



PERFORMANCE ART.



MINI JOHN COOPER WORKS PACEMAN.

With race-inspired performance combined with standard ALL4 traction, the MINI John Cooper Works Paceman is a fitting tribute to a racing legend. One time behind the wheel and you'll know that **RACING IS IN OUR BLOOD.**



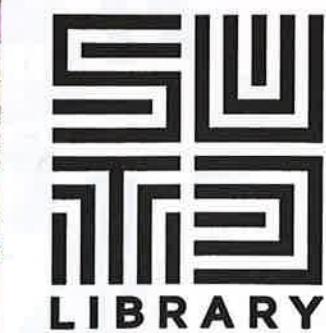
MINIUSA.COM/PACEMAN

All-wheel drive available on MINI Cooper S Paceman ALL4 or MINI John Cooper Works Paceman ALL4.
© 2013 MINI USA, a division of BMW of North America, LLC. The MINI name, model names and logo are registered trademarks.

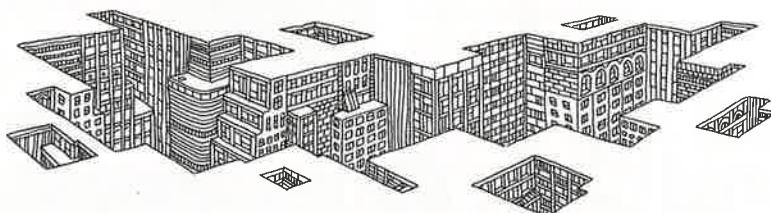
PRICE \$6.99

THE NEW YORKER

APRIL 22, 2013



THE CRITICS



A CRITIC AT LARGE

YELLOW FEVER

A hundred and twenty-five years of National Geographic.

BY ADAM GOPNIK

Magazines in their great age, before they were unmoored from their spines and digitally picked apart, before perpetual blogging made them permeable packages, changing mood at every hour and up all night like colicky infants—magazines were expected to be magisterial registers of the passing scene. Yet, though they were in principle temporal, a few became dateless, timeless. The proof of this condition was that they piled up, remorselessly, in garages and basements, to be read . . . later.

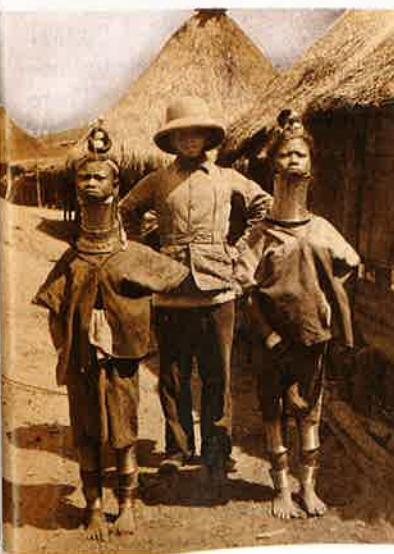
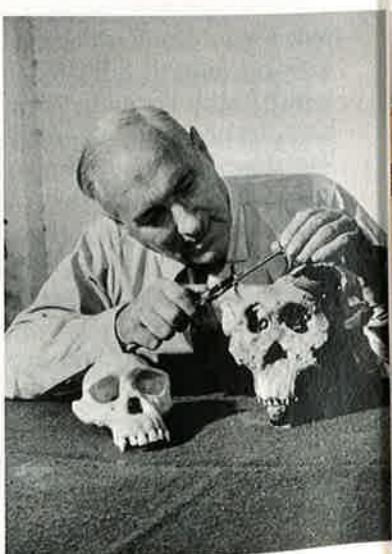
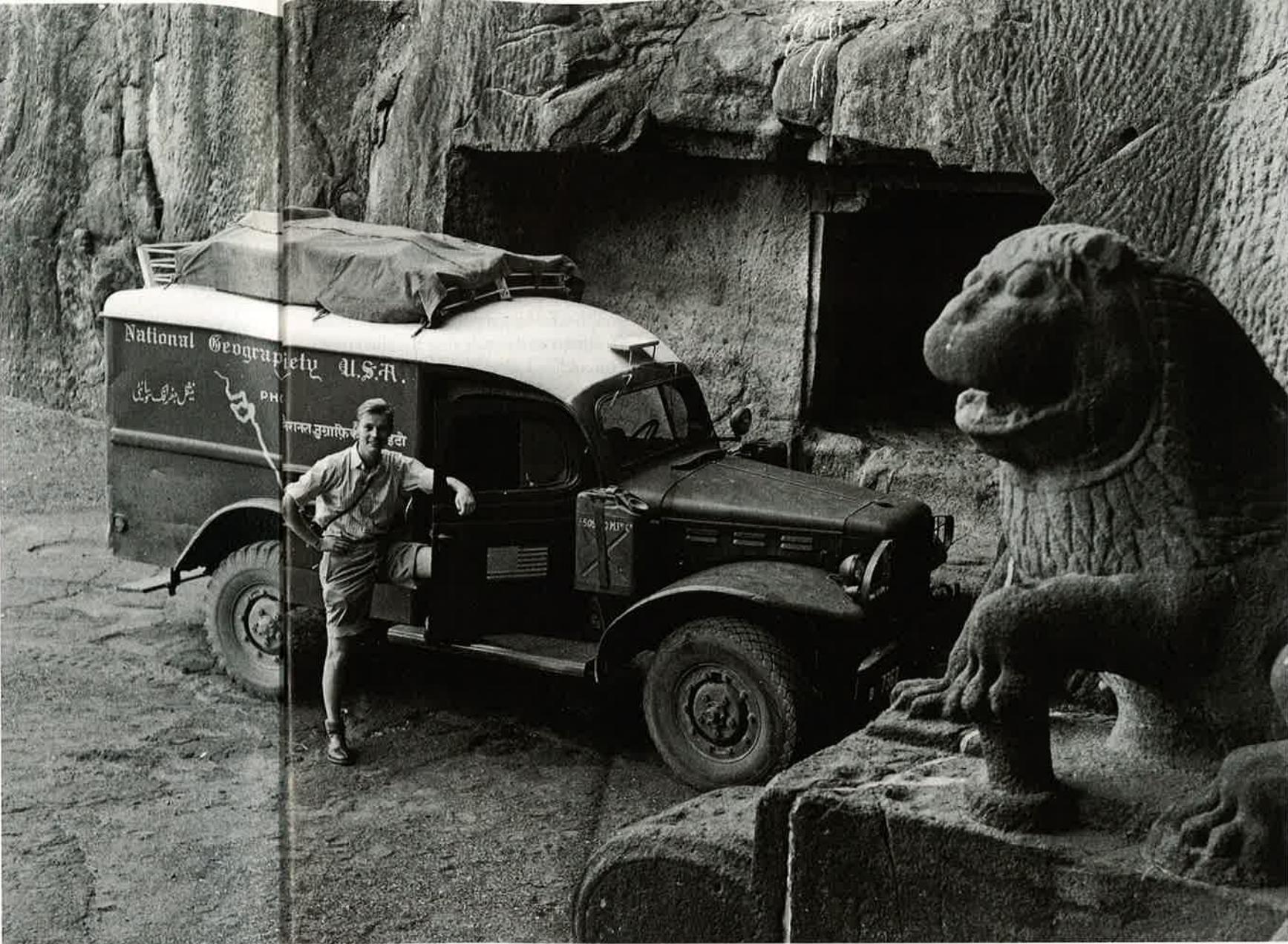
When I was a child, two piles of magazines, pillars of this misplaced faith in a leisurely reading future, rose in adjacent basements. In our house, *Scientific American*, dense with Feynman diagrams and unplayed mathematical games, accumulated, month after month; in my grandparents', it was *National Geographic*, yellow-bordered, and with a bright, unpredictable photograph—as likely an Afghan child as a space shuttle—on its cover. Though occasionally the *Scientific American* pile got upturned by an eleven-year-old searching for science-project material, as far as I could tell the *National Geographic* pile was never disturbed by its owners, and was there merely to ascend, ever higher. At times, down with measles or mumps, I would leaf through the issues, a little hypnotized; I recall being stopped once by an illustration of what had happened in an Alaskan earthquake,

with an entire family, openmouthed, suddenly divided, on either side of a gaping split in their otherwise normal street, the drawing made more frightening by being so densely illustrative, detailed and unrid—merely inspecting this alarming nation, merely *geographic*.

Both magazines were American institutions, and both partook of that essentially timeless, month-to-month rhythm—the December, 1967, issue of *Sci Am*, say, resembled the September, 1973, issue more than 1967 resembled 1973. Read today, they also bear the quiet imprint of their times. The July, 1975, issue of *National Geographic* seems mostly about itself and its own preoccupations. With Nixon out and Carter on his way, and the horror of Vietnam just over, the cover lines promise pieces on Ben Franklin, Ozark woodcarvers, and whistling swans, and yet it's also about the moment it was made. The way Ben Franklin feels so purposefully predictive of the bicentennial, the way the Ozark woodcarvers in 1975 belong more to a receding artisanal American past than to the Ozarks, the ads with their shrinking cars and the slightly blue tinge of the Ektachrome film stock: the issue becomes a period piece, even though not meant to be about its period.

National Geographic endures as an empire, a yellow rectangle on the screen of a cable channel having replaced the pillar of yellowed magazines as the prime reposi-

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: VOLKMAR K. WENTZEL/NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC; A. W. CUTLER/NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC; WIELE & KLEIN/NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC; ALFRED JOSEPH SMITH/NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC; BETTMANN/CORBIS; OPPOSITE: VASCO MOURÃO



Top: the photographer Kurt Wentzel at the Ellora Caves, India, 1953. Bottom: the anthropologist Louis Leakey, 1960; Padaung women in Burma, 1913; a sadhu, with his begging bowl, in India, 1913; the Temple of Luxor, Egypt, 1913.

tory of its existence. Those pillars must still grow in garages, but they have a more legendary existence, like the vines covering the Machu Picchu ruins (which the National Geographic Society was the first to publish and exploit). Having been provided not long ago with a set of DVDs of all the back issues—a hundred and twenty-three years' worth—I decided to forage once again among the magazines in my grandparents' basement. The DVD catches and groans, but beneath it I can still hear the dehumidifier humming, and feel the nubbly carpet under my legs, as the pile diminishes at last.

What was *National Geographic*? It was, and remains, the main journal of the National Geographic Society. You don't just subscribe; you join. The Society began, in 1888, as an impressively close-knit group of exploration-minded do-gooders, each with a view of the white man's burden, and three names. (Robert M. Poole, in his "Explorers House: National Geographic and the World It Made," gives a good account of the early years.) Gardiner Greene Hubbard, a founder, was succeeded as president by his son-in-law, Alexander Graham Bell—yes, that one—who was succeeded by his son-in-law, Gilbert Hovey Grosvenor, who ruled until 1954, and who is generally considered, in the surprisingly large and contentious academic literature devoted to the journal, to have given the thing its style and imprint.

Every magazine is addressed to a readership for whom what the magazine presents as attained is in truth aspirational: *Seventeen* is read by twelve-year-olds, and no playboy has ever read *Playboy*. The explicit goal of the National Geographic Society, and of its house journal, was to show the world to the worldly, to enlarge the map, to support exploration with grants and medals. But the real task of *National Geographic* was to show white people who rarely got far from Cincinnati or San Francisco what lay beyond their ken. Those contentious academics go farther, insisting that the magazine's agenda was to show readers where America stood in the great maw of geological time and in the great chain of creation, and to reassure them that they stood at the top of both.

As I leafed, or anyway clicked, through the issues, a more specific expedition came to mind: to traverse the year 1913,

SHORT TALK ON HERBOLOGY

The emperor considers his options. How he longed for the rhythm of campaigning, riding fast in foggy woods, riding slow eating chickpeas, accurate killing, little strange herbs of the frontier for his collection, little new bitter smells. He stood up. Arrest the envoys, he said.

—Anne Carson

page by page, and ad by ad, and see what images and lore are found. This was doubly enticing: first, because our possession of ten fingers makes centuries auspicious, and, second, because 1913 was itself so portentous—the last year when the optimistic, forward-looking, progressive civilization that *National Geographic* represented was so entirely sure of itself. "Never such innocence again," Philip Larkin wrote of that prewar moment. Are there fine veins of faults in the teacup that precede its cracking? What images do we see in 1913 when *National Geographic* looks at the world, what ghostly heralds of the catastrophe to come? What's in the world?

Well, bugs and muskrats. Or, at least, more of them than you might expect. The issues in that fateful year move from heights to depths, from Indiana Jones to the Wind in the Willows. One month, we are in those newly discovered ruins of Machu Picchu, with its vine-cleared Temple of the Three Windows, still one of the truly mysterious human sites. The next, among small woodland animals that "took their own photographs," as they tripped cunningly set wires in someone's back yard: that's when the muskrat appears, guiltily clutching a garden carrot in its mouth. A later caption informs readers, "A few days after it died, probably as a result of its carrot debauch."

In a piece with a similar inspiration, back-yard insects are viewed, microscopically, as bug-eyed monsters. (The science-fiction writers of the nineteen-forties must have seen them here first.) Every lighthouse in America is inspected—did you know that the brightest one in the world was once the Navesink light, in New Jersey, illuminating New York Bay?—and a long piece examines the parasitic theory of cancer, with photographs of diseased plants and flowers.

them not as a freak show but as a lesson to the imperialists on the dialectic of Hindu culture. The portraits of Indian ascetics look uncannily like Avedon's more recent ones; they are given the weight of their own alarming sense of self.

The academic complaint, of course, is not that this ethnographic gaze is necessarily disrespectful; it's that looking at all treats fellow human beings as tchotchkies in the shopwindow of the world, there to be seen. Subjects have been rendered as objects. Yet how could any act of representation escape that charge? The alternative is a tightly policed solipsism, more absolute than life could bear: depict no one but your own kind, for fear of transgressing against the Other's purity of being.

America is academically taken to be culture and the exotic is nature, to be gathered and exhibited and exploited. In these pages of 1913, however, it's America that is, as yet, merely natural and in need of exploitation. The pleasure derived from the Other is so obvious that it hardly needs to be underlined; the real risk is that we could love the Other too much, fall into these practices, love these ways, because they are more glamorous, more seductive, more absorbing than our own. The national, one might say, is always at war with the geographical.

The visit with the ascetics is followed by that ecstatic trip to the great Hindu temple at Madurai:

The thousands of brightly clad men and women, the interesting ceremonies, the dry river-bed with its borders of waving cocoanut palms, and over and through it all the sense of a divine presence that all the people seem to feel, even in spite of their hilarity and somewhat questionable conduct—all these bewilder the senses and cloud the mind until one is lost in a maze of thought where East and West stand in opposition. The practical Westerner sees much he would like to imitate in the child-like faith and simple ceremony. And yet he also sees much that he would like to purify and ennoble. Could the simple faith be linked to a noble ethical code, here would be power indeed.

Which is followed by a visit to "Texas, Our Largest State," whose tone, in contrast, is dry and flat. ("Although Texas is larger than France, Germany, or the central Atlantic States, only fifteen percent of its great domain is utilized.") The moral is very much that of a cosmopolitan traveler on the Teddy Roosevelt model: travel and learn, and then come home and develop. The lesson is not "Look how terrible!" but "See how wonderful!" American

rectitude confronts the far more fascinating ancient and exotic world. The score at the end of every issue is American Rectitude, 100; Exotic Delights, 99. But it's always a very close thing. Watching the contest is part of the thrill.

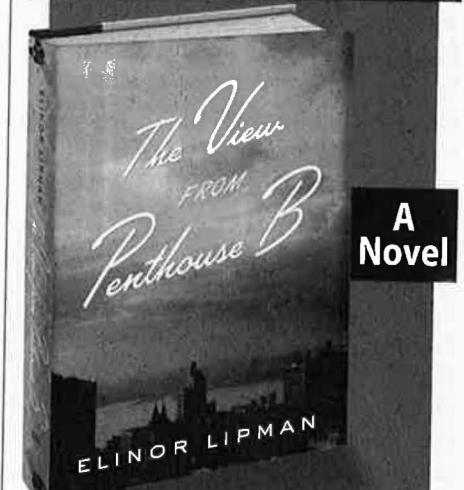
Some of the fault lines of 1914 are visible in the *National Geographic* of 1913: there's a premonitory piece on the Turks and the Balkans and the British balancing of power (a dry laugh rises); another piece testifies that the retreat of the Ottoman Empire from the Balkans was leaving a vacuum that no one could quite fill. Beyond that, one senses the larger, unsure purpose of imperialism in the period. The colonial vision in 1913, at least from not yet entirely imperial America, is one where improvement and exploitation seem all mixed up. Prestige seems to matter as much as power. The tragic view of life that today seeps even into the magazine's fun-loving and positive issues—the constant warnings of perils and disasters, ecological and population-based—was unknown.

Even when the bulwark broke, the contest in Europe still looked inspiring. One arrives, at last, in August of 1914, to find a specially inserted ready-for-war map of central Europe and the new Balkan states. How proudly the editors must have congratulated themselves for rushing it in and making the deadline. The map includes a table, resembling a prognosticator for a tournament or a race-course, of the combatants' armies: "This map will prove of much value to the members of the Society who wish to follow the series of military campaigns that it is feared will be without parallel in history." The fear is there, but the sense of excitement is, too: this will be quite a World Cup to follow, from afar.

Traversing through the yellow-bordered years that followed, the reader eventually notices the absence of what became a legendary feature. The very hardy legend is that *National Geographic* depended for its appeal on surreptitious glimpses of bare-breasted black women. Dave Barry has written that when a new issue of the magazine arrived "it was immediately analyzed for breast content, and this information was rapidly disseminated throughout the school." Curiously, some of the hypercritical cultural-studies mavens who analyze *National Geographic* at arm's

"Her worldview?
Her enthusiasm,
her effortless wit?"

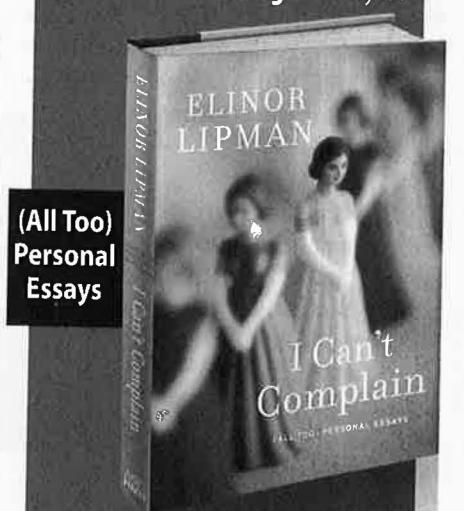
Just a few of the reasons we love
ELINOR LIPMAN."*



A Novel

After a lifetime apart, two sisters become unexpected roommates in a Manhattan apartment as they try to recover from widowhood, divorce, and Bernie Madoff—and discover what it means to make a new life in middle age.

"Charming." —Vanity Fair



(All Too) Personal Essays

"Dorothy Parker-esque wit and verve . . . A feast of bite-sized morsels of humor and wisdom."

Kirkus Reviews

Boston Globe

Available wherever books and eBooks are sold

Houghton Mifflin Harcourt hmbooks.com

BRIEFLY NOTED

Honor, by Elif Shafak (*Viking*). The sweeping title of this multigenerational novel refers to honor killing—a woman's murder at the hands of her relatives or with their approval. Shafak follows a family's journey from a small Kurdish village in the nineteen-forties to nineteen-nineties London, where her characters struggle over which inherited traditions to preserve in their new environment. In the effort to adapt, the family's women are disenfranchised and its men angered, often to the point of violence. Twins run in the bloodline, and, at times, the story becomes overcrowded with dichotomous symbolism: explorations of good and evil, chance and fate, the two sides to every coin. Still, Shafak writes beautifully and maintains a high level of tension, taking on the difficult task of bringing the news about a changing culture and telling an enduring story with near-Biblical themes.

Middle Men, by Jim Gavin (*Simon & Schuster*). The heroes of Gavin's début story collection—male, manic, malcontent—are all California journeymen of one sort or another. They spend their lives "half-assing" and "coasting," driving past "flatulent corridors of derelict foundries and abandoned railroad spurs" that look as if they'd been "sitting in a jar of formaldehyde." These men dream of glory but achieve, in its place, long, dull "stretches of competence" that, more often than not, feel closer to failure. And, just when they believe themselves to be jaded "beyond dreams," like the widowed plumber in "Middle Men," the two-part title story that is the collection's centerpiece, they are thwarted by that terrible tempestress hope. Gavin's peppery prose unsnaps the plight of his characters—from good but not good enough basketball stars to toilet salesmen—with poignancy and not a trace of sentimentality.



The King of Infinite Space, by David Berlinski (*Basic*). This lively survey of the legacy of Euclid paints the geometer as "stern, logical, unrelenting, a man able to concentrate the powers of his mind on what is abstract and remote." The axioms, theorems, proofs, and illustrations that fill Euclid's "Elements" express the conviction "that there is a form of unity beneath the diversity of experience." Berlinski guides us through an austere world of shapes and numbers with enthusiasm, assurance, and mischievous humor. He presents difficult ideas in straightforward terms, even when he moves into the strange and forbidding realm of non-Euclidean geometry. More than two millennia after it was written, Berlinski argues, the "Elements" remains relevant not only for students of geometry but as "a corrective to whatever is spongy, soft, indistinct, slovenly, half-hidden, half-formed, half-baked, or only half-right."

Blood Sisters, by Sarah Gristwood (*Basic*). The Wars of the Roses are often remembered for the men who seized thrones and

led battles, but in this lively history the women take the reins. Arguing persuasively for the existence of a "female network," which shadowed and influenced that of the men, Gristwood details the paths of seven royal women who transcended their roles as diplomatic pawns and heir-producers. Many gained control over their own finances and households, using them to court the allegiance of various factions and to sway popular opinion. When their male protectors were killed or dethroned, the women fought back: Marguerite of Anjou raised an army after her husband, Henry VI, lost his mind; Elizabeth Woodville, the widow of Edward IV, hatched a plot to take down Richard III. But it's the limitations of the women's power that come through most clearly in Gristwood's book. Even the formidable Marguerite ended her life impoverished and in exile, having lost her father, her husband, and her son—the three men without whom she was, in the eyes of those who mattered, worthless.

The King of Infinite Space, by David Berlinski (*Basic*). This lively survey of the legacy of Euclid paints the geometer as "stern, logical, unrelenting, a man able to concentrate the powers of his mind on what is abstract and remote." The axioms, theorems, proofs, and illustrations that fill Euclid's "Elements" express the conviction "that there is a form of unity beneath the diversity of experience." Berlinski guides us through an austere world of shapes and numbers with enthusiasm, assurance, and mischievous humor. He presents difficult ideas in straightforward terms, even when he moves into the strange and forbidding realm of non-Euclidean geometry. More than two millennia after it was written, Berlinski argues, the "Elements" remains relevant not only for students of geometry but as "a corrective to whatever is spongy, soft, indistinct, slovenly, half-hidden, half-formed, half-baked, or only half-right."

Still, the notion that the magazine teemed with bare-breasted natives is something of an urban—or, rather, rainforest-and-savanna—legend. They were

length share the same attraction: "I remember secretly grabbing my parents' copies of the magazine and taking them to a private place," Rachel Bailey Jones writes, in her book "Postcolonial Representations of Women." "The images of bare-breasted native women gave me my first taste of sexuality; I developed a strange fascination with these supposedly educational images."

They did exist. A bare bosom first appeared in *National Geographic* in the November, 1896, issue, in a portrait called "Zulu Bride and Bridegroom." T. Y. Rothenburg, in her highly critical "Presenting America to the World: Strategies of Innocence in *National Geographic*" (I'm not making these titles up), writes of one of *National Geographic's* early photographers that "the subject of bare brown breasts reveals much about his thoughts on sexuality and social meaning," while Kimberly Sanders, in her book "Skin Deep, Spirit Strong: The Black Female Body in American Culture," says of that first bride and bridegroom, "The couple has been reduced in the text to feral, fecund creatures, no different from wild animals." This seems unfair. The tone of the enclosing article is anthropological and disinterested, not condescending, let alone dehumanizing. The woman certainly looks equal to her spouse, and perfectly self-possessed; if anyone was being embarrassed, it wasn't her.

In any case, the editors would have a right to feel wounded by the charge: a later rationale, for a similar photograph, this one in the Philippines, was that "prudery should not influence the decision" to print images of nudity, and that these photographs were "a true reflection of the customs of the times in those islands." You have the feeling that the editors couldn't win at this game: had the local people been routinely covered up, against their own dress code, then surely contemporary scholars would be condemning *National Geographic* for censoring and Westernizing the Zulu bride. The urge really was to show people "as they are," and though it is not possible to show people as they are without showing how you are, how you are may be, in this case, more than merely racist.

there, but not often, and not in numbers. Any child (or future cultural-studies maven) who waited by the mailbox for the next glimpse would have had to be a very patient mailbox watcher. The legend persists because it attaches a low purpose to a high-minded enterprise, exposing what seems to be a mixed motive in a self-burnished institution.

What's really startling about *National Geographic*, as one passes from year to year, is not a hidden salaciousness but the repetition of characteristic juxtapositions. Though every magazine editor spends his time worrying about the "mix," magazines generally publish the same counterpoint of pieces again and again. ("He Was a Good Boy, But Now He's Bad!" followed by "The Subject Is Cool, the Author Still Cooler," was *Rolling Stone's* pairing in its classic period, as this magazine's was the Comment "All Liberal Pieties Are True" followed by the short story "Pious Liberals Play Each Other False.") *National Geographic* perfected the coupling of the very old seen from on high with the very near seen from up close. In the early part of the past century, Machu Picchu and much of ancient Egypt were uncovered and explored, and, on adjacent pages, bugs were placed under microscopes and rodents spied on at night. Fifty years later, the same counterpoint is played out: immediately after a piece on the Leakeys at Olduvai, their famous dig for hominid fossils seen from above and in the long perspective of time, comes page after page of weird tropical fish in a coral reef, seen in extreme underwater closeup.

Indeed, in *National Geographic's* issue of issues, December, 1969, the "First Explorers on the Moon" package (adventure, exploration, Americans) has scarcely ended when we are thrust "Inside a Hornbill's Walled-Up Nest," the magazine hurtling, as if by some internal imperative, from highest outer astronaut space to ultimate inner nesting space. What connects the magazine's preoccupations is less the idea of a planetary survey than an encompassing idea of the *unknown*. "At our doorstep lie whole realms unseen by man, their inhabitants unheard of. The frontier has not vanished": that's how the piece on the coral-reef fish ends, and those sentences could serve as a signature for every *National Geographic* piece. The poles gone, Everest climbed, the depths of

man's history unfolded—but there is still something unseen that can be seen. It is, in its way, a casual mystic's motto.

The mid-sixties, the moment when I first assayed that pile in my grandparents' basement, turns out to be a slightly misleading moment in the magazine's history. Like other magazines in that affluent era, when publishers yawned as carmakers begged for additional ad pages, it had become fat and a little becalmed. "Canada's Dynamic Heartland, Ontario" is one improbable cover line in 1963 and "Sweden, Quiet Workshop for the World" another. A piece on the island of Tahiti—complete with a roundup of beautiful, and highly clothed, Tahitian women—is backstopped, inevitably, by one on fireflies, seen close up and glowing. In a piece on South Africa, attitudes toward apartheid are delicate (not precisely complimentary, but far from outraged), while, in a piece on a trip south of the border, we are told that "everyone—city leaders, shoeshine boys, Indian fishermen—made us welcome in Mexico. Their gentleness and patience relaxed our Anglo-Saxon pace."

Yet the magazine clearly did not suffer from its archaisms. Magazines, for their devoted readers, are first about regularities of design, type, and tone—they are a matter of sound and sight as much as of sense. *National Geographic* never let its readers down on that front. It had neat diagrams of Jacques Cousteau's underwater stations, seen in a cross-section of the ocean, with cutaway views to show the French crew in their boxers; it had maps decorated with significant icons—state seals, natural landmarks—drawn in a style not quite cartoony yet not wholly earnest. In a year when the Rolling Stones were already performing and J.F.K.'s martyrdom was still keen, Melville Bell Grosvenor, a grandson of Alexander Graham Bell, published a piece on the "World's Tallest Tree," an American redwood. London's Big Ben, we're told, would fall short of the second-highest tree, and there is a graphic showing Big Ben, falling short.

This moment of stasis, Stephanie L. Hawkins argues in her new, highly critical cultural study, "American Iconographic: *National Geographic*, Global Culture and the Visual Imagination," arose only after a period of still sublim-

CD 40

THE CAREER DISCOVERY PROGRAM
AT HARVARD

40 years of opportunities to explore design

June 10–July 19, 2013

→ architecture → landscape architecture
→ urban planning → urban design

Harvard University Graduate School of Design
617-495-5453
www.gsd.harvard.edu/careerdiscovery/

SILVER HILL HOSPITAL
RESTORING MENTAL HEALTH SINCE 1931

Adolescent Dialectical
Behavior Therapy Program

Residential treatment for teens with
mood disorders, impulsivity or self harm

New Canaan, CT
(866) 548-4455 www.silverhillhospital.org

PUT ASSETS ON YOUR WALLS.
AMERICAN PAINTINGS
SHOULD BE A PART OF YOUR
DIVERSIFIED PORTFOLIO.

Request our complimentary 144-page
hardcover catalogue with 51 color plates of
important American paintings from the
19th and 20th centuries.

QUESTROYAL FINE ART, LLC
903 Park Ave. (at 79th St.) 3A&B, New York, NY 10075
(212) 744-3586 gallery@questroyalfineart.com
www.questroyalfineart.com

PRIVATE PALACES & VILLAS
OF VENICE & THE VENETO

October 6–13, 2013
Seven days of exclusive visits &
receptions with the owners of exemplary
private palaces & villas.
www.exclusiveculturaltours.com

JOHN CHRISTIAN
DESIGNERS & CRAFTSMEN

FAMILY CREST
RESEARCH INCLUDED, \$890

MONEY BACK GUARANTEE AND FREE RESIZE
RINGBOX.COM 1.888.646.6466

Ohana Family Camp in Vermont

Swim
Sail
Kayak
Canoe
Archery
Tennis
Hiking
Biking
Ohanacamp.org • (802) 333-3460

FEARRINGTON VILLAGE

HOMES · INN · SPA · RESTAURANT
Retire to a village with bluebirds, hollyhocks and
people of all ages. Near Chapel Hill, NC.

800.277.0130 | www.fearrington.com

mated but more self-evident political turbulence within the society. Hawkins's book is revisionist revisionism. Against the earlier, harsher critics of the magazine, she argues that its readers were neither monolithic nor easily duped, and that the letters to the editors, and, indeed, the broader gauge of cartoons and jokes and remarks published about it elsewhere, show that, whatever *National Geographic* might have been selling, the audience was not necessarily buying it.

She depicts Grosvenor, the longtime editor, as not merely conservative but frequently an outright racist. He may have had mixed motives in putting blacks in the magazine's pages, but he did all he could to keep them out of the Society's upper circles, and in the nineteen-thirties he was, if not exactly friendly to Hitler's regime, no enemy of it, either. Rothenburg's critique, however, extends to Grosvenor's reluctance to publish pieces in praise of the Soviet Union in the same era—a choice that, after all, now seems prescient and admirable. (Rothenburg also quotes, revealingly, and as one of *National Geographic's* base premises, "Everything printed in the Magazine must have permanent value, and be so planned that each Magazine will be as valuable and pertinent one year or five years after publication as it is on the day of publication." The pile in your grandparents' garage was not just anticipated; it was planned.)

Certainly, the Berlin of the Olympic Games is presented, in 1937, without much awareness of what was happening to its Jewish residents. But that's preceded, the year before, by a highly sympathetic piece on Paris under the Popular Front: "The self-confidence and determination of the workers was matched by the philosophical calm and genuine sympathy of those who saw power, for the moment at least, slipping from their hands." The tone is not surreptitiously reactionary. It is of the Wendell Willkie "One World" school of Republican Party thinking: good will and sound American horse sense can defeat political divisions, even in weird old Europe.

Europe was weird, but England was not. One of the striking things in the postwar *National Geographic* is that the magazine, utterly American, was so Anglophilic. Of the many heroes who appear in its pages, none are more frequently seen, or more heroically portrayed, than

the Leakey family and their skull fossils, and Jane Goodall of the chimps. A long article on the brio of Londoners in wartime preceded America's entry into the conflict. Indeed, the enthusiasm for the English side of things runs all the way back to the magazine's earliest moments, when British explorers were continually being feted. Accused of showing the exotic always as Other (or the Other always as exotic; it's hard to keep the categories straight), the magazine and its society had a purer end: making the entire inarticulate world speak, and making it speak a mid-Atlantic English. A slyer reading of *National Geographic* might be that its real cultural purpose was to reconcile the British scientific establishment with the American one—or, perhaps more to the point, to use the British eccentric tradition of exploration to humanize the more uptight American kind.

And then there is common glory in the Anglo-American love of facts. In a manifesto published in that manifesto-bearing year of 1915, *National Geographic* promised its readers, and demanded of its authors, "accurate accuracy." This lovable and very American term—not just fidelity to the facts but faithful fidelity to the facts—speaks for an empiricism about the world and its denizens more radical than any offered before between covers. Against the background of slack "illustrated" magazines that filled American newsstands, dense with exotic scenes but pitifully vague and inexact about their details, *National Geographic* promised to do what it then did: fight the fight for the one true map of the world, point by point and native by native, even, though not often, nipple by nipple.

The pages close, the DVD stops spinning and spitting. What impression is left? An evil essentialism can be espied in that commitment to timelessness, the new scholars of *National Geographic* believe. It showed stasis, not struggle, and thus lent legitimacy to the status quo. Yet *National Geographic* didn't propagandize for a Western view of the world in the guise of something else; it argued openly for it, in issue after issue. The belief in the superiority of Western civilization covers over a tremendous amount of suffering—the Belgian Congo genocide seems nowhere mentioned—but it is no crazier than beliefs we hold just as dear. The

National Geographers might have been wrong in their self-regard, but they were hardly sneaky. Meanwhile, historical criticism, which is ostensibly about trying to understand things as they were seen then, too often spends its time hectoring the dead about not having seen things as we do now. The cultural-studies approach to the creators of the old *National Geographic* is like nothing so much as an article in the old *National Geographic* about an alien tribe—no less condescending, certainly, if a good deal less generous.

For the naïve reader, one overwhelming impression remains: how exciting these old issues are. Read old issues of *Scientific American* and the space between what scientists guessed and what they came to know is a little exhausting—no, no, get off that notion, it's going to be this peculiar DNA that did it! Reading *National Geographic* is like looking at the greatest imaginable travel brochure: let's visit that planet! At the end, you want to go to new places and find out new things and go to old places and find out if they are still there and if what was said of them is true. What happened to that bright local lighthouse? (Closed, alas, in 1949.) Where stands the parasitic theory of cancer? (Mocked, discarded, and now, in viral form, revived.) As a mirror of the world as it is, *National Geographic* was as distorted as such mirrors always are; as an accelerant to American inquiry, it remains, a carrot debauch of curiosity.

I finally found the picture that had scared me so in my grandparents' basement. Mid-1964, in an issue that otherwise featured New York, including gleaming models of what are now the two rusted towers of the New York State pavilion at the World's Fair. There it was, the raging wall of water leaping into Seward, Alaska, the small figures caught running—but not a dividing street, as I had recalled. Instead, mother and children are pitched on top of their own lawn, the earth tilted right up out of the pavement, tree roots showing, fifty or so feet in the air, with the snow-covered ground and the cozy-looking house, improbably wholesome-looking even in extremis, dissolving behind the family. On the mother's face is a look of pained, intelligent concern. At the end of the piece, she announces her thanks to God for getting them down. But, really, they're still there.

Anybody got any old copies of *Mad*? ♦



THE ART WORLD

NEW AMSTERDAM

The city remakes its signature museums.

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL

Queen Beatrix, of the Netherlands, walks an orange carpet this week to reopen the Rijksmuseum, in Amsterdam. It's a big deal. The jewel in the crown of the nation's cultural institutions, where you can see major works by Rembrandt, Vermeer, and their cohorts of the seventeenth-century Dutch

Golden Age—and, perhaps, truly grasp their characters—has been under renovation for ten long years. The project has cost almost half a billion dollars and has been subject to frustrating delays, including a ferocious campaign waged by local bicyclists against the threatened loss of a shortcut through one of the

Rembrandt's "The Night Watch" (1642), at the press preview for the reopening of the Rijksmuseum, after a decade of renovation.

building's arches. The reopening coincides with improvements to the two other stellar museums in the immense public space known as the Museumplein, in the affluent Old South quarter. In September, the modern-art Stedelijk—home to touchstone paintings by Mondrian and Malevich—finished a makeover featuring an eccentric new entrance pavilion that not only looks quite like a bathtub, as critics were quick to note and mock; it looks exactly like a bathtub, of some two-tier Jacuzzi sort. Yet, inside, it is spacious and friendly. Next month, the Van Gogh Museum will reopen after its second modification in fourteen years, with a third planned, for a glassed-in entrance hall. The