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# Goings On

- **Fall Culture Preview**
  By Shauna Lyon, Inkoo Kang, Richard Brody, Fergus McIntosh, Sheldon Pearce, Marina Harss, Jillian Steinhauer, and Helen Shaw | What we’re watching, listening to, and doing this fall.

**Goings On**

# Fall Culture Preview

*What we're watching, listening to, and doing this fall.*

***By Shauna Lyon, Inkoo Kang, Richard Brody, Fergus McIntosh, Sheldon Pearce, Marina Harss, Jillian Steinhauer, and Helen Shaw***

*August 15, 2025*

*You're reading the Goings On newsletter, a guide to what we're watching, listening to, and doing.* ***Sign up to receive it in your in-box.***

**As you catch those last golden rays** of summer, here's something to look forward to: fall culture. Great art (and even not so great art) can soothe and buoy even the most beleaguered souls. Here's hoping this season is no exception—our critics have gathered the most exciting cultural happenings in our fall preview. Several new TV shows take on the fight for truth in media—I'm especially excited about the "Office"-esque comedy "The Paper" and the new season of, I can't help it, "The Morning Show"—and Vince Gilligan ("Breaking Bad") is back with a new sci-fi project set in Albuquerque. In movies, I can't wait to see Rose Byrne at the end of her rope in Mary Bronstein's "If I Had Legs I'd Kick You," and Richard Linklater's take on Godard. In music, I'm eager to experience Park Avenue Armory's sound storm of "11,000 Strings," and indie rock is clearly having a moment (Mac DeMarco, Big Thief, Jeff Tweedy, the list goes on); Fall for Dance renews a love of all that the form can offer, and the city's top ballet companies, New York City Ballet and American Theatre Ballet, both treat us to full seasons. The art world is having a feminist surge, if the shows of Ruth Asawa, June Leaf, and Vaginal Davis are any indication; Broadway gets Keanu Reeves waiting for Godot, Kristin Chenoweth reigning in "The Queen of Versailles," and a transfer of Bess Wohl's lovely, lived-in "Liberation." Don't miss it.

*New Yorker* subscribers enjoy access to our full seasonal cultural previews directly in their inbox. Thank you for your support.—*Shauna Lyon*

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# Television

*Illustrations by Gosia Herba*

**The Fourth Estate, Amateur Sleuths**

It's been a brutal year for journalism, with mass layoffs, corporate capitulation, and distrust of traditional media eroding the industry. One of the fall's most anticipated shows, **"The Paper"** (Sept. 4), on Peacock, hopes to turn this decline into comedic fodder. The new sitcom, a spinoff of "The Office," chronicles an editor-in-chief's efforts to turn around an Ohio newspaper with volunteer reporters.

Elsewhere, the romance of the fourth estate is alive and kicking. FX's **"The Lowdown"** (Sept. 23), Sterlin Harjo's noir follow-up to his acclaimed "Reservation Dogs," stars Ethan Hawke as a citizen journalist and a self-styled "truthstorian" in Tulsa whose exposé of a powerful local family leads to a suspicious death. (Hawke's character is inspired in part by Lee Roy Chapman, an autodidact whose work sparked a major reconsideration of

one of the city's founding fathers.) Led by an equally determined protagonist is Netflix's movie **"The Woman in Cabin 10"** (Oct. 10), in which a travel writer (Keira Knightley) on assignment aboard a luxury yacht sees a passenger being thrown off the ship and decides to investigate. Back on land, the TV anchors of Apple TV+'s **"The Morning Show"** (Sept. 17) return for a fourth season. Despite—or because of—the drama's so-bad-it's-good track record with ripped-from-the-headlines stories, it revisits that questionable well, with this year's installments bringing up issues of the media's credibility in an era of fake news and political polarization.

The pursuit of truth and justice continues outside of journalistic circles, too. In the adaptation of Mick Herron's book **"Down Cemetery Road"** (Apple TV+; Oct. 29), the disappearance of a girl in a peaceful English suburb results in a woman's obsession with the case. The streaming service also débuts **"The Savant"** (Sept. 26), a thriller in which a housewife (Jessica Chastain) infiltrates internet hate groups to deter mass shootings. The show is based on real life, as is the Netflix drama **"Wayward"** (Sept. 25), which is set at a facility for "troubled" teens, created by the comic Mae Martin, who was inspired by the stories of her childhood best friend. One suspects that much of the camp's darkness will stem from the show's creepy counsellor, played by Toni Collette.

If all this sleuthing motivates you to do some snooping of your own, there's currently plenty to find out about **"Pluribus"** (Nov. 7), Vince Gilligan's first major TV series since "Breaking Bad" and "Better Call Saul." The Apple TV+ project, which features Rhea Seehorn, who earned two Emmy nominations for her exquisite performance in "Better Call Saul," can be described as "mild science fiction," according to Gilligan. Publicity materials thus far tease that the show will involve doughnuts, Albuquerque, and "the most miserable person on Earth" saving "the world from happiness." Consider our curiosity whetted.—*Inkoo Kang*

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# Movies

**Kogonada, J. Law, the Rock, Godard**

Romance will be big in the coming season, as in Kogonada's third feature, **"A Big Bold Beautiful Journey"** (opening Sept. 19), starring Margot Robbie and Colin Farrell as strangers who magically get to relive moments from their past. In **"Splitsville"** (Aug. 22), directed by Michael Angelo Covino, a divorcing couple (Kyle Marvin, who co-wrote the script with Covino, and Adria Arjona) is thrown into turmoil by friends with an open marriage (Dakota Johnson and Covino). The mumblecore pioneer Jay Duplass directed **"The Baltimorons"** (Sept. 5), about a thirtysomething man (Michael Strassner) who breaks a tooth on Christmas Eve and forges a sudden relationship with an older emergency dentist (Liz Larsen). **"The History of Sound"** (Sept. 12), set in the nineteen-tens and twenties, stars Paul Mescal and Josh O'Connor as ethnomusicologists whose relationship develops in their travels to discover and record folk music.

The season's bio-pics involve an unusual range of subjects, starting with the M.M.A. fighter Mark Kerr, played by Dwayne Johnson, in **"The Smashing Machine"** (Oct. 3), the first feature directed solo by Benny Safdie. The prolific Richard Linklater has two artist-centered dramas: **"Blue Moon"** (Oct. 17), set amid the Broadway début of "Oklahoma!," in 1943, about the lyricist Lorenz Hart (Ethan Hawke) and his professional breakup with the composer Richard Rodgers (Andrew Scott); and **"Nouvelle Vague"** (Oct. 31), the story of the 1959 shoot, in France, of "Breathless," by Jean-Luc Godard (Guillaume Marbeck), with Zoey Deutch playing Jean Seberg. **"Roofman"** (Oct. 10) stars Channing Tatum as Jeffrey Manchester, a former Army Reserve officer whose nickname of the title refers to his method of breaking into McDonald's restaurants; Derek Cianfrance directed. In Scott Cooper's **"Springsteen: Deliver Me from Nowhere"** (Oct. 24), Jeremy Allen White portrays the singer-songwriter during the making of the 1982 album "Nebraska." Ira Sachs directed **"Peter Hujar's**

**Day”** (Nov. 7), an adaptation of a book by Linda Rosenkrantz (played by Rebecca Hall), in which the author documents twenty-four hours, in 1974, in the life of the photographer (Ben Whishaw).

Crime pays cinematically in Darren Aronofsky’s new drama, **“Caught Stealing”** (Aug. 29), about a former baseball player (Austin Butler) who, in the nineties, gets drawn into a web of danger while cat-sitting; Bad Bunny and Zoë Kravitz co-star. Paul Thomas Anderson’s drama **“One Battle After Another”** (Sept. 26), about ex-revolutionaries who unite to rescue a kidnapped child, stars Leonardo DiCaprio, Benicio Del Toro, Teyana Taylor, and Sean Penn. **“It Was Just an Accident”** (Oct. 15), by the Iranian director Jafar Panahi, is a drama about a former political prisoner who kidnaps a man who he believes had tortured him. Emma Stone teams up again with the director Yorgos Lanthimos in **“Bugonia”** (Oct. 24), as an executive who is kidnapped by conspiracy theorists (Jesse Plemons and Aidan Delbis). And Kelly Reichardt returns with **“The Mastermind”** (Oct. 17), set in Massachusetts in the seventies, about an art-school dropout (Josh O’Connor) who becomes an art thief.

Family stories get a varied workout this fall, as in Mary Bronstein’s **“If I Had Legs I’d Kick You”** (Oct. 10), starring Rose Byrne as a therapist whose life is rendered chaotic by her young daughter’s chronic illness; Conan O’Brien and A$AP Rocky co-star. Nia DaCosta wrote and directed **“Hedda”** (Oct. 22), an adaptation of Ibsen’s “Hedda Gabler,” starring Tessa Thompson. Lynne Ramsay’s **“Die My Love”** (Nov. 7) stars Jennifer Lawrence as a woman who struggles with postpartum depression. In Joachim Trier’s **“Sentimental Value”** (Nov. 7), set in Oslo, Renate Reinsve plays a woman whose estranged father (Stellan Skarsgård), a director, offers her a role in his new film. Noah Baumbach’s drama **“Jay Kelly”** (Nov. 14) is about an actor (George Clooney) on an emotional road trip with his manager (Adam Sandler).—*Richard Brody*

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# Classical Music

**Celestial Opera, Angela Hewitt's Bach**

What defines an opera if not the singing? While the composer Robert Ashley's characters often do more speaking than singing, his pieces aim to tell "a long story based on musical forms." Close enough. His electronic chamber opera **"Celestial Excursions,"** which traces the thoughts and speech patterns of old people, is at Roulette (Sept. 12-14). For bel-canto devotees, Donizetti's **"La Fille du Régiment"** (opening Oct. 17) brings coloratura fireworks to the Metropolitan Opera, which kicks off its season with **"The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay,"** adapted by Mason Bates and Gene Scheer from Michael Chabon's novel (opening Sept. 21). Jeanine Tesori's **"Blue,"** about a Black family victimized by a police shooting, is presented at the Wu Tsai Theatre (Nov. 15).

Few have captured infatuation like Schubert, three of whose lovelorn song cycles—"Die Schöne Müllerin," "Winterreise," and "Schwanengesang"—are performed in a single day, by the **Brooklyn Art Song Society** (Roulette; Oct. 12). The baritone **Matthias Goerne** brings the first to Carnegie Hall, on Oct. 19, with **Daniil Trifonov** at the piano. If Schubert plumbs the depths of solipsism, the Estonian composer Arvo Pärt travels the voids between the stars. The **Estonian Festival Orchestra** (Oct. 23) and **Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir** (Oct. 23-24) bring two all-Pärt programs to Carnegie, including "Tabula Rasa," a work of sumptuous austerity.

The **New York Philharmonic,** led for each program by a different conductor, presents a century-spanning trio of modern violin concerti: **Leila Josefowicz** plays Karol Szymanowski's second violin concerto (Sept. 27, 30), **Joshua Bell** plays Thomas de Hartmann's (Nov. 6-8), and **Nicola**

**Benedetti** plays Wynton Marsalis's swooning, high-kicking concerto, her recording of which won a Grammy (Nov. 13-16).

At the 92nd St. Y, it's Bach season: **Chris Thile** performs sonatas and partitas on the mandolin (Oct. 19), and **Angela Hewitt,** a legendary Bach interpreter, plays the Goldberg Variations (Oct. 24). The alchemical guitarist **Sean Shibe** performs Bach's Cello Suite No. 1 on classical guitar, before switching to electric for pieces by Steve Reich and Tyshawn Sorey (Nov. 7). Sorey's work also features in three programs by the percussion group **Yarn/Wire** (Miller Theatre; Oct. 27-29). **Wu Man,** a Chinese-pipa virtuoso, performs, with the Knights, the concerto that was written for her by Lou Harrison (Metropolitan Museum; Sept. 9). And, at the Park Avenue Armory, fifty "microtonally attuned" pianos, plus a chamber orchestra, buzz and heave in Georg Friedrich Haas's monumental **"11,000 Strings"** (Sept. 30-Oct. 7).—*Fergus McIntosh*

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# Contemporary Music

**Kali Uchis, Big Thief, Laufey**

The fall slate of concerts is highlighted by defining figures of indie rock's past half decade. At Radio City Music Hall, **Mac DeMarco** channels a stunning new LP, "Guitar" (Sept. 8), and a month later **Alex G** is joined by Nilüfer Yanya, scaling up his operation after a major-label début (Oct. 8). At Kings Theatre, **MJ Lenderman** performs one of the best albums of 2024, "Manning Fireworks" (Oct. 16). In the midst of a shakeup to its lineup, the now three-person folk-rock group **Big Thief** reaffirms its standing as one of the most dynamic and in-synch units in all of music (Forest Hills Stadium; Oct. 25).

As the season sets in, many of the best shows make their way to Brooklyn. At Brooklyn Steel: the avant-pop icons **Stereolab** (Oct. 1-2), the Wilco front man **Jeff Tweedy** (Oct. 22), the electronic duo **Autechre** (Oct. 25),

and the alt-rock band **Wednesday** (Nov. 11-12). At Brooklyn Paramount: the funk bassist **Thundercat** (Oct. 25) and one of U.K. hip-hop's generational lyricists, **Little Simz** (Oct. 30-31). Other acts run to fill the open space of Under the K Bridge Park. On Sept. 13, TV on the Radio hosts **"There Goes the Neighborhood,"** a homecoming celebration, featuring sets from Flying Lotus, Sudan Archives, Moor Mother, and *SPELLLING*; and on Sept. 27 the rock luminaries Iggy Pop, Jack White, and the Sex Pistols headline **CBGB Festival.** A week later, the Swedish experimentalist **Bladee** sets forth his mood board for a genreless music of the internet, alongside the rappers **Nettspend** and **Black Kray** and the indie-rock band **Bôa** (Oct. 3). On the groovier end of the spectrum, at Barclays Center, the electro-R. & B. producer and d.j. **Kaytranada** co-headlines two shows with the French house duo **Justice,** on Nov. 8-9.

For those tracking the ever-expanding definition of pop, upstarts arrive from all over with diverse visions. From TikTok, there's **Addison Rae,** who traffics in trip-hop and iPod nostalgia (Brooklyn Paramount; Oct. 1, and Terminal 5; Oct. 3). From France, there's **Oklou,** a different kind of Y2K fusionist, whose sound evokes bedroom pop instead of Britney Spears (Knockdown Center; Oct. 17). As K-pop revs up its global expansion, one of the sleepers is the bubbly girl group ***STAYC,*** whose songs possess a fun-house exuberance (The Theatre at M.S.G.; Oct. 21). The London singer **Lola Young,** fresh off the breakaway triumph of her sparingly scuzzy single, "Messy," cheekily embraces newfound notoriety in support of her upcoming album, "I'm Only F**king Myself" (Terminal 5; Nov. 5-6).

But M.S.G. is home to stars across genres. On Sept. 8, the **Haim** sisters unlock the vivid songs of their June release, "I Quit," and the Latin-soul iconoclast **Kali Uchis** follows suit, for May's "Sincerely" (Sept. 11-12). The alt-pop savant **Lorde** débuts her new album, "Virgin" (Oct. 1), while **Lainey Wilson,** an irreverent country songwriter who rode a win for entertainer of the year at the 2023 C.M.A.s to breakout success, continues her hot streak (Oct. 10). If any artist feels quintessentially autumnal, it's **Laufey,** the Icelandic jazz-pop sensation, who went from viral novelty to Grammy winner by honoring the sounds of the Great American Songbook, now on a new path for her "A Matter of Time" tour (Oct. 15-16).—*Sheldon Pearce*

# Dance

**Paris Opéra Ballet, “The Emperor Jones”**

Every year, the dance scene awakens with a jolt in mid-September. The starting bell, as usual, is the **Fall for Dance** festival (Sept. 16-27), a smorgasbord of works from around the world organized by New York City Center. This year, audiences can catch a collaboration between Sara Mearns (a leading dancer at New York City Ballet for almost two decades) and Jamar Roberts (formerly of Alvin Ailey) alongside a tap solo by the winning Dario Natarelli, choreographed with Michelle Dorrance; or the Paris Opéra stars Hannah O’Neill and Hugo Marchand, in Jerome Robbins’s dreamy “Afternoon of a Faun.” City Center also hosts a rare visit by the **Paris Opéra Ballet** (Oct. 9-12), albeit in atypical repertory—an earthy dance by Hofesh Shechter, “Red Carpet.” This is followed by an equally rare visit from the **Dutch National Ballet** (Nov. 20-22), bringing works by the éminence grise of Dutch ballet, Hans van Manen, plus a new trio by Alexei Ratmansky, “Trio Kagel.”

The vibrant ensemble **Indigenous Enterprise,** a collective of Native American dancers and musicians based in Phoenix, floods the Joyce with jubilant dancing and dramatically colored regalia in “Still Here” (Sept. 16-21). The company’s deft choreography of solos and ensemble passages allows the performers, each representing a different tribal tradition (Navajo, Cree, Pueblo, Seneca, and Lakota), to stand as both distinct and part of a harmonious whole. A few weeks later (Oct. 14-19), the **Limón Dance**

**Company,** founded in 1946 by José Limón, a father of American modern dance, offers a reconstruction of his eerily resonant “The Emperor Jones.” The dance, not seen in years, is loosely based on the play by Eugene O’Neill, about an arrogant despot undone by his demons.

Jamar Roberts, whose dances combine jaggedness with quicksilver complexity, débuts his third work for **New York City Ballet** (David H. Koch; Sept. 16-Oct. 12), set to music by the Venezuelan performance artist Arca. Justin Peck’s “Heatscape”—a dance driven by youthful energy and set against a backdrop by Shepard Fairey—also has its N.Y.C.B. première, and lovers of Balanchine will get the chance to see an extremely rare revival of the delicate and stylish “Ballade,” set to music by Fauré.

Misty Copeland bids farewell to **American Ballet Theatre** (David H. Koch; Oct. 15-Nov. 1), in an evening (Oct. 22) that includes some of her greatest hits. The company also rolls out a series of mixed programs, including one dedicated to the works of Twyla Tharp, whose first ballet for A.B.T., “Push Comes to Shove,” returns in full after an absence of nearly three decades. It’s vintage Tharp, combining the off-kilter with the virtuosic, and often poking fun at ballet’s self-serious tendencies.—*Marina Harss*

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# Art

**Ruth Asawa, the Met’s Egypt**

Arguably, the biggest art-world happenings this fall are not exhibitions but museums themselves. Both the **Studio Museum in Harlem** and the **New Museum** began as small, scrappy projects roughly half a century ago and

evolved to become collecting institutions with permanent homes. Both now reopen after high-profile—and high-price-tag—renovations that double their exhibition space. The Studio Museum returns, on Nov. 15, with installations devoted to its collection and history, plus a show of electric-light works by Tom Lloyd, who was the subject of the museum's first-ever exhibition, in 1968. The New Museum, mysteriously, still hasn't announced a reopening date, but will launch with **"New Humans: Memories of the Future,"** a building-wide show about the relationship between people and technology.

Elsewhere, heavy-hitting retrospectives abound. *MOMA*'s **"Ruth Asawa: A Retrospective"** (Oct. 19) features some three hundred works by the late Japanese American artist, who's best known for hanging sculptures of rough wire transformed into bulbous, organic-looking forms, but who also made drawings, prints, and sculptures and was an educator and advocate. *MOMA* follows with **"Wifredo Lam: When I Don't Sleep, I Dream"** (Nov. 10), a look at the twentieth-century Cuban artist, who travelled extensively between the Caribbean and Europe, and who filled his canvases with surreal, hybrid figures, calling his painting "an act of decolonization."

At the Brooklyn Museum, **"Seydou Keïta: A Tactile Lens"** (Oct. 10) spotlights the photographer, whose portraits of everyday people in the Malian capital, Bamako, from the nineteen-forties through the sixties both captured and helped create a modern national identity. Keïta shot most of his subjects in black-and-white in his courtyard, posing them to bring out their confidence and style. Clocking in at almost two hundred and seventy-five objects, this show will be its own blockbuster, and when you're done you can go see another: **"Monet and Venice"** (Oct. 11), which gathers and contextualizes the Impressionist master's sparing depictions of the city.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art's **"Witnessing Humanity: The Art of John Wilson"** (Sept. 20) includes the breadth of the artist's emotionally charged, figurative work about Black American experience, from prints condemning racism to affirming portrait paintings; the show extends the legacy of the under-known Wilson beyond his home town of Boston. Also at the Met is a revelation of a different kind: **"Divine Egypt"** (Oct. 12), which examines and taxonomizes the images of twenty-five deities in

ancient Egypt. This is the type of show the Met does best: scholarly *and* sumptuous.

Meanwhile, a list of this season's smaller single-artist surveys reads like a feminist corrective: among them are **June Leaf** at Grey Art Museum (Sept. 9), **Coco Fusco** at El Museo del Barrio (Sept. 18), **Vaginal Davis** at *MOMA* PS1 (Oct. 9), **Graciela Iturbide** at the International Center of Photography (Oct. 16), and **Gabriele Münter** at the Guggenheim (Nov. 7). But perhaps the biggest effort on this front is **"Designing Motherhood: Things That Make and Break Our Births"** (Oct. 4), at the Museum of Arts and Design. The ambitious and sprawling exhibition, in the works for years, uses medical objects, educational films, and contemporary art to consider how design has shaped reproduction—something that seems evident but has heretofore been rarely explored.

The Whitney Museum is also attempting to rewrite history, in a way, with **"Sixties Surreal"** (Sept. 24). When chronicling the decade, art institutions have typically foregrounded Minimalism and Conceptualism, with their pared-down aesthetics and subtle politics. "Sixties Surreal" looks, instead, at weird, brash, psychological, and sexual works made in those years by more than a hundred artists, to offer what will undoubtedly be a germane alternative.—*Jillian Steinhauer*

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# The Theatre

**American Excess; Dude, Where's Godot**

This fall, seriousness strikes the giddy Broadway theatre like a cold snap. James Graham's drama **"Punch"** deals with the aftermath of a killing blow (Friedman; beginning previews Sept. 9); Keanu Reeves and Alex Winters wax nihilistic in Samuel Beckett's **"Waiting for Godot"** (Hudson; Sept. 13); Laurie Metcalf stars in Samuel Hunter's melancholy **"Little Bear Ridge Road"** (Booth; Oct. 7); Bess Wohl's **"Liberation"** examines seventies feminism (James Earl Jones; Oct. 8); and Mark Strong and Leslie Manville play doomed spouses in Robert Icke's **"Oedipus"** (Studio 54; Oct. 30). Even the lightest fare—Yasmina Reza's **"Art,"** with Neil Patrick Harris, Bobby Cannavale, and James Corden (Music Box; Aug. 28)—stages arguments about the ineffable.

The fall's Broadway musicals are also a surprisingly unfrivolous lot, pondering the state of our union: **"Ragtime,"** Stephen Flaherty, Lynn Ahrens, and Terrence McNally's nineteen-nineties barn burner, charts the U.S.'s troubled racial history (Vivian Beaumont; Sept. 26); Stephen Schwartz and Lindsey Ferrentino adapt the 2012 documentary **"The Queen of Versailles,"** about an avatar of American excess, with Kristin Chenoweth in the throne (St. James; Oct. 8); and even the bombastic eighties megamusical **"Chess"** (Imperial; Oct. 15), by Benny Andersson, Björn

Ulvaeus, and Tim Rice, returns with new thoughts about the U.S.-Soviet relationship. As counterprogramming to all this political relevance, the goofball **“Beetlejuice”** (Palace; Oct. 8) boomerangs back to Broadway.

Speaking of musicals on a tight orbit: Andrew Lloyd Webber’s just-closed “The Phantom of the Opera” is reborn as the immersive **“Masquerade”** (218 W. 57th St.; through Oct. 19); William Finn and Rachel Sheinkin’s **“The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee”** takes another turn (New World Stages; Nov. 7); and Laurence O’Keefe’s 1997 **“Bat Boy: The Musical”** reëmerges from its cave at Encores! (City Center; Oct. 29-Nov. 9). Heather Christian’s superb, gospel-folk **“Oratorio for Living Things,”** happily, is also back, along with its peaceful, much needed cathedral atmosphere (Signature; Sept. 30).

Screen stars abound Off Broadway: the Shed hosts both André Holland in Tarell Alvin McCraney’s **“The Brothers Size”** (Aug. 30) and Tom Hanks in his time-travelling romance, **“This World of Tomorrow”** (Oct. 30); the “Los Espookys” genius Julio Torres rolls out his synesthetic standup in **“Color Theories”** (Performance Space New York; Sept. 3-21); Elizabeth Marvel headlines **“And Then We Were No More,”** by Tim Blake Nelson (La Mama; Sept. 19); Martyna Majok’s **“Queens”** (Manhattan Theatre Club at City Center; Oct. 14) features Anna Chlumsky; and Stephen Rea performs Beckett’s **“Krapp’s Last Tape”** (N.Y.U. Skirball; Oct. 8-19). (There are precious few classics this season: also Off Broadway is Ibsen’s **“The Wild Duck,”** at Theatre for a New Audience, beginning Sept. 2.)

Several of our finest playwrights have new work onstage: James Ijames, Damon Cardasis, and Sia adapt Cardasis’s queer coming-of-age film, **“Saturday Church,”** into a musical (N.Y.T.W.; Aug. 27); Jordan E. Cooper’s **“Oh Happy Day!”** sets a Biblical flood at a family barbecue (Public; Oct. 2); Anne Washburn’s **“The Burning Cauldron of Fiery Fire”** describes an insular California community (Vineyard; fall); and Talene Monahon’s satire about Armenian identity, **“Meet the Cartozians”** (Signature Center; Oct. 29), stars the recent Tony Award winner Will Brill. Apocalypse and the lure of despotic leaders are, for some reason, on many minds: Nazareth Hassan’s **“Practice”** (Playwrights Horizons; Oct. 30) satirizes a performance collective in thrall to its guru; at Roundabout, Rajiv

Joseph's **"Archduke"** (Laura Pels; fall) imagines the radicals who trigger a world war; Ethan Lipton's comic musical **"The Seat of Our Pants"** envisions the end times (Public; Oct. 24); and Brian Watkins's **"Weather Girl"** makes bleak jokes as the world burns (St. Ann's Warehouse; Sept. 16).—*Helen Shaw*

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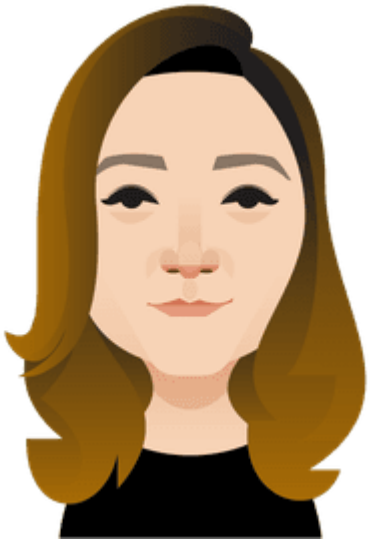
**P.S. Good stuff on the internet:**

- Your new word-game addiction
- David Bowie, up close
- What to do with that market haul

*Shauna Lyon is the editor of Goings On.*



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*Richard Brody, a film critic, began writing for The New Yorker in 1999. He is the author of "Everything Is Cinema: The Working Life of Jean-Luc Godard."*
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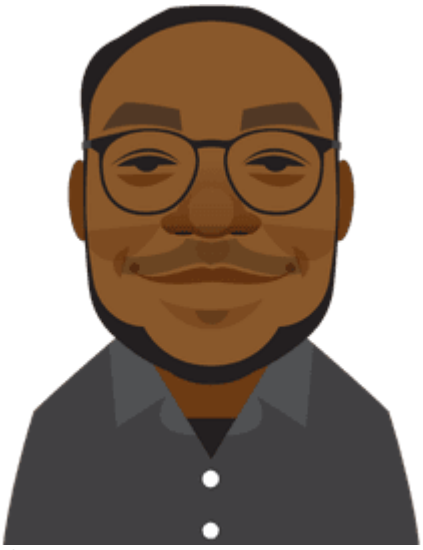

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*Jillian Steinhauer received a 2023 Rabkin Prize for visual-arts writing. She teaches in the Journalism and Design program at the New School.*

*Helen Shaw joined The New Yorker as a staff writer in 2022. She received a 2025 Grace Dudley Prize for Arts Writing.*

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# The Talk of the Town

- **Trump Sends in the National Guard**
  By Margaret Talbot | Is the President’s takeover of D.C. a dry run for other cities?
- **The Birds Flocking Back to the Fresh Kills Dump**
  By Eric Lach | New Yorkers stuck their garbage in Staten Island for fifty-three years. As the landfill becomes a park, foxes, deer, and grasshopper sparrows are moving in again.
- **The Ghouls of GHOST Are Dialling Back the Devil Stuff**
  By Amanda Petrusich | Fresh from selling out Madison Square Garden, the dark priest of the Swedish metal band talked about his childhood TV dreams while backstage at “The Tonight Show.”
- **The Met vs. the Met—Softball Edition**
  By Dan Greene | The Metropolitan Opera’s team was undefeated. So was the Metropolitan Museum’s. On a Central Park ball field, sound guys and lighting technicians faced off against art handlers and registrars.
- **“And Just Like That . . . ,” the Lost Season**
  By Emily Flake | Plotlines we’ll never see: Carrie grapples with shoe tariffs, and Miranda moves into the sewers.

**Comment**

# Trump Sends in the National Guard

Is the President’s takeover of D.C. a dry run for other cities?

**By Margaret Talbot**

August 17, 2025

*Photo illustration by Cristiana Couceiro; Source photographs from Getty*

Tourists who came to Washington, D.C., last week—tromping from one Smithsonian collection to another, eating ice cream on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial—witnessed a bit of history that they surely had not anticipated: the beginning of President Trump’s takeover of the District. At a press conference that Monday, Trump had vowed to bring order to a place that he said was beset by “total lawlessness,” and by “bloodshed, bedlam, and squalor.” Within days, D.C.’s police force had been federalized, the National Guard had been mobilized, and hundreds of troops had shown up, many in drab-colored Humvees.

Few tourists, and fewer locals, would recognize the nightmarish place in Trump's depiction. D.C., like virtually every American city, has crime and homelessness; in 2023, it experienced a notable spike in carjackings. But its problems are long-simmering, not acute. According to Metropolitan Police Department statistics, violent crime is down twenty-six per cent since the same time last year.

In any case, Trump's display of federal muscle was concentrated not in the neighborhoods where crime is most prevalent but in the iconic, touristic spots near the White House. Perhaps he envisioned a sort of sequel to the military parade that he staged in June, with made-for-Fox-News visuals: National Guardsmen clustered around the Washington Monument, D.E.A. agents standing outside an upscale bakery in Georgetown. On Fourteenth Street, a lively night-life corridor with a diverse population, men wearing *ICE* and Homeland Security vests operated a checkpoint at which agents, several with faces covered, pulled over drivers and questioned them. (According to the Washington *Post*, at least two were detained.) People walking their dogs or heading out on dates stopped to heckle. "Oh, I feel so much safer," a young woman scoffed. "Fascists, go home!" a guy on a bike shouted.

Trump's show of force is an imposition on a citizenry already aware that its democratic self-governance is tenuous. As advocates for D.C. statehood like to point out, the District has some seven hundred thousand residents—more than Wyoming or Vermont—but no right to elect a representative who can vote on legislation in Congress. Until the Home Rule Act of 1973 gave the city limited autonomy, it had no mayor or city council of its own. Even now, laws that the council approves after deliberation and public comment can be tossed out by Congress. This has happened many times over the years, usually with the aim of nullifying progressive legislation. In the eighties and nineties, Congress rejected a law to decriminalize gay sex and blocked the use of public funds for abortion services. This June, the House voted to repeal laws that allowed noncitizens to vote in local elections and that barred the police union from negotiating on disciplinary measures against officers. Two Republican congressmen recently introduced a bill that would revoke home rule altogether, in the interest of having Congress "manage the nation's capital."

An effective plan to improve the lives of D.C. citizens would require detailed policy and a prolonged investment of time and funds—the sorts of things that Trump has zero interest in. What he wants is a redecoration reveal for D.C., as in his paving of the Rose Garden: a makeover heavy on ball gowns and bulletproof vests, light on poor people. “I’m going to make our Capital safer and more beautiful than it ever was before,” Trump wrote on Truth Social. “The Homeless have to move out, IMMEDIATELY. We will give you places to stay, but FAR from the Capital.” Advocates for the homeless say that it’s unclear where people will be sent; the city does not have enough beds in local shelters.

As the week went on, Attorney General Pam Bondi attempted to usurp the authority of the police chief, Pamela Smith, by appointing the head of the D.E.A. as “emergency police commissioner.” The District pushed back, suing the Administration and arguing that its actions were “unnecessary and unlawful.” Americans have long been wary of using the military in local law enforcement, and for good reason. Soldiers generally don’t live in the places they’re dropped into; they don’t know the communities and are less answerable to them. They’re also usually not trained in law enforcement or empowered to make arrests, so using them to fight crime means relying heavily on the power of intimidation. Militarized patrols in city streets are uniquely chilling to the exercise of assembly and free speech.

An 1878 law known as the Posse Comitatus Act generally restrains the use of the military for such purposes. (Trump’s recent deployment of the National Guard during anti-*ICE* protests in Los Angeles has been challenged in court.) But the District’s peculiar status makes it easy to use it as a laboratory. In D.C., the President is allowed to send in the National Guard without officially federalizing it. And the Home Rule Act authorizes him to take over the Metropolitan Police in case of “emergency.” Though these Presidential powers do not apply elsewhere, Stephen Vladeck, a law professor at Georgetown University, worries that Trump’s recent use of the National Guard will be “desensitizing.”

At the press conference where Trump announced his plans for D.C., he suggested that other cities could be next. “You look at Chicago, how bad it is. You look at Los Angeles, how bad it is,” he said. “New York has a

problem.” (Baltimore and Oakland he dismissed as too “far gone.”) Days later, James Comer, the Kentucky Republican who chairs the House Oversight Committee, dutifully said that Trump’s “experiment” in D.C. ought to be replicated in “a lot of the Democrat-run cities in America.” There are ways around the Posse Comitatus Act, and Trump seems likely to test them. At a rally in L.A. where Governor Gavin Newsom was speaking last week, a force of Border Patrol agents, some armed with rifles, showed up uninvited. The Washington *Post* reported that the Administration was considering the creation of a “Domestic Civil Service Quick Disturbance Reaction Force”—hundreds of National Guard troops that could be deployed to cities to quell protests.

At the checkpoint on Fourteenth Street last week, D.C. police officers at least felt compelled to answer residents when they asked what was going on. (“Traffic-safety check,” one said, unconvincingly.) The federal agents just turned their backs. Trump had said at the press conference that his law-and-order enforcers could do “whatever the hell they want.” That’s not true—but it’s truer than it used to be. ♦

*Margaret Talbot joined The New Yorker as a staff writer in 2004. She is the author, with David Talbot, of “By the Light of Burning Dreams: The Triumphs and Tragedies of the Second American Revolution.”*

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Local Critters

# The Birds Flocking Back to the Fresh Kills Dump

New Yorkers stuck their garbage in Staten Island for fifty-three years. As the landfill becomes a park, foxes, deer, and grasshopper sparrows are moving in again.

**By Eric Lach**

August 18, 2025

*Illustration by João Fazenda*

One humid afternoon in July, José Ramírez-Garofalo drove his large Toyota truck through the lush new hills, valleys, and meadows of Freshkills Park, a twenty-two-hundred-acre green space that the city is constructing on Staten Island. Ramírez-Garofalo, a young man with dark hair, large forearms, and

the beginnings of a goatee, drove and talked fast. “It’s an impermeable geotextile membrane,” he said, referring to the thick plastic that was used, starting in the mid-nineties, to cap the four giant trash mounds of the old Fresh Kills landfill. “On top there is playground soil.”

The process of capping and terraforming the four mounds that once made up the country’s largest dump is complete, but the park won’t be fully open until at least 2036. This means that, most days, Ramírez-Garofalo and a team of ecologists he directs at the Freshkills Park Alliance have much of what will one day be among the country’s largest urban parks to themselves. For years, they have documented and analyzed the return of wildlife to the western shore of Staten Island. “The foxes are running wild,” Ramírez-Garofalo said. So are the deer, turkeys, skunks, crickets, spiders, ticks, bats, dragonflies, and ospreys. “During *COVID*, when the city shut down, it allowed a lot of the animals that were restricted to the extreme south shore to move across Staten Island,” he went on. “There was a lot less people and cars around, and so skunks, foxes, and turkeys all colonized basically every remaining patch of habitat.” To the right, a huge osprey took off from a telephone pole with a few languid flaps of its dark wings.

At the top of the north mound, Ramírez-Garofalo parked and got out to look around. The grass rose past his hips and swayed in the breeze. He has been studying the return of grasshopper sparrows, eastern meadowlarks, sedge wrens, bobolinks, and other grassland birds to the park for the past decade, since he was a student at the College of Staten Island. Several of these species are considered at risk, and hadn’t been seen living in the city for decades. “Last year, we had a hundred and thirty-six pairs of grasshopper sparrows, which is, like, unheard-of numbers,” he said. In his telling, after years of flying by during annual migrations, these birds have begun to gaze at this section of the outer boroughs with the cool eyes of upwardly mobile young professionals. “They see this habitat and they say, ‘Oh, wow. There’s a lot of food here. It’s damp. The grasses are tall. I could see myself breeding here next year,’ ” he said.

The Staten Island Expressway rumbled not far away; strip malls were visible to the east, and equipment that measures landfill gas poked through the ground at regular intervals—the trash beneath the park is still

decomposing—and yet the air smelled sweet. “The birds don’t give a shit,” Ramírez-Garofalo said. “We covered it. That’s good enough for them.” He bent over to examine a spider, then used an app on his phone to mimic the call of a grasshopper sparrow. “They’re not named that because they eat grasshoppers, though they do—oh, look,” he said. An actual grasshopper sparrow, a small brown bird with yellow marks, had flown over to investigate the digital commotion. Ramírez-Garofalo watched it fly off, proudly. “They literally sound like grasshoppers,” he said, playing the shrill song again on his phone.

The hazy skyline of lower Manhattan was on the horizon. Robert Moses opened Fresh Kills in 1948, and for years Staten Islanders held a grudge against the rest of the city because of it. Many worried that the marshy western shore of the borough had been forever marred. Ramírez-Garofalo has witnessed its retransformation. There are parts of the park that look like patches of Colorado prairie. The creeks that snake through it flow miraculously clean. A pair of bald eagles have started nesting nearby. Ramírez-Garofalo, who is twenty-nine, will soon defend his Ph.D. dissertation at Rutgers. He hopes to continue studying Freshkills for decades to come. “I’m thinking of reintroducing some carnivorous plants here,” he said, toeing the clayey, acidic soil. There’s more than enough work to go around for his small staff and handful of interns. “I could use a hundred million dollars,” he said, deadpan. He sees the park as a hopeful story at an otherwise “grim” time for conservation efforts. “We’re seeing all these species come back,” he said. “And they’re all here on Staten Island, for our viewing pleasure.” ♦

*Eric Lach, a staff writer, has contributed to the magazine since 2008. He writes regularly about New York City politics, people, and more.*

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**Ghouls Dept.**

# The Ghouls of GHOST Are Dialling Back the Devil Stuff

Fresh from selling out Madison Square Garden, the dark priest of the Swedish metal band talked about his childhood TV dreams while backstage at “The Tonight Show.”

**By Amanda Petrusich**

August 18, 2025

*Illustration by João Fazenda*

The Swedish hard-rock band GHOST appeared on “The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon” last month. When the group formed, in Linköping, in 2006, its members were anonymous, and their devotion to Satan was deep and jubilant. On a track from GHOST’s first album, the vocalist Tobias Forge offered up a demonic mandate: “Believe in one God, do we? / Satan almighty.” Since then, GHOST has cooled it a little with the devil worship,

though it has not exactly gone soft: the song “Mary on a Cross,” from 2019 (“You go down / Just like Holy Mary”), was decried as blasphemous, and the band’s American tours are still protested by wild-eyed church groups, who encircle venues and wave signs reading “Satan Has NO Rights.” These days, Forge’s identity is known, though he continues to be backed by a rotating cabal of so-called Nameless Ghouls. (There were seven Ghouls hanging out backstage at “The Tonight Show,” dressed in black hoods or top hats, masks, and glittering skeleton suits.)

The band released its sixth studio album, “Skeletá,” this spring; it débuted at No. 1 on the *Billboard* 200. Ahead of the taping, Forge wore jeans, high-top Converse, and a black leather motorcycle jacket. The night before, GHOST had sold out Madison Square Garden, prompting Forge, who is forty-four, to say, “All these years, that’s been some sort of elusive mirage on the horizon.” (GHOST dedicated the show to Ozzy Osbourne: “For being the Prince of Darkness, he sure gave us a lot of light,” Forge said from the stage.) He felt the same thrill about doing “The Tonight Show.” “I grew up very much in awe of a lot of sixties bands, like the Rolling Stones,” Forge said. “The story of those bands was filtered through these American television appearances. I am very happy that we’re allowed into the ether.”

GHOST is a theatrical and largely tongue-in-cheek outfit. Though the band is spiritually indebted to horror-punk and heavy-metal groups like Iron Maiden and the Misfits, it’s musically more aligned with the riff-rock bands of the seventies, such as Blue Öyster Cult. If you are not prone to pearl-clutching, there is a lot of perverse pleasure in GHOST’s music, which has more than a whiff of Spinal Tap. Even Forge’s gnarliest lyrics are also kind of funny: “The swamp of feces that is the world / Flatulates a whirl windstorm in which you swirl,” he sings on “Depth of Satan’s Eyes,” a cold and sludgy track from the 2013 album “Infestissumam.” If you’ve had a bad enough day, the line can feel like a koan, or at least something cute to send to the group chat. “That’s what we’re trying to do with everything that is GHOST,” Forge said. “Taking all these depressive issues—death, doom, gloom, destruction, oppression—and just turning it into something comprehensible and positive.” In another way, Forge is attempting to meet the world on its own terms. “We’re preaching about the evil on the other side,” he said. “My thirteen-year-old self was this angry Satanist who

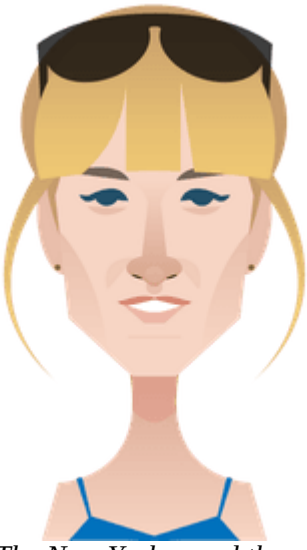
wanted to blow the world up. But now a lot of that is happening on a completely different level—spreading absolute, total death and destruction and chaos, in order for there to be nothing left."


*"Dad, it's O.K.—I'll just give him my lunch money."*
*Cartoon by Zachary Kanin*

After a sound check, Forge disappeared for a couple of hours. GHOST has had a series of front men over the years, all embodied by Forge; the latest is known as Papa V Perpetua, who exists within a complicated family tree of glowering dark priests. (Forge described his onstage persona as a mix of Mick Jagger, Freddie Mercury, and Charlie Chaplin.) Shortly before showtime, Papa emerged from a dressing room wearing black pants, a silver blazer, black leather gloves, and a metallic mask. He confidently strode toward the stage door. One of his eyes had gone milky, deranged. Past iterations of Papa have performed in a demonic papal gown, a towering mitre featuring an inverted cross (when the cross is encircled by the letter "G," GHOST fans refer to it as "the Grucifix"), and a full silicone mask, which gave his face a Hannibal Lecter stillness. Papa hasn't gone business casual yet, but his latest outfit is noticeably less restrictive. "Over the years, I've developed claustrophobia, which is not ideal," Forge said. "You see a little bit more of my face, you see a little bit more movement. Some of the obvious creepiness from the very paralyzed masks is technically gone."

That evening, the band performed "Lachryma," a single titled after the Latin word for "tears"; a fog machine was pumping. The track is a power

ballad about heartache—the way it oozes into every crevice of a life, a creeping, toxic flood. Like many GHOST songs, it is deceptively tender: “Now that sweet’s gone sour / Seeping down the cracks / Getting worse by the hour / The vile rot attacks,” Forge moans. At the end, before Fallon reappeared, all pep and cheer, Forge clasped his hands together and closed his eyes, as if locked in prayer. ♦



*Amanda Petrusich is a staff writer at The New Yorker and the author of “Do Not Sell at Any Price: The Wild, Obsessive Hunt for the World’s Rarest 78rpm Records.”*

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**Intramural Dept.**

# The Met vs. the Met—Softball Edition

The Metropolitan Opera's team was undefeated. So was the Metropolitan Museum's. On a Central Park ball field, sound guys and lighting technicians faced off against art handlers and registrars.

**By Dan Greene**

August 18, 2025

*Illustration by João Fazenda*

A typical Metropolitan Opera production employs at least nine high-definition cameras for the company's "Live in HD" and "On Demand" streaming series. The other day, as the opera's softball team, the Pitch Hitters, readied for an evening game in Central Park, a bespectacled, bearded opera employee stood on a red plastic box affixing a GoPro camera

to the backstop. “I videotape all the games, for quality assurance,” Mike Panayos, who oversees the opera’s titles (similar to closed captions) and coaches its softball squad, said. For this game, he was shooting three cameras in 1080p resolution at sixty frames per second—“So I can do a little slow motion,” he said. He spends about three hours editing the multiple angles into a single cut, complete with a score overlay, that he uploads to a private YouTube channel. Today was lucky: with no preceding game on the field, he had a full hour for setup. “If there’s someone on the field before, that’s a one-camera game,” he said.

Panayos peered through the viewfinder down the first-base line. “This is the shot,” he announced. GoPros were also aimed at third base and the dugout, for reaction shots. An opponent once objected to the practice. “I said it’s a public event with no expectation of privacy,” Panayos recalled. “The guy said, ‘What are you, the company lawyer?’ ”

Up walked a stocky man with a white beard and a blue ball cap. It was Avo Asencio, a Met Opera security guard who manages the Pitch Hitters’ lineups. “I’m beginning to get the butterflies,” he said. Their opponents, the Met Museum’s Metropolitans, were undefeated. So were the Pitch Hitters, who had not lost since their inaugural game last season, against the local PBS station. (Team name: ThirTeam.) The Pitch Hitters had cumulatively outscored their nine foes this summer by a tally of eighty-four to fifteen. Four had forfeited. “I think it’s that they didn’t want to play us,” Asencio said. He is in his thirty-seventh year at the opera and his thirty-fourth in security, after starting in ticketing. “I’m not leaving until they let me sing,” he said. His daughter Alysa is an usher-outfielder. “This has been the highlight of my whole career,” Asencio said.

Pitch Hitters—a stagehand, an electrician, the head of H.V.A.C.—trickled in and warmed up. Panayos noticed that their opponents’ red jerseys bore no numbers, a potential impediment to his meticulous scorekeeping. “When they don’t have numbers, I have to do a quick description—Bald Guy, Beard Guy, and so on,” he said. He turned his attention to his own lineup. “This is a rescheduled game, and our regular pitcher had concert tickets,” he said. An untested understudy would be tapped: Ryan Stofa, a twentysomething lighting programmer with a hedgelike beard and credits

including “Hamilton” and “Emojiland: The Musical.” “Does he know?” Panayos asked Asencio.

“Yeah, he knows,” Asencio said. He turned to Stofa, who was idling near the bench in gray cargo pants. “Stofa!” Asencio called. “You’re starting.”

“You got it,” Stofa said.

The Pitch Hitters, who wore white shirts with red three-quarter-length sleeves, huddled up. Nicholas Rinehart, a designated hitter from the opera’s education department, reminded his teammates that last year’s meeting between these teams had gotten testy. (Panayos: “There was a blown call, in our favor.”) “If anything happens on the field, Mike will handle it,” Rinehart said.

The bleachers beside the benches were nearly full and accordingly voluble. Passersby in athleisure parked strollers to check out the fuss. A gray-haired man in a checked shirt leaned his bike against the fence and marvelled, “This is major!”

Play commenced. The Pitch Hitters, led by a triple from the stagehand David Burgos-Henriquez, scored twice in the first inning. Stofa retired the first six batters he faced. Was he nervous about his mound début? “No,” he said, during an inning change. But he hoped his face suggested otherwise. He was playing to a particular audience. “It throws the other team off,” he said. “And the umpire might let me get away with some pitches.”

His teammates performed their parts with bravura. Cameron Daly, of the legal department, played a virtuosic third base. Mario Garcia, a member of the custodial department, belted a home run. By the final inning, the Pitch Hitters led 9–0. Asencio clenched both his fists and shouted, “Three more outs, guys! Three more outs!”

A few minutes and one too-late Metropolitans run later, the teams lined up to slap hands. The defeated were already talking revival. “See you in the playoffs,” one said. The two squads gathered for a group photo, then huddled separately. Panayos led rounds of applause for his principals and their audience. Asencio’s butterflies had been batted away. “I knew we had

it by the fifth inning,” he said. On the walk home, Panayos picked nits about his team’s tendency to hit pop-ups. “If we had the practice, I could straighten that out,” he said. His own performance had not been error-free: the home-plate camera, it turned out, was knocked askew before the opening pitch. Still, he had seen enough. ♦

*Dan Greene is a member of The New Yorker’s editorial staff.*

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**Sketchpad**

# “And Just Like That . . . ,” the Lost Season

*Plotlines we’ll never see: Carrie grapples with shoe tariffs, and Miranda moves into the sewers.*

***By Emily Flake***

*August 18, 2025*

LISA FINISHES HER DOC AND SPENDS THE REST OF THE SHOW STARING INTO THE MIDDLE DISTANCE


SEEMA AND SAMANTHA MEET, CAUSING THE COLLAPSE OF THE SPACE-TIME CONTINUUM

CHARLOTTE DEVELOPS A TASTE FOR UNUSUAL MEATS


MIRANDA JOINS THE C.H.U.D.S, MOVES TO THE SEWERS UNDER FOURTEENTH STREET


*Emily Flake, a New Yorker cartoonist, has published books including "Joke in a Box: How to Write and Draw Jokes."*

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# Reporting & Essays

- **The Family Fallout of DNA Surprises**
  By Jennifer Wilson | Through genetic testing, millions of Americans are estimated to have discovered that their parents aren’t who they thought. The news has upended relationships and created a community looking for answers.
- **The Otherworldly Ambitions of R. F. Kuang**
  By Hua Hsu | The author of “Babel” and “Yellowface” is drawn to stories of striving. Her new fantasy novel, “Katabasis,” asks if graduate school is a kind of hell.
- **Pam Bondi’s Power Play**
  By Ruth Marcus | Donald Trump now has the Attorney General he always wanted—an ally willing to harness the law to enable his agenda.
- **Bill Belichick Goes Back to School**
  By Paige Williams | Can the legendary former Patriots coach transform U.N.C. football?

**Annals of Inquiry**

# The Family Fallout of DNA Surprises

Through genetic testing, millions of Americans are estimated to have discovered that their parents aren’t who they thought. The news has upended relationships and created a community looking for answers.

**By Jennifer Wilson**

August 18, 2025

*Paternity has historically been tricky to pin down. “Mommy’s baby, daddy’s maybe,” as the saying goes. But now the milkman’s kid can buy a DNA test from Target.Illustration by Alexander Glandien*

Lily Wood is forty-three years old but considers April 9, 2019, to be her “rebirth day.” That was the date she received her results from Ancestry, the direct-to-consumer DNA-testing company. A self-described biohacker, Wood had been curious to see whether she had a genetic predisposition to diseases like Alzheimer’s. “I wanted to get ahead of things,” she told me.

It was actually her second time testing. The first time, Wood had used 23andMe, but the results had seemed off to her. “The ethnicity was wrong,” she said, before correcting herself. “I *thought* it was wrong.” Her heritage, as she’d always understood it, was French on her father’s side and Norwegian on her mother’s. And yet the 23andMe customers who had come up as genetically close matches had Italian names. Wood, who lives in Minneapolis, where she grew up, called her sister, who speculated that a strand of hair belonging to a lab technician had gotten into the vial. Her sister advised her to try Ancestry. When the new results came in, Wood learned that there was a man in the company’s database with whom she shared fourteen hundred centimorgans, a measure of genetic overlap that typically denotes a half sibling. But this man was a stranger to her—and the site said that he had Sicilian ancestry.

Wood drove to her mother’s house, a few miles away. When she arrived, her mother, Vicki, was sitting at the kitchen table with her husband, Wood’s stepfather. At the mention of the close match’s surname, Vicki’s face turned bright red. She replied that it was the name of her old boss at FedEx. Wood was nonplussed. “I was, like, ‘What are you saying right now? Are you . . . ? What?’ ” she recalled. Wood’s stepfather looked at his wife and said, “You never thought this was going to come back and bite you, did you?” Vicki then filled in a few details. She had gotten pregnant after sleeping with a higher-up on a business trip in Memphis while married to her first husband, Wood’s presumed father.

The next week was emotionally confusing for Wood. Money had been tight when she was growing up; the man she now calls her “birth-certificate father” had driven a cab, and she’d swept the floors at a local private school in exchange for tuition. Suddenly, here she was, Googling her biological father, a longtime executive at the shipping company, and finding pictures of what appeared to be him and his children riding horses at their ranch in Wyoming. She felt like her world was “shattering,” she told me, but no one around her registered the news that way. She remembered being asked, in the family group chat, what side dish she was bringing for Easter dinner. “We’re a sweep-it-under-the-rug sort of family,” she said. But, as Wood saw it, this wasn’t exactly her family anymore. She confronted her mother, telling her that she did not seem very remorseful. Her sister thought their

mother might interpret this as sex-shaming. Wood protested. “I don’t care who she slept with or if the marriage was closed, open, whatever,” she said. “This isn’t about sex. This is about the lie.”

Wood tracked down her biological father and introduced herself. His initial response was encouraging. He said that he remembered her mother. “We will help bring clarity to this,” he assured her, and told her he’d be in touch soon. A week later, she heard from him again, but the tone had shifted. By then, she had reached out to the man Ancestry had indicated was a half sibling. Her biological father chastised her. “His words were like ‘We don’t do shock and awe in my family’—as if I’m this, like, Jerry Springer–Maury Povich person.”

But Wood did ultimately get into the paternity-surprise media business. Six weeks after her rebirth day, she purchased a mike and, using her living room as a studio, launched a podcast devoted to interviews with people who, like her, had found out through commercial DNA testing that they had been misinformed about their biological parentage. Wood named her podcast “NPE Stories.” The term N.P.E. is often credited to a 2000 study conducted by a pair of geneticists at Oxford who examined whether male Britons with the last name Sykes could be traced to a single shared ancestor through their Y chromosomes. But they kept coming across men named Sykes who didn’t even share their father’s Y chromosome. They called these subjects, diplomatically, “non-paternity events.” In 2017, the acronym became a more entrenched online community when a woman named Catherine St Clair created a Facebook group, eventually called N.P.E. Fellowship, for people who had discovered misattributed parentage through commercial DNA tests. She rebranded N.P.E. to stand for the less technical “not parent expected,” and welcomed late-discovery adoptees (L.D.A.s) and donor-conceived persons (D.C.P.s) to join the family fray.

When Wood started her show, there was already a podcast of N.P.E. tell-alls called “CutOff Genes.” Soon came others: “Everything’s Relative,” “Family Twist,” “Sex, Lies & the Truth.” Before long, anyone with a Spotify account could listen to hundreds of hours of adults trying to make sense of their parents’ sex lives. (Episodes about people who found out that their parents had been swingers in the seventies practically formed their

own subgenre.) A man named Jonathon told the hosts of “Sex, Lies & the Truth” that, after being contacted by a daughter he never knew he had, he was upset with her mother at first, but then he reflected that thirty years earlier he had been a “weed-smoking hippie” while she had also been involved with a man training to be an engineer. “In that race, I was Seabiscuit,” he said. Not all episodes are so convivial. Many N.P.E.s look back on their childhoods and—cataloguing every slight, every time they felt different—wonder, Was *that* why?

Paternity has historically been tricky to pin down. “Mommy’s baby, daddy’s maybe,” as the saying goes. But now the milkman’s kid can buy a DNA test from Target. (Occasionally, people learn that their mother used an egg donor, but paternity surprises are more common.) Since the first commercial DNA test débuted, in 2000, the market has exploded. A 2025 YouGov poll found that one in five Americans has taken a direct-to-consumer DNA test. A few years ago, a research team at Baylor College of Medicine surveyed more than twenty-three thousand customers of these kits and learned that three per cent of them had discovered that a person whom they’d believed to be their biological parent wasn’t. (That number is in line with a 2005 study from a university in Liverpool which found a 3.7-per-cent median rate of misattributed paternity in the general population.) If the ratio holds, that means around two million Americans who have taken one of these tests are N.P.E.s.

A cottage industry has sprung up to service them. There are therapists who specialize in treating N.P.E.s, and “DNA detectives” who can track down relatives who haven’t taken tests by triangulating the results of those who have. There are coaches who guide parents in breaking the news about their child’s origins. Brianne Kirkpatrick Williams, of Watershed DNA, is a genetic counsellor who advertises on her website that she spent years delivering bad news to expectant parents, which makes her uniquely qualified to aid clients who want to inform their grown children that they were donor-conceived, say, or to let their spouses know that they were “contacted by a previously unknown biological child.” She charges eight hundred and ninety-nine dollars for a four-session “Prepare to Share” package.

I became interested in doing a story on N.P.E.s after a friend's ex-boyfriend found out in his thirties that he was one. Hunter (not his real name) was a state-level politician who ran a campaign on his working-class roots, only to find out that his mother had had an affair with a well-off scientist. Hunter had known his biological father his whole life as a family friend; sometimes this man dropped off hand-me-downs that his sons—Hunter's half brothers—had outgrown. Hunter told me that he had joined Facebook groups devoted to N.P.E.s but promptly left them. "It was too much," he said.

It turns out that anger at your mother and a hobbyist's understanding of genetics is a potent, and potentially politicized, combination. Some factions are trying to transform N.P.E.s from an identity group into an interest one. A guest on Wood's podcast, for example, an N.P.E. named Richard, who is a clinician by profession, argued that people could be entitled to sue their mother for keeping the identity of their father secret, on the grounds of "parental alienation." *Severance*, a magazine that covers N.P.E.s, was launched in 2019 by a Pennsylvanian writer named B. K. Jackson; it takes its name from a belief that N.P.E.s have been "severed" from their biological families. Alongside extramarital affairs, the magazine lists "adoption, kidnapping, undisclosed step-parent adoption, paternity fraud, donor-assisted conception" and "nonconsensual sex" as causes of severance. Such rhetoric, which places gamete donation next to criminal acts, has alarmed many in the L.G.B.T.Q. community, as has the legal-advocacy work of a Seattle-based organization founded by an N.P.E. called Right to Know. The group wants to mandate the inclusion of donor and surrogate names on birth certificates, which currently reflect legal, not genetic, parentage. Some in the L.G.B.T.Q. community fear that this will, by default, force them to report more information than opposite-sex couples are required to. In making its case, Right to Know can at times rely on nascent, controversial theories within the world of genomics, which many scientists caution overstate the impact of genes on our health and personalities.

In myth, if a hero wants to achieve greatness—to slay a multiheaded Hydra, to part the Red Sea, to bring balance to the Force—he is almost required to have a dramatic paternity reveal. But now millions of mere mortals are having to contend with the same epic dilemmas: What's the appropriate

amount of anger over an extramarital affair? Will our roots always tug at us, even if we don't know they're ours? Who or what, exactly, determines our destiny?

In 1999, the producers of "Maury" came to their host, Maury Povich, with an idea to boost ratings. "These soap operas—they take six months to reveal someone's secret father," Povich remembered them saying. "We can do that in fifteen minutes, on air." The show became known for its flamboyant paternity-test reveals, and for men, suddenly off the hook for child support, doing celebratory dances. Povich told me, "People come up to me all the time on the street. They like to grab their pregnant wife and get me to say, 'You *are* the father.' " His show was controversial; scholars have accused it of reinforcing stereotypes about Black women's promiscuity, but nonetheless it became a cultural touchstone. In a 2015 "Saturday Night Live" "Weekend Update" segment about Black History Month, Michael Che joked about Povich: "He set more Black men free than Abraham Lincoln." Povich's show was also an unlikely educational resource. In the nineties, DNA was the stuff of science fiction—I first heard about it in "Jurassic Park"—but here it was something real, with real-life consequences.

The scholar Nara B. Milanich, in her book "Paternity: The Elusive Quest for the Father," observes that, in the past, "biological paternity was considered an ineffable enigma of nature, not just unknown but indeed unknowable." For much of the twentieth century, the closest thing to a paternity test was the ABO blood-type test, invented in 1924 by a German doctor named Fritz Schiff. But that test could only exclude a possible father, not positively identify one. Then, in 1984, a British geneticist named Alec Jeffreys discovered DNA fingerprinting, which allowed scientists to take a sample of hair, skin, or saliva and single out a sequence of nucleotides specific to one person. But such testing was intended for professionals in a lab. That all changed when a retired business owner in Texas had some extra time on his hands.

People had always asked Bennett Greenspan whether he was related to the economist Alan Greenspan. "I had no answer," he said. He had never met Alan Greenspan and had never heard that he was a distant relation. Most of

us in his position would simply have replied no, but Greenspan, now seventy-three, had been fascinated by genealogy since he was a child. He once brought an empty chart to a shiva, where he mined his elderly Eastern European relatives for intel. He always felt that there were “paper-trail roadblocks” stopping him from getting a full picture of his family tree.

In 1997, Greenspan read an article in the *Times* about a group of geneticists who had tested the Y chromosomes of Jewish men who believed themselves to be part of an ancient priestly tradition called the *cohanim*. He called Michael Hammer, one of the researchers quoted in the story, who ran a lab at the University of Arizona, and asked to buy a DNA test; Greenspan figured that, if science could try to trace Jewish men alive today to Aaron and Mt. Sinai, there might be hope for his family tree. Hammer told him that his DNA tests were for anthropological purposes only. Greenspan countered with a technique he had learned from sales, which was to let an awkward silence emerge. Hammer fell for it, interjecting, “Someone should start a company for this, because I get calls from crazy genealogists like you all the time.” Hammer and the University of Arizona agreed to let Greenspan run direct-to-consumer tests out of their lab for a fee, and, in 2000, FamilyTreeDNA, the first home DNA-testing kit, was born. Greenspan remembered getting calls from confused customers: “These brothers called and they go, ‘We think your test is wrong—we two match, but our little brother doesn’t.’ I said, ‘Come *on*.’ ”

In 2006, a new kind of DNA test came on the market. Co-founded by Anne Wojcicki, a biotech analyst, 23andMe used autosomal DNA, which could better trace recent relatives on both the patrilineal and the matrilineal lines. Wojcicki envisioned 23andMe as a health-care startup: your saliva could reveal your odds of getting early-onset dementia, or determine if your earwax was sticky because of a C variant in the ABCC11 gene. In 2008, 23andMe hosted a celebrity spit party at New York Fashion Week. Wojcicki told a reporter from the *Times* that Barry Diller was unable to roll his tongue whereas his fellow-guest Anderson Cooper could make a four-leaf clover with his.

Another DNA-testing company also decided to start leveraging the power of celebrity. Back in 2003, Rick Kittles, then a geneticist at Howard

University, co-founded African Ancestry, a direct-to-consumer DNA test marketed to African Americans. He began contacting high-profile Black figures and offering to test them. The Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr., recalled hearing from Kittles. “I get a letter saying, ‘Dear Dr. Gates, have you seen “Roots”?’ ” Gates told me. “And I was thinking, What kind of idiot does this guy think I am? Everybody’s seen ‘Roots.’ ” Kittles thought that someone else had connected him to Gates, and doesn’t remember the letter, but, in any case, the men teamed up, and Gates hosted two seasons of a PBS show called “African American Lives,” DNA-testing famous Black people such as Oprah Winfrey, Quincy Jones, and Maya Angelou. In 2012, the premise was expanded to include all backgrounds, and the show became “Finding Your Roots.”

The first time Gates got an N.P.E. case, he told me, was ahead of an episode featuring LL Cool J. The genetic genealogist he works with on the show, CeCe Moore, called Gates to tell him she had discovered that the rapper’s mother was adopted. “I almost dropped the telephone, because this was not in my playbook,” Gates remarked. “I was just trying to get Black people their Kunta Kinte moment.” Then, just as the actress Kerry Washington was considering appearing on the show, her parents called Gates. According to Washington’s memoir, “Thicker Than Water,” her mother asked him, “If Kerry had been conceived in a way that was not biologically related to her father, would that kind of thing come up in a DNA test?” It turned out that they had used a sperm donor to conceive her.

The involvement of Gates, a prominent Black professor, quieted some concerns about the use of DNA to determine heritage. The field of genetics, after all, has an ugly history. The Nazis used paternity testing to look for “Jews hidden in Aryan genealogies,” as Nara B. Milanich writes. But now it was not only socially acceptable to take a DNA test; it was sometimes pitched as a form of racial justice. Kittles told me that the actor Isaiah Washington had founded a hospital in Sierra Leone after his African Ancestry test revealed roots there. I myself was given a test as thanks for speaking to a group of minority students about graduate school. “We don’t have an honorarium, but we have an Ancestry DNA test for you,” the vice-provost joked, handing me a small box. I’ve never been drawn to the idea of doing one personally, but something Gates said made me understand the

seductions of DNA, particularly for people who've been deprived of some part of their family story. "Our ancestors are dead in one sense, but they're very alive in the shaping of your very identity, your phenotype, the color of your hair, the color of your eyes, medical traits," Gates told me. "It's a kind of immortality that we didn't learn about in church."

Earlier this summer, I rang the bell of a brownstone on the Upper West Side; I was there to meet Michele Grethel, a psychotherapist, at her private office. Among the specialties listed on her website is "identity exploration (e.g., LGBQIA, trans/gender-non binary, and unexpected DNA discoveries)." To try to understand that range, I asked Grethel what the subject of her dissertation had been. She told me that she had written about gender dysphoria in eighteen- to twenty-five-year-olds who were assigned female at birth and were in the process of transitioning. She wanted to help people, she said, "who were coming into a more authentic sense of themselves."

Now Grethel leads a team of researchers who have surveyed hundreds of N.P.E.s about their experiences. As she sees it, they, too, are stepping into their true identity. She has observed that the N.P.E.s who tend to take the news hardest are the ones who had a difficult parental relationship. That was true of the "Prozac Nation" author Elizabeth Wurtzel, who, at the age of fifty, learned that her biological father was the photographer Bob Adelman, not her mother's husband, Donald Wurtzel, with whom she had a complicated dynamic. "I have been working out that relationship all of my life, in writing and therapy and conversation, with cocaine and heroin," she wrote in an essay for *The Cut*. "I have perfected a two-handed backhand to clobber the lob that is coming at me that is: the wrong problem. I have aced the wrong problem."

Sigmund Freud, in "Family Romances," writes that all of us, once we realize as children the uncertainty of paternity, begin fantasizing about alternative fathers. (In my fantasy, my father owned a gumball-machine empire, and I was an heiress with bad teeth.) But Grethel pointed out that the desire for a perfect do-over with a new parent can lead to profound disappointment. In 2012, the Canadian actress and director Sarah Polley learned that her biological father was the film producer Harry Gulkin, a

discovery she documented in the film “Stories We Tell.” “There was this honeymoon period,” Polley told me, of the year after she reconnected with Gulkin. “It was exciting—like, Wow, what a twist—but then it became quite tumultuous.”


*“God works in mysterious ways.”*
*Cartoon by Sam Gross*

Michael Slepian, a psychologist at Columbia University, researches the toll of keeping secrets. For his book, “The Secret Life of Secrets: How Our Inner Worlds Shape Well-Being, Relationships, and Who We Are,” Slepian asked research participants—half of whom were told to imagine themselves as having a “small” secret, the other half a big one—to estimate the height of a grassy hill. The latter group thought that the incline was sharper than the former did. Slepian deduced that people who say they feel “weighed down” by a secret do, in fact, feel burdened in other parts of their lives as well. The night after Slepian first presented his findings at Columbia, he got a frantic call from his father. He and his mother had realized that they, like his subjects, had been suffering under the weight of a secret. Slepian had been conceived through a sperm donor, his father confessed over the phone. “Many people assume it was the other way around,” Slepian told me, “that I research secrets because my family had been keeping one. But no—my research helped them unburden themselves.”

Slepian also studies the moral calculus of divulging a secret, like, for example, when and whether to reveal to a partner that you were unfaithful. He thinks that, in the context of N.P.E.s, technology has altered the question

of disclosure: “I know folks who wished they’d learned this from their parents rather than a website.”

The treatment of N.P.E.s is a growth market within the therapy sector, giving rise to N.P.E.-trauma-recovery coaches and identity-reinvention facilitators. Some interventions can seem more improvised than others. Lily Wood mentioned that she had been using eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (E.M.D.R.) to help her reckon with her discovery. This method typically involves having patients focus on a specific traumatic event; I asked Wood whether hers was the day she got the results. No, she said. Her therapist had her doing “point of conception” E.M.D.R.: “She’s, like, ‘I don’t do this very often, but we’re going to go back to the moment you were in utero. . . . Babies feel everything, even as a fetus.’ ” Wood was a little dubious herself. “I’m only on the third trimester, so I don’t know if it’s working yet,” she said.

Alexis Hourselt grew up in Tucson, Arizona, as the daughter of a Mexican American father and a white mother. Hourselt never felt a connection with her Mexican heritage, though. “I wanted to, being in the Southwest,” she told me. Rather, she was drawn to Issa Rae’s “Insecure” and the later, more politically inflected music of Beyoncé. “I loved ‘Formation,’ but I always thought, This isn’t *for* me.”

At some point, Hourselt added an Ancestry test to her Amazon wish list, which her family members all follow. She hoped that the test would uncover more about her Indigenous roots, and help her feel more connected to her father’s side. “Nobody ever bought it for me—which now makes sense,” she reflected. She purchased one for herself when it went on sale for Prime Day.

One afternoon, while waiting for the results, Hourselt was folding laundry and suddenly had an intrusive thought. “I was, like, Wouldn’t that be crazy if your dad wasn’t your dad? And then I was quickly, like, Stop it. You’re so ridiculous.” But, when the e-mail came and she clicked on her DNA map, the thought returned. Her DNA did not cluster with that of anyone in Mexico. Lit up instead was the western coast of Africa—countries like Nigeria, Mali, and Cameroon—and the African American population of

North Carolina. “I called my mom, and she acted surprised but in a way that very much let me know that she was not surprised,” Hourselt told me.

Hourselt, who, since 2022, has hosted the podcast “DNA Surprises,” invited me to Tucson for dinner with her family: her husband and kids; her sister Amanda; and her parents, meaning her mother, Carole, and Jaime, the father who raised her. A week before I was scheduled to come, Hourselt told me that Jaime had a conflict and wouldn’t be joining us. I didn’t probe. When I arrived, I was greeted by Hourselt, in a colorful Ankara-print baby-doll dress, and the smell of sautéed onions; her husband, Josh, was preparing fajitas. Her mother sat on the living-room couch in a gray sweatshirt, holding a pink Stanley cup. She looked uncomfortable.

We sat down for dinner, and together they took me back to July 22, 2021, Hourselt’s rebirth day. After the phone call, Carole and Jaime went over to their daughter’s house. Carole couldn’t stop crying, so Jaime did all the talking. “He said, ‘I met you when you were two months old,’ ” Hourselt recalled. She was taken aback. “I thought, Maybe Mom had an affair or something. It didn’t register to me as a possibility that he would be in on it.” The couple had been stationed together in the military, in Spain. Carole, then a new mother, told Jaime that her baby’s biological father was her Puerto Rican ex-boyfriend; the end of their relationship, she said, had been rocky. But that didn’t make sense to Hourselt. Her Ancestry matches had uncovered that her biological father was very likely an African American man. Carole swore that she didn’t remember the encounter, but the revelation then created problems in her marriage. “Jaime said, ‘I didn’t realize I’d married a floozy,’ ” she recalled. “And that’s the nice term for what he said.”

Hourselt barely spoke to her parents for a year. In that time, her biological father, Cliff, who is Black, reached out, asking to meet. Hourselt flew to Montgomery, Alabama, where he lives. On the flight there, she listened to Beyoncé’s “Black Parade,” a song now for her. “I was, like, This is me, ‘I’m going back to the South / Where my roots ain’t watered down.’ ” Cliff met her at the airport. They hugged for a long time. (“It was the best hug I ever had,” Cliff told me.) He took her to see the Equal Justice Initiative’s Legacy Museum and memorial to the victims of lynching.

Hourselt said that meeting her biological father caused certain things to click into place, like why she was the one in her family who always made the dinner reservations; Cliff also took a leading role in planning family functions, she observed. She accompanied him to one of them, a family reunion in North Carolina. There, however, biology began to reveal its limits. Hourselt, not having grown up in the Black church, felt lost. For the talent show, someone did a dramatic reading of Bible verses. “It was the ‘he who throws the first stone’ one,” she told me, trying to recall the exact words. I could hear my aunt’s voice in my head going, “Sister doesn’t know her Scripture.” It’s Jesus speaking in the Gospel of John, refusing to condemn an adulteress.

In “Mamma Mia!,” a daughter’s quest to find the truth about her paternity becomes an opportunity to revisit the exciting sexual escapades that filled her mother’s youth. In one of my favorite films, “Stealing Beauty,” the nineteen-year-old Liv Tyler—who learned late in childhood that her father was Aerosmith’s Steven Tyler—plays a young woman who travels to Italy on a hunch that her mother had a secret lover there; it, too, is a paternity quest that doubles as a sensuous study of a mother’s glory days. In real life, the N.P.E. community tends to take a less forgiving view of mothers with complicated pasts.

Catherine St Clair created her Facebook group after finding out from an Ancestry customer-service rep via a chat box that her brother was actually her half brother. N.P.E.s needed better support, St Clair felt. But, when she tried to create a separate group for the mothers of N.P.E.s, the backlash was ferocious. “There was a lot of animosity toward mothers,” she told me. “I said, ‘Wait a minute. They are victims of their circumstances and the social pressures that they went through.’ I’m not saying they made the right choices, but they did the best they could with what they had.”

There are undoubtedly cases of mothers and fathers not navigating these situations well, but it’s largely the mothers of N.P.E.s who have been pathologized. In an article for *Psychology Today*, a psychotherapist and N.P.E. named Jodi Klugman-Rabb argued, “Now that commercial DNA tests are revealing long-held family secrets, a new category of narcissism is emerging: motherly narcissism.”

Some of the language around mothers can make N.P.E. spaces sound eerily similar to those of fathers'-rights associations. These groups represent men as unsuspecting victims of women, and of feminism more generally, and regularly exaggerate the rate of misattributed paternity as thirty per cent. Some fathers'-rights groups have even called for mandatory paternity tests at birth. I asked Kara Rubinstein Deyerin, the founder of Right to Know, what she thought of that proposal: "What I say is, Kara believes every child should be paternity-tested when they're born, but Right to Know would never advocate for that, because that's a step too far, I think, for a lot of people."

Rubinstein Deyerin has shoulder-length salt-and-pepper hair. When we spoke, over Zoom, she was wearing a necklace with a Star of David. She began identifying as Jewish only three years ago. She was raised in Seattle as the daughter of a white mother and an African American father. As she grew up, Rubinstein Deyerin, like many Black Americans, became curious about her African origins, a history lost in the slave trade. "I said, 'Dad, let's take one of those tests.' " But, when she opened her DNA pie chart, her sample didn't cluster with any part of the African continent. Instead, a large portion was labelled "Ashkenazi." "I had never heard of it," Rubinstein Deyerin told me. She called her mother: "She said, 'But I don't know anyone Jewish.' I was, like, 'Well, you knew at least one.' "

Her mother had been sitting at the bar of an upscale restaurant in Seattle when Sam Rubinstein, a wealthy philanthropist from the area, approached her, Rubinstein Deyerin alleges. Her mother was eighteen; he was in his fifties. She got pregnant, and they never saw each other again. The man who Rubinstein Deyerin had believed was her father was working class, and so the news left her ruminating on the life she might have had. She took Rubinstein's name, and is determined to get the laws changed so that she can add it to her birth certificate.

Last summer, Rubinstein Deyerin travelled to the National Conference of State Legislatures, an annual gathering of state politicians, holding a mockup of what she calls an "expanded birth certificate." She e-mailed me a copy of it. At the top, there were lines for genetic parents, then legal parents, and then, if applicable, the surrogate. When I asked about the latter,

Rubinstein Deyerin began talking about epigenetics, a subfield of genetics that looks at how an individual's environment shapes gene expression: "How does that surrogate impact that baby? We don't know yet, but future generations should have access to that information." A geneticist I corresponded with cautioned me that this science is likewise "in its infancy."

Rubinstein Deyerin has a habit of dispersing scientifically disputed information, which emphasizes genetic determinism, to her followers. The Right to Know website offers a webinar with Robert Plomin, a behavioral geneticist known for making big claims about how much of our personalities and educational achievements are influenced by DNA. In his book "Blueprint: How DNA Makes Us Who We Are," for example, he writes that "the major systematic factor affecting divorce is genetics." Rubinstein Deyerin holds a biennial Untangling Our Roots conference in cities around the country, which always includes a panel on siblings discovering one another as adults and feeling "genetic sexual attraction," a theory—coined in the nineteen-eighties by a psychologist named Barbara Gonyo, who claimed to have fallen in love with her son years after giving him up for adoption—that has been criticized as providing intellectual cover for incest.

Rubinstein Deyerin, who has a law degree from George Washington University, established Right to Know to push through legislation that would make access to one's genetic information a legal right. She told me that the group had lobbied a state senator in Iowa named Annette Sweeney to pass the state's first-ever fertility-fraud law. "Sweeney does animal husbandry, and she was, like, 'Oh, my gosh, if I got the wrong specimen for my animal, it would be horrific,' " Rubinstein Deyerin said. Among the organization's platforms are calls for a national retroactive ban on anonymous gamete donation. Similar laws have recently been passed in individual states: a 2022 law in Colorado outlawed anonymous gamete donation; Oregon passed comparable legislation earlier this year. Rubinstein Deyerin told me that Right to Know hadn't worked on the Oregon bill but had previously sent material to lawmakers there. "It's about education in these spaces," she said.

Many L.G.B.T.Q.- and reproductive-rights activists are concerned by Right to Know's lobbying efforts, which have also included trying to create a national registry of sperm donors and recipients. "This just sounds like a list of lesbians and single women," Douglas NeJaime, a professor of legal ethics and family law at Yale, told me. (Because of advances in sperm freezing and reproductive technology, heterosexual couples are often less reliant on donor sperm than they were two decades ago. According to one study, roughly seventy-five per cent of couples who now use donor sperm are same-sex couples and single women.) NeJaime isn't against banning donor anonymity, but he stressed that it has to be accompanied by protections for L.G.B.T.Q. families, particularly in cases where the partners are not married and thus do not benefit from the marital presumption of parentage. Polly Crozier, the director of family advocacy at *GLAD* Law, also voiced apprehension about "this drumbeat of regulating gametes and fertility fraud and changing birth certificates, because, to me, the through line there is that biology is preëminent, that it's the only thing that matters." Similarly, the demands in the N.P.E. community for complete access to one's family medical history seem to overemphasize genetics in shaping health outcomes, discounting socioeconomics and other factors beyond our control.

There's also the fear that some N.P.E. voices are inadvertently playing into larger forces. Project 2025, the controversial manifesto for American conservative leadership, spearheaded by the Heritage Foundation, makes a pointed reference to "biological" parentage. One passage reads, "In the context of current and emerging reproductive technologies, HHS policies should never place the desires of adults over the right of children to be raised by the biological fathers and mothers who conceive them." The language echoes that of Them Before Us, a right-wing lobbying group whose site includes inflammatory stats about the dangers of children living with people to whom they're not biologically related and donor-conceived children's "profound struggles with their origins and identities."

NeJaime observed that the privileging of biological relatedness is arguably how donor-conceived N.P.E.s ended up in their position in the first place. "Why don't men who used a sperm donor tell their children?" he asked. "Because there's some expectation that real men are biological fathers of

their children, and there's some shame in not being the biological father." Rubinstein Deyerin is aware of these critiques, but is firm in her conviction that there should be a legal remedy for what happened to her, and others like her.

In many European countries, direct-to-consumer DNA testing is effectively banned; in France, taking such a test is punishable by up to one year in prison. These tests are disruptive, it is argued. But many N.P.E.s insist it's the secrets, not their unveiling, that throw families into chaos. Either way, I don't think most of them signed up for all of this when they purchased their DNA kits online. The ones I spoke to couldn't get the kind of recognition they wanted from the outside world. *Your father will always be your father*, people keep reassuring them. And so N.P.E.s have one another, a chosen family, as messy as any other kind.

Hourselt regularly attends the Right to Know conference and supports the organization's proposed birth-certificate reforms. She has been trying to get Cliff's name on her birth certificate, though she still considers Jaime to be her dad. Hourselt told me that, when Jaime saw her getting closer with her biological father, he said, "I just don't want you crying on anyone else's shoulder." ♦

*Jennifer Wilson is a staff writer at The New Yorker covering books and culture. In 2024, she received a Robert B. Silvers Prize for Literary Criticism.*

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**Onward and Upward with the Arts**

# The Otherworldly Ambitions of R. F. Kuang

The author of “Babel” and “Yellowface” is drawn to stories of striving. Her new fantasy novel, “Katabasis,” asks if graduate school is a kind of hell.

**By Hua Hsu**

August 18, 2025

*“I really like mastering the rules of something and then seeing if I can crack it and get really good at it,” Kuang, a Ph.D. student and a former debate champion, said.Photograph by Tony Luong for The New Yorker*

Rebecca F. Kuang finished her second year of college with little sense of what she wanted to do with her life. In the fall of 2015, she took a leave from Georgetown, where she was studying international economics, and got a job in Beijing as a debate instructor. In her spare time, she took coding

classes online. “I really like mastering the rules of something and then seeing if I can crack it and get really good at it,” she told me. One day, while on a coding website, she came across an ad for Scrivener, a popular word-processing application. Though she had dabbled in fan fiction, she had little experience as a writer. But Scrivener seemed so easy to use that she downloaded it and began writing a fantasy story. Kuang didn’t know much about structuring a story, so she searched Google for how-to books about plotting, world-building, and character development. Each time she finished a chapter, she e-mailed it to her father in Texas, where she’d grown up. He was an ideal reader, offering nothing but praise and a desire for more. When she sent him the final chapter, he asked, “What are you going to do now?” She consulted Google again and, about seven months after she’d begun writing, found an agent.

“The Poppy War,” which was published in 2018, as Kuang was preparing to graduate from college, tells the story of Fang Runin, or Rin, a young orphan from a poor region of the Nikan lands—a thinly veiled China—who distinguishes herself among the privileged students at an élite military school. (Kuang has described Rin as a reimagination of Mao Zedong as a teen-age girl.) Rin possesses shamanic powers that can call forth a vengeful god, but victory on the battlefield doesn’t result in the harmony she had hoped for. She’s brave but not all that reliable—another character calls her an “opium-riddled sack of shit.” “The Poppy War” mixes elements of Kuang’s family history with fictionalizations of the Nanjing Massacre and the Battle of Shanghai. But it’s also about democracy, nationalism, and the fallibility of popular will. The story, which continued in two subsequent books, is filled with big, messy teen-age emotions—from the longing for heroism to the insecurity of trying to measure up to your rivals—that have inspired readers to debate their favorite characters and write their own fan fiction.

Kuang, who publishes under the name R. F. Kuang, has worked in an unpredictable range of styles and genres during the past ten years. In 2021, the “Poppy War” series was a finalist for a Hugo Award, which recognizes the best science-fiction and fantasy books. In 2022, Kuang published “Babel: Or the Necessity of Violence: An Arcane History of the Oxford Translators’ Revolution,” a playfully erudite work of speculative fiction, set

in the eighteen-thirties, about the history of academia, the politics of translation, and the long arc of colonialism. She began working on it while she was a Marshall Scholar, in the midst of completing a master's degree in contemporary Chinese studies at Oxford. "Babel" won the Nebula Award for best novel and was a *Times* best-seller. In 2023, she returned with "Yellowface," a gossipy work of literary fiction about a white author navigating a cynical, identity-obsessed publishing industry in the era of Twitter beefs and social-media cancellations. It, too, was a best-seller. This month, Kuang will publish her sixth novel, "Katabasis," and, while I was reporting this piece, she finished the first draft of another one, tentatively titled "Taipei Story."

Kuang, who recently turned twenty-nine, has also been pursuing a Ph.D. in East Asian languages and literatures at Yale, where she's writing a dissertation on cultural capital and Asian diasporic writing. In April, I went to visit her, in New Haven, to talk about "Katabasis." I'd never been so curious about another writer's routines, habits, and time-management skills.

We met at Atticus, a popular campus bookstore and coffee shop. Kuang lives in the Boston area with her husband, Bennett Eckert-Kuang, a Ph.D. student in philosophy at M.I.T. During the spring, she spent a few days a week in New Haven, teaching a writing course for undergraduates and meeting with her advisers and students.

"I think I completely reinvent myself every few years," Kuang told me. "I have different interests and different expressions and different priorities." She speaks with a gentle, almost dazed curiosity, and poses ideas in terms of premises and theories, brightening whenever she has settled on a phrasing she likes. Her careful, coolly composed thoughts belie a mind that seeks constant stimulation. Looking back on the "Poppy War" trilogy or "Yellowface," she explained, was like returning to "a version of myself that doesn't exist," and she discussed the choices she'd made in those books with a fond, if wary, distance.

The current version of Kuang might be described as a tabula-rasa novice, a highly accomplished author who would prefer to be an eager disciple. "I think there is no attraction, for me, to being the most competent or well-

read person in the room, because then there's nowhere to go," she told me. "I find starting at zero, that epistemic humility—I find that very useful."

Kuang is one of the most relaxed graduate students I've ever met, and I got the impression that this wasn't only because of her relative financial security. Most people pursuing a Ph.D. feel panicked that they will never read enough. Kuang sees possibility instead, as though academia is meant to be constantly humbling. "I hate having my own mind for company," she said. "I really love when someone else is the expert."

At the next table, undergraduates chatted at a distracting volume about Marxist theory, and, as they tried to outdo one another, I was reminded of the anxieties that drive "Katabasis." Like "Babel," Kuang's new book can be classified in the genre of "dark academia," a brooding, post-Hogwarts take on the campus novel which fetishizes Gothic architecture, houndstooth blazers, and dusty tomes. Even within these conventions, "Katabasis" has an extremely specific premise. It revolves around Alice Law and Peter Murdoch, two graduate students who venture to Hell to rescue their adviser Professor Grimes, who has recently died. He was a cruel mentor, yet they fear that they will never succeed on the job market without securing a letter of recommendation from him. The only way to make it to Hell without dying, though, is to master a series of logical paradoxes, and the rules governing this fictional underworld rely on both magic and a faint grasp of Plato and Aristotle.

"Katabasis" is an effective satire of academic life. But there are very basic questions that Alice, a brilliant thinker and a rabidly box-ticking student, faces—and they feel like some that Kuang is contemplating herself. "What burns inside you? What fuels your every action? What gives you a reason to get up in the morning?" When Alice's adviser asks these questions, she doesn't have any good answers.

Growing up outside of Dallas, Kuang was self-conscious about the way she spoke. "I just would not put air through my vocal cords," she said. "I think I was just really, really scared."

Kuang's parents, Eric and Janette, are from China, but they met in Orange County in 1989, when Eric was a graduate student at the University of

California, Irvine. The couple returned to China in 1994, after Eric completed his Ph.D. Their first child, James, was born in Guangdong in 1995, and Rebecca was born the following year. “I struggled with my identity when I moved back,” Eric told me. “After five years in the U.S., after Tiananmen Square, I couldn’t find my place in China anymore.” In 2000, a year after Rebecca’s younger sister, Grace, was born, the Kuangs moved back to the U.S.

Kuang was a quiet and studious child. One day, in middle school, she went to a meeting with the debate team from a local high school, which was recruiting future competitors. “We are champions,” Kuang recalled the coach saying to her class. The coach told them that he could spot the “winning mind-set” in students; Kuang felt that he was looking right at her. She was instantly entranced. She began competing in Lincoln-Douglas debate, a one-on-one style that focusses on the ethical implications of real-world issues, and her difficulties with speaking quickly disappeared. Debate suited her personality at the time: awkward, analytical, dutiful.

The Dallas area was a hotbed of competitive debate, and, at first, the oratorical polish of Kuang’s teammates was intimidating. She spent months being coached on the art of the syllogism, a kind of logical argument in which one deduces a conclusion from a set of premises. “The idea that you could take something that seemed up to personal charisma or rhetorical choice and map it to this very rigid, argumentative structure was mind-blowing,” she said. At the highest levels, debate is a combination of politics and philosophy, and skilled debaters must master analytical reasoning and the ability to speak as fast as possible.

*“I know you’re my family, but I don’t find these visits comforting.”*
*Cartoon by Tom Toro*

Kuang quickly distinguished herself, attending summer camps where top young debaters from around the country trained. After her first year of high school, she transferred to Greenhill School, a private academy outside Dallas which is a debate powerhouse. She routinely skipped class to research debate topics, a process that opened her eyes to issues like systemic racism and mass incarceration. The cloistered intensity of debate also came to define her social world. It was a period of “sustained obsession.” On her bedroom wall, she tacked up a group photograph from debate camp, and would look at it while thinking about everyone’s strengths and weaknesses. These were her greatest rivals, and her closest friends.

I watched a YouTube video of Kuang at a debate tournament as a senior in high school. In such spaces, calm is the ultimate measure of swagger. “The term was ‘perceptual dominance,’ ” she told me. Her opponent was a noisy avalanche of language, but Kuang appeared cool and nonchalant. Having debated when I was in high school—though not at this level—I felt nervous as Kuang slowly rose to conduct her cross-examination. She was ruthless and precise, and she won the round by a unanimous decision. By most metrics, she was one of the most successful high-school debaters of that year.

Eckert-Kuang recalled meeting her around this time, in the Greenhill debate office, when he was a freshman and she was a senior. “Wow, this is so intimidating,” he remembers thinking. “She is the best debater in the country, and I am shorter than her.”

At Georgetown, Kuang intended to continue with debate before going to work in the Foreign Service. But she quickly realized that she no longer felt the same competitive drive. “I’d just had enough of winning,” she said. She recalled feeling depressed, having lost “the entire value system” that had structured her life. “There was this big question mark of ‘What on earth am I good for?’ ” she said.

Spending a year in China offered a way to deal with this question. Like many immigrants, Kuang had maintained a largely conceptual relationship

to her native country as a child, slowly losing her grasp of Mandarin. (She regained it in college and can now read novels in Chinese.) Her parents wanted their children to appreciate their heritage, but they didn't talk much about the family's experiences during the nation's twentieth-century tumult. When her father visited, he brought her to his ancestral village in Hunan, the site of a Japanese invasion during the Second Sino-Japanese War, and showed her bullet holes left in clay walls by Japanese soldiers. "I wasn't learning it as national history," she told me. "I was learning it as family history."

Now, after years of absorbing theories about diaspora and identity, Kuang jokes that she would no longer refer to her time in China as some kind of earnest "homecoming." But hearing about what her family lived through during the Second World War and the Cultural Revolution for the first time was transformative—Chinese history struck her as the stuff of epic storytelling. She didn't initially explain the inspiration behind the "Poppy War" chapters she sent to her father. "When I started to see all the family history," he said, "I was very proud."

Kuang was preparing to return to Georgetown when her agent told her that Harper Voyager was interested in "The Poppy War." She was nineteen. Writing had filled the void left by debate, but it lacked the meanness of competition. "I still have an edge, and I'm fiercely driven," she said. "You know, it's part insecurity, part superiority. But it's not directed at other people. It's fully inward." She and Eckert-Kuang (who was no longer shorter than her) soon began dating. "She chilled out a lot during that year in Beijing," he told me. He accompanied her to get a tattoo on her wrist to commemorate the book deal. "Show me the glint of light on broken glass," the tattoo reads, a quote often attributed to Chekhov. "A really fancy way of saying 'Show, don't tell,' " Kuang said.

Shortly before "The Poppy War" was published, Kuang met the renowned speculative fiction writer Ken Liu at a science-fiction and fantasy convention. Liu's 2011 short story "The Paper Menagerie" was the first story to sweep the Nebula, Hugo, and World Fantasy awards, and he translated Cixin Liu's "The Three-Body Problem" from Chinese to English. Ken Liu and Kuang talked about the challenges of drawing on Chinese

folklore for speculative fiction. “It was obvious that she had thought about what she was doing in a very conscious way,” he said.

One of the ironies of fantasy is that authors can imagine virtually anything, yet many remain beholden to alternative worlds filled with white people. “When fantasy writers draw inspiration from, say, Greek mythology or English mythology, people treat it as perfectly normal,” Liu said, as though “you’re talking about all humanity.” But drawing on Chinese history and aesthetics, as Kuang did for “The Poppy War,” “comes with a lot of baggage” for Western readers, who have historically had difficulty seeing such stories as “universal.”

“The Poppy War” benefitted from a multicultural turn within the fantasy and science-fiction communities. Kuang is close with the writer Tochi Onyebuchi, whose acclaimed novel “Beasts Made of Night,” from 2017, was set in a world inspired by Nigeria. Onyebuchi told me that he and Kuang have frequently discussed the bind of wanting to explore non-Western histories without being defined by them. “A lot of the otherness was being celebrated but also fetishized, to the point where audiences engaging with it wouldn’t feel the impetus to see beyond the cultural coating of a story,” he said.

Onyebuchi was describing a contemporary twist on the long-standing plight of genre writers: “People in our shoes had . . . worked so long to tell these stories based on where they had come from, or their own experiences and fascinations outside this Western pantheon. There can be this guilt that comes with wanting to be considered on your own merits.”

Kuang explained, “We have a chip on our shoulders about being sidelined or relegated to provincial literary spheres, even though we came from them and we love the work that’s there.”

A few months after the publication of “The Poppy War,” Kuang moved to England to study at Cambridge and Oxford as a Marshall Scholar. “I was still chasing prizes, and I think, to a bright-eyed twentysomething, if your whole life is about winning prizes and getting through that next door, that game itself is enough,” she said. “You just want to keep winning. But then

I'd won the prize. And the question was: What are you actually going to do with all this education?"

Though Kuang had extricated herself from the zero-sum world of debate, she still felt a need for achievement and recognition. This became the central theme of "Babel," which she began writing in earnest in 2020, during her final months in England. It is the story of Robin Swift, a young orphan from China who is given the opportunity to study translation at Oxford. Within the world of "Babel," global trade is facilitated by magical silver bars, produced at the university, which are engraved with equivalent words in different languages. The bars are activated when translators say those words aloud.

At Oxford, Robin befriends gifted children from Haiti and India. At first, they revel in their rare opportunity. "Translation, from time immemorial, has been the facilitator of peace," they are taught. But the young scholars eventually begin to reflect on the ways in which their multilingualism has been weaponized in service of colonialism. They realize that they're conduits not for exchange but for exploitation.

The pandemic forced Kuang back to the United States in the spring of 2020, and she finished writing "Babel," as well as her second master's thesis, in Florida, where Eckert-Kuang's mother had moved after he'd graduated from high school. Each morning, the couple would pack up their laptops, walk around the block, and reënter the house, pretending that they had just travelled through a space-time continuum to a coffee shop in a different dimension.

"Whenever I'm getting close to finishing one project, I start daydreaming about something else, so that I can pretty quickly transition," Kuang told me. "I'm very uncomfortable when I'm not working. If there's nothing, then I start to panic." She wrote the first draft of "Yellowface" in the three months before beginning her Ph.D. at Yale, in 2021. If "Babel" was erudite and weighty, then "Yellowface" was—as she described it—a "palate cleanser." The product of hours spent on Twitter, the novel is like a garish social-media thought experiment left to metastasize. It centers on a young white woman named June Hayward, who is the only witness to the freak death of her friend and rival, Athena Liu. Athena is a darling of the

publishing industry who, in the view of her competitors, has made a career out of exploiting “Chinese tragedy.” Consequently, June doesn’t feel too bad about stealing the only copy of Athena’s last manuscript, a work of historical fiction involving Chinese laborers during the First World War, and passing it off as her own.

June—who rebrands herself as Juniper Song, in the hope that she’ll pass as ethnically ambiguous—becomes a best-selling writer. She is an avaricious, self-pitying protagonist, yet the novel’s cynicism blankets the entire literary world, echoing some of Kuang’s own experiences of promoting the “Poppy War” trilogy, when she was positioned as an “ethnic” author.

The director Karyn Kusama is currently working on an adaptation of “Yellowface” for television. She was drawn, she said, to the way Kuang explored the “feelings and syndromes that I see among all kinds of people, but particularly among creative circles, in which there’s so much comparison and judgment and dismissal and ranking and categorization.”

Kusama said that Kuang has been very clear that she hopes the adaptation will neither lionize nor demonize the characters of June and Athena. When “Yellowface” was published, Kuang said in an interview that the character of Athena was “a way to wrestle with my deepest insecurities.” Athena’s somewhat cloying reflection on what it means to adapt family history for fiction—“I am ethically troubled by the fact that I can only tell this story because my parents and grandparents lived through it. . . . And sometimes it does feel like I’m exploiting their pain for my profit”—isn’t all that far from what Kuang told me about the epiphanies of her gap year in China. Perhaps, Kuang went on, Athena had become “trapped by her own success” as a “cultural broker.” What would she have been allowed to write, had she lived?

Kuang and her husband keep a shared Google Doc in which they rate every New Haven pizzeria they visit, assessing their offerings on crust, sauce, grease, cheese, and “holistic impressions.” One night, when she was wrapping up her teaching commitments for the semester, she and I ate the highest-rated cheese pizza within a ten-minute walk of her apartment, at a noisy, cavernous brewery. A medium pie was the size of a child’s desk and —were I a pizza rater—fatally lacking in grease. She showed me some of

the ceremonial selfies that she and Eckert-Kuang had taken after they'd input their ratings.

When Kuang began the Ph.D. program, she relished having an "escape to the classroom," she told me. "When I was younger, campuses were these idyllic, safe, contained worlds," she continued. "They have their own value system and sort of gaming structure, where you know all the things that you have to do well in order to feel good, and you just do those things." But the appeal was beginning to fade, and she was looking forward to living off campus, full time, to work on her dissertation. "I think most grad students feel this way toward the end of their Ph.D.s, as you transition roles between being a student to being somebody who teaches, going from passively receiving knowledge to trying to construct it and send it out into the world," she said. "The campus just feels way too small."

That week, Kuang had been discussing the craft lessons of the writer Verlyn Klinkenborg, which led her to think about "volunteer sentences," Klinkenborg's term for the banal placeholders that fill in for the actual thought a writer intends to express. The "Poppy War" trilogy had been propelled by plot, but lately she was attracted to the precision of literary fiction. She tends to reassess her older work quite harshly. The rhythms of "Yellowface" came from social media, a world she now tries to avoid engaging with. "I hate the style of the sentences in that book," she told me.

"Katabasis" was a few months away from publication, but she was already finishing up "Taipei Story," which she described as being heavily influenced by the work of Elif Batuman and Patricia Lockwood. It draws on her experiences of studying Mandarin in Taipei a few years ago while dealing with the death of her grandfather. "I think writing a novel is also a project in becoming a completely different personality, so that at the end of it you've adopted a completely different set of values and attitudes about the world that are trapped in the becoming of the novel," she said.

A couple of months later, I went to Boston to visit Kuang and her husband. It was the first long stretch in which they had no teaching obligations, meaning that they could move anywhere. "I'm very curious about what being a New Yorker does to your writing," she said, while we waited for breakfast sandwiches at a local café. "I've never been part of a literary

ecosystem. There are magazines that I admire a lot—*n+1, The Paris Review*. And I think often, Wow, it seems like a lot of these people know each other, and it would be very cool to know these people." Yet the notion of going to their parties, or of witnessing their interpersonal dramas up close, made her anxious, almost as if she didn't want to be let down. Ultimately, she preferred to engage from a distance with "the best versions of their positions."

"We are speculative-fiction writers who love 'The Brothers Karamazov,' " Onyebuchi told me, of himself and Kuang. They share an interest in bridging the ambitious world-building of fantasy with the sentence-level work of so-called serious literature. "Yeah, sure, the Hugo is nice," he added. "But what about a Booker? I can see it for her."

Kuang took me for a walk along her favorite jogging path. I asked if "Katabasis" was born out of some cynical revelation about academic life. When Alice, the protagonist, realizes that Hell is essentially just another campus, she is excited. "With each new matriculation you had the chance to reinvent yourself, to deserve your place there. And now Alice felt, though she knew this was dangerous, an instinctive want to fit into this place," Kuang writes. "If Hell was just another institution, then it couldn't be so bad." Alice hopes that rescuing Professor Grimes from the underworld will give her a competitive edge, but Peter, her rival, insists on coming with her. They constantly undermine each other; the one thing they seem to agree on is a disdain for the trustees, assistant deans, and other bureaucrats that stand in the way of knowledge. Slowly, the characters realize that academia "is an arbitrary game of egos and narcissists and bullying perceived as strength." And Alice (adrenaline-obsessed and prone to starving herself) and Peter (overbearingly brilliant, geeky, and afflicted with chronic illness) discover that they have more in common with each other than they do with Grimes.

*“It feels weird to attend a company party in the same spot where we have lunch.”*
*Cartoon by Jeremy Nguyen*

“I think I’m more scared to show this one to other people than I had been with other books,” Kuang said. “This one involves a lot of Bennett.” Kuang and Eckert-Kuang began their Ph.D. programs, in 2021, with optimism and excitement. But he lost weight throughout the fall semester and experienced intense abdominal pains. One night, he started writhing in agony. It was a “frog-in-the-water situation,” Eckert-Kuang said—he could no longer gauge how bad he felt. At an urgent-care clinic the next day, he was told to head to an E.R. immediately.

Kuang described her first year at Yale as one of endless “driving and crying.” Eckert-Kuang was diagnosed with Crohn’s disease, which has become more manageable over time. “It was all so hard, because he was going to the hospital constantly,” she said. “Many days I walked to class and, like, just sort of fantasized about—not *propelling* myself in front of a bus—but, if I accidentally got hit by a bus, I just thought, like, Oh, that would be really great, because then I wouldn’t have to worry about any of this anymore.”

The plot of “Katabasis” enacts a fantasy that Kuang had at the time, to “escape entirely into a world of ideas,” she said. Alice, Kuang explained, has “this idealized version of the academy as a place where you can leave your body behind and it’s just minds interacting with each other.”

Kuang said that seeing Eckert-Kuang suffer had done something to her brain chemistry, and that she continued to fantasize about the ability to

“escape” from one’s body. “So much of what the Peter character is going through is very close to his experience,” she said. Unlike her previous novels, she shared drafts with him while she was writing it. “I was very taken with the bits where it describes him as gangly and awkward, because I’m pretty aware this is how I am,” Eckert-Kuang told me. “I think of those facets of me as the most goofy, socially inept parts, and they’re described so lovingly.”

As Kuang and I walked, she talked about Plato’s Phaedo, a dialogue in which he explores the view that the human body stands in the way of true knowledge; consequently, a philosopher should not fear dying, for the transition to death actually frees the soul to pursue truth. “In the first half of the book, both Alice and Peter are very compelled by this, because I was compelled by this,” she said. (Kuang refers to this idea in both “Katabasis” and “Babel.”) “During that time, I was, like, It would be so, so great if our bodies did not exist and we could just think.”

That evening, I had dinner with Kuang and Eckert-Kuang at their apartment. In the living room, they displayed a few debate mementos. I asked who was better. “It’s a Jordan-LeBron thing,” Eckert-Kuang joked. “We’ll never know.” A metallic sign for Coco’s, the imaginary café they worked at during the pandemic, hung in the kitchen. They share the lingua franca of people who’ve known each other since they were teen-agers. “Turns out if you make out with someone at debate camp, you have to marry them,” Eckert-Kuang said. On their honeymoon, last summer, they went to Rome and visited the Colosseum. Eckert-Kuang remembered Kuang facing a kind of “mid-midlife crisis” about what the future held. “She was, like, ‘We’re out of life milestones. You date people, you get married, you have a kid,’ ” though they did not foresee starting a family anytime soon, if ever. “She seemed to think, I have no structure to my life. We hang out until we die? And my attitude is more ‘We hang out until we die! This sounds good to me!’ ”

As Kuang stirred a pot of pasta, I asked Eckert-Kuang about his dissertation. He paused, with a look familiar to any academic: Do you really want to know, or are you just asking out of politeness? Kuang poured me a glass of wine. I listened as Eckert-Kuang enthusiastically began talking

about Kant, adjusting his glasses and grinning to punctuate ideas he found particularly stimulating. Kuang sipped from a mug that listed three check-box options: “Single,” “Taken,” and “Mentally Dating Immanuel Kant.”

“We end up hosting a lot of his department parties,” Kuang told me. “It’s really fun to be surrounded by people in a field of which you have zero knowledge. While I was writing ‘Katabasis,’ I would go around and ask people, like, ‘Can you teach me logic?’ And they were so excited.” Eckert-Kuang recalled that many of his classmates had a “merely cognitive sense that she was a famous person,” with little awareness of what her books were about or how popular they were. “I think that gave her a sense of freedom from the being-a-famous-person shtick.”

Eckert-Kuang had spent the day working on his job file, though open professorships wouldn’t be announced until later in the summer. Otherwise, he was getting over a concussion—the result of hitting his head against a door frame—and his biggest source of stress was whether he’d recover in time to watch “2001: A Space Odyssey” at a local theatre the following week. They were looking forward to finally having a wide-open year together at home. “You write two more books,” he said to her, “and I’ll just hang out.”

In “Katabasis,” when Professor Grimes asks Alice what she truly wants, her replies are initially generic: a job, her own professional fiefdom, her name on an office door. It’s no spoiler to reveal that Grimes is not worth the journey to the underworld. Yet there’s something entrancing about his question. Alice views Grimes as someone of a higher order, which is why she suffers through the casual cruelty of his mentorship. “You’ve got to love cracking things open to see what they’re made of,” he tells her. “You must be fueled by the truth, and the truth alone. It must devour you.”

“Academia was decidedly not about gold stars,” Alice concludes, and it is not a place for validation. “No,” she continues, “the point was the high of discovery.” This is about as close to autobiographical disclosure from Kuang as anything she has written: “How good it felt when she seemed to abandon her body altogether—when she became fully incorporeal, drifting happily in a universe of ideas. She was very proud of the days she forgot to

eat. Not because she had any revulsion for food, but because it was some proof that she had transcended some basic cycle of need."

One morning, before the end of the spring semester, Kuang and I met for breakfast at a café near Yale. It was one of the last weeks that her class would meet before she left for book events in Europe. I was still trying to wrap my head around her prodigious work rate, what it was that continued to motivate her. "I just don't think I'm very good yet," she said. "I actually am afraid of being totally happy with my work, because, if you are perfectly satisfied with your abilities, there's nowhere else to go. You might as well be dead."

Then she asked me if I'd ever heard about the space-time worm. I had not. Kuang got very excited and began talking about worm theory, which is a school of thought among philosophers which posits that we exist in four dimensions. In addition to existing in three spatial dimensions, we also stretch through time, like a worm, linking us to the past. In this view, we are essentially the same person forever. The application of this argument is arcane—it pertains to metaphysics and the philosophy of language and whether, say, a photograph of Bill Clinton as a child can accurately be referred to as a photograph of the President.

This idea of continuity intrigued, and annoyed, Kuang. "I think since I wrote 'The Poppy War' I've had this enormous fear of arrested development. I think it is really dangerous for professional success to come to you too early, because then you start thinking, Oh, what I did when I was a child is sufficient. The only way around this is to be deeply critical of everything I've done before and try to start over as a person, as a writer, and chase a standard that I feel like I have not reached yet. I am much harder on myself with every project, but in the interest of not being this teen-age fluke that wrote, like, a pretty mediocre fantasy novel that happened to do fairly well."

A few days later, Kuang posted a photograph on Instagram of herself sitting in her living room, announcing that the first draft of "Taipei Story" was complete. "Katabasis" wasn't even out yet, and it was as though she was already moving on. "It's like slices of the space-time worm have a branch path and then persist without changing next to you," Kuang had told me.

“And it’s, like, Why won’t you just die, you childish space-time worm?” She laughed. “Anyways, I should get to class.” ♦

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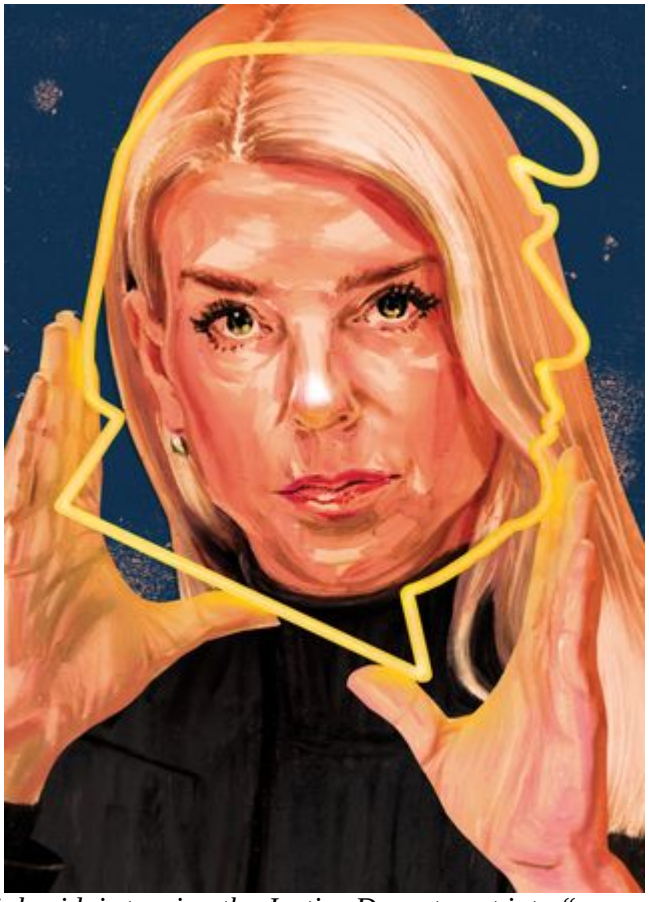
**The Political Scene**

# Pam Bondi’s Power Play

Donald Trump now has the Attorney General he always wanted—an ally willing to harness the law to enable his agenda.

**By Ruth Marcus**

August 18, 2025



*Bondi, one former official said, is turning the Justice Department into “a pure and unfiltered tool of politics and revenge.”Illustration by Diego Mallo; Source photograph by Chip Somodevilla / Getty*

It is rare for an Attorney General of the United States to venture into the offices of the Justice Department’s National Security Division. Up two floors and down a hallway the length of a city block from the A.G.’s fifth-floor suite, the division is a high-security area; visitors must deposit their cellphones in a cabinet before they enter and are required to punch in a code

at the door. At about 1 *P.M.* on February 10th, just a few days after she was sworn in as the nation's eighty-seventh Attorney General, Pam Bondi arrived at the division, accompanied by her security detail. A secretary stepped into the office of the division's acting chief, Devin DeBacker. "Were you expecting the Attorney General?" she asked. DeBacker hurried out and saw Bondi. She was holding framed portraits of leaders of the prior Administration—President Joe Biden, Vice-President Kamala Harris, and Bondi's predecessor, Merrick Garland. For the past four years, the portraits had hung on the wall, and the facilities staff hadn't yet got around to removing them. Bondi, furious, did the job herself. "Don't you people realize who won the election?" she demanded. DeBacker had served in the White House counsel's office during Donald Trump's first Administration and was about to be named the senior deputy of the division. Instead, hours after Bondi's appearance, he was informed that he was being demoted. The offending portraits were cited as the cause.

A more conventional Attorney General might have minimized the encounter for fear of seeming petty or punitive. Bondi bragged about it on Fox News, in an interview with the President's daughter-in-law, Lara Trump, who hosts a show on the network. "Someone didn't tell them that there's a new President," Trump said to Bondi as the pair strolled down the West Wing colonnade. "I did," Bondi replied. To Bondi and her allies, the outdated portraits offered proof that the department was riddled with suspect personnel seething at the election results. "This is the same National Security Division that was responsible for a lot of the underpinnings of the prosecution against the President," Bondi's chief of staff, Chad Mizelle, told me. "The idea that it was, 'Oh, sorry, mere oversight'—I mean, come on, we're not stupid."

During the past six months, Bondi has presided over the most convulsive transition of power in the Justice Department since the Watergate era, and perhaps in the hundred-and-fifty-five-year history of the department. No Attorney General has been as aggressive in reversing policies or firing personnel. None has been as willing to cede the department's traditional independence from the White House. In Trump's second term—"Season 2," Mizelle called it—"the handcuffs are taken off," he said. "We actually get

to do everything that the President wants us to do, everything that Pam wants us to do."

Bondi's Justice Department has vigorously defended even the most extreme elements of Trump's agenda, including the deportation of migrants to Central American prisons and the elimination of birthright citizenship. Bondi has embraced the President's most outlandishly unqualified nominees—such as Alina Habba, his choice to be the U.S. Attorney for New Jersey, who previously served as his private lawyer and has never worked as a prosecutor—and attacked "rogue judges" who stand in her way, filing misconduct complaints against them and urging that they step aside from cases. Most alarming, Bondi's Justice Department has demonstrated a willingness to use criminal law to exact revenge against Trump's political enemies. Bondi has reportedly ordered up a grand-jury probe into the Obama Administration's analysis of Russian meddling in the 2016 election, a subject already thoroughly investigated. Trump proclaimed himself "happy to hear" the news, though he was perhaps not totally satisfied. Asked about Ukraine at a news conference last week, Trump invoked Hillary Clinton's role in the "Russia, Russia hoax," and, pointing at Bondi, said, "I'm looking at Pam, because I hope something's going to be done about it."

Bondi's performance has produced almost universal outrage from Democrats, and, in private, at least, the unhappiness crosses party lines. I spoke to officials who have served at senior levels in every Republican Justice Department since Ronald Reagan's, including some who support much of Trump's agenda. They shared criticism of Bondi that ranged from troubled to appalled, worrying about everything from what one former senior official called Bondi's "ferociously sycophantic" rhetoric about the President to the purges of career staff. Bondi, many have concluded, has turned the Justice Department into a mere arm of the White House.

For Bondi, complaints from Democrats and what remains of the G.O.P. establishment are of little concern. The events of the past several weeks, however, have exposed a far greater problem for Trump's Attorney General: the rage of the *MAGA* right. For years, much of the movement has been obsessed with the government's investigation of Jeffrey Epstein, the

disgraced financier, child sex offender, and onetime friend of Trump's. Once Trump returned to power, these followers were convinced, his Justice Department would reveal the truth of various conspiracy theories involving Epstein: among them that his death while awaiting trial on sex-trafficking charges was not suicide, and that he maintained a "client list" of celebrities and politicians. But Bondi botched the matter from the start, a misstep that threatened to turn the President's base against him.

Bondi's Epstein travails began on February 21st. Just a month into the new Administration, she appeared on Fox News to tease disclosures about the case: "a lot of flight logs" and "a lot of names," she said. Asked about the famed client list, she offered, "It's sitting on my desk right now." The next week, Bondi and the F.B.I. director, Kash Patel, appeared at a White House event for conservative "influencers," distributing white binders labelled "Epstein Files: Phase 1." The material turned out to be mostly a rehash of previously released information. This not only infuriated Epstein conspiracy theorists but also annoyed White House officials, who hadn't been informed of the stunt in advance. Speaking again on Fox News the next week, she assured the network's Sean Hannity that she had received "a truckload of evidence," and that Patel would produce "a detailed report as to why all these documents and evidence had been withheld."


*Cartoon by Roz Chast*

That never happened. Instead, in early July, the Justice Department issued a memo saying that there was no client list and that it would release nothing more about Epstein. This announcement, predictably, provoked a full-blown revolt from the right. During a Cabinet meeting at the White House, Bondi attempted to revise her statement about the client list. "My response was it's

sitting on my desk to be reviewed, meaning the files, along with the J.F.K., M.L.K. files, as well," she said. The following weekend, the conservative group Turning Point USA held an annual conference in Bondi's home town of Tampa, and speaker after speaker called for her ouster. "Her days are numbered," the conservative podcaster Megyn Kelly predicted. "I just don't think Pam Bondi is skilled enough to avoid making another mistake very soon." Congressional Republicans demanded more documents, and Speaker Mike Johnson said, of Bondi's comments about the client list, "She needs to come forward and explain that to everybody."

As the backlash grew, Bondi seemed engaged in a frantic scramble to appease Trump and the *MAGA* movement, directing attention to other favored targets. The Justice Department took the unusual step of confirming that it was conducting criminal investigations into the former C.I.A. director John Brennan and the former F.B.I. director James Comey. It fired Maurene Comey, a federal prosecutor in Manhattan who worked on the Epstein case and who—more to the point—is James Comey's daughter. When Trump, citing the "ridiculous amount of publicity given to Jeffrey Epstein," instructed the Justice Department to "produce any and all pertinent Grand Jury testimony," it scrambled to comply. (Federal judges refused to unseal the testimony, with one writing that its release would provide no new information and would only "expose as disingenuous the Government's public explanations for moving to unseal.") In late July, Deputy Attorney General Todd Blanche, in a surprising move for the department's second-ranking official, spent two days interviewing Epstein's partner and procurer Ghislaine Maxwell, who is serving a twenty-year sentence for participating in Epstein's sexual abuse of children.

A senior Administration official told me that Bondi's mistakes on Epstein reflected a broader failure among members of the Administration to appreciate the hold that the issue has on the *MAGA* world. Many did not recognize "the almost cult around the subject matter," the official said, and so "she may have treated it a little more cavalierly than if she had it to do over now." Some Bondi critics—perhaps engaged in wishful thinking—suggested that she had lost stature in the Administration. "I had some conversations with some White House officials," Laura Loomer, the right-wing conspiracist and Trump ally, told me. "And they told me that the

President wasn’t going to fire her but that they were going to have a conversation with her to curb back her Fox News appearances.” (Administration officials said that this conversation didn’t occur.)

Bondi appears to have retained the backing that matters most: Trump’s. In late July, when she seemed at risk of losing her job over the ongoing fiasco, I asked to speak to Susie Wiles, the President’s chief of staff. Wiles, who has known Bondi since she ran for Florida attorney general in 2010, called that very night, and praised her in terms I hadn’t expected: “You know, she looks like Barbie. She’s blond and beautiful, and I think people will underestimate her because of how she looks. But she’s got nerves of steel, and she has stood up to some withering situations with a fair amount of grace.” About Bondi’s relationship with Trump, Wiles was succinct. “I have a long one,” she said. “Hers is longer.”

Mike Davis, who heads the conservative legal group Article III Project, told me, “This Epstein mess could have been communicated better.” Still, he said, “no Republican Attorney General has been more effective so quickly as Pam Bondi. She’s not going anywhere, and she shouldn’t go anywhere.” The latest confirmation of her standing came last week, when Trump, announcing a “historic action to rescue our nation’s capital from crime,” said that he was placing the District of Columbia’s police department under federal control and deploying National Guard troops to assist them. Bondi, he said, would be in command. On Thursday night, she named the head of the Drug Enforcement Administration the “emergency police commissioner”—only to back down the next afternoon after the D.C. attorney general sued.

If Trump is sticking with Bondi, it may be because, as one prominent conservative lawyer and Justice Department veteran told me, “in Pam Bondi, Donald Trump has the Attorney General he always wanted.” Trump’s previous selections for the post were among his greatest regrets of his first term. His initial choice for the job, the former Alabama senator Jeff Sessions, recused himself from the probe into the Trump campaign’s dealings with Russia, leading to the appointment of Robert Mueller as special prosecutor. Trump’s second pick for Attorney General, William Barr, was loyal for a long time—until he refused to back Trump’s effort to

declare the 2020 election stolen. Assembling his Cabinet for a second term, Trump would not tolerate any risk of subversion. He was looking for "the opposite of Jeff Sessions and Bill Barr," Davis told me.

Not surprisingly, Trump balked at the establishment candidates presented to him for the post: Jay Clayton, his first-term chair of the Securities and Exchange Commission; Robert Giuffra, a chair of the venerable New York law firm Sullivan & Cromwell; and Missouri's attorney general, Andrew Bailey. Trump turned instead to the Florida congressman Matt Gaetz, a flagrantly unsuitable choice; Trump's private lawyer, Boris Epshteyn, encouraged the selection. But Gaetz's escapades—he was under a congressional ethics investigation for sexual misconduct and drug use—proved to be too much even for the Republican-controlled Senate. Bondi, who had been "godmother" to Gaetz's Australian-shepherd mix, said privately that he was a poor choice for the job. (A Justice Department official denied this.)

As the Gaetz nomination foundered, Trump turned to Bondi, a former prosecutor who had served two terms as Florida's attorney general, between 2011 and 2019. She had been the state's first major elected official to endorse him in 2016, announcing her backing after her first choice, Florida's governor, Jeb Bush, withdrew from the primary race. At the time, the state's Republican senator, Marco Rubio, was still in the running, deriding Trump as a "con artist." But Adam Goodman, a political consultant who had recruited Bondi to run for attorney general, urged her to take the risk of supporting Trump. He seemed unlikely to win the G.O.P. nomination, but, Goodman argued, "if he does, wow, you'll be the first major elected G.O.P.er from Florida at the table." The bet, of course, succeeded. Trump wiped out the opposition, and Bondi secured a prime-time speaking slot at the Republican National Convention. Her address to delegates did not stint on contempt for Trump's opponent, Hillary Clinton. "Lock her up," she said, pointing to a sign attacking Clinton. "I love that."

In the aftermath of the 2020 election, Bondi had no compunction about echoing Trump's stolen-election claims, promoting what she called "evidence of cheating" and "fake ballots," and joining the former New York mayor Rudy Giuliani at the infamous Four Seasons Total Landscaping news

conference. Trump fomenting an insurrection on January 6th did not lessen her support; in 2021, she chaired two Trump-affiliated committees, earning more than two hundred and forty thousand dollars. Two years later, after Trump was indicted for trying to change the outcome of the 2020 election in Georgia, Bondi told Hannity that, once Trump returned to office, “the Department of Justice, the prosecutors will be prosecuted, the bad ones.” In 2024, in addition to being a fixture on the campaign trail for Trump, Bondi was an observer at his Manhattan trial relating to his hush-money payments to the porn star Stormy Daniels. When he was convicted on thirty-four felony counts of falsifying business records, Bondi reached a different verdict. It was, she proclaimed, “a sad day for our justice system.”

Even before her selection as U.S. Attorney General, Bondi’s loyalty to Trump paid off. On her federal financial-disclosure form, which she filed this past January, she reported earning a million dollars from the Florida lobbying firm Ballard Partners, which flourished during the Trump era, and five hundred and twenty thousand dollars from the America First Policy Institute, a conservative think tank central to Trump’s planning for a second term. She received nearly three million dollars in shares of Trump Media & Technology Group, which runs Truth Social, for consulting on a deal that took the company public. (She promised to sell the shares as part of her ethics agreement on entering government, and did so in April, in what she described as a “tremendous loss.”)

On a steamy morning in late June, I went to the Dirksen Senate Office Building to watch Bondi testify about her department’s budget request. It was only her second congressional appearance since her confirmation hearings, and, in addition to the usual flotilla of Justice Department officials, she was accompanied by her husband, the Florida private-equity investor John Wakefield. (Two early marriages ended in divorce, and Bondi called off another wedding during her time as Florida’s attorney general, convening guests in the Cayman Islands for a ceremony that never occurred.) When the Oregon senator Jeff Merkley posed a mild question about whether “foreign interests” had attended Trump’s private dinner to promote his meme coin, Bondi shifted to high umbrage. “Senator, it is wildly offensive that you would accuse President Trump of not protecting American interests in our country when he is the President that has shut

down our borders, unlike Joe Biden," she said."You're trying to play a gotcha question at a budget hearing when you have murders left and right in your state, violent crimes, and we're doing everything we can to help your liberal state."

Bondi's belligerence is often on display in an even more surprising venue: her dealings with federal judges. In one case, the U.S. district-court judge John Bates struck down Trump's order targeting the law firm Jenner & Block and told the Administration to inform federal agencies that the order was not in effect. Bondi, in a memorandum also signed by Russell Vought, the director of the Office of Management and Budget, blended grudging compliance with open disrespect. "On March 28, 2025, an unelected district court yet again invaded the policy-making and free speech prerogatives of the executive branch, including by requiring the Attorney General and the OMB Director to pen a letter to the head of every executive department and agency," the memorandum began.

Bondi and her staff have similarly tangled with ethics officials over federal rules limiting what gifts they are permitted to accept, seeking to keep everything from a *FIFA* soccer ball (Trump handed it to Bondi after a meeting) to a box of cigars from the mixed-martial-arts fighter Conor McGregor, according to a source familiar with the discussions. "Every new Administration needs time to adjust to ethics rules that might seem trivial," the source said. "What wasn't normal was the amount of pushback that we got." One episode involved Bondi's desire to sit in the President's box at the *FIFA* Club World Cup finals, in July, at the height of the Epstein uproar. When department ethics officials advised that this could run afoul of federal gift rules, the source said, Bondi's staff responded that she might need to be there to brief the President on security issues. The ethics advice, according to the source, was that Bondi could enter the box to answer questions from the President. Bondi and her husband went on to sit in the President's box, where he offered her his signature thumbs-up. (A department official said that Bondi did not resist ethics advice and that the couple did not remain for the entire game.)

Other Attorneys General have shared close—to some, disconcertingly close—relationships with the Presidents who appointed them. Robert F. Kennedy

was his brother's modestly qualified A.G. and consigliere at the age of thirty-five. Eric Holder once described himself as Barack Obama's "wingman" and the President as "my boy." But, even on a team of Trump sycophants, Bondi stands out for her fawning devotion. At an early Cabinet Room praise session, Bondi turned to Trump and said, "President, your first one hundred days has far exceeded that of any other Presidency in this country, ever, ever." She proceeded to make the fantastical claim that the seizure of twenty-two million fentanyl pills during that period "saved—are you ready for this, media?—two hundred and fifty-eight million lives." (The entire U.S. population is less than three hundred and fifty million; the number of fentanyl deaths each year is less than seventy-four thousand.) Bondi's obedience to the President includes matters as insignificant as ending the department's purchase of paper straws. A Trump executive order recognized that paper straws were "nonfunctional, more expensive, and potentially hazardous," she wrote to D.O.J. staff in March. "The Department stands with the President in rejecting these misguided efforts."

*"Excuse me, do you have a moment to read my screenplay?"*
*Cartoon by Ellis Rosen*

On March 14th, Trump announced, in effect, a new *MAGA* Justice Department in a visit to the D.O.J.'s Great Hall. For a President to appear at the department is itself unusual: Bill Clinton went to push his crime bill; George W. Bush spoke eight years later to mark the renaming of the building in honor of Robert F. Kennedy. Trump unleashed a partisan,

grievance-laden diatribe against the department and other foes which lasted for more than an hour, assailing “the lies and abuses that have occurred within these walls,” the “Marxist prosecutors” appointed by the Biden Administration, and “scum” such as the latest special prosecutor to investigate him, “deranged Jack Smith.” Then he left, to the familiar strains of his campaign anthem, the Village People’s “Y.M.C.A.”

The event left veterans of previous Administrations shaken. “There’s never been a Great Hall event anything like it,” Peter Keisler, a senior Justice Department official during the George W. Bush Administration, and a co-founder of the conservative Federalist Society, told me. “It sent the unmistakable message, not merely that there was a new sheriff in town but that this new sheriff intended to harness law enforcement into a pure and unfiltered tool of politics and revenge.” Shortly thereafter, a new piece of art appeared on the walls of the Attorney General’s conference room, where Bondi’s predecessors had displayed portraits of Attorneys General past: a large photograph of Bondi and Trump at the Great Hall event. (Her other selections: paintings of Washington and Lincoln, borrowed from the National Portrait Gallery, and the official D.O.J. portrait of Robert F. Kennedy. “She is very, very close to Bobby Kennedy,” Mizelle explained, referring to the Secretary of Health and Human Services.)

The Justice Department declined to make Bondi available for an interview with me, but it did arrange sessions with several other senior officials, who offered a glimpse of the new relationship between the D.O.J. and the White House. Mizelle, who worked at the Department of Homeland Security during Trump’s first term, is particularly close to Stephen Miller, a White House deputy chief of staff. “You have one client, and you have to represent that one client. If you don’t want to do that, then it’s just not the place for you,” Mizelle told me. When I asked him who the client is—the United States or the President—he rejected the premise of the question. “I don’t see a difference between those,” he said. “I think—and I don’t mean this as an attack on you—the very fact that you asked the question shows the fundamental problem in how everybody has always, in the last two decades, conceived of government. . . . The President is the executive branch.”

Temple Terrace, Florida, where Bondi grew up, sits at the northeastern edge of Tampa. It takes its name from the Temple oranges that grew in what was once the world's largest orange grove. Bondi's father, Joseph, was a professor of education at the University of South Florida; her mother, Patsy Hammer, was an elementary-school teacher. The eldest of three children, Pamela Jo Bondi received an early education in politics from her father, a Democrat, who served as a city-council member and then as the mayor of Temple Terrace. "The household she grew up in was one that loved what Roosevelt did during the Depression and loved Kennedy for his youth," Patrick Manteiga, the publisher of Tampa's *La Gaceta* newspaper, recalled. Bondi's father, he said, "was just a very traditional Roosevelt Democrat." Billy Howard, a Tampa lawyer who dated Bondi for about five years, said that she "was extraordinarily close with her father," who died of leukemia in 2013. "Her father was a very passionate individual about doing the right thing. And I think that passion for doing the right thing passed down to Pam."

In her own telling, Bondi is an accidental prosecutor, perhaps even an accidental lawyer. In college—she attended the University of South Florida for three years before graduating from the University of Florida—she imagined becoming a pediatrician. Even after deciding to go to law school, at Stetson University, in Gulfport, Bondi wasn't sure of her career path. "I knew I wanted to get a law degree, but I wasn't certain I wanted to practice law," she told the Florida newspaper *Business Observer*. Her father pushed her, helping to arrange an internship in the state's attorney's office. Bondi was hooked. She worked on four jury trials as an intern, and was hired after graduating. "What an ingenue!" one prosecutor wrote in notes from her job interview.

Ingénue or not, Bondi thrived. "Pam is a vibrant, enthusiastic, good natured individual," her supervisor wrote in an assessment in September, 1992, a year after she joined the office. "Her zeal and enthusiasm are evident in her case presentation. With her effervescent personality, she gives a cohesive feeling to the work area." As to weaknesses, the supervisor wrote, "She needs to continue polishing her trial skills and knowledge of the law, which comes only with experience." Bondi rose quickly through the office ranks, from processing misdemeanor traffic offenses to trying serious felonies. "I

always saw Pam as a career prosecutor," Paul Sisco, a Tampa defense lawyer who was a young prosecutor alongside Bondi, told me. "The great majority of us were sort of counting our time until we could get into private practice. Pam had a little bit more of a pure prosecutor philosophy, and by that I mean she was one hundred per cent convinced that was the correct side and she didn't want to do anything else."

A murder case in 2000 helped make Bondi's career, albeit in a circuitous way. A fifteen-year-old named Valessa Robinson was accused, along with her boyfriend, Adam Davis, and another friend, of killing her mother. Bondi secured the death penalty for Davis (the sentence was later reduced to life in prison); Robinson was also convicted of murder and served thirteen years. The high-profile case helped bring Bondi to the attention of producers and bookers at the TV networks and major cable outlets. She was soon a legal talking head on MSNBC, CNN, and, more and more frequently, Fox News. It was an unusual role for a local prosecutor, but Bondi had a knack for short sentences and punchy phrasing; she emphasized key words with the skill of a veteran correspondent. "These were all internet searches, done on the computer that Casey Anthony used, three months before that little girl went missing," Bondi told CBS News, speaking about the high-profile trial of a woman who was acquitted of killing her toddler. "So if that doesn't give you premeditation, I don't know what does."

It was through her television appearances that Bondi first encountered the real-estate developer Donald Trump, in 2006. Trump had filed suit against the town of Palm Beach after it fined him for flying an oversized flag at his private club, Mar-a-Lago. Bondi, in one of her cable appearances, spoke out in Trump's defense. Soon afterward, as Bondi related to Lara Trump, her assistant came in to announce, " 'Donald Trump's on the phone for you,' and I said, 'Donald Trump the billionaire?' " Trump, she recalled, "saw me defending him, got my number somehow, called up the state attorney's office and just wanted to thank me."

Bondi's television career was central, too, to her unexpected campaign for Florida attorney general in 2010. Two candidates, both with statewide experience, were running in the Republican primary. Goodman, the political consultant, spied an opening for an outsider in the race. "I thought, Oh, my

God, what about Pam Bondi? She's photogenic, she thinks on her feet," he told me. Goodman called to pitch her on the notion. An hour and a half later, she wasn't sold, but she was taking it seriously. She was still wavering the night before her announcement, she later said. "I had no political aspirations whatsoever," she told *Business Observer*. "I always said if I won the lottery, I'd keep prosecuting."

Bondi entered the race in December, 2009, and it quickly emerged that she had been a registered Democrat until 2000. Her explanation was that Tampa was a heavily Democratic area and she wanted her vote to have an impact in the primaries; this was undercut by the revelation that she had not voted in the primaries in 1984, 1986, 1988, or 1992. Florida newspapers offered an alternative explanation: shortly before the switch, her boss, a Democrat, died and was replaced by a Republican. "In my conversations with Pam, she never presented herself as being a conservative, a liberal, or anything," Manteiga, the newspaper publisher, told me. "She was in the middle." But Bondi was running in a Tea Party year that favored unconventional candidates, and she benefitted from her visibility on Fox News even as she positioned herself as the nonpolitician in the race. "I've not spent my career behind a desk in Tallahassee, but on the front lines," she said in a debate.

Bondi endorsed the Republican program with a passion that surprised friends and observers. "Once she jumped in, the evolution from prosecutor to politician happened so fast and with such ideological fervor that it jolted those who knew her," Colleen Jenkins, a reporter for the Tampa Bay *Times* (then known as the St. Petersburg *Times*), wrote. "Political Pam touts herself as pro-business, pro-Second Amendment and pro-life. She talks about Lincoln and Reagan and bedrock Republican Party principles. She blasted the national Democratic leadership on the Sean Hannity Show and met with ex-vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin at a breakfast in Washington, D.C. She even wears a necklace with elephants on it." Hannity went to Florida to campaign for Bondi; Palin provided an endorsement, as did the anti-abortion Susan B. Anthony List Candidate Fund. "There is no better woman to defend the pro-life, pro-woman legal position," the group's president, Marjorie Dannenfelser, said. Bondi won the primary with nearly thirty-eight per cent of the vote.

*Cartoon by Adam Douglas Thompson*

To the extent that the general election captured national attention, it was because of a St. Bernard named Master Tank, who had been separated from his owners in the chaotic aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, in 2005. Master Tank turned up at an animal shelter, emaciated and mangy, and Bondi, whose own St. Bernard had died of cancer days earlier, adopted the dog, whom she renamed Noah. When Master Tank's owners, Dorreen and Steven Couture, tracked down the dog three months later and sought to reclaim him, Bondi refused to give him up, alleging that he had been poorly cared for before the hurricane. The Coutures, desperate to recover the dog for their young grandchildren, whose parents had died prior to the storm, found a pro-bono attorney and filed suit. The attorney, Murray Silverstein, recalled being astonished that the matter had come to litigation. "We had the proof," he told me. "We figured a normal, ordinary, reasonable person would say, 'I didn't realize that, I'm so sorry, here is your dog back.' " Bondi went so far as to argue that the Coutures were seeking the wrong dog—there was a dispute over a missing toenail—but the judge overseeing the case rejected that argument. A July, 2006, Tampa Bay *Times* story captured the toll of the dispute. "Emotionally distraught, she started crying when a reporter asked innocuous personal background questions," Jenkins wrote of Bondi. "She said she was sensitive to a fault." (Other local journalists told me that Bondi had at some point called them in tears.) On the eve of trial, Bondi agreed to a settlement under which she would pay the dog's food and

medical bills and have visitation rights. But, Dorreen Couture later said, Bondi stopped making the payments after a few months and cancelled her first visitation. The custody battle, which was covered by *People* and CNN, lasted sixteen months.

From the perspective of Bondi and her supporters, the dog drama underscored her tenacity in defense of the vulnerable and mistreated. “I took a dog who was a walking skeleton,” she told the Tampa Bay *Times*, citing a veterinarian’s conclusion that Tank/Noah had been suffering from heartworm for years before Katrina. “There is no way I can send him back there to die.” Democrats saw an opportunity to portray her as selfish and heartless, willing to manipulate the legal system at the expense of grieving children. An ad sponsored by the state Party quoted Steven Couture saying of his grandson, “He’d wake up in the night, having nightmares that Bondi took his dog.”

The story wasn’t enough to defeat Bondi in a Republican year. “She had more notoriety. She’s very telegenic,” her general-election opponent, Dan Gelber, told me, using an adjective that was ubiquitous in stories about Bondi from the time. “She had a strong Fox News contingent, and I had a lot of very good professors from Columbia Law School.” As Matt Gaetz told me, “She was like a cult figure with law enforcement. She’s a beautiful blond woman. She took these tough cases, she went to court, and won. And what Pam did was she used the platform of her earned fame to dominate.”

Bondi, as Florida’s attorney general—the first woman to hold the office—staked out a political position that was undeniably conservative but not at the extreme. She brought in a Democrat, Dave Aronberg, who had run for attorney general in the primary and endorsed Gelber in the general election, to take on the “pill mills” that were contributing to the state’s opioid epidemic. “When I worked for her, I didn’t even consider her partisan,” Aronberg told me. During her second term, Bondi hired another Democrat, Patricia Conners, as her chief deputy. Gaetz, who worked closely with Bondi on criminal-justice issues as a member of the state legislature, described her as “more of a tactician than an ideologue,” adding, “She actually likes getting into the weeds of the criminal-litigation process. And I

think that gets her up more than reading old William F. Buckley articles about the nature of conservatism."

Bondi may not have sought out the culture wars of the Tea Party years, but she did join them. Continuing the work of her predecessor as attorney general, she was involved in orchestrating Republican states' 2012 challenge to the Affordable Care Act; she also had Florida sign on to a separate lawsuit challenging the A.C.A.'s requirement that religiously affiliated employers provide contraceptive coverage. She joined fifteen other states in a Supreme Court brief backing Arizona's "show me your papers" law, which required police to check the immigration status of anyone they suspected of being undocumented; Bondi wouldn't say whether she agreed with the law but framed it as a matter of states' rights.

Gay rights proved to be a particularly thorny issue for Bondi. Florida had banned same-sex unions, including in a 2008 constitutional amendment that defined marriage as being between a man and a woman. As court after court struck down the amendment, Bondi ducked disclosing her own views. She declared that "I have many, many gay friends," yet she kept appealing the rulings, despite mounting public criticism of her position. The backlash intensified when her office filed a brief asserting that "disrupting Florida's existing marriage laws would impose significant public harm." Bondi eventually acknowledged that the language was problematic—"I can tell you now I'm reading every word of every brief that's being written," she told the Tampa Bay *Times*—and presented herself less as an advocate than as a bureaucrat managing the issue until the U.S. Supreme Court weighed in. "There are great people on both sides of this issue, and all we want is finality for everyone," she said. Critics had a different take. "The saddest thing about Pam Bondi is how much of a shape-shifter she is," Nadine Smith, the executive director of Equality Florida, which advocates for L.G.B.T.Q. rights, told me. "She will cut her conscience to fit whatever suits her ambition."

Bondi served as Florida's attorney general at a time when, across the country, the role was becoming increasingly politicized. In that landscape, the National Association of Attorneys General tried to lessen the partisan divide. The leadership of the *NAAG* traditionally alternated annually

between Republicans and Democrats, and rotated along regional lines. In 2013, it was the Southern Democrats' turn, meaning that the Mississippi attorney general, Jim Hood, was in line for the position. Bondi mounted a last-minute challenge, not informing Hood in advance but lining up backing—or so she thought—from her Republican colleagues. The vote was conducted by secret ballot; two Republicans voted against her, dooming her effort. "I like Pam Bondi. She has always been very gracious, pleasant in her dealings with me," Chris Toth, then the deputy executive director of the group, told me. "But I also believe that she was more responsible for the rise in partisanship than any single A.G. that I ever worked with."

Bondi's tenure was marred by several episodes that prompted questions about her ethics and judgment. In 2014, she asked Governor Rick Scott to reschedule an execution; unbeknownst to Scott, the date conflicted with Bondi's "hometown campaign kickoff" reëlection fund-raiser. (When the reason was reported, Bondi quickly acknowledged that she had made a mistake.) That year, the New York *Times*, as part of a series on Republican attorneys general, reported on Bondi's close ties to a Washington law firm, the now defunct Dickstein Shapiro, which specialized in lobbying attorneys general on behalf of corporations. Bondi had even invited one of the firm's lawyers to recuperate at her Tampa home after having foot surgery. (A Bondi spokeswoman declined to comment to the *Times*.) Lisa Lerman, a legal-ethics expert at the Catholic University of America, described the relationship as "unseemly."

But perhaps the most intense criticism of Bondi's time in office involved her dealings with Donald Trump. In 2013, Trump made a twenty-five-thousand-dollar contribution to a political group supporting Bondi's reëlection; the check came three days after a Bondi spokeswoman said that her office was considering joining a fraud lawsuit against Trump University which had been filed by the New York attorney general. Bondi's office decided not to pursue the case, and she continued to welcome Trump's financial support. In 2014, Trump, along with Giuliani, headlined a fund-raiser for her at Mar-a-Lago.

The donation resurfaced as an issue in 2016, after Bondi's endorsement of Trump. Pressed by reporters, her office acknowledged that she had

personally asked Trump for the contribution. In the end, though, the evidence pointed more to a breakdown in procedures for vetting donations than to a quid pro quo. An outside investigator for the Florida Commission on Ethics concluded that, though the timing of the contribution "may raise suspicions," there was "no evidence" that Bondi weighed in on whether to pursue the case against Trump University. The investigator noted that the staff lawyer who looked into the complaints against Trump testified that he did not discuss them with Bondi and that she "was not involved in the decision" about whether to join the lawsuit.

In 2019, shortly after her second term as attorney general expired, Bondi joined Ballard Partners, which had opened a D.C. office the year before to capitalize on its Trump connections. Bondi was brought on as the chair of the firm's new corporate-regulatory-compliance practice, but her main role involved forging connections between Ballard clients and key officials. "She was more of a networker than a substantive lawyer," one person who worked with Bondi said. Brian Ballard, the firm's founder, disputed that characterization. "Pam is an incredibly substantive person, so that person doesn't know Pam well," he told me. Bondi reported lobbying the White House, Congress, and federal agencies on behalf of thirty clients, many with interests before the department that she now heads. They included blue-chip corporations such as General Motors, Amazon, and Uber; the government of Qatar (which paid Ballard a hundred and fifteen thousand dollars a month); and GEO Group, one of the nation's largest private prison companies.

One notable client of Bondi's was Carnival Corporation, the giant cruise operator. For years, Carnival and other cruise lines had docked their ships in Cuba under a special government exemption: a waiver that protected them from claims made by companies whose properties had been seized by the Castro regime. In April, 2019, the Trump Administration, wanting to up the pressure on post-Castro Cuba, was poised to change course and allow such lawsuits to proceed, exposing Carnival to hundreds of millions of dollars in potential liability. The company hired Ballard, and Carnival's chairman, Micky Arison, secured the highest-possible-level meeting: with the national-security adviser, John Bolton; the Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo; and Trump. The short session was "unusual," Bolton told me. "I

think a more normal course would have been to say, ‘Why don’t you meet with the Assistant Secretary of State for Latin America?’ or something like that,” he said. “I heard about the meeting after it was set up. I didn’t set it up. Pompeo didn’t set it up. We both saw eye to eye on the substance of the thing, which was not to extend the waiver again.” He went, he explained, because “I figured, good God, if this is going to happen, I’d better be there.” As Bolton recalled, Arison made his case to Trump, whom he had known for years; Bondi said little, and the Administration moved forward with its plan to end the waiver.

According to those involved in Bondi’s selection as Attorney General, Trump did not consider anyone else after the collapse of the Gaetz nomination. But the President hadn’t always been sold on her. Following his first election, the speculation was that Bondi would secure a prominent role in the new Administration. “I would imagine her opportunities are unlimited,” Brian Ballard, who had represented Trump’s interests in Florida and raised money for him during the campaign, said at the time. “There’s nobody closer to Trump in Florida than Pam Bondi.” Trump’s daughter Ivanka pushed Bondi for the key role of White House counsel, Maggie Haberman reported in her book “Confidence Man”; that idea went nowhere. Rubio pitched her for Homeland Security Secretary during the first transition and again when the position was vacated by John Kelly, in 2019. Governor Scott also lobbied for her to get an Administration job, telling one Trump ally, “She really wants to be in Washington.” Trump wasn’t convinced. When Bondi’s name would come up, the Trump ally said, “he’d roll his eyes and shake his head. I always took it as he didn’t take her seriously—he didn’t think she was a person of substance.” (Others dispute that Bondi was seeking an appointment—saying that, after years of government service, she preferred to earn more money and focus on her personal life—and maintained that Trump did not disparage her.) During the first term, the best Bondi could secure was an appointment to Trump’s opioid commission, and, after she left state office, a stint on the White House legal team for his first impeachment.

As Trump prepared for a second term, Bondi was not in line for an Administration position—this time apparently by her own choice. Then Trump made her an offer. “He picked up the phone one morning about

seven o’clock and called her and said, ‘I’ve made a dreadful error, and would you consider this?’ ” one senior Administration official told me. Within hours, Gaetz had withdrawn and Bondi’s selection was announced. Gaetz told me that, shortly afterward, he called Bondi. She said that she knew it had been a “tough week” for him and added, “Come work for me,” he recalled. He demurred—although, he said, “I thought that was super kind of her.” Others in the *MAGA* sphere were more concerned by Bondi’s selection. “I was absolutely, like, We can’t do this, right?” one prominent conservative said. “Pam’s great. She’s very political, she’s savvy, she’s high-energy, she’s always there, she’s got a big heart. I would never ask her any legal question at all to do with anything but a parking ticket.”

The Attorney General is often required to make decisions, with high stakes and on short notice, on an array of difficult matters, from blocking mergers to approving counterintelligence investigations to appealing cases to the Supreme Court. The job also involves supervising a vast bureaucracy that includes the F.B.I., the Drug Enforcement Administration, the U.S. Marshals Service, and the Bureau of Prisons. Few have come to the job with less experience in complex federal legal issues than Bondi. By all accounts, she was a capable prosecutor, and her colleagues on the impeachment team praise her performance. But as Attorney General she has fumbled basic questions. In late June, the Supreme Court handed the Trump Administration a major victory in its effort to eliminate birthright citizenship, ruling that, while challenges to Trump’s order worked their way through the courts, federal judges could not fully block it from taking effect. Bondi, appearing with Trump at a triumphant White House news conference, was asked whether the Justice Department would enforce the edict in states where it had not been struck down. “Birthright citizenship will be decided in October in the next session by the Supreme Court, unless it comes down in the next few minutes. I guess it could come down. There’s still—I think they’re still deliberating right now on some cases,” she said. This was gibberish. The Court had released all its rulings for the term, and it has not yet accepted a case that directly challenges Trump’s action.

Bondi also stumbled, at least early on, in staffing the department. By the time she took the job, the White House had announced the other top-tier Justice appointees: Deputy Attorney General Blanche; his top deputy, Emil

Bove (who has since been confirmed to a federal judgeship); and Solicitor General D. John Sauer. A cannier operator, knowing that Trump needed her to step in for Gaetz, might have insisted on appointing members of her own team; Bondi did not. She was able to select one minor player, tapping a Florida sheriff, Chad Chronister, to be the head of the D.E.A. But Chronister's nomination quickly faltered when it emerged that his department had enforced pandemic lockdown rules, arresting a pastor in 2020 for holding a church service. "She was hasty," a senior Administration official said, "and just skipped a very, very important step."

Bondi's penchant for Fox News appearances from the West Wing lawn helped fuel a perception that she is a figurehead Attorney General. She was absent from one of the highest-profile matters her department has handled: its move, in early February, to drop criminal bribery charges against New York City's mayor, Eric Adams. Bove, who was then the acting Deputy Attorney General, instructed Danielle Sassoon, the interim U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of New York, to dismiss the case. She refused, and sought a meeting with Bondi, to no avail. Sassoon turned to Mizelle, asking that he print out an e-mail she had written and put it in front of the Attorney General, according to a source familiar with the episode. Still, she heard nothing from Bondi, and Bove accepted her resignation. A former U.S. Attorney who served during a previous Republican Administration described Bondi's refusal to engage with Sassoon as extraordinary. "If a U.S. Attorney wants to speak to the A.G., they speak to the A.G.," this person told me. "It tells you how removed Bondi is from actually running the department."


*"We could put the children over there."*

*Cartoon by Bruce Eric Kaplan*

Justice officials dismiss this characterization of Bondi as inaccurate and sexist. But a whistle-blower complaint from Erez Reuveni, a former senior immigration lawyer, indicated that the White House is intervening heavily in the department—not merely shaping policy but overseeing the content and the timing of legal arguments. Reuveni described receiving an urgent call from Henry Whitaker, a counsellor to the Attorney General, telling him that the "White House wanted the brief filed by midnight" in one high-profile immigration case. In another case, that of Kilmar Abrego Garcia, who was mistakenly deported to El Salvador in March, Reuveni said that Deputy Assistant Attorney General Drew Ensign told him the White House wanted to know why he had failed to argue that Abrego Garcia was a terrorist. Reuveni replied that the evidence didn't support that assertion. Bondi fired him for insubordination.

Early in Trump's first term, the President erupted in anger over his inability to contain the investigation into Russian meddling in the 2016 election. "Where's my Roy Cohn?" he demanded, referring to his legendary personal lawyer and fixer, who stopped at nothing to manipulate the legal system to his clients' advantage. Bondi is no Roy Cohn, but in her Trump has found—at long last—an ally who will bend the department to his will and punish his perceived enemies. In seven tumultuous months, nearly every aspect of its operations has been reshaped to facilitate and enable his agenda.

"The transformation that this department has gone through since January 20th, it's something that nobody has been able to do in the recent history of the Department of Justice, and that's because of the Attorney General," Blanche told me. On the criminal side, investigating corruption is no longer a priority. The Public Integrity Section, which prosecutes corruption cases involving government officials, has been all but disbanded; under an executive order, enforcement of the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act, which prohibits U.S. companies from paying bribes overseas, has been suspended. On the civil side, the overhaul may be even more dramatic. A June memorandum from Assistant Attorney General Brett Shumate announced that the new priorities would be denaturalization; "combatting unlawful discriminatory practices in the private sector" (that is, going after diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives); pursuing doctors, hospitals, and

pharmaceutical companies that provide care to transgender children; and ending sanctuary-city protections. The Civil Rights Division has been upended, going from a unit entrusted with protecting minority rights in voting, housing, and education into one whose stated missions include "protecting children from chemical and surgical mutilation," "ending radical indoctrination in K-12 schooling," "keeping men out of women's sports," and "eradicating anti-Christian bias."

With the shift in focus has come a cataclysmic upheaval in personnel. Bondi is not the first Republican-appointed Attorney General to chafe at overseeing a workforce that undoubtedly skews liberal. But no Attorney General has been so overtly at odds with the staff she supervises. "There are a lot of people in the F.B.I. and also in the Department of Justice who despise Donald Trump, despise us, don't want to be there," Bondi told Hannity in March. "We're going to root them out. We will find them, and they will no longer be employed." Bondi spoke of the lawyers she oversees in the terms that Administration officials use for individuals they target for deportation: "We're starting at every level of the Justice Department and getting rid of the worst of the worst."

Thousands of employees have taken a buyout offer from the new regime. Not surprisingly, some seventy per cent of the Civil Rights Division's two hundred and fifty lawyers have left, much to the apparent delight of Assistant Attorney General Harmeet Dhillon. "I think that's fine," Dhillon told the radio host Glenn Beck in April. "The job here is to enforce the federal civil-rights laws—not woke ideology." Other departures have been more damaging to the Administration. More than half the attorneys in the Federal Programs Branch, which defends executive orders and other Administration actions against lawsuits, have left, limiting the department's ability to litigate the onslaught of cases it faces. In the élite Office of the Solicitor General, which represents the Administration before the Supreme Court, at least half the career lawyers have resigned.

Stacey Young, who left the D.O.J. in January and founded Justice Connection, a group that supports department employees, estimates that two hundred staffers have been dismissed or transferred to lesser positions. Generally, no reason is provided, in seeming violation of civil-service laws

that protect employees from being fired without cause and without being given due process. Instead, a typical letter of dismissal, signed by the Attorney General, invokes Article II of the United States Constitution—the provision establishing the authority of the President—and states, “You are removed from federal service effective immediately.” One lawyer was fired because he failed to remove his preferred pronouns from his e-mail signature, according to a department official, who said that the Attorney General possesses the power to terminate employees “for any reason or no reason whatever.”

The purge has served to intimidate those who remain in the Justice Department, diminishing the threat of pushback. Among those dismissed was the head of the Office of Professional Responsibility, which handles ethics complaints against department attorneys; no one has been named to fill that role. In late January, the Justice Department’s senior career lawyer and chief ethics adviser, Bradley Weinsheimer, was removed as Associate Deputy Attorney General, a position to which he was appointed during the first Trump Administration. The ethics matters he handled, including advising senior department officials about whether to recuse themselves from particular issues, were transferred to two political appointees.

In July, Bondi fired the department’s senior career ethics lawyer, Joseph Tirrell, in a letter that misspelled his name as “Jospeh.” In his first interview since being terminated, Tirrell told me that he presumed he was fired because of his decision, in the closing weeks of the Biden Administration, to sign off on Jack Smith’s request to accept pro-bono legal services from the Washington law firm Covington & Burling. As Tirrell describes it, the decision was a no-brainer. Federal regulations explicitly permit government employees to take free help for legal matters that arise in connection with their employment, and Trump’s campaign-trail demands that Smith be prosecuted meant that the special counsel was wise to prepare for that eventuality. Tirrell has filed a lawsuit challenging his dismissal. “They’re firing people solely for doing the work that they were required to do,” he said. “There’s definitely this culture of fear that’s been created in the department.”

One of the driving convictions of the Bondi Justice Department is that its predecessor, acting at the direction of the White House, improperly pursued Trump. Numerous prosecutors who worked on the criminal cases against Trump have been fired. “Obviously, you cannot have the people who were prosecuting the President of the United States still working for the President of the United States,” Mizelle said. “I mean, we would be stupid, right?” (For department veterans, that is not at all obvious. The career prosecutors assigned to work on the Trump cases were following legitimate instructions from the political officials in charge, much as Bondi has demanded of the career staff that reports to her.)

Bondi has created a “weaponization” working group to examine what Trump has called the “unprecedented, third-world weaponization of prosecutorial power to upend the democratic process.” Whether it will produce the actual indictments—not to mention convictions—that Trump craves is far from clear, but its activities have ramped up. Early this month, Bondi reportedly authorized Ed Martin—a former Stop the Steal activist who heads the new working group—to open criminal investigations into Senator Adam Schiff and New York’s attorney general, Letitia James. Schiff, as the chair of the House Intelligence Committee, had helped lead the 2020 impeachment proceedings, and James had successfully brought a civil fraud case against Trump. The New York *Times* also reported that the acting U.S. Attorney in Albany was investigating whether James’s office had violated Trump’s civil rights in pursuing its fraud suit.

Jared Wise, a former F.B.I. agent who was criminally charged with encouraging the January 6th insurrection, recently joined the department to work on weaponization. According to his indictment, Wise told D.C. police officers at the Capitol that day, “I’m former law enforcement. You’re disgusting. You are the Nazi. You are the Gestapo.” As officers were knocked to the ground in front of him, Wise, according to body-camera footage, yelled, “Yeah, fuck them! Yeah, kill ’em!” The jury in Wise’s case was about to begin deliberating when Trump took office and ordered such prosecutions dismissed. In a statement, a department spokesperson called Wise “a valued member of the organization,” adding, “We appreciate his contributions.”

Under Bondi, perceived weaponization has produced the real thing. But Justice Department officials bristle at the suggestion that her actions are anything beyond a necessary response to Biden Administration overreach. “I don’t think you will be taken seriously,” Mizelle warned me, “if you don’t acknowledge that prosecuting the former President of the United States was the single greatest shift toward weaponization that the Department of Justice ever could have undergone. And so any sort of notion that anything she does is even comparable to that just can’t be taken seriously. It’s laughable.”

This raises the unsettling question of what happens when a Democrat is elected President. Does one purge beget another? Once the criminal-justice system is deployed against political enemies, can that cycle be broken? I was haunted by my conversation with Sauer, the Solicitor General, who praised Bondi’s “absolute sense” of the “strategic judgment calls” that must be made in litigation. “When is it time to show judgment and restraint?” Sauer asked. “When is it time to be creative and aggressive . . . in taking a legal position that will advance the President’s agenda?” I suggested that it was hard to discern much restraint in the legal positions the department has advocated under Bondi. The Solicitor General laughed. “We view it,” he said, “the opposite way.” ♦

*Ruth Marcus, a former columnist for the Washington Post, became a contributing writer at The New Yorker in June, 2025. She is the author of “Supreme Ambition: Brett Kavanaugh and the Conservative Takeover.”*

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**U.S. Journal**

# Bill Belichick Goes Back to School

*Can the legendary former Patriots coach transform U.N.C. football?*

***By Paige Williams***

*August 18, 2025*

*The Tar Heels are being called “the thirty-third N.F.L. team” before the first snap. But everyone in Chapel Hill wants to talk about the coach’s girlfriend.Illustration by Madison Ketcham*

On the morning of December 12th, Bubba Cunningham, the athletic director at the University of North Carolina, in Chapel Hill, sent the football team’s equipment manager to pick up a U.N.C. sweatshirt with removable sleeves. He asked his wife to go to Goodwill and buy a suit jacket. Cut the sleeves off, he texted her, then added, “(Seriously).”

Sixteen days earlier, U.N.C. had announced the retirement of its football coach, Mack Brown. This had come as news to Brown. Cunningham was now preparing to reveal his replacement: Bill Belichick, who led the New England Patriots to a record six Super Bowl victories before leaving the team in January, 2024, fifteen wins shy of breaking Don Shula’s record as the winningest head coach in N.F.L. history. Colleges had hired former N.F.L. coaches before (Pete Carroll, at U.S.C.; Nick Saban, at Alabama), but there was no coach quite like Belichick, a brilliant tactician with an introvert’s appetite for granular detail, a shabby habit of wearing the sleeves of his sweatshirts cut off near the elbow, and the delicacy of a junk-yard dog. As far back as 1993, during Belichick’s first head-coaching job, with the Cleveland Browns, *Sports Illustrated* described him as “an automaton who offers no positive motivation and sees players only as faceless cogs.” At press conferences, he delivered curt non-answers or sometimes simply walked out of the room. Observers, including colleagues, called him

“robotic,” “gray,” “flat,” “the Kremlin,” “Sominex,” “Asshole,” “Doom and Gloom,” “a potted palm,” and “the greatest enigma in sports.” After two Patriots cheating scandals—Spygate (2007) and Deflategate (2015)—Shula started calling him “Belicheat.”

The split with the Patriots and the team’s owner, Bob Kraft, was characterized as mutual. No one believed that. According to ESPN, the Atlanta Falcons came close to hiring Belichick; then Kraft warned the Falcons’ owner that Belichick, whom he’d worked with for a quarter century, was arrogant, untrustworthy, domineering, cold. Belichick got no offers. For the first time in forty-nine years, he spent football season not on the field but as a TV commentator—a member of the media, which he’d always seemed to despise.

U.N.C., a twenty-eight-sport school that plays in the Atlantic Coast Conference, calls its athletic teams the Tar Heels, a reference to the distinctive footprints made by Colonial laborers who worked in turpentine distilleries. Carolina is a basketball school, and Chapel Hill is a basketball town. The men’s team has won as many national championships as Belichick has Patriots-era Super Bowl rings. Shelby Swanson, a recent U.N.C. grad who was the sports editor for the *Daily Tar Heel*, Carolina’s student newspaper, recently told me, “I’m from here. Both of my parents went to U.N.C. I just graduated from U.N.C. Basketball is the national brand.” Football has always been “sort of an afterthought,” she said, adding, “I mean no disrespect to the great players who’ve come through here, but literally for the entirety of my life I don’t think U.N.C. football has been nationally relevant.”

Carolina’s football team has never won a national championship, and last won a conference title in 1980, when Lawrence Taylor played linebacker. Fans have been known to arrive at games late and leave early, if they come at all. Yet U.N.C. football has repeatedly, and wishfully, been called a “sleeping giant,” as if all the team needed were a jolt.

At two o’clock on the day that Cunningham sent his wife to Goodwill, Belichick’s hiring was announced at a standing-room-only press conference on campus. U.N.C.’s chancellor gave Belichick the sweatshirt; Cunningham got a laugh by putting on the mutilated jacket. Belichick calmly answered

reporters' questions. When one asked whether he was biding his time until he could get back to the N.F.L., Belichick, without ripping the guy's head off, replied, "I didn't come here to leave."

Hours after the announcement, an enterprising U.N.C. alum trademarked the nickname Chapel Bill. It zipped into circulation in the shops on Franklin Street, the backbone of Chapel Hill's historic core, where one need only step over a low stone wall to be on campus. U.N.C., the oldest public university in the United States, opened in 1795, predating the town that grew up around it. Chapel Hill, which is closer to Virginia than to South Carolina, sits midway between the Blue Ridge Mountains and the Atlantic Ocean, in forests so dense that, this time of year, one can lose sight of the horizon amid a disorienting spectrum of sun-soaked green. In June, Thad Dixon, a new Carolina defensive back and a Los Angeles native, referenced the "culture shock" of moving to Chapel Hill by saying, "There's a lot of trees out here, bro."

The men's basketball team plays in the Dean Dome, which is named for Dean Smith, U.N.C.'s most revered coach, who led the team from 1961 to 1997, winning two championships and thirteen A.C.C. tournament titles. Smith integrated Carolina basketball, and helped integrate Chapel Hill. He stressed team over self, a philosophy that became known as the Carolina Way. There is never any question of filling the Dean Dome. Cunningham decided to present Belichick there, on December 14th, at halftime of a game against La Salle.

The equipment manager had made another stop, at Julian's, a men's clothier that has been on Franklin Street since 1942. The store occupies a long ground-floor space fragrant with polished wood and good wool. The owner, Bart Fox, often works at a desk in the rear, where a muted television shows whatever Carolina game happens to be on. The equipment manager asked for sports jackets, shirts, and ties, telling Fox, "You have five minutes. He's gonna be on camera."

Fox assessed Belichick to be just shy of six feet tall, barrel-chested, and still "mostly muscle," with none of the stooping that begins to happen to men in middle age. He selected a lightweight wool jacket in a hopsack weave that featured a tight pattern of light blue, medium blue, and eggshell, which

together created the appearance of the official school color, Carolina blue, a color that must never be called baby blue or powder blue. Fox described it to me as the blue that a Chapel Hillian sees when looking up at the sky on a nice day. (But don't call it sky blue, either.) U.N.C. had tinkered with Carolina blue over the years, arriving at a slightly richer shade for uniforms: Pantone 542. Older alums griped, but optics prevailed—the new version popped on television.

At the Dean Dome, the court cleared for halftime, and an m.c. stepped out with a mike. After congratulating the U.N.C. women's soccer team for its twenty-third national title, he introduced Belichick as "one of, if not *the*, best ever." Belichick joined him and said, "Can't wait to get started." He often mumbles and speaks so inaudibly that Swanson, the former *Daily Tar Heel* sports editor, told me she once had to borrow audio from someone who'd placed a recording device directly beneath his mouth at a presser.

The crowd cheered, but I wouldn't say wildly. Julian's framed a photo of Belichick's appearance, pairing it with a mannequin outfitted in the clothing that Fox had selected, and added a sign: "Dress like coach!" The sign was leaned against a larger framed image—of Dean Smith, on the cover of *Sports Illustrated*, shown triumphantly cutting down a championship net.


*"And then she opened Instagram, anticipating fresh new content—only to realize that she'd just closed it two seconds ago!"*
*Cartoon by Yinfan Huang*

In Chapel Hill, all kinds of things get painted Carolina blue: fences, buildings, hair, fire trucks. About twelve years ago, a contractor named Geary Blackwood hauled a massive flint rock to one of his properties, on a busy highway, to mark a row of mailboxes that kept getting mowed down. He decorated the rock with some leftover paint, which turned out to be "kind of a darker blue," he told me. "In this part of the country, that doesn't sit too well with a lot of people." Dark blue is the color of U.N.C.'s archrival, Duke, a private university in Durham, one town over.

Blackwood recently went to a hardware store where an employee had become known for her ability to mix a proper Carolina blue, and bought new paint. At Walmart, he bought bucketloads of industrial glitter. While the paint was wet, he used a leaf blower to bedazzle the rock. "When the sun hits it, it's beautiful," Blackwood told me. We were standing within sight of the rock on a nuclear afternoon in July; the surface did have the twinkling depth of a star-choked sky. I asked him why he'd decided to repaint it now. He said that it was to honor Belichick's predecessor, Mack Brown—"a beautiful man." Blackwood, and a lot of others I met in Chapel Hill, felt that the university had treated Brown harshly at the end of his tenure. When I asked what he thought of Belichick, he said, "I really like Mack Brown a lot."

Blackwood climbed onto a front loader and drove it off the back of a flatbed truck. He and a crew had spent the morning working on a refurbishment project at Kenan Stadium, where the football team has played since 1927, and where the Belichick era will formally begin, on the evening of September 1st, when the Tar Heels host Texas Christian University. Season tickets sold out, even with a price hike of twenty-five per cent. Individual tickets have sold out, too. Gabe Feldman, a sports-law professor at Tulane, told me, "The attention on those first few games is going to be unlike anything we've ever seen in college sports. It's something people still can't quite wrap their heads around." Carolina football is being called "the thirty-third N.F.L. team" before the first snap.

The author and sportswriter Art Chansky grew up in Newton, Massachusetts, near Boston. He moved to Chapel Hill in the seventies, to attend U.N.C., and stayed. As a longtime Patriots fan, he considered

Belichick a “hero,” he told me this summer. We were sitting on the patio at a chain restaurant called First Watch, eating from a hot skillet of blueberry-lemon cornbread. “He’s a genius of the nuances of football,” Chansky told me. “But can he get the players—and enough of them? That’s the big question. And can he coach them?” Belichick has spent his entire career focussing on experienced, peak-conditioned professionals, not teen-agers weeks out of high school. Chansky wondered what might happen when Belichick inevitably “gets tough on them.” In recent years, the N.C.A.A. has streamlined the transfer process, making it relatively easy for a player who feels slighted to change schools in a huff. As a sports psychologist at U.N.C. once pointed out, the football players often present as grown men, but beneath the uniform “they’re still college students.”

Or at least they’re supposed to be. Student athletes are expected to balance competition with scholastics, a once sacrosanct ideal that’s getting overshadowed as intercollegiate sports increasingly resembles the pros. A player who fails classes may lose a scholarship or a spot on a roster—a coach is supposed to monitor academic performance—but at this point all you hear about is money. In June, a federal court in California finalized a settlement, in House v. N.C.A.A., allowing colleges, for the first time, to share a certain percentage of athletic revenue with their players. U.N.C. athletics brought in a hundred and fifty-one million dollars in 2023-24, about half of which came from television rights and ticket sales. Per the House settlement, the school can now spend $20.5 million paying athletes, with an allowable annual increase of four per cent. (Football and men’s basketball are expected to receive most of the money, because they earn the most.) Allocating a fixed amount of cash up and down a roster involves weighing the dollar value of each position; overspend on your quarterback and you’ll have less money to attract the players necessary to support him. Belichick had to make such calculations constantly in the N.F.L., which has a salary cap.

College sports was already being transformed by the “name, image, and likeness” rule, or N.I.L., which took effect in 2021, allowing student athletes to be compensated for appearances, autographs, and endorsements—the kind of thing that used to result in penalties. That first year, the N.I.L. market was worth an estimated nine hundred and seventeen million dollars;

it's now worth an estimated $2.3 billion. Star players have landed million-dollar deals with brands like Bose and 7-Eleven. Shedeur Sanders (of the Cleveland Browns) reportedly had an N.I.L. value of $4.8 million at the University of Colorado, where he played for his father, Deion. The U.N.C. quarterback Drake Maye (now of the Patriots) had deals with Jimmy's Famous Seafood and Zoa Energy, which is owned by Dwayne (The Rock) Johnson, and with Mitchell Heating and Cooling. In 2022, Maye, addressing rumors about courtship from other teams, told a reporter, "Sadly, I think money is becoming a reason why kids go places," and "I think college football is going to turn into a mess."

This spring, the *Times* declared U.N.C. to be "at the forefront of the next stage of the N.I.L. era." Carolina has more than eight hundred student athletes, and Article 41, a self-described "talent management and social training" firm, was trying to turn all of them into influencers. Vickie Segar, a founder of the company, said that U.N.C. wants "every athlete at the school to make as much money as possible because it will get better athletes." In Chapel Hill, I heard people talking about athletes who drove brand-new vehicles, acquired from local dealers in exchange for social-media posts. Restaurants name dishes after players and let them eat for free. Alex Brandwein, the owner of Brandwein's Bagels, offers a gift card, branded swag, and, during finals, free bagels and coffee to any U.N.C. athlete who joins "Team Brandwein," which currently has a couple of hundred members. Brandwein, a native New Yorker and a U.N.C. business alum, who used to work in finance, told me, "We just want to give some shine and say thank you." Brandwein's loses nothing if a player leaves. At Chapel Hill Sportswear, on Franklin Street, Holly Dedmond, the store's longtime manager, showed me racks of unsalable N.I.L. merchandise tied to players who'd wound up transferring.

In the N.F.L., Belichick had the draft, in which teams select from a pool of eligible players, who have little control over where they land; as a college coach, he has to recruit, which requires persuasion—people skills. Belichick's forte has always been strategy. He learned that from his father, Steve Belichick, who was a legendary college scout. Steve spent two seasons as an assistant coach at U.N.C. (1953 to 1955) before taking an assistant-coaching job at the U.S. Naval Academy, in Annapolis, from

which he ultimately retired after thirty-three years. He showed Belichick, an only child, how to break down game film when he was still in elementary school. In “The Education of a Coach,” the journalist David Halberstam writes that Belichick had a coach’s mind by age ten. “All I *knew* was college football,” Belichick said at the U.N.C. presser. He showed off a vintage Carolina sweatshirt that he said had belonged to his dad. A photograph of Belichick as a toddler in the bleachers at Kenan Stadium was floating around. One had to strain to believe him when he claimed that his first words were “Beat Duke.”

When I was in Chapel Hill this summer, the coaches and the players were away, but you could sense a large machine shifting gears. In the N.F.L., Belichick famously resisted hiring a general manager, but he had hired one at Carolina, Michael Lombardi, whom he has known since his days with the Browns. They were revamping the football facilities the way that an incoming President personalizes the White House. U.N.C. had replaced the stadium’s body-wrecking synthetic turf with sixty-seven thousand square feet of Tahoma 31 Bermuda sod—Belichick wants his team playing on real grass. There had also been talk of bringing back boxwood hedges, which once bordered the playing field and provided a snack for the team’s wildly popular live mascot, Rameses, a Dorset ram whose curled horns its owners and handlers, the Hogans, an eleventh-generation farming family in Chapel Hill, ceremonially paint Carolina blue every autumn.

Real grass requires more upkeep. U.N.C. recently hired its first chief revenue officer and will soon hire a new executive director of the Rams Club, the athletics booster organization. The Rams Club has raised more than three hundred and fifty million dollars since 2019—some years up, some years down. Dedmond, the Franklin Street sportswear merchant, and a U.N.C. alum, told me, “If there’s one thing I’ve learned in the past thirty years, it’s that even though some of us Carolina fans are true blue, down to the core, there are plenty more that are bandwagon fans. If your team got beat bad on Saturday afternoon, you’re not gonna proudly wear your Carolina polo to work on Monday morning. That’s a real thing. People get embarrassed and ashamed, and they will put their Carolina stuff in the very *back* of the closet if the team’s not winning.” Chansky, the sportswriter, told me, “Hiring Bill Belichick is either one of the greatest hires that any school

has ever made or it's the biggest embarrassment that U.N.C. will ever have."

Everywhere I went in Chapel Hill, people wanted to talk about "the girlfriend," or, as one woman, a highly educated medical professional, put it, "that *Jordon* person." She meant Jordon Hudson, whom Belichick has been dating for a few years and who is twenty-four—forty-nine years his junior. Belichick has three children, and all of them are older than Hudson: Amanda, the head coach of women's lacrosse at Holy Cross, in Massachusetts, is in her early forties; Steve and Brian, former Patriots coaches who have joined Belichick's U.N.C. staff, are in their thirties. The Belichick children are products of Belichick's only marriage, to Debby Clarke Belichick, whom he met in high school and married in 1977. She owns an interior-design firm in Massachusetts and was rarely mentioned in connection with Belichick's N.F.L. career. Chansky believes that football is "old-fashioned," and told me that fans preferred coaches to have wives and girlfriends who "never said peep."

In February, 2007, not long after Bill and Debby divorced "quietly and amicably," as Halberstam put it, the *Post* reported that Belichick had been named in a New Jersey divorce case concerning a former receptionist for the New York Giants, where Belichick won his first two Super Bowl rings, as defensive coördinator. Belichick had been sending the woman "about $3,000 a month" for several years, and had provided her with a "$25,000 Jersey Shore summer rental" and "a private jet to Disney World." He'd also bought her a "secret $2.2 million Park Slope town house" with "stained-glass windows and parquet floors." (The woman has called Belichick a "family friend.")

That year, Belichick met a new friend, Linda Holliday. She was a decade younger than him, with twin teen-age daughters. She owned a clothing boutique and was a former Mrs. Little Rock who'd gone on to be runner-up in the Mrs. Arkansas pageant. Belichick and Holliday began dating, and spent time together in Florida and in Hingham, down the shore from Boston and not far from Foxborough, where the Patriots play. They also hung out on Nantucket, where Belichick lived in the off-season and, according to the Boston *Globe*, has amassed ten million dollars' worth of property. A friend

of Holliday's told me that Belichick sometimes attended gatherings, and hosted the occasional crab boil, but that he preferred private, more solitary activities, like paddleboarding.

In 2013, Holliday became president of the newly created Bill Belichick Foundation, which supported youth-sports organizations. She appeared with Belichick on red carpets and at Patriots events, once wearing a custom-made Patriots hoodie with "*BELICHICK*" spelled out in Swarovski crystals. In the summer of 2017, the couple got the cover of *Nantucket Magazine*, with the headline "Belichick & Holliday: America's Winningest Team." The publication declared Holliday the "kryptonite to soften the steeliest coach in the game." Belichick called her "the rose next to the thorn."

Belichick was on the verge of a tumultuous period. In 2020, the Patriots' star quarterback, Tom Brady, left the team and then signed with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers. Belichick had taken Brady in the sixth round of the draft, in 2000, and helped him develop into the greatest quarterback of all time; many wondered what the Patriots would be without him. In 2021, Tampa won the Super Bowl, and Brady got ring No. 7. The Patriots, meanwhile, were struggling. A former Patriots cornerback, Asante Samuel, Jr., tweeted that, with Brady gone, Belichick was "just another coach."

Four days after Brady's seventh Super Bowl win, Belichick met Hudson, on a commercial flight from Boston to Palm Beach. She was a student at Bridgewater State University, where she cheered competitively, and she had just been licensed as a cosmetologist. Hudson later posted a photograph of an inscription that Belichick had made in her "Deductive Logic" textbook: "Thanks for giving me a course on logic!" Below his signature, he listed the Super Bowls that he'd won with the Patriots. He repeated one, naming seven, not six—a curious mistake from a guy known for his fastidiousness.

In the 2022 season, the Patriots went 8–9, and failed to make the playoffs, for the second time in three years. In January, 2023, a video surfaced online, showing Belichick walking in New Orleans with a woman who turned out to be Hudson. "Linda was shocked," Holliday's friend told me. "She had no idea there was another girl." That fall, *People* reported that Holliday and Belichick had separated.

Another video soon went around, showing Ring footage of Belichick, shirtless, leaving an Airbnb on the Massachusetts coast, where he and Hudson had reportedly vacationed. By the time it appeared, Belichick was in what would be his final season with the Patriots, and was headed for his worst record in twenty-four years with the team. He had another year on his contract, worth twenty-five million dollars. The Patriots again failed to make the playoffs. Belichick departed the organization.

Halberstam had written that Belichick was "uneasy about and distrustful of the world of modern media and public relations precisely because he saw it as a world of people wanting to know the wrong things about him and his players. It wanted him to be more charismatic. There was a great contradiction here: He was ferociously driven, and his drive had made him a singular success, and his success had made him a celebrity," which he "most demonstrably did not want to be." Belichick was so resistant to social media that he dismissed Instagram as "Instaface." He was so private that, according to Halberstam, he once barked at a reporter for daring to ask how one of his kids was doing after a tonsillectomy.

Yet, once he and Hudson were dating, he started to appear in her social-media posts, in scenarios that seemed starkly out of character. On Instagram, he allowed himself to be seen in a Halloween costume: a fisherman pretending to catch Hudson, a mermaid. In another picture, he lay on a beach with his legs up, balancing Hudson like an airplane, which is both a form of acroyoga and the game that parents play with very small children. (Last week, Belichick said that his players at U.N.C. have been using yoga as part of their post-training recovery regimen.) As recently as 2018, the *Globe* had declared, "His image is rarely for sale. No Dunkin' Donuts spots. No how-to books. No exclusive line of hoodies." But, during this year's Super Bowl, there was Belichick—in a Dunkin' ad, with Hudson. Her L.L.C., Trouble Cub Enterprises, filed paperwork to trademark famous Belichickisms. "No days off!" and "Do your job!" had already been nabbed, by the Patriots, as had "Chapel Bill," by the U.N.C. alum, a lawyer in Manhattan. Hudson borrowed a Taylor Swift workaround: "Chapel Bill (Bill's Version)." The press reported that she was scooping up millions of dollars' worth of real estate in Massachusetts.

This past December, Hudson showed up at a popular Christmas gala on Nantucket, where Holliday's daughters were d.j.'ing. Hudson was with the reigning Miss Massachusetts U.S.A., who had on a sash and a tiara. Friends of Holliday's—and then Holliday herself—asked Hudson to leave. She refused, and the confrontation got heated enough that an employee of the venue wrote an internal incident report, which TMZ later published. The report noted that Hudson "was a paying guest" and that "no concerns had been raised regarding her behavior." The employee nevertheless escorted Hudson out and wrote that Holliday said, at the time, "If this didn't involve my girls, I don't think this would have bothered me as much," adding, "The 'momma bear' in me came out."

Holliday declined to speak with me. Elin Hilderbrand, a novelist and a friend of Holliday's, who was part of the group that asked Hudson to leave the event, told me, "No punches were thrown, no hair was pulled. But we did suggest she leave because we thought it was grossly inappropriate for her to be there." She explained, "Bill and Linda were together since the girls were, like, fourteen years old, and they thought of him as a father figure."

The week following the gala, Belichick was announced as U.N.C.'s next head football coach. Almost immediately, Hudson became a presence in university matters. Belichick asked a member of the athletics-communications staff to include her on all his e-mail correspondence. HBO was considering featuring U.N.C. and Belichick on "Hard Knocks," a series that typically profiles an N.F.L. team in the run-up to the season opener, until Hudson was said to have demanded an executive-producer title, and the plan fell through. (Belichick, through a university spokesperson, said that the show's format "did not fit what we wanted to do.")


*“This is not the summer banger I was promised.”*
*Cartoon by Lars Kenseth*

In April, during the Tar Heels’ spring training, Hudson accompanied Belichick to a public event called Practice Like a Pro, where she stalked on and off the field officiously, miking Belichick and flashing people the thumbs-up. Critics noted her miniskirt, duster, and tall white spike-heeled boots. One wrote, “Some kid is gonna tear an MCL tripping on a divot she left in the turf.” Other barbs included “attention seeking,” “Gold digger,” “Meghan Markle vibes,” “how did we get from Dean Smith to this?!,” and “Your football program is now officially a punchline.” Chansky, who is in his late seventies, told me, “It’s fine with *me* if Belichick wants to have a twenty-four-year-old girlfriend, but you can’t have one who’s getting all the headlines.” He added, “There’s still an understanding around here that you do things with a certain *tone* to it.” Belichick later told Michael Strahan, a down pillow of an interviewer, that Hudson represented his personal business interests only. In another interview, he insisted that Hudson “doesn’t have anything to do with U.N.C. football.”

Belichick had a memoir forthcoming, “The Art of Winning,” about his nearly fifty years with the N.F.L. In late April, he appeared on “CBS News Sunday Morning” to promote the book. Hudson accompanied him and watched the interview in progress. When Belichick was asked how they’d met, she interjected, “We’re not talking about this,” then reportedly stormed out and asked Belichick to come along. The clip went viral.

Hudson was ridiculed as overbearing and defensive. On Instagram, the comedian Nikki Glaser remarked that she appeared to have been simply acting as Belichick's publicist; an account attributed to Belichick's daughter-in-law Jen Belichick, who's married to Steve, replied, "Publicists act in a professional manner and don't 'storm' off set delaying an interview."

Charlotte Wilder, who had been dissecting the Belichick-Hudson affair with Madeline Hill on their podcast, "The Sports Gossip Show," told CNN, "If I were the parent of a student athlete and I saw a coach whose public narrative is completely out of control, I would ask, 'Why are *you* the guy who can then guide my children through this program?' " In May, Wilder and Hill showed up in Maine to watch Hudson compete in the Miss Maine U.S.A. pageant, and then did an episode about it. (Last year, Hudson was the pageant's runner-up. This year, she came in third; Belichick watched from the front row.) One night last month, according to Wilder, her phone rang. To her surprise, it was Hudson. Wilder says that she and Hill had several conversations with her, hoping to land an on-air interview. Then they did an episode about the phone calls, saying that, after some "yelling" and "crying," Hudson had eventually gone silent.

Belichick declined, through U.N.C., to speak with me, and when I tried to reach Hudson, also through U.N.C., I got no response. She sometimes claps back at her detractors ("Keep swinging, Keyboard Warriors"), though she became somewhat less visible after the pileup of embarrassments led U.N.C. faculty members and donors to express concerns about the school's reputation. According to the Raleigh *News & Observer*, one U.N.C. law professor asked Cunningham, the athletic director, "What amount of pride are we willing to sacrifice for (perhaps) a few more wins per year? What happened to the Carolina Way?" A local real-estate agent, Shenandoah Nieuwsma, who has a Ph.D. in religious studies from U.N.C., told me, of Belichick, "The only way he can dig himself out of this is by winning."

At least one of Chansky's books, on Dean Smith and racial integration, is taught in U.N.C.'s history department, but he told me that he specializes in "short form." He gets to the point in conversation, too. We had barely sat down to our blueberry cornbread when he mentioned President Donald

Trump: “Pardon my French, but this fucking country elected him—twice! It’s beyond my belief! This town is as divided as any place, but it’s mostly blue.”

The President may have been on Chansky’s mind because of how Belichick got his new job. “Remember, he wasn’t their first pick,” a host on NESN, the New England Sports Network, recently said. It has been widely reported that U.N.C. did not go to Belichick; Belichick went to the U.S. Secretary of State, Marco Rubio, the former senator from Florida. (Belichick owns a condo in Jupiter, near Palm Beach.) Rubio told Thom Tillis, who represents North Carolina in the Senate, that Belichick was looking for a “school with a sterling academic reputation that would allow him to build a program towards a national championship,” the *News & Observer* reported. Tillis then contacted the North Carolina Senate’s president pro tem, whose former chief of staff was the U.N.C. system’s general counsel. WRAL, in Raleigh, noted the development by saying that U.N.C. leaders “pushed back” on a “suggestion that the well worn path between the General Assembly and Chapel Hill represents a good-ol’-boy system.” On NESN, a host put it this way: “Bill bullied his way into the job.”

Belichick, who has known Trump for more than twenty years, publicly backed him in 2016. I met Chapel Hillians who suspected that this affinity, which appeared to involve a mutual hatred of the press, didn’t hurt him with U.N.C., whose governing board has close ties to wealthy Republicans. Nieuwsma, the real-estate agent, told me, “A lot of faculty, and the general public, are kind of upset about the way the administration at U.N.C. is going.” In a recent editorial, the *Daily Tar Heel* pointed out that U.N.C.’s chancellor, Lee H. Roberts, who served as the state’s budget director from 2014 to 2016, had supported allocating “the lowest share of funding to higher education since 1981,” and suggested that, among other things, he favored “millionaires at the expense of working-class North Carolinians,” including low-income students at U.N.C.

U.N.C. is paying Belichick fifty million dollars over five years, making him, by orders of magnitude, the highest-paid public employee in the state. “Please explain how UNC is suddenly so flush with money?” a U.N.C. economics professor, Peter Norman, asked university officials this spring,

according to the *News & Observer*, whose journalists obtained e-mails about Belichick via open-records requests. Norman wondered how U.N.C. could afford to pay its football coach ten million dollars a year when academic departments were "always told that there are not enough funds to hire the number of professors that we need." There was a rumor that Belichick, who can buy out his own contract for a million dollars, had taken the Carolina job on the condition that his son Steve, the Tar Heels' defensive coördinator, succeed him. Steve is being paid $1.3 million. Brian Belichick, who also coaches defense, makes half a million dollars. The state pays the average U.N.C.-system professor a hundred and twelve thousand dollars a year.

When the news of Belichick's hiring went public, Matthew Andrews, a U.N.C. professor who focusses on the intersection of sports and history, was at a pub. "There were these five middle-aged guys at the bar, and they stood up and high-fived and were jumping up and down," he told me. "I was, like, Oh, I guess *some* people are actually quite excited about this. If you think football is the most important thing ever, you're pretty excited about Bill Belichick. And if you think that we waste a lot of time talking about football, and that football is a symptom of many problems, you're down on the Belichick era."

I had run into Andrews at a coffee shop, where he was chatting with Swanson, the former *Daily Tar Heel* sports editor, who was leaving the next morning for a summer internship at the Minnesota *Star Tribune*. They were sitting outside, beneath a dense canopy and near thickets of ivy, where a sign warned of copperhead snakes. Andrews, who has taught at U.N.C. since the late nineties, told me about "the Matt Doherty years," in the early aughts—a dark time of bad basketball. "Sports bars went out of business," he said. "They rely on these nights when people come in and spend a hundred dollars each, on beer and wings. I knew sports were emotionally important. I didn't realize how *financially* important they are to the community." Yet Andrews didn't want Belichick—or his girlfriend—to become "the face of this town and this university," he said. "I'm *already* uneasy with football coaches being the face of universities."

A contingent in Chapel Hill, Andrews went on, wants the football team to fail. “They don’t want to be a football school,” he explained. “We want to be a basketball school.” In the evolving ecosystem of college sports, universities like Carolina will need to be both. “I realized this when Alabama beat us for the third year in a row in basketball,” Andrews said. “I’m, like, Wait a minute. Alabama is not supposed to beat us in *basketball*. Then it’s, like, Oh, their *football* money is buying *basketball* players.” He looked at Swanson and said, “If we’re not good at basketball, what *are* we?”

“I’ve spoken to Olympic-sport coaches and there’s two schools of thought,” Swanson replied. “One is that we want to make sure our sports are prioritized and funded, and when we see that so much money is dedicated to football—we disagree with that. Another school of thought is that there’ll be a trickle-down effect.”

“What it doesn’t trickle down to is the history department,” Andrews said.

One Saturday, I dropped by Lapin Bleu, which calls itself “a *JAZZ BAR* with a *HOCKEY PROBLEM*.” The owner, Mike Benson, was sitting with a few regulars, watching a television with the sound off. Carolina’s baseball team was in the seventh inning of game two of the super regionals, against Arizona. The team was trying to return to Omaha, for the College World Series, for the second year in a row. On another TV, “Jaws” was showing. Roy Scheider had just learned that he was gonna need a bigger boat.

The House v. N.C.A.A. settlement had been finalized a day earlier. One of Benson’s friends, Chip Hoppin, a fifty-year-old screen-printer who was drinking Guinness, whirled around on his barstool and said that he strongly supported paying student athletes but that money was “ruining *all* of sports, honestly.” He said, “Would *you* pay any seventeen- or eighteen-year-old to do anything—carpentry, play an instrument at your wedding—before the job’s done? No!” He preferred an incentive model: win a conference or a national championship, here’s a bonus. College football had become a free-for-all because of “rich old white guys with so much money they don’t give a fuck about *anything*.”

“They give a shit about winning,” Benson said.

“They care about selling concessions and selling seats—to them, that’s winning,” Hoppin said, adding, “When I win the lottery, I’m gonna be the most humanitarian motherfucker on the planet.” Of Belichick, he said, “Motherfucker’s a Trumper. You think he cares about *people*?”

Benson’s girlfriend came in with their dog, Cowboy. Arizona scored four runs, and took the lead. On the other TV, the shark hunters spent a tense night in their creaking boat, singing “Show Me the Way to Go Home.” Hoppin, moving on to “the freaking real-estate market,” said, “Who can buy a house right now? No one! Houses cost a million dollars. They’re not seventy thousand dollars anymore. Your kids literally can’t keep their eyes off their screens. You’re expecting them to go off into the workforce and actually *work*? When’s the last time *anything* was made in America? Everyone’s, like, ‘We’re gonna bring factories back!’ It takes twenty *years* to bring back industry!”

“I disagree,” Benson said. “There is a factory that’s thriving in America. It’s called the Cheesecake Factory.”

“Do you realize that hundreds of Latinos, at every single construction site, are getting shipped out of here, arrested?” Hoppin said. “What are all these contractors—who are Republicans, by the way, who voted for Trump—gonna do? Where are all the white people lining up for these jobs? Where are all the white people lining up to pick lettuce and rutabagas and shit? Mike’s, like, ‘Chip, shut up, just have fun, drink another beer, everything’s fine.’ ”

Benson said, “That’s pretty true.”

“We can go back to the Roman times,” Hoppin went on. “Do you think the senators gave a shit who won in the Colosseum? No! They built the Colosseum to keep the people at bay, so they wouldn’t revolt. They’re trying to keep poor people entertained while they take all their freaking money. It’s as old as the freaking hills—give them entertainment.”


*Cartoon by Liana Finck*

At the baseball game, the camera panned to Roy Williams, who spent eighteen years as Carolina's basketball coach. When he retired, in 2021, one of his assistant coaches, Hubert Davis—who played for Dean Smith before going to the New York Knicks in the first round of the 1992 N.B.A. draft—replaced him. Williams was sitting in the sun-beaten stands with a wet cloth around his neck. Belichick had been seen on the field, shaking the coach's hand, before presumably watching the game from an air-conditioned suite. Carolina lost, and would lose again the next day, and not get to go to Omaha.

Benson sent me to visit Scott Maitland, the owner of Top of the Hill, a bar-and-grill that, for the past twenty years, has hosted a live radio show on the Monday before every U.N.C. football game. A popular order there is a "blue and white"—half blueberry beer, half Belgian-style white. Maitland and I each ordered one. He showed me where the football coach sits, at the front of the restaurant, to chat with an interviewer as a hundred or so fans watch, over drinks and food. Maitland pays a broadcast company about twenty-five thousand dollars for seasonal hosting rights. When I asked if he expected Belichick to uphold the tradition, he joked, "What, in his professional career, makes you think he likes doing shows?" On the other hand, Maitland said, Belichick might be inclined to do it because the show features "not, like, *real* reporters."

Maitland, who grew up east of Los Angeles, graduated from West Point, where he captained the water-polo team. He deployed to the first Gulf War. In 1996, after finishing law school at U.N.C., he opened Top of the Hill in order to spare Franklin Street the arrival of a TGI Fridays franchise. He told me, “The concept of a student athlete—that’s important to me. Unfortunately, that era is gone.” The school letters on a team jersey used to be more important than the name on the back, he said, adding, “You could ride that idea down to the bottom of the ocean, or embrace the new.”

On July 24th, coaches and players assembled in Charlotte, two hours southwest of Chapel Hill, for the annual pre-season blitz of appearances and interviews known as the A.C.C. Football Kickoff. That morning, Belichick emerged from a black S.U.V. at the Uptown Hilton, wearing a dark sports coat and a Carolina-blue tie. My first impression of him was that, in person, he is smaller than you’d expect, and that he looked both relaxed and tanned.

The A.C.C. had issued a record number of media credentials for the event, and hired extra security. Belichick bypassed “radio row,” a nest of hosts in headphones sitting at placarded tables (Wake Up Warchant, iHeartRadio), and went to the TV floor, where there were studio sets and rows of mannequins dressed in the uniforms of all seventeen A.C.C. teams.

In Charlotte Hall, an auditorium, each head coach took turns appearing onstage with a few top players. Dabo Swinney, of Clemson, the defending A.C.C. champion, filled almost every seat. He is as gregarious as Belichick is stony, and is the winningest head coach in conference history. In 1992, he played on a championship S.E.C. team, at the University of Alabama, where he was twice named an Academic All-S.E.C. scholar-athlete. Swinney went on to earn an M.B.A., in case football didn’t work out. He had walked on at Alabama—a phenomenon that almost certainly will die now that every roster position in college football demands a dollar value.

“Our purpose is graduation, number one,” Swinney declared. “Number two is to equip ’em, as men, through the game. Number three is to make sure they have a great college experience. *Lastly* is to win a championship.” Other college football coaches often gesture at this hierarchy; Swinney conveys it with an evangelist’s zeal. Last year, he told a Clemson publication, “Ninety-eight percent of these kids are not going to play in the

NFL. We need to educate our young people in this society.” Sixteen years ago, Swinney began implementing a life-skills curriculum for Clemson football players, which centralizes instruction on everything from financial literacy and community service to “how to tie a tie, how to have a nice dinner—to résumé, to how to do an interview,” as he put it onstage. He recruited players who “align with our purpose, guys that really value education and want structure and family and accountability.”

Belichick moved nowhere without a scrum. Observers in lanyards clocked his every twitch. *Sports Illustrated* noted that his pocket square was “tucked in a little too far.” The *Athletic* watched him sugar his iced tea and ask the staff of the ESPN booth for popcorn. I was standing outside Charlotte Hall when the energy shifted and he materialized, and strode past, encircled by an entourage, then disappeared into a greenroom.

Three of his star players settled themselves onto stools onstage, at which point such a hush befell the auditorium that I joked with a TV cameraman, “Are we in *church*?” Belichick took the stage in utter silence. He broke the tension by throwing his arms up over his eyes, joking about the glare of the lights. He spoke for four minutes and fourteen seconds. He touched on the “great brand” of U.N.C., donor events, N.I.L., revenue sharing, the N.F.L. draft, scouting, competition, the physical condition of his roster, the transfer portal, and the importance of “stacking good training days.” Zero mention of the purpose of college.

The coverage was fawning. One newspaper declared Belichick’s appearance a “watershed moment” reminiscent of the excitement surrounding standout A.C.C. basketball tournaments, including one in 1982 when James Worthy and Michael Jordan played on the same U.N.C. team. Chansky called Belichick “almost human.” The flamethrowing commentator Paul Finebaum, meanwhile, predicted that Carolina football was “*not* going to be must-see TV.” Of Belichick, he proclaimed, “The end of his career was a disaster. He didn’t win a playoff game in his last five seasons. He had losing seasons three out of the last five. It was a mess at the end. He should have been fired earlier than he was.” Belichick was now “just trying to make good,” he said. “He’s trying to impress his girlfriend. He’s trying to make some money.”

Finebaum's network, ESPN, had just arranged to show the first three games of Belichick's inaugural season at U.N.C. ESPN, which is owned by Disney, had also committed to doing a live pre-game show on the sidelines at the season opener. The financial details were not immediately revealed, but it was already known that ESPN had extended its relationship with the A.C.C. through 2035, in a contract worth $3.6 billion.

Watching Belichick from the back of the auditorium, I saw Cunningham, the U.N.C. athletic director, whom I'd been trying to reach, slip into the second-to-last row. I tapped him on the shoulder. The next day, I visited him on campus, in his office, a second-floor corner space with picture windows. Outside, red-tailed hawks were wheeling about, hunting.

Someone in the general counsel's office had recently used a word that Cunningham liked—"liminality"—when referring to this crazy period in college athletics, and Cunningham repeated it to me. "It's not defined yet, what our future looks like," he said, adding, "We firmly believe that the investment that we're making in football right now is more than going to pay for itself."

The university had been brainstorming everything from selling jersey advertising space to stadium naming rights, according to the *Assembly*, a Raleigh-based news outlet that had learned these details through public-records requests. Maybe U.N.C. would raise the price of parking, or reduce the number of complimentary tickets, or bring multimedia promotional operations in house. There was talk of a "re-imagined basketball arena": replacing the Dean Dome with a "mixed-used development" that includes premium seating.

The schools with the best resources will get the top talent. When coaches are recruiting, they'll have to do better than a masseuse and a new locker room. The more successful the team, the more attractive it becomes to television and, potentially, to other N.C.A.A. conferences. Those conferences, previously bound by geography and historic rivalry, have been disbanding and morphing—who'd have thought that Stanford and Berkeley would wind up in the A.C.C.? Networks dictate game time, which, as Andrews, the history professor, mentioned, ripples out to the community, particularly the food-and-beverage industry. Restaurateurs in Chapel Hill

told me that they much prefer a three-o'clock kickoff, which allows them to make more money by drawing crowds at both lunch and dinner. Antoni Sustaita, who founded the Mexican restaurant Bandido's thirty years ago, in a basement space in the heart of Franklin Street, said that for home games "we staff up. Or, if the team's no good, we reduce staff. There's no proven way to do it. It's a gut instinct. The one thing we do know is that if it's anything that involves Duke—" He didn't even have to finish the sentence.

When I met Cunningham, U.N.C. had just announced that next year he will move to a newly created position in the chancellor's office, where he will help to oversee the diversification of revenue streams. The new athletic director is Steve Newmark, a former auto-racing executive whose teams competed on the Nascar circuit. He advised the school during the Belichick hiring process. His specialty is corporate sponsorships. ♦

*Paige Williams, a staff writer, writes U.S. Journal, a series that Calvin Trillin created, in The New Yorker, in 1967. She is the author of "The Dinosaur Artist" and the winner of a 2024 Mirror Award.*

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# Takes

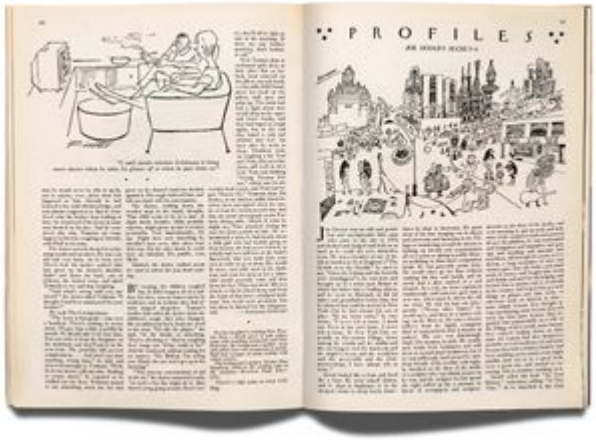
- **Adam Gopnik on Joseph Mitchell’s “Joe Gould’s Secret”**
  By Adam Gopnik | Mitchell captured New York’s oddballs and renegades with an understated lyricism that transformed fact into literature.

**Takes**

# Adam Gopnik on Joseph Mitchell's "Joe Gould's Secret"

***By Adam Gopnik***

*August 17, 2025*




*September 19, 1964*

***New Takes on the classics.*** *Throughout our centennial year, we're revisiting notable works from the archive. Sign up to receive them directly in your inbox.*

Joseph Mitchell was at once the most lucid and the most mysterious of the great mid-century *New Yorker* writers. Lucid in its clean, limpid minimalism, Mitchell's prose was like a beautiful, clear river, its bottom not muddy but sparkling—sparkling with what might simply be gravel catching the light or, perhaps, diamonds worth diving for. Whichever it was, in each of his sentences there was always the mysterious sense of something more left unsaid.

"Joe Gould is a jaunty and emaciated little man who has been a notable in the cafeterias, diners, barrooms, and dumps of Greenwich Village for a quarter of a century," begins Mitchell's Profile "Professor Sea Gull," from 1942, the foundation for his masterpiece "Joe Gould's Secret," from 1964. The slightly winking sobriety of the inventory is made poetic by the eccentric pairing of adjectives: jaunty and emaciated, hungry but happy—two concepts in sharp but subtly pointed contradiction.

On the surface, Mitchell's prose style derived from the economical newspaper writing he learned at the New York *World*. But his real heroes were the Joyce of "Dubliners" and the great Russian stylists—Gogol, Turgenev, Chekhov. And he was an instinctive avant-gardist. The story of Joe Gould, for instance, appeared in two batches—"Professor Sea Gull" and"Joe Gould's Secret," itself a two-part series—and the latter essentially revises all we thought we had learned in the earlier. The whole tells the story of a New England renegade who supposedly spent his life compiling, from overheard conversations, "The Oral History of Our Time." That book, we learn, never actually existed; all that did was a few antic skits and a set of compulsively rewritten tales of his mother's death. In this respect, the Oral History was a model for those missed masterpieces of advertised literary ambition. Joe Gould was Truman Capote and Harold Brodkey and all the other American authors whose encyclopedic aspirations shrank, in the way of literary things, to a few obsessive subjects, in a perpetually replayed fable of American writing.

Mitchell was the most quietly elegant of men, dressed in a costume—a homburg, a knitted vest, a tweed jacket—that seemed unchanged since the thirties, and speaking in a soft but confident North Carolina accent. I asked him once, over lunch at the Grand Central Oyster Bar, his favorite, what A.

J. Liebling and St. Clair McKelway and others of his cohort had in common. “Well, none of ’em could spell,” he breathed. “And none of ’em had any sense of grammar.” That myth having been exploded, he added, “But each one . . . each one had a kind of wild exactitude of his own.” A wild exactitude! It summed up then, and still does, everything we ask of *New Yorker* writing: a love of facts and details for their own sake, with some crazy gust of passion beneath to make it matter.

Along with the mystery of Mitchell’s sentences came another riddle: the perpetual silence that defined his later years at the magazine. Though he arrived daily in his office, and his typewriter certainly worked, he published nothing in the magazine between 1964 and his death, in 1996. What silenced him? Though there is much to be said for an abundance agenda in writing—we love those who die with their armor on, like Updike and Dickens—withdrawal is not necessarily neurotic. Truman Capote’s last editor, Joe Fox, once told me that Capote’s taste had survived his talent, and that he was sure Capote failed to finish his novel “Answered Prayers” exactly because he knew this. Mitchell, though a more refined man than Capote, also had perfect taste, and I suspect that he became suspicious—perhaps unduly so—of his own capacity to rise to the mark he held in his head.

No one who loves Mitchell can help but compare him with Liebling, his greatest colleague and closest friend. In Liebling’s best work, there is only one character—himself. (The new ones introduced are, like Colonel Stingo, Liebling in costume.) Since this character is as many-sided, cheerful, and witty as Odysseus, we don’t mind. Mitchell, in contrast, subsumes himself into his subjects, seldom intruding on the surface of his own prose. The two are perfectly paired and will remain so—like Chaplin and Keaton, the red and white roses of *New Yorker* allegiance. Readers need, and writers can draw from, both voices: both forms of extravagance, both pleasures in registering the world as it is, both kinds of sanity, both kinds of crazy. ♦

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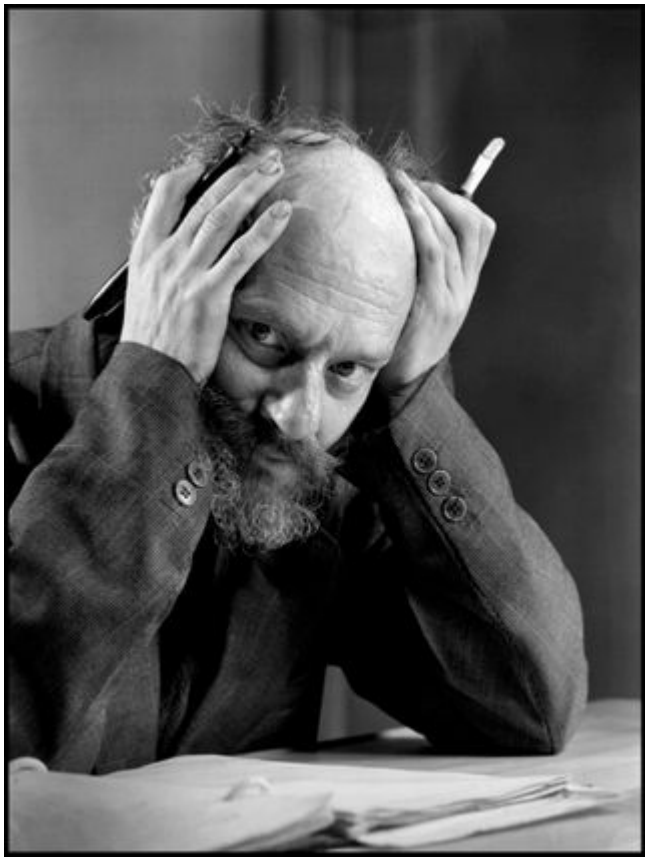
**Read the original story.**



Joe Gould’s Secret—I

*Adam Gopnik, a staff writer, has been contributing to The New Yorker since 1986. His books include “The Real Work: On the Mystery of Mastery.”*

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# Shouts & Murmurs

- **Some Funny Things About Getting Old**
  By Jack Handey | Everything’s shot. Why not laugh about it?

**Shouts & Murmurs**

# Some Funny Things About Getting Old

***By Jack Handey***

*August 18, 2025*

*Illustration by Luci Gutiérrez*

Children run alongside and taunt you, because you're old, but you don't care, because your hearing is shot!

Your hair falls out, but you can't tell, because your eyesight is shot. You brush your bald head with a stiff bristle brush, but you can't feel it, because the nerves in your scalp are all shot!

A rattlesnake bites you on the leg, but the poison doesn't go to your heart, because your veins are all shot!

You have a dream that your eyesight is perfect and your hearing is perfect, but when you wake up you can't remember it, because your memory is shot!

You get out your old mug shot and laugh at how much younger you look than in your recent mug shot!

Your bones turn brittle, and you develop a craving for peanut brittle. But you can’t eat it, because your teeth are all shot!

You take your dog Schatzi in to get her shots, but she howls the whole way, because it’s a rough road and your shock absorbers are shot!

At a wedding reception, you get up and dance with the young people, because your sense of dignity is shot!

You got your knees replaced ten years ago, but now the replacements are shot!

You go to a track meet, but you get confused and wander into the shot-put event, where you’re hit in the back by the flying shot. At the hospital, the doctor tells you your back is broken, but you ask how the shot is, because your brain is shot!

You try to buy a shotgun, to threaten your friend Don, but you can’t, because it turns out you’re a felon, whatever that is. The clerk also says your credit is shot!

You wet your pants, because, oh, why not?

You suddenly start slurring your words, and you think you’re having a stroke. But then you’re relieved when you realize that it was just the six shots of vodka you had!

Your balance is shot, and you fall over a lot. People say to give Tai Chi a shot, but you don’t, because your desire to try anything new is shot!

You decide to give it one last shot, but what was it again? ♦

*Jack Handey has written for The New Yorker since 1987. His series of one-liners, “Deep Thoughts,” has been featured on “Saturday Night Live.”His books include “My Funny Cowboy Dance.”*

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# Fiction

- **“Something Has Come to Light”**
  By Miriam Toews | He asked me if I wanted to ride with him, and I said no. He repeated that back to me. He said, No? Or . . . yes?

**Fiction**

# Something Has Come to Light

**By Miriam Toews**

August 17, 2025

*Photograph by Marcus Schaefer for The New Yorker*

I trust I'll be in Heaven when you read this, although God, in His wisdom, may have other things in store for me. Just yesterday afternoon Cor asked me if I had ever thought I'd live this long, and I said, No, not in a million years. What on earth am I *doing* here? It isn't necessary for all of your parents to read this, especially not Sandra. (But, Sandra, if you are reading this, please don't be angry with me. I love you very much. I think you know that.) I just wanted to tell you grandkids, in confidence, that all those school photos of you, of all of you, from all the years, all thirteen years from kindergarten to grade twelve—my goodness there are so many—are in a thick blue photo album in the top drawer of my bedside table. There's a Bible verse on the cover of the album, one from Psalms: "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help. My help cometh from the *LORD*, which made Heaven and Earth."

You remember how Sandra hung those school photos up on thin silver cords in my living room, with little clothespins? She said that it was the fashion to do that, and that this way I'd be able to see the photos all the time, hung out to dry, in plain view. There they'd be as I walked through the living room to the kitchen or to my bedroom or to the porch. I could look at them all day, every day. Sandra also said that, with the photos attached to the cords with clothespins, I wouldn't pull the paint off the walls if I needed to move them. She has had to repaint many of my walls for that very reason, and it was incredibly difficult to find exactly the right shade of white paint to match what was already there. You have no idea how many shades of white paint there are these days.

Bless her heart, but I just didn't enjoy seeing all your faces from all the years hanging from a wash line and staring out at me every day. I was afraid I'd begin not to see them, because they were always there. I didn't want to have fleeting glimpses of your faces as I passed them, back and forth from room to room, and I wasn't able to stand for long enough to look at them all before I'd get tired and need to sit. And I couldn't see them clearly from my chair in the living room, as they were hanging rather high up and were tiny because they were school photos. I want to study your faces. I want to concentrate on them, at specific times, in quiet worship, like at a church service, and then have silent conversations with each of you. This is one of my favorite activities. I like, from time to time, to go to my bedroom after supper and take out my photo album and sit up in my bed, with my comfortable pillows

and a cup of coffee and perhaps a Cuban Lunch or a Nutty Club on my bedside table, and stare hard at the photos, at each one of you, very slowly turning the pages until I get to the end. I don't want to do that every day, just once a month or so.

Read an interview with the author for the story behind the story.

So that is something you need to know: that I took your photos off the wash line and put them in an album in my bedside table, the table with the good lamp on it, which is something you kids will have to hash out, in terms of ownership, in terms of bequeathment. The good lamp.

Another thing: Many years ago, I dug up Roland Sawatsky from his grave and reburied the urn holding his ashes out behind the grain shed on our farm. There's a small black stone there to mark the spot, but it has no words carved on it. It's the only black stone. There might still be a feed pail next to it, which I used to sit on. This is a lot to absorb, I think, but I know you are smart kids, and you are kind and you are modern.

I'll just say that I loved your Grandpa Jake very much. He was a good man and a good farmer and a good Mennonite and he was good to me. Even when they took his leg, he was good to me and helped me and never complained. You are probably wondering who Roland Sawatsky was. Roland was my neighbor on the farm next to ours. When we were kids. And then as teen-agers, too. He was older than me by three years and we never spoke. Very rarely did we speak. He sat at the back of the school bus with the older kids. Now I wish I had known certain things then. For instance, one day he came over to our farm to tell my parents something and he was on his horse. I went outside to look at his horse, and he gave me a carrot to feed it. I asked him what the horse's name was, and he said it was Trotsky. I wish I had known what the joke was so I could have laughed then. And at other times. Of course, it's not a terribly funny joke. But I wish I had laughed more at things in life, especially at things presented as jokes.

Roland was known in town as a very good pianist and very clever. He went to the university in Winnipeg, but still lived at home on the farm. My father told me that his parents hadn't wanted him to go to university but that they'd reached a compromise, with him staying on the farm and commuting to his

classes in the city. His older sister had already left for Bible school in America. She wanted to work for Wycliffe Bible Translators, in Quito, Ecuador, and I think that is what she did with the American fellow she met in Bible school, but I'm not sure. Her name is Ruthie. Once, along the property line between their farm and ours, in those trees there, when I was very young, ten or eleven, she told me that Roland was an idiot. Sometimes he went to concerts that people from the city performed in our high-school auditorium. Just classical music, which was not considered a sin. Roland always sat in the very front row of chairs. People from town made fun of him behind his back—and to his face as well—for being so still and enrapt at these concerts and for always sitting in the front row. One time he himself gave a short concert there. It was very strange. He put up posters around town, and everybody was curious but also worried about it, as in: why was he doing this? I still have one of those posters somewhere. You'll probably find it. One of you could keep it if you wanted to. Another thing you'd have to agree on amongst yourselves. There's a funny drawing on it that Roland made of himself at a piano, and the date and time and place of the concert. I was there alone. I mean I'd gone there alone. There were two or three other people. I sat in the front row. I remember Roland's hands gripping the sides of the piano bench. He had such hands. Strong and steady. What would you call them today? Amazing? Everything is amazing today. He moved the bench around for a long time before he began to play, an inch forward, an inch back, an inch to the side, an inch to the other side. His hands gripped the bench that way until he found just the right place for it. I remember that, just before he started, he moved his hands over his chest, from the top of his chest down and then from the top again, several times, as though he were smoothing his button-down shirt, as though he were keeping his heart in place. But now I think he was probably trying to wipe the sweat off his hands. One other thing I remember from that concert is that he leaned his head all the way back, at times, while he played. I had never seen that before, the head so far back with the throat exposed and his Adam's apple. I had only ever seen bowed heads. Heads praying or looking at crops or at little children or the floor or what have you. A few times during that concert, he put his head down, too, so far down that he was almost resting his face, his cheek, on the piano keys. And playing at the same time. When he did that, I wanted to see him again with his head back. When his head was back, I saw sweat on his neck. I saw some of it slide down into his collar. His eyes were closed. And he made some sounds, too, that people teased him about

and talked about in town for a long time afterward. That Roland Sawatsky, they'd say. And they'd imitate his sounds. After he finished playing, he stood up next to the piano. Nobody clapped, because we don't clap. I think he saw me there. He smiled. He was out of breath. I didn't talk to him at the concert. I went home. I put my head back as I walked home to see how that felt. It was dark.

**Podcast: The Writer's Voice**
*Listen to Miriam Toews read "Something Has Come to Light."*

Then, a month later or maybe it was longer, Roland came to the farm again to tell my parents that he was going away to study and wouldn't be able to help with the harvest that year. He was on his horse. He asked me if I wanted to ride with him, and I said no. He repeated that back to me. He said, No? Or . . . yes? I said no again, and he put his head back and sort of groaned, the way he had when he was playing the piano in the school auditorium, but this time he was just pretending to be devastated, I think. I touched his horse's face. And then he was gone. I never saw him again. So that was the last time we talked.

*"That's odd—half the culture is holding up little signs begging to be moved to a different petri dish."*
*Cartoon by Meredith Southard*

My father told me that Roland had received a Rhodes Scholarship to Oxford University, in England. A lot of people in town didn't understand why he would choose to leave. They didn't like to talk about it. They felt a bit sorry

for Roland's parents. What will he do with ideas? they said. I remember Roland's father standing out under the yard light, with mosquitoes everywhere, talking with my father and shaking his head, sadly, and my father putting his hand on Roland's father's shoulder.

What happened then? Time passed, and I met Jake—well, I'd known him all my life—and we got married and farmed and started our family. Sandra was born nine months to the day from our wedding night. We stayed on the farm, my father's farm, and my parents moved into town. Then, one day, I was in the yard with the kids and Roland's father came to talk to Jake. Roland's father seemed old to me then, but now I realize he wasn't that old. He and his wife still lived on the farm next to ours, and our fields were side by side. Jake wasn't at home when Roland's father came to talk to him, so he talked to me. He told me that Roland was in trouble in England. He didn't say what the trouble was. He said that he and his wife were going to travel to England to see Roland, and he asked if Jake and I could feed his animals while they were gone. Then, the next week, Roland's father came to our farm again, and this time Jake was at home and they sat at the kitchen table. They prayed. It was September. But warm. Roland's parents were not going to go to England after all, Roland's father said. It would be too painful for Roland's mother. So instead they were going to get Roland a plane ticket to come home. By then, he had been in England for several years, eight or nine, I think. Later, after Roland's father left, I asked Jake when Roland was coming home. He thought the next week, but he wasn't sure. That night, I couldn't sleep, and the next day I couldn't concentrate on my housework or even on the children. Del got his foot caught in a trap of some sort that I had forgotten to put back in the bushes. I can't remember if it was a wolf trap or something else. How old is Del now? Sixty? He still has that terrible scar from my neglect.

The next week, on Wednesday evening after supper, Roland's father came to the house again. Our Roland has died, he said. Like that. Our Roland has died in England. Jake asked Roland's father how Roland had died, but his father didn't know. He stood and shook his head. He said that he and Roland's mother didn't want to know how Roland had died. It was 1969. In town, people said that Roland must have got caught up in drug-taking and whatnot and kept bad company. But that was just talk. His ashes would be sent back from England and his parents would bury them in an urn on their

farm. Our church doesn't believe in cremation, but the officials in England told Roland's father that shipping ashes would be a "fraction of the cost" (I remember that expression because Roland's father said it in English, although he only ever spoke Plautdietsch) of shipping a body, and Roland's parents had very little money. Jake said that burning Roland would also prevent anyone from doing an autopsy on him and getting to the reason that he died, which was for the best, because nobody wanted to know why. Especially not his mother.

Roland couldn't be buried in the church graveyard because he had long ago stopped being a member of the church. Jake asked Roland's father if there would be a service, and Roland's father said there wouldn't be one. Jake asked if we could watch Roland be put into the ground and pay our respects, then. Roland's father said yes, we could do that. Which was how I came to know where on their land Roland was buried.

So that's how it was then for a long time. On my daily walks I'd pass Roland's grave and whisper, Yes, I meant to say yes. I couldn't just say this to myself, in my head; I had to make a sound saying it. I mean I had to say it, not just think it. If there were days when I was unable to walk past his grave, I'd say it twice or three times or whatever the number of days that I'd missed was. For instance, when the twins were born, I was hospitalized for ten days and then had to say it ten times. Eventually, people stopped talking about Roland and his mysterious death. The world was bad, they said. And Roland had found that out.

Then, years and years later, Roland's parents both died, within months of each other. They were old. Jake was gone by then, too. He was happy to die. He was in such pain. Our kids had all grown up and left home. Even Del, with his mangled foot, had managed to leave. Roland's older sister, Ruthie, was living in Santa Barbara, California. She had met that American fellow at Bible school in Omaha, Nebraska, and they had married and moved to California after their mission work in Quito, Ecuador. When Roland's parents died, Ruthie flew home to take care of all the arrangements. They were allowed to be buried in the church cemetery because they were members. Ruthie came to the house and told me that she was selling her parents' farm and had hired a team to take Roland out of his grave and move him to Santa Barbara, California, to be with her and her kids and grandkids

there. Her granddaughter Madison had had the idea that Roland should be with them and not alone in a frozen field somewhere in Canada. Ruthie said that her grandchildren hadn't known that Roland had existed until a cousin had told them about him, at a funeral in Wheaton, Illinois. She shook her head. She didn't talk about Roland. She was angry that her cousin had blurted. I was struck by that word, how she said it. *Blurted*. We had coffee and buns and cheese. Madison was studying conflict resolution. When Ruthie told me that, I laughed, because I had never heard of such a thing. But Ruthie said that it was a serious field of study. She told me that these fellows would be coming for Roland in two days.

I started digging that evening. I had a small flashlight. I was already in my sixties. I managed to dig quite far down that first night. I put a small baby blanket over the hole. I held it down with rocks on all four corners, and then I covered the blanket with twigs and grass and stalks of wheat. The next night I went back and managed to dig all the way to Roland's urn and I took him. I filled in the hole with the dirt I'd dug up, and covered it again with twigs. That day, in the afternoon, the team arrived to move Roland, but of course they couldn't find him anywhere. They tried different places. Roland's sister came and said that that was very strange. She had been certain of the grave's location. The team worked all day and evening trying to find Roland. Eventually they left, and Ruthie went back to Santa Barbara, California, empty-handed. I buried Roland out behind the grain shed, as I mentioned. You will find the stone, I hope, and the pail I sat on. And then you'll know where Roland is.

If you're reading this, it means that I'm gone, too. The land is yours now, and I am wondering if you would let Roland's sister know where he is, so that she can bring him home and he can be together, finally, with his family, what's left of it, in California. Imagine Roland resting beneath palm trees! A warm sun all year. But, if you can't do that or if you don't want to do that, because I know you're all so busy, or if you don't know where his sister is or how to get ahold of her or if she's even alive, then you could, perhaps, leave Roland where he is, and just remember—as in, hold it in your hearts, or even whisper it, if that doesn't feel too silly—that when I said no, I should, in fact, have said yes. You could say it out loud, lifting your eyes to Heaven, like a prayer: Dear God, please forgive Grandma. She meant to say yes. ♦

*Miriam Toews is a novelist and the author of the memoir "A Truce That Is Not Peace."*

# The Critics

- **Did Racial Capitalism Set the Bronx on Fire?**
  By Daniel Immerwahr | To some, the fires lit in New York in the late seventies signalled rampant criminality; to others, rebellion. But maybe they were signs of something else entirely.
- **Briefly Noted**
  “Positive Obsession,” “Everything Evolves,” “Pariah,” and “Bonding.”
- **Helen Oyeyemi’s Novel of Cognitive Dissonance**
  By Katy Waldman | Kinga, the protagonist of “A New New Me,” has an odd affliction: there are seven of her.
- **“Highest 2 Lowest” Marks a Conservative Pivot for Spike Lee**
  By Richard Brody | Denzel Washington stars as a music executive who takes police matters into his own hands, in this remake of Akira Kurosawa’s 1963 kidnapping classic.

A Critic at Large

# Did Racial Capitalism Set the Bronx on Fire?

To some, the fires lit in New York in the late seventies signalled rampant criminality; to others, rebellion. But maybe they were signs of something else entirely.

**By Daniel Immerwahr**

August 18, 2025

*An abandoned tenement burns in the South Bronx, in August, 1977, near the peak of an arson wave in New York City.Photograph by Alain Le Garsmeur / Alamy*

Sometimes people say exactly the right thing. Other times, they don’t, and we just pretend that they did. When eighteenth-century Parisians clamored for bread, did Marie Antoinette respond, “Let them eat cake”? No, but the line captures the aristocracy’s witlessness. Patrick Henry probably never said “Give me liberty, or give me death,” either.

The second game of the 1977 World Series, at Yankee Stadium, provided another such occasion. It was a time of crushing austerity for New York City; tens of thousands of municipal employees had been laid off, including firefighters. These woes were background to the game, but they flashed into the foreground when a fire in an abandoned elementary school lit up the skies just blocks away. “Ladies and gentlemen,” the announcer Howard Cosell famously but never actually said, “the Bronx is burning.”

Indeed, it was. “It seemed like just every second there was a fire,” Darney (K-Born) Rivers, a local rapper, later recalled. “I’m talking about every block you went on.” Families kept suitcases by the door; children were told to wear shoes to bed.

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To some, this was a tragic turn in the country’s racial drama. White people left cities for the suburbs, taking jobs and tax revenues with them. Black people, trapped in neighborhoods that felt increasingly like holding pens, revolted. The Watts uprising of 1965, in Los Angeles, incinerated hundreds of buildings. The fires continued. The historian Elizabeth Hinton, in

“America on Fire” (2021), counts 1,949 urban insurgencies between May, 1968, and December, 1972.

Those uprisings subsided in the early seventies, yet the fires kept going. Bill Moyers, Lyndon B. Johnson’s press secretary, made an award-winning documentary, “The Fire Next Door” (1977), about Black and Puerto Rican neighborhoods in the South Bronx. “Burning buildings are as common here as broken dreams,” he intoned. The arsonists he highlighted included addicts, welfare cheats, and kids setting fires just “for the hell of it.” This was, Moyers felt, “a society out of control.”

That was an unfair characterization. The South Bronx was also a fount of artistic fecundity, where poets, musicians, artists, and dancers created hip-hop. The art grew amid the fires, a boisterous eruption of life in deadly surroundings. “Throw your hands in the air, and wave ’em like you just don’t care,” Rock Master Scott and the Dynamic Three instructed. Yet fire singed even that carefree party anthem, which ended with an ominous chant: “The roof, the roof, the roof is on fire. We don’t need no water, let the motherfucker burn.”

Conservatives saw all this as the devolution of post-Watts rioting into utter lawlessness. But was that diagnosis right? The South Bronx, the arson capital, hadn’t seen much upheaval. And although urban unrest had often burst forth from public-housing developments, the projects in the Bronx were virtually flameproof. As a report from the Bronx District Attorney’s office observed, the New York City Housing Authority provided residences for 169,663 families as of January, 1977, yet saw an “almost total absence of fires.”

The Bronx firestorm was selective not just in which buildings burned but in how they did so. The typical Bronx walkup was built of brick and concrete. A fire might not do much damage unless it burned the roof, in which case water would total the building. Rock Master Scott and the Dynamic Three proved to be keen students of pyrodynamics, because it was often the roof that caught fire. It was as if someone were trying to do as much damage as possible to privately owned—but not publicly owned—rental properties.

“In the community, we knew that landlords were burning their buildings,” the educator Vivian Vázquez Irizarry has said. This was an open secret, reported at the time and arising even in Moyers’s documentary. It made little dent on public consciousness, though. “When I first moved to New York,” the writer Ian Frazier remembers, “I assumed, as many people did, that the poverty and fires in the Bronx were just the way the Bronx was.”

In 2018, Vázquez and Gretchen Hildebran released a documentary, “Decade of Fire,” that exonerated the Bronx. Now a historian who worked on that documentary, Bench Ansfield, has published a formidable book, “Born in Flames” (Norton). The fires were set not by unruly tenants, Ansfield charges, but by landlords seeking insurance payouts. The late twentieth century gave rise to a horrifying dynamic, throughout the country but especially in the South Bronx, whereby owners had reason to burn their buildings and few people in power had reason to care.

The thought of cities burning in a racial reckoning has long haunted the American imagination. The era of slavery was also the age of wood, and nearly every major slave rebellion and conspiracy involved arson. In one of the most fearsome plots, the Denmark Vesey conspiracy of 1822, rebels allegedly planned to burn down Charleston.

It was easy to understand why slaves might torch cities. But the fires emerging in the mid-sixties, just as the civil-rights movement was racking up victories, were harder to interpret. Were they protests? Meltdowns? Crimes? As arson and violence convulsed Black neighborhoods, white support for the movement plummeted.

To conservatives, this was vindication. In an influential essay, “Looting and Liberal Racism” (1977), Midge Decter argued that New York’s racial liberalism had done nothing for Black and brown people other than convince them that there were “virtually no crimes” for which they’d be held accountable. Riots fed law-and-order conservatism.

Of course, there were other views. “This ain’t no riot, brother, this is a rebellion,” the Black Power activist H. Rap Brown declared in Cambridge, Maryland, in 1967. Which is to say, the people in the streets weren’t riffraff running amok but activists with aims. The problem was white violence,

Brown explained, and, if it didn't stop, Black people should "burn this town down." About an hour after Brown made that speech, as if to prove his point, police shot him. (He lived.)

Historians have come around to his view. Gerald Horne's "The Fire This Time" (1995), Peter B. Levy's "The Great Uprising" (2018), Hinton's "America on Fire," and, most recently, Ashley Howard's "Midwest Unrest" treat the tumult as a purposeful, even admirable revolt against racism. Yet these histories focus on the uprisings that wound down by 1972, not on the harder-to-explain fires that followed. Hinton, in another book, briefly connects the Bronx fires to Black revolts—both stemmed from excessive policing and incarceration, she says—but leaves it there.

Ansfield offers a tidier solution. The fires of 1964-72 constituted an uprising, yes. But not the subsequent fires. Those were neither riot nor rebellion but something else: "racial capitalism."

That term, "racial capitalism," entered American discourse in 1983—via the political scientist Cedric Robinson's "Black Marxism"—but came into vogue with the Black Lives Matter movement. The idea is that racial oppression is essential to capitalism. So, to take a stark but characteristic example from the historian Walter Johnson, Britain's Industrial Revolution was "founded upon the capacity of enslaved women's bodies" to maintain the supply of Black labor. Rape and forced family separation weren't unfortunate by-products but "elementary aspects" of the system. This grim structure has varied with time, yet its fundamentals—economic predation, white supremacy—remain intact. "The temporality of racial capitalism," the historians Destin Jenkins and Justin Leroy write, "is one of ongoingness."

Ansfield brings this expansive vision to the Bronx, following the trail from the arsonists who did the torching to the landlords who ordered it, the policymakers who enabled it, the financiers who encouraged it, and the insurers who paid for it. The Bronx's fire-prone tenements were dirt cheap, yet wealthy investors in several countries held stakes in them.

That pattern is familiar, Ansfield notes. Once, ships had carried slaves across the Atlantic as part of a triangular trade in captives and commodities that connected the international élite to sadistic violence in Africa and the

Americas. In the nineteen-seventies, insurance policies that encouraged arson were resold in Miami, London, and Rio de Janeiro. This was the "twentieth-century triangular trade in risk," Ansfield writes, a deadly commerce that was "just as legal as the eighteenth-century trafficking in human cargo."

When Ansfield filed their dissertation on this topic, in 2021, the response was rapturous. Prizes were heaped at their feet: best dissertation in American studies, in American history, at Yale (co-won), and so on. Reading their book, which is even sharper, you can see why. It's a deft, at times brilliant history. To the conservative line about riot-torn cities, it responds firmly: property owners, not their tenants, were the lawless ones. The Bronx was burned by the "lethal alchemy of race and capitalism."

The immolation of the Bronx was all the more staggering because, a generation before, it had been filled with upwardly mobile residents in sturdy homes. Colin Powell, who was raised in the South Bronx by Jamaican parents, remembered his neighborhood's "intact and secure" families and its "rough-edged racial tolerance" among Jews, Italians, Poles, Greeks, Puerto Ricans, and Blacks. Yet the postwar suburbs drained the borough. The South Bronx, in particular, lost more than sixty per cent of its population between 1950 and 1980.

Ansfield shows how the insurance industry hastened the Bronx's decline. As the nationwide uprisings began, insurers pulled out of so-called riot-prone areas. Because uninsurable buildings were hard to sell, property values collapsed. Between 1969 and 1979, the Bronx lost forty per cent of its manufacturing jobs, partly because firms couldn't secure insurance. Landlords floundered, too. The *Times* reported on the desperate owner of a tenement in nearby Inwood who offered to transfer its title to his tenants for a dollar; none took the deal. Many underwater landlords gave up. They extracted whatever rent they could as they cut services, stopped paying property taxes, and abandoned their buildings.

To stanch the bleeding, Congress, in 1968, created a form of last-ditch insurance: Fair Access to Insurance Requirements Plans. Private insurers would be obliged to offer policies that couldn't discriminate by neighborhood. In return, they would be reinsured by the federal government

against riots. *FAIR* Plan policies were neither cheap nor comprehensive, but, when New York started offering them, demand was overwhelming.

That should have sounded alarms. The *FAIR* Plans inadvertently replaced the too-little-insurance problem with a too-much-insurance one. Once insurers lost the ability to say no, landlords had little incentive to maintain their properties. If property values dropped, they could drive their buildings into the ground and cash out by arson. The more they did so, the further property values plunged, and the more enticing the practice became.

Owners often outsourced the arson to cash-strapped locals. Ansfield gives the example of a fifteen-year-old, Hector Rivera (not his real name), who set forty to fifty fires. “I don’t do it for fun,” Rivera explained to a reporter. “I do it when they hire me.” He made between three and fifteen dollars a fire. Occasionally, landlords did their own dirty work. In 1975, Imre Oberlander was arrested while en route to a building he owned, with firebombs and wearing blackface. (He pleaded guilty to weapons possession and served five years’ probation.)


*Cartoon by Tommy Siegel*

Oberlander had taken in a hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars from twenty-one fires in just five years. Another property owner, the convicted felon Joe Bald, was caught leading a ring of landlords who had reportedly collected around five million dollars on some two hundred and fifty burned buildings. A recent study by Ingrid Gould Ellen, Daniel Hartley, Jeffrey Lin, and Wei You estimates that in 1978 alone the state of New York had thirteen thousand more fires than it would’ve had without the *FAIR* Plan. Most other

states had *FAIR* Plans, too, and arsonists torched poor neighborhoods nationwide.

Insurers seemed oddly tolerant of this. Litigating claims was costly, the *FAIR* Plans spread out the pain among firms, and historically high interest rates allowed them to offset risks by investing premiums. Interest rates rose so high that out-of-state insurers started voluntarily underwriting Bronx tenements in the midst of the fires—no *FAIR* Plan needed.

Still, no matter how you slice it, selling fire insurance to arsonists is a terrible business model. It persisted, Ansfield explains, only because the market was opaque. As with more recent subprime mortgages, brokers sold, bundled, and resold crummy contracts so many times that the people left holding the bag had no clue what was in it. The losses on the policies held by Joe Bald's group wound through a labyrinthine chain of intermediaries before arriving at the storied insurer Lloyd's of London. Investors there were stupefied, and it was years before they grasped the extent of their exposure.

Politicians were no quicker to respond. The indefatigable activist Genevieve Brooks (later Brown) pressed the issue yet found that "no one, but no one, was interested." It took years to win over even a few officials to the cause. One, the Bronx District Attorney Mario Merola, was initially dismissive but became an "anti-arson crusader" in 1975, Ansfield writes. As he bluntly told the Senate, a "substantial portion" of his borough's arson was "committed for profit." Ansfield also praises the Arson Strike Force (initially the Arson Task Force) as a "bona fide white-collar crime squad." Its deputy director, Michael Jacobson, would co-author an article, "Burning the Bronx for Profit," that laid bare the evidence.

Yet evidence mattered only so much. Just as financial opacity concealed the fires from insurers, racial opacity concealed them from politicians. Gerald Ford, who was President during the peak of the arson wave, publicly mentioned the Bronx just once, to go by the American Presidency Project, and that was to commend Merola's office for locking up recidivists.

Meanwhile, fire-setting landlords enjoyed extraordinary immunity from prosecution—immunity from blame, even. Most people found it easier to

chalk up the conflagration to ghetto anarchy. Vivian Vázquez Irizarry laments, “That’s the only story that ever gets told”—to the point that inhabitants of the Bronx now believe it themselves. Ansfield agrees: “The vague impression that Bronxites burned down their own borough endures, while the vast fortunes made were forgotten.”

Ansfield’s great achievement is following the money, the thread linking the fortunes to the fires. This is the panoramic, it’s-all-connected view that racial-capitalism theory promises. One thinks of Walter Johnson’s insistence that the mills in Manchester depended on the rape of women in Mississippi.

That story works best, though, if the fires were all set for insurance. Were they? Other histories—Jill Jonnes’s “South Bronx Rising,” Evelyn Gonzalez’s “The Bronx,” Jonathan Mahler’s “Ladies and Gentlemen, the Bronx Is Burning,” Joe Flood’s “The Fires,” and Ian Frazier’s “Paradise Bronx”—identify multiple culprits. Landlords torched properties, everyone agrees. But renters did, too; New York City paid up to two thousand dollars to arson victims who had lost their furniture and clothing, and put them at the head of the line for hard-to-get public housing. Firemen spoke of seeing tenants sitting outside flaming buildings with their belongings neatly arranged beside them. Furthermore, scavengers used fires to destroy walls and steal fixtures and fittings. Perhaps a few tenants, furious at paying rent they couldn’t afford for services they weren’t getting, lit fires to strike back. (“We don’t need no water, let the motherfucker burn.”)

Ansfield discusses these phenomena with admirable sensitivity yet warns against overstating their significance. Burning to get public housing was “minimal”; welfare arsonists and building strippers were “scapegoats.” Elizabeth Hinton has claimed that the inhabitants of the Bronx lit more fires than their landlords did. Ansfield, having none of it, scolds Hinton for her “unsound verdict.”

We don’t actually know who lit more fires. But Ansfield’s contention that the fires were “primarily” landlord-set diverges from most judgments at the time, including those of insurance fraud’s fiercest critics. Merola, the Bronx District Attorney, campaigned energetically against landlords. Yet, when asked what proportion of arson they committed, he guessed “about 20 percent.” Michael Jacobson, of the Arson Strike Force, was unyielding in

exposing insurance arson. He now teaches at the *CUNY* Graduate Center, and I asked him how much arson in the Bronx had been for profit. Thirty to forty per cent, he estimated. But, he specified, this included cases where landlords ordered fires and those where they merely abandoned their buildings, leaving tenants, thieves, or others to light the match.

“The landlords collected,” Genevieve Brooks insisted in an oral history. Ansfield quotes that line, but not what she said next, which is that the building strippers did, too—“everybody profited,” Brooks observed. Similarly, Ansfield twice quotes Hector Rivera, the fifteen-year-old arsonist, explaining that he set fires because “they hire me.” Ansfield implies that Rivera worked for landlords, ignoring his specification that “they” were thieves stealing plumbing fixtures and hardware. “As with everything in the city, there were small-time plays and big-scale scams,” the New York novelist Colson Whitehead writes, in reference to the arson epidemic, in “Crook Manifesto” (2023). “People setting fires every night,” a character observes, “and not just guys in it for the insurance.”

These multicausal explanations soften the accusatory focus on landlords but pull the lives of tenants into sharper detail. As the South Bronx’s private-housing market collapsed, many owners compensated for lost rents by retracting services. Shivering, tenants used ovens and electric heaters for warmth, which, especially in buildings with old wiring, caused fires. As the deteriorating tenements emptied, the arson began. Landlords burned to get insurance, scavengers to access valuable metal, and tenants to escape the doomed buildings for safer, better-maintained, and subsidized public housing. Fire was contagious. Tenants expecting their homes to burn had reason to light the fires themselves, to control when they happened and thus protect their lives and property.

Michael Jacobson interviewed convicted New York arsonists for his dissertation. Some burned for pay, some not. What united them was their “highly stressful lives.” Most had quarrelled with someone right before the act. Unfortunately, fires, by ripping households and neighborhoods apart, only compounded the stress. And surely the more fires that raged, the easier it was to imagine using arson to rob apartments, hurt competitors, or get revenge. (The deadliest fire, at the Puerto Rican Social Club, was

orchestrated by a man motivated by jealousy.) In the holocaust of the South Bronx, lighting a match could seem like just hastening the inevitable.

Emphasizing arson's complex motives is no defense of the system. Even fires set by vandals were "shaped by a larger political economy which included banks, landlords, and insurance companies," Jacobson writes. Still, the relation between finance and fire was often indirect. Poverty has the power to make perpetrators of its victims, and Bronxites feared their neighbors as well as their landlords.

The thread tangles at the other end, too. Ansfield describes "vast fortunes" made from insurance arson. Yet claims rarely exceeded thirty thousand dollars, and the Bronx's swiftly depreciating tenements were generally owned by petty and mid-tier operators, not Tom Wolfe-style masters of the universe. Joe Bald, the leader of the arson ring, had been an interior decorator, a furniture dealer, and a rabbi.

There were fires that benefitted Wall Street. The historian Dylan Gottlieb has explained how Hoboken property owners torched hundreds of inhabited tenements and rooming houses to clear space for yuppies' luxury apartments. The Bronx fires, however, were a drain on the financial élite. Insurance arson wasn't the richest squeezing the poorest. It was hustlers—slumlords, corrupt brokers, tough guys, owners in dire straits—defrauding large corporations. The poor were collateral damage.

Racial-capitalism theorists, emphasizing systematicity, tend to see historical traumas as features, not bugs. They envisage a vast, extractive structure in which, as Walter Johnson writes, "white supremacy justified the terms of imperial dispossession and capitalist exploitation." But the Bronx had high unemployment, low property values, and large welfare rolls. How much was there to extract? Bronxites were less exploited by capitalists than mauled by an unexpected combination of policies and incentives that few outsiders bothered to notice. Ansfield, surveying the borough's devastation, deems it "the core of twentieth-century racial capitalism." One might alternatively see it as capitalism's no man's land. Rather than being central to the system, the Bronx hardly mattered to it at all. Sometimes that's worse.

In July, 1977, near the arson wave's peak, the power to New York cut out. The city had endured a blackout before, in 1965—a largely benign event memorialized in the flirty Doris Day comedy "Where Were You When the Lights Went Out?" This time, however, New York exploded. More than a thousand fires burned, and more than a thousand shops were ransacked. Crowds emptied the South Bronx furniture store where Vivian Vázquez Irizarry's father worked; it shut down and he lost his job of seventeen years.

"Poor people have been waiting years for those lights to go out," one woman explained. Musicians, treating the power outage as an impromptu arts grant, stole mixers and turntables. ("That sprung a whole new set of DJs," the hip-hop pioneer Grandmaster Caz recalled.) Others took baby food and diapers. The blackout exposed both the depth of people's needs and the depth of their rage. It was a "collective reckoning," Ansfield writes. The South Bronx burned, and "landlords were, for once, probably not the main culprits."

Three months later, President Jimmy Carter arrived to survey the debris. The blackout, Carter's visit, and the 1977 World Series turned the South Bronx into the country's most famous slum. Paul Newman starred in the blockbuster movie "Fort Apache, the Bronx." Ted Kennedy, Ronald Reagan, Pope John Paul II, and Mother Teresa made pilgrimages. The South Bronx was as crucial to understanding U.S. cities, the *Times* declared, as Auschwitz was to understanding Nazism.

The negative attention pushed the authorities to act. Perverse incentives in insurance and welfare policies were removed. Insurers, alerted to the problem and granted permission to respond, grew more discriminating in their underwriting and more probing in their investigations. Fire marshals and police investigators became conspicuous presences in arson zones. The Arson Strike Force tried outreach to deter kids from setting fires (straying from its anti-landlord mission into "a racialized paradigm of juvenile delinquency," Ansfield grumbles). It also identified arson-prone buildings and put their owners on notice (better, Ansfield feels, though still "far from mounting a confrontation with the property regime").

Whatever their shortfalls, such measures appeared to work. The number of intentionally set fires in New York City buildings dropped by nearly two

thirds from 1976 to 1984. This was a triumph, but also an indictment. Arson was fixable. How had it gone unfixed so long?

As the city recovered its budget, it poured vast sums into urban rehabilitation, especially in the Bronx. Suddenly, tenants' groups got resources. By 1984, with help from Genevieve Brooks's organization, families were moving into ranch houses on the former rubble field where Carter had once stood—wildflowers blooming in the burn scar.

The devastation Carter had witnessed arose from abandonment. The population rebounded soon afterward, though, and now parts of the South Bronx face the opposite phenomenon: gentrification. Ansfield describes a lavish party thrown, in 2015, to promote a residential and retail complex on the Harlem River which cost hundreds of millions to build. Celebrities like Kendall Jenner, Adrien Brody, and Naomi Campbell, along with leading New York politicians, drank Dom Pérignon amid loose bricks, fires burning in trash cans, and a sculpture made from bullet-riddled cars. "Ruin porn" is the name for this fetishizing of urban decay. Guests posted photos tagged #thebronxisburning.

Too soon. The memories of smoke-filled hallways, of desperate searches for family members, remain vivid. For more than a decade, economic forces, large and small, lit harrowing fires. These burned in the most populous city in the U.S., matched by others throughout the country, yet barely registered as news. Was all this, as Ansfield suggests, what capitalism required? In a way, that's a consoling thought. The more dispiriting alternative is that it needn't have happened at all, and that the Bronx's burned-out homes were monuments not just to greed but to indifference. ♦

*Daniel Immerwahr, a contributing writer at The New Yorker, teaches history at Northwestern University and is the author of "How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States."*

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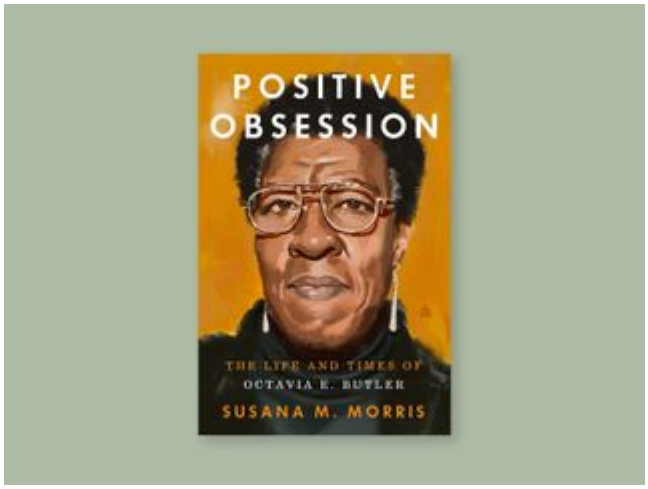
**Books**

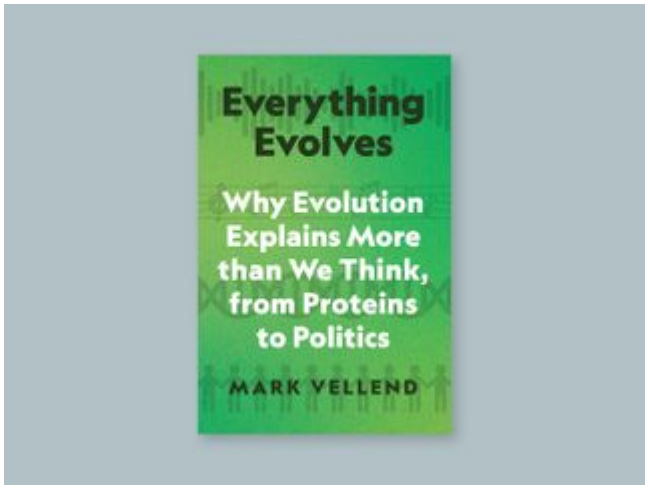
# Briefly Noted

*“Positive Obsession,” “Everything Evolves,” “Pariah,” and “Bonding.”*

*August 18, 2025*




**Positive Obsession**, *by Susana M. Morris (Amistad)*. This nimble biography examines the life of the legendary science-fiction writer Octavia Butler, whose works, such as “Parable of the Sower,” often articulated unsettling visions of social collapse. Born in California in 1947 to a domestic worker and a veteran, Butler found escape in sci-fi books as a child. As Morris shows, Butler’s stories, which reckoned with chattel slavery, climate catastrophe, and fascism, were as deeply attuned to West African culture and myth as they were to the American civil-rights movement. Yet Morris contends that Butler’s stories “were not nihilistic predictions but a sort of love offering for readers to receive and be changed by.”




**Everything Evolves**, *by Mark Vellend (Princeton)*. In this ambitious book, Vellend, a biologist, attempts to establish a "generalized evolutionary theory" to stand alongside physics as a crucial paradigm for understanding "how everything came to be." Here, biological evolution is merely one instance of a more fundamental process that can be seen in any system in which "new variants are produced, inherited, and moved around" and only some variants proliferate. Stepping away from living things, Vellend finds this dynamic at work in the development of violins and typewriters, in the technologies undergirding ChatGPT, and in the spread of cultural values like individualism.

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## What We're Reading

*Illustration by Ben Hickey*

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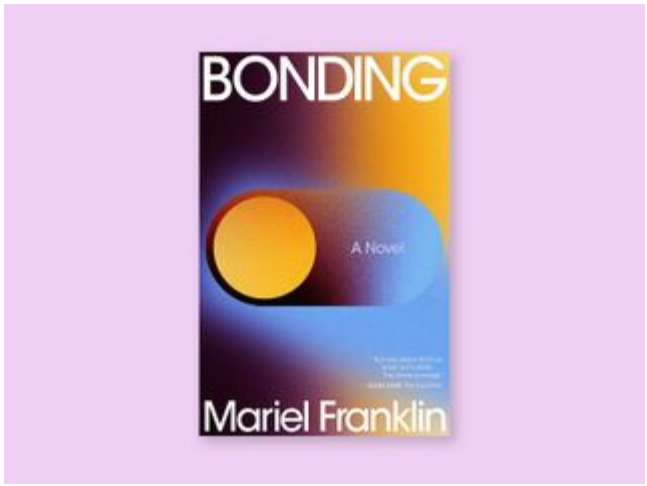
**Pariah**, *by Dan Fesperman (Knopf)*. The protagonist of this audaciously spoofy spy novel is Hal Knight, a comedian who has resigned in disgrace from his other job, as a Democratic congressman, after a video depicting him insulting an actress went viral. Hal is hiding out on a Caribbean island when the C.I.A. asks him to accept an invitation for an official visit to Bolrovia, a fictional Eastern European country whose autocratic President is a fan of his. In exchange for gathering intel, Hal is promised a Stateside image rehabilitation—presuming that he makes it out alive. Baked into the novel's high comedy is an awareness of the thin line between politics and show business; Hal sees his assignment as "24/7 improv, and with a less forgiving audience."




**Bonding**, *by Mariel Franklin (FSG Originals)*. In this stark, cynical début novel, an Englishwoman in her thirties becomes entangled with a man working in drug marketing just as her controlling ex-girlfriend—now the

founder of a nominally “ethical” dating app—reënters her life. Despite the book’s thinly drawn cast and its heavy-handed staging of the compromises involved in social platforms and pharmaceutical companies, Franklin’s novel expresses a compelling ambivalence about twenty-first-century experience, in which freedom results in atomization. As the protagonist muses, the dissolution of “communally enforced” conservative values has left behind a sea of people “like me: floundering, mostly on my own, bombarded with ads” for goods, substances, and experiences that may “ward off the realization that no one had any idea how to live.”

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**Books**

# Helen Oyeyemi’s Novel of Cognitive Dissonance

*Kinga, the protagonist of “A New New Me,” has an odd affliction: there are seven of her.*

***By Katy Waldman***

*August 18, 2025*

*Across her nine novels, Oyeyemi has shown a fascination with proliferation, complexity, indeterminacy, and paradox.Illustration by Joey Han*

Few fantasies are harder to wipe away than the romance of a clean slate. Every January, when we’re twitchy with regret and self-loathing, advertisers blare, “New Year, new you,” urging us to jettison our failures and start fresh. In fiction, self-reinvention is a perennial theme, often shadowed by the suspicion that it can’t be done. Lately, novelists have put a political spin on the idea, counterposing hopeful acts of individual self-fashioning to the immovable weight of circumstance. Halle Butler’s “The New Me” (2019), a millennial office satire, finds its temp heroine, Millie, trying to life-hack her way out of loneliness and professional drift—buy a plant, whiten her teeth, make friends, think positive. The trouble, Butler suggests, is that Millie can’t begin anew until the world does. It’s a vision steeped in the gloom Mark Fisher called “capitalist realism”: fiction that strains to imagine another world, only to collapse back into the one we know. The deck is stacked; Millie is doomed.

Now comes “A New New Me” (Riverhead), Helen Oyeyemi’s ninth novel, its title a knowing wink at Millie’s futile self-optimization. Our protagonist, Kinga, forty and single, grinds away at a corporate job. We meet her on a Monday: “up at six,” “crunching on instant coffee granules and repeating Snoop Dogg’s daily affirmations.” By week’s end, she’s exhausted, subsisting on delivery apps and barely able to move herself from bed to bath. But Oyeyemi, unlike her fatalist predecessors, conjures alternate realities. She swaps the dead-eyed liturgy of capitalist drudgery for something stranger—magic. Kinga suffers from a peculiar affliction: there are seven of her. Each takes charge of a day of the week, leaving voice memos and diary entries for the others; their texts and transcripts form the book.

Kinga-A is the striver, mainlining Snoop Dogg with her morning coffee. Kinga-B works at the same company, a bank, but with less zeal; Kinga-C, whose job is as vague as it is improbable, impersonates antique dealers and window washers. On “maintenance” Thursday, Kinga-D glides through appointments set by her predecessors. Fridays and Saturdays are given over to pleasure and partying, the boundaries between Kingas softening as the week winds down. Sabbath Kinga is an enigma—each Sunday she claims to stay in bed and catch up on TV, though the fitness tracker on the Kingas’ shared phone intimates clandestine trips to who knows where.

## What We’re Reading

*Discover notable new fiction, nonfiction, and poetry.*

Helen Oyeyemi, the British Nigerian novelist who published her début at twenty, is an original—a writer whose style is equal parts mischievous, moony, and tart. Her books occupy the borderlands of realism and fable, where the plausible brushes up against the impossible, and the laws of narrative logic are bent just enough to let in the surreal. If the self-help cant of the title seems to glitch or stutter, the book's contents shimmer with the same strangeness. Everyday routines are dusted with improbability: a typical meal is "pale-amber-tinted broths and avocados sliced in half and covered in wildflowers." Even the day job is askew—Kingas A and B work in the bank's matchmaking department, engineering meetups for personal-finance-focussed singles. Oyeyemi's prose is propelled by a subtle animism; her sentences sometimes seem to contain the whole book in miniature. At one point, a Kinga notices trees "full of tattered buds that had leapt for the light too early; I tried not to look, but they were everywhere, bright half lives crawling along the shadowy branches."

Each of the Kingas sports her defining trait like a gemstone embedded in her forehead—uptight, cynical, intuitive, and so on—and it's easy to fall for the almost fairy-tale logic of their distinctions. But the Kingas are unreliable narrators; are their characterizations to be trusted? The voices can blur; sometimes, there's the faint sense of an uninvited presence among them. At one point, Kinga-F pauses over a line she's written: "Is this really how I think about the things I see?" she wonders. "It feels borrowed. But I can't think who would've lent it to me."

Much of the novel's initial pleasure comes from its intramural politics. The Kingas squabble, kibbitz, and conspire, their volatile intimacy echoing the female frenemyships found in Oyeyemi's earlier work, especially "Parasol Against the Axe" (2024), about three women reconnecting at a bachelorette party. Kinga begins in a kind of psychological solidarity: romantically alone but squadded up inside her head. There's loneliness in the diary entries, but never a whiff of real despair. The plot engine revs, gently, when a dark-haired man appears tied up in her pantry. He's Jarda, possibly someone's secret boyfriend, possibly the scion of a crime family. He joins a supporting cast who float through the narrative, speaking episodically about betrayal, first love, ambition. The Kingas themselves trade fragments of family lore and piece together partial memories. Some anecdotes spiral forward—a

ransom scheme emerges, bit by bit—but others contradict or undercut one another, while still more seem to exist purely as motifs. One gets the sense that to grasp why any story appears where it does would be to understand the book completely.

Across her nine novels, Oyeyemi has shown a restless fascination with proliferation, complexity, indeterminacy, and paradox. Her framing devices keep sprouting new limbs. In “Gingerbread” (2019), one of her metaphors for art is a sweet loaf that’s ruinous and sulfuric and tastes of revenge. A woman who eats it declares her life “destroyed forever”—then thanks the baker.

Oyeyemi’s novels are less punishing than that loaf, but just as likely to scramble the senses. Genres and registers collide: her prose offers, in a single page, poetic candor, sly wit, dad jokes, and contemporary therapyspeak. The call sheet for a scene might include the moon goddess Selene, Ariana Grande, and Hedy Lamarr. At once overstuffed and evasive, Oyeyemi’s fiction is full of texts that shift shape for each reader, proposing that fiction is inherently confounding. “What I write is made up, but it’s also very, very made up,” she once said. “It’s not trying to reconcile its contradictions.”

The Kingas in “A New New Me” seem engineered to multiply and sharpen contradictions. Friday’s Kinga tells us that a man’s features are “very, very ordinary, and his eyes are alight with a cheerful ‘let’s fix it’ rationality”; for Saturday’s Kinga, the same man has a “face full of restless crests and curlicues,” as if “summoned out of a shower of sparks in order to contradict all orthodoxies.” Oyeyemi’s point, perhaps, is that every perspective is hopelessly partial. In these epistemologically treacherous conditions, the Kingas model how to proceed with curiosity and humility: “Maybe you see gentleness where I see joylessness,” one Kinga muses, debating their shared therapist. Yet Oyeyemi sometimes seems to go further, endorsing a relativism so deep that even provisional consensus is out of reach.

Oyeyemi is drawn to complication as an end in itself. She’s compared stories to viruses—always mutating, always spawning new forms—in a vision that echoes William S. Burroughs’s idea of the Word as “an organism with no internal function other than to replicate itself.” Her books, with

their Borgesian labyrinths and witchy symmetries, sometimes flirt with nonsense. Meanings proliferate, then blur. A perfumer claims that "fragrance has the power to delineate"; another passage insists his scents are so immersive they "prevent you from making . . . distinctions." Which is it? Or do Oyeyemi's words inevitably breed their own opposites, spinning fictions in which nothing is reliably true or false?

Yet in "A New New Me," the virus has achieved self-awareness. There's always been a flighty, avoidant streak in Oyeyemi's fiction, as if she forever wants to be telling a different story than the one she's begun.This novel is, in a way, about that very impulse: the lure of complexity as a means of escape. About halfway through the book, Oyeyemi delivers the septet's origin story. OG Kinga, as her variants call her, grew up sidelined and overlooked: her father went to prison when she was twelve, her brother floated through life on charm, and she was an outcast at school and made to feel inferior at home. At twenty-nine, OG Kinga attends her high-school reunion, primed to rub her beauty and success in her former classmates' faces. Perplexingly, they remember her fondly, as a friend. The gap between her self-image and their perception leaves her so rattled that she relinquishes control. "Guys," she says to her inner chorus, "would you mind just being me? What have I been doing it for?"

Many of the book's stories are later questioned or contradicted by other narrators. But, uncharacteristically, the provenance of this scene goes unchallenged. OG Kinga thought she was one thing; her classmates saw her as something else. The pain shatters her, and she splinters into an array of alters. The moment is oddly moving, in part because it seems to reach back and challenge Oyeyemi's usual strategy. Here the great proliferator tries, fleetingly, to fix the point of departure for all her novel's swirling forms. But, as OG Kinga retreats into the clamor of her seven selves, her one-woman circus looks less like a performance than like a defense—a way to make herself too many to pin down, and too many to wound.

Oyeyemi's characters are often fleeing from stories—sometimes literally, as when Jarda's mother bolts for Czechia after a friend foists a manuscript on her, or when a journalist in "Parasol Against the Axe" skips out to Prague after a letter from a disgruntled reader. But to run from stories is also to run

from yourself, a pattern clearer nowhere than in “A New New Me,” a book whose title radiates neurotic self-multiplication. Selves propagate in Oyeyemi’s fiction: as dolls, doppelgängers, a changeling with double pupils. Identities, like words, replicate virally. And, as the OG Kinga scene suggests, this proliferation isn’t always creative—it can flow from a kind of death drive. What’s at stake isn’t the familiar “death of the author” but a subtler vanishing act: you’re spun through so many stories that you never get to exist at all.

If Butler’s “The New Me” lampooned the self-improvement industry, Oyeyemi’s “A New New Me” pushes the logic of perpetual upgrades to the point that self-help is indistinguishable from self-erasure. It’s bloatware masquerading as betterment. Yet Oyeyemi doesn’t mourn the loss of unity or push for resolution. Is Kinga better off as one or seven? The book is agnostic. Some novels insist on being read as prescriptions for living; Oyeyemi’s simply depicts a process: one splinter of a soul briefly gains control of a body, and goes out to be engulfed by the world. ♦

*Katy Waldman, a staff writer, has written about books and culture for The New Yorker since 2018.*

**The Current Cinema**

# “Highest 2 Lowest” Marks a Conservative Pivot for Spike Lee

*Denzel Washington stars as a music executive who takes police matters into his own hands, in this remake of Akira Kurosawa’s 1963 kidnapping classic.*

***By Richard Brody***

*August 15, 2025*

*Washington brings a thrilling swagger to his role and, in the few moments when his swagger falters, nearly rends the screen with anguish.Illustration by Raj Dhunna*

It’s fascinating when filmmakers make drastic late-career shifts, as Martin Scorsese did with “The Wolf of Wall Street” and Francis Ford Coppola recently did with “Megalopolis.” Now it’s Spike Lee’s turn, and in his new drama, “Highest 2 Lowest,” he shifts in a surprising way. The film is a remake of the Japanese director Akira Kurosawa’s 1963 drama “High and Low,” among the greatest police procedurals. Lee turns the story into what is one of his most personal films, both emotionally and intellectually. Often, directors’ self-transformations involve changes in modes of production: Scorsese broke away from the studios and found independent financing; Coppola self-financed. Lee, who has had his own production company throughout his career, makes “Highest 2 Lowest”a film *about* his particular modes of production, one that focusses on the underlying notion of *owning* the means of production.

“Highest 2 Lowest” is a story of culture—of how it’s created and disseminated, flowing (in both directions) between the highest echelons of society and the lowest. The movie starts on high, with rapturous views of the Manhattan skyline and David King (Denzel Washington), one of the city’s highfliers, pacing on the balcony of his penthouse on the Brooklyn waterfront. A music executive, he’s discussing his plan to regain control of Stackin’ Hits, the label he founded. Five years ago, he sold a controlling interest, which is about to pass into the hands of a holding company that he fears will strip the label for parts, dispersing the archive of Black music that he enshrined there. David’s investment in the company is more than financial: renowned for having “the best ears in the business” (if you haven’t heard, he’ll tell you), he has been behind fifty Grammy winners and his music once dominated the charts. These days, the label barely breaks even, but he is looking to preserve his legacy and perhaps to recapture his glory days.

David and his wife, Pamela (Ilfenesh Hadera), are pillars of New York’s Black establishment, regular six-figure contributors to the Studio Museum in Harlem, but his planned buyout involves putting up the family’s entire fortune. Sitting in his Rolls-Royce en route to his office, in midtown, he turns to his chauffeur, Paul Christopher (Jeffrey Wright), for counsel. The men are lifelong friends, having grown up together in a rough Bronx housing project. Paul, who freely refers to his time “upstate”—that is, in prison—is grateful to David for putting him back on solid footing, and the pair’s bond is deepened by their having sons around the same age. David’s son, Trey (Aubrey Joseph), and Paul’s son, Kyle (Elijah Wright, the actor’s son), are best friends and are attending a summer basketball clinic together at Long Island University. (The coaches are L.I.U.’s actual coach, Rod Strickland, and the former N.B.A. player Rick Fox, both playing themselves.)

With the arrogance of privilege, the teens slip out onto the streets, and Kyle is kidnapped. As in Kurosawa’s film, the friends have swapped clothes, leading the kidnapper to snatch the chauffeur’s son rather than the mogul’s. When the kidnapper, thinking he’s holding Trey, first calls in, David prepares to cover the ransom with the money earmarked for buying back his label. When Trey shows up at home and it becomes clear that it’s Kyle who

is missing, David initially refuses to pay, but friendship and worry about bad publicity impel him to go ahead.

David is exceptionally motivated to get his money back: not only are his wealth and his business on the line, but making personal use of funds contractually committed to the buyout may also expose him to criminal charges. This is where “Highest 2 Lowest” diverges most from Kurosawa’s film. In “High and Low,” once the ransom is paid and the boy is returned, catching the kidnapper is a police matter, an intricate mass mobilization; in Lee’s version, David himself dominates the hunt, and, crucially, the culprit turns out to be someone in his professional field. Filming largely from David’s perspective, and augmenting the action with cultural politics, Lee seems fully in sympathy with the protagonist’s viewpoint.

Lee, working with a script by Alan Fox, spins out the multiple threads of action with startling swiftness and characteristically rapid-fire, confrontational dialogue. The cinematography, by Matthew Libatique, has a sense of swing, and “Highest 2 Lowest” often plays like a sassy duet for camera and star. Washington’s invigorating performance goes far beyond charisma and technique to enrich the role with an imaginative repertory of seemingly spontaneous gestures: a chilling series of gun-pointing fingers when in doubt; the removal of a diamond earring at a point of financial need. Washington delivers the dialogue with a thrilling range from purrs to roars, all imbued with an authoritative swagger. In the few moments when his swagger falters, he nearly rends the screen with anguish.

The movie’s sense of swing isn’t merely ornamental, and it certainly isn’t neutral; the tonality of Lee’s visual and dramatic art, from writing and acting to framing and editing, has always been inseparable from his world view. With “Highest 2 Lowest,” starting from the opening credit sequence’s soaring glide through New York’s gleaming side, Lee conveys a city of boundless ambition in vital and vigorous motion—but set in motion, now, from the top down. The story and the images converge in a vision of economic Realpolitik, with a sense of jobs created, careers fostered, ideas conveyed, and institutions founded and sustained, through the inspired cultural capitalism of producers with a critic’s discernment, an artist’s passion, and a financier’s savvy, drive, and daring.

Even the intense bromantic warmth of David and Paul's bond reinforces a distinctive view of power: David, for all his boardroom-honed elegance, has the same street-tough background as Paul, who provides the cunning and the muscle to back up David's cultural politics. (He also has the movie's funniest line: describing his gun as "insurance," Paul calls it "Jake, from State Farm.") The police—foremost three detectives, played by John Douglas Thompson, LaChanze, and Dean Winters—lend David additional muscle. Showing up at the King penthouse with startling rapidity, they set up shop there to monitor the situation and guide the family through the ransom negotiations. They are as fiercely protective of David as they are relentlessly hostile to Paul, whom they view as merely a criminal. "Highest 2 Lowest" is hardly copaganda, but it nonetheless offers a clear-eyed vision of the legal infrastructure, ranging from courts and prisons to street-level law enforcement, that sustains David's business empire and the musical agenda that it advances.

For all David's dependence on his nearest and dearest, and on social institutions at large, "Highest 2 Lowest" is the story of a self-made man who ends up taking the law into his own hands—and who does so aided by the talent that is at the core of his success, his ear for music. David is forced, by the kidnapper, to deliver the money himself, in an intricate, tensely dramatic sequence that (as in Kurosawa's film) is centered on a moving train—here, the 4 train from Brooklyn to the Bronx, from which David must throw the loot. Police officers seeking to thwart the getaway are impeded by the festivities of the Puerto Rican Day parade, which features a sublime performance by the salsa great Eddie Palmieri (who died earlier this month, at the age of eighty-eight). In lieu of Kurosawa's realistic vision of law enforcement, Lee offers a hallucination in realistic guise: David, seconded by Paul, descends to the kidnapper's subterranean lair, near the friends' childhood home.

It's pointless to discuss "Highest 2 Lowest" without risking a spoiler and mentioning that the perpetrator is a rapper (played by the real-life musician A$AP Rocky, a.k.a. Rakim Mayers). The rapper, who'd hoped in vain that David would sign him and launch him, is the crucial hinge not only in the movie's plot but in Lee's philosophical approach to it. Early on, Pamela questions why David even wants to reacquire Stackin' Hits, suggesting that

his passion for the music he once released is gone; the kidnapper turns out to embody exactly the kind of music for which David is no longer passionate. And it is David's view of culture, of authenticity and legitimacy, that wins out: his version of a happy ending involves Black music based in jazz and gospel, with no trace of hip-hop, and a vision of business as practically a mom-and-pop store (complete with nepo baby).

Lee's aesthetic of production, and of the power that's an essential and inescapable part of art, is fundamentally conservative—and no less stimulating for being so. Many great filmmakers, such as Whit Stillman, Éric Rohmer, and Clint Eastwood, have graced the cinema with original aesthetics for conservative viewpoints, but it's an unexpected plot twist to see Lee join them. With "Highest 2 Lowest," it's as if Lee, facing Manhattan from high in Dumbo, with his back to the rest of Brooklyn, were crossing the East River Rubicon. Oddly, the move comes not as a renunciation but as a new adventure. The movie's subject may be production, but the director is striking boldly out into a strange new artistic world. ♦

*Richard Brody, a film critic, began writing for The New Yorker in 1999. He is the author of "Everything Is Cinema: The Working Life of Jean-Luc Godard."*

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# Poems

- **“Suburban Divorcée”**
  By Cate Marvin | “Mowing the lawn, it’s revealed, is not the torture / it once appeared as the loved one tore through // the yard in heated fury.”
- **“O separation”**
  By Raymond Antrobus | “You mysterious cruel hand, / you cold dropped and not-yet-dropped rain.”

**Poems**

# Suburban Divorcée

***By Cate Marvin***

*August 18, 2025*

Mowing the lawn, it's revealed, is not the torture
it once appeared as the loved one tore through

the yard in heated fury, sluicing beds of flowers
bent dangerously toward the sun and the blades.

The machine was somehow derelict, excused for
its tendency to runnel through precious plantings

due to a lapsed brake he could not repair, his face
in sun murderous blank behind the mirrored eye

sockets. Worse than a chore, a downright war.
To even consider mowing the lawn after seeing

the scathing regard of the sun's acids run down
his smarting face as he spun the mower around

the yard, why, I figured it would be too hard. Now
that he's gone, I thought I'd hire someone or forsake

the lawn entire, grow it out like a beard. Mike from
across the road comes over as usual with his advice:

change the oil, the filter, sharpen the blades. Mike
doesn't want to open old wounds, but it's been his

suspicion the grass couldn't thrive because my ex
lowered the mower's mouth inches above the roots,

scraping sun-hot soil, in an effort to mow less. It’s
not exactly interesting, I’ll admit. That’s why some

people drink while mowing, hoist tumblers of wine
as they sail their yards. It’s strange, how I’ve come

to thrive on the rumble of the rider mower, blades
lowered, love how it clears rough green into fresh

swaths. Flying between apple trees to slash through
hairy bridges of weed, I see Mike. I raise my glass.

*Cate Marvin is the author of the poetry collection “Event Horizon,” among other books, and the recipient of a Guggenheim fellowship.*

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**Poems**

# O separation

***By Raymond Antrobus***

*August 18, 2025*

You mysterious cruel hand,
you cold dropped and not-yet-dropped rain,

you broken line of lost ducklings. Look
what you did to the artists, the lovers

who wanted to walk the Great Wall
of China from opposite ends, to meet

and marry, sending so many unmanageable
turns that something unmendable

was twisted between them, pushing them
on till they revised the agreement, promised

not to meet to marry but to meet to separate,
for you are a harsh teacher. The morning after

I sent the last letter I would write
as a husband, I trod a path of prickly leaves

through trees like long brown fingers
of cracked bark, poking the blue belly sky

where the sun kept breaking light
through the glistening gaps of the bare branches

that sent the boy in me one way,
the man the other.

*Raymond Antrobus is the author of the memoir "The Quiet Ear" and the poetry collection "Signs, Music," among other books.*

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# Cartoons

- **Cartoon Caption Contest**
  Submit a caption, plus vote on other entries and finalists.
- **Cartoons from the Issue**
  Drawings from the August 25, 2025 magazine.

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# Puzzles & Games

- **The Crossword: Monday, August 18, 2025**
  By Erik Agard | A challenging puzzle.

**Crossword**

# The Crossword: Monday, August 18, 2025

*A challenging puzzle.*

***By Erik Agard***

*August 18, 2025*

*Erik Agard is a co-founder of the Crossword Puzzle Collaboration Directory, a resource for aspiring puzzle-makers from underrepresented groups.*