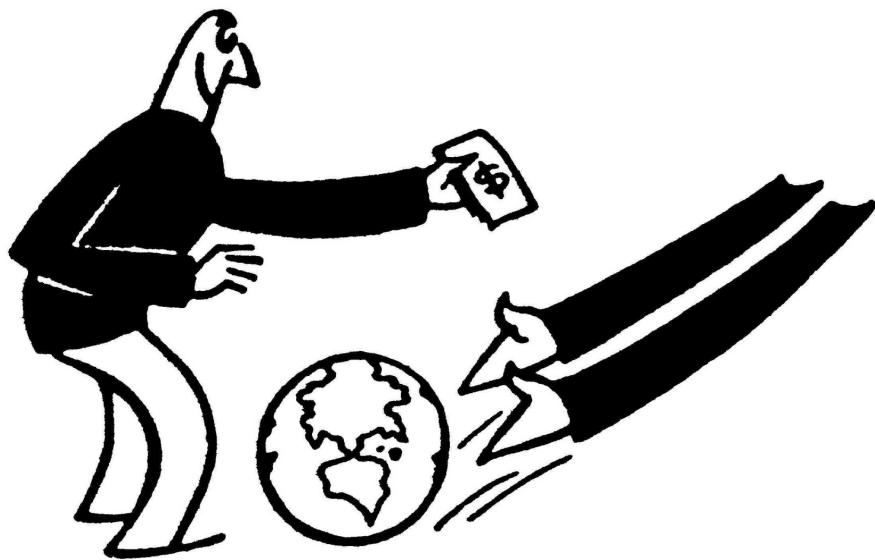
Stanford Takes on the Techlash

With more and more students becoming dorm-room C.E.O.s, three professors cooked up an ethics class for the coding set.

By [Andrew Marantz](#)

October 18, 2021

In the fall of 2015, Rob Reich, a philosopher and a political scientist at Stanford, was chatting with a freshman during office hours. “I asked him what he planned to study,” Reich recalled recently. “He said, ‘Definitely computer science. I have some ideas for startups.’ ” In the spirit of small talk, Reich asked, What kind? “He looked at me with total earnestness and said, ‘To tell you that, I’d have to ask you to sign a nondisclosure agreement.’ ”



The student was hardly the first to treat a Stanford education as a prelude to an I.P.O. In 1939, two graduates started Hewlett-Packard; in 1996, two Ph.D. students founded Google. A recent study estimated that if all the companies established by Stanford alumni were to form their own country, it would

have the world's tenth-largest economy. For a long time, the default attitude on campus, where recruiters from Instagram and [Palantir](#) dispensed company swag outside the Gates Computer Science Building, was that Big Tech could do no wrong. That attitude became harder to justify after the post-2016 "[techlash](#)"—the widespread realization that along with the upsides of the digital revolution, such as more efficient burrito delivery, might come downsides, such as the [unravelling](#) of Western democracy.

To Reich, the university seemed ripe for a cultural transformation, or at least a nudge toward nuance. "You can't become a doctor or a lawyer without being asked to engage seriously with the profession's ethical duties and trade-offs," he said. But it's easy to pass through Stanford, as a disproportionate number of Silicon Valley titans do, without giving any real thought to tech ethics.

Reich approached two other Stanford professors—Mehran Sahami, a computer scientist and a former Google employee, and Jeremy Weinstein, a political scientist who served on President Obama's National Security Council—about co-teaching an interdisciplinary course. It launched, in 2019, as Computers, Ethics, and Public Policy. ([Headline](#) on Stanford's news site: "Tech ethics course urges students to move responsibly and think about things.") The goal of the course was to infuse problem sets on policy dilemmas and philosophical debates with the brass tacks of coding. The first year, three hundred undergrads took the course.



"You're right—bad things do happen when you relax."
Cartoon by Colin Tom

Then *COVID* hit. Stanford, being Stanford, had a technological solution. A classroom was converted into a bespoke Zoom studio, with three cameras, a lighting rig, and a video wall, where students appeared in hundreds of rectangles. One of the cameras pointed at a sliding glass door from which professors emerged, like prizes on “Let’s Make a Deal,” when it was their turn to lecture. For a recent class, Reich entered first, removed his mask, and started to recap the assigned reading, “[The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas](#),” a 1973 short story by Ursula K. Le Guin, which he described as “a story about a Utopia, or possibly a dystopia.” Omelas is a city where all citizens live in splendor, but their comfort is made possible by the suffering of a child locked away in a dungeon. When the citizens learn this secret, some make their peace with it; others walk away in protest. Reich told his students, “What I would like you to discuss for three minutes, in a Zoom breakout room, is: Do you think the people who leave Omelas are heroes or cowards?” He then posted a Zoom poll, which included four options (heroes, cowards, both, neither). This generated a lively debate in the chat (Yuna Blajer de la Garza: “The tyranny of the majority!” Maya Ziv: “don’t sacrifice me on your altar of utilitarian utopia”), but the poll froze before the results could be finalized. “Good intentions tempered by technical affordances, as always happens,” Reich said.

Last month, Reich, Sahami, and Weinstein published a book titled “[System Error: Where Big Tech Went Wrong and How We Can Reboot](#).” The introduction recounts the story of Joshua Browder, who “entered Stanford as a young, brilliant undergraduate in 2015.” After three months at Stanford, he invented a chatbot to help people get out of paying their parking tickets; within a year he was the C.E.O. of DoNotPay, an “online robot lawyer” startup now valued at more than two hundred million dollars. “He is not a bad person,” the professors write. “He just lives in a world where it is normal not to think twice about how new technology companies could create harmful effects”—such as encouraging citizens to stop funding public roads, which tend to crumble when people DoNotPay for them. Browder wrote on Twitter that Sahami and Reich were “my two favorite Stanford professors,” and that he was “surprised to learn they spent the entire first chapter bashing DoNotPay.”

“Thanks for engaging with the book,” Sahami responded.

“I think we should discuss it in person during one of the classes,” Browder wrote back. “I will bring the data.” ♦

Letter from Moscow

- [A Black Communist's Disappearance in Stalin's Russia](#)

What happened to Lovett Fort-Whiteman, the only known African American to die in the Gulag?

By [Joshua Yaffa](#)

Content

In the spring of 1936, Lovett Fort-Whiteman, an African American man from Dallas, Texas, vanished in Moscow. He had lived in the Soviet Union for nearly a decade, most recently with his wife, Marina, a Russian Jewish chemist, in a cramped apartment around the corner from the Central Telegraph building. By then, a half-dozen African Americans had settled in Moscow permanently. Even among them, Fort-Whiteman, who was forty-six, was a striking sight. He wore knee-high boots, a black leather cap, and a belted long shirt in the style of Bolshevik commissars. Homer Smith, a Black journalist from Minneapolis and Fort-Whiteman's close friend in Moscow, later wrote, "He had adopted the practice of many Russian Communists of shaving his head, and with his finely chiseled nose set into a V-shaped face he resembled a Buddhist monk."

Nearly two decades had passed since the Bolshevik Revolution established the world's first Communist state, a society that promised equality and dignity for workers and peasants. In the Soviet Union, racial prejudice was considered the result of capitalistic exploitation, and, for the Kremlin, countering racism became a question of geopolitical P.R. Throughout the nineteen-twenties and thirties, dozens of Black activists and intellectuals passed through Moscow. Wherever they went, Russians would give up their place in line, or their seat on a train—a practice that an N.A.A.C.P. leader called an "almost embarrassing courtesy." In 1931, after the so-called Scottsboro Boys—nine Black teen-agers falsely accused of raping two white women in Alabama—were put on trial, the American Communist Party provided pro-bono legal defense, and rallies in their support were held in dozens of cities across the Soviet Union. Two years later, Paul Robeson, the singer, actor, and activist, visited Moscow and remarked, "Here, for the first time in my life, I walk in full human dignity."

Homer Smith eventually published a memoir, "Black Man in Red Russia," in which he described Fort-Whiteman as one of the "early Negro pilgrims who journeyed to Moscow to worship at the 'Kaaba' of Communism." Fort-

Whiteman, Smith went on, was a “dyed-in-the-wool Communist dogmatist” who once said that returning to Moscow after a trip to the U.S. felt like coming home.

By the mid-thirties, however, the exuberance of Moscow’s expat community had begun to wane. In 1934, Sergei Kirov, a leading Bolshevik functionary, was shot dead in Leningrad. Joseph Stalin, who had spent the previous decade consolidating power, used the event to justify a campaign of purges targeting the Communist élite. Foreigners, once feted, became objects of suspicion. “The broom had been sweeping steadily,” Smith, who attended the hearings for a number of high-profile defendants, wrote. “Thousands of lesser victims, I knew, simply disappeared or were liquidated without benefit of trial.”

Fort-Whiteman had become a polarizing figure. He could be pedantic and grandiose, with a penchant for name-dropping. “He did his best to proselytize and indoctrinate,” Smith wrote. Increasingly, Fort-Whiteman came to argue that the Communist Party, in order to win more support among African Americans, must acknowledge that racism, as much as social class, fuelled their plight. For Marxist ideologues, this was heresy.

One day, Smith stopped by Fort-Whiteman’s apartment. He knocked a few times, and finally Marina opened the door. “Is Gospodin Fort-Whiteman at home?” Smith asked, using the Russian honorific. Marina was clearly on edge. “No, he isn’t,” she said. “And I beg you never to come here looking for him again!” From his reporting on the purges, Smith could reasonably assume the worst. He later wrote, “I had been living in Russia long enough to understand the implications.”

Like many African Americans in the early twentieth century, Fort-Whiteman’s life was directly shaped by the atrocities of the antebellum South. His father, Moses Whiteman, was born into slavery on a plantation in South Carolina. Shortly after Reconstruction, he moved to Dallas and married a local girl named Elizabeth Fort. They had a son, Lovett, in 1889, and then a daughter, Hazel. When Fort-Whiteman was around sixteen, he enrolled at the Tuskegee Institute, the historically Black university in Alabama, then led by Booker T. Washington. Moses died a few years later, and Elizabeth and Hazel moved to Harlem. Fort-Whiteman eventually came,

too, finding work as a bellhop and moonlighting as an actor in a Black theatre troupe.

In his mid-twenties, he went to Mexico, entering without a passport, and headed for the Yucatán. The Mexican Revolution was under way, with upstart anarchist and socialist movements confronting the wealthy landowning class. By the time Fort-Whiteman returned to Harlem, four years later, in 1917, he was a committed Marxist.

In Russia, it was the year of the October Revolution, in which Vladimir Lenin and the Bolsheviks, after the abdication of Tsar Nicholas II, seized power and declared a dictatorship of the proletariat. In the U.S., the appeal of Communism for many immigrants and ethnic minorities was obvious: few other political philosophies at the time held out the possibility of full equality. “It can be difficult for many who think of the Soviet Union through the lens of Stalinism or the ‘evil empire’ to recognize all it seemed to offer African Americans,” Glenda Gilmore, the author of the 2008 book “Defying Dixie,” a history of the radical roots of the civil-rights movement, told me. “They weren’t delusional but, rather, thinking quite practically.”

Fort-Whiteman enrolled in a six-month course at the Rand School, a socialist training academy operating out of a converted mansion on East Fifteenth Street. He told a reporter from *The Messenger*, a Black-owned magazine that covered the politics and literature of the Harlem Renaissance, “Socialism offers the only lasting remedy for the economic ills from which humanity is suffering and which weigh so heavily on the colored race.”

In the years that followed, Fort-Whiteman returned to acting and began publishing theatre criticism and short fiction in *The Messenger*. His stories were richly imagined and often laced with a brash disregard for the era’s racial mores. In “Wild Flowers,” Clarissa, a Northern white woman with “a slight but well-knit figure,” has an affair with Jean, a Black man from the South “of pleasing countenance, and in the early flush of manhood.” Eventually, Clarissa gets pregnant, and she tries to hide the affair by accusing her husband of harboring Black ancestry.

As soldiers returned from the First World War, increased competition for jobs and housing contributed to rising racial tensions in the United States.

During the summer of 1919, some twenty-six race riots broke out across the country. In Chicago, a Black teen-age boy who drifted on a raft into a whites-only area of Lake Michigan was attacked with rocks and left to drown by a crowd of white bathers. In the violent aftermath, hundreds of Black businesses and homes on the South Side were destroyed, and nearly forty people were killed.

Fort-Whiteman set off on a speaking tour, in the hope that this nationwide spasm of racist violence, known as the Red Summer, would open up African Americans to his radical message. A labor organizer from Illinois compared him to “a man carrying a flaunting torch through dry grass.” Fort-Whiteman was detained in Youngstown, Ohio, after trying to convince Black laborers to join striking steelworkers. He drew a meagre audience in St. Louis, where the police arrested him, boasting to the local papers that they had busted the “St. Louis Soviet.”

Fort-Whiteman eventually caught the attention of the Bureau of Investigation, soon to become the F.B.I. In February of 1924, an agent named Earl Titus, one of the first African Americans to work at the Bureau, saw Fort-Whiteman speak in Chicago. As Titus wrote in his report, Fort-Whiteman told the crowd that “there is nothing here for the negro, and that until they have a revolution in this country as they have had in other countries, the negro will be the same.” Fort-Whiteman added that he “would like very much to go to Russia.”



"Let's eat somewhere that isn't so touristy."
Cartoon by Jeremy Nguyen

Four months later, at the age of thirty-four, he got his chance: he was selected as a delegate to the Fifth World Congress, the preëminent gathering of the Communist International, to be held that summer in Moscow.

On arrival, Fort-Whiteman and other delegates to the Comintern, as the Communist International was known, were taken to Lenin's mausoleum, on Red Square. The father of the Revolution had died six months earlier, and his body lay in perpetual state, attracting pilgrims from all over the world. Stalin had been named the head of the Party, but he had not yet solidified power. Bolshevik politics were in a liminal phase, marked by a boisterous debate over the future of Communism. Everything seemed up for grabs, including the Comintern's policy toward recruiting and organizing African Americans.

During a session devoted to the "national and colonial question," Fort-Whiteman was given the floor. Stalin was in the audience, along with foreign delegates such as Palmiro Togliatti, a leader of the Italian Communist Party, and Ho Chi Minh, then a young Vietnamese socialist, who had travelled to Moscow on a fake Chinese passport. Fort-Whiteman began by explaining the Great Migration: Blacks were moving north, he said, not only in search of economic opportunity but also as an "expression of the

growing revolt of the Negroes against the persecutions and discriminations practiced against them in the South.”

Fort-Whiteman suggested that issues of race and class, in varying and overlapping ways, were responsible for the oppression of African Americans. “The Negroes are not discriminated against as a class but as a race,” he said, seeming to acknowledge that this was a controversial statement. For Communists, he continued, “the Negro problem is a peculiar psychological problem.”

Much of the congress was leisurely. Delegates went boating on the Moscow River and attended a classical-music concert held along the shore. At the end of the three-week event, Fort-Whiteman decided to remain in Moscow. He was invited to enroll as the first African American student at the Communist University of the Toilers of the East (K.U.T.V.). White Americans attended the International Lenin School, Moscow’s premier academy for foreigners. But, because Soviet policy deemed African Americans a “colonized” people, they were to study at K.U.T.V., alongside students from China, India, Indonesia, and elsewhere. (Ho Chi Minh was a student there; so, too, was Deng Xiaoping, the future Chinese leader.) Students spent ninety minutes a day on Russian lessons, and the rest of their time reading Communist texts.

That summer, Fort-Whiteman embarked on a tour of the Soviet Union. Gilmore, in her book, recounts that a Cossack division in Ukraine made him an honorary member; in Soviet Turkestan, residents voted to rename their town Whitemansky. The archives of W. E. B. Du Bois contain a letter from Fort-Whiteman, written “from a village deep in the heart of Russia,” in which he describes how the many nationalities of the Soviet Union “live as one large family, look upon one another simply as human beings.” He tells Du Bois of evenings spent with his K.U.T.V. classmates, staging open-air theatrical performances in the forest: “Here life is poetry itself!”

Back in Moscow, Fort-Whiteman settled into his room at the Hotel Lux, where he wrote a number of letters to top Communist officials. I read them in the Comintern archive, held in the building that once housed the Marx-Engels-Lenin Institute—a five-story edifice in what is now a posh stretch of central Moscow, across from a Prada boutique. Fort-Whiteman asked Grigory Zinoviev, a powerful Bolshevik and the head of the Comintern,

about the possibility of enlisting “the discontented elements of the Negro race in America into the revolutionary movement.” He noted that, though African Americans were the most oppressed group in the United States, American Communist organizations had done little to reach out to them. Even if most Black workers had not read Marx, they had been pushed toward radicalism by the crucible of American racism. The Party, he wrote, must “carry Communist teaching to the great mass of American black workers.”

Fort-Whiteman soon returned to Chicago, where he established the American Negro Labor Congress (A.N.L.C.), a forum for Communists to make their pitch to Black workers. Not long after he arrived, he ran into Oliver Golden, a friend from his student days at the Tuskegee Institute. Golden, who was in his late thirties, worked as a railway porter. Fort-Whiteman was walking down the street in a Russian blouse and boots. Golden later recalled, “I asked him what the hell he was wearing. Had he come off stage and forgotten to change clothes?” Fort-Whiteman said that he had just returned from Russia, and asked if Golden wanted to study in Moscow. Golden remembered, “At first I thought he was kidding, but, man, I would have done anything to get off those dining cars!” A couple of weeks later, Golden was on a boat headed across the Atlantic.

That year, Fort-Whiteman dispatched ten Black students to study at K.U.T.V. “Feel assured that the university will be satisfied with the group of young men and women I am sending,” he wrote to K.U.T.V.’s director. The New York *Herald Tribune* reported that Fort-Whiteman hoped for his recruits to “do some real upheaving when they come home,” and that he planned to open a K.U.T.V. branch in Harlem with courses such as “Economics of Imperialism” and “History of Communism.” The journalist, clearly alarmed, wrote, “The flame of Bolshevism, kindled by Lenin and threatening at one time to set all Europe ablaze, is being quietly concentrated upon the United States through the instrument of the American Negro.”

Harry Haywood, a child of enslaved parents, who had served in a Black regiment in the First World War, helped Fort-Whiteman organize the American Negro Labor Congress. (His older brother Otto was among the men whom Fort-Whiteman convinced to study at K.U.T.V.) Haywood, in his memoir, “Black Bolshevik,” published in 1978, wrote, of Fort-Whiteman,

“There was no doubt that he was a showman. He always seemed to be acting out a part he had chosen for himself.”

On the evening of October 25, 1925, five hundred people assembled in a rented hall on Indiana Avenue, in Chicago, for the A.N.L.C.’s founding convention. The program, which Fort-Whiteman had arranged, quickly went awry. A member of a “Russian ballet” company—actually made up of white American dancers—shocked by all the Black faces in the audience, shouted a racial slur. Someone yelled back, “Throw the cracker bitches out!” The company refused to go on. A Soviet theatre troupe performed a one-act Pushkin play, in Russian. “Of itself, it was undoubtedly interesting,” Haywood noted. “But its relevance to a black workers congress was, to say the least, quite unclear.”

After the convention, Fort-Whiteman mounted a barnstorming tour of industrial cities, inviting press attention wherever he went. In Baltimore, the local African American newspaper wrote, approvingly, “If this is red propaganda, then for God’s sake let all our leaders supply themselves with a pot and a brush and give 12,000,000 colored people in this country a generous coating.” The white press reacted with predictable hysteria. In 1925, an article in *Time* referred to Fort-Whiteman as the “Reddest of the Blacks.”

Fort-Whiteman never ventured farther south, where the vast majority of African Americans lived. The A.N.L.C.’s recruitment efforts floundered. A Communist Party directive in the Comintern archive notes the failure of Fort-Whiteman’s mission, informing Party members that “all shortcomings in tactics and organization must be frankly brought to light.” One high-ranking Black official in the Workers Party of America declared that the organization ended up “almost completely isolated from the basic masses of the Negro people.”

Fort-Whiteman was removed as head of the A.N.L.C. in 1927. It appeared that his great ambition had failed: he hadn’t convinced many African Americans that socialist revolution was a means for combatting racism, nor had he convinced his Communist brethren in Moscow that African Americans were oppressed based on their race. But Fort-Whiteman wouldn’t let the matter drop.

In an article in the Comintern's official organ, he wrote that "race hatred on the part of the white masses extends to all classes of the negro race." This debate about the roles of race and class in the perpetuation of inequality continues among leftist activists and thinkers today. "It was clear then, as it is now, that, in America, race *classes* you," Gilmore told me. "Fort-Whiteman and others were talking about which should be fixed first." If race is a social construct, then an egalitarian revolution could be seen as a means for achieving racial equality, too. But, Gilmore added, Fort-Whiteman had a different notion: "Even as a devoted Communist, he understood that, in America, it always came down to the fact that he was a Black man."

In the Comintern archive, I read an "editorial note" that Fort-Whiteman's comrades later attached to his essay, calling his position "very superficial." Fort-Whiteman, they warned, was "shifting from the Communist to the petty bourgeois nationalist point of view."

At the Sixth Congress of the Comintern, in the summer of 1928, there was a major debate about how best to agitate for Communist revolution among African Americans. Some people within the Party pushed for recruiting sharecroppers and rural laborers in the South. Fort-Whiteman, who had returned to Moscow as a delegate, argued that it was better to wait out the Great Migration, organizing Black workers once they became urban proletariat in the factories of the North. His position aligned with that of Nikolai Bukharin, the editor of *Pravda*, who saw capitalism as ascendant; worldwide revolution, Bukharin argued, would have to be deferred. Stalin, of course, disagreed.

But, even as Fort-Whiteman found himself in opposition to the Communist mainstream on the "Negro question," as Comintern ideologues called it, he was thriving in the Soviet Union. He studied ethnology at Moscow State University and spent a summer in Murmansk, in the Arctic Circle, researching the effects of hydrogen concentration in water on fish metabolism. The Moscow *Daily News*, an English-language paper, hired him as a contributor. His clips reflect an omnivorous mind, on subjects ranging from early radiation therapies ("The result of this experiment was a 70 per cent cure of cancerous mice") to the fauna of western Siberia ("The expedition reports the presence of an abundance of elk"). In an interview that Smith conducted for the Chicago *Defender*, a Black-owned paper, Fort-

Whiteman described the Soviet Union as a place where “the Negro is untrammeled by artificial racial restrictions to make a genuine contribution to human culture.”

Along the way, he married Marina, a chemist in her late twenties, although, as Smith recalls, Fort-Whiteman’s Russian was still rudimentary, and Marina’s English wasn’t much better. Soviet authorities opened an Anglo-American school in Moscow, to educate the children of foreign workers; Fort-Whiteman took a job there, as a science teacher. Yevgeny Dolmatovsky, a celebrated poet, wrote a verse about a visit to Fort-Whiteman’s classroom: “The black teacher Whiteman / Leads the lesson. / From in my heart I draw my words / From the deepest reaches within / I see again, and again, and again / You, my Black comrade!”

Fort-Whiteman was eager to mentor the other African Americans living in Moscow. He regularly hosted lunches at his apartment, where he expounded on Marxist theory and boasted about his connections to top Bolsheviks, such as Bukharin and Karl Radek, an Austrian-born Jewish Communist and a former secretary of the Comintern. He also implored his visitors to remain acutely aware of their race. This emphasis on color consciousness, which ran counter not only to reigning Communist theory but also to the everyday experience of being Black in Moscow, was often met with resistance. One of Fort-Whiteman’s guests suggested that, if he enjoyed “going around with a black chip on his shoulder,” he should return to the American South. Smith later wrote, “His Negro guests relished the food and drinks, but the indoctrination dish did not prove as digestible.”

In 1931, a production company financed by the Comintern backed a big-budget movie, “Black and White,” about the American race problem. The film was set in Birmingham, Alabama, and featured Black stokers in steel mills and domestic workers in affluent white households. Fort-Whiteman was enlisted as a screenwriting consultant. A number of aspiring Black actors in the U.S. expressed interest in taking part. Langston Hughes joined on as a writer.

In the early-morning hours of June 14, 1932, twenty-two Black students, teachers, actors, and writers set off from New York, travelling to Germany on the ocean liner Europa, and then by train to Moscow. Fort-Whiteman met

them on the platform with a welcome party that included most of the city's small African American community. As Hughes later recalled, invoking a popular spiritual, "Certainly colored comrade Whiteman didn't look anything like *a motherless chile, a long ways from home.*"

The Americans spent the next few weeks dancing at the Metropol Hotel, cavorting with nude bathers along the riverfront, and embarking on love affairs. A member of the company was soon engaged to a Russian woman; Mildred Jones, an art student at the Hampton Institute, in Virginia, was pursued by an official from the Soviet Foreign Ministry. According to Smith, one couple were so engrossed in their rendezvous on a rowboat in the Moscow River that they failed to notice the boat was sinking.

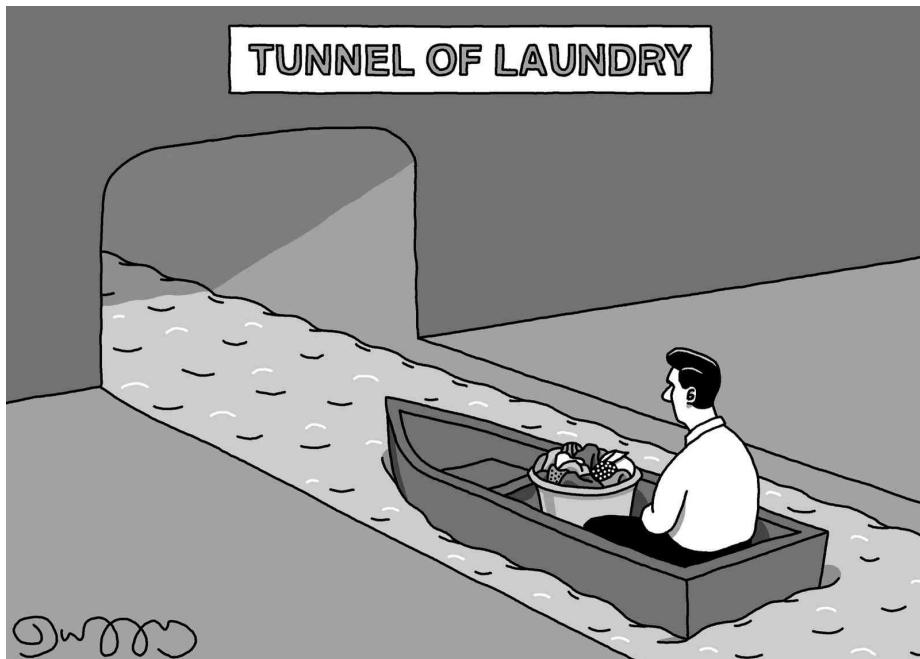
Fort-Whiteman had helped write the first draft of the "Black and White" script. I found a copy at the Russian State Archive of Literature and Art, where a typewritten note from the esteemed Soviet filmmaker Boris Barnet was attached to the first page. "This picture tries to provide a historical perspective to the narrative of the enslavement of American Negroes, which is part of the general enslavement and exploitation of the capitalist system," Barnet wrote. "Even if individual events in this picture may seem grotesque or almost incredible, the fault lies not with the author but with the viewer himself, who deliberately closes his eyes to the cruelty of the capitalist system."

Hughes, put in charge of revising the script, found the draft "improbable to the point of ludicrousness." He recalled, "I was astonished at what I read. Then I laughed until I cried." A number of the film's scenes, including one in which the son of a rich white industrialist asks a Black servant to dance at a party, were "so interwoven with major and minor impossibilities and improbabilities that it would have seemed like a burlesque on the screen." At one point, a well-heeled capitalist hatches a plot to keep labor unrest at bay, saying, "You see, racial hatred allows us to avoid more serious conflicts." The workers, however, aren't having it: "The proletariat does not see racial differences," one of the union leaders proclaims.

"Black and White" was a dream world of Fort-Whiteman's making. As Smith put it, "He was a negro intellectual and so steeped in party dogma that

he had completely lost touch with America.” Hughes told his Soviet hosts that the script was beyond saving.

In the end, the project fell apart for reasons that had nothing to do with Hughes or Fort-Whiteman. In the autumn of 1933, after years of negotiations, the United States agreed to grant formal diplomatic recognition to the Soviet regime. The agreement, Stalin hoped, would help secure the loans and the foreign machinery needed to realize his Five-Year Plan, an ambitious race to build up industry and modern infrastructure. But in return the Kremlin was required to limit its dissemination of anti-American propaganda. “Black and White” was cancelled before a single scene had been shot.



Cartoon by J. C. Duffy

By the mid-thirties, Stalin had squelched internal debates about the pace and the objectives of the Communist project. His secret police, the N.K.V.D., was sending previously loyal Party members to an expanding network of work camps, the Gulag, in the harshest corners of the country. Smith began to sour on the Soviet Union, wondering, “Was the racial equality worth the bare subsistence living in an atmosphere filled with fear and suspicion?”

Even Fort-Whiteman was having doubts. He confided to Smith that he feared Stalin was leading the country away from the original tenets of the

Revolution. In October, 1933, he sent a letter to the Workers Party head office, in New York. “I wish to return to America,” he wrote, proposing that he work as a lecturer at the Party school on East Fourteenth Street. Soviet authorities monitored the correspondence of foreigners in Moscow, and the letter was intercepted before it left the country. I found it in Fort-Whiteman’s file at the Comintern archive. A handwritten note from a top official at the Comintern’s Anglo-American secretariat, scribbled across the page, instructed subordinates to bring Fort-Whiteman in for a talk. His request to leave was denied.

Letters documenting Fort-Whiteman’s activities began piling up in his personnel file. His informal apartment gatherings were a cause of concern: “Fort-Whiteman held the most backward view that a group of this kind should not exist as a political entity nor within existing structures.” Indoctrination was the exclusive role of the Party, and Fort-Whiteman was going off script.

During the purges, ideological disagreements and skirmishes over bureaucratic positioning often blended with petty personal grievances. In April, 1935, at the Foreign Workers’ Club, Fort-Whiteman led a discussion about “The Ways of White Folks,” a new collection of fiction by Hughes, which depicts the immutability of racism with tragicomic irony. Fort-Whiteman, perhaps still stung by his experience on “Black and White,” was not a fan of the work, dismissing it as “art, not propaganda.”

William Patterson, a prominent Black Communist and a leading civil-rights lawyer, who had travelled to Moscow from Harlem some months before, was in the audience that night. He seemed to harbor ill feelings toward Fort-Whiteman, and moved to strike against him under the pretext of defending Hughes. In a letter to the Comintern, Patterson wrote that Fort-Whiteman had used his review of the book as cover for making “a very open attack upon the Comintern position on the Negro Question,” adding that Fort-Whiteman should be “sent to work somewhere where contact with the Negro comrades is impossible.”

That summer, at the Seventh Congress of the Comintern, a few American delegates met to discuss what to do about Fort-Whiteman’s efforts to “mislead some of the Negro comrades.” It was agreed that Patterson and

James Ford, a Black Communist who had run for Vice-President of the United States on the Party's slate, would take charge of the question. During the next several months, Patterson filed a flurry of letters with the Comintern. In an elegant cursive, he alleged that Fort-Whiteman had a "rotten" attitude toward the Party and was preoccupied with "the corruption of the Negro elements."

Once a person was identified as unreliable, the pile-on was inevitable; the only danger was to be seen as inadequately vigilant in calling out class enemies. A kindly archivist passed me a summary of the "secret" portion of Fort-Whiteman's personnel file, still technically off limits nearly a hundred years after its compilation. According to the accounts of unnamed informants, Fort-Whiteman had been overheard saying that the work of the Comintern had amounted to "empty talk," that Stalin was a "minor" figure in the Bolshevik Revolution, and that Communists held their "white interests dearer and closer" than those of Blacks. Fort-Whiteman, one source claimed, considered himself a natural "leader of the people" who would return to the U.S. and create a movement among African Americans outside Soviet influence.

Reading the list of Fort-Whiteman's supposed transgressions, I pictured him strolling through Moscow in those days, projecting an air of headstrong industriousness. He was still working on manuscripts and speeches, teaching, travelling, and attending the theatre—generally enjoying the kind of spirited intellectual and social life that would have been impossible in the land of his birth. In the spring of 1936, when he was ordered to report to N.K.V.D. headquarters, on Lubyanka Square, how could he have foreseen the cruelty that his adopted country was about to inflict on him? By the time Homer Smith knocked on Fort-Whiteman's door, a few days later, he was in exile.

After the Soviet collapse, many archives in Russia were suddenly accessible. Alan Cullison, who worked as an A.P. reporter in Moscow during the nineties, spent much of his free time researching the fates of Americans in the Soviet Union. In the Communist Party archive, he found a partial record showing that Fort-Whiteman had been banished to Semipalatinsk, a distant outpost in the eastern reaches of Soviet Kazakhstan. It was a hard, unforgiving place, but Fort-Whiteman made a life for himself. He found

work as a language teacher and a boxing instructor, attracting a circle of curious locals to his sports club.

Back in Moscow, the purges had taken on a fearful momentum. Radek, the former Comintern secretary, who had mentored Fort-Whiteman, was declared a traitor and sent to a labor camp. Bukharin was executed after providing a false confession at a show trial. On November 16, 1937, a squad of N.K.V.D. agents showed up at Fort-Whiteman's apartment in Semipalatinsk. Fort-Whiteman's investigative file at the agency's Kazakh bureau was unearthed by Sean Guillory, a researcher at the University of Pittsburgh who is working on an audio documentary about African Americans in the early Soviet Union. The file includes the testimony of a young man, whom Fort-Whiteman tried to recruit as a boxing pupil, reporting that Fort-Whiteman had recommended foreign literature and said, "Come join my club, we'll earn a lot of money, travel across the Soviet Union and go abroad."

For the next eight months, Fort-Whiteman was held in a prison cell in Semipalatinsk, while a "special council" of the N.K.V.D. was assembled to decide his fate. The Kazakh prosecutor's office sent me a copy of his case. It showed that, in August, 1938, he was found guilty of crimes including anti-Soviet agitation, slandering the Party, and "cultivating exiles around himself while instilling a counter-revolutionary spirit." He was sentenced to five years in a correctional labor camp.

His destination was Kolyma, a region in the Russian Far East which Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn described as a "pole of cold and cruelty." Fort-Whiteman was assigned to a network of forced-labor sites known as Sevvostlag, where convicts mined for gold and laid new stretches of road on the frozen tundra. The prisoners were outfitted with crude boots and thinly padded jackets—little defense against temperatures that regularly dipped to fifty degrees below zero.

Within a few months, Fort-Whiteman fell behind on his work quota, and his daily food rations were withheld. Camp guards beat him brutally and often. A man of so much vitality, even glamour, was reduced to a *dokhodyaga*, camp slang that roughly translates as "a person nearing the end of his walk."

None of his Moscow friends had any idea what had happened to him. Among them was Robert Robinson, an African American toolmaker from Detroit who had been recruited to work in Russia by Soviet emissaries who were visiting the Ford Motor plant. Robinson ultimately stayed in the Soviet Union for more than four decades. In a memoir, he described an encounter with a friend in Moscow who had been a prisoner in Kolyma with Fort-Whiteman. “He died of starvation, or malnutrition, a broken man whose teeth had been knocked out,” the friend said.

The final document in Fort-Whiteman’s long record is his death certificate, a faded sheet of paper held in a distant archive in Kazakhstan. Just after midnight on January 13, 1939, Fort-Whiteman’s frozen corpse was delivered to the hospital in Ust-Taezhny, a settlement carved out of fields of snow. The official cause of death was “weakening of cardiac activity.” Fort-Whiteman is the only African American recorded to have died in the Gulag, but in his final moments that distinction made little difference. He was buried in a mass grave with thousands of fellow-inmates who met the same fate. ♦

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Look-Alike Dept.

- Bounty Hunting for Brian Laundrie in a Land of Doppelgängers

[October 25, 2021 Issue](#)

Bounty Hunting for Brian Laundrie in a Land of Doppelgängers

Amateur sleuths have speculated that the fugitive is on the run on the Appalachian Trail—bad news for the archetypical long-distance hiker: skinny, pale, bald, and bearded.

By [Charles Bethea](#)

October 16, 2021

Severin Beckwith and Anna Brettmann, a young couple from Ithaca, New York, have been hiking from Georgia to Virginia on the Appalachian Trail since late September. In western North Carolina, after a few days of hard rain and little sleep, they decided to take a break from the woods. A shuttle delivered them to the Lodge at Fontana Village Resort, a rustic retreat two miles off the trail, where they ate lunch and lay down for a midday nap. Knocking awoke them. There was a muffled voice outside their door. It burst open before Beckwith could unlock it.



“Next thing I see is a bunch of guys with riot shields with ‘U.S. Marshals’ written on them,” Beckwith said. “Handguns pointed at my face.” Brettmann was still in bed. A marshal helped her get dressed as they handcuffed Beckwith, still in his underwear, and took him out to the hallway. He had a hunch why this was happening. “I really hoped I was right,” he said.

Beckwith resembles Brian Laundrie—the fugitive and person of interest in the killing of his fiancée, Gabby Petito—in the way that most white male long-distance hikers resemble Laundrie: skinny and pale, with a shaved head and a beard. The preponderance of such men, perhaps, has made the Appalachian Trail a locus of the manhunt among the amateur set. There’s also the fact that Laundrie has been known to hike the trail, and that it is regarded, mostly by those who’ve never hiked it, as a place to go if you want to disappear. An engineer from Florida was “99.99 per cent sure” that he saw Laundrie looking “wagged out” near the trail.

Days earlier, someone else had clocked Beckwith as resembling Laundrie. But the marshals had seen more than a passing similarity. One of them touched the side of Beckwith’s head and noted that he had, as Beckwith said, “a notch in the upper part of my inner ear just like his.” On top of that, Beckwith and Brettmann had booked their room with a credit card linked to a New York I.D.—Petito was from New York—“which, I guess, was good enough motive to come in.”

But Beckwith didn’t have Laundrie’s hand tattoos. His I.D. didn’t have Laundrie’s name on it, either. The marshals fingerprinted Beckwith (“They had to use our hotel Wi-Fi password,” Beckwith said, “because they were having trouble with their Bluetooth fingerprint thing”) and suggested that he shave his beard—which he did but “immediately regretted,” he said, “because I have much less of a chin than Laundrie does.” They told the couple that they now had a good story to tell. Then they left.

Who had alerted the marshals to the presence of a Laundrie look-alike? Beckwith remembered a moment earlier that day at the Fontana Lake marina, where they’d gone to call the shuttle. An employee had responded strangely to his request to use the telephone. He’d also, it turned out, taken Beckwith’s picture and passed it along to the authorities. A marshal showed the picture to Beckwith after kicking in his door.

“They had a little side-by-side,” Beckwith said. “It was Brian and then me on the phone calling to get the shuttle.”

For their unique troubles, the lodge gave Beckwith and Brettmann a free night’s stay—in a room with a working lock—and free breakfast. “It was a buffet,” Beckwith said. “We took as much as we could.”

A few days later, Maria Guzman, who runs Standing Bear Farm Hostel, a week’s walk down the trail, in Tennessee, met Beckwith and Brettmann while out for a hike. They told her the story.

“He does look like Laundrie,” Guzman said later. “But so do thousands of people.” A fellow-hiker attempted to give Beckwith a trail name, as is customary for long-distance hikers: the Fugitive. This was, Beckwith felt, “a bit too on the nose.” Instead, he went with Not Brian, which, he said, “basically covers it.” Guzman promised the couple a free pizza if they stayed at her hostel, which they ended up doing. Their luck was turning.

Guzman mentioned the Laundrie look-alike to her friends Tina Simerly and Xander McDouall, a local couple who were also searching for the fugitive. Simerly and McDouall are neither amateur sleuths nor government agents: they run a local bounty-hunting outfit called Predator Hunter Nation. (Duane Chapman, a.k.a. Dog the Bounty Hunter, was also on Laundrie’s trail recently, until he injured his ankle.)

“Mostly pedophiles,” Simerly said, describing their quarry. “But not exclusively.” She went on, “There are sightings all over Hartford”—a nearby town. “And nobody is paying attention.” She added, “Our friend Hunter, he saw him at the Citgo in Hartford, in a brown Ford Escape.” The bounty hunters discussed the reward being offered for information leading to Laundrie’s capture. “Last I heard, it was a hundred and seventy thousand,” Simerly said.

“One-eighty now,” McDouall said. “That’s half the reason people are even looking. But not us. We’re looking for this guy because he’s a predator.” He paused, and went on, “He’s a pretty generic-looking dude, though, really. People say I look like him, too.” ♦

Mojave Postcard

- [Live from the Mojave, It's Desert Weirdness](#)

[October 25, 2021 Issue](#)

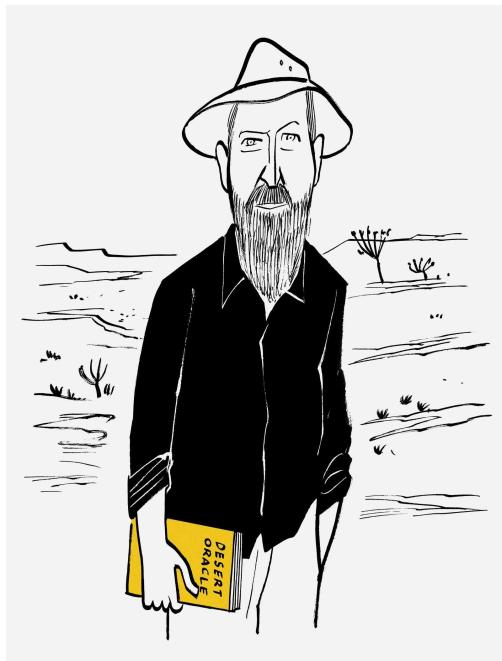
Live from the Mojave, It's Desert Weirdness

For his cult radio show, “Desert Oracle,” Ken Layne channels Mark Twain and Tom Waits to spin tales of weird pets, scorching weather, and U.F.O.s.

By [Abby Aguirre](#)

October 18, 2021

Ken Layne was at Theatre 29, a space in the town of Twentynine Palms, in the Mojave Desert, conducting a sound check before a live performance of “[Desert Oracle](#),” his late-night radio show and podcast, which is also the name of the culty [zine](#) he publishes, in nearby Joshua Tree. He was testing a vintage rotary phone that he would invite audience members to use during a call-in segment. His nasal, gravelly baritone rang out through the speakers: “Hello-o-o? Hello-o-o?”



Ken Layne illustration by João Fazenda

Layne, who is fifty-six, narrates “Desert Oracle” in character as a kind of old-school AM-radio host, but with a dash of Mark Twain (in the writing)

and a Tom Waits growl. The show inspires fervent fandom, from California to Brooklyn. Six-four and fair-skinned, Layne has alert blue eyes and a gray beard. Although it was a hundred and eighteen degrees out, he wore a long-sleeved black shirt, green pants, and a foldable ranger's hat.

Theatre 29 had been closed since the pandemic began, and the stage was still set for a production of "The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe" that never happened. Layne draped a black tarp over the Narnia wardrobe and plugged in a string of lights that simulated a campfire. Soon he was pacing the stage, reciting bits of monologue over a moody soundscape created by the musician RedBlueBlackSilver: "*In America alone, more people believe in space aliens—sixty-five per cent—than the sixty-four per cent who believe in the Biblical God . . .*"

Layne is a former blogger, and he dreamed up *Desert Oracle* during visits to a Buddhist monastery in Carmel and a Benedictine hermitage in Big Sur. He put out the first issue in 2015. The pocket-size publication mixes news with features about oddballs and local lore. Its desert strangeness extends to its real-estate listings: "Missile Silo with 25 Acres" near Roswell, New Mexico; a "Fabulous Cave Home" in Bisbee, Arizona.

The radio show came two years after the zine, but Layne had first sketched it out in 2010: "Desert weather report, pick a place, tell its story in long rambling humorous monologue," he wrote in a note at the time. He wanted to talk about missing pets and "funny Europeans." It wasn't an obvious fit for the local FM station in Joshua Tree, but Layne prevailed and now his show is on eleven stations, mainly in the Southwest. (He is planning a national tour for later this fall.)

The next night, Saturday, the theatre was packed. "Finally, it's the time of night when you can go outside and you can touch things again without gloves," he told the crowd, referring to the fact that the temperature had dropped one degree. He sat at a desk to tell what he calls a "radio story"—actually, a string of them. He started with Snippy, an Appaloosa mare that was found dead in Colorado's San Luis Valley in 1967, with surgical cuts all over her body and her head stripped to the bone. He ended with the sordid tale of Richard Doty, an agent for the Air Force's Office of Special

Investigations, who fed disinformation to ufologists in the seventies and eighties.

After a few audience calls (including one from a woman who described a camping trip during which she had seen a “blank darkness” move across the sky and block out the stars), Layne “lit” the campfire. As crackling sounds played through the speakers, he closed with a campfire story. He talked about billionaires launching themselves into space, mysterious drone sightings, and the “Tic Tac” U.F.O. video shot by a Navy fighter jet off San Diego. “It’s a time when our space age is really kinda on our minds,” he said.

What had begun as a story ended as a sermon. Layne urged the audience not to wait for permission to see inexplicable things. The government’s [U.F.O.](#) reports are always missing one thing, he said: “It’s the fact that a regular person—walkin’ the dog, takin’ out the recycling at night, comin’ back from getting milk at the convenience store, or whatever they’re doing—can have an encounter that will forever change your lives.”

Afterward, Layne came to the lobby to greet fans and talk about the heat.

“Yesterday, the air-conditioning in my car quit,” one woman said.

“*Oh-Jesus-Lord,*” Layne said.

“I remember the days when we didn’t have air-conditioning and we would have to roll the windows down,” another woman said.

“My grandparents and my parents would only roll the window down halfway, because you couldn’t hear anything,” the first woman said.

Layne nodded. “Wouldn’t want to miss any important conversation during your heatstroke, right?”

A guy in *Desert Oracle* colors—black shirt and jeans, yellow sneakers—wanted a photo. But first Layne wished his booking agent a safe drive home. “The stretch between here and Joshua Tree?” he said. “*Keep your eyes open.*” ♦

On Television

- The News, According to Charlamagne tha God and Jon Stewart

A shock jock joins the commentariat as a semi-serious race whisperer; a satirist turns sage.

By [Doreen St. Félix](#)

“Yes, we talk about race a lot on this show,” Charlamagne tha God says, in his new weekly late-night series on Comedy Central. “That’s America’s fault. Not mine.” Voilà, the rationale behind our glut of edutainment! The ignorance of the population has compelled Charlamagne, a radio personality turned member of the commentariat, to dispense his wisdom. He is the latest pop-cultural figure to convince Americans that he is a race whisperer. As the host and one of the executive producers of “Tha God’s Honest Truth with Charlamagne tha God,” he purports to offer an “unapologetically Black” perspective on crises like the backlash against critical race theory and the discourse surrounding mental health. It is the species of current-affairs television that executives like to categorize as urgent or necessary. The country needs Charlamagne, and it needs him badly. Maybe that’s why the set of his talk show looks like the lair of a B-movie superhero.

Charlamagne, born Lenard McKelvey, is a former protégé of the master gossip Wendy Williams. About a decade ago, he became a co-host, alongside DJ Envy and Angela Yee, of “The Breakfast Club,” Power 105.1’s four-hour rap morning show, where he embraced the role of provocateur, or “the Prince of Pissing People Off,” to quote the man himself. An offensive comment, always framed as an innocent inquiry, might cause a guest to storm off, or to threaten him. Birdman exiting an interview not two minutes after it began, Mo’Nique insinuating that Charlamagne is a sellout, Charlamagne sniffing Jennifer Lopez’s seat after she left the studio—the spectacles are too many to count. Mind you, Charlamagne is not a comedian, and his gift as an interviewer is to generate conflict, not to get answers. What blew up his profile was his unrepentance, his embodiment of the id. “The Breakfast Club,” which is videotaped and posted online, is de-facto television. The interviews spark endless social-media bickering and memes, making the man at the center of the rumpus as ubiquitous visually as he is aurally.

How does a shock jock come to host a semi-serious race-reckoning pageant? In a 2020 Slate article, Rachelle Hampton explained the way the Democratic machine has anointed Charlamagne “the spokesman for all Black voters.”

“The Breakfast Club” has become a campaign stop for politicians, or, as Hampton put it, a platform for candidates looking to “project authenticity.” Kamala Harris, Bernie Sanders, and Elizabeth Warren have all sat in the studio’s swivel chair. Charlamagne has a knack for coaxing the outrageous sound bite: “If you have a problem figuring out if you’re for me or for Trump, then you ain’t Black,” Joe Biden sassed during his “Breakfast Club” interview. The media frothed at the juxtaposition: buttoned-up politicos being disarmed by a Black male straight-talker. Charlamagne, in turn, has savvily leveraged his proximity to these power brokers, styling himself a guru for a people. During this past election, he was a fixture on cable television, speaking as a sort of soothsaying specialist on the Black condition.

The Charlamagne of “Tha God’s Honest Truth” is relatively chastened. He is older now, the show seems to say, and he wants to use his talents to bring about social change. During the concluding segment of each episode, he sits on a couch and, like Mr. Rogers, slips into his house slides. Such affectations are risible. The entertainer requires looseness to come alive, and the rigidity of the twenty-two-minute structure stifles him. When presenting mini histories on, say, the F.B.I. or German de-Nazification processes, he is weirdly uncharismatic. Sometimes he’ll go off script to express his amazement at the existence of his new show. A thoroughly uninteresting sketch on race relations will wrap, and then we’re back in the studio, where our presenter is shaking his polished bald head, ad-libbing, “I really can’t believe they’re letting me get away with this type of shit on TV.”

Occasionally, Charlamagne pulls up online criticism from his haters, borrowing from a popular late-night conceit that usually only highlights the growing irrelevance of the time slot. But Charlamagne is not like Fallon or Kimmel; he is an Internet man. He is versed in a certain kind of performativity, a conspiratorial brandishing of one’s Blackness as automatic expertise. By telling viewers that racists online are calling him “a race-baiting agitator,” he increases our sense of his courage, although the show never says anything that the viewer will not already have read in a viral Twitter thread. The first episode is a dehydrated riff on “crackers.” “I don’t think anyone has said ‘cracker’ this much on Comedy Central since Chappelle,” Charlamagne says, congratulating himself on this lowest-common-denominator offense. Frequently, he invites us to buy his merch.

“Tha God’s Honest Truth” presents a manicured view of a controversial man. Following the publication of his memoir, “Shook One: Anxiety Playing Tricks on Me,” in 2018, Charlamagne became a mental-health advocate, presenting himself as the intrepid demystifier of Black pain. The classic Charlamagne construction relies on defensive projections—that “we” don’t discuss this or that stigma. Now, on Comedy Central, Charlamagne makes sweeping pronouncements on the effects of generational trauma and sexual assault on Black women and men. He does this in spite of a sexual-assault allegation levied against him in 2001, which he has publicly denied. (Charges were dropped and the victim’s push to reopen the case was unsuccessful.) To the Black women guests who have been subjected to misogyny on “The Breakfast Club,” the new show will likely be unwatchable, a taunt.

Who is the intended audience for “Tha God’s Honest Truth”? I suppose I can paint in broad strokes the white viewers who will earnestly come to Charlamagne for a laugh and a lesson. It’s easy to side-eye Stephen Colbert, his producing partner. Too easy. The fact is that Charlamagne has lodged himself inexorably in Black popular culture. For every doubter, like myself, there are hundreds of diehards. A lot of people believe that he speaks truth to power. But he *is* the power. And he is too big to fail.

Six years after leaving “The Daily Show,” Jon Stewart has returned to television. The landscape has changed, and Stewart was an agent of the shift. The opening shots of “The Problem with Jon Stewart,” a bimonthly current-affairs program on Apple TV+, show the elder statesman conferring with his producers, mostly women, as they “map” the première episode, an examination of burn pits, the incineration of waste in military bases in Afghanistan and Iraq, and their effects on the health of veterans. No doubt, “The Problem” is motivated by righteous political intentions, but as a work of art it struggles to distinguish itself from the juggernaut that was its progenitor. The producers tell us that the first episode is meant to mirror the famous 2010 episode of “The Daily Show” in which Stewart hosted a panel of 9/11 first responders. Unmoored by the news cycle, though, “The Problem” is slow and earnest. It is also barely funny. “I thought you people liked me,” Stewart jokes when the audience responds lukewarmly to his opening monologue. We’re not breaking for commercial anymore, I want to say each time he ends a segment with “We’ll be right back.”

The media critic of yore emerges intermittently, though Stewart seems content to have ceded the satirist stage to his former colleagues Trevor Noah, Samantha Bee, and John Oliver. In the panel on burn pits, Stewart is awed by the bravery of the veterans, pledging to one guest that he'd follow him most places if he could. For this show to work, we need Stewart, an inveterate self-deprecator, to be the center. Instead, he is unsure of how to insert himself amid testimonies of unfathomable gravity. More effective is the scene of Stewart grilling Denis McDonough, the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, in Washington, D.C. (Stewart mentions, at the start of their contentious interview, that he never did off-site segments on "The Daily Show.") The opportunity to nail an equivocating government agent both invigorates the host and gives the show a fleeting sense of rhetorical purpose. The second episode, "Freedom," has a hazier topical focus but higher entertainment value. Part of that may be because of the vitality of its guests, Jenifer Lewis and Bassem Youssef. Maybe "the problem" with the series is Stewart himself. ♦

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Outreach Dept.

- [Bringing Barbershop Talk to the Stage](#)

[October 25, 2021 Issue](#)

Bringing Barbershop Talk to the Stage

To plug Keenan Scott II's new play, "Thoughts of a Colored Man," the producers sent a mobile barbershop around the city, in an attempt to diversify a Broadway audience that, Scott says, often doesn't include Black people like him.

By [Michael Schulman](#)

October 18, 2021

Keenan Scott II grew up in Flushing, Queens, but didn't see his first Broadway show until he was in his twenties. The show was "Wicked," and the ticket was a birthday gift. "It did not occur to me that stuff on Broadway was for me," he said the other day. "It's hard to invite people to spaces where they don't see themselves." Now that he's a newly minted Broadway playwright—his play "Thoughts of a Colored Man" opened last week, at the Golden—Scott is trying to change that. He had just left a rehearsal in midtown and was lurching through traffic in a black S.U.V., wearing green Nikes and a denim jacket with a pin that read "*BLACK GENIUS*."



*Keenan Scott II*Illustration by João Fazenda

Scott's path to Broadway was circuitous. As an adolescent living in the Pomonok housing project, he started writing poetry "as an escape," he recalled. When he was fifteen, his older sister's boyfriend invited him to a poetry slam. "I went, and I did horrible. I forgot my poem onstage." He told himself that he was done with poetry. "Then that competitive nature kicked in—the athlete came out. This can't be my one-and-done!" A teacher told him to study "Def Poetry Jam," and months later he returned to the club scene. "I killed it," he said. He had just been cut from the basketball team, so he filled his new free time at slams, competing against adults and "sharpening my sword."

By the time he got to Frostburg State University, in Maryland, he had decided to study theatre. "I thought, I'll break in with acting, then people will find out that I can write, too," he said. He read Shakespeare, [Mamet](#), Ibsen, but "I didn't see myself reflected in the plays." In his sophomore year, he said to a friend, "I'm going to write us something, so we don't have to change how we speak. We can be ourselves, and we can be full in our Blackness." He staged the play in a black-box theatre and sold all the tickets within two hours, at the rec center. That was in 2009, and the play was an early version of "Thoughts of a Colored Man." Melding poetry and dialogue, it traces a day in the lives of seven men in Bed-Stuy, where Scott now lives, with his wife and daughter. The characters have allegorical names, like Love, Lust, Anger, and Wisdom. In one raucous scene set at a barbershop, the guys debate gentrification and LeBron versus Kobe, while Wisdom cuts hair.

Scott is one of eight Black playwrights to be produced on Broadway this season, a benchmark that he called historic. But he stressed the need for "diversifying the producer pool" as well. The bigger lift may be diversifying the audience: how do you appeal to communities that don't think Broadway is for them? The producers devised a marketing ploy: a mobile barbershop. Scott was making an appearance at its first stop, the Castle Hill Y.M.C.A., in the Bronx. He was greeted by the branch's executive director, Sharlene Brown, who told him, "I'm a Queens girl, so I'm proud of you." Near some basketball courts, families sat at picnic tables, eating barbecue. The truck—bright yellow and emblazoned with the line "Your barbershop talk comes to Broadway"—was parked in front of a chain-link fence. Inside, an eight-year-old boy was getting a free buzz cut. "What's up, my man?" Scott said.

“I’m gonna sue him for one thousand dollars!” he yelled, scowling at the barber.

“What you gonna do with your thousand dollars?” Scott asked.

“I’m going to spend it all on Mech Arena,” he said, naming his favorite video game. Scott surveyed the décor—Knicks banners, a gumball machine, an Obama “HOPE” poster, vinyl records—and said, “We got some Miles Davis!”

“Who is Miles?” the boy said, annoyed. Scott gave him a fist bump through his smock, as the barber brushed off his neck. “How about if I sue *you*,” the boy threatened Scott, then added, looking at the barber, “I’m just joking. I’m still suing *him*.” He hopped out of the chair and returned to his mother, who had received vouchers for the play; tickets cost between forty-nine and two hundred and twenty-five dollars.

Outside, Scott addressed the crowd. “It’s very meaningful to me to come back to the community,” he said. “My father’s from Tremont, so the Bronx is a little bit of home, too.” He went on, “A lot of times, they say we don’t go to live theatre. We do, though. But we have to feel welcomed. When we feel welcomed, we show up.” Afterward, he shook hands and posed for photos, like a candidate for office. An older man leaned in and asked, “Why ‘colored’?”

“I’d love to have that conversation, but I have to pick up my daughter from school,” Scott said. “It’s a show about how we’re more than what we’re labelled. I wanted a visceral response from people when they saw the word ‘colored.’” A table of women beckoned him over. “I want you all at the show,” he told them. “It’s for us.” ♦

Personal History

- Writing “Eleanor Rigby”

How one of the Beatles' greatest songs came to be.

By [Paul McCartney](#)

My mum's favorite cold cream was Nivea, and I love it to this day. That's the cold cream I was thinking of in the description of the face Eleanor keeps "in a jar by the door." I was always a little scared by how often women used cold cream.

Growing up, I knew a lot of old ladies—partly through what was called Bob-a-Job Week, when Scouts did chores for a shilling. You'd get a shilling for cleaning out a shed or mowing a lawn. I wanted to write a song that would sum them up. Eleanor Rigby is based on an old lady that I got on with very well. I don't even know how I first met "Eleanor Rigby," but I would go around to her house, and not just once or twice. I found out that she lived on her own, so I would go around there and just chat, which is sort of crazy if you think about me being some young Liverpool guy. Later, I would offer to go and get her shopping. She'd give me a list and I'd bring the stuff back, and we'd sit in her kitchen. I still vividly remember the kitchen, because she had a little crystal-radio set. That's not a brand name; it actually had a crystal inside it. Crystal radios were quite popular in the nineteen-twenties and thirties. So I would visit, and just hearing her stories enriched my soul and influenced the songs I would later write.

Eleanor Rigby may actually have started with a quite different name. Daisy Hawkins, was it? I can see that "Hawkins" is quite nice, but it wasn't right. Jack Hawkins had played Quintus Arrius in "Ben-Hur." Then, there was Jim Hawkins, from one of my favorite books, "Treasure Island." But it wasn't right. This is the trouble with history, though. Even if you were there, which I obviously was, it's sometimes very difficult to pin down.

It's like the story of the name Eleanor Rigby on a marker in the graveyard at St. Peter's Church in Woolton, which John and I certainly wandered around, endlessly talking about our future. I don't remember seeing the grave there, but I suppose I might have registered it subliminally.

St. Peter's Church also plays quite a big part in how I come to be talking about many of these memories today. Back in the summer of 1957, Ivan Vaughan (a friend from school) and I went to the Woolton Village Fête at the

church together, and he introduced me to his friend John, who was playing there with his band, the Quarry Men.

I'd just turned fifteen at this point and John was sixteen, and Ivan knew we were both obsessed with rock and roll, so he took me over to introduce us. One thing led to another—typical teen-age boys posturing and the like—and I ended up showing off a little by playing Eddie Cochran's "Twenty Flight Rock" on the guitar. I think I played Gene Vincent's "Be-Bop-a-Lula" and a few Little Richard songs, too.

A week or so later, I was out on my bike and bumped into Pete Shotton, who was the Quarry Men's washboard player—a very important instrument in a skiffle band. He and I got talking, and he told me that John thought I should join them. That was a very John thing to do—have someone else ask me so he wouldn't lose face if I said no. John often had his guard up, but that was one of the great balances between us. He could be quite caustic and witty, but once you got to know him he had this lovely warm character. I was more the opposite: pretty easygoing and friendly, but I could be tough when needed.

I said I would think about it, and a week later said yes. And after that John and I started hanging out quite a bit. I was on school holidays and John was about to start art college, usefully next door to my school. I showed him how to tune his guitar; he was using banjo tuning—I think his neighbor had done that for him before—and we taught ourselves how to play songs by people like Chuck Berry. I would have played him "I Lost My Little Girl" a while later, when I'd got my courage up to share it, and he started showing me his songs. And that's where it all began.

I do this "tour" when I'm back in Liverpool with friends and family. I drive around the old sites, pointing out places like our old house in Forthlin Road, and I sometimes drive by St. Peter's, too. It's only a short drive by car from the old house. And I do often stop and wonder about the chances of the Beatles getting together. We were four guys who lived in this city in the North of England, but we didn't know one another. Then, by chance, we did get to know one another. And then we sounded pretty good when we played together, and we all had that youthful drive to get good at this music thing.



George Harrison, John Lennon, and Paul McCartney, in Liverpool, in 1958. Photograph © Mike McCartney

To this very day, it still is a complete mystery to me that it happened at all. Would John and I have met some other way, if Ivan and I hadn't gone to that fête? I'd actually gone along to try and pick up a girl. I'd seen John around—in the chip shop, on the bus, that sort of thing—and thought he looked quite cool, but would we have ever talked? I don't know. As it happened, though, I had a school friend who knew John. And then I also happened to share a bus journey with George to school. All these small coincidences had to happen to make the Beatles happen, and it does feel like some kind of magic. It's one of the wonderful lessons about saying yes when life presents these opportunities to you. You never know where they might lead.

And, as if all these coincidences weren't enough, it turns out that someone else who was at the fête had a portable tape machine—one of those old Grundigs. So there's this recording (admittedly of pretty bad quality) of the Quarry Men's performance that day. You can listen to it online. And there are also a few photos around of the band on the back of a truck. So this day that proved to be pretty pivotal in my life still has this presence and exists in these ghosts of the past.

I always think of things like these as being happy accidents. Like when someone played the tape machine backward in Abbey Road and the four of us stopped in our tracks and went, "Oh! What's that?" So then we'd use that

effect in a song, like on the backward guitar solo for “I’m Only Sleeping.” It happened more recently, too, on the song “Caesar Rock,” from my album “Egypt Station.” Somehow this drum part got dragged accidentally to the start of the song on the computer, and we played it back and it’s just there in those first few seconds and it doesn’t fit. But at the same time it does.

So my life is full of these happy accidents, and, coming back to where the name Eleanor Rigby comes from, my memory has me visiting Bristol, where Jane Asher was playing at the Old Vic. I was wandering around, waiting for the play to finish, and saw a shop sign that read “Rigby,” and I thought, That’s it! It really was as happenstance as that. When I got back to London, I wrote the song in Mrs. Asher’s music room in the basement of 57 Wimpole Street, where I was living at the time.

Around that same time, I’d started taking piano lessons again. I took lessons as a kid, but it was mostly just practicing scales, and it seemed more like homework. I loved music, but I hated the homework that came along with learning it. I think, in total, I gave piano lessons three attempts—the first time when I was a kid and my parents sent me to someone they knew locally. Then, when I was sixteen, I thought, Maybe it’s time to try and learn to play properly. I was writing my own songs by that point and getting more serious about music, but it was still the same scales. “Argh! Get outta here!” And, when I was in my early twenties, Jane’s mum, Margaret, organized lessons for me with someone from the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, where she worked. I even played “Eleanor Rigby” on piano for the teacher, but this was before I had the words. At the time, I was just blocking out the lyrics and singing “Ola Na Tungee” over vamped E-minor chords. I don’t remember the teacher being all that impressed. The teacher just wanted to hear me play even more scales, so that put an end to the lessons.

When I started working on the words in earnest, “Eleanor” was always part of the equation, I think, because we had worked with Eleanor Bron on the film “Help!” and we knew her from the Establishment, Peter Cook’s club, on Greek Street. I think John might have dated her for a short while, too, and I liked the name very much. Initially, the priest was “Father McCartney,” because it had the right number of syllables. I took the song to John at around that point, and I remember playing it to him, and he said, “That’s great, Father McCartney.” He loved it. But I wasn’t really comfortable with

it, because it's my dad—my father McCartney—so I literally got out the phone book and went on from “McCartney” to “McKenzie.”

The song itself was consciously written to evoke the subject of loneliness, with the hope that we could get listeners to empathize. Those opening lines —“Eleanor Rigby / Picks up the rice in the church where a wedding has been / Lives in a dream.” It’s a little strange to be picking up rice after a wedding. Does that mean she was a cleaner, someone not invited to the wedding, and only viewing the celebrations from afar? Why would she be doing that? I wanted to make it more poignant than her just cleaning up afterward, so it became more about someone who was lonely. Someone not likely to have her own wedding, but only the dream of one.

Allen Ginsberg told me it was a great poem, so I’m going to go with Allen. He was no slouch. Another early admirer of the song was William S. Burroughs, who, of course, also ended up on the cover of “Sgt. Pepper.” He and I had met through the author Barry Miles and the Indica Bookshop, and he actually got to see the song take shape when I sometimes used the spoken-word studio that we had set up in the basement of Ringo’s flat in Montagu Square. The plan for the studio was to record poets—something we did more formally a few years later with the experimental Zapple label, a subsidiary of Apple. I’d been experimenting with tape loops a lot around this time, using a Brenell reel-to-reel—which I still own—and we were starting to put more experimental elements into our songs. “Eleanor Rigby” ended up on the “Revolver” album, and for the first time we were recording songs that couldn’t be replicated onstage—songs like this and “Tomorrow Never Knows.” So Burroughs and I had hung out, and he’d borrowed my reel-to-reel a few times to work on his cut-ups. When he got to hear the final version of “Eleanor Rigby,” he said he was impressed by how much narrative I’d got into three verses. And it did feel like a breakthrough for me lyrically—more of a serious song.

George Martin had introduced me to the string-quartet idea through “Yesterday.” I’d resisted the idea at first, but when it worked I fell in love with it. So I ended up writing “Eleanor Rigby” with a string component in mind. When I took the song to George, I said that, for accompaniment, I wanted a series of E-minor chord stabs. In fact, the whole song is really only two chords: C major and E minor. In George’s version of things, he conflates

my idea of the stabs and his own inspiration by Bernard Herrmann, who had written the music for the movie “Psycho.” George wanted to bring some of that drama into the arrangement. And, of course, there’s some kind of madcap connection between Eleanor Rigby, an elderly woman left high and dry, and the mummified mother in “Psycho.” ♦

Poems

- “Spring Recalled in Spring”
- “Continuity”

[October 25, 2021 Issue](#)

Spring Recalled in Spring

By [Sandy Solomon](#)

October 18, 2021

Content

Audio: Read by the author.

Open the book, but the page cracks.
Take your arm, but it's gone.
The stairs we used just yesterday
belong to someone else.

I'll sing a song three hundred times.
I'll open a door for a breeze.
I'll spend my love in a spendthrift's dream
at no return or cost.

Love won't be reckoned in gain or loss;
it was and yet it is.
Across the woods the dogwood floats,
giving itself away.

[October 25, 2021 Issue](#)

Continuity

By [Terrance Hayes](#)

October 18, 2021

Content

Audio: Read by the author.

Before getting into the cab, she hands him a cup.
Then, after they kiss, she hands him the cup again.

As they walk, she hands him a man-made substance.
Then, after they kiss, she hands him the cup again.

She hands him a chalice of lightning
& he hands her a chalice of fire.

Then in the next shot, after they kiss,
They exchange chalices again.

When she goes through the metal detector,
She carefully places a pair of hoop earrings in a plastic tray.

When she retrieves them,
They are two silver bangles she fits to her wrists.

When they climb from the cab in the rain, her hair is wet,
But when they kiss on the sidewalk her hair is dry again.

After she takes off her helmet & breastplate,
& enters the water wearing nothing but courage,

She says to him, “You are nude,
But you must be naked to win.”

Or she says, “To survive you must lay bare
The heart,” according to the closed captions.

When they climb from the river, her hair is a river
Where night has fallen, tangled with twigs & stars,

Parting like a path of escape.
But in the very next shot,

As they climb from the river,
Her hair is braided with wire & string.

When he bangs on the rain-streaked window
Of the cab yelling her name in a pivotal scene,

Briefly reflected in the window in the rain
Tangled with wires & stars above a river

Is the hand of a fan or stagehand or bodyguard,
Body double, bystander, interloper, beloved ghost,

& the two of us watching from a bridge on the far side.

Shouts & Murmurs

- [How to Care for Your Bigfoot: A Parents' Guide](#)

[October 25, 2021 Issue](#)

How to Care for Your Bigfoot: A Guide

By [Amanda Lehr](#)

October 18, 2021



Illustration by Luci Gutiérrez

Well, it's happened. The Hendersons down the street got themselves a Bigfoot, and now your child is begging for one, too. Fear not. You may not be a Bigfoot person, but, by adhering to a few simple rules, you can integrate a Bigfoot into your household without wrecking your carpets or upending your life.

DO make it clear that Bigfoot is your child's responsibility. You will not be walking Bigfoot or cleaning his grotto or feeding him vast quantities of ground venison and acorns. This will not be the hamster all over again.

DON'T get a Bigfoot for the wrong reasons. Remember, a Bigfoot is a commitment! Anyone tempted to adopt a Bigfoot for likes on social media

should also know that they are uncomfortable with attention and photograph poorly.

DO consult a reputable breeder. Craigslist may offer cheaper options, but that's how you end up with a cut-rate yeti, a shaved grizzly bear, or a grown man in an ape suit. If you would prefer to adopt, consult the parent in your child's grade with the "BIGFOOT RESCUED ME" bumper sticker.

DON'T let your child overcrowd Bigfoot when you get him home. Yes, everyone's very excited to play with Bigfoot, but Bigfoot may be shy at first. He'll come out from behind that tree when he's ready.

DO invest in a good pair of clown shoes. If you want Bigfoot to respond to obedience training, you must make a convincing alpha.

DON'T let Bigfoot free-feed. Be clear with your child: Bigfoot may beg for jumbo marshmallows and HoneyBaked ham, but he doesn't always know what will give him a tummy ache! If your Bigfoot shows an intense interest in human food, discourage night foraging by padlocking your freezer and putting the contents of your pantry in an odor-proof bag that you hang from the top of a pine tree until morning.

DO remind your child to bathe Bigfoot regularly. Especially in the summer months, when Bigfoot's natural odor can become quite . . . pungent.

DON'T, under any circumstances, let Bigfoot dictate your sleep schedule. After you've put him in his grotto for the night, do not respond to any bids for attention. Including when he yowls during thunderstorms. Even if he sounds scared. And a bit like your child as an infant.

DO decide that there's an inherent dignity in compromise.

DON'T feel that you owe anyone an explanation for why Bigfoot is snoring in a nest of beach towels in the mudroom. You are the alpha.

DO pick up a few squeaky toys, a cow femur, and some Lincoln Logs on the way home from work. This is called enrichment, and it is a pragmatic measure to keep Bigfoot from gnawing the furniture. Remember: you're doing this for your child.

DON'T let Bigfoot on the couch to cuddle. Unless no one else is home. In that case, at least pretend to be asleep. Bigfoot doesn't have to know that his mossy warmth is soothing.

DO start taking Bigfoot with you on your morning runs. Cars give you a wider berth when you're with Bigfoot. And he knows all the best trails.

DON'T be too smug when your co-worker Ted brags about his family's new Mothman. Even though Bigfoot is clearly stronger and smarter, and knows more tricks than Mothman, and Mothman's pelt looks patchy.

DO offer to take some of the responsibility of caring for Bigfoot off your child's hands. This will help your child focus on school. Besides, it takes the manual dexterity and patience of an adult to brush Bigfoot's coat to a fine gloss.

DON'T tell anyone that you've been slipping Bigfoot marshmallows. Sometimes Bigfoot deserves a treat. And it's cute how he pouches them in his cheek.

DO include Bigfoot in family activities. If you're grilling on Memorial Day, why not spit-roast him a whole goat? If you're going on vacation, why not tour the scenic logging roads of the Pacific Northwest? The videos will come out blurry, but the memories will last forever.

DON'T let your child make fun of you for buying you and Bigfoot matching scarves. (Bigfoot's is a plaid table runner.) Bigfoot looks so handsome—*yes he does, so handsome!*—and your child is just jealous.

DO remember to get out the old stepladder each spring and mark Bigfoot's height on the side of the house. In ten years, you'll be glad you did.

DON'T let your child take Bigfoot away to college. A frat house is no place for Bigfoot. All Bigfoot's stuff is here. Besides, he can't sleep without you. ♦

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Tables for Two

- [The City's Only South African Restaurant and Bar](#)

[October 25, 2021 Issue](#)

The City's Only South African Restaurant and Bar

Kaia Wine Bar, Suzaan Hauptfleisch's Upper East Side institution, serves South African wine alongside elk, bobotie, Gatsby sandwiches, and bunny chow.

By [David Kortava](#)

October 15, 2021



If New York City is a graveyard of unrealized dreams, it's also a maze of hidden passageways leading to new rooms, where one can reinvent oneself in the wake of thwarted ambitions. In the early two-thousands, an aspiring stage actress named Suzaan Hauptfleisch left South Africa for Manhattan. Broadway never called, and this town's culinary scene is all the better for it. The city has seven thousand four hundred and thirty working actors. It has exactly one South African restaurant and bar: Hauptfleisch's Kaia, an Upper East Side institution that, in its eleven years, has supplied New Yorkers with 7.2 million dollars' worth of South African wine, mostly by the glass.



Suzaan Hauptfleisch grew up on a farm in the Free State. She describes her food as South African-inspired, improvisations based on sense memory, rather than strictly representative of South Africa.

By Hauptfleisch's estimate, upward of ninety per cent of her patrons live within walking distance. She doesn't take reservations for parties fewer than five, but regulars have assigned tables. On especially busy days, the place can feel more than neighborly. One afternoon, I was seated at the bar, working on the second of two generous pours of Chardonnay, when Hauptfleisch dispatched me downstairs to fetch a gallon of milk. Moments later, a server enlisted my help in prying open a jar of marmalade. "What is this, an agrarian commune?" I scribbled in my notebook. As it happens, Hauptfleisch comes from a long line of farmers; her ancestors were among the earliest arrivals at the Dutch colony in what is now Cape Town. "Kaia" is an intentional misspelling of "ikhaya," the Zulu word for "home."



In lieu of traditional South African wild game—kudu, springbok, ostrich—the restaurant serves elk. The meat is sliced thin, just barely seared, and seasoned with toasted black-mustard seed, coriander, and flaky sea salt.

Kaia's seasonal menu is the labor of Hauptfleisch and the Bronx-born chef Billy Dineen, with inspiration from Hauptfleisch's mother, Elize, who moved to New York last year. The trio usually describe their food as South African-inspired, improvisations based on sense memory, rather than strictly representative of South Africa. Key ingredients are impossible, or too costly, to procure on a regular basis. In lieu of traditional South African wild game—kudu, springbok, ostrich—they serve elk. The meat is sliced thin, just barely seared, seasoned with coriander, toasted black-mustard seed, and flakes of sea salt, and presented with a homemade sweet mustard. The elegantly minimalist dish is one of only a few that are offered year-round.



In its eleven years, Kaia, a derivative of the Zulu word for “home,” has supplied New Yorkers with 7.2 million dollars’ worth of South African wine, mostly by the glass.

On the other end of the spectrum, in terms of both fidelity to origin and complexity of flavor, is the *bobotie*, a spiced and fruity minced-beef not-quite-casserole, topped with a creamy egg custard. Although the Parliament of South Africa, sensitive to the rich culinary diversity of the country’s sixty million citizens, has declined to designate an official national dish, *bobotie* is sometimes said to be the unofficial one. (Though in my two years as a Peace Corps volunteer in rural Mpumalanga, I never encountered the stuff.) At Kaia, the kitchen prepares it with green apples, onions, raisins, cinnamon, yellow curry powder, apricot jam, and mango chutney—a scrumptious sweet-and-savory supernova that defies categorization.

For some South African expats, no offering is more comforting than the Gatsby, a Portuguese roll stuffed with garam-masala-braised chicken, pickled cucumbers, Peppadew peppers, and French fries. It’s a popular street food in the Western Cape, but it has fans in every province. The other day, a transplant from KwaZulu-Natal travelled by train from a sleepy suburb for the sole pleasure of devouring one. In the winter, Kaia swaps out the Gatsby for bunny chow, which involves filling half a loaf of hollowed-out white bread with spicy Durban curry—a legacy of South Africa’s Indian community. Like the Georgian *khachapuri*, it’s meant to be eaten with your hands; utensils are available for the weak.

One section of the menu that is decidedly not South African is the Kaia Taco Shop, an initiative by a longtime staffer of Mexican heritage. But dust the tacos with a little *peri peri*—fiery seasoning made from malagueta chilies, introduced to Southern Africa by Portuguese traders by way of the Americas—and you won’t speak ill of fusion cuisine again. (*Dishes \$5-\$33.*) ♦

The Art World

- “Greater New York” Confirms Rather Than Surprises

[October 25, 2021 Issue](#)

“Greater New York” Confirms Rather Than Surprises

MOMA PS1’s survey show of New York artists could use a watchword related to “avant-garde”—perhaps whatever the French for “sideways-garde” might be.

By [Peter Schjeldahl](#)

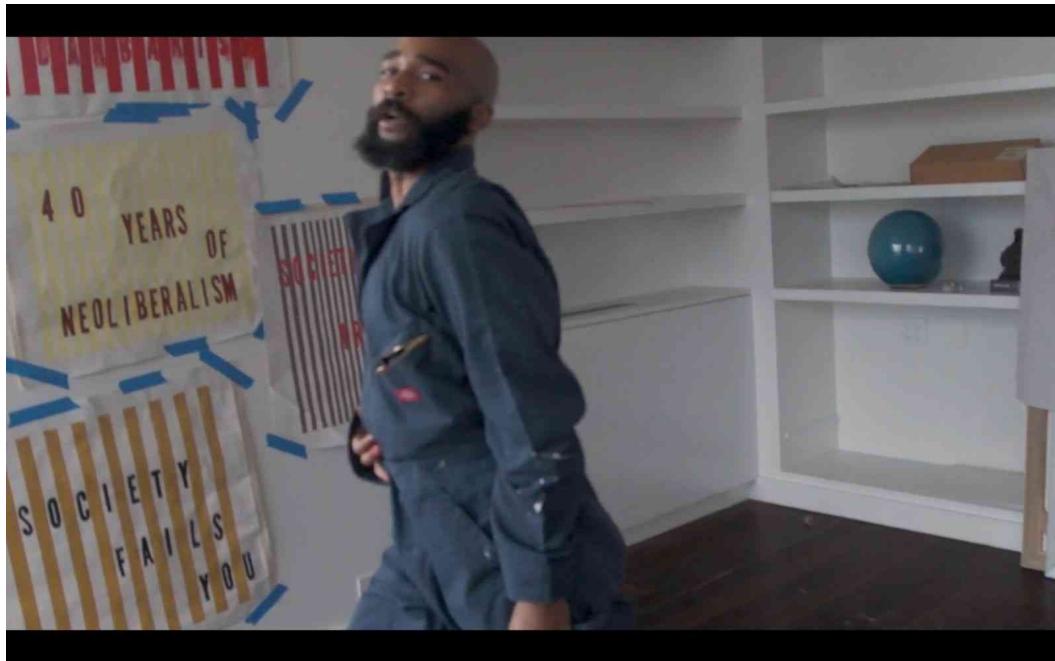
October 18, 2021



What did I expect of “Greater New York,” a show of hundreds of works by forty-seven more or less contemporary artists and collectives at *Moma PS1*? I know what I fantasized: the discovery of things that creators hereabouts have been up to during a year and a half in pandemic isolation. This was a foolish mistake on my part, ignoring the fact that the survey—the fifth that PS1 has mounted since 2000—was slated to open in 2020 and necessarily postponed. The result, with the exception of a number of up-to-date entries, amounts to something of a time capsule: a collection of judgments that predate a period so tumultuous it feels like an age. One current trend that is represented, albeit scrappily, is neo-Surrealism: the wild subjectivity of

artists turning from outer worlds to inner. But the fundamental mood is external, slanted toward politically charged urgencies and the proclivities of eccentric though not quite outsider talents. A consensus is projected that scants aesthetics.

Abundant artists' photographs document half a century of social activism in New York City, starting with Puerto Rican protests in the sixties and brushing up against the Black Lives Matter demonstrations of 2020. Almost a hundred works, in all mediums, were created before the year 2000. Nine of the artists are deceased. The show's chief appeal is an emphasis on foreign-born residents, historically a cynosure of New York as a bubbling rather than a melting pot. There are contributions by people from Egypt, Iran, Tunisia, Nigeria, Japan, Mexico, Argentina, India, and more. There's also a solid contingent of Native American artists. It is all somewhat blurry, however, in view of preoccupations with the more distant past as much as with what was novel a year or so ago. Much of the show's painting, sculpture, video, and assemblage, while well crafted and often flashy in terms of production values, preaches to art-school and urban-coterie choirs.



Still from "The Good Terrorist," by Marie Karlberg, from 2021. Photograph courtesy the artist

The show's gist could use a watchword related to "avant-garde," perhaps whatever the French for "sideways-garde" might be. A curatorial team led by Ruba Katrib has exercised considerable finesse while tending toward a

semi-underground orthodoxy. They give pride of place to a gaudy video installation by the Mohawk artist Alan Michelson, the subject of a recent feature story in the *Times*, that laments the historic collapse of the Lenape people's cultivation of oysters in tributaries of the East River. Go oppose that. Who isn't pro-oyster and regretful of the Lenape's displacement? Less overt assumptions of automatic agreement infect even some surreal and abstract works, or so it seemed to me. Am I overreacting? It's possible, as I scan the show's illustrated checklist for examples that I could deplore. There's an ambient restraint despite predominant agitation. What bugs me is a bent that frustrates delectation.

Exactly one artist really enthralled me: the Japanese-born Yuji Agematsu, who, since the mid-nineties, has fashioned tiny sculptures from detritus that he comes across in New York's streets. Three hundred and sixty-six of these, displayed on shelves in twelve plexiglass cases, memorialize as many recent strolls. Typically snuggled into the cellophane wrappers of packs of cigarettes the artist has smoked, they are singly—and all together—exquisite, achieving feats of formal and coloristic lyricism by way of used chewing gum, scraps of fabric, metal fragments, feathers, thread, and very much whatnot. The works convey a homing instinct for beauty in the humblest of materials, and in the most democratic of citizenly activities: walking in the city. It's easy to imagine them as monuments, thirty or so feet high, when you lean in to behold them from low angles. There's inarguably a political vibe about Agematsu's activity, but it's one that is subsumed by personal devotion. The suggestion of an underfoot Utopia is here and now, requiring no reformation of other people's attitudes. The works stand in contrast to many in the show that at least seem to toil backward from rote concluding sentiments, to the detriment of unforced pleasure.

A peculiar highlight, harshly disrupting the show's occasional airs of would-be subversion, is a looped hour-long film by the Swedish artist Marie Karlberg, "The Good Terrorist" (2021), derived from a 1985 novel by Doris Lessing. Squatting in a high-rise New York apartment, ultra-left radicals debate planting a bomb, sure to harm innocents, as a way to dramatize their cause. Some are fanatical, others hesitant. We learn toward the end that the bomb has detonated prematurely, killing the woman who was assigned to place it, in addition to some unlucky bystanders. Hysteria erupts at the squat, shattering the radicals' comity. Both the actors and the production are

defiantly amateurish in a way that, if you go with it, invests intimacy in a talky script. The characters' discordant emotions sink in, even when appalling. The scenario unfolds casually on the way to seeming nightmarishly plausible. The work is a fable without a moral, evincing Lessing's uncanny comprehension of twisted humanity. The fidelity of Karlberg and her cast to the integrity of the tale rattles and absorbs. How it befits a show marked by decidedly non-homicidal dissatisfactions hangs in the air. You won't forget it, wish as you might to do so.

The political is more important than the artistic. Using art to advance causes isn't bad; it simply surrenders independent initiative, always a fragile affair, to overbearing powers of worldly argument. There's an ethical heft in the sacrifice, shaming mere aestheticism. I can't defend my wish for autonomous experience in the face of concerns that acknowledge the real suffering of real people. But I find myself clinging to instances of creativity that eschew rhetoric. At PS1, some very odd sculptures by the young American Kristi Cavataro stumble toward bliss. Gamily geometric configurations of colorful stained glass are mounted on walls or stand knee-high on the floor. There's a whiff of nostalgia for Art Deco, but the pieces are subject to unprecedented ingenuities of form and mysterious pressures of feeling. Only the artist's desire justifies them.

Full disclosure: this is vaccinated me speaking, art-starved during my ongoing exile from the city since 2019, when my wife and I had to retreat upstate after a fire in our apartment building (still under repair). We thus missed New York's share in the pandemic, its summer of protests, and firsthand contact with fellow-culturati. Now my pent-up craving for gratuitous transcendence disgruntles me at the PS1 show. I want a reëngagement with art history that speaks to personal drives rather than to programmatic discontents. The show's neo-Surrealists and abstractionists are too miscellaneous and hermetic to do more than gesture in a compensatory direction.



Installation view of "Greater New York." Photograph courtesy MoMA PS1

Must ideology define us? Can we demur from one extreme without implicitly being lumped in with its opposite? The art world has become an aviary of miners' canaries in this respect; there is a near-certainty, whatever you do, of offending—or, anyway, disappointing—somebody. The PS1 show takes what has seemed the safest position, one that identifies cultural legitimacy with obeisance to supposedly unexceptionable opinions. The introductory text asserts that “we must push against colonial borders and address Indigenous geographies.” Who, pray tell, is this mighty “we”? Strong, historically grounded works of authentic complaint by the Seneca artist G. Peter Jemison prove plenty entitled to the first-person plural. Beyond that, however, the curators’ presumption of in-group prerogative edits not the panoply of current art but the makeup of its audience. (Don’t like it? Get lost.) Can we do better by accepting art’s limits as a force in the world?

“Poetry makes nothing happen,” W. H. Auden observed, but life without poetry is apt to be pretty bleak. How about basing value in joy and letting agreement and disagreement see to themselves? In the short term, seeking disapproval, as “The Good Terrorist” does, would seem to be the most availing escape hatch to freedom. Only doing things that one is not supposed to do and saying things that one is not supposed to say promise relief from a

climate of stagnating sensibility. Being disreputable beckons. Open up.
Reinstate surprise. ♦

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The Theatre

- “Is This a Room” and “Chicken & Biscuits” Bring the Unexpected to Broadway

A thrilling dramatization of the interrogation of the whistle-blower Reality Winner and a crowd-pleasing family comedy both rise above their pre-Broadway origins.

By [Alexandra Schwartz](#)

The human ear edits even as it absorbs. Every time I listen to a recording of an interview I've done, I'm confronted with the little repetitions and stutters that cling to what I process, in the moment, as perfectly fluid speech: the tics and filler phrases; the sentences that are snuffed out, unfinished; the runway of false starts from which a thought takes flight. One thing that immediately stands out in the stellar Broadway staging of "Is This a Room" (a Vineyard Theatre production, at the Lyceum) is the awkwardness of so much of our speech, its weird hesitations and confused banalities. That's because the play, which was conceived and directed by Tina Satter, takes as its text the transcript of the F.B.I.'s visit to the home of the whistle-blower Reality Winner, on June 3, 2017. Whoever typed the thing up preserved every hiccup and stammer with bizarre bureaucratic diligence, and the production pounces on its found script with perverse, bravura precision. How strange, how funny—how totally terrifying—to see the state express its power not with a shout but in a mumble.

Reality Winner was a twenty-five-year-old former Air Force language analyst who had been working as a Farsi translator for a military contractor when the F.B.I. came to interrogate her at her house, in Augusta, Georgia. Onstage, she is portrayed by the remarkable Emily Davis, who originated the role in the play's première, at the Kitchen, in 2019, and won an Obie and a Lucille Lortel Award for her performance when it moved to the Vineyard, later that year. The Reality we meet, as the lights go up, is a wiry woman wearing cutoffs and yellow Converse high-tops decorated with childish Pikachu, her blond hair pulled back in a sexless bun. It's not hard to imagine her in the military; she has the ramrod posture and modest manner of someone who knows how to take an order, or a browbeating, though she can't hide her anxiety from the two F.B.I. agents, Garrick (Pete Simpson) and Taylor (Will Cobbs), who have shown up with search warrants. Winner is suspected, they explain, of "possible mishandling of classified information," and they'd like to have a little talk with her. It's "completely voluntary," of course. This is where Reality should zip her lips and call a lawyer. Instead, she starts to talk and seals her fate.

What follows is a kind of jerky dance in the round, as Garrick and Taylor suss out their suspect, and Winner does her best to both help and hinder the men. Interrogation scenes are a staple of American entertainment, and part of what we are watching here is a performance of that performance. It's there in the way that the youthful, handsome Taylor grunts and puffs out his chest, as he must have seen a hundred actors do while playing agents and police officers on TV, and in the atmosphere of ambient menace that Satter summons, with the help of Lee Kinney and Sanae Yamada's ominous sound design and Thomas Dunn's cool, harsh lighting. The stage itself is bare, save for a couple of low platforms and a row of empty waiting-room chairs stationed behind the action, as if to suggest that other audience that tirelessly watches us all: the omnipresent apparatus of surveillance.

But the threat enveloping Reality keeps being undercut by the unintentional comedy of, well, reality. It takes the agents a good chunk of the play's taut sixty-five minutes to start the formal questioning, because the house first has to be searched, and Reality's guns and animals—her possessions include a pink AR-15 and a nervous foster dog—dealt with. ("O.K., so she does not like men," Reality says, of her dog. A playwright couldn't have come up with a better laugh line.) As the agents wait, they seem to deflate to human size. They make small talk with Winner about pets and CrossFit. A clueless, mulleted backup guy (Becca Blackwell) roams around, doing silly stuff. (Also silly: a large canine puppet that makes literal what the imagination has no trouble conjuring up on its own.)

The leader of all this non-action is the middle-aged Agent Garrick, a shambolic, avuncular presence with a paunch and a nervous cough. He seems to genuinely want to ingratiate himself with Reality, to understand why such a dedicated, promising member of the military would compromise her career—her life—to leak a document. Simpson is so commanding in the role of this deceptively mediocre career agent that he makes his virtuosity appear accidental, inevitable. The naturalism demanded by the script—all that fumbling and crosstalk—requires razor-sharp timing, and Simpson and Davis have honed theirs to metronomic precision. It is startling, while watching these two formidable actors match each other beat for beat, to realize the extent to which the actual Reality Winner accepted the conventions of the genre she found herself trapped in. Deflection, denial, confession, motive: they are all there, teased out by questioning, then

voluteered with a rush of relief as the pace picks up and the stage is bathed in pulses of pink light to represent redactions from the official transcript. (We are reminded in the program, but not in the play itself, that the classified document that Winner smuggled out of her office in her pantyhose concerned Russian interference in the 2016 Presidential election.) You may consider Winner to be a hero and a martyr—she was prosecuted under the 1917 Espionage Act and has just been released to home confinement, after nearly four years behind bars—or you may not. She herself insists that she didn’t see her actions as extraordinary. “I wasn’t trying to be a Snowden or anything,” she says. Whatever pushed her to blow the whistle, she found a way to make the role her own.

It’s exciting, and unusual, to see a small downtown play like “Is This a Room” come to Broadway. The abrupt abbreviation of the 2020 theatre season due to *COVID* has had one positive effect: it opened producers up to taking greater creative risks—at least for now. Maybe the experimental, documentary nature of “Is This a Room” would have made it seem too niche, too art-house, to bet on in a more cautious season. But the show goes down like a thriller, and should be a commercial no-brainer.

The same is true of “Chicken & Biscuits” (at Circle in the Square), another show being hailed as a welcome surprise on Broadway, for entirely different reasons. Written by Douglas Lyons and directed by the twenty-seven-year-old Zhailon Levingston, it’s an old-fashioned crowd-pleaser, a comedy as conventional as convention comes. A funeral is being held for the pastor of a New Haven church, but the proceedings are threatened by conflict between his two daughters, the prim Baneatta (Cleo King) and the raucous Beverly (Ebony Marshall-Oliver). Add a cast of competing family members, plus one very anxious Jewish boyfriend (Michael Urie), and high jinks ensue.

What makes the show unusual is that it is one of a record eight on Broadway this season to be written by a Black playwright. More unusual still is that it treats Black experience as a subject to elicit pleasure and joy, rather than sober contemplation and pain. Would “Chicken & Biscuits,” which ran, pre-pandemic, at Queens Theatre, have been staged on Broadway before last year’s protests against racial injustice made producers get serious about supporting Black work? Who knows, but when I attended a recent performance, and heard the audience roar with laughter—an audience that,

by the way, was more diverse than any I can recall seeing on Broadway—it was clear that the play had found the right home. Is some of the humor hokey, the characters a tad heavy on caricature? Sure. Is the show too long? By about twenty minutes. Does the priceless Norm Lewis, as Reginald Mabry, Baneatta’s husband and the church’s new pastor, bring down the house while revelling in the spirit, and was it a delight to be introduced to Aigner Mizzelle, making her Broadway début—as is much of the cast—as La’Trice, a Gen Z-er with SoundCloud dreams and no indoor voice? Yes, and absolutely yes. The show won’t be remembered for breaking any artistic ground, but it does offer something that has been in dangerously short supply lately: a good time. ♦

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Table of Contents

[NewYorker.2021.10.25](#)

[A Reporter at Large](#)

[How an Adoption Broker Cashed In on Prospective Parents' Dreams](#)

[American Chronicles](#)

[Can MasterClass Teach You Everything?](#)

[Art](#)

[The Conceptual and Empathetic Art of Gillian Wearing](#)

[Books](#)

[The Miracle of Stephen Crane](#)

[Briefly Noted](#)

[The Many Wars of Pat Barker](#)

[Comment](#)

[The G.O.P.'s Race to Out-Trump the Trumpists](#)

[Crossword](#)

[The Crossword: Wednesday, October 13, 2021](#)

[Fiction](#)

["The Umbrella"](#)

[Good Intentions](#)

[Stanford Takes on the Techlash](#)

[Letter from Moscow](#)

[A Black Communist's Disappearance in Stalin's Russia](#)

[Look-Alike Dept.](#)

[Bounty Hunting for Brian Laundrie in a Land of Doppelgängers](#)

[Mojave Postcard](#)

[Live from the Mojave, It's Desert Weirdness](#)

[On Television](#)

[The News, According to Charlamagne tha God and Jon Stewart](#)

[Outreach Dept.](#)

[Bringing Barbershop Talk to the Stage](#)

[Personal History](#)

[Writing "Eleanor Rigby"](#)

Poems

[“Spring Recalled in Spring”](#)
[“Continuity”](#)

Shouts & Murmurs

[How to Care for Your Bigfoot: A Parents' Guide](#)

Tables for Two

[The City's Only South African Restaurant and Bar](#)

The Art World

[“Greater New York” Confirms Rather Than Surprises](#)

The Theatre

[“Is This a Room” and “Chicken & Biscuits” Bring the Unexpected to Broadway](#)

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